

***The Shocking Ballad Picture Show: German Popular Literature and Cultural History.* By Tom Cheesman. (Oxford, U.K. and Providence, R.I.: Berg Publishers, 1994. Pp. xxxv + 240, illustrations, bibliography, indices of names, song titles, and first lines US \$54.95, ISBN 0-85496-893-8 cloth)**

Jamie Moreira

Volume 21, Number 2, 1999

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087823ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087823ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Moreira, J. (1999). Review of [*The Shocking Ballad Picture Show: German Popular Literature and Cultural History.* By Tom Cheesman. (Oxford, U.K. and Providence, R.I.: Berg Publishers, 1994. Pp. xxxv + 240, illustrations, bibliography, indices of names, song titles, and first lines US \$54.95, ISBN 0-85496-893-8 cloth)]. *Ethnologies*, 21(2), 221–225.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1087823ar>

In his more than 25 years of dedication to the people of Cape Breton, Caplan has helped capture the true essence of the folk. *Another Night* continues his devotion to his adopted Island, a devotion that will continue to yield treasures and be an influence for years to come.

Reference

Howe, Douglas. 1990. The Voice of Cape Breton. *Canadian Geographic*, April/May: 61-68

Cliff McGann
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

The Shocking Ballad Picture Show: German Popular Literature and Cultural History. By Tom Cheesman. (Oxford, U.K. and Providence, R.I.: Berg Publishers, 1994. Pp. xxxv + 240, illustrations, bibliography, indices of names, song titles, and first lines US \$54.95, ISBN 0-85496-893-8 cloth).

Recent trends in literary and cultural criticism have been highly favourable for ballad studies, and street ballads in particular have become a subject of increasing academic interest. Though folkloristics itself has contributed to this development through the success of such works as Buchan's *The Ballad and the Folk* and Renwick's *English Folk Poetry*, other disciplines and analytical schools have also been factors: social history, cultural studies, and discourse analysis are the dominant influences. The common ground among these fields, at least insofar as they deal with aesthetic subjects, is a desire to understand artistic works in relation to a broad range of social discourses and activities, not solely as freestanding and self-justifying creations. Balladry has been attractive to this line of research for several reasons. It has a longstanding and (relatively) well-documented history that spans the entire modern era and even earlier periods. As the author of the present work points out, in Germany it exhibits continuities that link Martin Luther and Hans Sachs with Adolph Hitler and Bertold Brecht (p. 2). Balladry also holds interest because it has enjoyed a broad based popularity, and as such it is regarded a credible resource for investigations of vernacular life, beliefs, fashions, practices, and values. Lastly, as a cultural phenomenon in its own right, and as an object of study and

artistic emulation, balladry cuts across class and culture divisions. The processes of its cultural diffusion and propagation, and the manner in which it has been studied, critiqued, adapted, and imitated by the intellectual elite, warrant as much attention as the workings of its aesthetic processes.

In *The Shocking Ballad Picture Show*, Tom Cheesman leads us through imaginative and insightful readings of a genre of street literature that will be new to many English speaking students of folksong: the German *Bänkelsang*, literally “bench song,” so called because of the singers’ practice of standing on benches to raise themselves above the level of the audience. In terms of its history, the conventional times and places of performance, the economics of the trade, and the social status of singers and their audiences, the tradition shares a great deal in common with the British broadside, even to the point of moving through transitions in theme and style roughly analogous to differences in blackletter and whiteletter broadsides. The characteristic feature of *Bänkelsang*, however, is the use of elaborate illustrations painted on canvas sheets as an added attraction of the performance. Canvasses normally presented several scenes, each one depicting a different part of the narrative. As the song progressed, the singer (*Bänkelsänger*) would indicate the appropriate image using a pointer, often slapping the canvass soundly to add intensity at critical points of the narrative. Although Cheesman notes sporadic references to illustrated ballad performances in Britain, the tradition is predominantly continental.

Those whose sense of broadsides comes mainly from British whiteletter tradition will find the thematic emphasis of the *Bänkelsang* somewhat unfamiliar. Like the broadside, the German picture ballad commonly features “true-crime” narratives, but rather than focus on human frailty and the remorse of the culprit as is the norm in British tradition, the *Bänkelsang* tends to accentuate the brutality and horror of the crime itself — hence the term “shocking ballad” — and the equally gruesome punishment, often delivered by divine or supernatural means. The genre thus has close links with the pseudo-religious *exempla*, and the underlying ideology of morality and retribution has been a crucial factor in various elite adaptations of the genre. These secondary forms, generally referred to in German as “*Moralitat*,” include works ranging from counter-Reformation propaganda, imitations of popular style within the Romantic “*Sturm und Drang*” movement, and Modernist realizations of the form; Brecht and Weill’s “Mack the Knife” is the best known of the latter, indeed, according to Cheesman, the best known *Moralitat* of all time. In the

concluding chapter, Cheesman even shows a convincing connection between the shocking ballad and the *Novelle*, Germany's main contribution to Western literary genres.

The first two chapters offer a synopsis of the cultural history of the *Bänkelsang*, beginning with brief descriptions of the genre, the trade, and extant materials available for research. Considerable time is then spent discussing the analytical value of such literature. The author's concern, however, is not so much the validation of his own efforts as the history of arguments that have been put forward over the past two centuries by researchers working within other cultural movements in order to support their interest in the genre. This segment introduces a central theme within the study: despite the frequent and often acerbic repudiation of popular culture by intellectual elites, there are nonetheless numerous examples of symbiotic exchanges between different levels of culture, especially during artistic movements such as Romanticism that tend, as Cheesman puts it, to "colonize" aspects of popular culture for elite ends. The second chapter examines the German literary adaptations of street literature in some detail.

But the book is not content simply to polarize these cultural exchanges. At least four separate perspectives are taken into account: the bench-singers, their audience, the economic and legal ruling class (who shape the tradition through active censorship and legal restrictions on performers, and who also surface as characters in the genre), and the literati. The interplay of these voices, moreover, is treated diachronically. The core chapters offer readings of ballad types or themes that exemplify significant discursive aspects of the genre within three broad chronological frames: the early modern period, the late eighteenth-early nineteenth centuries — especially in relation to the rise of mass education and the European nationalist movements — and finally, a late modern period lasting from the mid-nineteenth century to the fall of the Weimar Republic. Despite the complexity of the historical and cultural overlays, the analyses achieve a wonderful balance of intricacy and lucidity and produce substantial results. An analysis of thirty-six variants of a "hard-heartedness" ballad ranging in date from the late sixteenth century to the 1910s isolates no less than seven main influences shaping variant evolution and adaptation. There are also some innovative techniques applied in the analyses. Of note is the use of narratives from the "Great Tradition" as comparative material: the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son provides the basis for a discussion of tragic and melodramatic "home-coming" songs in popular tradition. This is

not a matter of cheap juxtaposition of the sublime and the ridiculous. Rather, in keeping with the “whole culture” approach, each basic narrative is shown to rely on the other for key aspects of its meaning. *The Shocking Ballad Picture Show*, to the extent that it reveals subtle transitions in ballad form and meaning in response to changing cultural conditions, brings to street literature the same finely-tuned level of analysis that *The Ballad and the Folk* brought to classical balladry.

One of the most admirable features of the book is the even-handedness with which the various perspectives are treated; even Dave Harker would have trouble isolating an authorial agenda in Cheesman’s work. Most importantly, there is no attempt to lionize popular tradition, to see it inflexibly as the “voice of the people.” In contrast to broadside tradition, which is sometimes read — and not always justifiably — with a socialist bias, the *Bänkelsang* is treated as an essentially conformist genre, one that offers views of social relations and of justice that are in sync with those of official culture. Admittedly, a rigid censorship is seen to be the shaping influence. Yet the recognition of an overriding official voice within the commercial genre enables an insightful comparison of themes as treated in chapbook versions and the same themes as contained in texts derived from oral sources or from personal copybooks. This approach is particularly important to the fourth chapter dealing with infanticide ballads. The commercial tradition is resolute in its condemnation of infanticide, punishing the offending heroines with pornographically violent torture and death. Vernacular tradition, however, is quite equivocal. Though punished for their crimes, the mothers nonetheless come across as, themselves, victims of circumstance, not simply as cold-blooded killers. The comparative analysis is dialogically supported by reference to the officially promoted mythology of Motherhood that arose during the nineteenth century and a discussion of the sexual and gender politics of the same period. It is Cheesman’s ability to engage all these often competing elements simultaneously that makes this a remarkable book.

A number of excellent studies of street literature have emerged during the last two decades, but in terms of its comprehensiveness and the fullness with which it contextually grounds its readings, this work stands out. It would be a great shame if the obscurity of the specific genre or regional considerations were to cause students of folklore and cultural studies in general to overlook this book. It should be required reading for anyone interested in popular culture in the pre-electronic age, and were it not for the hefty price-tag, it

would make an excellent text for any course on popular culture, balladry, or folksong. *The Shocking Ballad Picture Show* is an articulate, impressively researched, and in many respects a gutsy book that successfully navigates many complex channels of balladry, its influences, evolutions, and offshoots.

Jamie Moreira
Sir Wilfred Grenfell College
Memorial University of Newfoundland
