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EPILOGUE
Popularity, Performance, and Repetition

Katherine Steele Brokaw

THE ESSAYS IN THIS ISSUE demonstrate the vitality of ballads as cultural artifacts. The ubiquitous printing and performance of ballads in early modern England meant that they were lived by people in every station of life, sensed through eyes, ears, and bodies in motion. The contributors to this collection trace myriad webs of meaning and production within this remarkably interdisciplinary subject. Indeed, it takes at least the disciplines represented in this volume—history, art history, music history, literary studies, theater studies, digital codicology, and cognitive science—to begin to understand the prevalence and import of these ballads. Perhaps because of their immense popularity—they are *the* popular-culture item of early modern England—broadside ballads and the melodies, dances, and woodcuts related to them have been critically disparaged or neglected until recently.

But it is precisely their pervasiveness throughout early modern English society that makes them important as well as complex. Created and enacted by generations of professional artisans (writers, singers, printers, musicians, woodcut artists, and dancers) and consumed by everyone from gentlefolk to merchants to the poor, ballads supplied entertainment even as they served religious, moral, political, and occupational agendas. The resulting art forms touch upon every aspect of life in early modern England. Broadside ballads were of and for the people; as Adam Fox says, they were "popular in every sense of the word." The essays in this issue, as a whole, give us a better picture of just how popular they were while also helping us imagine the diverse ways in which they were performative.

The essays collected here help us understand the social forces that made ballad consumption so widespread and how these same forces informed their content and meanings. As Mark Hailwood explains, it was precisely the popularity of ballads that allowed them to be agents of urgent political messages, including protests against occupational exploitation. Thus while ballads both revealed and helped constitute

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occupational identities, their widespread use by people with varying agendas allowed them to, as Fox argues, both disparage the people of Scotland and give the Scottish distinctive cultural markers that helped construct a sense of national identity. That ballads, because of their immense popularity, could be so instrumental in identity formation helps explain how, as Una McIlvenna argues, ballad melody influenced moral and educative agendas.

Balladry's status as popular-culture phenomenon extended to dramatic and visual cultures. In their associations with stage plays, jigs, and dances, as Roger Clegg and Bruce Smith show, ballads pervaded and were in part constituted by nearly every available popular entertainment. So while the exquisite compositions of Tallis and Byrd may receive more critical attention, no early modern tunes were heard more frequently or in more diverse contexts than ballad melodies. And as Megan E. Palmer and Christopher Marsh illuminate, the broadside ballad's woodcuts were far more popular—and complex—than any other visual media, morphing from context to context and variously interpreted by countless consumers. Indeed, balladry is so intricately entwined with all facets of early modern culture that the aid of digital technology is often needed to untangle strands of meaning. While the English Broadside Ballad Archive has granted scholars—and the public, appropriately—access to words and melodies, Carl Stahmer has limned a future in which computing power will provide access to more webs of meaning, including visual and material information. It is fitting that so popular and interconnected an art form can live on and be studied through the tools of the Internet.

Digital media allow these ballads to be seen, read, and heard around the world, potentially re-performed anywhere there is web access. The essays here reveal the sense in which balladry's performativity is central to its popularity and importance. The "interpretive play" that Palmer identifies between printed word and image is melodic, kinetic, and dramatic in addition to being visual. As Marsh and Smith have discussed elsewhere and as McIlvenna discusses here, melody created meaning, by association lending interpretive frameworks to new texts that were set to old tunes. But melodic associations were more than aural: Smith shows us they were also kinetic. Ballads performed obvious fictions, as Clegg reveals in his study of the significant overlap between ballads and stage jigs. At the same time, as Frances Dolan argues, they could construct the idea of veracity, using first-person voicing to perform truthfulness. Their function in forming occupational and Scottish national identifies is performative in an Erving Goffman sense, contributing to the constitution of selfhood in everyday life.[1] But, as Hailwood's and Fox's essays both reveal, ballads could also allow a sort of role play as singers slipped into identities not their own. But in addition to the performances of music, drama, and identity, we might also see that the visual contents of broadside ballad pages—filled as they are with woodcuts, words, typefaces—are their own performative characters, creating meaning for readers who had previous associa-

1. See, for example, Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y., 1959).

tions with the images. The interaction of reader and broadside thus resembles the early modern theatergoer's association of actors, costumes, and characters with memories of their roles in appearances in previous productions. The texts, visuals, melodies, dances, and topics (political, newsworthy, religious) of ballads all created memories in early modern minds that were unique to each person, and those elements were then consistently and playfully re-combined to create new meanings.

Ballads were popular; ballads were performed. As such, part of their cultural impact came from the fact that they were repeated. Repetition made them popular, and repetition enabled their complex and personalized hermeneutics. As McIlvenna explains, it is through the reuse of melody (contrafactum) that cultural and emotional associations are brought to bear on meaning. Elizabeth Margulis has recently studied repetition in music, pulling together insights from cognitive science, musicology, and psychology (for Marsh and Smith, too, methodological insights from cognitive science have proven useful). A few key insights from her book, *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind*, are relevant to understanding the repetitiveness of historical balladry. First, she describes how humans tolerate repetition in music—both repeated strains in one song and the hearing of the same melody over and over—far more than we do repetition in other forms of entertainment or in social life (for example, hearing the same joke repeated), and thus repetition in music must be both pleasurable and functional. The recycling of melody in ballads, as several essays in this collection attest, was clearly enjoyable to consumers, helpful to ballad writers, and essential to the production of meaning. Further, Margulis explains that musical repetition pushes mental processing from the cognitive region of our cortex to the motoric, automatic part of our brain, the basal ganglia where we control functions like walking; in this way it shares cognitive characteristics with ritual. Thus, hearing a melody for the umpteenth time means that one can focus on other things—the words, perhaps; or the mood and memories the song conjures; or the swaying or dance into which the melody incites our body, perhaps through kinetic memory. Finally, Margulis argues that the repeatability of songs allows them to become the property of a community instead of an individual, thus becoming part of a tradition rather than just a moment.[2] This is clearly true of ballads: repeated singing of their melodies created a continuum of diverse interpretive communities that consumed these songs for generations.

The repetitions of today's popular music are as interpretively complex as ballads were in early modern culture. In the visual memes of the Internet, we see an analogue for the morphing and popularity of ballad woodcuts; it is still the case that the visual is as reiterative and popular as the aural. Lyrics are rarely distributed through cheap print anymore, but they are posted on social media, snatches of them "retweeted" when the words hit home with a listener. Melodies are transmitted digitally, flowing freely through our computers and iPhones, and they are transmuted, too, so that a sampled riff—like the borrowing from Sir Mix-a-Lot in Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda"—creates meaning for its popular audiences because of its familiar

2. Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis, *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind* (Oxford, 2014), 14, 58–71, 6.

melody. The recent phenomenon of the flash mob attests to the way songs may be composed for movement, and gestures may become embedded in a song's cultural meaning. In the early modern world, as in our contemporary moment, the cultural forms that are consumed and performed by the most people are the most influential, complex, and vital: they are worthy of our sustained and multifaceted attention.

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