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# "Old England of thy sins in time repent […]": Religious lexis and discourse in 17th century Broadside Ballads

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**Abstract**

This paper draws on the *Bodleian Allegro Catalogue* to examine a group of 17th religious broadside ballads. In particular I show that the Protestant broadside is a stylistically hybrid text where features of traditional ballads merge with 1) lexico-syntactic loans from the Holy Scriptures and 2) properties of religious prose style (i.e. interest in content, discourse cohesion, intrusive author). In the first part of my study I outline the specificity of the godly broadside as distinct from popular ballads. In the second part I focus on three apocalyptic broadsides and I analyse them in terms of discourse construction, collocation and prosodic features. Similarities in text organization highlight the use of formulaic patterns which reflect the Puritan stance in relation to the themes of repentance, God's Judgement and divine retribution. Borrowings from the language of the Prophetic Books, on the other hand, document the importance ascribed to intertextuality as a means of 1) enhancing the value of the ballad-content and 2) satisfying people's preference for themes they were already familiar with from their knowledge of the Bible or from their attendance of religious services. This latter aspect testifies to the major role played by the audience in the construction/representation of religious discourse.

**Key words:** 17th century, religious broadside ballads, discourse construction, intertextuality, audience

## 1. Introduction

In this paper I shall analyse religious terminology and discourse in 17th century English broadside ballads. Although traditional ballads are not the specific genre for the expression of the religious theme— as from the end of the 16th century psalms became the definitive godly songs— some ballads deal with religious matters for didactic purposes.

The stylistic analysis will show how conventional patterns of discourse construction and prosody determine the specificity of the godly ballad and place it halfway between popular ballads and authorial religious discourse[1]. The samples of ballads selected are taken from the Bodleian Library Ballads Corpus which went on line in 2004. This valuable collection contains over 30,000 ballads covering the period from the 16th to the 20th century. The on-line catalogue provides a scanned image of each ballad sheet together with ballad records describing the text of the songs in terms of title, subject, authors, publishers/printers and – where possible – date of publication.

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[1] In her book *Cheap Print and Popular Piety* Tessa Watt uses the expression 'godly ballads/songs' to refer to Protestant broadsides which circulated in the 16th and 17th century. I use and understand the term 'godly' in the same way.

1.1. *The circulation of broadside ballads in the 17th century*

In the 17th century the proliferation of the written word enormously accelerated the process of literary infusion and the dissemination of popular culture at all levels of society. This was made possible thanks to an increase in literacy. Still more important, in the 17th century «reading was taught before writing and it is therefore likely that many more rural people could understand a printed text than could sign their names to a Protestant Oath» (Watt 1991: 7). Finally, even if people could not read by themselves, they were used to buying printed works – particularly forms of cheap print – in the expectation that they would be read aloud to them when the opportunity arose. Reading aloud was a common practice of the time and it was only necessary to be in the presence of a reader of a text in order to gain access to its contents (Fox 2000: 43-44).

In the case of broadside ballads, the process of content-access and retention was made still easier by the nature of the genre itself. Broadside ballads were in fact not only texts to be read but primarily songs to be sung or even just images to be pasted on the wall. As Watt argues «it is in these oral and visual forms that the genre had the potential to reach a wider audience than its original buyers and 'literate readers'» (Watt 1991: 7). At that time, there was theoretically no man, woman or child who could not have access to a broadside ballad at least in its oral form, when it was sung aloud in the streets. Ballads were performed in alehouses, taverns, homes and at fairs – whenever a group of people gathered to discuss the day's events or to tell the tales of heroes and villains. As a form of popular literature they generally dealt with popular themes such as love, cuckolded husbands, betrayal, legendary heroes and natural wonders. This does not however mean that the religious topic was excluded. On the contrary, my examination of the Bodleian Library Ballad Corpus provides evidence of the extent to which Protestant culture appropriated popular ballads as a propaganda vehicle for the dissemination of the godly doctrine on a larger scale.

This practice has a long tradition in the history of the genre. Surviving ballads from the Middle Ages deal with biblical stories as documented by the 13th century *Judas* and *A Ballad of the Twelfth Day* and by the late-medieval songs *The Carnal and the Crane* (presenting a theological discussion between birds on the life of Jesus), *St Stephen and Herod* and *Dives and Lazarus*. As early as 1921 Leslie Pound highlighted the ecclesiastical stamp of the early ballads, hypothesising that either they were short narrative lyrics which emerged directly from the clericals in the context of their religious festivities and were then secularized in the hands of the minstrels for entertainment purposes, or they emerged from the minstrels and then the ecclesiasticals availed themselves of the type for biblical indoctrination. In either way, Pound was among the first to attribute to the Church a greater responsibility for the genesis and development of religious ballads: «If the modes of the Church were often utilized by the secular poetry, the contrary tendency, the adoption of what was popular by the Church, is also marked» (Pound 1921: 184). Literary historians have since confirmed the Church's appropriation of secular forms for its edifying purposes and have identified a continuity of practice running from the late Middle Ages to Protestant England (Greene 1977, King 1982, Watt 1991). As Watt (1991: 41) makes clear:

The first generation of Protestant reformers in England made no sharp break with pre-Reformation attitudes to traditional recreations. Their ballads, metrical psalms, interludes [...] were all attempts to appropriate pre-Reformation cultural forms in the service of Protestantism.

If psalms and sermons were confined to the parish church service, religious ballads met people in their everyday life and domestic environment, thereby reinforcing and supplementing the preacher's teaching (Walsham 1999). It should not be assumed, however, that the content of religious ballads completely reflected abstract theological concepts such as predestination or the prerequisites for communion. In line with the medieval movement to popularize biblical characters and tales, Tudor and Stuart broadsides were imbued with a practical and easily accessible kind of religion in the form of «role models, inspirational and apocalyptic stories, behavioural rules to become good Christians, guidance on the approach to death» (Watt 1991: 8). In Duffy's words, 17th century cheap print encapsulated that religion «for which poor men […] were prepared to part with money» (Duffy 1986: 43). It is from this perspective that the study of godly broadside ballads can be of particular interest to the historical linguist as well as to the historian of religion.

## 1.2. *Types of godly ballads*

The Bodleian Library Ballads Corpus documents a wide variety of godly ballad typologies, indicative of the religious tastes of the public. They include:
1.  Religious-political ballads.

These were polemical ballads intended to spread a nationalistic Protestantism and its corollary anti-Catholicism. Only a few Anti-Papist ballads were printed in the 17th century. The reason for their withdrawal from the printed market may be traced back to the political circumstances of the time. As Watt (1991: 90) claims «by the 1620s anti-popery was no longer simply a patriotic emotion directed against an external enemy, but a focus for discontent with the foreign policies of Charles I». Ballads of this kind were therefore unlikely to be printed but travelled around the country in oral or manuscript form. An example is provided by the ballad of 1643: *A warning to all priests and Jesuits by the example of two Masse-priests…whose execution was on Friday 1642*.
2.  Ballads for social reform.

These attack the wickedness of the age and present a catalogue of sins; the most common are usury, drunkenness, adultery, robbery and swearing. Examples of such ballads are: *A description of the age: very useful for all people […] to behold the vanity of this world* (1641); *A prospective glass for Christian to behold the Reigning of sin of this age* (1683-1696).
3.  Apocalyptic ballads.

These comprise a very wide category, which includes different subtypes of ballads, all calling for collective repentance: a) a group warning that the general Judgement Day is imminent (e.g. *Englands New Bell-Man*, dated 1658-1664; *A Looking Glass for all Christians*, dated 1663-1664); b) a group urging sinful England to repent by drawing comparisons with biblical cities destroyed for their covetousness (e.g. *Christs tears over Jerusalem,* 1674-1679); c) and a set of ballads presenting natural events and wonderful apparitions in the sky as prophetic signs of God's next punishment on England (e.g. *Newes from Hereford,* 1661).
4.  Aphoristic ballads.

These provide a set of moral precepts that should be followed in order to please God and obtain his grace. They were commonly structured either in the form of "the last dying speech of a parent giving advice to his/her children" or in the form of "a list of Admonitions for Good Christians". An example of the first kind is *An Hundred Godly*

*Lessons which a mother on her Death-Bed gave to her children […]* (1624) and an example of the second is *Good Admonitions or Wholesome Counsel Being good Instructions for these evil Times […]* (1666-1679) (see Würzbach 1990: 216).

      5.      Ballads on death and salvation.

These focus on the redemptive power of faith. They were usually last dying speeches addressed to God to obtain his mercy (e.g. *A very godly song entitled, The earnest petition of a faithful Christian, being Clarke of Bodnam, made upon his Death-bed*, still circulating in 1624).

      6.      Penitent Sinner Ballads.

These present the repentance speech of criminals or murderers at their execution. The songs are classified in the Bodleian Library Ballad Corpus as crime ballads, nonetheless the pervasive presence of godly concepts in their narrative shows the extent to which the borderline between godly and wordly balladry was far from clear-cut in the period. (e.g. *The Confession and Repentance of George Sandars* [1658-1644] and *Good People give an ear whilst a story I tell of twenty black tradesmen were brought up in hell* [1663]).

      7.      Scripture Ballads.

These offer a paraphrase of stories from the Old Testament and the Gospel. Their enduring presence in the 17th century bears witness to the importance ascribed to Biblical authority. One of the most popular ballads was *David and Betsheba* (1674-1679), as documented by its presence in the ballad partners stock lists after 1640 (see Watt 1991: 85).

Most of the ballad titles strike us for their length. This is understood by Würzbach (1990) as being a typical feature of the 16th and 17th century printed broadside. The written rendition, in fact, allowed for a detailed anticipation of the ballad content and its sub-genre (i.e. godly lessons, godly song, a looking glass) in a way that the traditional oral form was very unlikely to have done. Since this sort of metatextual advance information often included circumstantial details such as the name of participants or the place and time of the action, Würzbach utilizes the modern term "trailer" to refer to both the title and opening verse(s) of the street broadside. The intention of giving advance information combines with that of stimulating the public's interest in the product. In the long title «the ballad-monger gives details of the content, evokes the prevailing mood of the ballad, indicates the street-ballad sub-genre to be expected, and casts a bait for the recipient...» (Würzbach 1990: 81).

1.3. *The specificity of godly ballads*

The best way to introduce the specificity of religious discourse in godly ballads is to place it side by side with the discourse construction of traditional ballads. A rough visualisation of their graphic organisation is in fact sufficient to reveal their different degree of structural complexity and "heaviness". I shall compare the godly song *A Looking Glass for all true Christians* with the traditional ballad *Mattie Groves*[2].

    *A Looking Glass for all true Christians very useful and necessary for all people of what degree soever to look upon in these troublesome times of sorrow* (1663-1674)

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[2] The ballad is taken from F. Child's collection *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-1898). It tells the story of an adulterous love between Mattie Groves and Lord Arlen's wife.

(1)     heark heark methinks I hear a voice,
        Which said, the Lord made Man for his own choice
        And yet he will not **reconciled** be,
        To leave his sins and live **righteously**.
        Awake, awake thou mortal man from sleep.
        Repent thy sin, cry to the Lord and weep,
        for it is only he that must thee save, […]
        Therefore with **Nineve** let us repent,
        The Lord to us his **Messenger** hath sent.
        But all these warnings will not serve our turn,
        to make us leave our sins with speed and mourn […]
        The Lawyer he doth think upon his fee,
        The Usurer likewise on his money,
        The Glutton thinks at his deity cheer
        The Drunkard on his Tobacco and beer.
        And many grievous sinners more there are,
        and for to speak of all I do not dare; […]
        And when that day to many doth appear
        And see the Lord in **Judgement** then I fear
        Too late 'twill be for them to repent,
        With sorrow then their grief will still **augment** […]
        Methinks I see the Land is full of pride
        And also bent on **covetousness** beside,
        Which is a thing that doth offend the Lord,
        in **Scripture** we do find it is **abhor'd**. […]

*Mattie Groves* (1607-1641)

(2)     A holiday, a holiday
        The first one of the year
        Lord Arlen's wife came into church
        The gospel for to hear

        And when the meeting it was done
        She cast her eyes about
        And there she saw little Mattie Groves,
        Walking in the park.

        Come home with me Little Mattie Groves,
        Come home with me tonight
        Come home with me Little Mattie Groves
        And sleep with me tonight.

        Oh I can't come home I won't come home
        and sleep with you tonight
        By the rings on your fingers I can tell
        you are Lord Arlen's wife.
        […]

The very first thing to notice is that the godly ballad is introduced by an explanatory title which is intended to clarify the edifying purpose of the text. In the popular ballad, on the other hand, the title coincides with the name of the main character and there is no

reference to the end purpose of the story. The modern reader is led to infer that, unlike the religious ballad, *Mattie Groves* was a story told and sung with the sole purpose of entertaining the audience.

A second crucial distinction concerns the structure of the two ballads and the way in which it affects their content-presentation. Contrary to Richmond's definition of traditional ballads as «always stanzaic, either seven or eight rhymed couplets or quatrains rhyming *a,b,c,b,*» (Richmond 1989: 20-21), *A Looking Glass* presents no division into stanzas and verses are iambic pentameters, rhyming *a,a,b,b,c,c. Mattie Groves*, in contrast, shows the prototypical stanzaic organisation with an alternation of iambic tetrameter and trimeter (the common ballad metre). What is interesting is that while the simple structural organisation of the popular ballad fits the requisites of a song, the "heavy" versification of the godly ballad reveals an interest in content, which is closer to the argumentative style of printed didactic texts than to oral balladry (Cecconi 2009). As a matter of fact, while the stanzaic construction – with its repeated melody – imposes a particular set of constraints on the representation of the events, so that the author has to take care to express just one single action in each stanza in order to combine music and theme (Rubin 1995), the loose structure of *A Looking Glass* leaves plenty of room for explanatory details, background information and authorial comments. Its more complex construction partly reflects the spreading of the Calvinist belief concerning the primacy of God's word and content over music. As a result, while *Mattie Groves* presents the fast-moving and impersonal style of traditional ballads with abrupt transitions and ambiguities, *A Looking Glass* appears as a rather hybrid text combining features of balladry, such as rhyme pattern, parallelism and a few words belonging to traditional popular rhymes (e.g. "Glutton", "Drunkard", "beer"), with properties of the religious prose style, such as interest in content, an intrusive author, and a certain degree of discourse cohesion. Along with the frequent ballad-connectors "and" and "but", in fact, the godly broadside also relies on the use of the conjunctions "if" (4), "therefore" (3), "because" (1) and "besides" (1), which are almost totally absent in *Mattie Groves* (except for 1 occurrence of "if").

Finally, differences in text-length, word-length and word-choice contribute to the definition of the godly song as a *sui generis* kind of ballad. While *Mattie Groves* consists of 490 words, *A Looking Glass* contains 1022 words. In accordance with the lexical features of popular balladry, *Mattie Groves* presents a majority of monosyllabic words of concrete meaning ("wife", "church", "park", "eyes", "home", "sleep", "rings"), with instances of verbal repetition in the same stanza. *A Looking Glass*, on the other hand, shows many polysyllabic, abstract words belonging to the formal, religious register: "reconciled", "righteously", "troublesome", "messenger", "Nineveh", "Judgement", "Christians", "Scripture", "covetousness" "judgement". Despite its higher average word-length, however, a computational analysis with *Wordsmith Tools* shows that the type/token ratio in *A Looking Glass* (36.34) is lower than that in *Mattie Groves* (39.80). This is due to the repetition of keywords such as "Lord" (20 times), "God" (7 times), "repent" (7 times), "think" (7 times) , "man" (6 times) dispersed throughout the text. The finding is indicative of the extent to which even the religious ballad author takes care to combine lexical specificity with aids to content retention. After all, *A Looking Glass* too was ultimately a song to be sung.

## 2. Apocalyptic ballads

I shall analyse apocalyptic ballads in terms of discourse construction, collocation of religious words and prosodic features. Similarities in the structuring of the information will reflect the Puritan stance in relation to the themes of repentance, God's Judgement and divine retribution. In this regard, I shall take into account three ballads: *Englands New Bell-Man* (1658-1664)*; Newes from Hereford or a wonderful and terrible Earthquake* (1661) and *Christs tears over Jerusalem* (1674-1679). A careful reading will show the extent to which each song borrows patterns and themes from Old Testament stories of cities destroyed for their sins and re-adapts them to the verse structure, rhythm and musicality characteristic of the genre. This reveals the way in which godly ballads merge a long oral tradition of popular songs with the authority of God's written word in the Holy Scriptures.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is worth pointing out that, although modern readers may be struck by the catastrophic, threatening nature of prophetic discourse, in the 17th century people were quite familiar with it. Hearing and reading the Bible was part of «public duties in the public congregation» (Green 1996: 447); it was prescribed not only in church but also in good households as part of domestic religious education. All three ballads organise their discourse around two main sub-themes: *Exhortation to Repentance* and *God's Judgements on the Land*. The two titles occur in Joel (1), Jeremiah (4), Zephaniah (2), Isaiah (24, 29)[3]

(3)     Awake awake O **England**,
       **sweet England** now awake,
       And to thy prayers speedily
       do thou thy self betake,
       (*Englands New Bell-Man,* 1658-1664)

(4)     […]  Repent **fair England**, now repent,
       repent while you have space,
       And do not like Jerusalem,
       despise Gods proffered grace
       (*Christs tears over Jerusalem,*1674-1679)

(5)     **Old England** of thy sins in time repent
       Before the wrath of God to thee is sent,
       for such great wonders in late time have been,
       The like before I think was never seen
       (*Newes from Hereford,* 1661)

The religious songs, however, differ from the Prophetic books in their choice of addressee. The vocatives "O nation" (Zeph 2:1), "O nations" (Isa 34:1), "Ye inhabitants of the land" (Joel 1:2), "O Israel" (Jer 4:1), "O Jerusalem" (Jer 4:14) that we find in the *King James Bible* (1611) are replaced in the ballads by "O England, Sweet England", "Old England", "Fair England". This change in the paradigmatic axis is indicative of the traditional association between England and Jerusalem, two nations privileged by God.

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[3] All biblical quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: containing the Old and New Testaments in the authorized King James version* (1960).

In a late Elizabethan sermon a Bristol preacher declared «Blessed is Israel, because the Lord is their God and blessed is England because the Lord is their God» (in Collinson, 1988: 11). The implication is that as the Lord has suffered from the iniquity of Israel, his elect nation, and has taken His revenge on it, so he will do with England for its sinful conduct.

What is interesting linguistically is that the vocatives in the ballads are not just a mere re-adaptation of the neutral, biblical address-forms "O Israel", "O nations". They are, in fact, complex noun phrases pre-modified by positive evaluative adjectives ("fair", "sweet", "old")[4] which highlight the emotional involvement of the author and show his emphatic relationship with the land he belongs to. In this sense, contrary to the common definition of the ballad style as impersonal, the godly song reveals the author's ideological stance, thus providing a patriotic key to the interpretation of the ballad from the very beginning. If, on the one hand, the address to the nation is part of the well-established pattern of prophetic discourse, it is also true that the iterated, value-laden appeal to England reflects the strong sense of national community which characterises English Protestantism (Collinson 1988: 1-2).

In *Englands New Bell-Man* the exhortation to repentance combines with another feature of biblical discourse: the alarm theme. The Bell-Man rings his metaphorical bell to awake people for the Judgement Day when God will come to punish sinful nations. Regarding this theme one can compare examples from the Scriptures: «*Awake* ye drunkards and weep […]» (Joel 1:5), «Awake, awake, stand up O Jerusalem, which hast drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his fury » (Isa 51:17); «Blow ye trumpet in Zion and *sound* an *alarm* in my holy mountain» (Joel 2:1) with the first lines of the ballad: «*Awake awake* O England Sweet England now awake […]». While in the biblical examples the focus is on content, in the ballad the alarm theme is articulated in such a way that words and musicality successfully merge in verse-construction. The key-term *awake* is repeated three times within a chiasmic framework where the imperative form alternates with the vocative *O England/Fair England*. Its repetition acts both as a phonological foregrounding of the alarm theme and as an important aid to memorization. Moreover the rhyme pattern *a,b,a,b,* makes *awake* rhyme with *betake* thus enhancing musicality and helping word-retention through sound parallelism. It goes almost without saying that since ballads are songs, prosodic features are important as devices to reinforce the godly content in people's minds.

In accordance with the *exhortation to repentance* theme, the first stanza of the three ballads is characterised by at least one occurrence of the key-word "repent". The verb in the imperative form collocates with the vocative *fair England*, the same structure which occurs in the Old Testament, where about 60% of the vocatives "O Israel" and "O Jerusalem" co-occur with the imperative construction: «O Israel return unto the Lord, thy God» (Hosea 14: 1); Be thou instructed, O Jerusalem lest my soul depart from thee (Jer 6:1); «O house of Israel.[...] repent and turn yourselves from all your transgressions» (Ezek 18: 30). Another common collocate of *repent* in broadsides are time adverbials which stress the urgency of asking for God's mercy before it is too late. Since apocalyptic ballads generally reflect the Protestant view that people are experiencing the last days before the final Judgement, time adverbials function as *memento mori*:

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[4] Also the adjective "old" assumes positive evaluative connotations as it refers to the long history of the nation.

(6)     Let all Good Christian people
        **repent** therefore **in time** […]
        the trumpets shall sound on sudden
        and no man knows how soon
        (*Englands New Bell-Man,* 1658-1664)

(7)     **Repent** fair England, now **repent**,
        **repent while you have space**
        and do not like Jerusalem
        despise Gods proffered grace
        (*Christs tears over Jerusalem,* 1674-1679)

(8)     Except by prayer we **speedly repent**,
        And of our wicked sins for to relent […]
        *(Newes from Hereford,* 1661)

In close proximity to the word *repent* is the connector *therefore*, which is the main structuring device in the three ballads. The underlying pattern common to the examples is that the divine prophecies will be soon fulfilled, *therefore* England needs to repent:

(9)     […]
        The Lord thy God is coming
        within the day to clear,
        Repent **therefore** O England
        the day it draweth neere
        (*Englands New Bell-Man,* 1658-1664)

(10)    Lest he [God] forsake thee quite
        and turn away his face,
        Because like to Jerusalem
        Thou hast despise his Grace
        Repent **therefore** O England
        repent while thou hast space
        (*Christs tears over Jerusalem*, 1674-1679)

(11)    The famine so shall poverish to the Land,
        Thus shall we feel Gods wrathful heavy hand
        These are but warning pieces to you all,
        **Therefore** repent good people great and small
        (*Newes from Hereford,* 1661)

The frequent occurrence of *therefore* in godly ballads can be traced back to its frequency in the Old Testament which contains 59% of the occurrences of the word in the entire Bible. As a matter of fact, although the biblical Semitic style is mainly paratactical – a succession of short sentences linked together by simple co-ordinate conjunction – the Hebrew language possesses words for *if, because* and *therefore* (Caird, 1980: 117). Consider the following examples : «The earth shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble; the sun and the moon shall be dark […]. *Therefore* also now, saith the Lord, turn ye to me with all your heart […]» (Joel 2: 11-12); «[...] they are all estranged from me through their idols. *Therefore* say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols» (Ezek 14: 5-6).

Both in the Bible and in the ballads *therefore* functions as a mark of logical inevitability stressing the moral necessity for human repentance. By means of the connector *therefore* the exhortation to observance is linked to the other main theme of apocalyptic ballads: *God's Judgements on the Land*. The content of the divine judgement is presented through a prophetic mode of discourse which, by its very nature, is castigatory, feeding on catastrophe or threatened catastrophe (Collinson, 1988: 88). As a result, both in the Prophetic books and in the apocalyptic ballads religious words have a semantic preference for terms referring to disaster and punishment.

In the first ballad the warning to England is determined by the approach of the Judgement Day: «the day it draweth neere». A similar kind of prophetic sentence occurs in the pages of the Old Testament. By prophesising the destruction of Babylon, Isaiah warns people saying: «the day of the Lord is at hand» (13: 1,6); and so does Joel: «let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand» (2: 1,1) and Ezekiel: «For the day is near, even the day of the Lord is near» (30: 3). On the example of the Old Testament prophecy the representation of the Judgement Day in *Englands New Bell-Man* is accomplished through a set of collocates which inscribe it within a semantic field of destruction and eternal damnation:

(12)  The **dreadful day of vengeance**
      Is shortly now at end
      When **fearful burning fire**
      shall **wast both Sea and Land**
      And all mens hearts shall fail them
      to see such things appear […]
      **No succour help nor comfort**
      for them shall then appear […]
      The works of every creature […]
      Shall follow them together
      in that **most dreadful way**
      And no respect of persons
      shall at that day appear […]
      The wicked shall be **damned**
      **to sorrow, pain and grief**
      **In boiling brands of brimstone**
      with **doleful heavy** cheat […]

A comparison between this short passage and the Prophetic books reveals the extent to which images and style have been borrowed from the biblical source.

Table 1. A Comparison between *Englands New Bell-Man* and the *King James Bible*

| Broadside Ballad | King James Bible |
| --- | --- |
| The dreadful day of vengeance is shortly now at hand | Alas for the day of the Lord is at hand and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come (Joel 1: 15). |
| When fearful burning fire | […] their land shall be soaked with blood and their dust made fat with fatness. For it |

| | |
|---|---|
| shall waste both Sea and Land | is the day of the Lord's vengeance (Isaiah 34: 7-8) |
| And all mens hearts shall fail them to see such things appear | And I will make the rivers dry […] and I will make the land waste and all that is therein (Ezekiel 30: 12) |
| The Seas and Rivers running | Therefore shall all hands be faint and every man's heart shall melt (Isaiah 13: 7) |
| Shall roar in grievous wise, | |
| | And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea (Isaiah 5: 30) |
| | And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon and in the stars; and upon the earth distresses of nations, with perplexity; the seas and the waves roaring (Luke 21: 25) |
| The Beasts in Pastures feeding | The beasts of the field cry also unto thee; for the rivers of waters are dried up, and the fire hath devoured the pastures (Joel 1: 20) |
| Shall strain forth grievous cries | |
| The wicked shall be damned to sorrow, pain and grief In boiling brands of brimstone with doleful heavy cheat | And they shall be afraid: pangs and sorrows shall take hold of them; they shall be in pain […] their faces shall be as flames (Isaiah 13:8) |

The ballad shares the hyperbolic language of prophetic discourse, where the Lord's Judgement on nations is depicted in terms of cosmic collapse. As Caird (1980: 112) points out «the prophets do not make carefully qualified predictions that the inhabitants of the nation will be destroyed unless they repent. They make unqualified warnings of doom, accompanied by unqualified calls to repentance». This is also true for apocalyptic ballads where the audience is systematically threatened with fearful predictions.

A distinctive character of the godly ballad style arises from its phonetic potential. In ballads content and images are articulated in such a way that meaning is reinforced by prosodic construction. This is possible thanks to a particular phonetic device called phonosymbolism (Leech 1969: 98). In sound symbolism the thinness/sonority of sounds is conventionally associated with an impression of softness/hardness and is related to the expression of emotions. Ivan Fónagy has been among the first to recognize the crucial role of iconicity in the functioning of language as a system intimately associated with the human body and unconsious processes. According to his "dual encoding theory" every

spoken utterance encodes two different kinds of information: 1) the linguistic content expressed by lexis and grammar and 2) emotions/attitudes conveyed mainly by articulatory features (Fónagy 1971, 2000). For the analysis of sound symbolism in ballads, I shall refer to Leech's classification of English consonants on a scale of increasing hardness and to his labelling of plosives as the "hardest sounds". The following extract demonstrates the degree to which the repetition of /p/t/k/, /b/d/g in consonant clusters reflects and enhances the gravity and solemnity of the prophetic content.

(13)    The wi**ck**ed shall be **d**amne**d**
       **t**o sorrow, **p**ain and **g**rief
      In **b**oiling **br**and**s** of **b**rims**t**one
      with **d**oleful heavy chea**t**
      Re**p**en**t** therefore O En**gl**an**d**
      the **d**ay i**t d**raweth neere
      (*Englands New Bell-Man,* 1658-1664)

Instances of phonosymbolism also occur in the first verse of the ballad as we can see from the alliteration of the dental /d/ and its combination with the hard affricate /dʒ/ in "vengeance" (Table 1). What in Isaiah is "the day of the Lord's vengeance" (34:8) in the ballad becomes "The *d*rea*d*ful *d*ay of vengeance". In a similar fashion, what the Prophets of the Old Testament describe as "a fire" (Joel 2:3) or "fire of jealousy" (Zeph 1:18; 3:8) in the ballad becomes "fearful burning fire". In the complex noun phrase the negative evaluative adjectives function semantically and prosodically as intensifiers of destruction and eternal damnation. For example, the voiceless /f/ tends to be associated with a sense of 'hardness' because of the less relaxed articulation typical of voiceless sounds (Leech 1969: 99). Its repetition and combination with the plosive /b/ enhance articulatory tension. In the same broadside, the first line of the fourth stanza, «the seas rivers running shall roar in grievous wise», echoes Isaiah's image of the 'roaring of the sea' (5: 30) used to describe God's destruction of Jerusalem. What is new in the ballad is the way in which the threatening semantic component of the vision is reinforced by the alliteration of the consonant /r/ which phonetically echoes the deep and loud noise of seas: «the seas *r*ivers *r*unning shall *r*oar in g*r*ievous wise». Phonosymbolists generally agree as to the unpleasant character of the phoneme /r/. Fónagy (1991) accounts for its masculine and quarrelsome nature, Tsur (1992) considers it an aggressive consonant along with /g/ and Whissell (1999) correlates it with a sense of activation and nastiness as opposed to the passive sounds produced by the more tender consonants /l/ and /m/. The phoneme /r/ is also dominant in the next couple of verses: «The Beasts in Pastures feeding/shall **str**ain forth **gr**ievous **cr**ies», where the phonesthemes *str-, gr-* and *cr-* evoke a sense of disintegration and desperation which enacts catastrophic change[5]. What is more, the syntactic parallelism between the lines «shall roar in grievous wise/shall strain forth grievous cries» contributes to the foregrounding of the devastating effects of God's

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[5] Phonesthemes are small parts of words associated with some general meaning. The term was coined in 1930 by J.R. Firth (1930: 184) to refer to the systematic pairing of form and meaning in language. Common phonesthemes in the English language are the initial pairs *fl-*, which is expressive of movement and is typical of words such as *flap, flare, flee* and *gr-* relating to something unpleasant as in *grim, grisly, grotty, grotesque,* or relating to complaint as in *grumble, groan, grunt, grievous* (Waugh 2000: 33). I would also add the cluster *cr-* as occurring in words like *crack, crash, crock, crop* and *str-* as occurring in words such *strife, strike, straggly, strain, strap.*

vengeance on nature. It may be seen that the way in which iconicity works in ballads at the phonological, lexical and syntactic level is reflective of the extent to which form and meaning are deeply interrelated in language (Firth 1935, Violi 2000). By means of word-internal structure and cross-word association the audience is helped in the memorization of the song as well as in the retention and learning of its religious message.

In the second ballad, *Newes from Hereford,* the *God's Judgements* theme is expressed through the traditional association between earthquake and divine punishment. People at the time were familiar with this kind of interpretation as in many pages of the Old Testament an earthquake announced the coming of God to judge the wicked: «The earth shall quake before them; the heavens shall tremble» (Joel 2: 10); «the earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard and shall be removed like a cottage» (Isaiah 24: 20). However, while in the Prophetic books the earthquake is usually part of a cosmic quake and involves the whole universe, in the ballad the natural phenomenon is restricted to England. Again this is in tune with the ethnocentric vision of early modern English society, according to which England is the designated place of God and the focus of His redeeming force (Collinson 1988: 2).

An interesting peculiarity of this ballad regards the combination of the traditional prophetic language with forms of news discourse (Raymond 2003, Cecconi 2009). The song consists of a factual reportage of the event accompanied by a godly interpretation of it. As Watt (1991: 46-47) claims: «every event was still seen as the active work of God's hand in the world, and it is almost impossible to find a straight 'news' ballad which doesn't refer to the greater 'religious' significance of the individual secular event». The successful interplay of journalistic reportage and sermonizing editorial was ensured by the coalition of church and publishers, who exploited people's taste for sensationalism and turned 'strange news' into occasions for preaching. Walsham (1999: 44) recounts the publishers' practice of paying ghost-writers to produce edifying verses on disastrous events or to rewrite versions of outlandish happenings and bestow a suitable exhortation upon them.

The first stanza of *Newes from Hereford* is characterised by the traditional exhortation to repentance, where the author urges England to read the wonders as signs of God's next punishment on the land; the following verses are dedicated to a detailed report of the events:

(14)   About two of the clock t'th Afternoon,
       There did arise a violent storm right soon
       […]

       But presently it overcast again
       At six or seven o'clock with might and main
       Towards the Evening it began to hail
       […]

In accordance with the hyperbolic language of prophetic discourse as well as with the sensationalism of 17th century news style, the balladeer indulges in catastrophic descriptions:

(15)   The hailstones fall as big as Eggs were seen

> The like in England nere before hath been
> No tyles nor stones could make §[6] hardness yield
> It did destroy the cattel in the field

In the final part of the ballad the author's language echoes that of the beginning. In this way prophetic discourse acts as a framework to the whole song (Cecconi 2009: 152). Religious language is reintroduced through a set of associations between the wonders described and divine punishment. In this regard the word *God* collocates with terms belonging to the negative field of vengeance, anger and inexorable justice.

(16)    Old England of thy sins in time repent
        Before the **wrath of God** to thee is sent
        […]
        What man is able in our English Land
        The meaning of these things to understand?
        It doth be token **anger great from God,**
        Now he will smite us with **his heavy Rod**
        […]

        The famine so shall poverish to the Land
        Thus shall we feel **Gods wrathful heavy hand**
        […]

The noun phrases in the text recall similar collocations in the Old Testament: «the day of the Lord's wrath» (Zep 1: 18); «the rod of my anger» (Isa 10: 5); «in the wrath of the Lord of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger» (Isa 13:18). It is worth noticing that in the entire Bible the Lord-feeling semantic relation presents the collocation "Lord"-"anger" as being one of the most frequent (138 occurrences) after "Lord"-"mercy" (153 occurrences), followed by "Lord"-"wrath" (75 occurrences). Furthermore in the ballad the end-rhyme pattern helps to create further semantic links between words. Consider, for example, the semantic/phonetic connection between "God-Rod", which reinforces the idea of an implacable Lord: «It doth be token anger great from God/Now he will smite us with his heavy Rod». Taking inspiration from the Old Testament tradition, apocalyptic ballads insist on the representation of the Lord as Judge and spread the fear of His judgements in an attempt to move people to repentance. In this sense, the gruesome picture of the *Dies Ire* drawn from medieval theology becomes an essential component of formulaic discourse in godly ballads.

I would like to conclude my inquiry by looking at the England/Jerusalem theme which has emerged several times in the course of the analysis. In *Christs tears over Jerusalem* the identification between the two nations is made explicit through the collocation of the terms "Jerusalem" and "England" in the title: *Christs tears over Jerusalem: a caveat for England to call to God for mercy*. The comparison continues through the structural juxtaposition of the two words in the body of the ballad. The first part is an account of God's vengeance on Jerusalem after Christ's crucifixion and the second is a warning to England which is now being similarly plagued:

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[6] The letter in the manuscript is difficult to decipher. It could be the abbreviation of "that" or "the".

(17)   *Jerusalem*
       […]
       Therefore the days shall come
       thy enemies shall rise,
       And trench thee in on every side
       regarding not thy crys:
       Thy **strong and stately Towers***,*
       in wrath they shall confound,
       And make thy **sumptuous** buildings all,
       lie equal with the ground […]

        *England*
       […]
       But soon hast thou forgot
       his [Gods] favour in the same
       Which afterwards most grievously
       his wrath did so enflame:
       That then he plagued thee
       with Pestilence and Death,
       Whereby in Country and Town
       a number lost their breath.

Again, it is interesting to notice the extent to which the representation of Jerusalem's destruction in the ballad echoes that in the Old Testament:

(18)   And I will camp against thee round about, and will lay siege against thee with a mount and I will raise forts against thee. And thou shalt be brought down and shalt speak out of the ground […] Thou shalt be visited of the Lord of hosts with earthquake and great noise, with storm and tempest and the flame of devouring fire. (Isa 29: 3-6)

The identification of England with the sinful nation is also present in *Englands New Bell-Man* through the repetition of the word "towers", which in the Scriptures symbolises the earthly prosperity of the nation:

(19)   Why dost thou put thy confidence,
       in **strong and stately Towers***,*
       Why takest thou such pleasure,
       in building **sumptuous Towers**
       […]

In accordance with the musical requirement of balladry, the metaphor of the towers is articulated in such a way that sound effects and rhythm assist in the retention of the symbolic image. The term occurs twice in end-rhyme position and is pre-modified by adjectives with initial /s/: *strong and stately* in the same line and *sumptuous* two lines later. The choice of *s*-initial adjectives appears to be far from arbitrary as in the Bible *strong* is a frequent attributive adjective of *tower/s*[7]. In *Englands New Bell-man* and

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[7] The analysis of the occurrences of the word "tower(s)" in the on-line *King James Version* (http://quod.lib.umich.edu/k/kjv/about.html) shows that the word is not usually pre-modified by attributive

*Christs tears over Jerusalem* the authors have amplified the "strong tower" image of the Holy Scriptures by adding a conventional set of adjectives which share phonetic and semantic features. *Strong, stately* and *sumptuous* are all introduced by the fricative /s/ and stress the *opulence* of the buildings as symbol of people's corruption. This word-pattern documents the influence of formulaic discourse at the same time confirming the interrelatedness of form and meaning in the encoding of the religious message.

## 3. Conclusion

Although popular ballads are not a specific genre of religious discourse, my analysis has attempted to show how they nonetheless function as an effective means for the spreading of Protestant themes. In the first part of my study, the linguistic comparison between traditional ballads and religious broadsides reveals the specificity of the latter in terms of a more argumentative discourse construction, text length and word-length, the three aspects being strongly related to the printed character of the broadside. In the second part, the stylistic analysis of the apocalyptic sub-genre shows how images and themes from the *King James Bible* are borrowed and combined with phonetic features of the oral style.

A careful reading of the broadside ballads brings to the surface several aspects of Protestant teaching: the need for repentance, the influence of biblical prophecies in the interpretation of natural events, the representation of God as wrathful Judge, the appeal to the feeling of national community and the vision of England as the elect nation. All these topics are represented through a set of recurring images which are responsible for a certain uniformity in discourse construction. In Parry's terms this kind of «formulaic discourse» is what the (pre-literate) audience expects to find in godly broadside ballads and is therefore what the writer/performer needs to follow in order to meet the audience's approbation (Duffin 2004: 138)[8]. This doesn't mean that the ballad-author lacks individuality. Innovation is vital in the text but the meaning attached to the new element must be co-constructed by both the writer and the audience in relation to the authority of the Scriptures. Parry (1971) and Duffin (2004) talk in terms of an aesthetic agreement existing between singer and public and of a continuous negotiation between the two. Under the impact of the 16th and 17th century printed market this sort of dual partnership extends so as to include new operating forces in the process of production and reception (Walshman 1999: 44). By means of illustration, publishers assumed a leading role in broadside composition. Since they hired semi-professional writers to write pamphlets and ballads for social consumption, they had their say as to the topic and narrative ingredients to be inserted in the text. Given their material interests, however, their requirements ultimately conformed to the readers' preferences and expectations. In this sense, their intrusion into the singer-audience agreement enhanced rather than

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adjectives, the only cases being the collocates "strong" (6 occurrences), "high" (8 occurrences) and "mighty" (1 occurrence).

[8] In order to establish the critical authority of the audience, Duffin draws upon Parry's oral formulaic theory of composition and applies it to the Scots ballads. On discussing the relationship between the poet and the cultural tradition, Parry claims that: «The oral poet expresses only ideas for which he has a fixed means of expression. He is by no means the servant of his diction [...] but the style he uses is not his at all: it is the creation of a long line of poets or even an entire people » (1971: 270). Duffin concludes that if the formulaic diction belongs to an entire people and the poet is constrained by that diction, then it is the audience who authorise new elements of the style which can be accommodated within the ballad (2004: 138).

diminished the critical authority of the latter and contributed to the maintenance of the oral tradition. The practice was consistent with Fox's claim that in Early Modern England the oral repertoire and print formed a «dynamic continuum, each feeding in and out of the other to the development and nourishment of both» (Fox 2000: 50).

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