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The Ballad Inheritance in "The Thorn" and "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere"

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Abstract:

The ballad is a distinctive genre inherited by the Romantic poets. As part of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth's "The Thorn" and Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" represent their inheritance of ballad tradition. This paper argues that both poems apply two quintessential characteristics of the ballad—the conversational tone in narration, and the musicality in repetitive structure—to establish an oral-literate medium as part of their efforts to give voice to the marginalized people and invoke empathetic emotions. However, the deviation in the two poems' ultimate presentations —one distances Martha's image and the other objectifies the mariner's character— suggests and conforms to the oscillation between two poles in representing minstrelsy, in McLane's words, between "dispersal" and "reification" (152). Firstly, this essay explores how the conversational tone and the oral musicality are displayed in the two poems. An analysis of how the Gothic elements contributes to their ballad inheritance is also included. It then delves into how the two poems' ultimate presentations differ from each other in the effectiveness of enabling the vocalization of the marginalized people. Eventually, it links such a difference to Maureen McLane's argument about the fluctuation between "dispersal" and "reification" in the reconstruction of ballad tradition. Such variances effectively demonstrate Romantic poets' mediation between the preservation of contemporary poetic style and a complete return to the primitive traditions of the earlier ballads.

The ballad is a distinctive genre inherited by the Romantic poets, often held as "the signifie[r] both of literary historicity and of an apparently obsolete orality" (McLane 424). As part of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth's "The Thorn" and Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" represent their inheritance of ballad tradition by applying two quintessential characteristics of the ballad—the conversational tone in narration, and the musicality in repetitive structure—to establish an oral-literate medium as part of their efforts to give voice to the marginalized people and invoke empathetic emotions. Nonetheless, the deviation in the two poems' ultimate presentations—one distances Martha's image and the other objectifies the mariner's character—suggests and conforms to the oscillation between two poles in representing minstrelsy, in McLane's words, between "dispersal" and "reification" (152). That is, the divergences of the two poems' eventual presentations display the fluctuation between spreading the ballad through its orality effects, and vivifying the portrayal of the characters in the ballad to guarantee their vocalization. Such variances effectively demonstrate Romantic poets' mediation between the preservation of contemporary poetic style and a complete return to the primitive traditions of the earlier ballads.

Before the publication of Lyrical Ballads, the collection of ancient ballads had started in the late 18th-century Britain as an effort to reflect the historicity by recording the stories of the common people. Especially, ballad collectors like Thomas Percy got their materials from the lower-class balladeers, such as milkmaids and farmers. In the process of transcribing of their works, ballad collectors mediated and reproduced the ballad orality that contributed to the ensuing "oral turn" in Romantic poetry (McLane 213). For Wordsworth, the creation of Lyrical Ballads is not only against the literary backdrop of "the oral turn" largely triggered by the collection of working-class ballads, but also influenced by his own witness of "the general shortage of bread in the mid-1790s" (Butler 40) and the worsening destitution that

further highlight his emphatic feelings for the marginalized people. *Lyrical Ballads* is therefore peopled not only by joyful poets of creative natural perceptions but by mad mothers, idiot boys, starving and freezing old women, terrified and despairing convicts, shepherds reduced to public relief, American Indian women abandoned to die. Some of these poems cast into ballad form, such as 'The Mad Mother' and 'The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman', are unadorned, wrenching monologues portraying bleak suffering" (40). The pitiful conditions and sufferings of the working class and those obscure people at that time were thus recorded and shown in the ballad form to recount and retell their stories.

In the "Advertisements" of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth states that those poems are written for an experimental purpose - to "ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure" (qtd. in Wu 337). To support this, a conversational tone is employed in "The Thorn" through the speaker's storytelling. The speaker begins by depicting the thorn, an unimpressive natural object:

> There is a thorn, it looks so old,
> In truth you'd find it hard to say
> how it could ever have been so young,
> It looks so old and grey. (1-4)

These lines emphasize the age and obscurity of the thorn; especially, "there is a thorn" features a start reminiscent of oral storytelling traditions, describing the environment and drawing the reader's attention. "You'd find it..." is an apparent reminder of the mutual conversation that displays the speaker's intention of bringing himself closer to the reader/listener. An intangible, enclosed space of dialogue is therefore formed between the speaker and the reader. In the first and second stanza, it can be perceived that the speaker express his feelings and emotions to the reader by describing the thorn as "a wretched thing forlorn" (9), "a melancholy crop" (15) and "this poor thorn" (17, 22), with "wretched",

"forlorn", "melancholy" and "poor" conveying his sympathy. As the poem progresses through the next few stanzas, the speaker repeatedly reminds the reader of the authenticity of what he delineates—the thorn, the pond, the moss—by repeating "you see", and in doing so, the reader is brought closer into the place he narrates. This lasts until the sixth stanza, when the protagonist, "[a] woman in a scarlet cloak" (63), an item of clothing symbolic of guilt and sin (Al-Marsumi 147), is introduced. Again, the speaker uses "wretched" and the repetitive exclamation of "Oh misery" to build emotional resonance, forming a marginalized and unfortunate woman's image to stimulate the reader's curiosity.

The language of conversation is further foregrounded by the introduction of an interlocutor in stanza VIII, who poses a series of questions that not only await the next stanza to be answered, but also embed doubts in the reader's mind. The speaker then answers them by recounting the betrayal of Martha's husband, her anger and the rumor of her infanticide. Akin to the acknowledged Gothic elements in "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere", such as the setting of the scary icy ocean, the appearance of ghost-like spirits and the diabolical woman, the madness and deaths of crew members, the speaker in "The Thorn" also injects a macabre, haunting Gothic atmosphere into his conversation:

> For many a time and oft we heard
> Cries coming from the mountain-head.
> Some plainly living voices were,
> And other, I've heard many swear,
> Were voices of the dead.
> I cannot think, whate'er they say,
> They had to do with Martha Ray (170-176)

As the speaker tells the reader about the haunting cries and the "voices of the dead" in a gossipy tone, Martha's story turns gloomy, frightening and numinous. Meanwhile, the ghostly voices further accentuate Martha's forlorn state - the merciless betrayal by her husband that causes the ensuing tragedies including the probable infanticide. Apart from intensifying the state of misery and desolation that many other "Marthas" may have

experienced similarly at that time, the Gothic also signifies an attempted return to the old, rude ballad tradition, calling on what Walter Scott introduces in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border,* the 'primitivism' and 'barbarism', of "natural pathos" and wild impulses (54-55). The Gothic ambience, which creates a sense of mystery and antiquity, is described by Nick Groom as "all combining in an acute awareness of the transience of human endeavor, of loneliness, of the weight of the past, of antiquity, and of an inability to write" (40). By incorporating the Gothic in the dialogue, Wordsworth resorts to twofold ballad inheritance - both orality and primitive antiquity.

Similarly, a conversational narration is presented in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere", which recounts the experiences of a mariner returning from a long sea voyage. The mariner, as both the narrator and the protagonist of his tale, stops a wedding guest and draws his attention by telling his experience in a vivid, concrete way. At the beginning, the wedding guest asks: "By thy long grey beard and glittering eye/ Now wherefore stoppest me?" (3-4). The use of archaic words gives an impression of the old ballad, through which the mariner's appearance is also revealed - a hoary, old sailor with acute eyes. After several interruptions, he keeps on narrating: "The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared/ Merrily did we drop" (25-26). With concision and simplicity, such narration shares commonalities with "The Thorn", establishing a relatively understandable dialogue with the wedding guest. Yet the frequent use of archaic expressions, preserved in some Scottish dialects, as well as more inversion in syntax, such as "Nine fathom deep he had followed us" (129), changes the everyday conversation into a more poetical one. In this aspect, "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" is more closely adherent to the old ballad tradition, demonstrating imitation and simulation of poetic antiquity (pseudo-archaic spelling, locution, syntax) (McLane 424), and it is, as Wordsworth points out in the "Advertisement", "written in imitation of the style, as well as the spirit, of the elder poets" (338).

Besides this, Coleridge, like Wordsworth in “The Thorn”, also brings interlocutors into the poem to accentuate its dialogical character. At the end of stanza V, and stanza VI, two voices emerge to re-emphasize the mariner’s guilt at killing the albatross and his limitless penance hereafter. The two voices continue to question and answer, transforming themselves into storytellers to inform the reader of the mariner’s experience. A shift in the narrative perspective is therefore shaped by Coleridge - the mariner himself being objectified, turning into part of others’ story and withstanding their gossip and conjecture temporarily, in a way resembling Martha’s state in “The Thorn”. Such dialogical character also stresses a sense of fatalism - the mariner’s fate of performing penance is already doomed and consolidated by others’ words, interwoven into their folklore. In other words, the mariner not only *tells* stories himself, but also, he is *made into* others’ stories. Those stories are therefore spread, speculated and mystified by others, further complicating the relationship between the reader, the mariner and the listener. Thus, as the reader, we experience a short, momentary defamiliarization from the mariner’s image, but are soon pulled back to his narration, further approaching his past suffering. Coleridge, in this sense, takes an intermediary ground between the full return to ballad simplicity and the retaining of archaic poetic style betokened by the mariner’s diction and expressions.

Also, the compelling Gothic elements throughout the mariner’s tale intensify the gloomy atmosphere and heighten the mysterious effects, seemingly a deliberate attempt to make this story a ghastly ballad to be circulated among sailors, and probably, with its Christian references such as “the holy rood” (490), “a seraph-man” (517) and “godly hymns” (543), to warn people of the serious consequences of blasphemy. Yet unlike the “The Thorn”, where Gothic scenes are more indirectly felt than directly depicted, there are unmediated, even elaborate presentations of supernatural beings - “Her lips were red, *her* looks were free/ *Her* locks were yellow as gold/ Her skin as white as leprosy” (186-188); “They groaned, they

stirred, the all uprose/Ne spake, ne moved their eyes" (323-324). The depictions of the diabolical woman on the ship, and the returning dead from the grave, greatly accelerate the tension of the mariner's, mirroring his turbulent inner world and arousing the reader's empathy for him as an outcast. In doing so, Coleridge magnifies the ballad-related primitivism represented by the Gothic, and by installing Gothic horror into the tale, the warnings and instructive conveyances are powerfully communicated to the reader/listener.

Another aspect manifesting their ballad inheritance is that both "The Thorn" and "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" feature oral musicality, shown by repetitive lines and rhyming schemes, which function as a mnemonic instrument to pass on and reproduce the orality of ballads. As such, "[c]ompulsive recollection is beaten into the ballad form, with its regular rhymes and rhythms, formulaic motifs and refrains" (Stafford 16). These repetitions, by enhancing our memorization, particularly evoke the reader's empathy for the protagonists - their suffering, state and experiences are visualized through sounds. In other words, the rhythmic repetitions are aural, song-like, linked to orality, and this brings to mind the sound-based visualization of the suffering of the protagonists. For instance, in the first stanza of "The Thorn", many lines rhyme with each other, creating a rhythmic pace, to steadily bring the story to the reader. Some of the last words - "say"/ "grey", "points"/ "joints", "forlorn"/ "stone"/ "overglown" - with the long diphthong /eɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /əʊ/, generate a special musicality - a soothing, sounding and highly orderly rhyming pattern. Meanwhile, the long diphthongs are associated with the sound of moans and wails, which help to create a mournful, desolate atmosphere that foreshadows the miserable tale of Martha. Moreover, a ballad refrain can also be detected, such as "old and grey" in stanza I and IX, and "to drag it to the ground" in stanza II and XXIII. The repetition at the beginning and the end of the poem forms a circularity, stressing the memorability of the ballad to almost a musical formula. Through these musical repetitions, the reader is incessantly reminded of the poor, wretched thorn,

which, analogous with Martha, also contributes to accentuating her unfortunate suffering, thus aurally deepening the readers' sorrow and sympathy for her. Similarly, oral musicality is employed in "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere", with a particular emphasis on the sound impacts the lines create. Just as Fiona Stafford writes in her introduction to *Lyrical Ballads* (Oxford World's Classics), "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" is not a traditional folklore narrative or a conventional voyage storyline, but readers, like the wedding guest, cannot help but listen, "entranced by the *sound* of his [the mariner's] words" (xv). The acoustic effects generated by expressions like "It cracked and growled, and roared and howled/ Like noises of a swound" (59-60) especially limn the resounding noise of the breaking ice, underscoring the mariner's trepidation. With a form "strictly in 4343 ballad quatrains of abcb" (Stewart 58), the poem's structural uniformity works together with the resounding auditory effects, contributing to the integrity of the tale itself, the mariner's suffering and deep penance, as if we can hear his mental struggle, as if we could *hear* his mental struggle.

By fully exploiting the aura of oral effects, both poems accomplish what ballads usually aim at – to "present the voices of 'others', and to consider how the subaltern, such as the tenant farmer and the dairymaid, *sang* (McLane 11, originally italicized), that is, to allow the vocalization of those who were once absent and neglected by poetry depiction. Heather Glen uses the term "magazine verse" to label "the type of poetry that readers of *Lyrical Ballads* expected: poems on humanitarian subjects such as bereaved mothers, female vagrants...; poems modeled on ballads;..." (33). Glen's point also foregrounds the tendency for *Lyrical Ballads* to epitomize the life of the working-class people, especially of the marginalized. Though he separates poems of humanity and poems imitating ballads as two types, he draws a link between them, indicating that Wordsworth and Coleridge, in their *Lyrical Ballads*, in some way resort to the ballad tradition to enable the vocalization of those common, obscure people, by depicting their stories and evoking emotions. However, a

meticulous examination allows us to detect that the two poets actually differ in their final presentations of such efforts. “The thorn” distances us from approaching a true, live image of Martha, while “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” brings us deeply within the story to observe the mariner’s character - one ostracizes the protagonist; the other vivifies him.

Such a distinction is demonstrated by the contrasting absence/presence of the protagonist’s psychology. Wordsworth’s “The Thorn” doesn’t really give voice to Martha. Instead, her whole story is told in a gossipy tone, repeating her wail “Oh misery! Oh misery!”, without probing into, or at least depicting her mentality. This is noticeably shown by the speaker’s unreliability: he collects his information from rumors and others’ gossip by mentioning “They say” (133), “Old Farmer Simpson did maintain” (149), “And others, I’ve heard many swear” (173), and “some will say” (214). Meanwhile, putting the statement “her name is Martha Ray” (116) in parenthesis also implies the insignificance of knowing her name. Thus, the story is pieced together by others’ gossips and groundless conjecture about Martha, whose mental suffering is weaved into part of a sensational thriller. Thus, the image of Martha fails to be enlivened by the poem, but is inversely controlled, speculated and distorted by the storytellers through whom the reader is informed only part of her story. By contrast, Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” gives a detailed depiction of the mariner’s psychological activities. For one thing, the mariner himself seems to have magic power - with his glimmering, bright eyes - to control the wedding guest to listen: “The Wedding-Guest he beat his breast/ Yet he cannot choose but hear” (41-42), even manipulating his emotions. For another, his narration is laden with evocative expressions and exclamations, powerfully visualizing his image. Also, their divergent use of meters makes a difference in that larger divergence. While Wordsworth applies regular meter forms, Coleridge, with relatively uneven meters, presents more conscious and unconscious activity

in creation (Stewart 57), thus allowing a more vivid revelation of the mariner's psychological torture.

Ultimately, such a difference displayed by the two poems mirrors what McLane calls the fluctuation between "dispersal" and "reification" in the reconstruction of ballad tradition (152). That is, Wordsworth's "The Thorn", by framing a gossip narrative structure that abstracts and ostracizes Martha from the reader, it lays an emphasis on the ballad's role of "dispersal" - to spread this story farther through its orality effects, sometimes at the cost of sacrificing the marginalized people's true feelings, while Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere", by presenting the mariner's inner thoughts, reifies the mariner, thus empowering him to vocalize, to offer a glimpse into those lower class people. The two poems, therefore, with both ballad-related commonalities and differences, bespeak the strive to balance and reconcile between preserving contemporary Romantic poetic style and utterly returning to the earlier ballads. By producing oral effects as inheritance from the early ballad form to let the "others" speak, Wordsworth and Coleridge mediate between preservation and return, originality and simulation, thus shaping and maturing Romantic poetry.

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