

**‘MAKING A SONG AND DANCE ABOUT IT’:
(Self) Presentation in ‘The Ballad of John Spenser,
A Cheshire Gallant’.**

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I first became involved with the Cheshire Records of English Drama project in early 1992, when, as a still fairly new PhD, I was hired for two years as a Research Assistant to David Mills on a Leverhulme grant. At the end of the first year, I was promoted to Research Associate and told that I would be a co-editor of the volume. This is as much due to David’s generosity and sense of fair play as to my own hard work. I wish to express here my gratitude to David for all the help and support he has given me throughout the project, and for the trust and responsibility he gave me. Although the phrase has become somewhat hackneyed, it is nonetheless true that it has been a great privilege to work with him. And I would also like to express my appreciation to the entire Mills family — David, Joy, Ian, and John — for their many and frequent kindnesses to me over the years.

The Townships, Parishes and Other Localities section of the Records of Early English Drama volume for Cheshire, which is arranged alphabetically, begins with Acton. There are only two items for this location: one, from the diocesan Visitation Proceedings of 1611, cites John Spencer for ‘drumminge on Sabboath daies’.¹ This record was transcribed sometime in 1992 or 1993, when I was first involved with the *REED Cheshire* project as David Mills’ Leverhulme Research Assistant. The second item was only discovered when the volume was in the final stages of production, I think in late 2005 or early 2006. The University of Cape Town library was making a trial of the *Early English Books Online* database, and was inviting comments on the usefulness of the database prior to committing itself to a full subscription. As I am sure any REED editor will tell you, after the first dozen years on a volume you do get rather conditioned to thinking in REED terms. I ran a few keywords through the *Early English Books Online* search engine, and came up with a ballad on ‘Iohn Spenser a Chesshire Gallant, his life and repentance, who for killing of one Randall Gam was lately executed at *Burford* a mile from *Nantwich*’.² The text tells us that John Spenser³ was born at Acton, and that ‘For beating of the war-like Drumme/ no man could him surpasse’.⁴ The ballad dates from 1617, just

six years after John Spencer was drumming on the Sabbath in Acton. This, I think, makes it probable that we are dealing with a single individual, even though the name is a common one, and is spelt in one case with a 'c' and in the other with an 's'. Other than these two items, we have no information about John Spencer, and nothing more from Acton.

I have gone into this much detail about the background to the discovery of these two records because they not only seem to bookend my own involvement with the REED project, but also to illustrate two widely divergent ways of presenting information, and reflect in miniature some of the problems that face REED and REED-based work. On the evidence of the Visitation, John Spencer is just another faceless once-off Sabbath performer. He came, he drummed, he disappeared. The court is not interested in him as an individual; we have no information on his circumstances, or why he drummed on the Sabbath. Indeed, we have no final proof that he did drum — the entry is merely a memorandum of the charge against him. There is no 'self' in this record, and effectually no presentation. It is aimed at no audience, it has no opinion, and it does not seek to persuade the reader of anything. It simply states that John Spencer was accused of drumming on the Sabbath at Acton. As far as it goes, we may take it as reliable, but from a REED perspective not much can be made of it. It is evidence that Sabbath performances did occur (or at least were alleged to occur) and that Sabbath performers were presented (at least on this occasion) to the ecclesiastical authorities. As an individual, Spencer doesn't hold much interest, although the reader (or REEDer) can speculate whether he was a professional drummer, a resident, or an itinerant, whether 'drumming' refers to playing a drum or a tabor? Before I discovered the ballad, I had treated him as a professional drummer, resident rather than itinerant, had hedged on the drum/tabor issue, but suggested that he played to accompany dancing. From the evidence of the ballad, I was partly right and partly wrong, and partly it is still inconclusive. This is not unusual.

The next question that may occur is why Spencer did not turn up in more legal documents, if he had committed and been convicted of murder. There may well be records of his arrest and trial for murder, and I may well have read some of those records. I certainly read all the Quarter Sessions records in the Cheshire Record Office, and the Crown Books, and a good many other documents that might have mentioned it. The reason nothing surfaced is that the trial records clearly didn't mention anything relevant to REED. The courts are not concerned with first causes; the ballad, on

the other hand, turned up because I was searching on the keyword *dancing*, which is a REED activity, and, according to the ballad, the real source of all John Spenser's troubles.

The ballad is a completely different type of evidence from the court records. It has an audience, addressing itself to 'Kind hearted men' and 'Kind Youngmen'.⁵ The author is not an impersonal scribe: the first half of the ballad claims to be by Thomas Dickerson, about whom nothing more is known. The second half is allegedly by John Spenser himself, 'Written with his owne hands as he lay in Chester Castle'.⁶ I would like to digress for a moment to consider this claim in the context of other seventeenth-century ballads. Spenser's ballad comes down to us through the collection of Samuel Pepys. The frontispiece tells us that it was '

Begun by Dr Selden; Improv'd by ye addition of many Pieces elder thereto in Time; and the whole continued to the year 1700. When the Form, till then peculiar thereto, viz^t of the Black Letter with Picturs, seems (for cheapness sake) wholly laid aside, for that of the White Letter without Pictures.⁷

The back of the frontispiece gives us the rationale behind the original collection, a rationale which is, indeed, consistent with the aims of REED:

Though some make slight of Libells; yet you may see by them, how the Wind sits. As take a Straw, and throw it up into the Air; you shall see by that, which way the Wind is; which you shall not do so by casting up a Stone. More Solid things do not shew the Complexion of the Times, so well as Ballads and Libells.⁸

The collection is divided into sections, with a table of contents listing the page numbers in the various volumes that contain ballads of the different types. Our ballad is in the third section: 'Tragedy, viz^t Murd^{rs} Execut^s Iudgm^{ts} of God &c'⁹ and is in Volume 1. This section of Volume 1 contains 25 ballads, most of them from the early seventeenth century. Volume 2 contains mostly later ballads, so I shall concentrate on those in Volume 1. Of the 25 ballads, 14 involve murders, and 17 involve executions — there is naturally a good deal of overlap in these categories. Only two really could be said to have 'Iudgm^{ts} of God', and these are both upon misers (a greedy landlord and a corn-hoarder). Nine ballads contain sections that are written in the first person. In more than one case, the first-person narrative continues up to the very last possible moment: the head on the block in 'Sir Walter Rauleigh his lamentation',¹⁰ or the woman chained to the stake and the fire set in the second part of 'The

vnnaturall Wife'.¹¹ One ballad even seems to refer to the execution as first-person narrative, but in the past tense.¹² Clearly these ballads are, in one sense or another, ghost-written. Their modern equivalents, both in subject matter and in the emphasis on the 'personal angle', are the tabloid newspapers.

The writer of the 'Ballad of John Spenser', or Thomas Dickerson, is writing within a well-known genre, and one which draws on a number of other genres. A ballad about an execution can choose to express condemnation or sympathy with any of the figures: ballads about Sir Walter Raleigh and the Earl of Essex, for instance, tend to be lamenting the fall of the mighty, while others such as 'The deserued downfall of a corrupted conscience' condemn the criminal and celebrate the triumph of justice. Still others condemn the victim of murder, as in 'The Tragedy of Doctor Lambe'.¹³ Many, including the 'Ballad of John Spenser', purport to offer 'don't-try-this-at-home' advice and warnings, as titles such as 'A warning for wiues' or 'A warning for all desperate Women' show.¹⁴ It is interesting that fully five ballads cover the theme of wives killing husbands, which may reflect an interest in another motif, 'the world turned upside down', or a subversion of what was seen as the natural order. There are no ballads about husbands killing wives.

'The Ballad of John Spenser' is constructed as a combination of lament for the fall of a great man, 'One Spenser braue, of Cheshire chiefe', who, although he did kill Randall Gam, is nevertheless presented as wrongly executed. Dickerson tells us that Spenser and Gam were friends, that they quarrelled over a drinking game, that Spenser struck Gam in a sudden (and presumably drunken) rage, and that Gam lingered seven weeks before he died. This does sound more like accidental manslaughter than deliberate murder, and Spenser's execution is attributed to Gam's rich friends being able to influence the court:

For though he kild him by mischance,
yet Law him so disdaines.
That for the vnrespected blow,
he there was hangd in Chaines.
He that was kild, had many friends,
the other few or none,
Therefore the Law, on that side went,
and the other was orethrone.¹⁵

To emphasize Spenser's innocence further, we also have a folkloric inclusion of symbolic Nature:

He being dead, two Milke white Doues,
 did houer ouer his head,
 And would not leaue that hartlesse place,
 after he three howers was dead.
 Two milke white Butterflies did light,
 vpon his Breches there:
 And stood Confronting peoples sight,
 to their amase and feare.¹⁶

The final element in constructing a sympathetic view of Spenser is his faithful, long-suffering wife. She suffers from his actions, especially 'Whilst hee abroad did flaunt it out / amongst his lustfull Queanes',¹⁷ a fact which is emphasized in the second half, Spenser's first-person lament. Here Spenser's behaviour moves from neglect to actual abuse:

I had my choyce of damsels fayre,
 what card I for my wife,
 If once she came to intreat me home,
 I'd kick her out of doors,
 Indeed I would be ruld by none,
 but by intising whores.¹⁸

After his imprisonment, his wife (who remains unnamed) is the only person who visits him and provides food. Spenser himself (or his persona) presents her behaviour in terms of conventions that can be found in other ballads and folklore: 'She plays the part of a Constant wife'.¹⁹ It is worth noting here that in the five ballads of wives murdering husbands²⁰ the causes of the murders include domestic violence, drunkenness, and the husband asking for money from the wife, all of which have parallels in Spenser's ballad. Only one ballad involves a woman who arranges for her lover to murder her husband, and even there some blame is attached to her parents for forcing her into an uncongenial marriage. Spenser's wife clearly has more than one model that she could follow. There is another 'constant wife' amongst the Pepys ballads, Constance of Cleveland. Like Spenser's wife, she endures a great deal of neglect from her husband, and appears at her best when her husband is accused (unjustly, in his case) of murder. She goes as far as being willing to die in his place — the *Alcestis* theme — an option which Spenser's wife does not have. Spenser's wife

does provide the final image of the first part of the ballad, when she steals her husband's body and buries it secretly by night. This image, I think, recalls and possibly conflates two Biblical incidents from 2 Samuel 21. One of Saul's concubines, Rizpah, when two of her sons have been hanged, along with five other descendants of Saul, in order to satisfy the Gibeonites, protects their bodies from predators, and her behaviour seems to stimulate King David to arrange for the suitable burial of Saul and Jonathan:

10 And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it for her upon the rock, from the beginning of harvest until water dropped upon them out of heaven, and suffered neither the birds of the air to rest on them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night.

11 And it was told David what Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, the concubine of Saul, had done.

12 And David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son from the men of Jabeshgilead, which had stolen them from the street of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them, when the Philistines had slain Saul in Gilboa:

13 And he brought up from thence the bones of Saul and the bones of Jonathan his son; and they gathered the bones of them that were hanged.

14 And the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son buried they in the country of Benjamin in Zelah, in the sepulchre of Kish his father: and they performed all that the king commanded ...²¹

In this passage, we have both the example of the pious woman protecting her dead, and a story of bodies being stolen from places where they had been publicly displayed, so that they may be properly buried.

John Spenser's wife seems to be set up as a partial paradigm of the Corporal Acts of Mercy — she buries the dead, visits the prisoner, bringing him food and presumably drink, thus fulfilling four of the seven works. Spenser himself, on the other hand, in both sections of the poem, is possibly set up as a warning against the Seven Deadly Sins. Although ballads tend to be more concerned with motive and background than court records are, the Spenser ballad seems to trace the causality further back than do many other ballads. As far as the actual crime goes, the nearest parallel ballads to John Spenser's are, interestingly, those dealing with wives killing husbands in the midst of a domestic quarrel. Most of these give an immediate reason for the fatal quarrel (he was drunk, he

asked for money, they had a fight) but beyond a general background statement of whether the marriage had been usually quarrelsome or not, unlike the Spenser ballad, they don't give much of a picture of the couple's life.

The opening of the first half of the 'Ballad of John Spenser' seems to be trying to set him up as a 'great man' whose fall will be tragic (such as Raleigh or Essex). He is 'One Spenser braue, of Cheshire chiefe',²² 'so famde of all',²³ whose behaviour will be to 'his Countries grieve'.²⁴ In the second and third stanzas his 'brave' accomplishments are particularized: 'beating of the war-like Drumme', 'vaunting, leaping, and such like', and shooting.²⁵ It is only at the end of the second stanza that we find that he is in fact not a knight or a soldier, but a shoemaker, and that his main achievement has been to impress the local women:

For striuing still more things to learne,
the more he grew beloued:
No Shomaker but Spenser braue
by women was so prooued.²⁶

It is thus that his downfall begins: his abilities make him conceited, and the admiration of other women causes him to neglect his wife 'for the loue of euey Queane'.²⁷ Worse yet, he lets himself be maintained 'in parill fine and braue'²⁸ by women, and his concern is with fashion and conspicuous consumption rather than providing for his family:

In Silkes and Sattins would he goe,
none might with him compare;
No fashion might deuised be,
but his should be as feire
When as (God knowes) his wife at home
should pine with hungry grieve,
And none would pittie her hard case,
or lend her some reliefe. ²⁹

The sins of Pride, Lust, and, I would suggest, Avarice and Sloth are all represented here. Avarice involves not simply the desire to acquire wealth, of which Spenser cannot be quite absolved (given his willingness to accept gifts), but also the misuse of wealth — he is failing to put money to its right use, that is, supporting his family. His life — or, to use the modern phrase, lifestyle — is presented as one of idleness, and his progress makes one think

of that of the title character in *Mankind*. Spenser is yet another victim of Newguise, Nowadays, and Nought.

In Spenser's actual crime we have two more of the deadly sins represented: Gluttony and Anger. Gluttony, often portrayed in terms of drunkenness, is linked explicitly to his victim ('One Randall Gam beinge drunke'),³⁰ but the tavern context and health-drinking, which is condemned by Prynne and other tract-writers as both idolatrous and leading to excessive consumption, suggest that Spenser was not sober either. He is also described as 'apt to Quariling',³¹ suggesting that Anger, like the other sins, has become habitual with him.

The second half of the ballad, being in the first person and explicitly expressing repentance, tends to make the association with the sins even more definite. Spenser mentions pride four times, once specifically associated with his dancing ('being proud in dancings art'),³² talks of killing Gam in rage, warns against 'Dangers, Brawles, and Strife',³³ and the dangers of 'Vitious Queanes', because 'lust doth fully fill their Vaynes'.³⁴ He laments that he failed to support his wife, and also that he is now not able even to support himself — none of his friends from his tavern days will visit him in prison, where he lies with 'no food to enrich my life'.³⁵

There is, of course, one other sin, Envy, which does not appear to be mentioned, but I would like to suggest that it does potentially occur, although in an unusual place. Envy consists not only in regretting another person's good fortune, but also in rejoicing in another's misfortune, and by presenting Spenser's story as a ballad, the author leaves us to choose from a range of responses. We may feel horror at Spenser's deed and his death, we may feel pity or indignation for him or for his wife, we may be inclined to repent our own sins and give up dancing and hanging about in taverns, but we are also free to listen to the ballad in a tavern situation, and even to dance to it, thus turning Spenser's misfortune into entertainment and becoming ourselves participants in the same pattern that led to his downfall.

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NOTES

- 1 REED: *Cheshire* 8, line 14.
- 2 REED: *Cheshire* 8, lines 21–2.
- 3 For convenience, I maintain the spelling distinction between Spencer and Spenser, although the balance of probability is in favour of their being the same

- individual. Spenser, therefore, will refer to the individual of the ballad, Spencer to the Sabbath performer.
- 4 REED: *Cheshire* 9 lines 8–9.
 - 5 REED: *Cheshire* 8 line 25; 9, line 25.
 - 6 REED: *Cheshire* 11 lines 22–3.
 - 7 *The Pepys Ballads* edited W. G. Day 5 vols (Catalogue of the Pepys Library at Magdalene College, Cambridge; Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987) Facsimile Volume 1, frontispiece.
 - 8 Day *The Pepys Ballads* 1 frontispiece verso.
 - 9 Day *The Pepys Ballads* 1 Table of Contents.
 - 10 Day *The Pepys Ballads* 1 111, col 2.
 - 11 Day *The Pepys Ballads* 1 123, col 3.
 - 12 ‘The sorrowful complaint of Susan Higges’ (Day *Pepys Ballads* 1 113) seems to treat the speaker’s execution as a past event. The lines (33–6) may refer to the judgement, rather than the actual execution, but the idea of execution is foregrounded.
 - 13 Day *Pepys Ballads* 1 106, 107 (Earl of Essex), 110–111 (Sir Walter Raleigh), 134–5 (Dr. Lambe).
 - 14 Day *Pepys Ballads* 1 118–119, 120–121.
 - 15 The ballad is reproduced in full in REED: *Cheshire* 8–13. These lines are 34–41 on page 10. However, the layout here reproduces that of the original broadside ballad published in 1617, printed in London [by W. White] for I. Trundle (STC (2nd ed.) 23098; see *Early English Books Online*), which appears to have been written in fourteeners. It is to be sung to ‘the tune of in Slumbring Sleepe’.
 - 16 REED: *Cheshire* 11 lines 1–8.
 - 17 REED: *Cheshire* 9 lines 40–1.
 - 18 REED: *Cheshire* 12 lines 21–6.
 - 19 REED: *Cheshire* 13 line 6.
 - 20 The five ballads actually only cover four murders, as there are two separate ballads on Alice Davis’s murder of her husband.
 - 21 2 Samuel 21: 10–14 (Authorized Version).
 - 22 REED: *Cheshire* 8 line 29.
 - 23 REED: *Cheshire* 9 line 5.
 - 24 REED: *Cheshire* 9 line 1.
 - 25 REED: *Cheshire* 9 lines 8, 10, 12.
 - 26 REED: *Cheshire* 9 lines 17–20.

ELIZABETH BALDWIN

- 27 REED: *Cheshire* 9 line 25.
- 28 REED: *Cheshire* 9 line 27.
- 29 REED: *Cheshire* 9 lines 31–8.
- 30 REED: *Cheshire* 10 line 6.
- 31 REED: *Cheshire* 10 line 9.
- 32 REED: *Cheshire* 12 line 10.
- 33 REED: *Cheshire* 13 line 9.
- 34 REED: *Cheshire* 13 lines 20, 21.
- 35 REED: *Cheshire* 12 line 42.