



## Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies

Vol. 17, n°2 | 2013  
Varia

---

### Patricia Fumerton and Anita Guerrini (eds) (with the assistance of Kris McAbee), *Ballads and Broadsides in Britain, 1500–1800*

Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT, Ashgate Publishing, 2010, xvi + 357 pp., ISBN 978 0 7546 6248 8

James Sharpe

---



#### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/1445>

DOI: 10.4000/chs.1445

ISSN: 1663-4837

#### Publisher

Librairie Droz

#### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2013

Number of pages: 148-150

ISBN: 978-2-600-01776-3

ISSN: 1422-0857

#### Electronic reference

James Sharpe, « Patricia Fumerton and Anita Guerrini (eds) (with the assistance of Kris McAbee), *Ballads and Broadsides in Britain, 1500–1800* », *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [Online], Vol. 17, n°2 | 2013, Online since 10 December 2013, connection on 22 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/1445> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.1445>

---

This text was automatically generated on 22 September 2020.

© Droz

---

# Patricia Fumerton and Anita Guerrini (eds) (with the assistance of Kris McAbee), *Ballads and Broadsides in Britain, 1500–1800*

Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT, Ashgate Publishing, 2010, xvi + 357 pp., ISBN 978 0 7546 6248 8

James Sharpe

---

## REFERENCES

Patricia Fumerton and Anita Guerrini (eds) (with the assistance of Kris McAbee), *Ballads and Broadsides in Britain, 1500–1800*, Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT, Ashgate Publishing, 2010, xvi + 357 pp., ISBN 978 0 7546 6248 8.

- 1 Historians of crime in the early modern period have long been aware of the potentialities of various types of popular literature as sources for attitudes towards crime and criminals and, less certainly and less frequently, as sources of factual information. Initially, therefore, the volume under review here would seem to constitute a welcome addition to our knowledge and important genre within earlier modern popular culture, ballads and broadsides. In general, this initial reaction is justified : there are, however, some problems.
- 2 This collection is not, of course, purely about ballads and broadsides dealing with crime and punishment, and essays range widely from the advertising of monstrosity in ballads to broadside ballads about political cobblers. The collection begins with three essays focussing on the construction of the ballad genre, and in particular Patricia Fumerton's essay in this section can be recommended to anybody unfamiliar with broadsides and ballads as sources, the way in which collectors have put bodies of these materials together since the seventeenth century, and the much vexed question of the

status of the ballad as a product of oral or print culture. Four of the essays, however, are concerned with crime. Three, by Simone Chess, Frances E. Dolan, and Joy Wiltenburg are grouped in one section, entitled 'The Criminal Subject ; Gender, Law and Emotion', while the other, Thomas Pettitt's 'Journalism vs Tradition in the English Ballads of the Murdered Sweetheart' is located in a section on 'Strange News'.

- 3 Of these essays, Wiltenburg's is the most important. She addresses some of the key issues, in particular opening up the issue of the emotional content of the ballads, how, while being sensationalist crime accounts, they also invited public interest in the subjectivity of individual lawbreakers (and, above all, murderers), and how the criminal would move from contemplating the crime in question, to committing it, to the feeling remorse over it, and subsequently reacting to their deserved fate on the gallows. Obviously, these sources are open to multiple readings, and these are frequently more ambiguous than a straightforward acceptance on the part of the reader (or listener) to the consequences of lawbreaking. Nevertheless, Wiltenburg's suggestion that the ballads, in encouraging popular identification with very conventionalised narratives of crime and punishment, and of the perpetrators emotions, ranging from rage against their victim to subsequent remorse prompted by the workings of their own conscience and the realities of state power, present an almost Foucauldian vision of the state's powers of coercion and punishment as shapers of subjective experience. We are reminded of the need to focus on the relationship between what appears on the printed page, how the audience reacted to it (and as Wiltenburg reminds us, with ballads the potential audience went a long way down the social scale) and how the message in the medium was internalised. Wiltenburg also identifies that constant issue in how popular culture represents crime: how it offers 'a vicarious enjoyment of deviance, and constantly emphasized the common human feeling that bound the public observer to the inner experience of the criminal' (p. 186).
- 4 Simone Chess's objectives are more limited. She takes four ballads and, as the title of her essay puts it, seeks to show how they illustrate 'oath making, subjectivity, and husband murder in "murderous wife" ballads'. Her main point is that, by vowing or promising to kill their husbands, the women in these ballads broke the earlier vow of obedience they made when marrying, and hence paved the way for murder by establishing the subjectivity of the women in question and rendering them free agents capable of killing. This premise does rest on an assumption of pre-existing wifely subordination which goes beyond the wildest dreams of early modern patriarchs, and which probably bore little relationship to the reality of marital relationships among the middling and labouring sorts. There are also some fairly major interpretative leaps here. In particular, we find Anne Wallen, after being struck by her husband in the course of an altercation over his coming home drunk, beginning to 'curse and swear at him'. 'Cursing and swearing' is a term current in modern (English) English, and the 'swearing' element has no overtones of formal oath-taking. Yet within a few pages, with no evidence, the tentative suggestion that Wallen might be swearing a formal oath to kill her husband (which she eventually did with a chisel) becomes an established fact, 'a speech act, or a moment in which her speech is a performative act that recreates her as an autonomous subject, and, in doing so, helps her un-swear her wedding oath to coveture'. (p. 135). While accepting the importance of female speech and female verbal violence (which is what we are probably dealing with here) this does seem to be over-reading the evidence, this in turn reminding us of the problems inherent in interpreting popular literature of this type. Francis E. Dolan's chapter on

women who had committed petty treason by murdering their husbands, conversely, demonstrates how the evidence provided by ballads can be combined with that drawn from other sources to provide a more complete narrative of the case in question, and raises some interesting methodological issues. Issues of methodology are also raised by Pettitt's essay, which imaginatively opens up the relationship of the ballads upon which he focuses to broader, indeed international, folklore motifs.

- 5 Overall, then, this collection of essays will be of considerable interest to historians working on the history of crime in early modern England. It will also encourage scholars working on other national experiences of crime between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries to engage with ballads and other sources drawn from popular literature.

---

## AUTHORS

### **JAMES SHARPE**

Department of History  
University of York, UK  
jim.sharpe@york.ac.uk