

## THE ORAL QUALITY OF A PRINTED TRADITION

Roger de V. RENWICK

University of Texas at Austin  
Austin, TX 78712, USA

**Abstract:** While folklorists know that texts of the same ballad from different printers of street-broad-sides were seldom exact replicas of each other, we have rarely examined the actual range and nature of the variations printed transmission manifested. Grouping variations into three categories – printing mechanics, vocabulary, and narrative content – this essay discusses twenty-one different nineteenth-century broadside prints of the same British highwayman ballad, “The Wild and Wicked Youth”, to show just how each printer was in varying degrees “recreating” and not just “reproducing” the text he was passing on.

**Keywords:** broadside ballad, “Wild and Wicked Youth”, variation, orality/print.

While students of traditional verse have long studied variability among orally-transmitted, aurally-received texts, we’ve not done much with printed song-texts that were processed visually. Although we know that printed tradition was textually unstable (BROADWOOD 1974: x; HOLLOWAY and BLACK 1975: 3; DE SOLA PINTO and RODWAY 1965: 17) and that it displayed continuities with oral tradition (DUGAW 1984), in analysis we invariably confine ourselves to just a few examples of actual verses (e.g. ANDERSEN and PETTIT 1985; GREENHILL 1987). Here I hope to provide more detailed evidence than is customary of how a ballad’s transmission within the culture of nineteenth-century broadside printing evinced characteristics similar to transmission in “oral tradition.”

My data consist of twenty-one separate prints of “The Wild and Wicked Youth”, a British ballad that tells of a young man who turns highwayman in order to support a wife with expensive tastes. Eventually caught and sentenced to death, he defiantly requests a joyous, well-attended funeral. (The twenty-one broadsides come from the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library’s microfilm copies of Cambridge University’s Madden Collection, from UCLA’s Special Collections, and from photocopies of National Library of Ireland holdings. For a typical text, see A in the Appendix.) The ballad passed into domestic, amateur repertoires in both Great Britain and Anglo-North America and has been collected from many village and household singers, each version of which – as we expect from oral tradition – exhibits significant uniqueness (LAWS 1957: 172). Surprisingly, though the variation is considerably less than that found within a population of folk versions, each printed text is also in some way or other unique, evincing “recreation” and not just “reproduction”.

Indeed, even sheets from printers who shared business relationships – hence the same ballad stock – varied. For example, nineteenth-century county printers either bought rights to or simply stole ballads from London printers, especially the largest two, James Catnach and John Pitts (both of whom also stole from each other), and texts of “Wild and Wicked Youth” printed and sold locally by W. Fordyce of Newcastle, George Walker of Durham, and William Pratt of Birmingham are essentially Catnach’s (HOLLOWAY and BLACK 1975: 3–4). But all exhibit some oral-like recreation: Pratt’s typesetter, for example, systematically adding an “and” in front of several verbs that we find nowhere else: “*And* brought the gold home to my heart’s delight”, “*and* bid them goodnight”, “*And* taken I was” (my italics). W. S. Fortey bought out Catnach’s business from the founder’s sister, Anne Ryle, in 1859 and reprinted a “Wild and Wicked Youth” sheet Catnach had originally put out between 1813 and 1838 (HINDLEY 1887; 1968). While Catnach’s own type-forme would have long since been broken down (broadside printers could not afford to keep needed type set up just to accommodate possible future printings), unsold copies of the sheet were warehoused, and Fortey would have had an earlier sheet at hand when reissuing the “Wild and Wicked Youth” decades after Catnach published it (SHEPARD 1969: 58). But even if we ignore punctuation, one quarter of the thirty-two lines common to the two versions exhibit differences, though all minor – primarily the dropping or adding of single words, possibly for metrical reasons (e.g. “A robbing I went” instead of “A robbing went”, “my money did grow low” instead of “my money it did grow low”). Indeed, even two of Catnach’s own printings of the ballad aren’t exact replicas: the differences are minimal and are in mechanics only (the presence or absence of some end-of-line commas, “and” as opposed to “&”, variable spellings of “dear”/“dere”), but they do exist. In fact, just two of the twenty-one different broadside printings of “Wild and Wicked Youth” employed in this study share the same text, and the exactness resulted from use of the same forme, not from a copying that required new type be set up.

Among the twenty-one sheets, the simplest kind of variation is in mechanics: in punctuation, spelling (bred/bread, city/sity, pursue/persue, tears/tares, despair/dispair), capitalization (lords/Lords, square/Square), and typesetting (that is, the careless kind that produced such obvious and correctable mistakes as the running together of words – “sixhighwaymen”, “inGrosvenor square” – not the purposive kind resulting from lack of the right type [THOMSON 1974: 143]). But much of the time, differing punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and typesetting appear in lines and stanzas whose words are otherwise replicated exactly, suggesting that the compositor had a printed version in sight. Even so, he was apparently motivated by what might be called an “oral attitude” toward the ballad, for the above variations in mechanics did not change the *sound* of the original; in other words, the idea of visual proofreading to produce a copy that *looked* the same, not just sounded the same, did not seem paramount in the worldview of broadside print-culture participants. Possibly, as in oral performance, once the utterance had been “rendered”, it was considered done with, past, to be neither retrieved nor “corrected”.

Clearer instances that an oral attitude prevailed among transmitters of “Wild

and Wicked Youth” broadsides are seen in a second, more substantive kind of variation: change in word-form and word use. For example, tense occasionally differs, repositioning the protagonist in narrative time: the youth may say that in such-and-such a place “I died for scorn” (past), “I die with scorn” (present), or “I must die in scorn” (future), and that fair maids, lamenting his execution, “did cry” for him, “doth cry” for him, or “will cry” for him. Lexical alteration effects greater change in meaning. For instance, twenty of the twenty-one prints have a stanza in which the protagonist steals from nobility like Lord Golding and Lady Mansfield, and twelve of those twenty-one word the stanza’s fourth line (in which the robber returns home with his loot) the same: “And went to my heart’s delight”. But we also find the line rendered “Went to play with my heart’s delight”, “Went to the play with my heart’s delight”, and “Brought home the gold to my heart’s delight,” among others. In all cases, the only unvarying words are “heart’s delight”, probably because they’re key words in the line’s meter and rhyme, which are oral rather than visual phenomena, again indicating the importance of sound, not just of sight.

Such free-form re-presentation of word and phrase appears in virtually every stanza of “Wild and Wicked Youth”: the protagonist “always was a roving blade”, “was always counted a roving blade”, or “always was call’d a roving blade”; he turns robber to maintain his wife “fine and gay”, “fair and gay”, or “rich and gay”; after robbing the nobility in Grosvenor Square, he goes to Covent Garden not only with his “blooming”, his “blooming one”, his “blooming maid”, his “blooming girl”, or his “blooming bride”, but also with his “pretty girl”, his “sweet girl”, or his “heart’s delight”. When he is eventually either “dead and in my grave”, “dead and gone to my grave”, “dead and carried to my grave”, or “dead and laid in my grave”, he wishes to be borne by either four, six, or twelve girls who sport “gloves and ribbons”, “white gloves and ribbons”, “gloves and white ribbons”, “gloves and pink ribbons”, “white gowns and ribbons”, or even “broadswords and liberty”. To repeat: since similarities among most versions are much greater than differences, composers were apparently copying the text from an existing sheet rather than recalling it from memory; even so, none was consistently reproducing the text at hand and in sight but, like most household singers, was often recreating general narrative images and ideas.

Names constitute a special subset of vocabulary. In oral tradition, they are an unusually protean component of ballad narrative, reflecting folklore’s relevance to its contexts of performance and use: neither a transcendent nor an escapist form of expression, folklore maintains an intimate, organic, mutually-influencing relationship with “real life”, and names can be prominent signifiers of the real. “Wild and Wicked Youth” broadsides further exhibit an oral quality by similarly manifesting plasticity in names. For example, the robber most often burgles homes in Grosvenor Square, but he also robs in Groven Square; most times he’s captured in “Covent Garden” by “Fielding’s gang”, but he’s also caught in “Coven’s Garden” by “Fieldskin gang”.

Similar-sounding name-variants like these suggest, at the very least, such common vagaries of oral transmission as mishearing; name-variation in which sounds are quite *dissimilar* suggests the more interesting psychology of an “oral attitude” on a

printer's part. Thus the narrator, though most often born in Newry Town, is also born in Stephen's Green, Dublin City, and even Newgate gaol; he robs not just in Grosvenor Square and its various homophones, but also in Belgrave Square and Crosshowden Square; his female victim, most often Lady Mansfield, is also Lady Welding and Lady Williamson, while his captor is not just a phonic permutation of "Lord Fielding" but also the quite distinct "Lord Patrick".

A third kind of variation provides the most striking examples of an oral attitude: significant recomposition resulting from substantial additions or substitutions of content that change the ballad's plot, sentiment, or cultural ethos. While several of our twenty-one broadsides contain unique textual elements, four variations deserve special mention because they appear more than once, though of course never worded exactly the same. First is a pair of distinctive opening stanzas (found twice) in which the highwayman does not identify himself by the usual biographical facts of where born, where died, and how apprenticed, but by a declaration of attitude, taste, character, and behavior: he's a wild and wicked youth, excessively fond of women, and dismissive of parental strictures to mend his ways. Second is a distinctive line in the stanza treating the youth's initial venture into crime (invariably stanza 2): in place of the usual disclosure that to support his wife in style he "A robbing went on the highway", we find (in four texts) "Lords Dukes and Earls I made to pay". While it makes sense for a thief to prey on moneyed nobility, one perceives a radical sensibility underlying the robber's relieving aristocrats of the wealth that birth, status, and inherited privilege unfairly bestowed on them, an interpretation strengthened by the third substantive variation, found unequivocally in two of our broadsides, equivocally in a third: a stanza espousing a Robin Hood-like redistribution of wealth from undeserving haves to deserving have-nots ("I never robb'd a poor man yet, / Nor ever caused a poor man to fret; / But I robb'd the rich, and serv'd the poor / Which has brought me to death's door"). Fourth is the addition of a stanza (found wholly in three sheets, partially in one) in which the highwayman laments that, though others will grieve for him, he's still fated to hang.

Five of the twenty-one broadsides contain one or more of these four most-striking variations – variations which, I suspect, originated with an Irish or strongly Irish-influenced hand. Two of the five sheets were actually printed in Ireland, one in America, and two in Birmingham, England. The two Birmingham ones provide perhaps the best illustration of recreation within the printed tradition of "Wild and Wicked Youth", manifesting unusually distinctive plot elements as well as vocabulary.

Most individualistic is the version put out by S. W. Russell of Birmingham's Moor Street (text B in the Appendix), containing the statement-of-character/parental-disapproval opening stanzas, the rob-the-rich-help-the-poor claim, and half of the stanza telling of widespread general grieving over his impending death. This version also contains a motif found in none of the other twenty texts, the highwayman-narrator's disclosure that "With my pistol and my broad sword, / Stand and deliver was the word." But its most unique feature is of form rather than content: it reconstitutes "Wild and Wicked Youth's" usual narrative structure in a way often found in

oral tradition – by *rearranging* component parts (lines, couplets, and stanzas) from the order in which they appeared in the (presumed) source-model. Five of the seven stanzas are unique combinations of couplet-pairs that, in all other versions, are the closing two lines of one stanza and the opening two lines of another. For example, stanza 4 combines what are usually lines 3 and 4 of the robbing-the-nobility stanza (“I shut the shutter, bid them goodnight, / I carried the gold to my heart’s delight”) with the usual opening two lines of the capture stanza (“The very next night we did away, / To Covent Garden to see the play”). Of the twenty-one broadsides, this Russell version may have been most indebted to *actual* oral tradition: while all other versions display enough similarity to indicate direct copying (albeit inexact) from a printed source at hand, this one suggests what ballad scholars often claim to have been the case but can seldom exemplify – that Russell’s source was a real-life folk-singer (BROADWOOD 1974: x; LAWS 1957: 43; SHEPARD 1969: 46).

It is possible that Russell, unaware that “Wild and Wicked Youth” had already been widely issued on broadside, thought he was publishing an original song and hence was “reproducing” exactly what his contributor gave him orally. The same, however, cannot be said of the printer from whose shop came the other highly distinctive Birmingham broadside in this Irish-influenced group, T. Bloomer of High Street (see Appendix text C), for Bloomer *also* printed a broadside of “Wild and Wicked Youth” (Appendix text D) that, except for the youth’s being “undaunted” rather than “wicked”, was a fairly standard English text, close to the Appendix’s Catnach version (A). I’ve already mentioned that some printers put out more than one broadside of the ballad; Catnach himself did, as did C. Paul of 18 Great St. Andrew Street in London. But both made only minor changes each time, whereas in Bloomer’s case, the differences are much greater. Bloomer’s second(?) broadside merges the typical “Wild and Wicked Youth” form of his first(?) sheet with an Irish-influenced version – one similar to rival S. W. Russell’s in employing the distinctive statement-of-character/parental-disapproval opening, in naming the magistrate responsible for the robber’s capture “Lord Patrick”, and in combining both male and female pallbearers into a single stanza (they’re typically distributed over two stanzas).

Why would Bloomer issue two prints of the same song whose visible surface contents differed so markedly? Whether he stole the shared elements from his in-town rival Russell, or whether Russell pirated them from Bloomer, or whether they were both drawing from another source or sources, we can’t say. What we *can* say is that Bloomer’s concept of his printed broadside ballads included the legitimacy of “variants”: to him, ballad texts were fluid, shifting, protean, and multi-form, adaptable to *different* contexts of popularity, relevance, and use, without necessarily being different songs (his two versions sport the same title). In short, Bloomer exhibited what, in varying degrees, virtually every other broadside verse-maker, typesetter, and shop-owning printer of the nineteenth century represented in this sample of twenty-one texts did: an “oral attitude” toward his commercial broadside-ballad products, an attitude that would eventually be superseded by a contrasting “literate attitude” which we associate with printed transmission today.

## LITERATURE

- ANDERSEN, Flemming–PETTIT, Thomas  
 1985: *The Murder of Maria Marten*. In Carol L. EDWARDS and Kathleen E. B. MANLEY, eds. *Narrative Folksong*. Boulder: Westview Press, 132–178.
- BRATTON, J. S.  
 1975: *The Victorian Popular Ballad*. Totowa: Rowman & Littlefield.
- BROADWOOD, Lucy E  
 1974: *English Traditional Songs and Carols*. Wakefield: EP Publishing. (First published 1908.)
- DE SOLA PINTO, Vivian–RODWAY, Allan Edwin  
 1965: *The Common Muse*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. (First published 1957.)
- DUGAW, Dianne M.  
 1984: Anglo-American Folksong Reconsidered. *Western Folklore* 43: 83–103.
- GREENHILL, Pauline  
 1987: Folk Dynamics in Popular Poetry. *Western Folklore* 46: 77–95.
- HINDLEY, Charles  
 1968: *The Life and Times of James Catnach*. Detroit: Singing Tree Press. (First published 1878.)  
 1887: *The History of the Catnach Press*. London: Charles Hindley [The Younger].
- HOLLOWAY, John–BLACK, Joan  
 1975: *Later English Broadside Ballads*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- LAWS, G. Malcolm, Jr.  
 1957: *American Balladry from British Broadside*. Philadelphia: American Folklore Society.
- SHEPARD, Leslie  
 1962: *The Broadside Ballad*. London: Herbert Jenkins.  
 1969: *John Pitts*. London: Private Libraries Association.
- THOMSON, Robert S.  
 1974: *The Development of the Broadside Ballad Trade and Its Influence upon the Transmission of English Folksongs*. Ph.D. dissertation, Queen's College, Cambridge University.

## APPENDIX

(Verses have been typed to approximate textual formats of the original broadsides.)

[A]

## WILD AND WICKED YOUTH

J. Catnach, Printer, 2, Monmouth-court 7 Dials

*IN Newry town I was bred and born  
 In Steven's Green I died with scorn,  
 I served my time to the saddling trade,  
 And always was a roving blade.*

*At seventeen I took a wife,  
 I loved her dear as I loved my life,  
 And to maintain her fine and gay,  
 A robbing went on the highway.*

*But my money did grow low,  
 On the highway I was forced to go,  
 Where I robbed both lords & ladies bright  
 Brought home the gold to my heart's delight.*

*I robbed Lord Golding I do declare,  
 Lady Mansfield in Grosvenor Square,  
 I shut the shutters, bid 'em good night,  
 And went away to my heart's delight.*

*To Covent Garden I took my way,  
With my blooming to see the play,  
Till Fielding's gang did me pursue,  
Taken I was by the cursed crew.*

*My father cries I am undone,  
My mother cries for her darling son,  
My wife she tears her golden hair,  
What shall I do for I'm in despair.*

*But when I am dead, and in my grave,  
A decent funeral let me have,  
Six highwaymen to carry me,  
Give them broad swords and liberty.*

*Six blooming girls to bear my pall,  
Give them gloves and ribbons all,  
When I am dead, they'll tell the truth,  
He was a wild and wicked youth.*

[B]

The Wild and Wicked Youth

I AM a wild and wicked youth,  
I love young women, and that's the truth,  
I love them so, I love them well.  
I love them so, no tongue can tell.

My parents oft times told me I should rue,  
If such wicked ways I did pursue;  
I never minded what they did say,  
But still kept up in my wicked way.

With my pistol and my broad sword,  
Stand and deliver was the word;  
I robb'd Lord Golding I do declare,  
And Lady Mansfield in Grosvenor-square

I shut the shutter, bid them good night,  
I carried the gold to my heart's delight,  
The very next night we did away,  
To Covent Garden to see the play.

Lord Patrick did me pursue  
Taken I was by his cursed crew;  
I robb'd Lord Golding I do declare,  
And Lady Mansfield in Grosvenor square.

I never robb'd any poor man yet,  
Nor ever made any tradesman fret;  
Now I am cau and condemned to die,  
Many a young woman will for me cry.

Let six young highwaymen carry me,  
With their broad swords and sweet liberty,  
And six young women bear my pall,  
With their white gloves and white ribbons all.

[S.W. Russell, Printer, Moor-street, near  
Castle street, Birmingham – Travellers supplied]

[C]

THE  
Wild and Wicked  
YOUTH

I Am a wild and wicked youth,  
I love young women and that's the truth,  
I love them so and I love them well,  
I love them better than tongue can tell.

My father and my mother too,  
They offen told me I sholud rue,  
I never minded what they did say,  
But kept on my wild and wicked way.

At seventeen I took a wife,  
I loved her dear as I loved my life,  
And to maintain her both fine and gay,  
Lords Dukes & Earls I made to pay.

I robbed Lord Goldby I do declare,  
And Lady Mansfield in Grosvenor Square,  
I shut the shutters, and bid them good night,  
Went with my store to my heart's delight.

The very next day I did away,  
To Covent Garden to see the play,  
Lord Patrick did me pursue,  
Taken by his cursed crew.

My father cried O, I am undone,  
My mother cries for a darling son,  
My blooming girl tares her golden hair  
Where shall I go for I am in despair.

Let six highwaymen carry me,  
Give them sweet liberty,  
Six blooming girls to bear up my pall,  
Give them white gloves and pink ribbons all.

T. Bloomer, Printer, Birmingham

[D]

WILD  
AND  
Wicked Youth

T. Bloomer, Printer, Birmingham.

In Newry town I was bred and born,  
In Stephen's Green I die in scorn;  
I serv'd my time to the saddling trade,  
Was always counted a roving blade.

At seventeen I took a wife,  
I loved her dear as I loved my life;  
And to maintain her both fine and gay,  
I went a robbing on the highway.



---

But when my money it did grow low,  
On the high road I was forc'd to go,  
Where I robb'd Lords and some ladies bright,  
Brought home the gold to my heart's delight.

I robb'd Lord Golding I do declare.  
And Lady Mansfield in Grosvenor square  
I shut the shutters bid them good night,  
Went to the play with my heart's delight.

Through Covent-garden I took my way,  
With my pretty blowing to see the play,  
'Till the Fielding's gang did me pursue,  
Taken I was by the cursed crew.

It's now my father cries I am undone,  
My mother cries for her darling son;  
My blooming tears her golden hair,  
What shall I do for I am in despair,

But when I'm dead and carried to my grave,  
A pleasant funeral pray let me have,  
Six highwaymen to carry me,  
Give them broad swords and sweet liberty,

Six blooming girls to bear up my pall  
Give them white gloves and pink ribbons all;  
When I'm dead they may tell the truth,  
There goes a wild undaunted youth.