Crime in Verse
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CIRCULATING IN PRINT and in song, the two central genres of the crime ballad trade, the third-person “astonishing disclosures” of bloody violence and the first-person “last lamentations” of condemned criminals, reported horrific murders and recorded terrible executions in ear-catching rhymes. Marketed in oral performances by ballad singers, and often stamped with visually striking woodcut images or flanked by newsy prose reports, these songs of crime developed a remarkably public poetics, which, merging singsong rhythms, bloody excess, and sentimental rhetoric with case details and topical references, produced unexpectedly complex commentaries on the meanings of murderous transgression and capital punishment. When we remember that these verses were regularly sung and sold in Victorian streets and markets, the horizon of Victorian poetry and poetics broadens considerably. And if we consider, as David Vincent does in Literacy and Popular Culture (1993), that they aided the advance of popular literacy—and that the “most striking characteristic of the first phase of the expansion of imaginative literature was the sheer volume and noise which accompanied it” (201)—we can begin to imagine the volume and noise of street balladry as a significant part of Victorian literature and culture.

The poetic and political significance of street balladry, however, has been lost within a long history of critical dismissals. Simply put, crime ballads suffer from
bad reputations. On the one hand, they seem to embrace, with morbid enthusiasm, the abject and gory elements of murderous violence. In “Execution of John Gleeson Wilson” (1849) (figure 1), for example, meticulous sketches of terrible wounds (a jellied head and three-inch gashes) join stock phrases of gruesome excess (“weltering in their gore” and “blood did flow profusely”) to produce a portrait of astonishing destruction. When ventriloquizing the voices of condemned murderers, on the other hand, last lamentations fascinated their audience with confessions of sin and professions of remorse. In “The Last Moments and Confession of Wm. Sheward” (1869) (figure 2), the killer remembers his outrageous wife-murder with sentimental regret: “I boiled her head, how sad to tell, / I was mad without a doubt, / I threw it in the different parts, / I placed it round about.”

Responding to such representations of crime, many nineteenth-century critics cited the arraying of mutilated bodies as symptoms of working-class bloodlust and the sentimentalization of condemned murderers as inscriptions of working-class criminality. Yet, packaged in striking—and sometimes amusing—rhymes and accommodating the particulars of historical crimes, the verse-crimes of street literature frequently engaged stark appraisals of specific murder cases and confronted contentious issues in judicial and penal practices. At the very least, their public form and political content—and the image of Victorians singing “pools of blood as thick as mud, from all of them could trace” or “I boiled her head, how sad to tell, / I was mad without a doubt”—should inspire new questions about criminal representation in both poetic and political terms.

Yet, because applications of trite maxims, snippets of behavioral advice, and invocations of “feeling Christians” often accompanied such images of bleeding and weltering, murder ballads have more recently been labeled prim narratives of moral danger or simple-minded endorsements of state power. Critics have interpreted the confessing and regretting criminals of execution ballads as conventionally guilty subjects, affirming the terrible necessity of their public deaths and ratifying the retributive authority of the state. In this view, ballad recommendations of religious piety and personal restraint appear to betray the political interests and belie the social experiences of their working-class authors and audiences. Submitting to a ruthless law of genre, crime ballads as a whole become the inadequate and incongruous sum of their stock moral pieties and their stark bloody minutiae, and individual crime ballads are merely the indistinguishable products of a mechanized industry churning out unimaginative and inartistic reiterations of a strict melodramatic mandate. Caught between an uncompromising conservatism and an unabashed bloodlust, they are aesthetically and ethically suspect.
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 30th, 1849, at No. 26,
Levenson Street, Liverpool, at midday. 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 distinct part of the assem-
blage by bursts of execration.

Cadaver, 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. Up-
wards of 100,000 persons were present, the railway
company running cheap trains from all available parts.

THE LIVERPOOL TRAGEDIES.

Come all ye faithful christians and listen unto me,
The fire was not recorded in British history,
It’s of three dreadful murders committed, I am told,
By none John Gleeson Wilson, for the sake of cursed gold.

J. Hardman, Printer, Preston.

On Wednesday the 28th, consternation did prevail,
In Levenson Street in Liverpool, where thousands did bewail,
The fate of this poor family, who were left to devoir, [more
Snatched from a father’s fond embraces, who never will see them
This monster in human shape should go there to dwell,
And that he went for plunder to all it is known full well,
And when this ruthless 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 intercede, said, “should not do so,”
Then with a pucker in his hand, he gave her a severe blow.

Numberless times he did strike till she could no longer stand,
The blood did flow profusely from her wounds, and did him dead,
Then the eldest boy of five years old, in supplication said,
“O Mother, spare our precious lives, don’t serve as the said.”
This darling child of five years old he brutally did kill,
Regardless of a tender cord, his precious blood did spill,
The youngest child to the kitchen ran, to shun the awful knife,
The servant followed after and took its precious life.
The surgeon then describes the scene presented to his view,
A more appalling case than this he says he never knew,
Poor infant beings on the floor all writhing in their gore.
The sight was sickening to behold in 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 stream.
None could identify the boy, his head was like a jelly;
This tragedy is worse by far than Gronacre or Killo.

To the hospital in this sad state they quickly were conveyed,
The mother with her infant dead, and helpless servant maid,
Thousands did besiege the gates, there false for to enquire,
But in three days from those wounds, both of them did expire.

’Twill cause the captain many a pang to know their awful deed,
His loving wife and children sent to an untimely tomb,
’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 iron 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 heav’nly bliss for ever with him reign.

Figure 1
The Last Moments and Confession of Wm. Seward.

On Tuesday, April 20, the last dread sentence of the law was carried out in the case of Wm. Seward convicted at the last Norwich Assizes for the murder of his wife. The culprit died without any very painful struggles. He showed a considerable amount of nervous, although he trembled a good deal at the drop, to which he had to be carried on account of his tetanisation. In the prisoner's confession he stated that he killed his wife in June, 1851, and that he afterwards mutilated the body. He placed the head in a saucepan, and put it on the fire to keep the stew away. He then broke it up, and distributed it about Thorpe. He then put the hands and feet in the same saucepan, in hopes they might boil away. Carried portions of the body away in a pail and threw them in different parts of the city. The long hair on my return from Thorpe, he cut with a pair of scissors in small pieces and they blew away as he walked. The blankets, where there was any blood he cut in small pieces, and distributed them about the city, and made off with anything that had the appearance of blood about them. The prisoner also stated that he never saw or knew his present wife until June 21, 1852, twelve months after the occurrence. The confession was taken in the presence of a magistrate, and the governor and chaplain.

I am a sad and wretched man,
Borne down in care and woe,
I am doomed to die for a murder done
Near eighteen years ago;
A dreadful deed, as you may read,
I long kept in my breast,
Thad no comfort day or night,
Until I did confess.

With the dreadful knife I slew my wife,
And her body round did throw,
Now I must die for a murder done,
Near eighteen years ago.

I her body into pieces cut,
And scattered it around,
Here and there, I scarce knew where,
I placed it on the ground.
I now must die for that foul deed,
And in a murderer's grave lie low,
I did her kill, her blood I spilled,
Near eighteen years ago.

I boiled her head, how sad to tell,
I was mad without a doubt,
I threw it in the different parts,
I placed it round about;
Kept the secret eighteen years,
Within my guilty breast.

And till the same I did divulge,
I day nor night could rest.
For eighteen years, in grief and tears,
I passed many a dreary night,
I had not one moment's happiness,
Since I killed my own dear wife;
At length I did confess the deed,
For which I now must die,
For a murder eighteen years ago—
The which I don't deny.

There was letters sent from different parts,
To say my wife did live,
To save me from the gallows,
But none would they believe;
I could not from Justice flee,
I do deserve my fate,
No pen can write, or tongue can tell,
My sad and wretched fate.

My moments they do swiftly pass,
I soon shall sleep below,
I done that dreadful awful deed,
Near eighteen years ago;
I cut and mangled that poor soul,
Her limbs and body strewn about,
In hedges, lanes, and fields.

Figure 2
The Last Moments and Confession of Wm. Seward. Courtesy The Newberry Library, Chicago.
While an overemphasis on the poles of moral melodrama and vulgar gore has consistently diminished our confidence in the street ballad’s capacity for textual complexity and political sophistication, notions about the laws of genre and the conditions of production join expectations about the nature of authorship to further diminish their social status. Commissioned by enterprising printers, penned by anonymous “hacks,” and hawked in the streets by “the poorest of the poor” (O’Connell 168), street ballads flout our author-based and class-inflected definitions of literary creation. Lacking names and identities, ballad authors are chronically underestimated, and their verses, seeming to reflect the harried and impoverished existence of their authors, have rarely inspired careful literary analysis. Further incriminated by their association with a presumably delinquent and illiterate class, ballads and balladeers, emanating from and entertaining the “dangerous classes,” acquire a criminal taint.

This chapter seeks to extricate crime ballads from this limited conceptual paradigm by reviewing the analytical methods of ballad studies, the classed epistemologies of criminal discourse, and the cultural conditions of ballad production. Outlining interpretive strategies derived from the generic conventions of crime balladry and the topical details of individual songs, it presents careful readings of specific texts and historical contexts in order to demonstrate the street ballad’s potential for poetic and political variety. When contextualized and individuated, connections between the details of crime ballads and the details of historical crimes become more apparent, allowing us to reconsider the semiotic operations that underpin these ostensibly contradictory assemblages of moral didacticism, bloody abjection, sentimental lamentation, and spectacular death.

This approach also recognizes the usually unacknowledged distinction between first-person and third-person voices in ballad narratives, which organized criminal representations around the notions of astonished witnesses and lamenting criminals. Generalizing about the genre of “gallows literature,” commentators have rarely distinguished the rhetorical significance and political relevance of these two distinct voices, but in many cases ballad writers leveraged these fundamental differences in poetic voice and narrative perspective for both generic development and political argument. Indeed, a glimpse at even a relative few of the hundreds and hundreds of crime ballads preserved in library collections reveals that the anonymous poets of the ballad industry regularly applied the poetic tools of their trade to influence the generic evolution of the crime ballad and to intervene in public discussions of criminal trials, laws, and theories.

For this reason, the generic regularity and formal simplicity of street verses can be read as a verbal technology, which, as Harrison explains—via Purvis and Hunt’s idea of a “social semiotics” that “convey[s] social experience” while “constituting social subjects” (3)—performs “cultural work” (7). In this way, the lowly verses of the street, neither exploitative spectacles of gruesome misfortune
nor smug recitations of moral law, generated a multiplicity of formal strategies, aesthetic meanings, and political engagements and disseminated them in the streets and amongst the crowds of Victorian England. Viewed in this context, the apparent vulgarity of their art—the sensationalism of their themes, the expediency of their rhymes, the simplicity of their rhythms—serves a performative function in Slinn’s sense of the word: “both linking and distinguishing poetry from its contexts” (25), the ballad industry could pit its scrappy poetics of the street against the erudition of high literary culture and the authority of a disciplinary state.

Verse Crimes:
“Atrocious Rhymes” and “Lawless Meters”

Discussions of street ballads, like discussions of criminality, are steeped in the ideology of class. When criminal representation and working-class authorship meet in the tradition of “gallows literature,” the pressures of class ideology become strikingly apparent. Amidst ongoing Victorian conversations about urban streets and urban squalor, street balladry was seen as a particularly criminal poetics. For this reason the textual practices and the critical reception of street ballads must be understood with respect to Victorian economies and geographies of crime and class.

Though sometimes working at cross-purposes, the specialized rubrics of criminal discourse in nineteenth-century England often exploited the rhetorical convenience of an othered class while struggling to modernize and rationalize approaches to prevention and punishment. Across a range of projects—from establishing a police force and revising the criminal code to conducting statistical analyses and developing criminal anthropology—Victorians cited “the laboring classes,” “the criminal classes,” or the “dangerous classes” to organize vast amounts of data and reconcile competing theories. Reproducing this divisive epistemology of class, various print media consistently located the working classes in a cultural realm distinct from that of the middle and upper classes. The most striking and well-documented example of this logic is Henry Mayhew’s influential London Labour and the London Poor (1861), in which, eagerly citing and applying the ethnological arguments of Dr. Andrew Smith, he categorizes London “street-folk” as a local variety of the “wandering tribes.” With enthusiasm and precision, Mayhew explains to his readers that there are “two distinct and broadly marked races, viz., the wanderers and the settlers—the vagabond and the citizen—the nomadic and the civilized tribes” (1). Following this schema, he finds in the “vagabonds and outcasts” (2) of Victorian London the characteristics catalogued in Smith’s work: overdeveloped jaws and cheekbones,
underdeveloped heads, and a “different language” spoken “with the intent of concealing their designs and exploits” (2). Casting himself as a “traveller in the undiscovered country of the poor” (xv) and submitting his work to his civilized and settled citizen-readers, Mayhew promises an intimate “cyclopaedia of the industry, the want, and the vice” (xv) of the urban poor—a record of the their own stories told in their “own ‘unvarnished’ language” (xv). Interpreting his methodologies, contemporary scholars have underscored the ways in which Mayhew’s expedition metaphors and ethnographic taxonomies reinforced the racial, geographical, and linguistic separation of the poor from other classes of English Victorians. Underpinning this logic, as Simon Joyce indicates in his recent study of “literary geographies,” is Mayhew’s apparent preference for viewing “the London underclass as a distinctive social or cultural formation” rather than a “strictly determined economic class” (107).

The compatibility of and the tension between ethnographic and economic explanations for crime can be glimpsed in popular texts, judicial procedures, and legislative committees where a causal correlation between class status and criminal behavior became an axiomatic construct for addressing the collective experience of crime and its attendant anxieties. Joyce isolates the interpretive significance of the relationship between the forces of “capitalist accumulation” and the features of criminal character in this public discussion:

[T]his is the key issue in midcentury debates about the etiology of crime, since there was a general agreement that its existence closely correlated with the quality of life in the slums: the question which followed was whether slum inhabitants themselves were to blame, or the social and economic conditions into which they were born and lived. (106)

Moreover, Joyce explains, the discourse of crime prevention stems from the “different answers to this question” which “helped to determine what combative schemes were developed and practiced, ranging from conservative calls for more police and slum clearance, through liberal reform measures aimed at improving environmental and social conditions, to Chartist or socialist platforms which saw those conditions as the by-product of political disenfranchisement and capitalist economics” (106–7). But, Joyce aptly notes, the difference between left and right strategies can be “difficult to maintain in practice” (247), and his overview of etiological theories and “combative schemes” highlights not only the ubiquity but also the contingency of the epistemology of class as it became entangled in and destabilized by shifting political alignments, competing ideological constructs, and evolving urban geographies. In the case of street ballads, seen to represent the geographically determined criminal tendencies of slumlife and the culturally debased economies of cheap print, the processes
of entanglement and destabilization often played out in the context of specific murders and executions.

The appeal of establishing ethnographic and geographic, rather than economic, narratives of causation can be partly attributed to the popular and panic-inducing phraseology of “the dangerous classes” (“les classes dangereuses”), which, as David Philips explains, was coined in Paris in 1840 by H. A. Frégier and “was quickly turned into English and applied by some writers to the dangerous lower orders of Britain as well” (81). “The image of the ‘dangerous classes,’” Philips explains, “united the threat to person and property of ordinary crime, with the wider threat posed to the whole society by a militant and possibly revolutionary working class” (81). At mid-century, as the demand for accurate and verifiable national crime statistics led to virtual inventories of these putative dangerous classes, questions arose concerning the effects of asymmetrical and inconsistent methods—across decades and regions—employed in collecting and interpreting the annual returns. While in 1810, when such data collection and analysis began, records suggested that “about one person in every seven was a pauper, a vagrant, or a criminal” (Radzinowicz 239), decades on, the measuring of crime rates was complicated by the redefining of criminal acts, and, as a result, “perception and practice were not completely synchronized” (Taylor 2). Nevertheless, as statistics were tabulated and published, vigilant Victorians began to carefully evaluate the meanings and interpret the warnings embedded in the numbers. In his review of a half-century of crime statistics, for example, Jelinger C. Symons analyzed the “fearful” social picture that recent statistics painted and warned Victorians to act immediately:

Every country has its dangerous class. It consists not only of criminals, paupers and persons whose conduct is obnoxious to the interests of society, but of the proximate body of people who are within reach of its contagion, and continually swell its number. The magnitude of the dangerous class in England probably exceeds that of any European nation, and is largely increasing. However essential some political reforms may be, and others may become, any indirect remedies for an evil so urgent as this may well be postponed to the consideration of prompt, practical and direct means of attacking it. (1)

In Symons’s desperate calls for an aggressive pragmatism—in order to prevent England’s sinking deeper into criminality than any other European nation—we can glimpse the reactionary agendas and the reformist molds that shaped crime-class etiologies.

Operating within a similar rhetorical framework, the author of “Causes of the Increase in Crime” (1844), published in Blackwood’s, explains that the working classes are criminal because they undergo a “demoralization among the vast
crowd” in which “restraints of character, relationship, and vicinity are, in great measure, lost . . .” (7).6 Their numbers and associations render them criminal because “individual responsibility is lost among the multitudes” (13). In the next volume of Blackwood’s, the journal presents a more overt Tory stance, accusing the Liberals of ignoring a profoundly disturbing increase in crime and seeking a misguided course of benevolent legal and prison reforms. Amidst metaphors of infectious contagion and rushing water, crime is presented as a problem of class uprising:

Let us therefore no longer deceive ourselves, or attempt to deceive others. Crime is making extraordinary and unprecedented progress amongst us; it is advancing with a rapidity unparalleled in any other European state; if not arrested, it will come to render the country unbearable; and will terminate in multiplying to such an extent “les classes dangereuses,” as they have been denominated by the French, as, on the first serious political convulsion, may come to endanger the state. (“The Increase of Crime” 545)

In proclaiming the “extraordinary” and “unprecedented progress” of crime, such public conversations stirred anxieties about working-class organizing while essentially placing responsibility for overcrowding and urbanization on the poor. Government responses included legislating increased police surveillance in poor areas; developing and revising penitentiary and prison systems; enforcing and manipulating existing criminal laws, such as the Vagrancy Act of 1824, which defined and criminalized “idle and disorderly” acts of “rogues and vagabonds”; and designing and passing new crime bills, such as the 1869 Habitual Criminals Act, which accommodated the supervision, surveillance, and suspicion of former offenders and future offenders with inferences about “circumstance” and “character” (Wiener, Reconstructing 150). Meanwhile, assessments of class also informed strict common law notions of individual responsibility, applications of the Royal Prerogative of Mercy, and movements for the abolition of public execution.

While many discussions of working-class criminality imagined revolutionary upheaval and thus betrayed fundamental concerns about the accumulation of capital and the protection of property, reflections on murder also inspired wholesale indictments of the working classes. Sir Samuel Martin, a judge serving on the Capital Punishment Commission that oversaw parliamentary reconsideration of state execution in 1866, expressed the belief that murder is quite simply the exclusive domain of the lower classes:

[F]or the purpose of forming a real judgment upon the efficacy of Capital Punishments you must have recourse to persons who are well acquainted with
the lower classes in this country, and . . . no man who is not is competent to give an opinion on the subject. It very seldom occurs that any person in the middle class of life is indicted for murder. (Report of the Capital Punishment Commission Q 245: 36)

With no acknowledgment of the class inequalities inherent in policing citizens and indicting criminals, Martin maintains that “real judgment” on the “efficacy of Capital Punishments” requires familiarity with working-class subjects, who constitute England’s reserves of potential murderers. In order to benefit from the working-class citizenry’s collective experience of and expertise in murder—and with the integrity of important parliamentary deliberations resting on their insights—the commission summoned policemen, figures “well acquainted with the lower classes,” to describe and transcribe the working-class stance on murder and execution. Purporting to require access to their murderous voices and criminal psychologies, the commission hears the testimony of policemen-informants, who, having interpreted physiognomies and overheard conversations, serve as character witnesses for and behavioral experts on the entirety of Britain’s working-class population. Although working-class Britons certainly performed police work, the commission’s decision to restrict their interviews to policemen reified the characteristic silencing of the lower classes in a national conversation largely about them.

In Apprehending the Criminal (1992), Marie-Christine Leps presents an intertextual analysis of criminality in order to consider the “relation between the status of a discursive practice (as scientific, informative, or entertaining discourse), its mandate in the social production of knowledge, and the limits of its sayable” (3). Examining how criminology’s “textual production of ‘criminal man’ as an object of scientific knowledge was entirely determined by intertextual ideological maxims on race, sex, class, and morality” (47), she notes its role in “serv[ing] to legitimize the broader development of social management policies for the supervision, discipline, and control of the ‘lower orders’ through better knowledge of deviance in all its forms” (132). The press, meanwhile, “worked to incite, entertain, and distract the public into recognition of hegemonic truths” (132). Emerging from these discursive practices, Leps contends, was a normative “consensual ‘we,’” which, constituted “through its opposition to crime (economic, political, moral) and its perpetrators” (73), formed a “public united in its need for protection from criminal deviance” (132). While Leps’s analytical conclusions highlight late-Victorian criminology in particular, her discussion of the construction of a consensual and concerned citizenry in opposition to a deviant and criminal class aptly characterizes the logic informing the theories and policies of earlier decades. Overlooking the generic strategies and political references of broadside ballads, Leps argues that “[s]uch measures were met with
silence: working-class groups did not voice any systematic opposition, as no one could effectively side with criminals in social discourse” (132).

Insofar as genre can be construed as a system, the collective work of the crime ballads might be considered a fairly “systematic opposition” to circulating ideologies of criminality. In important ways, the class-inflected logics of criminal discourse, forged in the early-Victorian period, influenced the creation and the reception of crime ballads throughout the century. Responding to a hegemonic model that favored statistical prophecies of cultural doom, privileged the political anxieties of the propertied classes, and supported the prejudicial inclinations of the judiciary, ballads often adopted a counterdiscursive stance. In their locally contextualized and aesthetically stylized representations of crime, street ballads broached class politics, criminal theories, judicial procedures, and penal policies in explicit and concrete terms. With the trope of the astonished witness and the criminal poet, ballads narrowed the distance between the criminal other and the “consensual ‘we.’” While often deconstructing institutional and ideological divisions between citizens and convicts, however, ballads also found ways to side against the state (and its binary logic) without simply siding with the criminal. Simultaneously advocating alternate readings of crimes, questioning already established punishments, and decrying the actions of murderers, ballads introduced uncomfortable ambiguities and uncertainties into the discourse of crime and punishment. In doing so, they articulated a political sensibility concerned with the vexed and overdetermined relationship to poverty, policing, and punishment that characterized the lives of working-class citizens. Cultivating an aesthetic of immediacy and particularity—with eyewitness accounts of crimes and lyrical autobiographies of murderers—ballads claimed a poetic form of political speech with which to contest the ideological foundations of judicial and penal systems.

While class operated as a heuristic for explaining crime, it also suggested associations between bad behavior and bad poetry. Given the widespread insistence on the inherent deviance of the working classes, it is not surprising that street ballads about murder and execution, entangled within this network of presumptions about class and criminality, were often deemed accomplices to crime or that ballad singers, whose songs were believed to foster immorality and to glorify transgression, were suppressed by the police (Radzinowicz 275). Confident that the slums produced criminals, not poets, critics envisioned causal links between ballad depravity and ballad production in London’s 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, The Little World 252). Even a somewhat sympathetic article in The National Review remains wary of the neighborhoods that curious parties must traverse in order to locate a ballad singer. Disgusted
by the abundance of debris and filth, the author proves mindful of the artistic void that will inevitably greet intrepid ballad scouts (and interested periodical readers) seeking out “some unspeakable ditty” sung in a “brazen twang” (398): “They will scarcely find a gleam of poetic power to repay them for weltering in whole seas of slip-slop” (“Street Ballads” 399). Punning, perhaps, on the gory “weltering” so common in ballad crime scenes, this author maintains that these intriguing but disappointing curiosities are both socially polluted and poetically debased.

Like their working-class authors and audiences, these slum-dwelling ballads are demoralized and disempowered, criminalized and ghettoized, silenced and suppressed. Marked by the class hierarchies of urban geography, they appear tainted by the vulgar technologies of mass-production. In them, the voices of the murderous poor flowed forth in badly composed songs, creating a flood of cheap commodities, defying respectable mores, and threatening public safety. Such frightful ideas about working-class production and consumption of ballads have contributed not only to scholarly dismissals of their aesthetic sophistication but also to widespread suspicion of their criminal tendencies. Appearing in late-Victorian England as the ballad trade waned, several classed ethnographies of the ballad trade paired aesthetic degeneration and moral debasement. John Ashton, who collected ballads as records of “social manners and customs” in Modern Street Ballads (1888) and lamented their late-nineteenth-century decline, nevertheless disputed 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 is not great—but what can you expect for half-a-crown?” (Ashton vii–viii). Similarly, an article in The Quarterly Review, noting that “the metres employed” are “lawless” (“The Poetry of Seven Dials” 385), explains, “though they teach little or no history, they show, at least, what kind of Poetry finds the most favourable reception and the readiest sale among our lowest classes” (404).

When Francis J. Child, England’s dedicated collector of folk ballads, documented the “ancient national poetry” of the rural folk (366), he vigorously differentiated England’s traditional rural populace from its modern 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). Child’s references to such “huge numbers” and “a different genus” suggest a hierarchical taxonomy of literary culture, in which ballads, by virtue of their accessibility and their modernity, occupy the realm of the “low,” the “despicable,” and the “worthless.” Fully invested in the cooptation and authority of rural peasant voices, the pastoral romance of national culture cannot abide or acknowledge the cultural evolution or literary innovation of a working-class population in an industrialized state. Degraded by urban locales
and signifying modern corruption, they defile a national culture and sully an antique past.

With similar concerns, Sabine Baring-Gould, the collector responsible for preserving the British Library’s massive broadside collection, launched one of the most comprehensive assaults on the literary character of the street ballad. In an essay entitled “Broadside Ballads,” Baring-Gould criticizes, and virtually criminalizes, street ballad authors for favoring “the story of murder” and elevating the “vulgar assassin” to heroic status, and he explicitly blames street ballads for the sad demise of the “old romantic” ballads (190). Exhibiting a flagrant disdain for national tradition and an “overweening” (212) faith in their own poetic powers, he explains, street balladeers audaciously penned their own unsavory verses while opportunistically purloining random lines from rural ballads when inspiration failed them. Instead of collecting and preserving the pastoral songs of the country folk, acts which would have popularized the ancient rural ballads and edified modern urban readers, “these pot-poets loafed about in the low London public-houses, where it was only by rarest chance that a country man, fresh from the fields, and woods, and downs, with his memory laden with the fragrance of the rustic music, was to be found” (213).

Languishing in “public-houses” and possessing “neither taste, nor ear, nor genius,” they “poured forth floods of atrocious rhymes, and of utter balderdash, as was required as an occasion offered, and as they stood in need of half-crowns” (213). With “half-crowns” as their muses, these drunken bards alternately cannibalized ancient texts and spewed poetic filth. Aggravating these acts of gross literary indecency are their sinister affiliations with the morally unregenerate and economically opportunistic broadside print industry, which indiscriminately printed “the vile stuff composed by the half-tipsy, wholly-stupid band” (213) and, disseminating degenerate poetry throughout the streets and marketplaces of the nation, “did much to corrupt the taste of the peasant” (213). In Baring-Gould’s formulation, the positively criminal street-ballad writers, mired in urban sleaze, become “vulgar assassin[s]” guilty of the foulest of literary crimes. With “atrocious rhymes” and “vile stuff” as their weapons, they have driven ancient rural balladry, the literary essence of the nation, to an ignominious extinction.

Baring-Gould’s accusations—in which aesthetic ineptitude and criminal aptitude as well as bad taste and bad manners come to define the murderous verses of the urban poor—participate in a larger aesthetic argument that demarcates the domains of artistic achievement and criminal sensibility along class lines. In an odd yoking of elderly women and the newspaper-reading masses (perhaps connected by a perceived lack of education or taste), Thomas de Quincey, the enthusiastic advocate of murder as fine art, dismisses the possibility of interpretive sophistication when the masses read about murder. In “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” (1827), 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). De Quincey, interested in establishing a set of refined and structured aesthetic “principles of murder”—“not with a view to regulate your practice, but your judgment” (1008)—sees a lack of representational purpose and intellectual complexity in catalogues of bloody detail and gory imagery. In this formulation, the cognitive shortcomings of an unrefined mob and a populist aesthetic defined by quantities of blood combine to debase the aesthetics of murder. Along similar lines, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Wilde’s Lord Henry Wotton articulates late-Victorian aestheticism in classed terms when he confidently explains to Dorian that he is simply incapable of murder because “[c]rime 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). Within this statement about the procurement of “[e]xtraordinary sensations” lies an aesthetic distinction between the sensationalist excess of criminal acts and the intellectual restraint of aestheticist arts.

Coded in various formats and cited with impressive frequency—by both historical figures and fictional characters with both playful irony and sincere gravity—these ideas about practice and judgment, sensibility and vulgarity, crime and culture, insist that the theme of murder presents a representational obstacle for the working-class imagination. Each of these literary theories of murder exhibits a characteristic reluctance on the part of the middle and upper classes to ascribe textual power to the lower classes, and, demarcating the realm of high literary culture, they also reflect a pervasive investment in the notion of their cultural illiteracy. Collapsing working-class subjects into an indistinguishable mass, adamantly denying them the ability to aestheticize crime, and liberally bestowing their ability to commit crimes, they uphold the criminality of the working classes while overlooking any artistic or political sensibility in criminal matters. Because crime substitutes for art, it would seem, the “lower orders” stand capable of committing murders but incapable of representing them.

Rethorizing the “poetic power,” aesthetic sensibility, and cultural work of crime ballads—the most popular, profitable, and accessible genre of Victorian crime writing—requires consideration of these persistent stereotypes that shaped the content and the context of street literature. For with their representations of astonishment and lamentation, balladeers issued a substantial working-class reply to the nightmare of a dangerous and murderous mass. In “unvarnished” language and with a “brazen twang,” they challenged the totalizing categories of social scientific epistemologies, the ethical integrity of the criminal code, and the aesthetic and political discourses of the “consensual ‘we.’”
Confident of crime balladry’s ethnographic import, an article in The National Review presented it to a middle-class readership as “one of those windows through which we may get a glimpse at that very large body of our fellow-citizens of whom we know so little” (“Street Ballads” 399). When peering through this window, however, its author advocates reading practices that simplify ballad ethics and depoliticize ballad contents. Distinguishing crime ballads from “political ballads,” which explicitly cite government legislation or specific statesmen, the essay examines a few murder ballads merely to exhibit their uniformity: “the whole of the last dying speeches and confessions, trials and sentences, from whatever part of the country they come, run in the same form of quaint and circumstantial detail: appeals to Heaven, to young men, to young women, to Christians in general, and moral reflections” (405). Adding that “[w]e have seldom met with one of a different character” (405), the author strips these songs of poetic distinction, textual variety, and political intentionality while overestimating the significance and misrepresenting the consistency of moralistic frameworks.

While many Victorian critics expressed disdain for the criminal reputations and murderous intentions of crime ballads, contemporary critics have established a strong tradition of dismissing crime balladry on the grounds that it is poetically, politically, and morally conservative. Influenced by a critical legacy of ethnographic and historical analysis and limited by fixed definitions of political speech and textual complexity, contemporary studies have emphasized the language of didacticism and the limitations of genre. These commentaries, surprisingly consistent, almost always imagine a comparative narrative history in which ballads serve as foils to more successful and significant political protests or literary projects.

Accusations of conservatism have not gone wholly uncontested. Douglas Jerrold, for example, blamed the moral mandates of an increasingly conservative mainstream culture for the broadside ballad’s decline: “[t]he public ear has become dainty, fastidious, hypocritical; hence, the Ballad-Singer languishes and dies” (qtd. in Hindley, History xxxviii). More recently, acknowledging the threat of censorship, Richard Altick has suggestively articulated the dilemma of ballad morality as an imposition “from above” rather than an initiative “from below.” The moral frame, he argues, was often 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). Such reflections on the precise causes and effects of ballad moralizing remind us of the street ballad’s dynamic public presence, and they suggest that, in foregrounding aphorisms
and overemphasizing uniformity, we overlook other important features of the
genre.

Remedying the problem of critical literacy in the study of street ballads is
most easily accomplished by examining ballads. For in them we see that mur-
der ballads join other surviving broadsides of various genres to reveal a con-
sistently and explicitly class-conscious approach to criminal representation,
and even brief examples sufficiently demonstrate their aesthetic diversity and
ethical nuance. Moral advice, for example, often appeared in precepts that were
either marginal to or overwhelmed by the act of murder, and where tangential
or inverted, such advisories subverted or obscured conventional moral author-
ity. At a time when emotional, psychological, and medical causes for crime were
being considered, while common law rigorously resisted mitigation, traditional
explanations continued to serve—often with ironic implications.

In many ballads, for example, Satan, bearing the burden of some, if not all,
criminal responsibility, introduces legal and ethical complications. “He was by
Satan led” and “he with Satan did connive” frequently explained sin, absolved
guilt, or sensationalized crimes. In the “Copy of Verses” printed or “Particulars
of the Life, Trial, Confession, and Execution of Courvoisier” (1840) (figure 3),
when the condemned aristocrat-killer cries out, “the fiend exulting stood before
me / For he had worked my overthrow;” he disrupts the unitary nature of crim-
nal responsibility. Moreover, interpreting his crime with a Christian mythos,
this ballad criminal intimates the political versatility and ethical ambiguity of
Christian discourse in which practices of retribution conflict with notions of
forgiveness. In “Going to See a Man Hanged” (1840), Thackeray records the
experience of witnessing Courvoisier’s hanging and reminds his readers that the
ostensibly simple identity of Christian England is, in fact, politically complex. In
a sharply ironic depiction of this Christian nation, he explains, “government, a
Christian government, gives us a feast every now and then: it agrees, that is to
say, a majority in the two houses agrees, that for certain crimes it is necessary
that a man should be hanged by the neck” (157). In a similar way, in “The Life,
Trial, Sentence, and Execution of S. Adams for the Murder of His Sister-in-Law,
Martha Page” (1859), the condemned speaker challenges distinctions between
himself and his audience using a Christian notion of original sin: “Do not con-
demn before you listen, / None is without their crimes on earth; / None without
some stain upon him, / We are all sinners from our birth.” Whether constituting
allusions to committed abolitionists or acknowledging an audience of fellow
sinners, the “feeling Christians” so often hailed in street ballads, and so often
decreed by critics as evidence of political conservatism, evoke the moral com-
plexities of apprehending and punishing criminals.

Further demonstrating the ways in which crime balladry created oppor-
tunities for interpretive license, “Miles Weatherhill, the Young Weaver, and his
Figure 3
Sweetheart, Sarah Bell” (1868) challenges expected moral linkages between criminal acts and crime prevention. The lesson attached to Weatherhill’s slaying of Jane Smith, who interfered with his courtship of the young Sarah Bell, is not, “Thou shalt not kill,” but rather, “Where true love is planted, there let it dwell.” Targeting potential meddlers rather than potential rogues, the ballad proposes an unexpected schema of causation and remedy. If romantic chaperoning and sexual propriety incite lethal passions, and if didacticism should address the cause and not the effect, then the nurturing of “true love” offers a particularly pleasant solution to the national problem of crime.

We might similarly consider the subversive meanings made possible by the subtleties of poetic form and literary language. For example, in another Courvoisier ballad, “Trial, Sentence, Confession, and Execution of F. B. Courvoisier for the Murder of Lord Wm. Russell” (1840), moral outrage is subjected to the humorous effects of alliterative flourishes when his murderous actions are diagnosed as a problem of “pilfering passions.” Not merely accidents of mass production or hasty composition, such moments of suggestive irony and irreverent humor suggest the awareness of authors and audiences of their verbal and political impact. Attentive to the interplay of genre and discourse, we can read such moments of poetic play and criminolegal wit in the context of Victorian laws, trials, and punishments in which they circulated.

With more overt references to historical context, which generated institutional critiques on a larger scale, ballads often redirected moral judgments away from the crimes and punishments of individual criminals and toward structural analyses of social inequalities. The song of the “Dreadful Murder at Eriswell,” for example, sidelines the condemnation of two poachers who murdered a groundskeeper, preferring instead to argue for the repeal of “those cursed Game Laws,” which “has been the cause, / Of many a life’s blood to be shed.” With such ethical surprises and political allusions, balladeers, enjoying the interpretive liberties conferred by poetic license, privileged topical assessments of the crimes they documented. Linking social inequalities to criminal activities, they defamiliarized the moral conventions of criminal discourse and unraveled the didactic threads of a centuries-old genre. In these cases, ballads implicitly or explicitly absolved individuals of criminal responsibility while providing contexts that indicted social hierarchies. Representing crimes and punishments in both ethically playful and politically sobering ways, these maneuvers invited readers to reconsider the implications of particular crimes as well as more general theories of criminality.

In some cases, specific crimes provided opportunities to overturn expedient divisions between the dangerous masses and the respectable classes. For example, “Murder of A Wife at Ashburnham, Near Hastings,” highlights a scene of inverted class relations when a group of “servants” and “labourers,” acting as
policing authorities, hunt Jeremiah Stubberfield, the son of an “aged, wealthy sire” who has fled after murdering his wife:

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

Traveling “in numbers” (the stereotypical working-class mob), these upstanding laborers defy ordinary moral hierarchies when they take extraordinary measures to apprehend a wealthy, propertied, and hitherto respectable wife-killer. The crime’s political force takes shape in the image of household servants and farm laborers “pursu[ing] the murderer”—their fugitive master and landlord—across the countryside.

Similarly, references to the physical and emotional pain of capital punishment, the judicial context of all murder and execution ballads, created troubling juxtapositions of disgust for perpetrators of outrageous violence, empathy for their unsuspecting victims, and sympathy for condemned criminals. “The Execution of Five Pirates” (1864), for example, emphasizes the contradictory responses elicited by execution: “And though they were not fit to live, / We pity to them on the gallows, / Englishmen could not deny.” The pairing of ethical disgust and undeniable pity, which reconnects marginalized criminals to mainstream sentiments, is so common in crime balladry that we must consider it a central trope. When the processes of abhorring the crime and abhorring the punishment are conjoined, ballads express the irresolvable moral dilemma of capital punishment, which answers one killing with another.

Reiterating this dilemma, ballads often realign margin and center in ways that recall Stallybrass and White’s definition of transgression. In tracing relations between social margins and symbolic centers, Stallybrass and White adopt Barbara Babcock’s definition of “symbolic inversion.” 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). In the aforementioned examples, from Satan manipulating murderers to poor laborers hunting wealthy wife-killers to bad pirates inspiring sympathy pangs, ballad writers deploy the rhetorical power of inverted meanings. Even in these brief excerpts, we can see how balladeers politicized as they publicized scandalous crimes and spectacular punishments. Rather than simply applying the discourses of conventional moral authority, ballad writers often explored the classed politics and the collective experience of crime and punishment with
nuanced narrative details and allegorized symbolic inversions. Diminishing the significance of conventional moralistic framing devices, the inclusion of digressive and unexpected references to mitigating factors, ethical conflicts, and class tensions opened up the street ballad genre to poetic and political variety. As balladeers exploited the poetic and political opportunities of historical crimes, they often exposed the internal contradictions and institutional interests of criminal policies. In “John Bull, Can You Wonder At Crime?” (figure 4) the narrator criticizes the privileged classes of the nation, with their “riches in heaps stowed away, / Mouldy with age and mildew,” for willfully mystifying the rising crime rate while impoverishing (and endangering) the working classes. Apostrophizing John Bull, and continuing with an ironically charged “sir,” the speaker suggests the economic roots of crime by noting discrepancies between England’s scenes of abject poverty and the hoarded wealth of the nation and its wondering elite: “Your gold to yourself you confine, / Where a little would make a great change, sir, / In our terrible increase of crime.” Describing temptation and desperation, the ballad contrasts the harassment and imprisonment of earnest, hard-working, “poor Costermongers” with the relative impunity of “grinning,” pick-pocketing “rogues.” Meanwhile, “poor needle girls,” who are “[t]rying their best to exist,” the ballad explains, inevitably resort to sexual labor: “Can you wonder at their prostitution, / When blood-sucking forms barely give / Enough to ward off destitution.” The narrator then admonishes “Mr. Bull,” asking him to acknowledge the modest aspirations and vulnerable sensibilities of these impoverished girls, as they function “[w]ith feelings as keen and as tender, / As your proud city ladies, remember.” Having gentrified criminality with an indictment of the parasitic pastimes of the nation’s wealthy, the violent effects of capital accumulation, and the predatory varieties of roguish privilege, the narrator critiques, in an authoritative and commonsensical tone, the lingering perplexity of the nation: “And still you keep wondering at crime.” “John Bull, Can You Wonder at Crime” sketches an England in which the rarefied discourse of criminal theory and the policing mechanisms of the state justify the continued arrogance and privilege of an elite class, which masks its investments in the continuation of poverty with an anxious rhetoric about the “increase in crime.” Exasperated by this situation, which is presented in this ballad as a calculated performance, the narrator commands, “Go and listen to the great pangs of hunger / And never more wonder at crime.” The narrator also prescribes a remedy for both the disingenuous bewilderment of the nation and the debilitating suffering of the poor: “[j]ust visit the dens of the poor” and “scatter your hoarded up gold.” Demanding a redistribution of wealth and an end to mystification, the ballad narrator inverts the relationship between expertise and common sense and removes moral authority from the propertied classes and places it at the criminalized margins.
JOHN BULL, CAN YOU WONDER AT CRIME?

He laughs with contempt and derision,
While you send the poor Caster to prison,
Mr. Bull, can you wonder at crime?
I am sure you will own, Mr. Bull, sir,
Temptation is hard to resist
Look at our poor needle girls, sir,
Trying their best to exist;
Can you wonder at their prostitution,
When blood-sucking forms barely give
Enough to ward off destitution?
A girl tho’ she’s poor she must live,
The poor needle girl, God defend her,
With feelings as keen and as tender,
As your proud city ladies, remember,
Mr. Bull, can you wonder at crime?

Can you wonder at crime when you see
Rich lords with a star on their breast,
At marriage time laughing with glee,
A disgrace to their title and crest;
While rogues like those are protected,
They will laugh at the strength of our law,
Mr. Bull, it must be expected,
That crime will increase more and more,
Don’t it fill you with dire consternation?
It’s a shame and a great degradation,
To let such as these rule our nation,
And still you keep wondering at crime.

Just think when you’re drinking your wine, sir,
How the poor of old England are fed,
While you with your rich friends can dine, sir,
It’s a gotsend for them to get bread,
Just visit the dams of the poor, sir,
Such a sight you will rarely behold,
The fever dies go and explore, sir,
And scatter your boarded up gold;
For a little would soon break saunter
The chain that the poor suffer under
Go and listen to the great pangs of laughe
And never more wonder at crime.

London — H SUCH, Machine Printer & Publisher, 177, Union Street, Ber’d. S.B.

I’ve been thinking of late, I’ve been thinking,
And my thoughts I could scarcely divine,
I’ve been thinking why people should wonder,
At England’s great Increase of crime.

Crie old John Bull it’s a power,
There’s something I can’t understand,
And I would fork out a tribe to know, sir,
Why crime should increase in our land;
We have peace, we have plenty of gold, sir,
Our banks are as full as can hold, sir,
We can lay up the world, so I am told, sir,
Yet still there’s an increase of crime.

It’s quite true what you say, Mr. Bull, sir,
We’re riches in heaps stored away,
Mouldy with age and mildew, sir,
Guarded by night and by day;
But like the ill-natured dog in the manger,
Your gold to yourself you confine,
Where a little would make a great change, sir,
In our terrible increase of crime.

For expense you don’t earn a jot, sir,
You feed German Princes the lot, sir,
While the poor man with hunger may rot, sir,
Mr. Bull, can you wonder at crime.

Can you wonder at crime any longer,
When you see the police on their beat
Preventing the poor Outenongers
From eating their bread in the street;
While the rogues on the stool stands grinning,
At the broad open face of the day,
Your pocket he will pick for a shiling,
And the law cannot touch him he’ll say:
He desj all the police divisions,
With a similar attention to the politics of crime and class, ballads about the metropolitan police, which constituted a ballad genre in their own right, problematized the deployment of a centralized police force and the recruitment of policemen from the working classes. These ballads frequently questioned the methods of distinguishing between the state and the people and scrutinized the practices of delineating power and its subjects. Proclaiming that “in the country all around, / The people do severely frown,” “Complaints Against the New Police” considers the financing of the new police force and documents the activities of a petitioning underclass. Their political organizing offsets the silencing tactics of an overzealous police state in which public speech constitutes provocation and justifies incarceration: “And if a word to them you say, / They’ll drag you off without delay / Unto the Station-House.” The persona of the upwardly mobile policeman also appears in many ballads. “I’m One of the New Police,” for example, highlights the performance quality of the uniform: “My gloves of white, my coat of blue, / My dignity increase” (qtd. in Hindley, Life 207).

A long-running joke about police harassment constituted the most popular ballad characterization of the police, which began in 1829 with Peel’s Metropolitan Police Act but which Hindley traces well into the Victorian era. In this comical scenario, policemen are presented as gluttonous mutton thieves who attempt to capitalize on the illusion of respectability and the access to authority (and mutton) secured by their uniforms. “The New Policeman, and the Somers Town Butcher” confronts the policeman and deconstructs 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 203)

With the anxious topic of crime depicted as a question of “prigging” and the mechanisms of state supervision reduced to “handsome rigging,” the ballad parodies cultural anxieties about increasing crime and mocks the disciplinary power of the police.

In ballad scenarios of poetic justice, mutton-thieving policemen often suffer a humiliating comeuppance at the hands of an unsympathetic judicial bureaucracy. In “The Lamentation in Newgate of the Police-Man, Who Boned the Mutton,” the sentencing judge invokes the criminal stereotypes that code the desperation of urban poverty as the dissipation of a criminal class. As he
narrates his “downfall,” the lamenting policeman receives a judgment commonly passed on the poor in English courts:

“We are certain, Mr. Jones,
You intended for to take away
Both mutton, meat and bones.
You did not steal the meat for want
To pay you was not willing
When you stole the meat, you had
In your pocket fifteen shillings.”

Effecting a symbolic inversion and subversion of official power, this narrative logic is crucial to the ballad’s comedic and political content. In establishing his criminal intent, negating the existence of “want,” asserting his disdain for honesty, ruling that he simply was not “willing” to pay, and concluding that he “must in confinement dwell,” the court demotes the policeman to the criminal classes. Replete with parodic reversals and comical self-references—from the exaggerated lamenting of the former policeman (“O the mutton! / That fatal bit of mutton!”) to the contrived villainous testimony of the “cruel greasy Butcher”—this ballad manipulates the metonymic significance of the police in order to analyze the social effects of law enforcement and judicial practices. Applied to the police rather than the criminal, and mutton-thieving rather than murder, these lamentation tropes exemplify the self-parodic and self-reflexive engagements of the genre.9

The ethical and interpretive dilemmas surrounding murder, of course, offered balladeers more shocking subject matter and inspired more complex representational strategies. When deploying murder for the purpose of cultural critique, ballads often broached their political arguments more forcefully and more gravely. Of murder’s symbolic function, Foucault writes, “Murder establishes the ambiguity of the lawful and the unlawful” (Rivière 206). This ambiguity arises 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; voluntary sacrifice, punishment inflicted; memory, oblivion. Murder prowls the confines of the law, on one side or the other, above or below it; it frequents power, sometimes against and sometimes with it” (206). A shorthand for dissecting the power relations that determined lawfulness and unlawfulness, murder effectively fragmented and condensed the circulating ideologies of crime and class. If murder “prows” the borders 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 that scrutinized those explanations.
Contemplating the criminal broadside’s popularity, Foucault reads its marketplace success as a fantasy of criminal resistance: “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). Yet, in perceiving ballad popularity as a mark of criminal potential—and crime ballads as accomplices to or inspirations for crime—Foucault links, with stereotyping fascination, ballad reading and criminal activity. With respect to English street ballads in particular, “curiosity” and “political interest” intersect quite differently; the popularity of the crime ballads does not signify merely a fascination with blood or outlaws but, more, a critique of power. Because the law mandated death for murder and because most convicted murderers were working-class, the unlawful circumstances of particular crimes and the lawful deaths of the scaffold were of particular importance. And while murder exposed the relationships of power between the criminal and the state in the most explicit terms, it also accessed more intimate manifestations of power between murderers and their victims. For this reason, the often overwhelmingly graphic representations of specific crimes and the intricately politicized rendering of specific executions can be seen as attempts to claim interpretive authority.

An interest in mediating authority also informed the ways in which ballads constituted their audiences. For example, although many crime ballads constructed their audience as a collection of morally edified innocents, an equally significant number acknowledged an audience of murder tale aficionados schooled in the astonishing violence of individual criminals and state policies. The verses in the “Life, Trial, Character, Confession, and Execution of Stephen Forward” (1866), for instance, construct readers as crime history 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” (1867) places Mapp’s crime within a comparative framework: “Such a dreadful murder, as you may see, / Which we may compare to the Alton tragedy.” Similarly, “The Liverpool Tragedies,” printed on the broadsheet “Execution of John Gleeson Wilson,” registers the crime’s magnitude by citing notorious murderers, such as James Greenacre, whose ballads sold well into the millions in 1837. And “Lamentation of H. Lingley” (1867) references the notorious James Bloomfield Rush, whose execution ballad sold two and a half million copies in 1849. Lingley, the ballad informs us, will die “[o]n the very tree where Rush met his fate” and will lie “[b]y the side of Rush in a murderer’s grave.”

Such name-dropping implies a readership interested in historical crimes and executions and steeped in the knowledge of violent death, but it also reveals that ballad writers exploited anxieties about the pervasiveness of crime and invoked the prevailing crime-obsessed spirit of the age. The narrator of the “Lamentation of J. Mapp” reports:
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 intertextual and historicist references ask readers to assess individual crimes against a backdrop of cultural history and to consider their national significance. Offering rough sketches of unprecedented “horrid murders” and “atrocious deeds,” this comparativist mode undoubtedly served to heighten the marketplace appeal of ballads, but it also underscored the textual history of the ballads and the cultural literacy of their audience.

In each of these ballad techniques—ethical ambivalence, symbolic inversion, legal intervention, historical contextualization—we can see efforts to renegotiate moral equations and conduct political analyses. Their aesthetic innovation, political interests, and poetic variety remind us that crime balladeers continually renegotiated the relationships between generic conventions and historical events. As they selected content and shifted emphasis to create fictionalized representations of actual crimes, they produced meaningful tensions between the details of historical cases and the details of ballad crimes. In these tensions, we can glimpse the political charge of ballad poetics. With arguments about the criminal tendencies and moral primness of crime ballads delineated and dismantled, the remainder of this chapter explores the specific representational strategies of astonishing disclosures and last lamentations and considers the relationships between poetic crimes and historical criminals.

**The Aesthetics of Astonishment:**
**Acts of Murder and Scenes of Crime**

Narrated from the point of view of an astonished witness, third-person astonishing disclosures proclaimed the news of crime to a shocked and saddened citizenry, and deploying their rubric of astonishment and disclosure, they parsed the complex meanings of murder. Rarely depicted as isolated instances of appalling deviance, murders appeared in these texts as socially entangled mishaps and wholly collective tragedies worthy of close scrutiny and sustained reflection. In privileging astonishment, they differentiated moral and aesthetic responses to crime. Their notorious “full particulars” of gruesome killings and blood-soaked crime scenes constructed a political aesthetic of murder rooted in the signifying power of murderous agency and hapless victimization.

Assessing the aesthetic dimensions of murder, 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). This distinction between “moral outrage” and “aesthetic astonishment” sheds light on the repeated ballad promise of astonishing disclosures that would “make the blood run cold.” As stylized violence proliferates in these songs of murder, aesthetic astonishment overtakes moral outrage as the genre’s epistemological mode.

As legend has it, James Catnach, the publisher credited with bringing the crime ballad to new literary heights and unprecedented sales in the first half of the nineteenth century, extolled the textual power of “the most beautiful murder” (Mayhew 302) and thereby established a market value in which aesthetic criteria, not ethical dichotomies, informed the contemplation of “barbarous deeds” (Hindley, Life 361). The preference for contemplation over judgment also informed the advertising slogans used by ballad singers to peddle their scenes of murderous violence in the streets. Accordingly, “those connected with murder-patter” (Mayhew 302) conceived of their economic opportunities in aesthetic terms: “There’s nothing beats a stunning good murder, after all” (223).10 Recalling his own peripatetic investigations into the ballad trade while researching his History of the Catnach Press in August 1869, Charles Hindley explains that, even as a respectable scholar conducting research, he reacted not to the promise of a morality tale, but to the promise of gruesome detail:

[O]ur ears voluntarily ‘pricked up,’ on hearing the old familiar sounds of a ‘street, or running patterer’ with the stereotyped sentences of ‘Horrible.’—‘Dreadful.’—‘Remarkable letters founds on his person.’—‘Cut down by a labouring man.’—‘Quite dead.’—‘Well-known in the town.’—‘Hanging.’—‘Coroner’s Inquest.’—‘Verdict.’—‘Full particulars,’—‘Most determined suicide.’—‘Brutal conduct.’—&c., &c., Only a ha’penny—Only a ha’penny! (History x)

Conducting his study during the decline of the ballad trade, Hindley records his nostalgia for “old familiar sounds,” but, in isolating the resonant “stereotyped sentences,” he also documents the aesthetic project of the crime ballad marketplace. Framed in such energetic and exclamatory language, the components of “the most beautiful murder” privilege the poetics of astonishment and diminish the force of didacticism.

With their emphasis on violent agency (“most determined”), passionate excess (“brutal conduct”), and gory minutiae (“full particulars”), these songs required audiences to confront and consider the contingent and contentious meanings of murderous violence. The narrative strength of bloody descriptions and the iterative force of brutality contribute to what Martha Vicinus has described in general terms as the crime broadside’s ability to “provide forms and language for understanding the daily violence of one’s own life” and to
“provid[e] readers with a means of interpreting and managing violence” (*Industrial Muse* 16). Astonishing disclosures in particular managed the theme of murder by forcing questions about the particular causes, the collective effects, and the social consequences of extreme violence.

Through the voice of an anonymous narrator, third-person ballads enumerate the full particulars of murders by elaborating on details gleaned from official sources. Such reconstructions embed the multiple perspectives of criminals, eyewitnesses, neighbors, policemen, and judges. Submitting details for our interpretation, ballad murders often involve planning stages, explanatory letters, and murderer-victim dialogues, which punctuate, disrupt, or incite violence, and they frequently dramatize fragments of official discourse, such as coroner reports or signed confessions, excerpts of which might be supplied in prose sections of the broadsides on which they appear. Recasting official information, ballads elaborate any idiosyncrasies that might serve the needs of aesthetic effect or political suggestion.

The interplay of historical record and fictional elaboration extends to ballad crime scenes, the remains of murderous force discovered by authorities and documented by ballad narrators. Offering meticulous renderings of the grotesque arrangement or bloody disposal of bodies, crime scenes fulfill the promise of astonishment and disclosure with scenes of stylized gore. It is thus via the poetics of astonishment that “full and energetic” representations of murder produce both riveting aesthetic scenes and complex ethical situations. The business of ballad writing mandated this aestheticized treatment of murder by attempting to supply the artistic flair overlooked by the historical criminal who, as Mayhew’s informer reports, had no “regard for the interest of art and literature” (225).

In this strange collaboration, the murderer and the balladeer create grotesque bodily texts that develop the aesthetically overpowering and culturally resonant anatomy of a murder. Not simply a sensational or disinterested aesthetic, “the stunning good murder” voiced concerns about the social origins of murderous transgression and the cultural conditions of astonishing victimization. Exploring the social complexity of appalling violence, they demand interpretation—not outrage. In explicitly framing this terrible aesthetic in stunning or astonishing narratives, street ballads popularized an aesthetic of the sublime. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke argues that astonishment constitutes the “effect of the sublime in its highest degree” (101), and his reflections on bodily pain and hideous objects assist in sorting out the strategies with which the murder ballad scrutinized the baffling conflicts between individual agency and social prohibition that surrounded murder and execution.

The affective force of astonishment also created opportunities for ethical impact, and, although critics have often aligned ballads with melodramatic
forms in order to underscore their textual incompetence, more recent articulations of melodramatic forms are instructive in exploring the ethical complexities of ballad poetics. Peter Brooks’s “rehabilitation” (xi) of melodrama in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), for example, defines melodrama as a “mode of excess” that deploys the “aesthetics of astonishment” in order to engage moral conflicts. Explaining that melodrama enacts rhetoric of “overstatement and overemphasis” (36), which forces a confrontation with an evil that “astonishes” and “disarms” (34), Brooks concludes, “melodramatic rhetoric, and the whole expressive enterprise of the genre, represents a victory over repression” (41). Forcefully depicting that which has been subject to “censorships, accommodations, tonings-down” in other literary forms, melodrama “achieves plenitude of meaning” (41).

While ballads frequently privilege tragic plots or sublime aesthetics over melodramatic structures—and likewise astonishment over outrage—Brooks’s “rehabilitation” of melodrama usefully acknowledges the signifying complexities inherent in the ostensibly reductive exhortations and clichéd hyperboles that frequently operated in melodramatic texts—and in street ballads. Viewing street ballads in a similarly rehabilitative mode, we can see that, like stage melodramas, they developed a confrontational aesthetics of astonishment and achieved a “plenitude of meaning” that produced an epistemology of ambivalence, differentiation, and critique. With a plenitude of violence in particular, they fostered new levels of astonishment as they configured collective distress, and, in unsettling aphoristic equations of innocence and guilt, ballads rendered murders as reflections of, rather than deviations from, mainstream Victorian culture.

Revising and challenging Brooks’s psychologized schema, Elaine Hadley’s *Melodramatic Tactics* (1995) envisions the “melodramatic mode” as an embodiment of a “polemical” and “reactionary rejoinder to social change” (3). It is a textual project, which, through “a productive friction” or “a creative disjunction,” challenges cultural shifts within the market system of nineteenth-century capitalist production with a “resistant energy” that “emerges from what Jonathan Dollimore calls ‘the inevitable incompleteness and surplus of control itself’” (10). Hadley briefly catalogues the stock features of this mode: “its familial narratives of dispersal and reunion, its emphatically visual renderings of bodily torture and criminal conduct, its atmospheric menace and providential plotting, its expressions of highly charged emotion, and its tendency to personify absolutes like good and evil” (3). Hadley’s list of melodramatic features lends insight into the causes and effects of ballad innovations, which deploy similar “melodramatic tactics” to explore the social dynamics of control. Their “emphatically visual renderings of bodily torture and criminal conduct” challenged the axioms of crime and class, and, applied to specific crimes, they also staged shocked and saddened reactions to crimes in order to demonstrate the
collectively shared experience of criminality and victimization. Hadley’s assertion that the melodramatic mode “exerted an impact on the production of cultural meaning” in spite of its existence as a “less autonomous” discursive practice has useful applications for a revision of ballad hermeneutics. Such a definition of textual power accounts for multiple layers of crime ballad signification, from the conventional features of melodramatic emplotment, to the polemical qualities of “less autonomous” literature, to the culturally reactive force behind the melodramatic mode.

Applying these critical insights, we can see the processes of what Hadley labels “productive friction” in ballad representations of murderous acts and crime scenes. With them, murder ballads frequently introduced troubling details that highlighted the intimate complexities of violent circumstances and insinuated the epistemological shortcomings of legal fictions and judicial reasoning. While these astonishing disclosures explored obscure sequences of causes and effects and intentions and actions, they also addressed the painful consequences of collective reckoning. The bloody particulars of murderous violence suggested that, both literally and figuratively, murder is messy, and where De Quincey perceives bloodlust, ballad writers sensed, to borrow John Kucich’s phrase, “the political use of moral disorder” (2).

Offering a particularly vivid and gory example of the ballad aesthetic of astonishment is the ballad of “The Liverpool Tragedies,” which was printed on the broadside “Execution of John Gleeson Wilson” (1849). This ballad engages the political uses of moral disorder by reconstructing Wilson’s murders of Mrs. Heinrichsen, her two children, and a female servant “for the sake of cursed gold.” Detailing these “dreadful murders” for “feeling christians,” the ballad invents snippets of 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 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.
In the “open day” a killer, with clearly inscribed motive and clearly expressed intent, commences his “bloody work” and destroys a household as his victims appeal to sympathy and attempt to escape. Garrett Stewart, who maintains that literary Victorians tended to die “vocally,” argues that deathbed conversations could “inscribe the indecipherable” (13). Like these more benign and less violent deathbed conversations, street ballad dialogues between murderers and victims allowed murder narratives to articulate the indecipherable nature of violent death and to accommodate the audience’s expectations of disclosure.

The desperate final words of the servant girl (“should not do so”) and the “tender cries” of the five-year-old “darling child” attempt to check the forces of disorder. With their meager pleas for the preservation of their “precious lives” and “precious blood,” the ballad highlights Wilson’s merciless intentions and avaricious motives. Readers are asked to contemplate the intensity and intentionality of his violent actions, for “[r]egardless” of moral arguments and “supplication,” Wilson, wielding a “poker” and an “awful knife” and “striking at the children while the mother was away,” destroys their lives with “severe blow[s].” These murdered ballad-children embody uncorrupted innocence, but, in this contest between meek supplication and violent renunciation, they also signify ethical frailties and moral failures. Their invocations of mercy cannot check Wilson’s violence, and, unsuccessful in inspiring restraint and escaping Wilson’s weapons, the children emphasize the utter failure of the lawful, which, the ballad suggests, even collective witnessing and state-sanctioned punishment cannot fully restore.

While the broadside’s prose report portrays the murder victims in terms of conventionally gendered notions of vulnerability (“two unprotected women and two helpless children”), the ballad broadens the notion of victimization to include witnesses and survivors. The grief-stricken father, whose “hair [will] turn grey with grief,” mournfully acknowledges that “[n]o skill their lives could save,” and the citizens of Liverpool form a suffering collectivity, which laments the “fate of this poor family.” Just as, in the aftermath of the quadruple murder, “[t]housands did besiege the gates” of the hospital to ascertain the fate of the victims, “thousands did bewail” the victims’ sad ends. As the traumatized members of the community gather together, we are told, “consternation did prevail.” Broadening the scope of the crime’s impact even further, the ballad also interprets it in terms of national history. Noting that “[t]he like was not recorded in British history,” it dramatizes the inadequacies of moral authority and the pain of a national “tragedy.”

Just as the murder dialogue, consisting of verbal supplication and violent dismissals, stages the inefficacy of moral law, the crime scene reiterates this sad failure in the brutalized bodies of the victims. In “The Liverpool Tragedies,”
the surgeon reads the crime scene in terms of both bodily abjection and social tragedy:

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 surgeon’s claim that he “never knew” a “more appalling case” and that the sight was “sickening to behold” attests to the unprecedented and, therefore, astonishing nature of the case. Here, the corpses “weltering in their gore” confront and overwhelm the surgeon, and the reader, with the “appalling” effects of murderous violence. The ballad then produces the precise details of the “sickening” scene:

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.

With abject similes (“blood as thick as mud” and a head “like a jelly”), clinical details (“wounds three inches deep”), and the overall image of four bloodied and disfigured “human beings,” the ballad uses a melodramatic “mode of excess” to produce astonishment. This excess is reinforced by accentual stresses on the most grotesque elements: “pools,” “blood,” “thick,” “mud.” While critics consistently note the visual impact of ballad gore, the aural impact produced by metrical arrangements, and, in these particular instances, sheer monosyllabic force, also contribute to the poetics of astonishment.

In this way, ballads could use the bodies of victims to reject simple understandings of moral order and violent disorder. The interpretive process of reading the bodies of the victims is repeatedly invoked in the ballad trade. In a broadside printed by the infamous Catnach, under a woodcut entitled “The Arrest of the Prisoner,” a caption connecting murderous speech and violated corpse appears: “For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak with a most miraculous organ” (qtd. in Hindley, History 274). The heteroglossic layers of these lines from Hamlet invite more than a moral warning about clues and capture. The phrase turns an investigative notion into an aesthetic one by suggesting the communicative value of the corpse, which utters a miraculous speech in a miraculous form—literally in the “organs” of the murdered. In the context of ballad crimes, such grotesque utterances cannot be easily absorbed by a
disciplinary ideology or deflected by a didactic morality. In “The Liverpool Tragedies,” the “sickening” vision of four mutilated corpses signifies stark and brutal truths. As spectacles of violent disorder, they inform their audience that something is rotten in England, and eliciting astonishment and “consternation,” rather than outrage and panic, they propose grim reflections on crime as a shared social affliction.

“The Liverpool Tragedies” links outrageous violence to the temptations of “cursed gold,” but more often, ballads, reflecting the historical realities of violent crime, reported the murders of acquaintances and family members. In these songs, ballad authors, exposing the cultural contours of “conflictual complexes,” often forged more explicit connections between transgressive behavior and social prohibitions. Finding congruities and continuities between criminal acts, cultural practices, and social pressures, they disputed essentialist class-based ideas of criminality, intervened in legal debates about mitigation, and interrogated the principles of capital justice. “Verses on Daniel Good” (1842) (figure 5), for example, reports the 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 impending “recital” of his “wild deeds,” the narrator assures us, “[is] enough to turn your blood cold.”

Good’s crime intrigued and disgusted the public because he murdered, dismembered, and burned his victim, who by most accounts was said to be living as his common-law wife and was often referred to in broadsides and newspaper reports as “Mrs. Good.” Situating Good in a “gallery of evil men” (Men 140), Martin Wiener explains that as models of civilized, rationalized, modernized, middle-class manhood developed, masculine aggression in general—and extreme violence in particular—was most often associated with a reprobate and outmoded form of working-class masculinity. As a result, instances of impassioned male violence, from the mild to the extreme, attracted increasing public scorn.

Articulating such scorn, the judge at Good’s trial summed up his horrific crime as a murderous manifestation of his habitual sexual indulgence: “There is no doubt that it is the owing to the indulgence of your inclinations for one woman after another, that being tired of the unhappy deceased, and feeling that you could not enjoy to its fullest extent the fresh attachment you had formed, that you resolved upon destroying the unhappy woman who was the former object of your affection” (Times, 16 May 1842, 6). While in many ways, of course, Victorian gender ideologies accommodated and condoned erasures of feminine subjectivity and masculine prerogatives for “fresh attachment[s],” the combination of Good’s working-class masculinity and his apparently murderous philandering suggested a menacing figure who perfectly embodied criminal alterity—in its classed and gendered forms.
VERSES ON DANIEL GOOD,
Who was executed this morning May, '42, for the Murder of Jane Jones

Of all the wild beasts upon mother's black list,
Sure none is so barbarous and cruel as this,
Which in three poor Ross peas you'll unfold.
The recital's to turn your blood cold.

In the great town of London near Manchester square,
Jane Jones kept a tavern in South street we know,
A gentleman's coachman at visiting ease,
A cold-blooded murder, Dan Good was his name.

As a single man under her he made love,
And in course of time she procured ill prove,
Thus with false promises he took her from home,
To murder his victim and the baby in her womb.

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

Thus with a sharp hatchet her head did close,
The hope for mercy but none he could give,
Have mercy dear Daniel say wretched life spared,
For the sake of your own child which you know I bear.

No mercy, he cried, then repeated the blow,
Alien from this place you never shall go,
Neither you nor your beast shall trouble me more,
Then lifeline his victim he struck to the floor.

And when she was dead this sad deed to hide,
The head from her body he straight did divide,
Her hands up 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 all consumed,
But none of his intentions were fulfilled again.
This dark deed by Providence was brought to light.

To a pawn-shop the coachman he did go one day,
A boy said some treasures he did take away,
A policeman followed unto Putney Lane,
The coachman and tawneys in being back again.

When in searching the stable the body he spied,
Without head, legs, or arms, and right open naked,
Thus 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 body and bones.

He soon was found guilty and sentenced to die,
The death of a murderer on the gallows high,
The blood of the murderer must not cry vain,
As we hope that his like we shall never see again.

J. Harkess, Printer, Preston.

Figure 5
Verses on Daniel Good. Courtesy The Newberry Library, Chicago.
Such casual links between murderous motive and sexual rakeism established the crime as a grotesquely disproportionate application of force. Compounding these meanings was the gruesome fact that Good attempted to dismember the body of his victim and burn her remains in the stable of his employer. And further complicating the meanings of this astonishing brutality was the speculation about his victim’s pregnancy at trial. Although the consulting trial doctors could not “speak with certainty” on the matter, they speculated that Jones was pregnant, and press coverage of the trial frequently concentrated on the death of the unborn child in order to make the case for Good’s barbarity (Times, 14 May 1842, 8).

Given this context, we can see that when this particular broadside ballad labels Good a “cold-blooded monster,” it upholds a well-established consensus. But the ballad also undercuts these more common readings in important ways. In a realignment of motive, it challenges popular belief in the motivating force of a “fresh attachment” by presenting the murderer lashing out at the responsibilities of paternity. In contextualizing Good’s crime in these (unfortunately) familiar terms, the ballad connects his crime to the socially constituted pressures of paternal responsibility rather than to the sexual pleasures of a fickle working-class rogue.

Quite unequivocally the ballad confirms the pregnancy and claims that the illegitimate child inspires Good’s resolve “[t]o murder his victim and the babe in her womb.” The doubly murderous intent is then depicted in a dialogue between killer and victim and in the mutilation of her body, an act that 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.

In imagining the content of Jones’s appeals, the ballad deploys a common ballad trope of contrasting willful force and enfeebled resistance in carefully arranged murder dialogues that bespeak a disturbing intimacy. After Jones invokes moral obligations to “mercy,” her “wretched life,” and Good’s “own child” and accusingly establishes his knowledge of the child—“which you know I bear”—Good verbally and physically rejects them:

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.
In her desperate appeals to the imperatives of paternity, Jones cites moral obligations, but according to the narrative logic of this ballad, such invocations only serve to incite his violence and inspire his categorical rejection of her pleas with a resounding “no mercy.” Because this dialogue of moral bargaining also builds upon public discussions of Good’s motives and Jones’s potential pregnancy, Jones’s references to his “own child” and Good’s merciless renunciation of parental responsibility complicate judicial interpretations of his case. Ridding himself of a “brat” and “trouble,” Good clearly defines links between intentions and actions.

In the subsequent hiding of his crime, Good reinscribes his stated intentions on the bodies of his victims, a number that the ballad decisively doubles. Rendering Jones’s pregnancy a medical certainty, the ballad depicts a gruesome disemboweling and affirms the existence of a distinctly formed unborn child. With great symbolic weight, Good separates mother and child, thereby portraying a visual image of Good’s sexual sins and Jones’s fallen status:

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.

As stock phrases (“dripping with gore”) join significant topical references, the ballad interprets his crime. The astounding force of his attempt “to hide” this “sad deed” resonates in vividly descriptive verbs: “ript,” “divide,” “tore.” In this way, the details of the crime again encode both his murderous agency and his precise motivation.

After the murder, we are told, “He made a large fire in the harness room, / Her head, arms, and legs in the fire did consume.” The disposal of the burned and mutilated body, catalogued as separate parts, establishes the astonishing crime scene, which is discovered by a policeman, who, looking for a pair of trousers that Good has stolen, interrupts Good’s act of incineration. As ordinary policework intrudes upon extraordinary violence—as the search for a stolen pair of trousers becomes the discovery of a brutal murder—aesthetic astonishment is secured in the gaze of the unsuspecting witness: “When in searching 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 of Jones, it repeats the “shocking” details once more in an account of Good’s trial:

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.

With stresses on violent actions—“cut” and “burnt”—and abject parts—“flesh” and “bones”—the ballad fulfills the mandates of astonishment. Significantly, although the crime is “most shocking to state,” “Verses on Daniel Good” insists upon a triple “recital” of Good’s horrific violence. Details of the murder, the crime scene, and the trial enable a persistent return to the terrible murder that defines the crime ballad’s poetic power and the audience’s political curiosity.

In refusing to equivocate about the origins of motive, the nature of responsibility, or the existence of the child—in confidently asserting what “evidence proved”—this particular narrative of Daniel Good insistently explains personal motives with respect to sexual and gender codes, and it thereby undercut other circulating narratives highlighting his inexplicable monstrosity. The vulnerability of Jane Jones, a mangle keeper, arises from the intersection of her class disadvantages, her ambiguous common-law status, and her illegitimate pregnancy. She occupies a position fully outside the normative codes of sexual propriety, and she pays the exorbitant cost of sexual transgression even as—or precisely when—she attempts to appeal to domestic obligations and paternal responsibility. In the ballad, these codes clearly shape Good’s motive, which he unequivocally proclaims, despite the fact that the historical Good denied his sexual sins and his criminal guilt publicly throughout his trial and after. As the Times reported, Good “solemnly declare[d]” at every interview, “I never touched the body of the woman, alive or dead! so help me god!” (23 May 1842, 6). His continued insistence on his innocence, the Times explains, disrupted the seamless application of capital punishment: Good’s “obstinacy of denial . . . if truthful, involved terrible ideas of judicial murder” and, “if false, involved hardly less terrible impressions of frightful, impenetrable obduracy of impenitence” (23 May 1842, 6).

In marked contrast, operating with an agenda of (astonishing) disclosure and (full) particularity, the ballad’s certainties complicate the ethics of guilt in a way that the historical Good’s repeated claims to total innocence could not. The ballad’s preference for a clearly defined motive, the rejection of paternal responsibility, and its confirmation of Jones’s sexual impropriety, which other reports obscured with references to “Mrs. Good,” forces readers to confront a vision of villainy and victimization in terms of sexual politics. Further underscoring this agenda is the fact that, while other ballads addressed subgroups of Victorian culture (e.g., “listen all ye virgins fair”), this ballad addresses no one in particular. It thereby privileges the “productive friction” of astonishing violence over a pat recommendation of normative sexuality. The implied method of crime prevention in this ballad scenario is not religion and education, as the
times earnestly advocated for this “fatal fruit” of “rank soil” who “never had in his youth any religious instruction” and was “awfully utterly ignorant” (23 May 1842, 6). Sidestepping clichéd moral instruction, “Verses on Daniel Good” insists upon a “recital” of the crime’s astonishing gore in order to suggest congruities between culturally defined hierarchies of sexual power and the tragically violent dynamics of sexual intimacy.

In a similar mediation of familiar and unfamiliar violence, “Cruel and Inhuman Murder of a Little Boy by his Father” (1866) connects the unlawful hanging of a child to the lawful practice of execution. In the late 1860s, with execution theatries and abolitionist arguments on the national political agenda, the notion of a father hanging his little boy underneath the city in a dark cellar and then hanging for the crime high above the crowd on a public stage easily accommodated the methods of symbolic inversion so common in crime ballads. Accordingly, in condemning the inhumanity and cruelty of an extrajudicial hanging of a boy by his father, the ballad questions the manner in which a paternalistic state disposes of its outcast criminals.

In its prose report, this broadside emphasizes the obvious analogy between cruel murderer and cruel executioner: “the cruel father tied [the boy’s] hands behind, and had 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.” In generating such detailed imagery the broadside exploits the audience’s familiarity with scaffold practices. As Thackeray noted, execution audiences witnessed the stark demystification of the “drop into eternity”: “those who have paid for good places may see the hands of the government agent, Jack Ketch, coming up from his black hole, and seizing the prisoner’s legs, and pulling them, until he is quite dead—strangled” (157). The broadside’s execution analogy—with its emphatic imagery of hands-on killing—is thus doubly significant. It underscores the murderous intentions of a reprehensible child-killer, but, recalling familiar images of public execution, it insinuates the murderous inclinations (and inspirations) of the state.

This parallelism between criminal and state violence serves the poetics of astonishment at work in the ballad; for, while the state presumably executes guilty criminals, John Richard Jefferys executes an innocent child. In problematizing the categories of guilt and innocence, the ballad registers contempt for “a wretch named Jefferys,” a “sad, a base, and cruel villain,” who murders his own child in the Seven Dials district, a locale that is noted four times in the ballad. The Seven Dials district, of course, formed the center of ballad publication, and, thus, his crime astonishes the very community that reproduces his crime in verse:

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.

Like other ballads, this ballad highlights the failure of innocence in contrasting images of murderer and victim. Rather than adhering to stock conceptions of villainy, its suggestive allusions to the details of the historical case imbue its melodramatic mode with “productive friction.” Contextual details about the child’s seventeen-week residency at his grandmother’s house and Jefferys’s three-year estrangement from the child’s mother, which also circulated in press accounts of the crime, focus attention on the pressures of a defunct family romance. Accordingly, we are informed that Jefferys, enacting a “[v]engeance,” was “[d]etermin’d for to take his life” and that he “demand[ed] him” and “clandestinely took him away” because “he determined / Was his little boy to slay.” Acknowledging these circumstances, the ballad uses familial relations to comprehend Jefferys’s murderous intentions and constitutes its audience as a collective of “kindest fathers,” “tender mothers,” “sisters, too, and brothers.”

The murder is then rendered in striking detail. In the account of the hanging, the ballad abandons the previous hearsay mode (“we are told”), dispenses with hesitation (“can scarce reveal”) and supplies startling eyewitness detail:

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.

In spite of the claim that “[h]is actions no one can reveal,” the narrator provides a concrete set of images, which are apparently gleaned from the familiar procedures of hanging. Though the ballad insists on Jefferys’s “steel” cruelty, and later claims that “hanging is too good for such a villain,” it also tempers this condemnatory posture by asserting that “[w]e all have got our cares and trials / And unto fate are compelled to yield.” Perhaps an allusion to stories that his wife had left him for another man (Times, 13 September 1866, 9), which were discussed in the press and at Jefferys’s trial, this platitude also suggests that “cruel monstrosity” can be sung as a matter of “fate.”
Whether intimating that the roles of murderer and victim are fated or that Jefferys might have yielded more gently to his “cares and trials,” the ethical ambiguities and private circumstances alluded to in the ballad effectively reinforce or recenter the poem’s scaffold imagery. The privatization of scaffold violence—its application in domestic disputes—elides the practices of state-sanctioned hanging and “cruel and inhuman murder.” In this way, the murder’s eerie recasting of a “proper” hanging, in which the execution of personified innocence is carried out by a guilty patriarch, offers an ironic symbolic inversion. It implies, of course, that the very means by which social order was to be maintained and by which violent criminality was to be suppressed actually inspires crimes and fosters violence. The uneasy parallel between Jefferys’s disturbing transgression, hidden in a cellar beneath the city, and the state’s spectacular hangings, elevated on public stages, disorients the poles of margin and center, the hierarchies of high and low, and the binaries of criminals and citizens. In this context, relations between transgression and retribution lose their explanatory power and their ethical clarity.

Cases of infanticide signified quite differently when mothers murdered their children. Yet, even in maternal infanticide cases, the poetics of astonishment and the judicial treatment of murder often intersected in unexpected ways. As psychological theories and legal understandings of infanticide evolved, insanity defenses for infanticidal—particularly neonaticidal—mothers gained increasing interpretive power, and ballads registered these legal changes and grappled with their ethical implications. As Lionel Rose affirms, in infant-murder cases, the “likelihood of a conviction for murder was negligible” and, after 1849, no women hanged for killing their newborn infants (77). When a rare murder conviction occurred, “the Home Secretary invariably reprieved mothers who killed their own infants under twelve months” although “the ordeal of formal sentence to death still had to be endured in court” (76).

In spite of fairly consistent legal trends, representations of infanticide varied from sympathy to condemnation, and from pathos to outrage, and, as Christine Krueger argues, while mental science offered frank testimony on uncontrolable impulses, affective and sentimental frameworks “were still swaying judges and juries in the 1850s” (275). In her study of Victorian discourses on child-murder, Josephine McDonagh asserts that medicalizing infanticide and pathologizing women confirmed gendered prejudices about female mental weaknesses, secured the careers of medical men, and rhetorically diminished the necessity of repairing related social problems (125). Moreover, she explains, in the “phantom of public opinion” that constituted Britain’s child-murder “epidemic” (126), notions of Englishness or Britishness—riddled with assumptions about barbarity and civilization—were granted more explanatory relevance than individual hardships, family influences, and compounded oppressions (127).

As mental science offered clinical solutions of cure and containment—while
national(ist) anxieties dulled reformist sensibilities and contextual insights—ballad infanticides, functioning neither as instances of national degeneration nor as symptoms of medical pathologies, resisted totalizing narratives by highlighting the astonishing and specific details of individual cases. And while ballads often responded sympathetically to circumstantial mitigation and physiological indicators of insanity and, thus, reflected the court’s increasing leniency, the spectacle of maternal violence continued to figure prominently. “Copy of Verses on the Murder of Two Children, By Their Mother, On Battersea Bridge” (1846), for example, examines the case of Eliza Clark, who threw her three young children into the Thames and was attempting to jump into the river herself when bystanders stepped in and detained her (Times, 18 May 1846, 9). Two of her children drowned, and one survived. At trial, witnesses recounted instances of her motherly devotion and noted the perils of her domestic life, which was shaped by the stress of working-class poverty and the abuse of her alcoholic husband, a journeyman painter. The jury found her not guilty on the ground of insanity.

This particular ballad, printed soon after the crime’s commission and, therefore, not privy to the facts of the case or the trial verdict, announces the astonishing crime for public speculation. Neglecting any mention of Clark’s own attempt at self-murder, the ballad emphasizes the drowning of her children. An affront to parenting, her crime is unprecedented in “history’s annals,” and the opening lines proclaim, “Oh! list ye tender parents,” thereby submitting the case to sensitive and sensible parents for scrutiny and judgment. The ballad forcefully pits Clark’s guilty criminal intent against the children’s sweet innocence: “Her three sweet little infants / She did intend to slay.” Such conventional diminutive phrasings—“three sweet little infants,” “three pretty smiling babes,” “pretty smiling boy”—are maintained throughout the text and uphold the astonishing contrast between unsuspecting innocence and calculating malice. Clark’s violation of maternal ideals inspires exclamatory pathos: “A mother, oh! how sad to tell.” The chorus of the song underscores the notion of her destructive agency, expresses the distress of documenting her crime and, thus, ensures the reiteration of sadness and regret: “She threw her babes, how sad to name, / Into the fatal river Thames.”

Placed beyond comprehension, Clark’s motivations and intentions are ambiguous, but a reference to her “wicked deed” implicates the inscrutability of her conduct rather than the possibility of mental sickness: “Whatever could her mind possess. / Such a wicked deed to do, / There is no one can imagine. / The neighborhood all through.” The unintelligibility of her deeds defies the collective imagination as she is subjected to the local standards of the “neighborhood.” Yet, while the ballad introduces the issues of psychological disorder and domestic abuse that surfaced in Clark’s case, it also undercuts them with the dismissive
assessments of local gossip and thereby looks skeptically at mitigating circumstances and criminal lunacy:

She said her husband her ill-used,
Which did affect her mind,
But such by neighbors is denied,
For he to her proved kind.

Here, the ballad records the social dynamics of psychological testimony. As Hilary Marland has argued, the observations of neighbors and other lay-witnesses often influenced outcomes in infanticide trials, which in many cases “did not depend upon the evidence of a forensic expert or medical man experienced in treating insanity, but on the opinion of a surgeon or general practitioner and a collection of witnesses—neighbors, friends and passers-by—all of whom found it appropriate to comment on the woman’s state of mind and felt equipped to testify to the existence of insanity” (181). Positioning Clark’s mental state beyond imagination and discrediting her claims of domestic abuse through the citation of neighborhood testimony, the ballad insinuates that Clark was a premeditating killer and a self-interested liar. Such narrative choices document the inconsistencies of insanity defenses and the disadvantages of abused wives in the arena of public opinion. Circulating in 1846, amidst contentious legal reconsiderations of domestic violence and medicolegal debates about insanity, Clark’s ballad reflects the profound difficulties of interpreting child-murder while, at the same time, retaining a primary interest in astonishing spectacle.

A concern with the aesthetics of astonishment, of course, addresses the generic conventions of murder ballads, but it may also reflect the ballad’s timing with respect to the case. With limited press details to draw from and with the criminal case in progress, it carefully highlights the painful experience of witnessing such a public crime. It devotes an entire stanza, for example, to enumerating the children’s ages and describing their reactions as they are flung into the Thames:

The first was only ten months old
She in the river threw.
The second but two years and a half,
How sad, but yet how true;
The third a pretty smiling boy,
As I do now unfold,
Thrown by the mother in the Thames,
And he was five years old.

By cataloging each of her murderous actions, the ballad dramatizes the terror of
observing the destruction of innocence. The Thames, the “fatal river,” becomes both the weapon and the crime scene, and a subsequent stanza reports the tense rescue of the five-year-old, who, taken out in “an exhausted, wretched, / Sad and dreadful state” was saved “[f]rom a sad and watery grave.” The reclamation of the second child’s body and the total disappearance of the infant, who “far down the fatal stream / Was carried right away,” prioritize the suffering of the children over the desperation of the mother, whose psychological struggles remain unaddressed and whose suicidal efforts remain unacknowledged.

These eyewitness details also stress the pain of the London citizenry, which suffers intensely when apprehending and contemplating the spectacle. In doling out sympathy to both victims and witnesses, the ballad rather explicitly addresses the poetics of astonishment that characterizes third-person crime ballads. The figure of a single witness, functioning as a readerly surrogate, is inscribed in the poem: “Upon the bridge at Battersea / A person did her see, / Commit this sad and horrid deed, / This dreadful tragedy.” And as the recovery of the children’s bodies ensued, the ballad records the community’s response:

Each side the river with folks was lined,
Who when the tale did hear,
Did cause each heart to beat.
And every eye to shed a tear.

In the beating hearts and teary eyes of witnessing “folks,” this “dreadful tragedy” configures the crime as a source of collective pain visible in “every eye.” The affective power of an astonishing crime defines the shared experience of murder.

The final stanza returns to the figure of the murderous mother. A prisoner awaiting trial, she occupies a liminal position. “[C]onfined / Within a prison dark,” the ballad explains, the “cruel woman” confronts her own terror and terribleness: “Her dreadful deeds must surely strike / A terror to her heart.” The ballad then summarizes the consequences at stake in her case:

Investigations will take place,
And that most speedily
And if ’tis proved she is not mad,
Then she will punished be.

Abstaining from a pronouncement or judgment, the ballad adopts a tentative stance. In its final two lines, however, the ballad acknowledges the legal contest between criminal insanity and capital punishment that affects her case. As in numerous other ballads, Clark’s murders present the astonishing spectacle of
moral failure, but also the potential presence of madness. In highlighting sustaining ethical ambivalence and legal uncertainty, the ballad redirects attention away from legal judgment or moral outrage and toward the spectacle of murdered children and the experience of collective pain.

Also attempting to grapple with the social implications of murderous mothers, “The Esher Tragedy” (1854) depicts Mary Ann Brough’s murders of her six children. The cultural connotations of her motherhood and infanticide are reinforced by the twice-mentioned fact that she once “nursed the blooming prince of Wales.” This revelation resonates on many levels, suggesting, for example, the precarious safety, criminal affiliations, or potential contamination of the royal family. Although Brough’s crime fully accommodated the sensationalizing tropes of criminal contagion and moral degeneration, the speaker of “The Esher Tragedy” emphasizes the pathetic dimensions of her crime with the narrator’s pleas for “feeling christians” to “give attention” and “sympathize with me” during the “tale of sorrow.” This tragic frame is complemented by a prose report that reproduces text from Brough’s voluntary statement. Entitled “Confession of the Murderess,” the report 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 suicidal to homicidal intentions, the broadside underscores the mitigating presence of insanity and emplots Brough’s case as a personal, psychological tragedy.

In Victorian commentaries on her case, Brough’s tale shifted between medico-legal tragedy and sexual melodrama. Brough’s crimes became an important case study in medicolegal debates, and, because of the testimony of leading mental scientists, she was eventually acquitted on the grounds of insanity and committed to Bethlem. In Trial by Medicine (1981), Roger Smith notes that Brough’s case riveted public attention not only because of the extent of her crimes and her former position as wet-nurse to the prince, but also because it assembled questions about insanity, adultery, and revenge. The press reported that just before the murders, Brough’s husband had confronted her with an accusation of adultery. As Smith argues, her case “had all the elements of a Victorian morality play” (158):

Many special legal elements and medico-legal problems came together at the trial of Mary Ann Brough. It was equally plausible to reconstruct her life in terms of depravity or of disease. The crime was child murder, with evidence of weakness following her last confinement. But her crime was also a vengeful act against her husband. Medical evidence played an important role in her defence, and though the jury found insanity, both lay and medical critics
considered it an “escape.” Her case is the most striking example of the constraints on meaning in Victorian discourses.\(^\text{15}\) (\textit{Trial} 157)

Taking these easily sensationalized details of scandalous adultery and intimate revenge into account, we can see the extent to which the ballad sidelines them. Appearing early in the case and announcing the murder as event, “The Esher Tragedy” foregoes the widely publicized drama of marital infidelity and, instead of proposing a conventionally moralistic melodrama, favors a narrative of tragic mental illness.

The text embeds official information in a summary of the tragic facts, “[w]hich causes 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.” Conventional murder dialogues accommodate the recurrent ballad theme of moral frailty and enfeebled innocence. Her son, Henry, “cried aloud with eyes of pity, / ‘Mother, dear, don’t murder me.’” And though behaving “like a demon fierce and wild,” she responds to her victim’s entreaties with an unsettling blend of motherly affection and pathetic resignation: “‘My dear,’ said she, ‘it must be done.’” The juxtaposition of endearing appellations, methodical throat-cutting, and frenzied activity establishes the representational excess and friction fundamental to the poetics of astonishment. Together, such details achieve a “plenitude of meaning,” which cannot be reduced to a set of moral conventions or a theory of criminal malice. The murders, established as inevitable, are perpetrated with the “sharp and fatal razor”:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{From bed to bed, and to each chamber,} \\
\text{This wretched woman she did go,} \\
\text{While all around her own dear children,} \\
\text{Streams of crimson blood did flow.}
\end{align*}\]

The shift to trochees in the final line of this stanza underscore the importance of ballad gore—crimson streams of blood overflow the well-defined boundaries of moral outrage and force aesthetic astonishment. Throughout this account, the baffled narrator explicitly voices such questions of astonishment: “What on earth could urge it on” and “Oh! what must be the woman’s motive.” These questions also enfold the ever present issues of crime prevention and criminal responsibility: “Did she think she’d done amiss, / Or did she think of death and judgment / To perpetrate a deed like this?” These overwrought questions direct audiences toward the difficult and painful ambiguities involved in contemplating extreme violence.

In constructing the crime scene, the ballad renders a tableau of perverted domesticity, as the image of slumbering children transforms into a “surprising” scene of murdered children with ear-to-ear throat wounds:
The dreadful sight was most surprising,
To behold these children dear,
How their cruel hearted mother,
Cut their throats from ear to ear.

Having presented these details, the ballad imagines 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” and subject to “midnight dreams,” Brough experiences a fully psychologized tragedy. Somewhat sympathetically tracing Brough’s case from murder to crime scene to memory, the ballad forces uncomfortable linkages between suicide and homicide, motherhood and infanticide, control and desperation, sanity and insanity.16

More than a decade later, a broadside entitled “Barbarous Murder of a Child by a Schoolmistress” (1869) listed the ballad of Emma Pitt, who, “in such a barbarous manner killed / Her tender infant child.” Highlighting the alienation and vulnerability of the fallen woman, the historical circumstances of Pitt’s case reveal a debilitating social context in which the dangers of sexual transgression, the terror of postpartum madness, and the strictures of respectability establish the conditions for a murderous breakdown. The Times reported Pitt, aged twenty-four, to be a “young woman of most respectable connexions” and a “mistress of the national school” who birthed her child alone and in secret. The judicial interpretation of her case hinged upon the mutilated state of the infant’s body, which bore the signs of excessive, “barbarous” force. In particular, the infant’s severed tongue and bruised body introduced a debate about whether or not the infant’s injuries were sustained before death but while the child had a “separate existence” (Times, 26 July 1869, 11). The presiding judge summarized the essential legal question: “Was the child an inhabitant of this world, having an existence independent of the mother, and was its life extinguished by the act of the mother?” (Times, 26 July 1869, 11). Ultimately, Pitt was found not guilty of murder but guilty of concealing the birth, and she was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment with hard labor.17

The astonished narrator of this particular ballad intones moral conventions, faulting Pitt, a schoolmistress “[w]ell known for miles around,” for setting a “sad example” for her students. The narrator also apostrophizes an audience of concerned mothers, asking them to contemplate, in conventional ballad terms, an unprecedented horror that “we seldom find” in the “annals of history.” The words of the chorus reiterate this horror, intimating the distressing incongruity of a child-murdering schoolmistress: “This Emma Pitt was a schoolmistress, / Her child she killed we see, / Oh mothers, did you ever hear, / Of such barbarity.” Contemplating this “murderess”—“the author / Of this dreadful tragedy”—the narrator reassures readers on matters of justice, “When before a Judge and Jury, / This monster soon must stand; / And if she is found guilty, / She her deserts
will get.” But collectively the ballad verses destabilize such moral confidence when considering the death penalty. Lamenting, “if she is found guilty, / How sad will be her case,” the narrator explains, “If she has a woman’s feelings, / She surely will go wild.” Though Pitt’s “barbarous murder” requires a public response, execution is not unqualifiedly condoned, and acknowledgments of sympathetic concern for her solitary suffering and her “womanly feeling” diminish her imputed barbarity.

Offering a startling version of the speaking body, the historical particulars of Pitt’s crime fuel the poetics of astonishment. Accordingly, the ballad fixates on the 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 its tongue;
Sad and wicked, cruel wretch,
Hard was her flinty heart,
The infant’s tongue from the body was
Wrapped in another part.

In fusing her weapon and her psyche—a “flint stone” and a “flinty heart”—the ballad enforces the notion that she is simultaneously, and contradictorily, “sad and wicked.”

The crime scene also focuses on the displaced tongue of the victim: “The murderess placed in a drawer, / And it there, alas! was found.” In using the severed tongue as a central image and symbol, the ballad considers the origins and condition of Pitt’s murderous psychology. The tongue’s removal, with symbolic resonance, suggests a desperate need to conceal and silence the child. The coroner’s statement, which is quoted in the broadside’s prose report, asserts that “the child was born alive and murdered by someone,” and this chronology and the violent intensity of Pitt’s actions suggest the possibility of postpartum derangement. The gruesome silencing depicted in the ballad, however, confers a communicative power upon the severed tongue. A “most miraculous organ” of speech, wrapped and hidden in a drawer, the tongue forces aesthetic memory: “And mother’s, miles round Wimborne, / Will remember Emma Pitt.” Laden with implications about her sexual vulnerability and her mental derangement, the traumatic image of the child’s tongue constitutes the interpretive crux of the legal case, and in the ballad directed specifically at mothers, disturbs the memory of “the barbarous Emma Pitt.”

As a comparison of the ballads of Jefferys, Clark, Brough, and Pitt suggests, the ballad trade did not subscribe to uniform or stock responses to infanticide—
or any other crimes. Rather, they examined a spectrum of conflicting forces in their stylized representations of lethal force, and they exploited significant case-specific circumstances to nuance the meanings of murders. Finding unsettling congruities between criminal acts and social pressures, they developed suggestive mediations of the familiar and the unfamiliar. In “Shocking Murder of A Wife and Six Children” (1869), the ballad writer explores the all-too-familiar problem of urban poverty by conjoining expressions of astonishment and tropes of sentimentality to represent the murder-suicide deaths of an entire family.

According to the *Times*, the father, Walter Duggan, a thirty-nine-year-old silversmith, who had recently been dismissed from work because he suffered from consumption, sent a letter to the police stating, “Your attendance will be required at the above house early this morning” (1 July 1869, 10). The contents of the home and the testimony of witnesses uncovered a tale of tragic misfortune, and letters between Duggan and his brother documented a psychologically debilitating cycle of poverty and disease. At the inquest, the coroner summed up the unsettling revelation of this case: “It was deplorable to find people so despondent and distressed that they should be led to commit such fearful crimes in the very heart of the metropolis” (*Times*, 1 July 1869, 10). Ideologically and geographically central, this domestic tragedy unsettles the middle-class newspaper readership that witnesses this social failure occurring on a “street occupied by a ‘respectable class of artisans and their families’” (29 June 1869, 11). The Duggan case not only intimated the precariousness of respectable family life in London, but it also problematized the attribution of crimes to the “dangerous classes” and their displacement into urban slums. The verdict at the inquest stated, “Walter James Duggan and Emma Duggan murdered their children and afterwards destroyed themselves while in an unsound state of mind” (*Times*, 1 July 1869, 10).

In imagining the fatalistic resolve of the patriarch, the ballad highlights the confessional letter sent by Walter James Duggin—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.

As the letter replaces the characteristic shocking moments of discovery in murder ballads, Duggin’s actions appear less the sensational expression of an impassioned killer than the pitiful communication of a poor unemployed worker, whose eviction, the broadside notes, was scheduled for twelve o’clock the day the
bodies were discovered. Presented in these terms, the deaths embody a desperate response to escalating poverty. Privileging this reading, the ballad explicates, with mournful irony, the crime as a fulfillment of a paternal obligation to protect and provide: “Lest they should want, that fatal day, / His wife and children he did slay.”

The crime scene, accordingly, depicts death as a form of protection from poverty: “They found him stretched upon the bed, / His troubles o’er—was cold and dead.” This 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 signify impoverished and beleaguered domesticity:

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,

As a family of abject corpses displays the affections and attitudes of ideal domesticity, the ballad, deploying the common strategy of symbolic inversion, asks us to read the everyday conditions of poverty in astonishing images. The decomposition of the loving family establishes a grotesque juxtaposition of excess and order with which the ballad indicts political indifference to poverty and the deterministic forces of economic struggles. Uninterested in ethical questions of agency or legal analyses of murder and suicide, the narrative of the “ill-fated” family confronts the marginalization and silencing of the diseased and disenfranchised in the center of London.

As Judith Walkowitz has written of the Jack the Ripper murders:

If, traditionally, the “classical” body has signified the “health” of the larger social body—of a closed, homogenous, regulated social order—then the mounting array of “grotesque,” mutilated corpses in this case represented the exact inverse: a visceral analogue to the epistemological incoherence and political disorientation threatening the body politic during the “autumn of terror.” (City 198)

Although Walkowitz speaks here about a very particular set of bodies at a very particular time and although she clarifies how such “visceral analogue[s]” easily served reactionary panic mongering, her explanation of the semiotic power of “mutilated corpses” aptly articulates the political charge of the violated bodies of third-person murder ballads. They offer collective testimony about the epistemological challenges and legal questions—the incoherence and disorientation—created by eruptions of murderous violence.
It is thus in their insistence on graphic violence and bodily gore that murder ballads developed a poetics of critique with which to imagine congruities between crime and culture. With their revelations of astonishment and their attention to particulars, they complicated epistemologies of crime and representations of murder, developing a genre of occasional poetry that encouraged public reflection and political skepticism while expressing collective anxieties, regrets, and fears. In presenting murder as an interpretive and interpretable act, and cultivating the political curiosity of their readers, ballads constructed murders and crime scenes as sites where “social classification and psychological processes are generated as conflictual complexes.” Addressing precarious lives and fragile moralities, they reveal the capacity of verse forms to constitute public discourse and foster political debate.

**On the Gallows High and in a Murderer’s Grave:**

*Last Lamentations and the Criminal Poet*

While third-person murder ballads highlighted the social contexts and consequences of astonishing crimes, first-person ballads focused on condemned murderers and their relationship to capital punishment. Cast as “last lamentations” or “copies of affecting verses,” these ballads were marketed as the overflow of powerful feeling on the eve of death, and, supplying condemned criminals with expressive sensibilities and lyrical voices, they established the persona of the criminal poet and the trope of public lamentation. Inspiring one Victorian commentator to quip, “every man who is hanged leaves a poem” (*Literature of the Streets* 73), the confessional verses and wistful voices of these poet-murderers imagined the psychologies of violent agency and the traumas of public execution.

Central to the political context of lamentation poetics is the fact that this fictional affective voice enabled the condemned criminal to seize speech at the moment of official silencing by the state. Of their French counterparts, Foucault has argued that last lamentations posit the “lyrical position of the murderous subject,” and they “[mark] the place—fictitious, of course—of a subject who both speaks and is murderous” (*Rivière* 208). Imagining this “lyrical position” and highlighting the occasion that gained their voices a hearing, lamentation ballads emulated stage tragedies, procuring pity and inspiring fear as dispirited criminals were “launched into eternity.” In this way, criminal poets and their occasional poems examined matters of legal representation and political speech, which Foucault casts as “a subterranean battle . . . around two rights, perhaps less heterogeneous than they seem at first sight—the right to kill and be killed and the right to speak and narrate” (207).

In Victorian England, this contest of speech rights and murder rights included
the state’s rights to disciplinary silencing. As the merits and methods of the death penalty were studied by the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment in the 1860s, Sir Samuel Martin confidently explained its awe-inspiring effects: “a sentence of death has a most serious effect upon all the people in court; you have perfect silence, as perfect as can be, all the people seem very much interested in it, and the sentence does carry a very strong impression upon the persons present” (Report of the Capital Punishment Commission Q 246: 37). The versifying criminals and singing crowds of the lamentation trade disrupted the silencing mechanisms of capital punishment through the elaboration of poetic voice and the encouragement of public noise. Generating arresting connections between the historical criminal, the ballad criminal, and the ballad consumer, singing consumers might reproduce the “I” of the ballads and thus perform the identity of the murderer: “It is the song of crime; it is intended to travel from singer to singer; everyone is presumed able to sing it as his own crime, by a lyrical fiction” (Foucault, Rivière 207–8). Public and performative, this criminal voice suggestively undermined distinctions between the condemned criminal other and what Leps terms the “consensual ‘we.’” Though the principle of scaffold deterrence was founded on the premise that an ignorant and impressionable working-class crowd would feel disgust for the criminal and respect for the state, the gruesome and violent nature of the hanging invariably elicited sympathy for criminals and disgust for the state. Working-class Britons in particular were familiar with the violence and suffering of scaffold deaths, and, accordingly, their execution ballads addressed scaffold suffering, giving voice, at this public silencing, to the violence witnessed by spectators.

Exploring the political contentions of “perfect silence” and eternal silencing, execution ballads, and their generic features, reflect the evolution of nineteenth-century criminal law. While the steel-frame printing press and the business savvy of urban printers stimulated the broadside trade early in the nineteenth century, specific alterations in English criminal law shaped the development of the criminal poet later in the century. As an article in the Quarterly Review explained to its Victorian readership, “The ‘Dying Speech and Confession Ballad,’ strictly so called, is said to have been unknown in the trade until the year 1820, when a change in the law prolonged the term of existence between the trial and death of the criminal” (“The Poetry of Seven Dials” 399). Mayhew reports, “‘Before that,’ I was told, ‘there wasn’t no time for a Lamentation; sentence o’ Friday, and scragging o’ Monday. So we had only Life, Trial, and Execution’” (283). While legal changes allowed more time for ballad composition, the continued reductions in capital crimes decreased the number of executions, and after 1837, executions for an offense other than murder became rare. Early nineteenth-century balladeers often accommodated multiple executions with “lamentations and prison groans,” which catalogued the names—and sometimes listed brief
biographies—of several criminals to be executed while reserving fully drawn character studies for the most notorious criminals. In contrast, Victorian ballad writers responded to a restricted capital code, a decrease in the number of hangings, and an almost total cessation of multiple hangings by developing the well-defined persona of the single murderous subject that came to define the genre. Exploiting these legal changes, ballad writers and publishers maintained the profitable relationship between execution and broadsheets.

The poetic and political opportunities created by the newly individuated scaffold subject also contributed to the last lamentation’s concern with trial procedures and defensive testimony. Altering the nature of legal representation, the Prisoners’ Counsel Act of 1836 allowed defense counsel to address the jury on behalf of prisoners in capital trials while restricting prisoners from giving evidence in their own defense when such counsel was retained. Arguing that Victorian novelists investigated the contest between the passionate speech of criminals and the rational rhetoric of learned counsel engendered by the Prisoner’s Counsel Act, Jan-Melissa Schramm notes that Charles Dickens’s “fear that the professional rhetoric of the law displaces personal narrative was most pronounced when he dwelt upon the plight of the prisoner condemned to death” (111). “His creativity,” she adds, “was activated by a profound interest in the ways in which punishment excluded men from the wider community of stories; he was interested in the ultimate obliteration of evidence” (111). Inserting their affective verses into the “wider community of stories” surrounding condemnation and execution, last lamentations reflect a similar concern. Indeed, if any one consistency exists among the hundreds and hundreds of last lamentations circulating in the Victorian era, it is that they privileged the personal testimonies of the hooded and bound criminals on the scaffold. Entering a charged legal arena, they assigned emotionally intimate and psychologically complex identities to criminals just as the state demanded death by public hanging and the anonymity of an unmarked grave.

In restoring voices to silenced figures, many ballad writers exploited the contested quality of criminal speech by mimicking official confessions and simulating legal testimonies. In these instances, as criminal poets narrated their crimes, ballads effectively reopened criminal cases and reassessed legal defenses. Casting doubts on established guilty verdicts and death sentences, they not only complicated notions of criminal alterity, but also questioned the integrity of the judicial system. When criminals proclaimed murderous guilt and criminal responsibility at the same time, their speech established them as monumental transgressors and victims of state violence, positions that secured their status as tragic authors. In contrast, when they acknowledged violent acts but not malicious intents, they challenged murder charges and capital punishments. Whether rebutting intentionality or proclaiming responsibility, their expressions of mental stress
and emotional pain effected symbolic reversals of criminality that were founded on reformulations of guilt rather than on pleas of innocence. Adding personal narratives and verse soliloquies to the visual spectacle of execution, lamentations favored representations of psychological complexity and emotional vulnerability that problematized legal fictions and punitive codes.

Although their anonymity has aided their fall into literary obscurity, in their original context, it was authorial anonymity that authorized the lyrical fiction of the criminal poet. Stitching together the case details, genre codes, and legal terms—and imagining the violent death of the author—last lamentations resemble Roland Barthes’ authorless text, which he describes as “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (146) to be “disentangled,” not “deciphered” (147), by readers. Along these lines, they foster the new kinds of interpretive questions that Foucault associates with the authorless text and an authorless analytic. Displacing the “tiresome repetitions” of the “author-function,” “[n]ew questions will be heard”:

“What are the modes of existence of this discourse?”
“Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?”
“What placements are determined for possible subjects?”
“Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?”

Behind all these questions we would hear little more than the murmur of indifference:
“What matter who’s speaking?” (“What is An Author?” 138)

With attention to modes of contestation, citation, and circulation—as well as the constitution and determination of subjectivities—we can begin to understand the poetic performance of authorship and the political meanings of the criminal poet.

At the most fundamental level, the murderer’s identity as a sentimental poet placed between murder and execution offers a striking inversion of murderous guilt. If “every man who is hanged leaves a poem,” then every condemned murderer is a reflective poet whose own self-judgments, challenging judicial authority and legal reasoning, disrupt the edifying power of their public deaths. In “Trial and Sentence of George Britten” (1867), when Britten laments, “I have been the cruel author, / Of the cruel Woolverton tragedy,” his words express the condition of the criminal poet. An author of tragic violence and an actor in a violent tragedy, the lamenting and dying murderer alerts audiences to the profound moral difficulties of assessing crimes and measuring punishments.

In organizing this critical perspective, balladeers arranged strands of personal narrative, legal commentary, and social critique around the two events that conferred criminal identity, the murder and the execution. Because the criminal
poet is born “between two deaths—murder and execution” (Foucault, *Rivière* 208), the violent actions of murderers retained aesthetic significance even as ballads attempted to explore the violent nature of execution. In fact, because graphic violence forced the coincidence of poetic sensibility and violent agency, ballad authors often used gruesome details to generate interpretive ironies and conflicts. The sentencing judge in “Life, Trial, Confession, and Execution of Martin Brown” (1868) remarks, “So sad a crime, and so revolting,” and such descriptions of murder as both tragically “sad” and morally or aesthetically “revolting” dismantled distinctions between ordinary citizens and extraordinary criminals.

This combination of the sad and the revolting forms the framework for “The Last Moments and Confession of Wm. Sheward” (1869), which highlights the psychological struggles encountered by Sheward, who embodies the dramatically opposed identities of the criminal poet. Mediated by Sheward’s voice of grave sadness, the ballad records his wife-murder in 1851 and his confession and condemnation eighteen years later. The lamentation appears on a broadside that includes a report of the gruesome details of an apparently official confession:

He placed the head in a saucepan, and put it on the fire to keep the stench away. He then broke it up, and distributed it about Thorpe. He then put the hands and feet in the same saucepan, in hopes they might boil away. Carried portions of the body away in a pail and threw them in different parts of the city. The long hair on my [sic] return from Thorpe, he cut with a pair of scissors in small pieces and they blew away as he walked.

The song that follows sets these details within the larger narrative frame of a “sad and wretched man, / Borne down in care and woe.” In emphasizing the personal tragedy of Sheward and elaborating the burdens of “care and woe,” the ballad decenters the narration of violence and highlights the psychology of guilt. The details within the ballad, therefore, though shocking, are relatively muted and impressionistic compared to the graphic precision of the prose report. Sheward recalls, “I her body into pieces cut,” but his recollections of the disposal of the body, so graphically depicted in prose, remain less clear in verse: “[I] scattered it around, / Here and there, I scarce knew where, / I placed it on the ground.” Responding to the needs of rhyme, the vague language here also intimates the peculiar circumstances of his confession to an eighteen-year-old crime.

When reporting the more gruesome aspects of his crime, Sheward is consistently concerned with the tragic nature of his narrative and the sadness of expressing his actions: “I boiled her head, how sad to tell, / I was mad without a doubt.” His reference to madness further dissociates him from his violence, which, the ballad repeatedly asserts, occurred eighteen years before his own violent death. Presented in this way, Sheward’s lament emerges from a confronta-
tion with his contradictory selves: the past and the present, the violent and the sentimental, the criminal and the poet. The last lines of the ballad reiterate this grotesque combination of revolting violence and pathetic language:

I cut and mangled that poor soul,
My heart was flinty steel,
Her limbs and body strewed about,
In hedges, lanes, and fields.

This passage further underscores a contrast between two Shewards—the one who presently regards his wife as a “poor soul” and the one who eighteen years ago “cut and mangled” her and “strewed” her fragments in “hedges, lanes, and fields.” This juxtaposition of two selves develops the pitiable persona of the criminal poet who can simultaneously recall his own “heart” of “flinty steel” and express affection or sympathy for his victim, a “poor soul.”

For the most part, Sheward’s ballad produces a murderous subject preoccupied with portraying his intense emotional experience of an eighteen-year-old crime. Although the secret murder and gory dismemberment of a wife easily accommodates sensationalism, the ballad as a whole sidelines the crime and foregrounds the criminal. Explorations of psychological struggle are privileged over examinations of legal guilt, which Sheward repeatedly and unequivocally acknowledges: “I done that dreadful awful deed / Near eighteen years ago.” In a repetitive cycle, Sheward’s crime narrative is interrupted by reflections on the burden of guilt, the anxiety of discovery, and the compulsion to speak. This cycle implies that the conflict between silence and speech has “borne” Sheward “down in care and woe”:

Kept the secret eighteen years,
Within my guilty breast,
And till the same I did divulge,
I day nor night could rest.

With a restless need to “divulge” a “secret” lodged in his “guilty breast,” Sheward locates psychological guilt in a tension between anxious silence and confessional speech. He explains, “I’had no comfort day or night, / Until I did confess.” His wish to communicate, however, confronts the representational limitations of his unusual plight: “No pen can write, or tongue can tell, / My sad and wretched fate.”

This reference to the limitations of “pen” and “tongue” also alludes to the eighteen-year delay between his secret crime and his public condemnation. Reinforcing the epistemological difficulties and ethical dilemmas of defining
murderous subjects and condemning them to death, his psychological confusion and emotional turmoil disarm moral outrage:

For eighteen years, in grief and tears,
I passed many a dreary night,
I had not one moment's happiness,
Since I killed my own dear wife;
At length I did confess the deed,
For which I now must die,
For a murder eighteen years ago—
The which I don't deny.

While highlighting an obligation to express his “grief and tears,” this passage also suggests that shame and remorse—not state protections or judicial resources—discipline and punish the criminal. Sheward passed as a law-abiding family man, while “God’s all seeing eye” or “the eye of Justice,” powers that function in some ballad narratives, failed to apprehend his crimes. Rather than demonstrating that criminals are always subdued by society, Sheward’s ballad imagines criminals subduing and punishing themselves.

In covering Sheward’s unusual case the Times also highlighted the unsettling gap between confessional truth and evidentiary truth and noted the difficulty of prosecuting in 1869 a crime that allegedly occurred in 1851. Detailing the “strangeness of the story,” the Times reports that when Sheward confessed his crime and asked to be taken into custody, a skeptical police force only reluctantly complied after some preliminary fact-checking (1 April 1869, 9). Adding to the peculiarity of Sheward’s case, the newspaper reports that once taken into custody, “the man had revoked his confession and affirmed his innocence of that crime, so that it was on a plea of ‘Not Guilty’ that the trial actually proceeded” (1 April 1869, 9). Although circumstantial evidence eventually corroborated Sheward’s confession to the court’s satisfaction, his defense counsel maintained that Sheward “had revealed nothing in his confession which might not have been collected from the facts already known to the public” (1 April 1869, 9). At trial the jury had to “decide between his acknowledgement and his recantation” (1 April 1869, 9).

The Times eventually came to agree with the state’s action in this case, but Sheward’s street ballad fixates on the peculiarities of the case. In imparting an obsessive quality to Sheward’s need to confess his crime, the ballad insinuates that criminal speeches and confessional narratives—speech acts rather than criminal acts—define relations between crimes and punishments. Continuing to highlight the slippage between truth and testimony the ballad rather mischievously exploits the ironies of the state’s reversal. Initially hesitating to charge
Sheward, the state now insists upon his death. The limitations of judgment are embellished by references to letters of protest, which not only proclaim his innocence but also deny the crime:

There was letters sent from different parts,
To say my wife did live,
To save me from the gallows,
But none would they believe;

Arriving from “different parts,” these letters imply widespread support for Sheward and challenge the authenticity of his official confession. With these epistolary protests and their implausible claims, the ballad raises questions about the methods of naming, judging, and punishing criminals. If execution constitutes a response to crime narratives, not criminal acts, and if criminals subdue and punish themselves, then judicial procedures and capital punishments lose their authority.

Just as “The Last Moments and Confession of Wm. Sheward” reconfigures Sheward’s particularly shocking acts of murder and dismemberment as a tale of care and woe, “Lamentation & Execution of James Longhurst” (1867) frames Longhurst’s “cruel murder” of seven-year-old Jane Sax—for which he “was doomed to die” at “Horsemonger lane on the scaffold high”—within a narrative of a “wretched youth.” The historical Longhurst was tried and hanged for murder, but newspaper reports also attest to the fact that the murder followed a rape, and euphemistic references to the “terrible outrages [his victim] had suffered” appeared in newspaper reports (Times, 27 March 1867, 11). Accordingly, in his lamentation, Longhurst explains that first he “shamefully did her illtreat” and reports, “Then coward-like I drew my knife, / To rob this helpless child of life.” Longhurst recalls the murder in graphic detail: “I stabbed her in the throat—her blood did pour,— / Then left her welt’ring in her gore.” Continuing with the scene of discovery, he narrates a shocking attempt to conceal his crime:

She cried for help, did poor little Jane,
David Ensor to her assistance came;
Whilst I, a guilty wretch did stand,
And licked her blood from off my hand.

From the confession that he “did her illtreat” to the acknowledgment that he “stabbed her” to the claim that he “licked the blood from off [his] hand,” the ballad chronicles his descent into increasingly horrific behavior—from rapist to murderer to cannibal—and thus accommodates ballad conventions of grotesque violence.
In spite of Longhurst’s multiple affronts to ethical sensibilities and his devastating violation of fundamental taboos, this ballad, embodying the political interests of lamentation poetics, forces the coincidence of violence and sensibility—tempering Longhurst’s outrageous conduct with multiple references to his remorse for the crime, his sympathy for his victim, and his terrified anticipation of his impending execution. Helping to sustain the sympathetic tones of his ballad voice, the broadsheet documents in its prose section the “Terrible Scene in the Prison with the Culprit” and highlights his remarkable display of “contrition” since his condemnation. The report relays the “frightful scene” of a “wretched youth” struggling against the certainty of his own violent death: “The moment the culprit saw Calcraft, the executioner, approach him with the straps to pinion his arms, he started back with an aspect of terror depicted on his countenance, and began to struggle violently with the turnkeys.” The report also speculates about the nature of Longhurst’s resistance: “The prisoner’s conduct seemed to be actuated by an uncontrollable horror of the executioner and the apparatus of death.” This vision of the terrible punishments of the state and the intense suffering of the condemned is supported by the historical Longhurst’s youthful appearance. He was described in the press as “short in stature and very boy-looking,” and before her death, his victim reportedly identified him with the words, “That boy did it” (Times, 27 March 1867, 11).

In this context, the lamentation develops a fictional voice to reinforce the pathos of the historical Longhurst. Denouncing his crimes, the ballad Longhurst acknowledges his guilty agency and his shameful remorse: “James Longhurst, it is my name, / I’ve brought myself to grief and shame.” Highlighting her innocence, his references to his victim as “poor little Jane” and a “helpless child” also underscore his regret. Having claimed his identity as condemned criminal, he also casts himself and his death in a family tragedy:

My tender parents came to visit me,
My heart was breaking their grief to see,
Tears from their eyes did in torrents fall,
While for mercy to my God did call.

Tearful parents and merciful prayers domesticate Longhurst, as he responds to the emotional pain of his grief-stricken family. He explains, “I hope that none will them upbraid, / While I am in my silent grave,” and like so many execution ballads, his song thus acknowledges the consequences of death penalties on the families of condemned criminals.

Essentially imparting a plea for mercy, such details conjure the historical context in which the jury that found Longhurst “guilty” recommended mercy on the grounds that his crime did not seem premeditated (Times, 27 March
The ballad’s, and the jury’s, interest in mercy reflects the ongoing conflicts between the state and its citizens when interpreting capital crimes and assigning capital punishments. Such conflicts consistently establish the foundation for last lamentation voices, which depict the contest between the irrevocable decrees of condemnatory judgment and the ethical ambiguities in allocating mercy. The instability of interpretation is also underscored in Longhurst’s apostrophe to “[g]ood people,” whom he asks to “draw near” and listen to “[his] sad history,” from which, he surmises, they “will a warning take.” The particular instruction of this warning, however, remains wholly unspecified. While critical assumptions about the lamentation ballad’s habitual capitulation to state authority might lead us to find a simple advisory against bad behavior, the various strands of Longhurst’s “sad history” also register a more emphatically critical commentary on state retribution.

Casting the criminal as a beloved son facing “the apparatus of death” and the “silent grave,” the ballad constructs a personal tragedy, but the narration of his movement through the criminal justice system increases the scale—and significance—of his experience: “Then I was taken for this cruel deed, / And sent for trial, as you may read; / At Kingston assizes, tried and cast.” In the courtroom scene of his sentencing, the ballad explicitly represents the language of law and punishment:

The Judge said, James Longhurst, you are guilty found,
You will go from here to London town
And there you’ll die a death of shame,
And meet your fate at Horsemonger lane.

This account of Longhurst’s sentencing, with its stresses on “die,” “death,” and “shame,” exposes the performative qualities of state authority, which fixes his criminal identity with the words “guilty” and condemns him to a “death of shame” using the deterministic rhetoric of “fate.” Yet, at the same time, the ballad’s many empathic tones diminish the truth-claims of this judicial posture. In contrast to the imperious and anonymous judge, the personalized and conflicted criminal poet appears straightforward and sincere, conveying the most truthful—because the most precisely rendered and emotionally fraught—account of capital punishment. In a curious realignment of political authority, the sentimental speech and emotional authenticity of the condemned criminal awaiting the “silent grave” suggests that the social rupture created by Longhurst’s terrible crimes will not be repaired with the execution of a “boy.”

The tensions of speech and silence generate for Longhurst the same problems of communication that afflicted Sheward. Seeking to convey the suffering of the condemned criminal, Longhurst requires language unavailable in official discourses about criminal guilt and retributive justice:
While I lay in my prison cell,
My state of mind no tongue can tell;
I could not rest by day or night,
Poor Jane was always in my sight.

In this fashion, the ballad situates the essence of murderous guilt—and the consciousness of the criminal poet—somewhere between painful memories of violent agency and grim anticipations of violent death. Accordingly, Longhurst’s mournful and haunted attempt at articulation arises out of a confrontation with the “silent grave” and an obligation to “recall the past.” As the desire to speak and the difficulty of expression shape the experience of eternal silencing, the justifications for capital punishment are challenged by a troubled “state of mind” which both requires and defies communication.

In yoking the violent criminal and the sentimental poet, blurring a presumed line between deviant criminals and normal citizens, Sheward and Longhurst invite reexaminations of their crimes and punishments. In consistently spotlighting the condemned criminals of scaffold dramas, rather than highlighting the hapless victims of terrible crimes, lamentation ballads do not simply dismiss victims, who often haunt their killers or elicit their sympathy, but they do redirect attention to the definitions of criminal responsibility and the practices of execution that shaped the marketplace where ballads were sold and, of course, determined the immediate political context in which they were read. In their reevaluations of crimes and condemnations, lamentation ballads sometimes placed graphic imagery aside and concentrated instead on the legal language of criminal trials. As J. F. Stephen noted, “A crime being an act punished by the law as voluntary, intentional, and malicious, and the act being admitted, or proved, the only way in which criminality can be disproved is by rebutting the ordinary presumptions of will, intention, or malice. If either of these presumptions is rebutted, crime is disproved” (General View 86). Seizing upon these important distinctions, and undercutting legal fictions with lyrical fictions, balladeers often entangled murders in impressionistic memories of inexplicable impulses in ways that challenged guilty verdicts and death sentences.

In the “Execution of F. Hinson” (1869), for example, Frederick Hinson details his murder of the “false-hearted” adulteress, Maria Death. Tinkering with the legalities of the historical Hinson’s case, the ballad rehabilitates his murderous character by failing to acknowledge sexual improprieties shaping his conduct. Hinson’s victim was his cohabitating mistress, not his legal wife (who lived elsewhere), yet, as the Times reported, in spite of the taint of adultery and illegitimacy Hinson “laboured under the hallucination that he was justified in taking the life of the woman under the belief that she had proved unfaithful to him, and that, though not in law his wife, he regarded her as such in all respects.” The report also adds, “It may also be remembered that he has two young children,
one by his wife, who is still living, and the other by the murdered woman” (13 December 1869, 6).

Perhaps because of its legal and ideological liabilities, this lamentation ballad avoids Hinson’s domestic scandal completely. Hailing an audience of “[y]oung men and maidens” as well as “[y]ou married and you single all,” Hinson instructs his audience to “list to my sad lamentation” and to “pity, pity my downfall.” Although Hinson specifically warns “young men” against the passions that lead to crime and punishment—“Your passions curb, ’ere ’tis too late”—his narrative privileges moral justifications and legal defenses rather than cautionary tales and behavioral advice.

Hinson mystifies the circumstances of his crime by piecing together a crude psychology of impassioned jealousy, and he questions the murder charge by situating the crime in the context of his victim’s adultery: “When I found she was false-hearted, / Jealousy filled my mind, ’tis true.” Building a case for adulterous provocation, Hinson connects his jealousy to his desire to maintain both marriage and family: “I grieved from her for to be parted, / For I loved her, and our offspring too.” With the mad passions of jealousy, the legal mitigations of adultery, and the ideological force of domesticity invoked to explicate and expiate his crime, Hinson also intimates that he was mentally absent—rather than willfully present—at the time of the murder. Effectively disavowing legal responsibility, he proclaims, “Recall the dead I never can, / I saw her fall, and gazed in sadness, / A guilty and heartbroken man.” Unlike other ballad criminals who confess to stabbing, ripping, mangling, and boiling, Hinson admits only that he “saw” and “gazed” and thereafter became “a guilty and heartbroken man.” Hinson further diminishes culpability by describing his victim’s provocative behavior. When he finds her “[i]n company with that treacherous man,” he explains, “One kindly word from her would saved her / And stay’d alas my murderous hand.” Maria Death, however, “braved [his] anger” and provoked his “murderous hand.”

With murderousness attributed to his “hand” and his victim cast as an unrepentant adulteress, Hinson’s ballad revisits the prerogatives of enraged and wronged husbands, which informed Hinson’s defense at trial where, pleading “temporary insanity,” he requested a reduced charge of manslaughter on the basis of provocation (Times, 13 December 1869, 6). As Wiener has explained, while provocation as a mitigating factor in wife-murder had less and less impact on judges as the nineteenth century wore on, it continued to sway juries and influence public opinion (Men 199). At the same time, “[k]illings on the basis of sexual unfaithfulness,” characterized by familiar circumstances and the use of weapons, “presented a unique and stark situation for the criminal justice system: a confrontation between the worst provocation and the clearest intent to kill” (204). This gap between judicial and public opinion helps to explain the defensive strategies of this particular lamentation ballad, which counteracts the
historical Hinson’s known impropriety with the ballad Hinson’s projected righteousness. The ballad rather explicitly alludes to this rift between the judiciary and the public when Hinson claims to be “condemned by some, [but] by many pitied.”

Amidst the contradictions and ironies of criminal and matrimonial law that influenced Hinson’s case, the notion that Hinson was done in by impropriety—not murder— informs public commentary on his case:

When Frederick Hinson went to the Newgate gallows in 1869 for killing his apparently unfaithful common-law wife, the author of a printed circular asking for his reprieve acknowledged, while decrying, this distinction: “Had Hinson been married to the woman he murdered, thousands of people would have commiserated with him, and have considered him partially justified. It is, therefore, a morbid caprice to say he ought to be hanged because he was not married to the woman. He considered her his wife, she had children by him, and it appears that he had used her well.” (Wiener, Men 207)

Resurrecting the failed defensive strategies invoked at trial and infusing his reflections with affective tones, the ballad similarly negotiates a culture of consent for wife-murder in order to question the legal and moral grounds of his execution. More interested in the classed injustices of capital punishment than the gendered injustices of marriage law, this ballad, like many others, contests the murder conviction and the capital sentence by upholding the domestic privileges of men. The ballad Hinson, a legitimate and proper patriarch, claims the rights to violence unavailable to his improper historical counterpart.

Accordingly, as the condemned Hinson awaits execution in his prison cell, he is victimized by memories of his crime and haunted by the apparition of his victim:

> My days are spent in lamentation,  
> My sleepless nights were spent in prayer,  
> My mind was filled with agitation,  
> For Maria's shade was always there.

Engaged in “lamentation” and “prayer,” Hinson becomes a family man of deep religious faith whose ignominious death contrasts his respectable life:

> At Wood Green I was respected,  
> With all around in peace did dwell,  
> Now broken-hearted and dejected,  
> I pine within a gloomy cell.
His piousness is also underscored as he links justice to an anticipated meeting with “[his] offended God.” Wondering to himself, “How can I meet my heavenly father, / Or dare to him for mercy cry,” and hoping, “the Lord [will] have mercy on my soul,” Hinson characterizes his ballad as a “dying prayer” and admonishes his audience, “My dying prayer do not be scorning.”

Rehabilitating Hinson in this way, the ballad redefines his crime—he loved Maria and wanted her to stay—and his execution—his “poor darling orphans” will be left behind. Wholly invested in domestic propriety, callously thwarted by an adulterous “wife,” and mercilessly condemned by a home-wrecking state, Hinson is rescued from the criminal margin and restored to the ideological center where he performs the roles of moral teacher, loving father, devoted Christian, peaceful neighbor, and pitied victim. In this instance, the reflective criminal poet rather pointedly dismantles legal arguments and exploits gender inequalities to protest a state execution.

Also intervening in judicial procedures is the “Lamentation of Samuel Wright” (1864) (figure 6), which aggressively challenges the legal language of intent in Wright’s case. In doing so, the ballad fully relies on the notorious facts of his condemnation and execution, which many Victorians of all classes publicly denounced as a case of judicial murder. A London bricklayer, Wright was executed in 1864 for killing his “mistress,” and, as the Times reported, Wright had no defense counsel and pleaded “Guilty” at trial. After rejecting the prosecutor’s suggestion to the court that Wright obtain access to legal counsel and reconsider his plea, the judge sentenced Wright to death a mere three days after the crime was committed. Wright was then executed less than a month after his sentencing, despite a fully articulated public outcry. The speed with which Wright’s case moved through the criminal justice system was often cited as a fundamental injustice in his case, and the circumstances of his trial and execution featured prominently in abolitionist arguments and the deliberations of the Capital Punishment Commission.

In his reflections on the abolitionist movement in Victorian England, Alfred Dymond cites Wright’s case as tragic consequence of a flawed system of capital punishment:

But the year 1864 was marked by events that hastened affairs to a crisis. The execution of Samuel Wright, in the teeth of public opinion, for an offence that would probably be denominated murder in no other civilized country, without even the form of a trial, or the slightest means of defence, upon the ipse dixit of a judge whose sage opinion was founded upon ex parte depositions taken before the police magistrate, and after every class of the people had in turn prayed that his life might be spared—this case brought home to men’s minds the conviction that not in the humane professions of the law’s
LAMENTATION OF SAMUEL WRIGHT,
Who was Executed on Tuesday, January 12th, 1864, Horsemonger Lane Gaol, for the murder of Eliza Green, on Sunday, 13th of December 1863.

Oh! friends, I pray, you'll give attention,
You cannot fail to pity me,
and how when the eye did mention,
as hard to die upon a tree;
I never had the least intention,
The female, Maria Green to slay,
It was cruel want and aggravation,
Caused me to take his life away.
Drink and cursed aggravation,
All my hopes on earth did blight,
On a gallows high, I'm doomed to die,
Sad is the fate of Samuel Wright.

I never once deliberated
Or meant Maria Green to kill,
But in a moment of excitement,
I instantly, I her blood did spill,
I scarcely knew I had committed,
The dreadful deed when it was done,
I was unconscious of the murder,
From the place did not attempt to run.

Some I was taken and examined,
The deed I never once despaired,
And three or four short days after,
For the murder I was tried;
At the Bar I pleaded 'Guilty,'
The sentence then was passed on me,
To be took from Newgate to Horsemonger,
To die upon the fatal tree.

Friends, for me have persevered,
To save me from the gallows high;

Daisy, Printer, 57, High Street, St. Giles, London.

Alas! for me there is no mercy,
Every room they did dwell,
While others who was tried for murder,
And doomed to die upon a tree.
Through friends and money has been pardon'd
Who deserved to die as well as me.
But, oh! my friends, you must acknowledge
What I say has oft been said before.
Some laws are made to suit two classes,
One for the rich, one for the poor.
So it is with me and Townley,
A reprieve they quickly granted he,
He was, rich, and I was poor,—
And I must face the fatal tree.

On earth there is a great distinction,
The poor must die, the rich they'll save,
But well we know, when Death approaches,
There's no distinction in the grave;
Adieu! adieu! my dearest children,
Adieu! my loving parents dear,
For me to God, who reigns in Heaven,
Oh! offer up a silent prayer.

I thank, my friends, and neighbours kindly,
Who did their best my life to save,
The dreadful moments are approaching,
I must lie in a murderers grave;
My wretched victim strung to such me,
With a bright and deadly knife,
And I in a sad fit of frenzy,
Admit I took away her life.

Figure 6
administrators, but in a radical alteration of the law itself, was alone to be found safety from judicial error. (295)

Upon Wright’s conviction, working-class citizens, as well as members of the judiciary and proponents of abolition, mobilized to save him. Many Londoners boycotted his execution in protest, and, as the *Times* documented, as the scaffold was erected for Wright, a handbill condemning the execution circulated through the crowd:

A Solemn Protest against the Execution of Wright—Men and women of London, abstain from witnessing this sad spectacle of injustice. Let Calcraft and Co. do their work this time with none but the eye of Heaven to look upon their crime. Let all window shutters be up and window blinds be down for an hour on Tuesday morning in Southwark. Englishmen, shall Wright be hung? If so, there is one law for the rich, and another for the poor. (*Times*, 13 January 1864, 12)

Acknowledging these protests and referencing the charged political context of capital punishment debates, “Lamentation of Samuel Wright” contests the legality of his sentence and reiterates class critiques of his criminal case. As the circulating handbill attests, “the spectacle of injustice” embodied interlocking problems of class oppression and legal representation. A widely acknowledged procedural travesty, one which necessitated the “radical alteration of the law itself,” Wright’s trial also functioned as a disturbing counterpoint to murder cases in which access to learned legal counsel and applications of criminal insanity theories conspired to allow financially privileged and socially empowered killers to “escape” justice. As Wright was going to his death for a crime that was arguably a case of manslaughter, the audaciously unremorseful and unapologetically misogynist George Victor Townley, responsible for the more heinous and premeditated murder of his fiancée, who had recently broken their engagement, received respite three months after his trial and sentencing and was removed to an insane asylum for treatment.24

Though controversial insanity defenses were by no means unfamiliar to Victorians in 1864, the uncanny timing of the two cases attracted particularly intense public scorn. On 11 January 1864, just as the Home Office was rejecting Wright’s final petition for mercy and upholding his hasty conviction and sentencing, Townley was being transferred from Derby Gaol to St. George’s-in-the-Field’s Criminal Lunatic Asylum in London (*Times*, 12 January 1864, 9). In light of the Townley reprieve, Wright’s case symbolized the extreme vulnerability of the working classes within a biased and inconsistent criminal justice system, and among the taunts from the crowd at Wright’s execution were: “Shame,” “Judicial
explicitly concerned with the Wright-Townley scandal, “Lamentation of Samuel Wright” dispenses with conventional moral frames entirely and opens with the criminal poet exclaiming, “Oh! friends,” and insisting, “You cannot fail to pity me.” Contrasting the disingenuous and unscrupulous qualities of Townley’s “escape,” the speaker signals his own integrity and honesty with a frank and direct proclamation of his involvement in the death of Maria Green. He then goes on to carefully scrutinize criminal responsibility and construct a legal defense, which interrogates definitions of murder and methods of sentencing. In this fashion, the street ballad grants Wright the opportunity to testify at length on his own behalf using legal language that the ill-informed and unrepresented historical Wright was seemingly unaware of and incapable of articulating at his hasty trial “three or four short days after” the crime. Wright, with his right to speak restored, denies intent in wholly unambiguous statements: “I never had the least intention, / The female, Maria Green to slay.” He also dismisses premeditation: “I never once deliberated / Or meant Maria Green to kill.” The crime, he explains, occurred in “a moment of excitement”:

Aggravated, I her blood did spill,
I scarcely knew I had committed,
The dreadful deed when it was done,
I was unconscious of the murder,
From the place did not attempt to run.

In refuting the murder conviction, Wright cites the forces of “drink and cursed aggravation” and euphemistically professes that he “her blood did spill.” While Wright clearly denies malice aforethought, he consistently acknowledges his actions—even those taken in court: “At the Bar, I pleaded, ‘Guilty.’” This statement, of course, reflects the actual plea of the historical Wright, but, in the context of the Townley case, its reiteration here also contributes to the ballad’s emphatic representation of Wright’s personal integrity. Fraught with meaning, his plainspoken plea also alludes to the historical Wright’s initial ignorance of legal distinctions between murder and manslaughter and reminds readers that his death hinges on his political disenfranchisement, not his murderous guilt. That he killed Maria Green is not in question, but the ballad’s rehearsal of this defense echoes and addresses public calls for a judicial review of his case.

The defensive posture assumed in this ballad is reinforced with an allusion to dedicated protesters—a network of friends and the working-class community—intervening on his behalf. Proclaiming, “Friends, for me have persevered, / To save me from the gallows high,” Wright acknowledges the inadequacy of their pleas in a summary of the class injustices of his case:
Alas! For me there is no mercy,
Every boon they did deny,
While others who was tried for murder,
And doomed to die upon the tree,
Through friends and money have been pardon’d
Who deserved to die as well as me.

In this comparative study of judicial procedures, the “boon” of money and the
doctrine of poverty indict the effects of class privileges on the criminal justice sys-
tem. With the claim that Townley “deserved to die as well as me,” Wright does not
simply contest capital punishment but rather cites the bias of class that informs
all judicial procedures. Gatrell has argued that execution ballads of the 1860s
were politically “safe” because Parliament was scrutinizing capital punishment
and “abolitionism was in fashion” (Gatrell 164). Yet, as Wright’s ballad dem-
onstrates, the case-specific analyses and the dynamics of poetic voice allowed
balladeers to extend their commentaries beyond the rhetorical fashions of aboli-
tionism and enfold life-and-death questions about class stratification and, in this
particular case, the moral and legal economies of criminal psychology.

In fact, Wright interprets the verdict in his case wholly in terms of class con-

But, oh! my friends, you must acknowledge
What I say has oft been said before,
Some laws are made to suit two classes,
One for the rich, one for the poor;
So it is with me and Townley,
A reprieve they quickly granted he,
He was, rich, and I was poor,—
And I must face the fatal tree.

Apostrophizing his “friends,” Wright articulates the social necessity of his death
(“I must face the fatal tree”) in terms of “rich” and “poor.” And, as this criminal
poet articulates what “has oft been said before,” his personal tragedy, which he
characterizes as the case of “me and Townley,” points to the vulnerability of the
working classes in the criminal justice system: “On earth there is a great distinc-
tion, / The poor must die, the rich they’ll save” (emphasis added). Ordained by
laws “made to suit two classes,” Wright’s death on a “gallows high” and his disap-
pearance into a “murderers grave” are depicted as wholly overdetermined. The
necessity of his death even disturbs the leveling force of “the grave.” Although
Wright announces, “But well we know, when Death approaches, / There’s no
distinction in the grave,” in the political context of his execution and Townley’s
in institutionalization, this maxim only serves to reinforce the material disadvantages of class hastening Wright to an unmarked murderer’s grave.

His delivery of emotionally wrought “adieus” to his “dearest children” and his “loving parents dear” and his thanks to his friends and neighbors who “did their best [his] life to save” heighten this effect. But the ballad’s last four lines revert to legal discourse, as Wright concludes with the self-defense plea that informed public protests on his behalf. “My wretched victim strove to stab me, / With a bright and deadly knife,” he explains, and this introduction of a “bright and deadly knife” into the ballad further complicates the relationship between the condemned killer and the murder victim by displacing the language of intent onto the victim (“strove to stab me”) and the imagery of sensational violence onto her weapon (“bright and deadly knife”). The final two lines encapsulate the persona of this criminal poet: “And I in a sad fit of frenzy, / Admit I took away her life.” With this earnest and emotional voice, simultaneously bidding farewell and articulating mitigation, the ballad again sharply distinguishes between manslaughter and murder and pits the desperate expressions of sorrow against the looming condition of silence.

While Wright’s ballad documents a particular instance of widespread public sympathy for a condemned criminal at a time when abolition was “in fashion,” other ballads demonstrate that the trope of the criminal poet also produced critical readings of class conflict and criminal justice against the grain of mainstream public opinion. In 1840, when Francis B. Courvoisier, a valet and a Swiss national, murdered his aristocratic English employer, Lord William Russell, his crime dramatized very specific early-Victorian anxieties about class. Accommodating conventional stereotypes of a deviant and dangerous class, the class politics of his crime, the public stature of his victim, and the newspaper coverage of his trial mobilized elite Victorians, and his public hanging brought members of the aristocracy and the literati—including Thackeray and Dickens—into the scaffold crowd. Inciting public paranoia and outrage, Courvoisier’s crime and punishment were consistently narrated in terms of working-class threats to the property and persons of the upper classes. With Victorian England’s upper-class citizens playing the curious and horrified potential victims of working-class violence, the cultural scripts generated to explain his case sparked what Richard Altick has termed a “Victorian servant-neurosis” (220). Documenting the symptoms of this upper-class pathology, he cites diarist Charles Greville who explained that the Courvoisier case “frightened all London out of its wits”: “Visionary servants and air-drawn razors or carving-knives dance before everybody’s imagination and half the world go to sleep expecting to have their throats cut before morning” (220–21).

Motivated by the immense popularity of Courvoisier’s case, ballad publishers printed an array of broadsheets containing assessments of his crime and cop-
ies of his affecting verses. Though divergent in detail and emphasis, these ballads consistently highlighted the same motive for the killing: Lord Russell discovered Courvoisier’s thefts and terminated his employment, so Courvoisier resolved to murder him. Establishing causal links between property crimes and violent crimes, of course, easily confirmed prejudices about a criminally oriented underclass. Yet, the lyrical voice and narrative perspective of the criminal poet also confused that logic. The “Copy of Verses” printed in “Particulars of the Life, Trial, Confession, and Execution of Courvoisier,” for example, in addressing the classed tensions of Courvoisier’s crimes, renders the evolution from robbing to killing as a condition of master and servant relations—not from the perspective of the nervous propertied classes but, rather, from the perspective of a compromised and delinquent employee.

Invoking commonplace explanations for Courvoisier’s motivation and condemnation, the ballad describes the murder of Lord Russell as the actions of a servant being discharged without recommendation. Reflecting a precise circumstantial motive, it sidesteps the more common panic-inducing scenarios of a “frightened” London subject to revolutionary uprisings. A self-reflective criminal poet, Courvoisier acknowledges his misdeeds and regrets his errors in judgment, but he links them to the more local conditions of Russell’s household and the idiosyncrasies of his own character in ways that temper paranoid or neurotic readings of his crimes. Courvoisier laments, “I valet was unto Lord Russell / Who lived in Norfolk Street, Park Lane, / Where I might have lived a life of comfort / But for one thing which gives me pain.” In mournful retrospect, elaborating the “one thing which gives [him] pain,” Courvoisier contemplates his folly and hubris in expecting that daily pilfering would not be noticed or that servants would not be monitored:

I day by day my master plundered,
And did the property conceal,
Thinking I should not be suspected
And no one could the tale reveal;

He explains that Lord Russell, upon discovering Courvoisier’s theft, “threatened that he would discharge me, / From his service the next day.” “It was then,” this ballad version of Courvoisier states with absolute precision, “I formed the horrid plan, / For to commit the awful crime.” Far from denying malicious forethought or criminal intent, he affixes the moment of murderous inspiration and explicates his “horrid plan” as a response to the threat of a “discharge.” Reiterating this notion, Courvoisier explains that, amidst the wealth and comfort of Russell’s home, he made his murderous decision on “the fifth of May” at the precise moment when “my master . . . threatened to discharge me.” And, operating in a
confessional mode, unlike the historical Courvoisier who acknowledged his guilt but demanded to be “defend[ed] to the utmost” by counsel (Cairns 130), the ballad Courvoisier infuses his recollections with the affective tones of lamentation poetics while intimating the difficult circumstances of the servant class.26

In contextualizing Russell’s murder in this way, and in reconstructing the notorious character of the historical Courvoisier, the ballad refuses to reproduce simple causal links between crime and class. While arguments about the dangerous classes typically imagined working-class crime in generalist and reductive formulae of urban “demoralization” or collective rebellion, the criminal poet, redirecting attention toward the particular anxieties of a particular servant on a particular day, casts his violence not as a collective assault on aristocratic privilege but as the bad decision of a discharged servant. As in many ballads, Courvoisier’s verses also provide gory recollections of the murder: when “all was hushed in sleep,” he explains, “I armed me with a fatal knife, / And sought the chamber of my master, / Determined for to take his life.” And, in a moment of graphic reportage, the ballad forces the coincidence of sensitive poet and murderous agent: “His throat I severed in an instant,” he explains, and “from the wound life’s blood did flow.” In this striking symbolic inversion of power relations, such details connect issues of agency and premeditation to the theme of Courvoisier’s desperation.

In this “instant,” which occurred in his “master’s chamber” where “in peace Lord William [was] sleeping,” however, a more famous and more menacing murderous agent appears. Just as Courvoisier “severed” the throat and the “blood did flow,” he explains, “The fiend exulting stood before me / For he had worked my overthrow.” If only for a moment, the appearance of the “fiend” shifts the ethical terms of the narrative, muddling criminal responsibility and displacing agency. Fulfilling the codes of lamentation poetics, this symbolic imagery is also joined by emotional reflections. Courvoisier remembers his murderous actions with regret, and he frames his narrative, after all, with a dreadful awareness that he is “doomed to die a death of shame.” He then addresses his futile attempts to conceal his guilt:

> In my innocence I still persisted,  
> But God ordained it otherwise,  
> A British jury found me guilty,  
> And I am to answer with my life.

Subject to the powers of three inexorable forces, an overthrow by “the fiend,” the ordination of “God,” and the verdict of “a British jury,” Courvoisier, a multiply disadvantaged servant and foreigner, must confront his overdetermined scaffold fate: “blood for blood will be required, / And I must the dread forfeit pay.” While
the historical Courvoisier manifested the nightmare of a revolutionary criminal class and his execution encapsulated the disciplinary authority of a “consensual ‘we’” (who attended in the tens of thousands), the ballad’s application of lamentation poetics interferes in both constructions. A throat-severing murderer, an anxious thieving servant, and a condemned criminal poet, this particular version of Courvoisier fragments readings of the historical Courvoisier’s crimes, the nature of his character, and the necessity of his public death.

If songs about crime offered ballad writers opportunities to contest charges, convictions, and sentences, songs about execution afforded the possibility of interrogating the spectacle of public hanging. The verses printed on the broadsheet entitled “Life, Trial, Sentence, and Execution of Catherine Wilson, for the Murder of Mrs. Soames” (1862) (figure 7) foreground the subjective experience of the criminal in the condemned cell and at the scaffold. Between twenty and thirty thousand spectators attended the execution of Catherine Wilson, who, in 1862, was the first woman to be hanged at the Old Bailey in fourteen years (Times, 21 October 1862, 5). Public interest in her case was also increased by the eerie signs of calculating intent apparent in murder by poisoning, the crime for which she was convicted, and in the possibility of many more poisonings, which she was assumed to have committed but for which she was never tried.

Judith Knellman explains that because Wilson “posed as a nurse,” her “perversion of medical assistance” made her seem especially “diabolical” (72). As an alleged serial poisoner, “who supported herself by killing off acquaintances for their money and possessions” (72), she inspired “not one application to the Home Secretary for remission of her sentence, not even from the Society for the Abolition of Capital Punishment” (73). Because “through wholesale poisoning she managed to uphold her position reasonably well in middle-class London society” (72), Wilson presumed to outwardly mimic but secretly undermine the tenants of bourgeois respectability. The notion of an aggressive murderess opportunistically using her role as caretaker and cunningly exploiting the cover of femininity constituted aggravating factors in the eyes of the court, the press, and the public.

Negotiating these contentious issues, the ballad emphasizes the public spectacle of femininity and feminizes the psychological traumas of condemnation. Unlike many ballads, this one identifies a tune to which this crime ballad can be sung: “Ave Maria.” And with this ambitious musical allusion, it constructs a distinctly feminine criminal poet—or poetess—who reflects on the irrevocable sentence of death and her fate as a convicted poisoner. Anxieties about her “last night on earth” and her imminent public death, rather than recollections of her crime, convey her murderous subjectivity and establish her affective persona. In contrast, her ominous crimes, multiple poisonings, occupy a single stanza:
Figure 7
Life, Trial, Sentence, and Execution of Catherine Wilson, for the Murder of Mrs. Soames. Trials Broadside 233: Hollis no. 8120856. Courtesy of Special Collections Department, Harvard Law School Library.
Such deeds I did commit in life,  
For the sake of worldly gain;  
I have seen my victims lay and die,  
In anguish and in pain.  
I gave, as they thought, friendship’s cup  
And good news to them did bring.  
Poor souls, they little thought,  
That it was the adder’s sting.

Taking responsibility and outlining motivation, Wilson elaborates the sinister guises (the “friendship’s cup” and “good news”) and financial motives (“worldly gain”) of her crimes—the details that generated disgust for Wilson and support for her execution.

Having revealed her murderous duplicity and her base materialism and arranged her victims into a collective of “poor souls,” Wilson focuses solely on the projected scenes of her hanging and its tragic qualities, which are underscored by the rare spectacle of a condemned woman: “Oh what a death for a woman to die, / That is scarcely in her prime.” With the assertion that she is “scarcely in her prime,” the ballad alludes to newspaper reflections on Wilson’s sexual appeal. The *Times* reported that Wilson was rumored to be a “good-looking woman,” who was “well dressed on her trial,” and speculated that the execution crowd “went to see, not a triumph of justice and an object of indignation, but something more hideous and revolting even than ordinary executions” (22 October 1862, 6). Continuing this analysis of the convict and the crowd, the *Times* asserts:

Such was the respectable and prepossessing person who was to walk out of a window in the Old Bailey with her hands pinioned behind her, ascend a scaffold, be tired with a cap, noosed, and let go like a dog whose transgressions have provoked this requital, or who is no longer worth his keep. A woman dangling in mid air in broad daylight, in a London street, and over the heads of an immense rabble of low men and low women, is certainly a most disgusting sight. (22 October 1862, 6)

The severe criticism of Wilson’s trial and execution in the *Times* serves as a striking example of the classed and gendered semiotics of public execution. It is not only the hanging of a woman that so distresses this writer, but also the fact that a well-comported, “good-looking,” “respectable and prepossessing,” figure will be “noosed, and let go” in front of and “over the heads of” representatives of the low and criminal classes.
Just as the historical Wilson’s gender and class complicated the spectacle of her execution, it informs the ballad’s approach to her lyrical voice. Exploiting and objectifying feminine passivity and sentiment, this ballad uses the affective power of a woman’s lament to intimate the perversity of state killing. Highlighting her lack of agency, Wilson announces, “What would I give one hour to live— / But my life I cannot save” and reports, “A warning voice rings in my ear,” calling, “Catherine Wilson now prepare for death / Upon the gallows high.” Breaking from the lamentation trope of criminals haunted by their victims, this ballad criminal is instead haunted by a vision of her own impending victimization:

Since my sentence has been fixed,
On my bed I cannot rest,
Horrid visions haunt my pillow,
My mind is sore distressed.

Wilson’s victims, in contrast, are presented as sympathetic witnesses whom she envisions “around [her] bed, / Interceeding for [her] soul above.” With some irony, then, her victims, but not the state acting on their behalf or the public supporting her execution, apprehend the tragic weight of her circumstances and assist in the reclamation of her soul.

Also included in these “horrid visions” is Wilson’s abject and anonymous decay in the “murderer’s grave.” She reflects, “No stone will mark the spot, / My body burnt with lime.” Wilson’s self-directed terror is then interrupted by the internalized disciplinary voice of the state proclaiming, “Prepare to die, for in one hour, / You are a mass of lifeless clay.” Such blunt and abject articulations of her humiliating death—the “mass of lifeless clay” and the “body burnt with lime”—serve to underscore the violent consequences of execution.

Wilson’s ballad fully exploits the illusion of the criminal poet hastily and desperately penning verses as execution day breaks, for Wilson continues to express her sorrows even as the “hangman stands with rope in hand.” Recording the erection of the scaffold, she exposes the *mise-en-scène* of public hanging and highlights the integral set piece that transforms judicial killing into social justice:

The dull sounds of the workmen’s hammers
Ascend unto the sky,
Erecting of the fatal place
For the prisoner to die.

These details attribute a calculating intent and mechanized agency to the state,
for with them Wilson establishes the scaffold as a stage, the “fatal place” where “the prisoner” plays a role in a traditional and tragic political drama. As she writes her own tragedy, she exposes the performative, disciplinary function of her scaffold death, and her speech personalizes the spectacle of her public suffering. With a dirge-like pace and tone, she describes the procession:

The hangman awaits to pinion me—
The procession moves along—
The dead bell strikes out a dreadful peel—
Hark! I hear the busy throng,
The multitude will gaze on me
As they did on those before.

The ballad’s review of the “dreadful peel” of bells, the sounds of the “busy throng,” and the “gaze” of the “multitude” implies the routine and ritualistic history of this punitive drama and the role that Wilson, like “those before,” will play in this terrifying spectacle of justice.

At the ballad’s conclusion, Wilson projects the moment of her death: “The signal given—the bolt is drawn— / Catherine Wilson is no more.” The cessation of her life and her speech is further realized in the chorus: “Catherine Wilson thus did die, / A dreadful death upon the gallows high.” Formally and forcefully encoding the theme of interrupted speech, the ballad contrasts the impersonal and performative authority of state punishment with the intimate and authentic expression of criminal lamentation, and with the refrain of the chorus, it explicitly depicts the tragic conclusion implied in all execution ballads—the violent death and the eternal silence of the criminal poet.

Reproducing, in order to interrogate, the contests of speech and silence involved in judicial procedures, last lamentations restored the voice of the condemned criminal to the proceedings that ritualized and celebrated his or her violent death. As they restored and often rehabilitated the personal identities of murderers, they presented criminals as psychological subjects rather than spectacular objects. Their strategies of political resistance are rooted in the publicity of execution and the performativity of verse. The memorable speech of the criminal poet—exploiting the idea of authenticity associated with constructions of lyrical expression—disrupted the semiotic operations of and moral arguments for capital punishment. And complicating the public deaths of historical criminals, they blurred divisions between the “consensual ‘we’” and the criminal other and established congruities between criminal acts and cultural circumstances.
“I Shall Be Read By My Peers”:
A Poetry of Critique

While the enormous sales of murder and execution ballads alert us to their popular appeal, more precise readings of individual ballads reveal their remarkably innovative approach to murder—one that reconstituted working-class audiences as critical, rather than criminal, subjects. The qualities that contributed most to crime balladry’s public stature and cultural significance—their circulation in large quantities, their noisy presence in the streets, their availability in cheap print, their political immediacy, their anonymous authorship, their working-class audience—have fostered a long tradition of scholarly neglect. But contemporary theoretical frameworks, which have privileged questions of genre and discourse and examined the influences of literary markets and print media, enable us to reconsider their contributions to Victorian culture. “Genre” and “discourse,” of course, have been fundamental to studies of crime in the novel, but as these terms increasingly inform analyses of poetry, particularly in terms of cultural circulation and political participation, they foster new understandings of crime balladry’s fundamental generic tropes (criminal acts, crime scenes, and criminal poets) and formal qualities (simple rhythms and crude rhymes) with respect to legal and literary representation.

While providing new foundations for ballad exegesis, these theories of discourse and genre also encourage reconstructions of the field of Victorian poetry in ways that allow us to reconsider the literary legacy of the crime ballad. In particular, Williams’s description of genre “as a fully cultural as well as a literary category” and her interest in genre and discourse as a “dialectical pair” recombining and deforming thematic and formal codes of representation illuminate the ways in which individual crime ballads (as technology, as performance) responded to the class ideologies and disciplinary institutions informing criminal discourse. This concept of dialectical pairing allows us to read Victorian poetry as a network of shared and contested formal techniques, generic conventions, aesthetic tropes, and verbal technologies—just as we read criminal discourse as a network of shared and contested institutional mandates, political interests, epistemological modes, and specialist terminologies.

Reviewing recent work in and suggesting future priorities for the field of Victorian poetry studies, Armstrong considers a network of poetry in similar terms:

If we take seriously the idea of networks, of intertext, of multiple inter-relations and connections, if we take seriously the notion of poetry as technology,
then we will not understand the cultural work of the poets or the poetics and formal experiment of different groups by remaining with the “minor,” the “marginalized,” for that is to reinforce the categories we mean to challenge. . . . The whole point of a network or a field is the different ways of cutting or crossing it, ways that we constitute ourselves. . . . Landon–Tennyson, Chartist poetry–Browning, Michael Field–Wilde, street ballads–Swinburne’s ballads, sensation novel–sensation poem–sensation journalism, railways–the poetics of railway time, these are just a few ways of constituting networks. (“The Victorian Poetry Party” 25)27

New pairings of high and low or marginal and central texts—and recognition of their formal, thematic, and discursive affiliations—produces a vision of Victorian poetry as an open system of intertextual exchange less beholden to hierarchies of literary form and social class.

In imagining new constellations of texts, we can begin to look at how poets themselves invoked textual networks in their own stylistic appropriations and textual allusions. For example, the tale of Robert Browning quoting from “a ghastly [ballad] stanza” on James Thurtell’s murder of William Weare (“His throat was cut from ear to ear / His brains they battered in”) signifies, perhaps, not a passing sensational interest or an insignificant biographical tidbit, but a curiosity about and a recognition of the multiple realms of verse (Paul 338). Similarly, Browning’s reference to crime balladry in The Ring and the Book, in which Guido fears the poetic power of “portraiture in white and black / Of dead Pompilia gracing a ballad-sheet” (XI.1827–28), forms a part of the verse novel’s self-reflexive representations of legal and literary intertextuality.28

Offering a much more comprehensive example of poetic networks, Wilde’s “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” pairs aesthetic images and political arguments in ways that suggest a strategic identification with the public poetics of the “criminal” classes. To be sure, the ballad form was in no way the exclusive domain of street poetry. A nineteenth-century revival of the literary ballad, a Romantic tradition of lyrical balladry, and a popular tradition of political balladry, developed by Chartists and Irish nationalists among others, all inform the literary context of Wilde’s poem. Signifying its more immediate political context and content, however, are the striking resemblances between the language and logic of “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” and the language and logic of execution ballads. In one of his lectures on poetry’s modes of redress, Seamus Heaney usefully acknowledges the poem’s broadside genealogy: “Obviously, in one way, there is something entirely conventional about the subject of murder and retribution, the setting of gaol yard and gaol cell, the cast of warden and hangman and chaplain, the dreadful props of gallows and quicklimed grave—all of these things belong in the tradition of the broadside ballad” (Heaney, “Speranza in Reading”
Yet, in addition to the most obvious features of “subject,” “setting,” “cast,” and “props,” the structural foundations of the poem’s critique—the elaboration of lyrical criminal subjects (the narrative “I” and the “wistful” killer), the invocation of the tragic and the sublime (emotional terror and bodily pain), the scrutiny of speech and silence as disciplinary technologies, and the correlation of individual suffering and collective guilt—recall the conceptual terrain of the broadside ballad.

Highlighting the plight of the condemned criminal, the poem’s dedication registers an intent to memorialize Charles Thomas Wooldridge (“C. T. W.”), but Wilde, like anonymous balladeers before him, also uses the emotional appeal and the life-and-death urgency of a particular capital case to construct a more wide-ranging critique of the institutions and ideologies supporting all aspects of “Man’s grim Justice” (3.187). Aligning himself with the condemned murderer—“A prison wall was round us born, / Two outcast men were we” (2.73–74)—the speaker establishes two criminal personae with which to circulate through the prison grounds and record the procedures of incarceration and execution. References to “a hangman close at hand” (3.84), a “little heap of burning lime” (4.59), and the anonymous “dishonoured grave” (4.128) evoke the imagery of the street ballad and the obsessive concerns of the criminal poet.

Granting access to the interior of the prison and the minds of the prisoners, Wilde elaborates the psychological traumas of punishment—stony hearts and spectral visitations—in ways that further these associations. Casting prison life as a repetitive course of pathos and fear, the speaker proclaims, “Alas! it is a fearful thing / To feel another’s guilt!” (3.91–92), and recalls execution day as a distressing combination of the routine and the sublime: “And Horror stalked before each man, / And Terror crept behind” (4.47–48). At the end of the ballad, having reviewed the grotesque images of a quicklimed corpse lying in a “pit of shame” (6.2), the speaker remarks, “And there, till Christ call forth the dead, / In silence let him lie” (6.7–8), thus exposing the conflicts between the mandates of Christian ethics and the measures of capital punishment. Mediating the full particulars of prison life through the affective tones of the speaker, and developing ironic links between individual and institutional acts of violence, the poem uses the authenticity of the suffering criminal to diminish the ethical authority of the state.

While “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” does not rely solely on the manipulation or citation of the generic codes of crime balladry, it does similarly exploit the political immediacy of its themes in order to manage its polemical and emotional content. Within the more sensational story of a murder and execution lie important reflections on prisoners who have not killed and will not be killed but who are subject nonetheless to the silencing and humiliating procedures that Wilde condemns. In this respect, Wilde’s ballad exhibits a pointed engagement
with the late-Victorian discourse of prison reform. Penning his ballad just after his own release from prison in 1897, he inserts himself into parliamentary and public debates surrounding the 1895 Gladstone Report on prison reform that preceded the 1898 Prisons Act. As Seán McConville notes in *English Local Prisons: 1860–1900* (1995), the pressing problem of penal reform initially suffered from neglect in the periodical and newspaper presses, but Wilde, via letters to the *Daily Chronicle* and the publication of “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” helped to publicize the contentious issues of inadequate diet, unproductive labor, and enforced silence as well as the “ill-treatment in prison of children and the weak-minded” (708).

At the same time, Wilde’s ballad registers a late-Victorian disillusionment with the centralization of prison management and a growing distaste for the uniform treatment of all prisoners, which became increasingly problematic with the growth (and acknowledgment) of a more heterogeneous prison population. Lumping together “shrewd professional burglars, prostitutes, drunken brawlers, juvenile delinquents, weak-minded vagrants, respectable clerks who had succumbed to temptation and pilfered the cash register, misdemeanants who could not pay fines, and so on” (Wiener, *Reconstructing* 367–68)—and, we might add, a celebrity author for acts of “gross indecency”—late-Victorian prisons finally forced difficult questions about regulating prison culture.

In *Crime and Criminals* (1910), R. F. Quinton offers an account of the reassessment process that finally began, in 1894, “after sixteen years experience of prison centralization” (190), when Home Secretary Asquith finally assembled a committee, to conduct a “strict investigation and overhaul” of “the whole prison system,” its “administrative machinery,” and the “conditions under which prisoners are confined” (192–93). Asquith’s committee recommended abolishing unproductive labor, improving the classification system, developing penal reformatories for young prisoners, establishing special sentences for “habitual criminals,” designating training prisons for officers, and including medical representatives on the Prisons Board (Quinton 193). With such changes, the committee noted, “the system should be made more elastic, more capable of being adapted to the special cases of individual prisoners” (193).

The particularities of this reformist agenda, especially a concern with the identity and integrity of individual prisoners, structure the speaker’s many observations of prison culture—informing both the critical arguments and the lyric tones of his critique. Arguing that “every prison that men build / Is built with bricks of shame” (5.15–16), Wilde highlights tensions between the sensibility of the criminal subject and the suffering of the criminal body. “And by all forgot, we rot and rot, / With soul and body marred” (5.65–66), the narrator explains, and the conditions of mental and physical decay constitute a spiritual death, which parallels the gruesome physical death of the executed prisoner. An “open grave” (3.60) awaits the condemned man, and a “numbered tomb”
(3.72) houses the speaker. The poem’s attention to the physical space of prison life, like the street ballad’s attention to the structures and stagecraft of scaffold death, exposes the performative technologies of state discipline. Subject to the monotony of unproductive labor—“We turn the crank, or tear the rope, / Each in his separate Hell” (5.57–58)—prisoners succumb to the dehumanizing effects of psychological alienation. Regimented exercises render prisoners a “herd of brutes” (4.50) watched over by “strutt[ing]” (4.49) warders in “uniforms spick and span” (4.51)—descendants, perhaps, of the new police of ballad infamy who were said to “strut” in “spick and span” uniforms while stealing mutton. Intensifying the brutishness of the prisoners, this well-supervised routine is contrasted with the degrading, but no less supervised, neglect of sanitation: “Each narrow cell in which we dwell / Is a foul and dark latrine” (5.37–38). Similarly, a diet of “brackish water” (5.43), which “[c]reeps with a loathsome slime” (5.44), is served with portions of “bitter bread” (5.45), carefully weighed in scales but full of “chalk and lime” (5.46).

As these images of abjection and alienation address concerns about the rights and wrongs of individual prisoners, they also contribute to a more broadly conceived indictment of the collective guilt of a disciplinary culture whose “shame” forms each brick of its prison walls and whose indifference sanctions the wrongs catalogued by Wilde. In emphasizing the privatized sufferings of prisoners, and thus sideling the publicized crimes of criminals, the poem privileges the notion of social shame over the notion of individual guilt—an argument that appears most conspicuously in the reiterated line, “Each man kills the thing he loves,” as well as the accompanying qualification, “Yet each man does not die” (1.54). For this reason, perhaps, Wilde’s speaker claims indecision on the matter of “whether Laws be right / Or whether Laws be wrong” (5.1–2). The terms “right” and “wrong” are simply too reductive to accommodate the excesses of a sinning and punishing society or the belatedness of prison reforms.

A schema of ethical and epistemological paradox, which insists upon establishing congruities between criminals and citizens, is unique neither to Wilde’s crime ballad nor to the street ballad. But considered together, their verbal, generic, and discursive parallels reflect shared political and critical postures. While its historical context explains the poem’s manipulation of the theme of murder and the discourse of crime, the multiple implications of genre are best understood via notions of poetic performativity. Because poetic performativity, as Slinn argues, involves self-conscious engagements with literary form and political content, “both linking and distinguishing poetry from its contexts,” Wilde’s late-career turn to crime balladry stages an affiliation with a working-class genre and its audience.

Exchanging the stance of the dandy for the persona of the ex-convict, Wilde imagined his audience as a criminal class and himself as a criminal poet. In a letter to Robert Ross, Wilde recommended that his ballad be published in
Reynold’s Magazine because it “circulates among the lower orders, and the criminal classes, and so ensures me my right audience for sympathy” (Letters 661). Making the same case to Reginald Turner, he explained that it constitutes “an organ that appeals directly to the criminal classes, so my audience is gathered together for me” (662), and to Leonard Smithers, he explained that it “circulates widely amongst the criminal classes, to which I now belong, so I shall be read by my peers” (663). His concerns about audience, peers, and sympathy suggest the poem’s role in refashioning his public persona, reconstituting his professional relationship to literary culture, and fulfilling his personal and political commitment to penal reform upon his release from prison, a task that required him to negotiate markets for publication, genres of literature, and modes of “propaganda” (Letters 661)—which, he explained, characterizes the content of the poem after the lines, “For his mourners will be outcast men, / And outcasts always mourn” (4.137–38). Precisely because Wilde’s ballad was not relegated to the streets and because it also exceeds the length and scope of the typical street ballad, Wilde’s mingling of high and low literary styles can be read in terms of Felluga’s “performative loop” of “identification” and “self-estrangement,” which he defines via Cohen’s notion of genre as an “interrelationship with and a differentiation from” other forms and texts (495).

Insofar as Wilde’s ballad has often been viewed as a strange break with his literary past or a symptom of his altered post-prison consciousness, the generic and discursive associations of the ballad form—including its affiliation with the criminal classes—offer a way to reconsider “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” as another example of Wilde’s textual appropriations, performative aesthetics, and thematic interests. In her examination of the sexual economies and aesthetic theories influencing Wilde’s work, Regenia Gagnier reads Wilde’s ballad as a “solemn” version of Wilde’s formerly “light” expressions of paradox with which he interrogated the “politics of inside/outside social relations” (145). A similar interest in the politics of exclusion and inclusion inform the meanings of the ballad genre, the performance of criminality that Wilde implies, and the poem’s status as a mode of institutional critique.

Applying Armstrong’s image (via Mill) of Victorian poetry as a “system of concentric circles,” we can imagine these circles not only as domains of democratic and conservative ideologies but also as domains of institutional and aesthetic discourses, of high and low genres, and of classes of authors and audiences. In tracing the poetic and political uses of murder across systems of overlapping circles and intertextual networks, we can reconnect Wilde’s ballad, and street ballads, to the generic and discursive practices that they reproduced and interrogated. It is, thus, perhaps unexpectedly, not only through examinations of literary or sociopolitical themes, such as the theme of murder, but also through considerations of generic form that we can reassess the role of the working classes and the place of print culture in Victorian poetry studies.