
H-France Review Vol. 24 (October 2024), No. 63

Una McIlvenna, *Singing the News of Death: Execution Ballads in Europe 1500-1900*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. xix + 533 pp. Illustrations, music examples, bibliography, index of songs, and index. \$125.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-755185-1.

Review by Joseph Gauvreau, Harvard University.

Una McIlvenna's *Singing the News of Death: Execution Ballads in Europe 1500-1900* examines over four centuries' worth of popular song about executions and condemned criminals. Building upon the author's recent articles on the topic,[1] this book encompasses a corpus of ballads in English, French, German, Italian, and Dutch, spanning from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the eve of the Second World War. This broad scope provides valuable insight into a genre that, as McIlvenna convincingly demonstrates, features significant continuity across the entire spatial and temporal range of this study. Certain linguistic and periodic distinctions do indeed reveal variations in communities' attitudes towards different forms of crime and different types of criminals. Nevertheless, from its early modern expression to its end, the execution ballad remained in many ways a coherent and rather conservative genre. As other means of transmitting information about crime and punishment evolved, these songs retained a central role in the communal experience of public executions: circulated widely both orally and in cheap print form, and sung to well-known melodies, these ballads offered a moralized version of sensational crimes that almost invariably underlined the legitimacy of state justice. For about 450 years, execution ballads depicted and often ventriloquized criminals who had been tempted by the devil into horrific acts of violence but were at the last wholly repentant and accepting of their punishment.

Previous studies of execution ballads--and more broadly, of balladry and analogous popular song genres across Europe--have largely focused on a single linguistic tradition, and often a more narrowly defined time period.[2] Facilitated by extensive cataloging and digitization, current research is perhaps most extensive in the field of English ballad studies. Indeed, English songs make up the largest proportion of the corpus examined in *Singing the News of Death*. French execution ballads--or *complaintes* [3]--nevertheless represent a quarter of the songs considered (324 out of 1280), providing ample material of interest to the readers of H-France. Further, McIlvenna's analyses of various features and subgenres of the execution ballad are always careful to consider songs from multiple linguistic corpuses. Such an approach not only avoids overemphasizing the larger corpuses, but also demonstrates the porosity of boundaries between national and regional communities of singers, as well as the circulation of song between languages and across borders. A melody sung in France may have first appeared in England, but

might also be heard on the streets of Holland and Germany, while an Italian or a German may have sung songs in their own vernaculars deploring--or celebrating--the execution of the French king.

Singing the News of Death is structured in two parts: the first part includes an introduction and three chapters devoted to formal and thematic features relevant to all execution ballads. The second part includes five chapters and a coda, each devoted to particular types of crime as they are depicted in these songs. The first chapter, on the use of *contrafactum* in execution ballads, situates this particular genre within the broader culture of ballad-writing and singing.

Contrafactum is a term perhaps best known by scholars of the early modern period. For later periods the term “parody” is often employed to describe a similar process, whereby a well-known melody is reused with a new set of lyrics.[4] In much of popular song, such reuse of tunes was extremely common. The economy of cheap print certainly encouraged this, as it was far easier to create a broadside where melody was indicated solely through the opening phrase “to the tune of...” or “sur le chant de...” than it was to employ a separate typeface of musical notes, which might not even be legible to the average consumer. Yet as McIlvenna demonstrates, *contrafactum* was also intentionally exploited by writers of all manner of ballads, for the memory of lyrics previously associated with a melody could serve to enhance the experience and meaning of a new song. She provides many enlightening examples of this practice, one that also attests to the frequent interaction between the execution ballad and other genres of popular music, e.g., a melody frequently employed for political songs--“Packington’s Pound”--used for a ballad about men executed for allegedly plotting to murder the English king (p. 53); the accumulation of French execution ballads sung to the “air de Fualdès,” to the point that it became known as “the air to which all complaintes are set” (p. 65); the mocking dissonance between text and music in a song about an Elizabethan Catholic executed for treason, set to a lively dance tune (p. 73).

McIlvenna also makes the case for identifying the tunes of certain ballads that do not explicitly indicate a melody. In these situations, linguistic clues in the opening lines of the text--shared words or phrases--point to an earlier ballad, which must also align metrically with these new lyrics. This alignment of metres allows the singer to directly transpose the new texts onto the remembered melody. However, on two occasions in this book, French texts are connected to earlier ballad lyrics that appear to have completely different metrical structures, both in the number of syllables per line and the rhyme scheme. The first example in the book is a *complainte* from 1609 that opens “Messieurs à deux mains jointes.” The structure is a four-line stanza in hexasyllables, with a rhyme scheme aBaB--that is, with feminine ‘a’ rhymes and masculine ‘B’ rhymes (pp. 2-4). Because of the phrase “mains jointes” in its opening line, this *complainte* is said to be singable to the same tune as the popular sixteenth-century French song “Dames d’honneur je vous prie a mains jointes.” However, there does not seem to be any formal resemblance between these two sets of lyrics, as the earlier “Dames d’honneur” features a stanza of four decasyllables with a rhyme scheme aaBB.[5] Later in the book, a 1575 song beginning “Voulez vous ouyr chansonnette” is connected to a nursery rhyme beginning “Mademoiselle voulez-vous danser,” based on the shared phrase “voulez-vous.” Yet here again, it is not clear how the two texts’ meters (heptasyllable and decasyllable, respectively) align (pp. 198-199). The concern in these cases arises from McIlvenna’s convincing contention that the particular choice of melody for a *contrafactum* ballad is highly important to the meaning and reception of the

lyrics. If, however, this melody is not properly identified, it becomes impossible to interpret how exactly text and music interact, resulting in potential misreading of the ballad.

The second and third chapters provide specific insights into the role played by execution ballads in the ritualistic spectacle of public executions. Involving the participation of the entire community, these gruesome displays featured a highly codified system of corporal punishments, meant to impart varying levels of “infamy” on the criminal and their family, and hence to dissuade spectators from similar criminal activities (p. 92). The severity of the crime, but also the social class and gender of the condemned, influenced the specific type of execution--the shortest deaths being the most honorable. Crucially, execution ballads served to efficiently circulate information about particular crimes and their punishments beyond those present at the time of death: the memorability and easy oral transmission of a ballad served to propagate the justice system’s message of deterrence as widely as possible. The songs themselves devoted ample space to descriptions of the methods of torture and execution employed and highlighted the shame that these punishments inflicted on the condemned. Yet McIlvenna also demonstrates that execution ballads, largely aligned with state authority, were not wholly honest depictions of the last moments of the condemned. As a tool to “deliver an unequivocal message about the power of God and the state to deliver justice” (p. 181), these songs never made mention of the problems that could arise during executions: challenges to the legitimacy of the sentence, unrepentant criminals, unrest among the spectators, and even botched executions. Further, execution ballads frequently reused older lyrics, which were republished with different names, dates, and locations. These publications did not indicate that the new ballad was not telling the story of an actual criminal but simply sought to provide a generalized moral warning to the singers and listeners. The most fascinating divergence from authenticity that McIlvenna identifies is the frequent use of first-person narration in many execution ballads. Songs from the perspective of the condemned aimed to encourage compassion for the criminal, but specifically for the criminal as a model of repentance--no matter the heinousness of their actions, they are always depicted as remorseful in their final moments. Such a perspective further offered to the singer the “vicarious thrill of standing on the threshold between life and death” (p. 164), a unique feature of the execution ballad that, McIlvenna argues, did much for the popularity of this genre.

In the second half of the book, each chapter is dedicated to a particular category of execution ballad, distinguished by both the types of crimes committed as well as the types of criminals. First, a chapter on people executed for heresy and witchcraft, followed by a chapter on murder and violent crimes, then on political executions (including the execution of monarchs), on famous outlaws, on execution ballads in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and finally a coda on songs about executioners. Each of these topics is treated in a relatively independent manner, yet it is also possible to identify several themes that reoccur throughout the course of these chapters. One is the relationship between the execution ballad and other related media. Throughout their history, these songs were widely circulated in cheap print forms--broadsides and chapbooks--often accompanied by woodcuts and at times by detailed titles or prose accounts of the crime and execution. Each of these elements of the publication functioned in a distinct but complementary manner. In many instances, the details of a particular case appeared in the descriptive title or prose account, while the ballad itself featured a more general commentary on the crime and its punishment, a universalized didactic message that served not only as “news” but also as a timeless moral warning to singers and listeners. The rise of the newspaper in the

nineteenth century--seemingly a competing medium for spreading "news" about executions--thus did not harm the popularity of the execution ballad, which often maintained the highly emotive, sensationalist, and moralizing tone of earlier decades. In fact, it was only the end of public executions that truly brought about the end of the execution ballad.

Singing the News of Death identifies the tendency to uphold state authority and the justice system as one of the defining features of the execution ballad. As McIlvenna describes it, "the message of almost all execution ballads is a highly repetitive, conservative, and I would argue, fictional one" (p. 173). Yet a fascinating counternarrative of subversion can be traced through each of the thematic chapters of this book--never to the point of undermining the central argument, but enough to ask whether a slightly less monolithic definition of the execution ballad might be valid. The martyr ballads of the Reformation are well known: songs passionately refuting the legitimacy of death sentences for heresy and honoring the unwavering faith of religious minorities even during their gruesome executions. Further, execution ballads often offered a sympathetic portrayal of vulnerable mothers condemned for neonatal infanticide, in contrast to the harsh punishments inflicted for this crime in early modern Europe. Similarly sympathetic and even romanticized songs depicted famous outlaws as Robin Hood figures or lamented the death of noble heroes executed when they lost favor with the monarch. Each of these counterexamples points to comparable moments where the execution ballad diverged from a state-sanctioned portrayal of an unerring and unquestionable justice system. Indeed, ballads even sometimes took advantage of *contrafactum* to stage polemic exchanges about the legitimacy of an execution. As it was the case with Thomas Cromwell, a song written in celebration of a criminal's death might be re-written, employing the same tune and even some of the same lyrics, into a song arguing on the criminal's behalf (pp. 290-293).

Finally, we may conclude with a few questions that arise about one of the central themes of this book: the use of perspective in execution ballads. The use of first-person perspective, the ventriloquizing of the condemned, "draws the listener-singer's focus to the criminal, rather than the victim, and encourages them to identify with this troubled figure" (p. 155). Such an analysis is certainly compelling, yet McIlvenna's connection of this first-person perspective to the notion of the criminal as an "Everyman" (p. 155) is not always completely convincing. The argument is that execution ballads, a genre of popular song enjoyed by the lower and middle classes, employ the first person to create a ready connection between their criminal subjects and their average "listener-singer." What are we to make, then, of the many ballads recounting the deaths of noblewomen and men, and even executed monarchs--ballads which seem to feature the first-person just as frequently as songs about more common criminals? If execution ballads are intended as didactic instruments featuring "Everyman" characters with which the singer might readily identify, what does it mean for the average ballad singer to play the role of a dying duchess, a condemned king? Alternatively, what of the use of the first person in the often cruelly derisive execution ballads about persecuted minorities--what does it mean for the singer to share the voice of the heretic, the Jew, the foreigner? McIlvenna points to further fascinating uses of perspective at several points in the book, yet many of these instances are treated in isolation; however, it would be valuable to consider how such features reoccur across various subgenres of the execution ballad. For example, we learn that "a notable feature of political ballads is the use of apostrophe to speak directly to the condemned--the narrative voice in this particular category of ballad is employed by composers in a unique and potent manner" (p. 286). However,

apostrophe also appears as a feature of the choruses in multiple Italian songs which dramatize the crowd's communal mocking of the condemned, and thus seemingly underscores his exclusion from the community: we see this treatment of a Jew in "O Manasso traditore" (p. 83), and a notorious bandit in "O Carotta" (p. 372). The overlap of such formal features between very different types of execution ballads would be well worth further exploration--a testament to the richness of McIlvenna's topic, and to the numerous future possibilities for investigating the long and fascinating history of the execution ballad.

NOTES

[1] See e.g., Una McIlvenna, "Ballads of Death and Disaster: The Role of Song in Early Modern News Transmission," in Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika, eds., *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400-1700* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 275-294; Una McIlvenna, "The Power of Music: The Significance of Contrafactum in Execution Ballads," *Past & Present* 229 (2015): 47-89; Una McIlvenna, Siv Gøril Brandtzæg, and Juan Gomis, "Singing the News of Punishment: The Execution Ballad in Europe, 1550-1900," *Quaerendo* 51 (2021): 123-159. Along with her articles and book chapters on the topic, McIlvenna has also created a companion website with a searchable database of execution ballads. Many of these ballads are also accompanied by additional historical information, translations, and images of original prints. See <https://omeka.cloud.unimelb.edu.au/execution-ballads> (consulted 1 May 2023).

[2] For one exception in ballad studies that gathers scholarship from across linguistic divisions--albeit in a more circumscribed time period--see *Special Issue: Street Singers in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Luca Degl'Innocenti and Massimo Rospocher, *Renaissance Studies* 33: 1 (2019), pp. 1-158.

[3] The French *complainte* is a broader term for songs about the dead, akin to the English "lament." However, it was frequently employed in the title of French songs specifically referring to the execution of criminals.

[4] For a discussion of the history and scholarly distinctions between the terms "contrafactum" and "parody," see Robert Falck, "Parody and Contrafactum: A Terminological Clarification," *The Musical Quarterly* 65 (1979): 1-21.

[5] For the verse structure and melody of "Dames d'honneur," see Kate van Orden, "Female 'Complaintes': Laments of Venus, Queens, and City Women in Late Sixteenth-Century France," *Renaissance Quarterly* 54 (2001): 821, 837.

Joseph Gauvreau
Harvard University
gauvreau@g.harvard.edu

Copyright © 2024 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172