

The Devil, The Weaver's Bonny, and Alfreda Peel: Exploring the Roots of an Ancient Virginia Folk Ballad

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Boy meets girl. Boy asks girl a series of riddles. Girl cleverly answers them all. Boy turns out to be Satan. It's an old story.

In fact, in the obscure world of English folk ballads, it's one of the oldest known stories, the plot of "Riddles Wisely Expounded," a folk ballad dating to at least 1445. Although it has inspired many variations and even a popular novel, few people today know of the ballad. And even fewer know that it was in the mountains of southwest Virginia that the first American example was discovered and recorded, under the title "The Devil's Nine Questions." Despite this obscurity, "Riddles Wisely Expounded" provides a tangible link between Virginia's archaic mountain culture and its English/Scottish roots.

Alfreda Peel: Ballad Hunter

Not only is "The Devil's Nine Questions" itself of interest, but it comes with a charming account of its discovery. Alfreda Marion Peel, of Salem, Virginia, was one of the most prolific collectors of folktales and songs in Virginia history. Peel was born in Charleston, West Virginia, in 1890, but moved to Salem as a small child. In adulthood, she became a teacher, serving most of her career at Virginia Heights elementary school in Roanoke City. She was also a noted author, most conspicuously of *Witch in the Mill* (1947), a book based on some of the backwoods folktales she collected, and of a play, "Three Mile Field", set in the mountain communities.¹ Peel is credited with collecting

hundreds of ballads and folksongs, plus stories, customs, and superstitions of rural Virginia.

Here is Peel's account of the discovery of "The Devil's Nine Questions" (which preserves a flavor of the regional dialect she encountered). The year is 1922; the scene is the rural mountains of Giles County, where Peel was traveling in search of folksongs along with another ballad collector, Caroline Melbard. The "saw-mill cook" who sings the song is identified elsewhere as Mrs. Rill Martin.

"Hit's eight miles to the lumber camp, an' you better be mighty keerful o' rattlesnakes," said the saw-mill hand, looking in astonishment at the strange town women who, mounted on two rough farm horses, had lost their way on the wilderness road...and eight miles back. Heavens! And on these horses!

The day was hot — midsummer. It was a blessing that the road wound through dense woods where rhododendron and laurel overhung the path and the spruce pine grew darkly over the rocky brown streams. Where the trees parted a little we could see the green mountain spurs over which hung thunder heads, seeming motionless in the heat, and from which issued a low growl of warning.

Again we plunged into a rocky stream, and our horses struggled up a steep road scraped by logging teams to the little shanties that clung to the edge of a rocky gorge. An old woman with a pet owl on her shoulder stood in the doorway of one of the shanties. She was the saw-mill cook whom we knew for a "singing woman."

"May we wait here till the storm is over?" we asked, as the thunder rolled over our heads ominously.

"Come right in. Me an' Bill'll git yer saddles off."

Inside the shanty were long oil-cloth covered tables piled with soiled dishes. We told her of our quest and asked her to sing for us.

"I declare, I ain't got no time, fer I got to git my dishes washed."

My friend volunteered to wash them, so after many excuses the old woman finally consented.



*Alfreda Peel (from
Traditional Ballads of
Virginia).*

“We better set in the porch. I killed a right big rattler in the room yestiddy. It was lyin’ in the bunk, so it makes me kinder nervous to set in thar.”

So, accompanied by the owl which made strange noises, we sat in the porch while the rain dripped from the eaves and the storm rolled away among the mountains. Ballad after ballad she sang in her cracked and quavering voice, but still they were all familiar.

“Do you know one about the devil?” I asked hopefully.

“I kin sing one about ‘The Devil an’ the Nine Questions’:

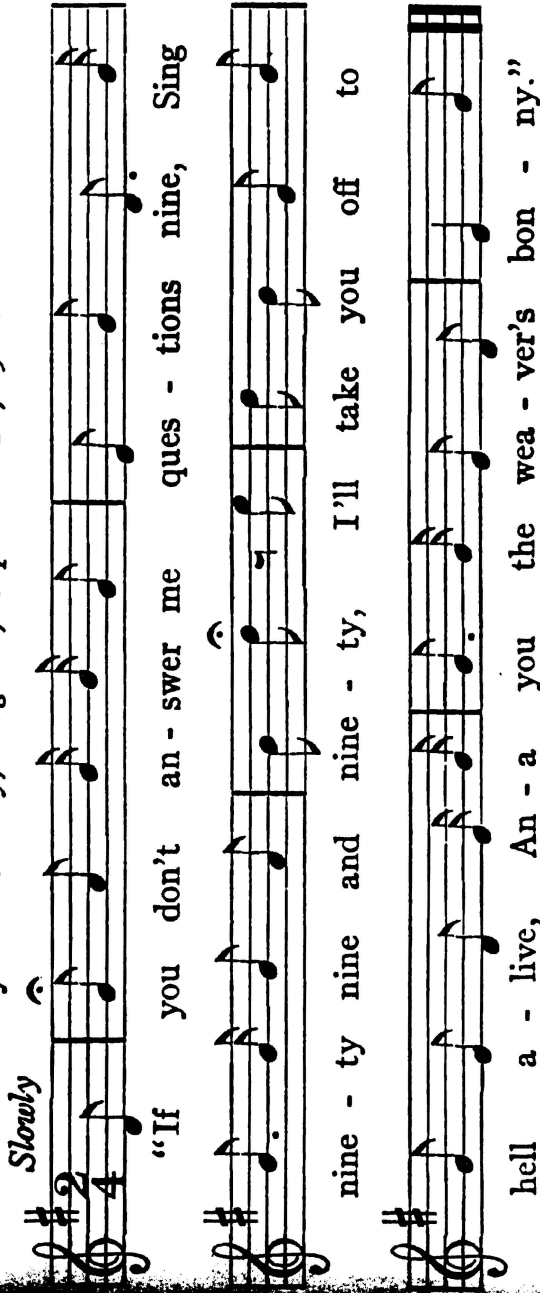
“Ef you don’t answer me questions nine,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety, I’ll take you off to hell
alive,
And you’re the weaver’s bonny.”

This was the ancient ballad of “Riddles Wisely Expounded,” recorded here for the first time in the New World in this remote corner of the Southern Appalachians.²

No. 1 THE DEVIL'S NINE QUESTIONS

Composed in by Miss Alfreda M. Peel; noted by Miss Evelyn Rex; sung by Mrs. Rill Martin, of Giles County, Virginia; September 11, 1922.

Slowly



“If you don’t an - swer me ques - tions nine, Sing
nine - ty nine and nine - ty, I’ll take you off to
hell a - live, An - a you the wea - ver’s bon - ny.”

A selection of the music of "The Devil's Nine Questions"
(from Traditional Ballads of Virginia).

Indeed, Peel had uncovered a rare ballad important on at least two levels: first and oldest. It was the first example of this ballad to be documented in America (and only a few would be afterwards), and no ballad with older roots had ever been discovered here. It was in fact the only ballad found in American tradition that provided a demonstrable link to Medieval Europe.³

Why was Alfreda Peel on horseback in the Virginia backwoods collecting folk ballads? Peel was one of the founding members of the Virginia Folklore Society, established in 1913. One of the first priorities set by the VFS was to identify and preserve as many ballads as possible, a goal set by the first president, C. Alphonso Smith.⁴

Accordingly, VFS sent out dozens of individuals to conduct field work, exploring the mountain communities and collecting previously unrecorded folk ballads. Many of the collectors were, like Peel, teachers — the Virginia Education Association cooperated closely with the VFS. By 1929, fifty-one traditional ballads had been identified and were published in an exhaustive registry, *Traditional Ballads of Virginia*. By then, Smith had died and leadership of the project had passed to another professor from the University of Virginia, Arthur Kyle Davis.

For her part, Peel was one of the group's most prolific contributors and remained active in the VFS until her death in 1953 from an automobile accident. She was also an accomplished singer, and often performed the ballads she had discovered for the Society's meetings.⁵ Were it not for the efforts of Peel and her co-laborers, many if not most of these ancient ballads would have been lost.

The Devil's Nine Questions

Here is the original text as collected by Peel and published in *The Traditional Ballads of Virginia*:

If you don't answer me questions nine,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety,
I'll take you off to hell alive,⁶
And you are the weaver's bonny.⁷

What is whiter than milk?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
What is softer than silk?
Say you're the weaver's bonny.

Snow is whiter than milk,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
Down is softer than silk,
And I'm the weaver's bonny.

What is louder than a horn?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
What is sharper than a thorn?
Sing I am the weaver's bonny.

Thunder's louder than a horn,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
Death is sharper than a thorn,
Sing I'm the weaver's bonny.

What is higher than a tree?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
What is deeper than the sea?
Sing I'm the weaver's bonny.

Heaven's higher than a tree,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
And hell is deeper than the sea,
Sing I'm the weaver's bonny.

What is innocenter than a lamb?
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
What is worse than woman kind?
Say I'm the weaver's bonny.

A babe is innocenter than a lamb,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
The^s devil's worse than woman kind,
Sing I'm the weaver's bonny.

You have answered me questions nine,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
You are God's, you're not my own,
And you're the weaver's bonny.⁹

The Ballad Tradition

A ballad is a narrative song, usually with a refrain, and relatively simple in structure. As a folksong, it is a cultural phenomenon without a clear origin but with some general characteristics, enumerated by the British scholar Robert Graves:

1. The ballad proper has no known author.
2. There is never an authoritative text of such a ballad.
3. It is incomplete without music, music of a repetitive kind that excites and sustains.
4. Though it may treat of Kings and Queens and notable figures in history, it is local, not cultural.
5. It is oral, not literary.
6. It is not highly advanced technically.
7. It does not moralize or preach or express any partisan bias.
8. It “begins in the last act” of the drama and moves to the final climax without stage directions.¹⁰

It is Graves’ point number 2 that brings the great variety to the ballad tradition. Even a relatively rare ballad such as “Riddles Wisely Expounded” has many versions, of which Peel’s “Devil’s Nine Questions” is but one.

The definitive registry of folk ballads in the English language was compiled by Francis James Child in the late 19th century. Child’s *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* represented a monumental effort on his part to catalog and categorize all surviving ballads. “Riddles Wisely Expounded” (the first in his collection, so designated Child 1) was the second oldest ballad he uncovered, with a broadside manuscript dating to about 1445 found in the Bodleian Library of Oxford.¹¹ This manuscript (of which Child was unaware when the first edition of his collection was published) has the superscription “Inter Diabolus et Virgo” — Between Devil and Virgin. It may represent an ancient (extra-biblical) legend of a confrontation between the Virgin Mary and Satan.

Besides the 15th century Bodleian manuscript, Child identified five other major versions, which he designated A through E. As will

Chart 1. Structure of the different versions.

	Identity of the Questioner	Maiden or Three Sisters?	Sequence of Riddles	Purpose of Riddles	Key phrase in refrain
Peel's Version	Probably Devil	Maiden	In pairs	Possession?	Ninety-Nine and Ninety
Bodleian Manuscript	Devil	Maiden	In a block	Possession	None
Child Version A	Knight	Three Sisters	In a block	Marriage	Bonny Broom
Child Version B	Knight	Three Sisters	In pairs	Marriage	Jennifer, Gentle, and Rosemary
Child Version C	Devil in disguise	Three Sisters	In a block	Possession	Bonny Broom
Child Version D	Unclear; probably Devil	Maiden?	In a block	Possession	Bonny Broom
Child Version E	Devil, perhaps in disguise	Three Sisters	In a block	Possession	Bonny Broom

be seen, each contains parallels to Peel's Virginia discovery, and so a brief overview is in order¹²:

- In Child's **version A** the questioner is a knight seeking a wife. He comes across three sisters, and the youngest is able to answer his riddles and claim a husband.
- **Version B** is a fragmentary version of A, with different refrain and riddles but the same happy ending.
- In **version C** the suitor is an "unco" (uncouth) knight who in the last stanza is identified as a "fiend" by the astute maid (lacking any sisters) and forced to flee. This action probably derives from an old legend that Satan must take flight if named, an idea that may also be intended by the last two stanzas of Peel's version.¹³
- **Version D** seems to be a significantly altered and incomplete variation of C.
- Finally, in **version E**, the questioner is identified only as a "stranger," but threatens that all three sisters (not only the one) "shall surely be Old Nick's" if they fail to answer the riddles properly.

These versions obviously vary considerably, but have one common theme: an exchange of riddles between a male and a female or between a male and three sisters. In some versions, the male is the Devil, in others he is a knight, and in some the knight seems to be the Devil in masquerade. The stakes in the riddle contest can be the maid's immortal soul, or marriage between the two. Yet in all versions the maid is the winner, either chasing Satan or the suitor away, or (if such was her desire) claiming a husband for herself through her clever responses to the riddles. Graves' formulation that there is "never an authoritative text of such a ballad" is certainly an apt description of "Riddles Wisely Expounded."

Roots of The Virginia Ballad

Which of these versions inspired "The Devil's Nine Questions"? Certain structural observations give some clues. In "The Devil's Nine Questions" the questions are asked and then answered in alternating pairs, as is the case in Child's version B. In A, C, D, E, and the Bodleian

manuscript all of the questions come in a block, and are answered in the same way. Thus, the Giles County ballad most resembles version B on this point of construction.

However, Peel's version, like the 15th century Bodleian broadside, notably omits the framing story about the three sisters found in Child variations A, B, C, and E, and so most resembles D on this point. D seems too fragmentary to identify the characters clearly, but the refrain employs the phrase "you may beguile a fair maid soon," indicating that only one girl was involved.

The refrain "Sing ninety-nine and ninety" is unlike any in Child. A, C, D, and E build their refrains around the phrase "the bonny broom" (note that the term bonny, as a noun rather than an adjective, describes Peel's weaver's daughter). In B, the refrain contains the repeated phrase "jennifer, gentle and rosemaree." Such a phrase is entirely lacking in the Virginia ballad. However, while these are sometimes taken to be the names of the three sisters, they may also refer to juniper, gentian, and rosemary, plants which (like the "bonny" English broom shrub) were considered to have aphrodisiac properties or at least reflected sexual symbolism. Thus, the English refrains generally hint at the sexual tension of the ballad's plot, something lacking in Peel's version.¹⁴

Perhaps the most interesting debate about the roots of "The Devil's Nine Questions" concerns the identity of the questioner. As originally recorded by Peel, neither character is explicitly identified. Perhaps the ballad is only a fragment and once had more of a storyline — if nothing else, the fact that there are only eight questions, not nine as the title suggests, may indicate missing stanzas. However, the riddler's threat "to take you off to hell alive" for incorrect answers and his conclusion, "You are God's, you're not my own," hint at a hidden identity as Satan.

More perplexing are some variations in the first stanza documented later, which contradict each other on the question of the riddler's identity. The first was apparently added by Mrs. Rill Martin, the original singer, in 1933:

The Devil went a-courting and he did ride
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
A sword and a pistol by his side,
And you're the weaver's bonny.¹⁵

The origin of this stanza is puzzling, borrowing some of its wording from the non-Child American ballad "Froggy Went a-Courtin'." However, it explicitly identifies the questioner as the Devil. That it was added to the ballad fully eleven years after the original version was documented is also puzzling. Had Mrs. Martin heard a different version? Remembered a forgotten stanza? Taken her own liberty with the text?

The second variant opening stanza was dated August 9, 1932, and was included in an aluminum phonograph recording of the ballad sung by Peel and recorded by Arthur K. Davis. It was later recorded also by Texas Gladden, a friend and collaborator of Peel. While neither Peel nor Gladden identified the source of this stanza, this version clearly identifies the riddler as a knight:

There was a knight came riding by,
Sing ninety-nine and ninety;
And there he spied a weaver's lass,
And she the weaver's bonny.¹⁶

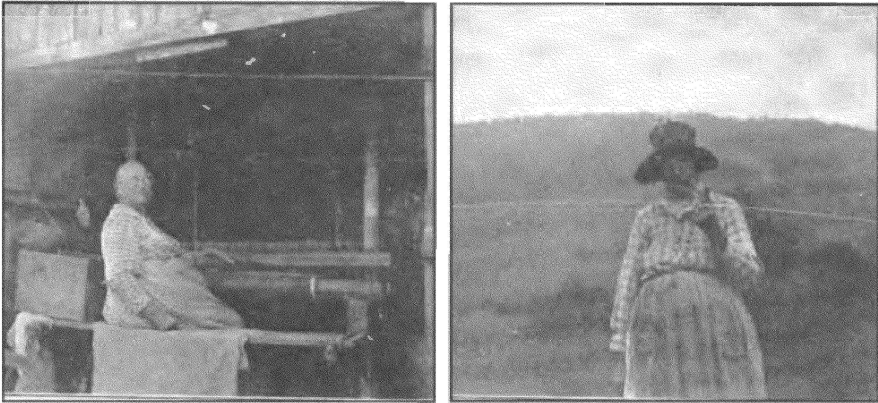
However, knight though he may appear, the riddler still threatens to take the girl "off to Hell alive." Thus, he is probably best understood as Satan masquerading as a knight, as insinuated in Child's versions C and D.

So with or without these two later and mysterious variations, we can conclude that Peel's ballad is most like Child versions C and D, in that the questioner is satanic in nature.

Finally, we can examine the riddles themselves to determine how they might link to older versions (see Chart 2). In all of the Child ballads, about 23 different riddle-and-answer pairs appear. Seven of the eight in "The Devil's Nine Questions" appear in the English versions in some fashion. Only "A babe is innocenter than a lamb" is a unique addition. "Death sharper than a thorn" is reminiscent of a riddle in all of the European versions, except that it is "hunger" that is compared to the thorn. "Thunder louder than a horn" appears in the Bodleian manuscript and versions A through E, though C substitutes "shame" for thunder and E "rumor." "Snow whiter than milk" is found in C and D; "Heaven higher than a tree" in the same two plus the Bodleian manuscript; and "Hell deeper than the sea" is in all versions except E. "Down softer than silk" is phrased thus only in C, but the

Chart 2: Riddles used.

Riddle	Peel's Version	Bodleian Manuscript	Child Version A	Child Version B	Child Version C	Child Version D	Child Version E
Snow whiter than milk	X	—	—	—	X	X	—
Down softer than silk	X	Silk softer than flax	—	—	X	Love for down	Love softer than melting wax
Thunder louder than a horn	X	X	X	X	Shame for thunder	X	Rumor for thunder
Death sharper than a thorn	X	Hunger for death	Hunger for death	Hunger for death	Hunger for death	Hunger for death	Hunger for death
Heaven higher than a tree	X	—	X	—	—	X	X
Hell deeper than the sea	X	X	X	X	X	X	—
Babe innocenter than a lamb	X	—	—	—	—	—	—
Devil worse than womankind	X	—	X	—	X	X	—



*Unidentified ballad singers of southwestern Virginia
(from Traditional Ballads of Virginia).*

Bodleian manuscript compares silk to flax in softness, while D and E compare love to the softness of down and melting wax, respectively. Finally, the closing riddle involving the “Devil worse than woman-kind” is in A, C, and D, although C uses the old title “Cloutie” for Satan.

Thus, of the several variations, “The Devil’s Nine Questions” seems most like Child’s versions C and D, in that there is (1) no mention of the framing story involving three sisters, (2) the romantic conclusion of a marriage between the knight and the quick-witted lass is lacking, and (3) seven of the eight Virginia riddles are present in some form. Since C is very close to D, and since both share several commonalities with the Bodleian manuscript from 1445, it seems reasonable to assume that “The Devil’s Nine Questions” represents a very old tradition. Indeed, Child (even when not originally aware of the 15th century Broadside) theorized that C and D were the earliest versions, and the “happy ending” of A and B, in which the clever lass happily claims a husband, are “modern perversions.”¹⁷

Still, Alfreda Peel’s ancient ballad may well represent a compilation of several earlier versions, or may derive from an unidentified source. But there is no escaping the fact that a song sung a generation before Columbus set sail for America was still being sung in the mountains of Giles County nearly half a millennium later.

We will never fully know how or when, but at some point in early Virginia history, an English or Scotch-Irish immigrant to Virginia, per-

haps an indentured servant, perhaps a wealthy landowner, recalled an old riddle ballad about the devil and a maid. This remnant of his or her youth across the sea was sung and taught to another, and then another. Over the generations, the song was passed on as an oral tradition, perhaps with a few changes in the melody, some alterations in the lyrics, a revised answer to one of the riddles. As the modern age dawned and a new popular culture began to overshadow tradition, fewer and fewer mountain folks remembered the old ballad. Had another generation passed, "The Devil's Nine Questions" might have been lost forever. But thanks to Alfreda Peel's labor of love, this demonstrable link between Virginia and medieval Europe is preserved.

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Alfreda Peel in later years (standing, with actress Dorothy Stewart) on the set of her play "Three Mile Field" (Salem Historical Society).

Endnotes

1. Unfortunately, after Peel's death in 1953, all copies of her play were called in by her estate's attorney and apparently lost. Anyone with information on "Three Mile Field" is urged to contact the Salem Historical Society.
2. Recounted in Arthur Kyle Davis, *Traditional Ballads of Virginia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1929), 46-47.
3. Tristram Potter Coffin, "Four Black Sheep among the 305" (accessed 1/16/2004 from <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/folklore/library/coffin.html>), 3.
4. "The Virginia Folklore Society: A Retrospective" (accessed 1/12/04 from <http://faculty.virginia.edu/vafolk/archive.htm>)
5. Ibid.
6. A later (1941) recording by the Lomaxes and Peel's friend Texas Gladden worded this threat as follows: "Or you're not God's, you're one of mine." The source of this variation is not clear. See Bertrand Harris Bronson, *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1959), 7.
7. Variant line is "An-a you are the weaver's bonny." Also, "the" precedes milk and silk in some versions in stanzas 2 and 3.
8. A typographical error in *Traditional Ballads of Virginia* caused this line to be reprinted, and even sung on professional recordings, as "She-devil's worse than woman kind." "The editor regrets the necessity of parting with the picturesque and distinctive variant," noted Arthur Kyle Davis in his correction (see Davis,

- More Traditional Ballads of Virginia*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 7, note 3).
9. Davis: *Traditional Ballads of Virginia*, 59-60.
 10. Quoted in Davis, *Traditional Ballads of Virginia*, 4. Graves adds a ninth point on the origin of ballads, ascribing them to communal authorship rather than an unknown individual. It was a controversial idea even in 1927 when written, and since not relevant here, is omitted.
 11. Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads, Edited from the Collection of Francis James Child* (New York: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1904), 1-3. The oldest ballad recorded, no. 23, has roots in the 12th century and deals with Judas' betrayal of Christ. After receiving his thirty pieces of silver, Judas is in turn robbed by his own sister. This ballad is one of Child's most controversial inclusions, however. Some deny that it was ever a song transmitted orally, as traditional balladry requires, but was instead a literary creation. See Dana Zweig, "Early Child Ballads" (www.pbm.com/~lindahl/ballads/early_child/index/html), 9-10.
 12. Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballad*, corrected 2nd edition prepared by Mark F. Heiman and Laura Saxton Heiman (Northfield, Minnesota: Loomis House Press, 2001), 1-10.
 13. Davis, *More Traditional Ballads of Virginia*, 5.
 14. Coffin, "Four Black Sheep among the 305", 4; see also J. Barre Toelken, "Riddles Wisely Expounded" (*Western Folklore*, volume xxv, number 1, January 1966), 1-16, for more on the figurative sexual references in such riddle ballads.
 15. Davis, *More Traditional Ballads of Virginia*, 3-7.
 16. *Ibid.* Gladden also altered the order of some of the riddles for unexplained reasons.
 17. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballad*, corrected 2nd edition, 9.