

Mopsa's Method: Truth Claims, Ballads, and Print

Frances E. Dolan

ABSTRACT Many scholars point to Mopsa in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* as the gullible reader we like to think we are not. But her method might be more like our own than we like to admit. Both early modern consumers, then, and scholars of the period, now, join Mopsa in seeking some truths in ballads and in interrogating what kinds of truths printed broadside ballads might offer. Frances Dolan's essay builds toward a case study of one ballad, "The Whipster of Woodstreet," the forms of evidence it provides to the curious, then and now, and the reading practices it invites and rewards. **KEYWORDS:** ballads as evidence; authority of print; paratextual truth claims; seventeenth-century murder trials; witnesses and confession; servants and mistresses

❧ IN *THE WINTER'S TALE*, Mopsa reliably prompts a chuckle from audiences when she announces: "I love a ballad in print, alive, for then we are sure they are true" (4.4.251–52).¹ The play seems to present her credulity as laughable, an example of a bumpkin's lack of sophistication. As a consequence, many critics enlist Mopsa's assertion to sum up how *not* to read ballads. Unlike Mopsa, we *know* that print does not ensure truth and we *know* that many early modern people were skeptical consumers as well. Yet this conviction of what we know sometimes leads us to underestimate Mopsa. Increasingly, what we "know" about early modern readers and audiences is how heterogeneous they were and how difficult it can be to pin down their responses, let alone generalize about them. To whatever extent print had authority, it was not inherent but interactive, as consumers filled in the blanks, corrected errata, or broke texts down and recombined them to their own ends.² Differently situated consumers might place the

1. All quotations from *The Winter's Tale* refer to *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York, 1997).

2. See Peter Stallybrass's work in progress on how print precedes manuscript by creating opportunities to fill in the blanks; on the active practices of readers, see, among others, Adam Smyth, *Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010), esp. 128–29.

line between truth and fiction at different points; any given consumer might place that line differently depending on the topic, occasion, or genre. Those printed broadside ballads on which I will focus here, for instance, announce their claims to truthfulness in titles, refrains, and various kinds of paratextual documentation, inviting the listener and reader to consider their truth claims.

Mopsa's assertion that printed ballads must be true is most often quoted out of context. But she goes on to express an uncertainty that seems to form part of her interest in ballads. When, in response to Mopsa's request for a ballad whose appearance in print ensures its truth, Autolycus offers her one "to a very doleful tune, how a usurer's wife was brought to bed of twenty money-bags at a burden," she is not at all sure of its truth just because it is printed. Rather, she asks, "Is it true, think you?" Assured by Autolycus that it is, she exclaims, "Bless me from marrying a usurer," as if that alone would spare her the fate of bearing a litter of money bags. Autolycus then backs up the ballad's truth claims with proof: "Here's the midwife's name to't, one Mistress Tail-Porter, and five or six honest wives that were present. Why should I carry lies abroad?" (4.4.253–61). He similarly points out that another of the ballads he has for sale, about the fish that "sung this ballad against the hard hearts of maids," is authorized by "five justices' hands at it, and witnesses more than my pack will hold" (4.4.272–73). The image of a pack overstuffed with witnesses pushes to absurdity the strategy on which many ballads and pamphlets relied: gesturing from the printed text to these living witnesses, who are simultaneously enlisted as corroboration and impossible to pin down. Lists of the names of midwives, justices, and other purported eyewitnesses were, indeed, frequently appended to both pamphlets and ballads. Just as law courts first granted women credibility as witnesses to the truth of other women's bodies, so ballads, as Autolycus reminds us, enlisted women as authorities on topics such as monstrous births.³ Ridiculed in *The Winter's Tale*, this strategy persisted anyway well into the eighteenth century in those printed ballads that situate themselves more or less in time and place, referring to recent events as their precedent and prompt, and announcing themselves as true. Many people depended on print, including ballads, for access to information. Since contemporaries were acutely aware that truth was interested and therefore contested, ballads had to reflect on and defend their own claims to veracity.

Scholars of early modern England continue to engage ballads' truth claims, both questioning them and relying on them as evidence. Ballads have been heavily mined in the history of sexuality, for instance; however, they are typically cited not to prove conduct so much as to illustrate the ways "seventeenth-century people articulated and visualised" organs and acts; or to exemplify "familiar scenarios and predictable metaphors for sex";⁴ or to yield "clues to how men thought sexual control

3. On women as witnesses, see Rachel Weil, *Political Passions: Gender, the Family and Political Argument in England, 1680–1714* (Manchester, U.K., 1999), 86–104; and Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 2003), passim.

4. Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 26, 83.

could be obtained.”⁵ They have also been widely used to document the popular dissemination of medical or legal knowledge;⁶ the options available for leveling insults; and the links between adultery and murder.⁷ In other words, ballads document popular knowledge, widely used language, and tenacious associations. Perhaps the fact that broadside ballads usually boast one or more woodcuts and a catchy tune bolsters their particular status as icing for our scholarly cakes, too irresistible to exclude but also valuable more as illustrations or elaborations than as substantive evidence. We have to assure ourselves and our readers that we know what ballads are *not* (evidence of historical events) so we can get on with using them for what they seem to be: caches of metaphors and tropes, anxieties and desires, conventional scripts and jarring details. As I will show, both early modern consumers, then, and scholars of the period, now, join Mopsa in seeking some truths in ballads and in interrogating what kinds of truths printed broadside ballads might offer. My essay will build toward a case study of one ballad, “The Whipster of Woodstreet,” the forms of evidence it provides to the curious, then and now, and the reading practices it invites and rewards.

Ballads authorize themselves through strategies as simple as proclaiming their truth in their titles, which have guided my selection of examples, and in their refrains. They shore up their status as “true relations” by specifying place, names, and date⁸ and through repeated assertion—“this story it is true.”⁹ They both draw listeners in and, as we will see, direct them outward as evidence finders and fact-checkers.

Let me first consider the complex role of voice in ballads’ self-authorization and then turn to the mechanisms by which ballads gesture outward, cuing readers or listeners to follow up the leads offered so that they might determine for themselves the broadside ballad’s truth. Some of the most exciting work on broadside ballads has explored the ways in which these texts invite the singer and the listener *in*, allowing for the identification with various subject positions and the taking up of different voices.¹⁰ What is the bearing of these voicings on ballads’ truth claims? To return to *The Winter’s Tale*, will the ballads seem more or less true to Mopsa if she herself sings them? Ballads

5. Elizabeth Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage* (London, 1999), 72–73.

6. Mary E. Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2004), 211–18.

7. Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1996), 186–87 and *passim*.

8. This strategy is often used in monstrous birth ballads, a subcategory that has been much studied. Among others, see Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Baltimore, 2005); and Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 127–36.

9. See, for example, “The Westminster Frolick: or, The Cuckold of his own procuring. Being a true Relation of a Vintener, who . . . undertook to persuade his Servant Maid to prostitute her self” (1681–84), Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge (hereafter PL), Pepys 4.131, EBBA 21795.

10. Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World in Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago, 1999), 198; Patricia Fumerton, *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England* (Chicago, 2006), 58. On cues to participation, see Pamela A. Brown, *Better a Shrew than a Sheep: Women, Drama, and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2003), 25–26.

often proffer the first person as a guarantor of veracity even as their performance underscores the fact that the first-person voice is a script and as such is transferable, and that, especially in ballads about executions, the first person requires certain sleights of hand and flights of fancy.

As one example, “The Unnatural Mother: Being a true Relation of one Jane Lawson . . . [who] Drowned her self and two poor Babes in a Well” (1680), begins and ends in Jane’s voice (from beyond the grave).¹¹ In the middle of stanza six, the verse switches from first to third person; a narrator other than Jane depicts the key events (her scolding, domestic violence, murder, and suicide) in the third person and the past tense, “as several neighbours tell.” Yet Jane returns in each refrain, pointing the lesson: “Then English Women all, / take pattern now by me, / I did into temptation fall, / thus lost the lives of three.” Jane Lawson’s voice authorizes the lesson—that scolding leads to violence—as coming from her experience, specific to her rather than generic. But the shifts between first and third person draw our attention to what is not said, an anonymous narrator’s interventions, and Jane’s death, which occurs at the end of stanza nine, yet also before the first line. The first person was gradually emerging as the authoritative voice of witnessing, and the ballad was particularly suited to exploring its possibilities, allowing audiences the thrill of hearing the repentant speak from beyond the grave or singers the opportunity to give voice to the guilty and the dead. Yet a ballad such as this one nonetheless reveals that authority does not necessarily come from inside the speaker, the deponent, or the eyewitness, even in ballads, which seem to depend on the authority of the first person. It comes instead from a narrator who stands outside the events, claiming to convey intelligence from “several neighbors.” Such a figure was widely called a relator—not necessarily a participant or a witness but the writer or speaker who undertakes the job of relating intelligence received from witnesses. In many ballads, this relator, usually anonymous, draws our attention to his or her process of gathering intelligence and invites the ballad consumer to play sleuth as well.¹² The relator also invites the consumer in as an eye- or earwitness, if not to the event in question then to a performance that claims to be a kind of reenactment of that event. The shift in voice in “The Unnatural Mother” not only distributes authority between Jane and the ballad’s relator but also draws attention to the existence of that relator, requiring the singer and the listener or reader to negotiate between the two.

Even as ballads that announce themselves to be “true relations” license consumers to verify them, some censure the consumer who requires proof. “A Wonderful Prophesie, Declared by Christian James a Maid” (1684–86), for example, both disparages those who require ocular proof as “like the misbelieving Jews” and offers itself as textual proof, which commands esteem precisely because it is mediated and author-

11. “The Unnatural Mother: Being a true Relation of one *Jane Lawson*, once living at *East-Barnet*, in *Middlesex*; who Quarreling with her Husband, urged him to strike her, and thereupon the same night, being the first of *Sept.* 1680. Drowned her self and two poor Babes in a Well,” PL, Pepys 2.191, EBBA 20806. Note how the title assigns Jane the blame for urging her husband to strike her and thus precipitating her murder/suicide.

12. On the relator, see Frances E. Dolan, *True Relations: Reading, Literature, and Evidence in Seventeenth-Century England* (Philadelphia, 2013).

ized. The ballad explains its own origin twice, first in verse and then in prose. The magistrates of the parish “desired to have” this wonderful prophesy “put in print,” crediting print with the power to produce change in the wicked and to “avoid scandal.” The ballad concludes with an addendum in prose, listing the “Names of [t]h[e] Masters of the Parish that saw the Maid on her Death-bed” and explaining again that the ballad originated with a letter that the masters “caused . . . to be written and sent from thence to London, on purpose to have it printed,” which was then “Contrived into Meeter by L. P,” and set to the tune of “In Summer Time.”¹³ The prose addendum sits outside the ballad proper, and it is hard to imagine that any singer would attempt to render it in song. A performer might point to it, however, as Autolycus refers to lists of printed “signatures,” as a selling point. It positions the broadside as printed text, appealing directly to a reader, and returns the reader at the end to the eyewitnesses who provide and verify its content. Carefully explaining how witnessing achieved ballad form, how truth became print, this addendum offers a model of how to create the appearance of proof without really constituting it, since neither we nor most consumers at the time can verify the verification. Anything, as Autolycus implies, can be sent out over the names of parish masters or midwives. Anyone can invent lists of names.

The list of names to which Autolycus jokingly refers is the most common verification strategy in broadside ballads.¹⁴ Autolycus mentions “justices’ hands,” reminding us of how the printed name stands in for the signature, which in turn represents the presence of the living witness and his or her notarization.¹⁵ Some ballads reproduce documents rather than listing eyewitnesses, thus acknowledging that the process of consumption and testing could be a textual one—comparing printed texts and taking texts as witnesses.¹⁶ Sometimes the lister of witnesses goes further, directing the reader to find and talk to an interested party. “Mans Amazement,” a “true Relation” of Thomas Cox’s encounter with the devil, begins with the usual insistence on the truth of the story and ends with directions for locating Cox, as, we are assured, hundreds have:

13. “A Wonderful Propheisie, Declared by Christian James a Maid of twenty years of age (late Daughter to Daniel James) who was born and bred near the Town which is called Padstow, in the County of Cornwall, who departed this life upon the 8th. of March. With a true relation of her Behaviour, both in her life time and at the hour of her death, worthy to be had in perpetual memory” (1684–86), PL, Pepys 2.55, EBBA 20679.

14. Many other texts advise the reader on where he or she can view a body or include lists of witnesses. See David Cressy, *Agnes Bowker’s Cat: Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 2000), on how texts tried to document their credibility by including lists of witnesses (34–35).

15. As just one example of many, “Strange and True News from Westmoreland. Being a true Relation of one Gabriel Harding, who coming home drunk, struck his Wife a blow on the brest, and killed her out-right, and then denied the same” (1685), PL, Pepys 2.155, EBBA 20775, ends with a list of the names of the “chiefest men that live in the Parish.”

16. For example, “Youths Warning-Peece. In a true Relation of the woefull Death of William Rogers of Cranbroke in Kent an Apothecary” (1636), British Library, Roxburghe 1.434-435, EBBA 30294, ends with a little appendix saying, “If any desire further information touching the manner of this mans Life, sicknesse, and death, let them read the Sermon Preached at his funerall, which is Printed by Authority.” This sermon can easily be found on EBO as Robert Abbot, *The Young-Mans Warning-Peece* (London, 1636).

And those that will take but the pains for to go
 A further Account of the truth you may know,
 Yea from his own mouth he will freely unfold,
 The sum and the substance of what I have told.¹⁷

The ballad's relator, who both produces the ballad and changes with each performance, enjoins the consumer to participate in relating the ballad's account to the "further Account of the truth" that she can extract if only she will "take but the pains for to go" question Cox for herself.

"A Warning for All Such as Desire to Sleep upon the Grass" (1664) similarly activates the consumer as a finder of fact, like an early modern juror. It offers "the most strange, but true Relation" of Mary Dudson, maidservant to "Mr. Phillips a Gardener, dwelling in Kent street, in the Borough of Southwark." According to the ballad, in July Mary fell into "a Dead-sleep in the Garden." When she was finally awakened, she continued very ill "many a day" until, on August 14, 1664, she vomited up "about fourteen yong living Adders," and finally one old adder, their dame, about 14 inches long, which tried to return into the maid's mouth but fled when thwarted. Since the maid, despite a litter that might prompt Mopsa to say, "Bless me from sleeping in the grass," "is yet living" when the broadside is printed, the ballad ends with this addendum: "Those that desire to be satisfied of the Truth more at large, may repair to this woful Wight, a Spectacle of Gods mercy, and an Object of true Charity, being a constant Laborer in her health: It is hard to say whether she will live or die. She lyeth over against the sign of the Ship in Kent-street in the Borough of Southwark. This Relation the Author had from her own mouth." Although the ballad is to be sung to the popular tune of "In Summer Time," when, presumably, one might be especially if ruinously tempted to sleep upon the grass, this addendum (fig. 1)—again situated outside the verse—links the broadside to the world of print, appeals to a reader, and invites its consumer into the active knowledge-making practice of checking what one hears and reads against other sources.¹⁸ Like other women who drew crowds—because they had survived execu-

17. "Mans Amazement: It being a true Relation of one Thomas Cox, a Hackney-Coach-man, to whom the Devil appeared on friday night, it being the 31st. of October, first in the likeness of a Gentleman, seeming to have a role of Paper or Parchment in his hand, afterwards in the likeness of a great Bear with glaring eyes, which so affrighted him, that it deprived him of all his Sences" (1671–1702?), PL, Pepys 2.175, EBBA 20792.

18. "A Warning for All Such as Desire to Sleep upon the Grass: By the Example of Mary Dudson Maid-servant to Mr. Phillips a Gardener, dwelling in Kent street, in the Borough of Southwark: Being a most strange, but true Relation how she was found in a Dead-sleep in the Garden, that no ordinary Noise could awake her; As also how an Adder entered into her body, the manner of her long Sickness, with a brief Discovery of the Cause at length by her strange and most miraculous Vomiting up of about fourteen yong Adders, and one old Adder, on August 14. 1664. about fourteen Inches in length, the Maid is yet living. The like to this hath not been known in this Age" (1664), University of Glasgow Library, Euing 375, EBBA 31986. Two of the other ballads I discuss, "Strange and True News from Westmoreland" and "A Wonderful Prophesie, Declared by Christian James a Maid" also refer to the tune "In Summer Time" about two decades later. This might suggest that this tune played a role in alerting consumers that a ballad would make a truth claim or at least in linking different ballads together; on this latter point, see especially Una McClivenna's essay in this issue.

Those that desire to be satisfied of the Truth more at large, may repair to this woful Wight, a Spectacle of Gods mercy, and an Object of true Charity, being a constant Laborer in her health: It is hard to say whether she will live or die. She lyeth over against the sign of the *Ship in Kent-street* in the Borough of *Southwark*. This Relation the Author had from her own mouth.
London, Printed for Charls Tjue on London-bridge. 1664.

FIGURE 1. Detail from “A Warning for All Such as Desire to Sleep upon the Grass” (1664). Euing 375, EBBA 31986. By permission of University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections.

tion, claimed to be possessed, or recounted visions—Mary Dudson might be both a spectacle one would pay to see and a true relator of her own story. One did not preclude the other. A kind of advertisement, the directive to visit Mary Dudson links her both to notorious victims or freaks and to experts, such as Hannah Woolley, who invited readers to supplement the process of reading her domestic instructions by visiting her.¹⁹ In other words, if a ballad is a performance script, the addenda might be as well, operating, as a recipe does, to advise the reader what to do—go look at and talk to Mary Dudson—but also standing in the place of the prescribed action—you probably won’t do this, but here is what you could and perhaps even should do.²⁰ The assurance that one might talk to Mary Dudson, getting the story straight from the very mouth through which those adders entered and exited, might be enough. For the reader at a remove of space or time, such invitations must substitute for the proofs toward which they gesture. Listing witnesses or reproducing documents, ballad relators assemble and open access to a kind of archive to substantiate truth claims, challenge rival narratives, and win readers’ trust. Yet even as they relate their “true relations” to evidence that stands beyond or behind them, that alternative to the textual recedes, leaving us only with the ballad itself. Readers today, advised of the location of a witness who, even if he once existed, is long dead, may feel the distance open between themselves and readers at the time, who could at least think that, if they cared enough to do so, they could talk to Thomas Cox or Mary Dudson.

While readers today cannot hunt down participants or witnesses, we can still follow the cues ballads offer, tracing their true relations to other surviving evidence

19. Early modern women who drew crowds of the curious include Anne Greene, Anne Gunter, and Anna Trapnel. I am grateful to Wendy Wall’s *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern English Kitchen* (Philadelphia, 2015), for reflections on reading recipes and references to Hannah Woolley’s *The Supplement to the Queenlike Closet* (London, 1674), sigs. A3r, D6v–D7r; and *The Ladies Directory* (London, 1662), sigs. A3v–A4r. On broadsides as advertisements, see Anita Guerrini, “Advertising Monstrosity: Broadsides and Human Exhibition in Early Eighteenth-Century London,” in *Ballads and Broadsides, 1500–1800*, ed. Patricia Fumerton and Anita Guerrini, with the assistance of Kris McAbee (Burlington, Vt., 2010), 109–27.

20. Wall, *Recipes for Thought*, and “Literacy and the Domestic Arts,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2010): 383–412; Sarah Pennell, “Perfecting Practice?: Women, Manuscript Recipes and Knowledge in Early Modern England,” in *Early Modern Women’s Manuscript Writing: Selected Papers from the Trinity/Trent Colloquium*, ed. Victoria Burke and Jonathan Gibson (Burlington, Vt., 2004), 237–58.

and testing their truth claims. Let me do just that with one ballad that is in the Huntington's collections and available on EBBA: "The Whipster of Woodstreet, or, A True Account of the Barbarous and Horrid Murther committed on the Body of Mary Cox, late Servant in Woodstreet London" (1689–92) (fig. 2).²¹ While the title names the servant and the location of her murder, and the ballad goes into considerable detail about the murder, the ballad does not name the "barbarous Dame," her mistress, who tortured Mary Cox. Instead, it simply concludes with a determined hope for (but no description of) her punishment: "for which, of the hemp she must taste, / old Tyburn must have her I trow." The ballad's indeterminacy acts as an invitation or provocation, similar to the invitation that, I have argued, the addenda after the verses in other ballads explicitly offer. Both its details and its reticence might make the modern researcher wonder if other accounts of the crime survive. While searching for such corroboration is often fruitless, databases have improved the modern researcher's odds. In this case, a search of the Old Bailey Proceedings Online reveals the name of the mistress, Elizabeth Deacon, who was tried for murder February 26, 1690.²² These printed proceedings, now so readily searchable and easily accessible, were also a form of cheap print, mass marketed for profit.²³ They thus raise as many evidentiary problems as ballads that make claims to truthfulness. In this particular case, the Old Bailey account includes more detail than the "Whipster of Woodstreet," perhaps because it reports on the trial, whereas the ballad anticipates the trial and verdict. The level of detail in the trial account appeals to readers interested in a controversial and sensational crime as much as it constitutes accuracy.

While the description of the crime in the ballad resembles that in the Old Bailey proceedings, the trial account suggests that the chronology of the case may have been more complicated than the ballad's plot. The ballad remarks that the mistress's violence enabled her to "extort" from the maid "a Confession . . . Of Crimes which the Maid never knew." But it never explains what those crimes were or why a confession mattered, dwelling instead on the mistreatment. In the ballad, the mistress tortures the maid "upon her husband's bed" and then confines her to her chamber for three days so that others cannot see the results of the torture. When Mary Cox first ventures downstairs, her mistress finishes her off with a blow to the head from a hammer. In the Old

21. "The Whipster of Woodstreet, or, A True Account of the Barbarous and Horrid Murther committed on the Body of Mary Cox, late Servant in Woodstreet London," Huntington Library, 80079, EBBA 32182. The date of this version is offered as 1689–92. But EBBA also includes a copy from the Pepys Library, which my research here suggests is more accurately dated as 1690 (PL, Pepys 2.190, EBBA 20805). Given the chronology I suggest, the ballad can hardly be earlier. It might, of course, have been printed later as well.

22. *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, August 30, 2014), February 1690, trial of Elizabeth Deacon (t16900226-1).

23. See Clive Emsley, Tim Hitchcock, and Robert Shoemaker, "The Proceedings—The Value of the Proceedings as a Historical Source," *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, September 26, 2014). As Garthine Walker summarizes, while the *Proceedings* were once "conventionally assumed to be accurate," they are "now understood to offer a partial, sometimes distorted, account of trials." See "Rape, Acquittal, and Culpability in Popular Crime Reports in England, c. 1670–c. 1750," *Past & Present* 220 (2013): 115–42 at 119n19.



FIGURE 2. Detail from “The Whipster of Woodstreet” (1689–92). Huntington Library, 80079, EBBA 32182.

Bailey account, all of the violence precedes and results in a confession of theft. In the trial record, an apprentice testifies that the torture, in which he played a role as assistant and observer, yielded a confession that the maid “had been confederate with some Thieves who intended to Rob her Master’s House while he was at Bristol Fair.” Armed with this confession, the mistress “had the Maid before a Justice on the next Monday,” the day before she died, “where she confessed the like, &c.” That “etc.” opens up a question as to whether Mary Cox was convicted and, if so, of what exactly. We cannot find out more about this through the Old Bailey Online. But if we turn to its linked database, *London Lives*, we find, from the City of London Sessions Justices’ Working Documents, a manuscript examination of Mary Cox from January 27, 1690, bearing her sign (x).²⁴ The statement claims that she aided various confederates in making a copy of the key to her mistress’s “dressing box whare their money was kept” and routinely defrauded the Deacons of cash and “goods, belonging to his trade” (including whips).

24. City of London Sessions Papers: Justices’ Working Documents (January 10, 1690–November 18, 1690), London Metropolitan Archives (*London Lives* ref: LMSLPS150010007–LMSLPS150010008).

Cox also confessed to participating in thefts from other nearby households. She did not mention her mistress's treatment of her. As so often, there is no record of an official consequence of this confession. Mary Cox seems to have gone home with her mistress, to die of her injuries the next day.

Mindful that each of our sources is equally if differently problematic, we might piece together a rough and provisional timeline using the examination, the ballad, and the printed account of the proceeding: on Monday, January 20, Elizabeth Deacon became suspicious and began to torture Mary Cox to extort a confession from her; a week later, on Monday, January 27, she brought Mary before a justice, who examined her and recorded her confession. According to the Old Bailey proceedings, Elizabeth Deacon, having gotten this confession on the record, then "grew careless of" her servant, Mary, and would not get her medical attention for her injuries. The next day, Tuesday, January 28, Mary Cox died. Then the ballad and broadside were printed. Elizabeth Deacon was tried a month later. In Deacon's trial, as recorded in the Old Bailey proceedings, the surgeon testified that the beatings she administered "did contribute towards" Mary Cox's death and so Deacon was convicted. The proceedings account was printed.

While the ballad compresses interrogations and assaults that seem to have unfolded over a week, the ballad woodcut might indicate that duration by multiplying figures of the mistress. It looks as if five women assault the maid but each seems to be the mistress, engaged in a different activity or using a different weapon. The weapons described in "The Whipster of Woodstreet" include a hot iron, a whip, Deacon's feet and hands, and a hammer. In this image we see a whip and a knife but the other implements are unclear. The image focuses on the maid's nakedness, quite rare in popular print. She is face down, the top of her body turned toward the viewer (so that we see her breasts), and emphasis is placed on the stripes on her backside, the glaring whiteness of her skin, and her black dress and perhaps her hat and ruff on the ground. The diminutive boy might be the apprentice who testified in the trial, his size indicating his youth and his diminished culpability as compared to the multiplied figures of the whipster mistress and her numerous instruments of torture. While experts on ballad illustration emphasize the creative and dogged recycling of stock images, this woodcut might have been made for the purpose. Then again, signs of wear and of revision, such as attempts to obscure some of the implements in the attackers' hands, might indicate that this, too, is a recycled image.²⁵

Although the mistress, Elizabeth Deacon, strove "to Extenuate her Crime" by depicting her maid as a thief and calling witnesses in her own defense, "none . . . could contradict or invalidate the King's Evidence"; after "some hours Debate," "the Jury looking upon the Heinousness of the Fact, brought in her guilty of wilful Murther."²⁶ In EEBO we can find another two-sided broadside from the Bodleian about the same

25. I am grateful to Patricia Fumerton and Megan E. Palmer for their thoughts on this woodcut and its possible provenance.

26. Trial of Elizabeth Deacon (*Old Bailey Proceedings Online* t16900226-1).

case: “A Remarkable Account of the Penitent Carriage and Behaviour of the Whip-Makers Wife, Both before and since her confinement in Newgate” (1689/90), which records that “Some reports . . . fly abroad, that she is with Child, but with what certainty we know not.”²⁷ Indeed, on the very day she was tried, Deacon successfully pled her belly and was examined by a jury of matrons who found her quick with child.²⁸ More than a year later, she again appeared before the Old Bailey, this time to beg a pardon. She appears to have gotten it.²⁹ As far as the record shows, Deacon did not suffer the fate at Tyburn that the “Whipster of Woodstreet” anticipates. Thus when “The Whipster of Woodstreet” was printed, it might have withheld Deacon’s name because she had not yet been tried or convicted; the relator might not have heard the reports that she was pregnant or at least intending to plead the belly. As a result, the ballad manages to be both titillatingly judgmental and noncommittal about the final outcome.

According to the broadside “A Remarkable Account,” which was “Publish’d to prevent false Reports” but not necessarily to correct them, this case made “considerable Noise” “not only in and about this great City, but in remoter Parts,” and “a person then present” reported that, on the night the maid died, “there was a Noise like the Noise of a Drum, and sometimes another strange Noise, like scratching behind a Partition in another Room.” The spectral noise heard on the night of Mary Cox’s death is akin to the noise produced by competing oral and print reports.³⁰ The curious consumer had to attempt to piece together knowledge of a notorious recent case amid that noise. Consumers then had to be as cagey and careful as we are now, collecting fragments of intelligence, questioning and comparing sources, attending to the gaps that would always have existed in what could be known or proven. Of course, a contemporary would only assemble fragments if he or she had access to them and cared about the case—and the reasons for caring would vary. In Mary Cox’s manuscript examination, now available on *London Lives*, we have ready access to one piece in the puzzle that some contemporaries had heard about but that few if any would have seen. But whether it suggests that Elizabeth Deacon had compelling reason to suspect her maid and protect her property, or that she had, as “The Whipster of Woodstreet” suggests, violently “extorted” from the maid “a Confession . . . Of Crimes which the Maid never knew,” we cannot be sure.

Those contemporaries interested in the case do not seem to have agreed on Elizabeth Deacon’s guilt. We have seen the clear condemnation in the ballad, “The

27. “A Remarkable Account of the Penitent Carriage and Behaviour of the Whip-Makers Wife, Both before and since her confinement in Newgate” (1689), Bodleian Library copy, accessed via EEBO. This text provides its own date as 1689, but this is o.s. dating and so probably refers to February 1690.

28. Old Bailey proceedings punishment summary, February 26, 1690, *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, February 7, 2014), February 1690 (s16900226-1).

29. The Old Bailey proceedings record that on May 27, 1691, “Elizabeth Deacon, the Whip maker’s Wife in Wood-street, pleaded Their Majesties most Gracious and Free Pardon” (*Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, August 30, 2014), May 1691 (016910527-1). It is not clear whether Elizabeth Deacon gave birth in the interval between pleading her belly and securing a pardon.

30. Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2000).

Whipster of Woodstreet.” Yet the Old Bailey proceedings and the broadside “A Remarkable Account” both record that the “Tryal lasted very long,” and the jury then engaged in “some hours debate” before bringing in a verdict. A different jury that same day, a jury of matrons, found Deacon quick with child, which might suggest some sympathy with her, and thus deferred her execution. According to “A Remarkable Account,” Mrs. Deacon had to be committed to the custody of the keeper of Newgate and moved from her own house to an unknown location, because “the incensed Rabble . . . threatned no less than the pulling down the House, about which they gathered in crowds, and about which a Guard was afterwards placed.” Yet, we are told, “Her Husband resolves to part (as ’tis said) with all, if her Life can be saved,” even as he also provided Mary Cox with a proper burial. Ultimately, Mrs. Deacon was offered a pardon and spared execution. Those as close as possible to the event, then, had mixed feelings and disagreed with one another.

Researchers today can trace these connections, if we “take but the pains for to go” outside the ballad, as “Mans Amazement” advises its audience to do. What is the yield of so bestirring ourselves, tracing these connections from text to text? Relating “The Whipster of Woodstreet” to other surviving texts offers one example that ballads’ constant claims to be true were not entirely specious, even if the truths they help us piece together are provisional and incomplete. This ballad offers consumers, then and now, some insight into a notorious event and thereby into the vexed relationships between mistresses and their servants, women and the law. For us now, though, it seems less important to learn more about this one seventeenth-century crime—among so many—than to imagine how some ballad consumers might have used ballads as part of their practice of making knowledge about recent events. Our own practices approach those of the most motivated and curious contemporary—who could get access to the printed texts by buying or borrowing them, reading or hearing them. Among the fragments we can assemble, the ballad “The Whipster of Woodstreet” offers as much insight as any not only into what might have happened in that household on Woodstreet but also into why contemporaries both cared and disagreed about it.

Mopsa’s assertion that she knows a ballad is true if it is printed probably worked as a joke on the early seventeenth-century stage in part because it addressed an anxiety about how often people sought truth in print and how compelling if also implausible the content of cheap print could be, even for consumers who prided themselves on not being clowns. It has remained funny as we have continued to seek various kinds of truth in broadsides in the centuries since. Many scholars evoke Mopsa as a kind of inoculation against the ballad quotation that will often follow. As a low-status female character who is interested in ribbons, gloves, tawdry-lace, and ballads, she might serve as an uncomfortable mascot for the social historians who have relied on ballads. Indeed, distrust of ballads as evidence often slides into disparagement of the kind of knowledge projects that depend on them. Yet ballads are no less reliable than many other sources. They join the Old Bailey proceedings in a cheap print dialogue, rather

than standing opposed to them as popular ephemera versus legal document. Mopsa's assertion, which makes it so easy to dismiss her, is quoted much more often than her question: "Is it true, think you?" In that question, Mopsa proves herself a reasonably good representative of the print consumer, then and now, interested but uncertain whether to trust or not, and actively evaluating what ballads have to say.

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FRANCES E. DOLAN is Distinguished Professor of English at the University of California, Davis. She is the author of five books, most recently *True Relations: Reading, Literature, and Evidence in Seventeenth-Century England* (2013). She has depended on broadsides in all of her books and includes several in her textbook, *The Taming of the Shrew: Texts and Contexts* (1996).

