

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Una McIlvenna. *Singing the News of Death: Execution Ballads in Europe 1500-1900*
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). 533pp. ISBN 978 0 19 755185 1**

Jennifer Lodine-Chaffey
Montana State University Billings
j.lodinechaffey@msubillings.edu

In *Singing the News of Death: Execution Ballads in Europe 1500-1900*, Una McIlvenna focuses not only on the narrative structure of execution ballads, but also details their performative aspects, moral purposes, and historical significance. Taking a multilingual approach by examining ballads in English, French, German, Dutch, and Italian and detailing their production for over 400 years, McIlvenna aims ‘to fully explore for the first time a phenomenon that was vibrant across Europe for centuries’ (p. 22). In contrast to earlier scholars, who often viewed eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ballads as vulgar and corrupted versions of traditional songs, McIlvenna argues that execution ballads in the later centuries showed marked continuities with early modern ballads. These ballads, she notes in her introduction, were not only textual accounts of public punishment, but also songs meant to be sung. Indeed, the use and reuse of well-known tunes added to the emotional appeal and moral message of the ballad. Popular across Europe and widely available to people from all walks of life, execution ballads typically offered first person accounts of crime, repentance, and divine judgment in the form of capital punishment.

At over 500 pages, McIlvenna’s study is extensive, including twenty-nine images of printed ballads and relevant artwork and eleven examples of musical notation. Apart from the introduction and concluding segments, the book is divided into two parts. Part I, ‘Features of Execution Ballads’, analyzes how melodies provided listeners with meaning beyond the printed words, details the importance of public shame in the execution ritual, and explores the mix of truth and exaggeration in ballads. Part II, ‘Crimes that Feature in Execution Ballads’, offers an analysis of the differing representations and treatments of criminals

featured in ballads including outlaws, murderers, heretics, and witches. The book ends with a consideration of the final centuries of execution ballad production.

In Chapter 1, McIlvenna explains how execution ballads used well-known melodies to create meaning. *Contrafactum*, or setting new words to old tunes, allowed listeners to associate earlier tunes to new ballads. Thus, execution ballads exploited the emotional aspects of traditional songs as ‘printers relied on the public’s knowledge of melodies in order to make their goods appealing’ and meaningful (p. 53). Similar types of ballads, McIlvenna finds, used the same tune. For instance, the popular tune ‘Fortune My Foe’ was used across Europe for ballads about murders and executions, becoming ‘a universal melody of lament’ (p. 62). While most execution ballads used sombre tunes, McIlvenna notes that some English and French ballads were based on melodies in major keys to satirize the executions of heretics and sexual criminals, while in German lands, printers tended to use well-known Christian folk hymns or chorales to stress the possibility of God’s redemption even at the scaffold. Ballads usually included tune directions for listeners and singers by indicating well-known melodies; those written in Italy, however, lacked such directions. Instead, Italian execution ballads made meaning through formal structure. Thus, in Italy, songs employing *terza rima* metre became associated with the executions of nobles and sympathetic treatments of the condemned; those in *ottava rima* offered chronological narratives of a criminal’s life and their just and grisly punishment; and those in *barzelletta* form typically mocked criminals from differing religions or geographic regions.

Chapter 2 offers an exploration of the shame and dishonour of public executions, a theme often mentioned in ballads. According to McIlvenna, shame was linked to the punishment rather than the crime committed. Indeed, other public punishments, including skimmingtons, whippings, and charivaris, carried a similar sense of disgrace and the office of executioner was often viewed as shameful, save in England and France. As evidence for the shame of public executions, McIlvenna points to the strategic choice of the route to the execution; the display of the condemned individual before the crowd; the methods of executions used; the transference of disgrace to surviving family members and the resulting economic repercussions; the lack of burial for many victims; and the posthumous punishment of the corpse through the display of body parts or dissection.

Despite claims of truthfulness, execution ballads presented listeners and readers with a mix of fabrication, exaggeration, and fact — a theme that McIlvenna takes up in her third

chapter. For modern readers, the inclusion of the first-person voice of the already deceased, the presence of miracles and folkloric elements, and the use of reoccurring tropes such as last-minute pardons and wrongly hanged maidens attest to the fictional aspects of these accounts. However, many of these elements provided readers and listeners with moral teachings and may have elicited sympathy for the condemned. Thus, the printers concerned themselves less with veracity and more with messages meant to instill social obedience and adherence to legal and religious precepts. Although in reality executions could be botched and innocent people executed, McIlvenna argues that ‘the message of almost all execution ballads is a highly repetitive, conservative [...] and fictional one: the condemned person is always guilty, the crime is universally decried, the execution goes smoothly, usually with the criminal confessing and begging for repentance, even giving a calm, eloquent speech of warning to spectators to eschew daily temptations so as to avoid the same fate’ (p. 173).

The final segment of the book explores the crimes most frequently showcased in execution ballads. Chapter 4 examines songs written about individuals executed for heresy and witchcraft. As expected in the age following the Protestant Reformations, authorial bias determined the depiction of those executed for heresy, with ballad writers praising victims of the same faith and denigrating those holding different religious beliefs. For authors celebrating the condemned as martyrs, familiar hymns were often employed as a form of religious protest. Ballads written about the execution of witches and sorcerers varied by region, as English works typically depicted witches as poor elderly women who ‘made a pact with the devil out of spite and revenge’ (p. 213), French ballads concentrated on demonic possession and werewolves, while German ballads detailed the mass executions of those condemned for witchcraft.

Murder ballads, the subject of Chapter 5, were one of the most popular types of execution ballads during the period McIlvenna covers. First appearing in the sixteenth century, these ballads provide historians with an uneven and inaccurate view of crime due to their focus on shocking and sensational killings. Murder ballads frequently detailed family murders, which were typically instigated by drink, the devil, provocation by kin, or poverty. Tropes, such as the victim’s final words pointing to the identity of the murderer, the killing of a pregnant woman by her lover, and the theme of ‘blood crying loud for vengeance’ are common in these ballads (p. 237). McIlvenna contends that nineteenth-century ballads tend to echo early modern murder ballads as they consistently blame Satan as the root cause of killings and refer to murderers as evil. The messages of ballads about servants killing their masters or mistresses reiterate social and religious teachings, reminding readers and

listeners to ‘avoid amorous relations with your master, respect your mistress, and above all, avoid the temptation to get ideas above your station that will lead you to ruin’ (p. 251). Murderous wives were a popular topic for seventeenth-century ballads, which often portrayed these women as scolds, even while pointing out that many who committed mariticide were victims of abuse. Although infrequent, ballads about infanticide offered a didactic message reminding listeners that ‘it is the responsibility of young women to bear the burden of sexual honour and resist the attractions of men’ (p. 277). Therefore, most murder ballads incorporated moral messages meant to warn the listeners and readers of the dangers of sin and the importance of social hierarchy. McIlvenna also points to regional differences in murder ballads about female murderers, noting that while women rarely spoke in German ballads, Italian ballads usually offered sympathetic accounts of the executions of noble women, often omitting their crimes, and detailing their repentance and beauty.

McIlvenna next explores the executions of high-ranking individuals for treason. Ballads about the political executions of celebrity subjects often celebrated the condemned individuals while simultaneously confirming the justice of their punishments. In addition to upholding the government and attesting to the importance of hierarchy in European society, McIlvenna points out two important aspects of execution ballads focused on royals and aristocrats. First, she notes that these ballads frequently functioned as tools for propaganda and battles over the meanings of these executions occurred through songs, which were used ‘to argue for the legitimacy of each side’s political and religious aims’ (p. 310). Second, misogynistic language appeared frequently in ballads about women rulers. McIlvenna provides a useful example of this trend through her exploration of the ballads about Marie-Antoinette, many of which blamed the executed queen for France’s economic problems and depicted her as monstrous and sexually deviant.

In Chapter 7 McIlvenna provides an overview of ballads about the executions of outlaws. While ballads celebrating executed highwaymen as dashing swashbuckling figures were common in England, other geographic areas tended to represent outlaws as dangerous and evil individuals who threatened families and religious communities. The more nostalgic or romanticized treatments of outlaws typically omit a moral lesson and represent the condemned as a ‘game’ criminal who meets his end with flair; many of these more positive depictions were also written years after the criminal’s death. More realistic ballads depicted the condemned as fearful criminals, such as the French chauffeurs who invaded homes and held the inhabitant’s feet to the fire to learn the location of valuables. These less glamorized

ballads also offered more conservative messages by depicting the condemned outlaws as unambiguously guilty and sincerely repentant.

McIlvenna turns to the nineteenth-century evolution of the execution ballad and its demise in her final chapter. During this time, Europeans showed great interest in sensational crimes and celebrity cases; ballads about spectacular murders predominated and authors continued ‘to use diabolical temptation to explain why men murder others’ (p. 395). The various phases of the criminal investigation and legal procedures also captured the public’s imagination leading to the publication of ballads at each stage of the process. The end of public executions, which McIlvenna attributes not to Enlightenment ideologies that viewed capital punishment as brutal but instead to fears of public revelry and mob mentality, signaled the end of execution ballads in most nations. As executions moved indoors fewer ballads were written and eventually the publication of execution ballads ceased altogether.

In conclusion, McIlvenna’s study makes an important contribution to scholarship about ballads. In particular, her analysis of the use of *contrafactum* to create meaning and ensure emotional engagement with execution ballads challenges readers to consider the experience of hearing and reading these works as multimodal rather than simply textual. Additionally, McIlvenna offers a corrective to the way scholars have approached execution ballads by noting the continuities across Europe and throughout time. Indeed, *Singing the News of Death* reveals that many of the features of early modern ballads — didacticism, sensationalism, and religious sentiment — continued to be deployed by writers and publishers until the final years of ballad publication. I am curious, though, why McIlvenna chose to focus this study only on certain languages and geographic areas. While her research project is extensive and considers a range of sources, more thorough discussions concerning the omission of Spanish or Scandinavian execution ballads and a call for scholars to explore ballads from other regions would strengthen the book’s impact and provide historians and literary critics with further reasons to examine execution ballads beyond the scope of this study.