

BALLADS (BALLADRY). Standing among the most significant poetic developments of the medieval period, balladry alone, aside from a few isolated *lyrics, brings us the unmitigated voice of the British medieval commoner. Its influence on subsequent English literature is immense. Rooted in the earlier *Anglo-Saxon epic tradition, often adopting and subverting aristocratic ideals and literary conventions to express the very different world view of the middle and lower classes, and influencing later poets from Christopher Marlowe to Thomas Hardy to C. Day Lewis, the ballad at once provides a unifying influence and a means of measuring the changing perceptions and concerns of the general populace. Nonetheless, no poetic form has been so unfairly maligned. As the original vehicle for the *vox populi*, it has always been associated with social unrest, and this, combined with its essentially parodic mode and frequently sardonic tone, removes it from the realm of “polite” literature. At best, balladry has been considered simplistic folk song; at worst, vulgar and propagandistic. Only in recent years, with the growth of appreciation for popular culture and the democratization of the arts in general, have the medieval ballad's special qualities begun to receive the serious consideration they deserve.

Of all poetic forms, the ballad alone has enjoyed uninterrupted popularity from the early Middle Ages to the present. Both as a term and a genre it derives from the tenth century, reaching its heyday between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries and again, after a brief hiatus, with the Romantic poets of the nineteenth century and continuing into the present. In the broadest sense, balladry connotes popular folk song, anonymous and pervasive, and frequently with very ancient roots. All agree that it is an oral tradition, that is, one in which the poems are produced, experienced, and transmitted orally, without the aid of the written word. Moreover, three general classifications of ballads—traditional, broadside, and literary—are generally accepted.

The traditional, or folk, ballad is the earliest form, deriving from the general populace, primarily in rural areas or small villages and towns. It arises from the common farm worker, laborer, or tradesperson, many of whom in the Middle Ages were the descendants of the displaced *Anglo-Saxons conquered in 1066 by *William I's Norman armies. Thus the folk ballad has at heart the epic tradition (by definition, also oral) of the earlier English people. This is important, as the discussion of ballad perceptions and themes here indicates, since the medieval commoners, with their very different racial and cultural heritage, embraced a profoundly different way of viewing the world from that of the primarily Norman-French aristocracy.

The traditional ballad functioned for the nonliterate of the Middle Ages in many of the same ways popular writing functions in contemporary society. It offered them a means of recording their opinions, perceptions, history, and world views; usually set to popular folk tunes, it also provided entertainment. Sometimes it became a kind of “oral newspaper,” recording events and concerns (local, regional, and national) in song and passing them from area to area and even to nations abroad via traveling tradespeople and the crews of merchant ships. The subject occurrences may have been major, such as those recorded in the so-called historical ballads *Chevy Chase* and *The Battle of Otterburn*, or they may have been more of household or clan tragedies, like the bride stealing of *The Douglas Tragedy* or the child murders in *The Cruel Mother*. The story of **Sir Patrick Spens* shows how, over time, historical events can enter the realm of

quasiepic fiction. Also like a newspaper, the songs included their share of editorials, where the actions of public figures might be condemned or satirized (e.g. *Queen Eleanor's Confession*, *Lamkin*). They functioned as a political forum and vehicle for propaganda and as such drew attention and censure from those bastions of medieval feudal society, the aristocracy and the church. But most often ballads functioned simply to record the world views, behavioral codes, and aspirations of the non-elite of medieval society.

Broadside balladry, too, began in the Middle Ages, although several centuries later than the traditional, originating in the cities with laborers and the new middle classes represented by trade guilds, shopkeepers, entrepreneurs, and civic leaders. Also commoners, and often originally migrants from the countryside, these people nonetheless developed concerns and aspirations diverging from those of their rural counterparts in the same way as rural and urban perceptions have always differed. Thus, while traditional folk song continued to flourish in the urban areas there arose alongside of it a distinctly new form of balladry more immediately concerned with politics, economics, commerce, and class relations. Such ballads tended more to the harshly satirical and propagandistic, so much so that they quickly became associated with rabble-rousing and general social unrest. Indeed, Warton (46) credited a political ballad with instigating a statute against libel as early as 1275, and under Elizabeth I ballads were reviewed as a matter of course for the purposes of determining and manipulating public opinion. By the early 1700s the broadside was generally considered, in the words of Daniel Defoe (59), “a useful incentive to mischief.” Later in the same century Horace Walpole went so far as to suggest government composition of ballads ridiculing the French Revolution with the purpose of swaying public opinion in favor of the monarchy and his own political party.

As broadside balladry grew to become a major form of propaganda, it was not only employed by social reformers and general rabble-rousers associated with the lower and middle classes, but it was also appropriated by establishment strategists and publicists who thought it better to adopt and manipulate that which they could not eliminate. It is from these later specimens that the broadside type receives its name, for by the early Renaissance the practice of printing such ballads on broadsheets and selling or publicly posting them had been established. Nonetheless, while more topical (and hence more short-lived) and more politically motivated than the traditional ballad, the broadside at least shares with the former the quality of being generally a product of and for the commoner. The third type of ballad—the literary—is a different creature indeed.

The earliest literary ballads were religious, represented, in fact, by the first ballad to be written down in its entirety, the thirteenth-century *Judas*.

Indeed, only one religious ballad of true popular origin, *The Bitter Withy*, survives from the medieval period, and it evokes the same bitter world view as the main body of traditional song. The other three are believed to be products of the clergy, who sought to “rehabilitate” an offensive tradition—rebellious, satiric, and often bawdy—by composing alternate lyrics for established popular tunes. Occasionally the upper classes did likewise. Literacy being the province of these elite segments of the population, such imitations were more likely to be recorded in medieval manuscripts and were probably composed in writing. In contrast, folk ballads continued for centuries to depend upon communal memory and entertainment for their survival. Nonetheless, as befits a form

associated with the commoners and generally scorned by the poets of the elite, the popular ballads that we can trace back to the Middle Ages far outnumber literary specimens.

During the Renaissance, as class boundaries continued to break down, the ballad entered mainstream literature with such writers as Christopher Marlowe, Walter Raleigh, and John Donne, and their famous related trio of poems, *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*, *The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd*, and *The Bait*. However, as a glance at these examples confirms, the ballad retained its satiric mode and pragmatic outlook even as it entered the world of literacy. Moreover, it continued to be scorned as a form for "serious" poetic endeavors. Both characteristics and reputation persisted in later literary ballads. The Victorian poet Thomas Hardy, for example, openly drew upon old traditional songs when he produced such sardonic pieces as *Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?* and *The Ruined Maid*. Similarly, C. Day Lewis's *Song* represents yet another paraphrase of Marlowe's famous poem in updated form, this time expressing the dismal economic and social conditions of the 1930s, and X. J. Kennedy took potshots at everything from romantic love to drug abuse in his ballad *In a Prominent Bar in Secaucus One Day*.

Despite its adoption as a mainstream literary poetic form, the ballad has also remained strong in oral tradition, although, with the growth over the centuries to almost universal literacy in English-speaking countries, the oral tradition itself has declined considerably. Not only do ancient songs such as * *Barbara Allen* and *I Gave My Love a Cherry* still survive in the nursery and coffee house, but popular music of the twentieth century continues to adapt old ballads and create new ones. American folk singer Woody Guthrie produced scores of ballads in which he immortalized the hard conditions of middle America in the 1930s and 1940s, with his son Arlo following his lead in singing about the hippie culture of the 1960s; popular 1960s and 1970s musical duo Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel directly adapted one of the oldest of English ballads in writing *Scarborough Fair*, within the last decade, a popular British singing group revived the ancient **Sir Patrick Spens* in a new musical version; and contemporary American country and western music produces more ballads than any other form of song. The ballad, then, rather than disappearing or surviving only as a specialized literary exercise in the manner of the roundel or the sonnet, remains a very strong and consistent influence in poetry. Its major formal and thematic characteristics have changed little since the Middle Ages, although the continuing democratic impulse has allowed it to establish itself in literary as well as oral tradition, and in "high" as well as popular culture.

In formal terms the ballad is a slippery animal. Purists insist upon highly regulated rhyme and metrics, but in actuality, medieval as well as later ballads varied greatly from such strictures. Stanzas tended to be two or four lines, although certain medieval specimens stretch to eight or ten lines; meters tended to be between three and seven stresses per line (four being the most common), and individual poems might combine several; the primary rhyme scheme tended to be either the couplet or alternating rhyme (*abab*). In other words, loose rules existed but embraced broad variations and were not infrequently broken.

The most notable of mechanical matters in balladry is the vocabulary of stock lines held in common by the genre as a whole. These are formulaic phrases, usually descriptive,

any one of which may appear in scores of completely unrelated ballads. For example, *Robin Hood, Johnnie Cock, and any number of star-crossed lovers meet “under the greenwood tree.” Many a hero or heroine rides on a “milk-white steed,” even though he or she may have instructed the servants to “saddle me the black, the black / Or saddle me the brown.” In folk song everything from a maiden's hair to the towers of a castle may shine “like the gold so red.” Such stock lines perform a number of functions. They may help to maintain rhyme schemes (as is reflected by their usual appearance in the second or fourth line of a stanza) or offer the balladeer time to think during a performance, whether he is calling upon memory for an old song or composing a new one. On the other hand, formulaic phrases may simply act as a shorthand to express a commonplace that bears no real import in the story. In any event, they clearly exist as a by-product of oral composition. Composing and singing poems without the aid of writing necessarily involves extensive memorization; stock lines and phrases considerably ease the burden. An associated feature also resulting from the oral nature of folk song is the profusion of ballad analogues. These are varying versions of what is clearly the same song. As Albert Lord proves in his unsurpassed study of oral composition, *The Singer of Tales*, two performances of a ballad, even by the same singer, will virtually never be identical; and this, combined with the imperfection of human memory, accounts for the minor changes effected in a ballad over time. As time or distance lengthens, such changes become more significant. The multiple versions of *Barbara Allen* or *Sir Patrick Spens* are examples of this. In contrast, some analogues represent a deliberate re-working of a story, changing emphasis or outcome to reflect a different purpose or opinion. The related ballads *The *Three Ravens*, *The Twa Corbies*, and *The Corpus Christi Carol* exemplify this latter type. Nonetheless, in both kinds of analogues, plot and characters generally remain the same.

While most formal characteristics of balladry are somewhat hard to pin down, those related to semantics are much more consistent. Medieval ballads are famed for their “impersonal” stance, that is, the lack of moral commentary on the actions of ballad characters. Indeed, the narrator is not often an obvious presence; when he does intrude, it is usually to call for attention from the audience or to assert the truth of his story. Such a presence reflects the relationship of balladry to the earlier epic tradition, where the Anglo-Saxon *scop (bard) held the important and dignified position as the guardian of history and social mores and the commentator on current events within his non-literate society. In keeping with this apparent “reporter” stance, ballads also concentrate upon action and result rather than motive. It has been frequently observed that ballads enter the drama of their story “in the fifth act”: they present the crisis and the denouement, but ignore the events that lead up to them. As has already been hinted, simple description for the sake of painting a scene or delineating characters is nonexistent, dismissed with a formulaic vocabulary so widely used as to make it almost meaningless. Explanations and extenuating circumstances carry no weight in the ballad universe.

It is nonetheless a mistake to assume that the ballads offer no judgement on the behavior of their characters. It is merely that their value system is implicit, shown in the concrete cause-and-effect relations of their action. Their mode is ironic and satiric, letting the absurdity or disaster of a situation direct the audience to the obvious conclusion: rejection of that which leads to the undesirable result. Consider the following stanzas from *Sir Patrick Spens*, describing the aftermath of the shipwreck in which all of the crew, led by Sir Patrick, are drowned:

O ours Scots nobles were right loath
 To wet their cork-heeled shoes,
 But long before the play was done,
 Their hats, they swam above.

Half over, half over to Aberdour
 It's fifty fathoms deep,
 And there lies good Sir Patrick Spens
 With the Scots lords at his feet.

The voyage was ill considered in the first place, as both Spens and a common shipman indicate earlier in the ballad, yet Spens was bound by his honor and feudal obligation to the king (who ordered the voyage) to undertake it anyway, even though he knew that his monarch had been directed by a rival who wished him out of the way. Rather than painting a sympathetic or tragic portrait, however, the ballad presents us with comedy. The image of the nobles' hats floating on the surface of the water after the owners have drowned might have come straight from a cartoon; calling the endeavor a "play" suggests the artificiality, or perhaps the absurdity, of the system (chivalric feudalism) that dictates such ridiculous behavior over common sense. The final stanza takes the parody to its ultimate degree, depicting the drowned Scots lords at the feet of the heroic, but very dead, Sir Patrick in a parody of feudal obligation.

Indeed, such rejection of the ideal is precisely what constitutes the value system propounded by the ballads. Heroism is rejected as foolish or destructive, and canniness is exalted in its place. Romanticism is at best an unrealistic dream, but more frequently a misleading and destructive force. Only pragmatism, seeing to the essential needs of everyday life, leads to success in medieval folk song. The mothers of "*Lord Randal* and "*Edward, Edward*, for example, do not concern themselves with the imminent deaths of their sons—the deaths are unavoidable—but with the inheritance portions for the family left behind. The various discarded mistresses do not waste time mourning broken hearts, but rather worry about lost means of support; in the words of *The Lass of Rock Royal*,

O, who will shoe my bonny foot,
 Or who will glove my hand?
 Or who will bind my middle slim
 With the broad lily band?

Or who will comb my bonny head
 With the red river comb?
 Or who will be my babe's father
 Ere Gregory, he come home?

So it continues throughout the ballads, this obsession with the basic needs of survival and a tacit or explicit rejection of idealism and the gentler emotions.

The reason for such a coldly pragmatic outlook is not hard to find in the ballads. Quite simply, the universe is a cold, unfriendly, dangerous place that makes no special allowances for humanity. Consider the following definition of existence offered by a ballad maiden from the thirteenth-century *Riddles Wisely Expounded*:

Hunger is sharper than is the thorn,
Thunder is louder than is the horn.

Longing is longer than is the way,
Sin is more ready than is the day.

God's flesh is better than is the bread,
Pain is more fearful than is death.

Grass is greener than is the wood,
Love is sweeter than is the nut.

Thought is swifter than is the wind,
Jesus is richer than is the king.

Sulphur is yellower than is the wax,
Silk is softer than is the flax.

The natural world here is not beautiful: it is filled with thorns, thunder, and wind, and the human lot with hunger, pain, death, and unfulfilled longing. The apparent religious consolations of “God's flesh” and Jesus' promise are undercut by their comparisons, for clearly this maiden knows flax, not silk, and sees the king as so rich that only a deity can be more so. Likewise, human behavior is far from admirable, for “sin” is more frequent than the sun rising.

This maiden's perceptions, though bittersweet, are nonetheless pessimistic in the extreme, concentrating on an unfriendly nature and the most basic of human needs under its conditions. She is echoed several centuries later by the lady of *The Gardener*, who presents the case in a much less gentle fashion:

The hail stones shall be on thy head,
And the snow upon thy breast,
And the east wind shall be for a shirt
To cover thy body next.

Thy boots shall be of the tangle
That nothing can betide;
Thy steed shall be of the wan water:
Leap on, young man, and ride.

Throughout the ballad universe humanity is generally cruel, untrustworthy, and dangerous. Around every corner is one—often an aristocrat—who would lie or cheat, rape a girl, steal another's belongings, unjustly maim or kill, or refuse to pay for good services rendered. The best one can do, in the ballads, is look to one's own survival and trust nobody. It is a bitter vision indeed.

Sadly for the medieval commoner, religious consolation is lacking. The near absence of ballads on religious themes was mentioned earlier. Four ballads survive, and only one a folk product. *The Bitter Withy* suggests no reward, earthly or heavenly, for virtuous behavior; indeed, it implies the opposite. Concentrating on a fictional incident in the

childhood of Jesus, the ballad depicts the Savior as a vengeful commoner who, rejected as a playmate by the “lords' and ladies' sons” because he was “a poor maid's child / born in an ox's stall,” repays the insult by drowning his tormenters. Moreover, the murders go unpunished except for a spanking from his mother with the withy (willow), and even the tree is then cursed. Says the child Jesus, since the withy hurt his behind, “It shall be the very first tree / That perishes from the heart.” Not for the commoner's Savior meek Christian tolerance or forgiveness, but rather a satisfying revenge that distinctly smacks of class jealousy and resentment.

Perhaps the chivalric ballads offer the most significant windows into the commoner's mind, for they demolish the misconception of a period of idyllic feudalism or cohesive ideology, and certainly of a monolithic age of faith. A number of ballads draw upon tales of *chivalry or *courtly love, and substantially more adopt motifs and themes from the *romances produced by the nobility. However, such are not simply adopted without question. Rather, the balladeers twisted and undercut the symbols of aristocratic ideology, deliberately juxtaposing them upon the pragmatism and the bleak universe they inhabited. A brief study of three related medieval ballads will suffice to illustrate the divergence of the commoners' view from that of the aristocracy and the church, as well as demonstrate the practice of creating deliberate analogues. *The Three Ravens* and *The Twa Corbies* reflect, respectively, the aristocratic and commoner's views of the same subject: a knight slain in combat.

Down in yonder green field,
There lies a knight slain under his shield.
His hounds they lie down at his feet,
So well they can their master keep.

His hawks, they fly so eagerly,
There's no fowl dare come him nigh.
Down there comes a fallow doe,
As great with young as she might go.

She lifted up his bloody head
And kissed his wounds that were so red.
She got him up upon her back
And carried him to the earthen lake.

She buried him before the prime,
She was dead herself ere evensong time.
God send every gentleman
Such hawks, such hounds, and such a leman.

Here the knight's animal companions, themselves symbols of nobility, behave with appropriate loyalty, protecting his body (the speakers are ravens who would devour it) until his metamorphosed beloved buries him decently. Similarly, in the tradition of true love, the lady subsequently dies of heartbreak. The imagery of the poem—green fields and an “earthen lake” reminiscent of rebirth for a grave—along with the religious hours and final apostrophe to God, romanticize the deaths and underscore the “rightness” of the chivalric ideal. The spokesman for the commoner, however, takes a different view of the same situation:

“In behind yon old foul ditch

I know there lies a new slain knight,
And nobody knows that he lies there
But his hawk, his hound, and lady fair.

“His hound is to the hunting gone,
His hawk to fetch the wild foul home,
His lady's taken another mate,
So we may make our dinner sweet.

“Ye'll sit on his white neck bone,
And I'll pick out his bonny blue eyes;
With a lock of his golden hair,
We'll thatch our nest when it grows bare.

“Many a one for him makes moan,
But none shall know where he is gone;
O'er his white bones, when they are bare,
The wind shall blow for ever more.”

Obviously, a different value system is at work in this second poem. Not only is there a suggestion of treachery, both in the hidden and defiled body and the inconstancy of the lady, but all participants in the drama exude the commoner's pragmatism by simply getting on with their lives. Hounds hunt, hawks prey on smaller fowl, and ladies get married. Moreover, the corbies are in tune with the bleak universe of the ballads—a dirty ditch, the cold wind blowing over naked bones~for they make use of that which chance has brought them, mindful of empty bellies and the threat of a winter coming upon them in a bare nest. No room for sentimentality exists.

The third medieval analogue, *The Corpus Christ Carol*, adapts the tale to religious ends. The ravens are eliminated, and the falcon becomes a metaphor for the soul, traveling to a fruitful orchard by grace of the sacrifice of the knight (Christ), whose eternally bleeding body recalls both the magnitude of his sacrifice and the eternity of heaven. The lady becomes a maid, or virgin, kneeling and weeping beside the bed upon which the body lies. Interestingly, the courtly and religious ballads thus borrow from each other's imagery to reinforce an idealism in which church and aristocracy work together to reinforce a feudal system that rests so heavily on the shoulders of the deprived commoner.

In such manipulation of the nobility's symbols and ideologies, as well as in carefully crafted vision of a mournful and unfriendly universe, lies the greatest art of the ballad. From the sardonic to the lyric, the medieval ballads prove that non-literate does not equate to unskilled or unintelligent. Moreover, the overall view of life and living conditions that they offer should dispel any notions we may still have of the Middle Ages as a period unified by faith and courtly idealism. Here we find instead the impulse which led to the great peasant and laborer uprisings of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, to the *Lollard movement toward a more accessible religion, and eventually to the democratic impulse that broke down feudal barriers in the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries.

That the traditional ballads concern themselves as much with arguing for a different world view and an alternate value system as with the stories they relate, that they operate on a philosophical level as well as provide entertainment, accounts for their quite amazing survival. In contrast, the lack of the same in the broadsides ensured their demise shortly after the situation prompting their composition dissipated or changed. Only scholars of the medieval period have ever heard of *London Lickpenny*, but any folksong enthusiast can hum a few bars of *Barbara Allen*, *Greensleeves*, or *Scarborough Fair*. But songs passed on from one generation to another are not the only way in which a ballad can survive. When a particular set of conditions ceases to exist, the same general outlook and attitude can transfer itself to a new situation.

Billie McGee Magar, a mid-twentieth-century American ballad from the Midwest, provides a fascinating study of changes in balladry. Still dimly recognizable as the tale of *The Twa Corbies*, this song transforms the dead knight into a dead horse, which “some cruel butcher's slain,” lying on the great plains of middle America instead of the fields or ditches of England. Nonetheless, as in its medieval antecedent, the carrion birds~this time, crowsmake use of the meat it provides, still sitting on a neck bone and picking out eyes. The pragmatic and pessimistic perceptions of the medieval commoner resurface in the songs of rural America during the dust-bowl era ... as they do today in the parodic and tragic ballads of Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho in the West, and of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Louisiana in the South.

Thus far, mention has been made of several thematic divisions in the medieval ballads. As one would expect, classifications are inexact tools, and a single ballad may operate primarily in one arena while exhibiting characteristics of one or several others. This being said, along with the chivalric, the religious, the romantic, and the domestic (the catch-all classification for the majority of ballads that do not fall under any other), two other types merit consideration here. The supernatural ballads are particularly interesting for their preservation of pre-Norman practices and beliefs. That superstition dies hard, and hardest among country folk, is a banality borne out by balladry of the Middle Ages. Fairies and elves, doors to the underworld (or otherworld), dwarves, giants, and demons, enchantments of every variety—all find a home in the folk song of the period. Underlying their entertainment value, however, is a system of belief that predates Christianity and coexisted with that faith for centuries after the British Isles were supposedly converted. Here we find ancestors dwelling as corporeal dead in a parallel world, the gates to which open more easily at some times than others (the origins of our modern *Halloween). We know that the dead are sentient and physical, disturbed by too much mourning (e.g. *The Unquiet Grave*) or by calling their names (*Earl Bran*), and that, for some reason, they have ill intentions toward even those they loved in life (*The Demon Lover*). We also find remnants of a nature religion, in which trees, plants, streams, and places have spirits (*Young Aiken*), and where fairies dance, luring mortals to magical worlds where time passes differently and the unconscious reigns (*Thomas Rhymer*). In short, an entire folk wisdom based upon the spiritual truths of an earlier period can be found in the supernatural ballads of medieval times.

Just as the ballads offer us a glimpse into the past beyond the Middle Ages, so do they foreshadow those to come. The so-called yeoman balladsproduced by the rural class of that name dividing the peasant from the nobilityexhibit a peculiar hybrid of the commoners' and the aristocracy's views. The yeomenry rose from the ranks of the peasants, finally acquiring their own land and, with it, some wealth. They slowly

acquired a level of education and a higher status in the employment of the nobility, even establishing a level of a sort in the feudal military hierarchy. Thus they aspired to (and after a few centuries attained) a near equality with the lesser nobility. Not surprisingly, such people required a certain level of conformity with the ideology of their social betters. Nonetheless, the yeomen never entirely lost the sensibilities of the class from that they arose, and the odd mixture of the two manifested itself in the outlaw hero archetype which dominates their song. Ballads of Robin Hood and Johnnie Cock and Adam Bell exalt heroes as much for their canniness (they are all, for example, masters of disguise, puns, and the shady deal) and their pure physical prowess as for their honor and piety. They are loyal to the king and conform, even in their outlaw groups, to a kind of feudal hierarchy. Nonetheless, they *are* outlaws, at war with the aristocracy, the high church officials, and public servants such as sheriffs and foresters. Most notably, they all poach the king's deer, which is itself a handy metaphor for the social position of the class as a whole. Caught in the middle, aspiring to the ranks of the nobility and thereby domination over the class from which it arose, on the one hand, and abhorring the abuse of the commoners by greedy and selfish abbots and aristocrats, on the other, dreaming of honor and romance yet bound by the pragmatism of generations, the yeomanry was neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring. Such is reflected in the yeoman ballads. The unifying force underlying these diverse perceptions is, again, the democratic tendency that eventually led to the crumbling of the feudal system and the ability of the middle classes, rural and urban alike, to break through class barriers, so that by the reign of Elizabeth I the sons of tradesmen could occupy positions of influence such as those held by Christopher Marlowe, Walter Raleigh, and John Donne.

Medieval balladry, then, far from being the inexpert poetry of docile imitators of a paternal aristocracy, represents the voice of the majority in the England of the Middle Ages. As art, it raised irony and parody to new levels of sophistication; as a document of social history, it reveals the inequities and abuses of the feudal system; as philosophy, it recognizes with piercing clarity the weaknesses of the complex aristocratic ideology and the inadequacies of the medieval church. Above all, the ballad represents change—in ideals and approaches, in social structure, in poetics. In it the Middle Ages survive in all their diversity and discovery, and in it the past and the future are met.

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