

Folk & Traditional Song Lyrics

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Lady Odivere (Grey Silkie 3)

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In Norowa a lady bade
A bonny lass in muckle gear
And it was soothly sung and said
She was a lady sweet and fair

Them cam' fae east and west i' pride
An' some cam' sailan owre the sea
An' a' tae win her for a bride
But never a bride wad the lady be

She bade them gang heem an' mend their claes
That they had worn in comin' sae far
She ca'd them fules, she ca'd them flaes
Set stooks on them and gae them a skar [frightened them]

There was a man baith stoor and strang
An' he wis neemed Odivere
He lo'ed the sword, he lo'ed the sang
But aye he lo'ed the ladies mair

This Odivere fell on his knee
An' vooed a voo upo' his life
And swore b' him that hang on tree [Odin, not Christ]
To mak' this lady fair his wife

He's coorted her, he's wedded her
An' they were blithe and blissfu' baith
An' aye he bragged near and far
He won his wife b' Odin's oath

He's left her in his boorly ha'
A-greetan sair that dolefu' day
Tae Guthaland he's gaen awa' [The Holy Land, lit 'God's land']
The muckle pagan loons to slay

As he cam' back fae Guthaland
I' Muckle Garth he bade awhile [Byzantium]
An' foys aand fiechtins had tae hand
For ladies fair did him beguile

At Muckle Garth he tarried lang
Black sight on him for bidan there! [The evil eye]

While sat i' dule her maids amang
Wi' tearful e'e his lady fair

An' aft she boonied hersel sae braw
An' aft her gowden hair wad keem
An' then look owre the castle wa'
To see her ain good-man come heem

An' aye she looked and lipped lang [Expected]
For many a dowie day and year
But Ovidere, he didna come
Nor word o' Oddie did she hear

[The ballad singer pauses]

At e'enin i' the mirkin o't [Darkening]
A stately knight cam' tae her ha'
Fu' lood he chapped on the yett
And loodly at the yett did ca'

'A boon, a boon, ye porter loon
Bed me this nicht within your ha'
Me vista's lang, the night is mirk
An' home and haudin' far awa"

'Begone, begone, awa, awa
To bed you here that may not be
Nae stranger sleeps within' this ha'
While my good lord's ayont the sea'

'Gin you wad no' find the weight o' me hand
Gae tell your lady mistress fair
That I hae come fae Guthaland
An' bear her word of Odivere'

The yett was opened at his word
An' boldly strode he in the ha'
And a' the women roond him said
A stoorer knight they never saw

An' he's taen off his silken cap
An' he's gaen doon upo' his knee
And he's laid a gowd ring on the lady's lap
That she was unco fain to see

'A token fae thee husband dear
I bring tae thee my lady fair
I left him weel, i' jolly cheer
They ca' him noo Sir Odivere

'An' weel he's won his knight's degree
B' slaying many a soldier stoor
An' makan hosts of pagans flee
Afore his sword sae sharp an' door'

When she the gowden ring had seen
She took nae tent o' what he said [heed]
But drew her kerchief owre her een
An' colour fae her fair face fled

But syne her bonny face grew bright [Afterwards]
An' blithely blinked her bonny e'e
'Rise up, rise up, ye valiant knight
For oncons guid ye bring to me [News, tidings]

'A stately bulie i' the ha' [Feast]
Poor oot the best o' blude-red wine
Wi' futh o' a' that's guid and braw [Abundance]
That this brave knight fu' weel may dine'

An' many a tale he told that nicht
O' tulyies focht for ladies fair [Contests]
An' a' about that worthy knight
I' Guthaland, Sir Odivere

He minted aye, tho he never said [Hinted]
An' skeeted aye i' ilka tale [Insinuated]
That Odivere was a rovin' blade
An' liked the lasses ower weel

An when the bulie was fairly done
An' a' the servants gaen tae bed
An' the twa themsels were left alane
The lady to the stranger said

'Why bring ye back that gowden ring
That brings to me sair dule and pain
That minds me o' the blithesome days
When I o' thee was ower fain?'

'Ye ken, fair dame, to me aye dear
Lang syne ye gae that ring tae me
An' on this ring i' moon-licht clear
Ye swore forever mine to be

'An' I i' dule hae gaen sin' syne
A lanely man on land an' sea
An' never a face hae seen but thine

That I could spier me wife to be'

'Noo wheest, noo wheest, ye fause-tongued knight
Your words will work me muckle skaith [Harm, injury]
Full weel ken ye what sundered us
It was the dowie Odin's aith'

He's taen her white hand i' his stately nave [Fist]
An' fain was she, an' fain was he
What happened next ye need no' speer [Inquire]
In sooth I wisna dare to see

The knight's awa' i' the morning grey
He bade no' for a farewell foy
What naebody kens, naebody can say
But the lady's left i' peerie joy [Small]

Her bonny e'en blinked no sae bright
Her red and white grew white an' grey
An' ilka day she wished for nicht
An' ilka nicht she wished for day

[The ballad singer pauses]

I heard a lady ba'an her bairn
An' aye she rockit, an' aye she sang
An' took sae hard upo' the verse
Till the he'rt within her body rang

'Ba loo, ba loo, me bonny bairn
Ba loo, lillie, ba loo lay
Sleep thu, me peerie bonie budo
Thu little kens thee mither's wae

'Aloor! I dinna ken thee faither
Aloor, aloor, me waeful sin
I dinna ken me bairn's faither
Nor yet the land that he lives in

'Aloor, aloor, ca'd sall I be
A wicked woman b' a' men
That I, a married wife, soud hae
A bairn tae him I dunno ken'

Then up an' spake a grimly gest [Apparition]
That stood sae lech at her bed feet
'O here I am, thee bairn's faither
Although I'm no' thee husband sweet'

'Me bairn's faither I ken thu are
Nae luv sae sweet I'll ever hae
And yet I hae a guid, guid man
That's far awa' fae me this day'

'I care no' for thee wedded earl
I wish his face I'll never see
But when six months is come an' gane
I'll come and pay the noris fee [Nursing fee]

'It's no be said thu tint b' me [Lost]
A bodle worth o' worldly gare
So when I come, thu'll get thee fee
An' I me bairn to be me heir'

'Noo, for the love I bore tae thee
A love that's brought me muckle shame
O tell me where thee home may be
An' tell me true thee vera name'

'San Imravoe it is me name
I gang on land and swim on sea
Amang the ranks o' selkie folk
I am a yarl o' high degree

'I am a man upo' the land
I am a selkie i' the sea
My home it is the Soolis-Skerry
An' a' that's there is under me

'Mair or a thoosand selkie folk
Tae me a willing service gae
An' I am king o' a' the folk
An' law to them is what I say'

'O hoo can thu thee bairn tak'
An' hoo can thu thee bairn save?
I' thee caald home thu'll only mak'
The grimly sea me bairn's grave'

'Me peerie bairn I'll safely ferry
Tho' I hae neither ship nor skift
Wi' muckle care tae Soolis-Skerry
Afore the sun's hich i' the lift'

'But hoo sall I me young son ken
An' hoo sall I me bairn know?'
'O' a' the selkies i' Soolis-Skerry
He'll be the middlemaist o' them a'

'His megs sall a' be black as soot [Flippers]
His croopan white as driven snaw [Body]
An' I beside him, like the sam'
I was tae thee i' times awa'

'Me ain guidman's a warrior prood
An' aye a stival nave has he [Strong fist]
An' he may prick or club me bairn
When he's a selkie i' the sea'

'I fear no that, I fear but this
That cockcraa comes an' finds me here
But come what may, I come again
An' fetch me bairn in ae half-year

'For then will be a seventh stream
An' then again a man I'll be
An' tak' me bonny peerie bairn
A' tae the boons o' Soolis-Skerry'

When the six months were come and gane
He cam' to pay the noris fee
The tane o' his hands was fu' o' gowd
The tither fu' o' white monie

The lady's taen a gowden chain
Her waddin' boon fae Odivere
She tied it roond her bairn's haas [Neck]
It for her sake she bade him wear

'I'm come to fetch me bairn awa'
Farewell for thu're anither's wife'
'I'll wad thee wi' a gowden ring
An' bide beside thee a' me life'

'Thu wadna when I wad, goodwife
I winno when thu're willan noo
That day thu tint thu'll never find
It's late, it's owre late tae rue

The lady lives a lanely life
An' aften looks upo' the sea
Still lipenan her first luve ta fin' [Expecting]
But jubish that can ever be [Doubtful]

[The ballad singer pauses]

So Odivere's come home again

Wi' muckle store o' wardly gear
An' he, his lady, an' his men
Mak' holidays wi' bulies rare

They danced and sang, they told their tales
An' syne sat doun tae drink and dine
Wi' joles of flesh and fuman cogs [Ale kegs]
An' wallie horns o blude-red wine

Ae day says Oddie tae his men
'I doot gin here we langer link
We a' grow fat as butterba's
An' dee wi' futh of meat and drink [Excess]

'It's weel enough a peerie while
I canna thole it lang ava
Let's hunt the otters on the shore
An' start the morn a' blink o' da"

They hunted otters on the shore
A selkie ran oot o' a geo [Large crag fissure]
An' Odivere he took no lang
To fell him wi' a mester blow

Then oot and spak een o' his men
'Far hae I sailed and muckle seen
But never gowd on a selkie's haas
Till noo I see 't with baith me e'en'

They bore the selkie tae the ha'
An' never a word said Odivere
His face was black an' lowed his e'en
Though he did neither ban nor swear

'Co' doon, co' doon, Lady Odivere
Co' doon and see me ferly fang [Strange capture]
Ye's read tae me this riddle-rae
B' a' the saints that ever sang'

The lady she cam' doon tae see
They made sae muckle steer
'Here's the gowd chain ye got fae me
Tell me, goodwife, hoo cam' it here?'

'Aloor, aloor, me bonny bairn
Me bairn, what am I born tae see?
Me malison lie on the hand
That's wrought this deed o' blude on thee!'

The lady wi' her torn hair
She was a doleful sicht tae see
Her greetan lood and sabban sair
Her arms aroond the dead selkie

'Yer bairn, guidwife! No bairn o' mine
An' yet ye were me wedded wife
I doot, when I've been far fae home
Ye've led a wicked woman's life'

'An' gin I be thee wedded wife
A wedded man wur thu tae me?
Ye left me tae a lanely life
An' bade lang years ayont the sea'

'I left thee with baith lands and gare
An' made thee mistress o' them a'
An' thocht thu wad be true to me
As I to thee when far awa''

'Black sight upo' thee lands and gare!
Thu little kens a woman's he'rt
To think thee gift o' worldly gare
Is a' the lovin' husband's pert'

'When doughty deeds were to be done
It wad hae been a bonny pass
Had I ly'n hame tae culye thee [Fondle]
An' bore me fingers i' the asse

'I couldna thole a sluggard life
An', lady, I wad hae thee ken
When I took thee to be me wife
I did no' want a cluckan hen'

'Gin I can cluck, saul thu can crawl
Owre a' thee deeds wi' women done
Hoo ilka bonny wench thu saw
Thu coorted her and ca'd it fun

'But ae deid bairn, aloor, hae I
An' if this deed was wrang i' me
Hoo many bairns hes thu tae shaw
Hoo true a man thu's been tae me?

'Could I no tak what cam tae me
Tae tempt me i' me langsome life
While thu were skalan frank and free [Throwing away]
Thee dearest tocher o' a wife?'

'Ye lee, ye lee, ye leean limmer!
Whare'er we drank abune them a'
Thee wee-faur'd face I toasted aye
An' focht wi' him that said me na

'An' when i' battles saviest pall [Darkest]
Me he'rt grew strang when maist ootmoucht [Exhausted]
B' thinkan on me lovan wife
That she was faus I little toucht

'Wi' selkie folk thu's led a life!
Awa,, ye limmer slut, fae me!
I wadna hae thee for a wife
For a' the gowd i' Chistindee!'

She's whipped the chain fae the selkie's haas
An' waped it on Oddie's croon [Swung it down]
'Gae, tak' ye that, ye ill-tongued tyke [Hound]
An' keep it for a parting boon!'

The lady they put i' a hich hich toor
Wi' nae sweet light t'row hole or bore
They hae gaen her meat and water there
An' streaked fast the iron door

[The ballad singer pauses]

The Ting has passed her awfu' doom [Assembly]
That for her fauts an' sinfu' deed
She s'ud be taen an' brunt tae asse
Withoot mercy or remeed

'Aloor, aloor, the dolefu' day
Aloor, what am I born tae see?
I' the red-hot fire I man be brunt
O waes me he'rt and waes me

'O gin me faither been i' life
He wad hae doorly focht for me
Deid mither's gest will thu no come
An' set thy dolefu' dochter free?

'When I lay on thee cother breest [Comfortable]
An' thu thee peerie bairn did rus [Praise]
Thu little thocht thy bonny bairn
Wad be a cinder i' the asse'

Then up and spake San Imravoe

An' a lood and waillie cry gaed he
'Ye selkie folk, tae Norowa
Ca' a' the whal's i' the Nort Sea' [Drive]

The day before that lady fair
Was tae be brunt wi' muckle woe
A cry was raised aroond the ha'
'Whal's, whal's i' ilka bay and voe!'

Then Odivere an' a' his men
Ran tae the ca' wi' muckle speed
An' there was rowin', rootin', yowlin'
And noise that micht hae raised the deid

They rowed an' rooted a' the day
But never a whal' got for their pains
An' i' the mirken home they gaed
Wi' sweean laevis an' tiftan banes [Smarting palms and aching bones]

An' when they cam' tae the ha'
They got a gluf, ye may be sure [Shock]
For ilka door stood open wide
An' the door o' the toor lay on the floor

An' they ran up and they ran doon
An' glower'd about wi' a' their een
The lady fair was clean awa
An' never mair b' mortal seen

An' Odivere's a lanely man
An' weary o' his sicker skathe [Hard fate]
An' aye an' sair he rues the day
He ever took the Odin aith

Tae menye-singers t'anks we gae [Wandering singers]
Tae menye-singers drink we a'
Wur foy's they wur no worth a strae
Withoot their songs an' ballans bra'

The recent thread on seal songs reminded me of this. I am not posting it for the DT - epics such as this (93 verses and 2688 words) have limited appeal in this age of the 30-second grab - but simply for the interest of those who enjoy ballads. 'The Great Silkie (Child 113), the basic text of which is in the DT, is but a fragment. The other DT entrant, 'The Grey Silkie', from the singing of Jean Redpath, is longer, but still a fraction of the complete story. Her source was the

ballad as recovered by Professor Otto Andersson of Finland from John Sinclair of Flotta in the Orkney Islands. Jean confessed to being confused by the text until she had read the epic 'Lady Odivere'. Here is the epic in its full glory. My source is George Mackay Brown 'An Orkney Tapestry' London 1978, Chapter 5 'The Ballad Singer' - a reading of which I commend to all; a poet writing brilliantly about folk poetry. Mackay's source was Ernest W. Marwick 'An Anthology of Orkney Verse'. This is a glorious example of folk poetry. The action unfolds in 5 acts, like a play.

There was little consistency in the mixture of English and dialect in the printed text - for example, 'nicht' and 'night' both occur - so I simply went with the flow and reproduced exactly the text in Mackay's book. Sule Skerry (Soolis-Skerry in the ballad) is a rocky islet 25 miles west of Hoy Head in Orkney. In square brackets are Mackay's occasional elucidations of the dialect - Child's glossary is also useful. Most of it should be easy enough for those with a knowledge of Scots balladry.

Child #113
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