The ballads of *Tam Lin* and *Thomas the Rhymer*: transformations and transcriptions


**Abstract**

Fantasy, in the shape of folk and fairy tale is the oldest and the first literary genre in Scotland, as in almost any society. (Manlove, 2003) Such stories would originally have been told orally. Two of these fairy tales appear in the fifteenth century border ballads of “Tam Lin” and “Thomas the Rhymer”, and seem unique to Scotland, r least because of their debt to native fairy lore. Novelistic retelling of such traditional material became more common in the twentieth century and this, arguably, could be considered the twentieth century’s unique contribution to the telling of traditional tales. This paper explores the question of why these particular ballads should exert such a strong appeal for modern children’s writers, and how such transformations and translations might be considered modern-day variations, upholding the ballad tradition. The exemplar texts include Liz Lochhead’s *Tam Lin’s Lady* as well as a selection of novels for young adults which use one or both of these ballads as their source material. The paper considers how the material in both its original and transformed aspects serves important cultural functions by initiating children into facets of a social heritage and by transmitting many of a culture’s central values and assumptions as well as a body of shared allusions and experiences, ensuring that ballads can still have a significant impact on today’s young readers.