

# “I love a ballad in print”: The Broadside Conundrum and the Historical Axis in Ballad Tradition

David Atkinson

In *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions*, Cecil Sharp, the leading figure in the English folk song revival of the early twentieth century, extols the fact that one of his singers, Henry Larcombe, of Haselbury Plucknett, in the county of Somerset, sang him eleven stanzas of a ballad, “Robin Hood and the Tanner” (Child 126), that proved almost word for word the same as the corresponding stanzas of a black-letter broadside copy in the Bodleian Library (Sharp, *Some Conclusions* 17). Later on, though, he states that the vitality of folk song depends entirely upon its continuing to be sung in the present: “a folk-song never grows old . . . Its life is conditioned by its popularity. If its development is arrested, sooner or later it falls in popular esteem; singers cease to sing it, and it dies beyond hope of resuscitation” (Sharp, *Some Conclusions* 124). From the strict perspective of performance, this is probably right. It poses a conundrum, however, when Sharp goes on to say: “It is recorded on no written or printed document, and all the antiquarians in the world are incapable of reviving it” (Sharp, *Some Conclusions* 124). For not only have more recent revival movements proved quite capable of resurrecting ballads that, to the best of our knowledge, have not been current since the seventeenth century, but, much more importantly, it is now known that perhaps as many as ninety per cent of English-language ballads and folk songs have a history in cheap, popular print of the broadside and chapbook kind.<sup>1</sup> “Robin Hood and the Tanner” is a classic example. For all that the Robin Hood ballads ostensibly embody English history in sung verse, and have a very strong presence in broadsides and chapbook garlands printed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they were subsequently collected only rather infrequently from singers at the time of the folk song revival in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century.

Sharp also writes: “The latter-day folk-song does not necessarily bear upon it any mark to witness to its antiquity. One of comparatively recent origin may be indistinguishable from one that has been continuously sung, though in ever varying form, for many centuries” (Sharp, *Some Conclusions* 125). Although both the subject and the language of Henry Larcombe’s “Robin Hood and the Tanner” do in fact bear inherent witness to antiquity, the qualified assertion here is certainly not wrong (and one can think, too, of some of the best examples of modern song-writing in imitation of the folk song idiom). Nevertheless, a perceived chronology is still absolutely essential to Sharp’s own understanding of folk song in terms of *continuity*, *variation*, and *selection* (Sharp, *Some Conclusions* 16–31); and it is under the heading of “continuity” that he cites the Henry Larcombe ballad. Further, the idea of tradition, now routinely attached as an identifier to the sorts of

ballads and folk songs under discussion here—that is to say, “traditional” ballads and songs—itself seems absolutely to demand a chronological dimension (Williams 318–20; *Oxford English Dictionary* “tradition”). The time scale is up for negotiation—it might be as short as a single generation—but ballads do have to have a history.

Mr Larcombe (1824–1908) was eighty-two years of age and blind when he sang “Robin Hood and the Tanner” for Sharp, and he said that he had not sung it or heard it sung for forty years or more (Sharp MSS Folk Tunes 632, Folk Words 683–685; Sharp, *Collection I*: 148–49, 717). It is unknown how he had learned it in the first place. It is unlikely to have been directly from one of the seventeenth-century broadside or garland copies included in Francis James Child’s standard edition of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads [ESPB]* (III: 137–40).<sup>2</sup> But “Robin Hood and the Tanner” was in print at a later date, in anthologies such as *A Collection of Old Ballads* (I: 83–89), Thomas Evans’s *Old Ballads* (I: 112–18), and Joseph Ritson’s *Robin Hood* (II: 33–40), and as a broadside under the title of *Robin Hood and Arthur-a-Bland*. He might, of course, have learned it orally, directly from another singer. There are only two more records of this particular ballad in England in the early twentieth century, both from Hampshire (Gardiner Collection GG/1/3/79, GG/1/20/1221), although that does not preclude its having been known more widely, perhaps at an earlier date. But that merely begs the question as to where Mr Larcombe’s putative source might have learned it.

Cecil Sharp, we can assume, was more or less aware of all this. So how could he draw attention to the continuity of “Robin Hood and the Tanner” and yet at the same time write of folk songs as being recorded in “no written or printed document”? The answer, it seems, must lie in the emphasis on continuing performance that is apparent in the quotation cited above, to the effect that a folk song dies when singers cease to sing it. The same belief appears to underlie Sharp’s account of broadside or chapbook ballads. There, he envisages folk songs as having been picked up by the hawkers and pedlars who sold ballad sheets at fairs and the like, and subsequently passed on to the ballad printers, who would reissue them on broadsides, “but, usually, in a very garbled form, and after many editings” (Sharp, *Some Conclusions* 101), “freely and often unintelligently edited” (Sharp, *Some Conclusions* 123). “A broadside version of a ballad is usually, therefore, a very indifferent one, and vastly inferior to the genuine peasant song” (Sharp, *Some Conclusions* 101).

This judgement is an aesthetic one, and it is by no means Sharp’s alone. Sabine Baring-Gould, the prominent English folk song collector of the late Victorian period, described broadside ballads in very much the same terms, as urban corruptions of a pristine rural tradition (Baring-Gould Manuscript Collection, Harvard Notebook, Appendix no. 5, Baring-Gould to Child, 23 August 1890; Baring Gould and Fleetwood Sheppard viii). And Child himself famously described the great collections of broadside ballads, such as the Pepys and Roxburghe collections, as “veritable dung-hills, in which, only after a great deal of sickening grubbing, one finds a very moderate jewel” (and he mentioned some of the Robin Hood ballads in this

connection) (Hustvedt 254; Brown; Palmer). Such strictures are not, in fact, borne out in any consistent or singularly meaningful way by close comparison of roughly contemporaneous collected and printed copies, but there do appear to be currents in this late Victorian and Edwardian thinking about ballads and folk songs that made such conclusions inevitable. One is a strongly nostalgic, pastoral strain, pitting present, and predominantly urban, decadence against an unsullied, and predominantly rural, past (Dugaw, “Legacy of the Pastoral”). Closely related is an origin myth that places the beginnings of English balladry in an imaginary, Rousseau-esque environment, prior to literacy.

For Child, the requisite environment was a “condition of society . . . in which the people are not divided by political organization and book-culture into markedly distinct classes, in which consequently there is such community of ideas and feelings that the whole people form an individual” (Child, “Ballad Poetry” 214). For Sharp, too, folk song originated in a period “when the unit was not the individual, but the community; we are dealing with the product of a people as yet undivided into a lettered and an unlettered class” (Sharp, “Lecture on Folk Songs from Somerset” 4). Only slightly less fancifully, Sharp describes folk song as the creation of “the common people”: “those whose mental development has been due not to any formal system of training or education, but solely to environment, communal association, and direct contact with the ups and downs of life . . . the unlettered, whose faculties have undergone no formal training whatsoever, and who have never been brought into close enough contact with educated persons to be influenced by them” (Sharp, *Some Conclusions* 3–4). It is evident that this sort of origin myth would readily lead to the idea of “oral tradition” as a defining requirement for folk song, in turn reinforcing an instinctive tendency to devalue on aesthetic grounds the earlier written and printed copies, even while they remain absolutely crucial to the chronology of the English-language ballads. In the wake of arguments like these, it is quite predictable that oral tradition should have been elevated into the shibboleth that, for many, it has subsequently become (see, for example, Karpeles 2).

Rather than merely pointing out that such origin myths are historical nonsense, it is more profitable to consider them as an important part of the intellectual environment that gave rise to the folk song movement of the nineteenth century and later. Indeed, the construction of hypothetical origins for English balladry already had an illustrious precedent in Thomas Percy’s “Essay on the Ancient Minstrels in England” prefacing the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (first published in 1765), where (to summarize greatly) Percy posited a written scaldic poetry which then gave rise to an oral minstrel tradition, which in turn gave way to the “minor poets” who turned out ballads for the broadside press (I: xxi–cvi; Groom). At least the first two of Percy’s elements are almost entirely ahistorical. Nevertheless, the question remains, what really can be said about the early production, reception, and transmission history of the traditional ballads of England and lowland Scotland as they are now understood?

In practice, for better or for worse, the ballad is exemplified by, though certainly not confined to, the items in *ESPB*: a set of narrative verses in ballad or common metre, suitable for singing, beginning *in medias res* and telling the story swiftly through dialogue and action, eschewing sophisticated verbal devices but often drawing upon stock phrases or “commonplaces.”<sup>3</sup> The ballads are set to strophic melodies, but the tunes are by no means always fixed to a particular set of words, and while there is no doubt an aesthetic gain from the combination of words and music, ballad words can also exist quite independently of melodies, and melodies independently of words (supremely in the folk melodies interwoven into the work of composers of the English school, such as Ralph Vaughan Williams, George Butterworth, and Gustav Holst). For this reason, the ballad is in practice almost always identified by literary style. Although one tends to speak of ballad singing, the precise circumstances of historical practice are frequently no longer recoverable. Certainly not all of the contributors from whom ballads have been collected have been singers.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, in practice, and particularly in the wake of the revival of interest in folk song collecting and performance (and facilitated by the development of sound recording) in the late Victorian/Edwardian age, and again following the Second World War, literary style alone is no longer viewed as an entirely sufficient descriptor for the traditional ballad. In the light of several centuries now of ballad publishing, performance, collecting, editing, and scholarship, three main loci for the ballad can be identified:

- a) ballad words in broadside and chapbook print
- b) ballad words collected at an earlier date, mostly during the Romantic revival of the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries, and often published in ballad books, only in some instances with melodies
- c) ballad words collected during the folk song revival of the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries and later, often published in ballad books, mostly with melodies, sometimes preserved as sound recordings.

Either *a* and *b*, or *a* and *c*, or *b* and *c* are sufficient conditions for the traditional ballad—but *a* alone, or *b* alone, or *c* alone may not be. As noted, the schema is self-fulfilling, and it depends on a quality of being “traditional” that is applied retrospectively, for tradition is always necessarily a quality that is ascribed in the present to items that existed in the past. It is frequently so applied by collectors, scholars, and revivalists, but often also by their informants as well, although they might not use precisely that terminology.

For all its potential limitations (under certain circumstances, for example, there may be sufficient geographical spread within a single period to infer an underlying chronological dimension), the schema outlined above nonetheless serves in practice to distinguish the items considered by Child, Sharp, and a host of other collectors, scholars, and performers—distinguishing them from items of similar style that have

seemingly not maintained popularity with singers, or items of different kinds that the same singers might have enjoyed performing. There are then three particular consequences flowing from it that demand consideration.

(i) The various conditions are not all of the same type: thus *b* and *c* relate to performance of some kind ostensibly unsupported by the written word, while *a* relates to the written word and might remain quite independent of performance in its conventional sense.

Printed ballads on broadsides and in chapbooks have been a significant presence in popular culture from the sixteenth century through to the beginning of the twentieth century. And during this time, while they could always provide the basis for performance, they did not have to do so. For all that is said about ballad-sellers singing their wares to attract buyers and to convey the appropriate melody to their audience, their prime motive must have been simply to sell ballads as commodities.<sup>5</sup> One of the uses for broadsides, for example, for which there is good early evidence, is that they were pasted on walls in domestic dwellings and alehouses (Rollins, “Black-Letter Broadside Ballad” 336–38; Watt 12, 148–49, 194). The woodcut illustrations, which were frequently more decorative than directly illustrative of the text, would fulfil the same function as wallpaper or tapestry, and the gothic black-letter typeface used for most broadsides of the seventeenth century might also have been considered decorative (or maybe that is just a modern perspective, and the important thing is that black-letter was the familiar typeface for popular printed items). Ballad texts so displayed were, of course, available for reading, which would most likely be reading out loud, or for singing.

Or not. John Selden and Samuel Pepys accumulated broadside ballads not just as examples of collectable ephemera but also for the light they could shed on the social and political history of their times, the history of printing, and human nature at large (Luckett). Similar impulses appear to have lain behind the formation of other large broadside collections, such as the Roxburghe collection in the British Library, the Madden collection at Cambridge, and the various collections that constitute the Bodleian Library Broadside Ballads. It might be argued that this was not the original impetus behind ballad publishing, but it is doubtful whether the printers and booksellers would have been unduly bothered. Ballad sheets belong with ephemeral printed literature and of the large numbers of sheets thought to have been printed, in the nineteenth century especially but also in the earlier period (Watt 11; Rollins, *Analytical Index*; Mayhew I: 284), many can be presumed to have been lost. It is sometimes said that one reason for the low survival rate of printed ephemera at large is that such items ended up being used as toilet paper (Cornwallis 50). One can think of other “non-performance” uses as well, as lining paper, for lighting fires or pipes, for writing on the verso and in the blank spaces.

(ii) The schema says nothing in itself about how the ballad words got from *a* to *b*, or *a* to *c*, or even *b* to *c*.

While precedents for most English ballads and folk songs can be found in broadside and chapbook print, there are a number for which only conditions *b* and *c* apply, in which case an oral transmission route must be presumed. Some of these instances are ballads such as “Lord Randal” (Child 12) or “The Maid Freed from the Gallows” (Child 95) which depend for their storytelling technique largely on repetition from one stanza to the next, with only minimal incremental change, and which therefore seem particularly amenable to memorization. Singers, moreover, have often told collectors that they learned songs directly, by ear, from other singers, and there is no reason to disbelieve them as a matter of principle (Bearman). Equally, though, it is well known for singers to have possessed manuscript notebooks, printed broadsides, and even ballad books, which they could consult at will, perhaps to refresh the memory (see, for example, McKean).

On the other hand, ballad singers must nearly always have learned the melodies orally, from other singers (or else made up their own tunes, as is sometimes claimed). Printed broadsides and chapbooks rarely carry music notation, and although seventeenth-century copies often indicate a tune by name, it is not certain that those particular tunes were necessarily used. Even in the later period, when notation was sometimes printed in ballad books, it seems improbable that singers would have relied upon it, given the relatively simple nature of ballad melodies and the relative difficulty of singing from notation (in contrast to instrumental musicians, who have long made use of manuscript notation).

The only credible conclusion is that ballad words have been transmitted by both written and oral means, in some instances over a very long period of time, and that the two methods must be considered as to all intents and purposes indistinguishable. At the same time, an almost exclusively oral route has operated for the transmission of ballad tunes. Given that ballads were certainly not *always* sung, even when they were recited for collectors, it is reasonable to consider the transmission of ballad tunes and ballad words as parallel processes which, albeit potentially mutually reinforcing (Marsh), also potentially reinforce the separation of words and music referred to above.

(iii) The schema cannot be presumed to function in reverse.

If conditions *a* and *c* are present, then a ballad may be deemed traditional at the time of its collecting in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. But at the time of the broadside printing—in, say, the seventeenth, eighteenth, or even the nineteenth century—it need not have had any special traditional status at all. It need have been nothing more than “popular,” in the most general sense of that term.

“James Harris (The Dæmon Lover)” (Child 243), for example, is first known on broadsides of the mid-seventeenth century under the title *A Warning for Married Women*, which provided Child’s A text. Child’s B text, “The Distressed Ship Carpenter,” printed in *The Rambler’s Garland* (c.1785), is now known to have been published under the same title and with a very similar (albeit not verbally identical) text rather earlier in the eighteenth century, in *A Collection of Diverting Songs, Epigrams, &c.*



(c.1740) and as a broadside, *The Distressed Ship-Carpenter* (c.1750). In the Romantic revival period, “The Dæmon Lover” was collected in Scotland and published. Further broadside copies were printed in America from the late 1850s under the title of (*The House Carpenter*). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the ballad was collected in England (rather rarely) and North America (much more frequently). Child felt that “it does not seem necessary to posit a tradition behind [243] A” (*ESPB* IV: 361). Viewed from the other end of the chronology, however, there is little question that *A Warning for Married Women*, “The Distressed Ship Carpenter,” and other printed copies all belong to a continuity that runs from the 1650s through to, say, Mrs Marina Russell singing “Well met, well met, my own true love” in Upwey, Dorset, in 1907 (Hammond Collection HAM/5/32/31; *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* 3.2: p. 84). Or, if you prefer, to Bob Dylan singing “The House Carpenter” in 1961 (Heylin).

Unlike *A Warning for Married Women*, “The Distressed Ship Carpenter” and American broadside copies all have the striking “Well met, well met, my own true love” opening of collected copies like Mrs Russell’s. Nevertheless, throughout its chronology the ballad narrative remains recognizably the same as that of *A Warning for Married Women*, albeit with considerable compression and some variation (the cloven-footed Devil, for example, makes his appearance in Scottish copies). It does seem plausible that the ballad was rewritten at some point, perhaps in the early eighteenth century, into a form that seemingly became more popular with singers. While the later printings do not specify a melody at all, the tune(s) identified by name in *A Warning for Married Women* does not bear any evident resemblance to those later collected from ballad singers (Bronson III: 429; Simpson 368–71). And yet *A Warning for Married Women* was printed more than half a dozen times (also under the title *A Warning for All Maids*) over a period of at least fifty years, from the mid-seventeenth century into the early eighteenth century.

*A Warning for Married Women* is plausibly attributed to Laurence Price (fl.1628–75), known as a writer of broadsides and chapbooks, on the basis of the initials “L.P.” at the end of one of the early copies (ESTC R186280) (Harker, “The Price You Pay”; “A Warning”). There is little reason to think that this particular piece would have been readily differentiated at the time of its appearance either from other items written by Price or from other broadsides of a similar nature. For example, the roughly contemporaneous ballad *A Warning for Maidens* was apparently set to the same melody as *A Warning for Married Women* and employs a similar narrative technique to tell a story that is itself comparable with that of “The Dæmon Lover.” *A Warning for Maidens* was printed on broadsides several times in the seventeenth century,<sup>6</sup> and right through the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth centuries (later headed *Bateman’s Tragedy* or *Young Bateman’s Ghost*), with provincial as well as London imprints extant. The same story had been the subject of a play printed in 1636, and it was recast in prose in chapbooks printed throughout the eighteenth century as *Bateman’s Tragedy; or, The Perjured Bride Justly Rewarded* (occasionally reprinting the verse ballad as well). All this is ample testament to the enduring popularity of

both the ballad story and the ballad itself, and yet it has never been collected from performance at a later date and, rightly or wrongly, is unlikely to be considered as a traditional ballad.

Neither are other items attributed to Laurence Price likely to be so considered, such as *A Warning for All Wicked Livers*, a highwayman ballad dated to 1655, also identified by the initials “L.P.”. On the other hand, early broadside copies of both “The Famous Flower of Serving-men” (Child 106) and “Robin Hood’s Golden Prize” (Child 147) are similarly printed with Price’s initials. Authorship of this kind at this date is unlikely to have counted for much in itself, but these anomalies within an identifiable corpus do serve to highlight the hit-and-miss status of the traditional ballad as it has come to be defined. “The Famous Flower of Serving-men” has been collected subsequently, but “Robin Hood’s Golden Prize,” otherwise known only from print and manuscript, is (along with others of the Robin Hood ballads) one of the pieces that some students of the subject would consider unwarranted inclusions in Child’s *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*.

Here, then, we have a challenge to the regressive method in historical research. We can guess as to reasons why certain ballads that are known early on in print did remain popular (with purchasers, readers, singers?) while others did not. But the results are likely to be along nothing more than speculative lines concerning such things as narrative style and durability of subject matter. Or perhaps the ballads that survived just became attached to memorable tunes.

The regressive method, as Peter Burke outlines it in his ground-breaking *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, means reading history backwards in order to fill in the gaps of the distant past, often drawing on recent fieldwork (81–85). “It was only in the late eighteenth century that ballads and stories were systematically collected from oral tradition . . . and that popular customs and festivals were systematically described. There is therefore a strong case for writing the history of popular culture backwards and for using the late eighteenth century as a base from which to consider the more fragmentary evidence from the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries” (82). “Again, if we want to study the folksongs of early modern Europe the regressive method is indispensable and the years around 1900 need to be taken as a point of departure” (82). But do they? In the years around 1900, folk song collectors were conscious of gathering the remnants of a practice that was thought to be dying out. Singers may well have shared something of the same attitude. Although it has been shown that this perception was certainly exaggerated, there is little doubt that other forms of entertainment had become prevalent well before the early twentieth century and that ballads and folk songs could increasingly be seen as outmoded. This much is apparent from Flora Thompson’s (admittedly fictionalized and nostalgic) account in *Lark Rise to Candleford* of singing in a village pub in rural Oxfordshire in the 1880s (chapter 4). In other words, both the collectors and, potentially, their contributors had an emotional and intellectual investment in ballads and songs that were old, that



could be associated with a particular way of life and social environment, and that were under a perceived threat from modernity. This complex of conditions and the concomitant emotional investment was, and is, conveniently codified under the rubric of tradition.

But outwith the periods of self-conscious revivalism and concerted ballad collecting, this complex of conditions does not have to apply. The evidence for widespread ballad singing and ballad selling in the early modern period is, although mostly somewhat literary, fairly compelling (Gammon 10–11; Würzbach 253–84).<sup>7</sup> What the ballads meant to the people who bought them, or read them, or sang them, is, however, much more opaque. What we can say concerning the early history of the traditional ballads is that a small sample of verses out of a much larger volume that were in circulation apparently acquired a much longer-lasting popularity than other, contemporaneous productions. The reasons for, and the nature of, that popularity are mostly quite simply unknown, as is both the manner in which it was manifested—through singing, and/or reading (aloud), and/or repeated printing—and the manner in which the ballads were transmitted—by oral means, or in print, or, most likely, through an indistinguishable combination of the two. Only at a later date did that popularity, now reinforced by a degree at least of evident chronological continuity, come to be endorsed by ballad collectors with the attribute of tradition.

Combined, moreover, with the origin myths outlined above, and underwritten empirically by the fact that many of their contributors did enjoy singing the ballads and songs and that they spoke of having learned them by ear, tradition became further refined into oral tradition. The special appeal of this formulation is that, to the casual observer, oral transmission also provides a ready mechanism for what is one of the most noticeable characteristics of ballads and folk songs: their variability from one instance to the next. Given the expectation that ballad melodies would indeed nearly always be transmitted orally, and given, too, the natural variation in the ability of singers to hold to a specific tune, the formulation is to that extent unexceptional. But where it does become controversial is in its apparent exclusion of the printed ballad from the rubric of tradition.

There are two probable reasons for this. The first is the assumption that the circulation of printed broadside and chapbook texts would somehow “fix” the words of ballads and act as a brake on variation. This assumption, in turn, seems to be wrong for two reasons. Firstly, these are not texts of any recognized authority. While there might be an obligation to learn and reproduce verses from, say, the Bible with a high degree of accuracy, the singer learning a ballad from a broadside would be under no equivalent obligation. Whether learned from a broadside or from another singer—and regardless of a likely intention to reproduce both words and tune in a conservative manner—he or she would nonetheless be free consciously or unconsciously to introduce variations. Secondly, broadside-type prints are themselves subject to variation. It is very much a belief peculiar to the twentieth century that printed works are to all intents and purposes fixed. In fact, the texts of printed ballads vary in ways

that are directly comparable with the kinds of variation encountered in collected copies of ballads (Dugaw, “Anglo-American Folksong Reconsidered”).

Thus, to return for a moment to “The Dæmon Lover,” different copies of *A Warning for Married Women* vary from one another in mostly minor verbal details. All are substantially different from the eighteenth-century “Distressed Ship Carpenter” copies, which also vary from one another in verbal details. In comparison, the *House Carpenter* printed on broadsides in Philadelphia and New York in the nineteenth century is somewhat tauter in narrative construction, with less redundancy of detail, the language more modern and with occasional localized touches (“On the banks of old Tennessee”). Yet the overall pattern is still unmistakably that of the “Distressed Ship Carpenter.” Collected copies, too, are frequently quite similar to the broadside texts, and yet they are not to be expected to reproduce them verbatim.

Perhaps none of this is especially surprising. What it shows is that while printers might merely copy from one another, they might equally modify a ballad text in very much the same sorts of ways as might be expected of singers, introducing minor differences and every now and then evidencing a more substantial recasting. This whole area remains under-researched, but it is in fact already apparent from the broadside evidence in *ESPB*, including Child’s collations of variants among different printed copies. Intuitively, one would anticipate that textual variation among printed copies would be generally greater among ballads that have had a longer chronology and that have been collected more frequently. Space precludes detailed investigation, but “The Golden Vanity” (Child 286), in print in the seventeenth century, is another good example along the “Dæmon Lover” lines. Variant readings, most of them relatively minor lexical details, can be identified among printed copies of “Caroline and her Young Sailor Bold” (Roud 553) and “The Bold Princess Royal” (Roud 528), both of which were in print and widely collected from the nineteenth century onwards. But there are just as many, if not more, variant readings, and some of them of real semantic significance, among nineteenth-century broadside copies of a third sea song, “The Fatal Ramilies” (Roud 1266), which has been collected no more than two or three times. Where such variants might have originated—in printing shop or in performance—remains unknown. Moreover, it is of no practical consequence, since the variants are indistinguishable on the basis of their putative origin. While it is much too early to draw grandiose conclusions on the basis of a few examples out of the potentially vast array of evidence that could be examined, it is simply not sufficient to invoke the mechanism of oral transmission to account for ballad variation.

The second probable reason why the printed ballad has been largely excluded from the rubric of tradition lies with a way of thinking that favours vocal performance as somehow the natural, correct, or “authentic” mode of expression for the ballad. There are several interconnected reasons for this perception. The folk revivals brought collectors into direct contact with the immediate human sources for ballads, who came to be accorded a particular kind of authority over the texts and tunes they supplied. For most non-professional observers, an interest in ballad melodies was, and is, most

readily facilitated by listening to singing. Both “live” performances and the arrival of sound and video recording have encouraged a further interest in all of the extratextual elements that performance can bring to words and tunes (vocal quality, expression, gesture, and so forth). More generally, the equation of authenticity with the human voice is an aspect of the phonocentrism and the “metaphysics of presence” that has cast writing as necessarily subordinate to speech, and which, according to Derrida, has dominated Western thought since the time of Plato.

Later, too, this way of thinking about the ballad has encouraged ethnographic and ethnomusicological perspectives on ballad singers and singing and, less happily, has fostered the appearance of a perceived dichotomy between text and context. This dichotomy is not a useful one. The entire path of broadside production—writing, printing, distribution, selling—through to reception—reading, reciting, singing, display and preservation, and the final disposal down the privy—engages human actors and social contexts at every turn. Modern textual scholarship—in particular, the social theory of text (McGann)—readily acknowledges that the creation of the text itself requires the agency of numerous different human actors and is necessarily influenced and altered by its social, cultural, political context. Indeed, each single document that bears a text, each individual printed broadside or chapbook, will necessarily have had its own distinctive history of production, ownership, reading, transmission, survival or destruction, as it has passed through multiple hands.

But much of that human activity along the historical axis that the traditional ballads traverse remains unexplored and perhaps irrecoverable. This observation is especially true of the earlier period, prior to the Romantic revival, but in fact it extends to ballad printing in virtually all of its facets. Researches into the history of the book are beginning to shed light on certain aspects, and there is now a substantial body of work in social history establishing the continuity of oral and literate culture in the early modern period and beyond (see, for example, Fox; Stock; Thomas). For better or worse, it remains more or less inevitable that the ballad should be viewed in the light of its own peculiar history, the legacy of the different waves of folk revivalism and their origin myths, and the consequent perspective of oral tradition. But at the very least, the broadside conundrum must serve as a warning that this perspective does not tell anything like the whole story.

## Notes

- 1 “Broadside” is the term used to describe a single sheet of paper printed on one side, which remained a common format for ballads from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. “Chapbooks,” covering a whole range of popular literature, were small booklets, usually of eight to twenty-four pages, often sold by itinerant pedlars, and were particularly common during the eighteenth century. The rough figure of ninety per cent comes from earlier studies (Thomson; Wehse) and from a variety of (mostly verbal) reports on current research in this area.

- 2 A late seventeenth-century manuscript copy, unknown to Child, derives from one of the garlands (Knight 117–22).
- 3 There is much more to be said about ballad style, which is well covered in standard studies of the subject (Gummere; Gerould; Hodgart).
- 4 Bell Robertson, one of the leading informants for the large folk song collection made by Gavin Grieg and the Rev. James B. Duncan in north-east Scotland in the early twentieth century, is a prime example here (Shuldham-Shaw, Lyle, et al. VIII: 579–85).
- 5 Shakespeare’s scene in *The Winter’s Tale*—from which, of course, the quotation in my title is borrowed—is a piece of pastoral parody and needs to be understood as such, but nonetheless gives a good sense of ballads as both artefacts and commodities (briefly discussed by Chartier 333–35).
- 6 Stationers’ Register entries (Arber III: 236; IV: 131; Eyre and Rivington II: 497) relate to 1603, 1624, and 1675, respectively. The earliest extant copies are of the mid- to late seventeenth century.
- 7 A search under “ballad” in the online *Proceedings of the Old Bailey* will produce an interesting selection of results.

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*Note:* Early printed items are identified by reference to the English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC) <<http://estc.bl.uk/>> wherever possible, and in other instances an exemplar is cited.

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