

THE TENDER CABIN BOY. CANNIBALISM AND THE SUBJECT

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Abstract: Cannibalism is a narrative of the self and of the other. Dramatising as it does the fear that the body's boundaries are unstable and can be breached, it remains the representative barbarism, yet it also lies at the center of Western culture, in the form of the Catholic Mass, for example. From Othello's 'anthropophagi' to the racist jokes of the 1950s, the theme of cannibalism in popular discourse has coincided with periods of high colonialism when relations with the other are at their most sharp. As *The Silence of the Lambs* showed it is also a popular contemporary narrative of alienation.

This paper examines the topos of cannibalism in nineteenth century popular songs relating to the sea. Given the horror with which the practice was condemned in the nineteenth century, particularly by the proselytising churches, it is paradoxical that it became central to popular representations of contemporary capitalism as a metaphor of the colonial project. Bloodsucking and dismembering became regular features of popular legend. In these songs the victims are not the colonial other but usually disempowered members of the ship's crew such as cabin boys. They exist against a background of several documented cases of actual cannibalism. The song representations became so widely known that they attracted parody and burlesque in light opera and the music hall.

Keywords: broadside; cannibalism; 'custom of the sea'; Darwinism; Thackeray; utilitarianism.

Cannibalism is a narrative of the self. "Devouring is the project of the totalising self which denies the other's difference" (PLUMWOOD 1993: 193). As *The Silence of the Lambs* showed, it is also a contemporary popular narrative of alienation within our own society. In his full study of the practice, A. W. Brian SIMPSON reports, 'scholars or pseudo-scholars have produced elaborate and sometimes comical taxonomies of the practice. Wholly uncritical works of this kind have been published in very recent times' (1984: 112).

This paper examines the topos of cannibalism in nineteenth century English popular songs and narratives relating to the sea. The songs do not, of course, stand alone as cultural artefacts, but as part of a popular response to the practice which in Europe goes back to the Middle Ages and beyond. 'The Ship in Distress', for example, is found as a sixteenth century French sailor ballad 'Le Petit Navire' and as the Portuguese 'Nau Catarineta', still re-enacted ceremonially in Brazil (ENTWISTLE 1939: 94)

Cannibal songs were of two kinds, in dialectical relation to each other: on the one hand, viewing cannibalism as a mark of the colonial other, and, on the other, as survival cannibalism, a 'custom of the sea', an occasional occurrence among shipwrecked seamen with its own code of practice, including, for example the drawing of

lots. Those involved may have been castaways but they were not outcasts, and the many songs associated with them are a reminder that the narrative power of people-eating overwhelms its cultural significance. A. W. Brian SIMPSON (1984) has documented nearly thirty examples of cannibalism by the crew and passengers of American and British ships during the century: in only one case were any of those involved put on trial.

This was in the 1884 case of the *Mignonette*, which foundered in a storm off South Africa. Three men and a boy escaped in a boat, without provisions. Driven to starvation after two weeks adrift, they proposed killing one of their number by lot. This was rejected by one of the crew. Following this, the captain killed the cabin boy, who was then eaten. Four days later they were picked up. The captain and mate appeared in London in the Queen's Bench before the Lord Chief Justice and other judges in December. They were sentenced to death, but were later reprieved and sentenced to six months imprisonment without labour (VINCENT 1895: 1162). The captain's status as a folk hero was confirmed when his wax likeness appeared in Madame Tussaud's (not in the Chamber of Horrors). The sentence of death was a formality to emphasise condemnation of the 'custom of the sea': there was no question of it ever being put into effect. (SIMPSON 1984: 240, 248).

MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES IN SURVIVAL CANNIBALISM

As cannibalism had become the representative barbarism, associated with outsiders and not sons of the Empire, mitigating circumstances were always present. *Self-preservation* was one such defence. A person may take the life of another if their own life is in danger, if such an act is necessary to save themselves. A broadside ballad on the *Mignonette* case makes the point twice that 'They killed the poor boy to preserve their own lives' (text in SIMPSON 1984: 85). Speaking as one of the crew, the narrator of a Hampshire set of 'The Ship in Distress' defends himself by saying

my poor messmates were almost perished
With nothing left but skin and bone'
(BROWNE 1987: 95).

When the whaler the *Essex* was sunk by a sperm whale in the mid-Pacific in 1820, cannibalism took place on two of the boats. The event was the source of episodes in two American narratives, Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. It also gave rise to an English broadside 'The Shipwreck of the *Essex*'. As the boats are cast adrift the captain makes it clear that the will to survival will determine their conduct thereafter:

we must do the best we can
For life is precious to every man.
(quoted in SIMPSON 1984: 316)

Some songs emphasise the lengths to which the crew would go to avoid murder. In the probably Irish ‘Banks of Newfoundland’:

Some of our men jumped overboard, said they would rather swim to land,
But alas, it was five hundred miles from the Banks of Newfoundland.
(PALMER 1986: 193).

This suggests a degree of self-interest and individualism which is often considered foreign to the popular ballad.

Insanity was frequently given as a reason for a recourse to barbarism. The word ‘bulimia’ was given at that time to the condition of starvation leading to insanity. The condition goes back at least to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* Book 8, where Erisychthon eats his own limbs one by one because of his insatiable hunger, while modern eating disorders can be regarded as a form of self-consumption. One of three contemporary broadsides on the *Mignonette* case of 1884 makes the point raised repeatedly at their trial that the four crew members had lost control of their senses:

Mad with the thirst and the hunger as well,
What they did then is fearful to tell
(text in SIMPSON 1984: 85)

The ritual of *drawing lots* appears in nearly all cannibal narratives, and it was clearly considered the central plank in the argument for legitimating survival cannibalism. Within the British merchant marine it was regarded as a ‘custom of the sea’ only on condition that it had been preceded by the drawing of lots (SIMPSON 1984: 145). The practice features in nearly all the ballads and broadsides, in some cases even appearing in the title (‘The Drawing of the Lots’, ‘La Courte Paille’ [The short straw]), although this probably says more about the sensibilities of editors than about the preferences of singers (ORD 1930: 63; KENNEDY 1975: 288).

Early examples of drawing lots appear in the cases of the *Dolphin* in 1759 and the *Peggy* in 1765, where the victims selected were a Spaniard and an African American who was part of the ship’s cargo. As Simpson comments, ‘it strains credulity to suppose that lots were fairly cast’ (PALMER 1986: 56–57; SIMPSON 1984: 124).

These two cases call into question the real element of chance in drawing lots. On the few occasions where ‘the custom of the sea’ was tested in court, the lot-drawing was considered a decisive element because it suggested that the victims acquiesced in their own murder.¹ In both oral tradition and the documentary record, the lot would fall to a disproportionate extent on the weakest victim, such as a woman, boy or a foreigner. The Brazilian anthropophagists, led by Oswaldo de Andrade, emphasised the way cannibalism in the colonial project is a metaphor of appropriation, consumption and selective digestion of differences. I suggest here that this is not

¹ It was so taken in the *Mignonette* trial (SIMPSON 1984: 94).

only true of the colonial context but of the individual instances associated with the 'custom of the sea.' Both the broadsides and contemporary news reports show that what appeared to be a random sacrifice for the greater good was often actually rigged in favour of those in a position to assert their power. A. W. Brian Simpson goes so far as to say that there are cases where providing a place for a cabin boy in a ship's boat suggests that he was included as a supply of fresh meat (SIMPSON 1984: 164). This may have applied to the shipwreck of the *Francis Spaight*, an emigrant ship wrecked in the Atlantic in 1836. Lots were drawn only for the four apprentices on board, and the draw was apparently rigged in selecting the 14-year old Patrick O'Brien. He was bled to death, and later another of the boys was killed before the crew attracted the attention of a passing American ship by waving the hands and feet of O'Brien (SIMPSON 1984: 132). No charges were ever brought. The broadside written on the event emphasises almost carnally the youth and physical qualities of the four apprentices:

There was four youths among our crew most comely to be seen
 Growing in the prime of life their age was scarce nineteen.
 Come let the four boys now cast lots the captain he did cry
 They have no wives to lament their lives 1 of the 4 must die.
 'The Sorrowful Loss of Lives and Casting the Lots on Board
 the Francis Spritt [sic]' (text in SIMPSON 1984: 321–22)

In songs from the oral tradition the victims were usually boys ('The Ship in Distress,' 'Banks of Newfoundland,' 'Sept Ans sur Mer,' 'La Courte Paille'). Could this be the Europeans' cultural concept of the body, clinging to classical Greek models of flawless beauty in contrast to the sailors, whose bodies were marked by piercing, tattooing and furrowing of sea life?

In several cases the victim was a woman. 'The Silk Merchant's Daughter', already mentioned, is the best-known song on this theme. One version collected in landlocked Bedfordshire mentions the name of the ship as *The Nancy*, but there is no evidence to link the song with any particular shipwreck (*OLD SONGS* [1904]: 20). Nevertheless, there are several documented cases where women were the victims. After *The George* was wrecked in 1822 on a voyage from Quebec to Greenock in Scotland, a woman, Joyce Rae, and five sailors were consumed; those rescued were shipwrecked a second time, and only the captain and one seaman survived. The street ballad written on the event makes much of the fact that Joyce Rae's husband was with her and had to take part:

At length we drank the female's blood
 To quench our raging thirst.
 Her wretched husband was compelled
 Her precious blood to taste.
 (SIMPSON 1984: 315)

As in 'The Silk Merchant's Daughter', the writer clearly assumes that the tie of marriage or betrothal would add a further twist of pathos. However the choice of a woman as victim also fits larger cultural imperatives such as patriarchy, where women are objects for consumption.

On some occasions no straws were drawn, and then the chain of command was even more evident: *hierarchies* dominated even in death. Typically the officers survived, or (once again) English castaways rather than foreign (SIMPSON 1984: 128). In such cases a new authority was invoked for the elimination of the weak: *Darwinism*. This is very evident in those widely-sung ballads such as 'The Ship in Distress' and 'The Banks of Newfoundland,' where the victims are selected, openly or by deception, from among the weakest survivors. After the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, the principle of the survival of the fittest was often invoked in debates on cannibalism. In the press debate on the *Mignonette* case, where there was no drawing of lots because the victim was nearly unconscious, Lamed Nun Dhalet Yod objected strongly to the (European) implication that the strong could kill the innocent weak (SIMPSON 1984: 88). After the 1892 shipwreck of the *Thekla* in North Atlantic, two Norwegians and a Swede ate a Dutchman called Fritz, again after drawing lots. An Oslo paper emphasised that in this case the stronger had not killed the weaker: 'We may conclude how unaffected these people are by amongst other things the theory, known in England as the 'struggle for life,' according to which the right of the stronger [*Sterkeres Ret*] is exalted to law [*Retten*]''. This gave rise to a Norwegian ballad (SIMPSON 1984: 265).

LACUNAE

While there was no documented case in the nineteenth century of a crew being rescued at the moment of murdering one of their number, this is the typical scenario of songs that entered the oral tradition in England: they include 'The Silk Merchant's Daughter,' 'Little Billee' and 'The Banks of Newfoundland'. Realism or statistical probability are not associated with the narrative ballad, but it is surely significant that none of the broadsides which reported actual cases of death has entered the oral tradition.

Instead the narratives lead us to the brink, perform the full horror in dumb-show, but then offer a premature closure. While according to the custom of the sea the sailors ate their victims, the ballads vomit up a traditional mixture of piety and self-congratulation, with all the former hierarchies still firmly in place:

God bless that ship and her brave captain,
Who gave us life to tell the tale,
For by his great and friendly actions
To Lisbon we did safely sail.

(BROWNE 1987: 95)

May God protect all jolly sailors who boldly venture on the main
 And keep them free from all such trials never to hear the likes again.
 (COPPER 1975: 211)

Despite these comforting appeals, they are playing with a known incompleteness. This is because ballads quote constantly, from each other and from master narratives of the day: When one of the broadsides describes the crew of the *Mignonette* as being ‘Tho’ surrounded by water not any drop to drink’, the holocaust described by Coleridge in ‘The Ancient Mariner’ is vividly present (text in SIMPSON 1984: 86). A ballad on the wreck of the *George* in 1822 ends:

They have the sad case of the *George* to deplore,
 And we think they will go on the seas never more
 (SIMPSON 1984: 118)

The elegiac song ‘We’ll go to Sea no More’, though not printed until 1906, was once ‘known to every seaman’ (HUGILL 1984: 402).

Not only verbal but melodic intertexts supply the missing or diverted narrative. In the case of ‘Little Billee’, to be discussed presently, the melody is almost invariably that of ‘Le petit navire’, known all over Europe as a song of cannibalism, and the songs were being sung to a backdrop of sensational cases like that of the *Francis Spaight* and the *Thekla*. These cases were very widely reported: John Ord heard a farm servant singing ‘The Merchant’s Daughter Turned Sailor’ in the very year of the *Mignonette* trial (n. d.: 64). In at least one case, ‘The Ship in Distress’, a full-blooded tale of man-eating found in Brittany, Portugal and Catalonia has become yet another narrative where a ship’s sail is spotted in the nick of time.

These songs tease the listener, offering a truncated version of what was being completed with unrestrained detail in the broadsides and the mass media. Another contradiction lay in the identification of the practice with the colonial other: the context of the first reference to eating human flesh in the South Seas was actually a reported case on an American ship, the *William Brown* (SIMPSON 1984: 171). Cannibalism still speaks through ‘our’ culture. The conventional location of Christianity at the opposite pole to cannibalism very obviously ignores the Catholic Mass.² I come from a country which has forced cows to turn cannibal, and is now struggling to cope with the consequences, and I live in one where animal rights groups have exposed

² Militant Protestants were not slow to point this out: ‘A New Song of the Late Lord Chancellors [Jeffreys] Last Will and Testament’ (1689) depicts the Pope as a blood-drinker:

Unto the Pope of Italy,
 I do bequeath my Blood to He,
 ‘Twill serve instead of Claret Wine,
 Then let him have his fill of mine,
 For he loves blood with all his heart,
 Then let him take it for his part. (lines 55–60)
 (DAY 1987: 2. 287)

the degradation involved in fur farming, where silver foxes are fed the ground-up remains of their slaughtered blood-relations.

In the shipwreck narratives the gaps are more subtle, but it is not surprising that their sentimentality attracted parody and burlesque. It is a characteristic of utilitarian discourse that other, equally telling arguments are suppressed, and it was this hidden discourse that parodists of the genre often delighted in exposing. These parodies have themselves become part of the oral tradition and in many contexts have displaced their models. The best-known of these is 'Little Billee', written by the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray before 1863, which has itself vigorously entered the oral tradition and is, with 'The Ship in Distress', probably the most widely-sung ballad of cannibalism in England.³ By concentrating on three suppressed aspects, the youth, the powerlessness and the tenderness of the victim, he subverts the conventional discourses of the broadsides (although he too stops short of actually letting his victim be killed and eaten).

First, the equally utilitarian, counter-argument that the extreme youth of the cabin boys entitled them to be spared first, had been suppressed. The fact that this would probably be the one prevailing today reflects a significant change in sensibility since the nineteenth century, emphasising youth over reproductive ability. Secondly, his powerlessness is emphasised. As in the real life shipwreck of the *Francis Spritt*, where the drawing of lots was apparently rigged in selecting the 14-year old Patrick O'Brien, Billee is in every sense 'little', young and in no position to defend himself.

Finally, Thackeray makes the obvious point that the meat of a cabin boy would be much more toothsome than that of any old sea dog. As gorging Jack and guzzling Jimmy quite rightly reason,

There's little Bill, he's young and tender;
We're old and tough, so let's eat he.
(THACKERAY 1900: 595)

This truth, literally unspeakable in the pathos of the broadside, is similarly expressed in 'La Courte Paille' (The Short Straw), where the boy *is* killed and eaten,

On le mangea à la sauce blanche
Avec les sal-, sal-, salsifis pas cuits

Ils eurent la délicatesse
De mettre sa, sa, sa part de côté.
(KENNEDY 1975: 288)

³ All the versions I have seen keep the mock-pathetic detail of Little Billee undoing the button of his shirt, but a Hampshire singer understandably changed the port of sailing from Bristol to Portsmouth, while Bob Roberts changed Thackeray's reference from Admiral Napier to the much better-known Nelson (BROWNE 1987: 94; Bob Roberts. *Songs from the Sailing Barges*. Topic Records LP 12TS361, 1978, Side 2, Track 9, 'Little Boy Billee.')

*They ate him up with white sauce
And with some sal--sal-salsify uncooked*

*They had the good manners
To put hi-hi-his share aside.*

Just as cannibalism is today the source of jokes which help us to distance us from the implications of the practice, so jocular verses like these were also part of the lore of survival cannibalism. Even the modern historian of the *Mignonette* case cannot resist a jest at the most sickening moment of all, when the murderers had to dismember the boy's body: 'it might now be supposed that the three sailors, confronted with the corpse of their shipmate, would be in something of the same state of puzzlement as children confronted for the first time by artichokes – uncertain how to proceed next. But Dudley and Stephens seem to have had no such problem. They stripped the body, threw the clothes overboard, and at once cut out the heart and liver, which they ate' (SIMPSON 1984: 68).

Finally, 'Little Billee' points up the incongruity of exaggerated piety in a context of legitimated murder. Such piety in the act of execution was held to be a mitigating circumstance. To whoever was waiting to have his heart torn out and devoured, the point may have seemed an academic one, but singers used such moments for dramatic (and later for comic) purposes. The chosen victim in 'The Ship in Distress' begs to be allowed time to pray 'unto our dear Lord' while prudently sending sailors up the rigging to look out for passing ships. One does indeed pass and rescue them. In 'The Banks of Newfoundland', an Irish song not known in England and Scotland, one of many to bear that title, the captain's boy was given a full hour to say his prayers, and in that time an English ship appeared on the horizon. Contemporary accounts of shipwrecks show that such ships often failed to stop, but in this case the sailors were rescued and the boy's life was spared (PALMER 1986: 193). To maximise his chances, Little Billee says his prayers from the masthead while scanning the horizon for signs of land or passing ships. Choosing the longest sacred texts known to him, he says his catechism and then goes on to the Ten Commandments. Evidently an inventive lad, he has reached the Twelfth Commandment before he sights land and thus saves his life (THACKERAY 1900: 595).

Were perhaps all of these songs performed as burlesques? At least one piece of evidence strongly suggests that they weren't. The North Derry singer Eddie Butcher recalled that his father, who learnt most of his songs in the nineteenth century, 'did not like to sing "It is now for New England" ("The Silk Merchant's Daughter") because it upset him to think that the heroine, or the hero, would be eaten by shipmates,' indeed by her lover (SHIELDS 1981: 13). He was not typical in this: the song has been widely collected in England, Scotland and America.

CONCLUSION

For an urban population at least, the process of killing for food is still a matter of revulsion, and therefore of suppression. Cannibalism as taboo can be explained, as the eco-feminist Carol ADAMS has done, as a displacement of guilt about eating meat by absorbing the original concern about animals' fates into a new human-centred hierarchy (1991: 42). By favouring narratives which stopped short of actually killing and eating people, singers clearly diverge from the majority of the broadsides. In place of the sensationalism of the custom of the sea, they introduced an element of divine intervention: above all they privileged the values of common humanity and the rights of the disempowered. In so doing, they achieved in the ballad what plainly had not been foremost on the high seas. Nevertheless, their songs clearly belong to a liminal tradition in which the values of a society are tested through transgression.

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