

Patrick Spedding and Paul Watt, General eds.; Ed Cray, David Gregory and Derek B. Scott, Volume eds., *Bawdy Songbooks of the Romantic Period*. 4 vols. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011. Pp. 1952. £350. ISBN 9781848930292.

These four volumes contain over 1,100 song texts, transcribed from songbooks published in the 1830s and '40s. These 'songsters' captured songs performed and circulated across many decades before that – hence the application of the word 'Romantic' to this edition. The use of the period label to describe these saucy songs is partly a poke in the ribs of Romanticism's high poetic seriousness. But also, if a foundational movement of Romanticism across Europe is a self-conscious and democratically inclusive attempt to revalue oral folk cultures, then the collecting of these songs in the 1830s and '40s has to be a constituent of that broader effort. That such songs made it into print shows how powerful was that Romantic impulse to collect and capture otherwise evanescent and momentary cultural forms.

The editors' introductions and supporting apparatus are excellent. All puns, slang, euphemisms, double-entendres, innuendoes, and historical and literary references are explained in precise and necessary detail, making the endnotes an entertaining read in their own right. The overall quality of the presentation and scholarship is exemplary. Pickering and Chatto must also be praised for supporting editors in their pursuit of under-appreciated corners of the Romantic period, yet again. Given the price, university libraries are the only likely audience for these once 'popular songs'. A paperback follow-up would be an ideal next step.

The texts are not always bawdy: they range from the lewd, to the parodic through to the sentimental. Still, the lewd predominates. Not a single hole or protuberance, flap, fold, excrescence or seepage of the Georgian human body is left unridiculed by these mostly anonymously-authored songs. A few choice song titles will illustrate the kinds of content on offer: 'Johnny's Lump', 'Moll Slobbercock', 'Kiss My Duff', 'Cock-eyed Sukey!', 'Mary's Hairy Pouch', 'The Ball Cock', 'The Lady's Wound', 'The Buttered Carrot', 'The Gape Hole', 'Mutton Fresh', 'Mike Hunt', 'The Slap-up Cracksman', and 'The Middle Leg'. Such songs are a testament to the sheer fleshiness and eye-winking knowingness of the Georgian age, and to its raw joy in accent, dialect, slang, pun and put-down. Yet to label these texts with the plain word 'song' is to do a disservice to them; the sub-titles the collectors coin for their wares on their gloriously-composited title pages (emulated lovingly here) reveal the sheer linguistic glee they took in presenting their gaudy wares. These songs are variously introduced as 'Queer Songs', 'Amatory Songs', 'Spreeish Songs', 'Bacchanalian and Double Entendre Songs', 'Laughable Songs', 'Sensitive Songs', 'Sporting Songs', or 'Randy, Roaring, Rousing, Tear-Up, Flare-Up Songs'; we are also to enjoy 'Rum Chaunts', 'Dainty Ditties', 'Mouth-Watering Parodies', 'Rummy Toasts', 'Ticklish Staves', 'lecherous, slap-up tit bits' and finally – my personal favourite – 'Funny Fakements'. There is raucous variety here, even if the primary intention to entertain often makes the songs direct and simple in the delivery. Here's an example of a take on a pastoral setting:

Mounting a Maid

A slap-up parody on '*Mountain Maid*'.

The mountain maid from her bower had hied.
To wash her q—m at the river side,
Where the radiant moon shone clear and bright,
On her latter-end so lilly white;

On a mossy bank lay a sheppard swain,
Who woke his pipe to a tuneful strain,
And so blithely and gay, were the notes he play'd,
That he quickly mounted the mounting maid.

She lay with pleasure quite oppressed,
While he lay close to her panting breast,
'Till he was out of breath they say,
And could, alas! no longer lay;
She took his pipe then in her hand,
Another tune to make him stand,
And so blithely and gay, where the tune he play'd
When he mounted again the mounting maid. (2, 395)

If quite typical of the collection overall, this song is more coy than most. It relies on a central replacement of 'mountain' by 'mounting' – and it takes this poetic slip as far as it can. It is full of the language of serious, stylised poetic feeling, and the only determinedly 'bawdy' elements are few and far between. But of course, the playing on the 'pipe', and its 'standing' – are obvious innuendoes – while the 'q[ui]m' and 'latter end' of the woman are laid bare: the singer dispenses with metaphorical cover for her, while being relatively delicate about the male parts. But once our drunken tittering has faded, such songs are in some ways empty vessels.

One of the central delights these volumes afford, is in presenting sexual terms which are still current nearly two centuries years later. The puns, the obsession with hair and legs, bottoms, breasts and – a dominant focus of course – the erect penis and the welcoming vagina – all carry on today in salacious brutal comedy just as they did in the late-night male supper rooms of the late Romantic period. Of course, for all the 'ass', 'muffs', 'dildoes', 'bollocks', 'boning', 'pricks', and 'cocks', there are many figurations of genitalia and sexual toys which are not at all current now. The volumes constitute a language-historian's treasure trove: Derek B. Scott might have located the earliest occurrence of the word 'randy' (in its common modern sense, 4, xxxi), which seems an apt as a headline for the many other discoveries to be made here.

The alignment of radical and pornographic publications in this period means that the circulation of these songs might have had a political import, in collecting around reform (through the work of William Benbow, for example, who is one among many names the editors provide). Some political expressions were more taboo than pornography; both were often published by the same brave pioneers, who circulated piratical editions of big sellers too (Benbow being a prime example again). But as the bawdy songs are presented here, any politicized purpose is hard to discern. The songs' primary objective is clearly to titillate and entertain rather than to bring the state to its knees. There is always rebellion of a kind in the carnivalesque reversals of comedy, of course. But together these songs do not even mount an attack on normative sexual mores. The songs' genital focus can seem grotesquely restrictive in its hetero-normativity. Any suggestions of homosexuality, for example, are fleeting at best. As Derek B. Scott points out, Mike Hunt's name is, in the end, a pun, and he is not the male lover of Job Halls, as is implied in their eponymous song (4, xxv –xxvi; 115–116). Even the most politically explicit of the songs, as David Gregory writes, only '...reveal a mild oppositional spirit and a certain cynicism or scepticism with regard to the dignity, probity and competence of the governing elite' (3, xxii). The boldness to collect bawdy songs, might only indicate a stale commercial alertness to a salacious male market.

The songs are replete with the scars of the times, though the deliberate and desensitised comedic sensationalism of the songs, means we have to be cautious about how we approach songs such as ‘The Sailor’s Yard’ (2, 138–40), which tells of a sailor who gets much of his penis blown off while ‘engaged with the French’. The hapless Jack Junk takes Morrison’s pills to restore himself to lusty vigour, only to suffer an effect akin to that which surprises the Jack of ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’. The excess growth of Jack Junk’s penis eventually kills him and ‘shook the whole country for fifty miles around’. More concretely, the songs offer rich pickings for historians in search of details of life in London – specific streets, parks, pubs, and singing and drinking venues are named – alongside occasional appearances of technologies like electricity, steam and macadamized roads – while famous figures of the musical stage are constantly nodded to.

Reading so many songs in search of the same goal, means the laughs inevitably stop, but so might scholarly curiosity. Women are being picked apart here, the meat of their flesh hacked into – and it is indicative that there are a good number of songs set in butcher’s shops, with mutton, beef and pork put to constant euphemistical work. Even in the songs in which men are ridiculed and women momentarily empowered, it is always apparent that we are being sung to by men, and as an assumed audience of privileged supper-club men, a characteristic the editors point out. This all-male culture means that the exposed female body is the central spectacle we are enjoined to leer at and laugh about; there is also a lot of sniggering at working-class culture, at rustic accents, at the desperation of the poor and uneducated, the naïve and morally corruptible.

Such material tells us something in the extreme, in the chiaroscuro light of male arousal, in the garish excess of display, in the lusty, beer- and gin-fuelled urban song culture that even its participants couldn’t recall much of the following morning. To try to dig through the garish abrasiveness, to find identities and commentaries on culture and society from the slick wit and prattle of these anonymously-written songs, is to risk forgetting what puerile, ill-thought-out prejudicial slop such cultural forms are sometimes made of. There are certainly jewels here, but to find them a lot of frogs have to be kissed. Nevertheless, these resilient, tenacious editors have done a fine and important job in opening the door on a dank, dark corner of the early nineteenth century that many scholars will not know even existed.

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