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Monstrous Children and the Fear of Sin

UCSB's English Broadside Ballad Archive is an archival website that is the result of the collaboration between various faculty members and students. The goal of EBBA is to archive all the surviving ballads around the time period of the 17th century. EBBA takes broadside ballads and makes them easily and wholly accessible. This is evident in the website's extensively catalogued ballad sheet facsimiles, facsimile transcriptions, text transcriptions, and recordings. During my time with EBBA as an undergraduate research assistant, I was able to witness the amount of time and dedication that every individual team member contributed to the overall functioning of the website. Not only was I able to expand my knowledge of the more technical aspects of how archiving works, but I was also able to personally analyze the ballads themselves. My work this past quarter consisted mainly of working with Music XML and XBallad. Music XML consisted of encoding musical transcriptions so that they would be displayed correctly on the EBBA website. The program, XBALLAD, was used so that we could TEI-XML encode ballad transcriptions.

Engaging with the broadside ballads on XBallad was when I became the most interested in the various ballads I was working with. This was because I was put in a position to carefully examine both the ballad sheet facsimiles and the actual text transcriptions of the ballads. All of

the images fascinated me, and I was drawn to pay attention to the narratives, themes, and writing styles of each ballad.

The two ballads I want to closely examine are EBBA 37065 and EBBA 37066. These are broadside ballads that fall into the Huth collection, which contain many “monster” ballads. In looking at these two ballads in particular, I noted the prevalent theme of religious piety. Although both focused on the imagery of monstrous children, the monstrosity seemed to be more of a visual representation of the dangers of sin. EBBA 37065 is entitled “The true description of two monstrous children” and EBBA 37066 is entitled “The true reporte of the forme and shape of a monstrous child.” The former seems to set the scene for the importance of religiosity, while the latter emphasizes the risk of religious sinning.

The ballad sheet of “The true description of two monstrous children” contains the image of two children connected at the stomach. The text then reads:

“...For sure we all may be aghast,
to see these shapes unkynd:
And trembling feare may pearce our hearts
our God to have in mynd.

...

Wherein the goodness great of God
we way and set so light:
By such examples callying us,
from sin both day and night....”

Thus, a tone of disgust permeates the ballad, as the poem itself invites the audience to look upon the image with horror. This sensation of the intense fear of monstrous children is also closely tied to the fear of God. However, the fear of this monstrosity is meant to scare the viewer, while the fear of God is approved of and encouraged. While the writer distances our connection through descriptions of them as “beastes,” “unnatural shapes and formes,” and “shapes unkynd,” God becomes a personal figure seen as “our” God. By juxtaposing monstrous descriptions of the children with the holiness of God, good and evil are strictly defined as polar opposites with concrete associations. This ballad then sets the scene for “The true reporte of the forme and shape of a monstrous child.” This ballad describes a child’s deformity as a result of parents having the child out of wedlock. The image on the ballad is one of a child with no full limbs. Both arms are portrayed as stumps, and one leg is completely missing. Once again, this ballad acts as a warning to the readers. The writer says:

“... I meane not this as though deformed shape
Were always linkd with fraught minde with vice
But that in nature god such draughtes doth shape
Resemblyng sinnes that so bin had in price

So grosses faults brast out in bodies forme
And monster caused of want or to much store
Of matter, skews the sea of sinne: whose storme
Oreflowes and whelmed virtues barren shore

...

To shewe our misse behold a guiltlesse babe
Reft of his limmes (for such is vertues want)
Himself and parentes both infamous made
With sinful byrth: and yet a worldlyng scant
...
Of bastard sonne in bastard shape descryed.
Better farre better ungyven were his lyfe
Than geven so. For nature just envied
Her gift to hym: and crops wyth mayming knyfe...”

In this ballad, the reader sees the direct connection between a person’s sins and the result of their sins. This also creates a greater feeling of unease and guilt, due to the emphasis on the innocent child, “a guiltlesse babe... with synful byrth.” Once again, the broader message to the audience is that religion is a serious matter and sinning is an action that cannot be ignored.

Conclusion: EBBA is an amazing resource that fills a real need for online access to ballads. My experience with EBBA has been a very fun and interesting one. As an English major, I am not usually engaged with the more technical side of research, and the archival process was a different experience for me. However, my time as an undergraduate research assistant has made me appreciate the value of public databases and all the work that goes towards their functioning.