'The Steam Arm':
Proto-Steampunk Themes in a Victorian Popular Song

Kirstie Blair
(University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK)

Abstract:
This article introduces an early Victorian popular song, with some preliminary reflections on how it, and indeed similar texts, might be relevant to twentieth and twenty-first century practitioners and critics of steampunk. 'The Steam Arm' describes a veteran who acquires a prosthetic limb, with disastrous consequences. As a text from the start of the 'steam age', it reveals the fantasies and anxieties surrounding technological progress in early Victorian literature.

Keywords: music-hall, prosthesis, proto-steampunk, song, steam, steampunk, technology

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'The Steam Arm' (transcribed in full below) is an anonymous ballad that appears to date from just before Victoria's accession to the throne. It relates the story, in the third person, of a one-armed Waterloo veteran, beaten by his "arrant scold" of a wife, who determines to get even with her by replacing his lost arm with a mechanical steam-powered limb. The prosthetic arm is successfully grafted on to his stump, but once in action, it turns out to be too successful, not only striking down his wife, but the police who come to arrest him, the mayor who tries him, and the walls of the cell in which he is imprisoned. In the second-to-last stanza the hero attempts to return home and take his wife in his arms, but as his steam arm "smash'd the crockery ware", its incompatibility with love and domesticity is apparent. The soldier is finally doomed to remain alienated from all society, a haunting figure wandering "like a sprite", while "his arm keeps moving with two-horse might".

In attempting to define steampunk, one recent commenter in the online forum 'The Great Steampunk Debate 2010' argued that a common denominator is its evocation of "retrofuture": the future as imagined from a nineteenth-century standpoint (Steampunk Scholar 2010).[1] 'The Steam Arm' is an exciting text for steampunk enthusiasts, because it seems to justify steampunk retrofutures, to give them historical credibility. That is, the song's fantasy about the powers of technology demonstrates that its unknown nineteenth-century author, as well as the many performers and

readers who assisted its circulation and survival, imagined imminent technological advances in formulations that share much in common with those of twenty-first century enthusiasts of Victorian technology. In this brief article, I provide some historical context and background for 'The Steam Arm', but also offer a preliminary reading of the text through the lens of recent commentaries on steampunk.

Rebecca Onion's detailed examination of steampunk's relationship to technology argues that steampunk longs to return to an age when machines were "visible, human, fallible" and when man and machine collaborated (Onion 2008: 145, 147). As Onion notes, the most intimate examples of this collaboration, in steampunk texts and artefacts, often lie in cyborgs or prosthetic limbs. Edward Steam, the power-hungry, part-mechanised father in Katsuhiro Otomo's film *Steamboy* (2004), provides a key instance, while various websites attest to steampunk interest in the actual creation of steam-powered limbs.[2] Steampunk texts such as *Steamboy* frequently focus on how human and technological interactions tend to spiral out of control, as the relationship between man and machine becomes unbalanced. As Lavie Tidhar's 2005 survey of the steampunk genre suggests:

> What steampunk narratives repeat again and again is the inevitability of the loss of control, as technology evolves beyond the confines of one person, assuming a mythical force that shapes and controls narrative causality. (Tidhar 2005)

'The Steam Arm' suggests that this narrative, as well as the fascination with human and technological interactions, has a long history. As the song progresses, the arm, rather than the veteran, starts to become the subject of the verbs, and in "Down fell the walls and out popp'd the arm", nine verses in, he appears to have disappeared completely, his desired narrative (to restore his dominant status in his marriage) subjected to the shaping force of the steam arm. 'The Steam Arm' thus nicely indicates that the trope identified by Tidhar is not only visible in contemporary steampunk culture but was also prevalent in popular Victorian culture, decades before the advent of Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, R. L. Stevenson, and modern science fiction.

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If the steam arm in the song is dangerous and threatening, however, there is also clearly an exciting and indeed celebratory element to this surrender of control. The pseudonymous 'Professor Calamity' has provided an influential definition of "authentic steampunk" on his blog, emphasising that steampunk accepts the fallibility of machines and the chaos they might cause as liberating:

> The machine has become liberated from efficiency and designed by desire and dreams. […] Imperfection, chaos, chance and obsolence [sic] are not to be seen as faults but as ways of allowing spontaneous liberation from predictable perfection. (Professor Calamity 2004)

The protagonist of 'The Steam Arm', who seeks to use steam power for domestic, personal ends rather than viewing it as an agent of efficient industrial production, arguably thus liberates both the machine and himself. As the steam arm knocks down policemen, shakes its fist at the mayor and destroys the trappings of domesticity, it might be read as expressing the subconscious, rebellious desires of a veteran who, on the surface, was content with the "shilling a day" pension he received for his military service, but was evidently left unable to fulfil the desirable role of a strong husband. The seventh verse relates his return home with his new arm:

> He started home and knocked at the door
> His wife her abuse began to pour;
> He turn'd a small peg, and before
> He'd time to think, she fell on the floor.

"[B]efore/ He'd time to think" clearly implies that knocking his wife down was not the soldier's willed intent, and the detail of the "small" peg seems to emphasise that the arm's response was disproportionate to his expectations. Yet the earlier suggestion that his wife used to "bang him left and right" and that he sought a prosthetic arm "out of spite", plus the fact that she greets his (triumphant) return with a torrent of abuse, suggests that the arm simply acts out his desired revenge.

One of the best lines in 'The Steam Arm' is the slyly ambiguous statement of the soldier's hope "that force of arms would win [his wife's]

esteem", soon to become comically and horrifyingly ironic. The protagonist's veteran status is crucial in that it allows for the central pun on 'arm' as weapon. As J. S. Bratton's survey of Victorian popular songs observes, many songs focused on similar puns: "By puns, plays on words, and particularly by the device of taking literally abstract or metaphorical turns of phrase, the imagination is freed into a world where the fantastic and the physical are comically combined" (Bratton 1975: 182). 'The Steam Arm' provides a classic illustration of this tendency. "Force of arms" hints at the soldier's military past, but his final words – "Come to my arms, my dear" – suggest that the force he intended was romantic and sexual rather than straightforwardly violent. Yet due to his former career, his artificial limb inevitably destroys all it touches:

> With policemen soon his room was fill'd,
> But every one he nearly killed;
> For the soldier's arm had been so drill'd,
> That once in action, it couldn't be still'd.

Even before he obtains the steam arm, this verse implies, the veteran was subject to mechanical bodily actions instilled by long habit. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, in his seminal work on the Victorian railway, includes a brief assessment of the mechanisation of the modern military force: "[I]n the creation of the modern military, there was a mechanization of the 'human material' analogous to the mechanization in the more or less simultaneously emerging process of mass manufacture" (Schivelbusch 1986: 153). He then goes on to suggest that it was the army that provided an initial model for the conditioning of the subject by technology:

> In the modern army individuals are for the first time mechanized, or even subsumed, into an organizational scheme that is completely abstract and exterior to them. In the further history of the modern age, this condition becomes increasingly common in all spheres of life. (Schivelbusch 1986: 160)

As a soldier, this suggests, the protagonist of 'The Steam Arm' is already subject to the forces of mechanisation. The prosthetic arm is simply a literal

embodiment of his position as an agent designed for mechanical violence. But rather than being a docile subject, of course, the soldier destroys and confounds (in an unspoken pun) the arm of the law. There is a pleasurable irony here – perhaps particularly for a working-class audience, for whom soldiery might have been one of few available career options – in that the soldier's arm is now a force of anarchy, seemingly bent on destroying the social order, if ultimately excluded from it.

Located at the start of what would become known as the Victorian age, the soldier in 'The Steam Arm' might represent the advent of the modern subject, shaped by technological forces beyond his control. The song's dating to this period, the mid-1830s, cannot be precise, but besides the fact that this was the decade when steam power made a major impact on daily life, via the development of railways, the earliest copies in major collections date from this time. 'The Steam Arm' features in Roy Palmer's facsimile reproduction of the broadsheets published by Thomas Ford of Chesterfield in the 1830s, and it appears in songsters – cheap booklets of song lyrics, usually sold for one or two pennies – from Newcastle and Glasgow around the same period (Palmer 2001: 9A; *The Welch Harper*, *The Merryman Songster*). The Newcastle songster, *The Welch Harper*, contains an internal reference to events of 1835. The ballad collection at the Bodleian Library contains at least five copies of 'The Steam Arm' in song sheets estimated to date from 1819 to 1844.[3]

Initially, then, 'The Steam Arm' would have been one of the ballads hawked on the streets by patterers, printed on broadsheets or in songsters, and intended to be sung in informal public venues – pleasure gardens, song-and-supper places, taverns – or in the domestic circle (Bratton 1975: 28). An intriguing point here is that selling broadsheets and songsters in the street was one of few jobs available for lower-class men unable to engage in manual labour, including wounded veterans – we might recall Dickens's one-legged Silas Wegg in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), who sells "halfpenny ballads" among his other commodities (Dickens 1989: 44). If the song were sung in the streets to attract customers, the singer might well have had an affinity to the protagonist. 'The Steam Arm' evidently survived into the 1860s, the era when the music-halls began to dominate popular entertainment and dictate the popularity of songs, as it is reprinted in *The Billy-Cock Hat*, one of a series of London songsters dated by internal evidence to the early-mid 1860s. Like most reasonably successful Victorian

songs, it also crossed the Atlantic. Three undated song sheets of 'The Steam Arm' can be viewed on the Library of Congress site 'America Singing: Nineteenth-Century Song Sheets', one of which contains a rare illustration of the song, depicting the hero standing in a triumphant position, steam arm upraised, having just knocked down the mayor.[4]

Most popular nineteenth-century songs were endlessly reprinted, and despite these instances 'The Steam Arm' actually has, comparatively speaking, a relatively slender presence. Songsters were named after the most popular song in the collection, and 'The Steam Arm' does not headline any of these booklets or feature as a named song on the front cover. The fact that, in this relatively small sample, there are more incidences of its occurrence on broadsheets and in songsters dating roughly from the 1830s-1840s might suggest that its popularity waned around mid-century, as the music-hall began to predominate. Certainly, compared to the 'swell' songs of the 1860s and onwards, the third-person narrative and form of 'The Steam Arm' seem dated. Music-hall performers and audiences valued props and costumes, and it would also presumably have been difficult to enact the song fully on stage. Yet it was still familiar enough in 1850 to be alluded to in the opening lines of 'The Fast Man', written and performed by the popular dramatist W.T. Moncrieff:

> Of the Dutchman's fast Cork Leg they've told,
> And the Fast Steam Arm of the Soldier bold –
> But a story now I will unfold
> Of a faster than either these heroes old!
> (Moncrieff 1850: 187)

Moncrieff could assume that a mid-century audience would know the songs he refers to, and would get his pun on 'fast', meaning both speedy and badly behaved.

This association of 'The Steam Arm' with 'The Cork Leg' is important; possibly the former was written to capitalise on the success of the latter, as an updating of an older song with modern technology. The two songs share a common form and chorus, and may well have been sung to the same traditional tune. 'The Cork Leg' also features a prosthetic limb that cannot be stopped: a wealthy Dutch merchant, who breaks his leg after kicking a poor relation out of the door, buys the finest cork leg available and

has it fixed on as tightly as possible, but when he starts walking the leg keeps on going and he cannot stop. The ballad ends with the sinister image of "A skeleton on a cork leg tight", a picture which served as cover illustration and advertisement for at least one songster (*The Cork Leg Songster*). In some versions, but not all, the cork leg is partially steam-powered:

> An artist in Rotterdam, 'twould seem,
> Had made cork legs his study and theme;
> Each joint was strong as an iron beam,
> The springs a compound of clockwork and steam.
> (*The Cork Leg Songster*, n.d.)

Yet this reference to steam is casual, and is not explicitly given as a reason for the cork leg's malfunctioning. 'The Cork Leg' is fundamentally a tale of a rich man gaining his comeuppance. In contrast, the protagonist in 'The Steam Arm' is relatively poor, the same social class as the intended audience and pre-figures the socially marginalised or exploited heroes turned anti-authoritarian subversives that feature in much of today's steampunk. 'The Steam Arm' also differs from 'The Cork Leg' in adding the comic elements of the henpecked husband and his brushes with authority, creating a more sympathetic central character and a more complex situation.

Asa Briggs, in *The Power of Steam*, briefly mentions 'The Steam Arm' as part of a "sub-culture of popular comic songs" about steam, suggesting that 'The Steam Arm' was either part of, or indeed helped to create, its own genre (Briggs 1982: 170). A significant later song in this respect would be the very well-known and frequently recorded American folksong 'John Henry, the Steel-Driving Man', generally assumed to date from the late nineteenth century. In contrast to 'The Steam Arm', however, it chronicles the bittersweet triumph of man over machine, as Henry successfully challenges a steam drill with his hammering but dies of his efforts; it is also perhaps more a song designed to accompany labour than one designed to be performed for an audience.

Jake von Slatt has offered an influential definition of steampunk as standing at "the intersection of technology and romance" (qtd. in La Ferla 2008). While the narrative of 'The Steam Arm' evidently relates to this in

its focus on the quasi-magical powers of steam (note how the steam arm grows "more and more" in power, as it becomes more destructive), it is also important that the song itself, as artefact, stands at the intersection of musical and cultural traditions. 'The Steam Arm's' narrative format and form, in four-beat lines and four-line stanzas, mark it as a more or less traditional ballad. Yet the repetitive beats common to this form also stand for the industrialised repetitive action of the steam arm:

> The arm going like an auctioneer's hammer;
> It fell in weight like a paviour's rammer,
> And many with fear began to stammer.

This stanza is the only one to end its lines with an extra unstressed beat, a variation which, in running on the line beyond its usual end, might add to the sense that the arm is unstoppable. Modern technology intrudes into an older form of popular entertainment. The same is true of the song's publishing history. Its preservation (in exactly the same format) across many different sources speaks to the modern technologies of mass reproduction and cheaper printing techniques that enabled this fantasy scenario of technological triumph to circulate throughout the UK and US.

'The Steam Arm' fuses the desires and fears surrounding new technology with a relatively sophisticated social and political context. In doing so, it anticipates the themes of steampunk literature from almost two centuries later, including but not limited to the desire for more intimate forms of technology, the related delight in malfunctionings, chaos and disorder, and the key question of whether technology works (or ought to work) for or against both individual and state. It also justifies the neo-Victorian bent of such literature, by indicating the contiguity of fantasy steampunk Victorian futures with popular Victorian fantasies. As a text from a relatively unstudied genre, and from the early Victorian period rather than its close, it suggests that steampunk enthusiasts might find much of interest and inspiration in as yet undiscovered Victorian sources.

Transcript
From *The Billy-Cock Hat, New Comic Song, Singing Nightly with Applause and also the following Popular Songs* (London: P. Macdonald, n.d. [1860-1863]). Bodleian Library, Harding A777 (1).

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THE STEAM ARM
Oh! Wonders sure will never cease,
While works of art do so increase;
No matter whether in war or peace,
Men can do whatever they please.
Ri too ral, etc

A curious tale I will unfold
To all of you, as I was told,
About a soldier stout and bold,
Whose wife, 'tis said, was an arrant scold.

At Waterloo he lost an arm,
Which gave him pain and great alarm;
But he soon got well, and grew quite calm,
For a shilling a day was a sort o' balm.

The story goes, on every night
His wife would bang him left and right;
So he determined, out of spite,
To have an arm, cost what it might.

He went at once, strange it may seem,
To have one made to work by steam,
For a ray of hope began to gleam,
That force of arms would win her esteem.

The limb was finished, and fixed unto
His stump of a shoulder neat and true;
You'd have thought it there by nature grew,
For it stuck to its place as tight as glue.

He started home and knocked at the door,
His wife her abuse began to pour;
He turn'd a small peg, and before
He'd time to think, she fell on the floor.

With policemen soon his room was fill'd,
But every one he nearly killed;
For the soldier's arm had been so drill'd,
That once in action, it couldn't be still'd.

They took him, at length, before the mayor,
His arm kept moving all the while there;
The mayor said 'Shake your fist if you dare,'
When the steam arm knocked him out of the chair.

This rais'd in court a bit of clamour,
The arm going like an auctioneer's hammer;
It fell in weight like a paviour's rammer,
And many with fear began to stammer.

He was lock'd in a cell for doing harm,
To satisfy those who had still a qualm,
When all at once they heard an alarm,
Down fell the walls and out popp'd the arm.

He soon escap'd and reach'd his door,
And knock'd by steam raps half a score;
But as the arm in power grew more and more,
Bricks, mortar and wood soon strew'd the floor.

With eagerness he stepp'd each stair,
Popp'd into the room – his wife was there;
'Oh! Come to my arms', he said, 'my dear';
When his steamer smash'd the crockery ware.

He left his house, at length, outright,
And wanders now just like a sprite;
For he can't get sleep either day or night,
And his arm keeps moving with two-horse might.

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Notes

1. Editors' note: 'Steampunk Scholar' is the *nom de blog* of Mike Perschon, whose essay on 'Steam Wars' appears in this issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*.
2. For examples, see Page 2007 and 'Steam Armatron' (n.d.).
3. Catalogue references and images can be seen at the Bodleian Library's Broadside Ballad catalogue, at
    http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/ballads/ballads.htm.
4. Search using the keywords 'steam arm' at *America Singing: Nineteenth-Century Song Sheets*, (22 Oct. 1999), accessed 14 May 2010,
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