

# Lamkin, “The Terror of Countless Nurseries”

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This paper is an attempt to come to terms with a ballad unique in its often motiveless brutality.<sup>1</sup> 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 Ockham’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 1865. 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”.<sup>2</sup> 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 Bronson<sup>3</sup> finds thirty-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 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<sup>4</sup>. 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<sup>5</sup>.

The ballad was first given serious study by Annie G. Gilchrist in 1932.<sup>6</sup> In her “‘Lambkin’: 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 a historical foundation. She argues that the Scottish form is “the undoubtedly older and completer form”<sup>7</sup>, 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 Lambkin 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 at 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",<sup>8</sup> when John DeWitt Niles' "*Lamkin: The Motivation of Horror*" appeared.<sup>9</sup> 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<sup>10</sup>, from the lips of the celebrated Mrs. (Anna) Brown<sup>11</sup>. He notes how her version is distinguished from all others in three particulars: the three-stanza dialogue between Lord Wearie and Lambkin 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".<sup>12</sup>

The centre of his argument is that the murders, in Flanders' words,<sup>13</sup> "seem rather extreme as retaliation for failure to pay a debt." He discusses

Phillips Barry's idea that "the Linnfinn", as one informant named the central character, is a cast-out leper, and that the lady's blood caught in a silver bowl is a sure cure for this disease.<sup>14</sup> He discusses MacEdward Leach's notion, based upon the similarity between "Lord Wearie" and the "Wearie's Well", mentioned in some texts of "Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight", that the lady has been abducted by her demon lover – Lord Wearie himself – and that Lambkin kills the lady, his former wife, for it.<sup>15</sup> Niles mentions, too, the suggestion proposed by Ninon Leader that the blood is necessary for the proper securing of the foundations of the castle, and that the "fee" Lamkin was tricked out of was actually the blood of the mason's wife or baby: the killing is thus a revenge killing of the equivalent.<sup>16</sup>

Niles' own view is briefly stated. There has been a deal between the owner of the castle and the devil himself, whose help was sought and provided, in return for a sacrifice, which was not made. "One day when the lord was away, the stranger made his way into the castle and claimed the lives which he had been promised. When the lord returned home, he discovered how his attempt to cheat the stranger had ended in the deaths of his own wife and child." Like Gilchrist and Niles before him, he too does not discuss the possibility of several meanings.

The most recent study of the ballad is that of Gammon and Stallybrass.<sup>17</sup> Their "Structure and Ideology in the Ballad: An Analysis of 'Long Lankin'" is a thought-provoking and richly perceptive but ultimately confusing paper, based in part on a structural analysis which generates the binary oppositions of Lord/Lady and Lamkin/Nurse and Lord/Lamkin and Lady/Nurse (and ultimately, Culture/Nature), and in part on a linguistic appreciation of various salient and repeating turns (such as the ".in" ending in Lamkin, basin, kin, pin, etc.). They suggest that the ballad is "... among other things, an essay in the ideology of patriarchal society: women are weak (whether false or fair): men are strong (whether evil or good)"<sup>18</sup> and connect the structure of the ballad with the structure of patriarchy itself: "The text is a working upon the self-contradictory demands of patriarchy. For the demand is to uphold the patriarchal household even though that very household is founded upon the dissolution of another patriarchal household."<sup>19</sup>

Where their thesis differs from all the preceding ones is in the question of meaning. The structuralist approach they use suggests that the drama of

the song is, as it were, embedded in the culture; that what freight the ballad carried in previous ages is still now carried, because of the continued patriarchal social base. They thus have no need to predicate social behaviours, which, if once known, are not now known (the utility of an innocent's blood to either cure leprosy or to secure the foundations of a building, the likelihood of being kidnapped by the fairy folk, etc.).

In order to come to a deeper understanding of the "meaning" of a ballad, it is necessary, we think, to look at who sang it and to/with whom. Though it is a commonplace that ballads were passed on by women rather than men, it is astounding to think that this ballad in particular was thus transmitted. What might a woman possibly see or hear in such a song? Why would a song speaking so strongly to the vulnerability of women and children be so widely remembered? Devoid of humour, gallantry, and love, it seems to speak to the worst fears of women, and to offer them, not safety or rescue but inexorable death, of themselves and of their baby. The inexorability of the murders provides the clue. We are here, as in many of the ballads, in a landscape of fairy story. Many informants reported that they learned the song as a child, from a mother, a loved aunt, or a servant. That Mrs. Brown and so many other singers remembered and passed on ballads such as this that they heard when they were little suggests that there is something in the ballads that speaks particularly to children. We would argue that this "something" is a landscape similar to that of the Grimm's tales: timeless, ahistorical, moral and archetypal. To a child, whose minimal life experiences offer little referents, this is an ideal landscape through which to make sense of the world.<sup>20</sup>

In ballads, the rhythm of the words, the simplicity of the story, the marriage of tune and tale and the absence of psychological complications provide a language that a child can readily absorb. The violence, rather than repelling a child, adds to a ballad's appeal, and child psychologists such as Bettelheim speak out against the expurgation of the violence in fairy tales. They argue that children have real fears, which, purged from fairy tales, makes them ineffective; more, there is the implication that children's fears are not real.

What are these fears of children that the fairy tale (and, we would argue, this ballad) addresses? The first trauma of infancy is separation from mother, and we propose that it is precisely the fear of abandonment that gives the "Lamkin" ballad such

power. To recapitulate the story from the point of view of a child listener: it is night-time. You are in bed, yet a terrifying force you do not recognize or understand attacks you. It comes from the dark outside. Your father is away and cannot help or protect you. Your mother is upstairs and does not respond to your cries. The person whose job it is to look after you has betrayed you.

This is the stuff of the child's worst fears: abandonment by the caregivers. And how does the ballad help deal with these fears? Firstly, in typical ballad style, it simply states the facts, and lets the listeners draw what conclusion they may. The conclusions drawn will change over time, but the ballad is thus still relevant. It encourages divergent, rather than convergent, reflection or thinking. Secondly, it happens to someone else: a child, yes, but a child in a cold castle, a long time ago (the same distancing as is caught up in "once upon a time"). Third, and most importantly, the ballad deals with the fears by projecting the anger at the absent ones onto two strangers, Lamkin (a good name for a stuffed toy, perhaps?) and a nurse. In some versions, notably Mrs. Brown's, these two stand-ins for the absent parents go through an obscene parody of child care – "Then Lamkin he rocked, and the false nourice sang, /till frae ilkae bore o the cradle the red blood out sprang." This is Lamkin, "the terror of countless nurseries".

But if the song speaks to the child's deepest fears, of being abandoned, does it not also speak to the fears of the mother? The child wants to hear it, because in hearing it, it can rehearse and play through again the pain of abandonment, and can begin to strategize how it can live by itself, how it can be separated from its mother. But what of the mother's fears? Why would a mother or a mother-substitute want to sing the song, which so cruelly denounces her as a weak and uncaring caregiver? We remember that for every listener there is a singer.

To recapitulate the story from the point of view of the mother: it is night-time. You are in bed, and you are woken by the cries of your baby, downstairs. Your husband, before he left, warned you of danger. You are in *his* house, without friends close by. Perhaps the baby is your first, and you are just recently married. Quite who your husband is, and how his house "works" you do not know. The nurse, who is not your friend, cannot or will not help you. She has contempt for you. You feel helpless: if the nurse does not know what to do for a crying baby,<sup>21</sup> what can *you* do? And if the nurse

is a mother surrogate, the mother tells *herself* not to wake up. You are friendless in a cold, dark house. You are frightened to come down the stairs in the dark.

The mother, too, has, to use today's language, "abandonment issues". Short years ago, she was herself a child, feeling the same fears. The fear of abandonment does not magically disappear when you are a "grownup"; similarly, when you bear a child, you are not magically given skills to raise it. The song thus functions for the mother in much the same way as for the child: it brings the fears (in this case, both abandonment and helplessness) into consciousness and allows them to be met and perhaps overcome.<sup>22</sup> Langlois, in an important article on horror stories told by mothers to mothers, addresses these fears, which she typifies as "the dreadful anxiety for the lives of their children that is one of the most difficult aspects of parenting."<sup>23</sup>

We want to propose that this is what "Lamkin" is about, its "meaning" for those who sang it and heard it over the years: abandonment, and the consequent unknown.

If we now reconsider Gilchrist's arguments, we note that she argues in favour of one ballad, with one meaning, in two forms, the second being an inferior (because incomplete) recollection of the first. She takes the ballad to be historical and, as it were, "profane". Its meaning, for it has only one, lies entirely on the surface. A mason is unpaid – he exacts vengeance on the family of his oppressor. What could be simpler?

But if we ask ourselves what were the effects of the loss of the motive (the opening verse or verses) we can only say that they have *improved* the ballad, giving it a darker flavour and taking away any simplistic moral.<sup>24</sup> If it is important that the song have a motive, is it conceivable that the motive could have been forgotten without the song itself falling into desuetude? If it is not important that the song have a motive, then why the search for a "forgotten" motive? We agree with Gammon and Stallybrass when they note that "lapses of memory are *motivated*" and that "we need to examine *which* passages are forgotten and *why* they are."<sup>25</sup> It is our view that the verse or verses regarding the mason are as much likely to be "add-ons", appended by an adult with a need for a motive, a "rationalizer", in Long's terminology.<sup>26</sup>

What can be said of Gilchrist can *a fortiori* be said of Niles (a deal with the devil), Leach (abduction

by the fairies), Barry (leprosy cure) and Leader (good foundations for a castle). The song is transformed; what was once open-ended, divergent, and capable of many meanings, now becomes convergent, rational, and causative (Why? Because...). With each of these theories, the child is, as it were, forgotten (except as an "innocent bystander"), and the "meaning" of the ballad is to be found in a relationship between two men before the incipit. The ballad now makes rational sense, but it is not the same ballad; and we have had to predicate, *pace* William of Ockham, all sorts of multiplicities, multiplicities that are not necessary. But the stronger argument might be that whatever the truth of these theories, none of them is explanatory – none of them, that is, explains why the ballad maintained its popularity over the centuries. And if, as we suspect, the landscape of this ballad is a fairytale landscape, then the search for the name of the mason or for "Lord Wearie's Castle" is as pointless as a search in shire records for Hansel and Gretel's parents.

As stated above, we believe that for generations of singers and listeners, "Lamkin" was about separation and abandonment.<sup>27</sup> It has spoken to these generations because everyone has experienced abandonment. Abandonment is always painful, whether it is the withdrawal of care by neglectful parents or simply the necessary separation of parent from child and child from parent. Abandonment is part of growing up. "Lamkin", at face value a titillating murder story, is actually a poetic and metaphoric vehicle through which to negotiate the pain of abandonment.

Through the ballad, we can embrace the frightened child within all of us:

Almost everywhere we find the effort...to rid ourselves...of the child within us -- i.e., the weak helpless, dependent creature -- in order to become an independent, competent adult deserving of respect. When we reencounter this creature in our children, we persecute it with the same measures once used on ourselves.<sup>28</sup>

"Lamkin" presents us with the "weak, helpless, dependent creature" we all once were and gives us the opportunity to accept and perhaps transcend it.

The abandonment of the child by the parent -- the first and likely most painful abandonment -- can arouse feelings of rage in the child. However, the culture teaches us to "honour thy father and thy mother". But the Fourth Commandment teaches that children must not hate their parents:

[T]his...message...has been drummed into them from early childhood; they *cannot* hate [their father] either, if they must fear losing his love as a result; finally, they do not even *want* to hate him, because they love him.<sup>29</sup>

By presenting the “false parents”, Lamkin and the nurse, as the villains, “Lamkin” provides a safe vessel for the pain and rage of abandonment. Singers and listeners can feel rage without guilt against Lamkin and the nurse and revel in their deaths at the end of the ballad.

As Gammon and Stallybrass so perceptively acknowledge,<sup>30</sup> the last verse or verses, of Lamkin and the false nurse being killed, represent a shift to a mythic level. Lamkin and the nurse will be killed again and again, and cannot ever be finally done away with. The dark out of which they eternally come is an interior darkness in each of us, the unknown contents of our own subconscious.

## Notes

- 1 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
- 2 Child, Vol II, 321
- 3 *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads*. 4 vols., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962: Vol. II, 428-445: Addenda, Vol. IV, 479-80
- 4 Christie, *Traditional Ballad Airs*, 1876, Vol I, 60 and a copy in the Blaikie Mss.
- 5 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.
- 6 *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, Vol. 1 (1932), 1-17
- 7 *Ibid*, 7
- 8 *The Ballad Book*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955, 288, quoted by Niles, q.v.
- 9 *Journal of American Folklore*, 90 (1977), 49-67
- 10 Robert Jamieson, *Popular Ballads and Songs*. Edinburgh, 1806
- 11 This is Child’s “A” text.
- 12 Quoted by Niles, 52
- 13 Helen Hartness Flanders, *Ancient Ballads Traditionally Sung in New England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961, II, 296

14 Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, “Two Maine Texts of ‘Lamkin’, *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Vol. 52 (1939), 70-74

15 *The Ballad Book*, 288

16 Ninon Leader, *Classical Hungarian Ballads and Their Folklore* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, Appendix, 348-9, quoted in Niles, 57

17 *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*, XXVI, No. 1 (Winter, 1984), 1-20; hereafter Gammon)

18 Gammon, 13

19 Gammon, 15

20 Many psychologists have made this point, notably Bruno Bettelheim in his *The Uses of Enchantment*. Be it noted, however, that the Grimms edited many of their texts, suppressing some themes (e.g. pregnancy) and adding others.

21 How well we recall our first baby waking at night and crying, and the sense of ignorance and helplessness!

22 The suppression or the silence in some versions of what happens to the lady after Lamkin catches her in his arms makes sense if the singer imagines herself to be the lady: the attack is too close to home and too difficult to project. Gammon notes that this verse (frequently, “... here’s blood in the kitchen, here’s blood in the hall...”) is added (without editorial note or comment) by A.L. Lloyd and Vaughan Williams in *The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd., 1959, 60-61 to Sister Emma’s text, collected by Sharp in 1909.

23 Janet E. Langlois, “Mothers’ Double Talk” in Joan Newton Radner, ed., *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993, 80-97. We are grateful to Pauline Greenhill for bringing this article, amongst others, to our attention.

24 With a rational explanation, the crime in the ballad becomes preventable (pay your mason), and thus loses much of its potency.

25 Gammon, 1

26 It is Gammon & Stallybrass’ view (with which we concur) that Mrs. Brown herself is the author of these verses; they note that “The A text seems to be a striking example of the literary mind at work on oral culture, filling in the ‘gaps’ of the narrative with the kind of social-psychological explanation that is so striking a feature of the realist novel. “ 6. See above at footnote 9 for Niles’ view of Mrs. Brown’s creative abilities.

27 We would argue, also, that these generations, *contra* Niles, “understood [the ballad] fully”, albeit unconsciously.

28 Miller, Alice. *For Your Own Good: Hidden cruelty in child-rearing and the roots of violence*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1990, 58  
29 Miller, 118  
30 Gammon, 12

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### Bill Sarjeant Remembered

It was about a year ago that Bill and I were together in Saint Paul. He had come in on a conference, and not knowing where to stay, was booked into this truckers' hotel out in the industrial section of the city. It was the kind of hotel that had a lobby about the size of a phone booth and lots of guys and ladies dressed in black with long silver chains on their wallets.

We went bookstore shopping, as we were wont to do when Bill came through. We went out to dinner, we drove around. I remember Bill loved to go birding and as we drove he would point out the bird names to me with just a quick reference to his bird guide. "Oh, that's a Brown Thrush of course", and we'd continue on. We got lost that day, driving all over half the state of Minnesota it seemed, and Bill was happy as could be. At the last bookstore we stopped at, Bill bought his usual 30 volumes, I bought one slim one, and he left his airline ticket in the store, and had all sorts of trouble getting home. I later retrieved the ticket and mailed it to him, but knowing the airlines, Bill is gone, and their check is in the mail.

It was always an adventure with Bill, and I don't know him half as well as you do. He befriended me on the road when I was doing a lot of touring in Canada years ago, and it was great to be a friend to him, and bring him home to my home as he did with me.

This was way too soon for this beautiful guy. I will always think of Bill as someone very special, and I am really going to miss him.

*Charlie Maguire, Minneapolis, Minnesota USA*