

Title

Lamentations of Lost Loves: Music And Breakup Culture in the 17th & 21st Centuries
--to the tune of “good 4 u” by Olivia Rodrigo

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Introduction: The ultimate objective for the English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA) is to collect and digitalize surviving seventeenth-century ballads, aiming to cultivate an easily accessible, online archive for storage and retrieval of said ballads. This past quarter, I had the opportunity to return to EBBA as a research assistant, making this my second time to perform tasks for the archive. Previously, I worked with the ballads on Photoshop, enabling my familiarity with the language and composition of the ballads through the process of facsimile transcriptions. However, this time, my EBBA tasks are quite different. My main task is to insert data for the musical aspect of the archive into an interpreter (Sublime Text) and make the appropriate changes to the music files. If I do this correctly, the result should produce a melody that accurately reflects the tunes that were sung when ballads were regularly published and well known. Considering how the ballads themselves are the lyrics of hymns, this sparked an interest in the relationship between melody and lyrics as they appear in the ballads. After gaining experience with both elements of the ballads during my research hours and two quarters of performing EBBA tasks, I decided to further pursue aspects of this contemplation. As I searched the archive for answers, I noticed an abundance of ballads that circulated this recurring theme of lamentation--but more specifically--lamenting the loss of *love*. While this musical method of expressing grief towards the loss of a previous love is quite common both in the ballads and current times--it led me to think about how love laments from the 17th-century might relate to the “break-up” culture that exists and dominates the modern music industry. How do the ballads exemplify and illustrate the concept of losing love differently than the well-known pop songs we listen to today? While the two outlets for heartbreak are drastically different in their composition of melody and lyrics and technological advancements, can we actually say 21st-century breakup songs are unique to that of the broadside ballads?

Discussion: In order to accurately attempt an answer to this question, I began my search in the EBBA Archive under “infidelity” and “marriage,” hoping to access the ballads containing those correct themes. Out of the *many* ballads I found under these keywords, the one I am choosing to focus on is titled *A CALL to CHARON, To Carry the Dying Lover over to the ELIZIUM Shades: OR, The Discontented Lover Overcome with Grief* (EBBA ID 33151). The ballad is essentially a lamentation, told from the perspective of a man grieving the lecherous behavior of his lover. From the first stanza of the ballad, the speaker states, “I am a weary of my Life, / and cannot be eased no, no where; / Then put a period to my Grief, / and carry me where I may know no care.” From this quote, it is evident that the emotional dynamic of the broadside ballads and 21st-

century breakup songs are on a similar wavelength. The speaker is indefinitely spiraling into a pit of despair over the adultery in their relationship with their lover. So, basing the evidentiary support off of only the first stanza, the two centuries have a lot more in common than we might believe--and actually reflect the same raw human emotions in their lyrics.

However, as I researched further, I realized one aspect of “break-up” ballads that is exceptionally different from the romantic music currently in circulation: the problematic gender dynamic. When surfing through the lamentable ballads pertaining to infidelity within the archive, I discovered that the ratio of cheating women versus men was uncanny. Most of the ballads I came across were men complaining and grieving over their cheating lovers/wives. Men often were not held accountable for their misbehavior in the 17th century, so the ballads reflected this inequality. From the previous ballad, the speaker states in their final stanza that “My very Sighs and Tears discover, / That I was ever true to you, / Now my fair *Sylva* and most unkind Lover, / for ever, for ever I bid adieu.” While it is unfair to assume that the speaker is a man, the odds of it are very likely, given the time. Also, *Sylva* is a woman’s name--which makes this ballad another that characterizes women as the only lustful, dishonest lovers. The speaker cannot forgive *Sylva* for her behavior and bids her farewell forever so they can grieve. While the speaker is justified in their lamentation for their severed relationship, I began to ponder upon the lecherous label women are given in the ballads and how this might compare to modern music.

Reflecting upon how modern music might represent a broader gender scope in break-up-themed songs, my mind thought of Olivia Rodrigo’s new album “*Sour*.” The entire album essentially exploits the unfaithful mannerisms of her previous boyfriend. I thought of this album due to the drastic difference in female representation it secretes when compared to the ballads. In this case, the roles have switched, and women now have the agency to accuse men of being faulty in a relationship. Also, in modern music, the content is relatively inclusive to all genders and all relationships, which is not common in the 17th century. Despite the fact that the technological advances we have access to in our current society make modern music appear more evolved than the ballads, much of the romantic content is similar. However, comparing the evolution of musical representation from the ballads to modern media allows me to reflect and appreciate how much our society has progressed. Not only do the ballads exemplify societal progression towards respecting women and their valuable status in the relationship (and in general), but they reveal the inherently compassionate elements of humanity. By merely studying the facets of “break-up” material in the ballads, I am reminded of why it is important to protect and restore these historical documents. They remind us of our past and how far we have adapted as a society, but more than that--they encourage betterment for a promising future.