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The Broadside Ballad and the Woman's Voice

Sandra Clark

Despite a common view that the appeal of early modern street literature was to a predominantly male audience, there is ample evidence that the broadside ballad had a particular appeal for women. Any account of its reception history would notice the many references in the period to the popularity of ballad-singing with young women. In the eighteenth century it is claimed that most professional ballad-singers were women but in the seventeenth century, though a woman pedlar sometimes helped a male partner to sell ballads, there are only a few names of women actually known to have sung publicly before the Restoration. One example is that of the wife of one William Nynges, who was ordered, with her husband, 'not to singe Ballades nor to sell either Ballades or Alminackes in the market'. Another is Nan Sharpe, a ballad singer referred to in *Merlinus Anonymus* 1653, about whom nothing more is known. The traditional or folk-ballad was commonly transmitted through women's singing, there are many references in the seventeenth century to women in domestic situations singing ballads of all kinds and there is a strong tradition of female transmission from early times up to the nineteenth century. The histories of the traditional and the broadside ballad are closely interconnected, and it would be misleading to regard them as completely separate genres, even if their origins might appear to be antithetical. Singing, like story-telling, is very much a woman's act in the early modern period, and the ballad, though produced as a printed object available to be read, was sold to an audience by a singer, and circulated as much by singing as by reading.

But ballads can be said to be more directly expressive of the woman's voice through textual means. Increasingly in the course of the seventeenth century ballads are addressed to particular groups, or target audiences, rather than, as earlier, being formulated towards a collective audience. Many seventeenth century ballads are specifically addressed to women, especially where the subject (marriage, relations between the sexes, gossip, confessions of criminal women) has gender-related interest; and many are written from a woman's perspective, often with first-person delivery, though this need not mean, of course, that such a speaker represents women's interests. But it is also worth remembering that a 'woman's voice' need not be directly presented, but can be mediated through a gender-neutral perspective which shows sympathy to women. There is no evidence to refute the general assumption that the writers of the ballads were all male; certainly the names of the known writers are men's, though a very high proportion of all known ballads (including those non-extant) are anonymous. The ballads were delivered mostly by male singers but this is an age when male presentation of female roles onstage was an accepted convention, and an element of virtuosity in the transvestite performer expected. It is sometimes assumed that only one singer delivered the ballad, but many dialogue

ballads seem to call for a second performer, and it is tempting to wonder if this second performer might not sometimes, as in the case of William Nynges's wife, have been a woman. Travelling ballad-mongers, who sold broadsides along with other wares, may not necessarily have been skilled singers, of course; but nonetheless, the dramatic and performative aspect of the street-ballad separates it generically from other printed materials, and constitutes an important part of its unique role, situated as it is on the boundaries between the oral and the written, and between commercial transaction and free circulation. It was also the cheapest, most accessible, and most widely available form of print, produced in enormous quantities from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. Like many cultural productions of the 'small' tradition it was consumed at all levels of society. Because it was delivered to its first audiences in public spaces such as marketplaces, alehouses, playhouse entrances, the ballad was equally available to women and to men listeners. The presentation had to be such as to attract a wide audience, and no doubt the skills of the presenter may, at least initially, have counted for as much as those of the writer and the appeal of the material. The opportunity for an audience to contribute to the performance, by joining in with the refrain, increased the ballad's appeal, and enhanced its role as a vehicle of communal feeling.

The street-ballad genre has been interestingly related to the pamphlet debate on gender by Diane Purkiss in 'Material Girls: the Seventeenth-Century Woman Debate'. She makes a fascinating and plausible case for its importance as one of the generic origins of Swetnam's pamphlet, and a source for the formation of his speaking-position. But in her (very proper) concern to forge links between Swetnam's discourses of misogyny and those in the ballads, I believe she under-represents the range of positions on gender roles in the ballads, as well as making no allowance for the kinds of factors I have been discussing. Recent social historians of the early modern period have drawn on ballad materials to correct what they regard as an over-emphasis by historians on patriarchal oppression as the prime constituent of early modern gender relations. And there are in fact connections which can be made between these ballads and the Swetnam debate, where analogies for the kinds of proto-feminist position taken by Sowerham and Speght can be easily found in the ballads, as will, I hope, emerge in my later discussion. For instance, the Joan Sharp poem which concludes *Ester hath hang'd Haman* takes the view that men's hypocritical and self-interested attitudes towards women's sexuality condition women's behaviour:

If you ask how it happens some women prove naught:
By men turned to serpents they are over-wrought.
What the serpent began, men follow that still:
They tempt what they may to make women do ill.
...
It proves a bad nature in men doth remain,
To make women lewd their purses they strain.

For a woman that's honest they care not a whit:
They'll say she is honest because she lacks wit.
They'll call women whores, butt their stakes they might save –
There can be no whore but there must be a knave.

The conclusion is that neither sex is blameless but that the sexual misdemeanours of which Swetnam and his fellow misogynists accuse women are largely the result of cultural conditioning whereby women's interests and values are constructed and determined by those of men. Speght in *A Muzzle for Melastomus* also takes a position of compromise, acknowledging the need for both spouses to make adjustments if the marriage is to succeed as a partnership. She writes that 'as yoke-fellows they are to sustain part of each other's cares, griefs and calamities'; the husband, as 'the stronger vessel' should bear 'a greater burden' than the wife, but even so he should not regard his status as head of the household in too absolute a sense:

Thus if men would remember the duties they are to perform in being heads, some would not stand a tip-toe as they do, thinking themselves lords and rulers, and account every omission of performing whatsoever they command – whether lawful or not – to be matter of great disparagement and indignity done them. Whereas they should consider that women are enjoined to submit themselves unto their husbands no other ways than as to the Lord (Shepherd, p. 72).

The majority of writers who discuss gender relations in popular literature tend to class ballads with pamphlets and domestic drama as primarily concerned with the enforcement of male social and sexual control over women as right, and, pre-eminently, natural. Probably this is the initial impression to be gained from any broad consideration of the content of ballads. But I would like to suggest that this impression can be nuanced, and that in content as well as form there is not only good evidence of an alternative voice, but also, as in the medieval and Tudor antecedents of the street ballad described by F. L. Utley in *The Crooked Rib*, the potential for satire at the expense of male values. I am not sure that I would go as far here as F. O. Waage, who has identified a 'strong tendency in all social ballads to vindicate covertly their women', but for all ballads about shrews, scolds and cuckoldry, with titles like 'The Cruell Shrow', 'The Cucking of a Scold', 'The Cuckolds Lamentation', 'The Essex Man cozened by a Whore', 'My Wife will be my Master', it is possible to cite an equally extensive selection differently inflected: 'The Married-womans Case', 'The Patient Wife betrayed', 'The Carefull Wife's Good Counsel', 'The Married Wives Complaint', 'A Womans Work is Never Done'. Martin Parker and others wrote paired ballads, setting out antithetical views on the same subject, for example, 'The Married Womans Case' and 'The Married Mans Case' (lost), 'A Fairing for Maids' and 'A Fairing for Young-Men', 'Keep a Good Tongue in Your Heads' and 'Hold Your Hands, Honest Men',

'The Wiving Age' and 'The Cunning Age' It is evident that there was a demand for ballads that appealed distinctively to women, with an appeal capable of being heightened in performance.

To illustrate the nature of the ballads' appeal for women, and the textual strategies by which it is organised, I might have chosen from several groups of ballads, particularly those concerned with witty maids, or with women's gossip; but in order to make a link with the pamphlet debate, I have restricted my discussion to ballads on marriage. The ballads share many of the positive views of marriage expressed in the Swetman response pamphlets, but they differ substantially on some aspects. Generally, their overall view of marriage is much less idealised and more negative, and the textual and performative strategies enable a plurality of perspectives unavailable to the pamphleteers. The ballads constitute an interesting forum for debating marriage; the range of viewpoints is wider than those who think the genre to be dominated by the interests of the patriarchy might allow, and the dramatic potential of the ballads' presentation in the public forum creates the chance for comic performers to challenge or subvert their texts as well as to express them directly. Tessa Watts notes a libel investigation in 1584 which records an apparently standardised ballad with individual names of local people inserted. Not all ballads are comic, and the presenter has many roles, some of them didactic. Especially in ballads with terms like 'counsel' 'lesson', or 'warning' in their titles, s/he may be an authoritative figure, instructing the audience. Many ballads afford no opportunities for irony or satire in delivery, but instead aim to inculcate moral values and offer guidance on conduct in the manner of the marriage manuals, or the pamphlets of Speght or Sowernam. For example, in 'The Married Man's Lesson, Or A Disswasion from Jealousie' (*RB* 3, pp. 231-3), the presenter gathers his audience to offer them counsel - 'You men who are marri'd, come hearken to me'; his subject is happy marriage, and he advocates an open, tolerant attitude, and an acceptance of human weakness as the prime factors in creating it:

A wife that's indifferent - betweene good and ill -
Is shee that in huswifery shewes her good will,-
Yet sometimes her voyce shee too much elevates;
Is that the occasion for which her hee hates?
A soveraigne remedy for this disease
Is to hold thy tongue; [then] let her say what shee please:
Judge! is not this better th[a]n to fight and [to] scratch?
For silence will soonest a shrew overmatch.

The last verse is addressed to both sexes:

Now, lastly to both men and women I speake. . .
Bee loving and tractable each unto other,
And what is amisse let affection still smother.

'The Carefull Wifes Good Counsel' (*RB* 3, pp 478-80), as its title suggests, is another ballad of advice, largely delivered in the wife's voice. She is characterised in the title and through her refrain, 'Save something for a rainy day'. She urges her spendthrift husband to consider that the companions with whom he spends his time in preference to her will desert him when his money runs out: "The hostess she will flout at thee" and "Your jovial boon-companions, too/ Will likewise take their leave of you". In the last three stanzas the husband responds, and he accepts his wife's advice, picking up her refrain: "Thy words have so prevail'd on me;/ No longer will I run astray,/But think upon a rainy day." Thrifty husbandry is a traditional attribute of a good wife, and the ability to redeem a wastrel husband proverbial.

A *Fairing for Maids*' (*RB* 8, pp 676-78) takes a different line; it consists of the advice of a woman offered as a present to women contemplating marriage. In a simple proverbial style the presenter makes caveats about hasty marriage and fortune-seeking husbands. Marriage is viewed as a risky undertaking for a woman; the refrain goes, 'For when you are bound, then you needs must obey.' The single life is praised, in terms that challenge the notion that the early modern unmarried woman's identity was constructed through patriarchal constraint. Marriage is seen as a condition which a woman (and in the equivalent ballads, a man) is free to choose or reject. Even if this did not correspond with the economic reality of most women's lives, it was clearly a vision of a life which many imagined living. :

Whilst you are single, there's none to curb you:
Go to bed quietly and take your ease.
Early or late there's none to disturb you
Walk abroad where you [will], and when you please.

Marriage is acceptable if the woman is lucky enough to find 'a constant youth', but this may not be easy. In such 'counsel' ballads the text does not lend itself to irony. They may well have been used for entertainment on communal occasions, such as weddings, where social values of the community at large are celebrated and confirmed.

Many marriage ballads take the form of a dialogue, which has origins in the medieval debate and the jig, where an element of dialectic between the viewpoints is inbuilt. Sometimes the debate is resolved by the capitulation of one party to the views of the other, as in 'A Pleasant New Ballad' (*PG* 36) or 'Robin and Kate; or, A bad husband converted by a good wife' (*RB* 2, pp. 413-18). In the first part of 'A Pleasant New Ballad' the wife abuses the husband for his inadequacies, and he attempts to mollify her; in the second, the roles are reversed. Each partner assumes an equally extreme position, the wife as Lady Pride, the husband as a despotic patriarch:

[*Wife:*] Nay, thou art not worthy to carry my Fan,
I will be supplied by a properer man:

And wee'l haue our Coach & horse to ride at pleasure
And thou shalt ride by on foot, and wait our leisure.

[*Husband:*] Dame Ile make you know that I am your head,
And you shall be ready at board , or in bed,
To giue me content, or else be sure of this,
Both gowne and lace, horse and Coach all you shall misse.

In the end the wife gives in and they are reconciled. The husband gets the last verse: 'Why that's a good Wench, now come kisse & be friends / Put out all the Candles Ile make thee amends.' In 'Robin and Kate' the partners are less antagonistic; Robin wants to live as a prodigal and a free man, enjoying the pleasures of male company in the alehouse, while Kate begs him to stay at home with her and not waste their money. She is characterised as loving and affectionate, never losing her temper or showing impatience: 'I prethee, my joy, doe not take at the worst/ The words that I speake in the heat of affection'. She insists that she has no desire to overrule or control him, as he accuses her of doing: 'Alas! my deare Luif, thou mistakest me much,/ I do not command thee, that's not my intention,/ For my humble duty unto thee is such/ that one word of anger to thee Ile not mention.' Finally, he is persuaded and agrees to stay at home: 'Now all my delight in thy bosom shall dwell.' Undeniably, the tone and linguistic structures of this ballad create possibilities for irony. A male singer could easily subvert Kate's protestations in his delivery, using her voice to express a theatrical notion of 'woman' as a role, and thus endorsing misogyny. But equally, the verses could be sung so as to support the viewpoint they express; and a reader, or non-professional performer, would be more likely to interpret the ballad in this way. A debate structure is implicit in 'The Woman to the Plow, And the Man to the Hen-Roost' (*RB* 7, pp. 185-9), in which the presenter addresses himself to both sexes ('Both Men and Women, listen well. . .') and narrates an account of a couple who exchange domestic chores. Each fails in the other's tasks. The man's ineptitude is no less than the woman's, and there is no implication that her household duties are the easier:

Nothing that he in hand did take
Did come to good; once he did bake,
And burnt the bread as black as a stock;
Another time he went to rock
The cradle, and threw the child i'th' floor,
And broke his nose, and hurt it sore.

The solution is a return to the status quo, given as a recipe for conjugal contentment:

Take heed of this, you Husband-men,
Let Wives alone to grope the hen,
And meddle you with the horse and ox,

And keep your lambs safe from the fox.
So shall you live Contented lives
And take sweet pleasure in your Wives.

Such poems as this show ballad-writers as concerned to address women's interests as men's, and to reinforce the values of companionate marriage as a working partnership. That husbands and wives have different perspectives, but of equal emotional weight, is acknowledged in pairs of ballads, linked by content, format, and sometimes tune, like 'Hold your Hands, Honest Men' (*RB* 3, pp. 243-4), and 'Keep a Good Tongue in Your head' (*RB* 3, pp. 237-42), or 'The Cuckold's Complaint' (*RB* 7 431) and 'The Scolding Wives Vindication' (*RB* 7 pp 194-7). Wurzbach notes that the answer-ballad was a 'common literary procedure' in the seventeenth century, and also an advertising technique. A ballad which had proved itself popular would be followed by another designed to imitate or reply to it, and the sales of both would be boosted. She suggests that the procedure constitutes 'a kind of discussion forum'. In 'Keep a Good Tongue in your head' the husband describes the wife's many virtues; she is beautiful and fecund, a good needle-woman and weaver, controls her servants efficiently and is witty on appropriate occasions: 'With eloquence she will dispute; /Few women can her confute'. But, as the refrain insists, 'she cannot hold her tongue'. In 'Hold your Hands, Honest Men' the wife extols her husband, who is tall, handsome, active, athletic, learned, and well-travelled, but likewise has a single defect:

I have as compleat a man
As any poor woman can;
He makes my heart to leap
His company to keepe
It comforts me now and than:
There's few exercises
That man enterprises
But he well understands;
Yet, like a dart,
He wounds my heart;
I, for my part,
Must bear the smart;
For he cannot rule his hands.

The short lines, regular rhyme scheme, and emphatic refrain help to create a light mood, and in both ballads there is scope for comic delivery through the characterisation of the first-person narrator, and for possible irony in the account of the spouse's virtues; but at face value they problematise the issue of marital violence, whether verbal or physical, and present it for reflection. Neither poem singly offers a solution to the problem it describes; but taken together as companion poems they may imply the possibility of a solution in compromise.

'The Cuckolds Complaint, or, The Turbulent Wife's Severe Cruelty' (*RB* 7 p 431),

presented by the husband, is in two parts; the first stresses how the wife's unreasonable behaviour obliges the husband to take over the most intimate of her domestic duties:

I am forced to wash her Smock, and the Child's s[odd]en clouts also;
Though I sit up till Twelve a clock: a Curse of a cruel Shrow!

But the second, with changed refrain, 'The world is turn'd upside down', describes his previous life as a reveller and man of means, and his regret that he has lost it. A skilled performer could exploit the disjunction between the two parts to mock or satirise the narrator's complaint; in the light of part two, the complaint of part one stems from something other than female disorderliness. 'The Scolding Wife's Vindication' again locates the cause for the wife's behaviour in the husband, and takes as its theme the idea that the husband's sexual inertia drives the wife to excessive behaviour. The refrain consists of variations on the line 'he nothing at all would do'. She describes the frustrations of her condition; she is 'a Buxome Dame' in her 'blooming Prime' which she fears will pass without fruition; she has made strenuous efforts to arouse her husband with amorous activity and aphrodisiac foods ('I feasted him e'ery day,/ With Lamb-stones, and Cock-broths too. . . /I fed him with Jelly of Chicks,/ And curious Egg-Caudles too'), but notwithstanding, 'He lyes like a lump of Clay'. Perhaps there is some implicit irony at the expense of the sexually demanding woman, but taken directly, this ballad invites sympathy for the woman's situation, and offers a female perspective on cuckoldry, one of the commonest topics in marital ballads.

Predictably, most cuckoldry ballads are presented by a male narrator or offered from a male viewpoint. The list of titles is large. Many treat masculine failure in the sexual arena mockingly; the cuckold is an absurd, comic figure who has failed as a man. The best that can be said for him is that his situation is universal, and not worth lamenting. In 'A Catalogue of Contented Cuckolds; Or, A Loving society of Confessing Brethren of the Forked Order' (*RB* 3 pp 481-3) a series of tradesman - brewer, baker, cook, tailor, turner, and so forth - meeting in a tavern, in turn describe their situation to the refrain 'yet I swear by this glass of sparkling wine / I will now be contented, and never repine'. In 'My Wife will be my Master' (*RB* 7 pp. 188-9)), set to a tune with the suggestive title, 'A taylor is no man', however, the husband, who presents the ballad, is intimidated and effeminate; his inability to cope with a masterful wife, who spends her time like a man, drinking in taverns, makes him a figure of fun:

And when I am with her in bed, she doth not use me well, Sir;
She'l wring my nose, and pull my ears, a pitiful tale to tell, Sir.
And when I am with her in bed, not meaning to molest her,
She'l kick me out at her beds-feet, and so become my Master.

He admits to his own helplessness:

But if I were a lusty man, and able for to baste her,
The would I surely use a means, that she should not be my master.

In 'Rock the Cradle, John' (*RB* 7, pp 162-4), and 'The Taylor's Lamentation' (*RB* 7, p474) the cuckolded husbands are responsible for their own predicaments; but the docile husband in 'Rock the Cradle, John', an unusually accomplished ballad, by Martin Parker, which has exceptional rhythmic and narrative complexity, is treated in an equivocal tone, which balances sympathy for a man who makes the best of a bad job with mockery of his effeminate doting. When his wife gives birth to another man's child a month after their wedding, the midwife jeers at the husband's efforts to claim the child for himself; but the semi-dramatic mode of this ballad, which offsets direct speech from three characters against a cynical narrative commentary, allows for the possibility of the husband's response to his situation being treated with some respect:

'See here the boy is like the Dad, which well may make your heart ful glad,
Cheer up your selfe and be not sad, for that which here is done:
His ruby lips doe plaine disclose, his cherry cheekes and dad's owne nose.'
'For twenty pound I will not lose,' quoth he, 'my little sonne'.
So well content this foole was found, he leapt for ioy above the ground.
'Old sorrow shall,' quoth he, be drown'd, since new are fresh begun,
Rocke the Cradle, Iog the cradle, thus Ile haue it knowne,
I loue to rock the Cradle, the children be mine owne'.

Disregarding its performative mode, ballad material such as this has been read from a clearly masculinist perspective as functioning to discourage female deviance and 'reaffirm the notion of woman as a sexual being'. But delivered to a mixed audience in a public arena, its effect could be quite other, even empowering women.

Unlike the domestic handbooks, the marriage ballads present marriage as a condition which is not necessarily beneficial to either sex. Those which depict the disadvantages it holds for women may be read from a twentieth century standpoint as exposing the oppressive nature of early modern patriarchal society, but it is important to recognise that in most of them this is done in a mode of female self-revelation, a mode which, in dramatic delivery, could make a strong appeal to women in the audience with similar experience. In the dialogue ballad 'The Cunning Age, OR A re-married Woman, repenting her marriage' (*PG* no. 42), a type of gossips' song and an answer by John Cart to Martin Parker's 'The Wiving Age', a re-married woman, a widow, and a young wife debate marriage. The re-married woman regrets her action and wishes she had remained a widow:

I marry'd a Boy, that now holds me in scorne,
He comes among Whoores both euening and morne,
While I sit at home like a creature forlorne.

The widow determines to take warning from this: 'With no Skip-iacke boy a match I will make;/Two `Sutors I haue, but I both will forsake.' At one point the two join together to address the young wife, who regrets her recent marriage, having been cheated by her husband; the unanimity of the speakers stresses their message:

Oh woe is me, Cousin, that euer 'twas done,
A beggarly slaue my affection hath wonne;
He brag'd of his riches, whereof he had none,
But fiue little Children, foure Girles, and a Sonne.

The penultimate stanza adopts a new textual stratagem, referring to the actual speech situation of the performance. The narrator, here the widow, points out that married women have been treated misogynistically by the ballad community, and speaks out on their behalf:

Nay more, to abash vs, the Poets o'th'times
Doe blazon vs forth in their Ballads and Rimes,
With bitter inuectiue satyricall lines,
As though we had done some notorious crimes.
O this is a scandalous Age,
O this is a scandalous Age.

I would I the Poet could get in my clutches,
He were better write ballads against ye Arch-dutches;
There is one mad ballad that sorely vs touches,
The hetroclite Singer, that goes vpon Crutches,
Doth roare out the Wiuing Age,
Doth roare out the Wiuing Age.

Such self-referentiality, not uncommon in the ballad genre as a whole, though unusual in dramatic (as opposed to narrative or discursive) ballads, functions primarily as an advertising technique, staking a claim for ballads in the marketplace of print; but in this instance it also creates a speaking-position for the women it represents, defining a voice for them even if its force is mitigated by the comic mode. The disadvantages of marriage for women are acknowledged, both implicitly and explicitly, in ballads which depict widowhood as a powerful and economically privileged position, or celebrate the freedom of the single life. Again, the mood is predominantly comic or at least satirical, but in 'The Married Womans Case (*PB* no. 74) addressed to 'You Maidens all, that are willing to wed' the tone in which the woman narrator describes the miseries of her marriage to a man with venereal disease is without humour or satire:

A woman that to a whore-monger is wed
is in a most desperate case:
She scarce dares performe her duty in bed,
with one of condition so base:
For sometimes hee's bitten with *Turnbull*-street Fleas,
The Pox, or some other infectious disease;
And yet, to her perill, his mind she must please.

In 'A Woman's Work is never done' (*RB* 3, pp. 301-6), presented as a 'song for Maids to sing', in which the detailed first-person account of an exhausting daily routine attributes to the woman a considerable degree of self-consciousness, the tone and content are deliberately mundane, with no elements of irony, humour, word-play or verbal wit, even in the refrain line (variations on 'I'm sure a woman's work is never done'). The woman gives a detailed and strongly realistic account of her daily routine, listing her tasks: she must rise early, make the fire, prepare breakfast, send the children to school, make her husband's dinner, keep the fire going, and so on. At night she gets neither peace nor pleasure:

Then if my husband turns me to the wall,
Then my sucking childe will cry and brawl;
Six or seven times for the brest 'twill cry,
And then, I pray you judge, what rest take I.
And if at any time asleep I be,
Perchance my husband wakes, and then wakes me;
Then he does that to me which I cannot shun,
Yet I could wish that work were oftener done.

The refrain line at this point is the one significant variation. In the last verse she addresses herself to 'all you merry girdles that hear this ditty' and urges the advantages of the single life: 'you see that maids live more merrier lives/ Then do the best of married wives.' Except for the pleasure of successful dramatic impersonation by the singer, the appeal of this ballad seems restrictedly female. It elaborates on a specifically female condition, described without satire or celebration. The ballad bemoaning the married woman's lot from personal experience is not uncommon. In 'The married wives Complaint of her unkind husband' (*Douce* 2, 151b) and 'The Married wives complaint. OR, The Hasty Bride repents her bargain' (*Douce* 2, 144b) the wives tell similar stories of wastrel husbands, domestic violence, marriage portions squandered in the alehouse. Each praises the single life. The wife in 'The Married wives Complaint of her unkind Husband' recalls earlier happy times 'milking the Cows and making Hay':

When I did lead a single life
I had my pleasure euery day,
I neuer knew what belong'd to strife

But now I am bound I must obey.

Her counterpart in 'The Married wives complaint, OR, The Hasty Bride Repents her bargain' voices a similar complaint against men:

Trust not a Man Maids if you be wife
though neuer so well you do know him
And euery Damsell I will advize
no farther then she can throw him.

These ballads are explicitly addressed as advice to the unmarried ('all young Maids that are to wed'), but their appeal is to all women concerned with the state of matrimony. The viewpoint is gender-specific: marriage is likely to bring women more pain than pleasure, and it is not economically advantageous. Such ballads illustrates an extreme of the range of tone and attitude of which the genre was capable.

Ballads circulated freely, in larger numbers than any other form of print, and more often than not unlicensed by authority.. They express and explore communal values in a way which was unique in the period; and it is worth remembering that these are the social values of the non-elite, characteristically secular, pragmatic, and mundane. Ballads were commonly addressed to target-audiences, which frequently included women, and, probably more than any other contemporary genre, they were capable of addressing interests peculiar to non-elite women. What Wurzbach calls the 'receptive impression' created on an audience by a ballad-singer is distinctively different from the appeal of any other form of literature, and the directness of this appeal to women, as one target group, is worth consideration.

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