

**THE ASPECTS OF PERRY-LORD FOR POPULAR BALLADS, CONCERNING  
THREE ANGLLO-SAXON BALLADS (SIR PATRICK SPENS, LORD RANDAL, THE  
WIFE OF USHER'S WELL)**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is through properly selected examples to prove that Millman Parry and Albert Lord's aspects of the theory of the popular ballad can be applied in the English ballads too. Perry and Lord explained how the Homeric epic and numerous popular ballads of the Balkans and traditions, could be transmitted through many generations by oral route and why have appeared formulaic principles in the way they are created and presented. Following the same procedure, we will try to show the same principles on an analysis of three Anglo-Saxon ballads: Sir Patrick Spens, Lord Randal, and The Wife of Usher's Well. Ballads will be treated according to the theory of oral-formulaic structure of the ballad. This theory suggests that the more phrases the singer knows, the higher is the chance to improvise and structure strings of verses. Ballads Sir Patrick Spens, Lord Randal, and The Wife of Usher's Well will be analyzed starting from their metric system, rhyme, and as well as locating stylistic figures used in these ballads. The paper will have a comparative approach to find similarities and differences between ballads of Balkans posed by Perry and Lord, and three Anglo-Saxon ballads. Also, this paper will analyze the themes treated in these ballads. Given that these ballads are located in two different regions with different history and culture, this paper will try to come to the conclusion that no matter that they belonged to two different traditions, histories and cultures, themes encountered in them if not identical, then many are very similar.

**Key words:** *ballad theory, structure, oral-formulaic, metric system*

## INTRODUCTION

Ballads have great value in literature, in this case in English literature. It is impossible not to notice so many valuable ballads in English literature, which motivate the reader and make more curious in searching different ballads. Every good reader knows the importance of ballads especially of the old English ballads, which use very clear language attracting the reader to read more and more.

A ballad is “a folk song or orally transmitted poem telling in a direct and dramatic manner some popular story usually derived from a tragic incident in local history or legend. The story is told simply, impersonally, and often with vivid dialogue.”(The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, 2008:32). What Goethe says about ballads is that the value of these songs of the simple people is in the fact to be found that their motifs are drawn completely from nature. He added that in the art of saying things capably, uneducated men have greater skill than those who are educated. Ballads deal with historical events, local traditions, with personal adventures or achievements. We can say that they are totally objective. However, today’s poetry is completely subjective which deals with the study of the subjective conditions rather than objective realities.

Accordingly, old ballads are of great value because of the spontaneity. They present subject matter lyrics where in general they show the unconsciousness or also called *naïveté*. In some cases, the *naïveté* is presented with soft and acceptable humor, which attracts the spirit of the man (reader) with its real, sincere and beautiful description of different human experience. The old ballads are related to the popular epic, which deal with historical or real events. The old ballads are told by ordinary people and written by authors, but they are valued by their simplicity because they are presented just as the people told them.

The popular ballads are so different from the contemporary ones that all the people of each culture must appreciate the unwritten literature such as, popular ballads, or stories and proverbs because they deal with originality. Even though nowadays literature is seen as if it is understood only by professional people and that only few people can write poetry or other forms of literature, in fact it is not like that at all. There are many people of each nation who can produce real impressive songs or poems which may seem original, clear and objective.

Time has shown that every nation with its own language and tradition can produce really impressive songs that speak clearly and objectively for their uniqueness, but also for the cultural communication with other nations. Simplicity is the element to which is always given importance in this type of work, in which people have pointed out the necessity of communication as an essential means by which this works are successfully transmitted from generation to generation, from era to era and have survived through the millenniums. Oral literature should be further investigated in order to discover its stylistic and structural elements that provide its existence and still make it current, i.e. “alive” literature. Such is the case, of course with the English and Scottish ballads, but firstly let us see how much are ballads investigated in these regions.

The interest in folklore in Balkans began in the 19th century as part of the Enlightenment and Renaissance activities of intellectuals from the region, not only for cultural interest, but also for nationalist interests. Despite numerous research projects in recent years, we can say that relatively little has been explored in our region at the time when the research interest in folklore in the UK and the USA during the first half of the 20th century was on upswing.

The American folklorists Millman Parry and Albert Lord are they who did a research on ballads of Balkans. Albert Lord discusses the oral tradition through his theory of literary composition and applied on Homeric epic and medieval epic. The theory set by Millman Parry and later elaborated and expanded by Albert Lord, concentrates on the oral- formulaic composition of these epics and ballads that were transmitted orally through the centuries before finally being enrolled. The analysis is made of the ways by which the performers recite these ballads and transform those ballads from oral form into written form. The development of their theory suggests that folk singers use formulaic statements to recall long passages that make up these ballads.

The theory of oral-formulaic composition is based on the key idea that poets have available various "formulas" in the process of composition and with their use and connectivity they can quickly compose a number of verses. But what is meant by the term "formula"? Millman Perry offers the following definition: "a group of words that are regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea."(Lord, 2003:30).

The theory of oral-formulaic structure elaborated by Millman Parry and Albert Lord can be traced, recorded and applied not only on the ballads of Balkans but also the Anglo-Saxon ballads. Perry and Lord explained how the Homeric epic and numerous folk ballads in the Balkans and traditions could be transmitted through many generations orally and why such formulaic principles have appeared in the way these ballads are created and presented. Following the same procedure, we will try to show these principles on an analysis of the three Anglo-Saxon ballads: Sir Patrick Spens, Lord Randal, and The Wife of Usher's Well. Ballads will be treated according to the theory of oral-formulaic structure of the ballad. Millman and Perry treated this theory in the ballads of Balkans, so for us it is of great interest to examine whether the same theory can be treated in the ballads originating from the Anglo-Saxon regions and traditions. Of course, until ballads are not written in paper, the ballad cannot have a unified text. This allows many singers of folk ballads and songs to improvise in their own words, i.e. with their formulaic strategies and thus produce varieties and invariant of the same ballad.

Perry and Lord in the beginning give us a general introduction on the history of oral formulaic composition. Furthermore, they continue to research the training of the singers of these folk songs and the process of their performance. Much effort has been given to reveal who are these people who have so much control over the performance of folk ballads, traveling from one place to another in order to perform folk songs. The authors conclude that singers, who sing long passages of ballads, do not tell the same story for the second time with the same words. Lord and Perry indicate three stages in the preparation. In the first phase the man who is trained to be a performer of folk songs is passive and his job is to listen to the songs in order to get acquainted

with the themes and the general structure of the ballad. In the second stage he tries to put in context the story that he knows, according to certain metrics of poetic verses. In the third phase, he tries to recite a ballad for the first time and compose his first full song.

In the chapter titled "The Formula", Lord expresses his belief that there is a classical oral formula and thus provides the definition of Parry, who thinks that the formulas are mathematical in nature and defined as "a group of words that are regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea." (Lord, 2003:30 ) His analysis focuses more on the metric system and the repetition rather than content.

In the chapter titled "Theme", Lord and Parry concentrates on the content of the ballad. Parry says that the same subject can be expressed with the help of many different formulas and give a few examples of such ballads from the Balkans.

"Songs and the Singers" is the chapter where precisely is given the difference between a traditional singer of folk songs and modern or contemporary scientist and his views on oral formulaic composition in a song as a text which is subject of change from one to another singing. Lord tells us that traditional singers of folk songs think of them as "flexible plan of themes." (Lord, 2003:99) As a result, a folk song or ballad goes through changes because over time the memories begin to change and show new ways.

Furthermore, Albert Lord speaks of oral tradition and writing in a culture, exploring the transition from oral to written tradition. While writing in a culture can affect its oral tradition and while writing replaces the oral tradition, as a result we get the disappearance of the oral tradition. Further, Lord applies the theory of oral formulaic composition on Homer's works *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the medieval epic, and thus tells us that the modern reader treats Homer as oral-formulaic composer.

To prove that the above theory of Parry and Lord may be applied on the English ballads, we will argue and apply their views on appropriate examples. As a first example, we can enumerate the analysis of one of the Anglo-Saxon ballads titled *Sir Patrick Spens*.

The ballad *Sir Patrick Spens* is a historical ballad written in 11 stanzas. The ballad has a typical ballad stanza with four lines - a structure that helps singers as easy as possible to remember it. The ballad describes the tragic event of the thirteenth century. The ballad tells the story of the knight-sailor Sir Patrick Spence who goes in the sea on a mission for the King. Sir Patrick should bring the King's daughter and he needs to sail with her to Scotland. Sir Patrick has to fulfill this mission in the winter, but he has the feeling that an accident is forthcoming that actually occurs. The narrator tells the story "in medias res" ("in the middle of things"), without any comment on the events. It remains to the readers to discover the reasons of sailing and to decide whether this trip was a wise decision or not. But in the end of the ballad we understand that Sir Patrick and his crew die in this journey. The rhyme of each stanza of this ballad is A B C B. For example:

Up and spake an eldern knight,	A
Sat at the King's richt <b>kne:</b>	B

"Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor C  
That sailed upon the se." (Witham, 1903&1904:38)B

Almost all ballads have stanzas that consist of four or six lines, and use one of the two main meters 4-3-4-3 or 4-4-4-4. The ballad *Sir Patrick Spens* uses 4-3-4-3 metric. There are no other variants of *Sir Patrick Spens* and all lines have the same rhythm and rhyme scheme.

The first and third verse of each stanza, have four accents, while the second and fourth verse have three accents. Their accents form a rhythm that is iambic and ballads have musicality when reading, indicating that they were sung during the performance. An example of the first four verses of *Sir Patrick Spens*:

The *king sits* in *Dumfermline* *toune*.  
/ / / /  
*Drinking* the *blude*-red *wine*:  
/ / /  
'O *whar* will I *get* gnid *skipper*,  
/ / / /  
To *sail* this schip of *mine*?' (Sargent, 1904:103)  
/ / /

We can also say that in this ballad is used much alliteration, i.e. repeating the same consonant at the beginning of some consecutive words:

For I brought as **m**uch white **m**oney  
As will gane **m**y **m**en and **m**e. (Sargent, 1904:105)

In the ninth and tenth stanza is used repetition, repeating the same word:

9.  
They hadna been **a week, a week**,  
In Noroway but twae,  
10.  
**"Ye lie, ye lie**, ye liars loud!  
Sae loud's I hear ye lie. (Bates, 2012:535)

In *Sir Patrick Spens* are included several topics. The ballad treats more topics such as suffering, lost, loyalty, conflict between conviction and obedience to authority, dangers at sea and death.

The Anglo-Saxon folk ballad *Lord Randall* which comes from the folk tradition is written in 10 stanzas of four lines and is based on the tragedy of a young man who was poisoned by his

beloved. Contrary to popular song *Sir Patrick Spens* where 4-3-4-3 metric system is used, in this folk song the metric system which is used is 4-4-4-4. For example:

Oh *where* ha you *been*, Lord *Randall*, my *son*?  
 /                    /                    /                    /  
 And *where* ha you *been*, my *handsome* young *man*?  
 /                    /                    /                    /  
 I ha *been* at the *greenwood*: mother, *mak* my bed *soon*,  
 /                    /                    /                    /  
 For I'm *wearied* wi *hunting* and I *fain* wad lie *down*. (Sargent, 1904:22)  
 /                    /                    /                    /

The rhyme in *Lord Randall* may be unusual for us. We note that all stanzas have the same last four words: 'son', 'man', 'soon', and 'down'. We can say that this song is written in rhyming couplets. The words of his mother always end with 'son' and 'man'. Even though the words 'son' and 'man' are not identical while reading, they are heard similar but not identical and therefore the rhyme is not perfect ("imperfect rhyme" or "weak rhyme"). The same can be said about these two verses in which the accented word 'down' is read as 'doon'. So the rhyme in the ballad *Lord Randall* is AABB.

### *Lord Randall*

#### 10

“What d’ ye leave to your true-love, Lord Randal, my **son**?  
 What d’ ye leave to your true-love, my handsome young **man**?”  
 “I leave her hell and fire; mother, mak my bed **soon**,  
 For I’m sick at the heart, and I fain wad lie **down**.” (Sargent, 1904:23)

As one of the most used stylistic figure in *Lord Randall* is repetition. In any line, in the second part of each statement the same words are repeated. Whenever Randall answers the questions posed by his mother, he ended his answer with the same words. Throughout these questions and answers, we gradually learn more about the story and in the end, we learn what happened to Lord Randall. This dialogical method built into the narrative is common in ballads and it achieves greater dramatic tension in the singing of the ballad.

#### 2

“An wha met ye there, **Lord Randal, my son**?  
 An wha met you there, **my handsome young man**?”  
 “O I met wi my true-love; **mother, mak my bed soon**,  
 For I’m wearied wi huntin, **and fain wad lie down**.” (Sargent, 1904:22)

The main theme treated in this folk sing is Randall’s sincere love and betrayal or cheating of the beloved one. Poisoning in this song is used metaphorically, meaning the dearly loved

didn't poison him with poison, but the love he felt for her was actually the poison. This means that love is a symbol of death and the bed is a symbol of the tomb. Also, as a subtopic treated in the suffering of the mother for her son.

Our third and final folk ballad for analysis is *The Wife of Usher's Well* which dates from the 17th century. The ballad has a tragic story: the death of three sons and sufferings of their mother. This song is written in 12 stanzas of four verses with rhyme ABCB. This ballad begins "in medias res", i.e. no previous introduction to the events that led to the tragedy of three sons.

### The Wife of Usher's Well

THERE lived a wife at Usher's well,  
And a wealthy wife was she;  
She had three stout and stalwart sons,  
And sent them o'er the sea.

They hadna been a week from her,                    5  
A week but barely ane,  
When word came to the carline wife

That her three sons were gane. (Sargent, 1904:168)

The *Wife of Usher's Well* is written in the typical form of folk ballad, in 12 stanzas of four lines with alternating 4-3-4-3 metric system. For example:

They **hadna been** a **week** from **her**,  
/        /        /        /  
A **week** but **barely ane**,  
/        /        /  
Whan **word came** to the **carline wife**,  
/        /        /        /  
That **her** three **sons** were **gane**. (Sargent, 1904:168)  
/        /        /

The ballad has a refrain that is repeated to separate segments of the story. Many ballads also have partial repetition in which a phrase is repeated with slight differences such as the story progresses.

"Fare ye weel, my mother dear!  
Fareweel to barn and byre!  
And fare ye weel, the bonny lass  
That kindles my mother's fire!" (Sargent, 1904:168)

Alliteration is significantly present in this ballad with an aim to achieve an impressive sound effect. In the second line, for example, *And a wealthy wife was she* or third *She had three stout and stalwart sons*. Another stylistic figure used in this song is synecdoche (part of something that is whole or vice versa). For example:

It fell about Martinmass,  
When nights are lang and mirk,  
The carlin wife's three sons came hame  
And their hats were of birk. (Sargent, 1904:168)

In line *their hats were o the birk*, "birk" is the name of birch that grows in front of the gates of paradise. Also "birk" is used metaphorically as a symbol of death. One of the themes treated in this ballad is supernatural. Mother uses magic to return her sons, but they can return only as spirits and have to disappear early in the morning. Other themes are: tragic death, medieval religion / superstition and magic of culture, the relationship between the mother and her sons and suffering.

## CONCLUSION

From the above discussion of the three Anglo-Saxon ballads we can conclude that, like many Balkan ballads analyzed by Parry and Lord, Anglo-Saxon ballads also can be transferred to generations orally because most of them follow the same characteristics as ballads of these regions. This means that these characteristics have universal scope and application. The people who sang these songs and folk ballads were illiterate people with simple, dramatic and powerful language. These simple people managed to play a major role in their dissemination and transfer from one generation to another and from one culture to another. Preferred structural model of the ballad is stanza because almost by definition ballads were composed in stanzas with four rhymed verses ABCB with 8 + 6 + 8 + 6 syllables, as in ballads *Sir Patrick Spens* and *The Wife of Usher's Well*. However, there are other models such as the rhyming couplets with parallel AABB rhyme, as we saw in the case of folk ballad *Lord Randall*. The rhyme in the ballads is simple, but often irregular or "poor", often depends on the phonological features of the respective dialects in which the ballad occurred. They use the same "formulaic" words, phrases or expressions because they give musicality to the song. On a narrative level, in these songs are used repetition, symbol, alliteration, metaphor etc. The themes of the Anglo-Saxon ballads and ballads of the region are numerous and very similar. They treat themes of sincere love, the supernatural, often transferred



to dialogic form (mother and son, brother, sister, etc.), betrayal, suffering, sacrifice and the like. Given that these ballads are located in two different regions with different history and culture, this paper comes to the conclusion that no matter what they belonged to two different traditions, histories and cultures, the structure, the style and the themes that can be found in them if not identical, then in large part very similar.

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