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“I’ve Always Identified with the Women:” How Appalachian Women Ballad Singers’ Repertoire
Choices Reflect Their Gendered Concerns

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Appalachian Studies

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Appalachian Studies

by

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December 2018

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Tradition, Folk Song, Appalachian Music

ABSTRACT

“I’ve Always Identified with the Women:” How Appalachian Women Ballad Singers’ Repertoire Choices Reflect Their Gendered Concerns

by

Sara Lynch-Thomason

This thesis explores how contemporary Appalachian women’s gendered experiences influence their choices of ballad repertoire. This inquiry is pursued through a feminist analysis of interviews with six women ballad singers from Madison County, North Carolina. In evaluating the women’s choices of ballads and their commentary on the songs, this thesis draws upon narratological theories as well as concepts from Appalachian traditional music studies.

This study finds that women’s repertoire preferences reveal contemporary female concerns for physical safety and political agency. The singers also extract hidden transcripts from ballad texts and use ballads to educate audiences about women’s historic oppression. However, some singers find other factors, such as a song’s tune, or its significance as a part of regional heritage, to be more significant than the narrative content of the songs. This work affirms the contemporary influences of gendered concerns in ballad singing communities.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my great-grandmother Pearl Hatfield. I am most grateful that this resilient Appalachian woman passed her curiosity about the world to my Mamaw, who passed it on to my mother, who passed it on to me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to each of my committee members for their generous support through every stage of my thesis-writing process. I would also like to thank my mother, Corbin Hayslett, and Becky Beyer for feedback and emotional support. And finally, thanks to Dr. Jane MacMorran for introducing me to Thomas Burton's *Some Ballad Folks*.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Story One: A robber comes across three sisters in the woods. He alternately commands each sister to choose between marrying him or dying by his hand. The first two sisters refuse his demand of marriage, and he kills them both. The third sister, however, threatens the robber, telling him that were he to kill her, her brother Baby Lon would avenge her death. Suddenly realizing that this woman is his sister and that he has murdered his other siblings, the robber ends his life with his “wee pen-knife.”

Story Two: Phyllis and Mari, two friends attending a concert, are kidnapped by four sadistic criminals. Over a few days’ time, the criminals brutally torture, sexually violate, and ultimately murder the two women. The criminals unwittingly arrive at the home of Mari’s parents. Mari’s mother realizes what has taken place, and she and her husband murder each criminal one by one.

Story Three: Three sisters are out for a walk. In a field, they encounter a robber. The robber singles out a sister and tells her that he will kill her if she will not marry him. The sister convinces him to lie down with her. The other two sisters jump on the robber from behind and smother him with the cloth from their dresses. The three women leave the robber’s body in the field. That summer, his body is obscured by beautiful flowers that bloom across the field.

Each of these stories is a different manifestation of a ballad motif that has been passed through oral tradition for at least 400 years. Known by many names—“Babylon,” “The Bonny Banks of Fordie,” and “Three Sisters” (Roud 27)—versions of this ballad have wound their way across Scandinavia, the British Isles and the United States.¹ The first version was sung by residents of Perthshire, Scotland in the early 1800s.² The second is a summarization of Wes Craven’s 1972 film *The Last House on the Left*, which in of itself is a reimagining of Ingmar Bergman’s 1960 film *Jungfrukällan (The Virgin Spring)*, an interpretation of a Scandinavian

1. Francis James Child, “14. Babylon; or, The Bonnie Banks of Fordie,” vol. 1, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1882; Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 170-173. This song is number 27 in the Roud Folksong Index.

2. William Motherwell, *Motherwell’s Minstrelsy* (Glasgow: John Wylie, 1827), 88, <https://archive.org/details/minstrelsyancien00moth>.

version of the “Three Sisters” ballad.³ The last story was crafted by a woman in a ballad workshop that I conducted in Kentucky in the summer of 2017. In the workshop, I distributed printed lyrics containing the first few verses of some lesser-known ballads and asked the participants to write their own endings. The three participants who chose to create their own endings to the “Three Sisters” ballad—all women—constructed stories in which the sisters cleverly killed their attacker and walked away unscathed.

For me, these contrasting manifestations of the “Three Sisters” ballad raise questions about the intentions of ballad singers and the meanings of their songs. Were these choices motivated in part by the teller’s gendered experiences? Did any of the tellers of these versions of the “Three Sisters” change the ballad narrative from how they had first learned it? What morals or lessons did each teller intend to convey with their story? What audiences were these stories designed for, and who felt empowered (or disempowered) when they were told?

As a singer of ballads for over a decade, I have often contemplated these questions while making choices about my own repertoire. As I’ve chosen to sing certain ballads, altered lyrics, or sung in solitude, I have been acutely aware that these choices are prompted in part by my personal, gendered experiences. For example, I have enjoyed learning and teaching, “Marching Away with the Spaniards,” a Kentucky ballad with Scottish origins that tells the story of a “pretty little miss” who, despite her father’s pleas, runs away from home to join a band of traveling Spaniards. I enjoy this song because it reminds me of the strong sense of independence

3. K.A. Laity, “The Virgin Victim: Reimagining a Medieval Folk Ballad in *The Virgin Spring* and *The Last House on the Left*,” in *Folklore/Cinema*, ed. Sharon R. Sherman and Mikel J. Koven (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, Urban Institute, 2007), 180, 182-183.

with which my mother raised me, and how she emphasized that a woman's self-determination was important in a culture that would not always listen to her.

In a very different sense, I've enjoyed singing a British Isles song called "Queen Jane," though it's a song I've never felt comfortable teaching to others. The ballad tells the story of a noble woman who, while picking nuts in the woods, is raped by a lord. I've probably sung this ballad more than any other: It comes to me spontaneously while I am cooking, while I am in the woods, or driving my car. Singing this song, with its quiet air and slow melody, is a way for me to meditate on an event of sexual violence that occurred to a female friend several years ago. I am still trying to wrap my head around the fact that this event occurred at all, and at yet another level, I am trying to meet the reality that such an event could likely happen to me. Singing the song provides a framework to help me examine the violence that I fear, while also placing a limit on that examination. The narrative structure of the ballad, with its exposition, conflict, and resolution, means that predictably, the noblewoman will suffer sexual violence (as I might someday) and that the violence will end (as would mine). In this way, my singing of "Queen Jane" provides an odd sense of control and safety.

For the past several years, as I've shared music and taught workshops in Madison County, North Carolina, I've wondered to what degree gendered experiences play a role in the musical choices of my fellow women ballad singers. Do such experiences influence these women's choices of ballad narratives? Do they influence the lessons or morals the women extract from the songs? Do women singers find it important to communicate these lessons or morals to others, and what strategies do they use to do so?

To help answer these questions, I conducted intensive, semi-structured interviews with six Madison County women ballad singers of varying ages, economic backgrounds, and singing

experiences. My study uses the setting of Madison County because it is an area that contains diverse singing cultures that produce a range of relationships to the gendered aspects of balladry. Several different ballad-singing families have lived in the county since at least the early twentieth century, and scholarly research and commercial media focused on those families has helped to foster the county's reputation as a historic hub for ballad singing traditions. I examined the data from these interviews using thematic and narrative analysis, and interpreted my findings using literary theory, feminist narratology, and ballad scholarship. Additionally, I drew upon Appalachian traditional music studies and examinations of Madison County's musical and documentary history.

Singing Communities in Madison County

Madison County has earned a reputation as a region in which ballad singing and traditional song have flourished for many generations. This reputation is well earned, although the diversity of the county's singing communities has not always been fully recognized. A brief review of the county's history and its current singing communities helps to set the stage for my study of local women singers.

Madison County is located in Western North Carolina and borders Tennessee to the west. It covers 451 square miles, a quarter of which is U.S. Forest Service land. Carved out in 1851 from its neighboring Yancey and Buncombe Counties, Madison County is forested, rugged and mountainous, with an elevation change of almost 4,000 feet.⁴ Unlike neighboring Buncombe

4. Martha King, "Madison County Project: Collaborative Ethnography, Tradition, and Media," (master's thesis, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 2006), 3, <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/indexablecontent/uuid:ebe5b1bd-bace-42b7-b7a3-d542fc2c2d95>.

County, which contains over 238,00 residents, many of whom reside in the burgeoning city of Asheville, Madison County has a much smaller population of approximately 21,000, with over 90% of those residents living in rural areas.⁵ The county seat, Marshall, which sits along the east bank of the French Broad River, contains approximately 870 residents.⁶

For thousands of years, a number of indigenous people, including the Cherokee, lived in the area that is now Madison County. By the late eighteenth century, European and British Isles colonizers began to move into what is present-day Western North Carolina and East Tennessee, forcing many indigenous peoples to integrate or move out of the region. During this period, white Western North Carolina residents were primarily first, second, and third generation immigrants from Germany, England, and Northern Ireland. Some of these white colonizers also brought enslaved Africans and African-Americans with them. All of these peoples contributed their own musical traditions to the region, including ballads and folk songs from the British Isles. Regional residents continued to sing and adapt British Isles songs throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

5. “Buncombe County, North Carolina: Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics, 2010,” Census.gov, United States Census Bureau, accessed February 6, 2018, https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/DEC/10_DP/DPDP1/0500000US37115; “QuickFacts: Madison County, North Carolina,” Census.gov, United States Census Bureau, accessed February 6, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/madisoncountynorthcarolina,nc/PST045217>; “County Profile: Madison County, January 2018,” North Carolina Department of Commerce, Access NC: North Carolina Economic Data and Site Information, <https://accessnc.nccommerce.com/DemoGraphicsReports/pdfs/countyProfile/NC/37115.pdf>.

6. “Marshall town, North Carolina: Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics, 2010,” Census.gov, United States Census Bureau, accessed February 6, 2018, https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/DEC/10_DP/DPDP1/1600000US3741580.

Since the early twentieth century, Madison County has been an area of interest for ballad collectors and documentarians, from English folklorist Cecil Sharp to filmmaker John Cohen and photographer Rob Amberg.⁷ Today, researchers and documentarians continue to produce studies and films about the county's singers. As I will elucidate in the next chapter, this continuous documentation has fostered several cultural consequences for the county, transforming oral traditions and shaping many singers' sense of identity. Today, the Madison County, North Carolina Tourism Administration now markets the county's musical history to attract tourists, hosting several annual music festivals and promoting the area's "traditional mountain music" and "eighth generation ballad singers" on its website.⁸

Today Madison County contains many overlapping communities of singers who make music in a variety of commercial and non-commercial settings. These settings include music-hosting venues in Marshall such as Zuma Coffee, The Depot (a converted railroad depot building), and the Madison County Arts Council performance space. Yearly festivals such as the Bluff Mountain Festival in Hot Springs and the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival in Mars Hill also reliably feature ballad singing. A group called Chanters All, founded in the 1990s, hosts traditional song get-togethers every month or so, and local musicians, including me, teach ballad workshops. Several county residents perform ballads commercially, including Sheila Kay

7. King, "Madison County Project," 8-9, 13.

8. "Who We Are—Our Madison County Towns & Music and Art Heritage," Visit Madison County, Madison County, North Carolina Tourism Administration, updated 2016, accessed February 6, 2018, <https://www.visitmadisoncounty.com/who-we-are/>; "Eighth Generation Ballad Singers," Visit Madison County, Madison County, North Carolina Tourism Administration, updated 2016, accessed February 6, 2018, <https://www.visitmadisoncounty.com/who-we-are/traditional-music-heritage/traditional-music-today/eighth-generation-ballad-singers/>.

Adams, Donna Ray Norton, and Joe Penland. Informal song swaps and music gatherings also occur at get-togethers hosted by area musicians including Sheila Kay Adams.

Some of Madison County's singers, including Penland and Adams, grew up in the county learning songs directly from friends or relatives who in turn had learned them from previous generations of local singers. But, as this study makes evident, many more of Madison County's residents have learned to sing ballads through a broader variety of influences, from exposure to recordings of French folk-revival bands on YouTube to learning songs from friends and family in other parts of the United States. Their repertoires, singing styles, and the methods by which they learn ballads are much broader than what collectors found 100 or even 50 years ago in the region.

In the past few decades, most commercial media and scholarly research concerning ballad singing in Madison County has focused on a demographic I refer to as "heritage singers." I define heritage singers as ballad singers descended from Madison County musicians who were documented in earlier periods by researchers such as Sharp and Cohen. The county's contemporary heritage singers include Sheila Kay Adams, Donna Ray Norton, and Denise Norton O'Sullivan. Several recent documentary works have focused on these singers, including a documentary film by Martha King and Rob Roberts titled *Madison County Project*, released in 2005, and David Weintraub's *A Great American Tapestry: The Many Strands of Mountain Music*, released in 2017.⁹ The term "heritage singer" is drawn from scholar Martha King's term "heritage maintenance," which refers to the ways in which Madison County singers like Adams and Norton use their ancestry to promote their status as musicians, a dynamic that is detailed in

9. King, "Madison County Project," 61.

subsequent chapters.¹⁰ My use of the term “heritage” refers to how heritage singers conceptualize and promote ballad singing in Madison County as a multi-generational, oral tradition practiced through specific family lines.¹¹ This also means that in the context of this study, the term “heritage” refers to white, Anglo-American traditions. Although African American communities across the South have engaged in ballad singing since at least the nineteenth century, and though many different racial and ethnic musical heritages exist in Madison county, “heritage” in this context refers exclusively to how heritage singers—all of white ancestry—perceive ballad singing as a familial inheritance.¹²

One of the goals of this study is to reshape current conceptions of who sings ballads in Madison County by highlighting several of the county’s non-heritage singers who thoughtfully engage in historic song traditions. In "Towards a Workable Past: Dangerous Memories and Feminist Perspectives," Appalachian scholar Mary Anglin states that when scholars recognize the economic and cultural histories that distinguish different settings in Appalachia, it is “no longer viable to speak of Appalachia in the singular *a* (timeless/eccentric/isolated) land and *a* (quasi-native) people” (author’s italics).¹³ Similarly, my work demonstrates that there is no monolithic group of ballad singers contained within Madison County, but rather that the area contains multiple communities of singers from a variety of economic, regional, and musical backgrounds.

10. King, “Madison County Project,” 33.

11. King, “Madison County Project,” 33.

12. Barry Lee Pearson, “African American Ballads,” liner notes for *Classic African American Ballads*, Smithsonian Folkways 40191, compact disc, 2006.

13. Mary Anglin, "Towards a Workable Past: Dangerous Memories and Feminist Perspectives," *Appalachian Studies Journal* 6, no. 1/ 2 (Spring/Fall 2000): 75.

Theory and Methodology

The Interviews, Coding, and an Introduction to the Participants

The main method I chose to conduct this study consisted of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with adult women singers who live or have lived in Madison County for varying lengths of time. My use of in-depth interviews as the main form of data in my study was inspired by *Some Ballad Folks*, a book of compiled interviews conducted by East Tennessee State University (ETSU) professor Dr. Thomas G. Burton on Beech Mountain, North Carolina in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴ Beech Mountain is located in the northwest corner of North Carolina, and like Madison County, the area has a rich history of ballad singing traditions. Burton and his assistants recorded interviews with five women ballad singers of varying generations: Lena Harmon, Rena Hicks, Hattie Presnell, Buna Hicks, and Bertha Baird. Departing from the practices of many twentieth-century folklorists, Burton was not concerned with collecting songs but instead wanted to know what the songs meant to the singers and their community. Burton asked the Beech Mountain women to discuss their favored ballads, the meanings of the ballads, and how they felt about the songs. The women's answers demonstrated that they individually and communally interpreted the social and moral meanings of ballads, selected and rejected songs based on personal preference, and used ballads in social situations to influence the actions of community members. This work inspired me to design a study that used Burton's model of in-depth, semi-structured interviews to elicit conversation on the social meanings and uses of ballads. In imitating Burton's pioneering approach to ballad studies, my work attempts to expand

14. Thomas Burton, *Some Ballad Folks* (Johnson City, TN: East Tennessee University Press, 1978). The recordings and transcriptions of these interviews are part of the Thomas G. Burton-Ambrose N. Manning Collection at the Archives of Appalachia at ETSU. The collection guide is available at: <https://archives.etsu.edu/repositories/2/resources/11>.

understandings of how women singers in Western North Carolina have used ballad narratives to express their gendered experiences and values.

I started my project with the aim of including women from a diversity of generational, economic, and song culture backgrounds within Madison County, hoping such a mix of participants would help to contribute a broad variety of ideas to the study. Before identifying my participants I submitted a description and sample of interview questions to the institutional review board (IRB) office of ETSU, which determined that my study did not constitute human subjects research and was exempt from a full IRB review. Next, I developed an informed consent document that described the project's goals, the interview process, and the participants' rights. I proceeded to call or e-mail nine women whom I knew to be active ballad singers who sang for personal enjoyment, as a social pastime, as performers, or all three. I described the project and asked them to consider participation. Some women never responded while others declined due to a lack of time. Of the six who consented to participate, three were women I had sung or spent time with before the project began and three I had not met before or had only met in passing. I made sure that half of my participants were less known to me in order to create a greater likeliness of the participants sharing information and thoughts that were not based on a knowledge of my personality or repertoire preferences.¹⁵

I chose to limit the number of participants in my project to a small size, which created benefits but also fostered some limitations. I chose a small number of participants so that I could conduct multiple interviews with each participant. I wanted to ensure that I could revisit the

15. Bruce Jackson, *Fieldwork* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 69. As noted by Jackson, an experienced oral historian, when a researcher interviews a friend the friend is more likely to avoid information she thinks the researcher may not want to hear, and so I took pains to avoid this scenario.

participants' ideas multiple times so that I could feel confident representing their thoughts in my analysis. This smaller sample size also allowed me to take the substantial time needed to transcribe and analyze each interview. However, the smaller scope of the project also meant that the participants did not represent a wide variety of racial or sexual identities. Most women ballad singers in the county are white, but had I conducted more extensive inquiries I might have been able to interview ballad singers from other racial backgrounds. While I did not ask the participants to describe their sexual identities, what they chose to describe about their sexual identities and romantic relationships in the interviews were heteronormative in nature. As a result, this study does not account for the much broader, intersectional experiences of women ballad singers in Appalachia, including women of Affrilachian, Latinx, American Indian, trans, and queer identities. Future studies that include participants from a broader spectrum of identities will likely reveal different gendered concerns, selections of repertoire, and interpretations of the meanings of ballads.

I conducted the interviews for the study between January and April of 2018. I interviewed each participant twice, with each interview lasting between 45 minutes to 1.5 hours. The interviews primarily took place at the participants' homes, and a few interviews took place by phone when a participant lived too far away or was unavailable for an in-person interview. I used an intensive interviewing model that utilized semi-structured conversation and broad, open ended questions. This model, as described by grounded theorist Kathy Charmaz, emphasizes that the researcher should practice active listening in order to encourage the participant to elaborate on topics she finds important.¹⁶ In the first interview I asked the participants about how they had

16. Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), 25-26.

been exposed to ballad singing, if any ballads had helped the singers through difficult times, and what ballads they favored and disliked. To prompt discussion on the latter topic, I asked the question: “What ballads and folk songs mean a lot to you as a woman?” A follow up question was, “What ballads and folk songs do you dislike because of your experiences as a woman?” In the semi-structured conversations that unfolded from these questions, I also asked the participant to explain why she liked and disliked certain ballads, the morals or meanings of those ballads, and how her feelings and interpretations were influenced by her personal experiences. At the end of the first interview I conducted a short survey to gather biographical information including the singers’ date of birth, racial and ethnic heritage, class background, and family structure. The participants also signed the informed consent documents.

I transcribed the first interviews using verbatim transcription so that my analysis could account for the emotional elements of the interviews and the nuances of the participants’ efforts to express their ideas. Before setting up the second interview I sent each participant a transcription of their first interview, so they could review the material and consider if they wanted to add to or clarify any ideas in the second interview. In the second series of interviews I did not follow a standard series of questions. Instead, I tailored the questions for each participant based upon the topic matter she had shared in the first interview. The questions remained mostly open-ended, with a few being close-ended in nature, and were designed to help the participant engross upon themes and ideas introduced in the first interview.

When designing the study, I had a few ethical concerns. I had initially intended to focus on how the participants’ choices of repertoire were influenced by difficult or even traumatic experiences. I was concerned that the interviews could potentially evoke upsetting memories and feelings for the participants. To prevent this I included a statement in the consent forms that

made clear that the participants could ask for the interviews to end at any time and that they did not have to answer any questions which they were uncomfortable answering. This theme did not remain a prime focus of the study largely because I only included one interview question about difficult experiences and repertoire and because the participants discussed a much broader variety of ways in which they were emotionally connected to their repertoires. However, in their interviews several participants did freely choose to describe hard personal experiences such as losing loved ones or enduring difficult relationships.

I also wished to be able to ensure anonymity for the participants if they so wished. Because many of the ballad singing communities in Madison County overlap, and because several participants in the study are performers, I thought it likely that someone reading my thesis would be able to easily identify the participants if I did not take preventable measures. To address this concern, I included a statement in the informed consent document that explained that the participant could choose to be anonymous in the study, and that I would make efforts to obscure their identity in my thesis. By the end of the first interview, five participants stated being comfortable with the use of their real names, and a sixth consented to have her real name used after both interviews had been conducted.

I applied simultaneous coding and narrative analyses to assess the data from my interviews. I began the coding process by using hard copies of my transcripts and performing a close line-by-line reading of the texts. I looked for topic matter related to four categories: the participants' gendered concerns and ideologies, their plot summaries of the ballads they favored and disliked, their reasons for liking or disliking those ballads, and how they interacted with or used those ballads in solitary or social settings. Although I was attentive to these topics in the transcripts, I chose to use a technique recommended by qualitative theorist Kathryn Roulston and

began my analysis without the use of pre-determined codes.¹⁷ I did this because I wanted to avoid beginning the transcription process with a set of codes that contained phrases or concepts that did not conform to the data provided by the participants. I worried that using codes that contained terms such as “feminist” or “sexist” could be assumptive of a participant’s conceptualizations of her experiences or ideas. Instead, I let the participants’ responses guide the material, using descriptive and in vivo coding as themes or topics arose. As my reading of the transcripts progressed, I began to apply pattern coding, looking for consistencies and incongruities concerning the four categories discussed above.

Since my interviews included several types of narratives, including the participants’ personal stories and their retellings of ballad plots, I wanted to use some form of narrative analysis to help me understand what the participants found valuable about the stories they told. In particular, I wanted to identify what a participant found to be the most emotionally evocative and defining elements of a story’s plot, and what she thought was the “point” of that story. As with my choice to avoid pre-determined codes, I wanted to apply a narrative analysis to safeguard against my own assumptions about the participants’ interpretations of their stories. I decided to use a structural analysis model created by William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, outlined in two papers: Labov and Waletzky’s “Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experiences” (1967) and Labov’s “Uncovering the Event Structure of a Narrative” (2001).¹⁸

17. Kathryn Roulston, *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010), 152.

18. William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, “Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experiences,” in *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts*, ed. June Helm. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966); Labov, “Uncovering the Event Structure of a Narrative,” (paper presentation, Georgetown Roundtable on Language and Linguistics, Washington, D.C., 2001), <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/uesn.pdf>.

Labov and Waletzky identify several elements of narrative: abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and coda.¹⁹ I used this model to primarily identify two narrative elements in the participants' stories: the abstracts and the evaluations. Abstracts often consist of one or two sentences that a narrator uses to introduce a story and summarize its plot before she relays the story in full detail. Remarks such as "That's one with a really sad ending" or "It's a swashbuckler" are examples of abstracts.²⁰ Evaluations occur when a narrator reveals her attitude about a story and justifies her telling of a story to her listener (describing the "point" of the story) and tend to appear in the course of a story or towards the end.²¹ Identifying these elements helped me to understand what that participants found to be meaningful and evocative in the stories they told.

As I wrote the thesis I decided to refer to the participants by their first names instead of their surnames. Although there is a historic precedent for the use of surnames in scholarship, my use of first names in this study illustrates a familiarity that is descriptive of my relationships with the participants. This familiarity was fostered through the interviews, in which the participants discussed women's historic circumstances, shared personal stories, and sometimes invited me to provide my perspectives on the topic matter. In these interactions I was aware of myself not only as a researcher but also a woman singer engaging with another woman singer about topics of mutual interest and concern. This awareness allowed me to feel a sense of "subject shift" in my interviews. "Subject shifts" as coined by ethnographer Jeff Titon, are scenarios in which a researcher conducting fieldwork can feel simultaneously outside and within a participant's

19. Labov and Waletzky, "Narrative Analysis," 32-39.

20. Labov, "Uncovering the Event Structure of a Narrative," 3-4.

21. Labov and Waletzky, "Narrative Analysis," 37-39.

world, with the researcher acting as both an observer and a participant.²² Aware of this paradoxical phenomenon in my own study, I choose to use first names to illustrate the intimacy of my interactions with the participants but with an awareness that this familiarity does not diminish my commitment to portraying their ideas objectively.

The six women whose voices make up this study represent a mix of generations, economic backgrounds, and experiences as singers. They are Betty Smith, Channing Showalter, Darci Dewulf, Donna Ray Norton, Sheila Kay Adams, and Susi Gott. The participants range in age from 30 to 91 years old. Most understand themselves as working class or poor, some feel their economic class has fluctuated in their lifetimes, and one, Darci, identifies her upbringing as “privileged.”²³ All six participants are white (although Sheila Kay Adams defines her ethnic background as a “mountain person”).²⁴ Currently, Donna and Darci live in urban or suburban communities in Madison County, Sheila and Susi live in rural parts of the county, and Betty and Channing no longer live in the county.

Each of these women has a different relationship to Madison County and was introduced to ballad singing through distinct experiences. All three participants who were raised in the county—Sheila, Susi, and Donna—were exposed to ballad singing at a young age. Both Sheila and Donna are related to well-known singing families of the county and have learned ballads from family members and neighbors. Susi was also born and grew up in the county, and as a

22. Jeff Todd Titon, “Bi-Musicality as Metaphor,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 108, no. 429 (Summer 1995): 290.

23. Darci Dewulf, interview with Sara Lynch-Thomason, February 8, 2018, Marshall, North Carolina.

24. Sheila Kay Adams, interview with Sara Lynch-Thomason, February 8, 2018, Marshall, North Carolina.

child she learned ballads from neighbors and visiting musicians. Susi is about a decade younger than Sheila, and many of the neighbors from whom Susi learned ballads were the same relatives teaching ballads to Sheila when she was growing up. The other three singers, Darci, Channing, and Betty, grew up outside the county but have lived there for varying lengths of time. Betty grew up in Guilford County, North Carolina, where friends and family exposed her to ballad singing at a young age. Betty went on to live in Georgia for much of her life, and moved to Madison County in the late 1980s with her husband Bill. After several decades, the couple moved to a retirement community in Black Mountain, North Carolina where Betty still resides. Darci was born in California in 1970, spent her teenage years in Athens, Georgia and moved to Madison County in 1995. Channing was raised in Seattle, Washington, lived in Madison County from 2014 to 2017, and currently lives in Port Townsend, Washington. Both Channing and Darci were exposed to ballad singing and folk song in their teenage years and early twenties, learning songs from commercial recordings of folk revivalists as well as community members.

The singers enjoy ballads in a variety of social and performance-based contexts. All six sing ballads at informal gatherings, and both Susi and Sheila like to host singings at their homes. All six also perform ballads and folk songs. Betty, Sheila, and Susi have spent substantial portions of their lives making their livings as musicians, using folksongs and ballads as elements of their repertoires. Additionally, Sheila, Channing, Susi, and Betty have taught ballads through workshops and regional folk camps such as the annual Swannanoa Gathering in Black Mountain, North Carolina.

As explored in the analysis of this study, all six women's gendered concerns play a role in the ballads they choose to learn and share. However, the participants' understandings of the purposes of balladry and its value as a part of regional heritage are just a few of the factors that

cause them to have diverging viewpoints concerning the importance of gendered content in ballad singing traditions.

Feminist Methodology and Gender-Related Terminology

In this study I examine women singers' choices of repertoire and commentary on ballads as a strategy through which to understand how traditional song can be used to mediate and express gendered experiences and ideologies. I approach this work from a transformational and intersectional feminist standpoint, utilizing bell hook's concept of feminism as a practice that addresses all oppressive power hierarchies, not only those that affect women.²⁵ From this standpoint, the end of sexism necessitates the transformation of society as a whole away from systems of domination. As philosopher Amy Allen affirms, "Insofar as feminists are interested in studying power, it is because we have an interest in understanding, criticizing, challenging, subverting, and ultimately overturning the multiple axes of stratification affecting women in contemporary Western societies, including (but not limited to) sexism, racism, heterosexism, and class oppression."²⁶

In the study, patriarchy is the system of domination with which I am centrally concerned. I use gender theorist Judith Lorber's definition of patriarchy as "a system of interlocked oppressions and exploitations of women's bodies, sexuality, labor, and emotions." As I demonstrate in my analysis, patriarchal ideologies pervade literary elements of balladry—such as

25. bell hooks, "Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression," in *Readings in Feminist Rhetorical Theory*, ed. Karen A. Foss, Sonja Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2004), 53.

26. Amy Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 2.

narrative voice—and influence the implied and overt morals of the songs in the genre. If and how different women singers identify patriarchal structures of power within ballad texts, and if these systems influence how the singers choose to interact with ballads, is one of the central tasks of this thesis.

Since this study focuses on women and women’s experiences, it is necessary to clarify what I mean when I refer to “women.” I approach this project with an understanding of gender as a socially-constructed phenomena that pervades the day-to-day economic, social, and emotional experiences of individuals, as well as fundamentally shaping their identity. I use Judith Butler’s explanation of gender as a “performative accomplishment” constantly constructed through the “stylized repetition of acts through time.”²⁷ I agree with Butler that gender is not based on a stable, unchanging sense of self, but rather is reconstituted through continuous social performance.²⁸ Thus, when I refer to a “woman” in my study I refer not to her sex but to her performance of a gendered role. However, I also refer to some biological experiences as “female” in this study in order to reflect the gendered situatedness of those experiences. The participants discussed physical experiences such as birthing in the context of answering questions about what ballads mattered to them as women, and so I call such experiences female experiences in the study to reflect the gendered context in which the women place those events. In doing so, I do not intend to label such experiences as exclusively gendered as female, since such experiences are not limited to those who identify as women.

I also utilize a specific set of terms when referring to the participants’ articulations of

27. Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988), 519.

28. Butler, “Performative Acts,” 520.

female experience. In the course of the interviews, the participants discussed many topics they understood to be reflective of women's experiences, from raising children to rebuking flirtatious men to experiencing hardships in marriage. Often, the participants discussed the topic matter in the context of their personal, individual experiences. For example, a participant might discuss enjoying the actions of a female ballad character because the character's actions reminded the participant of events in her own life. In this study I refer to such articulations as observations of *individual* female experience. Another layer of articulation entailed the participants referring to both personal events and events in ballads as actions that affected women as a social group. For example, participants explained that ballad plots relayed events that women often experienced, whether in the past, present, or both. These articulations are what I refer to as *collective* understandings of women's experiences, the idea that many women share certain social, economic, or emotional experiences. One final layer of gendered articulation the participants used was to discuss personal events or events in ballads as a strategy to critique social and economic systems of power that impact women's lives. Participants would, for example, discuss the plots of ballads as a way to complain about the systemic exploitation of women in past historic eras or use other ballads as examples of narratives that promote women's abilities to overcome oppressive conditions. I refer to these articulations as expressions of "oppositional consciousness." As political scientist Jane Mansbridge explains in her essay "The Making of Oppositional Consciousness," "members of a group that others have traditionally treated as subordinate or deviant have an oppositional consciousness when they...identify injustices done to their group, demand changes in the polity, economy, or society to rectify those injustices, and

see other members of their group as sharing an interest in rectifying those injustices.”²⁹ When critiquing the systemic oppression of women and promoting women’s strategies to overcome this oppression, the participants of the study articulate an oppositional consciousness towards the systems of domination that oppress women.

The use of the term oppositional consciousness, however, does not imply that the participants in the study possess a unified understanding of the strategies needed to overcome systems of domination. Members of an oppressed group are oppressed in unequal ways, and women’s sexuality, nationality, class, and ethnicity impact their wellbeing and shape their concerns. And so, as sociologists Aldon Morris and Naomi Braine observe “oppositional cultures usually fail to provide shared definitions of experiences that make clear the need for collective action.”³⁰ Thus, even though many of the participants in the study used common terms such as “patriarchy” and “misogyny” to describe systems that compromised women’s rights and autonomy, the participants’ individual definitions of those terms—and their opinions on what strategies are needed to transform women’s political and social status—cannot be assumed to be unified. This study, however, does provide a window into what the participants identify as social factors that impact women, and the varying resistant strategies that the participants choose to use in ballad cultures. As my analysis shows, these strategies include choices of repertoire, use of hidden transcripts, and commentary on the ballads.

29. Jane Mansbridge, “The Making of Oppositional Consciousness,” in *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest*, ed. Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1.

30. Aldon Morris and Naomi Braine, “Social Movements and Oppositional Consciousness,” in *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest*, ed. Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 26.

Feminist Narratology

In examining the participants' evaluations of ballads, I apply concepts from feminist narratology concerning the gendered situatedness of ballad narratives. As narrative theorist Susan Lanser explains in "Towards a Feminist Narratology," a central understanding of feminist narratology is that every narrative text—or in this case, every ballad—is "referential- and influential- in the representation of gender relations."³¹ As narratives, ballads were created by authors embedded in their own sociohistorical positioning and these narratives overtly and covertly transmit culturally-bound morals and lessons, often of a patriarchal nature. A great number of ballads in the European and American canon focus on romantic relationships, frustrated and otherwise, and these stories illustrate gendered negotiations of power reflective of their respective time periods. As a ballad is passed through oral tradition, each singer changes lyrics or adds interpretations to its narrative, becoming a co-author of the gendered meanings of the song.

While ballad texts are referential in nature, a singer may assign meaning to a ballad through a number of interpretive lenses. This study employs a proposal by Lanser that the "semiotic and abstract" aspects of texts, such as symbolism and motif, alongside the "concrete and mimetic" qualities that reflect personal and everyday experiences, are both valid elements through which to discern the meanings of texts. This approach studies narrative "in relation to a referential context that is simultaneously linguistic, literary, historical, biographical, social, and

31. Susan S. Lanser, "Towards a Feminist Narratology," *Style* 20, no. 3, (Narrative Poetics, Fall 1986): 344, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42945612>.

political.”³² As I demonstrate in my analysis, female ballad singers rely upon these multiple lenses when interpreting the meanings of ballad texts.

In this study I also work from an assumption that many women employ a particular interpretive lens to balladry based on an understanding that the meanings of the songs are not overt, but coded and disguised. Scholar Joan Newlon Radner says of coding in women’s cultures, “acts of coding—covert expressions of disturbing or subversive ideas—are common phenomena in the lives of women, who have so often been dominated, silenced and marginalised by men.”³³ Anthropologist James Scott notes that the vulnerability of a subordinate group forces that group to create “a ‘hidden transcript’ that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant.”³⁴ Following Radner’s and Scott’s observations, in this study I assert that women’s historically marginalized position causes them to interpret and make use of coded expressions and hidden transcripts in daily life. As a result, women singers are alert to the possibility that ballad texts may contain coded messages about female experiences even when the songs overtly detail male acts of fulfillment and desire. Women singers not only read hidden transcripts in ballad narratives but also manifest them in their commentary and performance of ballads. As Scott details, a person can express hidden transcripts through forms of language and narrative, including “rumour, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms,” and

32. Lanser, “Feminist Narratology,” 345.

33. Joan Newlon Radner, *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), vii.

34. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 136.

“folktales.”³⁵ As observed by literary theorists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, women writers of the Victorian era used such transcripts within their literature, embedding feminist messaging into what appeared to be conventional stories. In these writings the “surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning.”³⁶ Similarly, my analysis shows that women singers can make use of hidden transcripts through subtle and overt choices of lyric changes, commentary on songs, and choices of repertoire. The singers’ interpretations, commentary, and performance of ballads through the use of hidden transcripts can also operate as strategies of resistance to what they perceive as the patriarchal messaging of ballads.

Ballads

Studying a singer’s relationship to balladry requires some orientation to the type of narrative song that is being discussed. I define balladry as a distinctive style of narrative song that crystallized in Europe in the middle ages, the form and literary techniques of which have remained much the same in succeeding centuries. The basic elements of the ballad genre—a melody matched to verse, with a narrative focus on action—are consistent across European and American balladry. As orally-transmitted narratives, singers have shared ballads widely, with the same narrative manifesting across multiple languages and cultures, as in the “Three Sisters” ballad referenced earlier in this chapter. In my study I attempt a balance of referencing the

35. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Every Day Forms of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 137.

36. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 73.

history and origins of ballads as understood in ballad scholarship while recognizing the participants' situated understandings of the songs. I use the names of the ballads as they are given by the participants and when possible reference the participants' lyrics for the ballads they discuss. I identify all songs and ballads by their number in the Roud Folk Song Index, a comprehensive database encompassing much of British Isles and American folk song and balladry.³⁷

Although I focused on the topic of balladry in the interviews, I also asked the participants to talk about folk songs in order to include a greater range of narrative songs in the study. Many folk songs, though never earning the title of "ballad," contain enough elements of plot to be considered narratives. As described by scholars Roger Abrahams and George Foss, these "lyric songs" contain a "common theme or image" and a "progression of stanzas determined by causal...relationships."³⁸ For example, in the song "On Top of Old Smokey" (Roud 414) the narrator explains that he has lost his sweetheart by courting too slow, and the successive stanzas warn against false-hearted lovers. Lyric songs illustrate gendered interactions and morals, and the participants' discussion of these songs contributes to my understanding of the participants' gendered reactions to the narrative themes of traditional song.

My study also acknowledges the multicultural nature of contemporary ballad singing in Appalachia. The participants in my study sing and interpret ballads that have been in Appalachian cultures for varying lengths of time, but they also sing ballads that have been

37. The Roud Folksong Index is a facet of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, an online resource of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, <https://www.vwml.org/>.

38. Roger D. Abrahams and George Foss, *Anglo-American Folksong Style* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 88.

collected in many parts of Europe, including Scandinavia, Scotland, and France. These interests reflect the ease with which any contemporary singer can use a variety of media to listen to and learn ballads from many cultures. In this study, I consider each singer's full repertoire of ballads, not just those commonly identified as Appalachian. I do this to acknowledge the contemporary realities of Appalachian singing cultures as multicultural and technologically modern, and to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' gendered preferences for ballad narratives.

Contributed Terminology

In the course of this study, I found the need to create several terms that described the phenomena I observed. These terms build upon previous scholarship by literary scholars, narratologists, and philosophers, and illustrate important aspects of the participants' emotional and interpretive relationships to ballads. These terms are explored here.

In Chapter Three of the study I discuss the importance of empathy as a form of emotional attachment to balladry. Empathy is the vicarious experiencing of the thoughts, attitudes, or feelings of others, and the participants expressed empathy for both ballad characters and their narrative situations. Most participants empathized with female characters more often than male characters, and often compared the experiences of women characters to the experiences of women in past and present eras. For example, a participant might say she felt sadness for a woman character who commits infanticide because the participant felt that women in many eras had been forced to make similar choices. I call these expressions of empathy towards the perceived collective experiences of women as "affinity empathy." This type of empathy entails two elements: Group identification, and empathy for that group based on assumptions of shared circumstances. I use a definition of group identification as described by Arthur Miller et al. in

“Group Consciousness and Political Participation:” “Group identification connotes a perceived self-location within a particular social stratum, along with a psychological feeling of belonging to that particular stratum.”³⁹ In the case of this study, the participants understood themselves to be part of a category of peoples—women—and understood the circumstances of their lives to be related in many ways to those of women from many times and places. As described by the participants, these shared circumstances spanned physical, emotional, and political experiences, from birthing to relationship conflicts between men and women to suffering from misogynist oppression. This sense of shared circumstances led many of the participants to express empathy for women as a category—both women ballad characters and women of the past and present—even when the participants felt they had not experienced the same events as many women and women characters (such as, for example, the experience of committing infanticide). In the case of this study, discussions of ballad narratives and characters were what prompted expressions of affinity empathy, but affinity empathy can be triggered in any number of other scenarios.

Another term I created in the course of this study refers to how the participants approach ballad texts to discern their meanings and moral messages. A ballad’s narrative voice and moral message influences how a participant interprets the meanings of a ballad. While some ballads contain female narrative voices, directly address a female audience, and contain moral messages directed to women, many ballads do not address a specifically-gendered audience and do not contain any moralizing statements. This latter category of ballads, however, is still mined for meaning by many of the participants, who interpret the songs to contain hidden transcripts for and about women’s experiences. I define ballads interpreted in this way as “semi-public texts,”

39. Arthur H. Miller, Patricia Gurin, Gerald Gurin, and Oksana Malanchuk, “Group Consciousness and Political Participation,” *American Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 3 (August 1981), 495, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2110816>.

inspired by Lanser's term "semi-private" texts. Lanser defines a semi-private text as a type of text "in which a narration is private but is designed to be read as well by someone other than its officially designated narratee."⁴⁰ Understanding a text's semi-private narration "requires a reader who brings to it particular kinds of knowledge," built from that reader's life experiences.⁴¹ Lanser uses Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" as an example of semi-private narration. The work takes the form of a personal journal, but many feminist readers view the text as written to communicate critiques of patriarchy that women are particularly equipped to decipher. Following Lanser's logic, I define semi-public texts as texts which do not address a specific audience nor contain moralizing statements, but through which certain readers (or in the case of ballads, listeners and singers) perceive meanings specific to their knowledge and life experiences. In this way, ballads that on the surface do not appear to carry specific meanings nor teach particular lessons to women are interpreted as doing so from the perspective of particular participants.

A third term I created in the course of this study pertains to ballads that trigger a particular mix of emotional reactions for some participants. In the course of the interviews, some participants discussed feeling simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by particular ballads. The participants were uncomfortable with the events or perceived morals of the songs but also felt a need to discuss and think about them, both in the interviews and in their everyday lives. These ballads had a common element of telling stories in which forms of violence occurred, including rape, massacres, and infanticide. The participants' emotional responses to these songs is reminiscent of the paradoxical engagement elicited by the horror genre, in which people, as

40. Lanser, "Feminist Narratology," 353.

41. Lanser, "Feminist Narratology," 354.

philosopher Noël Carroll describes, “find pleasure in what is by nature distressful and unpleasant.”⁴² I call the ballads that elicit this horror-like response “fascination ballads” because they prompt a confusing fixation for the participants. As shown in my analysis, violence in of itself is not a defining trait of fascination ballads. Some participants are not bothered by such content, and in some cases particularly enjoy violent and gory aspects of balladry. What fascination ballads have in common is the complex emotional response they elicit, which I argue actually produces varied benefits for some women singers. As explored in proceeding chapters, the participants can choose to use fascination ballads to contemplate or cope with fears of contemporary violence, as well as use the songs as tools to educate friends and audiences about the historic oppression of women.

Appalachian Women’s Status as Ballad Singers

I view my work as a means by which to make women’s historic and contemporary contributions to Appalachian musical cultures visible. Appalachian scholar Barbara Ellen Smith writes, “The history of Appalachia is a drama written largely about men... women have been extras, hidden behind quilts and sunbonnets in tradition-bound domestic roles that have supported their husbands, sons, and fathers as they transformed the region and made its history.”⁴³ One way in which Appalachian media and literature have hidden women’s musical experiences is by relegating women into gendered musical roles that connote a lower status compared to other forms of musical production. As discussed in the literature review, women

42. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 159.

43. Barbara Ellen Smith, “Walk-Ons in the Third Act: The Role of Women in Appalachian Historiography,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 5.

ballad singers are well represented in Appalachian documentaries, archival collections, and biographies. However, women instrumentalists are comparatively underrepresented in regional scholarship, despite a storied history as players. Scholar Deborah Thompson notes that regional scholars have repeatedly ignored women and musicians of color (both singers and instrumentalists) while elevating the perceived virtuosity of white male instrumentalists.⁴⁴ I propose that this gap between women's representations as singers and their representation as players of instruments is because song is historically associated with femininity and domesticity. As noted by Thompson, "The associations of singing...with religious and family-based music does not challenge traditionally feminine gender roles."⁴⁵ Song, as well as mountain dulcimer, piano, and organ have traditionally been acceptable musical engagements for women, allowing a female player "to keep her arms modestly down, unlike the less-genteel fiddle, banjo, or guitar."⁴⁶ I argue that compared to women banjo players or fiddlers, many scholars have considered women singers "safer" subjects of study because their actions do not appear to challenge the public/male and private/female binaries of patriarchy.

Appalachian women's recognition as singers also evokes their historical status as tradition bearers, a status that can be viewed as paradoxically important and innocuous. This status is linked to Western cultural associations with women as representations of nature and home life. These representations are iterated within much of Appalachian literature. In *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction*, Danny Miller observes that writers have consistently

44. Deborah J. Thompson, "Performing Community: The Place of Music, Race and Gender in Producing Appalachian Space" (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2012), 214, 216, 217, http://uknowledge.uky.edu/geography_etds/1.

45. Thompson, "Performing Community," 223.

46. Thompson, "Performing Community," 223.

portrayed Appalachian women in regional literature as “preservers and leaders of community life” who possess a “close, almost mythic, relationship with the natural world.”⁴⁷ I perceive that these representations grant women a hallowed purpose as maintainers of tradition, but also implicate them as inferior to men, who have traditionally performed the task of conquering the natural world and innovating older customs in the name of progress.⁴⁸

Women’s status as tradition bearers also fosters mythologized parameters concerning their creativity as singers. As noted by scholars John Gold and George Revill, many twentieth century folk song scholars projected a romanticized image of the “folk,” believing that their songs were innate expressions of the natural world.⁴⁹ Similarly, many writers have viewed Appalachian women as almost unconscious channelers and preservers of historic song.⁵⁰ Writer Emma Bell Miles illustrated this confluence between women’s song and cultural preservation in her description of the differences between Appalachian women and men. In her book *The Spirit of the Mountains*, Miles described, “The woman belongs to the race, to the *old people*. He is a part of the young nation. His first songs are yodels...It is over the loom and the knitting that old ballads are dreamily, endlessly crooned.”⁵¹ For Miles, women’s songs were an expression of the

47. Danny L. Miller, *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 3.

48. Ellen Koskoff, *A Feminist Ethnomusicology: Writings on Music and Gender* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2014), 80; Miller, *Wingless Flights*, 4.

49. John R. Gold and George Revill, “Gathering the Voices of the People? Cecil Sharp, Cultural Hybridity and the Folk Music of Appalachia,” *Geojournal* 65 (2006): 56, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10708-006-0007-z>.

50. Miller, *Wingless Flights*, 11.

51. Emma Bell Miles, *The Spirit of the Mountains* (New York: James Pott and Company, 1905), 69.

Appalachian people's ancestral past, while men's vocalizations symbolized a departure from their historic "race" and culture.

The historic confluences of song with femininity, added to women's traditional status as preservers of culture, creates an interesting mix of signals when a woman sings a ballad in Appalachia. Her gender grants her a status as a natural purveyor of an elevated regional art form, but also frames her as a passive, rather than an innovative, producer of music. Both of these associations can be problematically used to obscure the social power of ballad singing. As stories, ballads shape cultural ideas, teaching listeners not only how to organize the world around them, but also to how to morally evaluate the actions of others. In *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio Narratology*, sociologist Arthur Frank notes, "Stories teach people what to look for and what can be ignored; they teach what to value and what to hold in contempt."⁵² By choosing repertoires, providing commentary on songs, and altering ballad narratives, women singers act as culture agents, shaping perceptions of what stories "belong" to Appalachian culture, and implicitly, what actions and behaviors within those stories are permissible. These musical choices create opportunities for gender systems within Appalachia to be reinforced, constructed, and refuted. In this study's overt attention to gender, I identify Appalachian women singers as historic and contemporary agents who play a powerful role in shaping Appalachian narratives of power and gender.

52. Arthur W. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio Narratology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 48.

Plan of Work

In this thesis I seek to understand how contemporary women's gendered experiences influence their choices of ballad repertoire. I examine women singers' choices of ballads, their interpretations of ballad narratives, and the ways in which they communicate these interpretations to understand how gendered experiences play a role in women's balladry.

In Chapter Two, I explore literature relevant to my study, examining the evidence of women's gendered choices in balladry, historic representations of Appalachian women singers, and changes in oral tradition in Madison County. I illustrate women's active role as ballad singers in European and Appalachian traditions and explore historic evidence of women's preferences for particular narrative themes in balladry. Additionally, I examine twentieth and twenty-first centuries women musicians' strategies to counter the misogynist messaging of ballads through choices of repertoire, commentary, and aesthetic presentation. I also examine how historic research and multi-media documentaries in Madison County have affected traditions of oral history, encouraged forms of "heritage maintenance" amongst certain singers, and proliferated ballad singing amongst natives and non-natives of the county.

In Chapter Three, I explore the participants' understandings of ballads as dramatic narratives and examine literary techniques foundational to the genre. This framework serves to explain how singers interpret the meanings of ballads in subsequent chapters. Next, I explore the range of emotional associations a singer can have with a ballad. I divide these associations into three categories: narrative empathy, communal associations, and musical, literary, and cultural associations. I use literary theory to explore how the participants identify with ballad characters and their situations, and establish the participants' particular empathy for female characters. I also examine how singers can associate ballads with specific friends, family, and places, and

how these associations can foster a sense of importance and duty for heritage singers. Last, I examine the attractions of aesthetic and folkloric elements of balladry.

In Chapter Four I explore the ballads that the participants dislike or reject because of gendered concerns for the themes and meanings of the songs. The themes of the rejected ballads illustrate the participants' understanding of the contemporary relevancy of the gender conflict detailed in ballad narratives and illuminate the participants' concerns for their survival and safety as women. An examination of fascination ballads illustrates how some ballads elicit a sense of horror from ballad singers which may help the singers contemplate dangers in their everyday lives. I also examine the varying types of attachments many singers can have towards "The Knoxville Girl," a violent murder ballad. Some participants' strong aesthetic and communal attractions to the ballad show that the narrative content of ballads can be a secondary concern for some singers.

In Chapter Five, I examine the ballads favored by the participants for their gendered elements. The favored themes illustrate the participants' desire to see women characters portrayed in heroic and capable roles, sometimes through the female characters' appropriation of symbols and actions associated with male power. Additionally, the participants' favoring of themes in which women suffer or cause violence also illustrates an attraction to ballads that can be used to educate contemporary audiences on women's historic subjugation. Both Chapters Four and Five illustrate the participants' willingness to provide commentary and read hidden transcripts in the ballad texts to foster a greater understanding of women's historic and contemporary circumstances.

Chapter Six offers a summation of my findings concerning the participants' choices of repertoire, interpretations of the meanings of ballads, and strategies to convey these meanings to

others. I also observe that while gendered concerns play an important role in how women singers choose their ballad repertoires, the singers' broader emotional attachments to ballads also shape their repertoires in meaningful ways.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women have been active composers and singers of ballads since the High Middle Ages. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries women troubadours and minstrels provided ballad compositions for wealthy patrons.¹ Women likely continued to create ballads through the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, though the names of ballad authors from these periods are largely unknown. Beginning in the seventeenth century and into the Victorian era, there is more substantive evidence of women's active roles in balladry. In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, women actively sang, printed, and distributed broadside ballads, and likely composed many ballads as well.² Additionally, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women provided the majority of contributions to major ballad collections. Scholar David Buchan observes that women outnumbered men as source singers in records of Scottish balladry after 1750, and Deborah Symonds notes that women singers provided most of the songs for James Francis Child's seminal collection, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*.³ This evidence suggests that women were not only active, but perhaps dominant transmitters of ballads in Scotland and England during those periods.

1. Fiona Ritchie and Doug Orr, *Wayfaring Strangers: The Musical Voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 10.

2. Dianne Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry: 1750 to 1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 20.

3. David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 76; Deborah A. Symonds, *Weep Not for Me: Women, Ballads and Infanticide in Early Modern Scotland* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1997), 11.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries scholars and documentarians recorded many songs from Appalachian women ballad singers. The works of scholars and writers such as Jean Thomas, Cecil Sharp, Thomas Burton, and Martha King, amongst many others, attest to Appalachian women's proclivity towards ballad singing since the early 1900s. Women singers including Jean Ritchie, Sheila Kay Adams, and even Dolly Parton are recognized nationally and internationally for their singing of ballads. And as in Scotland and England, Appalachian women have sometimes provided the majority of songs for ballad collectors, as they did for Cecil Sharp's collecting excursion in North Carolina in 1916.⁴ While women's historic participation in ballad singing has included professional roles in minstrelsy, their penchant for singing is likely also tied to their historic obligations as domestic workers and caretakers for children and elderly family members. Today, as in the eighteenth, the fifteenth, or the twelfth centuries, song provides an accessible artistic outlet to women whose hands are too busy to play an instrument but whose voices are free to sing.

Gender and Ballad Repertoires

Throughout the last 800 years of ballad transmission, within which women have played such active roles as singers (and likely composers), the majority of ballads narrate events in which men have greater social and political power, and women submit, willingly or unwillingly, to this power.⁵ In other words, in most of these narratives, men act while women are acted upon,

4. "Cecil Sharp's Madison County, NC Singers," Visit Madison County, Madison County, North Carolina Tourism Association, accessed February 20, 2018, <https://www.visitmadisoncounty.com/who-we-are/traditional-music-heritage/cecil-sharp/cecil-sharps-madison-county-singers/>.

5. Lynn Wollstadt, "Controlling Women: 'Reading Gender in the Ballads Scottish Women Sang,'" *Western Folklore* 61, no. 3, 4 (2002): 296.

often violently. For example, in "Controlling Women: 'Reading Gender in the Ballads Scottish Women Sang,'" scholar Lynn Wollstadt observes that male protagonists in Scottish ballad repertoires commonly tend to wield power or authority over women, and often commit a rape or a betrayal of the female protagonist.⁶ Additionally scholar Susan Cook's survey of G. Malcolm Laws Jr.'s extensive *Native American Balladry* found that women were victims of murder in five times as many cases as men in murder ballad scenarios.⁷ In their emphasis on male power and female submission, ballad narratives are arguably a reflection of the patriarchal cultures in which they were constructed. This does not necessarily mean that European, British Isles, and American ballad authors wrote their songs with a conscious intention to reinforce patriarchy, but rather that, regardless of the author's intentions, these songs reflect the gendered circumstances of daily life for many people from the High Middle Ages to the early twentieth century.

However, it is also the case that in both British Isles and American balladry, women characters act with agency in several historic songs, implying that some authors perhaps took pleasure in creating songs that subverted patriarchal narratives. Several ballads, for example, feature female protagonists who use their own wit and resources to save themselves or their male lovers. For instance, in "Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight" (Roud 21) an English ballad published as early as the seventeenth century, a noblewoman outwits her would-be murderer by causing him to fall into a river and drown. In rare cases, female ballad characters help female ballad protagonists avoid mistreatment or abuse. One example can be found in the eighteenth-century

6. Wollstadt, "Controlling Women," 299.

7. Susan C. Cook, "'Cursed Was She': Gender and Power in American Balladry," in Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, eds., *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 215.

Scottish ballad “Broomfield Hill,” (Roud 34) that features a “witch-woman” who instructs a maiden to use magic to help her escape an attempted rape and murder by her lover.⁸ However, in the vast majority of historic ballad plots, even when a woman attempts to practice agency, she must ultimately yield to the power of a male protagonist.

Though ballads imply, and sometimes overtly preach, gendered ideologies, they rarely remain static. As British Isles and American singers have passed ballads through oral tradition, they have altered aspects of the ballad narratives, often in reaction to gender-related cultural changes. For example, Dianne Dugaw observes in *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry: 1750 to 1850* that over 200 years-time, the daring heroine of the the “warrior woman” ballad motif, popular in both England and America, was altered to reflect shifting ideals of femininity. Dugaw notes that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, social expectations that working women be physically capable and women’s intermittent participation in warfare made the adventurous and physically robust female protagonist of warrior woman ballads an acceptable character in popular culture.⁹ However, by the mid-nineteenth century, Victorian ideals of femininity prompted many writers to transform this character into a “small,” physically weak, and timid helpmate to her lover.¹⁰

In Appalachian traditions, composers have created entirely new ballad narratives in response to gendered cultural shifts. In her study of nineteenth and twentieth-century Appalachian ballad narratives, Christina Hastie observes that Appalachian femicide ballads such

8. Child, “43. The Broomfield Hill,” vol. 1, *Popular Ballads*, 394.

9. Dugaw, *Warrior Women*, 123.

10. Dugaw, *Warrior Women*, 3, 67.

as “The Death of Pearl Bryan” (Roud 500), “Omie Wise” (Roud 447), and “Lula Viers” (Roud 1933) indicate both the changing roles and opportunities of women in Appalachia (and America) and a cultural fascination with the idea of punishing women who attempt to take advantage of these changing roles.¹¹ Hastie observes that women in femicide ballads appear to be both sexually active and to take part in demanding justice for the deaths of other women. Hastie argues that both actions indicate illustrate the increasing mobility and agency of Appalachian women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, in these ballads the response to such agency is, inevitably, the murder of the main female character.¹²

Ballad writers and singers almost certainly altered the lyrics of the warrior woman ballads and Appalachian murder ballads to reflect their gendered experiences and ideologies, and some studies of eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century ballad singing cultures do suggest that men and women used their own gendered experiences to select and promote ballad repertoires. In “Fair and Free: The Cultural Implications of Independent Women in Francis James Child’s *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*,” Kathryn Rose MacLennan argues that the popularity of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century ballads featuring independent heroines was due to the fact that women singers related to the heroines in the ballads. MacLennan posits that working women were attracted to these “independent woman” ballads because the songs provided accurate portrayals of contemporaneous women who challenged

11. Christina Ruth Hastie, ““This Murder Done””: Misogyny, Femicide and Modernity in 19th-Century Appalachian Murder Ballads,” (master's thesis, University of Tennessee, 2011), iv, 152-154, http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/1045/.

12. Hastie, ““This Murder Done,”” 17.

segregated gender roles and other forms of coercion.¹³ Echoing these observations, Symonds argues that Scottish women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would have identified with women characters in infanticide-themed ballads because the ballads accurately portrayed the predicaments and compromised choices of pregnant women of the period.¹⁴

Perhaps the most substantive study linking gender to repertoire comes from Lynn Wollstadt, who conducted an analysis of an archived collection of field recordings of Scottish ballad singers to examine possible correlations between the genders of the singers and the themes of the songs they sang.¹⁵ By analyzing the themes of the ballads most popular amongst women singers, she found similar patterns in the portrayals of gender roles and, significantly, she also found that these gender roles were at odds with those in the traditional body of ballads in Scotland.¹⁶ Wollstadt identified several recurring categories: Dying men or boys, women who suffer from being in love with men who are socially beneath them, and stories that can be interpreted as cautionary tales that warn against the dangers of women's involvement with men.

13. Kathryn Rose MacLennan, "Fair and Free: The Cultural Implications of Independent Women in Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*," (master's thesis, University of Regina, 2007), i.

14. Symonds, *Weep Not for Me*, 66.

15. Wollstadt, "Controlling Women," 314. Wollstadt used recordings sourced from multiple collections in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh. These recordings were made between 1951 and 1997. Wollstadt referred to the singers as "traditional" and stated that the sources came from "field recordings" but did not contextualize the recordings further in her essay or endnotes. Wollstadt's analysis could be understood in a more nuanced way if the social backgrounds of the women and men who shared their songs were provided, either in the archives or in Wollstadt's study. Were they raised in oral song traditions? Did they encounter these songs in twentieth century folk revivals? How old were they when recorded?

16. Wollstadt, "Controlling Women," 300.

Although most Scottish ballad narratives involve authoritative male protagonists, the women's ballads studied by Wollstadt featured women protagonists who desired authority and, in some cases, attempted to practice it, often inciting violence from male characters. Moreover, the most attractive and sympathetic male characters were ones who were vulnerable and whose traditional hegemonic power was elusive.¹⁷ A fourth category identified by Wollstadt was one in which women marry authoritative men, sometime consensually and sometimes against their will. Wollstadt recognized that this category seemed to break the patterns of the other three categories, but argued that the women characters were attracted in some degree to the male characters' vulnerability, and that the songs were another example of women attempting to exert authority in challenging circumstances.¹⁸ The correlated themes that Wollstadt observed in her study suggest that women may have consciously or unconsciously chosen to learn ballads that reflected their lack of social control and a distrust of male authority.

Several other scholars support Wollstadt's line of thinking. These critics have noted that twentieth- and twenty-first century women have selected ballads and folk tales that critique or resist patriarchal gender ideologies. Scholar Martha Hixon observes that late twentieth-century female authors and editors, tired of "typically passive, dependent heroines omnipresent in Western twentieth century fairy tale collections" selected ballads and folk tales that could be interpreted as having a "feminist" message.¹⁹ One particular tale was often cited: the sixteenth-

17. Wollstadt, "Controlling Women," 296.

18. Wollstadt, "Controlling Women," 300, 311, 312.

19. Martha Hixon, "Tam Lin, Fair Janet, and the Sexual Revolution: Traditional Ballads, Fairy Tales, and Twentieth-Century Children's Literature," *Marvels & Tales* 18, no. 1 (2004): 78, 79, 83, 84, 86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41388685>.

century “Tam Lin” ballad. “Tam Lin” features a female protagonist named Janet who undergoes trials to save her lover. As a result, the ballad has maintained popularity throughout the twentieth century, with authors reproducing the song and its story in varied formats, including children’s books, young adult fiction, full-length novels and collections of folk tales.²⁰ Hixon also notes that Janet has evolved through these retellings to become an idealized romantic character who lacks the social limitations of women in earlier periods in which the ballad was sung.²¹

Two recent works examine ballad singers’ use of commentary, new compositions, and new arrangements of ballads that counter traditional songs with condemning or discomforting narratives about women. In “Destroying Patriarchy: Struggle for Sexual Equality in Mexican-American Corridos and Anglo-American Ballads,” Bradley Tater observes that both Anglo-American ballads and Mexican-American corridos contain competing messages about gender roles and behavior.²² He finds that in the case of “gender conflict” ballads and corridos—which feature men and women in conflict or who are choosing lovers outside of their original partnerships—many artists and singers use the songs to promote feminist ideals.²³ For example, in some Appalachian ballad singing cultures, singers have orally transmitted ballads that favor women’s self-determination and orally defended the actions of women ballad characters.

20. Hixon, “Tam Lin,” 67-92.

21. Hixon, “Tam Lin,” 77-78. Janet’s motivations to marry her lover Tam Lin are no longer to obtain security due to her pregnancy, but instead purely for love.

22. Bradley Tater, “Destroying Patriarchy: Struggle for Sexual Equality in Mexican-American Corridos and Anglo-American Ballads,” *The Journal of American Culture* 38, no.1 (March 2015): 4-15.

23. Tater, “Destroying Patriarchy,” 4-15.

Moreover, in corrido traditions, artists have created entirely new songs using the storytelling techniques of the genre. Tater warns that these strategies can be countered through patriarchal alterations or parodies. Satirical versions of feminist corrido songs, for example, make fun of female protagonists who in their original contexts appeared self-determined and powerful. Tater concludes that these competing narratives illustrate the historic and continuing tensions between patriarchal and feminist ideologies in American societies.²⁴

In common with Tater, music scholar Lydia Hamessley recognizes that ballads exhibit patriarchal gendered ideologies and that many singers are uncomfortable with this fact. In her essay “A Resisting Performance of an Appalachian Traditional Murder Ballad: Giving Voice to ‘Pretty Polly,’” Hamessley opens by naming an issue in contemporary ballad singing: the misogynist lyrics of Appalachian murder ballads create conflicting feelings for many musicians and listeners. This actually causes some singers to abandon interaction with ballads and the old-time genre. In response to this problem, Hamessley asks whether it is possible to find or create performances of Appalachian music that retain historic musical aesthetics, while presenting lyrics that do not ignore, yet do not celebrate, the narrative’s misogyny. Hamessley argues that leaving murder ballads out of old-time repertoires ignores their significance and altering lyrics would be ineffective. Instead, she argues that certain musical choices are a viable way to foster “resistant” performances of murder ballads that do not celebrate violence against women. She builds her argument by reviewing several commercial renditions of the murder ballad “Pretty Polly” (Roud 15) and concludes that the New Coon Creek Girls’ version of the song is the most successful “resisting performance” due to the ways in which one band member’s fiddling provides an emotional expression of Polly’s experience. According to Hamessley, this gives

24. Tater, “Destroying Patriarchy,” 13-14.

Polly symbolically powerful associations with the devil. Hamessley asserts that one way to create a resisting performance of a ballad is to introduce an emotional perspective, in this case with an additional instrument, without altering the words significantly or dramatizing the dialogue.²⁵

Tater's and Hamessley's work illustrates that a number of contemporary female singers are frustrated by the patriarchal and misogynist messaging of many ballads and folk songs, yet wish to express themselves within these genres. To do so, singers choose a variety of strategies to counter misogynist messaging: They defend the actions of the women characters in songs, select specific narratives to sing, introduce new emotional perspectives to ballads through musical choices, and write entirely new songs. Interestingly, Hamessley's assertion that alterations to ballad lyrics and rejections of ballads are altogether "ineffective" not only seems to ignore women's historic choices not to sing certain ballads but also contradicts the choices of the participants in my study.

Studies in the twentieth and twenty-first century, such as those of Hamessley, Hixon, and Tater provide clear documentation of women singers' struggles with patriarchal ballad narratives. It is tempting for feminist researchers to assume that historically, feminist concerns have been a prevailing factor in women singers' choices of repertoire. But even the evidence of some works reviewed here suggest other possibilities. Wollstadt's study, which found that many women singers sang ballads in which women married authoritative men, serves as an example.²⁶ While Wollstadt focuses on particular narrative elements to explain the singers' attractions to the

25. Lydia Hamessley, "A Resisting Performance of an Appalachian Traditional Murder Ballad: Giving Voice to 'Pretty Polly,'" *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 9 (2005): 14, 16, 33, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/190640>.

26. Wollstadt, "Controlling Women," 311-313.

songs, it could be that the singers had altogether different reasons to keep such songs in their repertoires. As the next few sections begin to explore, Appalachian women singers' repertoire choices are not only influenced by gendered experiences, but also by scholarly research and commercial promotion of ballad singing traditions.

Appalachian Women Singers in Scholarly Research and Commercial Media

Ballad singing has been a part of music cultures in the United States since seventeenth-century colonization by whites. Collectors have documented American and British Isles ballads across the country, including the west coast, the Southwest, the Midwest, and New England. However, the efforts of scholars, writers, and commercial documentarians in the last one hundred years have solidified Appalachia's reputation as a region with strong ballad traditions, identifying women as prominent tradition bearers.

Historically, writers and folklorists have portrayed white Appalachian men and women as musical people. Early twentieth-century folklorists and missionaries valued and promoted aspects of Appalachian musical traditions. For example, several mission schools taught mountain children Appalachian ballads; regional festivals promoted fiddle, banjo, and dulcimer music; and folklorists roamed the Mountain South looking for historic songs. The roots of such efforts were linked in part to many culture workers' enthusiasm for the idea that aspects of Appalachian music served as evidence of America's connection to an Anglo-Saxon past.²⁷ As noted by John Gold and George Revill, nineteenth and twentieth-century folklorists and music theorists, inspired by the writings of Johann Gottfried von Herder, perceived of folksongs not as

27. Gold and Revill, "Gathering the Voices," 55-66, 59.

contemporary compositions but rather as remnants of a much older, pre-modern past.²⁸ Relating this idea to Appalachian culture, many folklorists agreed with the statement by musicologist George Pullen Jackson that Appalachian music was “a . . . tradition which goes back beyond ‘Sumer Is Icumen In’ and disappears in the cultural mists of the Angles, Saxons, and Celts.”²⁹ In addition, the Herderian idea that the “folk” possessed an innate proclivity for music affected the perceptions of scholars of Appalachian song. English folklorist Cecil Sharp echoed this idea in 1917 when he described the “Laurel Country” peoples of Western North Carolina as “a community in which singing was as common and almost as universal a practice as speaking.”³⁰

For collectors and musicologists such as Sharp, Appalachian ballads served as prime evidence of this linkage between white American cultures and an ancient Anglo-Saxon heritage. The interest in collecting such evidence was one motivation for a collecting craze that swept Southern Appalachia in the early nineteenth century.³¹ Early collectors such as Olive Dame Campbell, Cecil Sharp, Alphonso Smith, and Dorothy Scarborough traveled to record and transcribe ballads across southern Virginia, Western North Carolina, North Georgia, East

28. Gold and Revill, “Gathering the Voices,” 57.

29. George Pullen Jackson, “White Top Festival Keeps Folk Music Alive,” *Musical America* 53 (September 1933): 7ff, quoted in David E. Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 196.

30. Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil Sharp, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1917), viii.

31. King, “Madison County Project,” 6.

Kentucky and East Tennessee.³² In these early collecting projects, as in later ones, Appalachian women were consistent—and sometimes largely prolific—sources of ballads. For example, thirty-one out of the thirty-eight singers recorded by Sharp in Madison County, North Carolina were women, with Jane Hicks Gentry, a resident of Hot Springs, North Carolina, providing seventy songs and ballads for Sharp alone.³³

As the pursuit of ballad collecting continued in the early twentieth century, some scholars started to provide more biographical and cultural information along with songs and tunes, and their writings helped to constitute a more complex understanding of Appalachian men and women's lives. Notably, it seems that women were amongst the earliest collectors to begin to include such information. Folklorist and writer Emma Bell Miles, who perhaps did not consider herself a ballad collector, included hymns and ballads in her 1905 book, *The Spirit of the Mountains*, connecting the songs thematically to her descriptions of the lives and culture of Appalachian women and men. Two women, Alreda Peels and Dorothy Scarborough, both inspired by the efforts of male collectors such as Alphonso Smith, Cecil Sharp, and Kyle Davis, were also conspicuous for their inclusion of field notes and cultural descriptions in their ballad collections.³⁴ Peels, a student of Smith, provided contextual descriptions and field notes in her

32. Kara Rogers Thomas, "Music in the Mountains: Music and Community in Western North Carolina," (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2004), 42, 47; Campbell and Sharp, *English Folk Songs*, 1, 192.

33. Betty N. Smith, *Jane Hicks Gentry: A Singer Among Singers* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 4; "Cecil Sharp's Madison County, NC Singers," Madison County, North Carolina Tourism Administration.

34. Thomas, "Music in the Mountains," 42, 45-46, 50, 54.

collecting projects in the 1920s, a practice well ahead of her time.³⁵ Scarborough, a Columbia University professor who collected ballads near Charlottesville, Virginia and in Western North Carolina took the time to describe her fieldwork in her 1937 publication *A Songcatcher in the Southern Mountains*. This departure from the traditional spare introductions of singers by her collector contemporaries provided “a glimpse into the lives and personalities” of the people who furnished her with songs.³⁶ Last, Jean Thomas, who published her book *Ballad Makin’ in the Hills of Kentucky* in 1939, described East Kentucky singers’ emotional relationships with the ballads they sang. Thomas’ work is descriptive and includes a few examples of women expressing their gendered concerns when commenting on ballads. For example, Thomas cites one young female singer who, in her comments on her repertoire, interprets the actions of a male ballad character as dishonest, and warns that women must be careful of false-hearted lovers.³⁷

In the mid-twentieth century, the creation of numerous autobiographies, scholarly studies, literature, and film on female ballad singers solidified Appalachian women’s associations with traditional song. Studies by scholars Patricia Sawin, Betty Smith, and Thomas Burton provided in-depth accounts of the lives of a number of female singers from Western North Carolina, including Bessie Eldreth Smith, Jane Hicks Gentry, and Hattie Presnell. Burton’s *Some Ballad Folks*, based on interviews conducted with Beech Mountain women, was especially significant

35. K. R. Thomas, “Music in the Mountains,” 42.

36. K.R. Thomas, 46-48. Notably, Scarborough also took pains to foster egalitarian relationships with her interviewees, cultivating friendships, giving thank-you gifts, and providing singers with transcriptions of their songs; Dorothy Scarborough, *A Songcatcher in Southern Mountains: American Folk Songs of British Ancestry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), ix.

37. Jean Thomas, *Ballad Makin’ in the Hills of Kentucky*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oak Publications, 1964), 174.

for exploring women singers' interpretations of ballads and social uses of the songs in their daily lives. Appalachian singers Jean Ritchie and Almeda Riddle wrote of their personal and communal experiences of ballad singing culture in their respective autobiographies, *Singing Family of the Cumberlands*, published in 1955 and *A Singer and Her Songs: Almeda Riddle's Book of Ballads*, published in 1970. Film documentaries such as Mimi Pickering's *Dreadful Memories* (1988), on the life of singer Sarah Ogan Gunning, George West's *Almeda Riddle* (1985), and Thomas Burton and Jack Schrader's, *Buna and Bertha* (1973) also focused on Appalachian women singers' songs and experiences. Dramatic film made Appalachian women singers more visible as well. Maggie Greenwald's 2000 film *Songcatcher*, set in Western North Carolina, used several women ballad singers in the soundtrack of the film and depicted several female ballad singer characters.

Many of these works differed from earlier literature concerning women and women singers in that they portrayed women as engaging in a variety of musical genres and as being innovators of songs. Unlike many early scholars who chose to focus exclusively on "Anglo-Saxon" ballads and ignore other forms of folk song, writers and autobiographers such as Smith and Riddle made clear that the song repertoires of white Appalachian women historically encompassed several genres beyond balladry, from church hymns to children's songs, popular songs, and shape note. Additionally, the works of researchers such as Kristina Horton, Mimi Pickering, and Shelly Romalis affirmed that white Appalachian women have been as much innovators of songs as transmitters of older ones. Studies of women singers such as Kristina Horton's *Martyr of Loray Mill: Ella May and the 1929 Textile Workers' Strike in Gastonia, North Carolina* (2015) and Shelly Romalis' *Pistol Packin' Mama: Aunt Molly Jackson and the Politics of Folk Song* (1999) illuminated the ways in which women adapted ballad lyrics and

used traditional tunes to compose songs on topics ranging from class issues to personal relationships. In *Pistol Packin' Mama: Aunt Molly Jackson and the Politics of Folk Song*, Shelly Romalis argues that such songs often articulated “the consequences and constraints of gender,” speaking to domestic concerns, familial and community relationships, the effects of poverty on the singers, and on their husbands and children.³⁸ Sarah Ogan Gunning’s “I Hate the Company Bosses” also serves as an example, in which Gunning describes the deaths of her baby and husband from desperate conditions enforced by coal “company bosses.”³⁹

The autobiographies, scholarly studies, and commercial documentaries detailed here have fostered an intimate understanding of many aspects of Appalachian women’s experiences in ballad singing cultures. While these works often provide details on women musicians’ varied emotional relationships to ballads and folk songs, few pay special attention to the gendered aspects of these choices. Romalis’ *Pistol Packin' Mama* is an exception to this, although in her case most of the songs examined are works composed by Gunning and Jackson, not historic ballads. Additionally, the majority of these works focus on women who could be considered Appalachian “natives,” and whose song experiences were largely influenced, at least in childhood, by practices of oral transmission. My study updates these images by showing that women singers in Appalachia come from many geographic backgrounds. They are also influenced by a variety of learning styles and cultural values in their ballad singing experiences. Moreover, my analysis of gendered choices shows that many women singers understand that

38. Shelly Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama: Aunt Molly Jackson and the Politics of Folk Song* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 8, 12.

39. Sarah Ogan Gunning, “I Hate the Company Bosses,” track 7 on *Girl of Constant Sorrow*, Topic Records 12T171, 1967, LP.

ballads do not merely tell stories about historically distant events and circumstances, but rather, the songs have a strong relevance to their contemporary lives.

Madison County: Scholarly Research, Commercial Media, and Changes in Oral

Tradition

In the early twentieth century, music was an active and accessible pastime in Western North Carolina. Fiddle and banjo playing, as well as the singing of hymns, camp-meeting songs, popular songs, children's songs, and ballads—often called “love songs”—were common forms of entertainment. Singers maintained these traditions not only through oral transmission but also through the use of written texts. Many singers wrote down songs and even kept collections of transcribed songs in “ballad boxes” using these transcriptions to recall song lyrics or simply enjoy the story. People sang in many private and social spaces: at church, at home, at “frolics,” during work parties such as molasses makings, plowing in the field, or alone in the woods.

By the early twentieth century, ballad collecting was a popular scholarly pursuit, in part because academics in England and America promoted the songs as evidence of a connection to an Anglo-Saxon past. Ballad collectors traversed hillsides and hollers in Southern Appalachia looking for ballads that could be traced to Scotland or England.⁴⁰ During this period, the collection and documentation of ballads and ballad singers in Madison County began. Amongst the earliest collectors in the county was the future founder of the John C. Campbell Folk School, Olive Dame Campbell, followed a few years later by English folklorist Cecil Sharp. Soon after in

40. King, “Madison County Project,” 6.

the 1920s, Western North Carolina native Bascom Lamar Lunsford began to travel the region, eventually collecting hundreds of songs.

In the 1960s, the urban folk revival spurred another round of ballad collecting and documentation in Madison County. Filmmaker and musician John Cohen collected ballads in the area with the help of his friend Peter Gott, a singer who had moved to the county several years before. A decade later, in the mid-1970s, photographer Rob Amberg began a multi-decade photo documentary project that culminated in the 2002 book *Sodom Laurel Album*. During the same decade, musician and folklorist David Holt also encouraged county singers to travel and perform, providing more opportunities for national audiences to hear, film, and record the singers. In the 1980s, folklorist Alan Lomax also visited the area and recorded songs from some of the same singers formerly interviewed by Cohen and Gott.

In the last several decades, commercial media producers and scholarly researchers have continued to document the ballad singers of Madison County. Two films by graduate and undergraduate researchers were produced in the early 2000s, respectively, *Madison County Project*, created in 2005 by Martha King and Rob Roberts, and *Over Home: Love Songs from Madison County*, created in 2012 by Kim Dryden and Joe Cornelius. Additionally, Greenwald's 2000 film *Songcatcher* promoted further awareness of ballad cultures in Western North Carolina. Recently, the one-hundred-year anniversary of Cecil Sharp's visit to the county in 1916 has prompted celebratory ballad performances and exhibits as well as a radio documentary by the BBC titled "Folk Connections: Cecil Sharp's Appalachian Trail."⁴¹

41. "Folk Connections: Cecil Sharp's Appalachian Trail," July 31, 2017, BBC Radio, online streaming, 43:50, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06yp4cv>.

The scholarly research and production of commercial media on Madison County ballads by Sharp, Cohen, and others brought international attention to a mix of local male and female singers. The oldest documented generation of singers included women such as Jane Hicks Gentry and Mary Sands, born in the 1860s and 1870s respectively, who provided songs to Sharp and whose names were published in his 1917 *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*. Later, during the 1960s folk revival, a group of singers including Dillard Chandler, Dellie Norton, Berzilla Wallin, and Cas Wallin became nationally known through several of John Cohen's projects, including his 1964 album *Old Love Songs & Ballads from the Big Laurel, North Carolina* and in his 1969 film documentary *End of an Old Song*. During bicentennial celebrations in 1976, several county singers, booked as a group, toured across the East Coast. Evelyn Ramsey, Dellie Norton, Berzilla Wallin, and Cas Wallin performed for bicentennial festivals in Washington, D.C. and Durham, North Carolina and for events such as the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival in Mars Hill, North Carolina, and the 1982 World's Fair in Knoxville, Tennessee. Today, several descendants and relatives of these men and women, among them Sheila Kay Adams, Denise Norton O'Sullivan, Donna Ray Norton, and Melanie Rice, continue to sing ballads.

Beginning in the 1960s, the research and filmmaking of ballad singers by Cohen and others began to foster several significant changes in Madison County's singing cultures, which scholar Adrienne Hollifield mapped out in her work "Family Tradition, Orality, and Cultural Intervention in Sodom Laurel Ballad Traditions." Hollifield asserts that when collectors chose to record particular versions of songs that were sung differently by members of the community, the collectors fostered an idea that one singer's song version was superior over another.⁴² In

42. Hollifield, "Family Tradition," 12.

response, the singers discarded some of their versions of songs in preference for the versions favored by collectors.⁴³ Additionally, when singers were paid for their songs and toured publicly, they began to view singing less as an openly shared activity and more as a performative practice in which certain singers were elevated above others.⁴⁴

Hollifield argues that these influences, taken collectively, discouraged some oral traditions but also fostered a blend of oral and literate practices amongst those who continued to sing. In the first category, singers Evelyn Ramsey and Debbie Chandler became so frustrated by collectors and professional artists profiting from their songs that they stopped singing publicly.⁴⁵ Evelyn Ramsey, for example, was the first in her community to share the song “Black is the Color” with a collector. She became frustrated when she realized that she had never been credited as the source for the song, especially because the song enjoyed popularity among a number of professional singers.⁴⁶ In this second category, Sheila Kay Adams chose to perform ballads using the “formulas, diction, and economy of language” common to balladry, but also altered lyrics and regulated rhythm and rhyme schemes as a method by which to translate ballad narratives more directly to audiences unfamiliar with ballads.⁴⁷

Although scholarly research and commercial recording and filmmaking have altered oral tradition in the county, they have also encouraged a circular, self-replicating relationship

43. Hollifield, “Family Tradition,” 12.

44. Hollifield, “Family Tradition,” 8, 11-13.

45. Hollifield, “Family Tradition,” 15.

46. Hollifield, “Family Tradition,” 11.

47. Hollifield, “Family Tradition,” 26.

between those documenting local singers and the singers themselves. King observes that contemporary singers such as Donna Ray Norton, Dee Norton Buckner, and Denise Norton O’Sullivan understand that “preservation benefits the singing tradition itself” and encourage preservation and documentation of the songs.⁴⁸ King also observes that singers such as Norton, Sullivan, and Buckner, well aware of the documentation of their ancestors and relatives, cultivate forms of “heritage maintenance” which they use to “craft a space of perceived authenticity” as tradition bearers.⁴⁹ The singers perform heritage maintenance by treating ballad singing “as a birthright” and emphasizing their familial relationships to other ballad singers, praising “outsider” singers (i.e. non-familial singers) who take the time to learn the songs, and allowing themselves to be the subjects of research and commercial media projects.⁵⁰ According to King, heritage maintenance keeps ballad traditions alive while also bringing “local fame and national recognition” to heritage singers.⁵¹

The singers’ heritage maintenance may, in part, be an effort to carve out a particular identity in a county that currently hosts a broad variety of music venues and musicians, which is another effect of historic research and documentation. Venues such as Zuma Coffee, The Depot, and the Madison County Arts Council host traditional music, as do yearly festivals such as the Bluff Mountain Festival and the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival. Several singers and musicians, inspired the county’s historic musical traditions, now organize and perform at county

48. King, “Madison County Project,” 34.

49. King, “Madison County Project,” 61.

50. King, “Madison County Project,” 61-62.

51. King, “Madison County Project,” 34.

festivals, teach workshops, and find funding for other local music performances. These artists, who include Rodney Sutton, Laura Boosinger, David Holt, Bobby McMillon, and Joe Penland, are not “birthright” inheritors of Madison County’s ballads, and yet are highly significant contributors to the county’s musical traditions. Federal and county organizations promote these musicians as well as heritage musicians such as Sheila Kay Adams in order to bring tourism and income to the county. The Madison County Tourism Administration as well as the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area (a federally-funded non-profit) dedicate sections of their websites to ballad singing and ballad singers, emphasizing the talents of heritage and non-heritage singers alike, but with an emphasis on the multi-generational heritage of certain county musicians.⁵²

The rich history of scholarly research and commercial media production of Madison County’s singers is a helpfully complicating factor for this study. The effects of research and commercial media discussed here already show evidence of the many non-gendered influences that might affect a Madison County singer’s repertoire. She may ask herself what songs a potential collector, documentarian, or scholar wants to hear, or she may favor ballads with clear, direct narratives that are easy for an audience to follow. If she is a heritage singer, she may wish to sing ballads her ancestors are known to have sung. Conversely, she might favor ballads that are less known to the area, attempting to provide something unique at local gatherings or

52. “Ballad Singing,” Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, accessed February 17, 2018, <http://www.blueridgeheritage.com/directory/artist/236>; “Traditional Music in Madison County North Carolina,” Visit Madison County, Madison County, North Carolina Tourism Administration, accessed February 17, 2018, <https://www.visitmadisoncounty.com/who-we-are/traditional-music-heritage/>; “Traditional Musicians of Madison County North Carolina,” Visit Madison County, Madison County, North Carolina Tourism Administration, accessed February 17, 2018, <https://www.visitmadisoncounty.com/traditional-musicians-madison-county-north-carolina/>.

performances. Factors such as these shape the extent to which a singer is concerned or compelled by the gendered dynamics of ballads.

CHAPTER 3

EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH BALLADRY

My dearest dear the time draws near when you and I must part.
And no one knows the inner grief of my poor aching heart.
Or what I've suffered for your sake, the one I love so dear,
I wish that I could go with you, or you might tarry here.
—The first verse of Sheila Kay Adams' version of "My Dearest Dear"

A participant's gendered relationship to balladry is affected by an extensive web of emotional associations with the songs. A quote from Sheila Kay Adams suggests several of the emotional attachments a singer might have to one ballad:

After my daddy died the only song that...I woke up thinking about it and went to sleep thinking about...was 'My Dearest Dear.' And that was the one that Sharp collected from my great-great aunt...And she sang 'My Dearest Dear' for Sharp on...the evening of August the fifth, nineteen and sixteen. That would have meant my grandmother was giving birth to mama. Yeah, she was born on August sixth. That was always a real special kind of song for me.¹

For Sheila, the lyric song "My Dearest Dear" (Roud 3601) evokes thoughts about three different members of her family—her father, her great-great aunt Mary Sands, and her mother. Each of these associations indicates a different type of value that Sheila attaches to the song.

The lyrics, in which a narrator says goodbye to a departing sweetheart, ran through Sheila's mind as she dealt with the loss of her father. Sharp's collection of the song from Mary Sands reminds Sheila of her familial connections to Madison County's history of being a site of research and documentary-making. And the timing of Sharp's collection of the song from her great-great-aunt has caused Sheila to connect it to a significant life event in her family. For many singers, hearing a single ballad can evoke a series of images and emotional associations such as Sheila describes.

1. Sheila Kay Adams, interview with Sara Lynch-Thomason, March 19, 2018, Marshall, North Carolina.

These associations keep singers enamored of certain songs, and detesting of others. An exploration of these associations fosters an interesting and complex understanding of how some female singers make gendered choices in their engagement with balladry. This study divides emotional associations into three categories: narrative empathy; communal associations; and musical, literary, and cultural associations.

A starting point for exploring these associations is examining how the participants define balladry, its origins, and its functions as a musical category. Understanding the singers' perceptions of what literary theorist Gérard Genette calls the "architextuality" of balladry, that is, its purpose and functions as a genre, informs how the singers analyze ballads in terms of the emotional relationships they expect to have with the songs.²

Defining and Interpreting Ballads

When asked to give a definition of a ballad in her first interview, Susi Gott answered, "It's the story...that carries the piece. It's a, a piece of history. It's something that generally leaves you...with a bit of...that tugging at the heart strings."³ Susi's definition of balladry touches on three different qualities of the ballad genre: A ballad contains a narrative, has historic origins, and produces a sad emotional effect. Other singers in the study brought up many of these same qualities of balladry during their interviews. The structure, history, and types of narratives

2. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Dobinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 7, 12.

3. Susi Gott, interview with Sara Lynch-Thomason, February 13, 2018, Shelton Laurel, North Carolina.

found in balladry influences singers' definitions the genre and determine how they discern the functionality of the songs, so it is helpful to examine these aspects in detail.

All of the participants agreed that a ballad is a type of story, or, in Donna Ray Norton's words, "A ballad is a story told in song."⁴ Betty Smith echoed the opinions of other participants, insisting that a ballad needed to illustrate an event, not merely describe a feeling or an idea. "Ballads have one thing that other songs don't have," explains Smith, "and that's action."⁵ This emphasis on narrative as a defining attribute of balladry is echoed by ballad scholar Gordon Hall Gerould, who stated that European and British Isles ballads tend to "focus the tale on a central situation, and to relate it in terms of dramatic action."⁶

As songs that tell stories, ballads use, meter, rhyme, and other literary formulas to relate the event or series of events in a song. In their interviews, several participants referenced literary formulas that aided in conveying the action of the stories. One of these was the rapid movement from scene to scene in balladry, often broken down by stanza. The participants recognized that the sequence of actions in a ballad narrative appeared broken or spasmodic. This aligns with the work of scholar F.B. Gummere, who described ballad action as "leaping and lingering."⁷ Hollifield extrapolates on Gummere's idea, providing a helpful explanation of how this

4. Donna Ray Norton, interview with Sara Lynch-Thomason, March 15, 2018, Weaverville, North Carolina.

5. Betty Smith, interview with Sara Lynch-Thomason, April 9, 2018, Black Mountain, North Carolina.

6. Gordon Hall Gerould, *The Ballad of Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 84.

7. Francis B. Gummere, *The Popular Ballad* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1907), 91.

technique functions in ballad stories, stating that the “leap” is a stanza which “furthers the action, usually with events moving very quickly,” and the “lingering” is a stanza which accentuates a detail that emphasizes “the emotional or structural aspect of a story.”⁸ I posit that the leaping and lingering of balladry is exacerbated by oral transmission itself, through which entire verses can be forgotten, producing plot holes that further accelerate the sequence of events.

Many participants also felt that balladry’s focus on action created a simple, direct writing style that set the songs apart into their own genre. Darci described balladry’s use of language as possessing a “purity of message and composition” that she had not encountered in any other modern musical genre.⁹ Ballad scholars agree that this writing style is a natural product of the basic elements of balladry: the need for ballad composers to fit stories to tunes, or conversely, to fit tunes to verses, naturally produces language that is direct and undetailed.¹⁰ Hollifield calls this style of writing an “economy of language” necessary to oral tradition.¹¹ This focus on action and “economy of language” can often mean that sensory details about a setting or the emotional inner world of a character are spare in ballad texts.¹²

For many participants, another distinctive aspect of how ballads conveyed narrative action was through the use of a detached or emotionless narrator. The “impersonal” tone of balladry has been observed by ballad scholars as well. My analysis suggests that this tone is due

8. Hollifield, “Family Tradition,” 4.

9. Dewulf, interview, February 8, 2018.

10. Gerould, *Tradition*, 87.

11. Hollifield, “Family Tradition,” 26.

12. Hollifield, “Family Tradition,” 26.

to the common use of “extradiegetic” narrative voice in ballad texts.¹³ The term “extradiegetic” was created by Gérard Genette, who defined several types of narrative voice within literature. For Genette, the narrative voice represented a narrator, named or unnamed, who relayed the story from a particular vantage point. A narrative voice could be “intradiegetic,” speaking from within the narrative, or it could be extradiegetic, using a third-person perspective that seems to speak from outside the narrative.¹⁴ The opening lines of a Kentucky version of the ballad “Barbara Allen” (Roud 54) illustrate an extradiegetic narrative voice:

‘Twas in the merry month of May
The green buds they were swelling,
Poor William Green on his death-bed lay
For the love of Barb’ra Ellen.¹⁵

There is no identifiable narrator in this verse, creating a sense that the story is being objectively translated to the audience. Ballads often switch between intradiegetic and extradiegetic narrative voices, complicating this sense of objectivity. Regardless, the consistent use of the extradiegetic voice, combined with a direct, simple diction can give a sense that the narrator is nonpartisan—an emotionally disengaged observer of the song’s sequence of events. The narrator’s disengagement and refusal to take sides produces the detached tone common to balladry.

13. Gerould, *Tradition*, 103.

14. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 229.

15. Sharp and Campbell, *English Folk Songs*, 97.

The elements of extradiegetic narration, leaping and lingering, and the simplistic writing style of balladry also means that singers can interpret a song's plot very differently. Betty Smith gave an example of this dynamic when she recounted an argument she had with a man over the plot of a ballad called "Little Margaret" (Roud 253).¹⁶ The ballad's narrative begins with a woman named Little Margaret sitting in her room combing her hair. Soon, she sees her sweetheart Sweet William ride by her home with a new bride. In the next scene, Sweet William dreams of Lady Margaret, and when he awakes he decides to seek her out. He learns that she has died and been laid in a coffin. Betty recounted that a man she knew had assumed about the manner of Lady Margaret's death: "and he would say, 'You know she jumped out the window.' And I said, 'It doesn't say she jumped out the window!'"¹⁷ Such disagreements are common in Appalachian ballad singing cultures and speak to the fundamental ways in which singers use personal interpretation to make sense of ballad plots and characters.

As shown, all the participants understood ballads as songs and moreover, as stories told through particular literary techniques. In addition, the participants defined the historic nature of balladry as integral to the genre. Susi's remark that a ballad is "a piece of history" reflects the other participants' understandings that ballads were composed in the past. When asked to talk about ballads, the participants always discussed songs that had been composed between the

16. Also known as "Lady Margaret," the earliest records of this ballad come from eighteenth century texts, although the song is probably much older. Collected across the British Isles, the United States and America in many variant forms, the version I outline here is most similar to those collected in Western North Carolina.

17. Smith, interview, February 7, 2018.

middle ages and the early twentieth century.¹⁸ One participant, Donna, stated that ballads could not be composed by contemporary writers: “It [a ballad] can't be something that somebody just wrote. That does not count as a ballad. It has to be something that's been passed down for generations...something old.”¹⁹ While this characterization of balladry certainly matches with early twentieth-century definitions of ballads as ancient or archaic, it also reflects the fact that ballad formats and literary techniques have remained much the same since the Middle Ages, giving them a recognizable style that is rarely imitated in contemporary songwriting.

Finally, Susi's definition of a ballad as a song “that generally leaves you...with a bit of...that tugging at the heart strings,” alludes to a third aspect of balladry referenced by many participants. This is the idea that ballads generally tell emotionally stirring or tragic stories.²⁰ Susi referred to happy endings in ballads as “rare,” and Donna referred to “*ballad* ballads”—which I read as “genuine” or “authentic” ballads—as songs containing murder.²¹ Betty's description and evaluation of the “Barbary Allen” ballad, which she referred to as “really a typical ballad,” helps to illustrate the participants' expectations that ballads contain violent or tragic themes.²² In the narrative, a man, often referred to as “Sweet William,” falls in love with a local woman named “Barbary Allen.” Barbary is called to William's bedside, where he informs

18. Notably, these songs were also consistently of European, British Isles, or North American origin, reflecting the participants' understood the genre to have regional parameters as well.

19. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

20. Gott, interview, February 13, 2018.

21. Gott, interview, February 13, 2018; Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

22. Smith, interview, April 9, 2018.

her that he is dying and will not recover unless she returns his affections. Having heard that William has flirted with other women, Barbary spurns his request. Betty explained, “And so she just leaves when he’s sick and about to die...and then he dies. Then she, who is not sick, dies because she has caused him to die. And I guess that’s a typical ballad story (laughs).”²³ Betty went on to say that “Barbary Allen” ballad “is not a nice story,” explaining that the characters in the song don’t attempt to understand one another, and noting, “Course a lot of ballads the people are not very nice people are they?”²⁴ The observations of Susi, Donna, and Betty reflect their expectations for ballads to provide dramatic, often violent narratives in which people do not consistently behave altruistically.

The participants’ understandings of ballads as historic, dramatic musical narratives that make use of specific literary techniques affects how singers interpret the meanings of ballads and the experiences of ballad characters. The next sections of this chapter explores these expectations and how they also shape a singer’s ability to empathize with ballad characters and narrative situations, sometimes in contrasting ways.

Narrative Empathy

Because ballads tell dramatic, often violent, stories about the experiences of men and women, singers and listeners often find opportunity to empathize and sympathize with ballad characters or the situations in which those characters find themselves. In her essay “A Theory of Narrative Empathy” scholar Suzanne Keen writes that empathy is evoked when “we feel what

23. Smith, interview, April 9, 2018.

24. Smith, interview, April 9, 2018.

we believe to be the emotions of others.”²⁵ A close cousin to empathy is sympathy, which is when one feels a supportive emotion for another. As stories, ballads invoke in singers and listeners what literary scholars call “narrative empathy,” a state in which aspects of a narrative foster an emotional response.²⁶

Nearly all of the Madison County singers in this study expressed forms of narrative empathy and sympathy towards ballad characters and the situations or conflicts in which the characters found themselves. Singers said they felt sorry for certain characters, or simply expressed being moved by what happened to the characters. Sheila recalled a poignant story in which her Great Aunt Berzilla Wallin (whom Sheila called “Berzill”) empathized with the situation of an unnamed female character in a ballad called “The House Carpenter” (Roud 14).²⁷ In common versions of the ballad, the female character is convinced by an old sweetheart to leave her husband and child. She boards her sweetheart’s ship, but a short while later regrets her decision. Soon after, the ship begins to sink. Sheila recalled that every time her “Granny” Dellie Chandler Norton—a sister to Berzill—sang the portion of the ballad in which the female character expressed her fears of death and her desire to go home, Berzill cried.²⁸

every time...Granny [Dellie] would sing (sings),

“Oh take me out, oh take me out,
Oh take me back,” cried she.
“For I’m too young and lovely by far

25. Suzanne Keen, “A Theory of Narrative Empathy,” *Narrative* 14, no. 3 (October 2006): 208, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20107388>.

26. Keen, “Narrative Empathy,” 214.

27. Also known as “The Daemon Lover,” versions of this British Isles ballad have been collected across North America.

28. Adams, interview by Sara Lynch-Thomason, February 8, 2018.

To rot in the salt, salt sea.’”

Berzill would start crying. Every time... And the first time I was concerned, and I said, “are you alright?” And she said, “Lord yeah, but I just think about the, oh what a pitiful situation that little gal was in.”²⁹

This story illustrates how Berzill’s sympathy for the female character was elicited from her empathy for the ballad character’s situation. A singer’s identification or empathy for a character, called “character identification” by literary scholars, is often intertwined with a concern for the character’s experiences, or “narrative situation.”³⁰ Some singers expressed both kinds of empathy simultaneously when talking about ballads. Donna Ray Norton, for example, articulated feeling a visceral empathy with the ballad character Young Emily, and these feelings also produced an innate concern for Emily’s circumstances. The “Young Emily” ballad (Roud 182) features a character who warns her lover Edmund to conceal his wealth from her father.³¹ Edmund becomes intoxicated and brags about his fortune and, as a result, Emily’s father kills Edmund in the night and steals his gold. Emily dreams of “Edmund’s blood a-flowing like a stream” and confronts her father the next morning, telling him that he will be publicly executed for what he has done.³² Donna stated that she visualized the ballad’s story every time she sang the song. The result, Donna said, is that,

I feel like I am Young Emily...I can visualize the whole song...I feel like, like I can feel her pain in that song, you know? Like it’s, kind of like a second-nature to me now because...I’ve sung it so many times...I can see her dreaming at night...and I can feel

29. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

30. Keen, “Narrative Empathy,” 216, 219.

31. Sometimes called “Young Edmund” or “Young Edwin,” versions of this ballad have been collected in the British Isles and North America.

32. Donna Ray Norton, “Young Emily,” YouTube video, 03:48, posted November 20, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTly0ovwxFs&feature=youtu.be>.

like when she's talking to her dad, I can just feel how mad she is at him, like I can just feel it...you know people say, "I feel you?" That's how I feel about Young Emily. "I feel you."³³

Donna's ability to "become" Young Emily was not because based on having experienced similar life situations to the ballad character, nor was it that she necessarily had a strong sense of Emily's personality based on the text provided. But parallel experience and detailed descriptions of a character's emotions are not necessary to create an empathetic response in a singer. Keen, in "A Theory of Narrative Empathy" writes, "empathy for fictional characters appears to require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization."³⁴ These minimal elements are often as much as a ballad singer can expect from ballad narratives. As previously noted, balladry's spasmodic sequencing of events, economy of language, and use of voice can create an impersonal tone and a deceptively simple narrative. The material from these interviews suggests that this lack of detail actually encourages singers to actively interpret a ballad's causation of events as well as the emotions and motivations of the ballad characters. In the words of Betty Smith, "There's a lot of 'we don't know's' in ballads...you have to use your imagination."³⁵ In the case of "Young Emily," although the song contained the minimal amounts of description typical in balladry, Donna's repeated *imagining* of the ballad narrative was a powerful enough practice to illicit a strong empathetic response, and the participants' use of imagination as an interpretive tool is evident throughout this study.

Even though the participants expressed empathy for both male and female characters, virtually all of them empathized with women much more frequently than with men. This is not

33. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018

34. Keen, "Narrative Empathy," 214.

35. Betty Smith, interview, April 9, 2018.

surprising, given that one of the central questions of the interviews was, “What ballads mean a lot to you as a woman?” Of course, women characters appear in the majority of ballads, providing consistent opportunities for narrative empathy. Betty pointed this out in her interview, noting that ballads with universally male characters were rare for the genre, and stating, “I do sing more songs about women. But that’s because there are more songs about women.”³⁶

Arguably, the participants’ empathy for female ballad singers is in part a result of the predominance of female characters in the genre and the focus of the questions in the interviews. However, I theorize that the participants’ empathy for female characters stems from the participants’ larger concern for the perceived collective experiences of women, not merely for the particular circumstances or character traits of women characters in the narratives. This empathy for women’s collective experiences, or affinity empathy, was expressed by Darci, Sheila, Channing, Susi, and Donna throughout their interviews. For instance, Channing pointed out that she was fascinated by ballads about childbirth and infanticide. Though she had never experienced either, the ballads still caused her to think about, “being a woman, and what it must have been like to be a woman a long time ago also.”³⁷ Darci echoed this sentiment when she noted that “the fundamental emotional experience” of many women’s circumstances in ballads were easily relatable to contemporary women’s experiences:

Even though society is really different. Courtship and...economics and all that is very different than when those songs were written, but, you know...some of the choices that the women make and the way that that’s dealt with, it seems very universal and still very applicable...when you lose your love, when you have a child...all of those

36. Betty Smith, interview with Sara Lynch-Thomason, February 8, 2018, Black Mountain, North Carolina.

37. Channing Showalter, interview with Sara Lynch-Thomason, February 15, 2018, phone interview.

experiences...it just seems like they were captured in a really intense fundamental way in the ballads for me.³⁸

These sentiments reflect the fact that many of the participants use ballads as an entry point to through which to reflect on women's collective experiences. This consciousness plays a formative role in many of the singers' choices of repertoire.

Surprisingly, empathy with ballad characters was not a universally expressed sentiment amongst the participants. In particular, Betty Smith did not feel that she had much in common with male or female ballad characters, saying "I don't know that I really relate to any of them."³⁹ One reason she cited for her feelings was that she had not experienced the kinds of dramatic events that often occur in ballads, such as murder and infanticide. Betty also emphasized that, were she in the same circumstances, she would not make the same decisions as many ballad characters. She illustrated this point by talking about a nineteenth-century American ballad called "Young Charlotte" (Round 260). In the ballad, Charlotte, the protagonist, is invited to a winter ball but refuses to wear a blanket on the sleigh ride to the party. As a result, Charlotte freezes to death during the ride. Betty said, "I'm not going to be like Young Charlotte and freeze to death just because I won't put on enough clothes...to go out in bad weather...sometimes...you think 'What is wrong with her?' You know (laughs)." Smith said that she did sometimes sympathize with characters, but also affirmed "I don't guess I put myself in her [any female ballad character's] place or anything like that. I think it's more like I'm just telling a story."⁴⁰

38. Darci Dewulf, interview with Sara Lynch-Thomason, April 4, 2018, Marshall, North Carolina.

39. Smith, interview, February 8, 2018.

40. Smith, interview, February 8, 2018.

Betty's comments certainly do not mean that she does not have emotional attachments to balladry. As discussed in the rest of this chapter, narrative empathy is only one facet in a spectrum of emotional relationships with the genre.

Communal Relationships with Balladry

Another powerful emotional layer of engagement with balladry is the singer's association of ballads with familial and communal relationships. Virtually all of the singers spoke of the importance of family and friends who had taught them ballads or sung with them in the past. Many described having clear memories of who had taught them ballads, at what age, and where. Sheila described, "Because...this tradition for me, and the songs that I learned from these women, I mean it was like gifts. Every single one of them is like a gift and I know who I learned every single one of them from, where I was...and it was that made it such an impression on me."⁴¹ Because many participants have distinct memories of where and from whom they learned ballads, hearing a ballad can evoke memories of the person. Channing shared, "when I learn songs in person...from someone, I remember that person and the place and when we learned it so much, almost like every time I sing it."⁴²

Singers associate ballads with those who taught them the songs, but also by how they understand certain songs to be significant to other people. Many participants related that singers in their community had favorite ballads that they sang frequently. Sheila and Donna both used the term "signature song" to describe a song or ballad that a singer was known for singing.⁴³ For

41. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

42. Showalter, interview, February 15, 2018.

43. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018; Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

Donna and Sheila, hearing a community member sing a signature song was moving both because they understood that the song was emotionally important to that singer, and because of their feelings towards the singer as a friend or family member. Sheila recalled that when community member Evelyn Ramsey sang her signature song “Black is the Color,” (Roud 3103) “I would cry every time. Not even have to listen to the words. It was what her voice did.”⁴⁴ So, the emotional significance of a ballad connected closely to the depth of love or friendship participants had for the person who-sang the song. For example, Sheila had a familial love for her cousin Dillard Chandler when he was alive, and she was often moved to tears when she heard him sing ballads such as “Awake Awake” (Roud 22620) and “Pretty Sara” (Roud 417).⁴⁵ The themes of both songs concern romantic separation and heartbreak, and Sheila always felt that the ballads were autobiographical, saying, “Dillard never married, never had a family, never had children.”⁴⁶ When Sheila thinks of the ballads in her contemporary life, she is often tempted to cry because of the strong sense of empathy towards Dillard that they engender.

When the participants sing ballads that they associate with specific singers, this not only evokes memories and empathy for family or community members, but it can also foster a sense of connection to those persons after they have passed away. Donna shared that she enjoyed

44. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

45. “Awake, Awake” is also often referred to as “The Drowsy Sleeper.” This early nineteenth-century ballad has been collected in the British Isles and North America. “Pretty Sara” is an early nineteenth-century American ballad, with one of the earliest versions collected by Sharp in 1916 from Mary Sands of Allantand, North Carolina. See Sharp and Campbell, *English Folk Songs*, 173.

46. Adams, interview, March 19, 2018; The earliest known version of “Black is the Color” (also called “Black is the Color of my True Love’s Hair”) was collected by Cecil Sharp in 1916 in Hot Springs, North Carolina. See Sharp and Campbell, *English Folk Songs*, 255.

singing “Little Matthey Groves” (Roud 52) because her deceased father, Donald Norton, had also sung the ballad.⁴⁷ Donna has few memories of her father because he died when she was two years old, but singing “Little Matthey Groves” helps her feel a sense of relationship with him.

Some singers also use ballads to reinforce their relationships to family and community by comparing the characteristics of ballad characters to the characteristics of people they know. For example, Donna explained that she enjoyed singing the humorous ballad “The Farmer’s Curst Wife” (Roud 160) because the female protagonist in the ballad reminded Donna of her grandmother. In the ballad, the devil appears to a farmer and informs him that he’s planning on taking the man’s wife to hell because of her mean behavior. The farmer happily acquiesces to the arrangement, but the devil is forced to bring the woman back home after she causes too much trouble in hell by beating up and killing several devils. Donna said, “I feel like...she [Donna’s grandmother] would be the farmer's curst wife in that song. Because she literally like, she just cussed and was mean as a snake...but she was a good woman, you know.”⁴⁸ Donna’s version of the ballad comes from Madison County, and some of the phrasing in the song also reminds Donna of her grandmother’s use of language: “where it says ‘She grabbed old Satan by the hair of the head, said ‘I’d a dun killed you if you weren’t dun dead.’”...my grandmother would have said those exact words. Like I'm pretty sure...she said them to me. Like (laughing) ‘I’m going, I’m going to kill you.’”⁴⁹

47. This seventeenth-century British Isles ballad has been collected in across Appalachia and North America.

48. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

49. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

For some of the participants, singing ballads not only evokes associations with friends and community, but also with the cultures and places in which the singer learned the songs.

Donna, who spent her childhood in Sodom, and later learned songs from Sodom-raised singers such as Sheila, associated ballads with the community and its culture:

I mean...it's not just about the people [who sang], it's about the place too for me. You know, like Sodom. And Sodom is just a very close-knit community. I mean, you could go over to your neighbor's house and just go in without knocking on the door because you're probably related to them. People would just be sitting around singing, talking, having a good time all the time. Um, and so that's why the songs are important to me too I guess is because of the place that I learned them. And so when I sing them...I feel like I'm home.⁵⁰

Sheila also described certain ballads as evoking synesthetic memories of her childhood:

And so whenever I sing "Young Emily" I smell warm milk in my daggone head. Because Granny taught it to me when she'd milk the cows down at the milk gap. Or smell blackberries. I can smell it right now, those boiling blackberries where Berzill in the summertime, in July would crank that woodstove up...and you could smell it all over the house...it was like all of these memories are attached and you know, the nostalgia thing, the smell, sense of smell will, boy that sends me.⁵¹

These kinds of associations add yet another emotional layer to the relational aspects of balladry, serving to "place" the singer within a community and foster a sense of belonging.

As demonstrated, ballads operate as signifiers of relationships and of particular cultures. In this way, ballad singing embeds singers within a web of communal associations that serve to reinforce a sense of identity and kinship. However, for some of the participants, communal associations with ballad singing invoke a particular kind of identity, that of tradition bearer, and this emotional aspect of ballad singing merits further discussion.

The extensive productions of research and documentary media concerning Madison

50. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

51. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

County ballad singing has fostered a strong sense of cultural pride in several of the participants. In their interviews, Sheila and Donna often referenced the unique qualities of Madison County's ballad singing traditions, citing the longevity of the oral passage of the songs between local families. They also noted the ballads' close relationships to British Isles ballads. Donna, Sheila, and Susi each used language in their interviews that emphasized their relationships to singers and musicians who, because of scholarly attention to their work, have come to be well-known as part of the elevated legacy of Madison County ballad singing. When asked, "Tell me who your people are and where you were raised," all three spoke in detail about how they were related to or had interacted with singers such as Dellie Chandler Norton, Dillard Chandler, or Lee Wallin. All three also made references in their interviews to how and when family and community members had been documented, whether by Cecil Sharp, or in the case of Susi Gott, by her own father Peter Gott.

The participants' self-awareness of their familial and communal ties to well-recognized singers—and their emphasis on these ties within the interviews—demonstrates that the participants understand themselves to be a part of an important tradition and that this tradition carries a certain amount of prestige and responsibility. Martha King, in writing on heritage maintenance within Madison County ballad traditions in the early 2000s, observed that the youngest generation of county singers (including Donna) emphasized "valid familial relationships" to grant themselves "cultural legitimacy" as singers, and allowed themselves to be documented as a method of helping the tradition continue.⁵² As participants who emphasized familial (and in Susi's case communal) relationships to well-known county singers, Susi, Sheila, and Donna illustrated that they understood their own importance as culture bearers. This sense of

52. King, "Madison County Project," 33.

status in of itself is another kind of emotional investment with balladry, and one that also comes with responsibilities. Donna Ray Norton was one singer who spoke extensively about her pride in her family's ballad traditions, but also her responsibilities as a heritage singer. Her descriptions of her duties to her family's heritage afford a more detailed look into the emotional attachments that tradition bearers can have towards singing and performing ballads.

Donna did not grow up singing ballads ("I didn't think it was cool.") but came to care about the love songs when she chose to study ballads for a senior exit project in her literature class.⁵³ During her research she came across Cecil Sharp's *English Folk Songs* book and was surprised to recognize so many family names. "I...was reading Cecil Sharp's book and was like, 'Ah, these are my ancestors.' ...And I was like, 'Mom, there's this book!'" And my mom was like, 'I know I've been trying to tell you this for forever.'"⁵⁴ Donna's description of her reaction to discovering her relatives in Sharp's book is indicative of the way in which she understands her place in Madison County's ballad traditions: not merely as a singer but also as a descendant of singers. For Donna, singing ballads is not only is only an enjoyable activity in of itself, but perhaps more importantly a way to strengthen spiritual ties to her ancestors. Donna illustrated this idea by talking about an experience she had the first time that she performed ballads solo for an audience:

I'll never forget one of the first shows that I actually did by myself where I was going to be singing for like an hour and a half alone and...you know telling stories and stuff. I was pretty young. And I was going to Warren Wilson College. And I was so scared. And I didn't know what I was doing...but like right before...when we were doing the sound check...and I know this sounds crazy, but I had my whole family behind me. Like my

53. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

54. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

grandfather was there. And he just nodded at me...it was like, "You got this." You know?⁵⁵

This story communicates the weight of importance with which Donna views her ballad singing. Other comments in her interview iterated that her identity as a ballad singer is tied closely to the approval she senses from her ancestors: "I just know that it's something that would mean a lot to them. And so that means a lot to me."⁵⁶

If these feelings evoke a sense of familial approval and self-pride as a heritage singer, they also evoke an imperative for Donna to continue what she views as a waning tradition: "I feel like this tradition is dying out. And so that really scares me because that's part of...the world's history, you know. And so it's important to me that it lives on."⁵⁷ Donna is happy that more people are becoming interested in ballad singing, but also bemoans the disappearance of the familial aspects of the practice. Her concerns over the disappearance of this aspect of the tradition makes her own status as a heritage singer even more valuable, and shapes which songs she sings and why.

As discussed here, the communal aspects of balladry can produce powerful emotional associations with ballads. Particular songs can evoke memories and feelings about community and family members, as well as a sense of connection to culture and place. These associations can also elicit another layer of emotional associations for those who consider themselves tradition bearers, fostering a sense of responsibility to one's community or ancestors to continue

55. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

56. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

57. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

ballad singing traditions. How these associations shape and influence a singer's concern for the gendered content and meaning of songs will be explored in the succeeding chapters.

Musical, Literary, and Folkloric Attractions to Ballads

So far in this chapter, the topic matter has largely explored how a singer's relationship with other *people*, whether fictional ballad characters or family and community members, impacts that singer's emotional connection to ballads. There are many other factors that influence a singer's attraction to a ballad: some of these are musical, others literary, and yet others have to do with cultural interests in the songs. An exhaustive study of these factors would require its own thesis (and certainly these factors have been the subjects many books on balladry) but what is reviewed here are components of these three categories that were brought up the most frequently by the participants in the study. These components help to illustrate the priorities and passions that some participants have for ballads which, as will be shown, can influence the degree of regard or concern with which singers treat the gendered elements of a ballad's narrative.

The musical elements of a ballad—the tune, key, meter, and rhythm—can affect a singer's attraction to a ballad in both subtle and blatant ways. As a musical genre, ballads often possess unique melodic and rhythmic elements that singers can find attractive. Darci hinted at this when she said that musical patterns in “traditional songs” repeat a great deal, and yet the songs possess an “incredible variety musically,” adding, “It seems like that's the genre in which the most has been done with the least amount of material?...there's a remarkable number [of songs] that are very distinct given the fact that nobody's like, ‘Well let's throw in a jazz chord,’

you know?”⁵⁸ Darci’s comments reference the fact that certain musical patterns in folk songs can make the genre feel accessible and predictable: Scholars have noted that the same tune tends to be repeated with each ballad verse, similar melodic progressions can be found across multiple tunes, and the same tunes are often used for different lyrics. However, as Darci also referenced, ballads possess a great deal of musical variety, and this variety is due in part to the age of some ballad tunes and the passage of ballads through oral tradition. Because many ballad tunes were created before the development of classical scale structures, the tunes do not conform to the standards of Western scale degree formulas. As a result, these tunes often offer notes and melodic progressions unfamiliar and surprising to the modern ear. Moreover, many of the people who shared and sang ballads historically were not familiar with Western classical standards of pitch, scale, key, and rhythm. This has fostered a wide variety of musical interpretations, often captured in twentieth century field recordings and musical transcriptions: singers change the rhythm and meter of a song at will, alter the tonic center of ballads, and sing notes considered to be outside of standard scale structures. For singers such as Darci, who have been raised with Western standards of music, hearing these “unique” interpretations of a ballad can be a compelling reason to learn the song.

Of the different musical elements discussed by the participants, ballad tunes were the most influential factor determining a singer’s interest in or attraction to a ballad. All the singers reported that they often learned a ballad and kept it in their repertoire because they felt the tune was beautiful or pleasing. If a ballad contained a tune a singer considered unattractive, whether boring, depressing, or too simple, this quality was often reason enough to dissuade the singer from learning it. Betty, for example, recalled that she was never interested in learning the “Ballad

58. Dewulf, interview, February 8, 2018.

of Frankie Silvers” (Roud 783) because she felt it had a boring tune, or in her words, “the nothingest tune.”⁵⁹ Conversely, a singer’s attraction to a tune could even override the singer’s dislike of a song’s lyrics. Several participants discussed attractions to the tunes of murder ballads including “The Knoxville Girl” (Roud 263) and “Pretty Polly” (Roud 15).⁶⁰ Although the participants had varying levels of discomfort with the violence that took place in the songs, they also said that, at least for periods of time in their lives, they had ignored the narrative content of the songs because they found the tunes so compelling.

Some of the literary features of ballads, particularly poetic or descriptive writing, were another reason many participants were attracted to some ballads. As discussed, the combination of lyrics with a simple, repeated melody in balladry often necessitate an economy of language that emphasizes action over description, and so the rarity of a particularly moving or poetic passage can easily capture the attention of a singer. For example, Donna praised the “beauty” and “poetry” of the last two verses of the ballad “Young Emily.”⁶¹ The verses occur after the main events of the narrative have already taken place: Edmund has been killed, his body thrown into the sea, and Emily has told her father that he will be punished for what he has done. Instead of focusing on action, the last two verses switch to an intradiegetic narration, providing a window into Emily’s thoughts as she mourns for Edmund. They read:

59. Smith, interview, February 7, 2018; “The Ballad of Frankie Silvers” is a late nineteenth century ballad originating in North Carolina and based upon a historic murder that took place in 1831.

60. “The Knoxville Girl” is a late eighteenth-century ballad, collected across the British Isles and North America; “Pretty Polly” is a mid-twentieth century American ballad.

61. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

“See the coach on yonder mountain
A moving to and fro
It reminds me of my driver boy
Who drove in the lowlands low.”

“My true love’s a laying in the ocean
The fish swim o’er his breast
His body’s in a gentle motion
I pray that his soul’s at rest.”⁶²

For Donna, the poetic beauty and sense of emotion found in these lines was accentuated by the fact that the rest of the verses in the ballad felt “raw” in comparison.⁶³ Favored lines, phrases, and verses such as these were often the parts of the ballad that moved the participants most. When Sheila spoke of one of her favorite ballads, “The Silk Merchant’s Daughter,” (Roud 552) the parts of the song she described as having the “prettiest” and “best writing” were also the parts of the song that she described as making her cry.⁶⁴

Another literary aspect important to many participants was the clarity and complexity of the sequence of events in a ballad. Several participants, including Sheila and Betty, stated their attractions to ballads that had “a good story.” By this they meant songs in which the sequence of

62. Donna Ray Norton, “Young Emily.”

63. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

64. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018; An eighteenth-century ballad, “The Silk Merchant’s Daughter” has been collected in the British Isles and North America. Versions of this song have also been collected in Madison County. See Sharp and Campbell, *English Folk Songs*, 186-188.

events and the causation of those events was clear.⁶⁵ In addition, “good stories” were also ones which contained multiple scenes, not just one event. The degree of visual description a ballad contained also helped participants to imagine the sequence of events more clearly. Donna stated that when a ballad possessed clear plot development and strong visual details, the song evoked imagery in her mind: “But...the better the story the more you can picture the song play out. Like when you shut your eyes you can see the forest, or you can see the coach that they’re riding in...That’s what I mean when I say a good story. Like you can see it happening.”⁶⁶

Some participants did state that they were particularly attracted to ballads with plot holes, saying that songs with unclear story lines sometimes created an intriguing air of mystery. Darci cited an Irish song called “She Moved Through the Fair,” (Roud 861) in which a female character dies, but the cause of her death is unclear.⁶⁷ The song evoked questions for Darci: Why did this character die? How did she die? Just as the “completeness” and visual details of a narrative evoked a satisfying visual image, a lack of explanation for certain transitions in the plot could also compel a singer to use their imagination to fill in the gaps of a narrative.

A ballad’s historic context and cultural meaning also proved attractive for several singers. Sheila and Betty were especially vocal about their interest in the folkloric aspects of balladry. In the interviews, both singers spoke frequently about the historic meaning of certain phrases or actions in a ballad. Sheila, for example, talked about how the presence of a bird in a ballad may have connoted a supernatural presence or a soul’s spirit in older European contexts. Both singers

65. Smith, interview, February 7, 2018.

66. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

67. This song originated in early twentieth-century Ireland.

also took pleasure in debating the historical accuracy of ballads commonly understood to describe historic events. For example, Sheila and Betty discussed the late-eighteenth century ballad “Mary Hamilton,” (Roud 79) in which a maid-in-waiting to a Scottish queen is accused of infanticide and executed.⁶⁸ In their interviews Sheila and Betty both took time comparing different historical accounts of the events described in the ballad and raised questions concerning the location and time period in which the events took place. This interest in the folkloric and historic significance of ballads connotes an understanding of the songs as cultural artifacts whose meaning can be unpacked through scholarship and research.

Related to this scholarly interest, many participants were attracted to ballads that had been rarely collected. Betty, for example, is fascinated with historic Madison County singer Jane Hicks Gentry because many of Gentry’s ballads were not collected anywhere else in Western North Carolina. Additionally, if a ballad contained plot sequences or types of characters considered to be outside the regular cannon of balladry, singers would often describe the ballad as “unique” and “different.”⁶⁹ Betty Smith gave an example when describing a ballad called “The False Knight on the Road,” (Roud 20) pointing out that she liked the song because it contained only male characters, a rarity in the ballad genre.⁷⁰

As this chapter has explored, a singer’s attraction to ballads are myriad and complex. Often, a singer may not even know why she is attracted to a ballad at the time. Darci shared,

68. This ballad has been collected in the British Isles and North America.

69. Showalter, interview, February 15, 2018; Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

70. This early nineteenth-century ballad has been collected in the British Isles and North America. Jane Hicks Gentry provided a version to Cecil Sharp as well. See Sharp and Campbell, *English Folk Songs*, 2.

“Sometimes a song will resonate with me for obvious reasons and sometimes...you know I’ll think about, ‘Why am I gravitating towards this particular song right now?’ And sometimes I can’t even figure it out.”⁷¹ A singer may not always have cognitive understanding of why a song appeals to her, and regardless of content, communal associations, or musical aesthetics, the act of singing produces a pleasing visceral affect for the body. Music can change and evoke moods, and music has been empirically proven to affect blood pressure and pulse rates.⁷² Several singers spoke about the pleasing physical feeling of singing in their interviews, with Susi sharing, “Singing makes you feel good to begin with, you know. It vibrates your body, it’s an expression of your soul...”⁷³ What happens when such powerful factors meet a female singer’s gendered concerns for the content of balladry? How do female singers mediate their communal and cultural associations with a particular ballad with their feelings about the gender dynamics of that ballad’s narrative? The choices and strategies singers use to arbitrate these different influences are the central question of the succeeding chapters in this study.

71. Dewulf, interview, April 4, 2018.

72. Max Peter Baumann, "Preface: Music and Healing in Transcultural Perspectives," *The World of Music* 39, no. 1 (1997): 6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41699127>.

73. Susi Gott, interview with Sara Lynch-Thomason, April 10, 2018, phone interview.

CHAPTER 4

DISLIKED BALLADS AND FASCINATION BALLADS

The patriarchal themes common to balladry present a continuous challenge to many women singers. This challenge is rooted in the fact that women singers empathize with the experiences of female ballad characters. For some singers, this narrative empathy can elicit an affinity empathy for women as a social category. As expressed by Sheila, women can feel affinity empathy for other women regardless of the differences in women's experiences across different time periods: "I'm all about the women in these songs. And it used to really piss me off that...in most of them, they were pursued by men, they were basically ordered to do this by men because they didn't have any say. And in mine and your age we can't imagine. They couldn't say 'no.' So, I've always identified with the women."¹ In every era, it is likely that, like Sheila, women have felt character identification with and affinity empathy towards female ballad characters, and have used the songs to reflect on personal experiences and the historic statuses of women. And in every case, each woman has brought her own situated interpretation to the text in order to determine the gendered meaning of the ballad—and to determine if it was a song worth singing. This chapter explores the ballad narratives that the participants disliked and rejected, and how these choices are influenced by the singers' gendered concerns.

In discussing the ballads they disliked "as women," the participants consistently brought up ballads that evoked concerns for the safety and agency of female characters. These ballads fall into three themes. The first theme is pain related to childbearing and the loss of children, the

1. Adams, interview, March 1, 2018.

second is men' murder and manipulation of women, and the last is fascination ballads. In the first two categories, the participants' rejection of the themes and was expressed through several different actions. They chose not to sing the ballads in their daily lives, and in their interviews they either avoided discussing the ballads or discussed them in order to criticize them. However, in the third category of fascination ballads, the participants' treatment of the ballads was more complex. The participants were fascinated by and interested in discussing the events of the ballads, but unsure how to interact with the ballads in their daily lives. Throughout this chapter I argue that all of these choices accomplish multiple ends for the participants: By rejecting narratives about gendered violence and manipulation, the singers symbolically reject the violence and manipulation of women in the present-day. Furthermore, I argue that fascination ballads can help women singers to contemplate forms of violence which threaten them in their day-to-day lives.

This chapter also demonstrates that, in spite of the powerful nature of the participants' reactions, themes of gendered violence and manipulation are not a consistently decisive factor in determining a women singers' choice of repertoire. An examination of the murder ballad "The Knoxville Girl" shows that, while a woman singer can dislike a ballad's violent narrative content, she may have other positive associations with the song and choose to sing it. This choice not only exposes distinctions in women singers' priorities as musicians but also illustrates that women singers disagree on the degree of threat posed by gendered violence in contemporary societies.

Suffering in Childbirth and the Suffering of Children

A category of song some participants avoided concerned suffering related to motherhood and childrearing. This category can be divided into two themes: the suffering of children and

pain in childbirth. Betty and Sheila talked the most about their struggles with these two themes. Betty said she had never been able to sing songs in which bad things happened to children, citing two songs as examples: “Put My Little Shoes Away” (Roud 4340) and “No Telephone in Heaven” (Roud 3523). “Put My Little Shoes Away” features a dying child telling her last wishes to her mother, and “No Telephone in Heaven” concerns a child who asks a clerk to call his late mother up in heaven. Both songs focus on a single scene, with the children’s narration making up the majority of the lyrics. When Betty was growing up in the 1920s and 1930s, the songs were popular early country hits and she heard family members sing them frequently.² However, Betty always had an aversion to the songs and never learned them. Sheila also talked about her relative’s evasion of songs in which children died, stating that Berzilla Wallin and Dellie Norton Chandler would not sing songs or ballads in which children suffered. Dellie had told her this directly, saying, ““Oh, we don’t sing them about babies dying.””³ Sheila felt that this choice was because both women had lost children, recalling that Dellie had told her, ““Why, if you lost just one child back in the day...you were lucky.””⁴

Sheila also could not sing “The Death of Queen Jane” (Roud 77), a sixteenth-century British-Isles ballad concerning a painful childbirth. Some scholars interpret the ballad as a fictionalized account of the birth of Edward VI of England, son of King Henry VIII and Jane

2. “Put My Little Shoes Away” was written in 1873 by Samuel N. Mitchell and popularly recorded in 1926 by Riley Puckett. “No Telephone in Heaven” was recorded by the Carter Family in 1929.

3. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

4. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

Seymour.⁵ In the ballad, Queen Jane has been in labor for several weeks and convinces Henry to “cut the child out of her left side.”⁶ In her interview, Sheila’s discomfort was evident when she described the moment of Jane’s surgery: “she rolls over, and I just couldn’t stand it. You know at that time, the thoughts of, because it was a cesarean.”⁷ Sheila’s short, hesitant phrases reflect her unease with even imagining the event. She stated that even though the song had a beautiful tune, she had always had trouble singing it, saying “it was just awful to me.”⁸

Betty, Sheila, Dellie, and Berzilla’s evasion of these songs seems tied to their concerns for the survival and safety of mothers and children. The ballads seem to evoke the participants’ individual fears of suffering in child bearing, as well as fears of the emotional pain of seeing one’s own child suffer or pass away. The singers’ evasion of these songs was sometimes motivated by parallel experiences with ballad characters. Dellie, for example did not sing songs about children dying because she had in fact lost her own children. But others seemed to avoid the songs out of a sense that the songs illustrated possible experiences they as women might go through. For example, Betty disliked songs about children dying at an age when she was too young to have been a mother. These latter reactions may indicate the participants’ understanding that pain in childbirth or the possibility of losing a child are inherent or perhaps even unavoidable experiences for women as a social group. In either case the singers seemed to

5. Child, “170. The Death of Queen Jane,” vol. 3, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 372-373.

6. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

7. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

8. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

possess an embodied, emotional closeness to the events of the ballads, and this closeness made the songs feel unbearable to sing.

Femicide Ballads and Unequal Treatment

Throughout the interviews, virtually all of the participants cited the regularity with which women were manipulated or harmed in balladry, summarized by Darci's statement, "The women really have a hard time coming out on top."⁹ Additionally, the participants noted the frequency with which women were killed or died from other causes such as heartache or suicide. A woman character's uncharacteristic survival of a conflict provoked the typical comment "[that's] one of the only ballads where the woman doesn't end up dead."¹⁰ The high death rate of women in balladry bothered many participants. A narrative trope several particularly disliked was the murder of women by male assailants. I refer to this category of song as "femicide ballads," borrowing Diana Russell and Jane Caputi's definition of the term as "the murders of women by men motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women."¹¹ Femicide ballads, as Hastie explains, represent a cultural fascination for punishing women for acting on their own agency, sexual and otherwise. She explains that these songs duplicitously present texts that are "sorrowful over the fate of fallen innocence while they simultaneously depict overt misogyny toward sexually active young women."¹²

9. Dewulf, interview, February 8, 2018.

10. Gott, interview, February 13, 2018.

11. Diana Russell and Jane Caputi, "'Femicide:' Speaking the Unspeakable," *Ms.* 1, no. 2 (1990): 35.

12. Hastie, "This Murder Done," 155.

Femicide ballads can be found in British Isles and American balladry, with names such as “The Knoxville Girl” (Roud 263), “Pretty Polly,” “The Banks of the Ohio” (Roud 157), and “Down in the Willow Garden” (Roud 446). The fundamental plot of these songs involves a man (frequently also the narrator of the song) who tricks his sweetheart into entering a rural space such as the woods or a riverbank, where he then kills her. The woman can be stabbed, drowned, beaten, or combinations of all three. The male assailant’s motivation to murder the woman is often unstated, but sometimes there are indications that the woman is pregnant, that the male assailant suspects the woman of sexual promiscuity, or that the man wishes to marry a wealthier woman. In any case, the assailant chooses to kill the woman in order to punish her behavior or remove her as a hindrance .

Femicide ballads have enjoyed a particularly strong popularity in Appalachia. Appalachian composers wrote many of the ballads in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often basing the songs on real murders that had occurred in the region. These “true crime” femicide ballads include “The Death of Pearl Bryan,” “Omie Wise,” “The Murder of Laura Foster” (Roud 1935), and “Lula Viers.” Throughout the twentieth century, bluegrass, country, and old-time musicians performed these songs alongside older broadside ballads such as “Pretty Polly.” Hastie argues that the creation and historic popularity of such ballads in Appalachia can be attributed to the fact that the songs symbolically illustrate the cultural tensions brought about by industrialization in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Appalachia. Hastie notes that during this period, the increased mobility of young men and women in newly urbanized regional landscapes challenged older Conservative Christian and Victorian values.¹³ Femicide ballads represent a cultural interest in the idea of punishing women who took advantage of this

13. Hastie, “This Murder Done,” 6, 83.

increased mobility to experiment with new forms of agency, such as choosing to have sexual encounters outside of marriage. Hastie adds that, while femicide ballads are a regional expression of these cultural dynamic, these dynamics are really a microcosmic reflection of broader American cultural experiences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁴

The preponderance of femicide ballads in Appalachian musical cultures may be one reason why the participants chose to talk about the ballads in their interviews. It may also influence their strong opinions about the genre. Many participants described femicide ballads as “really, really mean” and “horrible songs.”¹⁵ Several singers, including Channing, Darci, and Donna said they either did not presently sing femicide ballads or had refused to sing the songs in earlier periods of their lives. Different participants focused on different elements of femicide ballads to explain why the topic felt so discomfiting. Some found the motivations of the male assailant to be disturbing. Susi complained that the assailants in femicide ballads had unjustifiable motivations for killing the women, saying “So many of those songs end up in the woman dying because why? I don’t know, because she wouldn’t be, she wouldn’t marry the guy...or he wouldn’t marry her, so he thought he had to get rid of her in order to get her out of his life.”¹⁶ Sheila felt that the male assailant’s motivation was often to hide his sweetheart’s pregnancy. She acknowledged that some versions of femicide ballad texts stated this plot dynamic directly, but she also felt that such was the case in ballads where there was no overt mention of pregnancy.

14. Hastie, “This Murder Done,” 157.

15. Gott, interview, February 13, 2018; Dewulf, interview, February 8, 2018.

16. Gott, interview, February 13, 2018.

Some singers also felt uncomfortable with the tone and use of narrative voice in femicide ballads. Channing felt uneasy with the seemingly neutral voice of some femicide ballads, noting that there seemed to be “no emotion” in the telling of the narrative.¹⁷ She wondered if the songs were written by men, and if the songs’ tone might be a result of male authorship. Donna implied a similar concern when she observed that songs with “the man’s point of view” were often the same songs in which women characters died.¹⁸ These comments seemed to allude to consistent aspects of narrative voice found in femicide ballads. In a survey of thirteen texts of English and American femicide ballads, including all the femicide ballads mentioned in the previous paragraphs, I found the narrative voice to be either extradiegetic, the male assailant’s intradiegetic perspective, or a combination of both. Sometimes, the extradiegetic voice laments the fate of the female character, calling her death a “tragedy” and “sorrowful,” and sometimes the female character engages in dialogue with the male assailant.¹⁹ However, the female character is never granted her own intradiegetic narration.²⁰ Singers like Channing and Donna seemed to feel that these uses of narrative voice problematically directed a listener’s empathy away from the female character and towards her assailant, or at best fostered an ambiguity concerning with which character the listener should empathize.

This discomfort with the narrative voice in femicide ballads also translated to discomfort with the public performance of the songs. Channing said she disliked hearing singers perform

17. Channing Showalter, interview, April 4, 2018, February 15, 2018, phone interview.

18. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

19. Hastie, “This Murder Done,” 191, 195.

20. My lyrics for these ballads were sourced from Hastie’s index of femicide ballads. See Hastie, “This Murder Done,” 176-203.

femicide ballads, especially when the performer's only reason for singing the song seemed to be because of its traditional status.

And people sing them in shows and it seems like they're sort of just like singing it because "this is what we do. Oh yeah we sing murder ballads and they're...really gruesome." And they kind of apologize for that but they don't...really give anything to me that shows that they feel like it's important to be singing about or that there's meaning behind it.²¹

Channing's discomfort with a lack of explanation or meaning could be read as a discomfort with the ambiguous morality of femicide ballads, and a fear that this sense of moral ambiguity will be translated to audiences if some other explanation is not given.

The participants' dislike of femicide ballads reflects a discomfort with the patriarchal elements of the songs and the female characters' lack of voice or agency. Hastie notes that the murdered and drowned woman of femicide ballads embodies a Victorian ideal of the silent, passive female, cleansed of her agency in baptismal waters.²² The participants' choices to not sing femicide ballads, their questioning and protest of the male assailant's motives, and their discomfort with the narrative voice of the ballads indicates an oppositional consciousness that rejects this implied ideal of female passivity and victimization.

Several participants also complained of the unequal power dynamics between men and women in balladry, even when those dynamics did not manifest as men committing violence against women characters. In particular, Channing and Darci expressed a dislike for a family of

21. Showalter, April 4, 2018.

22. Hastie, "This Murder Done," 22, 109.

ballad narratives scholars refer to as “broken token” ballads (Roud 264).²³ These ballads tell the same general story: A man comes home from war or time abroad and tests his lover to see if she has remained faithful. He approaches her in disguise and asks her if she will court him. She refuses his invitation, saying she will wait for her love. He counters that her sweetheart may be dead or married to another, to which she still proclaims her loyalty to her missing sweetheart. The disguised lover then reveals himself, sometimes producing a ring or locket that he knows his sweetheart will recognize, and the two are happily reunited.

Channing and Darci expressed frustrations with the male character’s actions in broken token ballads, interpreting his behavior as manipulative and hypocritical. Darci described his behavior as badgering and likened his actions to internet “trolling” due to his apparent intention to provoke and upset his sweetheart.²⁴ Channing disliked the man’s choice to “test” his lover because she felt it demonstrated a double standard of behavior, saying, “he’s been way the hell wherever gone and then he comes back and is wondering if she’s been true to him. Which really like, he’s probably not been true to her.”²⁵

The participants’ dislike of ballads in which women are manipulated and murdered implies an interpretation of the ballads as stories that carry a certain immediacy and relevancy to their lives. For many participants, the ballads do not represent abstract or symbolic events as much as they mirror realistic and ongoing issues of gender conflict. Armed with this

23. “Pretty Fair Maid (The Maiden in the Garden; The Broken Token),” Robert B. Waltz and David G. Engle, *The Ballad Index*, updated 2018, accessed June 18, 2018, <https://www.fresnostate.edu/folklore/ballads/LN42.html>.

24. Dewulf, interview, April 4, 2018.

25. Showalter, interview, February 15, 2018.

understanding, the singers feel compelled to criticize the actions of the male ballad characters and question the ballads' use of narrative voice. Additionally, when the narrative voice does not seem to provide a truthful or realistic portrayal of the events, the participants are willing to go beyond textual evidence to interpret the events in the ballads from a perspective of oppositional consciousness. Channing's assumption of the dishonesty of the broken token ballads' male protagonist, or Sheila's understanding that femicide ballads concern unspoken realities of pregnancy, are examples of the singers' willingness to mine the songs for evidence of women's individual and collective experiences of oppression, regardless of the values presented by the ballads' lyrics.

It should be noted that although many of the participants have been exposed to ballads with themes of gendered violence and manipulation because of their living in Appalachia, they rarely distinguished between the Appalachian and non-Appalachian origins of those ballads. Often the singers were aware of the regional origins of the songs, and some, such as Sheila and Donna, learned them from relatives or community members in Madison County. However, none of the participants expressed concern for the predominance of such ballads in Appalachia, nor did they articulate such violent narratives as being endemic to the region. Their lack of discussion concerning the origins of the songs indicates an assumption that the songs reflect broader social realities.

While virtually all of the participants articulated a concern for the unfair and misogynist treatment of women characters in balladry, some did enjoy femicide ballads for their lyrical content, aesthetic aspects and communal associations. This is discussed in a case study of "The Knoxville Girl."

“It’s Not Just About the Words:” “The Knoxville Girl” Ballad

There was a woman. I sang at [the] Asheville Festival and it was “Knoxville Girl.” And it’s a pretty bloody ballad, I know. And she said “Ooh, that’s terrible!” And I said, “You must have heard me sing this song dozens of times in all the years (laughs).” Because...I used to sing it quite a bit. She said, “I never listened to the words!”

—Betty Smith, interview, April 9, 2018

Betty Smith’s story about performing “The Knoxville Girl” illustrates the competing levels of attachment that a female singer can have with a ballad. The woman who talked to Betty had enjoyed aesthetic elements of “The Knoxville Girl” for years, but once she listened to the lyrics, her feelings about the song suddenly changed. In common with this woman, many participants were uncomfortable with the topic matter of “The Knoxville Girl” but were simultaneously attracted to the ballad for other reasons. Others had liked and disliked the ballad at different points in their lives. Exploring the factors of attraction to “The Knoxville Girl” reveals the complex, multilayered relationships female singers can have with songs concerning gendered violence.

“The Knoxville Girl” is an American femicide ballad with roots in British broadside ballads of the eighteenth century. The ballad enjoyed commercial popularity in the twentieth century and many musicians, including the gospel-based Louvin Brothers (recorded 1956), bluegrass duo Flatt and Scruggs (recorded 1980), and rock artist Nick Cave (recorded 1996) recorded the song. As a result, the ballad has become well known in several musical genres.

The plot of “The Knoxville Girl” concerns the narrator, “Willie,” and his unnamed sweetheart. Throughout the ballad Willie speaks from an intradiegetic position, narrating his actions to the audience. At the beginning of the ballad Willie calls upon his sweetheart, a woman he has been courting for some time. As the two take a walk, Willie picks up a stick and knocks

his sweetheart down. She begs for her life, but to no avail. The next few verses dwell on the woman's suffering and death, and Willie's mocking of her body:

She never spoke another word,

I only beat her more.

Until the ground around me,

Within her blood did flow.

I took her by her golden curls;

I drug her 'round and 'round,

Throwing her into the river

That flows through Knoxville town.

“Go down, go down, you Knoxville girl,

With dark and roving eyes;

Go down, go down, you Knoxville girl,

You can never be my bride.”²⁶

Willie goes home to Knoxville, where his mother notices the blood on his body, which he excuses as a nosebleed. Lying in bed, he sees “black flames of hell.” Soon after, he is taken to the Knoxville jail, where he knows he will spend his life for killing “The girl I loved so well.”²⁷

26. Louvin Brothers, “Knoxville Girl,” YouTube video, 03:50, December 12, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhMiKeSffns>.

27. Louvin Brothers, “Knoxville Girl.”

The narrative's violence is perhaps the most noticeable element of the ballad's lyrics. The extensive details of the unnamed woman's suffering did not escape the notice of participants who discussed the ballad, but while many disliked these details, Donna found them to be an attractive aspect of the song. She described the ballad's "super gory" lyrics as both unique and entertaining, saying, "It's just kind of fun to hear something so dramatic and horrific in a song...because you don't normally hear things like that...so it's a little different than all the other ones to me."²⁸ For Donna, the rarity of such bloody lyrics also enhanced the entertainment value of the ballad, making it a shocking "attention getter" for her audiences.²⁹

Several participants also affectionately associated "The Knoxville Girl" and other femicide ballads with community and family ties. Donna valued "The Knoxville Girl" because it was a song her late father had sung. Susi said she loved femicide ballads such as "Pretty Polly" and "Down in the Willow Garden" because they reminded her of friends and family, saying, "those are the songs I grew up with so, I love them...for the people who sang them and because those were my reference points."³⁰ Donna also felt that "The Knoxville Girl" had value by virtue of the fact that it had been in regional oral traditions for many generations. She acknowledged that the ballad contained unsettling content but stated that singing the ballad was also about "the heritage and the preserving of the songs...It's not just about the words."³¹

28. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018; April 4, 2018.

29. Donna Ray Norton, interview with Sara Lynch-Thomason, April 4, 2018, Weaverville, North Carolina.

30. Gott, interview, February 13, 2018.

31. Norton, interview, April 4, 2018.

Several participants also found the ballad's clear sequencing of events and tune to be attractive elements. Both Donna and Betty referred to the ballad as a "good story," with Betty emphasizing that the ballad had a coherent and logical storyline.³² The two also praised the ballad's tune, with Betty stating that it had "a good feel to it."³³ Donna and Betty's attraction to the tune of "The Knoxville Girl" may be due to the singers' sense that its feel or tone is rare in ballad genres. The popular tune of "The Knoxville Girl," repeated by artists including the Louvin Brothers, The Country Gentlemen, and Nick Cave, is in a major key in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. For some singers, the cheerful-sounding tune and snappy time signature of the ballad may contrast starkly with the minor tunes and straight or irregular timing often found in ballad genres. In some cases, these musical elements may provide enough of an appeal to override a singer's dislike of the ballad's violent narrative. For example, Channing had at one time been attracted to "Down in the Willow Garden," and "Pretty Polly" because of their "upbeat melodies," but as she became more aware of the lyrical content she had stopped singing the songs.³⁴

Donna's, Betty's, and Susi's attraction to elements of "The Knoxville Girl" is a reminder that women singers enjoy many elements of ballads outside of the songs' lyrical content. Susi succinctly summarized this dynamic when she stated, "By and large, a good song is a good song, and whether its gender-appropriate or even politically correct by today's climate...it all disappears into the song. If it's a good song, it's worth singing anyway."³⁵ The ballad's tune,

32. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018; Smith, interview, April 9, 2018.

33. Smith, interview, April 9, 2018.

34. Showalter, interview, February 15, 2018.

35. Gott, interview, February 13, 2018.

communal associations, clear sequencing of events, and uniqueness of narrative can cause a woman singer to put aside her concerns about the song's gendered violence and enjoy it for its many other qualities.

Discussions of "The Knoxville Girl" and other femicide ballads also indicated differences in the participants' emotional engagement with the songs. These differences were sometimes rooted in disparate understandings of the function and purpose of balladry. All of the participants understood ballads as mimetic and referential: Ballads were stories that relayed the circumstances of people in other eras. Sometimes ballad stories recounted specific historic events, and sometimes they were fictional but still illustrative of particular social circumstances. As has been discussed, for some singers this understanding evoked an affinity empathy that made murder ballads like "The Knoxville Girl" too painful to sing. Some singers, however, seemed to relate more closely to the semiotic aspects of ballads, feeling that the songs functioned as narratives that relayed fables about human nature. Betty's relationship with "The Knoxville Girl" represents this perspective. Betty was aware that many femicide ballads depicted real historical events, but she was not concerned with the motivations of the male assailant in "The Knoxville Girl," saying, "I don't really understand why he killed her. But that's true of some of the songs is, he loved her and he killed her. Which doesn't make any sense (laughs). But then people don't always make sense do they?"³⁶ This remark could be interpreted to mean that Betty was not concerned with understanding the motivations of the male assailant because this knowledge would not necessarily contribute more meaning to the ballad. Betty's enjoyment of ballad narratives was not borne from a sense of relating closely to the ballad character's

36. Smith, interview, April 9, 2018.

experiences, but from the fact that the songs told entertaining stories about human behavior. Betty added, “[A ballad] doesn’t have to be anything that I really know about. Just think it’s a good story.”³⁷ Betty’s understanding of ballads as songs that told entertaining, semiotic stories about human behavior seemed to create a comfortable emotional distance from songs like “The Knoxville Girl,” a ballad Betty had sung and performed for decades.

The participants’ discussion of “The Knoxville Girl” and other femicide ballads also revealed that a singer’s various emotional attachments to gender conflict ballads do not remain static. Instead, these attachments change depending on the singer’s concern for the social relevancy of the events in the songs. Donna had disliked femicide ballads when she was younger, but had come to enjoy singing “The Knoxville Girl” partially because she felt that the “women’s movement” had made the gendered violence of the ballad less relevant in contemporary culture. She explained: “...women are a lot more empowered these days than they ever have been before. So, you know, maybe that doesn't happen as much as it would a long time ago.”³⁸ Darci, however, had reached the opposite conclusion in her time as a ballad singer. She had at one time been attracted to songs and ballads with “death and gore.”³⁹ However, she began to dislike songs in which women suffered after she became a mother. Raising her daughter caused Darci to think about women’s sociohistorical statuses. As a result she began to understand ballads as illustrating the continuity of women’s collective oppression up to the present day. When discussing songs with gendered violence, she said, “at first you think, ‘Isn’t this a quaint,’ you know, ‘this was the

37. Smith, interview, February 7, 2018.

38. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

39. Dewulf, interview, April 4, 2018.

antiquated view of the world.’ And then it dawns on you that like, ‘Yeah it was, and guess what? We’re not so far removed from that as we should be.’”⁴⁰ Darci developed an affinity empathy for female ballad characters out of this sense of shared inheritance of oppressive treatment, so that the same songs she once enjoyed for their morbid aspects now feel too disturbing to sing.

This examination of relationships to “The Knoxville Girl” and related femicide ballads shows that many factors can play a role in a singer’s relationship to ballads narratives of gendered violence. Even when a singer expresses concerns for about a ballad’s narrative content, her aesthetic or communal associations with the song may foster a strong emotional attachment. However, a singer’s emotional response to ballad narratives with gendered violence may be more acute at one point in her life than in another depending on her perceptions of the historical accuracy of a ballad narrative and the relevancy of gender violence in contemporary culture. All of these factors move and interlock with each other in the course of a singer’s interactions with femicide ballads.

Fascination Ballads

In the course of the interviews, some participants discussed their complex feelings towards fascination ballads. These ballads triggered feelings of attraction and repulsion for the participants, and a sense of confusion regarding how to interact with the songs. In their interviews, Channing and Darci both discussed fascination ballads, the themes of which generally encompassed forms of violence such as infanticide or rape. Both participants articulated their fascination with the ballads as a concern for the experiences of the women in the

40. Dewulf, interview, February 8, 2018.

stories, paired with a frustration with the perceived patriarchal morals or messaging of the stories. An examination of Darci's relationship with one ballad helps to explore the emotional relationships to fascination ballads and the gendered concerns they evoke.

In the last several years, Darci's interests in folk revival music has led her to learn several French language songs and ballads. She has been especially inspired by the repertoires of French revivalist Gabriel Yacoub and Breton musician Alan Stivell. In her time learning ballads from these men's repertoires, she became "horribly fascinated" with a French traditional ballad covered by Yacoub called "Les Trois Petits Frères de Pontoise" or "The Little Brothers of Pontoise."⁴¹ Though Darci has never brought herself to learn the song, she has thought about and listened to it constantly. At the beginning of the ballad's narrative, three brothers take a walk and see three young women. They rape the women, and afterwards the youngest woman threatens the brothers, saying that if they go through the town of Pontoise they will be punished for what they have done. The brothers pass through Pontoise and are arrested. A fourth brother, who resides at the court of King Louis, hears of what has happened and rides to the village in an attempt to rescue his brothers. He arrives too late: A judge has already passed sentence on the men and they have been hanged. The fourth brother only arrives with enough time to see his youngest brother's soul leave his body in the form of a white bird. Enraged, the fourth brother curses the judges of Pontoise and calls his men-at-arms to lay waste to the town. Seven thousand people are killed, and the assailant's horses are up to their flanks in blood.

41. Dewulf, interview, February 8, 2018.

Darci find the ballad “confusing,” “exhausting,” and “intense.”⁴² Part of her fascination with “Les Trois Petits Frères de Pontoise” is the possibility that a satisfying ending to the song seems achievable, but is then brutally snatched away. Darci said that she felt terrible for the three women who are raped, but then felt some satisfaction in the prospect of the brothers being punished for their crime. However, she felt the vengeance of the fourth brother erased the song’s sense of justice: “So...even when it seems like, ‘Well OK they did this shitty thing that they’ve been condemned to death. And that doesn’t make what they did OK but maybe this will serve for example or whatever.’ And then just...nope...it’s going to get so much worse.”⁴³ Darci, also found the massive scale of the fourth brother’s vengeance to be disturbing. She felt his vengeful actions exhibited an unrestrained rage possible in male behavior: “That just seems like a really, really, egregious example of, you know, ‘We’re dudes, we’re going to do whatever the hell we want to.’ You know? ‘And if we get caught then we’re just, we’re going to have such a tantrum that everybody dies.’ That’s like, the colossal hissy fit at the expense of so many innocent people.”⁴⁴

Darci’s feelings of fascination and frustration with the lyrics were enhanced by Yacoub’s musical arrangement of the ballad, found on his 1978 album *Trad. Arr.*⁴⁵ Yacoub begins the song accompanied by a guitar, with a harmonium and violin added a few minutes into the piece. The singing and instrumentation flow together in a steady, uninterrupted rhythm for several minutes. At the beginning of the verse in which the fourth brother witnesses his brothers’ hanging, the

42. Dewulf, interview, February 8, 2018.

43. Dewulf, interview, February 8, 2018.

44. Dewulf, interview, February 8, 2018.

45. Gabriel Yacoub, “Les Trois Petits Frères de Pontoise,” track 9 on *Trad. Arr.*, Boucherie Productions 3184, 1978, LP.

arrangement shifts to Yacoub singing a new, slow rhythmized melody. Two male voices harmonize with him while the harmonium provides a steady drone. This stark, quiet singing continues through the verses in which the youngest brother's soul appears as a bird, and the fourth brother curses the judges. As the fourth brother musters his soldiers and begins to massacre the town, Yacoub begins to sing the original melody. The rhythm picks back up to its original tempo, the full instrumental accompaniment is reintroduced, and this arrangement continues through the end of the song.

Darci expressed confusion as to why the arrangement of the song changed as the fourth brother arrived in Pontoise, and then again, why the same “lilting” melody returned during the massacre of the town.⁴⁶ I interpret her frustrations as an expression of confusion with the shifting tone of the piece indicating empathy for certain elements of the narrative. This shift to a slow a cappella could be interpreted as an invitation for the listener to pay attention to—and empathize with—the three brothers' deaths and the fourth brother's grief and anger. However, Darci directs her empathy towards the three women and the townspeople, whose painful experiences in the song are accompanied by what Darci characterizes as a more pleasant melody.

Darci's mix of fascination and revulsion towards the violence of “Les Trois Petits Frères de Pontoise” is similar to the attraction/repulsion paradigm observed in the horror genre of modern-day film. Her willingness to consistently listen to, think about, and discuss a ballad that she admittedly feels “overwhelmed” by is reminiscent of the same seemingly contradictory behaviors that compel scholars to ask why people are drawn to horror films and media.⁴⁷ Though theories vary widely on this topic, several studies suggest that engagement with horror can be

46. Dewulf, interview, February 8, 2018.

47. Dewulf, interview, February 8, 2018.

psychologically beneficial by helping an individual to compartmentalize and cope with fears of violence she may experience on a daily basis.⁴⁸ As summarized by media scholars Mary Beth Oliver and Meghan Sanders in their essay “The Appeal of Horror and Suspense,” these studies lead to the hypothesis that “given safe conditions of exposure, individuals will show a preference for a stimulus situation containing an event or object representative of the real-life source of their fear.”⁴⁹ Darci’s fascination with the violence of “Les Trois Petits Frères de Pontoise” indicates that she may fear the possibility of such violence in her own life or the lives of other women. A repeated engagement with the ballad may be a way for Darci to cope with the fear of this violence. Moreover, her concern with the gendered elements of the ballad’s violence, which she articulates as unrestrained male rage and desire, is magnified by the fact that the narrative voice and musical arrangement seem to direct empathy towards the perpetrators of the violence and away from the women and townspeople. For Darci, these elements may further affirm a patriarchal bias that magnifies her fears of the possibility of unpunished misogynist violence.

The participants’ mix of emotions with fascination ballads can produce an uncertainty of how to engage with the songs: Whether to sing them, and if so, in what contexts. Often, the participants felt that the stories and themes of fascination ballads should be more visible in society. However, they were uncomfortable with the morals or messages the songs seemed to advocate. Channing’s relationship with the infanticide ballad “The Cruel Mother” (Roud 9) serves as an example. The ballad is of English origins, but many versions have been collected in

48. Mary Beth Oliver and Meghan Sanders, “The Appeal of Horror and Suspense,” in *The Horror Film*, ed. Stephen Prince (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004): 249, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hj2bp.16>.

49. Oliver and Sanders, “Horror and Suspense,” 250.

the United States. In “The Cruel Mother,” a woman has an affair with her father’s clerk and becomes pregnant. Alone in the woods, she gives birth to twins, murders them, and hides their bodies under a marble stone. She returns home and encounters two boys playing ball. She has a conversation with the children, who reveal that they are the ghosts of the babies she has killed, and they tell her she will be sent to hell for her actions. Channing felt that “The Cruel Mother” should be sung publicly because it communicates an aspect of women’s experiences that has been a historically forbidden discussion topic. However, she was also very uncomfortable with the condemnation of the mother to hell, and the absence of any punishment for the clerk, who only appears in the first few verses of most versions of the ballad. She articulated feeling uncertain of her “responsibility to the song” and struggled to know if she should sing it for others and if so, what kind of context she should provide.⁵⁰

Fascination ballads such as “The Cruel Mother” and “Les Trois Petits Frères de Pontoise” provide a powerful psychological function for singers like Channing and Darci. They evoke a sense of horror the singers use to explore women’s historic collective experiences and the possibilities of such violence in contemporary society. The singers feel that fascination ballads contain important meanings that need to be explored, but they also dislike the songs’ patriarchal bias and moralism. But as with femicide ballads, a singer’s relationship to fascination ballads can change over time. This is especially possible if the singer can find effective strategies to convey her feelings about the song to others. These strategies are elucidated in the next chapter.

In examining the disliked ballads, it is clear that female ballad singers reject ballad narratives due to concerns for individual and collective experiences of women. Some ballads evoke concerns for painful experiences in birth or motherhood, while others elicit anger over

50. Showalter, interview, February 15, 2018.

patriarchal dominance and men's manipulation of women. The rejection of these songs illustrates that women singers can feel a powerful closeness to these themes in their daily lives. Avoiding these songs both serves as a rejection of the legitimacy of the messages of the songs and produces a greater sense of safety by reducing the distress caused by hearing or singing them. Moreover, some singers choose to experience the feelings of horror that some ballad narratives evoke, helping them contemplate the proximity of certain kinds of violence in their own lives.

On the other hand, some singers find much to enjoy about a ballad even when it conveys a narrative in which women suffer from violence. The narrative meaning "disappears into the song" if other associations about the ballad carry more emotional weight. These factors may help to explain why, if women have been predominant transmitters of ballads for hundreds of years, they have willingly transmitted songs that tell stories that illustrate violence against women. Moreover, some women's horror-like fascinations with certain ballads may be another reason why women have shared and discussed songs with disturbing themes.

This chapter also shows that contemporary women singers have differing understandings of the social power of ballad narratives and how these narratives influence cultural views. Singers such as Darci and Channing would likely agree with feminist scholar and musician Peggy Seeger's assertion that contemporary singers who willingly sing about the oppression of women "disseminate messages in song that they would not dream of passing on in conversation or prose."⁵¹ For some women singers, ballads with gendered violence or manipulation reflect contemporary realities and patriarchal teachings that are at best disturbing and at worst perpetuate harmful messages to contemporary audiences. But for other women singers, the

51. "Concerts, workshops, & residencies," Peggy Seeger, accessed February 22, 2018, <http://www.peggyseeger.com/concerts>.

narrative content does not carry this sense of threat. Rather, the enjoyment of a ballad's aesthetic beauty or communal associations can foster an emotional enjoyment that matters a great deal more than the gendered elements of the song's narrative.

CHAPTER 5

FAVORED BALLADS

The thing that attracted me to them [the love songs] was that they told stories. Pretty powerful stories. About all of the trouble women could really get into.
—Sheila Kay Adams, interview, February 8, 2018

The gender dynamics of the disliked songs in this study, demonstrate that women participants encounter enough misogynist violence in balladry that they are not surprised when a woman doesn't "come out on top" by the end of the ballad narrative.¹ Gendered violence is a part of the architextuality of balladry: it is a theme singers and listeners expect to encounter, whether they desire to or not. This dynamic deeply influences what the gendered dynamics in ballads the participants favor as well. When the participants discussed the ballads they enjoyed, they repeatedly defined the ballads by what they were *not*: They did *not* tell stories of violence against women, or they were *not* ambiguous in their gendered morals. When the participants discussed what ballads they liked, the base standard they sought was whether a female character had any degree of authority or agency. At a minimum standard, the participants favored ballads in which a woman character "stands up for herself," representing her needs and desires through speech or action.² Beyond meeting these standards, the participants favored ballads in which women acted heroically and even dominated or exposed the vulnerability of men. But as is illustrated in this chapter, female characters with agency do not have to meet their personal goals to be appealing. In fact, many participants are attracted to stories in which women face certain forms of violence or deliver violence to others.

1. Dewulf, interview, February 8, 2018.

2. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

This chapter examines four categories of ballads favored for their gendered dynamics. First, it explores favored ballads, defined by the participants as reversing the gendered expectations of the genre. These were ballads in which women exerted authority by adopting roles and behaviors traditionally associated with men or narratives in which women characters, endangered by male assailants, found clever ways to preserve their own safety. Second, some singers enjoyed ballads in which women responded realistically to the unwanted advances of men, exhibiting an “everyday” level of agency perceived of as rare to the ballad genre. Contrasting with these narratives, the third category of favored songs were those in which women characters suffered, but whose stories could be used to educate audiences about women’s historic oppression. Finally, the fourth category concerned songs narrated by women that directly provided morals or messages about women’s experiences and abilities. In these last two categories, women singers read hidden transcripts in the ballads or made use of hidden transcripts in social contexts to communicate messages that they perceived empowered themselves or other women.

Gender Disguise Ballads and Reversals of Gendered Expectations

Many participants described enjoying and singing ballads in which gendered roles and behavior were reversed from the “normal” behaviors of men and women in the ballad genre. Prominent amongst these were narratives in which women accomplished their goals by masquerading as men. Dugaw and several other scholars have discussed this phenomenon in the ballad genre. Popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the British Isles and colonial America, these ballads tend to be structured around a woman’s departure from home, her disguise as a man, her experiences in her masculine job or role, the discovery of her sex, and her

choices about marriage.³ The plots of such narratives can vary widely, and the women in these ballads are motivated to present as men for many reasons, from pursuing a sweetheart to testing a lover or simply having a penchant for travel. However, the common factor amongst these songs is that a woman changes her gender presentation to that of a male, which allows her to change her social behavior and transforms others' perception and treatment of her. Dugaw refers to these ballad narratives as warrior woman ballads, and other scholars have referred to them alternately as “cross-dressing” ballads, “transvestite” ballads, or “female highwayman” or “female sailor” ballads.⁴ Each of these terms carries certain limitations. Those that refer to the specific occupations the women practice, such as sailors and warriors, do not fully encompass the broad range of activities of women in the genre. The term “transvestite” and “cross-dressing” can imply particular sexual orientations or social activities, such as transgender or queer sexualities or the practice of drag performance. Here I choose to call these songs “gender disguise” ballads. This term illustrates the defining action of the motif—the protagonist's strategic switch in gender presentation in order to attain her goals—without implying her sexual identity, her emotional response to switching genders, or her specific male-oriented occupation.

The two participants who discussed gender disguise ballads were Donna and Darci. Both praised the heroism and authority of the female protagonists. Donna particularly liked the ballad “Jackaro.” The “Jackaro” narrative concerns a woman whose lover has been sent away to war, sometimes by the arrangement of her own parents. In order to pursue her sweetheart, she dresses as a man and makes her way to the battlefield, sometimes by sailing on a ship. The woman finds

3. G. Malcolm Laws, *American Balladry from British Broad-sides* (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1957), 7.

4. Pauline Greenhill, “‘Neither a Man nor a Maid:’ Sexualities and Gendered Meanings in Cross-Dressing Ballads,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 108, no. 428 (Spring, 1995), 159.

her sweetheart wounded on the battlefield. She picks him up and carries him to a doctor, who heals his wounds. At the end of the ballad, the woman and her sweetheart are married.⁵ Donna pointed out that songs like “Jackaro” presented narratives in which women could act with strength. She enjoyed that a song like “Jackaro” allowed women characters to “kick butt” and be heroines.⁶

Darci praised the strength of another ballad heroine named “Sovay” (Roud 7). The “Sovay” ballad concerns a woman who decides to test her love’s loyalty by dressing up as a highway robber. She accosts him in disguise and threatens to shoot him if he doesn’t give over his valuables. He gives over his watch and chain; however, he refuses to give over his ring, saying that it was a gift from his true love. The next day, the lovers meet in a garden and Sovay reveals the watch and chain. Her sweetheart blushes and she explains that it was she in disguise on the highway. She explains her motivations in the last verse:

“I only did it for to know
Whether you were a man or no;
If you had given me that ring,” she said,
“I’d have pulled the trigger, I’d pulled the trigger and shot you dead.”⁷

Darci enjoyed the bold behavior of Sovay, particularly because her actions mimicked those of men in broken token ballads. Sovay’s use of disguise and her testing of her lover’s

5. Versions of this ballad have been collected in Scotland, Canada, and throughout the United States. The plot summary provided here follows those provided in Sharp’s collection, including a version from Madison County.

6. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

7. “Sovay/Cecilia/The Female Highwayman,” *Mainly Norfolk*, accessed July 11, 2018, <https://mainlynorfolk.info/martin.carthy/songs/sovay.html>.

loyalty was a satisfying reversal from the broken token motif in which, as Darci described, “the woman is the one who gets questioned or taunted.”⁸

The participants’ enjoyment of the gender disguise motif can be read as an enjoyment of the powers women in the ballads are able to exert by appropriating the traditional roles and behaviors of men. Not only do the disguised women successfully take on the occupations of warriors and robbers, they also, as scholar Pauline Greenhill notes, “freely commandeer symbols of masculinity and of male power and privilege.”⁹ Sovay’s use of a gun and the “Jackaro” protagonist’s physical carrying of her lover to a doctor are examples of these symbolic appropriations. The appropriations not only make the female characters appear emotionally and physically strong, they also make the male characters appear vulnerable. Scholar Alisa Solomon points out that such appropriations in balladry reveal the fluid nature of gender and the fragility of masculine hegemony.¹⁰ The participants perceived these reversals in gender dynamics as rare motifs in the ballad genre, and this sense of rarity also gave the songs a special appeal. The very agency of women in gender disguise ballads—and the unambiguous rewards that women reap through the practice of this agency—stands in stark contrast to the overall cannon of balladry, in which women are punished for attempting to make their own choices.

The second favored theme concerned women who escaped attempted violence and meted out punishment to their would-be assailants. Several participants brought up the ballad “Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight” as an example of this theme. “Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight” is part

8. Dewulf, interview, April 4, 2018.

9. Greenhill, “‘Neither a Man nor a Maid,’ 160.

10. Alisa Solomon, “It’s Never Too Late to Switch: Crossing Toward Power” in *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*, ed. Lesley Ferris (London: Routledge, 1993), 145.

of a class of European ballads, with many variants. Versions of the ballad have been collected in Southern Appalachia, and Cecil Sharp and Olive Dame Campbell collected two from Madison County.¹¹ The narrative version, as relayed by the participants follows thus: A knight romantically pursues a noblewoman. The knight instructs her to steal her family's money and horses, and the two run away together. When they reach a span of water—sometimes a river, and sometimes the ocean—the knight reveals that he plans to drown the woman. He tells her he has drowned “six king's daughters” at the same spot, and commands her to remove her dress because it is too fine to rot in the water.¹² The woman says she will do as he asks, but requests that he turn his back while she undresses. He acquiesces, and she pushes or throws him into the water. When he pleads for her to help him, she responds,

“Lie there, lie there you false-hearted man
Lie there in the place of me
Six king's daughters have you drowned in the sea
But the seventh one I'll not be, be, be
But the seventh one I'll not be.”¹³

The woman rides home again. Her parrot speaks to her, asking why she has been gone and she asks the parrot not to reveal her short absence to her parents.

Many participants enjoyed the “Elf Knight” ballad because the female character, as Betty Smith stated, “won in the end,” not only surviving an attempted murder but using both wits and

11. Campbell and Sharp, *English Folk Songs*, 4, 8.

12. Smith, interview, February 7, 2018.

13. Smith, interview, February 7, 2018.

physical strength to overcome her assailant.¹⁴ Betty commented on the song's reversal of the ballad genre's "typical" dynamics by observing that the female protagonist was "doing things you don't see women do in other ballads. She takes care of herself."¹⁵ Furthermore, the female character in the "Elf Knight" ballad speaks frequently, engaging in dialogue with the knight and her parrot, and Darci enjoyed that this dialogue granted the female protagonist a strong sense of agency. Darci was familiar with a French language version of the ballad and took pleasure in rearticulating the female protagonist's taunting of the drowning knight in the French version: "and she's like 'Nobody's going to miss you but your parents and I'm just going to tell them that you drowned.' And so it was like, cool. That's cool, you know?"¹⁶ Additionally, the ballad seemed to hold a special appeal because of its close resemblance to femicide ballad narratives, but with an ending that favored the female protagonist. As Betty commented, the "Elfin Knight" female character was "the only woman I know of in balladry who throws the *man* in the water" (emphasis mine).¹⁷

The participants' enjoyment of the ballad also seemed to indicate that they valued the survival of the woman character more than desiring a scenario in the narrative in which no one was hurt. Darci, Betty, and Sheila all appeared comfortable with the outcome of the ballad and none criticized the woman's willingness to kill her assailant. Sheila characterized the woman's actions as a form of self-defense when discussing a verse in which the woman says to her parrot,

"Just because I murdered a man

14. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

15. Smith, interview, April 9, 2018.

16. Dewulf, interview, February 8, 2018.

17. Smith, interview, February 7, 2018.

Does not me a murderer make.”¹⁸

Sheila stated, “She was saying to the parrot, you know, ‘I threw him over into the sea, and drowned he was now. And so, does that make me a murderer? Just because I killed him does that make me a murderer? Even though he’s killed and murdered these young women?’ So, I guess it was just kind of like ‘tit for tat.’”¹⁹ Sheila added that not only were the female protagonist’s actions justified, but that such forms of self-defense should occur more often in the ballad genre: “And Lord, in these ballads, I think a lot of them women ought’a killed a lot more of them men, myself (laughs). Just saying.”²⁰

Realistic and Capable Behavior

The participants’ attraction to ballads such as “Sovay” and “Lady Isabel and the Elfin Knight” indicate a wish for the female characters in balladry to appear capable and able to handle adversity. However, the actions of women characters do not need to be as dramatic as Sovay or Lady Isabel to appeal to contemporary women singers. Darci spoke of being attracted to songs in which women simply behaved with a “normal” degree of agency, especially when dealing with the unwanted advances of men.²¹

Darci’s pursuit of French language ballads has led her to discover several ballads in which she feels female characters realistically handle gendered conflict. In one “Nous Irons en

18. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

19. Adams, interview, March 19, 2018.

20. Adams, interview, March 19, 2018.

21. Dewulf, interview, April 4, 2018.

Flandres” (“We’ll Go to Flanders”) a man flirts with a shepherdess, but he is dissuaded from his efforts when she threatens to sic her dogs on him if he won’t leave her alone. In another, “Les Filles Sont Volages” (“Girls are Fickle”) a man encounters a woman and asks if she’ll be his sweetheart. She rejects him, saying she favors someone else.

The woman replied
“Young man, get away.
There is another I like
Much prettier than you.”²²

The song ends with the rejected man declaring that he will join a monastery.

Darci felt that the women’s actions in the ballads realistically mirrored women’s responses to the unwanted advances of men. Additionally, she enjoyed that even though the women’s actions upset the men, the men didn’t punish the women through violence. The two ballads “definitely put the woman not even in a position of power but just in a normal position where she should be to start with. You know? It takes her out of this automatic victim role, or at best passive role. And she’s given some say about what goes on.”²³

It is interesting to note that Darci’s appreciation of the female characters’ actions was not tarnished by both ballads’ focus on the male characters’ emotions and frustrations. The intradiegetic narrative voice of “Les Filles Sont Volages” is that of the man, who warns the listener that women are fickle and untrue. In “Nous Irons en Flandres” the last two verses focus

22. Malicorne, “Les Filles Sont Volages,” track 4 on *Malicorne*, Hexagone 883 002, 1974, LP. My translation from Malicorne’s version of the ballad.

23. Dewulf, interview, April 4, 2018.

on the man's sadness as he complains to another male friend about the shepherdess' rejection, and the two decide to go to Flanders to find other women. Darci acknowledged that the ballads focused on male perspectives and emotions, but she felt that the women's degree of agency still made the songs enjoyable to sing.

Ballads that Can Be Used to Foster Empathy for the Sociohistorical Circumstances of Women

The participants were also attracted to ballad narratives that portrayed women in realistic circumstances. Channing and Sheila were drawn to ballads that they felt recognized and created opportunities to empathize with the sociohistorical circumstances of women. However, unlike the ballads favored by Darci in the previous category, the ballads in this category are ones in which women suffer hardships. Sheila and Channing discussed this topic a great deal and both used "Mary Hamilton" as an example. Sheila and Channing felt that the ballad's overt theme of infanticide and implied theme of rape presented aspects of women's experiences that deserved greater recognition in present-day societies. By reading hidden transcripts in the ballads, the two singers were able to find additional ways to empathize with Mary, who is ambiguously presented in the texts as both a victim and a criminal. Both also think about or directly used the song as an educational tool to foster compassion for women's historic experiences.

"Mary Hamilton" is an eighteenth-century ballad that has undergone many changes through oral tradition. The ballad's events take place in Scotland, and because the lyrics mention the Stewart (or Stuart) family, some scholars have interpreted the song to be an account of a case of infanticide that occurred in the court of Mary Stuart, better known as Mary Queen of Scots.²⁴ There is no strong historical evidence to suggest that the events described in the ballad occurred

24. Albert H. Tolman, "Mary Hamilton; The Group Authorship of Ballads," *PMLA* 42, no. 2 (June 1927), 422-424.

during Mary's reign, and several scholars have noted that the ballad's narrative more closely resembles the legend of Maria Danilova Gamentova, a woman from a Scottish expatriate family who was executed for infanticide of the Russian Tsar's child in 1719.²⁵ The song has been collected in Appalachia, and Sheila recalled that some members of her family knew a few phrases of the ballad. There are many variations of "Mary Hamilton," but the description given here is closest to Channing and Sheila's versions of the ballad's story.

The ballad begins by informing the listener that word has spread throughout the royal household that Mary Hamilton, one of four Marys who are maids-in-waiting to the Queen, has had a child by "the highest Stewart of all."²⁶ In Sheila's version, Mary Hamilton wraps the baby in an apron:

'She wrops her up in the apron so tight,
throws it into the sea.
"Sink ye or swim ye my little baby,
but your Mammie you'll never more see."²⁷

In Channing's version, Mary puts the child in a boat, with the same farewell of "Sink ye or swim ye."

The Queen inquires as to the whereabouts of the baby that she heard in Mary's chambers the night before, but Mary denies that there was such a baby. Mary is sent to Edinburgh town to stand trial for infanticide and found guilty. As she is led through the city, the women of the town cry for her fate. When she mounts the gallows, the king rides by and condemns her for her

25. Tolman, "Mary Hamilton," 423.

26. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

27. Adams, interview, February 8, 2018.

actions. In the last several verses Mary speaks extensively. She requests that her parents not learn of her death, and she declares her innocence, claiming that she is still a maid. Last, she reflects on her impending execution, saying:

‘Last night there was four Maries
The night there’l be but three
There was Marie Seton, and Marie Beton,
And Marie Carmichael, and me.’²⁸

Channing and Sheila both expressed a great deal of empathy for Mary and felt that her choice to commit infanticide was due to her compromised social position as a woman. Both Channing and Sheila believed that the father of Mary’s child was the king. Sheila felt that Mary would not have been able to refuse the advances of the king, but neither was Mary allowed to have a child out of wedlock, so she was “kind of between the devil and the deep blue sea.”²⁹ Both participants described Mary’s circumstances as universal to women in her period and culture and stated these circumstances still had relevance in the present day. When asked how she felt about Mary’s killing of her child, Sheila replied, “Oh, I think she was being perfectly sensible. I really do, because...it’s only been recently...that we’ve been able to choose for ourselves as far as having babies. You know, to decide whether we’re old enough or well-adjusted enough or whatever to give birth. But back then they didn’t have no choice. And I, I have a lot of sympathy for her.”³⁰ Channing described Mary’s act of infanticide not only as a

28. Child, “173A. Mary Hamilton,” vol. 3, *Popular Ballads*, 385.

29. Adams, interview, March 19, 2018.

30. Adams, interview, March 19, 2018.

realistic reflection of the compromised choices of women in past eras, but she also interpreted Mary's infanticide as having a symbolic meaning about women's collective experiences: women must sometimes destroy parts of themselves that are considered unacceptable or threatening to society:

I think there's another slant of maybe looking at these songs more archetypally, with the child representing more of like a inner voice or creative force in a woman's life that she's having to, you know, secretly kill in the forest because society won't accept it or it's dangerous to her...so that's another way of seeing it which also feels really important to sing about.³¹

The singers' ability to empathize deeply with Mary was cultivated in part by their reading of hidden transcripts in the ballad's narrative. "Mary Hamilton" contains mixed signals concerning with whom an audience should empathize: Mary is condemned for her crimes and even appears cold in her declaration to her child of "Sink ye or swim ye." And yet, she also speaks extensively at the end of the ballad, proclaiming her innocence, talking about her family, and describing the severity with which her life has changed. MacLennan notes that ballads, as co-authored narratives, often present a clash of views, and it can be difficult for a listener to discern the values of the ballad. She points out that this is especially true of infanticide ballads, in which "the audience is asked to pity a woman who has committed a heinous crime while she is condemned at the same time by her community."³² Channing and Sheila, however, interpret the ballad as a narrative that generates empathy for women's experiences, and they do this by interpreting "Mary Hamilton" as a semi-public text. Both women see the ballad's function as a narrative that can generate compassion for women's historic circumstances, even though within the text Mary can appear cruel and multiple parties condemn her actions. For example, Channing

31. Showalter, April 4, 2018.

32. MacLennan, "Fair and Free," 11.

interpreted Mary's line of "Sink ye or swim ye" not as a heartless goodbye but as a tender wish that her baby might not die, stating, "her [Mary] saying "Sink ye or swim ye" is like, of course the baby is not going to survive but it's kind of her hoping that it will, I think."³³ Sheila interpreted another part of the ballad as a message for and to women. She pointed out the moment when Mary is led through the streets of Edinburgh and the women of the city pity her: "I love the line where it says, 'And all the women hung out their windows and cried 'Alas, poor thee.' Because everybody knew the plight [of women] in these old love songs."³⁴ Sheila read the women's empathy in the ballad as an acknowledgement of Mary's compromised situation, but also felt the women represented an "everybody" audience who acknowledged women's struggles within and outside ballad narratives.

The "Mary Hamilton" ballad certainly could have been interpreted similarly in other eras. The song was popular at a time in Scotland when citizens were pondering the realities of infanticide and observing the state's reaction to such crimes. Symonds notes that infanticide songs like "Mary Hamilton" reflect the circumstances and choices of pregnant women in Scotland from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, when the Industrial Revolution was scattering close-knit rural communities and creating a class of young, single working women. In these circumstances, women were bereft of traditional customs such as communal shaming systems that could force men to marry their pregnant lovers. When these women became pregnant, some chose infanticide. Several hundred were investigated on suspicion of murdering their children and at least fifty were executed.³⁵ Furthermore, MacLennan notes that the secrecy

33. Showalter, interview, February 15, 2018.

34. Adams, interview, March 1, 2018.

35. Symonds, *Weep Not for Me*, 8.

with which Mary births and disposes of her child mirrors historic cases of infanticide.³⁶ Women singers in these eras would have recognized the realism of Mary's circumstances and perhaps chosen to empathize with her plight, despite the state's—and the king's—condemnation of her actions.

Both Channing and Darci find it important to bring the historic realities of women such as “Mary Hamilton” to light by using the ballad as an educational tool in ballad workshops, conversations, and performances. Channing felt that singing and discussing “Mary Hamilton” could provide an opportunity for contemporary singers and listeners to better understand the maligned or misrepresented choices of women in other eras, saying “In telling those stories, it's bringing light to someone's life that might, I don't know, that the mother's side of the story might not have been told.”³⁷ Channing constantly debates how to present or talk about “Mary Hamilton” in different settings, but she knows that in whatever context she presents the song, she wants to make it clear that she is “not condemning the mother.”³⁸ Sheila has been teaching the “Mary Hamilton” ballad in traditional song workshops for several years, in which she typically explains the compromised circumstances of Mary's position and raises questions about who is responsible for her pregnancy.

This category of ballads relates closely to the fascination ballads explored in the previous chapter. Both “Mary Hamilton” and “Les Trois Petits Frères de Pontoise,” for example, concern forms of violence that many singers and audiences could find disturbing, especially from a

36. MacLennan, “Fair and Free,” 120.

37. Showalter, interview, February 15, 2018.

38. Showalter, February 15, 2018.

female oppositional consciousness perspective. Channing's fascination with "The Cruel Mother" is similar to her fascination with "Mary Hamilton," and in both cases she is still debating how to discuss the ballad with other singers and audiences. The category of song discussed here could be most effectively thought of as another variety of fascination ballads, but one in which the singer has debated the song's meaning and significance and has decided that the topic matter is so important that it needs to be sung and discussed publicly.

Channing and Sheila's empathy for Mary is the motivating factor for their need to share a ballad like "Mary Hamilton." However, because of the mixed sense of values in the ballad, the two women must act as translators of the narrative. As Tater has observed, this choice has been made by other female ballad singers, who will orally defend the actions of female ballad characters when the ballad itself condemns the character's actions.³⁹ Similarly, Sheila and Channing must tell friends and audiences which characters deserve empathy and explain what the hidden transcripts of the song reveal. MacLennan notes that ballads in which female characters commit infanticide "represent the tension within a community over what is and is not considered a crime."⁴⁰ Arguably, Channing and Sheila's motivations to talk about "Mary Hamilton" and direct empathy towards Mary may reflect present-day tensions over the criminalization of birth control, abortion, and family planning resources.

Ballads that Overtly Address Women's Experiences and Have a Female Narrative Voice

All the songs discussed in this chapter could be interpreted as songs that "teach" something about women's experiences. The courageous actions of the gender-disguised women,

39. Tater, "Destroying Patriarchy," 13.

40. MacLennan, "Fair and Free," 117.

the realistic responses of the women in the French ballads, and the violent choices of Mary Hamilton were understood by the participants as reflections of the spectrum of strategies women have employed in response to the curtailment of their safety or agency. These interpretations were not based on any overt messages or moralizing statements in the ballads. Rather, the participants extracted the lessons and meanings of the ballads by interpreting the plots of the songs and reading hidden transcripts. In contrast, the songs in this last category of favored ballads directly or strongly imply lessons about women's conditions and abilities and often contain intradiegetic, female narration.

Donna and Sheila discussed this category the most, and both focused on songs that had been a part of Madison County's musical traditions for several generations. When asked what songs meant a lot to her as a woman, Donna said she loved the song "Come All You Fair and Tender Ladies" (Roud 451). This lyric song has been collected across the British Isles and the United States, and Sharp collected a version in Madison County.⁴¹ The song is narrated by a woman, who addresses a female audience. The common opening verse reads:

Come all you fair and tender ladies,
Be careful how you court young men;
They're like a star of a summer's morning,
They'll first appear and then they're gone.⁴²

Through the succeeding verses, the narrator laments that men will pledge their loyalty to their sweethearts but quickly leave to court other women. The woman narrator wishes she could become a bird, fly to her lover, and chide him for his actions.

41. Campbell and Sharp, *English Folk Songs*, 220.

42. Campbell and Sharp, *English Folk Songs*, 220.

Donna remarked that she thought the song was a conversation between two women, and that the song's message of caution was important for women to pay attention to: "I feel like it's like a woman singing a song to other women. Like telling them to be careful who they give their heart to...so that one's I think important. And I think every fourteen-year-old girl should have to listen to that song (laughs)."⁴³ Donna also found the song accessible because it was not about a particular woman's experiences, but about women's common experiences: "I really love 'Fair and Tender Ladies.' Because that song, it's not really about someone, but it's just a song, a nice message to women."⁴⁴ The song's message and the narrators' invitation to all "fair and tender ladies" to hear her lament created a collective sense of inclusion that Donna enjoyed.⁴⁵

Another song narrated by a female voice that conveys a lesson about women's experiences is "Single Girl" (Roud 436), a song enjoyed in Madison County since the Carter Family made it famous in the late 1920s. A woman who laments her marriage narrates the song. She complains of poverty, hard work in the kitchen, and a neglectful husband. In many verses she contrasts her life before and after her marriage. A typical verse reads:

When I was single, my shoes they did squeak
Now I am married, my shoes they do leak.
Oh I wish I was a single girl again
Lord, lord, don't I wish I was a single girl again.⁴⁶

43. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

44. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

45. Campbell and Sharp, *English Folk Songs*, 220.

46. Sheila Kay Adams, "Single Girl," YouTube video, 02:46, posted October 26, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zuta89S57c>.

Although the narrator does not directly address a female audience or make a moralizing statement, Donna and Sheila understood the message of the song as a cautionary tale about women and men's relationships. Donna recognized that the song had a similar moral to "Come All You Fair and Tender Ladies," but described "Single Girl" as more humorous, "like a joke" about the interactions between women and men.⁴⁷

Several participants also favored ballads in which the given moral praised women's abilities. One such song was a "The Farmer's Curst Wife" (Roud 160).⁴⁸ In the humorous ballad, long popular in Madison County, Satan arrives at a farmer's home and take the man's "scolding wife" with him to hell.⁴⁹ Soon, however, the woman has beaten and killed several "little devils" and Satan must take her back to the farmer again.⁵⁰ Several participants appreciated that the wife was physically strong and capable of overcoming even Satan himself. Sheila especially enjoyed that her Aunt Inez Chandler's version, contained text that directly acknowledged this fact. The last verse of Inez's version went:

This proves that us women's better than the men,

Because we can go to hell and come back again.⁵¹

47. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

48. Also known as "The Farmer's Curst Wife," this ballad dates back at least to the mid-nineteenth century and has been collected across the British Isles, Ireland, Canada and the United States.

49. Sheila Kay Adams, "Frank Islam Athenaeum Symposia: Sheila Kay Adams Sings Farmers Cursed Wife," YouTube video, 03:43, posted September 22, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PFpKLntC1I>.

50. Sheila Kay Adams, "Farmers Cursed Wife."

51. Adams, interview, March 19, 2018.

Sheila felt that the song's lesson had been a motivating factor for women to sing the "Farmer's Curst Wife" to other women in the past: "I think it's just a funny song that women kept singing for the next generation because, well, the woman comes back as the strong one, now don't she? She can 'outfox the devil and the old man too.'"⁵²

Sheila and Donna's discussion of the songs in this category illuminated ways in which the songs could be used in social contexts as overt and covert commentary on women's experiences. When talking about "Single Girl" Sheila recalled that Dellie Chandler Norton's mother, a midwife who the locals called "Big Till," sang the song to Dellie when Dellie was giving birth to her eldest daughter. Dellie told Sheila that while she was in labor, Till sang slightly different lyrics to Dellie:

When I was single, my shoes they did squeak.

Now I am married my shoes they do leak.

Wish I was a single girl again, *so will you*. (my emphasis)⁵³

Big Till's use of "Single Girl" illustrates that women can use a song's relevant topic matter and accessible narrative voice to comment on their own situations. The narrator's voice felt familiar enough to Till that she felt confident adopting it as her own in order to comment on her daughter's situation. Additionally, Till's statement of "so will you" emphasized, perhaps humorously, that her daughter would have done well to listen to the implied moral of the song and stay single.

52. Adams, interview, March 19, 2018.

53. Adams, interview, March 1, 2018.

Similarly, the thematic content and narrative voice of “Come All You Fair and Tender Ladies” felt personal enough to Donna that she was confident using the song as critical commentary on her own relationship troubles. Donna explained that when she was younger and just beginning to perform as a ballad singer, she had an abusive boyfriend who controlled many aspects of her life. Donna did not feel able speak up for herself in the relationship, but singing “Come All You Fair and Tender Ladies” at performances gave her an outlet to express herself. Donna enjoyed singing the song’s warning against courting young men because it served as a disguised way of criticizing her partner: “when I was with him singing ‘Fair and Tender Ladies,’ that was my favorite (laughs). But he didn’t know that of course...I just enjoyed that.”⁵⁴ Just as with “Single Girl,” the relevance of the song’s topic matter and its accessible narrative voice allowed Donna to feel comfortable adapting the song to her own purposes. Additionally, the song’s traditional status enabled Donna to simultaneously conceal and reveal her feelings about her relationship. As a traditional singer, Donna could pretend to sing “Come All You Fair and Tender Ladies” purely as an example of Madison County’s musical heritage, all the while using her performance as a hidden transcript that expressed criticisms of her boyfriend.

The songs in this category are appealing to the participants for many reasons. Like other favored ballads, the narratives feature women who practice large and small degrees of agency. Songs like “The Farmers Curst Wife” and “Come All You Fair and Tender Ladies” feature women who bravely face their circumstances, or who expose, through their actions or speech, the historic oppression of women. But these songs also produce a unique level of intimacy between the woman singer and the song. To an extent, this is accomplished by the presence of a moralizing statement. Unlike a ballad such as “Mary Hamilton” that must be interpreted for its

54. Norton, interview, April 4, 2018.

meaning, many of these songs make clear statements that critique gendered dynamics and celebrate women's abilities. Additionally, in a genre that favors extradiegetic narration and intradiegetic male narration, ballads told from the perspectives of women can make a song feel more personal to women singers. Sheila's observation that women sang "The Farmer's Cursed Wife" "for the next generation" also highlights another aspect of these songs that is appealing to the participants.⁵⁵ Ballads narrated by women, or containing morals concerning women's strengths and abilities, can foster a sense of dialogue between past and present-day women singers. As Donna observed, these ballads can make a singer feel as if there's "a woman singing a song to other women," creating a feeling that semi-private knowledge is being passed from one singer to another⁵⁶. Last, the intimate nature of the songs gives women singers the confidence to use the songs in social situations as personal forms of commentary and critique.

The mix of themes found in the favored ballads speaks to the participants' enjoyment of songs that present both fantasy and realism, producing different kinds of benefits for the singers. Daring and heroic female characters such as Sovay and Lady Isabel represent the outer limits of the behavioral possibilities for women. These female characters are what language scholar Walter Ong calls the "heavy characters" common to oral tradition, persons "whose deeds are monumental, memorable."⁵⁷ The deeds of the heavy characters in the favored ballads present enticing images of women's assertion of agency and they represent opportunities for personal autonomy and freedom. Yet, women characters do not have to be heavy to be memorable. The

55. Adams, interview, March 19, 2018.

56. Norton, interview, March 15, 2018.

57. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 30.

“normal” behaviors of the women in the French songs were compelling to Darci because they illustrated basic, practical uses of agency that many women practice in their everyday lives. Further still, the participants valued some ballads because the songs illustrated women’s struggles to assert agency in highly compromised circumstances. By virtue of representing some of the most troubling aspects of women’s experiences, these ballads affirmed historic realities that some participants used to foster concern for women’s rights in the past and present. Last, ballads that used female narration and moralized about women’s experiences could be about humorous or depressing topics, but their appeal lay in the singers’ ability to immerse themselves into the roles of the characters and feel an intergenerational sense of kinship with women singers from the past.

In examining favored ballads such “Mary Hamilton,” it is evident to what extent female singers rely upon commentary and critique to make a story’s meaning clear. This is also true of many of the unfavored ballads as well, the patriarchal dynamics of which women singers must translate to make clear to audiences. The need to translate ballads for others is a common experience for ballad singers of all genders, but in many of the cases discussed here, the translations are of a socio-political nature. In critiquing the behavior of the brothers in “Les Trois Petits Frères de Pontoise,” or asking an audience to consider Mary Hamilton’s lack of autonomy, or even praising the actions of women like Sovay, the participants articulate which behaviors and social structures should be celebrated and which should be changed. This work necessarily entails a symbolic shift in power: When singers take on the role of becoming translators of a ballad, the narrative voice of the ballad must yield to that of the singer, who becomes the predominant narrator of the ballad’s story. In this role as meta-narrators to the ballads, women singers help to change the interpretations and meaning of songs for their audiences and

themselves. As Lanser observes, the act of telling a story to others, and being understood can become “not only the objective of the narration but the act that can transform (some aspect of) the narrated world.”⁵⁸ In presenting a ballad through a particular lens, a singer helps to change the meanings of a song, creating new reasons for singers and audiences to either continue to sing that song or leave it behind.

It may appear unnecessarily difficult to utilize ballads as a device to critique social systems and change cultural views, especially since many of the songs require the additional labor of locating hidden transcripts and translating the meanings of the songs to others. After all, plenty of other contemporary music genres provide songs that directly and unambiguously describe women’s experiences and promote their rights to safety. As a form of folklore, however, ballads can be particularly effective in convincing audiences of new viewpoints. In “On the Political Uses of Folklore: Performance and Grassroots Feminist Activism in India,” Christine Lynn Garlough argues that folklore can be used as a tool for change and transformation. In her work with an Indian women’s performance group, she observed that the group made use of folk dance and folk heroine motifs in their performances in order to comment on contemporary issues of rape and inheritance law. By presenting innovative ideas in a familiar form, Garlough argues, “folklore can be used to advance marginalized perspectives that may be difficult to articulate because they are not widely accepted or openly discussed.”⁵⁹ Ballads reliably present structural and literary formulas familiar to folk-music loving audiences. Their poetic structure, historic origins, and violent plots are all familiar dynamics with which listeners expect to engage. By

58. Lanser, “Feminist Narratology,” 357.

59. Christine Lynn Garlough, “On the Political Uses of Folklore: Performance and Grassroots Feminist Activism in India,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 121, no. 480 (Spring, 2008): 188.

presenting a song that feels familiar in its sound and topic matter, and then raising questions about elements of the narrative, women singers rebirth ballad narratives into songs that communicate contemporary topics, shifting how audiences interpret the experiences and choices of women.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

I began this thesis with an interest in exploring the ways in which gendered experiences influence women singers' choices of ballads and how these choices help to fulfill women's needs. In the course of the study, I realized that the questions I was addressing applied equally to my own choices of repertoire. Why did "Marching Away with the Spaniards," with its triumphant young heroine, appeal to me as much as "Queen Jane," in which a woman is assaulted by a male assailant? In what ways did I profit from my different uses of the songs—teaching one while privately singing the other? This study revealed the many benefits and uses that women singers can derive from the ballad genre.

This study affirms the powerful role of narrative empathy in determining women singers' repertoires. The participants saw themselves in female ballad characters, and understood that the experiences of the characters illustrated individual and collective experiences of women. The participants' empathy for ballad characters also triggered feelings of affinity empathy for the "fundamental emotional experiences" of women as a collective group. The participants' empathy for female characters was a major factor in determining what songs the singers favored and disliked. They selected ballads that directly praised or illustrated women's abilities to accomplish their goals and manipulate male authority, ballads that reversed gendered expectations of the genre, and ballads that could be used as tools to educate others about women's historic circumstances. The participants also frequently rejected femicide ballads, ballads that evoked personal fears related to childbearing or mothering, and songs in which men manipulated women. These choices revealed that women singers understand that ballad narratives contain topic matter that is highly relevant to contemporary women's lives. In these choices of repertoire,

the participants expressed their fears of male aggression and assault, anxieties of physical or emotional pain in aspects of motherhood, wishes for reproductive and sexual freedom, and goals of social autonomy in male-oriented environments.

In a variety of ways, this study also establishes that the narrative content of balladry by itself is not enough to determine whether a female singer finds a song appealing. Some singers are more likely to keep a ballad in their repertoires if they feel capable of communicating the meaning of the ballad to others or using that ballad as an educational tool. This is true especially of fascination ballads, the topic matter of which, while often disturbing, can help singers process their own fears of violence or be used by singers teach others about women's historic experiences. These choices can be empowering acts that simultaneously shift a ballad's narrative voice to new ownership and change how others understand the meaning of the song.

Another important finding of this study is that ballads, regardless of their topic matter, appeal to women singers because they can serve as moving reminders of communal ties and regional heritage. Women singers associate ballads with specific family members, friends, and places, and oftentimes the narrative content of a ballad is less emotionally relevant than the communal images and memories that the songs evoke. Additionally, singers who understand themselves as tradition bearers, including heritage singers, often favor songs that have been passed by their family members and historically revered by past researchers and documentarians. Even when the singers have concerns about the gendered dynamics of a ballad, they often prioritize the song's significance as a symbol of local heritage, and sing the song as a way to honor the memory of familial and communal ancestors.

This study also adds to literary and narratological theories of how women singers and readers interpret texts. Ballads that have a female narrative voice or overtly empathize with

women's experiences hold a special appeal to many women singers. Women singers can also feel uncomfortable with the extradiegetic and male intradiegetic narration common to ballad texts, and sometimes respond to this discomfort by reading ballads as semi-public texts. By reading ballads in this way, the singers are able to locate hidden transcripts and meanings within the songs' lyrics, allowing a ballad to become newly personalized in powerful ways.

These observations of how women singers choose their repertoires, value ballads for their associations with community and heritage, and use commentary and hidden transcripts as tools for interpretation bolster some of the arguments made by ballad scholars and offer explanations of some of the questions raised by previous scholarly work. This study reinforces the arguments by Wollstadt, Tater, and Hamessley that women singers favor ballads in which women characters assert agency and defy male authority, and that women are willing to orally defend the actions of women characters in songs. But this study also complicates the picture of why women favor and reject ballads by observing that women singers value songs for many reasons aside from narrative content. Some scholars, such as Wollstadt, struggle with discerning the reasons why women singers keep ballads in their repertoires that seem to favor male authority. My study suggest that songs with ostensibly disturbing content can actually be used by singers to evoke positive associations with community, educate others about women's experiences, or help singers contemplate their own fears.

This study also contributes new vocabulary that expands understandings of the purposes that ballads serve in singers' lives and the methods by which singers interpret the meanings of ballads. The concepts of affinity empathy, semi-public texts, and fascination ballads can aid future scholarship in the field of narratology, literary interpretation, and ballad studies. These terms may have special significance for studies of women singers' repertoires in past eras. If

scholars conceptualize historic women's readings of ballads as vehicles to elicit affinity empathy, as semi-public texts that reveal hidden messages, or as fascination ballads that provide particular benefits, this may provide a stronger conceptual framework within which to discern women's choices of repertoire in the ballad genre.

This study also raises some questions about Appalachian women singers' choices of repertoire that beg further research. This thesis touches on the fact that women singers' values and gendered concerns can evolve over time, which in turn changes their repertoire preferences. I found that in the interviews many participants also spoke of preferring different ballad themes at different stages of their lives. Sheila, for example, had enjoyed dramatic ballads about love and betrayal when she was younger, but in recent years had come to focus on songs about missing loved ones who had passed away. My study did not take an in-depth look at these shifting preferences, and further research could provide a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between women singers' life stages and their attractions to different ballad themes over time. Another dynamic brought up in the interviews was that many of the participants discussed having a wide span of musical influences in their lives. Many stated that they felt balladry fulfilled some of their emotional needs, but that other genres of music more accurately articulated aspects of their emotional and gendered experiences. A study on the ways in which women ballad singers engage with a blend of musical genres to fulfill varying emotional needs could foster a clearer understanding of how balladry functions as one facet of expression amongst many other musical options for contemporary women singers.

While this study has significance for women's ballad cultures across many times and places, it also reveals dynamics about women's musical cultures in Appalachia. This study demonstrates that Appalachian women ballad singers, especially those who identify as tradition

bearers, face a unique combination of influences and pressures when they select ballads to sing. While gendered concerns were a priority for many of the participants, the elevated legacy of balladry in Madison County motivated many of them to prioritize songs that reinforce a sense of local and regional identity. These influences hold implications for women singers in parts of Appalachia where historic music plays a role in cultural tourism economies. Tourism projects that promote regional music such as the Blue Ridge Music Trails of North Carolina, or Virginia's The Crooked Road, likely create similar motivations for women ballad singers to present songs that not only represent themselves, but their families and communities.

This study also possesses the potential to shift gendered representations of Appalachian women ballad singers. In "Beyond the Mountains": The Paradox of Women's Place in Appalachian History," scholar Barbara Ellen Smith observes that historic portrayals of Appalachian women frame them as both placid helpmates to their husbands and supporters of mountain communities. Smith wonders how to locate female agency underneath these portrayals, which she understands to be facets of the dominant masculine images and histories of the region. Smith's description of the historic representations of Appalachian women, not uncoincidentally, is similar to representations of Appalachian women singers, who act as passive vessels of traditional song. The inventiveness and agency of women singers has been hard to locate through this fog of historic representations. However, this study affirms that Appalachian women singers express their gendered concerns through thoughtfully choosing repertoires, using commentary, and reading ballads as semi-public texts, and view these choices as effective forms of gendered self-expression. An awareness of these strategies also presents new potential visions of how Appalachian women singers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used historic song to negotiate, rebel, or reconcile their gendered concerns. Considering the ways in which historic

women singers may have read ballads as semi-public texts, used commentary to contest the values of ballad narratives, or meditated on their own fears through fascination ballads could deepen understandings of Appalachian women as historical agents, affirming, as Smith states, that “Those who in the official documents of history, emerge at most as long-suffering victims, nonetheless practice their own willful humanity.”¹

This study also reinforces the idea that Appalachian women do not maintain, as scholar Mary Anglin summarizes, “a commonality of interests simply by virtue of gender.”² Even in the limited scope of this project, the participants chose to sing or reject ballads based on diverging priorities. The factors that could determine a ballad’s ultimate appeal could range from tune, to connotations of community or heritage, to an ability to evoke affinity empathy. Additionally, the interviews revealed varying opinions regarding the challenges that contemporary women faced in their daily lives, such as exposure to abuse and violence. These observations disrupt the image of the Appalachian woman as an embodiment of tradition and culture, and replaces it with a vision of the many women of Appalachia who interpret and shape cultural practices to their own disparate ends.

1. Barbara Ellen Smith, "Beyond the Mountains": The Paradox of Women's Place in Appalachian History," in "Appalachia and the South: Place, Gender, Pedagogy," special issue, *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 11, no. 3 (Autumn, 1999): 13.

2. Anglin, "Workable Past," 72.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Research Study Title: *Ballad Repertoires and Life Experiences of Women Singers in Western North Carolina*

Researcher: Sara Lynch-Thomason

The working title of this project is “*Ballad Repertoires and Life Experiences of Women Singers in Western North Carolina*.” It is being conducted as a part of my thesis research for my completion of my master’s in Appalachian Studies at East Tennessee State University (ETSU).

The purpose of this project is to explore the ways in which contemporary women’s personal experiences influence their choices of ballad repertoire. Each volunteer in the study will be interviewed twice, and both interviews will be recorded using a digital recording device. The interviews may take place at your home or at another private location of your choice. Each interview will last about an hour but may go a little longer.

After the first interview takes place I will send a survey to you via e-mail requesting some biographical details that may have not been covered in the initial interview. As I create the transcriptions and write my thesis, I may contact you with additional questions via phone or e-mail.

At the end of both interviews you will be given the opportunity to reflect on the content of the interviews and request any omissions of material. You are not obligated to answer any interview or survey questions which you do not wish to answer. If, in the course of the interview, you wish to end the interview or pause the discussion the I’ll be happy to do so.

Unless you request otherwise, I will keep your identity anonymous in the thesis literature. We can work together to figure out a comfortable degree of anonymity, creating name pseudonyms, obscuring locations etc.

I will also make sure that your identity is confidential in other venues. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings. In such cases, as in the thesis literature, you will remain anonymous unless you request otherwise. I will not share audio recordings from your interview publicly (on radio, online, at conferences) unless you provide me with explicit permission to do so.

If you wish, the audio recording and data from your interviews be stored in a regional archive such as the Archives of Appalachia at ETSU. I will discuss this possibility with you at the conclusion of the project. Restrictions on if/when the materials are donated and where will be discussed before any actions are taken, and another consent form concerning materials donation will be provided.

You will be provided full transcriptions of both interviews and digital or physical copies of both interviews. I'll provide these materials to you by June 15th, 2018. If you're interested I can also provide you with a copy of my thesis once it is completed.

The content you provide for this project may be used in future publications such as journal articles and books. In such cases, you do not give up any copyright or performance rights that you may hold.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary and I appreciate your help with my research. If you decide to participate in this study you can change your mind and quit at any time during the study. You may quit by contacting me at 615-430-4323 or e-mailing me at blairpathways@gmail.com.

If you have any questions, concerns, or problems relating to this study and wish to contact members of my ETSU advisory committee, you may contact: Dr. Lee Bidgood (423-439-4584, bidgood@etsu.edu) or Dr. Rebecca Adkins Fletcher at (423-439-7994, fletcherr1@etsu.edu).

If you have any research-related questions or problems at any time, you may call me at 615-430-4323 or e-mail me at blairpathways@gmail.com.

After reading the material above, please sign the following statement. You will keep one copy of the form and I will keep a copy for my research records.

By signing below, I certify that I have read or have had this document read to me and I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and to discuss my participation with the interviewer. I understand the consent process and I freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this project.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Appendix B

Biographical Survey

Research Study Title: *Ballad Repertoires and Life Experiences of Women Singers in Western North Carolina*

Researcher: Sara Lynch-Thomason

The information you provide here will provide me with broader biographical information that may have not been covered in the interview. Feel free to answer these questions as simply or as fully as you wish. You do not need to answer any questions that you do not wish to. I am requesting the same information from each interviewee.

Your Name:

Address:

Place and Date of Birth:

Where you were raised (please list multiple locations if relevant):

Do you identify with a particular ethnic or racial heritage? If so, which one/s?

Do you identify with a particular class background (poor, rich, working class, middle class etc.)? Please describe.

Please list your current occupation and past occupations. *Note: By occupation I mean work that you have done to support yourself or your family, paid or unpaid. Work such as “homemaking,” is relevant.*

Do you live with any immediate family (partners, spouses, children)? If so, please list them here (i.e. two children, one partner).

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Note:

Date:

Participant Name:

Stated to participant: If at any point in this interview I ask a question that you don't want to answer, or if you say something you don't want included in the interview, let me know. We'll also have a chance to go over the transcription later.

Make sure to ask questions in bold

Part 1: Biographical information, learning folk songs and ballads:

- Tell me your name and today's date.**
- Tell me who your people are and where you were raised.**
- What types of music did you grow up with in your household?**
- How did you come to sing ballads and folk songs?**
- Who were or are some of your favorite singers?**
- What do you define as a ballad?**
- Do you write your own songs? Are any of them inspired (lyrics, melody) by ballads or folk songs?**

Part 2 Favored Songs

Are there ballads or folk songs you sing that mean a lot to you as a woman?

-For example, are there songs you sing that you relate to because of things you've experienced as a woman?

Per song:

Origins

- Where/from whom did you get that song?**
- When did you learn it?
- Can you sing the song for me?

Plot and Meaning

- Can you tell me what is happening in the song?**
- What do you think about that story?**
- Do you think the story teaches anything or has a moral?**
- Do you identify with any of the characters in the song?**
- Are there any parts of the song that you particularly like? Why?

Usage and Emotional Response

- How does it feel to sing that song? Why?

- When have you sung the song in the past? Why?
- Do you like to sing it alone or sing it to other people? Why?
- When do you sing it now?
- Do you perform the song? Why or why not?
- Does this song remind you of events or experiences in your own life?**
- Have your feelings about the song changed at all over time?**
- Have you heard other versions of that song? Are there other versions you like less or more?
- Where are those other versions from and why do you feel the way you do about them?

Aesthetic Changes

- In your time singing that song, have you changed it in any way?**
- Have the lyrics changed?
- Has the melody changed?
- Have you changed other parts of the song, like the timing?
- Do you sing it with other instruments?

Part 3 Disliked Songs

Are there ballads or folk songs you've heard that you don't like as woman?

*Ask versions of the questions above, but be sure to ask:

- What is the song about?**
- Are there any parts of the song that you particularly don't like?**
- How does it feel when you've heard that song? Why?**
- Does this song remind you of events or experiences in your own life?**
- Have you ever sung the song in the past? Why?
- Have your feelings about the song changed at all over time?

Part 4: Are there any songs that have helped you through difficult times?

*If yes, go through same process as above.

-Are there any questions you wished I had asked? Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

Appendix D

Questions for Donna Ray Norton, Second Interview

Questions for Donna Ray Norton, Second Interview Wednesday April 4, 2018

-“Knoxville Girl” -You said you really loved that song, and you liked how clear the story was. You also described the song as “super gory.” Do you think that’s part of why you find it appealing too?

-You said that since you’re a bit empathic, and that can affect what songs you like to sing or don’t like to sing. Can you tell me more? What aspects of a song (tune, story etc.) can affect your mood?

-Are there any ballads or historic/traditional songs that you have never wanted to sing?

-Have you ever changed the lyrics to any songs? This could just even just be one word. If you have, why?

-You talked about “Single Girl” as being a funny song, like a “joke about women and men.” What makes that song feel funny? Are there lines in that song that feel particularly funny to you? Are there any that don’t feel as funny?

-What do you think that song’s message is? Is it similar to “Come All You Fair and Tender Ladies?” Do those songs feel different? Why?

-Have you ever put yourself in the position of a man in the song?

-Have you ever felt deeply for a man’s experience in a song?

-You said when you were starting to sing and do shows your boyfriend, the person you eventually married, was jealous and you couldn’t do anything alone. Why do you think he was jealous? What would he do at performances?

-I think it’s really neat that you were getting to sing songs about strong women even if he was trying to control parts of your life. I know you talked about this some before, but did singing those songs help you think about your situation with him? Like choices you needed to make?

-Can you describe with some of these songs, what it feels like to sing them? Like when you’ve come to the end of singing a particular ballad, how does it make you feel?

-You described the audience laughing in “Matthey Groves” when the head is kicked against the wall. Do you like that you don’t always know when the audience will laugh?

-You said Sodom is a very close-knit community, and that “you could go over to your neighbor’s house and just go in without knocking” and that “people would just be sitting

around singing, talking, having a good time.” Was it like that when you were a kid, or were you describing a time before?

-You described your own songwriting as “like a nursery rhyme” or like a line from “Happy Gilmore.” Do you mean you feel like it’s silly?

VITA

SARA LYNCH-THOMASON

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