

2014

# Empathy or Entertainment? The Form and Function of Violent Crime Narratives in Early-Nineteenth Century Broadsides

Bates, Kate

Bates, K. (2014) 'Empathy or Entertainment? The Form and Function of Violent Crime Narratives in Early-Nineteenth Century Broadsides', *Law, Crime and History*, 4(2), pp. 1-27.

Available at: <https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/8900>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/8900>

---

SOLON Law, Crime and History

University of Plymouth

---

*All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.*

# EMPATHY OR ENTERTAINMENT? THE FORM AND FUNCTION OF VIOLENT CRIME NARRATIVES IN EARLY-NINETEENTH CENTURY BROADSIDES

*Kate Bates*<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract:**

This article will explore the meaning and morality of popular accounts of violent crime in early-nineteenth century broadsides. Broadsides were a form of street literature and, for almost 300 years until the latter half of the nineteenth century, they were a forerunner to our modern tabloid newspapers. These flimsy sheets were published on a wide range of topics, but by far the most prevalent were those covering violent crime, especially murder. The publication of these broadsides reached a peak in the first half of the nineteenth century and their popular appeal was greatest among the labouring poor. This has led several critics, both then and now, to dismiss this cheap literature as merely gruesome and sensationalistic entertainment, appealing to the evidently debased and ignorant tastes of the uneducated masses. However, this article will argue that not only were these broadsides often far less gory than others have claimed, but also that these representations of murder held more social significance than vicarious gratification for their readers. For what is often overlooked is the fact that these dramatic depictions of violent crime reveal compassion rather than cruelty, and this article therefore will suggest that early-nineteenth century broadsides, in emphasising murder, actually reflected tastes that were more moral than morbid.

**Keywords:** broadsides, crime narratives, violent crime, murder, victimisation, empathy, emotion, morality

## **Introduction**

Broadsides were a form of street literature and, for almost 300 years until at least the late 1860s, they were a forerunner to our modern tabloid newspapers.<sup>2</sup> Like newspapers, early-nineteenth century broadsides covered a wide range of topics, from politics to royal scandals, but contemporary commentators attest that by far the

---

<sup>1</sup> Kate Bates is Lecturer in Criminal Justice at Liverpool John Moores University,

[K.L.Bates@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:K.L.Bates@ljmu.ac.uk) [dr.kate.bates@gmail.com](mailto:dr.kate.bates@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Leslie Shepard, *The Broadside Ballad: A Study in Origins and Meaning* (Herbert Jenkins, 1962); Matthias A. Shaaber, *Some Forerunners of the Newspaper in England, 1476-1622* (Frank Cass and Co., 1966); Robert Collinson, *The Story of Street Literature: Forerunner of the Popular Press* (J.M. Dent & Sons, 1973); Steve Chibnall, 'Chronicles of the Gallows: The Social History of Crime Reporting', in Harry Christian (ed.) *The Sociology of Journalism and the Press* (University of Keele, 1980) pp.179-217; Cory Way, 'Nothing beats a stunning good murder': Crime News in England and America', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2006; Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London* (Manchester University Press, 2012).

most popular were those reporting on crime and punishment, especially murders and executions.<sup>3</sup> Accounts of such events could run to several editions of a series of broadsides, covering all aspects of the criminal justice process, from details of the crime scene, to edited transcriptions of trial proceedings and, finally, the murderers' last dying speeches as they stood on the gallows. Indeed, it is this fascination with the minutiae of violent crime and punishment that has led nineteenth century broadsides themselves to become the focus of much academic deliberation and debate with regard to their form and function.<sup>4</sup> For example, not only have several scholars recognised the importance of this execution ephemera in the growth of working-class literacy during the first half of the nineteenth century, but also it has been suggested that broadsides dealing with violent crime gave their predominantly working-class readers a means to express and cope with the harsh realities and intolerable conditions of their own lives during a period of intense social change and industrialisation, and therefore played a significant role in the creation of a distinct urban working-class culture.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as Carter Wood argues, cultural narratives have always been central to the ways in which people deal with the experience of violence, whether as perpetrators, victims or witnesses, and provide 'the social imaginaries through which its experience is organised'.<sup>6</sup> It is unfortunate therefore that, in his seminal work on changing social meanings of violence in the early

---

<sup>3</sup> See, most notably, Charles Manby Smith, *The Little World of London; or, Pictures in Little of London Life* (Kessinger, 2010, 1<sup>st</sup> edn: 1857); Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor; A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Those That Cannot Work, and Those That Will Not Work. Vol. 1: The London Street-Folk* (Griffin, Bohn, and Company, 1861) and Charles Hindley, *Curiosities of Street Literature* (Seven Dials Press, 1969, 1<sup>st</sup> edn: 1871).

<sup>4</sup> For several contrasting interpretations see David D. Cooper, *The Lesson of the Scaffold: The Public Execution Controversy in Victorian England* (Allen Lane, 1974); Chibnall, 'Chronicles of the Gallows'; Beth Kalikoff, *Murder and Moral Decay in Victorian Popular Literature* (UMI Research Press, 1986); Patricia Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture 1790-1860* (Clarendon, 1991); V.A.C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770-1868* (Oxford University Press, 1994); Philippe Chassaing, 'Popular Representations of Crime: The Crime Broadside - A Subculture of Violence in Victorian Britain?', *Crime, History & Societies*, 3, 2 (1999) 23-55 and Ellen O'Brien, *Crime in Verse: The Poetics of Murder in the Victorian Era* (Ohio State University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Richard D. Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet: Murders and Manners in the Age of Victoria* (J.M. Dent & Sons, 1972); Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth Century British Working-Class Literature* (Croom Helm, 1974); Louis James, *Print and the People 1819-1851* (Allen Lane, 1976); Victor E. Neuburg, *Popular Literature: A History and Guide* (Woburn Press, 1977); David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1989); Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*; Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Ohio State University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> John Carter Wood, *Violence and Crime in Nineteenth-Century England: The Shadow of Our Refinement* (Routledge, 2004) p.12; John Carter Wood, 'A Change of Perspective: Integrating Evolutionary Psychology into the Historiography of Violence', *British Journal of Criminology*, 51, 3, May (2011) 479-498.

decades of the nineteenth century, he fails to take account of broadsides whilst examining working-class attitudes to customary versus civilised violence.

However, for those historians who do examine this genre, one often recurring and currently predominant view is that these murder and execution broadsides were 'primarily a form of entertainment' and that the supposedly extreme narratives of graphic interpersonal violence contained within them had the fundamental ability to titillate and 'amuse'.<sup>7</sup> This somewhat pejorative label of sensationalistic entertainment has often been applied to this cheap literature and throughout their history these broadsides have been disparaged and dismissed, deemed unworthy of serious consideration. For example, nineteenth century, middle-class critics frequently denounced them as 'doggerel' and 'thoroughly despicable and worthless'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the fact that the most popular broadsides during this period mainly contained tales of 'barbarous' murders led many to speculate about the debased morals of those who wrote and read them, and this 'gallows' literature was deemed a morbid curiosity produced purely for 'the delectation of the mob'.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly, both then and now, the immense popularity of this genre of broadside has been blamed upon the apparently debased and ignorant tastes of the working classes, who were the main audience for this type of street literature during this period. For example, one modern scholar states that nineteenth century crime broadsides in particular 'appealed directly to the lowest common social denominator and relied on the prurient and voyeuristic tendencies of the masses and their seemingly insatiable desire for vicarious terror and cheap thrills'.<sup>10</sup> Whilst this notion may create some dispute amongst scholars of the genre, more recently it has similarly been argued that the lower classes of the early to mid-nineteenth century clearly revelled in the 'vulgar and outrageous images of brutal murders' contained in broadsides, which provided their readers with 'an alternative and more suitable way to experience and even participate in violence'.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as this article will show, the insistence that these broadsides are simply a form of violent entertainment does both

---

<sup>7</sup> Crone, *Violent Victorians*, p.99.

<sup>8</sup> Sabine Baring-Gould, *Strange Survivals: Some Chapters in the History of Man* (Methuen & Co, 1892) p.209 and Francis J. Child 'Ballad Poetry', in Frederick Barnard and Arnold Guyot (eds.) *Johnson's New Universal Cyclopaedia: Volume 1* (A.J. Johnson, 1878) pp.365-368, p.367.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous, 'The Press of the Seven Dials', *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, 130, 28 June (1856) 401-405, p.401.

<sup>10</sup> Heather Worthington, *The Rise of the Detective in Early Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p.8.

<sup>11</sup> Crone, *Violent Victorians*, p.110, p.267.

their readers and their content a disservice because, as any close reading of the genre will reveal, there is much more to them than celebratory and salacious gore. In fact, this article will argue that not only were these broadsides often far less graphic and gruesome than others have claimed, but also that these representations of murder held more personal and social significance than vicarious gratification for their readers. For what is often overlooked is the fact that these dramatic depictions of violent crime reveal compassion rather than cruelty, and this article therefore will suggest that early-nineteenth century broadsides, in emphasising murder, actually reflected tastes that were more moral than morbid. This is an interpretation that is long overdue because whilst important historical work has been achieved regarding the emergence and cultivation of 'the newfound power of empathy' and public sentiment, sympathy and sensibility, due to the reading of Anglo-American novels in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the middle classes,<sup>12</sup> no such regard has been given to the similar influence of the street literature of the lower orders, despite the increasingly 'very real impact of working-class presence in the public sphere' during the same period.<sup>13</sup>

## 1 Narratives of Violence and Victimisation in Early-Nineteenth Century Broadsides

In order to explore narratives of violent crime in early-nineteenth century broadsides, a sample of 650 was taken from three different collections, containing broadsides printed and published all over Britain between the years 1800 to 1850.<sup>14</sup> Although it must be noted that there was, and still is, a separate legal system in Scotland to that in England and Wales, the broadside trade during this period was nationwide and broadsides were produced in locales covering the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, with the main hubs of production being London, Newcastle, Glasgow and

---

<sup>12</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (WW Norton and Co., 2007) p.28; G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 1992); Glenn Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* The University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Aruna Krishnamurthy, 'Introduction', in Aruna Krishnamurthy (ed.) *The Working-Class Intellectual in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Ashgate, 2009) pp.1-24, p.18.

<sup>14</sup> 324 broadsides were taken from the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera held at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford; 316 were taken from the National Library of Scotland's The Word on the Street collection; and ten were taken from a Special Collection held at the University of Glasgow. All of the broadsides used are digitised copies and are available for download online at: <http://www.johnjohnson.chadwyck.co.uk>; <http://digital.nls.uk/broadsides>; and <http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/teach/hang/ephg68.html>. The two main collections accessed, the John Johnson and National Library of Scotland, have fully searchable indexes under various subject categories, which for this study included crime, murder, last words and executions.

Edinburgh. News of violent crime therefore, wherever it occurred in the country, reached both urban and rural audiences throughout the nation via a dedicated network of broadside pedlars and printers. This is an important point to note for, as this article will argue, this nationwide broadside trade indicates that for the most extreme crimes of violence and murder, there is evidence of a universality of emotion that extended far beyond geographical boundaries and differences in legal systems. Indeed, the two main collections used for this study both contain broadsides printed in Scotland and England indicating the nature and extent of not only the broadside trade itself in the early nineteenth century, which has been extensively covered elsewhere,<sup>15</sup> but also the widespread interest that these crimes of violence evoked. This suggests therefore that it was the essence of the crime narrative contained in these broadsides that mattered to their readers and not necessarily either provincial or procedural concerns. It is a shame therefore that most current studies of early-nineteenth century broadsides tend to focus only on those printed in London, since Scotland also had its thriving broadside trade which is often overlooked.<sup>16</sup>

Also it was considered important for this study to conduct a discourse analysis on all aspects of the broadsides' textual content, whether verse or prose. This was because several broadside scholars have chosen to favour discussion of the copies of verses contained in broadsides rather analyse their prose accounts of crime and punishment. For example, O'Brien considers Victorian crime broadsides as a form of 'street poetics', and quite deliberately disregards any interrogation of their prose discourses.<sup>17</sup> This favouring of the verse texts of broadsides is one that is unaccountably adopted by a number of studies.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Crone states that verses

---

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*; John Strathesk (ed.) *Hawkie: The Autobiography of a Gangrel* (David Robertson & Co., 1888); Shepard, *The Broadside Ballad*; Leslie Shepard, *John Pitts: Ballad Printer of Seven Dials, London 1765 – 1844* (Private Libraries Association, 1969); Leslie Shepard, *The History of Street Literature* (David & Charles, 1973); Collinson, *The Story of Street Literature*; Neuburg, *Popular Literature*; Peter Isaac (ed.) *Six Centuries of the Provincial Book Trade in Britain* (St Paul's Bibliographies, 1990); Robin Myers and Michael Harris, M. (eds) *Spreading the Word: The Distribution Networks of Print 1550-1850* (St Paul's Bibliographies, 1990); Sheila O'Connell, *The Popular Print in England* (British Museum Press, 1990); Cathy L. Preston and Michael J. Preston (eds) *The Other Print Tradition: Essays on Chapbooks, Broadsides, and Related Ephemera* (Garland, 1995); Edward J. Cowan (ed.) *The Ballad in Scottish History* (Tuckwell Press, 2000); Charles Hindley, *The Life and Times of James Catnach, (Late of Seven Dials), Ballad Monger* (Kessinger, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> A notable exception is the work of Anne-Marie Kilday who uses Scottish broadsides in her studies of infanticidal women in the eighteenth century.

<sup>17</sup> O'Brien, *Crime in Verse*, p.34.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, James Hepburn, *A Book of Scattered Leaves: Poetry of Poverty in Broadside Ballads of Nineteenth-Century England. Study and Anthology: Vol. 1* (Associated

are 'perhaps the most important feature on murder and execution broadsheets' without providing any evidence or explanation to prove why and it is this unjustified bias towards broadside verse which appears only to result in an inconsistent reading of the genre as a whole.<sup>19</sup> Not least when it is considered that with regards to the sample used for this particular study only 13% of the broadsides contained any form of verse at all. Similarly, much emphasis has been given to the woodcut illustrations of broadsides, especially those depicting executions.<sup>20</sup> However, only 19% of the sample considered for this study contained any form of decorative illustration, suggesting that textual discourses of broadsides are by far their most important feature and, hence, overdue some close analysis.

For this reason especial consideration was given in this study to prose broadside narratives which appeared to emphasise the most lurid, shocking and emotive aspects of crime and violence, especially those words and phrases which specifically refer to acts of extreme physical violence and/or the infliction of serious personal injury. This analysis revealed that contrary to the common assumption that a predominant theme of broadsides is graphic and sensationalistic bloodshed,<sup>21</sup> there is ample evidence to suggest that descriptions of violence in broadsides are nominal but arguably fulfil an important function. For example, out of 650 broadsides, only 301 included any violent or graphic content, meaning that over half of the whole sample (54%) featured no depictions of bloodshed or killing at all, even though they related to acts of extreme physical assault and murder, preferring instead to focus their attention upon the execution of the criminal or to provide religious and/or moral commentary upon the events. Out of the 301 'violent' broadside accounts, a total of 50 make generalised references to revolting spectacles of barbarity but decline to provide any detailed descriptions regarding the violence involved in the individual crimes due to a stated regard for public decency, even though they evidently had access to this information from trial transcripts and other newspaper sources. For example, 'Here was depicted a scene of iniquity truly diabolical,... but the details of which it would be improper here to recite, and which, having answered the purposes

---

University Presses, 2000) and John Holloway and Joan Black (eds.) *Later English Broadside Ballads: Vol.2* (Routledge, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Crone, *Violent Victorians*, p.110.

<sup>20</sup> See, most notably, Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, but also Thomas Gretton, *Murders and Moralities: English Catchpenny Prints 1800-1860* (British Museums Publications, 1980).

<sup>21</sup> Chassaingne, *Popular Representations*; Worthington, *Rise of the Detective*; Crone, *Violent Victorians*.

of justice, ought not to be repeated',<sup>22</sup> or 'The circumstances attending the commission of the crime are of too indelicate a nature to admit of a public description'.<sup>23</sup>

Evidently this self-censorship was undertaken so as not to give offence, especially if the crime was sexual in nature or involved injuries to infants, and only very vague comments were made in order to intimate what had occurred, such as, 'Jewett than [*sic*] placed the child upon the bed, and fully completed his criminal purpose'.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the fact that 'euphemisms veiled the most horrific crimes' in broadsides has also been recognised by Gatrell, who suggests that this cheap literature was often far less sensational than others have made out.<sup>25</sup> In addition, 82 of the 'violent' broadsides contained only purely factual statements and/or medical descriptions from surgeons' depositions given at inquests or trials and, although sometimes graphic in content, these often meticulous descriptions can hardly be claimed to sensationalise the violence of the attack or revel in its physical effects on the victim, but do instead educate their readers regarding forensic evidence, which was becoming 'a more regular feature in trials for fatal violence' during this period.<sup>26</sup> For example, one broadside reported that:

The Surgeon deposed, That, on examining the body he discovered a large wound on the posterior of the head, occasioning a violent depression of the brain, and several smaller wounds on various parts of it, which had doubtless been the cause of her death. He further discovered a cut on the thick part of the right thigh, about 4 inches long, effected by a sharp hatchet, and had penetrated to the bone. One of her eyes was entirely gone, supposed to have been eaten out by vermin. He then opened the body, and took away the foetus of a fine female child, nearly at full growth.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> *An Account of the Crimes, Trial, and Execution of Joshua Beaumont, For A Rape and Murder. Who was Hanged at York, on Wednesday, Aug. 15, 1810*, [Gateshead: Marshall], Oxford, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera: Crime, Murder and Executions [Shelfmark: Crime 1 (20)].

<sup>23</sup> *An Account of the Cruel and Barbarous Murder Of Euphemia Couper, A young Girl, only between 9 and 10 years of age, By Donald McGraw aged 72, A Merchant in Perth; Who was executed for the same, pursuant to his sentence, on Friday last, July 11, 1806*, [Gateshead: J. Marshall], John Johnson Collection, [Shelfmark: Crime 2 (11)].

<sup>24</sup> *The Last Dying Words, Speech, and Confession of Thomas Jewett, who was executed on Saturday the 4<sup>th</sup> Day of April, 1807, on the Drop behind the Castle, York*, [n.pl.: Angus], John Johnson Collection, [Shelfmark: Crime 1 (101)].

<sup>25</sup> Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, p.175.

<sup>26</sup> Shani D'Cruze, 'Murder and Fatality: The Changing Face of Homicide', in Anne-Marie Kilday and David Nash (eds.) *Histories of Crime: Britain 1600-2000* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) pp.100-119, p.108.

<sup>27</sup> *A true and particular Account of the Crime, Trial, and Behaviour, of John Robinson, of Mickleby, Near Whitby, Farmer; Who was Executed at York, on Monday, July 20, 1807, for*



Consequently, only the remaining 169 broadsides (26% of the overall broadside sample) can be said to be in any way vicariously lurid or needlessly explicit in detail. However, even the most graphic narrations still tend only to either describe the crime scene or the attack and wounds, all details in fact which appear in trial evidence, but these broadsides present the same accounts using more plebeian, non-medical, unofficial and ineloquent language. For example: 'The body presented a most horrible appearance, the head being beaten to such a degree, that it was nearly flat, and the brains were scattered about in all directions upon the ground',<sup>28</sup> or '[he] stabbed his wife in many parts, ripped her body up, and tore out part of her bowels!!! And after thus mangling the unfortunate and unsuspecting woman, he cut her throat from ear to ear'.<sup>29</sup> Also, these graphic broadsides always qualify their gruesome content by making subjective statements about it, such as 'one of the most horrible spectacles that can be imagined',<sup>30</sup> or 'these fearful atrocities',<sup>31</sup> and in doing so invoke a sense of horror and genuine shock. In addition, only twelve broadsides discuss bloodshed in verse form and could be interpreted as written for entertainment purposes alone. However, it has been argued that verse may have been used in these news ballads to 'better extract the moral truth' from the event described, and that this form of print was therefore not merely an amusement but ultimately helped their readers to absorb the enormity of the situation before them.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately then, it is possible to argue, based upon the sample evidence, that the overwhelming majority of broadsides include their violent content, not simply for sensationalistic entertainment but, more importantly, to provide factual information about a particular

---

*the cruel and barbarous Murder of Susannah Wilson, his Servant, a in State of Pregnancy*, [Gateshead: Marshall], John Johnson Collection, [Shelfmark: Crime 2 (54)].

<sup>28</sup> *An Account of a dreadful and barbarous Murder, Committed on the Body of Richard Taylor, a Shoemaker in his 79<sup>th</sup> Year, near the Village of Lumley, in the County of Durham, etc.*, [Gateshead: Stephenson], John Johnson Collection, [Shelfmark: Harding B 9/3 (144)].

<sup>29</sup> *An Account of A Dreadful Case of Murder and Suicide, Which occurred in the City of West Chester, on the Night of Friday, the 19<sup>th</sup> of February, 1813, where John Hamilton, a Weaver, first murdered his Wife in a most cruel manner, and then cut his own Throat from Ear to Ear*, [n. pl.: G. Angus], John Johnson Collection, [Shelfmark: Crime 1 (87)].

<sup>30</sup> *An Account Of The Examination of Thomas Clark, For The Wilful Murder Of Mary Ann Westerup, At Hall-Garth Water Mill, near Durham, on Sunday Afternoon, the 8<sup>th</sup> Day of August, 1830, at 10 Minutes before Six*, [n. pl.: W. Boag], John Johnson Collection, [Shelfmark: Harding B 9/2 (90)].

<sup>31</sup> *Execution. A Full and Particular account of the Execution of W. Burke, who was hanged at Edinburgh on Wednesday the 28<sup>th</sup> January, 1829; also, an account of his conduct and behaviour since his condemnation, and on the Scaffold*, [n. pl.: n. pr.], Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: L.C. Fol.74 (097)].

<sup>32</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Factual fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (Columbia University Press, 1983) p.70.

crime and to invoke emotional reaction and moral denunciation against violent behaviour.

One main example of this latter function is the case of the Gilmerton carter murder in 1830, which is covered in 14 different broadsides contained in the National Library of Scotland collection.<sup>33</sup> John Thomson and David Dobie were two young men in their twenties who worked as coal carters and who were hired by an unmarried woman named Margaret Paterson, aged 35 years, to take her to visit her father in the village of Gilmerton near Edinburgh. On the journey, these men assaulted, raped, robbed and murdered Margaret in so brutal a manner that, even to this day, the details beggar belief. Not only did Dobie and Thompson forcibly drag her into a field, brutally beat and repeatedly rape her, but also afterwards they proceeded to further abuse and mutilate her person by inflicting several serious lacerations, presumably with her own scissors which were found blood-stained nearby,<sup>34</sup> and by forcibly inserting various items into her vagina and 'up her fundament',<sup>35</sup> including the broken bones of her own corset, several rough stones, handfuls of straw, and a quantity of leaves, horse dung and pieces of coal. Despite her dreadful injuries, which left her 'grievously cut and torn in the inward parts of her body',<sup>36</sup> Margaret however did not die at the scene, but was found later by locals, who were attracted by her groans to the spot where she had been abandoned; and 'finding her to be in a very deplorable state',<sup>37</sup> she was given immediate assistance and taken to her father's house, where she languished in the greatest of agonies for five full days before dying, having retained 'the full possession of her faculties till the last moment'.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, The Word on the Street Collection: Crime, Executions and Executioners, Last Words, Murder, available at <http://digital.nls.uk/broadsides/index.html>.

<sup>34</sup> *Murder. Fourth Edition – Authentic Particulars. A Fourth Edition, containing New and Interesting Particulars of that most heart-rending and cruel Rape, Robbery, and Murder, of Margaret Paterson, at Gutterdike near Gilmerton, on the night of Saturday, the 24<sup>th</sup> of April, 1830, ...*, [n. pl.: Forbes & Owen], The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: F.3.a.14 (53)].

<sup>35</sup> *Trial and Sentence. A full and particular account of the Trial and Sentence of John Thomson and David Dobie, carters, Gilmerton, who are to be Executed at Edinburgh, on Wednesday the 18<sup>th</sup> August 1830, for the Assault, Rape, Murder and Robbery of Margaret Paterson, and their Bodies to be given for dissection!*, [n. pl.: Wm. Robertson], The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: F.3.a.13 (10)].

<sup>36</sup> *Trial and Sentence*, The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: F.3.a.13 (10)].

<sup>37</sup> *Trial And Sentence Of The Gilmerton Monsters*, [n. pl.: Forbes and Owen], The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: F.3.a.14 (58)].

<sup>38</sup> *Murder. Fourth Edition – Authentic Particulars*, The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: F.3.a.14 (53)].

Needless to say the public outrage in Scotland regarding this murderous attack was immense, exceeded only by the crimes of Burke and Hare two years before, and broadside readers were spared no awful details, being exposed to the full horror of the trial indictment and medical depositions. But that, however, is the point - for in order to evoke the appropriate response to such a hideous crime, the public had to be made aware of the extent of the brutal violations. Skirting the details would have diminished the moral atrocity of the crime and, in this case especially, exhaustive descriptions of the violence endured effectively allowed broadside readers to bear witness to the victim's sufferings. Certainly, the harrowing nature and extent of Margaret Paterson's degradation seemed to galvanise public opinion and the crime was viewed as a wicked and brutal abomination and the men concerned a monstrous disgrace to civilised society. The people of Edinburgh especially seemed both shocked and saddened that this atrocity could have happened so near to their beloved capital city and the trial judge, Lord Meadowbank, no doubt seemed to speak for them when he was reported as saying:

It is hardly possible to imagine that persons would have been found living in this Christian land who could have brought their minds to the commission of such atrocious crimes. Melancholy it is to think that, had this unprotected female been wandering the world amongst the most barbarous people, she would have been in a state of comparative safety to what she was within three miles of the metropolis of this most civilized country.<sup>39</sup>

This case, therefore, certainly suggests that entertainment was probably the furthest thing from the public's mind when faced with such a horrific crime and, moreover, points to the fact that emotional repercussions of violent acts, especially brutal murders, are often felt far beyond the immediate criminal and victim. Certainly modern criminologists recognise the phenomenon of 'secondary victimisation', where murders can also take their toll on the wider community in which they occur.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, early-nineteenth century broadsides provide evidence of this secondary victimisation because their accounts of violent crime do not just revel in the gory details of murder as 'part and parcel of the fun',<sup>41</sup> but also tell of how local communities struggled to deal with such a traumatic event. In fact, these broadsides contain a plethora of narrative accounts describing how people responded in the immediate aftermath of a violent crime, such as murder, and their narrations expertly

---

<sup>39</sup> *Trials For Rape, &c - D. Dobie, J. Thompson, and D. Bertie, Before The High Court Of Justiciary – July 12 and 14*, [n. pl.: Forbes and Owen], *The Word on the Street Collection*, [Shelfmark: F.3.a.14 (60)].

<sup>40</sup> Shani D'Cruze, Sandra Walklate and Samantha Pegg, *Murder* (Willan, 2006) p.20.

<sup>41</sup> Chassaigne, *Popular Representations*, p.27.

convey the sense of confusion and concern felt by locals after such a serious crime has been committed in their midst. For example, one broadside recounts how the fatal stabbing of a young girl by her jealous ex-lover in a public house in the east-end of Glasgow resulted in an evening of dancing and drinking becoming 'a scene of horror, terror, and dismay; females shrieking, and shouts of murder spread terror around; the whole neighbourhood became alarmed' and that 'the death of the unfortunate girl has caused a great sensation in that vicinity, where friends of both parties reside'.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, there is also often an intense sadness conveyed by these broadside accounts, as if the usually peaceable and industrious locals are deeply wounded and disturbed by a murder occurring in their neighbourhood, for example, at one murder scene 'Crowds of spectators thronged ... during the whole of yesterday, and the countenance of every one cast a melancholy gloom'.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, there is also a strong commiseration with the victim, and locals are often evidently left feeling responsible for securing them justice. One particularly poignant broadside shows that this sense of responsibility is experienced even if the victim is a complete stranger. It gives no details of the crime but merely contains a verse entitled *A Tribute of Regret*, written in response to an 'unprecedentedly barbarous murder', which took place in the small parish of Lochwinnoch in Renfrewshire in the year 1821. The victim was a person unknown to locals, but the distress and anger they felt on his behalf was no less for that, for the verse concludes by saying:

And, while thy BLOOD for Vengeance cries,  
- Borne on the wings of deep drawn sighs,  
Thy Country's pray'rs to heav'n shall rise,  
And make thy cause their own, poor stranger.<sup>44</sup>

The broadside also poignantly alludes to the probability that this lonely stranger would have 'a wife, children, and other endearing relatives' grieving over his loss at

---

<sup>42</sup> *Awful Murder In Bridgeton. An account of a most cruel and inhuman Murder, which was committed at Mile End, Bridgeton, on Monday evening last, on the body of Sarah McVicar, a fine young woman, about 18 years of age, who was stabbed in the throat by her Sweetheart, Charles Campbell, in a fit of jealousy, and instantly fell dead at his feet – 5<sup>th</sup> December, 1825*, [Glasgow: John Muir], The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: L.C. Fol.73 (084)].

<sup>43</sup> *An Account Of The Horrid Murder Of Mr Marr, Mrs Marr, their Child, and Apprentice, In their Dwelling House, in Ratcliff-highway, on Saturday Night, 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1811*, [n.pl.: Angus], John Johnson Collection, [Shelfmark: Crime 2 (6)].

<sup>44</sup> *A Tribute of Regret*, [Lochwinnoch: W. Taylor], The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: APS.4.82.33].

home and so it is doubtful that this broadside was written to amuse its readers but, more appropriately, to publically mourn the fact that someone had so tragically and cruelly lost their life.

In fact, early-nineteenth century broadsides often provide their readers with emotional cues as to how they should react to any particular account of violent crime, with appeals for pitiful compassion, not gleeful gratification, being the norm. Indeed, broadsides often clearly state that murder, considered to be the blackest of all crimes, is abhorrent to common feelings of humanity and that the natural human response is not to feel titillating pleasure but instead to recoil with horror and indignation when faced with it. It is certainly evident from a reading of these broadsides that murder is considered a highly emotive issue and there is no shortage of adjectives used to portray the expected response to it, for example, 'heinous', 'repugnant', 'atrocious' and 'infernal'. However, broadside narratives of murder do not only seek to provoke knee-jerk, emotional reactions but also often articulate in considerable detail much more lucid explanations for the strength of response this crime evokes. One broadside, in particular, neatly summarises the emotions behind the moral denunciation of murder in society and is all the more interesting because the victim who inspired such an impassioned response upon his unlawful and untimely death was just a simple labouring man killed as a result of a drunken dispute. The broadside account of his killing is prefaced with this quote:

Murder is a crime which too unhappily occurs in this country: and when a deed of this dark description has been committed, every feeling of the human heart rises up anxious to discover the perpetrator of such a dreadful outrage, and the mind never rests satisfied till the murderer is sacrificed to the demands of Justice. Murder carries with it such an appalling sound - such dreadful ideas - that human nature starts back affrighted, and is shocked at the contemplation of the horrid deed! It is the greatest possible violation of the social compact; and is not only a crime against the law of the land, but against the law of God. By murder, the wretched victim is plunged into eternity, unwarned, and oftentimes unprepared. By murder, a rent is made in a peaceful family, and the domestic heart is frequently robbed of one of its most valuable ornaments. The murderer lifts up his impious hand, and setting at defiance all rules and law, sends the object of his stroke into another world - deprives society of a member - plunges families into the abyss of affliction and distress - and excites the utmost consternation and alarm throughout the neighbourhood.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> *An account of James Caines, aged 20, and Mark Whiting, aged 24, Who were Executed at Gloucester, April 11, 1825, for the Murder of Isaac Garden or Gordon, of Bitton, in Nov. last*, [Chippenham: R. Alexander], John Johnson Collection, [Shelfmark: Crime 1 (34)].

This broadside, and many others like it, certainly seems to take murder seriously and by emphasising the public and personal effects of such a crime appears to urge its readers to do the same. This suggests therefore that early-nineteenth century broadside representations of violent crime may have had a more serious significance than others have allowed and that these tales of human misery and suffering reflected tastes that were more moral than morbid. For example, sociologists have long recognised that the public's seemingly enduring fascination with stories of violent crime, especially murder, is not because they appeal to some perverted desire for entertainment, but rather because they provoke in us a 'collective psychic response'<sup>46</sup> by speaking to our more pressing 'existential' concerns.<sup>47</sup> It is to be argued here, therefore, that even the most cursory reading of these broadsides reveals that they are addressing issues far beyond titillating tales of crime and punishment, but are instead engaging in wider discourses on morality, society and the meaning of life.

## **2 Narratives of Empathy and Emotion in Early-Nineteenth Century Broad­sides**

Narrative accounts of crime and punishment, whether based on fact or fiction, are arguably 'a social phenomenon', and criminality and its public response have certainly been ubiquitous themes throughout the history of our popular culture.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, 'the mythology of crime' has been 'a great imaginative obsession' for centuries, and this fact has led many sociologists, as well as crime historians, to wonder why these tales of crime and punishment hold such a fascination for us and to ask what primal needs do they fulfil?<sup>49</sup> Undoubtedly, this fascination can be traced back to the crime broadside, with several scholars recognising that these 'dark dramatic stories of love and death are profound allegories of the human situation'.<sup>50</sup> For example, MacGill Hughes argues that these broadside accounts of violent crime have a fundamental power and impact precisely because they deal with life events which are common to all of us, such as love and death, loss and suffering, good fortune and ill fate, and this recognition in itself charges them with great import, not

---

<sup>46</sup> D'Cruze et al., *Murder*, p.22.

<sup>47</sup> Jack Katz, 'What makes crime 'news'? ' *Media, Culture and Society*, 9 (1987) 47-75, p.68.

<sup>48</sup> Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (Pluto Press, 1984) p.vi; Anna King and Shadd Maruna 'The Function of Fiction for a Punitive Public', in Paul Mason (ed.) *Captured by the Media: Prison Discourse in Popular Culture* (Willan, 2006) pp.16-30.

<sup>49</sup> John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 1976) p.51.

<sup>50</sup> Shepard, *The Broadside Ballad*, p.37.

only for the people directly involved in these incidents of real-life crime, but also for the readers experiencing it through the printed page.<sup>51</sup> These broadside tales of murder therefore are primarily stories of intense human interest because they tell of personal vicissitudes and intimate relations and, hence, allow us to indulge our natural curiosity in each other and, ultimately, ourselves. Indeed, MacGill Hughes argues that this curiosity in human nature is one of the main reasons why crime features so heavily in these stories, since crime often becomes ‘the excuse for telling as much as possible of the private lives and passions of the participants’.<sup>52</sup> For news of a serious crime like murder, more than any other case of human interest, is able ‘to expose a man’s soul to the public’ and each of us responds accordingly, transfixed not only by the remarkable circumstances, but also wondering how we would behave if a similar situation ever arose in our lives.<sup>53</sup> For, as one commentator was to write in 1864: ‘There is something, ... “intensely human” about a murder. The fate of the murdered man and of the criminal tried for his life comes home to every one, high or low, rich or poor, in a way which no other event ever approaches to’.<sup>54</sup> The human interest story therefore has the ability to engage its readers on a deeply personal level, as well as reminding them of their shared experiences and common understandings and, in this respect, it is possible to argue that crime broadsides took the most obvious personal crises of others, such as murder, and used them to help their readers become better acquainted with themselves and the world in which they lived.<sup>55</sup>

This account of crime news as a basic form of human interest story cannot fail to be significant for an interpretation of early-nineteenth century crime broadsides, not least because the type of murder most commonly represented in their reports had a distinctly domestic nature. For example, these broadsides corroborate the recognised historical fact that, at least with regards to homicide, most criminals and victims are known to each other and often related.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the large sample of broadsides used for this study reveals that the most common relationship recorded between a murderer and victim was that of near kin, such as a husband and wife, or child and

---

<sup>51</sup> Helen MacGill Hughes, *News and the Human Interest Story* (Transaction, 1981).

<sup>52</sup> MacGill Hughes, *News*, p.197.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p.200.

<sup>54</sup> Anonymous, ‘Sensational Literature’, *The Reader*, 4, 98, 12 Nov (1864) p.597.

<sup>55</sup> MacGill Hughes, *News*.

<sup>56</sup> Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in England 1750-1900* 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Pearson Education, 2010); D’Cruze, ‘Murder and Fatality’.

parent.<sup>57</sup> Also the majority of these murders occurred within, or near, the family home and so it is arguable therefore that early-nineteenth century broadside readers were not afforded the luxury of enjoying from a safe distance titillating tales about some fictional bogeyman, but instead were faced with the frightening reality that, like charity, crime begins at home.

It is important, therefore, to recognise that the social significance of the murder broadside is not in its representation of violence per se but in its ability to speak directly to 'the imaginative, emotional and social realities of its audience'.<sup>58</sup> For, in both their style and content, broadsides were often able to induce 'a psychological sense of participation' for their readers by placing a deliberate emphasis on people, situations and events which, to the great majority of readers, would have seemed entirely plausible and within the realms of their own everyday experience.<sup>59</sup> For example, broadside murderers tend not to be evil psychopaths but ordinary men and women who either momentarily lose their self-control, mainly due to drink and a violent temperament, or who simply succumb to the temptations of vengeance, lust and greed.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, victims of violent crime are depicted in broadsides as having suffered at the hands of various forms of inhumanity and cruelty. Words such as 'unfortunate' or 'ill-fated' are used to describe them and the impression formed is that

---

<sup>57</sup> Out of the 650 broadsides sampled a total of 202 included information regarding the relationship between the criminal and victim: 57 victims were wives and 42 were children (including step-children); 20 were near relations, e.g. an aunt or brother-in-law; 16 were husbands; and twelve were parents. After this the relationships become more diverse but continue to retain some social connection, e.g. eleven victims were employees; nine were lovers; eight were employers; six were friends / acquaintances; six were customers; five were work colleagues; four were neighbours; three were landlords; and three were lodgers. This broadside data therefore suggests that people were more likely to fall victim to crime, especially interpersonal violence, in their own home or workplace, and at the hands of someone they knew or came into contact with on a routine basis. This broadside portrayal of criminality as a form of 'everyday violence' is not only one that any modern criminologist would be familiar with, as discussed by Shani D'Cruze, 'Introduction: Unguarded Passions: Violence, History and the Everyday', in Shani D'Cruze, (ed.) *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850-1950* (Pearson Education, 2000) pp.1-24, p.1, but importantly it is one that, as previously indicated, is also corroborated by historical studies based upon more official contemporary records.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Hughes, 'Foreword', in Charles Hindley, *Curiosities of Street Literature* (Seven Dials Press, 1969) pp.5-11, p.10.

<sup>59</sup> Joan Rockwell, *Fact in Fiction: The Use of Literature in the Systematic Study of Society* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) p.43; see also Katz, *News; Chassaigne, Popular Representations*; and Joy Wiltenburg, 'True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism', *American Historical Review*, Dec (2004) 1377-1404.

<sup>60</sup> When broadsides discuss individual cases of crime, specific motivations are not always identified. However, out of 650 broadsides, a total of 181 cited a direct cause of the crime and a wide range of criminal motivations was recognised, e.g. domestic disputes between husbands and wives (mainly aggravated by drink); non-domestic fights or quarrels between strangers and / or acquaintances; negative emotions, such as revenge, hatred, jealousy and lust; or simply the desire for monetary gain.



they were all normal people going about their everyday business, blissfully unaware that a senseless attack would soon end their lives. The implication therefore is that not only are these victims deserving of sympathy, but also that their innocence should strike a chord in the heart of the honest broadside reader who may be as likely to suffer crime themselves. For the very nature of a victim's 'ordinariness' makes their violent end all the more affecting and their pitiful calls for vengeance and retribution therefore seem to speak directly to those reading about their plight and also indicates a continuation of early-modern belief that 'true stories about the undoing of murderers provided graphic exempla of the supreme power of divine providence'.<sup>61</sup>

Indeed, broadside accounts of violent crime and murder, whether wittingly or not, often seem to incorporate a plethora of trivial detail, which serves to impart 'the greatest semblance of reality' to their dramatic accounts, and this is an aspect of 'true crime' literature recognised by those who have studied the genre.<sup>62</sup> These details tend to come from rather prosaic and circumstantial descriptions of both the people and places involved in the events and it is this mundane familiarity that breeds compassion not contempt for the victim.<sup>63</sup> For example, one early-nineteenth century broadside describes an unfortunate quarry of murder as 'a Poor Pedlar Boy' who, being 'rather weak in his intellects, and being of a slender, delicate frame, gained his livelihood by carrying a small pack, containing a few articles of hardware and stationary [*sic*], which, according to evidence, could not have exceeded the value of a few shillings';<sup>64</sup> whilst another reported that a Mrs Devon, who resided in the Gorbals area of Glasgow was found lying dead in bed from a cut throat 'by two of her own children, on their return from the Cotton Mill, to dinner, about two o'clock'.<sup>65</sup> The

---

<sup>61</sup> D'Cruze, 'Introduction', p.13; Malcolm Gaskill, *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) p.203.

<sup>62</sup> Eric H. Monkkonen, *Crime Justice History* (Ohio State University Press, 2002) p.17; see also Philip Rawlings, 'True Crime', in John Vagg and Tim Newburn (eds.) *The British Criminology Conferences: Selected Proceedings. Volume 1: Emerging Themes in Criminology*, Papers from the British Criminology Conference, Loughborough University, 18-21 July 1995, [Online] (British Society of Criminology, 1998). Accessed 3 March 2009: <http://britsoccrim.org/volume1/010.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> Wiltenburg, 'True Crime'.

<sup>64</sup> *Trial & Sentence Of James Gordon, who is to be Executed at Dumfries, on the 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1821, for the Barbarous Murder of James Elliott, a Poor Pedlar Boy, by Knocking him on the Head with a Wooden Clog, in a Lonely Muir, in November last*, [n. pl.: John Muir], The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: L.C. Fol.73 (019)].

<sup>65</sup> *Horrible Murder! Committed on the body of Mrs. Devon, who was found in her own house in the Gorbals, this afternoon, Tuesday April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1824, with her throat cut, cold and lifeless, and presenting a spectacle too shocking for description*, [Glasgow: John Muir], The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: L.C. Fol.73 (069)].

pitiabile nature of this crime was exacerbated further when it was discovered that the victim had only borrowed the razor, which was used as the murder weapon and found lying on the chimney, from a neighbour earlier that afternoon in order to shave her husband.

These circumstantial details may appear trivial in and of themselves, but modern scholars of crime and the media would argue that they actually perform an important function; for, in juxtaposing horrific events with recognisable everyday experiences, these discourses of domestic murder serve to provoke a heightened emotional response in the reader.<sup>66</sup> There is a powerful emotional charge wrought by the clash between dull and disrupted lives, which has long been used as a literary device, since even the ancient Greek poets recognised that personal tragedy is often made 'more poignant by emphasizing the fragile nature of domesticity'.<sup>67</sup> Thus broadside accounts of domestic murder effectively bring the distant tragedies of other people closer to home through 'a process of defamiliarization', whereby moments and objects of familiarity are made grotesque by their association with brutal and senseless violence meaning that, for the reader, what is safe and known is, for a period of time, 'transmuted by shock into alien, strange and hostile "otherness"'.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, this recognised authorial technique of the crime-reporting genre serves, in effect, to make the reader a 'mediated witness' to violent crime, by encouraging them to identify with those who have experienced victimhood in real-life and to align their emotions accordingly.<sup>69</sup> Thus the principal emotions evoked by these violent crime accounts are not callous amusement or vicarious relief, as some would argue, but instead the more empathic emotions of 'pity, horror, sorrow, and fear'.<sup>70</sup>

Broadsides then, by including often detailed descriptions of the impact and aftermath of violent crime, were not providing their readers with salacious titillation, but were forcing them to re-evaluate their own morality and mortality. This ironically is especially true with regards to the more sensationalistic content of crime broadsides for, although graphic depictions of blood and injury, or what Valier terms 'gothicism', may initially grab our attention, they also compel us to consider the harm and

---

<sup>66</sup> Katz, 'What makes crime 'news'?'; Wiltenburg, 'True Crime'.

<sup>67</sup> Jean Seaton, *Carnage and the Media: The Making and Breaking of News about Violence* (Allen Lane, 2005) p.xvi.

<sup>68</sup> Moira Peelo, 'Framing Homicide Narratives in Newspapers: Mediated Witness and the Construction of Virtual Victimhood', in Yvonne Jewkes (ed.) *Crime and the Media. Volume 2: Media Representations of Crime and Criminal Justice* (Sage, 2009) pp.143-157, p.147.

<sup>69</sup> Peelo, 'Framing Homicide', pp.143-6.

<sup>70</sup> Wiltenburg, 'True Crime', p.1396.

suffering being inflicted upon another human being and this causes us to imaginatively experience the damage and degradation of one of our own.<sup>71</sup> For, as we saw with the Gilmerton carter case, images of blood and physical suffering are 'a potent reminder of victimisation' and they can help us to comprehend otherwise abstract acts of violence.<sup>72</sup> Readers of early-nineteenth century broadsides, therefore, were often forced to explicitly imagine the terror and pain of innocent victims, whose sufferings evoked emotions of shock, outrage, sympathy and fear, and it was this simple language of emotion that helped them to directly personify and appreciate the crimes and crises of others.<sup>73</sup> With regards to the reporting of violent crime, these 'techniques of representation' have changed little over the centuries and a study of early forms of crime news, such as broadsides, 'reveals important parallels to modern media practices'.<sup>74</sup> For example, our modern tabloids are also quick to report on the various personal atrocities and injuries inflicted on victims of violent crime and to argue that this is done solely for our entertainment is surely to ignore the fact that when faced with these depictions of real crime most of us feel shocked and outraged, not amused.<sup>75</sup>

One prime example of this is a recent news story, which has striking similarities to the Gilmerton carter case of 1830, for it also relates to the barbaric rape and murder of a young woman. Jyoti Singh Pandey was a 23 year-old medical student who, on Sunday 16 December 2012, in Delhi, India, boarded a bus with a male friend after an outing to the cinema. On this bus were six men, aged between 17 and 35, who began to harass and attack the couple, battering them with iron rods. Once the male friend of Jyoti was beaten unconscious, the men then took turns to repeatedly rape her whilst the bus drove around the city. On what was to become 'a two-and-a-half hour ride to hell',<sup>76</sup> Jyoti was brutally gang-raped by this group of allegedly drunk men, including the driver of the bus, with each of them raping her twice, even after

---

<sup>71</sup> Claire Valier, 'Punishment, Border Crossings and the Powers of Horror', *Theoretical Criminology*, 6, 3 (2002) 319-337, p.320 – see also Way, 'Nothing Beats a Stunning Good Murder'.

<sup>72</sup> Philippe Rosenburg, 'Sanctifying the Robe: Punitive Violence and the English Press, 1650-1700', in Simon Devereaux and Paul Griffiths (eds.) *Penal Practice and Culture, 1500-1900* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) pp.157-182, p.172.

<sup>73</sup> MacGill Hughes, *News*; Wiltenburg, 'True Crime'.

<sup>74</sup> Wiltenburg, 'True Crime', p.1388; Way, 'Nothing Beats a Stunning Good Murder', p.87.

<sup>75</sup> For an insightful analysis of modern press ritual see Philip Elliott, 'Press Performance as Political Ritual', in Harry Christian (ed.) *The Sociology of Journalism and the Press* (University of Keele, 1980) pp.141-177.

<sup>76</sup> Nada Farhoud and Jalees Andrabi, 'India Gang Rape Victim's Father: I Want the World to Know My Daughter's Name is Jyoti Singh', *Daily Mirror*, [Online], 5 Jan 2013, para.20 of 61. Accessed 11 Apr 2013: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/india-gang-rape-victims-father-1521289>.

she became unconscious, after which they continued to violate her with 'an iron rod in her private parts'.<sup>77</sup> Once they had finished with her, and presuming her to be dead, the men then stripped both of their victims naked, robbed them of their valuables, including their mobile phones, and threw them out of the moving bus into a deserted street where the two were later found 'lying in a pool of blood' by a passing security guard who alerted the police.<sup>78</sup> The injuries sustained by Jyoti as a result of this vicious attack were horrific for not only were her genitals 'damaged beyond repair' and her body covered in lacerations and bite marks, but also doctors were forced to remove her intestines due to the damage inflicted on her internal organs.<sup>79</sup> Due to the severity of her injuries, and despite 'her desperate battle for life' and doctors futile attempts to save her, Jyoti died 13 days later on 29 December 2012.<sup>80</sup>

For the first ten days after the attack she had been conscious and able to communicate with both the police and her family through written notes.<sup>81</sup> Due to her statements, the six men were later arrested and charged with her rape, abduction and murder, for which they face the death penalty.<sup>82</sup> The harrowing details of this attack, which were reported in local and national newspapers, caused unprecedented shock and outrage in Delhi and the case also dominated headlines around the world. The people of India took to the streets in their thousands in order to protest against the attackers and publically mourn Jyoti's death and, once again, the emotional repercussions of a violent crime were demonstrably widespread throughout a distraught community.<sup>83</sup>

It is important to note, however, that the distress and anger wrought by this horrific crime extended far beyond the geographical boundaries of India, as people from all

---

<sup>77</sup> Mail Today Bureau, 'Savagery Shames City', *Mail Today*, [E-Paper], 18 Dec 2012, 6, 33, p.1, pp.10-11, p.1. Accessed 11 Apr 2013: <http://epaper.mailtoday.in/epaperhome.aspx?issue=18122012>.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Steve Nolan and Larisa Brown, 'Indian Gang Rape Suspects 'Blame the Victim for Being Out Late at Night with Male Friend'', *MailOnline*, 9 Jan 2013, para.8 of 37. Accessed 11 Apr 2013: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-225915/Delhi-gang-rape-Indian-gang-rape-suspects-blame-victim-late-night-boyfriend.html>.

<sup>81</sup> Farhoud and Andrabi, 'I Want the World to Know'.

<sup>82</sup> Suzannah Hills, 'Judge Bars Delhi Gang Rape Defendants from Chaotic Courtroom after 150 People Cram into Space Meant for 30', *MailOnline*, 7 Jan 2013. Accessed 11 Apr 2013: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2258306/Delhi-gang-rape-Five-men-charged-Jyoti-Singh-Pandey-murder-appear-court.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Andrew Buncombe, 'Rage at Brutal Rape Erupts in India', *The Independent*, [Online], 23 Dec 2012. Accessed 11 Apr 2013: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/rage-at-brutal-rape-erupts-in-india-8430114.html>.

over the world responded to newspaper reports on internet forums in order to denounce the heinous nature of the attack, as well as to express their grief for the victim who endured it. For example, one commentator on a British newspaper message board suggested that: 'the rapists shud be hanged till death n may jyoti's soul rest in peace [sic];<sup>84</sup> whilst another wrote:

I cannot stop crying now!!! This case shocked me so hard, I've never assumed that a human is capable of doing SUCH A THING! Wasn't there even 1 sane person among these 6.. i dont know how to call them [sic]. Show them the same mercy they have shown to the poor girl! I am sorry for what I'll say, but they do not deserve to be hanged! They deserve their intestines to be ripped off and pulled out trough [sic] their noses in public while being beaten by the crowds. I hope they suffer the way they made her suffer! But still, they derserve [sic] to and she did not! My prayers go for her family and her soul! Rest in peace, dear Jyoti!<sup>85</sup>

These comments certainly provide contemporary evidence to suggest that readers of violent crime reports do not in any way celebrate violence, but instead commiserate with those who are harmed by it. This empathic response to victims of violent crime has been shown to have an important function by modern criminologists interested in the mediated spectacle of crime and punishment in public discourse. Several scholars of modern crime media have noted that the emotion of empathy, especially when evoked by narratives of brutal victimisation, often directly correlates to a heightened punitive response, and that readers of violent crime news willingly find themselves fulfilling the role of 'enraged avengers' or defenders of victims with whom they identify.<sup>86</sup> This suggests that the prominence of graphic images of physical violence in the reporting of crime may have a more significant purpose than mere voyeuristic entertainment, since it leads to 'a kind of virtual vigilantism, in which a proxy audience is constructed to celebrate vengeance against perpetrators of

---

<sup>84</sup> Deeptimayee Behera, 'India Gang Rape Victim's Father: I Want the World to Know My Daughter's Name is Jyoti Singh', Message Board: What Do You Think About the Sickening Attack?', *Daily Mirror*, [Online], 26 Jan 2013, para.1 of 1. Accessed 11 Apr 2013: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/india-gang-rape-victims-father-1521289#comments>.

<sup>85</sup> Kamelia Avramova, 'India Gang Rape Victim's Father: I Want the World to Know My Daughter's Name is Jyoti Singh', Message Board: What Do You Think About the Sickening Attack?', *Daily Mirror*, [Online], 21 Jan 2013, para.1 of 1. Accessed 11 Apr 2013: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/india-gang-rape-victims-father-1521289#comments>.

<sup>86</sup> Claire Valier, *Crime and Punishment in Contemporary Culture* (Routledge, 2004) p.7 – see also Richard Sparks, 'Divided Sympathies: David Hume and Contemporary Criminology', in Susanne Karstedt, Ian Loader, and Heather Strang (eds.) *Emotions, Crime and Justice* (Hart, 2011) pp.317-330 and Chris Greer and Robert Reiner, 'Mediated Mayhem: Media, Crime, Criminal Justice', in Mike Maguire, Rod Morgan and Robert Reiner (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* 5th edn (Oxford University Press, 2012) pp.245-278.

unmitigated evil'.<sup>87</sup> However, this desire to express solidarity with the victim and to secure them justice is not to be thought a modern phenomenon for, as this article has shown, early-nineteenth century broadsides also contained discourses of 'intuitive sympathy' for victims of violent crime and, similarly, the existence of these altruistic emotions can also be shown to result in a desire for retributive punishment.<sup>88</sup> For example, with regards to the public execution of the Gilmerton carter murderers, the general consensus expressed in broadsides was that, such were the soul-harrowing atrocities of 'these Monsters of Iniquity',<sup>89</sup> the nature of the crimes for which they stood accused precluded any feelings of public pity, and one particularly unforgiving broadside was to state: 'We scarcely recollect any person in the situation of Dobbie and Thomson, whose fate has excited less commiseration'.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, many broadsides will positively rejoice at the perceived justness of a criminal's capital punishment, especially if the crimes were of a heinous nature, and will make such comments as: 'Surely none will regret that justice has at last interposed to rid the community of such a monster'.<sup>91</sup> Harsh punishment then is seen as just reward, especially for murderers who showed no mercy for their victims, and the general sentiment relayed in broadsides is:

So now he's hanged for the deed,  
And what more can I say,  
But ye that did no mercy show,  
Can scarce for mercy pray.<sup>92</sup>

It is therefore possible to argue that one of the main reasons for including discourses of violence and victimisation in early-nineteenth century broadsides, and their modern tabloid newspaper counterparts, is the concept of 'fair retaliation' which advocates that, in order to desire justice, we must first be witness to injustice, and the

---

<sup>87</sup> Robert Reiner, 'The Rise of Virtual Vigilantism: Crime Reporting Since World War II', *Criminal Justice Matters*, 43, Spring (2001) 4-5, p.5.

<sup>88</sup> Richard Sparks, 'Divided Sympathies', p.319.

<sup>89</sup> *Melancholy Accident, With Farther Particulars Relative To The Gilmerton Murder, &c.*, [Edinburgh: n. pr.], The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: F.3.a.13 (7)].

<sup>90</sup> *The Gilmerton Murderers, &c. A Sketch of the Conduct, Transactions and Behaviour of David Dobbie and John Thomson, who were Executed on Wednesday the 18<sup>th</sup> August 1830, for Assault, Murder and Robbery, with their Last Dying Confession, and Behaviour on the Scaffold, &c.*, [Edinburgh: R. Menzies], The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: F.3.a.14 (69)].

<sup>91</sup> *A true Account of the Trial, Confession, last Dying Words, and Execution of Samuel Tucker, Who was Hanged at Salisbury, on Friday, Aug.2, 1811, for the Cruel and Barbarous Murder of his own Wife, at Bradford, in the County of Wilts.*, [Gateshead: Marshall], John Johnson Collection, [Shelfmark: Crime 2 (92)].

<sup>92</sup> *Trial and Execution of James Wilson, At Carlisle, on Monday the 16<sup>th</sup> March, for the wilful Murder of John Elliot, a poor Pack Boy, on Eastdale Moor, on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of August, 1834*, [n. pl.: n. pr.], The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: Ry.III.a.2 (114)].

more heinous and despicable the unjust acts, the more our desire for vengeance is inflamed.<sup>93</sup> This is not to argue that broadsides were a form of ideological social control manipulated by the authorities to legitimate state violence, but rather that they were instead an extension of ordinary people's desire to punish those who had committed despicable crimes.<sup>94</sup> For it must be recognised, at least in our own selves if not our ancestors, that it is human nature to publically denounce the worst of crimes and criminals, and early-nineteenth century broadsides certainly allowed their readers to do just that in the exact period when public executions were on the decline.<sup>95</sup>

### 3 The Meaning and Morality of Violent Crime in Early-Nineteenth Century Broadsides

The argument that portrayals of violent crime in popular culture and the media are simply a form of entertainment is one that appears with monotonous regularity, since it provides an easy answer to the question of its enduring appeal. Yet, as this article has shown, to insist that crime narratives, such as early-nineteenth century broadsides, provide only amusement or vicarious relief for their readers is to leave 'certain of their central features unexplained, or else tends to explain them in terms that are, finally, farfetched and unconvincing'.<sup>96</sup> For to claim that these stories are merely entertainment is to beg the questions: 'Why is it distracting, relaxing, entertaining, to sink oneself in someone else's life and problems?', and are we really to assume that every reader of a violent crime story is of 'a cruel and thoroughly perverted' nature?<sup>97</sup> Academic research into the attractions of violent entertainment would certainly suggest that the answers are more complex than others have allowed, for it has shown that the satisfactions gained from watching or reading violent representations have less to do with our morbid curiosity and baser instincts and 'more to do with old-fashioned virtues of morality and justice'.<sup>98</sup> For it must be recognised that, with regards to crime narratives especially, the violence is often only

---

<sup>93</sup> Dolf Zillman, 'The Psychology of the Appeal of Portrayals of Violence', in Jeffrey Goldstein (ed.) *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment* (Oxford University Press, 1998) pp.179-211, p.206.

<sup>94</sup> Rosenberg, 'Sanctifying the Robe'.

<sup>95</sup> Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*.

<sup>96</sup> Lincoln B. Faller, *Turned to Account: The Forms and Functions of Criminal Biography in Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge University Press, 1987) p.119.

<sup>97</sup> Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art* (Penguin, 1959) pp.7-8; Faller, *Turned to Account*, p.120.

<sup>98</sup> Jeffrey Goldstein, 'Why We Watch', in Jeffrey Goldstein (ed.) *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment* (Oxford University Press, 1998) pp.212-226, p.215.

a means to an end, with much of the appeal deriving from 'the projection of the successful control of threats and dangers' and 'the promise of safety in a just and orderly world', where goodness is shown to eventually triumph over evil.<sup>99</sup> It has been argued that 'the production of a news story, particularly one involving death or injury, can often be seen as a morality play - in which outrage, grief, anger and the search for culprits all have their parts', and that one of the main functions of violent crime news is to establish reassuring order out of destructive and threatening chaos.<sup>100</sup> Stories of violent crime then have a symbolic power that extends far beyond the circumstances of an individual case and can become representative of wider social and moral issues, especially if they tap into our innermost fears regarding personal and public safety, and lead us to question not only our own morality, but also 'the vulnerability of collective identity, suggesting that the crime threatens to rip society in some essential part or symbolizes the presence in the community of forces so malevolent as to threaten the metaphorical social fabric'.<sup>101</sup>

This equating of violent crime to questions of order can also explain why, as discussed in the previous section, stories of domestic murder feature so prominently in media discourses of crime, for historically the violation of blood ties has often sent powerful messages with regards to perceived threats to social and moral order.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, traditionally the basis of all morality and social authority emanated not only from the church and state, but also from the domestic circle and so the security and sanctity of family life came to represent both the heart of the home and the social body.<sup>103</sup> A domestic murder, therefore, can be viewed as not only 'an act of radical rebellion against the discipline of the family', but also can be deemed to threaten 'the very foundation of all social order', which has implications for society that go far beyond the loss of one individual.<sup>104</sup> For a familial murder, more than any other act of homicide, 'gives the nation a set of facts on which to test its moral values' and

---

<sup>99</sup> Zillman, 'Psychology of Appeal', pp.186-7; Goldstein, 'Why We Watch'.

<sup>100</sup> Seaton, *Carnage and the Media*, p.31 – see also Richard V. Ericson, Patricia Baranek and Janet B.L. Chan, *Representing Order: Crime, Law, and Justice in the News Media* (Open University Press, 1991); Richard Sparks, *Television and the Drama of Crime: Moral Tales and the Place of Crime in Public Life* (Open University Press, 1992); Moira Peelo and Keith Soothill, 'The Place of Public Narratives in Reproducing Social Order', *Theoretical Criminology*, 4, 2 (2000) 131-148.

<sup>101</sup> Katz, 'What makes crime 'news'?', p.52; Chris Greer, 'News Media, Victims and Crime', in Pamela Davies, Peter Francis and Chris Greer (eds.) *Victims, Crime and Society* (Sage, 2007) pp.21-49.

<sup>102</sup> Wiltenburg, 'True Crime'.

<sup>103</sup> Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*; Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (Macmillan Press, 1980).

<sup>104</sup> Faller, *Turned to Account*, p.22.



exposes the damaging consequences of neglecting our social and moral responsibilities to each other.<sup>105</sup>

It is certainly interesting to note that early-nineteenth century broadsides, when reporting on incidents of familial homicide, will often make reference to social bonds and the murderer's dereliction of duty to not only his own blood relations, but also to the kinship of society as a whole. For example, patricide is viewed as particularly odious and a crime which no circumstance could justify or palliate, for the murder is aggravated by a son killing 'the author of his own being ... the individual whom he was bound by the laws of God and of nature to have protected even at the risk of his own life'.<sup>106</sup> However, it is spousal murder that is thought to be of the first magnitude, since it can be considered as 'dissolving one of the primary bonds of society, or as a breach of that sacred confidence which ought to subsist between a man and his wife, from which arises all the other relative and social duties of civilised life'.<sup>107</sup> It is possible to argue that popular representations of murder, in whatever form, become 'an emblem of moral decay' and reflect a growing cultural fear of degenerating social and moral authority.<sup>108</sup> Knight has shown that, in popular narratives of crime, such as broadsides, it is not only the commission of an act of murder that is symbolic of the social order, but the inevitable apprehension of the killer is too. For, especially in the centuries before the advent of the police, these providential stories tended to depict murderers being caught quite naturally, and often by pure chance, by the local community alone, and this represents a corresponding belief in 'the unity of society' and its ability to deal with disorder itself.<sup>109</sup> Hence, the basic ideology and image promoted by these early crime narratives is one of 'an integrated Christian society', which needs only to rely upon its shared social and moral values in order to protect itself against the commission of crime.<sup>110</sup> Discourses of violent crime then, such as those contained in early-nineteenth century broadsides, not only provided their readers with 'a model of unmediated social control of crime' but also offered hope

---

<sup>105</sup> MacGill Hughes, *News*, p.277; David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>106</sup> *A Correct Account of the Trial and Sentence of Peter Moffat, for the Murder of his Father, at Kilsyth, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 1822, and who is to be Executed at Stirling, on Friday the 28<sup>th</sup> July, 1826*, [n. pl.: n. pr.], The Word on the Street Collection, [Shelfmark: Ry.III.a.2 (70)].

<sup>107</sup> *Treason & Murder'. An Account of the Behaviour and Execution of Margaret Cunningham, alias Mason, for the Murder of her Husband; with Remarks on her Crime*, [Gateshead: Marshall], John Johnson Collection, [Shelfmark: Crime 1 (54)].

<sup>108</sup> Kalikoff, *Murder and Moral Decay*, p.170.

<sup>109</sup> Knight, *Form and Ideology*, p.13.

<sup>110</sup> Knight, *Form and Ideology*, p.18.

and comfort to people by facilitating 'the twin beliefs that we are all Christian at heart and that our society is integral and at root a single healthy body'.<sup>111</sup>

Popular representations of violent crime have a meaning and morality far beyond that of entertainment alone and early-nineteenth century broadsides may have helped their readers to cope with a multitude of fears: 'the generic anxiety of modern life - the sense we have today,... that the world is rapidly going to hell' would also have been shared by those struggling to survive the great social and cultural upheavals of the early nineteenth century and it must surely have been no coincidence that broadside tales of murder and mayhem peaked in popularity and production during this period.<sup>112</sup> It has been argued that throughout the nineteenth century, there was a noticeable increase in depictions of brutal deaths, both in print and other forms of popular culture, that 'rapidly supplanted actual experience as a new and newly anxious audience sought novel ways to cope with its fears'.<sup>113</sup> However, this public fascination with death and dying, especially if it is violent or unjust in any way, should not be viewed as 'evidence of a 'lowbrow' insensitivity in the modern public'<sup>114</sup> or a desire to rebel against the increasing discipline and civility of modern times as some would argue,<sup>115</sup> but should instead be interpreted as confirmation of man's search for meaning and moral certainty in uncertain times. Katz has argued that the predominance of stories on violent crime in the news can be understood as 'serving readers' interests in re-creating daily their moral sensibilities through shock and impulses of outrage', and that 'by picking up the paper to read about yet another brutal crime, readers can attempt to sustain their conviction that their own moral sensibility has not yet been brutalized into jaded indifference'.<sup>116</sup>

The reading of violent crime news is therefore not an amusing distraction from the realities of everyday life, but 'a collective, ritual experience' sustained by the provocation of strong emotions, 'which each reader can assume are shared by many others'.<sup>117</sup> This argument surely cannot just be applicable to modern forms of mass media, but must also have relevance for earlier forms of printed news, such as

---

<sup>111</sup> Knight, *Form and Ideology*, p.13.

<sup>112</sup> Vicki Goldberg, 'Death Takes a Holiday, Sort Of', in Jeffrey Goldstein (ed.) *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment* (Oxford University Press, 1998) pp.27-52, p.48 – see also MacGill Hughes, *News*.

<sup>113</sup> Goldberg, 'Death Takes a Holiday', p.28.

<sup>114</sup> Katz, 'What makes crime 'news'?', p.67.

<sup>115</sup> See, for example, Crone, *Violent Victorians*.

<sup>116</sup> Katz, 'What makes crime 'news'?', p.67.

<sup>117</sup> Katz, 'What makes crime 'news'?', p.64.

broadsides, since they too form a crucial part of 'the historic tradition of emotive crime news delivery' that has for centuries helped to reinforce communal bonds and shared moral values.<sup>118</sup> For crime news has always provided its readers with an opportunity to react en masse against deviance and perhaps discourses of violence and victimization in early-nineteenth century broadsides were a potent way of constructing shared values and a sense of unity amongst their readers, and this socializing function 'may have been as much a reason for lengthy descriptions of attacks and bloodshed as titillating the public's base taste for the morbid'.<sup>119</sup>

The fact that crime news speaks to more philosophical than frivolous concerns is also borne out by its consistent focus on serious incidents of interpersonal violence and not the more common property crimes, such as theft and burglary, which often fail to provoke moral outrage in anyone but the actual victim and it is perhaps ironic that, for all of the attempts at 'ultra-realism', the crime most featured in these news reports tends to be the one that readers would least likely encounter.<sup>120</sup> It is telling that out of the 650 broadsides used for this study, the overwhelming majority (74%) featured the crime of murder, with individual property offences, as opposed to robberies or burglaries resulting in murder, only appearing in a total of 18% of the sample. Early-nineteenth century broadsides confirm the notion that: 'The popularity of images of violent death, then and now, conceivably has something to do with its relative rarity in real life'.<sup>121</sup> Whilst some may argue that this almost obsessive focus on murder is proof of its titillating entertainment value, it is important to remember that early-nineteenth century broadsides were, like their newspaper counterparts, reporting on real-life instances of this fatal crime and consequently there is an important difference between the emotional effects of fact and fictional accounts which needs to be acknowledged. For, as we have seen in the previous sections, homicide in reality is 'an act of great violence and social disquiet' and its disturbing effects can cause profound damage, disruption and distress for the victim's family, friends, and extended community.<sup>122</sup> Therefore, those affected by murder in real life do not benefit from the 'willing suspension of disbelief' afforded to audiences of dramatic depictions of simulated violence created purely for the purpose of entertainment, and neither do those who assume the role of witness by reading or watching second-hand accounts

---

<sup>118</sup> Way, 'Nothing Beats a Stunning Good Murder', p.507.

<sup>119</sup> Chassaigne, 'Popular Representations', p.40 – see also Wiltenburg, 'True Crime'.

<sup>120</sup> Katz, 'What makes crime 'news'?'; Greer and Reiner, 'Mediated Mayhem', p.248.

<sup>121</sup> Goldberg, 'Death Takes a Holiday', p.43.

<sup>122</sup> Peelo, 'Framing Homicide', p.147 – see also Goldstein, 'Why We Watch' and Seaton, *Carnage and the Media*.

of violent crime in the news.<sup>123</sup> It would be a mistake to equate, as some scholars of the genre have done, factual early-nineteenth century broadside accounts of violent crime and homicide to other more fantastical forms of contemporary popular entertainment, such as penny-dreadfuls, detective fiction, and theatrical melodrama, which also prominently featured violence and murder.<sup>124</sup> For all of these, like horror films, graphic novels and television crime dramas today, 'carry clues to their false identity' and thus we, the audience, are protected from the full horror of the violence inflicted by 'the dramatic distance of fiction'.<sup>125</sup> The context and circumstances of violent crime are both crucial and when representations of it, whether in print or film, become too obviously 'records of reality' then it becomes disturbing and repellent, not amusing and fun.<sup>126</sup>

## Conclusion

The aim of this article, has been to rescue the early-nineteenth century crime broadside, and its readers, from 'the enormous condescension of posterity'<sup>127</sup> by highlighting the fact that, both in form and function, these popular representations of violent crime were not pandering to pleasurable perversion, but were instead reflecting and responding to ordinary people's compassion and concern when faced with incomparable cruelty. For any other interpretation simply does not do justice to how we ourselves react to factual reports of violent crime, since feelings of shock, pity, outrage and horror are our natural human responses, especially when faced with senseless murders, and we only have to pick up a newspaper or switch on the television to verify this. Why then should anyone imagine that our ancestors felt any differently when they read a crime broadside in the early nineteenth century?

---

<sup>123</sup> Clark McCauley, 'When Screen Violence is Not Attractive', in Jeffrey Goldstein (ed.) *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment* (Oxford University Press, 1998) pp.144-162, p.152 – see also Jeffrey Goldstein, 'Introduction', in Jeffrey Goldstein (ed.) *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment* (Oxford University Press, 1998) pp.1-6.

<sup>124</sup> See, for example, Richard D. Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet: Murders and Manners in the Age of Victoria* (J.M. Dent & Sons, 1972); Worthington, *Rise of the Detective*; and Crone, *Violent Victorians*.

<sup>125</sup> Goldstein, 'Introduction', p.2; McCauley, 'When Screen Violence is Not Attractive', p.160.

<sup>126</sup> McCauley, 'When Screen Violence is Not Attractive', p.156; Goldstein, 'Why We Watch'.

<sup>127</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* rev. edn (Penguin, 1980) p.12.