

Broadside Ballads from the Pepys Collection: A Selection of Texts, Approaches, and Recordings. Patricia Fumerton, ed.

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This volume continues the recent process of transformation in the accessibility of broadside ballads to researchers from all disciplines. It emerges directly from one of the engines of this transformation, the excellent online English Broadside Ballad Archive, headed by Patricia Fumerton at the University of California. *Broadside Ballads from the Pepys Collection*, edited by Fumerton, presents facsimiles of 155 songs, organized according to the original collector's own thematic categories ("Devotion and Morality," "Love Pleasant," and so on). The volume opens with eleven short introductory pieces, concisely discussing balladry in all its aspects. There are additional essays preceding the

chosen ballads in each of the thematic categories. There are also two CDs slipped neatly into the front and back covers of the book. These contain performances, mostly unaccompanied, of the opening verses from the majority of the featured ballads. All in all, this is quite an operation, presenting written work from eleven different authors and performances from twenty-five musicians.

There is no doubting the interest and value of the chosen material. Who could resist titles such as “A merry Ballad of a rich Maid that had 18 severall Suitors of severall Countries,” set to the tune of “Hoop do me no harme good man” (certainly Pepys couldn’t). There are stimulating texts here for scholars with interests in religion, politics, perceptions of the past, crime, courtship, marriage, sociability, humor, and seafaring. The introductory essays are all useful, and some of them are particularly stimulating. Gerald Egan’s piece on the significance of the distinctive black-letter type in which most ballads were published is a skillful presentation of the argument that this was both a font for the lower orders and a conveyor of nostalgia for more highly educated consumers. Paxton Hehmyer’s introduction to the “State and Times” ballads makes several interesting points, notably concerning the manner in which an old ballad, reissued in a new decade, could take on fresh meaning and set up resonances between different historical contexts.

It is also pleasing to hear the recordings alongside the texts. In most cases, the voices are untrained and the singing unaccompanied. Interestingly, this creates the impression that these were songs for everybody rather than the preserve of professional musicians. Modern listeners, familiar with multitrack recording and other sophisticated production techniques, may need to adjust their expectations, but it is interesting to be presented with this personal listening challenge. The male singer who performs “A wonderful Example of God Justice” (along with several other songs) has a voice that is particularly well suited to the material. And “Fraunncis new Jigge,” rendered in full as a minidrama with instrumental accompaniment, forms a thought-provoking contrast to the other recordings.

Certain aspects of this project are, however, more questionable. The ballads and recordings are, for example, already available on the fabulously useful EBBA website, and I did find myself wondering about the projected audience or readership for this volume. Fumerton’s preface, describing the book variously as “a teaching edition,” a “companion” to the website, and the “fairly formed brother” of “a wonderfully monstrous digital archive,” is never fully convincing on this point (xix–xxiii). It is also peculiar that almost all of the introductions to the thematic sections focus exclusively on the texts to the neglect of the woodcut pictures and the melodies. The earlier essays urge students and researchers to consider all aspects of these multimedia publications, but the message apparently falls off the cart during the journey from the start of the book to the end. Simone Chess makes a strong case for the importance of pictures in her first contribution, arguing that the recycling of images may have enabled them to “carry their own subtle meanings” (35). When she introduces the ballads on “Drinking and Good Fellowship,” however, the woodcuts go completely unnoticed (267–82). The tunes are similarly neglected in the thematic essays, despite Fumerton’s early warning about the

risk that we might “lose sight of the ballad as song” (xx), an expression that neatly, if accidentally, implies the dominance of seeing over hearing. It seems that the legacy of text-only scholarship is remarkably strong.

Lastly, it also appears inconsistent to emphasize the importance of the black-letter font but then to present the so-called facsimiles in modern lettering. This policy does, of course, make the ballads easier to read today but, in my experience, most students find that they can process black-letter print perfectly well if they work at it for an hour or so. Earlier scholars are criticized for publishing broadsides in a form that failed to reproduce “the important aesthetic ‘look’ of the ballads” (xx), and yet that look is absent here too.

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