

Gender Representations in “The Ballad of Tam Lin”

Evgeniia Ermakova and Sabina Likhareva

Abstract—The present paper addresses a highly relevant issue of gender representation in literature that generates much academic interest as well as practical implications. The material for analysis is the text of the medieval ballad “Tam Lin” as published in the “Child Ballads”. Investigation methodology includes semantic, linguocultural, sociocultural and literary analysis. The findings have been categorized to show how a man and a woman are perceived and portrayed in the English culture. The paper would be of interest for scholars and practitioners dealing with gender issues, English and culture studies.

Index Terms—Culture, gender, representation, semantics.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ballads are poetical narratives frequently having medieval legendary background and performed to music. They have their origins in folk oral tradition and tend to change little from generation to generation [1]. Being transmitters and reflectors of naïve mythological picture of the world, they are a manifestation of the traditional values of a society. In the context of gender representations in a particular national culture, ballads acquire great significance because they mirror the primordial view of traditional gender relationships. The present research is a sociolinguistic and linguocultural analysis of the text of “Tam Lin”, the Scottish-English ballad, to examine how gender representations specific for the English language/culture are manifested in it. It is expected that the paper would help in a better understanding of the roots of traditional gender representations still affecting the contemporary vision of gender.

The recent anthropocentric turn in humanities has placed man in the center of numerous interdisciplinary studies which take different aspects of human nature as a starting point for various cultural and language observations. Crossroads in literature and culture provide vast opportunities to shed a new light on cultural specificity of the national representations of human nature [2]. The analysis of gender issues on the basis of the English fictional texts has also established itself as an important part of English classroom in EFL practice [3]. The study of gender representations in such folk poetical genre as ballads contributes to embracing specificity of gender roles in the English culture. Gender images have shaped under the influence of national and cultural semantics of the language; i.e. they are ethnically specific and culturally marked. In other words, they are closely linked to such components of the national lifestyle as history, religion, social structure, geographical position, folklore, outlook, art, everyday life,

etc. It is due to being rooted in the national mentality that gender representations are so fixed in the cultural memory of the nation.

II. MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

As well as myths and fairy-tales, ballads, in spite of belonging to a plot-driven genre, represent complex multilevel structure full of implicit cultural senses. The material of the present study is comprised by text version A (Robert Burns’ version) of “The Ballad of Tam Lin”, taken from “The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, 1882-1898” edited by F. J. Child, otherwise known as “Child Ballads” [4], although the first mention of the plot dates back to as early as 1549. It can be addressed as a monument of both English and Scottish culture; while the setting, characters and main plot motif belong to the Scottish Borders folklore, the theme and mode of conflict resolution are more specific to the English culture. The storyline is as follows: Tam is a prisoner of the fairies abducted from the world of mortal men and devoid of soul; he asks Janet, an earthly woman, to help him turn into a man again by catching him and holding him tightly despite all his transformations to dangerous and frightening beasts. She does it out of great love and so saves him and his eternal soul from the demonic realm of elves.

As with many other ballads, “Tam Lin’s” plot is not just physical but metaphysical or providential, suggesting different lines of interpretation due to the presence of mystic, magical and fantastic senses and cultural symbols. For the purpose of this study, it would be more appropriate not to concentrate on such aspects of “Tam Lin’s” world as pagan-Christian or Scottish-English dichotomies, but look in more detail at the conflict as two genders’ interaction and at the means of representing gender in the text.

The main analytical tool was complex linguistic, social and cultural analysis of the ballad; the combination of approaches proved to be necessary because the text elements verbalizing gender features tend to belong to different semiotic systems: first, there are language units (phonetic, lexical, morphological, and syntactical), stylistic means (metaphors, epithets, etc.), cultural symbols (colors, plants, animals), concepts of culture (fairy world, enchantment and disenchantment) and literary devices, such as metamorphosis. In the context of the ballad all of these are close-knit and tightly interwoven generating various religious, moral, sociocultural and mythical components of gender identities.

It should be noted that gender identities of the main characters, Tam and Janet, and their interaction, can be studied from five closely connected yet slightly different perspectives:

Disenchantment as the plot-moving device to cross borders between the real and fairy worlds;

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E. V. Ermakova, S. Likhareva are with Department of Linguodidactics, Perm State National Research University, Perm, 614990 Russian Federation (e-mail: janerm@list.ru, sabinaleendnatally@gmail.com).

Personal development of an individual, or manliness evolution;

Gender power relations;

Male and female initiation rites;

Evolution of the spiritual and religious components of identity.

III. ELVISH WORLD AND GENDER SEMANTICS

The first perspective, or plot line, focuses on the bonds of the unreal supernatural world with the men's world by way of showing how the main characters enter the fairy world and how later they remove its spell. As Bergman points out, elf in the English cultural and literary tradition frequently appears as an otherworldly double [5], whose function is to specify what is common, human and culturally approved, and thus separate it from what is inhuman, vicious and deviating from the cultural norm, i.e. to differentiate appropriate behavior patterns from the undesired or marginal models. In terms of gender, the semantics of elvish magic can be associated with that of sexual temptations surrounding a man at the dawn of life. According to Hall, Anglo-Saxon *ælf* (elves) were paradigmatically associated with seductive, feminine beauty, and for men relationship with them might mean compromising their authentic gender features [6]. Tam Lin submits to seduction under the spell of the The Queen o' Fairies and indulges in unduly behavior, although realizing that by doing so he is breaking away from the decent lifestyle and moral obligations. So, the words and phrases pertaining to magic and witchcraft emphasize both the enjoyment and the danger of sexual freedom: *elfin gray*, *The Queen o' Fairies*, *the pleasant fairy-land*, *fairy folk*, *unco*, *erie*. However, in spite of all attraction and delight, the world of elves is gloomy and frightening: *We pay a tiend to hell*. The word "*hell*" is strongly negative as it means the evil citadel, the place of punishment after death, and Tam's retribution for staying in the elves' kingdom. Many of the above-cited words also have negative connotations; even the generic term "*fairy*" in the English culture denotes a supernatural creature that is if not entirely devilish, still rather sinister and in the best case wily and mischievous, but mostly fatal for humans (the question of differentiation between fairies and elves and their classification generates much controversy; however, in this paper the words are considered synonymous). Very vivid is the description of The Queen o' Fairies: *angree Queen*, *her ill-far'd face* (ill-faured – ugly, off-putting), *ill death* (deadly illness). The real world as opposed to the magic kingdom is represented by the words that from the point of view of gender are associated with cultural success as meeting male expectations: *auld grey knight*, *castle*, *auldfac'd knight*, *earthy knight*, *ladies fair*, *earthy thing*.

The motif of Tam's deliverance from elvish spell is widely expressed through religious symbolism aimed at proclaiming the supremacy of Christendom over diabolic creatures unmistakably speaking of the pagan past of both Scotland and England. Among culturally interesting details are, for example, numeric symbols used to emphasize the two worlds' confrontation:

"*Four and twenty ladies fair*" – as a rule, the number has providential allegories, it is associated with the harmony of

sky and earth, the 24 elders in Revelation, or Mary, the Mother of God (The crown of the Virgin with 24 florets).

"*A rose but only twae*" – in many cultures the number brings bad luck; in Christianity, however, it comes to symbolize the unity of man and woman, or the union between Christ and the church.

"*Ay, at the end o' seven years*" – the number has immense importance in Christian tradition, as it is tied directly to God's creation of all things. At the same time, for Tam who belongs to the elves it can mean suffer and redemption.

Apart from numeric symbols, in the text of the ballad there are lexical units representing religious semantics:

"*If e'er ye was in holy chapel, Or Christendom did see*" – the Christian world is real and thus opposed to the shadowy fantastic fairy world.

"*But the night is Hallowe'en, lady, The morn is Hallowday*" – Halloween night, as is known, is considered the time when evil spirits are released from the spirit world realm into the physical world.

"*Just at the mirk and midnight hour*" – as well as Halloween, midnight in folklore is a metaphor of border between the real and the imaginary.

"*At Miles Cross they maun bide*" – the symbolism of a crossroad conveys another image of Tam's dual nature: he is living between the worlds, torn apart by the fairies and the humans.

"*My right hand will be glov'd, lady, My left hand will be bare*" – in religious and cultural traditions left and right also have spiritual meaning, and in mythology serve as representations of past and future, or life and death.

The above-mentioned lexical units and symbolic elements are employed to represent Tam's ambivalence, and the process of changing gender identity from the intermediate, immature and dependent position of the The Queen o' Fairies' captive to the cultural success as a noble knight, husband and father.

IV. DISENCHANTMENT AS EVOLUTION OF MANLINESS

There are several symbols that bear special significance though their gender semantics may be implicit and imbedded in the cultural context, for example, the word *well*, commonly defined as a hole in the earth or a natural source of water. However, in the ballad a well represents a border between the two worlds or their meeting point, and the meaning is specified by the ballad ring composition: "*Tam Lin was at the well*" – at the beginning the well symbolizes the entrance into the world of magic. In order to become man again Tam should plunge in clear spring water and wash away the evil spell: "*Then throw me into well water*" (metaphor of birth). Both the exposition and the denouement of the story are connected with the well as the symbol of innocence and purity, a new start and freedom from sins.

The main color symbol of gender semantics is *green* (*green mantle*, *green kirtle*, *as green as ony glass*, *among the groves sae green*, *green hill to dwell*, *green een*). Green is the color of magic and sorcery, but also the color of nature, trees, plants and flowers, so it is possible to identify several shades of its meaning:

"*Among the groves sae green*", "*In you green hill to dwell*" – as a rule, as the elves live in the woods: such non-human

beings are often associated with the color green, either in their clothing or even their flesh [7], so green brings good luck to them, and bad luck to the mortal men;

“*Green kirtle*”, “*green mantle*” – in medieval and Renaissance tradition of the English literature the green color of clothes is perceived as figurative expression of such attitudes as joy of life, wanton humor and gaiety in love; women wearing green were considered sexually promiscuous;

“*As green as ony glass*” – green is the symbol of new life, as Janet is pregnant when she returns from the magic forest;

“*Green een*” – as is known, green in the English culture often symbolizes jealousy.

In the aspect of gender, the most relevant meaning of green is probably its association with physical, earthly love: “*I’ll turn a naked knight; Then cover me wi’ your green mantle*”.

Looking at Tam’s evolution as the development of his gender identity, we should pay attention to its dominant idea of disenchantment, or breaking the fairy spell. The word “*turn*” appears in the text four times; *well water*, as was already said, also means cleansing from magic bonds and past sins.

Another way of representing gender identity dynamics is the depiction of Tam’s transformations. According to the plot, Tam undergoes a series of metamorphoses: he turns into four animals (*an esk, an adder, a bear sae grim, a lion bold*), two metal objects (*a red het gaud of airn, a burning lead*), and, at the end, a human (*a naked knight*). All of these images have very pronounced and culturally determined gender symbolic meaning:

“*They’ll turn me ... into an esk and adder*” – a snake is an implication for sexual promiscuity. Besides, it has strong religious connotations of sinful temptation and treachery, as well as wisdom and immortality because of its ability to change its skin;

“*They’ll turn me to a bear sae grim and then a lion bold*” – in the old Celtic culture the images of a bear and a lion were associated with leadership and sovereignty. In the Norman church tradition that exercised considerable influence over medieval England’s culture, the bear often figures as a symbol of the devil [8]. Up to this day, one of the meanings of “*bear*” in English is an ill-bred, clumsy and rude person. A lion is a traditional British symbol whose cultural meaning remained unchanged: its positive features, such as courage, dignity and sublimity, overbalance danger for people;

“*They’ll turn me ... to a red het gaud of airn*” – according to the folk tradition, the word “*iron*” often is a substitute for a weapon (a sword); in the Biblical tradition iron is daemonic and serves as instrument of death. In medieval magic rites iron’s function was to protect from ill spirits, and holding burning hot iron was practiced as a form of trial (especially for women accused of adultery or witchery);

“*They’ll turn me ... into a burning lead*” – as well as iron, lead possesses witchcraft-protecting power;

“*I turn a naked knight*” – nudity symbolizes human nature and belonging to mortal men.

After the spell is gone, Tam is compared to a joyful bird: “*As blythe’s a bird in Spring*”. In West Europe’s mythology birds are the embodiment of spiritual power and freedom, and according to the common rural cyclic pattern, spring brings

regeneration and new beginning in life. The climax of Tam Lin’s story is the victory of life and human virtues over dark magic spell. These allusions fit very well in the context of the archetypal initiation rites dating back to the prehistorian times that both Tam and Janet have to pass in order to mature and enter a new stage of life.

V. GENDER AND POWER IN “TAM LIN”

Taking into account the symbolic meanings of all the animals and things mentioned in the ballad, it is also possible to look at the plot as a conflict between male and female worlds, where the world of elves (associated not only with the cultural semantics of magic and fantasy, but also freedom, spirit and experiment) belongs to men, and the earthly world – to women. Thus, the ballad can be treated as an investigation of gender power relations, and its message is a metaphorical guide for women about hardships and success recipes in a man-woman relationship. In fact, “*Tam Lin*” is a purely feminine plot in spite of its male title. According to this implicit cultural code, a truly loving woman should be patient and all-forgiving, ready to fight with metaphorical animals as figurative designations of wild male passions and flaws: the power of animal instincts, rudeness, offensive behavior, disloyalty, and even betrayal. It is noteworthy that although “*Tam Lin*” represents the values of traditional culture that is often described as male-dominated and patriarchal, the main driving force of the plot and the most active character is Janet, and also it is she who undergoes the severe trial. It turns out that the nature of gender relations portrayed in “*Tam Lin*” is more dialectical than it may seem. On the one hand, as is stated in the Bible, a woman is more inclined to sin, so in order to achieve personal and cultural success she should suffer more than a man and tolerate more. But on the other hand, the role of a woman as an initiator, supporter and guardian angel is enormous; she makes things happen, and without her creative and life-generating power even the best men remain exposed to evil impacts.

VI. CONCLUSION

The main points revealed by way of gender representations analysis in “*The Ballad of Tam Lin*” can be summarized in the following way.

The main features of male representation:

*A man’s love life is an ego trip until he meets a truly devoted woman;

*A man commits many wicked deeds involuntarily, as though being spell-bound;

*Male sexuality is partly animal-like, and partly human-like, but his soul is hard to win;

*A man’s true love is a deserved prize for a worthy woman;

*A man is helpless without a woman;

*A man who is good and nice is often vulnerable or even victimized;

*A man can hurt easily without intending to do so;

*A man’s main duty is to marry and become the head of the family.

The main features of female representation:

*A woman's love is not as egoistic as man's love, it is sacrificial and self-denying;

*A woman should be strong and courageous because her spirit is stronger than that of a man;

*A woman is capable of saving a man's body and soul;

*A woman's quest is a fight for a man (with fate, another woman, or even with himself);

*A woman can go any length to get what she wants;

*A woman is supposed to be loyal;

*A woman should be ready to suffer for the sake of love;

*A woman is naturally a wife and a mother.

The analysis has identified about 60 words and phrases in the text of the ballad that can be said to verbalize gender representations. The main conclusion can be made that representing gender in "Tam Lin" should be interpreted against the broad background of the English culture, pan-European, Celtic and Biblical mythology, traditional lifestyles, and political and social history of the society. These issues have become increasingly important in recent years as both men and women tend more and more to question the underlying concepts (the assumptions, ideas and attitudes) which govern and determine what is "Male" and what is "Female" in the contemporary society.

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Evgenia Ermakova was born in the city of Ukhta, Komi Republic, former USSR (now it is Russia), on August 9, 1973. From 1990 she studied 5 years at Perm State University, Perm, Russia, and graduated in 1995 with the diploma of English Teacher and Translator. Further education included post-graduate course in English Literature from 1997 till 2000, at the end of which she presented her Ph.D thesis on "Poetic World of Benjamin Disraeli's Novels" and obtained

Ph.D in the field of philology.

Her employment history includes work at Perm State Technical University (from 1995 till 2000 as English teacher, from 2000 till 2004 as senior lecturer), work at Perm Regional Library as American center coordinator (2004-2005), and current job as associate professor at Perm State National Research University (from 2005 till present time). Her research interests include English and world literature, cognitive linguistics, and intercultural communication.

Dr. Ermakova took part in a number of renowned international conferences, among them ICOSTURK 1016 and ICLLTL 2017. She participated in organization and holding of International School of Metaphor at Perm State Research University in 2016 and 2017.



Sabina Likhareva was born on May 10, 1992 in Berezniki, Russia.

From 2014 until present she has been studying for a bachelor degree at the faculty of modern foreign languages and literatures, Perm State National Research University, Perm, Russia. 2009 through 2013 she studied at the sub-faculty of foreign languages, Pedagogical College named after A.P. Ramenskiy, Solikamsk, Perm region, Russia.

Her professional experience includes the following positions:

- English teacher, Language Centre "Green Apple", Perm, Perm Region, Russia (2015-present);
- English teacher, Mathematics Advanced School №3, Berezniki, Perm Region, Russia (2013-2014);
- Educator and English Instructor, Children's Health Camp "Friendship", Berezniki, Perm Region, Russia (2011-2013).