

## MEDIEVAL BALLADS

Ballads are short, anonymous narrative poems or songs which have been preserved and elaborated by oral transmission over the centuries; many have been passed from one country to another with suitable modifications to local needs. This happened to many Irish and Scottish ballads which sprang up in modified forms in America and Australia.

Because of their highly mutable oral form, it is almost impossible to date most ballads. After Caxton first set up the printing press in 1477, ballads spread rapidly.

They were an essentially popular tradition of the unschooled and illiterate, which recalled the early oral verse narratives of the Celts and the Anglo-Saxons.

Most ballads were set to music, as they were meant to be sung rather than read. Thus ballads are usually in simple quatrains (four-line stanzas) with a repeated refrain (the repetition of one or more lines). They are simple in form, plot and language, so as to make them easier to remember.

Ballads can be classified in many different categories, from **border ballads** about the rivalry between the English and the Scottish people, to **ballads of outlaws** celebrating the lives of outlaws or criminals such as the cycle of Robin Hood, to **ballads of magic** recounting stories about fairies, witches and ghosts, to **ballads of love and domestic tragedy**, to **town ballads** which served as a polemical commentary on difficult urban conditions.

### Famous Ballads

*Lord Randal* is a traditional Scottish ballad which tells "with a certain malicious humour" the sad tale of a noble called Lord Randal. It probably derives from the late Middle Ages. *Geordie* is a famous English ballad, which presents a rather complex narrative: the storyteller, or narrator, meets a young woman who is lamenting the fate of her lover.

Its date of composition is unknown, it may be dated to the late Middle Ages; it is still widely known today and often sung in traditional as well as modernized versions.

### FEATURES

- Medieval ballads were anonymous narrative poems, intended to be sung with the accompaniment of music: short stories in verse, coming directly from popular tradition.
- They had a simple musical rhymed meter; being composed in short stanzas of two or four lines, and were sung to a simple instrumental accompaniment. Produced by the common people they weren't in written form but mostly recited or sung in the market square, in alehouses or at fairs. They were sung by balladeers and often accompanied by dance, as the word ballad (from Latin, through French) hints to.
- Generally, in every ballad, there is a refrain: a phrase or a line, which is repeated again and again after a stanza. Use of colloquial language is an indispensable feature of a ballad: they use day-to-day, common words and stock phrases easy to be memorized, The story is often told through dialogues.
- The traditional ballad had no single author; rather, it was the product of many poets. It had no written form and underwent many changes during the course of time due to new circumstances and conditions.
- Ballads usually have an abrupt and unexpected opening, they don't provide any details about the subject matter, the surroundings, atmosphere or environment. The ending of many ballads may

also be abrupt and unexpected. Motifs or proceedings are not explained and often there are supernatural elements.

- The content of a ballad often involves love and death, battles, adventure or a quest or journey involving risk and crossing boundaries, or desire and loss. Many had outlaws as their protagonists.