News and Popular Balladry

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In recent years the cheap printed media of seventeenth-century London has gained acceptance as a source material through which historians can understand the attitudes and concerns of the so-called 'common people' of the age. As Christopher Hill articulated, 'Ballads give us the history which commoners knew, history from the commoners' point of view'. Several key studies have been instrumental in reconstructing ordinary world views through the texts of these printed sources, Jerome Frieman has analysed the proliferation of miracle press between 1640 and 1660 as a way of understanding people's uncertainty during the English civil wars. Tessa Watt's book, Cheap Print and Popular Piety 1550–1640, provides an excellent example of the way that black letter broadsides can be analysed to provide insight into popular faith through the religious ballads of the time. Dianne Dugaw, while specifically concerned with eighteenth-century ballads, has made a significant contribution to the field through the introduction of gender studies, and this theme has also flavoured the work of Joy Wiltenburg, in her analysis of the representations of women in popular literature. Margaret Spufford has produced an important scholarly critique of the place of printed literature and the Restoration chapbook trade, while Natascha Würzbach's The Rise of the English Street Ballad, 1550–1650, provides a detailed structural examination of the language forms found in the ballads, examining the cultural place of ballads through the areas of performance practice and modes of reception. Recent articles have also focused on the attitudes expressed in cheap literature, drawing correlations between printed material and the outlook of those who consumed it. These cover a range of topics from public execution, to monstrous children and madness.

While the representations found in these popular texts provide a fascinating insight into one aspect of early modern culture, there can be no doubt that reading such texts to gain understanding of the attitudes of the common people can be highly problematic. Aside from the difficulties in defining the readership of such texts, historians of popular literature are also confronted with the inherent problems of reception history, and the understanding of how such texts were understood by those that heard them. This is perhaps best illustrated by the intrinsic complexities present in understanding cultural rituals of inversion, or when reading humour of the past, humour whose interpretation is certainly culturally determined.

Historians may uncover clues into the reception history of popular texts when such texts reveal an interconnection between different media. The broadside
ballads of early modern London are representative of such a source. As a genre of popular English print they were unique, blending woodcuts and verses, as well as indicating the musical tunes to which they were to be sung. These printed song sheets were usually anonymous, although several well known authors emerged during the period. They sold for a penny each at the book stalls of London, or were sung and hawked by peddlers on the streets. The increase in literacy during the period facilitated the spread of this popular print, and these songs reflect the way in which early print came to encompass the popular forms of oral culture, a culture whose common folk-tunes were published with new topical verses.

One of the cultural functions of the broadside ballads was as a transmitter of news, yet the information which it presented was shaped by its form as a printed song. Consequently, each part of the printed artefact brought its own narrative of the news. The verses tell one part of the story, be it through the use of rhyming slang or popular metaphor. Often the accompanying woodcut offers another perspective through its presentation of subject matter, or the use of emblematic meaning. The tune can provide a further clue to the ballad’s interpretation, the difference perhaps between a mournful lamentation or a rousing dance. All exist as a part of the text; the method of transmission thus shapes the cultural meaning of the event described. Through analysing the relationship between visual, literary and musical elements within the ballads, I hope to gain an insight into the ways in which news was formulated and spread through the printed culture of the early modern city, thus revealing the way such accounts were received, and the cultural attitudes that underlay the popularity of this printed culture.

The streetscapes of seventeenth-century London were the public spaces in which such ballads were performed, and this sense of space, together with the oral tradition within which these ballads existed, can be gleaned through the structure of the language within the printed texts.12 Street performers needed to call up a crowd and the first verses were often used by a narrator to address the audience, while the last verse could refer directly to the selling of the printed broadside. News, transmitted as song on the streets, would reach people from a wide social background. The broadsides and their woodcuts were also appealing as objects which were pasted up on walls. In Walton’s The Compleat Angler of 1653 we find a description of an ale-house where twenty ballads were stuck about the wall.13 It may be that illiterate people consumed ballads for their worth as visual items, and we can certainly speculate that both the literate and illiterate were exposed to performances of ballads as street culture.

These popular songs are representative of the relationship that existed between the literate culture of early print as characterised by the text, and the oral culture of folk music and story. The accompanying music was indicated in the text by the name of the tune, illustrating that the consumers of the culture had a pre-existing familiarity with the music. As such we can surmise that the melodies were part of the urban folk culture, a printed representation of aural musical knowledge. This fact, coupled with the formulaic structure of the verses, indicates that recitation was a major source of transmission of these songs.

The relationship between the printed artefact and its oral performance, reinforces our understanding about the connection between the content and
dissemination of these songs. The oral transmission of the printed culture reinforces the fact that we cannot assume an entirely literate audience for these printed songs. This is manifested in the recognisable tension between the language of the oral and the written world within the texts. The verses, through constant reference to the aural world of the listeners, emphasise the intersection between these two coexisting languages.

This complex interweaving of oral forms and literate ones can also be seen in the themes and narratives of these street songs. Their topical content and their representation of contemporary news, illustrate the dissemination of local events into printed culture. The oral culture of hearsay and gossip pervades the narratives and forms of these ballads, influencing the topical content of the songs and shaping early modern perceptions of news.

The ballads were full of characters who exchanged news in the form of humorous dialogues. When Dick asks Robin, 'Canst thou tell me any newes from abroad', Robin replies, 'I can tell thee none, but I can sing some'. It was rarely news of foreign and political events, for the accounts related in the ballads were local events which told stories about the characters' own lives or those of their neighbours. The ballads were framed in a style of urban gossip, topical news whose content was liberally scattered with scandal. From stories of the latest crime to neighbourly dialogues, a persistent thread of this local oral transmission can be discerned in the printed news of these ballads.

The way in which 'news' was passed in oral form, even within a printed medium, meant that much of the information that took the form of 'news' in the ballads was based on hearsay. Ballads dealing with sensationalist crimes of the period are particularly reflective of this form of oral news for, although the specific events dealt with can often be confirmed using the Assize records, the details of people, places and events found in the ballads appear to have been liberally embellished with the rumour of the day. One example of this can be seen in a ballad entitled A Warning for Wives. The song concerns the murder of one Robert Francis who, according to the ballad, was stabbed by his wife with a pair of scissors. The woman was arraigned and condemned to burn at Clerkenwell-Green on the 21 April 1629. As the ballad title implies, the sight was meant to dissuade other wives from acting in a similar manner. What is of interest in the ballad is the extraordinary detail it contains about the circumstances leading up to the murder. It would seem that the couple, who lived near Cows Cross in Smithfield, had a history of domestic disharmony which continued for many years. Apparently upon the 8 April, 'certain words of difference' passed between them over some small matter, and at ten in the evening the fateful deed was done. The following verse gives us an insight into the source of this detail.

As many of the neighbours say,
that thereabout doe dwell,
This couple had most part of the day
been drinking, so they tell.
The importance of the neighbours as sources of information about the murder of Goodman Francis was emphasised by the woodcut which accompanied the ballad. Here the neighbours, who were present at the scene of the crime, are represented as direct eyewitnesses to the murder.

The hearsay of neighbours appears to have played an integral part in ballad literature as a source of information. The details of many sensationalist ballads was often justified by the presence of witnesses. The following verse, which concerns the heinous crimes of George Sands and his murder of a young woman, illustrates the way in which rumour accompanied such crimes, and thence became integral in the spread of information.

The Maid that on Saint James his day,
was found neere Holborne dead,
Tis thought this wench did make away,
if all be true that’s sed. 16

The ballads were also songs of crime which described actual events and functioned much like early newspapers, telling sensational stories, and embellishing details. Two ballads, both published in 1628, deal with the murder of goodman Davis by his wife Alice and further illustrate the way in which details of actual events must have been embellished by gossip. The ballads agree on the main details of the events. Alice and her husband, who worked as a locksmith, were said to be residents of Westminster. The murder was said to have occurred

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on the 29 June, and for her crime Alice was burnt to death in the central field of Smithfield on the 12 July. The event was no doubt extremely newsworthy for both travellers and locals alike. The facts of this case are also confirmed by the *Middlesex County Records*, where we find Alice Davis was tried and found guilty for the murder of her husband Henry Davis on the 9 July 1628. Despite her pleas of pregnancy, a jury of matrons found her not pregnant and she was sentenced to be burned at the stake.¹⁷

The county records confirm the existence of Alice, the subject of the ballads, and illustrate the way in which ballads often told stories of actual happenings. The songs, however, were imbued with details of the crime which must have come from other sources. Not only do these ballads give additional information concerning the date of the murder and Alice’s subsequent execution, dates which correspond to the time frame of the criminal record, they also supply details of the circumstances leading up to the murder, in which Alice’s husband demanded money from her and she refused him. The ensuing argument resulted in his untimely demise when Alice stabbed him with a knife. Once again the neighbours feature in both these ballads as witnesses to the events.

My husband I did say was slaine,
   amongst my Neighbours there,
And to my house they straight way came,
   being posset with feare;
And then they found him on the floore
   Starke dead all weltring in his goore.¹⁸

The evidence gleaned from the criminal records, and the embellished detail of the crimes found in the ballads, lends further credence to the view that crime ballads functioned as an early form of newspaper. There can be no doubt that highly topical events such as these were extremely marketable to the general populous, a factor attested to by the existence of two extant ballads on this murder and burning. Both ballads appear to have been written to warn other women not to commit similar offences, and their titles, *A warning for all desperate Women*,¹⁹ and *The unnatural Wife*,²⁰ bear this out. The ballads reinforce the patriarchal concepts of social order and serve as illustrations of the consequences of transgressing this order. Alice is portrayed as an ‘unnatural wife’, one whose fate will warn other ‘desperate women’ by her example. As *A warning for all desperate Women* informs us, the husband, like the state, was the absolute authority.²¹

These ballads of crime and murder usually treat their subjects in one of two ways, presenting the criminal as either accursed or repetitive. Songs which condemned the actions of the subject were often narrative, a tail of judgement from without. Redemptive songs were mostly written from the point of view of the felons who tell their stories before their untimely demise on the gallows. Although the songs were based on factual events, and evidence confirms the places, names and circumstances of these crimes, these accounts were fictitious personalised descriptions which were written from the criminals’ perspective.

Such songs made use of different tunes whose aesthetic meaning was specific to the message of the text. While some melodies, such as the tune ‘Bragandary,’
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were used extensively in ballads that condemned the actions of the subject, one of several well known melancholic tunes were meant to evoke a sympathetic reaction from the audience. The redemptive tunes were known as lamentations. The two ballads about Alice Davis are of interest as they serve to illustrate how tunes were used to facilitate the construction of Alice as both a figure of sympathy and one of condemnation. Although both ballads were written from the point of view of Alice herself and agree on many of the details of the events, they were each set to different tunes which gives them a markedly different character, and illustrate how different cultural meanings might be constructed around sensationalist news through the use of particular melodies.

The first ballad was set to the tune of ‘Bragandary,’ and like the ballad of Katherine Francis discussed earlier, condemned the criminal’s actions. This tune was used specifically in murder ballads and those condemning immorality, and also occur in one ballad damning the supernatural skills of witches. The words, which tell of the madness of murderous women described in the voice of the narrator, made use of hearsay and gossipy story telling. The tune also offers a telling insight into public opinion about the crime, for the presence of a tune such as ‘Bragandary’ within a crime ballad expresses condemnation for the actions of the criminal. The accompanying woodcut emphasises this reading, showing Alice accompanied by the Devil. It was expected that the audience would receive the news along with its intended meaning, a meaning shaped by the aesthetic of musical, textual and visual elements.

The second ballad about Alice Davis was sung to a tune called ‘the Ladies Fall.’ This melody was also used in many ballads dealing with crimes or warnings of Gods judgement, yet it was much more redemptive in character, and lyrically more supportive of Alice herself. The woodcut emphasises Alice’s status as martyr, burnt to death for her crime.
This style of topical crime ballad presented the criminal as redemptive, one who asks for forgiveness from God for the terrible sins they have committed. The most famous of this type was known as 'Essex's Last Goodnight', a song written to publicly mourn the execution of the Earl of Essex by Elizabeth I in 1601. In the fifty years preceding this event, the tune was used repeatedly in execution songs and in particular those that represented injustice, or present the criminal as a redemptive victim. The other tune used specifically for such redemptive execution songs was known as 'Fortune my Foe'. The tune is modal in character, a slow and mournful lamentation. The following verse, from a 1616 ballad, about the murder of John Wallen by his wife, illustrates the redemptive words which often accompanied this melancholic and emotional tune.

My Judgement then it was pronounced plaine,
Because my dearest husband I had slane:
In burning flames of fire I should fry,
Receive my soul sweet Jesus now I died.22

It may be that the two ballads concerning Alice Davies were written to cater for two distinctly different audiences, those who were in judgement of Alice's actions on the one hand, and those who felt sympathy for her situation on the other. In an age in which the theatre of punishment was used to signify the prevailing social order, different portrayals of the same crime give us insight into the plurality of opinions. Ballads which portrayed violence and illustrate the condemnation found in both the lyrics and music, emphasised the public outrage that surrounded these crimes. The redemptive song, on the other hand, raises questions about the public legitimacy of some types of extra-legal violence. Such songs appealed to a sympathetic audience, indicating that the state could not always affect public discipline through the desired reading of rituals of violence.23 It is therefore possible to see how ballads were not only used to transmit contemporary news within the city, but also illustrate how such news was received.

Certain forms of violence sat on the boarder between the legitimate and illegitimate. Work was more closely akin to the domestic sphere than it is today, and physical punishment was often used to enforce the master/servant relationship. Despite the general acceptance of discipline, excessive violence was almost always condemned. It would seem that cases of abuse used to enforce master/apprentice relationships were all too common in an age in which such physical punishment was used. One terrible case of mistreatment can be found in the Middlesex County Records of 1655, where William Lovejoy, a toolmaker, tied his apprentice to the shop, beating and whipping him and then rubbing salt into his wounds.24 Other records also display the abuse of apprentices by masters. In 1621 there was the case of a Bristol cooper who kept his apprentice 'in a most beastly manner', and beat him so badly he was nearly crippled.25

One ballad, The Cries of the Dead,26 deals with one such abusive employer. Published in 1625, this ballad illustrates the cruel mistreatment and murder of an apprentice in Southwark, and no doubt reflects the public outrage that accompanied the news of this form of violence:
committed by one Richard Price Weaver, who most unhumaynly tormented to death a boy of thirteene years old, with two others before, which he brought to untimely ends, for which he lyeth now imprissoned in White-Lyon, till the time of his trial. The case is of interest not only because it was undoubtedly well known around London, but also because contemporary records enable several of the assertions contained in the ballad to be verified. The ballad tells that Price cruelly murdered the poor apprentices. The first boy died by scourging with a whip and the woodcut illustrates Richard Price whipping the poor apprentice, while the lyrics express outrage at his actions.

![Woodcut illustration of Richard Price whipping a boy](image)

The ballad also informs us that Price got away with this murder.

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This his deeds was not known
which he kept secretly
Not to light, many a day
came this vile villany.
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The second boy died as a result of beating, and for this murder Price paid with his own blood. The truth of the story in this ballad is confirmed by two records of Richard Price in the Assizes records of Surrey. The first, from March 1620, records that Richard Price was indeed a silk weaver from St Thomas, Southwark, who stood trial for the murder of Roger Edwards. The records show
that Edwards died as a result of whipping, however Price was found not guilty.\textsuperscript{30} The second trial, which took place on the 3 February 1621, found Richard Price guilty of the murdering John Clarke by assaulting him and kicking him in the stomach, inflicting injuries from which he died. He was sentenced to hang.\textsuperscript{31}

The ballad and criminal records of Richard Price illustrate the way in which the ballad form was used to transmit aspects of contemporary news which were just as factual as any newspaper today. The subjects of these ballads were the topical, sensational news and current affairs of contemporary London. The evidence of embellished stories and use of rumour parallels today’s sensationalist press. Such evidence lends support to the idea that this genre of crime ballads functioned as an early form of newspaper. These news ballads form the genesis of newspapers and contained the seeds of the early tabloid press.

The hearsay of witnesses of good repute was particularly important if the subject matter was bizarre or unbelievable. The ballad of The Lamenting Lady tells the story of a woman who gave birth to 365 children in one burden. The title claims a monument to her was built in Lowdon, ‘as many Englishmen now living in Lowdon, can truly testify the same and hath seen it’.\textsuperscript{32} This story must have circulated for many years afterwards, for as late as 1660 Samuel Pepys writes: ‘By waggon to Lausadune where the 365 children were born. We saw the hill where they say the house stood wherein the children were born.’\textsuperscript{33}

The ballads made use of the local culture of hearsay and rumour, which was then shaped by the printed medium and further spread within the city. Such stories sometimes took the form of urban myths which came to have a life of their own. Perhaps nowhere is this more aptly illustrated than in the fantastical ballad of the pig-headed woman. The story of this female monster became something of a phenomenon in London towards the end of 1639. There were a number of ballads published about her, which attest to the incredible popularity of this monstrous subject matter. Five ballads were registered with the stationer’s company, and included among the titles were A Strange Relation of a Female Monster, The Woman Monster, A Maiden Monster, and A new ballad of the swines faced Gentlewoman all licensed in the December of 1639.\textsuperscript{34} A Monsterous Shape, Or A Shapeless Monster,\textsuperscript{35} is the only extant ballad from the many published. The ballad begins by urging the audience to listen:

\begin{quote}
\begin{flushleft}
to what I shall unfold,
Such newes afor was never told
as I will now relate.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{flushleft}
\end{quote}

The ballad-monger then tells the story of a rich Dutch girl, who was both loving and courteous, a gentlewoman in all things save her hideous face which resembled that of a pig.\textsuperscript{37} The tune to which this ballad was set was in the character of a dance, with a light and quick tempo. Dances were often set as comic pieces or dialogue jigs, and in this song the use of a dance tune must have reinforced the humour of the subject matter.
A Monstrous Shape.
O R
A Shapelesse Monster.

A Description of a female creature borne in Holland, compleat in every part, save only a head like a swine, who hath travailed into many parts, and is now to be scene in LONDON, 1640.

She is loving, courteous, and effeminate.
And none as yet could find a loving mate.

To the tune of the Spanish Pavane.

Aside from her looks, this woman was presented as eminently marriageable, a sight which many a 'young man long to see', yet the writer warns young men not to be tempted by her 'golden purse' because of her hideous appearance. It would appear, however, that a 'Great store of suiters' attempted to visit this woman every day, at least according to the hearsay of others. The writer, in acknowledging the basis for this story, reinforces our understanding about the extent to which such 'news' was passed on through the oral culture of the early modern city, even if it eventually found its way into print.

News based on rumour could easily become urban myth. This appears to have happened to the story of the pig-headed woman, and can be found in a pamphlet dealing with the subject, and published in 1640 by Francis Grove. The pamphlet offers more detail about the woman, naming her as Mistress Tannakin Skinker (no pun intended), who was born at Wirkham on the river Rhine. The pamphlet goes into great length about her, but perhaps most interestingly, it has this to say about her stay in London:
I should have spoken something of her residing in or about London, as of her being in Black-Friers, or Covent-garden, but I can say little: onely abundance of people doe resort to each place to enquire the truth: some have protested they have scene her, by the helpe of their acquaintance, and give this reason why she will not as yet be constantly in one place, because the multitude is so great that doe resort thither, that they dare not be knowne of her abiding, least by denying the sight of her, they that own the house should have it pulled downe about their eares.

The multitude of people who were said to have gone in search of this woman is indicative of the phenomenon created by such a story. We can see how urban myths not only contributed to ballad culture, but were also perpetuated by it, thereby adding to our knowledge of the way in which oral stories become ‘news’. The pamphlet, combined with the overwhelming number of ballads about the pig-headed woman, presents us with the intriguing possibility that Mistress Skinker actually existed, but, most importantly, many ordinary folk of the time must have believed so. Concepts of truth were culturally determined according to people’s frame of reference. Early modern London was a society in which news and information were processed according to people’s assumptions about the nature of the world. It may be that many Londoners echoed the sentiments of Mopsa in Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale, when he proclaims, ‘I love a ballad in print, a-life, for then we are sure they are true’.

The ballad of The Two Inseparable Brothers offers us a very different insight into the extraordinary. The character of Lazarus, the subject of this strange and wondrous ballad was certainly newsworthy, and his existence can be more definitely traced through contemporaneous records. The ballad tells the story of Lazarus who had a deformed brother growing out of his side, and recounts tales of their life and travels from their native country of Italy. Being ‘now in England’ he had for ‘about a moneth’ remained ‘unseene’, until he obtained ‘leave’ to show himself on the streets of London.

The ballad is certainly accurate in this respect for leave was given by way of a performance license on 4 November 1637, when the master of the Kings revels granted:

to Lazaras, an Italian, to shew his brother Baptista, that grows out of his navell, and carres him at his syde. In confirmation of his Majesty’s warrant, granted unto him to make a publique shewe.

Not only do such sources confirm the existence of Lazarus and his place of origin, but the dates also coincide, for two ballads were registered in the following months of that year. The first, A Picture of the Italian yong man with his brother growing out of his side with some verses thereunto, was registered by Robert Milborne on the 23 November 1637. This may possibly refer to the ballad of The two inseparable brothers published by Thomas Lambert, for it contains a detailed woodcut of the Italian.
The ballad confirms the spectacle of this sideshow attraction and the popularity of the subject, claiming that Lazarus could be viewed in London.

But that to ratifie this truth
Now in the Strand this wonderous youth
is present to be seen,
And he with his strange burden, hath
Bin shewn (with marvaile) as he saith46
to our good King and Queene.47

It does appear likely that the King and Queen indeed viewed this strange monstrosity, for the Mayors' Court Books note a licence, 'signed with his Majesties owne hand',48 during the Italian's tour of Norwich in 1639.

It may be that the ballad was commissioned by Lazarus himself and this would account for the extremely favourable presentation enjoyed by the subject matter. These cheap songs seem to have functioned as a form of advertising in early modern London, often publicising other ballads through the tune citation,
advertising longer chapbooks on the same subject, or broadcasting significant events. This ballad of Lazarus would certainly have generated interest in his sideshow on the Strand. During his travels to Scotland in 1642 Lazarus, ‘had his portraiture with the monster drawn, and hung out at his lodging, to the view of the people’. Such pictorial representations were no doubt an effective form of advertising.

Ballads which portrayed news of a more political nature were sporadic before 1639, however those that do exist are of interest. In 1635, when Algenon Percie the tenth Earl of Northumberland was instigated in the order of the garter, a ballad was published to commemorate the news. The lyrics tell of his great magnificence:

The common eyes were dazeled
With wonder to behold,
The lustre of apparel rich,
all Silver Pearle and Gold.

The words were set to a tune called ‘Quell the pride & c.’, which is possibly a variant of a common slander song known as ‘Pride and Lecherie’. The music is indicative of the popular sentiment surrounding the Duke’s character, an overtly haughty man whom Clarendon called, ‘the proudest man alive,’ adding that, ‘if he had thought the King as much above him as he thought himself above others, he would have been a good subject’.

It is interesting to observe the shifting nature of news from 1639 onwards, as ballad literature reflected an increase in political and religious content, telling stories about foreign events, or news of war. This shift was partly a result of the diminishing effectiveness of censorship laws. Changing attitudes can be discerned in an increasing number of ballads, and correspond to the emerging political and religious instability of England during this time. The stationer’s register for 1641 contains records of 82 ballads registered in that year, and indicates that 42 ballads were about religious and political matters. There were at least six ballads registered about the calling of Parliament in April 1640, and titles such as A true Subjects wish for the happy successe of our Royal Army, A famous sea fight, England reformed, and England’s cure after a lingering sickness, give some indication of this shift in the culture of news. Many of these more political news ballads have tunes which strongly link them to the themes of war. Tunes with titles such as ‘Lets to the Wars again’ and ‘Mars & co.’ invoke the sentiments and flavour of battle.

In April 1640 Thomas Lambert printed a ballad by Martin Parker which rejoiced at the calling of Parliament by the King. The ballad, An Exact Description Of the manner of how his Majestie and his Nobles went to Parliment, has a distinctly royalist flavour, and certainly there is no real sense of any popular anti-court platform, or any overt mention of the grievances of the 1630s that gave rise to the surge of local petitions to this Parliament. What is to be found, however, is a sense of hope which pervades the tone of the ballad. Parliament had been called, ‘to the comfortable expectation of all Loyal Subjects’ an expectation of resolution and compromise. King Charles had
finally done his duty and called Parliament and the people rejoiced in the occasion:

Unto the world to say and sing  
The praises of our loyal King,  
Who now this present hopeful spring  
Hath call'd a Parliament.  

Only once do the verses of the ballad hint at any of the tensions over Charles's personal rule and the encumbrance of taxation that led up to the calling of the Parliament. Yet it is interesting to note that the expectation of the people was that any popular grievances would be resolved by the Parliament.

For we may be assur'd of this,  
If any thing hath been amisse,  
Our King and State will all redresse  
In this good Parliament.  

The ballad emphasises the people's sense of hopeful resolution promised by the calling of the short Parliament, a resolution of the conflict that existed between King and Parliament. There is a feeling that the uncertainty of Charles's personal rule is past and that the correct relationship had been reinforced. The verses illustrate how the social stratification within the King's procession echoes the order of good assembly. This sense of right order can also be seen in the woodcut which accompanies the ballad.

Phrases like 'every man in his degree', and 'every one in order right' stress the organisation of the true Commonwealth. This indicates that the order of good government, the rightful place of King and court within the social arrangement
was accepted and expected. In this ballad there is no impression that the populous felt any sense of the impending dissolution of what history now calls the 'Short Parliament', for the King dissolved the Parliament the following month in an action that was to have dire consequences. While praising the King the ballad also gave the political message that all was to be right with the world: Parliament had been recalled.

Another example, which represents this transformation in ballad content, stems from a garland of 1641. This garland articulates many of the popular religious and political grievances which had circulated in manuscript form, but now found a voice in cheap printed material. It was entitled *Keep within compasse*, which may well have been a humorous reference to the disintegration of censorship during this time. The garland was in the form of, 'a merry Dialogue between two or three merry Coblers, with divers Songs full of Mirth and News, which may very fitly be applyed to these times'. Although the initial dialogue concerns the domestic affairs of the two men, the characters relate news in song, and these contained many references to matters of state.

And I do also understand,  
That Patentees must out of hand,  
Bee banished from our English land  
For nimming. 

The extract here refers to the encumbrance caused by the trade monopolies which were granted by the King. These patents were deeply unpopular and were undergoing redress in the long parliament of that year. The next verse, which concerns the impeachment and imprisonment of Archbishop Laud by the Parliament, echoes the scores of anti-episcopal tracts that enjoyed a wide circulation around London at this time. The unpopular Arminian religious practices imposed by the Archbishop had linked him, in the mind of the populous, with the ritualistic Roman Catholics.

Some said in England was the Pope  
But I did ever better hope,  
He should be first choakt in a rope  
You know where. 

Robin was well within his compass to sing of such matters, for a short time at least. The political uncertainty of the period ensured that many of the traditional avenues of government censorship were no longer in operation. The Stationers Company had been under Royal Charter and material had often gone to the Archbishop for approval under the old system. In 1643 the Parliament attempted to reimposed strict censorship on the output of the presses, however it seems to have done little to stem the tide of publishing or the public's desire for news. There was a proliferation of printed material throughout the period of the English Civil Wars. Popular songs became an important avenue for propaganda on both sides of the war. There are examples of parliamentary tracts set to the tunes of the Psalms, while the famous royalist ballad *When the King enjoys his own again* was penned during the shifting fortunes of Charles I's 1643
It became the great cavalier ballad of the English Civil War and was attached to many royalist songs written after that time.

Much publishing centred around the uncertainty of the time, and prophetic pamphlets, astrological almanacs and stories of strange happenings all flourished. Some examples can be found in ballad format, such as the song of Englands Monthly Predictions for this present yeare 1649 which calls for the repentance of all England. Such prognostic publications also coincided with an increase in published political commentary, in particular satire, as well as the emergence of political news books and prose corantos, which number among the first newspapers of England.

To conclude, it can be seen that the news of early modern London needs to be read through a number of texts. The lyrics, woodcuts and music of street ballads all add to our understanding of how such news was read and received. It can also be argued that hearsay featured significantly in the London broadside ballads of the 1620s and 1630s, and gossip influenced both the style and content of the songs and the culture of news within the early modern city. In the ballads from 1639 on, however, there was a shift in the nature of the news. The ballads of the Civil Wars increasingly reflect the religious and political changes which took place during this period, and were also used as an effective form of political propaganda. This was paralleled by the emergence of early news books or mercuries around this time. The culture of news changed, a change which was brought about by the turbulence leading up to the English Civil Wars. During these wars printed ballad output went into major decline and the genres of printed material changed. Printed ballads were used as a form of propaganda, and it is likely that many ballads circulated orally but were not printed. It may be that the ‘enormity’ of the times were ill suited to the lighter style of the ballad form.

ENDNOTES

5 Joy Wiltenburg, Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Popular Literature of Early Modern England and Germany, University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, [Ph.D. 1984].
8 For a discussion on differing interpretations of criminal elegies see J. A. Sharp, “Last Dying Speeches”: Religion, Ideology and Public Execution in Seventeenth-Century


16 Anonymous, *The life and death of M. Geo: Sands*, Printed at London for F. Coules, and are to be sold at his shop at the upper end of the Old Baily neere Newgate, c. 1626, Verse 8.


22 T. Platte, *Anne Wallens Lamentation*, Printed for Henry Gosson, and are to be solde at his shop on London bridge, c. 1616, Verse 20.


28 White-Lyon was the common prison of Surrey.


NEWS AND POPULAR BALLADRY

35 Lawrence Price, *A Monstrous Shape ... Or A Shapeless Monster*, Printed by M.F. for Thomas Lambert, and to be sold at the signe of the Horse shoee in Smithfield, London, 1639, STC. 20317.
36 Lawrence Price, *A Monstrous Shape ... Or A Shapeless Monster*, Verse 3.
38 Lawrence Price, *A Monstrous Shape ... Or A Shapeless Monster*, Verse 12.
39 Anonymous, *A certaine Relation of the Hogfaced Gentlewoman called Mistris Tannakin Skinker*, Printed by J.O. and are to be sold by F. Grove, at his shop on snow hill neare St Sepulchers Church, London, 1640.
46 Been shown (with marvel) as he has said.
50 Martin Parker, *A brief description of the triumphant show by the Right Honourable Algernon Percie*, Printed at London for Francis Coules and to be sold at his shop in the old Bayle, c. 1635, Verse 6.
53 Martin Parker, *An Exact Description Of the manner of how his Majestie and his Nobles went to Parliament*, Thomas Walkley for Thomas Lambert, London, 1640, STC. 19230.
55 Martin Parker, *An Exact Description*, Verse 1.
56 Martin Parker, *An Exact Description*, Verse 2.
57 Thomas Herbert, *Keep within compasse Dick and Robin*, Printed for Thomas Lambert, and are to be sold at his shop in Smithfield, over against Hosier Lane at the signe of the Bunch of Grapes, 1641, Wing. H1529. Title page.
58 Thomas Herbert, *Keep within compasse*, p. 5, Verse 3.
59 Thomas Herbert, *Keep within compasse*, p. 6, Verse 2.