

When Form Meets Desire: The Transformation of the
Early Nineteenth-Century Gallows Broadside

By
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Abstract

Formerly a relatively stable genre, the format of the British gallows broadside underwent a transformation in the early half of the nineteenth century. A collision between external forces and the desires of a burgeoning working class manifested on the page as a veritable Frankenstein's monster, stitched together within a "more is more" framework. My thesis explores this period of transition, beginning with the traditional ballad format of prior centuries before analyzing a hybrid prose/ballad broadside published around 1815. By 1825, a new *mise en page* emerges that minimizes the ballad in favor of assigning valuable real estate to sensational headlines, custom woodcuts, and detailed accountings of the events surrounding the crime, trial, and/or the execution itself. The tumultuous alterations mirror a similarly tumultuous alteration of the working classes via their forced exodus from the countryside to the city in search of work. The revised layout reveals influences from both the newspapers that were under assault from the "taxes on knowledge" as well as the increasingly popular (but expensive) novel and its preference for Gothic content. Compellingly, we also see the emergence of working-class resistance with doomed convicts brashly challenging the authority of the state. And all the while, profit-driven printers jumped at the opportunity to satiate the demands of their customers (in exchange for a mere penny or two). The gallows broadside thus mediates the social and economic transformations of nineteenth-century England, providing critical cultural insights on the plight of the working classes.

Acknowledgements

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And, of course, I owe the greatest thanks to my husband, Michael (aka "the pit crew"), for taking care of me during this project. Meals and refreshments magically appeared at my desk when time or an empty stomach were deemed irrelevant by thoughts that compelled my attention elsewhere. He patiently listened and offered feedback when I fought through the stickier parts, and I am certain that the poor man knows more about nineteenth-century broadsides than any other software engineer on the planet.

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1 Introduction

When I began my research on gallows broadsides, it was purely by chance, meeting the basic due diligence required to ascertain the various literatures available in nineteenth-century England. I encountered broadsides in a perfunctory list alongside newspapers, chapbooks, penny dreadfuls, novels, plays, and poetry – to name a few. Consisting of one sheet of cheap paper with sensationalist headlines and gawdy illustrations accompanied by questionable prose and even worse poetry, broadsides – simply stated – do not impress. If anything, they offend, and I was instantly repulsed by the seemingly salacious revelry in matters of gore, murder, and overt profiteering off of public execution. I decided against further investigation and have not stopped writing about broadsides since, a paradox best explained by an almost reflexive refusal on my part to embrace prejudice without further inquiry. And the more I looked, the more I felt compelled to understand and contextualize this enigma of popular culture.

My investigation revealed glaring gaps in my knowledge of nineteenth-century literature including the broadside's well-established ubiquity before disappearing almost completely from the modern record. The *gallows* broadside held the rank of the most popular literature of the period – not the beloved novel or any collection of poetry – but a hastily composed document on paper so frail, we have only a fraction of the millions that were printed. So how is it that a text of such immense popularity can simply go away? It is one thing for a fad to come and go, but this “fad” reigned for a few hundred years with its golden age dominating the early- to mid-1800s. And yet, broadsides are not studied or communicated consistently within scholarly circles that, in principle, are deeply invested in extrapolating culture from literature. Even if a scholar dedicates their research to high literature, they cannot exclude the influence of popular literature given that the one is inextricable from the other; all cultural forms operate in concert with one another,

defining and redefining their roles in response to changes from within society and without. So, is the reticence (or absence) of further inquiry resolved by the simple observation that the quality of broadsides was commonly poor and therefore unappealing? The answer to that question is anything but simple as evidenced by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars who also struggled to assign broadsides a place within the literary retinue, ultimately relying upon subjective assessments to determine the cultural and literary value (or lack thereof) of individual broadside texts (Brown 68-69, 72; McDowell 39, 45, 47).

In fact, the closer one looks, the more disparate the scholarly viewpoints become – even in the modern era. For example, my claim on the golden age of broadsides existing within the nineteenth century would likely be refuted by Patricia Fumerton and Anita Guerrini whose compilation of essays concerning broadsides produced between 1500-1800 claims that the genre “had largely disappeared by the nineteenth century” (8). I am not deterred by these incongruencies. Rather, I see any incoherence as symptomatic of a medium that stubbornly resists norms due to its unique capacity to adapt multiple literary and cultural trends into its format and content. As such, broadsides need to be approached with a sensitivity to these emerging and evolving trends and to what those trends might tell us about the fluid nature of the culture producing them.

My contribution to the study of broadside “trends” centers on the transformation of its format and messaging in the early half of the nineteenth century and what those changes may say about British culture more broadly. My research reveals how a relatively stable medium can reinvent itself when pressured by the dynamic interplay between governmental, economic, and social factors. I will present evidence demonstrating that the gallows broadside evolved from a didactic narrative supporting state-sanctioned corporal punishment to a highly informative,

transgressive, and entertaining news source that appealed to the working class' desire for diversion from the toils of urban living at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. While not openly or obviously radical in content, these forgotten ephemera, nevertheless, served as a link to the lost traditions of an agricultural past and as a unifier in an uncertain present that would ultimately drive ever-increasing literacy rates and civic engagement, providing momentum for the series of reforms and protests that would (ironically) culminate in the abolishment of public executions.

Existing broadside scholarship has made important inroads on communicating the significance of broadsides in relation to its role within society, leading to the coining of what has come to be known as “broadside culture.”¹ When considered as its own culture, scholars can more readily identify and recognize the complex network of relationships between human and non-human aspects of the broadside. On the one hand, there are the printers with their teams of writers, illustrators, compositors, and hand-pressmen who collaborated to produce the physical broadside which itself was a product of the evolving technologies behind the press, paper, and ink. Then there were the street peddlers hawking broadsides on street corners, using their performative skills to lure in customers and whet buyers' appetites to purchase their own physical copy of the tale. The crimes, convicts, victims, witnesses, judges, juries, executioner, court proceedings, and day of execution all served as inspiration for content. And then there is the audience itself who both affected and was affected by the information included in the broadside with printers, writers, and illustrators increasingly crafting content in response to audience demand. This list is far from complete, providing only a sampling of some of the more

¹ Mid twentieth century scholars, Richard Altick and Leslie Shepard, separately delve into understanding the broader contexts of broadside culture, and popular literature more generally, that align with later concepts of textual cultures as described in Robert Darnton's “history of the book” and D.F. McKenzie's “sociology of the text.”

obvious interrelationships. Forces deemed more external also played an important role in broadside culture as I will demonstrate under the section, A “Fortunate” Tax.

More recent scholarship engages in close readings of broadside texts to expand upon a fascination with true crime and a working class that was increasingly more engaged in understanding the power of the state. Ellen O’Brien’s research on the transgressive aesthetics within broadsides (or ballads, as she refers to them) reveals that “many ballads [...] unequivocally contested conventional morality and capital punishment” (19), refuting established assumptions by “those few modern scholars to explore Victorian crime ballads [that] have read their moral advice and warnings as allegiance to symbolic law” (19). O’Brien’s work points to the multiple layers of meaning and the transgressive agendas represented on the page that some scholars have neglected in favor of a reading that dismisses contradictory information in order to focus on an interpretation that prioritizes the overt themes of morality and law and order.

In a similar vein, Cameron Nunn’s work on the representation of male youth in nineteenth-century crime broadsides identifies a desire to create empathy in the audience by depicting the convict as a sympathetic character. By rehumanizing juvenile delinquents, “the broadside opens up [...] the opportunity to reinterpret the convicted youth as a son, brother, apprentice, lover, or even a keen-witted satirist. They linked convicted youths back to their communities and the diverse emotional and social relationships that existed within those communities” (Nunn 469). Rather than demonize and ostracize these boys, broadsides honored their humanity and validated those individuals connected to them. While Nunn does not make a direct connection to a transgressive agenda behind these modifications, my argument will show that printers were responding to the working class’ desire to defy their assigned status as the

criminal class, a status that was constantly forced upon them via policing and discriminatory legislation.

Popular sentiments towards the penal system were in a state of flux as evidenced by Dorice Elliott's work on transportation broadsides.² A tension emerged "between punishments based on the spectacle of brutality – primarily hanging – and newer methods aimed at reforming and rehabilitating wrongdoers into productive citizens through surveillance and discipline" (Elliott 238). Printers tasked with navigating this shifting social dynamic seemed to adapt a strategy that appealed to both the old and the new by reinforcing the existing structure while also questioning it. Elliott encapsulates this dichotomy as: "Like the crowds who watched public hangings, the readers of execution broadsides might absorb the overt moral message about the sinfulness of crime and the power of the state to punish it, but they could also read the executed criminal as a hero who defied such power" (238). Framing the convict as a hero afforded executed individuals a martyr-like status in death that would have been unavailable to them in a reformed penal system intent upon rehabilitation. As the general public became less convinced of the appropriateness of execution as punishment (except in the case of murder), the state's continued application of the practice showed a barbarism that was out of touch with contemporary ideas on acceptable forms of punishment.

O'Brien, Nunn, and Elliott identify specific rhetorical effects of nineteenth-century broadsides that add to the argument that these texts were doing far more than simply relaying didactic messages to their audience. What we are seeing is the emergence of a transgressive rhetoric hiding in plain sight and couched between the familiar rhetorics of contrite confessions

² Transportation was an alternate sentence to execution in which the convict was "transported" to far away colonies (like America and then Australia) for seven to fourteen years, typically. Due to the Bloody Code, crimes like theft technically qualified for execution but such executions for petty crimes were rare and very unpopular.

to God and acquiescence to state-mandated punishment. While some readers (then and now) might be able to gloss over these conflicting details as merely adding flavor to the story, it is nevertheless remarkable that there is a greater and more pointed presence of these transgressive moments occurring in the early part of the century than had appeared in the ballads of preceding centuries.

My research arises out of and builds upon the construct of broadside culture by querying the changes in format that begin appearing roughly between 1795 and 1825. While current scholarship has identified social trends emphasizing the appeal of true crime and emerging transgressive interests within the working class, it has not explored what *changed* between earlier gallows broadsides versus those of the nineteenth century. It is as though the broadside is regarded as a distinct text within scholar-defined periods rather than as a text that spans centuries. As a point of comparison, the novel rapidly evolves alongside writerly invention and the technological advances associated with printing and papermaking in the nineteenth century, but I have yet to see an argument that claims the novel has no relationship to its forebears. Rather, researchers look back in time to track the novel's changes in format, giving credit to Aphra Behn's short prose in *Oroonoko* as an early example of the novel form that would shift towards the epistolary form used by writers like Sir Walter Scott in the eighteenth century. Jane Austen begins her writing career (*Lady Susan*) adopting the epistolary form before remaking the novel into a form that is still relevant and recognizable to modern readers. In two sentences, I have given the barest details of a history that now spans five centuries. The history of the novel reveals that it exists on a continuum while the broadside appears to exist in discrete time periods, and it is this oversight that my essay seeks to redress via an analysis of the gallows broadside's transformation at the turn of the eighteenth into the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Any study that intends to examine the sociocultural factors that effect change is necessarily hampered by the scope of an individual project, and I acknowledge that my research is in no way an exhaustive assessment of the changes in format to the gallows broadside across centuries. Nor is it comprehensive of the significance and meaning behind those changes. Instead, my intention is to offer an opening into further exploration of what is driving the changes to the gallows broadside genre with a heavier focus on the early part of the nineteenth century.

2 A “Fortunate” Tax

During and following the French Revolution (1789-1799), British officials cast a leery eye toward their own burgeoning working class and the increasingly outspoken middle classes. The state sought new strategies for preventing a like revolution on British soil and a key initiative was to increase the stamp tax on newspapers in 1789, 1797, 1815, and 1819 due to a desire in some writers and publishers to engage in critical reporting that did not always cast the British state in a favorable light (Altick 379; Tucker, Unwin, et.al.). The idea behind the tax was to limit the circulation and the access on both national and foreign affairs in order to prevent the organization of individuals around any ideas of insurrection. Tom Paine’s two-part pamphlet, *The Rights of Man* (1791, 1792), and William Cobbett’s weekly newspaper, *Political Register* (1802-1817), were two such sources of radical propaganda that the state relentlessly worked to suppress. Noteworthy to the focus of this paper is the fact that gallows broadsides were exempt from the tax as they were regarded as being *supportive* of the state’s penal system. The net effect was that stamp taxes financially prevented the working class from gaining easy access to news *except* through crime broadsides whose content centered largely around infractions *within their*

own class and the associated punishments: fines, imprisonment, transportation,³ or death. The British state's enforced taxation on newspapers but not on broadsides created an opportunity for profit-minded printers to use and adapt the broadside genre into a hybrid beast of sensationalist agendas, indulgently feeding the emotions of the masses and, ultimately, fueling civic outrage against working-class inequities.

Broadsides developed alongside the printing press and afforded printers and the general public the ability to, respectively, produce and buy literature cheaply. Broadside production is first referenced in 1520 but our earliest extant copy is dated to 1535 (Shepard 45). They are frequently referred to as broadside ballads due to the initial and enduring practice of capturing orally sung ballads in print which kept popular ballads from disappearing when new lyrical narratives came to the fore. Thus, their initial role was to create a permanent record of orature that otherwise would have persisted only as long as ballad-singers chose to sing them (or remembered them).⁴ Leslie Shepard adds:

Broadsides preserved something of a tradition at a time when folk memory was beginning to fail. Many news items excited a sense of wonder and awe, and much of topicality was not unmixed with superstition. The verse form itself, as well as the music of the ballads, kept city dwellers in touch with an older, more mysterious past (46).

³ Transportation referred to a forced exile rather than imprisonment or death. Britain used their colonies (initially America and then Australia) as dumping grounds for convicts when the death sentence appeared as too harsh a penalty (as in the case for petty theft) or as being unpopular with a sympathetic public. The duration of the exile was commonly seven years.

⁴ Ascertaining the authenticity of ballads in print in terms of their accurate reproduction of original orature has presented scholars with something of a holy grail quest. Frances James Child's, *The English and Scottish Ballads*, (1857-58) is one such example of an "authentic" collation of broadsides that under closer scrutiny reveals a selection criteria that is ultimately "aesthetic, stylistic, and subjective" (Brown 72).

Ballads were no longer the sole territory of live performance; they were available for purchase and could be tucked away and available for recall at a moment's notice within one's own home, enabling buyers to reconnect with an agricultural past actively being erased by an industrial present.

The narratives contained within ballads ran the gamut from myth and folklore to the criminal, employing didactic messaging intended to reinforce cultural norms and behaviors. While some crime ballads did record factual data, the focus remained on incursions against social norms and the resulting penal repercussions. Importantly, printers exercised considerable poetic license when translating actual events onto the page. Members of the public with the financial and educational access required to buy newspapers or peruse legal documents understood the folk tradition accompanying broadside ballads and, arguably, could readily distinguish between fact and fiction. The working class, however, had limited discretionary funds (if any) and disparate levels of literacy and education (if any). As such, working-class readers “were thought to be easily affected by sensual imagery, as their brains were assumed to associate words on the page with concrete, external objects”; whereas genteel “readers could remain aloof by rising to the logic of abstraction” (Secord 13).

Other than the religious truths communicated through the Church and the Bible, broadside ballads offered one of the few outlets for the working class to comprehend their world and their role within it. Shepard adds that “the popular literature of the streets held the last hints of a secret that mankind once knew – the meaning of religion and everyday affairs, the balance between tradition and topicality, the wonder and mystery of the humblest life” (46). For the working class, broadsides were not mere entertainment; *they were a resource for understanding their purpose in life.*

When government legislators chose to increase the stamp tax, they, effectively, forced a centering of attention around working-class deviation due to the high representation of working-class individuals affected by the penal system. Officials believed that they were creating a closed-loop system by keeping the working class within a controlled bubble of information, but in reality, they created the space for a system to thrive on the communication of crime and execution which ultimately had the *opposite* effect of subduing the working class. “When a force manipulates another, it does not mean that it is a cause generating effects; it can also be an occasion for other things to start acting” (Latour 60). In this instance, the state does not appear to foresee the economic opportunity that their intervention made possible. Crime sells but murder and execution *sell-out*, attracting the attention of opportunistic printers and hawkers looking to score a profit. The price of broadsides was stable at one to two pence apiece, so increased production was key to earning profits. Production follows demand and with printers limited to the broadside medium as one of the only ways to reach the rapidly expanding working class (and avoid the prohibitive stamp tax), they focused their efforts on refining that which sold best: the gallows broadside.

3 A Relatively Stable Genre

In order to appreciate the nineteenth-century changes in format, it is necessary to consider earlier versions of the gallows broadside ballad medium.⁵ Figure 1 is an example of a ballad from the late eighteenth century⁶ (approximately 1780) and provides an important point of

⁵ The digital broadside collections I have consulted to-date include the English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA), Harvard Library, Bodleian Library, and the British Library.

⁶ This is by no means the only format seen in this period. Some broadsides did not have any illustrations. Some were considerably shorter in length and sold in narrow strips (slip-ballads). Some used prose over poetry; though there are far fewer examples of prose suggesting that the ballad itself had a strong appeal for the buyer.

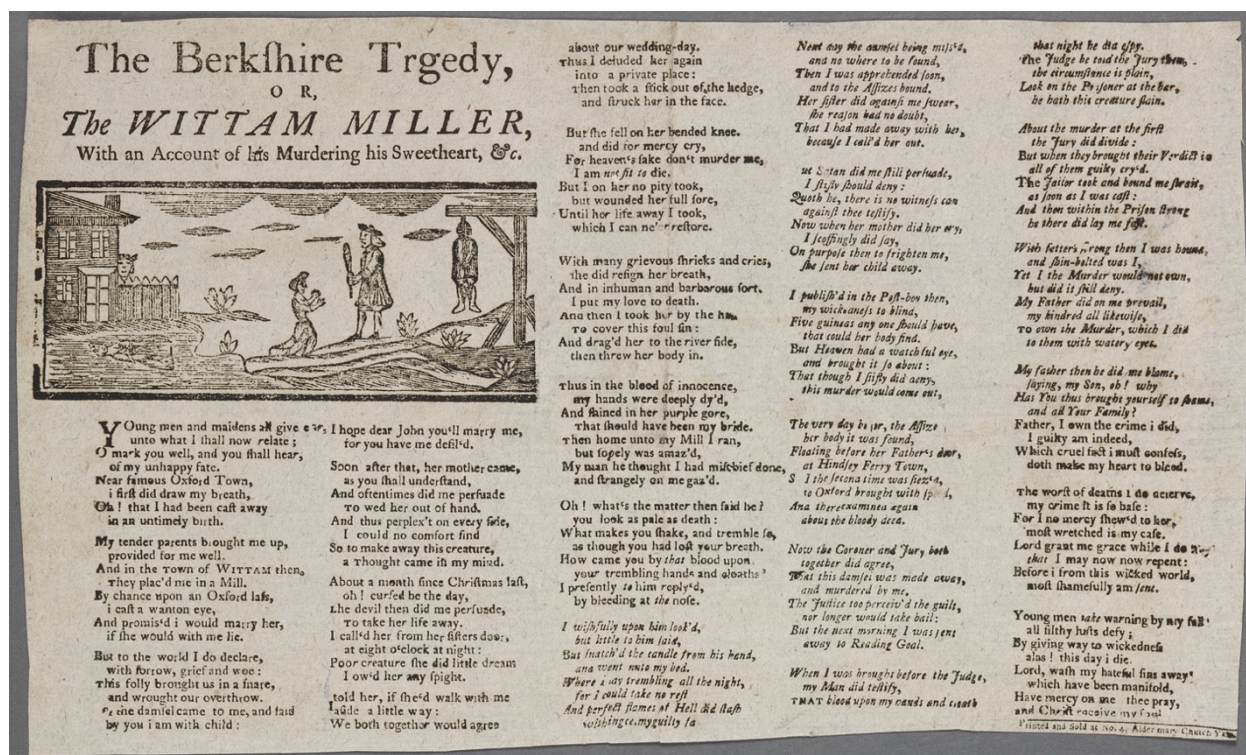


Figure 1: Gallows Broadside Ballad 1780; Courtesy of EBBA (32449), University of California, Santa Barbara

comparison when considering the changes that begin appearing after the stamp tax increases.

This broadside is characterized by a lengthy ballad with a bolded and enlarged title accompanied by a woodcut illustration featuring a continuous narrative:⁷ the victim's body washing ashore, the moment of the assault, and the hanging of the convict. The format is a hybrid between white letter and black-letter, making use of the roman type associated with the former and a multi-column landscape layout associated with the latter which gives the text an old-timey look.⁸ This is a tale of a lovers' tryst gone awry with the young lady becoming pregnant and the gentleman responsible choosing to murder her rather than marry her. He is eventually caught, confesses to the crime, and evidently executed via the scaffold as revealed by the illustration. It is noteworthy that the woodcut closely follows the ballad which is a strong indication that it was created

⁷ The incorporation of at least two different scenes of a narrative into one illustration or painting.

⁸ White letter was introduced in the mid seventeenth century where it was initially associated with political tracts. Its use of roman type was arguably more legible as compared to the gothic type of black-letter. (McShane 209-10).

specifically for this criminal incident. Creating woodcuts took time and required skilled labor which made them costly to produce.⁹ Murders attracted the most public attention, translating into a higher volume of sales and making the additional costs of production viable and financially rewarding for printers.

Beyond the economic, performative, and moralistic aspects of the ballad, it is also important to note when information is communicated that is educational in nature, specifically in reference to matters of the state. While the ballad mostly adheres to the familiar narrative of the treacherous lover and relaying the circumstances leading up to and including the crime, it also provides details (albeit slim) on the court proceedings. The following stanzas provide a cursory understanding of the players and their actions during the proceedings of the local Assizes.¹⁰

The very day befor, the Affize
 her body was found,
 Floating before her Father's door,
 at Hindfey Ferry Town,
 I the fecond time was fiez'd,
 to Oxford brought with fp[ee]d,
 And there examined again about the bloody deed.
 Now the Coroner and Jury both
 together did agree,
 That this damfel was made away,

⁹ To save on costs, printers commonly relied upon a selection of generic woodcut illustrations that could be reused on different print runs until they inevitably wore out and could not reproduce the image with sufficient clarity.

¹⁰ Assizes were twice yearly (spring and fall) court proceedings held in the counties outside Middlesex (former county of London). Justices appointed and based in London would travel to the outer counties to preside over criminal cases and determine sentencing for convicts.

and murdered by me.

The Justice too perceiv'd the guilt,

nor longer would take bail:

But the next morning I was fent

away to Reading Gaol (“The Berkfire Trgedy”).

Real locations are identified by name (Hindsey Ferry Town and Reading Gaol), and the Coroner, Jury, and Justice are assigned with the roles of determining cause of death and making a judgment regarding the suspect. The concept of bail is introduced as well as the Justice’s right to refuse it and to remand the prisoner to jail. Two subsequent stanzas introduce the jury’s role in deciding guilt and delivering their Verdict to the judge. No information whatsoever is provided on the gallows or the convict’s impending death – no date, no location,¹¹ and no description of the event. Instead, the audience is given an oblique reference to his fate: “The worft deaths I do deserve” and a warning to other youths to avoid the “wickedness” of his crime with a final appeal to God to have mercy on his soul. The ballad ends like a tragic fairytale with an enigmatic death that, in the real-life version of events, was very visible and very public.

If we go back even earlier, let’s say 200 hundred years, to a gallows broadside ballad from 1589 (see Figure 2), we again find a convict’s first-person confession, references to actual locations (Yorke, London, Newgate [Prison]), and cursory information on the court proceedings:

Before the judges when I was brought,

[...]

¹¹ While executions certainly could and did take place in close proximity to prisons, the prison housing the convict could not be assumed to be the default location of the convict’s execution. For example, Newgate Prison sent their convicts to neighboring Tyburn for execution until 1783. There were also portable scaffolds or scaffolds constructed for the occasion that were then torn down following the event. Preferred sites of execution would be common knowledge despite the lack of an explicit reference in the ballad.

Be sure I had a carefull thought,
 Nine score inditements and seaventeene,
 againft me there was read and feene.
 And each of these was fellony found,
 [...]

For this I was condemned that day (“Luke Huttons lamentation”).

Huttons is brought before the judge where he is found guilty of felony charges on all 197(!) indictments and is subsequently condemned to death. The extended title does link the execution to a location, stating that the convict was “condemned to be hanged at Yorke” (“Luke Huttons lamentation”), but there is no mention of the events on the day of execution. While this *could* be attributed to the limitations of the first-person point of view adopted in both the 1589 and 1780 ballads, I would be remiss at stopping there. What we are seeing is a recurring pattern spanning at least 200 years¹² that firmly places the blame on the convict for their crime and, crucially, for their ensuing execution. The bulk of the ballad is about the convict’s guilt over the crimes he has committed as well as his unrelenting regret at the horrible mistakes he has made.¹³ The court appointees and, by extension, the state are portrayed as being fair, and their actions are sanctioned *by the convict* as justified and appropriate to the crime(s). Importantly, the convict’s fate is *his* fault, and he unequivocally owns all the blame.

Prior to 1800, the gallows broadside ballads that I have analyzed to-date demonstrate a consistency in how they (1) communicate a very similar message to their audience, (2) mediate

¹² This figure is likely more in the realm of 300 years, but I am limited by the available archive of gallows broadsides produced between 1500-1800.

¹³ Joy Wiltenburg also notes that the ballad conveys Hutton as “a witty young adventurer,” freeing prisoners he was responsible for guarding and commemorating his nineteenth birthday with nineteen acts of robbery (185).

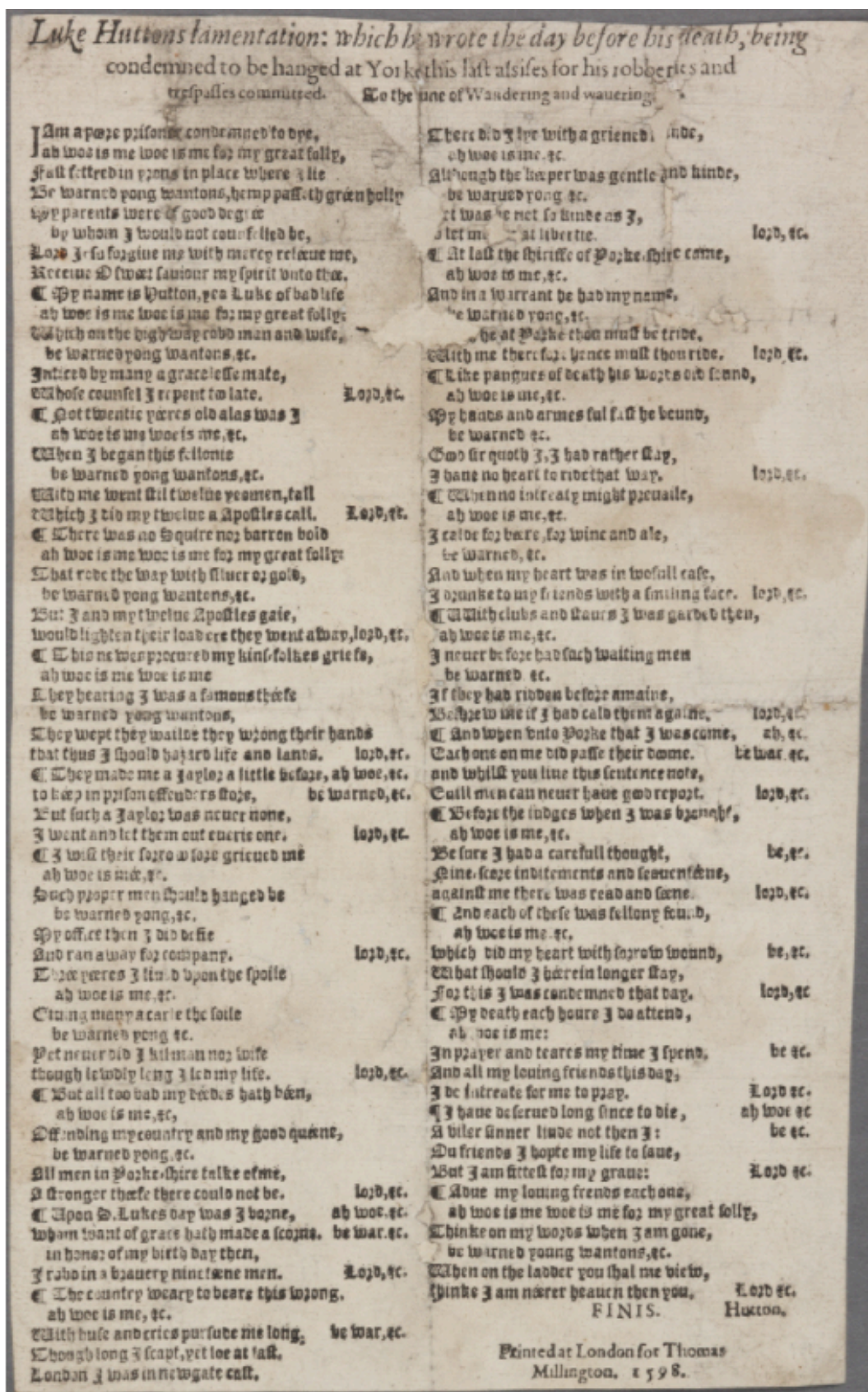


Figure 2: Gallows Broadside Ballad 1598; Courtesy of EBBA (32346), University of California, Santa Barbara

the circumstances contributing to each convict's death and (3) control the amount of information given to the audience. Effectively, the ballad instructs the audience on how to think and feel about the crime, the convict, and the execution via its narrative, didactic, illustrative, and performative features. It also implies what should and should not be freely communicated concerning the execution itself: the *nonverbal* illustration may portray the means of death while the *written* account of the execution is conspicuously missing. Thus, the spoken and written word remains focused on the crime and the convict's guilt and not on the state's very public, violent, and lethal assertion of power. Pushing the envelope even further, we can add that the convict has symbolically hanged him or herself as we do not see an executioner or a representative of the state presiding over the execution. The illustration only shows the convict hanging from the scaffold. These omissions point to the controls in place (whether social, official, or both) over the discourse of execution within a ballad: that which may be witnessed and seen did not translate into that which may be freely expressed in a permanent record. How this pattern of omission was enforced or not is outside the scope of this thesis, but the staying-power and stability of the resulting tradition speaks directly to the level of disruption required to completely transform the genre in the nineteenth century.

4 A Genre in Transition

While the gallows broadside ballad enjoyed the pecuniary benefits of both stable costs and a stable readership upon entering the nineteenth century, its prose cousins - newspapers and novels - were in a state of flux. The stamp duties crushed demand for individual copies of newspapers and pamphlets; however, it is crucial to note that they did not crush the demand for news. Rather, Londoners found workarounds in the popular (and illegal) practice of "borrowing"

newspapers at an hourly rate as well as forming “newspaper societies” comprised of multiple families that shared the cost of a single subscription (Altick 323). The working class also pooled their resources to access news. In one example, “workingmen clubbed together to buy [Cobbett’s radical *Political Register*] and read it aloud in the alehouses” (Altick 324). Nevertheless, news publications were forced to shut down when declining revenues could not support operating costs.

The novel also experienced its own surge in demand driven by popular writers like Sir Walter Scott. However, publishers kept prices high to cater to the wealthier classes and to manage the costs of production – including an acute paper shortage that doubled the price of paper between 1793 and 1801 (Altick 262). And, like newspapers, books were also assessed stamp duties. Circulating libraries offered one alternative to ownership for those that could afford the subscription rate, but for those with less discretionary income, number-publications, or serials, allowed consumers to buy a novel in financially manageable parts over time.¹⁴ An additional bonus of the serials was their incorporation of illustrations. Though it may be foreign to a modern reader to envision illustrations being as important to a buyer as the content of the prose, this was not the case for nineteenth-century buyers who were readily impressed with illustrations that captured dramatic scenes referenced in the text.

With a workweek spanning Monday through Saturday and workday shifts ranging between fourteen to sixteen hours per day, it is tempting to assume that the working class did not have the time or energy to devote to reading (Altick 87). However, there were limited options for public recreation in the cities that, as a whole, had not yet implemented parks, museums, or art

¹⁴ However, most serials were not cheaper when the total costs were compared to a completed book, and, in some notable examples, buyers would have been better served saving up the money to buy a completed book instead of the ultimately costlier serial version (Altick 265).

galleries. Reading offered an alternative to the vices of brothels, bars, and gambling - and provided the working class with a desperately needed diversion during their limited time off from a grueling workweek (Altick 88):

[Reading] was increasingly crucial because under the conditions of industrial life the ability to read was acquiring an importance it never had before. The popular cultural tradition, which had brought amusement and emotional outlets to previous generations, had largely been erased. The long hours and the monotony of work in factory and shop, the dismal surroundings in which people were condemned to spend such leisure as they had, the regimentation of industrial society with its consequent crushing of individuality, make it imperative that the English millions [working class] should have some new way of escape and relaxation, some new and plentiful means of engaging their minds and imaginations. Books and periodicals were the obvious answer (Altick 4).

Before the mid-century removal of stamp taxes and the technological advancements in production that allowed for greater affordability and access newspapers and books, the working class had limited access to print sources that offered news and recreation.

The broadside was uniquely positioned to meet the working-class public's demand for news, storytelling, recreation, and culture – and to do so on the cheap. Its stable cost structure and immunity from stamp taxes afforded printers the opportunity to reexamine and reinvent the format and the content. Borrowing from the successes of the newspaper and book trades, broadside printers adapted a genre that had prioritized the ballad for centuries into something new that managed to compress aspects of the newspaper and the novel into a single sheet of paper, emphasizing prose, sensationalism, narrative, commentary, informative news, and graphic

illustrations. Importantly, broadsides retained their appeals to pathos given that traditional “[n]ewspaper reports did not usually provide a societal coping mechanism, a reassuring means of understanding the motivations and behaviour of offenders” (King 77). Where newspapers “rarely offered their readers a neat means of resolving their anxieties” (King 77), the broadside readily supplied its trademark didacticism to set everything to rights in the end with a contrite convict confessing their guilt and accepting their fate within both the prose and the obligatory ballad.

Figure 3 represents an early hybrid form of the prose and ballad combination, thus serving as what I would classify as a transitional piece. As the year of publication is not indicated on the text, a range from 1813-1838 has been suggested by the Bodleian Library which corresponds to the printer, James Catnach’s, years in publishing.¹⁵ However, upon closer examination, it appears that the soldiers or officials accompanying the convict are wearing long-coats and tricorne hats, a fashion more closely associated with early part of the 1800s. In addition, there is the repeated use of the long “s” in the text,¹⁶ a relic of prior centuries that is rarely seen in nineteenth-century broadsides. Collectively, this would suggest that this broadside is representative of one of James Catnach’s earlier works.¹⁷

The newspaper and the novel’s influence are already apparent in the layout changes with a greater amount of real estate given to the prose section than to the ballad. Also notable is the difference in font size between the two. Rather than edit out details from the prose to allow the ballad to have its own column, the ballad’s verses are composed in a much smaller font

¹⁵ James Catnach would come to be known as the most famous of the Seven Dials’ District printers who specialized in the production of gallows broadsides. If Figure 4 is indeed an early example of his work, it provides an important reference point for the rapid evolution of the genre that would emerge in the mid-1820s.

¹⁶ Notable exception: The fine print sections do not use the long “s” which suggests that the small type was likely newer and in line with emerging type-setting trends.

¹⁷ *The Times* reports the execution occurring in December of 1823.

HARDING B/4(243)

THE
TRIAL
AND
Execu-
tion



OF
J. Pallet,
AT
Chelmsford,
FOR THE

MURDER OF J. MUMFORD:

JOHN PALLET was indicted for the wilful Murder of James Mumford, by beating him with a stick and thereby Killing him.

Robert Smith, a publican, deposed that he was in the lane leading from Widdington to Quendon on Monday night last, when he found a body lying in the middle of the road. He alighted and raised it: the man groaned, but did not speak. Witness set him down by the bank-side, and then went back to Widdington and procured a horse & cart, the people with which went off while he went to another person. On his following them he found them with the prisoner, who was carrying the body; he reached just when the other men had stopped the prisoner, and were questioning him as to where he got the body.

John Read, carpenter, was one of those to whom Smith communicated the alarm, and went with 4 others down the lane—heard the prisoner calling "Hallo!" and crying "Here is Jem Mumford." He had the body of a man on his back. The body was put into a cart & taken to the Flower-de-luce public-house. Matthew Dellos was also one of the party, & spoke to the same facts.

After the examination of other witnesses, the Judge summed up, and the Jury returned a verdict of Guilty—DEATH.

Chelmsford, Dec. 15.—This day the unhappy young man was conducted by the Sheriff and law officers to the fatal platform. The Chaplain attended him, and they prayed together for a considerable time. Every thing being ready, the signal of death was given, and the poor unfortunate youth was hurried into eternity.

Pallet made the following awful Confession to the Goaler:—
"He vowed revenge against young Mumford for having pounded his pigs, and having had him fined 5s. for being drunk. On the night of the murder he way-laid Mr Mumford as he was proceeding to his father's house, and was about to strike the fatal blow but his heart failed him, and he desisted: He made a second attempt, but his heart again misgave him, and he again desisted; at length he made a desperate blow at his head with a bludgeon, which knocked off his hat; with a second blow he telled him to the ground, & then, by repeated

strokes, smashed his skull to atoms. He then retired from the scene of slaughter, & resolved to run away but he had not power to move one foot before the other. Once more he tried to escape, and to quit the dreadful spectacle, but he could not resist the impulse again to approach the body & hardly knowing what he did, he took it upon his shoulder, throwing the head behind, and was carrying it in that way when he was detected."

Mr Mumford has a brother an apprentice to Mr Burbridge, ironmonger, St. John-Street, Smithfield.

A COPY OF VERSES.

TO this most foul and horrid deed,
I pray good folks give ear,
'Twill make such mother's heart to bleed,
When they the same shall hear.
Concerning Mr James Mumford,
A wealthy farmer's son,
Residing near to Widdington,
Some thirty miles from town.
Last Monday night this poor young man,
Left London as we hear,
Where he had on a visit been
To see his brothers dear.
And as he journeyed on his way,
Suspecting of no ill,
A villain mack'd him for his prey,
And did him basely kill.
John Pallet was the Murderer's name,
He ow'd this youth a spite,
Thirsting with vengeance for the same
He swore he'd take his life.
While he was but a little way
From his dear Father's door,
He butcher'd was so strangely,
As no'er was heard before.
He with a bludgeon fell'd him dead,
And then with many a blow,
He to a mummy beat his head,
Till none his face could know.
And while the bleeding, mangled corpse,
He carried on his back,
To hide it in a pit—he was
Took in the horrid act.
This young man was belov'd we hear,
By all the country round,
His mournful death caus'd many a tear
While laying him in the ground.
A speedy sentence did await,
His equal, deadly foe,
Who died at Chelmsford for the same,
This morning you must know.

J. Catnach, Printer, 2, Monmouth-Court.



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© Bodleian Library

Frame:

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2

seemingly to *create more space for the prose*.¹⁸ Additionally, the prose section is presented *before* the ballad and is given the most space on the page in relation to all the other features. Thus, we are not only confronted with a change in the genre's format, but we are also seeing a deemphasis of its primary feature: the ballad which is beginning the process of transitioning into a cultural artefact, functionally giving buyers access to the familiar and expected form associated with the broadside genre but set apart and no longer the dominant text.

An even closer inspection reveals another layer of emphasis (or deemphasis) within the prose itself: *variance* in font size. The first four paragraphs are composed in a medium-sized font and give a basic account of the story including the discovery of the body, apprehension of the murderer, and the court proceedings. In line with ballads of the past, only the barest of details are included regarding the court case: "After the examination of other witnesses, the Judge summed up, and the Jury returned a verdict of Guilty --- DEATH" ("The Trial and Execution of J. Pallet"). "Death" is capitalized for effect, making the judge's sentence stand out on the page, but, otherwise, very little is communicated concerning the trial, and, at first blush, there does not appear to be anything noteworthy regarding the execution other than its association with the capitalized word, "death."

For details on the execution, we literally have to read the fine print. In fact, there are four locations where we encounter the exceptionally small font: the details of the execution, the identification of the gaoler who recorded the convict's confession, a brief blurb about a living relative of the murder victim, and the ballad. Using the Bodleian Library's provided ruler to enlarge the document to its actual size, the fine print just barely becomes legible. For any ease of

¹⁸ Peter King notes that newspapers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were undergoing their own redesign to maximize content: "layouts and font sizes were changing in ways which made a larger and larger amount of word space available" (101).

reading, it needs to be blown up to one and a half its original size. Nineteenth-century readers with less than perfect vision would have needed a magnifying glass (or a high tolerance of eyestrain) to make sense of any of it.¹⁹

Working from the induction that font size is indicative of emphasis, we can reason that the fine print was used to deemphasize sections of lower priority to the printer and, by extension, to the reader. We have already established that the ballad was deemphasized in relation to the prose, therefore making the prose easier to read due to the larger font. If we apply the same line of reasoning to the other instances of fine print, it should follow that those sections would also be of less interest to the reader. Arguably, the two brief mentions of the gaoler and of the victim's relative each function more as secondary details that are not critical to the overall story, but the same cannot be said for the execution which states the following:

Chelmsford, Dec. 15 -- This day the unhappy young man was conducted by the Sheriff and his officers to the fatal platform. The Chaplain attended him, and they prayed together for a considerable time. Every thing [sic] being ready, the signal of death was given, and the poor unfortunate soul was hurled into eternity ("The Trial and Execution of J. Pallet").

The relation of the events on the actual day of the execution would have been of great interest to readers, effectively serving as the grand finale to the story as well as a *written* record of the live event that the public bore witness to. Additionally, the passage is inclusive of "new" information as compared to earlier ballads that did not offer a witness accounting of the execution. Therefore, it is highly likely that readers would want to see and read this section, so why did Catnach

¹⁹ Richard Altick also remarks on the "villainously small" print of the period adding that inadequate indoor lighting (day and night), poor nutrition, age-related deterioration of vision, lack of access to spectacles, and the sheer fatigue of impossibly long and tedious workdays effectively made print inaccessible to many would-be readers (93).

choose such a tiny, hard-to-read font?

While we cannot judge for certain the exact motivations of the printer, we can consider how a genre in transition would navigate the boundaries imposed by the state and by how much alteration of format an audience would tolerate. In light of the ever-present threat of a stamp-duty assessment, I would be willing to speculate that Catnach was trying something new by including the execution day particulars within the extended amount of prose. If my speculation is accurate, then he may have experienced some trepidation around putting too much emphasis on this section, thereby opting to communicate the details in fine print in order to test the waters (and reach a more limited audience with better eyesight). Judging by the gallows broadsides that he produced in the ensuing years, Catnach learned very quickly that his audience did indeed want all of the details concerning execution day and were more than happy to pay him for it - and to the extent that profits outweighed any real concern over censorship.

Another trend we see emerging in this transitional piece is a trend borrowed from the novel – and, specifically, the Gothic novel that was actively taking advantage of the following government loophole to reach a broader audience: “Parliament exempted from the 4*d.* duty all part-issues of works which had originally been published in book form. While this concession allowed the reprinting in cheap numbers of all sorts of book, [...] in practice it primarily benefited the already flourishing Gothic fiction trade” (Altick 321). These serials were wildly popular, and we can see Catnach applying an early adoption of the Gothic style in the section of prose with the largest font (aside from the headline), giving it the greatest amount of emphasis as compared to the other parts of the story. In this section, the gaoler provides his version of the

convict's final confession that the gaoler supposedly witnessed firsthand.²⁰ The following excerpt exhibits a poetic license on par with sensationalist trends in the Gothic serials designed to shock and horrify the audience: "at length he made a desperate blow at his head with a bludgeon, which knocked off his hat; with a second blow he felled him to the ground, & [sic] then, by repeated strokes, smashed his skull to atoms" ("The Trial and Execution of J. Pallet"). The ability to describe events in detail without the constraints of rhyme and meter granted printers and their writers the freedom to indulge in sharing (and embellishing) every gory detail, effectively shocking the pence out of customers' pockets in their eagerness to own a copy.

Another consideration of the novel's influence on the text is the dominant use of the third person in both the prose and the ballad. In fact, only one line of text is attributed to the convict demonstrating yet another departure from the ballad genre's historical adherence to the first-person point of view via the convict. The only other instance of the first person occurs in the second line of the ballad that is intended to reinforce the ethos of the reciter of the ballad (the ballad-seller or the buyer of the ballad) as they provide a hook for the audience to listen in: "To this most foul and horrid deed, / I pray good folks give ear" (Catnach, "The Trial and Execution of J. Pallet"). The overall effect of transitioning to the third person is the loss of the confessional style of storytelling in favor of a more Gothic narrative that emphasizes the retelling of the crime through other parties.

5 Frankenstein's Broadside

While governmental officials busied themselves with taxing their critics out of business,

²⁰ That validity of this quote or how much of it was actually attributable to the gaoler would not have been a concern to the printer or his writer(s) given that regulating bodies did not yet exist that could censure printers for inaccurate reporting.

they unwittingly rewarded printers with less scruples against manipulating information intended for public consumption. Waving stamp duties on printers employing pro-government propaganda seemed an obvious way of keeping the working classes in check, but, in reality, the state's actions translated into an increased pressure on the remaining printers to deliver news to the working class, albeit in a less conspicuous form. Broadside printers rose to the task and reimagined the broadside into a medium that could serve as recreation *and* a primary news source, blending fact with folklore and increasing production to meet customer demand for timely updates. The resulting product compounded the extant appeal and power of the broadside medium. Its historical connection with age-old traditions, myths, religion, and the meaning of life merged with the demand for news and information which refashioned the broadside ballad into a veritable Frankenstein's monster of print controlled by printers with profit motives on par with Victor Frankenstein's obsession with controlling life.

Figure 4 is illustrative of the re-formed gallows broadside medium of the second quarter of the nineteenth century, marked by a new proclivity for density and detail. Printed in 1831 by the very same James Catnach, this example also demonstrates the rapid evolution of format and content over a period of approximately fifteen years. The Holloway crime, in particular, garnered intense public interest due to the gruesome nature of the murder. There are multiple extant copies of broadsides from various printers concerning the murder, trial, confession, and execution of John Holloway for the murder, dismemberment, and botched burial of his pregnant wife. In the following analysis, I will review the rhetorical choices of the text and consider what they can tell us about readership demand and the profit-driven printers' effort to meet that demand.

Beginning with its visual presentation, there is an appreciable difference in the *mise en page* as compared to earlier gallows broadsides. The artwork particularly stands out with its use

EXECUTION

Of John Holloway for the Murder of his Wife at Brighton

Holloway Murdering his Wife



CALL me not to strict account
How I have lived here
For then I know right well, O Lord,
Must vie I shall appear.
I need not to confute my life,
For surely thou canst tell
What I have done, and what I am
Thou knowest very well.

Wherefore with tears I cease to thee
To beg and to entreat,
Even as a child that hath done ill
And fears to be lost,
To come to the throne of grace,
Where mercy doth abound;
Pleading mercy for my sin,
To heal my deadly wound.

O Lord, I need not to repeat
What I do beg and crave;
For those that know before I ask
The things that I would have,
Mercy, good Lord, mercy I ask,
This is the best way;
For mercy, Lord, at all my suit,
O let thy mercy come.

Holloway signing his Wife's Grave.



JOHN HOLLOWAY was put to the bar charged with the wilful Murder of his wife, Celia Holloway, aged 22, at Brighton, in Aug. last.

David Maskell sworn—I live at Brighton and am a labourer. On Monday afternoon, about four months ago I went into a place called the "Rottingden," in Preston, which lies on the side of the high road, in the plantation of Mr. Standford's farm, and in a sort of hollow, overhung with branches of trees, a little on the left of a narrow footpath, up the hill, leading from the "Hole in the Wall," to the Church hill, I stooped to the earth, and fancied some of it had been moved I poked some of the mould away with my stick, and saw a piece of red cotton sticking through the earth, I took no particular notice of it then; but went home, and mentioned to my wife, who said it might be a small child buried there. I mentioned it to several persons; but I did not go and tell the Magistrate. I mentioned it to Mrs. Gillan, and on Friday night, myself and her husband went to the spot between 6 and 7 o'clock, Gillan scratched the dirt away, and the piece of red cotton was still there. We poked the stick into the earth, which smelt very strong and nasty.

Catherine Bishop, wife of Henry Bishop, labourer, Brighton.—The deceased was my sister, and was married about six years ago to the prisoner, John Holloway, who was then a bricklayer. I saw the deceased for the last time about six months ago, she then lodged with me in Cavendish Street; she (the deceased never lived long together with the prisoner. He left her when she was pregnant with the second child, and enlisted in the Blockade Service, if she had been spared another month, she would have had a third child. While the deceased and I were living in Cavendish-street the prisoner was taken up by the parish, and he was compelled to allow his wife 2s. a week, to assist her in her maintenance; he used to send the money to the other prisoner, Ann Kennard, with whom he lived. I produce a piece of figured cotton from my quilt, it corresponds with the gown that was upon

my late sister when her corpse was dug out. I am positive the stays now produced, belonged to my sister; she mended them when we were living together. The prisoner always treated my sister very ill, he almost starved her to death.

Several other witnesses proved that the prisoner had often threatened to kill his wife, and treated her in a most brutal manner.

Feldick the high constable, was on duty on Saturday night, when the prisoner, Holloway came to the watch-house, and gave himself up, as he had heard the officers were after him for the murder of his wife. He declared he was innocent, and said, that about five months ago, he saw her part of the way on the London-road, as far as Preston, where he left her with her box, she intended to get upon the first coach for London. He said she had 10l. with her; he gave her himself, and one she saved up. The woman Kennard, was in custody before he gave himself up.

After the evidence had been gone through, the following confession, signed by Holloway, was read:

"Ann Kennett knew nothing of this circumstance going to happen until I got the whole of Celia's clothes in that house. When I told her what my intentions were she promised to assist me. I then went and fetched Celia, who came with me to the south end of North Steine Row. I left Celia there, and told her to wait till I came for her. I went into this house in North Steine Row, and told Ann that she was just by, and Ann concealed herself in a cupboard. I then called Celia, and when she came into the house, I shut the door, and told her to sit down upon the stairs, as my partner was up stairs in bed. I kept her in conversation some time, when under pretence of kissing her, I passed line round her neck and strangled her. I found I could not manage this by myself, so I called Ann to help me, which she did by taking hold of each end of the rope till the poor creature dropped. I then dragged her into a coal hole under the stairs, and having fastened the end of the cord to a nail, I left her suspended by the

neck. I then proposed cutting her up, but Ann told me to wait till the blood was settled; then the next thing we did was to burn the bonnet, particularly. The next day, I cut the body, and emptied the chaff out of the bed to have the tick to carry part of the body away in; I cut off the head first, and I think I carried the arms with the head; Ann Kennett followed to see whether the blood came through the tick. The first attempt we made did not succeed, and I went back, and put the body into a box, and then into the tick; the next day I borrowed a wheelbarrow, also a pick and shovel, and the same night I wheeled the body till we came near to the Hare and Hounds, when we turned up the hill and then down the foot-path that leads to where the body was found. I made an attempt to dig a hole that night, but found it too dark, so I put the box under some bushes near the spot, with the pick and shovel; then I took the barrow home, and the next morning I went and dug a hole with an intent to bury box and all, but the roots of the trees prevented me, so I took the body out, threw it into the hole, and covered it up, after which I destroyed the box. Ann pawned the deceased's clothes."

The confession being read through-out with such silent attention that a pin could almost have been heard, had one dropped in the Court—

The Judge called upon the prisoner to make any observations he might think proper to the jury.

Holloway said "My Lord, I have not a single word to say for the purpose of saving my life; I don't wish my life to be spared; but I will tell your Lordship, that if justice is done fairly, I ought not to be hanged; for when such a murderer as Winter was spared last Assizes, my life ought not to be taken. I think, my Lord, that no man ought to be hanged for murder in this country after Winter was saved, who murdered his wife—and his was a ten times more plain murder than this of mine. I say again, I don't wish my life to be saved, but your Lordship does not know but I may have concealed something to

save another, and there is no positive evidence, except my confession, which may have been made to save another that I did the murder. But not wishing to save my life, I admit what I did was a most cruel murder, and Ann Kennett is innocent. I am the man. I have no witnesses, and do not wish to call any one to save my life."

The jury without hesitation found the prisoner Guilty. He was sentenced to be hanged, and his body to be given for dissection.

Herham, Dec. 16.—The awful sentence of the law was carried into execution this day amidst an immense concourse of spectators assembled from all parts.

The Brighton Tragedy.

O! That night I could scarcely think
And went along with her to live,
In man and wife the same.
My wife at this much vexed was,
And did me no money.
That I resolv'd to be reveng'd,
And her life to destroy.
I took a house in Denkey-Row,
And there I did her lead;
I drew her down upon the ground,
And pinch'd her throat till dead.
But I resolving to make sure
In my wife's blood to give,
I took out my large pocket knife,
And then I cut her throat.
But how the body to conceal
I next resolv'd my mind,
So I cut off her nose and ears,
And left the rest behind.
I put the body and the thigh
Into a box at night;
Near Preston Chapel I buried them,
To keep them out of sight.
I was alone who did the deed,
None but I saw, no, not Ann,
And how can I for pity ask,
Who pity had for none?
Thus you see by God above
All murders are condemn'd;
The prisoner was, by his own words,
To the gallows condemn'd.
At Leves he was trial for this
By Judge and Jury here;
They found him guilty—and decreed,
He should be hang'd there.
At Herham goal he was brought out,
As thousands there did view,
And when the fatal drop fell,
He look'd the world adieu.
It is a shocking sight to see
Man at the gallows die,
But blood for blood, and life for life,
Both Law and Justice cry.
After he hung till he was dead,
His body was cut down,
And for dissection it was sent
To Surgeons in the town.
Oh, Neighbours, then beware of strife,
Nor let your passions rise;
Be not a fool and what you die,
Be prudent and be wise.
There's not a crime that can escape
The Almighty's avenging eye;
If you meet in punishment on earth,
You'll meet it when you die.
Then pray to GOD to keep you safe,
And to your Union's union tie;
Be loyal subjects to your King,
And God will bless your day.

Printed by J. C. Gurney, Monmouth Court, 7 Dials.

Figure 4: Gallows Broadside Ballad 1831; Courtesy of Harvard Digital Collections, Harvard

of highly detailed decorative borders, internal accents, and illustrations. The headline is especially unique with each letter of “EXECUTION” being its own woodcut font-illustration. Where the 1780 broadside employed a continuous narrative in its single woodcut drawing, this 1831 example contains three separate woodcuts that each illustrate a specific scene depicting the murder, the disposal of the body, and the hanging of the convict with the latter given the central position and the most real estate in relation to the other two images. Of note is the considerable amount of detail in the scenes, with foregrounds and backgrounds given seemingly comparable attention from the shading on personal clothing to the individual leaves on bushes to the bolt heads on the ominous gateway doors. Given the cost of the additional labor and ink to produce these woodcuts, we can infer that broadsides customers preferred highly illustrated texts and were more likely to buy them.

In keeping with a “more is more” strategy, we also find a multiplicity of textual content. The traditional ballad is now located in the lower half of the far-right column. An analysis of its content reveals that is written in the third person as opposed to the first with a quoted section attributed to the convict. The more traditional first-person lamentation now appears separately from the ballad and is located within an abbreviated prayer above the illustrated gallows scene. In both the prayer and the ballad, the font is approximately a third of the size as the text detailing the circumstances of the crime and the court proceedings. The overall effect is that of a continued emphasis on the prose and the illustrations and a deemphasis on the ballad that had formerly dominated the textual content in earlier broadsides.

Regarding the information communicated by the text, we see a theme centering around execution beginning with the highly stylized woodcut headline and continuing in the explicit details contained within the text. Any former taboo on printing the particulars on execution is

largely abandoned. Following the jury’s guilty verdict, “[h]e was sentenced to be hanged, and his body to be given for dissection” (“Execution of John Holloway”). The location, Horsham, is given as well as the date of December 16th on which “[t]he awful sentence of the law was carried into execution on this day amidst an immense concourse of spectators essembled [sic] from all parts.” The ballad on the lower right column titled, *The Brighton Tragedy*,²¹ adds:

At Horsham gaol he was brought out,
 As thousands there did view,
 And when the fatal drop it fell,
 He bade the world adieu.
 It is a shocking sight to see
 Man at the gallows die;
 But blood for blood, and life for life,
 Both Law and Justice cry.
 After he hung till he was dead,
 His body was cut down,
 And for dissection it was sent
 To Surgeons in the town. (“Execution of John Holloway”).

The actual location of the execution, Horsham Gaol, is listed twice as is the vast number of spectators, described as “an immense concourse” (in the prose) and numbering in the “thousands” (in the ballad). The “fatal drop it fell” refers to the practice of using a false floor that would drop out from underneath the convict to effect the hanging. The “shocking sight” of the death is mentioned; though it should also be noted that the blank space encompassing the

²¹ The murder took place in Brighton which is located 18 miles south of Horsham.

convict's head on the illustration is meant to portray the hempen-cloth bag placed over his head which prevented any excess of shock on the part of the audience due to the graphic nature of the death. Additionally, the ballad is transparent about what happens after the convict dies, revealing that his body is destined for dissection by the local surgeons which was not an uncommon practice for disposing of convicts' bodies.²²

The lack of ambiguity regarding the execution is consistent with the particulars contained within the prose portion of the text. The account begins in the courtroom where two separate witnesses testify: the discoverer of the body and the deceased's sister. Factual events are supplemented with sensationalist details to create the story behind the events. In the case of the man who found the body, he shares the time, location, and persons involved as well as the moment of discovery: "We poked the stick into the earth. which [sic] smelt very strong and nasty." The sister produces a piece of fabric left at her home by the deceased to dramatically link the fabric found on the body with the sample in her hand adding that "[t]he prisoner always treated my sister very ill, he almost starved her to death." Nearly two full columns of text are then attributed to the apprehension and the signed²³ confession of the killer, John Holloway, which largely reads like a Gothic crime novel:

I kept her in conversation some time, when under pretence [sic] of kissing her [his wife], I passed line round her neck and strangled her. I found I could not manage this by myself, so I called Ann [his lover] to help me, which she did by taking hold of each end of the rope till the poor girl dropped. I then dragged her into a

²² Convicts guilty of murder were not deemed eligible for Christian burial which afforded surgeons with the opportunity to legally dissect fresh bodies in the interest of expanding their knowledge of human medicine.

²³ Writers freely associated their literary creations (or modifications) with direct quotes from individuals, so all direct quotes must be read with a grain of salt.

coal hole under the stairs, and having fastened the end of the cord to a nail, I left her suspended by the neck. I then proposed cutting her up, but Ann told me to wait till the blood was settled (“Execution of John Holloway”).

Details on the dismemberment and botched disposal of the body follow, and, to build dramatic tension, the writer adds that “[t]he confession being read throughout with such silent attention that a pin could almost have been heard, had one dropped in the Court.”

The extended confession is reminiscent of earlier ballads in the sense that it is written in the first person, but rather than an unequivocal acceptance of his guilt and an accompanying display of remorse, Holloway questions the judge’s authority to have him hanged by appealing to the precedent set in the case of another murderer:

My Lord. I have not a single word to say for the purpose of saving my life; I don’t wish my life to be spared; but I will tell your Lordship, that if justice is done fairly, I ought not to be hanged; for when such a murdrer [sic] as Winter was spared last Assizes, my life ought not to be taken. I think, my Lord, that no man ought to be hanged for murder in this country after Winter was saved, who murdered his wife – and his was a ten times more plain murder than this of mine (“Execution of John Holloway”).

Holloway is making the argument that the court will be unjust if he is sentenced to hang for two reasons: 1) It is unethical to hang a man for any crime, and 2) The evidence presented in court does not definitively confer guilt on the accused. Holloway adds:

I say again, I don’t wish my life to be saved, tho’ your Lordship does not know but I may have concealed something to save another, and there is no positive evidence except my confession, which may have been made to save another that

did the murder. But not wishing to save my life, I admit what I did was a most cruel murder, and Ann Kennett is innocent. I am the man. I have no witnesses, and do not wish to call any one to save my life (“Execution of John Holloway”).

With this final statement, Holloway presents a rationale for his confession: to save the life of another, namely his lover, Ann Kennett. Holloway is submitting his life in place of his lover’s thereby assuming the role of victim and martyring himself on her behalf (who the audience may now suspect as having committed the crime instead of Holloway based upon his statement).

Bearing in mind that printers and their writers enjoyed considerable freedom with textual content and were financially motivated to generate a high volume of sales, it is reasonable to conclude that any given part of the text was manipulated to create a more sensational narrative to attract buyers. For all we know, Holloway never made that last appeal and, instead, stood quietly when asked by the judge to make any final comments. But that is beside the point of a medium whose primary objective is *not* the factual relation of events.

Instead, the role of the nineteenth-century gallows broadside was to embody a physical representation of working-class desire. Like Frankenstein’s monster, it was a patchwork composition of incongruent parts that, when sewn into a single document, educated its audience on the status of the various needs and concerns of a growing working class attempting to make sense of its role within society. Thus, a single broadside is able to communicate a horrific crime both visually and verbally, present damning witness accounts, have the suspect confess his guilt, convict the suspect, redeem the convict through prayer, revere the authority of the state, question the authority of the judge, question the evidence, question murder as the appropriate sentence, question the assumed guilt of the convict, reflect on the tragic murder and the innocent victim,

affirm the will of God, and pen it all into verse to be sung in the streets.²⁴

The desire of the working class is, more appropriately, a *collection* of desires – all very much real, alive, and valid – regardless of the desires’ symmetries and contradictions. The 1831 broadside mirrors the existing and evolving desires in active debate with one another which is in contrast to the earlier examples that favor tradition and consistency in both format and message. Where past broadsides offer a myopic view of working-class culture, the modern version explodes with multiplicity. The printers made great pains to include everything on the same page from the desire for entertainment through art and drama to the traditional appeals of a religious and storied past to the hope for an empowered working-class identity.

While the Holloway broadside *does* affirm the actions of the state and points repeatedly to the guilt of the convict through the various features on the page including the illustrations, prose, ballad, and prayer, it also gives voice to criticism of the state’s actions. Granted, the criticism is confined to the testimony of the convict, but why did that statement make it past editorial review? Criticism of the state risked, at minimum, the imposition of the stamp tax, and, in some instances, jail time. Either penalty translated to the likely closure of their business,²⁵ so why did printers take the risk – and how did they get away with it? Answering the “why” is easy; there were profits to be had in giving the customers what they wanted – *big profits*.^{26,27} The

²⁴ We also find a similar multiplicity of ideas in London newspapers from the 1780s to the early nineteenth century: “[T]he multi-vocal, sporadic, brief and sometimes chaotic styles of crime reporting in newspapers created a kaleidoscope of different and often contradictory messages about such issues as the prevalence of violent crime, the effectiveness of policing and penal institutions and the quality of justice meted out by the courts” (King 73).

²⁵ “Sales of the popular *Spectator* sometimes ran as high as 3,000 copies, and already this circulation level was enough to attract advertising. An excise duty on advertisements was introduced by the Stamp Act (1712), along with other so-called taxes on knowledge aimed at curbing the nascent power of the press. The rate of duty, at one penny on a whole sheet (four sides of print), was the same as the cover price of *The Spectator*, and this effective doubling of the price killed it, along with many other newspapers” (Tucker et.al.).

²⁶ “Charles Hindley, in his *History of the Catnach Press*, claims that Catnach, the most prolific publisher of his day, sold as many as two and a half million copies of accounts of two notable executions in 1849” (Nunn 455).

²⁷ Philippe Chassaing argues that broadside writers identified with the working class and, therefore, recognized and took advantage of the opportunity to speak for them, albeit anonymously (3).

“how” is where it gets interesting: Nineteenth-century broadside culture begins with the broadside’s historic position as a site of learning and contemplation about meaning and purpose in day-to-day life. It then assumes a new agency as a primary news source due to the state’s interference with freedom of speech and its elimination of the broadside’s literary competitors. To meet the desires of the working class and net attractive profits, printers birthed a reformed gallows broadside that employed subversive communiqués amidst traditional didactic and state-affirming rhetoric. Frankenstein’s superhuman monster meets its equivalent in the multifaceted broadside that now provides news, recreation, and spiritual and cultural guidance. To borrow Michel Callon’s line, “[t]ranslation becomes treason” (15) – but only if you know what you are looking for.

Ellen O’Brien examines the transgressive aesthetic within gallows broadsides and concludes:

In mastering the aesthetics of astonishment,²⁸ the street ballads advanced a poetics of transgression, one that unsettled comfortable moral assumptions about the dichotomy of innocence and guilt, produced symbolic inversions through confrontations with graphic violence, and revealed a murderous art reflective of – not deviating from – the culture which produced it (22).

In this context, a working-class audience can be horrified and enthralled by the violence of Holloway’s wife’s murder while simultaneously questioning the state’s authority to commit its own graphic and equally enthralling murder via legal execution. The gallows broadside can still negate the critical comments of the prisoner and thereby please the state, but, crucially, *it does*

²⁸ O’Brien’s phrase for encapsulating the highly dramatized and sensationalized effect (and affect) of gallows broadsides.

not omit the criticism! As a result, readers now have the opportunity to contemplate the justness of execution in the case and are even given the Winter case for comparison. Readers are being challenged to ponder why Winter was spared and not Holloway. Did the Winter case have stronger evidence as Holloway suggests? Is execution being applied disparately and unfairly? Do citizens *ever* deserve the death sentence?

The power of omission is that it denies existence. Combined with the power of the written word, omission erases history. By including transgressive messages within broadsides, printers of the nineteenth century engaged in capturing “the poor man’s history” (Altick 28) alongside the traditional version of events. Broadsides were no longer the sole terrain of state propaganda, but, instead, had become a hybrid genre capable of communicating to opposed audiences that could each read the same document and leave with different interpretations. Where members of the upper classes might conclude their reading by feeling gratified that the convict got what he or she deserved, members of the working class were paying attention to the devil in the details and uniting in turning a critical eye towards the ruling classes.

6 Conclusion

The working-class audience perusing the nineteenth-century broadside was being invited to challenge the status quo. With the opportunity to redefine the working-class community within a framework of victimhood, oppression, and persecution, a new desire emerges that seeks out knowledge and demands answers to questions previously disallowed or unheard of. It is not surprising that literacy rates were rapidly increasing,²⁹ there was a new field of information to

²⁹ In England and Wales, literacy rates in 1800 were at 60% for men and 45% for women. By 1871, literacy rates jumped to 81% for men and 73% for women (Eliot 293). Following the 1855 repeal of the stamp tax and the technological advancements reducing the cost of printing, multiple literatures became financially accessible to the

learn and dots to connect between court cases, manifesting in an alternate reality where judges are fallible, laws are classist, and working-class citizens are gathering to articulate their grievances with one another. Broadsides offered a means of resistance against a biased social and political narrative by “over[throwing] the edifying power of state execution’s spectacular lesson when they transformed the image of the ignorant and criminal scaffold crowd into the image of a literate and literary public” (O’Brien 16). The broadside worked to inform and empower the working class to seek out information, buy it, *read it*, and share it with their peers and family at home, work, the pub, and while spectating at an execution. In short, the broadside acted as a unifier of the working class and put their collective voices in print for all parties to hear their dissent, their despair, their outrage, and their hope for change.

And change happened, albeit in fits and starts. “Transformation through collaboration, ugly and otherwise, is the human condition” (Tsing 31), and broadside culture contributed to penal reforms in 1832 and 1868 with the former dramatically reducing the number of crimes punishable by death – crimes that had disproportionately targeted the working class. The latter reform mandated that all executions be conducted behind prison walls, *privately*, which largely squelched the increasingly riotous behavior of crowds in and around the “economically depressed Seven Dials district where [broadside] printers operated” and where the ballad-sellers sold broadsides to the working class (O’Brien 16).

In 1855, the British government repealed the stamp tax which opened the door to competition in the cheap press. Faced with entrepreneurial rivals in the print world and with the removal of public executions, the gallows broadside went into decline and soon lost its exclusive

public. Charles Dickens tackles issues of literacy on multiple fronts in his serial-turned-novel, *Our Mutual Friend*. Dickens’s serials (usually 2-chapter installments released monthly) were yet another driver in promoting literacy in the latter half of the 1800s.

status as well as most of its influence over its audience. It did not disappear entirely; the general public still loved ballads, and print runs of long-ago executions sold well to consumers moved by nostalgia for a rich and conflicted past. Sometime in the early half of the twentieth century, gallows broadsides all but disappeared, save for the few preserved in collections and studied by scholars interested in broadside culture. Analyzing early nineteenth-century broadsides with fresh eyes and illuminating the work done by these former giants of culture breathes life back into a dynamic period and offers raw insights into a working class struggling to establish and define its identity in a setting increasingly foreign in its modernity.

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