

Abstracts: SAA Session “Shakespeare and Ballads”

David Baker (guest, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

“Against Feeling, or, ‘There might be thought’”

Some critics, including Bruce Smith, argue that the early modern English ballad was associated almost exclusively with feeling, and thus that the reception of ballads was largely emotional. In this paper, I counter that, at least for some in the period, ballads were also associated with, if not the intellect, than a recognized set of intellectual problems having to do with the truth claims made by popular texts. These writers responded to ballads as intellectual provocations, and said so. I illustrate this with remarks on ballads in Sir William Cornwallis’ *Essayes*, and I conclude by showing that, in Ophelia’s mad scene in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare has staged, not just ballads (as is well known) but the conflicted intellectual responses they provoked.

Claire Busse, La Salle University

“Hear for your love, and buy for your money”: Ballads and Theater as Experiential Commodities”

Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* and Francis Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607) depict similarities between ballads and theater, showing them to be commodities that are experiential in nature. They do so to demonstrate how the means of production and demands of consumers in both art forms undermine authority and resist limits on interpretation. In *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson explores what it means for an art form to be a product—both in terms of its creation and consumption. In *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, Beaumont focuses on the flexibility of the art form, examining ways in which the consumers of the aesthetic experience recast it to fit their particular needs. Both authors show ballads and theater to be potentially disruptive art forms, as it is impossible to control the audience’s experience and response to the works.

Amrita Dhar, University of Michigan

“The Ballads of Poor-Tom-Ness”

Taking as my point of departure a curious word, ‘amanuensis’, used by Simon Palfrey of Edgar-Tom in *King Lear*, my paper will place in conversation the ballads of ‘Tom a Bedlam’ (British Library, Additional MS 38539), ‘Mad Tom a Bedlams desires of peace’ (National Library of Scotland, Crawford 1003), ‘The Mad-mans Morrice’ (University of Glasgow Library, Euing 201), ‘The cunning Northerne Begger’ (University of Glasgow Library, Euing 55), and ‘A New Mad Tom of Bedlam’ (University of Glasgow Library, Euing 248) with Shakespeare’s creations for both the *History* (Quarto, 1608) and the *Tragedy* (Folio, 1623) of *King Lear*. What is the relationship between the Toms of the ballads and their Harsnett-vocabularied counterparts in the plays? Who is being represented, and by whom? Do these Toms exist in mutual knowledge of each other? And what does the idea of Tom do—in all these cases—to the idea of authorship?

Tobin Siebers, in his theory of complex embodiment, offers that differently-abled bodies have different kinds of knowledge. Indeed, that a differently-abled or disabled body *is* a body of knowledge: for knowing the ways in which a certain society functions, and for knowing who can gain admittance in it. I take up from this to argue that Shakespeare’s Edgar-Tom is an author, a reporter, and a body that lays claim to a very specific kind of knowledge. He/they know their ballads, or at least the world in which the ballads are born and belong. But more to the point, all the Toms—Shakespeare’s or otherwise—whose words we hear, claim to know the power of song to confront—and perhaps combat—pain, loneliness, hunger, and cold. The claim is big, at best. But a nevertheless haunting one, because the Toms should all know that thinking on such things is dangerous. That way madness lies, as Lear could have told them. But they continue to contemplate and find words for the most terrible deprivations. Whom are they talking of? Whom to? To enforce whose charity? Or is it just listening that they wish to command?

Patricia Fumerton, University of California-Santa Barbara

“Staging Ballad Publics: The Packs of Autolycus”

This talk is about how ballad publics form the ground for the convergence of class in *The Winter's Tale* and, to the extent it is possible, for the restoration of “faith” in the final Act in Sicilia. But that moment of faith is dissonant in this Act because the Sicilian court, in its elite environs, cannot hold together the component parts of popular ballads. The broadside ballad, printed on a single sheet and taken in at a single glance, unites the senses in the experience of text, art, and song, and invites everyone to participate in enjoying the ballad, even to the extent of inhabiting roles. The closest approximation to such a multi-media formed community occurs in the sheep-shearing feast in *The Winter's Tale*. But though the final Act of the play calls upon the different media of the broadside ballad—especially, I posit, the tune “Rogerero”—it does so in a way that is fragmentary and discontinuous and exclusive, conjuring up more the sense of contingency and disjunction that have continually raised their unsettling spectres throughout the play.

Erika T. Lin, George Mason University

“Singing Games: Embodying Narrative in Early Modern Ballads and Processions”

The road maps in John Ogilby's 1675 *Britannia* exemplify movement through space conceptualized not as an abstract whole but in relation to users' own bodies. In a world navigated on foot, this format is more useful than the bird's-eye view. Ever since Walter Ong, scholars have traced the relationship between oral and literate cultures as a spatial phenomenon—or, more precisely, as a phenomenon of how space is represented on flat surfaces. What interests me here, however, is what a “land-based” way of conceptualizing space suggests about narrative form. If narrative is a journey from one point to another, punctuated by certain events along the way, then how does embodied performance in actual material space—especially, though not only, in terms of communal processions—transform understandings of narrative? If performance is understood as a sort of presence and presentness, then how does the “here and now” of the act of performance relate to the movement *through* space and time of represented, remembered, or imagined narrative? My paper explores these issues by considering two popular figures, Robin Hood and George a Greene, the Pinner of Wakefield, both of whom appeared repeatedly in ballads and also featured prominently in festive paratheatricality and on the commercial stage. Juxtaposing an episode from the play *George a Greene, the Pinner of Wakefield* with the ballad “The Jolly Pinner of Wakefield” and festive games that took place in 1607 in Wells, Somerset, I examine how these legendary person(ae) were understood in relation to their famous narratives in embodied performance. Understanding the ways in which narrative is related to real and represented space can, I hope, offer new ways of interpreting the complex interactions between broadside ballads and theatrical activity, both of which involve roleplaying and storytelling as mutually constitutive acts and both of which are reshaped by and in live performance.

Megan Palmer-Browne, University of California-Santa Barbara

“Desdemona's Disordered Ballad”

Desdemona's “song of willow” gives audiences a poignant glimpse into the character at her most vulnerable: singing snatches of an old ballad that recalls a sad event from her childhood, Desdemona seems to intuit the fullness of her tragic destiny and her powerlessness in the face of her husband's jealousy. For members of *Othello*'s early modern audience, the sense of pathos might well have been heightened by previous familiarity with the ballad in question. But in a play which, as Scott McMillan notes, “remains a textual mystery,” Desdemona's song is perhaps most enigmatic of all. Neither the song itself nor Emilia's later reference to it appear in the first quarto of 1622 (Q1); both are first printed a year later in the first folio (F). Furthermore, while some scholars have pointed to the survival of two possible tunes in lute books predating *Othello* as evidence that the ballad is, as Desdemona says, “an old thing,” actually fitting her words to either one requires rather acrobatic adaptations on the part of the singer. The

tune familiar to audiences today appears in a musical manuscript after 1615, and it uses the same lyrics as the two extant broadside ballads of the song, both of which also postdate the play.

Drawing on this complicated textual history of the play, the tunes associated with Desdemona's song, and the broadsides that it, my paper makes two conjectures. First, I advance the hypothesis that the willow song may well be a late addition to the play: not conceived as part of *Othello* as Shakespeare wrote it in c. 1602, nor as his company played it in c. 1604, but rather added for the play's revival during the lavish 1612 theatre season. Second, I argue that the two broadside ballads featuring the song were likely produced to coincide with the printing of the first and second quartos, respectively. While the evidence for these conjectures remains inconclusive (at least without recourse to either a newly discovered trove of foul papers or the invention of time travel), entertaining them allows us to reimagine Desdemona's song, and indeed the character herself, as a dynamic site of collaboration and interchange between a large group of early modern Londoners. Not only Shakespeare, but his actors, the musician(s) who wrote the song, the members of the King's Men who modified the play, and even the printers and publishers of the quartos, the folio, and the two broadside ballads are Desdemona's authors. Even before she is re-created on stage, on screen, or in the mind of a reader, she is already the work of many minds.

Kris McAbee, University of Arkansas-Little Rock

“She’s Crafty, She Gets Around: Women’s Craft and Commodification in Ballads”

This paper provides a survey of seventeenth-century ballads that describe women as “crafty.” At least fifteen different ballads with crafty women in the title were published at the end of the seventeenth century, demonstrating a real market for ballads about the crafty woman type. More ballads yet describe women as “crafty” in the ballad text. These crafty women ballads can be divided into four (sometimes overlapping) subsets: women who are crafty because they embrace the single life, women who are crafty in avoiding unwanted sexual encounters, women who are crafty in punishing or tricking men, and women who are crafty in achieving desired sexual encounters. This examination reads these different subsets to suggest, first, that what marks these women as crafty is that they act as agents in their own financial circumstances; second, that these depictions of financial control or gain appeal to an audience of women and inspire them as consumers of ballads; and, third, that this dynamic creates and sustains the “crafty” woman as a commodity of ballad culture.

Jessica C. Murphy, University of Dallas at Texas

“Greensickness carrion’: Re-reading Capulet through Broadside Ballads”

After Romeo and Juliet have spent their first night together, Juliet’s parents try frantically to convince her she should marry Paris. During this argument in which Juliet resists her parents’ authority and refuses the match, Capulet calls his daughter “greensickness carrion” (3.5.157). This moment has traditionally been read as yet another proof of Capulet's inability to father his daughter properly. However, when we read greensickness through the lens provided by early modern broadside ballads, a new reading of Capulet emerges. In this reading, he fully understands the condition his daughter is in and is using the greensickness trope as a way to maintain her value as a commodity in the marriage market.

Rochelle Smith, Frostburg State University.

“The True Form and Shape of Caliban: Monstrosity and Wonder in *The Tempest*”

In the early 16th century, children born with visually arresting birth defects were called monstrous births and were viewed as prodigies or signs, divine messages from God. These monstrous births were discussed in medical treatises and pamphlets, and they were one of the favorite subjects of broadside ballads. As the period progressed, a more scientific approach favoring reasoned inquiry over naïve wonder began to prevail, although the ballads retained their earlier emphasis on monstrosity and wonder. Shakespeare’s one overt reference to the popular literature of monstrous births in *The Winter’s Tale*—in Autolycus’ ballad of “how a usurer’s wife was brought to bed of twenty money-bags at a burden, and how she longed to eat adders’ heads and toads carbonadoed” —seems to position the audience on the side of

rational inquiry by inviting us to laugh at the naïve gullibility of the country folk like Mopsa who ask, “Is it true, think you?” However, in another of Shakespeare’s romances, *The Tempest*, we find a very different kind of obsession with both monsters and birth. In this play, the word “monster” recurs more often than in any other of Shakespeare’s plays, almost entirely in reference to Caliban. Caliban is described in the *dramatis personae* as a “savage and deformed slave;” while critics have thoroughly explored “savage,” we have not, I suggest, taken “deformed” seriously enough. This paper will argue that in *The Tempest* Shakespeare depicts an actual monstrous birth in his deformed slave, Caliban. The monstrous birth ballads that were so popular throughout this period serve as an essential context for understanding Caliban’s role and the theme of monstrosity and wonder in this late play.

Rachel Willie, Bangor University UK

“Re/De-polluting the body politic: ballads on the page and stage”

This paper examines how royalists appropriated ballad song to present changing attitudes to regicide and Restoration. Ballad songs not only provided a tune through which words could be performed, they also connected a corpus of texts through the memory of past utterances. Focusing upon the tune ‘Cook Laurel’, this paper demonstrates how the use of song establishes a mnemonic connection between parliamentary figures and vagabonds and scoundrels. This image of Cook Laurel became a common trope in Elizabethan folklore and was adopted by Ben Jonson in his masque, *Gypsies Metamorphosed* (1621). This emphasises the porous nature of the relationship between Jacobean courtly performance space and the Restoration paper stage. The setting of new words to old ballad tunes consolidates negative representations of roundheads; music provides a prehistory to royalist satire. This demonstrates how popular culture was harnessed during the commonwealth and early Restoration to both lament the regicide and celebrate the downfall of the Protectorate and Rump Parliament.