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

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.

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The enduring popular fascination with crime and criminality suggests that history matters. In the most obvious sense, current representations of crime in the media bear traces of earlier codes and practices. It is important to note that up until the middle of the 19th century most poor Europeans remained illiterate or semi-literate, and most Europeans were poor. Gradually, printed pamphlets or broadsides, which presented news narratives in the form of prose or rhyming ballads, began to replace handwritten newsletters by the start of the 16th century. Amongst these diverse publications were the cony-catching pamphlets —"cony" meant "victim" in the jargon of the pickpockets, dice-cheats, confidence tricksters, and assorted villains that populated Tudor London. Crime in the United Kingdom describes acts of violent crime and non-violent crime that take place within the United Kingdom. Courts and police systems are separated into three sections, based on the different judicial systems of England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Responsibility for crime in England and Wales is split between the Home Office, the government department responsible for reducing and preventing crime, along with law enforcement in the United Kingdom; and the Ministry of