

Ballad of the Month

Lamkin (Child #93)

Editor: The gruesome tale of the wronged stonemason entering the castle of the greedy nobleman and extracting his revenge by murdering the nobleman's wife and baby with the help of the nurse is one I've been reluctant to sing. Not being one to shy away from the usual tabloid exploits of the Child ballad, with their rapes, murders, infanticide, and incest, I am at a loss to explain my reluctance.

So it is with pleasure that I welcome Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat's discussion of this ballad. After reading their discussion and hearing Northwest Territory balladeer Moira Cameron sing it, I'm ready to tackle it. Almost.

*It's Lamkin was a mason good
As ever built wi' stane,
He built Lord Wearie's castle
But payment he got nane.
But the nourice was a fause limmer
As e'er hung on a tree;
She laid a plot wi' Lamkin,
Whan her lord was o'er the sea.
She laid a plot wi' Lamkin,
When the servants were awa'
Loot him in at a little shot-window
And brought him to the ha'.
"Oh whare's the lady o' this house
That ca's me Lamkin?"
"She's up in her bower sewing
But we soon can bring her down.
Then Lamkin's ta'en a sharp knife
That hung down by his gair
And he has gien the bonny babe
A deep wound and a sair.
Then Lamkin he rocked,
And the fause nourice sang
Till frae ilka bore o' the cradle
The red blood out sprang.
"Oh still my bairn, nourice,
Oh still him wi' the pap!"
"He winna still, lady,
For this nor for that."
"Oh still my bairn, nourice,
Oh still him wi' the bell!"
"He winna still, lady,
Till ye come down yoursel."
Oh the firsten step she steppit
She steppit on a stane;
But the neisten step she steppit
She met him — Lamkin.
"Oh sall I kill her, nourice,
Or sall I lat her be?"
"Oh kill her, kill her, Lamkin'
For she ne'er was good to me."*

"Oh scour the bason, nourice,
 And mak' it fair and clean,
 For to keep this lady's heart's blood,
 For she's come o' noble kin."
 "There need nae bason, Lamkin,
 Lat it run through the floor;
 What better is the heart's blood
 O' the rich than o' the poor?"
 But ere three months were at an end,
 Lord Wearie came again;
 "Oh, wha's blood is this" he says,
 "That lies in my hame?"
 "Oh, wha's blood," says Lord Wearie,
 "Is this on my ha'?"
 "It is your young son's heart's blood,
 It's the clearest ava'."
 Oh sweetly sang the blackbird
 That sat upon the tree;
 But sairer grat Lannkin,
 When he was condemned to dee.
 And bonny sang the mavis,
 Oot o' the thorny brake;
 But sairer grat the nourice,
 When she was burnt at the stake.

Tune: Traditional Ballad Airs by W. Christie (1876)

Lamkin, "The Terror of Countless Nurseries"

Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat

This paper is an attempt to come to terms with a ballad unique in its often motiveless brutality.¹ In an interpretation that speaks to the undoubted popularity of the ballad by addressing the question of its "meaning", we look to the listeners and to the singers to provide significant clues.

We start by drawing a distinction between "origins" and "meanings". A song might at its composition bear one meaning – it might have been made for some purpose later obscured – and yet continue its life bearing other meanings, having to do with the social context in which it finds itself. Given the varied perspectives of later singers and audiences, it might bear or have borne several meanings, both synchronically and diachronically. To distinguish between etiology – the causation of the ballad, and utility – why the ballad is and has

been passed on, William of Ockam's warning – pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate – "multiplicity ought not to be posited without necessity" – should ring in our ears. We shall be addressing the question of the multiplicities of meanings, from leprosy to pacts with the devil, which have been used to explain Lamkin's original meaning.

In this paper, we review other theories as to the etiology and the meaning of the ballad, and argue, predicated on its wide circulation over considerable time, and on its singers and listeners, that it speaks to the issue of abandonment, on the part of both the murdered child and the murdered mother. Further, we suggest a reason for the continued presence (in every variant collected) of the five essential persons: The absent father and the mother, their "dark twins" Lamkin and the false nurse, and the baby.

"Lamkin" appears in Child in twenty-five variants, the earliest dating from a 1775 letter from a Kentish churchman to Bishop Percy, and the latest in Allingham's *The Ballad Book* of 1892. Most of the variants are from Scotland, with a very few from Ireland. "The story is told," Child notes, "without material variation in all the numerous versions. A mason has built a castle for a nobleman, cannot get his pay, and therefore seeks his revenge." Child quotes Motherwell as saying "it seems questionable how some Scottish lairds could well afford to get themselves seated in the large castles they once occupied unless they occasionally treated the mason after the fashion adopted in this ballad." Child disagrees with Motherwell's notion that the mason's name was Lambert Linkin, and suggests that the name Lambkin "was a sobriquet applied in derision of the meekness with which the builder had submitted to his injury." He closes his relatively short and somewhat uninterested head note with the fruitful statement that Lambkin's name was a "simply ironical designation for the bloody mason, the terror of countless nurseries".ⁱⁱ We shall return to this statement later. It is to be noted that fourteen of the sixteen identifiable texts from informants were taken from the singing of women.

Bertrand Bronsonⁱⁱⁱ finds forty-five tunes, which he organizes into thirty-three variants. The earliest is from Virginia in 1914 and the latest from Arkansas in 1941. He also records tunes from

i Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-1898, 10 parts in 5 vols.; rpt. New York:

Dover, 1965), Vol II, 320-342: additions & corrections, III, 515; IV, 480-1; V, 229-231; 295-6

ii Child, Vol II, 321

Newfoundland (four collected in the 'thirties) and six from England in the period 1896-1911. Given that most of Child's sets derived from Scotland, it is interesting that Bronson only reports two Scottish tunes^v. Again, be it noted that of the thirty-five tunes, twenty-three are noted as sung by women and eight by men. Coffin and Renwick report a total of forty-five North American texts^v.

The ballad was first given serious study by Annie G. Gilchrist in 1932.^{vi} In her "Lamkin: A Study in Evolution", she posits two forms of the ballad, which she titles "The Wronged Mason" and "The Border Ruffian". She proposes that the first form is Scottish and the second Northumbrian, and that they are distinguished by the presence or absence of the identification of the motive for the murder he and his accomplice commit.

In the Scottish tradition, she identifies Balwearie Castle as a possible site, but argues that whether or not there was any connection between it and the ballad, it seems to her "probable" that the ballad has an historical foundation. She argues that the Scottish form is "the undoubtedly older and completer form"^{vi}, the Northumbrian version differing only in that the murder motive is missing. There are thus problems for the singer of the latter version in finding other motives for the murders. She discusses such possible motives as robbery, or the jealousy of Lamkin as a spurned lover of the lady.

Having decided that the Scottish is the real form of the ballad, and that the Northumbrian version is an incomplete version of it, she turns her attention to the villain's name, which she argues is Flemish in origin. She finds that there were "former colonies of Flemings" at Balwearie, Fife, and reports that the "dule-tree" on which Lamkin was hanged "used to be pointed out". She appears

to presume that there is only one meaning, the original meaning, to the ballad.

Bertrand Bronson reports much of the above in his head note. He argues that it is "highly probable, on Miss Gilchrist's showing, that... the secondary variety is a north-country offshoot arising from the loss of the first stanza", and that, with this loss, "deterioration as once begins to eat into the ballad from this side and that." He finds (it seems to us) no great distinction, as between the two forms of the ballad, in the tunes associated with the texts.

It was not until 1977 that a re-examination of the ballad was attempted, in spite of MacEdward Leach's comment that "this ballad needs detailed study"^{viii} when John DeWitt Niles' "Lamkin: The Motivation of Horror" appeared.^{ix} Again searching for original meaning, Niles' very thorough study led him to suppose that no singer in the last two hundred years of its recorded history "might have understood (it) fully." Niles, like Gilchrist, assumes here that the "original meaning" is the "true" or "only" meaning.

He begins his analysis by a comparison of the two types identified by Gilchrist, and a close reading of the Jamieson text^x, from the lips of the celebrated Mrs. (Anna) Brown^{xi}. He notes how her version is distinguished from all others in three particulars: the three-stanza dialogue between Lord Wearie and Lamkin over the former's inability to pay the latter what he owes him; the nurse's urging on of Lamkin in the killing of the lady, with the inflammatory "What better is the heart's blood/o the rich than o the poor?" and the two-stanza ending beginning "O sweetly sang the black-bird/that sat upon the tree". He takes these as examples of Mrs. Brown's skill and ability, and evidence that she "did not hesitate to improve upon the raw materials of oral tradition".^{xii}

- iii *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads*. 4 vols., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962: Vol. II, 428-445; Addenda, Vol. IV, 479-80
- iv in Christie, *Traditional Ballad Airs*, 1876, Vol I, 60 and a copy in the Blaikie Mss.
- v Coffin, Tristram Potter. *The British Traditional Ballad in North America*. With a Supplement by Roger deV. Renwick. Austin & London: University of Texas Press, 1977, 89-91, 242-3. Coffin identifies four "Story Types", and each predicates the existence of a

- mason. Renwick finds a further type, again with a mason.
- vi *Journal of the English Folk and Dance Society*, Vol. 1 (1932), 1-17
- vii p. 7
- viii *The Ballad Book*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955, 288, quoted by Niles, q.v.
- ix *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 90 (1977), 49-67
- x Robert Jamieson, *Popular Ballads and Songs*. Edinburgh, 1806
- xi This is Child's "A" text.
- xii Quoted by Niles at 52

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