THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *THOMAS THE RHYMER* AND *THOMAS OF ERCELDOUNE*

By E. B. Lyle

The relationship between the ballad of *Thomas the Rhymer* (Child No. 37) and the romance-prophecy of *Thomas of Erceldoune* was last discussed at any length in a phase of ballad scholarship which is now over. Holger O. Nygard outlines the general position in a recent study of "Popular Ballad and Medieval Romance":

> The question of the relations of the ballads and medieval romances touches upon the great controversy of ballad origins, the controversy which created such a flurry in ballad criticism during the early years of this century. There were two firmly held and forcefully expressed extremes between which ranged a wide array of more considered opinion. The extremes were composed, on the one hand, of communalists, who held that ballads originated from the spontaneous song of the throng or communal group in dance or celebration of some event, and, on the other, of scholars who viewed ballads as the degeneration of the minstrelsy of romance in the later Middle Ages. The shades of opinion between these two extremes reflected measures of caution and prudence, for the evidence existent was hardly sufficient to enable anyone to generalize in a bold and forthright manner. The central issue in the Ballad War is now a matter of history, well documented, analyzed and laid to rest, as is apparent from a review of the names and dates of the contestants in the squabble. [1]

The time of war is past, but the polarizing of thought on ballad issues, which was typical of this period, still lingers. According to this polarization, the ballad is a form necessarily associated with the "folk," in contrast to the "art" literature of which the romance formed a part. This idea has remained potent, although the conception of the kind of association with the "folk" has altered from the theory of communal origin[2] to either a theory of oral-formulaic composition[3] or, more commonly, to an unsubstantiated opinion that an early ballad would be simple in story and language. It is only if we assume that the early ballad is necessarily and always a "folk" form (however this is defined) that the present widely held view that *Thomas the Rhymer* was derived from *Thomas of Erceldoune* can be considered to have been arrived at by valid argument during the course of the ballad war. Hermann M. Flasdieck pointed out that *Thomas the Rhymer* is far from being a simple narrative and could even be said to be overladen with narrative content,[4] and Wolfgang Schmidt noted that it employs language like that of a romance.[5] Both concluded that,

since it is untypical of the popular ballad, it must be derived from the romance of *Thomas of Erceldoune.* Once we move away from the preconceptions of the ballad war, however, it becomes apparent that this conclusion is by no means a necessary one. It is quite possible that the packed narrative and courtly language observed by the German scholars in the ballad of *Thomas the Rhymer* were derived from an early ballad which also had these characteristics. Such a ballad might have been a source of the romance of *Thomas of Erceldoune.*

In order to keep clear of preconceptions, it may be advisable, for the moment, to avoid the use of the term "ballad" for *Thomas the Rhymer,* and also of the term "romance" for *Thomas of Erceldoune* which, with half of its 700 lines devoted to prophecy, is certainly not a typical example of the romance form. The situation, stated without recourse to these terms, is that a composition of roughly 80 lines, first recorded from tradition in the year 1800, bears a strong resemblance to a narrative of about 350 lines which serves to introduce a series of prophecies in a work of the fourteenth century. The question is whether the shorter and later piece is an abbreviation of the fourteenth-century work, or whether the fourteenth-century work is an expansion of an early form of the shorter piece. So that the two texts may be compared, the relevant sections of the longer work, *Thomas of Erceldoune,* are set down below in parallel with *Thomas the Rhymer.*

Since *Thomas the Rhymer* exists in seven variants,[6] some selection is necessary in order to make possible a direct comparison with *Thomas of Erceldoune.* The ballad narrative given here is based on Child *E*, the fullest of the traditional variants from the Scottish Border where the scene is set.[7] The whole of the consecutive narrative of variant *E* is quoted, with the exception of its thirteenth stanza. This stanza is a slighter statement of material that occurs in two separate stanzas in other variants, and has been replaced by *B* 9 and *Tam Lin M* 9, which have been inserted into the narrative at the appropriate points as stanzas 13 and 16. The ending, which is not found in *E*, is made up from *B* 12 (stanza 19) and *D* 10 and 11 (stanzas 20 and 21).[8] The material added to *E* is enclosed in square brackets. The lines quoted from *Thomas of Erceldoune* occur in the same order and context as the equivalent lines in the ballad, and no attempt has been made to include all the points of resemblance which are to be found scattered through the longer work, mainly near the beginning.[9] Where a complete stanza of *Thomas of Erceldoune* seems to have a ballad-stanza equivalent, it is quoted in its entirety, even when some of the material differs widely. Single lines are given only when there is a strong similarity in words or ideas. The two lines which are marked † are not comparable to the ballad lines quoted opposite from *E*, but to the equivalent lines of variant *B*: "And lootit low down on his knee" (*B* 3.2, cf. *E* 4.2), and "For I'm but a lady of an unco land" (*B* 4.3, cf. *E* 5.3).

THOMAS THE RHYMER	*THOMAS OF ERCELDOUNE*	
1 Thomas lay on the Huntlie bank,		
A spying ferlies wi his eee,		
And he did spy a lady gay,	Saw j whare a lady gaye	35
Come riding down by the lang lee.	Came ridand ouer a longe lee.	36

2 Her steed was o the dapple grey,
And at its mane there hung bells nine;
He thought he heard that lady say,
"They gowden bells sall a' be thine."

Hir palfraye was a dappill graye, . . . 41

3 Her mantle was o velvet green,
And a' set round wi jewels fine;
Her hawk and hounds were at her side,
And her bugle-horn wi gowd did shine.

4 Thomas took aff baith cloak and cap,
For to salute this gay lady:
"O save ye, save ye, fair Queen o Heavn,
And ay weel met ye save and see!"

†He knelyde downe appone his knee, . . . 85
"Qwene of heuene als þou wele maye!" 88

5 "I'm no the Queen o Heavn, Thomas;
I never carried my head sae hee;
For I am but a lady gay,
Come out to hunt in my follee.

"Qwene of heuene ne am j noghte, 91
For j tuke neuer so heghe degre.
†Bote j ame of ane oþer countree, . . ." 93

6 "Now gin ye kiss my mouth, Thomas,
Ye mauna miss my fair bodee;
Then ye may een gang hame and tell
That ye've lain wi a gay ladee."

7 "O gin I loe a lady fair,
Nae ill tales o her wad I tell,
And it's wi thee I fain wad gae,
Tho it were een to heavn or hell."

"Here my trouthe j will the plyghte, 107
Whethir þou will in heuene or helle." 108

8 "Then harp and carp, Thomas," she said,
"Then harp and carp alang wi me;
But it will be seven years and a day
Till ye win back to yere ain countrie."

Scho sayd,"Thomas, take leue at sonne & Mone, 157
And als at lefe þat grewes on tree;
This twelmoneth sall þou with me gone,
And Medill-erthe sall þou none see." 160

9 The lady rade, True Thomas ran,
Untill they cam to a water wan;
O it was night, and nae delight,
And Thomas wade aboon the knee.

Scho ledde hym jn at Eldone hill, 169
Vndir-nethe a derne lee;
Whare it was dirke als mydnyght myrke,
And euer þe water till his knee. 172

10 It was dark night, and nae starn-light,
And on they waded lang days three,
And they heard the roaring o a flood,
And Thomas a waefu man was he.

The montenans of dayes three, 173
He herd bot swoghynge of þe flode;
At þe laste, he sayde, "full wa es mee!
Almaste j dye, for fawte of fode." 176

11 Then they rade on, and farther on,
Untill they came to a garden green;
To pu an apple he put up his hand,
For the lack o food he was like to tyne.

Scho lede hym in-till a faire herbere, 177
Whare frwte was growand gret plentee; . . . 178
He pressede to pulle frowyte with his hande, 185
Als mane for fude þat was nere faynt; 186

12 "O haud yere hand, Thomas," she cried,
"And let that green flourishing be;
For it's the very fruit o hell,
Beguiles baith man and woman o yere countrie.

Scho sayd, "Thomas! þou late þame stande, 187
Or ells þe fende the will atteynt.
If þou it plokk, sothely to saye,
Thi saule gose to þe fyre of helle; . . . 190

13 ["But I have a loaf and a soup o wine,
And ye shall go and dine wi me;
And lay yer head down in my lap,
And I will tell ye farlies three.]

"Thomas, sothely, j the hyghte, 193
Come lygge thyne hede downe on my knee,
And þou sall se þe fayreste syghte,
Þat euer sawe mane of thi contree. 196

14	"And dinna ye see yon road, Thomas, That lies out-owr yon lilly lee? Weel is the man yon gate may gang, For it leads him straight to the heavens hie.	"Seese þou nowe 3one faire waye, Þat lygges ouer 3one heghe mountayne? – 3one es þe waye to heuene for aye, Whene synfull sawles are passede þer payne.	201 204
15	"But do you see yon road, Thomas, That lies out-owr yon frosty fell? Ill is the man yon gate may gang, For it leads him straight to the pit o hell.	"Bot seese þou nowe 3one ferthe waye, Þat lygges ouer 3one depe delle? 3one es þe waye, so waylawaye, Vn-to þe birnande fyre of helle.	213 216
16	["O dinna ye see yon castle, Tamas, That's biggit between the twa, And theekit wi the beaten goud? O that's the fairies' ha.]	"Seese þou 3itt 3one faire castelle, Þat standis ouer 3one heghe hill? Of towne & towre, it beris þe belle; In erthe es none lyke it vn-till.	217 220
17	"Now when ye come to our court, Thomas, See that a weel-learnd man ye be; For they will ask ye, one and all, But ye maun answer nane but me.	"When þou commes to 3one castelle gaye, I pray þe curtase mane to bee; And whate so any mane to þe saye, Luke þou answere none bott mee.	225 228
18	"And when nae answer they obtain, Then will they come and question me, And I will answer them again That I gat yere aith at the Eildon tree."	"I sail saye syttande at the desse, I tuke thi speche by-3onde the see."	231 232
19	[It's when she cam into the hall – I wat a weel bred man was he – They've asked him questions, one and all, But he answered none but that fair ladie.]	In-to þe haulle sothely scho went; . . .	253
20	["Wherever ye gang, or wherever ye be, Ye'se bear the tongue that can never lie.]	"Thomas, þou sall neuer lesynge lye, . . ."	318
21	["Gin ere ye want to see me again, Gang to the bonny banks o Farnalie."]	"To huntlee bankkis þou take the waye; . . ."	679

The narrative of *Thomas the Rhymer* is fairly coherent, although part of the ending has obviously been lost. The narrative of the complete text of *Thomas of Erceldoune,* on the other hand, is well known to be incoherent, so much so that George Kane can speak of its "apparent pointlessness which actually at times makes it hard to discern what effect [its author] intended."[10] The question of relationship can therefore be posed in the following way: was the short vigorous work arrived at by the inspired selection of material from the longer incoherent piece, or was the longer piece arrived at by a process of patchwork additions to the shorter work, a process which might go far to account for its incoherence? It is the second of these possibilities that is open to straightforward investigation, and I hope to show that the internal inconsistencies and oddities in the narrative of *Thomas of Erceldoune* are compatible with the theory that *Thomas of Erceldoune* was based on an early form of *Thomas the Rhymer.*

There are, for example, difficulties in interpreting the function in *Thomas of*

Erceldoune of the loathly-lady theme,[11] a theme which is entirely absent from *Thomas the Rhymer.* If this theme is an addition made to his ballad source by the author of *Thomas of Erceldoune*, the difficulties would then be seen to arise from his failure to fuse the added theme satisfactorily with the source narrative on which it was superimposed. The longest section of narrative concerned with the loathly-lady theme occurs at lines 109-156 of *Thomas of Erceldoune* and, when these lines are omitted, the narrative runs directly on, as in the equivalent ballad stanzas (7 and 8):

"Here my trouthe j will the plyghte, 107
Whethir þou will in heuene or helle." 108

Scho sayd, "Thomas take leue at sonne & Mone, 157
And als at lefe þat grewes on tree;
This twelmoneth sall þou with me gone,
And Medill-erthe sall þou none see." 160

It can be seen that the lady's command to Thomas to take leave of "Medill-erthe" follows most effectively on his promise to dwell with her in her "oþer countree" (line 93), wherever this may be. The apparent continuity here is certainly consistent with the possibility that the transformation episode at lines 109-156 was wedged into a narrative where it originally had no place.

One point I have already discussed elsewhere[12] is the absence in *Thomas of Erceldoune* of any offer of food to Thomas when he is dying of hunger, a narrative weakness which was felt by Josephine Burnham, in her study of the romance-prophecy, to stand in need of explanation.[13] The presence of the offer of food in *Thomas the Rhymer* (stanza 13) appears to indicate that the ballad was derived from a treatment of the story that contained this element and not from *Thomas of Erceldoune.* I have suggested that the offer of food was in the early ballad, and was perhaps omitted by the author of *Thomas of Erceldoune* in the process of altering a stanza from the *abcb* rhyme-scheme found in the ballad to the *abab* rhyme-scheme which he normally employs. This still leaves the question of why the author of *Thomas of Erceldoune* should ignore the demands of coherence in this way, and the only possible answer seems to be that *Thomas of Erceldoune* was composed by a slap-dash worker; and this remains true whether or not an early form of *Thomas the Rhymer* was used as a basis for his construction.

The most recent editor of *Thomas of Erceldoune,* Ingeborg Nixon, has drawn attention to the sharp stylistic variations within its narrative.[14] She comments: "The style of the narrative as a whole is that of a ballad rather than a romance, i.e. the tempo is fast, and the poet makes his effects with a few vivid words, rather than with lengthy descriptions. . . . But Fytte I contains two long descriptive passages of the 'list' kind which are different in form from the rest of the narrative [lines 49-64 and 177-184]. These elaborate descriptions are a common feature of the romances, but are at variance with the economy of words practised elsewhere in this poem." The explanation suggested by Dr Nixon is that the narrative section of *Thomas of Erceldoune* was a shortened form of a longer romance, but her observations fit equally well, or even better, with the theory that the author of

Thomas of Erceldoune was using a ballad source and expanding it by the addition of romance conventions. It is possible to see how this might have been done in the description of the garden, where the only detail provided by the ballad is the essential one that "fruit" or "apples" grew there. Since the garden was a regular subject for description by conventional catalogue lists, the author of *Thomas of Erceldoune* would have found no difficulty in taking a hint from his ballad source and adding the list that is found in his work of *pere, date, damasee, fygge, wyneberye, nyghtgales, papeioyes,* and *throstylls* (lines 179-184).

It seems that, in the case of the garden, the author of *Thomas of Erceldoune* may have expanded his material by elaborating according to a convention that was called to mind by a feature in the ballad, and it is interesting to observe that a similar mental process could be responsible for the confused opening of the narrative in *Thomas of Erceldoune.*[15] According to the ballad opening, when Thomas is lying on Huntlie bank he sees a woman of the otherworld:

> Thomas lay on the Huntlie bank,
> A spying ferlies wi his eee,
> And he did spy a lady gay,
> Come riding down by the lang lee.

This opening is like that of a *chanson d'aventure*, but differs from it in that the adventure befalls a named protagonist, Thomas, and not, as is the case in the *chanson d'aventure*, the narrator himself. I suggest that the likeness of the opening of the early ballad to a *chanson d'aventure* was sufficient to encourage the author of *Thomas of Erceldoune* to slip into the use of conventions appropriate to the *chanson d'aventure*, in spite of the obvious fact that the use of these conventions (involving first person narrative about a recent event) would not accord with the rest of his story.

These observations indicate that the state of the text of *Thomas of Erceldoune* is compatible with the theory that the *Thomas of Erceldoune* narrative was based on a ballad source, and it even appears that this theory throws some light on the obscurities of the longer work. Since the arguments put forward in support of the contrary view, that *Thomas the Rhymer* was derived from *Thomas of Erceldoune,* cannot now be considered valid, it seems justifiable to adopt as a working hypothesis the theory that an early form of *Thomas the Rhymer* was a source of *Thomas of Erceldoune.*[16]

NOTES

1 Holger Olof Nygard, "Popular Ballad and Medieval Romance," *Folklore International: essays in traditional literature, belief, and custom in honor of Wayland Debs Hand,* ed. D. K. Wilgus (Hatboro, Pa., 1967), p. 161.

2 For this view of the origin of *Thomas the Rhymer*, see Arthur Saalbach, *Entstehungsgeschichte der schottischen Volksballade Thomas Rymer* (Halle, 1913), pp. 61-65.

3 J. H. Jones, "Commonplace and Memorization in the Oral Tradition of the English and Scottish Popular Ballads," *Journal of American Folklore*, LXXIV (1961), 97-112. A. B. Friedman, "The Formulaic Improvisation Theory of Ballad Tradition – a Counter-statement," *Journal of American Folklore*, LXXIV (1961), 113-115.

4 Hermann M. Flasdieck, *Tom der Reimer: Von keltischen Feen und politischen Propheten (Wort und Brauch,* XXIII, Breslau, 1934), pp. 48-49.

5 Wolfgang Schmidt, "Die Volksballaden von Tom dem Reimer," *Anglia*, LXI (1937), 199-202.

6 Six variants are included in Francis J. Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston and New York, 1882-98, repr. Dover Publications, New York, 1965), I, 323-326, IV, 454-455, 458. A seventh variant is printed in the *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore,* Vol. II, *Folk Ballads from North Carolina,* ed. Henry M. Belden and Arthur Palmer Hudson (Durham, North Carolina, 1952), pp. 46-47.

7 The setting is discussed in my note, "A Reconsideration of the Place-Names in *Thomas the Rhymer,*" *Scottish Studies,* XIII (1969), 65-71.

8 The variants are quoted from the texts in Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads,* but the following corrections have been made to *E* from Scott's "Materials for Border Minstrelsy," National Library of Scotland MS 877, ff. 177r and 178r: "wi" for "in" (3.4), and "waefu" for "waefou" (10.4). Mrs Greenwood, who sent this variant to Scott, commented in her covering letter, "I am pretty certain I have heard more verses than those I now send, but those are all I could procure" ("Letters to Scott 1804-6," National Library of Scotland MS 3875, No. 189, f. 176r). A "teind to hell" stanza that was set down by Mrs Greenwood at the end of her text after a line of crosses is not included here because of the complication that a stanza like it occurs in *Tam Lin* (Child No. 39).

9 *Thomas of Erceldoune* is quoted from the Thornton MS text in *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune,* ed. James A. H. Murray (EETS, OS 61, 1875). The square brackets in Murray's text have been omitted, and "ff" at line 92 is printed as "F". The parts of lines 35 and 36 which are missing from the Thornton MS have been supplied from the text in Cambridge University Library MS Ff.5.48.

10 *Middle English Literature* (London, 1951), p. 15.

11 William P. Albrecht, *The Loathly Lady in "Thomas of Erceldoune"* (University of New Mexico Publications in Language and Literature No. 11, Albuquerque, 1954), *passim*, but particularly pp. 18-19 and 68-69.

12 "A Comment on the Rhyme-Scheme of Two Stanzas in *Thomas of Erceldoune,*" *Notes and Queries,* N. S. 16 (1969), 48.

13 Josephine Burnham, "A Study of Thomas of Erceldoune," *PMLA,* XXIII (1908), 411.

14 Ingeborg Nixon, "Thomas of Erceldoune" (Ph.D. thesis, Edinburgh University, 1947), pp. 27-28. I am much indebted to Dr Nixon for giving me permission to quote from her thesis.

15 The "change of person" and the "time discrepancy" have often been commented on. See Robert Jamieson, *Popular Ballads and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1806), II, 5-6; Burnham, *op. cit.,* pp. 382-385, 415-416; Nixon, *op. cit.,* pp. 26-29; Albrecht, *op. cit.,* pp. 16-17. I take it that the use of "mee" at line 276, where "him" would be expected, arose from the author's carelessness. He possibly became confused by his direct address to the reader or listener, "More þane j ȝowe saye parde" at line 274, and by the tag "so hafe I grace" at line 275, and continued in the first person when he should have returned to the third with the resumption of the narrative at line 276.

16 Two recent studies that I had not seen when this article was written favour the view that the ballad variants were derived from *Thomas of Erceldoune* and do not seriously consider the alternative possibility that I discuss here. They are "A Study of *Thomas of Erceldoune*" by Howard C. Miller (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Lehigh University, 1965) abstracted in *Dissertation Abstracts* 26 (Michigan, 1966), pp. 7299-7300, and "The Origin and Tradition of the Ballad of *Thomas Rhymer*: A Survey" by C. E. Nelson in *New Voices in American Studies*, ed. Ray B. Browne, Donald M. Winkelman, and Allan Hayman (Purdue University Studies, 1966), pp. 138-150.