I Darena Lat You In:
The Child Ballads, Academic Canons, and the Folk Tradition

By Jared Bishop

A Bachelor's Thesis

Submitted to the department of English

Haverford College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

April 2024

Faculty Consultant: Gustavus Stadler

It's in a smoky Dublin pub that I hear my first Child Ballad. Amidst clinking glasses and dim lighting, a trad session winds down to a lone guitar player and their partner. As the hour draws close to midnight, they sing in harmony, lilting a strange tale of a conditional marriage, a marriage only to be consummated when the groom's riddles are answered. It's a bizarre song, full of repetition and odd turns of phrases, but it's also electric, griping me with the refrain and story. After the last chord has died out, I stagger my way over to their table and ask them what they just sang.

"Why, a Child Ballad, of course," the guitar player responds.

I blink. "A what?"

"You know, a Child Ballad. We just sang Child 1. There's three hundred of 'em!"

Armed with new knowledge, I head home, and like a specter conjured by speaking its name out loud, Child Ballads invade my life.

Scarborough Fair comes on the radio. It's a variation of Child 2. My brother sends me a folk song he thinks I'll like, and it turns out to be a version of Child 10, the "Twa Sisters." At a bluegrass concert, the lead singer plays a moving, mournful song. When I later look it up, I realize that it's Child 210. At every corner, I'm confronted by songs and lyrics that I now recognize as part of the folkloric mother text (Atkinson) that is "The English and Scottish Popular Ballads" (ESPB), by academic Francis James Child. But what is a "Popular Ballad," why are they still sung today, and who was Child?

The English and Scottish Popular Ballads are a ten-volume anthology that were published by Francis James Child and his protégé George Lyman Kitterdge from 1882 till 1898, the last volume published posthumously after Child's death in 1896. Through luck, circumstance, and enduring cultural appeal, Child's collection of 305 ballads and variations has risen to be what is embraced by many as the "bedrock of traditional folk

music" (Thomson 1). To this day they can still be heard in folk circles,[1] on the radio,[2] and in the background of films.[3]

Despite bearing Child's moniker, the ballads in the ESPB are anything but childish. The collected songs are filled with incest, murder, sexual assault, curses, faeries, and all manner of themes morbid and creepy. In the ballads, kings strip their daughters to see if they're pregnant, lost sons return from the other realm with nothing but bloody knives, and mothers curse and kill their own offspring. As Thomson puts it: "It is as if every tabloid newspaper headline of the last century or so has been bound together into a single document, and then ferociously edited by a malicious elf" (Thomson 2).

But the ballads were not written by an elf. They were collected and edited primarily by a single man, academic and proto-folklorist Francis James Child. He published the ESPB as a curio collection of poetry, 305 ballads that he assessed to be an exhaustive representation of traditional balladry from England and Scotland. In many ways, Child's assessment of merit and scale has proven to be true – many of the ballads are still sung today, and more still have survived the ravages of time. Yet how much of that is Child's own doing, it's hard to tell.

In this thesis, I use the ESPB as a lens through which we can explore the idea of canons and canonicity in literature, focusing on how we understand canons that are not grounded in academia. I start by laying a groundwork of the origins of Child's work and the ESPB, then transition to an exploration of Child's definition of folk balladry and

---

[1] See on youtube: 4224. Performing the Child Ballads – Part 4. Twa Corbies (Child #26) - at ...

[2] See on youtube: The False Knight On the Road - Fleet Foxes or Edward (Child Ballad No. 13) - Sarah Jarosz & Chris Thile | Live from Here with Chris Thile

[3] See on youtube Bonny George Campbell - Uncle Monty song - A Series of Unfortunate Events

popular balladry. Through critiquing Child's definitions, a view espoused by contemporary academic criticism, I move to dismiss the ESPB as an ineffective academic canon. At the same time, I argue that the canonicity of the Child Ballads is inarguable due to popular, unacademic culture, and use the tension between traditional academic canons and the unorthodox folk community that maintains the Child Ballad canon to explore how we define and understand canons.

Francis James Child (born February 1, 1825 in Boston, Massachusetts), both studied and then later worked at Harvard University, where he taught as professor of rhetoric and oratory. From his privileged post, he began to work on ballad anthologies, publishing a proto-text which he confusingly named "The English and Scottish Ballads (ESB)" (Not to be confused with "The English and Scottish Popular Ballads (ESPB)").

At the time of publication, Child would not have considered his work to be part of the field of "folklore," given that the term had only been coined some few years prior and had yet to see any real momentum in academia (Oxford). To Child, his work anthologizing folk ballads fell under the umbrella of academically anthologized poetry–he saw folk ballads as a form of relatively unstudied proto-poetry, a "national poetry" (Child *Ballad Poetry* 2) of popular genus that would then go on to evolve into lyrical poetry as a whole. As such, he contrived in his anthology to remove the melodies and music that accompanied the ballads. Poetry, to Child, was not music – the music that accompanied the lyrical form of the popular ballad was meaningless at best, and a distraction from the literature of the form at worst. But before I address the problems with Child's approach, let us first take Child's argument as far as we can. Child's non-inclusion of music and his view of the ballads as poetry are key in our later

exploration of folk, intention, and definition, but first I wish to paint a complete picture of Child's work.

It was during Child's research for his *British Poets* and earlier ESB series that the origins of the ESPB started to stir. The domino that started the path to the publication of the Child Ballads is hard to trace, as Child is not a well-documented scholar. He was a semi-reclusive academic, and while his works and personality appear to have been well regarded, no biographies of him were published in his lifetime. In many ways, his life was uneventful, and prior to the publication of the ESPB, Child himself recognized that he had made no significant marks on the face of academia. "I must hasten," he wrote to his friend R.G. White, "to do one useful thing before I die–if I can.... I have nothing to show for my fifty years" (Child *Grant White Letters*). As such, what can be reconstructed about Child's life has been taken from missives, lecture notes, journals, the writings of his students, and odd bits of flotsam. All reconstructive work has been done entirely post-mortem. The resulting picture of Child, subsequently, is speculative, but generally shows an author with an obsessive love for roses, numerous health ailments, and above all else a burning passion for English literature and poetry.

Despite the uncertainty around the history of Child's own life, Child's obsession and passion for balladry cannot be denied. After the publication of the single-volume ESP, he worked on the ESPB for years before he felt comfortable with its publication, struggling with both the scale and scope of the project. He aimed to make a collection of "all the "popular" ballads in our language in all their forms" (qtd. in Brown *The Cause* 4), but struggled with the necessary inclusions and history, as well as the state of balladry at the time of publication. Child's intent in publication is most clear in his amendment to the first volume of the ESPB, where he writes: "It was my wish not to

begin to print The English and Scottish Popular Ballads until this unrestricted title should be justified by my having at command every valuable copy of every known ballad" (Child *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* 1). A large part of Child's struggle was his desire to find "original" texts, for many texts on balladry that were published had been heavily edited or personalized, such as Percy's "Reliques."

"Reliques of Ancient Poetry," published by Bishop Percy in 1765, over 100 years before Child would even begin publishing, was a pseudo-academic collection of "ancient poetry" (Percy 11) and a signpost of the cultural movement in folk balladry that would see it move away from an oral tradition to a literary one. Percy's text was massively successful, and helped pave the way for more folk publishing, but, in a period between the ESP and the ESPB, while Child was attempting to clean and republish the original folio for Percy's "Reliques," the text which many of the Reliques were based on, he noticed several glaring differences (Rieuwerts). Child discovered that Percy had been less than scrupulous in adherence to his source text, enhancing and replacing rhymes in places, writing directly over the source material in others, and even tearing out pages for publication (Richetti). Though Percy's contribution helped popularize the folk ballad, it incensed Child that the Bishop had added his own effect, and although Percy provided a foundation to what Child would then build on, Child scorned Percy's work: he sought an academic, comprehensive, and faithful-to-the-source-material anthology.

Beyond Percy's mistreatment of source text, Child thought that ballads as a whole had been "mutilated" (Child *English and Scottish Ballads* viii) through the transformation of the tradition from oral to print. Ironically, given that he entered into the publishing tradition of ballads with the ESB and ESPB, Child wrote that "no words could express the dulness (sic) and inutility…of broadsides" (Child viii). He espoused a

view of balladry that decentered the "ballad publisher," and the broadside (a popular form of media that was a single disseminated page, usually containing a few ballads), and desired to return to or at the very least represent a ballad tradition that was oral and genuine. To Child, the advent of ballad publishing was a crippling blow to a longstanding tradition.

Yet after the publication of the ESB, Child was still dissatisfied with the state of ballad studies, and doubly unsatisfied with his impact on the ballad community. He returned to ballad research, embarking on the much more thoroughly researched, much more ambitious project, the project that would grant him his lasting stay in the English-speaking academic sphere: *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Like Percy, though, while in many regards Child succeeded in the creation of his magnum opus, it's where he failed that makes the ESPB so interesting.

Put simply, Child never defined his criteria or definitions for what "popular ballads" were, and as such, the ESPB failed on a fundamental level to enter into academic dialogue. During the years of research pending publication of the first volume and all through the publication of the series, Child neglected to define the very type of work he sought to anthologize. As stated by prominent Child scholar Brown: "The ESPB, as we have it, is *not* the definitive critical edition of popular ballads; nor did Child *ever* clarify his terms *critical*, *popular*, and *traditional*; nor does the ESPB contain all versions even of the 305 items it includes…; nor did [Child] ever write the history of the popular ballad" (Brown *Child's Unfinished Masterpiece* 246). A scathing review, but fair, considering the myriad failures of a work that purported to be an exhaustive collection of popular balladry.

Dave Harker, in his article “Francis James Child and the Ballad Consensus” also tears apart Child’s missing criteria for balladry, ending with the scathing remark that “a compilation such as Child’s can tell us almost nothing” about “the lives, interests, and general culture of the people who made, remade, and used these songs” (Harker 163-164). To Harker, the lack of transparency and missing definitions from Child render the work to be valuable only in studying what “late nineteenth century English-speaking literary scholars” (164) considered to be ballads.

Yet it’s not like Child merely guessed at what a ballad was. Certainly, Child was guided by an abstract priori of balladry, an invisible philosophy that guided and defined editorial choices and construction, as evidenced by Child’s innumerable discarded ballads, and doubly evidenced by the years Child spent on constructing the ESPB. Scholars, especially Child’s protégés, have tried to use his process as a lens through which to reconstruct the criteria for his anthology and thus redeem the work, but the results have been to no avail. Haverford alum and Child defender F.B. Gummere writes in his book “Primitive Poetry and the Ballad” that “It is clear that the notion of a traditional ballad existed in very exact shape for Professor Child when one thinks of the host he rejected,” (Gummere 273) but as Gummere’s argument is one of negative space, I find it unconvincing. Gummere’s suggestion that should we look at Child’s rejected ballads (notably not accessible until collected and archived posthumously by student and successor Kittredge), we would then be able to form a detailed map of his criteria, gaining access to his text, is both unproven and unfounded.

Ultimately, although we have gained access to the sources Child worked from, his correspondences with other academics, and the end result of his ten volumes, it remains a fact that Child never explained, in text or otherwise, *why* a ballad was a popular

ballad, *what* a popular ballad was, or *why* one ballad belonged in his book more than another. Child's ESPB fails on several fundamental levels to make good on its promise of anthology, and through missing definitions, a lack of history, and murky scholarship (made far less murky posthumously, once again by Kittredge), the ESPB is rendered academically inscrutable. Child is dead, his priori or philosophy fated to remain hidden, and critiques such as Harker's or Browns' are difficult to field counterarguments for; it is impossible to defend Child's collection, history, or methods because there is no way to define what exactly he was collecting. Modern criticism, likewise, has no place for entry or comparison, and the result is an amorphous collection of 305 "ballads" that claim to be an authoritative collection of English and Scottish ballads, but in reality stand outside of criticism and academic accessibility.

In a curious twist, Child knew that his ballad collection, as it stood, was merely a collection of three hundred and five assorted ballad archetypes untethered by any academic foregrounding. He wrote to his friends and correspondences to ask about how he might go about organizing and defining his ballads, and wrote in other missives that he felt that the second edition of the ESPB should require "20 or 30 pages about ballad poetry in general" (Child as qtd. in Brown *Child's Unfinished Masterpiece* 244) by way of introduction. He believed that the ESPB was a series that would not stand on its own until it had acquired a second, far more editorialized printing, and planned to hone in on his definitions and his criteria far more carefully in the second run. Through a second printing, he could show how each of the 305 ballads in his collection fit his definition of "popular ballad," as well as provide a history of folk balladry, inclusions markedly absent from the first edition.

Yet Child's desire to release a second edition would go unfulfilled, because on the 11th of September, 1896, Child passed away, having published only nine out of ten volumes for the first edition. In some ways, Child's failing health helps explain the gaps in due diligence, but in many ways, Child's inability to define his criteria seems a puzzling oversight. Child was not young, already pushing past his mid-sixties when he started the publication of the Child Ballads. He was wracked with ailments, and often complained in missives to his friends that his free time was consumed by "gout & debility" (Child *Macmath Correspondence*). He acknowledged his failing health, and in a preliminary draft of his will, written at the time of the publication of volume VIII in 1891, even wrote a contingency for Kittredge to assume control of the project in the case of Child not being able to finish the ballads (Child as qtd. in Brown *Child's Unfinished Masterpiece* 213-214). Death was on Child's mind during publication, and thus the failure to define cannot be hand-waved as an untimely, truncated oversight. Child skipped writing the introduction to the ESPB, the place where inclusion of a definition of "popular ballad" would be necessary, and continued to put it off until his death.

Doubly curious about Child's missing definition is that Child was no stranger to having to define his work. He frequently lectured on balladry during his Harvard talks series, a series of lectures open to the paying public, notably, a medium where he would have been forced to define what exactly a "popular ballad" was, or at least how it differed from a regular ballad. Unfortunately, no lecture notes remain that are either accessible or relevant.

A proto-definition of the "popular ballad" from Child does exist, however, in the form of an 1874 article written for The Folk Journal of America. Post ESB and eight years before he would begin to publish the ESPB, Child ventured a definition of "ballad"

as "a narrative song, a short tale in lyric verse" (Child Ballad Poetry 214), and, when comparing the ballad to the popular ballad, he defined the popular ballad as different due to having "a fundamental characteristic…the absence of subjectivity and of self-consciousness" (215). On top of the lack of subjectivity and centralization of the narrator, Child also required anonymity from the popular ballad; a popular ballad was a ballad that had "come down to us anonymous" (215). He clarified what he meant by anonymity and addressed possible counterarguments, stating that "popular ballads" necessarily must have had an origin, as even "popular ballads" could not "write themselves" (Grimm as qtd. in Child as qtd. in Hart 757), but doubled down on the anonymity of the popular ballad; Despite recognizing every ballad as having at one time had an author, while all ballads told "stories with a point," popular ballads were written "in an unaffected style…, not written by a poet conscious of his or her role" (Child as qtd. in Harker 151). What Child sought was an abstract tradition, not an authorial anthology. "The author counts for nothing," he wrote, and further clarified that genuine popular ballads were "extremely difficult to imitate by the highly civilized modern man," and that "most of the attempts to reproduce this kind of poetry have been ridiculous failures" (Child 215). Although poets like Keats, Cavalcanti, and Coleridge[4] could write *ballads*, they could not write *popular* ballads.

Evident behind Child's words is his derision of the broadside publisher and the Percy manuscript. To clarify, Child took no issue with poets who wrote in the ballad form, focusing instead on those who claimed to be purveyors of the genuine "popular ballad" tradition. To Child, the uncertain wellspring of creation–the nexus of unclear origin and the removal of the author–was the demarcation of the popular ballad, and

[4] See "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" by Keats, "Ballada 5" by Cavalcanti, or "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Coleridge

neither the Percy folio, bearing edits and dramatizations, nor the contemporary Broadside, which sought commercial success through substantial editing, were part of a true "popular ballad" tradition. Child's design in the ESPB was to find ballads whose origins were murky, their roots unspecific and wide-reaching, and anthologize them, thus returning the ballad tradition to its origins. A popular ballad, to make it into Child's book, had to be from a tradition outside of publishing or academia.

Now, before we assess the feasibility of Child's definition, it's important to note that Child saw the above-mentioned article as a provisional definition. Gummere writes that Child "wished [the article] to be neither quoted nor regarded as final" (Gummere 378). Yet despite Child's claim of incompleteness, the article remains the most complete statement of definition from Child. Lacking any other definition, it unfortunately takes center stage, and if we dismiss it as unpolished or early in the refinement process, it still reveals some of the principles that drove the ESPB's creation and editing process.

Even as we understand Child's definition of "popular ballad" to be a vague proto-definition, it still is deeply flawed, for how does one determine anonymity? And how could one ascertain the "un-authorized" nature of a ballad? Is there truly a way to tell that a ballad has eclipsed the progenitor that Child recognized but dismissed? Certainly, as Child was working primarily from manuscripts and correspondences which required only one author to publish, there was no way of immediately confirming the "popular" nature of his ballads. Although in later years Child would begin to work from word-of-mouth transcription, eschewing the publishing that he saw as disastrous (and thus could skip the centering of the author/editor that occurs in putting pen to paper), I think it would have been impossible for Child to satisfactorily provide or confirm his criteria for "popular" balladry in his work. The very nature of the work that he sought to

anthologize he saw as coming from no particular author, but, as he stepped into the role of academic editor, he was forced to arbitrarily prove anonymity, which by definition escapes clear definition. By attempting to anthologize works that were passed exclusively "through the mouths of unlearned people" (Child *Ballad Poetry* 220), but having access to those texts only in the form of scholarly transcriptions and printed folios, he established an impossible dichotomy: the need to prove anonymity, but only through the use of non-anonymous sources.

Even beyond the impossible dichotomy of anonymity, it's still unclear why Child omitted some of the ballads he did, another mark against Gummere's suggestion that we reverse-engineer Child's criteria. Child omitted many ballads for vulgarity, claiming that they were of an artificial vulgarity (Hustvedt), but provided no further elaboration of what constituted "artificial" or real vulgarity. Child's definitions, while confusing at best, are contradictory and generally unilluminating for further understanding the ESPB's criterion. Even as we understand Child's words to be a provisional definition, the underlying logic is still deeply flawed. Child scholar Rieuwerts echoes a simple truth: "Child has left us no clear-cut and easy-to-apply definition of the English and Scottish ballads" (Rieuwerts 2).

Just how much of the failure to provide a definition is Child's fault, though, is difficult to determine. Part of the criticism levied against Child (his failure to provide a usable definition for "Popular ballad") is also expressed within the entire field of ballad studies. The anthology text "The Flowering Thorn: International Ballad Studies" partially defines ballads as tunes that are "as hard to define as they are easy to recognize" (McKean 2). Once we move past Child's work and definitions into the wider

world of folklore and ballad studies, not just "popular" ballads, but ballads in general become difficult to provide clear-cut definitions for.

Yet contemporary academia does what Child did not: scholars today acknowledge the difficulty in providing specific definitions for broad folk terms, and instead suggest a "notable multiformity of meaning, text, and tune" (McKean 1) present in all ballads, a definition that acknowledges the complexity of folk studies while also serving as an anchor for further discussion.

Contemporary academia, driven by movements such as modernism and new criticism, is able to accept a multiplicitous network of understandable signs that all point to "ballad," rather than an explicit definition. This kind of network of meaning was not available to Child, who was already transgressing established boundaries of English literature and poetry by suggesting "popular ballads" were just as much literature as ballads by Tennyson and others. Child did not have the language or tools to define "popular ballad," as the explosive multiplicity that is now expressed by modern academics, both for balladic origins and definition, was not an accessible framework for a scholar in the early-late 19th century.

In order to publish the ESPB, Child had to enter the academic dialogue of the late 1800s, which is also where difficulties in definition arose, for the idea of folk or "popular" culture at the time was incredibly constrictive. Folklorist Julie Henigan states that "'folklore' and 'folksong' developed from scholarly ideas about the evolution of societies from primitive to civilized" (Hennigan as qtd. in Thomson 81), suggesting that Child's proposition of primitive poetry from unlearned communities was inspired by a pre-existing notion of how folk and communal traditions worked.

Indeed, a view of balladry as a dying form of the unlearned was all but ubiquitous in the 1800s and early 1900s, espoused by many of Child's contemporaries and codified by fellow anthropologists and academics. Cecil Sharp, a folklorist, writes in his 1917 "English Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians" that "in England, no one under the age of seventy ordinarily possesses the folk-song [ballad] tradition" (Sharp xxv), reinforcing the idea of a dying medium, and turns to the uneducated as conservators of the tradition, celebrating finding communities of peoples in Appalachia who "set the standard of bodily and material comfort perilously low" (xxii). Sharpe's assertion that people who live in squalor are the last bastion of the genuine folk tradition was a familiar refrain for scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Kittredge, Child's direct successor, writes that a folk tradition in modern society is "the heritage of the illiterate only," and that it will dry up "unless it is gathered by the antiquary" (Child & Kittredge *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* xii).

Contemporary academia frowns on the assumptions made by these early folklorists, and since Child's time, how academics define and approach folk has drifted substantially. "There is nothing essentially… primitive about ballads in general" (Hennigan as qtd. in Thomson 81), Hennigan states, cautioning modern scholars away from the type of thought that dominated Child's contemporaries. Karl Hagstrom Miller, a culture historian, defends up Henigan's claims of fabricated unlearnedness, espousing a nuanced, far less narrow mode of defining folk balladry. The progenitors of folkloric studies, he argues, painted a false "image of a separate world, one that shared very little with turn-of-the-century… politics and popular culture" (Miller 86). He doubly clarifies that his critique is levied against scholars such as Child, and casts a negative light on the belief held by Child, Kittredge, and Sharpe that "Education and literacy…had brought an

end to the oral traditions that produced the ballads" (91). While contemporary approaches to ballad traditions do embrace the idea of isolated, relatively uneducated communities, acknowledging that the people in these communities were actively part of the ballad tradition, it also acknowledges that the very same communities may not have been as completely isolated, or as uneducated as depicted, and that for every community that was a poster child for a victorian definition of the ballad tradition, there was another that didn't fit the fabricated mold.

Yet I struggle with completely dismissing Child's approach, for it seems that even as Child constructed false dichotomies between ballad collectors (academic) and ballad conservators (uneducated), painting himself as a savior antiquarian, he struggled with the untruth of reducing the ballads to poetry, and of consigning their conservators to a lower class. Child was wildly aware of the inability to clearly define "popular ballad," as evidenced by his recanting of the 1874 article and proposing no further definition. Even earlier, in his ESB, he claimed that the distinction between "ballad" and "broadside" was "not absolute, for several of the ancient ballads have a sort of literary character, and many broadsides were printed from oral tradition" (Child *English and Scottish Ballads* vii). Indeed, it seems Child recognized the limitations in both necessitating an oral, illiterate tradition and of transposing said tradition to poetry, but was unable to see an alternative. The established narrative of folk or "popular" ballads as the songs of the unlearned was an extremely limiting factor in the publication of the ESPB, in collection, definition, and also in entrance into academia. In order to do the research that he loved, Child had to enter into the dialogue and language of the 19th century, requiring the transformation of the ballads from music and tradition to poetry and anthology. The English/folklore academic tradition had not yet progressed to a definition of balladry

that acknowledged a complex network of mutability, music, and culture, and thus Child could not have provided an acceptable definition for "popular" balladry– he lived and died without ever having been able to define that which he anthologized, for the tradition was too restrictive.

I don't mean to suggest that Child fully understood the difficulty in defining "popular" ballads in 19th-century terms (though it is more than possible that he did), nor that he sought to escape it. Child was just as complicit in reinforcing the false "lower class" narrative as any of his contemporaries, differing substantially in the ESPB only by missing definitions of "popular," and "traditional." Even the decision made by Child to not transcribe the music that accompanied the ballads wasn't novel: The Percy folio, published over 150 years before Child, neglected to include music, and there were a large number of ballad conservators that followed Percy's footsteps in publishing ballads as ancient poetry. Yet the combined space made by Child's absences is more than the sum of their parts: the absences left by Child provided an easy foothold for folk revivalists to re-integrate the ESPB ballads into the larger folk tradition.

Before we explore the contemporary folk tradition, though, it is perhaps easier to begin thinking of the ESPB as a canon, and use canonization as a lens through which we field future exploration of the Child Ballads.

As it stands, the perceived binary of folk vs literature is under extreme tension in the ESPB, and roiling under the surface of said binary are a thousand other seemingly oppositional forces: oral vs academic traditions, scholarship vs music, individualism vs a social fabric, conservation vs evolution, and many more. As we consider the ESPB in a rapidly evolving and contemporary society, the oppositional forces under the surface of the ESPB are only aggrandized, and harmonizing the original designs and intentions of

the ESPB with the current cultish, un-academic following is difficult, but is made more accessible through the framework provided by canonization. To use canons, though, we must first define them, which in turn will redefine how we view the ESPB.

Author Longxi Zhang defines a canon as "'a standard' of what is considered valuable in a literary or cultural tradition" (Zhang 119). Using Zhang's definition, we can begin to reframe Child's work in the ESPB as a canon, not just a publication: Child's ESPB attempted to create a comprehensive canon of "popular" English and Scottish ballads. But Zhang's definition only grazes the surface of literary canonization – it provides a sweeping overview, but neglects to imply deeper social, political, and academic movements behind the formation of a canon. Altieri writes that hidden behind the word canonization are the "ideological banners for social groups: social groups propose [canons] as forms of self-definition, and they engage other proponents to test limitations while exposing the contradictions and incapacities of competing groups" (Altieri 39). Implicit within the idea of academic canonization are the ideals of an author or creator, and implicit in having an author is an agenda (think of Child's distaste of the author in Percy's canon, or the invisible cultural guidelines for how the "folk" canon was defined). Externally, canonization also conjures the presence of an authoritative force that approves or disapproves of one text or another, working in tandem with the creator to lend veracity and weight to the canon.

All this is to say: when we peel back the works that constitute canons and gaze at their authors, we are met with a nebulous web of the cultures and ideals that drove the canon's creation and ensure its perpetuation. The idea of a canon as a cultural creation further reinforces Harker's proposal of the (minuscule) value of the ESPB; certainly, a canon constructed by one man cannot act as an authoritative collection of balladry,

especially when we do not accept it to be as such. Using the previously outlined argument that Child's criteria are missing and thus render his work inscrutable, we can even further degrade the value of Child's canon: without external approval, the "competing groups" of Altieri's definition have bested the ESPB, and the work is only capable of reflecting the ideas and ideals that created it. Yet because Child neglected to define or explain those ideas and ideals, we are forced to further reframe Child's ESPB as a free-floating canon, a collection of texts gathered under nothing but the vague context of "anthologization."

It is inarguable that there is cultural context and underpinnings for Child's work in the ESPB, as every cultural artifact bears the culture that bore it, but it is hopelessly opaque, and perhaps irrelevant, for as Zhang says "before a literary work can be accepted as canonical, it needs the work of critics and scholars to convince people of its literary value and its significance in every other aspect" (Zhang 120). The ESPB, while well regarded for a short period, quickly gained the attention and then derision of critics, and, by the time of the folk revival, had already been reduced to "not the definitive critical edition of popular ballads" (Brown *Child's Unfinished Masterpiece* 246). Panned by critics, opaque as to the cultures it's supposed to represent, the ESPB is a failure by Child to form the canon that he set out to make: *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* are *not* a collection of every ballad of value from the English and Scottish tradition.

When we dismiss Child's work as either an inutile free-floating canon or an ancient cultural relic, though, we are left in an uncertain place, especially when it comes to the value of analyzing/critiquing said work. If we do not accept Child's ESPB as an exhaustive canon of folk balladry, if we do not see Child's collection of "popular ballads,"

as able to be studied for substantial anthropological or literary gain, it then raises the question: what can we learn from the ESPB? If the *English and Scottish Popular Ballad*s are, as Harker suggests, merely a curio of the nineteenth century or a case study on the growing pains of new academic disciplines, then what worth is there in returning to texts such as these, almost one hundred and fifty years later?

The underlying impetus for the above questions is a defiant truth: the ESPB is still popular (as in liked, admired, and enjoyed by many, not Child's ill-defined "popular") today. The popularity and acceptance of the ESPB, especially in the twenty-first century, seems to care little for its authenticity or failed canonization, and it is inarguable that the anthology has captured some sort of enduring zeitgeist within folk circles and the larger folk community. Online databases list over one hundred and fifty distinct recordings of Child's first ballad alone,[5] and those are only what have been recorded. Child's audience is massive, but not the audience Child intended to gather with his publication. Brown, in an NPR interview, states that the ESPB has "reached a wider audience" than Child ever had intended, and that that Child could "not have imagined" (Brown *These Songs Tour Like New*) the effect his book has had.

Although Child's ESPB canon may have failed on an academic level–it is not used as a collection of proto-poetry, which was Child's intention–while most academic works of the nineteenth century have slipped quietly into oblivion, the Child Ballads remain, still sung, recorded, and read. Placed against the fabric of late 19th century works, the Child Ballads stand out as both one of the most enduring and most disseminated works, and the significance of their permanence cannot be understated. The ESPB, widely

[5] See: https://www.childballadrecordings.com/, filtered by Child 1. Most ballads have at least 100 accessible, distinct recordings, with some like Child 4 having well over 500.

dismissed as a valuable resource to academics, remains at the center of the traditional folk music world.

It is unfair, then, to suggest that the ESPB holds no value, for it has been judged against the ravages of time, and has been preserved through stewardship. The enduring popularity and continued permanence of the ESPB in performance and cultural memory speaks to me, at least, of some idea of value; there *must* be an external, approving figure for the ESPB canon, as the ballads are still viewed as a canon. Perhaps, then, there is an alternative to the academic canon, a way to rationalize the relatively un-academic culture that maintains Child's canon.

One way of reframing the canon for the ESPB is through a "popular" (as in Child's popular) lens, a lens that dismisses the political alignments of its progenitor and rather represents an indistinct conglomeration of all the external influences in canonization. When we disregard the "ideological banners" of the scholar and the scholar's culture as a price to pay for entering into the dialogue of canonization, we can instead study the culture of the audience that eternalizes or maintains the canon; just as Child wished his collections to represent an uncertain nexus of creation/cultural texture rather than an author, we too can redefine the authority behind a canon in Child's terms, centering the milieu of folk singers and musicians that maintain the Child Ballads instead of the disproving academic authorities.

Westfahl and Slusser provide a method for approaching canons such as the "popular" ESPB canon, suggesting a theory of canonization that stems from a place outside of academia. In their book Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization, and the Academy, they claim that for traditional academic canons, "once the texts escape from the powerful but impermanent control of public opinion and mass market

publishers, they fall entirely under the jurisdiction of literary scholars," but that in the case of some canons (such as science fiction, in their argument), that there is a secondary community, who "embody and maintain the traditions" (Westfahl & Slusser 2-3). Child's canon, it seems, embodies the community-driven, secondary canon of Westfahl and Slusser, and their definition of a secondary community harmonizes with the idea of a "popular" canon as one that is upheld by a group of non-academics.

It seems simple to now draw a line between the "academic" ESPB canon and the "popular" ESPB canon, comparing the two as separate ideological markers of canonization. It is doubly easy when we consider the proposed ESPB canon and the actual state of the ESPB canon today: the former is literature, the latter musical. Yet establishing a stark binary between academic canons and "popular" canons is redolent of the same thinking that caused early folklore scholars to dismiss the myriad origins of balladry, and reinforces the idea that what is musical or cultural is not academic. Furthermore, it dismisses the actuality of the ESPB canon. Much academic criticism is levied against Child's *proposed* or *intended* canon, but few scholars appreciate the *actual* canon, the one that Child had no intention of forming, but bears his name nonetheless. The Child Ballad folk tradition, although perhaps different from the ESPB, is by all accounts a successful canon.

Charles Altieri, in "An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon," provides criteria for academic canons, and through his definition, we can perhaps reconcile the "popular" canon as a harmonizing or sympathetic force to academic/literary canons, rather than an antagonistic one. Altieri writes that "for a work to play canonical roles it must exhibit qualities which define it as a significant distinctive entity. Canonical works are expected to provide knowledge of the world represented, to exemplify powers for making

representations that express possible attitudes or produce artistic models, and to articulate shared values in a past culture that influence the present or to clarify means of reading other works we have reason to care about" (Altieri 54). Breaking it down, Altieri requires four distinct modes of meaning from a literary canon for it to be considered successful. The canon must:

1) Offer insights into its constituent culture,

2) Provide a framework of themes and ideas for producing art or artistic models related to the canon,

3) Provide a bridge between the values/cultures of the past and the values/culture of today, and

4) Provide a context or a framework for appreciating other works not in the canon.

I argue that even if we are to bifurcate the definition of canon, The ESPB/Child Ballads function as both an academic canon as well as a "popular" musical one. Harker, in critiquing the ESPB, inadvertently validates the first point by agreeing that the ESPB is "a collection of the kinds of songs described by late-nineteenth-century English-speaking literary scholars as 'ballads'" (Harker 164). While perhaps not the culture that Child sought to represent, the ESPB still is a collection of what was taken for ballads in 1882, and is at the very least representative of a culture of proto-folklorists and ballad collectors. The enduring folk tradition and myriad recordings of the ESPB ballads are evidence enough to fulfill the criteria of the second point alone, and the recording/publishing of Child ballads into the present supports the third as well. The passions that drove Child to collect and publish the ESPB is the same passion that drives the reproduction and permutations of the Child Ballads today. As for the fourth point,

the field of folklore and folksong has been largely built off the back of seminal works like the ESPB, and the ESPB's popularity has allowed Child's contemporaries such as Grunvald and Macmath to return to the limelight, as folklorists have been forced by the ESPB's opacity and popularity to explore other contemporary works. In addition, folk songs and folk balladeers today recognize and sing from a wider tradition than Child's, but, as is the case for people like me, they would not have had the tools or wherewithal to enter into that tradition without the stepping stones that Child provided.

While it's true that Child's ESPB is not a "traditional" academic canon, and a large part of the ESPB's success was in no part due to Child's intentions, it's also inarguable that the Child Ballads are a canon of 305 distinct folk ballad archetypes, and that each one of those 305 bear Child's name. "Popular" canon or "academic" canon, the folk-song archetype of "Riddles Wisely Expounded" in the ESPB is almost always referenced in popular culture by catalog number of "*Child 1*: Riddles Wisely Expounded," and regardless of how we define a canon, the "Child Ballads" are seen as a complete entity in and of themselves.

Yet simply concluding that the Child Ballads is a canon feels weak, as it fails to acknowledge the nuances in the musical tradition of the "popular" idea of a canon, especially when compared to the traditional literary academic canon. As much as I wish to marry the folk singers who sing compilations of the Child Ballads[6] to the critics of Child, there still remains tension between the academics, who worry that people "fetishize" (Harker 64) Child's work, and the folk tradition, which carries its own set of standards and values, and seems to care little for academia.

---

[6] See: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. (n.d.). The English and Scottish Popular Ballads: (Child Ballads) [CD], or Leggett, Steve, Anaïs Mitchell, & Jefferson Hamer: "Child Ballads," AllMusic 2013

At its root, this divide between academics and folk singers can be traced beyond differences in canonical acceptance to a simple fact: the folk songs and ballads that Child collected in his ESPB were a musical tradition before they were text. The ballad tradition that Child entered into was one of community, music, performance, explosive mutability, ephemerality, and temporality – all things lost in the transition to pen and paper. In his seminal work "Musicking," Small offers an insight into why all parts of a musical tradition are important, especially for academics. He writes that too often, academics are concerned with the question "What is the nature or the meaning of this work of music?" (Small 10). In phrasing the question so bluntly, he centers a mode of exploration that prioritizes a singular understanding of a piece, which he calls "music," a mode that was the nature of academia for years, and is unrepresentative of how a community or culture actually experiences music.

No piece has a singular meaning, similar to how there is no singular definition of a folk ballad. Putting the meaning of a work at the tip of a pyramid of value/understanding is how scholars such as Child got trapped in ideas of "ballad poetry" and "unlearned" cultures. What Small suggests, instead, is a transition to the question "What does it mean when this performance (of this work) takes place at this time, in this place, with these participants?" (Small 10). By marrying the lived experience of a musical act (location, time, participants) with the actual music, a process which he calls "musicking", Small suggests that "music" cannot be understood or approached without incorporating or acknowledging "musicking." No music exists in a vacuum, and thus an academic understanding of musical works can not, and should not be different from a cultural understanding of the works.

“Music” and “Musicking” are no doubt evocative of the “academic” canon and the “popular” canon. The academic idea of the ESPB canon seeks authority, meaning, and definitions, submerging the community that lives and practices the ballads as secondary to an anthropologic dismissal of the ESPB. The canons proposed by academia are distorted by an us/them relation, and as a result, much like the people who study “music,” most academics ignore the living context of the ballads, or, if they acknowledge it, it is only in the context of how Child dismissed it as well. Similar to “music,” their critique and exploration of the ESPB is centered around an atemporal idea of meaning or value.

The popular canon, however, centers the cultural experience and fabric of the folk singers that maintain it. The framework for “musicking” is present, even if it is unconsciously centered. The ballads are performed from inside of the space that Small looks at; academia studies folk, not the other way around. Yet folk singers must read/participate in the sharing of ballads in order to bring them into the modern tradition, and by returning to texts such as the ESPB for inspiration, they are unwittingly entering into the space of academic dialogue. As such, neither academia nor folk can ignore the other. The academic canon of the ESPB cannot ignore the culture of the “popular” canon and must address the Child Ballads as both text and living tradition. The continued relevance and recording of the Child Ballads is as much part of the canon as is Child’s failed criteria.

I want to be clear: the folk culture that has revived the Child Ballads is *not* academic. Folk traditions have much lower barriers to entry, especially considering the general accessibility and breadth of the folk community today. Folk singers do not need to prove that what they're singing is a “genuine” ballad, and very few audiences are

discerning when it comes to “true” ballads vs “invented” ballads. There are no definitions needed for “popular ballad,” as a ballad either is, or it isn’t. Singers and audiences are allowed to make invisible value-based judgments. In almost every way, the greater folk community moves in the exact same pattern of editorializing as Francis James Child. The reclamation of the Child Ballads by the folk community, then, is not surprising: the community merely reclaimed its own.

Yet still, the Child Ballads were intended to be academic, and were consciously thrust into academic discourse by Child. Although initially barred entry, the ESPB was redeemed by folk singers and thus returned to the tradition that rejected it by the very tradition that it sought to divest from. The relationship between folk and academia in the ESPB centers the question of what it means to be an academic text, especially in relation to popular culture; The ESPB straddles the boundaries between folk and academia, but exists fully in neither realm. The canonization of the Child Ballads in both spheres calls on us to reexamine and perhaps even redefine how academic canons intersect and reflect popular culture, and doubly reflect the need for a multidisciplinary, inclusive canon. A contemporary understanding of the ESPB must acknowledge the interconnectedness of the popular folk canon and the traditional literary canon, and assert that the two are not distinct from each other–they are simply part of the larger ESPB canon. A recording made of a Child tune is of equal value to Child's missing introduction, as both offer insight into the ballad tradition. The evolving nature of the ESPB tradition and canon underscores the necessity of acknowledging both the past dismissal of the ESPB and the present flourishing ballad tradition.

Works Cited

Altieri, Charles. “An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon” Critical Inquiry , Sep., 1983, Vol. 10, No. 1, Canons (Sep., 1983), pp. 37-60 Published by: The University of Chicago Press Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343405

Atkinson, David. “The English Revival Canon: Child Ballads and the Invention of Tradition.” The Journal of American Folklore, vol. 114, no. 453, 2001, pp. 370–80. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/542028

Brown, Mary Ellen. “THE CAUSE: Working Together for Ballads, Francis James Child and William Macmath,” date unknown, digital, https://scholarworks.iu.edu/iuswrrest/api/core/bitstreams/68718493-0e4c-42ff-bd4b-afdd97166df2/content

—. “Child’s Unfinished Masterpiece : The English and Scottish Popular Ballads,” Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. Print.

Brown, Mary Ellen and Stephanie Coleman. "Hundreds Of Years Old, These Songs Tour Like New” Weekend Edition Saturday, National Public Radio, 20 April 2013. Transcript, https://www.npr.org/2013/04/20/177997065/not-for-kids-these-child-ballads-are-steeped-in-history.

Child, Francis James. "Ballad Poetry," Johnson's Universal Cyclopædia, 1900, Journal of Folklore Research, Vol. 31, No. 1/3, Triple Issue: Ballad Redux (Jan. - Dec., 1994), pp. 214-222

—. “English and Scottish Ballads,” London: Sampson Low, 1861.

—.“The English and Scottish Popular Ballads,” Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co, 1890. https://archive.org/details/englishandscotti01chiluoft

—. “Vol. 2: Childs Popular ballads, Macmath’s Correspondence,” Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. 22 Aug 1888 MS 14032.

—. English and Scottish Popular Ballad Research Materials, 1849-1914 (MS Am 2349). Houghton Library, Harvard University. https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/hou01700/catalog

—. 13 June 1880 Richard Grant White Letters from James Francis Child and Charles Eliot Norton, 1854-1880 (MS Am 1430-1430.1). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Child, Francis James and George Kittredge. "English and Scottish Popular Ballads," Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co, 1904, Cambridge Edition of the Poets, https://ia801605.us.archive.org/31/items/englishscottishp00sarg/englishscottishp00sarg.pdf.

"Folklore, N., Sense 2." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8841763247.

Gummere, F. B. "Primitive Poetry and the Ballad," 1st ed, University of Chicago Press, 1903. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/432434

Harker, Dave. "Francis James Child and the 'Ballad Consensus,'" Folk Music Journal, vol. 4, no. 2, 1981. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4522084

Hart, Walter Morris. "Professor Child and the Ballad." *PMLA*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1906, pp. 755–807. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/456762

Hustvedt, Sigurd Bernhard. "Ballad Books and Ballad Men: Raids and Rescues in Britain, America, and the Scandinavian North since 1800," Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1930. https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674184428/

McKean, Thomas A. "Introduction." The Flowering Thorn: International Ballad Studies, edited by Thomas A. McKean, University Press of Colorado, 2003, p. 2. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt46nrm0.3

Miller, Karl Hagstrom. "Isolating Folk, Isolating Songs: Reimagining Southern Music as Folklore," Duke University Press, 2010.

Percy, T. "Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, Volume I (of 3), Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs and Other Pieces of Our Earlier Poets Together With Some Few of Later Date," Lord Bishop of Dromore, Project Gutenberg, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45939/45939-h/45939-h.htm.

Richetti J, ed. Bibliographies. In: "The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660–1780." The New Cambridge History of English Literature. Cambridge University Press; 2005:833-912.

Rieuwerts, Sigrid. "'The Genuine Ballads of the People': F. J. Child and the Ballad Cause." Journal of Folklore Research 31, no. 1/3 (1994): 1–34. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814508.

Rieuwerts, Sigrid. "The Folk-Ballad: The Illegitimate Child of the Popular Ballad." Journal of Folklore Research, vol. 33, no. 3, 1996, pp. 221–26. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814677

Sharp, Cecil J., et al. "English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians: Comprising Two Hundred and Seventy-four Songs and Ballads with Nine Hundred and Sixty-eight Tunes, Including Thirty-nine Tunes Contributed by Olive Dame Campbell." Loomis House Press, 1917, 2012 Printing.

Small, Christopher. "Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening," Wesleyan University Press, 1998, Print.

Thompson, D. “An Evolving Tradition: The Child Ballads in Modern Folk and Rock Music,” Backbeat Books, 2023.

Westfahl, Gary, and George Slusser. “Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization, and the Academy,” Google Books, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 30 Jan. 2002

Zhang, Longxi. "Canon and World Literature". Journal of World Literature 1.1 (2016): 119-127. https://doi.org/10.1163/24056480-00101012.