

Female Moralistic Propaganda in English Broadside Ballads

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Introduction

This past quarter, I have been fortunate enough to become involved with the English Broadside Ballad (EBBA) to conduct undergraduate research. It proved to be an amazing experience, and gave me incredible exposure to the print culture of the 16th and 17th centuries. At the start of this quarter I was mainly working on album and ballad facsimiles, but as the quarter progressed I was able to contribute in other areas as well. I was put to work on compositing ballads which tasked me with the satisfying job of digitally ‘stitching’ the ballads together to show them as they would have originally looked, but my favorite research area was keywording. Finding the keywords associated with each ballad allowed me to actually take the time to read each of the ballads I was working on. As I read through the ballads, I saw that each of them preached and supported moralistic ideals that were highly regarded in society at that time. Each of the ballads tells a different story, but because they teach a specific lesson, or send a specific message supporting the traditional ideals of the time, it is easy for one to see the immense potential these ballads held to be used as moralistic propaganda. Bearing this particular function of the ballads in mind, I decided to focus on finding examples of clear moralistic propaganda in the ballads with an emphasis on female conformity. I want to explore the broadside ballads potential to serve as female moralistic propaganda.

Discussion

When reflecting back on 16th and 17th century England, broadside ballads are not the first thing to come to mind. Historically speaking, there was a lot more going on in England back then, what with the tensions between religion and state, as well as the monarchical issues affecting the country's political state. Therefore, it is safe to say that the broadside ballads do not garner as much attention as the rest of the historical happenings of the time period. However, despite England's 16th and 17th century print culture not being at the forefront of historical research, it held a prominent role in shaping and supporting the society of the time. Through my work in keywording, I was tasked with identifying the overall themes and goals of the ballads to make them more readily accessible to anyone researching a specific type of ballad. It was through this work that I noticed the supportive aspect of each ballad to the patriarchal ideals of 16th and 17th century english society. I applied this mode of thought to each of the ballads I was assigned and found that every one of them contained some sort of moralistic lesson or message that upheld the societal values of the time. I realized, however, that this was too broad of a topic to delve into because it would involve the general coalescence of broadside ballads that could potentially undermine the significance of their role in english society. So, instead of focusing on the overall propagandic aspect of the broadside ballads, I honed in on the potential for female moralistic propaganda that these ballads held.

The 16th and 17th centuries were a very harsh, and repressive environment for women. Women essentially served no further purpose in society past procreation and domestic upkeep, thus making their presence in broadside ballads very limited. Throughout my study of these ballads, specifically the Collection of 225 Ballads, I found that whenever a female character was

included, the only purpose of their presence in the ballad was to highlight all of the flaws all women were seen to possess. They were almost always shown in a negative light, and were often used to show the audience how women should behave, as well as how they should be treated. I found two ballads in particular that embody the propagandic aspect of the broadside ballads that supports female conformity to the oppressive patriarchal society of 16th/17th century England.

Ballad 37677, *A Prospective Glass / FOR / CHRISTIANS; / To behold the Reigning Sins of this AGE: / OR, / The Complaint of Truth and Conscience against Pride, Envy, Hatred, and Malice; which / is too much Practis'd in this present AGE*, is a prime example of female moralistic propaganda. This ballad deals with all the evils a good christian man may encounter in life, but it's advice regarding women undoubtedly functions as a propagandic briefing on how to view and treat women. The lines "I think that the Devil's in Women for Pride," and "... flatter before your face, / Then cut your Throat behind your Back, / and that in a little space..." show that the apparent nature of women was one of evilness and deceit. This ballad justifies the poor treatment of women by affirming the negative and deceitful connotation associated with women in that time. Further supporting the negative perception of women are the following lines; "Their Smiles shall be presently turn'd to a Frow[n] / They'll do what they can for to tumble you down, / And ruin a Neighbor for less than a Crown; / O Malice, desperate Malice..." This ballad portrays women as manipulative, and deceitful villains looking for any chance to take men down. This is not in any way an accurate portrayal of women, but in 16th and 17th century England it was. Women were regarded as evil temptresses awaiting their chance to lead everyone astray, and it was this accepted impression that justified the persecution of women for centuries. This

ballad, though seemingly unimportant in the grand scheme of literature, was one of the many pieces used to lock women into the prison-like cell of societal conformity.

The next example is ballad 37671, *A New and True BALLAD of the Poet's Complaint: / OR, / A new Song to a new Tune, of a Young Wench living in Holbourn, with a full description of the / notable Tricks put upon her by two Cornuted Suitors. / Reader assure thy self the thing is true, / And though it seem full strange 'tis very true; / I wish such Gypsies fitted all as she, / Then would they learn much honester to be.* This ballad follows the revenge of two men who were cheated by a woman named Nell. This ballad describes Nell as "... a lusty strapping Jade, / And one that passed for a Maid," immediately infusing the ballad with the majoritarian narrative that makes all women out to be deceitful. Although this ballad is about a woman who 'cheats' on the two men she was romantically involved with, the ballad's depiction of Nell reflects and reinforces the negative characterization of women by representing them with these shameful, and immoral female characters. As the ballad continues, the two men exact their revenge on Nell in extreme measures. "... both of them did trayle / Her to a little Pond thereby, / And souz'd her very handsomely. / The Taylor being loath to be / Behind his friend in Courtesie, / Lends her his helping hand, and tyes / Her head and face between her thighs: / And minding to go through stitch / Sticks a light Candle in her Breech..." The men brutally drown and assault her, and although this was not viewed as assault then it does not dismiss the fact that Nell was violently abused here. This blatant attack of Nell in the name of revenge sends a clear message to the readers that it is acceptable to treat women so cruelly. The ballad ends with the flee of Nell leaving the town as a 'disgraced' woman, clearly placing all of the blame and shame upon her while the men are indirectly commended for their 'valiant' actions. This ballad plainly supports

the terrible treatment and negative regard of women, while acting as an example of how women should not behave if they want to do well.

As seen with the two examples provided above, the ballads inadvertently encourage female conformity and justify the hostile treatment of women by men. The moral messages provided by these broadside ballads subtly strengthen the confines of female existence by detailing how women should, or should not, act while simultaneously vindicating men of their violent disrespect of women. Women of 16th and 17th century England were forced to submit to the repressive standards of their patriarchal society, and the broadside ballads serve as evidence that print culture was used as moralistic propaganda to influence their behavior.