

Fair Annie, Fair Annet, Patient Annie: The Saga of a Romantic Ballad



by Kathy Warnes

The horse fair Annet rode upon,
He ambled like the wind,
With silver he was shod before,
With burning gold behind.

(J.E. Houseman, British Popular Ballads)

Fair Annie, Fair Annet, Patient Annie

A ballad progresses through life stages just like the people who sing it. Fair Annie or Patient Annie, is a haunting example of ballad evolution. The core story of Fair Annie involves a Lord who kidnaps her away from her family when she was young and enjoys a long term relationship with her. They have seven sons together and she is pregnant with their eighth child, but yet he does not marry her because she is poor. Then one day the Lord tells Fair Annie that he plans to marry a richer, younger woman and he orders her to prepare a welcome for his bride.

Fair Annie is sad because she doesn't look like a maiden, and as she welcomes the bride she bemoans her lot. She says that it would be better for her sons if they were rats and she the cat.

The bride comes to see Fair Annie and asks her why she is so sad and who her family was before the Lord kidnapped her. The bride-to-be reveals that she is Annie's sister and says that she will give Annie her dowry because she wants Annie to marry the Lord. Annie's sister remains a maiden and returns home.

There are several Scandinavian versions of fair Annie, including the Swedish Skon Anna and the Danish Skjon Anna. These versions feature a king who has just ascended the throne after his father died. His long time mistress, Anneck, tries to convince him to marry her and the queen mother sides with Anneck. The king refuses and chooses another bride. Anneck asks to speak with the bride and the queen mother arranges for the two rivals to meet. At the meeting, the bride-to-be realizes that Anneck is her sister.

The patience and forbearance of women toward their errant lovers is one of the main themes of Fair Annie or Patient Annie.

Marie de France Tells the Story of Fair Annie and So Does Thomas Percy

Medieval poet Marie de France, translated Mary of France, retold the story of Fair Annie in her lai – or musical narrative poem – called Le Fresne, with a few variations. Scholars believe that she was born in France, but lived in England during the late twelfth century. She lived and created her poetry at an English court resembling the royal court of King Henry II.

In Marie de France's version of the story, Annie is not kidnapped, but abandoned with mementos attesting to her birth. She is one of twins which the people of her time considered a proof of adultery, and a servant abandoned her to keep her from being killed. The bride in Le Fresne is her twin sister.

In the seventeenth century, Thomas Percy, Bishop of Dromore, compiled a book of poems and ballads called Reliques of Ancient Poetry, with some of the poems originating in the twelfth century. A version of Fair Annie appears in Reliques of Ancient Poetry and Francis James Child used Percy's material as an important source for his 1883 ballad collection.

Francis James Child Collects Fair Annie

American scholar, educator, and folklorist Francis James Child who lived from February 1, 1825 to September 11, 1896 compiled a collection of folk songs known as the Child Ballads. He taught at Harvard University, first as a professor of rhetoric and oratory and then in 1876 as Harvard's first English professor. In 1876 he began work on the Child Ballads, a five volume work published between 1882 and 1898. The Child Ballads are a major contribution to English-language folk music.

One of the ballads that Francis James Child recorded, Child ballad number 74, was a variation of the story of Fair Annie appearing under the title "Fair Margaret and Sweet William." In this version of Fair Annie, Sweet William is in love with the maid Fair Margaret, but he tells her that he is marrying someone else. Fair Margaret sees William and his bride together after the wedding ceremony and with a broken heart, she runs off to kill herself. Her ghost comes into

William's bridal chamber and asks William if he loves her or his new bride and William tells Margaret that he loves her much more than his bride. The next morning William wakes up and says that he had a bad dream and in this dream he saw Lady Margaret's ghost. He searches for her and finally finds her body in a coffin. Sweet William kills himself too and the lovers are buried beside each other. A rose grows from Lady Margaret's grave and a green briar from Sweet William's grave. The rose and the green briar grow together and form a lovers knot.

Fair Annie is Still Sung in the Twentieth and Twenty First Centuries

A more detailed although prose version of Fair or Patient Annie appeared in *Old Ballads in Prose*, by Eva March Tappan which Houghton Mifflin published in 1902 for \$1.20. This version of the story has Fair Annie waiting patiently for Lord Thomas to decide whether he wanted her or his new bride.

As the popularity of folk music ebbed and flowed in the twentieth and twenty first centuries modern balladeers sang and reinvented Fair Annie. English folk singer Peter Franklyn Bellamy who lived from September 8, 1944 to September 19, 1991, forged a solo career recording numerous albums and touring folk clubs and concert halls. He also helped found the folk group, The Young Tradition.

In 1983, Peter Bellamy compiled and Anglicized his rendition of Fair Annie from the versions he found in Bronson's *Tradition Tunes of the Child Ballads*. He recorded his version on the song on a cassette that he called *Fair Annie & Peter Bellamy*.

This is Peter Bellamy's version of the lyrics of Fair Annie:

"Comb back your hair, Fair Annie," he said,
"Comb it back into your crown.
For you must live a maiden's life
When I bring my new bride home."

"Oh, how can I look maidenlike
When maiden I am none?
For six fair sons have I had by you
And a seventh coming on?"

"Oh, you will bake my bread," he said,
"And you will keep my home.
And you will welcome my lady gay
When I bring my bridal home."

And on the door he's hung a silken towel,
Pinned by a silver pin,
That Fair Annie she might wipe her eyes
As she went out and in.

Now, six months gone and nine comin' on

And she thought the time o'er-long.
So she's taken a spyglass all in her hand
And up to the tower she has run.

She has look-ed east, she has look-ed west,
She has looked all under the sun,
And who should she see but Lord Thomas
All a-bringin' of his bridal home.

So she has called for her seven sons
By one, by two, by three,
And she has said to her eldest son,
"Oh, come tell me what you see..

So he's look-ed east, he has look-ed west,
He has looked all under the sun.
And who should he see but his father dear,
He was bringin' of his new bride home.

So it's, "Shall I dress in green?" she said,
"Or shall I dress in black?
Or shall I go down to the ragin' main
And send my soul to wrack?"

"Oh, you need not dress in green," he said,
"Nor you need not dress in black.
But throw you wide the great hall door
And welcome my father back."

So it's, "Welcome home, Lord Thomas," she said,
"And you're welcome unto me.
And welcome, welcome, your merry men all
That you've brought across the sea."

And she's serv-ed them with the best of the wine,
Yes, she's serv-ed them all 'round.
But she's drunk water from the well
For to keep her spirits down.

And she's wait-ed upon them all the livelong day,
And she thought the time o'er long.
Then she's taken her flute all in her hand
And up to her bower she has run.

She has fluted east, she has fluted west,
She has fluted loud and shrill.

She wished that her sons were seven greyhounds
And her a wolf on the hill.

Then, "Come downstairs," the new bride said,
"Oh, come down the stairs to me.
And tell me the name of your father dear,
And I'll tell mine to thee."

"Well, King Douglas, it was my father's name
And Queen Chatryn was my mother;
And Sweet Mary, she was my sister dear
And Prince Henry was my brother."

"If King Douglas, it is your father's name
And Queen Chatryn is your mother,
Then I'm sure that I'm your sister dear
As Prince Henry, he is your brother."

"And I have seven ships out on the sea
They are loaded to the brim.
And six of them will I give to you
And one more to carry me home.
Yes, six of them will I give to you
When we've had Lord Thomas burned!"

Using Peter Bellamy's version of Fair Annie, Martin Simpson, another English folksinger, guitarist, and song writer, recorded the song on a 2001 CD that he called *The Bramble Briar*. His lyrics closely follow Peter Bellamy's and he uses the same chord structure as Bellamy's, but his tune that he uses for Fair Annie is different.

Even though Fair Annie is an ancient ballad dating back to the twelfth century, the twenty-first century is young enough for more balladeers and writers to record and reinvent the story of the classic love triangle.

References

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