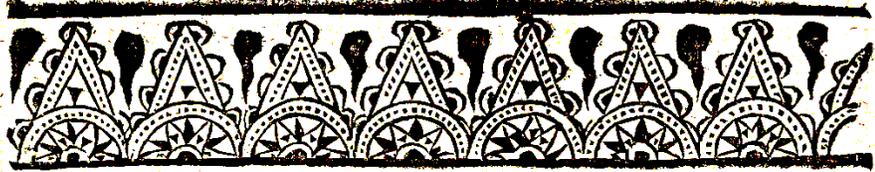


MORALS and LESSONS in Ballads

OR

Analyzing the Social Message

To the Tune of *FRAP* As ordained by *EBBA RAship*



What is a ballad?

Generally, ballads are cheap, widely distributed songs that contain social lessons intended for an early modern audience. During my time at EBBA, the Houghton collection I focused on contained popular messages that advised how to behave as a King, as parents, as courting lovers, and as a married woman or man. Many of the ballads in the collection employ serious tones and end tragically in order to enforce their messages onto the audience.

Repetition

A consistent literary strategy throughout the ballads is the use of repetition that punctuates a segment. The repeated phrases seem to drive the theme into the audience's heads and resemble an old wives' tale that suggests a certain way of living.

Sensationalism

Despite their moralistic focus, the ballads are often filled with sexual innuendos and defamatory depictions of potentially real political figures of the time period. A few ballads even venture farther to describe graphic, sensationalist content. The ballad I chose to focus on (analyzed in the right column) is an example of one.

Example:

A pleasant new Ballad to sing Evening and Morn Of the BLOODY

MURDER

Of Sir JOHN – BARLEY – CORN .

EBBA 35478, Houghton Library - Hazlitt EC65.A100.690v2 1.67

Summary:

The ballad describes a fight in which Sir John Barley Corn duels an array of gentlemen and emerges victorious. In vengeance, the other gentlemen conspire, capture Sir John Barley Corn, and torture him in curious ways. Consequently, he dies and the moral is explicitly stated to be careful with your intake of alcohol, but to also keep it true and refrain from diluting it.

Analysis:

The description of the torture is gruesome because it is described in extended details.

Example: "They cut his Legs off by the Knees, / and Limb from Limb divide."

However, the torture involved is metaphorical; it is not meant to be taken literally (a gentleman was tortured). What *is* meant to be taken literally are the characters' names, which are alcoholic beverages.

Ex: William White Wine, Sir Thomas Good-Ale

The morbidly gruesome description, while sensational, becomes entertaining because it employs this humorous alcohol analogy; the torture becomes ways to prepare alcohol made from barleycorn.

Moral:

Like most of the Houghton collection ballads, the moral of this particular ballad extends beyond simply being careful with alcohol and refraining from dilution. This specific lesson can be applied to society in general, implying that one should search for a middle ground and not take an extreme; do not overindulge, but do not cheat yourself from quality either.

Reference:

<http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/35478/citation>

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