



Norma Waterson: English Folk Singing
"Death and the Lady"

Norma

Well, the song, I think the first writings of it were the 17th century. But I'm absolutely sure that it goes back before then, probably around the 14th, 15th century, because, both Martin and I, I think it was the Black Death, the plague that swept over the country, and made people think about what was going to happen to them. They knew the death was coming, they tried to get away from it in loads of ways, but they knew it was coming. And so they tried to buy their way into Heaven, and meeting with death and saying, you know, 'I'll give you all that I've got. I'll give you costly, rich robes and everything, to wear, just give me a little more time on this Earth.' And him saying, 'your time's up, you've got to go.' And that version of that song was collected by Cecil Sharp, before, in the 17th century. It was a much, much longer ballad, maybe, I don't know, about 30 verses, something like that. And each verse would be this conversation between death and the lady, and the song's called 'Death and the Lady.'

As I walked out one day, one day
I met an aged man along the way
His head was bald, his beard was grey
His clothing made of the cold earthen clay
His clothing made of the cold earthen clay

I said, 'old man, what man are you?
What country did you belong unto?'
'My name is Death, has heard of me?
All kings and princes bow down unto me
And you, fair maid, must come along with me'

Well, I'll give you gold, I'll give you pearls
I'll give you costly, rich robes to wear
If you will grant me a little while
And give me time, my life to lament
And give me time, my life to lament

I want no gold, I want no pearls
I want to costly, rich robes to wear
I cannot grant you a little while
Nor give you time, your life to lament
Nor give you time, your life to lament

In six months' time, this young girl died
'Let this be on my tombstone,' she cried
'Here lies a poor, distracted maid,
who in her youth she was snatched away.'
Her clothing made of the cold earthen clay