Murtering Wives and Dearest Husbands: OR, Gender Divisions and Morality in 17th Century Broadside Ballads

As a Research Assistant for EBBA, my work taught me how to closely examine a multitude of mainly 17th century English ballads in order to make sure the EBBA website shows no discrepancies in the information it presents about the ballads. In this process of checking for accuracy, several ballads stuck out to me: namely, the many ballads discussing women murdering their husbands, and the resulting punishment they received. Upon closely reading these ballads, several questions came to mind: did the resulting punishment of these women have any connections to the punishment of those accused of witchcraft? How does the portrayal of these women compare to the portrayal of their husbands? Do these portrayals attempt to relate a bigger message about Early Modern gender and marriage to society as a whole?

After taking a closer look at these ballads, the answers to my questions emerged. I looked at EBBA ballads 20050, 20051, and 20053, and noticed that all three ballads describe the wife’s punishment as having been burned alive. The practice of burning women at the stake relates to the punishment for having been accused of witchcraft mainly in the 17th century. Furthermore, ballad 20051 contains a woodblock print of a woman stabbing her husband, with a demonic figure sitting behind her, as though the demon is over her shoulder directing her actions. Both concepts of being burned at the stake and being influenced by a demon compare the women who killed their husbands to witches.

That being said, the portrayals of both the murdering women and their husbands appear significantly different. Although the women are mainly described as penitent and under some inhuman influence, their husbands are more often described as sweet, dear, and loving. This clear divide between the characterizations of wives as easily influenced and unable to control their own actions, and the husbands as innocent victims of heinous crimes, is only furthered by the advice given at the end of the ballads. Ballad 20051 advises wives to not be so hasty and to consider the consequences of their actions, without taking into account the potential harmful actions of the husbands, placing the blame entirely on the women instead of considering the possibility that their husbands may have done them wrong. The characterizations of each gender and the relations between the two communicate the idea that women should be more wary of their husbands and more obedient towards their husbands, which appears to be a biased opinion of male printers who most likely created the ballads. Although these concepts do show considerable bias, they also show the ideals of gender relations and morality in English culture at the time of the Broadside Ballads.

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