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978-0-521-17744-3 - The Rise of the English Street Ballad, 1550-1650

Natascha Würzbach

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European Studies in English Literature

The Rise of the English Street Ballad, 1550–1650

This study of the street ballad is the first to investigate both the rise and the period of flourishing of a specific genre of popular literature which has so far been vastly neglected. Attention is focused on the social and cultural conditions which accompanied its development: the relative position of authors and printers, the marketing and distribution of texts, the nature of the balladmonger and his audience. The contemporary reputation of the street ballad is examined, as is the importance of the genre for the history of ideas. The street ballad is also looked at as a literary form, and its various types and the literary devices they employed are described in detail and richly illustrated in order to convey a general notion of the genre and of the features which were relevant to its subsequent development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In the period from 1550 to 1650 the street ballad was a widespread and well-known type of ephemeral literature which, both from the point of view of content and that of form, met the literary needs of the middle and lower classes of the time, and the broadsheets on which it was printed were singularly well suited to the conditions that street and marketplace imposed on performance and sale. The development of the street ballad in this period also mirrors a change from religious dogmatism and a world view orientated towards redemption and salvation to one that is secular in attitude, worldly-wise, and a reflection of a modern individualism.

The street ballad is of literary interest because of the wide range of subjects it touches upon as well as its capacity for giving literary expression to everyday human experience from a variety of points of view – pious, sentimental, humorous, sensational. It is also of interest to the literary historian since it decisively influenced the subsequent development of the ballad as a medium of entertainment and instruction. Such diverse forms as the popular songs and political ballads of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the ballad opera, the *chanson*, the cabaret song, the pop song and some types of literary ballad all belong to a tradition reaching back to the street ballad.

Natascha Würzbach's study, appearing now for the first time in English, will be of value to scholars and students of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English literature, balladry, folklore, street literature, cultural studies, and the history of journalism.

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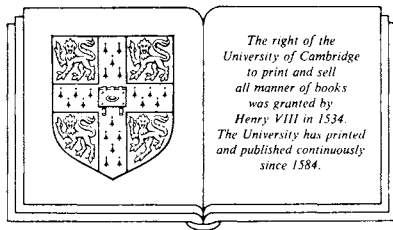
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Translated from the German by Gayna Walls



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A Ballet, a ballet! let every Poet,
A ballet make with speed:
And he that has wit, now let him shew it;
For never was greater need:
And I that never made a ballet befor;
Will make one now, though never make more.
(1658)

Who makes a ballet for an ale-house doore,
Shall liue in future times for euer more.
(between 1597 and 1601)

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Preface

Popular literature has generally been considered the province of folklore studies. In the present work I have attempted to do justice to the English street ballad as a valid literary form from the standpoint of literary criticism. The English street ballad emerged out of specific social and cultural conditions in the sixteenth century and in the first half of the seventeenth century, when the genre was at its height; it was capable of giving literary expression to everyday human experience. It was a literary genre which corresponded in both form and content to the literary requirements of the lower and middle classes of the time, and which singularly fulfilled the conditions for performance and sale in the street and the marketplace. The street ballad used simple, clear, descriptive means, and made use of presenters' devices commonly found in the popular entertainment of the time. With this, the element of fictional self-presentation was introduced into the literature, pointing up the subjective mediating function of a textual speaker. The speaker's sole responsibility for his textual message corresponded to the plurality of opinion, secular in nature, which was evident in the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times. The literary-historical innovations of the street ballad decisively influenced the further development of the ballad within the area of entertainment and instruction: the popular song and political ballad of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ballad opera, the drawing-room ballad, music-hall song, *chanson*, cabaret song and pop song, and not least some types of literary ballad, all belong to the same genre tradition as the street ballad.

The present study, which was published in German in 1981, has been revised and abridged for the English version. My particular thanks are due to the translator, Dr Gayna Walls, who has shown perception and a fine understanding in her English rendering of the text. Working with Gayna Walls was for me a most pleasurable and profitable experience.

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Abbreviations

Titles are given in shortened form

- AB *Ancient Ballads and Broadsides*, H. Huth, ed. (London 1867)
 BB *Ballads and Broadsides*, H. L. Collmann, ed. (Oxford 1912)
 BBBM *The British Broadside Ballad and Its Music*, C. M. Simpson, ed. (New Brunswick 1966)
 BBLB *Broadside Black-letter Ballads*, J. P. Collier, ed. (published privately, 1868)
 CM *The Common Muse*, V. de Sola Pinto, ed. (London 1957)
 CP *Cavalier and Puritan*, H. E. Rollins, ed. (New York 1923)
 OB *Old Ballads from Early Printed Copies*, J. P. Collier, ed. (London 1840)
 OEB *Old English Ballads: 1553–1625*, H. E. Rollins, ed. (Cambridge 1920)
 POA *The Pack of Autolyclus*, H. E. Rollins, ed. (Cambridge, Mass. 1927)
 PB *The Pepys Ballads*, 8 vols., H. E. Rollins, ed. (Cambridge, Mass. 1929–32)
 PG *A Pepysian Garland*, H. E. Rollins, ed. (Cambridge 1922)
 PMO *Popular Music of the Olden Time*, 2 vols., W. Chappell, ed. (London 1855–9)
 RB *The Roxburghe Ballads*, 9 vols., W. Chappell and J. W. Ebsworth, eds. (London, Hertford 1869–99)
 SB *Songs and Ballads*, T. Wright, ed. (London 1860)
 SHB *The Shirburn Ballads*, A. Clark, ed. (Oxford 1907)

System of quotation from the above ballad editions: reference to sources in these editions is by abbreviation, the number of the text (in so far as the texts are numbered in the particular edition), volume number in roman numerals (if there is more than one volume), and page number in arabic numerals. For example: PB, no. 84, II, pp. 224–8; PG, no. 8, pp. 49–53; RB, III, pp. 556–9. For reasons of consistency the verse number is given in every case, even if in the edition itself the verses are not numbered (in the case of RB the *line* number is also given). Where there is no division into

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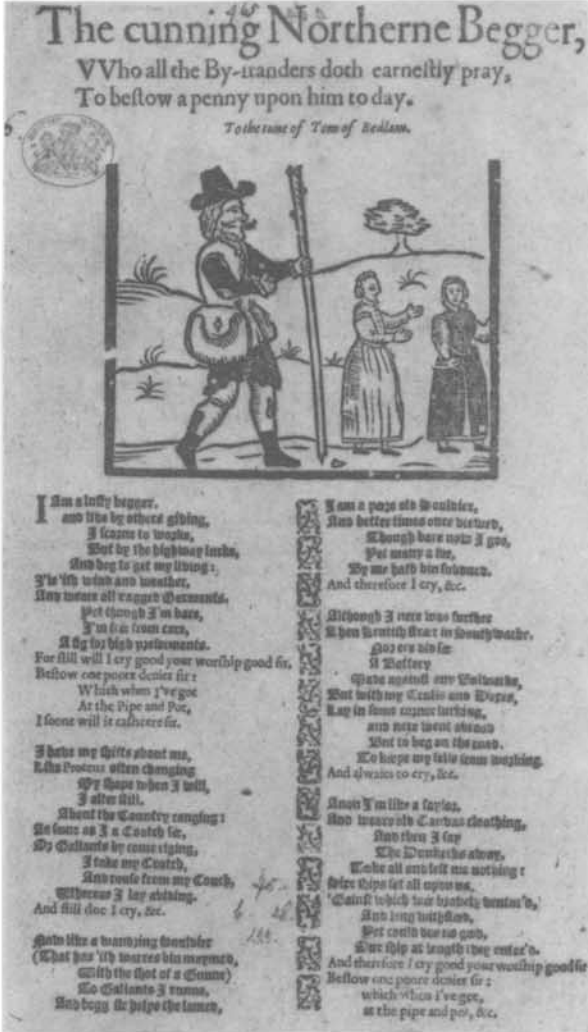
verses, only the line number is given, even if lines are not numbered in the editions. For example: *PG*, no. 44, v. 10, pp. 52–3; *ibid.* 10, 1–3, p. 52; *RB*, II, vv. 3–5, lines 17–40, p. 263; *AB*, no. 22, lines 10–32, p. 125.

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1 *The cunning Northerne Begger* (between 1626 and 1681); Roxburghe Collection, vol. I

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2 *The Cooper of Norfolk* (between 1625 and 1660); Roxburghe Collection, vol. I



3 *The Cruell Shrow* (between 1601 and 1640); Roxburghe Collection, vol. I