
Donald Braid
Indiana University

The ballad wars have not ended. In *The Ballad Matrix*, William McCarthy enters the field armed with the ballad repertoire of Agnes Lyle, daughter of a weaver from Renfrewshire in southwest Scotland. Lyle's ballads were collected by William Motherwell in 1825 and present a repertoire exceeded in size only by that of Mrs. Brown of Falkland. McCarthy draws heavily on oral-formulaic theory in his analysis and in fact states that one of the goals of his study is to assess the validity of this theory to ballad scholarship. His use of oral-formulaic theory will undoubtedly draw criticisms from those who are skeptical of claims by some scholars that there is, for example, a single method of oral recreation or that certain aesthetic patterning (such as annular, binary and trinary structuring of stanzas, tone, characters and narrative) derives from innate properties of "oral mind." McCarthy is often careful to acknowledge these criticisms and suggest an open and flexible interpretation of the process of oral-formulaic composition, but at other times he seems to embrace fully the implications of universalizing claims about the oral mind. Beyond these controversies the book still has a great deal to offer in support of a theory of ballad composition.

McCarthy's argument pivots on the insights gained from considering patterns found in Agnes Lyle's repertoire as a whole—patterns lost in studies that focus on comparisons between single ballad texts. He suggests that the consistency of patterns in structural aesthetics, imagery, and symbolism clearly mark the ballads as resulting from "the work of a single artist with a single vision" (20). This consistency argues for a recreative model of ballad transmission and against a conservative model in which ballad traditions result from random accretion and repetition of memorized texts acquired from a diversity of sources.

McCarthy develops his argument in three main sections. In the first he presents a detailed background of the social and political climate of Renfrewshire in the early 1800s. He then focuses attention on William Motherwell as ballad scholar and collector. Motherwell's field notes, philosophy, and collecting method are explored in order to develop an immediate context for interpreting the texts of Lyle's ballads.

In part two McCarthy explores Lyle's compositional techniques through an examination of the aesthetics of their structural patterning. He builds on the methodology David Buchan developed in *The Ballad and the*
Folk in discerning the annular, binary and trinary patterning of stanzas, characters, tones, and narration. By working with the repertoire as a whole, McCarthy develops an analysis that suggests Lyle's oral compositional technique is most fluent in working with ballads sung in standard ballad meter. Deviations from the symmetry of "... her customary well articulated oral architectonic ..." (83) are suggested to result from factors such as unfamiliar meter or the influence of popular standards which compromise her technical abilities in oral recreation.

The leitmotifs in Lyle's ballads are the focus of part three. McCarthy draws on the structural analysis of Roger deV. Renwick (English Folk Poetry), the literary approach to symbolism as developed by Edith Randam Rogers (The Perilous Hunt), and the "narratological-linguistic" approach of Flemming G. Andersen (Commonplace and Creativity) to develop a picture of the themes and values typically found in the Scottish ballad tradition. Comparing patterns of the whole tradition to the patterns embodied in Lyle's own repertoire, McCarthy is able to suggest something of Agnes Lyle's personal values and suggest how these values relate to her socioeconomic position and interests.

McCarthy's conclusion returns attention to a more general consideration of oral-formulaic theory and ballad composition. He develops a very useful and thorough typology of what the term formula means in relation to the Scottish ballad. He then situates the insights he has gained from his study with regard to previous work that has tended to focus on the ballads of Mrs. Brown of Falkland. The Ballad Matrix does not provide definitive answers to persistent questions about Scottish ballads and therefore does not mark an end to the ballad wars. It does, however, present a perspective on ballad transmission and performance that will be of interest to any ballad scholar or student of oral literature.


Carol P. Jamison
Indiana State University

On July 27, 1214, King Philip Augustus of France led his warriors to victory against King Otto of Germany. This battle, fought at the bridge of Bouvines in Flanders, grew to epic proportions and became entrenched in