

“SHAME AND SCANDAL”: ROBERT SERVICE, CALYPSO, AND COUNTRY MUSIC

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This paper is partly an analysis of the transmission of a song and a motif, partly a detective story. The detective story is unfinished at this point, but I will give the facts as I know them now, and present possible scenarios that can be based on these facts. The paper will include a comparison of two of the forms of the story, and it will end with some analysis and speculation about why a country singer from central Ontario would find this particular song appealing enough to include in his repertoire.

Fact one. Robert Service was a popular poet who wrote verse about the Klondike gold rush of 1898. His best known works are “The Shooting of Dan McGrew” and “The Cremation of Sam McGee,” both included in the 1907 volume *Songs of a Sourdough*. When he wrote those poems he was a bank clerk in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, but the book became an immediate best-seller and it and its two successors gave Service the economic means to do what he pleased with his life.

What he pleased was to tour Europe, and then settle in Paris. He lived in France, for the most part, until his death in 1958. During that time he wrote a number of novels and volumes of verse. From 1921 to 1939 he did not publish any poetry, but in 1939 he published *Twenty Bath-Tub Ballads* and in 1940 *Bar-Room Ballads: A Book of Verse*. *Bar-Room Ballads* seems to be a collection of left-overs from the previous thirty or so years and includes “Madame la Marquise,” a slightly risqué poem about the French aristocracy. This is a summary:

Verse One: The son of a marquis tells his papa that he wants to take a wife. Papa says he is too young but asks if the girl is respectable and if she has a good dowry. The son says yes and tells her name.

Verse Two: Papa is staggered. He moans and groans and generally makes a fuss. When the son demands an explanation, Papa gives some preliminaries and concludes “My son, you can’t wed Mirabelle. She is...she is your sister.”

Verse Three: The son is broken-hearted and roams the world for awhile. He returns home, finds another prospective mate, and asks his father about her.

Verse Four: Is essentially a repeat of Verse Two, concluding with: “You cannot wed Raymonde, my boy, because I am...her father.”

Verse Five: The son goes to his mother for comfort. She asks him what the problem is.

Verse Six: He tells her the whole sordid story and concludes, “If I choose another wife, she’s sure to be his daughter.” The poem ends:

The Marquise rose. “Cheer up,” said she, “the last word is not spoken.
A Mother cannot sit and see her boy’s heart rudely broken.
So dry your tears and calm your fears; no longer need you tarry;
Today your bride you may decide, to-morrow you may marry.
Yes, you may wed with Mirabelle, or Raymonde if you’d rather...
For I as well the truth may tell...Papa is not your father.”

Fact two. Little Joe Nicholson is a professional country singer from central Ontario. One of the songs he performs is "Shame and Scandal," which Joe first heard on a visit to the home of some friends during 1975. They had been vacationing in the Caribbean and brought back an album by "The Montague 3 + 1," a band that played at their hotel. The "Montague 3 + 1," it turns out, is named for the Montague Hotel in the Bahamas, so they were probably staying there. Joe's friends were using the album for background music at a party. Joe liked "Shame and Scandal" and borrowed the album to learn the song. He changed the location of the song to Minden, where he lived, and also changed or rearranged some words to sound more like Canadian English. There is a recording of him singing it at the Orillia Legion during the summer of 1984.

Fact three. "Shame and Scandal" was a very popular calypso, originally sung by Lord Melody sometime in the mid-forties, perhaps earlier. I have asked a number of Caribbean scholars and Trinidadians about it, and while none of my informants owned a copy, they nearly all knew of it. My persistent searching managed to uncover three versions besides Joe's. Since then, I have heard of — and heard — several more versions.

One was recorded by Odetta in 1956. It is particularly interesting in that the tune, chorus, and guitar accompaniment are essentially the same as Joe's. The story, though, is quite different. It seems to be a traditional ballad placed in San Sebastian: the older brother is a "Hollander," meaning a Dutchman, I assume, whose younger brother falls in love with his wife. Younger brother and the wife want to leave together, but the older brother refuses, the wife falls down, and the man — which one is unclear — is burned in a voodoo fire. The wife loses her faculties and the song ends rather cryptically: the brothers hire a nurse for her, and then: "The brothers are lonely, the nurse is young. And now you know my tale is sung."

The second version, placed in Jamaica, is sung by "Clint Eastwood and General (Saint)," a reggae band based in England. It features the father, mother, and son plot, but the lyrics and the performance style have been changed almost to the point of becoming unrecognizable.

The third version is sung by a Barbadian band, "The Escorts." They have given the song a reggae beat, but other than that, it is quite similar to Joe's version.

The question of the connection between the Service poem and the Calypso presents a number of possible explanations or scenarios.

1. The first possible scenario is polygenesis. The plot of the poem and song is not so unlikely that it could not have been made up by more than one person. But what about the structure? Both versions have essentially the same plot structure, grouped as question — response with the father, question — response with the father, question — response with the mother. It seems unlikely that, even if two writers had invented the same plot, they would have structured it so similarly.
2. Scenario two is a common source. Service was probably living in France at the time he wrote the poem, and it is given a distinctly French setting. The earliest Calypsos were sung in Creole French and were often about scandalous behaviour among the ruling class in Trinidad. There is, then, the chance of a mutual French source. Gerald Thomas has suggested the possibility of a French popular song source — the theme would be in keeping with that idiom. To explore this

scenario further, one would need an index of popular song in France and fairly detailed knowledge about its connections with the Caribbean. It is, certainly, a possibility.

3. The third scenario is that the song began as a folk-motif in the Caribbean. One of my informants thinks that "Shame and Scandal" was originally a folk-song from the Bahamas and that Melody simply cleaned it up and popularized it. Another informant denies that possibility. I have not been able to locate the motif in any collection of Caribbean tales or songs and if Service did learn the song from a Caribbean source, it must have been indirectly: there is no evidence that he ever travelled to the Caribbean. On the other hand, there was apparently a fairly active connection between France and its West Indian colonies through the first half of this century. Assuming that Odetta was singing a traditional version of the song, we can hypothesize that the melody and chorus were traditional. But where did the plot come from?
4. That last scenario is that Melody was somehow acquainted with "Madame la Marquise" and based his song on it. I do not have any figures on the sales of *Bar-Room Ballads*, but Service's books of verse generally sold extremely well throughout the English-speaking world. So Melody could possibly have read the poem or heard it recited, and then have based a song on it, fitting it to a pre-existent tune and chorus. Two objections to this scenario are that Service's poems would have been completely unknown to a person of Melody's race and status, and, that one of the most valued features of any Calypso is its originality: it would simply go against the grain for a calypsonian to appropriate someone else's plot. I cannot comment on the first objection: I simply do not know enough about Melody's life or about the distribution of Service's poems. The second objection is undermined by the evidence that the tune and chorus may well have been traditional. If you can use a second-hand tune, why not a second-hand plot, especially one from a source that your audience is probably unfamiliar with?

Now, a comparison of the poem and the song. Two similarities have already been noted; they have the same plot and the same simple plot structure.

On the other hand, the song has a refrain, which the poem lacks. The refrain, "Woe is me, shame and scandal in the family" twice, summarizes the son's emotional reaction to his parents' goings-on. It also gives the song a melodic and lyric hook — a short segment that is repeated often enough to be easily remembered. Anyone who has heard the song more than once is likely to be able to recall the plot and the refrain, even if the actual verses elude them.

"Madame la Marquise" uses six fourteen-line verses and includes a minute description of the characters, their behaviour, their explanations, and even at one point, the weather. "Shame and Scandal" uses a similar line-length, four accented syllables, but it tells the story in eighteen lines plus refrains as opposed to eighty-four lines.

The song has compressed the poem in two ways. First, all detail and characterization have been dropped. In their place we get a refrain giving an emotional reaction to the story. This deletion of detail and characterization is also found in the movement from literary broadside to oral ballad. The change from a distanced, 'neutral' stance to an involved

'judgemental' stance parallels norms in Afro-American balladry, and the use of a floating refrain — one that can be dropped into unrelated songs — is common to a large number of traditions.

The second technique of compression is that descriptions of the situation are not repeated. What is described in the first verse is modified slightly in the second and dropped altogether in the third. As a result, the verses get progressively shorter: eight lines, six lines, and finally four lines.

This compression is essential to a popular song — if it had been the same length as the poem, it would not have fit on a 78 rpm record. At the same time, it makes it easier to learn — fewer words: less to memorize.

Little Joe and the Calypso

This brings us to the question of Joe Nicholson, an Ontario country singer, learning a calypso. It is worth stating that he is not in the habit of exploring exotic idioms in search of material. As a rule, he selects what he likes from the songs that he hears on the radio, on records, or from other performers in his own geographic area. The only other calypso he performs is "Yellow Bird," and that was popularized in North America by Lawrence Welk in the early sixties. *Why, then, would he learn this one?*

First, the lyrics appeal to him. At one point he told me that "Shame and Scandal" was "just like the way things happen in Minden." So it reflects his own perception of reality.

Neither the story nor the music are completely foreign to Joe's native idiom. Country music, since the late forties, has often explored marital infidelity as a topic, but few of the songs on the radio present it in a humorous light. There are, however, a fair number of bawdy songs in oral circulation and Joe has a substantial repertoire of them. As a rule, he only sings risqué songs when they are requested by someone in the audience and they are not really central to his repertoire, but he does know them and he will perform them when the situation is right: "Shame and Scandal" is one of Joe's request-only bawdy songs.

Musically, the song uses the same melodic and harmonic materials as country music, though they are organized differently. "Shame and Scandal" has a recurring harmonic pattern of tonic — dominant, dominant-tonic over two lines of verse. The same progression is the basis for about one fifth of all of the songs Joe sings. In the country songs, though, it is most likely to be the first half of a harmonically asymmetrical sixteen-bar verse. Here it is simply repeated every four bars all the way through the song. The melody is almost as symmetrical, the cadence at the verse ends and the slight variation in the refrain are the only asymmetrical elements. Given that he liked the lyrics, this simplicity only made the song easier for Joe to learn.

Rhythmically, the actual melody of "Shame and Scandal" is fairly straightforward in both Joe's and The Escorts' versions. Rather than regularize the accompaniment, Joe has adapted it to his own interpretation of a calypso rhythm. In fact, Latin and Caribbean rhythms are not as foreign to country music as one might think. Joe's musical hero, Hank Snow, released a number of Latin-influenced songs during the early fifties. "Rhumba Boogie" was the most popular; it was a number-one country hit in 1951 and stayed on the Billboard charts for twenty-seven

weeks. Other country songs in the same general style were Snow's "Panamama" and Mitchell Torok's "Caribbean." Joe sings all three of these songs on a regular basis. During the fifties, Latin rhythms were also popular in jazz and popular music and the influence passed into the country idiom. In the middle and late fifties, calypso music was in vogue, with such singers as Harry Belafonte. So, Joe became familiar with the Latin and calypso rhythms through both popular and country music; the calypso rhythm of "Shame and Scandal," though somewhat unusual, is not completely foreign to Joe's experience or practice.

Conclusions

I will end with a story. A poet, normally associated with the Canadian north, moves to France. There he makes up a mildly scandalous poem about the aristocracy. The book finds itself in Trinidad, perhaps in the hands of an American serviceman during the war. The poem or its plot gets to the ears of a calypso singer; perhaps he borrowed and read the book, perhaps the serviceman told the story to the calypsonian or recited the poem while the calypsonian was in one of the calypso tents where servicemen went for entertainment. The calypso singer liked the plot — it was similar in some ways to the songs he already knew. But he needed a tune. Thinking about the new story reminded him of the aristocracy and of incest. There was another song with those elements, and it had a perfect chorus: "Shame and Scandal." He put the plot and the song together and had a local hit on his hands. In fact, everybody started playing it. Decades later, some Canadian tourists go to visit the islands and buy an album from the band that is playing in the lounge of their hotel. The tourists, and the album, carry it to central Ontario where a local musician hears it. It is amusing and yet familiar enough to what he knows that he learns it and it becomes a modest success for him. People like it and ask him to play it and it is on its way to oral currency in Canada.

Now, that is just a story. I know that the part after the calypso singer writes it is true. Joe told me, and he would not lie. The first part is just a fantasy, but of all the fantasies, this one seems to fit best with the rest. All four of the scenarios presented are possible, but strictly as a story, the movement from text and oral to recorded to oral to recorded to recorded to oral seems to have the most coherence and balance. It presents a symbiosis of print, recordings, and oral transmission that may become the norm rather than the exception for song transmission in the future. It may already be the norm for most people and songs.

If that is so, have print and electronic media destroyed oral transmission? Based on the evidence from "Shame and Scandal," I think not; they have just helped it take on some new and interesting forms.

"Shame and Scandal" as performed by Joe Nicholson

In Minden town there lived a family
With much confusion as you will see
Was a mama and a papa and a boy who had grown,
Who wanted to marry and have a wife of his own.
He found a young girl who suited him nice.
He went to his papa to ask his advice
His papa said son: "I have to say no;
The girl is your sister, but your mama don't know."

Woe, woe is me, shame and scandal in the family.
Woe, woe is me, shame and scandal in the family.

The weeks went by and summer came down,
So the best cook in Minden town he found.
He went to his father to name a day:
His papa shook his head and to him, he did say:
"You can't marry this girl, I hate to say no.
Cause she, too, is your sister but your mama don't know."

Woe, woe is me, shame and scandal in the family.
Woe, woe is me, shame and scandal in the family.

He went to his mama and covered his head.
He told his mama what his papa had said.
His mama, she laughed and said: "Go, man, go.
Your daddy ain't your daddy, but your daddy don't know."
Woe, woe is me, shame and scandal in the family.
Woe, woe is me, shame and scandal in the family.

"Shame and Scandal" as performed by Odetta

Refrain: Woe-oe me, shame and scandal in the family.
Woe-oe me, shame and scandal in the family.

There was a family lived on the isle
Of San Sebastian for a long, long while
The head of the family was a (Hollander) man,
The younger brother, his name was Ron.

Refrain

The Hollander man kept in the tower
A wife as pretty as a big white flower.
She saw the brother, she stole his heart,
And that's where the trouble of the [bubly] starts.

Refrain

The wife and the brother, they wanna to go,
But the Hollander man, he tell them no.
The wife fall down and the evil came,
Burncd the man in a voodoo flame.

Refrain

Her eyes are empty, she cannot talk.
The nurse has come to make her walk.
The brothers are lonely, the nurse is young
And now you know, my tale is sung.

Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues. Tradition Records, TLP-1010 (recorded
September, 1956 in San Francisco)

MADAME LA MARQUISE

Said Hongray de la Glaciere unto his proud Papa:
"I want to take a wife, *mon Pere*." The Marquis laughed: "Ha! Ha!
And whose, my son?" he slyly said; but Hongray with a frown
Cried: "Fi! Papa, I mean — to wed, I want to settle down."
The Marquis de la Glaciere responded with a smile:
"You're young, my boy; I much prefer that you should wait awhile."
But Hongray sighed: "I cannot wait, for I am twenty-four;
And I have met my blessed fate: I worship, I adore,
Such beauty, grace and charm has she, I'm sure you will approve,
For if I live a century none other can I love."

"I have no doubt," the Marquis shrugged, "that she's a proper pet:
 But has she got a decent *dot*, and is she of our set?"
 "Her *dot*, said Hongray, "will suffice; her family you know.
 The girl with whom I fain would splice is Mirabelle du Veau."
 What made the Marquis start and stare, and clutch his perfumed beard?
 Why did he stagger to a chair, and murmur: "As I feared?"
 Dilated were his eyes with dread, and in a voice of woe
 He wailed: "My son, you cannot wed with Mirabelle du Veau."
 "Why not? my Parent," Hongray cried, "Her name's without a slur.
 Why should you look so horrified that I should wed with her?"
 The Marquis groaned: "Unhappy lad! Forget her if you can,
 And see in your respected Dad a miserable man."
 "What is the matter? I repeat," said Hongray growing hot,
 "She's witty, pretty, rich and sweet... Then — *mille diables!* — what?"
 The Marquis moaned: "Alas! that I your dreams of bliss should banish;
 It happened in the days gone-by, when I was Don Juanish,
 Her mother was your mother's friend, and we were much together,
 Ah well! You know how such things end, (I blame it on the weather.)
 We had a very sultry spell, One day, *mon Dieu!* I kissed her,
 My son, you can't wed Mirabelle, She is ... *she is your sister.*"
 So broken-hearted Hongray went and roamed the world around,
 Till hunting in the Occident forgetfulness he found,
 Then quite recovered, he returned to the paternal nest,
 Until one day, with brow that burned, the Marquis he addressed:
 "Felicitate me, Father mine: my brain is in a whirl;
 For I have found the mate divine, the one, the perfect girl,
 She's healthy, wealthy, witching, wise, with loveliness serene,
 Ah! Proud am I to win a prize, half angel and half queen."
 "'Tis time to wed," the Marquis said, "You must be twenty-seven,
 But who is she whose lot may be to make your life a heaven?"
 "A friend of childhood," Hongray cried, "For whom regard you feel,
 The maid I fain would make my bride is Raymonde de la Veal."
 The Marquis de la Glaciere collapsed upon the floor,
 And all the words he uttered were: "Forgive me, I implore,
 My sins are heavy on my head, Profound remorse I feel,
 My son, you simply cannot wed with Raymonde de la Veal."
 Then Hongray spoke with voice that broke, and corrugated brow:
 "Inform me, Sir, why you demur, What is the matter now?"
 The Marquis wailed: "My wicked youth! Ah! how it gives me pain,
 But let me tell the awful truth, my agony explain...
 A cursed Casanova I; a finished flirt her mother;
 And so alas! it came to pass we fell for one another,
 Our lives were blent in bliss and joy, The sequel you may gather:
 You cannot wed Raymonde, my boy, because I am ... *her father.*"
 Again sore-stricken Hongray fled, and sought his grief to smother,
 And as he writhed upon his bed to him there came his Mother,
 The Marquise de la Glaciere was snowy-haired and frigid,
 Her wintry features chiselled were, her manner stiff and rigid,
 The pride of race was in her face, her bearing high and stately,
 And sinking down by Hongray's side she spoke to him sedately:
 "What ails you so, my precious child? What thongs of sorrow smite you?
 Why are your eyes so wet and wild? Come, tell me, I invite you."
 "Ah! if I told you, Mother dear," said Hongray with a shiver,
 "Another's honour would, I fear, be in the soup forever."
 "Nay, trust," she begged, "my only boy, the fond Mama who bore you,
 Perhaps I may your grief alloy, Please tell me, I implore you."

And so his story Hongray told, in accents choked and muffed.
 The Marquise listened, calm and cold, her visage quite unruffled.
 He told of Mirabelle du Veau, his agony revealing.
 For Raymonde de la Veal his woe was quite beyond concealing.
 And still she sat without a word, her look so high and haughty.
 You'd ne'er have thought it was her lord who had behaved so naughty.
 Then Hongray finished up: "For life my hopes are doomed to slaughter;
 For if I choose another wife, she's *sure* to be his daughter."
 The Marquise rose, "Cheer up," said she, "the last word is not spoken.
 A Mother cannot sit and see her boy's heart rudely broken.
 So dry your tears and calm your fears: no longer need you tarry:
 To-day your bride you may decide, to-morrow you may marry.
 Yes, you may wed with Mirabelle, or Raymonde if you'd rather...
 For I as well the truth may tell ... *Papa is not your father.*"

From *Collected Poems of Robert Service* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1961).

Resumé: *Dans son article, Douglas Gifford examine l'anecdote traditionnelle traitant de la fille qui ne peut trouver d'époux car son père lui dit que tous les prétendants sont ses fils. A la fin, sa mère dit à la fille qu'elle n'a rien à s'inquiéter, parce que son «père» n'est pas son vrai père. Gifford discute ce thème qui est à la base de «Madame la Marquise» de Rudyard Kipling, et d'un «blues» chanté par Odetta. Finalement, il décrit la rapport entre ces deux et la version chantée par Joe Nicholson, un chanteur populaire ontarien.*

Note by Edith Fowke

I have come across three other versions of this story. There was a hillbilly version on a record from the 1940s. I think by Grandpa Jones. Buffy Sainte-Marie published and recorded one she called "Johnny Be Fair" that began:

Well, Johnny be fair and Johnny be fine and wants me for to wed.
 And I would marry Johnny but my father up and said:
 I'm sad to tell you daughter what your mother never knew,
 But Johnny is a son of mine and so is kin to you.

This is in *The Buffy Sainte-Marie Songbook* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1971) p. 194. She introduces it with the comment: "On the trials and tribulations of living in a small town. Based on a joke I heard from an Irishman and dedicated forever more to himself."

Anne Passovoy composed and recorded a folksong she calls "The Captain is a Father to His Crew," sometimes known as "Starship Unity." It begins:

My father is the captain of the starship Unity,
 And me and mamma live on board to bear him company,
 And I am of the age when I am anxious for to wed;
 And I must choose a groom who'll win approval from my Dad,

After several members of the ship's crew turn out to be her Dad's sons, her mother tells her:

Well, tidy your antennae, girl, and comb your hair so blue.
 I've taught you that a skipper is a father to his crew.
 He's doubtless laid each female in the Galaxy, but still
 He's not the critter that sired you, so marry whom you will."

(As quoted in a letter from Anne Passovoy. Song appears in *The Westerfilk Collection*, published by Jordan Kare (Berkeley, 1980).