The Servant Problem in Child Ballads

Roger de V. Remnick

The central characters in most Child ballads are members of the gentry, often the nobility, and are even, in some cases, royalty. Because they own property, enjoy substantial income, possess unlimited leisure time, and wield significant power over others, they tend to live interesting lives—that is to say, they enjoy experiences which are the stuff of story and drama, the ballad genre’s raisons d’être. Members of the employee class, on the other hand—mostly household servants of one kind or another—are seldom ballad heroes and heroines, probably because in real life such working-class folk were too busy meeting basic needs for survival to enjoy the sorts of intensified, elevated, poignant human experiences that ballads customarily describe.

While seldom ballad protagonists or antagonists, servants are quite common in supporting roles. More often than not, however, these roles are bland, homogenized, featureless work functions, like porter, kitchen helper, nurse, armed retainer, and (especially) pageboy. Moreover, the depictions of what little motivation and personality such servants do display not only are stereotypical but also appear extremely unfavorable. For example, many Child ballad servants are not able to think for themselves. Child Maurice’s pageboy (Child 83E) can be accused of illustrating this character trait: He delivers a love letter to the object of his master’s intended seduction but insists on putting it into the lady’s hand in her husband’s presence, even though she suggests pointedly that, surely, the letter is intended for someone else? But the messenger is completely blind to the hint. Predictably, the husband becomes suspicious, assumes an adulterous liaison, meets Child Maurice in his wife’s place, and beheads his supposed rival.

Then there are servants who can’t seem to do the job they are paid to do. This character trait is most often implied in a well-known ballad commonplace, an employer’s plaintive query, “Why can’t I find any of my well-paid menials when I need one?” For example, the king in “Hind Etin” is moved to ask this rhetorical question when he discovers that his men have allowed a potential enemy into his
domain: “O where are all my rangers bold / That I pay meat and fee, / To search
the forest far and wide, / And bring Akin to me?” (Child 41A). A similar cry of
frustration at servant inaction comes from the king in Child 114H after hearing
that Johnnie Cock may be mortally wounded and dying untended in the forest.
Perhaps most plaintive of all is the father’s cry in “Lady Diamond” (Child 269A)
after his servants have failed to stop him from murdering his daughter’s kitchen-
boy paramour: “O where is all my merry, merry men, / That I pay meat and wage,
/ That they could not withold my cruel hand, / When I was mad with rage?”
These servants were evidently able neither to do the job they were paid to do nor
think for themselves.

Other thoroughly unsatisfactory servants in Child ballads do not keep their
minds on their work. Instead, they are riveted by events taking place in the
household and, to make matters worse, spend far too much time gossiping about
them. Such random servant gossip can bring terrible grief to others. For instance,
the rumor that Mary Hamilton (Child 173) has been impregnated by the queen’s
husband begins in the kitchen before spreading throughout the court, resulting
eventually in Mary’s execution for infanticide. Similar below-stairs gossip re-
sults in the parents of Johnny Scot’s pregnant love imprisoning their own daughter
(Child 99C, K). A more invidious version of this type is composed of servants
who not only don’t keep their minds on their work but go even further and
actively mind the business of their betters. These more-motivated, goal-directed
servants can make all kinds of mischief for social superiors. For example, in
“Lady Elspat” (Child 247), a page, overhearing sweet words exchanged between
his master’s sister and her lover, tattles to the mistress of the household, who has
the lover brought before a judge. Another page, this time in “Little Musgrave”
(Child 81), goes to great lengths to report his mistress’s infidelity to her husband,
who in a fury slays both wife and lover. An old-woman servant in “Auld Ma-
trons” (Child 249) for no apparent reason other than busybodiness runs off to
tell the sheriff that his daughter is entertaining a lover, thus putting the hero in
great danger when the sheriff’s men attack the house in force.

Then there are Child-ballad servants who forget their place. This character
trait is most overtly exhibited in servant impertinence. For instance, the squire’s
boy in one version of “The Broomfield Hill” (Child 43F) so forgets his place as to
assume moral superiority over his betters: When asked why he did not awaken
his master so he could seduce a visiting maiden, the page has the cheek to reply
that “in the night ye should have slept, master, / And kept awake in the day; /
Had you not been sleeping when hither she came, / Then a maid she had not
gone away.” In Child 286A, Sir Walter Rawleigh’s ship boy also has the temerity to take the moral high ground after his master refuses to carry out an earlier offer to reward the boy with his daughter’s hand for sinking an enemy ship: “Then fare you well, you cozening lord,” the ship boy declaims, “seeing you are not as good as your word.”

Servants who forget their place normally do so temporarily or in a way that’s circumscribed, so their insolence doesn’t have wider, more-debilitating, or permanent effects on their employers’ lives. A more-serious kind of forgetting-one’s-place does have major consequences and is manifested in servants who get above their station—that is to say, try to change the ballad world’s existing social structure. Typical members of this category are servants who presume to enter into love relationships with sons or daughters of the household. Examples are legion, particularly of male servants forming liaisons with their employers’ daughters, as in “The Kitchie-Boy” (Child 252) and “Willie and Earl Richard’s Daughter” (Child 102). These liaisons almost inevitably produce tragic results; only occasionally, when the servant proves to be truly exceptional, is the match successful, as in “Willie o Winsbury” (Child 100) and “Richie Story” (Child 232F, G), and then only after the lovers have endured significant ordeal. Perhaps the worst offenders in this category, however, are those who try to get so far above their station that they not only ape but actually impersonate their masters, as in “The Lord of Lorn and the False Steward” (Child 271). Glasgerion’s servant in Child 67 may be the most prominent example of all: He impersonates his master to keep a midnight tryst with a noblewoman Glasgerion has sweet-talked into an affair.

Servants who get above themselves are just one step away from the very worst of their kind, the ones who can’t be trusted when their employers’ backs are turned. These servants go further than usurping a master’s place; they more than metaphorically bite the hand that feeds them by betraying a master to his enemies—even, in some instances, by killing him themselves. Nurses are especially guilty of this character trait, as may be seen in “Sir James the Rose” (Child 213), “The Laird of Wariston” (Child 194), and “Lamkin” (Child 93), where a nurse colludes in the murders both of her mistress and the infant supposedly in her care. Servants who go so far as to slay their employers personally may be exemplified by Earl Douglas’s pageboy in “The Battle of Otterburn” (Child 161B), who, like his brethren in other ballads, bears a message to his master but, unlike them, becomes so infuriated with the earl’s formulaic if-your-message-be-true-I’ll-reward-you-but-if-it-be-false-I’ll-punish-you response that he stabs him to death.
This highly unfavorable view Child ballads apparently take of servants puzzles the folklorist. After all, a basic tenet of our discipline is that folklore is related in a fairly direct, unmediated, practical way to the social, cultural, and empirical contexts of its quotidian performance. If, as I think has generally been assumed, the Child ballad was principally a working-class cultural possession, we are moved to wonder why working people loved to sing and hear songs that presented in such a bad light characters with whom they would presumably have identified? Why, for example, would ballad collector William Allingham’s contributor, “a nurse in the family of a relative in Ireland,” possess in her repertoire a version of Child 93, “Lamkin,” in which a nurse actively helps the villainous mason murder the baby in her care (Child 1882–98, 2: 339; Shields 1974). After all, it’s not as if working-class singers “didn’t know any better” (as a master or mistress might have said), since the “perfect servant” is represented in the Child ballad repertoire, though of course not nearly as frequently as his or her imperfect cousin. For example, the pageboy in “Lady Maisry” (Child 65A) unequivocally does the job he’s paid to do: Ignoring the possible life-threatening harm he might suffer at the hands of his mistress’s brother, he delivers Maisry’s letter to her English lover, who is deeply hated by her family. In Child 244C, James Hatley resists any temptation to get above his station; when offered a reward of his own land and a band of retainers by the king, Hatley, knowing his place, refuses: “I thank ye, king, and I thank ye, queen, / I thank ye a’, nobilitie, / But a prince’s page I was a’ my life, / And a prince’s page I yet will be.” The contributor who recited this version for folklorist William Motherwell (a Mrs. Drain of Kilmarnock) was obviously familiar with what makes a “good” ballad servant and just as obviously approved of the favorable portrayal, and there is no reason for us to think that Mrs. Drain’s fellow working-class singers didn’t share the same knowledge and attitude. Why, then, did they prefer to sing about “bad” servants? This apparent paradox (which in its most generalized form is a lack of logical fit between text and context) presents the ballad analyst with as big a “servant problem” as servant behavior itself poses for ballad masters and mistresses.

What are some possible answers to this type of servant problem? I can think of at least eight. Hypothesis One is that perhaps in the pre-modern-day period, when most of the texts in The English and Scottish Popular Ballads were gathered, the genre was principally a middle-class rather than working-class art form and hence indeed reflected its context by reproducing the sentiment probably common to employers of every era that “you just can’t get good help anymore” (Marshall 1949: 16). Hypothesis Two: Perhaps the ballad was a working-class
phenomenon but most common among singers and audiences who were not themselves “in service.” There is evidence that servants, especially those who worked indoors, were generally disliked by the general community. To outsiders their jobs didn’t seem physically demanding, and they spoke, looked, and acted in a more-genteel way than members of the nonservant working class. The unfavorable ballad representation, therefore, may reflect nondomestic working-class hostility toward domestic workers (see Maza 1983: 122–31).

Like the first two, Hypothesis Three depends chiefly on historical facts: Perhaps the singers from whom the texts in The English and Scottish Popular Ballads were gathered considered their songs to be archaic, by definition not reflective of the present but of the past; hence, they were not bothered by the apparent lack of contemporary “relevance.” Indeed, ballad depiction of servants does seem in general to reflect the cultural realities of pre-eighteenth-century service, which, still exhibiting a medieval character, was built on the same patriarchal models that governed life in general. The medieval familial unit was not the nuclear or “affectionate” family of the modern era but the whole household, to which belonged both kin and nonkin; the servants were considered an intimate part of this household, and the family head was expected to act in loco parentis to them all, overseeing their moral, spiritual, intellectual, and physical well-being (Marshall 1949: 4–7; see Fairchilds 1984: 4–6). In fact, many servants were actual blood relatives of the manorial lord and/or lady, as reflected in “Child Maurice,” “Prince Robert,” and “The Earl of Errol” (Child 83D, 87C, 231E). Ballad portrayal of servants as generally immature, unreliable, lazy, impertinent, ungrateful, naturalistic, precultural creatures—often actual children and always like children—is consistent with this conception (see Robbins 1986: 150–52; Hecht 1980: 3–4; Goldberg 1992: 5). The bands of armed retainers appearing in several Child ballads, and to a lesser extent the many pageboys, may denote this older servant world, while the several anthropomorphized animal servants may represent the same idea metaphorically.

The next three hypotheses are less dependent on historical facts than on the psychology of ballad singers. Hypothesis Four: Perhaps singers identified not with such external attributes of ballad characters as their professions and social class but with their feelings of despair and delight, their sheer good fortune in simply having the opportunity to enjoy emotionally charged experiences redolent with tragedy and romance. In other words, perhaps ballad singers and audiences empathized with heroes and heroines, whatever their social identities (though if that were the case, then ballads would have been a form of escapism
for servants and hence closer to popular culture than folklore). Another primarily psychological (and particularly Freudian) explanation is Hypothesis Five: While Child ballads usually depict a late-medieval/early modern world, the texts in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* come mostly from eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century sources. Perhaps these (post) Enlightenment-era bearers of ballad tradition were subconsciously dissociating themselves from their pre-eighteenth-century ancestors—cum-surrogate parents (perennial objects of youth hostility and antagonism) who populated the ballads’ fictional landscape by embracing employers’ typically deprecating views of them.

Still primarily a psychological explanation is Hypothesis Six: Real indoor servants in upper-class households were, when beginning their new lives as servants, displaced from their familiar contexts of working-class cottage culture and restituated in contexts of genteel manorial or, later, country-house culture. As an integral part of their employment, they were trained to dissociate themselves from the “commonness” of their former background and enculturated into upper-class manners, tastes, values, and worldview (see Fairchilds 1984: 101–2). But their new cultural personae had no meaningful arenas for action: Their more refined speech, clothes, deportment, or even sensibilities brought servants no significant rewards or privileges, no change in identity or circumstance. They were still, in all meaningful ways, unempowered and unprivileged. The ballad working folk they sang and heard about, however, did enjoy certain powers and privileges that resembled those of the leisure-class elite but were embodied in servant actions—idling, gossiping, dressing up, exercising personal power apparently on whim. Thus, the servants in “The Rantin’ Laddie” who forget their place are reproducing their employers’ treatment of the Earl of Aboyne’s pregnant—but-unmarried love: “For her father he will not her know, / And her mother she does slight her, / And a’ her friends hae lightlied her, / And their servants they neglect her” (240A). In short, to working-class singers and listeners, ballad servants may have been fantasy projections of themselves, and ballad singing and listening would have functioned psychologically as a compensatory mechanism.

Hypothesis Seven, which weds psychology to a bit of deconstruction, can be put this way: Perhaps simply singing and hearing about employers’ discomfort at servants’ hands allowed working-class bearers of tradition not only to imagine but even voice discontent with their circumstances, especially the typical day-to-day indignities servants customarily suffered. Real servants had few sanctioned means of expressing grievance, for the code of conduct to which they were expected to conform mandated their silence; any complaints or contrary opinions were typically deemed examples of “talking back” or “insolence,”
and servants had to know how to “hold their tongues” (see Hill 1996: 1; Marshall 1949: 15). Household servants in the premodern era were thus habitually denied any voice of their own: They were urged to identify their own interests fully with those of their employers and bend to their will (Gerard 1994: 9). Singing was probably one of the few opportunities for working people to express a personal voice publicly, safely couched in that superficially innocuous form we call the “ballad of tradition.” In short, ballad singing in the preindustrial British Isles may have been an act of resistance against conditions considered unjust, humiliating, and dehumanizing (see Gerard 1994: 264–68).

While this “resistance hypothesis” is attractive, it does not necessarily require us to believe that real working-class ballad singers and hearers identified with fictional servants, only that they identified with the conditions of inequity, frustration, and powerlessness service entailed. Hypothesis Eight proposes that bearers of tradition identified with both the conditions of ballad service and the imaginary characters who are ballad servants. It goes this way: perhaps the working-class singers and listeners to whom Child ballads were vital and meaningful everyday artifacts understood the motives and rationales of the servants they sang about in different ways from the ones I have already outlined. For example, from the servant point of view, Child Maurice’s pageboy (Child 83) and the “merry men” serving Lady Diamond’s father (Child 269), rather than not being able to think for themselves, may have been simply respecting the common employer stricture to follow orders exactly, while the seemingly incompetent page in “The Broomfield Hill” (Child 43) was repeating to his master that worthy’s own dictum about paying attention, keeping alert, and not sleeping on the job. Similarly, the servants who cannot seem to do the job they are paid to do are not visible and readily available every minute one may unexpectedly need their services because they are busy with their duties, not loitering and enabling the devil to find work for their idle hands. As for the gossiping servants who do not keep their minds on their work, and even the interfering tattlers who mind the business of their betters, what else are they doing but pursuing the very goal of honesty and truthfulness that their employers repeatedly emphasize as an important virtue? After all, Lady Barnard was a married woman and did in fact take the initiative in seducing Little Musgrave, thus breaking her vows of fidelity to her husband (Child 81). Indeed, it can be fairly said that the servants whose gossip revealed to parents that their unmarried daughter was carrying Johnie Scot’s baby were instrumental in bringing the lovers together in holy matrimony, both allowing true love to triumph and saving a child from the stigma of bastardy. The lovers themselves seemed overcome by inertia, incapable of doing anything
purposeful about their situation (Child 99). Servants who forget their place and presume to offer their masters some homily like “always keep your word” are similarly acting under a moral imperative, one that was probably inculcated in them by the very employer now feeling victimized by its application, or by the sermons they were urged to take to heart (and heard at the very Sunday church services which employers insisted their servants faithfully attend).

From the masters’ and mistresses’ point of view, servants who get above their station are acting out of self-interest and subverting what the employer class considers the natural order of society. But servants may see such events in a different light: They may be actively modeling for their employers what is, in fact, ideal upper-class behavior. This behavior is well illustrated by “Willie o Winsbury” (Child 100) who, when his former employer finally agrees to the match between Willie and his daughter and offers to confer his personal wealth upon his new son-in-law, refuses the gift! Had Willie’s motives been materialistic and self-interested he would hardly have spurned the offer of wealth and property and would not have upheld the patriarchal virtue that a husband must provide for his wife. Even those least satisfactory of servants, the ones who cannot be trusted when their employers’ backs are turned to the point where they may even kill their lords, are not necessarily acting pathologically but rather, in support of cultural norms, for in every case the masters have transgressed—for example, by refusing to pay a man for his labor (“Lamkin,” Child 83), which strikes against the heart of the paternalistic ethos that social obligation should counterpoint personal privilege, or by being a seducer and indiscriminate fornicator (Child 194, “The Laird of Wariston”).

In short, every unfavorable servant stereotype can be revoiced to suggest that Child ballad servants are not acting destructively but constructively, appropriating values of the very “dominant discourse” that employers themselves espouse, measuring specific masters and mistresses against those standards, and revealing how unsatisfactory their behaviors actually are. In this paradigm, Child ballad servants are being as resistant as those in Hypothesis Seven but not in the obvious sense of rebelling against or subverting the “natural” order at all. In fact, they are *upholding* the traditional system of service; what they are resisting is their ballad employers’ propensity to pervert that system. From this angle, then, the servant problem is not a problem at all but a solution: a solution to the master and mistress problem in Child ballads.
References


