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For A Bunch of Blue Ribbons:

Taking a Look at Wife-Selling in the Black Country and the West Midlands

By Stéphanie Prévost (Paris Diderot University, France)

'GOOSE herding, gurning and even wife-selling will be among the attractions at a Staffordshire fair'. This is what the Stoke daily *The Sentinel* announced on 19 August 2013 about the Bank Holiday Shugborough Goose Fair, near Stafford. The journalist assured readers that wives who partook in this mock wife-selling event could actually seek revenge by *'offering up their husbands for a spell in the stocks'*. That husbands could sell their wives in Britain seems today most extraordinary, although some have recently dared to do so. The case of Sharon Osborne's husband who put her up for sale on eBay, with her mobile number at the auction price of 1p made front page news, not the least because Paul Osborne justified himself, on his being inculpated, by saying that his wife had been unfaithful, or so he thought. A recent article in the Gail Middleton column of *The Black Country Bugle* dated 23 February 2016 reveals the strong dismay still triggered by this bygone custom, which may not have been too uncommon until possibly 1928, including in the Black Country.

In his *Wives for Sale* (1981), historian Samuel P Menefee listed 387 cases in Britain over the period 1073-1928. In her 2009 *Blackcountryman* magazine article, Margaret Dallow remarked that the highly ritualistic practice of wife-selling went as far back as Roman days and posited that it derived from wives' status as chattel in the Bible (Deuteronomy 5:21). Most of them (319 cases) happened in between 1760-1880, whereas in Customs in Common (1991), Edward P Thompson only accepted 218 authentic cases over the same years. Despite diverging figures, both agreed that the heyday of bride sales was really between 1800 and 1840, with a steady decline after that. Despite Edward P Thompson's suggesting that it was impossible to decide for sure whether *'cases reported [are] the tip of an iceberg or a true index of frequency'*, it now clearly appears that the number of wife sales in Britain must have been underestimated as we only know of cases that were reported in some way or other, either in the press or because they resulted in a court procedure. Edward P Thompson and Katherine O'Donovan before him (in a chapter entitled *'Wife Sale and Desertion as Alternatives to Judicial Marriage'* published in John M Eekelaar & Sanford N Katz's 1984 *The Resolution of Family Conflict Comparative Legal Perspectives*) contended that such wife sales were originally conceived of as a most-often consensual, though illegal, *'alternative to judicial marriage dissolution'* that was still accepted as valid by the community if practiced according to certain rules: *'the open market, publicity, the halter, the form of auction, the passage of money, the solemn transfer, and on occasion ratification by paper'*. Because of all this, but mostly because wife-selling was never on the statute book and because by the nineteenth century, it became a much disputed common law practice associated with the semi-skilled working classes, such self-divorces often left few traces to posterity.

Still, *'Smithfield bargains'*, as wife sales became known in the late 18th century, did not only take place at London's Smithfield market. There were a number of hot spots, in particular Sheffield and its surroundings, as well as the Black Country area (Tipton and Walsall in particular) as well as Birmingham and other nearby districts of the West Midlands. The *Lichfield Mercury* even devoted articles on 22 June 1923 and again on 20 January 1933 to this *'custom of the people'* that was then presented as commonplace in

the 1830s in the area. Numbers are difficult to gauge for sure, but taking heed from Menefee's list of cases, which is the most complete one up to this day, 51 wife sales (out of 387) took place in the Black Country and the West Midlands in between 1692 and 1901. Some cases may have gone unnoticed, but amongst the 51, 29 occurred in between 1763 and 1842, mostly in Staffordshire and Lincolnshire. Altogether, the list breaks down into seven wife sales occurring in Staffordshire over the years 1763-1842 and another ten after that period, with eight bride sales happening in Lincolnshire in between 1763-1842 and another two after 1842. Sales did take place also in Worcestershire, Warwickshire, Gloucestershire, Shropshire and Herefordshire, but to a lesser extent.

If this '*relic of a barbarous age* [which was] *still extant* [sic] *in England*', to quote from the London weekly *The Illustrated Police News* on 19 November, 1870, eventually died out as a custom in 1928 in Blackwood (South Wales), it survived in folklore till much later on and was a central part of the Black Country and Staffordshire folk songs until the 1970s at least. One may here think of the repertoire of George Dunn (1887-1975) of Quarry Bank, Staffordshire, or of the Raven Brothers with their 1971 Argo Kate of Coalbrookdale album, which, on side one, included the *Wife for Sale* track. These songs tell us much about the practice itself as they were inherited from its heyday. The theme became popular in nineteenth-century broadside ballads, alongside elopement songs, to the point that it even permeated the Irish folk song heritage, whereas wife-selling was never a feature of semi-skilled workers' culture there. That *The Ship Carpenter's Wife*, most likely produced in the mid-19th century (according to the National Library of Scotland), was recorded in 1966 by Eddie Butcher (1928-2013), a traditional Irish folk singer from Co. Derry, eventually to feature on his 1972 *Shamrock, Rose & Thistle* album attests to this.

Apart from *The Ship Carpenter's Wife*, which is an alternative title for the Raven Brothers' *Wife for Sale*, catalogues of broadside ballads like those developed by the Bodleian Library or the National Library of Scotland keep on record several songs, including *John Hobbs, The Wedding and Sale of a Wife by Auction*. The latter two were printed in Birmingham respectively in the late 1810s and around 1850. However, they do not recount cases that took place in the Black Country. Upon a closer look, lyrics display variations, especially regional ones. For instance, the two versions of *The Wedding* that were printed in Birmingham in the 1850s and that have survived at the Bodleian Library, give different locations for the sale (Nottingham and Sheffield). As recurrently mentioned in the accompanying texts, the songs were written on the occasion and it even seems that some were performed at the sales themselves.

Such ballads give us an inkling into the highly ritualistic practice of wife-selling, which was more or less standardised throughout Britain. *The Ship Carpenter's Wife*, which was first printed in between 1830 and 1850, but may have been passed on orally even before that, sets the scene of a wife auction that was inspired by the sale of a woman, named Mary MacKenzie, on 16 July, 1828, in Edinburgh's Grassmarket. The last stanza goes: '*He* [the selling husband] *keeps up the topsails avoid of all care, / And Jack is well pleased with his ten shilling wife, / Long may he flourish and prosper through life, / The sailor that bought the Ship Carpenters Wife.*' The song dwells on how mutual disagreement between husband and wife could lead to a consensual sale that offered both partners a new chance in life. Such occurrences were underpinned by the loose interpretation of the legal status of coverture that married women, as *femmes couvertes*, were the legal property of their husbands who could dispose of them at will. Even though

wife selling was illegal, it was true that upon marriage, a woman's legal existence dissolved into that of her husband's. Coverture was only disassembled first through the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1884 and then with the 1891 Clitheroe settlement, which definitively gave women certain rights over their bodies.

The prospect of a fresh start was only one side of the coin, as the remark by the editor-in-chief of *The Staffordshire Advertiser* upon a wife sale held at Walsall in late October 1837 makes clear: *'The husband was glad to get rid of his frail rib, who, it seems, had been living with Snape [her lover and the buyer], at any price, erroneously imagining that because he had brought her through a turnpike gate in a halter, and had publicly sold her in the market before witnesses, that he is thereby freed from all responsibility and liability with regard to her future maintenance and support'*. By making reference to Eve's creation out of Adam's rib in Genesis (2: 22), the journalist clearly sought to denounce a two-fold gross misconception amongst the plebeian classes that evidence of a wife having engaged in 'criminal conversation' allowed the husband to sell her off (especially to the lover) and that once the sale was over, the purchaser was considered wedded to the sold wife and thus became in charge of her, with the former husband being cleared of all responsibility. On the contrary, local authorities tended to turn a blind eye to such sales although they were illegal, infringing the 1753 and 1836 Marriage Acts which ruled out common-law unions, and therefore resulted in bigamy. Their bet was that the purchaser would provide for their newly acquired lady, thereby preventing her from being a burden on the state poor relief system under the New Poor Law of 1834, which her otherwise being abandoned by her first husband might result in. This take only makes some sense if one remembers that sales were often pre-arranged with the purchaser normally being known to the sold wife, either because he would be a relative or more likely, her lover: it was thus expected that due to such bonds, purchasers would care. Judges tend to be less lenient upon hearing of cases after the adoption of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, which introduced civil divorce, thus making divorcing less costly. Nonetheless, the breakdown of cases evoked here above shows that the practice did not disappear altogether after that date and that it actually remained enshrined in the culture of semi-skilled workers (like tailors, chain-makers, carpenters, bakers, button-makers, cobblers, etc.) and of army/navy staff for whom the costs of divorce, though lessened, still remained beyond their means. EP Thompson also suggests that the old plebeian classes may also have been reluctant to shed a practice that was rooted in their own class culture.

Overall, despite what seemed an easy way out of unhappy wedlock, the staging and the low prices (often less than £1 and some drink) at wife auctions contributed to shaming both parties – as they had failed to have a happy marriage. This was particularly true for the sold wife, who was recurrently presented as the cause of this failure: a successful domestic life rested on a wife's capacity to manage and run her household. If, up to the 1860s, pre-agreed terms of sale were most often respected, Rachel A Vaessen still contended in her 2003 MA thesis *'Humour, Halters and Humiliation: Wife-Sale as Theatre and Self-Divorce'* that the playing of rough music as part of the display ritual, as well as physical closeness of bidders who could physically examine wives on sale suggest an emotional charge and potential violence as part of the process by which faulty women were sold at public places associated with cattle (fairs or cattle markets). A correspondent at *The Royal Leamington Spa Courier* even flared up on 12 June 1869 on the occasion of a sale that had occurred the previous week at Tipton, near Birmingham,

that: 'a man of the name of Cope on that day having sought and found his wife in a public-house, began by abusing her "in the coarsest and most violent language", and a crowd having collected, announced his determination to sell her'.

This ambivalence invites us to ponder on how wife-selling was perceived in the Black Country and the West Midlands, especially after 1857, and how it made a lasting imprint on folk memory. Undisputedly, the custom was recurrently decried in newspapers from the early nineteenth century. This trend was accelerated with the adoption of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act and also with the broadening of the franchise, which raised the issue of how fit working classes were to become citizens. For instance, on 11 April, 1863, *The Hereford Times* lamented upon a recent case that this was a 'shameful outrage upon propriety and decency'. The consultation of late 19th-century newspapers also reveal that the unilateral decision to sell a wife in her absence, especially for drink, constituted a commonplace evolution of what had formerly been a more or less consensual arrangement equating to a de facto (though not de jure) divorce. While this made the practice even more barbaric, late 19th-century folkloric depictions tended to more neatly lay the blame on both partners for engaging in such a sale. No matter if the sale had not been previously consented to by the wife, or if the latter had not been able to secure a legal divorce because under the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, she had been unable to prove another ground (cruelty in particular) beyond adultery, adultery being sufficient to secure a civil divorce in court for a husband from 1857. A late version of *The Carpenter's Wife* song, circulating between the 1880s and the late 1910s, is eloquent about this as on the one hand, it reactivated the idea of wife-selling as brutal chattel purchase, the song is about a carpenter 'being a little or rather too fond of his beer [and] being hard for cash' who decided to auction his wife for ten shillings, while at the same time, it exculpated the selling husband, since his wife too 'was going on a spree'.

As the number of cases plummeted after 1857, incredulity became more widespread at the permanence and even at the very existence of such an olden custom in late nineteenth-century Britain. Disbelief went hand in hand with disdain vis-à-vis what seemed crude, not to say almost primeval and savage. The presence of a Wessex wife sale at the opening of Thomas Hardy's 1886 novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* thus provoked dismay as to whether such folk practice really still existed in England at the time. It furthered the debate. Two years later, folklorist John Ashton provided a positive answer to that question as he opened his *Modern Street Ballads* with several ballads on wife sales, notably *The Ship Carpenter's Wife* and *John Hobbs*. There, he also pointed out that he had given prior evidence of the persistence of the wife-selling phenomenon in his *Old Times; A Picture of Social Life at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (1885) in which he referred to cases as recent as 1862, 1870, 1881, 1882 and even 1884.

Yet, in its articles devoted to 'The Selling of Wives' of 16 December 1892 and of 6 November 1903, *The Lichfield Mercury* preferred overlooking contemporary cases – including in the neighbourhood – and in its section 'things worth knowing', ranked wife-selling as 'not uncommon practise [sic] with our grandfathers'. To wit, in 1892, *The Lichfield Mercury* cited the 1802 Hereford case of a butcher who had sold his wife for 'twenty-four shillings and a bowl of punch', but surprisingly neglected to mention the three Lincolnshire cases of November 1842. After a case in Sheffield made front page news in the 19 November, 1870 edition of *The Illustrated Police News*, wife-selling became even more sensational and local communities tended to react strongly to such happenings as their being publicised meant that the borough would then be clouded by

shame and opprobrium on a local, national, possibly international scale. That it was too shocking to acknowledge that wife-selling was not completely extinct in the West Midlands at the time, although it had become rare and much rarer than in Yorkshire, may thus well account for this omission in the *Lichfield Mercury* articles. This hypothesis would tend to be confirmed by the ambiguous phrasing of the 1903 piece, which first had the reader believe that it was about 'a strange and unwonted exhibition [that] took place in Walsall market on Tuesday last' before breaking the news that the article was reprinted from *The Globe* in 1837. In a way, the 1971 interview of folk singer George Dunn by folklorist Roy Palmer as part of his work for the *Traditional Music in England* project would also testify to this shame-proneness about wife-selling. Indeed, when asked about the prevalence of this custom in the 1890s, Dunn confessed that 'terrible things [were] happening to women', but disputed the existence of wife-selling, saying he knew nothing about it, whereas it strangely still featured in his repertoire.

As a matter of fact, the inclusion of the article in the local Lichfield daily in 1903 was probably not random at all. Most likely, it came as confirmation of the verisimilitude of the plot of George Morley's new novel *A Bunch of Blue Ribbons*. The latter started appearing in serialised form from 1902 in the pages of *The Birmingham Weekly Post* and which displayed an 1871 wife sale in rural Warwickshire, more precisely in the district of Snowford (chapter 18). One needs to note that the commission of *The Birmingham Weekly Post* for the story both partook in the new craze for local history and followed up the account of a case reported in the London *St James Gazette*, and also in the 4 December, 1901 Richmond, *Virginia Times*, of a Worcestershire farmer who had bought his neighbour's wife for a pipe of tobacco. A close analysis of British and American dailies included in The 19th Century British Library Newspapers Database, The British Newspaper Archive and Chronicling America discloses that this must have been the latest case in the West Midlands.

The publication of *A Bunch of Blue Ribbons* thus more or less coincided with the extinction of wife-selling in the West Midlands. The novel was a success, was lauded as realistic and was eventually issued in book form in 1907, that is twenty one years after Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. The triptych structure of *A Bunch of Blue Ribbons* with its happy ending probably contributed to its great popularity. It also reinstated the original meaning of wife-selling and tended to move away from its more gruesome late developments, although this was not without ambiguities.

The novel has a love triangle involving young Rina, the shepherd Kitty Woodgrass and the captain of the Snowford cricket team, Wilfred. Although Rina had given Kitty her bunch of blue ribbons, which traditionally marked a promise to stay true to him and marry him, she eventually eloped with Wilfred and broke up all connections with her relatives. Rina had become enamoured to Wilfred after Kit's short absence and the narrator describes Rina's feelings for Wilfred as 'more than a passing interest'. The second part is entitled *The Reality* and exposes the flawed relationship between Rina and Wilfred, whose union was besides somehow frowned upon by locals as they had not been properly married. As John R Gillis remarked in his 1985 *For Better or for Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present*, the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act opened up 'the era of mandatory marriage', which turned cohabiting as husband and wife into 'living in sin', to take up the title of Ginger S Frost's 2013 study. Despite their living tally, Wilfred and Rina were regarded as married after 'taking the fortnight's residence in the district (Snowford) required by the law'. This meant that both partners had duties towards each other. After

three weeks together however, both Wilfred and Rina realised how mismatched they were. The second part concludes with Wilfred drinking all his money away and with an unexpected encounter between Wilfred and Kitty in an inn. Wilfred was so broke that he was ready to sell Rina away to Kitty for 10 shillings and eventually accepted the higher price of £2 proposed by the shepherd. Kitty insisted that the writ of the sale be made on the bunch of blue ribbons. It read: *'For the sum of two pounds paid to me by Christopher Woodgrass, I, Wilfred Sheldon, late farmer's son of Snowford, but now outcast of nowhere, being of sound mind at the time, have that day, May, the 24th, 1871, sold my wife, Marina Sheldon, formerly Marina Warf, to the aforesaid Christopher Woodgrass, shepherd of Snowford, in the full and firm belief that he will make a better husband than I have or can ever hope to be.'*

However verisimilitudinous, this sale nonetheless displays some hybridisation of the ritual. Indeed, the deal took place without Rina's knowing and was conceived of as redemption for the latter by both men, for she had eventually wrongly given in to a man whom she did not really love and had broken her word for that. It equally stigmatises the weakness of 'a woman's heart', which corresponds to part of the title of chapter 16, and 'the rustic temperament' of Wilfred, by contrast to that of the gallant hero, Kitty. It is only thanks to him and his unflinching love that Rina can be offered a new, hopeful 'destiny' in part three. There, Rina eventually discovers the existence of the sale as the bunch of ribbons falls out of Kitty's clothes while asleep. She confronts Kitty who explains the circumstances of the sale, which results in Rina sobbing that *'Wilfred [had] sold her like a sheep'*. To complete her redemption, Rina begs Kitty to marry her in the proper way. The novel thus casts a new light on wife-selling, which takes on different connotations for Wilfred, for whom total failure beckons, and for Kitty, whose devotion to Rina is twice symbolised by the blue ribbons. If it be correct, as Roy Palmer pointed out in *The Folklore of Warwickshire* (1976), that blue was the colour of heaven and that blue ribbons stood for true love and the prospect of a happy marriage, one needs to remark that the symbol here operates at another level: blue ribbons were commonly associated to the British Temperance movement from the 1880s and it is undeniable that in the novel, Kitty won Rina back because he abstained from drinking. *A Bunch of Blue Ribbons* can thus be read as a moral tale celebrating the propriety of civil marriage, true love, and temperance. In fine, Morley's work is a way of indirectly evoking the fact that more and more late-19th-century wife selling cases came to be heard of in courts in the first half of the 20th century when such sales came to be denounced as illegal, especially by sold wives who thus hoped to be able to secure a separation in the process and be able to subsequently legally remarry. In a very paradoxical way, one might argue with Jennifer E Gourlay in her 2003 PhD devoted to *'Negotiating Spaces: Women and Agency in English Renaissance Society, Plays and Masques'*, that wife-selling is also about female empowerment as it gave *'some women a chance to negotiate a space for themselves in separation and remarriage'* in a particularly unfavourable, unequal socio-political and economic context.

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