Blason Populaire, Football Chants and the Construction of Masculinity

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Introduction

In research conducted by myself and John Widdowson in 2002, we established that football chants played a key role in keeping blason populaire alive in England at the dawn of the twenty-first century, replacing older forms of the genre, such as village rhymes, which appeared to have undergone widespread decline. Based primarily on the inter and intra group rivalries between rival sets of football fans and serving as verbal emblems of their allegiances and support, football chants are a perfect example of a modern day form of blason populaire.¹

In my subsequent PhD research, I went on to investigate this claim in more detail by examining the ways in which football chants create, maintain and contest the identities and rivalries so crucial to blason populaire, as well as the ways in which they stay true to the genre by, to a large extent, relying on key themes used in expressions of the genre in the past.² In the following pages, I will focus on one of these themes – gender and, more specifically, masculinity. While progress is being made to make the game of football more inclusive for females at all levels, from players and officials to fans, the football ground remains a playground for the performance of masculine, heterosexual identity, as the language of many football chants illustrates. I will show how, by commenting on gender, football chants adopt a theme that has proved constant throughout the years in expressions of blason populaire. I will then look at integrative football chants, showing how they can be a celebration of masculinity through their discourses on male bonding concerning drinking, fighting and women as well as the militaristic imagery that they employ. I will also illustrate how, contrastingly, many divisive chants rely on insults about women to define the out-group and in order for fans to assert their own supposedly superior masculinity.

Blason populaire and gender

The construction of gender, in particular masculinity, through football chants is undoubtedly a continuation of one of the key themes of blason populaire. The genre has always been used to offer comments on men and women on the basis of their gender, with their supposed characteristics often serving as reflections of an entire place or community. In the first instance, there are examples of general blason populaire about men and women as two separate groups, and in which gender actually defines the in- or out-group, rather than place or other group characteristics. So, for example, there are expressions that are generalisations about all men or that are universally applied to all women. Under this kind are proverbs about men such as “like father, like son” and “it takes three generations to make a gentleman”, as well as those about women such as “the female of the species is more deadly than the male”, “a whistling woman and a crowing hen are neither fit for God nor men”, and “hell hath no fury like a woman scorned”. All of these examples have been in existence for hundreds of years. Secondly, there are those expressions about men or women of a particular place who come to represent all that is good or bad about the community. Rather than simply being
about men or women as general groups, they become first and foremost stereotypes of a particular place, with judgements on gender being a secondary issue, a by-product of this process. For example, “an Englishman’s home is his castle” is a generic statement about English people in general rather than solely English men.

I will now examine the latter type in more detail, as they are the ones most closely resembling the football chants of today. Many of the expressions that use gender to construct judgements on place are simple in form, comprising no more than a one-line statement, a nickname such as “Lancashire fair women”, the similar “Suffolk fair maids”, or “Chester chief men”. Others are longer verse forms such as:

By Tre, Pol and Pen,
You shall know the Cornish men

Pakefield for poverty,
Lowestoft for poor.
Gorleston for pretty girls,
Yarmouth for whores.
Caister for water dogs,
California for pluck.
Damn and bugger old Winterton,
How black she do look.

It is a common feature of the longer verse forms to consist of four lines. Each of the lines will either promote or belittle some apparent characteristic of a different place, thus comparing the four places mentioned. Many of these rhymes, typical of other expressions of blason populaire, are formulaic, and can be adapted to suit any number of places. This is the case with the example below, of which there are numerous variants:

Sutton for good mutton, Cheam for juicy beef,
Croydon for a pretty girl, and Mitcham for a thief.

We can safely assume that these rhymes are integrative about the women from the places mentioned, and as such integrative about the place in general as a by-product of this. However, it is not unusual for expressions to be divisive towards women and, as will become apparent, to a lesser extent men. In these instances, the women are normally judged on their perceived sexual behaviour or by their attractiveness, or rather lack of it. For example, there is a variant of the rhyme about Sutton and its neighbouring localities that replaces “pretty girl” with “whores”:

Sutton for mutton, Carshalton for beeves,
Epsom for whores, and Ewel for thieves.

This formula is repeated in rhymes about places other than Sutton and their respective neighbours:

The Cheviots for muttons,
And Chillingham for beves,
Newcastle for its whores,
And Redesdale for its thieves.  

There is also another popular formula that is similar in its function, operating by comparing four neighbouring places on the basis of what they are famed for, in this case the characters of residents in all four instances:

Beccles for a puritan, Bungay for the poor,
Halesworth for a drunkard, and Bilborough for a whore.  

Braintree for the pure, and Bocking for the poor;
Cogshall for the jeering town, and Kelvedon for the whore.  

Rudgwick for riches, Green for poors,
Billinghurst for pretty girls, Horsham for whores.

As the three variants illustrate, the rhyme easily allows any other place to be commented on, due to its simple formula that is so typical of blason populaire. The use of the word *whore* alerts us to the fact that many insults against women traditionally contain a sexual element. Schulz has noted that “men tend to think of women in sexual terms, whatever the context, and consequently any term denoting women carries sexual suggestiveness to the male speaker”. Certainly in the case of the language used in football chants, this statement contains some truth, with women consistently being referred to in a sexual manner or regarding the level of their attractiveness. Most of the rhymes so far have situated women as the defining characteristic of a place, whether good or bad, alongside the main characteristics of other, primarily neighbouring, places. However, sometimes we find rhymes that make direct comparisons between the females of two different places, as in the following:

Halifax is made of wax,
And Heptonstall of stone;
In Halifax there’s many a pretty girl,
In Heptonstall there’s none.  

The rhyme has an integrative function through describing the women of Halifax as pretty, while it is divisive towards neighbouring Heptonstall, where such pretty women are said to be non-existent.

It is notable that the majority of expressions discussed here are focused on women, with few about men. In expressions of blason populaire where gender is used as a defining characteristic to comment on a place, it is the attributes of women that are used more frequently. Thiselton-Dyer wrote of this focus in his study of the folklore of women:

“Many of our old towns and villages throughout the country have long been famous for certain characteristics, and some of these which pay special honour to
the fair sex are embodied in local rhymes, which, if not in all respects quite complimentary, are generally quaint and good-humoured.”

It is certainly noteworthy that no comparable text exists about the traditional expressions pertaining to men, and the question has to be asked as to whether this is an oversight or because there are simply not as many expressions relating to men, or the ones that do exist are not as worthy of comment on the judgements that they make. This difference is not only evident in the blason populaire that is related to particular places but also when considering that which refers to both men and women as distinct groups in their own right.

The reliance on women to denote the negative characteristics of a place can be seen as an extension of the fact that there are reportedly more insult terms with which to describe women than men and that the general terms about women are more likely to acquire negative connotations over time. If there are more insult terms available about women it would suggest that there would similarly be more expressions of blason populaire based on them. Schulz has found that “… the largest category of words for designating humans in sexual terms are those for women – especially loose women”. This is something which is apparent in football chants, with the sexual behaviour of women serving as a reflection not only on the masculinity of the in-group and out-groups, but also as a statement on the entire community to which the expressions refer. Furthermore, even some insult terms that are generic and can be applied to males to insult their masculinity contain some reference to women’s sexual behaviour or a euphemistic reference to their body parts. In this way they automatically insult women as well as the person at whom they are directly aimed.

All of the football chants in this collection that refer to women, either directly or indirectly, and also older expressions of blason populaire, concentrate on either their attractiveness or their sexual behaviour, conforming to Romaine’s argument that many terms about women portray them as “sexual commodities”. This focus on female insults cannot wholly be blamed on a lack of comparable terms with which to describe men. Rather, it can be explained largely by a need to engage in typically male discourses of women and sex in order to display a superior masculinity.

**All boys together: male bonding**

Having examined the relationship between blason populaire and gender, I will now consider the ways in which football chants promote a positive masculine identity. The most obvious way to present this is to overtly celebrate it. The chants that function in this way are centred upon two key themes: the direct assertion of being male and a preoccupation with traditionally male-dominated pastimes, namely drinking, women, and fighting. For example, the chant “Hello, hello we are the [name/nickname] boys” and its variants is centred on the task of defeating one’s enemy while at the same time boldly asserting male solidarity:

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Hello, hello, we are the Barnsley boys,
Hello, hello, we are the Barnsley boys,
And if you are a Wednesday fan,
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Surrender or you’ll die,
We all follow the Barnsley.

(Sung to the tune of “Marching Through Georgia”.)

The masculinity is borne out through the direct assertion of being male in the first and second lines, i.e. “Hello, hello, we are the Barnsley boys”, while the use of the collective we unites them in the joint cause of supporting and representing their club. This solidarity is reinforced in the final line with “We all follow the Barnsley”. These elements of the chant provide support for the notion that football provides an opportunity for male bonding. Armstrong and Young have suggested that “‘Fandom activities’ are essentially a male domain, where male cohesion and an attributed masculinity to events are a much lauded state of affairs”. This chant, and others like it that promote masculinity in a positive way, certainly display the cohesion that Armstrong and Young speak of. Although the chant is primarily integrative, it is not without its divisive elements, with the third and fourth lines setting a confrontational tone towards the rivals. This serves the dual purpose of raising one’s own esteem and superiority, thus effectively deriding one’s rivals. The use of militaristic language, which is often employed to describe football support, as in “surrender or you’ll die” adds to the masculine nature of the chant while at the same time maintaining the use of the original version of the song as an army marching tune. The importance of defeating one’s enemy, in this case the rival group of fans, is also highlighted. Indeed, a verbal victory against rival fans can take on as much significance as the result on the pitch. Both sets of fans are engaged, metaphorically at least, in the predominantly male enterprise of war. Fighting is again used as a way of constructing a superior masculinity in the next example:

Fight, fight wherever you may be,
We are the boys from the West Country,
Fight you all wherever you may be,
We are the boys from the West Country.

(Sung to the tune of “Lord of the Dance”.)

The implication in this chant, which has variants from all over the country, is that the fans singing it, in this case Bristol City fans, are not afraid of any rival fans that they may meet. This lack of fear is indicative of superior strength, or at least a belief that they are physically superior. The repeated claim that they will fight anyone is juxtaposed with a direct statement of the Bristol City fans’ masculine persona: “we are the boys from the West Country”. Again, the direct assertion of being male is made through use of the word boys.

The presentation of a superior masculinity through fighting and ultimately victory is evident in another chant, which has become the anthem of Bristol City: “Drink Up Thee Cider”. As would be expected of an anthem, its main function is integrative:

Drink up thee cider,
Drink up thee cider,
For tonight we’ll merry, merry be,
We went down the Rovers,
To do the bastards over,
So drink up thee cider in the jar.

(Sung to the tune of “Drink Up Thy Cider”.)

The target of aggression is Bristol City’s biggest rivals, Bristol Rovers, and there is again the element of City fans being the superior men by defeating their rivals, as highlighted in the fourth and fifth lines “We went down the Rovers,/ To do the bastards over.” In this example, not only are Bristol Rovers fans defined as inferior through losing a physical battle with their City counterparts but also through the label City fans apply to them: bastards. This label will be discussed in detail presently but, in brief, if we consider the original meaning, it undermines the status of men as real men through the accusation that they are illegitimate. However, whether it still carries its original connotations is debatable. The masculine essence of the chant is further borne out through the focus on collective drinking and its consequences: “Drink up thee cider,/ Drink up thee cider,/ For tonight we’ll merry, merry be.” This expresses a shared bond amongst the Bristol City fans, again linking us back to Armstrong and Young’s idea that football support provides “male cohesion”. Intertwined with the expression of masculinity is also the stereotype of West Country inhabitants being cider drinkers, which is further emphasised by the fact that the original song “Drink Up Thy Cider” is in fact a West Country anthem.

The final two chants that are celebrations of masculinity are based on women. In the first of these, the virtues of the city of Manchester are extolled through the attractiveness of its women.

Oh Manchester is wonderful,
Oh Manchester is wonderful,
It’s full of tits, fanny and City,
Oh Manchester is wonderful.

(Sung to the tune of “Oh When the Saints Go Marching In”.)

The chant sums up all of Manchester’s supposedly best attractions, namely women and Manchester City, through the eyes of the presumably male football fan. It marks out football support, or at least support of Manchester City as a male domain, as Robson has noted in his discussion of a Millwall variant of the chant. Robson states that the “sexual - and sexist” references in it “… identify the interpretive fan community as definitively male (and therefore beyond feminization) in a celebration of virility.” Heterosexual masculinity is expressed through the sexualisation of women, achieved through their reduction to no more than their body parts, with their sexual organs becoming metonyms for the whole person. The fact that euphemisms are used reinforces the “lad” element to this chant. Although its language may cause it to be interpreted divisively towards women, its main function is integrative. Notwithstanding its sexist nature, it is supposed to be an apparently positive, if somewhat misguided, compliment about the women of Manchester. To be as high in priority
as the male fans’ love of Manchester City is some compliment indeed. The pursuit of women and football, according to this chant, go hand in hand.

The following chant, in contrast, is aimed directly at women, and in so doing is a blatant display of heterosexual masculinity.

Get your tits out,
Get your tits out,
Get your tits out for the lads,
Get your tits out for the lads.

(Sung to the tune of “Guide Me, Oh Thou Great Redeemer”.)

It is integrative for the group of men singing the chant, as it unites them in a celebration of heterosexual masculinity, highlighted by the use of lads in the final two lines and the concentration on sexual behaviour. However, it is divisive to those at whom it is aimed; the women are reduced to sexual objects and described solely in terms of how they can entertain men. In this instance, it was sung by Leeds United fans to a young woman who took part in a penalty shoot-out competition during half-time during a match with Manchester United. It is the only chant in the present collection that is aimed directly at women. When women are referred to in football chants it is normally to undermine the opposition, by calling them women or by insulting the alleged character of females from the place where they are from. However, in this example there is no opposition as such apart from the woman herself. By singling out an individual woman for humiliation through the chant it can be described as nothing other than divisive.

Ejaculating the rival

All of the chants discussed thus far pivot around the celebration of what is considered to be typical masculinity. I will now consider those chants in which a rival is derided through the undermining of their masculine identity. These can be primarily integrative, with their main function being to affirm the in-group’s superior identity; in these instances, the denigration of a rival can be so implicit that it involves the use of just one insult term amongst an otherwise self-aggrandising chant. Contrastingly, there are those chants that are blatantly divisive and where the intended insult is the main purpose behind its use. Marsh et al have stated that “although football fans have a few ways of expressing their own potential heterosexuality, they are far fewer than the rituals for denigrating the masculinity of others”. 21 This is certainly the case in the present data, where there are more chants, and thus necessarily more variation, that denounce rivals as having inferior masculinity to promote their own superiority in that area. All of the chants which I collected that operate by casting aspersions on the rival’s inadequate masculinity draw on themes of a sexual nature or use sexual language in order to highlight the supposed deficiency. This is immediately apparent from taking just a cursory glance at the insult terms concerning masculinity: e.g. bastard, cunt, queer, scrubber, slapper, twat, and wanker. Crolley and Long have suggested that the use of sexist language at football matches has declined, stating that “there are fewer reports of collective sexist chants
or wolf-whistles around football grounds today than there were a decade ago.” However, there remains a high degree of implicit sexism through the language used to deride one’s rivals. It is these terms that will now be examined.

_Bastard_ is a term frequently used in football chants. It is often used to refer to the rival team, including players, managers and fans, and the referee. It can be aimed at individuals – for example, the goalkeeper is frequently singled out for abuse when taking a goal kick with “you fat bastard” – or used collectively about a group, as in “shit on the bastards below”, which forms part of a longer chant. Chants including the word range from simple one-line repetitions such as “you dirty northern bastard” and “you fat bastard” to longer verses such as “who’s the bastard in the black?” It is not unusual for an adjective to precede _bastard_ in order to add further force to the insult issued. So a player might be a “greedy bastard”, a “dirty northern bastard”, or a “shit Welsh bastard.” It is not only used in solely divisive chants but is sometimes uttered in those that are primarily integrative where an insult may be aimed at the opposition as an aside. For instance:

> Forever and ever,
> We’ll follow our team,
> We’re Sheffield Wednesday,
> We are supreme,
> We’ll never be mastered,
> By no United bastard,
> We’ll keep the ____ flag flying high.
> (Sung to the tune of “Red Flag”.)

King has discussed the use of _bastard_ in football chants, stating that the “sexual deviance of the opposition has been imputed to the parents of those fans by the frequent use of the term ‘bastard’ in football songs, in which case the sexual promiscuity of the mother unmans the son”. Thus, the masculinity of the people at whom it is aimed is again attacked. However, it is possible that the use of _bastard_ today has lost much of its original meaning and is used without any intentional reference to illegitimacy, so frequently is it used as a general insult. Like many other swearwords, it may have become “‘demystified’ into mere forms of words”.

_Wanker_ is another insult term used to insult the perceived masculinity of rival fans. As an abuse term, it operates by suggesting sexual inadequacy. It is again a favourite one to apply to the referee and is normally aimed at specific individuals in response to on the pitch events. In the case of the referee it is used if he is considered to have made a bad decision, while if it is aimed at a player or manager it can be because he has used foul play or if a player is returning to play against his former club, or simply because he is disliked. The chant types that use _wanker_ as a form of abuse, in the case of the present data at least, are generally fixed, with little variation. Like the majority of those containing the word _bastard_, they are simple one-line repetitions such as:
[Name]’s a wanker.
(Sung to the tune of the “Hallelujah Chorus”.)

The referee’s a wanker.

In two further chants, the denigration of masculinity is achieved through labelling members of the opposition as parts of the female anatomy, using sexual slang. For instance, cunt is used in the first example of this type:

My old man said be a Wednesday fan,
I said, “Fuck off, bollocks, you’re a cunt.”
(Sung to the tune of “The Cock Linnet Song”.)

This chant is normally reserved to display the bitter rivalries between local teams, with the name of the club in the first line generally being that which has the greatest rivalry with the perpetrator’s club. So, for instance, in the three examples of this chant collected in the present data, two illustrate Barnsley’s hatred for Sheffield Wednesday and another illustrates Queens Park Rangers’ rivalry with Chelsea. Sutton has noted that “referring to women by synecdoche, reducing the being to the body part, is also among the worst of insults”.25 Hughes has also highlighted the word as one of the “most egregious taboo words in English”.26 This helps us to understand why it can be a particularly effective word with which to undermine masculine status when it is applied to a male, as in the example above. Firstly, the target at whom it is aimed is reduced to no more than a body part and secondly, a female body part at that. As a result of this there is the overall insult that the target is in fact a woman, and for a man to be signified as a woman is a sign of weakness, in the context of football chants at least. It must also be considered that the term is used because there is no comparable word carrying the same force that can be applied solely to males.27 Euphemism is again used in a chant aimed at Everton fans by their Manchester City rivals to ridicule their supposed inability to find employment:

Get to work you,
Get to work you,
Get to work you lazy twats,
Get to work you lazy twats.
(Sung to the tune of “Guide Me, Oh Thou Great Redeemer”)

Its power to insult operates in the same way as cunt by suggesting that the people (mainly male) at whom it is aimed are the female sexual organs.

I have already highlighted how the alleged sexual behaviour of the mother can be used as a means of assault on the male fan’s sexuality. King has noted the importance of the use of such insults based on sexual deviancy in football chants in emasculating the male:
The importance of these attributions of sexual deviance is that, although the fans merely draw uncritically on any term of abuse they can find with which to vilify their rivals, they almost invariably employ claims which are typical of the modern (bourgeois) order of knowledge. The opposition are sexual deviants because they are masturbators (and therefore both lacking in self-control and in normal sexual prowess) or their mothers were sexually uncontrolled women. Unlike the fans themselves, the opposition are not real men. 

This is evident in two further chants collected in the present research in which the topic of incest is introduced to highlight such apparent deviancy amongst the opposing fanbase. For example, one such chant implies that the opposing fans conduct sexual relations with their mothers:

Home to shag your mother,
You’re going home to shag your mother,
Home to shag your mother,
You’re going home to shag your mother.

(Sung to the tune of “Guantanamera”)

Na na na na – inbreds,
Na na na na – inbreds,
Na na na na, na na na na,
Na na na na – inbreds.
Your sister is your mother,
Your uncle is your brother,
You only shag each other,
The Barnsley family.

(Sung to the tune of “The Addams Family”)

The accusation of incest also brings with it the implication that the rival fans are somewhat simple.

It is not only the mothers of the fans whose (imagined) behaviour can reflect badly on them but also the behaviour of women in general from the town at which the abuse is aimed, providing clear parallels with older expressions of blason populaire. We have already seen how the conduct of women from a particular group or place can be a measure of the status of that group or place overall. In the same vein, so can the labelling of women in football chants, as the next two examples illustrate. Both are variants of the same chant type, which is generally used to deride supporters of a team on the basis of the local and regional stereotypes of the place. Only the different term used for “prostitute” distinguishes the two:

Town full of scrubbers,
You’re just a town full of scrubbers,
Town full of scrubbers,
You’re just a town full of scrubbers.

(Sung to the tune of “Guantanamera”.)
Both of these variants were applied to Barnsley fans on the occasions when they were used. Both scrubber and slapper can be used to describe a promiscuous female or, taken to the extreme, a prostitute. In the case of scrubber, McConville and Shearlaw highlight this when describing the word as a “term of abuse for a woman considered coarse or ‘promiscuous’. … In Liverpool it specifically means prostitute, and this sense underlies its use elsewhere in the UK”. However, in Barnsley scrubber has a further meaning. It can be used to describe people of both sexes who are dirty or unkempt. Thus, it is possible that when this chant type was used to refer to Barnsley people, the perpetrators thought they were expressing one sentiment while some of the rival fans at whom it was aimed may have interpreted it in an entirely different way. For the purposes of the present discussion of the term, we will adhere to the first meaning above, as a promiscuous woman and/or a prostitute, whilst also taking into consideration that it can have a secondary meaning. The allusion to the notion that Barnsley women are at best promiscuous and at worst prostitutes serves as a slight on the whole town, exemplified through the use of “town full of”. Such ways of referring to women serve two purposes in the construction of a masculine identity. Firstly, we again see the sexualisation of women from the male perspective. Describing women in such sexual terms portrays them as objects and thus as inferior to men. The resulting opposition between male and female, with female being subservient, results in a superior notion of masculinity. Secondly, as the women who are described as “scrubbers” and “slappers” in the chants come to represent the whole town or place that is being insulted, the status of the males of that town is negatively affected, with their supposed inability to control the sexual behaviour of the women undermining their masculinity. It is ironic, and in no small way hypocritical, that the fans can chant about women as no more than sexual objects in order to celebrate their own virility, yet women who are perceived to behave in a comparable way are stigmatised through chants which have the opposite function.

Summary

In the case of the football chants presented in this article, the language presents an image of the archetypal alpha-male. Through the language used, the fans create a tough male identity in order to achieve supremacy over their rivals, to verbally defeat them. By contrast, the rivals are defined as effeminate and/or deviant which, in the context of the football crowd, signals weakness for those at whom the chants are aimed, while at the same time serving to reinforce the alleged superior masculinity of those singing. At the football match, the masculinity that is being performed is more pronounced than would be found in other everyday contexts. For instance, where else would it be possible to sing to a female “Get your tits out for the lads” without causing outrage? This example, together with others discussed,
illustrates how football chants cross the boundaries of acceptability by using language that would not be tolerated in everyday use. The focus of football chants on gender reinforces their status as a crucial form of modern day blason populaire, taking over from the older village rhymes of the past and keeping the genre alive on a large scale in England today and presumably for many years to come.

Notes
1. Briefly, blason populaire is a folkloric term used to describe forms of traditional language, such as proverbs, sayings, rhymes, jokes and football chants, which offer comment on particular communities, groups or places. More detailed descriptions of the genre can be found in Scott 1975; Widdowson 1981; Green and Widdowson 2003; and Luhrs 2007.
2. The present article is based on football chants collected from English football grounds between 2003 and 2004 during this research.
8. Thiselton-Dyer, p. 130.
15. Schulz, p. 72.
16. For example, see the later discussions of bastard and cunt.
19. Armstrong and Young, p. 175.
27. See, for example, Sutton, pp. 279-296, and Brigid McConville, and John Shearlaw, The Slanguage of Sex, London, Macdonald, 1984.

References
Palmer, R., Britain’s Living Folklore, Felin Fach, Llanerch, 1995.