

Interpretative Notes for “Earl Richard” (1802)

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 aloud.

Overview |

The ballad is concerned with the murder and disposal of an unfaithful knight, the subsequent discovery of his body and the punishment of the guilty party. There are some supernatural aspects presented in the narrative.

Verses 1 - 2 |

The first voice encountered in the ballad is that of Richard, rejecting his old love, who has borne him a child. He tells her that his new love is much more beautiful than his former lover, using callous language.

Despite rejecting her, he opts, when asked, to stay with his former lover all night.

Verse 3 |

The murder occurs in this verse. The lady plies Richard with ale and wine. He goes to bed alive but does not get up again.

Verse 4 - 5 |

Information regarding the murder is lingered over in these verses. Linging is a ballad mechanism to provide more information regarding a situation. Its opposite is leaping, when there is an abrupt scene change within a ballad verse. A good example of this may be found in “Clerk Saunders”, where Saunders is buried in the first two lines of a verse, but appears in the middle of the night at Margaret’s bower in the next.

We learn that Richard’s death has been violent, as the lady is warned to keep her green clothing away from the blood of the murdered man. Unmarried women in ballads are often portrayed as wearing green, as it symbolises, among other things, youth and fertility. In this case, it does not indicate any supernatural powers on the lady’s behalf – unlike the robes worn by the Fairy Queen in “Young Tam-lane” or “Thomas the Rhymer”

These verses include the popinjay - an archaic word for a parrot. The popinjay functions as a character that provides information, which otherwise would be concealed. It also functions as mode of obtaining justice. Talking birds are not uncommon in the ballads, and they are usually linked to the characters of murderous female characters.

Verses 6 - 7 |

Richard’s murder is concealed by the help of more than one servant woman. The lady requires help to remove the corpse from her bower. The dead man is dressed, carried him to a river – identified as Clyde in this version – and put into the water. Such detailed practicalities are not usually displayed in ballad tales concerning murder. The fact that Richard must be dressed in his boots and spurs suggests he was entirely at rest in the lady’s bower.

It should be noted that the River Clyde rises in the South-West of Scotland.

Verses 8 - 10 |

The popinjay questions the lady once again, asking what she has done with Earl Richard. She tries to entice the bird into a golden cage, but it refuses, stating that if it did, it would suffer the same fate as Richard.

Verse 11 |

There is a scene change in this verse, introduced with the indicator line “O it fell anes, upon a day”. Using such a line informs the listener that the scene has changed and time has passed. This is not the same as leaping, which offers no such introduction.

This verse informs the listener of the social position Richard enjoyed, as he should ride at the king’s right hand.

Verse 12 |

“The lady turned her round about”

In short, this line provides information about the character’s emotional state, rather than simply presenting a physical act.

This formula family was identified as the “He looked over his left shoulder” formula family by Flemming G. Andersen. The formula can represent an active, aggressive stance by a character, or if the character is subordinate to another, it can represent their despair and inability to defend themselves, either in words or deeds. Very rarely, it can be used to indicate contentment, but it is more frequently associated with tense, dangerous or aggressive situations. Either way, it appears within ballads at a pivotal moment of personal confrontation.

This is an interesting use of the formula, as here it used in its passive form, indicating despair, but it is a deceitful despair: the lady knows full well where Richard is.

Verse 13 - 14 |

The king employs divers to dive the water and try to find Richard, but they are unsuccessful.

Verse 15 - 17 |

The king stays overnight in the lady’s castle and the popinjay talks to him, suggesting that search is made by night for Richard. Scott suggests that the “candles” mentioned by the popinjay are “dead candles”.

Sir Walter Scott believed that these “candles” – which are also mentioned in other version of this ballad printed in *The English and Scottish Traditional Ballads* – were corpse lights, thought to be a supernatural occurrence “giving forth a pale blueish light quite unlike that given out by an ordinary candle” (McPherson 123). Scott had been informed that such lights had been used in the recovery of a body from the River Ettrick, and supposed that they were of a “phosphoric nature”.

Scott’s suspicions were along the right lines. It is now supposed that accounts of such lights, in reality, relate to gaseous effluvia escaping from decomposing matter within marshy waters or damp ground and refracted by light: an explanation which would be just as alien to many people of the 18th and 19th Centuries as the corpse light is to us. Within the ballad context, however, the “candles” may equally be normal candles put to use in an arcane way.

Verse 18 |

Search is made by night, as suggested, and the dead candles are seen.

Verse 19 |

Richard has been put into the “deepest pot in a’ the linn”. A pot is a deep hole in the channel of a river, often associated with an eddy. Scott, in notes which follow the ballad, makes a point of discussing pots. He wrote that the “deep holes, scooped in the rock by the eddies of a river, are called pots; the motion of the water having there some resemblance to a boiling cauldron” (*MSB* (1802) II: 48). A linn can mean a cataract or a torrent of water, or a pool below a waterfall.

How Richard is found is relatively detailed for a ballad: not only has he been placed in a deep pool, but he has been weighted down.

Verse 20 |

The source of the blood mentioned in verses 4 and 5 is established in this verse: Richard has “a deadly wound”. Murder established, the king demands to know who has killed Richard.

Verse 21 |

The popinjay states that it was the lady who killed Richard. She is referred to as his “light lemman”. This indicates that in this version of the ballad, Richard and the lady are not married, as a lemman is a lover, not a spouse. The word “light” can mean cheerful, light-hearted, or it may mean pale or fair.

Verses 22-23 |

The lady denies the crime, but blames her maid Catherine. Preparations are made to execute the lady by burning.

Burning is a judicial execution associated with female ballad characters. This reflects actual judicial practices. Women were rarely hanged. Instead, in Scotland at least, they were more frequently strangled and burned: the phrase “wirriet at the stake” is used to indicate this in trial records. It was thought that watching a woman being hanged, with all the associated kicking and thrashing which often accompanied hanging, might excite male onlookers.

Verse 24 - 25 |

In this ballad, the fire acts as an external form of justice, for the innocent victim does not suffer in any way from the fire:

It wadna take upon her cheik,
Nor yet upon her chin;
Nor yet upon her yellow hair,
To cleanse the deadly sin.

In contrast, the lady who is guilty of the murder is swiftly consumed by the fire – burning, the ballad states, like green holly. The blame, then, in this version of the ballad, is placed entirely upon the lady. In other versions, the servant’s hands are burnt, as she helped conceal the murdered man.