

'Provisions being scarce and pale death drawing nigh, / They'd try to cast lots to see who should die': The Justification of Shipwreck Cannibalism in Popular Balladry

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Abstract

Ballads actively shaped contemporary popular mentalities and through analysing ballads historians are presented with a world of propaganda and persuasion, aimed at a broad spectrum of society from literate to illiterate. Nineteenth-century ballads describing shipwrecks highlight the moral ambiguities present in extreme life-or-death situations. Many such ballads teach that survival cannibalism was rational, pragmatic, civilised and should be actively encouraged. This article demonstrates how ballads placed cannibalism into a chivalrous context, allowed sailors to vicariously experience the events thereby learning a prescribed 'ritual' to follow and made breaking the anthropophagic taboo socially acceptable, even virtuous.

In fictitious ballad narratives, cannibalism is a test of virtue as one person offers their body as sustenance to preserve a starving friend. It is not a horrific departure from civilised attitudes, but a heroic self-sacrifice. Ballads recounting real events of shipwreck cannibalism helped to promote the 'civilised cannibalism' ritual of drawing lots to select the victim, placing anthropophagy within a democratic, equitable process. Shipwreck cannibalism ballads offer a contrast to other European descriptions of cannibalism, as the sailor-cannibals are never presented with any of the traits associated with the imagined, non-European cannibal of colonial discourse.

Keywords: ballads; cannibalism; shipwreck; nineteenth century; anthropophagy; sailors

Nineteenth-century British broadside ballads describing shipwrecks often present cannibalism not only as an acceptable practice but as a moral imperative. This is a notable difference to representations of cannibalism in other cultural discourses; particularly European imperialist doctrines in which descriptions of cannibalism as a cultural practice were used as moral justifications for colonial intrusion (**Banivanua-mar, 2010: 262**). In recent years, street literature has become increasingly valued as one of the best insights into popular historical mentalities. The effectiveness of broadside ballads for facilitating this insight is that they were ubiquitous in urban populations and their impact widespread (**Hepburn, 2000, vol 1: 63**). The appeal of broadside ballads was their accessibility. They were inexpensive and, by combining the textual with the visual and the aural, they were accessible to a broader cross-section of society, including the semi-literate or the completely illiterate (**Fumerton, 2006: 133; Roud, 2014: 1**). In the maritime community, books, tales and ballads all functioned as important means of communication, education and entertainment (**Rediker, 1987: 158**). Ballads did not merely illustrate popular opinions by holding a mirror up to British society (**Davey, 2017: 46**). Rather, they were also instrumental in shaping their audience's perception of the world. Ballads about emigrant shipwrecks, for instance, were often at least partly didactic in purpose, reminding audiences that death might come at any time and a constant state of preparedness for meeting one's maker was vital (**Reid, 2013: 142**). It has been argued that sailors were ideal ballad consumers: irregular opportunities to use their income meant that, temporarily, they had a little extra money to spend, little room to carry books, often had an interest in music, and a lot of time on their hands (**Miller, 2012: 250**). Chapbooks and ballad-sheets taught many under-privileged people in society to read and sustained the practice of literacy in those unable to afford books (**Shepard, 1973: 110**). Their influence on the urban population in particular was significant. This might not be immediately obvious, as the ultimate fate for most ballads – one unavoidable for inexpensive paper – was often being ignominiously repurposed as pipe kindling, or paper for use in the privy (**Hehmeyer, 2012: 11**). However, this allows a broad generalisation to be made: the extant ballads which have managed to survive the test of time are likely to be those which were most numerous and, therefore, probably most popular and often reprinted.

Shipwrecks are crises which test social conventions in isolation from the conditions that normally support them; assumptions about divine Providence, national character, gender roles and civilised behaviour are thrown into sharp definition (**Lincoln, 1997: 155**). Shipwreck accounts were of immense interest to a popular readership in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and accounts were quickly published following a wreck (**Ibid**). Street literature shipwreck accounts held several purposes:

some informed travellers of the risks they would have to face at sea; others appear to have formed part of public mourning; and some offered readers practical hints on survival in desperate circumstances (**ibid: 155; 159**). Margarette Lincoln argues that shipwreck narratives (though a minor genre) yield significant insights into contemporary popular culture and deserve wider attention (**ibid: 172**). I wish to contribute to this by including ballads in the source base to be considered. Ballads fulfil many of the same aims as published accounts, but their key differences lie in the manner of their dissemination and in the personal way in which their audience experienced their narrative. In his classic study, Brian Simpson suggested that ballads describing 'the custom of the sea' instructed starving sailors on how to survive shipwrecks (**Simpson, 1994: 141**). I believe this argument can be taken further.

One of the most significant functions of ballads was the possibility they offered for the vicarious experience of disaster. Broadside ballads market variable role-speculation to their consumers. Singers try out identities, taking them on and casting them off as the song proceeds (**Fumerton, 2002: 504**). Patricia Fumerton argues that this is not theatrical role-playing but a vicariously or metonymically 'lived' subjectivity (**ibid: 512**). Role-speculation was experienced by singing the various parts and, for the audience, by listening and, especially, singing along (**Fumerton, 2003: 227**). Singing a ballad in the persona of someone desperately trying to survive a shipwreck allows for safe participation in the disaster. This article discusses how those hearing or singing a ballad vicariously experienced the extreme situations, in which social norms were inverted, and cannibalism was morally acceptable. I will undertake a close reading of fictitious ballad narratives which place cannibalism into a chivalric context, and ballads recounting actual events which emphasise the drawing of lots to maintain social order and encourage civilised behaviour.

Many themes which appear in nineteenth-century shipwreck cannibalism ballads are prefigured in earlier works. *The Oxfordshire Garland* from the mid-eighteenth-century uses cannibalism as a device for encouraging heroic, self-sacrificial behaviour. In this ballad, a young woman is kidnapped by a merchant. The ship is wrecked in a storm and everyone onboard perishes except for the lady and one sailor. The audience is left to assume that this was divine intervention deciding their fate, and that only this sailor was worthy of being saved. Storms and shipwreck were often interpreted as a divine punishment as the story of the Flood would have been highly familiar to the contemporary audience (**Lincoln, 1997: 160**). The sailor's virtue is proven when they are washed ashore on an uninhabited island and eventually begin to starve. The sailor offers his own body to save the lady: 'if my flesh your hunger would suffice, / Pray take and eat your fill' (**Bodleian, ca. 1736-63**). His only request is that they pray

first. While they are praying a ship appears and they are rescued. Last-minute salvation after an appeal to delay anthropophagy is common in fictional ballad narratives. The victim, who is often selected by lots, begs for one more day or climbs the mast to search one last time for a sail – which is the case in the ballad *The Ship in Distress* (Ashton, 1891: 45). Paul Cowdell argues that, in ballads where cannibalism is postponed and then the protagonists are saved, it is possible that the aspiration not to be reduced to cannibalism was highly significant because the danger of cannibalism was such a reality of life at sea (Cowdell, 2010: 733). However, at least in this ballad, it seems that the decision to delay cannibalism is not because of any fear of ‘becoming’ a cannibal and acquiring the cultural attributes that were assumed to accompany this. The anthropophagic act does not occur in this ballad, but not because it is morally repulsive. The sailor’s offer to die to preserve the lady’s life, which would turn her into a cannibal, is instead presented as a noble gesture. Cannibalism is placed into a chivalrous context. Significantly, it is only after the self-sacrificial offer is made that help appears. This concept of self-sacrifice, which is extolled as a noble virtue, becomes even more noteworthy when considering ballads relating the ritual of shipwreck cannibalism.

There are numerous examples of survival cannibalism following shipwrecks in the nineteenth century: the *Stefano* (1875), the *Mignonette* (1884), *La Méduse* (1810), and the ill-fated Franklin expedition to the Arctic during the late 1840s (Tannahill, 1996: 196; 192). In many cases, lots were reportedly drawn to decide who should die to preserve their crewmates’ lives. This practice is reflected in ballads. The early nineteenth-century ballad, *The Silk Merchant’s Daughter*, for instance, tells the story of a lady boarding a ship in disguise to find the man she loves. During the voyage, the ship springs a leak and sinks. The ballad describes how, with ‘Provisions being scarce and pale death drawing nigh,’ the survivors ‘cast lots to see who should die’ (Bodleian, ca. 1820). The ritual of drawing lots is then described: ‘The lots they went round, and all cast about / [And] every young Seaman his lot he drew out’ (Ibid). The deadly lot falls to the young woman. They then drew lots to select who should kill the victim: ‘the lots they went round by one two & three / For to see who among us the butcher should be’ (Ibid). The equality of the ritual is maintained as each participant acknowledges that they may either have to give their life or take a friend’s. This point is brought home as the man drawn to kill the lady is the very man she loves and went to sea for. She reveals herself to him and he offers to trade places saying, ‘in hopes of your long life my dear I’ll die first’ (Ibid). Drawing lots maintains social order when facing the prospect of cannibalism, but if someone heroically offers themselves as a victim then the issue of one person being forced to die is avoided. Cannibalism, in such instances, is presented as the rational and pragmatic

solution; a concept voiced by the lady's lover as he prepares to die: 'Be quick in your motion let business go on' (**Ibid**). In this ballad too, anthropophagy is avoided as they find a harbour. Ballads were primarily designed for entertainment, and these fictional cannibalism accounts celebrate self-sacrificial behaviour by including cannibalism as simply an enticing addition to a set narrative of reunited lovers. In this ballad, the celebrated, chivalrous, voluntary victim is saved and rewarded as the couple marry and live happily together. Notably, these ballads never present the potential cannibals as monstrous, evil, bestial or with any of the other traits associated with the imagined, non-European cannibal of colonial discourse. The fictional cannibalism ballads mainly celebrate chivalrous, self-sacrificial behaviour, but there are also themes of destiny and fate. Had the lots not selected the lady as the victim and her partner as the butcher, they would not have been reunited. This is highly significant as it invests the lots with authority. This will become particularly important when considering ballads recounting real instances of shipwreck cannibalism.

In a shipwreck, both the physical ship and the social ties that unite the crew begin to disintegrate (**Thompson, 2007a: 14**). This is exacerbated if the survivors are stranded without food or water. Carl Thompson terms this the 'aftermath-phase' and it was often more horrifying than the wreck itself (**Thompson, 2007b: 67**). The 'aftermath-phase' contains harrowing scenes of hunger, thirst and physical deterioration. Here, the survivors' capacity for self-control begins to crumble as they consume anything vaguely edible (**Ibid: 68**). The survivors' physical decline is accompanied by the decay of the less tangible structures that make people human. Cannibalism was the '*ne plus ultra* of horror' in this phase, as it combined the collapse of the fully human self and the collapse of group loyalties and social cohesiveness (**Ibid: 68**). Therefore, a ritual that civilised the impulses of starvation was needed (**Berman, 2016: 281**). Cannibalism, if placed into a structured and fair setting, could restore order and ensure the survival of the many at the expense of the individual. I shall refer to this as 'civilised cannibalism' to differentiate it from the gastronomic and ritual cannibalism famously dismissed by William Arens, and as a more structured and regulated practice than suggested by the term survival cannibalism (**Arens, 1979: 18**). The cornerstone of civilised cannibalism was the infamous drawing of lots, which we saw in *The Silk Merchant's Daughter* and also figures in several other ballad accounts. Making decisions based on the casting of lots has been common practice throughout human history, using everything from pebbles and nuts to coins and dice (**Silverman & Chalmers, 2001: 1467**). In ancient Greece, democracy was a political regime in which offices were equally distributed by the drawing of lots (**Avramescu, 2011: 32**). The drawing of lots at sea to

decide upon a victim in times of starvation is thought to be an old tradition of the sea and it was generally held that, as long as one drew lots, all would be well (**Simpson, 1994: 255**). Ballads encourage acts of self-sacrifice and heroism, but the crucial point is that, in dire situations, civilised cannibalism was the rational choice. The case of the *Francis Spaight* is one of the best documented accounts of shipwreck cannibalism and gave rise to several ballads (**Ibid: 128**). This ship partially capsized on 3 December 1835 (**Simpson, 1997: 130**). The crew survived for twenty days before being rescued. Their story was quickly taken up by newspapers around Britain. The *Morning Post* described the 'aftermath-phase':

They continued in that dreadful condition, and without food, until the morning of the 18th Dec., when, finding it impossible to exist any longer without meat or drink, they were driven to the necessity of drawing lots, which fell on a boy, who was killed, and on his body they subsisted until the 20th (Anon, 1836a).

Significantly, the surviving sailors were pitied not reviled. The *Royal Cornwall Gazette* described how the arrival of the ship *Agenoria* 'prevented any more such heart-sickening necessities' (**Anon, 1836b**). It describes the cannibals, not as monstrous figures who have abandoned civilised behaviour, but as 'wretched creatures,' whose 'miserable condition language fails to describe' (**Ibid**). Empathy was also clearly shown to the starving seamen by the *Agenoria's* crew. The rescued crew reported being treated with the 'greatest humanity and kindness.' (**Anon, 1836a**).

Ballads about shipwreck cannibalism are frequently sung in the first person. Therefore, the role-speculation offered is that of someone who experienced the tragedy and the singer is provided with a preview of the techniques used to survive and the ritual they might have to follow in the future. In *The Loss of the Francis Spaight*, the singer (in the persona of a survivor) recounts their experiences: 'Our vessel it became water-logg'd in dead hour of the night, / The swelling billows o'er us roll'd, which did us sore affright' (**Bodleian, ca. 1830-1910a**). Furthermore, the fact that the ballad is sung in the persona of a survivor means it is being sung by a cannibal. Anyone singing this ballad assumes the identity of a cannibal. Ballads provide cannibals a voice to emphasise the suffering they endured and justify their recourse to anthropophagy.

If first-person narratives allow role-speculation on the part of the singer, the vicarious experience offered to the audience often provides instruction on the cannibalism ritual. This can be seen in a ballad describing the ship the *Essex*. The narrative of this famous whaling ship helped inspire Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (**Simpson, 1994: 125**). This ship sank in November 1820 after it was attacked by a sperm whale and

the survivors piled into the small whaling boats. The cruel irony of this event is that the captain suggested making for the Society Islands, but the crew refused fearing that cannibals lived there (**Dowling, 2016: 4**). Instead they attempted the longer voyage, in boats not designed to cross open ocean, towards South America. They slowly starved and repeatedly drew lots to see who would be sacrificed until the crew of twenty had been reduced to eight (**Dowling, 2016: 5**). The ballad *The Shipwreck of the Essex* describes how a sailor was selected through the drawing of lots and ‘Then his messmates they killed him and cut off his head, / And all the ship’s crew from the body did feed’ (**Simpson Appendix C, ca. 1820**). The specific detail of decapitation is an important piece of information for those sailors having a preview of the ritual as it seems to have been a common preliminary action to consuming the corpse (**Simpson, 1994: 142**).

Ballads justified cannibalism by arguing that it was rational and in the interests of the many. One way this was achieved was through acknowledging that sailors’ families depended on them for financial support. The captain of the *Francis Spaight* only entered four boys into the lottery because ‘they have no wives: to save our lives one of these four must die’ (**Healy, 1976: 62**). This might seem unfair. However, family destitution (so often the result of shipwreck) was a constant theme in nineteenth-century popular literature, and the existence of dependents constituted a rational ground for exclusion from the ritual (**Simpson, 1994: 62-63**). This argument also occurs in a ballad describing the ship the *Mignonette*, a famous account of cannibalism which occurred on a yacht in 1884 and later caught the imagination of the British public. The ballad, *Fearful Sufferings at Sea: Lad Killed and Eaten*, describes how the sailors ‘thought of their children, their homes and their wives, / They killed the poor boy to preserve their own lives’ (**National Library of Scotland, ca. 1884**). With the acknowledgement of the dependents, the ballad explains that the decision to commit anthropophagy not only saved the sailors’ lives but their families’ too.

In *The Loss of the Francis Spaight*, one of the boys, O’Brien, states: ‘I know you are all combined to take my life away’ (**Bodleian, ca. 1830-1910a**). The intimation that this selection was rigged occurs frequently in written accounts of the *Francis Spaight* (although this is the only ballad that mentions it). A detailed account of the event was written by one of the survivors, John Palmer. Concerning whether the selection was rigged or not, Palmer answers diplomatically:

Whether there was a previous understanding among some of the ship's crew, that he should be the one selected as a victim...is well known to Him, from whom no human act can be concealed; but...such was the distracted state of my feelings at that moment, that it was impossible for me to determine (Palmer, 1837: 7).

Drawing lots is a game of chance. However, it is rarely presented as such. Lotteries were not only equitable, they put the choice in the hands of God (**Goodwin, 1992: 44**). Therefore, ballads present the results with the solemnity of destiny and fate and not as simple bad luck. As in the *Silk Merchant's Daughter*, the lots themselves hold authority and shape the destiny of the characters. For example, the lot 'said O'Brien was to die' (**Healy, 1976: 62**). O'Brien is aggrieved at being selected because he does not feel that this is his fate, people conspired against him. The unfair drawing of lots is the only part of this narrative to which the ballad allows its audience to object. The actual cannibalism, on the other hand, is presented as necessary and the ballad reinforces its message that one of the four unmarried boys should have been consumed. Its final verse rejoices that the crew are now safe on shore with '[their] comrades and [their] wives' (**Bodleian, ca. 1830-1910a**). Jacob Berman argues that it is highly likely that the drawing of lots was never a fair selection. Contemporaries reading published accounts knew what to expect in a story of drawing straws: the captain never lost; black sailors, foreigners and cabin boys often did. The lottery brought cannibalism under the cloak of rationality, civility and fairness (**Berman, 2016: 278; 285**). The recurring dramatic events in shipwreck narratives are noted by Thompson who refers to a master narrative familiar to writers and readers of shipwreck narratives, and to some extent the participants in a wreck (**Thompson, 2007b: 66-67**). Kirsty Reid argues that the master narrative concept seems to have a limited application in the case of broadside ballads, which tended to dwell on the initial 'disaster-phase' and pay little attention to themes like cannibalism, survival on desert islands or encounters with savage peoples (**Reid, 2013: 133**). The ballads discussed in this article are an exception to this general statement as they all include depictions of cannibalism.

The possibility that lots were never drawn, or drawn fraudulently, initially seems to conflict with representations of civilised cannibalism in ballads, where it is a key factor (**Cowdell, 2010: 731**). However, this disparity is at the heart of the uncomfortable truth confronted by ballads: starving sailors ate one another to survive. These sailors could not simply be demonised as savages because of the moral areas of uncertainty which clouded their cases. Ballads might be criticised as sources for not reflecting this historical reality. However, as tools of propaganda and persuasion they constructed a reality which extolled the virtue of democratic selection

and encouraged self-sacrifice. While it is likely that the ritual of drawing lots was rarely performed equitably, and the choice of victim rigged or highly unfair, one of the functions of civilised cannibalism ballads was to promote an ideal method of victim selection.

Civilised cannibalism ballads illustrated circumstances wherein anthropophagy was represented as rational and justifiable. One way was through descriptions of dependant families and another was through an emphasis on how long sailors endured starvation before resorting to cannibalism, and on the dangers that they confronted daily. The ballad about the *Essex*, for example, states: 'God bless all poor seamen their children and wives, / In trying to get their bread how they venture their lives' (**Simpson Appendix C, ca. 1820**). Many ballads allude to a distinction between seamen, who can understand the demands of maritime life, and landsmen, who cannot. One such instance of a ballad aimed at a non-maritime audience begins: 'Attend ye British landsmen / And listen unto me, / While unto you I do relate / The dangers of the sea' (**Simpson Appendix C, ca. 1822**). Another of the *Francis Spaight* ballads, on the other hand, speaks to the fraternity of sailors: 'The hardships that we suffered brother seamen you may guess' (**Simpson Appendix C, ca. 1835**). This divide between the maritime and the non-maritime audience is encapsulated in the ballad *The Ship in Distress* (also known by the title *You Seamen Bold*), which states that sailors 'see dangers landsmen never know,' and that 'no tongue can tell what [sailors] undergo' (**Ashton, 1891: 44**). This might suggest that the custom of the sea was more accepted by the maritime community than the non-maritime. However, as an examination of the response to the *Mignonette* disaster will show, shipwreck cannibalism was mostly understood and condoned by the general population. Ballads taught their entire audience, maritime and non-maritime, that civilised cannibalism was rational and acceptable. Emphasis on the divide between the maritime and non-maritime audience was perhaps intended to help the non-maritime audience, who had no direct experience of the struggles of seafaring life, to emote with starving sailors.

The case of the *Mignonette* was a cause célèbre during the final years of the nineteenth century (**Hutchinson, 2011: 14**). The strength of public sympathy for the sailors can be seen from the anonymous threatening letter sent to the mayor of Falmouth which condemned him for issuing an arrest warrant for the men who had survived by eating the cabin boy. The writer stated an intention 'to come to Falmouth to shoot the Mayor... [who had placed] suffering upon men who had already gone through so much' (**Anon, 1884a**). On the other side, a letter was published in the newspaper which stated that the 'magistrates of Falmouth have done a public service

in arresting Captain Dudley [captain of the *Mignonette*].’ The letter argues that:

It is high time that the hideous tradition of the seas which authorises starving sailors to kill and eat their comrades should be exposed in a court of justice, and sailors taught, once and for all, that the special dangers of their profession furnish no excuse for a practice as directly opposed to human nature as it is to divide law (Anon, 1884b).

On its way to Australia, the *Mignonette* was swamped by a large wave and sank. The four sailors got into the life boat and:

On the eighteenth day, they having had no food of any kind for seven days and no water for five days, and their condition having become so bad, they began to discuss the advisability of casting lots as to who should be killed for food for the others (Anon, 1884c).

The next morning, the captain and mate suggested that they should kill the young cabin boy, Richard Parker. The reason for this choice was ‘because he was suffering most from having drunk so much salt water. They also reasoned that he was only a lad, with no responsibilities, while they were married men with wives and families depending on them’ (Anon, 1884c). Parker was killed, eaten and they were rescued a few days later. Once in Falmouth, they were arrested ‘on a charge of “wilfully, feloniously, and of malice aforethought” killing Richard Parker on the high seas’ (Anon. 1884a).

One ballad persuades the audience to accept their actions by emphasising that anyone who has not experienced the horrors of shipwreck cannot comprehend them: ‘God help poor sailors – for we cannot see / What they go through when alone on the sea’ (National Library of Scotland, ca. 1884). The ultimate didactic message of the ballad is given in the lines:

*It may seem strange to me and to you,
But we cannot tell what hunger will do.
What must it be when day after day,
Starvation slowly takes life away,
The burning sun on them, ‘tis fearful to think
Tho’ surrounded by water not [a] drop to drink (National Library of Scotland, ca. 1884).*

The fullest expression of the different opinions held by men of the sea and the representatives of the common law is that the survivors were astonished to be arrested (Simpson, 1994: 11; 10). They had accelerated Richard Parker’s death and, to the law, this was murder but public opinion largely differed (Simpson, 1994: 65). In fact, many of the public saw the sailors as heroes who had survived a horrific ordeal and should be

celebrated rather than prosecuted (**Hutchinson, 2011: 25**). However, this was, notably, not the initial reaction. *The Cornish Telegraph* reported that ‘the question most extensively discussed was “why did they not cast lots?” and in the mind of a very large section a feeling of strong antipathy towards the survivors has been created on this point’ (**Anon, 1884c**). This might seem surprising as the decision to select a young victim was not questioned in the events of the *Francis Spaight*. One possible explanation for this is that there were multiple youths to be entered into a lottery in that case, whereas on the *Mignonette*, as there was only one young boy, no lottery could be drawn, and fate could not select the victim. In Falmouth, local opinion was initially against the survivors but when the captain’s account describing the attempt to draw lots began to circulate, public opinion turned in their favour (**Simpson, 1994: 80**). This might have been selective use of the truth, as they had only discussed drawing lots, however, the turn in public opinion following the report demonstrates that the casting of lots was generally deemed acceptable practice. It was the failure to conform to the civilised cannibalism model which was denigrated. This is highly significant when considering the role of ballads. As noted earlier, it is probable that the drawing of lots rarely occurred, and if it did, that it was unfairly rigged. Ballads, as a form of popular entertainment and education, helped promote the ideal ritual of civilised cannibalism where the process was entirely equitable, and fate selected the victim.

Ballads were particularly significant in the events surrounding the *Mignonette* as they played a part in the survivors’ trial. The wording of the ballad cited above, indicates that the story was converted into ballad form while the legal case against the men was still ongoing. This piece emphasised the hardship faced by sailors and called for sympathy:

*The Captain and mate are now on their trial,
To killing the boy they give no denial,
'Tis a terrible story which they have to tell,
How they have suffered and how the boy fell.
They will never forget those days on the sea,
As long as they live, wherever they be
[God] bless poor sailors alone on the wave,
The ocean alas, is too often their grave* (**National Library of Scotland, ca. 1884**).

This method of circulating a sympathetic narrative was vital to the surviving sailors’ legal defence. Ballads were vehicles of mourning and commemoration and played roles in broader public attempts to raise money in the aftermath of shipwrecks; either for the support of survivors and bereaved families or to erect gravestones and monuments to the dead

(Reid, 2013: 143). In the case of the *Mignonette*, ballads not only disseminated the story to a wide audience and garnered public support, but it is highly probable that the money gained from selling such ballads went directly to pay for the sailors' legal costs (Simpson, 1994: 84). A defence fund was set up and thanks to strong public support, for which ballads can take some credit, a talented and costly lawyer was hired to defend the men (Hutchinson, 2011: 27). The gesture which most strikingly captures the public sentiment towards the cannibal sailors was that Daniel Parker, older brother of the deceased Richard, publicly shook hands with the men who consumed his brother (Hutchinson, 2011: 26). The sailors were initially sentenced to death, but this sentence was commuted by Queen Victoria to six months in prison. It was decided that this mild sentence would best satisfy the judicial process and appease public opinion (Hutchinson, 2011: 32). The money remaining in the defence fund after the trial was used to erect a tombstone for Richard Parker. Hutchinson states that the two biblical quotations inscribed upon it are highly telling of the general sentiment held by the people who paid to erect it: 'Though he slay me yet will I trust in him' and 'Lord lay not this sin to their charge' (Hutchinson, 2011: 37). The influence of public opinion, which ballads helped shape, was instrumental in the outcome of this case.

One of the best ways to appeal to public sympathy was to encourage the audience to feel pity for sailors. In the *Francis Spaight* ballads, once O'Brien has been selected, the cook is called upon to bleed him. This was another common step in the procedure. Bleeding someone who is still alive ensures that there is blood to drink (Simpson, 1994: 122). The final verses of *The Loss of the Francis Spaight* are positioned so as to legitimise all previous events and inform the ballad audience that the crew had done everything possible to avoid cannibalism. The penultimate verse begins 'hunger and thirst they are two things that are very ill to bide,' before explaining that the sailors had managed to survive for sixteen days, chewing the horn buttons of their jackets for sustenance, before ever 'in human blood our hands we did embrue' (Bodleian, ca. 1830-1910a). Another ballad addresses the non-maritime audience, 'come landsmen all and pity we, / Rolling on the raging sea', and states that 'when you hear our awful fate, / You can't but shed a tear' (Ibid). It is noteworthy that the awful fate is 'ours' meaning survivors and deceased. The ballad encourages pity for the men who consumed their crewmates. The fact that this verse is addressed only to landsmen suggests that perhaps the non-maritime audience were less familiar with the terrible conditions which could lead to such extreme situations where cannibalism appeared the rational course of action. These were the people the ballad needed to convince, and it achieves this through a ballad formula.

Ballad formulas are structural devices made of repeated verb-centred lines or phrases which highlight crucial points in the ballad action (**Andersen, 1985: 29-30**). There are two formulas repeated in *Loss of the Ship Francis Spede*. The first emphasises the time endured before cannibalism took place: 'Our vessel on the ocean, / Quite motionless they lay, / For 16 days and 16 nights, / All on the raging sea' (**Bodleian, ca. 1830-1910b**). This formula demonstrates endless suffering and explains that the shipwrecked mariners saw no hope of rescue. The second formula describes the consumption of O'Brien: 'his tender veins were bled, / And on his tender flesh and blood / His hungry messmates fed' (**Bodleian, ca. 1830-1910b**). This formula shows the level to which the crew has been reduced. However, the ballad does not cast judgement. It is highly significant that the fact that the first step in survival cannibalism is to bleed the victim's veins is emphasised through a ballad formula. This supports the notion that ballads helped foster and sustain a prescribed civilised cannibalism ritual designed to prevent the crew devolving into anarchy. Formulas highlight crucial sections of a ballad. The first formula emphasises how hopeless and interminable their suffering was, which it crucially does before the second formula highlights what a desperate state the crew were in. The ultimate message which is reinforced by these devices is that the men are to be pitied not reviled.

Some ballads give O'Brien a final speech in which he does not blame his crewmates or accuse them of murdering him. This final speech almost certainly never happened. In reality, O'Brien was attacked by the crew. Palmer informs us that, 'he was instantly dispatched, and his limbs detached from his emaciated body, and distributed among his still more wretched shipmates!' (**Palmer, 1837: 7**). The ballads describing the event would never include this information. They aimed to promote civilised behaviour and self-sacrifice. The role of survival cannibalism in saving the many at the expense of the individual is made clear in *Loss of the Ship Francis Spede* in a macabre image. The ballad explains that the crew signalled to a passing ship by waving O'Brien's legs in the air, and it was this that 'caused them to draw nigh' (**Bodleian, ca. 1830-1910b**). The description of this gruesome semaphore underlines the fact that the crew would have died if it were not for O'Brien. His death saved them twice: once as physical sustenance, and once as a signal for help.

I support Simpson's argument that ballads instructed sailors on the ritual of drawing lots and the way in which crewmates should be consumed. However, I believe that ballads did more than simply reflect contemporary mentalities; they had an active role in shaping them and affecting their audience's perception of the outside world. Descent into cannibalism suggests the collapse of civil society and a slide into a state of nature (**Thompson, 2014: 142**). This association appeared frequently in European

colonial literature, justifying the subjugation of native rights. However, the presentation of cannibalism in shipwreck ballads is radically different. In fictitious ballad narratives, cannibalism was accepted and not portrayed as a monstrous act. These ballads encouraged and rewarded self-sacrificial behaviour. Ballads describing real disasters argued that cannibalism was necessary for the survival of the majority and the welfare of their families. They achieved this through emotive language, ballad formulas, and an emphasis on a community of sailors whose sufferings could not be fully comprehended. Through role-speculation, ballads allowed their audience to vicariously experience the horrors of shipwreck and illustrated the conditions that drove sailors to cannibalism. The function of ballads was to highlight the morality of the circumstances where cannibalism was acceptable. As a form of popular entertainment and education they promoted civilised cannibalism which revolved around a fair, equitable victim selection process where fate and destiny took control. The custom of the sea was not just acceptable and justifiable; it was a moral imperative.

It seems clear that most people, both from the maritime and the non-maritime audience, accepted the custom of the sea, but only when it was accompanied by the drawing of lots. The frequent addresses in ballads to landsmen in particular might suggest that there was more antipathy towards this view among them, or at least that they needed greater help in understanding the dangers and horrors of maritime life. However, it seems that the civilised ritual was rarely, if ever, followed and with dubious fairness when it was. This is why ballads promoted civilised cannibalism. This combatted the uncomfortable truth of the way in which the custom of the sea was followed. The ideal version espoused by ballads removed the anarchic, savage connotations of cannibalism.

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