

1-1-2004

Ballads and the Supernatural: Spells, Channs, Curses and Enchantments

Sheila Douglas

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Douglas, Sheila (2004) "Ballads and the Supernatural: Spells, Channs, Curses and Enchantments," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 33: Iss. 1.

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol33/iss1/27>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu.

Sheila Douglas

Ballads and the Supernatural: Spells, Charms, Curses and Enchantments

In the time from which our earliest ballads originated, there was among the general population no commonly held scientific knowledge, which would explain everyday phenomena. These were consequently interpreted according to what is now called superstition, but at one time, and by some even today, would be regarded as spiritual insight. There was no universal schooling because until the Reformation the Church controlled education; there was no psychiatric medicine to throw light on hallucinations, delusions or eccentric behavior. There was no religious tolerance, to admit the validity of any beliefs apart from those taught by the Church. The justice system used methods such as trial by ordeal or trial by combat. In fact, these were implemented by the forces of religion, as Cosmo Innes records in *Scotland in the Middle Ages*. He describes them as being “among the common privileges and prerogatives of jurisdiction granted to the greater monasteries.”¹

There was everywhere a habitual ascription of anything that could not be explained easily to magic and the supernatural. This should not be entirely scoffed at, as some of it was psychological insight that was not recognized at the time. It is a natural human instinct to want to make sense of the world in which we live. Those who believed, and still believe, in the supernatural are not necessarily to be found among the ignorant and uneducated. They are often people who are aware of a dimension to life other than the purely physical.

¹Cosmo Innes, *Scotland in the Middle Ages* (Edinburgh, 1860), p. 186.

They could see goodness and evil at work all around them; they experienced sudden disasters, illnesses or injuries, or perhaps acquired or lost possessions in what seemed like magical ways. Two or three centuries ago, phenomena that we take for granted as part of everyday life, like television, the Internet, space travel, or heart transplants, would have seemed to the general population as the most impossible of dreams, which could be realized only through magic or witchcraft.

In medieval times and even up to the eighteenth century, the Devil really existed in people's minds as an actual person who could have a physical presence. The Church used images, statues and pictures to give concrete meaning to abstract theology, which encouraged people in a habit of conceiving of God and the Devil, virtues and vices in character form, as in morality plays. But there was little understanding of the working of the human mind. Mentally ill people, who suffered from delusions, hallucinations, or who heard voices, who nowadays would receive sympathy and treatment, were dragged before courts and terrorized or tortured into confessing to all kinds of "crimes." Harmless old women who knew the lore of herbal medicine were burned at the stake for curing illnesses. They were also blamed for any unforeseen misfortune which befell their neighbors. Various kinds of sexual license or perversion were explained as the work of Satan and scapegoats found. *The History of Witchcraft in Scotland* was written in 1819 by scholar and song collector Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, as an introduction to an edition of Revd. Robert Law's *Memorialls*, which Sharpe edited. It documents countless cases in which both men and women were hunted down, tried and burned at the stake, for offenses ranging from raising winds to transforming people into animals and consorting with the Devil. King James VI wrote a learned treatise on witchcraft and demonology, which was taken perfectly seriously by scholars and populace alike.

Michael Lynch describes the witch-hunts of the seventeenth century as "a search for scapegoats on which to visit the sins of society."² He sees them as "the product of an age of uncertainty," when sudden misfortunes or death befell people for no reason they could understand. A harsh climate, poverty, squalor that produced disease before the cures could be found for them, and religious and civil unrest were the soil on which ignorance and superstition fed. As well as that, however, belief in the supernatural can be viewed as a search for spirituality, a refusal to accept that physical existence is all there is. An effort of imagination is necessary to evoke the historical context of the supernatural ballads, to picture oneself as living in such a world. The stories in the ballads are about human problems that still beset us, but the way they are told is colored by the background of their times.

Those of our ballads that deal with the supernatural and magic of any kind are among our oldest. The landscape, society, world picture and belief system

²Michael Lynch, *Scotland: A New History* (London, 1992), p. 185.

they reflect are either medieval or even-pre-Christian. Those who would sing them today have to take account of the fact that they come from a time when people believed in such things. This must affect the way they are sung. The fact that people today no longer believe such things should not affect the story told in, for example, the great witchcraft ballad "Allison Gross."³

What happens when this is not taken into account was illustrated for me very clearly. I was fortunate enough to hear the singing of that ballad by the late, great Lizzie Higgins. She, like many Scots travelers, had a strong belief in the supernatural, and consequently sang the ballad in a memorably blood-chilling and dramatic way. I have also heard it sung by a revivalist singer, who presented the song harshly and rhythmically, as a more light-hearted or even grotesquely comic song. This may have been suggested by the use of the word "toddle," which does have comic connotations today in connection with young children or drunk men. This suggests a superficial approach to the content of the ballad, and a failure of imagination in considering its basis in supernatural belief. Whatever the reason, this rendering of the ballad was totally lacking in power. But a deeper examination of the ballad may reveal that the meaning it can have for us today is not only just as powerful, but can also be understood in terms of present-day beliefs.

The motifs in the ballad provide guidance to the singer as to how to sing it. First of all, there is the witch, who in medieval times was not a figure of Halloween fun with a broomstick and a pointed hat, but a real and much-feared persona, believed to possess all kinds of powers. Our ballad tradition reveals several different types of individuals who were called witches. Exemplified here is the one who exerts power over another's will in order to dominate that person completely. In "Allison Gross" a young man describes how the witch "trysted me ae day till her bower" and offered him fair speeches and rich gifts to bribe him into becoming her "leman sae true." This kind of gift is common in balladry and not always in a witchcraft context. Allison Gross is apparently not an old hag, but a lusty young woman. (Cutty Sark in "Tam O' Shanter" is more than a comic parody and represents an erotic stereotype that has a long history.)

Witchcraft rituals were often connected with nudity, having sexual intercourse with the Devil and indulging in erotic dancing, which was condemned by the post-Reformation church, along with playing music and play-acting. Many of those burned as witches were not old. We have also to keep in mind that centuries ago people's life expectancy was much less than today, and a man or woman in their forties could be regarded as old. The spokesman in the ballad refers to her as ugly, but that may be because her reputation as "the ug-

³Francis James Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols. (New York, 1965), No. 35. Further references to ballads will be identified by Child number in the text. Unless otherwise noted Child's A text has been used.

liest witch i the north country” makes her frightening and dangerous. There is also the possibility that he regarded her as a witch because of her power over him. The singer has to convey his feeling of revulsion in the recurring verse beginning, “Awa awa, ye ugly witch.”

He steadfastly refuses all her offers, of “a mantle o the red scarlet” or “a sark o the saftest silk” or “a cup of the good red gold,” so she then proceeds to use her supernatural power to transform him into an ugly reptile. The stanza is worth quoting:

Then oot she taen a silver wand,
 An she’s turnd her three times roun an roun;
 She’s muttered sich words till my strength it faild
 An I fell down senseless upon the groun.

After this, it seems he became a loathsome serpent coiled round a tree. The figure of the worm or serpent crops up in some of our oldest ballads and could be a folk memory of the sort of creatures that existed in pre-historic times. It could also be an image that has continued because of biblical influences, and the Garden of Eden story that Christian missionaries imprinted on people’s consciousness.

Yet to his sister Maisry, he must still appear to be a man, because she comes every Saturday night “wi silver bason an silver kemb” to delouse his head, as family members did for each other in those days. This in itself has become a motif for intimacy and affection in ballads and folktales all over Europe. It can be interpreted as proof that she still regarded him as a human being and still loved him as her brother. This feeling of tenderness must be conveyed by the singer. What then did become of the young man?

When we re-read the stanza quoted above it seems that what has been practiced on the young man would be recognized today as hypnosis. It is described in a manner that would fit the way it is practiced even today, when a hypnotist may use an object and movements to relax a subject and tell him in a low voice that he will go to sleep. After he wakes, he may well believe he is changed into someone or something else and act accordingly.

This has been seen in stage acts which have been televised, but which abuse the proper use of hypnosis in hospitals and clinics, where people go for treatment to change their behavior. Allison Gross of course uses the power abusively and maliciously. The young man believes he is a worm and must “toddle about the tree.” This symbolizes the subjection in which he is held by Allison Gross, which must be of a sexual nature, since the snake is traditionally a phallic symbol. Since he can no longer see himself as a man, it also means that he is rendered impotent by the power of the witch. Her evil thought is, like all evil thoughts, basically selfish: if she cannot have him as a lover, she won’t let anyone else. It has been pointed out by a hypnotherapist that people cannot be induced by hypnosis to do anything that is against their nature.

What Allison Gross did with her spell was to play on the young man's doubts of his own worth and adequacy, which most people, especially young ones, have within them.

The reference to the "tree" in both this ballad and in "The Laily Worm and the Machrel of the Sea" also brings an echo to our minds of the Garden of Eden story, where the serpent is connected with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, in the account of the fall of man, always interpreted in Christian dogma as a sexual fall. In fact, like many myths, it is not meant to be taken literally, but interpreted symbolically. That is not to deny but to emphasize the truth it contains. When human beings become aware of their sexuality they also face choices which may be good ones or bad ones. Having these choices is what makes us human, and the choices we make are what shape our lives.

When people's choices are taken from them, they are like those in the ballads, held under an evil spell. In "Allison Gross" the enchantment is broken not by the exercise of some holy power, as in some ballads and folktales, but by a being with stronger magic power, the fairy queen herself, who is riding by with "the seely court" at Halloween. The word "seely" of course carries a sense of holiness, but this is in line with the fact that people feared to offend the fairies and referred to them as "the good folk." In his introduction to "Allison Gross" Child comments that in the same way the Greek nereids, who approximate to the fairies and elves of northern tradition, were also referred to in this conciliatory way and had a queen who compensated people for the injuries caused by their malicious tricks. The fairy queen alights nearby on a "gowany bank" and restores the young man to his own shape by stroking him three times on her knee. This could be interpreted as a symbolic act of love, as well as magic to remove the witch's spell. The singer must express the feeling of relief and joy he has at the end of the story.

This use of magic to remove magic suggests a pre-Christian origin for the belief in transforming the hypnotic power of a witch. There are well-documented accounts of how the believers in the old pagan religion, sometimes called Wicca, were regarded by the early church as followers of the Devil and in the seventeenth century it was through religious zeal that witches were identified, pursued and burned at the stake. Before mesmerism and hypnosis were understood it was not surprising that practitioners of these arts were seen as evil magicians or witches, especially when they used their spells to dominate others. Nowadays they would be called "power freaks." Many people regard the abuse of hypnosis for stage entertainment as distasteful, because it often humiliates those who subject themselves to it for amusement or out of curiosity, by making them bark like dogs, take off their clothes or perform ludicrous or repulsive antics. In the same way, Allison Gross demeaned and degraded the young man who would not submit to her sexual advances.

There is a folktale which I collected from the Perthshire Stewarts which is the legend of a trickster called the Baker Boy, and which supports the idea of

mesmerism or hypnosis being used in a less horrifying way, but which was interpreted as witchcraft or magic. The Baker Boy, according to John Stewart, was the nickname of a character who used to appear at fairs and markets and play tricks on people. An old woman was once coming through a fair carrying two sheaves of corn she had bought to feed her goat when she saw a crowd gathered. "Come and see a cock pu a lerrick tree" was the cry. She pushed forward and all she could see was a cockerel pulling a corn straw and said so. This attracted the attention of the Baker Boy, who came forward, no doubt fixing her with his eye, and commented on the two sheaves of corn she was carrying. He offered her a guinea for them, which she accepted. The acceptance of the coin put her in his power, just as the young man would have been had he accepted any of Allison Gross's gifts. When the old woman looked round again, she could see the cockerel pulling the larch tree. No doubt when she tried to spend the guinea she would find, as in another story of the Baker Boy and a man at an inn, that the money he had given her was just a round bit of wood.

The same motif is used in the greater wonder tale of *The King o the Black Art*. [Arne-Thompson 325, *The Magician and his Pupil*, with versions found in most of the countries of Europe.] It occurs in the part of the story that deals with the horse sale. The King in disguise is trying to trick the father, who has rescued his son, into letting him try the horse, which is really the boy. The son has told his father to sell him but keep hold of the bridle and bit. If he lets the King try him, he will have to let them go too, so the King will once more have him in his power. When he has got the old man drunk and he agrees to let the King try the horse in return for a pile of gold, he rides off with it, leaving his victim with just a pile of horse dung.

Notice that Allison Gross offers the young man three gifts, she turns herself round three times, and the fairy Queen strokes his head three times to remove the spell. The number three, which occurs again and again in ballads and stories, has been associated with the Trinity. But its use in connection with fairy belief shows that it is pre-Christian and linked to an older world picture that was based on some elemental significance of the number three, or the idea of threefoldness. Emily Lyle in her book *Archaic Cosmos* cites this in connection with an old concept of the structure of the cosmos.⁴ Indeed, the Trinity itself is just another example of it.

The ballad of "Allison Gross" recounts what for the young man in question is a traumatic experience at the hands of someone who exercises her strength of will upon him. He is delivered from this spell by the supportive love of his own kin and a stronger power that restores his sense of identity and worth. The ballad singer must be true to this interpretation just as an actor must be true to the part he or she is playing. What makes the ballad even more

⁴Emily Lyle, *Archaic Cosmos* (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 6-7.

powerful is that the motifs encode a type of human experience with which many people can identify—being subjugated by another, being disfigured by fear and the destruction of self-esteem, escaping from its grasp and being restored to normality. Modern victims of sexual harassment and abuse would understand Allison Gross as the personification of their nightmares.

“The Laily Worm and the Machrel of the Sea” (Child 36) further illuminates the dark world of witchcraft belief by presenting the use of magic as an expression of the hatred of a stepmother. The darkness of this must be reflected in the singer’s voice

I was but seven year auld
When my mither she did die;
My father married the ae warst woman
The warld did ever see.

The stepmother is a potent figure in the folk traditions of the world, in which the ties of kinship are held sacred. She is the dark side of the ever-loving mother figure, which seems to suggest a belief that a woman who is not the natural mother cannot love children as her own if she has not borne them. Interestingly, many of the stories that feature a wicked stepmother seem designed to give the children in the situation as explanation, if not an excuse, for their negative feelings, and a relatively harmless way of dealing with them. They see themselves as faced with the dilemma of pretending to love someone they do not love or forfeiting the love of someone they do love. Wicked stepmothers always come to a bad end, as in this ballad. This reveals the essential bias of certain types of folk belief and folk song or tale of providing a form of psychotherapy for people in certain situations in which fear, hatred or jealousy are causing problems.

According to the ballad the stepmother turns the two step-children into a loathsome serpent and a mackerel. Using the principle outlined in the interpretation of “Allison Gross,” one can only imagine the manifestations of hatred that brought this about, the bullying, humiliating, use of foul names and insults, and the poison of constant negation of an unwanted relationship. The laily worm, like the one in “Allison Gross,” is totally in the power of the witch. It behaves like any other serpent or dragon of medieval story by killing whoever comes its way, but, in the second section of this repetitive song, the serpent/man appears to be addressing his father, whom he finds himself unable to kill because of their relationship:

“Seven knights *hae* I slain,
Sin I lay at the *fit* of the tree,
An war ye *na* my *ain* father,
The eight *ane* ye should be.”

This suggests he has not completely lost touch with his real self. The mackerel of the sea, on the other hand, seems to be able to come and go in and out of her own shape and will not come at the witch-stepmother's command, when she (and not the fairy queen or any other) is forced to lift the enchantment. There is even another strand of meaning suggested by the fact that in older Scots the word mackerel means bawd, pimp or procuress. It is difficult to fit this idea into this ballad, however, in which "machrel of the sea" does seem to indicate a fish.

Although the process of laying on the spell is not described, it would be perfectly possible to ascribe to it the same practice of hypnosis as in "Allison Gross." The young man is trapped in the belief that he is a loathsome monster. His sister Maisry, as in "Allison Gross," comes to him and lays his head on her knee and combs it with a "siller kame" and washes his hair in the sea. His father questions the stepmother and it told what he knows to be lies. Again, it seems to be the power of human love that is the stronger magic—the man's love for his son is something she cannot prevail against. The fact that in the end the wicked stepmother is burned as a witch shows that the father treats her behavior in the way witchcraft was treated then, as an art of the Devil:

He has sent to the wood
For whins and for hawthorn,
An he has taen that gay lady,
An there he did her burn.

This strange story, coming to us from a grim and distant past, is seldom sung today, but would need a strong, stark presentation, without theatricality or whimsy of any kind.

A ballad that features a witch, not for her malevolent power but for her attempt to overcome death, is "The Wife of Usher's well (Child 79). Nowhere in the ballad is she referred to as a witch, but the fact that she causes gales and storms until her three sons come back for the grave demonstrates this pretty clearly. The title of "wife" as applied to witches was customary and very often to be called "the Wife of" signaled the fact. In folktales there are wise old women called "hen wives" or "spae wives."

Wells were very much surrounded with superstitious belief and were connected with the idea of health and cures, probably because many of them contained water rich in beneficial minerals. Thus these beliefs were founded on true experience, although people ascribed the curative properties of the water to magic or to the power of a saint. Wise old women or witches were often consulted by people looking for cures and were experts in herbal medicine. Although later the belief was annexed and used by the Christian church, it was an essential part of the old pagan belief.

In the ballad we are told that this wealthy mother *sent* her three sons "oer the sea" which would, of course, simply mean sending them out to seek their

fortune. Long ago if you crossed the sea you were completely cut off from the place you had left. Water also protected you from witches as in Tam O' Shanter: "a stream they daurna cross." Being a rich woman the Wife would have high social standing, so perhaps she sent them to broaden their horizons, like those who went on the grand Tour in the eighteenth century. They may have learned some of her magic and were sent abroad to spread her power across the world. That is not the focus of the story, however; whatever she intended, they were not meant to die.

Raising storms was a practice widely associated with witches, often with the purpose of causing shipwrecks. The North Berwick witches were supposed to have done this to the ship carrying James VI, but the Wife of Usher's Well sees it as a means of bringing her sons back from the dead. The mother's desire to bring back the dead is one we can view with understanding and sympathy, as it is one of the most powerful motives for believing in ghosts.

I wish the wind may never cease,
Nor fashes in the flood,
Till my three sons come hame to me,
In earthly flesh and blood.

The curse works and her sons come home at Martinmas, the night on which the spirits of the dead are abroad, and "their hats were o the birk." They appear to be "in earthly flesh and blood," but birch-bark hats identify them as having come from the grave, as it is "at the gates o Paradise,/ That birk grew fair enough."

They are not living men but revenant ghosts, so the tragic ending of the story is inevitable. At cock-crow they must return whence they came: this motif is universally found in revenant ballads. Shakespeare also uses it in *Hamlet*, when his father's ghost appears to him to tell him of his murder. There are a number of ballads about lovers' ghosts who return for a variety of reasons to haunt a beloved, testifying to the power of human love, but this is the only ballad in the Scots tradition in which a mother brings back her sons.

Those who heard the ballad of "The Wife of Usher's Well" in the seventeenth century would also understand that the reason the three sons cannot rest in peace, and can be called back to earth, is because their mother mourns for them too much. This idea of excessive mourning disturbing the sleep of the dead is found also in "The Unquiet Grave" (Child 78). Singers of "The Wife of Usher's Well" have to express a sadness that is timeless. It needs no understanding of a past age to enable one to empathize with this situation. It is a very sad story, the middle section when the mother gives orders that "aa my house shall feast this night,/ Since my three sons are well," adds poignant emphasis to the ending, when they bid her farewell forever. We are also conscious of their grief at leaving her and the comfort and pleasures of life.

Fare ye well, my mother dear!
 Fareweel to barn an byre!
 An fare ye well, the bonny lass
 That kindles my mother's fire!

Ballads such as "Tam Lin" (Child 39) and "Thomas Rhymer" (Child 37) bring us into the realm of fairy belief, which was also widespread up to the nineteenth century and still is not extinct. Like belief in witches it contains echoes of ages long past, old religion and people's efforts to make sense of the work before scientific and technological advances seemed to explain things more clearly. Modern folklorists such as John MacInnes and Margaret Bennett demonstrate fascinating insights into this area, pointing out, for example, that the idea of fairy changelings was an acceptable way of accounting for a child that was abnormal or handicapped in some way. In both "Tam Lin" and "Thomas Rhymer" we have the motifs of fairy abduction and an Other World that a mortal can be taken to by the fairies, by a different road from those that lead to Heaven or Hell.

In "Tam Lin" the person carried off is Tam himself, who was carried away by the Fairy Queen when he fell from his horse while out hunting. His only hope of being free from her power is to have an earthly lover who will risk everything for him. Janet is warned not to go to Carterhaugh because of Tam Lin, who has become notorious for waylaying young women there, who always have to forfeit something to him—a ring, a pledge of love, a green mantle or their maidenhead. Janet, with her green skirts kilted up above her knee and her hair nicely braided, sets out for the woods knowing all this, so it seems obvious that she is seeking not just romance but a physical relationship. Some versions of the ballad have a stanza missing here, but another version makes it clear:

He took her by the milk-white hand,
 And by the grass green sleeve,
 And laid her low down on the flowers,
 At her he asked no leave (Child 39, variant D).

A stanza like this occurs in many ballads and is a formula for seduction, or rape, although it is unlikely that it would have been viewed in this way in the past.

When she returns home it becomes apparent that she is pregnant and one of her father's old knights comments on the fact and is afraid one of them will get the blame. Janet returns to Carterhaugh no doubt hoping to meet Tam Lin and he finds her pulling the leaves of the "double rose" that will abort her child. He stops her and she asks him if he is a Christian. It turns out that he is the grandson of Lord Roxburgh, but in thrall to the Fairy Queen.

He outlines to Janet how she can break the spell. On Halloween night the Queen and all her train will ride by, and he will be with them, on a white

horse, and with a glove on his right hand, his bonnet cocked up and his hair combed down, so as to be recognizable. She is to wait at Miles Cross (probably a crossroads, because they are always associated with magic), pull him from his horse and hold onto him, no matter what form he changed into—snake, lion or red-hot brand. Here we meet again the “transformation” motif. Janet sees him turned into a whole range of fierce creatures or dangerous things, but maintains her trust in him and follows his instruction to “hold me fast, and fear me not” because he is the father of her child and her earthly lover. In this way the power of the fairy Queen is broken by the power of human love.

The ballad singer here must convey the high drama of the story by bringing the human passion of the characters to life, and also create a feeling of wonder at the strange other-worldliness and frightening power of the fairies.

Thomas Rhymer, who is known to be Thomas of Ercildoune or Earlston, is a noted early fourteenth-century poet and seer. He figures in Blind Hary’s *The Actis and Deidis of Schir William Wallace* and is reputed to have made many prophecies concerning the future of Scotland. He is a figure of mystery and magic, much of it based on the belief that he had visited the fairy kingdom. The ballad tells a story which generations of Scots believed to be true. Many such tales of mortals disappearing for years and then reappearing probably arose because such a thing was perfectly possible in such an age when communication was difficult and there was no way of proving that returning travelers were not telling the truth.

This ballad is also demanding of the singer, because it has such a dream-like quality to it, that needs an unhurried and momentous delivery, creating feelings of awe and wonder.

“The Elfin Knight” (Child 2) and “The Fause Knight upon the Road” (Child 3) belong to a group of ballads called by the late David Buchan “the wit-combat ballads,”⁵ otherwise called riddling ballads. Perhaps they originated in the old sport of flyting which was enjoyed by practitioners of the medieval art of rhetoric, who liked to use their skills in verbal dueling. In those times there was a delight in words and in competitive word games such as asking riddles. There are ballads in which there is a battle of wits, but in these two there is a supernatural element in the story. In both of them the aim is for the elfin knight or the fause knight, in both cases understood to be the Devil, to get the better of an opponent. The Elfin Knight is ostensibly being wooed by a young woman and the paid forfeit referred to is, like the mantle green in “Tam Lin,” her virginity. But it also seems to stand for the young man’s constancy. The young woman has actually sought to meet with the knight, as she says, when she hears his horn blowing:

⁵David Buchan, “The Wit-Combat Ballads,” in Carol L. Edwards and Kathleen E. B. Manley, eds., *Narrative Folksong* (Boulder, CO, 1985).

I wish that horn were in my kist,
 Yea, and the knight in my arms niest (Child 2, variant B).

The sexual symbolism of the horn and the kist is obvious here. It seems the girl is out to demonstrate her ability to keep her maidenhead, but it all depends on her getting the better of the other.

The knight enters the combat first, asking her to make him a shirt, without cutting or hemming, or using scissors or needle and thread. She replies by challenging him to plough a piece of land with his horn. Then he is to plant it with a peppercorn. The harvest is to be drawn home in a cart of stone and lime by a robin and stored in a mouse's hole. It is to be threshed with a shoe sole, winnowed in his palm and sacked in his glove, and brought across the sea without getting it wet. Then he can come and collect his shirt! As neither task is possible, she can keep her maidenhead, and he can remain constant to his "seven bairns and my wife" (if they exist). A copy of "The Elfin Knight" was found bound with an edition of Blind Hary's *Wallace* published in 1673.

There are eleven other versions, complete and incomplete, in Child, but in every case the tasks are ludicrously impossible. The wit combat game, which Buchan saw as having darker overtones, seems to be a kind of courtship, or even flirtation ritual, that allows the participants to cross swords verbally without coming to grips physically. What would have happened if they had not come to a truce in this battle of the sexes can only be the subject of speculation. It certainly seems as if some kind of danger is implied.

"Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight" (Child 4) begins in a similar way to the previous ballad but has a more tragic ending. When she hears him blow his horn, she is filled with desire for him, summons him and he makes her ride out with him to the woods, where she expects him to make love to her, but he tells her:

Seven king's daughters here hae I slain
 And ye shall be the eight o them.

In the distant past the Elf-Knight would appear as a demon lover, or the devil in disguise. The quick-witted girl, however, persuades him to sit down and rest, with his head on her knee. She lulls him to sleep with "a sma charm"—again an example of hypnotic power—and then kills him with his own sword and dagger. The woman definitely comes off best in this case—in variant A. In other versions of the ballad, he makes her "fetch me some of your father's gold/ And some of your mother's fee" (variants E and F), so his motive for murder is clear. In other versions she is called May Colven (C) or Collin (D), and he is called false Sir John, both characters associated with the Culzean area of Ayrshire. He is also called "an outlandish knight" (variant E), which means he is a stranger. This evokes the age of the knight errant. The ballad comes from a time when women usually did not get the best of it, so perhaps it carries

the story of the Elf Knight to a kind of wish-fulfillment conclusion. It may be sung as a warning to young girls, as so many folk songs are.

“The Fause Knight Upon the Road” (Child 34) also relates to the flying tradition and concerns a contest of wits between the devil and a schoolboy, that is between experience and innocence. The lad encounters a sinister stranger on the road, in folklore regarded as a situation fraught with danger. The questions the fause knight puts to the boy, “O whare are ye gaun?” and “What is that upon your back?” would not be asked by someone who knew the boy. Whether the verbal sparring is a game or in deadly earnest rests on how intimidating the Fause Knight appears to be. The only version we have was collected by William Motherwell, but Child found a Swedish ballad that parallels it, and there are many other folktales in the Scandinavian tradition that resemble it, so it goes back much further than the early nineteenth century when Motherwell collected it. The character who meets the boy is sometimes female, but always sinister.

Motherwell also collected two versions of “Riddles Wisely Expounded” (Child 1, variants C and D) that also have a connection with the devil, as evinced by the lines:

As sune as she the fiend did name,
He flew awa in a blazing flame (variant C).

This is after the woman has successfully solved the riddles he gave her, for example,

O what is higher nor the tree?
And what is deeper nor the sea?

* * *

O heaven is higher nor the tree
And hell is deeper nor the sea (variant C).

At the beginning of the ballad, he is identified as “a knicht riding frae the east” and the woman is the youngest of three daughters in the house of a widow.

The question of how these ballads should be sung in an age very different from the one from which they date should be answered by regarding them as examples of how quick-wittedness can be an advantage in tricky situations. They should be performed with humor that has an undertone of menace, with an emphasis that adds significance to both questions and answers.

A ballad that seems akin to these wit combat ballads is “The Two Magicians” (Child 44) in which the verbal sparring seems to be replaced by actual transformations; both protagonists apparently have magic powers. Child describes it as “a base-born cousin of a pretty ballad known all over Southern Europe,” presumably because it has a sexual connotation.

The lady stands in her bower door,
 As straight as willow wand;
 The blacksmith stood a little forebye,
 Wi hammer in his hand.

The smith is determined to gain the lady's maidenhead and she is just as resolved to keep it. She then transforms herself into "a turtle dow," an eel, a duck, a hare, a gray mare, a het girdle, a ship and a silken plaid on a bed, to which he responds by becoming "another dow," a trout, a drake, a greyhound, a saddle, a cake, a nail and "green covering," and so gained her maidenhead. The whole process has the air of a courtship ritual that tests the ability of each partner to respond and adapt to the other, however unlike they appear to be.

Another apparently dissimilar couple is the "earthly nourris" and the seal man in the beautiful and mysterious "The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry" (Child 113). This is one of many ballads and stories found in Northern Europe featuring the seal people, in which the belief that seals can become human and father children or bear children to mortal partners is central. This belief may have arisen from the fact that seals live both on land and in the sea, and their cries can be mistaken for human cries. The seal man, whom comes to the woman's bed, describes himself unequivocally:

I am a man upo the lan,
 An I am a silkie in the sea;
 And when I'm far and far frae lan,
 My dwelling is in Sule Skerrie.

Talking animals are part of the stock in trade of folk tradition, in both ballads and tales. The girl is not happy that he has "aught a bairn" to her. She is presumably not cheered up, even by being given a purse of gold as a nurse's fee. There is a sense of doom, when he foretells that he will take his young son and "teach him for to swim the faem," and they will both be killed by the harpoon of the "proud gunner" who becomes her earthly husband. The seal man is a very dominant character, reflecting the admiration northern folk had for what seemed to them a strange and wonderful creature. The story also suggests that the killing of the seals by the fishermen is tragic and wrong, because, as living creatures, they are akin. The coupling of the seal man and the "earthly nourris," by comparison, does not seem so unnatural.

The ballad of "The Wee Wee Man" (Child 38) encapsulates very neatly the main points of fairy belief that were current when these stories were told. Fairies were always met with by chance in the countryside, in the world of nature. This connects them with the belief in the Earth Mother Goddess that was part of the old religion. They inhabited an Other World "Between a water and a wa" which indicates that they are not connected either to streams and lochs or to human dwellings and settlements.

They are very small, the size of their legs being described in terms of the dimensions of the hand—a “shathmont,” which according to Child’s Glossary is “the measure from the top of the extended thumb to the extremity of the palm, six inches.” There is a theory that the fairies were survivors of an earlier race driven underground by successive waves of conquering invaders and settlers. Any strangers were viewed with suspicion in ancient communities, particularly those who were markedly different in appearance from local inhabitants. Thus belief in fairies is like any belief in the supernatural, an attempt to explain the inexplicable.

Despite his small size, however, “the wee wee man” is amazingly strong, and can throw a “meikle stane” that even the doughty “Wallace wight” could not have lifted as high as his knee. This reference to Wallace that is made in five of the seven extant versions of the ballad could date it to the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, when Wallace was a great folk hero. There are many tales in Celtic tradition of such characters as the wee man, for example, the story of John Grant, the Cam Ruadh of Glen Isla in Perthshire, who was very small and very strong, a swift runner and a prodigious archer. In Pictish country he had the qualities and attributes that made for survival in a wooded hilly terrain.

The wee man lives in a “bonny bower” to which he invites the narrator and others, the wee man running and the others following behind on horseback. When they dismount on a “bonny green” they are met by a “lady fine” with a retinue of beautiful ladies. It is like a mirror image of the royal court, and this is emphasized by the lines “Though the King of Scotland had been there,/ The warst o them might hae been his queen.” They ride further on and come to a splendid hall with a roof of beaten gold and a floor of crystal, where the ladies dance with knights and in one version, “There were pipers playing in every neuk” (variant E). This is a traditional picture of the fairy court as imagined by a populace who may have seen or heard of the palace or castle where the king lives. Then, as in many folk tales of this kind, the whole scene, including the palace, the wee wee man, the Queen and the ladies and knights vanish into thin air.

While belief in the supernatural continued long after the age in which the old ballads were composed and sung, and is alive even today, it has not generated songs based on it, unless in a fanciful manner or even for comic effect. Such songs are not made and sung necessarily by people who share a belief in fairies or witches or ghosts. It was observed some years ago by A. L. Lloyd, the great English folklorist, collector and singer, that what was originally part of a serious religious faith can reappear in a subsequent age as joke or whimsy.⁶

Perhaps one of the most unlikely manifestations of supernatural belief appeared as a component of that fascinating secret cult of ploughmen known as

⁶A. L. Lloyd, “Lady into Landscape,” *Chapbook*, 4.5 [1979], 17-21.

the Horseman's Word, which was prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I first heard this described by Hamish Henderson at a workshop at Falkirk Folk Festival in the 1960s, when he spoke of it as a secret society that had in it elements of freemasonry, a craft guild, an early trade union and a magic circle. Some old ploughmen will still not speak about it or reveal its occult rituals, but when I was putting together *The Sang's the Thing*⁷ I had the opportunity to read the notebook of an old "made horseman" who was the grandfather of Jim Wallace, one of the singers whose lives I was chronicling.

The Horseman's Oath was administered by means of a ceremony, to which the initiate was brought by a sponsor, with the following questions and answers:

- Q: Who is there?
 A: A brother and a blind man.
 Q: What do you want here with a blind man?
 A: To be made a horseman the same as myself.
 Q: How do you know you are a horseman?
 A: Because I have been tried and re-tried and ready to be tried by you.
 Q: What way come you here?
 A: Through crooks and straits as the road led.
 Q: What brought you here?
 A: To find the secret.
 Q: Did anyone send you here?
 A: No.

The oath is taken with right hand upraised and in a position "neither waking, nor swinging, sitting, lying, standing clothed nor unclothed, boots on nor boots off." As this would involve kneeling with some clothing removed or rolled up, and with one bare foot, it is easy to see the resemblance to Masonic ceremony. This is not the only idea to be borrowed from freemasonry, as the idea of a brotherhood is at the basis of the whole thing. The initiate has to promise to "conceal and never reveal" nor give nor see given any word of his oath to any living soul, and keep all the vows of horsemanship, under the threat of the most horrendous penalties, including being quartered by wild horses. The horseman must pray for this fate as his just desert if he breaks the oath. All this contrasts dramatically with the lessons in horsemanship which follow, which are completely founded on kindness to the horse, who is, after all, the ploughman's closest companion. These lessons also gave strictly practical instruction on the craft, as one of the medieval guilds might have done for tradesman.

⁷Sheila Douglas, *The Sang's the Thing* (Edinburgh, 1992).

At the initiation ceremony the new horseman has to shake hands with the Devil, who is present in the guise of Aul Hornie, who is probably an older ploughman with a goatskin over his head. In the shadowy meeting place where these rituals would be enacted this was probably quite a frightening experience. In the ballad "Nicky Tams" there is a reference to "the Horseman's Grip and Word," which suggests freemasonry in the idea of a secret handshake:

First I gaed on for bailie loon,
Syne I gaed on for third;
Then of coorse I had tae get
The Horseman's Grip and Word.

In some versions of the song it is merely "the Horseman's grippin Word." Being a horseman was also described as having had "a shak o Auld Hornie." This symbolized the investing of the new horseman with magical power to control horses and also, it was said, women. This is reflected in that category of songs called the bothy ballads, in which the ploughman will often refer to his dandy pair or will condemn a farm on which he is fee'd, because he has been landed with a poor pair of horses. There are also many songs in which the ploughman is praised, by women, such as "Plooman Laddies" (not in Child):

Doon yonder den there's a plooman lad,
Some simmer's day he'll be aa my ain;
An sing laddie-aye and sing laddie-O,
The plooman laddies are aa the go.

There was an aura of physical attractiveness to the ploughman who had high status in the farm towns and who was usually a strong, fit man. This was enhanced by his legendary power over horses that was widely viewed with wonder by other country people. There are tales of the use of aromatic oils that will make horses come to you. It is hard nowadays to establish how much genuine belief in magic was involved and how much was a strategy to create respect for ploughmen, regarded by those outside the farming community as the lowliest of men. The idea of the Ploughman Poet that arose around Burns when he visited Edinburgh had none of the resonances that attached to "made horsemen." In folklore horses have always been connected with magic and the relationship between horse and horseman has always been a special one.

*Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama
Glasgow*