

Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Signature:

Melissa Winkler

April 13, 2010

Tell No Tales On Me: A Study of Murder Ballads

by

Melissa C. Winkler

Adviser

Walter Reed

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies in Culture and Society

Walter Reed
Adviser

Regine Jackson
Committee Member

Cathy Caruth
Committee Member

April 13, 2010

Tell No Tales On Me: A Study of Murder Ballads

By

Melissa C. Winkler

Adviser

Walter Reed

An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies in Culture and Society

2010

Abstract

Tell No Tales On Me: A Study of Murder Ballads By Melissa C. Winkler

Murder ballads are songs that tell instances of violent and bloody killings. Whether the murderers in these songs are men killing their sweethearts or mothers killing their newborn infants, the characters in these ballads are very closely linked to one another. The ballads demonstrate the proximity of love and death. The passion that allows the characters to love is the same passion that allows them to kill. This thesis is an exploration of murder ballads through three lenses. The first lens uses the ballads as examples of folklore and analyzes the symbols and conventions that the ballads draw upon. These symbols reappear in all ballads, and this section explores the instances where they appear in traditional and subversive ways. The second section uses a feminist framework to explore the implications of the ballads on gender and patriarchal discourse. In this section, I analyze the symbols for their contribution to gender norms and conventions. The third section moves away from the ballads themselves and uses two essays by Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller* and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, to explore the implications of technological development on ballad culture in general. In order to link these three readings together, I consider them in terms of Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*. In treating the materials as an archive, I explore the acts of remembering and forgetting that go into the creation of murder ballads. Murder ballads work as metaballads that comment on ballad culture itself. Exploring them theoretically allows for a path toward understanding the implications of these songs on a larger cultural framework.

Tell No Tales On Me: A Study of Murder Ballads

By

Melissa C. Winkler

Adviser

Walter Reed

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies in Culture and Society

2010

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Walter Reed, Regine Jackson, Cathy Caruth, Seth Wood, Angelika Bammer and Peter Wakefield for their encouragement and advice. All of these people have been important mentors and have gone above and beyond in helping me complete this project.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	p.1
Chapter One: Murder Ballads as Folklore.....	p. 5
Chapter Two: Murdered Maidens and Maidens Murdering.....	p.23
Chapter Three: Reading Murder Ballads Through Walter Benjamin...	p.39
Conclusion.....	p.53
Works Cited.....	p. 56
Bibliography.....	p. 59
Appendix A: Song Transcriptions.....	p.64

Introduction:

The silence that occurs before a song begins feels like an abyss that consumes the listener. The piercing of the angelic voice of the singer saves the audience before they slip into the silence. Running beneath the beauty of the voice and the music is a certain otherworldly quality. We recognize the song as a tale of love, but something about the love is eerily unrecognizable. The path that the lovers have taken contradicts our expectations as listeners. We continue along in the hopes of finding the happy ending that we have come to expect, but instead we find only violence and murder. The passion that allows these characters to love is the same passion that allows violent rage to consume them. Murder ballads lead us down these paths and leave us there with the blood, forcing us to reevaluate our expectations and experiences. Folk music is always interested in death, and this relationship with dying gives the music its power. Murder, however, is a very particular means of understanding and arriving at death. Life is a precious thing, and taking the life of another is a culturally reprehensible action. The cultural implications of murdered sweethearts and children open up a new way of interacting with the systems that surround our understanding of death. These songs that tell of the proximity of life, love, and murder introduce us to the cultural and theoretical frameworks that shape individual and collective identity.

Folk music grounds itself in folklore, and therefore operates within a narrative system of myths and archetypes. Folksongs are artistic representations of the narratives and discourses that shape individual and collective interaction with social structures. The genre of folk music consists of many different ballad forms. The specific focus of this thesis is murder ballads, which rest between two further classes of ballads: broadsides and traditional. The broadside ballads are songs written down in response actual instances of murder. The broadsides are quickly disseminated, and the haste with which they emerge forces them away from the details of the actual events and makes them more representative of larger social frameworks. Murder ballads can also fall into the category of traditional ballads, which rely almost entirely on an oral component rather than the printed material texts of broadsides and use the family as the main site of transmission (G. Malcolm Laws xi). This thesis is a three-part reading of five murder ballads and their variants. These ballads selected deal exclusively with maniacal lovers who manipulate their partners and either commit murder or force their partners to do so. Through these three readings, I hope to discover the complexity of this specific form of folk music, as well as make comments on the wider cultural implications of the genre.

The first reading explores the status of murder ballads as examples of folklore whose symbols and motifs can be read for their consistencies and their contradictions. The section uses Roger Renwick's analysis of folksongs to read the ballads and their status in the larger cultural framework. Ballads draw from a limited collection of symbols

and plot constructions and reformulate the meanings and appearances of these constructions. The second section draws upon the symbolic exploration of the first chapter, but with special attention being paid to the role of patriarchy and the gender constructions at work in these symbols. This feminist critique attempts to explore the contradictions of the social expectations being placed on women and men by exploring the implications of these constructions. The third chapter uses two versions of a single murder ballad to explore the changing landscape of ballad culture itself. This exploration is accomplished in a reading of the ballad through two essays by Walter Benjamin: *The Storyteller* and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Both the loss of the storyteller and the constantly changing technological capabilities affect the role that ballads play in society. This reading hopes to discover exactly what is at stake in this acceleration of reproducible art. With these three chapters, I hope to present three interdisciplinary readings that demonstrate the richness of murder ballads as texts.

Finally, as a means of framing these three separate readings, I will put them into conversation with one another using Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*. The first two chapters explore the way folk ballads interact within the established cultural and symbolic systems, while the third chapter's reading of the texts through Benjamin challenges us to consider the effects of the changing landscape of recording and preservation. The interaction of these readings is an important one if we consider the function of the archive, not simply for folk music, but as a social institution in general.

The archive works simultaneously with that which is past, that which is passing, and that which will come in the future. The archive is, of course, not entirely comprehensive. Derrida speaks of the censoring that occurs in the creation of the archive in terms of the “political power of the archive which consists in selecting the traces in memory, in marginalizing, censoring, destroying, such and such traces through precisely a selection, a filter, and which...is made possible by...the finitude, the limitation...human power of space” (Derrida, seminar 44). Because there is a spatial limit to what can be included in the archive, and because the archive has this “political power,” exploring what is excluded and forgotten from the archive becomes equally important in gaining a sense of the archive. By using an engagement with the multiplicity at work in the creation of the archive, I hope to weave the three interdisciplinary readings of murder ballads together and use their connections and contradictions to grasp at an understanding of the effects of archiving on folk music itself.

Chapter One: Murder Ballads as Folklore

She never spoke another word
 I only beat her more
 I beat her till the ground around
 Within her blood did flow”
 -”The Knoxville Girl” Rusty York

The murderer in this ballad seduces the woman, silences her, and beats her to death. The lasting image from the violence is a pool of blood that is deep and expansive enough to consume the ground. The earth itself is marred with this murderous rampage. The cultural landscape is also affected by the scenes of violence present in murder ballads. These ballads simultaneously inform and reflect the social narratives that work to shape individual and collective identity. More specifically, murder ballads, because they deal almost exclusively with love relationships, serve as lenses through which we can view the relationship between love and death. How does murder function within these ballads and what does its presence indicate about larger social structures? Murder is a symbolic action that relates to larger cultural structures. Murder is a specific type of death that has a particular function not only within the structure of these ballads, but with a larger cultural narrative. Roger Renwick explores the methods of that ballads employ to engage with the larger social structure:

Like traditional and anonymous folksongs, local songs do not attempt to disguise their conventionality, and go to great efforts to familiarize and to legitimize their topics and messages by placing these within well-known frames of reference of

both culturally normative content and culturally normative ethos...In their topic, messages, composition and performance they are intimately related to ongoing social life. (Renwick 3)

The conventionality of the narrative components of folksongs reflects their connection to the mythical structures and ideological frameworks that members of community, the folk, use to interact with the cultural landscape. Through a reading of structure and form, I hope to discover the way that conventions and symbols are working within songs to supplement or in some cases contradict the overarching social systems.

A central focus of my reading involves exploring the metaphorical structures at work within folk music. This exploration involves locating symbols and conventions and understanding how they interact with one another. Symbols and conventions work together to create an economy of representation. The symbols are the recognizable markers that make up the conventions. For example, the leading of a young woman away from her home is a symbol that operates within the convention of using isolation as a site for murder. The reading of symbols and conventions comes directly out of work done by Roger Renwick and G. Malcolm Laws, who analyze the appearance of symbols across a wide array of folksongs in order to classify the meanings of repeated symbols. In Renwick's reading of folk poetry, he defines the two main operating systems at work within poetry:

My own assumption is that coherence should obtain among members of a clearly related textual corpus: in particular, the coherence of a unified system of meanings informing those texts. Finding the code to this coherent system requires analytical instruments of some sensitivity, an "apparatus" that in our case has

built into it another of my assumptions: that folk poetry- like any other kind of literature, I am sure- exhibits levels of signification that range from straight-forward denotative “reflection” to profoundly connotative symbolization. (14)

Symbols exist in a spectrum of meaning. They can function either as really obvious and readily accepted signifiers, or they can be the gateways into deep textual and social meaning. Symbols, therefore, have a doubling effect. This duality of structure is important not only to understand how specific symbols operate, but also to gain insight into the complexity of the system of representation. Additionally, recognizing symbols and conventions does not allow for a deep enough investigation. Understanding the way that these conventions are interacting with each other and within the larger social framework is a necessary component to reading the songs “folk poetry often contains signifiers that have to be decoded if the poetry’s meaning is to be revealed, not simply identified and match up one-to-one with equivalents in the empirical or conventionally defined world” (Renwick 14-15).

Classification is an important methodological tool when doing a reading of the symbols, conventions and structures of ballads. The initial classification form that I am working from involves defining the genre of the ballads that I am using, namely murder ballads. Murder ballads fall into the category of traditional ballads which George Malcolm Laws in *The British Literary Ballad: A Study in Poetic Imitation* defines as “traditional narrative songs carried in the memories of the folk from one generation to another and sung in public or private, usually among country people” (xi). In American

Balladry From British Broad-sides, Laws offers a more specific definition for “popular ballads,” which is the material being explored here; “by ‘popular ballad’ we mean a narrative song, usually anonymous, which depends upon oral tradition for its preservation. The ballad must tell a story; it cannot be primarily a lyric expression of emotion”(1). From this definition of the genre, Laws goes on to further classify the broadsides in eight categories based on the subject of the song: “War Ballads, Ballads of Sailors and the Sea, Ballads of Crime and Criminals, Ballads of Family Opposition to Lovers, Ballads of Lovers’ Disguises and Tricks, Ballads of Faithful Lovers, Ballads of Unfaithful Lovers, and Humorous and Miscellaneous Ballads” (6). The ballads that I am dealing with specifically fall most clearly into the categories “Lovers’ Disguises and Tricks” and “Ballads of Unfaithful Lovers,” but because these categories offer fluidity in their boundaries, some songs may move in and out of these classifications. By narrowing the scope of the ballads and classifying them, a movement can be made to explore the themes and motifs that repetition and exposure make most visible. Renwick further classifies the themes and motifs used within ballads as either “poetic” or “nonpoetic:”

For an analysis of fuller meaning, however, we must turn to special signifiers in the text. The special signifiers are those that “make a difference” between the poetic universe of the folksong imagery on the one hand and the nonpoetic signs on the other...The poetic imagery signifies and connotes the nonpoetic indicates and denotes. We can isolate a poetic signifier and seek its range of possible meanings by canvassing the genre for all other manifestations of the same image. (24)

Drawing from Renwick's analytical approach, I will explore the repetition of poetic signs and their implications on the specific ballads they appear in as well as the genre as a whole.

A common tool of murder ballads involves presenting a courting relationship that the listener immediately recognizes as an idealistic moment when love begins to form. The listener slips into the woosers courting attempts just as the object of affection has until we realize that it has all been a trap. The love is a game manipulation where the players die and the listeners are forced to move away from their assumptions of love ballads. "Pretty Polly," a popular murder ballad that details one woman's experience with a potential mate follows this trajectory. In the ballad, a man (often times a ship carpenter) woos Polly and leads her away from her family home with the promise of marriage. This promise comes early in the song and seems to be a sufficient motivation for the young woman. Before he can marry her, however, Willie (sometimes Billy) insists that Polly leave her home and go away with him. Willie justifies this trip by insisting that he has "some pleasures to see" (Steele). Polly complies, jumps on the back of Willie's steed, and together they ride away from town. Steele's version of the song highlights the swiftness and passion of their escape with a rapid banjo solo. In other versions like Jean Ritchie's and John Hammond's, rapid and intense musical movements mark the swiftness and passion of this moment in the song. The E.C. Ball version of the song takes on a different musical form. The lightness and simplicity of the instrumentation presents a contradiction

between the musical tone and the lyrics. His detachment from the violent intensity of the song makes the listener even uneasy as he or she grapples to make sense of the contradiction. Very soon into their journey, Polly grows suspicious of her lover, and this suspicion grows into debilitating fear. This fear seems to not merely be related to his removing her from the familiarity of her home, but also to a sudden change that has overcome him, "Pretty Willie, Pretty Willie/ I fear your way"(Steele). The facade that Willie has maintained throughout the courting dissolves away to reveal his true intentions. He has no desire to marry Polly, but rather he has taken her away from her family and from civilization and brought her into the woods to kill her. In fact, he has already dug her grave, and it waits there for her. Polly begs for her life to no avail. Willie stabs her through the heart, and the blood flows over both of them as Polly falls into her grave. Willie buries her and rides away. The unprovoked murder is complete, the woman is dead, and the man is free to return to his life.

This brutal tale of murder immediately disturbs the listener with its gruesome details. The structure follows along a path of folkloric symbolism. An immediate concern for listeners comes from their disconnected relationship with the characters in the song. We get nothing more than their first names and the shallow defining characteristic "pretty." Despite this lack of characterization, the listener is still captivated by the events of the ballad. Laws suggests that this simplicity of character development is central to the goal that ballads are attempting to achieve. The song's concern is not to present

elaborately constructed characters and plots, but rather to draw upon conventions to tell a story:

These [simple naming techniques] are usually stereotypes whose actions and reactions are largely determined in the minds of the ballad makers. Thus the motivation for much broadside ballad action is weak or non-existent by literary standards. But this does not disturb the balladist, who is primarily concerned with exciting action and not with artistry” (Laws 90).

The main function of the ballad is to work within the limits of the ballad form to reflect and interact with the major mythical constructions at work in society. Ballads do not make an attempt to paint extremely detailed portraits of the characters in their songs, but rather they rely on an already present discourse that listeners will recognize and accept.

The symbols and conventions at work in “Pretty Polly” extend beyond the vague character establishment into important plot devices. One of the most prominent motifs in the song is Willie leading the young Polly away from her home and into the woods. Taking a girl from her home and civilization and leading her into the isolation of the wilderness has one of two meanings in popular ballads. The meaning of this motif depends on the types of ballad, “murdered-sweetheart ballads may begin with the man luring the maid away from the safety of home with a false promise of marriage, while ballads of successful courtship may end with the man leading the maid toward home with a true promise of marriage” (Renwick 31, italics in the original). The oppositional meanings of the same action indicate the potential duality of conventions within folk

music. The structure of songs that tell stories of lovers in a successful relationship mirrors the structure of these tragic ballads. Murder ballads use the structure of comedies to force the listeners to assume the presupposed outcome. At the moment the listener fully allows assumptions about the plot to take him or her over, the structure is corrupted. What was thought to be a conventional love song becomes a song about violence and blood. Rather than having a marriage ceremony to complete their love cycle, the two are joined together in violence and blood.

The pervasiveness of symbols becomes very clear with an exploration of many ballads and their variants. A ballad that shares the themes and structure of “Pretty Polly” is “The Knoxville Girl,” a variant on the popular ballad “The Oxford Girl.” In this ballad, unlike with “Pretty Polly,” the experience of courting is further detailed. The young man tells of their ritual meetings, “And every Sunday evening/Down at her home I’d dwell” (York). The ballad in its “Oxford Girl” form begins with a declaration of love for the girl, “I fell in love with an Oxford girl/She had a dark and roving eye” (Collins). This murderer comes to us in a much more elaborate disguise. The earnestness of his confession of love and the man’s devotion to courting leads us to believe he loves the girl. In a seemingly innocent move, the young lovers leave the safety of the girl’s home and go for an evening walk. In the Collins version, we get the image of the man taking her “lily-white hand.” This moment brings out two very important folk song conventions. First, as with “Pretty Polly,” the leading away from town indicates imminent death. In a

song of successful courtship, this leading away would be framed by a lack of parental consent that make such a departure necessary if true love is to prevail (Renwick 25-26). In this ballad, however, the parental consent is there from the beginning. This makes the leading away a much more sinister act. Why would they need to leave the protection of society for the isolation of the woods? This leaving sparks a fear in the listener of the events that are about to transpire between the lovers. The lily-white hand is another very important symbol in the ballad tradition. Its pervasiveness across many ballads makes it a central piece of conventions. Despite the frequency of its appearance, this act can be narrowed down to just a few meanings:

The act can be the immediate prelude to a romantic commitment on the part of the hand-taking male...especially when the advances of either partner are explicitly sexual...In direct contrast, taking by the lily-white hand may also signal the imminent death of the one whose hand is taken, whether it be murder by the lover...or by a jealous rival whose suitor has slighted her in favor of the victim. (Renwick 26)

The taking of the lily-white hand serves in some cases as the strong prelude to a sexual act. The virginal woman with her white hand is taken away by the man. This romantic hand taking may also lead to an act of marriage. In this ballad, however, the man seems to be completely unmotivated by sex or marriage. In "The Oxford Girl," he even explicitly states that he could never marry the girl, "But I feel too ashamed for to marry her/A-being so young a maid" (Collins). His intentions in leading her away are much more ominous.

When they reach their destination away from the town, he springs into action. Taking a stick, he knocks her to the ground. Once on the ground, the girl begs for her life “she fell down on her bended knees/For mercy she did cry/ ‘Oh Willie my dear, don’t kill me here/I’m not prepared to die” (York). In this pleading on bended knee, we see another important ballad symbol at work. The change in the positional relationship of the two lovers serves as a physical representation of the change in their relationship to one another. The woman begging for her life is in a subordinate position like the man who was very recently her lover. Renwick explores the pervasiveness of this act, “the falling on bending knees and the crying for pardon or mercy (the kneeling and the importuning always appear together and thus seem to constitute a single signifier)” (28). Like with the taking of the lily-white hand, this signifier manifests itself differently depending on the nature of the song. In certain instances, it can mean begging a pardon from a lover whom the kneeler has wronged. This supplication can lead to a successful loving relationship (Renwick 29). In the tragedy of murder ballads, however, the pleading is for the kneeler’s life, and it is always an unsuccessful tactic. The bending of the knee also serves as an inversion of the marriage proposal. Rather than the man on bended knee asking the woman to complete the courting cycle, the woman is begging for her life.

Before the girl can plead further, he beats her until her blood flows on the ground around her body. In “The Oxford Girl,” the man, determined to dispose of the body, grabs her hair and drags her to the river, “I caught fast hold of her curly, curly locks/And

I dragged her through the fields/Until we came to a deep riverside/Where I gently flung her in” (Collins). The odd and seemingly out-of-place gentleness with which he throws her body into the river reinforces the symbolic meaning behind the river. As is the case with the other symbolic conventions at work in ballads, the river has a polarized meaning. It can facilitate lovers returning to one another and being bound forever or it can symbolize permanent separation (Renwick 25). In this murder ballad, the river becomes a more important indication of separation than the girl’s death. Perhaps that is where the lover’s remorse comes from in the final stanza, “Look out, she go, look out, she floats/She’s a-drowning on the tide/And instead of her having a watery grave/She should have been my bride” (Collins). Just as quickly and fully as he is overcome by his desire to murder the girl, he becomes entirely remorseful having lost her forever. “The Knoxville Girl” ends differently as the murderer leaves the girl’s body and returns to his mother’s house. She notices the blood and questions her son, but the police quickly arrive to take him to prison. The punishment for his crime is death. The difference in the ending of these two variations of the same tale indicates a difference in the intentions of the ballads. While punishment for the murder is inevitable, the presentation of this punishment varies. The man in “The Oxford Girl” is left with his own regret for murdering the woman who he actually loved. His punishment is therefore entirely self-inflicted. In “The Knoxville Girl,” however, the punishment comes from the outside. Society determines that he must die, and he mourns himself rather than the girl he has

just murdered “And now they’re going to hang me/Oh Lord I hate to die/And now they’re going to hang me/Between the Earth and Sky” (York). This ballad, then seems to reinforce the power of society over the individual. In both cases, however, the men cannot escape punishment for their crimes.

Central to understanding the symbols and conventions at work in these various ballads, is an exploration of the ballads where similar symbols are being used to represent different things. As Renwick points out, symbolic meanings (unless they represent an exceptional instance) operate as polarizing figures, “when that [metaphorical] subspectrum becomes overlaid with a cluster of significations that reach beyond single reified referents to embrace polarized sets of concepts, then we are in the realm of symbolization” (57). The polarization of symbols is an obvious consequence of the juxtaposition of songs of successful courtship with songs of murdered lovers, but there is also a complexity of meaning within each subgenre. The ballad “False Sir John” reconsiders the traditional murdered sweetheart ballad in that rather than having a woman who easily falls victim to her lover’s sadistic crime, she is able to foil his plans to kill her. This ballad uses the same symbolic conventions that are at work in “Pretty Polly” and “The Knoxville Girl,” but explores the other potential meanings of these symbols. “False Sir John” is a variation of the popular Child ballad, “Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight.”

The ballad opens with a description of Sir John’s courting of the young May Colvin, “her father’s only heir.” Immediately, the naming convention that appears in the

other ballads is broken here. Instead of merely a first name, we get a first and last name as well as a description of this maiden as a legal subject. This naming draws the listener deeper into the tale. It also creates a more complex female character for the audience to grasp onto. Sir John arrives and woos the young lady. In the Jean Ritchie version, this wooing occurs “while she spun the cloth/And while they made the hay” (Ritchie). In other versions of the song, this wooing is linked to an instrument that has a supernatural power over the rest of the community, “He’s taen (sic) a harp into his hand/He’s harped them all asleep/Except it was the king’s daughter/Who one wink couldna (sic) get” (Child 4B). In this second act of wooing, the audience is drawn into the lover’s trance just as the kingdom has been. The Ritchie version presents us with a more earnest and persistent wooer who captivates the audience and the lady through his dedication to her.

Eventually, Sir John’s tactics work and he is able to convince May Colvin to run away with him. Before they can flee the father’s house, however, Sir John convinces May Colvin to steal her father’s gold and horses: “It’s bringing me some of your father’s gold/And some of your mother’s fee/I’ll take thee to some far off land/And there I’ll marry thee” (Ritchie). She gathers quite a collection of gold and the two lovers flee from the house and ride far away from the town “till they come to a lonesome spot/A cliff by the side of the sea” (Ritchie). In this isolation, Sir John reveals the truth of his manipulation and his plan to kill the young girl, “Light down, light down said False Sir John/Your bridal bed do see/It’s seven women ever drowned in here/And the eighth one

you shall be” (Ritchie). At this point in the ballad, all the normal conventions that make up murdered sweetheart tales are present. The listener prepares for the imminent violently brutal death that is about to occur. However, a major diversion from the traditional structure of the successful false lover murder ballads occurs. Rather than act quickly as the suitors of “Pretty Polly” and “The Knoxville Girl” do, Sir John slows the pace of action. His greediness gets the best of him and he demands that May Colvin remove all of the beautiful clothing she is wearing, “Have off, have off your Holland smock/With borders all around/For it’s too costly to lay down here/And rot on the cold, cold ground” (Ritchie). He demands that she removes her clothing until the point that she will be completely naked, “Take off, take off your silken stays/Likewise your handsome shoes/For they’re too fine and costly/To rot in the sea with you” (Ritchie). This final request gives our heroine the opportunity to take action. May Colvin insists that Sir John turn his back to her rather than violate her modesty, “Turn around, turn around though False Sir John/And look at the leaves of the tree/For it don’t become a gentleman a naked woman to see” (Ritchie). Sir John agrees, and he turns his back to the girl. This is his fatal mistake. May Colvin develops a seemingly supernatural strength and overtakes the man. She throws him into the sea and ignores his pleas for mercy, “No help, no help said May Colvin/No help will you get from me/For the bed’s no colder to you, sir/Then you thought to give to me” (Ritchie). May Colvin mounts on the horses and returns to her father’s home.

In this tale of unsuccessful murder at the hands of a false lover, the symbolic constructions that prevail in songs of successful murder present themselves in a different manner. The leading away that Sir John uses in this ballad serves a very similar purpose to the leading away of the other two murdered sweethearts. This leading away, however, is only effective if it happens quickly. The lovers convince the girls to ride away with them and do not allow them any time to think about the consequences of this departure. Sir John's desire for wealth, however, slows the pace of the escape, setting him up for failure. Arriving at an isolated spot miles away from civilization means disaster for the women of "Pretty Polly" and "The Knoxville Girl." Once removed from the protection of society, they are easy targets for the vicious wrath of their lovers. For May Colvin, this isolation is a key factor in her successfully overcoming her murderer. Because she is outside the limits of society, she is able to evoke a power normally denied to women of her standing. The wilderness is a place where lovers go to experience a deeper connection. Just as easily as the wilderness allows lovers to openly express their passion and desire for one another, it allows murdering lovers to enact their plans. This removal from others also makes the murder that she commits a crime that she can do without any consequence. Sir John's orders for the girl to remove her gown reflect another prevalent convention in ballads. Like all other symbols, the removal of the gown has oppositional meanings. In a successful tale of lovers being reunited, the removal of the gown "is integral to the uniting of lovers in their "true" guise" (Renwick 27). In tales of murder,

however, this gown removal indicates the separation of lovers (Renwick 27). May Colvin removing her heavy and burdensome garments actually gives her the freedom she needs to overtake the devious lover and throw him into the water. Sir John's demands for her clothing also slows the action down considerably, giving May Colvin the opportunity to formulate a plan to overtake her murderer. Once she has channeled the power and strength necessary to overtake the man, the pleading that was present in "The Knoxville Girl" occurs. This pleading, however, is done by the would-be-murderer rather than the lady. The hierarchical relationship between the two, she is on the cliff and he is in the water, mirrors the standing-kneeling dichotomy of the previous ballads. Again, this change in position reflects an inversion of the marriage proposal. Sir John is not asking for her hand in marriage, but rather begging for his own life. The presence of the river here reflects another important symbolic convention. The water, as with other symbols, has the power to unite or to tear apart, "the two overarching significations of a tide, whether river or seashore's waves, as human conveyor are clear; it brings lovers together to facilitate mating...on the one hand, and on the other separates sweet-hearts irrevocably" (Renwick 25-26). The water is necessary in this ballad to completely eradicate False Sir John from May Colvin's life. She does not need to worry about the potential for him to regain power and overtake her. Ultimately, one of the major failures of this murder lies in the slowed down pacing of events. False Sir John seems to have a much more elaborate and thought out plan for wooing and murdering whereas the other

murderers seem to become momentarily possessed by a passionate desire that leads to their extreme violence just as May Colvin does. Giving the woman an opportunity to think about a plan for revenge marks the downfall of the murderers.

In a bizarre twist from the rest of these murder ballads which end shortly after the climax of the action, "False Sir John" has an epilogue detailing the events after the murder. May Colvin mounts her steed again and rides through the night until she arrives at her father's house. This nearly seamless transition away from the murderous passion that overtook her in the woods into her role as a maiden in the confines of society is complicated by only one thing, her parrot. The parrot knows not only of May Colvin's escape with Sir John, but also seems to suspect that she has murdered him, "Then up and spoke that little parrot/Said "May Colvin where have you been?/And what have you done with False Sir John?/That went with you right in" (Ritchie). This moment of confrontation with the parrot is even odder given the fact that the parrot is not repeating but creating speech. On one level, the bird's ability to formulate original thoughts and speech reflects the manipulation of symbols that run throughout the entire song. On a deeper level, the parrot's questions mirror the corruption of traditional comedic narratives to create the tragic alterations in murder ballads. The girl begs the parrot to remain silent "Oh hold your tongue you pretty parrot/And tell no tales on me" (Ritchie). The pleading for silence functions not only in reference to Meg's specific transgression, but also as a plea for folk music itself. In repetition, symbols and the conventions that they lead to gain

their meaning. This repetition, however, must happen without acknowledgement from the songs themselves, especially when the songs attempt to reformulate expectations. The power of the songs comes from their ability to trick listeners into following along an expected path towards loving relationships only to expose a new and tragic formulation. If recognition of this trick occurs, the power disappears. Songs, like the parrot of “False Sir John,” gain their power through their ability to fluctuate between creation and repetition. Repeated symbols afford the song a framework from which to move, but the real telling of the story comes with the reconsideration of these symbols. The multiplicity of the meaning of these symbols mirrors the multiplicity of the interaction between murder ballads and cultural narratives. By moving between the inside and the outside, murder ballads are able to use symbols and conventions to thread themselves into large cultural narratives.

Chapter Two: Murdered Maidens and Maidens Murdering

In the depths of the woods, one of the most severe transgressions is committed. A young, unwed woman delivers two beautiful baby boys, both who she quickly stabs through the heart and buries in the ground. This act of infanticide is the central plot to the murder ballad “The Cruel Mother.” The mother’s violent murder of her children is a horrific crime that the listener has a difficult time coming to terms with. A mother killing her children corrupts any culturally formulated notion of what a mother is supposed to be. A listener can place this woman in the category of bad mother and move on knowing that she is the opposite of what we as a society strive to protect. Such a reading, however, only captures the surface of what is a very complicated action. Consider the fact that had the mother let her children live, they would be bastards, outcasts. They would exist on the fringe of society because of the scandal and stigma that surrounds their birth. The infanticide that occurs in the ballad indicates the complexity of the perceptions surrounding not only motherhood, but womanhood itself. The transgression of the ballad does not exist in isolation, but rather, interacts constantly with deeply embedded hegemonic systems that dictate gender norms. The gender norms that force the mother to make the decision to murder her children shape the action of the other murder ballads. All the women of the ballads operate within these gender constructions. They must explore

archetypes and contradictions within the system in order to gain a sense of identity.

Through an exploration of the functions of archetypal relationships and identities, I hope to bring to light what the existence and pervasiveness of these gender archetypes says about cultural ideals.

Through imagined stories and artistic forms, murder ballads interact with the discourses that cultural communities use to maintain a collective identity. These discourses, however, do not appear to members of the group as intentional and contrived narratives, but rather become so deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness that they are completely naturalized. In a patriarchy, the major power structure shapes the world in a way that privileges the male viewpoint and reinforces oppressive gender norms. Dichotomous gender discourses bleed into folklore and lead to stories and myths that reinforce gender norms. They use archetypes and symbolism to simultaneously echo the established values and to contradict normative structures. Despite the fact that ballads are heavily shaped by dominant discourses and systems of social control and oppression, they are the artistic form of expression of the marginalized classes. Their origin in the subordinate groups indicates a separation from the strongest sites of social control, on the one hand. On the other hand, the fact that oppressive narratives and institutions appear in these songs indicates the far-reaching power of hegemonic control. The relationship

between murder ballads and dominant discourse becomes even more complicated when we juxtapose the songs that reinforce normative values with those that subvert dominant discourses. How are these subversive stories operating within the dominant structures?

Because of the power that sexuality brings, sexually active, unwed maidens are a tremendous threat to the patriarchal social structure. “The Cruel Mother,” derived from the Child ballad, “The Greenwood Side,” a minister’s daughter falls in love with his clerk, and the two lovers follow the traditional courting ritual for “a year and a day,” laying the foundations for a successful love relationship. After this courting period, however, the man rapes the girl, “till the young girl he did betray.” This rape leads to an unwanted, out-of-wedlock pregnancy. The fact that this pregnancy is the result of rape does not save the girl from the effects of the social taboo surrounding sex and pregnancy outside of marriage. In order to maintain her virtue and status, the girl must go out into the isolation of the woods and kill her children. Once she is alone deep in the forest, the woman leans against a tree and delivers her twin boys, “she leaned her back up against a thorn/and there two bonny boys she has born” (Collins). The moment of penetration that is not present in the actual moment of conception comes here. The penetration produces immediate results as the babies are born just as the thorn enters her body. The woman is entirely responsible for conception and birth. She alone is implicated for the violation to the accepted social narrative that insists that unwed women be virginal maidens. Because

this transgression will taint her reputation, she must take action to hide protect her status. This means murdering the babies. The woman takes her penknife and stabs them, “she took her penknife keen and sharp/And pierced those two babes through the heart”(Mangsen). In the Mangsen version, she attempts to no avail to wash the blood of the knife, “she washed the penknife in the brook/But the more she washed the redder it looked.” The inability to clean the knife indicates the fact that she will be forever tainted for her pregnancy and for the murder she commits.

This murder seems necessary if she is “to go a maiden home” (Collins). She buries the bodies and returns to her father’s house in what seems to be a seamless transition back into her old life. One day, however, the woman sees two young boys playing. Immediately, she grows excited and tells the boys that if they were her children she would dress them in fine clothing. The boys then reveal their identities. They are the aged ghosts of her murdered newborns. They foresee an elaborate punishment for her sins, ending with “seven years in the flames of hell.” The mother laments having killed the children, and accepts all of the punishments while begging God to keep her out of hell. This plea to escape the punishment of hell indicates a complication in the woman’s actions. She willingly accepts the other punishments, but this one is too much. The act of murdering the children has a double meaning. On the one hand, it is one of the most objectionable actions a woman could take in a patriarchal system. Murdering mothers mean bad mothers. On the other hand, perhaps this act of murder is a noble attempt on

the woman's part to keep her children safe from the social stigma that their bastardized status would bring. They would be outcasts, permanently marred by their mother's indiscretion. The woman has no way out. Becoming pregnant and keeping the babies leads to an equal level of stigmatization within the patriarchal framework.

More often than the mother-child relationship that "The Cruel Mother" focuses around, murder ballads explore heterosexual, erotic love relationships. These ballads begin with moments of courtly love that quickly turn violent and bloody murders where the female victim has very little opportunity to defend herself and easily falls victim to the violent rage of her lover. This narrative structure can be found in the ballads "Pretty Polly" and "The Knoxville Girl" or its variant "The Oxford Girl." These ballads begin with the courting of fair young maidens by seemingly trustworthy men. In "Pretty Polly," the courting ritual is extremely abbreviated. Listeners must assume, however, that some level of courting has occurred to make Polly willing to leave her home in the hopes of marrying the man. "The Knoxville Girl" discusses the courting ritual in more explicit detail, "I met a little girl in Knoxville/The town we all know well/And every Sunday evening /Down at her home I'd dwell" (York). From the beginning of the song, a strong foundation for a successful tale of courtship has been laid. The murderer has invested a lot of time in wooing the maiden, and the listener begins to feel uncomfortable as he or she recognizes the path that the relationship will take. Knoxville as "the town we all know well" represents the courting ritual that we as a society know so well: the man

woos the woman and the two get married. Automatically, we connect the song's narrative with that social narrative. Because these ballads are examples of folklore, it is important to consider the conventions at work within them. The institution of marriage has a far-reaching cultural relevance. The values that society places on love relationships exemplify themselves in the institution of marriage:

Love relationships are seen as transgressions in the expressive vision of song poetry because of the importance placed on the marital unit as a successful end to such affairs. The ordeals that lovers undergo in song courtships truly socialize them to the importance placed on the marriage they with such difficulty manage to negotiate. (Roger Renwick 51)

Within the patriarchy, marriage is the goal of all love relationships, but successful marriage requires much more than love and attraction to one another. Courtship is the social institution that teaches young men and women not only the values that should guide their decision to get married, but also the trajectory that their marriage should take. The manners that two lovers use in the developing stages of their relationship allow for outsiders listening to the song to recognize the relationships as courting rituals. If the courtship is to succeed, the woman must be pure and virginal. In "Pretty Polly," the wooer demands that the girl come away with him before he can marry her, "Pretty Polly, Pretty Polly/Come and go away with me/Before we are married/Some pleasures to see" (Steele). The quest for pleasure seems to be the lover's test of the girl's virtues. By agreeing to go with him and indulge in pleasures, she exposes herself as an impure, less-than-ideal woman. While "The Knoxville Girl" doesn't give any explicit implication that

its heroine lacks these virtues, the earlier form of the ballad indicates that the girl from Oxford may not be as pure as an ideal woman should, "I fell in love with an Oxford girl/She had a dark and roving eye/But I feel too ashamed for to marry her/A-being so young a maid" (Collins). This two-fold explanation for the wooer's resistance to marrying the girl offers important insight on the weight society places on marriage. Whether the girl's "dark and roving eye" indicates that she has been unfaithful and lacking in virtue, and is therefore tainted and deserves no love from the man, or whether her age indicates an insurmountable taboo, the fact that his inability to marry her marks her as a target for murder shows that the ultimate goal of any love relationship is marriage. Because he cannot marry her, he must find a way to terminate the relationship, "failure to attain the desired end, whether because of falseness of one partner or interference by such agents of control as parents, means that the two have failed the test of the 'survival of species'"(Renwick 51). The falseness in murder ballads can be both the falseness of a promiscuous woman or the falseness of the man tricking her. The fact that the man is the murderer, however, indicates that the woman's falseness is more socially reprehensible. Marriage is such an important institution because procreation is essential to the survival of the human race, and patriarchal discourse defines proper sexual relationships. Not every form of procreation is acceptable, however. Communities mold love relationships and define acceptable marriages based on traits they wish future

generations to possess. Communities do not value women with a loose moral code, and therefore, enact methods of social control to limit their procreative abilities.

As the women in these ballads develop their sexualities, they become both unfit for marriage and completely undesirable sexually. The men who have courted them do not desire them sexually, and therefore they are obsolete members of the patriarchal society as they have lost their status and value. The complete loss of value makes their deaths a socially acceptable outcome. In “Pretty Polly,” the wooer leads the girl away from her home and deep into the woods. Before they even arrive to the spot where the man has dug her grave, Polly is completely aware of her impending doom, “He led her over the hills and a valley so deep/And at last Pretty Polly began to weep/She threw her arms around him/She suffered no dear/ ‘How can you kill a poor girl? /I loved you so dear” (Steele). Polly’s pleas are done in vain and she cannot convince her former lover not to kill her. The act of murder reflects a manipulated sexual union, “He stabbed her through the heart/And the blood it did flow/And into the grave/Pretty Polly did go” (Steele). Instead of sexual, creative penetration, the knife inflicts a destructive violent unification. The impurity that motivates Polly to agree to leave the safety of her home and seek out the pleasures that this man promises makes the girl an undesirable member of society. The man’s promises are part of an elaborate test of her purity. He has already dug her grave, knowing that if she agrees to leave with him she reflects the immorality that he wants eliminate. The penetration with the knife unifies the two in Polly’s blood.

She then falls into the grave, which has taken the place of the bridal bed. He buries her with some dirt and returns home without any expression of remorse. By the standards of patriarchal system that values purity and chastity among women, Willie is a savior. He has not only saved other potential suitors from this woman who is willing to leave her home and partake in pleasures, but the future generations who will suffer from her impurity. The end of the song brings no moral retribution for him because he protects the virtues most important to the overarching social structure.

The other ballads, despite having a female protagonist who easily falls victim to her murderer, do not have this scene of penetration. The women are not even sexually desirable in the same morbid sense that Polly is to her killer. The Knoxville girl's killer has no desire to share in any sort of penetrative act with her. He maintains the guise of courting and leads her away from town for an evening stroll, "And every Sunday evening/Down at her home I'd dwell/We went to take an evening walk/About a mile from town" (York). This act is immediately recognized as an innocent part of the courting process. This walk quickly takes a more sinister turn. The courter finds a stick (sometimes on the ground, sometimes he cuts it from a bush) and knocks the girl to the ground. In "The Oxford Girl," this knocking to the ground is enough to immobilize the girl and silence her. She has no opportunity to plea for her life. An interesting twist in this ballad is that the man has no intention of murdering the girl until he kisses her, "I took her by the lily-white hand/And I kissed her cheek and chin/But I had no thoughts of

murdering her/Nor in no evil way” (Collins). The moment that he beats her is a moment of possession. The man represents a pathological embodiment of cultural ideals. He is so invested in protecting the value system that he murders the girl because her willingness to kiss him indicates a lack of virtue. Society want to see her killed because in kissing the man and embracing sexual desire she has violated the value systems that it treasures. The Knoxville girl gets the opportunity to make a plea for her life once she is on the ground, “She fell down on her bended knees/For mercy she did cry/ ‘Oh Willie my dear, don’t kill me here/I’m not prepared to die”(York). The narrator of both songs is the man, mirroring the power that society gives to the male voice. The girl only speaks here though the voice of the man. She is both disenfranchised and denied a voice. This plea has no effect on the man and he continues to beat her until the entire ground around her is soaked with her blood. He leaves her body there and returns to town. In “The Oxford Girl,” the man drags the girl by her hair through the forest to the riverbank. Once there, he “gently” throws her into the water. The river carries the girl away, but the landscape is forever marked with her blood.

The leading away from society and into the isolation of the woods seems like an interesting and perhaps unnecessary move. If the collective consciousness supports the control placed on these women by their male counterparts, why must the two leave the boundaries of the civilization for the wild, lawlessness of the woods? In the woods, lovers are free to express their passion for one another. In ballads that lead to successful love

moments, the lovers find a connection and an openness with one another that can only exist in the wilderness. In tragic love songs that end in murder, the wilderness is the place where extreme violence can occur. The movement away from civilization is, in fact, essential for reinforcing the systems of hegemonic discourse. By removing the lovers from society, the ballad removes them from contrived systems of control and brings them into nature. The systems that allow for women who are less than virtuous to be murdered must appear as representations of the natural order of things. These women must be eliminated because they threaten what is fundamentally virtuous. Nature not only allows for them to be murdered, but facilitates the violence by providing the weapon and the location. Only when the man of "The Knoxville Girl" returns back to the limits of society does he have to face the consequences of his actions. He is arrested for his crime, tried and sentenced to death, but he shows no remorse for his crime. He merely laments his own death, "And now they're going to hang me/Oh Lord I hate to die/And now they're going to hang me/Between the earth and sky"(York). Society does not condone his actions, but it also does not question the gender norms that motivate his violence. There is little attention paid to the girl's death. Society punishes the man but maintains the discourses that motivate his actions.

Despite the overwhelming power of the hegemonic discourse, not all female victims of murder ballads fall so easily to violence of their maniacal lovers. Within the

genre of murdered-sweethearts, there are a significant number of ballads that have female protagonists who fall in love with their suitors, but who are able to gain the power in the end and escape the clutches of death. “False Sir John” which is a variant of the extremely popular Child ballad “Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight” (Child Ballad 4) presents one such heroine. The popularity of this ballad means that it is constantly recreated and therefore appears in a variety of forms. The ballad tells of a young woman wooed away from her father’s home by a man who promises her love, marriage, and the excitement of an exotic new life in a far off location. The girl is the only heir to her father’s fortune. This elevates her to a social status above the typical woman who is completely marginalized by oppressive social systems. Perhaps this elevated status plays a part in her successful overtaking of her lover. The wooing done in this ballad mirrors the detail seen in “The Knoxville Girl.” In the Jean Ritchie version we see Sir John inserting himself into her daily routine, “he wooed her while she spun the cloth/and while they made the hay”(Ritchie). This description serves to both establish the traditional courting ritual and to show the exceptional status and power of this woman. She is not a meek and inactive woman, but rather an important, and in many ways independent, member of society. In one version, the knight comes to the young woman’s father’s home and uses his harp to put all the members of the house into a sleep-like trance, “There came a bird out to a

bush, On water for to dine/An sighing said, says the king's daughter, 'O wae's this heart o mine!' /He's taen a harp into his hands, He's harped them all asleep/Except it was the king's daughter, Who one wind coulna get"(Child Ballad 4B 55). The girl's immunity to the effects of this magical trance has two potential meanings. On the one hand, she could be immune because the man wants to isolate her so he can trick her. On the other hand, the woman could be immune because she is more powerful than the other members of her house. Her willingness to go with him, while naïve, is at least partially done of her own freewill, which is something we do not have in the other ballad. This resistance to his spell perhaps foreshadows her later refusal to be killed at the hands of this deceitful man. In both cases, the woman's power shines through as a defining factor.

With the rest of the kingdom asleep, Sir John convinces May Colvin to steal away with him into the depths of the forest. In Child Ballad 4B version, they arrive at the river's edge, and the evil suitor coaxes the fair maiden into this treacherous water. The suitor then reveals that she is his seventh victim who shall drown in this water. His plan to kill her does not come out of his love for her, but rather his desire to kill what she represents. Through murdering numerous women, he gains power. The woman is merely an object on his path to gaining power. Then, there is the twist: "Since I am standing here' she says, 'This dowie (sic) death to die, One kiss o your comely mouth I'm sure

wad comfort me” (Child Ballad B 56). This request draws upon the lustful exuberance of the manipulative man, and gives him a false sense of power. As the man, he is able to comfort the dying maiden in the same way a parent would comfort a child. He makes a motion downward from his physical and symbolic position above her, and is quickly pulled into the water. When they are on an even plane, the woman turns the tables on the man and avoids death. In the Jean Ritchie version of the tale, Sir John demands that May Colvin remove her fine clothing so that he may take it with him. He has no desire to have sex with her or to rape her. The sort of de-sexualization that occurs in this ballad is different from that which occurs in “Pretty Polly” and “The Knoxville Girl.” May Colvin is not cast out from society because of sexual transgressions, real or imagined. In fact, she protects modesty and asks Sir John to turn around while she removes the final layer of clothing, “Turn around, turn around though False Sir John/And look at the leaves of the tree/For it don’t become a gentleman a naked woman to see/A naked woman to see” (Ritchie). Sir John’s lack of sexual desire for May Colvin does not mesh with the larger collective desire for May Colvin. She is a modest woman who was driven by promises of love rather than any sexual pleasure, and therefore she maintains the social ideals. These ideals are still flawed, of course, as they deny women the right to sexual power and independence, but this song still presents a subversion of the traditional narrative.

Once May Colvin has convinced Sir John to turn around, she becomes possessed with strength and power and is able to knock him into the water, “Oh False Sir John has turned around/To gaze at the leaves on the tree/She’s made a dash with her tender little arms/And pushed him into the sea” (Ritchie). The woman overcomes the man not only with her wit but also with her physical strength. This combination of power overturns all expectations. This female protagonist of this ballad is something very different from the beautiful young maiden who dies easily at the hands of her brutal lover. In every version of the song, there is this clever trick that leads into the woman gaining the supernatural strength she needs to overtake her murderer. The hegemonic discourse that dominates “The Knoxville Girl” is part of the silencing campaign. In an attempt to protect the gender constructions that promote the image of women as docile maidens who are helpless without their male counterparts, Western society suppresses the image of this powerful, autonomous woman. She shatters gender conventions, and provides the listener with a heroine who subverts the stereotypes and draws upon a mythical strength and intelligence to redefine herself within a patriarchal society. The successful creation of such a powerful woman within the framework of Western ideology indicates that within the hegemonic framework, people long for a woman who subverts traditional hegemonic discourse and defines a new archetype.

The subjects of murder cannot escape the rules of gender structures and normalization. They are always operating within these systems, even in the moments that they contradict the norms. Patriarchy already contradicts itself making it all the more difficult for women to find powerful identities within this system. Whether the woman murders or is murdered, the peculiar type of death that is murder leads to important cultural commentary. The women, like May Colvin, who overtake their murderers can only do so by becoming murderers themselves. This reinstates them in the patriarchal system, but the mere fact that they exist indicates a longing for women who find triumph in redefining cultural norms.

Chapter Three: Reading Murder Ballads Through Walter Benjamin

We are a society obsessed with death. While we sometimes allow death to take center stage in cultural myths and rituals, we more often bury it in shadowy repressions. Death, however, is a resilient and forces itself out of the shadowy depths and into a central cultural place. One important site of death's emergence from repression is artistic expression. An artistic response to death simultaneously reflects and shapes our collective understanding of life and death and the mythological constructions surrounding both. One form of this artistic expression that goes beyond itself and speaks to larger cultural concerns comes in the form of ballads. Ballads serve as poetic narratives that emerge from a collective discourse. Traditionally, ballad culture depends on oral transmission to reach both individual listeners and a larger social collective. The orality allows individuals to participate on very personal levels with the songs.

A sub-genre of folk ballads that provides a place for death is murder ballads which are songs that capture violent, and often bloody, moments of killing. Using instances of murder as their common motif, these songs explore the relationship that society and individuals have with death. Appearing as what seems to be a precursor to the modern sensationalist tales that litter tabloids, many murder ballads first appear on printed broadsheets in the 1700s in England and Scotland (Wilentz 1). These broadsheets tell murderous tales in gruesome and elaborate detail. Sometimes the stories told are

based on actual murder cases, but because they are constantly created and recreated by different performers, the facts surrounding the event change to the point where any trace of an actual crime disappears. This tradition, with its strong oral component, traversed the watery depths of the ocean to arrive in the New World with European immigrants. The ballads and the themes they confront are woven into the cloth of American identity and provide sites of important inquiry into social ideologies. In their early form, these ballads were sung in families, small community gatherings, or by the occasional traveling balladeer. With the advent of recording technology, the ballads were able to break the limitations of space and time and move beyond isolated communities. Using two examples of these ballads as primary texts, I plan to explore the implications of the movement into mechanically reproducible ballads. Specifically, using Walter Benjamin's essays, *The Storyteller* and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, I will seek to discover the complexities that surround the changing landscape of ballad culture. What do we stand to lose and to gain when the storyteller moves from an actual body into a cluster of sound waves emanating from a machine?

In Walter Benjamin's *The Storyteller*, Benjamin explores the loss of the storyteller and the effect this loss has on narrative landscape. In addition to the rise of the novel, Benjamin insists that the movement of death out of the spotlight has been the central catalyst for the decline of the storyteller:

Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one; think of the medieval pictures in which the deathbed has turned into a throne toward which the people press through the wide-open doors of the death house. In the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living... It is, however, characteristic that not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. (6-7)

All that the storyteller can tell is found in this intimate and tangible relationship with death. The loss of such a relationship marks for Benjamin the loss of the important cultural narrator that is the storyteller. Benjamin appears to be laying the foundation for a world that allows for a complete separation from death, and therefore the absolute loss of storytelling and the storyteller. These murder ballads, however, seem to relate to death in an unexpected way given Benjamin's critique, namely by bringing death to the forefront. Death and dying affect the ballads, the performers, and the listeners because they are the most central pieces of the narratives. Using Benjamin's essay, I will do a reading of murder ballads which seem to fall in line with much of Benjamin's critique while simultaneously serving as moments where storytelling is very much alive, albeit in death. To supplement this piece which considers the movement away from traditional storytelling in the acceleration of technological advancement, I will explore the effects that technological recording and mass distribution has on ballads in American culture using Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Here, Benjamin considers the shifting status of the work of art as it rapidly becomes more accessible through its reproducibility. In this essay, rather than lamenting the loss of the

original, Benjamin is able to find a positive relationship with the changing face of artistic representation. These two essays draw upon common ideas, but are also contradictory enough to enhance a reading of the ballads as primary texts.

To arrive at an understanding of the ways in which death weaves its way into murder ballads, we must explore the implications of the changing narrative landscape. “The art of storytelling is coming to an end,” Walter Benjamin tells us (1). Storytelling and its storyteller are quickly slipping away from us. A cultural practice that seems to have existed forever is moving away more and more rapidly. A major cause of this loss, which Benjamin explores in depth, is the attempt by societies to make death invisible:

It has been observable for a number of centuries how in the general consciousness the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness. In its last stages this process is accelerated. And in the course of the nineteenth century bourgeois society had, by means of hygienic and social, private and public institutions, realized a secondary effect which may have been its subconscious main purpose: to make it possible for people to avoid the sight of dying. (Benjamin 6)

The movement of death from a central and visible place in society into a private, isolated, and largely inaccessible world shakes the foundation upon which storytelling rests. What are the consequences of removing death from an ever-visible place and casting it into the shadows? An attempt to silence death that emerges out of a fear of proximity to it has residual consequences as death constantly pushes itself through the boundaries established to protect us against it. The strength of death to permeate these boundaries

appears in the scenes of bloody violence occurring in murder ballads. These songs are an attempt to overthrow the enforced repression and restore death to its proper proximity with life. The performers of these ballads are storytellers, and as such, they must be vigilant to death and its importance in their work, “death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death” (Benjamin 7).

While all murder ballads deal with instances of death, particular songs offer more intense portraits of death. One such ballad is “The House Carpenter.” The song begins with a lover returning from sea to reclaim the woman he once loved. Clarence Ashley refers to this mysterious figure as “an old true love” while Bob Dylan insists he is “my [the woman’s] own true love.” In any case, the lover’s return is surrounded with an eerie, ghost-like quality. The Ashley version makes this eeriness particularly evident as the lover mysteriously rejects the woman’s offer to come inside, “Well I can’t come in or I can’t sit down/For I haven’t but a moment’s time/They say you’re married to a house carpenter/And your heart will never be mine” (Ashley). At this point, the man reveals his true reasons for returning to his lover, “Now will you forsaken your house carpenter/And go along with me” (Ashley). While the Dylan version of this command to leave her lover maintains a thicker veil on the intentions of the lover, “Forsake, forsake your house carpenter/And come away with me/I’ll take you where the green grass grows/On the

shores of sunny Italy” (Dylan), the intimacy of death in this proposition is still amazingly powerful. The lover quickly sways the woman into joining him in the life that could have been. She picks up her baby (or her babies three) and kisses them goodbye. Kissing the girl marks a final ceremonious farewell to her time with the living.

Both the Ashley and the Dylan versions of the song have a steady rhythm that hauntingly underscores their voices. These haunting melodies seem to remind the listener of the ever-present quality of death. In the Dylan version, the time between the departure of the two lovers and the moment we once again meet them onboard the ship is marked with a guitar solo that manipulates the steadiness of the rhythm in the rest of the song. While this instrumental solo provides us a hopeful glimpse in which we imagine the two lovers finally finding that which they had been denied, this moment of change acts more as a confirmation that the last connections to life have been severed and that death will move out of the shadowed undercurrent of the song and take up the central location. When the woman leaves her child, she leaves behind her last connection to life. While they are on the ship, the child that returns to her is merely a ghostly shell sent to remind her of what she has left behind, “Well, they were sailin’ about two weeks/I’m sure it was not three/When the younger of the girls, she came on deck/Sayin’ she wants company” (Dylan). This child appears as a ghost to tell both her mother and the listener that the

woman's choice to leave was the wrong choice. She begins to weep, but her weeping cannot save her from her fate. In both versions, the ship sinks and all is lost to the sea. The Dylan version, however, allows the woman to glance at the heaven that she will never have and the hell in which she will spend eternity with her deceptive lover, "Those are the hills of hell fire my love/Where you and I will unite." While the Ashley version ends rather abruptly after the demise of the two lovers, the Dylan version brings the guitar change from the earlier moment back to mark the end of the song. The hopefulness that the listener felt for the lovers at the moment of their reunion is completely absent as death has enacted its power of their fate and the fate of the song when this guitar rhythm appears again to mark the end of the song. The difference between this song and other tales of lovers who find each other fully in death is the fact that the man tricks the woman and leads her to her death. She arrives at death because he leads her there. The woman is allowed to reunite with her former lover, but it is a reunion that is marred by death and punishment. The lover and the woman both must suffer for their attempts to deny death its rightful place at the center of society.

Benjamin's work in *The Storyteller* laments the loss of storytelling but offers very little insight into the potential for positive effects resulting from this loss. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin approaches the effects of

technological reproduction on art with a more positive lens than he uses to view way than the loss of storytelling. The rise of the novel and the movement away from death seems to irreparably taint the relationship human beings have with one another. Benjamin insists that experience is the only way to create stories, “experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn” (1). This view of storytelling mourns the loss of something pure that comes only from actual experience with events. Benjamin considers the movement away from the original differently in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Rather than considering reproduced art to be a lamentable movement away from purity, Benjamin explores this movement as a breaking away from a totalitarian system which seeks the annihilation of variants in order to preserve the original. Within the fascist system, the purity of the art in its original form must be preserved. Benjamin’s critique of the compulsion to maintain an original insists that changing technology eliminates the entire notion of a pure original. The invention of recording devices and the ease with which people can access and preserve songs has brought murder ballads into the mechanical era and offer a site for exploring the relationship between different song variations.

For Benjamin, one of the major effects of the movement into the era of technological reproduction involves the shift away from the desire to center art around

ritual. Art's centrality to ritual is historically what has given artistic production its value, "The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition...the contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult...the unique value of the "authentic" work of art has its basis in ritual" (IV). Ballads are created and performed in a ritualistic moment that connects the performer to the live audience. The intimacy between singer and audience that performances elicit serves to fulfill the ritualistic nature of musical performance. Music is perhaps different from other forms of artistic expression in that the audience and the performer actively participate and witness the creation of the art. Benjamin is speaking specifically of visual art that has a more tangible space in the world, but his theories can be expanded to include performance and time. Through ritualistic transmission, ballads serve as artistic expressions of cultural mythologies and values. Traditionally, ballads are tied up with this cult and ritual. With the onset of technologies that allow for recordings and easy transmissions, the ritualistic nature of music changes. The traditional form of performance and listening to ballads becomes a new type of ritual that calls any notions of authenticity into question, in so far as it opens up debates about whether one version of a song can be considered more original than another.

The major result of the movement into the era of mechanically reproducible art comes with the loss of the aura, or the essence of the artwork. The aura insists that the creator of a work of art has a special tie to its creator and to the state of its original production:

For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays. (IX)

The overthrow of the aura that Benjamin is confronting in his essay challenges the traditional discourse that surrounds works of art and notions of authenticity. One counter argument to Benjamin's claims insists that the reproduced piece of art merely reminds one of the things it represents, thereby preserving a sense of authenticity and purity. Benjamin considers the photograph which serves to remind a person of the loved one that is now lost. We can easily substitute the photograph with a recording of a song, especially a recording of a live performance. For a listener who was present at the original performance, the recorded version of the song can serve as a means of recalling the emotion of the initial experience. Similarly, for a performer listening to his or her own song allows for a sort of time travel into the emotion surrounding the initial

experience. In response to this potential critique, Benjamin insists that a moment of feeling can never exist in the future in the exact same way it existed in the past:

The cult of remembrance of loved ones [or in the case of ballads, experiences] absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty. (VI)

The picture, or song, can never fully replace the person or moment that it captures.

Whether the subject of the photo is a loved one with whom the viewer has an intimate connection, or merely a stranger whose photograph has been taken and distributed, the photograph can evoke an emotional response but never recreate the subject or the moment completely. It is always a representation, and because of the impossibility of creating an identical, lasting experience, the aura will always be lost. Benjamin also draws upon the failings of human memory. Memory will not allow for a pure recollection of the past. Any encounter with a reproduced piece of art will always be affected by the experiences that have occurred between the time of the event and the moment of reflection. This changing relationship between the viewer and the piece of art will also be affected by the passage of time in so far as returning to a piece of art after a period of time and having to reincorporate the piece into the changed worldview. Because of the insurmountable separation between the past and a present that is constantly moving into the future, the reproduction will always replace the ritualistic value of the aura.

“The work of art has always been reproducible” Benjamin tells us, but “mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new...it advances...with accelerated intensity.” (I). The distinction that Benjamin makes in regards to the increased acceleration and intensity that technological reproduction brings is particularly important when considering ballads. Like all works of art, ballads have always been subject to the power of reproducibility. The advent of recording technology has brought music out of its dependence on proximity to the performer and into a world where anyone can gain access to songs as they are sung in a specific moment in time. The rapidly changing technology also reflects a change in the way that people receive works of art, “the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well” (III). With ballads, this means a movement away from the limits of live performance and oral traditions into a realm where songs are sung and heard in a completely different way. The listener has the ability to separate their experience from the moment of recording, as well as from the individual instances of listening. The accessibility of songs changes the listening experiences. An individual can now instantly download a song onto his or her iPod and have access to that song anywhere. The ritual

that once involved listening to someone live is now replaced by a completely different listening experience.

This new method for sense perception that technological advances bring also stems from the modern listener's urge to take songs from the a distant context and bring them deeply into the private and personal realm or what Benjamin understands as "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly"(III). The need for proximity and control is partially where Benjamin finds the decay of the aura. Experiences that were once foreign and distant now delve deeply and personally into the listener. This idea also appears in Benjamin's storyteller, as the storyteller attempts to bring that which is foreign and unknown into a close, personal proximity with the listener. Benjamin makes a comparison between the surgeon and the magician. While the magician focuses on interacting with the patient by remaining a safe distance away, "the surgeon does exactly the reverse [of the magician]; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating the patient's body"(IX). The surgeon achieves success only in entering the patient's mind and body. In a similar way, the singer penetrates the listener's body. This penetration is even more profound with the recorded version of the song. The song, rather than being an exceptional moment of listening in the specific context of a concert or performance is brought into the ordinary.

The mechanically reproduced song allows the song to transcend the limits of its position and enter into a context that it would traditionally have been excluded from, “technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself” (II). The placement of songs out of their moment of conception and into the listener subverts the notion of a pure and original recording, as well as that of a pure and original listening experience.

The relationship that murder ballads have to cultural identity becomes enhanced with mechanical reproduction. The ballads that many listeners were once excluded from now enter their lives. This replacement of songs in a new context changes the rituals that surround the creation of and listening to songs. Because of technological advancement, the storytellers who create the ballads reach an entirely new population of listeners. Murder ballads seem to be an exception to the loss that Benjamin laments in *The Storyteller*. They centralize death and bring experience and distance directly to the listeners. The combination of subject matter and ease of dissemination allows ballads to move beyond limits of space and time and interact with a larger cultural landscape.

Conclusion: “Oh hold your tongue, you pretty parrot”

The primary texts of the three readings exist today largely because of a movement in the early twentieth century by Harry Smith, the man responsible for *The Anthology of American Folk Music*. This desire to record and archive the music that has played such a central role in the formation of American identity seems to stem in part from a realization of the changing cultural landscape that was quickly moving beyond isolated community structures that harbor cultural preservation through oral transmission. The creation of this archive reflects this fear of the limits of human memory. The creation of this anthology and others lies in Jacques Derrida’s analysis of the Freudian concept of psyche that shapes the nature of the archive:

The psyche is structured in a way that there are many places in which traces are kept, which means that within the psyche there is an inside and an outside... Since the archive does not consist simply in remembering, in living memory, in anamnesis, but in consigning, in inscribing a trace in some external location... Archive is not a living memory. It’s a location. (Derrida lecture 42)

The collective human consciousness has duplicity in its structure that demands space that is both within and without. This duplicity of memory spawns the need for creation of an archive. Within folk music preservation, this doubling of space demands that there be an artificial site of memory created. We cannot hope to preserve folk music simply in the ever-moving present, but rather must design an external place to store these memories.

The external site of memory, however, is not by any means a pure location that functions as a citadel that resists any human influence. There is a complexity to the archive that stems from a simultaneously need to find an exterior site of preservation and a desire, once the exterior space has been created, to destroy it:

Because of this exteriority, what is kept in the archive, of course can be erased, can be lost, and the very gesture which consists in keeping it safe...is always, and from the beginning threatened by the possibility of destruction...The risk has to do with what Freud defines as a death drive-that is, a drive to, precisely, destroy the trace without any reminder, without any trace, without any ashes. (Derrida 42)

There is a complexity to our relationship with the archive. We establish the archive to protect ourselves from the finitude of our memories. We want to construct both the past and the future by controlling what goes into the archive. These protective methods, however, put the archive at risk. As long as people interact with the archive, it can be altered to the point that it is completely eliminated.

In the mid-1960s, Bob Dylan, the most prominent figure in folk music of the 20th century was accused of being a traitor to folk music when he “went electric.” This move away from the traditional folk form was seen as a corruption of folk music. Dylan’s fans and contemporaries began to view him as the man who wanted to destroy folk music, the burner of the archive. In response to these accusations, Dylan cites the exceptionality of folk music and the inability of any person to destroy it:

Traditional music is based on hexagrams. It comes about from legends, Bibles, plagues, and it revolves around vegetables and death. There’s nobody that’s going

to kill traditional music. All those songs about roses growing out of people's brains and lovers who are really geese and swans that turn into angels—they're not going to die... Obviously, death is not universally accepted. I mean, you'd think that the traditional-music people could gather from the songs that mystery is a fact, a traditional fact... traditional music is too unreal to die. It doesn't need to be protected. Nobody's going to hurt it. In that music is the only true, valid death you can feel today off a record player. (Marcus 114)

Because folk music derives its meaning from death, it exists beyond any sort of human control. Just as the archive exists both intimately within both the minds and tangible realities of societies, it is beyond the control of individual members. No one can destroy the archive, just as no one can destroy folk music, because no one can destroy death.

Within the larger archival framework of folk music itself I have done analysis of my own archive of folk music, specifically murder ballads. The readings of the ballads presented here attempt to explore how the conventional realities of murder ballads operate in society and within their own contradictions. Their contradictions give them that "unreal" quality that Dylan describes. As the cultural landscape changes constantly, these ballads morph and adapt themselves to fit into the realities. This fitting in requires both remembering and forgetting. Derrida tells us that both functions are essential to maintaining the archive, "the archive--the good one--produces memory, but produces forgetting at the same time... the work of the archivist is not simply the work of memory. It's a work of mourning" (55). Loss within the archive leads to rediscovery. Forgetting is central to remember, and the futurity of folk music finds its power in the reassurance that it will forever be rediscovered.

Works Cited

Ashley, Clarence. "The House Carpenter." The Anthology of American Folk Music.
Folkways Music, 1952.

Ball, E.C. "Pretty Polly." Archive of Folk Culture- Anglo-American Ballads, Volume 1.
Rounder Select, 1999.

Benjamin, Walter. The Storyteller. The Slought Foundation. "

"http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf"

http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf

"http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf"

http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf

---. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. UCLA School of Theater,
Film and Television. Transcribed: Andy Blunden, 1998. HYPERLINK

"http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm"

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>

Child, Francis James. The English and Scottish Popular Ballads. New York: Dover
Publications Inc, 1965.

Collins, Shirley Elizabeth. "The Cruel Mother." False True Lovers. Folkways, 2001.

---. "The Cruel Mother." Love, Death and Lady. Fledg'ling UK, 1970.

- Derrida, Jacques. "Archive Fever: A Seminar by Jacques Derrida, University of the Witwaterstand, August 1998)." *Psychoanalysis and the Archive*. Ed. Carolyn Hamilton. Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002.
- Dylan, Bob. "House Carpenter." *The Bootleg Series Vol. 1-3*. Columbia Records, 1993. Cd.
- Hammond, John. "Pretty Polly." *People Take Warning! Murder Ballads and Disaster Songs 1913-1938*. Tompkins Square, 2007. CDs.
- Laws, G. Malcolm, Jr. *American Balladry from British Broadside: A Guide for Students and Collectors of Traditional Songs*. Philadelphia: The American Folklore Society, 1957.
- . *The British Literary Ballad, A Study in Poetic Imagination*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1972.
- Mangsen, Cindy. "Cruel Mother." *Fast Folk Musical Magazine*: Vol. 1, No.10, 1984.
- Marcus, Greil. *The Old, Weird America*. New York: Picador, 1997.
- Renwick, Roger. *English Folk Poetry*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980.
- Ritchie, Jean. "False Sir John." *Ballads From Her Appalachian Family Tradition*. Smithsonian Folkways, 1961

---. "Pretty Polly." Jean Ritchie and Doc Watson at Folk City. Smithsonian Folkways, 1988.

Steele, Pete. "Pretty Polly." Archive of Folk Culture- Anglo-American Ballads, Volume 1. Rounder Select, 1999.

Wilentz, Sean and Greil Marcus. *The Rose and the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

York, Rusty and the Kentucky Mountain Boys. "The Knoxville Girl." *Early Bluegrass*. Jewel Recording Company, 2002.

Bibliography

Adams, David. *Why Do They Kill?: Men Who Murder Their Intimate Partners.*

Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2007.

The Anthology of American Folk Music. Folkways Music, 1952.

“Appalachian Journey.” American Patchwork Series. Dir. Alan Lomax. Public

Broadcasting Station, 1996. DVD.

Ashley, Clarence. “The House Carpenter.” The Anthology of American Folk Music.

Folkways Music, 1952.

Ball, E.C. “Pretty Polly.” Archive of Folk Culture- Anglo-American Ballads, Volume 1.

Rounder Select, 1999.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Storyteller.* The Slought Foundation. "

"http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf"

http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf

"http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf"

http://slought.org/files/downloads/events/SF_1331-Benjamin.pdf

---. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.* UCLA School of Theater,

Film and Television. Transcribed: Andy Blunden, 1998.

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>

---. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2008.

Butler, Judith. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Child, Francis James. *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1965.

Collins, Shirley Elizabeth. "The Cruel Mother." *False True Lovers*. Folkways, 2001.

---. "The Cruel Mother." *Love, Death and Lady*. Fledg'ling UK, 1970.

Derrida, Jacques. "Archive Fever: A Seminar by Jacques Derrida, University of the Witwaterstand, August 1998)." *Psychoanalysis and the Archive*. Ed. Carolyn Hamilton. Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002.

---. *Archive Fever*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Dylan, Bob. "House Carpenter." *The Bootleg Series Vol. 1-3*. Columbia Records, 1993. Cd.

Ewick, Patricia and Susan Sibley. "Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative." *Law and Society Review*. Volume 29, Number 2, 1995.

Hammond, John. "Pretty Polly." *People Take Warning! Murder Ballads and Disaster Songs 1913-1938*. Tompkins Square, 2007. CDs.

Irons, Glenwood. *Gender, Language and Myth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992.

Laws, G. Malcolm, Jr. *American Balladry from British Broad-sides: A Guide for Students and Collectors of Traditional Songs*. Philadelphia: The American Folklore Society, 1957.

---. *The British Literary Ballad, A Study in Poetic Imagination*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1972.

The Louvin Brothers. "Knoxville Girl." *Tragic Songs of Life*. Gusto, 1956. HYPERLINK

"<http://www.mudcat.org/@displaysong.cfm?SongID=6538>"

<http://www.mudcat.org/@displaysong.cfm?SongID=6538>

Mangsen, Cindy. "Cruel Mother." *Fast Folk Musical Magazine*: Vol. 1, No.10, 1984.

Marcus, Greil. *The Old, Weird America*. New York: Picador, 1997.

Marsh, Dave. "Barbara Allen." Ed. Wilentz, Sean and Greil Marcus. *The Rose and the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

People Take Warning! Murder Ballads and Disaster Songs 1913-1938. Tompkins Square, 2007. CDs.

Plain, Gill and Susan Sellers. *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2007.

- Propp, Vladimir. *Theory and History of Folklore*. Trans. Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984.
- Renwick, Roger. *English Folk Poetry*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980.
- Ritchie, Jean. "False Sir John." *Ballads From Her Appalachian Family Tradition*. Smithsonian Folkways, 1961
- . "Pretty Polly." *Jean Ritchie and Doc Watson at Folk City*. Smithsonian Folkways, 1988.
- Rollin, Lucy. *Cradle and All: A Cultural and Psychoanalytic Reading of Nursery Rhymes*. Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1992.
- Rooney, Ellen. *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Sparks, Rennie. *Pretty Polly. The Rose and the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad*. Ed. Wilentz, Sean and Greil Marcus New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.
- Steele, Pete. "Pretty Polly." *Archive of Folk Culture- Anglo-American Ballads, Volume 1*. Rounder Select, 1999.

Tolstoy, Leo. The Kreutzer Sonata. Trans. Benjamin R. Tucker. New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971.

Wilentz, Sean and Greil Marcus. The Rose and the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.

York, Jake Adam. Murder Ballads. Denver: Elixir Press, 2005.

York, Rusty and the Kentucky Mountain Boys. "The Knoxville Girl." Early Bluegrass. Jewel Recording Company, 2002.

Appendix A: Song TranscriptionsThe Knoxville Girl- Rusty York

I met a little girl in Knoxville
The town we all know well
And every Sunday evening
Down at her home I'd dwell

We went to take an evening walk
About a mile from town
I picked a stick from off the ground
And knocked that poor girl down

She fell down on her bended knees
For mercy she did cry
"Oh Willie my dear, don't kill me here
I'm not prepared to die"

She never spoke another word
I only beat her more
I gave her till the ground around
Within her blood did flow

I hurried back to Knoxville
Got there about Midnight
My mother she was worried
She woke up in a fright

Son, my son what have you done
to bloody your clothes so?
The answer I gave mother
Was bleeding at the nose

They carried me to the Knoxville jail
They locked me in the cell
My friends all tried to get me out
But none could pull my bail

Her sister swore my life away
 She swore without a doubt
 She swore that I was a pretty young lad
 And laid her sister out

And now they're going to hang me
 Oh Lord I hate to die
 And now they're going to hang me
 between the earth and sky

Pretty Polly- Pete Steele

Pretty Polly, Pretty Polly
 Come and go away with me (x2)
 Pretty Polly, Pretty Polly
 Come and go with me
 Before we are married, some pleasures to see

Pretty Willie, Pretty Willie
 I fear your way
 Pretty Willie, Pretty Willie
 I fear you way
 Pretty Willie, Pretty Willie I fear the way you've taken my body out

He led her over the hills and a valley so deep (x3)
 And at last Pretty Polly began to weep

She threw her arms around him
 She suffered no fear (x3)
 "How can you kill a poor girl?
 I loved you so dear"

He stabbed her through the heart
 And the blood it did flow (x3)
 And into the grave Pretty Polly did go

He threw some dirt o'er her and turned to go home (x3)
 Left nothing behind but the girl left to mourn

The Oxford Girl- Shirley Collins

I fell in love with an Oxford girl
 She had a dark and a roving eye
 But I feel too ashamed for to marry her
 A-being so young a maid

I went up to her father's house
 About twelve o'clock one night
 Asking her is she'd take a walk
 Through the fields and meadows gay

I took her by the lily-white hand
 And I kissed her cheek and chin
 But I had no thoughts of murdering her
 Nor in no evil way

I caught a stick from out the hedge
 And I gently knocked her down
 And the blood from that innocent girl
 Came a-trickling down

I caught fast hold of her curly, curly locks
 And I dragged her through the fields
 Until we come to a deep river side
 Where I gently flung her in

Look how she go, look how she floats
 She's a-drowning on the tide
 And instead of her having a watery grave
 She should have been my bride

False Sir John- Jean Ritchie

False Sir John a wooing came
 To a lady young and fair
 May Colvin was this lady's name
 And her father's only heir
 Her father's only heir

He wooed her while she spun the cloth

And while they made the hay
 Until he gained her lawed consent
 To mount and ride away
 To mount and ride away

It's bringing me some of your father's gold
 And some of your mother's fee
 I'll take thee to some far off land
 And there I'll marry thee
 And there I'll marry thee

She's gone into her father's coffer
 Where all of his monies lay
 She's took the yellow and left the white
 And lightly skipped away
 And lightly skipped away

She's gone into her father's stables
 Where all of his steeds did stand
 She's took the best and left the worst
 In all of her father's land
 In all of her father's land

She's mounted on a milk white steed
 and he on a dapple gray
 and rode till they come to a lonesome spot
 a cliff by the side of the sea
 a cliff by the side of the sea

Light down, light down said False Sir John
 Your bridal bed do see
 It's seven women ever drowned in here
 And the eighth one you shall be
 The eighth one you shall be

Have off, have off your Holland smock
 With borders all around
 For it's too costly to lay down here
 And rot on the cold, cold ground
 And rot on the cold, cold ground

Cast off, cast off your silks so fine
 And lay them on a stone
 For they're too fine and costly to rot in the salt sea foam
 To rot in the salt sea foam

Take off, take off your silken stays
 Likewise your handsome shoes
 For they're too fine and costly
 To rot in the sea with you
 To rot in the sea with you

Turn around, turn around though False Sir John
 And look at the leaves of the tree
 For it don't become a gentleman a naked woman to see
 A naked woman to see

Oh False Sir John has turned around
 To gaze at the leaves on the tree
 She's made a dash with her tender little arms
 And pushed him into the sea
 And pushed him into the sea

Oh help! Oh help, May Colvin
 Oh help or I shall drown
 I'll take thee back to the father's house
 And lightly set thee down
 And lightly set thee down

No help, No help said May Colvin
 No help will you get from me
 For the bed's no colder to you, sir
 Than you thought to give to me
 Than you thought to give to me

She mounted on the milk white steed
 And led the dapple gray
 And rode till she came to her father's house
 At the breaking of the day
 At the breaking of the day

Then up and spoke that little parrot
 Said "May Colvin where have you been?
 And what have you done with False Sir John?
 That went with you right in
 That went with you right in"

"Oh hold your tongue you pretty parrot
 And tell no tales on me
 And I'll buy you a cage of beaten gold
 With spokes of ivory
 With spokes of ivory"

The Cruel Mother- Shirley Collins

A minister's daughter in the North
 Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
 She's fallen in love with her father's clerk
 Down by the greenwood side-i-o

He courted her for a year and a day
 Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
 Till her the young man did betray
 Down by the greenwood side-i-o

She leaned her back up against a tree
 Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
 And there the tear did blind her
 Down by the greenwood side-i-o

She leaned her back against a thorn
 Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
 And there two bonny boys she has born
 Down by the greenwood side-i-o

She's taken out her little penknife
 Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
 And she has twined them of their life
 Down by the greenwood side-i-o

She laid them beneath some marble stone
Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
Thinking to go a maiden home
Down by the greenwood side-i-o

As she looked over her father's wall
Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
She saw her two bonny boys playing ball
Down by the greenwood side-i-o

Oh bonny boys, if you were mine
Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
I would dress you in silks so fine
Down by the greenwood side-i-o

Oh cruel mother when we were thine
Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
We didn't see aught of your silks so fine
Down by the greenwood side-i-o

Oh bonny boys, come tell to me
Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
What sort of death I'll have to die?
Down by the greenwood side-i-o

Seven years as a fish in the flood
Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
And seven years a bird in the wood
Down by the greenwood side-i-o

Seven years a tongue in the warning bell
Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
And seven years in the flames of hell
Down by the greenwood side-i-o

Welcome, welcome fish in the flood
Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
And welcome, welcome bird in the wood
Down by the greenwood side-i-o

Welcome tongue to the warning bell
 Hey the rose and the lindsay-o
 But god keep me from the flames of hell
 Down by the greenwood side-i-o

The Cruel Mother- Cindy Mangsen

There was a lady lived in York
 It was alone and alone'y
 She fell in love with her father's clerk
 Down by the greenwood sidie-o

He courted her for a year and a day
 It was alone and alone'y
 Till he the young girl did betray
 Down by the greenwood sidie-o

She leaned her back against a thorn
 It was alone and alone'y
 And there she had two little babes born
 Down by the greenwood sidie-o

She took her penknife keen and sharp
 It was alone and alone'y
 And pierced those two babes through the heart
 Down by the greenwood sidie-o

She washed the penknife in the brook
 It was alone and alone'y
 But the more she washed the redder it looked
 Down by the greenwood sidie-o

As she was walking her father's hall
 It was alone and alone'y
 She spied two babes a playin' ball
 Down by the greenwood sidie-o

Oh babes, babes if you were mine
 It was alone and alone'y
 I'd dress you up in silks so fine

Down by the greenwood sidie-o

Oh mother dear when we were thine
 It was alone and alone'y
 You did not treat us then so kind
 Down by the greenwood sidie-o

Oh babes, babes it's you can tell
 It was alone and alone'y
 What kind of death I'll have to die
 Down by the greenwood sidie-o

Seven years a fish in the flood
 It was alone and alone'y
 And seven years a bird in the wood
 Down by the greenwood sidie-o

Seven years a tongue in the morning bell
 It was alone and alone'y
 And seven years in the flames of hell
 Down by the greenwood sidie-o

Welcome, welcome fish in the flood
 It was alone and alone'y
 And welcome, welcome bird in the wood
 Down by the greenwood sidie-o

Welcome tongue in the morning bell
 It was alone and alone'y
 But God spare me from the flames in hell
 Down by the greenwood sidie-o

The House Carpenter:-Bob Dylan:

Well met, well met my own true love
 Well met, well met cried she
 I've just returned from the salt, salt sea
 And it's all for the love of thee

I could have married a king's daughter there

She would have married me
 But I have forsaken my king's daughter there
 And it's all for the love of thee

“Well if you could have married a king's daughter there
 I'm sure you're the one to blame
 For I am married to a house carpenter
 And I'm a-sure he's a fine young man”

Forsake, forsake your house carpenter
 And come away with me
 I'll take you to where the green grass grows
 On the shores of sunny Italy

So up she picked her babies three
 And give them kisses one, two, three
 Sayin' take good care of your daddy while I'm gone
 And keep him good company

Well, they were sailing about two weeks
 I'm sure it was not three
 When the younger of the girls, she came on deck
 Sayin' she wants company

“Well, are you weepin' for you house and home?
 Or are you weepin' for you babes?”
 “Well, I'm not weeping for my house carpenter
 I'm weeping for my babies three”

Oh what are those hills yonder, my love?
 They look as white as snow
 “Those are the hills of heaven, my love
 You and I'll never know”

Oh what are those hills yonder, my love?
 They look as dark as night
 “Those are the hills of hell fire my love
 Where you and I will unite”

Oh twice around went the gallant ship

I'm sure it was not three
When the ship all of a sudden it sprang a leak
And it drifted to the bottom of the sea

The House Carpenter: Clarence Ashley

Well met, well met said an old true love
Well met, well met said he
I'm just returning from the salt, salt sea
And it's all for the love of thee

Come in, come in my old true love
And have a seat with me
It's been 3/4ths of a long, long year
Since together we have been

Well I can't come in or I can't sit down
For I haven't but a moment's time
They say you're married to a house carpenter
And your heart will never be mine

Yes I could have married a king's daughter here
I'm sure she'd have married me
But I've forsaken her crowns of gold
And it's all for the love of thee

Now will you forsaken your house carpenter
And go along with me
I'll take you where the grass grows green
On the banks of the deep blue sea

She picked up her little babe
And kisses gave it three
Says stay right here, my darlin' little babe
And keep your papa company

Well they hadn't been on ship but about two weeks
I'm sure it was not three
Till his true love began to weep and mourn
And he weeped [?] most bitterly

Says are you weepin' for my silver or my gold
Says are you weepin' for my stoal
Are you weepin' for that house carpenter
Whose face you'll never see anymore

No it's I'm not weepin' for you silver or your gold
Or neither for you stoal
I am weeping for my darling little babe
Whose face I'll never see anymore

Well they hadn't been on the ship but about three weeks
I'm sure it was not four
Till they sprung a leak in the bottom of the ship
And it sunk for to rise no more