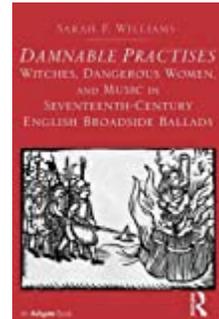




Sarah F. Williams. *Damnably Practises: Witches, Dangerous Women, and Music in Seventeenth-Century English Broadside Ballads.* London: Routledge, 2015. xii + 225 pp. \$112.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4724-2082-4.



Reviewed by Penelope Gouk (University of Manchester)

Published on H-Music (June, 2017)

Commissioned by Lars Fischer (UCL Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies)

A Uniquely Powerful Social Tool

As I will elaborate in the course of this review, Sarah F. Williams's *Damnably Practises: Witches, Dangerous Women, and Music in Seventeenth-Century English Broadside Ballads* offers a step toward narrowing what the founders of the new H-Net Commons Network H-Music describe as the "astounding ... gap between the role that music has played (and continues to play) in history and the role it plays in most mainstream historical scholarship."^[1] With its tight focus on a subset of surviving seventeenth-century English broadside ballads, and on the sounds with which this body of printed texts is associated, Williams's book represents in microcosm what the H-Music editors would like to see happening within the historical community at large. That is to say, they hope that historians in general (rather than just music historians, I presume) will begin to realize the value of taking music more fully into consideration in their quest to deepen our understanding of past cultures. I, for one, certainly welcome this recognition that music needs to be integrated more fully into the "big picture" of history—cultural, social, and intellectual—and also, perhaps more

appropriately than this visual metaphor allows, as part of the "soundscapes" of the past.

Indeed, one acknowledged source of inspiration for Williams's study proves to be the literary scholar Bruce R. Smith's *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (1999), which demands that scholars listen (or imagine that they are listening) to the "verbal artifacts" that constitute evidence for early modern performances of songs, cries, and ballads that filled the streets, taverns, and theaters of seventeenth-century London and beyond. Williams claims that "singing, hearing and seeing ballads was a shared daily experience for most English citizens," and she argues that these functioned as "a uniquely powerful social tool" in their capacity to educate semi-literate members of society (p. 1). Whereas Smith surprisingly omitted any discussion of actual music in his acoustemology, Williams devotes considerable energy to interrogating the handful of popular tunes that can be associated with the particular broadsides that she has selected for examination and analysis. In brief, this selection comprises broadside bal-

lads that through their tunes, images, and texts represent transgressive and unruly women, especially those identified as witches and female criminals guilty of malfeasance. Annoyingly, however, Williams nowhere explicitly says how many broadsides fitted her criteria, nor is it clear how many thousand ballads overall she sifted through to arrive at her core samples. I will return to the significance of this point later. According to the online English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA), about eleven thousand broadsides from the seventeenth century have been preserved).[2] As Williams does explain in her introduction, she arrived at her (unquantified) selection through the discovery of a lacuna in historical, literary, popular culture, musical and gender studies scholarship (p. 2), a finding that exemplifies the multidisciplinary methodology that has enabled her to do something original with her chosen body of evidence. Previous studies of the broadside ballad have tended to treat it as a fixed historical object, but Williams argues that the broadside ballad is a multimedia artefact reliant upon embodied performance and image working in concert to communicate representations of unruly women in the tune and text (p. 16). It is therefore best studied through a multidisciplinary approach that can do justice to these evanescent and performative qualities.

Williams divides her book into four main chapters, each of which examines the body of evidence that she has put together from a different perspective, and requires a particular theoretical approach. The first chapter explores the raw materials available to ballad writers and singers who chose to represent dangerous women through the verses they sang and the images that were printed on their broadsides, illustrations that were both aesthetic and didactic. Sensational trial accounts were an important source of the stereotypical language routinely used to describe female domestic criminals, but Williams also tracks down other sources that offered material about women, disorder, sound, and witchcraft: for example, sermons and religious tracts, demonological treatises, popular songs, street literature, and folklore traditions. Most notably, she shows how transgressive women, through their representation in language and imagery, were linked to other marginal groups, such as Catholics and witches, who were also regarded as a threat to the unstable social order. "The grotesque, misogynistic language used to describe witches and verbally abusive female criminals," she explains, "was mirrored in Puritan diatribes against practitioners of Catholicism" (p. 47). At the same time, there was a strong suspicion of the acoustic disorder routinely associated with witches and domes-

tic scolds, each of which had specific modes of aural representation mirrored and elaborated in the broadside ballads that offered a composite portrait of these stereotypical figures.

In chapter 2, Williams reveals that the broadsides depicting witchcraft and female crime were associated with just three popular tunes to which their words seem to have been sung. Here she offers an original exploration of the musical, theatrical, and literary histories of this small set of tunes, arguing that they (i.e., the tunes) helped build a portrait of, and shaped contemporary attitudes toward, witchcraft and female transgression. We will return to consider this argument in more detail below. Williams locates her subset of ballads within the larger but unquantified pool of broadsides that through their public display and oral performance served not only as entertainment but also as a vehicle for educating semiliterate consumers about the Bible, morality, and mythology, to mention only a few important topics that the ballads addressed.

In chapter 2, the reader is also first introduced to the specifically musical and metrical dimensions of Williams's chosen ballads, and on the whole she has avoided making this section too technical for non-musicians. It is important to know that the tunes in question were not notated on the broadsides to which they were coupled; their titles alone provided sufficient indication of the melodies that were to be sung from memory or by imitation. What is tricky, however, is to follow her account of the three tunes's changing associations with different broadsides over a century or so, an intertextual analysis that presumes a knowing response to these melodies among the lay public as well as the educated elite. I will return to the musical evidence and Williams's interpretation of it below. Her conclusion from this chapter is that these three tunes and the cultural associations attached to them created powerful audience expectations regarding the representation of witchcraft and related female domestic crime.

Williams's examination of the power of particular musical sounds to evoke these negative representations of women is complemented by her survey of the ballad texts themselves: in chapter 3 she finds a wealth of words used by the ballad writers to portray their subjects as dangerous and damnable, guilty of verbal excess and what she calls "acoustic disorder" more generally. Crucially, Williams argues that the excesses described within the ballad texts were heightened by their intimate association with the three tunes that were discussed in the

previous chapter. At the same time, these misogynistic profiles of disorderly women drew on the same sources that informed other writings about female transgressions and their threat to the fragile social order in the seventeenth century: for example, vernacular medical handbooks, treatises on demonology, and marriage conduct books. As Williams acknowledges, the general theme of unbridled femininity and the fear of its consequences has already been explored by literary scholars, historians, and musicologists, but by focusing particularly on the acoustemology of early modern English broadsides she makes a fresh contribution to our understanding of how this popular art form communicated ideas to the semi-literate and shaped early modern attitudes toward women (p. 91).

Indeed, Williams's fresh focus on broadsides extends to a consideration of their performative aspects and visual displays in the form of woodblock images and typography, which for the most part have been understudied. As she argues in chapter 4, these elements not only were crucial to disseminating stereotypes of female transgression at the time but also offer clues to present-day scholars about ballad singers's selling practices, performance styles, and their movements in and around public spaces. There was, for example, a good deal of overlap between ballad mongering and the theaters, and they both worked to communicate depictions of female malfeasance. Williams presents contemporary descriptions of ballad performers's skills, for example in attracting and holding their listeners's attention not just through their texts but through the power of their gestures and sung narrative as well. Though theatrical references usually place the melody in the voice of a male singer, the textual strategies employed in the broadsides examined in this book required the (male) singer to take on a female persona. Instead of looking to this as an example of male domination, Williams focuses on the way that female listeners were invited to identify with the voice in the text, and how they often ended up performing ballads at home.

This leads us to Williams's final chapter, which puts together again all the parts of the ballads that have been explored in earlier chapters, and traces their later influence. It seems that acoustical stereotypes associated with seventeenth-century female malfeasance persisted into the eighteenth century chiefly through instrumental music: it is reasonable to assume the association of witches with vigorous dances, rustic entertainments, ballad tunes, and marginalized ethnicities persisted well into the next century (p. 155). For Williams, the most ex-

pecting direction for future research on broadside ballads and female transgression involves moving away from the public sphere of ballad culture, which she has explored in her book through a variety of methods, and turning toward the more private and domestic sphere where women consumed ballads at home, a strategy that might illuminate the social power of ballad trade music and performance within private, interior spaces. Considering these two spheres and the sounds with which they are associated together, it can be argued that broadside ballads, which have long been dismissed as ephemeral and superficial, were powerfully communicative social tools in public and domestic spaces.

I very much enjoyed reading Williams's book and believe that it has made a significant contribution to our understanding of ballad culture as an acoustical and embodied phenomenon that flourished in the liminal space between oral and written traditions and materiality and ephemerality in the seventeenth century. However, there are two related questions raised by the book that merit further discussion, especially in the context of a new network that aims to promote historical investigation into the acoustical, specifically musical, dimensions of past cultures. Why, firstly, does an author who deliberately centers on sounds have nothing to say about the acoustical resources available to readers of her book, who will likely want to know what her selection of ballads actually sounded like? And the second question that follows the first is: how many ballads is she discussing altogether?

Although it is, of course, impossible to recreate past renditions authentically, a good step toward helping readers at least get a sense of the sounds involved would be to point more emphatically toward the EBBA, a resource that Williams only briefly mentions in passing in her introduction. For although she does not say so herself, readers can, for example, hear a full rendition of the ballad "Witchcraft Discovered and Punished" (1619) set to the tune of "Fortune my Foe" on the EBBA website.^[3] Similarly, one can listen to "A Warning to all Desperate Women" (1628), a ballad set to the tune of "The Ladies Fall."^[4] These sound clips are significant because one of the most important parts of Williams's argument is the claim that three tunes in particular came to be associated with the women represented in her sample ballads: "Fortune my Foe," "The Ladies Fall," and "Bragandary" and that these musical settings helped to build a portrait of, and shape contemporary attitudes about women, disorder, magic, and malfeasance through music (p. 86). The argument that music itself has agency, in this context

helping to develop stereotypical concepts of transgressive women, is certainly challenging, and suggests that historians who want to understand how broadside ballads functioned in early modern society cannot afford to neglect the music with which they were intimately associated.

There are, however, two significant problems with this line of argument. On the one hand, the difficulty in reconstructing precisely the sounds produced by ballad singers and their audiences springs not least from the fact that they sang unaccompanied by ear, learned by rote, and therefore had no need of notated music. Yet often we think we know what particular ballad tunes sounded like thanks to early modern composers' efforts to write them down, frequently with a view to using them as the basis for their own instrumental variations. John Dowland, for example, included a version of "Fortune my Foe" in a printed collection of his lute music. Meanwhile the only guidance found on printed broadsides about how to sing a particular ballad took the form of the phrase "sung to the tune of ...," the assumption being that the given tune was well known and simple enough to enable people to use it for any new ballad that had the right meter. Williams includes notation for each of the three tunes she is interested in. Yet while the first two tunes—"The Ladies Fall" and "Fortune my Foe" (extracts are given in example 2.1 on p. 60)—seem fairly stable, that of "Bragandary" is more elusive. As Williams herself acknowledges, the musical example she gives may be from the lost tune—or at least a melodic structure very similar to it (example 2.2 on p. 80). In this instance, the tune she transcribes does not match the tune with the same name in the EBBA, so presumably the jury is still out on whether she is right or not in her attribution.^[5]

On the other hand, Williams's argument that each of these three tunes came to be associated with specific broadside topics, accruing more meanings and stereotypical associations over a significant period of time, is characterized by a certain ambiguity. She wants to argue that these tunes came to be particularly linked to witchcraft and female crime. Yet she also wants to stress how witches and wayward wives were part of a broader array of (mostly male) characters whose stories were sung to the same tunes. This leads us to my second question about the size of her sample and its relationship to ballad culture more generally. It is difficult to get a sense of exactly (or even roughly) how many ballads Williams has looked at overall, let alone the size of her particular sample. If I am not mistaken it comprises approximately twenty ballads. I have inferred this from three

tables in the second chapter, each of which lists a selection of ballads that were sung to one of the three tunes already singled out for attention. The first table, listing ballads sung to "Fortune my Foe," comprises a chronological list of twenty-six titles, of which three pertain to witchcraft, four to female murderers, and nine to the execution of male criminals, the remainder including accounts of monstrous wonders (1), strange occurrences (1), disasters (1), and godly ballads (3). In other words witches and murderesses are found in just a quarter of the ballads listed here and are outnumbered by hanged men. Indeed, "Fortune my Foe" was known as the hanging ballad because it was so closely associated with the punishment of male criminals and murderers. Furthermore, by Williams's own admission, the musical gestures that embodied the verbal excesses of witches were not unique to them but rather fulfilled a variety of functions.

Since this table contains just a "selection" of sources, the reader has no way of telling how many sources have been left out, which makes it impossible to calculate what proportion of all ballads sung to "Fortune my Foe" are devoted to women's transgressions. Likewise, the second table, which consists of twenty-one titles apparently sung to the tune of "Bragandary," does include six misogynistic ballads about women, including witches (1), harlots (2), domestic scolds (2), and monstrous women (1), but there are other themes, such as vice (3), the devil (3), and prophecy (2), that are also represented here and arguably have a similar relationship to the tune as do the verses about women. The third table includes twelve ballads sung to "The Ladies Fall." Doubtless because of the tune's title, there are proportionally more ballads about women in this table (6), in other words, half of the total, although only one of these is about witches (namely, the one titled "Damnable Practises" of 1619 from which Williams took the title for her own book).

As I have attempted to show here, there is something problematic about Williams's presentation of her research that makes it difficult to accept her conclusions uncritically. Aided by new databases and previous scholarship, she has evidently searched through a lot of ballads to find the ones that focus on dangerous women, and the fact that only three tunes are associated with this category seems to be a significant discovery. What we do not know from this clustering, however, is how many other ballads are also associated with these tunes and rely on the same musical gestures to heighten their effects. Such statistics are important because of the weight that she places on the effectiveness specifically of these three melodies in shaping and perpetuating a particular