

Patricia Fumerton, *The Broadside Ballad in Early Modern England: Moving Media, Tactical Publics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020)

Una McLivenna, *Singing the News of Death: Execution Ballads in Europe 1500-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)

Since the publication of Tessa Watt's *Cheap Print and Popular Piety* (CUP, 1994), ballad studies have blossomed. Contributions to scholarship on English balladry have included a plethora of articles by Angela McShane; contributions by Steve Roud, David Atkinson and Oscar Cox Jensen; my own *Singing the News: Ballads in Mid-Tudor England* (Routledge, 2018); and, of course, Chris Marsh's masterful *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (CUP, 2002). Many of these studies have sought to recapture the ballad as a multifaceted artefact, highlighting the power of words, music, image and object. Patricia Fumerton's *The Broadside Ballad in Early Modern England: Moving Media, Tactical Publics* and Una McLivenna's *Singing the News of Death: Execution Ballads in Europe 1500-1900*, continue this tradition, adding much to our knowledge of the genre.

Both books successfully place performativity at the centre of their analysis by investigating the effects of song upon the audience. The importance of these authors' work lies in their differing approaches to how ballads were heard and indeed seen. Fumerton, as director of the English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA) at the University of California in Santa Barbara, has spent many years collecting, creating and curating digital editions of thousands of ballad texts. She provides a valuable synthesis of current ideas about how ballads worked in the early modern period and puts forward a considered framework for understanding the intermediality of early modern ballads. This is achieved through a strong emphasis on theory which some readers might find off-putting, especially as it is combined with an element of speculation in the analysis of her case studies. McLivenna similarly brings to her research her experience of working with the ARC Centre for the History of Emotions. Her book seeks to capture not only the performative aspects of early modern ballads across Europe but also their emotional effects on the singer and listener.

Comprising Chapters 2 and 3, Part I considers the associations that audiences might have made between ballads. Her analysis of the woodcut images on the *Mock-Beggar Hall* sheets offers a new perspective on a selection of songs. This reinforces our knowledge of how reusing images might add to a song's meaning. Chapter 3 provides a fascinating comparison of three different ways contemporaries might have understood this single song.

Part II investigates the experiences of a network of seventeenth-century ballad collectors. Fumerton suggests that they were 'in the service of an emotive, intellectual and historical cause of preserving black letter' both in script and print as white-letter began to predominate (pp. 16-17). Her examination of how ballad collectors 'dismembered' their artifacts is thought-provoking. Moreover, her focus on Pepys's fascination with collecting examples of calligraphy to create a history of handwriting made makes notable links between script and print which are often overlooked by scholars who work with only one or the other.

Part III further examines Pepys's role as a collector, along with his activities in creating ballad networks by sharing songs with a strong gender or political bias. Fumerton describes these as 'wassup' ballads akin to the catchphrase of a set of Budweiser adverts from the 2000s. The knowingness – where people understand what might only be alluded to – and downright bawdy euphemism involved in these songs will be familiar to ballad scholars, but the use of the term 'catchphrase' in the analysis seems not entirely appropriate when many of them contain no repeated phrases.

Part IV concentrates on one ballad, that hardy perennial, 'The Lady and the Blackamoor'. It was popular for more than 150 years, which gives the author a golden opportunity to investigate the movement of a single ballad across time and space. By way of conclusion, Fumerton posits that ballads 'can create a multimedia cross-class and full experiential moment more extensively and intensively than can drama' and therefore their use on stage allowed Shakespeare to '[address] the limits of his... plays' (p. 320).

Fumerton's intermedial approach is only made possible by her choice of case studies. The songs at the heart of the book are less representative of ballads as a whole since each all of her case studies went through different (sometimes multiple) editions that had both woodcut images and a variety of tunes for which we still have the music. This aside, Fumerton's work is conceptually informed by the New Textualism, which foregrounds the material context as well as the words themselves. Fumerton nevertheless admits that the New Textualism emphasises the book over other printed forms; prioritises the visual over the oral; and often fails to recognise that the distance between the physical item and its ultimate consumer is bridged by many 'interpretative remakings' (p. 7). In addressing these problems, she is further inspired by 'historical phenomenology' which 'foregrounds human subjects in all their plurality as agents' (p. 8). Her amalgam of the two approaches allows her to explore 'the historical and cultural aesthetics of the ballad-as-experience' which she terms 'experiential ballad aesthetics' (p. 11). She also draws on a range of other theories including assemblage theory and tactical media. It is this latter theory which might prove most useful to ballad scholars. As described on page 13, tactical media are 'plural, open and fluid... assembled in loose, improvisational and temporary associations to a particular end or goal' but, critically, can easily be disassembled. Tactical media, then, might prove to be a convenient shorthand to describe the inherently changeable nature of the ballad as song.

Not everyone will agree with all of her findings. While Fumerton's analyses are certainly possible, they are not always the most obvious explanations. This is most apparent in her analysis of the two *Mock-Beggar Hall* ballads. Fumerton suggests that the title refers to 'false' beggars but a simpler reading would be that it is the halls which mock real beggars by denying them the charity they deserve. There are also areas that musicians in particular might find over-egged. It is difficult to argue with her comment that a baritone cannot sing *Shackley Hey* in F major. This is because, in the musical example she gives, the melody reaches C6 (the C above the treble staff) which is a note which many amateur sopranos cannot reach. She also makes much of the perceived differences between major and minor versions of the tune 'Northern Nancy'. While the performative effects of the two versions are indeed different, many of the variances she picks out are decorative passing notes rather than being an intrinsic part of the tune – as such, they represent choices made by a singer at an individual performance and cannot be relied on as the way in which an audience would have heard the song. Nonetheless, there is much in Fumerton's work to admire, not least in how she combines her depth of knowledge with a willingness to apply and often critique theoretical approaches.

Where Fumerton's study focuses on the early modern English broadside ballad, Una McLivenna's monograph spans 400 years and five languages, taking in English, French, German, Dutch and Italian execution ballads from 1500-1900.<sup>1</sup> This multilingual approach allows us to see 'surprising continuities' (p. 5) where previous scholarship has tended to be siloed into national historiographies.

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<sup>1</sup> I should acknowledge that I happily provided the musical scores and analysis used in the book, but their interpretation remains entirely the author's.

The book is in two sections. Part I focuses on theoretical issues around execution ballads. Chapter 1 demonstrates again how important melody was to the ballad. McIlvenna supports the view that music not only added meaning through association but also generated an emotional response in the listener, arguing that ballad writers demonstrated a 'sophisticated ability... to consciously exploit complex emotional reactions around an already emotive topic' (p. 50). She goes further, suggesting that the process of setting new words to old tunes was 'especially significant' for execution ballads because of the 'complex web of ideas that early modern public execution presented around punishment, community and performance' (p. 57). Intriguingly, the satirical nature of some execution ballads in English is only replicated in the French corpus: German and Dutch execution ballads are limited to 'sombre contemplation' (p. 75), while Italian execution ballads only mock their subjects when they are in *barzilletta* (jest) form, which was applied to criminals who were 'already judged as outsiders, such as Jews or Moors' (p. 83). Though the existence of melodic meaning in early modern ballads is largely accepted by those who work on English ballads, McIlvenna's comprehensive account demonstrates that this phenomenon was well known on the continent.

Chapter 2 turns to the criminal's emotional response to execution, and in particular the feelings of shame created by their punishment. She argues that it was the manner of punishment rather than the crime itself that provoked the most shame (p. 91). She also suggests that the term 'shame' is multivalent, identifying four different aspects of emotional response: the experience of being found guilty of the crime; the public humiliation of punishment; the shame of the offender's family at the method of punishment; and the shame of commentators at witnessing the execution (p. 92). Rather than simply recounting examples of shame being felt, McIlvenna attempts to unpick why execution produced this feeling above all others, suggesting, for example, that one reason was because, in some forms of execution, there was no chance of Christian burial and therefore no hope of salvation (p. 113).

Chapter 3 investigates the thorny relationship between fact and fiction in ballads, perhaps epitomised by their insistence on the first-person voice and inclusion of supernatural elements. She argues that this also encompasses ballads' omission of botched executions or criminals who refused to conform to the expectation that they would repent. She nevertheless points out that while some crime stories are based on folklore rather than fact, or appear in many versions which claim the events occurred in different places, other stories that are now known to be impossible or appear outlandish were nonetheless 'corroborated' in the judicial record. Similar problems faced early modern consumers, not least because the men (and they almost always were men) who sold these songs were associated with criminality and vagrancy. This is the background against which we should understand balladeers' claims they were only retailing the truth.

Part II focusses on the sorts of crimes that were featured in execution ballads, beginning with a chapter on 'the devil's business'. She first examines martyr ballads before moving on to look at songs about witchcraft, noting that there are no extant Dutch or Italian songs on the subject of sorcery. She reveals some fascinating differences between English, German and French verses, including the gendering of werewolves and witches, and the numbers involved in the crimes. Although the genre might be international, she notes that the songs reflect beliefs about witchcraft which were specific to each region. Her next focus is murder ballads, where she reveals that murder songs became popular in Italy and Germany long before other countries where ballads were dominated by heresy and political crimes until at least the beginning of the seventeenth century, and in the case of Dutch song, the 1660s. Chapter 6 addresses political executions, highlighting the misogyny surrounding executions of, or ordered by, royal women, as well as 'the surprising amount of disapproval in balladry in their own kingdoms of the executions of Charles I and Louis XIV' (p.

342). Chapter 7 turns to the topic of outlaw balladry, where she makes a distinction between 'nostalgic' songs that treat their activities 'somewhat light-heartedly and offer no moral lessons' and 'realistic' songs which depict the outlaw as a 'heinous criminal who, full of repentance, receives his appropriate punishment' (p. 344). She offers the chapter as a case study in the need to be aware of tune reuse in execution songs, as the realistic ballads are set to the so-called hanging tunes whereas the nostalgic are not. Being composed much later than the events described, nostalgic ballads passed into popular culture and contributed to the romanticisation of outlaws.

The final chapter explores the evolution of the execution ballad in the nineteenth century, arguing that balladry 'continued to play a central role in the transmission of information about crimes and executions, although the variety of crimes covered was drastically diminished, to focus almost exclusively on murder'. This was despite the wide availability of daily newspapers and changing patterns of public executions to make them less theatrical (pp. 376-7). Instead, across most of Europe, it was the movement of executions behind closed doors that slowed their production. A short 'coda' discusses songs about executioners themselves.

Such a large-scale comparative study across time and geographical locations requires McIlvenna to demonstrate her familiarity with five individual historiographies of ballad culture. Likewise, in order to understand the many facets of execution ballads, several chapters need to explore existing work on the concept under discussion. Thus in the chapter on murder and violence, we are given a description of the main aspects of early modern homicide law, while in the chapter on shame she discusses the history of honour. This makes the book highly accessible because it does not require any prior knowledge of the reader. *Singing the News of Death* is therefore likely to be of interest to those studying a wide variety of fields, including the histories of emotions, religion, gender, crime and punishment, and politics as well as ballad culture itself.

Both scholars are to be commended for their commitment to approaching ballads as song – something which was intended to be heard and with the capacity to move the emotions of the listener. Whilst to study ballads as a multimedia whole is the goal of many working in the field, practical limitations often prevent this. What both Fumerton and McIlvenna highlight above all is the need to find a suitable methodology for ballad studies. We must recognise that even when we have words alone, these texts were not just intended to be voiced or sung, but to be seen as well as heard, in true multimedial fashion.