Ballad History Through the Lens of Six Ballads

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The History of the Ballad

Storytelling is an art that dates to some of the earliest moments in human history. It has taken many different forms, but it can still be found in all cultures. Stories are passed down from one to another over decades and even centuries. Storytelling can be dated back to 30,000 years ago and could possibly be even older (Brown, 2022). Stories survive. They live on from one generation to the next. Parts of the stories may change over time, but their essence can still be found.

The ballad is an amazing form of storytelling. What better way to help one remember a story than to sing it and put it in verse? It makes oral transmission much easier. There are countless songs that are alive and still spreading throughout the world today that can be traced back to ballads that were sung centuries ago. Many ballads now take the form of children's songs, are weaved into popular music, and even sung as traditionally as they were hundreds of years ago. It is the stories and the music that are being kept alive.

The prolific author Neil Gaiman, wrote concerning the importance of keeping stories alive in his short story, *The Man Who Forgot Ray Bradbury*,

> *[T]he burning point of paper was the moment where I knew that I would have to remember books, if other people burn them or forget them. We will commit them to memory. We will become them. We become authors. We become their books. […] as long as your words which are people which are days which are my life, as long as your words survive, then you lived and you matter and you changed the world[.](Gaiman, 2021)*

While it may seem out of place to compare the stories and tales told through ballads as essential to keep in remembrance, there are reasons that these stories have survived for so long. There is something about them that connects us on a very human level that keeps us telling and retelling their stories.

The purpose of this paper is to explore, analyze, and elaborate on what are the major points of the origin, the dissemination, and the popularity of six select ballads in Western musical tradition.

What Is a Ballad? The Origins of the Ballad

The ballad is a genre that seeps into many facets of history and culture. It has the distinction of being a genre of poetry, literature, and song. One basic definition of a ballad comes from Meredith L. McGill: "ballads are narrative poems distinguished by their concision, episodic structure, objective or neutral tone, and dense patterns of repetition and refrain" (McGill, 2016).

Ballads have appeared in nearly all literary periods among nearly all communities. What makes the ballad difficult to specifically define is how much it can vary between regions, especially when it comes to form. The ballads of south-eastern Europe are typically stichic, and not stanzaic; their metrical structures also come in a large variety. Ballads tend to follow an episodic narrative, one that unfolds with a cumulative sense of progression (McGill, 2016).

The ballad as an Anglo-American poetic genre is broken into an ABCB form with alternating 4- and 3-beat lines arranged in quatrains, rhymed in the second and fourth lines. Francis James Child's collection often disregards the poetic form in favor of focusing on plot points and the narrative itself (McGill, 2016).

Jakob Grimm, whom Child was a big fan of, believed that popular poetry and fairy tales were composed by the folk. It was the idea that a community spontaneously create the stories together, similar to how a group of people would work together to make a fire (Bold, 2019). This theory has been expanded with more detail on how the art was composed Gummere, and George L. Kittredge. Kittredge further posits,

> *Different members of the throng, one after the other, may chat his verse, composed on the sur of the moment, and the sum of these various contributions makes a song…a song made in this way is no man's property and has no individual author. The folk is its author…the history of balladry, if we follow it back in a straight line without interruptions, would lead us very simple conditions of society, to the singing and dancing throng, to a period of communal composition* (Bold, 2019).

It is important to point out that neither Gummere nor George could prove that there were ballads created in this way, but they felt it ought to be that way. Cecil Sharp, an American folk song collector in the late 1800s and early 1900s, had a different view. He felt that communal composition was ridiculous and unthinkable. He believed that the community did have a part developing the ballad, but it was secondary and did not happen until after an individual had already composed the piece. It is also important to note that Sharp insisted that a ballad is not a ballad if it does not have a tune. In short, "the individual is creative, the performer is re-creative, the folk are the selective audience" (Bold, 2019).

The ballad scholar, Bertrand Bronson states that "the longer a ballad or folk song exists in oral tradition, the more it changes" (Bronson, 1975). It was thought that eventually a song would become unrecognizable, this does happen occasionally. This explains why there are multiple tune variants for many if not most ballads. The number of tonal variants is always much smaller than the number of text variants. The magic of the ballad is that most of the time, the tune manages to maintain its identity even with the many minor alterations that happen when a tune is orally transmitted.

Broadside Ballads

Oral tradition is a major vehicle for which ballads were transmitted from one person to another. Once printed material became more mainstream, the ballads found a new way of being shared through what became known as broadside ballads. Broadside ballads became very popular because they were cheap to print and easy to circulate. They were printed on a single sheet of paper and sometimes even a half-sheet (thus they were able to print two at the price of one page). The page was ornamented with fancy borders and illustrations. They could easily be compared with posters, proclamations, criminal information, and advertisements. One could find them in the streets, on the walls of taverns, at the scaffold, and in public squares. This form of balladry survived for such a long time for several reasons. They were circulated apart from official channels of publications and lay outside the governable fields of the popular circulation (Ritchie, 2021).

Child did not care for and only reluctantly used few broadside ballads because he thought of them as a "low form of artistic composition" (Bold, 2019). For Child and other ballad scholars, ballad collecting was an act of weeding through many of the cheap broadside ballads. Child also described these ballads as "veritable dung-hills, in which, only after a great deal of sickening grubbing, one finds a very moderate jewel" (McGill, 2016).

Ballads in Early America

While popularity of the broadside ballad began to wane in Europe, Scottish and English ballads became very popular among American readers. Americans saw them as a "voice of the people, offering one solution to the vexing formal and political problem of literacy culture in a republic" (McGill, 2016). Ballads were imported, reviewed, reprinted, and circulated by many periodicals and volumes, including many translations of German and Spanish ballads. When they appeared in American magazines, they were usually given the generic title of "Ballad" or "An Original Ballad". In a search of a digitized American Periodical Series for poems with the word "ballad" in the title that were published between 1820 and 1865, there were more than 1,400 hits and when the word "original" is added to the search parameter, there appeared another 360 results (McGill, 2016).

The American ballad collector Cecil J. Sharp and Maud Karpeles journeyed all over North Carolina, Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia recording songs and ballads during the years of 1916 through 1918. Their efforts resulted in obtaining 1,612 tunes and 500 different songs from 281 singers. These findings were published in a collection titled *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* in 1917. More collections were released in later years. (Smith, R., 1934).

The eight most prevalent ballads from these collections include:

Child 4 Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight
12 Lord Randal
73 Lord Thomas and Fair Elinor
75 Lord Lovel
84 Bonny Barbara Allen
95 The Hangman's Tree
155 Sir Hugh, or, The Jew's Daughter
243 The House Carpenter, or, The Deamon Lover

As of the 1950s in America, the Southern states seem to have had the most active culture of singing and preserving ballads. C. Alphonso Smith reports in the 1916 *Musical Quarterly* journal,

> Of the three hundred and five ballads listed by Child, Tennessee reports eight as surviving through oral transmission in her borders, Georgia nine, Texas ten, South Carolina thirteen, North Carolina nineteen, Missouri twenty, Kentucky twenty-four, and Virginia thirty-seven. To this list must now be added West Virginia, which […] already reports twelve traditional ballads (Smith, 1916).

The top five ballads include: *Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight, Lord Thomas and Fair Annet, Lord Lovel, Bonny Barbara Allen,* and *The Maid Freed from the Gallows* (Smith, 1916).

Reed Smith presents an updated version of surviving ballads as of 1934 and where they were located (Smith, R., 1934):

Total for the South	73
Total for New England (including New Brunswick)	73
Total for New England (excluding New Brunswick)	62
Total for the United States	98
Total for Canada	49
Total for America	109

In order to gain a more contextual picture of the life of ballads, it is important to follow the journeys and histories of specific ballads and how they are still seen and used today.

1. Bonny Barbara Allen (Child 84)

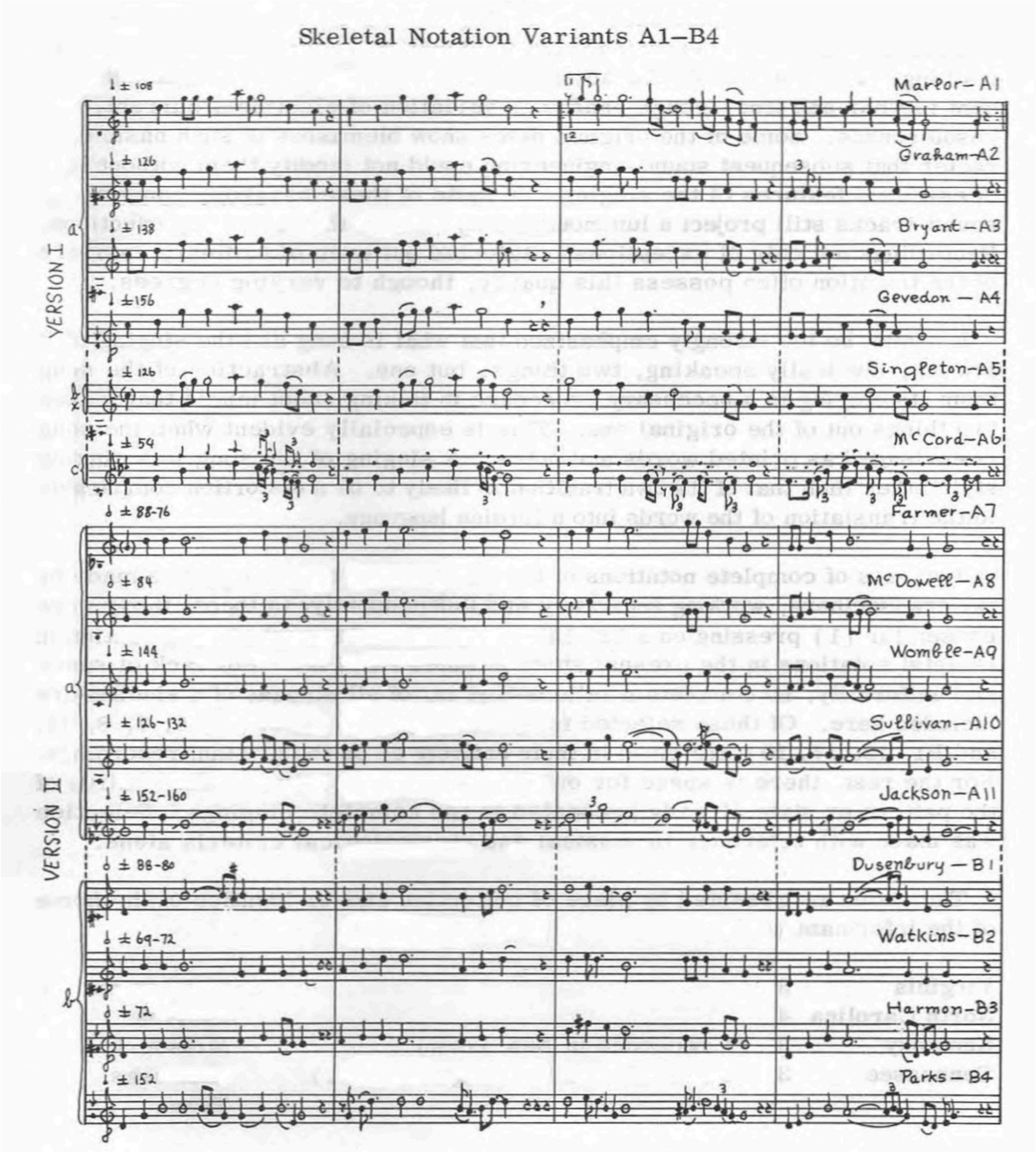
Other titles: *Barbary Allan, Barbery Ellen, John Graham and Barbara Allen*

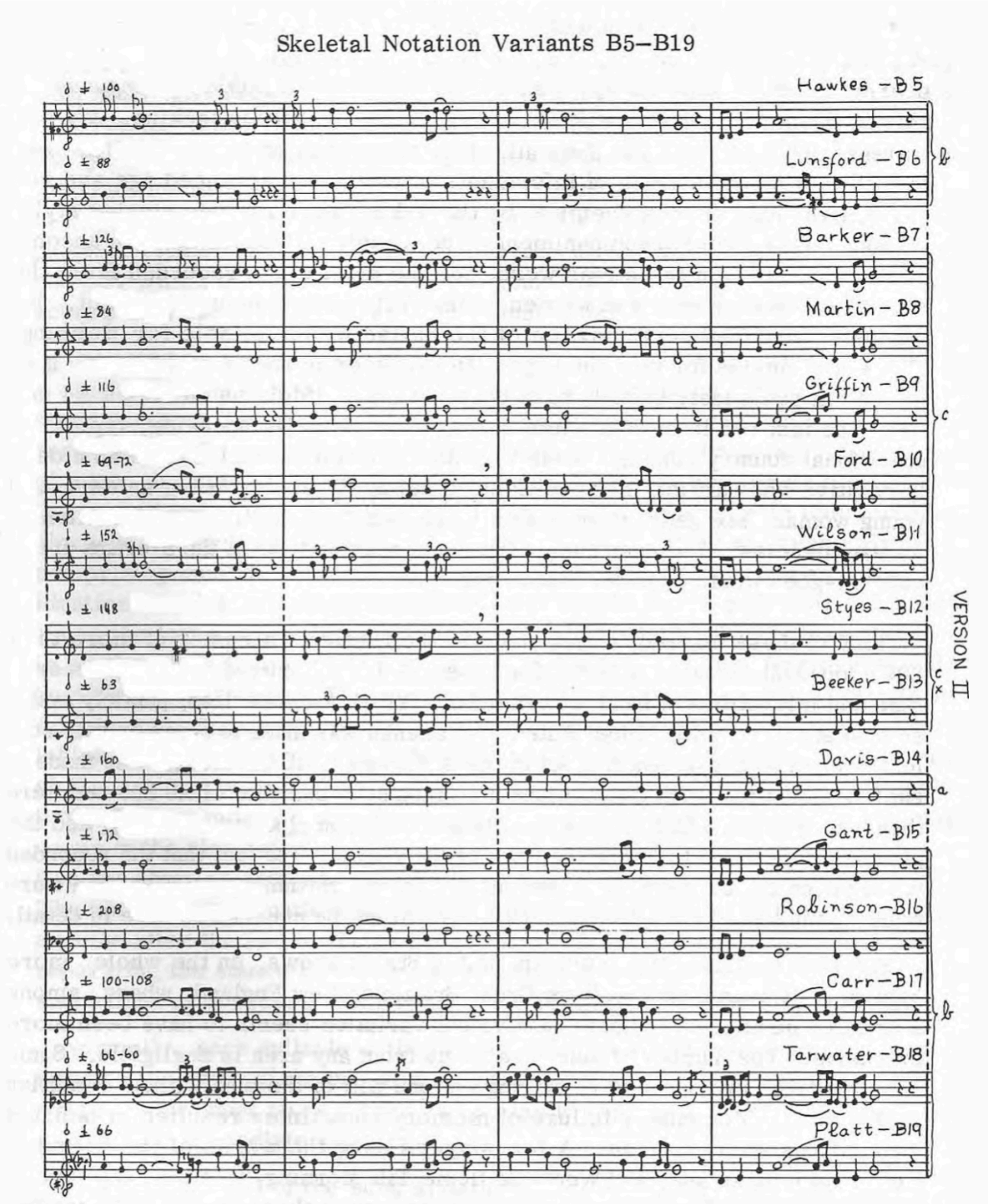
This ballad has the largest geographical spread of any ballad. While it is not very popular in Britain, Western, or Northern Europe, analogues can be found in Spain and even Serbia (Flanders, Vol. II, 1961).

The Child Type A text begins with a Sir John Graeme who falls in love with Barbara Allen. He professes his love for her and is rejected. When she returns to her home, she hears the death-bells chime. This causes her to repent of her actions and she dies in sorrow (Child, 1888). Many of the variants from B – I have very minor differences. The text type J and K begins in a tavern where the man danced with all the ladies there and slighted Barbara Ellen. This results in him falling ill. Barbara visits his sickbed without being summoned. The rest of the story remains the same with the added line that the man acknowledges his guilt.

In the Type L text, there is no scene of confrontation between the two characters. She is told by his servant about his condition, and she replies that she already knows that he is dying. She then goes into a field where she hears the death-bells, and the birds sing of his death. The rest of the story remains the same. There are a few types where Barbara Allen blames her mother for causing the tragedy, and this leads to her mother also dying. This version also includes a unique section in which Barbara Allen encounters the corpse of the lover moving around as a revenant. She asks the corpse to lie down so she may look upon it, but the corpse replies that it cannot, and it will not let her look upon it. This version is not very prevalent among variants that from the United States and does not appear in any of the British versions. Due to the added theme of parental opposition to love, it is thought that this variant is a later addition. At the same time, it is also thought that it may be part of an even earlier story type than what we know from Child's sources (Coffin, 1977).

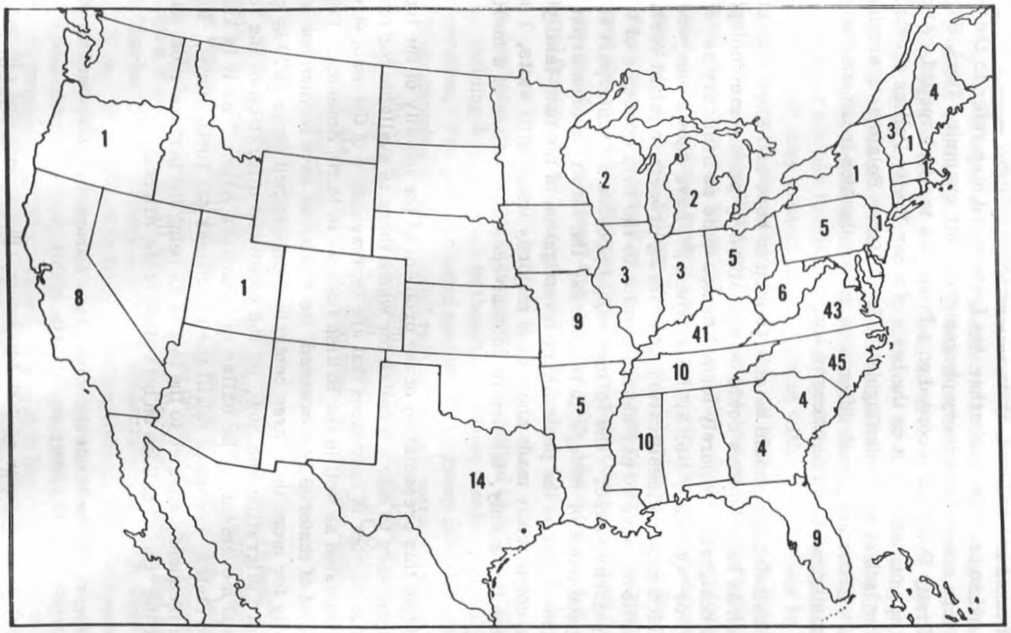
This ballad has been well published in print in America. As of 1933, there were roughly 81 variants of the text of *Barbara Allen*, and 34 variants of the tune (although, this list includes duplicates) in the United States (Smith, R., 1934). The tune variants (below) have their differences, but still maintain a similar melodic rise and fall and harmonic progression.


Skeletal Notation Variants A1–B4
VERSION I
VERSION II
a
b
c
Marlor–A1
Graham–A2
Bryant–A3
Gevedon — A4
Singleton–A5
McCord–A6
Farmer–A7
McDowell–A8
Womble–A9
Sullivan–A10
Jackson–A11
Dusenbury — B1
Watkins–B2
Harmon–B3
Parks – B4


Skeletal Notation Variants B5–B19
± 100
Hawkes – B5
± 88
Lunsford – B6
b
± 126
Barker – B7
± 84
Martin – B8
± 116
Griffin – B9
c
± 69-72
Ford – B10
± 152
Wilson – B11
± 148
Styes – B12
VERSION II
± 63
Beeker – B13
c
x
± 160
Davis – B14
a
± 172
Gant – B15
± 208
Robinson – B16
± 100-108
Carr – B17
b
± 66-60
Tarwater – B18
± 66
Platt – B19
3

(Seeger, 1964).

By the mid 1900s, these variants could be found spread out across 26 different states.



Distribution of the "field collection" of published variants of the ballad "Barbara Allen" in the United States as of December 1962: 243 notations, about one-third transcribed from sound-recordings. (Commercial and revivalist sources are not included in this roster nor are those of British and Canadian field collection amounting to 93 items as of the same date.)

(Seeger, 1964).

Some versions start in the spring and some take place at Martinmas (which is where the original Child type A text begins). The name of the lover is often mentioned, but many of the names are different, Williams, James, David, and many more. A now common ending includes the pair being buried next to each other, with a rose and a briar growing out of the graves and intertwining at the end. This ending is not found in the original Child ballad. Another popular plot point that is not featured in the original Child version is that while on his deathbed, the man offers gifts to Barbara. Over time, this ballad has also become a play party that can be found in *American Play-Party Song*, by Benjamin A. Botkin (Flanders, Vol. II, 1961).

B. H. Bronson described the ballad as such, "This little song of a spineless lover who gives up the ghost without a struggle, and his spirited beloved who repents too late, has paradoxically shown a stronger will to live than perhaps any other ballad in the canon. It is still universally known" (Zierke, 2022).

Some of the most well-known recordings of *Barbara Allen* in the United States during the 1950s were done by artists like Jean Ritchie, Burl Ives, Pete Seeger, The Everly Brother, and Tennessee Ernie Ford. Popular recordings in the 1960s were done by singers like Joan Baez, Peggy Seeger, and Phil Tanner. The 70s through the 90s is when even larger artists spread the ballad and a few interesting variants were performed by the likes of Art Garfunkel, The King Singers, Dolly Parton, and Judy Collins. The 2000s were interesting in that one of the early greats of the 1900s, Bob Dylan, released a recording of this ballad in 2005, ten years after he had recorded it. Other artists in the 2000s include Emmy Rossum, Rose Laughlin, Rosanne Cash (daughter of Johnny Cash), and Sarah Lenka (Zierke, 2022). Despite having so many variations of both the text and the tune, all these recordings maintain a similar feel and genre.

2. Twa Sisters (Child 10)

Other titles: *The Two Sisters, The Bonny Busk of London, Bow and Balance, The Lord of the North Country, The Sister's Murder, The Twin Sisters, Wind and Rain, The Cruel Sister, The Berkshire Tragedy* (Coffin, 1977; Zierke, 2022).

After much analysis, Paul G. Brewster has discovered that the ballad is of Scandinavian origin; most likely from Norway prior to the 17th Century (Zierke, 2022). From there it spread to England and Scotland. It was not uncommon for tunes and traditions to cross the North Sea to Aberdeenshire and move onward from there. This is also evident in the Scandinavian influence of many Scottish fiddle tunes (Ritchie, 2021). It is more likely that the versions that arrived in

America were from the English version instead of the Scottish (Zierke, 2022). This ballad is told more as a tale than sung as a ballad in the Slavic countries (Flanders, Vol. I, 1961).

Most of the plots have this as a main outline of the story: there are two girls out walking. One is drowned in a river. Her bones are used to make an instrument. These story elements are found in most variants, but there are many other differences. There are more plot variations in this one ballad than in any other Child ballad.

In the original type A text from Child starts with a knight, Sir William, who came and courted an elder sister, while at the same time he was wooing the younger sister. This made the elder sister jealous. The elder sister asked the younger one to go walking with her towards their father's ships. She then pushed the younger sister into the water and let her drown. She is mistaken as a mermaid or a swan by a miller who lived down stream. A famous harper later passed by and, seeing the corpse in the water, decided to make a harp out of her breastbone and strings out of her yellow hair. It was said that the harp could play the most beautiful music ever heard. The harper went before a king and queen to play for them, but the harp only played an accusation of the younger sister towards her murderer, "Woe to my sister, false Helen!" (Child, 1888).

In the Type R variant, the Miller notices that the sister down in the water is none other than Sweet William's lover. When Sweet William learns of her fate, he takes his own life. The rest of the ballad follows the original Child text. The Type R variant has quite the unique twist in the story in that the girl does not die but is rescued from the river by the Miller. The miller then reveals he is in love with the girl, and she says that she loves him back. It turns out that the miller is exceedingly wealthy, and he takes her to his castle where they get married and live happily ever after. The title *The Wind and the Rain* comes from the variant T, in which the difference is that instead of a harper who pulled the body out, it is a fiddler. The only tune the fiddle would play was “the dreadful wind and rain”. Not all the variants include sister. The Type U text has two lovers fishing. The man proposes marriage and is turned down. In a violent rage he beats her and throws her body into the river. The rest of the text follows Child’s story structure (Coffin, 1977).

Once this ballad made it to America, it continued to change rather drastically. In some of the American variants, no one is punished for the murder. In others, the oldest sister is hung at the end. In another one, the story is told in the first person by the suitor. Despite these differences, the rest of their text follows the Type A structure. It is important to note that the British variants of the text imply a more comical tone when talking about making the instruments with the girl’s anatomy. The American versions deal with the whole story in a serious and dark tone. The phrase “the wind and the rain”, which is found in four of the later versions of the ballad also appears in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night*. It is unclear as to which one came first. This ballad has also made its way to Russia from Great Britain in a ballad collection from a Saskatchewan Doukhobor community (Coffin, 1977).

Several of the American variants change what the suitor gives the younger sister as a gift to a “beaver hat”. These variants also do not describe the victim as having yellow hair. There is even a variant from Poland that was found in New England. This version has the younger sister being murdered during a raspberry contest. It ends with a flute being made from the reeds of her grave. The Polish version has a very different melody from any of the Anglo-American versions (Flanders, Vol. I, 1961).

W. M. Hart explains that one of the most common ways that new variants have emerged is in the lengthening of the ballad by adding new stanzas. Many of the variants of the *Twa Sisters* are a product of this practice (Hart, 1906).

This ballad was sung by one Willie Matheson of Aberndeenshire to the folk song collector, Alan Lomax in 1951. The recording was added to a 2011 anthology of Scottish recordings made by Lomax called *Whaur the Pig Gaed on the Spree.* Other prominent recordings of the1900s include the artists: John Jacob Niles of Kentucky recorded an eight-verse version of the song in 1932. Bob Dylan performed it in the 1950s. Half-sister to Pete Seeger, Peggy Seeger sang the variant *O the Wind and Rain.* Shirley Collins sang *The Birkshire Tragedy*, a shortened version of the ballad in 1959. Martin Carthy and Dave Swarbrick on their 1990s album, *The Bows of London*. A folk metal band called, Extremo, released an old Norwegian version of the ballad on their 1998 album, *Weckt die Toten!* The Swedish group, Garmarna sang the ballad on their 2020 album *Forbundet* (Zeirke, 2022). The prominent Kodály music educator, Jill Trinka, included a version of *The Wind and the Rain* in her song book for children, *Bought Me a Cat*. In the footnotes of the ballad, she does include a note that one should be careful when dealing with this subject matter to children (Trinka, 2007).

3. The House Carpenter/Deamon Lover (Child 243)

Other titles: *Fair Janie, House Carpenter's Song, The King's Daughter, My Little Carpenter, Nice Young Man, The Old House Carpenter, Sweet William, Well Met, We're Met We're Met, the Young Ship's Carpenter* (Coffin, 1977)

When Child collected this ballad, he received it from Sir Walter Scott who heard it from Mr. William Laidlaw (Child, 1888). Child traced it back to a broadside ballad from London that was licensed in February 1957 (Zeirke, 2022).

The story is of a man, who in some version is a demon and in others the ghost of an injured lover, who persuades a woman to leave her children and her current lover or husband who is a carpenter. She leaves her children and goes away with her new lover on a ship full of riches. They encounter a storm with rough waves and die and go to hell.

The man and woman are only named in a few variants. She is known as Jane Reynolds and the lover is known as James Harris. In the Type A text, Jane is from Plymouth and James is a sailor. They are married and shortly after James is called to the service and is reported dead after three years. Jane then marries the carpenter. One night when the carpenter is out, Jane hears a rapping on her window. It is the ghost of James. Like in the other variants, she leaves the carpenter to be with her former lover. She later repents but it is too late. The ship she left on sinks, and she is never heard from again. When the carpenter hears of this, he hangs himself in sorrow (Flanders, Vol. III, 1961).

A difference in who says the opening lines appears between the Type A and B text. In the Type A text, it is she who starts with “well met, well met” and tells the demon lover that she could have married a “rich young man” and he tells her she is to blame for not doing so. In the Type B and many other variants, the roles are reversed (Coffin, 1977).

The American variants often omit the supernatural element and the carpenter’s suicide. The carpenter’s occupation also changes from a ship’s carpenter in the British versions to a house carpenter in the American version. The most popular American version can be traced to a broadside ballad published by De Marsan in about 1860. This version was taken mainly from oral tradition, although it stays quite close to the original Child text. This ballad used to be more popular in Scotland, but its popularity has lessened. It is still present in England, but in variants that referred to the man as a ship carpenter and not a house carpenter (Flanders, Vol. III, 1961).

Type G was collected by Bronson and was heard from a man in Wisconsin. The first verse of this variant adds events that happen prior to the visitation of the ghost/demon. It tells of how the carpenter, George Allis, whose name is also mentioned in Type A of this ballad, must leave his love. He promises that he will be back, and they make a vow of fidelity. During his travels he refuses to take a Queen's daughter, staying faithful of his promise only to come back and find his love has married another man. The rest of the story follows similarly as found in Type A. It is important to note that it is thought that the Type G was a more recent addition in the American tradition. This variant is also unique in that it takes place in a logging town in the Northwest. George Allis is referred to as a logger instead of a carpenter in Type G (Coffin, 1977).

Though the title often contains reference to a demon, it is only in the Type B and C text that he is given a connection to hell. Type C in America also notes that the lover has a cloven foot (Coffin, 1961). The name change from *The Deamon Lo*ver to *The House Carpenter*, is an example of how Americans strove to make some ballads more palatable to the strong Christian culture in early America. C. Alphonso Smith is quoted saying, "The few ballads that are most off-color in Child's collection either do not survive in the United States or are shorn of their most offending features" (Smith, 1916).

At first glance, one might define this ballad as a supernatural, horror, or tragic ballad, but it often was not thought of as such in America. Sheila Kay Adams describes how her grandmother categorized ballads like *The House Carpenter*,

> *This is what folks over home called a love song. This was one of Granny's favorite ones. Her sister sang a version of it and called it "The House Carpenter." I found out later when I got old enough and in college and discovered the Child collection of ballads, it was actually called "The Deamon Lover," and I learned it from her when I was about nine years old. […] They all sang songs that they would refer to as "love songs." It didn't matter how gory or if it was a murder ballad or if three people died, it didn't matter. They would refer to them as love songs. Even if they were dirty, they would refer to them as love songs* (Ritchie, 184).

This ballad became increasingly popular in the US in the 1900s. It was adapted into a choral arrangement by Ralph Vaughan Williams called *The Lover's Ghost.* It was performed by some of the top folk artists of that time including Jean Ritchie, Joan Beaz, Annie Watson and the Doc Watson Family, Pete Seeger, and Bob Dylan. This is a ballad that is still performed by current performers such as Doug Wallin, who on his 2002 album *Far on the Mountains Volume 3*, notes that he sees the ballad as a "vehicle for the social control of married women" (Zeirke, 2022) instead of focusing on the supernatural elements.

It should also be noted that a folk song commonly geared towards children, *Our Gallant Ship*, which is derived from Child Ballad 283, *The Mermaid,* includes the stanza about the gallant ship spinning around three times before sinking to the bottom of the sea. The words are nearly identical to one of the last verses of many of the variants of *The House Carpenter* (Zeirke, 2022).

4. The Maid Freed from the Gallows (Child 95)

Other titles: *The Hangman, Hangman Hangman (Hold Your Holts), Hangman on the Gallows Tree, The Highwayman, My Golden Ball, The Raspel Pole (Coffin 1977), The Prickle Bush, Prickle Eye Bush, The Golden Ball* (Zeirke, 2022)

This ballad has nearly as many variants as *Barbara Allen*. Variants can be found not only in England, but throughout various parts of Europe and even in Asia. The gender of the victim changes from variant to variant (Zeirke, 2022) This ballad was likely first introduced to the English in the latter half of the seventeenth century by gypsies. One of the possible reasons for this ballad's popularity is how it is a model folk ballad; it contains a simple plot, a question-and-answer structure, and repetition (Flanders, Vol. III, 1961). While this is true, the ballad remains a bit out an outlier because it does not tell the full story. There are many parts that are left out of most, if not all versions. We do not know why the girl is condemned, nor do we know why her family refuses or does not pay her fee (Urica, 1966).

The original story is about a girl who is kidnaped by pirates. The pirates bring her to the different members of her family hoping for a ransom only to be turned down by all of them. The girl's husband or sweetheart is the last one approached by the pirates, and he tells them he would give everything he had to free her. In this version her family later dies and instead of the traditional black, she wears gaudy clothes saying that "only her sweetheart deserves black". Much of the story is abridged in the British and American versions to the point where the whole story takes place on the scaffold or a gallows tree where the victim is to be hung for an unknown crime. Sometimes this crime involved losing a golden ball, comb, or key. Other variants associate the crime with the girl's virginity. The golden ball is thought to be a later addition that came from printed, mass-culture forms. The variants that include the specifics of the crime are not commonly found in the American variants but are more common in the British and West Indian ones. (Flanders, Vol. III, 1961).

The gender of the victim is swapped in the Type C text. This is typical among Slavic variants of ballads. Some scholars, such as H. C. Krappe, used to speculate that the reason for the switch was due to the culture of those countries that put the life of men higher than the life of women. This is a very farfetched theory as it is far more likely that the gender changes depending on who is telling the story (Urica, 1966).

There are twelve versions of this ballad that begin with the maid pleading to a judge and not to an executioner. In later variants the maid does not mention a judge. It can be assumed the characters of the judge and executioner have been merged into one. One part of the story that has remained very consistent is the number of relatives that come to see the maid, a father, mother, brother, and sister (Urica, 1966).

The main Scottish variant is the only one to include the “curse verse”. After being freed, the maid curses the different members of her family. She curses the family that nothing will grow at their house except for thistles and weeds. The brother she curses that he will be killed by his wife. To the sister she says that her eyes will be peaked out by crows. This “curse verse” is a common occurrence in other traditional ballads, such as the *Cruel Brother* (Urica, 1966).

It is thought that this ballad migrated to America as early as the seventeenth century. It can first be traced to Virginia before the revolution and from there it spread all over the United States. Most of the American variations are very similar and follow the same framework, thus making it easier to memorize and share (Urica, 1966).

In Virginia, the African American community called this ballad, *The Prickly Bush*. It is this variant that harkens back to the printed broadside ballad version because it includes a golden object, in this case a comb. The golden comb has been lost and it is the true love that finds and returns it, thus saving the maiden (Smith, 1916).

The variant found in Franklin County circa 1916, in which the gender of the person on the gallows is switched, is very close to the variant used by the renown folk artist, Jean Ritchie, in her 1954 recording of *The Hangman Song.* She says, "Our family sings it in a down-to-earth mountain way which slights the tune and wastes no words in getting the tale told" (Zeirke, 2022).

Smith goes on to describe an interesting adaptation of this ballad that was used at a grade school for African American students in Scottsville, Virginia. Smith recounts that the school had a tradition of performing something during the closing exercises of the school day. This day, they set up a play in which the students sang and acted out the story of *The Hangman's Song* (Smith, 1916). The social, cultural implications, and perspectives of how African-Americans treated this ballad will not be covered in this paper, but it deserves an in-depth study of its own.

This ballad has been used in a large variety of ways, including as a game, cantefables, a drama, a party-play, and a folktale (Flanders, Vol. III, 1961). Walter Morris Hart expressed that ballads were better off falling into the hands of children rather than "simple folk". He goes on to say that that was the reason that the ballad of *The Maid Freed from the Gallows* variant F became a children's game. He explains that it is "the last stage of many old ballads" (Hart, 1906).

There are still many variants of this ballad that have been recorded within the last several decades. Each has its own level of unique variations. During a 1948 radio show, the folk singer Leadbelly, sang a variant he called *The Gallows Pole*. This version is tonally different from most other variants. Only a portion of the whole story is present. Much of the story is spoken and there are large sections of solo guitar playing. On the 1981 album *Green Fields,* by The Watersons*,* they sang *The Prickle Holly Bush*. While the story is the same. It contains an extended chorus and is performed a cappella with vocal harmonies. Jon Boden, from the band Bellowhead, said he learned the song "around the campfire from the good people of Forest School Camps – upholders of one of the few genuine oral singing traditions left in England" (Zierke, 2022). A year later in 2003, his band recorded the song. His band could be described as folk-rock. It is more instrument heavy and rhythmic, but the tune stays consistent with other variations. Other prominent recordings include that of James "Iron Head" Baker in 1934; Harry Jackson, who adds the twist of the true love paying the hangman to ensure that the hanging takes place; Julia Scaddon; and Sarah Anne Tuck (Zierke, 2022).

5. Fair Margaret and Sweet William (Child 74)

Other titles: *False William, Lady Margaret's Ghost, Lady Maud's Ghost, Pretty Polly and Sweet William, Sweet William's Bride* (Coffin, 1977), *King William and Fair Margaret, Prince William and Lady Margaret, Fair Margaret's Misfortune* (Flanders, Vol. II, 1961).

The first hints of this ballad appear in an old English play, titled *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, which was written around 1607. It contains this stanza:

> *When it was growne to darke midnight,*
> *And all were fast asleepe,*
> *In came Margarets grimely ghost,*
> *And stood at Williams feete* (Atkinson, 2014).

This is important to note because the first broadside ballad version of this text, *Fair Margaret's Misfortune*, does not appear in print until roughly 1720. It is generally thought of as a *terminus* *ante quem*, or last possible date for the Child Ballads, but there are no further mentions to this story prior to *Fair Margaret's Misfortune* (Atkinson, 2014).

Another very similar ballad appeared at roughly the same time as *Fair Margaret's Misfortune,* simply called, *William and Margaret*. There are very few differences between the two. *Fair Margaret* has twenty stanzas and *William and Margaret* has seventeen. Textually, the main difference is where the story starts. *Fair Marga*ret starts with two lovers on a hill, where *William and Margaret* begins with the scene with Margaret's ghost at William's bed. Child claimed that the two ballads were the same, but *William and Margaret* was simply rewritten in a more elegant style (Atkinson, 2014).

The story type A follows Sweet William, dressed in blue, denies that he and the Lady Margaret are not in love and that she shall see his bride the next day. That morning, Margaret watches the wedding processional out from her window. She throws down her comb and leaves her room never to be seen again alive. That night, William has a dream in which he sees Margaret's ghost at the foot of his bed. The ghost asks him how he likes his bed and his wife. He replies that he loves the person at the foot of his bed the most. When he wakes, he tells his wife of his dream and goes to check on Margaret. Her family answers the door and brings him to her corpse. He kisses her head before he dies himself (Coffin, 1977). The ending of most of the text types includes the imagery of out of Margaret's grave grows a red rose and out of William's grave grows a briar. Both plants grow side by side up to the top of the church where they form a true lover's knot (Flanders, Vol. II, 1961).

In a few of the variations of the story, more detail is given about how Margaret died in that she commits suicide by throwing herself out of the window or by other means. In other types it is William's wife who has the dream, and she tells it to William. The type D text includes a verse in which Margaret addresses her family and tells them to make her deathbed because she feels ill. She then dies of a broken heart. There are a few early variants in which there is no ghost at all, and William goes to see Margaret of his own accord only to find that she has died. This type is unique because it distorts the rose and briar ending. In this ending nothing grows from William's grave and the rose that grows out of Margaret's grave dies once the roots reach William's breast. This signifies that even in death, Margaret's love goes unrequited. Type G changes only a small part of the words that create a very different take on the story. Margaret's ghost still appears to William, but this time she blesses the union of him and his new bride. When William goes to Margaret's house the next day, her family tells William to "go home and kiss your nut-brown bride and leave our sister alone" (Coffin, 1977). These variants can all be dated to before 1950 in Europe.

Once this ballad came to America, the text for most variants changed significantly from the original Child version. Most variants found in America can be seen as a compilation of many of the European variants. The opening scene where William denies his love to Margaret is not present in most text types. They include Lady Margaret's ghost, although in the variant collected by Sharp and Karpeles, the ghost appears to both William and his bride. It also has both visiting the house of the deceased Lady Margaret. Many variants include a phrase in which after William has his dream, he asks the permission of his wife to visit Margaret's house. In one variant the text merges parts of the story from Child Ballad 73, *Sweet Willie and Fair Annie*, in which Margaret (like Annie) attends William's wedding against the judgement of her mother (Coffin, 1977).

This ballad has been recorded by many of the big names in folk music in the 1900s, such as Jean Ritchie, Pete Seeger, and A.L. Lloyd. Their recordings have subsequently inspired other artists. Sherly Collins included the ballad in her album, *The Power of the True Love Knot*, in 1976. In the album notes she states that she learned the song from a Jean Ritchie recording. She explains that even after looking at many versions of this ballad, she still had questions about the story: “none (of the versions) I can find explain why Sweet William passed up Lady Margaret, or how she died or how he died. But with all its ambiguities, or maybe because of them, it remains the outstanding ballad of its type where the true-lover's knot triumphs over human pride, tragedy and death” (Zierke, 2022).

Dave Arthur, Pete Cooper, and Chris Moreton, later known as *Rattle on the Stovepipe*, included this ballad on their 2003 album, *Return Journey.* They recount an interesting anecdote,

> *During the final session of a recent storytelling residency in a primary school, I gave the children the option of requesting anything that we'd done over the ten weeks, the top choice was the supernatural ballad of Little Margaret. One of my sources for the song, Bascom Lamar Lunsford, the North Carolina lawyer, had actually learnt it from a nine-year-old girl. So it has gone full circle* (Zeirke, 2022).

6. Tam Lin (Child 39)

Other titles: *Tam Lane, The Young Tamlane, The Bride Stolen by the Fairies, Young Tom Line, Tam-a-line, Janet and Tam Blain* (Acland, 1997).

The original story features Tam Lin, a man who had been wooed as a lover to the Queen of the Elves in the land of fairies. He appears to Janet while she is picking roses in Carterhaugh. She is seduced by Tam Lin. She asked him if he is a “Christian knight”, and he replies that he wants to leave the land of the fairies because he is worried that he may become a tithe to Hell (fairies must pay a tithe to Hell once every seven years). Lady Janet wants to bring him back so that he can become the father of her unborn child. To do this, she must go to a certain crossroad on Halloween night and pull a rider from a white horse as the fairy folk ride by. She does this and the knight is changed into several different animals in her arms by the fairies until he finally becomes a naked man. Queen of the Fairies is very displeased and says that had she known what Tam Lin had planned, she would have taken out his heart and replaced it with a heart of stone. She would have also used him as the tithe to Hell (Child, 1888; Coffin, 1977).

One of the first places this story can be found in print is in the 1548 edition of *The Compaynt of Scotland,* titled *The Tayl of Yong Tamlene.* This is also a dance within the same work called *Thom of Lyn.* Child explains the significance of the setting of the ballad:

> *Carterhaugh is a plain, at the conflux of the Ettrick and Yarrow in Selkirkshire, about a mile above Selkirk, and two miles below Newark Castle; a romantic ruin which overhangs the Yarrow, and which is said to have been the habitation of our heroine's father, though others place his residence in the tower of Oakwood. The peasants point out, upon the plain, those electrical rings, which vulgar credulity supposes to be traces of the Fairy revels. Here, they say, were placed the stands of milk, and of water, in which Tamlane was dipped, in order to effect the disenchantment; and upon these spots, according to their mode of expressing themselves, the grass will never grow. Miles Cross, (perhaps a corruption of Mary's Cross,) where fair Janet awaited the arrival of the Fairy train, is said to have stood near the Duke of Buccleuch's seat of Bow-hill, about half a mile from Carterhaugh* (Child, 1888).

While the father of Janet's child is not made clear in Child's first variant, later variants imply that Tam Lin was the father. Later versions also state that the knight on the white steed is Tam Lin (Bold, 2019).

Many variants of this ballad can be described as having two different opening sections, or an opening that can be broken into two parts. The first describes Lady Jane (or sometimes Lady Margaret) leaving to wander into the woods and pick roses. This opening is very similar to the opening of the ballads *Hind Etin* (Child 41) and *The King's Dochter Lady Jean* (Child 52). The other opening has to do with the woman being confronted by an elder man asking her if she is with child and her telling him that if she is, it is her own fault. The man then describes how to get rid of the child by gathering certain herbs in the forest (Lyle, 1970a).

For a more detailed comparison between all the variants and how their story points match up, the researcher Abigail Acland has created an extensive table included in the appendices of this paper.

This ballad's story has captured the imagination of many and has become subject to many different iterations from plays to movies, as well as many different recordings. One of the first recordings done of this ballad was by Betsy Johnson of Glasgow and Willie Whyte of Aberdeen. They sang for a field recording done by Hamish Henderson in 1956. Hugh Sheilds, another folk song collector, heard and recorded the song from Eddie Butcher of Magilligan Co. Londonderry in 1968 and added it to his published collection, *Folk Ballads from Donegal to Derry*. This ballad was picked up by the British folk-rock band, Fairpoint Connections also in 1968. They recorded the song with Sandy Denny, a famous singer-songwriter of the late 1960s. In this recording they performed the song in 3/4 meter with an occasional 4/4 bar thrown in to better fit the words. This recording was featured on numerous albums by both Fairpoint and Denny, as well as in many live performances (Zeirke, 2022).

On the sleeve notes of her debut album in 1971, Anne Briggs, the singer had A.L. Lloyd include this about her recording of *Tam Lin*:

> *Better known through Child's* ***English and Scottish Popular Ballads*** *as Tam Lin. It was thought to have disappeared from tradition but of recent years a number of versions, mostly fragmentary, have turned up among country singers, particularly Scottish travelling people. I cobbled this set together, in part from Child, in part from recent collection; the tune is derived from one used for this ballad by travelers. Many consider it the best of all English-language ballad stories (*Zierke, 2022).

A. L. Lloyd himself recorded a version of the ballad a few years later. Other artists who have performed and recorded a version of *Tam Lin* such as Mike Waterson, have cited A. L. Lloyd as their inspiration for the variant they chose to use (Zierke, 2022). This ballad has been sung and recorded by dozens of different artists in the past few decades and is still found on folk albums currently being released. This includes being featured on the Folk Alley Sessions by Anaïs Mitchell and Jefferson Hamer in 2013. This recording is unique in that Mitchell and Hamer set the Child Ballads in a new light and update the text. For their version of *Tam Lin*, they ended up omitting subplot points concerning the fairies and the Fairie Queen. This was not intentional at the start, but as they were writing they decided to focus on the love story between Janet and Tam Lin (Thompson, 2013). This resulted in a completely new variant.

Conclusion

While the ballads referenced here have differences in their stories, there are major similarities that connect them all. Ballads are stories. Just as fairytales morph from generation to generation to reflect and commentate on the society from which they emerged, so do ballads. They both maintain the essence of their story that they were born with, but their physique is molded and shaped slowly like the muscles of a human body through the passage of time. Different parts are highlighted, strengthened, changed, elongated, added, and removed depending on the people, community, and culture.

The origins of many of these ballads become irrelevant as ballads are seen and interpreted in different ways as they age. They are seen through a contemporary lens and not specifically through one of the past. One does not need to have a solid grasp of ancient Greek culture in order to enjoy the tales of Perseus, as one does not need to know that the ballad “Twa Sisters” originated in Norway prior to the 17th century to be captivated by the chilling tale it tells.

Ballads, like stories, survive because there is an intrinsic part of humans that is drawn to telling and hearing stories like a moth to a flame. While technology, cultures, viewpoints, and even the connections between people are constantly changing, stories will always be told. Ballads will always be sung. Their popularity may change, but the genre will remain as it has been since its creation.

Appendices

Tam Lin story comparison between variants (Acland, 1997).

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