

Contemporary Understandings of Biological Determinism Using Broadside Ballads

By Sofie Schneibel

This past quarter I have keyworded and transcribed for the English Broadside Ballad. Keywording involves reading a ballad and then breaking it down to its most essential elements, so that it can be easily categorized and accessed through the database. Transcribing, which is the more involved of the processes, is the act of copying the ballad in its original form, which might be damaged or fading, into the preservative digital format. Both of these processes make these ballads more cohesive and accessible to academics and the general public who might want to engage with these texts. In my time participating with EBBA and informed by my two majors of Sociology and English, I became curious about the original function of these ballads and how they might pertain to our contemporary culture. In particular, many of the ballads I worked with were heavily informed by the dominant Christian culture and can be seen as forwarding their own religious, social, and political agenda. In light of recent political upheaval across the United States due to the **leaked Supreme Court draft opinion on repealing Roe v. Wade** I thought it might be interesting to look at works from the 1600s about women because Justice Alito cited court documents from this time written by Sir Matthew Hale, an **anti-abortion and marital rape advocate**. By looking at one example of tales for women, in this case "The Duke's Daughter's Cruelty" I want to examine how biological determinism informs this tale, and the political and religious function of this ballad.

In the ballad I chose, the author writes about a Duke's Daughter who has an affair with her father's clerk and gets pregnant. When it comes time to give birth she goes into the forest where she has the babies and subsequently murders them. While I do not condone these actions and while they are not reflective of the vast majority of women's experiences with pregnancy, there is a more sympathetic view of the Duke's Daughter than the original author affords her. This involves investigating biological deterministic ways of thinking and how it informs the bad/mad complex of women who do not conform to a typical societal mold. **Biological determinism**, simply put, is the idea that human behavior is dictated by specific genetic and physiological processes (Allen 1). This is most commonly referenced when discussing the relationship between mother and child, and how there is supposedly an inherent, natural bond between the two. When women act against this construct, women become subject to the bad/mad complex (women who commit "unnatural" behaviors are either conceived as "spoiled" – usually in terms of gender –, or are written off as insane), which helps explain away other factors that might actually inform their decisions. This biologically deterministic thinking and the bad/mad complex are highly relevant to discourse surrounding **abortion and women's reproductive rights**. In regards to the former, the main character, the Duke's Daughter, loses her gender identity when she murders her babies, demonstrating how this experience is antithetical to traditional understandings of gender: "She cut her hair and changed her name . . . from Fair Elinor to Sweet William," (lines 41–43). In rejecting her basic biological destiny – to be a mother – she also loses her gender identity, illustrating the "bad" aspects of the complex. In the second half of the ballad, after the Duke's Daughter returns to court as Sweet William, she starts seeing "apparitions" of her dead children, which ultimately leads her to rip out her hair and let herself waste away. In rejecting her biological destiny she has gone crazy, and has been condemned to hell by her children. By publishing this ballad, which is from the late 1600s after the rulings referenced in Justice Alito's draft opinion, there is a political agenda being forwarded that pertains to women's role in society. Even though this is not a tale of abortion, it is a tale of how a woman cannot foreseeably raise these children without scrutiny and social isolation, and therefore takes control into her own hands. However despicable these actions are, it does demonstrate the infrastructural factors that might go into one of these decisions and how this is a uniquely gendered ballad, evidenced by the fact the biological father is only mentioned once, in passing, in this ballad. This squarely puts the responsibility of parenthood, and all the social repercussions that come with having these children, on the mother, which falls in line with biologically deterministic discourse which posits that this is women's predetermined, natural role. Therefore by publishing this ballad of women's unique pain, shame, and responsibility, there is a **political and religious agenda** being forwarded and a very distinct message being communicated to the general public about their social position. **This exercise in fear is still a powerful mechanism being utilized by today's media**, and shows the inherent politics in printing, publication, and preservation. With every article that passes through the social sphere, we have to be wary of what messaging it is trying to sell us and who it benefits. The processes of keywording and transcription are not separate from these agendas, and even though we seem so far removed from these original contexts, we have to survey what we are taking and how it is being manipulated from a modern standpoint. My work in EBBA has been more conscious of the previous precedents that have been set which still determine **my access to reproductive rights**. By continuing this awareness I will be both a better scholar and a more perceptive citizen in general, hopefully bettering myself and others in the process.