

Robert Cooperman

Matty Groves and Lady Arlen

“I won’t come home for my life, for I am but a serving lad
And you are Lord Arlen’s wife.”—“Matty Groves,” Fairport Convention

What does Reverend say about forbidden fruit?
Nothing more forbidden than her, nor sweeter.
No one would ever mistake me for the quality,
even after I scrubbed my fingernails, my face
soot-etched like the church’s lead-paned windows.
But when I smile, women swear the sun shines
on them alone, even if I’m a poor man’s son
and haven’t a poet’s bone in my body.

The bone I do have women crave, cry for,
even My Lord Arlen’s highborn wife,
when she saw me after church, New Year’s Day,
her husband off with a scullery maid, she sneered.

Now, we lie in My Lady’s big feather-soft bed,
my bull snorting and pawing to gore her again;
we explode as one, right before her husband bursts
into her chamber and demands I defend myself,
but I’m up and stabbing with my snee before
his sword can slash me; I pin the rich fop to the wall,

who thought his station his impenetrable armor,
the fool! But now I must escape across the border
or try for Spain or France, though Lady Arlen begs me
to pleasure her again, the mad woman using me
to rid herself of her troublesome Lord; before she screams
I raped her and murdered her dear Lord, I’d better run.

Lord Arlen, About To Die

“Matty struck the very first blow
And he hurt Lord Arlen sore.”—“Matty Groves,” English folk ballad

This is what comes of cleverly thinking I’d catch
my slut-wife with her low-born paramour,
the excuse I needed to kill her, and him,
and be rid of the harpy, shrill as a crow.
I feigned outrage when that servant-ass gasped—
as I was finishing with my own strumpet—
the toady yammered of his mistress and this Groves,
at it like a pair of yowling wildcats.

I thought they’d be asleep in each other’s
lust-spent arms, thus easy prey; I should’ve
summoned my armed serving men, but in my pride,
I believed a member of the lower orders
would beg for his life, as if it were worth anything.
“Little” Matty Groves was it? The man’s huge,
and sped like an attacking wolf, his blade out
before I could announce I’d give him an honorable
chance to earn his lady-love in a trial by combat.
But what do the serving class know of honor?
His blade was slashing before I could slap him
with my sword-edge, while he’d shit himself.

Instead, my blood’s draining like a spout-flooding
downpour; my wife kneels, pretending to cradle me
in grieving arms while she pokes her finger into
and widens the wound, screaming for my physician,
knowing I’ll be dead before that drunken dolt
can be separated from the serving girls his peg-o
is drawn to like a lodestone pointing
the way to the storied Northwest Passage.

Lady Arlen Sees Matty Groves

“Come home with me Little Matty Groves.”—“Matty Groves,” Fairport Convention

Sometimes, one simply must get dirty,
as when I spied Little Matty after church,
my husband too pre-occupied with his slut,
to listen to a minister, whose sermons, he smirked,

“Could put a stone to sleep.”

After the service, Matty Groves—the son
of one of My Lord’s tenants—was staring at me
as if tormented by glimpsing a nobleman’s feast
through lead-paned windows, until a guard orders
with the stomach-thrust of his lance-but,

“Move on!” Even more scornful than his master.

I could say I took pity on the bodice-bewitched boy,
but then I’d be a better Christian than I am.
What I did think was,

“Even if his fingernails are never free of manure,
and his face is chimney-smudged, he fills his trousers
like a stallion covering an eager broodmare.

When the square cleared of congregants,
I stalked up to the boy—my breasts bobbing
like ripe, red apples—and nodded for him to follow.

Like a summoned ghost, he fell in behind me,
anticipating the pleasures of a lifetime distilled
into a single afternoon; plus the consequences
My Lord would visit on him should he discover us,
after Arlen had sated his filthy appetites.

The Servant Lad: “The Ballad of Matty Groves”

I hid near enough to My Lady Arlen
to overhear her inviting Matty Groves
into her soft bed, when I’d thought her virtuous,
and here was I, a finer figure of a man,
yet she paid me no more attention
than a spavined nag bound for the knacker.

Groves is dirty as if he’d rolled in a pig sty,
and has not a word of poetry, nothing of song.
But she’s bewitched by his one attribute,
bloated like a bullfrog croaking the night away.
I would’ve shown her how a man can entertain
a lady, both with his words and his wooing.
She’d have none of it, so My Lady, you’ll pay
for dallying with dirt. I ran to inform My Lord
that his wife was putting the horns to him,
while he was finishing with a scullery drab.
He cursed me for interfering and for lying.

“When, My Lord, have I ever told you false?”
That stopped him from buttoning his britches
while the jade glared at me as if a duchess.
“If I speak lies, kill me. If I speak true,
reward me as you see fit.” I should’ve asked
for immediate payment, but followed him
to his wife’s boudoir, where he was cut down
by that rogue Groves, who fled as if all
the banshees of Ireland were baying for his blood.

And there was My Lady Arlen, her bed clothes
ripped, to reveal such whiteness, my breath
left my body as if I’d beheld the Virgin Herself.

“Bring me that murderer’s head!” she shrieked,
“and I’ll reward you as you deserve.”

Oh, she was good; no, excellent. Off I went.

Robert Cooperman's latest collection is *Just Drive* (Brick Road Poetry Press). His work has appeared previously in *The Homestead Review*, and in *The Sewanee Review* and *Slant*.