Songs of separation, non-recognition and reuniting[1]

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ABSTRACT

There are a significant number of songs with a 'broken motif', that they are seen as their own category or type of song. But to what extent is the idea of two young people splitting an object and keeping half each, seen as declaration of their undying love? And to what extent are the practical means of recognition after a period of separation, in a world preceding the camera and lacking (for most) even a portrait of one's nearest and dearest? Since the advent of advanced software coupled with heightened security at airports and the use of CCTV in crime work, much research has been done and continues to be done on facial (and body) recognition by machines. Comparatively little has been done on the ability, or lack, of humans to recognise even those who were previously close to them after the passing of medium to long periods of time. The present study was ignited by an event in my own family within the current millennium, where upon arrival at their doorstep a son was not recognised by his parents after a space of around 10 years (in the former's middle age). To what extent is this extreme? Is it possible that the relatively large number of 'broken token' folksongs suggests evidence that loss/lack of recognition of others once romantically closely engaged with was a 'common' or 'usual' phenomenon, or is it maybe just a great theme for a story?

KEYWORDS:
broken motif, broken token, separation, folksong, lack of recognition

PREAMBLE

My research interest in song texts has, from the start, been connected to 'reality' — not quite the same as historicity. The title of my very first paper, given at an International Ballad Conference (Swansea, 1996), alluded to 'The Maid and the Box'.[2] At that time, I had just moved to the small Hungarian village of Martonfa, where three ladies still carried their daily shopping past my house with their baskets on their heads. Some years later, a student approached me requesting to write his thesis on archery. Gergely Somkúti-Nagy was himself a mounted archer of some prowess, but I had to remind him that this was an English Department, not an archery centre, and that I would be utterly unqualified as his tutor and it would otherwise be impossible to find a reader. We came to a happy conclusion, whereby I suggested that he look at the prowess of Robin Hood as a bowman in fiction and compare it with what the student knew of mediaeval longbow archery. In his thesis, 'Archery and the Impact of the Welsh Longbow on Medieval Society', Somkúti-Nagy convincingly demonstrated

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that, far from fanciful poetic licence and improbable distances, there was evidence of informed knowledge on the true capabilities of the late mediaeval longbow and that the prowess of Robin Hood in (e.g.) the *Geste* is by no means fanciful. (Somkúti-Nagy, 2009, pp. 26–29)

The present paper similarly sets out to compare the romantic notion of a material object which is symbolically broken in two, each half being given into the safekeeping of one of the two lovers, with its function in practice. Like most educators, after more than forty years in the business I have developed what I hope is a reasonably convincing acknowledgment of younger people greeting me, conveying that yes of course I remember them; after all, we spent several years off and on together, in lecture halls, seminar rooms and corridors. (True, with only one exception I did not fall in love with any of the many thousands of students that sifted through my hands.) In contrast, the young people in the ballads below typically spent very little time between their declarations of love and separation. In a world and in centuries when foreign warfare and naval activity, both warlike and mercantile, took its toll on the adult male population, often together with involuntary subjugation to these hard ways of life, even domestic service and work mobility by necessity, would have sometimes resulted in infrequent meetings between lovers. Some kind of quick promise backed up by a material object (generally) of two parts would have been welcomed, indeed caused some relief, as even the briefest of courtships may have resulted in pregnancy which, in the normal run of things, would be followed by matrimony.

This study will take the reader through a selection of British and American broken token ballads and a primary prose text before examining the practical application of memory studies.

'Adieu, Sweet Lovely Nancy'[3]

Adieu, sweet lovely Nancy, ten thousand times adieu,
I am going across the ocean, love, to seek for something new.
  Come change your ring with me, dear girl,
  Come change your ring with me,
   For it might be a token of true love while I am on the sea. (1–5)

There are sufficient songs in the Anglo-American song corpus for them to make up a category known as the Broken Token song. None, however, appear in Peter Kennedy's 1975 *Folksongs of Britain and Ireland,* although he had already made two recordings of one ('The Dark-Eyed Sailor') as early as his 'first major field trip' (1952) in preparation for the BBC 'As I Roved Out' project: a 'good version' from singer Emily Bishop and an 'alternative version' from Fred Jordan. (Gregory, 1952–1957, p. 220)

The token is a physical object, dear to both parties, such as a ring (as in Adieu, Sweet Lovely Nancy, but even a handkerchief, as in 'A British Man-of-War:[4]

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3 https://mainlynorfolk.info/copperfamily/songs/adieusweetlovelynancy.html
4 https://mainlynorfolk.info/peter.bellamy/songs/thebritishmanofwar.html

Young Henry took his handkerchief and cut it fair in two,
Said he, 'One half you keep for me; the same I'll do for you.
Though the bullets may surround me and cannons loudly roar,
I'll fight for fame and Susan on this British man-o'-war.' (13–16)

The object is not always cut in half, but exchanged, as can be seen in Lovely Nancy, or simply given, as in the braided hair and the tobacco box with the inscription on it in 'The Token'.[5]

In the American song 'William Hall' (Roud 400), otherwise known as the 'Brisk Young Farmer', collected in many states of the USA, the young man gives his entire ring to his sweetheart rather than breaking it in half, and does not receive one in return. Here the young farmer is coerced into going to sea, as his parents disapprove of the attachment and believe that this way, he will forget her.

In the version recorded by the Canadian-American country music artist Hank Snow, sometime between 1937 and 1943,[6] the ring has both the lovers' names on it, and after being cut in half each lover receives the half with the other's name on it:

A cowboy with his sweetheart stood beneath a starlit sky
Tomorrow he was leaving for the lonesome prairie wide
She said 'I'll be your loving bride when you return someday'
He handed her a broken ring and to her he did say

5   Dibdin, C. 1745–1814. Broadside. Roud V413. BOD 18191
6   Hank Snow: 'The Broken Wedding Ring'

'You'll find upon that ring sweetheart my name engraved in gold
And I shall keep the other half which bears your name you know.'
He went away to ride and toil this cowboy brave and bold
But long he stayed and while he strayed the maiden's love grew cold.

Taking another folksong motif stretching from *Lord Bateman* to *The Watchet Sailor*, he returns just in the nick of time to prevent his beloved entering a marriage with another and reigniting the maiden's love for him through the ring:

Just then there stood within the door a figure tall and slim
A handsome cowboy was their guest and slowly he walked in
'I'll drink with you a toast.' said he, and quickly in her glass
He dropped his half of wedding ring, then anxiously he watched.

She tipped her glass and from her lips a ring fell shining bright
The token she had longed to see lay there beneath the light
'Though years have been between us dear, love won our last long fight,
It's you my cowboy sweetheart and my Jack I'll wed tonight.'

The disguise motif sometimes appears instead of, or without, a physical token. Such is the case in the song made famous by the Copper family, 'The Claudy Banks', in which — as elsewhere — the young man disguises himself to obtain the knowledge of his loved one's faithfulness. As a stranger, he tells Betsy that her Johnny has been shipwrecked on the Spanish Main:

When Betsy heard this dreadful news, she soon fell in despair
In a-wringing of her hands and a-tearing of her hair.
'Since Johnny's gone and left me, no man on earth I'll take.
Down in some lonesome valley I'll wander for his sake.

Young Johnny, hearing her say so, he could no longer stand,
He fell into her arms, crying Betsy, I'm your man.
I am that faithful young man and whom you thought was slain,
And, since we met on the Claudy banks, we'll never part again.

A particularly gruesome version, though with a happy ending, of the broken token motif is 'The Silk Merchant's Daughter' (Palmer, 1986, pp. 140–141), in which the lover of the rich silk merchant's daughter, a poor porter, is sent away to 'serve the king'. The merchant's daughter then dresses up as a rich merchant herself to seek him out. After killing one of several 'Indians' who attempt to mug her, she finds her lover but does not reveal her identity. They set out to sea together, but the ship springs a leak and they have to take one of the ship's boats. Starving, they draw lots to see who will be butchered to keep the rest alive, and not only does the still disguised merchant's daughter lose, but her lover must do the deed. Only at this point does she reveal her true identity:

Then he called for a knife the business to do.
She says: 'Hold your hand for one minute or two.
A silk merchant's daughter in London I be;
Pray see what I've come to by loving of thee.'

Then she showed a ring betwixt them was broke.
Knowing the ring, with a sigh he spoke;
'For the thoughts of your dying my poor heart will burst;
For the hopes of your long life, love, I will die first.'

Just as the deed is about to be done, a ship appears on the horizon and saves them all at the eleventh hour, avoiding the act of cannibalism.[7]

'Broken Token', as sung by Cyril Tawney,[8] contains all the essential elements: the young man returns after a time, is not recognised by his erstwhile sweetheart, the man suggests that he(!) is dead or married, to which she replies that she wishes the best for him — happiness if married, rest if buried — but that she will have no-one else. The ring appears only now: pulled out from the sailor's pocket to prove his identity. After seven years' absence it has become battered (rather than broken) as he carried it around with him:

As I walked out one bright May morning
A fair young lady I chanced to see
I asked her if she had a sweetheart
And this reply she gave to me

'It's seven long years since I had a sweetheart
It's seven long years since I did him see
And seven more I will wait upon him
Till he returns for to marry me'

'I don't know how you can love a sailor
I don't know how you can love a slave
Perhaps he's married or else he's buried
Or lying in his cold watery grave'

'Well, if he's married, I wish him happy
And if he's buried I wish him rest
But for his sake I will never marry
For he's the young man that I love best'

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7   There are several songs entreating cannibalism in the desperation of hunger at sea, the occasional existence of which is highlighted by discoveries surrounding Franklin's ill-fated last expedition to the Arctic. Among other accounts (Annabel Venning's article 'Very British Cannibals' in Mail)

8   https://mudcat.org/@displaysong.cfm?SongID=9403

He put his hand into his pocket
His fingers being so long and thin
Pulled out a ring that was bent and broken
And when she's seen it then she fell

He lifted her into his arms
He gave her kisses three by three
Sayin' 'Who am I but your only sailor boy
Just returned for to marry you".

We have seen that the object, tokening both love and separation, is not always a ring. It should also be pointed out that neither is the final outcome always positive. The section 'Love' in John Ashton's *Real Sailor Songs,* contains several examples of token (broken or otherwise) songs. When young James ('a gallant sailor bold"), tells young Flora ('a damsel so virtuous and kind") that he is 'forced to go,/ Unto a foreign shore", Flora weeps and he breaks 'A ring in two, saying here's one half for you,/And the other he pressed to his heart". (Ashton, No. 67)[9] But Flora is having none of it, she dresses up as a sailor and for five years they remain undiscovered. When they are released from the navy and disclose themselves, the captain:

was suddenly overcome with surprise,
As he gazed on her so bright, and said with delight…
…
…You lovers bold, here's £50 in gold,
With you to get married I will go…

Fair Phoeby, mourning for her dark-eyed sailor William (Ibid, No. 71), as it has been 'two long years since he left the land", is then accosted by William, whom she does not recognise:

It's two long years since he left the land,
I took a gold ring from off my hand,
We broke the token — here's part with me,
And the other rolling at the bottom of the sea.

When William feigns making advances upon her, she draws out a dagger, swearing that 'for my dark ey'd sailor, a maid I'll live and die.' Finally, William shows her his half-ring and they live happily ever after in wedlock 'in a village down by the sea'. One feels that two years is a rather short time in which to give up on your lover — naval ships were commonly out that long without ever touching land. Perhaps believing him dead also played with her faculty to recognise him.

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9   In this volume song numbers rather than page numbers are given.

In 'The Distracted Sailor's Garland', (Ashton, No. 58)

> He made Vows to her again;
> He would wed, if she'd believe him,
> When he did return from Spain.
>
> Then a Piece of Gold was broken,
> And each other took a Part,
> And these words by her were spoken,
> *Billy*, thou hast won my Heart; (14–20)
> ...
> *Billy* a Golden Locket gave her,
> And begg'd of her to be true (33–35)

Despite doubling his tokens, when Billy returns, he finds his Molly married, which, cursing 'false Lovers all,' drives him to distraction and eventually to the mad house.

In 'The Welcome Sailor' (Ibid., No. 74), the male lover pretends to be a comrade of the sailor who goes in search of 'a lonely maid", telling her,

> ...my pretty fair maid, mark well my story,
> For your true love and I fought for England's glory,
> By one unlucky shot we both got parted,
> Any by the wounds he got, I'm broken hearted.
>
> He told me before he died his heart was broken,
> He gave me this gold ring, take it for a token,
> Take this unto my dear, there is no one fairer,
> Tell her to be kind and love the bearer. (9–16)

She rebuffs him, saying,

> Young man, you've come too late, for I'll wed no stranger.
>
> Soon as these words she spoke, her love grew stronger,
> He flew into her arms, he could wait no longer,
> They both sat down and sung, but she sung clearest,
> Like a Nightingale in spring, Welcome home, my dearest. (20–24)

So far, the broken token has appeared predominantly as an object, material or symbolic, of faithfulness. This is backed up by the centuries-old tradition of giving or exchanging rings, most often but not always as a symbol of indivisible love. These gimmal or gimmel rings, also known as joint rings, can be traced back to the mid-fourteenth century.[10] They appear in English literature frequently, from multiple ref-

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10   One dated 1350 can be found in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

erences in Shakespeare, to Dryden, to Thomas Hardy, while one of Herrick's poems bears the title 'The Jimmall Ring or True-Love Knot'. The rings were popular across the social classes and national boundaries and clearly were, apart from symbols of love or loyalty, also evidence of the craftsman's skill, as they were made to appear to be a single ring until taken apart. They spread across England, Germany and elsewhere throughout the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, according to Wikipedia, Martin Luther wed Catherine Bora with the aid of a gimmel ring.

It does not take much imagination to see that rather than a ring being physically broken — moreover into two clean halves — it is more likely that two identical (or mirror image) interlocking rings designed to be reunited are being referred to in the broken token songs: it is the question of whether the two lovers remain faithful to each other or not that is the issue, and this has led a number of people to interpret the broken token song as in fact representing the gimmel ring custom, despite the token not always being a ring and not always being broken/split/halved. In 'The London Merchant's Daughter and Her Young Sailor Bold' (Ashton, 66), which has a happy outcome despite the dastardly efforts of Amelia's father to prevent the marriage by sending William off to sea, Amelia gives her lover her own ring as 'a pledge of love'.

> One sweet May morning, just five years after,
> This lovely maiden, as we are told,
> Walking on the breach, met a gallant sailor,
> She thought it was her sailor bold.
>
> Young William knew her, and soon embraced her,
> And shew'd the token of love in gold,
> In joyful transports, they kissed each other,
> Amelia, and her young sailor bold. (29–36)

There is another point at issue here, and that is the matter of recognition. I was first attracted to do some work on broken token songs after I discovered a letter among my late mother's effects, presumably never posted, in which she writes of my estranged brother's appearance at their door after a few years of non-communication, and their shock at initially not recognising him. It is undated, but the estrangement would have taken place after his third child's early years, when he was in his middle age. I only mention this because my parents would have had a physical memory of their son which would have been enhanced by a great many photographs of him from babyhood to adulthood (indeed fatherhood) and frequent meetings prior to the estrangement — in fact, he continued to live with them a while after his university years. The characters in the broken token songs did not have such aids. They would not have even recognised their sovereign, whose profile appeared upon (at least some of) the coins they used. Queen Victoria was the first monarch to appear in photographic form, during which time Hardy makes use of the gimmel ring in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), while in *The Knot Tied: Marriage Ceremonies of All Nations,* the writer and publisher William Tegg states that 'the gemmal, gimmal, or germinal ring was for many generations a most popular love-ring in this country' (Tegg, 1877,

pp. 320–25), insinuating that such objects and uses were a thing of the past. The Ninth Edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica (1886) also refers to the ring in the past tense:

> Gemel or gimmel rings, from the Latin *gemellus,* a twin, were made with two hoops fitted together, and could be worn either together or singly; they were common in the 16th and 17th centuries and were much used as betrothal rings (Black, Black, 1886, p. 561).

Is it possible that the decline of these rings is in some way linked to the advent of the camera and the spread of photographic aids to visual memory and recognition? How long did it take one person to forget the physical features of another? Countries like Hungary, which hold school reunions, generally do so every five years. Might facial recognition have a part to play in the choice of interval? (It happens to be the interval of separation of the lovers in 'The Distracted Sailor's Garland', though of course one should be wary of time duration in popular — or any — song texts.)

Roy Palmer has unearthed a text written by one Corporal John Ryder, who in 1853 published his own military experiences in *Four Years' Service in India, by a Private Soldier.* Ryder 'Enlisted …in 1844' and 'returned to England in 1849 or 1850" (Palmer, 1977, p. 292). His detailed description of his homecoming after fighting in the Second Sikh War provides ample evidence of how quickly facial (and presumably body) recognition is lost. He was swarthier than when he left his first posting in Ireland, but one wouldn't expect an army man from the ranks to be particularly white skinned. There is no reference to any severe wound or deformation.

> Expecting recognition and welcome as it was market day, 'I bought a new set of clothes, and then met some…but they did not know me until I had made myself known to them.' Not wishing to shock his parents, who did not know of his coming, he goes to the pub and has a neighbour send for his father. Meanwhile he meets 'two of my old companions; one was the very next-door neighbour, and was of the same age as myself. We had been at school together, and play-fellows, but they neither of them knew me. The landlord who brought me the ale had known me from a child, but did not appear to have the slightest recollection of me […] he eyed me all over, and wondered who I was. While I was in talk, my father came in. He looked round, but did not see anyone whom he knew […] I called to him, and said, 'Come, old man, will you have a glass of drink?' He looked very hard at me…The old man had altered much…He was going away, when I said, 'Well then, father, so you do not know me.' He was quite overcome. He knew me then […] My companions also knew me then, and this caused no small stir in the village. The news soon flew. My mother heard it, and came to see; when she came in she looked round, but did not know me, though I was sitting beside my father […] She appeared very confused, and said, 'Some one said my boy had come, but I did not believe it.' […] she was going away quite contented, till I called her back, and said, 'Do you not see him?' but she did not know me then, until I said, 'Mother, you ought to know me'. The poor old woman then knew me, and would have fallen to the floor, if she had not been caught" (Ibid., pp. 264–5).

What can be drawn from this autobiographical piece is of course anecdotal, but as a qualitative approach, it is valuable documentation that fits directly into the province of the broken token song. While the author has not been forced by circumstance to enlist (or at least there is no evidence pointing to this), he will suit as a model of the young man who as an adult leaves his home, the place where he has spent all his pre-enlistment life, and whom upon returning is not recognised by casual acquaintances, boyhood friends, immediate neighbours or, indeed, his own parents — and that after a protracted period of time — he has bought two beers for his father before he reveals himself, and his mother has expressly gone to the ale house to seek him out yet does not recognise him.

A variety of songs address the theme one way or another. Apart from anything else, here is evidence of many young adults being parted for periods of such a length of time that they fear they will not recognise each other later, but also that only a short amount of time has elapsed (probably in courtship, i.e., not living together) prior to their parting, making later recognition a challenge. There also exists in broken token songs, the western notion of precipitous and early falling into love, and that such a deep emotion engenders a stubborn, faithful love that transcends facial recognition — not to mention possible deformation through mishap, war or disease. Such faith is often symbolized in song in the form of a physical object, or a pair of objects split into two parts, making up that category of song: the broken token.

The broken token song, like the many other songs otherwise depicting young lovers separated for extended lengths of time, of women disguising themselves as men to accompany them or seek them out, or of young men tramping the countryside with intentions of varying and dubious honour, are stark evidence of the massive human movement that took place in Britain over the centuries through both trade and war.

Modern-day science affords law enforcement with the means to identify unique facial characteristics through computer identikits. Such means were not available, and largely still are not available to the average person, who may confuse total strangers with people they have known in the past as well as failing to recognise those with whom one has had even an intimate relationship with, in days gone by. Michigan University's Neil Lydick begins his brief historical overview of the science of computer facial recognition since the 1960s by pointing out that 'Though we may take for granted our brain's ability to recognize the faces of friends, family, and acquaintances, it is actually an extraordinary gift' (Lydick, 2007). A gift that sadly can be lost, as the published research of Jenesen, et al., into the connection between memory and recognition bears out (Jenesen et al. 2010, pp. 63–70).

Linguists have carried out much research into the relationship between lexicosemantic memory and autobiographical memory, 'the vast majority of such studies [being] driven by words-as-cues" (Schrauf, 2009, p. 28). Schrauf gives the example of an autobiographical memory experiment in which the participant 'receives a cue word (e.g., *horse*) with the instruction to retrieve a specific memory.' Various criteria are set: the memory should be personal, it should be connected to a particular day (occasion), should implicate visual imagery and be associated with the cue word. Schrauf joins Greenberg and Rubin in various published research between 1998 and

(the time of publication) 2006, who advocate a *basic-systems model of episodic memory* (Ibid., 29) — in brief, the kind of memory that is linked to a particular episode in one's past. One largely unresearched area is the relative stimulative effect of an imageable cue-word and its pictorial equivalent (a picture of a horse):

> After all, a picture of an object and the name of that object both activate the same area of the cortex, and in either case an initial stimulus must be processed (word versus picture). [...] Of particular interest here is retrieval latency in response to the two kinds of cues. If latencies are equivalent, this would add support for, but not prove that, from the viewpoint of autobiographical retrieval, pictorial versus verbal cuing has similar effects via their visual referents (Ibid., 33–34).

Let us replace Schrauf's horse with our broken token, for the present let us say a ring, a small object about the size of a small drawing. There are possibly fewer objects with less powerful imagery. From easy, quick and cheap to complex, painstaking and be-jewelled, a ring could be fashioned and worn by all. The appearance of a ring on one's finger could signify impending marriage but also recent death; for those in authority, rings held seals. As we have seen, rings could be given as diplomatic presents. Similarly, a ring was not, and still is not given lightly.   The giving of a ring, therefore, is a significant and very personal event. Such an event immediately satisfies three of the four criteria for autobiographical, episodic memory retrieval. If we replace the cue word in the experiment with the object of equivalent stimulus, then the fourth criterion is also satisfied. However, it should not be forgotten that rings (and other objects) *were* indeed exchanged or broken as pledges between two (at the time) intensely, emotionally connected individuals, our own investigation is into songs that relate to such an occasion. Songs on this subject were legion –a very cursory search on the Roud Index (Roud 264) immediately produces 570 results —, and the song can be seen as the 'cue word'. Moreover, many of these songs appeared in written form, and even those from oral tradition could engender associations with others seen, possibly possessed, on broadsides and in other forms of cheap literature — our cue card, if you like.

The ring serves to kickstart an episodic memory — the making of a pledge at a time in the past, the distance of which makes visual recognition unreliable. It retrieves the memory through the image of the ring, which 'triggers activation in the sensory cortices' (Ibid., 31). Schrauf cites Robinson's research in the 1970s into three categories of word: verbs, nouns and adjectives, which he refers to as activity, object and affect words. It was also found that 'emotion cues took longer to recall' (Ibid.) More recent research (2006) by Altarriba has shown that 'certain non-emotion words [...] possess a certain valence and arousal" (Ibid.).

Using this psycholinguistic research as a base point and applying it to the act of a pledge or promise made in the knowledge of an impending long-term separation, with the aid of a shared physical object, a custom active with some frequency between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, and which was recorded in the form of many songs describing the later outcome, we can state that rings (and other objects) acted as non-emotional cues that could immediately be recognised and trig-

gered an autobiographical memory within the sensory cortices. The human face, which is mutable over time and holds emotional associations, was comparatively less efficient in bringing forth these memories. The degree to which facial recollection is unreliable over time is poignantly displayed in the prose description of the young man's homecoming from war provided by Palmer. The physical addition suggests that people were perfectly aware of the unreliability of human recognition in a world preceding photographic reminders (which, by the way, are stable in time unlike bodies) and that the giving of such objects, rather than serving to strengthen the promise (a token of true love) took place specifically to spur autobiographical recall or episodic memory.

If the non-emotion object (the ring, handkerchief, locket etc., broken, exchanged or simply given) had this purpose, then what of the song, which essentially is a fictional construct? We can say that the prevalence of the song type — that we have such a 'category' at all as a 'broken token song' — was in itself a complex, ever-present cue (words, tune, prominence of physical object, constancy in love…), ranging around society and functioning as a constant 'mass autobiographical retrieval'. The exchanging of or halving of an object in order to secure or strengthen long-term faithfulness in absence, far from being an original idea, was common practice in real life. As was the haphazard probability of the vow being kept — ring or no ring.

Finally, the broken token song is no freer from parody than any other kind. 'The Broken Piano Leg', lyrics by Biggs Tinker, cited by Charley Noble, is a delicious example:[11]

It happened on a Monday morning,
A mournful maiden shed a tear,
Because her true bespoken lover,
Was off to sea for many a year.

But ere the time had come for parting,
Into her parlor then she went;
She pulled the leg from her grand piano,
Off it came, all broke and bent.

'Take this piano leg,' she told her lover,
'And while you're gone, I'll truly yearn;
The piano now is all lopsided,
I cannot play 'til your return.'

Then off to sea this young man traveled,
Worked seven years upon the deck,
Then he returned to claim his true love,
The piano leg around his neck.

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11 Tinker, B. https://mudcat.org//thread.cfm?threadid=57774#910982

But he approached unrecognized,
His back all bowed just like an egg,
So heavy was his constant burden,
Around his neck, the piano leg.

He said, 'My dear, I've come to marry.'
She said, 'Oh no, that cannot be;
I'm betrothed to another
Who sails upon a distant sea.'

He said, 'I am your true betrothed;
This piano leg will prove it so;
Pray place it back 'neath the piano,
From whence it came so long ago.'

She cried, 'My dear, I'm glad to see you;
The piano is lopsided yet;'
They placed the leg back beneath the piano,
And side by side played a duet.

Now you've heard the tale of a broken token,
When a dear possession's broke in two,
And when the parts are all reunited,
Two lovers cry, 'My god, it's you!'

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Andrew C. Rouse was coerced away from teaching English as a foreign language and into folk research in the 1990s. Since then, he has attended numerous conferences (KfV, EFDSS, TSF) and published papers and books. After some years in The Folk Tone Drum, a 'Celtic' band, he founded Simply English, Hungary's only formation to perform exclusively English folk material, which has performed in a number of European countries as well as the UK. Sadly, in 2020, the band could not celebrate its 25th anniversary due to COVID, but there's still a chance they'll celebrate a 30th!
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