

Parodies of the Pre-Raphaelite Ballad Refrain

CAROLYN WILLIAMS

DURING the nineteenth century, the distinction between “ballad imitations” and “bona fide ballads” becomes harder and harder to make.¹ Neither the kind of narrative and dramatic presentation, nor the alternating four-beat and three-beat lines of what we now too-simply call the “ballad stanza,” nor the refrain provides a single stable marker of nineteenth-century poems that are called “ballad.” To the question “what is a ballad?” the nineteenth-century historical record answers: any number of things, both poetic and nonpoetic.

By the Victorian *fin de siècle*, however, and from a certain aesthetic perspective, the related ideas of “ballad” and “refrain” had been strongly associated both with one another and with a more general notion of formal repetition—as we can see, for example, when Oscar Wilde identifies the refrain as a formal principle in prose and drama as well as in verse. Close to the

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¹ Albert B. Friedman, *The Ballad Revival: Studies in the Influence of Popular on Sophisticated Poetry* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 157. Friedman is correcting Thomas Babington Macaulay on his comments about some stanzas by Matthew Prior.

publication of his own *Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898)—which makes its own critical use of the refrain—Wilde remarks upon “the refrains whose recurring *motifs* make *Salomé* so like a piece of music and bind it together as a ballad.”² Long before Wilde, of course, literary ballads conventionally turn on the form’s musical roots, but here, in Wilde’s comment on the principle of recurrence in *Salomé* (1893–94), the late-nineteenth-century focus on music (as the preeminent model for the arts in general) is retrospectively made to include the history of ballad revivals, assimilating the ballad refrain to the recurring motifs and leitmotifs of melodrama and opera. Notably, Wilde emphasizes the binding aspect of the refrain rather than its interruptive function.

The etymology of “refrain” is instructive, as John Hollander explains, pointing out the constitutive tensions between refrain as *refractus* (Latin, broken back, rebroken) and *refréner* or *se retinir* (French, to curb or check, to bridle oneself).³ Breaking into the continuity of the ballad’s narrative drive, the refrain also binds the whole together, its repetitions filling the very gaps that it creates. Deriving from the medieval carol burden, where it interrupted strophic singing to mark a time for dancing, the refrain of the *balade* in Old and Middle French (with cognates in Old Occitan, Spanish, and Portuguese) was a definitive feature of this song genre.⁴ For literary ballads, of course, the refrain serves a different purpose, creating a pause for the “dancing” of the eye and the mind rather than the body. Hollander’s transition from etymology to literary history is helpful in this regard, when he reminds us that “lyrics from the Renaissance on—poems whose relation to song-text is itself figurative—have tended more and more to trope the scheme of

² Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (1897), in his “*De Profundis*” and *Other Prison Writings*, ed. Colm Tóibín (New York: Penguin, 2013), p. 113.

³ See 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), pp. 73, 75.

⁴ Scholarship on the origins of the ballad is voluminous and controversial. Asserting an early date of origin, Gordon Hall Gerould meticulously argues that the conjunction of a “lilting” meter, “used with a refrain” for dancing was “a commonplace of the twelfth century” (Gerould, *The Ballad of Tradition* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932], pp. 208–9; see also p. 224).

refrain, to propound a parable out of its structural role” (“Breaking into Song,” p. 74). Parodies of the ballad refrain can highlight these structural “parables,” as I show in this essay. But I also propound in this essay a parable of my own, in which the dynamics of the refrain within the poem will be seen as homologous to the dynamics of parody within literary history.

Because parody must imitate its past object in order to be recognized as parody, it can sometimes degenerate into neutral imitation and be taken as “mere antiquarianism.”⁵ In such cases, the profoundly overlapping intents of parody and revival may be clearly felt. And yet, for that very reason, parody is often itself a scholarly mode, and it can be useful to scholarship in historical poetics today, if we grasp what exactly a parody means to pinpoint. Thus parody instigates and produces the contours of a literary history, insofar as it graphically identifies features that can be more or less widely recognized at a certain specific time, and turns against those features with its own critical point. Like the operations of the refrain within any given ballad, in literary history parody both repeats and departs from past form. Thus parody serves as a negative “moment” in the history of literary forms, protesting against or turning away from—while also reinstating—its object from the past, simultaneously binding and interrupting the continuity of literary history. In order to focus this point about how parodies of the ballad refrain can illuminate the form of literary history, I first pause for a brief discussion of an exemplary collection of ballad parodies before the Pre-Raphaelite ballad refrain attracted particular parodic attention. I then turn to several parodies of the

⁵ An essay in the *Westminster Review* pointed this out, unfavorably reviewing a German text on parody. See [Anon.], “Art. IV.—Parody,” *Westminster Review*, 62 (1854), 95–115. “Mere antiquarianism” is Walter Pater’s term for an unimaginative kind of historical research that his studies were meant to oppose. See for example the opening of “Leonardo da Vinci”; and for his distinction between antiquarian and aesthetic interest, see Walter Pater, “Two Early French Stories,” in his *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1980), pp. 78, 14–15. On eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century attitudes toward antiquity and antiquarianism, see Jonah Siegel, “Mere Antiquarianism,” a response to the *Romantic Circles* issue on “Romantic Antiquarianism”; available online at <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/antiquarianism/praxis.antiquarianism.2014.siegel.html>>, accessed 22 August 2015.

Pre-Raphaelite ballad refrain—in order to see what is being parodied, and how—before returning, in the end, to “profound [my] parable” about the structural operations of parody in literary history.



Wave after wave of ballad collection, revival, and parody across the nineteenth century demonstrate the sheer formal heterogeneity in what might be called a “ballad.” For example, even a cursory glance at *The Book of Ballads*, the 1845 compendium of parodies supposedly edited by “Bon Gaultier” (William Edmondstoune Aytoun and Theodore Martin), shows us this profusion at a moment just before the earliest Pre-Raphaelite poetry. This wild formal heterogeneity was itself the butt of parody in the volume as a whole.⁶ Bon Gaultier’s *Book of Ballads* codes that heterogeneity in part as national difference. Crucially, the volume’s contents are divided into sections of “English Ballads,” “Spanish Ballads,” “American Ballads,” and “Miscellaneous Ballads”—which latter cluster lampoons still other national and ethnic groups. In other words, readers could notice at a glance the association of balladry with national cultures, and Bon Gaultier’s parodic harping on nationalism suggests that the association itself was becoming a little threadbare, even by 1845.⁷

Bon Gaultier’s section on “American Ballads” offers an especially suggestive document for transatlantic studies, humorously adapting its American subject matter to faux-medieval frameworks of various sorts, and thus playing on the assumption that a relatively new culture—with no ancient literary past—might be incongruously approached through the old form of the ballad. For example, “The Fight with the Snapping

⁶ See *The Book of Ballads*, ed. “Bon Gaultier” [William Edmondstoune Aytoun and Theodore Martin] (London: Wm. S. Orr and Co, 1845). See also “Parody,” *Westminster Review*, p. 111.

⁷ On the nationalism inherent in the search for the “folk” through their songs, see Dave Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British “Folksong” 1700 to the Present Day* (Milton Keynes: Open Univ. Press, 1985). And see Meredith Martin, “‘Imperfectly Civilized’: Ballads, Nations, and Histories of Form,” *ELH*, 82 (2015), 345–63. (As Martin puts it, “the ballad doesn’t have a folk” [p. 361].)

Turtle; or The American St. George” is composed in two segments under the archaic headings “Fytte First” and “Fytte Second.” Playing on the catch-all notion of a ballad as a popular narrative poem on a historical or legendary subject, this ballad of “the American St. George” replaces the ancient dragon with the indigenous snapping turtle and invents humorously bathetic acts for the newly vaunted hero. The parody aimed in particular at William Cullen Bryant, who accompanies the hero as his squire in order to be “the Homer of the battle,” and who invokes American slang, American place names, and American accouterments throughout, all the while imitating a traditional English ballad.

Yet many of the Bon Gaultier ballads poke fun at well-known examples from the home culture’s more recent past. The reviewer in the *Westminster* notes, for example, that “The Lay of Mr. Colt” parodies “one of Mr. Macaulay’s most stirring lays” and that “The Queen in France” is “an admirable imitation of the old Scotch ballad style” (“Parody,” *Westminster Review*, pp. 110–11). In the latter ballad, when the French King calls for a song to entertain Queen Victoria, the Harper rejects Lamartine and Hugo as models in favor of “the sang o’ the Field o’ Gowd, / In the days of auld langsyne.” Other dialect traditions come in for their share of parody, too; “The Massacre of the Macpherson,” for example, purports to be “From the Gaelic” and makes itself almost unintelligible with ridiculously dense linguistic feints. Quite recent balladeers such as Edward Bulwer Lytton and Alfred Tennyson come in for their share of ridicule, too, as does Thomas Moore, whose *Irish Melodies* (1808–1834) were still enormously popular. “The Bard of Erin’s Lament,” Bon Gaultier’s parody of Moore, professes to be written by one of the unsuccessful candidates for the Laureateship after the death of Robert Southey. Because of that pretext, this set of poems was recognizable at the time as a parody of parodies, for the *Rejected Addresses* of James and Horace Smith (1812) had presented a set of parody odes to the reopening of the Drury Lane Theatre after it had been destroyed by fire. This historical chain of parodic commentary is explicitly acknowledged when the reviewer in the *Westminster* states that “The Bard of Erin’s Lament” seems “superior to Messrs. Smith’s ‘Living Lustres’,”

the parody of Moore in the *Rejected Addresses* ("Parody," p. 109). Its superiority is perhaps owing to the fact that the later poem parodies not only "the ballad" as such, but also the way the ballad migrates, having moved through Moore's work into the middle-class drawing-room and having been cheapened (this parody implies) by its greater distance from the supposed authenticity of the folk. Notably, however, the Bon Gaultier parodies do not highlight the ballad refrain.



The ballad refrain becomes a particular object of parody in a particular situation, at a particular time, in relation to a particular verse culture. In the 1870s and 1880s, the refrain was taken to be an identifying feature of the ballad in parodies of Pre-Raphaelite poetry, whose sophisticated attempts to revive the past seemed ostentatious and affected to some readers. As practiced by the Pre-Raphaelites, especially William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Algernon Swinburne, the ballad refrain functioned as an allusion to past verse traditions, creating the ornamental or atmospheric effect of another culture and another time.⁸ Both Morris and Rossetti specialized in a print-culture imitation of the "musical" refrain, cordoned off from the stanza and often italicized, a kind of music—or, at the very least, a rhythm—designed for the mind's eye. These refrains provide a meditative pause in the exposition, whether restful or exclamatory, arresting, jarring, or soothing—a moment for relief or "revival" of the reader within the revivalistic poem itself. They provide the punctual mark of a turn away from the strophe toward another register entirely—no longer toward dancing, of course, but now toward an elsewhere in the unreachable past. In this respect, the refrain's archaism

⁸ A thorough treatment of the Pre-Raphaelites' variations on the ballad is beyond the scope of this argument. But it should be noted that Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal in particular practiced the ballad very differently and did not inspire the same sort of parodies. See Constance W. Hassett, "Elizabeth Siddal's Poetry: A Problem and Some Suggestions," *Victorian Poetry*, 35 (1997), 443–70, especially 449–51. Swinburne, who will figure briefly in this essay, adroitly parodied both himself and others in *The Heptalogia* (1880); he also re-created and transformed the refrain in *A Century of Roundels* (1883).

punctually reminds its reader of the poem's intent to imitate a past in both story and form. Thus these refrains mark time doubly—both in the poem itself and also in literary history—highlighting, in other words, the distance between the nineteenth-century imitation and the Old French or “early Italian” model.

The historical distance enacted by the refrain sometimes appears as another language—thus establishing a displacement not only in time but also in place or national culture, as signified by the shift away from English. The high seriousness of this learned display is especially noticeable in Morris's early poetry, for example in “The Eve of Crécy,” which commemorates the British victory in France that turned the tide of the Hundred Years' War, with its refrain of “*Ah! qu'elle est belle La Marguerite*”; or as in “The Gilliflower of Gold,” which tells of a fierce battle enacted as the knight-narrator remembers the death of his loved one, his memories and feelings developing around the variable use of the refrain, “*Ha! Ha! la belle jaune giroflée*.” Wilde defends these internationalist incursions: “all this love of curious French metres like the Ballade, the Villanelle, the Rondel; all this increased value laid . . . on curious words and refrains” is, Wilde argues (somewhat vaguely), an expression of the spirit of the present time, “the attempt to perfect flute and viol and trumpet through which the spirit of the age and the lips of the poet may blow the music of their many messages.”⁹ Here Wilde argues in favor of the gathering in the present of “curious words and refrains,” as if they could metaphorically indicate the wealth of the historicizing present time, recollecting all its many pasts.

Before Wilde, Pater's review of Morris's poetry (1868) had also respected these “snatches of the sweet French tongue” in *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858).¹⁰ More important, Pater makes a theoretical statement about revival in general, arguing that “an actual revival must always be impossible,” an effort of “vain antiquarianism . . . a waste of the poet's power” (“Poems by William Morris,” p. 307). But Morris in his handling of an ancient subject

⁹ Oscar Wilde, “The English Renaissance of Art” (1882), in his *Miscellanies* (London: Methuen and Co., 1908), p. 253.

¹⁰ [Walter Pater], “Poems by William Morris,” *Westminster Review*, 90 (1868), 308. Further references appear in the text.

“never becomes an antiquarian,” Pater argues, for Morris means to create neither a “mere reproduction” of the past nor “a disguised reflex of modern sentiment,” but something in between past and present. Pater famously called this kind of poetry “aesthetic poetry,” emphasizing the proud assertion of its conjoined imitative and historicizing functions (p. 300). It is, he asserts, a form of poetry made for the present day that yet displays its “charming anachronisms” (p. 306).

In a similar context, Pater speaks of the refrain as a “question of the poetic value” in his essay on Rossetti (1883). In doing so, he tacitly acknowledges what we will soon see had been a widespread reaction against the refrain in the decades just past. He proposes various functions of the refrain: “to relieve . . . the sentiment of terror” (in “Troy Town” and “Eden Bower”); to perform “the part of a chorus” (in “Sister Helen”); and to serve as “the keynote or tune of a chant” (in “The White Ship”). Following popular skepticism, however, Pater also asks whether the effect of the refrain appears “to the mere reader” that of a “positive interruption and drawback.” And he engages—as he did in his review of Morris—the related question of revival in general, addressing the fact that “Rossetti turned so often from modern life to the chronicle of the past,” and pointing out that “such old time as that [which Rossetti represents] has never really existed except in the fancy of poets.”¹¹ Again, in other words, Pater understood full well that these pasts are created for and in the present, and he repeatedly justifies the modern poetry of his generation specifically for its historicizing, revivalist efforts. He mentions several of these, glancing at the English and Scottish revivals, while focusing more particularly on Morris’s revival of French influences (Provençal poetry, Thomas Malory, Jean Froissart) and the melded “early Italian” and French inspirations of Rossetti (Dante, Pierre de Ronsard, François Villon).

But Pater does sound defensive about the refrain—and his defensiveness itself can be read as one symptom or critical after-effect of a widespread popular reaction against Pre-Raphaelite

¹¹ Walter Pater, “Dante Gabriel Rossetti” (1883), in his *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan [Library Edition], 1910), pp. 217, 216. The essay was first published in 1883 in Thomas Humphry Ward’s *The English Poets*.

antique imitation in general—and the refrain in particular. In 1866, for example, George du Maurier, better known for his anti-aesthetic *Punch* cartoons (1873–1882), wrote “A Legend of Camelot” for that magazine, a faux-medieval ballad with an absurdly reductive refrain, printed in Gothic blackletter. The object of his parody, Morris’s “The Defence of Guenevere,” employs a powerful refrain in which Guenevere answers her accuser, Sir Gauwaine, by accusing him in turn—but she does so only three times in the poem’s 295 lines. Du Maurier hyperbolically supplies the vapidly generalized refrain “O miserie!” after every tetrameter couplet, while making fun of the framework of address, with its antique diction, in the original poem’s dramatization of Guenevere’s trial:

“Who knows this damsel, burning bright,
 Quoth **L**auncelot, “like a northern light?”
 Ⓢ miserie!
 Quoth **S**ir Gauwaine: “I know her not!”
 “Who quoth you *did*?” quoth **L**auncelot.
 Ⓢ miserie!¹²

In this parody—as in his anti-aesthetic cartoons—George du Maurier both represents and helps to create a popular readership who were supposed to be appalled by the literary-historicist sophistication of the Pre-Raphaelites and aesthetes, who regarded their experiments in revival as nonsense, and who were eager to take them down several pegs.

In 1871 Robert Buchanan crystallized this sense of outrage. Writing pseudonymously as “Thomas Maitland,” Buchanan launched his infamous critique of the Pre-Raphaelites (and of D. G. Rossetti in particular) in “The Fleshly School of Poetry.”¹³ (Rossetti responded angrily in “The Stealthy School

¹² See [George du Maurier], “A Legend of Camelot—Part 1,” *Punch*, 3 March 1866, p. 94. Part 2 appeared on 10 March 1866, p. 97, and Part 3 appeared on 17 March 1866, p. 109.

¹³ See “Thomas Maitland” [Robert Buchanan], “The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti,” *Contemporary Review*, 18 (1871), 334–50. Further references to this essay appear in the text. Telling the story of the controversy, John A. Cassidy suggests that Buchanan’s rage against Rossetti was due to personal animus (see Cassidy, “Robert Buchanan and the Fleshly Controversy,” *PMLA*, 67, no. 2 [1952], 65–93). For a more recent and capacious account see Gavin Budge, “The Aesthetics of Morbidity: DG

of Criticism,” and Swinburne responded parodically in *Under the Microscope*.)¹⁴ Buchanan attacked on two main grounds, objecting both to the sexual explicitness of the poems and to their “grotesque mediævalism” (“Fleshly School of Poetry,” p. 342). The controversy resonated actively for at least two decades and was remembered long afterward, as we can see when Ezra Pound records in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly” (1920) that “Foetid Buchanan lifted up his voice.” (Notably, Pound’s own form of faux-historicism builds on his nineteenth-century forebears.)

Indeed, the Pre-Raphaelites did open Victorian poetry to a new frankness about “fleshly” concerns. But Buchanan’s prurient blustering about Rossetti’s “nasty” propensities has already received a great deal of critical attention (“Fleshly School of Poetry,” p. 338).¹⁵ Instead, in this essay I want to focus attention on Buchanan’s disgust at the Pre-Raphaelites’ historicizing practices, their imitation of old poetic styles and forms.

All Buchanan’s points about form are objections to the principle of revival itself—for, to Buchanan, any imitation of past forms seems “false” and “meretricious,” “the mere fiddle-dedeing of empty heads and hollow hearts” (“Fleshly School of Poetry,” pp. 340, 346). In general he finds it repellent “when writers deliberately lay themselves out to be as archaic and affected as possible.” Here his equation of “archaic” and “affected” is telling. He dislikes a turn away from “spontaneity,” the effect of having “taken a great deal of trouble” (pp. 341–42). To illustrate what he thinks of as their absurdity, he selects

Rossetti and Buchanan’s *The Fleshly School of Poetry*,” in *Outsiders Looking In: The Rossettis Then and Now*, ed. David Clifford and Laurence Roussillon (London: Anthem Press, 2004), pp. 203–20.

¹⁴ See D. G. Rossetti, “The Stealthy School of Criticism,” *Athenaeum*, 16 December 1871, pp. 792–94; and Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Under the Microscope* (London: D. White, 1872). See also Rossetti’s unpublished limerick (fair copy, British Library, Ashley Collection, A1880): “As a critic, the poet Buchanan / Thinks the Pseudo worth two of the Anon. / Into Maitland he’s slunk; / But what gift in the skunk / Guides the shuddering nose to Buchanan”; available online at <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/372-186g.blms.rad.html>>, accessed 19 August 2015.

¹⁵ See, for example, J. B. Bullen, who emphasizes the commonness of this complaint against the Pre-Raphaelites, in *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998); and Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), especially pp. 25–27.

several particular formal features for particular scorn. First he ridicules archaic vocabulary, pronunciation, and rhyme, disdain-
ing the poets who affect “the construction of their grandfathers
and great-grandfathers, and the accentuation of the poets of
the court of James I. . . . to rhyme ‘was’ with ‘grass,’ ‘death’ with
‘lièth,’ ‘love’ with ‘of,’ ‘once’ with ‘suns,’ and so on *ad nauseam*”
(p. 346). Here older English—though not “early English,”
much less Old English—represents an intrusion on the contem-
porary language that seems as objectionable as if it were another
language altogether. For Buchanan, a learned imitation of older
English is foreign, worse than irrelevant in the present day.

Buchanan also dislikes metrical irregularities that might
suggest an antiquarian interest. He regards them as distortions
of the poetic corpus, “unnatural” stresses on the “wrong” syl-
lables, especially “the habit of accenting the last syllable in words
which in ordinary speech are accented on the penultimate”
 (“Fleshly School of Poetry,” p. 345). He gives as an example the
opening of Rossetti’s “Love-Lily,” italicizing the strange stress as
if it were a shriek: “Between the hands, between the brows, /
Between the lips of Love-Lil^{ee}!” (p. 345; italics and exclamation
added by Buchanan). Then he offers lines from Rossetti’s
“Jenny” that illustrate the same supposed fault:

“Saturday night is market night
Everywhere, be it dry or wet,
And market night in the Haymar-^{ket}!”
(p. 346; italics and exclamation added by Buchanan)

From “Madonna Mia” by Swinburne he singles out these lines:

“In either of the twain
Red roses full of rain
She hath for bondwomen
All kind of flowers.”
(p. 346; italics added by Buchanan)

In this example, Buchanan’s ire settles not on the archaic chiv-
alry of the poem’s content, but on the stress given to the third
syllable of “bondwomen.” Calling Swinburne out for faulty
prosody, Buchanan suggests that only the “lilting” smoothness
of a regular jog-trot meter would do. (Needless to say, if the

word were mentally pronounced without the expectation of that meter, one could hear Swinburne's "incorrect" stress in "bondwomen" as a deliberate choice to catapult this stanza across its last enjambment so that it would settle calmly in "all kind of flowers.")

But Buchanan's critical motives should interest us. In making these objections, he wants to protect "our popular songs" from becoming ridiculous, as they would perforce become—he argues—if strange stresses were allowed. This is important: Buchanan means to safeguard the traditional ballad meter against metrical flaw, in order to assert a "real" national past against a mistaken contemporary revival of other pasts—pasts inflected by other language traditions (including the archaic language of "the court of James I"). He frets: "If the Pre-Raphaelite fervour gains ground, we shall soon have popular songs like this:—

'When winds do roar, and rains do pour,
Hard is the life of the sailor;
He scarcely as he reels can tell
The side-lights from the binnacle,
He looketh on the wild water,' &c.,

and so on, till the English speech seems the speech of raving madmen" ("Fleshly School of Poetry," p. 348). In other words, his point about accent is made to serve a contradictory defense; "our popular songs," inherited from "our" past, must be defended against an incursion from other versions of that national past.

Chief among these attacks on the formal gestures of revival, Buchanan reserved his special contempt for "the device of a burthen, of which the fleshly persons are very fond for its own sake, quite apart from its relevancy" ("Fleshly School of Poetry," p. 348).¹⁶ However, this very lack of "relevancy" to the

¹⁶ Buchanan was not alone in protesting the supposed irrelevancy of the refrain. Writing as "A Newdigate Prizeman"—and he actually was one—W. H. Mallock hits many of Buchanan's targets, while adding a few of his own, in "How to Write A Modern Pre-Raphaelite Poem," a section of his *Every Man His Own Poet: or, The Inspired Singer's Recipe Book* (Oxford: Thos. Shrimpton & Son, 1872), pp. 12–14. The recipe format, a staple convention of parody, emphasizes the formulaic nature of its object, stipulating

ongoing narrative, lyric, or dramatic thrust of the poem is inherent to the refrain and its critical interest, a point that Hollander makes theoretically central. Hollander characterizes the formal change in registers caused by the intervention of the refrain: “*That was all full of meaning; now meaning stops for a while and we all dance again*” (“Breaking into Song,” p. 75). The refrain stops the forward impulse of the narrative, turning away into its own repetition, again and again. Thus, according to Hollander, the “poetic refrain . . . starts out by troping the literalness of the repetition, by raising a central question: *Does repeating something at regular intervals make it more important or less so?*” (p. 75). His answer is that the refrain must always balance between the predictability of a meaningless timing device and an exquisitely modulated surprise each time the story advances, emotion intensifies, and the refrain changes in small degrees throughout the poem. Thus Hollander imagines a spectrum of reader response ranging from “O, *that again*” to the gradually increasing feeling of “incremental pain.” As he points out, “the ultimate story of modern poetic refrain is ‘What is it to mean *this* time around?’” (p. 75).¹⁷

Indeed, the traditional ballad did not practice the variations in “application” that are one hallmark of the modern literary refrain. “Application” is Edgar Allan Poe’s term, from his “Philosophy of Composition” (1846), in which, with respect to his own composition of “The Raven,” he discusses the need to bring the refrain out of the “primitive condition” caused by its “monotone—both in sound and thought.” He will vary the “application” of the refrain, changing its meaning or its orientation to the stanzas as they develop; in this way, he hopes “to

that the conventions have become so hackneyed that anyone can imitate them (“Every Man” being the very opposite of the unique “Inspired Singer”). Tacitly aiming his parody at Rossetti’s “The Blessed Damozel” (1850), Mallock’s recipe calls for archaic terms that are “obsolete and unintelligible” and for a refrain, since “this kind of poem is much improved by what is called a burden. This consists of a few jingling words . . . that . . . have no reference to the subject of the poem they are to ornament” (*Every Man His Own Poet*, p. 14).

¹⁷ Debra Fried makes a similar point in comparing the refrain both to epitaphs, which enjoin the traveler to stop and yet to move on, and to echo poems, which fruitfully confuse origin and telos of stanza and refrain (see Fried, “Repetition, Refrain, and Epitaph,” *ELH*, 53 [1986], 615–32). However, Hollander’s formulation is more firmly aligned with my literary historical framework.

diversify, and so vastly heighten, the effect, by adhering, in general, to the monotone of sound, while [he] continually varie[s] that of thought."¹⁸ We might note that these modern refrains practice, within the form of each poem, the principle of highlighting and repeating, yet distorting, an original—just as the modern refrain alludes to and imitates the traditional ballad refrain that it highlights, imitates, and distorts. And for that reason, among others, we can see that Rossetti's refrains mark themselves as modern variations on the form of the refrain, while Morris's strive to be more traditional imitations.

To illustrate the refrain's lack of "relevancy," Buchanan makes fun of Swinburne's "The King's Daughter" (1866), which begins:

We were ten maidens in the green corn,
 Small red leaves in the mill-water:
 Fairer maidens never were born,
 Apples of gold for the king's daughter.¹⁹

Lines 2 and 4 vary elegantly as the poem advances, and the gradual modulations of what is in the mill-water and what is "for" the king's daughter intensify our growing sense of ballad dread, violence, and gendered, sexual suffering. This story of incest and death might well have elicited Buchanan's squeamish sexual aversion, were he reading for the content of the narrative. Instead, he lampoons the form of the refrain, ostentatiously divesting it of any "relevant" content and rendering it as jingling folk nonsense:

"We were three maidens in the green corn,
Hey chickaleerie, the red cock and gray,
 Fairer maidens were never born,
One o'clock, two o'clock, off and away."
 ("Fleshly School of Poetry," p. 349)

¹⁸ Edgar A. Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," *Graham's Magazine*, 28 (1846), 164. Fried also discusses Poe's treatment of the refrain in "The Philosophy of Composition" (see "Repetition, Refrain, and Epitaph," pp. 626–29). See also Hollander, "Breaking into Song," pp. 73–74. On the traditional ballad in this respect, see Friedman, *The Ballad Revival*, p. 321.

¹⁹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, "The King's Daughter," in his *Poems and Ballads*, 3d ed. (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868), p. 321.

pain of its varying applications in the main body of the poem, to a horrifying though ambiguous transition to another realm (“*Lost, lost, all lost, between Hell and Heaven!*”) in the last stanza. The poem itself, in other words, already amply provides the answer to Buchanan’s peevishly questioning parody—

(*O Mr. Dante Rossetti,
What stuff is this about Heaven and Hell?*)
 (“Fleshly School of Poetry,” p. 348)

—for the refrain has instrumentally guided the reader’s heightening moral and emotional apprehension throughout. Moreover, in addition to his imputation of its irrelevance, Buchanan also presumably disdains the Mariolatry of Rossetti’s refrain. Here the conventional ballad invocation of the mother—as in “Lord Randall,” for example, and scores of others—is elevated to religious significance with the repeated invocation of “Mary Mother.” Buchanan is explicit about his distaste: already “disheartened and amazed” by Rossetti’s use of archaic vocabulary in “The Blessed Damozel,” he expresses shock that the damozel “addresses the mother of Christ as the ‘Lady Mary’” (“Fleshly School of Poetry,” p. 341). To Buchanan, then, part of the offensiveness of the refrain in “Sister Helen” would have to do with Rossetti’s “Art-Catholic” gesture, a blend of medieval chivalry and medieval faith.²¹

This refrain’s invocation of “Mary Mother” reminds us how close the figure of apostrophe is to prayer, since both forms of address turn toward a distant or absent other. Perhaps we might say that apostrophe, like other forms of address—and like the refrain—turns the poem away from the ongoing strophic narration (apo-strophe) into another register, not for dancing but for wrenching emotional resonance. Thus the characteristic movement of the refrain (its “irrelevant” turn away from the ongoing narration) is doubled by the apostrophic address here, and this doubling movement is further underscored by italicization (a form of printed differentiation of “voice”), as if the

²¹ On Rossetti’s “Art-Catholicism,” see Colin Cruise, “Versions of the Annunciation: Wilde’s Aestheticism and the Message of Beauty,” in *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England*, ed. Elizabeth Prettejohn (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 167–87.

words intervene from elsewhere, while at the same time they seem to come from a profound interiority indicated by the parentheses. In this case, the refrain-as-apostrophe both interrupts the action and forces the reader into the position of abject and increasingly desperate supplication. Thus this refrain excels at “propound[ing] a parable out of its structural role” (Hollander, “Breaking into Song,” p. 74), its interruption forcing the reader back, again and again, into the poem’s incremental development of pain. Its seeming irrelevance is intensely part of its point, for the refrain turns away from the unfolding story of catastrophe to seek comfort or relief from a mother who might have been expected to offer divine intercession, yet who turns out to be more like an antiquarian, “Art-Catholic” substitute for the old mother of the traditional ballad, an object of address (but little more than that), a hypothetical auditor, a place toward which the invocation is directed, a destination for the cry of pain.

“After Dilettanti Concetti” (1882) by Henry Duff Traill, another parody of Rossetti’s “Sister Helen,” also targets the supposed irrelevancy of the refrain.²² In this poem, the address to “Mother Mary” becomes an address to “Mother Carey,” the high-art Lady-Mother rhyingly replaced by the low-art “auld wife” or domestic crone-mother of folk tale and nursery rhyme, the very Ur-figure of popular oral transmission. But the content of the narrative no longer details the traditional ballad suffering of a self-torturing and revengeful Helen. Instead, this parody ballad tells of Sister Helen’s obsessively writing a new ballad, and thus the poem’s literary-historical reflexivity is placed at the center of the joke. Imitation ballad-writing itself is portrayed as a compulsive and self-torturing activity:

“Why do you wear your hair like a man,
Sister Helen?
This week is the third since you began.”

²² See “After Dilettanti Concetti,” in H. D. Traill, *Recaptured Rhymes: Being a Batch of Political and Other Fugitives Arrested and Brought to Book* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1882), pp. 109–12. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text. The poem can also be found in *The Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (New York: Modern Library, 1968), pp. 473–75; and online at <http://literaryballadarchive.com/PDF/Traill_1_After_Dilettant_f.pdf>, accessed 26 April 2016.

“I’m writing a ballad; be still if you can,
 Little brother.
 (*O Mother Carey, mother!*
What chickens are these between sea and heaven?)”
 (“After Dilettanti Concetti,” p. 109)

The disagreeable sexual slur against Sister Helen’s hairstyle is striking and puzzling, perhaps meant to imply the stereotype of the masculine woman writer, a strong-minded woman whose compositional activity is supposed to be both compulsive and meaningless. This “Sister Helen,” though, is also ostensibly a Pre-Raphaelite, with her stereotypical dress of “sage, sage green,” her lean figure, and her pale complexion (p. 109). Such a writer would in due course be attracted to the ballad refrain, as we see later in the poem when the little brother asks:

“And who’s Mother Carey, and what is her train,
 Sister Helen?
 And why do you call her again and again?”
 “You troublesome boy, why that’s the refrain,
 Little brother.
 (*O Mother Carey, mother!*
What work is toward in the startled heaven?)” (p. 110)

The little brother might well ask, “Why do you call her again and again?”—for that is a question suggested in the original, as I have been at pains to argue. The overlapping of refrain and apostrophe makes the repetitive “call” to the mother quite meaningful in the history of the literary ballad, even while the parody focuses on the refrain’s supposed meaninglessness.

Likewise, Traill practices variations in the refrain’s application, as Rossetti did, but he makes them more nonsensical. Thus, using the ballad refrain, this parody makes fun of ballad imitation, pointing out that ballad revival and ballad imitation have become mechanical, compulsive, and hackneyed activities. Yet the repetitions do lead to a significant impasse. Eventually another voice enters the poem when “(*A big brother speaketh:*)” (“After Dilettanti Concetti,” p. 111). Addressing both Helen and the little brother, this “big brother” inverts the syntax of his first

The sonnet propounds an awakening of the “common-sense of man,” causing a turn away from the “ballad-burden trick.” In line 54 it becomes clear that the sonnet, supposedly sung by the big brother, has been impersonating a voice for the ballad refrain itself all along. “My face” is the face of the ballad refrain, and the “I” of the poem does not refer us to the big brother’s subject position, but to that of the ballad refrain:

“I, alas!
 The ballad-burden trick, now known too well,
 Am turned to scorn, and grown contemptible—
 A too transparent artifice to pass.” (p. 112)

This confession grows even more acute in the sestet. The ballad-burden laments “What a cheap dodge I am!” and compares itself to the sound of metallic rattling as cats run through the streets with tin cans tied to their tails. Conjuring these cats’ tails and hindquarters, which have been “burdened” with the street “urchin’s ‘art,’” the parody invokes “the wretched creature’s caudal part” (p. 112), learnedly alluding to the caudal sonnet tradition while reasserting the shame of the “foolish empty-jingling ‘burden’” of the ballad. Thus this lyric parody of the ballad refrain, we might say, “propounds a parable” out of the “structural role” of the “caudal part.” We have reached the back-sides and tail-end of the tradition of the ballad refrain.

In turning from ballad to lyric, Traill’s parody makes a tacit comment about the course of nineteenth-century literary history, while turning the tradition of ballad revivals inside out, speaking from the “subjective” position of a personified ballad refrain—something that by definition can be “lyrical” only in the musical sense, never the personal or subjective sense, even though it operates an intense emotional response in the reader.

On the opposite end of the formal spectrum from Traill’s generic complexity and self-reflexiveness, Charles Stuart Calverley chooses bathetic simplicity for his parody of the ballad refrain. Both Hollander and Friedman mention Calverley’s parodic “Ballad” (1872) along with “Sister Helen,” though they do not expand on that connection.²⁴ Indeed, the connection

²⁴ See Hollander, “Breaking into Song,” p. 76; and Friedman, *The Ballad Revival*, p. 321.

they implicitly assert could never be clinched, for Calverley's poem lampoons an entirely different kind of ballad—not the Pre-Raphaelite ballad, but the traditional ballad, the kind of plain-spoken English “popular song” that Buchanan wanted to protect. Like Traill's parody, Calverley's “Ballad” responds to the long tradition of ballad revivals in general, commenting on the tediousness of the search for “folk” origins that is seen to have reached a level of nonsense in its repetitions of the same tropes and conventions over and over again. And like Traill's, Calverley's ballad might well be intended as a response to Buchanan in particular, especially to his demand for a tradition that depends on simplicity and straightforward language.²⁵ In both respects, Calverley's “Ballad” gives us a simplicity that has been comically reduced to simple-mindedness:

The farmer's daughter hath soft brown hair;
 (*Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese*)
 And I met with a ballad, I can't say where,
 Which wholly consisted of lines like these.²⁶

The poem begins with comfortingly banal fatuity: an “auld wife” sits at her “ivied door, . . . / A thing she had frequently done before” (“Ballad,” p. 48) We should think of the “auld wife” in opposition to “Mother Mary,” as a secular, ordinary “mother” who is the totemic spirit of the traditional ballad.²⁷ In other words, this sort of ballad has also “frequently [been] done

²⁵ Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* (1881) may be seen as another demonstration that parodists were still making fun of Buchanan even a decade later. At the conclusion of the comic opera, Bunthorne, the chief aesthete, sings: “In that case unprecedented/ Single I must live and die, / I shall have to be contented / with a tulip or lily,” the pronunciation of lil-EYE poking fun at two of Buchanan's chief objects of irritation (archaic rhyming and unusual stress). See W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, *Patience*, in *The First Night Gilbert and Sullivan: Containing Complete Librettos of the Fourteen Operas, Exactly as Presented at Their Première Performances; Together with Facsimiles of the First-Night Programmes*, ed. Reginald Allen (New York: Heritage Press, 1958), p. 166.

²⁶ [Charles Stuart Calverley], “Ballad,” in his *Fly-Leaves* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, and Co., 1872), p. 49.

²⁷ Cf. Walter Scott in *Guy Mannering* (1815), where it is said of the smugglers that “they'll . . . hae an auld wife when they're d'ying to rhyme ower auld ballads, and charms . . . rather than they'll hae a minister to come and pray wi' them” (Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering*, ed. P. D. Garside, vol. 2 of *The Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1999], p. 272).

before,” but Rossetti’s attempt to re-sacralize and Art-Catholicize the mother figure has here been reversed and undone, returning her to the position of the “auld wife.” The poem also shows how ballad imitation can veer toward nonsense verse, for a certain piper (who will later be important to the narrative) pipes “Till the cow said, ‘I die,’ and the goose asked ‘Why?’ / And the dog said nothing but search’d for fleas.” (In many of his parodies, Calverley articulates a critical understanding of the relations between parody and other forms of imitation—not only nonsense, but also translation—connections that must be bracketed here to be developed elsewhere, at another time.)²⁸ Clearly Calverley parodies not the sophisticated Pre-Raphaelite ballad, inflected by “Old French” and “early Italian” influences, but the “early English” Anglo-Scottish traditional ballad; he parodies not ballad violence and suffering or “weird” atmospherics, but the “traditional” pretense to be representing ordinary, everyday folk. His refrain—“(Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese)” —provides no increase in “incremental pain” but the utterly mechanical repetition of the timing device: “O, *that* again,” in Hollander’s characterization.

The reflexivity of recognizing “lines like these” registers the debate about the proper metrical form of ballad lines, which will only later eventuate in a consensus settling around the alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines; this stanza imitates the traditional four by four of common meter. If any parable is propounded out of the structural role of this refrain, it might well have to do with the vaunted late-nineteenth-century idea of pure form, joined to childish nonsense and the banality of a grocery list. Eschewing learned historical research, this ballad reduces the long literary history of the nineteenth-century ballad revivals to an accidental finding: “I met with a ballad I can’t say where.” Nor, from the point of view of this parody, would it ever be possible to say “where” the ballad comes from. This is irrelevancy with a vengeance, making meaning by turning full away from meaning-making. Calverley’s parody makes the important point that revival and parody

²⁸ But meanwhile, see Patrick G. Scott, “A Few Still Later Words on Translating Homer, or C. S. Calverley and the Victorian Parodic,” *Postscript*, 4 (1987), 9–18.

are similar forms of imitation. His parody “Ballad” suggests that literary revival is already to some extent playing at parody.



Formally, then, the ballad refrain offers a model for the way parody works in literary history. Just as the ballad refrain turns away from strophic progress in the narrative—to mark a time for dancing or for other forms of “irrelevance”—parody provides a “negative moment” in literary history, imitating or repeating yet also distorting or turning away from the past at the same time. In other words, parody conservatively reinstantiates its object, even while distancing itself from that object in the mode of critique and moving away from the past into an assertion of the ultimate value of the contemporary moment. Though by no means a modern mode, parody is therefore a powerfully *modernizing* one.²⁹

Thus parody can usefully be seen as the complement, companion, and dialectical “other” of the nineteenth-century revivals—including the ballad revivals. If nineteenth-century historicist revivals can be taken as a sincere or even reverent effort to re-collect or re-create an honored past, then parody treats the past lightly, blatantly identifying its generic traces as too easily deployed, too easily recognized in the present moment. When the object of parody is already an imitation of past forms—as, for example, when we consider a parody of a literary ballad, an imitation of an imitation—the parodic dynamic is doubled, and the parody’s relation to the literary past is doubly reflexive.

Though revival and parody both depend on imitation and the felt distance between present and past, parody always casts its lot with contemporaneity, highlighting its own knowing and up-to-date point of view, as compared with that of the past object, which—simply by virtue of being parodied—comes to seem strangely old-fashioned, outworn, hackneyed, and all-too-recognizable. To be more precise: parody re-creates its object *in and as the past*. For the historical poetics of nineteenth-century

²⁹ For a more developed discussion of parody’s temporal, historicizing, and modernizing functions, see Carolyn Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2011), pp. 6–17, especially pp. 9–10.

literary ballads, this insight is all the more piquant, since that is their aim in the first place: to re-create an object in and as the past. Whether turning against the Pre-Raphaelite or the traditional Anglo-Scottish ballad, the parodies we have examined in this essay make the very effort to revive old ballads itself seem very old, turning one massive trend in nineteenth-century literary history upside-down, inside-out, and (especially) backward.

Thus this form of historical thinking is homologous to the operations of the ballad refrain, since the “negative moment” of parody simultaneously disrupts and yet also binds the continuity of literary history. Insofar as the parody turns away from repeating the literary past, it also preserves it; insofar as it repeats the past, it also turns away. Thus, as we have seen, something as playful and specific as the parodies of the Pre-Raphaelite ballad refrain can provide a model for larger issues in literary history. In this sense, the history of forms suggestively illuminates the forms of history.

Rutgers University

ABSTRACT

Carolyn Williams, “Parodies of the Pre-Raphaelite Ballad Refrain” (pp. 227–255)

Parodies of literary ballads changed over the course of the nineteenth century, as did their implicit commentaries on practices of poetic revival in general. In the 1870s and 1880s a focused reaction against the Pre-Raphaelite ballad refrain has much to show us about the function of the refrain, which operates as a timing device yet also guides a gradual increase in the ballad’s incrementally modulated sense of pain, making meaning by turning away from narrative progression and meaning-making. Debates about the poetics of revival, a subject across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, culminate in the great theorizations of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, who both comment on the ballad refrain. The dynamics of literary history may also be illuminated by this attention to parodies of the ballad refrain, for the role of the refrain within any given ballad may be seen as homologous to the role of parody within literary history—simultaneously interrupting, turning away, and binding a sense of continuity. This essay glances at the ballads of “Bon Gaultier” (1845) and demonstrates the general parodic interest in—and defenses of—the Pre-Raphaelite ballad refrain later in the century, before attending to parodies of D. G. Rossetti’s “Sister Helen” (1870, 1881) by Robert Buchanan in 1871 and Henry Duff Traill in 1882.

Keywords: Pre-Raphaelite; parody; D. G. Rossetti; ballad; Henry Duff Traill

Appendix

H. D. Traill, "After Dilettanti Concetti," in his *Recaptured Rhymes: Being a Batch of Political and Other Fugitives Arrested and Brought to Book* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1882), pp. 109-12.

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AFTER DILETTANTE CONCETTI.

"WHY do you wear your hair like a man,
Sister Helen?

This week is the third since you began."

"I'm writing a ballad; be still if you can,
Little brother.

(O Mother Carey, mother!

What chickens are these between sea and heaven?)"

"But why does your figure appear so lean,
Sister Helen?

And why do you dress in sage, sage green?"

"Children should never be heard, if seen,
Little brother?

(O Mother Carey, mother!

What fowls are a-wing in the stormy heaven!)"

AFTER DILETTANTE CONCETTI. 111

Little brother.

(*O Mother Carey, mother!*

Thy brood flies lower as lowers the heaven.)”

(*A big brother speaketh:*)

“The refrain you’ve studied a meaning had,

Sister Helen!

It gave strange force to a weird ballad.

But refrains have become a ridiculous ‘fad’

Little brother.

And *Mother Carey, mother,*

Has a bearing on nothing in earth or heaven.

“But the finical fashion has had its day,

Sister Helen.

And let’s try in the style of a different lay

To bid it adieu in poetical way,

Little brother.

So, *Mother Carey, mother!*

Collect your chickens and go to—heaven.”

112 AFTER DILETTANTE CONCETTI.

*(A pause. Then the big brother sing-
eth, accompanying himself in a plain-
tive wise on the triangle :)*

“Look in my face. My name is Used-to-was ;
I am also called Played-out and Done-to-death,
And It-will-wash-no-more. Awakeneth
Slowly, but sure awakening it has,
The common-sense of man ; and I, alas !
The ballad-burden trick, now known too well,
Am turned to scorn, and grown contemptible—
A too transparent artifice to pass.

“What a cheap dodge I am ! The cats who dart
Tin-kettled through the streets in wild surprise
Assail judicious ears not otherwise ;
And yet no critics praise the urchin’s ‘art,’
Who to the wretched creature’s caudal part
Its foolish empty-jingling ‘burden’ ties.”