

The Language and Style of Historical Ballads

— With Special Reference to *The Battle of Otterburn* —

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0. *The Battle of Otterburn* (Child, No. 161, hereafter *Otterburn*) is, along with *The Hunting of Cheviot* (Child, No. 162), one of the most famous ‘historical ballads’⁽¹⁾ which were traditional along the Scottish border.⁽²⁾ It has long been recognized that these two ballads are based on the same historical event, the battle of Otterburn, fought in 1388 between the forces of Richard II and Robert II of Scotland. Though composed based on Froissart’s chronicles,⁽³⁾ *Otterburn* is mostly independent of written sources, and contains a lot of minstrel’s additions which make it an authentic historical ballad. The text of *Otterburn*, being extant in the manuscripts from about 1550,⁽⁴⁾ well retains many linguistic and stylistic features peculiar to the medieval minstrelsy. In the present paper, I am going to examine the language and style of *Otterburn* as a historical ballad.

1. One of the salient features of prosodic devices in *Otterburn* is the excessive use of alliteration. The first example is seen in the seasonal *incipit* in the opening stanza⁽⁵⁾:

Yt fell abowght the lamasse-tyde,
whan husbandes wynnes ther haye,

The next example is seen in the second stanza;

The grete wold ever together ryde,
that raysse they may rewe for aye.

Thus we come across a large number of alliterative expressions throughout this ballad. They seem to be ornamental for the most part and have no special structural function. Here is one exception:

They swapped together whyll that they swette
wyth swordes scharp and long. (st. 54)

In this case, the alliteration of *sw* (and eye-alliteration of *sch*) seems to have a special effect of giving a quick tempo to the lines. It is true that these lines are alliterative formulas of medieval romances and not the original phraseology of this ballad at all,⁽⁶⁾ but the frequent occurrence of *sw* (and *sch*) here is effective enough to stir up the listeners' excitement. For that matter, formulaic expressions are preferred by ballad singers because they can make the audience rest on them, without distracting their attention from the stories.⁽⁷⁾

A large number of alliterative formulas and tags are seen throughout the ballad:

a berne vpon the bent (line 17), *styll* and *stalwurthly* (24), *game* and *glee* (54), the *holtes* on *hye* (56), *cawte* and *kene* (103), that *ryall* was euer in *rowght* (130), *heven* on *hyght* (135), *byde* hym vpon thys *bent* (159), *ryude* and *rennte* (165), *styyfely* in *stowre* can *stond* (230), a *bayllefyll bronde* (232), etc.⁽⁸⁾

F. Gummere comments on the use of these alliterative formulas as follows:

Striking is the tendency to excessive alliteration. . . . These are marks of the poet and are in line with the characteristics of middle-English lyric in its mingling of popular and artistic elements.⁽⁹⁾

Apart from these formulas, there is another type of alliteration which utilizes /d/ and /k/ sounds contained in the periphrastic *do* and *can*:

<i>dyd</i> helpe hym well that <i>daye</i>	(st. 34)
Vpon sent androwe lowde <i>can</i> they <i>crye</i> ,	(st. 47)
the <i>dowglas dyd</i> he <i>dye</i>	(st. 61)

In the above examples, *dyd* and *can*⁽¹⁰⁾, whose function is to indicate the past tense, are utilized for arranging the metre and rhyme of the lines. It is quite interesting to note that *dyd* is used to alliterate with *daye* and *dye* in the first and third examples respectively, while *can* with *crye* in the second. Judging from this evidence, it may be safely concluded that the adherence to alliteration was a common practice for medieval minstrels and it was used mainly not for functional but for ornamental purposes.

2. The rhyming structure of *Otterburn* is also a characteristic which proves that the ballad is of minstrel origin. The limited number of rhyme words are used repeatedly in this ballad. The rhyming words of seventy stanzas, therefore, can be easily classified into several groups. Only major groups are

given below:

- (1) haye⁽¹¹⁾ : praye : sulway : aye : saye : daye : naye : wednysday : awaye : maye : graye
- (2) wee : stalwurthlye : se : me : envye : dye : be : glee : hye : perssye : bodye : the : lesse :
companye : yee : flee : bee : trenite : thre : sertenly : pety
- (3) bryght : ryght : hyght : fyght : knyght : myght
- (4) lanye : agayne : sayne : fayne : sertayne : slayne : collayne : rayne : grone
- (5) towyn⁽¹²⁾ : bowyn : long : dowyn : stounde : growynde : agoustoune

It should be noted here that the rhyming structure and minstrel's asserverations are closely related to each other. For example, in his discussion of the Robin Hood ballads, E. K. Chambers refers to the function of asserveration as follows:

It may be added that all the narratives have much of what may be called a minstrel's padding, to eke out stanzas, where rhyme does not come easily, or perhaps merely to emphasize his good faith, with such recurrent phrases as 'For sooth as I the say,' or 'Sertenly withouten layn.'⁽¹³⁾

This is also true of this ballad and, as he notes, the asserveration is one feature that classes *Otterburn* as 'sheer minstrelsy.'⁽¹⁴⁾ Asserverations, as a rule, come to the rhyming positions, that is to say, in the second half line of the couplet.⁽¹⁵⁾ All the rhyming sounds listed above therefore can be found in the asserverations. The most common form of asserveration, for example,

For soth as I yow saye

appears six times (five times in the rhyming position) and rhymes with *daye* (in sts. 17, 34) and *awaye* (in sts. 32, 62, 65). There are also variations:

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------|
| For soth and sertenlye. | (st. 59, 63) |
| For soth withowghten naye. | (st. 18) |
| I tell yow in sertayne. | (st. 49, 56) |
| I tell you wythowtten drede. | (st. 8) |
| I tell you in this stounde. | (st. 55) |
| As I haue tolde yow ryght. | (st. 47) |
| The cronykle wyll not layne | (st. 35) |

The last one has often been quoted as evidence that the author was aware of the existence of authorities, that is, Froissart's *Cronicles*.

There are several occasions where it cannot be decided whether the rhyme is intended or not; *in* : *duyme* (st. 3), *northomberlond* : *wrang* (st. 4), *ioyne* : *tayne* (st. 36). Further different nasals or nasal combinations are occasionally allowed to rhyme together, *long* : *dowyn* (st. 54), *growynd* : *agurstoune* (st. 60), *name* : *agayne* (st. 69).⁽¹⁶⁾ Difficult as it is to restore the minstrel's rhyming technique to its original state, it can be imagined that the poet could manage to allow these pairs to rhyme in his recitation.

Concerning the rhyming structure of *Otterburn*, there is one more point which should not be passed by. As is known well, the most common stanza in English ballad is the one conventionally written as a quatrain, the second and the fourth lines rhyming (*abcb*). This is of course true of *Otterburn*, though there are not a few exceptional stanzas whose rhyme scheme is *abab*.⁽¹⁷⁾ Interestingly, this exceptional rhyming pattern converges between stanzas 50 and 60 or thereabouts. To take an example,

'By my good faythe,' sayd the noble *perssye*,
 'now haste thow rede full *ryght*;
 Yet wyll I never yeld me to *the*
 wyll I may stonde and *fyght*.' (st. 53)

It is noticeable that these stanzas deal with the combat scene between Percy and Douglas.⁽¹⁸⁾ Furthermore, as I already mentioned earlier, alliteration also abounds in these stanzas, having a kind of dramatic effect on the scene:

The stonderdes *stode styl*l on eke a syde
 wyth many a *grevous grone*. (st. 57)

Though prosodic devices such as alliteration and rhyme are not uncommon in ballad poetry, the synergistic effect caused by the cooccurrence of them in this spot marks a striking effect on the lines. This scene is foregrounded against the background consisting of regular stanzas whose rhyming pattern is *abcb*. This is indeed a rare case where prosodic devices contribute to make the scene vivid and lively. In this sense, this may be called as an example of 'functional' use of prosodic devices in minstrel ballads.

3. Among the stylistic features of *Otterburn* are chivalrous or courtly elements added by the minstrel to adorn his recital.⁽¹⁹⁾ The mention of the dubbing of knights belongs to the knightly or courtly tradition of the poem:

And syne my logeyng I haue take
 wyth my brande dubbyd many a knight. (st. 10)

Likewise the battle cries or challenges:

To the newe castell when they cam
 the skottes they cryde on hyght,
 'Syr hary perssy, and thow byste wythin
 com to the fylde and fyght ! (st. 9)

And boasts or adjurations exchanged by the combatants:

'Yelde the to me,' sayd the dowglas,
 'or elles thow schalt be slayne!' (st. 51)

'By my good faythe,' sayd the noble perssye,
 'now haste thow rede full ryght;
 Yet wyll never yelde me to the
 whyll I may stonde and fyght.' (st. 53)

The invocations of saints or deity in favour of the victory of one party or the other are also seen:

The other were slayne in the fylde,
 cyste kepe ther sowlles from wo ! (st. 66)

Now let vs all for the perssy praye
 to ihesu most of myght
 To bryng hys swolle to the blysse of heven,
 for he was a gentyll knyght. (st. 70)

In the above-quotations, we can perceive the chivalric and courtly elements peculiar to the medieval romances of 'Great Tradition'⁽²⁰⁾, which were handed down to the border ballads in one way or another. It might have been a common practice for a ballad poet to utilize the themes, art-forms and conventions of Great Tradition to compose his stories, though the way of contact between the Great Tradition and the little tradition still remains unsolved.

4. There are plenty of heroic or chivalric epithets which belong to epic tradition such as 'the *doughtye* Dowglasse' and 'the *noble* Perssye.' It is interesting to note that partisanship is reflected in the delicate use of those epithets. In many cases, the name Percy is, except in the direct speeches, mentioned with epithets: Syr Henry Perssy, *prowde* Perssye, the *noble* Perssy, he was a *gentyll* knight; on the other hand, for Douglas, who is a leader of Scottish armies, *doughtye* is used just once in the opening stanza. This is however quite understandable, if the fact is taken into consideration that this English *Otterburn* were sung for the entertainment of the English people living in Northumberland. It is actually a natural tendency for historical ballads to celebrate or admire local heroes of their own one-sidedly.

Heraldic terms or emblazonry are also seen in stanzas 45, 46:

The whyte lyon on the ynglyssh perte,
 for soth as I yow sayne,
 The lucettes and the cressawnttes both
 the skottes faught them agayne. (st. 46)

The descriptions of weapons, as Arngart lists,⁽²¹⁾ include *burnysshed brande*, *bayllefull bronde*, *fyne collayne*, *scharpe arowes*, *swordes scharpe and long*; Among other paraphernalia of battle are *armur bryght*, *bassonettes*, *standerdes*, *my brede banner*, *toke the fylde*, *the batell ioyne*; alliterative formulas descriptive of fighting includes *a berne vpon the bent*, *in stowre can stond* and so on.

5. Localism is also one of the characteristics peculiar to historical ballads. A minstrel would add local colour to the ballad to make his audience feel it familiar to them. As for the places which appear in the third stanza, though Thomas Percy notes that the several stations mentioned here are well-known places in Northumberland,⁽²²⁾ they are hardly widely known outside the immediate neighbourhood where the battle took place.

Over *hoppertope hyll* they cam in,
 and so downy by *rodclyff crage*;
 Vpon *grene lynton* they lyghted downy,
 many a styrande stage. (st. 3)

Percy identifies *hoppertope hyll*, *rodelyff crage* and *Grene lynton* with *Ottercap-hill*, *Rothley Craggs*, and *Green Leyton*, respectively, all of which are extant place names in Northumberland. Hart comments on the introduction of the local place names in the historical ballads as follows:

Almost any one of these ballads (= border ballads) would furnish a similar list of names. That geography may not always be accurate does not signify. Like Stevenson's map of *Treasure Island*, this insistence upon place relations has a definite realistic effect, very different from the detachment of the Simple Ballad.⁽²³⁾

As the historical ballads, which as a rule deal with comparatively minor, local events, are sung for the local people, minstrels have had to introduce local heroes or local place names into his stories to make them appealing for their audiences with a strong love for their heroes and home provinces.

6. I have so far examined some aspects of the language and style of *Otterburn* as a historical ballad. Indeed, as a ballad of minstrel origin, *Otterburn* shares some characteristics with the Robin Hood ballads such as alliterative phrases, minstrel's paddings and other stylistic features. But the tendency to imitate the courtly and chivalric tradition or to stick to the geographical details is much stronger in *Otterburn* and it is distinctly reflected in the descriptions of heroic or chivalric manners of characters and that of place names. Thus we may conclude that it is these stylistic features that makes *Otterburn* one of the outstanding pieces in English ballady.

NOTES

I should like to thank Mr Trevor Sargent, Tottori University, for improving my English. Needless to say, any inadequacies are all my own.

- (1) "No ballad can be called truly 'historical', for none is reliable on matters of fact. There is rarely any proof that such ballads have been written within living memory of the events they describe. There are, nevertheless, a group of ballads which can be called 'historical' since they are about well-known national events. The best known are *Otterburn* and *Cheviot*." (M.J.C.Hodgart, *The Ballads*, New York: Norton, 1962, p.16.)
- (2) "Refusing classification, there stand out those two great ballads, probably on the same fight, *Cheviot* and *Otterburn*." (*The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, p.94.)
- (3) Child's head-note to *Otterburn* (*The English and Scottish Popular Ballad*, 5 vols. Boston, 1882-98, (rpt.) New York: Dover, 1965, Vol.III, pp.289-92.)
- (4) G.L.Kittredge, *English and Scottish Popular Ballad*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904, p.xiv., "There are two manuscripts of the English *Otterburn*, namely MS. Cotton Cleopatra C. IV and MS. Harley 293, both at the British Museum". (Child, *ibid.*, P.289.)
- (5) "These ballads (= the Border ballads) show a tendency to indicate the time of the action." (W.M.Hart, *Ballad and Epic*,

New York: Russell & Russell, 1967 (originally issued in 1907), p.62.)

(6) This is also seen in *Cheviot*:

At last the Duglas and the Perse met,
 lyk to captayns of myght and of mayne;
The swapte togetharm tylle the both swat,
 with swordes that wear of fyn myllan. (st. 31)

(7) Hodgart, *op. cit.* p.31.

(8) O. Arngart, *Two English Border Ballads*, Lund: Gleerups, 1973, p.27.

(9) *The Popular Ballad*, Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1907, p.262.

(10) *OED*, s.v. Can, *v*², "Its main function is now filled by *did*, though the original *gan* is still a favourite note of ballad poetry."

(11) "The *-e* added in some of the above forms is just an attempt to produce an eye-rhyme, for final, unstressed *-e* had been lost in northern English centuries ago." (Arngart, *op. cit.*, p.26.)

(12) *Towyn* is *town*. *-y-* is intrusive. This is the case with other words in this group.

(13) *English Literature At The Close of The Middle Ages*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945, p.137.

(14) *idid.*, p.160.

(15) There are one or two instances they are in other places. In stanza 41, though 'for soth' comes in the second half line, but not in the rhyming position. On the other hand, in stanza 69, the tag *For soth as I yow saye* comes in the first part of the second line, which is not, as a rule, a rhyming position. *Saye* rhymes with *tayne* in the first line.

(16) Arngart, *ibid.*, p.27.

(17) Stanzas containing this irregular rhyming pattern are stanza 1, 7, 15, 33, 48, 50, 53, 54, 55, 56, 58, 61, 64, 67. (Arngart, *ibid.*)

(18) "This battle is most commonly single combat ; occasionally, as in *Otterburn* and *Cheviot*, masses of men are engaged in it, or small groups, as in *Jonnie Armstrong* or in *Jamie Telfer*. But even in *Otterburn* and *Cheviot* the general conflict shows a tendency to break up into individual encounters." (W.M.Hart, *op. cit.*, p.63.)

(19) Gummere highly praises the chivalry in this ballad, saying "*Otterburn*, transcendently heroic ballad. . . must be placed beside the *Cheviot*. The chivalry lies here in facts." (*op. cit.* pp.257-58.)

(20) "Despite great differences of style, outlook and often of poetic merit, the two kinds are alike in one respect ; they (= Country ballads and Town ballads) do not belong to the Great Tradition of our civilization, but they speak for 'the people'." (M.Hodgart, *The Faber Book of Ballads* , London: Faber and Faber, 1965, pp.11.)

(21) *op. cit.*, p.23.

H.B.Wheatley (ed.) *Thomas Percy: Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, New York: Dover, 1966, vol.1, p.40.

(22) *op. cit.* p.60.

(23) *op. cit.*, p.61.