The Representation of the Female Subject within ballads and The Social Implications

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Introduction:

The English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA) exists to preserve a literary tradition, made popular in the 17th century, of combining songs, poetry and folklore in a easy to consume, single sheet format, known as a ballad broadside. During my time here I assisted in this program by using photoshop to reformat the apperance of ballads so that they maintained the authenticity of their original layout while still being updated to the more legible text.

Initial Observations:

While doing this I gleaned a common and surprising thread. While many of the ballad broadsides have a reputation for being somewhat crude in their depiction of women, many of the ballads still display this characteristic but somehow also appear to be geared towards a female audience. This is fascinating to me considering that even in todays society which is so hyper-conscious about issues of feminism, there is still a negative trend in media that is geared towards women. Shockingly, the objectification and stereotyping present in modern media is very similar to that in ballads even though they were written at a time when females had few rights and were thought of as lesser beings.

Case Study:

This ballad tells the story of a woman, “Nancy”, who is admired by a man, “The Miller”, who is infatuated with her. She propositions him and he agrees to pay her in exchange for sex. She makes a plan to take the money from him without keeping her end of the deal by escaping with her boyfriend, “Robin.” However the plan goes awry when the Miller forces himself on her at her refusal so, Robin intervenes and assaults the Miller. In the end the couple takes the money they swindled and uses it to pay for a wedding ring and get married.

Analysis:

It is clear that this sort of scandalous subject matter is something that women at the time would probably enjoy reading. However underneath the facade of this superficial story we can see that there is a negative image of female sexuality and morality being portrayed here. The story may seem to the audience to be a message of empowerment, clearly a woman has escaped with her partner, her money, and her dignity from a man who is willing to force her into sex. However, what isn’t emphasized is that Nancy is willing to manipulate a man’s sexual desire for her own personal gain and allow him to think that she can be bought. Not only that but she is able to manipulate her love into participating in this charade with her. Nancy walks away guiltless when really, she is the criminal in this story. The fact that the Miller tries to force himself on Nancy, is a mask used by the writer to confuse the audience’s perception of her as a redeemable character and as representative of the entire sex.

Conclusion:

The portrayal of the women in this ballad demonstrate how writers at this time were propagating a superficial and degrading image of females in a way that supported a society where they were treated as shallow and morally corrupt. It is terrible that this was the message being sold to readers who were most likely women. What is shocking about this is that even 300 years later the media still feeds into this image from places like US Magazine and Hello! which, are primarily marketed for women. It is so important that records of these types of ballads exist so that we can look back into our history and understand where we had problems in the past and where we still have huge changes to make in modern society.