

What Is a Ballad? Reading for Genre, Format, and Medium

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BALLADS have proved famously difficult to define, in part because of the work they have been asked to do to establish and justify the discipline of literary criticism. Their very commonness—appearing in all literary periods, cutting across distinctions between high and low culture—keeps us from seeing how they have functioned within the genre system and how they have been used to define the boundaries of literariness itself. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that ballads were crucial to the historical development of formal literary study. As Susan Stewart has shown, in the eighteenth century the ballad’s imaginary achronicity enabled the theorization of literary periods, while the “scandals” of ballad forgery helped produce consensus about the rules of authentication of literary texts.¹ In the nineteenth century, American scholar Francis James Child brought German philological methods to bear on the corpus of ballads that had been collected by British poets and aristocrats; his efforts to establish procedures for comparative ballad study played a significant role

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¹ See Susan Stewart, “Scandals of the Ballad,” in her *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 102–31.

in the professionalization of English. Child was the first to hold a Professorship of English at Harvard, as distinct from the Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory. His definitive, ten-volume collection of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, published between 1882 and 1898, made a powerful case for the importance of scholarly attention to vernacular literature. Not only are ballads pivotal to the historical origins of the discipline, but they also continue to shape literary critics' sense of their subject. In this essay I cycle through multiple definitions of the ballad in order to identify some of the roles that ballads have played in demarcating the proper objects of literary critical attention. My aim is not to arrive at a comprehensive definition of the ballad, but rather to show what kinds of reading become possible and what considerations of necessity get shifted to the margins when critics focus on genre, format, or medium—that is, when they think of the ballad primarily as a text, when they take print format into consideration, and when they broaden their sights to consider the role of print in a larger media ecology. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Wreck of the Hesperus" (1840) will help illustrate what literary critics stand to gain by understanding the relationship between print history and the history of poetic genres as dynamic rather than taxonomic, complicating the division of ballads into subgenres based on authenticity or literary aspiration. Broadening our gaze to take in the poem's publishing history and its swift remediation into musical and visual culture suggests that, in the nineteenth-century, the ballad did not signal nostalgia for a disappearing folk. Rather, it offered much-desired access to an emergent, multimedia mass culture.

I begin with the ballad-as-genre, or more precisely as a poetic and stanzaic form that usefully blurs the relationship between form and genre. In a brief essay distilling scholarly consensus on Anglo-American poetic genres for college students, Jon Stallworthy notes that ballads have a characteristic meter and stanzaic form: alternating 4- and 3-beat lines arranged in quatrains, most often rhymed in the second and fourth lines (*abcb*).² Three

² See Jon Stallworthy, "Versification," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, Fifth Edition, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005), p. 2041.

centuries of antiquarian recovery and scholarly editing of British ballads have produced a set of stylistic markers, most of which are supposed to make their appearance in any one poetic instance: ballads are narrative poems distinguished by their concision, episodic structure, objective or neutral tone, and dense patterns of repetition and refrain. At least since the pioneering, comparative scholarship of Child, who worked closely with Danish scholar Svend Grundtvig, ballads have been assumed to be modular, common to all European language traditions and literary cultures, and authentic emanations of folk sensibility more or less altered or degraded by the history of their transmission.³ Authentic or traditional ballads are, we are told, anonymous or collective works of art, primitive survivals of preliterate cultures that can rejuvenate a literature grown too effete, too ornamental, or too self-referential.⁴ In nations where a preliterate balladic culture does not exist (as in the United States), one needs to be invented—hence the extraordinary efforts of American ballad scholars such as Child to authenticate and stake a claim to British ballads as a kind of common property of Anglo-American letters,⁵ and the inclusion of Native American songs, chants, and tales at the beginning of anthologies of American Literature.⁶

³ For the history of nineteenth-century comparative ballad scholarship, see Sigurd Bernhard Hustvedt, *Ballad Books and Ballad Men: Raids and Rescues in Britain, America, and the Scandinavian North since 1800* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1930).

⁴ William Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (1800; 1802) is the locus classicus for imagining the ballad as an antidote for poetic diction grown too ornamental. For the adoption of this idea as an explicit rationale for ballad scholarship, see Francis James Child's introduction to the second edition of his *English and Scottish Ballads* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1860); and his influential definition of the ballad, first published in *Johnson's New Universal Cyclopaedia*, 4 vols. (New York: A. J. Johnson, 1875–80), I, 365–68. This short essay is most easily found as Francis James Child, "Ballad Poetry (1875)," in *The Anglo-American Ballad: A Folklore Casebook*, ed. Dianne Dugaw (New York: Garland, 1995), pp. 58–67.

⁵ For Child's distinctly American investment in British ballads, see Hustvedt, *Ballad Books and Ballad Men*; and Mary Ellen Brown, *Child's Unfinished Masterpiece: "The English and Scottish Popular Ballads"* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2011). Michael C. Cohen provocatively and persuasively argues that "*The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* is a Reconstruction text and the Child ballad a Reconstruction genre" (Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* [Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2015], p. 156; see pp. 136–63).

⁶ *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, first published in 1989 in a bid to expand the canon of works studied in American literature classes, begins with a selection of "Native American Oral Literatures," subdivided into sections on narrative and poetry.

There are many problems with this set of assumptions about the ballad, problems that call out for redefinition and refinement. For one thing, the formal specificity of the ballad falls apart when it is considered in comparative context: southern and eastern European ballads, for example, are stichic not stanzaic, with a variety of metrical structures, including octosyllabic Spanish *romanceros*, trimeter Romanian ballads, and so forth.⁷ If the ballad is the common literary currency of European nations, then it is so in the relatively weak sense of a popular narrative poem that ranks below or falls short of the epic. This is where specific claims about ballad form give way to general statements about the ballad as a genre, claims that cover a wide range of poems regardless of metrical or stanzaic patterning. It is worth noting that Child's exhaustive comparison of ballad variants across European traditions largely disregards poetic form, chronicling instead divergences in plot and minute differences in narrative detail.⁸ Child's careful sifting of collections and archives so

Andrew Wiget's introduction to the section on "Native American Oral Poetry" takes care to situate these chants, prayers, and dream songs in ritual context; moreover, the publication dates placed in fine print at the end of these "poems" indicate that they were translated and first published in the twentieth century. But their placement at the front of the volume—prior to a selection from Christopher Columbus's *Journal*—as a kind of timeless prehistory of American writing makes them homologous to the ballads frequently inserted at the beginning of anthologies of English literature. See *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Paul Lauter, et al. (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Co., 1989), and subsequent editions. By contrast, John Hollander's two-volume *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century* (New York: Library of America, 1993) includes a section on "Nineteenth-Century Versions of American Indian Poetry" at the end of the second volume, clearly marking both the historical origins of these texts and the many acts of translation, adaptation, and reimagination necessary for the conversion of indigenous expressive forms into something recognizable as poetry. For an excellent, brief essay on the nineteenth-century remediation of native song and chant—one written to accompany Hollander's selection—see Matthew Parr, "Nineteenth-Century Versions of American Indian Poetry," in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Eric L. Haralson (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), pp. 314–20.

⁷ Dianne Dugaw's excellent entry in the most recent edition of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* emphasizes the metrical variability of European ballads; see Dugaw, "Ballad," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Fourth Edition, ed. Roland Greene, et al. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 114–18. See also James Moreira's entry on the "Ballad" in *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*, ed. Thomas A. Green, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 1997), I, 81–83.

⁸ Child's authoritative collection is loosely organized according to meter, based on Danish scholar Svend Grundtvig's theory that ballads written in two-line stanzas were

as to identify the ballad with collective not individual art, anonymous not authored texts, and oral performance rather than writing suggests that ballads are a counterpart or shadow image of the lyric, part of the process of lyricization that Virginia Jackson argues had transformed the reading of poetry by the beginning of the twentieth century.⁹

A structuring opposition between ballad narrative and lyric time has long been a mainstay of definitions of the ballad. Thomas A. Green's *Folklore* encyclopedia (1997) includes separate entries on the ballad and the folksong, but also further distinguishes between "Folksong-Narrative" and "Folksong-Lyric."¹⁰ Widely accepted hallmarks of ballad style recast this foundational opposition between narrative and lyric in other terms: ballad narratives are typically episodic (not unfolding with a cumulative sense of progression); their "gapped quality" and reliance on repetition reintroduces lyric time within the space carved out for narrative poetry, marking a kind of infinite regress of a split between narrative and antinarrative modes. The casting

simpler and therefore older than those written in four-line stanzas. Grundtvig also theorized that four-line stanzas with alternating four- and three-beat lines were older than quatrains with four beats per line. Hustvedt prints Grundtvig's 25 August 1877 letter to Child justifying his recommendation that Child organize his collection by meter and not by subject (see Hustvedt, *Ballad Books and Ballad Men*, pp. 275-78). Hustvedt also includes Grundtvig's organizational scheme for Child's volume (*Ballad Books and Ballad Men*, Appendix B, pp. 305-35), demonstrating that Child approximated Grundtvig's mode of organization. But Child nowhere acknowledges in his ten-volume edition that his organizing principle is based on a theory of the historical succession of metrical and stanzaic forms.

⁹ Child's account of the universal style of the genuine ballad demonstrates a troubling logical circularity: his evolving theory of the essential nature of the ballad influences his selection of a canon of poems that are then used to substantiate his theory. Between first and final editions of his authoritative ballad collection (1856; 1882-98), Child eliminated 115 "romances, lyrics, broadsides, and dishonest ballads of various kinds," adding ninety new titles and vastly expanding his collation of new versions of the remaining ballads (Hustvedt, *Ballad Books and Ballad Men*, p. 223n). For Child's editorial process, see Hustvedt, *Ballad Books and Ballad Men*; Dave Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British "Folksong" 1700 to the Present Day* (Philadelphia: Open Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 101-120; and Brown, *Child's Unfinished Masterpiece*. For lyricization, see Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005).

¹⁰ See Roger deV. Renwick, "Folksong, Lyric," and James Moreira, "Folksong, Narrative," in *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*, I, 343-47 and 348-55. For the distinctive temporality of lyric, see Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979).

of the ballad as the lyric's untutored, disreputable double, and the attribution of powers of rejuvenation to anonymous, popular verse, suggests that the ballad is not only a preliterate but also a "paraliterary" genre—Samuel R. Delany's term for genres that stand in a subsidiary but constitutive relation to the category of literature. Delany coined this term to describe the creative energy generated by genres such as science fiction and literary criticism, genres that are in pointed dialogue with literature but lack either the aspirations or the discursive conditions that would gain them admission to the ranks of high culture.¹¹

From the perspective of genre, then, ballads mark the territory that lies just outside of the properly literary. The ballad is the literary form of nonliterary verse, which is to say that when you recognize a ballad as such, you bring popular poetry under literary scrutiny. Ballads provide a framework for the pursuit of comparative literature (or at least of European literatures). They are also poems that index or foreground the scene of their transmission, whereas lyrics are said to repress it. Ballads are poems framed in some way by their telling—though, as we shall see, this narrative framing can be seen not only as a stylistic hallmark of the genre but also as a recasting of the material conditions of their circulation.

Much of the work of ballad definition considers only the ballad as text; the ballad's stylistic coherence depends on imagining its independence from media—in particular, the textually and authenticity-compromising commercial circulation of printed broadsides. The history of ballad collecting and ballad scholarship is one of aggressively weeding out cheap print so as to imagine that the central drama of the ballad is an encounter between orality and literacy; the collapse of handwriting and print in this formulation serves to erase the impact of printed broadsides on early modern ballad transmission. Eighteenth-century ballad collectors such as Thomas Percy, Joseph Ritson, and Walter Scott understood themselves to be the curators of a rural tradition they falsely imagined to

¹¹ See Samuel R. Delany, "The *Paradoxa* Interview: Inside and Outside the Canon," in his *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and The Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover, N.H.: Univ. Press of New England, 1999), pp. 186–217.

be outside the corrupting influence of print; they offered to their readers printed versions of handwritten transcriptions of inextricably entangled print and oral sources.¹² A disdain for cheap print has long been a commonplace of ballad scholarship. Child famously described the broadside collections of Samuel Pepys and the Duke of Roxburghe as “veritable dung-hills, in which, only after a great deal of sickening grubbing, one finds a very moderate jewel.”¹³ Child’s collection of exhaustively authenticated “traditional ballads” offers readers a corpus of texts cleared of the corruptions of commerce and the street—a printed simulacrum of the timelessness of “oral tradition.”¹⁴

Can the ballad still perform its work—identifying what is proper to the literary and reviving literary tradition from just outside its borders—if we bring to ballad discourse an awareness of the print formats in which ballads circulate? Critics who acknowledge the importance of cheap print to the circulation of the ballad and the ballad’s importance to the history of print tend to take up a different canon of poems and tell a different story about the nature and history of the genre. Broadside ballads were printed on one side of a single sheet of paper; they involve a single pull of the press and thus can be produced and circulated quite inexpensively. Published as single sheets or as half-sheets (to save the cost of paper), broadside ballads are often set off by ornamental borders and woodcut illustrations, which can easily be made to align with type-height. These embellishments could be reused for different purposes, like

¹² In her *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), Tessa Watt describes the methods of the early modern professional ballad-sellers, who brought printed texts from the metropole to the provinces and returned to the city with rural songs that they subsequently set in print. Dianne Dugaw concisely notes in her *Princeton Encyclopedia* essay on the ballad that “the interaction of oral forms with written culture has been pervasive, despite scholarly theories that defined the two expressive realms as entirely in contradistinction to each other” (Dugaw, “Ballad,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 115).

¹³ Francis James Child, letter to Svend Grundtvig, 25 August 1872, rpt. in Hustvedt, *Ballad Books and Ballad Men*, p. 254.

¹⁴ For the simultaneous emergence of the idea of “oral tradition” and the radical expansion of commercial print, see Paula McDowell, “‘The Art of Printing was Fatal’: Print Commerce and the Idea of Oral Tradition in Long Eighteenth-Century Ballad Discourse,” in *Ballads and Broad-sides in Britain, 1500–1800*, ed. Patricia Fumerton and Anita Geurrini (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 35–56.

pieces of moveable type. Woodcut illustrations are also relatively easy to trace by hand and recarve. The broadside ballad is the site of and occasion for visual elaboration that does not require special skill to reproduce.

Read in terms of their print format, broadside ballads are allied with posters, proclamations, advertisements, and criminal confessions. They helped to constitute a variety of publics, civic and social; they were to be found at the scaffold, in the tavern, on the street, and in the public square. Through their strong association with the news, satire, and popular opinion, broadside ballads retained the air of circulation below or beyond official channels, the commercial afterlife of legitimate literary culture, the ungovernable field of popular circulation itself. A form of cheap print that endured for centuries, broadside ballads shift the locus of oral performance from the minstrel or the ballad singer to the ballad seller, who sings not to transmit tradition but to hawk a cheap commodity.

Broadside ballads maintain a strong formal relation to the page; indeed, one might argue that some of the features we have attributed to ballads as hallmarks of oral culture, such as concision, are actually enforced by the constraints of the broadside format. Single pages were easy to post and to circulate hand-to-hand, outside of authorized channels of distribution. Broad-sides invited the reader to take in woodcuts, text, and references to familiar tunes in a single glance, insisting on the visual and auditory appeal of what was printed on their faces.

Ballads were important components of early modern publishers' stock, and as such they possess a complex temporality that may say more about control over intellectual property than it does about the reading preferences of poor and working-class people. Literary critics' and ballad scholars' suppression of the conditions of circulation of traditional ballads has conferred on them a kind of timelessness, but emphasizing the temporally bound nature of street ballads can also be misleading. Street ballads are often taken to be of the moment, reliable evidence of popular sentiment at any one point in time. And yet William St. Clair has argued that a canon of popular works was locked in place in the early seventeenth century by intellectual property law and printing house customs. In St. Clair's account, cheap

print in Britain was comprised of a sharply restricted canon of works—not the people’s literature but rather literature for the people—until the end of the eighteenth century, when the defeat of perpetual copyright opened up a significantly wider range of works for reprinting.¹⁵ The breakup of the London cartels that controlled cheap print and the increased circulation of texts across national borders made the nineteenth century, in Andrew Piper’s words, a “golden age” of broadsides.¹⁶ But the broadsides that proliferated through decentralized networks of exchange tell time no more accurately than those that were brought from cities to the provinces. Street ballads written to commemorate events and to exploit local disasters, such as shipwrecks, are often less timely than they appear to be, circulating years and even decades later, despite their lack of newsworthiness.¹⁷

Of course ballads were not only published as broadsides; they regularly appear in the full range of nineteenth-century periodicals, from daily and weekly newspapers to general-interest magazines designed for an emerging middle class, to literary monthlies and quarterlies that appealed to the elite. English and Scottish ballads were enthusiastically embraced by American readers as a canon of popular works that they could claim as their own, a prehistory of British letters to which they felt intimately connected through what they imagined were common “Saxon” roots. Ballads were popular in the United States because they were thought to bear a privileged relation to the

¹⁵ See William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004).

¹⁶ See Andrew Piper, “Transitional Figures: Image, Translation, and the Ballad from Broadside to Photograph,” in *Book Illustration in the Long Eighteenth Century: Reconfiguring the Visual Periphery of the Text*, ed. Christina Ionescu (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), p. 159. Leslie Shepard argues that “once the broadsides were released from both monopolist printing and political censorship, they lost much of their militancy and became largely entertainment with a rough edge” (Shepard, *The History of Street Literature: The Story of Broadside Ballads, Chapbooks, Proclamations, News-Sheets, Election Bills, Tracts, Pamphlets, Cocks, Catchpennies, and Other Ephemera* [Newton Abbot, David and Charles, 1973], p. 127).

¹⁷ See for example, the publication history of a ballad written to commemorate the wreck of a New York packet ship that sank off the coast of Ireland in 1822. “The Loss of the Ship Albion” circulated in newspapers as late as 1826 (*New York Telescope*, 18 March 1826, p. 167) and in broadside format as late as 1832 (*Loss of the Ship Albion: And Bruce’s Address* [Boston: Sold wholesale and retail, by L. Deming, no. 62, Hanover Street, 2d door from Friend Street, Boston, 1832]).

voice of the people, offering one solution to the vexing formal and political problem of literary culture in a republic. Collections such as Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–3) and William Motherwell's *Minstrelsy, Ancient and Modern* (1827) were imported, reviewed, reprinted, and mined by periodicals for poems to reprint, as were volumes of translated German and Spanish ballads.¹⁸ Thousands of reprinted and “original” ballads were published in American magazines, many of them mock-feudal poems with the generic title “Ballad.”¹⁹ Ballads were a staple of nineteenth-century mass print; the anachronism of circulating pseudo-archaic verses in periodicals designed for modern readers was clearly part of their appeal. For instance, James Russell Lowell's upmarket literary nationalist monthly *The Pioneer* devoted a double-page spread to a faux-feudal poem, “The Rose,” transforming the broadside ballad's customary border area into a site for illustration.²⁰ What we might consider a violation of the periodical's nationalist aims does not register as such; instead, the trace of the broadside format does generic work for Lowell's journal, marking the contents of the middle-class magazine as broadly popular.

From the perspective of print history, the ballad is a reminder that literature is subtended by a hierarchy of print formats that

¹⁸ Philadelphia publisher Matthew Carey reprinted Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* in a single volume in 1813; Boston publisher William D. Ticknor ran through four editions of William Motherwell's *Minstrelsy, Ancient and Modern* in 1846. Boston publisher James Munroe printed a volume of *Songs and Ballads; Translated from Uhland, Körner, Bürger, and Other German Lyric Poets* in 1842, while the Harper Brothers reprinted Edward Bulwer-Lytton's translation of *The Poems and Ballads of Schiller* in 1844. Editions of J. G. Lockhart's translation of *Ancient Spanish Ballads, Historical and Romantic* were published by New York publishers Wiley and Putnam in 1842 and C. S. Francis in 1856.

¹⁹ Edgar Allan Poe published a poem with this generic title in the Richmond monthly the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1837 and again in the Philadelphia daily newspaper the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1841, before republishing it under the title “Bridal Ballad” in the *Broadway Journal* in 1845. See Edgar Allan Poe, “Bridal Ballad,” in *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Volume I: Poems*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 304–10. A search in the digitized *American Periodical Series* for poems with the word “ballad” in the title that were published between 1820 and 1865 returns more than 1,400 hits. Limiting this list to poems that also include the word “original”—one index of poets' desire to write new poems in a form that would convey ancientness, anonymity, and collectivity—returns more than 360 hits.

²⁰ See [Anon.], “The Rose,” *The Pioneer*, 1:1 (January 1843), 40–41.

remain largely invisible to the literary-critical gaze. Critics often expect generic distinctions between high and low literary genres to map onto then-current hierarchies of print, but, in the antebellum United States, literary ballads, traditional ballads, and street ballads refuse to line up properly. Literary ballads can be found in respectable volumes of verse as well as in newspapers and magazines. Traditional ballads were published in multivolume scholarly compilations at the same time that they were circulated on cheap broadsides alongside the latest theatrical songs and shipwreck poems. Print formats in this period do not reliably secure distinctions between and among poetic genres; indeed, the close link between the ballad form and the broadside format retains the power to reclassify poems, to detach them from one system of literary value and confer upon them a kind of authorless authority. To note just one example: Thomas Dunn English's sentimental poem "Ben Bolt" was first printed in 1843 in the New York literary weekly the *New Mirror*; it was subsequently set to music, then recirculated on broadsides as a faux-olde popular song, and circulated again in the form of response poems, spin-offs, and parodies.²¹ "Ben Bolt" begins as legitimate literary culture; indeed, the poem stands as one of two representing its author in Rufus Wilmot Griswold's encyclopedic *Poets and Poetry of America* (1855).²² But its unauthorized circulation as sheet music and on broadsides transports the poem outside of recognizably

²¹ An untitled version of "Ben Bolt" was first published in *The New Mirror*, 2 September 1843, p. 347, as if it were a private communication, signed only with the initials TDE. For the plagiarism controversy concerning rival musical settings of the poem, see Edgar Allan Poe's notices in *The Broadway Journal*, 4 October 1845, pp. 198–99, and 25 October 1845, p. 248. A musical setting with the lyrics attributed to English can be found in *Graham's Magazine*, 32 (April 1848), 236–38. The Readex *American Broadsides and Ephemera* online collection includes numerous broadside versions of the ballad, including response poems such as "Ah, Yes I Remember; An Answer to Ben Bolt" (1852) and "Ben Bolt's Grave" (c. 1860); spin-offs, such as "Cottage By the Hill" (c. 1859) (sung to the tune of "Ben Bolt"); and parodies such as "The Paupers" (c. 1853). Newspapers and magazines also circulated reprints as filler and in sections devoted to miscellaneous poems (see, for example, *The Literary Union*, 17 November 1849, p. 101; and *The Prisoner's Friend*, 10 November 1849, p. 24). They also printed numerous response poems and parodies including Sidney Dyer, "The Grave of Ben Bolt," *Home Magazine*, 1 (April 1853), 539; and [Anon.], "A Hint to Ben Bolt," *The Spirit of the Times*, 17 May 1856, p. 164, which asks, "Oh, don't you remember the b'hoys, Ben Bolt."

²² See Thomas Dunn English, "Ben Bolt," in *The Poets and Poetry of America*, ed. Rufus Wilmot Griswold, 16th ed. (Philadelphia: Parry and McMillan, 1855), p. 576.

literary precincts. The broadside's conventional anonymity and impersonality eventually strips the poem of its authorship and its gentility, keeping the song alive but no longer in the possession of its author. Acknowledging print's complex role in the circulation of ballads raises new challenges for ballad scholars; it is no longer a question of preserving authentic works by cataloging variants, but rather of finding ways to describe and track the circulation of popular poems in forbiddingly large numbers across many different kinds of print.²³

Attending to the circulation of ballads in a variety of print formats should do much to short-circuit the binary distinction between orality and literacy that continues to be invoked in discussions of the genre. The ballad is not a remnant of oral culture preserved in writing, but rather a genre that flourishes with the rise of print. Print enhances the transmission of ballads locally—mediating performances on the streets, in theaters, and in taverns—and enables ballads to circulate transnationally, not only as part of familial or cultural inheritance, but also in authoritative collections claiming to represent the characteristic expressions of a people, as magazine reprints, as newspaper filler, in chapbooks, and as broadsides passed from hand to hand. And yet, viewing the ballad through the lens of a single medium—that of print—risks smuggling a stadial media theory back into ballad discourse (first oral performance, then handwriting, then print), an unfortunate narrowing of interpretive possibilities, since printed ballads have long traded on their multimedia status, claiming a privileged relationship with both sound and image.²⁴ One constant in the history of printed ballads is that they have succeeded in part by pretending to be something else.

²³ Michael C. Cohen's *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* models this kind of approach tracing the circulation of broadside ballads, "minstrel songs, contraband songs, and spirituals . . . as they moved up and down the hierarchy of genres in nineteenth-century America" (p. 14).

²⁴ The broadside ballad explicitly appeals to sound and image on its face. Cheap collections of secular songs, known as "songsters," often included references to "airs," evoking musical accompaniment while saving the expense of engraved musical notation, and ballads were embedded in theatrical performances as early as Shakespeare's plays. Ballads operate as a kind of fulcrum for critique in such landmark works as John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* (1728) and Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* (1928), their extraliterary status a potent tool for deflating the pretensions of the rich and powerful.

The proliferation of ballads in a wide range of print formats and their promiscuous boundary-crossing—between high and low, literary and nonliterary, legitimate and unauthorized publication, art and commerce—raises troubling questions about the coherence of the ballad as an object of study. Loosened from its presumptive origins in traditional song, does the ballad become merely an attenuated set of stylistic markers, a grab bag of themes and incidents, a weak appeal to a popular readership? Can ballads continue to do the work of definition if their lineage is suspect or if they are, like many of the poems that are printed and reprinted in antebellum periodicals, manifestly inauthentic?



I conclude by looking closely at a faux American ballad that acknowledges its inauthenticity—underscoring its status as a modern, printed text and not as a relic of tradition—but that nevertheless uses the ballad form to explore the boundaries of literariness. In “The Wreck of the Hesperus,” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow turns to the ballad not to signal nostalgia for an imaginary folk or the literary reclamation of popular verse, but rather to bring poetry into rapport with the terms of an emergent mass culture.

In 1840, Longfellow announced in a letter to a friend: “I have broken ground in a new field; namely, *Ballads*; begin[n]ing with the ‘*Wreck of the Schooner Hesperus on the Reef of Norman’s Woe.*’” He went on to elaborate on his plans for future publication, with another friend’s failure to sell more than a dozen copies of a collection of poems firmly in mind. Of “The Wreck of the Hesperus,” Longfellow wrote: “It will be printed in a few days, and I shall send it in some newspaper. I think I shall write more. The *National Ballad* is a virgin soil here in New England; and there are good materials. Beside[s], I have a great notion of working upon *people’s feelings*. I am going to have this printed on a sheet, and sold like *Varses*, with a coarse picture on it. I desire a new sensation, and a new set of critics.”²⁵ While this certainly

²⁵ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, letter to George Washington Greene, 5 January 1840, in *The Letters of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, ed. Andrew Hilen, 6 vols. (Cambridge,

sounds like self-indulgent, aristocratic slumming, Longfellow clearly envies the field of reception that had been created by the ballad sellers. So too did Nathaniel Hawthorne, who volunteered to distribute copies “to every skipper of every craft he boards in his Custom-House duties; so as to hear the criticisms thereon.”²⁶ While ballad collectors such as Percy, Motherwell, and Child elaborated the fantasy of an unprinted (even an unwritten) “oral tradition,” in part to cleanse the ballad of the taint of trade, struggling American authors such as Longfellow and Hawthorne saw the ballad as an antidote to a scant and unpredictable market for literature, identifying the form with commercial and popular success—ready sales to avid consumers of print ephemera.

The newspaper publication of Longfellow’s “Wreck of the Hesperus” should remind us that the poem was intended from the start for popular consumption. Although technically eligible for copyright, Longfellow did not try to limit the poem’s circulation. Instead, he accepted a badly needed, one-time payment of \$25 from Park Benjamin for its appearance in the mammoth weekly *The New World*, and had the satisfaction of seeing the poem reprinted in numerous newspapers and magazines.²⁷

“The Wreck of the Hesperus” is a mash-up of Felicia Hemans’s popular 1826 recitation piece “Casabianca” (“The boy stood on the burning deck”) with the traditional ballad “Sir Patrick Spens,” which Longfellow could have found in Percy’s, Scott’s, or Motherwell’s ballad collections.²⁸ Longfellow’s poem tells the story of an arrogant father and his doomed daughter, whom the father lashes to a mast to keep safe from the howling storm into which he has foolishly and fatally sailed. Like the boy

Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1966–82), II, 203. Hereafter referred to as *Letters*.

²⁶ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, MS journal, 4 January 1840, quoted in *Letters*, II, 205, n. 7. See also Virginia Jackson’s reading of Longfellow’s letter to Greene in her “Longfellow’s Tradition; or, Picture-Writing a Nation,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, 59 (1998), 471–96.

²⁷ See Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, letter to Epes Sargent, 2 January 1840, in *Letters*, II, 205–6, and editor’s note, in *Letters*, II, 209, n. 1.

²⁸ Perhaps as a nod to his success with the ballad, William D. Ticknor’s reprint edition of William Motherwell’s *Minstrelsy, Ancient and Modern, with an Historical Introduction and Notes*, 2 vols. (Boston: William D. Ticknor and Co., 1846), was dedicated to Longfellow.

in “Casabianca,” the sailor’s daughter poignantly asks a series of questions that her dead father cannot answer; both Hemans and Longfellow use dramatic irony to explore the troubling unresponsiveness of paternal authority. But Longfellow’s poem is remarkable for its striking emphasis on sound right up until the final tableau where the poem suddenly shifts to the scene of a fisherman’s grisly discovery of the daughter’s frozen corpse. The poem includes many simulations of the ambient noise of the storm: “the snow fell hissing” (l. 23); “Through the whistling sleet and snow, / Like a sheeted ghost, the vessel swept” (ll. 58–59).²⁹ It also narrativizes the daughter’s struggle to understand the minous sounds she hears: what she thinks are church-bells turn out to be fog-bells; what she imagines as the sound of guns turns out to be the sound of other ships breaking up in the storm.

In this poem, Longfellow seeks to approximate the multimedia appeal of the broadside ballad, its provision of an “air” (even if imaginary) as well as a woodcut illustration of the most exciting part of the action. It is important to note, however, that at its climax, Longfellow’s poem dislocates the sounds it portrays from any person in the story who could plausibly have heard them—with the exception, of course, of the reader. After the death of the father, the schooner drifts without human direction, and Longfellow takes a kind of lurid pleasure in the ship’s destruction: “Like a vessel of glass, she stove and sank, / Ho! ho! the breakers roared!” (“Wreck of the Hesperus,” p. 15, ll. 75–76). Longfellow models for his reader both pleasure in the violent destruction of the ship and a sense of superiority to poetizing accounts of shipwreck. For instance, one stanza invites the reader to aestheticize the plight of the *Hesperus* by indulging in fanciful metaphors, then follows with a description emphasizing the brutality of its demise:

She struck where the white and fleecy waves
 Looked soft as carded wool,
 But the cruel rocks, they gored her side
 Like the horns of an angry bull.
 (p. 15, ll. 69–72)

²⁹ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Wreck of the Hesperus,” in *Poems and Other Writings*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (New York: Library of America, 2000), pp. 13–15.

Circulating without centralized control, indulging in a quasi-pornographic account of the death of a beautiful woman, and permitting readers both to luxuriate in sensation and to distance themselves from it, Longfellow's "Wreck of the Hesperus" needs to be read alongside poems such as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" (1845), poems that successfully split the difference between high-cultural and mass-cultural appeal. Virginia Jackson has argued that Longfellow's ballad exemplifies his characteristic strategy of abstracting popular verse-genres, dissociating them from their traditional social functions in order to make them available for middle-class reading.³⁰ Such a process of abstraction was certainly necessary to convert New England materials into a "National Ballad," but Longfellow turns toward mass culture in this poem, not away from it. Longfellow's poem may make lurid shipwreck ballads safe for middle-class readers and public school recitations, but it is the multimedia appeal of the ballad form and the broadside format that haunts the poem and that sets the terms of its success.

Longfellow's appeals to sound and image in "The Wreck of the Hesperus" were quickly taken up by composers and illustrators who saw his troping on the multimedia history of the genre as an opportunity to translate verbal art into aural and visual form. H. Earle Johnson records at least seven and perhaps as many as fourteen settings of the poem by British and American composers before 1900, including one by popular British songwriter John Blockley and one by American composer Arthur Foote.³¹ Johnson notes that many of Longfellow's poems became household favorites not through book or newspaper publication, but through the circulation of sheet music designed for parlor singing.³²

³⁰ See Virginia Jackson, "Longfellow in His Time," in *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*, ed. Alfred Bendixen and Stephen Burt (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), pp. 238–58.

³¹ Seven of the titles that Johnson records are undated, a common phenomenon with uncopyrighted sheet music. Most of these settings are by minor composers, though a cantata by Arthur Foote was performed and published in Boston in 1888. See H. Earle Johnson, "Longfellow and Music," *American Music Research Center Journal*, 7 (1997), 43–44.

³² Johnson notes that "England was the major source of mass-produced musical works," and that Longfellow owed much of his British fame to the circulation of his poetry as popular song ("Longfellow and Music," p. 23; see pp. 23–25).

“The Wreck of the Hesperus” also proved popular with illustrators, most of whom ignored the poem’s narrative action in favor of the final tableau, choosing the fisherman’s discovery of the drowned daughter’s body to represent the poem. This tableau proved irresistible to artists because it marks a shift in the poem’s focus from sound to vision, staging a scene of horrified recognition:

At daybreak, on the bleak sea-beach,
 A fisherman stood aghast,
 To see the form of a maiden fair,
 Lashed close to a drifting mast.
 (“Wreck of the Hesperus,” p. 15, ll. 78–80)

Longfellow’s emphasis on the fisherman’s shock at discerning a human “form” emerge from the rocky coastline was an invitation to artists to play with the similarities between figure and ground, to reflect on the lifelike but inanimate nature of visual representation. See for example Daniel Huntington’s engraving for the illustrated edition of *Poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (1845) (Figure 1), in which the shape of the drowned woman’s body is self-consciously echoed by the rocks behind.³³

This emblematic scene also permits Longfellow to indulge in and draw attention to the machinery of poetic sentiment. If the title of the poem promises the spectacle of a ship in ruins, its final scene delivers something more disturbingly intimate. The fisherman’s (and the reader’s) arrested gaze is matched by

³³ *Poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1845), [facing p. 52]. *The Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Illustrated* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1879) also includes a small engraving, “Lashed Close to a Drifting Mast” (p. 45), drawn by W. L. Sheppard. *Oliver Optic’s Magazine: Our Boys and Girls*, a monthly magazine aimed at children, includes a full-page illustration of the scene with just this stanza representing the poem as a whole (January 1874, p. 49, with the full poem on p. 69). E. P. Dutton published an illustrated edition of the poem, advertising both that their edition was “authorized” and that the images were produced by eight illustrators under the supervision of engraver George T. Andrew (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Wreck of the Hesperus* [New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1888]). The concluding image in this volume is of the fisherman’s discovery. Winslow Homer’s “The Wreck of the ‘Atlantic’—Cast Up by the Sea” (*Harper’s Weekly*, 26 April 1873, p. 345), although nominally representing a later shipwreck, clearly owes much to the tradition established by Huntington and others, reprising the scene of a fisherman gazing at a prone, drowned woman washed up on the shore.



FIGURE 1. Daniel Huntington, engraving for “The Wreck of the Hesperus,” in *Poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1845), [facing p. 52].

the stasis—or near stasis—of the corpse itself. Insisting in the final stanzas on subtle differences between the human and the nonhuman, Longfellow depicts the object of our attention as itself immobilized by grief, animated only by the motion of the waves:

The salt sea was frozen on her breast,
 The salt tears in her eyes;
 And he saw her hair, like the brown sea-weed,
 On the billows fall and rise.
 (“Wreck of the Hesperus,” p. 15, ll. 81–84)

It is, of course, Longfellow’s poetic lines that give this corpse its eerie animation, falling and rising with alternating anapests and iambs. Longfellow is startlingly explicit here in calling attention to poetry’s artifice, its ability to move the reader through the metrical simulation of barely discernible motion.



FIGURE 2. Cover of sheet music for John J. Blockley and H. W. Longfellow, *The Wreck of the Hesperus* (Baltimore: Miller & Beacham, n.d.). Courtesy of the Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries, The Johns Hopkins University.

Composers and illustrators who significantly extended the reach of this poem picked up on aural and visual cues that were already there, enabled by the ballad's traditional mobilization of both sound and image. For example, the sheet music for John J. Blockley's setting of the poem (see Figure 2) capitalizes on the sensationalistic final tableau even as it adapts Longfellow's lines for voice and piano.³⁴ Longfellow's "Wreck of the Hesperus" is clearly a ballad reimagined for mass culture, however, one that foregoes the fiction of folk origins and oral transmission to explore new conditions of circulation. In its attention to the production of sound without a hearer, its figuration of aesthetic reception as the product of accident and drift, and its self-conscious play with fixity and artificial motion, "The Wreck of the Hesperus" projects an audience of readers and not auditors—not readers imagined as auditors, but rather a field of circulation characterized by its uncertainty. Reprinted in newspapers and fine editions, in sheet music and illustrated children's magazines, "The Wreck of the Hesperus" suggests that the ballad remains a resource for redrawing the boundaries of literature even as mass culture threatens the survival of traditional folkways and upends the generic hierarchies of literary elites.

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ABSTRACT

Meredith L. McGill, "What Is a Ballad? Reading for Genre, Format, and Medium" (pp. 156–175)

In this essay I show how definitions of the ballad shift as critics take into account not only the place of ballads within the genre system but also the mediation of nineteenth-century ballads across the full range of popular and elite print formats. Arguing that the ballad is a genre that flourishes with the rise of print, I show how Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Wreck of the Hesperus" (1840) exploits the ballad's multimedia appeal, forgoing the fiction of folk origins and oral transmission to explore the terms of a sensationalist mass culture.

Keywords: print format; poetry and mass culture; paraliterary genres; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; "The Wreck of the Hesperus"

³⁴ John J. Blockley and H. W. Longfellow, *The Wreck of the Hesperus* (Baltimore: Miller & Beacham, n.d.).