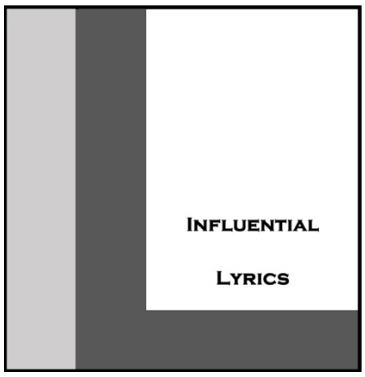

Series 1, Number 1

"Sir Patrick Spens"

Sir Patrick Spens...

The king sits in Dumferling toune,
Drinking the blude-reid wine:
"O whar will I get guid sailor,
To sail this schip of mine?"

Up and spak an eldern knicht,
Sat at the kings richt kne:
"Sir Patrick Spence is the best sailor
That sails upon the se."

The king has written a braid letter,
And signd it wi his hand,
And sent it to Sir Patrick Spence,
Was walking on the sand.

The first line that Sir Patrick red,
A loud lauch lauched he;
The next line that Sir Patrick red,
The teir blinded his ee.

"O wha is this has don this deid,
This ill deid don to me,
To send me out this time o' the yeir,
To sail upon the se!

"Mak hast, mak haste, my mirry men all,
Our guid schip sails the morne:"

"O say na sae, my master deir,
For I feir a deadlie storme.

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

O our Scots nobles wer richt laith
To weet their cork-heild schoone;
Bot lang owre a' the play wer playd,
Thair hats they swam aboone.

O lang, lang may their ladies sit,
Wi thair fans into their hand,
Or eir they se Sir Patrick Spence
Cum sailing to the land.

O lang, lang may the ladies stand,
Wi thair gold kems in their hair,
Waiting for thair ain deir lords,
For they'll se thame na mair.

Haf owre, haf owre to Aberdour,
It's fiftie fadom deip,
And thair lies guid Sir Patrick Spence,
Wi the Scots lords at his feit.

* The poem exists in multiple versions; this is from Percy's *Reliques* (1765) with some modernized spelling for easier reading.

PODCAST (https://influential lyrics, etc.).

Topics

- Popular Ballad
- Ballad Stanza

Lines to remember...

Haf owre, haf owre to Aberdour,
It's fiftie fadom deip,
And thair lies guid Sir Patrick Spence,
Wi the Scots lords at his feit.

Podcast Script

In 1765, Bishop Thomas Percy published a 3-volume book called *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry.* The book introduced a number of short, late medieval poems into the English literary canon, the most famous of which is probably the popular ballad called "Sir Patrick Spens." There has been some considerable debate among literary historians about the provenance of the poem—Was it really a medieval manuscript? How much "editing" (perhaps rewriting or even composing) was by Percy himself? Does the poem describe some specific historical event? etc. etc. For present purposes, I'm going to set that debate aside and focus instead on the poem itself. The poem goes like this…

[Poem]

So what can we say about this poem? And how can we best understand and appreciate it? Well, for starters we can simply describe the poem and work our way through the narrative. (After all, especially if you are just listening and not reading, even the literal meaning may be a little obscure!)

The poem fits into a whole genre of lyrics called "Popular Ballads." Typically, these are brief narrative poems—poems that tell a story, rather than, for example, express the feelings of the poet or provide some richly symbolic image. As narrative poems, then, they have characters and dialogue and some sort of conflict and resolution. And this material is arranged into rhyming quatrains called "ballad stanzas." I'll fill you in in a later episode with a more precise definition of a ballad stanza, but for the present you can think of it as a poem that you can sing to the tune of Amazing Grace.

So what's the story behind Patrick Spens? Well, we begin in "Dumferline town" apparently in the royal court where the king is looking for a "good sailor," and an "eldern Knicht" suggests he get Sir Patrick Spens. So, the king writes a "braid" letter to Sir Patrick, and then the scene suddenly jump-cuts to Patrick himself reading the letter while walking on the sand. The letter elicits two very different responses—at first, Sir Patrick laughs and then he cries: "the tear blinded his ee." The implication, of course, is that this is a laughably ridiculous command from the king given that it's dangerous to set sail in this season. What's more, Sir Patrick is dismayed, thinking that someone may have deliberately done him an "ill deed." Nevertheless, he has no choice but to obey the royal command and thus endanger himself and

his crew. So, Sir Patrick gathers his spirits and exhorts his crew of "Mirry Men" to get ready to sail, even though one of the crewmen raises some serious doubts about the fate of this voyage because he's seen an omen in the sky that foretells a "deadly storm."

At this point, the narrative fast-forwards past all the preparations, the boarding of the ship, the ill-fated voyage, the storm, the sinking of the ship, and the rest. Instead, we jump to this stanza:

> O our Scots nobles wer richt laith
> To weet their cork-heild schoone;
> Bot lang owre a' the play wer playd,
> Thair hats they swam aboone.

In other words, the Scots nobles who were passengers on the ship (wearing—significantly—fashionable cork-heeled shoes that they didn't want to get wet), have drowned when the ship sank. Now, the only thing left are the hats that are floating on the surface, the last remnants of this ill-advised and deadly voyage.

The narrative then closes with a return to the setting of the court. But now instead of a king surrounded by his Lords, it's a poignant still-life of the Ladies who can do nothing but stand with their "gold kems in their hair" and wait for the men they'll never see again. The final stanza offers an inversion of the Royal hierarchy—at the bottom of the sea, "their lies guid Sir Patrick Spens / Wi the Scots lords at his feet." In other words, now Sir Patrick is in a position of authority…even though everyone including Sir Patrick is dead.

So, that's the basic "content" of the poem—simple enough. And I'd like to emphasize that the lasting influence of this work comes not so much from a profound "message" as from the rhythmic effect of the language. Those ballad stanzas are evocative and just fun to read (despite the tragic content). Take that final stanza, for example:

> Haf owre, haf owre to Aberdour,
> It's fiftie fadom deip,
> And thair lies guid Sir Patrick Spence,
> Wi the Scots lords at his feit.

Note the internal rhyme in the opening line, the alliteration on F in the second line, the dramatic pause after the second line, and then the punch-line quality of that final image of the "Scots lords at his feit." The poet William Butler Yeats once said that a poem should "click shut like a fine jewelry box." I would argue that this musical quality of the language (together with that final image) provides exactly this sort of satisfying closure.

[interlude]

Okay, so now we have a good "feel" for this little poem. We are at least aware of some of the unanswered questions about its origin, we have a sense of the overall form and literal meaning of the poem, and so forth. But this sort of discussion always takes us to one more big question: "So What?" Or, if I put this a little more precisely… While it's all well and good to understand the poem and to appreciate something of the musical quality of the language, is this all there is? Is there some meaning or value or significance to the poem beyond just the fun of hearing it? What does it all *mean*?

Well, at risk of sounding too smart-alecky about this, I might turn the question onto itself and ask: "What exactly do we mean by meaning?" If we're looking for some significance beyond the literal meaning of the words, then what would that significance look like and how can we come to understand it? Hmmm…. Well, I do have an idea—a sort of hypothesis—that might help us grasp this "deep meaning" (as my students used to say).

The idea is this: that the meaning, the value, the significance of a lyric is not something *inside* the poem that we can draw out if we only look hard enough. Instead, the meaning, value, and significance has to do with the connections one might develop between the poem and some area of interest *outside* the poem.

Let me give you an obvious example: If I were a historian especially interested in, for example, the political and economic relations between Scotland and Norway in the medieval period, then this poem would be of particular interest. If it really is a late medieval text, it could offer an illustration of the conditions under which such international trade and diplomacy took place, and this, in turn, could help enrich my understanding of the history of the period.

Or, let me give you another example: Let's say I am especially interested in business and management. Well, the poem is sketchy about this but clearly there are two classes of people in the poem—those who are associated with the court (that is the King, the "eltern knicht," the Scots lords and their ladies) and those sailors who are, for want of a better term, transportation workers (that is, Sir Patrick and his crew of "mirry men"). The only real exchange between these two classes is an order—the "braid letter"—that the king sends to Sir Patrick. This is very much a top-down system of management—the King orders something to happen without ever consulting the very people whose expertise he needs. The result, of course, is a disaster, and, to a student of business administration, the poem could become a parable about poor management and catastrophically ineffective communications within the enterprise.

And here's one more example: Suppose now that I am an environmentalist, and I am keenly interested in the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Okay, note that formally the poem is divided into two different settings—the world of the court at the beginning and end and the world of nature in the middle. The courtly life is characterized images of wealth and status—like the king's "blood-red wine," the Scots noble's "cork heeled shoes," the ladies with "gold combs" and fans. The world of the sailors, by contrast, is one of nature—Sir Patrick is walking on the sands, the crewman reads omens in the sky (the new moon with the old moon in its arms) that turn out to be accurate. One might expand on this

reading and suggest that the poem illustrates how people can get so caught up in the trappings of culture (wine, nice shoes, gold combs, etc.) that they fail to recognize the power and the dangers of the natural world, and this leads inevitably to a disastrous result.

My point with these examples is not to claim that we've discovered some ultimate "deep meaning" that the poem expresses. Rather, it is to demonstrate a pattern of thought that is central to the appreciation of poetry (and of other forms of art as well). First, we read the poem—preferably out loud so that we get a feel for the rhythm, the artistry, the music of the language. Next, we describe the poem—in this case, sorting out the narrative, identifying important images, noting things like contrasting settings, characters, etc. And finally, we draw connections between these formal aspects *inside* the poem and some other area of interest *outside* the poem. It's in this process that we can begin to appreciate the meaning, the value, and the significance of the work. And then (if you're anything like me!) you're drawn back into the poem for another, richer reading!

So that's my take on "Sir Patrick Spens" and my hypothesis about developing a sense of the relevance of the poem. I hope you'll have a moment to listen to the poem again, and perhaps memorize a few lines—they really are fun to say! I hope especially that my explication will help you to enjoy this influential lyric!

As always, many thanks for listening! If you've found the discussion useful, please consider liking and subscribing to the podcast. That will help others locate *Influential Lyrics* in their podcast feeds.

Have a great week, and I look forward to getting together once again for the next episode!

[repeat poem]

Further Reading

Friedman, Albert V. "*Ballad*." *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Alex Preminger, et al., Princeton University Press, 1993.

King, Richard J., "The Poets at His Feet: The Afterlife of 'Sir Patrick Spens.'" *Scottish Literary Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, Autumn-Winter 2009, pp. 21-44.

Percy, Thomas. *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. 3 vols., J. Dodsley, 1765. *HathiTrust*, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100024549. [This is the original publication of the poem; "Sir Patrick Spens" begins on p. 71 of vol. 1.]

Piper, William Bowman. “The Composition of ‘Sir Patrick Spence.’” *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 81, no. 4, Fall 2002, pp. 469-91.

ETC....

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