

# Women and the Ballad Trade in Eighteenth-Century England

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Knowing that women sold ballads in the eighteenth-century streets it is but a small step to imagining them as characters out of Hogarth's engravings, impoverished, debased, or defiant. No doubt there is some truth in that characterization, but overall the variety of women's experiences in the ballad trade was very much broader than this. While a good deal of attention has been paid to the women's contributions to the eighteenth-century book trade, comments specifically concerning the ballad trade have been fairly superficial, with the exception of Paula McDowell's studies of some individual women early in the century (cited below). This paper presents some evidence for the different ways in which women were involved with the ballad trade, paying attention to their economic role, and interrogating some contemporary visual and literary representations of ballad women.

Categories of occupation within the book trade in the eighteenth century are not easy to define and were probably never very clearly delineated (Raven 4-5). At one end of the scale were booksellers, who undertook a role more or less equivalent to that of the modern publisher, and may or may not have also been printers, but even within this group there were huge differences in terms of scale of business and economic prosperity. A number of them were women who enjoyed some real independent success, most of them born or married into bookselling family dynasties, which in some instances they effectively headed over long periods of time (McDowell, *Women of Grub Street* 33-45, 51-58). James Raven likewise points to the critical contribution made by women, especially widows, in the maintenance and succession of individual book trade businesses (361). Isobel Grundy describes more broadly the roles of women as publishers and owners of bookshops and circulating libraries, and as readers and authors, right across the long eighteenth century (146-59). Paula McDowell in a later article infers "a vast network of women printers and publishers" ("Women and the Business of Print" 135).

With specific reference to the ballad trade, an example of a successful female bookseller who issued titles from the core repertoire of prose chapbooks and narrative ballads during the early part of the eighteenth century is Sarah Bates. Her husband, Charles Bates, was apprenticed in 1683 and died in 1716, after which his widow continued the business in her own right until c.1735 (BBTI; McKenzie 46 [no. 1228]; Plomer 26). Sarah Bates was in business for nearly as long as her husband before her. Among ballads with her imprint are titles such as *Fair Margaret's Misfortune*, *Queen Eleanor's Confession*, and *The Unconstant Shepherd*. She also participated with other booksellers in the publication of more substantial books such as *The Queen's Royal Cookery* and *A New Academy of Complements* (sic).

After the 1720s-1730s the ballad trade was dominated by William and Cluer Dicey in Northampton and London, and it is not until the second half of the century that the names of female booksellers come to the fore again. Ann Gamidge, widow of Samuel Gamidge (d.1777), continued trading as a bookseller in Worcester after her husband's death until c.1798 (BBTI; Holmes 21). Susannah Bayley, presumed to be the widow of Thomas Bayley, continued the business as a bookseller/printer in London during the 1790s, and her name appears in a number of imprints. Sarah Butler, probably the widow or daughter of John Butler (d.1796), was still selling ballads in Worcester in the 1830s. A small bound volume of sixteen chapbooks acquired "at Mrs. Butler's shop in Nicholas Street, Worcester a short time before the old Lady's death" survives in the British Library (11622.c.22.). At the end of the century Ann Dunn and Ann Bell were printing chapbooks in Cumbria, in both cases continuing the business in the wake of a male relative (McKay), and Margaret Angus similarly continued her late husband's business in Newcastle at the beginning of the new century (Wood 63). That emerges as a common pattern, but McDowell makes the point that imprints and Stationers' Company records do not necessarily tell the whole story: not only do some women appear to have chosen to remain invisible, even more importantly, widows, sisters, and daughters must have been fully engaged in the business in order to acquire the necessary skills well before they were in a position to take it over (McDowell, *Women of Grub Street* 38–41; McDowell, "Women and the Business of Print" 139, 145).

The imprints of some of the Dicey ballads printed in Northampton include lists of agents in different parts of the country. Among the names are Mary Timbs in Newport Pagnell (perhaps related to John Timbs in Stony Stratford), and Margaret Ward in Sun Lane, Reading (probably related to Nathan Ward at the same address). Samuel Harward was printing ballads in Tewkesbury from the 1760s and half a dozen of his imprints also include the name of a Miss Holt in Upton-upon-Severn, a small town situated some six miles from Tewkesbury but an important crossing point on the River Severn. Miss Holt is known primarily from these Harward imprints but also appears in newspaper advertisements in the 1780s as a vendor of patent medicines, a trade closely associated with the book trade during the eighteenth century (Feather 83–84; Isaac). Given that she was located not far from Harward's own base in Tewkesbury she was probably named because she provided an important link in the distribution chain. There may well have been many more women like these—local booksellers, stationers, and traders in other commodities—who remain largely invisible. They were not itinerant ballad sellers, and singing was most probably not involved in their business at all, but they were nonetheless intrinsic to the trade.

At the beginning of the century, women played an active part in the wholesale and retail distribution of printed material as trade publishers, mercury-women, hawkers, and ballad singers (McDowell, *Women of Grub Street* 51–62). Trade publishers were middlemen who undertook the production and distribution of pamphlets and periodicals. The mercury-women constituted a particular category of occupation that emerged during the high Augustan period to facilitate the distribution of political news-sheets and pamphlets, either in the streets or from retail premises. By the 1680s "mercury-woman" (or simply "mercury") had become a gender-specific term (*OED* mercury, n. 4b., C2. mercury woman). While some contemporary sources distinguish

between the wholesale trade of mercury-women and the retail trade of hawkers, in practice those divisions of labour were blurred (McDowell, *Women of Grub Street* 55).

McDowell describes these roles as opportunities in the “interstices” of the book trade that could be seized by women during the period following the lapse of the Printing Act in 1695, but she also sees the consolidation of the trade as the century progressed as having had the effect of squeezing out much of this “peripheral book trade activity” (*Women of Grub Street* 29–30). She also characterizes the ballad singers and hawkers of this period as predominantly female and less socially moored than any other occupational group within the book trade (McDowell, *Women of Grub Street* 58). She certainly provides some striking examples of women, some of them very elderly, existing near the margins of society and experiencing “a seemingly endless cycle of quick sales, quick arrests, and repeated periods of detention” (McDowell, *Women of Grub Street* 61). But she also describes their labour as being “of real commercial importance,” and cites the example of a ballad singer who provided the printer Catherine Clifton with a copy for a seditious ballad in return for which she received one hundred further printed ballads to sell on the streets (McDowell, *Women of Grub Street* 60, 61).

Studies of the trade that do not take a specifically gendered approach find examples of both men and women engaged in singing and selling ballads, although there is possibly some variation between the ways in which they are represented in contemporary press reports and memoirs (Cox Jensen 213 n. 11). Pieces in newspapers complain of ballad singers attracting unmanageable crowds, consorting with pickpockets and prostitutes, acting in a drunken and disorderly fashion, promoting immorality and sedition (Atkinson; citing reports from the British Newspaper Archive and British Library 17th-18th Century Burney Collection). They also record something of the precariousness of ballad singers’ lives, like a woman tossed by an “over-drove ox” in Holborn, resulting in an injury to her leg (*Whitehall Evening Post; or, London Intelligencer*, 30 March–1 April 1769). Another woman singing ballads in Southwark when a wagon came by was thrown down by the crowd “and the waggon went over her head and killed her on the spot” (*Westminster Journal and London Political Miscellany*, 3 September 1768). These are events worth recording, but they form only a partial picture.

Sometimes women and men went out together, like Matthew Jackman and his wife who were arrested for singing “disaffected Ballads,” although she was released when it was decided she had been “acting under her Husband’s Directions” (*Daily Post*, 18 February 1731). A deserted soldier was reported travelling the country in company with a female ballad singer (*Country Journal; or, The Craftsman*, 14 October 1732). Sometimes, too, ballad singers went out with children, a tactic that might be expected to appeal to the charitable instincts of the better-off (Hitchcock, *Down and Out* 117). Several of Hogarth’s ballad singers are either pregnant or carrying infants. Paul Sandby’s *Fun upon Fun* has a flamboyant male ballad seller in the foreground, while in the middle distance a woman and two children, possibly his family, form a more respectable-looking group of ballad singers. The title-page woodcut from *A Garland of New Songs*, printed in Newcastle, depicts a family group of man, woman, and child singing in the street and holding out for sale a “New Song.”

Some “shabby ballad-singers” were reported as having “gone about the streets singing their vagabond sonnets, joined by two or three children, d[e]cently dressed, to attract the idle croud” (*Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 24 September 1772). A singer who was arrested for singing abusive songs in St Paul’s Churchyard, “having a young child, and promising the Magistrate never to be guilty of the like offence, was forgiven” (*Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 17 February 1777). Beggars, it was thought, would sometimes borrow children for the purpose, and a woman arrested for singing ballads, “attempting to impose an infant child in her arms upon the Alderman, which she had borrowed for that purpose, was committed to Bridewell for the space of one month” (*Middlesex Journal and Evening Advertiser*, 6–8 February 1776).

Reports of ballad singers outside London mostly start to appear in the press from the mid-century. So, an old woman named Comyns was taken up by order of the mayor of Exeter “for singing a libellous Ballad through the Streets of the City, called ‘The Long Comfort and Marygold’” (*Public Advertiser*, 9 March 1769) (the ballad has not been identified). In Bath two women who had been singing a ballad titled “Wilkes and Liberty!” in the streets in an intoxicated state and were being “very abusive” were sent to prison, “where in the Evening one of them hung herself with her Garters, but she was cut down just Time enough to save her Life” (*Public Advertiser*, 24 May 1768).

A particularly brutal and widely reported murder was perpetrated at Congleton, Cheshire, on the person of Anne Smith, a ballad singer, aged twenty-two, by one Samuel Thorley, a vagabond associated with the butcher’s trade, who dismembered her in a particularly horrific manner, apparently in order to taste human flesh (*Chester Chronicle; or, Commercial Intelligencer*, 11 April 1777). Three men “in liquor,” who had broken the windows of houses and a church in Isleworth, then went into a barn, “where finding a poor ballad woman near 70 years of age, they treated her in so brutal a manner, that she died in the Workhouse” (*London Evening Post*, 25–27 February 1766). In Surrey a poor woman who had been taking shelter under a hay-rick, with the permission of the owner, witnessed robbers entering his property, made her way to a neighbouring house, and raised the alarm, which resulted in the perpetrators being apprehended, after which a collection was made for her, along with a present from the victim and a share of the government reward, which “will enable her to follow some other employ than that of ballad-singing” (*General Evening Post*, 4–7 July 1778). Ballad singing, like any other way of making a living on the streets, could be a dangerous occupation.

It has frequently been noted that it is difficult to gain historical insight into the lives of the poor except where they come into conflict with authority, so that ballad singers are mostly seen through the eyes of the better-off and are depicted, both in writing and in visual representations, in prejudicial terms as rogues and vagabonds. In 1735, we find ballad singing described as “a continual nursery for idlers, whores, and pick-pockets; a school for scandal, smut, and debauchery” (*Grub Street Journal*, 27 February 1735), and the same article was printed again thirty-five years later (*Lloyd’s Evening Post*, 8–10 August 1770). Newspapers regularly reported ballad singers brought before magistrates and the City authorities and charged with various offences, often under vagrancy and licensing laws, although in practice the application

of such legislation was rather patchy. The impression is that the authorities were more vigorous where they identified ballads as libellous or seditious than in dealing with mere nuisances in the streets.

Ballad singing sometimes appears as a last resort of the poverty-stricken, closely allied to outright begging (Hitchcock, *Down and Out* 65–70). Thus “a poor woman dropped down dead as she was singing a ballad in Duke’s-court, near St. Martin’s-lane[.] Her death is said to be occasioned by extreme hunger and cold, having been out in the street all the preceeding [*sic*] night for want of money to pay her lodging” (*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 24 January 1767). There is some evidence that most of London’s beggars were women, specifically married or widowed women with children, whereas the written sources tend to concentrate on male beggars (Hitchcock, *Down and Out* 4–5). If ballad singing really was so closely allied to begging, then there is a good chance that there were large numbers of female ballad singers who remain out of sight. Nevertheless, the claim that most ballad singers were women (Hitchcock, “Publicity of Poverty” 176), even if true, would be difficult to substantiate.

Moreover, the direct equation of street traders with beggars has proved problematic for historiography, even if contemporaries did frequently describe them in that way (the tension is explicit in Hitchcock, “Publicity of Poverty” 177; Hitchcock, “Begging on the Streets” 489). There is an argument to be made that they should be considered simply as members of the labouring classes, as a precarious element in the eighteenth-century economic infrastructure. Moves to license “Old-Cloaths Men, Chimney-Sweepers, Gold-Finders, Kennel-Rakers, Running-Stationers, Ballad-Singers, Wheel-barrows, Cobblers-Stalls, Herb-Stalls, Fish, or Oyster-Stalls, Hosemending-Stalls, Shoe-Blacks, and Basket-Woman [*sic*]” place ballad singers among a whole host of self-evidently useful street traders (*St James’s Chronicle; or, British Evening Post*, 5–8 April 1766). Seen from the perspective of the booksellers and printers, street sellers were integral to the commercial success of the trade at large. Indeed, the description of “ballad singers,” which predominates both in contemporary reports and in modern scholarship, tends to mask the primary activity of ballad *selling*, and it is certainly possible that it could provide a viable way of making a living.

The examination of one Mary Rice at Basingstoke at the beginning of the century recorded her working as a gardener, “and at other times she used to buy books and ballads and sell them about the country going from place to place,” and she “sometimes begged victuals and sometimes when she sold books or ballads she made her bargain to have some victuals given her and sometimes she got her lodging in barns” (Spufford 43). Her experience may have been fairly typical. The reported earnings of a (male) ballad singer in London who “was heard to say, at a Public-house in Fleet-market, that he earned from 18 Shillings to a Guinea almost every Day during the late City Election, by singing Songs upon Wilkes and Liberty,” were probably exceptional, and he may have been in the employ of interested parties (*Public Advertiser*, 4 April 1768). But the press also repeated a complaint that “The Farmers far down in Kent offer five shillings a day and beer, for hands to get in their corn, at the same time that itinerant Players, Ballad Singers, and Beggars swarm all over the country” (*Lloyd’s Evening Post*, 27–30 August 1773). So maybe ballad selling really could be more profitable than farm labouring.

Visual and literary evidence has to be treated with a good deal of caution. Ballad sellers were among the street traders depicted in the series of Cries of London which were reinterpreted by different artists over a period of a couple of centuries. Sean Shesgreen contrasts Hogarth's ballad seller in *The Enraged Musician*, "old and abandoned, evoking the class of 'horribly ragged, dirty and disgusting' London prostitutes," with her fashionably dressed and attractive counterpart in Marcellus Laroon's print of *A Merry New Song* (107-08). Yet the different images can just as well be interpreted in terms of the different aesthetic, social, and political agendas of their creators. They can again be contrasted with what looks like the more precise realism of the (presumed) family grouping in Sandby's *Fun upon Fun*. The families of ballad sellers depicted on chapbook title pages were presumably meant to project a sympathetic image, appealing to potential purchasers. Probably, women at both ends of the spectrum of respectability could be found singing and selling ballads in the streets, but none of the visual representations should simply be assumed to be typical.

A slip song of uncertain date called *The Ballad Singer* presents its subject as a beggar—"the strains that beggars chaunt, / Issue from the breast of want"—and makes a mawkish, sentimental appeal for charity: "Then O incline to gentle pity, / Come buy, oh buy the beggar's ditty." The beggar/ballad singer of the text is described as "him" but the woodcut at the head of the ballad shows a female figure, seemingly respectably dressed and carrying a basket, along with a dog which may be a companion or alternatively may be harrying her. What might be a more realistic description is found in a verse dialogue "Between a Ballad-Singer and his Wife" in *The Comforts of Matrimony*, a volume published under the pseudonym of "Ned Ward, Junior" (150-53). The husband remonstrates:

Peggy, can't you say or sing  
 Something better of the King?  
 What's Lord North, and all his crew,  
 What's government to me or you?  
 Let us chaunt our songs nocturnal,  
 Tho' State Rogues should hang or burn all:  
 Let us sing, throughout the City,  
 Every kind of pretty Ditty.  
 Tales of Love, in tender song,  
 Will the fleeting hours prolong;  
 And a bloody cruel murder,  
 All our honest views may further: -  
 But why should either you or me  
 Tempt Newgate, or the Pillory?  
 Neither of which I'd wish a glimpse on,  
 For all my love for Master Simpson.\*

(The asterisk refers to a footnote: "A famous Ballad Printer in 1779." Charles Simpson was an important printer of ballads and street literature in Stonecutter Street, London.) The ballad singer's wife responds that political and seditious ballads, for all

the risk they run of attracting the attention of the authorities, are the most lucrative and it is not their business to concern themselves with the contents:

Business will thrive if well we tend it;  
 Let's get a penny, and then spend it:  
 For me, I swear, there's nothing in't,  
 Nor dread to sing whate'er they print.

Possibly the main purpose of the dialogue is satirical, but if these observations are true they provide a useful insight into the economic potential of different areas of the trade.

The memoirs of Mary Saxby (1738–1801), sometime vagrant and eventual convert to Methodism, record how at various times in her early life she resorted to ballad singing as a means of supporting herself (Saxby 8–9, 11–13, 15–16, 18). She describes “singing in alehouses, at feasts and fairs, for a few pence and a little drink,” singing in company with another woman in Dover, where she narrowly escaped rape at the hands of a group of sailors, and again at Epping market, where she was committed to the Bridewell. Another time when she was pregnant she “took up my old trade of ballad-singing, and soon got plenty of good clothes for myself and my infant; and saved a little money to carry us into the hay country.” She also worked as an itinerant pedlar, at one time kept a small shop, and later sold religious tracts. The implied contrast between her earlier occupation as a ballad singer and later as a seemingly more respectable, albeit small-time, seller of drapery and haberdasher's goods may well be something of a generic trope. She mentions, too, the temptations of thieving and prostitution as she wandered through the country in a dirty and hungry state, but credits God with preserving her from such courses.

Mary Saxby's *Memoirs of a Female Vagrant* has been regarded as a valuable, and rather rare, first-hand representation of a woman's life at the margins of society, and in outline it may well be so, but it is also heavily larded with, and structured by, a conventional religiosity, which was evidently the reason for its composition (see Gagnier 346–47). Tim Hitchcock makes use of her account, but also acknowledges the literary convention underlying it (“Publicity of Poverty” 176–77; *Down and Out* 69, 81, 166, 229). A more sanguine view is embodied in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry which comments on the variety and apparent veracity of her story (Carter).

An avowedly fictional account is found in a chapbook called *The Surprising History of a Ballad Singer*, which survives in a Falkirk printing of 1818. The first-person narrator recounts her previous life in the form of a letter to an unidentified correspondent. The salient points are that, left impoverished on the death of her grandmother, she eventually finds herself alone in London, where she is befriended by two ballad singers. At first reluctant to go with them (“I had heard much of the vices belonging to the metropolis, especially in the low classes of ballad-singers and beggars”), she finds they are in fact respectable sisters who endeavour to conceal their occupation of ballad singing from their fellow lodgers (“poor people, but not those of the lowest order”). The sisters, named Jane and Harriet, have both been the victims of unfortunate liaisons, after which Jane “yielded to the solicitations of a ballad-singer, who shared her room, and embraced the profession of an itinerant vocal performer,”

while Harriet was forced into “a course of life disgusting to the female character,” involving “illicit commerce with the other sex,” before eventually joining her sister as a ballad singer. The narrator’s description of their occupation is of some interest:

[. . .] a life, at best, harrassing [*sic*] a[n]d precarious, tormented by beadles and constables; sometimes flush of money, and at others attacked by cold, rain, hunger, thirst, and poverty, and the insults of licentious men, who think virtue cannot reside in the breast of a ballad-singer. Indeed, most of the set are viciously inclined, and Harriet, Jane, and myself (for I had, alas! no other alternative than to join with them) were obliged to use great caution and reserve to prevent us from forming any acquaintance with others of our occupation; a behaviour which frequently obtained us unmerited abuse.

My voice, and the sprightliness with which I sung, obtained, as the sisters had predicted, much success and emolument; and I have had several sixpences, shillings, nay, even half-crowns, given me of a night, for singing fashionable theatrical songs, particularly by ladies of a certain class, who are noted for profusion and frequent want of true taste, too often making good the proverb of, Light come, light go.

[. . .]

During this time I was initiated by the sisters in all the mysteries of the trade [. . .] which are sedulously attended to by those who regularly follow ballad-singing to procure a living: this is to select popular theatrical songs, and to learn the true air. We used to go three or four times to the house where it was brought out; and I in general remarked, we were most fortunate with those produced by the summer theatres, especially Sadler’s-Wells. We were also careful to vary the scene, that our voices might not become too common in any one neighbourhood; and as to our persons, we so carefully disguised them, that I am positive no one would have recognised them when out of our singing occupation.

We frequently went many miles from home; attended the installations, and all manner of public fetes: sometimes we repaired to sea-ports; and once we made a pedestrian excursion as far as Margate, subsisting on the road by singing a fashionable song of Grimaldi’s in every town or village through which we passed. We received more money than we expected, and, to acknowledge the truth, spent it as freely; yet I was not happy: frequently reflections would obtrude, and make me disgusted with the life I led. (13–14)

Then Harriet dies, Jane is injured, and the narrator goes out ballad singing alone. She is invited into a house of genteel appearance, but finds that she is not permitted to leave and that she has in fact been procured to become the mistress of a baronet. Eventually, she escapes and gains a place as a nursery maid with a genteel city family, and one day when she goes into a shop to purchase some gloves she discovers that the proprietor is her old friend Jane, whose former lover has set her up in business—“Which shews that a blessing attends virtuous conduct” (24).

The *Surprising History* is fiction, but circumstantial details like the theatre songs learned by ear (the tunes at least), the journeys on foot out of the capital, and their



success with the “fashionable song of Grimaldi’s” nonetheless contribute something to our understanding of the ballad trade. Mary Saxby was able to support herself by singing ballads, and the itinerant women in the *Surprising History* find themselves rewarded, sometimes well, for singing (not, it seems, for selling ballad sheets). The *Surprising History* is indeed formulaic, but, with a framework of religiosity in place of the poetic justice of the sentimental novel, Saxby’s memoirs follow a pattern that is really quite similar. Both depict ballad singing as precarious and risky, and yet not quite the worst occupation imaginable for a socially disadvantaged woman. There may be truth in both publications, but there is also conventional morality and literary conceit.

Isobel Grundy charts the expansion of women’s involvement in all areas of the book trade throughout the century. McDowell argues that Robert Darnton’s notion of a “communications circuit” underlying literary production of all kinds will help set women’s roles in the book trade within a broader context (McDowell, “Women and the Business of Print” 136). In the 1790s the religious writer Hannah More established the Cheap Repository Tracts and successfully appropriated the structures of the ballad trade to disseminate a series of heavily moralized ballads, some of them of her own authorship. The more representative run of female ballad singers, if not exactly authors, can also be envisaged as having had the capacity orally to “rewrite” ballad texts to political ends when they cried them in the streets, and as having wielded some influence over the publishers as to what they should print and reprint (McDowell, *Women of Grub Street* 82–90; McDowell, “Women and the Business of Print” 143–44). Grundy, however, expresses some scepticism as to whether the mere fact of women being women would have made any real difference to the day-to-day business of the book trade occupations in which they were engaged (152). Sarah Bates and others carried on their businesses, apparently quite seamlessly, in the wake of their male relatives.

There remains much to be uncovered, but researching women in the ballad trade is enlightening because it helps fill out the canvas of economic activity and complicates certain stereotypes that might prevail about such things as impoverishment and lack of agency, and (from a more folkloric perspective) about imagined communities and ballad repertoires. On the one hand, the eighteenth century offers a lurid picture of destitution and prostitution, and on the other, one of small-scale commerce and economic activity. It is still not easy to strike the correct balance between those two poles.

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