

## With Child: Illegitimate Pregnancy in Scottish Traditional Ballads

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One of the oldest and most common assumptions regarding ballads and folk songs is the idea that they explicate the values of a community. This concept goes back at least to the Grimms, whose notion of communal creation meant that folk songs were literally communal products, and to Francis Barton Gummere (1961), who thought that "the folk" were so homogeneous in thought that they could create songs while dancing at the same time. In contradistinction to high art, which was considered the expression of individual genius, folklore was supposed to represent the views of everyone within a particular community; it was the single voice of an entire people. In 1866, Carl Engel said that traditional music "reveals especially the individual views, customs and prejudices of a people" (quoted in Elbourne 1976:463). Here Engel explicitly states that *a people* can be so in agreement as to have the views of *an individual*; the folk are not individuals, but one individual. Cecil Sharp was somewhat uneasy about the notion of communal creation, yet in 1907 he called folk song "a communal and racial product, the expression in musical idiom, of aims and ideals that are primarily national in character" (quoted in Stekert 1968:230). Communal creation has few defenders today, yet there is still sympathy for the notion that folk song is the voice of a people and not of a person. As late as 1968, Alan Lomax and Joan Halifax argued, "Given the highly redundant nature of folk song and the fact that song is usually a group communication device serving to focus the attention of groups, to organize them for joint response, and to produce consensus, it seems obvious that the texts of songs will be limited to those matters, attitudes, concerns, and feelings on which the community is in maximal accord" (1968:275). In the same year, Roger Abrahams and George Foss posited that "the traditional performer is synthesizing the group, reaffirming its values, giving it a

feeling of community. His aim is a normative one, and his arguments will thus be conservative, in favor of the status quo" (1968:10). In this paper, I will argue against the idea that ballads represent normative community values. My argument rests on a close examination of several ballad texts that are from the same culture and that focus on the same social problem: out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Rather than expressing a single response to this situation, the texts express a multiplicity of opinions and suggest a variety of outcomes. I am looking not at broadside ballads nor at protest songs, but at the most classic form of traditional British song—the Scottish ballads of the Child canon. And I maintain that the central feature of these ballads is not consensus, but conflict.

The classic Scottish ballads have long been considered a high-water mark of folk culture. Stark and beautiful in expression, eerie and haunting in melody, they have been a source of national pride at least since the eighteenth-century Scottish folk revival spearheaded by Allan Ramsay and Robert Burns. In 1776, David Herd observed that

the merit both of the poetry and the music of the Scots songs is undoubtedly great; and that the peculiar spirit and genius of each is so admirably adapted to each other, as to produce, when conjoined, the most enchanting effect on every lover of nature and unaffected simplicity. For the characteristic excellence of both, he apprehends, is nearly the same, to wit, a forcible and pathetic simplicity, which at once lays strong hold on the affections. (1973:xi)

More than two hundred years later, Hamish Henderson muses on the "unchallenged excellence of many of our ballad versions" (1983:102) and quotes Stanley Hyman's description of the classic Scots ballads as "a folk literature unsurpassed by any in the world."

Though Scottish ballads remain a source of national and cultural pride, they hardly represent the locus of normative values that Lomax and others would expect. To the contrary, the world that the ballads present is anything but a place of harmony and shared ideas. It is a world rife with conflict, a world of murder and rape and revenge, of war and abduction and broken promises, of thwarted love and malicious cruelty. Even comic ballads bespeak a world in conflict—lovers who do not agree and poke fun at one another, courtship that relies on the guessing of riddles or the performing of difficult tasks. My contention is that Scots ballads, like Greek tragedy, exist not to provide a sum of shared values, but instead to articulate conflicts that arise from unshared values; and, in so doing, the ballads suggest solutions, air grievances, and perhaps defuse or detonate these conflicts by changing them from reality to representation.

The notion that ballads grow out of dissent is not a new one. Several scholars, such as J. E. Housman (1952:49) and David Buchan (1972:17-18), have called attention to the fact that ballads thrive in regions of conflict. Famous examples are the border ballads of Scotland (Buchan 1972) and the *corridos* of the Texas-Mexican border (Paredes 1958). Yet even here, the implication has been that ballads emerge out of the tensions between conflicting communities; all conflict is assumed to be inter-communal rather than intra-communal. Each group—however it may be delineated, by language, proximity, nationality, or ethnicity—is still assumed to be a place of shared, agreed-upon cultural values. This supposition of shared, communal values ignores the fact of dissension within a community and assumes that folklore ignores these tensions as well—that it speaks only to group harmony, rather than to group conflict.

A different portrayal of folklore's role is suggested by Luigi Lombardi-Satriani's idea of "folklore as culture of contestation." Rather than focusing on ethnic similarity or geographic proximity, Lombardi-Satriani concentrates on difference in economic class. Lombardi-Satriani insists that "folklore be interpreted as a specific culture that derives from the lower classes *with the function to oppose* the hegemonic culture, the latter being a product of the dominant class" (1974:103). Here folklore is seen not as reinforcing dominant communal values, but as actively opposing them. To Lombardi-Satriani, folklore is not fundamentally harmonious, but fundamentally contestative. It exists not to exemplify national character or regional mores, but to articulate conflict. The very notion of a distinct "folk culture" began during the eighteenth century, a time of intense class stratification caused by the growth of industrial capitalism. A function of the division of society into classes, folklore remains intimately bound both to class society and to the articulations of the class not in power.

Though the notion of folk culture is a product of the eighteenth century, the artefacts that are considered part of this culture may be much older. It is difficult to say exactly when the ballads were composed because they were often not written down prior to the eighteenth-century interest in ballad collecting. We know of their earlier existence through a comparatively few number of manuscripts, the Stationers' Register, and the mention of ballads in medieval and early modern writing. Ballads were certainly common by Shakespeare's day, and it would probably not be far wrong to suggest the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries as the great age of ballad composition.

The study of folklore began as a salvage and rescue operation, an attempt to collect songs and stories of the European peasantry before their way of life was crushed by the steamroller of economic progress. Though few present-day scholars would restrict folklore to the creations of the

peasantry, it seems clear that the vast majority of folk songs have been produced by those without a great deal of economic and political power—whether they were peasants, professors' daughters like Mrs. Brown of Falkland, travellers like Jeannie Robertson, or petty capitalists like the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ballad-hawkers who sold broadsides in the streets of British cities (see, for example, Brown 1985; Gower 1968; and Porter 1976).

Yet, in viewing folklore as "culture of contestation" and as the product of class stratification, we must not fall into the error of reducing society to two homogeneous voices—one of the oppressed and one of the oppressor. Lombardi-Satriani writes:

This contestation is on the part of the dominated against the dominators, on the part of the weak against the strong. But the categories of dominated and dominators are neither abstractly nor immutably fixed, nor do they include only the politically and economically dominated. (1974:103)

Thus, though folklore may represent those not in power, there is no assumption that members of this group will agree. Similarity of class does not make other differences disappear. Nor should we view all folklore as revolutionary or diametrically opposed to the elite culture. What is most important is that folklore is *different* from elite culture and representative of different points of view. As Lombardi-Satriani argues further:

We assume the term contestation as used in the sense of "to adduce opposing testimony." . . . [I]t is whatever form of "contraposition of witnesses, testimony and documents" is contestable, with the antagonistic intention being explicit rather than implicit. . . . There is also another contestation, which we will refer to "by its position," of whatever cultural product that places itself in opposition to any other simply by its presence. (1974:104)

These definitions of contestation are congenial to M.M. Bakhtin's notion of the social stratification of verbal genres. Here, the entire folk milieu may be viewed as contestative because it exists as a counterpoint to the elite milieu. High art proclaims itself universal; folk art gives the lie to this notion simply by the fact of its existence:

At the time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, national, and political centralization of the verbal-ideological world in the higher official socio-ideological levels, on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all "languages" and dialects; there developed the literature of the *fabliaux* and *Schwänke* of street songs,

folksayings, anecdotes, where there was no language-center at all, where there was to be found a lively play with the "languages" of poets, scholars, monks, knights and others, where all "languages" were masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face. (Bakhtin 1981:273)

Thus folklore may be contestative because it adds other voices, other points of view, to those expressed by the dominant culture. These alternate voices may be contestative simply by the fact of their existence—they are the opinions of peasants and shopkeepers rather than princes and generals. Or they may be contestative because they express ideas not sanctioned or expressed by the dominant culture, but which may be viable points of view in other strata of society.

If we see folklore as culture of contestation, then it would logically follow that the conflicts between men and women would be played out in this arena. As Lombardi-Satriani notes:

Women . . . constitute along with the proletariat the category of the historically oppressed. . . . Now, if folklore constitutes in every case the demands of all the possible categories of the dominated, we also ought to find in it, for example, the demands of women, their protests against males, their dominators. (1974:103-104)

Unfortunately, however, Lombardi-Satriani is unable to find strongly articulated gender conflicts in the material he studies: "In reality this occurs only rarely; in fact we find that the most frequently expressed values in folklore are the male values, or truly, in this specific regard, the values of the dominators" (1974:104). This observation may be true for Lombardi-Satriani's Italian material, or perhaps as a man, he simply is not privy to the folklore of women. But it certainly is not true for the great Scots ballads; in them, the articulations of women are strong and clear.

A brief word must be said about the relationship between songs *about* women and songs *by* women. It would be wrong to suggest that the voices of ballad women precisely mirror the voices of real women in early modern Scottish society. At this juncture, it is impossible to know who composed ballads about women and whether these compositions were intended as realistic, idealized, or didactic representations. Nonetheless, there is a certain amount of evidence suggesting that the ballads (and particularly these unwed pregnancy ballads) are, in part at least, a woman's genre. This evidence must, of course, be speculative, but it is worth taking into consideration. Female informants are over-represented in Child's collection and in others; and several of the most famous ballad informants—Anna Gordon Brown, Mrs. Hogg (the Ettrick Shepherd's mother), Agnes Lyle, Bell Robertson—were women. David Buchan observes:

As far as they can be traced, then, Anna Gordon's ballads are stories of a woman's tradition; her three immediate sources were women, and the most important of the three, Anne Farquharson, derived hers from the nurses and old women of Allanaquoich. (1972:64)

Robert Burns also learned most of his ballads from women: his mother and an elderly maid of his mother's (Brown 1984:2). Likewise, women have important roles in the stories of the ballads. Sometimes they are victimized ("Eppie Morrie" [Child 223]) and sometimes they are cruel ("The Mother's Malison" [Child 216]), but rarely are they the fragile and helpless beings represented in the elite literature of the time. Ballad women rescue lovers, undo magic curses, and travel hundreds of miles to be with the ones they love. Perhaps the fact that ballad women are far more active than their counterparts in high art represents the fact that peasant women had relatively more autonomy in relation to men than did elite women. Rosalind K. Marshall describes this phenomenon and notes its reflection in the Scottish folk song:

Girls without property had always been able to exercise a far greater element of personal choice than had their wealthy contemporaries. . . . Servant girls, farm labourers' daughters and the children of lesser tradesmen and shopkeepers associated much more freely with members of the opposite sex . . . . Nor did women play a passive role. Scottish folk songs of the period frequently include an independent-minded heroine, ready to take the initiative in courtship and looking for both romantic love and strong physical attraction in marriage. (1983:186-187)

The fact that unwed pregnancy ballads are often told from a woman's point of view and look with detail at what is usually considered a woman's problem further suggests that these ballads represent women's sentiments. However, it is important to reiterate that the ballads do not present a single, unified expression of women's solidarity. It would be wrong to describe all of them as proto-feminist tracts, just as it would be wrong to posit a community of women and expect each ballad to speak for all. As a general rule, the ballads tend to show sympathy for the woman, yet they are by no means uniform in their ideas.

The three Scots ballads that I wish to examine—"Tam Lin" (Child 39), "The Cruel Mother" (Child 20), and "Lady Maisry" (Child 65)—deal with conflicts that arise from illegitimate pregnancy. These unwed pregnancy ballads comprise a rather large corpus of Scots balladry; many other fine additions could be made to my small selection—"Mary Hamilton" (Child 173), "The Lass of Roch Royal" (Child 76), "The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry" (Child 113) "Fair Annie" (Child 62), and "Lizie Wan" (Child 51), to name a few. Many of these ballads are quite somber and depict the

woman as being abandoned by the man, or even killed—by his family, hers, by accident, or by herself. Even when the ballad ends in marriage, the marriage is usually purchased at great price, after difficulty ("Tam Lin") or heartbreak ("Fair Annie") has been endured. Yet few of the ballads seem like sermons or cautionary tales that threaten women with the consequences of breaking societal rules. Instead, the ballads give a wide variety of possible outcomes to this difficult and perilous situation. Rather than upholding societal norms that condemn the pregnant spinster as immoral and sinful, the ballads offer alternative points of view. Often there is great sympathy and a certain amount of righteous indignation for the woman who has been abandoned, murdered, or thrown over for another woman. Some condemn the man who has abused and left her; others show the woman a helpless victim to the machinations of family members (hers or his); while still others show a happy ending obtained by human love or supernatural grace. Thus, the same society that condemns the woman by legal or clerical means may also exonerate her by artistic ones. Obviously, different forces within the same society are in conflict here. The following three ballads present varied ways of handling the problem of unplanned pregnancy.

### "Tam Lin"

"Tam Lin" is one of the best-loved of all the great ballads, one that has long won praise for its high artistic quality. Child said, "This fine ballad stands by itself" (Child 1898, I:336); MacEdward Leach called it "the finest of the fairy ballads" (1955:136); and Hamish Henderson and Francis Collinson regarded it as "one of the major ballads in our tradition" (1965:22). It is also possibly one of the oldest of Scots ballads; "The Tayl of the Young Tamlene" was first mentioned in the *Complaint of Scotland* in 1549. However, since no texts survive before the eighteenth century, we cannot be certain that "Young Tamlene" is a version of the song Child called "Tam Lin." Likewise, though airs called "Thom of Lyn" and "Young Thomlin" are mentioned in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscripts, no tunes have come down to us dated earlier than the eighteenth century.

"Tam Lin" is the story of a well-born young woman, usually called Janet but sometimes Margaret. The Janet versions usually begin with a warning against going to Carterhaugh, where Tam Lin lives, for he will exact as payment from maidens, "Either their rings or green mantles / Or else their maidenheid." But Janet ignores this warning and goes to Carterhaugh "as fast as she could hie." (The Margaret versions often omit the warning; Margaret simply chooses, for one reason or another, to go to Carterhaugh.) Once at Carterhaugh, the heroine picks flowers (sometimes nuts or berries), a means for calling a supernatural being. Tam Lin, who is in thrall to the Queen of Elfinland (or the Queen of the Fairies), appears

and tells her to stop pulling flowers. She refuses and claims Carterhaugh as her own, where she can do as she pleases without asking anyone's permission. In most versions, she then returns home pregnant. Her father notices her condition, but does not seem troubled by it; the only one who expresses concern is an old knight at her father's castle who fears he may be blamed for it. Janet then goes back to Carterhaugh and pulls flowers once again—both to summon Tam Lin and (in many versions, such as Child A, B, D, F, G, and I) to gather plants for an abortifacient. Tam Lin appears and explains that he is bound to the Queen of Elfinland. Janet can save him if she performs a series of fearful and difficult magical deeds. She decides to do so, abandons the abortifacient plan, and rescues her "ain true love" from the Queen of Elfinland.

"Tam Lin" is an inversion ballad, presenting a world that is the reverse of the patriarchal, Calvinist society that existed in the time and place of its creation. In the real world that the creator of "Tam Lin" inhabited, a pregnant spinster would have faced shame, clerical punishment, and the expectation of the poverty and marginality due a single mother. If the man agreed to marry her (as, in fact, happened reasonably often), she would be saved from being a social outcast; though the shame and the Church discipline might still have to be endured. Yet in "Tam Lin," there is no punishment nor fear of it, no anguish, no men who can decide Janet's fate. To the contrary, "Tam Lin" presents a world in which women hold both material and spiritual power, a world where men are fairly helpless creatures who look on while powerful females—Janet and the Queen of Elfinland—perform the action. The entire ballad focuses on Janet, and she controls the course of the story. No brothers appear to condemn or to save her, as they do in other ballads; no fathers bar her way. She goes where she pleases and takes responsibility for her actions. She begins the ballad by deliberately disobeying a command to avoid Carterhaugh and seeks out Tam Lin, though she knows that this act will mean the loss of her maidenhead. When Tam Lin tells her to stop pulling roses and asks why she has come to Carterhaugh without being sent for, she replies that Carterhaugh is her own and that she can go there "Withoot the lief o' thee." When the "auld grey knight" expresses concern about her pregnancy and fear that he or some other knight will be blamed for it, she replies scornfully and angrily, though she does reassure the knight that she will not blame him for her condition:

O, haud your tongue, ye auld grey knight,  
And an ill deith may ye dee,  
Faither my bairn on wha I will,  
I'll faither nane on thee. (MacColl 1990:351)

With her father she is more gentle, but she still insists, "O, if I gang wi' bairn, faither, / It's I will tak' the blame." When she returns to Carterhaugh, she begins to search for the means to make an abortifacient. When Tam Lin appears and tells her how she can win him away from the Queen of Elfinland, she decides on that as the better plan. The tasks she must perform are fearful and complex, but she is perfectly capable of completing them and winning Tam Lin as her "stately groom." "Tam Lin" does not defy convention; it simply side-steps it. Rather than protest societal norms directly, it offers an alternate and fantastic universe in which the patriarchy is absent, the supernatural is represented by elves and fairies, and the action is controlled by women.

### "The Cruel Mother"

A far more realistic, and much sadder, ballad is "The Cruel Mother." The protagonist of this ballad is a young woman who, in most versions, has no name; she is simply known as "a lady in London" or "a king's daughter in the north." She falls in love and becomes pregnant and then is abandoned by her lover. No good solution is open to her—no supernatural beings attempt to help her, and no man offers to marry her. So she takes matters into her own hands. She goes to a lonely spot in the woods where she "leans her back against a thorn" and gives birth to her baby—in some versions, to twins. She then takes out her "wee pen-knife" and kills and buries the child. On the way home, she meets the ghost of her dead baby and speaks to him without realizing his identity. Their dialogue is some of the most chilling in all of British poetry. In the Child B version, for example, the mother says:

O sweet babe, and thou were mine,  
I wad cleed thee in the silk so fine.

And the child replies:

O mother dear, when I was thine,  
You did na prove to me sae kind.

At this point she realizes who the revenant is; and he then foretells her death and the divine punishments she will receive after death, usually ending in the eternal punishment of Hell.

At first glance, "The Cruel Mother" reads like a cautionary tale; it seems to champion normative values and warn young women against untoward behavior. Yet the woman is condemned as a "cruel mother," not as a wanton woman; it is the fact of infanticide that turns her into a villainess. She may have been unwise in the course of her love life, but

there she merely committed mistakes, not crimes. A few versions even show sympathy at the beginning for the abandoned woman, though this sympathy is quickly curtailed by a condemnation of the infanticide.

It is true that "The Cruel Mother" lacks the celebration of female sexuality and female power found in "Tam Lin." It is also true that "The Cruel Mother" could be used to uphold conventional standards of propriety and to frighten young women into good behavior. However, rather than seeing this as evidence of the folk's inherent conservatism, I see it instead as evidence that "the folk" has no opinions; individual folks do. "Tam Lin" suggests a revolutionary alternative to dominant sexual mores; "The Cruel Mother" clearly does not. Yet it is hard not to pity the lonely young woman giving birth in the forest and, though we must condemn the murder, we can also feel her remorse and pain. In the Child B version, she speaks to her child prior to the murder, and her words are anything but cold-blooded:

Smile na sae sweet, my bonie babe,  
And ye smile sae sweet, ye'll smile me dead.

Clearly, the cruel mother finds no pleasure in this dreadful act; she can simply think of no other way out of her predicament. She is a woman who tried to challenge the conventions of her society—and lost. Finding herself trapped by the result of her sexual behavior, she sees no good way out; and so she resorts to murder in an effort to end what she cannot hide. In some versions, she welcomes the punishments that her child prophesies for her, though she does beg to be released from the final pain of Hell. "The Cruel Mother" could certainly make a young woman think twice before yielding to passion, but it is not a simple denunciation of unchaste behavior; rather it is a grimly realistic portrait of what may happen in a society where those in power condemn unchaste behavior. Rosalind Mitchison and Leah Leneman tell us that infanticide and child abandonment, though not common, were nonetheless recognized ways for unmarried women in early modern Scotland to deal with unwanted pregnancy. Mitchison and Leneman speculate that "as the Church increased the efficiency of its discipline the social stigma of producing an illegitimate child may have become more fearsome" (1989:210), thus leading to an increase in child abandonment and murder. Ultimately, it is difficult to tell if "The Cruel Mother" affirms conventional sexual standards or highlights their rigidity, whether the cruel mother is more to be pitied or condemned.

### **"Lady Maisry"**

In contrast to "Tam Lin," in which normative societal values are defied, and "The Cruel Mother," in which they win out in the end, "Lady Maisry" presents conflicts that occur within Scottish society. "Lady Maisry"

is a tale in which a woman attempts to defy her male kin, and this struggle is played out in the story of the ballad. The heroine is a well-born Scottish woman who becomes pregnant by a man who is usually (though not always) depicted as an English lord. Her relatives (particularly her father and brother) are very angry when they discover her condition and taunt her with having been a whore. She replies that she is no whore and that her English lord is planning to marry her. But her family sees marriage (especially to an Englishman) as no expiation of sin, and they prepare a grisly punishment—a bonfire to burn her to death. Maisry dispatches an errand boy to fetch her lover, who arrives just in time to kiss her before she dies in the fire. He then threatens to burn Maisry's family—and sometimes the entire town—before throwing himself into the bonfire. We have no doubt that he intends to do what he says.

Lady Maisry is condemned by her family on two counts—in all versions, for sexual wantonness, and in most, for dallying with the enemy. Hers is a horrifying tale, a folk rendering of *The Duchess of Malfi*, a story in which a woman's sexual indiscretion is punished by death. Yet the justice of this punishment is, to put it mildly, debatable; the ballad leaves our sympathies clearly on Maisry's side. The ballad shows her family violating law and kin ties in a brutal and repugnant way. It shows that her punishment is not uniformly believed to be just, for the errand boy is most eager to help, and her lover hurries to her side. Nor do her kin escape with their lives; they will be consumed by the same fire that they prepare. It is a tale rich in symbolism, in which all who have yielded to passion end up consumed by fire.

The ballad portrays a struggle within Scottish society—the fight to control a woman's sexuality. Since Maisry is a high-born woman, her choice of marriage partner has consequences for her family. By becoming pregnant prior to marriage, her virtue has been tainted and her chastity gone: her value as a commodity has been lowered. Since she has become pregnant by an Englishman, marriage cannot save her; marriage to an Englishman would simply mean that her dowry (*tocher* in Scotland) would be in the control of the enemy. Her child would grow up under the control of his father, not his mother, and thus would be an Englishman; Maisry has essentially created a soldier to fight her kin. The only solution is to destroy Maisry before her child is born, before her dowry leaves family hands, and before her shame is widely known.

In all versions, it is Maisry's male relatives—her father and her brother—who instigate the burning, and it is her brother who is particularly active. Some versions do not mention her mother and sister as taking part at all, though her lover clearly holds them responsible for standing by and doing nothing to stop it. Child D shows the mother and sister actually

participating in the burning, while Child E and F show an equally horrifying passivity:

Her father he put on the pot,  
 Her sister put on the pan,  
 And her brother he put on a bauld, bauld fire,  
 To burn Lady Marjorie in;  
 And her mother she sat in a golden chair,  
 To see her daughter burn. (Child E)

In this ballad, the men are active, while the women are passive—and if they dare step out of this passive role, as did Maisry, they are destroyed.

"Lady Maisry," like "The Cruel Mother," shows the horrors that may follow a woman's "illegitimate" sexuality. Yet unlike "The Cruel Mother," "Lady Maisry" condemns no part of the woman's behavior. It is the family that is portrayed as evil, while Maisry is the hapless victim. The courage with which she greets her fate increases our admiration for her. In Child A, Maisry waits for her lover to approach and taunts her brother:

Or he was near a mile awa,  
 She heard his wild horse sneeze:  
 "Mend up the fire, my false brother,  
 It's na come to my knees."

Maisry continues to taunt her brother and believe that her lover will save her. When he arrives too late to do so, his grief is overwhelming:

"O I'll gar burn for you, Maisry,  
 Your father an your mother;  
 An I'll gar burn for you, Maisry,  
 Your sister an your brother.

An I'll gar burn for you, Maisry,  
 The chief of a' your kin;  
 An the last bonfire that I come to,  
 Mysel I will cast in."

Like "Tam Lin," "Lady Maisry" portrays a brave woman and a devoted couple. But in this case, human love and female courage are not enough. Conventional mores, carried to their most rigid and inhuman extreme, have won out. Moreover, this fact is an indictment of these standards, not a vindication. Rather than upholding the correctness of dominant societal standards, "Lady Maisry" is a cry against these standards—and of their twisted misuse in the hands of people such as Maisry's family.

### Conclusion

As we have seen, these three ballads present very different attitudes toward out-of-wedlock pregnancy. "Tam Lin" eludes convention and laughs at normative standards of propriety; it presents a world in which female sexuality is celebrated and illegitimate pregnancy causes neither shame nor pain. "The Cruel Mother" presents a very different world, a place devoid of the human love that triumphs in "Tam Lin," a place where unsanctioned sexuality can only lead to infanticide and eternal damnation. It is a cold place, and it offers the abandoned woman neither sympathy nor a second chance. "Lady Maisry" is somewhere in between; though Maisry and her lover may long for the freedom found in "Tam Lin," her family contrives to make their fate closer to that of "The Cruel Mother." "Lady Maisry" may celebrate the values found in "Tam Lin," but it inhabits the world of "The Cruel Mother."

There are, of course, many other responses to illegitimate pregnancy in other ballads. "Mary Hamilton" deals with illegitimate pregnancy followed by infanticide, but its tone is very different from that of "The Cruel Mother." Mary Hamilton, though guilty of sexual impropriety and infanticide, is portrayed so sympathetically that Tristram Coffin considers her tragic end the "emotional core" of the ballad: "This core, the tragedy of beauty and youth led astray, the lack of sympathy within the law, the girl's resigned indifference to her lot, are driven home with full force. . . . This is the essence of the story: the beauty and youth of a girl snuffed out by law" (1957:212). "Fair Annie" is a passionate defense of common-law marriage, a story in which a man's attempt to abandon his common-law wife (also mother to his seven children and pregnant with the eighth) is thwarted by the loyalty between two sisters. In "The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry" (Child 113), the father returns after a seven-year absence and takes the child off the mother's hands. However, the father is a magical seal (or *silkie*) who takes the child to his strange and watery home and also prophesies the child's death—both father and son will one day be shot by the woman's lawfully wedded husband.

More than one hundred years ago, William Motherwell wrote of the ballad poet:

In his narrative, the poet always appears to be acting in good faith with his audience. He does not sing to another what he discredits himself, nor does he appeal to other testimony in support of his statements. (1968:xiii)

This unflinching sense of truth is one of the qualities that has always attracted people to the ballads. Though a ballad story may deal with witches, fairies, and magical seals, the human beings act and speak with

direct and forcible honesty. It should not surprise us that such unwavering honesty should produce a multitude of different opinions. Ballads that deal with social problems—such as illegitimate pregnancy—may present very different attitudes toward and very different solutions to these problems. The ballads that I have discussed do not necessarily uphold societal norms; instead, they show what may happen when societal norms are broken. Rather than exemplifying moral unity, these ballads demonstrate different points of view. Rather than presenting shared values, these ballads are loci of conflict. By viewing them in all their moral, artistic, and social complexity, we come closer to understanding their intricacy than if we search for a unity they do not possess. Instead of a single, predictable point of view, the ballads offer an occasionally bewildering polyphony of voices.

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