



Some patterns of the ‘Murdered Sweetheart Ballads’ in oral tradition, early recordings, and popular culture.

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ABSTRACT

Narrative songs with regards to the theme called ‘murdered sweetheart’, are part of a wider repertoire of murder ballads that circulated in England, Scotland, Ireland, and North America. It is through these Murdered Sweetheart Ballads (cf. Wilgus 1979), that the balladeer informed the listeners about the tragic consequences of non-standard behavior in certain social contexts, such as: pregnancy out of wedlock in patriarchal communities. Murder ballads that contain specific references to facts which occurred in real life (such as the representative case of the assassination of Naomi Wise in Randolph County, back in 1808) passed mainly (through not only) in oral music contexts; despite the transient nature of the singing itself, the meanings behind certain verbal expressions were transmitted and finally preserved in sound recordings released from the early twentieth century onwards. These traditional patterns, that are related to the controversial imagery of women murdered by men and developed in both oral and written traditions, were gradually revised, transposed, and reinterpreted in popular culture by musicians who were engaged within the recording industry as well as filmmakers—each applying their own understanding with regards to this sensitive subject.

KEYWORDS:

narrative song, murder ballad, England, Scotland, Ireland, North America

In his article *Why Is the Murdered Girl so Popular?* (1951) Arthur Field expressed his opinion on the persistence of the ‘murdered women’ subject in American traditional folk songs:

I look into a body of folklore with an eye to gaining insights into the psychodynamics of a culture. One of the reasons I have chosen to discuss ‘murdered girl’ ballads is the striking nature of the content which, as we shall see, is well suited for the psycho-dynamic type of analysis. In short, I am seeking the psychological meaning of the popularity of a particular ballad theme; this question is but a part of the ever current argument about the role of folklore in society. (...) a number of the songs have no such moral and seem to have more behind them than the simple warning. Analysis of the content, most of the ballads included, shows that almost all ‘murdered girl’ ballads are sung in the first person; it is always ‘I stobbed her with a dagger,’ [...] songs like ‘Pretty Polly’ and ‘The Waxford Girl’ fill an almost unconscious need to let out aggression through fantasy (Field, 2021, pp. 113, 118–119).

He concluded that the themes and performances linked to this *topos* were still able to found an audience, and aroused the interest of musicians as well because ‘the singers of these songs may have a strong emotional involvement with the murders they sing about (...)’ (Ibid, p. 118.)

The dissemination of this motif — i.e., the murder of a young woman at the hands of her partner (either a stranger or someone known to the victim) — concerns a phenomenon which is associated to the radical changes surrounding the role of women in patriarchal Western societies, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century. Although narratives about women and their ordinary lives were totally underrepresented, if not obscured, we can find tales in Western historical accounts (because ‘as elsewhere, gender is a problematic category’) (Anglin, 1995, p. 187), such as the cases of Naomi Wise, Lula Viers, and other young women, which were disseminated throughout the long century and beyond, through literature and traditional music.

These forms of expression (both written narratives and music), provided continuity to new patterns and imaginaries, which, however, involved the complex relationship between the two genres, especially in times of drastic subversions of the preceding social models and lifestyles (e.g., the absence of men in the family assets in times of war and the responsibility of women to manage family and commercial affairs by themselves). Narratives and tales about all kinds of atrocities committed to the detriment of women’s lives and freedom — whether sung, written, or told — demonstrate prejudices about womanhood in general, and the consequences of women’s self-determination (including their tragic deaths), when they left the ‘safe haven’ of their domestic environment or failed to conform to standardized social behaviours.¹

Between 1820 and 1860, the cult of ‘True Womanhood’ spread in American society: ‘attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues — piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity’ (Welter, 1966, p. 152). These were the expectations around women — daughters, sisters, wives, mothers.

The distancing from these four virtues, for whatever reason, corresponded to a deviation from a set of conventions that were strongly rooted in patriarchal communities. Examples such as the previously mentioned cases of Naomi Wise or Pearl Bryan and Lula Viers — women who were impregnated and drowned in rivers by the men they loved — but also some exceptions, such as the case of Frankie Silvers — a young woman from North Carolina executed in 1833 for apparently killing her husband Charles for domestic abuse — have been immortalized in songs and narratives throughout the past two centuries. In the late nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill pleaded for change for women which were constantly subject to the will of men (husbands, fathers, brothers). This is what the English economist and philosopher asserted back in 1869 in his avant-garde booklet titled *The Subjection of Women*:

At present, in the more improved countries, the disabilities of women are the only case but one in which laws and institutions take persons at their birth and ordain that

1 Only by the end of the twentieth century examples of deconstruction of the male’s narrative were examined, leading to the introduction of new historical feminine perspectives (Babcock 1987).



they shall never in all their lives be allowed to compete for certain things. The one exception is that of royalty (Mill, 1869, p. 34).

Prejudice against women existed in both the upper and lower classes, in urban or marginalized, isolated or peripheral areas, depending also, but not only, on their role and function in the family and in society, with unpleasant consequences in the darkest scenarios. In Appalachia, still in recent years,

Women (...) continue to face debilitating poverty, racism, classism, misogyny, and homophobia. They worry about feeding their children, being beaten by their husbands or boyfriends, losing family, friends, and church if they 'come out,' and losing the comfort that comes from the mountains they love (Massek, 2015, p. 293).

THE STORY OF NAOMI WISE

As stated, the ballads and novels on the topic of the murdered sweetheart, which flourished in England and in North America, often depicted facts that occurred in real life (whether it was a woman killing a man or, more frequently, a woman being murdered by a man):

In several American ballads including 'Poor Omie' and 'On the Banks of the Ohio' the lover takes the girl to a lake or river and drowns her despite her pleas. These murders are usually unmotivated in the ballads, apparently because of tabus against the mention of pregnancy or illegitimacy. This is in sharp contrast to Child balladry, which is usually frank and explicit where sex is concerned (Laws, 1950, p. 23).

The first account of the life and death of Naomi Wise, which took place in Randolph County, North Carolina, in 1807 or 1808, at the hands of Jonathan (or John) Lewis, is found in the book written by Braxton Craven (1822–1882) — *Life of Naomi Wise True story of a Beautiful Girl, Enacted in Randolph County, N.C. about the year 1800.*² This book was reprinted in 1962 with the title *The Story of Naomi Wise and the History of Randlesman.*³ At the beginning of his tale, Craven immediately gives a detailed description of the social environment of New Salem, of Naomi's family, and of her tutor, Mr. William Adams:

Over one hundred years ago there lived where New Salem now is, in the northern part of Randolph Co., N.C., a very open and warm-hearted gentleman by the name of William Adams. A few families of nature's noblest quality lived in the vicinity. They were not very rich, but were honest, hospitable and kind; they knew neither the luxuries nor vices of high life. Their farms supplied enough for their own tables,

2 Craven was a professor of rhetoric and philosophy at Duke University. Born in Randolph County, he has been a long-standing friend of Mr and Mrs Hutton who, in turn, were relatives of a member of the jury that condemned John Lewis for the murder of Naomi, more specifically: Mrs Hutton's grandfather was a direct witness of the legal proceedings (Dowd, 1896, p. 25).

3 In 1874, Craven published the same story under the pseudonym Charles Vernon under the title *The Story of Naomie Wise, or The Wrongs of a Beautiful Girl*; I managed to find an edition of this volume (Caruthers, Craven, 1888).

and sufficient for a brisk trade with Fayetteville, N.C. [...] The people were somewhat rude: still however hospitable and kind. At William Adams' lived Naomi Wise. She had early been thrown upon the cold charity of the world, and she has received the frozen crumbs of that charity (Craven, 18??, p. 3)

Subsequently, the author provides a brief account of Naomi's history and her daily life amongst her family:

Her size was medium, her figure beautifully formed, her face handsome and expressive, her eyes keen yet mild, her words soft and winning. She was left without father to protect, mother to counsel, brothers and sisters to love, or friends with whom to associate. Food, clothing and shelter must be earned by the labor of her own hands; not such labor, however, as females at this day perform. There was no place for her but the kitchen, with the prospects of occasionally going to the field. This the poor orphan accepted willingly; she was willing to labor, she was ashamed to beg. The thousand comforts that parents can find for their children are never enjoyed by the fatherless (...) (Ibid., p. 4).

Braxton Craven's report of Randolph County depicts a community in which most households, who came from different states — particularly Pennsylvania and Virginia — and lived in close contact with one another, tended to be extremely conservative — if not offensive — to the detriment of other established families within the same area. The relatives of Jonathan Lewis are described as 'lions of the country', and drunkards with 'pugnacious' character (*Idem*). Randolph County itself is represented as a land which is mostly ruled by iniquitous families whose dynamics of mutual protection to crime interfere with the quiet existence of honest citizens. The first pages of Craven's narrative are devoted entirely to the reconstruction of Lewis's family, particularly Richard and Stephen Lewis — Jonathan's father and uncle, respectively — both of whom are portrayed as brutal individuals ('heartless tyrants'). The author himself cannot explain how such cold-hearted, despicable men could attract and marry women: 'how can a pure and good woman love such a wicked man?' (Ibid., p. 6). After laying out his own considerations regarding matters of love and what love should be, Craven returns to the murderer, Jonathan Lewis, and his family, and recounts anecdotes concerning the perpetrated mistreatments of his uncle Stephen to his wife: a preamble to Naomi's tragedy. Jonathan is then portrayed as 'a large, well-built, dignified-looking man [...] young, daring and impetuous', (Ibid., p. 8). whom the Adams family allows to date young Naomi until Jonathan's mother (an experienced woman who wished her son would 'settled down' with a financially worthy wife) steps into the scene:

Naomi was blooming in all the charms of [f] early womanhood; her love for Lewis was pure and ardent; and the rumour was abroad that the marriage was shortly to take place. But an evil genius crossed the path of Lewis in the shape of his mother. Her ambition and avarice projected for her son a match of a different character. She deemed it in the range of possibility that Jonathan might obtain the hand of Hettie Elliott, the sister of Benjamin Elliott, his employer (...) Mrs Lewis thought Miss Elliott a prize worthy an effort at least. The Elliots were wealthy, honorable and of high



repute. (...) Lewis made some advances to Hettie, which were received in such a way as to inspire hope. This was the turning of the tide in the fortunes of Lewis (Ibid., p. 10).

The rest of the novel is dedicated to Lewis's intention to end Naomi's life and the final completion of her assassination. The two characters, Jonathan and Naomi, exchange a petrifying dialogue that 'doubles' the theme of the eight-stanzas ballad at the end of the book, entitled 'Song of Naomi Wise': 'The whole tragedy would, perhaps, have been lost in oblivion but for the song of 'Omi Wise,' which was sung in every neighbourhood' (Ibid., p. 21). This written source is considered a reference to other versions spread from the late nineteenth century onwards, most of which do not include direct reference to the capture and detention of Jonathan/John Lewis, such as the one shown below.⁴

'Song of Naomi Wise'

Come, all good people, now you draw near,
A sorrowful story you quickly shall hear,
A story I will tell you about Naomi Wise,
How she was deluded by Lewis' lies.

He promised to marry and use her well,
But conduct contrary I sadly must tell;
He promised to meet her at Adams' spring,
He promised marriage and many a fine thing.

Still nothing he gave, but flattered the case.
He said: 'We will marry and have no disgrace;
'Come, get up behind me, we will go to town,
And there be married, in union be bound.'

She got up behind him: he straightway did go
To the banks of Deep River where the waters flow;
He said: 'Now, Naomi, I'll tell you my mind;
I intend to drown you and leave you behind.'

'O! pity your infant, and spare me my life!
Let me be rejected, and not be your wife!'
'No pity, no pity,' the monster did cry;
'In Deep River's bottom your body shall lie!'

The wretch then choked her, we understand.
And threw her in the river, below a mill dam.
Be it murder or treason, O! what a great crime!
To drown poor Naomi and leave her behind.

⁴ The song appeared in Caruthers, and Craven (1888, pp. 116–117) is titled 'Poor Naomi'.

Naomi was missing! they all did well know,
 And hunting for her to the river did go;
 Finding her floating in the water so deep.
 Caused all the people to sigh and to weep.

The neighbors were sent for to view the sight,
 For she had lain floating all that long night;
 Ho early next morning the inquest was held,
 The jury correctly the murderer did tell.

TRAILS IN ORAL TRADITION

Malcolm Laws stressed that:

In the ballads, as in life, murder may be the outcome of a love which has become burdensome. 'An American Tragedy' told a story already too familiar to ballad-makers here and abroad. Usually, the man lures his pregnant fiancée to a lonely spot on the pretext of planning their wedding. He then announces that he will kill her. She pleads for her life and that of her baby, but he brutally murders her and attempt to conceal the body. The crime is soon revealed frequently by supernatural means and the murderer is executed. This story, with variations, may be found in 'The Oxford Girl', 'The Cruel Ship's Carpenter', 'The Old Oak Tree', 'James MacDonald', and 'Pat O'Brien' (Laws, 1957, pp. 21-22).

These titles are referred to as 'Ballads of Unfaithful Lovers', in which 'it is usually the disloyalty of only one lover which produces the conflict and hence the ballad story' (Ibid., p. 20), and belong to the wider pattern of the murdered sweetheart 'in which a girl stated or assumed to be pregnant is murdered by her lover, who is usually brought to justice in one manner or another'. Wilgus's list, which consists of British, Irish and American ballads in merit to the same theme, includes murder ballads such as 'The Jealous Lover' (Laws F1); 'Poor Omie' (Laws F4), and 'On the Banks of the Ohio' (Laws F5), all 'closely related' in a way that 'it is difficult to discuss a single example of the pattern' (Wilgus, 1979, p. 172). Therefore, 'Omie Wise' is part of the specific category of murder sweetheart ballads linked to many other types that were performed in both continents.⁵

5 In association with the 'Rose Connelly' ballad and the subsequent account of 'Omie Wise', Alan Lomax reports on a discussion between two people involving questions of justice which reveal how the punishment of a murderer depended on the decisions taken by 'the clan with the most political influence': 'Boze: Talkin' 'bout killin' people, there ain't nothin' to it. I don't see what a man worry his self bout a trial for. If I has enough 'gainst a man, I'd set on the roadside one night an' pick him off jes like I would a bird. There ain't nothin' to it. If they ketch you an' you use your head a little bit an' know what lawyer to git, you'll come clear. Pede: It seems to me you'd have to fret some about the trial. Boze: Well, there



These generally develop through the following sequences: (1) a man invites a woman to talk about the possibility of getting married; (2) the man and woman walk or ride to the crime scene, usually an isolated place near a body of water—often by a river—a wood or a weeping willow; (3) the man threatens to kill the woman with a weapon (a knife, a stone, a stick); (4) the woman begs for mercy; (5) the man kills her; (6) the murderer gets rid of the body by throwing it into a river or burying it; (7) the corpse is found, the offender is discovered and sentenced to death.⁶

There are also versions including the involvement of another person who buries the corpse after it is found in the wilderness, whether it is a third person (a family member or a stranger), or a group of people cooperating to exhume the dead body to give it a decent burial, as sung in the Variant C of ‘Poor Omie’, collected by Cecil Sharp:

He kicked her, he choked her, as we understand,
Then threw her in deep water below yon mill dam.
Then Omie were missing and by no means could be found
And people to hunt her they all gathered round (Sharp, 1917, pp. 229, 230).



Sharp's transcription of the ‘Poor Omie’ tune as sung by Tom Rise (North Carolina); Variant C, or in the two types collected by Edward Henry Mellinger:

‘Poor Omie’ (Variant A)

12. Little Oma's brother
Was fishing one day.
He saw the corpse of Oma,
Come floating along.⁷

‘Poor Omie’ (Variant B)

10. Early next morning
A little boy fishing, about nine o' clock,

ought'n to be nothin' to it. If somebody do you dirt, there ain't no use to wait for the courts, cause the ain't goin' to do nothin'. The best way is to trust in God an' your gun... (Wilderness, Adams, p. 615; Lomax, 1960, p. 261).

⁶ These sequences are mentioned by Arthur Field (1951).

⁷ ‘Poor Omie’, Variant A, ‘Little Oma Wise’. 1938. Obtained from Miss Mary King, Gatlinburg, Sevier County, Tennessee, August 12, 1929 (Mellinger, 1938, pp. 221–222).



He spied the corpse of Oma
A-lying on the rocks

11. He took his canoe
And brought her to the bank;
Her clothes being dampen,
He laid her on the bank.

12. The people all gathered
From every city and town
To see the corpses of Oma
In the place of Oma drown.⁸

The constitutive elements of this ballad vary in the transmission process (distinctively: names of characters, toponyms, endings). Gerald Milnes reported the story of Leroy Wingfield, who in turn heard it from Robert Channel, who at the time was directly involved in the discovery of the body of a murdered woman named Naomi Wise, near a mill, along the Cheat River (Randolph County, West Virginia): “Old man” Robert Channel told Wingfield he had helped pull the drowned girl out of the millrace and bury her on the hill above the river’ (Milnes, 1995, 381). Here is the version sung by Mrs. Amanda Ellen Eddy of Riversville, West Virginia, and reported by Milnes:

1. Oh come all you young people, a story I will tell
About a maid they called Naomi Wise.
Her face was fair and handsome: She was loved by everyone;
In Randolph County now her body lies.

2. They say she had a love, young Lewis was his name;
Each evening he would have her by his side;
She learned to love and trust him and she believed his word;
He told her she was doomed to be his bride.

3. One summer night he met her and took her for a ride;
She thought that she was going to be wed.
They came down old Cheat River, and so the story goes,
‘You have met your doom,’ these words the villain said.

4. She begged him just to spare her; the villain only laughed.
They say he was heartless to the core.
In the stream he threw her, below the old mill dam,
And sweet Naomi’s smile was seen no more.

⁸ “Poor Omie, Variant B, “Oma Wise”. Recorded by Mrs. Henry from the singing of Miss Dicey McLean, Crossnore, Avery County, North Carolina, July, 1929 (*Ibid.*, pp. 223–224).



5. Next day they found her body, floating down the stream,
And all the folks for miles around did cry.
Young Lewis left the country; they brought him back again,
But could not prove that he caused her to die.

6. They say that on his deathbed young Lewis did confess;
He said that he had killed Naomi Wise.
So now we know her spirit still lingers round the place
To save some girl from some villain's lies.

7. Young people, oh take warning and listen while I say,
You must take care before it is too late.
Don't listen to the story some villain tongue may tell,
Or you are sure to meet Naomi's fate (Ibid., p. 385).

The last three stanzas (5, 6, 7), provide details surrounding the events omitted in Craven's version: the community finds the body, Lewis leaves the country (5); Lewis confesses the murder on his deathbed (6); the singer/narrator warns young people (7).

Some English broadsides on the theme of the murdered sweetheart, circulating in the nineteenth century, also present admonitions in their closing stanzas, e.g.:

1. 'John Cooney's Lamentation. For the murder of his Sweetheart', sung from the viewpoint of the murderer: 'Let each kind and tender youth a warning take be me, / To be ruled by their parents and shun bad company';⁹
2. 'Shocking Murder in Gloucestershire, a young woman shot by her sweetheart': 'Now all young men and maidens / A warning take I pray, / And with each others feeling's / Be careful not to play (...)' (Roud V32954);¹⁰
3. 'Murder of a Sweetheart at Witney': 'So all young men be warned in time. / And take advice from me, / Think of Edward Roberts' fearful crime / And beware of jealousy.' (Roud V32953);¹¹
4. 'The Lamentation of Patrick Kilkenny who is sentenced to die on the 20th of July, for the murder of his sweetheart, Margaret Forquhar': 'So now to end my sad tragedy, / To young and old let this a warning be, / For Margaret Farquher let each christian pray, / And for my salvation on my dying day.' (Roud V1363).¹²

9 Cf. <http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/static/images/sheets/15000/10561.gif>

10 A broadside printed in 1853, cf. <http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/static/images/sheets/10000/05531.gif>

11 A broadside printed between 1860 and 1883, cf. <http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/static/images/sheets/20000/18895.gif>

12 A broadside ballad, from the viewpoint of the murderer, printed in Dublin, and circulating between 1850 and 1899, cf. <http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/static/images/sheets/15000/12043.gif>

In Frank Brown's vast collection, only one of eight variants (see letter G) of Naomi's ballads collected in North Carolina includes the 'warning' closing stanza:

7. Young people, oh, take warning
 And listen while I say:
 You must take care before it is too late.
 And listen to the story
 Some Dillon tongue will tell
 Or you are sure to meet Naomi's fate (White, 1952, p. 698)

EARLY RECORDINGS

A song about the murder of Naomi, attributed to Carson Robison and related to West Virginia oral culture, introduced tune and lyrics that differed from that of Craven, and gave life to a parallel tradition (Milnes, 2015, p. 83). The song was performed and recorded in 1925 (Columbia 15053-D), by Al Craver (vocal solo), Del Staigers (cornet), Vernon Dalhart (vocalist), Murray Kellner (fiddle), and Robison himself (guitar).¹³ This seems to be the earliest sound recording of the West Virginia variant mentioned by Milnes, followed by three other versions released between 1925 and 1926.¹⁴ There is also a variant for voice, guitar, fiddle, and mandolin performed by A'nt Idy Harper and the Coon Creek Girls, released in 1938 for Vocalion (04354), apparently based on Robison's version, although the lyrics include a reference to the Deep River (North Carolina) rather than the Cheat River (West Virginia).¹⁵ In this track, stanzas n. 5 and n. 6 are omitted (the detection of the body and Lewis' deathbed confession) — I suppose for timing reasons related to the recording.¹⁶

By examining and understanding the actual processes through which the Naomi Wise case has been disseminated in West Virginia, I began to understand the irrelevance of factual origins as they relate to folk song variants and legends. The facts have become extraneous to the role that the story plays in the minds of people. Claims to Naomi and the song about her death are a projection of a basic human need to give recognition to innocents and brutes, to reaffirm social stratification (the lofty, the lowly; the dominant, the submissive), and to claim local ownership of an event of regional importance as commemorated through song (Milnes, 1995, p. 379).

13 Discography of American Historical Recordings, s.v. 'Columbia matrix W141313. Naomi Wise / Al Craver,' accessed May 26, 2022, https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/2000031077/W141313-Naomi_Wise.

14 Victor 19867, Edison 51669 and 5098, Vocalion 15281 and 5088, Okeh 45075, cf. adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php

15 <https://www.discogs.com/it/release/15527724-Ant-Idy-Harper-And-The-Coon-Creek-Girls-Poor-Naomi-Wise-Sweet-Fern/image/SW1hZ2U6NDcyODczNDM=>

16 This sound recording is included in *Roots n' Blues — The Retrospective, Disc 3 (1925–1930)* published by Columbia in 1992 (track n° 17). A digitized version is available at <https://archive.org/details/03-frank-hutchison-the-last-scene-of-the-titanic> (see Track n° 65).



In 1927, G. B. Grayson recorded a version of 'Ommie Wise' (Victor 21625).¹⁷ This is believed to be the first reference to Craven's narrative in the early discography, followed by Clarence Ashley's performance for Columbia Records in 1929.¹⁸ Grayson's version adds new elements, such as the two closing stanzas devoted to the capture and imprisonment of John Lewis: the murderer is sentenced to death and spends six months in a prison, from which he manages to escape and then joins the army:

I'll tell you all a story about Ommie Wise
 How she was deluded by John Lewis's lies.
 (*fiddle solo on the same tune*)
 He told her to meet him at Adams's Springs;
 He'd bring her some money and some other fine things.
 (*fiddle solo on the same tune*)
 He brought her no money nor no other fine things,
 But, 'Get up behind me, Ommie, to Squire Ellett's we'll go.'
 She got up behind him, 'So caref'lie we'll go.'
 They rode 'till they came where deep waters did flow.
 (*idem*)
 John Lewis, he concluded to tell her his mind;
 John Lewis, he concluded to leave her behind.
 (*idem*)
 She threw her arms around him, 'John, spare me my life,
 And I'll go distracted and never be your wife.'
 (*idem*)
 He threw her arms from round him, and into the water she plunged.
 John Lewis, he turned 'round and rode back to Adams's Hall.
 He went, enquired for Ommie, but, 'Ommie, she is not here.
 She's gone to some neighbour's house and won't be gone very long.'
 (*idem*)
 John Lewis was took a pris'ner and locked up in the jail,
 Was locked up in the jail around, was there to remain a while.
 John Lewis, he stayed there for six months or maybe more
 Until he broke jail; into the army he did go.

It seems that Robison's and Grayson's versions are the earliest sound records with references to Naomi's story, representing the dissemination of two different oral traditions: one circulated in North Carolina and associated with Craven's narrative and ballad, the other spread across West Virginia and beyond:

17 G. B. Grayson's song was reissued in the *American Folk Music* by Harry Everett Smith (Folkways Records, 1952, FP 251, track n° 13). See the bibliography in the liner notes for further references.

18 Clarence Ashley, 'Naomi Wise'. Columbia 15522D.



Ant Idy Harper's tune based on Robison's version (transcription by ear)



G. B. Grayson's tune (transcription by ear)

Versions of Naomi Wise ballads based on Grayson's tune influenced many folk singers from the next generation, such as Doc Watson's interpretation of 'Little Omie Wise'. Doug Wallin's performance is also based on the same tune pattern.¹⁹ Although these sound documents have distinctive vocal elements, the recording methods could not have failed to influence the features of these performances. It is reasonable to suppose that they truly represented oral transmission of melodic and poetic material in the place where the performers originated. It is also reasonable to assume that these songs have the characteristics of a recorded musical scheme and structure. However, these could have been the listening matrix from which the folk revivalists of the following decades learned about this repertoire, especially for musicians working on the edge between traditional and popular music. The coexistence of murder ballads sung in oral (participatory) contexts and artistic performances (based on presentation models) (Turino, 2008, pp. 23–65), changed the roles and functions of these ballads, as seen from the gradual exclusion in early recordings of the 'warning' endings and the 'come all ye people' incipit found in the older versions.

With the development and diffusion of recorded products, the idea of the song as a 'track' (i.e., as a musical object) replaced the ephemeral experience of musical practices and the imagery associated to these aural situations. The articulation of songs in standardized, discographic and radio-ready forms gradually allowed musicians to evoke exclusive sound scenarios and to replace personal experience in participatory contexts with presentational musical forms (live music):

When asked if his songs — specifically 'Down by the River' — make sense to him, [Neil] Young replied, 'No, that's not a requirement. It doesn't have to make sense, just give you a feeling. You get a feeling from something that doesn't make any sense... it's not about information. The song is not meant for them [the audience] to think about me. The song is meant for people to think about themselves' (Nelson, 2015, p. 139).

¹⁹ Wallin's version apparently never reached the audience until the mid 90s. His songs, including 'Omie Wise', were released in *Family Songs and Stories from the North Carolina Mountains*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1995 (SFW40013).



Versions of Omie Wise were given by Shirley Collins (1959), Dock Boggs (1963–68)²⁰ — who followed the path traced by Grayson — Roscoe Holcomb (1965)²¹, Greg Graffin, Judy Henske, and other folk singers. These were drawn to the record market, so that the allure of the murder ballads' atmosphere permeated the music industry in the mid-60s and lasted thanks to central figures of the folk rock and popular music scene.

POPULAR MUSIC AND CULTURE: THE DREADFUL'S SPLENDOUR

'Narrative and visual representation of death, drawing their material from a common cultural image repertoire, can be read as symptoms of our culture (...)' (Bronfen, 1992, p. 38), in which perhaps the actual perception of 'folk imagery' functions as an environmental, individual transposition, rather than a communal experience. Bob Dylan's cynical version of Naomi Wise (Minnesota Session, 1961), with the sound imprint of Woodie Guthrie in his vocal style, presents the tragic event in all its palpable brutality, omitting the conventional introductory part and jumping directly into the murder scene ('Well she met him as she promised / Up at Adams's spring...'). The assassination of Naomi takes place in Dutch Charlie's creek (Minnesota) after she has been 'kicked' and 'cuffed to the worst understand". In the same years, Italian songwriter Fabrizio De André — so attracted by traditional American music in the early years of his long career — wrote 'La Canzone di Marinella' (1962).²² The song, based on a single, repetitive tune in dance time, makes reference to a story that appeared in a local paper when De André was about 15 or 16 years old. There were rumours of a young girl who had been forced into prostitution and found dead in the Tanaro River. In an interview for Italian television (RAI, 1997),²³ De André recalls that this dark episode touched him so deeply that he felt he had to try to 'give her a new life to sweeten her death.' From the very first verse, the singer stated that the song is based on a true story (*Questa di Marinella è la storia vera*: This is the true story about Marinella), and whether one believes that it is a true account or a fiction, the songwriter's intention was to purify the cruelty of this tragic event through metaphors such as the wind carrying the girl's mortal body from the deep river to a star. The murder is indefinite and barely narrated. The lyrics permeated with an atmosphere of childlike innocence: *'tu lo seguisti senza una ragione / come un ragazzo segue l'aquilone'* (you fol-

20 Boggs recorded eight songs for Brunswick in 1927, including a version of 'Pretty Polly' (Brunswick 132); after meeting Mike Seeger in 1963, he recorded a series of folk songs released by Folkways Records between 1963 and 1968; this material, including his version of 'Omie Wise', was reissued by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings in 1998.

21 In the liner notes of *Roscoe Holcomb / the High Lonesome Sound* (FA 2368, 1968), John Cohen wrote that in Roscoe's version 'The melody is the same he knows for *Born and Raised in Covington*' which is also similar to the tune sung in 'Little Birdie', included in *The Music of Roscoe Holcomb & Wade Ward* (Folkways Records FA 2363, 1962).

22 This song (literally, 'The Song of Marinella') was then released in 1964.

23 RAI: acronym for Radio Televisione Italiana, Italian channel and broadcasting media.

lowed him without any reason, as a boy follows his own kite). Both the gestures of the characters and the death itself are suspended in an undefined time.

Although the modes of performance and creation of popular music radically changed both the functions and perceptions concerning the singing of murder ballads, they continue to fascinate songwriters of the next generations by reinterpreting and reworking old material and adding new visual insights to the imaginative soundscape that music generates. In 1996, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds released the album simply titled *Murder Ballads*, whose ten tracks were all based on the narrative of love and death, including traditional ballads such as ‘Stagger Lee’, ‘Henry Lee’, and ‘Where the Wild Roses Grow’ — the latter, performed with Australian pop singer Kylie Minogue and also produced as a single with ‘The Ballad of Robert Moore & Betty Coltrane’ and a version of ‘The Willow Garden’.

‘Where the Wild Roses Grow’ contains many elements of what has already been described as a ‘murder sweetheart ballad’ (see *infra*): a man and a woman fall in love and promise each other true and everlasting love, the man takes the woman to a river and kills her (in this case ‘with a rock in his hands’). Both performers take turns singing each stanza and recounting the events from their own point of view. The song traces the murder scene by introducing features found in other traditional murder ballads, such as the theme of loss and sorrow (He/I said ‘give me your loss and your sorrow’) also found in ‘Rose Connolly’ (‘grief is my comfort / and sorrow is my care’) (Wilgus, 1979, p. 173) and the perpetuated scene of the river as a burial ground. The scenario prepared by Rocky Schenck for the video production emphasized and reinforced the gloomy atmospheres surrounding the two characters through the very familiar Pre-Raphaelite iconography of John Everett Millais’ *Ophelia*. This image emotionally engages the viewer from the very first moment:

Schenck [...] positioned Eliza in the water like her Victorian predecessor, surrounded by flowers, even as he made her the teller of her own tale. [...] The psychologically complex attraction of representations of dead women has been explored more fully in Elisabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body*. Bronfen goes beyond the Victorian context, addressing the numerous narrative and visual representations of the dead feminine body in Western culture. She refers to figures such as Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa, Edgar Allen Poe’s Ligeia and the Grimm Brothers’ Snow White, reinforcing her claim that ‘culture uses art to dream the deaths of beautiful women’ (Bronfen 1992: xi). [...] According to Bronfen, the aestheticised and eroticised representations of the dead feminine body have allowed Western culture to ‘repress and articulate its unconscious knowledge of death [...] by localizing death away from the self, at the body of a beautiful woman’ (Bronfen 1992: xi). In other words, she concludes that when artists mask representations of death as sexual fantasy, a spectator can continue to indulge in the morbid fascination of looking at a corpse without having truly to confront the fear of death. Thus, the desire to look at a dead woman’s body is, for Bronfen, aligned with denial and with a desire to control the uncontrollable (Zeleny, 2010, p. 57).



In 2010, Dylan Tuccillo wrote and directed *Omie Wise — A Folktale*, a multi-award winning short movie ‘about a strange girl dealing with misfortune and loneliness in unusual ways. Spanning over many years, *Omie Wise* is a sixteen minute film that winds through the years of Omie’s life, following her as she looks for her missing boyfriend, Sam.’²⁴ The story has been almost entirely reinvented by the author, although it is partially connected to the patterns of oral tradition. Music and score, recorded by Brian Taylor and produced by Ben Crippin Taylor, were performed by Tao Rodriguez Seeger (banjo), Josh Chaplin (guitar), Elizabeth Hanley (fiddle), and Robert Matsuda (violin). Five classic folk songs are included in the soundtrack: ‘Dry Bones’ by Bascom Lamar Lunsford; ‘The Ship that Never Returned’ and ‘Naomi Wise’, performed by Dan Tate; ‘Georgia Buck’, by Aunt Jenny Wilson.

A FEW CONSIDERATIONS

Since singing is a social behaviour, a singer can usually choose what to sing, and in the case of narrative songs, both the singers and the listeners have the opportunity to identify and empathize with the characters that are part of the plot. When performers intentionally choose to express and convey certain arguments to someone (whether that someone is a single person, a group of people, or an audience of thousands), they are definitely not ‘invisible’ presences, nor are they someone who has no ‘role’ in the story. By deciding how and what to sing, by giving away or (re)introducing certain elements, they (re)confirm certain meanings to themselves and to their listeners. There is no impersonal force driving singers to express themselves — as scholars of the past put it, that is, regardless of their own will to perform a song in a particular context. Murder ballads — and those in which women are at the centre of the discourse — show the extent to which ideas and concepts in question are perceived, intended, and ‘repositioned’ over time through various expressive forms by those who deliberately choose to disseminate these narratives through their own experiences and with the tools available at their disposal. This should also be true for other forms of expression in a context where there are no restrictions regarding art, whether they come from a writer’s pen or a director’s screen.

With regard to the topic, women’s freedom to think, act, and express themselves is still an extremely sensitive issue. The conditions for women to live and act freely have all been diverse and complex until now, especially when many discourses are still male-oriented, not only in ‘marginalized areas’, as Appalachia and other areas have long been portrayed (the ‘South,’ the ‘rural,’ the ‘periphery’): the ‘glamorization of domestic violence is not solely a contemporary dilemma housed by the mass popularity of current musical genres. Instead, the phenomenon arrives much earlier, as captured in the seemingly unlikely vessel of Appalachian murder ballads’ (Hastie, 2011, p. 159). In Rocky Schenck’s contemporary vision of a murdered woman, the character of Elisa Day still remains a passive figure; from the very first frame to the

²⁴ Excerpt taken from the short description of this movie, available on Vimeo, cf. <https://vimeo.com/14532934>.



end of the video, her ‘vital signs’ are limited to the singing/narrative voice that doubles the man’s account. She tells her version from an innocent, virginal point of view that is pushed to the limit of pure naivety (“They call me the wild rose / But my name was Elisa Day / Why they call me that I do not know / For my name was Elisa Day”). The man is stuck in his role as a petty, almost unaware vehicle for the perpetration of violence — as if the latter should be considered a uniquely masculine attribute. Tuccillo’s film presents a new story with a new (apparently ‘happy’) ending for poor Omie, but it still portrays the main character — throughout the whole movie — as a miserable and insecure individual who is crushed by the events of her own life and only finds solace in marriage to a man: the once very lonely girl is now a grown woman surrounded by her new family (husband and two children), and the observer, who is familiar with the folktale, concludes that at least poor Omie did not die.²⁵

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25 User comments I have found in an online forum dedicated to this movie highlighted this very aspect.



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