Music, Charm, and Seduction
in British Traditional Songs and Ballads

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In this essay, I want to explore certain themes and intertextual elements in popular and traditional songs that circulated in Britain and Ireland, and wherever people from these islands went, roughly in the period from 1600 to 1850. I make no particular distinction between songs that traveled orally and those that circulated in print. Certainly these two media produce different characteristics in the material, but the distinction is largely an aesthetic one, and pieces regularly crossed between the two.¹

Using the myth of the siren in Homer’s The Odyssey as a starting point,² I explore popular images of music, particularly vocal music.³ These are the elements and interrelated themes of the siren myth as I see them:

- The irresistible power of music—its magical, “enchanting,” “charming” nature;
- The potentially evil nature of music (or its possibilities for evil uses);
- The sensual and sexual nature of music—a dangerous pleasure that should be resisted or indulged only with powerful protection;
- The loss of self-control and judgment induced by music—music as the enemy of reason, with the power to drive people mad;
- Sirens tend to be animal in form or have something of an animal nature; they are creatures of air or sea, not like earthbound humans. (In postclassical times, they have been depicted as a sort of mermaid; older representations give them birdlike features.)⁴

I will use the adjective “sirenic” to describe songs that contain these elements in any significant way. I will show that the themes and ideas of the siren myth were commonplace in British popular and traditional song and that they overlap and interrelate. I will finish by looking at pieces that deal explicitly with mermaid-type creatures and consider the ways the themes are worked into them. There are, of course, many ways of studying song texts, and this is but one: the search for common or related themes across an extensive range of material.⁵
“Charmed by the Notes”—Birds, People, Encounter, and Separation

Typically, many traditional lyrics open on a bright morning with birds singing. Some simply celebrate the scene itself, as does “The Birds in the Spring,” when “the voice of the Nightingale re-echoes all round” (Stubbs 1970: 10). Or the beauty of birdsong may be an incentive to come away with a lover, as in the Irish song “Kellswaterside”:

“For in sweet Ballybogey, where I will you bring,
You’ll hear the birds whistle and nightingales sing;
Your heart will be glad and no tears need you weep,
And the birds in the evening will sing you to sleep.”

(Huntington 1990: 466)

In some songs the erotic connotation of birdsong is made explicit, as in “The Bonny Hawthorn”:

“O hark bonny Bess, hear the birds in the grove,
How delightful their song, how inviting to love.”

Another version has “how in tissing [enticing] to love” (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Harding b25 [255]; 2806 c.18[42]). A morning meeting among singing birds is a commonplace setting for an amorous encounter, as in “A Sweet Country Life”:

No fiddle nor flute or haughtboy or spinet,
Can ever compare with the lark or the linnet.
Down as I lay among the green bushes,
I was charmed by the notes of the blackbirds and thrushes.

This idea of the superiority of the natural song of the birds is overturned in the next verse by the sweetness of the song of the young woman:

Johnny the ploughboy was walking alone,
To fetch up his cattle so early in the morn,
He espied pretty Nancy among the green rushes,
Singing more sweet than the blackbirds and thrushes.

(Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Harding B 25(1857);
see also Broadwood 1843: 11)
Nature scenes with singing birds and the comparison of the female voice to birdsong crop up in some Scots songs: “Her voice is like the ev’ning thrush / That sings on Cessnock banks unseen” (Burns 1995: 669–70). Singing young women are a commonplace of the popular idiom in such songs as “On a Tuesday Morning” (Palmer 1979: 149) and “Green Bushes.”7 To “The Shepherd of the Downs,” the sound of a female voice is paralyzing:

As he was a walking one evening so clear
A heavenly sweet voice sounded soft in his ear
He stood like a post, not one step could he move
He knew not what ailed him, but thought it was love.

(Copper 1971: 258–59)

The female with a beautiful voice is common in popular and traditional song: Characters like “Long Preston Peg,” “that sings with a voice so soft and so sweet,” abound (Dixon and Bell 1857). Sometimes the motif is used in an interesting way that contrasts the positive and the negative. In “The Poor Man’s Labour’s Never Done,” the contrast is between early and later marriage:

First when I married my wife, Janet,
Out of her company I could na stay
For her voice it was sweeter then the lark or the linnet,
Or the nightingale at the break o’ day

Now she’s fairly altered her meaning
Now she’s fairly altered her tune
Nothing but scoldings comes up her throat
So the poor man’s labour’s never done (Shuldham-Shaw 1966: 80–81).

The process of the marriage going sour is depicted through the change in the wife’s voice. A similar sentiment is expressed in the song “The Joyful Widower,” when the bereaved husband muses

I rather think she is aloft
And imitating thunder
For why, methinks I hear her voice
Tearing the clouds asunder (Johnson 1771: 99).
The motif of the beautiful-voiced female has plenty of life in it and runs through nineteenth-century popular song, sometimes in a comic way, undermining or parodying the older conventions. In Stephen Foster’s “minstrel” song, Nelly Bly has a voice “like a turtle dove” (Bodleian Library, broadside ballad collection: Firth b. 27 [153], often reprinted on song sheets without crediting the writer). Even in the mock pastoral of the music-hall tradition, found in oral circulation by Alfred Williams, “Pretty Polly Perkins” has “a voice like a blackbird, so mellow and clear” (Williams, MS No.Mi.680).

The arresting quality of the voice, sometimes male, sometimes innocent, sometimes knowing, is affirmed in a number of pieces, such as “Just as the Tide Was Flowing,” where the woman, an object of male fantasy if ever there was one, “so sweetly sang a roundelay.” Because of her dress, her musical taste, and money, she is presented as a woman of higher social status than the sailor who encounters her (Karpeles 1974: 558–59). In “Bushes and Briars,” the song which reputedly changed Vaughan Williams’s life, the female sings out her feelings—“her voice it was so clear”—in an English song that comes close to the blues in its feeling (Palmer 1983: 27–28).

The narratives of these encounter songs range through the possible outcomes of such events: marriage, rejection, and misalliance (I will deal with seduction later). Invert these encounters, and you have leave taking and separation. Here again we find birds singing, as in the ubiquitous “Pleasant and Delightful”:

The blackbirds and thrushes, sang on every green spray,  
And the larks they sang melodious, at the dawning of the day.

The related song “Jimmy and his True Love” is a song of parting set against a backdrop of birdsong (Mackenzie 1928: 125; Laws O30”).

In these types of song, the beauty of the surroundings heightens the pain of parting and loss. One is reminded of Burns:

How can ye chant, ye little birds,  
And I sae weary, fu o’ care.  
Thou’l break my heart, thou warbling bird,  
That wantons thro’ the flowering thorn:  
Thou minds me o’ departed joys,  
Departed never to return. (Kinsley 1971: 456)
So birdsong and human song can be associated with negative experiences and emotions. In “Banchory’s Land,” a song from Aberdeenshire, Scotland, the effect of singing fails to attract the disenchanted female; the effect is opposite to what happens with the arresting voice:

It was on a mid-Lanterns as Phoebus left the sky
While I did sing with all my might my true love passed by
While I did sing with all my might my true love passed home,
And mony an anxious look she gave to see fin I would come.

(Greig-Duncan Collection, 4: no. 707A)

Singing is also used other ways in popular and traditional songs: The lover stricken by his condition can lose his voice, and singing can function as consolation and remembrance, as an expression of merriment and celebration, as a cause for anger and violence, and as a warning.

Perhaps the most extreme contrast in singing in a narrative occurs in “Lamkin” (Child 93). The eponymous main character, in some versions an unpaid mason, enters the civilized home of a lord while he is away and, with the help of a treacherous nurse, murders the lord’s baby and wife. After stabbing the child, the murderers engage in a travesty of infant care:

Then Lamkin he rocked,
    and the fause nourice sang,
Till frae ilka bore o’ the cradle
    the red blood out sprang.

Nursing and singing a lullaby are allied to a gruesome act of murder. But these villains get their just desserts and are executed—to the accompaniment of a different sort of singing:

O sweetly sang the blackbird
    that sat upon the tree;
But sairer grat Lamkin,
    when he was condemned to die.

And bonny sang the mavis,
    out o’ the thorny brake
But sairer grat the nourice,
when she was tied to the stake.

We are back with the birds, this time providing an ironic counterpoint to retribution (Child 93A). 9

“His Intentions Were to Court a Pretty Maid”—Singing and Seduction
To see singing as a means of seduction is only an extension of its power to charm and enchant. In “Jack the Jolly Ploughboy,” the singing has a clear intention:

Jack, the jolly ploughboy, was ploughing up his land;
His horses lie beneath the shady tree.
He did whistle, he did sing, caused the valleys for to ring;
His intentions were to court a pretty maid.

(Mackenzie 1928: 130; Laws M24)

In the related song “The Nut Girl” (or the “The Nutting Girl”), the ploughman’s voice has an intense effect on the young woman:

There was a brisk young damsel,
A nutting in the wood,
His voice was so melodious,
It charmed her as she stood.
She had no longer power,
In the lonely wood to stray,
But what few nuts she had poor girl,
She threw them all away.

She went unto her Johnny,
As he sat on his plough,
Says she young man I feel myself,
I’m sure I can’t tell how;
He said my pretty fair maid,
I’m glad to meet you here,
Come sit you down beside me,
I will keep you out of fear.
Young Johnny left his horses,
Likewise he left his plough,
He took her to a shady grove,
His courage for to show.
He took her by the middle so small,
And then he set her down
She said young man I think I see,
The world go round and round.

(Bodleian Library, broadside ballad collection: 17252)

We notice similar elements in the ballad of “Hind Etin”:

Lady Margaret sits in her bower door,
Sewing at her silken seam;
She heard a note in Elmond’s wood,
And wishd she there had been.

Significantly, when Margaret gets to the wood, she starts gathering nuts:

She hadna pu’ed a nut, a nut,
Nor broken a branch but ane,
Till by it there came a young hind chiel,
Says, Lady, lat alane. (Child 41A)

The “young hind chiel” abducts her and takes her to live in a hidden place in the greenwood, a cave in some versions, where she bears him children. It seems likely that “The Nutting Girl” is a come-down version of a much more ancient and mysterious song, and the “young farmer” is the descendant of the fairylike Hind Etin. In both songs, it is the power of sound that attracts the women.

Songs like “The Nut Girl” are rich in a kind of simple metaphor: Young women throw their nuts away, an encounter takes place “Just as the Tide Was Flowing,” and “The Lark in the Morning” is both the bird singing and a suggestion of what the idealized pastoral figures in the song are up to.

The lark in the morning she rose from the west
And mounts in the air with the dew upon her breast;
And with the pretty ploughboys she’ll whistle and she’ll sing,
And the ploughboy is as happy as a prince or a king. (Palmer 1983: 164)

The idea that singing can be consciously manipulated to seduce is quite old in the English tradition. The old carol of the clerical seducer Jankyn and his victim Aleyson (punning with Kyrieleyson) appears in the fifteenth-century Sloan manuscript. Jankin’s voice has “a merry tone,” he reads the epistle well, he “cracks a merry note” and uses extreme decoration in his singing:

Jankyn crakit notes, an hundred on a knot,
And yyt he hakkyt hem smallere than wortes to the pot
[He chops them smaller than vegetables for the pot].

The voice has done its seductive work; all Jankyn needs is to wink and tread on Aleyson’s foot, and she is his; unfortunately, the result is pregnancy (Greene 1977: 278–79).

This song runs in the same tradition as others making fun of clerics, such as the “Friar in the Well,” where the protagonist declares he wants sex with a young girl. She fears going to hell, but he reassures her that if she were in hell, he could sing her out. She agrees but asks him to bring her ten shillings. He returns from getting the money, and she tricks him into falling into the well:

You said you could sing my soul out of hell,
Well, now you can sing yourself out of the well. (Purslow 1965: 33)

This song has been in existence since the later seventeenth century. A piece of similar vintage, from the pen of that period’s most significant dirty and salacious songwriter, Thomas D’Urfey, makes a case for using singing to seduce:

Would you have a young virgin of fifteen years,
You must tickle her fancy with sweets and dears,
Ever toying, and playing, and sweetly, sweetly,
Sing a love sonnet, and charm her Ears. (D’Urfey [1719–20] 1959: 1, 133)

Of all the songs about the sexual attractiveness of the singing voice, the most widespread has to be “The Gypsie Laddie” (Child 200) in its various guises. In this celebrated ballad, a lady forsakes her husband, home, and children to live with the gypsies. Most versions celebrate the gypsy’s singing:
Three gypsies came to our good lord’s gate
And wow but they sang sweetly!
They sang sae sweet and sae compleat
That down came the fair lady.

Many versions, like this one, make it clear that there is more to the magic of the gypsies than just their singing:

And she came tripping down the stair,
And a’ her maids before her
As soon as they saw her well-far’d face
They coost the glamer o’er her. (Child 200A)

Child glosses “glamer” as “charm;” other versions have it as “glamourie.” Clearly, our modern vocabulary of attraction owes much to an older vocabulary of magic.

The music of the gypsies changes between different versions. In “The Whistling Gypsy Rover,” the hero is described thus:

He whistled and he sang till the greenwoods rang,
And he won the heart of a lady.¹⁰

In an American version, “Black Jack Davy came a-singing through the woods” (Mellinger 1938: 110–12). In another, “He came walking o’er the hill singing loud and gaily” (Older 1963). And in yet another, “Gypsy Davie,” the husband approaches the encampment:

And he heard the notes of the big guitar
And the voice of the gypsy singing
The song of the Gypsy Dave.¹¹

In some versions the abducting gypsies are executed. In others, generally the more-modern versions, the woman asserts her independence and refuses to return to her husband. (For an important study of this ballad, see Rieuwerts 1991.) Singing, whistling, or guitar playing, most versions stress the winning musicality of the gypsies.
“He’s Harped Them All Asleep”: Soporific Music, Seduction, and Destruction

Instruments appear widely as erotic symbols in the traditional songs of the British Isles. I do not have space here to explore the rich body of material that uses the fiddle, the German flute, and the bagpipe as sexual symbols, but a few comments are in order.12 Usually in such songs, playing music is a metaphor for the act of sex. Sometimes dance tunes attest to the desire for sexual activity with titles like “Do It Again” and “The Reel of Stumpie” (Madden Ballads, vol. 2, 17, Cambridge University Library; Kinsley 1971: 678). These erotic songs are interesting and often inventive, but I do not feel they are deeply sirenic. They do attest to the sensual and sexual nature of music and sometimes relate to the loss of self-control while experiencing musical activity. However, a body of song material features instruments being used in a deeply sirenic way, inducing sleep. Most often, this happens by playing an instrument, usually a harp. However, in an interesting early sixteenth-century song, “With Lullay, Lullay, Like a Child,” attributed to John Skelton, the woman (sirenlike) is able to sing her unwanted lover to sleep and escape to a preferred man who kisses and embraces her:

With lullay, lullay like a chylde
Thou slepyst so long; thou art begylde.

* * *
With “ba, ba, ba,” and “bas, bas, bas,”
She cheryshed hym, both cheke and chyn;
That he wysst neuer where he was;
He had forgotten all dedely syn.
He wantyd wyt her loue to win
He trusted her payment and lost all hys pray
She left hym slepyng and stale away. (Greene 1977: 279–80)

However, it is the Scottish tradition and its diaspora that display this motif most strongly, and it is usually the harp which is most potent in producing a soporific effect (perhaps not surprising when the most likely alternative is the bagpipe). “Glasgerion,” or “Glenkindie,” presents a Scottish harper with truly sirenic power:

He could harpit a fish oot o’ saut water
or water oot a’ a stane;
He could harpit the milk fae a maiden’s breist
Wha’ ne’er gi’ed souk tae wean.
Glenkindie turns his harping to his own inclinations:

He’s harpit in the King’s castle,
    He’s harpit them a’ asleep;
A’ but the bonnie young countess
    Wha’ love did wauken keep.

First he harpit a dowie air
    And syne he harpit a gay,
And many a sigh between the hands
    I wat the lady gie (Child 67B)

However, his musical power is shared by his apprentice boy, Jock, which leads to tragic consequences for all concerned, a clear example of such power.

The motif of sleep-inducing harp music crops up in a number of other ballads: in some versions of “The Outlandish Knight” (Child 4B, stanza 2), in the jocular “Lochmaben Harper” (Child 192), and in “Fair Annie” (Child 62E, stanza 14). There is a strange verse in one of Motherwell’s versions of “The Cruel Brother”:

She put the small pipe to her mouth,
    And she harped both far and near,
Till she harped the small birds off the briers,
    And her true love out of the grave. (Child 49B, stanza 10)

Does the verb “to harp” simply mean “to play,” or are two instruments involved? The end of this particular version seems to have picked up parts of other ballads, particularly “The Unquiet Grave,” but the stanza above is testimony to the potency of musical power.

“The Song She Sang She Sang so Sweet”: Sirens and Mermaids
It is, in part, the power of the voice itself that arrests “George Collins” on his morning walk:

George Collins walked out one May morning
    When May was all in bloom.
There he espied a fair pretty maid
    A-washing her marble stone.
She whooped, she holloed, she highered her voice,
She held up her lily-white hand.
“Come hither to me, George Collins,” she said,
“For your life shall not last you long.”

(Johnstone of the Folk-Song Society 1909: 301–2, version d; Child 85)

The stark warning is mysterious, but perhaps there is a connection, through the act of washing, with the mermaid that Clerk Colville finds at the symbolically titled “wall o’ Stream”:

“Ye wash, ye wash, ye bonny may,
And ay’s ye wash your sark o’ silk”;
“It’s a’ for you, ye gentle knight,
My skin is whiter than the milk.”

He’s taen her by the milk-white hand,
He’s taen her by the sleeve sae green,
And he’s forgotten his gay ladie,
And away with the fair maiden. (Child 42A, stanza 6)

We are reminded at once that “…but hear the call / Of any Siren, he will so despise both wife and child.” Colville, like George Collins, ends up dead.

In “Clerk Colville,” we have the merging of some of our themes. Child’s C version even has this stanza:

And she took harp into her hand
And Harped them a’ asleep
And she sat down at their couch side
And bitterly did weep. (Child 42C, stanza 7)

The maid who has diverted Colville from his prior love is described as a mermaid, and I will conclude this discussion with a look at some songs that deal with mermaids and mermaidlike creatures. It is clear that the mermaid in “Clerk Colville” takes human form when on land. The same is true of the man/seal in “The Great Silkie” (Child 113), but he appears not to have any musical attributes.

“I am a man, upo the lan,

An I am a silkie in the sea;
And when I’m far and far frae lan,
My dwelling is in Sule Skerrie.”

The silkie fathers a child with an “earthly nourice” (who, interestingly, “sits and sings” as the song opens). But such an ill-matched union cannot end happily:

“An thu sall marry a proud gunner,
An a proud gunner I’m sure he’ll be,
An the very first schot that ere he schoots
He’ll schoot baith my young son and me.” (Child 113)

Wimberley points to a Danish ballad where a human woman bears seven children to her lover under the sea:

Her ears he stopp’d, and her mouth she stopp’d
And down to the bottom of the ocean dropped. (Wimberley 1965: 135)

The function of stopping the ears is different from *The Odyssey*, but the existence of this detail in such a context is suggestive.

Some comic songs of nineteenth-century origin deal with encounters between humans and mermaids, sometimes leading to reproduction or exile to an alien watery home, but the sirenic lure of the mermaid does not seem to be significant in these pieces.14

There is a reasonably widespread song, recorded in England and North America, about a young woman by the seashore lamenting the loss of her drowned lover. It is variously known as “I Never Shall Marry” or “The Drowned Lover,” on English broadsides as “The Lover’s Lament for Her Sailor” and, sometimes, “The Mermaid.” In some versions the woman throws herself into the sea in grief and is thus reunited with her lover:

And now every night at six bells they appear,
When the moon it is shining and sky it is clear,
Those two constant lovers with all their young charms
Rolling over and over in each other’s arms. (Spicer 1995)

Is this the way people believed mermaids were made? In spite of the magical quality of this verse, and the fact that the song is sometimes called “The Forsaken Mermaid,” this is not a mermaid song as we generally understand it. In one version, learned from the late Ron Spicer, the woman is described thus:
She’d a voice like a nightingale, skin like a dove
And the song that she sang it was all about love.

Another version runs,

I heard a shrill voice make a sorrowful sound
Midst the winds and the waves and the waters all round.

(Purslow 1969a: 38)

This is more of a lover’s ghost song that happens to have an oceanic setting, but we notice that the woman’s birdlike voice has a siren quality.

In the classic ballad “Sir Patrick Spens,” some versions feature a mermaid appearing before the storm:

Then up and raise the mermaiden,
    Wi the comb and glas in her hand
“Here’s a health to you, my merry young men,
    For you never will see dry land.” (Child 58J, stanza 18)

None of these mermaids sing, although they do converse. Given the low number of versions in which they appear (four out of eighteen in Bronson 1959–72, two of which are fragmentary), it is possible that this element is an import from other songs or stories that connect mermaids with storms. One is never quite sure, with the fluid nature of oral tradition; perhaps the next song discussed is actually a descendent of “Sir Patrick Spens.”

The most widespread mermaid song, which some may remember from school, is again called “The Mermaid.” Bronson prints forty-two versions of it (1959–72). It was circulating on broadsides in the mideighteenth century and seems to have gotten into many corners of the English-speaking world. The song is very simple: A ship’s crew spies a mermaid, almost always “with a comb and a glass in her hand”; various members of the crew step up, and with typical balladic incremental repetition, foretell their deaths and the loss to their relatives; the ship is lost.

When I went through the texts of “The Mermaid,” it seemed none of them mentioned singing until I came across a version collected in Twyford in Hampshire, England:
As I sailed out one day, one day
And being not far from the land;
    And there I spied a mermaid
A sitting on a rock,
With a comb and a glass in her hand.

The song she sang she sang so sweet,
But no answer at all could us make;
    Till at length our gallant ship
She tooked round about;
Which made our poor hearts to ache.

(Bronson 1959–72: no. 289, version 36)

In one other version of this song, I found implications that the mermaid sang:

* * *
And her skin was like a lily so fair
Her cheeks were like two roses and her eyes were like a star
And her voice like a nightingale clear.

(Bronson 1959–72: no. 289, version 41)

Compare the mermaid in “Clerk Colville,” whose “skin was whiter than the milk,” and I need not highlight the recurring nightingale.

Perhaps the most interesting song of this sort is one often called “The Mermaid” as well, but more usually “The Maid on the Shore.” There is nothing fishy about this woman, but elements of the siren are combined in a way both surprising and amusing:

'Twas of a young maiden who lived all alone
    She lived all alone on the shore, O;
There was nothing she could find for to comfort her mind,
    But to roam all alone on the shore, shore, shore,
But to roam all alone on the shore.

It was of a young captain who sailed the salt sea,
    Let the wind blow high or low, O
“I will die, I will die,” the young captain did cry,
   “If I don’t get that maid on the shore, shore, shore,
If I don’t get that maid on the shore

“I have lots of silver, I have lots of gold,
   I have lots of costly wear, O
I’ll divide, I’ll divide with my jolly ship’s crew
   If they’ll row me that maid from the shore, shore, shore,
If they’ll row me that maid from the shore.”

After long persuadance they got her on board
   Let the winds blow high or low, O
Where he placed her a chair in his cabin below,
   “Here’s adieu to all sorrow and care, care, care,
Here’s adieu to all sorrow and care.”

Where he placed her a chair in his cabin below,
   Let the winds blow high or blow low, O,
She sung charming and sweet, she sung neat and complete
   She sung captain and sailors to sleep, sleep, sleep,
She sung captain and sailors to sleep.

She robbed him of silver, she robbed him of gold,
   She robbed him of costly ware O,
And she stole his broadsword, instead of an oar,
   And she paddled her way to the shore, shore, shore,
And she paddled her way to the shore.

“My men must be crazy, my men must be mad,
   My men must be deep in despair, O,
To let her go ’way, with her beauty so gay,
   And paddle her way to the shore, shore, shore,
And paddle her way to the shore.”

“Your men was not crazy, your men was not mad,
   Your men was not deep in despair, O,
I deluded the sailors as well as yourself:
I’m a maiden again on the shore, shore, shore,
I’m a maiden again on the shore.” (Bronson 1959–72: no. 43, version 29)

What fate would have befallen the woman if she had not sung the sailors to sleep? A. L. Lloyd had some additional verses in which the captain articulates his intention of spending the night with the woman and then passing her over to the crew. This idea seems to be welcome to the maid, who has “grown so tired of her maidenhead” as she walked all alone on the shore. I am not sure if Lloyd found these verses in a source unknown to me or made them up himself. If they are invented, I do not think the song needs them. The sexual implications are certainly there; not only does the captain fail to “get that maid on the shore” but she even paddles back with his broadsword! What the song represents is the adoption of siren qualities by a woman to assert her independence of action and resist male sexual violation and violence.

So the traditional and popular songs of the English-speaking world contain sirenic elements that we can connect back to ancient times and songs. These elements include the arresting, seductive, and soporific power of the voice and birdsong; the sexual potency of vocal, and sometimes instrumental, music; the danger of the loss of control that music can induce; and the portentous sight and sound of the mermaid. All these elements have been used and reused, divided and combined in countless songs and stories. They bear witness to a widespread and compelling notion that music, so “shrill and in sensual appetite so strong” (The Odyssey; book 12, line 65), is powerful and its influence is hard to resist.

**Notes**

Versions of this paper were given at the 1998 conference, The Siren in Music, at the University of Cambridge and at the 1999 Aberdeen conference. I thank all those who contributed comments. References to texts in the Child and Bronson collections are by number and version only.

1. The study of what circulates and survives orally is of immense interest, but there is always a complex and fascinating interchange between literate and oral cultures. For a helpful overview of this area, see Ong 1982.

2. Homer, The Odyssey, book 12. I particularly looked at versions by Chapman and Samuel Butler, both of which are easily available on the Internet.

3. Music is always interpreted culturally; its meanings are never natural. This essay seeks to explore popular meanings, not criticize them. One of the inspirations for this essay is Robert Walker’s *Musical Beliefs, Psychoacoustic, Mythical, and Educational Perspectives* (1990).
4. I am suggesting that there is an aspect of bird song as experience or simile that has something of the siren quality about it. See the next section. Some fascinating aspects of anthropology suggest that the way we perceive and classify animals has important ramifications for our perceptions of the world. See, for example, Leach 1972.
5. On related themes, using similar methods but in a historically more grounded way, see Gammon 1982.
6. The Harding collection is available online at <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/ballads/ballads.htm/>.
9. For a fuller study of this ballad, see Gammon and Stallybrass 1983.
10. Remembered from a commercial recording heard in childhood, which, in retrospect, was obviously based on Bronson 1959–72: song 200, version 9.
11. Recalled from a long-lost recording of Woody Guthrie.
12. I have collected quite a lot of material on this subject and may cover it in a future essay.
14. See, for example, “Married to a Mermaid” (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, broadside ballad collection [sheet dated 1870], frame 17766) and “Paddy Miles and the Mermaid” (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Harding B11 [2920], frame 03825).

References


Madden Ballads, Cambridge University Library.


**Recordings**

