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## The Words ‘Laughter’ and ‘Laugh’ in a selection of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*

**Abstract:** This paper wittily addresses the theme of laughing and laughter in eight ballads selected from Volume 1 of Gutenberg's three volume collection of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, including *Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight*, *The Cruel Brothers*, *The Boy and the Mantle*, *The Laidley Worm*, *Clark Colven*, *The Broomfield Hill*, *King John and the Bishop* and *Captain Wedderburn's Courtship*, with a variety of other intertextual references. Drawing simultaneously on the two most comprehensive collections of English and Scottish Ballads: Francis James Child's and Steve Roud's, the paper demonstrates that laughter in ballads is "no laughing matter", and, indeed, the balladic laughter, no to be mistaken for (s)laughter, due to its social context of mediaeval times, prevails in various shades of negativity, as corroborated by Norbert Elias's sociological theory of laughter and Anca Parvulescu's study thereof. The paper provides a unique insight into the both merry and mirthless laughter prompted by a modern reading of English and Scottish folk ballads in today's cosmopolitan context.

**Keywords:** English Popular Ballads, Scottish Popular Ballads, merry laughter, mirthless laughter.

And the very first lines that Patrick he read  
A little **laugh** then gave he  
And the very last line that Patrick read  
The salt tears filled his eyes

Oh who is he that's done this deed  
And told the King of me  
For never was I a good mariner  
And never do intend to be<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nic Jones, "Sir Patrick Spens," *Ballads and Songs*, Trailer LER2014 33rpm, track one, side one. Text: <http://www.goldilox.co.uk/engfolk/lyrics/1979-L.htm>.

These verses from the ballad *Sir Patrick Spens*, as sung by Nic Jones, were what immediately came to mind when being approached to write something on laughter in ballads. It was first published in 1765 in Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* and is remarkable for since appearing with some frequency in both ballad and poetry collections/anthologies, not to mention record labels. It is #58 (number 58) in Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*<sup>2</sup>, a mid-nineteenth-century collection of 305 ballads, the main source and focus of the present work, and #41 in the Roud Folksong Index.<sup>3</sup> Given virtual space at the Vaughan Williams Library of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, the Index lists 161 instances of the ballad. Dedicated more to the recorded presence of ballads and songs, the website *Mainly Norfolk* lists recordings from 1961 onwards, many of them by iconic figures in the second folk revival – Bert Lloyd, the early folk-rock band Fairport Convention, for whom it was to become something of a long-term standard with a bumpy ride as regards recordings, Peter Bellamy, Martin Carthy, Brian Peters and many others. For the LP notes to his recording, from which we have cited two early verses, Nic Jones wrote, "Three very common ballads are included in this record: *Sir Patrick Spens*, *The Outlandish Knight* and *Little Musgrave*. All three are well-known to anyone with a knowledge of balladry, as they are well represented in most ballad collections."<sup>4</sup> Anyone who knows the plot will straightway recognise that it is no laughing matter, for despite being selected as "the best mariner," Sir Patrick and all aboard his ship are drowned in the rough seas between Norway and Britain. His laughter is bitter and, in one variant, contains a magical number, for

When Patrick lookd the letter on,  
 He gae **loud laughters three**;  
 But afore he wan to the end of it  
 The teir blindit his ee.<sup>5</sup> [emphasis added]

<sup>2</sup> For non-folklorists it is worth noting here that in Child's day the term "folk-lore", coined in 1846 by the antiquarian William Thoms, was not yet in general currency. This is why Child's ballads are contained in a work under a title the adjective of which is "popular". The two terms, along with "traditional", continue to dog academics, especially as their meanings have modified and come to mean different things in different geographical locations, along with the contracted forms "pop" and "trad". For more on the conception of the term, see: Duncan Emrich, "'Folk-lore': William John Thoms," *California Folklore Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (Oct 1946): 355–374.

<sup>3</sup> Roud Folksong Index, <https://www.vwml.org/search?q=patrick%20spens&collectionfilter=RoudFS;RoudBS;VWMLSongIndex;MasterIndex&is=1>.

<sup>4</sup> Nic Jones, notes to LP.

<sup>5</sup> *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, eds. Helen Child Sargent, and George Lyman Kittredge (London: D. Nutt, 1905), 104.

In *Mary Hamilton*, Child #173; Roud #79), we find the same motif:

When she gaed up the Cannogate,  
 She laughd **loud laughters three**;  
 But whan she cam down the Cannogate  
 The tear blinded her ee. [emphasis added]

Digging a little deeper into the use of the word “laughter” and its derivatives in ballads. I have made use of various online sources, either with search engines of their own or by simply using the “search” function in Google. This has constrained me to employ practical sources – for instance, the Gutenberg project has the whole nineteenth-century collection of 305 English and Scottish Popular Ballads and their many variants compiled and edited by the Harvard scholar Francis James Child, and the Sargent and Kittredge critical edition of 1905 exists in one file in pdf form, making it user-friendly when it comes to word searches (carefully avoiding instances of the word “slaughter”!).

Child’s activities took place at a time when there was an upsurge in ballad-collecting, together with assertions as to what actually comprised the genre: part of the mission of the American scholar, who rarely left his home base and relied on written sources and other collectors and contributors to do his field-work for him, was to preserve the final and purest remnants of an almost-dead tradition. He was able to entertain such an ambition because he shared the sublime self-assurance of the Victorian (despite being American), whether desk-bound or exploring uncharted territory on land and sea (Livingstone, Darwin). He brought with him his own prejudices as to what constituted a ballad, which made him capable of considerable editorial partiality. This is not to detract from the scale of his enterprise, but it does explain as briefly as possible the nature of the mind that could not only collect but, it must be remembered, discard potential entries in the final collection. This is a matter that has long engaged Child scholars, especially as one of his driving ambitions was to “save” “all” the surviving ballads, though it will not be particularly here as we are not concerned with the might-have-been content of the five volumes.

When I first joined the folksong research community in the mid-nineties, conferences typically included an entire section (if not more) on “the Child Ballads”, and it was *de rigueur* to be able to reel off Child numbers in speech and mandatory to include them in writing. Yet there was some consternation and doubt within the community – many scholars are also practitioners – who were singing considerably more than 305 items and encountering still more in the written medium. It took A.L. Lloyd’s *Folk Song in England* (1969) to include a chapter on industrial song. A year or so later, Steve Roud, then librarian for local studies in the London borough of Croydon, initiated what began as a personal project but which has now expanded to a massive data-

base of a quarter of a million entries referring to some 25,000 individual songs (and rising). Naturally, the Child ballads received Roud entries, too, and now even the most diehard stalwarts (and Wikipedia) accompany the Child # with a Roud #. Apart from sheer size and separation by history, for the present purpose the Child collection and the Roud database differ in that the latter has no full texts, only titles and first lines – so if the words that are being sought out are not included there the ballad will not be caught in our net. However, it does contain entries of field recordings and encompasses both written and oral sources, both centuries old and by performers and collectors alive today. At the time of writing, there are, for instance, 161 entries in Roud for Ballad #41 (Sir Patrick Spens, Spence etc.), of which 57 are printed. Roud has significantly outstripped any previous collection both in size, thoroughness and logical approach, and while Steve Roud is still managing and expanding his Index, it now calls upon a considerable number of volunteers and has found a home at the website of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library of the English Folk Dance and Song Society.

There are literally hundreds, if not thousands of written and, now, recorded sound sources that for the present purpose will have to be ignored. What follows is rather an informed glimpse into laughter as it appears in some of the English and Scottish ballads and their (in some cases, many) variants collected by and on behalf of and compiled by the Harvard scholar Francis James Child (1825–1896), originally published in five volumes between 1882 and 1898, and which despite various online editions existing, still to be found in print. The search for laugh in Vol. 1 of the Gutenberg<sup>6</sup> three-volume edition resulted in eight ballads: *Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight*, *The Cruel Brothers*, *The Boy and the Mantle*, *The Laidley Worm*, *Clark Colven*, *The Broomfield Hill*, *King John and the Bishop* and *Captain Wedderburn's Courtship*. Interestingly, and perhaps significantly, where (as often is the case) the item appears in more than one variant, the word does not appear in each and every one. For ease of searching, in addition to the free Gutenberg resource I have also made use of the Internet Sacred Text Archive. While Gutenberg is an admirable resource for the initial word search, the Sacred Text resource has each ballad (with its variants) separately filed. In addition, I have turned to the 1904 critical edition of the ballads, which in pdf form is divided into ten sections as well as a large pdf of the entire work. For additional information I have turned to *Mainly Norfolk*,<sup>7</sup> a folksong resource less academic but eminently magpie-

<sup>6</sup> *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, edited by Francis James Child, in five volumes (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., [1882], 1965), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/44969/44969-h/44969-h.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> *Mainly Norfolk*, *English Folk and Other Good Music*, <https://www.mainlynorfolk.info/folk/records/anaismitchell.html#childballads>.

like which according to Stewart Hendrickson's *Traditional Song and Music Resources* "[c]omprises 4544 web pages cataloguing 3339 albums and 2133 songs and tunes, with cross references to the Child, Laws and Roud folksong indexes and to the Traditional Ballad Index at California State University, Fresno."<sup>8</sup> There follows a synopsis of the 53 ballads unearthed in the wordsearch of the first of the five-volume Gutenberg edition.

*Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight* (Child #17, Roud #21) tells of a false knight who, eloping with Lady Isabel, is outwitted and killed by her when he tries to murder her, as he has already done to six preceding lovers. In Variant E, she returns home and is greeted by her parrot, who is bribed to remain silent so that her father will not learn of her misadventure. Neatly twisting its words to cover up its squawking, the parrot tells her father that the cats are after it, which is "no laughing matter". This might be a prophetic statement of the contexts in which laughter appears in the other ballads.

In *The Cruel Brothers*, (Child #11, Roud #26), the brother stabs his sister on her wedding day in revenge for her knightly courtier neglecting to ask his permission to marry her. In version K, however, the single sister is replaced by "three ladies playing at ball" (a popular leisure activity in ballads) who are approached by three knights dressed in red, blue and green respectively. Each knight proposes to and is rejected by a lady: "The three young knights then rode away, And the ladies they laughed, and went back to their play." While this version might appear lighter in tone for its lack of a murderous brother, the hard-heartedness of the ladies cannot be ignored in their laughter.

The single version of *The Boy and the Mantle* (Child #29, Roud #3961) is set in the court of King Arthur. A boy enters the court one May day with a magic mantle that cannot be worn by an unfaithful wife. After Guinevere's infidelity is exposed, Sir Kay bids his wife wear it. The result puts her to shame, for:

When she had tane the mantle,  
and cast it her about,  
Then was shee bare  
all about the buttockes.  
Then euery knight  
That was in the kings court  
Talked, **laughed**, and showted,  
full oft att that sport. [emphasis added]

The poor woman is publicly ridiculed by all the knights making fun of her – though as it transpires, all but one of the courtly wives are unfaithful.

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<sup>8</sup> *Traditional Song and Music Resources*, <http://www.stewarhendrickson.com/songs/TradResources.html>.

*The Laidley Worm Of Spindleston Heughs* appears as an appendix to Kemp Owyne (Child # 34, Roud # 3912) and is a story of transformation of a princess into a dragon (the Laidly Worm) by a beautiful but wicked stepmother. Just before the transformation at the end of stanza 9, the princess is depicted as happy with not a care; her merriment is abruptly cut short as the wicked stepmother casts the spell upon her:

The princess stood at the bower door,  
**Laughing**, who could her blame?  
 But eer the next day's sun went down,  
 A long worm she became. [emphasis added]

*Clerk Colven* (Child 42A; Roud 147) relates the seduction of Clerk Colven, or at least his extramarital relationship with a mermaid. As punishment, he begins to suffer from agonising head pains, from which he eventually dies. It is the mermaid who laughs at the man's pain:

42A.7 'Ohon, alas!' says Clark Colven,  
 'And aye sae sair's I mean my head!'  
 And merrily **leugh** the mermaiden,  
 'O win on till you be dead. [emphasis added]

...

42A.10 'Ohon, alas!' says Clark Colven,  
 'An aye sae sair's I mean my head!'  
 And merrily **laughd** the mermaiden,  
 'It will ay be war till ye be dead.'

42A.11 Then out he drew his trusty blade,  
 And thought wi it to be her dead,  
 But she's become a fish again,  
 And merrily sprang into the fleed.

42A.12 He's mounted on his berry-brown steed,  
 And dowy, dowy rade he home,  
 And heavily, heavily lighted down  
 When to his ladie's bower-door he came.

42A.13 'Oh, mither, mither, mak my bed,  
 And, gentle ladie, lay me down;  
 Oh, brither, brither, unbend my bow,  
 'Twill never be bent by me again.'

42A.14 His mither she has made his bed,  
 His gentle ladie laid him down,  
 His brither he has unbent his bow,  
 'Twas never bent by him again. [emphasis added]

Child lists three variants, but it should be noted that "A number of scholars (Coffin, Lloyd, Bronson) have speculated that 'Clerk Colvill' is actually

a fragment of a longer ballad, 'George Collins,' with 'Lady Alice' [Child 85] forming the rest."<sup>9</sup> The Roud Folksong Index provides us with 247 distinct versions, 36 from England, 12 from Scotland, but 180 from Canada and the USA, showing how the Anglo-Scottish ballads have spread across North America. Note the dialect spelling, *leugh*, in the tenth verse.

Of the three Child variants of *The Broomfield Hill*, only the first has any reference to laughing. The plot, summarised, is that a man wagers a maiden that if she goes out into the broomfield a virgin, she will not return so. The odds are outrageous. The maiden accepts the bet. The man goes to the designated venue but falls into a deep sleep as he has been up all night setting the trap. Although his goshawk, greyhound and serving-man (and in other variants, horse) attempt to rouse him, he cannot be awakened when the maiden arrives – not even when she kisses him. She leaves various objects around him, including a ring on his finger, to prove that she has been there and won the bet.

While the ballad – at least, this variant – seems no more than a little fun and trickery, the laughter is an expression of triumph, rather than of humour. The maiden has in fact enchanted or drugged the gentleman – who is no gentleman, and in some versions intends to murder her either after having his way with her or in the event of her refusing him.

- 43F.15 'O where was thou, my serving-man,  
Whom I have cloathed so fine?  
If you had wak'd me when she was here,  
The wager then had been mine.'
- 43F.16 'In the night ye should have slept, master,  
And kept awake in the day;  
Had you not been sleeping when hither she came,  
Then a maid she had not gone away.'
- 43F.17 Then home he returnd, when the wager was lost,  
With sorrow of heart, I may say;  
The lady she **laughd** to find her love crost, [+]  
This was upon midsummer-day.
- 43F.18 'O squire, I laid in the bushes conceald,  
And heard you when you did complain;  
And thus I have been to the merry broomfield,  
And a maid returnd back again.
- 43F.19 'Be chearful, be chearful, and do not repine,  
For now 'tis as clear as the sun,  
The money, the money, the money is mine,  
The wager I fairly have won.' [emphasis added]

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<sup>9</sup> Clerk Colvill [Child 42], <https://www.fresnostate.edu/folklore/ballads/C042.html>.

*King John and the Bishop* (Child 45A; Roud 302) is listed among the group of ballads associated with Robin Hood, although the outlaw does not appear in it. Hearing that the Abbot of Canterbury lives a more opulent lifestyle than does he, King John calls the abbot before him and sets him three riddles that he must answer if he wants to keep his head. The abbot manages to get a three-day reprieve to find the answers. Dejectedly homeward on his way, he meets his shepherd who asks what the news is. Upon hearing the abbot's woes, the shepherd (at once his brother) offers to change clothes with the abbot and take on the task. Naturally, he is able to provide the answers to the three questions, including the last, "What am I thinking at the moment"?

- 45A.23 'First,' quoth the king, 'Tell mee in this stead,  
With the crowne of gold vpon my head,  
Amongst my nobilitye, with ioy and much mirth,  
Within one pennye what I am worth.'
- 45A.24 Quoth the shepard, To make your grace noe offence,  
I thinke you are worth nine and twenty pence;  
For our Lord Iesus, that bought vs all,  
For thirty pence was sold into thrall  
Amongst the cursed Iewes, as I to you doe showe;  
But I know Christ was one peny better then you.
- 45A.25 Then the king **laught**, and swore by St Andrew  
He was not thought to bee of such a small value.  
'Secondlye, tell mee with-out any doubt  
How soone I may goe the world round about.'
- 45A.26 Saies the shepard, It is noe time with your grace to scorne,  
But rise betime with the sun in the morne,  
And follow his course till his vprising,  
And then you may know without any leasing.
- 45A.27 And this [to] your grace shall proue the same,  
You are come to the same place from whence you came;  
[In] twenty-four houres, with-out any doubt,  
Your grace may the world goe round about;  
The world round about, euen as I doe say,  
If with the sun you can goe the next way.
- 45A.28 'And thirdlye tell me or euer I stint,  
What is the thing, bishoppe, that I doe thinke.'  
'That shall I doe,' quoth the shepard; 'For veretye,  
You thinke I am the bishopp of Canterburye.'
- 45A.29 'Why, art not thou? the truth tell to me;  
For I doe thinke soe,' quoth the king, 'By St Marye.'  
'Not soe,' quoth the shepard; 'The truth shalbe knowne,  
I am his poore shepard; my brother is att home.' [emphasis added]



King John is portrayed in rare good humour. In the B variant, where he does not laugh at the trick, but is made to smile, we see fun being poked at the entire feudal system both with John's unlikely reward of making the illiterate shepherd the abbot (!), and the shepherd's awareness of the comparative safety of his present status in his refusal. The faculty of superior common sense in the countryman is a familiar folk motif.

45B.18 The king he turned him about and did **smile**,  
Saying, Thou shalt be the abbot the other while:  
'O no, my grace, there is no such need,  
For I can neither write nor read.'

45B.19 'Then four pounds a week will I give unto thee  
For this merry jest thou hast told unto me;  
And tell the old abbot, when thou comest home,  
Thou hast brought him a pardon from good King John.' [emphasis added]

The motif of three seemingly insoluble riddles is also common in folklore, and the third, "Tell me what I am thinking" is redolent of Bilbo Baggins's third riddle to Gollum – "What have I got in my pocket?" in *The Lord of the Rings* – who complains bitterly and with some justification that Bilbo is cheating, as the question isn't even a riddle. It may be said here that within the category this ballad actually is among the class where nobody suffers – the King's honour is satisfied and he is put in good humour, the life of the bishop/abbot is saved and his status left intact, and the shepherd receives a lifetime stipend. In the version performed by my own band, learned from the Somerset revival folksinger Chris Foster and most closely following the B version, the humour is enhanced in that it is a mere "tuppence a week" that the shepherd receives.<sup>10</sup> Smiles in fiction and even more graphically in film, it should not be forgotten, are often associated with cruelty. While the shepherd has saved his immediate liege lord's life, King John still intends to punish the abbot/bishop. And the tension between crown and cassock was something with which earlier listeners would have been more familiar. Chris Foster writes for his record sleeve notes, "A song about a clash between church and state, including a shepherd with a misplaced sense of loyalty, three good riddles and a dubious happy ending." Riddles continue in the last of the "laughing Child ballads", the Scottish ballad *Captain Wedderburn's Courtship* (Child #46; Roud #36), which judging from an advanced search in the Roud Folksong Index (title: Wedderburn, place: England = 0; place: Scotland = 11; place: Canada = 1; place: Ireland = 1) appears to have

<sup>10</sup> Simply English, "King John and the Abbot of Canterbury," in *A Story So Merry* (University Press Pécs in cooperation with Nortonbury Bt., 1997), DLC D 100. Track 1; Chris Foster, *All Things in Common* (Topic Records, 1979), Track.

made its way from Scotland to Ireland and Canada without getting to England at all, although the ballad is known under a variety of other titles, and it is not entirely certain whether of the many variants to be found under Roud #36 how many should be counted as being this particular ballad. A quote from the album cover of Ewan McColl's 2009 double CD *Ballads: Murder-Intrigue-Love-Discord*, cited in the invaluable online resource *Mainly Norfolk*, suggests that this was a piece that grew over centuries, that the riddle portion has a longer history than the story of Captain Wedderburn and his courtship:

Riddles and riddling songs have long been popular in the folklore of the world's peoples. It is probable that the riddle portion of this ballad existed independently in tradition some time before *Captain Wedderburn's Courtship* came into being. The meter and form of the ballad suggest a late composition (probably no earlier than the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century), while the riddles have been found in manuscripts dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.... the riddle portion of the ballad has been collected widely as a separate song entitled *I Gave My Love a Cherry* or *The Riddle Song*.<sup>11</sup>

Of the three Child variants, only the fragmentary #46C has reference to laughter:

46C.10 'One question still you must answer me, or you I **laugh** to scorn;  
Go seek me out an English priest, of woman never born;' [emphasis added]

The B variant is more explicit as to how the priest was born:

46B.14 'The priest he stands without the yett, just ready to come in;  
Nae man can say he eer was born, nae man without he sin;  
He was hail cut frae his mither's side, and frae the same let fa;  
Sae we'll baith lie in ae bed, and ye'se lie at the wa.'

While in the A version the deed is performed by the tusks of a wild boar:

46A.17 'The priest is standing at the door, just ready to come in;  
Nae man could sae that he was born, to lie it is a sin;  
For a wild boar bored him mother's side, he out of it did fa;  
And you man lye in my bed, between me and the wa.'

The riddle in question is familiar to us from Shakespeare: Macbeth's nemesis is Macduff, "from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped" (V.8.2493-4). Although it goes beyond the purpose of the present essay, the Caesarean section as a means of saving the child in a difficult birth has been known since Antiquity:

Caesarean section has been part of human culture since ancient times and there are tales in both Western and non-Western cultures of this procedure resulting in live mothers and offspring. According to Greek mythology Apollo removed Asclepius, founder of the famous cult of religious medicine, from his mother's abdomen. Nu-

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<sup>11</sup> Kenneth G. Goldstein, <https://mainlynorfolk.info/steeleye.span/songs/captainwedderburnscourtship.html>.

merous references to cesarean section appear in ancient Hindu, Egyptian, Grecian, Roman, and other European folklore. Ancient Chinese etchings depict the procedure on apparently living women. The Mischnagoth and Talmud prohibited primogeniture when twins were born by caesarean section and waived the purification rituals for women delivered by surgery.<sup>12</sup>

The name itself comes from Julius Caesar, whose mother is inaccurately supposed to have given birth to him in this way. “[H]owever this seems unlikely since his mother Aurelia is reputed to have lived to hear of her son’s invasion of Britain. At that time the procedure was performed only when the mother was dead or dying, as an attempt to save the child for a state wishing to increase its population.”<sup>13</sup> It appears in graphic form in another of the Child ballads, *The Death of Queen Jane* (#170 A and B), where the queen demands that she be cut open to save the baby. Although this ballad does not contain and form of the word *laugh*, it does remind us that the word has a number of relations, one common one of which is the noun “mirth”, which appears in but a sprinkling the Child ballads despite being a standard vocabulary in folksong and here is juxtaposed with the act of mourning:

The baby was christened with joy and much **mirth**,  
 Whilst poor Queen Jane’s body lay cold under earth:  
 There was ringing and singing and mourning all day,  
 The princess Eliz[abeth] went weeping away.<sup>14</sup> [emphasis added]

Elsewhere, the word “merry” is frequently used in ballad texts without meaning anything in particular. There are 57 instances in the Child ballads. The tragic ballad *Fair Margaret* has the forlorn hero who has just heard of his true love’s death goes to visit her corpse with his merry men. Robin Hood’s band of merry men were not necessarily a merry lot!

The riddle, though not the caesarean element was also exploited by the medieval scholar J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*, when, like Macbeth, the Nazgul erroneously believes itself invincible when challenged by Eowyn:

Begone, foul dwimmerlaik, lord of carrion! Leave the dead in peace!

A cold voice answered:

Come not between the Nazgul and his prey! Or he will not slay thee in thy turn! He will bear thee away to the houses of lamentation, beyond all darkness, where thy flesh shall be devoured, and thy shrivelled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Eliot Sewell, “Cesarean Section – A Brief History,” last updated: July 26, 2013, <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/cesarean/part1.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Sewell, “Cesarean Section – A Brief History.”

<sup>14</sup> *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads edited from the Collection of Francis James Child*, eds. Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904), 418.

A sword rang as it was drawn.

Do what you will; but I will hinder it, if I may.

Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!

Then Merry heard of all sounds in that hour the strangest. It seemed that Dernhelm laughed, and the clear voice was like the ring of steel.

But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Eowyn I am, Eomund's daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him.<sup>15</sup>

It should be remembered that in *Captain Wedderburn's Courtship* the motif of the priest born through Caesarean section is only incidental to the plot, one of a number of riddles the protagonist must solve in order to gain his lady. Also, that here at least it can be argued that the ballad in which laughter occurs draws to a happy end. Laughter would seem to be a rare commodity among the Child ballads; indeed, while there do exist more than a few humorous/comic ballads, even within the Child corpus, these do not appear to make use of the notion of laughter.

We should not be surprised at the almost exclusive prevalence of negativity in the presence of balladic laughter. In his *Essay on Laughter*,<sup>16</sup> Norbert Elias describes laughter as a complex phenomenon:

Laughter may be the laughter of exultation and triumph or that of derision and gloating, the laughter of irony or romping and teasing; it may be the side-splitting laughter of merriment, the hilarious laughter of rejoicing and good cheer; the spontaneous and uproarious laughter of children or the near restraint of polite adults; the controlled and thoughtful laughter of the sophisticated or, gay and soft, the laughter of young lovers. It may have the form of a horse laugh or a hollow laugh, a pleasant peal of laughter or a shout and a burst. One may chuckle, chortle, giggle, cackle, burble, snigger and titter, or even smirk, simper, guffaw, and cachinnate.<sup>17</sup>

Elias also regards laughter as an "an immediate, unpremeditated reaction<sup>18</sup> which "[m]omentarily... paralyses or inhibits man's faculty to use physical force."<sup>19</sup> However, while it may be an involuntary and spontaneous physical act, that does not prevent it from having more sinister undertones. Laughter, and humour in general, does not exist without a social context, and this must be considered when observing references to it in texts – in the pre-

<sup>15</sup> John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969) 874.

<sup>16</sup> Anca Parvulescu, "Norbert Elias: Essay on Laughter," *Critical Enquiry* 43, 2 (2017): 281–304. Elias began writing the essay in 1956 and over a protracted period added and edited. Here, Parvulescu shapes the essay into a cohesive whole.

<sup>17</sup> Parvulescu, "Norbert Elias: Essay on Laughter," 282.

<sup>18</sup> Parvulescu, "Norbert Elias: Essay on Laughter," 283.

<sup>19</sup> Parvulescu, "Norbert Elias: Essay on Laughter," 288.

sent case, ballad texts. As Billig points out, for Anton Zijderveld to be able to formulate any view on the comic, he “needed to draw on his considerable knowledge of mediaeval and modern social life”.<sup>20</sup> Where laughter does appear in the 305 ballads collected by Child, it is not central to the theme, though it can be an important subplot. Sir Patrick Spens laughs as he anticipates the peril he has been consigned to; the parrot has to lie in order to save his mistress from disgrace, surely no laughing matter; the three ladies laugh as they reject their suitors; all the knights at King Arthur’s court laugh in derision as the faithlessness of his wife is laid bare like her buttocks; the princess’s laughter presages her being turned into a hideous worm/dragon by her beautiful but cruel stepmother; the mermaid laughs as she punishes Clerk Colven for his seduction with headaches that will eventually kill him; the maiden laughs as she thwarts the murderous advances of her suitor; King John’s laughter is at best rueful when the disguised shepherd whom he believes to be the abbot tells him that he is worth one penny less than Christ (and in the B variant smiles as he cooks up the idea, when the shepherd’s subterfuge is exposed with the successful answering of the third riddle: What am I thinking at the moment?), of placing the diocese in the shepherd’s hands and so upsetting the feudal order; and remaining with riddles, Captain Wedderburn is warned that he will be laughed “to scorn” if he cannot answer the final question set to him in order to win what must have been a reluctant lady – although he does get the girl in the end and so avoids the embarrassment of becoming the butt of humour. It would seem that in the ballad genre and context, laughter is overwhelming associated with unpleasant experiences. It is likely that it is not merely in the ballads that this is so, but that in a world of proximate violence – public maimings and executions, lack of recourse to justice for all and a feudal system that was strongly biased toward two superior, foreign languages (French, Latin) and a homely vernacular (English) – laughter had among its roles that of coping with such an environment. Writing in *Neuroscience News*, Lynn A. Barker states, “The truth is that laughter isn’t always positive or healthy. According to science, it can be classified into different types, ranging from genuine and spontaneous to simulated (fake), stimulated (for example by tickling), induced (by drugs) or even pathological. But the actual neural basis of laughter is still not very well known – and what we do know about it largely comes from pathological clinical cases.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Lynn A. Barker, “The Science of Laughter – And Why It Also Has a Dark Side,” *Neuroscience News*, May 12, 2017, <https://neurosciencenews.com/neuroscience-laughter-6661/>. The article also appeared with permission as “The Darker Side of Laughter,” *DISCOVER*, June 26, 2017 and in *Scientific American* as “The Science of Laughter – And Why It Also Has a Dark Side”.

The term “wicked laugh” can be found in *Diary and Letters of Madame d’Arblay (1778–1784)*,<sup>22</sup> but the phenomenon predates it. To give but one example, Bishop Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, the very title of which supposes “oldness”, was published in 1765 and includes (for instance) the bitter laugh of Sir Patrick Spence and the devious laughter of King John. The *Reliques* also contains *The Jew’s Daughter* (Child #155; Roud #73), a gruesome ballad also known as *Little Sir Hugh of Lincoln*, which tells the gruesome tale of some young knightly boys who kick their football into the garden of the Jew. Hugh, who is selected to fetch it back, is murdered by the Jew’s daughter. The ballad, like its plot, is conjectured to have originated from slightly after the trumped-up trials of Jews in Lincoln, England in 1255, during the reign of Henry III. At this time their existence was most precarious – the Crown had taken around one-third of Jewish-owned land, and in 1290 the Jews were entirely expelled from England:

And scho has taine out a little pen-knife,  
 And low down by her gair,  
 Scho has twin’d the yong thing and his life;  
 A word he nevir spak mair.

And out and cam the thick thick bluid,  
 And out and cam the thin;  
 And out and cam the bonny herts bluid:  
 Thair was nae life left in.

Scho laid him on a dressing borde,  
 And drest him like a swine,  
 And **laughing** said, Gae nou and pley  
 With your sweet play-feres nine.

Scho rowd him in a cake of lead,  
 Bade him lie stil and sleip.  
 Scho cast him in a deip draw-well,  
 Was fifty fadom deip.<sup>23</sup> [emphasis added]

It is telling that here, too, the Jewess laughs as she graphically mutilates and kills Little Sir Hugh, in a ballad that many contemporary singers refuse

<sup>22</sup> *Diary and Letters of Madame d’Arblay, 1778-1784*, ed. Charlotte Barrett (London: Bickers and Son, [n.d.]), 279. “He told me this was the worst ball for company there had been the whole season; and, with a wicked laugh that was too significant to be misunderstood, said, ‘And, as you have been to no other, perhaps you will give this for a specimen of a Bath ball!’” [emphasis added]. Madame d’Arblay was the married name of the writer Frances (Fanny) Burney (1752–1840). Charlotte Barrett, the editor, was her niece.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry. Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs and Other Pieces of Our Earlier Poets Together With Some Few of Later Date*, vol. I (of 3), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45939/45939-h/45939-h.htm>.

to include in their repertoire despite its belonging among the more iconic pieces in the genre. For performers, it equally attracts and repulses. In his extensive notes to the 2011 anthology album, *Bramble Briars and Beams of the Sun*,<sup>24</sup> a reissue of songs recorded by A.L. Lloyd and Ewan MacColl in 1956 on the Riverside label under the title of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Vic Gammon writes

That this song of enticement and ritual murder proved popular in oral tradition and print is one indication of its efficacy and hold on the popular imagination. Child prints 21 texts from English, Scottish and (unusual for him) North American sources. Bronson reproduces 66 tunes with texts with an emphasis on North American versions; Roud gives a stunning 253 references to publications and deposits.<sup>25</sup>

As the parrot we encountered at the outset remarks, this is no laughing matter. Or, if it is, then it is no matter for jocularly, guffaws, the tongue in cheek, or the crinkling relaxation of facial muscles encouraged in modern laughter therapy. The laughter in these ballads is, for the most part, solitary, and such laughter “loses its momentum quickly when indulged in alone” and “can have ominous connotations).”<sup>26</sup>

The present investigation of the Child Ballads has been carried out using the full texts as available online. I am particularly grateful to David Atkinson, editor of the Folk Music Journal, for making available to me the critical Sargent and Kitteridge edition. The word, “laughter”, was adhered to in seeking out instances in the 305 ballads where laughter appears. Inevitably, this is at the cost of passing by other related words and phrases. Moreover, the 305 ballads in the Child collection are not in any way definitive – even if Child believed, or at least announced this to be the case. Several tens of thousands of English-language ballads are catalogued by Steve Roud’s index housed on the English Folk Dance and Song Society’s website housed by the digital Vaughan Williams Memorial Library. However, one particular feature of the ballad genre is the way in which it deliberately employs clichés as a device to strengthen the narrative. This being the case, the compact 305 ballads and their variants can be seen as a workable way to investigate the employment of “laughter” in the traditional English and Scottish ballad.

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I may be forgiven for concluding this paper with an anecdotal addendum. In the southern Hungarian city of Pécs where, many years ago in the latter

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<sup>24</sup> *Bramble Briars and Beams of the Sun*, Fellside Recordings FECD240 (2 CD, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> *Bramble Briars and Beams of the Sun*, notes.

<sup>26</sup> Barker, “The Science of Laughter – And Why It Also Has a Dark Side.”

part of the 1980s, when chinks were gradually being observed in the armour of socialist Hungary, I was approached by the local “pol-beat” musician Sándor Czizmadia and asked if I would join him in a weekend of playing at what was then the city’s only privately-owned restaurant, which specialised in the cuisines of Hungary, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Eastern Germany. The owner had acquired some Scottish recipes and decided to advertise a weekend of Scottish music and poetry. Sanyi’s wife was of the opinion we shouldn’t touch it with a bargepole but we went ahead, collecting some Scottish ballads and tunes.

The evening before the event, we came together with the actors from the state theatre for the first time. These had brought together the Hungarian translations of the humorous poems of Robert Burns, and they embarked upon a list of demands of similarly humorous traditional Scottish songs. We immediately realised that, with one or two exceptions, our hastily-assembled repertoire was fine on murders and ghostly apparitions, but largely lacking in the commodity demanded by these local thespians. The crunch came when the restaurant owner appeared with a couple of imitation kilts made for tiny tourists and a plastic, unplayable pseudo-bagpipe – Sanyi was a guitarist and I am a vocalist – and demanded that we should wear the former and play the latter. I simply said that I would not insult my Scottish friends on either count, and we left the venue to where, in an age predating mobile phones, Sanyi’s wife was waiting in their car.

“I told you so,” she said. And laughed. Mirthlessly.

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## **Die Wörter ‚Laughter‘ und ‚Laugh‘ im Band *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads***

**Abstract:** Dieser Aufsatz befasst sich auf witzige Weise mit dem Thema „das Lachen“ und „lachen“ in acht Balladen, die aus dem 1. Band der dreibändigen Sammlung englischer und schottischer Volksballaden ausgewählt wurden, darunter: *Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight*, *The Cruel*

*Brothers, The Boy and the Mantle, The Laidley Worm, Clark Colven, The Broomfield Hill, King John and the Bishop and Captain Wedderburn's Courtship* mit einer Vielzahl weiterer intertextueller Bezüge. Dabei stützt er sich gleichzeitig auf die beiden umfangreichsten Sammlungen englischer und schottischer Balladen: von Francis James Child und Steve Roud, und beweist, dass das Lachen in Balladen „keine lachende Angelegenheit“ ist, und dass das Lachen (*laughter*), das aufgrund seines sozialen Kontextes im Mittelalter nicht mit (*s*)*laughter* zu verwechseln ist, in verschiedenen Schattierungen von Negativität vorherrscht, was durch Norbert Elias' soziologische Theorie des Lachens und Anca Parvulescu's Studie dazu bestätigt wird. Der Beitrag bietet einen einzigartigen Einblick in das fröhliche und das freudlose Lachen, das durch eine moderne Lektüre englischer und schottischer Volksballaden im heutigen kosmopolitischen Kontext hervorgerufen wird.

**Schlüsselwörter:** englische Volksballade, schottische Volksballade, fröhliches Lachen, freudloses Lachen.

## **Słowa ‚Laughter‘ i ‚Laugh‘ w zbiorze *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads***

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł w dowcipny sposób podejmuje temat śmiechu i śmiania się w ośmiu balladach (*Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight, The Cruel Brothers, The Boy and the Mantle, The Laidley Worm, Clark Colven, The Broomfield Hill, King John and the Bishop and Captain Wedderburn's Courtship*) wybranych z tomu pierwszego trzypiętomowej kolekcji angielskich i szkockich ballad popularnych i uwzględnia liczne odniesienia intertekstualne. Nawiązując jednocześnie do dwóch najobszerniejszych zbiorów angielskich i szkockich ballad: Francis Jamesa Childa i Steve'a Rouda, artykuł pokazuje, że śmiech w balladach „nie jest sprawą do śmiechu”, i rzeczywiście, balladowy śmiech (*laughter*), którego nie należy mylić z (*s*)*laughter*, ze względu na jego społeczny kontekst czasów średniowiecza, przeważa w różnych odcieniach negatywności, co potwierdza socjologiczna teoria śmiechu Norberta Elias i studium Ancii Parvulescu. Artykuł dostarcza unikalnego wglądu w śmiech wesoły i beztronski, jaki wywołuje współczesna lektura angielskich i szkockich ballad ludowych w dzisiejszym kosmopolitycznym kontekście.

**Słowa kluczowe:** angielska ballada popularna, szkocka ballada popularna, śmiech radosny, śmiech niewesoły.