

Ballad: Mister William

In "Mister William," a ballad from "The Bab Ballads," we are introduced to the tale of Mr. William, a character who leads a life of respectability and kindness but is tempted into committing a crime purely to experience vice. He rationalizes that a single act of wickedness after a lifetime of virtue will not tarnish his reputation, comparing his planned sin to the innocent misbehaviors of a child, suggesting that minor sins can accumulate over time if not addressed. William decides against petty theft, deeming it beneath him, and instead chooses to forge a will, redirecting substantial wealth to himself, believing the magnitude of the temptation justifies the act.

However, the law does not view temptation as a mitigating factor, and William is caught and sentenced to life imprisonment, a fate he finds unbearable. His genteel upbringing makes the harsh realities of prison life particularly difficult to endure. He becomes the subject of sympathy from both prison guards and clergymen, the latter of whom approach a government official advocating for his better treatment due to his status as a gentleman with significant personal wealth. They argue that prison is unduly harsh on someone of his background, emphasizing his need for a more comfortable and dignified existence, even within the confines of his incarceration.

This ballad humorously critiques the justice system and societal attitudes towards crime and punishment during the Victorian era, highlighting how wealth and social status could influence perceptions and treatment. The story unfolds with a blend of wit and satire, illustrating the flawed logic of Mr. William's experiment with crime and the equally flawed compassion of those who believe his genteel background should afford him special privileges in prison. The narrative presents a clever commentary on morality, justice, and the social hierarchies of the time.