

Genesis Taber

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Patricia Fumerton

UCSB Department of English

Wandering in Anachronistic Woods

Examining the Intersection of High and Low Culture in English Broadside Ballads

Introduction:

During the 2019-2020 winter quarter, I acted as an intern for the English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA) taking part in the Early Modern Center's (EMC) ongoing archival goal of digitizing all extant early modern broadside ballads. My primary duties involved the creation of digital ballad and album facsimiles as well as electronically "stitching" pieces of fragmented, or otherwise physically tampered, ballads. This process of remediation was accomplished via the usage of the online editing software Adobe Photoshop. On the platform, the original color photographs were cropped and reconfigured to remove any extraneous material allowing for a focused, unobstructed presentation of the ballad or album. After the majority of EBBA's collections had been dealt with in this manner, I briefly worked on the task of key wording, a labeling process that distills the narrative of each ballad into 3-5 words encompassing the major themes of the piece. This system of shorthand notation affords an ease in navigating the extensive database when searching for a ballad on a particular topic.

After reading and engaging with multiple broadside ballads, I began to notice thematic recurrences particularly an abundance of allusions to figures and texts of antiquity. I found myself questioning the impact of situating and featuring these characters and stories, particularly in anachronistic and novel contexts, within the 'world' of ballads - a world in no way associated with 'serious' literature. Notwithstanding their reputation as trifling entertainment to be hawked

on cities streets, juxtaposed between their bawdy subject matter and lyrical rhyme are numerous nods toward mythology and the ‘classical’ cannon of Western literature. This amalgamation of high and low culture fascinated me. A ballad that particularly struck me was one I encountered in the British Library’s Roxburghe Collection “Thro’ the Wood Laddy” (EBBA ID 31076).

Discussion:

Over the course of its forty lines, “Thro’ the Wood Laddy” references four figures of classical literature, opening with the presentation of two famed females, Phillis, provocative and predatory lover of Aristotle in a cautionary medieval tale, and Thisbe, counterpart to Pryamus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, whose consecrated blood transformed the white mulberries forever red, walking as a pair through the woods:

AS Phillis and Thisbe did walk hand in hand,
O they spyd a shepherd, (O they spyd a shepherd,
As Philis and Thisbe did walk hand in hand,
O they spyd a shepherd that was at a stand.

The depiction of these particular woman as companions creates an interesting blurring of narrative and lends an additive nature to the framework of the ballad. As symbols of distressed love and, in the case of Phillis, dangerous seduction, their presence and known history crafts an atmosphere conducive to a ballad interested in unanticipated romance and sexual eagerness.

After the women encounter a startled shepherd going “thro the wood” and engage with him in conversation, mythological figures are interwoven into the scene with the presence of Cupid and Venus, the valorized signifiers of romance and love.

Just as they were talking, a Boy I espyd
With a bow and a quiver (with, etc.) fast tyd to his side.

Said the boy to the shepherd to thee I am sent,

From Venus my mother, (from, etc.) they mind to content.

These allusions are immediately framed within the colloquial as the ballad then goes on to shift into an emphasis on carnal overtones and usage of slang terms creating a sense of blended cultural and historical setting.

I will pull off my garters and bind up the wound,

While poor bleeding Strephon in my arms doth swoon.

Down under a valley where Chesley doth stray,

Whilst Strephon shall kiss me, (etc. and bless me all day

The image “I will pull off my garters” to “bind up the wound” is explicitly erotic with its conflation of emotional and physical pain and the double entendre imbued in the act of taking off garters- a stripping done in order to form a makeshift cloth for medical care as well for sexual pleasure. This sense of prurience is further emphasized in the line “Whilst Strephon shall kiss me, (etc. and bless me all day”. According to the Oxford English, the term “Strephon” originated from the name of a character in Sir Phillip Sydney’s 16th century work *Arcadia* and came to popular usage as term for pastoral male lovers. With this in mind, Strephon kissing and “blessing” “all day” with his sexual prowess aligns with the expected crude, common, and licentious themes of the broadside ballads, yet the presence of Thisbe, Phillis, Venus, and Cupid complicates the tone and story arc of the ballad as a whole turning into something more nuanced than simple lust. Taken together, the direct positioning of classical allusions within historically fluid ballads intimates, to some degree, the significance of classical texts and tales on the early modern popular imagination.

Conclusion:

I am truly grateful I had the opportunity to work with the EMC this quarter. Interacting with the database these past months has greatly expanded my understanding of literary research methodologies and the archival process in general as well as renewed my appreciation of the extensive amount of time and painstaking effort academic communities expend in trying to preserve textual artifacts. Before my experience with EBBA, I had not deeply considered the immense importance of open, public databases - being an undergraduate in an affiliated university, I took for granted my ability to access primary sources. Without the project, the majority of these wonderfully rich, culturally revealing broadside ballads would be lost in obscurity, buried away in recesses of libraries, or isolated in small private collections. I feel privileged that I was able to make a contribution, even to a small degree, to EBBA's cause.