

Cheap Print and Street Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century

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12. Afterword

After the lapse of the Printing Act in 1695, in the early years of the new century, printing — especially cheap printing — began to spread outside of London and become established in the regions. In the second half of the century, there were major booksellers issuing street literature titles in almost every area of the country. The Newcastle trade, in particular, connected Scotland more closely to the north of England. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the introduction of the iron hand-press, improvements in paper production, and the development of commercial stereotyping all meant that items of cheap print began to look and feel different. Black-letter typography had been left behind in the early decades of the century. Pictorial prints of improved quality depicting up-to-date subjects were seen in the streets and displayed in stationers' shops. Songs from the theatres and pleasure gardens were appearing on slips in increasing numbers, arguably contributing to the emergence of a bourgeois 'mainstream' canon of songs. Prose fiction had become less firmly rooted in old legends and folklore, which were being superseded by the equally fanciful conventions of the gothic. The long continuity since the seventeenth century, or even earlier, was no longer so apparent.

Nevertheless, theatre and pleasure garden songs, the growth of a market for chapbooks for children, and the rise of amatory and gothic prose fiction all came directly out of the commercial businesses and the print formats of the eighteenth-century street literature trade. The cheap fiction published by Thomas Sabine seems a world away from the typical Scottish chapbooks in terms of content and moral outlook, and yet it was a product of essentially the same trade practices, confirmed by Sabine's own activities in the chapbook market. Pictorial prints and ballads, even some of the same titles, continued to be sold in the streets. Stories like those of Jane Shore and Fair Rosamond remained current

right through from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries in ballad and chapbook form. Accounts of criminals and other adventurers, whether in verse or prose, circulated in cheap printed formats. Tastes in literature were expanding, but not altogether beyond recognition. This mix of continuity and development is at the heart of the eighteenth century, and could usefully remain at the heart of future research into the cheap print trade.

That future research could fruitfully pursue a number of directions. For instance, some of the preceding chapters have complicated certain easy assumptions about what actually counted as cheap print, for both producers and consumers, what is a 'chapbook' (strictly a single-sheet pamphlet, or anything that might have been carried by a chapman), what sorts of titles best characterized the itinerant trade, and what they might say about their purchasers and readers, both economically and culturally. The price stability of the printed items under consideration presumably meant that the dearer publications became more accessible, at least to parts of the population, as inflation eroded the cost in real terms.

It is something of a cliché in ballad scholarship that ballads were sold and circulated among the poorest members of society. Some of the newspaper reports from the eighteenth century about indigent ballad singers (often women associated with pickpockets and prostitution) would tend to support that impression. It is certainly the case that by the nineteenth century, when there were more competing layers of print at different — but still relatively low — prices, ballads became associated with the working classes — an impression exemplified by Henry Mayhew's informants in *London Labour and the London Poor* (and plenty of other sources), and fostered by some of the shoddy workmanship evident on nineteenth-century broadsides. Yet a century or more beforehand, when perhaps 1*d.* was worth more, such literature may have been less affordable at the lower strata of society, and ballads, chapbooks, and pictorial prints may well have enjoyed greater cultural status.

The satirist and editor William Gifford, born into straitened circumstances in rural Devon in the 1750s, learned to read and became acquainted (via his mother) with 'the literature of a country town, which, about half a century ago, amounted to little more than what

was disseminated by itinerant ballad-singers, or rather, readers' and 'acquired much curious knowledge of Catskin, and the Golden Bull, and the Bloody Gardener, and many other histories equally instructive and amusing'.¹ The burgeoning market for children's literature towards the end of the century likewise testifies to parents spending their money in order to encourage literacy — as well, apparently, as a particular moral outlook — in their children.

Uncertainty about print runs and low survival rates make it difficult to estimate the popularity of cheap print — 'popularity', that is, simply in terms of how many copies were produced. Nonetheless, ESTC lists very many titles, editions, and issues that can be classified as street literature by one criterion or another — extent measured in sheets or pages, booksellers and printers concerned, price (where it can be ascertained), characteristic subject matter, etc. So far as it goes, the evidence is that this sort of literature was printed in great quantities in the eighteenth century, and the assumption is that booksellers in general had a pretty good eye as to what their customers would buy. Many early cheap printed publications are nowadays considered desirable objects in their own right, infelicities of typography notwithstanding, and it might well be thought patronizing to think that was not the case at the time they were in circulation. Scholars today owe a debt of gratitude to bibliophiles like the antiquary Joseph Haslewood who made a collection of Samuel Harward's Tewkesbury chapbooks. Conversely, the label of 'ephemera' has done street literature no favours.

Regional centres like Norwich and Penrith, and booksellers like Harward in Tewkesbury, were important drivers of the spread of print of all kinds throughout the century. John Feather's early work on the book trade outside of London is invaluable, but largely focuses on the trade in books rather than cheaper forms of print.² There are many more booksellers and aspects of the regional trade that merit attention. Ian Maxted's comprehensive survey of the book trade in Exeter and

1 William Gifford, *The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis, Translated into English Verse* (London: G. and W. Nicol, and R. Evans, 1802), p. iii.

2 John Feather, *The Provincial Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); John Feather, 'The Country Trade in Books', in *Spreading the Word: The Distribution Networks of Print, 1550–1850*, ed. Robin Myers and Michael Harris (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies; New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 1998 [1990]), pp. 165–83.

Devon, which ranges wider than the cheap end of the trade, sets a high standard.³ Some other examples include shorter studies of the trade in Worcester,⁴ Warrington,⁵ Canterbury and East Kent,⁶ and (to some extent) Newcastle.⁷ Further research into John White's career in Newcastle is in progress at the time of writing.

Another front for investigation lies in the regulation of print in so far as it impinged on the cheap end of the trade and its extension outside of London. This expansion of printing also meant the decline of the strict oversight of the Stationers' Company and the ownership of titles exemplified by the seventeenth-century ballad partnership. After 1712, old ballad and chapbook titles were no longer entered in the Stationers' Register. That is not to say that booksellers never entered street literature titles, but for much of the century these tended to be topical pamphlets, where there was a market worth protecting.

By way of a few examples, *A Narrative of All the Robberies, Escapes, &c. of John Sheppard*, a 32-page octavo, priced at 6d., was entered on 23

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- 3 Ian Maxted, *The Story of the Book in Exeter and Devon*, Exeter Working Papers in Book History, 12 ([Exeter]: Exeter Working Papers in Book History, 2021) <https://bookhistory.blogspot.com/2007/01/devon-book-36.html>.
 - 4 Martin Holmes, 'Samuel Gamidge: Bookseller in Worcester (c.1755–1777)', in *Images & Texts: Their Production and Distribution in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, ed. Peter Isaac and Barry McKay (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies; New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 1997), pp. 11–52; Margaret Cooper, *The Worcester Book Trade in the Eighteenth Century*, Worcestershire Historical Society Occasional Publications, no. 8 ([Worcester]: Worcestershire Historical Society, 1997).
 - 5 Michael Perkin, 'William Eyres and the Warrington Press', in *Aspects of Printing from 1600*, ed. Robin Myers and Michael Harris (Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic Press, 1987), pp. 69–89; P. O'Brien, *Eyres' Press, Warrington (1756–1803): An Embryo University Press* (Wigan: Owl Books, 1993).
 - 6 Henry R. Plomer, 'James Abree, Printer and Bookseller of Canterbury', *The Library*, 3rd ser., 4 (1913), 46–56; David Shaw and Sarah Gray, 'James Abree (1691?–1768), Canterbury's First "Modern" Printer', in *The Reach of Print: Making, Selling and Using Books*, ed. Peter Isaac and Barry McKay (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies; New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 1998), pp. 21–36; David Shaw, 'Retail Distribution in East Kent in the Eighteenth Century', in *Worlds of Print: Diversity in the Book Trade*, ed. John Hinks and Catherine Armstrong (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press; London: British Library, 2006), pp. 197–205.
 - 7 Barbara Crosbie, 'Provincial Purveyors of Culture: The Print Trade in Eighteenth-Century Newcastle upon Tyne', in *Economy and Culture in North-East England, 1500–1800*, ed. Adrian Green and Barbara Crosbie (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2018), 205–29; Peter Wood, 'The Newcastle Song Chapbooks', in *Street Ballads in Nineteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, and North America: The Interface between Print and Oral Traditions*, ed. David Atkinson and Steve Roud (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 59–76.

November 1724, just a week after Jack Sheppard was executed at Tyburn, and went through eight editions all dated that same year.⁸ *A True Copy of the Paper, Delivered the Night before her Execution, by Sarah Malcom* (sic) was issued as a sixteen-page quarto pamphlet, priced at 4d., and entered on 29 March 1733, in the wake of Sarah Malcolm's execution on 7 March.⁹ In the wake of the defeat of the Jacobites at Culloden, *The Remarkable Affecting Case and Dying Words of Mr. Archibald Oswald, an Ensign in the Young Pretender's Service* was published as a 32-page octavo, priced at 6d., and entered on 23 October 1745.¹⁰ The loss of the East Indiaman the *Halsewell* on 6 January 1786 gripped the nation and spawned numerous accounts, two of which were entered in the Stationers' Register. *A Circumstantial Narrative of the Loss of the Halsewell*, an 86-page octavo, which went through twenty-one editions in the same year, priced at 1s., was entered on 24 January 1786;¹¹ and *An Interesting and Authentic Account of the Loss of the Halsewell*, a 48-page octavo (no price given), was entered on 3 May 1786.¹²

The inference from examples such as these is that booksellers were most concerned to assert ownership in more valuable titles, which might also have been the (slightly) more expensive ones. On 19 November 1785, though, John Evans made several entries of children's chapbook titles, including *Puzzle Cap*, *Tommy Truelove's Present*, *The Pretty Alphabet*, *The Story of Princess Fair-Star*, *A New Riddle Book*, *A Trip to the Fair*, *The*

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- 8 *A Narrative of All the Robberies, Escapes, &c. of John Sheppard* (London: printed and sold by John Applebee, a little below Bridewell Bridge, in Blackfryers, 1724), price 6d. [ESTC N51640], entered to William Mears and John Applebee, 23 November 1724.
 - 9 *A True Copy of the Paper, Delivered the Night before her Execution, by Sarah Malcom* [sic] (London: printed for J. Wilford, behind the Chapter House, near St Paul's, 1732 [1733]), price 4d. [ESTC T100705], entered to Benjamin Mott, James(?) Brotherton, John Wilford, 29 March 1733.
 - 10 *The Remarkable Affecting Case and Dying Words of Mr. Archibald Oswald, an Ensign in the Young Pretender's Service* (London: printed for J. Robinson, at the Golden Lyon, in Ludgate Street, 1745), price 6d. [ESTC T72875], entered to J. Robinson, 23 October 1745.
 - 11 *A Circumstantial Narrative of the Loss of the Halsewell (East-Indiaman), Capt. Richard Pierce* (London: printed for William Lane, Leadenhall Street, 1786) (subsequent extant editions all price 1s.) [ESTC T61155], entered to William Lane, 24 January 1786.
 - 12 *An Interesting and Authentic Account of the Loss of the Halsewell, East-India-Man, with All its Dreadful Circumstances* (London: printed by W. Bailey, No. 42, within Bishopsgate, 1786) [ESTC T113892], entered to W. Bailey, 3 May 1786.

*History of Master Playfull and Master Serious, The Pleasing History of Master Sammy Steady, Nurse Teachem's Golden Letter Book, A Concise History of All the Kings and Queens of England, The Good Boy and Girl's Lottery, and King Pippin's Delight.*¹³ In the following decade, both Hannah More and John Marshall entered substantial numbers of Cheap Repository Tract titles. Even if the individual titles were cheap to produce and cheap to buy, these markets were evidently competitive. For some titles there was a concept of ownership within the trade, which might imply that for others — the old ballads and chapbook histories, for example — the stricter regulation of the seventeenth century had effectively been allowed to lapse. The copyright legislation of 1710 appears to have had only a slight impact on the cheap print trade. The role of the Stationers' Company as printing and bookselling began to spread well beyond London — as well as any other evidence for regulation and 'customs of the trade' that can be recovered or inferred, and evidence of collaborative or cooperative publishing — all require further investigation in order to test whether these inferences are correct.

The role of women in the street literature trade has attracted only a limited amount of attention to date. A majority of the booksellers named in the preceding chapters were male, and any connection of women with cheap print tends to bring to mind the grotesque ballad sellers of Hogarth's prints, the more or less criminal women of the newspaper reports mentioned above, or the 'mercury women' of the late seventeenth century who facilitated the distribution of news-sheets and pamphlets, often at the margins of legality.¹⁴ Sarah Bates, who as a widow was able legitimately to head up the ballad and chapbook business, provides a marked contrast to such stereotypes, and there are other female booksellers to be glimpsed through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and into the nineteenth. They can stand for the many women who were engaged in the print trade, but who often remained (at least to modern eyes) invisible.

Nevertheless, widows, sisters, and daughters must have been fully engaged in the trade in order to acquire the necessary skills well before

13 Cf. Chapter 10 above.

14 Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace, 1678–1730* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

they were in a position to take over a business.¹⁵ Paula McDowell posits ‘a vast network of women printers and publishers’ across the eighteenth century, although of course not all of them will have been involved in the cheap print trade.¹⁶ Then there are the bookshop owners like Agnes Thomson in Aberdeen and stationers named in Dicey imprints, as well as Miss Holt in Upton-upon-Severn, distributor for Samuel Harward, of whom we know virtually nothing. McDowell’s network could well be expanded if research can uncover more details about the lives of women engaged in all facets of the trade.

Paul Langford wrote in his classic history of eighteenth-century England: ‘The growth of a reading public, expecting and enjoying access to books, as a means both of instruction and recreation, has major implications for the cultural history of the period.’¹⁷ Indeed it does, and the contribution not just of books but of cheap print in the streets and markets and fairs needs to be factored into the equation. It is hoped that the foundations laid by detailed studies like those in this volume will facilitate such an assessment. To reiterate, it is the intention here first and foremost to make current research available more widely and in a timely fashion, and secondly to pave the way for others to build upon it, perhaps pursuing some of the directions suggested.

15 McDowell, *Women of Grub Street*, pp. 38–41.

16 Paula McDowell, ‘Women and the Business of Print’, in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1700–1800*, ed. Vivien Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 135–54 (p. 135).

17 Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 [1989]), pp. 90–91.

