

Danish Ballads In English

Simon ROSATI

► Key Words

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Elveskud

The Elf-Shot

Steeleye Span

▼ABSTRACT

This survey article describes the slender but long-running thread of translations of Danish ballads into English. It starts from the early nineteenth century (Jamieson 1806) and runs through to the present day (Broadbridge 2011). It gives examples of translations, focusing where possible on the ballad *Elveskud* (DgF 47). There is consideration of the language and suitability for singing of the various translations. The article concludes by mentioning available recordings of Danish ballads in English, particularly two by the folk-rock band Steeleye Span.

Danish Ballads in English

The English folk-rock group Steeleye Span have recorded a good many ballads over their long career, with a particular interest in ballads which include folklore, of which there are not all that many in English (though see Wimberly 1965). In 1974 their album *Now We Are Six* included a ballad entitled *Seven Hundred Elves*, and in 1975 *All Around My Hat* included *Dance With Me*. Both ballads concern elves. More important for this article, both ballads are in fact Danish. *Seven Hundred Elves* is, in Danish, *Troldren og bondrens hustru* (DgF 52¹) and *Dance With Me* is one of the most famous Danish ballads *Elveskud* (DgF 47). There is a long, though slender, thread of translations of ballads from Danish into English, and it is the purpose of this article to describe those translations, focusing, where possible, on *Elveskud*. Translations from German versions of the original Danish will not be considered.

In the song *Elveskud* a man rides out on the eve of his wedding to invite guests. He comes across a group of elves, among them the elf-king's daughter, who invites him to dance. When he politely declines, she offers him various precious gifts. When he still declines, she becomes angry and strikes him a magical, and mortal, blow. He returns home to die, asking his mother to keep the news of his death from his bride-to-be. His mother does this, but the young woman finally realizes the truth. Both she and the mother die of grief. In various forms the ballad spread to many European countries, perhaps originating as the Breton *Ann Aotro Ar C'Hont* (see Luzel 1971 I: 4-24).

Prior to the Romantic movement, interest in the songs of the people was very limited. In the Sixteenth Century Sir Philip Sidney rather shame-facedly described being moved by the old song of Percy and Douglas (Child 161 and 162²) (widely quoted, but see for example Marsh (2013: 263)); Izaak Walton mentions *Chevy Chase* (Child 162) and *Jonny Armstrong* (Child 169) (2000 [1653]: 81), and Samuel Pepys, in his diary entry for January 2nd, 1666, mentions hearing *Barbara Allen* (Child 84) (Pepys 2003: 567), but that is about all. The publication in 1765 by Bishop Percy of *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (Percy 1885), and, in 1778-9 in Germany, Herder's *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (Herder 1975), which included a translation of *Elveskud*, as *Erlkönigs Tochter*, helped stimulate great interest in the songs of the common people.

A problem for both English and German speakers was the paucity of available songs, and interest, including Herder's, turned to other languages. In Denmark aristocratic ladies had long had an interest in ballads, collecting them in personal notebooks, and a volume of ballads was published as early as 1591, Vedel's *Folkevisebog* (Ed. Jørgensen 1926). Thus material was available to translators. Denmark was also the first country where editors began to publish a truly scholarly edition of ballads. Svend Grundtvig published the first volume of *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* in 1853, and this had a huge influence on Francis James Child when he came to prepare a scholarly edition of ballads in English, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-1898). So there has been an early and continuing awareness in English-speaking countries of Danish ballads in print.

The Nineteenth Century

In 1806 Robert Jamieson published *Popular Ballads and Songs from Tradition* and included a number of translations from the Danish, among them *Sir Oluf and the Elf-King's Daughter*, which is *Elveskud*. He starts as follows (p 219):

Sir Oluf the hend has ridden sae wide,
All unto the bridal feast to bid.

And lightly the elves, sae feat and free,

They dance all under the greenwood tree!

And there danced four, and there danced five;
The Elf-King's daughter she reekit bilive.

Jamieson clearly feels that Scots is the suitable language for ballads, perhaps influenced by Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, published in 1802-3, which claimed ballads for Scotland. For many people, including many Scots, words such as 'hend', 'reetit' and 'bilive' will not be understandable, or even pronounceable. Does 'bilive' rhyme with five? Perhaps, but stanza one does not have a true rhyme (which is not unusual in ballads). The word 'feat' is in the dictionary, meaning elegant, but it is not common. Thus it is not clear what the Elf-King's daughter does in stanza three. It is also noteworthy that Jamieson includes no refrain.

George Borrow (1803-1881) translated ballads from a wide variety of languages, many of which were published in *Romantic Ballads Translated from the Danish* (1826), *Ballads of All Nations* (Ed. Johnson 1927), and most notably in volumes 7 to 9 of the *Works of George Borrow* (Ed. Shorter 1967) as *Songs of Scandinavia*. Volume 7 includes both ballads recorded by Steeleye Span, as *Ellen of Villenskov* (pp. 103-108) and *Sir Olaf* (pp. 142-144):

Sir Olaf rides on his courser tall,
Guests to bid to his bridal hall.
Gaily they dance in the greenwood.

In fours and fives the elfins dance,
The elf-king's daughter I see advance.
Gaily they dance in the greenwood.

'Sir Olaf, cease so fierce to ride,
And dance with me for a little tide.'
Gaily they dance in the greenwood.

Borrow gives no details of his source. It is easy to understand, and trips easily off the tongue when recited.

Moving on, we come to Prior's *Ancient Danish Ballads* (three volumes, 1860). This is a scholarly work, and includes 173 Danish ballads, an appendix of translations from other languages, a lengthy introduction and descriptions of each individual ballad. By this time Grundtvig's huge collection of Danish ballads, *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* (1853-1976), was under way and Prior uses this, as well as Vedel. He includes both of the ballads that Steeleye Span recorded, as *The Elf and the Farmer's Wife* (volume II: 164-178) and *Sir Olave* (volume III: 298-309). His headnotes make it clear that he does not like Jamieson's 'broad

Scotch' (II: 164). There are two versions of *Sir Olave*, the first of which starts as follows (III: 301-2):

Sir Olave a journey at nightfall rode,
It seem'd as if round him daylight glow'd.
But what avails bewailing?

The hill he had trodden, where all by night
The dwarfs were tripping their dance so light.

And out of the group a maiden flew,
Her fair white arm on his shoulder threw.

The second starts like this:

Sir Olave he speeds his lonely way
To bid his friends to his wedding day.
*The Elves in chorus with mirth and glee
Are dancing beneath the greenwood tree.*

And four he saw dance, and five saw dance,
The Elf-king's daughter herself advance.
The Elves etc.

It is notable that the first has an ominous refrain, while the second seems cheerful. In both cases there is dramatic irony in the tension between the mood of the refrain and the events of the ballad. The first version is rather wordy, meant for reading, not singing. The second line of the second stanza of the second version seems ungrammatical, unless think that Sir Olave saw the Elf-king's daughter advance.

In 1866 Robert Buchanan published *Ballad Stories of the Affections*, a collection of translations of Scandinavian ballads and more modern pieces. This included both *Troldren og bondrens hustru*, as *The Wee, Wee Gnome* (1869 edition, pp. 20-26) and *Elveskud* as *The Elf Dance* (pp. 53-56), which starts as follows:

Sir Oluf, the knight, full wide hath rid,
The guests to his wedding feast to bid.
But all in the moonlight the elves dance feattly!

Lightly the elfin companie

Is dancing under the greenwood tree.

There dances four, there dances five-
How in their midst shall Sir Oluf thrive?

Buchanan has the following to say on rendering Danish ballads into English (p xiv):

Had I consulted my own taste, and translated throughout in broad, old Scotch (the only really fitting equivalent for old Danish), I should not only have hopelessly bewildered English readers, but have laid my efforts open to dangerous comparison with those of Jamieson. I have, therefore done the best I could in the English dialect, using Scotch words liberally, but only such Scotch words as are quite familiar to all readers of our own ballads.

Gray (1954: xiii) thinks Buchanan should have had more confidence in his own judgement, and translated into Scots. He does use the word 'featly' (see Jamieson above), but otherwise tries to create atmosphere by using archaisms ('hath'), unusual forms ('rid' for 'ridden') or unusual spellings ('companie'). He also uses the form 'dances' instead of the expected 'dance' to create two extra syllables.

The Twentieth Century

E. M. Smith-Dampier published *Ballads From The Danish* (1910) and *Danish Ballads* (1920, reissued in 2013), the latter being a selection of translations of ballads included in *Danske Folkeviser*, edited by Olrik, with Falbe-Hansen, first published in 1899, which includes *Elveskud* (1927 edition, pp. 126–128). It starts as follows:

Hr. Oluf rider saa vide,
Alt til sit Bryllup at byde.
Men dansen den gaar saa let gennem Lunden.

Hr. Oluf rider med Bjærge,
Der dansed Elver og Dværge.

Der dansed fire, der dansed fem,
Elverkongens Datter rækker Haanden frem.

Smith-Dampier's translation, entitled *The Elfin Shaft* (2013: 116–119), begins as follows:

Sir Oluf hath ridden west and east
To bid his friends to his bridal feast.
Gay goes the dance by the greenwood tree.

By the howe he took his way,
And there danced elf and fay.

There they danced in blithesome band;
The Elf-king's daughter reached forth her hand.

Clearly, Smith-Dampier is concerned to keep the original rhythm and rhyme scheme, which leads her to introduce points of the compass in the first stanza, to translate *Dværge* as fay (fairy), rather than dwarves in the second stanza, and not to mention the number of dancers ('fire' is four and 'fem' is five) in the third stanza. Nonetheless, the story is the same. She, like Buchanan, uses the archaic 'hath'. A howe is where one would expect to find fairies, but the use of 'fay' and 'blithesome' creates a rather twee effect, more Disney than Grimm. This version would be difficult to sing: the third lines of stanzas one and three have nine syllables, while that of stanza two has six, or possibly seven if we say 'dancéd'.

Alexander Gray published two collections of Danish ballads, *Four and Forty* (1954) and *Historical Ballads of Denmark* (1958). *Four and Forty* includes a number of supernatural ballads, but not *Elveskud*. Here is the start of *The Fause Kelpie (Nøkkens Svig)* (1954: 12):

By the Kirk there's dancing' on Holy Fair;
(At the rise o' the brae!)
The lassies are dancing' wi' wind-blawn hair.
(Heavy's the hert, when you ride awa.)

Wi' glintin' swords knights boo as they pass;
There, singin' to them, is the King's ain lass.

Prood was the lass, and braw her sang;
The kelpie heard it, and he thocht lang.

In his introduction, Gray is somewhat critical of Jamieson's Scots approach of 150 years earlier, suggesting he goes too far, using archaic language that is difficult to follow (p xiv). But he does feel that Scots is more suitable than standard English:

I have long been convinced that the Folk-poetry and the ballads of the Germanic and the Scandinavian peoples are untranslatable into standard English without the

sacrifice of all the essential flavour which makes them what they are, and which alone lures the translator onto his perilous task. (pp. xi-xii).

In Britain, ballads are generally associated with Scotland, no doubt due in part to Scott - indeed ballads are sometimes referred to as Border ballads. Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-1898) contains a preponderance of Scottish texts. David Buchan (1972) claims Aberdeenshire as the home of the best ballads in Britain. Gray's rendition is not particularly difficult to understand, and reading aloud helps to clarify the meaning; and in any case he glosses words he thinks might be difficult. A kelpie, incidentally, is a water monster, in Scandinavia a troll.

In 1967 Dal and Meyer published *Danish Ballads and Folk Songs*, a translation of Dal's *Danske Viser: Gamle Folkeviser, Skæmt, Efterklang* (1962). It includes *Elveskud* as *The Elf-Shot* (pp. 33-35), which starts as follows:

*Many ride, erect and red,
Still next morning, ill and dead.*

*So widely Sir Oluf does ride,
His wedding guests to invite.
So blithely they tread the dance in the meadow.*

*The dance is trod by five, by ten,
The elfin king's daughter waves to him.*

It is a little unclear how the unusual warning at the start relates to the rest of the ballad, but it does provide an ominous tension with the typical refrain, which as usual gains increasing dramatic irony as the action unfolds. It is not in the source, which is Peder Syv's 1695 expanded edition of Vedel (1591). Meyer's translation would be difficult to sing, with the number of syllables per line being quite variable: line two of the first stanza has seven syllables and three stresses, whereas line two of the second stanza has nine syllables and four stresses, for example.

A small detour from translation brings us to a slight oddity. The Canadian children's fantasy writer K. V. Johansen's *The Serpent Bride* (1998) consists of retellings in prose of ten Danish ballads, all of which are in Grundtvig. *Elveskud* is not included, presumably as all the stories need to end happily. The first story, *The Mighty Harp* (*Harpenskraft* DgF 40), is a version of the Orpheus story, though with a better outcome. It starts as follows:

William had arrived at the farmstead in the fall, striding long and lanky through the gate as though nothing were further from his mind than the looming thunderstorm

that piled black clouds over the hills and grumbled warning of rain to come. (p. 15)

She continues in this vein, taking six pages to reach the marriage of the two protagonists, whereas Gray's version (1954: 8) starts:

In her bower sat William wi' his May;
 (*The strings are o' gowd.*)
They played at the dice on their weddin' day.
 (*Sae sweetly he harped to his lady.*)

There could hardly be a better example of the economy of ballads. On the other hand, Johansen, presumably of Danish ancestry, is bringing the appealing subject matter of the Danish ballads to a new audience, and her acknowledgement of Olrik, Smith-Dampier, Prior and Grundtvig (no page number) demonstrates her knowledge.

The Twenty-First Century

Finally, we have a very recent example of translation in Broadbridge's (2011) bilingual edition of Danish ballads. The English and Danish texts are side by side, the only example of such a practice in all the translations. There are also lavish, colourful and attractive paper-cut illustrations by Sonia Brandes. The book is a most appealing artifact, produced with financial support (as was some of Borrow's work back in the day). So it seems a shame that the book seems to have been remaindered fairly quickly. Perhaps this demonstrates just how slender, albeit long, is the thread of Danish ballads in English. *Elverskud* (sic) is quoted on the front inner flap of the dust jacket, and the refrain provides the title in both languages. Here is the beginning (p. 118):

Sir Olaf rides out far and wide,
His wedding guests to invite.
So sweetly they sing in the meadow.

Hr. Oluf hand rider saa vide,
Alt til sit Bryllup at byde.
*Men dansen den gaar saa let gennem
Lunden.*

Sir Oluf rides out to the hills,
He sees the dancing of the elves.

Hr. Oluf rider med Bjerger,
Der gik en Dans med Dværger.

As four and five dance in a ring,
The Elf-King's daughter waves to him.
frem.

Der danser fire, der danser fem,
Elverkongens Datter rækker Haanden

And here is the end (p. 121):

Sir Oluf and his beloved maid,
His mother too with sorrow laid.
So sweetly they sing in the meadow.

Hr. Oluf og hans Fæstemø,
Hans Moder blev og af Sorgen død.
*Men dansen den gaar saa let gennem
Lunden.*

Broadbridge has chosen to use simple, standard English, with as many rhymes, half-rhymes and as much assonance as possible, giving an appealing and singable ballad. The light rhythm works with the refrain to create dramatic irony as things turn bad, ending in three deaths on a wedding day. Broadbridge (pp. 167–169) is rather critical of earlier translations, regarding some as too Scottish, and therefore difficult for a wider audience, (Jamieson, Buchanan, Gray); he does not see why ballads should be seen as peculiarly Scottish, unlike Scott, or even Child, most of whose examples come from Scotland. He regards other translations as too literal (Borrow, Smith-Dampier, Meyer), and therefore offering ‘literalness without the poetry’ (p. 168). He has a point, and his translation is most appealing.

Recordings

Bronson (2009 I: ix) rhetorically asked ‘When is a ballad not a ballad?’ and answered his own question ‘When it has no tune.’ We have seen that many of the translations would not be easy to sing, but let us turn now to sung versions. In fact, there seem to be very few recordings of Danish ballads in English. In 2007 Bill Shute and Lisa Null recorded *The Feathered Maiden or Nilaus Erlandsen (Jomfruen i fugleham* DgF 56), which they adapted from Dal and Meyer (1967: 41–43). Jim Moray’s version of *Lord Douglas* (or *Earl Brand*, Child 7) includes a naming taboo which is not present in collected versions. While fighting his lover’s brothers he will be safe as long as she does not call his name; but when he seems to be about to kill her father, she calls on him by name to stop and he receives a mortal wound. This naming taboo can be found in the Danish ballads *Ribold og Guldborg* (DgF 82) (see Child I: 88–90), and in *Hildebrand og Hilde* (DgF 83), which is where Moray says he found it (sleeve notes to Moray 2012). The Anglo-German band Litha recorded a German version of *Elveskud, Herr Oluf*, which is Herder’s translation. But, other than Steeleye Span’s two songs, that seems to be about all.

Steeleye Span’s versions of *Seven Hundred Elves* and *Dance With Me* are both arranged for a rock band with a violin player. This can make hearing the words quite difficult, which is unfortunate when the songs are ballads. Further, the lead singer Maddy Prior’s voice seems rather far back in the mix. Both songs use a stanza of the ballad as a chorus. *Dance With Me* starts as follows (sleeve notes, edited for punctuation):

A knight he rode his lonely way
Thinking about his wedding day
As he rode through a forest near
The elf king's daughter did appear

Out she stepped from the elfin band
Smiling she held out her hand
Welcome, Sir Knight, why such speed?
Come with me the dance to lead

Ch. Dance, dance, follow me
Round and round the greenwood tree
Dance, dance, while you may
Tomorrow is your dying day
Dance with me, dance with me

The song ends with the blow, so only the chorus tells us the outcome. The chorus also has a cheerful melody, preserving the tension present in many print versions. The words bear a strong similarity to Prior's B version (1860 II: 306-309), so we may speculate that he was the source, particularly given that the words of *Seven Hundred Elves* closely resemble Prior's C version of *The Elf and the Farmer's Wife* (1860 III: 175-177).

Of Child's 305 ballads, only numbers 19, 32 to 44, and number 113 (discovered and published later) involve fairies, elves, witches, shapeshifting and other such folklore. Steeleye Span had already recorded *King Henry* (32), *Allison Gross* (35), *Thomas Rymer* (37), *The Wee Wee Man* (38), *The Queen of Elfland's Nourice* (40) and *The Twa Magicians* (44); in several cases theirs was a rare or even unique recording of that particular song. Another English folk-rock band, Fairport Convention, had made *Tam Lin* (39) their own. So they were running out of such ballads in English. Given the availability of Danish ballads in English, it seems a natural development for them to arrange and record two of them. (Steeleye Span have subsequently recorded *King Orfeo* (19) and *The Great Silkie of Sules Skerry* (113)).

When they were starting out, there was a lot of interest in folklore and neo-pagan matters, reflected in the recordings of contemporary folk bands such as Spriguns and Mr. Fox, an interest that has surfaced in folklore studies from time to time since the late nineteenth century, including Twenty-first Century folk music.

Steeleye Span's interest coincides with that of many listeners, and a thread of readers over two hundred years, which helps explain the continuing appeal of *Seven Hundred Elves* and *Dance With Me*.

Notes

- 1 DgF numbers refer to numbers assigned in *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* (Grundtvig et al.).
- 2 Child numbers refer to numbers assigned in *The English And Scottish Popular Ballads* (Child).

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