

DIFFERENT TIMES: SAME PROBLEMS

THE RELEVANCE OF BALLADS IN THE PRESENT DAY

Sheila DOUGLAS

Merlinwood, 12 Mansfield Road, Scone, Perth PH2 6SA, Scotland

Abstract: This paper based on Scottish ballads, aims to paint a contrast between the ethos of the world from which the ballads sprang and that of the present day, which seems so far removed from it. Then it will consider three ballads that will show that the human situations, emotions and problems they reflect, while they may be interpreted differently today, nevertheless show the unchanging character of human nature and the timelessness of the principles that help to resolve its problems. This along with the undying love of storytelling that is shared by people worldwide, suggests that ballads are as relevant today as when they were first sung. The three Scottish ballads I will consider are *Alison Gross*, *Binnorie* and *The Bonnie Earl of Murray*.

Keywords: witchcraft, hypnosis, murder and revenge, bones mourning

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 would be regarded as spiritual insight. There was no universal schooling, no psychiatric medicine nor any religious tolerance. There was everywhere a habitual ascription of anything that could not be explained easily to magic and the supernatural. Those who 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. Two or three centuries ago, phenomena that we take for granted as part of everyday life, would have seemed to the general population as the most impossible of dreams, which could be realised only through magic or witchcraft.

Those of our ballads that deal with the supernatural and magic of any kind are among our oldest. The fact that the singer or people generally today no longer believe such things, or so it is, not always correctly, assumed, should not affect the story told in character in, for example, the great witchcraft ballad, *Alison Gross*.¹ To hear it sung by the late, great Lizzie Higgins², was an experience never to be forgotten. Lizzie believed deeply in the supernatural and her performance of the ballad was memorably blood-chilling.

¹ CHILD 35.

² Daughter of the great Jeannie Robertson MBE, Aberdeenshire ballad singer, and equally respected as a tradition bearer.

The witch in medieval times was not a figure of Halloween³ fun with a broomstick and a pointed hat, but a real and very much-feared persona, believed to possess all kinds of powers. Our ballad tradition reveals several different types of individuals to whom were attributed the title of witch. Exemplified here is the one who exerts power over another's will in order to dominate that person completely. In *Alison Gross* a young man describes how the witch invites him to meet her in her "bower."

*Auld Alison Gross she lives in yon tower
The ugliest witch in the North Countrie
She's trysted me ae nicht til her bower
An mony a braw speech she's made tae me.*

*

*She showed me a mantle o the reid scarlet,
Wrocht wi gold and fringes fine
Gin ye'll be my leman sae true
This guidly gift it sall be thine.*

Alison Gross is apparently not an old hag, but a lusty young one. Many of those who were burned as witches were not old; some were what would nowadays be called teenagers. We have also to keep in mind that, centuries ago, people's life expectancy was much less than today. He refers to her as ugly, but that may be because her reputation as "the ugliest witch in the North countrie" makes her frightening and dangerous.

He steadfastly refuses all her offers, of "a mantle o the reid scarlet" or "a *sark* (shirt) o the saftest silk" or "a cup o the guid red gold", so she then proceeds to use her supernatural power to transform him into an ugly reptile. The verse is worth quoting:

*Then oot she tane a silver wand
An she 's turned her three times roun an roun
She's muttered sic words that my strength it failed
An I fell doon senseless upon the groun.*

After this, it seems he "became" a loathly 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 pre-historic times or could remind people of the Garden of Eden story from Genesis that the Christian missionaries would have 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 a *siller* (silver) basin and a *siller kame* " to delouse his head, as family members did for each other customarily in those days. This in itself has

³ Celtic festival of Sabhain known in English as All Hallows Eve and in Scots as Halloween.

become a motif for family intimacy and affection, in ballads and folktales all over Europe. She still regarded him as a human being and still loved him as her brother. When we re-read the verse quoted above, it seems that what has been practised on the young man would be recognised and understood today under a different name. Hypnosis is not a modern invention. But here we have its use described in a way that would fit the way it is practised 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 public, in stage acts, which abuse the use of hypnosis, which is more properly used in hospitals and clinics. Alison Gross of course uses the power abusively and maliciously. The young man believes he is a “worm” and must “toddle aroon the tree”. This symbolises the subjection in which he is held by Alison Gross, which must be of a sexual nature, since the snake is traditionally also a phallic symbol. As he cannot any longer see himself as a man, it also means 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. A practising hypnotherapist pointed out to me, that people cannot be induced by hypnosis to do anything that is against their nature. What Alison Gross did with her spell was to play on the young man’s doubts of his own worth and adequacy. This is the way evil always works.

When people’s choices are taken from them, they are like those in the ballads, held under an evil spell. What makes the ballad even more powerful is that the motifs encode a type of human experience with which many human beings can identify: modern victims of sexual harassment and abuse would understand *Alison Gross* as the personification of their nightmares.

*Binnorie or The Twa Sisters*⁴ is a Scottish version of a ballad and story found all over Europe, sometimes called *The Singing Bone*⁵. Two heiresses are wooed by one knight, possibly initially more interested in their land, but the fact that he falls in love with the younger one, suggests this is not so. The elder one is jealous and entices her sister to the water’s edge and drowns her, ignoring her cries for help. Her corpse is dragged out of the miller’s dam and seen to be that of a rich lady. A passing harper/fiddler makes an instrument out of her bones and/or strings it with her hair. When he is in the king/lord’s banqueting hall, the harp/fiddle “plays its lane” and reveals not only the murder, but also the murderer.

The widespread distribution of this motif of murder revealed from the bone or bones of the victim, while it may appear in the ballad as a mysterious and wonderful occurrence, can be seen in modern times in terms of forensic science and pathology. We are quite accustomed to seeing archaeological research produce bones, from which doctors and scientists can deduce cause and circumstances of death, and have

⁴ CHILD 10.

⁵ See Child’s introduction to the ballad *The Twa Sisters* CHILD 10.

seen murder cases solved from finger-prints, bloodstains, teeth, hair and bones, and now in DNA, in ways that would have been thought supernatural in medieval times. To make a ballad and sing it at the royal court would make it the hottest property around and to make the excuse that the harp or fiddle “played its lane” would be a good way of avoiding being strung up for singing it. In modern parlance, one term used for someone confessing to a crime, or revealing incriminating evidence is “singing”.

This brings me to the third ballad I want to consider *The Bonnie Earl o Moray*⁶. He was a great folk hero in his day, an aristocrat but beloved by the common people in the reign of James VI. When he was tricked into an ambush prepared for him by his enemy the Earl of Huntly, and cruelly murdered, there was a great public outcry that generated enormous compassion – not to mention who knows how many ballads, two of which have come down to us. The modern parallel I wish to draw is with the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, which seemed to trigger a similar popular response and which is still surrounded by all kinds of unresolved rumour and speculation. Probably the truth will never be known about the death of the Bonnie Earl. But oral tradition has a knack of mirroring the reality of the situation.

*Ye Hielans an ye Lawlans o whaur hae ye been?
They hae slain the Earl o Moray an hae laid him on the green.
He was a braw callant an he rade at the ring
An the bonnie Earl o Moray, he micht hae been a king.*

Sandy Ives in his IBC paper in LA in 1993,⁷ quoted a contemporary source, that described Moray as “The most weirlyk man baith in curage and person, for he was a comelie personage of a great stature and strang of bodie like a kemp”. To capture and kill such a man would take a bit of doing.

The rivalry between him and the Earl of Huntly was typical of the period. The feud went back to a previous generation, when Regent Murray had the Earl of Huntly and one of his sons executed. The deep principle of feudal vengeance demanded blood for blood. In modern times this is looked on as gangsterism. The Earl’s body was exhibited publicly by his mother with all its wounds. “They hae slain the Earl o Moray and hae laid him on the green,” corresponds with facts that are known about his death. The details are fairly blood-curdling. When he was attacked by the Earl of Huntly and his followers in Donibristle House, which was set on fire, he ran out with his hair ablaze and was cut down in the grounds, where his dead body was found. The reference to the idea that “he micht hae been a king” could be a compliment to his prowess but could refer to the fact that he was believed to have had an affair with the Queen who was Anne of Denmark. The ballad certainly implicates him in the verse:

⁶ CHILD 181.

⁷ IBC Conference 1993 proceedings *Ballads and Boundaries*, 1994. p. 135.

*O wae be tae ye Huntly and wherefore did ye sae?
I bade ye bring him wi you but forbade ye him tae slay.
He was a braw callant and he rade at the glove
An the bonnie Earl o Moray, he was the Queen's true love!*

The public mourning for the bonnie Earl was widespread and heartfelt and what would be called today OTT. The murder was described by an Edinburgh lawyer as shameful and causing “the greit regret and lamentation of the haill pepill.” In Moray’s day, the body of a murdered man could be seen by the public, with all his wounds.

People long ago were seldom spared having the brutal realities of violence shown to them; nowadays, in Scotland, we protect ourselves from such rude shocks. But the mass hysteria and piles of flowers do not seem to me to reflect any real ability to confront and cope with the barbarity it is meant to counteract. The calls for retribution and punishment of Huntly for the death of the bonnie Earl, although they were loud enough, seemed to fall on deaf ears and Huntly was never punished. The story finds many echoes in the present day, when the tragic death in mysterious circumstances of admired and popular young men or women, like Princess Diana or Jack Kennedy, can be mourned to even greater excess before film and television cameras. It can also be seen that the mourning that follows the tragedy can distort the situation to the extent that it increases the charisma of the victim beyond reason.

LITERATURE

HERRERA-SOBEK, Maria (ed.)

1994: *Ballads and Boundaries*. Los Angeles, UCLA.

CHILD, Francis James

1882–98: *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Boston, Houghton, Mifflin.