

Alum, Ground Bones and Pebbles: Reader Resistance in The English Broadside

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The known market for London broadsides in the seventeenth century was upwards of twenty thousand, according to Raymond Williams (*Long Revolution* 182). Moreover, many of these buyers were drawn precisely from those groups that are known to have been active transmitters of occupational songs. Many broadside printers were established in London, and increasingly elsewhere, with the specific intention of serving the new audience of skilled workers, as suggested by the occupations mentioned in the song titles: "The Collier Lad's Lament," "The Love-Sick Serving Man," "The London Prentice" and so on. According to Dave Harker, broadsides became the predominant literary form current amongst working people, above all in the towns, in pre-industrial times (193). Through them, a particular song could be disseminated through an area, and a social spectrum, much wider than that covered by an individual performer.

This increased circulation, however, was achieved at a price. The most serious charges brought against the broadsides are their tendency to reflect the values of the dominant, written culture, and to alter songs drastically on commercial principles. The tendency of broadside texts to articulate Establishment values was overwhelming, and frequently enforced by law through a system of licensing. In this interpretation, broadsides tend to be close to Roland Barthes' definition of a "readerly" text, assuming an essentially passive, receptive reader who tends to accept its readings as already made. They are considered to be relatively closed texts, easy to read and undemanding of their readers. "Writerly" texts, on the other hand, challenge the reader constantly to rewrite them, to make sense out of them. It is not difficult to see the usefulness of Barthes' distinction to the circumstances of an oral performance, which is often self-evidently audience-led. John Fiske has suggested a third category, the "producerly," for items of popular culture like soap operas and fanzines (33). A producerly work is not "difficult" for those who are comfortably accommodated within the dominant ideology, but it also has the openness of the writerly, exposing the limitations and weaknesses of its preferred meanings.

I maintain that many broadsides have this quality, including the London broadsides from the seventeenth century which are the subjects of this paper. Although they were commodities and printed under licence, they were not simple extensions of religious or political authority. On the other hand, neither were they a countercultural and subversive assault on that authority. They include jingoistic pieces on military campaigns, occasional pieces on wonders and portents, and songs featuring skilled occupations such as the shoemakers and carpenters (Porter "Cobblers" and "Jesting"). As in other areas of popular culture, such as the adult western, work is regarded as an active *male* enterprise.

This paper considers representations of London bakers as a test case for the ideological stance of broadsides: bakers were widely accused of adulterating their bread with alum, ground bones and even pebbles. In addition to its usual meaning of the set of ideas of a particular class or group, ideology can also be regarded as, in Raymond Williams' words, "the process of the production of meaning through signs" where "ideology is taken as the dimension of social experience in which meanings and values are produced" (*Marxism* 70). In the case of the seventeenth century broadside makers, and of their public, bakers were one focus of their attempts to make sense of the new economic order that was being put in place.

At this time, bread was still generally made at home. Cakes and biscuits might be bought, but the bakers still largely formed part of the retinue of the nobility. The only exception, an important one from the point of view of the broadsides, was London. Bakers were, therefore, not skilled tradesmen working alone in their shops but hangers-on of the aristocracy, members of the middling orders who later came, in the words of Jürgen Habermas, to occupy a "public sphere" (qtd. in E. P. Thompson 88). There is a description of a London bakery of 1619 "in which there were twelve or thirteen people working, including the master and his wife, four paid employees called *journeymen*, and apprentices, servants and three or four children" (Applebaum 340. Original italics). The working relationship was a paternal rather than a purely economic one. The apprentices were strictly regulated in their comings and goings, and strictly forbidden to drink or smoke. It is from such groups of masters that Geoff Eley sees "the emergence and consolidation of a new and self-conscious bourgeois public" who were

ultimately related to processes of capitalist development and social transformation... processes of urban cultural formation, tendentially supportive of an emergent political identity and eventually linked to regional political networks; a new infra-structure of communications, including the press and other forms of literary production... and a new universe of voluntary association; and finally, a regenerate parliamentarianism. (qtd. in E. P. Thompson 88)

The baker was not just any middle class trader. He or she "was, alone of all those who dealt in the people's necessities (landlord, farmer, factor, carrier, miller), in daily contact with the consumer" (E. P. Thompson 221-22). Bread was associated with hunger and thereby with possible insurrection. The assertion that famine was unknown in England after 1650 can no longer be maintained, and food distribution in London, particularly of bread, was ensured by the authorities. In addition to this paternalistic attempt to keep the public peace, E. P. Thompson has documented another way in which the supply of bread was not left merely to market forces. Bakers were suspected of enriching themselves at the expense of the poor: "Three dear years will raise a baker's daughter to a [marriage] portion," ran a proverb printed by John Ray in 1678 (Wilson 816). Through what historians have called "riots" and Thompson rightly calls the working of the moral economy of the poor, bread was frequently confiscated from bakers and distributed at lower prices. Anne Carter of Maldon, near London, was hanged in 1629 for leading just such a food "riot." In 1693, a large number of women went to Northampton market, "with knives stuck in

their girdles to force corn at their own rates" (E. P. Thompson 188, 253, 297, 333-34).

The Cheating Trade

In these conflicts the broadside writers, while not able to side openly with the crowd, kept up continuous pressure on millers and bakers alike. Both were almost without exception targets of criticism in the broadsides. The price of bread was rarely mentioned. Makers of broadsides knew that it was futile to complain about the price of bread when its dearness was a result of the high cost of grain.¹ Instead, they linked bakers with fraud. Bakers appear in every one of the eleven broadsides I have seen where cheating trades are featured.

The seventeenth century London broadsides frequently mention short weight, a charge made against bakers since the Middle Ages. In an illustration from Assisa Panis (1226), a defaulting baker is being drawn through the streets on a hurdle with his lightweight loaf tied round his neck. This was the punishment laid down for stealing meal or dough and was enforced for nearly 400 years. A folk tale current in London at the beginning of the seventeenth century described how a baker's daughter was changed into an owl when she gave Jesus short weight.² This practice was particularly resented by groups such as the London apprentices who made up an important proportion of the broadside readership. One complains in Dekker's *Honest Whore*, "Are not baker's arms the scales of justice? yet is not their bread light?" (Part 2, 2. 2. [122-23]). In "Merry Tom of All Trades cheats; or, A trick to get money at every dead lift" (c.1690), a baker declares, "No man can accuse me / for making too much weight" (Day 4. 261, lines 47-48), implying that such fraud had become proverbial.

By the nineteenth century, baking at home was less common than ever among city dwellers, and the struggle for democratic rights became linked with demands for cheap bread in the growing towns. In Nottingham in 1812, "women paraded with a loaf upon a pole, streaked with red and tied with black crepe, emblematic of 'bleeding famine decked in Sacckeclothe'" (E. P. Thompson 257). The adulteration of flour was widespread and became a new source of grievance against the bakers. Inferior bread was whitened with alum and contained pulverised gypsum, whiting and burnt bones. The Pitt broadside "London Adulterations, or, Rogues in Grain, Tea, Coffee, Milk, Beer, Bread... etc." (c. 1825) made the charge specific:

The baker will swear all his bread's made of flour,
But just mention alum, you'll make him turn sour;
His ground bones and pebbles turn men skin and bone:
We ask him for bread and he gives us a stone. (qtd. in Palmer 175)

The biblical intertext in the last line (*Matt.* 7. 9) increases the force of the argument. Street ballads were thus part of a continuum of public outcry against injustice.

There is a distinction to be made here between the cheat and the trickster. The first includes fraud practised by the empowered to increase their profit, within a system they have helped to set up. The trickster, on the other hand, adopts the strategies of the disempowered. Since they lack their own space, tricksters have to get along inside a network of already-established forces and representations. In the broadside, this is frequently a means of winning back some of the surplus value

which has been extracted from work carried out under conditions of inequality. The trickster is frequently regarded by folk narratologists as a male figure, but in the broadsides, as in the oral tradition, the most common example of this by far, probably numbering hundreds of examples, is the prostitute who steals a man's purse or clothing. Bakers, who are always seen from outside, clearly lie in the first of these categories, and many of the ballads describe the punishments they suffer for their dishonesty. Three of them end up in the pillory, the proverbial fate of bakers (Day 1. 156; 3. 72; 4. 261), while for another three their oven comes to represent the flames of Hell. For a contemporary chapbook writer it seemed natural that Faustus should encounter bakers and millers in Hell (Ashton 47). An eighteenth century engraving (reproduced in Muller 10) shows a thieving baker who made his bread too small being burnt to death in his own oven. In each case the baker had broken social norms and obligations, and the broadsides are enforcing the moral economy of the poor.

Bakers and Gender

The world of the baker as documented in the broadsides is a male world. This is despite the fact that women are known to have owned bakeries during the period when the broadsides were being sold, and indeed have worked as commercial bakers since the sixth century BC (Applebaum 51, 295; E. P. Thompson 317, 326). The working environment of the broadside baker, on the other hand, is unequivocally one of male power. As well as emphasising the connection between wealth and fraud, described above, London broadsides drew on popular stereotypes, and perhaps ritual associations, of the association between baking and fertility. The baking process, like that of milling, became an arena for sexual activity: "They are all adulterers, as an oven heated by the baker," said Hosea of the Israelites (7. 4). The broadside "Hey ho for a husband" (Day 4. 9) is representative of the six that use baking as a sexual metaphor. A girl of fifteen, tired of being a virgin, seeks out nine men, all from different trades, believing (rightly) that they will satisfy her in ways peculiar to their calling. One of these is a baker, and she resolves:

Ile undertake to learn his Trade
And work as well as he,
his Oven brave
Ile ready have
That he his Batch may set
For fifteen years of age am I
And have never a suitor yet. (Day 4. 9, lines 84-89)

As a result of the baker's lusty advances, many women ended up with "a bun in the oven," to use a metaphor for pregnancy recorded (by OED) only from 1951 but clearly related to this earlier sense of the bakery as a space for sexual encounter. Four of the broadsides use "oven" in this sexual sense, including "A Ballad of All the Trades" (early 18th c):

O the Baker, the bonny, bonny Baker,
The Baker that is so full of sin,

He never heats his Oven hot,
 But he thrusts, but he thrusts, but he thrusts
 his Maiden in. (Pinto and Rodway 440)

or "The Jolly Trades-Men":

Sometimes I am a Baker,
 And Bake both white and brown Sir;
 I have as fine a Wrigling-Pole,
 As any is in all this Town Sir:
 But if my Oven be over-hot,
 I dare not thrust it in Sir;
 For burning of my Wrigling-Pole,
 My Skill's not worth a Pin Sir. (Pinto and Rodway 438)

However, these adventures are not by any means heroic ones. The affairs are often secretive, perhaps because of the tendency for deception described above. In "The Bakers Frolick," two brothers sleep *à trois* with "Jenny the Town Jilt" every Sunday in the absence of their wives. As the ballad maker puts it,

by putting the Fuel so oft to the Spot,
 Their Oven with using at last prov'd too hot (35-36)

Inevitably, the brother-bakers are robbed by Jenny, "a great loss by fire/ Of a Sunday" (44-45). Such robbery, as we have seen, is one of the strategies of the disempowered.

Marriage offered an arena for showing a challenge to the power of the baker. With only one exception, to be discussed below, he is shown as *mal marié*. In the "Dialogue between a Baker and his Wife living near Lambath Ma[r]sh" (Day 4. 147), the wife scolds her husband for his drunkenness and for being led astray by a tailor. Another broadside, "The Discontented BRIDE," offers "A brief Account of Will, the Baker, who sow'd himself in a Blanket every Night going to Bed, for fear of Enlarging his Family" (Day 4. 119. Original capitals). Naturally the bride is not slow to satisfy herself with a gallant in a tavern.

Nine of the broadsides featuring bakers are narratives. More than half merely refer to the fact of the protagonist being a baker, but with no circumstantial detail of any kind. Away from his working environment, the baker is a figure of ridicule in the familiar territory of sexual ignorance and humiliation. In a 1693 broadside, Thomas the baker seduces a woman and then refuses to marry her because she is no longer a virgin ("Young Lass's lamentation," Day 5. 331). In another from the same time, a woman arrives in London from the West country and is made pregnant by a "Gallant," a member of the fashionable aristocracy. She hastily marries a baker and easily persuades him that the twins born five months later are his ("The Somerset'shire Damsel Beguil'd," Day 4. 22).

The most bizarre of the narratives is "The Gelding of the Devil" (Day 4. 351) (c. 1790). This Chaucerian tale is based on a fabliau: it has many European analogues and is no 1133 in the Aarne-Thompson international folktale index (S. Thompson 221). It is the only one not to deal directly with the baker's relations with women,

but it was to become the most sexually political of all. For example, although not named, the baker's wife is the controlling figure. The baker, on his way to Nottingham Market, meets the Devil, who expresses his admiration for the baker's horse: "His skin was smooth and his flesh was fat" (line 11). On hearing that this is because the horse has been gelded, the Devil asks the baker to do the same for him, "Which put the Devil to great pain, / And made him to cry out amain" (29-30. Fig. 1). The Devil vows to take revenge by gelding *him* next market day, and the baker rides sorrowfully home to tell his wife: "Oh, quoth the good-wife without doubt, / I had rather both thy eyes were out" (61-62).³ She then offers to present herself in his place, dressed in his clothes. The Devil appears as agreed, and quite fails to notice the deception. She lifts up her skirts:

Oh, quoth the Devil, now I see,
He was not cunning that gelded thee,
For when he had cut out thy Stones,
He should have closed up thy wounds.
But if thou'lt stay some little space,
I'le fetch some Salve to cure the place. (lines 105-10)

To prevent this, she lets fly a fart for good measure. This persuades the Devil to have nothing more to do with her, and she returns home to her grateful husband. Thus the baker comes out of the encounter unscathed for once.

The ballad is very competently written, but the question remains as to why, when the setting changes from version to version, from Mansfield to Ayr to Manchester, the male protagonist should always be a baker. One answer is that occupations, unlike titles and tunes, very rarely change from one song version to another (Porter *Occupational* 77-78). On the other hand, "The Gelding of the Devil" seems to be only very loosely about a baker as such. No details of his trade are given; no trade terms appear as they do in other broadsides. Even though there is an ideal opportunity to describe the baker's characteristic cap and apron during the cross-dressing episode, his wife merely says, "Give me thy Hat, thy Band and Coat, / Thy Hose and Doublet eke also" (lines 74-75). Only the fact of his going to market even suggests that he is a tradesman, and the knife he carries would surely be more appropriate to a trade like the butcher's. Yet I would suggest that the male protagonist of this narrative is unambiguously identified as a baker through his relation to the contemporary popular ballad market. A ballad is a narrative that signifies, and these significations are particularly marked in the tale role. One aspect of the tale role is the relation between work and social function. The mere mention of a man or woman's work, often without any further naming (the protagonist is simply "a baker of Mansfield," line 3), is itself sufficient to direct and shape the narrative. "Role" and "occupation" become fused. Juri Lotman has called the setting up of such predictable behaviour patterns in orality an "aesthetics of identity," which rests on the assimilation of stereotypes, floating in the unstable milieu of lived experience (qtd. in Zumthor 202). Each ballad draws on a larger system of meaning, an intertext. Taken together, the negative stereotypes in the ballad "The Gelding of the Devil" only fit the baker. Firstly, as the owner of a "smooth and... fat" horse (line 11), the baker is prosperous, a member of the monied classes. He is racked with sexual anxiety, an attribute of a small group of skilled male occupations also includ-

ing the tailor and the cooper. He associates with devils and as we have seen, bakers are popularly associated with Hell. Finally, he escapes castration by a trick: deception is quintessentially the baker's mode of operation.

When "The Gelding of the Devil" was rewritten a few years later for a genteel public, decisive changes were made which obscured this characterization. In Thomas Durfey's enormously popular *Wit and Mirth, or, Pills to Purge Melancholy* (3. 147), a series of books eventually numbering six volumes, the baker's role is made less comical, the wife less decisive, and the emphasis on the physical nature of the encounter is increased. Both the gelding, the devils' comments on the wife's body, and her fart to repel them, are described in nauseating detail, at least double the length of the broadside. The effect is to create a more dignified role for the protagonist, the baker, and to reduce the wife to a risible physical specimen. It has been changed from a song about male insecurity to its opposite, the familiar male discourse of sexist jokes predicated on the female body. As Jean-Luc Godard writes, "In every image, we must ask who speaks" (qtd. in Hebdige 188). *Pills to Purge Melancholy* had quite a different audience to the broadsides, one where the baker was by no means a figure of ridicule and a class enemy.

"The Gelding of the Devil" is an exceptional example of a widely-known tale with international analogues. In general, the broadsides are responding to local abuses and target local figures. Their intertexts are the many popular publications that resisted the petty bourgeoisie, whose power had greatly increased as a result of the political struggles of the seventeenth century. They have little in common with, for example, the many murdering bakers featured in the shocking ballads of Germany, the Bankelsanger (Cheesman), or the skilful lovers of the contemporary French street ballad (such as "L'Histoire d'un Boulanger," Day 5. 455).

Conclusion

This paper has been concerned with cultural meaning, which in the case of the baker's trade may be quite independent of its material practices. Since the broadsides are not occupational songs, they cannot be taken as evidence of actual conditions within the trade: there is no evidence, either internal or external, to suggest that they were either performed or produced by the baker's themselves. What is clear is that cheating by bakers became the representative fraud in an age obsessed with deception, and this is found in a majority of the street ballads. Punishment, in the form of humiliation or ridicule, has the effect of resisting in the text what was already being resisted through food riots and, to a lesser extent, legislation. The texts are, therefore, to a considerable extent reader-led. They do not only represent, as Tom Cheesman maintains of the German "shocking ballad," "the normative assumptions of a broadly 'bourgeois' public—the beliefs and values of an urban citizenry" (49). As we have seen, such values may be both upheld *and contested* in different performances of the same ballad. Broadside are "a terrain in which culture, ideology and power intersect" (qtd. in E. P. Thompson 94). The ballads also indicate the positions of those who had benefited least from the changes brought by the political turmoil of the seventeenth century and were being gradually impoverished. "The Gelding of the Devil" indicates that the precise stance of the broadside depended on a vigorous exchange between mediators ("producers" in Fiske's words quoted at the beginning of this paper), whose interests were often in conflict.

Notes

¹ In this respect they were closer to the real conditions of life than Thomas Hood more than a century later when he wrote:

Oh, God! that bread should be so dear,
And flesh and blood so cheap!

("Song of the Shirt" 39-40: Hood *Poems*: 46)

² "The greedy peasant woman." The tale is widely known and is no. 751 in the international folktale index (S. Thompson 150). In Britain it invariably features a baker's daughter or a peasant woman working in a baker's shop (Briggs *Dictionary*: A. 1. 112-13, 124, 443). Ophelia's reference in *Hamlet* 4. 5. [40-41] suggests it was well-known to London audiences at that time (c. 1603).

³ The Devil's words do not appear on the woodcut even though a bubble appears for the purpose. According to the text of the broadside, his words are under the circumstances quite restrained: "Oh... beshrew thy heart, / Thou dost not feel how I do smart" (lines 33-34).

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