Victorian Literature and Culture (2000), 15–37. Printed in the United States of America.

"THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MURDER": THE TRANSGRESSIVE AESTHETICS OF MURDER IN VICTORIAN STREET BALLADS

By Ellen L. O'Brien

> To say that this common [criminal] fate was described in the popular press and commented on simply as a piece of police news is, indeed, to fall short of the facts. To say that it was sung and balladed would be more correct; it was expressed in a form quite other than that of the modern press, in a language which one could certainly describe as that of fiction rather than reality, once we have discovered that there is such a thing as a reality of fiction.
>
> —Louis Chevalier, *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes*

SPEAKING OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE, Louis Chevalier traces the bourgeoisie's elision of the working classes with the criminal classes, in which crime becomes either the representation of working class "failure" or "revenge" (396). Chevalier argues that working-class texts "recorded" their acquiescence to and acceptance of "a genuine fraternity of [criminal] fate" when they "described and celebrated [it] in verse" (397). Though a community of fate might inspire collective resistance, popular poetry and ballads, he confirms, reproduced metonymic connections between criminal and worker when "their pity went out to embrace dangerous classes and laboring classes alike. . . . One might almost say [they proclaimed these characteristics] in an identical poetic strain, so strongly was this community of feeling brought out in the relationship between the favorite subjects of working-class songs and the criminal themes of the street ballads, in almost the same words, meters, and tunes" (396). Acquiescence to or reiteration of worker/criminal equations established itself in workers' views of themselves as "a different, alien and hostile society" (398) in literature that served as an "involuntary and 'passive' recording and communication of them" (395). Though I am investigating Victorian England, not nineteenth-century France, and though I regard the street ballads as popular texts which record resistance, not acquiescence, Chevalier's work usefully articulates the predicament of class-based ideologies about worker and criminal which functioned similarly in Victo-

rian England. More importantly, Chevalier acknowledges the complexity of street ballads as cultural texts. By observing that the perceived "common fate" was "sung and balladed" in a "form quite other" than that of news media, in a literary language of "fiction," he highlights the sophistication of these texts as they "document" or "actually are the lower-class civilization which they reconstitute so accurately" (401).

Nineteenth-century England's increased specialization in and development of the discourses of criminology, crime reform, and class, though sometimes working at cross purposes, tended to locate the laboring classes, implicitly or explicitly, in a distinct cultural realm. Though this tangled discursive web is too immense to fully consider here, we can glimpse in popular texts and debates its distinct effects. Henry Mayhew marketed his influential *London Labour and the London Poor* as travels in "the undiscovered country of the poor," and as Gertrude Himmelfarb reminds us, his expedition metaphors and classificatory terms — "race," "foreign," "tribe" — reinforced the racial, geographical, and national separation of the poor from other classes of English Victorians (324). Legal debates about crime and punishment, including Common Law's strict notions of individual responsibility and free will, applications of the Royal Prerogative of Mercy, movements for criminal justice reform, and arguments for the abolition of public execution, were negotiated with reference to class; and the call for verifiable national crime statistics led to virtual inventories of the dangerous classes (Radzinowicz 238; Taylor 4–5). The street ballads, caught in these intersecting presumptions about worker and criminal, were deemed accomplices to crime, and mid-century reformers partook in the tradition of arguing for the suppression of the ballad singer, "the poorest of the poor" (O'Connell 168), whose songs were believed to foster immorality and to glorify crime (Radzinowicz 275). Ballad depravity was considered the necessary result of their origins in the economically depressed Seven Dials district where ballad printers operated and where "order [was] maintained by an extra force of policemen, and the first symptoms of riot [were] summarily suppressed" (Smith 252). Meanwhile, government officials continued to advise modest contentment and to deny links between poverty and crime (Taylor 54) while legislating increased police surveillance in poor areas and passing crime bills, such as the 1869 Habitual Criminals Act and the 1871 Prevention of Crime Act, which helped to criminalize poverty.

The crime ballads of Victorian England inserted themselves into this fray of criminal discourses and class ideology. In doing so, they developed the most sustained poetic and aesthetic treatment of crime in the Victorian era — in hundreds and hundreds of third-person "astonishing disclosures" of murderous deeds and hundreds more first-person criminal "last lamentations" — to sell and sing at public executions. This "gallows literature" is of central importance for considering how and why crime becomes art and how verse songs in particular accommodated a public, working-class examination of crime and its politics. An investigation of the Victorian criminal imaginary through the poetry of the streets reveals a substantial working-class reply to the Victorian condensation of crime and labor into a dangerous class. As texts presented at the scaffold, murder ballads overthrew the edifying power of state execution's spectacular lesson when they transformed the image of the ignorant and criminal scaffold crowd into the image of a literate and literary public. In the many and varied texts of this criminal art the laboring classes developed a poetics which could "reconstitute" and respond to the political, legal, and social turbulence surrounding murder and its punishment and which could define, reflect, and contest hegemonic connections between crime and class.

Scholars, however, seem reluctant to espouse working-class contributions to and influence in Victorian aesthetics and literature. The sheer volume of this literary production and its position in a marketplace of cheap goods (broadsides sold for a halfpenny or a penny) combined with its relationship to working-class production and consumption have contributed to a long-standing scholarly dismissal of the aesthetic sophistication of these texts. John Ashton, who collected these records of "social manners and customs" in *Modern Street Ballads* (1888) and lamented their late nineteenth-century decline, nevertheless disputes their artistic value: "taking them as a whole, we must fain confess that art as applied to these Ballads was at its very lowest. Their literary merit was not great — but what can you expect for half-a-crown?" (vii–viii). Even Francis J. Child, England's dedicated ballad collector who preserved rural ballads as "ancient national poetry," (366) was not yet ready to identify English national folk poetry with the urban masses: "The vulgar ballads of our day, the 'broadsides' which were printed in such huge numbers in England . . . belong to a different genus; they are products of a low kind of *art,* and most of them are, from a literary point of view, thoroughly despicable and worthless" (367). Romantic pastoralism, so invested in the co-optation and authority of rural peasant voices for a national tradition, refused to confer the same reputation, regard, or Englishness upon urban workers whose art, it was assumed, was doomed to oversimplification, moral weakness, and criminality.

Not surprisingly, similar assumptions about a working-class inability to produce aesthetic objects extend to imaginings — fictional or otherwise — of the literary elite. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* Lord Henry Wotton represents a late-Victorian class-based aestheticism when he explains to Dorian that he would not be capable of murder because: "Crime belongs exclusively to the lower orders." He adds, "I don't blame them in the smallest degree. I should fancy that crime was to them what art is to us, simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations" (252; ch. 19). The "lower orders," thus, stand wholly capable of murder but not of its representation. In an odd yoking of old ladies and vulgar masses (perhaps connected by a perceived lack of education), Thomas De Quincey, the notorious advocate of murder as fine art, dismisses the possibility of interpretive sophistication when the masses read murder. In "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts," he writes, "As to old women, and the mob of newspaper readers, they are pleased with anything, provided it is bloody enough. But the mind of sensibility requires something more" (1008). In assuming that a quantification of blood can be the masses' only aesthetic criterion, he overlooks the capacity for a qualitative sensibility or aesthetic purpose in beholding the representation of crime. Of course, each of these speakers denies the masses the ability to textualize crime, to aestheticize beyond or instead of the criminal act itself.

It would be difficult to insist that contemporary criticism has not suffered from similar assumptions about those who commit crime and those who write about it. A new approach to the ballads is needed, one that would dispense with such assumptions, ask new questions about this "sung" and "balladed" criminal imaginary, and analyze the "reality of fiction" which street patterers transported on broadsheets through the streets of Victorian London and transferred onto the singing lips of the masses. The ballads' poetic/aesthetic understanding of crime and punishment functioned on various levels with a political sensibility informed by a vexed and over-determined relationship to social transgression. In reconsidering ballads as aesthetic and political texts, we can trace complex meanings of

murder in their vulgar and violent imaginings. Unlike the "fashionably scandalous nineteenth-century idea of murder as art" which offered De Quincey and his contemporaries a "way of domesticating the most aberrant, sociopathic behavior — of converting a moral transgression into an amoral, aesthetic digression" (Black 111), the crime ballad aesthetic reveals its different position in the web of symbolic structures which interpreted and governed Victorian crime, punishment, and literature.

In formulating a new approach, I will focus on the third-person "astonishing disclosures" which developed an aesthetic through which questions about murder, as social transgression, could be addressed. In these ballads crime becomes art at the murder scene, which is cast as an aesthetic site/sight for exploring the significance of the crime. Two representations, the account of the crime and the account of the crime scene, confer this meaning. One establishes the aesthetic of violent murder at the center of an "astonishing disclosure"; the other creates a shocking tableau of murder victims, transformed into art objects by the inexplicable artistry of an impassioned murderer. Though at first glance the centrality of violence might seem to legitimate De Quincey's theory about the quantification of blood, a closer look uncovers the ways in which the murderous frenzy and its hideous objects participated in, synthesized, or appropriated nineteenth-century aesthetics. The murderer's impassioned creation calls to mind Ruskin's gothic art, available to the laborer and grounded in unselfconscious artistic production.[1] The murderer's art embodies Ruskin's "terrible grotesque" with its "diseased and ungoverned imaginativeness" (166). Street ballads framed this terrible art in narrative astonishment ("astonishing disclosures") whereby they further consolidated the aesthetic of the sublime in the nineteenth-century imagination. Burke and Kant both cited astonishment as the sublime's corresponding passion, and their ideas about the aesthetic value of fear, pain, and violence broke the aesthetic primacy of the beautiful. Ballads distilled the sublime's emotional correlatives into a poetics of social commentary to create an urban sublime arising from social, rather than natural, forces.

At the same time, these aesthetic structures, in privileging the spectacle of violence and its victims, could highlight the exclusions and blindspots of legal and judicial discourse. For in ascertaining the "malice aforethought, expressed or implied" necessary for establishing a murder conviction, courts neglected the social text of the crime scene and focused instead on the intent implied in the murder weapon (Chadwick 389). As ballads were not concerned with indictment or conviction, but rather with contemplating and expressing the crime's meaning, usually on the occasion of the perpetrator's execution, stylized violence had both aesthetic and legal connotations. My interest, then, lies in the participation of these texts in circulating aesthetic codes *and* politico-legal codes and in how these codes intersected. But it also lies in a question about how these graphic songs of murder could circulate among the working classes in the thousands, sometimes millions, and not prompt contemporary critics' attention to the transgressive function of these studies in transgression itself. Masses of Victorians melodically uttering "pools of blood as thick as mud, from all of them could trace" or "[f]rom the tender roof of the infant's mouth/she cut away it's [sic] tongue" should inspire new questions about criminal representation — in both the aesthetic and the legal implications of the word.

Strangely, though, these texts, for the most part, have not raised our modern eyebrows. Critics have assumed that they do not play with ethical boundaries or recast symbolic definitions. An underestimation of street literature's sophistication and subtlety

often leads to the diagnosis of conservatism. In "The Literature of the Streets" Victor Neuburg argues that the ballads' lack of radical rhetoric equals a "muted" politics (197). Similarly, V. A. C. Gatrell, sensitive to the complexities of working-class texts, nevertheless casts the broadsides as "objective correlatives" to "acquiescence, approval, identification with the law" whose "lip-service to conventional morality" was "sentimental, not transgressive" (156). Indeed, conventional moral rhetoric has posed the most substantial critical barrier to aesthetic analysis. In a reversal of Victorian suspicion, those few modern scholars to explore Victorian crime ballads have read their moral advice and warnings as allegiance to symbolic law. This argument privileges the "come all ye" ballad introductions which cast the audience as concerned, innocent citizens: "attend all you feeling parents dear," "you kindest fathers, tender mothers," "you feeling Christians," "good people." And it foregrounds ballad connections between justice and state punishment: "hanging is too good for such a villain," "she her deserts will get," "the blood of the murdered will not cry in vain." These "thread[s] of didactic quality" inspire David Cooper's argument that crime ballads "confirmed the lesson of the gallows" (26). Such an argument, however, too hastily situates the ballads and the scaffold in the same discursive position because it focuses on didactic "threads" to the exclusion of the greater portion of the text and to the exclusion of many ballads which unequivocally contested conventional morality and capital punishment.

When combined with theories about generic convention, assumptions about textual simplicity and sentimental morality further obscure aesthetic consideration. Natascha Würzbach's speech act theory of early street ballads suggests that critique, humor, *and* didacticism are all comfortably embedded within the moral frame: "the street ballad frequently also looks at social reality critically, humorously, and from diverse points of view, all of which can be combined with didactic intentions . . . recognizable in the recurrent illocutionary acts of warning and advice on the level of the presenter's communication with his audience" (235). Thus, seemingly dialectic meaning remains moralistically anchored and embedded. In *Murder and Moral Decay in Victorian Popular Literature* Beth Kalikoff considers street ballads as a genre circumscribed by "a narrow set of conventions" (9). Crime ballads operate as "moral fable[s]" (14) which define murderous transgression as a violation of "the most basic contracts implied within particular kinds of human relationships" (17). This moral fable, Kalikoff argues, is reinforced by its presence in the execution marketplace where its "frantic, chaotic murders . . . reflect a resounding determination to punish criminals with the violence that characterizes their attack on legal, sexual, and moral authority" (19). Critical emphasis on convention and stylistic repetition, like emphasis on morality and simplicity, forces us to overlook specific utterances put forth in the ballads and the weight of material internal to the poems. Thus, we must re-open the possibility of difference among the texts, overturn an idea of strict genre regularity, and look closely at specific ballads as representations of and explorations of murder.

When we remember that the narrative kernel, *as advertised,* continued to lie in the aestheticized "full particulars" or "the astonishing disclosures" of murder or that sentimental moralizing was tangential to, if not threatening to, sales and consumption, ballad aesthetics can assert themselves in critical studies.[2] James Catnach, the publisher credited with bringing the crime ballad to new literary heights and unprecedented sales, sought "the most beautiful murder," thereby establishing a literary and market value in which

aesthetics — not ethics — is applied to contemplate "barbarous deeds" (Hindley, *Life* 361). These links between beauty, value, impact, barbarity, and violence reflect the ballads' formulation of an urban sublime based on the aesthetic power of violence. Accordingly, patterers who distributed and sang ballads in the Victorian streets located their value in stylized violence: "There's nothing beats a stunning good murder after all" (Mayhew, qtd. in Hindley, *History* 69). And Charles Hindley, researching his *History of the Catnach Press* in 1869, reacted not to the promise of a morality tale, but to the promise of gruesome detail: "our ears voluntarily 'pricked up,' on hearing the old familiar sounds of a 'street, or running patterer' with the stereotyped sentences of 'Horrible.' 'Dreadful.' 'Hanging.' — 'Coroners inquest.' — 'Verdict.' — 'Full particulars.' — 'Most determined suicide.' — 'Brutal conduct.' — &c., &c., 'Only a ha'penny! — only a ha'penny!'" (*History* x). Hindley responds to these stereotypes with fascination because the images and phrases betray insights into human will ("most determined"), extremes of passion, and an alluring language of energy — all aesthetic components of the "beautiful murder." Kalikoff, despite her belief in the efficacy of the moral frame, concedes that when "the nameless narrator concludes with a moral admonition or tag," it is "in a language much *weaker* than the full and energetic description of the murder that precedes it" (14; emphasis added). Most likely, a Victorian audience was as aware of this as she; and the strength of a "full and energetic description" most likely, then as now, communicated more forcefully than common moral advice. If, as Richard Altick has argued, the moral frame was simply "a device employed by the printer's hireling lyricists to fend off the persistent complaints of the pious that crime literature of the streets was morally poisonous" (49), the ballad's sublime core was a device deployed for the purposes of social analysis. It was this violent core that allowed ballads to "provid[e] forms and language for" or "a means of interpreting and managing violence" (Vicinus 16).

In challenging the authority of dominant ethical frameworks, in an effort to uncover the aesthetic issues at stake, we should also note that moral advice often appeared in precepts which are secondary to or dwarfed by the act of murder; and where tangential or inverted, moral conversions courted parody or subversion and obfuscated moral responsibility. In an era when emotional, psychological, medical, and social causes for murder were being considered, while English Common Law resisted mitigation, traditional explanations continued to serve. In many ballads Satan shares some, if not all, responsibility; "He was by Satan led" and "he with Satan did connive" were not uncommon ways of explaining, absolving, and/or increasing the significance of the crime. In "Miles Weatherhill, the Weaver, and his Sweetheart, Sarah Bell" acceptable moral linkages between act and judgment slip when the lesson attached to his slaying of two lovers is not, "Thou shalt not kill," but rather, "Where true love is planted, there let it dwell." In other ballads, contextual information redirects moral judgment away from the individual criminals and towards social conditions and legal problems. The song of the "Dreadful Murder at Eriswell" transforms the condemnation of two poachers who murdered a groundskeeper into an argument for the repeal of "those cursed Game Laws" which "has been the cause, / Of many a life's blood to be shed" (sic).

In these cases, and in many others, ballads implicitly or explicitly exculpated individuals of moral responsibility while providing contexts which could indict social structures. Such strategies also defied notions of class criminal guilt. "Murder of A Wife at Ashburnham, Near Hastings" inverts class relations when a group of "servants" and

"labourers," acting as moral and police authorities, hunt an "aged, wealthy sire" who murdered his wife:

> They did pursue the murderer,
> They in numbers went along,
> Searched the hedges and the ditches,
> Dragged the river and the ponds. . . .

Capital punishment — always the context of the murder ballad — often registered pity for the condemned with the narrator's disgust at the crime. "The Execution of Five Pirates" emphasizes the contradictory responses which execution elicited: "And though they were not fit to live, / We pity to them on the gallows,/Englishmen could not deny." These conflicting sentiments about responsibility and punishment point to the dangers of substituting a national morality for a working-class perspective or in assuming that ballads reiterated the lessons of the scaffold; a shifting and complicated working-class relationship to legal prohibition and protection yielded ideological conflicts which were inscribed in their songs of Victorian crime.

Due to the unreliability of explanatory frames and the displacement of simple didactic instruction, a crime ballad hermeneutic must address the pressing consistency of the murderous act and the crime scene, which together constitute the transgressive center of the murder ballad. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White adopt Barbara Babcock's definition of "symbolic inversion" to formulate a definition of transgression, one useful in theorizing the murder ballad poetics. Babcock writes, "'Symbolic inversion' may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political" (qtd. in Stallybrass and White 17). Ballad murders enact such inversions, or transgressions, when moral language is overwhelmed by the aesthetic language of graphic violence. Where de Quincey saw only the quantification of blood, ballad writers sensed, to borrow John Kucich's phrase about transgression, the "political use of moral *disorder*" (2). If, as Babcock argues, all symbolic inversions "define a culture's lineaments" while "question[ing] the usefulness and the absoluteness of this ordering" (Babcock 29), these graphic inversions addressed the cultural lineaments of murder — ideologies of class and crime, legal definitions of murder, theories legitimating capital punishment — in order to revise the social ordering of murderous transgression and its absolute punishment. Stallybrass and White claim transgression as a way to "illuminate sites where social classification and psychological processes are generated as conflictual impulses" (25); the street ballad claimed murder for similar reasons: to recreate and textualize these sites and to explore the meanings that they bore.

Thus, I am not arguing, as Victorians often did, that street ballads were fundamentally amoral, but that, because of the meanings they inscribed upon murders and crime scenes and because of their multiple discursive and narratological levels, they conveyed lessons beyond what the moral frames or excessive blood imply. The business of ballad writing was to treat murder aesthetically by supplying the artistic flair overlooked by the historical criminal who had no "regard for the interest of art and literature" (Mayhew, qtd. in Altick 49). In bestowing this regard, balladeers cast murderers as artists whose violent medium

produced "stunning good murders" and elaborate crime scenes. The importance of this murderer-artist identity lay not only in the artist persona but also in the picture of Victorian culture that the artist created and in how these works of art spoke about the violence of Victorian society. More than a sensational or disinterested aesthetic, it voiced insights into the legal and social discourses surrounding criminality, murder, and capital punishment. Here we might make one final distinction between morality and aesthetics. Joel Black writes: "Our reactions to . . . fictional representations of murder may range from horror to admiration, but whatever shock we experience will consist of aesthetic astonishment rather than of moral outrage" (9). A difference between "moral outrage" and "aesthetic astonishment" explains the repeated ballad interest in "*astonishing* disclosures" which would "make the blood run cold"; as stylized violence proliferates, aesthetic astonishment overtakes moral outrage. In mastering the aesthetics of astonishment, then, street ballads advanced a poetics of transgression, one that unsettled comfortable moral assumptions about the dichotomy of innocence and guilt, produced symbolic inversions through confrontations with graphic violence, and revealed a murderous art reflective of — not deviating from — the culture which produced it. The response to this confrontational poetics was most certainly astonishment.

The power of aesthetic representations and symbolic inversions of murder is rooted in murder's social status. Of its symbolic function, Foucault writes, "Murder establishes the ambiguity of the lawful and the unlawful" (*Rivière* 206). This is so because murder "posits the relation between power and the people, stripped down to its essentials: the command to kill, the prohibition against killing; to be killed, to be executed. . . . Murder prowls the confines of the law, on the one side or the other, above or below it; it frequents power, sometimes against and sometimes with it" (*Rivière* 206). Murder, thus, provides a striking motif for transgression. And if murder "prowls" the borders or lineaments of the lawful and the unlawful, it is not surprising that the class which was understood to exist at that same limit might buy and sell songs of crime which resisted the symbolic prohibitions on transgressions which were used to define them. This political dimension of murder — as the conflict of symbolic ordering and psychological impulses — explains why hegemonic morality became submerged within a politicized aesthetic about Victorian violence. Murder, a shorthand for investigations into the lawful/unlawful, effectively fragmented *and* condensed the circulating ideologies of crime, class and culture.

Thus, though the working classes are suspected of being incapable of aestheticizing crime, it is precisely the complexity of their major aesthetic project (and its subject) that has led critics to ignore the political content or to see it as "muted." In fact, murder ballads join other surviving broadsides of various genres to reveal a consistently political and class-conscious approach to crime. In "John Bull, Can You Wonder At Crime?" the narrator criticizes the nation, with its "riches in heaps stowed away, / Mouldy with age and mildew," for mystifying the rising crime rate. An explanation of the true cause unfolds in scenes of abject poverty which contrast the hoarded wealth of the wondering elite: "Your gold to yourself you confine, / Where a little would make a great change, sir, / In our terrible increase of crime." Constituting a ballad genre in its own right, ballads against the metropolitan police problematized the recruitment of police from the working classes and questioned the means of distinguishing between the state and the people, power and its subjects. "Complaints Against the New Police" critiques their tactics: "And if a word to them you say, / They'll drag you off without delay." "I'm One of the New Police"

highlights the performance quality of the uniform: "My gloves of white, my coat of blue, / My dignity increase" (qtd. in Hindley, *Life* 207). The most popular ballad characterization of the police (which began in 1829 with Peel's Metropolitan Police Act but which Hindley traces into the Victorian era) cast them as mutton thieves capitalizing on the illusion of respectability. "The New Policeman, and the Somers Town Butcher" confronts the policeman and his props:

> Hollo! New Police,
> Who in blue coats strut on,
> Your fame you won't increase
> By stealing joints of mutton.
> Who would e'er suppose,
> In such handsome rigging,
> Spick and span new clothes,
> Men would go a prigging? (qtd. in Hindley, *Life* 203)

The judge in "The Lamentation in Newgate of the Police-Man, Who Boned the Mutton" echoes the judgment commonly passed on the poor in English courts: "You did not steal the meat for want / . . . When you stole the meat, you had / In your pocket fifteen shillings." The reversal, achieved in the taunted, interrogated, imprisoned agent of the law who must receive the words usually pronounced over the thefts of the poor, demonstrates the signifying power of the police, who, like murder, provided efficient signs for a political analysis of crime.

When deploying murder for similar purposes, the ballad voice approached these concerns more forcefully and less humorously. Because the law mandated death for murder, ballad writers scrutinized the unlawful circumstances which culminated in the lawful deaths of the scaffold. The financial success of these scrutinies implies a receptive audience; Foucault considers this relationship in the French broadsides: " . . . if these true stories of everyday history were received so avidly, if they formed part of the basic reading of the lower classes, it was because people found in them not only memories, but also precedents; the interest of 'curiosity' is also a political interest" (*Discipline and Punish* 68). In rooting ballad popularity in its potential as precedent for, accomplice to, or inspiration for, crime, Foucault implies, as did those who wished to subject ballads to control, a curiosity linked to future criminal activity. Instead, we might say that curiosity takes its political shape in the street ballads' aesthetic resistance to an ideological equation which yoked violent crime and an othered class while it accepted violence which served prevailing dispositions of power. The transformation of what was considered vulgar brutality into a culturally embedded art form simultaneously rewrote an ignorant curiosity as a political one.

Though many crime ballads constructed the audience as morally edified innocents, an equal number recorded curiosity by constructing an audience of murder tale aficionados schooled in narratives of astonishment and gore. The verses in the "Life, Trial, Character, Confession and Execution of Stephen Forward" construct readers and singers alike as crime literature enthusiasts: "Of all the crimes we ever heard, of all the crimes we read,/Sure none on earth did ever know, a more sad dreadful deed." The narrator of the "Lamentation of J. Mapp" suggests a comparative study of Mapp's crime: "Such a dread-

ful murder, as you may see,/Which we may compare to the Alton tragedy." "The Liverpool Tragedies," printed on the broadsheet, "Execution of John Gleeson Wilson" (Figure 1), registers the crime's magnitude by citing the notorious murderers, Greenacre and Kelly, whose ballads sold well into the millions, and "Lamentation of H. Lingley" invokes the notorious Rush, whose execution ballad sold two and a half million copies. Lingley, the ballad informs us, will die "On the very tree where Rush met his fate" and will lie "By the side of Rush in a murderer's grave." As the use of these names suggests, the ballad audience was familiar with criminals, their crimes, and their executions. A ballad occasionally addressed the pervasive presence of crime itself, suggesting both a culture steeped in the knowledge of violent death and a prevailing violent spirit of the age. The narrator of the "Lamentation of J. Mapp" laments,

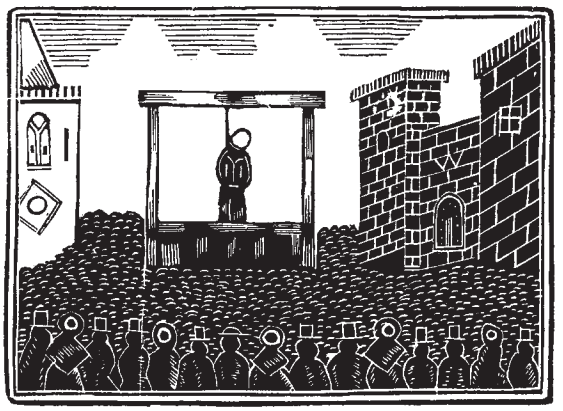
> How sad and dreadful it is to state,
> The horrid murders that have been of late;
> In every quarter both far and near,
> Such atrocious deeds before this no one did hear.

These allusions and superlatives surely aided in marketing ballad lyrics, but they also highlighted crime's textual or narrative status; such intertextuality further undermines readings of street literature which underestimate its literary language, its writers, and its audience.

Amidst these textual layers, at the narrative's center, the account of the horrid murder is complex. Characterized by a voice which witnesses only after the fact, the ballad re-witnesses or re-enacts a murder mediated by the astonished testimonial voice of an anonymous narrator through details gleaned from official sources. This patchwork of direct and indirect testimony creates oscillating narratological levels — the historical crime/criminal, the fictionalized crime/criminal, a witness within the narrative/the ballad narrator-witness, the voice of social morality, the voice of legal judgment, the voice of public sympathy, and so on. As they prowl the lawful and the unlawful, the murders studied in the ballads often involve planning stages, explanatory letters, dialogues between victim and murderer (which punctuate, disrupt, or incite violence), and the subsequent arrangement or disposal of the body or bodies. Murder narratives dramatize fragments of official discourse — a coroner's report, a signed confession — excerpts of which might be supplied in the prose section of the broadside. Thus, the ballad account reinvents official information, magnifying any idiosyncrasies which might serve the needs of aesthetic effect. A coroner's report printed on John Mapp's broadside connects the victim's clothing to the crime: "I found a shawl tied round her neck, and about eight inches shoved tightly into her mouth." The ballad then assigns fetishistic importance to the victim's clothes, objects which can distinguish or interpret the crime and criminal and reinforce the pathetic or bathetic: "Her clothes he scattered over ditch and field, /. . . . Little Kitty's brooch that was found on Mapp, / And he took her ribbon from her Sunday hat."

The anatomy of a crime scene presents the tableau of violent death found by authorities and/or witnessed by an omniscient narrator. The crime scene, which Victorianists are adept at discussing as a site of evidence in detective fiction, functions in the ballad as a found object, the traumatic remainder of the criminal act, with aesthetic, rather than evidential, import; it need not disclose an unknown identity but must elicit aesthetic

EXECUTION OF
JOHN GLEESON WILSON,
At Kirkdale Gaol, on Saturday, September 15th, 1849, the Murderer of Mrs. Hinrichson, her Two Children, and Female Servant.



One of the most appalling murders which has for years startled and disgusted society took place on the morning of Wednesday, March 28th, 1849, at No. 20, Leveson Street, Liverpool, at mid-day. A miscreant in the most brutal manner murdered two unprotected women and two helpless children.

In due course Wilson was committed for trial, which took place before Mr Justice Patteson and a respectable jury, who, in less than five minutes, returned a verdict of GUILTY.

On Saturday morning, a few minutes before twelve o'clock, the iron gate leading to the drop was opened, and the prisoner appeared between two priests—the Rev. Mr Duggan and the Rev. Mr Marshall. A general feeling of horror seemed to pervade all present, which found expression in the most distant part of the assemblage by bursts of execration.

Calcraft, the London executioner, was unable to be present from illness, and the office was performed by Howard, from York, who was especially brought to Liverpool by the Under Sheriff. The priests read in English, the service of the Catholic Church for a departing soul until the bolt was drawn, and the wretched culprit was launched into eternity.

Thus terminated the life of one of the greatest criminals that ever disgraced the human family. Upwards of 100,000 persons were present, the railway company running cheap trains from all available parts.

—‡—

THE LIVERPOOL TRAGEDIES.

Come all you feeling christians and listen unto me,
The like was not recorded in British history,
It's of three dreadful murders committed, I am told,
By one John Gleeson Wilson, for the sake of cursed gold.

On Wednesday the 28th, consternation did prevail,
In Leveson Street in Liverpool, where thousands did bewail,
The fate of this poor family, who we're left to deplore, [more.
Snatched from a father's fond embraces, who ne'er will see them

This monster in human shape did go there to dwell,
And that he went for plunder to all it is known full well,
And when this callous villain saw their defenceless state,
He did resolve them all to kill and rob them of the plate.

His bloody work he did commence all in the open day,
By striking at the children while their mother was away,
The servant girl did interfere, said, "should not do so,"
Then with a poker in his hand he gave her a severe blow.

Numberless times he did her strike till she could no longer stand,
The blood did flow profusely from her wounds, and did him brand,
Then the eldest boy of five years old, in supplication said,
"Oh master, spare our precious lives, don't serve us like the maid."

This darling child of five years old he brutally did kill,
Regardless of its tender cries, its precious blood did spill,
The youngest child to the kitchen ran, to shun the awful knife,
This villain followed after and took its precious life.

The surgeon thus describes the scene presented to his view,
A more appalling case than this he says he never knew,
Four human beings on the floor all weltering in their gore,
The sight was sickening to behold on entering the door.

The mother's wounds three inches deep upon her head and face,
And pools of blood as thick as mud, from all of them could trace,
None could identify the boy, his head was like a jelly;
This tragedy is worse by far than Greenacre or Kelly.

To the hospital in this sad state they quickly were conveyed,
The mother with her infant dear, and faithful servant maid,
Thousands did besiege the gates, their fate for to enquire,
But in three days from incise wounds, both of them did expire.

'Twill cause the captain many a pang to know their awful doom,
His loving wife and children sent to an untimely tomb, [save,
'Twill make his hair turn grey with grief, no skill their lives could
And he did go, borne down with woe, in sorrow to the grave.

But now he's taken for this deed, bound down in irons strong,
In Kirkdale Jail he now does lie, till his trial it comes on,
May God above receive the souls of those whom he has slain,
And may they all in heavenly bliss for ever with him reign.

J. Harkness, Printer, Preston.

Figure 1. "Execution of John Gleeson Wilson," 1849. Broadsheet, from *Curiosities of Street Literature*, ed. Charles Hindley (New York: August M. Kelley, 1970), 197. Courtesy of Augustus M. Kelley, Publishers.

astonishment. These stylized crime scenes are either carefully constructed by the murderer or created when the murderer's attempts at clean-up are disrupted by an unexpected witness whose gaze freezes the tableau of gruesome discovery. Many ballads recount the murder and then return to it through a description of the crime scene. The two are logical companions in a depiction of the crime, but more importantly, crime scenes allow a ballad to repeat its sublime core, "the most beautiful murder." In developing these two components of murder at varying narratological levels, street ballads could contemplate murder as act, as transgression, and as social phenomenon.

In "The Liverpool Tragedies," we can see how all of these aesthetic and narrative features collaborate in the construction of a murder. Printed on the broadside, "Execution of John Gleeson Wilson," this ballad tells of Wilson's murders of Mrs. Hinrichson, her two children, and a female servant "for the sake of cursed gold," and deploys dialogue to undertake the task of explication:

> His bloody work he did commence all in the open day,
> By striking at the children while their mother was away,
> The servant girl did interfere, said, "should not do so,"
> Then with a poker in his hand he gave her a severe blow.
>
> Numberless times he did her strike till she could no longer stand,
> The blood did flow profusely from her wounds, and did him brand,
> Then the eldest boy of five years old, in supplication said,
> "Oh master, spare our precious lives, don't serves us like the maid."
>
> This darling child of five years old he brutally did kill,
> Regardless of its tender cries, its precious blood did spill,
> The youngest child to the kitchen ran, to shun the awful knife,
> This villain followed after and took its precious life.

Garret Stewart, who maintains that literary Victorians tended to die "vocally," argues that deathbed conversations "inscribe the indecipherable" (13). Street ballad dialogues between murderer and victim, a type of final conversation which Stewart does not examine, allowed the murder narrative to articulate the indecipherable nature of violent death. The servant girl's final words ("should not do so") attempt to impose the lawful, and by way of the murderer's verbal and physical rejection, the ballad approaches the boundaries of murderous transgression. By placing dialogue in the victims' and murderers' mouths, ballads postulated subject positions for the objectified act and constructed psychologies for the participants while authenticating the witnessing narrative, which was not a first-person account. Children, as in much literature, circulated as moral innocents, and hence, moral weakness; the child's invocation of moral restraint, "spare our precious lives," cannot check transgressive violence. The failed attempts at moral reasoning, supplication, and escape emphasize the absolute failure of the lawful, which even apprehension and punishment cannot restore. In this uneasy dialogue between the murderer and his victim lies the inefficacy of moral law, a state then encapsulated in an aesthetic monument to the unlawful, the crime scene.

Crime scenes, as I have suggested, enacted another type of speech through the bodies which enabled the murder, when over, to impart meaning. The speaking/meaning corpse was no stranger to the Victorian popular imagination. The dangling corpse of the publicly hanged criminal was to convey the unequivocal, deterrent message of state power. Speaking bodies appeared in literary entertainments as well, and from these materials we might glean interpretive strategies of, or precedents for, these bodily texts. In Shakespeare's *Richard the Third,* popular among working-class Victorians, Lady Ann likens Henry's wounds to mouths which speak the presence of the murderous Richard, "see dead Henry's wounds / Open their congeal'd mouths and bleed afresh!" (1.2.55–6).[3] With respect to this passage, Linda Charnes comments on the textual power of connecting corporeal wounds, mouths and speech: "the power to attach meaning to things — and especially to things that don't automatically 'speak for themselves,' such as body parts, physical features, wounds that bleed afresh, and so on . . . constitutes political power" (31). This analysis lends insight into the trembling and dangling bodies of the executed, and given criminology's attachment of body parts and physiognomic features to criminality, a connection that helped to collapse worker into criminal, it is not surprising that working-class ballads would employ similar materials for challenging that argument. Symbolically inverting and contesting forms of bodily speech, ballads used victims' speaking bodies to reject dominant understandings of moral order, to revise legal definitions of capital murder, or to illustrate unacknowledged forms of social violence.

Accordingly, in "The Liverpool Tragedies" the surgeon reads the crime scene as a text:

> The surgeon thus describes the scene presented to his view,
> A more appalling case than this he says he never knew,
> Four human beings on the floor all weltering in their gore,
> The sight was sickening to behold on entering the door.
>
> The mother's wounds three inches deep upon her head and face,
> And pools of blood as thick as mud, from all of them could trace,
> None could identify the boy, his head was like a jelly;
> This tragedy is worse by far than Greenacre or Kelly.

Here, the corpses "weltering in their gore" speak, not lament, the "appalling" failure of innocence and the inadequacies of moral law; the abject excess of these images rejects sentimental lamentation or moral outrage and returns to the astonishing sublime. Through the "sickening" vision, the ballad challenges moral authority: preach to us the sanctity of Victorian moral law, and we will sing to you bodies dripping in gore. Catnach printed a woodcut entitled "The Arrest of the Prisoner" with a caption connecting speech and corpse: "For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak with a most miraculous organ" (qtd. in Hindley, *History* 274). The heteroglossic layers of this epigram invite more than a moral warning about clues and capture. They turn an investigative notion into an aesthetic one by suggesting the communicative value of the corpse, which utters a miraculous speech in a miraculous form — in the "organs" of the murdered. Such astonishing utterances refuse to be absorbed by a dominant ideology or reduced to a didactic morality.

"The Liverpool Tragedies" sings of "random" violence, the connection of strangers through the barbarous deeds of their attackers. But more often, ballads reported the murders of acquaintances and family members. In these songs, murders forged connections between transgression and social order, connections which could dispute essentialist or class criminality, intervene in legal debates about motive, mitigating circumstances, and provocation, and interrogate concepts of justice. "Verses on Daniel Good" (Figure 2), for example, reports the 1842 execution of Daniel Good, a gentleman's coachman, convicted of the "barbarous and cruel" murder of Jane Jones, who "kept a mangle in South street." The "recital" of this barbarity and cruelty, the narrator assures us, "[is] enough to turn your blood cold." Although Daniel Good is characterized as an essentially criminal "cold-blooded monster," the murder narrative foregrounds the crime's origins in social taboo. Jones's illegitimate pregnancy inspires Good's resolve "To murder his victim and the babe in her womb." Thus, the murder, through dialogue and through the multilation of Jones's body, monstrously confronts the socially inscribed meaning of one transgression, in terms of another:

> Then with a sharp hatchet her head did cleave,
> She begged for mercy but none he would give,
> Have mercy dear Daniel my wretched life spare,
> For the sake of your own child which you know I bear.
>
> No mercy, he cried, then repeated the blow,
> Alive from this stable you never shall go,
> Neither you nor your brat shall e'er trouble me more,
> Then lifeless his victim he struck to the floor.

As in Wilson's ballad, moral equations here are evaluated and discarded during the murder; Good's cry "No mercy" names and defines his actions, and the dialogue enables the ballad to verbally "prowl the confines of the lawful and unlawful" — the victim invokes strictures of the symbolic order and the murderer categorically denies them. Language thus injects the presence of the lawful, only to fail.

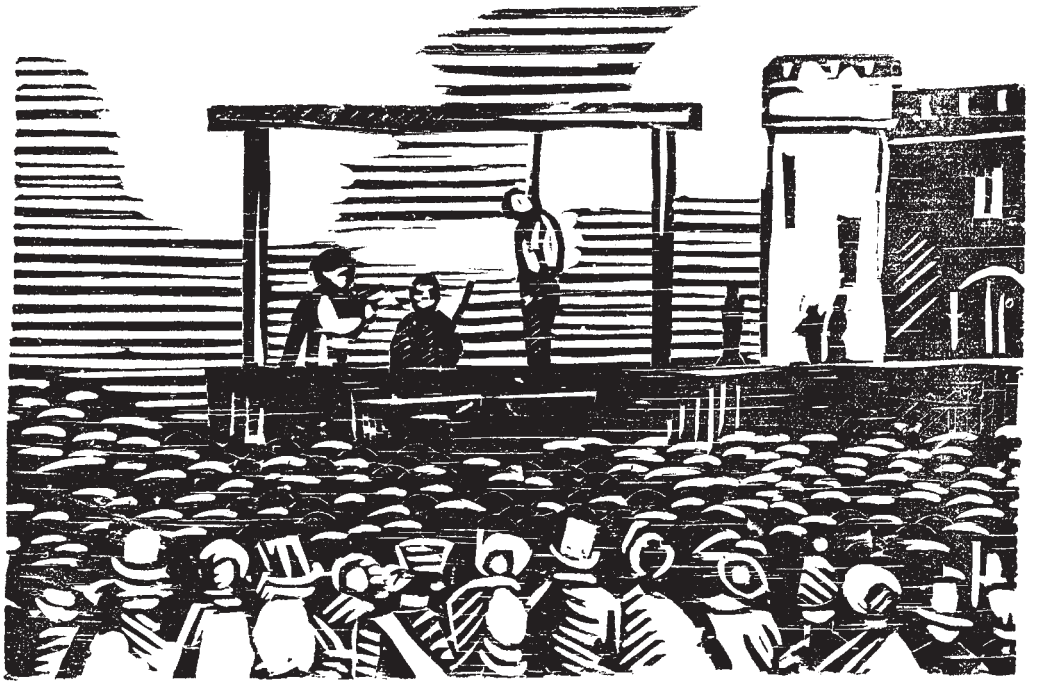
In the subsequent hiding of his deed, Good reiterates meaning and motivation by inscribing his verbal message on the body of his victims, a number now clearly doubled. Through a gruesome disemboweling, he separates them to render a visual symbol of his original transgression:

> And when she was dead this sad deed to hide,
> The limbs from her body he straight did divide,
> Her bowels ript open and dripping with gore,
> The child from the womb this black monster he tore.

The graphic arrangement of the body, as crime scene, is produced when a policeman (who is looking for a pair of trousers that Good has stolen from a pawn-shop) interrupts Good's act of incineration: "He made a large fire in the harness room, / Her head, arms, and legs in the fire did consume." As the ordinary intrudes upon extreme violence, the narrative secures aesthetic astonishment in the gaze of the unsuspecting witness: "When in search-

VERSES ON DANIEL GOOD,

Who was executed this morning May,'42, for the Murder of Jane Jones



Of all the wild deeds upon murder's black list,
Sure none is so barbarous and cruel as this,
Which in these few lines unto you I'll unfold,
The recital's enough to turn your blood cold.

In the great town of London near Manchester square,
Jane Jones kept a mangle in South street we hear,
A gentleman's coachman oft visiting came,
A cold-blooded monster, Dan Good was his name.

As a single man under her he made love,
And in course of time she pregnant did prove,
Then with false pretences he took her from home,
To murder his victim and the babe in her womb.

To his master's stables in Putney Park Lane,
They went, but she never returned again,
Prepare for your end then the monster did cry,
You time it is come for this night you must die.

Then with a sharp hatchet her head did cleave,
She begged for mercy but none he would give,
Have mercy dear Daniel my wretched life spare,
For the sake of your own child which you know I bear.

No mercy, he cried, then repeated the blow,
Alive from this stable you never shall go,
Neither you nor your brat shall e'er trouble me more,
Then lifeless his victim he struck to the floor.

And when she was dead this sad deed to hide,
The limbs from her body he straight did divide,
Her bowels ript open and dripping with gore,
The child from the womb this black monster he tore.

He made a large fire in the harness room,
Her head, arms, and legs in the fire did consume,
But e'er his intentions were fulfilled quite,
This dark deed by Providence was brought to light.

Te a pawn-shop the coachman he did go one day,
A boy said some trowsers he did take away,
A policeman followed unto Putney Lane,
The coachman and trowsers to bring back again.

When in searching the stable the body he spied,
Without head, legs, or arms, and ript open beside,
Then a cry of murder he quickly did raise,
And the coachman was taken within a few days.

And when he was tried, most shocking to state,
The evidence proved what I now relate,
That Daniel Good murdered his victim Jones,
Then cut up and burnt her flesh and boues.

He soon was found guilty and sentenced to die,
The death of a murderer on the gallows high,
The blood of the murder'd must not cry vain,
An we hope that his like we shall ne'er see again.

J. Harkness, Printer, Preston.

Figure 2. "Verses on Daniel Good," 1842. Broadsheet, from *Curiosities of Street Literature*, ed. Charles Hindley (New York: August M. Kelley, 1970), 195. Courtesy of Augustus M. Kelley, Publishers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300281023 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ing the stable the body he spied, / Without head, legs, or arms, and ript open beside." And though the ballad has already twice dwelled on the dismemberment, it repeats the "shocking" detail once more:

> And when he was tried, most shocking to state,
> The evidence proved what I now relate,
> That Daniel Good murdered his victim Jones,
> Then cut up and burnt her flesh and bones.

This ballad, of course, protests too much; the crime is "most shocking to state," yet "Verses on Daniel Good" masters the murder ballad aesthetic in an impressive triple "recital" of Good's horrific violence. The murder, the crime scene, and the trial enable a persistent return to the terrible kernel which defines the ballads' aesthetic power and the audience's political curiosity.

The textualization of Daniel Good's crime raises questions about personal motives and provocation as well as about sexual codes and behavior. As a poor laborer, a mangle keeper, who is cast outside codes of sexual propriety, Jane Jones is vulnerable. These codes clearly shape Good's motive ("Neither you nor your brat shall e'er trouble me more"); yet his crime, an object of grotesque fascination, is depicted as monstrous. Unlike other ballads which address an intended subgroup of Victorian culture (e.g., "listen all ye virgins fair"), this ballad addresses no one in particular, and thus, focuses on an aesthetics of violence rather than a restoration of sexual and behavioral norms. And in sidestepping moral instruction, this sublime art locates murder in a problematic and contradictory transgressive continuum of causes and effects which are proportional to social restrictions. Ballad murder, then, whether the lone act of a deranged monster, the random encounter between strangers, or the individual expression of free will, always results from entangled and mutually constructed social transgressions.

This insistence on a transgressive continuum shapes the murder ballad aesthetic, for in assigning murder an intricate speech, ballads explicate not simply — never *simply* — barbarous murderers but social and legal structures as well. Speaking corpses can be used to indict circumstance, rather than the murderers who are already indicted, and to connect violence to the pressures of institutional and ideological violence. "Cruel and Inhuman Murder of a Little Boy by his Father," for example, erects its aesthetic core at the hanging of a child, in the manner of a state execution. The broadside reports: "the cruel father tied [the boy's] hands behind, and . . . literally enacted the part of executioner of his own child, holding its legs, and forcing down its body to complete the strangulation of the poor boy." The ballad describes "a wretch named Jefferys [sic]," a "sad, a base, and cruel villain," who in murdering his own child in the Seven Dials district, the center of ballad publication, astonishes the very community which reproduces his art:

> His little boy named Richard Arthur,
> By the wretched father, we are told,
> Was cruelly and basely murdered, —
> The child was only seven years old;
> The villain took him to a cellar,
> Resolved his offspring to destroy,

Tied his little hands behind him,
And hanged the pretty smiling boy.

The emphasis on the diminutive and the innocent happiness of the child highlight the failure of innocence; "pretty little prattling innocence" succumbs to cruel villainy. Aesthetically, the ballad depends upon the hanging's spectacular cruelty, and Jeffery's performance as executioner in the dark secrecy of a Seven Dials cellar renders his crime horrifically contradictory. Not surprisingly, given the iconography of the scaffold in Victorian London, the ballad fixates on the hanging, as "cruel" and "inhuman," with eyewitness detail, where previously it offered hearsay ("we are told"). The testimony is thus immediate and powerful:

Then he to the cellar took him, —
His heart was harder far than steel,
The wicked, base, inhuman monster,
His actions no one can reveal.
His only child, to hold beside him,
With rope he bound his little hands,
When behind his back he placed them,
He in the cellar did him hang.

Despite its insistence here on Jeffrey's "steel" cruelty and its claim that "hanging is too good for such a villain," the ballad later explains that we all have our "cares and trials" and are "unto fate compelled to yield." The ambiguity of this lesson's application is not resolved; but regardless of whether it implies that the roles of murderer and victim are fated or that Jeffery might have gently yielded to his "cares and trials," the ballad's central image remains unambiguous as it forges an undeniable link between hanging and "cruel and inhuman murder." In its eerie recasting of a "proper" hanging, in the simulacra of executioner and scaffolding, in Jeffery's appropriation of state violence, the song offers a "symbolic inversion" in Babcock's sense of the word. It presents the hanging of innocence and the triumph of monstrosity through the very means by which Victorian moral and social order was to be maintained and by which violent criminality was to be suppressed.

If crime ballads, as I am suggesting, registered irregular and ambiguous didactic messages while positioning themselves aesthetically at the sites of murderous acts and crime scenes, then ballad authors were in a position to exploit the market value of this violent aesthetic as a way to explore a variety of meanings and transgressions. It is tempting to find moral consistency — if we are still determined to find it — in the repeated dismay and horror leveled at infanticide, though Jeffery's case reminds us that "cruel monstrosity" can still be sung as a problem of "fate." But the movement of murder into the family circle also allowed ballads to interrogate the values important to the Victorian bourgeois identity, domesticity, and family. These values, paraded before the Victorian public in propaganda representing Queen Victoria as dutiful wife and mother, came to stand for a national identity from which the working classes were often excluded. Thus, infanticide in particular enabled ballads to go beyond a defense of the working classes; it allowed ballads to undermine the very foundations of an English identity.

"Barbarous Murder of a Child by a Schoolmistress" lists the ballad of Emma Pitt, convicted of murdering her "tender infant child." Conventional morality offers reassurance, "She her deserts will get," while an audience of mothers is asked to contemplate the horror of Pitt's act, "Oh mothers, did you ever hear, / Of such barbarity." Pitt, a schoolmistress "[w]ell known for miles around," is also faulted for setting a "sad example" for her students. Such moralizing begins to unravel, however, when, considering a death penalty, presumably her "deserts," the narrator laments, "if she is found guilty, how sad will be her case" and notes, "If she has a woman's feelings, / She surely will go wild." Though Pitt's actions require a response, execution is not unqualifiedly upheld as a just one, and her barbarity is diluted with sympathetic concern.

Framed in this moral confusion, Pitt's act of murder offers a striking version of the speaking body. Fusing her weapon and her psychological state, a "flint stone" emboldened by a "flinty heart," the ballad fixates on her removal of the child's tongue from its mouth:

> With a large flint stone she beat its head
> When such cruelty she'd done,
> From the tender roof of the infant's mouth
> She cut away it's [sic] tongue;
> Sad and wicked, cruel wretch,
> Hard was her flinty heart,
> The infant's tongue from the body was
> Wrapped in another part.

The crime scene speaks through the displaced tongue of the victim: "The murderess placed in a drawer, / And it there, alas! was found." In using the severed tongue as an aesthetic symbol, the ballad postulates both Pitt's motivation and psychological state. The tongue's removal suggests a desperate need to silence the child symbolically, literally, finally, and the coroner's statement that "the child was born alive and murdered by someone" raises the possibility of postpartum derangement. The gruesome silencing, however, confers upon the tongue, as the "most miraculous organ" of speech, a most powerful message. As the gruesome remainder of the murder, the wrapped tongue hidden in a drawer, forces aesthetic memory: "And mother's [sic], miles round Wimborne, / Will remember Emma Pitt." Laden with implications about her motive and psychology, the aesthetic image, aimed specifically at mothers, complicates the memory of "the barbarous Emma Pitt."

Murdered children, as aesthetic symptoms of the predicaments of Victorian motherhood, function similarly in "The Esher Tragedy" which depicts Mary Ann Brough's murders of her six children. The social connotations of her motherhood and infanticide are reinforced by the twice-mentioned fact that she once "nursed the blooming prince of Wales" while the tragic dimensions of her crime are emphasized by the narrator's pleas for "feeling christians" to "give attention" and "sympathize" during the "tale of sorrow." This tragic frame is complemented by a prose report, "Confession of the Murderess," which details her decision to "go down and get a knife and cut [her] throat" after her children repeatedly wake her with requests for "barley water" late into the night. She notes, "I was bad all day; I wanted to see Mr. Izod, and waited all day. I

wanted him to give me some medicine." In representing this shift from one transgression, suicide, to another, homicide, the broadside deconstructs monstrosity by introducing the possibility of insanity or illness — mitigating forces which implicitly advocate judicial leniency.

The ballad embeds this official information in a summary of the tragic facts "[w]hich [cause] each kind heart to bleed": "'Twas with a sharp and fatal razor, / She committed this foul deed, / And one by one she cut their throats." Her murderous actions encounter resistance and dialogue which accommodate the recurrent ballad theme of the failures of innocence and symbolic law. Her son, Henry, "cried aloud with eyes of pity, / 'Mother, dear, don't murder me.'" And though "like a demon fierce and wild," she responds with an unsettling union of motherly affection and necessary violence: "'My dear,' . . . 'it must be done.'" The inevitable violence is perpetrated with the "sharp and fatal razor":

> From bed to bed, and to each chamber,
> This wretched woman she did go,
> While all around her own dear children,
> Streams of crimson blood did flow.

Throughout this account, the narrator voices questions of astonishment — "What on earth could urge it on" and "what must be the woman's motive" — and wonders about Brough's rational awareness of the crime and its punishment: "Did she think she'd done amiss,/Or did she think of death and judgment . . . ?" The crime scene renders a tableau of perverted domesticity, as the illusion of children slumbering in their beds gives way to throat wounds from ear to ear:

> The dreadful sight was most surprising,
> To behold these children dear,
> How their cruel hearted mother,
> Cut their throats from ear to ear.

This scene gives way to the scene of Brough in "a prison's gloomy cell,/Where midnight dreams to her will whisper/And her deeds of blood will tell." Haunted by the "phantoms of her six dear children," Brough's tragedy, a rehearsal of "her deeds of blood," becomes a psychological one. And the ballad which sympathetically traces Brough from murder to crime scene to memory forces uncomfortable linkages between suicide and homicide, motherhood and infanticide, control and desperation, rationality and insanity.

The political implications of these songs of infanticide are distinct in comparison to other politicized versions of similar tales. Matthew Arnold made famous the newspaper account of Elizabeth Wragg: "A shocking child murder has just been committed at Nottingham. A girl named Wragg left the workhouse there on Saturday morning with her young illegitimate child. The child was soon afterwards found dead on Mapperly [sic] Hills, having been strangled. Wragg is in custody" (249). Yet his commentary on her story silences the very questions which ballads raised. Though Arnold musters a sympathetic "poor thing," he uses Wragg's story to illustrate "a touch of grossness in our race" (249) and ignores the power of the social institutions implied in her story ("girl," "workhouse,"

"illegitimate," "in custody") to shape transgression. As the ballads of Brough and Pitt suggest, ballads consistently encoded such forces in aesthetic violence and in moral disorder. In their astonishing details, the violent crimes and deaths of everyday people revealed a transgressive continuum which pointed not to the deviance of a race but to the social failures of a nation.

The nation's failures are strikingly rendered in "Shocking Murder of A Wife and Six Children" which, in a story of family murder-suicide, examines the fragility of the family (symbol of moral stability) as a social unit consistently destabilized by capitalist structures. The murder is announced in a confessional letter sent by Walter James Duggin, the father-murderer-suicide, to the authorities:

> To the police he did a letter send,
> That he was about this life to end,
> And that he had poisoned, he did declare
> His wife, and his six children dear.

The letter displaces the shocking moment of discovery so that Duggin's act is depicted not as the gory expression of an impassioned killer, but as the pitiful communication of a poor unemployed worker, whose eviction, the broadside notes, was scheduled for twelve o'clock the day the bodies were found. The murders thus become the final, desperate act of poverty: "Lest they should want, that fatal day, / His wife and children he did slay." And the crime scene depicts death as protection from poverty: "They found him stretched upon the bed, / His troubles o'er — was cold and dead." The unlawful "shocking sight" affords no weltering gore but rather, the fatal tableau of a Victorian family tragedy which "[c]aused in many an eye a tear." The social conditions apparent in the arranged bodies speak of familial affection and the astonishing failure of innocence:

> They found upon another bed,
> The ill-fated mother, she was dead,
> While two pretty children we are told,
> In her outstretched arms she did enfold,

Thus, the murdered and the suicide lie in ruins amid the domestic space and in proper family relations. In this emblematic decomposition of the family, infanticide, murder, and suicide take on particular force as ways of indicting political indifference to poverty; and in the public songs of these deaths, the silenced oppression of laissez-faire economics is heard.

From the barbarity perpetrated upon strangers to desperate family violence, murder for the ballad author constituted an interpretive act; in murder narratives and crime scenes ballads sang and explicated social violence. These relatively few examples of the ballad aesthetic remind us of a textual and communicative power available to the working classes and open up new perspectives on the poetics of crime in Victorian literature. The ballad treatment of murder as a multivocal transgression with social, criminal, and legal meanings reveals that the working classes were far from silent about or acquiescent to ideologies which constructed them as criminal, and their aesthetic methods of analysis refute dismissals of their artistic and literary merit or sophistication.

Finding ways to read crime ballads as something other than a moral conservatism or a gruesome fetish requires an appreciation for these texts as heteroglossic products of and responses to a variety of discourses, as works of narrative sophistication and play, and as a popular literature of Victorian culture. We should remember that the characteristics of these ballads which lent them their textual power and influence — the large quantities in which they circulated, their audible presence in the streets, their availability as cheap literature, their "vulgar" subject matter — have, in fact, fostered our own critical inattention. Furthermore, the anonymity of the ballad authors, another factor in scholarly dismissals, helped to create the conditions for this political aesthetic. Secured from critics and accountability, which was transferred to the publishers who owned and profited, the subversive ballad voice was protected in a way that other dissident, working-class voices were not.[4] With the "most beautiful murder" the ballads produced an urban sublime which could cast the experience of a "criminal class" in an aesthetic of its own creation. These texts are neither simple nor vulgar in their expression of a national concern with crime and its punishment, and they are essential for investigating working-class participation in and influence on the Victorian literary and political world.

University of Connecticut

NOTES

1. In 1861 the *National Review* extolled these gothic qualities: "That self-denying mind, indifferent to worldly fame, which characterized the architects of our cathedrals and abbeys, would seem to have descended on our ballad-writers." In response to the knowledge that "anybody writes them," the author notes, "we walk about the streets with a new sense of wonder, peering into the faces of those of our fellow-lieges who do not carry about with them the external evidence of overflowing exchequers, and saying to ourselves 'That man could be a writer of ballads'" (qtd. in Hindley *History* xv).
2. In fact, national morality was seen as a detriment to the broadside ballad trade. Hindley notes, "the patterer must live; and lest the increase of public virtue should condemn him to starvation, the 'Seven Dials Press' stepped forward to his aid, and considerately supplied him with — 'cocks'" (Hindley, *Life* 361). Douglas Jerrold blamed moral posturing for the broadside ballad's decline: "the public ear has become dainty, fastidious, hypocritical; hence, the Ballad-Singer languishes and dies" (qtd. in Hindley, *History* xxxviii).
3. The 1843 Theatrical Regulation Act opened up high drama to theaters outside Covent Garden and Drury Lane, and Samuel Phelps played his Richard to a working-class audience interested in a play exploring the relations between political power and murder (Colley 93). The ballad, "It's a Nice Thing But It Won't Wash," reports, "King Richard was the play perform'd, / And to me it was a nobby treat."
4. This protected speech was, of course, the result of economic exploitation. Smith's account of the ballad trade explains the devalued labor of the ballad writer:

> The established honorarium for a new song is a shilling, though eighteen pence is sometimes given for something "particular spicy." This miserable payment is defended by the publisher on the ground that, whatever he pays for a song, he cannot make it his own. "If I print a new song," says he, "on Wednesday, my neighbor is selling it on Thursday. How can I afford to pay for property which is at another man's use as it is at mine? (254)

WORKS CITED

Altick, Richard D. *Victorian Studies in Scarlet.* New York: Norton, 1970.
Arnold, Matthew. "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold.* Ed. Dwight Culler. Boston: Houghton, 1961.
Ashton, John. *Modern Street Ballads.* London: Chatto and Windus Piccadilly, 1888.
Babcock, Barbara, ed. *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society.* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978.
"Barbarous Murder of a Child by a Schoolmistress." Hindley 219.
Black, Joel. *The Aesthetics of Murder: A Study in Romantic Literature and Contemporary Culture.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991.
Chadwick, Roger. *Bureaucratic Mercy: The Home Office and the Treatment of Capital Cases in Victorian Britain.* New York: Garland, 1992.
Charnes, Linda. *Notorious Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.
Chevalier, Louis. *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes In Paris During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century.* Trans. Frank Jellinek. New York: Howard Fertig, 1973.
Child, Francis J. "Ballad Poetry." *Johnson's New Universal Cyclopaedia.* Vol. 1. New York: A. J. Johnson, 1875–80. 365–68.
Colley, Scott. *Richard's Himself Again: A Stage History of Richard III.* Westport: Greenwood, 1992.
"Complaints Against the New Police." Madden Broadsides, Cambridge University Library. 12.49.
Cooper, David D. *The Lesson of the Scaffold: The Public Execution Controversy in Victorian England.* Athens: Ohio UP, 1974.
"Cruel and Inhuman Murder of a Boy by His Father." Hindley 224.
De Quincey, Thomas. "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts." *Selected Writings of Thomas de Quincey.* Ed. Philip Van Doren Stern. New York: Random House, 1937.
"Dreadful Murder at Eriswell." Baring Gould Broadsides, British Library: 1.1.151.
"The Esher Tragedy." Hindley 199.
"The Execution of Five Pirates, for Murder." Hindley 217.
"Execution of John Gleeson Wilson." Hindley 197.
Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1979.
———. Ed. *"I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother . . . : A Case of Parricide in the 19th Century*. Trans. Frank Jellinek. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1975.
Gatrell, V. A. C. *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the People 1770–1868.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.
Himmelfarb, Gertrude. *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age.* New York: Knopf, 1984.
Hindley, Charles, ed. *Curiosities of Street Literature.* 1871. New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1970.
———. *History of the Catnach Press.* 1887. Detroit: Singing Tree, 1969.
———. *The Life and Times of James Catnach (Late of Seven Dials), Ballad Monger.* 1878. London: Redwood, 1970.
"It's a nice thing but it won't wash." Baring Gould Broadsides, British Library, 1.1.176.
"John Bull, Can You Wonder At Crime." Baring Gould Broadsides, British Library, 1.1.151.
Kalikoff, Beth. *Murder and Moral Decay in Victorian Popular Literature.* Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1986.
Kucich, John. *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction.* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994.
"Lamentation of H. Lingley." Hindley 222.
"Lamentation of J. Mapp." Hindley 221.
"Lamentation in Newgate of the Police-Man, Who Boned the Mutton." Madden Broadsides, Cambridge University Library, 12.56.

"Life, Trial, Character, Confession and Execution of Stephen Forward." Hindley 216.
Mayhew, Henry. *London Labour and the London Poor.* 1861. New York: Dover, 1968.
"Miles Weatherhill, the Young Weaver, and his Sweetheart, Sarah Bell." Hindley 214.
"Murder of a Wife at Ashburnham, Near Hastings." Hindley 226.
Neuburg, Victor. "The Literature of the Streets." In *The Victorian City: Images and Realities.* Ed. H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff. London: Routledge, 1973. 191–210.
O'Connell, Sheila. *The Popular Print in England 1550–1850.* London: British Museum, 1999.
Radzinowicz, Leon. *A History of English Criminal Law and its Administration from 1750.* Vol. 3. New York: Macmillan, 1957.
Ruskin, John. "The Stones of Venice." *The Complete Works of John Ruskin.* Vol. 11. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1904.
"Shocking Murder of a Wife and Six Children." Hindley 234.
Smith, Charles Manby. *The Little World of London; or, Pictures in Little of London Life.* London: Arthur Hall, 1857.
Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression.* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986.
Stewart, Garrett. *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.
Taylor, David. *Crime, Policing and Punishment in England, 1750–1914.* New York: St. Martin's P, 1998.
"Verses on Daniel Good." Hindley 195.
Vicinus, Martha. *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Literature.* New York: Harper and Row, 1974.
Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* London: Penguin Books, 1985.
Würzbach, Natascha. *The Rise of the English Street Ballad 1550–1650.* Trans. Gayna Walls. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.