

Formulaic Language and Story Telling in Ballads

Fair Margaret and Sweet William

<http://www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/lloyd/songs/fairmargaretandsweetwilliam.html>
[Roud 253 ; Child 74 ; Ballad Index C074 ; trad.]

Shirley Collins sang this ballad as “Lady Margaret and Sweet William” in 1976 on her album *The Power of the True Love Knot*; it was also included in her anthology “A Favourite Garland”. June Tabor sang “Fair Margaret and Sweet William” in 2003 on her CD *An Echo of Hooves*. Her version was collected by Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles from Jeff Stockton of Flag Pond, Tennessee in 1916. It is much older though; according to June Tabor’s notes it was first mentioned in Beaumont and Fletcher’s 1611 play *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*.

Shirley Collins sings “Lady Margaret and Sweet William”

Sweet William arose one May morning
And dressed himself in blue;
We want you to tell of something about
The long love between Lady Margaret and you.

“I know nothing of Lady Margaret’s love,
I’m sure she don’t love me.
But tomorrow morning at eight o’clock
Lady Margaret my bride shall see.”

Lady Margaret sat in her own hall door,
A-combing down her hair,
When she saw Sweet William come a-riding by,
Bringing his new bride home.

She first threw down her ivory comb,
Tied up her long yellow hair,
And out of the door went this lady gay,
To never return any more.

Now late that night when William was in bed,
And most all men was asleep,
Lady Margaret’s ghost came to Sweet William’s side
And stood at his own bed feet.

Saying, “How do you like your snow-white pillow?
How do you like your sheet?
And how do you like the new found bride
That’s a-lying in your arms asleep?”

“Very well, very well do I like my pillow,
Better do I like the sheet,
But the best one of all is that pretty little girl
That’s a-standing at my own bed feet.”

So early next morning when William awoke,
And most all men was at work,
Sweet William said he was troubled in his head

June Tabor sings “Fair Margaret and Sweet William”

Sweet William arose on a May morning
And he dressed himself in blue;
We want you to tell of that long love that’s been
Between Lady Marget and you.

“Oh, I know nothing of Lady Marget’s love,
And I know she don’t love me.
Before tomorrow morning at eight of the clock
Lady Marget a bride shall see.”

Lady Marget was a-sitting in her own bower room,
Combing back her yellow hair,
And she saw Sweet William and his new wedded bride
And the lawyers a-riding by.

It’s down she stood her ivory comb
And back she threw her hair,
And it’s you may suppose and be very well assured,
Lady Marget was heard no more.

The day being past and the night coming on,
When most all men were asleep,
Something appeared to Sweet William and his bride
And stood at their bed feet.

Saying, “How do you like your bed making
And how do you like your sheets?
And how do you like that new wedded bride
That lies in your arms and sleeps?”

“Very well do I like my bed making
Much better do I like my sheets,
But best of all is that gay lady
That stands at my bed feet.”

The night being past and the day coming on,
When most all men were awake,
Sweet William he said he was troubled in his head

By the dreams that he dreamed last night.

“Such dreams, such dreams I do not like,
Such dreams they are no good.
I dreamed that my hall was filled with wild swine,
Lady Margaret was drowning in blood.”

So he called his comrades to his side
And numbered them one, two, three,
And the last one of them, “Go tell my bride
Lady Margaret I’ve gone to see.”

He rode till he came to Lady Margaret’s hall,
Pulled all on the ring.
There’s none so ready as Lady Margaret’s brother
For to rise and let him in.

“Now, is she in the garden?” he said,
“Or is she in the hall?
Or is she in the upper parlour
Among them ladies all?”

“She neither is in the garden,” he said,
“Nor yet into the hall,
But yonder she lies in her cold coffin
With her pale face turned to the wall.”

Lady Margaret was buried in the old churchyard,
William lay anigh her,
And out of her grave grew a red, red rose
And out of his a briar.

They grew and they grew on the old church tower
Till they could grow not higher
They met and they twined in a true lover’s knot,
The red rose around the briar.

By the dreams that he dreamed last night.

“Such dreams, such dreams cannot be true,
I’m afraid they’re of no good.
I dreamed that my chamber was full of wild swine
And my bride’s bed floating in blood.”

He’s called down his waiting men
One by two by three,
Saying, “Go and ask leave of my new wedded bride
If Lady Marget I mayn’t go and see.”

He’s rode up to Lady Marget’s own bower room
And tingled all on the ring,
And who was so ready as her own born brother
To rise and let him in.

“Is Lady Marget in her own bower room
Or is she in her hall?
Or is she high in her chambery
Amongst the ladies all?”

“Lady Marget’s not in her own bower room
Nor neither is she in her hall,
But she is in her long cold coffin
Lies pale against yon wall.”

“Unroll, unroll those winding sheets
Although they’re very fine,
And let me kiss them cold pale lips
Just as often as they’ve kissed mine.”

It’s first he’s kissed her ivory cheeks
And then he’s kissed her chin,
And when he kissed them cold pale lips
There was no breath within.

Three times he’s kissed her ivory cheeks,
Three times he’s kissed her chin,
And the last time he kissed them cold pale lips
It crushed his heart within.

Lady Marget died like it might be today,
Sweet William he died on tomorrow,
Lady Marget she died for pure true love,
Sweet William he died for sorrow.

Lady Marget was buried in yons churchyard,
Sweet William was buried by her,
And out of her grave sprung a red, red rose,
Out of his a green, green briar.

And they both grew up the old church wall
Till they could not grow any higher
And they met and they tied in a true love’s knot,
Red rose around green briar.

The Douglas Tragedy

English Poetry I: From Chaucer to Gray.
The Harvard Classics. 1909–14.

“RISE up, rise up, now, Lord Douglas,” she says,
“And put on your armour so bright,
Let it never be said that a daughter of thine
Was married to a lord under night.

“Rise up, rise up, my seven bold sons,
And put on your armour so bright,
And take better care of your youngest sister.
For your eldest’s awa the last night.”

He’s mounted her on a milk-white steed,
And himself on a dapple grey,
With a bugelet horn hung down by his side,
And lightly they rode away.

Lord William lookit oer his left shoulder,
To see what he could see,
And there he spy’d her seven brethren bold,
Come riding over the lee.

“Light down, light down, Lady Margret,” he said,
“And hold my steed in your hand,
Until that against your seven brethren bold,
And your father I mak a stand.”

She held his steed in her milk-white hand,
And never shed one tear,
Until that she saw her seven brethren fa,
And her father hard fighting, who lovd her so
dear.

“O hold your hand, Lord William!” she said,
“For your strokes they are wondrous sair;
True lovers I can get many a ane,
But a father I can never get mair.”

O she’s taen out her handkerchief,
It was o the holland sae fine,
And aye she dighted her father’s bloody wounds,
That were redder than the wine.

“O chuse, O chuse, Lady Margret,” he said,
“O whether will ye gang or bide?”
“I’ll gang, I’ll gang, Lord William,” she said,
“For ye have left me no other guide.”

He’s lifted her on a milk-white steed,
And himself on a dapple grey,
With a bugelet horn hung down by his side,
And slowly they baith rade away.

O they rade on, and on they rade,
And a’ by the light of the moon,
Until they came to yon wan water,
And there they lighted down.

They lighted down to tak a drink
Of the spring that ran sae clear,
And down the stream ran his gude heart’s blood,
And sair she gan to fear.

“Hold up, hold up, Lord William,” she says,
“For I fear that you are slain;”
“‘Tis naething but the shadow of my scarlet cloak,
That shines in the water sae plain.”

O they rade on, and on they rade,
And a’ by the light of the moon,
Until they cam to his mother’s ha door,
And there they lighted down.

“Get up, get up, lady mother,” he says,
“Get up, and let me in!”
Get up, get up, lady mother,” he says,
“For this night my fair lady I’ve win.

“O mak my bed, lady mother,” he says,
“O make it braid and deep,
And lay lady Margret close at my back,
And the sounder I will sleep.”

Lord William was dead lang ere midnight,
Lady Margret lang ere day,
And all true lovers that go thegither,
May they have mair luck than they!

Lord William was buried in St. Mary’s kirk,
Lady Margret in Mary’s quire;
Out o the lady’s grave grew a bonny red rose,
And out o the knight’s a brier.

And they twa met, and they twa plat,
And fain they wad be near;
And a’ the warld might ken right weel
They were twa lovers dear.

But bye and rade the Black Douglas,
And wow but he was rough!
For he pulld up the bonny brier,
And flang’t in St. Mary’s Loch.

Tam Lin

"I forbid you maidens all
that wear gold in your hair
To travel to Carter Hall
for young Tam Lin is there

None that go by Carter Hall
but they leave him a pledge
Either their mantles of green
or else their maidenhead"

Janet tied her kirtle green
a bit above her knee
And she's gone to Carter Hall
as fast as go can she

She'd not pulled a double rose,
a rose but only two
When up there came young Tam Lin
says "Lady, pull no more"

"And why come you to Carter Hall
without command from me?"
"I'll come and go", young Janet said,
"and ask no leave of thee"

Janet tied her kirtle green
a bit above her knee
And she's gone to her father
as fast as go can she

Well, up then spoke her father dear
and he spoke meek and mild
"Oh, and alas, Janet," he said,
"I think you go with child"

Fair Margaret ran in the merry green wood
And pulled a flower but one
When at her side stood young Tam-a-Lin,
Saying, "Margaret, leave it alone.

"How dare you pull my flowers, madam?
How dare you break my tree?
How dare you run in these green woods
Without the leave of me?"

"Oh this green wood it is my own,
My father gave it me.
And I can pluck myself a flower
Without the leave of thee."

He took her by the milk-white hand
And by the grass-green sleeve
And laid her low down on the flowers
And asked of her no leave.

And when he'd had his will of her
Young Margaret she felt shame,
Says, "If you are a gentleman
Pray tell to me your name."

"Oh Tam-a-Lin is the name," he said,
"The Elf Queen gave to me.
And long I've haunted these green woods
All for your fair body.

"So do not pluck that herb, Margaret,
That herb that grows so grey,
For that would kill the little babe
That we've got in our play.

“Well, if that be so,” Janet said,
“myself shall bear the blame
There’s not a knight in all your hall
shall get the baby’s name

For if my love were an earthly knight
as he is an elfin grey
I’d not change my own true love
for any knight you have”

Janet tied her kirtle green
a bit above her knee
And she’s gone to Carter Hall
as fast as go can she

“Oh, tell to me, Tam Lin,” she said,
“why came you here to dwell?”
“The Queen of Faeries caught me
when from my horse I fell

And at the end of seven years
she pays a tithe to hell
I so fair and full of flesh
and feared it be myself

But tonight is Hallowe’en
and the faery folk ride
Those that would their true love win
at Miles Cross they must buy

So first let past the horses black
and then let past the brown
Quickly run to the white steed
and pull the rider down

For I’ll ride on the white steed,
the nearest to the town
For I was an earthly knight,
they give me that renown

Oh, they will turn me in your arms
to a newt or a snake
But hold me tight and fear not,
I am your baby’s father

And they will turn me in your arms
into a lion bold
But hold me tight and fear not
and you will love your child

And they will turn me in your arms
into a naked knight

“When I was a boy just turned of nine
My uncle sent for me
To hunt and hawk and ride with him
And keep him company.

“Oh drowsy, drowsy as I was,
Dead sleep upon me fell,
And the Queen of Elfin she rode by
And took me for herself.

“Tonight it is good Hallowe’en,
The Elfin court will ride.
And they that would their true love win
At the crossroads they must hide.

“The second court that comes along
Is clad in robes of green.
It is the head court of them all
For in it rides the Queen

“And I upon a milk-white steed
With a gold star in my crown,
And I do ride beside the Queen
And you must pull me down.

“Then I will grow in your two arms
Like a savage creature wild.
But hold me fast, let me not go,
I’m the father of your child.”

But cloak me in your mantle
and keep me out of sight”

In the middle of the night
she heard the bridle ring
She heeded what he did say
and young Tam Lin did win

Then up spoke the Faery Queen,
an angry queen was she
Woe betide her ?ill-fought? face,
an ill death may she die

“Oh, had I known, Tam Lin,” she said,
“what this knight I did see
I have looked him in the eyes
and turned him to a tree”

She took her petticoats in her hand,
Her mantle on her arm,
Unto the crossroads she’s away
As fast as she could run.

The first court it came riding by,
She heard the bridles ring.
And the second court all dressed in green
And Tam Lin like a king.

She pulled him from his milk-white steed,
He on the ground did lay.
And the Elf Queen gave a shrieking cry,
“Young Tam-a-Lin’s away, my boys!
Young Tam-a-Lin’s away!”

And then they turned him in her arms
To a wolf and to an adder.
She held him fast in every shape
To be her baby’s father.

They shaped him in her arms at last
A mother-naked man.
She wrapped him in her mantle green
And saw her true love won.

Out then cried the Elfin Queen
And an angry woman was she,
Said, “You’ve stolen away the very best knight
In all my company.

“Oh had I known, Tam-a-Lin,” she says,
“What now this night I see,
I would have burned out your two grey eyes
And put in two from a tree, Tam-a-Lin,
And put in two from a tree.”