CHARACTERIZATION AND SYMBOLIC PLOT AS
DEVELOPMENTS OF THE ROMANTIC LITERARY BALLAD

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Master of Arts

by

Henry Webster Arbaugh, Jr., B.A., B.S.Ed.

The Ohio State University
1970

Approved by

Richard T. Martin
Adviser
Department of English
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. THE LIMITATIONS OF NEO-CLASSICAL BALLAD IMITATION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. WORDSWORTH'S &quot;WE ARE SEVEN&quot; AND &quot;THE THORN&quot;: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHARACTERIZATION IN THE BALLAD</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. COLERIDGE'S &quot;THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER&quot;: THE INFUSION OF SYMBOLIC PLOT</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. KEATS'S &quot;LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI&quot;: THE RELATION OF SYMBOLIC SETTING TO CHARACTER AND UNRESOLVED SITUATION</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

THE LIMITATIONS OF NEO-CLASSICAL BALLAD ImitATION

The extension of the traditional ballad into a distinctive literary product with sophisticated moral and psychological insight appears solely the achievement of certain Romantic poets. These writers of literary ballads desired the folk narrative's appeal for feeling rather than for reason, its simplicity, and its passion for the past, the remote, and the supernatural; yet, they reflect the artistic consciousness that exacted more imaginative freedom and more symbolic expression from the ballad form. That William Wordsworth's "The Thorn" and certain other Lyrical Ballads, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner," and John Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" have achieved the ballad's admirable qualities without engaging in mere antiquarianism or trite imitation shows that these writers did fulfill their highly original artistic goals. Although the Neoclassical period is recognized as sponsoring the ballad revival, their revival remains relatively sterile and—in its moralizing and sentimentalizing—totally unattuned to the
very nature of popular expression. Unlike the Romantics who could adapt sophisticated techniques to the ballad without altering it materially, the Neo-classical writers had gone astray in their efforts to adapt the ballad tradition to their own advantage. The Augustans failed because they too often retreated into plodding scholarship without even really understanding the essence of authentic folk balladry. Their antiquarian pursuits account for their mistaken notion of judging the quality of an imitation by its closeness to the "real thing"—which was often to them not the older ballad but the tawdry penny broadside of lesser quality. They were also unsuccessful because they attempted to frame their ballad imitations within the dignified structure of the epic and, as a result, found that the simplicity which they admired in the ballad tradition and the universality which they sought in the epic tradition became incongruous for them. These Neo-classical writers could never bring the immediacy of a highly personal and simple human experience to their poems because they attempted to create characters of high position and of heroic proportions, whose significance as central figures in national histories paralleled the universality of their own adventures. The subtle nuances of character portrayal which provide a meeting ground for the real and the supernatural and which precipitate a psychological study of man's responses to a possibly uncontrollable fate within a violent universe are
absent, for the most part, in the ballad imitations of the Neo-classical period but become peculiar to the Romantic works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats. Keeping the ballad's rapid movement, meter and stanza forms, and the simplicity of language and situation to be found in ballads, these Romantic writers can still approach the psychological penetration found in a Browning dramatic monologue or pursue moral or metaphysical questions posed in philosophical poems.

Perhaps the most curious phenomenon about the absorption of balladry into literary art is that popular ballads—as they are properly understood and defined by very recent scholarship—were misinterpreted, even discredited, by Neo-classical antiquaries, critics, and imitators, and this misapprehension was continued well into the Romantic period by even those poets whose works pay the greatest service to folk art. To many eighteenth-century men of letters, a ballad was only "a doggerel poem written to a familiar tune, printed on folio sheet or long slip, and sold at bookstalls or hawked about the street by ballad singers."¹ These pieces were called "stall ballads" or "broadsides" and were written by hack writers who did great damage to the dramatic quality and simplicity of authentic ballads in their aspiration toward cultivated art. Because these broadsides had known authorship, often of a poor grade, and were frequently influenced by mass
urban tastes of heterogeneous quality, they most often were degraded to conveying maudlin human-interest stories, news of localized tabloid crime, or uninspired topical satires which were often carefully controlled by political interests. The purveyors of folk ballads directed their talents to rural people whose tastes had already been developed within a simple, well-established tradition; however, the hack rhymers who attempted to be "cutely" original in appeasing their semi-literate broadside audience turned out stories with cheap pathos or tawdry homiletics. Although some broadside pieces were of a redeeming higher quality and were either assimilated into the folk tradition or recognized by literary artists, most of them fail when compared to folk ballads because they tell their stories in a perfunctory, undramatic, and diffuse manner—usually losing the excitement of the action to excessive sentimentality. Because the distinction between the broadside and the true ballad of tradition had never been made, most acknowledgement and study of ballads by Augustan and Romantic erudites actually concerned only the broadside material, much of which was quite contrary to the traditional ballads. It was not until the vast collection (305 ballads—each with a number of variants), The English and Scottish Popular Ballads (1882-1898), by Francis James Child that a recognition of what constitutes the finer ballad of tradition was made. Child's judiciously researched ballads were carefully screened before being included in his collection,
and each of the accepted "popular," "traditional," or "folk" ballads was systematically numbered—the well-known "Barbara Allen" is Child #84, for example. His collection stands as an ultimate source for one comparing folk ballads in their purest form to the literary ballads of sophisticated writers. For the most part, the ballad scholars of today appraise a literary ballad by judging the quality of its source: the better products being inspired either by the popular ballads themselves or by a "composed" piece which follows closely the authentic ballad constants of narration. Although this paper is not intended to be a source study or a probe into the integrity of Neo-classical and Romantic antiquaries, an occasional look at such concerns can be of importance in evaluating the quality of the Romantics' adherence to folk norms or, more importantly, in understanding their artistic departure from them.

The Neo-classical period is considered the time which founded ballad study, yet an alien climate for the ballad's artistic maturation. Unlike the Romantic artists whose very norms and values provided the impetus for stronger assimilation of ballad style into their own works, the Neo-classical writers actually retarded such a growth with their concepts. The Neo-classicists' predilection for the historical ballad rather than for the adventurous type and their partiality for their own pedantic and elongated revisions of simple traditional
narratives account for the writers' rather awkward expression within the ballad style. One may better understand the Romantic climate for ballad growth if he can see the Neo-classical attitudes as initially given by Joseph Addison's rather egregious motives for applauding popular song. In appealing to the tastes of his Spectator audiences, the journalist says, "It is impossible that anything should be universally tasted and approved by a multitude, tho' they were only the rabble of a nation which hath not in it some peculiar aptness to please and gratify the mind of man." Hence, the theory—that reason and taste, each being endowed to all men by nature, is more easily expressed by simpler people who are not overlaid with prejudice—was expressed by "Chevy Chase," a broadside version of "The Hunting of the Cheviot" (Child #162). This ballad's value to the Augustan mind was further justified by the assertion that this simple folk song has qualities of the epic. Addison compares "Chevy Chase" with Virgil's great poetry and says that the historical ballad like the Aeneid is founded upon an "important precept of morality." The first stanza of "Chevy Chase," Addison demonstrates, does have this didactic element, and he further insists that this ballad's creator, like Virgil, must have been 'directed by the same
poetical genius, and by the same copyings after nature." The *Spectator* appraisal sees the ballad then, not only as a rendering of the eighteenth century's faith in the soundness of the ordinary man's common sense judgment but also as a potential epic.

The Augustan fondness for the epic explains why many ballad imitations of this period are those classed as "historical." Their subject matter, often based on an authentic historical event, concerns a few people, "affecting larger social units, at least the clan, perhaps even the nation." The broadside "Chevy Chase" with its history-based plot and slight, interpolated social moral probably appeals to Addison because of his predilection for the heroic character and the epic story.

Matthew Prior's "Henry and Emma" called "the first significant ballad imitation of the eighteenth century" changes an adventurous ballad, "The Nutbrowne Maide," into a historical poem and almost into a chivalric romance. The original is an example of the "dialogue" ballad (the story evolves from a conversation between two characters--"Lord Randall" [Child #12] and "Edward" [Child #13] are traditional examples). In the original ballad, a man tests the nutbrown maid's steadfast affections by falsely telling her that he has been banished and must leave her.
She will not allow him to leave without her and offers to endure hardships, privations, and all conceivable discomforts to be by his side. She will even cut her hair and wear men's clothing, if need be, to accompany him. The man then lies about his fidelity to her and discredits her virtue to test even further her faithfulness to him. At last, he admits the trick and confesses that he is actually a rich squire who wishes to marry her. After she accepts his love as true, she says men owe God a certain gratitude for women like herself who have her kind of steadfast devotion. In the imitation, Prior gives a rather lengthy prologue before the dialogue. This prologue not only provides a complex setting but also makes the central characters into virtuous patriots during the struggles between King Edward and France. Emma's steadfastness is "symptomatic of that British sturdiness which not only enabled Edward to triumph but which sustained 'unwearied Marlborough's toils'[l. 746]". The diction of the imitation seems stilted and pedantic, and Prior employs the ornamental heroic couplets of the prologue in rather lengthy passages which do nothing to move the action or to make the imitation as "dramatic" as the folk product.

In "The Nutbrowne-Maide," the young man, at one point, persists in his trick by telling his "Twewe" lover
that in his banishment he may encounter much of the vio-
lence of warfare and that she could not accompany him
because women are "ful febyl for to fyght." Her direct
and relatively simple response takes only six terse lines:

I wolde wythstonde, with bowe in hande,
To greeve them as I myght,
And you to save, as wyme have,
From deth many one:
For in my mynde, of all mankynde
I love but you alone."

(ll. 163 to 168)

In contrast, Emma's loquacious response is full of mixed
allusions given in the lofty, but quite obtrusive and
heavy heroic couplets. A reader of ballads, who is ac-
customed to anticipating the story's outcome with
"baited breath," comes to a complete halt in his pursuit
of the story to focus entirely upon Emma's grandiose
speech--one which belongs to the heroine of a Greek
tragedy in her finest hour, but not to a ballad's heroine:

With fatal certainty Thalestris knew
To send the arrow from the twanging yew;
And, great in arms, and foremost in the war,
Bonduca brandish'd high the British spear.
Could thirst of vengeance, and desire of fame
Excite the female breast with martial flame?
And shall not love's diviner power inspire
More hardy virtue, and more generous fire?
Near thee, mistrust not, constant I'll abide,
And fall, or vanquish, fighting by thy side.
Though my inferior strength may not allow,
That I should bear or draw the warrior bow;
With ready hand, I will the shaft supply,
And joy to see thy victor arrows fly.
Touch'd in the battle by the hostile reed,
Shouldst thou (but Heaven avert it!) shouldst thou bleed;
To stop the wounds, my finest lawn I'd tear,
Wash them with tears, and wipe them with my hair;
Blest, when my dangers and my toils have shown,
That I, of all mankind, could love but thee alone.

That the epic tradition and then that of the ballad are incongruous is illustrated when one notices some more of the resultant shortcomings of "Henry and Emma" as Prior imposes the epic form upon a simple ballad framework to depart still further from the ballad's very virtues which he originally sought. Prior's departure from what Gerould calls the ballad "constants" illustrates the faults of a Neo-classic imitation. Gerould says, for example, that one such structural and rhetorical characteristic of the traditional paradigm is the "stress on situation, rather than on continuity of narrative or on character as character is presented in heroic poems." Foremost to the authentic ballad is that it breaks into the story when the "train of action is decisively pointed toward the catastrophe". A ballad should only imply setting, background, or time, and thus the ballad's action becomes paramount while the epic's fondness for characterization and historicity is sacrificed for anonymity. Unlike the ballad's "fifth act" beginning, however, Prior's imitation opens with 251 lines of scene setting and historical prologue. The first twelve lines, for example, are an invitation for
Cloe to "unbend thy serious brow;/ Wilt thou with pleasure
hear thy lover's strains,/ And with one heavenly smile
o'erpay his pains?" while the bard shall "...take the
sprightly reed, and sing and play." After the epic's
typical invocation, Prior proceeds to tell us that Emma's
father "had headed his appointed bands,/ In firm allegiance
to [King Edward's] command" (ll. 45-46) before having Emma,
"a daughter, chaste and fair" (l. 57). Following these
perfunctory lines are more which tell how she received the
Christian name of "Emma" and the sobriquet of the "nut-
brown maid." Her desirability for marriage is readily
discernible with the speaker's telling:

In tilts and tournaments the valiant strove,
By glorious deeds to purchase Emma's love.
In gentle verse, the witty told their flame,
And grac'd their choicest songs with Emma's name.

Henry alone, however, is the only suitor who takes "more
secret ways...to see the beauteous maid," and it takes
another one hundred lines to learn how "Careful Henry" has
won Emma's affection. The last few lines of this super-
fluous introduction explain how the pair of lovers ar-
range the tryst which will allow the real situation of
the ballad to unfold itself through dialogue. From the
incipience of the "vis-a-vis" confrontation, one does not
find the ballad's quick alternation between speakers; instead, each character gives highly elaborated and seemingly premeditated rhetoric of twenty to forty lines. Prior is intent upon rendering the tale as a formalized debate which proceeds like the slow-paced, line-by-line progress of an epic with its classical embellishments and its topical overtures. The ballad constant of a dramatic rendering is lost because the obtrusive oratory of each speaker slows the action to an almost grinding halt as the characters become more and more self-conscious and aloofly academic in their eloquence.

To say that "Henry and Emma" fails as a sophisticated rendition of a folk ballad because it does not concentrate upon the crucial event or does not allow the action to unfold itself is, however, not enough. Even more important, the imitation in its fully subjective characterization and lack of openness to supernatural reference fails to capture the later Romantic poets' naturally developed symbolism and dramatic freedom—the style given, for example, in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner." Prior's complex wording, his highly rhetorical and coherent organization, and his concentration upon motives and feeling rather than upon action are products of a
sophisticated and polished writer. The rather anonymous character and the indefinite setting of the folk ballad are lost in Prior's poem. In "The Nut-Browne Maide," one never knows much about the participants in the action or about their environment; the protagonists are not even named. This folk ballad's hero and heroine exist in a passive, fatalistic world where their physical actions in that world are more engaging than their moral or emotional temperaments. On the other hand, "'Henry and Emma's' emotional intensity is increased not by balladic repetition but by progressively exaggerating Henry's cruelty, and Emma's affection."¹⁰ The sentimentality becomes so obtrusive that Henry seems to become "sadistic and Emma appears priggishly self-righteous."¹¹ In the ballad, for example, the young man objects to the girl's accompanying him by saying that others will think "That ye be gone away/ Your wanton wylle for to fulfylle"(ll. 100-101) and that "...thus for me/ [you will] Be called an ylle woman." (ll. 105-106. To this accusation of salaciousness, she will reply:

Theirs be the charge that speke so large
In hurting of my name.
For I wyl prove that feythful love
It is devoid of shame.

(11. 111-114)

A comparison of the wording here with that of Prior's
Emma quickly shows the Neo-classical imitation's shortcomings:

Let Emma's hapless case be falsely told
By the rash, young, or ill-natur'd old:
Let every tongue, its various censures choose;
Absolve with coldness, or with spite accuse
Fair truth at last her radiant beams will raise;
And malice vanquish'd heightens virtue's praise.

(11. 316-321)

Prior's moral bias is propagated when the characters engage in a self-pity that turns the focus away from the crucial situation. Emma's hyperbolical assessment of her plight is much too over-colored and ego-assertive:

Yet, when increasing grief brings slow disease;
And ebbing life, on terms severe as these,
Will have its little lamp no longer fed;
When Henry's mistress shews him Emma dead;
Rescue my poor remains from vile neglect:
With virgin honours let my hearse be deckt,
With decent emblem; and at least persuade
This happy nymph, that Emma may be laid
Where thou, dear author of my death, where she,
With frequent eye my sepulchre may see.

(11. 612-622)

As an Augustan imitator, Prior would justify these subjective additions by his concept that the story as an epic should focus on the feeling of its specially identified participants and as an epic needs the applied linguistic virtuosity to raise it to its proper level of elegance.
The faults of "Henry and Emma" result from the author's conformity to his period's restricting classical demands. Later eighteenth century imitations and Romantic literary ballads show improvement because they repudiate these elevated complexities and try to achieve the simplicity and unity of the traditional ballad.

Shortly after Prior's "Henry and Emma," the Neo-classical period's imitation of adventurous, instead of historical, ballads flourished and in a way shows the Augustan age approaching the Romantic and Gothic adventure narratives that were to influence Romantic antiquaries and writers. Addison justified his later defense of the folk adventure narrative, "The Children [or "Babes"] in the Wood" by virtue of its simplicity of thought and style, its ability to please many and varied generations of readers, and again its longstanding popularity with people who are not prejudiced by fashion or the dictates of criticism.

One of the most successful adventure-ballad imitations was David Mallet's "William and Margaret," included as "Lady Margaret"(#74) in the Child collection. The Child ballad begins with Lady Margaret's being told that her lover has forsaken her for another who has more wealth and position. As she sees the false William returning from church with his new bride, she resolves to
visit the newlyweds that evening in ghostly form after she has committed suicide. Late at night by his bedside, William tells the spectre, whom he believes is Margaret in the flesh, that he really loves her. The next day, he visits Lady Margaret's castle to find that his true love has been in the coffin ("laid out against the wall") since his wedding. Central to the folk ballad, of course, is the eerie wonder of the apparition's midnight visit, but some variants explain how William becomes so distraught upon seeing what has happened that he kisses the corpse, and thereby falls dead himself at the foot of the casket. Mallet's version provides a ready contrast between Romantics (Bürger, for example, used the same story for his "Lenore") and those whose verse was still formulated by Augustan taste. Rather than dwell upon the action of the story's participants, Mallet stressed the supernatural "with fascination and fulness rather than upon matter-of-fact economy as in true ballad verse." The ballad-attempt also has Neo-classical figures of speech, balance and personification, and an unnatural moralizing note. Despite these shortcomings, this poem has a true ballad theme which is not hindered excessively by classical epic affectations.

The reason for mentioning Mallet's piece is to
illustrate that while the work shows quality, its merits were rarely acknowledged, and the work, and others like it, often became an object of scorn. Neo-classical tastes were for pieces like "Henry and Emma" (Even Percy for example, preferred Prior's imitation over the original) and the adventurous ballads and imitations were generally overlooked or relegated to anthologies of drinking songs, Cavalier pieces, parodies of popular and literary works, polished ballad imitations, and sometimes a few of the traditional ballads—none of which were distinguished from another. A version of "The Twa Sisters" (Child #10), a story of extreme jealousy which brings about the death of two sisters and their lover, is included in Wit and Drollery (1682), for example. Mallet's "William and Margaret" is burlesqued by Thomas Tickell's "Colin and Lucy," which mimics ballad style with machine-like excellence but fails to capture the feeling contained in Mallet's imitation or in the folk original. In fact, Tickell sees the emotional quality fused into Mallet's piece as unnatural pathos and uses this sentimentality as the basis of his parody. In Tickell's satire, Colin deserts Lucy for a wealthier bride as Lucy dies of unrequited love. When Colin witnesses her tragic demise, he undergoes a sympathetic expiration:
Compassion, shame, remorse, despair
At once his bosom swell;
The damp of death bedew'd his brow,
He groan'd, he shook, he fell! 13

(11. 53-56)

The element of the supernatural, actually the basis of the Child collection and Mallet's piece, is entirely absent. No doubt, Tickell wished to rationalize the supernatural and felt that the ghostly return of the heroine to her lover's bed chambers was of little value to the world of wit and urbanity.

Recognizing that the ability to imply tragic emotions rather than to express them and "a disregard of reason and unconsciousness of mission" 14 are virtues to be extracted from folk expression was impossible for Neoclassical writers. Prior's "Henry and Emma" shows that the eighteenth-century writers could not naturally evolve a moral or symbolic truth from a literal reality without asserting their own moral bias or losing the simplicity of traditional narrative. Tickell's love of wit and sacrifice of the genuine emotion unfolding from supernatural experience are poles apart from Coleridge's ability to create a mystical experience and to evolve naturally a moral in "The Ancient Mariner." Giving the folk ballad a psychological and moral insight becomes
possible for Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats because unlike their Neo-classical predecessors, they could consciously or unconsciously introduce an imaginative characterization and symbolic plot to extend the limits of the ballad.
FOOTNOTES

Chapter 1


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.


11. Ibid.


CHAPTER 2

WORDSWORTH'S "WE ARE SEVEN" AND "THE THORN":
THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHARACTERIZATION IN THE BALLAD

William Wordsworth shows a marked affinity with the ballad tradition in his _Lyrical Ballads_; yet, he sets up conspicuous qualifications to ascertain that his employment of common language and humble themes are never in the interest of literal imitation or never become the object of historical curiosity. Unlike the Neo-classical ballad imitators, Wordsworth recognizes the popular ballad as a means and not as an end in itself. He sees the ballad form as a valuable resource through which the sophisticated artist may dramatize the essential conditions of human experience and in combination with a simple vocabulary embody "significant moral and psychological insight without becoming abstractly philosophical."¹ One authority labels the Romantic period as an era of "sentimental humanitarianism" and contends that the ballad of simplicity was the means by which its artists expressed themselves.² This label very aptly shows Wordsworth's concerns in the selective employment of
ballad thought and style. He would use the simple and
direct delivery of natural feelings and the emotion-
evoking subject matter of folk song to project human
character, human concerns, and human passion. Russell
Noyes finds that Wordsworth's commitment to the unpre-
tentious language of the ballad directly relates to
a profound and deeply spiritual sympathy with simple
folk:

Language for him meant the real (not the
perverted) language of men, rooted in
accurate observation and approved by
usage. Colloquial forms and phrases
were to Wordsworth the most sincere
expression of deep human passion. 3

Wordsworth's own statement of purpose not only includes
his motives for choosing ballad-like language but also
relates his need to combine a portrayal of genuine human
experience with the poet's imaginative shadings:

The principal object, then, proposed in
these poems, was to choose incidents
and situations from common life, and to
relate or describe them throughout, as far
as possible, in a selection of language
really used by men, and at the same time
to throw over them a certain colouring of
the imagination... and above all, to make these
incidents and situations interesting by
tracing in them, truly though not ostensibly,
the primary laws of our nature. 4
The history of Wordsworth's absorption with the more refined versions of certain broadside ballads—as evidenced through his letters, prose works, and more self-revealing poetry—is another set of clues to understanding better the poet's aesthetic goals and his development of artistic techniques within the ballad structure. One knows from his *Excursion*, for example, that he had heard "strollers [enact] 'Fair Rosamond' and the 'Children of the Wood'" (VII. ll. 86-93) and from his autobiographical *Prelude* that he had browsed among stalls piled with broadsides and chapbooks in London and that while in villages he had uncovered "half-penny ballads and penny and two-penny histories [with crude woodcuts which were] strange and uncouth" (VII. ll. 189-195). His appreciation of "Children [or "Babes"] in the Wood" shows up in the preface of the *Lyrical Ballads* in which he argues that the simple speech of conversation is an acceptable instrument for poetic communication:

These pretty babes with hand in hand
Went wandering up and down,
But never more they saw the Man
Approaching from the town

Dr. Johnson's earlier parody of this ballad reflects the Augustan's attitude that such inferior language can move to no relevant conclusion:
I put my hat upon my head
And walked into the strand,
And there I met another man
Whose hat was in his hand.

Wordsworth's defense of the broadside's stanza centers upon the precept that "a selection of the language really used by man" can trace valid human experience; whereas Johnson's parody has meaningless subject matter which is "a fair example of the superlative contemptible." In his introductory notes to "Lucy Gray," Wordsworth states as his purpose the desire to give ballad-like subject matter a much greater depth when he says, "The way in which the subject matter was treated and the spiritualizing of the character might furnish hints for [discerning] the imaginative influences which I have endeavored to throw over common life." The addition of a character spiritualization and imaginative enhancement to the ballad's subject matter, then, can be realized in Wordsworth's literary product which contains a language of feeling noticeably similar to that in "The Children in the Wood":

The storm came on before its time:
She wandered up and down;
And many a hill did Lucy climb:
But never reached the town.

Wordsworth's sincere appreciation of what potential lies
in the folk idiom becomes most apparent when he writes:

I have many a time wished that I had talents to produce songs, poems, and little histories, that might circulate among other good things in this way, supplanting partly the bad, flowers and useful herbs to take the place of weeds. Indeed, some of the poems which I have published were composed, not without a hope that at some time or other they might answer this purpose. 6

What Wordsworth implies by "flowers and useful herbs to take the place of the bad" is a moral and educative intention, and this sense of purpose is fulfilled through his concentration on "dramatic lyricism" over what he saw as the ballad's strict adherence to the story for its own sake.

Understanding Wordsworth's use of the word "lyrical" in the title of his famous literary ballad collection can better clarify how the poet's desire for distinctive individual perception, a modified didacticism, and the frequent use of monodramatic narration must qualify the meaning of "narrative" or "story" as these terms are understood by one whose thinking is rigorously fixed to expect the strong story line of the folk ballad. The aesthetic conditions behind Lyrical Ballads rule out stories which emphasize only crucial action—despite the fact that there are varying degrees of narrative
organization behind the purely lyrical in Wordsworth's poetry. In the preface, Wordsworth defines his practice as trying to capture more the private experience or the clandestine world of one's innermost feeling:

It is proper that I should mention one other circumstance which distinguishes these Poems from the popular Poetry of the day; it is this; that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling.  

Although he wrote many poems which he called ballads, he asserts a poetic theory which candidly disavows the purpose for which a folk ballad exists—that is, the effective recounting of a dramatic story for its own sake.  

As Wordsworth reveals in "Hart-Leap Well,"

The moving incident is not my trade;  
To freeze the blood I have no ready arts:  
T'is my delight, alone in the summer shade,  
To pipe a simple song for thinking hearts.  

(II opening stanza)

In "Simon Lee", which is almost devoid of any action in treating an old man's spiritual anguish at growing older, the poet invites his readers to evaluate the absence of pure narrative by saying:

O' gentle reader! You would find  
A tale in everything  
What I have to say is short...  
It is no tale; but, should you think,  
Perhaps a tale you'll make it.  

(11. 75-79)
When Wordsworth speaks of "The White Doe of Rylstone," he concludes that the dramatist, along with the balladmonger, is likely to "crowd his scene with gross and visible action" but that the narrative poet's role is seeing "if there are no victories in the world of spirit" and evoking interest in "the gentler movements and milder appearances of society and social intercourse, or the still more mild and gentle solicitations of irrational and inanimate nature." The traditional ballad would hold the listener with what Francis B. Gummere calls "leaping and lingering:" that is, with rapid movement, suspense and the pronounced climax, but Wordsworth seems to want one's interest to be directed toward private and more delicate sensibilities and passions. The narrative element should discriminately appear as a teaching device—much like the lecturing professor's discreet use of analogy to enhance a principle without once allowing the example to rob the precept of its warranted importance or value. Although the concentration of story may vary among Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth never permits the narration to "upstage" the intended emphasis on deep human feeling in poetry. Simultaneously, the emphasis upon the moral or the didactic never dissipates into philosophical obtrusiveness because Wordsworth keeps the reader's attention on common and simple experience. His Lyrical Ballads retains the folk ballad's unconscious expression of situation while building a poet's consciousness of "the primary laws of
our nature." In short, the forthright simplicity of ballad narrative exists concurrently with the poet's profound description and reflection.

If one remembers that understanding the term "dramatic lyricism" is the key to distinguishing Wordsworth's pieces from popular balladry, he can more fully appreciate the achievement of "We Are Seven," which still reveals the ballad's simplicity and some of its stylistic peculiarities. The poem is "lyrical," of course, because it is a subjective and melodic piece which stresses emotion and creates for the reader a single, unified impression. As with the ballad, one also finds the "dramatic"—that is, tense situation and emotional conflict achieved through the dialogue. The folk ballad's fast-paced alternation of speaking characters, however, results in one's being directly and unconsciously attracted to violent action. In the ballad "Babylon" (Child #14), for example, the murder of two sisters is committed by a robber who eventually discovers in a confrontation with his third potential victim that he has been terrorizing his own blood sisters. Assault,
possibly rape and incest, murder, a hideous disclosure, and the robber's resultant suicide are emphasized while being evolved through the robber's conversation with each of the three sisters. The passion in Wordsworth's "We Are Seven," on the other hand, arises almost as much from the speaker's play of mind and turns of emotion as from the other character's speech or behavior. The narrator here is not impersonal but actually guides the reader's responses indirectly by being a participant himself. Central to the power of "We Are Seven" is understanding the principal agony of the poem, which arises not from violence but from the speaker's own limitation in trying to impose his adult consciousness of death upon a child.

The child in "We Are Seven" is initially described as being full of a child-like vivacity and joy that has not yet been invaded by an adult awareness of the austere facts of sorrow, separation, or death. Having no consciousness of time and history, she cannot feel the burden of the limits of mortality. Most uncommon to the folk ballad is this poem's opening stanza which poses such a problem with the technique of the rhetorical question:
A simple child...
That lightly draws its breath
And feels its life in every limb
What should it know of death?

The folk ballad's initial four lines would hurl the listener into the story's action, and the conflict which would ensue would be an ostensible, physical one involving violent, external forces. The situation presented here, however, involves more subtle forces in opposition—those very much alien to the folk comprehension. Asked repeatedly in various ways to tell how many brothers and sisters she has, the child responds, in something of a folk-line refrain, that they number seven. Upon further interrogation, the speaker finds that the child insists on including her sister Jane and her brother John, both of whom have died, among the living. The sophisticated and unusual conflict which one faces here is one between two mental states; that is, a confrontation between the adult mind which is bound by the chains of time-consciousness and the child intelligence which represents total innocence and thereby is oblivious to the impact of separation between the deceased and herself. So intense is the child's innocence that her daily visits to Jane and John's graves and her habit of knitting stockings, hemming a "kerchief," and eating her
supper in the churchyard fail to make the black reality of death apparent at all. Unlike the folk raconteur, the narrator here cannot remain objective in his description. He feels the compulsion to assert his frame of consciousness upon the girl. Frustration can only result, however, because his insistence on seeing the world from his viewpoint appears to the child merely nonsensical addition exercises—"Twas throwing words away" (l. 67). Although the reader is never given specific names or settings, he is, nonetheless, highly involved in an actual character study—unlike the popular ballad in which the delineation of personalities is entirely absent. Both the "I" and the child can be detached from the limited action and be subjected to an inquiry concerning psychological causes and effects and behavioral "whys" and "hows."

Extremely important to this paper is the concept that while Wordsworth maintains this psychological involvement, the poem still upholds a natural simplicity by bearing some semblance of folk narrative style. Although the very nature of the poem forces one to examine more closely character and philosophy to realize its full significance, "We Are Seven" still maintains the ballad's rapid movement by keeping the dialogue constantly shifting from one speaker to the next. As in the popular
ballad, dramatic interchange is heavy; fifty-five of the poem's sixty-nine lines are spoken. The device of incremental repetition, used often in protracting a tense moment in the folk product, is used effectively by Wordsworth to delay the child's shocking unawareness of death:

And two of us at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea.
Two of us in the churchyard lie,
My sister and my brother...

Then, by repeating her exact words in the incremental repetition pattern, the speaker eggs on the little girl so that she will admit her brother and sister's death:

You say that two at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea,
Yet, we are seven! I pray you tell,
Sweet Maid, how this may be?

Repetition is used extensively in traditional art because, as Friedman explains, "any compressed narrative of sensational doings told a high pitch of feeling is bound to repeat words and phrases in order to accommodate the emotion that cannot be exhausted in one saying." As Fair Ellendor (American variant of "Lord Thomas and Fair Annet"—Child #73) is bleeding profusely, she has the time and energy to scream:
Are you blind, are you blind?...
Or can't you very well see?
Oh can't you see it's my own heart's blood
Come a-tricklin' down to my knee?!

In Wordsworth's literary ballad, the agony of the narrator-participant is psychological rather than physical; yet, the exasperation of being unable to communicate death's actuality to the child is still poignant enough to demand folk repetition: "'But they are dead: those two are dead!" (l. 65). Wordsworth also shows an admirable affinity with the folk ballad when he ends the poem at the climactic moment without engaging in any extraneous aftermath. The reader may then ponder the finer meanings of the poem for himself while the crucial statement which ends the work rings in his ear: "'Nay, we are seven!"

One measure of a literary ballad's value—besides its ability to surpass the limitations of popular balladry—should be its power to transcend even its own limitations of specific subject matter and moral implications so that it suggests to some extent the more encompassing philosophies and concerns of the poet. While maintaining the ballad's simple language and style, "We Are Seven" intimates the larger and more profound Wordsworthian concepts which occur in varying expression
throughout the poet's works which are not literary ballads. Within itself, the poem does present the inability of a specific child to conceptualize death; but more, "We Are Seven" signals Wordsworth's deeper examination of the wretched limits which keep the adult estranged from the wellsprings of divine security and joy as the innocent child, really the "father of the man," draws an exhilaration and the assurance of eternal providence. The thought of death is a grim foreboding and a life-long burden to the mature consciousness, but the child's life seems a blessing in being free of this adult state of mind. Wordsworth's ability to have carried this concept in both the simple ballad form and later, in the more sophisticated form of "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" shows his genius at finding a variety of means to express his personal philosophies.

"The Thorn" goes even further than "We Are Seven" in transcending the traditional narrative's limitations by assuming the dramatic monologue's power of psychological penetration, by using a symbolism unfamiliar to folk balladry, and by treating human catastrophe with unobtrusive profundity. Stephen Parrish contends that Wordsworth has developed the poem to where it is not even a literary ballad at all but is exclusively a dramatic monologue.12
This view ignores "The Thorn's" marked similarity to ballad stanza pattern, rhetoric, and theme--yet, his thesis does show the work's most significant feature: one comes to view the workings of a mind as they are implied through the self-revelatory narration of a person who stands somewhat on the periphery of absolute truth because of his private imaginings and his susceptibility to superstitious villagers' tales. The poem, then, has no existence outside of the narrator's imagination; thus, of utmost primacy to any reader's appreciation is the probing into the speaker's consciousness and an understanding of that psychology. If one traces the design of the poem, he will see that the folk ballad's unconscious and objective, rapid, action-crammed narration has been replaced by the ordering of events only as they pass through the mind of the narrator. Unlike the traditional chronology, "The Thorn's" rendering of events depends upon the manner in which events or ideas will flash onto the narrator's screen of consciousness and then be interpretively shown to the viewer. The human psychology is often irrational and complex; therefore, one may be shown the effects before the causes, seemingly disassociated images, and much introspection before he realizes the actual story of a work in which the
narrator's importance supersedes that of characters and situations. Such being the case here, the story begins with the crucial image (not the ballad's "crucial event") which prompts the rendition in the first place:

There is a thorn--it looks so old,
In truth you's find it hard to say,
How it ever could have been young,
It looks so old and grey.

(11. 1-4)

Perhaps, the violence of the conflict between the old tree and nature which follows is meant to foreshadow the later human conflict in which one person endures many assaults toward her dignity, but the reader now can only speculate as he is forced to digest what appear to be prosaic details. The voice says:

Up from the earth these mosses creep,
And this poor thorn they it round
So close, you'd say that they were bent
With plain and mainfest intent,
To drag it to the ground.

(11. 16-20)

The thorn and mosses are elaborately placed. The distance of these objects from the road and the specific location and conditions of "a little muddy pond" (1. 30) and a bryophytic mound suggesting "an infant's grave in size"( 1. 53) gain more recognition apparently than the
main character, Martha Ray, who is not mentioned until line 63 and then only as "a woman in a scarlet cloak."

Very significant to the study of "The Thorn" as a dramatic monologue is the narrator's own admission that he knows nothing of why the doleful woman cries by the thorn during the most unpropitious weather conditions:

I cannot tell; I wish I could;
For the true reason no one knows.

(11. 89-90)

and then his remarkable disclosure of "I'll tell you all I know"(l. 105)--which, by the way, is the entire history of Martha Ray and her abandonment by Stephen Hill, her pregnancy, and her madness. During this recounting, he does attempt to convince the reader that he cannot tell, however,

...what became of [the woman's] child
There's none that ever knew:
And if a child was born or no,
There's no one that could ever tell;

(11. 157-160)

Concerning whether the woman still resides on the mountain or whether the cries "which oft were heard" were hers, the narrator is dubious:
I cannot think, whate'er they say,
They had to do with Martha Ray.

(11. 175-176)

Up until now, the narrator has consistently and verbosely dealt with the recollection of others and has cited somewhat objectively the village superstition growing up around the incident, but now, as Parrish points out, he suddenly gives first-hand testimony. He claims to have come upon the woman before he realized the value of her story and to have actually studied her appearance, despite the blinding storm and obscuring mountain crags which allowed no others such a view. He also alleges that he "turned about and heard her cry, 'Oh misery! Oh misery!'" (11. 201-202). Along with these declarations, he unleashes all the suppositions concerning the baby's fate—some of which probably are colored by his candidly revealed imagination. Whether the child was hanged or drowned, it lies buried under the hill of moss, which some say is red with blood and which has been said to shake when threatened with examination. After these disclosures, the narrator's method closely parallels the frequent ballad technique of repeating the initial stanza upon completion of the story line. Rather than
repeat the poem's beginning exactly, however, the narrator returns to his former position of skepticism and his earlier obsession with the imagery of the thorn:

I cannot tell how this may be,  
But plain it is, the thorn is bound  
With heavy tufts of moss, that strive  
To drag it to the ground.  
And this I know, full many a time,  
When she was on the mountain high,  
By day, and in the silent night,  
When all the stars shone clear and bright,  
That I heard her cry,  
"Oh misery! oh misery!  
"O woe is me! oh misery!"

(11. 243-252)

The manner in which the narrator orders these events, particularly his alternation between what may be deemed fiction or fact, provides a psychological insight into a man whose personality results from his inability to report objectively. The excitement and mystical aura are not conditioned by the characters whose story one views but by the storyteller's lapses from actuality into "imagination," "by which word I mean the faculty," says Wordsworth himself, "which produces impressive effects out of simple elements."14 The tree—as it is presented initially in the drama with nature, then as it is seen under the influence of superstition, and finally as it is recalled in conclusion—stimulates the entire
"monodramatic" rendering and is the major constituent element to share attention with the speaker.

To prove that "The Thorn" is "first, a story about a tree and second, about a man,"¹⁵ Parrish emphasizes Wordsworth's artistic ambiguities in the work:

Wordsworth left ambiguities in the poem, but to leave one here—to suggest that Martha Ray was really on view by the tree in storms some twenty years after—would have been to throw away his best opportunity both of making the tree "impressive" and of "exhibiting the laws by which superstition acts upon the mind." For Martha's presence in the poem surely illustrates one law: that when a credulous old seaman catches sight in a storm of a suggestively-shaped tree hung with moss and later crams his head with village gossip, then his imagination can turn the tree into a woman, the brightly-colored moss into her scarlet cloak, and the creaking of the branches into her plaintive cry, "O misery! O misery!"¹⁶

Wordsworth's own notes about "The Thorn" do more to prove that he was writing "a portrayal of superstitious imagination"¹⁷ and emphasizing the narrator and the passionate evoking tree. In the advertisement to the 1798 edition of Lyrical Ballads he wrote, "as the reader will soon discover, [the poem] is not supposed to be spoken in the author's own person: the character of the loquacious narrator will sufficiently shew itself in the course of the story." Thinking that he failed to "shew" any specific
background on the poem's speaker in "The Thorn," Wordsworth then wrote:

The character which I have here introduced speaking is sufficiently common... a Captain of a small trading vessel for example, who being past the middle age of life, had retired upon an annuity or small income to some village or country town of which he was not a native or in which he had not been accustomed to live. Such men having little to do become credulous and talkative from indolence; and... they are prone to superstition. On which account it appeared to me proper to select a character like this to exhibit some of the general laws by which superstition acts upon the mind. 18

Because Wordsworth judiciously uses symbolism to reveal the character of the narrator and to emphasize the magnitude of Martha Ray's sorrowful plight, the poet's "The Thorn" provides another examination into how the ballad form was extended to include sophisticated techniques. Traditional ballads fail to use extra-literal language which suggests something apart from itself because the ballad's stress on crucial situation limits the intense description necessary to develop symbolism. What some writers have called "ballad symbolism" is often very beautiful metaphors or images. One of the loveliest tropes occurs in the Scottish folk lyric, "Waley, Waley":

Oh, love is handsome and love is fine,
Gay as the jewel when first it is new,
But love grows old and it waxes cold,
And it fades away like the morning dew.

Comparing love to the splendor of a jewel or comparing
love's dissipation to the evaporation of morning dew
illustrate the use of figures to show somewhat concretely
a quality or idea, but unlike the symbol, these compar-
sions do not embody the idea or quality themselves.
Coming more closely to symbolism is the "rose and briar"
verses which appear in many traditional ballads.

...  
a red rose grew from William's grave
a briar from Barbara Allens.

They grew and they grew from the
old churchyard
Till they could grow no higher.
And there they 'twined in a true lover's knot
The red rose and the briar.

The symbolism behind the ugly thorn and the lovely rose
as inseparable parts of the same plant has a universal
suggestion of meaning which would be known immediately
to the simple folk audience. Wordsworth, however,
imbibes a creative symbolism into "The Thorn;" that is,
he secures the suggestiveness of the symbol not from
qualities inherent in itself but from the way in which
it is used in that poem. Wordsworth's thorn, for example,
becomes more than a means to springboard the narration; as it stands there old, grey, wretched, and forlorn and endures against the overgrowing lichens and creeping mosses "like a stone," it comes to suggest Martha Ray herself who holds onto the "plain and manifest intent" not to be dragged down by the pain of Stephan Hill's abandonment. The thorn's size, comparable to the "a two year's child," brings to mind the woman's fate and the ugly infanticide which the reader will ponder in retrospect as he reviews the thorn's description in the final stanza. As one is here reminded of the thorn's struggle for life in the midst of the raw forces of nature, he clearly sees Martha Ray's endeavor to preserve her own tenuous grasp on the strength of life in the midst of the raw forces of human unkindness and disregard. Stephan Hill's insensitivity is continued by the villagers who, not comprehending her suffering, are cruel in their unfeeling curiosity. The "little muddy pond" which never evaporates despite its diminutive size and the "hill of moss" whose uncanny movement begins whenever it is investigated not only share Martha Ray and the thorn's setting but also share their allegiance to some mystical force which moves them in their struggle for existence.

Coleridge's definition of "symbol"
applies certainly to the thorn and its suggestion of Martha Ray's story: "It partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible." Having more time for descriptive passages than the ballad's rapid movement would allow, Wordsworth can build the thorn's symbolism effectively—but he does so with the folk ballad's device of repetition:

It [the thorn] stands erect, and like a stone
With lichens it is overgrown.

Like rock or stone, it is o'ergrown
With lichens to the very top.

To develop the parallel between the thorn and the "poor woman" and to increase the psychological implication revealed in the loquacious seaman's narration, Wordsworth uses a device which approximates incremental repetition. In stanza seven, the narrator says:

... And there beside the thorn she sits
When the blue daylight's in the skies,
And when the whirlwind's on the hill,
Or frosty air is keen and still.

and then whetting our appetites for more information, he asks:

... And why sits she beside the thorn
When the blue daylight's in the sky,
Or when the whirlwind's on the hill,
Or frosty air is keen and still?

(11. 82-85)
Framing this part of his presentation into this incremental repetition pattern allows him to build up to "I cannot tell; I wish I could" before revealing that his "love of gab" and his retreat into imagination have influenced him to give a quite different mode of narration. Martha Ray's pathetic situation and Wordsworth's use of ballad style are both emphasized with the use of the exclamatory folk-like refrain:

Oh misery! Oh misery!
Oh woe is me! oh misery!

Wordsworth's development of the ballad idiom can further be seen if one compares "The Thorn" with its symbolism and dramatic narration to the ballad "The Cruel Mother" (Child #20), indirectly the source of the literary product. The folk ballad is described by Child as follows:

A young woman, who passes for a leal [loyal] maiden, gives birth to two babes, puts them to death with a penknife, and buries them, or ties them hand and feet and buries them alive. She afterward sees two pretty boys, and exclaims that if they were hers she would treat them most tenderly. They make answer that when they were hers they were differently treated, rehearse what she had done, and inform, or threaten her that Hell shall be her portion.19

The most striking parallel between Wordsworth's poem and
this narrative is, of course, the mother's infanticide and her burying of them, but each work's similarity in specific detail also becomes rather apparent:

She lean'd her back against a thorn
All-a-lee-a-loney-o
And then she had two pretty babes born
Down by the greenwood sidie.

She placed them under a mossy stone...
And then she started to go home...

These lines are the only reference to the "thorn" and the "mossy stone." In the folk version, the thorn serves primarily as a euphemistic way to describe the "pretty babes'" birth, and the "mossy stone" becomes only the corpse's place of concealment after a brutal stabbing. At no time does the thorn suggest any meaning apart from itself, which is transferred to the woman's identity to stand for her past experience and present struggles. The "mossy stone" never propagates any interest in why a woman cries: "oh misery! oh woe is me!"; in fact, the ballad's heroine (using the word in its most generic sense) feels utterly no remorse whatsoever in her cruel deed. The folk ballad, again, is interested purely in action while Wordsworth's product, which dwells on character revelation and symbolic implication, suggests "that the feeling therein developed [should] give importance to the
action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling." In Wordsworth's poem, the woman's guilt and sorrow result from the symbolic implication growing from the thorn's description and the sea captain's imaginative rendering while the folk heroine's slight remorse only results from the action of the murdered infants' spectral return. That Wordsworth chose not to imitate strictly the popular ballad but preferred to extract its merits discreetly for his use mirrors his genius as seen in *Lyrical Ballads*. Stork frames this point by saying:

The 'gross and violent stimulants' [Wordsworth's expression for the ballad's appeal to action] of the old ballad narrative gave vitality to many a weak phrase and line; with the modern poet the interest of each passage started from a dead level and, being helped by no poetic convention of any sort, depended solely on the intrinsic power of the given poetic impulse.\(^{20}\)

Along with many other poets, Wordsworth found no doubt that the stark ballad format was uncompromisingly superficial; the ballad indulges neither in psychological examinations nor in any an adequate description of the setting to suggest further meaning. To the literary artist, the ballad characters are insufficiently motivated. Wordsworth felt that both the poet and his created characters should have a "more lively sensibility...more tenderness...a greater...['human'] nature and a more comprehensive soul."\(^{21}\)
The ballad, however, divests its characters of this sensibility, and they react as automatons in a world of violence, wherein the situation prompts their tautly reflexive responses. The ballad protagonist needs more than a robot-like character; he should don a "form of flesh and blood...[and, like the poet, have] a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate eternal excitement." 22 To Wordsworth, however, the ballads passed over human sentiment in a flat, perfunctory fashion and typically de-emphasized those elements which Wordsworth wished most to develop; his ballad poetry "is eloquent in showing how sharply the ballad (whether traditional or broadside) has to be wrenched from its true nature to accommodate a poet whose concern is with 'inner significance,' not outward spectacle." 23 A contrast between "The Thorn" and the ballad "The Cruel Mother" (Child #20) or between "We Are Seven" and any similarly-patterned, question-and-answer folk ballad serves to enhance Wordsworth's importance in providing the necessary power or "eloquence" in transcending these limitations of the folk ballad.
FOOTNOTES


17. Ibid., p. 155.


19. Francis James Child, The English and Scottish Popular Ballads [originally published in ten volumes by Houghton, Mifflin, and Company between 1882-1898] re-published in five volumes (N.Y.: Dover Publications, Inc., 1965), I, 218. Before each ballad, which Child lists consecutively, are a record of the variants (each given a letter of the alphabet) and their sources, an explanation of the history of the ballad, the divergences from one variant to the next, the common story element among the variants which gives the ballad its identity, the superstitions and folklore behind the story, the ballad's continental influences, etc. For future references, the Child number should explain any allusion to a ballad in the text and a footnote which refers to Child's notes should only require the number of the ballad and the volume number of the Dover edition. Some of the Child ballads to which this paper frequently and emphatically refers are listed in the appendix.


22. Ibid., pp. 254-255.

CHAPTER 3

COLERIDGE'S "THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER":
THE INFUSION OF SYMBOLIC PLOT

Wordsworth's poems are able to inject the ballad story line into the lyric to express more imaginatively the human experience, but Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" draws even more heavily on the ballad's style and manner of narration to introduce the symbolic plot and a resulting deeper psychology into the Romantic literary ballad. Coleridge's accomplishment lies in his ability to have taken the ballad's simple, matter-of-fact presentation of supernatural and fantastic adventure and to have given it an extra-literal suggestion with moral and psychological implication. The reader can accept the highly unusual nature of the old mariner's miraculous voyage with a folk-like ingenuousness—what Hustvedt calls "a sublimation of ballad wonder"—and yet open his mind to a myriad of symbolic and psychological interpretations which are quite unfamiliar to the folk consciousness.

Understanding the term "symbolic plot" is crucial to
understanding all aspects of Coleridge's artistic improvements upon the literary and folk ballad genre. Explicit in the wording of the term itself is the insistence that one is considering the "symbolic" and not the "allegoric" and is stressing "plot" over simple "story." With "allegory," the "objective referent evoked is without value until it is translated into the fixed meaning that it has in its own particular structure of ideas, whereas a 'symbol' has permanent, objective value, independent of the meanings which it may suggest."² Expressed far less formally, "allegory says one thing but means another, while symbolism means what it says and another thing besides."³ Coleridge is most emphatic in his preference for symbolism over allegory when he says:

[Faith's] name and honours [are] usurped by a counterfeit product of the mechanical understanding, which in the blindness of self-complacency confounds symbols with allegories. Now an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into picture-language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from the objects of the senses; the principal being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a symbol...is characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general. Above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes
of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity, of which it is the representative.\textsuperscript{4}

In other words, Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner" sought to dramatize what is universal in human character and experience and to unfold this drama imaginatively through the use of a remote and supernatural background, but the poet never wished to sacrifice the distinct human temperament in its reaction to awesome and mystical forces in nature. As Professor Lowes has said, the emphasis was to be upon "some interest deeply human, anchored in the familiar frame of things."\textsuperscript{5} and not, as Coleridge says, "upon abstract notions [translated] into picture language."

The insertion of a symbolic language into the framework of the popular ballad--whose stories of genuine human conflict are directly and literally recounted--brings about the expansion of the ballad "story" with its terse description and barren psychology into the more complex entity called "plot." E. M. Forster distinguishes these terms by defining "story" as "a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence" and by explaining "plot" as "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality."\textsuperscript{6} The "story" for its
own sake is, of course, the paramount feature of popular narrative, and because the stress on the crucial situation with its resulting constant of total objectivity is basic to its very being, the ballad cannot deal with motive, causality, and inner feeling, which are so often the outcome of a strong symbolic environment in the sophisticated work. The purely dramatic work—and the ballad story which shows the principals revealing their passions in verbal confrontation certainly fits into the camp—finds the characters "more or less cut to its requirements [but a work with "plot"] finds them enormous, shadowy, and intractable, and three-quarters hidden like an iceberg."7 With the ballad, the chronology of events is so very central to one's interest that he incessantly must ask "and what happens next?" The "plot" of "The Ancient Mariner," on the hand, asks one to ponder the narrator's apparently gratuitous slaying of the albatross as the possible cause of his isolation and suffering, and thus the reader's appreciation of this work is conditioned by the query "why?" The apparent causelessness of the mariner's act, in fact, has become one of the central issues which has precipitated a harvest of critical investigation. That the narrator is "enormous, shadowy, and intractable" in his actions spurs
on a tremendous concern about his motivations and temperament despite the fact that he reacts to his maritime fate with passivity and recounts that adventure with the sparse objectivity of the ballad in which no concern for human temperament or character exists. In Coleridge's work, the emphasis on the supernatural and mystical experience, often the subject of popular balladry, is responsible for integrating the "symbolic" and the causality element of "plot;" that is, each of these entities in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" are mutually dependent upon the other. The symbols are derived from the elements which are the causes and effects in the story, and the causes and effects have their basis in the symbolic environment. As Professor Lowes explains:

The relentless line of cause and consequence runs likewise, unswerving as the voyage, throughout the poem. But consequence and cause, 'in terms of the world of reality,' are ridiculously incommensurable. The shooting of a sea-bird carries in its train the vengeance of an aquatic daemon acting in conjunction with a spectre-bark; and an impulse of love for other creatures of the deep summons a troop of angels to navigate an unmanned ship. Moreover, because the Mariner has shot a bird, four times fifty sailors drop down dead, and the slayer himself is doomed to an endless life. The punishment, measured by the standards of a world of balanced penalties, palpably does not fit the crime.
But the sphere of balanced penalties is not the given world in which the poem moves. Within 'that' world, where birds have tutelary demons and ships are driven by spectral and angelic powers, consequence and antecedent are in keeping—if for the poet's moment we accept the poem's premises. And the function of the ethical background of 'The Ancient Mariner' is to give the illusion of inevitable sequence to that superb inconsequence.8

What Coleridge has done, then, is first to assert an essentially medieval viewpoint wherein his fondness for the weird and unusually romantic becomes so great that his imaginative power provides an hallucinatory reality—that is, a world of supernatural agencies whose retribution unleashes itself upon seemingly automatistic characters through phantasmagorical pressures and shocks which seem to the reader who is anchored to this world much too capricious and unnecessary. Coleridge relates the experiences of this other-worldly environment, however, from a frame-of-mind that demands one's "willing suspension of disbelief." His narrator subtly moves the reader to accept his tale with the same unquestioning naïveté so one accepts a simple folk ballad. Thus, the reader who identifies with the skeptical wedding guest in the opening frame is hurled through the context of images and moral associations as part of the supernatural journey itself until he ends up "a sadder and wiser man"
like the wedding guest, himself, who has discerned an ethical meaning behind the mariner's actions in that story. It is the symbolic implication, then, behind the old navigator's crime and punishment which give these moral effects their cause.

A deeper understanding of "symbolic plot" and "characterization" as newfound dimensions in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" can evolve from understanding one's own refutation of Wordsworth's charges against the poem. Wordsworth wrote:

The Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct character, either in his profession of Mariner, or as a human being who might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural: secondly, that he does not act but is continually acted upon: thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other; and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated.

Disproving all of Wordsworth's allegations depends upon realizing that Coleridge's emphasis on characterization and the supernatural followed a far different course than Wordsworth would ever have pursued and that—as has already been stated—through the abundant imagery and symbolism used to express the supernatural world of the voyage, Coleridge could imply causality. Coleridge's
intentions and the division of aims which ensued when he and Wordsworth co-created the *Lyrical Ballads* are most openly expressed in the famous passage from "Biographia Literaria," which reads:

...our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of our poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors of imagination... In this idea originated the plan of *Lyrical Ballads*: in which it was agreed that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment that constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself, as his object to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonder of the world before us.¹⁰

As Coleridge points out, Wordsworth's intent was to fuse the commonplace with wonder; Coleridge's share was conversely to make real the remote and marvelous. The essence of Coleridge's different approach lies in his ability to embody his conceptions by beginning the work with a mythical skeleton. The "myth" has been explained
as a story presenting supernatural episodes as a means of interpreting natural events to make concrete and particular a special perception of man or a cosmic view. As with the folk ballad, any emphasis on specific historical background or upon any specific institution's moral didacticism is non-existent; the common themes do attempt, however, to explain religion or the meaning of existence and death. Myth plays a great role in the imaginative expression of certain experiences:

Contemporary critics have found in the myth a useful device for examining literature. There is a type of imagination...that can properly be called "the Archetypal Imagination," which sees the particular object as embodying and adumbrating suggestions of universality. The possessors of such imagination...present us with narratives which stir us as "something deep and primitive in us all. Thus [they] approach literature [by seeing narratives as] a structure of unconsciously held value systems or a unique embodiment of a cosmic view.

To say that Coleridge begins "The Ancient Mariner" with a "mythical" skeleton is to recognize his poem's folk-like use of a preternatural setting which conditions an indefiniteness of time, place, and characterization. The statement also explains Coleridge's "laboriously accumulated" imagery. To portray elements of the supernatural as he transfers "from our inward nature 'a human interest' and
'a semblance of truth,'" Coleridge must start with images or phantasmata which extra-conceptually signal his desired emotional or spiritual states. Wordsworth, on the other hand, would begin by describing emotions and spiritual conditions in conceptual terms and then builds the imagery to develop those conditions. 13 Hough compares Coleridge's imagistic or mythical method of describing physical realities to the approach used in the psychoanalysis of dreams:

A dream only exists in the images in which it is to be embodied, though a shadow of its significance can be discussed for special purposes by an analyst. So it is with a myth, which exists to make actual a metaphysical, moral, or psychological experience that is only potential until it has been embodied in imagery. 14

One cannot escape considering the Romantic's pre-occupation with the dichotomy between dream-like states and the reality of waking consciousness in observing the concept behind Coleridge's imagistic approach in "The Ancient Mariner." Although the concept is never made ostensibly central to Coleridge's story as it is in Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes," one does find that in the navigator's world, the actual is often obscured so that many particulars and their reasons for being become indistinguishable--hence, the reader is carried to the outermost limits where
the dark and the light and the ice and the sun blend into a nebulous pattern and where the albatross, whose death brings on the navigator's misery and solitude, suddenly appears from a fog.

Coleridge's expansion of the title in his 1800 edition to read "The Ancient Mariner, 'A Poet's Reverie'" suggests that the poet may have been trying to give a dream-like quality to the mariner's adventure so that the reader in retrospect may distinguish for himself the actual experience from the experience tinged by the anguished narrator's imagination and thereby have an even more profound insight into the multifaceted realities of metaphysical, moral, or psychological experience. The narrator's inability to separate reverie and reality occurs as the mariner blesses the gentle sleep that "slid into [his] soul":

The silly buckets on the deck
That had so long remained,
I dreamt that they were filled with dew;
And when I awoke it rained.

My lips were wet, my throat was cold
My garments all were dank;
Sure I had drunken in my dreams,
And still when I awoke, it rained.

By continuing the experiences of the hallucinatory world into those of this world, Coleridge is purposely adumbrating entire scenes to show that man's symbol-making
ability in dreams becomes a way of reflecting his emotions in his waking consciousness. A wish for ending the agony of drought becomes in sleep the vision of "silly," water-filled buckets (The O.E.D. gives the etymology of "silly" as the Old English "saelig" which once meant "happy, lucky, blessed, innocent"), and upon awakening, his redemption from the strange punishment of drought is continued. As the buckets are filled with curative dew in the mariner's dream so is the mariner's body covered with curative rain in the actual world. The entire voyage is a series of scenes which often confuse the states of reverie and consciousness. The reader, like the wedding guest, must look back upon the mariner's tale as a process in which the interplay between the dream-world and physical reality has a prodigious bearing upon the mariner's total psychological condition during both the voyage and the terrestrial aftermath. The dream-like aura and the supernatural manifestations permeate the poem so that Coleridge can begin "his long flight unhindered by the weight of actuality; course and destination, indefinite... Though the mariner tells the tale, the effect on the reader is almost that of an impersonal narrative." 15 Lamb's reply to Wordsworth's critical appraisal implies that Coleridge's narrator recounts the
story with the traditional ballad's impersonality; that is, the narrator never moralizes and rarely allows his subjective attitude toward the action to intrude. Lamb responds to the charge that the mariner has no real character by saying, "the Ancient Marinere undergoes such Trials, as overwhelm and bury all individuality of memory of what he was, like the state of a man in a Bad Dream, one terrible peculiarity of which is: that consciousness of personality is gone."¹⁶ If it were not for the "frame" in which the reader shares the wedding guest's curiosity and eventual wisdom about the mariner's psychology, one would feel that the mariner, like the ballad narrator, never asserts his personality upon his rendition of the sea adventure—-at least never so obtrusively that one loses the sense of the strange and remote or feels lost in abstruse philosophy.

The relationship between "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and traditional ballads, particularly those classed as ballads of the supernatural, is worthy of some investigation in studying the development of Romantic literary balladry. Coleridge's literary ballad about the mariner's mystical experience at sea and the supernatural ballads of tradition both have the power to unfold extra-sensory experiences simply and directly, share
cryptic passages which in their terseness make the eerie adventure seem even more removed from actuality, and suggest—to varying extents—some twilight atmosphere in which the living may share common ground with the supernatural.

The traditional ballad of Thomas Rymer (Child #37) tells of "True Thomas," who is held captive for seven years in elfland before he is released by the fairy queen who grants him the gift of prophecy. Although "The Ancient Mariner" shares its greatest similarity with the ballad in style and unobtrusive suggestion of the supernatural, Coleridge's ballad and the folk product both show men entrapped in a world which is partially, if not completely, determined by supernatural agencies and show these men with a newfound consciousness or insight upon their return to human society. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" shows a sophistication and development, however, which would make any deeper comparison with "Thomas Rymer" much too contrived. The traditional ballad assumes that all supernatural events are important only as far as they motivate concise and unusual action. The audience would accept strange adventure at face value and would never question the reality of the supernatural—much less ponder its moral or metaphysical implication. "Thomas Rymer"
ends so abruptly that the hero's prophetic powers upon
his return to civilization fail even to gain any mention:
"And till seven years were past and gone; True Thomas on
earth was never seen."

With "The Ancient Mariner," however, an
entirely new consciousness prevails. At the conclusion
of the mariner's narration, the reader and wedding
guest alike are moved to review the mariner's entire
voyage with all of its supernatural nuances to
understand in what respect they have become sadder and
wiser men. As the mariner must have wondered many times,
the reader comes to question what part of any profoundly
emotional experience or what part of existence itself is
colored by one's private imaginings and reveries. The
mariner's penance and endless quest for absolute truths
are realities in Coleridge's poem, and yet during the
course of the voyage, the mariner treats these ethical
entities with the same unconscious style of narration
as that of the ballad narrator for whom such matters are
unimaginable. What is left is an emphasis on the
deply human experiences of estrangement, anxiety, a sense
of self-contempt, and utter worthlessness, related in a
manner, much like the ballads, which stresses unconsciously
the strange world of the mariner's experiences without
indulging in bathos for the mariner's condition or
asserting ostentatiously any moral deliberation. The symbols--regardless of their supernatural overtones--never draw attention to themselves or force the reader's scrutiny; they stress that element of somewhat universally human experience in an attempt to realize the familiar in the strange. Both the supernatural ballads of tradition and "The Ancient Mariner" share the unobtrusive recounting of personal adventure to discern genuine human values; but Coleridge's use of the supernatural and the development of a symbolism for it is

not here so much an external agency, a manipulation of the human action, as an integral part of a story which, whether we read it large or small, treats of mental states and spiritual phenomena, amalgamated uncannily with a vivid physical world.18

In the employment of the supernatural, then, there is a subtle difference between Coleridge's ballad and the folk narratives. The traditional ballad's audience accepts the unearthly and marvelous for what it is; that is, for the sake of the story, the existence of the supernatural is never questioned, and any hint of a relation between the supernatural and the finer sensibilities of the character is dismissed. The folk ballad characters have only a unilateral dimension, and although their
actions may be determined by unearthly forces, they never seem to have any consciousness of how these forces affect their mental states or moral outlook. The audience for these ballads would ask, "and then?"—as Forster would describe their response to these "stories 'gratia' the story." Once the action has been completed, the ballad is totally finished with no inquiry into the consequence of any of that action. For example, with the faint intimation of Thomas Rymer's return in seven years, the story is irrevocably terminated, and the effect upon Thomas of seven years captivity in elfland or of the gift of prophecy as potentially unlimited power will never be pursued. Coleridge would say that Thomas fails "to act in congruity" with the power of the imaginative situations around him and that while the "'physical' wonders" may temporarily bemuse an audience, the poet of more sophisticated ballads needs to suggest unobtrusively a "'moral' miracle [to] awaken" his audience to its own inward nature. When one contrasts the "supernatural" folk-ballad with Coleridge's poem of psychological and moral consequence—which folk-like supernaturalism has only served to build and enhance—he may agree with the idea that "The Ancient Mariner" is not, in the usual sense, a supernatural poem at all:
"The Ancient Mariner" tells of an individual overpowered by his circumstances, whose connections with life are shaped partly by his acts, more by his inadvertencies, and broken in such a crucial way as to deprive him of control and of all creative power. This is for Coleridge not only a personal tragedy but the profoundest tragedy of the human situation.\(^{20}\)

If Coleridge's development of the Romantic literary ballad includes a subtly implied psychological and moral consequence behind the folk ballad's starkly unconscious narration of action, then one must consider the results of such development and question the value of Coleridge's infused psychology and morality. Wordsworth's criticism that the mariner has no distinct personality is adequately countered by Lamb, who shows that a fully-delineated temperament is really unnecessary for the mariner whose "Trials...overwhelm all individuality or memory of what he was [so that]...all consciousness of personality is gone."\(^{21}\) Coleridge himself explained that he never intended to impose a fully-developed naturalistic characterization but that

the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of...emotions that would accompany such situations [concerning supernatural incidents and agents] supposing them real. And real in "this" sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency.\(^{22}\)
The mariner becomes not so much important for how his motives and internal action bring about external conditions as he is significant because his self-revelatory narration lets the reader review a genuine, universal human experience, an experience, as Coleridge puts it, that is "real...to every human being" who has experienced the unexplainable. His actions at any one specific moment may never seem well-motivated but when the reader judges them against the total realm of his experience at sea and during human encounters at home, his actions carry a very serious moral and spiritual bearing on human life.

It is the reader who supplies the psychological "cause" and "effect" through the process of retrospection. The meaning of the mariner's cryptic experiences become elusive and seem somewhat abridged unless one places these events within their correct dimension: a world of nature and the elements, which seems simultaneously beneficent and antagonistic, of supernatural agencies, of causes which elicit the most profoundly imaginative responses, and, afterwards, of unsympathetic listeners, whose relatively bland endeavors at the moment of being accosted make the mariner's experiences even more engagingly mysterious. The importance of the mariner's sea world to the mariner's psychology—which the reader
himself must eventually supply--conditions one to see that "the function of elements and heavenly bodies is not merely to 'image' the mariner's spiritual states but also to provide in the narrative structure the link between the mariner as an ordinary man and the mariner as one acquainted with the invisible world, which has its own set of values." 23

To the reader, this ambivalent quality makes the mariner appear as cryptic and elusive as his experiences at sea. Lamb's response to Wordsworth's charge that the mariner leaves no distinct impression is "the Marinere from being conversant in supernatural events 'has' acquired a supernatural and strange cast of 'phrase' eye, appearance, 'et cetera' which frighten the wedding guest." 24 When the reader reflects upon the nature of this extraordinary man who recounts these strange experiences, he comes to realize that "what matters in 'The Ancient Mariner' is not just that a man was becalmed and haunted but what sort of man he was." 25 As the reader's understanding of the poem's psychological implications involves more than viewing the mariner when he is being "acted upon," so does any comprehension of the moral implication demand more than a shallow acceptance of what the mariner asserts as a possible moral:
He prayeth best, who loveth best,
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

(ll. 614-617)

The moral needs the frame of reference of the mariner's total reaction to a horrendous experience and, equally important, of the reader's vicarious sharing of that experience. One is dealing with an unobtrusive moral and a subtle character delineation which are inextricably a part of each other and which are both shaped by reader's quasi-intuitive acceptance of the mariner's religious convictions. The moral significance comes about when the reader discerns that

The wedding guest is "a sadder and wiser man" not so much because of the mariner's didactic assertions as because he has had a horrifying glimpse into human endurance of the extremest hardship, the utter antethesis of his own sheltered life as typified by the joyous and prospective wedding feast.26

Coleridge's sophisticated use of the folk ballad's unconscious rendering of plot to achieve an unobtrusive characterization and moral perception does not distract from his adoption of the ballad's method of narration and style. He did his greatest service to folk balladry by going beyond the shortcomings of strict imitation while
paradoxically approaching more nearly the essence of purely traditional ballads than any Neo-classical attempt at facsimile. Despite "The Ancient Mariner's" success in engaging the reader in its narrator's human and moral nature, the poem, for the most part, retains the ballad character's anonymity resulting from a "fatalistic passivity;" that is, the characters automatistically undergo experiences which might befall anyone because they inhabit a world of unexpected hazards, a world not rationally and logically ordered...a world not comprehended as historically coherent. In the world of the ballad [as in "The Ancient Mariner's world], one's actions may initiate a disastrous chain of events...that destructive chain is likely to begin somewhere else, and in any case, the individual has no chance of guiding or adjusting to all the circumstances latent with danger which make up his environment.28

The mariner's seemingly fated world and Thomas Rhymer's inability to resist capture by supernatural beings contrasts noticeably to Prior's "Henry and Emma," where identifiable characters who have been placed in a specific historical setting seem to show by their highly controlled rhetoric and sustained emotion the ability to determine their own roles in life. "The Ancient Mariner" also surpasses the previous attempts to capture traditional styles because Coleridge approaches the ballad in an
"anti-antiquarian" fashion. Unlike Prior's "Henry and Emma" and like the folk ballads, "The Ancient Mariner" is free from any historical perspective and has that undefined time element which does not seem immediate but rather appears somewhat distant and romantically removed from the chaotic, workaday world of the present. The temporal perspective is derived from the mythological conception upon which Coleridge's imagery is derived rather than from the specificity of history that must be inherent in the epic-like Augustan narrative. Coleridge's poem lacks the historical pageantry that retarded the movement in eighteenth-century ballad imitations. Popular verse and "The Ancient Mariner" have the concentration or dramatic brevity that does not pause for historical reflection or for any moralizing. "The Ancient Mariner's" introductory element of the mariner's detention of the wedding guest is itself immediately dramatic and resembles the ballad's fifth-act beginning. In "Henry and Emma," however, one must be lulled by a prologue comparing a former world to a contemporary one. Some Augustan imitations also contained an antiquarian-like narrator whose attitude toward the folk-simulated characters was condescending. Neo-classical attempts to raise the characters and their behavior to a sophisticated level became moral treatises with very little of the
ballad's stress on a crucial situation. The Augustans who belittled the customs and simple beliefs of a system inferior to their own were treating the ballad as a sociological study of untutored minds and civilizations. A reader cannot empathize with a character or become involved with a hero's action when that man is held to be unworthy of our attention. Coleridge's attitude toward the seamen and their beliefs about the albatross as a bearer of good fortune becomes credible.

The reader of "The Ancient Mariner" temporarily "suspends his disbelief" of folk superstition and believes in the same ominous forces as the man who precipitated them. The situation becomes crucial, the suspension increases, and all action is significant—all because the reader is thrust into the action with the characters whose systems of beliefs and mentality he shares. Coleridge's ability to give an imaginative re-enactment of primitive beliefs and actions is another of his innovations toward an improved literary ballad style.

Thus far, the similarities shown between "The Ancient Mariner" and folk ballads have been those concerning the thought and more broadly encompassing literary methods of characterization, tone, and temporal perspective, but most significant in such comparison is the
study of certain ballad stylistic devices and themes in Coleridge's poem. One critic even contends that his use of certain ballad conventions prevented the appearance of his characteristic "weaknesses of substance, purpose, and lack of virility and stimulated the terse descriptive phrase, narrative speed, minute actuality, live restraint, and medieval glamour and remoteness tending toward the supernatural."\textsuperscript{30} The influence of the ballad style upon Coleridge's writing is especially apparent when one notices that Gerould's "ballad constants" not only prevail but so do ballad meter and simplified diction. The theme of a man's impulsive crime which precipitates "the spectral persecution"\textsuperscript{31} and a life of wandering as an expiation for that crime are common to "The Ancient Mariner" and "The Wandering Jew," an old broadside in The Reliques. Percy's notes to the ballad helped shape Coleridge's conception of the mariner, and both Coleridge and Wordsworth, suggests Friedman, recalled the weatherwise "old salt" in "Sir Patrick Spens" (Child #58) whenever they see a light-encircled moon.\textsuperscript{32} In fact, Coleridge quoted the first stanza (with the change of one line) of Percy's "Sir Patrick Spence" as an introduction to his "Dejection: An Ode":
Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon,
With the old Moon in her arms;
And I fear, I fear, my Master dear!
We shall have a deadly storm.

and his fondness for this old ballad may have some correspondence in "The Ancient Mariner's" moon imagery or in the picture of the mariner. Although much of the poem's subject matter and mystical imagery reputedly comes from non-traditional sources—such as Shelvocke, Martens, and other travel writers; the Neo-Platonic demonologists; and some highly-respected literary artists: Chaucer, Spenser, and Chatterton—"The Ancient Mariner," like the popular ballad, still carries actual and simulated folk commonplaces, repetitive and refrain-like passages, and telescoping of detail to stress the action. Description follows the folk ballad's stereotype: there is the bride "red as a rose" (ll. 34), the "bright-eyed mariner" (ll. 20, 40, et al), and "the Nightmare, Life-in-Death" whose "...lips were red, her looks were free/ Her locks were yellow as gold" (ll. 190-191. The spectral sweet-heart in "The Unquiet Grave" (Child #78), who arises from her grave to describe her ghastly appearance as "My lips are cold as clay my love/ My breath is earthy strong" is just as ominous; and the girl in "East Virginia" (an American mountain lyric patterned after a seventeenth-century broadside), has "...hair [which] was of a
sun-bright color/ And her lips were ruby red" but seems a tame American counterpart. As in many folk tales and ballads, clichés dealing with certain numbers appear: when Coleridge's "Spectre-Woman" wins the mariner, she whistles "thrice"(l. 198), and for "'seven' days and nights" the curse operates. Coleridge sometimes will "coin" a sophisticated correlative for a traditional trope, and his imitation sounds as natural as the ballad's "milk-white steed" or "lily-white hand." In Part II, the poet gives us "And thou art long, and lank, and brown,/ As is the ribbed sea-sand"(ll. 226-227). "The Ancient Mariner" often repeats phrases which by their reappearance serve as refrains. The following repetitive passages are similar to the phrases in the refrainless folk ballad:

The ice was here, the ice was there
The ice was all around.

(ll. 59-60)

Water, water, everywhere
And all the boards did shrink.
Water, water everywhere
Nor any drop to drink.

(ll. 119-122)

These lines of great repetition, like those of many folk ballads, seem there to emphasize the frightful experiences which reduce the characters' speech to an hysterical
pattern of reiteration—as well as to reinforce the rhythmical pattern of the poem. Those lines describing the ice are powerful in accentuating what one reads in the gloss: "The land of ice and of fearful sounds where no living things was to be seen." Those describing the irony of ubiquitous water which is unfit to drink stress the mariner's realization that one of the most savagely painful parts of his punishment is the drought. Unlike the ballad refrains which are often nonsensical although necessary for promoting the ballad's strict cadence, the refrain-like lines of Coleridge's poem are there to emphasize theme. The simple refrain in "The Cruel Mother" (#20), "All alone and a-loney-o" carries no real meaning while Coleridge's

    Alone, alone, all all alone
    Alone on a wide, wide sea

(11. 232-233)

underscores the mariner's utter isolation, the first principal stage of his penance and of his initiation into the agonizing loneliness that will haunt him throughout his life.

Coleridge's use of incremental repetition not only parallels the popular ballad's but also provides information rapidly and increases dramatic tension. By concrete and repeated allusion to the mariner's reckonings,
one learns of the ship's change of position:

The Sun came up upon the left,  
Out of the sea came he!  
And he shone bright, and on the right  
Went down into the sea.

(11. 25-28)

but later one reads the similarly-constructed stanza  
whose substituted element informs him that the ship has  
continued southward around the cape:

The sun now rose upon the right  
Out of the sea came he,  
Still hid in mist, and on the left  
Went down into the sea.

(11. 83-86)

Although somewhat separated from each other, two other  
practically identical stanzas show that the albatross's  
murder has not yet discontinued the crew's good fortune:

And a good south wind sprung up behind;  
The Albatross did follow  
And every day for food or play,  
Came to the mariner's hollo!

(11. 71-74)

And the good south wind still blew behind,  
But no sweet bird did follow,  
Nor any day, for food or play,  
Came to the mariner's hollo!

(11. 87-90)

Within one stanza, the substitutions of incremental
repetition climax the tragedy of the many dead and focus one's attention upon the deck from his panoramic view of the sea--similar to an effective cinematographic technique called a "dissolve":

I looked upon the rotting sea,
And drew my eyes away;
I looked upon the rotting deck,
And there the dead men lay.

(ll. 240-243)

The phantasmagoria and private pains which beset the ancient mariner prove that both Coleridge's poem and the folk ballad are capable of imaginatively producing acute sensory appeals; e.g., Thomas Rymer's journey to the underworld suggests some frightful moments in the mariner's voyage:

For forty days and forty nights
He wade thro red blude to the knee,
And he saw neither sun nor moon,
But heard the roaring of the sea.

To describe another of the mariner's unsettling experiences, Coleridge again uses incremental repetition. Two successive stanzas begin incrementally with "The seraph band, each waved his hand" (those stanzas beginning with ll. 491 and 495). The first of these stanzas expresses the mariner's joy at seeing the seraph-band; the second,
however, expresses grief at the spirits' silent retreat
and uses the very "unfolk-like" device of an auditory
image to describe the absence of sound:

This seraph-band, each waved his hand,
No voice did they impart—
No voice but oh! the silence sank
Like music on my heart.

(ll. 495-498)

Where literary elegance would call for variation, Coleridge
often observes the folk format and forces repetition of
words, like the adjective in the following: "Yea slimy
things did crawl with legs; Upon the slimy sea"(ll. 125-
126). As in traditional verse, Coleridge many times omits
connecting stanzas and transitional labels or dialogue
tags. The incremental repetition and folk-like telescoping
force a rapidly-moving dramatic intensity. Descriptions
of death and the movements of the spectre-ship are more
and more telescoped.

As Coleridge reworked "The Ancient Mariner," he in-
creased his usage of the ballad's simplified diction and
metaphor. Ironically, the 1798 text's archaic spellings
and syntax which Coleridge believed were "in imitation of
the 'style' as well as the spirit of the elder poets" do
not seem to have the ballad's fast-paced rhythm or dramatic
intensity found in his 1834 text. "The mariner's gave it biscuit worms" (l. 65) in the first draft becomes in the final form, "It ate the food it ne'er had eat" (l. 67); "Like morning frost y-spread" (l. 260--1798 text) is changed to "Like April hoar-frost spread" (l. 268); and:

And she is far liker death than he
Her flesh makes the still air cold

(ll. 189-190)

becomes

The Nightmare Life-in-death is she,
Who thick's man's blood with cold.

(ll. 193-194)

That Coleridge came extremely close to recreating the elliptical and suggestive phrasing which brings out the ballad's emotional intensity is seen in the comparison of a stanza from Southey's "Inchcape Rock" with one from "The Ancient Mariner." Both stanzas describe identical situations: a ship is left adrift at sea; however, Southey's rather trite imitation seems clumsy:

No stir in the air, no stir in the sea,
The ship was as still as she could be;
Her sails from heaven received no motion;
Her keel was steady in the ocean.

(ll. 1-4)

when compared to Coleridge's
Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

(11. 115-118)

When Coleridge distends the ballad quatrain to five or six lines, he is following a formula of traditional ballads which have occasional quintains or sextains.\(^{34}\) Moments of extreme emotional intensity can be given in the extra lines which are repetitions of former wordings or thoughts only with dramatic substitutions.\(^{35}\) For example, the blessing of the water snakes, which begins the reversal of the mariner's suffering; the passage in which the hermit's shrift is anticipated; the saving of the mariner when his ship sinks; and finally, the stanza in which the wedding marriment is contrasted with the "little vesper bell" calling the greybearded mariner to prayer with paralleled extra lines illustrate:

Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,  
That made the breeze to blow!

(11. 95-96)

and

'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,  
That brings the fog and mist

(11. 101-102)

Occasionally Coleridge departs from a strict simulation
of ballad style and thought. His departures are significant in showing how an artistic genius can advantageously use all the possible merits of the folk genre and yet transcend any of its limitations without being ostentatious or artificial. "The Ancient Mariner" uses synaesthesia to evoke a richness of psychological response quite alien from the stark clichéd figures of the genuine ballad. While retaining the ballad's simplicity of diction, Coleridge creates a complexity of sensations in passages such as:

And the bay was white with silent light,
Till rising from the same,
Full many shapes, that shadows were,
In crimson colors came.

(11. 480-483)

and earlier, "beams bemocked the sultry main,/ like April hoarfrost..." (11. 266-267). The use of internal rime, with more consonance and alliteration than even the most thickly dialectical Anglo-Saxon song, occurs in the polished passage, "The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew/ The furrow followed free." Chiasmus, rarely found in traditional verse, is found in "For the sea and the sky, and the sky and the sea" (l. 250), and the oxy-moronic passage (11. 369-372) which has The noise of a brook" singing "a quiet tune" to "the sleeping woods"
would be foreign in popular balladry. Coleridge also interpolates some intricate diction like "He loved the bird that loved the man/ Who shot him with his bow" (ll. 404-405) and some sophisticated metaphors like "They raised their limbs like lifeless tools" (l. 339). With the intrusion of moral commentary into a form always devoid of a narrator's subjective interference, "The Ancient Mariner" makes its most significant departure from pure ballad duplication. One finds a frequent delay for an aphoristic observation—"O sleep, it is a gentle thing,/ Beloved from pole to pole!" (ll. 292-293).

The Christian background predominates with prayers, allusions to the Godhead and invocations to Christ and Heaven's mother. In part IV, the mariner prays that God will let it be true that he is seeing the very "light-house," "hill" and "kirk" that belong to his home or that he may always be granted the continuation of the delusion. A feeling of wonder and such appeals to the deity do not, however, seem out of place, and all these passages subtly prepare one for the mariner's lesson given in terse, folk-patterned incremental repetition:

He Prayeth well, who loveth best
Both bird and man and beast.

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us
He made and loveth all.
Coleridge manages in assimilating the style of popular balladry into "The Ancient Mariner" with the same excellence as he achieved in bringing a level of sophistication to the ballad and thereby reaching beyond its limitations. The process never dishonors the folk ballad by indicating its weaknesses but reflects its potential virtues: an opportunity to speak symbolically in a texture of apparent simplicity and to unfold supernatural experiences as though they were directly and realistically occurring. The ballad's highly stressed element of strong action within an economized narrative pattern could be introduced into lyric poetry—as it had been with Wordsworth's literary ballads—and Coleridge's expression of abstract concepts and feelings was presented through the mariner's self-revealing narration "to be more personal and less formal, to stress actual, particularized experience as the originating matrix of [his] poetry."36

Unlike the ballad, however, Coleridge's narrative goes beyond a simple rendering of story and introduces the element of causality: a feature which the reader discovers only in his review of why he, like the wedding guest, should be sadder, but wiser about the mariner's evangelical moral and the mystical scheme of expiation. Causality is the element which
distinguishes the "plot" from mere story, and the plot, which forces one's query into the mariner's deeper motives, depends upon a sense of "mystery [which leaves] part of the mind...left behind, brooding, while the other part, goes marching on."37 The folk ballad never makes this element of mystery inherent; its essential nature is the highly emphasized concentration on crucial action alone. Coleridge, however, envelopes the entire scheme of his poem behind an aura of mystery; and the imagination—essential for one's brooding and later probing into the mariner's mysterious voyage—has two focal points, greatly similar to those in "mystery": "one fixed, the other in 'that untravell'd world whose margin fades/ Forever and forever when [we] move.'"38 Part of "The Ancient Mariner's" mystery evolves from Coleridge's mariner who has been given a character depth which the participants in ballad situations never had. The cryptic and "importunate mariner is more completely outfitted with special feelings and mental experiences than any ballad personage,"39 but for a purpose, that of bringing the reader Coleridge's moral perspectives.

As with Wordsworth's old sea captain in "The Thorn," one needs Coleridge's ancient mariner to provide the imaginative perspective which gives the story its very essence. Each
of the seafarers gives a somewhat symbolic identity to his experience by his presence as the narrator; however, the mariner, unlike Wordsworth's old navigator, asserts his presence so strongly and so pervasively that his "long grey beard," "skinny arm," and "glittering eye" stand out as meaningfully in the reader's memory as the symbolic adventure itself. Wordsworth's sea captain with his ingenuous acceptance of village superstition talks in the shadows and only serves as a means for an imaginative rendering. His narration is only significant in giving certain values or meanings to Martha Ray's plight, which, once related to the reader, makes him dispensable. The ancient mariner, however, lives beyond the story he relates, and his presence before the wedding guest has great consequence. The mariner's self-assertion, his symbolic adventure, and the consequence which both bear for all members of his future audiences are entities which Coleridge has extended into the ballad form. As Evelyn Wells comments:

Christian morality and philosophy underlie the idea of the otherworld turning the story into a metaphysical rather than a physical experience. The important thing thus becomes not the killing of the bird and all that follows that act, but the revelation of a great truth to the human mind. A deeper depth than that of the ballad has been plumbed.
but, as Friedman may add, "without the ballads [that "deeper depth"] could not have been conceived."41
FOOTNOTES

Chapter 3


7. Ibid., p. 85.

8. Lowes, p. 300.


11. Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman, p. 298.

12. Ibid., p. 299.


14. Ibid.


20. Coburn, p. 130.


28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.


33. Ibid., p. 278.


35. Ibid., p. 441.

36. Kroebber, p. 188.


CHAPTER 4

KEATS'S "LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI": THE RELATION OF SYMBOLIC SETTING TO CHARACTER AND UNRESOLVED SITUATION

Although both Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" adapt the ballad form to their own especial advantage and show a remarkable similarity to the best of ballad models, the works appear to be so dissimilar that one who places them side by side in a rather superficial examination may doubt that they both share an affinity with the same source. The length of Coleridge's work may seem to destroy its semblance to the popular ballad's compact, often elliptical mode of presentation which the shorter, twelve-quatrain poem of Keats more ostensibly suggests; on the other hand, "La Belle Dame" does not share the ballad's objectivity and consequently seems to fail in showing that apparently unconscious narration which makes the baldly-stated moral of Coleridge's mariner somewhat static when contrasted with the mariner's more action-filled adventure. A.B. Friedman, whose concerns center upon the relationship between folk balladry and
literature, actually goes so far as to say that even though "La Belle Dame" is universally acknowledged to be among the greatest of literary ballads, the work is more in the practice of the "romance" than in that of the popular ballad:

About Keats's debt to the romances in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" one can be quite positive. Keats must have felt about the ballads as he did about Scotland: they were all "anti-Grecian" and "anti-Charlemagnish." Doubtless, he admired the mysterious dramatic effects of which the ballad style is capable, but his own devotion to poetry of a rich and sensuous texture, to loading every rift with ore, precluded his writing easily in the bare idiom and bold unsubtle figures characteristic of the ballads. The initial query, a ballad formality--"O what can ail thee, knight at arms?"--is not preparatory to sanguine action in ballad fashion. It elicits instead a subjective description of an obscure, languid state of anguish... True, the piece belongs to the "condensed and hinted order of things," but it is not the kind of condensation or ellipsis one finds in the ballads.1

To point out the poem's aberrations from the true ballad of tradition or to trace Keats's indebtedness to another idiom of story-telling does not preclude his use of ballad technique for unfolding highly symbolic narration; in fact, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is nonetheless a ballad despite its divergences and the interpolation of the romance's "rich and sensuous texture"--but it is a
highly developed literary ballad which shows the great level of sophistication to which an artist drawing upon many traditions and skills can bring to the folk narrative.

Common to "La Belle Dame" is "the intertwined fatalistic philosophy and stark anonymity of protagonist of folk ballads."² Like Coleridge's old mariner and the typical protagonist of the traditional narrative, the "knight-at-arms" lives in a mechanized universe where he is more acted upon than acting; furthermore, the knight's lack of identity and of any specified temporal dimension within this world of bizarre and occult agents supplies Keats with the potential for a symbolic rendering. Given the strange and timeless environment in which the anonymous characters unhesitatingly react against insurmountable, otherworldly forces to a degree that is genuinely human and universal, the fate of the knight--like that of Coleridge's mariner--not only acquires an extra-literally meaning but bears a consequence which significantly demands the reader's assessment. Even these supernatural ballads of tradition, which depict their anonymous characters in equally remote and mysterious settings, fail to make consequence a necessity, and bypass symbolism in their monomaniacal stress on the crucial action. In the same manner that "The Ancient Mariner" surpasses these traditional ballads,
Keats's poem forces the reader to ponder "why?": in this case, why is the knight left "on the cold hillside?" or why should the knight appear to have changed so much within when he is described at the end of the poem no differently than he was at the beginning—-that is, must the knight still appear "alone and palely loitering" and still maintain his position despite the barrenness of the lake and the absence of birds' song? This kind of analysis, which the folk ballad would never prompt, goes further than merely accounting for the knight's whereabouts by the end of the poem. The reader's investigation must also include more than a study of the character change which is revealed by the knight's narration of his trip to the elfin-grot.

With "La Belle Dame"—as opposed to the simple folk ballad—-the reader feels compelled to understand the meaning of the story's natural setting. He may ask why there is a "cold hill's side," the "wither'd sedge" and a lake without any birds singing, in the first place, and what is the significance of these trappings in nature other than to indicate with ballad-like deftness the season and a sense of temporal remoteness. "La Belle Dame" is much like "The Ancient Mariner" in giving a symbolic meaning to the setting as well as to the speaking character and his narration, itself. The reader who answers the questions which each
poem poses finds that his investigation is not at all exhausted but has merely been extended to more profound inquiries concerning metaphysical relationships. The simple folk narrative does not precipitate such a thoroughgoing examination, but Keats's artistically complex poem demands a symbolic re-reading with no guarantee that any one reader's answers to all the poem's implied questions will be the same as another's.

Although "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "The Ancient Mariner" share the sophisticated addition of symbolic plot to the ballad form, Keats's literary ballad treats the knight-at-arms in a manner which resembles more the ballad's total lack--at least extreme scarcity--of character delineation but which simultaneously suggests his ability to give the knight a symbolic temperament revealed through the cryptic quality of his narration. The knight appears much more elusive than the mariner; even the aloneness he suffers is more mysteriously and delicately put forth than is that of the mariner's at sea. The mariner is assertive: he leaps in the path of the wedding guest and holds him with a skinny hand and a glittering eye because his heart will burn unless he forces his awesome presence and his symbolic tale upon a listener. The mariner's adventure at sea seems
more immediate to a reader's experience—except, of course, for the mariner's encounters with supernatural agencies, which to one unimaginative critic can be explained away as mere manifestations of an abandoned seafarer's thirst, exposure, and delirium. Most modern readers, nonetheless, have vicariously experienced primitive sea travel, even if they have had only the briefest exposure to Thor Heyerdahl's journals. Keats's knight-at-arms, however, belongs to a world which is too imaginary to be demarcated and much too far removed from anyone's realm of experience. In this respect, he is more similar to the protagonists of some supernatural ballads and has their glamour and romance in his suggestively medieval and vaguely ethereal nature. Keats can create a protagonist which has more of the ballad hero's anonymity and remoteness than Coleridge's ballad-like mariner and yet imbibe his protagonist with a symbolic importance and metaphysical conflict which equal that in "The Ancient Mariner" and which extend the folk ballad to a new level.

Keats brings his sophisticated additions to the ballad form by sometimes employing the actual stylistic techniques of folk ballads. What Gerould calls the ballad constant of a dramatic rendering entails an economic and rapid narrative movement often with a tendency toward
understatement and a number of disconcerting shifts—all of which exist in the ballad for an emphasis on the fast-paced interchange between speaking characters and for its need of never being perfunctory. "La Belle Dame" opens with a stranger's questioning the knight-at-arms to focus upon the central issue with the ballad's abrupt "fifth-act" opening: "O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms?" Many times ballads are structured within a pattern of questions and answers, both of which follow the incremental repetition model which has the crucial substitution carrying the suspense-filled narrative in the answer of the interrogated character. Although the question-answer exchange does not rapidly go back and forth between the participants as in the folk ballad, "La Belle Dame," nonetheless, unfolds its action in the manner of "Lord Randall" (Child #12) or "Edward" (Child #13). The ugly truth that Lord Randall has been murdered by his sweetheart evolves from his mother's initial query, "O where ha you been, Lord Randall, my son?" followed successively after each of the boy's replies with "And wha met ye there, Lord Randall, my son?," "And what did she give you...?," "And what became of [your hounds]...?," et cetera, until eventually she concludes "O I fear you are poisoned..." Similarly Edward's mother questions her
son about the blood on his "coat lap" to discover that "It is the bluid o [his] brither John." In both ballads, it is the son whose answers unfold the narrative core, and it is the mother and the reader empathizing with her responses, who together uncover the son's crime. Similarly, the stranger--along with the reader identifying with him--asks the determining questions in the opening three stanzas, that the knight answers in the next nine stanzas to give the crucial self-revelatory narration: "I met a lady in the Meads...a faery's child [who left me]...death pale...with anguish moist and fever dew...on the cold hill side." In "La Belle Dame" as compared to the folk ballads, the responsibility of making the really pertinent conclusions belongs to the reader and not to some inquisitive mother or even to Keats's anonymous stranger.

To the reader of "La Belle Dame," this assignment is even more taxing because Keats gives the crucial and more philosophical results with an abbreviated ballad-like suggestiveness that outdoes even the elusive style of the ballad itself. The onset of the knight's demise is subtly intimated by the sprite's seemingly evil-tinged declaration of love and with the exchanged gifts of kisses and wild flora. In the very opening stanza, the autumnal background with its associations of decay and transitoriness is implied with allusively laconic statements that surpass the ballad's: "The sedge has withered
from the lake," "The squirrel's granary is full," "no birds sing," and "...the harvest's done." Nowhere in the poem does one find the obtrusive philosophical asides or pagentry-like descriptions which shackle the Neo-classical ballad-imitations to a cumbersome and unimaginative sense of the historical or of the immediate, conventional present. "La Belle Dame" is likewise free of the tedious heroic couplets which retarded the action of Prior's "Henry and Emma." Keats has used the ballad stanza to give a rapid movement but has modified the quatrains by substituting only a two-foot fourth line. Evelyn Wells contends that the terse two beats "interrupts the rhythm like a catch in the breath, thus adding to the tension."6 Like many traditional ballads, "La Belle Dame" ends with a varied repetition of the opening stanza:

...alone and palely loitering?
Though the sedge has wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

reinforcing, perhaps, a very "unfolk-like" concept: that the imperfect and impermanent world of reality becomes actually indistinguishable from a seemingly treacherous dream world and that time loses its physical dimension and drifts elusively by in the preternatural experience of the knight. This concept is enhanced by Keats's use
of the ballad's cryptic quality to enhance his poem's bemused, dreamy atmosphere and to infuse his sophisticated pictures of potentially destructive beauty. Keats has created a montage of ballad-like disconnected scenes to give not only the ballad's concentrated action but also to assert the literary artist's subjective description of a condition. Gerould explains that the poet has made with a stroke of genius an artistic virtue out of folksong necessity.  

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" not only shows an affinity with folk style but reflects also the influence of certain folk motifs and legends. Like Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner," Keats's literary ballad shares a common basis with the traditional ballad "Thomas Rymer" (Child #37); in fact, Earl Wasserman confirms any evidence of their relationship by saying that regardless of "La Belle Dame's" specific source, the poem "clearly belongs to a folk legend best known in the form of the medieval ballad, 'Thomas Rymer.'" A variant of this ballad was transmitted to Alexander Tytler by a Mrs. Brown in 1800, and six years later in **Popular Ballads and Songs**, Robert Jamison printed a copy which may have influenced Keats, although somewhat distantly, as he wrote his sophisticated ballad of the Knight-at-arms. (Because "La Belle Dame" parallels the folk ballad much more closely in its story
and themes than does "The Ancient Mariner," the synopsis of "Thomas Rymer," which is given here, is much more detailed than was the one used for analyzing Coleridge's ballad.) In the version collected from Mrs. Brown, "True Thomas" encounters a lovely "ladie gay" whom he mistakenly hails as "Mighty Queen of Heaven," but she corrects him with "That name does not belong to me;/ I am but the queen of fair Elfland." She then directs him to accompany her to Elfland where he must serve her for seven years, and after pulling Thomas up behind her on her "milk white steed," she guides him upon a journey which lasts "forty days and forty nights" and which entails wading "thro red blude to the knee" and never seeing "the sun nor moon, but [hearing only] the roaring of the sea." At last, the elfin queen and her mortal captive reach a "garden green" in which Thomas is warned not to touch the fruit there unless he wishes to bring upon himself "a the plagues that are in Heaven." After sharing a "loaf... likewise a bottle of claret wine" with the sprite, the young man rests his head upon the elfin queen's lap and is told that of the three roads which lie before them--"the path of righteousness," "the path of wickedness," and "the road to fair Elfland"--he must take the last. In the manner of the ballad's abrupt closing, one is then told, "And till seven years were past and gone/ True Thomas on earth was never seen." Although Keats's
literary ballad is by no means a professed imitation as is Mallet's "William and Margaret" of "Fair Margaret and Sweet William" (also "Lady Margaret"--Child #74) or as Prior's "Henry and Emma" is of the broadside "The Nut-Browne Maid," his "La Belle Dame" does reflect a practicing acknowledgement of the superstitions and preternatural details which pervade this traditional ballad, as well as others of supernatural content. The consequence of the knight's infatuation and love play with "the lady in the Meads"--as intimated by the spectral warriors, princes, and kings' somber disclosure that the "fairy child...hath thee in thrall"--evolves from Keats's indirect expansion of a folk superstition which underlies the occult experiences of many ballad heroes, although never explained outrightly in the content of the ballads themselves. In his notes to "Thomas Rymer," Professor Child explains this belief:

What we learn from the adventures of Thomas concerning the perils of dealing with fairies, and the precautions to be observed, agrees with the general teachings of tradition upon the subject. In this manner there is pretty much one rule for all. "unco" folk, be they fairies, dwarfs, water-sprites, devils, or departed spirits...eating and drinking, personal contact, exchange of speech,
receiving of gifts, in any abode of unearthly beings, including the dead, will reduce a man to their fellowship and condition.9

Keats's use of this folk superstition explains why the estranged and "palely loitering" warriors, kings, princes, and the knight, all of who have had contact with other-worldly beings, are imprisoned in eternal sleep upon "the cold hill's side..." The knight compares with several ballad heroes whose fate shows the imposition of this belief. When William begs the departed Margaret, whom he jilted, to arise ("Lady Margaret"--74) she responds, "If I should kiss your red, red lips [His are not yet "starved" or "pale."],/ Your days would not be long'; similarly, the young man who waits "a twelve-month and a day" for a kiss from his deceased sweetheart ("The Unquiet Grave"--78A) is told "And had you one kiss from my clay-cold lips, your time would not be long." As the knight's meal of "...relish sweet,/ And honey wild, and manna dew" most assuredly leads to his enchantment, one wishes that he had been warned by the old sage as Child Rowland had been before he ventured into the unearthly realm to save his sister Burd Ellen: "for if one tasted or touched in Elfland he must remain in the power of elves, and never see middle-earth again."10
Abstinence from speech—especially from an attempt to communicate with supernatural beings in their own "language strange"—is also prescribed, as one discovers in the following lines from a Child-collected variant of "Thomas Rhymer": "For gin ae word you whould chance to speak,/ You will neer get back to your ain countrie (A, 15)."

That the elements of story and folklore in "Thomas Rhymer" noticeably parallel those in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is quite clear; in fact, all the larger narrative elements in stanzas four through seven of Keats's poem correspond to those throughout the folk ballad. Common to each work are the encounter between a mortal and an attractive elfin lady; one character's desire of love for the other (Thomas makes the advances while "The Queen of Elfland" merely places his head upon her lap, but Keats's fairy-lady is the one who openly professes her love to the knight); the use of a "steed" onto which one character pulls the other for their journey together (Keats's knight pulls the lady onto his "pacing steed" while in the ballad it is the lady who pulls Thomas Rhymer onto the conventional "milk-white steed."); and the elfin lady's preparation of strange food for the mortal (although Thomas wants to pick the forbidden fruit for the lady before she begins
to fix the meal for him. ) Concerning these correspondences, Earl Wasserman comments:

Apparently the myth of a journey to a mysterious otherworld that is neither heaven nor hell nor earth, and of capture there by the fairy magic of love for one who seems to be "Queen of Heaven," constituted a pattern that evoked from Keats a body of speculation ripe for expression and helped give these speculations an artistic shape... to him [the ballad of "Thomas Rymer"] was also a meaningful narrative in which he recognized his own journeys heavenward.11

The slight modifications which Keats makes in the narrative of "Thomas Rymer" and his more apparent additions to this ballad suggest the themes and concerns which the poet proposed to absorb into "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." Keats expanded the folk product to include three more significant details: the knight shows his infatuation with the "lady in the meads" by making "a garland for her head, / And bracelets, too;" the pitiless sprite in turn "look'd at [him] as she did love" and then bends down to "sing a faery's song;" and eventually she culminates this love play by telling the knight "in language strange...'I love thee true.'" Wasserman says that these additions were woven into the popular narrative as "a series of increasing intensities that [resultantly] absorb the self into essence: nature, song, and love."12

By implying more openly the fairy lady's direct overtures
of love in juxtaposition with the knight's growing infatuation and dependence upon her, i.e., by "increasing the enthrallments of self-hood," Keats makes the relationship between the "belle dame" and her mortal captive have an ultimately greater consequence than it had with "True Thomas" and, as a result, is investing the poem's elfin setting and the eventual gestures of love—which spring partially from the influence of this bizarre environment—with a symbolic importance that is entirely absent in the folk ballad. The innovation which one witnesses is that Keats has transmuted the folk "story" into "symbolic plot." By simply adding details which make plausible the fairy lady's increasingly successful seduction of the knight into her conditions, the poet has given the reader important answers to problems concerning the knight's motives behind his indulgences in the dream world. The reader will then be induced to question further the values of such an ideal and soporific state, as well as the values of the beautiful lady without tenderness, for an assessment of his own existence.

In the traditional ballad, however, one sees Thomas Rhymer getting pulled upon the elfin queen's "milk-white steed" but never wonders "why" he stays on the horse with his captor. (In contrast, it is interesting
to note that Keats modified this action, by conversely having the knight draw the lady onto his horse. That the knight exerts a will—despite his rather passive fall under the lady's wiles later on—portrays him as more outrightly human and comes to bear further consequence for the sophisticated reader.) Thomas Rhymer's motives behind wanting to pick forbidden fruit for the very one who kidnapped him, his reasons for obeying the fairy queen's orders to pursue the "road to fair Elfland" instead of choosing the "path to righeousness" or "the road to Heaven," and the volition to inhabit Elfland for seven years remain as darkly inexplicable. On the other hand, the analogous actions in "La Belle Dame" are subtly motivated. Behind all of the knight's performances is the intimation of a need to stay under the precarious influences of the beautiful "faery child": at least to remain controlled by whatever spiritual or aesthetic idealism she may seem to represent. For the reader who vicariously undergoes the mysterious experience in the poem, Keats has prepared the way for an acceptance of the knight's resultant fate of "palely loitering...on the cold hill side."

In Keats's work, the fairy lady's "wild" eyes, exotically long hair, and feminine gracefulness make her understandably enticing; in the ballad, however, the
only description of the elfin queen's powers of attraction is just three rather uncomplimentary adjectives for a lady: "gay," "brisk," and "bold," along with the information that her skirt is "grass-green silk." In fact, her "milk-white steed" and its mane are given the same amount of meager description as she is. Keats, however, shows the effect of the lady's alluring beauty when he has the knight flitting about to gather flowers like a love-sick adolescent; similarly, one can see that the knight's addiction to her gift of inebriating "honey wild and manna dew" and the lady's professions of love not only portray her powers of seduction more fully but also provide the knight with a motivation to journey to the "elfin grot" despite its potential dangers. With the infusion of only a few original narrative elements and the poet's richer description, Keats has amplified the ballad of "Thomas Rymer" to have a symbolic consequence which makes the sensitive reader readily aware of the world which prevails for those who vainly pursue ideal beauty while bound to this mortal life.

Just as the characters and their significant actions in "La Belle Dame" are given the type of description which conditions a symbolic narrative, so too is the natural setting described to relate the protagonist and itself to some more profound level of meaning. The first three
stanzas not only provide the ballad-like query, whose answer becomes the narrative basis in succeeding quatrains, but also describes the knight and the autumnal scenery surrounding him in complementary terms so that "images and human values are gradually blended stereoscopically until at length the reader's mode of poetic vision has been adjusted to see the symbolized value as the third-dimensional projection of the image." In the folk ballad, any detailed portraiture of the setting--much less the process of implying the symbolic integration of the main character and nature--is uncommon. Gummere confirms the point by saying: "This expression of nature in new and startling phrase is half of poetry...But the ballads take nature for granted...in the typical ballad of situation and dialogue and refrain, nature plays no part. Landscape is ignored." The only traditional narratives in which objects of nature carry any suggestion of extra-literary value are "Barbara Allen (84)"--in which the red rose growing from William's grave and the ugly briar from the cruel Barbara's entwine to form a "true-lover's knot" above the departed pair whose love was never fulfilled in life--and "The Unquiet Grave (78)," in which a "wither'd stalk" that was once the "fairest flower
that e'er did grow" stands in the graveyard as a reminder
to a mortal not to attempt any contact with his departed
lover until "death [too] calls [him] away." In the bal-
lads having these rare examples, however, the suggestively-
symbolic images are always at the end of the ballad and
seem external to the central narration; that is, to the
characters as they are concerning themselves with the
action at the time of its denouement. For proof that
the "red rose-briar" image has no direct symbolic impor-
tance to the narrative or to the characters in the bal-
lad, one finds that this figure is a well-known folk
commonplace and often ends other popular ballads of
romantic tragedy, in which it remains isolated from the
central action there, also. 16 With "La Belle Dame Sans
Merci," however, the interrelation between nature and the
knight bears a direct relevancy to the narrative through-
out the ballad, but, as Wasserman explains, it is an
interrelation which is so unobtrusively expressed that
it appears only vaguely present--thereby giving the
feeling of the simple folk ballad in which such symbolic
interplay is absent:

The similarity of the gaunt, pale appearance
of the solitary knight to the desolation
and decay of nature is clearly implied, but
the absence of any explicit relationship
leaves the connection vague and therefore
fluid enough so that nature and the knight may later be welded into an organic, instead of a synthetic union.17

The infrequent and irregular references of any allusion to setting in the ballad, however, contrasts noticeably with the artistically patterned and abundant description of natural setting and character in the beginning stanzas of "La Belle Dame." Even though the initial query "What can ail thee, knight-at-arms?" and a similar rhetorical organization are common to each of the first two stanzas and thereby seem to parallel the folk ballad's practice of incremental repetition, Keats departs from any form of ballad organization by asserting an artistically-developed structural pattern which alternates the questions concerning the knight's well-being in the first two lines of each of the first two stanzas with the poetic descriptions of nature in each of these stanzas' remaining two lines. As Wasserman also shows, Keats balances the adjectives describing the knight in the beginning halves of the stanzas with his projected images of nature in the latter halves: "alone," "no birds sing;" "palely loitering," "the sedge has withered." Furthermore, these sets of images are somewhat symbolically united in the third stanza where the emphasis outwardly appears to be upon the coordination of two natural images,
"a lilly" and "a fading rose," while the knight, whose condition of desolation has been aligned with theirs, evolves as the actual center of attention. This process of interplay relates the decaying process of nature in autumn with the deteriorated spirit of the knight, whose story the reader now awaits so that he may uncover the causes of this apparent dissipation. The manner in which this process has accrued is very much unlike any "modus operandi" in the folk ballad, as the following synopsis of the poem's initial stanzas would illustrate:

By this absorption of the knight into the structural pattern of the natural imagery, the movement from a suggested but unstated relationship of man and nature in stanza one to an implied interrelationship in stanza two has now been completed. In the third stanza, the two terms are organically integrated, and human values and natural images have been molded into interchangeable expressions: the lily and the rose are present in the knight's countenance and the withering is theirs.

Unlike the raconteur of folk narratives, Keats infuses a rich description of the natural setting into the first three stanzas of his ballad to color the knight's suffering with a romantically ominous atmosphere; furthermore, by implying an integration of desolate nature and the main character, the poet can portray the "structural drama of their coalescence [to] compel a symbolic reading."
later on. In the next six stanzas, which form the center of the narrative, Keats arranges the crucial events so that the highly balanced and intricate pattern of unfolding action is functional to the subtler meanings behind the story; in this important section, the reader finds "a progressive shrinkage of the 'I' as a power and a corresponding dominance of the 'she' [the fairy lady], until in stanza seven,...the lady alone controls the entire action, and the knight passively yields to her."\textsuperscript{21} As Keats's artful modification of the "Thomas Rymer" story results from the slight addition of only three details to bring a texture of causality to the mortal's actions, so too does his arrangement of these details adequately define "why" the knight's subordination by the lady is inevitable. This type of inevitability is missing, however, in the folk ballad because it lacks both the descriptive power and the narrative organization to reflect a character's determining strengths and weaknesses behind his significant actions.

In "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," the movement toward the knight's growing enervation and inevitable enthrallement is clearly delineated by the opening lines of stanzas four through nine: "I met a [fairy] lady...," "I made a garland for her hair," "I set her on my pacing steed," and then, "She found me [magic food]," "She took me to her elfin grot,"
and consequently "...there she lulled me asleep." 22
As an interesting contrast to this well-ordered pattern of movement from selfhood to enthrallment, one might turn to "Thomas Rhymer" and notice there the opening lines of some stanzas which are treating analogous points in the narrative. The following excerpts show that any progressive domination of Thomas's will is of no concern to the ballad's narrator: "True Thomas he took off his hat," "'O no, 'O no, True Thomas,' she says," 'But ye maun go wi me now,'" "For forty days and forty nights," 'But I have a loaf here in my lap,'" and "'O see not ye yon narrow road.'" With the folk ballad, such a treatment is obviously unfair because it makes the narrative seem ludicrously incoherent and barren. The ballad was never meant to show the balanced and intricate patterns of movement which bring symbolic consequence to a character's experiences, because in its stress on action alone, the ballad ignores any implication of character change with symbolic effects. It would have no "prologue" because it begins with such abruptness that it seems to have started "in media res"; it similarly ends so suddenly after the crucial action that the listener who expects some aftermath may be startled to find that the ballad has already been
completed. In the course of narration, the folk ballad has no time for any structural symmetry because it must leap impulsively from the most pertinent dialogue and action to the eagerly-anticipated climax—all the while observing the strictest chronology and a complete restraint from whatever such an oral tradition would judge as digressionary. On the other hand, the reader of "La Belle Dame" may continually return to the work for a more careful examination of the subtly-developed rhetorical organization and artistic imagery which has been used to extend the symbolic potential of the ballad form. Wasserman traces the "intricate interlacing of the meaningfully balanced patterns" when he re-examines the literary ballad in its entirety:

In one sense, the first three stanzas are introductory to the following narrative. Within this main narrative (stanzas 4-12) the action is perfectly pivoted on the central stanza (8), the narrative, the symbols, and the grammatical controls symmetrically rising to and falling away from this central point. And in yet another sense, the first three stanzas (1-3) and the last three are "prologue" and "epilogue," the central six (4-9) being perfectly balanced by the distribution of the opening patterns, "I and She." 23

The folk ballad's absence of what is called "an epilogue" in "La Belle Dame" shows by contrast Keats's
ability again to expand the ballad idiom to include a more profound meaning. A brief comparison of Keats's poem, having the epilogue, with an Anglo-American ballad, that merely repeats its first verse to conclude the story, illustrates Keats's more symbolic narration. The ballad "Sailor on the Deep Blue" (long in the American oral tradition, but originally derived from the British broadside, "The Sailor Boy and His Faithful Mary") begins and ends with:

   It was on one summer's evening
   Just about the hour of three
   When my darling started to leave me
   For to sail upon the deep blue sea. 24

The central narrative is quite simple: a girl, the "I" of the ballad, has been patiently awaiting her sweetheart's return from sea when she is told by a retired, old sea captain, "O yes, my little maiden,/ He is drowned in the deep blue sea," and upon hearing the tragic news, she responds with a ballad character's impulsiveness, "For I'm going to end my troubles/ By drowning in the deep blue sea." The story itself is definitely over at this point even though the modern listener may wish to question the girl's motives for suicide or hear if her attempt were successful. The addition of the repeated first verse at this point, however, seems superfluous and is
actually only a ballad convention. One is not to assume that the maiden is recalling her sweetheart's egress to the sea as she relentlessly goes to her death; the ballad's repetition of the first quatrains at the conclusion of the story carries no relevance to the narrative at all.

There is a great significance, however, in having at the end of "La Belle Dame," the repetition of the initial stanzas describing the "palely-loitering" knight and the landscape of deteriorating nature. As these integrated images are repeated in the epilogue, the reader—who has witnessed the knight's dissipation in the elfin grot and who now sees the protagonist as doomed to a Coleridgean "life-in-death" existence on the cold hill side—can better understand the hopelessness of trying to transcend mortal limitations by becoming lost in a pursuit of the ideal. The suggested tragedy is that the knight is doomed to a limbo existence with strange kings, princes, and warriors who share his now death-pale and lonely countenance and, worse yet, that as he loiters there with them, cut off from both the mortal world and his desired ideal, he must be continually reminded of his own nightmarish condition by having to watch the eternally recurrent decay and desolation of nature around him. That the opening stanza shows little variation in its wording and imagery from
the closing quatrain may suggest how little of a distinction can be made between the ephemeral and limited mortal world of the anonymous stranger, who seeks the answers in the prologue, and the selfless and timeless, dream-like world of the knight-in-arms, who explains his condition in the epilogue. Yet the realm inhabited by the knight does have a distinct identity which is set apart from the stranger's mortal world just as clearly as the phrasing in the epilogue bears a distinction from the words in the prologue. Unlike the first stanza, the last one begins, "And this is why I sojourn here," showing that as a consequence of the knight's enthrallment, the strange world of the "wither'd sedge" and death-pale beings has assumed a very real meaning and a most apparent identity for the knight. It is important to remember that his special twilight realm only exists "a posteriori": it has no reality or existence until it is actually realized to have been the result of a significant experience. The substitution of "though" in the third line of the last stanza for "the" in the corresponding line of the first stanza also establishes the unique conditions of the knight's existence; he has a consciousness or a "being," but one which stands outside any physical dimension of time. "Though" the objects in
nature wither and decay because they exist within the normal temporal dimensions, the knight continues to sojourn "alone and palely loitering" as a result of his experience in the elfin grot. The comparison of the first stanza with the last shows that the stranger in the prologue is unaware of this temporal perspective, as is certainly the reader who identifies with him, and that the conditions which are continually prevailing in the epilogue can only exist for the empathetic reader as a consequence of the knight's narration which was prompted by the stranger's curiosity and subsequent query.

The reader, then, finds that the symmetrically-balanced organization manifests a texture of causality throughout the poem; yet once aware of the timelessness which predominates in the world of the knight, the reader can also see, by the similarity between the first stanza and the last, an intimation of an eternal process which seems to obscure any sense of causality in the physical or temporal nature of events. In contrast, the ballad of tradition bluntly tells an exciting story which is structured upon a rigid observance of unfolding only overt action in the strictest chronology so that it lacks the profundity of Keats's symbolic plot built on what Wasserman sees as an "intricate interlacing of
meaningfully balanced patterns." Unlike the anonymous bard with whom the folk ballad originated,

Keats conceived of a poem as a perfectly ordered cosmos, and experience not only completed but also self-contained by reason of its circularity. And this perfect circularity...not only is a control over the work of art as a poetic microcosm but also is itself a meaning functional to the poem. 25
Chapter 4


3. D.W. Hardy ("The Theme of 'The Ancient Mariner'" ) shows that the sun and the moon are major symbolic elements; W.H. Auden (The Enchafed Flood: The Romantic Iconography of the Sea) gives the sky, the sea, and the wind this extra-literary meaning while John Lowes (The Road to Xanadu) contends that in a symbolic sense, the primary channels of action or the main characters are "Earth, Air, Fire, and Water."


5. Both of the variants of the ballad, which have been cited, are classed as "A" by Child. They are to be found in the appendix of this paper.


10. Ibid.


12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., p. 70.


16. Other Child ballads, some of whose variants contain this "rose-briar" imagery, are "The Douglas Tragedy [Ethan Brand]" (7), "Lord Thomas and Fair Annet" (73), "Lord Lovel" (75), and "The Lass of Roch Royal" (76).


18. Ibid., p. 67.

19. Ibid., pp. 67-68.

20. Ibid., p. 67.

21. Ibid., p. 79.

22. Ibid., p. 78.

23. Ibid., p. 82.


25. Wasserman, p. 82.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Even though an avowed and collective interest in the popular ballad tradition seems more consonant with the literary standards of the Romantic period than with those of the preceding Neo-classical age, the ballad's influence may ironically be least apparent in the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats, who—unlike the Neo-classical poets with their fastidiously rigid ballad imitations and antiquarian pursuits—have more thoroughly assimilated the folk narrative's themes and style into their personal mode of expression. The Romantic poets were victims of a paradox: they sought to imitate the folk ballad as a way of achieving its simplicity, its unobtrusive rendering of strongly-felt human passions, and its aura of the supernatural and remote; yet, they exacted originality by rebelling from the very eighteenth-century literary ballad imitators and antiquaries who had initially awakened them to the ballad's virtues. Thomas Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, which stands as the pivotal document of the ballad revival, may be responsible for having somewhat
resolved this dichotomy of interests. The work climaxes the Neo-classical absorption in the ballads, and "since it largely determined the lines which the appreciation of popular poetry took thereafter, it is the most influential book in the Romantic phase of the revival as well."¹ The work caught the avid attention of Neo-classical writers, especially Percy's own scholarly circle including Goldsmith, Shenstone, and Dr. Johnson; but more importantly, two quite distinguishable groups of Romantic writers felt its impact upon their age's literary thought. The first of these, early Romanticists like Scott, Shenstone, and Chatterton, tried, as did Percy himself, to collect and criticize original sources while still maintaining their roles as sophisticated writers. These writers were caught between literary elegance and antiquarianism; hence, in deciding whether to venerate their genuine folk compilations or whether in their imitations to alter "subversively" (a purist's word) those folk products to appease a sophisticated audience, these artists evolved a literary ballad theory which indirectly affects the better literary ballads of later Romantics. The second group includes Burns, Southey, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats—all of whom did not have the purist's concern for making exacting copies of the original ballads
but used what they believed to be the ballad's admirable qualities while rejecting what they felt to be inferior.

In fact, these Romantics disregarded the challenges which were directed against *The Reliques* by Joseph Ritson—a collector, whose allegiance lay with the purist antiquaries and who, thereby, won the respect of the Neoclassical poets writing sterile and unoriginal copies of medieval relics—and were most influenced by the ballads which Percy most altered. His changes gave the old ballads the "feeling" that Neoclassical imitators had missed and that Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats later thrived upon. Wordsworth later showed his appreciation when he wrote, "I do not think that there is an able writer of verse of the present day who would not be proud to acknowledge his obligations to *The Reliques*;" his collaborator Coleridge had been moved by Percy's notes to the broadside "The Wandering Jew" and by *The Reliques*'s variant of "Sir Patrick Spens" in the conception of his ancient mariner. Kroeber's summary of the Romantics' obligation to Percy and of the manner in which they differed from the Neo-Classics in the employment of Percy's collections outlines the course that ballad appreciation was following:
Romantic employment of the ballad involves a heavy dependence upon the antiquarians—especially Percy—and at the same time a complete reversal of those archaizers' implicit attitude toward imaginative literature. To the Romantics the attraction of ballads lay in the means they seemed to provide for once again making poetry a serious business of civilized life.  

Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats are universally acknowledged as writers of the greatest literary ballads, probably because they free themselves from strict imitation and often imbue their poems with a sophisticated characterization, a meaningful description of setting, or the symbolic plot; with something of the epic's universality, but without the epic's tedious and grand movement; and with the desirable qualities of broadside balladry, the better antiquaries' revisions, and other sophisticated ballad imitations. Keats's "La Belle Dame," for example, certainly contains the ballad's mysterious dramatic effects that its creator admired, but this poem can also have many of the romance's distinctions: the lady is more reminiscent of Spenser's Duessa or Phaedria than of "Thomas Rymer's" elfin queen, her title is drawn from Ros's translation of a poem by Alain de Chartier, and the poignantly unresolved quality of the situation is noticeably medieval. Although Coleridge's The Ancient Mariner indirectly owes its origin to the
ballad and directly imitates the ballad style with
tasteful artistry, it is "overlaid with metaphysical
and religious sophistication which makes it 'something
less and something infinitely more than a ballad'
(Hustvedt). "5 Yet, despite these Romantics' predilec-
tion for some infusion of different styles into their
imitations, the actual power of their poetry came from
the traditional and broadside ballads that Percy collected.

In the folk ballads, the Romantics discovered a
strength which could be adapted to the basic pattern of
the major nineteenth-century mode: the lyrical narra-
tive of dramatic confrontation. 6 For example, Wordsworth's
ability to direct the reader's interest toward more inti-
mate and delicate sensibilities than were found in the
folk ballad evolved from blending his rather abbreviated
narrative with the "lyrical"--that particular element in
which the "feeling developed gives importance to the
action and the situation"--and the folk ballad's rapidly-
moving "vis-a-vis" dialogue which he used to suggest a
character's inward feeling subtly through the spoken
line, rather than to impose his own experiences through
affected description. The lyrical interpolations that
Wordsworth gave to the traditional ballad's abruptly-
moving narrative could, thereby, still be made compatible
with the anonymity peculiar to the folk character, with narrator impersonality, and with the abbreviated ballad stanza. Coleridge likewise used the trait of dramatic confrontation to emphasize the effect of the cryptic mariner's strange tale upon the "now sadder, but wiser" wedding guest. Keats uses the question-answer dialogue, common to "Lord Randall"(12) or "Edward"(13) to unfold his poem's additions of a pervasive dream-like atmosphere, a symbolic and detailed natural setting, and a seemingly more mysterious and ominous otherword experience. The subtle employment of the ballad's dramatic rendering by these poets is not all, however, that makes their works indicative of a collective interest in popular verse which is more symptomatically Romantic than Neo-classical. As Noyes explains:

[The more elusively defineable] ballad spirit [also] permeated the thought and literature of the age...The ballad had its share in bringing about a "renascence of wonder" and rejuvenated the sensibilities of a public grown tired of the falsely noble language and stilted sentiment of much of late eighteenth century poetry. People discovered that their ancestors were genuine human beings capable of manly emotions... Taken as a whole the revival of the popular ballad was the most potent single liberating factor in the whole Romantic movement. 7

That particular "ballad spirit [which] permeated...
the whole Romantic movement" involves an ease and unpre-
tentiousness of expression, as well as a simplicity in
general, then, which is quite lacking in the Neo-classical
age. The poets of this period had used the ballad form,
but only because it afforded them a universally-
accepted structure in which they could propagate their
love of antiquarian trappings and of the time-worn
preachments of the grandiose Greek epic. The damage
that Augustans did to the ballad's inherent qualities
were legion. Their tendency was to moralize about
their age, to satirize with Augustan rationality, or to
enamel description—thereby damaging the ballad's sense
of brevity and dramatic concentration.

The Romantics, on the other hand, captured that "ballad
spirit" by appearing as candid and unobtrusive as the bal-
lad itself, yet having the genius to infuse their works
with subtle psychological description achieved through self-
revelatory narration and with a symbolic plot and setting.
The story of "The Thorn" is unfolded in such
a way as to make the narrating old sea-captain the focal
point because of his imaginative retrospection and his
unwittingly symbolic descriptions of Martha Ray's
mountain retreat. Coleridge has made his ancient mariner
so important that the story has no meaning if it is
told without the assertion of the narrator's presence or
told without showing the consequence of the supernatural
experience upon this character's spiritual condition in
the final frame. Yet Coleridge's symbolic plot and
psychological penetration are achieved through the
stylistic devices which emphasize crucial and overt action
in the ballad. Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"
also appears to maintain the ballad's focus on exciting
supernatural adventure behind an aura of credulously-
implied folk superstition while, unlike the folk ballad,
building an interrelation between the protagonist and
the natural setting within a symmetrically-balanced
structure for symbolic suggestion. In all of these
literary ballads, the romantic poets are able to in-
sert moral and psychological overtones without resorting
to the Neo-classical imitators' assertion of their own
overly deliberative consciousness.

As Josephine Miles contends, the principal debt
that Romantic narrative art owes to ballad practice is
that which lies at the very core of the action-filled
folk idiom: the predominance of action verbs over
modifying words and structures. Even Romantic nar-
ratives which are not in the ballad form--such as Keats's
"Lamia" and "The Eve of St. Agnes" or Byron's "Childe
Harold's Pilgrimage"--contain this syntactical trait
and owe to the popular ballad their sense of immediacy and dramatic sensory appeal. Possibly, no better justification exists for a study of the relationship between the influence of popular balladry upon the literary ballads of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats than Miles's commitment that the new Romantic narrative mode developed from the folk ballad:

The idea which gave life to this romantic mode was the idea of the spirit's narrative, the individual's lyrical story, half articulated and half heard, but powerful in its force of implication. It is one triumphant solution to the long Augustan search for a great heroic poem or a cosmical epic, which should reconcile the inheritances of classical culture and of contemporary science, in a descriptive panorama of heroic proportions, stressing scenes and sublimities and subordinating Sir Patrick Spence to Virgil, Spenser, and Milton. When the heroic story finally came to be told, it was of the individual self, of the Mariner, the adventurer Childe, even the infant of the Songs and The Prelude, the self who was the son of Sir Patrick Spence, who said little, and felt much, and implied more, and died deeply. For such a narration, the form could be better lyrical and epical, the structure better repetitive than cumulative, the terms better active than descriptive, as the individual poet is both hero and minstrel, both treedharp and the wind in it, both the story and the storyteller, in the romantic mode.  

When one accepts her thesis, the revival of interest in the folk ballad as demonstrated by the Romantic ballad writers is clearly what became that "most wholesome and
most potent single liberating factor in the whole Romantic movement."
FOOTNOTES

Chapter 5


8. Miles, p. 119.

Child's "A" Variant of "The Cruel Mother" (20), Vol. I—First printed in Herd's manuscripts and often cited by present-day Wordsworth scholars.

1
And there she's leand her back to a thorn,
   Oh and alelladay, oh and alelladay
And there she has her baby born.
   Ten thousand times good night and be wi thee

2
She has houked a grave ayont the sun,
And there she has buried the sweet babe in.

3
And she's gane back to her father's ha,
She's counted the leelest maid o them a'.

4
'O look not sae sweet, my bonie babe,
Gin ye smyle sae, ye'll smyle me dead.'
Cruel Mother
(Down by the Greenwood Sidie)

There was a lady lived in York
All-a-lee-a-loney-o
She fell in love with her father's clerk
Down by the greenwood sidie.

When nine months had come and past
All-a-lee-a-loney-o
Then she had two pretty babes born
Down by the greenwood sidie.

She leaned her back against a thorn
...........
Then she had two pretty babes born
.....

She took the top knot from her hair....
And then she bound their arms and legs....

She took her penknife keen and sharp...
And then she stabbed their tender hearts...

She buried them under a mossy stone...
And then she started to go home...

One day as she was a walking through the hall...
She saw two babes a playing at ball...

Oh babes, ob babes, if you were mine...
Why, I'd dress you up in silks so fine...

Oh mother, oh mother when we were thine...
You didn't dress us up in silks so fine...

You took the top knot from your hair...
And then you bound our arms and legs...

Then you took your penknife keen and sharp...
And then you stabbed our tender hearts...

Oh babes, oh babes, it's Heaven for you...
Oh mother, oh mother, it's Hell for you....
"O where ha you been, Lord Randal, my son?
And where ha you been, my handsome young man?'
'I ha been at the greenwood; mother mak my bed soon,
For I'm wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down.'

'An wha met ye there, Lord Randal, my son?
An wha met you there, my handsome young man?'
'O I met wi my true-love; mother mak my been soon,
For I'm wearied wi huntin, an fain wad lie down.'

'And what did she give you, Lord Randal, my son?
And what did she give you, my handsome young man?'
'Eels fried in a pan; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm wearied wi huntin, and fain wad lie down.'

'And wha gat your leavins, Lord Randal, my son?
And wha gat your leavins, my handsom young man?'
'My hawks and my hounds; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie down.'

'And what becam of them, Lord Randal, my son?
And what becam of them, my handsome young man?'
'They stretched their legs out an died; mother mak my bed soon,
For I'm wearied wi huntin, and fain wad lie down.'
'O I fear you are poisoned, Lord Randal, my son!
I fear you are poisoned, my handsome young man!
"O yes, I am poisoned; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wad lie down."

'What d' ye leave to your mother, Lord Randal, my son?
What d' ye leave to your mother, my handsome young man?
'Four and twenty milk kye; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wad lie down."

'What d' ye leave to your sister, Lord Randal, my son?
What d' ye leave to your sister, my handsome young man?
'My gold and my silver; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm sick at the heart, an I fain wad lie down."

'What d' ye leave to your brother, Lord Randal, my son?
What d' ye leave to your brother, my handsome young man?
'My houses and my lands; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wad lie down."

'What d' ye leave to your true-love, Lord Randal, my son?
What d' ye leave to your true-love, my handsome young man?
'I leave her hell and fire; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wad lie down.'
'What bluid's that on thy coat lap,  
Son Davie, son Davie?  
What bluid's that on thy coat lap?  
And the truth come tell to me.'

'It is the bluid of my great hawk,  
Mother lady, mother lady:  
It is the bluid of my great hawk,  
And the truth I have told to thee.'

'Hawk's bluid was neer sae red,  
Son Davie, son Davie:  
Hawk's bluid was neer sae red,  
And the truth come tell to me.'

'It is the bluid of my greyhound,  
Mother lady, mother lady:  
It is the bluid of my greyhound,  
And it wadna rin for me.'

'Hound's bluid was neer sae red,  
Son Davie, son Davie:  
Hound's bluid was neer sae red,  
And the truth come tell to me.'

'It is the bluid o my brither John,  
Mother lady, mother lady:  
It is the bluid o my brither John,  
And the truth I have told to thee.'

'What about did the plea begin,  
Son Davie, son Davie?  
'It began about the cutting of a willow wand  
That would never been a tree.'

'What death dost thou desire to die,  
Son Davie, son Davie?  
What death dost thou desire to die?  
And the truth come tell to me.'

'I'll set my foot in a bottomless ship,  
Mother lady, mother lady:  
I'll set my foot in a bottomless ship,  
And ye'll never see mair o me.'
'What wilt thou leave to thy poor wife,  
    Son Davie, son Davie?'  
'Grief and sorrow all her life,  
    And she'll never see mair o me.'

'What wilt thou leave to thy old son,  
    Son Davie, son Davie?'  
'I'll leave him the weary world to wander up  
    and down,  
    And he'll never get mair o me.'

'What wilt thou leave to thy mother dear,  
    Son Davie, son Davie?'  
'A fire o coals to burn her, wi hearty cheer,  
    And she'll never get mair o me.'
Child's "A" Variant of "Babylon" or "The Bonnie Banks of Fordie" (14), Vol. I. In Motherwell's *Minstrelsy*, p. 88.

1 There were three ladies lived in a bower,
    En vow bonnie
And they went out to pull a flower.
    On the bonnie banks o Fordie

2 They hadn'a pu'ed a flower but ane,
    When up started to them a banisht man.

3 He's taen the first sister by her hand,
    And he's turned her round and made her stand.

4 'It's whether will ye be a rank robber's wife,
    Or will ye die by my wee pen-knife?'

5 'It's I'll not be a rank robber's wife,
    But I'll rather die by your wee pen-knife.'

6 He's killed this may, and he's laid her by,
    For to bear the red rose company.

7 He's taken the second ane by the hand,
    And he's turned her round and made her stand.

8 'It's whether will ye be a rank robber's wife,
    Or will ye die by my wee pen-knife?'

9 'I'll not be a rank robber's wife,
    But I'll rather die by your wee pen-knife.'

10 He's killed this may, and he's laid her by,
    For to bear the red rose company.

11 He's taken the youngest ane by the hand,
    And he's turned her round and made her stand.

12 Says, 'Will ye be a rank robber's wife,
    Or will ye die by my wee pen-knife?'

13 'I'll not be a rank robber's wife,
    Nor will I die by your wee pen-knife.'
'For I hae a brother in this wood,
And gin ye kill me, it's he'll kill thee.'

'What's thy brother's name? come tell to me.'
'My brother's name is Baby Lon.'

'O sister, sister, what have I done!
O have I done this ill to thee!

'O since I've done this evil deed,
Good sall never be seen o me.'

He's taken out his wee pen-knife,
And he's twyned himsel o his ain sweet life.
Child's "A" Variant of "Thomas Rymer" (37), Vol. I--
Alexander Fraser Tytler collected this variant from

1 True Thomas lay o'er yond grassy bank,
   And he beheld a ladie gay,
   A ladie that was brisk and bold,
   Come riding o'er the fernie brae.

2 Her skirt was of the grass-green silk,
   Her mantel of the velvet fine,
   At ilka tett of her horse's mane
   Hung fifty silver bells and nine.

3 True Thomas he took off his hat,
   And bowed him low down till his knee:
   'All hail, thou mighty Queen of Heaven!
   For your peer on earth I never did see.'

4 'O no, O no, True Thomas,' she says,
   'That name does not belong to me;
   I am but the queen of fair Elfland,
   And I'm come here for to visit thee.

5 'But ye maun go wi me now, Thomas,
   True Thomas, ye maun go wi me,
   For ye maun serve me seven years,
   Thro weel or wae as may chance to be.'

6 She turned about her milk-white steed,
   And took True Thomas up behind,
   And aye whene'er her bridle rang,
   The steed flew swifter than the wind.

7 For forty days and forty nights
   He wade thro red blude to the knee,
   And he saw neither sun nor moon,
   But heard the roaring of the sea.

8 O they rade on, and further on,
   Until they came to a garden green:
   'Light down, light down, ye ladie free,
   Some of that fruit let me pull to thee.'

9 'O no, O no, True Thomas,' she says,
   'That fruit maun not be touched by thee,
   For a' the plagues that are in hell
   Light on the fruit of this countrie.
'But I have a loaf here in my lap,
Likewise a bottle of claret wine,
And now ere we go farther one,
We'll rest a while, and ye may dine.'

When he had eaten and drunk his fill,
'LAY down your head upon my knee,'
The lady sayd, 'ere we climb yon hill,
And I will show you fairlies three.

'O see not ye yon narrow road,
So thick beset wi thorns and briers?
That is the path of righteousness,
Tho after it but few enquires.

'And see not ye that braid braid road,
That lies across yon lillie leven?
That is the path of wickedness,
Tho some call it the road to heaven.

'And see not ye that bonny road,
Which winds about the fernie brae?
That is the road to fair Elfland,
Whe[re] you and I this night maun gae.

'But Thomas, ye maun hold your tongue,
Whatever you may hear or see,
For gin ae word you should chance to speak,
You will neer get back to your ain coun-
trie.'

He has gotten a coat of the even cloth,
And a pair of shoes of velvet green,
And till seven years were past and gone
True Thomas on earth was never seen.
SAILOR ON THE DEEP BLUE SEA

It was on one summer's evening
Just about the hour of three
When my darling started to leave me
For to sail upon the deep blue sea.

Oh, he promised to write me a letter,
He said he'd write to me;
But I've not heard from my darling
Who is sailing on the deep blue sea.

Oh, my mother's dead and buried,
My pa's forsaken me,
And I have no one for to love me
But the sailor on the deep blue sea.

Oh captain, can you tell me
Where can my sailor be;
Oh yes, my little maiden,
He is drowned in the deep blue sea.

Farewell to friends and relations,
It's the last you'll see of me;
For I'm going to end my troubles
By drowning in the deep blue sea.

It was on one summer's evening
Just about the hour of three
When my darling started to leave me
For to sail upon the deep blue sea.

American variant of "The Sailor Boy and his Faithful Mary," according to the Journal of the Irish Folk-Song Society, XVII, as cited by Cox. From a recording of the Carter Family--May 10, 1928.
A LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED


Child, Francis James. The English and Scottish Popular Ballads. Originally printed in 10 vols. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1882-1898; 2nd ed. 5 vols. N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1965 [This collection is the one known as Child's "monumental" collection; it is in this collection that he records what are considered to be only the "popular" or genuine ballads of tradition. This significant work could not be confused with his earlier English and Scottish Ballads (1857-1859)--later cited as the source of the broadside "Henry and Emma"--which is little acknowledged by scholars of balladry because it contains much of what are "unpopular" pieces and makes no important distinction among the types of ballads.]


Stevenson, Lionel. "'The Ancient Mariner' as a Dramatic Monologue." Personalist, XXX (January, 1949), 34-44.


Stork, C.W. "The Influence of the Popular Ballad on Wordsworth and Coleridge." PMLA, XXII (1914), 299-236.


