Astronomical References in Traditional British Ballads

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Abstract. This paper studies references to astronomical bodies and phenomena in the traditional English-language ballads of Britain. It begins with a survey of the ways in which astronomical bodies are invoked in ballads. The most common references are to the Moon and the Sun. These luminaries and their phenomena are invoked primarily either to add atmosphere to a scene within which action takes place or to indicate the time at which an action takes place. In the second part of the paper, I examine two ballads – Old Tom of Bedlam and Sir Patrick Spens – in which astronomical bodies or phenomena play a role in the plot of the story of the ballad itself.

The ballad is represented in the traditional music of many cultures.[1] A ballad is essentially a form of sung narrative verse, or, to put it more colloquially, a 'story-song'. Ballads are typically told in the third person but often include quotations of first-person speech by the song's protagonists. They usually have a simple verse structure (many English language ballads have four-line verses in which the second and fourth lines rhyme) and do not have choruses, although sometimes the last line of a verse is the same or similar throughout the song. The subjects of ballads include (fictionalized) accounts of historical (or contemporary) events, tragedies, often with a supernatural element, and humorous tales. The length of a ballad depends upon the story, but in extreme cases ballads can have more than forty verses.

The aim of this paper is to investigate references to astronomical phenomena within the English-language ballad tradition of England, Scotland and Wales. These references range from brief remarks in which an astronomical body or phenomenon appears within the description of the setting in which an event during the story takes place to more detailed accounts where an astronomical event plays a role in the narrative itself. After some brief remarks on the sources for studying British ballads, I first present a broad survey of the types of astronomical references which

[1] See Alan Bond, *The Ballad* (London: Methuen & Co, 1979).

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appear in ballads and their relative frequency and role within the narrative before turning to in-depth analyses of two ballads: Old Tom of Bedlam and Sir Patrick Spens.

Traditional British Ballads: Sources

The ballad tradition has been and continues to be a living tradition. Ballads are learnt, adapted, sung, and passed on by individuals. As a consequence, traditional ballads are continually evolving and there is no definitive canonical version of a ballad. Indeed, many versions of a ballad often co-exist at the same time, even within relatively small local communities of singers. In most cases we cannot, therefore, speak of an author of a ballad.

Related to the traditional ballad are what are known as 'broadside ballads'. These are ballads composed and published as broadsides for sale. Broadside ballads were composed and printed between the sixteenth and nineteenth century. Although some broadside ballads entered the repertoire of traditional ballad singers, most were quickly forgotten and exist only in their printed form.

Several attempts have been made to collect, transcribe, and publish the lyrics of traditional ballads over the past few centuries. The most influential collections are Bishop Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, published in three volumes in 1765,[2] and Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, published in five volumes between 1882 and 1898.[3] Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* contains one hundred and eighty ballads, each presented in a single version drawn from a range of textual sources, including a partially preserved manuscript (the so-called 'Percy folio').[4] Child's work was more ambitious. A folklorist and fourth Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University, Child travelled around the British Isles collecting songs directly from traditional singers and compared these with written versions of the songs as presented in Percy's collection and other printed and manuscript sources. Child often presented more than a dozen versions of each song, noting their source and (sometimes) their relationship to one-another.

[2] Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (London: J. Dodsley, 1765), 3 volumes.

[3] Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1882–1898), 5 volumes.

[4] On the sources for Percy's collection and his approach to them, see Nick Groom, *The Making of Percy's Reliques* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Some General Observations

In order to get a general sense of what types of astronomical bodies and phenomena are mentioned in traditional British ballads, their roles in the ballad, and their relative frequency, I have conducted a basic statistical analysis of the ballads collected by Child in his *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. My reasons for choosing this collection are that (a) it forms a well-defined and sufficiently large corpus of ballads to provide meaningful statistics, (b) Child's collection is a fairly representative sample of the wider tradition (by contrast, Percy's collection is biased towards the ballads of the English-Scottish border region), and (c) there already exists a searchable concordance of the Child ballads prepared by Cathy Lynn Preston at the University of Colorado in Boulder.[5]

Before presenting the results of this analysis, however, a few words of caution must be made. First, Preston's concordance has been computer generated and cannot be assumed to be one-hundred percent reliable. Indeed, I know of one instance of the word 'Moon' which does not appear in the concordance. It is possible, therefore, that a very small number of references to astronomical bodies or phenomena in the Child ballads are missing from the concordance. Second, and more methodologically difficult to deal with, as discussed in the previous section, Child often presented several versions of the same ballad. Some of these versions are nearly identical to one-another, whereas others differ considerably. For example, Child presents three versions of the ballad he names 'Trooper and Maid'.[6] The first version begins with the lines 'One evening as a maid did walk, The moon was shining clearly'.[7] The second version has similar lines in the middle of the first verse: 'By chance a maid was in the close, The moon was shining clearly'.[8] The allusion to the luminary shining bright is then echoed in the fifth verse where we have a reference to the Sun: 'They sleeped together in each other's arms, Till the sun was shining clearly'. The third version omits all reference to the shining of the luminaries but the final verse ends with the lines 'When the sun and the moon dance on the

[5] Cathy Lynn Preston, *Child Ballads Concordance: A "Working" KWIC Concordance to Francis James Child's The English and Scottish Popular Ballads (1882-1898)*, https://www.colorado.edu/faculty/preston/child-ballads-concordance [accessed 27 March 2024].
[6] Child no. 299.
[7] Child no. 299A.
[8] Child no. 299B.

green, It's then that we'll be married'.[9] One could argue that the first two versions, at least, should be treated together as providing only one instance of an astronomical reference. But how would we then treat the third version? I have decided instead to take each version given by Child as a separate piece of data. Given that I am here only interested in broad trends rather than detailed statistics, occasional double counting of references should not make a meaningful difference.

Preston's concordance lists 112 references to the Sun, 66 references to the Moon, 12 references to the stars as a general category, and 1 reference to a single star. There are no references to the planets, either individually or as a group, nor to transient astronomical phenomena such as comets or meteors. The reference to a single star appears in the ballad 'The Carnal and the Crain', a Christmas carol, and refers to the star of Bethlehem.[10] The preponderance of references to the Sun and Moon and to the stars as a group rather than to individual stars, planets, or other celestial bodies may partly reflect a greater familiarity with these bodies by the general populace. But I suggest a greater reason for the Sun and Moon appearing in ballads lies in way that astronomical bodies are used within the ballads' narratives.

Broadly speaking, it is possible to discern five ways in which astronomical bodies and phenomena are used in ballads:

1. As part of the description of the setting within which actions occur. For example, in the ballad 'Young Johnstone', the titular Johnstone's ride home is described as follows:

> Up he gat, and awa he rade,
> By the clear light o the moon,
> Until he came to his mother's door,
> And there he lichtit doun.[11]

Here, the Moon lights Johnstone's journey home. But, more importantly, it adds to the atmosphere of this part of the story, situating it on a clear Moon-lit night. Similarly, the Sun's light adds to the atmosphere of the setting for a damsel's lament after the marriage of Sir John of Hasillgreen in the ballad 'John of Hazelgreen':

[9] Child no. 299C.
[10] Child no. 55.
[11] Child no. 88D.

Into a sweet May morning,
As the sun clearly shone,
I heard a propper damsel
Making a heavy moan;
Making a heavy moan,
I marvelled what she did mean,
And it was for a gentleman,
Sir John of Hasillgreen.[12]

Here the Sun's clear morning light contrasts with the damsel's sorrow. References to the Moon dominate the group of ballads that used astronomy to provide the setting for actions; only a few ballads refer to the Sun or to stars in such contexts. This may reflect a desire to provide atmosphere for important events such as journeys (especially flight), meetings of lovers, and supernatural appearances which often take place during the night.

2. To indicate the time at which an action occurs. Unsurprisingly, here it is references to the Sun which dominate. In most cases, these are simple allusions to sunrise or sunset. For example, in 'Earl Crawford' we have:

The Earl Crawford mounted his steed,
Wi sorrows great he did ride hame;
But ere the morning sun appeard
This fine lord was dead and gane.[13]

A more involved reference to the Sun's daily course appears in 'King John and the Bishop', a comic song in which King John challenges the Bishop of Canterbury to answer three question or pay with his life.[14] The bishop fears he will be unable to answer them, but a local peasant offers to take his place and successfully answers the kings' questions. The second question concerns how long the king will live:

'And the next question thou mayst not flout;
How long I shall be riding the world about.'
'You must rise with the sun, and ride with the same,
Until the next morning he rises again,
And then I am sure you will make no doubt

[12] Child no. 293A.
[13] Child no. 299B.
[14] Child no. 45B.

But in twenty-four hours you'l ride it about.

Here the daily course of the Sun, from sunrise, to its passage across the sky, to Sunrise the following day, is directly connected to the twenty-four hour day. A very small number of the Child ballads refer to the Moon in the context of time indication; stars are never used in this way.

3. As a point of comparison. The brightness of the Sun, Moon, and stars are all compared with people, jewels, and other possessions. For example, in 'Lamkin', two diamond rings are compared to the stars:

You have two bright diamonds,
As bright as the stars,
Put one on each finger,
They'll show you doun stairs.[15]

4. As objects to swear by. A small number of ballads mention to oaths sworn to one or more of the Sun, Moon, and stars. For example, in 'The Gypsy Laddy':

Said she, 'I can swear by the sun and the stars,
And the moon whilk shines sae clearie,
That I am as chaste for the gypsie Jockie Faw
As the day my minnie did bear me.'
'Gif ye wad swear by the sun,' said he,
'And the moon, till ye wad deave me,
Ay and tho ye wad take a far bigger aith,
My dear, I wadna believe ye.'[16]

5. As an integral part of the narrative. In only one Child ballad, 'Sir Patrick Spens', does an astronomical phenomenon play a role in the narrative itself. In addition, the ballad 'Old Tom of Bedlam' collected by Percy but not included in Child's collection includes astronomical bodies and phenomena in the narrative. I will discuss these two ballads in the following sections.

As the preceding summary shows, most references to astronomical bodies or phenomena in traditional ballads are fairly mundane, using them either

[15] Child no. 93M.
[16] Child no. 200E.

to add atmospheric details to the setting within which action happens or else as time indicators. References to the Moon and the Sun dominate, with only a few references to star and very occasional references to other celestial bodies or specific astronomical phenomena.

Old Tom of Bedlam

Old Tom of Bedlam is one of several ballads which revolve around a madman named Tom.[17] Bedlam refers to Bethel hospital in the city of London. Founded in the thirteenth century by the Bishop-elect of Bethlehem as a medieval hospital (an institution for the care of poor and other needy individuals), by the early 1400s at latest, Bethlem became an insane asylum.[18] Around the same time it acquired the colloquial name 'Bedlam' – a simple corruption of 'Bethlem'. The word 'bedlam' later came to refer more broadly to chaos and upheaval, both within the mind of an individual or in society at large.

Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* contains three 'mad songs' – Percy remarks that 'the English have more songs and ballads on the subject of madness, than any of their neighbours' – of which Old Tom of Bedlam is the first.[19] Percy reports that the ballad was among those found in the folio MS, which he has compared with two or three printed versions. He also notes that the song may have been written by a William Basse.

Percy's version of the ballad has twelve verses and describes Tom's desperate and unsuccessful attempt to leave the world of madness. After introducing Tom and the world and gods who oppress him in the first two verses, from the third verse onward the ballad switches to a first-person account told from Tom's perspective. It begins by referring to his night and daytime challenges:

> Through the world I wander night and day
> To seek my straggling senses,
> In an angrye moode I mett old Time,
> With his pentarchye of tenses.

Verses five to eight describe part of his nighttime battles:

[17] In addition to the ballads, Tom of Bedlam is referenced in Shakespeare's King Lear.

[18] For a history of Bethel Hospital, see the anonymous note 'The Old 'Bethel' and the New: Seven Hundredth Anniversary of Foundation', *British Medical Journal* 1, no. 4512 (1947): pp.935–6.

[19] Percy, *Reliques*, XVII.

Come, Vulcan, with tools and with tackles,
To knocke off my troublesome shackles;
Bid Charles make ready his waine
To fetch me my senses againe.

Last night I heard the dog-star bark;
Mars met Venus in the darke;
Limping Vulcan het an iron barr,
And furiouslye made at the god of war:

Mars with his weapon laid about,
But Vulcan's temples had the gout,
For his broad horns did so hang in his light,
He could not see to aim his blowes aright:

Mercury, the nimble post of heaven,
Stood still to see the quarrel;
Gorrel-bellyed Bacchus, gyant-like,
Bestrauyd a stong-beere barrell.

On a first reading, these verses primarily draw on well-known mythology of the Roman gods. In verse five we have Vulcan, the Roman god of fire and husband of Venus, who is often depicted holding a blacksmith's hammer. Tom calls on Vulcan to free him from the shackles on his mind. In verses six and seven Mars and Venus meet and Venus' husband battles with Mars, watched on, in verse eight, by Mercury and Bacchus. But these verses also contain several astronomical allusions: the dog-star barks in verse six and in verse five Tom asks 'Charles make ready his waine'. The dog-star is an obvious reference to Sirius, the brightest star in Canis Major (the 'greater dog' constellation). With this context, it seems likely that 'Charles make ready his waine' refers to the constellation of the Plough (part of Ursa Major), which was sometimes known as Charles' Wain (from Middle English 'charlewayn' referring to a peasant's wagon).

Given the references to these two constellations in the ballad, it seems likely that the song is deliberately exploiting the ambiguity in the use of the names Venus, Mars, and Mercury to refer both the Roman gods and to the planets. Indeed, it seems likely that it is because of this ambiguity that these particular gods are named at all: Venus and Mercury are simply bystanders in the mythological plotline described in these verses – a battle

between Vulcan and Mars. Venus's presence as Vulcan's wife makes sense, but there is no particular reason why Mercury should be there rather than another god. In Tom's mind, the battle between Mars and Vulcan is both a mythological battle and something that is played out in the night sky. Thus, we could perhaps take some of the references to refer to specific astronomical phenomena or configurations: Mars and Venus meeting could refer to a close conjunction of the two planets and Mercury standing still to the planet's station at the beginning of end of its retrograde motion. This is not to suggest that the ballad refers to a specific occasion on which this occurred, or even that this is what Tom imagines in his mind, but simply that in parallel to referring to the mythological attributes of the gods reference may also have been made to the attributes of the planets (their motions, conjunctions between then, etc) as a way of emphasizing the ambiguity in the names.

A further brief astronomical reference appears in the final verse:

> The man in the moone drinks claret,
> Eates powder'd beef, turnip, and carret,
> But a cup of old Malaga sack
> Will fire the bush at his backe.

For an audience, the nocturnal setting for much of the ballad and this reference to the Moon would likely echo common myths about the Moon as the cause of madness.

Sir Patrick Spens

Sir Patrick Spens is one of the most widely known Scottish ballads. It is included in both the Percy (who names it Sir Patrick Spence) and Child collections, with Child presenting no less than eighteen versions.[20] Lines from the ballad, which is still widely sung today, are quoted by Coleridge at the start of *Dejection: An Ode* (1802),[21] and scenes from the ballad were depicted by several nineteenth and early twentieth century painters, including Elizabeth Siddal, James Archer, and Robert Burns.

The ballad tells the story of an ill-fated sea voyage and the death of Sir Patrick and all the crew on board. The ballad begins in the town of

[20] Child no. 58.

[21] R.A. Benthal, 'New Moons, Old Ballads, and Prophetic Dialogues in Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode"', *Studies in Romanticism* 37, no. 4 (1998): pp.591–614; Richard J. King, 'The Poets at his Feet: The Afterlife of "Sir Patrick Spens"', *Scottish Literary Review* 1, no. 2 (2009), pp.21–44.

Dunfermline where the king is residing. The king asks for a fine mariner to sail a fleet of seven ships, and is told that Sir Patrick Spens is the best mariner to sail the seas. The king therefore writes to Sir Patrick, commanding him to captain this fleet. Initially pleased to receive a letter from the king, Sir Patrick is then shocked to read what the king desires for, at least in some versions of the ballad, Sir Patrick says that he was never a good sailor and rhetorically asks who has given his name to the king, the implication being that whoever has done so wishes him harm. But Sir Patrick must sail and, despite fearing a deadly storm, sets off. The storm then hits, and the boat sinks with all in board. The ballad ends with those in shore lamenting his loss. Some versions of the song state that Sir Patrick's journey was because he was to transport a princess to Norway. The ship sinks some fifty miles from the Aberdeenshire shore; in some versions it is implied that this is on the return journey but usually it the boat sinks not long after setting sail on the outward journey. Child notes that a possible historical background to the ballad is to be found in the marriage of Margaret, daughter of Alexander III, to Eric, king of Norway in 1281. Margaret was transported by boat to Norway and much of the fleet was drowned on the return voyage. As Child also notes, however, the name Sir Patrick Spens is not attached to these events in any historical source.[22] Thus, at most, this is a fictionalized account of the tragedy.

The interesting part of the ballad for the present study is that the storm is predicted by the appearance of the new Moon. The exact wording differs considerably between the different versions, but the basic events are the same. Let us first consider the version collected by Percy and reproduced as Child no. 58A:

'Mak hast, mak haste, my mirry men all,
Our guid ship sails the morne:'
'O say ne sae, my master deir,
For I feir a deadlie storme.

'Late late yestereen I say the new moone,
Wi the auld moone in hir arme,
And I feir, I feir, my deir master,
That we will cum to harme.'

[22] Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 2, part III, p.19.

Some versions state that the person who saw the Moon and made the prediction was a young boy (a cabin boy?); in one version, this is Sir Patrick's son. In others, it seems to be Sir Patrick himself who sees the Moon and predicts the storm. The important point for our purposes, however, is the nature of the observation and the basis for the prediction of bad weather. First the observation: we are told that late in the evening, the new Moon was seen with the old Moon in its arms. As has long been recognized,[23] this is very likely a reference to the phenomenon known as earthshine.

Earthshine is the illumination of the dark part of the Moon caused by reflected light from the Earth's surface. In principle, earthshine is visible to the naked eye for 2 or 3 days around conjunction. The naked eye visibility of earthshine depends primarily upon three factors: the fraction of the Moon's disc that is directly illuminated in comparison to that which is illuminated by reflected light, the sky darkness, and the intensity of reflected light (which depends upon the reflectivity of the Earth surface facing the Moon and so if affected by seasonal factors such as cloud cover over the oceans). The first and second factors depends upon the age of the Moon from conjunction, but in the opposite senses: the amount of the Moon's surface illuminated by reflected light is greatest at conjunction then decreases as the Moon move away from conjunction; conversely, as the Moon moves further from conjunction, it will be visible later in the evening and hence visible when the sky is darker. In practice, it seems that it is the second factor which is most significant in determining whether earthshine will be seen. Ancient Babylonian reports of observations of the presence and absence of earthshine on the evening of the first visibility of the new Moon crescent confirm this statement. The Babylonians systematically observed the visibility of the new Moon crescent and measured the time interval between Sunset and Moonset on that night. This time interval is dependent upon several factors including the Moon's latitude, the obliquity of the ecliptic to the horizon (which varies with the season), and, most crucially, the time interval between conjunction of the Sun and Moon and Sunset on the evening of first visibility of the crescent. These reports show a strong correlation between longer Sunset to Moonset intervals and the visibility of earthshine: the longer this interval, the more likely it is that earthshine will be seen.[24] It may be notable, therefore, that

[23] See, for example, King, 'The Poets at his Feet', which includes a review of previous discussions of the identification of this phenomenon.
[24] Taylor Knapp and John Steele, 'The Moon Wears a Crown: Babylonian Reports of Earthshine', *Astronomische Nachrichten* 334 (2003), e230101.

in the ballad, the new Moon was seen 'late yestereem', implying a longer time interval between Sunset and Moonset, which, as notes, correlates with a greater likelihood of seeing earthshine.

In the ballad, the sighting of earthshine is interpreted as an ill omen, specifically of a coming storm. It seems that this association of earthshine and a coming storm is taken to be widely held belief. One version of the ballad makes this clear:

> Yestreen I saw the new mune,
> And the auld mune in her arm;
> And this is the sign since we were born
> Even of a deadly storm.[25]

An association between the Moon and the weather has a long tradition stretching back to antiquity. For example, in his *Phaenomena*, an extremely widely read and influential Greek poem describing the constellations and the night sky, Aratus provides a set of connections between the crescent Moon and the weather:

> Observe first the moon at her two horns. Different evenings paint her with different light, and different shapes at different times horn the moon as she is waxing, some on the third day, some on the fourth; from these you can learn about the month that has just begun. If slender and clear about the third day, she will bode fair weather; if slender and very red, wind; if the crescent is thickish with blunted horns, having a feeble fourth-day light after the third day, either it is blurred by a southerly or because rain is in the offing. But if, when she brings the third day, the Moon does not lean forward from the line of the two horn-tips, or shine inclining backwards, but instead the curve or the two horns is upright, westerly winds with blow after that night. But if she brings in the fourth day also similarly upright, she will certainly give warning of a gathering storm; if the upper one of the horns should lean well forward expect a northly; when it inclines backward, a southerly. But when the whole disc curves round her on the third day, reddening all over, then she will certainly be a stormy sign; a fierier redness will mean a severer storm.[26]

[25] Child no. 58C.
[26] Aratus, *Phenomena*, 778–780; trans. by Douglas Kidd, *Aratus: Phaenomena* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

The final statement is probably a reference to the unusual case of earthshine being seen on the third day of the new Moon.

Ptolemy makes a similar connection between the Moon and storms in his *Tetrabiblos*:

> We must observe the moon in its course three days before or three days after new moon, full moon, and the quarters. For when it appears thin and clear and has nothing about it, it signifies clear weather. If it is thin and red, and the whole disk of the unlighted portion is visible and somewhat disturbed, it indicates winds, in that direction in which it is particularly inclined. If it is observed to be dark, or pale, and thick, it signifies storms and rains.[27]

Ptolemy is here discussing the period around new Moon and makes a clear connection between earthshine ('the whole disk of the unlighted portion is visible') and high winds.

Whilst it is unlikely the ballad draws directly either upon Aratus, Ptolemy, or any other written source there was clearly a widespread tradition associating the Moon and more specifically earthshine on the Moon's surface with storms and winds.[28] It is because of this broad tradition that this part of the ballad resonates with its audience.

Conclusion

From this brief study of astronomical references in traditional British ballads it is apparent that astronomical bodies and phenomena are invoked primarily to provide a sense of atmosphere to scenes within the ballad. By far the majority of references are to the Sun or the Moon, and almost always refer to extremely mundane phenomena such as the luminary rising or setting. Only in Sir Patrick Spens is a rarer astronomical phenomenon – earthshine – mentioned, and here the astronomical phenomenon plays a direct role in the plot of the ballad as an ill omen predicting a deadly story which indeed hits and causes the death of Sir Patrick and all his shipmates.

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[27] Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* II.13; trans. by Frank E. Robbins, *Ptolemy: Tetrabiblos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940).

[28] In addition to the ancient sources, medieval writers such as Isadore of Seville and Bede (who is critical of the ideal) discuss the relationship between the Moon and wind and storms. See Anne Lawrence-Mathers, *Medieval Meteorology: Forecasting the Weather from Aristotle to the Almanac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Ch. 1.

In doing so, the ballad draws on popular beliefs of a connection between the appearance of the Moon and the weather.