

# Horses For Discourses?: The Transition from Oral to Broadside Narrative in “Skewball”

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The well-known horse-racing ballad “Skewball” (hereafter, *SB*) has a well-established oral tradition in Ireland, with versions documented throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The latest is a 1979 field recording of Derry folksinger and storyteller, Eddie Butcher (Shields 2011:58–9).<sup>1</sup> The ballad was also assimilated into African-American oral tradition, in which it was reconstructed and renamed “Stewball” (Lomax 1994:68–71; Scarborough 1925:61–4), and was still being documented in American folk tradition as late as the 1930s (Flanders 1939:172–4). In common with countless other folk songs, *SB* was appropriated by broadside<sup>2</sup> printers and subsequently enjoyed widespread public appeal throughout England in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, its popularity waning with the later decline of the broadside as a medium of ballad transmission and distribution.

A comparative analysis of oral and broadside versions reveals clear differences between the two narratives. I argue that these variations were quite deliberate in origin, being a direct result of interpolations and excisions made by broadside ballad printers to the original oral narrative. By drawing comparisons between versions of *SB* collected from both oral and broadside sources, this paper will demonstrate that as a consequence of significant social and cultural advancements in the nineteenth century, *SB* was deliberately revised with the aim of enhancing its appeal and relevance to an increasingly literate middle class audience.

## Historical Context

The narrative recounted in *SB* centres on a historically documented horse race held in Kildare, Ireland on March 30, 1752 (Heber 1753:106).<sup>3</sup> The race in question was a two-horse challenge between Sir Ralph Gore’s Grey Mare (Pick 1803:504)—the clear favorite—and Arthur Mervin’s Skewball (Pick 1803:91; Harewood 1835:309), a far lesser-known racehorse (if not completely unknown in Ireland), in which the latter unexpectedly triumphs to great acclaim. Unsurprisingly, the narrative of *SB* has changed considerably over time. Such variation is to be expected from a ballad that was based on eighteenth-century events in Ireland, enjoyed widespread popular appeal as a nineteenth-century English broadside printing, became established in

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African–American slave culture and later appeared as a work song among African–American prisoners,<sup>4</sup> and ultimately became popularised on both sides of the Atlantic in the folk revival of the late 1960s and early 1970s. There are, however, key narrative features that are common to all documented oral and broadside versions of the ballad,<sup>5</sup> namely:

(i) A two–horse challenge for a considerable purse is arranged to be held on “the plains of Kildare” between Sir Ralph Gore and Arthur Mervin, both of whom were well–known figures in eighteenth–century Irish horse racing circles, and served as presidents of the Irish Jockey Club in the late 1750s (Carpenter 1998:312).<sup>6</sup>

(ii) Although fleeting comparative references are periodically made to other racehorses, only two are mentioned as participating in the contest related in the ballad. The race favorite is a grey mare owned by Gore and is referred to variously in the ballads as either Grey Mare, Maid Sportly, or Miss Portly/Portsley/ Sportl(e)y /Sportsly/Sprightly, or in later versions as Miss Grizzle.<sup>7</sup> The lesser–known challenger—a skewbald gelding—is owned by Marvin and known as Skewball<sup>8</sup> throughout all documented versions

(iii) Upon hearing of the challenge and the wager that has been put down, the skewbald—the clear second favorite in the contest—instructs his master to place a considerable bet as he is assured of victory. Despite the established reputation of the favorite, Skewball wins easily to both the surprise and delight of the assembled crowd.

Despite both oral and broadside versions of *SB* sharing the overall subject matter and common structure shown above, a comparative analysis of the two genres reveals some striking differences. Inconsistencies can be clearly observed among the *dramatis personae* involved and throughout the general narratives related. Without question, the most obvious distinction between oral and broadside versions is the presence of the well–established folklore motif of the speaking horse, found almost exclusively in the oral versions. The popular belief in horses possessing human faculties is well–attested to in Irish oral tradition,<sup>9</sup> however, in spite of—or indeed perhaps, because of—this popularity, it failed to make an entirely seamless transition into broadside format in the ballad under review. Such narrative variations show that *SB* has always retained a considerable adaptability to the expectations of its varied audiences—a quality which no doubt ensured its survival in the traditional canon for several centuries. The various revisions provide us with clear examples of the expedient manipulation of ballad narrative by both traditional folksinger and broadside printer alike. Of particular interest is the revision of the earliest documented oral versions for publication as

a broadside ballad sheet. I argue that this revision was deliberately undertaken as part of a concerted effort to present *SB* as historical narrative to an increasingly literate and socially advanced (and markedly non-traditionally focused) audience, and in doing so, deflect from the ballad's folkloric origins.

### Market Forces and "The Folk"

A ballad is rarely (if ever) performed in isolation, and its rendition requires an active recipient in the form of an audience. This holds true for both an oral ballad, related in the intimate surrounds of the fireside, or a broadside hawked at a busy city street corner. In either circumstance, the audience assumes an active role in the ballad's transmission and thus is an integral party to the performance itself. It can be reasonably argued, therefore, that the audience fulfils as important a role as that of the performer; in its absence, the ballad would effectively cease active transmission. Without a receptive audience, the most well-crafted ballad would very quickly become a defunct artistic endeavour from a contemporary perspective, and thus pass quickly into the relative obscurity of cultural history. Consequently, the audience exerts a direct influence on the performer, whether in the actual content of the utterance, or in the personal style of expression (Casey, *et al* 1972:397–403; Ferris, 1970:439–49).

In the context of oral ballad recitation, the performer is not simply a singer, but is also a storyteller.<sup>10</sup> The folksinger, therefore, enjoys considerable freedoms (in both the content related and the style utilized), yet must always remain cognizant of the requirements of the audience if the transmission of his or her art is to continue. In such a context, the most obscure narrative can be related in as fantastic a style as is demanded (or indeed, expected) by the audience, depending on the storytelling prowess of the individual performer. While oral ballads were quite often based on historical fact, narrative accuracy in the depiction of such events was often of secondary importance to the fundamental entertainment value of the story. Consequently, linear narrative and chronology are quite often not the primary focus of the oral ballad singer. If the historical facts assisted in the development of a ballad's narrative—and in the process, fulfilled the audience's expectations—the performer could utilize them as appropriate. If the audience's expectations remained unfulfilled, the facts and characters involved could always be inflated (or deflated) to meet the requirements of "the folk." This finely balanced dynamic between audience and performer is likened by Casey, *et al.* to the relationship between politician and constituency:

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A singer interacts with his audiences in the way that a politician interacts with parts or all of his constituency. The “good singer” is aware of the likes and dislikes of the groups and individuals for whom he performs. He manipulates his repertoire in response to perceived or anticipated performances, giving his constituents what he thinks they would like to hear. He is more or less sensitive to their feedback and thus quick to react in situations in which either his or their expectations are not fulfilled. (1972:397)

Above all other considerations however, the traditional singer was transmitting his or her art, which was always of primary importance over and above how believable the narrative was, or its relevance to the day-to-day existence of “the folk.” Indeed, as a short-lived antidote to the hardships of everyday life, perhaps the more fantastic the narrative, the better.

Besides obvious differences, broadside ballads differed significantly from their oral counterparts in two major aspects, one cultural, the other economic. One of the primary cultural distinctions resulted from the simple fact that the narrative freedom of the singer or storyteller was not, and indeed could never be, enjoyed by the broadside publishers since the flexibility and spontaneity associated with oral folk transmission did not lend itself well to broadside publishing. Broadside ballads were generally more linear, and had considerably less narrative flexibility than those of the oral ballad style. They were also, as a contemporary form of literature, more reflective of changing contemporary attitudes. Coupled with this was the fact that the popular height of broadside ballad publishing coincided with the increasing literacy of a burgeoning middle class that was a result of the social and economic progress of the Industrial Revolution (Williams 1981:51). Whereas both the folksinger and his or her audience belonged to a tightly-knit community bound by a shared system of cultural values, the broadside was designed for anonymous consumption across a much wider geographic area. By the nineteenth century, the folk ballad was fast becoming a relic of times past and was not in keeping with the social, economic, educational and industrial advances of the period. However, despite the changing mores of the time, it would have been foolish for broadside publishers seeking new material to ignore existing folk ballads, many of which were regularly appropriated for print and sale, as observed by Wehse:

More frequent than the entering of an original broadside text into oral tradition seems the adaptation of orally transmitted folksongs to broadside publication. The reason has to be sought in the economic situation of broadside printing and publishing . . . Why, should the publisher pay a professional writer for a really new and authentic song if it was only necessary to reproduce already existing subject matter and still make a good profit? (1975:328)

The broadside publisher was not transmitting the ballad for the sake of its own particular merit, but simply as an efficient means to a financial gain. Unlike the traditional singer, the broadside publisher was now dependent on “the market,” not simply “the folk.” It could be argued, therefore, that the publisher had to be even more aware of the cultural requirements of his audience than the traditional singer. Whereas a traditional singer who ignored his audience’s needs and expectations might simply encounter a public rebuff from his or her audience—an occurrence, to be fair, at which most contemporary folksingers would still recoil in horror—the broadside publisher would suffer financial hardship. In essence, what the traditional singer might endure in terms of a bruised ego, the ballad printer would have to absorb in terms of financial loss. In practice, this meant that broadside publishers and peddlers had to be more than willing to manipulate the subject matter of their printings to accommodate the varied requirements of their audience—something which was clearly undertaken in the case of *SB*, with scant regard for the continuity of the narrative. Broadside published by such editorial manipulation of existing oral ballads were often found wanting, as pointed out by Williams:

Although, in their hunger for material, early broadside publishers did sometimes print relatively untouched versions of oral ballads, the tendency was more often to rewrite them so that they conformed to literate logic and taste. The broadside ballads usually focussed on the narrative to the exclusion of almost everything else. The number of major characters in the stories was frequently reduced (often to one person, the narrator), and their qualities almost disappeared under the weight of descriptive detail, as though the literate logic and an urban sense of naturalism struggled to fill the gaps in the once skilfully but sparsely rendered ballad stories. (1981:48)

That the broadside printers “struggled to fill the gaps” when they appropriated *SB* for publishing is evident in their treatment of *Skewball*’s propensity to speak at key stages of the ballad narrative. The speaking horse—a clear remnant of the now passé folklore era—was duly excised so as to present the ballad as historical narrative. However, in their efforts to make the ballad more appealing (or, indeed, fundamentally believable) for what they clearly regarded as a more culturally and intellectually advanced audience—one who we may assume would have scoffed at the prospect of a supernatural, speaking horse—the ballad printers continually fail at their numerous attempts of revision. What remains is a corrupted series of verses that jar significantly with the rest of the narrative and undermine its own chronological sense. Thus, in their haste to revise the unpalatable, mythological aspect of the ballad, the broadside printers produced versions that compromise the credulity of the narrative itself—an ironic twist that would

surely have brought a wry smile to the lips of a many a wizened *seanchaí*.<sup>11</sup> The traditional singer may well not have had the new-found sophistication of nineteenth-century England, but at least he knew his craft intimately and could still script and deliver a tale to good effect. The corrupted revisions show the narrow social confines in which the ballad printer operated, as well as the practical difficulties involved in overseeing the transition from the oral ballad—with all its associated cultural freedoms—to the more restrictive medium of the broadside.

### Oral Versus Broadside Narrative in “Skewball”: An Analysis

While *SB* gained prominence and widespread popular appeal as an English broadside printing, the ballad’s oral tradition is also well-established, and can be shown to have both pre-existed the first datable printings, and to have long outlived the late nineteenth-century decline in broadside publishing. Oral versions of the ballad were collected in America until the 1930s (Flanders 1939:172–4) and in Ireland until as recently as 1979 (Shields 2011:58–9), suggesting that (for some at least) the mythological worldview provided by the oral ballad was not lost just yet.

As well as an overall common structure shared with broadside printings, oral versions of *SB* display the following key narrative features:

- (i) Skewball speaks to his master before the race and instructs him to bet heavily as his victory is assured.<sup>12</sup>
- (ii) As the race nears its climax, Skewball duly asks his rider how far his opponent is behind him.
- (iii) Without hesitation, his rider confirms that the favorite is considerably behind, and that they are to prove victorious.
- (iv) Skewball addresses the assembled crowd and calls for a toast to his defeated opponent.

Documented oral versions of *SB* are as follows (see Appendix 1 for full text):<sup>13</sup>

#### (i) Filgate MS (Louth County Council Archive Collection)

The earliest printed version of *SB* to which a date can be confidently assigned is that found in *The Vocal Library* (hereafter *VL*) (Souter, ed. 1818:526),<sup>14</sup> a songbook containing a diverse range of English, Irish and Scottish material stretching back over several centuries. The intervening period of some fifty-four years between the publication of *VL* and the actual date of the race is not an insignificant amount of time if one considers the later widespread

popularity of the ballad. That oral versions of *SB* significantly preceded this printing is attested to by the discovery of a handwritten version which can be dated to 1764, entitled “The Noble Scuball.” (This previously undocumented version was uncovered as part of the author’s ongoing study of the Filgates of Lisrenny Family Papers,<sup>15</sup> a diverse collection of estate records and personal papers, catalogued and held at the Louth County Council Archives, Dundalk, Ireland.) While displaying the common narrative already discussed, Filgate retains the folklore motif of the speaking horse—in this instance, pre-, mid-, and post-race. The transcription shows several corruptions that are consistent with oral documentation, yet correctly records Skewball’s owner as “Arthur Marvin,” a name shown to have undergone widespread revision in the broadsides. Significantly, verse 4 specifies (correctly) that the race took place at The Curragh, a location which has been universally amended in subsequent versions to “the Plain(s) of Kildare.” It should also be noted that Filgate accurately records Skewball as racing against “Grey Mare,” whereas in the three later oral versions discussed below, his opponent has been amended to “Miss Greazle/Grissel/Grizzle.”<sup>16</sup> The Filgate MS, therefore, is the only version of *SB* hitherto documented which fully agrees with all of the established historical facts of the original race.

#### (ii) McCall MSs (National Library of Ireland)

Three manuscripts held in the National Library of Ireland—one belonging to the songwriter and ballad collector John McCall<sup>17</sup> (1822–1902), and two belonging to his son P.J. McCall (1861–1919)—contain fragmentary versions of *SB*, one of which is dated by P. J. McCall to 1890.<sup>18</sup> The versions each contain only four verses and were originally collected in the Carlow–Wexford area (Munnely 1985:455–77). The first two lines of the second verse are missing in two of the versions and have clearly been interpolated by P. J. McCall into the third. In all three it is the singer who bets heavily on Skewball, but no mention is made of either Gore or Mervin. Again, Skewball wins with ease and speaks to his rider after the race.

#### (iii) Peter Buchan MS (British Library: MS. Add 29408–29409)

The British Library Manuscript Collection contains an unpublished mid-nineteenth century manuscript version of *SB* transcribed by the Scottish folksong collector Peter Buchan (1790–1854). This manuscript is of added significance because it confirms that oral (i.e., specifically non-broadside) versions were not strictly an Irish phenomenon, and that identical folklore narratives—complete with the speaking horse—were still in circulation in

Britain even at the height of broadside publishing popularity in the nineteenth century, thus demonstrating the robust longevity of this particular folklore motif. In this version, Skewball speaks three times to his rider, twice during the race and once before (and not to Mervin as in other versions). The pre-race remarks (Verse 4: “Skewball to his rider began to discourse”) would appear to have been substituted directly from Verse 7, as the line is at odds with the established rhyming pattern.<sup>19</sup> Like Filgate, the transcription shows corruptions that are consistent with oral documentation, e.g., “Sherrif Moir” (Sir Ralph Gore) and “Arthur O’Mearlin” (Arthur Mervin). A character not found in any other version is present: “Lord Melville,” possibly a further corruption of “Mervin.” Furthermore, the first two lines of the final verse in which Skewball calls for a toast to his defeated opponent are missing in this version.

### (iv) Eddie Butcher Version (Hugh Shields’s Field Recordings)

In the 1960s (Shields 1988:16–7) and again in 1979 (Shields 2011:58–9), folklorist Hugh Shields collected a version of *SB* from Derry folk-singer and storyteller Eddie Butcher (1900–1980), which is unmistakably similar to the Mayne broadside printing. The main structural difference is the omission of verses 3 and 5 of Mayne. Again, a number of inconsistencies are evident: for example, verse 1 reads as “great heart of marble,” instead of “brave Arthur Marvín”; in verse 2, Butcher cites the challenger as “young Mrs. Gore,” and refers to “Miss Grizzel” as “their Monaghan grey mare.” Aside from these tantalizing (if unexplained) snippets of locally-influenced ballad revision, Butcher’s version agrees with Mayne in style and content, which would appear to be the singer’s source.<sup>20</sup>

The enduring ubiquity of *SB* in oral tradition over the course of several centuries cannot be examined in isolation from the ballad’s spectacular and marked success as a nineteenth-century broadside, with published versions collected across a wide geographical area throughout England, as far north as Newcastle, and as far south as London. Over the course of researching this paper, the author has been able to locate twenty-seven extant printed broadside sources for the ballad (under various titles) from the early-to-mid-nineteenth centuries (see Appendix 2). Despite this wide appeal among the buying public, broadside versions of *SB* began to disappear as the medium declined in the late nineteenth century. The latest printing examined as part of the current research was not in fact English and was published in Belfast by the printer and publisher Alex Mayne. (As already stated, the narrative presented in this printing has more in common with earlier oral versions.<sup>21</sup>)



All English broadside printings show a common eleven-verse structure<sup>22</sup> and, with the exception of the wide variations in the spelling of Mervin's name, all show a comparatively similar narrative content which may be summarized as follows:

Verse 1: The ballad begins with the standard broadside opening of "Come ("Ye"<sup>23</sup> in one instance) gentlemen sportsmen," and tells of how Skewball was brought to Ireland by Arthur Mervin.

Verse 2: Mervin is challenged by Sir Ralph Gore to race Skewball against his grey mare (of varying title) for the sum of 500 guineas/pounds.

Verse 3: After Skewball hears of the wager, he encourages Mervin to bet heavily on him, as his victory is assured.

Verse 4: Huge crowds assemble for the match, most of whom lay money on the grey mare.

Verse 5: A knowing Mervin encourages those with money to lay hundreds on the grey mare, which he will match with some thousands on Skewball.

Verse 6: Mervin disperses the crowd and informs all to be ready for the contest the following day.

Verse 7: On the day of the race, Mervin, who now seems to be dictating proceedings, orders his rider to mount Skewball, and clears the spectators from the path of the horses.

Verse 8: The race begins and Skewball immediately takes what will prove to be an unassailable lead.

Verse 9: As the race nears its climax—while both horses are in "the midst of the sport"—Mervin asks his jockey what distance the grey mare is behind. (At this same stage in the oral versions, it is in fact Skewball who asks this of the rider.)

Verse 10: The jockey replies that he is well ahead of the grey mare and will win easily. However, as a result of the deliberate revisions already referred to, both this and the preceding verse display several corruptions and inconsistencies of note.

Verse 11: The race ends with Skewball winning easily, as predicted by the horse himself. An ecstatic crowd cries out that this is Skewball's first race in Ireland, and by winning he has "broke Sir Ralph Gore."

As this analysis demonstrates, the ubiquity of the mythological, speaking horse is central in traditional oral versions of *SB*, with the motif being ultimately utilized to facilitate progression of the ballad narrative. The ubiquity of this motif suggests that *SB* may well have enjoyed an oral existence for a

considerable period before the popular nineteenth century broadside versions, and that the events surrounding the famous 1752 triumph of Skewball may simply have been grafted onto a pre-existing folklore narrative.

Despite only one reference to Skewball's gift of speech (Verse 3) surviving in the English broadsides—perhaps more an editorial oversight than by actual design—the ballad has clearly been revised in order to present it in a historical (and consequently more “credible”) format for the benefit of a specific target audience. Thus, broadside *SB* is no longer the quasi-mythical tale of a horse with the supernatural gift of speech, as recounted in the oral versions. Instead, a clear attempt has been made at transforming the long-established folklore narrative of *SB* into a simple historical account of a documented sporting event which relates the considerably more sober narrative of an unfavored horse triumphing against all odds.

### A Ballad in Transition: From Filgate to the Broadside

The earliest documented oral version of *SB* is the handwritten transcription found among the Filgates of Lisrenny Family Papers, which can be dated to the year 1764—a mere twelve years after the actual race upon which the ballad was originally based—with the earliest datable broadside version being *VL*.<sup>24</sup> Both versions present similar narratives. A comparison of the two, however, shows some notable differences which are illustrative of the general transition from oral to broadside:

Come all you brave gallants and listen to all,  
And I will sing you the praise of Noble Scuball,  
Who is lately come oover[?] as I understand,  
By brave Arthur Marvin the peer of the land.

And of his brave actions you heard of before,  
How he was challeng'd by one Sir Ralph Gore.  
Five hundred guineas on the course of Kildare,  
To run with the sporting gallant grey mare.

When Scuball he heard of the wager being laid,  
He said to his master 'Be not afraid.  
Five hundred guineas you may lay on the course,  
And I will cover your castle with red matches of gold'

Come gentlemen sportsmen, I pray listen all,  
I will sing you a song in the praise of Skew Ball;  
And how he came over, you shall understand,  
It was by Squire Mervin, the pearl of this land.

And of his late actions as you've heard before,  
He was lately challeng'd by one Sir Ralph Gore,  
For five hundred pounds, on the plains of Kildare,  
To run with Miss Sportly, that famous grey mare.

Skew Ball then hearing the wager was laid,  
Unto his kind master said - 'Don't be afraid;  
For if on my side you thousands lay would,  
I would rig on your castle a fine mass of gold!'

The day being come, and the cattle walk'd forth,  
The people came flocking from East, South, and North,  
For to view all the sporters, as I do declare,  
And venture their money all on the grey mare.

Brave Arthur Marvin, smiling did say:  
'Get ready, brave nobles, for tomorrow is the day.  
Get ready your horses and saddles prepare,  
For we we[?] must away to the Curroh of Kildare.'

When Scuball he came to the middle of the course,  
He and his rider began to discourse.  
'Come my brave rider and tell unto me,  
How fare is my disting[distance?] post is from me.'

The rider look'd back and this he did say:  
'You may go very easy for we will win the day.'  
Such leaping and josting the[they?] had for a while,  
The more she stood back law full[?] a mile.

When Scuball came to the winning post,  
He bid all his nobles for to drink a toast.  
'Now since you laid all your purses on the grey mare,  
Now she is bet and the sorrow ma care[Sir Ralph  
Gore?]

Squire Mervin then, smiling, unto them did say,  
Come, gentlemen, all that have money to lay;  
And you that have hundreds I will lay you all,  
For I'll venture thousands on famous Skew Ball'

Squire Mervin then smiling, unto them did say,  
'Come gentlemen sportsmen, tomorrow's the day,  
Spurs, horses, and saddles and bridles prepare,  
For you must away to the plains of Kildare.'

The day being come, and the cattle walk'd out,  
Squire Mervin order'd his rider to mount,  
And all the spectators to clear the way,  
The time being come not one moment delay.

The cattle being mounted away they did fly,  
Skew Ball like an arrow pass'd Miss Sportly by;  
The people went up to see them go round,  
They said in their hearts they ne'er touch'd the ground.

But as they were running in the midst of the sport,  
Squire Mervin to his rider began his discourse;  
'O! loving kind rider, come tell unto me,  
How far at this moment Miss Sportly's from thee?'

'O! loving kind master, you bear a great style,  
The grey mare's behind you a long English mile,  
If the saddle maintains me, I'll warrant you there,  
You ne'er shall be beat on the plains of Kildare.'

But as they were running by the distant chair,  
The gentlemen cry'd out – 'Skew Ball never fear,  
Altho' in this country thou was't ne'er seen before,  
Thou hast beaten Miss Sportly, and broke Sir  
Ralph Gore.'

The most obvious distinction between the two versions is the interpolation into *VL* of four additional verses, a feature found in all English broadside printings with the exception of two.<sup>25</sup> These verses do not in themselves significantly alter the basic narrative of the ballad, and essentially function as dramatic devices in order to heighten the pre-race suspense, thus making the ballad more appealing to its audience. The interpolated verses are also significant: by placing emphasis on the race itself, they fundamentally dilute the significance of the speaking horse, the essential component of the folklore narrative. Further proof of the editor's hand is in the fact that all four interpolated verses (4, 5, 7, and 8) are practically sequential, constructed as they are around a verse that lends itself perfectly to their pre-race, suspense-building narrative. It is also worth noting that the opening address of the first verse has been corrected from "brave gallants" to "gentlemen sportsmen." This subtle revision provides further evidence of the broadside publishers' efforts to tailor the ballad to a specific niche audience (i.e., the horseracing fraternity), their target sales market.<sup>26</sup> A further interesting revision of *VL* is the amendment of the actual race location from "the Curroh of Kildare" (Verse 4, MS Filgate) to "the Plains of Kildare" (Verse 6). This was presumably made for the sake of rhythmic continuity, a feature present in all other broadside versions of the ballad.

### Skewball, His Rider and His Master: Divergent Discourses

With the exception of some minor differences in wording and phraseology, English broadside versions of *SB* all share a common structure and narrative until the final three verses. Between these verses there are several distinct narrative streams, distinguished mainly by the changing identities of the characters. In addition to these variations, the broadside publishers have made numerous attempts to excise the mid- and post-race utterances; it is now Mervin, not Skewball, who speaks to the rider as the race reaches its climax. These clear narrative inconsistencies were duly appreciated by publishers at various stages in the ballad's broadside incarnations, and consequently, several attempts were made at its revision and correction. But in their haste to present the ballad in a markedly less folkloric style, the broadside publishers ultimately do not succeed: what remains are corrupted verses containing narratives distorted to the point of absurdity, as the following analysis will show.

In thirteen broadside versions, Skewball races against a grey mare known as "Miss Sportly."<sup>27</sup> Of these, eleven were printed in London, with the remaining two—Wright and Walker—printed by publishing houses in Birmingham and Durham, respectively. Walker and Birt are identical, as

are Batchelar and Jennings. Wright omits verse 5, and Ryle is identical to two of the Pitts printings.<sup>28</sup>

In verse 9 of *VL*, Mervin asks the rider, “How far at this moment Miss Sportly’s from thee?” The rider replies in verse 10:

‘O! loving kind master, *you* bear a great style,  
The grey mare’s behind *you* a long English mile,  
If the saddle maintains *me*, I’ll warrant you there,  
*You* ne’er shall be beat on the plains of Kildare.’ (Author’s emphasis)<sup>29</sup>

The reader will note the obvious difficulty presented by the rider telling Mervin—a spectator, and not an actual race participant—that *he* bears a great style and that *he* (i.e., Mervin) will never be beaten, a remnant of the rider’s original remarks to Skewball which always seem to successfully resist correction. The same difficulty is repeated in all of the Ryle and Pitts printings, which also contain what is, perhaps, the starkest narrative corruption found in any of the broadsides: Mervin’s asking the rider,

‘O! loving kind rider, come tell unto *me*,  
How far at this moment Miss Sportly’s from *me*?’

The Batchelar, Birt, Howard & Evans, Jennings, Walker and Wright printings all attempt to correct this inconsistency, as the rider now says that the grey mare is behind *him* (note the excision of verse 10 “me” in all except Jennings), but the verses still lack the narrative continuity afforded by the oral versions:

‘But as they were running in the midst of the sport,  
Squire Mervin to his rider began his<sup>30</sup> discourse;  
O! loving kind rider, come tell unto *me*,  
How far at this moment Miss Sportly’s from *thee*?’<sup>31</sup>

‘O! loving kind master, *you* bear a great style,  
The grey mare’s behind *me* a long English mile,  
If the<sup>32</sup> saddle maintains,<sup>33</sup> I’ll warrant you there,  
You ne’er will be beat on the plains of Kildare.’

In verse 11, all “Miss Sportly” versions excise the post-race speech by Skewball in which he salutes his defeated opponent and often partakes in a celebratory toast. Instead, it is now “the gentlemen” who speak in unison, proclaiming Skewball’s debut victory. In doing so they further emphasise the ballad’s transition from a mythological tale of a supernatural speaking horse to a recounting of the considerably less fantastic narrative of an unexpectedly triumphant sporting underdog:

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But as they were running by the distant chair,  
The gentlemen cry'd out – 'Skew Ball never fear,  
Altho' in this country thou was't ne'er seen before,  
Thou hast beaten Miss Sportly, and broke Sir Ralph Gore.'<sup>34</sup>

Seven broadsides, all appearing to stem from the same common source, record Skewball's opponent as "Maid Sportly," and refer to Mervin as either "Irving," "Irwin," or "Iwrin." In all seven versions, Mervin again asks the rider, "O loving kind rider come tell unto me, / How far is Maid Sportly this moment from thee?" Verse 10 of the Ford, Forth, Jackson and Harding B15 (290) printings all display the by now familiar pattern of narrative discontinuity:

'O loving kind master *you* bear<sup>35</sup> a great stile,  
The grey<sup>36</sup> mare is behind *me* a great English mile,  
If *your*<sup>37</sup> saddle maintains *me* I'll warrant you there,  
*You*<sup>38</sup> ne'er shall<sup>39</sup> be beat on the plain of Kildare.'

In Eyres, and in both Harkness printings, an attempt has clearly been made at addressing the above inconsistencies along with those of the "Miss Sportly" versions, by presenting lines 3 and 4 as a straight reply by Mervin to the rider. What results is perhaps the most successful attempted revision of the verse, but we are still left with the inconsistency of the rider's reply to Mervin in line 1, as already discussed:

'O loving kind master *you* bear a great stile,  
The grey mare is behind *me* a large English mile,  
'If *your* saddle maintains *you* I'll warrant you there,  
*You* ne'er will be beat on the plain of Kildare.'

As in the "Miss Sportly" versions, verse 11 also excises Skewball's victory comments, and interestingly refers to him as a mare:

But as she was<sup>40</sup> running by the distance chair,  
The gentlemen cried<sup>41</sup> out 'Scew Ball never fear,  
Altho' in this country thou wast<sup>42</sup> ne'er seen before,  
Thou hast beaten Maid Sportly and broke Sir Ralph Gore.'

One broadside (Sergent) records Gore's grey mare as "Miss Sprightly," but once again struggles with the excision of the Skewball/rider conversation in the final verses:

But as they were in the midst of their sport,  
[?] Squire Mervin began this discourse;  
Saying, 'O loving rider, come tell unto *me*,

How far is Miss Sprightly now distant from *thee*?  
 Says he, ‘my dear master, *you* bear a great stile,  
 The grey mare’s behind *me* a full English mile,  
 If the saddle remains, I’ll warrant you here,  
*You* ne’er shall be beat on the plains of Kildare.’

But as they were running by the distance chair,  
 The gentlemen cry’d out, ‘Skew Ball never fear;  
 Altho’ in this country thou ne’er was before,  
 Thou’s beaten Miss Sprightly, and broke Sir Ralph Gore.’

“Miss Sprightly” appears in *SB* on just one other occasion, this time in an oral version collected in New York in the mid-nineteenth century. In common with other oral versions, horse and jockey speak in the final verses. Interestingly, the shouts of the gentlemen in the broadsides have now been inserted into the mouth of Skewball himself, thus further strengthening the speaking horse motif present across all oral versions:

‘Although *I* was never in this country before  
 I’ve beat Miss Sprightly and broke sorrow four [Sir Ralph Gore].’  
 (Thomson, ed. 1958:82–84)

Three versions (Croschaw, Hoggett and Harding B25 (1784)) list the opponent as “Miss Sportsly” and again attempt to circumvent the chronological difficulty posed by the original revision of these verses, primarily by the insertion of “we” and “us” into verse 10. Again, it is “the gentlemen” who speak after the race, and not our hero:

And as they were just in the midst of their sport,  
 Squire Mirvin to his rider begun this discourse,  
 ‘O loving kind rider come tell unto *me*,  
 How far is Miss Sportsly this moment from *thee*?’

‘O loving kind master *you* bear a great style,  
 The grey mare is behind *us* a full English mile,  
 If the saddle maintains *us*<sup>43</sup> I warrant you there,  
*We* ne’er shall be beat on the plains of Kildare.’

And as they were running<sup>44</sup> past the distance chair,  
 The gentlemen cry’d<sup>45</sup> ‘Skewball never fear;  
 Although<sup>46</sup> in this country thou wast ne’er seen before,  
 Thou by beating Miss Sportsly has broke Sir Ralph Gore.’

Most noteworthy of all the English broadsides is the Stephenson printing which, while showing some clear signs of revision, nonetheless retains

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Skewball's mid-race conversation with his rider:

And when they were just in the middle of their course,  
Skewball to his rider began this discourse,  
'Oh loving kind rider pray tell unto *me*,  
How far is Miss Portsley this moment from *thee*?'

Verse 10 presents an unclear dialogue, one that would appear to be between rider and Mervin as in the Eyres and Harkness printings:

'Oh loving kind master *you* bear a great style,  
The gray mare's behind *me* a large English mile,  
'Then stick close to *thy* saddle my boy never fear,  
*Thou* ne'er shall be beat by this charming gray mare.'

The final two lines above provide a further echo of the folkloric origins of *SB*; similar lyrics appear in two oral versions collected in America, both of which display common ancestry with earlier oral versions of the ballad. In both, it is Skewball who speaks to his jockey:

'Stick close to your saddle, my boy, never fear,  
We ne'er shall be beat by the gallant Gray Mare.' (Benton 1826:3)

'Stick tight to your saddle my boy never [fear]  
For you ne'er shall be beat on the plains of ki[ldeer].' (Thomson, ed. 1958:84)

The final verse of Stephenson shows similar content to all versions previously discussed:

And when they were running by the distance chair,  
All the gentlemen called, 'Skewball .....[?] fear,  
Although in this country you ne'er run before,  
By beating Miss Portsley you've broke Sir Ralph Goer.'

It is worth noting that the pre-race remarks between Mervin and Skewball (verse 3) are the only remnants of the gelding's propensity to speak that have survived in the English broadsides. Perhaps an intimate understanding between master and animal was one thing; however, a horse engaging in conversation with his rider mid-race, and subsequently calling for a toast to his defeated opponent and drinking to her health was clearly a step too far for the ballad printers. An interesting insight into early nineteenth-century attitudes—and by extension, the cultural restrictions encountered by ballad printers in their relentless pursuit of market share—can be found in a letter from one C.H. Chester to the periodical *The Sporting Magazine* (Vol. 8, January 1834:258). Here, the contributor recounts "about



thirty-five years ago singing this song at Hambleton after a racing dinner.” Chester includes a version of the ballad with only seven verses—pointedly omitting verse 3, along with verses 5, 6 and 7—thus, making no mention whatsoever of the speaking horse. He goes on to describe the mid-race conversation between the jockey and Mervin as “the ludicrous circumstances detailed at the three mile post, which it must be admitted the author had largely availed himself of poetical licence in relating.” If such an event seemed somewhat incredible (albeit, justifiably so) to the contributor, one can only imagine what such a learned gentleman would have thought of a horse that could not only speak, but could also accurately predict a race result, advise his owner on the amount to bet, encourage his jockey and advise him to “stick close to the saddle,” ask his jockey mid-race as to where his opponent currently was, win the race with some ease and finally, call for a toast to his defeated opponent. Indeed, what had long been popular around the Irish fireside was clearly no longer best-suited to the more genteel surroundings of a nineteenth-century English post-race gathering.

Interestingly, in a London publication from 1823 (*The London Magazine*, Vol. 8, 1823:72), a fragmentary version of the ballad in which Skewball speaks to his rider is included in the short story, “The Yorkshire Alehouse.” Unlike the Stephenson printing, the verse which follows has not been edited, which would strongly suggest that printed versions of the ballad containing Skewball’s various conversations with his rider had successfully avoided revision having travelled intact to England. The dating of this verse to 1823 further shows that such versions were still in circulation for some considerable time after the narrative was initially edited in the earliest broadsides. Unlike Mr. Chester, the author of this particular short story—“Nalla”—was clearly not squeamish about employing either folklore or poetic licence, as we are informed that Skewball “was begotten by Belzebub, and could speak like a Christian.” The speaker proceeds to quote the following two verses:

And when that they came to the middle of the course,  
Cubal to his rider began to discourse;  
Saying, ‘Come, pretty rider, pray tell unto me  
How far in the distance Miss Sportly may be.’

The rider look’d back, and replied with a smile,  
‘I think she’s about the space of half a mile.’  
‘So—stick to your saddle, my boy, never fear;  
You’ll never be beat by the gallant grey mare.’

The various excisions and interpolations by the broadside printers all contribute towards the dilution of the ballad’s folkloric origins, thus reducing the speaking horse motif to fulfilling a role subordinate to

the victory of the underdog of the race. The opposite can be observed in the oral versions where the speaking horse motif is ubiquitous to the narrative progression, and proves to be of equal—if not greater—importance than Skewball's unexpected broadside triumph. Due to the folkloric, mythological origins of the oral versions, the audience seems to instinctively know that Skewball will win, and could be forgiven for expecting nothing less than a stunning victory from a horse of such supernatural prowess. Not so with the broadsides, in which the context of Skewball's victory as underdog is all-pervasive, and is continually accentuated by numerous literary devices and suspense-building mechanisms, more often than not with scant regard to the overall chronological continuity of the ballad itself. When all of the above textual re-workings are considered, it is difficult to dismiss them as only casual editorial oversights. Rather, they are quite deliberate manipulations undertaken in order to satisfy the cultural expectations of a niche audience; they thus provide a useful insight into the changing sensibilities of the increasingly educated and socially advanced classes of nineteenth-century English society.

### Conclusions

I have established that the ballad *SB* (Laws: Q22 / Roud: 456) is based on a two-horse match held on The Curragh of Kildare on March 30, 1752, between a previously unknown skewbald gelding (Skewball, b. 1741) and a grey mare of considerable repute (Grey Mare, b. 1745), owned by Arthur Mervin and Sir Ralph Gore, respectively. While *SB* enjoyed broad popular appeal as a nineteenth-century English broadside ballad, it has a well-established oral tradition in Ireland, stretching back into the mid-eighteenth century and long outliving the late nineteenth-century decline in broadside ballad publishing. Oral versions have been documented as recently as 1979. That *SB* is of Irish origin, and had a previous oral incarnation which circulated for a considerable length of time before its appearance as a nineteenth-century English broadside, is supported by a version dated to 1764, uncovered by the author as part of ongoing study of the "Filgates of Lisrenny Papers" (Louth County Council Archive Collection).

I have focused on some of the practical difficulties encountered by broadside publishers as they sought to appropriate folksongs from the traditional canon and reproduce them in broadside ballad format. As a form of contemporary literature, the broadside was representative of nineteenth-century society, and consequently, sought to reflect the transition from the traditional folklore setting to a more modern, sophisticated and, above

all, literate era. As well as reflecting these social and educational advances, broadside publishers were also compelled in no small part by economic necessity, and consequently regularly manipulated the narrative of existing folksongs to suit the requirements of their target sales market. In the case of *SB*, the transition from folksong to broadside is inhibited by the seeming inability of the broadside publishers to successfully oversee the excision of Skewball's gift of speech, a folklore motif ubiquitous throughout all oral versions. A comparative analysis of all extant broadside printings has shown that several attempts were made at excising this oral narrative feature, but that all fail to do so without significantly compromising the ballad's narrative chronology. It has been shown that these revisions—combined with the four additional verses interpolated by broadside publishers into the earliest documented oral version of *SB*—were deliberately undertaken with a view towards obscuring the mythological significance of the ballad's folkloric narrative. In doing so, they present the ballad simply as an historical account detailing the unexpected—albeit, heroic—triumph of a sporting underdog.

### Appendix 1:

#### (i) Filgate MS (Louth County Council Archive Collection)

Come all you brave gallants and listen to all,  
And I will sing you the praise of Noble Scuball,  
Who is lately come oover[?] as I understand,  
By brave Arthur Marvin the peer of the land.

And of his brave actions you heard of before,  
How he was challeng'd by one Sir Ralph Gore.  
Five hundred guineas on the course of Kildare,  
To run with the sporting gallant Grey Mare.

When Scuball he heard of the wager being laid,  
He said to his master 'Be not afraid.  
Five hundred guineas you may lay on the course,  
And I will cover your castle with red matches of gold.'

Brave Arthur Marvin, smiling did say:  
'Get ready, brave nobles, for tomorrow is the day.  
Get ready your horses and saddles prepare,  
For we we[?] must away to the Curroh of Kildare.'

When Scuball he came to the middle of the course,  
He and his rider began to discourse.  
'Come my brave rider and tell unto me,  
How fare[?] is my disting[distance?] post is from me.'

The rider look'd back and this he did say:  
'You may go very easy for we will win the day.'  
Such leaping and josling the[they?] had for a while,  
The more she stood back law full[?] a mile.

When Scuball came to the winning post,  
He bid all his nobles for to drink a toast.  
'Now since you laid all your purses on the grey mare,  
Now she is bet and the sorrow ma care[Sir Ralph Gore?]

Francis Lucas Lee  
Tullymeela, March the 9<sup>th</sup> 1764 four[?]  
Fryday evening within Six minutes of Six o'clock.<sup>47</sup>

(ii) McCall MS (National Library of Ireland)

*Skew Ball: A Sporting Song*

I'll sing of the match that with Skewball I made,  
And of all the wages that on him was laid;  
To run with Miss Grizzle that bonny grey mare,  
For five hundred pounds on the Plains of Kildare.

Bold Skewball set off with a terrible pace,  
And bonny Miss Grizzle kept well in the race,  
So when that they had come to the middle of the course,  
Skewball and his rider began to discourse.

Saying: 'Skewball you are going at a wonderful style,  
Miss Grizzle is distanced an English half-mile.  
And if you run this round as you have run before,  
Neither Nimrod nor Tiger could ever do more.'

But when that they came unto the winning post  
Skewball bid his rider to drink just one toast,  
'Here's a health to Miss Grizzle, that bonny grey mare,  
That emptied their purses on the plains of Kildare.'

Supplied from memory by Mr. John McCall. The song is fragmentary.<sup>48</sup>

(iii) Peter Buchan MS (British Library: MS. Add 29408 – 29409)

*Miss Grissel, the famous Gray Mare*

Come nobles and gentlemen all,<sup>49</sup>  
I'll tell you a story concerning Skewball.  
How he was brought over ye may understand,  
By Arthur O'Mearlin the pearl of the land.

The glorious action ye've oft heard before,  
The time he was challeng'd by the young sherrif Moir,  
To ride with Miss Grissel the famous grey mare,  
For nine thousand pounds on the plains o' Kildare.

How the day was appointed the cattle brought forth,  
And all the whole nobles both east, south and north,  
Came there a-viewing and on them to stare,  
And laid all their purses on the famous grey mare.

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The wager being laid and the money laid down,  
Skewball to his rider began to discourse:  
‘These nine thousand pounds by me ye shall hold,  
And your castle well covered with silver and gold.’

Lord Melville he paid down his money in count,  
And ordered the jockies that moment to mount,  
And all the spectators for to clear the way,  
For now is the moment no longer delay.

The orders then given, they quickly did fly,  
Skewball like an arrow Miss Grissel pass’d by,  
And had you but seen him as he turn’d them around,  
You scarce would have thought that one foot touched the ground.

But as they were riding in the midst of the course,  
Skewball to his rider began to discourse.  
Says, ‘Without hesitation could you tell to me,  
How far before Miss Grissel we be.’

The rider then turned and gave a smile,  
Said, ‘I think we’re before her, about full ten mile.’  
‘Keep close to your saddle boy ye need not fear  
That e’er ye’ll be beat by the famous grey mare.’

‘If ye turn this way as ye’ve done before,  
No chieftain or hero could ever do more.’<sup>50</sup>

### (iv) Eddie Butcher Version (Hugh Shields’s Field Recordings)

Come all you noble gentlemen, I pray listen all,  
To I sing the praises of noble Skewball;  
He is lately come over as we understand,  
He’s the great heart of marble and the pearl of the land.

His valours and actions we have heard of before,  
But now he is challenged by young Mrs. Gore,  
For to run with Miss Grizzel, the handsome grey mare,  
For ten thousand guineas on the plains of Kildare.

‘Oh Sir Arthur’ in his stable to his master did say,  
‘Noble master, dear master, be you not afraid,  
For if it’s some thousands upon your side hold,  
I will rig in your castle to the topmast in gold.’

The gentlemen from England from East, North and South,  
They all came there the cattle to view  
And in viewing the cattle just as they came there  
Sure they all bet their money upon the grey mare.

The money was paid down in good ready count  
 When the riders got orders that moment to mount,  
 When the word of spectator was to clear the way,  
 For the hour is approaching, no longer can stay.

By the word of command then away they did fly,  
 Skewball like an arrow the grey mare passed by  
 And if you had a–been there to have seen them going around  
 You'd have thought in your heart their feet ne'er touched the ground.

When that they came to the middle of the course  
 Skewball to the rider began to discourse;  
 'Noble rider, dear rider can you tell to me,  
 How far is the grey mare this moment from me?'

Says the rider to Skewball, 'You ran in great style,  
 For the grey mare's behind you one English half–mile  
 And if you stand your running I vow and I'll swear  
 That you ne'er will be beat by their Monaghan grey mare.'

Oh, when that they came to the last winning post,  
 Skewball to the rider will drink a long toast;  
 Drink a health to Miss Grizzel, the handsome grey mare,  
 For she emptied their purses on the plains of Kildare. (Shields  
 1988:16–7)

## Appendix 2:

### Broadside Printings

Bathcelar (London)	[Madden Coll.: London Printers 1, # 630]
Birt (London)	[Bodleian Library: Firth c. 19(78)]
Croshaw (York)	[Bodleian Library: B29 24/2]
Eyres (Warrington)	[Bodleian Library: Gale doc. no. CW3316680623]
Ford (Chesterfield)	[Madden Coll.: Country Printers 5, # 25]
Forth (Pocklington)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (4021)]
Harkness (Preston)	[Bodleian Library: Firth c. 26(51)]
Harkness (Preston)	[Madden Coll.: Country Printers 1, # 721]
Hoggett (Durham)	[Madden Coll.: Country Printers 1, # 613]
Howard & Evans (London)	[Madden Collection: Slip Songs O–Y, #1682]
Jackson (Birmingham)	[Bodleian Library: Johnson Ballads 1406]
Jennings (London)	[Madden Coll.: London Printers 1, # 479]
Mayne (Belfast)	[Irish Traditional Music Archive, Dublin]
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Johnson Ballads 999]

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Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (73)]
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (3533)]
Pitts (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B15 (289b)]
Pitts (London)	[Madden Coll.: London Printers 1, # 725]
Ryle (London)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B15 (289a)]
Sergent (Preston)	[Bodleian Library: Gale doc. no. CB3330619539]
Stephenson (Gateshead)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B25 (1785)]
<i>The Vocal Library</i>	[London, 1818]
[Unknown Publisher]	[Bodleian Library: Harding B6 (54)]
[Unknown Publisher]	[Bodleian Library: Harding B25 (1784)]
[Unknown Publisher]	[Bodleian Library: Harding B15 (290)]
Walker (Durham)	[Madden Coll.: Country Printers 1, # 676]
Wright (Birmingham)	[Bodleian Library: Harding B28 (274)]

## MS Versions

Filgate MS

*PP00001/002/004/001: Filgates of Lisrenny Papers* (Louth County Council Archive Collection, Dundalk).

Peter Buchan MS

*MS 29,408, 29,409: Collection of ancient Scottish and English ballads, formed by Peter Buchan, corresponding member of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and used by him as the foundation of his "Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of Scotland, hitherto unpublished"* (British Library, London).

P.J. McCall MS

*Collection of Ballad Sheets and Cuttings of Songs made by PJ McCall, laid down in 13 volumes* (National Library of Ireland, Dublin).



## Notes

1. Laws: Q22 / Roud: 456. The ballad is also known variously as, “Scewball,” “Scew Ball,” “Screw Ball,” “Skewball,” “Skew Ball,” “Skyball,” “Scuball,” “Sku–ball,” etc.
2. For the purposes of the current research, the term “broadside” refers to the practice of printing ballads on single sheets of paper so as to enable their cheap and efficient dissemination over a broad geographical area. For a wider discussion on the vagaries of the word, see Earnest, R. and Earnest, C. 2005:11–14.
3. See also, General Advertiser, April 11, 1752; London Evening Post, April 9–11, 1752; Pue’s Occurrences, April 27, 1752.
4. See, for example, Alan Lomax, *Prison Songs: Historical Recordings from the Parchman Farm 1947–48. Volume 2: Don’tcha Hear Poor Mother Calling?* (Rounder: Burlington, MA, 2007).
5. African–American versions, while clearly sharing common origins with the Irish and English versions under discussion, vary significantly in terms of narrative and characters involved.
6. Sir Ralph Gore is also referenced as, “Sir Francis Gore” (Mayne broadside printing, Belfast), “Sherrif Moir” (Peter Buchan MS) and “young Mrs. Gore” (Eddie Butcher recordings: Shields 1988:16–7; Shields 2011:58–9). Arthur Marvin is referenced variously in English broadsides as, “Arthur Irmin / Irvine / Irving / Irwin / Iwrin / Merlin / Merwin / Mirvin / Morvin; Also “Arthur O’Mearlin” (Peter Buchan MS) “Arthur Marvin” (MS Filgate), “Arthur Marvel (Benton 1826:3–4), “Arthur Melvin (Mayne broadside printing, Belfast), “Artumaro” (Flanders 1939:172–4) and “Spurmurthy” (Thomson, ed. 1958:82–4). As well as the pair’s prominence among the racing fraternity, Gore was also a major Fermanagh landowner of Cromwellian planter background, a fact which may well have contributed to the ballad’s broad appeal in Ireland, seeing as his mare was defeated so heavily by an unknown horse of inferior pedigree.
7. See Mayne broadside printing, Belfast; Also referenced as, “Miss Greazle” (Eddie Butcher recording – Shields 2011:58–9), “Miss Grissel” (Peter Buchan MS; Flanders 1939:172–4) and “Miss Grizzel” (Eddie Butcher recording – Shields 1988:16–7).
8. Also referenced variously in English broadsides as, “Skew Ball,” “Scewball” and “Scew Ball.” Also, “Scuball” (Benton 1826:3–4; Thomson, ed. 1958:82–4), Sku–ball (Flanders 1939:172–4) and “Skyball” (Mayne broadside printing, Belfast).
9. See, for example: Ó Duilearga 1935:153; Ó hÓgáin 1977–79:199–243; Ó hÓgáin 2006:284; O’Keefe 1859:69.
10. Ewan McColl’s 1964 series of recorded interviews with Irish traditional singer Seosamh Ó hÉanaigh (1919–1984) provides several illustrative examples of this cultural crossover: Ó hÉanaigh–“Because, as I told you before, before they ask you to sing—they never ask you at home to sing a song, they say ‘say a song’—and you tell the story first and then you sing the song. But without a story, the song is useless.” (Reproduced at <http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/heaney.htm#intro> )
11. From Modern Irish: “seanchaí, m. (gs. ~, pl. –aithe). 1. Lit: Custodian of tradition, historian. 2. Reciter of ancient lore; traditional story–teller.” (Ó Dónaill, ed. 1977:1076). See also Old Irish: “senchaid. m. Later also senchaide.... a reciter of lore; a historian.” (Quinn, ed. 1990:536)
12. In the Peter Buchan MS version, Skewball instructs his rider, and not his master, with the lines: “The wager being laid and the money laid down, / Skewball to his rider began to discourse”, the latter line appearing later in verse 7—as in other oral versions—when Skewball converses with his rider. The reader will note that these lines are considerably at odds with the established rhyming pattern of the ballad, and would appear to be a revision for the sake of narrative continuity, i.e., to ensure that Skewball speaks only to his rider throughout. This conversation is absent in the truncated P.J. McCall MS version.

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13. The author has focused solely on oral versions collected in Ireland and England, or on American versions which are clearly of direct descent from same. African–American oral versions, while strongly retaining the presence of a speaking horse in the narrative, are not included as part of the research undertaken for this paper.

14. Both Flanders (1939:173) and Thompson (ed.,1958:83) cite the 1822 edition of *VL* as the earliest printed source for *SB*, quoting Scarborough (1925:62).

15. ‘Sale of Farm Stock’ – PP00001/002/004/001: Filgates of Lisrenny Papers, Louth Co. Council Archive Collection.

16. It will be noted that this change in opponent, along with the presence of a speaking horse, are also evident in the Mayne (Belfast) broadside printing, which would appear to be the source for the Eddie Butcher versions. The Mayne printing is by far the most extensive, and manages to successfully combine the various nuances and vagaries of both broadside and oral versions, providing an 11–verse epic in which Skewball converses no less than five times.

17. *A collection of traditional and other songs and ballads made by John Mc Call, mid–19th c., including many from the Carlow–Wexford area.* (MS 13,849, National Library of Ireland):66.

18. *Collection of Ballad Sheets and Cuttings of Songs made by PJ McCall, laid down in 13 volumes* (National Library of Ireland), Vol. VI:17; Vol. VI:122.

19. See note 12.

20. Andy Irvine’s seminal 1976 recording of the ballad as “The Plains of Kildare”, draws heavily on the Eddie Butcher version (e.g., “young Mrs. Gore”, “Miss Griesel”, “10,000 gold guineas”, the ubiquitous speaking horse who imbibes, etc), as well as the 1962 recording by A.L. Llyod (e.g., “Well, past the winning post, bold Skewball won so handy / And horse and rider both called for sherry wine and brandy”). A nod is also duly given in the direction of Skewball’s travels across the Atlantic, when Irvine calls the horse by his African–American slave sobriquet of “Stewball”, and in doing so, completes the perfect circle of the gelding’s epic journey back to Ireland.

21. Mayne printed at 34 High Street from 1852, and subsequently at 7 ½ High Street from 1854–67 (Moulden 2006:979). Unfortunately, a premises number is not printed with the address on the broadside, so a more specific date for the printing cannot be given beyond this broad timeframe.

22. Exceptions are the Wright printing (Birmingham) which omits verse 5, and an anonymous, undated printing, Bodleian Library: Harding B 6 (54), which shows only eight verses, four of which contain only two lines.

23. Bodleian Library: Harding B25 (1784). Anonymous, undated printing.

24. The author concedes that other broadside printings may well have been published and in circulation before that of *VL*. However, due to the inherent difficulties involved in dating certain broadside material, it has been decided to construct the comparative analysis on a version to which a definitive date can be readily assigned.

25. See note 22.

26. Cox (1857:116) recounts that, “the praises of Skewball, or the gallant Skyball as he was called, have been heard sung on Irish Race–courses within the last twenty years”, a fact which would further illustrate the economic expediency—and, of course, the resultant marketing acumen – displayed by both broadside publishers and peddlers in their pursuit of market share. Performance of *SB* on English racecourses during this period is also documented. (See *The Sporting Magazine*, Vol. 8, January 1834:258).

27. Wright reads, “Miss Sportley.”
28. Bodleian Library: Harding B11 (73) and Harding B15 (289b).
29. Italics have been added to the following verses as appropriate.
30. Howard & Evans reads, “this.”
31. Birt and Walker read, “How far is Miss Sportly from catching of thee?”
32. Birt and Walker omit, “the.”
33. Jennings reads, “me.”
34. Verse 11 of VL is reproduced above. Other “Miss Sportly” versions show very minor variations in spelling, but otherwise agree fully with the wording of VL.
35. Jackson reads, “beor.”
36. Jackson reads, “grew.”
37. Jackson reads, “you.”
38. Jackson reads, “yuo.”
39. Ford reads, “will”
40. Jackson reads, “wrs.”
41. Eyers, Ford and Jackson read, “cry’d.”
42. Forth reads, “wert”; Jackson reads, “want.”
43. Hoggett reads, “as.”
44. Hoggett reads, “coming.”
45. Hoggett reads, “cri’d.”
46. Hoggett reads, “Altho.”
47. Punctuation and capital letters have been amended from the original MS as appropriate.
48. McCall, P.J., *ibid.* Vol. VI:122. Punctuation and capital letters have been amended from the original MS as appropriate.
49. Revised in MS to, “and listen all.”
50. Punctuation and capital letters have been amended from the original MS as appropriate.

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