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ARTICLE

Providence, Editorial, and News in Early Modern Ballads

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Abstract

This article overturns the assumption that early modern ballads include too much godly, moralizing content to be considered part of news culture. It uses a wide range of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English ballads in print and manuscript to demonstrate that one of the news ballad's most significant features was the inclusion of providence – the ongoing supernatural workings of God in the material world. Placing these songs in the context of other cheap print genres and drawing on research into the role of religion in everyday life, the article shows that rather than undermining the ballad's role in news culture, providence defined it. Moreover, the early modern distinction between God's overall plan and specific examples of his intervention in earthly affairs helps to subdivide the genre into those where providence forms an editorial line and those where providence itself provides the story. This second type has traditionally been seen as godly rather than 'newsy'. Understanding providence shows that those ballads which have been dismissed as more moralistic than topical in fact shared the most important news people could hear.

I

There has always been an embarrassing problem with early modern ballads, especially those topical songs which had immediate relevance because they related to current events.[1] The awkward fact is that a large number of ballads dealing with the news stories of the day contain little information about what actually happened. This has led some people to go so far as to say that ballads 'were not to narrate news'.[2] Instead these songs have been dismissed as barely disguised morality tales. Even for those who use the term 'news ballad', it has sometimes been a struggle to explain the existence of songs which claim to be about news but contain little in

[1]Original spelling has been maintained throughout this article, apart from i/j and u/v, which have been modernized, and contractions, which have been silently expanded.

[2]Angela McShane, 'Ballads and broadsides', in Joad Raymond, ed., *The Oxford history of popular print culture, vol. 1: cheap print in Britain and Ireland to 1660* (Oxford, 2011), p. 361. See also Tessa Watt, *Cheap print and popular piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge, 1991) and Angela McShane, 'The gazet in metre; or the riming newsmonger: the broadside ballad as intelligencer. a new narrative', in Joop W. Koopmans, ed., *News and politics in early modern Europe, 1500–1800* (Leuven, 2005), pp. 131–52.

the way of factual information. Using analysis of more than 400 sixteenth-century ballads, not just in print but also in manuscript, supplemented by pre-Restoration ballads taken from the *English Broadside Ballad Archive* and a variety of news pamphlets from *Early English Books Online*,[3] this article will demonstrate that not only did the news ballad exist as a distinct genre of song in early modern England, but one of its most significant features was the inclusion of providence – the ongoing supernatural workings of God in the material world. It argues that providence itself was news to God-fearing people. Moreover, these ballads highlight the distinction made in early modern England between universal and particular providence, which helps to subdivide not just news ballads but other news media too. By demonstrating that even those ballads which have been dismissed as more moralistic than topical are in fact news ballads, this article provides a new framework for thinking about the news values of a wide variety of early modern news media and the interplay between news formats, recognizing that the appearance of providence in news media was not just about moralizing editorial but about selling a particular form of news: news of God's judgement.

That ballads have a role in news culture is an idea which goes back more than 100 years. This belief is based not just on their content but also on their titles. Some ballads have the word 'news' in their titles, for example *A ballat intituled Northomberland newes wherin you maye see what rebelles do use*.[4] Others, such as *A true relation of one Susan Higges, dwelling in Risborrow a towne in Buckinghamshire*, highlighted their veracity.[5] Some were loquacious, outlining their content in titles which indicated their topicality and reliability. These included *Good newes from the north, truly relating how about a hundred of the Scottish rebels, intending to plunder the house of M. Thomas Fudsie (at Stapleton in the bishoprick of Durham.) were set upon by a troupe of our horsemen, under the conduct of that truly valorous gentleman Leiutenant Smith, leiutenant to noble Sr. John Digby; thirty nine of them (whereof some were men of quality) are taken prisoners, the rest all slaine except foure or five which fled, wherof two are drowned. The names of them taken is inserted in a list by it selfe. This was upon Friday about fore of the clock in the morning, the eighteenth day of this instant September, 1640*.[6] Indeed, Nicolas Moon suggested that where an event was labelled as 'news' in a ballad, the song was likely to have a much greater concern to authenticate its claims than other songs.[7] Topical ballads therefore signalled not only their role in spreading news and information, but also the truth of their reports.

[3]Data taken from Jenni Hyde, *Singing the news* [research dataset], Lancaster University, https://doi.org/10.17635/lancaster/researchdata/617 (accessed 7 June 2023); Patricia Fumerton, ed., *The English broadside ballad archive*, University of California, Santa Barbara, https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu (accessed 7 June 2023); *Early English books online*, ProQuest, https://www.proquest.com/eebo/index (accessed 7 June 2023).

[4]William Elderton, *A ballat intituled Northomberland newes wherin you maye see what rebelles do use* (London, 1570) STC (2nd ed.) / 7554.

[5]*A true relation of one Susan Higges* (London, 1640), STC (2nd ed.) / 13441.

[6]*Good newes from the north* (London, 1640), STC (2nd ed.) / 19238.

[7]Nicolas Moon, '"This is attested truth": the rhetoric of truthfulness in early modern broadside ballads', in Simon Davies and Puck Fletcher, eds., *News in early modern Europe: currents and connections* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 231–2.

Few today, however, would be so confident about the journalistic nature of early modern ballads as the early-twentieth-century American scholar Hyder E. Rollins was in claiming that:

> perhaps the best way in which to judge the broadside ballad as a whole is frankly to compare it with the modern newspaper. Viewed from that angle, there is nothing in the ballads that cannot be duplicated today, and it is a comfort to discover that twentieth-century journalism is an inheritance.[8]

Nevertheless, a wealth of recent scholarship has highlighted the ballad's role in spreading news, including my own *Singing the news*, which focused on sixteenth-century news songs in print and manuscript, and Una McIlvenna's *Singing the news of death*, which spanned the European continent and 400 years to look at the emotional impact of news songs about executions.[9] Both works highlight the intermediality or interconnectedness of early modern media. Klaus Bruhn Jensen has defined this concept as a 'means of expression and exchange, different media refer to and depend on one another, both explicitly and implicitly; they interact as elements of various communicative strategies; and they are constituents of a wider social and cultural environment'.[10] He points out that intermediality 'denotes communication through several discourses at once, including through combinations of different sensory modalities of interaction'.[11] These might include music and words, or words and image, for example. This concept was central to Patricia Fumerton's *The broadside ballad in early modern England* as well as *Communicating the news in early modern Europe*. Co-written by an international team of scholars, this latter contribution to the field of information culture highlights the tangled web of news genres which circulated across early modern Europe.[12] Likewise, research has shown that there was a significant overlap between ballads in print and manuscript.[13]

Despite a long tradition of seeing broadside ballads as one aspect of early modern news culture, the credibility of ballads as a form of news media has in recent years been weakened by those who highlight the sheer amount of almost information-free moralizing and godly gloss which some topical songs contain. It is undeniable that some ballads, rather than giving a full account of the newsworthy event itself,

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[8]Hyder E. Rollins, 'The black-letter broadside ballad', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 34 (1919), p. 265.

[9]Jenni Hyde, *Singing the news: ballads in mid-Tudor England* (Abingdon, 2018) [hereafter, Hyde, *Singing the news*]; Una McIlvenna, *Singing the news of death: execution ballads in Europe, 1500–1900* (Oxford, 2022). See also Una McIlvenna, 'When the news was sung: ballads as news media in early modern England', *Media History*, 22 (2016), pp. 317–33.

[10]Klaus Bruhn Jensen, 'Intermediality', in Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Robert T. Craig, eds., *The international encyclopedia of communication theory and philosophy* (Chichester, 2016), DOI: 10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect170 (accessed 9 May 2023), p. 1.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Patricia Fumerton, *The broadside ballad in early modern England: moving media, tactical publics* (Philadelphia, 2020); Jenni Hyde, Joad Raymond, Massimo Rospocher, Yann Ryan, Hannu Salmi, and Alexandra Schäfer-Griebel, *Communicating the news in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2023).

[13]See Hyde, *Singing the news*; Andrew Taylor, *The songs and travels of a Tudor minstrel: Richard Sheale of Tamworth* (York, 2012); Hyder E. Rollins, 'An analytical index to the ballad-entries (1557–1709) in the registers of the Company of Stationers of London', *Studies in Philology*, 21 (1924), pp. 1–324.

merely offer the briefest outline of what happened and then proceed to use the event largely as a means to explore its moral connotations. In her study of early modern cheap print, Tessa Watt conceded that 'Every event was still seen as the active work of God's hand in the world, and it is almost impossible to find a straight "news" ballad in the sixteenth century which does not refer to the greater religious significance of the individual "secular" event',[14] and that 'there was a broad cross-section of "news" ballads: miraculous happenings, monstrous births, floods and fires, which sometimes made use of religious judgements, but which (like criminals' last speeches) appealed to their audience primarily on other grounds'.[15] Watt characterized these songs as 'edifying' rather than 'political'. They 'addressed themselves', she argued, 'directly to the morality and salvation of the people'.[16] Likewise, Ian Green noted that the religious content of many ballads was providential and that this functioned as 'a warning to readers to avoid the like offences, lest they too should feel the sharp edge of God's anger'.[17]

Nevertheless, to dismiss these songs as 'not news' is to assume that modern definitions of news apply to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is essentially the message propagated by scholars such as Angela McShane, for whom the purpose of these songs was emphatically not to share the story of a recent event with an audience. The songs could not be considered news because the lack of factual detail meant that the audience already had to know the specifics of what had happened.[18] Like Watt, McShane suggested that songs of this sort used political events and natural disasters as a springboard to teach the audience about how they should behave or to warn them of generic evils, but she is one of the few who has been prepared to state baldly that because ballads had an 'affective, panegyric, mocking [or] entertaining' function they were 'doing something different' to spreading news.[19] Marcus Nevitt, for example, argued that although ballads and pamphlets on the same news topic appeared, the ballads helped to feed the appetite for news in pamphlets because they were performed on the streets and went to great lengths to show that they were 'steeped in the more quotidian analysis of oral news transmission'.[20] He also notes that singing 'propelled the ballad beyond the confines of the literary audience', making it 'community property'. Songs, in short, fashioned a community out of the audience.[21]

But a song can do all that *and more*. The dismissal of the news-function of ballads arises from a mistaken assumption that any songs which concentrated on God's hand at work in the world could not really be about the day-to-day news, that is, the 'reporting of events considered to be novel, relevant to contemporary

[14]Tessa Watt, *Cheap print and popular piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 47

[15]Ibid., p. 124.

[16]McShane, 'The gazet in metre', p. 144; Watt, *Cheap print and popular piety*, p. 96.

[17]Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism in early modern England* (Oxford, 2000), p. 463.

[18]McShane, 'The gazet in metre', p. 142.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Marcus Nevitt, 'Ballads and the development of the English newsbook', in Martin Conboy and John Steel, eds., *The Routledge companion to British media history* (London, 2015), p. 185.

[21]Ibid., p. 186.

society and/or worthy of discussion'.[22] To the early modern mind, however, providence fitted this description perfectly. Likewise, Andrew Pettegree contended that newsworthy events were characterized by 'developments at court, wars, battles, pestilence or the fall of the great' – all topics that were often given a providential significance.[23] Simply put, providence was news, and it was just as much news in a ballad as it was in any pamphlet.

In their seminal study of what makes a story 'newsworthy', moreover, Galtung and Runge identified a series of 'news values' that influenced the decisions over whether any given event was worth reporting and, if so, how that report represented the story.[24] One of their key news values was meaningfulness: the idea that the news story needed to be 'interpretable within the cultural framework of the listener or reader'. Another was consonance, that is, that the event was something which the audience might reasonably expect to happen. Together, these two values allowed for easier 'reception and registration' of the news.[25] Providence, which appeared as a facet not only of topical ballads but of news pamphlets too, can clearly be seen to add both meaningfulness and consonance to early modern news-making, making it not just part of the news, but a defining characteristic of early modern news – a story that contained providential import was intrinsically more newsworthy than one which did not.

After all, in the early modern period, providence was pervasive. God was immanent in the universe. As Keith Thomas put it, 'the disposition to see prodigies, omens and portents sprang from a coherent view of the world as a moral order reflecting God's purposes and physically sensitive to the moral conduct of human beings'.[26] With the same stroke of the pen, the Devonshire barrister Walter Yonge included natural phenomena and crime alongside international news and political developments in his diary as 'matters of fact and report', demonstrating that the definition of news in the period was wide-ranging.[27] Moreover, Yonge assigned supernatural and divine meaning to the occurrences. In October 1616, he noted that a local man had been robbed and murdered by four neighbours who set his house alight with him inside. Yonge commented that 'All his body was consumed and burned, except that side where he was wounded, which was neither burnt nor his clothes scorched with any fire, a wonderful judgment of God against murder'.[28] Likewise, in 1626 Yonge noted that a lightning storm which killed eight people from Newmarket who refused to attend church and join a national day of prayer and fasting to avert the plague, was clear meteorological evidence of 'God's hand upon the contemners

[22] Hyde, *Singing the news*, p. 108.

[23] Andrew Pettegree, *The invention of news: how the world came to know about itself* (London, 2014), p. 4.

[24] Johan Galtung and Marie Holmboe Runge, 'The structure of foreign news: the presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises in four Norwegian newspapers', *Journal of Peace Research*, 2 (1965), pp. 64–91.

[25] Ibid., pp. 66–7.

[26] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England* (New York, NY, 1971), p. 91.

[27] *Diary of Walter Yonge, Esq., Justice of the Peace, and M. P. for Honiton, written at Colyton and Axminster, co. Devon, from 1604–1628*, ed. George Roberts (Camden Old Series, vol. 41, London, 1848), p. xxv.

[28] Ibid., p. 30.

of his ordinances'.[29] While he did not directly ascribe providential meaning to each event he recorded, Yonge's frequent references to God's judgement and the sense of wonder with which he describes rain like drops of blood, waves like flames of fire, and earthquakes with blue water suggest a providential reading of the events.[30] Providence therefore 'played a key role in domestic decision-making, in household divinity, and in the private management of crisis and calamity'; it provided consolation, encouragement and patience as well as shaping 'political argument, tactics and action'.[31] God was believed to operate within the world in order to sustain a plan which He had laid out before the world began. Walsham's rich study of providence in early modern England, or the playing out of this plan for the universe, showed that it was an ineluctable part of news, be it presented in ballads, pamphlets, sermons or passed on informally by word of mouth. As a result, providence was intrinsic to any retelling of the news in early modern balladry, where it provided a community-brokering property which brought the audience together in a shared response to the news.[32]

Early modern audiences nonetheless drew a distinction between two forms of providence. This distinction provides us with a new analytical framework for understanding news ballads in particular and early modern news culture more broadly. Both these forms of providence appeared in news media in different ways, and an author's choice of providential framework allows us to subdivide news items into two categories. First, there was universal providence: God's overarching plan that the world at large (and not just particular interest groups or individuals) would continue to function and progress according to the laws He laid down at Creation. Universal providence informed the early modern community's understanding of each and every event. Although ballads which express universal providence have commonly been accepted as topical or news ballads because they contain large amounts of detail, the significant fact is that universal providence provided an 'editorial line' which expressed the author's opinion on the topical issue at hand. Universal providence did not form the news item itself, but instead helped to shape the audience's response to the information they heard by setting it in the context of God's overarching plan for the universe.

The second form of providence was particular providence, which related to specific manifestations of God's intervention to help His chosen people or punish sinners.[33] Where particular providence provided the news story, it was God Himself, made manifest through his providential plan, who formed the subject of the news. This helps to explain why some topical ballads talk more about God than they do about the event at hand. It is the reporting of particular providence that accounts for the modern misunderstanding in which songs are seen as a way to cash in on events by expounding on the moral value of a news story. Only to the modern eye do

[29] Ibid., p. 96.

[30] Ibid., pp. 14, 30.

[31] Walsham, *Providence in early modern England*, pp. 19–23.

[32] Nevitt, 'Ballads and the English newsbook', pp. 187–9.

[33] On the distinction between 'universal' or 'general' providence and 'particular' or 'special' providence, see the authoritative account by Walsham, *Providence in early modern England*.

these songs appear not to be about news, and as such they have often been categorized as moralistic rather than newsworthy.[34] To contemporaries, these songs were just as topical as ballads which gave detailed accounts of political developments or natural disasters. To early modern consumers, they were, unquestionably, news.

II

To be fair, from a modern and secular viewpoint, a supernatural entity is rarely to be seen as the driving force behind disasters such as fires, floods, or major political upheavals. It is indisputable that some early modern popular songs lack the specifics and detail we would like to see, or the facts and figures of the event which Nicolas Moon identified as being one of the ways in which balladeers signalled the credibility of their songs.[35] A ballad describing the execution of John Stevens, for example, never mentions what he did to bring down a judgement of high treason. Despite having twenty-three verses, such hard information as the ballad contains is mostly provided by its title, *The godly end, and wofull lamentation of one John Stevens, a youth, that was hangd, drawne, and quartered for high-treason, at Salisbury in Wiltshire, upon Thursday being the seventh day of March last 1632. with the setting up of his quarters on the city gates*. The song counsels other young people that they should 'heavenly thoughts retaine' and live in fear of God and the king in order to avoid Stevens's fate.[36] Another ballad fleetingly described the murder of a family at Queendown near Rainham in Kent in only the most general terms before spending a full fourteen verses reminding the audience that God always punishes such transgressions.[37] A third song, *The confession and repentance of George Sanders gentleman late of Shugh in the county of Hereford, who unnaturally killed his uncle, and accused his owne father for the murder: but by Gods providence being discovered, he dyed for the same* even foregrounds the importance of providence by placing the word in its title. It provides no further details of the murder than those contained in the title. Instead, it concentrated solely on God's judgement on his crimes.[38] The theme of self-examination was emphasized as each of these three ballads was set to one of the most famous of traditional 'hanging tunes', 'Fortune My Foe', and so this choice of melody itself encouraged listeners 'to reflect on the spiritual nature of the execution process, and to contemplate their own sinful lives'.[39]

It is therefore undeniable that many of the ballads about topical incidents appear to be more concerned with these events as an example of God's judgement upon a sinful individual (or upon a sinful society more broadly) rather than providing the listener with a detailed account of what happened. At first glance, many of these songs might easily appear to fall into the category of 'improving' self-help or devotional literature rather than news. But even if we were to accept that to modern ears

[34] McShane, 'Ballads and broadsides', pp. 361–2.

[35] Moon, 'This is attested truth', pp. 231–2.

[36] *The godly end, and wofull lamentation of one John Stevens...* (London, 1633), STC (2nd ed.) / 23260.

[37] *The lamentation of Edward Bruton, and James Riley...* (London, 1635), STC (2nd ed.) 3945.7.

[38] *The confession and repentance of George Sanders...* (London, 1635?), ESTC S124246.

[39] McIlvenna, *Singing the news of death*, pp. 63–4. See also Christopher Marsh, '"Fortune My Foe": the circulation of an English super-tune', in Dieuwke Van Der Poel, Louis P. Grijp, and Wim van Anrooij, eds., *Identity, intertextuality, and performance in early modern song culture* (Leiden, 2016), pp. 308–30.

these ballads appear to be a subset of devotional material rather than news items per se, the question remains, why did contemporaries not see fit to include them in their collections of devotional material?

There are, for example, several manuscript collections of devotional songs from the sixteenth century, and a significant proportion of the songs they contain are known to have appeared in print too.[40] I have noted elsewhere that as the survival rates for printed ballads in this period are low, the proportions of printed ballads in the collections can only be a rough estimate; nevertheless, the manuscript collections are not a separate genre of song – they contain material which is similar in style to songs printed on broadsides, they often name tunes, and in several cases, they are undisputedly the same song. But the ballads which people saved for posterity in these compendia were usually 'intensely personal'.[41] These were songs which scrutinized man's sinfulness and provided a penitential function for the individual Christian. Perhaps these were similar in function to the printed sermon, for which the market was growing in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Many of the early printed sermons addressed particular sins and called for repentance.[42] Both sermon and ballad focused on providing comfort, solace or chastisement in the long term, while it has also been shown that Protestant reformers used the ballad as a way of educating ordinary people. John Foxe, for example, included ballads in his *Actes and monuments* not only as improving literature but also to teach readers about Protestant culture.[43]

What the manuscript song compilations did not include was the sort of topical material which highlighted God's hand being immanently at work in the world through current events, despite their apparently 'godly' content. In one sixteenth-century Protestant manuscript collection of thirty-nine popular songs, twenty-seven are devotional and only six are topical. Of the twenty-six ballads preserved in a similar Catholic manuscript, eighteen are devotional, while none are topical.[44] This strongly suggests that songs about providence were consumed as news, not as improving, devotional literature.[45]

Likewise, only a handful of entries in the *100 Ballads* list of most popular songs between 1557 and 1711 are classified as news.[46] Nevertheless, around a quarter of the entries in the list are there because they had short-term popularity, often because they were songs about politics. Herein, of course, lies a tension – songs might be political without being directly topical, while some of the topical songs are classified not as news but, for example, as crime. Christopher Marsh comments of one

[40]Hyde, *Singing the news*, p. 195.

[41]Ibid., p. 200.

[42]Green, *Print and Protestantism*, p. 195.

[43]Patrick Collinson, 'Truth, lies and fiction in sixteenth-century Protestant historiography', in *This England: essays on the English nation and commonwealth in the sixteenth century* (Manchester, 2011), p. 234.

[44]Sloane MS 1896, British Library, London; Add. MS 15225, British Library, London. Data taken from Jenni Hyde, *Singing the news* [research dataset].

[45]Hyde, *Singing the news*, pp. 197–200.

[46]Christopher Marsh and Angela McShane, *100 Ballads*, https://www.100ballads.org/ (accessed 28 May 2025).

of these, *Luke Huttons lamentation*, that 'It is remarkable that a song about a particular criminal of the 1590s should still have been popular almost one hundred years later'.[47] The songs in the list are ranked on a number of criteria including, for example, the number of reprints; registration with the Stationers' Company; inclusion in the sixteenth-century *Shirburn ballads* manuscript collection; and the number of surviving editions.[48] Given the criteria used for selection, the relative lack of topical songs in the catalogue does not necessarily suggest that they were not popular, not least because the list is made up of only 120 titles of more than 10,000 survivals of millions of ballads published during the period in question – a tiny fraction of the ballad presses' output even without considering those that circulated in manuscript and oral form.[49] Instead, the fact that they did not, for the most part, maintain their popularity over time points precisely to their consumption as news.

To suggest that the emphasis on providence in a popular song eradicates any sense of it as news is surely based on a failure to recognize that, for early modern listeners, it was impossible to separate what has happened – the *news* – from its providential significance. As Alexandra Walsham noted, for the people of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, 'God was no idle, inactive spectator upon the mechanical workings of the created world, but an assiduous, energetic deity who constantly intervened in human affairs. His finger could be discerned behind every inexplicable occurrence. He regularly stepped in to discipline sinners and bestow blessings upon the righteous and good.'[50] It was, of course, a trope among many of the educated clergy, and not least for the hotter sort of Protestant who believed that the Reformation had not gone far enough, that the largely unlettered masses too often understood the world around them in terms of superstition – that is, fate and fortune. Walsham, however, has conclusively shown that providence played a central role in the 'plaine mans religion'. It was the lens through which many early modern people made sense of the world around them. Natural disasters, monstrous births, wars, and rebellions were not 'impromptu interventions'. Instead, they were 'events for which God had foreseen the need' in order to test, reward, and punish His chosen people. He had built them into His plan for humanity from the very beginning.[51] So ingrained was this belief in early modern England that it formed the basis of the belief in predestination as it appears in Article XVII of the Thirty-Nine Articles, the Elizabethan formulation of Protestant doctrine. This stated that 'Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the World were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his Counsel, secret to us, to deliver

[47]Christopher Marsh, *100 – Luke Huttons lamentation: which he wrote the day before his death, being/ condemned to be hanged at Yorke for his robberies and trespasses committed/ there-about [Euing 189]*, https://www.100ballads.org/show/101 (accessed 28 May 2025).

[48]Christopher Marsh and Angela McShane, *Methodology*, https://www.100ballads.org/page/essays/methodology (accessed 28 May 2025).

[49]Ibid. On the circulation of ballads in print, manuscript, and oral transmission, see Christopher Marsh, *Music and society in early modern England* (Cambridge, 2010); Hyde, *Singing the news*; Adam Fox, *Oral and literate culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2000).

[50]Walsham, *Providence in early modern England*, p. 2.

[51]Ibid., pp. 229–30.

from curse and damnation, those whom He hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting Salvation as vessels made to honour'.[52]

For the God-fearing early modern audience, providence was probably the most important news there was. For the majority of early modern men and women, 'religion was something lived'.[53] It was therefore incumbent upon balladeers and other newsmongers to remind their audience that God's hand was constantly at work in His creation. It was *news* of God's plan being worked out in the physical world around them. The anonymous author of *Strange newes from Brotherton in Yorkeshire, being a true relation of the raining of wheat on Easter day last, to the great amaizment of all the Inhabitants; It hath rained wheate more or lesse every day since, witnessed by divers persons of good ranke and quality, as the Lady Ramsden who gethered some herselfe, some of it was sent to Judge Green, and M. Hurst dwelling at the Fountaine Taverne in Saint Anns Lane neere Aldersgate in London. To the tune of the rich merchant man,* opened by warning his listeners 'oh wretched England mind!/the wonders God doth show,/Observe and lay it well to heart,/before thine overthrow'.[54] He went on to suggest that, although it was impossible for humans to know for certain what the event presaged, it might mean that God would feed the faithful even during times of dearth. The song drew on other examples where portents were sent to warn humanity of an impending crisis, even commenting that during the Thirty Years War:

> Our King when he was Prince,
> and journed into Spaine,
> It was a wonder that he did
> returne so safe againe:
> In time of bloody warre,
> when thousands fell we know,
> The Lord preserv'd our royall King
> whereever he did go.[55]

All the stories included in the song could, according to the balladeer, be traced back to God's providential hand moving to protect the faithful and punish the sinful, which of course was particularly pertinent given that this song was printed in 1647 during the interbellum between the first and second civil wars. It seems safe to assume that the anonymous balladeer was not only a royalist, but an anti-Spanish Protestant. Moreover, the melody itself highlighted the providential nature of the song. The tune of 'The Rich Merchant Man' was associated with the divine punishment of moral failings such as greed.[56] The refrain, which encouraged audience participation and which was the section – repeated throughout the song – that

[52] Article XVII of *The thirty-nine articles of the Church of England*, in G. W. Leibniz, *Dissertation on predestination and grace*, trans. and ed. Michael Murray (London, 2011), p. 3.

[53] Lucy Wooding, *Tudor England: a history* (London, 2022), p. 497.

[54] *Strange newes from Brotherton in Yorkeshire, being a true relation of the raining of wheat on Easter day last, to the great amaizment of all the inhabitants...* (London, c. 1647–8?), ESTC R184717.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Una McIlvenna, 'The rich merchant man, or, what the punishment of greed sounded like in early modern English ballads', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 79 (2016), pp. 279–99.

singers and audience were most likely to remember, encouraged them to reflect on these stories in the future: 'The wonders of the Lord,/let none forget therefore,/But carefully beare them in mind,/both now and evermore'. Whether a real event had occurred in which wheat fell like rain in Yorkshire or whether the story was apocryphal hardly matters. The ballad was sold as 'strange news' and formed part of a genre of songs in which unusual occurrences were attributed to mankind's failings.

III

The role of providence in ballads was nonetheless complex. Not only did it help to define the news ballad as a genre, it reflected the contemporary distinction between universal and particular providence. In ballads, this was admittedly a distinction more of emphasis than theology. It reflected the observable level at which providence operated. Particular providence formed the news story in a ballad when it focused on God's intent. These ballads did not provide a detailed account of the earthly manifestation of His help. Instead, they spelled out to the audience news of God's wrath, indignation or pleasure as He intervened in the human world. These are the songs which often look devotional or moralistic to modern eyes, because the bulk of the text, and often the tune as well, is dedicated to reflecting God's judgement. Nevertheless, to the early modern English man or woman, this judgement would have been both topical and newsworthy information, as evidence from Yonge's diary shows. Universal providence, on the other hand, imbued a detailed topical song about an event with an editorial line, sometimes in a matter of one or two verses. Examining the presence of universal and particular providence in turn will help to elucidate this difference.

A belief in universal providence reflected a general belief in God's ongoing care for creation. For news ballads, this provided an editorial line which suggested the way in which the news story should be understood by the audience as an event which exemplified God's overarching plan for the world. Using the melody 'Fortune My Foe', *A cruell murther committed lately upon the body of Abraham Gearsy*, for example, warned its listeners to:

> Behold these lines, you that have any care,
> And from bloodshedding alwayes doe forbeare;
> Though murder be committed secretlye,
> Yet for revenge to God it loud doth crye.
>
> And that sinne goes not long unpunished,
> Therefore let all men of this sinne take héede:
> Many are daily for such crimes accused,
> And yet alas too commonly tis used.[57]

Likewise, *A true relation of one Susan Higges* foregrounded the narrative of Higges's criminal career by providing facts about her wrongdoings, before highlighting how this fitted into God's overall plan. Although 'Well thought of by good gentlemen/and

[57] Richard Crimsall, *A cruell murther committed lately upon the body of Abraham Gearsy* (London, 1635), STC (2nd ed.) / 5418.

farmers of good fame', Higges began her descent into delinquency and a dual life by blackmailing the young men who came to 'play' with the 'yong country girles' who served in Higges's house. She moved on to cross-dressing and highway robbery, before murdering a woman who recognized her through her disguise and threatened to reveal her identity. Soon afterwards, Higges's conscience was moved by God and forced her to confess her crimes, 'For blood can never secret rest,/nor long unpunisht be', demonstrating that this is part of the natural progression of the universe along the lines laid out at creation.[58] The servants who heard her confession told the justices of the peace, who conveyed her to gaol and condemned her to death at the assizes. Finally, Higges warned her listeners to mend their ways so as not to follow in her footsteps to the gallows:

> So fare well earthly pleasure,
> my quaintance all adue,
> With whom I spent the treasure,
> which causeth me to rue.
> Leave off your wanton pastimes,
> lascivious and ill,
> Which without Gods great mercy,
> doth soule and body kill.
>
> Be warned by this story,
> you ruffling roysters all:
> The higher that you climbe in sinne,
> the greater is your fall:
> And since the world so wicked is,
> let all desire grace,
> Grant Lord that I the last may be,
> that runneth such a race.[59]

By contrast, ballads featuring particular providence only briefly described the 'event' which had been planned by God to remind sinful humans of his power and the need to amend their ways. Instead, the news was of God Himself. It was this latter aspect – news of God's plan for the world rather than the events by which this plan could be seen – which formed the news that dominated the story. In these songs, God's judgement took centre stage. *A looking glasse for corne-hoorders*, for example, makes particular providence central to understanding the song as a whole. The song tells the story of a farmer who agreed a price to sell his corn to a poor man, who left his coin as a down payment. When the poor man returned with the balance to collect the grain, the farmer demanded a higher price, forcing the poor man to borrow money from a friend in order to pay the increased cost. The ground then opened up while the farmer was out harrowing his fields, swallowing the farmer and his team of horses to vanish without trace. The providential warnings here are woven throughout the song. They provide a clear framework for understanding the event as God's

[58] *A true relation of one Susan Higges*.
[59] Ibid.

justice meted out to his sinful subjects. Early on in the song, the balladeer assures his audience that:

> The poore being abus'd
> by the rich, by the rich,
> And by them cruelly us'd
> in every towne:
> But God that heares their moane,
> for their sakes hath this showne,
> That's already noysd and blowne
> over the land.[60]

After the poor man is overcharged for the goods, the balladeer interrupts the story to assure the listener that 'God will sure requite/all those, that doe delight/To affront and affright/those that are poore'. This sets up the expectation that the farmer's comeuppance will be providential, as indeed is highlighted by the final verse which warns listeners:

> Let them take heed how they
> doe oppresse, doe oppresse
> The poore that God obey,
> and are beloved.
> God will not let these long
> alone, that doe his wrong,
> Though ne'r so rich and strong
> that are oppressors.[61]

It is perhaps the ballads and broadsides featuring monstrous births which provide the most obvious examples of particular providence in relation to news. They form part of a genre that Julie Crawford termed 'marvellous Protestantism'.[62] In these songs and verses particular providence, in the form of monstrosity, was used to 'discouer unto us the secret judgemeent and scourge of the ire of God, by the things that they present'.[63] In fact, these broadsides are the only ones which seem to have been guaranteed a bespoke woodcut illustration. Perhaps this was in part because the unique nature, indeed the topicality, of the events being described prevented the recycling of existing woodcut images in the way that was common for broadside ballads of the period.[64] It probably also indicates that these songs were guaranteed to sell enough copies to make the expensive process of commissioning a new woodcut

[60] *A looking glasse for corne-hoorders, By the example of John Russell a farmer dwelling at St Peters Chassant in Buckingham shire, whose horses sunke into the ground the 4 of March 1631* (London, 1631), ESTC S126185.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: monstrous births in post-reformation England* (London, 2005).

[63] Pierre Boastuau, *Certaine secrete wonders of nature containing a descriptio[n] of sundry strange things,* trans. Edward Fenton (London, 1569), A4r.

[64] Christopher Marsh, 'A woodcut and its wanderings in seventeenth-century England', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 79 (2016), pp. 245–62.

viable. One broadside in verse, *A discription of a monstrous chylde, borne at Chychester in Sussex, the .xxiiii. daye of May. This being the very length, and bygnes of the same. M. CCCCC. LXII,* began by warning its readers that the strange birth was a warning from God to put aside wrongdoing and repent past sins:

> When God for synne, to plage hath me[n]t
> Although, he longe defarde
> He tokens truly, straunge hath sent
> To make hys foes a fearde.
> That they thereby, might take remorce
>
> Of their yll lyfe mispent
> And more of loue, then feare or force
> Their formall faultes repent.[65]

The child was a 'token strange', a wonder which 'doeth demonstrate playne/The great abuse and vyce/That here in Englande now doeth raygne'. The monstrosity of the infant was a sign from God that society, in its decadence, had itself become monstrous.

Similarly, the author of *A mervaylous straunge deformed swyne* claimed that the animal's 'monstrous shape (no doubt) fortels/Gods wrath we should beware'. The broadside was registered with the Stationers' Company in the aftermath of the Northern Rebellion against Elizabeth I, shortly following the execution of John Felton, who pinned a copy of the Papal Bull *Regnans in Excelsis* to the gates of the bishop of London's palace. The author warned his listeners that those who were not loyal to the queen were like monstrous swine themselves.[66] Another wonder ballad opened by making the manifold failings of the English people unmistakeable: 'This monstrous shape to thee England/Playn shewes thy monstrous vice'.[67] Moreover, these broadsides emphatically positioned such monsters as proof that the end of days was near: 'The scripture sayth, before the ende/Of all thinges shall appeare/God will wounders straunge thinges sends/As some is sene this yeare'.[68] Park and Daston go so far as to claim that to European Christians, the monster or marvel was important only in so far as it was 'the bearer of a divine message' about the 'perceived violation of moral norms', thus implicitly noting that it was the particular providence itself which was the news. Although scholars such as Patrick Collinson have cast doubt on the truth of stories of providential monstrous births, in some ways the truth or otherwise of the birth itself is immaterial.[69] What matters is the function of particular providence in the narrative. While printers were no doubt also aware of the selling power of a sensational story, Park and Daston are surely correct in noting that monsters were a 'paradoxical product of God's mercy, an alert and a

[65] J. D., *A discription of a monstrous chylde, borne at Chychester in Sussex, the .xxiiii. daye of May…* (London, 1562), STC (2nd ed.) / 6177.

[66] J. P., *A mervaylous straunge deformed swyne* (London, 1570), STC (2nd ed.) / 19071.

[67] *The forme and shape of a monstrous child borne at Maydstone in Kent, the xxiiii. Of October. 1568* (London, 1568), STC (2nd ed.) / 17194.

[68] J. D., *A discription of a monstrous chylde*.

[69] Collinson, 'Truth, lies and fiction', pp. 219–20.

warning issued to allow sinners one last chance to reform themselves and avert the catastrophe to come'.[70]

IV

The distinction between universal providence providing an editorial line for news and particular providence forming the news story can most effectively be seen in two contrasting ballads concerning a fire that destroyed the market town of Beccles in Suffolk in 1586. One is by Thomas Deloney and the other by D. Sterrie.[71] Both songs stress that the event was a result of God's anger with his people, but, from a purely modern perspective, it is Deloney who stands out for providing far more in the way of factual information.

Deloney's song exemplifies universal providence functioning as an editorial slant. The ballad's authorial voice personifies the town, meaning that the story is ostensibly told by the town of Beccles itself. This allows Deloney to create an emotive first-person account from the municipal victim's perspective. The song begins by describing the former riches and beauty of the location. Three verses then describe the fire in detail, as well as the residents' inability to keep the flames under control:

> The flame whereof increasing stil the blustering windes did blowe
> And into divers buildings by disperst it to and fro
> So kindling in most grievous sort it waxed huge and hie
> The river then was frozen so no water they could come by.

According to the ballad, the inhabitants took their belongings to the fields. Some of the less respectable members of the community then began to loot what was left of the abandoned town. The fire raged from 9am to 4pm, destroying eighty houses and the church, as well as severely damaging the marketplace. The voice of Beccles finally warned its listeners to live in harmony with one another and to obey God's word in order to avoid the same fate. The broadside contains no woodcut image other than the patterned border which separates the two columns of text. Information is key to the song, which provides a clear narrative account of the event framed by the editorial line that this was God's punishment on his sinful people. This is universal providence at work.

Sterrie's ballad differed greatly, and largely because of his divergent approach to providence. His broadside is more visually appealing for a start. It has a woodcut of burning houses as well as large, decorative borders which draw attention to the title. Sterrie's song was set to the sombre sixteenth-century dance tune, 'Labandala Shot'. The melody had previously been used for a so-called goodnight ballad – a song ostensibly written by a criminal called George Mannington immediately prior to his

[70]Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the order of nature, 1150–1750* (New York, NY, 1998), p. 181.

[71]Thomas Deloney, *A proper new sonet declaring the lamentation [of Beckles in] Suffolke...* (London, 1586), STC (2nd ed.) / 6564; D. Sterrie, *A briefe sonet declaring the lamentation of Beckles...* (London, 1586), STC (2nd ed.) / 23259.

execution at Cambridge Castle in 1576.[72] Despite its popularity, indicated by the fact that the song was first registered as a broadside and then included in a printed collection which went through several editions, the Mannington ballad gives no indication of the crime for which the eponymous criminal was to be executed. Instead, it concentrates wholly on his repentance for his sinful life. The tune would later be used for two songs in the compendium *The countrie mans comfort or religious recreations fitte for all well disposed persons*, penned by John Rhodes to provide godly entertainment and encourage the 'Schollers of pettie schooles the poore coutrieman and his familie ... to sing good things and forsake evill'.[73] Both the songs which used the tune (*A song or Ditty made on this theame I know not what, wherein is shewed how men ought not to set their mindes on worldy pleasure but on the living Lord* and *A sorrowfull song or sonnet, wherein is lamented our miserable estate in this life hunting after vanity*) complained about society's immorality and urged people to repent of their wicked ways.[74] This suggests that the melody was associated with songs about God's just punishment of transgressive behaviour.

Sterrie's disaster song set the scene by lamenting that the people of Beccles had been left in sorrow because 'God in his ire:/For sinne hath consumed pore Beckles with Fire'. A description of the town's beauty before the disaster followed:

> The Sea and the Countrey, me fitting so nye,
> The fresh water River, so sweete running by,
> My medowes and commons, such prospect of health,
> My Fayers in somer, so garnisht with wealth,
> My Market so served, with corne, flesh, and fish,
> And all kinde of victuals, that poore men would wish

There is, however, much less detail about the progress of the fire in this song. A printed marginal annotation explains that 'A rude felowe by fiering his chimney, procured their casaulltie', which also suggests that this is in fact a news ballad rather than a devotional song. The rest of the factual information, such as it is, is included in a single verse and is less than explicit:

> the winde lowde in skie,
> The water harde frosen, the houses so drye
> To see such a burning, such flaming of fire,
> Such wayling, such crying, through scourge of Gods ire,
> Such running, such working, such taking of payne,
> Such whirling, such haling, such reaving in vaine,
> Such robbing, such stealing, from more to the lesse,

[72] *A sorrowfull sonet, made by M. George Mannington, at Cambridge Castle* was registered in 1576 (*A transcript of the registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640 A.D.*, ed. Edward Arber (3 vols. London, 1875), II, pp. 304). It was reprinted in Clement Robinson, *A handeful of pleasant delites containing sundrie new sonets and delectable histories*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (New York, NY, 1965), pp. 65–8.

[73] John Rhodes, *The countrie mans comfort. Or religious recreations fitte for all well disposed persons* (1637), STC (2nd ed.) / 20961, sig. A2r-A2v.

[74] Ibid., sig. C1v-C4v and C8r-D2v.

Such dishonest dealing, in time of distresse

The remaining verses deal with the general misbehaviour and sinfulness of the population at large which provoked an angry God into punishing his people, as well as an admonition to the audience that they should repent their sins and 'forget not, my wofull annoye'.

At first glance, this song appears to be less of a news ballad than Deloney's. Sterrie was more interested in the hermeneutics which explained the occurrence than the facts of the matter:

But O my good neighbours, that see mine estate,
Be all one as Christians, not live in debate,
With wrapping and trapping, each other in thrall,
With watching, and pryeng at each others fall,
With hoving, and shoving, and striving in Lawe,
Of God nor his Gospell, once standing in awe,
Lyve not in heart-burning, at God never wrest,
To Christ once be turning, not use him in jest,
Live lovely together and not in discorde,
Let me be your mirrour, to live in the Lorde.

But this was not because Sterrie was a poor balladeer. It was a conscious decision to foreground the aspects of the event which highlighted particular providence.

When he wanted to, Sterrie could tell a sensational story just as well as Deloney. In 1573, for example, he had written a sixteen-page pamphlet in verse about a Bristol murder. It attempted to explain why a shear-man called John Kynnestar stabbed his wife more than twenty-five times before tossing her body out of a window into the street below.[75] Although there is no tune indicated, and the verses are not in the standard format of the English broadside ballad, it is certainly not impossible that they could have been sung. Likewise, the presentation of the news in rhyming verses but in pamphlet form muddies the waters of early modern print genres. By combining the verse form of the ballad with the material format of the news pamphlet, the publication perhaps hoped to appeal broadly to both literate and illiterate audiences and suggests that the lines between the material formats of news and ballad genres could be blurred.[76] It also capitalized on the features of the oral tradition to ensure that both audiences could remember the story – something which would be picked up later by civil war newsbooks, which contained what Marcus Nevitt describes as 'prefatory ballads'.[77] Moreover, with

[75]D. Sterrie, *A true reporte or description of an horrible, wofull, and moste lamentable murther doen in the citie of Bristowe by one Jhon Kynnestar* (1573), STC (2nd ed.) / 21485.

[76]See also Jenni Hyde, 'Mere claptrap jumble? Music and Tudor cheap print', *Renaissance Studies,* 32 (2021), pp. 212–36, which highlights the ways in which musical print of the mid-sixteenth century mixed genres in entrepreneurial experiments.

[77]Nevitt, 'Ballads and the development of the English newsbook', p. 184.

nineteen twelve-line stanzas by Sterrie followed by a ninety-six-line 'admonishment' by Jude Smith, this was not a publication which would have been easy to fit onto a broadside.

Notwithstanding the question of genre, the verse-pamphlet opened with the discovery of the crime, the apprehension of the murderer and his imprisonment and interrogation. The next six verses comprise Kynnestar's confession. He described how a voice in his head told him to 'A rise goe kill thy wife'. He fetched a knife and 'sodainly her strake,/In bedde where she did lye'. Despite her protests, he continued to stab her twenty-five times until she cried 'God forgeve thee,/And Christ take mercie upon me,/And so fell doune and died'. Rather than calling for help from his neighbours and making an immediate confession, Kynnestar went back to bed, before getting up again to throw her body out of the window. The verses end with his trial and execution. So Sterrie was perfectly capable of writing verses with a strong narrative arc that gave significant information about a topical news story. The lack of details in Sterrie's Beccles ballad, by contrast, suggests that when it came to a disaster like the Suffolk conflagration, he chose instead to foreground news of particular providence. As far as Sterrie was concerned, God's vengeance, wrought on his sinful people, was just as newsworthy as the destruction of the town itself.

v

Whether the news was framed through the lens of providence or providence was made central to the news story, ballads in their need to provide a moral framework for an event were essentially no different to other forms of early modern news media. Indeed, looking at a wide variety of early modern cheap print, Alexandra Walsham commented that:

> it is misguided to attempt to disentangle 'news' from the 'extraneous matter' with which it was published. Although these sheets and tracts have been heralded as 'forerunners' of the tabloid newspaper and precursors of the yellow sensational press, it is anachronistic to speak of 'journalism' as such in early modern England. The notion of supplying raw and undigested information for its own sake was embryonic, but still ethically suspect. ... the writing of 'newes' was unashamedly subservient to the ends of religious indoctrination and political propaganda. Bias was not only expected but inbuilt.[78]

Prior to the 1580s, however, the one-off news pamphlets published in England were usually either official or semi-official. Their style tended to be 'dry and staid', albeit they were 'often prefaced with long preambles offering moralisms and providential commonplaces'.[79] From the later sixteenth century onwards, a wider range of sensationalist pamphlets were also published. Still printed as and when events dictated, these pamphlets offered authors the opportunity to moralize and explore soteriological issues within an engaging, sometimes titillating genre.[80] A pamphlet entitled

[78]Walsham, *Providence in early modern England*, pp. 39–40.
[79]Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and pamphleteering in early modern England* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 102.
[80]Ibid, p. 108.

More strange newes described a storm surge which affected the Bristol Channel.[81] The section describing the effect on Somerset opened by reminding readers:

> therefore doeth God not onely call some of our Countrimen nowe on the sudden but also to afright us the more to make us looke about, doth he strike our Cattle with diseases: he takes away the lives of our beasts for labour: he destroyes the Corne-fields and threatens us with famine: he undermines our houses with tempests, to make us feare a desolation.[82]

The author explicitly set up the way in which readers should interpret the news that followed:

> Read therefore, with trembling there his late dreadful judgements and mocke not ourselves with vaine hopes, but know that if earthly fathers may be drawne away to forget their owne children, our heavenly father may by the vilenes of our soules be drawne to shake off his owne people. Listen then how hee menaceth, and stand amazed at the wonders of his wrath.[83]

The opening section therefore provided an editorial 'nudge' which informed the way the rest of the information should be understood in terms of God's judgement on a sinful population. Likewise, a pamphlet entitled *Sad news from the countrey* admonished its readers 'that man (if any such deserve that name) must be exceeding stupid, or very careless that does not once perceive and lay to heart the late most unseasonable weather', declaring that 'He, and He alone, ... for our sins, by His overruling providence, sometimes makes the heavens as brass, parching the ground with scorching droughts, and at other times opens the bottles of heaven, to wash away the hopeful fruits of the teeming earth with deluges of water'.[84] *Sad news from the countrey* was a compendium of letters describing the effects of the Bristol floods. One opined that 'Certainly the Lord hath a controversie with sin, and since pride and fulness of bread, have been sins so rife amongst the people, they cannot but acknowledge it just, if now they are afflicted with poverty, and leanness of teeth'. The author prayed that 'the merciful hand of providence, preserve us'.[85] It closed with the admonitory epigraph: 'When from the clouds excessive water spins/Heaven surely weeps for our unwept for sins'.[86] These one-off pamphlets carefully coated their news in universal providence in order to shape the audience's response to the story.

By the late sixteenth century, occasional news pamphlets were in competition with serial news sheets. These publications contained little or no contextual information to help their audience comprehend the news or indicate what they should

[81] *More strange newes: of wonderfull accidents hapning by the late overflowings of waters, in Summersetshire, Gloucestershire, Norfolke, and other places of England...* (London, 1607), STC (2nd ed.) / 22916; K. J. Horsburgh and M. Horritt, 'The Bristol Channel floods of 1607 – reconstruction and analysis', *Weather*, 61 (2006), pp. 272–7.

[82] *More strange newes*, B3r.

[83] Ibid.

[84] *Sad news from the countrey* (London, 1674), Wing / S256, A2r.

[85] Ibid., A3v and A3r.

[86] Ibid., A4v.

think, so they were difficult for people to understand.[87] An example of this is to be found in the serial publication *The chiefe occurences of both the armies*, which described the ongoing attempts of the Protestant Henri IV of France to take control of Normandy from Catholic forces during the French Wars of Religion:

> The prince of *Parma* having taken notice thereof by his intelligences: suddenly thought to have surprised the king, and his armie lying before Roan, and the king being gone to Deepe the eight day of Aprill, news wer brought to sir Roger Williams, by one who had served sir Thomas Morgan, that the prince of Parma had fully determined and purposed to lodge in Darnetall on Monday being the tenth of the saide moneth: whereupon aswell as upon other advertisements, Sir Roger Williams dispatched in all hast letters unto his majestie, who at the receit therof presently the next day in the evening repaired to the camp then before *Roan:* and at his arrivall sent the duke of *Boillon,* otherwise the vicount of *Touraine* with eight hundred horses to discover the enemy.[88]

Although the reader could follow the progress of the campaign, there was no contextual information to explain, for example, that Sir Roger Williams was a career soldier whom Elizabeth I had sent as part of an army to support the French king. If the reader were to rely solely on the information in the book, the identity of both Williams and Morgan would remain a mystery. Moreover, there was no explanation of why any of the information in the newsbook should matter to the reader.

By the 1620s, English serial corantos (news sheets), translated from the Dutch, had joined the news market. Published at least once a week, these listed the news which arrived in the form of letters from various locations. Their profitability peaked in 1624, then fell before they were banned by Charles I at the behest of the Spanish ambassador in 1632.[89] But there was a problem. Nathaniel Butter's *The certaine newes of this present weeke* gave no indication of how readers should interpret dispatches received from abroad about, for example, the 1622 battle of Fleurus in the Netherlands, where the Spanish Catholic army was successful against German Protestant forces:

> The copy of newes from Rome, dated the 27 of July, 1622.
>
> The Pope writes his letter to the cardinall *Sapedo*, Viceroy of *Naples*, concerning the restitution and delivery of certaine commanders and others of his gallies which had beene formerly taken and imprisoned, and were ready to be executed; upon which letters bother gallies and commanders were set at liberty, and sent home againe with all their company.
>
> There hathe been a generall fast in the city of Rome, and very solemne procession, with much ceremonie, for the space of many daies, for the generall good

[87] Pettegree, *The invention of news*, p. 8.

[88] G. B., *The chiefe occurences of both the armies, from the eight of Aprill, till the seventeenth of the same month with other intelligences given by credible letters* (London, 1592), STC (2nd ed.) / 11260. See Raymond, *Pamphlets and pamphleteering*, pp. 106–7.

[89] Raymond, *Pamphlets and pamphleteering*, pp. 132, 149.

> successe and victory of the Catholike armies in Germany, France, and the Low Countries.[90]

In this instance, it is difficult to imagine how any reader coming to the publication without any other information would even be able to understand what they were being told, let alone why it mattered. These newsbooks either relied on their audience's prior knowledge of the events in question (at the very least, an awareness that they were occurring), or that their readers were also well-enough connected to be able to draw on their social networks to explain the import of what they read or heard. In fact, there has been a suggestion that one of the main reasons why the early English corantos failed to gain a strong foothold in the marketplace was the straightforwardness, even bluntness, of their information.[91] In other words, there was no editorial message to give context to the facts and help readers interpret the story, leaving busy consumers to work out for themselves what to think. But as Walter Lippman noted, news has to sell. Reflecting on early twentieth-century newspapers, he argued that the editor must 'woo at least a section of his readers every day, because they will leave him without mercy if a rival paper happens to hit their fancy'.[92] In this respect, little had changed in the intervening 500 years. By 1630, Butter was complaining that he was losing money publishing corantos.[93] The fact that English corantos failed suggests that context was highly important to consumers, who wanted their news items packaged in a format that helped them to make sense of the world. That missing context was providence. If the absence of providential context helped to account for the failure of English corantos, then not only should we see providence as an item of news, but we should also see it as intrinsic to news in the period.

Ballads, on the other hand, had almost always included an editorial slant of one form or another. This directed the audience's responses, placing the news in a familiar context and effecting a response, encouraging readers to sympathize or to criticize. The fact that the news had been digested and re-presented in this way demonstrated that the author and reader were expected to join in a particular view of the truth and that the language 'communicated a level of information beyond and above the facts'.[94] Universal providence as an editorial slant merely provided an example of how the audience should interpret news of strange and unexpected events.

Meanwhile, a belief in divine providence should not blind us to the fact that the early modern mindset was also apocalyptic. This was central to the way early modern Europeans on both sides of the confessional divide 'read what they believed was a terrifying collapse of the natural and moral order around them, from earthquakes to floods, from monstrous births to comets, and from extreme human cruelty to the

[90] Nathaniel Butter, *The certaine newes of this present weeke. Continued from Rome, Naples, Genoway, France, the Low-Countries, the Palatinate, and many other places…* (London, 1622), STC (2nd ed.) / 18507.72.

[91] Pettegree, *The invention of news*, p. 8; Raymond, *Pamphlets and pamphleteering*, p. 149.

[92] Walter Lippmann, *Public opinion* (New York, NY, 1922, reprinted New York, NY, 2004), p. 191.

[93] Nathaniel Butter, *The continuation of the most remarkable occurences of newes*, 9 (16 July 1630), p. 14.

[94] Joad Raymond, *The invention of the newspaper: English newsbooks, 1641–1649* (Oxford, 1996), p. 134.

disasters of war'.[95] Such apocalyptic interpretations of events were in fact especially important in framing those events that signified particular providence as news. In this scenario, news about particular providence was probably the most important news there was. If the second coming was nigh, then it was imperative that balladeers and other newsmongers shake their audience out of its reverie in order to prepare for the Last Judgement. It was, after all, 'a definition of man's fallen condition that he should not always see and co-operate with providence'.[96] As Walsham noted, texts such as providential ballads 'often glossed over the fact that true repentance was not something that human beings could do of their own volition'. Instead, it was God's gift to his elect.[97] But this did not stop ballads, or indeed other media, spreading news of God's judgement on the world, as the number of providential ballads about wonders and calamities testifies.

VI

Providence was not included in ballads simply because it allowed the author to expound on the moral implications of an event. As Stuart Hall argued, the ideological concepts embodied by news media 'do not produce new knowledge about the world. They produce recognitions of the world as we have already learned to appropriate it'.[98] Providence was, in fact, part and parcel of news-making across early modern media. News of providence not only reflected an early modern mindset which viewed everything that happened in relation to God's plan for the universe, it shaped the audience's response to the occurrence. Moreover, an awareness of universal and particular providence enables us to correct a misconception around topical ballads. It allows us to appreciate the nuanced role that different forms of providence took in popular song, while simultaneously being conscious that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ballads which contained one or both of these forms of providence would have been recognized as news. Further research will reveal just how far this pattern is repeated across other news forms.

Important as the central role of providence is for our understanding of early modern news, the knowledge that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century news was imbued with an editorial perspective based on God's overarching plan for mankind also has implications for our understanding of the broader history of news. When Andrew Pettegree claimed that the divine interpretation of events was 'all the more potent in an age when tidings good and bad were interpreted within a theological framework',[99] he nevertheless understated the centrality of providence to early modern

[95]Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika, 'Introduction: rethinking disaster and emotions, 1400–1700', in Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika, eds., *Disaster, death and the emotions in the shadow of the apocalypse, 1400–1700* (London, 2016), p. 4.

[96]J. C. D. Clark, 'Providence, predestination and progress: or, did the Enlightenment fail?', *Albion*, 35 (2003), pp. 559–89, at p. 561.

[97]Alexandra Walsham, 'Deciphering divine wrath and displaying godly sorrow: providentialism and emotion in early modern England', in Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika, eds. *Disaster, death and the emotions in the shadow of the apocalypse, 1400–1700* (London, 2016), p. 31.

[98]Stuart Hall, 'The determinations of news photographs', in Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, eds., *The manufacture of news: deviance, social problems and the mass media* (London, 1973), p. 186.

[99]Pettegree, *Invention of news*, p. 137.

news culture. It was not merely a matter of interpretation. Whether or not the news was able to grab and keep a reader's attention was:

> a problem of provoking feeling in the reader, of inducing him to feel a sense of personal identification with the stories he is reading. News which does not offer this opportunity to introduce oneself into the struggle which it depicts cannot appeal to a wide audience. The audience must participate in the news, much as it participates in the drama, by personal identification.[100]

The one area with which all early modern Christians could be expected to identify personally was providence. Providential ballads and other successful news media provided important news of God's manifest judgement on the world. If 'Divine omnipotence was still believed to be reflected in daily happenings, and the world provided abundant testimony to the continuous manifestation of God's purpose', then to an early modern audience any ballad, or indeed any form of news media which focused on God's pleasure or dissatisfaction with his people, actually contained significant amounts of factual information.[101] News of God's ire or His approval was just as newsworthy as the event that provided for its earthly manifestation. Where with twenty-first-century eyes we see little more than religious moralizing, early modern listeners were hearing about *real* news which was for them material proof of God's everlasting purpose, devised 'before the foundations of the World were laid'.[102]

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[100] Lippmann, *Public opinion*, p. 192.
[101] Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic*, p. 78.
[102] Article XVII of *The thirty-nine articles of the Church of England*.

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