

Life and Love and ‘Lasca’

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Very few people these days have heard of, let alone read, the heroic ballad ‘Lasca’ by Frank Desprez, yet less than a century ago it was one of the most popular poems in the English-speaking world. In 1919 an American newspaper could claim that ‘there is scarcely an American who has not read the poem, recited it, or committed it to memory’.¹ In 1953 Australian writer Alan Marshall, recalling the popular elocutionists of his childhood, declared:

there was one poem [reciters] had to include in their repertoire if they did not wish to be considered elocutionally immature.

This masterpiece, called ‘Lasca’, invariably brought an encore (most important for the sake of prestige), and, when well delivered, sometimes made audiences thump their boots upon the floor—a sign of great enthusiasm.²

The poem was frequently included in elocution manuals and books of standard recitations. It was also recorded twice on Edison cylinders—in 1905 and 1909—by the American stage and screen actor Edgar L. Davenport; recordings which are now freely available on the University of California, Santa Barbara’s *Cylinder Preservation and Digitization Project* website.³ The time limitations of cylinder recordings—initially two (1905)

¹ *Newark Advocate* (Ohio), 5 December 1919, n.p., reproduced in ‘Classic Cowboy Poetry: ‘Lasca,’ by Frank Desprez’, *Western and Cowboy Poetry Music & More at the Bar-D Ranch*, <http://www.cowboypoetry.com/lasca.htm#Lasca>, accessed 14 September 2010.

² Alan Marshall, ‘Boo! to the Villain’, *Argus Week-End Magazine*, 6 March 1953, p. 15.

³ Three recordings are available, but that from 1913 is a reissue of the 1909 version. Donald C. Davidson Library, University of California, Santa Barbara, *Cylinder Preservation and Digitization Project*:

and later four minutes (1909)—mean that the Davenport recordings are more truncated than printed versions of the poem, themselves usually shorter than the original text by many lines. But, because it soon became such a party piece for reciters and early entered an oral tradition, 'Lasca' exists in many versions.

This article gives an account of the poem's history and its textual transformations—but also its appropriations, notably within the genre of 'cowboy poetry', which has some parallels with the Australian bush ballad. For, as Alan Marshall's recollection shows, 'Lasca' was a stand-out favourite in this country, even surviving quite late as a de facto 'bush recitation'. Furthermore, Desprez's nostalgic evocation of 'Texas, down by the Rio Grande' may have influenced one of the most famous Australian ballads of them all.

Complete texts of 'Lasca' are hard to come by. The only more or less scholarly version I have been able to locate appears at the end of a sixty-year-old article in the Texan literary journal *Southwest Review*. Its author was Mabel Major, whose research into the life of 'Lasca's' creator established most of what is now known about Frank Desprez. Her text of the poem is, however, based on its second authorised appearance, in Desprez's little collection *Curtain Raisers for Amateurs and Others* from 1886. So, before discussing its variations and influence, here is the original text of 'Lasca', including Desprez's footnotes, transcribed from its first publication in November 1882.⁴

It's all very well to write reviews,
 And carry umbrellas, and keep dry shoes,
 And say what every one's saying here,
 And wear what every one else must wear;
 But to-night I'm sick of the whole affair,
 I want free life and I want fresh air;
 And I sigh for the canter after the cattle,
 The crack of the whips like shots in a battle,
 The melley of horns and hoofs and heads
 That wars and wrangles and scatters and spreads;

<http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/search.php?queryType=%40attr+1%3D1016+&query=lasca>

⁴ Frank Desprez, 'Lasca', *London Society* 42.251 (1882), pp. 484-86.

The green beneath, and the blue above;
And dash and danger, and life and love.

And Lasca!

Lasca used to ride

On a mouse-gray mustang close to my side,
With blue *serapé*⁵ and bright-belled spur;
I laughed with joy as I looked at her!
Little knew she of books or of creeds;
An *Ave Maria* sufficed her needs;
Little she cared, save to be by my side,
To ride with me, and ever to ride,
From San Saba's shore to Lavaca's tide.
She was as bold as the billows that beat,
She was as wild as the breezes that blow;
From her little head to her little feet
She was swayed in her suppleness to and fro
By each gust of passion; a sapling pine,
That grows on the edge of a Kansas bluff,
And wars with the wind when the weather is rough,
Is like this Lasca, this love of mine.
She would hunger that I might eat,
Would take the bitter and leave me the sweet;
But once, when I made her jealous for fun,
At something I'd whispered, or looked, or done,
One Sunday, in San Antonio,
To a glorious girl on the Alamo,⁶
She drew from her garter a dear little dagger,
And—sting of a wasp!—it made me stagger!
An inch to the left, or an inch to the right,
And I shouldn't be maundering here to-night;
But she sobbed, and, sobbing, so swiftly bound
Her torn *reboso*⁷ about the wound,
That I quite forgave her. Scratches don't count
In Texas, down by the Rio Grande.

Her eye was brown—a deep, deep brown;
Her hair was darker than her eye;

⁵ Cloak. (Desprez's note.)

⁶ The principal square in the city of San Antonio. (Desprez's note)

⁷ Headdress. (Desprez's note.)

And something in her smile and frown,
Curled crimson lip and instep high,
Showed that there ran in each blue vein,
Mixed with the milder Aztec strain,
The vigorous vintage of Old Spain.
She was alive in every limb
With feeling, to the finger-tips;
And when the sun is like a fire,
And sky one shining soft sapphire,
One does not drink in little sips.

Why did I leave the fresh and the free,
That suited her and suited me?
Listen awhile, and you will see;
But this be sure—in earth or air,
God and God's laws are everywhere,
And Nemesis comes with a foot as fleet
On the Texas trail as in Regent Street.

* * * *

The air was heavy, the night was hot,
I sat by her side, and forgot—forgot:
Forgot the herd that were taking their rest,
Forgot that the air was close opprest,
That the Texas Norther comes sudden and soon,
In the dead of night or the blaze of noon;
That once let the herd at its breath take fright,
That nothing on earth can stop their flight;
And woe to the rider, and woe to the steed,
Who falls in front of their mad stampede!

* * * *

Was that thunder? No, by the Lord!
I spring to my saddle without a word.
One foot on mine, and she clung behind.
Away! on a hot chase down the wind!
But never was fox-hunt half so hard,
And never was steed so little spared,
For we rode for our lives. You shall hear how we fared

In Texas, down by the Rio Grande.

The mustang flew, and we urged him on:
 There was one chance left, and you have but one:
 Halt, jump to the ground, and shoot your horse;
 Crouch under his carcass, and take your chance;
 And if the steers in their frantic course
 Don't batter you both to pieces at once,
 You may thank your star; if not, good bye
 To the quickening kiss and the long-drawn sigh,
 And the open air and the open sky,

In Texas, down by the Rio Grande!

The cattle gained on us, and, just as I felt
 For my old six-shooter behind in my belt,
 Down came the mustang, and down came we,
 Clinging together, and—what was the rest?
 A body that spread itself on my breast,
 Two arms that shielded my dizzy head,
 Two lips that hard on my lips were prest;
 Then came thunder in my ears,
 As over us surged the sea of steers,
 Blows that beat blood into my eyes,
 And when I could rise,
 Lasca was dead!

* * * *

I gouged out a grave a few feet deep,
 And there in Earth's arms I laid her to sleep;
 And there she is lying, and no one knows,
 And the summer shines and the winter snows;
 For many a day the flowers have spread
 A pall of petals over her head;
 And the little gray hawk hangs aloft in the air,
 And the sly *coyote*⁸ trots here and there,
 And the black snake glides and glitters and slides
 Into a rift in a cotton-wood tree;
 And the buzzard sails on,

⁸ Wolf. (Desprez's note.)

And comes and is gone,
 Stately and still, like a ship at sea;
 And I wonder why I do not care
 For things that are like the things that were.
 Does half my heart lie buried there
 In Texas, down by the Rio Grande?

'Lasca' made its thrilling debut in *London Society*, subtitled *An Illustrated Magazine of Light and Amusing Literature for the Hours of Relaxation*. As literary ballads were part of a stock in trade of popular verse which most newspapers carried,⁹ there's no reason why a relaxed middle-class Londoner shouldn't have been lightly amused by this harrowing tale of miscegenation and stampeding cattle set in remote Texas.

Its author, Frank Desprez (1853-1916), was a twenty-nine year-old Bristol-born former apprentice engraver who, from his late teens, spent three years working on a Texan ranch. Following his return to England in 1875, Desprez gradually established himself in the theatre scene, notably as the librettist of the musical comedy *Tita in Thibet* (1879), becoming close friends with, and secretary to, the impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte. In these capacities Desprez went on to script humorous one-act curtain-raisers for the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan, later co-writing the lyrics to *The Nautch Girl, or, The Rajah of Chutneypore* (1891), with music by Edward Solomon, which played at the Savoy Theatre during the interregnum following Gilbert's famous 'carpet quarrel' with Carte and Sullivan. From 1884 he was a contributor to the major theatrical journal, *The Era*, going on to become its editor in 1893, where he stayed until ill health forced him to retire in 1913. He died in 1916.¹⁰

Four years before 'Lasca', Desprez had drawn upon his Texas experiences in one of his curtain-raisers. *After All!*, with four songs by Alfred Cellier, was first staged in 1878 as a companion piece to early performances of *HMS Pinafore*. Its simple plot involves a character called Selworthy who has lately returned to London to search for his long-lost

⁹ See J.S. Bratton, *The Victorian Popular Ballad* (London: Macmillan, 1975).

¹⁰ Mabel Major, 'The Man Who Wrote 'Lasca'', *Southwest Review* 36 (1951), pp. 298-304. Also Kurt Gänzl, 'Desprez, Frank', *The Encyclopedia of Musical Theatre: A-K* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 353. Desprez may have briefly returned to the US, as the *Bar-D Ranch* page on 'Lasca' notes: 'A search of immigration records finds a 24-year old Frank Desprez, artist, leaving Cornwall in 1877, headed to New York.'

sweetheart after ten years acquiring a fortune in the New World. As he tells his friend Pennyfather:

Sel. You know I left England intending to invest that legacy of mine in cattle-farming in America.

Pen. And did you do so? (*Sitting R. of table.*)

Sel. (*with assumed indifference*). Yes. Went into partnership with a Western man; I found the capital, he the experience.

Pen. And how did you get on?

Sel. Oh, the old story. In six months *he* had the capital and *I* had the experience.

Pen. Dear me! What did you do next?

Sel. Bought a toothbrush and a revolver, and went down to Texas.

Pen. What did you do there?

Sel. The first thing I did was to shoot a sheriff. People were so delighted with my spirit of enterprise, that they offered me his berth.

Pen. Do [*sic*] you take it?

Sel. No. Played euchre same night with a silver-miner, my toothbrush against his boots; won his boots. Played him toothbrush and boots against his shirt; won that. Played him toothbrush, boots, and shirt against his braces; won again. Played toothbrush, boots, shirt and braces against his –

Pen. (*looking round*). S-s-s-h!

Sel. Well, I won the entire outfit.

Pen. What did you do then?

Sel. Crossed over the Rio Grande into Mexico. They were getting up a Revolution there, and, as I had two shirts, they made me Governor.

Pen. Did you govern long?

Sel. No. I collected the revenues as quickly as possible, and abdicated one night down the river in a canoe; invested in sheep-farming, made money, took ship for England, and—here I am!

The action hinges on Selworthy's slowly dawning awareness that, not only has Pennyfather succeeded in marrying the sweetheart, but she's blossomed into a fat shrew. Just as the above dialogue parodies some already familiar

images of the Wild West, Selworthy's memories of his sweetheart's Lasca-like eyes and oddly foreign tones are made fun of:

Sel. Her whole manner was so gentle, so timid, and retiring;
shrinking, you know, from observation, like –

Pen. Like a snail.

Sel. And then her eyes, so sweet and liquid in expression...
(*Sighs.*)

Pen. It was her eyes that hooked you, evidently.

Sel. So dark and soft—like a gazelle's, you know.

Pen. No, I don't. Never knew a gazelle.

Sel. And then her voice, so sweet and melodious, and with that delicate *timbre* that you so seldom find in our Saxon races...
(*Overcome.*) O, Pennyfather—that girl!¹¹

Though 'Lasca' reveals a more passionate streak, Desprez's temperament seems to have leaned towards comedy such as this rather than more serious modes. Nevertheless, while his stage works are now largely forgotten, in his romantic Texas ballad he left a remarkable legacy—especially in the land that inspired it.

In 1963 Mabel Major could describe 'Lasca' as 'the best known Texas poem'.¹² Hal Cannon, founding director of the Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, claims that the poem appeared in the Montana *Stock Growers' Journal* in 1888 and that it subsequently 'enjoyed wide distribution in American society, not only around the campfire but in Victorian parlors and chautauqua programs'.¹³ Its appearance in the *Stock Growers' Journal* probably marks its rapid entry, through recitation, into American popular culture. According to Major's sources, 'Lasca' was already in oral circulation by the mid 1880s:

¹¹ Desprez, libretto of *After All!*, n.p., available as a PDF from *The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive: After All!*:

http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/companions/after_all/index.html

¹² Major stated this in the abstract of a conference paper to the South Central Modern Languages Association in 1963 titled 'From Ghent to Texas', of which only the abstract survives. See 'Abstracts of Papers: American Literature', *The South-Central Bulletin* 23.1 (1963), p. 10.

¹³ Hal Cannon, 'Cowboy Poetry', *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jan Harold Brunvand (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), p. 168.

Mrs. Margie B. Boswell, Fort Worth poet, first heard 'Lasca' in 1885 at Parker Institute. Beulah Spruill gave it as a recitation, and Mrs. Boswell's mother thought it was a good poem. Newton Gaines, Texas Christian University physics professor and cowboy singer, learned it from his father, S.M. Gaines, who knew it before his marriage in 1889. He thought the poem a little naughty and felt somewhat guilty teaching it to his son, out of earshot of the women folks. In the nineties and early 1900's elocution teachers taught the poem with appropriate gestures.¹⁴

Clearly 'Lasca' was able to cross boundaries of class and gender, from rough cowboy recitals around the campfire to more genteel parlour performances. Even so, the poem retained a risqué flavour that elocutionists with their 'appropriate' stylised gestures needed to tone down for middle-class consumption. Ten years after its first publication, it had so risen in public esteem as to appear in the social column of the *New York Times*:

The Misses Van Winkle of 11 East Forty-fifth Street gave the last of their series of afternoon readings yesterday, when a hundred guests listened to some entertaining recitations by Miss Annie Baker. Among Miss Baker's selections were James Whitcomb Riley's 'That Old Sweetheart of Mine,' several of Robert Browning's poems, 'The Song of the Camp,' by Bayard Taylor, 'Lasca,' and some Southern dialect stories.¹⁵

As a mark of its oral circulation, note how 'Lasca' has already lost its authorship. Indeed, the present-day Texas Folklore Society website, which reproduces a version of the poem, observes that 'It quickly moved into the oral tradition where it remains'.¹⁶

Although it incorporates local references and some Hispanic words, 'Lasca' isn't written in Western or cowboy dialect. At least not the sort of dialect that characterises many classic cowboy poems, such as 'Alone' by Bruce Kiskaddon (1878-1950):

¹⁴ Major, 'The Man Who Wrote 'Lasca' ', p. 298.

¹⁵ 'In the Social World', *New York Times*, 8 March 1892, p. 8.

¹⁶ 'Other Things', *The Texas Folklore Society*, accessed 14 September 2010, <http://www.texasfolkloresociety.org/OtherThings.htm>

The hills git awful quiet, when you have to camp alone.
 It's mighty apt to set a feller thinkin'.
 You always half way waken when a hoss shoe hits a stone,
 Or you hear the sound of hobble chains a clinkin'.¹⁷

We are now so familiar with this kind of Western patois from Hollywood films and old TV shows like *Gunsmoke* that it can seem comic ('camping' indeed). Specific to the evolving culture of Western ranching, it's been suggested that 'it took until the mid-1870s for a distinctive idiom to spread widely enough to distinguish cowboy language, poetry, and song from those of ordinary citizens'.¹⁸ About this time, too, 'signed' poems with cowboy themes started to be published in local newspapers¹⁹—which corresponds to the period that Desprez spent on a Texan ranch. Still, when cowboy poetry was at last established as a literary genre in the early twentieth century, 'Lasca' was co-opted into its canon. In 1919 the co-founder of the Texas Folklore Society, John Avery Lomax, included the poem in his second influential anthology, *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp*—about the time when William S. Hart, the first major star of screen Westerns, recorded it on a 78 rpm disk. No doubt the rise of the Hollywood horse opera had a role to play in the consecration of cowboy poetry, which 'reached its height between 1905 and 1935'.²⁰

So a literary ballad of the Wild West written by a cultured late imperial Englishman with links, via D'Oyly Carte, to Gilbert and Sullivan, has become a part of modern Texan folklore. Yet 'Lasca' wasn't only a hit in Texas and the USA, and it's evident that performers in other countries were often more likely to learn it through oral transmission rather than print. When accounting for the selections in his *Popular Reciter* of 1914, English humorist Joseph Blascheck specifically commented on 'Lasca' as a 'well-known favourite' that was 'constantly being inquired for' but

¹⁷ Cited in Buck Ramsey, 'Cowboy Libraries and Lingo', in *Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry*, ed. David Stanley and Elaine Thatcher (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 100.

¹⁸ Guy Logsdon, 'The Tradition of Cowboy Poetry', in *Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry*, p. 53.

¹⁹ David Stanley, 'Cowboy Poetry Then and Now: An Overview', in *Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry*, p. 7.

²⁰ Hal Cannon, 'Cowboy Poetry: A Poetry of Exile', in *Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry*, p. 63.

'difficult to find' in books.²¹ Blascheck himself could locate only a manuscript copy in his collection. The editor of one 1890s British elocution manual formatted the text in prose, '*Adapted for Recital*', possibly because he had only ever heard it and was uncertain about how to set it correctly.²²

This is hardly surprising for, in structural terms, 'Lasca' is not a typical Victorian literary ballad. Most obviously, it lacks a stanzaic structure, so that its divisions are strophic and irregular. More curiously, though, while Desprez's prosody is broadly based on four-beat anapestic couplets, there is much variation throughout: in rhyming pattern, but especially in off-beats and therefore line length; some lines being as long as thirteen syllables and others—effectively hemistichs—five. Desprez thus employs a largely accentual metre common enough in folk poetry but unusual in parlour verse.

Mabel Major felt that Desprez must have taken his form from Joaquin Miller's 'Kit Carson's Ride',²³ which was first published in *Harper's Magazine* in August 1871. While there are obvious similarities, notably in content (a point I'll take up shortly), the use of a 'galloping' anapestic metre was common enough by this time in ballads involving horses: Adam Lindsay Gordon employed it in 'From the Wreck', as would A.B. Paterson in 'The Man from Snowy River'. Miller publicly acknowledged Robert Browning's 'How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix' as his model, and Browning (or so Miller claimed), Virgil;²⁴ though Browning also copies the stanza of Sir Walter Scott's 'Lochinvar', which may well have been the progenitor of them all. Then again, the metrical irregularity of 'Lasca' may also owe something to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's immensely popular 'Paul Revere's Ride' (1861), which skillfully varies anapests with iambs.²⁵

²¹ Joseph Blascheck, introduction, *The Popular Reciter: Book One* (Melbourne and Sydney: Lothian, [1914]): n.p.

²² John Forsyth, *The Practical Elocutionist* (London: Blackie and Son, [1895?]) p. 277.

²³ This is part of Major's argument in her 1963 'From Ghent to Texas' paper. See footnote 12.

²⁴ In a note to 'Kit Carson's Ride' Miller wrote of meeting Browning in London, and asking 'to borrow the measure and spirit of 'Good News' for a prairie fire on the plains, driving buffalo and all other life before it into a river.' The Englishman replied: 'Why not borrow from Virgil, as I did? He is as rich as one of your gold mines, while I am but a poor scribe.' In *Joaquin Miller's Poems: Volume Two: Songs of the Sierras* (San Francisco: Harr Wagner, 1920), p. 182.

²⁵ This was suggested to me by my colleague David Kelly.

Whatever the case, 'Lasca's' rhythmical and phonetic variations are well adapted to the exciting narrative and assist in pacing its performance: qualities that undoubtedly aided its widespread circulation. To that extent, and regardless of its clearly literary origins, the success of 'Lasca' was based on its adaptability as an oral text. It's not hard to see why it was taken up by cowboy poetry, a genre, as David Stanley writes, that 'remains intensely oral in performance'.²⁶ Among the oral-formulaic devices that the poem employs one could note such things as: simple, dramatic action without complex reflection; in the heroine, the use of a memorable, because stereotypical character;²⁷ a degree of redundancy, as in the refrain 'In Texas, down by the Rio Grande' (though this also works as mnemonic aid, to mark transitions in the story); and, ultimately, a conventional, not to say conservative, moral framework. As with a play script, each individual performance may rightly be deemed the 'proper', because fully-realised, version of the text. In this regard, the first cylinder recording of Desprez's poem in 1905 is prefaced by an announcement that credits the text to its performer—"Lasca", by Edward L. Davenport—even though Desprez was still alive and busy editing *The Era*.

Along with other variations at the level of the line, American versions of the text are generally missing two sections; namely, the opening five lines:

It's all very well to write reviews,
And carry umbrellas, and keep dry shoes,
And say what every one's saying here,
And wear what every one else must wear;
But to-night I'm sick of the whole affair

—and the proleptic fourth verse paragraph:

Why did I leave the fresh and the free,
That suited her and suited me?
Listen awhile, and you will see;
But this is sure—in earth or air,

²⁶ Stanley, 'Cowboy Poetry Then and Now: An Overview', p. 6.

²⁷ As Walter J. Ong has observed, 'Colourless personalities cannot survive oral mnemonics. To assure weight and memorability, heroic figures tend to be type figures': *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), p. 70.

God and God's laws are everywhere,
 And Nemesis comes with a foot as fleet
 On the Texas trail as in Regent Street.²⁸

Oral transmission no doubt partly accounts for the elision of these sections. The opening cry of the edited version, 'I want free life and I want fresh air', sets the scene with greater urgency, immediately putting the hearer in a Western setting by removing the introductory urban frame. The reference to London's Regent Street in the other deleted passage is an even greater distraction for an American audience; besides, without this the action moves seamlessly from the sultry, unpredictable Lasca to the sultry, unpredictable prairie night.

The popularity of 'Kit Carson's Ride' by Joaquin Miller has already been cited as an influence. Written from the perspective of the title character, this ballad tells of how the legendary frontiersman and his Indian lover, together with a friend called 'old Revels', flee a revenge party of Comanches determined to recapture Carson's 'stolen brown bride'. As the party rests and Carson dallies with his love, Revels suddenly senses a greater threat bearing down upon them in the form of a prairie fire driving before it a herd of buffalo. The trio then briskly saddle up and ride for their lives—but Revels falls in the blazing stampede, and so too does the Indian girlfriend, with a final 'look of delight/That I should escape'.²⁹ Publicly denounced by friends of Carson for this unchivalrous and wholly fabricated treatment of their old comrade, eventually, in the 1897 edition of his *Complete Poetical Works*, Miller shortened the text and gave it a happy ending, with Carson rescuing the woman at the last minute.³⁰

²⁸ These variations from Desprez's original are also noted by Major in 'The Man Who Wrote 'Lasca'', p. 302.

²⁹ The original version of the poem, cited here, is reproduced in Gerald Thomson, 'Kit Carson's Ride': E.F. Beale Assails Joaquin Miller's Indecent Poem', *Arizona and the West* 26.2 (1984), pp. 140-44.

³⁰ Miller also added an introduction which suggests that 'Lasca' may have influenced his revision. The 1897 version boldly begins (*Joaquin Miller's Poems: Volume Two*, p. 177):

*Room! room to turn round in, to breathe and be free,
 To grow to be giant, to sail as at sea
 With the speed of the wind on a steed with his mane
 To the wind, without pathway or route or a rein.*

Even so, the parallels with 'Lasca' are all too apparent, even down to its racy eroticism:

We lounged in the grasses—her eyes were on mine,
 And her hands on my knee, and her hair was as wine
 In its wealth and its flood, pouring on and all over
 Her bosom wine-red, and pressed never by one,
 And her touch was as warm as the tinge of the clover
 Burned brown as it reached to the kiss of the sun.

Through her indigeneity, Carson's lover is inextricably linked to the natural world; but, as a *vaquera* (cowgirl), Lasca is also connected to nature through her work with horses and cattle. In both poems, desire is figured as wine, with Desprez's narrator literally drunk with Lasca's beauty:

Her eye was brown—a deep, deep brown;
 Her hair was darker than her eye;
 And something in her smile and frown,
 Curled crimson lip and instep high,
 Showed that there ran in each blue vein,
 Mixed with the milder Aztec strain,
 The vigorous vintage of Old Spain.
 She was alive in every limb
 With feeling, to the finger-tips;
 And when the sun is like a fire,
 And sky one shining soft sapphire,
 One does not drink in little sips.

Both Lasca and the unnamed Indian woman are depicted as wild opposites of white domestic femininity, whose cultivated presence is absent from these works as it is from the men's business of most cowboy poems—and bush ballads, for that matter. Characterised by their exotic ethnicity, these wild women 'naturally' inhabit the frontier as a border zone between civilization and its others. As well, Lasca, it is implied, is highly sexed, the repetition of 'to ride' in the couplet 'Little she cared, save to be by my side,/To ride with me, and ever to ride', carrying an ancient and obvious innuendo.³¹ What's more, it's she who's on top during the stampede, chivalrously protecting her man rather than vice versa, and so usurps the

³¹ In the *OED* the first usage of 'ride', meaning 'To mount a partner or mate for the purpose of sexual intercourse; (also) to have sexual intercourse, esp. when positioned on top', is from circa 1275.

hero's role. Small wonder, then, that she must be laid to rest, along with the prospect of racial intermixing. Miller clearly thought the same of Carson's 'bride', as in an early defence of the poem's original ending he wrote that 'She represents a race that is passing away'.³²

It's worth reflecting on Lasca's heritage because, although it's possible that Desprez actually met some vaqueras in his Texan travels, they were relatively rare.³³ In any case Lasca, with her flamenco dancer's 'Curled crimson lip and instep high', is something more: a literary, and racial, hybrid, with 'the milder [read *inferior*] Aztec strain' in her blood strengthened by 'The vigorous vintage of Old Spain'. For the Spanish link is, of course, the key to her character, the amorous *señorita* being a familiar exotic to English culture from at least as early as the shanty that begins 'Farewell and adieu to you, Spanish ladies'. As a man of the theatre, too, Desprez was likely influenced by the first London production of Georges Bizet's *Carmen* in 1878, with its *habanera* beginning '*L'amour est un oiseau rebelle/Que nul ne peut apprivoiser*' (Love is a rebellious [wild] bird that none can tame). Unlike Bizet's faithless cigarette girl, however, Lasca is self-sacrificing and fiercely jealous; though both images feed in to the stereotype of the beautiful, 'fiery' Hispanic woman that continues to fascinate American popular culture.³⁴

The erotic elements of 'Lasca' were well suited to adaptation to the new medium of film, and four Hollywood movies were based on Desprez's poem, in 1913, 1917, 1919 and 1931.³⁵ The last of these, *Lasca of the Rio Grande*, is a sixty-five minute B-grade outing that gave Latino actor Leo Carillo top-billing, even though he didn't play the romantic lead. Lasca herself was played by Dorothy Burgess, a minor actress who specialised in

³² Cited in Thomson, 'Kit Carson's Ride', p. 150.

³³ Cynthia L. Vidaurri, '*Levantando Versos* and Other Vaquero Voices: Oral Traditions of South Texas Mexican American Cowboys', in *Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry*, p. 261.

³⁴ Decades before Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek arrived in Hollywood, for example, there was Dolores Del Río and Lupé Velez. More recently still, the character of Gloria Delgado Pritchett in the Emmy Award-winning TV sitcom *Modern Family*, played by Colombian actress and former model Sofía Vergara, offers an updated, domesticated version of this sexy Latina type.

³⁵ 'Lasca', *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States: Feature Films, 1911-1920: Film Entries*, ed. Patricia King Hanson and Alan Gevison (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 500. This entry describes the five-reel 1919 film of this title. The 1913 version was two-reels long, and that released in 1917 as *The Mad Stampedo*, one.

Spanish roles without actually being a Latina herself. The film is unavailable in Australia, but a plot summary on the *Internet Movie Database* sketches a conventional Hollywood love triangle that pays oblique tribute to Desprez's poem only at its climax. The non-Anglo characters are suitably romantic and outré.

Texas Ranger Miles Kincaid is in love with dance hall singer Lasca, and bandit Jose Santa Cruz also has staked a claim on her. Lasca kills a man in self defense and Kincaid, taking her to jail, lets her escape. All hands survive a cattle stampede but Lasca loses her life when she steps in to save the life of the man she loves, Kincaid, from being killed by Cruz.³⁶

Nowhere in accounts of 'Lasca' has it been noted that Desprez had previously created a complementary Spanish-American character in a poem called 'The Vaquero', which appeared in the London journal *Temple Bar* in January 1879.³⁷ He glossed the title as follows:

A Californian cattle-driver. Furnished with revolver, lasso, and long-lashed whip, these adventurous gentry conduct the half-wild cattle of the plains over miles of their surface; and, with their gay sashes, high boots, gilded and belled spurs, and dark, broad hats (*sombreros*), present a very picturesque appearance.

Desprez's lost poem serves to remind the modern-day reader of the vital role of the vaqueros in the early US cattle industry, as well as the Hispanic origin of much of the cowboy's dress and style.³⁸ But, for English readers in 1879, the vaquero is another amorous exotic: a faintly Byronic outsider

³⁶ 'Plot Summary for *Lasca of the Rio Grande*', *The Internet Movie Database*, accessed 14 September 2010, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0022053/plotsummary>. The character of Santa Cruz is actually 'a wealthy, half-Portugese, half-Indian ranch owner': for a more detailed plot summary see '*Lasca of the Rio Grande*', *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States: Feature Films, 1931-1940: Film Entries, A-L*, ed. Patricia King Hanson and Alan Gevison (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 1143-44.

³⁷ Frank Desprez, 'The Vaquero', *Temple Bar* 55 (1879) pp. 91-92.

³⁸ In his entry on 'Cowboys' in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, Guy Logsdon observes that, while 'The greatest cultural influence came from Mexican *vaqueros*', 'A different strain of *vaquero* moved northward through California into Nevada and Oregon, and slowly the Americanization of the word *vaquero* became *buckaroo*', p. 170.

who is only truly at home on the wild plains. By this time Desprez was a librettist, so the poem with its quaint refrain may have been written with a musical setting in mind. To the best of my knowledge, this is only its second appearance in print:

Oh, who is so free as a gallant *vaquero*?
 With his beauty of bronze 'neath his shady *sombrero*:
 He smiles at his love, and he laughs at his fate,
 For he knows he is lord of a noble estate:
 The prairie's his own, and he mocks at the great.
 'Ho-ho! Hai! Ho-ho!
 Head 'em off! Turn 'em back!
 Keep 'em up to the track!
 Ho-hillo! Ho-hillo!
 Cric-crac!'

Oh, Donna Luisa is proud as she's fair;
 But she parted last night with a lock of her hair.
 And under the stars she roams, seeking for rest,
 While she thinks of the stranger that came from the West;
 And Juan bears something wrapped up in his breast –
 'Ho-ho! Hai! Ho-ho!
 Head 'em off! Turn 'em back!
 Keep 'em up to the track!
 Ho-hillo! Ho-hillo!
 Cric-crac!'

His proudest possessions are prettily placed,
 His love at his heart, and his life at his waist.
 And if in a quarrel he happen to fall,
 Why, the prairie's his grave, and his *poncho's*³⁹ his pall,
 And Donna Luisa—gets over it all!
 'Ho-ho! Hai! Ho-ho!
 Head 'em off! Turn 'em back!
 Keep 'em up to the track!
 Ho-hillo! Ho-hillo!
 Cric-crac!'

The Padrè may preach, and the Notary frown,

³⁹ Cloak. (Desprez's note.)

But the *poblânas*⁴⁰ smile as he rides through the town:
 And the Padrè, he knows, likes a kiss on the sly,
 And the Notary oft has a 'drop in his eye,'
 But all that he does is to love and to die –
 'Ho-ho! Hai! Ho-ho!
 Head 'em off! Turn 'em back!
 Keep 'em up to the track!
 Ho-hillo! Ho-hillo!
 Cric-crac!'

Like Lasca, Desprez's vaquero is highly sexed, but with a courtly insouciance which is utterly foreign to the evolving image of the Anglo-American cowboy. Indeed, the 'cowboy', as such, was little-known outside the West at the time this was written. The *OED*'s examples of this particular usage ('A man employed to take care of grazing cattle on a ranch') are all from the 1880s, with the exception of one from 1849 that associates the term explicitly with Texans. 'Vaquero', on the other hand, is cited as early as 1826; so, for an English audience, he was potentially a more recognisable figure.

The first mention of 'Lasca' in Australia that I have located is from 1887, in a brief review of Desprez's *Curtain Raisers for Amateurs and Others* in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, where the poem is praised along with a companion piece as 'new and above the average in merit'.⁴¹ The poem appears again in performances by the African-American Jubilee Singers in 1892, whose concerts of minstrel songs and spirituals included a recitation of 'Lasca' by 'Miss Julie Wormlie' (*sic*), who was 'twice recalled' to the stage of Sydney Town Hall.⁴² After this it is regularly listed in advertisements for and accounts of recitals. For instance, the 'Alexander-

⁴⁰ Peasant-girls. (Desprez's note.)

⁴¹ 'Current Literature', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 July 1887, p. 9. The companion poem was 'The C'rrect Card', in which a crippled jockey tells the story of his fall. It bears some comparison with A.B. Paterson's 'Only a Jockey', which appeared in the *Bulletin* on February 26 that year. 'The C'rrect Card' was first published, however, in June 1873 in *Temple Bar* 38, pp. 366-69, by which time Desprez was no doubt already in America.

⁴² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 June 1892, p. 4. The reciter's correct name was Julia C. Wormley: see Lyn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), p. 125.

Young-Page Entertainments', to be offered on Saturday evening, 15 September 1900, again in the Town Hall, where 'Miss Edith Tasca-Page will render the Mexican Idyll "Lasca," and the Humorous Sketches "After Marriage," and "How He Proposed"''.⁴³ By the 1920s it was so often performed as to have become tedious, as evinced by a satirical poem in the popular *Smith's Weekly*:

Way out in the suburbs howls the wild Reciter,
 Storming like a general, bragging like a blighter;
 He would shame hyenas slinking in their dens
 As he roars at peaceful folk whose joy is keeping hens.
 'How We Beat the Favourite,' 'Lasca,' 'Gunga Din,'
 There they sit and tremble as he rubs it in.⁴⁴

As a reviewer in the Hobart *Mercury* noted, 'At one time and another most of us have been victims of the would-be elocutionist.'⁴⁵

Cinema and radio were already cutting a swathe through such parlour pleasures, but recitations of 'Lasca' appear to have remained popular here longer than anywhere outside America. If the days of the 'wild Reciter' were numbered in the cities, it was a different story in rural Australia. As late as 1940, North Queensland folklorist Alex Vennard, aka 'Bill Bowyang', was reprinting 'Lasca' in his collections of *Bush Recitations*, describing the contents as 'rare poems, recited in the bush places in the early days'.⁴⁶ Vennard collected these through his 'On the Track' column in the *North Queensland Register* (Townsville), but also from anthologies and other newspapers, including the *Bulletin* and *Smith's Weekly*.⁴⁷ 'Lasca' appeared three times in *Australian Bush Recitations*, in numbers 2, 3 and 6—its forthcoming appearance in number 6 encouragingly advertised by

⁴³ 'Amusements: Centenary Hall', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September 1900, p. 2.

⁴⁴ Kodak (pseud. Ernest O'Ferrall), 'The Reciter', *Odd Jobs* (Sydney: Art in Australia), n.p. All the poems in this chapbook first appeared in *Smith's Weekly* under the heading 'Games for Big Kids'.

⁴⁵ 'The World of Books: Reviews', *Mercury*, 17 November 1928, p. 15. The review was of *Odd Jobs*.

⁴⁶ Bill Bowyang (pseud. Alex Vennard), introduction, *Australian Bush Recitations No. 2* (Red Hill: [the author], [1937]), [p. 3].

⁴⁷ Hugh Anderson, 'On the Track with 'Bill Bowyang'', *On the Track with Bill Bowyang: With Australian Bush Recitations* (Ascot Vale: Red Rooster, 1991), pp. xix-xxi.

the statement that: 'Those who cannot sing will make a "hit" at any gathering when they recite this famous poem.'⁴⁸ Line-by-line, Vennard's versions are very close to Desprez's original, and include the framing London context. Most likely Vennard had access to a printed text—or perhaps the local reciter who provided his source was less troubled by English references in a poem about Texas.

Desprez's use of this framing device, whereby a middle-class narrator compares his routine present in England with his romantic past in a foreign land, allowing the story to unfold in a series of vivid flashbacks, was a significant innovation. Most ballads cut straight to the story—which helps explain why the first five lines of 'Lasca' were so often dropped in performance. But here the shift between home and abroad is thematic, because it emphasises not only distance in time, but also distance in place. Furthermore, the London sections of 'Lasca' expose a flawed narrator who has retreated to a comfortable bourgeois existence and now tastes life *only* 'in little sips'. Memories of his Mexican spitfire are also now tempered with pious moral judgement on their sinful relationship, for 'God and God's laws are everywhere./And Nemesis comes with a foot as fleet/On the Texas trails as in Regent Street'. As noted earlier, Lasca is the true 'hero' of the tale, for she has greater agency and courage and, at the moment of crisis, takes the initiative. She also carries a phallically 'dear little dagger', which she wields with near-deadly effect. His nostalgia for her as both sexual object *and* subject represents a nostalgia for his own lost, ideal masculinity—a masculinity also embodied in the glamorous vaquero in the poem of that title—but which is only imperfectly realised within the conformities of the modern metropolis.

This nostalgic masculinity would be copied by Rudyard Kipling in his famous *Barrack-Room Ballad* 'Mandalay', written in 1890, which also uses a London frame to express desire for the lost, exotic other. The class register has changed, and for this reason the poem is comic, but the underlying sentiment is the same:

By the old Moulmein Pagoda, lookin' eastward to the sea,
There's a Burma girl a-settin', and I know she thinks o' me;
For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the temple-bells they
say:

⁴⁸ Bowyang, "'Bill Bowyang's' Bush Recitations No. 6', *Australian Bush Recitations No. 5* (Red Hill: [the author], [1940]), p. 18.

'Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to
Mandalay!'...

I am sick o' wastin' leather on these gritty pavin'-stones,
An' the blasted Henglish drizzle wakes the fever in my bones;
Tho' I walks with fifty 'ousemaids outer Chelsea to the
Strand,
An' they talks a lot o' lovin', but wot do they understand?⁴⁹

The poet who perhaps took Desprez's message most to heart didn't write about a woman of another race in an exotic locale but, rather, about a male compatriot who happens to be working up-country. In 'Clancy of the Overflow' from 1889 A.B. Paterson drew upon Desprez's device of a city-bound middle-class narrator recalling his adventures in remote places. Like 'Lasca' and like 'Mandalay' it also hankers after a lost masculinity, but because its object of desire is male rather than female Paterson only lightly sketches Clancy, who is a brief, abstract presence in the text. This Australian vaquero is disembodied, a singing cowboy dissolving into the natural world through which he rides:

In my wild erratic fancy visions come to me of Clancy
Gone a-droving 'down the Cooper' where the Western
drovers go;
As the stock are slowly stringing, Clancy rides behind them
singing,
For the drover's life has pleasures that the townfolk
never know.

And the bush hath friends to meet him, and their kindly
voices greet him
In the murmur of the breezes and the river on its bars,
And he sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plain extended,
And at night the wond'rous glory of the everlasting
stars.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Rudyard Kipling, 'Mandalay', *The Complete Barrack-Room Ballads of Rudyard Kipling*, ed. Charles Carrington (London: Methuen, 1973), pp. 64, 66. In the parlour song version of this poem, made famous by baritone Peter Dawson, only the first and last verses are used, thus avoiding the more grotesque aspects of the Cockney speaker's orientalism.

⁵⁰ A.B. Paterson, 'Clancy of the Overflow', *The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses*, 1895 (Sydney University: Sydney University Press, 2009), p. 16.

Instead, Paterson focuses on all those facets of urban life that diminish the prospect of a life more richly lived: along with the ugly details of the urban landscape, the 'nervous haste' of the city crowds with their eugenically 'stunted forms and weedy'. Significantly, the speaker would 'like to change with Clancy' rather than actually be *with* him, while recognising the impossibility of the exchange. That's because the distance that separates Paterson's narrator from Clancy is more profound than even geography: it's the gulf that divides modernity from the heroic, pre-modern world of myth.

'Clancy of the Overflow' directly dramatises a tension that operates through many bush ballads, which were written by authors with city addresses for metropolitan journals—most famously, the *Bulletin*—keen to construct an idealised rural-based Australian identity.⁵¹ There were close links between cowboy poetry and middle-class journalism, as well, and for the same reasons. Just as Paterson, though he had experience of station life, could never be called a 'bushman' of the kind celebrated in his verse, most of the writers who were instrumental in establishing cowboy poetry as a distinct genre had little or no direct experience as cowboys.⁵² In this regard, and although he was only in Texas for three years, Frank Desprez was somewhat exceptional.

A reviewer in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1957 casually remarked that "'The Man from Snowy River"... apparently occupies the same position in Australian popular literature as "Lasca" in the American'.⁵³ But 'Lasca' was a favourite here too, and the long currency of Desprez's poem in Australia implies that ideological connections between the bush and the Wild West extend some way back along the dusty trail of frontier history. Certainly more work needs to be done on the obvious affinities between bush ballads and cowboy poetry. Although the title of

⁵¹ See Richard White, 'Bohemians and the Bush', *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981); also Graeme Davison, 'Sydney and the Bush: An Urban Context for the Australian Legend', in John Carroll, ed. *Intruders in the Bush: The Australian Quest for Identity* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁵² See Stanley, 'Cowboy Poetry Then and Now: An Overview', pp 7-10; also Logsdon, 'The Tradition of Cowboy Poetry'.

⁵³ Kenneth Porter, 'Folklore in Australia', *Journal of American Folklore* 70.275 (1957), p. 91. Porter also unfairly described Paterson's poem as 'cliché-ridden doggerel'.

Adam Lindsay Gordon's *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes* (1870) ensured earlier recognition of the bush ballad compared to the cowboy poem, both emerged as literary forms at about the same time, took shape in nationalistic journals from the 1880s, and were popularly canonised by the early twentieth century. Not only are they thus coeval but, considering the respective influence of Gordon and Desprez, in each case an immigrant Englishman had a major hand in establishing the genre.

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