

TRANSCRIPTION

Duncan Williamson sings a ballad of an otherworld encounter, “Lady Margaret”

ScottishVoicesProj.0528

[This recording was made in August 1986 at a rented house in Auchtermuchty, Fife. Present were Williamson, John Niles, and five members of Niles’s research team, including David Kotyk recording much of the session on video.]

[The excerpt begins with some introductory words by Williamson, not transcribed here, that provide the background of the story. Two children had grown up at the same time in different parts of the same estate and were betrothed to one another at birth, but the boy went missing when he was just a year old. No one knew where he was or what had happened to him. Later the young lady grew up, and at the age of eighteen she went walking through the woods of the estate one day, and this is what happened to her.]

[*Duncan Williamson sings:*]

- 1 Oh Lady Margaret she sat ind her high chamber
 She was sewing her silken seam
 And she luikit east and she luikit west
 And she saw those woods grow green.

- 2 So picking up her petticoats
 Beneath her harlin gown
 At’s when she came to the merry green wood
 That was there that she let them down.

- 3 For she had not pulled one nut, one nut
 One nut nor scarcely three,
 When the highest lord in aa the country round
 Come ridin through the trees.

- 4 He said, “Why do you pull those nuts, those nuts?
 Why do you bend those trees?
 How dare you come to this merry green wood
 Without the leave of me?”

- 5 She said, “Sir, onceten time those woods were mine
 Without the leave of youse,
 And I can pull those nuts, those nuts
 And I can bend those trees.”

- 6 So he tuik her gently by the hand
 An he gently laid her down,

And when he had his will of her
He rose her up again.

7 She said, "Now you have had your will of me
Come tell to me your name,
And if a baby I do have
I will call it the same."

8 He said, "I'm an earl's son from Carlisle
And I own all those woods so green,
But I was taken when I was young
By an evil fairy queen.

9 "But tomorrow night is Halloween
And all those nobles you can see,
And if you will come to the Five Mile Gate
It is there you {will} set me free.

10 "First they will come some dark, some dark
And then they will come some brown,
But when there comes a milk-white steed
You must pull its rider down.

11 "Oh first I'll turn to a wicked snake
And then to a lion so wild,
But hold me fast and fear me not
I may be the father of your child.

12 "Then I'll turn to a naked man,
Oh an angry man I'll be!
Just throw your mantle over me
And then you will have me free."

13 So that night at the midnight hour
Lady Margaret she made her way,
And when she came to the Five Mile Gate
She waited patiently.

14 Oh first there came some dark, some dark,
Then there came some brown,
But when there came a milk-white steed
She pulled its rider down.

15 First he turned to a wicked snake,
Then to a lion so wild,
She held him fast and feared him not

He might be the father of her child.

- 16 Then he turned to a naked man,
 Oh an angry man was he!
 She threw her mantle over him
 And then she had him free.
- 17 Then cried the voice of the fairy queen,
 Oh an angry queen was she!
 Sayin [— — —].

[The video recording breaks off abruptly at this point. As Williamson goes on to complete the song (as was recorded concurrently on an audio tape recorder), the fairy queen declares that if she had known that this would happen, she would have replaced his living heart with a heart of clay. William and Margaret, however, ride away merrily, she on a milk white steed and he on a dapple gray.]

Note

One of Williamson's most evocative ballads, this song usually goes by the title "Tam Lin" (Child no. 39; Roud no. 35). Though often printed, and though well known to the public in the polished literary versions published by Robert Burns and Walter Scott, the ballad of "Tam Lin" has been recovered from oral tradition only rarely in recent years. Williamson's version is a notable exception. According to Duncan, his grandmother Bett MacColl used to sing parts of the song in and around the town of Tarbert, Kintyre. He has also reminisced that when he was a child, his father used to tell him the substance of the ballad as a story. Only later did he learn it as a song (see David Campbell, *A Traveller in Two Worlds* (Luath, 2011), vol. 1, pp. 182–85). Over the years he was able to fill out the words, whether by hearing bits of the song sung round the campfires or, it is fair to guess, by encountering printed versions and then using his powers of reconstruction to shape it into his own form. Transcriptions of his performances dating from as early as 1967 can be consulted in Peter Hall, "Scottish Tinker Songs," *Folk Music Journal*, 3 (1975), 46–47; in the journal *Tocher* 33 (1979), 156–59; in Duncan and Linda Williamson, *A Thorn in the King's Foot* (Penguin, 1987), pp. 258–64; and in Donald Braid, *Scottish Traveller Tales: Lives Shaped through Stories* (University Press of Mississippi, 2002), pp. 8–13. John Niles recorded the song from him on multiple other occasions (on his tapes 84DW01, 86DW22, 87DW02, 87DW06, 87DW07, and 88DW05-V).