

THE NEARNESS OF THE REMOTE:
"THE BROOM OF THE COWDENKNOWS" (CHILD 217) REVISITED

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NEW WORDS TO AN OLD TUNE

"The Broom of the Cowdenknows" has been put forward by Robert Chambers as "the best specimen that can be given of that native poetry on which Scotland prides herself so much."¹ "The Brume o' the Cowdenknowes" Chambers had in mind, however, is not the traditional ballad, but—as he calls it—a "simple, delightful, and truly pastoral song"² that was first published in Allan Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany* in 1723 and was written by a man—or more likely a woman—with the initials S.R.:

How blyth ilk morn was I to see
The swain come o'er the hill!
He skipt the burn and flew to me:
I met him with good will.

*O the broom, the bonny bonny broom
The broom of the Cowdenknows;
I wish I were with my dear swain,
With his pipe and my ewes.*

I neither wanted ewe nor lamb,
While his flock near me lay:
He gather'd in my sheep at night,
And chear'd me a' the day.

O the broom, &c.

He tun'd his pipe and reed sae sweet,
The burds stood list'ning by;
E'en the dull cattle stood and gaz'd
Charm'd with his melody.

O the broom, &c.

While thus we spent our time by turns,
Betwixt our flocks and play;
I envy'd not the fairest dame,
Tho' ne'er so rich and gay.

O the broom, &c.

Hard fate that I should banish'd be,
Gang heavily and mourn,
Because I lov'd the kindest swain
That ever yet was born.

O the broom, &c.

He did oblige me every hour,
Cou'd I but faithfu' be?
He staw my heart: Cou'd I refuse
Whate'er he ask'd of me?

O the broom, &c.

My doggie and my little kit
That held my wee soup whey
My plaidy, broach, and crooked stick,
May now ly useless by,

O the broom, &c.

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¹ Robert Chambers, *The Scottish Songs*, Edinburgh, Tait, 1829, vol. 1, p. 221.

² *Loc. cit.*

Adieu, ye Cowdenknows, adieu,
Farewel a' pleasures there;
Ye gods, restore me to my swain,
Is a' I crave or care.

*O the broom, the bonny bonny broom
The broom of the Cowdenknows;
I wish I were with my dear swain,
With his pipe and my ewes.*³

This song is no folk ballad but a piece of poetry firmly embedded in eighteenth century pastoral tradition. It was set to the tune of "The Broom of the Cowdenknows" as were almost half a dozen other poems published in Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany*.⁴

When summer comes, the swains on Tweed
Sing their successful loves,
Around the ewes and lambkins feed,
And music fills the groves.

But my lov'd song is then the broom
So fair on Cowdon-knows;
For sure so sweet, so soft a bloom
Elsewhere there never grows.⁵

These are the first verses of Robert Crawford's popular poem, but none of the other poems had the same appeal. Only these two new sets of words to the old familiar tune were reprinted as broadsides and chapbooks, in garlands and song books.

According to the editor of the *Tea-Table Miscellany*, new sets of words were written, "by ingenious young gentlemen" to well-known Scottish melodies "so that the modest voice and ear of the fair singer might meet with no affront"⁶. They were meant to replace the traditional renderings of those songs that were unacceptable to polite society singing at a tea-table. If S.R.'s and Crawford's versions were henceforth referred to as the *new* "Broom of the Cowdenknows," what was the *old* ballad like?

THE STORY OF BONNY MAY

Sir Walter Scott claims to have published "The Original Ballad of the Broom of Cowdenknows" in his *Border Minstrelsy*: "The beautiful air of Cowdenknows is well known and popular. In Ettrick Forest, the following words are uniformly adopted to the tune, and seem to be the original ballad."⁷ The ballad starts with the familiar burden:

O the broom, and the bonny bonny broom,
And the broom of the Cowdenknows!

The story, told in 26 verses, is that of Bonny May, "the bonny lass i' the Cowdenknows," being seduced by the Laird of Oakland hills.

A troop of gentlemen rides by while Bonny May is milking her father's ewes. One of

³ Allan Ramsay, *The Tea-Table Miscellany: Collection of Choice Songs, Scots and English*, reprinted from the Fourteenth Edition, Glasgow, Crum, 1871, vol. 1, pp. 13-14.

⁴ Apart from the two quoted above, *The Tea-Table Miscellany* contains: (a) "Song for a Serenade" (by L.), beginning "Teach me, Chloe, how to prove / My boasted flame sincere", to be sung to the tune: "The broom of Cowdenknows". No refrain is given. (Ramsay, vol. 1, p. 17).

(b) To the same tune a song by G. entitled unimaginatively: "Song" ("Subjected to the power of love By Nell's resistless charms") — (Ramsay, vol 1, pp. 30-31).

(c) In the 4th volume of *The Tea-Table Miscellany* (Ramsay, vol 2, pp. 137-38) is another, rather sentimental text offered to the tune "The Broom of Cowdenknows": The song is called: "O my heavy Heart!" and begins: "O my heart, my heavy heavy heart" — the first verse is supposed to be repeated as a sort of refrain after each verse.

⁵ Ramsay, vol. 1, pp. 150-51.

⁶ Ramsay, vol. 1, p. x.

⁷ Sir Walter Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, ed. T. F. Henderson, Detroit, Singing Tree Press, 1968, vol. 3, pp. 43-50.

them approaches her since —as the ballad says— "the night is misty and mirk"⁸ and he has ridden astray. The maid backs away in fear that he will do her wrong and refuses to go away from her father's herd and show him the way. The rider asks her to take pity on him and his steed, but the maid is not to be taken in. Although he denies his identity, the maid of Cowdenknows recognizes him as "The Laird of Oakland hills" who would not take "No" for an answer. He takes her eventually by force, rapes her, gives her some money and tells her to wait till she hears more of him. The Laird returns to his men who are wondering where he has been for so long and the maid who is returning home, is asked the same question by her suspicious father. After she has a baby, Bonny May is out in the fields again when a troop of gentlemen appear, this time only to put her to shame about having had the baby outside wedlock. When the maid claims to have a husband at home, she is immediately accused of lying and reminded of that 'misty night' by one of the riders, who identifies himself after all as the rich "Laird of the Oakland Hills." He, as her seducer, has come back to claim for himself "the bonniest lass / That's in a' the south country."⁹

Similar versions of this ballad were recovered from tradition by Lambe and Herd in the eighteenth century; by Buchan, Kinloch and Motherwell in the nineteenth century and by Greig, Duncan and Carpenter in the early part of the twentieth century. The ballad is usually called "Bonny May," and not "The Broom of the Cowdenknows." Indeed, the references to the Cowdenknows (near Melrose in the Borders) are very slight. There is no mention of Cowdenknows in early versions of Child 217 and as Henderson points out, even in Scott's *Border Minstrelsy* the references to Cowdenknows could "easily be omitted without injury to the context."¹⁰ The name of the place and the main protagonists vary greatly in any case. In some versions it is not Cowdenknows, but Auchentrone, Lochinvar, Rock River or Oakland Hill. Motherwell's remark that "it would be endless to enumerate the titles of the different versions of this popular song which are common among reciters"¹¹ certainly seems well justified.

With each district having its own localized version, the stability of the ballad story is even more remarkable. The seducer always returns to own up and indeed this seems to be the point of telling the story of "Bonny May." Although a rich land-owner is taking liberties with a poor milk-maid she is eventually "rewarded" by being made his wife. Thus, the outcome (marrying into a higher social class) justifies the means and we have a happy ending ballad story after all. Or do we? Do we really share this view when we listen to or read this story today? It is interesting to observe that every attempt is made to lessen the guilt of the seducer by indicating that the milk-maid did not really mean to say 'no.' Here are some examples from the *Minstrelsy* version:

- (1) The milking-maid might succumb to the rider's advances, but she is worried about the consequences: "For if ye wad gain my love the night, ye wad slight me ere the morn."
- (2) After being raped she is "singing" on her way home.
- (3) She longs to be with the Laird as the day of giving birth to the baby approaches.
- (4) And when she is asked about the baby on his return the ballad simply states: "Never a word could that lassie say, / for never a ane could she blame."¹²

It is typical for Child 217 or, as a matter of fact, for Child ballads in general, not to take sides. The tension between love and rape in the ballad story is never resolved.

Crucial to the understanding of this ballad is its social setting. A rich man takes pity

⁸ Scott, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 46.

⁹ Scott, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 50.

¹⁰ Henderson, in Scott, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 43n.

¹¹ William Motherwell, *Minstrelsy, Ancient and Modern: With an Historical Introduction and Notes*, Glasgow, Wylie, 1827, p. lxx n26.

¹² Scott, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, n. 49.

on a maid who has nothing to offer but her beauty or you might say: her body! In a different social situation and, more specifically, with a different role for women in society, the social meaning of the ballad "Bonny May" evaporates. All we are left with, then, is not a story ending happily but one of rape and male oppression.

The first sign of its social meaning being eroded is the attempt to lessen the inequality of the match. To F.J. Child it is a "decidedly modern trait"¹³ that in some nineteenth century versions the maid is portrayed as "almost" equal to the "laird": she, the Maid o the Cowdenknows, has twenty plows and three to offer, whereas he, the Laird o Rochna hills, has thirty plows and three.¹⁴ Other versions, for instance one collected by Peter Buchan (Child 217 M), strike us as being even more absurd. After hearing a ballad story which leaves no doubt about the maid being raped, we hear in a prelude about the maid's father having been "once a landed laird" who lost his estate through drink and gambling¹⁵—thus, she "deserves" to become the Earl o the Rock-rivers wife—even if it has to be against her will.

THE COMPLEXITY OF UNDERSTANDING

If the social meaning—crucial to the understanding of Child 217—is constantly being eroded, what are we to make of this ballad today? Can Child 217 still be transmitted without having had its meaning changed beyond recognition?

It was William Motherwell who first insisted that ballads must "be received and listened to"¹⁶ in the same spirit with which they were sung. But how can we possibly share the same feelings and, as Motherwell says, have the same "deep and honest sympathy with the fates and fortunes of our fellow kind"¹⁷ if our own world and value judgements are so very different from the ones depicted in the ballad? Motherwell does not call for the ballad to be frozen in time: he was a field-collector and was very much aware of the ballad as a living genre. Neither does Motherwell advocate that we—as listeners and receivers of the ballad story—should step into the singer's place and see the world through his or her eyes. This is what I described as a "communicative fallacy:" the naive notion that we only have to reconstruct the performance situation of a ballad in order to understand its meaning and function.¹⁸ What Motherwell calls for is not a reconstruction, but a mediation or a translation of past meaning into the present situation.

This is what the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the leading exponents of hermeneutic theory, has called the task of effective-historical consciousness ("wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein"): "Effective-historical consciousness is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation, [...] i.e. the situation in which we find ourselves with regard to the tradition that we are trying to understand."¹⁹ Thus, the process of understanding itself is of historical nature and not just an overcoming of the distance between the present interpreter and the historical phenomenon.

Any interpretations of the past whether they are performed as song or as a critical text are as much a creation of the singer's or interpreter's own time and place as the phenomenon under investigation was of its own period in history. The interpreter is

¹³ Francis James Child (ed.), *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols., Boston, Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1882-98; rpt. New York, Dover, 1965 (= *E.S.P.B.*); vol. 4, p. 192n.

¹⁴ See Child 217 H (from the Kinloch Manuscripts), *op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 201.

¹⁵ Child, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 204.

¹⁶ Motherwell, *op. cit.*, p. xxvii.

¹⁷ Motherwell, *op. cit.*, p. xxvii.

¹⁸ See Sigrid Rieuwerts, "Field-Collecting of English and Scottish Ballads: A Researcher's Point of View," *ARV: Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore* 48 (1992), p. 246.

¹⁹ *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986, p. 269.

always guided in his understanding of the past by his or her own peculiar concepts and value judgements; there is no such thing as objective knowledge of the past. Our "situation" limits the possibilities of understanding and only the lifting of our eyes to the "horizon"—a term used in German philosophy ever since Nietzsche—carries us beyond: we are no longer limited to what is near to us, but the remote comes in sight. To quote Gadamer again:

Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of the tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation but consciously bringing it out. This is why it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project an historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present. [...] In the process of understanding there takes place a real fusing of horizons, which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously removed."²⁰

This fusing of horizons ("Horizontverschmelzung") is in effect the interpretation of the present in light of the past, whereby the otherness of the historical phenomenon is maintained even against our own expectations of meaning. The present and past horizons, however, are not completely separate entities: the present situation with its horizon, i.e. "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point,"²¹ is formed by the past.

If this tension between the text and the present can be experienced in the study of any type of literature, how much more so in traditional ballads and songs where their interpreters do not rely on the written characters but remember of themselves. Precisely because of this fusion of horizons, ballads in living tradition acquire different meanings, present different values and depict different worlds. In the workings of tradition, these fusions of horizons occur constantly: "for there old and new continually grow together to make something of living value, without either being explicitly distinguished from the other."²²

If a ballad gestalt, however, is no longer changing or indeed remembered by singers of themselves, then it has run its course. And once it has lost its personal relevance to the singer and his/her own situation and no longer "feels right," the singer's interest in and perhaps performance of the ballad can at best be antiquarian or historical. On the other hand, ballads are made into something of "living value" if they take on new meanings and nuances in transmission. It is an on-going process of alienation and appropriation. In this sense the shaping and reshaping of any ballad—which happens more often than not unconsciously and "beyond our willing and doing"²³—is essentially a creative adapting and adopting process that structures itself. The remote becomes the near, the foreign becomes one's own, "not by destroying it critically or reproducing it uncritically, but by explicating it with one's own horizons and one's own concepts and thus giving it new validity."²⁴ The act of understanding and interpreting in song or prose becomes a genuine dialogue between the interpreter and the text, the singer and the song.

NEW VALIDITY IN "THE BROOM OF THE COWDENKNOWS"

Entering into this dialogue with a ballad that justifies rape is not easy for singers today. Indeed, it is a great challenge to give new validity to "The Broom of the Cowdenknows" if the traditional text is not to be destroyed critically or reproduced

²⁰ *Hermeneutics Reader*, pp. 272-73.

²¹ *Hermeneutics Reader*, p. 269.

²² *Hermeneutics Reader*, p. 272.

²³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, transl. and ed. David E. Linge, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976, p. xi.

²⁴ Gadamer, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

uncritically. And yet, many singers have entered into this dialogue with "The Broom of the Cowdenknows" over the period of its recorded history. Here are some examples of how the ballad Child 217 was given new validity and was adapted and adopted.

The chorus "O the broom, the bonny broom" is often referred to in Elizabethan literature and the ballad is said to have been sung to Queen Elizabeth by the gypsy Alice Boyce. Furthermore, we learn from *The Complaynt of Scotland* of 1549 that Child 217 was a well-known Scottish dance. We also know that "The Broom of the Cowdenknows" was often performed on stage. In the newly restored theatres of Stuart England new dramas of three acts came into fashion that were "plaited throughout with songs, dances, and instrumental music."²⁵ And then, of course, there were the so-called "Ballad Operas:" in John Gay's highly successful *Beggar's Opera*²⁶ for example, the tune of "The Broom of the Cowdenknows" was —because of "its sweetness and simplicity"²⁷— adopted as the parting duet between Macheath and Polly at the end of the first act.

The air was also used in a completely different setting, and that is for the Jacobite rebellion. A broadside, probably printed in 1716, i.e. about eight years earlier than "The Broom of the Cowdenknows" versions published in Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany*, is written from the perspective of a Jacobite in exile.

Hard fate that I should banish't be
and Rebel term'd with scorn,
For serving of the bravest Prince
that ever yet was Born.

*O the Broom, the bonny bonny Broom,
the Broom of Colding-knows,
O had I back my King again,
then would my Heart rejoyce ...*²⁸

These few examples may give an inkling of how "The Broom of the Cowdenknows" gained new validity.

Given the limitations of this paper it will not be possible to tackle the rather complex problem of the historicity of Child 217; a black-letter broadside, however, printed before 1625, cannot be ignored since it contains the earliest known text. It is preserved in the Roxburghe Collection in the British Library and is inscribed:

The lovely Northerne Lasse
Who in this ditty, here complaining, shewes
What harme she got milking her dadyes Ewes.²⁹

The text is set "To a pleasant Scotch tune, called 'The Broom of the Cowden knowes.' "

It is, as the title suggests, a ditty that has hardly any story to it, but there can be no doubt that the writer had at least some knowledge of the traditional ballad that was later recorded as "Bonny May." Since the English ditty—despite its length—leaves out some interesting particulars of the traditional ballad, F.J. Child thinks it very likely that its author "knew only the burden and built his very slight tale on that."³⁰ The burden is given as

²⁵ Dianne Dugaw, "'Critical Instants:' Theatre Songs in the Age of Dryden and Purcell." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23 (1989), p. 159.

²⁶ John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera and Polly: Together with the Airs of the Music from the original editions of 1728 and 1729*, London, Chapman & Dodd, 1923.

²⁷ See Robert Chambers, *The Songs of Scotland Prior to Burns: With the Tunes*, Edinburgh, Chambers, [1862], p. 364.

²⁸ Thomas Crawford, "Political and Protest Songs in Eighteenth Century Scotland I: Jacobite and Anti-Jacobite", *Scottish Studies* 14 (1970), p. 11.

²⁹ Chappell, William, and Woodfall Ebsworth (eds.), *The Roxburghe Ballads: Illustrating the Last Years of the Stuarts*, 8 vols., Hertford, Ballad Society, 1869-1901, rpt. New York, AMS Press, 1966; vol. 1, p. 588.

³⁰ Child, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 192.

With, O the broome, the bonny, broome,
the broome of Cowdon Knowes!
Fain would I be in the North Countrey,
to milke my dadyes ewes.

The story is that of a milk-maid who is beguiled by a shepherd-boy while milking her father's ewes. "Now, too late, repent I doe" is the gist of the first part of the broadside. In the second part, we hear of a young man who takes pity on the fallen woman and marries her. "To be a true, obedient wife and observe your husband's will" is the moral message this rather vulgar ditty wants to convey.³¹

Needless to say, singers would have to trim this black-letter broadside a lot to make it acceptable to a modern audience. And yet, it is not impossible, as a fragment of the Yorkshire version of "The Broom of the Cowdenknows," performed in harmony by "The Watersons," proves:

O, the broom, the bonny, bonny broom,
The broom of Cowdenknows!
Fain would I be in the North Country,
To milk my daddy's ewes.

All the maids that ever were deceived,
They're part of these, my woes.
Once I was a bonny lass,
When I milked my daddy's ewes.

O, the broom, the bonny, bonny broom,
The broom of Cowdenknows!
Fain would I be in the North Country,
To milk my daddy's ewes.³²

One might be led to believe that the second stanza is a modern addition, but in fact, it is to be found in the old broadside ("The Lovely Northern Lass") mentioned above. It is part of the chorus!

CONCLUSION

"The Broom of the Cowdenknows" never lost its appeal—primarily, I would argue, because of its charming melody: it could be sung with deep pathos and nostalgia. Singing it has become almost synonymous with being Scottish. It is quite a different story with the texts though, especially the ones that were deemed to come close to the original ballad story. Since the mid-nineteenth century the ballad of "Bonny May" has hardly ever been recorded from tradition outside the North East of Scotland.³³ In America for example, "The Broom of the Cowdenknows" has only been found among emigrants who were born in Scotland, but even their versions were interspersed with fragments from S.R.'s new set of words in *The Tea-Table Miscellany*. S.R.'s lyrics are probably the most popular adaptation of Child 217. Rewriting the story completely, as S.R. and others have done, is definitely the safest way to give new validity to a ballad like "Bonny May." These gentle love lyrics are a far cry from the old ballad, but "as is abundantly testified by the song-books and sheet music of the period—[they] were warbled, to rapturous applause, by the favourite vocalists at the London 'gardens' and other places of popular resort."³⁴

Archie Fisher based his rendering of "The Broom of the Cowdenknows" on S.R.'s version, but he does not reproduce it uncritically. If we are right in saying that what is foreign to us and what is our own will merge in the act of understanding, then the general

³¹ Chappell and Ebsworth, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 592.

³² "The Watersons" in Ethel Raim and Josh Dunson (eds.), *Grass Roots Harmony*, New York, Oak, 1968; pp. 16-17. See also The Watersons, *Early Days*, London, Topic TSCD 472, 1994.

³³ For a modern collated version of "Bonny May" see June Tabor, *Airs and Graces*, London, Topic TSCD 298, 1989.

³⁴ T. F. Henderson, *Scottish Vernacular Literature: A Succinct History*, 3rd rev. ed. Edinburgh, Grant, 1910, p. 404.

dichotomy is between belonging and alienating, localizing and distancing, present and past. If interpreters identify or distance themselves from one of the characters in the ballad, then obviously the sex of the singer becomes very important. And this is precisely the way Archie Fisher makes "The Broom of the Cowdenknows" feel right and true to him: he reverses the roles in the song. It is no longer "How blythe was I each morn to see, / My *swain* come o'er the hill!" but: "How blythe each morn was I ta see, / My *lass* come o'er the hill". To facilitate a comparison with S.R.'s text, the modern version which has become a favourite of many revivalist singers is quoted in full:

How blithe each morn was I ta' see
My lass come o'er the hill
She skipped the burn and ran ta' me:
I met her wi' good will.

*O' the broom, the bonny bonny broom
The broom o' the Cowdenknowes;
Fain would I be in the north country,
Herding her father's ewes.*

We neither herded ewes nor lamb
While the flock near us lay
She gathered in the sheep at night
And cheered me all the day.

O' the broom, &c.

Hard fate that I should banished be
Gone way o'er hill and moor
Because I loved the fairest lass
That ever yet was born.

O' the broom, &c.

Adieu, ye Cowdenknows, adieu
Farewell all pleasures there
To wander by her side again
Is all I crave or care.

*O' the broom, &c.*³⁵

In this modern version, the most lyrical verses of S.R.'s text have been left out and it is remarkable how the meaning of "The Broom of the Cowdenknows" changes because of the simple fact that the character is no longer female but male. The story is no longer about rape, but true love and thus, Archie Fisher makes "The Broom of the Cowdenknows" come alive for many of us today.

For its transmission, the ballad depends upon its ability to acquire different meanings and present different values and worlds. It is the dynamics of understanding that become transparent in oral literature. The reception and interpretation of a piece of work transmitted only in writing seldom reveal the complex nature of the process of understanding itself. In literature, however, dominated by oral transmission and performance, the singer's dialogue with the ballad text is reflected in his or her own rendering of it. It is the life blood of a ballad that it can be adapted to one's own setting and adopted into one's own personal story, thus gaining new validity. It is precisely this nearness of the remote that keeps a good ballad going. And to see how the more gifted ballad-singers recreate and relive a song or distance themselves from it, also widens my horizon of the possibilities of human understanding

35 "The Broom of the Cowdenknowes," *Sing out!* 31.1 (1985), p. 1. See also Archie Fisher, *Will Ye Gang, Love*, London, Topic, 1976; rp. Danbury, CT., Green Linnet GLCD 3076, 1993.