

# What Happens When We Don't Read Ballads Closely Enough: The Cautionary Tale of the American Woman Poet and the Ballad

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**I**N 1837 and 1840, two collections of American poetry included Emma Embury's poem "Ballad" among their selections: Charles Fenno Hoffman's *The New-York Book of Poetry* (1837) and John Keese's *The Poets of America* (1840).<sup>1</sup> Since this poem's original publication a decade earlier—it had first appeared in *The New-York Mirror* on 30 May 1829—it had been largely forgotten.<sup>2</sup> In this

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<sup>1</sup> See Emma C. Embury, "Ballad," in *The New-York Book of Poetry*, [ed. Charles Fenno Hoffman] (New York: George Dearborn, 1837), pp. 191–92; and E. C. Embury, "Ballad," in *The Poets of America: Illustrated by One of Her Painters*, ed. John Keese (New York: S. Colman, 1840), pp. 242–43. All quotations from "Ballad" are from *The Poets of America*.

<sup>2</sup> "Ballad" was published in *The New-York Mirror* under the name "Ianthé" (see "Ballad," *New-York Mirror*, 30 May 1829, p. 369). It was reprinted in the first volume of *The Atlantic Club-Book: Being Sketches in Prose and Verse, by Various Authors*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1834), I, 115–16; it also appeared in *The Gems of American*

short essay I would like to put some pressure on these editors' choices to include Embury's "Ballad" in anthologies that were devoted to the definition, promotion, and celebration of American poetry.<sup>3</sup> In both of these collections, poems whose titles are marked by their genre—"Ode," "Epithalamium," "Elegiac Lines," "Sonnet"—were clearly being tasked by the editors with representing the current state of that genre within the burgeoning national literature, since, while many poems were often titled by their genre in the nineteenth century, these collections mostly presented singular examples of each.<sup>4</sup> In order to communicate to readers the present state of a given genre in American poetry, these editors not only had to reflect back to readers what an instance of a genre looked and sounded like, but they also had to select content that was historically representative of that genre.

This need to present generically typical content is particularly interesting when it comes to Embury's poem, in part because it was the only poem titled "Ballad" in either of these collections and in part because it was seemingly perfect for this task of representation. Embury's "Ballad" reproduced a trope that the genre had long employed—that of a woman who comes to bad ends—and in doing so it represented at least one strand of the ballad's history.<sup>5</sup> But instead of simply participating

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*Poetry by Distinguished Authors* (New York: A. & C. B. Edwards, 1840), pp. 191–92, which is a reprint, without the front matter, of Hoffman's *New-York Book of Poetry*. Otherwise, it had not been reprinted in other periodicals or collections between 1829 and 1840, nor had it been included in the cluster of Embury's poems that were published in Sara Josepha Hale's *The Ladies' Wreath; A Selection from the Female Poetic Writers of England and America* (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1837).

<sup>3</sup> Although Samuel Kettell's 1829 *Specimens of American Poetry* and George B. Cheever's 1831 *The American Common-Place Book of Poetry* had both collected and published exclusively American poems a decade earlier, it was not until the 1840s that several large anthologies of American poetry hit the literary marketplace. The 1840s would see the publication of Rufus Wilmot Griswold's *The Poets and Poetry of America, with an Historical Introduction* (Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1842) and *The Female Poets of America* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1849), Caroline May's *The American Female Poets: With Biographical and Critical Notices* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1848), and Thomas Buchanan Read's *The Female Poets of America: With Portraits, Biographical Notices, and Specimens of Their Writings* (Philadelphia: E. H. Butler & Co., 1849).

<sup>4</sup> The exception to this practice is that in *The Poets of America* there are two poems titled "Ode."

<sup>5</sup> For a historical overview of the many different types of ballads, see Albert B. Friedman, *The Ballad Revival: Studies in the Influence of Popular on Sophisticated Poetry* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961); Tristram Potter Coffin, *The British Traditional*

in the genre's depiction of such a woman—something these editors must have *thought* the poem was doing—Embury's "Ballad" protests, I argue, the genre's conventional tale of woman's woe by critiquing a constitutive aspect of the ballad: its repetitive refrain. While Embury's ballad refrain, to use John Hollander's formulation about ballads more broadly, "propound[s] a parable out of its structural role" of unchanging repetition, here that parable signals to readers how the ballad's conventionally gendered content offers a critique of the ballad itself:<sup>6</sup>

BALLAD.

"La rose cueillie et le cœur gagné ne plaisent qu'un jour."

The maiden sat at her busy wheel,  
 Her heart was light and free,  
 And ever in cheerful song broke forth  
 Her bosom's harmless glee.  
 Her song was in mockery of love,  
 And oft I heard her say,  
 "The gathered rose, and the stolen heart  
 Can charm but for a day."

I looked on the maiden's rosy cheek,  
 And her lip so full and bright,  
 And I sighed to think that the traitor love,  
 Should conquer a heart so light:  
 But she thought not of future days of wo,  
 While she carolled in tones so gay;  
 "The gathered rose and the stolen heart,  
 Can charm but for a day."

A year passed on, and again I stood  
 By the humble cottage-door;  
 The maid sat at her busy wheel,  
 But her look was blithe no more;  
 The big tear stood in her downcast eye,

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*Ballad in North America*, revised ed. (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1977); David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972); and William Bernard McCarthy, *The Ballad Matrix: Personality, Milieu, and the Oral Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> John Hollander, "Breaking into Song: Some Notes on Refrain," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), p. 74.

And with sighs I heard her say,  
 “The gathered rose, and the stolen heart  
 Can charm but for a day.”

Oh! well I knew what had dimmed her eye,  
 And made her cheek so pale;  
 The maid had forgotten her early song,  
 While she listened to love’s soft tale.  
 She had tasted the sweets of his poisoned cup,  
 It had wasted her life away:  
 And the stolen heart, like the gathered rose,  
 Had charmed but for a day.

(“Ballad,” in *The Poets of America*, pp. 242–43)

The maiden in “Ballad” is a stock figure of the genre, one that populated early-nineteenth-century American periodicals. Take, for instance, “Lucy: A Ballad” (which was published anonymously on 6 March 1802 in the *Weekly Museum*), which figures a once “sweet unblemish’d maid” who meets her end in an unfortunate and humiliating way.<sup>7</sup> While it is unclear if Lucy is dead or simply defiled, the implication is that her capital (both personal and poetic) once lay in her innocence, which is now gone. Whereas Lucy’s innocence is taken from her without her consent, other ballads feature women who actively contribute to their demise by being consciously faithless. “Faithless Sally Brown: An Old Ballad” (which was published anonymously on 5 October 1822 in *The Ladies’ Literary Cabinet*), “Louisa, or Unadilla’s Rose Hath Fallen: A Ballad” (which was published under the penname “Sigma” on 31 July 1824 in *The New-York Mirror*), and “Faithless Nelly Gray: A Pathetic Ballad” (which was published anonymously in December 1826 in *The Port-Folio*) present three versions of the faithless woman, all of whom were once pure and good but ended up rejecting the men (both husbands and fathers) to whom the poems imply they should have remained faithful. The lesson in each of these ballads is that these women could have acted differently and did not, and for that they are punished with sadness, guilt, and death.

But unlike the typical fallen-woman ballad, which offers up a cautionary tale by narrating a shift in a woman’s position due

<sup>7</sup> [Anon.], “Lucy: A Ballad,” *Weekly Museum*, 6 March 1802, p. 4.

to her own greed, pride, desire, weakness, or stupidity, Embury's "Ballad" makes a crucial revision to these stories by embedding the poem's cautionary tale into the language of the poem's refrain ("The gathered rose, and the stolen heart / Can charm but for a day"). One might think that, by having the poem's maiden sing the very caution she is meant to heed, Embury assures this maiden's triumph over that which plagues the women who appear in other ballads. To the contrary, though, this maiden's act of singing these lines seems, at least in part, to lead to her very downfall. Despite her continual repetition of the song, she forgets it—and in forgetting, she falls victim to the "traitor love." The poem does not make clear why the maiden "had forgotten" the song she sang, but there seem to be three possible explanations: because love's great charms rendered ineffective the maiden's knowledge; because the passage of time provoked (or required) her to forget; or because the manner in which she knew and recited the song emptied it of its effectiveness. The first two readings leave the maiden blameless for her fate, while the final one suggests that the act of memorizing the song, and then repeating it while engaged in other work, renders it useless. In other words, this woman comes to bad ends not simply because she forgot the song she sang, but because she repeated it. In this way, Embury's ballad highlights what can come of repetition for the woman singer: she will become that of which she sings.

While it is unclear where or when the maiden in this poem learned the song she repeats, it is clear that the song is meant to be an instrument of moral guidance. As Catherine Robson has argued about memorizing poetry in the nineteenth century, such an act was important for, among other reasons, "its religious and moral aspect: the individual, both in childhood and in later life, would be guided, improved, and comforted by the principles and sentiments stored within."<sup>8</sup> In this way, the repetition of verse functioned as a supplement to a young woman's education, and here we see one such woman in the midst of that education's failure. Bound up in its own metrical, linguistic, and

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Robson, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012), p. 7.

syntactical repetitions, the ballad becomes the perfect genre for this story of repetition's dire consequences. By showing that it did no good for the maiden to repeat the original verse (in the end she is both fallen *and* silenced), the poem suggests that the refusal to repeat instructional language in the first place may be precisely what is needed.

But while "Ballad" critiques the effect that such repetition has on the woman singer, the point here is not simply that all repetition is bad. The poem itself finds ways out of the kind of repetition that causes its subject's downfall. Unlike the woman figured in it, "Ballad" foregrounds its own ability to revise itself, as can be seen, for instance, in its move from its French epigraph to its English refrain and in its inversion of the lesson's first and second phrases in the poem's final couplet, which are taken out of the woman singer's voice and articulated by the poem's narrator. Additionally, the repetition of the refrain itself can be seen doing a certain amount of subversive formal work within the poem, as it interrupts the poem's narrative, keeps the poem from revealing the actual details of the story, and suspends the poem's meaning. As Hollander has argued, the "refrain is rooted in a rhetorical self-consciousness" ("Breaking into Song," p. 75), and so its very existence in this poem signals a resistance to the unfolding of events in time that the rest of the poem seems to want to perform. All of this is to say that "Ballad" reveals the ways in which the refrain both embodies the power to make this endlessly repeatable story come true *and* represents a structural turning away from such a story.

My point is not merely that the subject of Embury's ballad is a critique of the ballad. One might usefully contrast it, for instance, with "Woman's Truth: A Ballad" (which was published under the name "Arion" in *The Philadelphia Monthly Magazine* in February 1829), a poem that takes as its subject the kind of knowledge about women that the publication of ballads was circulating. The drama of the poem revolves around the fear of "young Madoe" that "fair Rosine" will not be faithful to him in his absence. He has been listening to others, or, as it were, reading too many ballads: "I fear—I fear, thy faith will freeze, ere the holy city's won: / Men say, that lady's love is like yon moon's deceitful smile, / Which beams but when the sun

looks on—may'st thou not too beguile?" Once Rosine has proved herself faithful, the final stanza delivers up a lesson about the false sense of women that we normally get from ballads:

Now recreant is the heart and base, and false the tongue which saith  
That lady's love is light or lithe, or fickle lady's faith:  
Oh! the beam of woman's heart, when fixed, can never turn away;  
But on the breast it brightened first, it burns and burns for aye.<sup>9</sup>

In attempting to repair women's reputations, "Woman's Truth: A Ballad" recognizes as a type the female figure who sits at the center of such ballads. But for Embury, the point is not a self-conscious repudiation of the ballad's gendered contents, as her target is the unconscious, unintended meaning the refrain garners in the context of the ballad's repetitions of the story of fallen women.

Embury stands in an interesting position to her culture's repetitions of the story of fallen women, for, like the refrain in "Ballad," she warns against this story while also repeating it herself. Embury published many tales and poems in periodicals, anthologies, and books from the 1820s through the 1860s, and what figures most prominently across all of this work are variations on the story of a woman who is being coerced by some male figure and who, most often, does not have the strength to resist him. Even when this woman holds her ground—as, for instance, the woman in "The Widow's Wooer" does—the lesson is clearly that women must have impeccable moral fortitude, because men (often figured allegorically as "Love") are out to prove their weakness. This can be seen in "Two Portraits from Life," "Cheerfulness," "Farewell," "Maiden Purity," "Error," and countless other poems that present the "charm" (a word Embury uses over and over again) to which women often fall prey.

In fact, not only did Embury repeat a similar story over and over again, but "Ballad" itself—the poem that made the problem of repetition most explicit by employing a refrain—was repeated as an anthologized exemplar of the genre. Yet as if

<sup>9</sup> "Arion," "Woman's Truth: A Ballad," *Philadelphia Monthly Magazine*, 1 (1829), 245, 248.

taking its cue from the poem's warning against nonrevisionary repetition, these repetitions of "Ballad" appeared in a variety of different forms. In the wake of the poem's reprintings in 1837 and 1840, "Ballad" was included in George P. Morris's *American Melodies; Containing a Single Selection from the Production of Two Hundred Writers* (1840), a book in which Morris collected poems that he thought would be "the most popular, when adapted to music."<sup>10</sup> The first published score for Embury's poem, which was written by George J. Webb, appeared in May 1842 in *The Boston Miscellany of Literature and Fashion* (the same year that the poem appeared, without the French epigraph, in Rufus W. Griswold's *The Poets and Poetry of America*). In 1849 Griswold printed "Ballad" again, this time in *The Female Poets of America*, and in 1850 a version of it was written by Charlie Hine for voice and guitar.

In the midst of this poem's republication, redistribution, and reprinting as song, Embury turned to the problem of the ballad refrain again when she published another ballad, this one titled "'Love's First Step is Upon the Rose': A Ballad," in *The Ladies' Companion, and Literary Expositor* in 1843. In this later ballad, Embury returned to the earlier questions about the refrain's relationship to repetition, gender, genre, and the cautionary tale that she had raised in "Ballad," but this time with a focus on the maiden's act of singing:

'Love's First Step is Upon the Rose': A Ballad

It was a lady young and fair,  
     Who sang that mournful strain,  
 Her brow wore not a shade of care,  
     Her cheek no trace of pain;  
 Yet sung she, e'en as one who knows  
     How youthful hearts are torn,  
 "Love's *first* step is upon the rose,  
     His *second* finds the thorn."

Bright jewels bound her raven hair,  
     And sparkled on her hand,  
 For earth held nought of rich or rare

<sup>10</sup> See George P. Morris, "Preface," in *American Melodies; Containing a Single Selection from the Production of Two Hundred Writers*, ed. Morris (Philadelphia: Henry F. Anners, 1840), p. 3.



Her wealth might not command;  
 Yet, mark how sad the music flows  
 From lips curved half in scorn,—  
 “Love’s *first* step is upon the rose,  
 His *second* finds the thorn.”

No brighter, lovelier face appears  
 In pleasure’s crowded mart,  
 That proud eye was not made for tears,  
 No blight should touch that heart;  
 But, as she sings, some memory throws  
 Its shadow o’er life’s morn;—  
 “Love’s *first* step is upon the rose,  
 His *second* finds the thorn.”

Alas! it is a weary task,  
 To trace life’s hidden cares,  
 And who would raise the smiling mask  
 Which maiden feeling wears?  
 A quaint old rhyme may oft disclose  
 How much the heart has borne;—  
 “Love’s *first* step is upon the rose,  
 His *second* finds the thorn.”<sup>11</sup>

In this later poem, Embury presents a woman who repeats a refrain she already “knows.” Unlike the woman in “Ballad,” who becomes, over the course of the poem, the embodiment of the verse she repeats, the woman in “Love’s First Step” is already that woman. She is not at odds with what she knows, nor does she try to resist this knowledge. In fact, given that the ballad narrates what is by then her own “memory,” the ballad *is* what she knows. In this way, the tension between before and after that existed in “Ballad” is not operative here, and instead we are faced with the tension between outer and inner. Describing how this woman looks does not tell us who she is (she at least semi-successfully wears a “smiling mask”), but hearing her sing does. The poem depends on this woman’s act of singing the refrain—“Love’s *first* step is upon the rose, / His *second* finds the thorn”—to reveal who she really is. Embury’s critique of the ballad’s conventionally

<sup>11</sup> Emma C. Embury, “‘Love’s First Step is Upon the Rose’: A Ballad,” *The Ladies’ Companion, and Literary Expositor*, 19 (May 1843), 23.

gendered content here resides even more fully in the refrain than it did in “Ballad,” as this poem places the woman’s identity fully in that refrain.

And yet, as in “Ballad,” the refrain does not simply function as a vehicle for gendered critique. Here the poem does not vary the refrain or use it to sidestep the story’s unfolding in time, but instead calls explicit attention to the woman’s act of singing. In every stanza the reader of this printed poem is reminded that the ballad’s “quaint old rhyme” is being sung, and so the disjunction between the genre’s oral history and its present construction as both textual and literary is starkly on display. By invoking the orality at the center of the genre, Embury displaces this maiden’s individuality as well as the importance of her particular story. All of this singing recapitulates Embury’s literary construction (and, as we have seen, continual reconstruction) of the genre as one that employs repetition while also undercutting it. Interestingly, while this later poem embeds within the woman’s singing the oral/textual disjunction that is constitutive of the genre, one of the editors of the earlier poem layered this aspect onto the poem upon publication: When John Keese printed “Ballad” in 1840, he included below the poem’s final stanza a drawing of a dejected woman sitting at her loom (see Figure 1). Here the drawing is part of the poem, as the reader (along with the poem’s “I”) looks on at the woman. The fiction of orality that is being invoked by this ballad’s sung refrain, then, is undercut by the reminder that one is reading this printed poem in a book, that the woman is transmitted by both the sounds she makes and the way she looks on the page.

In conclusion, by using a similar formula—a woman singing a refrain that comes to mark her identity—across these two ballads, Embury highlights the ways in which the ballad’s structural repetition opens up space for the woman poet to reflect on the cultural power levied by such repetitions. In other words, by employing the refrain, ballads invite not simply the repetition of this figure but, as Embury teaches us to read the genre, the development of a gendered critique of its form. While nineteenth-century readers, editors, and critics may have read the “lessons” of Embury’s poems as those of, in Rufus

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The maid sat at her busy wheel,  
But her look was blithe no more ;  
The big tear stood in her downcast eye,  
And with sighs I heard her say,  
“The gathered rose, and the stolen heart  
Can charm but for a day.”

Oh! well I knew what had dimmed her eye,  
And made her cheek so pale ;  
The maid had forgotten her early song,  
While she listened to love's soft tale.  
She had tasted the sweets of his poisoned cup,  
It had wasted her life away :  
And the stolen heart, like the gathered rose,  
Had charmed but for a day.



FIGURE 1. Page showing illustration for E. C. Embury, “Ballad,” in *The Poets of America: Illustrated by One of Her Painters*, ed. John Keese (New York: S. Colman, 1840), p. 243.

Griswold's words, "a pure moral tendency,"<sup>12</sup> attention to her use of the ballad refrain reorients us to see the genre both as one that supports the endlessly repeatable trope of the woman who does not listen to the refrain's warnings and as one that mounts both internal and external formal resistances to such repetitions. By reading Embury's ballads within the history of their early-nineteenth-century American publication and circulation, we can begin to unravel the ways in which they participate in, while cautioning against, precisely what the genre makes possible.

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ABSTRACT

Alexandra Socarides, "What Happens When We Don't Read Ballads Closely Enough: The Cautionary Tale of the American Woman Poet and the Ballad" (pp. 215–226)

This essay looks closely at two ballads by the nineteenth-century American poet Emma Embury in order to explore some of the ways in which the ballad's use of the structural refrain enables a critique of its often-gendered content. By situating Embury's poems within the context of the proliferation of the "bad woman ballads" that appeared in print in the first several decades of the nineteenth century, this essay explores her particular manipulations of the genre. In Embury's ballads, the cautionary tale is housed in a refrain that is sung by a woman. This form works to make these women's downfalls come true at the same time that it suggests a way out of this endlessly repeatable story that the genre performs so faithfully. This essay suggests that in our consideration of the genre, we pay particularly close attention to how women poets approached the ballad's formal devices.

Keywords: ballad; Emma Embury; women's poetry; refrain; poetic genres

<sup>12</sup> See Rufus W. Griswold, *The Poets and Poetry of America: With an Historical Introduction* (Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1847), p. 360.