*FORTUNE MY FOE:* THE CIRCULATION OF AN ENGLISH SUPER-TUNE

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There can be little doubt that *Fortune my Foe* was the best-known secular melody in early modern England. Its extraordinary prominence within musical culture began in the 1560s and continued into the eighteenth century. During this long period, the tune acquired a range of alternative names and travelled widely, both up and down the social scale and across the country. It also reached the Netherlands where it was known as *Enghelsche Fortuyne*. To most modern listeners, it is perhaps rather a dull melody – I have even heard my students describe it as ’truly depressing’ - yet it clearly resonated remarkably in the ears of our forebears. It attracted the interest of composers and playwrights who presumably knew that their audiences would recognise both the tune itself and verbal allusions to it. It was also a musical mainstay of broadside balladry, and the expression ‘Fortune my foe’ entered common currency as a concise exclamation of despair. The tune was heard in marketplaces, alehouses and aristocratic homes, and it provided the soundtrack to numerous public executions. This paper explores the reasons for *Fortune*’s ear-catching success and considers the manner in which it moved around, connecting all sorts of people and all sorts of lyrics.[[1]](#footnote-1) In particular, the culture of balladry will present an ideal field in which to investigate a particular species of intertextuality. Literary theorists have taught us that no text exists in isolation; instead, every work is framed by others. Every reading (or, in our case, listening) depends on prior codes and involves the reader in a personal transformation of the text. And no text is the creation of a single author in any simple sense because each composition registers the presence of many different voices.[[2]](#footnote-2) Our task now is to add the mediating role of melody to the mix, and it is hoped that the travels of *Fortune my Foe* within and beyond English balladry will provide a stimulating case study.

Many early modern tunes are, of course, lost to us. We owe the survival of *Fortune my Foe* to the decisions made by several sophisticated composers to use it as the basis for instrumental pieces. There are settings for lute, cittern, lyra-viol and virginals, and the celebrated musicians who felt drawn to the tune included John Dowland, Thomas Tomkins, William Byrd and Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck. Lesser musicians also fell under *Fortune*’s spell. In the Folger Library, Washington, a copy of *Musica Transalpina*, the famous collection of Elizabethan madrigals, contains a blank page in which a contemporary owner of the volume has written out the *Fortune* melody, untitled, in a rough and ready musical hand [Fig. 1]. Perhaps he grew tired of learning his complicated madrigal part and sought reassurance for a moment in the simplicity and familiarity of the period’s favourite tune.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Playwrights shared the perception of composers that references to *Fortune* were likely to please their listeners. In William D’Avenant’s *Love and Honour* (1649), a woman is said to play the virginals so exquisitely that the character Altesto can ‘wish no more of he[a]ven/ Than once to hear her play *Fortune my Foe*’. His conversational partner responds with the observation that *Fortune* is one of the tunes that ‘my old widow prisoner sings/ With more division than a water work/ When the maine pipe is halfe stopt’. In *The London Cockolds* (1682), a comedy by Edward Ravenscroft, Townly consoles the sexually frustrated Ramble with the line, ‘in all your afflictions how truly maiest thou sing *Fortune my Foe*’. There are other instances in which the melody is not even named for the benefit of audiences but is instead sounded without words by an actor or musician. ‘Joyless’, a character in Richard Brome’s *The Antipodes* (1638), demonstrates his joylessness at one point by whistling *Fortune my Foe*. Later in the century, Aphra Behn’s play, *The Roundheads,* included a scene in which a group of Royalists humiliate two former parliamentarians to the tune of *Fortune*, forcing one of them to dance.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is peculiar, for *Fortune* was certainly not a dance tune and does not appear in any of the major collections of such melodies. A satirical purpose was surely at work here, though the precise nature of its operation will only emerge towards the end of this paper when we have come to know the melody a little more intimately.

*Fortune* was best known not as a dance tune but as the most frequently cited broadside ballad melody of the entire early modern period. Between 8000 and 9000 English ballads survive from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, representing a fraction of the original whole but a relatively impressive sample nonetheless. These single-sheet publications were sold for roughly a penny a piece and were clearly the early modern age’s most ubiquitous form of print and music. They were published in London, usually without the inclusion of an author’s name, and then distributed through the capital and the country beyond by ballad-singers who performed them in public spaces, aiming to draw a crowd before persuading its members to part with their pennies. Consumers then carried the ballads away with them for reading, display and, ideally, singing among friends [Fig 2]. By the time the format matured and settled in the early seventeenth century, a typical ballad carried a text of 12-20 verses, one or more simple woodcut illustrations and, just beneath the title, the name of a suggested tune. The melodies were only very rarely notated on the sheets, and the normal expectation was therefore that sellers and buyers would learn the tunes if they did not know them already, and then apply them to the predominantly black-letter texts. Ballads enjoyed or endured a reputation as the songs of the streets, the music of the masses, and they were often maligned by courtly commentators, yet individuals from the upper ranks clearly consumed ballads for themselves and sometimes pasted hundreds of them into bound volumes. For this complicated collecting habit, cultural historians are profoundly grateful. Without the ballads preserved by men like John Selden and Samuel Pepys, our knowledge of the genre would be sketchy indeed. Ballads, when they were not collected, often ended up as linings for pots, padding for the spines of books and even toilet paper.

Surviving ballads designate approximately 2000 different tune titles. Some of these are alternative names for the same melody, but Simpson has estimated that there were around 1000 separate tunes. About half of these were at some point recorded in musical notation by composers or publishers of the period.[[5]](#footnote-5) Attempts to count the citations and thus identify the most successful tunes inevitably produce lists that are headed by *Fortune my Foe*, under one of its various names. I have so far counted 142 surviving ballad sheets that designate the tune, a figure that places *Fortune* far ahead of its nearest rival, *Chevy Chase*. Some of the 142 *Fortune* ballads are duplicates or different editions of the same text, but a remarkable 84 separate songs were sung to this one tune. Once again, no other melody came close. I am currently involved in a project that aims to identify the period’s best-selling 100 ballads. As the list begins to take shape, it is clear that approximately 10% of these extremely successful songs were set to the *Fortune* melody. By any measurement, therefore, this was an English super-tune.

The success of *Fortune* can be explained and explored in a number of ways. In the first place, it had many of the characteristics associated with what musically-engaged psychologists call ‘ear worms’. It may well have stuck particularly fast in people’s minds for the following reasons: it was only four lines long; in compass, it extended to just seven notes; it was dominated by repeated notes and short steps rather than more ambitious jumps (34 of the tune’s 38 notes are followed by a repeated note or by movement to an adjacent note); it was repetitive, opening with a double rendition of the same line; it was strong and simple in rhythm, and each line commenced with a motif made up of a minim followed by two crotchets; and it was unusual among ballad tunes in featuring a relatively high proportion of minims and semibreves [Fig. 3]. All of these attributes have been identified by psychologists as characteristic of melodies that lodge easily in the mind.[[6]](#footnote-6) We might add that the tune’s metre was relatively unusual and therefore distinctive, suiting it to four-line verses with ten syllables per line. Simpson remarked on the tune’s ‘unusual melodic and rhythmic persistence’ and it is certainly true that versions of *Fortune* in composed works tend to be significantly more similar to one another than is typically the case with other early-modern ballad tunes.[[7]](#footnote-7) *Fortune*’s combination of distinctiveness, simplicity and singability helped to ensure that it achieved and maintained a prominent place within English musical culture.

The uncomplicated nature of the *Fortune* melody also made it highly adaptable, and this too helped to promote its widespread dissemination. It was simple enough to attract attention on the bustling London streets and some commentators associated *Fortune* with the common people in particular. In 1647, *Certain Elegant Poems* by the mischievous divine, Richard Corbet, included ‘A proper new Ballad, intituled the Fairies farewell, or God a mercy Will, to be sung, or whistled, to the tune of Medow Brow by the learned, by the unlearned to the tune of Fortune’.[[8]](#footnote-8) On the other hand, the elaborate instrumental divisions or variations on the tune set down by William Byrd and other courtly composers suggest that men and women from the highest ranks of society also found *Fortune* irresistible. It would of course be simplistic to regard the tune’s ability to connect high and low society as evidence of an underlying cultural unity. Instead, we see and hear multiple acts of appropriation. Composers were not only picking up the tune instinctively but playing around with it, manipulating it, fitting it for courtly ears. They were elaborating and elevating the common melody, enabling their aristocratic listeners to feel that they were not ‘of the street’ at all but rather creatures of the decorated indoors, listening to lutes and lyra-viols instead of the boisterous bawling of the ballad-singer. *Fortune* attracted inventive composers because its simplicity allowed them considerable freedom of operation. In the renditions by Dowland, Byrd, Tomkins and Sweelinck, the skeleton of the tune is fleshed out and enhanced by the addition of elaborate runs, gap-filling, ornaments, syncopations, arpeggio figures, contrapuntal accompaniment, rhythmic inversions and unexpected accidentals. A sparse tune is rendered busy in the hands of these expert practitioners. In Carole Cerasi’s recording of Tomkins’ version of *Fortune* a 40-second tune is varied with such skill that the performer’s fingers are occupied for over seven minutes.[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus the tune allowed plenty of space for the musical imagination, yet its simplicity could also seem to some a drawback and a marker of baseness. In 1672, Matthew Locke criticised a system of tuning for the viol because it allegedly prevented the instrument from playing anything except ‘such lean stuff as *Fortune my Foe’*.[[10]](#footnote-10) Clearly, there was considerable traffic between high and low society, but it did not always flow freely.

The same observation can be applied to the practices of ballad collectors. It was a little embarrassing for sophisticated individuals to feel the pull of common street music, and so collectors made the ballads their own by some combination of trimming, ordering alphabetically or thematically, numbering, annotating and pasting into bound volumes. A street ballad that was contained and confined in this manner was no longer a street ballad, becoming instead the curious collectible of a cultured connoisseur. Significantly, it was shut up when not in view rather than displayed brazenly for all to see on the wall of some lowly alehouse. One ballad that used the *Fortune* melody and proved popular with collectors was *Save a thief from the Gallows, and he’l Hang thee if he can*. Samuel Pepys’ copy has been cut in half, numbered by hand and stuck into an album in a section full of other songs on comparable themes. In Volume III of the Roxburghe Collection, the same song has been pasted within the confines of a pre-existing decorative border and again numbered by the orderly editor.[[11]](#footnote-11) These techniques of appropriation were the collector’s equivalent of the composer’s clever musical divisions and ornaments.

It might also be argued that *Fortune*’s success owed something to the fact that its essentially lugubrious mood accorded well with the fashion for melancholy that existed in early modern Europe, particularly in the decades between 1560 and 1640. In a famous work on the illness, first published in 1621, Robert Burton remarked ‘few there are that feele not the smart of it’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Of course, the performance of merry songs and tunes was regularly identified in the period as one of the ‘pills’ that could help individuals to overcome or at least manage melancholy, and several printed collections mentioned the affliction specifically. *Fortune* was probably not, however, a tune that could be relied upon to raise the spirits, and its value to the melancholic may have lain more in the opportunity it offered them to express and indulge their misery (indeed, one Dutch song to the melody opened with the word ‘Meelankoely’).[[13]](#footnote-13) The tune is in the Dorian mode, a scale pattern characterised by ‘sober slow-tim’d Not[e]s’ that were conducive to ‘sobriety, prudence, modesti and godlines’. It is no surprise, therefore, that the clergyman William Slatyer identified *Fortune* as one of the ‘common, but solemne tunes’ to which he encouraged his readers to sing metrical psalms in 1630.[[14]](#footnote-14) It is indeed a predominantly serious tune, more glum than gleeful. The dominant rhythmic motif recalls the sober beating of a drum. The basic minim beat suggests that delivery was typically slow, and the sombre mode seems to leave little room for optimism.

Yet *Fortune* may not have been quite as miserable as all that. When the late Patrick Collinson examined Tessa Watt’s outstanding PhD thesis in 1988, he reportedly argued with her over the mood of this melody.[[15]](#footnote-15) Watt considered *Fortune* morose but Collinson insisted that, in the hands of a composer such as William Byrd, it was actually quite a sprightly number. It seems to me that Watt was probably closer to the mark, though it can certainly be argued that the basic tune does present a few seconds of passing brightness in its third line. Here, *Fortune* reaches its high point and the implied harmonies are cheerier too, though the line is followed by another one in which the listener is pulled back down towards the gloomy key note. Perhaps the more energetic of Byrd’s variations were an attempt to liberate the positive potential of the melody, or was the composer instead fashioning something lively from raw materials that were dismal and stodgy, thus demonstrating his capacity for artful invention and playfully subverting the expectations of his listeners? This is an interesting question, though not one that we can possibly answer with any assurance.

Where ballad tunes were concerned, success tended to breed further success. Over many decades, *Fortune* was named as the melody for such a quantity of songs that it gathered a fascinating range of overlapping associations. By steadily accruing significance beyond itself, *Fortune* became a holder of meaning, rather than a mere vehicle for the texts, and this certainly helped to establish its reputation as one of the ‘go to’ melodies for all those involved in the composition of ballads. *Fortune* attached itself to three themes in particular and the rest of this paper will be devoted to a consideration of them. In the beginning, the tune carried an Elizabethan love-song entitled, *A Sweet Sonnet, wherein the Lover exclaimeth against Fortune for the loss of his Ladies favour, almost past hope to get again, and in the end receives a comfortable answer, and attains his desire*. Surviving copies all date from the later seventeenth century, and we cannot therefore be certain of the ballad’s original date. It seems to have originated in the 1560s and it was certainly well-established by 1589.[[16]](#footnote-16) As the title suggests, the song is divided into two equal sections. In the first, a melancholic man bemoans the loss of his sweetheart, opening with lines that gave the tune its name:

Fortune my foe, why dost thou frown on me

And will thy favour never better be?

Wilt thou I say, for ever breed my pain,

And wilt thou not restore my joys again?

Fortune, the man complains, has stolen his love away, leaving him in a condition ‘Far worse then [than] death’. In the second half of the song, his lady seeks to reassure him, insisting that he has not in fact lost her and urging him to pull himself together. She begins,

Ah silly soul, art thou so sore afraid?

Mourn not my dear nor be not so dismaid

Fortune cannot withall her power and skill,

Enforce my heart to think thee any ill.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Overall, therefore, this is supposedly a happy song - ‘A sweet Sonnet’ – in which the relative optimism of the tune’s third line penetrates the surrounding gloom. It was, however, the woeful wailing of the man’s contribution that exerted the greatest influence over the melody’s subsequent history (gloom has a habit of enveloping everything close to it). Most literary references to the song connect only with its first half. In several plays of the period, for example, characters sing the song or whistle the tune in order to indicate their dejectedness rather than to celebrate their return to happiness.[[18]](#footnote-18) Similarly, a highly successful later ballad that imitated the original by redeploying its tune and reworking its romantic theme concentrated exclusively on the misery of the male. This was *The Young Mans A.B.C.*, first published in the 1630s and featuring a desperate appeal to an allegedly unfeeling sweetheart. It contains several verbal echoes of the original song but in this later broadside there is no reassuring response from the woman in question.

Romance, therefore, was *Fortune*’s original theme, but it was not by any means the most important in statistical terms. In fact, only three out of eighty-four surviving ballads that use the tune were primarily romantic in their subject matter. The tune’s association with troubled courtship clearly survived for 100 years or more, but it was an association built on the impressive success of two particular songs - *A Sweet Sonnet* and *The Young Mans A.B.C. -* rather than on a wider flowering of love-songs set to *Fortune*. Despite the small number of titles, *Fortune*’s romantic resonance reached far and wide. In 1601, for example, a Yorkshire servant composed a libellous song to the tune of *Fortune* while ridiculing the sexual exploits of one of his master’s enemies. It seems likely that the melancholic romance of the tune was a central feature of his satirical purpose.[[19]](#footnote-19)

A very different case is encountered as we move on to consider the second of the tune’s main areas of influence. From the late sixteenth century onwards, *Fortune* was also used for sober ballads on moral and religious themes. The initiator of this new trend, or perhaps merely the most influential early example, was *An Excellent Song, wherein you shall find,/ Great consolation for a troubled mind* (c. 1619-29), which opened with the lines,

Aim not too High in things above they reach

Nor be too wise within thy own conceit,

As thou hast wealth and wit at will,

So give him thanks that shall increase it still.

In this frequently reprinted song, we once again witness the interplay between misery and mercy that seems to have been one of the tune’s defining characteristics. The title demonstrates that the song was designed to bring comfort to the spiritually anguished, and many lines within the text bear this out (‘forgive offences ever past,/ As thou thy self will be forgiven at last’). Reassuringly, the first of two woodcut pictures on later seventeenth-century editions shows a benevolent Christ in glory, riding in a cloud and flanked by cherubs. On the other hand, the tune leaves us in little doubt that this is a serious, weighty song with little time for frivolity. The text is presented in ABC format, each verse opening with a different letter of the alphabet, a device that accorded well with the didactic intent of the song. The verses contain as many warnings as they do moments of comfort (‘Beware of pride, the Mother of mishap’; ‘Keep thou no Cancar hidden in thy Heart’; ‘Quench fond desires and pleasures of the flesh’). And the second picture is much more troubling than its partner. Three numbered skeletons are represented rising from their graves, presumably on the day of the general resurrection. They look very far from jubilant, however: number one appears terrified; number two is similarly troubled and also in flames; and number three seems to be tearing out what remains of his or her incongruous hair. This was obviously not an image that viewers can have found particularly uplifting, despite its theological theme. The song struck a chord, however, and it remained on sale for many decades. Its opening words, ‘Aim not too high’, also became established as the most common alternative name for the *Fortune* melody.

In fact, the new title outstripped the old one during the seventeenth century. Overall, fifty-two of our eighty-four ballads named the tune *Aim Not Too High* rather than *Fortune my Foe*. Furthermore, thirty-four of the fifty-two ballads set to *Aim Not Too High* presented texts with primarily moral and religious messages, suggesting that those involved in the composition of ballads tended to choose a tune-title that indicated by association the predominant theme of the song. In the wake of *An Excellent Song,* many others followed on similar lines, rapidly establishing the morality/religion theme as the tune’s most important sphere of operation. By 1660, one author had come to think of *Fortune* as ‘that preaching tune’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Many of the ballads that named the melody *Aim Not Too High* were, like *An Excellent Song,* general moral and religious warnings, often including verses on the uncertainty of life and the urgent need for repentance. A representative example was *A Looking-Glass for all true Christians. Very useful and necessary for all people of what degree soever, to look upon in these troublesome times of sorrow* (c. 1681-84). This ballad carried the same image of Christ in glory that appeared on *An Excellent Song,* suggesting the intriguing possibility that pictures and tunes with distinctive associations sometimes moved in tandem between texts (this image also appears on several other ballads set to the *Fortune* tune under one or other of its names). The metaphor of the ballad as a looking-glass was also recurrent. Three other songs that named the tune were presented to potential customers as looking-glasses, for true Protestants, Christian families and maids respectively.[[21]](#footnote-21) It is also notable that several of these moralising ballads generated additional names for the tunes as publishers linked new ballads to old ones, offering potential consumers a guide to content that doubled as a cheap advertising technique. In this manner, the *Fortune* melody was sometimes called *A Lesson for all True Christians*, *A Letter for a Christian Family* or *The Godly Mans Instruction*. In each case, the new tune name was simply a transposition of an existing ballad title. And so it went on.

Other ballads to the tune of *Aim Not Too High* pursued the moral-religious theme not through general aphorisms but by presenting particular examples of God’s judgement. Most of these case-studies were of the thunderbolt variety, carrying graphic but cumbersome titles such as

*A Wonderfull Wonder, being a most strange and true relation of the resolute life, and miserable death of Thomas Miles, who did forsweare himself, and wished that God might shew some heavie example upon him, and so it came to passe for as he sate at his meate hee choked himself, and died in short space after, which hapned the 8 of August last, 1635, and being ript up by the chirurgions of S. Bartholmewes Hospitall, was found to have a gub of meate sticking fast in his throate, which was the cause of his death. Written to warne all rash swearers to forsake their evil ways, which God grant we may* (c. 1634-58).

The warnings contained in ballads of this sort were grim indeed and the melody’s dominating sobriety held centre stage. Other songs in this category drew religious lessons from the burning of Cork city, a fire on London Bridge, the death of a disorderly apothecary, a terrible earthquake in Hereford, and an extraordinary storm of hail. Most followed a simple interpretative pattern in which news of brutal disasters inflicted by God was promoted as the motor of repentance (‘Thunder, and Lightnings, to procure our feares’ as the author of *A Wonderful Wonder* put it). When sung, these songs are generally some combination of distressing and depressing. Of course, there is always the prospect of eternal salvation for those who repent obediently and sincerely but the promise of delight ahead is normally drowned out by the reality of disaster behind. It is as if the tune’s optimistic third line sounds in vain.

There were other ballads, however, that seemed to take inspiration from that third strain in order to spread much happier stories of providential intervention. As God punished the wicked, so he rewarded the just (though much less frequently if the ballads are a reliable guide). When one has sung one’s way through a whole series of disaster ballads, these good news stories, set to the same tune, come as something of a surprise and the effect is more than a little curious. Take, for example, *The Kentish WONDER* (c. 1695-1703)*,* which recounted the extraordinary story of a poor widow from Kent who was,

by the Providence of the Almighty, miraculously preserved in her Necessity, so that she and seven small Children lived seven Weeks upon a burnt six-penny Loaf of Bread, and yet it never decreased, to the great wonder of all that hear it, and the Praise of the Almighty, who never forsakes them who put their trust in him.

The opening lines reiterate this optimistic message and form quite a contrast when compared with a typical verse from *A Wonderfull Wonder:*

You faithful Christians whereso’er you be,

Trust still in God and you shall surely see,

In faithful service he doth take delight,

And you shall never be forsaken quite.

(*The Kentish WONDER*)

But let them know that doe the Lord provoke

By cursed oaths, on them to strike the stroke:

Know that although he suffers them a space,

He will at last confound their wicked race.

(*A Wonderfull Wonder*)

The same tune carries both texts, forming a link between the two sides of various polarities within the Christian message: goodness and evil, joy and despair, salvation and damnation. The associations of this tune were so strong that listeners to tales of God’s benevolence must have been wordlessly reminded of those other, darker tales of divine intervention. One ‘wonder’ was quite unlike another, and yet they were bound together by a melody.

In these moral and religious ballads, it is as if the human romance of the original song has been appropriated and redirected. The object of devotion is no longer the provocatively nonchalant maiden but instead the ever-vigilant Lord. To listeners who knew songs in both categories – and this surely included a vast majority of ballad consumers – the contrasting associations must have created an interesting subconscious interplay between different forms of love. The *Fortune* songs, whether romantic or religious, presented a related image of a loved one who held power over devotees and could be either sympathetic or harsh. In one case, moreover, the attempt to appropriate a secular song for godly purposes was much more explicit. In John Rhodes’ *The Countrie Mans Comfort*, the author included ‘A song against Fortune and those that have or doe defend the same, which may be sung, to the Tune of: Fortune my Foe, why dost thou frowne on me’. This was, in short, a critical response to the original romantic ballad and, more broadly, to the contemporary habit of personifying Fortune as a god-like entity capable of influencing earthly events. The new song began, bluntly, with the lines,

Fortune shall be no God nor guide of mine,

Fortune to thee, nothing I will resign:

Fortune thou art the heathens Queen and Princesse

How should a Christian take thee for his Mistres.[[22]](#footnote-22)

This, it seems, was a bold bid to render the original tune religious, and the subsequent stream of solidly godly ballads to the *Fortune* melody suggests either that Rhodes was successful or that he was surfing a cultural wave. By the early seventeenth century, the tune could mean subtly different things to different people or more than one thing to the same person.

To complicate matters further, the *Fortune* tune also operated very regularly within a third thematic area. When the Poet in Samuel Rowley’s *The Noble Soldier* speaks fearfully of ‘the Hanging Tune’, it seems certain that he is referring to *Fortune* which was, by this date, the melody chosen most frequently for ballads that featured the ‘last dying speeches’ of executed criminals.[[23]](#footnote-23) Twenty of the eighty-four surviving ballads that used the tune were in this category. Most of these songs gave the melody its original name, perhaps partly because the expression ‘Fortune my foe’ seemed to suit the lot of a condemned criminal even more poetically than the alternative, ‘Aim not too high’. The tune first acquired its association with crime and punishment during the late sixteenth century. The vast majority of Elizabethan ballads are lost but we do know that in 1592 a licence was issued for the publication of ‘The Lamentacion of John Parker whoe for consenting to the murder of John Bruen was hanged in Smithfield the 28 of June 2 yeres after the fact was committed to the tune of *Fortune*’. [[24]](#footnote-24) This song has not survived though we have plentiful examples from the decades that followed. When Rowley referred to ‘the Hanging Tune’ in 1634, it is entirely possible that some of the following songs, all set to *Fortune* and recently published, were ringing in his ears:

*Anne Wallens Lamentation, For the Murthering of her husband John Wallen a Turner in Cow- lane neere Smithfield; done by his owne wife on satterday the 22 of June 1616. Who was burnt in Smithfield the first of July following* (c. 1616).

*The Godly End, and wofull lamentation of one John Stevens a youth that was hang’d, drawne, and quartered for high-treason, at Salisbury in Wilshire, upon Thursday being the seventh day of March last 1632. With the setting up of his quarters on the city gates* (c. 1633).

*The Lamentation of Edward Bruton, and James Riley, who for the bloody murder committed on the bodies of Henry Howell, and his Wife, upon Queenes Downe, were executed and hanged in chaines, neere the same place on the 18 day of March, 1633* (c. 1633).

The stream of execution ballads set to this remarkable melody continued into the later seventeenth century, and Alexander Oldys clearly knew what he was talking about when, in 1682, he imagined the shame of being ‘sung about the Streets in a Ballad to the tune of *Fortune my Foe*’.[[25]](#footnote-25) *Fortune* had reigned supreme as the king of ‘hanging tunes’ for almost a century, and it only began to lose this status after 1683, displaced by a brand new melody called *Russell’s Farewell*.

A notably successful crime ballad to the tune of *Fortune* was *The Sorrowfull Complaint of Mistris Page for causing her husband to be murthered for love of George Strangwidg, who were executed together*. This dealt with a sensational case that took place in Plymouth in 1589-90, and we can assume that the first edition of the ballad was issued shortly afterwards. The earliest surviving version, however, is a transcript in the *Shirburn Ballads*, dating from the first years of the seventeenth century.[[26]](#footnote-26) Further editions were printed in c. 1609 and c. 1635, and it is clear that *The sorrowfull complaint* was usually issued on a sheet with two other songs, *The Lamentation of Mr. Pages Wife* and *The Lamentation of George Strangwidge*, both of which used the same tune and dealt with the same sensational murder. In some editions, the date of the case was altered in order to make the songs seem more topical for listeners and readers. Taken together, they present an interesting and reasonably representative example of ballads in this category. Eulalia Page confesses to having organised the murder of her husband in alliance with her sweetheart, George Strangwidge. She expresses repentance, willingness to die and confidence that God will forgive her. She also makes it plain, however, that her greedy and oppressive parents are to blame for forcing her to marry the wealthy but unlovable Master Page. Strangwidge sings the same tune (literally) and accepts his share of the guilt. He repents the deed done but cannot relinquish his love for the radiant Mrs. Page. He is prepared to die with her, and manuscript records from Devon reveal that he did just that. The lovers were executed together in March 1589-90, along with two hired assassins, and their burials are recorded in local parish registers.[[27]](#footnote-27)

It is particularly interesting to consider the role of the tune in carrying the messages of these ballads into the minds of contemporary listeners. Audiences in the 1590s would have connected the *Fortune* melody particularly with the original love song. The opening lines of Mrs Page’s *Lamentation* seem to nod towards its predecessor: ‘Unhappy she whom Fortune hath forlorne,/ Despis’d of grace, that proffer’d grace did scorn’. Beyond this, the tune must have added considerable resonance to the declarations of love made by both condemned parties. Eulalia addresses George directly:

And thou my Dear which for my fault must Dye,

Be not afraid the sting of Death to try:

Like as we liv’d and lov’d together true,

So both at once let’s bid the World adieu.

And George responds in kind:

Farewel my love, whose loyal heart was seen,

I would thou hadst not half so constant been:

Farewel my Love, the pride of plimouth Town,

Farewel the Flower whose beauty is cut down.

It is noticeable, however, that the Page texts share only a limited quantity of verbal material with the earlier love song. Where rhymes are common to both songs, they seem thoroughly unexceptional and probably insignificant (‘me’ and ‘be’, for example). Shared rhymes are rather more likely to occur within each broadside than between them. In *A Sweet Sonnet*, there are eight internally repeated rhymes and in the Page songs rhymes recur on ten occasions. It is thus apparent that the intertwining of the two broadsides is primarily grounded in the sharing of a tune rather than in a striking series of precise verbal allusions.

As the decades passed, moralising songs that usually named the tune *Aim Not Too High* became steadily more prevalent. This development meant that listeners, hearing the familiar tune to which the Page ballads were sung, probably began to understand them not only in relation to the old love-song but also in the light of publications such as *An Excellent Song.* Even now, those who sing to themselves a series of songs in both categories will find that the different texts seem to echo or haunt one another. The singer or listener experiences, through memory and association, not one but several songs simultaneously. The text that is being performed holds the limelight, but the tune encourages other lyrics, remembered and half-remembered, to gather in the background, jostling for attention. Of course, the connection was particularly easy to make because, in one sense, the execution ballads were a sub-set of the moral and religious songs. They too attempted to urge repentance through the dissemination of sensational examples but they focused particularly on gory crime and state-sponsored punishment. In the Page ballads, there are several verses in which one is reminded of the preaching voice that characterised the more general of the moral and religious ballads. Eulalia takes a moment, for example, to warn adults against forcing their daughters into loveless marriages:

You Parents fond that greedy minded be,

And seek to graft upon the Golden tree:

Consider well, and rightful judges be,

And give your Doom, ‘twixt parents love & me.

The stern tone of other ballads is here echoed, though Eulalia’s actual message might be regarded as a critique of warnings to family members heard elsewhere. Typically, moralising ballads set to our tune included verses that targeted the young for disobeying or disrespecting their parents. In the best-selling *Letter for a Christian Family*, for example, a firm rebuke is delivered to the youth of England:

And some will curse their parents to their face,

Methinks to them it is a foul disgrace,

But ‘tis forbidden in the Laws of God,

Therefore let’s serve him all with one accord.

Eulalia Page, singing to the same tune, grasps the opportunity to point out that sometimes the fault lies on the other side of the parent-child relationship.

Through the tune, moralising ballads inhabited execution ballads but the interaction could work the other way too. Those who listened to *A Letter to a Christian Family* must have been well aware of the melody’s association with crime and punishment. The presence of the ‘hanging tune’ is menacing and adds new depth to the series of moral warnings that constitute the text. Those who do not pay heed will, according to the tune, face dire consequences. This is a song with a noose attached and a deadly drop threatened:

The sin of pride we see doth so excel,

In men and women now the truth to tell:

And for that sin we read that Satan fell,

From an high Angel to a Devil in Hell.

Love, morality and execution were, then, the chief subjects associated with the tune of *Fortune*. This thematic trio did not, however, encompass all of the ballads sung to the tune, and it is important to mention some of the songs that seemed to sit between or beyond these principal categories. The tune also seems to have established a relationship with songs on supernatural subjects. This began with *The Judgement of God shewed upon one John Faustus*, first issued during the 1580s, and continued into the next century with occasional *Fortune* ballads on the deeds of witches and ghosts.[[28]](#footnote-28) These songs can be regarded as occupying the ground between the ‘judgement’ ballads and the execution ballads, but they also seem to have endowed the tune with an additional other-worldly *frisson*. *Fortune* was also named from time to time on ballads that simply told sensational and tragic stories but without the explicit moral or religious reflection contained in the tune’s more didactic songs. A very successful and long-lived example was *The Lamentable and Tragical History of Titus Andronicus*. In this immensely bloody ballad, the moralising is concentrated wholly in the last line: ‘And so God send all Murtherers may be serv’d’.

A very different case is presented by *The Honest Plaine Dealing Porter: Who once was a rich man, but now tis his lot,/ To prove that need will make the old wife trot*. This was composed by the immensely witty Martin Parker and probably published at some point in the 1630s. Unfortunately, we cannot be absolutely certain that the designated tune, *The Maids A.B.C.* was *Fortune* by yet another name, but it is certainly our best guess.[[29]](#footnote-29) If *Fortune* is indeed the tune, then this seems to be an intriguing and unusual example of a skilful and knowing composer drawing on the associations of a famous tune for humorous effect. When the text is read in silence, the ballad appears to be a conventional and conservative piece in which the poor and lowly are advised by one of their own to know their place and stick to it without demur. The proverbial refrain line – ‘’Thus need will make the old wife trot’ – seems clumsy and rustic but seriously intended. When the sombre tune is added, however, its connections with sad love, heavy moralising and public execution surely reveal this as a piece of satire. Parker was reportedly an alehouse-keeper and yet his humble, happy porter is fiercely critical of those who sit drinking all day. He much prefers to ‘rise at four i’ th morne,/ And labour hard till nine at night’ before returning home for a meagre but marvellous meal with his (trotting) wife. It seems likely that this song was designed for convivial performance in a tavern and that the ‘honest plaine dealing Porter’ was not only an example of the humble-but-happy worker of literary convention but a spoof upon him:

I trudge abroad be it cold or hot,

Thus need will make the old wife trot.

The porter’s words are upbeat but the doleful tune sounds his doom. Of course, the song may have been interpreted more literally by some listeners but I doubt that this was the dominant interpretation in the crowded alehouse of its author.

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In the richly associational world of early modern balladry, many songs echoed others and complex threads of mutual influence criss-crossed the genre. A great deal of material was constantly recycled and reassembled in shifting configurations. Themes, expressions, characters and pictures all moved around between songs, but melodies were perhaps the cross-pollinators of this art-form *par excellence*. The redeployment of existing tunes was a deeply-rooted habit and it ensured that the multi-layered and variable significance of any song had a prominent musical aspect. The better-known the tune, the denser was its web of associations, and no melody was more active a presence within early modern balladry than *Fortune my Foe*. By c. 1620 it had acquired the capacity to call to mind thoughts of love and/or godly morality and/or capital punishment. The tune was heavy and unchanging, yet its movements within English culture were light and lively. *Fortune* was a stable tune but in its ability to fly freely from place to place it also contributed continuously to the potential instability of meaning. Each listener brought different past experiences to a rendition, and so every hearing was unique and personal. Frequently, the contrasts between the interpretations made by individual listeners must have been subtle but there was nothing to prevent the existence of more radical differences. Those who attended to a sober moral song must have responded differently depending on whether their most memorable prior exposure had been to *Fortune* as a love-tune or *Fortune* as a melody of the gallows. Of course, our information on actual listening experiences and responses is depressingly meagre, and so we have little option but to speculate and imagine.

In doing so, we can draw reassurance from two trends within recent writing on early modern culture and on music more generally. First, Foucault and others have demonstrated that the Renaissance world was full of powerful resemblances. Nothing existed alone and everything reflected or echoed something else. Associational habits of mind were thus firmly embedded and it can be argued that the identification of interconnections between different songs was something that came instinctively to people.[[30]](#footnote-30) Second, research into musical cognition has established that these associational thought-processes are, to a significant degree, hard-wired into us. There are, of course, cultural differences – modern pop music does not typically apply old tunes to new texts – but there is no escaping the human brain’s habit of forming links between different musical events. The cognitive processing of music involves the automatic storing of data, the learning of the musical grammar particular to one’s culture, the creation of mental templates or schemas against which new or repetitive musical experiences can be assessed, the generation of expectations based upon one’s developing knowledge and consequently the experience of emotion (which, in music, is closely related to the fulfilment or particularly the frustration of expectation). Every region of the brain is involved and most of us – without even thinking about it – have become advanced listeners by the time we start school![[31]](#footnote-31) The human brain collects, dissects and connects; it must have had a field day when it was set to work on early modern ballads. Historians and literary scholars have tended to concentrate on the texts of ballads, but it is clear that to early modern minds the words were just one aspect of a complex product that stimulated the ears as well as the eyes.

We return, finally, to the poor parliamentarians who were mocked by their enemies to the tune of *Fortune* in Aphra Behn’s play, *The Roundheads* (1682). Claude Simpson noted the reference in his monumental research aid, *The British Broadside Ballad and its Music*, but he seemed to overlook the likelihood that this was in fact a dark melodic joke. Behn first sets a scene that is perfect for the introduction of musical banter. Triumphant Royalists surround a bonfire in 1660, overjoyed that the hated Rump Parliament is at last at an end. As many audience members must surely have remembered, the months preceding the Restoration of Charles II had witnessed an explosion of Royalist balladry. At the time, the diarist Thomas Rugg had remarked that one song, *The Rump Dock’t*, had been ‘almost in everybodys mouth’ and the period’s most famous printed collection of loyal ballads was entitled *The Rump (1660)*.[[32]](#footnote-32) So prominent was Royalist balladry on London’s streets at this date that the first of Behn’s two frightened parliament men disguises himself as a ballad-singer in the hope of throwing his opponents off the scent. The tactic fails and he is captured by raucous Royalists who carry him in triumph around the bonfire. One of the revellers calls out to a nearby fiddler, ‘Play Fortune my Foe, Sirrah’. To the sober strains of this tune, a second parliamentarian is apprehended and commanded to dance.[[33]](#footnote-33) This, surely, is a kind of wordless wit. The tune may have worked on a number of levels. Most obviously, the Royalists were threatening their captives with execution by sounding out ‘the hanging tune’. Beyond this, audience members may also have found humour in the tune’s associations with moral instruction (parliamentarians deserved to be taught a lesson) and, more ironically, with romance (a connection that is also implied by the urge to make the victims dance). Fundamentally, the incident was funny because the tune was being used simultaneously for a purpose that suited its associations well - to threaten execution and urge repentance – and for a secondary purpose to which it was clearly inappropriate – dancing. The sober mood of the tune might alone have been sufficient to render this juxtaposition amusing but the effect must have been significantly enhanced by audience awareness of the long and varied history of this extraordinarily successful tune. Perhaps it was a dull melody at heart, yet it transcended its dullness by carrying several different meanings at once. It spoke of romance, religion and retribution and because it did all this simultaneously and without words it could also, on occasion, make people laugh.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. Untitled version of the tune, *Fortune my foe*, sketched onto a blank page in *Musica Transalpina* (London, Thomas East: 1588), Cantus part-book, Fiiiir. Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington D.C., STC 26094. Image © Folger Shakespeare Library.

Fig. 2. John Smith, *Singers in a Window* (London: c. 1706). British Museum, Prints and Drawings, 1855,0512.96. Image © The British Museum.

Fig. 3. The melody, *Fortune my Foe*, from Paris Conservatoire MS Rés. 1186, fo. 24, quoted by Claude Simpson, *The British Broadside Ballad and its Music* (New Brunswick: 1966) 227.

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1. I will concentrate on England. The tune’s remarkable history in the Netherlands can be investigated at <http://www.liederenbank.nl> (233 songs to the melody are cited). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example: Kristeva Julia, *Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*  (New York: 1980); Chandler Daniel, *Semiotics: the Basics* (London: 2007), ch. 6; Chartier Roger, *The Order of Books* (Cambridge: 1994)14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Instrumental versions are listed in Simpson C. M., *The British Broadside Ballad and its Music* (New Brunswick: 1966), 225-231; Byrd William, *Musica Transalpina* (London, Thomas East: 1588), Cantus part-book, Fiiiir, copy in Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington D.C., STC 26094. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. D’Avenant William, *Love and Honour* (London, Hum. Robinson and Hum. Moseley: 1649) 7; Ravenscroft Edward, *The London Cockolds* (London, Jos. Hindmarsh: 1682) 35; Brome Richard, *The Antipodes* (London, Francis Constable: 1638) G1r; Behn Aphra, *The Roundheads* (London, D. Brown and H. Rhodes: 1682) 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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8. Corbet Richard, *Certain Elegant Poems* (London, Andrew Crooke: 1647) 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cerasi Carole, *Tomkins: Barafostus Dreame* (Metronome MetCD 1049: 2007) track 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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12. Burton Robert, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (London, Henry Cripps: 1621) 70; see also Gowland Angus, “The Problem of Early Modern Melancholy”, *Past and Present* 191, 1 (May, 2006) 77-120. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <http://www.liederenbank.nl> (HsLdGA Ga1474 [c. 1590] 23r). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Butler Charles, *The Principles of Musik* (London, John Haviland: 1636), 1; Slatyer William, *Psalmes, or Songs of Sion* (London, Robert Young:1630), subtitle. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Personal information from both parties. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Simpson, *British Broadside Ballad*, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Various editions of *A Sweet Sonnet* can be viewed on the database, ‘English Broadside Ballads Online’ (<http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu>). This is also the most accessible source for the rest of the ballads that I will be discussing in this paper. Where my text includes clear information on the title and date of ballads, it seems unnecessary to duplicate this in the footnotes and I would like to direct readers to the EBBA website where facsimiles and transcripts of all my sources, together with detailed supporting information, can be found. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Anon, *The Maydes Metamorphosis* (London, Richard Olive: 1600) C3v. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Sisson C.J., *Lost Plays of Shakespeare’s Age* (Cambridge: 1936) 129-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Anon, *Rump, or, An Exact Collection of the Choycest Poems and Songs* (London, Henry Brome and Henry Marsh: 1662) 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *A Looking-Glass for all True Protestants* (1679); *A Looking-Glass for a Christian Family* (c. 1683); *A Looking-Glass for Maids* (c. 1644-82). All available at <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rhodes John, *The Countrie Mans Comfort* (London, M. D[awson] : 1637) B8v-C1r. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Rowley Samuel, *The Noble Soldier* (London, [John Beale] : 1634) D4v. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Simpson, *British Broadside Ballad*, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Oldys Alexander, *The Fair Extravagant, or, the Humorous Bride* (London, Charles Blount: 1682) 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *The Shirburn Ballads*, ed. Andrew Clark (Oxford: 1907) 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For details, see *Shirburn Ballads*, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See, for example, *Witchcraft Discovered and Punished* (1682). Other examples, not available on the EBBA website, include *The Disturbed Ghost* (London, Philip Brooksby: 1672-96) and *A Miraculous Cure for Witchcraft* (London, S.I.: c. 1670). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The most likely source of this tune title was the ballad, *The Virgins ABC* (c. 1624-80), which was sung to *The Young Man’s A.B.C*., another name for *Fortune my Foe*. It is, as ever, difficult to establish the precise sequence in which seventeenth-century ballads were published. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
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31. There is a lively summary of recent findings in Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music*. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
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