

Interpretative Notes to “Thomas the Rhymer”

There are several levels of information contained within language used in traditional ballads. Much is that of the narrative, but there may be other important points of information which can refer to cultural or historic practices, or may refer to the emotional condition of the characters.

Literal statements may actually indicate a different action, which cannot fully presented due to the constraints of ballad language and the invasive nature a full description would have on the actual narrative of the story within the ballad.

Developed euphemisms may be used to indicate but not state a more visceral event than that which seems to be referred to. In the *Minstrelsy*, Scott seems to have resorted to at least one of these, and may have invented it.

Sometimes, such information may be presented through the use of supra-narrative functions, which operate as an effective shorthand code, implying actions, emotions or the likelihood of a certain outcome, which would not be easily described concisely or within the bounds of a ballad's verses.

Several forms of these language structures, formulas and formulaic language have been developed within the tradition, in order to contain a full emotive response from a listener, who would often share the knowledge with the singer. To help interpret the subtleties which exist within some ballads, we have provided a list of interpretative points to help pinpoint important moments of action or response within these ballads, or to better explain certain phrases within the narrative or the dialogue

And remember, if words ever seem confusing on the page - always try reading them al

Overview |

The ballad presented in the *Minstrelsy* as “Thomas the Rhymer - Part first” tells of the meeting between the Fairy Queen and Thomas the Rhymer, called True Thomas in the ballad; how he accompanies her to the Land of Fairy; and how he remains there for seven years. Unlike the events in “The Young Tamlane”, Thomas the Rhymer is party to a willing abduction.

Verse 1 - 2 |

These verses establish the beauty of the Fairy Queen.

“he saw a lady bright”

In the ballads, shining things are often beautiful things.

‘Her shirt was o’ the grass green silk,
Her mantle o’ the velevet fyne”

The beauty of the Fairy Queen is reflected by her fine clothing: ugly creatures do not wear beautiful clothes in the ballads.

The green colour of her shirt emphasises her otherworldly nature. Green has long been associated with supernatural creatures: one of the most famous of these otherworldly creatures is the otherworldly knight who plays the beheading game in *Gawain and the Green Knight* is described as being finely attired, but apart from touches of gold, he appears entirely green – “ouer-al enker grene” (line 50).

The horse the Fairy Queen rides upon is also finely attired, with “fifty siller bells and nine” hanging from each strand of its mane.

Verse 3 - 4 |

Thomas mistakes the Fairy Queen for the Queen of Heaven, but she corrects him and states that she has come specifically to visit Thomas.

Verse 5 - 6 |

“Harp and carp”

This phrase literally means “play (on a harp) and sing”. It also appears in the Minstrelsy version of “The Harper of Lochmaben”. The Fairy Queen is quite direct with Thomas, telling him that she will have control of him if he kisses her lips.

Despite this, Thomas boldly kisses her.

Verse 8 |

Fairies are often described as riding white horses in both historic and literary accounts. The horse, unsurprisingly, has otherworldly speed.

Verse 9 - 13 |

The Fairy Queen brings Thomas to a plain - “a desert wide” - and shows him three roads. This is an allegorical landscape, and the three paths the Fairy Queen shows Thomas must be considered as such.

The first road is “narrow” and “thick beset wi’ thorns and briars”. This is, says the Fairy Queen, “the path of righteousness”. A comparison may be made with this image and those portrayed in “A Lyke Wake Dirge”, where the spirit of the dead must walk along a thorny road. The second road, the “braid, braid road” appears a much easier option, but it is “the road to wickedness”. The third road winds its way “about the fernie brae”. This makes it quite clear that the fairies’ homeland is distinct from heaven (which we may assume lies at the end of the thorny road) and hell (which lies at the end of the braid road).

Verse 14 |

A warning is issued in this verse. The Fairy Queen informs Thomas that if he speaks at all while he is in “Elflyn land”, he will be trapped there forever. In other versions, he is warned not to eat the fruit that grows in her country, as “a’ the plagues that are in hell / Light on the fruit”. These injunctions have parallels in many other tales and legends.

Verses 15 -16 |

The landscape presented in these verses moves from the realms of allegory into fantasy. The sky above is dark, with no moon, stars or sun. They travel through rivers, they wade through blood which runs through the springs (it is, the narrative says, the blood which is shed on earth)

Verses 17 - 20 |

There is a supposition inherent in these verses that time has passed and that Thomas has done as he was instructed by the Fairy Queen. He has gifts bestowed upon him - the first being “the tongue that can never lie”, which is then followed by cloth (clothing), and green velvet shoes. The cloth is described as being “even”, which can be defined as proper or befitting one’s station, and given that the shoes are of velvet, the cloth, then must be inferred to be fine.