

Title: Women's Involvement in Supernatural Ballads
—to the tune of “Disturbia” by Rihanna.

Affiliation:

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Introduction:

EBBA's mission is to collect and digitalize surviving seventeenth-century ballads in order to provide a legible and easily-accessible online archive, permitting interested individuals to surf through said ballads at any time without difficulty. This quarter, my main task was to transcribe the text of existing documents onto a separate document with modern, legible print. As I worked on transcribing ballads and exploring the archive this fall, I began to take a particular interest in the themes of the supernatural elements in ballads—especially since I had the opportunity to work with EBBA during Halloween! I started my research with the “supernatural/magic” category within the archive. One recurring theme I did happen to make note of in this category was how often women were described as “cruel,” or “wicked.” Or, if mentioned otherwise, the ballad served as a “warning for maidens,” ultimately implying that ballads and instilled fear were used to enforce certain behaviors on women. As for men, they were described as “princes” or “knights.” Basically, men seem to be the embodiment of bravery when a rather supernatural catastrophe occurs in the ballads. After reading repeated ballads that coincide with these concepts, I began to wonder why women were exploited in supernatural scenarios and, if at all, how the brazen woman in a story might be represented. Would she embody bravery like the men, or would the story be another subliminal mockery?

Discussion:

To conduct a possible answer for this, I carefully read ballads mentioning “supernatural” or “woman/en.” One ballad, out of the *many* I came across, titled *The Politick Wife; OR THE Devil outwitted by a Woman* (EBBA ID 33452) seemed to elicit an arc with a heroic woman. The Ballad recites a bizarre tale, in which an unhappy, poor husband negotiates with “Dumkin the Devil” for some money and food if he can show him a beat that the Devil is unable to name. However, in the event that he cannot upkeep his end of the bargain, he will go “*Directly unto Hell.*” The husband tells his wife of this negotiation, and she says: “*Come tie a string abot my neck / And lead me to this place, / And I will save you from the Devil.*” While it is the wife's idea to present herself to the Devil as a horrifying, unnamed beast, the woodcut of the ballad suggests otherwise. The composition of the woodcut is as follows: “Devil” on the left, wife on all fours with a rope around her neck in the middle, and husband holding rope on the right. This picture makes a mockery of the female body and treats it as though it is something to be stared at rather than respected.

Further, when the “Devil” lays eyes on the “beast,” he is horrified by its appearance: “*Then he showed to him his wife’s buttocks, / And swore it was her face. / She has monstrous cheeks, the Devil he said.*” After encountering the wife, the devil is so frightened and disgusted that he allows the husband to go “*joyfully home.*”

Conclusion: While this is supposed to be a ridiculous ballad, it is evident to me that women’s intelligence and appearance are still being exploited. The woman’s body is on display, and viewed as “monstrous.” Despite the woman being the one to outwit the Devil and free man from trouble, the ballad still works against her and makes a mockery of women.