

Flying Fish and Falling Stars

Adynata and other forms of hyperbole in Irish and Scottish
ballad literature

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“When might you return again, and when might we get married?” a girl asks her lover in Christy Moore’s rendition of the ballad “As I Roved Out.” “When broken shells make Christmas bells,” responds the young man, “we might well get married.” The man has not turned her away nor evaded the question, but to any discerning listener, his answer is essentially “never.” This particular poetic device, found abundantly in writings from since the Classical Period,¹ is technically known as an adynaton, plural adynata. Familiar contemporary equivalents in English include “when pigs fly,” and “when Hell freezes over.” While often quite variant in the concepts employed, all these phrases share two commonalities—they are by nature hyperbolic, and they function as a synonym for “never.” In examining adynata and similar forms of hyperbole in the Scottish and Irish ballad tradition, we find more commonalities still—a curiously limited vocabulary of concepts recycled between even the most disparate songs—and are given clues as to their deeper function, both in storytelling and in ballad performance.

Using a swathe of ballads from the Child collection and the ITMA (www.itma.ie) as our basis, we can begin by arranging many of these instances of hyperbole into distinct categories. The first and foremost of these (for the purpose of this paper), the adynaton, seems to appear most heavily in the older ballads, that is, the Child collection and some broadsheets. They occur in a variety of formats, such as the answer to a question in conversation—e.g., “When will you return?” “When the sun and moon dance on the green.”—or simply in the voice of the narrator if no dialogue is involved. As mentioned, concepts employed in ballad adynata tend to come from a fairly narrow set of topics, which we will discuss later.

The second of these categories I will refer to as the “inverse” adynaton—essentially, an adynaton synonymizing “always” as opposed to “never.” The few examples of this in the repertoire tend to utilize less fantastical concepts than regular adynata do; for instance “We will comfort one and other while there remains a stone / In that pretty little cottage on the shores of sweet Benone,”² and “We will remember your greatness til

¹ “Adynaton,” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, accessed February 19, 2018, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adynaton>.

² Shields, Hugh, *Shamrock, rose and thistle: folk singing in North Derry*, (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1981), 140-141.

the stars forget how to shine,”³ the implications being, respectively, that stones will always exist at the mentioned cottage, and that stars will never “forget” how to shine. There is, however, an important distinction to be made when considering this kind of adynaton, which is that the phrase in question must not have a literal, consequent connection to its context. For instance, commonly occurring phrases such as “I will fight as long as I can wield a sword” and “I will travel as long as I can wear a shoe,” could be mistaken as a kind of inverse adynaton in the sense that the narrator should almost always be capable of holding a sword or wearing a shoe; but because these are logical requirements to the acts to which they are tied, they are not hyperbolic and so not adynata.

A third category, more distant from the adynaton, is the hyperbolic conditional—an extreme and highly unlikely (but, in contrast to the adynaton, theoretically possible) conditional used to inflate the pledge or declaration to which it is tied. For example: “Had I but all the diamonds / That on the rocks do grow / I’d give it to my Irish laddie / If he to me his love would show,”⁴ “Lebanon’s plains, if you could command them / is not sufficient to make amends,”⁵ and “If I were the Emperor of Russia to command / Or Julius Ceasar, or the Lord Lieutenant of the land / I would lay down my golden plate, my people and arm . . . [for you].”⁶ What is of interest here is that, while the implication is almost certainly that the speaker/narrator will never attain the requirements of the conditional, the statement’s phrasing as a hypothetical “if” and its existence in the realm of theoretical possibility remove any question of its being an adynaton.

The last category I will define is, broadly, the use of paradoxical, contradictory, impossible, or hyperbolic concepts in contexts other than figures of speech. Examples of this include the absurdly gargantuan amounts of food in “Great Big Irish Stew,”⁷ the widow’s impossible command to her daughter for her to

³ McGonigle, Michael, “Terence McSweeney,” recorded in McFeeley’s Bar, Clonmany, Co. Donegal, 25 September, 1992, ITMA, accessed February 19, 2018, https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/sound/terence_mcsweeney_michael_mcgonigle.

⁴ “The Belfast Mountains,” (London: s.n., 18--?), <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/2006-bs>.

⁵ Shields, Hugh, *Shamrock, rose and thistle: folk singing in North Derry*, (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1981), 153-155.

⁶ “Colleen Bawn,” (London: H. Such, 18--?), <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/2018-bs>.

⁷ “Great Big Irish Stew,” (London: s.n., 18--?), <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/1972-bs>.

retrieve “the maidenhead [she] lost last night” in “The Widow’s Daughter,”⁸ and the slew of contradictory phrases that make up the letters in the peculiar ballad-story “Irish Love Letters.”⁹ In all these cases, and arguably in most cases, the intent of such absurdity is humour. One major trope in this category, however, is not so tongue-in-cheek, and potentially touches back on the category of adynata—this is the “wit contest” or “riddle exchange” trope exemplified in a handful of child ballads, such as “The Elfin Knight,”¹⁰ “Captain Wedderburn’s Courtship,”¹¹ and “Proud Lady Margaret.”¹² In this popular ballad template, a series of paradoxical or impossible concepts are expounded in the form of riddles or riddle-like requests, often in the context of courtship—e.g., a man says he will marry a woman if she can make him a shirt with no cuts or seams; she replies that she will do so if he can sow an acre of land with a single peppercorn; he may reply with another impossible request, and so forth. Though many variants exist with requests or questions that end up being cleverly solved or fulfilled by the person being courted,¹³ it is the extreme or truly impossible requests (like those in the example above) that are of interest in that they can resemble adynata almost exactly in form; only their place within this particular trope cause us to understand it as something different.

Even among these different categories, similarities of subject matter persist. All clear instances of adynata found in the repertoire—seventeen, plus a list by Child of ten-or-so excerpted examples of adynaton in other, non-Anglo-Irish works¹⁴—all construct their phrases by drawing concepts from one or more of five different topics: a) vegetation and the growth thereof, b) bodies of water and aquatic life, c) birds, d) celestial bodies, and e) bells. In extended declamations of adynata in a single ballad, we may see one or two more unusual adynaton thrown into the mix, but only in proximity to a “standard” adynaton adhering to the vocabulary of topics above. Of the five “inverse” adynata found in the repertoire, four follow the standard

⁸ Shields, Hugh, *Shamrock, rose and thistle: folk singing in North Derry*, (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1981), 161-162.

⁹ *Six hundred and seventeen Irish songs and ballads*, (New York: Wehman Bros, 190-?), 24.

¹⁰ Child, Francis James, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 1.1, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1894), 6-20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 1.2, 415-425

¹² *Ibid.*, 425-431.

¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. 1.1, 8-14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 1.2, 437.

vocabulary; many of the “impossible-isms” in the Elfin Knight-type ballads do as well. A list of these adynata, with the vocabulary terms bolded, has been compiled below:

- I. “When broken shells make Christmas **bells** / we might well get married” (Christy Moore’s “As I Roved Out,” final line¹⁵)

- II. “When the law can stop the **blades of grass from growing as they grow** / And when the **leaves in Summer time their verdure** do not show / Then I will change the color I wear in my caubeen / But ‘till that day, plaze God, I’ll stick to the wearing of the green!” (“The Wearing of the Green,” second stanza, lines 5-8¹⁶)

- III. “When **apples still grow** in November / When **blossoms still grow on each tree** / When **leaves are still green** in December / It’s then that our land will be free” (Christy Moore’s “Only Our Rivers Run Free,” opening lines¹⁷)

In the following, lengthy example (IV) from “Gra Gal Macree,” four of the five vocabulary categories are utilized. The middle stanza is better interpreted as using hyperbolic conditionals as opposed to adynata, but is included here due to its subject matter and placement between two stanzas of elaborate adynata.

- IV. “The **moon** it may darken and show no more light,
And the **stars** from the heavens may fall down by night,
May the east turn west, and the **sea** flow over the shore,

¹⁵ Planxty, “As I Roved Out,” track 10 on *The Well Below The Valley*, Shanachie, 2005, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6zuXGknmg25LGMAuN9hHe1>.

¹⁶ “Wearing of the green,” (New York: Henry J. Wehman, 18--?), <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/2099-bs>.

¹⁷ Moore, Christy, “Only Our Rivers Run Free,” track 14 on *The Time Has Come*, WEA Ireland, 1983, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6gZjpROWKFASiY9HSnZUi7>.

If I prove false to the young man I adore.

*“If was a **blackbird** or had wings to fly,
I’d fly o’er the **seas** where my love doth lie,
And in his breast I would lay myself down,
And with my two arms my love I’d surround.*

“That the ships on the **ocean** may go without sails,
And the smallest of **fishes** shall turn into **whales**:
In the midst of the **ocean** may there **grow a large tree**,
If I ever prove false to thee, my lovely Johnny.”
 (“Gra Gal Macree,” last three stanzas¹⁸)

V. “May **Pheobus and Luna in dark eclipse** mourn / And the **gulf** of Venus with sulphur mine
burn / And the **troubled ocean** turn to dry land / If I ever prove false to you on the River
Ban” (“The River Ban,” sixth stanza¹⁹)

VI. “The bees shall lavish, make no shore / And the **dove** shall become a ranger / The **fallen**
water cease to roar / Before I’ll ever change her” (“The Girl I Left Behind,” fifth stanza²⁰)

The Child ballad referenced below (VII) seems to lie at the root of our first example, Christy Moore’s
“As I Roved Out.” In it, a maid repeatedly asks her lover (after a night together) when he will return or when

¹⁸ “Gra Gal Macree,” (London: H.P. Such, n.d.), <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/2014-bs>.

¹⁹ “The River Ban.” (s.l.: s.n., n.d.), <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/2072-bs>.

²⁰ “The Girl I Left Behind,” (New York: H. De Marsan, 18--?), <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/23315-bs>.

he will marry her, and is each time met with a different adynaton in response.

VII. “O when will we twa meet again?
Or when will you me marry?’
‘When **rashin rinds grow** gay gowd rings,
I winna langer tarry.’
...
‘When **heather-knaps grow** siller taps...
‘When **heather-cows grow** owsen-bows...
‘When **cockle-shells** grow siller **bells**...
‘When **apple-trees grow** in the **seas**...
‘When **fishes** fly, and **seas** gang dry...
‘When frost and snaw shall warm us a’...’”
(“Trooper and Maid,” stanzas 7-10²¹)

The adynaton below (VIII) was referenced by Fintan Valley as being a trope in the old “chanson de Malmariée” song type.²² Though in the modern folk tradition, it appears most prominently in an English folk song, “The Butcher’s Boy,” Valley makes reference to an extremely similar phrase found in Irish-language folksong—as translated into English: “A young virgin I shall never be / Until **apples grow** on the horns of cows.”²³

²¹ Child, Francis James, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 5.1, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1894), 173.

²² Valley, Fintan, *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music*, 2nd ed., (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), 634-635.

²³ *Ibid.*, 635.

- VIII. “A maid again I shall ne’er be / Till **cherries grow on an apple tree.**” (Tommy Makem’s “The Butcher Boy,” second stanza, last two lines²⁴)
- IX. “And relieved she will never be / Till St. Mungo come o’er the **sea**” (“Kemp Owyne,” final line²⁵)
- X. *Translated from Irish:*
 “My love, and my portion, do not think for ever
 That I would ever exchange you for another consort;
 Until the **sea** change entirely into blood,
 And until the hills go under each other.
- “Until **watercress shall grow** through the middle of the fire,
 And until the **trout** come to sue for it;
 Until the **starlings** shall altogether lose their bills,
 And, until a **blackbird** is made of the **thrush.**”
 (“Ugh, Oh Una,” last two stanzas²⁶)

The commonalities of subject matter between the three Child ballads below (XI, XII, and XIII)—fratricide—suggest that these ballads have common origins. Two of these, IX and X, are almost certainly from the same mold, that is, the “Edward” Child ballad,²⁷ which also makes use of a prolonged conversation regarding blood stains resulting from fratricide, but does not include an adynaton. Though “The Twa Sisters”

²⁴ Makem, Tommy, “The Butcher Boy,” track 2 on *Songs of Tommy Makem*, Tradition Records, 1961, <https://open.spotify.com/track/3v1FIa0cjnnSZTv94EeawC>.

²⁵ Child, Francis James, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 1.2, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1894), 310.

²⁶ Hyde, Douglas, *Love Songs of Connacht*, 5th ed., (Dublin: Gill & Son Ltd., 1909), 69.

²⁷ Child, Francis James, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 1.1, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1894), 168.

(in XI) does not follow the same template as the others, it is of interest that it also features an adynaton in the context of fratricide.

- XI. “‘Whan will ye come hame again, Willie? / Now, Willie, tell to me’ / ‘Whan the **sun and moon** dances on the green, / And that will never be.’” (“The Twa Brothers,” final stanza²⁸)
- XII. “The **sun and the moon** shall dance on the green / That night when' I come hame.” (“Lizie Wan,” final stanza²⁹)
- XIII. “‘O sister, o sister, take me by the gowne / And drawe me up upon the dry ground.’ / ‘O sister, o sister, that may not bee / Till salt and oatmeale **grow both of a tree.**’” (“The Twa Sisters,” third and fourth stanza³⁰)
- XIV. “The **fish** shall never swim in the **flood** / Nor **corn grow** through the clay / Nor the fiercest fire that ever was kindled / Twin me and Rothiemay.” (“The Fire of Frendraught,” sixteenth stanza³¹)
- XV. “‘O when will ye be back, bonny lad, / O when will ye be hame?’ / ‘When heather-hills are nine times brunt, / And a' **grown green** again.’” (“The False Lover Won Back,” second stanza³²)

²⁸ Ibid. vol. 1.2, 441.

²⁹ Ibid., 448.

³⁰ Ibid. vol. 1.1, 126.

³¹ Ibid. vol. 4.1, 45.

³² Ibid., 211.

The ballad referenced below (XVI) has the curiosity of containing the line “A maid again I’ll never be” (in varying stanzas depending on the variant³³), placing it among the “chanson de Malmariée” songs classified by Valley, of which “The Butcher Boy” (adynaton VIII in this list) is a part.

XVI. “Whan **cockle-shells** turn silver **bells** / And **mussels** they **bud on a tree** / Whan frost and snaw turns fire to burn / Then I’ll sit down and dine wi thee.” (“Jamie Douglas,” twelfth stanza³⁴)

The final adynaton on this list is from a very old ballad, one that dates to the mid-15th c. according to the intro given by Child.³⁵ Its point of interest is that it features an adynaton which comes to pass in a miraculous fashion—the revival of a roasted fowl. This is likely a result of the ballad’s religious connotations related to the birth of Jesus; Herod says he’ll believe St. Stephen’s story about the Messiah’s birth when his roast cock rises and crows, which it does. Interestingly, according to Child, non-Anglo-Irish ballads of the same format exist where the cooked animal in question is a fish³⁶ (again corresponding with the five standard topics).

XVII. “King Herod answered thus to him: / ‘I’ll not believe this story / Till the roasted **cock** that is on the board / Claps his wings and crows before me.” (“St. Stephen and Herod,” seventh stanza³⁷)

As mentioned, several of the identified “inverse” adynata adhere to this vocabulary as well: “William and Jane on the Banks of Clyde” (fourth stanza, lines 7-8: “While yonder **green hills with flowers** are

³³ Ibid., 93-97.

³⁴ Ibid., 94.

³⁵ Ibid., vol.1.1.1, 233.

³⁶ Ibid., 241.

³⁷ Ibid., 233.

decorated / My own dearest William I'll always adore"³⁸), "The Piper of Crossbarry" (final stanza, first two lines: "While **grass is green on Ireland's scene**, while the **heath grows** on the **moor** / So long we'll talk of those who fight that Ireland might endure"³⁹), "The Woods at Dromboe" (final two lines: "While **the Foyle and the Swilly continue to flow** / That stain will remain on the woods of Drumboe"⁴⁰), and "Terence McSweeney" (final line: "For we will remember your greatness til the **stars** will forget how to shine"⁴¹).

Though the five-topic vocabulary seems to persist almost absolutely across the ballad adynata, it is harder to draw similar connections between the topic of an adynata and the subject matter of the ballad in which it is contained; this is demonstrated in how the longer chains of adynata will simply cycle through up to four vocabulary topics as necessary, regardless of context. It's more useful to identify in what contexts adynata are most often employed—almost exclusively, vows of fidelity (to a person or to homeland) and vows of permanent separation (from a person or from home, or both). We begin to see how freely exchangeable the various adynata are within these contexts—the traitorous sister in "The Twa Sisters will rescue her sister when "salt an oatmeale both grow of a tree," while the maiden in "Gra Gal Macree" will remain true to her love until "in the midst of an ocean there may grow a large tree." Based on everything we've seen so far, there is nothing that should make one of these adynata more suited for its context than another. In all cases listed, with the exception of "St. Stephen and Herod," the adynata's construction has no obvious bearing on its ballad's narrative, and vice versa. This suggests a more decorative or even improvisatorial function to the ballad adynaton, where, especially in the aural tradition, a performer finds the freedom to alter or exchange adynata as necessary. We find evidence of this in the ubiquity of the five-topic vocabulary and in documented variants of the adynata ballads: In Tommy Makem's 1961 recording of "The Butcher Boy," cherries grow on an apple

³⁸ "William and Jane on the Banks of Clyde," (Dublin: P. Bereton, 18--?), <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/banks-of-clyde>.

³⁹ "The Piper of Crossbarry," (Listowel: Cuthbertson, 19--?), <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/7641-bs>.

⁴⁰ Doherty Minogue, Joe, "The woods at Dromboe," recorded in McFeeley's Bar, Clonmany, Co. Donegal, November 1, 1991, ITMA, accessed February 20, 2018, https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/sound/woods_at_dromboe_joe_doherty.

⁴¹ McGonigle, Michael, "Terence McSweeney," recorded in McFeeley's Bar, Clonmany, Co. Donegal, September 25, 1992, ITMA, accessed February 20, 2018, https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/sound/terence_mcsweeney_michael_mcgonigle.

tree; in a 1990 recording, he sings about an ivy tree instead.⁴² In one Child variant of “Jamie Douglas,” mussels bud on a tree; in another, fishes fly from tree to tree⁴³. It’s in this way that the performer may be allowed the creative liberty of constructing their own adynata from the standard vocabulary, colouring or “personalizing” a ballad without altering any part of its narrative.

A similar kind of creative license could be tied to the use of hyperbolic conditionals. The specifics of such phrases as we find in “Colleen Bawn” (third stanza),⁴⁴ “The Maid of Sweet Gortein” (fifth stanza),⁴⁵ “True Lovers’ Discourse” (thirteenth stanza, lines 3-4; fifteenth stanza lines 3-4),⁴⁶ and “The Banks of the Bann” (fourth stanza)⁴⁷ likewise have little to no bearing on the ballad narrative. In some cases, such as “True Lovers’ Discourse,” they don’t even affect the rhyme scheme. As with adynata, we see an opportunity for creative license by the performer. It’s difficult to locate the same kind of evidence for this, since most instances of this hyperbole we find are in broadsheets—usually in the grandiloquent “hedge-schoolmaster”-style⁴⁸ person-praise songs—where no clear variants are recorded. But in our one rare instance where we possess a recorded variant, we already see the potential for this kind of improvisation: Hugh Shields’ original recording of “Moorlough Shore” (by four different singers all attempting to recall the words to the song)⁴⁹ features the line, “Had I fifty pounds in gold or ten times as much more / I would freebie give it all for the maid that lies near to the Moorlough shore.” In Eddie Butcher’s more “authoritative” version collected by Shields a year later, the conditional of the same line becomes “For if I had ten thousand pounds or ten times as much

⁴² Makem, Tommy, “The Butcher Boy,” track 17 on *Songbag*, Shanachie, 1990,

<https://open.spotify.com/track/2yIDvmNLNDtGqMHm8Hd0p0>.

⁴³ Child, Francis James, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 4.1, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1894), 96.

⁴⁴ “Colleen Bawn,” (London: H. Such, 18--?), <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/2018-bs>.

⁴⁵ “The Maid of Sweet Gortein,” (s.l.: s.n., 18--?), <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/23331-bs>.

⁴⁶ Shields, Hugh, *Shamrock, rose and thistle: folk singing in North Derry*, (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1981), 153-155.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁸ Valley, Fintan, *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music*, 2nd ed., (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), 643-644.

⁴⁹ Shields, Hugh, *Shamrock, rose and thistle: folk singing in North Derry*, (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1981), 123.

more...”⁵⁰ Though obviously the rhyme scheme (“more” / “shore”) places some restriction on the structure of a chosen phrase, we see how well the hyperbolic interjection lends itself to improvisatory modification.

While it is true that the kind of hyperbole we’ve seen is largely decorative, there is the possibility of a narrative function—particularly in the case of adynata—when we consider the similarities between some adynata and the “impossible-isms” of the fourth category of hyperbole defined here. Many of the riddle and riddle-requests expounded in such Child ballads as “The Elfin Knight,” “Captain Wedderburn’s Courtship,” and “Proud Lady Margaret” resemble ballad adynata thematically—frequent references are made to birds, sea, and impossible acts of vegetative growth. Unlike adynata, these clearly serve a narrative purpose; on a superficial level, that may simply be the entertainment quality inherent in extended sequences of absurd concepts (as no doubt “Great Big Irish Stew” and “Irish Love Letters” exemplify), but more importantly as a demonstration of wit. In all three Child ballads referenced above, as well as the somewhat more banal “Riddles Wisely Expounded,”⁵¹ riddles or riddle-requests are used as a means of appraising someone’s wit, specifically to gauge their suitability as a romantic partner. When the Elfin Knight asks the maiden to make him a shirt with no seams or needlework, and she replies with a far more elaborate and similarly impossible request, the maid is seen as matching or surpassing the wit of the knight, who first presented his ingenuity with his original request. This is enforced in some German variants, where the courted party earns respect simply for propounding new impossible tasks in response to others; in Child’s words: “the person upon whom a task is imposed stands acquitted if another of no less difficulty is devised which must be performed first.”⁵² We see from this how the construction of a riddle is itself a form of wit-flaunting. Exchange the riddle for the adynaton, and it could be seen that the delivery of adynata, particularly in dialogue, has the effect of an assertion of wit or ingenuity. The narrator’s statement in “As I Roved Out” (“When broken shells...”) carries the twofold function of refusing the maid’s advances while asserting his wit over her; similar could be said of the murderous sister’s proclamation in “The Twa Sisters” (“Till salt and oatmeale...”), and Johnny’s reply to

⁵⁰ Ibid., 124.

⁵¹ Child, Francis James, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 1.1, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1894), 1-6.

⁵² Ibid., 8.

his lover in “The False Lover Won Back” (“When the heather hills...”). An Eastern-European variant of “The Twa Brothers” goes a step further to emphasize the contrast in wit between conversation parties when a mother foolishly attempts to fulfil the requirements of an adynata given to her by her murderous son. (She is told that her dead son will return “when a crow turns white and a withered maple greens,” so she attempts to soak a crow in milk and irrigate a tree with wine.)⁵³ Though this interpretation obviously cannot hold true of all adynata, it identifies a situation where the adynata is not merely decorative, but holds narrative power—where it tells us something about our characters that one word like “never” couldn’t do on its own.

In summary: Despite the ballad adynaton’s ancient and effectively untraceable roots, we find several uncanny similarities among occurrences when we consider the ubiquitous five-topic vocabulary. Examined side by side with other common hyperbolic tropes in ballad literature, the adynaton also begins to reveal clues as to its function as a still-living part of the ballad tradition—in some cases, a malleable ornament affording creative license from performers; in others, a powerful declamation that elevates the wit of its speaker; in many cases, both. A poetic device of seemingly little consequence becomes a poignant curiosity, if only for its ability to persist so predictably while taking on forms so diverse.

⁵³ Ibid., vol. 3.2, 507.

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