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'I'VE SHOT THE MAN THAT SHOT BILL BROWN': SOME OBSERVATIONS ON BALLADS AND REVENGE

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Abstract: There is considerable moral ambivalence in the representation of revenge in anglophone ballads (compared, perhaps, with folktales). A ballad like 'Lamkin' internalises the notion of personal injury as crime. In contrast, the poaching ballad 'The Death of Poor Bill Brown' depicts revenge without legal consequences, giving a sense of moral clarity which is nonetheless deceptive when set against its social background. 'The Gallant Poacher', on the other hand, employs a kind of popular theology to replace the impulse to revenge. Ballads like these do not teach morality, but rather invite the exploration and negotiation of ethical ideas like revenge and justice.
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Charles Dickens recalled a tale of the Bluebeard kind, probably heard as a child from his nurse Mary Weller, which he called 'Captain Murderer'. This eponymous character was in the habit of marrying tender young brides; then after a month of marriage he would order his wife to make a pie-crust, chop her into pieces, and eat the pie. When, however, he chose the fair one out of two twin sisters for his next bride, her dark twin became suspicious, and when she heard that her sister was dead she was able to figure out what had happened to her. In consequence, she offered herself as his next bride, and was duly eaten, but just before she rolled out the pie-crust she had taken a deadly poison, and so Captain Murderer swelled up and died a horrible death as the result of eating her. In this way, the dark twin exacts a kind of revenge for her sister's death that also embodies an extreme of self-sacrifice, to the extent that 'revenge' seems scarcely the right word for her noble act.

Various scholars over the years have looked at parallels between anglophone ballads and folktales in prose, and concluded that in spite of the expectation that there might be a degree of overlap among their narratives, there is in fact relatively little common ground. Rather, there is 'a tendency toward complementary distribution of subject matter', which translates into differences of narrative structure and technique, and of moral configuration: sequential structure, separation of 'internal' and 'external' realms (familiar versus unfamiliar characters, human versus otherworld), and moral clarity in the tale; episodic structure, violation of the internal/external boundary, and moral ambiguity in the ballad (SHULDINER 1978). Tales treat of individual choices and experiences; ballads treat of characters within their social environments. The morality of the dark twin's action in 'Captain Murderer' is presented with apparent clarity.

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Revenge is not, without qualification, an especially common theme among the CHILD ballads. In 'Robyn and Gandeleyn' (CHILD 115), though, Robyn is slain by an arrow from out of the blue, and Gandeleyn swears not to leave the greenwood until he has had revenge for his master: 'Hoo hat my*n* mast*er* slayin? / Ho hat do*n* þis dede? / Xal I neu*er* out of grene wode go / Til I se [his] sydis blede'. Then Gandeleyn sees the perpetrator, 'a lytil boy' called Wrennok of Donne, and there is an exchange of defiant words, with Gandeleyn insisting on what amounts to a duel with bows and arrows: 'Eu*e*r on for a*n* oþ*er*' (presumably something like 'an eye for an eye'), 'Mysau*n*t*er* haue he xal fle' (ill chance betide he who flees). Wrennok's arrow goes, it seems, through the fork of Gandeleyn's breeches – though the etymology of the phrase 'sa*n*choþis of his bryk' was inexplicable even to CHILD (1882–98: V: 371). Whether Wrennok aimed to miss is not to be known; but Gandeleyn's arrow goes unerringly through Wrennok's heart, and his sense of triumph, justice, or duty done, is such as to warrant being reiterated over two final stanzas.

This narrative comes out of a fifteenth-century manuscript, which might or might not be a minstrel's songbook. It is a story of swift vengeance, carried out with precision and inviting little in the way of moral qualm, short on circumstantial detail, motivation, characterisation, and invitation to empathy, exhibiting a straightforward technique that on the page at least bears comparison with 'Captain Murderer'. By contrast, it suggests just how rich the anglophone ballads usually are in terms of circumstantial detail, even when much of it is conventionalised, and how sophisticated in narrative technique, how subtle in suggesting the beginnings of a story even while commencing 'in the fifth act of the play'. So a character like Lord Barnard, the betrayed husband who slays his unfaithful wife and her lover Little Musgrave exacts a sort of instant, extra-judicial revenge, slicing up the adulterers with his sword and kicking body parts around the bedchamber (CHILD 81). There is immediately a sort of *frisson* here if Musgrave and Lady Barnard are envisaged as still stark naked when her husband draws his sword on them; but if Lord Barnard commits a crime – and this kind of narrative focus on the lovers, and their betrayal by the 'little foot-page', does tend to place him in the wrong – then it is still a crime comprehensively motivated by a complex of passions. In a similarly unpremeditated moment, Mary shoots her unwelcome suitor and her uncle on the banks of sweet Dundee, after they have conspired to have her lover press-ganged away to sea (LAWS M 25; ROUD 148). In contrast, the eponymous Fair Annie, cast off in favour of a new bride after she has born seven sons, eschews revenge and is rewarded when the newcomer turns out to be her very own sister (CHILD 62). But in 'Child Maurice' (CHILD 83), where a husband (in several versions named Lord Barnard) erroneously thinks himself betrayed by his wife, and takes a bloody revenge on a character who turns out to be his wife's son, the action appears rather more premeditated and certainly the more tragic.

Narrative tone, and vocal presentation, can manipulate an audience's condemnation of Lord Barnard, the slayer of Little Musgrave; their readiness to applaud Mary on the banks of sweet Dundee; or their sympathy for everyone in 'Child Maurice'. Yet an abstract analysis of any of these stories might well go right against those readings: the legal mind might not agree with the ballad singer, and individual

listeners can always have their own views about things like adultery. Not everyone would regard Fair Annie's patient self-sacrifice as an unmitigated virtue. It is difficult to argue that ballads such as these present anything like as clear a perspective on the morality of revenge as does the tale of 'Captain Murderer'. Does Mary on the banks of sweet Dundee kill her wealthy suitor and her uncle in revenge for the press-ganging of her ploughboy-lover William, or in defence of her honour when the squire tries to force her to the ground? It is difficult to be precise about these things: both are valid, but the circumstantial details of how she comes by a weapon during the struggle seem to preclude any great degree of premeditation. Of course, part of the difficulty is that 'revenge' is not a clear category at all, and the very conception of justice probably necessarily incorporates an element of retribution. Part, too, lies in the instability of ballad reception, the difficulty of circumscribing an interpretation for a performed art form, involving the interaction of singer and listener, at any place or time.

But those considerations apply equally to tales, and few would equate the dark twin of 'Captain Murderer' with Lord Barnard in 'Little Musgrave'. The difference perhaps arises out of the attention to naturalistic detail in the ballad text: the seduction itself and the loyalty of the little foot-page, but even more so the way the drowsy Musgrave is so easily persuaded to delay when he knows he really should be going, the slowing down of the action and the effect of a kind of soft focus when Lord Barnard enters the bedchamber; his anger which combines loss of self-control with a degree of calculation that offers his adversary the better weapon; and then the cutting of steel into naked flesh. The ballad metre and melody can perhaps carry concrete detail, even if it is conventionalised detail, more readily than the prose folktale, without breaking into the flow of narrative action. Singer and audience can conceptualise the emotions of 'Little Musgrave' better than those of 'Captain Murderer', but the corollary is a sacrifice of moral simplicity.

David BUCHAN (1982: 165–6) identified a group of 'tragic-revenge' ballads from the repertoire of Anna Brown of Falkland, comprising 'Fause Foodrage' (CHILD 89), 'Jellon Grame' (CHILD 90), and 'Lamkin' (CHILD 93). Revenge in these ballads is delayed and premeditated, sometimes over the space of many years. In 'Fause Foodrage' the legitimate King Honor's son, raised in secret, grows up to take an apparently legitimate revenge upon the usurper who has seized his rightful throne and lands and kept King Honor's wife in thrall all these years. The narrative situation has echoes of *Hamlet*, but nothing like its emotional and moral complexity, and King Honor's son appears morally untainted by revenge. Rather similarly, in 'Jellon Grame' a boy takes revenge on the eponymous Jellon Grame for having killed his mother. Revenge is swift and apparently quite without premeditation. In Anna Brown's 'Lamkin' the eponymous character is a mason who, in collusion with a nurse, slaughters Lord Wearie's wife and baby son in revenge for his refusal to pay him for building him a castle. Once again, the motive is quite clearly delineated. What follows, though, is a narrative of seemingly much greater moral complexity, for instead of a swift response, in the anger of the moment so to speak, the children's nurse plots with Lamkin, who enters the house when it is quiet and Lord Wearie

himself is away, stabs the baby so that its cries will bring its mother downstairs, and finally kills her too. Some scholars have felt that this cruelty and bloodletting is excessive in relation to the given motive – that the morality of Lamkin's revenge is untenable. Many singers, too, have given versions with no trace of the disputed payment, and while some still seem to suggest a revenge killing, others seemingly just replace the wronged builder with a fearsome figure like 'Long Longkin'. It is as if moral horror at the business of revenge has prompted the creation of a mysterious, even supernatural, character capable of such determined malignancy (figuratively speaking, for the uncertainties of transmission do not justify deductions about the genetics of the ballad).

The 'problem' of revenge in 'Lamkin' is largely created by narrative construction. The cause in Anna Brown's ballad is established right at the beginning, so the whole of the rest of the ballad is taken up with the intimate details of revenge, and it is these that are so repugnant: 'frae ilka bore o the cradle / the red blood out sprang'; the lady's orders to the wet-nurse, 'still him with the pap!' 'still him with the wand!' 'still him with the bell!' till finally she has to come down herself. The murder of the lady is carried out in slow motion: 'scour the bason, nourice, / and mak it fair and clean'; and the nurse replies contemptuously, there needs no basin, let her blood run on the floor, 'What better is the heart's blood / o the rich than o the poor?' Finally, the ballad notes, the blackbird sang as Lamkin was hanged, and the thrush as the nurse was tied to the stake. It is easy to envisage all this in terms of the filmic quality in ballad stories to which M. J. C. HODGART (1962: 27–8, 30) drew attention, the rapid change of focus which not only gives impetus to the narrative but a counterpointing of image against metrical pattern and narrative movement.

What the ballad technique permits is, paradoxically, a kind of objectivity. It presents its material, in this case the materials of revenge, to listeners and singers who bring to it their own preconceptions – the notion of personal injury as crime, for instance, and the conflation of the ideas of retribution and justice. 'Revenge', wrote Francis Bacon, 'is a kind of wild justice'; and King James VI and I stated, 'Revenge and murder come coupled together'. By early modern times, the extension of the judicial power of the state had largely brought control over the righting of private wrongs into the public arena. The Senecan literary tradition, too, most notably popularised on the English stage of Shakespeare's day, promoted the ethical ambivalence of revenge. Members of the audience of *Hamlet* could have also been purchasers of Henry Gosson's printing of 'The lamentable Ditty of Little Mousgrove and the Lady Barnet'. Without labouring connections of this kind, it is perhaps a fair assumption that ballad audiences should bring to the revenge theme some presumption of moral ambivalence. The core ballad style then allows that ambivalence free play over the narrative surface, picking up on details that variously stimulate pathos or repugnance.

Potentially, though, ambivalence and the 'permissive' nature of ballad style can cut both ways. One 'Lamkin' text, communicated to Thomas Percy from Kent in 1775, is incomplete in that the informant included prose explanations, one of which states, 'Whilst he and the nurse are plundering the house, the lord comes home, and

avenges himself upon these wicked villains' (CHILD 93 K). So the pattern of revenge comes full circle: an instant retribution is exacted by the lord who, it might be felt, has some justice on his side, for here the intimate circumstantial detail, which in 'Little Musgrave' invited sympathy for the lovers, seems (so the history of ballad commentary suggests) to play against the conspirators. But the nurse's cry in Anna Brown's ballad, 'O kill her, kill her, Lamkin, / for she neer was good to me', and even more her argument, 'What better is the heart's blood / o the rich than o the poor?' lets an alternative voice be heard. This social commentary, given the usual setting of the Scottish ballads and their cast of dutiful retainers, seems a strikingly inventive piece of parallelism to counter Lamkin's concern to catch the lady's blood. Where he presents his vengeance as almost an act of ritual, the nurse speaks more like Dickens's Madame Defarge. 'There need nae bason, Lamkin, / lat it run through the floor' is the authentic voice of class war. Coming from within the heart of the family, within the walls of the strongly built castle, from the servant classes, and from a woman, the subversive force embodied in the nurse is deeply threatening, perhaps more so than even Lamkin himself, against whom walls should normally be enough protection. Nevertheless, the ballad sees order reimposed in the end (at one time a servant's killing of their master or mistress could be classified as 'petty treason' and attract the penalty of death by burning rather than hanging, but the hanging/burning ending in the Child ballads probably functions more simply as an execution formula carrying a sense of judicial closure and order restored). The ballad, if not its characters, internalises the notion of personal injury as crime.

Not so 'The Death of Poor Bill Brown' (ROUD 609), which relates with something of the ballad style an account in which a poacher, Bill Brown, is shot by a gamekeeper and, as he lies dying, calls upon his friend, the first-person narrator of the ballad, to revenge his death; this man goes out the following night, encounters the gamekeeper, who is called Tom Green, and shoots him dead. 'Bill Brown' was printed in Frank KIDSON's *Traditional Tunes* (1891: 131–3), with a tune from east Yorkshire and text from a broadside copy, and has been recorded more recently from singers in west Yorkshire, notably Arthur Howard, and Will Noble who learned it from him. On the face of it, the song appears to be fairly localised, and in fact it relates in some way to events that took place near Sheffield. Nevertheless, a text very similar to that sung by Arthur Howard was printed in London by Henry Parker Such in the second half of the nineteenth century, under the title 'Poor Bill Brown', beginning 'Ye gentlemen both great and small'. The same song was also printed on unascribed broadsides, and by Harkness of Preston as 'The Death of Poor Bill Brown'. 'Poor Bill Brown', as sung by Arthur Howard and printed on the broadsides, is a concise and neatly structured song of nine five-line stanzas, rhyming *aabbb*, and apparently tailored to the melody. Scarcely a more transparent tale of revenge could be imagined. The narrator fulfils his friend's dying request by shooting down the gamekeeper in cold blood: 'I fired and brought him down, / My hand gave him his deep death wound'. The final stanza begins, 'Now revenge you see my hopes have crown'd, / I've shot the man that shot Bill Brown', ending, 'I've crown[e]d his hopes and his memory'.

But there are no repercussions in the ballad text – no hanging or burning, no judicial closure. Clearly a capital offence, the shooting in more or less cold blood of the man who shot Bill Brown is recounted in a largely matter-of-fact tone, rising to perhaps a hint of triumph at the end, with touches of detail that define the human scale of events: 'I know the man that shot Bill Brown, / I know him well and could tell his clown, / And to describe it in my song, / Black jacket he had and red waistcoat on, / I know him well, and they call him Tom'. The epithet 'poor' Bill Brown certainly indicates sympathy for the victim; but the use of a first-person narrator is the one narrative device that is really there to direct the listener's response. The account is otherwise allowed to stand as if its morality were as self-evident as that of 'Captain Murderer'. Yet that can scarcely be, for the events exist against a background of, on the one hand, enclosure and rural poverty; repressive, if confused, class-based legislation; and the absurdity of the notion of private property in wild animals. Clearly, these considerations hold true for a large proportion of poaching activity and establish legitimising notions for poaching as a 'social crime', a conscious challenge to the prevailing social and political order and its values. Yet against these currents have to be set the operation of a lucrative black-market in game; the involvement of a range of social groups besides the rural poor; and the not uncommon employment of extreme violence by poaching gangs, as manifested in the 'poaching wars' of the late eighteenth century. Poaching could probably represent at one and the same time a challenge to the class-based system of property, and the reassertion of another, parallel system of purely commercial property rights. Nice distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' criminals, 'legitimate' social crime and chaotic disorder, are not easy to make. But the partisan tone of '(The Death of) Poor Bill Brown' must still be allowed to sit somewhat uneasily with the description of what, on one view, is an extraordinarily brutal, extra-judicial execution.

Such also printed another, quite different song under the title 'Bill Brown of Brightside Town', beginning 'In seventeen hundred and sixty-nine'. This piece, too, was published by several provincial printers (including Harkness again) as 'Bill Brown'. The text runs to twenty quatrain stanzas, and the penultimate words of the second and fourth lines provide a rhyme (or half-rhyme at any rate), while these lines invariably end with the word 'then' (so the rhyme-scheme is *ab*then*cb*then), creating a slightly absurd, doggerel effect in print, although this may not be so marked if sung to a suitable melody – KIDSON (1891: 133) suggested this was originally 'The Mill, Mill, O' which, according to Roy PALMER (1979: 9), fits very well. Out poaching with his companions near Thrybergh (near Rotherham), Bill Brown from Brightside (now part of the Sheffield conurbation) was shot down by a gamekeeper called Shirtl(e)y. The act is represented as quite deliberate, and the keeper was found and brought to trial at York, but acquitted of murder; the broadsides raise the suspicion of bribery. The ballad ends, 'Yet poor Brown's blood lost in the wood, / For vengeance cries amain then'; but there is no revenge killing, and no text in common with '(The Death of) Poor Bill Brown' – although the similarity in narrative outline is undeniable and the name is probably sufficient to posit a direct connection

(otherwise perhaps the nearest textual contact lies in the idea at the end of 'crowning' Bill Brown's name).

Partly because of the rather bizarre rhyme scheme, the syntax and story of these 'Bill Brown (of Brightside Town)' broadsides are quite difficult to follow. Nevertheless, it does seem that in 1770, John Shirteliff, a gamekeeper of Thrybergh, was acquitted at York assizes of a charge of shooting William Brown, after a trial lasting more than seven hours (PALMER 1979: 9, citing the *York Courant* of 3 April 1770). Not surprisingly, the ballad has not been collected from singers in this form. What it does have, however, is a certain amount of textual similarity with another, apparently much more popular poaching ballad, 'The Gallant Poacher' (LAWS L 14; ROUD 793). This was issued on broadsides by numerous London and provincial printers, and collected from English singers including George Dunn, Walter Pardon, Harry Cox, Louie Hooper and Lucy White, Henry Adams, Joseph Leaning. Comprising six ten-line stanzas with a complex rhyme scheme *aaabccdddb*, with short lines at *b* and *c*, the text looks to be strongly shaped by its distinctive melody. Here half-a-dozen poachers go out one night but are heard by a keeper who shoots and kills one of them. Besides the general outline, which is more or less necessarily shared by many poaching songs, the lines that are closest to 'Bill Brown (of Brightside Town)' are the emphatic 'For help he cried, / But was denied'. But perhaps more compelling is the treatment of the figure of the keeper. The most memorable part of 'Bill Brown (of Brightside Town)' is the biblical image of the gamekeeper: 'Like Cain he stood seeking for blood, / With his bayonet and gun … This rogue's intent was fully bent, / One of us poor lads should die'; 'Like cruel Cain up to him came, / And so renew'd his wounds'. In 'The Gallant Poacher', too, the keeper 'swore before the rising sun, / That one of us should die'. And although the reference to Cain is not used explicitly there, the final stanza pictures him as a man banished and scorned:

> Now the murderous man who did him kill,
> And on the ground his blood did spill,
> Must wander far against his will,
> And find no resting place;
> Destructive things,
> His conscience stings;
> He must wander through the world forlorn,
> And ever feel the smarting thorn,
> And pointed at with finger scorn,
> And die in sad disgrace.

The idea of the mark of Cain is fairly evidently present behind these final lines. 'The Gallant Poacher' does not cry out for revenge but rather employs a form of popular theological reference to make its plea for justice. The language builds on other references: 'He crossed all life's tempestuous wave, / No mortal man his soul to save'; 'He now lies sleeping in the grave, / Until the judgment day'. The overall effect is very different from the pedestrian verse of 'Bill Brown (of Brightside Town)' (such

points of contact as there are cannot be taken to indicate a definite genetic relationship), and perhaps closer to lyric lament than the hard-edged account given in '(The Death of) Poor Bill Brown'.

'Lamkin', 'Little Musgrave', '(The Death of) Poor Bill Brown' are all in their different ways disturbing songs which invite the play of not only the receptive listener's emotions but their awareness of moral ambivalence, over the subject of revenge. This is achieved through a particular kind of attention to telling detail, counterpointed against narrative movement, which invokes a context, social and/or ethical, which brings the listener up short. This has something to do with ballad style (though there is no intention to set up definitions here) – the more surprisingly because ballad descriptions are often thought of as largely conventional (as, of course, they often are) – and the way in which classic ballads operate within a context without becoming context-bound. The lesson, so far as it goes (more of an observation or reflection, really), is that ballads do not teach morality and ethics: rather, they present the sort of ground upon which ethical ideas like revenge and justice can be explored – preferably at a safe distance from the listeners' and singers' immediate present. Ballads may not so much embody and transmit communal wisdom, as focus the attention of the community on to areas where wisdom has to be negotiated.

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