

Summary notes for Ballads lecture, October 29, 2014

KEYWORDS: BALLADS; FAIRY WORLD; SYMBOL

Today's reading included a traditional ballad, "Tam Lin," and a reinterpretation of the ballad form and setting by the Romantic poet John Keats

"Tam Lin" is a very old ballad, a Scottish story dealing with the common motif of the fairy lover

A ballad is a narrative poem, often set to music

Many ballads were preserved and passed down orally, and then collected, often much later, by antiquarians and folklorists

Ballad subject matter often includes traditional stories like the one found in "Tam Lin." There are many accounts of men taken by fairies; the fairy otherworld is understood to be a place of seduction and delight, often dangerous to mortal men.

Keats uses the figure of the fairy lover in such a way as to call to mind the growing fascination with vampires; the poem's system of symbols also allows us to read the poem in terms of the appeal and dangers of imaginative creation

BALLAD METER Ballad meter is made up of stanzas of four, iambic lines – the second and fourth lines rhyme, and are usually shorter.

There is often a refrain (a repeated line or set of lines).

In the example below, you can see how Keats both uses and modifies traditional ballad form:

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam:
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke, and found me here
On the cold hill side.

The rhyme is on -ide, in the 2nd and 4th lines; the 4th line is shorter than the preceding three. The line "On the cold hill side" repeats several times, as do other final lines in the poem: this practice suggests a refrain

“Tam Lin”: key symbols

Janet plucks a rose: the rose is traditionally associated with sex; in going to Carterhaugh despite the warnings about the sexual danger that awaits there, she could be said to be claiming her own sexuality

Janet wears green, a colour associated with sex and also with regeneration in both pre-Christian and Christian systems

When Janet draws Tam Lin from the well, thus reclaiming him from the fairies, the poem's system of symbols allows us to read it both in terms of a story of sexual initiation, and in terms of Christian redemption (Tam Lin experiences a second baptism, which liberates him from the demonic fairies)

The combination of symbolic resonances associated with sex and with salvation allow us to see Janet as a positive female figure; contrast this emphasis with the negative attitudes we have been discussing towards women in the Arthurian world as imagined by Tennyson

“Belle Dame”: key symbols

The opening and closing stanzas of the poem are filled with images of death and decay; the “lily” in stanza three suggests death

The central stanzas use rhyme and sound effects to underline the intoxication of the knight. Note the many examples of alliteration and assonance in the lines below, and the onomatopoeic effect of zone/ moan, further underlined by the very short final lines:

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She look'd at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew;
And sure in language strange she said,
I love thee true.

The fairy song, the manna, and the enchantment can all be read as pointing symbolically to the process of imaginative creation; what, then, do we make of the suggestions of death, of a draining of life force?