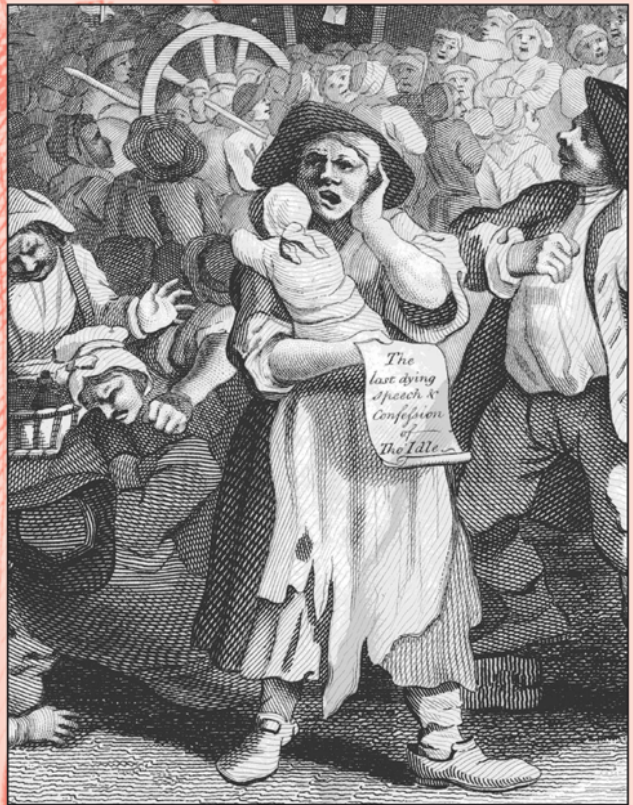


Desire, Drink and Death in English Folk and Vernacular Song, 1600–1900



Vic Gammon

ROUTLEDGE

An **Ashgate** Book

DESIRE, DRINK AND DEATH IN ENGLISH FOLK
AND VERNACULAR SONG, 1600–1900

For Sheila

Desire, Drink and Death in English Folk and Vernacular Song, 1600–1900

VIC GAMMON
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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>List of Music Examples</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>Guide to Abbreviations and Main Sources</i>	xv
 Introduction: Exploring Old Songs	 1
 1 Song, Sex and Society in England, 1600–1850	 15
2 Such a Merry Tune: Music, Musical Instruments and Dance as Sexual Symbols	51
3 Echoes of the Siren: Music, Charm, and Seduction in British Traditional Songs and Ballads	83
4 ‘Nothing Like Drinking’: English Vernacular Song and Strong Drink	103
5 Singing and Popular Funeral Practices in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries	177
6 Child Death	207
7 Song, Experience and Authenticity	231
 <i>Index of Songs and Tunes</i>	 249
<i>General Index</i>	257



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List of Illustrations

1	Drunkards as brute beasts: a woodcut from ‘Looking-Glass for Drunkards’, ballad 4.258 (The Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge, used with permission)	171
2	A fiddler in the stocks, a woodcut from ‘A Statute for Swearers and Drunkards’, ballad 1.215 (The Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge, used with permission)	172
3	‘Vital Spark’ (‘The Dying Christian to his Soul’): sheet music page 2	173
4	‘Vital Spark’: sheet music page 3	174
4	‘Vital Spark’: sheet music page 4	175
6	‘Babes in the Wood’: a song from <i>The Copper Family Song Book – a Living Tradition</i> (Peacehaven, 1995, used with permission)	176



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List of Tables

2.1	Comparison of verses from versions of ‘Nightingales Sing’	52
7.1	Comparison of plot elements in three versions of ‘The Cruel Mother’	236



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List of Music Examples

4.1	‘O Good Ale’ from Chappell’s <i>Popular Music of the Olden Time</i>	105
4.2	‘John Come Kiss Me’	106
4.3	‘Goddesses’	107
4.4	‘O Good Ale’ from <i>The Copper Family Song Book</i> (used with permission)	107
4.5	‘Little Brown Jug’ from the Butterworth Collection (reproduced courtesy of EFDSS)	108
4.6	‘Little Brown Jug’ from <i>Minstrel Songs Old and New</i>	109
4.7	‘The Wild Rover’	153
5.1	‘The Moon Shines Bright’	184
5.2	‘Since our Good Friend Has Gone to Rest’ (used with permission of the Sussex Archaeological Society)	186
5.3	‘Into this World We Nothing Brought’ (used with permission of the Sussex Archaeological Society)	188
5.4	‘Weep Not for Me’ (used with permission of Shropshire Archives)	190
5.5	‘When Blooming Youth Is Snatched Away’ (used with permission of the Sussex Archaeological Society)	191
5.6	‘Hark from the Tomb’ (used with permission of the Sussex Archaeological Society)	193
7.1	‘My Old Man’s a Dustman’	233
7.2	‘Old Mother Lee’	234
7.3	‘Henry my Son’	237
7.4	‘The Little Cock Sparrer’	239
7.5	‘How Happy We Shall Be’	240
7.6	‘A Woman Sat on a Churchyard Wall’	241



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Needless to say, all errors, omissions, mistakes and misinterpretations are my responsibility.

Vic Gammon
Hexham, Northumberland
March 2007

Guide to Abbreviations and Main Sources

This book draws heavily on a number of archives and collections, mainly holding or books reproducing folk song and broadside ballad material. To avoid endless repetition in the notes, I have given each of these collection or repositories a short title. These are listed below together with some information.

Bodleian – Bodleian Library Broadside Ballads, a large collection (30,000+) of ballads dating mainly from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. The collection is held at the Bodleian Library in Oxford and is available on the Internet at <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/ballads/ballads.htm>. Ballads are referenced by shelf marks, which take a variety of forms.

Bronson – Bertrand Harris Bronson, *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959–72. This is Bronson's monumental attempt to make an anthology of the collected tunes together with their texts of all the 'Child' ballads (see below). I have referenced these by ballad number and version number.

Child – *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Edited by Francis James Child, New York: Dover Publications, 1965. As many editions of this standard and influential collection exist, I have referenced 'Child' ballads by ballad number and version letter only.

Euing – *The Euing Collection of English Broadside Ballads*, Glasgow: University of Glasgow Publications, 1971. A collection of seventeenth-century ballads available in book form. References to this collection are by page number.

FMJ – *Folk Music Journal*, 1969–present.

JFSS – *Journal of the Folk Song Society*, 1899–1932. Much of the work of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English folk song collectors was published in these volumes.

Laws – Laws numbers were developed in the 1950s and 1960s by the US scholar G. Malcolm Laws (See G.M. Laws, *American Balladry from British Broad-sides*, Philadelphia, PA: American Folklore Society, 1957 and G. Malcolm Laws, *Native American Balladry* (Philadelphia, PA: American Folklore Society, 1964). I have used Laws numbers sparingly as the system has now been superseded by Roud.

Laws's books do contain useful critical comment and information, and numbers are usually invoked in reference to associated textual discussions.

Madden – The Madden Ballads collection presents mainly eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ballad sheets and is housed at Cambridge University Library. The collection was made by Sir Frederick Madden. I have referenced the ballads cited to the microfilm edition published by Thompson Gale; the referencing is to reel number and frame number. There are other ways of referencing the collection, but this is the edition I mainly used. The publisher's guide to the collection can be found at <http://microformguides.gale.com/Data/Introductions/30330FM.htm>

Pepys – A ballad collection that once belonged to Samuel Pepys and is now housed in the Pepys Library at Magdalene College, Cambridge. Each is referenced by volume and ballad number. This collection is now being made available on the Internet by the Early Modern Center at the University of California at Santa Barbara and can be accessed at <http://emc.english.ucsb.edu/ballad%5Fproject/index.asp>

Pills – *Pills to Purge Melancholy*, edited by Thomas D'Urfey, 6 vols (London, 1719–20), reprinted edition, 3 vols [each volume combining two of the original volumes] (New York: Folklore Library Publishers, 1959). References are to the six volumes.

Roud – The Roud Folk Song Index and the Roud Broadside Index are magnificent research tools and the single most important advance in research in this area in recent years. 'The Roud Folk Song index is a database of 146,000 references to songs that have been collected from oral tradition in the English language from all over the world'.¹ The broadside index is 'offered merely as a finding aid and not a definitive catalogue',² but is nevertheless extraordinarily useful. All the multiple versions of songs are assigned a single 'Roud number'. By searching the database on that number, one can assemble references to all the versions of a song that Roud has been able to catalogue. The same numbering system is used for both catalogues. The indexes are available at the VWML website (<http://library.efdss.org/cgi-bin/textpage.cgi?file=aboutRoud&access=off>) and can also be purchased for installation on your own computer.

SHC – Surrey History Centre, Woking, houses many of the papers and books of Lucy Broadwood, although not the bulk of her folk song collection, which is at VWML.

VWML – The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Cecil Sharp House, 2 Regents Park Road, London, NW1 7AY. The VWML houses most of the important folk song collections made in England since the late nineteenth century. A guide to the resources of the Library can be found at <http://library.efdss.org/cgi-bin/home.cgi>.

1 <http://library.efdss.org/cgi-bin/home.cgi>

2 <http://library.efdss.org/cgi-bin/textpage.cgi?file=aboutRoudbroadside&access=off>

These include originals or copies of folk song collections including those made by Sharp, Vaughan Williams, Gilchrist, Butterworth and Broadwood.

Other references are given in full the first times they are referred to in each chapter.

Note on Quotations

I make use of significant amounts of quotation in my writing. I think it is important to try to convey to readers sufficient of the material for them to obtain a sense of the nature of the original. As has been customary in this field, I tend to regularize and modernize spelling where necessary and to use minimal punctuation in the quotations of song and other texts. This is to facilitate understanding and not to put a level of strangeness between the reader and the text. I make exceptions for some of the earlier texts and dialect pieces where I have felt that rendering into modern spelling was a violation and distortion of the original.



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Introduction

Exploring Old Songs

The popular songs of the past are an interesting and exciting subject, sometimes an intriguing and enigmatic one. I have long been interested in songs that are variously labelled folk songs, traditional songs, ballads, broadside ballads, street ballads, ballets, slip songs, psalms and hymns. I am particularly interested in the views of the world and of life that the songs reveal and the textual and musical ways those views are expressed. The perspectives, attitudes and values that popular songs articulate fascinate me. These are often different from the perspectives shown in what we might call elite, approved or official culture. In addition, popular songs have their own conventions and styles that set them apart from other cultural products. I hope that in this book I communicate something of the discoveries and pleasures I have experienced in pursuing this interest.

The book is organized around the three general themes of the title. The first three chapters are on song and sexuality, and explore some of the ways in which English vernacular song has dealt with human sexuality and its cultural meanings. The second and third chapters additionally deal with perceived relationships between sexuality and music as have been expressed in popular songs. The extensive central chapter deals with songs about the role of drink in social life, a long-established subject and concern. The later chapters deal with death and attitudes to it, exploring the lost idiom of the English funeral hymn and various other song materials that have death as a central element.

I see my work as explorations in English vernacular and folk song. I think 'explorations' is a good term; it suggests a strange country, discoveries, unexpected visions and connections. I have found much of my research work a journey of discovery. After reading a great deal of material on the subject of the popular song of the past, I do not feel we have a very clear view either of the song material itself or the ways it was performed and used. It is rather like the fable of the blind man and the elephant: the best we can obtain is the piecing together of fragmentary impressions. Both the material itself and the ways in which it has been interpreted can mislead us into accepting what is only a partial and incomplete view as something more substantial. This is a general point: our whole relationship with the past may appear much more solid than it really is.

I do not want to avoid the fact that a book like this is in a number of ways a piece of creative work. The work draws on the rich resources of song collections and uses the materials garnered to attempt to say coherent things about themes, genres and meanings. In doing this, I am in a privileged position not available to those who used and passed on the material in the past. In that I fashion something out of these materials, I do that in terms of my own cultural and historical perspectives. Future

writers with different perspectives might find different things to write about in these same materials. We cannot escape being historically constituted subjects.

Folk and Vernacular Song

One particular and dominant view that I feel has misled us greatly is the notion of ‘folk song’ as promulgated by Cecil Sharp. Put briefly, Sharp took from the singing repertoires of mainly older country people in Somerset, Appalachia and other places those pieces that conformed or came close to his preformed notion of ‘English folk song’. Simultaneously he rejected much else that was in common usage because it failed to meet his criteria of authenticity. He then served up the part for the whole. It is not that people did not sing the songs Sharp recorded – but that was not all they sang. There was a great deal of other material in popular circulation: for example, stage songs, national songs, products of the ballad sheet presses, psalms and hymns. The performance of this wider repertory was a normal state of affairs that had existed in different ways for centuries and not, as Sharp interpreted it, a sign of decline. Some elements of the repertory, such as music hall and blackface minstrel songs, were relatively new, but there had been movement within popular repertoires for the entire period discussed in this book.¹

I like the term ‘popular’, containing, as it does, notions of ‘belonging to the people’ and ‘well-liked’.² Some of my nineteenth-century intellectual forebears, including Chappell and Child, favoured the word, although we have to make an effort to understand the complexities of meaning it had for them. Modern historians of ‘popular culture’ have no difficulty with the term. But the terms ‘popular music’ and ‘popular song’ have become so associated with the music of industrial mass culture that to use them in the historical context can be more confusing than enlightening. Personally, I am very comfortable with the notion that what I write about is popular song. However, in the cause of understanding I tend to use two other terms instead: ‘vernacular’ and ‘folk’ songs.

I first heard the term ‘vernacular’ in connection with language, but I became interested in its use in the context of architecture. Here it seemed to describe buildings put up by local builders rather than designed by architects or built to impress. Usually these were domestic buildings, farm buildings and the like. People learned building techniques through tradition and example, and used materials that were at hand. This seemed to me very analogous to processes related to the music in which I was interested. Further investigation led me into ideas of the domestic, native and indigenous.³ Connotations of the everyday and the local, as opposed to the elite,

1 For an assessment of Sharp, see Vic Gammon, ‘Cecil Sharp and English Folk Music’, in *Still Growing: English Traditional Songs and Singers from the Cecil Sharp Collection*, ed. by Steve Roud, Eddie Upton and Malcolm Taylor (London: English Folk Dance and Song Society in association with Folk South West, 2003), pp. 2–22.

2 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. and expanded edn (London: Fontana, 1988), pp. 236–8.

3 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <http://dictionary.oed.com/>.

national and international, were appealing. 'Vernacular' had the advantage of not carrying much of the negative ideological baggage that the term 'folk' carries.

'Folk' came into the language from the German *das Volk*, a term from Herder and the Grimms with deeply Romantic connotations. 'Folklore' was coined in England in the 1840s; 'folk song' came into common usage in England in the last quarter of the nineteenth century – a new term, a sure indication of new ways of thinking and feeling. There were monstrous arguments over what it meant exactly, notably in the controversy around 1905 between Cecil Sharp and Arthur Somervell of the Board of Education. Sharp won the day, perhaps more by vehemence than logic, and his particular interpretation of the term became widely disseminated and accepted. Crucial to Sharp's definition was the distinction between 'folk song' (shaped by oral tradition) and 'national song' (made by composers and remaining largely unaltered in popular use).

Sharp's ideas were an interesting mixture. He had some very useful and intelligent things to say about the processes of oral tradition and he was undoubtedly a very skilled and energetic collector. In his own mediating way, he saved a great deal of unique material that would otherwise have been utterly lost. On the negative side, he bequeathed us notions of 'folk song' and 'folk music' imbued with racial ideas and deriving from his Romantic nationalism, a matter of faith rather than fact or logic. 'Folk song' is a sort of ideal type. It is a selection from the repertoires of country singers; it is also a construction and interpretation placed upon elements of those repertoires. 'Vernacular song' is, in contrast and as I use the term, a complex ragbag, a layered and porous repertory where the ancient and ephemeral, the pious and the bawdy, the traditional and commercial all rub shoulders. It is the songs people have chosen to perform, whatever those songs' genres or origins.

The term 'folk song', as Sharp and his supporters defined it, stuck. It is the most commonly used term to refer to the traditional, customary and often (though not exclusively) orally transmitted songs of a people. It is also connected with at least two movements of 'folk song revival'. The first was that of the late Victorian and Edwardian collectors, and the second an international movement that developed after the Second World War. Not to use such a widely understood term would be churlish, although I tend to reserve it for the material recovered by, and the products of, those revivals. The people who maintained 'folk songs' for hundreds of years never used the term, referring rather to 'ballads', 'love songs', 'old songs' or just 'songs'.

This book brings together essays written over the last twenty or so years. Some of them have been published, but about 60 per cent of the book is new material. There has been a shift in my work over time from a concentration on England to a wider interest in the songs of the English-speaking world, particularly other parts of Britain and North America. I now see the anglophone world as a unified field of study, although my geographical roots and concerns will be evident in much that follows. I have made only minimal adjustments to previously published work, to correct errors and to add some significant new evidence.

Historical Song and the Postmodern Condition

This book is about song in the past, roughly 1600–1900. The past is inescapable; its debris is all around us. The past is also unattainable; it is gone, vanished. To investigate it is simultaneously a necessity and in some ways an impossibility. We bring to its investigation our assumptions, prejudices and half-baked ideas. Patrick Joyce has summed up the problem well: ‘... the events, structures and processes of the past are indistinguishable from the forms of documentary representation, the conceptual and political appropriations, and the historical discourses that construct them’.⁴ Realistically so, yet such a view is not a counsel of despair and I have found it impossible not to take an interest in history in its widest sense, knowing that the best we will ever do is a distanced, mediated and incomplete retelling of some aspects of it. The past will always be a problem to the present, an ultimately insoluble but fascinating problem.

What we make of song material from the past cannot be the same as contemporaries made of it; we cannot fully reconstruct, let alone inhabit, their cultural knowledge. The ‘meaning’ of any individual song is not simply a result of its words and music. Other songs impinge on its meaning, creating expectations and modifying its ability to produce meanings. People understand songs contextually and they often contain references that are simply lost to later generations. Cultural, social, economic or technological changes (and most likely a combination of all of them) impinge on the interpretation of songs, and so the significance, the meanings of any particular material, changes. The historian Lawrence Levine has usefully reminded us: ‘We tend to forget too easily the truth that precisely the same forms of culture can perform markedly distinct functions in different periods or among different groups.’⁵

Meanings, then, are never set, they are always dependent on cultural context and interpretation, and on other meanings that place and modify them. Meaning is constantly changing. Shared meaning is, at best, a sort of temporary social agreement. The most attuned contextual reading of a song will never uncover all its possible implications and connotations, and conversely the modern experience of that same song may create meanings that were never there for an earlier audience. In addition to these difficulties, such problems are compounded by the fact that every human being’s experience of his or her culture is fragmentary, incomplete and personal. The individuals of a past audience or audiences may have experienced and interpreted a song differently from each other.⁶ Put that another way, we can say a song is polysemic; it is capable of producing a number of meanings. I put some faith, however, in repeated ideas as significant cultural markers. If people keep saying the same things, it is probably important to them collectively. That, at least, is a start.

In a sense, our relationship with the past is a sort of one-sided dialogue where we make up the answers to the questions we ask from the rubbish we find. The

4 Patrick Joyce, ‘History and Postmodernism’, in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. by Keith Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 244–9 (p. 247).

5 Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 240.

6 The ending of Chapter 5 is precisely about this issue.

rubbish can even prompt questions and we can search for answers. The rubbish is not animate and will not give away all its secrets. (In the case of ballad sheets, they have been widely considered as rubbish by generations of English students following Child's aesthetically inspired characterization of collections of them as 'veritable dung-hills'.⁷) Awareness of the limits of historical understanding and inquiry should be a humbling experience that makes us both reflective (we need to be aware of what we are doing) and modest in our claims.

Literacy and Orality

I take a view of the song material I study in this book that is probably somewhere between two polarized positions, one that sees oral tradition as supreme and one that views it as inevitably corrupting material. To Child, Sharp and their intellectual descendants (simplifying their view somewhat), oral tradition and its characteristic products were the centre of their study and represented the highest aesthetic value. They valued the special qualities that oral tradition imparts to a song. People of this school tend to underplay and disparage the role of the ballad press in disseminating songs, generally seeing it as a corrupting influence. C.J. Bearman, for example, shows that the majority of a sample of Sharp's Somerset singers, who commented on the subject, said that they learned their songs from oral sources, and argues that 'there was widespread knowledge of a considerable body of traditional song in early twentieth-century Somerset'.⁸

This is interesting and in certain ways incontestable, but it does not disprove the thesis that the ballad press was influential in stabilizing, reinforcing and providing material for the popular song repertory. Singers may be at several degrees of separation from the ballad sheet and still be subject to its influence. Nor does it deal with the problem of collector selection at source. We know that there were types of song that Sharp did not want to collect; he tells us so. He did not like 'composed' local carols.⁹ He did not think that songs about hunting were 'held in high esteem by the folk',¹⁰ although this genre still has a vigorous life a century after Sharp started collecting. He thought the broadside press had had a marked 'and in many ways detrimental influence upon the words of folk-ballads and songs',¹¹ a view in which he seems to be echoing Child. Sharp felt that the 'chain of tradition' snapped about 1840.¹² He was scornful of 'Old English Songs', examples of which he declared, 'never had more than a fleeting popularity with the country singers'. We are not told how he tested this observation. To Sharp, 'folk-song' (he used the hyphenated form) was a

7 Roy Palmer, "'Veritable Dunghills': Professor Child and the Broadside', *FMJ*, 7.2 (1996), 155–66 (p. 157).

8 C.J. Bearman, 'Cecil Sharp in Somerset: Some Reflections on the Work of David Harker', *Folklore*, 113.1 (2002), 11–34 (p. 30).

9 Cecil Sharp, *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions* (London: Simpkin; Novello; Taunton: Barnicott & Pearce, 1907), p. 101.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 119–120.

‘spontaneous utterance’.¹³ It was communal in two senses: ‘in authorship’ and ‘in that it reflects the mind of the community’.¹⁴ Sharp held that the entry of composed work into the ‘folk’ repertory was a sort of pollution, a mark of degeneration.

Frank Kidson, although he saw folk song as a distinct genre, took a rather different view: ‘In the eighteenth century Boyce, Arne, Dibdin, Hook, and Shield, with others, were represented among all classes, and the songs of these composers, the best of their time, were on the lips of high and low.’¹⁵ Broadside ballad collections and manuscript tune books tend to support Kidson’s opinion. Elsewhere Kidson wrote, ‘it must be admitted that a great number of art-songs which have been individually and personally created, having won the affections of the people have really become “communal”’.¹⁶ Lucy Broadwood wrote of the singer Henry Burstow: ‘He has a list of more than four hundred songs, old and new, which he knows by heart. Among them about fifty or sixty are of the traditional ballad type, and these have been noted and preserved’.¹⁷

Broadwood’s statement has a directness and honesty to it that contrasts with Sharp’s vague expressions. A study of Burstow’s repertory shows that it was indeed wide-ranging and eclectic, and had a major overlap with the known products of the nineteenth-century broadside press. It also included a number of pieces from the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century songwriters Kidson mentioned.¹⁸ Much of the material Sharp rejected may well have been ephemeral and, by his standards, aesthetically inferior. Nevertheless, it was part of the rich complex of material that made up popular experience of music and music-making in the past.

Sharp’s view of ‘pure’ folk song, as the product of uncorrupted oral tradition now degenerating, was not shared by all his co-workers. Some other contemporaries, and some modern writers like John Wardroper, seem to imply that the only thing oral tradition can impart to a song is ‘charming disorder’.¹⁹ Discussing the work of the printer Samuel Harward of Tewkesbury, Wardroper states: ‘From such printers, songs reached the smallest village. After a process of oral transmission, misremembering, splicing and reinventing, many lived on to the present century, to be collected by scholars and labelled folksong’.²⁰ This seems a brief if not unreasonable summary of the process. I am totally with Wardroper when he discovers in old ballads ‘passages that entered folksong’ – although he may be sustaining a false dichotomy in maintaining the (Sharpian) distinction between folk song and broadside ballad. However, when

13 Ibid., p. 1.

14 Ibid., p. 15.

15 Frank Kidson, ‘Folk-Song and the Popular Song’, *The Choir*, 3/32 (1912), 149–51 (p. 150).

16 Quoted in John Valdis Francmanis, ‘The Musical Sherlock Holmes’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Leeds Metropolitan University, 1997), p. 262.

17 Lucy Broadwood, *English Traditional Songs and Carols* (London: Boosey, 1908), p. xi.

18 Vic Gammon, “‘Not Appreciated in Worthing’?” Class Expression and Popular Song Texts in Mid-nineteenth Century Britain’, *Popular Music*, 4 (1984), 5–24.

19 John Wardroper, *Lovers, Rakes and Rogues* (London: Shelfmark Books, 1995), p. 99.

20 Ibid., p. 13.

he writes dismissively of ‘broadside songs’ that ‘survived in a muddled form as a “folksong” to be collected by Cecil Sharp in the 1900s’,²¹ he ignores evidence of what many people see as improvements in broadside texts wrought by oral tradition, not to mention the creation of what Barre Toelken has described as ‘gems of nuance and poetic suggestion’ through the process.²² It is interesting because elsewhere Wardroper recognizes that some broadside ballads ‘show some of the prolixity encouraged by the large broadside sheet’.²³ There seems to be some tacit approval of the winnowing and economizing process of oral tradition here.

Oral tradition is both a creative and a degenerative process; or rather, it can be dominantly either. At any moment, both tendencies are probably at work. In a flourishing tradition where the processes of oral recreation are well practised, it is dominantly creative. By comparing texts and tunes in Bronson’s *Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads*, one can observe that creativity at work, although some of its processes and lines of transmission remain quite mysterious. One can also observe degeneration. In a decaying tradition, except in the mouths of a few remaining singers of the first order, degeneration is bound to dominate. In addition, degeneration itself can produce things of surprise and beauty.²⁴

This is only part of the picture. There has been no pure oral tradition in Western countries since at least the invention of printing. One of the effects of studying the great broadside ballad collections is the realization of just how much of the material collected by the Victorian and Edwardian collectors had appeared on printed ballad sheets over the previous three centuries. I think the collectors knew this even if some of them tried to deny or downplay it.²⁵ Many of the songs put out by printers already show telltale signs of having passed in and out of oral circulation. What we are dealing with in pre- and early industrial England is a society in which oral and literate modes of transmission interacted in complex and dynamic ways. Adam Fox has summed up the situation very well: ‘One of the fascinating and defining characteristics of English society in the early modern period is the way in which oral, scribal, and printed media fed in and out of each other as part of a dynamic process of reciprocal interaction and mutual infusion.’²⁶

It is for this reason that I find the broadside ballads of the seventeenth century onwards, previously the hunting ground of the historically- and literary-minded, such a rich vein to mine. Among those prolix and wordy pieces, it is often possible to find the earliest known versions of a song that went on to have a long and vigorous life which in some cases continues to this day. It is also possible to find narrative ideas and

21 Ibid., p. 324. Sharp, p. 102, wrote, ‘it must be confessed that the words of the folksong often come to the collector of to-day in a very corrupt and incomplete state’.

22 Barre Toelken, ‘Foreword’, in Mary-Ann Constantine and G. Porter, *Fragments and Meaning in Traditional Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2003), p. x.

23 Wardroper, p. 328.

24 See the fascinating discussions in Constantine and Porter.

25 Sharp, pp. 101–3; Frank Kidson, ‘The Ballad Sheet and Garland’, *JFSS*, 2.2 (no. 7) (1905), 70–78.

26 Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 410.

plot structures that, clothed in another text, had an ongoing life. I am not at all sure that it is possible to say why, for example, ‘Barbara Allen’²⁷ has flourished in very different contexts for over three centuries whereas other songs on the same theme of death caused by rejected love simply perished. The fact that a number of such songs existed is in itself interesting and says something about contemporary ideas of the effects of unrequited love. Such pieces were part of the material available for vernacular singing and may well have had an oral life about which we know nothing. We have a fragmentary and incomplete record of past repertoires and we should consider all material that might yield insight and understanding, whether from print or oral tradition. Such an approach may not please the latter-day Sharpians, but so be it. I am much more interested in what ordinary people actually sang than in what Cecil Sharp thought they ought to have sung.

Explorations of Themes and Genres

This book is not a complete study of the vernacular song of the pre- and early industrial period. It is a series of explorations organized around three important themes. My central interests in this book are themes and genres. I use the term *theme* to describe a recurrent idea that runs through a lot of material; for example, the playing of a musical instrument as a metaphor for copulation, that spring is a time for sexual encounter, or that particular types of liquor can be praised for their goodness. A *genre* is a recognizable type of song; for example, the funeral hymn, calendar custom song, drinking song or sexual encounter song. Songs belonging to a genre have recognizable features and characteristics in common. Themes can behave predictably but can sometimes crop up unexpectedly, as when we find sexual metaphors in drinking songs or verses akin to funeral hymns in May songs. Song scholars had been exploring intertextuality long before it was named, theorized and became fashionable.

The emphasis in this book is on the thematic rather than the musical aspects of the material. Yet we should never forget the musical aspect of song (it is that which gives song its particular characteristics). Song is not poetry – it is song. You can read a song, but it only finds its full expression as the unity of text and music in performance. That is when song lives. We dissect song to understand and discuss it, but the whole is emotionally and aesthetically greater than the sum of the parts and we should never forget that. Having said this, an understanding of the meanings created by the musical aspects of songs from the past is subject to the same difficulties of recovery and interpretation as textual meaning; such meanings are cultural and contextual.

A tune’s meaning and affect is dependent upon, and in part created by, the other tunes that form a known set or repertory. It is cultural in that it has a place in the web of meanings that cultures create and in the way it relates to cultural norms and values. In viewing such things from a different time (I would argue in some ways

27 Roud 54.

from a different culture), we are not able to access these norms and values in their fullness; we may not even have an inkling that they existed.

Musical meaning was a vital issue for people in the past. There were appropriate places and times for the performance of particular pieces; for example, wassail songs during midwinter customs, tunes with bawdy word associations in single-sex company. Ideas of appropriateness were important. The difference between sacredness and secularity in music was much debated and some tunes certainly carried particular connotations and meanings for those who recognized them. For example, the tunes ‘Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be?’²⁸ and ‘The Rogue’s March’ were sometimes used as forms of mockery. ‘Fortune my Foe’ was used to carry criminal ‘last goodnight’ ballads and songs involving death and nemesis. Such tunes set up expectations in the audience and were heard as appropriate for certain types of texts.

Against this, it is clear that tunes show a flexibility of use and an ability to be adapted (almost to disguise themselves) that can be quite remarkable. Thus versions of the same tune – ‘Dives and Lazarus’, for example – can carry a religious ballad, a lyrical love song, a song complaining of unemployment, a song about excessive mourning and a brutal murder ballad. That great English survivor ‘Greensleeves’ has, since the sixteenth century, carried love songs, numerous bawdy songs and Christmas carol texts; it has been a country dance tune, a morris dance tune and an Irish jig. It has been the vehicle for the rudest of songs, often with a mocking ‘Which nobody can deny’ refrain, but also the epitome of pastoral Englishness in Vaughan Williams’s popular setting. This tune is mightily impressive in its adaptability and we can reconstruct what seems to be a good record of its development and use.

Much song material has come down to us in fragmentary form. Ballad collections and song sheets generally give us words only, and on the rare occasions they print tunes they tell us nothing about performance style. The manuscripts of folk song collectors are often notable for the fragmentary nature of the material they represent, often prioritizing tunes over texts. This was sometimes due to the poor memory of the singer, sometimes due to the collector’s unwillingness to take down what he recognized as a standard set of words obtainable on a ballad sheet. I see my job as trying to make some sense of the fragments.

Social History and Song Study

Songs are at the centre of these chapters. My background is in social history, a discipline with its own conventions and controversies. My key influences in this field were E.P. Thompson and Keith Thomas, supported by a number of other excellent historians. Some of the work in this book is social history, but not all. In placing songs, a certain type of source material, at the centre of my studies in this book I have two aims: first, to explore the nature of that source, its conventions, potential meanings, and so on; second, to use songs to illuminate aspects of the culture and society in which they were performed. Since the pioneering work of E.P. Thompson,

28 Roud 1279.

some significant social historians have recognized song as an important source and some excellent work has been produced.²⁹

There is an older tradition than post-war social history to which I also feel an allegiance. It is an interest in song study that goes back to Joseph Ritson in the eighteenth century, bad-tempered, belligerent Ritson. This type of scholarship carried on with different emphases through Chappell, Furnivall, the Ballad Society and Child in the nineteenth century. Spanning the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, Kidson and Gilchrist showed it was possible to relate the oral to the historical. Writers such as Rollins, Wimberly, Simpson, Bronson, Lloyd, Hodgart, Toelken, to Renwick and Atkinson today have all contributed to this area of study. These scholars have put song firmly at the centre of what they do – as I try to in this book. A.L. Lloyd was particularly important in my personal development; I am critical of some aspects of his work, but I know that his influence was crucial in stimulating and forming my own interest.

I have a different emphasis to some others in the field of song research who have concentrated on studying, comparing and extracting meaning from the multiple variants of a single song. In looking at groups of related songs, in studying themes and genres rather than individual songs and song families, I try to make a song study informed by social history. I do value the work of those who use a method based on the comparison of variants. Such work is sometimes richly rewarding, as examples from Roger Renwick and Sigrid Rieuwerts amply demonstrate,³⁰ but it is not what I generally try to do.

The Commonplace Activity of Singing

One thing of which we can be certain is that singing was ubiquitous in pre-industrial society. If it is appropriate to speak in such terms, it was the only significant form of artistic expression for vast numbers of the population. It is a hard leap of historical understanding to think our way out of modern notions of the place of song in society into a very different situation. An excellent impression of one aspect of the widespread use of song is given by the Elizabethan writer on music, John Case, in his consideration of ‘the general use of music’. Case writes of the relationship of music and work:

... look with but half an eye to the country, wherein toiling and as they call it good husbandry should exclude all pleasurable recreation, how heartily doth the poor swain

29 See for example V.A.C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770–1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

30 Roger deV. Renwick, *Recentring Anglo/American Folksong: Sea Crabs and Wicked Youths* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001); Sigrid Rieuwerts, ‘The Historical Moorings of “The Gypsy Laddie”: Johnny Faa and Lady Cassillis’, in *The Ballad and Oral Literature*, ed. by Joseph Harris, Harvard English Studies, 17 (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 78–96.