

SONGS OF SEPARATION, NON-RECOGNITION AND REUNITING

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**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)¹**

There are sufficient songs in the Anglo-American song corpus for them to make up a category known as the Broken Token song, although not one appears in Peter Kennedy's *Folksongs of Britain and Ireland* (1975).

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"²):

**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

1. Roud 165. "Adieu Sweet Lovely Nancy." *Mainly Norfolk: English Folk and Other Good Music* [online] [accessed July 15, 2018]. Available from: <<https://mainlynorfolk.info/copperfamily/songs/adiusweetlovelynancy.html>>. The Roud numbers refer to the *Roud Folk song and Broadside Ballad Index* of Steve Roud, which has superseded the ballad numbers given in the nineteenth century by Francis J. Child and which can be found at the website of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library of the English Folk Dance and Song Society.
2. Roud 372. "The British Man-of-War." *Mainly Norfolk: English Folk and Other Good Music* [online] [accessed July 15, 2018]. Available from: <<https://mainlynorfolk.info/peterbellamy/songs/thebritishmanofwar.html>>.

the tobacco box with the inscription on it in “The Token”.³ In the American song “William Hall” (Roud 400), otherwise known as the “Brisk Young Farmer” and 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 in this way he will forget her.

In the version recorded by the Canadian-American country music artist Hank Snow (1914–1999) sometime between 1937–1943,⁴ the ring has both the lovers’ names on it, and after being cut in half each 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**

**“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 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.**

3. DIBDIN, Charles (1745–1814). Broadside. Roud V413. BOD 18191. See: <<http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/static/images/sheets/15000/10936.gif>>.

4. “The Broken Wedding Ring.” *YouTube* [online] [accessed September 27, 2018]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zupCRO_aHrU>.

**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 in order to secure 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: 140–141), in which the rich silk merchant’s daughter’s lover, a poor porter, is sent away to “serve the king”. She dresses up as a rich merchant herself in order to be able to seek him out. After killing one of a couple of “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 to 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.⁵

“Broken Token” as sung by English singer-songwriter Cyril Tawney⁶ (1930-2005). contains all the essential elements: the young man returns after a time, is not recognised by his erstwhile sweetheart, 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**

5. There are several songs treating cannibalism in the desperation of hunger at sea, the occasional existence of which is highlighted by discoveries surrounding Franklin’s ill-fated last expedition (1845) to the Arctic. Among other accounts, see Venning, Annabel 2009: “Very British Cannibals.” *Mail Online* [online] June 26 [accessed June 26, 2018]. Available from: <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1195810/Very-British-cannibals-How-epic-Navy-voyage-Arctic-came-truly-sinister-end.html>>.
6. “Broken Token (2).” *The Mudcat Café* [online] [accessed July 10, 2018]. Available from: <<https://mudcat.org/@displaysong.cfm?SongID=9403>>.

**“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”**

**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 was 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” But Flora is having none of it, 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...**

(Ashton 1973: No.67)⁷

Fair Phoeby, mourning for her dark-eyed sailor William “two long years since he left the land”, is 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.**

(Ashton 1973: No. 71)⁸

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 rather a short time to give up on your lover—naval ships were commonly that long without touching land. Perhaps believing him dead also played with her faculty to recognise him. In “The Distracted Sailor's Garland”

**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)
[...]**

7. “James and Flora or The United Lovers”. In this volume song numbers rather than page numbers are given.

8. “Fair Phoeby and her Dark Eyed Sailor”.

**Billy a Golden Locket gave her,
And begg'd of her to be true (33-35)**

(Ashton 1973: No. 58)

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” 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)**

(Ashton 1973: No. 74)

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 gimmel or gimmel rings, also known as joint rings, can be traced back

to the mid-fourteenth century⁹. They appear in English literature frequently, from multiple references 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 and Germany and elsewhere throughout the 15th–19th 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", 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)**

(Ashton 1973: No. 66)

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

There is another point at issue here, and that is the matter of recognition. I was first attracted to do some work on the 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 after the early years of his third child and 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 university years. The characters in the broken token songs did not have such aids. They would not even have recognised their sovereign, whose profile appeared upon (at least some of) the coins they used. Queen Victoria (1819–1901) was the first monarch to appear in photographic form, and while Hardy makes use of the gimmel ring in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), in his *The Knot Tied: Marriage Ceremonies of All Nations* the writer and publisher William Tegg states that “the gemmal, gimmel, or germinal ring **was** for many generations a most popular love-ring in this country” (Tegg 1877: 320).¹⁰ The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 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.” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1886: 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

10. The section on the gimmel ring can be found in Tegg 1877: 320-325, and refers, among other things, to numerous literary sources.

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.)

The British folklorist and historian Roy Palmer (1932–2015) 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 1845 and returned to England in 1849 or 1850 (Palmer 1977: 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 particular 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 of them [...] 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." (Palmer 1977: 264–265)

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 length of time that they fear they will not recognise each other later, but also that but a short time has elapsed (probably in courtship, i.e. not living together) prior to the parting, making later recognition a challenge. There also exists in the broken token song 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.

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Summary

There is a category of English folk song called the Broken Token song, in which an article (often but not always a ring) is broken in two, one half each to be kept by lovers upon their separation, generally because the male lover has to join the armed forces (mostly navy) or seek his fortune (also often on a merchant ship). The present study investigates the purpose of the ring—faithfulness to each other, or recognition (jogging memory) after a period apart. Was it so easy to “forget” the person one loved in days before the camera and the photograph?

Key words: Broken token; ring; gimmal ring; love; exchanged tokens of love; separation; non-recognition.