The Flowering Thorn

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One summer, not long after graduating from college, I worked as assistant director of a YMCA camp in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. The camp nurse, Ida Lanning, was a local mountain woman retired from regular nursing practice. One day I chanced to ask her if she knew any really old songs. With a little prodding, she broke into a rendition of “Barbara Allen” (Child 84), the only such song she could recall. Thus, in my first inept attempt at fieldwork, the first ballad I ever collected was “Barbara Allen,” very nearly the most popular of the English and Scottish Popular Ballads (Child 1882–98).

For many people, indeed, “Barbara Allen” is the quintessential ballad. But when I began to study ballads more closely I started to think that in one essential way it was anomalous. Though framed in the ballad stanza that dominates in the English and Scottish tradition, it relies on a single rhyme or assonance running from beginning to end. In typical versions, all stanzas end with the name Allen, and consequently the second lines end with words that rhyme with Allen and each other. In time, I began to notice other ballads in English where the same rhyming feature occurs—first of all, ballads like “The Gypsy Laddie” (Child 200) and “Geordie” (Child 209). Curious, I went through the 305 in Child (1882–98) to see how common single rhymes were. They proved to be rare but not as unusual as I had first supposed. About forty of the ballads have at least some versions that are predominantly single rhyme, though some of these ballads and versions include maverick stanzas that could well be later additions to a ballad that started out as single rhyme, just as late versions of “Barbara Allen” often include the “rose and briar” stanzas that do not use Allen rhymes.

When I began to analyze the list, I found that single-rhyme ballads are not a single group but, rather, several groups with very different metrical characteristics. Some are small, but two groups, the one containing “Barbara Allen” and “The Gypsy Laddie” and a second, metrically distinct group of romantic and historical ballads, are really large enough to constitute subgenres within the Child corpus, with clearly implied national, or at least regional, origins. But first, let us identify all the single-rhyme groups in some sort of logical order.
In the first group, typified by “Barbara Allen” and “The Gypsy Laddie,” the name or word that determines all the rhymes has a refrainlike quality. In addition to these two ballads and “Geordie,” I found nine other ballads (see the list below) that utilize the same metrical form and refrainlike rhyming technique. True refrains that stand apart from the narrative lines also appear in a number of ballads, most notably the couplet ballads, but I did not count these in the single-rhyme census. I did, however, find a number of other metrical types where refrainlike narrative lines determine the rhyme scheme.

“Glasgow Peggie” (Child 228) and “Richie Story” (Child 232) constitute the whole of the second group, with feminine rhymes controlled by the names of the title characters, much as in ballads of the “Barbara Allen” type but with four beats in all four lines of the \( abcb \) stanza. “Lord Saltoun and Auchanachie” (Child 239), in a group by itself, is also composed in four-beat lines, but it rhymes \( aabb \). The fourth line usually ends “Auchanachie,” and the third rhymes with it. The ballads of the fourth group contain refrainlike last lines but are composed in stanzas of four very long lines (or eight short lines); the first and second long lines rhyme freely, but the third and fourth share a common rhyme determined by the refrainlike last half-line or line. These ballads are “Captain Wedderburn’s Courtship” (Child 46), “John of Hazelgreen” (Child 293), and “Walter Lesly” (Child 296). In the fifth group are two ballads in the Middle English carol stanza of \( aaab \), with all the \( b \) lines on the same rhyme. They are “The Gaberlunyie-Man” (Child 279 appendix) and the closely related “Beggar Laddie” (Child 280). Into a sixth group, I put a number of ballads composed in nonce stanzas with refrainlike lines that encourage a consistent single rhyme. In “Fair Flower of Northumberland” (Child 9), for example, the three-line stanza always ends with the word “Scotland” or “Northumberland.” “The Golden Vanity” (Child 286) has a dozen ways to form stanzas but consistently uses rhymes on “vanity” and “lonesome sea.” “Lord Randal” (Child 12), “Edward” (Child 13), and “The Maid Freed from the Gallows” (Child 95) also contain refrainlike lines that impose a common rhyme throughout the ballad.

In addition to ballads with refrainlike rhymes, I also found some with more straightforward single rhymes reminiscent of ones common in Spanish balladry. Indeed, since the most common rhyme sound in English ballads is long \( e \), I expected that some ballads would rely on long-\( e \) rhyme throughout. Such proved to be the case. But first I should point out that some ballads, despite a marked preference for the long-\( e \) rhyme, at least in some versions, seem to admit stanzas with other rhymes freely enough to disqualify them as single-rhyme ballads—for
example, “King Arthur and King Cornwall” (Child 30), “Young Andrew” (Child 48), and “Young Beichan” (Child 53). Quite apart from these, a large group of ballads (group seven) exhibits consistent long-e rhymes, regularly combined with a long meter stanza, four beats to the line. Seven of these are historical ballads, most with Percy connections: “King Henry V’s Conquest of France” (Child 164), “Johnnie Armstrong” (Child 169B), “The Rising in the North” (Child 175), “The Earl of Westmoreland” (Child 177), “The Laird o’ Logie” (Child 182), “Archie o’ Cawfield” (Child 188), and “Outlaw Murray” (Child 305). In one of these, “The Laird o’ Logie,” the name must be pronounced “Low-GEE,” with wrenched accent on the second syllable, and rhyme words such as “courte-SY” and “fer-RIE,” must also be pronounced with wrenched accent on the last syllable. Five more magical ballads, mostly from Mrs. Brown of Falkland, are metrically identical to these historical ballads but do not rely quite as consistently on long-e rhymes. These five are “Kemp Owyne” (Child 34), “Allison Gross” (Child 35), “The Laily Worm and the Machrel of the Sea” (Child 36), “Thomas Rymer” (Child 37B), and “Brown Robin’s Confession” (Child 57).

I found only two possible single-rhyme ballads with neither refrainlike nor long-e rhymes. “Erlinton” (Child 8) exhibits moderately consistent, but rather free, n rhymes, such as “pin”/“gane” and “wane”/“dawn.” And “St. Stephen and King Herod” (Child 22) retains enough rhymes on “halle” to suggest that at one time the whole ballad may have relied on that rhyme. These two ballads constitute group eight.

Most of the categories of single-rhyme ballads, then, contain few examples. But two groups are more substantial, the initial “Barbara Allen”/“Gypsy Laddie” group and the long-e, long-meter group of historical ballads, mostly from Percy’s *Reliques* (1765 [1996]), and magical ballads, mostly from Mrs. Brown (see Buchan 1972). The historical ballads, in particular, intrigued me at first. Apparently dating back to the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and closely resembling late versions of romances, they seem to corroborate Fowler’s thesis in *A Literary History of the Popular Ballad* (1968: chap. 4) that a minstrel ballad tradition operated into the seventeenth century. These ballads even serve to pinpoint where that minstrel tradition operated and where relics of it survived for another hundred years or more, namely, in the old Northumbrian section of northeast England and just across the border in Scotland. But survival proved to be the key element to consider. These ballads did indeed survive to be included in the Percy folio, or subsequently to be collected by Percy, but they have not survived into the twentieth century. In most cases there is only one text ever
recorded for each. Four out of the five metrically similar magical ballads also survived only into the early nineteenth century. The only possible exception is “Thomas Rymer,” which Duncan Williamson sings in a version (not single rhyme) that seems traditional and textually independent of the nineteenth-century versions (1987: 252–57); in other words, it is not a deliberate reworking of any of the three variations in Child. This group of historical and magical ballads may therefore constitute a subgenre, but it is essentially a dead one.

The other large group of these single-rhyme ballads, however, has not only survived but thrives, even today. Versions of “Barbara Allen,” “The Gypsy Laddie,” and others, have been collected in large numbers not only in England and Scotland but also in Ireland and North America, and they continue to be recorded. This group includes enough ballads, with enough common characteristics in addition to meter and rhyme technique, to warrant consideration as a living subgenre.

I found a total of twelve ballads that clearly belong in this group:

“Barbara Allen” (84)
“The Bonnie House o’ Airlie” (199)
“The Gypsy Laddie” (200)
“Geordie” (209)
“The Braes o’ Yarrow” (214)
“Rare Willie Drowned in Yarrow” (215)
“Andrew Lammie” (233)
“The Earl of Aboyne” (235)
“The Rantin Laddie” (240)
“The Baron o’ Leys” (241)
“James Hatley” (244)
“Earl Rothes” (297)

Of these, the oldest seem to be “Barbara Allen,” “The Gypsy Laddie,” and perhaps “Geordie”; the newest is probably “Andrew Lammie.” As one of those early ballads may well be the prototype for the subgenre, it is worth asking just how old the three are and whether they originated in England or Scotland.

The earliest reference to “Barbara Allen” is the famous entry of 2 January 1666 in the diary of Samuel Pepys: “I to my Lord Bruncker’s; and there find...above all, my dear Mrs. Knipp, with whom I sang; and in perfect pleasure I was to hear her sing, and especially her little Scotch song of Barbary Allen.”
between the lines, one gathers that the song was old even in Pepys’s day. But was it Scottish? Apparently Pepys did not mean to imply that. According to Hales, in an essay at the beginning of volume two of Bishop Percy’s Folio Manuscript: “Songs and ballads of rustic and of humble life were called ‘Scotch’ from about the middle of the 17th century, and without any intention of imputing to them a Scottish origin, or that they were imitations.” Hales adds, surprisingly, “This conventional meaning of ‘Scotch’ seems to have been accepted in Scotland as well as in England, for in no other sense could Allan Ramsay claim, among others, Gay’s ballad, ‘Black-ey’d Susan,’ in the first part of ‘A Miscellany of Scots Sangs’” (1867–68: xv note). The same, he says, applies to Thompson’s Orpheus Caledonius, which includes pieces by Ambrose Phillips and other well-known Englishmen.

Sometimes, when textual evidence cannot answer questions of provenance, musical clues can suggest answers. When we look at the melodic tradition of “Barbara Allen,” however, we find that the evidence is mixed. There is indeed a clear English tradition (Bronson’s Group A) but also a distinctively Scots tradition (Bronson’s Group B). And two further traditions (Groups C and D) are mostly American but with Scottish connections; Group C is a typically pentatonic Appalachian group with some Scots connections, while D is related to the Scots “Boyne Water” family of tunes.

To summarize the information on age and provenance: On the one hand, the earliest mention of the ballad is in England in 1666. When Pepys used the term “Scotch song,” he may have meant no more than what we mean today when we, equally loosely, use the term “folk song.” And there is one distinct and strong English melodic tradition. On the other hand, there is a strong Scots melodic tradition as well, and two other distinct traditions that have stronger connections with Scotland than England. The song tradition has been stronger in Scotland and Scotch-Irish parts of North America than in England and English parts of North America. And Pepys just might have meant what he said—or been more accurate than he knew—when he called the song Scotch. For “Barbara Allen,” then, the evidence is ultimately ambiguous. While I strongly suspect that it is a northern song, we cannot consider the issue settled.

The case of “The Gypsy Laddie” is just the opposite: There is really no question about the provenance, but the date is unclear. The ballad seems unambiguously Scots, but the earliest known text is in the 1740 Tea-Table Miscellany (Child 1882–98, 4: 61). Bronson, however, feels that the connection with the house of Cassilis can show us the way to an earlier date:
The first class [of tunes for “Gypsy Laddie”] has one of the longest traditional sequences observable in all British balladry. Its earliest appearance is in the Skene MS., ante 1630; its latest is current today. The name which it bears in the Skene MS. is “Lady Cassiles Lilt,” and Child as well as later students, failed, I believe, to note the full implications of this fact. Child says that we have no evidence that the ballad was associated in tradition with the Cassilis family until the end of the eighteenth century. But this tune yields such evidence. For it is indisputably the same tune as the one found with our ballad in Johnson’s *Museum* and in a number of recent traditional versions. The Skene tune was never translated from tablature until Dauney published it in 1834, and anyhow it is obvious that later variants have developed traditionally, not by derivation from that or any other authoritative record. The most reasonable explanation of such a phenomenon is that the ballad was associated with the family which gave its name to the tune much earlier than explicit statements survive to show, and earlier indeed—supposing the ballad in anything like its later form to have been circulating around 1630—by nearly a hundred years than the first extant record of the text. (1959–72, 3: 198)

The Skene Manuscript evidence thus pushes the record of “Gypsy Laddie” back into the early seventeenth century, a time when Gypsies had just been expelled from Scotland and several Gypsies named Johnnie Faw were hanged for violating the interdict (Child 1882–98, 4: 63–4).

In the case of “Geordie,” the evidence for age and point of origin is ambiguous. The Scots texts of “Geordie” are no earlier than the 1780s, a hundred years or more after the earliest English texts, but Child’s headnote suggests that the historical events behind the ballad may well be traceable to 1554 and Scotland (1882–98, 4: 124). The 1680 English broadside ballad “George of Oxford,” moreover, seems to be a reworking of a traditional text to reflect events contemporary with the broadside. It exhibits a slightly different plot and cast of characters from the ones found in traditional versions of “Geordie.” Of a second Northumbrian “Geordie” broadside, “George Stoole,” Child says that it “was printed by H. Gosson, whose time is put at 1607–1641” (1882–98, 4: 126). He adds in a note on the same page that “it seems to have been familiar in Aberdeen as early as 1627,” when a Robert Gordon there collected a tune called “God Be with Thee, Geordie”
(Child received this information from William Macmath). The English broadsides are, then, earlier than any collected Scots texts but seem to be reworkings of a traditional song (or songs?), probably Scots, rather than the original forms of the ballad (see Motherwell 1827: lxxvi note; Cox 1925: 135). Child assigns the Scots form of the ballad to the main body of his entry and reserves the “George of Oxford” and “George Stoole” broadsides for an appendix.

The tunes associated with the ballad do not really clarify the question of origin. The older Northumbrian “George Stoole” broadside mentions no tune but supplies the following refrain:

Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, my bony love,
Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, my bonny!
Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, my own deare love,
And God be with my Georgie!

The tune Robert Gordon collected in Aberdeen in 1627, “God Be with Thee, Geordie,” is surely the appropriate one, but today we have no way of knowing whether this was a Scots or an English tune. The headnote for the “George of Oxford” broadside does mention a tune, “Poor Georgie,” which apparently predates the broadside; this tune too, however, is otherwise unidentifiable (Simpson 1966: 136 n). Like the “Barbara Allen” evidence, the indications from “Geordie” tunes that have survived in tradition are mixed. One clear tradition (Bronson’s Group B), with texts more like the broadsides, goes to an English tune. The other three traditions have Scots tunes, all also associated with other ballads (a “Gypsy Laddie” tune, Bronson’s Group A; a “Barbara Allen” tune, Bronson’s Group C; and a tune from the widespread Boyne Water family of ballad tunes).

After considering the evidence in each case, it seems safe to say that the three earliest identifiable examples of the “Barbara Allen”/“Gypsy Laddie” ballad subgenre were already known in the early seventeenth century. It is not as clear that the subgenre originated in Scotland. But whether this form of the single-rhyme ballad originated in Scotland or not, it was there that it took root. The three oldest of these twelve ballads exhibit strong—even if not exclusive—Scots affiliations, while the later nine are all clearly Scots in subject matter and tradition.

But what are the characteristics, besides Scots provenance, that make this a single subgenre? First, in these ballads there is a single word that determines the rhyme throughout. For five of the ballads, this word is a proper name: “Allen,”
“Geordie,” “Airlie,” and “Hatley,” and in some texts of Child 215, “Willy.” For three it is a geographical term: “Yarrow,” “Gemrie,” and “London.” For one it is the word “lady,” which is really a title, and for three more it is the word “laddie,” also a sort of title. “Andrew Lammie” is anomalous in this, as in several other regards: the two names “Lammie” and “Annie” seem jointly to control the rhyme. All of these rhyming words, “Allen,” “Geordie,” “laddie,” “Lammie,” and the rest, are two-syllable words with the accent on the first syllable. Consequently, these ballads share a feminine rhyme scheme, a feature in itself unusual in the Child tradition, which heavily favors masculine rhymes. The meter is a form of the ballad stanza, with four beats in the first and third nonrhyming lines and three beats in the second and fourth feminine-rhyming lines.

Next, the rhyme is even freer in these ballads than is usual in the Child corpus and in English/Scots folk song generally. “Yarrow,” for instance, is intended to rhyme with “sorrow” and “morrow” but also with “before O,” “clear O,” “gude O,” and “yellow.” “Allen” is paired with “tavern,” “token,” “to him,” “near him,” “fell in,” and “yellow,” as well as with “dwelling,” “falling,” “growing,” “hanging,” or almost any other “-ing” word.

When we look at the aesthetic of these ballads, a definite lyric quality can be discerned; Pepys called “Barbara Allen” a song, and the appellation fits. The presence of this lyric quality confirms what David Fowler has to say about the aesthetic shift in ballads in the eighteenth century. He sees ballads of the preceding century or so as strongly narrative. And indeed that seems true of the long-rhyming ballads with roots in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But sometime around 1700, “the traditional narrative emphasis of ballads gradually became subservient to the influence of melody, which began to play a much more important part in determining ballad structure” (1968: 15–16). This movement expressed itself in intensification of narrative symmetry, development of commonplaces, and maturing of incremental repetition (1968: 16–17). In the case of the present set of ballads, we may add development of equally lyrical and haunting airs.

In discussing the lyric character of this subgenre, I will limit my examples to “The Bonnie House o’ Airlie,” a ballad not so familiar as others of the twelve. Parallels from the more-familiar “Barbara Allen,” “Andrew Lammie,” or “Gypsy Laddie” will easily come to mind.

By intensification of narrative symmetry, Fowler seems to mean both compression and increased similarity of part to part of the story, achieved, to some extent, by repetition. This symmetry is clear in “Airlie.” Versions tend to run to eight or ten stanzas, with the longest in Bronson reaching only twelve. The use
of repetition to forward the narrative is frequent in virtually all texts. For example, in stanza two of the text in Child’s additions and corrections (1882-98, 5: 252), the men of Argyll come “For to plunder the bonnie house of Airly.”

In stanza three,

Lady Margaret looks oer her bower-window,
And O but she looks weary!
And there she spied the great Argyll
Coming to plunder the bonnie house of Airly.

In stanza five, the great Argyll “hath taken her by the left shoulder./ Says, Lady where lies thy dowry?” To which she replies, “It’s up and it’s down by the bonny bank-side.” And in stanza seven,

He hath taken her by the middle so small,
And O but she looks weary!
He hath laid her down by the bonny burn-side
Till he hath plundered the bonnie house of Airly.

This repetition is not incremental, but every line in that seventh stanza reworks at least one earlier one.

Repetition that is more truly incremental does occur in many versions of the ballad, such as the double-stanza Christie text (Bronson 1959-72, 3: 193):

But ye’ll tak’ me by the milk white hand,
And ye’ll tak me fairly,
And ye’ll lead me down to yon deep deep glen
That I mayna see the burning o’ Airlie.

He’s ta’en her by the milk white hand,
But he hasna ta’en her fairly;
For he led her up to yon high high hill,
Bade her look at the burning o’ Airlie.

‘Ye’ll bring to me a cup o’ wine,
Ye’ll bring me it frae Airlie,
And I’ll drink to Charlie the chief o’ our clan,
And syne to my ain Lord Airlie.”

Commonplaces also abound, as is clear from the preceding examples. Generally, however, they are only one or two lines in length:

It fell on a day, on a bonny summer day,
When corn grew green and yellow.

The lady looked over her own castle-wa.

“Come down, come down, Lady Margaret,” he said,
“Come down, and kiss me fairly.”

“I swear by the swerd I haud in my hand.”

He’s ta’en her by the milk white hand.

Nevertheless, two stanzas regularly occurring in this ballad may be called proper commonplace ones, adapted to the context:

“Gin my gweed lord had been at home,
As he’s awa’ for Charlie,
There dursna a Campbell o’ a’ Argylle
Set a fit on the bonnie hoose o’ Airlie”

and

“Eleven bairns I ha’e born,
And the twelfth ne’er saw his daddie,
But though I had gotten as mony again,
They suld a’ gang to fecth for Charlie.”

The melodious, lyrical quality of this ballad’s tune is likewise typical of the subgenre. Bronson divides the main tune into two groups. The first, older group includes the authentic forms of the tune. The second includes the plagal. Many readers, although they may never have heard the ballad, nevertheless know one plagal form of the tune united to a later set of words, those of the familiar and
much-loved “Loch Lomond.” “The Bonnie House o’ Airlie” thus exhibits not only a haunting melody but also all the traits, including intensification of narrative symmetry, commonplace development, and mature incremental repetition, that Fowler identifies with an aesthetic shift in balladry characterized by the subordination of narrative to melody. These same traits, and equally haunting melodies, are apparent in other ballads of this subgenre.

A final characteristic of this ballad subgenre is durability. Though I know of no post-Child texts of “Jamie Hatley” or “Earl Rothes,” the other ten of these twelve ballads survived well into the twentieth century in oral tradition. Admittedly, for two of these ten, “Rantin Laddie” and “Baron o’ Leys,” the twentieth-century record is rather skimpy. But others, such as “Barbara Allen,” “Yarrow,” “Andrew Lammie,” and “The Gypsy Laddie,” continue (even as the twenty-first century gets under way) to be among the most popular of all ballads. The single rhyme, combined with the other characteristics discussed, apparently rendered these songs not just memorable but easily so.

This brief survey of single-rhyme ballads has uncovered two groups large enough to be considered subgenres within the Child corpus, in addition to a number of individual ballads and groups with distinctive rhyme and metrical schemes. The first of the subgenres, apparently from a now-extinct minstrel ballad tradition rooted in Northumberland, is characterized by long-meter (four beats to the line) stanzas with long-e rhymes and includes both historical and magical ballads. The second subgenre, from a still lively and widespread tradition probably Scots in origin and dating from the early seventeenth century, features lyrical romantic narratives—even when the subject matter is historical. These narratives, strongly influenced by their melodies, are framed in untypical feminine-rhyming ballad stanzas in all or nearly all of which a final word, a title (“lady” or “laddie”) or a name, repeated from stanza to stanza like a refrain, determines rhyme but with considerable allowance. The melodic tunes and echoing stanzas create a lyric intensity that leads to narrative compression, enhanced by various other forms of verbal repetition, including incremental repetition, and effective use of commonplaces. As a result, these songs are not only attractive but also easy to remember, contributing, no doubt, to their unusual durability and the “perfect pleasure” that they have given listeners ever since the days of Samuel Pepys. If, as may well be the case, “Barbara Allen” was the first and the prototype of this subgenre, then we have to admit that when that hardhearted sweetheart rejected her Sweet William, she really started something. We should not be surprised, though, for we have always known that she was quite a woman.
Notes

1. The entry can be found under this date in any edition of the diaries.

References


