

Written Composition and (Mem)oral Decomposition: The Case of “The Suffolk Tragedy”

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For the study of verbal performance culture in late medieval and early modern England—that significant triangular continuum between a literature, theatre, and folklore that had yet to negotiate their modern borders—oral tradition in its purest form has limited relevance. On the one hand, in a culture in which “oral, scribal and printed media fed in and out of each other as part of a dynamic process of reciprocal interaction and mutual infusion” (Fox 2000:410), a given narrative’s complete trajectory from composition, through transmission, to performance and reception, altogether independent of writing, print, or reading, will certainly have occurred, but will not necessarily have been typical, and while audible then would be invisible now: the word-craft of the past is accessible to us in the present only by virtue of having undergone material textualization at some point in the meantime. On the other hand, it is evident that ignoring non-textual processes would severely hamper a fully historical appreciation, even at the more literary end of the spectrum.¹ Shakespearean tragedy, no less than popular ballads and folk wondertales, is performed from memory and can be transmitted from one performer to another without the intervention of a written or printed text (Graves 1922; Troubridge 1950-51). And while not all oral tradition involves improvisation, improvisation is invariably oral, and as late as the nineteenth century a stroller performing in English provincial fairgrounds reported that he had more than once been “told what character he’s to take, and what he’s to do, and he’s supposed to be able to find words capable of illustrating the character.” The same informant reckoned that for one actor who learned his part ten did not (Rosenfeld 1960:149). Much if not most of even non-dramatic verbal culture was experienced as performance, as activity rather than artifact, deep into the early modern period, and a gentleman visiting Devon in the early nineteenth century was startled to find that the poetry of the seventeenth-century cavalier-clergyman Robert Herrick had been preserved in local memory among his parishioners, passed down orally from parent to child for a century and a half (Marcus 1986:140).

In such a “para-literate” culture (Bennett and Green 2004:10), those non-textual processes will have been involved to greatly varying degrees (over time; between cultural systems; among genres) and will have had varying impacts on the verbal material subjected to

¹ For the purposes of this study, “text” (and “textual”) will refer exclusively to verbal production in the form of visual signs (writing; print) on a material surface (here invariably paper, but in theory also vellum, stone, etc.).

them. They will also have comprised a complex of aspects between which it is necessary to distinguish more strictly than in a culture totally innocent of letters. “Oral” in this context is best taken to mean specifically vocalization in performance, and it applies with equal legitimacy to both retrieving words from memory and reading them aloud from a text. Reception of oral performance is correspondingly “aural,” but we need other terms for what happens before the first performance and between subsequent performances.

Composition can also be oral if it is coterminous with performance (or, conversely, if performance involves a significant degree of improvised re-composition), but in late medieval and early modern England it is just as likely to have been literally scribal: as words form in the mind they are written down (although they may take a detour through the composer’s voice to his ears before they get to his hand). If composition involves neither simultaneous oral utterance nor scribal registration, the sequence of words remaining within the mind, it may be designated “mental,” by analogy with the arithmetic that is engaged in without benefit of pen and paper. But the definitive cultural distinction relates to the mode of conservation of verbal material between composition and performance, or between performances. If conservation is not as written or printed characters then it is in the memory, which, rather than the page, duly provides the medium from which the verbal material is retrieved in performance. The opposite of “written” transmission, which involves conservation as text and vocalization from a text, is therefore not “oral” transmission, but what I suggest we designate “memoral” (“memor-al”/“mem-oral”) tradition, since it comprises conservation in, and oral performance from, memory (and, conversely, memorization from oral performance by the next performer in the chain of transmission). But of course in cultural reality the transmission of a verbal product from composition to a given performance (not least if traversing a sequence of performers) can have comprised almost any imaginable permutation of the processes just described, and in varying proportions.

Amidst this complexity, it is evident that no assumptions can be made about the non-textual processes involved in a given tradition of verbal culture in late medieval or early modern England. Faced with the text of a medieval work whose form we suspect may have been influenced or even determined by memoral processes, there is no alternative to an analysis designed to determine the presence and relative significance of symptoms of textual and memoral processes, respectively (enhanced, when possible, by external information on how works of this kind were transmitted at the period). But what are the symptoms of memoral transmission? These too defy generalization, for while some may apply universally others will reflect other factors: professional versus amateur performers; ceremonial versus convivial context; spoken versus chanted versus sung performance; stanzaic versus stichic verse; narrative versus dramatic versus lyric mode. For each permutation of these, the symptoms of memoral transmission need to be established by comparative analyses of different versions of a verbal product within a given genre or tradition at various points in its trajectory from composition through transmission to reception, and preferably under circumstances where the interference of textual processes can be ascertained and allowed for.

Paradoxically but unavoidably, those traditions most likely to have involved the largest degree of memoral transmission are the least likely to survive, not least in multiple versions of externally ascertainable relationships: so much so indeed that controlled experiments have been

undertaken to *create* the evidence by recording performances of late medieval popular narratives deliberately committed to, and retrieved from, memory by a modern scholar (Zaerr 2005; Zaerr and Ryder 1993-94). The results are intriguing and useful, but with due caution something less artificial is feasible by examination of material from post-medieval, and thus better documented, phases of narrative tradition, in an area of verbal culture in which there is strong likelihood of a considerable degree of continuity from earlier periods.

The area concerned is that of narrative song, which in the English-language traditions of the British Isles, as in many cultures of Western Europe, can be encountered in the very different, but strongly related, contexts of oral tradition and popular print. The “popular ballads” recorded from English and Scottish folk tradition and figuring in most anthologies and surveys of English Literature—songs such as “Sir Patrick Spens”; “The Wife of Usher’s Well”; “Edward”—actually have less authentic claim to either the noun or the adjective than the much maligned but vastly more numerous commercial songs that shared the same stanza forms and many melodies. Within about a century of the introduction of printing there emerged in London (and subsequently in the English provinces, Scotland, and Ireland) a highly commercialized business—effectively the first of England’s mass media—which supplied popular songs known as ballads to a broad market in the form of single sheets of paper with the text of a song on one side, hence “broadside ballads.” Within the limitations of the ambient technology these were multimedia products. The text, usually set out in stanzas, was designed to be sung, often with an existing popular tune specified as suitable for the purpose, and illustrated by a more or less suitable woodcut. From the late sixteenth to the late nineteenth century, hundreds of new ballads were issued each year. Commissioned from professional hack writers, published in massive, sometimes six-figure print-runs, sold at a discount to both stationary stall-holders and itinerant peddlers, they reached and were popular with a socially very broad audience, from the metropolis to the most distant and isolated communities.²

The vigor of this popular song culture complicates inordinately any attempt to write the history of “folksong” (including the traditional ballad) in England. There is no doubt that there were “memoral” traditions of song in England in the medieval period, the Victorian period, and all the periods in between: songs received aurally from performance, conserved in the memory, then retrieved from memory in oral performance, and that in a tradition linking a series of singers over many decades or centuries. It is equally clear that a significant segment of these traditions survived into the early twentieth century, to be recorded as “folksongs” by Cecil Sharp and other collectors, both in the British Isles and North America. But the two modes had manifestly tangled with each other throughout the time of their joint existence (reproducing, with greater intensity, the entanglement of manuscript and memoral tradition in earlier periods). It is possible, greatly to be hoped, and entirely in keeping with the commercial spirit of the broadside business, that some songs printed as broadsides were actually acquired on the cheap from memoral tradition, recorded from a singer rather than bought from an author, and thus inadvertently preserve an antecedent “folk” tradition. (Something similar has plausibly been claimed of the blues recorded and issued as “race records” in the United States in the early twentieth century.) But the reverse is equally if not more plausible and amply documented: songs written for the

² Standard introductions to the broadside trade include Rollins 1919; Würzbach 1989; Shepard 1973.

broadside business having been printed, hawked around the countryside, bought, sung, memorized and passed on (the original print having been discarded at some point in the interim), entered memorial tradition, in due course to be encountered and recorded as folksongs. Indeed, the recorded corpus of folksongs probably underrepresents the extent of the phenomenon, as collectors, who believed they were rescuing from oblivion a national song heritage of considerable antiquity, were less likely to record a song that they recognized as deriving from a broadside—unless it had what sounded like an old tune (in which case they tended to note down only the first verse of the song).

The folksong credentials of such broadside derivatives might therefore be suspect, but the derivation facilitates investigations that come as close as we ever can to an understanding of the impact of memorial transmission on verbal material (in song form) over a substantial period. The present writer has accordingly undertaken a series of experiments that involve juxtaposing, with an original text published as a broadside in the seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth century, derivative, folksong versions subsequently recovered from memorial tradition. While the memorial versions of a given song of course vary from each other, there is a distinct tendency for them to differ from the original broadside in the same kinds of ways. That these are indeed characteristic symptoms of memorial transmission (in a generally literate environment) is increasingly confirmed as repeated experiments with different songs show—if always with interesting adjustments—similar results. The focus on narrative songs of course reflects the present writer's literary interests, not least the emergence of this research under the auspices of controversies concerning the transmission of the traditional—narrative—ballads.

The greatest potential weakness of this approach is that (in accordance with a process invoked a moment ago) the folksong may stem precisely from an antecedent memorial tradition of which the broadside itself is a derivative, effectively reversing the thrust of the evidence (and rendering the results unsafe when we cannot know which direction is the true one).³ This danger can largely be obviated, however, by studying news broadsides reporting specific crimes, trials, and executions that actually happened, so that the broadside ballad concerned (however much indebted to established generic paradigms) is effectively a new song: any versions subsequently recorded from oral tradition must be derived from the original broadside, either exclusively through memorial tradition or (in some documented instances) via an intermediate, revised broadside whose contribution to the changes can be exactly ascertained (see Pettitt 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 2001).

The changes perceived in such experiments with narrative songs indicate that verbal material produced under the conventional “literary” auspices, whose composition is initially scribal and whose transmission is initially textual—written by a professional, then printed and sold on a broadside—when subjected thereafter to the memorial preservation, oral performance, and aural reception characteristic of folk (memorial) tradition, systematically loses many of the features with which it was initially characterized and acquires others. The original broadside ballads display the typical features of a popular, grub-street journalism that symptomatically emerged and developed contemporaneously with the rise of the novel. The account of the crime

³ This is the problem with explorations otherwise analogous to the present experiments, for example Greene 1967.

and trial is expansive and circumstantial, explicit on names, places, and times, and painting the scene of the outrage (and in the case of murder the discovery of the body) with uncompromising and lurid detail. The characteristic ethos is that opportunistic combination of the moral (take warning by this man's fate), the melodramatic (the victim begs for mercy), the sentimental (the criminal begs for forgiveness), and in the case of a female victim, voyeuristic titillation (purple gore on lily-white breast) we still associate with tabloid journalism. The narrative is packaged between the buttonholing "come all ye" *incipit*, by which the ballad-vendor was to attract a crowd, and the concluding valediction of the narrator or, just as often, the perpetrator, who having ostensibly told his story anticipates with horror his impending fate—the ballads in many cases designed to be sold at the public execution, which attracted vast crowds.

The oral derivatives are in contrast leaner and meaner, the pressures of their transmission tending to subtract anything not essential for the progress of the narrative (not least that opening and closing packaging and any moralizing, sentimental, or melodramatic elaboration along the way). The process can be compared to the weathering of rock or the wearing of cloth to reveal the underlying structures and their patternings that hold the whole together. In a literary context that has half an eye on late medieval culture, a more appropriate image—less agreeable but enabling a useful play on words—is the decay of a corpse in which the softer tissues disappear and reveal the skeletal structure beneath. It is usefully represented by the "cadaver tombs" of late medieval churches and cathedrals, which display the dignitary fully fleshed and in all his magnificence above (equivalent to the song as composed in writing) and beneath the corpse (the song as decomposed in and by memoral transmission), with the clothes reduced to rags and the body literally to the bare bones (including the incremental repetition of the rib-cage), which more resemble other skeletons than the living man resembled other men.⁴

To translate this into generic terms (and invoke yet another image), memoral tradition has something of the function of a "ballad machine," gradually shaping narrative songs into conformity with the traditional ballads, a genre canonized in Francis James Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Child 1965). These are characterized precisely by the impersonality and economy of their narrative, and the crime broadsides also acquire in the course of transmission some of the verbal repetition patterns familiar from traditional balladry, as well as verbal commonplaces or formulas. In the rare cases where the oral versions have actually *added* narrative material to the song, it tends to be scenes or motifs familiar from other traditional ballads (usually expressed in conventional ballad idiom), either deriving from specific songs or (more likely) of a formulaic status that is common to the tradition as a whole.

But there is a further insight to be gained from the crime, trial, and execution broadsides, for precisely by virtue of being news ballads we can sometimes juxtapose them not merely forwards, with their folksong derivatives, but sideways, with contemporary journalistic accounts of the events concerned, whose manner of handling the narrative provides illuminating similarities and contrasts. Indeed, in rare instances the broadside can be compared backwards with a journalistic prose account that provided its immediate source, permitting an analysis of a narrative's trajectory towards and through memoral tradition at various stages. This is feasible

⁴ A classic instance is the tomb of Bishop Thomas Bekynton (died 1465) in Wells cathedral. For illustrations of this and several other examples, see Fairweather 08 15 07.

since broadside ballad authors seem not to have acquired their information about the events they relate by attending the trials of the accused (which often took place at distant towns on the regional assize circuits). They based their accounts on reports in the newspapers or in occasional newssheets, both of which (prior to the tabloids' usurpation of the sensationalist function of the broadsides in the late nineteenth century) tended to be relatively restrained and factual, often presenting what they at least claimed were verbatim transcripts of statements in court and judicial documents. Accordingly, under favorable conditions comparisons can be made between the content, form, and style of a prose account that is the product of scribal composition, designed to be textually transmitted and received by reading, with a parallel or directly derivative stanzaic rendition of the same story, which while composed in writing and designed initially for publication in print, is also created to be suitable for singing: that is, oral performance and aural reception, and probably also in the knowledge that the song would thereafter be diffused by word of mouth and enter memorial tradition—whose impact, as already noted, can be discerned in the derivative folksongs.

As might be anticipated, while there are some instances where it is possible to juxtapose journalistic prose accounts and a broadside ballad on a given crime, and others where it is possible to juxtapose an original news ballad with its folksong derivatives, the number of cases permitting sequential juxtaposition of all three is extremely limited. This may be precisely because news ballads generally tended to have a restricted shelf-life in folk tradition, and it may be no coincidence that those that did make it as folksongs were advantaged by a case with particularly striking and memorable features, like the revelation of the whereabouts of the corpse of one victim in her mother's dream (as in the song to be explored below) or the sleepless nights of the murderer haunted by hellish visions. It is also noticeable that those broadside ballads that devoted greater efforts to telling the story than to moralizing over it or to wallowing in the condemned criminal's remorse and spiritual conversion seem to have been more congenial to the needs and tastes of folk tradition.

There follows a longitudinal study along these lines of one of those rare songs for which these conditions are met, and in a particularly useful way, enabling revealing comparative analysis of the way the same narrative was first written as prose for reading, then composed into a song for singing, only to be decomposed by singing in memorial tradition. The song concerned is "The Suffolk Tragedy, or the Red Barn Murder" (beginning "Young lovers all, I pray draw near"), one of the several news ballads inspired by the 1828 trial and execution of William Corder for the murder (in 1827) of Maria Marten at the notorious "Red Barn" at Polstead, Suffolk.⁵ I have only recently disentangled it from the better-known "Murder of Maria Marten" ("Come all you thoughtless young men"), already subjected to a similar comparative

⁵ I have used "The Suffolk Tragedy, Or, the Red Barn Murder" issued by Thomas Ford of Chesterfield, Thomas Ford's Ballads, Derby City Libraries: Local Studies Library, accession no. 60374, # 121, and acknowledge with thanks both the provision of a copy and permission to quote. See below for discussion of other printings. For purposes of comparison with the derivative folksong version, I have resolved the text into ballad quatrains (as signaled by the rhyme-scheme) and supplied stanza numbers.

analysis at an earlier stage of this project (Andersen and Pettitt 1985).⁶ It will be relevant for what follows to note that while based on real events, “The Suffolk Tragedy” belongs to the “murdered sweetheart” subgenre of crime and execution broadsides, telling the story of a gullible young woman who is lured away to a lonely spot and murdered by her seducer when she demands he fulfill his promise to marry her—a subgenre that emerged in the mid-seventeenth century and persisted strongly throughout the life of the broadside ballad as a news medium. The existence of this subgenre will be among the factors shaping the way the broadside handles the available information about the case (see Pettitt 2005).

As a first step, we may see how the original broadside compares with a contemporary journalistic account, and the idiosyncrasy of dating the murder to May 19th the two share (ballad stanza 7.2; other sources give May 18th), together with many parallels in phrasing (signaled below by my underlinings), suggests that the prose report is the direct source for the first eighteen stanzas of our broadside (on the right below).⁷ The account (on the left) is taken from a prose newsheet on the discovery of the body published, ironically, by the London printer James Catnach,⁸ who also published the rival ballad on the case, “The Murder of Maria Marten”:

*Atrocious Murder of a Young Woman in
Suffolk. Singular Discovery of the Body
From a Dream.* Printed J. Catnach, 1828

The Suffolk Tragedy or The Red Barn Murder.
Printed Thomas Ford, Chesterfield⁹

A murder,

1. Young lovers all, I pray draw near
and listen unto me,
While unto you I do relate
a dreadful Tragedy

⁶ The two songs have now accordingly been assigned separate numbers in the Roud Broadside Ballad and Folk Song Indexes with “The Murder of Maria Marten” as 215 and “The Suffolk Tragedy” as 18814 (Roud 08 15 07). The other ballads based on this case are “The Red Barn Tragedy” (“Come all you young lovers, I pray you attend”), “A Copy of Verses on the Execution of Wm. Corder” (“Hark! ’tis the dreary midnight bell”), and “William Corder” (“Good people I pray draw near”). Passing references in contemporary sources suggest there were probably others.

⁷ The historical accuracy of the ballad is not an issue in its own right, but to the extent the chronology of (real) events may be useful it is as follows. 1827: Maria Marten killed by William Corder in the Red Barn and buried there, Friday, May 18; 1828: body found, April 19; Corder arrested, April 22; Inquest records verdict of unlawful killing by Corder, April 26; Corder convicted and condemned at Bury Assizes, Friday, August 8; hanged, Monday, August 11. On the events themselves and the extraordinary popular interest they provoked, see the website of the Moyses’s Hall Museum, Bury St Edmunds (Moyses’s Hall 08 15 7).

⁸ *Atrocious Murder of a Young Woman in Suffolk. Singular Discovery of the Body from a Dream*, in Hindley 1968:180-82. The same account appears almost verbatim in *The Sunday Times* of 27 April 1828 (*Sunday Times* 1972), but verbal details suggest the ballad derives directly from the Catnach newsheet (which itself is probably derived from the newspaper).

⁹ Two other printings of the song have been consulted, one with the same title, “The Suffolk Tragedy or the Red Barn Murder,” and no indication of printer or place (Oxford, Bodleian Library Johnson Ballads 2889), the other titled “The Red Barn Murder of Maria Marten” issued by Plant of Nottingham (Cambridge University Library, Madden Collection, vol. 20 [Country Printers 5], #116). Neither has any textual variations of significance for the current inquiry except for the way they refer to the barn where the decisive events occur. The Ford of Chesterfield

rivalling in cold-blooded atrocity that of Weare,
has been brought to light, within a few days,

at Polstead, in the county of Suffolk.

The circumstances which have reached us
are as follows:-- Maria Marten,
a fine young woman, aged twenty-five,
the daughter of a mole-catcher in the above village,
formed an imprudent connection,
two or three years ago,
with a young man, named William Corder,
the son of an opulent farmer
in the neighbourhood,

by whom she had a child.

He appeared much attached to her,
and was a frequent visitor at her father's.

On the 19th of May last,
she left her father's house,

2. As for cold-blooded cruelty
the like was never heard,
It is as true as ever was heard
or put upon record.
3. In the County of Suffolk
'twas in Polstead Town,
Maria Marten lived there
by many she was known,
4. Her beauty caused many young men
to court her as we find,
At length upon a farmer's son
this damsel fix'd her mind.
5. As they walked out one evening clear,
she unto him did say
William, my dear, **my time draws near**
let's fix our wedding day,
6. **You know I am with child by you,**
then bitterly she cried
Dry up your tears, my dear, says he
you soon shall be my bride.
7. In eighteen hundred and twenty seven
nineteenth day of May,
Maria was dressed in men's clothes,
her mother then did say,

text used here, like that printed by Plant of Nottingham, consistently refers to this site as the "Red Barn" (stanzas 9.1, 11.1, 12.3, 14.4, 15.1.): it is never merely "the barn." The latter is the designation, however, in three of the references (sts. 11.1, 12.3, 15.1) in the unattributed print in the Bodleian Johnson Ballads. When compared with the source narrative, the Catnach prose account, honors are evenly divided between the two alternatives: in the three instances where the prose also refers to the barn, each alternative agrees with the source and against the other on one occasion (in the third instance all agree). The priority of the Bodleian variant may be suggested by its inclusion of a woodcut (evidently meant to represent Corder) that also appears on a follow-up Catnach newsheet reporting further developments in the case: *Atrocious Murder of a Young Woman in Suffolk. Singular Discovery of the Body from a Dream. Apprehension of the Murderer at Ealing, Middlesex*; see Hindley 1968:183-85. If this is the case, then the uniformity of the references in the other (now derivative) printings may be due to the kind of internal contamination otherwise associated with memory-based transmission—in this instance the time between a compositor consulting the copy text (which probably happened less often in connection with a popular song) and setting the print. In popular consciousness "the Red Barn Murder" quickly became synonymous with the Marten case.

stating, **in answer to some queries,**

that she was going to the Red Barn
to meet William Corder,
 who was to be waiting there with a chaise
 to convey her to Ipswich,
 where they were to be married.
 In order to deceive observers,
 Corder's relations being hostile to the connection,
 she was to dress in man's attire,
 which she was to exchange at the barn

for her bridal garments.

She did not return at the time expected;
 but being in the habit of leaving home
 for many days together,
 no great alarm was expressed by her parents.

When, however, several weeks had elapsed, and no intelligence was received of their daughter, although Corder was still at home, the parents became anxious in their inquiries. Corder named a place at a distance where he said she was, but that he could not bring her home for fear of displeasing his friends. Her sister, he said, might wear her clothes, as she would not want them. Soon after this, Corder's health being impaired, he, in real or pretended accordance with some advice he had received, resolved on going abroad. Accordingly, he left home in September last, expressing a great anxiety before he left to have the barn well filled. He took with him about £400. Several letters have been received by his mother (a widow) and sister, as well as by the Martens, in which he stated that he was living with Maria in the Isle of Wight. These, however, bear the London post-mark. He regularly desired that all his letters should be burnt, which request was not complied with. Strange surmises lately gained circulation throughout the neighbourhood, and one person stated, as a singular circumstance, that on the evening when Maria Marten disappeared, he had seen Corder enter the Red Barn with a pick-axe.

The parents became more and more
 disturbed and dissatisfied, and these fears

8. My daughter why disguise yourself,
 I pray tell unto me,
 Where are you going? For I fear
 some harm will come to thee.

9. Mother! I am going to the Red Barn
to meet my William dear,

His friends won't know me on the road

and when I do get there

10. I'll put on my wedding robes
 then we shall haste away,
To Ipswich Town, to-morrow is fixed
 for our wedding day.

11. She straight went to the Red Barn
 and never more was seen

were still more strongly agitated
 by the mother dreaming,
 on three successive nights last week,
that her daughter had been murdered,
 and buried in the Red Barn.

She insisted that the floor of the barn
 should be upturned.

On Saturday, Marten, the father,
 with his mole spade and a neighbour with a rake,
went to examine the barn;

and soon, near the spot where the woman dreamt
 her daughter lay buried,

and only about a foot and a half underground,

the father turned up a piece of a shawl
 which he knew to have belonged to his daughter,
 and his assistant with his rake
 pulled out part of a human body.

Horror struck, the unhappy father and his neighbour
 staggered from the spot.

The remains were afterwards disinterred,
 the body being in a state of decomposition.

The pelisse, shawl, Leghorn bonnet, and shoes

Until eleven months were past,
the mother dreamed a dream,

12. That her daughter was murdered by
 the man she loved so dear,
In the Red Barn beneath the floor
 her body was buried there.

13. Three times she dreamed
 the same dream
 then to the father said,
 I beg you will rise instantly,
 and with you take the spade,

14. Our neighbour with his pickaxe
 will bear you company,
 To the far corner of the Red Barn
 where our daughter does lie.

15. They went to the Red Barn,
 the corner they were told,
The same spot the mother dream'd,
 they raised the floor and mould,

16. When they had dug
 eighteen inches deep,
 the body there they found
 Tied in a sack, and mangled
 with many a ghastly wound.

17. Her shawl, her bonnet and pelisse
 in the grave were found,
 That eleven months had been
 buried underground.

were, however, distinctly identified
as those once belonging to Maria Marten. . . .

18. Soon as they were discovered
they were identified
To be Maria Marten's when
she left home to become a bride.

....

The remaining stanzas (19-24) of the broadside, which will be quoted in full below, are evidently based on a later source of a similarly journalistic character reporting the arrest and trial of Corder. Indeed, the ballad author's eye may have been straying elsewhere towards the end of the stanzas quoted, since the detail of the body being found in a sack (stanza 16) does not appear in the prose account: it does appear, however, in the report of the discovery of the body, "Most Horrible Murder" in *The Sunday Times*, 27 April, 1828, which also, like the song, describes the body explicitly as "mangled."¹⁰

Even a cursory glance at these parallel texts will discern that in the transition from prose journalism to news broadside the most significant operative factor is subtraction. There is a lot the broadside does not choose to report, for example the reaction of the men recoiling, "horror struck," on discovering Maria's body. Perhaps the most notable omission is the account of events during the period that elapses between the disappearance of the girl and the discovery of her body, in which the main developments are Corder's various subterfuges to give the impression Maria Marten is still alive and to placate the anxiety of her family, narrated in the prose account with novelistic detail.

The result of the omissions, clearly deliberate, creates a leap from one episode to another of the kind more often associated with traditional ballads—an anticipation that is one of the deviations characteristic of this particular experiment: "The Suffolk Tragedy," at least in its crime sequence, is narrated with somewhat greater efficiency than many another murdered sweetheart broadside. A further consequence is to have the mother's revelatory dream come unbidden, effectively as a providential event, rather than led up to with more psychological plausibility as it is in the prose account, prompted by growing suspicions and circumstantial evidence (such as Corder's being seen approaching the barn with a pickaxe on the day of the disappearance):

11. She straight went to the Red Barn,
and never more was seen,
Until eleven months were past,
the mother dreamed a dream.

Indeed, the status and function of the mother's revelatory dream are a small but central instance

¹⁰ The "bleeding mangled body" of Maria is similarly invoked in "The Murder of Maria Marten," Hindley 1968:187, stanza 8.3. The phrase has a good gothic pedigree, with Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* of 1764 presenting "the bleeding mangled remains of the young prince" to the horrified gaze of his parents (Walpole 1985:17).

of what happens to narrative as it modulates through different discursive media. With no evidential force (and vulnerable to challenge) the mother's dream was not mentioned at the trial, even when she was called as a witness; in the journalistic account, it is prepared for by growing anxiety and made plausible by hints of what might have happened and where; in the broadside it is an unexplained and therefore supernatural intervention: as we shall see shortly in the derivative folksong, it has become the central, pivotal moment linking the disappearance and the discovery.¹¹

In many passages the song marches side by side with the prose narrative, selecting sequences whose formulations, with many verbal echoes, change the original only as much as is necessary to meet the requirements of meter and rhyme. And as variant forms of journalism the two discourses share the device of packaging their narrative with a striking opening gambit, both finding "cold-blooded" an appropriate eye- (or ear-)catcher. They have a mutual interest in specifics, the song retaining place-names like Polstead, Suffolk, and Ipswich, as well as personal names like Maria and William.

There are occasions, however, when the simple expedient of retaining material but moving it has considerable impact. For example, the information that Maria was dressed in men's clothes, which in the prose narrative is part of a third-person account in the course of which Maria explained her plans, is in the broadside moved to become a description of how she looked, prompting the anxious question of the mother. This in turn amounts to an addition that is qualitatively, if not quantitatively, significant. For while the prose account has Maria explaining her plans merely "in answer to some queries," the latter is dramatized in the ballad as the mother's question, Maria's explanation correspondingly modulating into a first-person reply, the whole sequence transformed from narrative to a dialogue mode, which is evidently more congenial to a text designed for performance. The same process—the retention of material but in a different mode—occurs after the mother's dream. In the prose account we are merely told that she asked that the barn be examined and consequently that the father and the neighbor dug up the floor. In the song we are given her speech, which instructs the father, with the neighbor, to dig up the floor with their tools, leaving the next stanza to report they did so without the specifics.¹²

But perhaps the most significant instance of dialogue is also the song's major addition to the prose source: the interview between Maria and Corder where she demands marriage on account of her pregnancy. Its absence in all judicial sources and journalistic accounts (other than broadside ballads)¹³ is probably accounted for by its not having happened. Or at least if trial evidence (and the *Sunday Times*' reporting of it) is to be believed, having produced her first

¹¹ If the revelatory dream of Maria Marten's mother was indeed her own assertion rather than added at some phase in the mediation of the narrative, then this is undoubtedly an instance of ostension: the perception of reality shaped by pre-existing narrative conventions, the revelatory dream being a commonplace in popular and traditional murder narratives.

¹² That the neighbor's historically correct rake becomes a pickaxe may be a residual concatenation of spade and pickaxe from the—here unrecounted—murder and burial scene discussed above.

¹³ Maria is also pregnant in "William Corder," while the pregnancy is omitted by "Copy of Verses, on the execution of Wm. Corder" and "The Murder of Maria Marten" (neither of which, however, mention the illegitimate child/children); "The Red Barn Tragedy" is closest to the journalistic accounts by including the birth and death of the child she bore to Corder.

illegitimate child some years previously by another man, Maria had had another, by Corder, some months before her murder. This latter child had died, and their surreptitious burial of its body had evidently prompted local suspicion: indeed, according to Corder's confession, the row in the barn had been provoked precisely by mutual recriminations over this incident. The prose account, if laconic, is in accordance with the evidence of the case as reported by the regular press, noting briefly Maria's "imprudent connection" with Corder, "by whom she had a child." But the ballad is coerced by subgeneric convention into staging a fully fledged pregnant-sweetheart-demands-marriage scene, with the evening walk and the dialogue deploying conventional phrases like "I am with child by you" and "fix the wedding day."¹⁴

In relation to the general run of murdered sweetheart ballads, a major idiosyncrasy of "The Suffolk Tragedy" is the absence of a murder scene, usually seized on by ballad writers as an occasion for a purple passage. Here, instead, we move directly from Maria's leaving home to the mother's dream about the body's whereabouts. We are quite effectively placed in the position of the mother, speculating about what has happened, rather than following Maria as the protagonist. But this rather (traditional) ballad-like manner of handling the material (unlike the matter of Corder's explanations for Maria's absence) does not involve the omission of material from the prose source, for the latter too stays with the parents, for the very good reason that it was written before the arrest of Corder and the trial (both prompting subsequent news-pamphlets from the Catnach presses) and lacks the necessary information. Our broadside writer (who does cover the trial) evidently chose not to switch sources and introduce information from one (which described the murder) while following the narrative line in another (which didn't): it is perhaps by way of compensation that when the body is found its condition bears witness to what happened in the missing murder scene: "mangled / with many a ghastly wound" (broadside stanza 16.3-4).



Performance of the "The Suffolk Tragedy" by Freda Palmer as recorded by Mike Yates (Hall 1998, item 12).

Thus composed, "The Suffolk Tragedy" was printed, sold, sung, remembered, and passed on, entering late English memorial tradition, and its impact can be ascertained by juxtaposition of the original text with the words of the song when it was recovered from folk singers. This did not happen often, and of the three versions available the only one suitable for full-scale analysis of this kind is the one recorded by Mike Yates in 1972 from the singing of Freda Palmer of

¹⁴ As this suggests, broadside ballads are not innocent of the use of commonplace phrases akin to the formulas of traditional ballads: they are a boon to a somewhat uncommitted author writing at speed. It might be added for completeness' sake that the "Suffolk Tragedy" broadside as written also contains a few verbal repetitions between linked moments in the narrative ("eleven months"; "fix the wedding day"; "to the red Barn") noted below as characteristic symptoms of oral transmission: earlier studies have likewise indicated that it is not the repetitions themselves that are symptoms, but their frequency and the way they are generated out of non-repetitive formulations.

Witney in Oxfordshire.¹⁵ Freda Palmer's version follows, juxtaposed with what is now the full text of the original broadside, with the underlining on this occasion signaling significant differences:

Original broadside

printed Thomas Ford, Chesterfield, ca. 1828

Derivative folksong

recorded Mike Yates, 1972

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1. Young lovers all, I pray draw near,
and listen unto me,
While unto you I do relate
a dreadful Tragedy,</p> <p>2. As for cold blooded cruelty
the like was never heard,
it is as true as ever was told
or put upon record.</p> <p>3. In the County of Suffolk
'twas in Polstead Town,
Maria Marten lived there
by many she was known,</p> <p>4. Her beauty caused many young men
to court her as we find,
At length upon a farmer's son
<u>this damsel</u> fix'd her mind.</p> <p>5. As they walked out one evening clear,
she unto him did say,
William my dear, my time draws near,
let's fix our wedding day,</p> <p>6. You know I am with child by you,
then bitterly she cried,
Dry up your tears my dear, says he,</p> | <p>10. <u>This damsel</u> caused many young men
to court her as <u>you'll find</u>
<u>Till</u> at length upon a farmer's son
<u>this damsel</u> fixed her mind.¹⁶</p> |
|---|--|

¹⁵ For the broadside, see note 14; the oral text is my transcript of Freda Palmer's performance as recorded by Mike Yates (Hall 1998, item 12) with the exception of stanza 1 (not included in the recording as published "for technical reasons"), which is supplied from Yates 2002:3. I am grateful to Mike Yates for his permission to cite this text in full: this is not the first time that I have benefited from his song collection in both Great Britain and North America, and it will probably not be the last. Freda Palmer's performance is copyright Topic Records and is reproduced here with their kind permission.

¹⁶ As my numbering indicates, this stanza, the earliest part of the broadside narrative remembered (broadside stanza 4), is actually sung last (as Palmer stanza 10). This order was not, however, an idiosyncrasy of this performance: it was the same when Freda Palmer was recorded singing this song by Steve Roud six years later in 1978 (personal communication, 25 Jan 2005) and evidently represents the song as she conceived of it.

you soon shall be my bride.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>7. In eighteen hundred and twenty-seven,
nineteenth day of May,
Maria was dressed in men's clothes,
her mother then did say,</p> <p>8. My daughter why disguise yourself,
I pray tell unto me
Where are you going? For I fear
some harm will come to thee.</p> <p>9. Mother! I am going to the Red Barn
to meet my William dear
His friends won't know me on the road,
and when I do get there</p> <p>10. I'll put on my wedding robes,
then we shall haste away,
To Ipswich Town, to-morrow is fixed
for our wedding day.</p> <p>11. She straight went to the Red Barn,
and never more was seen,
Until eleven months were past,
the mother dreamed a dream,</p> <p>12. That her daughter was murdered by
the man she loved so dear,
In the Red Barn, beneath <u>the floor</u>,
her body was buried there</p> <p>13. Three times she dreamed the same dream
then to the father said,
I beg you will rise instantly,
and with you take your spade,</p> <p>14. Our neighbour with his pickaxe
will bear you company,
To the far corner of the Red Barn
where our daughter does lie,</p> <p>15. They went to the Red Barn,</p> | <p>1. In eighteen hundred and twenty-seven,
on the <u>ninth</u> day of <u>June</u>;
Maria was dressed all in men's clothes
and her mother <u>to her</u> did say</p> <p>2. <u>Oh daughter</u> why dost <u>thou</u> disguise thyself
<u>pray tell it</u> unto me
<u>For I'm sure</u> some harm <u>or other</u>
<u>may happen unto</u> thee.</p> <p>3. <u>Oh mother</u> I'm going to the Red Barn
to meet my William dear
His friends won't know me <u>as I am</u>
<u>nor</u> when I shall get there</p> <p>4. <u>I will</u> put on my wedding <u>gown</u>d
and <u>we will</u> haste away
To <u>Islip</u> town tomorrow is fixed
<u>all for</u> our wedding day.</p> <p>5. <u>She straightway went</u> to the Red Barn
and never more was seen
Till eleven months <u>was over</u>
her mother she dreamt a dream</p> <p>6. Three nights she dreamt <u>the very same</u> dream
then unto <u>her husband did say</u>
I <u>will have thee</u> rise instantly
and with <u>thee</u> take <u>thy spade</u></p> <p>7. <u>Thy</u> neighbour with his <u>pick-axe</u>
<u>shall</u> bear <u>thee</u> company
To the fer corner of Red Barn
<u>my daughter there you'll find</u></p> <p>8. <u>They straightway went</u> to the Red Barn</p> |
|--|--|

to the corner they were told,
The same spot the mother dream'd
they raised the floor and mould,

to the place where they'd been told
And with their spade and peck-axe
they raised the floor and mould

16. When they had dug eighteen inches deep,
the body there they found,
Tied in a sack, and mangled
with many a ghastly wound.

9. And when they'd dug seven inches deep
the body there they found
Tied in a sack and mangel-ed
with many a ghastly wound.

17. Her shawl, her bonnet, and pelisse
in the grave were found,
That eleven months had been
buried under ground

18. Soon as they were discovered
they were identified
To be Maria Marten's when
she left home to be a bride.

19. A warrant soon was issued out
against the farmer's son,
Who had married a Lady near
the City of London,

20. He soon was apprehended
and placed in a dreary cell,
For murdering the young girl
who loved him so well.

21. And when his trial did come on
he at the Bar did stand,
Like a guilty criminal
waiting the judge's command,

22. The judge then passing sentence,
made him this reply,
You're guilty of the Murder,
so prepare yourself to die.

23. You must prepare yourself to die
on Monday on the tree,
When hung the usual time thereon
dissected you must be,

24. And when you bid the world farewell,
 prepared may you be,
 To dwell with Christ our Saviour,
 that died upon a tree.

The broadside here has been presented as “double” ballad stanzas, which is how it was printed (if in long lines), but as always it was designed to be sung, as Freda Palmer sings it, to a rounded melody that encompasses the verbal equivalent of a single ballad stanza. The difference has had a limited but interesting impact on the wording in that an instance of grammatical continuity between stanzas within a double stanza has been reformulated to give, as normal in song tradition, a correspondence between the verbal and musical elements, that is with each stanza as a complete sense-unit:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>9. Mother! I am going to the Red Barn
 to meet my William dear
 His friends won't know me on the road,
 and when I do get there</p> | <p>3. Oh mother I'm going to the Red Barn
 to meet my William dear
 His friends won't know me as I am
 nor when I shall get there [.]</p> |
| <p>10. I'll put on my wedding robes,
 then we shall haste away,
 To Ipswich Town, to-morrow is fixed
 for our wedding day.</p> | <p>4. I will put on my wedding gownd
 and we will haste away
 To Islip town tomorrow is fixed
 <i>all for</i> our wedding day.</p> |

In the line of memoral tradition of which this performance by Freda Palmer is the culmination,¹⁷ the song has manifestly been subjected to the ruthless excision of material proving inessential, the narrative effectively reduced to its basic, stark essentials: decomposed to the bare bones. We have lost the characteristic broadside *incipit* calling for attention (broadside stanza 1) and characterizing the sensational but authentic character of the story (broadside stanza 2), together with the opening setting of the scene (specifying the location; introducing the protagonists). The events are detached from their historical location and could almost be happening anywhere: this is only marginally if at all compromised by a passing reference to the lovers' supposed destination, which replaces the original Suffolk Ipswich (broadside stanza 10.3) with the similar-sounding Oxfordshire Islip (Palmer stanza 4.3), close to the home town of the singer. We are left to infer that the damsel was “fair,” and will not be told until later that her lover was “a farmer's son,” while it remains significant that he was “dear” to her (Palmer stanza 3.2); meanwhile the lovers are reduced from specific, historical individuals with surnames to the generic boy and girl,

¹⁷ Discussion of Freda Palmer's version has hitherto been confused by the assumption it is derived from the quite distinct “The Murder of Maria Marten,” for example by Mike Yates in his notes to the published CD (Yates 2002) and in Fred McCormick's review of it, who by way of illustration of the changes “the ‘corrupting’ processes of oral tradition have wrought . . . to many . . . ballads on the disc” comments that “between creation and collection strange things have happened to Freda Palmer's *Maria Marten*” (McCormick 1999:3).

“Maria” and “William.”

Of the central narrative we have even lost their affair and its consequences: it is perhaps sufficiently implied by the revelation that the girl is going to her wedding, but surreptitiously (sts. 3-4). The memorial version opens instead with what this tradition has evidently selected as one of the song’s core scenes—the departure of the girl from her home in a manner that prompts her mother’s concern (Palmer sts. 1-4: note that the broadside’s earlier stanza on courtship, broadside stanza 4, is retained but is now the last stanza, Palmer stanza 10, of the song). That this scene takes the form of a one-on-one confrontation (there is no sign of the lover or the father) in dialogue is largely due to the broadside author. But it will be noticed that in tradition the balance of question and answer has acquired a small but measurable verbal reinforcement with the parallel openings of the two speeches:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 8. My daughter why disguise yourself, | 2. <u>Oh daughter</u> why dost thou disguise thyself |
| 9. Mother! I am going to the Red Barn | 3. <u>Oh mother</u> I’m going to the Red Barn |

The exchange has also replaced some of the original formulations with more traditional song-idiom: “pray tell it unto me” (Palmer 2.2) and “all for our wedding day” (4.4).

The broadside’s already ballad-like leap to the next scene is made more so by the omission of a stanza summarizing the mother’s dream. Here too traditional narrative efficiency seems to be at work: we do not need to be told what she dreamt since its subject is effectively determined by what went before, and its import is more than adequately implied by the instruction to dig in the barn. Verbally, as a result of the omission, we get the kind of intense repetition characteristic of folksong aesthetic: “her mother she dreamt a dream / Three nights she dreamt the very same dream” (Palmer 5.4-6.1)—again with some reformulation into traditional phraseology (“the very same . . .”).

The song has now moved into its second scene, in which the mother instructs the father where to look for the body, and (following the broadside) proceeds directly to the sequel, in which the body is discovered. And here the song ends: tradition (in which the other memorial versions concur) is emphatically indifferent to the judicial aftermath of identifying the body, arresting the culprit, the trial, and the judge’s moral admonitions: our last image is of the girl’s body, the horror savored in the extended “mangel-ed” of Freda Palmer’s penultimate line.

The scenes that are retained, and the way they are formulated, now comprise a complex of sequences and balances—some, as my annotations indicate, reinforced by verbal repetition—that together amount to what I would hail as a triumph of vernacular aesthetic: “aesthetic” because the text is as complexly structured as a sonnet; “vernacular” because the structure has been achieved not by the artistic skills of a particular author but through the necessity of

achieving a given aim (telling a story) under given circumstances (singing from memory).¹⁸

In terms of time the nine stanzas of the song comprising the narrative resolve themselves into two equal sections of 4½ stanzas, balancing around that eleven-month gap between Maria's departure (ending in the second line of stanza 5) and the mother's dream about the body (beginning at the third line of stanza 5). The balance between these sections is supported by thematic images that were present in the broadside, but that now acquire a greater prominence and take on a more structural role. The first scene (as defined by the time-sequence) anticipates Maria leaving the Red Barn with her lover (on her way to her wedding); the second anticipates her leaving the Red Barn with her father (on her way to her funeral). The first scene is dominated by the mother's conversation with Maria, about Maria's going to the Red Barn; the second scene by the mother's conversation with her husband, about his going to the Red Barn, and here the balance is reinforced by verbal repetition that is limited but nonetheless stronger than in the original (and each of these is the fourth line of its respective scene):

7.4 her mother then did say,

1.4 and her mother to her did say

13.2 then to the father said,

6.2 then unto her husband did say

In terms of persons and place these same nine stanzas comprise three sections, steadily shortening in length: four stanzas where mother and daughter are together at home (sts. 1-4); three stanzas where the daughter is in the Red Barn and the mother, at home, dreams of her (sts. 5-7); and two stanzas where the daughter is in the Red Barn and her father finds her there (sts. 8-9). These too are more emphatically linked conceptually, the link reinforced by verbal repetition achieved through internal contamination. The first and third scenes (as defined from this perspective) are linked by the moves to the Red Barn of, respectively, the daughter and the father, the link now emphasized by more closely parallel formulation:

11.1 She straight went to the Red Barn,

5.1 She straightway went to the Red Barn

15.1 They went to the Red Barn,

8.1 They straightway went to the Red Barn

The first and second scenes are balanced, as we have already seen from the time perspective, by the parallel speeches of the mother to, respectively, her husband and daughter; while the second and third scenes (respectively, mother with husband; husband with daughter) are closer in the song than in the broadside thanks partly to the reappearance (resulting from the total reformulation of a line) of the spade and pickaxe and the verbal contamination that produces the balance between:

¹⁸ Among the more formal features of this aesthetic, the generation of repetition patterns will be discussed in what follows. It would take a more substantial and statistically based investigation to determine to what degree the memorial version of the song has acquired ballad formulas (and whether they differ from the verbal commonplaces already noted in the broadside); the following phrases, however, seem to have more of folksong idiom about them than the original formulations: "Pray tell it unto me" (stanza 2.2, vs. "I Pray tell unto me"); "All for our wedding day" (4.4, vs. "for our wedding day"); ". . . the very same dream" (6.1, vs. "the same dream").

14.4 where our daughter does lie,

7.4 my daughter there you'll find

16.2 the body there they found,

9.2 the body there they found

There have also been some interesting changes in content, as well as form and formulation. Published as a song about a man executed for killing a girl, thanks not least to the dropping of the judicial aftermath, in which the lover naturally usurps the role of protagonist, it is now emphatically a song about mother and daughter. And this feminizing of the narrative is reinforced by (and may, conversely, explain) the shift in the stanza describing Maria (Palmer stanza 10):

This damsel caused many young men
to court her as you'll find
Till at length upon a farmer's son
this damsel fixed her mind.

Originally part of the setting of the scene (broadside stanza 4), it is now the last stanza of all (Palmer stanza 10), ensuring that at the close it is emphatically Maria who remains, or returns to, the center of attention—and attention perhaps intensified by the repetition of “this damsel” (Palmer stanza 10.1 and 10.4) generated by internal contamination out of its one occurrence in the broadside (stanza 4.4). Maria’s main competitor as protagonist is now no longer William but her mother: the latter takes anxious leave of the living girl and will next see her dead and “mangled with many a ghastly wound,” the two moments linked by her dream, which is triggered by the first and premonitory of the second. It is also striking that the broadside mother’s humble request to the husband to search the barn, “I beg you will rise instantly,” has in tradition become the peremptory “*I will have thee* rise instantly,” and is addressed to a man whose status is shifted from “the father” (with an implied independent relationship to Maria) to “her husband” (with a merely auxiliary relationship to Maria). Accordingly, in the barn he will no longer find “our daughter” but “*my* daughter.” Singers are unlikely to have known that the historical Mrs. Marten was actually Maria’s stepmother, but this fact emphasizes the distance traveled by the song to reach the intensity of the relationship in Freda Palmer’s version.

This may well reflect the impact on the song of a tradition that was not merely memorial but a woman’s tradition, Freda Palmer having learned many of her songs as a girl from an aunt whom she helped making gloves (Yates 2001:5).¹⁹ It may or may not be proper to suggest that the noticeable emphasis on clothing has a similar explanation, but Maria’s dress also establishes a thematic balance between the two core moments in the song’s handling of the narrative: Maria takes leave of her mother “dressed all in men’s clothes” (Palmer stanza 1.1), anticipating that she will “put on my wedding gown” (stanza 4.1), only to be found by her father, “tied in a sack” (stanza 9.3). The men are merely the agents who effect the transitions, but in a significant

¹⁹ In the version recorded from a male singer, George Digweed, in 1906, the mother, speaking to her husband, refers to Maria as “*your* daughter.” London, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, English Folk Dance and Song Society, Gardiner MSS., H214.

pattern: ostensibly on her way to be married, the girl is taken to the barn (living) by her lover, and brought back (dead) by her father, a poignant reversal of their respective roles in the traditional wedding processions in which the girl is taken to the church (single) by her father and brought back (married) by her lover. Much of this dynamic is present in the broadside but embedded amidst other information: memoral tradition, by decomposing the other material, has brought this thematic pattern into prominence.²⁰

This song provides a rare opportunity within English song tradition of following the trajectory of a narrative from prose journalism, through verses written and published for singing, to a song orally performed from memory, and almost certainly passed on from voice to ear by a sequence of several singers in the interim. The changes are not haphazard, and the decomposition to which the singers subject the song is not necessarily destructive: the result is not without its aesthetic qualities. Indeed, while “The Suffolk Tragedy” as originally composed conforms very much to the image of sensational journalism-in-song in opposition to which Francis James Child evidently defined his “popular” ballads, it is very likely that had he encountered Freda Palmer’s performance (especially if unaware of its origins), he might well have been tempted to include this “Fair Mary and Sweet William” in his collection, for it has many of the qualities associated with the Child ballad. And most of those features can be shown, with an unusual degree of certainty, to be a result of the impact of memoral tradition on the song.²¹

These results cannot of course be transferred wholesale and unreservedly to earlier periods, but it is striking that the discursive mode that emerges in “The Suffolk Tragedy” in memoral tradition also characterizes early ballads such as “St. Stephen and Herod” and “Judas.” In contextual terms the later middle ages displayed a similar amalgam of textual and memoral traditions of popular narrative, if with manuscript in the role of the broadside, and some of the insights achieved here might also be relevant in a general way to other genres of performed, stanzaic narrative, say the tail-rhyme romances, be it with regard to the impact of performance on the text or the antecedent conversion of narrative into the text to be performed. The fifteenth-century chronicler, Jean Froissart, has left us a revealing diatribe against “jongleurs and marketplace entertainers” who have “sung and rhymed the wars of Britain,” suggesting that both processes were in his mind: in contrast to his—reliable, prose—account, these others have “corrupted the just and true story with their songs and contrived rhymes” (Froissart 1869-88:ii, 265; trans. Coleman 2005:33, in the context of a discussion with several points of connection to the present study). Narratives of English battles (if more often against the Scots than the French) loom large among the early English ballads, and the results of the present study and its

²⁰ There are some changes in Freda Palmer’s version compared to the original broadside that are not germane to the present context, but nonetheless interesting. Changing the date of Maria’s disappearance from “nineteenth day of May” (broadside stanza 7.2) to “the ninth day of June” at the expense of spoiling the rhyme with “did say,” has no immediately discernible motivation. Equally unexplained is the discovery of the body when the men had dug “seven inches deep” (song stanza 9.1) as opposed to the “eighteen inches” of the original, but interestingly the depth was “corrected” to eighteen inches when Freda Palmer sang the song for Steve Roud in 1978 (personal communication).

²¹ This is very much in accordance with the thesis of Tristram P. Coffin (1961) that narrative songs acquire ballad qualities in the course of memoral tradition. The other versions of “The Suffolk Tragedy” recorded from tradition, that of George Digweed mentioned earlier, and that of Australian singer Sally Sloane (Fahey 2004), may take the song further towards the “emotional core” he postulates as the final culmination of these processes.

antecedents might invite speculation that narrative songs were not composed with their balladesque features but acquired them over time, as and to the extent that they were subjected to the decomposing effects of memorial tradition: similar processes, if from different points of departure (for example, minstrel romances and holy legends), may have produced the earlier traditional ballads that emerged prior to, or at least independently of, the broadside press.²²

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²² I have studied the “balladizing” of a medieval romance (*Sir Eglamour of Artois*) in Pettitt 1982. For what looks like a specific instance of the process in a European tradition, see Putter 2004.

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