

»CHILD ROLAND AND THE KING OF ELFLAND« AS THE
SOURCE FOR SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR*, III, 4, 186-188.

By *Karl Heinz Göller*

Edgar's words at the end of III, 4 in Shakespeare's *King Lear* have puzzled the commentators. They usually are considered as two quotations of different origin.

Child Roland to the dark tower came
His word was still: Fie, foh, and fum,
I smell the blood of a British man.

Child Roland in the first line has been associated with the *Song of Roland* or related French songs; the couplet containing the ominous »fie, foh, and fum« is generally thought to refer to Jack the Giant-Killer.¹ I believe I have found remnants of what John Dover Wilson calls a »lost ballad« as the common source for the three lines.²

In 1849 James Orchard Halliwell printed »Child Roland and the King of Elfland« as one of the nursery tales he had collected.³ In this tale Roland is a son of King Arthur. Playing ball with his sister and brother in the merry town of Carlisle he tosses the ball so mightily that »o'er the kirk he gar'd it flee« (p. 78). Roland's sister Burd Ellen looks for the ball, but does not return; she has been abducted by the King of Elfland. The two brothers go in quest of her. The elder one fails. Roland follows Merlin's instructions and finds his sister in the castle of the Elfland King, after having walked through a dark passage, »which was dimly but pleasantly lighted by crystallized rock« (p. 71).

In the banqueting hall Roland finds his frightened sister. But at once the King of Elfland rushes into the room and shouts:

Fe, fi, fo, fum,
I smell the blood of a Christian man. (p. 72)

¹ See Kenneth Muir, ed. Arden Edition (London 1972), p. 120.

² See George Jan Duthie and John Dover Wilson, ed. New Cambridge Edition (Cambridge 1960), p. 218.

³ James Orchard Halliwell, *Popular Rhymes and Nursery Tales of England* (London 1849, rpt. 1970), pp. 78 ff. On the text, see also Katherine M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language* (London 1970), Part A, I: Folk Narratives, »Child Roland«, pp. 180-84, as well as »The Giant Killer«, pp. 266 ff.

That Roland should speak these words is an incongruity.⁴ But the fact of their association with the verse on Roland's coming to the dark tower is evidence that all three lines spoken by Edgar at the end of III, 4 ultimately derive from the type of story (or ballad) retold by Halliwell.

⁴ See my paper on »Sir Hugh of Lincoln — from History to Nursery Rhyme«, in *Jewish Life and Suffering as Mirrored in English and American Literature*, ed. Franz Link (Paderborn 1986), Beiträge zur englischen und amerikanischen Literatur, Bd. 6.