Murder Ballads in English:
From Oral Tradition to Crime Fiction

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This paper presents a brief overview of the dynamics between the oral and written (printed) traditions in British literature in the period between the 17th and 19th centuries, with special emphasis given to first printings of British and Irish murder ballads. Exploring the early printing concepts of "ballad sheets" through analytical reading of specific texts the article on the one hand strives to point out the early roots of crime fiction in British literature (e.g. thematic sensationalism and lurid illustrations) while on the other attempting to shed light on the interaction of various elements of oral and written culture. By mapping out the connections between the patterns of oral tradition (melody, meter, public performance) and new forms of printed text, the goal is to show that ballad sheets, although representing first instances of periodicals still aim to maintain and transmit earlier oral poetic forms.

Key words: murder ballad, oral tradition, ballad sheet, early printing, British lyric, Irish lyric

The early printing process of popular ballads in England was dependant on many factors and many people, including the availability of printing presses and expenses involved, and difficulties in the dissemination of the printed materials. Authorship of the early texts was also problematic as, naturally, the printed ballad of the time was usually the product of more than one generation of minstrels, orators and their audiences. "The studied naïveté of many late ballads, together with the often quite spurious historical information which they contain, suggest the presence, persistence, and importance of minstrel-redactors in transmitting and even formulating the ballad" (Hirsh (ed.) 2005: 9).

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the printed ballad sheets were also still used primarily as sources for popular minstrels from which to learn the new songs, usually composed lyrically to existing and well-known tunes in order to facilitate both the minstrel's adoption and repetition of the song and the audiences' ability to understand it and potentially remember and later reproduce the salient points. Since at the time one of the favorite pastimes

of England's uneducated labor force was to attend public hangings and executions, it is natural that one of the most popular and enduring type of ballad was the so-called murder ballad, of which traces remain to this day especially in the work of folk and country musicians, and somewhat surprisingly, particularly in the United States (Bob Dylan, Bobbie Gentry). These ballads were renderings of popular murder or other criminal cases, composed in clear non-poetic style, almost prose-like had it not been for the functionality of the melody and rhythm as mnemonic devices. At the time the ballads were printed on "broadsides", large sheets of paper which carried the printed material on one side only and were mainly utilized for printing ephemera such as advertisements, public announcements and later on ballads and early news stories. Broadsides were the most common type of printed material available in England in the period between sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. With time such "ballad sheets" would also come to contain woodcut illustrations to accompany the thematic scope of the ballad and other paratextual information, such as the name of the printer's and areas of availability of their materials. The illustrations, rudimentary or more advanced as the case may have been, served primarily as incentives to the illiterate among the audiences, so that they could combine what they heard spoken or sung and the image presented to them, which was calculated to ensure their buying the ballad sheet, even though they were not able to read what was printed on it. Some of these illustrations were later framed as ornamental pictures of grizzly deeds, and served as reminders of rare leisure days. The printed materials were usually distributed at the aforementioned public executions, during which time fairs and other similar events would be organized near or at the site of the prison (especially Newgate Prison in the vicinity of London), where those members of the audience able to read could purchase them from itinerant sellers for a minimal price and those who could not would be able to gather around minstrels and orators and listen to the latest popular murder ballad. Oftentimes such ballads were composed to coincide with the imminent execution of an infamous criminal and then the songs would carry the additional intensity and relevance of current information. Most usually however, the ballads were thematically arranged around well-known or exotic historical cases of criminal behavior. At later stages (by the eighteenth century) the publishers would often commission authors to write ballads to popular melodies, usually in order to reflect certain events of popular interest and sell more copies. "On the whole, ballad writers, described by one scholar as 'hack versifier[s],' did not tap into the system of patronage available to writers in other literary circles, and were therefore predominately poor unless they had another more lucrative source of income" (McAbee, Murphy 2007).

The ballad-printing business was fully developed by the seventeenth century, with the forming of "The Ballad Partners", a group of six print-

ers/publishers, whose idea was to monopolize the industry by attempting to police the production of ballads outside of their guild. This, in turn led not only to the development of a "Ballad Warehouse" c. 1656 where stocks of printed materials were kept and sold only to chapmen (itinerant sellers of small print-ed materials) as opposed to hawkers (men who were selling their wares by crying out loudly the titles and more lurid aspects of the material at fairs and other mentioned places in order to sell the goods to as many people as possi-ble), but also to a growing number of "undercover" printers and publishers who were able to print ballads that were less conservative in content and com-prised alternative, more sensationalist materials which proved to be very pop-ular with audiences.

This paper takes a closer look at two murder ballads composed and rec-orded in English, although one of them was quite well-liked in Britain of the 17th and 18th centuries and the other is more local in character, created in Ire-land and reflective of the region and the times (19th century). The ballad later popularly known as "The Cruel Moor" was first collected in ballad sheet form by Samuel Pepys in the second part of the 17th century, and represents the genre of historical murder ballads, its focus primarily on the exotic nature of the location and the crime itself, depicting the barbarity of the Roman times as well as of the black heathens and thus reinforcing the prevailing notions of civility and religious observance of the era. The Irish ballad, saved in ballad sheet form by the famous Irish collector Patrick Weston Joyce belongs to the genre of contemporary murder ballads, as it depicts an apparently true crime that was fresh at the time, strictly of local interest and dedicated to the more sensationalist aspects of the case. The aim of juxtaposing these two ballads is not only to pinpoint the significant moment of transfer from oral tradition of balladry and medieval lyric composition to early printed and publicly dissemi-nated material, but also to observe the key elements in murder ballad for-mation which will be of particular import in the subsequent creation of crime fiction during the first part of the 19th century.

Sample 1: Historical Murder Ballad

Samuel Pepys (1633–1703), a famous British diarist, Chief Secretary to the Admiralty and Member of Parliament, was instrumental in offering histori-ans the first glimpse into the everyday life during the second half of the 17th century, including eyewitness accounts of such monumental events like the Great Fire of London (1666) and The Great Plague. His incredibly large and erudite library included a collection of some 1800 ballads, collected in their early printed form. This collection is now housed in The Pepys Library in his Alma Mater, Magdalene College, at the University of Cambridge. The collected

printed ballads, "begun with the acquisition of John Selden's ballad collection (probably in the 1680s)"[1] comprise 5 albums, and some of the printed sheets were cut down to size in order to fit the albums, but some of them, printed on smaller sheets have been kept intact. The collection is diverse thematically, and most types of ballads are well represented: "Pepys was curious about all the topics of his times, hence his collecting ballads on a variety of subjects: religion, history, the state, the latest murders and executions, drinking and good fellowship, frolics, etc." (Fumerton Online).

Figure 1 *A Lamentable Ballad of the Tragical end of a Gallant Lord and a Vertuous / Lady*; with the untimely end of their two Children, wickedly performed by a Heathenish Black-a-moor their Servant: the / like never heard of before. The (t)une is, The Ladies fall.

Although some other and later printed versions of this famous murder ballad, which has been in the *Dictionary of the Anonymous and Pseudonymous Literature of Great Britain* published by Samuel Halkett and Reverend John Laing in 1883 probably erroneously ascribed to the English poet Ambrose Philips, present the printed text of the song in stichic form, the version on the ballad sheet (published between 1686 and 1688) in the Pepys Collection is divided into 5 columns, and while the first two appear to be stichic, it becomes clear from the third column on that verses are in fact at least from then on divided into 17 clear octave stanzas, with two being split into quatrains due to the size of the sheet and the arrangement of text. It can be therefore deduced that the first two columns also would have been, were it not for the constraints in space (as the first two columns are positioned directly under the woodcut

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[1] "The Pepys Collection". https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/, accessed March 25, 2017, https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/Pepys

illustration) divided into further 8 octave stanzas, making up the final number of 25 octaves, or 190 lines. The rhyming pattern is somewhat scattered, with most stanzas maintaining the ABCBEFGF pattern, offering two points of rhyming in each stanza, with iambic trimeter verses following tetrameter in even numbered lines, which are additionally indented in relation to the odd numbered lines. The sheet also references as part of the title the former ballad *The Lady's Fall* to which tune the new murder ballad could be sung; this makes sense as the shortness of the verses and a sing-song quality of the shift between the eight and six-syllable lines lend themselves easily to melody. The reference to previous sung ballads was a popular ploy during the medieval period as an attempt to get the listeners and audiences to adopt more easily the new compositions: they would be rhythmically arranged to relate to existing and preferably well-known ballads, which would naturally first make them easier to learn by heart by the minstrels and then easier to adopt by the audience. Of course, most of these ballads were also performed narratively, without recourse to singing, especially by those performers who were unable to sing. These performances were proven to be more susceptible to subtle changes over time in interpretation, as prose retelling made it more difficult for a fixed form of the ballad to be maintained. Additional paratextual information offers the names of the printers: W. Thackeray and T. Passinger.

The Pepys version of the ballad sheet contains an intricate woodcut illustration depicting a man begging on his knees in front of a fortress while on top of the castle a black-skinned figure of a slave dressed only in a white cloth holds a woman by her hair and a child upside-down by his ankle, dangling. A black horse can be seen in the left-hand corner of the illustration, and the castle is surrounded by protective moat filled with dark water. Another child (female) is depicted falling from the castle into the moat. The detailing of the illustration, even though the drawing technique is fairly rudimentary, speaks of the craft of the woodcutter, but also of the rather expensive and sophisticated printing equipment able to produce such a detailed rendering of the ballad's theme. That the printers were willing and able to invest in such intricate work speaks of the lucrative deals they were able to make with the itinerant sellers of the ballads, especially those which proved popular with audiences as this one apparently did, which is evidenced by the fact that there are more than half a dozen known variants of the same ballad from different printers.

As mentioned before, the detailed illustration functions primarily as an explicatory drawing for those in possession of the ballad sheet who were illiterate. The illustrations in ballad sheets needed to show as much of the story as possible in order to make it worth the buying even for those who were not able to read the text of the ballad. Of course, the practice was such that for each ballad sheet bought there would be potentially a fairly large audience able to see it, or hear the ballad spoken or sung, but this was something the printers

and sellers had to count with. Additionally, for those who were literate the illustration would serve as a clear and tempting indication of what they were about to read, functioning in a way as today's blurbs on covers of books do by whetting the readers' appetites. The same function is performed by the long and detailed title which is in fact a summary of the textual composition.

The ballad itself, as is depicted in the illustration, recounts a historical tale of a wealthy nobleman with a faithful and loving wife ("A Virgin of great fame") and two small children ("whose beauty did excel"), who spends most of his time hunting wild animals with his black servant. The time period is not clearly stated anywhere on the sheet, but the mention of Rome as the setting and further lack of proper names and references positions it at a distance from the listener/reader. During one of the hunts the servant commits a misdeed which the nobleman corrects and thinks nothing more about it. Yet the day after his wife and children beg him not to go hunting again. Disregarding their pleas the man leaves, upon which the servant decides to take his vengeance for the slight he received. He isolates the lady and her children within the castle and upon the highest tower first ravishes the woman and then murders cruelly the children while their father watches helplessly from the field, finding no way to penetrate the castle as the servant has lifted the gate. Begging for his wife's life and upon the servant's brutal request, the lord cuts off his own nose without spilling a drop of blood, but the servant only laughs at him and throws the lady off the tower. Seeing this, the lord dies of sorrow and the servant decides to kill himself instead of waiting to get caught and tortured by the townsfolk.

The narrator of the ballad appears openly in only one instance during the text, at a crucial point when the crimes are about to be committed, claiming:

> But now my trembling heart it quakes
>   to think what I must write;
> My senses all begin to fail,
>   my soul it doth affright:
> Yet must I make an [end] of this,
>   which here I have b[e]gun,
> Which will make sad the hardest heart,
>   before that I have done.

The effect of this stylistic device is twofold, and at first glance might appear to be paradoxical: such a dramatic break before the main events within the ballad will incite the curiosity and the thrill of the audience's expectation even more, but it will also fully prepare the listener/reader for what is about to be revealed, especially with all the salient details having been revealed at the outset by the illustration and the summarizing title. This second effect, however, is not too far removed from the first: by pausing with the narration to prepare the reader in advance for the terror of the tale, the unknown author of the

ballad also magnifies the impact that the events themselves will have on his audience. The effects of this early oral poetic device will continue to be frequently employed in literature, and especially in genre fiction, as a means of ratcheting up the tension and augmenting the suspense factor of the plot.

Sample 2: 19ᵗʰ Century Contemporary Irish Ballad

Patrick Weston Joyce (1827–1914), Irish teacher, historical writer and editor, member of the Royal Irish Academy, became known internationally for his work on the origin of Irish toponyms and traditional Irish music, including ballads produced both in Irish and English languages. Although he was known to disparage ballads in English created in Ireland as *Anglo-Irish Peasant Songs*, he did include a number of recorded English language ballads in his anthologies of Irish folk songs, but even more importantly his two surviving scrapbooks contain printed pages of several murder ballads popular at the time. These scrapbooks were purchased and made available by the Dublin City Library and Archive in 2001.
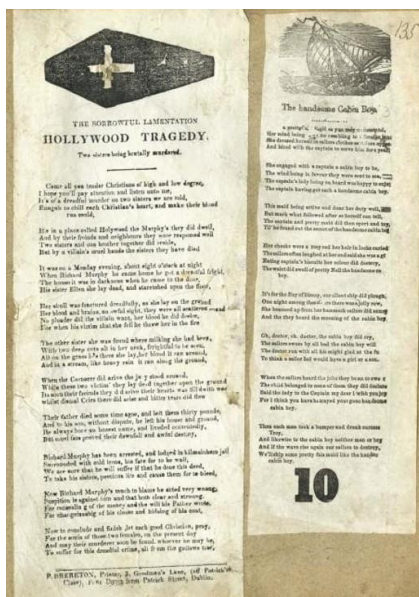

Figure 2 *The Sorrowful Lamentation*; *Hollywood Tragedy*:
Two sisters being brutally murdered

In contrast to most murder ballads of especially the medieval period, this particular ballad is formally divided into 10 quatrains instead of being recorded in stichic form. The rhyming scheme is regular and consists of a simple

AABB CCDD pattern, which might account for the division into stanzas. Each line is either 13 or 14 syllables in length, and the relative length of the lines achieves a more somber effect in the performing of the ballad. The title of the ballad utilizes the trope line of "Sorrowful Lamentation" as a means of inviting the knowing audiences into what is at this point anything but: the murder ballads are most emphatically not sorrowful and are certainly not lamentations except in the most basic of senses by which the narrator decries the horror of the crime at the beginning and the end of the ballad. In murder ballads lamenting has been replaced even as early as the 16th century by a sensationalist and fairly cold-blooded description of the crime committed, and the purpose of such ballads was not to induce sadness or tears but rather a sense of vicarious participation in the atrocious acts committed somewhere safely away from the listener – be it in the past or a in far away location. In this case, since the ballad was composed in English and the geographic location most carefully mentioned is the village of Hollywood in County Wicklow in Ireland, it can be assumed that the ballad was meant to travel further than through Ireland as in that case it would have been written in Irish.

The cutting also shows the rudimentary illustration of a black Catholic coffin with the sign of the cross upon it. The fact that the coffin is rendered fully black speaks more of the munificence of the printer than of any conscious artistic desire to create a sense of dread through the sheet of dense black color on the printed sheet, although such effect is surely also achieved. The crude simplicity of the illustration, especially when compared to the illustration of a ship in full sail in the cutting placed next to the murder ballad in Joyce's scrapbook adds to the rawness of the experience in detailing the facts of the murder which are to follow. Naturally, such comparison would be impossible in the original usage of the ballad sheet, but it is useful to remember that most of the woodcut illustrations by the 19th century were quite elaborate, especially if made in England which was much more advanced and wealthy than Ireland, and audiences would have surely been aware of this fact.

The beginning of the ballad invokes good Christians of high and low standing by introducing the narrator, usually in the guise of the very minstrel performing the song. Most ballads while orally performed would of course change shape over time and with different performers, partly in response to various audiences: "the formulas in any poetry are due, so far as their ideas go, to the theme, their rhythm is fixed by the verse-form, but their art is that of the poets who made them and the poets who kept them" (Parry 1971: 272). This particular version was printed by P. Brereton in Dublin, as suggested by paratextual information at the bottom of the page contained in Joyce's scrapbook. In contrast to other murder ballads collected within the scrapbook (e.g. *James M'Donald Who was executed in Longford for the murder of Anne O'Brien*) this piece of ballad sheet is apparently preserved whole, with woodcut illustration

and additional information above and below the ballad text respectively. The narrator, in accordance with oral tradition invites the listeners to take heed of the story he is about to tell and further invokes their Christian sensibilities in order to emphasize the un-Christian character of the murder that has been committed ("Enough to chill each Christian's heart and make their blood/run could"). In murder ballads the sensationalist material is often shrouded, more or less successfully in the concern for the sensitivities of the listener/reader, although the succeeding verses more often than not dispute such concern as the scenes depicted in song are regularly quite graphic and deliberately so ("Her skull was fractured dreadfully… her blood and brains… they were all scattered round", etc.). The sensationalist element of the murder ballads, both oral and printed, is essential in the later formation of the crime fiction genre within British literature as it correctly traces and targets the very feelings that are of significance in creating within the audience the sense of almost participating in the crime committed, or of witnessing it, but without the intruding reality of such acts. Additionally, such ballad material offered to the audience the frisson without exposure to danger, and satisfied their baser needs while capturing their imagination and attention successfully, thereby in essence justifying the means through achieving the main goal of oral and early printed telling of murder ballads – popularity and excitement.

From the second stanza the story of the murdered sisters is introduced, first by locating the place they lived in with their brother, and then by repeated reminders of the crime that is about to be committed. Repetition, of course, is a popular device in oral poetry, as it allows for layering of sensation and also serves as *aide memoire*, both for minstrels and narrators and their audiences, especially if the song is longer. The brother, Richard Murphy, is at first depicted as returning home in the evening to find his sisters dead in their home, and the song claims that the motive for the murder was nothing as simple as robbery but pure bloodlust, thereby adding to the sensationalist element of the ballad; for the audiences of the time, living in the era of lawlessness and barefaced avarice, gainful killing would almost be understandable regardless of the essential heinous nature of the crime, but bloodlust is seen as the most grievous of sins.

After the detailed description of the sisters' dead bodies the ballad proceeds to record the trappings of police investigation into the crime. This is an intriguing and telling development in ballad of the 19th century as the formal poetic liberty takes second place to fairly correct descriptions of procedure in dealing with a criminal case (the arrival of the coroner, taking statements from neighbors and friends, the actions of the police). This is another significant change that allows us to trace the beginnings of crime fiction to murder ballads of oral and early printed traditions. As the police force was being officially established and organized in the first part of the 19th century, the audiences in

search of sensationalist material grew hungry for details of such new and exciting developments, and murder ballads soon began to reflect such interests, giving full sway to procedure in place of detailing feelings, motivations and atmosphere as they mostly did in the 16th and 17th centuries. This in turn, especially with the growing number of literate consumers, would lead to prose compositions replacing the ballads, both orally presented and printed, first in the form of short factual accounts, then as short stories and finally, by the middle of the 19th century through the formation of the crime novel. Although murder ballads would survive as a form of poetic expression, and would go on to be utilized in traditional folk culture as means of supplying sensationalist material mostly to uneducated audiences, the newly developed crime fiction, both true crime and fictional, would by the turn of the century become the dominant form by far.

This particular ballad interestingly ends by describing how Richard Murphy, the brother, has been arrested in suspicion of murder of his sisters, but concludes the final stanza with the narrator's plea for Christian souls to pray "may their murderer soon be found, whoever he may be", which most unusually leaves room for doubt that the right culprit has been apprehended. Historical murder ballads concerned themselves with crimes committed in the past where everything was known and solved a long time ago, but contemporary ballads were sometimes careful not to judge those who have still not been proved of wrongdoing, and this seems to be the case in this ballad. In this way ballads dealing with contemporary crime begin to resemble a sort of poetic journalistic form which reports sensationally on the crime committed, but does not go so far as to mark the perpetrator.

Final Thoughts

British vernacular lyric followed earlier developments of oral secular poetic traditions in France (11th century), Germany (12th) and Italy (13th), and all of it stemming from the earlier Latin verse. Balladry as the most musical form of oral poetry became in Britain closely connected to early printing processes from 16th century onwards, most usually in the form of printed "broadsheets", later known colloquially as "ballad sheets", through which the dissemination of the texts became faster and wider. In response to growing audiences who were possessed of specific leisure tastes a highly specific genre of ballad was developed in the English language and this type of "murder ballad" was explored briefly in this paper in an attempt to render clear the connections between apparently diverse strands of cultural development in British literature of the time. "Throughout the canon of Middle English lyric poetry (…) whether written by men or by women, clerics or courtiers, English lyrics display an empiri-

cal tendency, a somewhat limited employment of literary convention for its own sake, and, in many cases, a kind of tough liveliness which sets them apart from many of their European cousins, as their attention to diction and to public attitude lends them both power and interest" (Hirsh (ed.). 2005: 8). And while it would be impossible and certainly unwise to say that murder ballads were any more a *certain, sine qua non* ancestor of crime fiction than was the gothic novel, the immense influence of both on the structuring of the genre is undeniable. The poems discussed in this article show remarkable and resilient qualities when it comes to utilizing literary devices which contribute to atmosphere, the build-up of tension and incorporation of sensationalist topics, and this belies their early origin, or more correctly, offers a valuable insight into just how *early* such contexts became incorporated in the creation of British popular literature. The distillation of these particular qualities from ballads into the form of early crime fiction of the 19th century naturally took a somewhat circuitous route, and yet the genre bears still clearly recognizable connections to oral traditions, not least in the performative aspects of the narrative.

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Illustrations

1   University of California, Santa Barbara – English Broadside Ballad Archive
2   Dublin City Library and Archive

Баладе о убиству на енглеском језику:
Од усмене традиције до криминалистичког жанра

Урош Томић

Резиме

Рад представља сажет осврт на динамику усмене и писане (штампане) традиције у британској књижевности у периоду између 17. и 19. века, с посебним нагласком на штампаним записима енглеских и ирских балада о убиству. Испитујући ране штампане концепте баладних листова критичким читањем појединачних записа, аутор с једне стране упућује на почетке криминалистичког жанра у британској књижевности (нпр. сензационализам у тематици и цртежу), а с друге осветљава узајамно дејство различитих елемената усмене и писане културе. Указујући на везе између усмене традиције и нових облика (штампаног) текста (мелодија, метрика, контекст јавног извођења песама), аутор настоји да покаже како баладни листови, иако представљају рани периодички материјал, и даље имају за циљ одржавање и преношење усмених песничких облика.

Кључне речи: баладе о убиству, усмена традиција, баладни листови, рана штампа, британска лирика, ирска лирика

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