The Ballad Tradition

Historical Ballads
Some background to the Historical ballads

Historical ballads date mainly from the period 1550–750, though a few, like “The Battle of Otterburn,” celebrate events of an earlier date, in this case 1388. “The Hunting of the Cheviot,” recorded about the same time and dealing with the same campaign, is better known in a late broadside version called “Chevy Chase.” The details in historical ballads are usually incorrect as to fact because of faulty memory or partisan alterations, but they are valuable in reflecting folk attitudes toward the events they imperfectly report. For example, neither “The Death of Queen Jane,” about one of the wives of Henry VIII, nor “The Bonny Earl of Murray” is correct in key details, but they accurately express the popular mourning for these figures. By far the largest number of ballads that can be traced to historical occurrences have to do with local skirmishes and matters of regional rather than national importance.

The troubled border between England and Scotland in the 16th and early 17th centuries furnished opportunities for intrepid displays of loyalty, courage, and cruelty that are chronicled in such dramatic ballads as “Edom o Gordon,” “The Fire of Frendraught,” “Johnny Cock,” “Johnie Armstrong,” and “Hobie Noble.” Closely analogous to these are Spanish romances such as “The Seven Princes of Lara,” on wars between Moors and Christians.

gbrianica.com

Background to the poem Sir Patric Spence:

‘William H. Matchett considers the ballad probably to be fiction.

The events of the ballad are similar to, and may chronicle, an actual event:

In 1290 the bringing home of the Scottish heir to the throne, the seven-year-old Margaret, Maid of Norway was being conveyed across the North Sea to Scotland, when she took sick and died. Her mother, Margaret was married to Eric II of Norway in the summer of 1281. She was conducted to the wedding in Bergen by a number of knights and nobles, who were drowned on the return voyage. The name "Patrick Spens" has no historical record, and, like many of the heroes of such ballads, is probably an invention,[8] although some historians believe that he was actually Sir Patrick Vans of Barnbarroch.[9] Vans was the original ambassador sent to negotiate the marriage between James VI and Anne of Denmark, and accompanied James VI when he set out during tempestuous weather in October 1589 to bring home his bride, who had been driven back to the coast of Norway by storms. It was Thomas Finlayson Henderson’s theory that the ballad was most likely based on this voyage.

The opening lines refer to a king who is located in Dunfermline where historically there was a royal residence, Malcolm's Tower.

Earl's Knowle on Papa Stronsay is traditionally thought to be the final resting place of Sir Patrick Spens. The history relating to the burial of Sir Patrick Spens on Earl's Knowle on Papa Stronsay is related by William Edmonstoune Aytoun (b. Edinburgh 21 June 1813, d. 4 August 1865), Sheriff and Lord Admiral of Orkney and Shetland. It was after his retirement from this position that he edited a collection of Scottish poetry in which the first poem is Sir Patrick Spens. In his foreword to the poem Aytoun, he writes:

“It is true that the name of Sir Patrick Spens is not mentioned in history; but I am able to state that tradition has preserved it. In the little island of Papa Stronsay, one of the Orcadian group, lying over against Norway, there is a large grave or tumulus, which has been known to the inhabitants, from time immemorial, as ‘The grave of Sir Patrick Spens’. The Scottish ballads were not early current in Orkney, a Scandinavian country; so it is very unlikely that the poem could have originated the name. The people know nothing beyond the traditional appellation of the spot, and they have no legend to tell. Spens is a Scottish, not a Scandinavian name. Is it, then, a forced conjecture, that the shipwreck took place off the iron bound coast of the northern islands, which did not then belong to the Crown of Scotland? ‘Half ower to Aberdour’ signifies nothing more than that the vessel went down half-way between Norway and the port of embarkation.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_Patrick_Spens
Summarise, in your own words, the important points concerning
a) Historical ballads
b) The ballad of Sir Patric Spence

They had not sailed a league,
a league, a league but barely three
When the sky grew dark,
The wind blew loud
and angry grew the sea.

The anchor broke, the topmast split
Twas such a deadly storm.
The waves came over the broken ship,
Til all her sides were torn.
1. The King sits in Dunferline tow,  
   Drinkin the blude-reid wine  
   ‘O whaur will A get a skeely skipper  
   Tae sail this new ship o mine?’

2. O up and spak an eldern knight,  
   Sat at the king’s richt knee;  
   ‘Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor  
   That ever sailt the sea.’

3. Our king has written a braid letter  
   And sealed it wi his hand,  
   And sent it to Sir Patrick Spens,  
   Wis walkin on the strand.

4. 'Tae Noroway, to Noroway,  
   Tae Noroway ower the faem;  
   The King’s dauchter o Noroway,  
   Tis thou maun bring her hame.'

5. The first word that Sir Partick read  
   Sae loud, loud laucht he;  
   The neist word that Sir Patrick read  
   The tear blindit his ee.

6. 'O wha is this has duin this deed  
   An tauld the king o me,  
   Tae send us out, at this time o year,  
   Tae sail abuin the sea?

7. 'Be it wind, be it weet, be it hail, be it sleet,  
   Our ship maun sail the faem;  
   The King’s dauchter o Noroway,  
   Tis we maun fetch her hame.'

8. They hoystit their sails on Monenday morn,  
   Wi aw the speed they may;  
   They hae landit in Noroway  
   Upon a Wodensday.

9. 'Mak ready, mak ready, my merry men aw!  
   Our gude ship sails the morn.’  
   ‘Nou eer alack, ma maister dear,  
   I fear a deadly storm.’

10 ‘A saw the new muin late yestreen  
    Wi the auld muin in her airm  
    And gif we gang tae sea, maister,  
    A fear we’ll cam tae hairm.’

11 They hadnae sailt a league, a league,  
    A league but barely three,  
    When the lift grew dark, an the wind blew loud  
    An gurly grew the sea.

12 The ankers brak, an the topmaist lap,  
   It was sic a deadly storm.
An the waves cam ower the broken ship
Til aw her sides were torn.

13 ‘Go fetch a web o silken claith,
Anither o the twine,
An wap them into our ship’s side,
An let nae the sea cam in.’

14 They fetcht a web o the silken claith,
Anither O the twine,
An they wappp’d them roun that gude ship’s side,
But still the sea cam in.

15 O laith, laith were our gude Scots lords
Tae weet their cork-heelt shuin;
But lang or aw the play wis playd
They wat their hats abuin.

16 And mony wis the feather bed
That flattert on the faem;
And mony wis the gude lord’s son
That never mair cam hame.

17 O lang, lang may the ladies sit,
Wi their fans intae their hand,
Afore they see Sir Patrick Spens
Come sailin tae the strand!

18 And lang, lang may the maidens sit
Wi their gowd kames in their hair,
A-waitin for their ane dear loes!
For them they’ll see nae mair.

19 Half-ower, half-ower to Aberdour,
Tis fifty fathoms deep;
An there lies gude Sir Patrick Spens,
Wi the Scots lords at his feet!

Task: Having read the background to the ballad and one version of the ballad, write what you think might be an English translation (don't cheat by looking it up online!).
Think about the words you would use instead of the Scots
Do you need to change the sentence structure for it to make sense now?
What words are you surmising the meaning from using the context?
Task: Listen to this version of the Ballad
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIfYL2Jp7ml

Task: Answer these questions while listing again or after listening again.
1. Do you hear any instruments that you recognise?
2. Is there one main instrument? ________________
3. How does the mood of the music change when lots of instruments are playing?
4. Describe the voice singing. _____________________________
5. Is the texture of the music thick or thin? _____________________________
6. Are the sounds smooth or jumpy? _____________________________
7. Does the music have a melody? _____________________________
8. Would the melody be easy to sing? _____________________________
9. Does the music have a clear steady beat? _____________________________
10. Does the beat move in Threes? Fours? _____________________________
11. Do you hear any particular rhythm patterns which keep repeating? _____________________________
12. Are there parts of the music that repeats? _____________________________
13. Are there clear sections in the music? _____________________________
14. Does the music get faster/slower, louder/softer? What mood does this create? _____________________________
15. How does listening to this version of the ballad make you feel? _____________________________

*Adapted from https://amplify.nmc.ca/pdf/Active_listening_Guide.pdf

Task: Now, listen to this different version:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gz3HJYGbfuI

Task: Answer these questions while listing again or after listening again.
1. Do you hear any instruments that you recognise?
2. Is there one main instrument? ________________
3. How does the mood of the music change when lots of instruments are playing?
4. Describe the voice singing. _____________________________
5. Is the texture of the music thick or thin? _____________________________
6. Are the sounds smooth or jumpy? _____________________________
7. Does the music have a melody? _____________________________
8. Would the melody be easy to sing? _____________________________
9. Does the music have a clear steady beat? _____________________________
10. Does the beat move in Threes? Fours? _____________________________
11. Do you hear any particular rhythm patterns which keep repeating? _____________________________
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13. Are there clear sections in the music? _____________________________
14. Does the music get faster/slower, louder/softer? What mood does this create? _____________________________
15. How does listening to this version of the ballad make you feel? _____________________________

*Adapted from
Task: Write a detailed paragraph comparing and contrasting these versions of the ballad, using your answers to the questions, and anything else you think is relevant, stating which you prefer and why.
Understanding and Analysis

Task: Read the Article and answer the questions below:

(From: https://smartenglishnotes.com/2019/07/17/sir-patrick-spens-summary-analysis-and-questions/)

1. In what point of view is the poem written? Who is the narrator?

2. In the fifth stanza, Sir Patrick Spens is moved to tears as he reads a letter requesting his help. What causes this display of emotion?

3. What modern-day saying does the line “Be it wind, be it weet, be it hail, be it sleet, Our ship must sail the faem” sound like? (Ask an American friend for answer)

4. What happens to the ship in section II?

5. At the end of the poem, Sir Patrick Spens is said to be laying fifty-fathoms deep. What is he doing there?

6. A ballad generally consists of quatrains with the following metrical scheme: the first and third lines have four accented syllables, while the second and fourth have three accented syllables. What is the metrical scheme of this poem? Does it fit the standard form of the ballad?

Check your answers on the site.
The Death of Queen Jane

Task: Listen to this version of the Ballad

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6ZNp9le6x8

Task: Read this version of the ballad

Queen Jane was in labour
For six days or more,
Till her women got tired
And wished it were o'er.

Good women, good women,
Good women if you be,
Will you send for King Henry,
For King Henry I must see.

King Henry was asent for,
King Henry did come,
For to meet with Queen Jane:
My love, your eyes do look so dim.

King Henry, King Henry,
King Henry if you be,
If you have my right side open'd
You will find my dear baby.

Queen Jane, my love,
Queen Jane, my love,
Such a thing was never known,
If you have your right side open'd
You will lose your dear baby.

Will you build your love a castle
And lie down so deep
For to bury my body
And christen my dear baby.

King Henry went mourning,
And so did his men

Background to the Child versions of the ballad:
‘There are 20 versions of the song given by Child, but they are consistent in the basic tale. Queen Jane is in difficult labour – the time given ranges from three days to an astonishing six weeks – and asks a succession of people to cut open her sides and save her baby. Each refuses her in turn, understanding that this would cause her death. She asks for others to be sent to her – variously her mother, a surgeon or doctor, and King Henry – and of each she makes the same request. Finally someone – King Henry in most versions – succumbs to her pleas and the surgery is done, whereupon she dies. The song ends with descriptions of the mourning, and most versions contrast the joy at the birth of a male heir with the grief over the death of the queen.’

And so did his dear baby
For Queen Jane did dien.

How deep was the mourning,
How wide were the bands,
How yellow, yellow were the flamboys,
They carried in their hands.

There was fiddling, there was dancing,
On the day the babe was born,
While the royal Queen Jane
Beloved lay cold as stone.

Martin Carthy and Dave Swarbrick recorded Death of Queen Jane for their 2006 album Straws in the Wind. Carthy commented in the sleeve notes:
‘Something about Jane Seymour surely got its hooks into the collective imagination because, apart from Death of Queen Jane, there aren't many songs this sympathetic to actual (as opposed to storybook) royalty. Neither is there a great deal of good feelings towards Henry VIII: he's very much on the sidelines. The song has her dying in the immediate aftermath of birth of her son—which of course makes for the starkest drama—but in fact she died twelve days afterwards: the idea of the [Caesarean] section to assist the birth is not, I think, supported by history.’

https://mainlynorfolk.info/cyril.tawney/songs/deathofqueenjane.html

Task:
Quote and comment on all the sympathetic depictions of Queen Jane.

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Quote and comment on examples of Henry’s grief.

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Task: Listen to this version of the ballad

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT2ugT3am1M&feature=youtu.be

That’s it. No other task. It’s just too beautiful not to include.
‘Two main ballad traditions survive relating to the death of Jane Seymour, the third wife of ___________. One comprises formally composed verse, while the second consists of vernacular ballads that developed through ___________. One of the most common ___________ within these ballads is the suggestion that a ___________ was employed after a difficult labour, and that this contributed to Jane’s death. There has been a great deal of historiographical ___________ surrounding this topic, which has long been infused with ___________, and the ballads were also influenced by contemporary ___________ and ideology. An examination of the historical context reveals that until the ___________. The surviving historical evidence does not allow us to ___________ with confidence the conditions surrounding Jane’s death, but an ___________ of the ballads in their historical context does provide ___________ into past understandings of the events and the role of the songs in communicating such ideas.

Numerous ___________ accounts of the circumstances of Jane Seymour’s death have been recorded since the ___________, including ballads composed and published as poetical works, and ballads that circulated in oral tradition before being ___________. Examination of the ___________ within their historical contexts allows us to gain insights into the origins and credibility of the differing accounts of Jane Seymour’s death and, accordingly, a better ___________ of the role that the ballad might have played in communicating ideas to ___________.


- early eighteenth century, sixteenth century, wife, evidence, understanding, examination, Henry VII, transcribed, oral tradition, ascertain, political bias, themes, contradictory, caesarean section, the public, opinion, debate, insights, ballads,
Flodden Field

Task: Read the lyrics of the ballad

KING JAMIE hath made a vow,
    Keepe it well if he may!
    That he will be at lovely London
Upon Saint James his day.

‘Upon Saint James his day at noone,
    At faire London will I be,
    And all the lords in merrie Scotland,
They shall dine there with me.’

Then bespake good Queene Margaret,
    The teares fell from her eye:
    ‘Leave off these warres, most noble king,
Keepe your fidelitie.

‘The water runnes swift and wondrous deepe,
    From bottome unto the brimme;
    My brother Henry hath men good enough;
England is hard to winne.’

‘Away,’ quoth he, ‘with this silly foole!
    In prison fast let her lie:
    For she is come of the English bloud,
And for these words she shall dye.’

With that bespake Lord Thomas Howard,
    The queenes chamberlaine that day:
    ‘If that you put Queene Margaret to death,
Scotland shall rue it alway.’

Then in a rage King Jamie did say,
    ‘Away with this foolish mome!
    He shall be hanged, and the other be burned,
So soone as I come home.’

At Flodden Field the Scots came in,
    Which made our English men faine;
    At Bramstone Greene this battaile was seene,
There was King Jamie slaine.

Then presently the Scots did flie,
    Their cannones they left behind;
    Their ensignes gay were won all away,
Our soldiers did beate them blinde.

To tell you plaine, twelve thousand were slaine
    That to the fight did stand,
    And many prisoners tooke that day,
The best in all Scotland.

That day made many [a] fatherlesse child,
    And many a widow poore,
    And many a Scottish gay lady
Sate weeping in her bower.

Jack with a feather was lapt all in leather,
    His boastings were all in vaine;
    He had such a chance, with a new morrice-dance,
He never went home againe.
Understanding and Analysis

Task: Note down the words and phrases you aren’t familiar with (1). Note what you think they mean (2). Then find their meaning (3).

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‘On the 9th September 1513, while Henry VIII was away, busy campaigning against the French, James IV and his Scottish troops crossed the border and challenged the English force, which was headed by Thomas Howard, the Earl of Surrey, at Flodden in Northumberland. Before leaving for France, Henry VIII had left his wife, Catherine of Aragon in charge of England as Governor of the Realm and Captain General of the Forces. She was Regent and was to manage the kingdom, with the help of a council, while Henry was fighting France, with the help of Imperial forces. Flodden was a victory for Catherine. After about three hours of fighting, the English army had defeated the Scots, killing most of the Scottish aristocracy, including two abbots, two bishops, twelve earls and King James IV himself. The English army lost around 1,500 men, whereas the Scottish army lost 5,000 – 17,000, depending on which source you believe.’


Task: Write the letter Catherine of Aragon would have sent to Henry VII, as you imagine in, using modern day English.

Note the following as you draft:
- The character of Catherine of Aragon:
  - She is Spanish royalty, and not just royalty, but the daughter of the King and Queen, the daughter of Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon! Think about those titles.
  - She came to England when she was a young girl, and was married to Henry's brother shortly before he died.
  - She married Henry at his request because she saw it as her duty, something she took seriously, something she believed was given to her from God.
  - She was in charge of the country while Henry was away.
  - When Henry ‘divorced’ her, by many accounts she reminded stoic; she refused to accept the divorce, even until her death.
  - She was not someone to be trifled with!
- Search for information on Catherine’s life and her character.
- Note down the important points you’ve found.

You letter:

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Just for fun, try and translate your letter into Tudor English.

You letter:
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Task: Using a mobile phone, text the news of the victory, from Catherine to Henry (NOT that such news should be delivered in this manner).
Writing a modern-historical ballad.

Take an incident or piece of British news (local or nationwide), and create your own ballad version of it.

Checklist for Ballads
A ballad is a form of verse to be sung or recited and characterised by its presentation of a dramatic or exciting episode in simple narrative form.

Here are some typical characteristics:

Plot:
• a single episode of highly dramatic nature is presented
• the supernatural is likely to play an important part
• the incidents are usually such as happen to common people (as opposed to nobility) and often have to do with domestic episodes
• physical courage and love are frequent themes

Structure:
• incremental repetition is common
• transitions are abrupt
• often the ballad is brought to a close with some sort of summary stanza

Narration:
• slight attention is paid to characterisation or description in a detached narration

Dialogue:
• action is largely developed through dialogue with little clue as to who is speaking

Language:
• tragic situations and sudden disasters are presented with the utmost simplicity using plain, simple language

Taken from: http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/analyzing-comparing-medieval-modern-1097.html?tab=4