

Introduction: survey of research to date and delineation of study area

Shakespeare's picture of Autolycus and Earle's character of the pot-poet relieve the historian from a vain effort to describe a vast amount of heterogeneous material, though a lively and instructive chapter might be made of a mere list of titles.

Such was Douglas Bush's assessment, in 1945, of the state of research and extent of intellectual interest in the English street ballad. He repeats this judgement in the volume of the *Oxford History of English Literature* ([1962], p. 48) dealing with the years 1600–60, the period, as Bush informs us with reference to the specialist H. E. Rollins, of the flowering of the street ballad. This short, concise and necessarily simplified dictum admirably describes the state of research on the subject. The reference to the comic figure of the low-class balladmonger in *The Winter's Tale*, and to the frequently cited caricature of a drunken hack writer whose main income derived from ballads, has become a convention in historical literary scholarship, and shows the extent to which the study of the street ballad has always been hampered by prejudice. This is a traditional prejudice, which originated in the age of the street ballad itself and is directed against both the 'inferior' quality of the actual ballads and also against the genre *per se*, which is regarded as having low- to middle-class social and literary status.

The description and classification of street ballads has up till now been confined to content, together with bibliographical, cultural–historical and some textual aspects. No attempt has been made systematically to bring these together into a cohesive picture, and it is the construction of the texts which has here been most neglected. It is immediately noticeable that the texts have a metric and verse pattern, with rhyming couplets or alternate rhyme scheme. The length (80–120 lines) was determined by the fact that street ballads were printed on a single sheet (broadside) or on both sides (broadsheet),¹ usually illustrated with a woodcut. This form of publication was also used for prose texts, and for other purposes than entertainment and instruction, so that a distinction can be discerned here which is important though not always obvious.² 'Black-letter' type, in general use only until the middle of the sixteenth century when 'white-letter' type became the rule, was retained for street ballads and for prose of popular entertain-

2 Introduction

ment and instruction for over a century longer than for more ‘highbrow’ material.³ This typographical indication of the low literary status of the street ballad was not abandoned until the turn of the seventeenth century.⁴ The text of the ballad was sung or recited as the printed copy was being sold, and this distribution in the street, marketplace, public house or at the fair, instead of through the usual channels for books, is a further distinguishing factor of the street ballad. The relevance of this for a socio-literary genre definition has not, however, been investigated so far.

The predominantly bibliographical and editorial interest in the street ballad continued the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tradition of antiquarian collecting. The editions, published between the nineteenth century and the 1930s, have provided an excellent basis for further research. These editions contain a major proportion of the printed copies of ballads surviving in amateur collections.

Texts from the so-called Suffolk Collection,⁵ which for the most part contains ballads from 1560 to 1570, were published by H. Huth in *Ancient Ballads and Broad-sides* (1867)⁶ and by H. L. Collmann in *Ballads and Broad-sides* (1912). The texts edited by Huth comprise mainly ballads showing those street-ballad features which were to become characteristic of the genre in the seventeenth century. Their relatively wide thematic variety can be seen as representative of the second half of the sixteenth century. The texts in Collmann’s selection show more the fluctuation between the street ballad and other forms of verse of this early period. Similarly, J. P. Collier’s *Broadside Black-letter Ballads* (1868) contains a large number of early ballads, some from H. Huth’s collection.⁷ Some texts overlap with the volume published by Collier in 1840, *Old Ballads from Early Printed Copies*. T. Wright provided access to the MS. Ashmole 48 with his publication *Songs and Ballads* (1860). This is a collection of verses presumed to have been put together by the itinerant singer Richard Sheale in the mid-sixteenth century. There is disagreement as to whether it preceded the corresponding printed copies.⁸ From the point of view of the textual make-up, the verses in this collection represent more or less a transitional stage leading to the street ballad proper.

The transition from early street ballads to textual material from the seventeenth century is illustrated by H. E. Rollins in his first editions. *Old English Ballads: 1553–1625* (1920) contains texts from various printed copies and from MSS in the British Library, and also from the Rawlinson MS. (Bodleian), most of which are religious in content. *A Pepysian Garland* (1922) comprises a selection from the largest ballad collection, the Pepys Collection.⁹ Rollins chose here texts between 1595 and 1639 for the first volume of the collection, evidently selected from the standpoint of quality,¹⁰ in order to awaken interest in this literary form among a wider public. A. Clark had already published texts from the transition period in

his *The Shirburn Ballads 1585–1616* (1907). This is a collection from the beginning of the seventeenth century¹¹ of handwritten copies of printed copies of varying provenance. Over a third of these have been published following the printed copy, in other editions (especially in *RB*).

The most comprehensive editions are W. Chappell and J. W. Ebsworth's *Roxburghe Ballads* (1869–99) and Rollins's *Pepys Ballads* (1929–32). The Roxburghe Collection¹² contains 1,466 ballads, mainly from the seventeenth century, of which 176 are duplicates. It is in four volumes, of which the third contains numerous eighteenth-century texts. The edition comprises nine volumes. The first three, edited by Chappell, follow exactly the order of the collection, whereas Ebsworth in the subsequent volumes arranged the texts, which he dated, in thematically related groups. Most relevant to our period of investigation are volumes I and II.¹³ The Pepys Collection also contains mainly seventeenth-century ballads,¹⁴ which Rollins arranged in chronological order. The first two volumes span the period from 1610 to 1640, and the third begins in 1666.¹⁵ His commentary on the individual texts is, compared with other editors', particularly detailed and informative, and always includes a chronological reference. A further edition by Rollins contains exclusively news and sensational ballads from the seventeenth century: *The Pack of Autolyucus or Strange and Terrible News* (1927).¹⁶ With all these taken together, a fair proportion of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century street ballads had been made available.¹⁷

The dating of street ballads presents relatively few problems in the majority of cases.¹⁸ If the publication date is not given in the title of the text, it can be deduced from the name of the printer on the statutory imprint which is normally to be found: the period of activity of most of the printers has been established.¹⁹ Further, the entries in the Stationers' Register²⁰ for the period 1557–1709, compiled by Rollins, provide a set of precise dates. Finally, references to or treatment of contemporary events, together with the use of tunes to earlier street ballads as announced in the title, enable us approximately to date the ballads. Frequent reprintings or imitations of previously published texts present a particular bibliographical problem, appearing as they do without any indication that they are not the original. These become more common in the second half of the seventeenth century. We can, however, establish a relatively precise chronological framework, according to which the texts can be arranged and which enables us to build up a description of the historical development of the various types of ballad.²¹ The reverse process, that is, deducing the date of origin from the thematic material, style, and structure type, produces imprecise results. This is because popular literature, with its functional nature and consequent rigidity of form, allows of gradual change only, while similarly the tradition-bound character of the street ballad inclined

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Natascha Wurzbach

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction

authors towards outmoded styles. Further, borrowings from other literary genres often appeared long after the original.

The history of the term 'ballad' was elucidated by A. B. Friedmann ([1958], pp. 95–110; [1961], pp. 35–9). He proved convincingly that the English word 'ballad' was taken over, not from the Italian *ballata* ('dance'), but from the French *balade*, a type of verse-form which became established in England in the fourteenth century. The form of the *balade* differs so markedly from the verse-form of the street ballad that the evolution of the term only becomes clear with the discovery of the missing link in the chain of development: the 'pseudo-ballade'. Right up to the early eighteenth century, the English version of the term 'ballad' referred exclusively to street ballads printed on broadsheets.²² It was only with the reawakening of interest in folk ballads that the reference of the term was extended to include these too. No distinction was made between the terms 'traditional ballad' and 'broadsheet ballad' until the first editions of street ballads appeared. The name 'street ballad', as used by V. de Sola Pinto (1947; 1957), has the advantage of being a socio-cultural (cf. 'street literature', R. Collison [1973]) as well as a biographical definition of the genre. The German translation of the work as '*Strassenballade*' signals the difference between the street ballad and the German *Bänkelsang*.²³

The reasons for the marked neglect in academic research of the street ballad as opposed to the folk ballad, in spite of the many available editions of the former, are rooted in the history of ideas and of literary scholarship. This can be deduced both from the extensive research work produced on the folk ballad in contrast with the sparse material relating to the street ballad,²⁴ and from explicit comments on the subject. The folk ballad, with its high tragedy and lofty ideals, archaic techniques, and supposedly age-old texts²⁵ fitted in more easily with accepted poetic norms and with the sense of historical pride²⁶ than the street ballad. As long as the latter was measured against the folk ballad in terms of its literary-historical placing, structure and function, there could be no prospect of an unbiased view or a more thorough study of the street ballad.²⁷ In addition there was, even during its heyday, a predominantly negative evaluation of the street ballad from the point of view of orthodox literature. This attitude persisted, despite possible differences in quality in the text corpus and despite the popularity and widespread influence of the street ballad and its own internal literary development which was of long-term significance. Irregular verse-formation, inelegance of style, incredible and fantastic content, obscenity and dubious morality,²⁸ together with a general lack of 'poetry', 'culture', and 'taste', are the criticisms levelled at the street ballad.²⁹ Such judgements, usually brief generalizations, indicate a lack of more precise interpretational perception of the texts on the part of the ballad specialists

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

Rollins, Chappell and Ebsworth, in spite of their undoubted contribution by way of a preliminary classification of the material.

The study of the street ballad has up till now been characterized by attempts at justification which stem from traditional literary and aesthetic value judgements, and also by a predominant interest in content. Rollins's doubtless literary interest in the texts is often expressed through an emphasis on qualities which are orientated towards the norm of orthodox literature:

'A pleasant wooing song' (*PB*, I, p. 72), 'this graceful ballad' (*PB*, I, p. 186), 'The ballad is worthy of its distinguished tune: it is a fine love-song, the composition either of an extraordinarily gifted ballad-writer or of a real poet' (*PB*, II, p. 3), 'Certainly this is a pretty ballad, even though its language and ideas always border on indecency' (*PB*, II, p. 8).

And:

This charming love-song is an illustration of what a broadside ballad could become when a real poet turned to that medium of expression. There are few poems in the Elizabethan miscellanies more delightful than this. It is commended to the attention of those – if there be such – who believe all ballads to be trash. (*PB*, II, p. 249)

A. B. Friedmann ([1961], pp. 49–53), too, clearly evaluates what he calls the 'literary ballad' as opposed to the 'journalistic ballad' according to content and the presence or absence of 'high poetry'. Rollins does however recognize the poetic achievement of the street ballad on its own literary level:

When the authors and the audience for which the songs were intended are considered, the poetry seems especially good. Frankly writing for money, the balladists nevertheless often had a lyric gift that made their ditties superior to the average American ragtime songs. The words of the most popular 'lyrics' of recent days seem all the more contemptible when compared with these ballads, and their music is hardly superior to the ballad tunes. The common people of the seventeenth century who admired ballads had, it appears, better taste than have the mass of people in the twentieth-century England and America. Accordingly, it is not hard to understand why they flocked to see and hear the great poetic drama of their time. (*PB*, II, p. xiii)

Interest in the content of the street ballad was at first historical.³⁰ The texts proved to be dubious source material, however, since they were more concerned to sensationalize than to give an accurate account of events. The change to a mainly cultural–historical and anthropological consideration of the street ballad from the end of the nineteenth century onwards not only produced the valuable information given in commentaries on single texts:³¹ it also corresponded more closely to the nature of the street ballad as both realistic presentation of life and provider of entertaining and prac-

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Natascha Wurzbach

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Introduction

tical instruction in the ways of the world for an audience unaccustomed to literature of any kind. Ebsworth mentions, in 1878 (I, p. xv), the importance of the texts ‘to the student of human nature and of English history’ and admires the ‘Touches of genuine humour, genuine pathos . . . Only the dainty and discontented reader can possibly find these ballads valueless’ (ibid., p. xiv). Rollins goes further:

The ballads here reproduced give pictures of a many-sided age. Their quaintness and melody and humor should appeal to the general reader, while the historian and the student of literature will find in them value of another sort.³²

Attempts at classifying according to content³³ have mentioned the journalistic aspects of the street ballad³⁴ and pointed out the marketplace methods of advertising and selling religious and secular instruction: ‘Wisdom crying aloud in the Streets’ (Ebsworth, *RB*, pp. viii, xxvii) together with the variety of topical themes, in the widest sense: ‘All Sorts and Conditions of Men’ (ibid., p. xxxvi). It has been shown that love is the predominant theme,³⁵ as is usual in literature, and that ‘low life’ (ibid.) is preferred as a setting. The differing levels of fictionalization have also been noted.³⁶

Recurrent assertions that the street ballad reflects low- to middle-class customs and attitudes signalled the development of a new objectivity of perspective in street-ballad research. This new sociological side of the literary study of the street ballad was formulated in 1935 by its adherent L. B. Wright:

The unity of aristocratic tone in Elizabethan literature has been greatly emphasized by literary historians. ‘One can hardly exaggerate the aristocratic nature of Elizabethan literature’, one writer asserts. So complete has been the preoccupation of students with the aristocratic tradition that they have almost forgotten the existence of any other point of view. If one means by ‘literature’ the works that have stood the test of time and are still regarded as worth reading for their own sakes, then it is true that most literature was aristocratic; but if one considers the books that delighted the mass of Elizabethans, much will be found which does not show the touch of gentleman or scholar. ([1935], pp. 90–1f.)

Even if Wright discounts the ‘test of time’ variable, which probably depends on general public approval, he does take audience reaction and the practical purpose of the texts as a basic criterion for investigation and assessment in his *Middle Class Culture in Elizabethan England*. He stresses the significance of the street ballad as one of the most important reading media, ranking with chapbooks, tracts and prose pieces, educational and didactic texts of the time. The cultural justification and selling success of street-ballad texts had its origin in their practical moral instruction and advice on social behaviour, in their information, entertainment and social

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Natascha Wurzbach

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

7

protest and in the development of the sense of identity of the middle classes.

In order to place the actual texts culturally and historically, and elucidate the relationship between author, text and audience, it is necessary to look at more than just content. It is only by examining the textual procedures of the text that an insight can be gained into the conditions for and possibilities of communicating a textual item, and into the closely related receptive capacity and changing taste of the audience. The first – and only – scholar to characterize the street ballad on aesthetic grounds was V. de Sola Pinto, who published a high-quality selection in his anthology *The Common Muse* in 1957. From a specifically social and class-orientated standpoint of literary criticism he stresses the distinctive worth of the street ballad in comparison with what he calls ‘hall-marked’ literature. In describing the particular qualities of the street ballad, he refers in his introduction to ‘common sense’, an ‘unsentimental, uncourtly and irreverent’ attitude to love, knowledge of the ‘simple life’, the penetrating directness of the colloquial language (‘racy homely English’), and clarity of meaning without the sacrifice of complexity. He also mentions harmony of intention and execution, that is, the street ballad does not go beyond the possibilities of a literature of instruction and entertainment for a low- to middle-class urban audience but often puts these possibilities to excellent use.³⁷ Pinto is, however, quite objective when it comes to a comparative literary evaluation of the street ballad:

it has to be admitted that the *Common Muse* at her best falls a good deal short of the Olympian sublime. Her characteristic virtues are those of the middle way: directness, simplicity and honest earthly realism. (ibid., p. 12)

Pinto notes with regret the lack of scholarly research on the street ballad, both as a subject in its own right and as a genre which influenced the poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which he describes in brief as a research problem, in an earlier essay:³⁸

My contention is that here we have a vast body of popular poetry which has hitherto been grossly neglected and undervalued by the academic critics and historians of English literature. One of the great tasks which lies before English scholarship is the exploration and revaluation of this popular art, which expressed so admirably for three centuries the spirit of the common English people. Another task of equal importance is to examine the relationship between this popular poetry and the work of the great English poets, from Shakespeare down to the nineteenth century.

In formulating these two tasks Pinto, an authority in literary scholarship, is clearly distancing himself from the prejudices which had up till then prevailed among historians. Of the two tasks he describes, the first is a prerequisite for the second. Aspects of historical literary relationships can

8 Introduction

only be explored on the basis of a more precise description of the text corpus. It therefore proved convenient to limit the period of this study to the years 1550–1650, for reasons which are socio-literary, bibliographical, and inherent in the texts themselves. Extant printed copies very rarely date from before the mid-sixteenth century.³⁹ It was only in the second half of the sixteenth century that the circulation of the street ballad gradually increased owing to the larger printings and a more organized method of distribution. Although broadsides were used for state proclamations and church edicts they were not used for literary texts, and certainly not for ballads of any kind, until around the middle of the sixteenth century.⁴⁰ From this time onwards certain characteristics of the street ballad begin to develop, evident also in the texts themselves. This early phase in the history of the street ballad, when textual composition, function, and method of distribution were not yet established,⁴¹ forms one of the historical bases for the accumulation and combination of genre-specific features. For the purposes of genre description and definition, this part of the text corpus is better seen as a contrastive background, while the main interest will be focused on the period when the street ballad came into its own as a genre type. The diversity and quality of the street ballad at this the apex of its development was due to a wider circulation and greater effectiveness, within its own limitations. At the end of the sixteenth century this development can be observed together with a striking change from religious to secular thematic content. There is a clear hiatus during the Civil War years, when street ballads were suppressed and for a time banned completely. From then on they show a significant narrowing on both the thematic and functional sides which was accompanied by a downward trend in quality. The period I have chosen for my investigation spans thus the origins and rise of the street ballad and the years of its greatest flowering as an independent genre. With the definition of specific genre characteristics and their function, a basis for further diachronic research has been established even where the street ballad lacks complexity of characteristics and literary message and where it is effective as a model for other literary forms.⁴²

Out of approximately 1,000 edited ballads⁴³ of our period of study, a selection of about 200 examples will be interpreted from different standpoints. I have chosen this limited number because the themes and procedures in the text corpus recur relatively frequently, due to the powerful constraints of tradition and what we can almost call 'low-brow' consumer pressure. I have selected texts of special quality in the sense that they illustrate convincingly genre-specific features which serve to convey a literary message of contemporary relevance which is orientated towards the audience. One of my main purposes in doing this is to counteract somewhat the low prestige of the street ballad. This concept of quality is not determined by one-sided, specifically literary values, such as are often applied, either

explicitly or implicitly, through a traditional ranking of genres and types of content. The texts are 'literary' in so far as the entertaining and instructional aspects of their message differ from the purely practical purpose of factual and 'useful' literature. It is for this reason that the texts are preferably, though not necessarily, fictional in content. Ballads with a political or historical content are not included in this study, since their essential historicity would require a close historical analysis which is not possible within the framework of this investigation. Furthermore, texts of this kind frequently appear in the earlier period in a song form which was not yet typical of the street ballad, and again in the second half of the seventeenth century. Ample quotations are provided to compensate for the fact that the texts are not easily accessible otherwise.

The iconographic and musical dimensions of the street ballad cannot be dealt with in this study, for reasons connected with both the material in hand and the space available. The woodcut illustration on the broadside, increasingly common in the seventeenth century, was a crude affair and had little actual illustrative function with regard to the text.⁴⁴ Since there were usually only one or two figures involved it was possible to use an idea several times over, which resulted not infrequently in a crass incongruence between illustration and text.⁴⁵ The woodcut, therefore, offers little scope for research within the context of this study, though its principal function of helping to sell the product should not be underestimated.

It was common practice to use the same tunes for several street-ballad texts.⁴⁶ This allowed the use of popular tunes in the introduction and spreading of new texts, so there was no definite functional interrelation. The coordination of melody and text was certainly easier because at that time musical performance was far freer in its relation to musical content than is the case today. Tempo and rhythm were not fixed, and missing notes could be added to texts as necessary. Musical notation is very seldom found on the printed sheets, however. The naming of the tune in the subtitle – 'To the tune of *Fortune my Foe*'⁴⁷ – is clearly a resort to the familiar, which is reactivated by the singing or reciting of the performer. The quality of the tunes, which extend into the area of folk-song, dance music, and contemporary song tradition, is higher than one would assume from contemporary opinion of street ballads.⁴⁸ Apart from its mnemonic function, the tune doubtless had an emotive and sometimes illuminating effect which should be examined from the psychological and musical point of view to supplement the analysis of the texts. The consistently simple structure and easy comprehensibility of the texts guaranteed a form of verbal communication which was relatively independent of the music.

The main concern of this study is to describe the texts systematically, a process which will lead to the establishing of essential and recurrent textual characteristics. The aim is to discover the differential criteria which

10 Introduction

mark the English street ballad as a genre which comprised the mass of broadsides. The bibliographical form of publication of the street ballad in close relation to its distribution by means of performance and sale at the same time, and the strikingly communicative structure of the texts as an obvious consequence of this, require a pragmatic approach to the texts, bearing in mind the present stage of methodology. Since this method of investigation takes into account the fact that utterances – also literary ones – are dependent on both situation and action, a textual description and interpretation based on literary and social aspects is indeed possible. In Elizabethan and Stuart times, the street ballad was integrated into the social activities of the lower and middle classes, as has been shown in socio-historical research. This invites the question as to the relationship between textual construction and non-textual determinant components. We have to remember the special nature of the communicative relationship between performer and listener and its effect on the textual procedures and successful distribution. It will be necessary to define more precisely the topicality value, that is, the relevance to the outside world, of a literary form which is often described as the forerunner of journalism.

The literary and sociological framework within which a literary form of substantial independence and diversity developed will prove to be an important contributory determinant in explaining the genre characteristic of a particular communication structure. For a further categorization of the various forms of publication of the street ballad, the traditional genre-theory distinctions according to the speech criterion will hold; they can be systematically applied through the communication-theory approach. Here the communication levels of the street-ballad texts which will be established constitute an important coherence factor. In addition, there are further principles of coherence which denote a particular sub-category of genre, which must be examined by the tentative use of linguistic category analysis. It will be seen that the undeniable but until now overemphasized heterogeneity of the text corpus is, from the point of view of structure, only slight and can be reduced to the predominance of a few characteristic textual procedures. But the main feature of the street ballad, the ‘story’,⁴⁹ frequently cited in the few references to the genre in works of literary criticism, must be considered as in no way valid for all texts.

Because of the size of the text corpus and the priorities of this study, the first classificatory genre description and definition based on socio-literary considerations, the analysis has to be limited to mainly systematic and macrostructural aspects. For this, speech-act theory has been applied as a model for the principal connection between textual procedures and non-textual components, although a complete analysis according to the criteria of speech-act theory is not possible for each individual text. Similarly, investigations of linguistic style, an important area on which little research