The Three Ravens

Anonymous, (1100 - 2010)

Original Text:

Thomas Ravencroft, Pammelia. Deutromelia. Milsmata, ed. Mac-Edward Leach, facsimile reprint of 1609 and 1611 first editions (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1961). M 2 R2P3 MUSI

1There were three ravens sat on a tree,

2They were as black as they might be.

3The one of them said to his mate,

4'Where shall we our breakefast take?'

5'Downe in yonder greene field,

6There lies a knight slain under his shield.

7'His hounds they lie downe at his feete,

8So well they can their master keepe.

9'His haukes they flie so eagerly,

10There's no fowle dare come him nie.'

11Downe there comes a fallow doe,

12As great with yong as she might goe.

13She lift up his bloudy hed,

14And kist his wounds that were so red.

15She got him up upon her backe,

16And carried him to earthen lake.

17She buried him before the prime,

18She was dead herselfe ere even-song time.

19God send every gentleman,

20Such haukes, such hounds, and such a leman.

Notes

1]

This ballad was first printed in Ravenscroft's Melismata, a song-book of 1611, and variant versions were recorded as late as the 19th century. It is the only English ballad in this collection.

The ballad has a refrain, "Downe a downe, hay down, hay downe", etc. alternating with the lines.Back to Line

11]

a fallow doe. The knight's lady is meant.

16]

lack. Pit.

17]

prime. The first hour of the day.

20]

leman. Sweetheart

THE THREE RAVENS

The object of the present work is to analyse the ballad “The Three Ravens”. In particular I will start from a denotative analysis and then I will continue with the connotative one.

What immediately strikes my attention is the layout of the ballad, which is arranged into ten rhyming couplets of lines, that often create an anaphora. I think this denotative choice makes the ballad more memorable because it had to circulate orally. It goes without saying the ballad is full of alliteration because of the same reason.

Just reading the title and the first two lines the reader knows the protagonists of the ballad are three black ravens.

The choice of ravens has probably a symbolic meaning, indeed the raven is always associated to a passage from one condition to another: for example, the transition from ignorance to knowledge, from life to death, from evil to good, from night to day.

In the following lines the readers find out these ravens can speak in particular one asks the other about their breakfast meal. The raven’s proposal is to feed on a dying knight, lying on a green field.

Unexpectedly, before they have a chance to reach it, the knight is saved by a deer, which carries him to earthen lake and buries him before the prime

Even the choice of the deer is interesting because it is the symbol of vital regeneration, immortality and eternity.

In addition, in the 19th line there is a reference to God, who the reader understands had sent that deer together with other creatures pointed out by the repetition of the adverb such, to save the valiant knight.