

Dramatic Functions of Ballad Performances in Shakespeare's Tragedies

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses, among numerous forms of music, on ballad performances and explores their dramatic functions in Shakespeare's tragedies: *Hamlet* (1600-01), *Othello* (1603-04), and the First Quarto of *King Lear* (Q1; 1608), in which ballad performances are demonstrated as significant theatrical devices, interrelating the main plots of the plays.

In early modern England, the ballad was a flexible and accessible art-form for all levels of society. Through printed materials and auditory sense, the use of ballads spread in the society as forms of recreation, entertainment, communal activity, and as transmitters of legends, old tales, and news. The ballad functioned as an important medium that interrelated print with oral cultures, and the elite with illiterate workers. Shakespeare is among the playwrights who utilized ballads in their works, recognizing their power as a medium for social influence. With regard to the use of ballads, this dissertation treats performances within plays. Arguments in each chapter owe their inspiration to Bruce R. Smith's views, which shed light on not only ballads, but also street cries, work songs, and jigs, in order to analyze early modern English soundscapes. Smith emphasizes the power ballads hold in manifesting the past

in the present; performances of already-known ballads in the theater unite the past and present, the onstage players and the audience, through passion (emotional movements that outpour from singers' and performers' bodies). Furthermore, his argument for multiple subject positions of ballad performers is confirmed in each discussion of this dissertation. Ballads seem to have been underestimated as second-rate literature, yet they play an essential role in the plays discussed in this dissertation, as well as in other plays by Shakespeare. In this sense, this dissertation proposes the retrieval of Shakespeare's tragedies into the context of the popular culture of the 16th and 17th centuries,

In Chapter 1, mad Ophelia's ballad performances are examined, situating her mad singing in the structure of *Hamlet*. Ophelia has provoked a great deal of controversy and has stimulated discourse propped on diverse frameworks. Research on her mad scenes in Act 4 Scene 5 has often focused on gender, sexuality or the representation of madness gendered as feminine. However, critics surprisingly fail to grasp the point that she sings her ballads in the midst of a political crisis in Denmark. Her ballad performances are divided into two sections by the rebellion in which the populace has demanded that the king be replaced by Laertes because of the royal family's attempt to cover-up the murder of Laertes' father. Close investigation of each of her five ballads and her manner of singing, situating within the structure of *Hamlet*, clarifies the following: First, Ophelia functions as not only a pitiful tragic heroine but also a ballad singer who performs folk songs, by assimilating with the populace; Second, her mad songs internalize multiple-voices beyond class and gender divisions; Third, in the second half of her performance, which is demonstrated after the uprising of Laertes and his followers, Ophelia's singing voice is

released in the theater internalizing protests of the populace, which were not allowed to be expressed directly on stage in early modern England. This chapter also shows a comparative analysis of Ophelia with two contemporary mad women characters; Pandora in John Lyly's *The Woman in the Moon* (first mentioned in a Stationer's Register entry for 1595); and the Jailer's Daughter in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613-14), a collaborated work by John Fletcher and Shakespeare. The analysis highlights the uniqueness of the function of Ophelia's ballad performance in the structure of the play.

Chapter 2 explores dramatic functions of Iago's performance in Act 2 Scene 3, and Desdemona's in Act 4 Scene 3 of *Othello*. Through an analysis of Iago's performance in terms of the categorization and style of ballads in early modern England, I argue that his performance has a function similar to "charivari," or "Skimmington riding," in which a community expressed objection to inappropriate marriages, and exercised surveillance of sexuality. His performance is not a mere demonstration to encourage drinking but an implication of a sharp critic addressing Othello and Desdemona, the newly married couple whose marriage is considered unnatural in Venetian society.

I examined various versions of "Willow song" circulated in early modern England, to show the flexibility of ballads that are found in both "high" and "low" culture. Although Desdemona's "Willow song" has been widely discussed, little attention has been paid to the arrival of wind in the midst of her ballad performance. A close analysis of her performance raises the point of her vocality functioning as an incantation, which invokes the wind from the dead realm. In *Othello*, the wind is associated with the dead. The most remarkable storm is reported in the opening of Act 2, wherein Venetian military ships arrive

at Cyprus after surviving the deadly storm, which killed much of the Turkish navy. When Desdemona sings “Willow song,” which was sung by Barbary, a dead woman, conveying the lament and melancholy of sufferers of love, wind from the realm of the dead arrives at her chamber integrating the voices of the dead and the living. Furthermore, Othello’s revenge on his wife is associated with the wind: Othello strangles Desdemona, depriving her of breath, and he then cuts his own throat to stop his own wind. Desdemona’s ballad performance functions as a ritual to render the stage into a site for corpses.

Chapter 3 begins with an overview of the textual arguments on Q1 and the First Folio (F1: 1643) of *King Lear* to provide a ground for treating Q1 on this dissertation. Among the numerous striking differences between Q1 and F1 is the so-called mock trial, which occurs only in the quartos. Even in the production based on F, this part has often been considered indispensable to the storm scene. The impact of the mock trial on stage is attributed partly to the ballad performances by the Fool and Edgar, whose singularity lies in the fact that his singing is associated with his fluctuating social position. Edgar sings ballads disguised as Tom of Bedlam, a symbol of the marginalized, and it is notable that he shares a dialogue ballad with the Fool in the mock trial scene. As singing is normally associated with the singer’s marginality in Shakespeare’s plays, scenes including shared songs that transgress the social status are hardly observed. In *Twelfth Night*, although a shared song that oversteps the social status is presented as a menace to be controlled, the deed is not presented as having a significant impact on the whole play. Q1 *King Lear* is noteworthy as Edgar, who shares a ballad with his social inferior, survives and is mentioned as the restorer of the kingdom, although the end of the play is ambiguous.

Edgar's gradational identity, which indicates the coexistence of a marginalized ballad singer and a possible future ruler, might be a significant experiment by Shakespeare.

This play also provides musicality in the unperformed singing voice. Although Lear is marginalized as a vagabond, his former high status prevents him from singing on stage, as musical performances by noble men in public were regarded as inappropriate behavior in early modern England. Instead, his singing in madness is reported by Cordelia. Her words provoke the audience to imagine Lear's fierce singing voice while he wanders around Dover. However, the imaginary singing voice of Lear changes to a happy tone at the end of the play, when he is held in captivity with Cordelia. Lear's wish is to spend his remaining days sharing a song and telling old tales with his daughter. As death renders this singing by Lear and Cordelia forever unperformed, the audience can do nothing but imagine their singing voices. Their voices might be heard in combination with the audience's imagination. The unperformed, imaginarily combined voices of Lear and his daughter are a dramatic device that heightens the tragic effect.

As *Desdemona* (2012), written by Toni Morrison, with lyrics composed by Rokia Traoré, shows, ballads are recycled and repeatedly utilized in various media. They survive in Shakespeare's plays, with added and altered lyrics, reflecting the social trends and culture in which the new versions are created. Ballads originate in oral tradition and survive in various forms ranging from the vulgar to the elite. To observe their roles in the context of early modern culture is to understand how they markedly contributed to bridging the division between "high" culture and "low" culture.