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ballad: A short definition of the **popular ballad** (also called the **folk ballad** or **traditional ballad**) is that it is a song, transmitted orally, which tells a story. Ballads are thus the narrative species of *folk songs*, which originate, and are communicated orally, among illiterate or only partly literate people. In all probability the initial version of a ballad was composed by a single author, but he or she is unknown; and since each singer who learns and repeats an oral ballad is apt to introduce changes in both the text and the tune, it exists in many variant forms. Typically, the popular ballad is dramatic, condensed, and impersonal: the narrator begins with the climactic episode, tells the story tersely in action and dialogue (sometimes by means of dialogue alone), and tells it without self-reference or the expression of personal attitudes or feelings.

The most common stanza form—called the **ballad stanza**—is a *quatrain* in alternate four- and three-stress lines; usually only the second and fourth lines rhyme. This is the form of "Sir Patrick Spens"; the first stanza also exemplifies the abrupt opening of the typical ballad and the manner of proceeding by third-person narration, curtly sketched setting and action, sharp transition, and spare dialogue:

The king sits in Dumferling towne,
Drinking the blude-red wine:
"O whar will I get a guid sailor,
To sail this schip of mine?"

Many ballads employ set formulas (which helped the singer remember the course of the song) including (1) stock descriptive phrases like "blood-red wine" and "milk-white steed," (2) a *refrain* in each stanza ("Edward," "Lord Randall"), and (3) **incremental repetition**, in which a line or stanza is repeated, but with an addition that advances the story ("Lord Randall," "Child Waters"). See *oral poetry*.

Although many traditional ballads probably originated in the later Middle Ages, they were not collected and printed until the eighteenth century, first in England, then in Germany. In 1765, Thomas Percy published his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, which, although most of the contents had been revised in the style of Percy's era, did much to inaugurate widespread interest in folk literature. The basic modern collection is Francis J. Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-98), which includes 305 ballads, many of them in variant versions. Bertrand H. Bronson has edited *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads* (4 vols., 1959-72). Popular ballads are still being sung in the British Isles and in remote rural areas of the United States. To the songs that early settlers brought with them from Great Britain, America has added native forms of the ballad, such as those sung by lumberjacks, cowboys, laborers, and social protesters. A number of twentieth-century folk singers, including Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Simon and Garfunkel, adapted or even composed ballads; most of these, however, such as "The Ballad of

"Bonnie and Clyde" (about a notorious gangster and his moll), are closer to the journalistic "broadside ballad" than to the archaic and heroic mode of the popular ballads in the Child collection.

A **broadside ballad** is a ballad that was printed on one side of a single sheet (called a "broadside"), dealt with a current event or person or issue, and was sung to a well-known tune. Beginning with the sixteenth century, these broadsides were hawked in the streets or at country fairs in Great Britain.

The traditional ballad has greatly influenced the form and style of lyric poetry in general. It has also engendered the **literary ballad**, which is a narrative poem written in deliberate imitation of the form, language, and spirit of the traditional ballad. In Germany, some major literary ballads were composed in the latter eighteenth century, including G. A. Bürger's very popular "Lenore" (1774)—which soon became widely read and influential in an English translation—and Goethe's "Erlkönig" (1782). In England, some of the best literary ballads were composed in the *Romantic Period*: Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (which, however, is much longer and has a much more elaborate plot than the folk ballad), Walter Scott's "Proud Maisie," and Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci." In his *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, Wordsworth begins "We Are Seven" by introducing a narrator as an agent and first-person teller of the story—"I met a little cottage girl"—which is probably one reason he called the collection "lyrical ballads." Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner," on the other hand, of which the first version also appeared in *Lyrical Ballads*, opens with the abrupt and impersonal third-person narration of the traditional ballad:

It is an ancient Mariner
And he stoppeth one of three....

See John A. and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934); W. J. Entwistle, *European Balladry* (rev. ed., 1951); M. J. C. Hodgart, *The Ballads* (2nd ed., 1962); D. C. Fowler, *A Literary History of the Popular Ballad* (1968). For the broadside ballad see *The Common Muse*, eds. V. de Sola Pinto and Allan E. Rodway (1957).

