

John Barleycorn Versus Lord Millet: A Ruminantion on Cultural Contrasts

by

Erin Leigh Clemens



**Professor Wendy Xie
FLIT 293
27 November 2007**

Erin Clemens

Wendy Xie

FLIT 293F

26 November 2007

John Barleycorn Versus Lord Millet: A Ruminant on Cultural Contrasts

In our survey of early Chinese literature, I have noticed a large difference between the portrayal of the natural world in the Chinese context versus that of the portrayal in the Western context. There seems to be more of a passivity, a gentle manipulation and appreciation combined with a natural remove in the Chinese tradition, whereas the Western canon seems to indicate an extremely harsh interdependence, a fight for life or death against the elements and the natural world, and a common experience of connection which we cannot escape. In this paper, I have chosen to examine two hymns/ballads from each canon, each representing anthropomorphic harvest deities and the agricultural cycle, as a microcosmic representation of Chinese versus Western literary traditions in which to further explore this concept of divergence.

For purposes of clarity, I would like to define what I mean by the Western canon. As an English-speaking American, when I reference the Western canon I indicate all literature that has impacted our literary traditions; namely, Greek and Roman works, Celtic and Germanic ballads/poems/tales, Western European contributions and then the English-language works themselves. I feel there is no problem in doing this as English is an amalgamation of various Germanic sources mixed with Latin, French and a variety of other languages – English as we speak it now or even 100 years ago did not exist until relatively recently in the world; it is a language that is constantly

in flux and constantly changing. I am also supported in my definition by the curriculum set by English-language educational institutions in teaching works from these canons in our Western literature classes. Also, for purposes of continuity, all Chinese works refer to all works constructed within a Chinese language framework.

I would now like to begin an examination of these two different traditions.

Contrasting General Views of Nature

One of the key differences in the development of Chinese literature as opposed to Western literature is found in their divergent views of man's relation to nature. The natural world in the Chinese tradition is depicted as a peaceful, restorative retreat from the complicated and often misguided affairs of mankind. Much celebrated poems by authors such as Wang Wei and Li Bo portray the tranquil, soft beauty of gentle streams, steady mountains, and quiet forests. The stereotype of the official/scholar retreating to a rural refuge either in protest of the affairs of his countrymen or in a sublime quest for simplicity and truth is well-established. Rural life is glorified within literature, from the utopia of Tao Qian's *Peach Blossom Spring* to the wise fisher couple in Li Yu's *Silent Operas*.¹ During a recent trip to the Metropolitan Museum in NYC, I had to opportunity to view their extensive collection of Chinese calligraphic works. It did not escape my attention that almost all of these pieces contained images of beautiful vistas and serene animals; all were considered to be typical representations of that artistic genre.

¹ From "An Actress Scorns Wealth And Honor To Preserve Her Chastity", discussed in class and within our textbook. It is worth noting that the wisdom and happiness of the fisher couple also convinces the actor/official couple to eventually give up their post and move to the countryside to live a simple life.

In the Western literary tradition, however, nature is imbued with a darker, threatening aura. It is far more common to encounter depictions of raging storms and turbulent waters than it is to find gentle showers and soft streams. Nature is something that always holds a hint of threat to the Western imagination; one can get lost forever in our dark forests, stormy nights and harsh seas. It is dangerously beautiful; we never forget that behind the flowers and trees lies a force which is stronger than humankind, and can cause great loss and suffering. Hansel and Gretel wander lost in our woods, Odysseus confronts seemingly unending trials from various forces of nature and many of our so-called Great American Novels concern deprivation and trials in places such as the Dust Bowl² and on the violent seas.³

***She Bore The Folk* – A Preliminary Interpretation**

She Bore The Folk is an agricultural hymn taken from the Classics of Poetry.⁴ I chose this selection specifically because of its portrayal of the development of agriculture within Chinese society (an occupation which was to characterize the Zhou period), as well as the simplicity and beauty of its imagery. This has been one of my favorite works covered thus far in our course.

Inside is a rendering of 后稷 (Hou Ji), the man considered personally responsible for the development of this industry. It details his miraculously painless and divine birth, his growth into manhood and the various endowments of his supreme knowledge of agriculture.

² John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

³ Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

⁴ Classics of Poetry #245. The Classics of Poetry is a collection of over 300 poems, ritual hymns and ballads that, at its furthest extent, is believed to date back to the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty.

She who first bore the folk –
Jiang it was, First Parent.
How was it she bore the folk? –
she knew the rite and sacrifice.
To rid herself of sonlessness
she trod the god's toepint
and she was glad.
She was made great, on her luck settled,
the seed stirred, it was quick.
She gave birth, she gave suck,
and this was Lord Millet.

Many mythical figures are conceived through divine parthenogenesis - examples abound, such as the Greek Naiad Nana (*who conceived when an almond fell into her lap*), the mother of Zoroaster (*conceived, as one version says, through a divine essence filtered through milk*), the Celtic diety Lugh (*conceived during a dream beside the River Boyne*), the Buddha Shakyamuni (*conceived in a vision of a white elephant*) and the Korean hero Dung Ming (*conceived after a ray of light entered his mother's bosom*).

When her months had come to term,
her firstborn sprang up.
Not splitting, not rending,
working no hurt, no harm.
He showed his godhead glorious,
the high god was greatly soothed.
He took great joy in those rites
and easily she bore her son.

His passive, gentle nature is evident from birth, which is smooth and harmless. It is also a joyful event for his divine father, as Lord Millet's divinity and superiority is established from birth when he "showed his godhead glorious."

It is also of note that, like most births through divine parthenogenesis, he is his mother's firstborn - implying virginity on her part before the act of conception.

She set him in a narrow lane,
but sheep and cattle warded him
She set him in the wooded plain,
he met with those who logged the plain.
She set him on cold ice,
birds sheltered him with wings.
Then the birds left him
and Lord Millet wailed.
This was long and this was loud;
his voice was a mighty one.

Read literally, Jiang's careless abandonment of Hou Chi shortly after his birth makes no sense. He is a wanted child and the son of a diety. Taken metaphorically, this implies a divine protection through his animal and human benefactors. It can also be read as a linking of Lord Millet with the natural world, fitting for an agricultural diety. Perhaps his exposure to the elements mimicks the exposure of seedlings to the harsh world?

And then he crept and crawled,
he stood upright, he stood straight.
He sought to feed his mouth,
and planted there the great beans.
The great beans' leaves were fluttering,
the rows of grain were bristling.
Hemp and barley dense and dark,
the melons, plump and round.

As he grows into maturity, he experiences a hunger for what he does not have that leads him to great discoveries and innovations - namely, that of agriculture. This is a softer, more passive version of the stereotypical masculine experience of questing - whether for knowledge, love, their place in society or attainment of some desired, concrete form.

It is also interesting to me that Lord Millet apparently already has the means through which to create agriculture known to him - he does not have to seek out seeds or knowledge.

Lord Millet in his farming
had a way to help things grow:
He rid the land of thick grass,
he planted there a glorious growth.
It was in squares, it was leafy,
it was planted, it grew tall.
It came forth, it formed ears,
it was hard, it was good.
Its tassels bent, it was full,
He had his household there in Tai.

Further examples of his natural expertise in agricultural methods.

This passage also reveals a location where these innovations first appeared, indicating perhaps a human prototype from which the mythological Lord Millet was derived.

He passed us down these wondrous grains:
our black millets, of one and two kernals,
Millets whose leaves sprout red or white,
he spread the whole land with black millet,
and reaped it and counted the acres,
spread it with millet sprouting red or white,
hefted on shoulders, loaded on backs,
he took it home and began this rite.

The grain millet is given particular attention in this tale, although he also planted hemp, barley and beans. This is because of the primary role millet has had in Chinese agriculture. It grows quickly, it is a wild crop, it does not require much water or attention and it stores for a long period of time. It has been farmed in China since about 4500 BCE. A cursory search of online Chinese dictionaries revealed an average of 11 different characters to describe various forms of millet.

And how goes this rite we have? –
At times we hull, at times we scoop,
at times we winnow, at times we stomp,
we hear it slosh as we wash it,
we hear it puff as we steam it.
Then we reckon, then we consider,
take Artemisia, offer fat.
We take a ram for the flaying,
then we roast it, then we sear it,
to rouse up the following year.

The term "rite" bears an interesting implication of religious observance, once again underscoring the divine nature of Lord Millet and the birth of agriculture.

This description could be of either a feast after harvest time or a religious rite practiced to give thanks for the harvest.

It is also interesting to note the shift in point of view from an objective third person narration (he, it) to the first person plural (we), thereby immediately dispensing with the past and implying the carrying on of this tradition to the present day.

We heap the wooden trenchers full,
wooden trenchers, earthenware platters.
And as the scent first rises
the high god is peaceful and glad.
This great odor is good indeed,
for Lord Millet began the rite,
and hopefully free from failing or fault,
it has lasted until now.

Everything is as it should be - the heavens delight in the correct usage of the gift of agriculture.

More credence is lent to the theme of religious observance in these ending lines ("the high god is peaceful and glad;" "Lord Millet began the rite...hopefully free of failing or fault").

***John Barleycorn* – A Preliminary Interpretation**

John Barleycorn is a very well-known Scottish ballad. I chose this specifically because when we first discussed *She Bore The Folk* in class, this immediately sprang to mind for parallels I will discuss in depth later. It is also one of my favorite works in the English language tradition, combining sharp metaphor with elegant phrasing.

Like many older songs and works of literature, the age and authorship of this piece are unknown. One of the earliest written versions of it can be found in the Bannatyne Manuscript of 1568⁵. Subsequent generations have proven quite adept at reinterpreting this tale; the version I have chosen to examine is that rendered by the famous Scottish poet Robert Burns (1782), as his version lends itself more readily to literary perusal.

⁵ When the Black Death (i.e. bubonic plague), swept through Europe and came to Edinburgh in 1568, Scottish merchant George Bannatyne escaped to a country estate in a bid for survival, where he passed the time by recording a manuscript of famous songs and poems. It subsequently became the only written source for some famous Scottish poems and songs.

There was three kings into the east,
Three kings both great and high,
And they hae sworn a solemn oath
John Barleycorn should die.

In other version of this tale, the three kings are often described as three farmers, searching out new lands to build their fortunes upon. They are also often described as coming from the west, land synonymous with the countryside in the UK.

They took a plough and plough'd him down,
Put clods upon his head,
And they hae sworn a solemn oath
John Barleycorn was dead.

This simultaneously describes the act of planting seeds and of burial, drawing parallels between the two by the interment of the seemingly dead John Barleycorn into the earth.

But the chearful spring came kindly on,
And show'rs began to fall;
John Barleycorn got up again
And sore surprised them all.

Similar to other Western godheads and dieties (many of whom exemplify various cycles of sacrifice, death and resurrection), Barleycorn experiences a period of seeming death before sprouting as a plant in the spring.

The sultry suns of summer came,
And he grew thick and strong,
His head weel arm'd wi' pointed spears,
That no one should him wrong.

As Barleycorn grows from his fragile infancy into manhood (or as the plant grows and blossoms on the stalk), he becomes so strong that no one would dare attempt to harm him (or harvest him) in that state. There is an obvious parallel here between the states of male physical maturation and the growth cycle of grain.

The sober Autumn enter'd mild,
When he grew wan and pale;
His bending joints and drooping head
Show'd he began to fail.

By the start of the harvest season (or about 3/4 through a human life cycle), Barleycorn is beginning to show signs of age. "Wan and pale" refers to the mellowing, drying colors grain begins to take on after its green growth stage...the "bending joints and drooping head" signify old age for both flora and fauna. Barleycorn is reaching full maturation.

His colour sickened more and more,
He faded into age;
And then his enemies began
To show their deadly rage.

This refers to the Western mythological habit of aged kings being supplanted through death by their young successors, often at the hands of the new kings. Examples of this can be found within the Arthurian cycle and in the traditional battles of the Oak King and the Holly King.

They've ta'en a weapon long and sharp,
And cut him by the knee,
Then ty'd him fast upon a cart,
Like a rogue for forgerie.

Descriptions of harvesting, winnowing, threshing, parching, sprouting and otherwise preparing the grain, which can also be interpreted simultaneously as violent acts against the person of Barleycorn.

They laid him down upon his back,
And cudgell'd him full sore;
They hung him up before the storm,
And turn'd him o'er and o'er.

They filled up a darksome pit
With water to the brim,
The heaved in John Barleycorn,
There let him sink or swim.

They laid him out upon the floor,
To work him farther woe,
And still, as signs of life appear'd,
They toss'd him to and fro'.

They wasted, o'er a scorching flame,
The marrow of his bones;
But a Miller used him worst of all,
For he crush'd him between two stones.

And they hae ta'en his very heart's blood,
And drank it round and round;
And still the more and more they drank,
Their joy did more abound.

The other common association of John Barleycorn (aside from the spirit of the harvest), is as the spirit of beer and other grain alcohol. His heart's blood is the fermented beverage drawn from his grains.

This is a list of attributes supposed to be infused into a person through consumption of John Barleycorn (in his liquid state).

The final stanzas of this ballad are stylized by Burns...the most common form is as follows...

"Here's little Sir John in a nut-brown bowl,
And brandy in a glass;
And little Sir John in the nut-brown bowl
Proved the stronger man at last.
And the huntsman he can't hunt the fox,
Nor so loudly blow his horn,
And the tinker he can't mend kettles or pots
Without a little of Barleycorn."

John Barleycorn was a hero bold
Of noble enterprise.
For if ye do but taste his blood,
'Twill make your courage rise.

'Twill make a man forget his woe;
'Twill heighten all his joy;
'Twill make the widow's heart to sing,
Though the tear were in her eye.

Then let us toast John Barleycorn,
Each man a glass in hand,
And may his great prosperity
Ne'er fail in old Scotland.

Parallels

Before I begin contrasting these two works, I must first draw a closer comparison than my initial survey delineates.

There are the obvious parallels of both being agricultural hymns/ballads focusing on a central male protagonist as progenitor of agriculture and the harvest. Aside from that, both works represent the foundational view of agriculture in each society. In *She Bore The Folk*, Lord Millet's very birth can be likened to the beginnings of optimal seed life. After his mother follows the correct rites and rituals (seed preparation), and then treads in the footprint of a god (the tilled and furrowed earth), Lord Millet is brought gloriously into being; smoothly sprouting without hardship, he survives the crucial first developmental period strongly no matter where he has been laid.

John Barleycorn belays the Western literary notions of the beginning of agriculture and indicates our cultural history of a nomadic people coming into a new land and discovering wild plants which were then tamed into domestic crops. John Barleycorn is not born of a mother; he is found and "killed" (turned to seed) by the three men⁶ coming from a different land. Despite the seeming violence of his death, after time passes the men notice that he is rising to manhood again from out of the grave they have buried him in (growing into a seedling from the farmed earth).

Both pieces imbue a hint of the divine in their protagonists. Lord Millet is presumed to be one of the founding ancestors of the Zhou dynasty; he is granted

⁶ The number three is highly significant to the West; it is the number of personalities usually attributed to our multiple deities within one physical being (i.e. the Christian Holy Trinity of Father, Son and the Holy Ghost and the Celtic Triple Goddess of Maid, Mother and Crone).

many honors due to his development of agriculture and is revered as the father of that occupation. John Barleycorn is a figure reminiscent of all the sacrificed kings and lords of the Western canon; like the Celtic Taliesin or the Christian Jesus Christ, he rises from the seeming dead of the grave (a symbolic womb), into glorious and robust life. He is an Everyman elevated to nobility and divinity by the nature of the sacrifice; after all, Jesus was born in a stable to a carpenter to die on a cross and be reborn, while Taliesin was a poor and ignorant servant granted the gift of wisdom before he was devoured and then reborn.

Contrasts

It is notable to me that the title characters in each poem (“Lord Millet” and “John Barleycorn”), each carry within their phrasing the same essential ideas with different implications. Each reference a type of grain that is most commonly found in their native terrain (the various millets of early Chinese agriculture, as opposed to the many barleys and corns found in the UK). Each also contains an anthropomorphic label – “Lord” in the Chinese tale, and “John” in the Scotch. I find it very interesting that “Lord”, which bears implications to a Western mind of wisdom, transcendence and superiority, is contrasted within these two tales to “John”, one of the most common English names and one that is associated with Everyman and the commonality of human experience.⁷

Another difference lies in their visual portrayals. Lord Millet is often portrayed as a fat, fecund gentleman of older years, still in robust health, and often is holding

⁷ John is, in fact, so common that anytime a person of unknown identity needs to be identified in some way in the West, they are referred to and recorded as John Doe (usually with a number following the name for tracking purposes).

sheaths of millet or records of some nature. There seems to be something noble and correct in his bearing and his demeanor. John Barleycorn, however, is most often portrayed as half-man, half-grain; a masculine face attached to a sheath of wheat, or a largely human form with sheaths of wheat standing in for his appendages. His other common portrayal is as a fat, jolly farmer, usually not very attractive and extremely intoxicated.

The very development of agriculture as portrayed in these two tales points to a startling difference. In *She Bore The Folk*, the beginning is found at birth; Lord Millet comes into the world in the first stanzas of the poem, blossoms throughout, and everything is finished with a contemplation of his many gifts to the world.

In *John Barleycorn*, the beginning comes at an end; within the first 4 lines of the poem, the protagonist is killed. It is his seeming rebirth from death (echoing the Western concept of life in death), that begins the continual cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

It is also worth noting that depictions of the protagonists within these two texts also point to another difference; one of personal ties to the earth. For example, although *She Bore The Folk* is about Lord Millet, much time is devoted to describing his mother's conception and birthing process, as well as the general processes of the rites Lord Millet developed and their applications to the generation of the time this piece was composed. While he does develop agriculture, and while his growth parallels that of his crops, there is a remove to the language used in describing his association with them. Some barrier appears to separate the consciousness that is Hou Ji from the mythical role of Lord Millet. John Barleycorn, however, exists as the

crop; every thought and action he has is likened to that of the harvest. He does not develop agriculture so much as embody it. This indicates a vast difference in interactions with the land; the Chinese hymn details a peaceful co-existence with the harvest whereas the Western ballad implies a violent dependence upon the crop.

Conclusion

From these interpretations and examples, two differing themes can be wrought. The Chinese tradition points to a concurrent existence with the harvest, where change is wrought through skillful and gentle manipulation of the terrain and the environment; in the Western tradition, existence with the crops is interdependent to the point that one cannot draw a line between man and nature.

The Chinese tradition speaks of the noble Lord Millet who, through the divinity of his mythical birth and his natural superiority and knowledge, brings blessings to his people. The Western tradition, however, implies an Everyman who must be sacrificed in a ritual bonding with the crops to gain the secrets of growth and farming.

The Chinese tradition bespeaks a removal from the experience of nature and agriculture that allows for the observation of beautiful vistas and abundant crops. The Western tradition differs in that it indicates an almost inseparable experience of nature in humankind, in which the particular experiences of the crops are our primary perceptions.

For whatever reason (the rise of industrialization in the West versus the Chinese reliance on an agricultural industry, the nomadic nature of most Western cultures versus the stationary solidity of the Chinese), differing views on the human

relationship to nature have developed in the literary canons of each traditions the exemplify a different cultural feel for these two disparate sets of experiences.

I believe the two examples I have chosen and examined provide an excellent rendering of these inherent differences, both which are both beautiful and full of merit in their own right and only serve to deepen our understanding of the many facets of nature when examined simultaneously.

<http://www.erin-clemens.com>

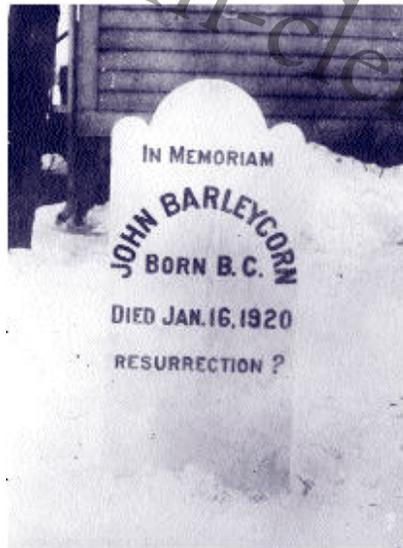
Appendix: Images of John Barleycorn and Lord Millet

John Barleycorn



A beer label designed by artist Janis Taylor.

http://www.madriverbrewing.com/pages/brews/john_barleycorn.html



A “tombstone” erected during a faux funeral by the Weis Brothers Saloon in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on the eve of Prohibition.

<http://www.allaboutbeer.com/features/215wantbeer.html>



John Barleycorn by artist Graham Higgins - entitled "Resurrection."

<http://www.pokkettz.demon.co.uk/barleycorn/index.html>

John Barleycorn

Download This Video



Still from a Youtube video of Mike Waterson singing the ballad.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NNgLqz89Z8

后稷 - *Hou Ji (Lord Millet)*



Bronze statuette of Hou Ji, courtesy of the Musee Guimet in Paris.

<http://www.guimet.fr/-English->



Marble Statue of Hou Ji from Wugong.

<http://www.snwugong.gov.cn/zs/News/Showlvyou.asp?id=53>



Hou Ji liquor bottles produced by Wuhan Art Beverage Bottles.

<http://zyc190190.cn.ec51.com/>

Bibliography

Burns, Robert. John Barleycorn. Published 1782.

<http://www.davidpbrown.co.uk/poetry/robert-burns.html>. Accessed 14 November 2007.

“She Bore The Folk.” An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911.

Owen, Stephen, ed. and trans. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. Pages 12-14.

<http://www.erin-clemens.com>