

From the Execution Ballad to the Dramatic Monologue: Criminal Confession Reconfigured

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Introduction

The Victorians were fascinated by sensational crime, guilt and punishment. They avidly consumed narratives, dramatizations and visual representations of real and fictional crimes, visited the sites and collected souvenirs of famous murders.¹ Early Victorian lower-class audiences enjoyed sensational crime mostly in the form of broadside execution ballads. Increased literacy, the progressive reduction (1836) then abolition (1855) of the stamp tax on newspapers (which competed with broadsides for the public's attention), and the end of public executions (1868) led to the ballads' gradual demise, and the sensational press and penny dreadfuls took their place.² Targeted more at a middle-class audience were, first, the various publications known as the *Newgate Calendar* (until 1841) and the Newgate novel of the 1820s—40s, then the Sensation novel of the 1860s—70s, as well as extensive newspaper reports on trials in the mainstream press.

Historians of the Victorian interest in crime usually assume that cultural discourse on the subject is the province of prose, with the notable exception of the execution ballad. This ephemeral, highly formulaic genre, with its abundant use of *clichés* and its explicit moralizing, sometimes hastily cobbled together from earlier texts and targeted at a popular audience, seems to offer little in terms of artistic value, as even its early collectors acknowledged.³ While the sensational press had its lower- and middle-class versions and the Sensation novel transferred the lower-class crimes of the penny dreadfuls to middle-class settings, there seems to be no poetic equivalent to the execution ballad for a middle-class readership.

This article explores a corpus of “high literary” poems aimed at a middle-class audience which, I will argue, respond to some of the concerns and formal features of the execution ballad: dramatic monologues about crime. Presenting plots and situations similar to those in the execution ballad and exploiting the sensational potential of crime, these poems invite the contemporary reader to compare them to the familiar format of the ballad and other execution literature. The reading of the monologues offered here considers how they play with reader expectations shaped by the execution ballad. Through this approach, the article shines light on how murder plots from the popular poetic tradition are reshaped in the new, more complex genre of the dramatic monologue. The number of dramatic monologues about criminal transgression is small, but their prominence as case studies illustrating the characteristics of the genre is striking. Robert Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover” (1836) and “My Last Duchess” (1842) are the most famous exponents of the genre,⁴ while his “Roman murder story,”⁵ *The Ring and the Book* (1868—69), offers its most complex expression.

The dramatic monologue is widely acknowledged as the distinctive new poetic genre of the Victorian period. It is particularly suited to what Isobel Armstrong has termed “cultural critique,”⁶ participating in contemporary debates about issues such as gender, politics or religion and, more pertinently for our purposes, crime and insanity, as both Michael Mason and Ellen O’Brien have suggested.⁷ Despite substantial critical attention to the genre’s interventions in these debates, studies of the dramatic monologue’s origin do not relate it to other contemporaneous poetic genres. Instead, the established critical view on its genealogy is that it is a reaction to the Romantic self-expressive lyric (Herbert Tucker, E. Warwick Slinn), the Romantic closet drama (Robert Langbaum), the conversation poem and the Socratic dialogue (W. David Shaw), or that it developed out of the work of Romantic women poets (Armstrong, Glennis Byron).⁸

The “horizon of expectation”

Without dismissing these established genealogies, I want to suggest that dramatic monologues also respond to more popular contemporary genres, specifically the execution ballad and related execution literature. This argument draws support from the increasingly well documented interest of the Victorian middle class in contemporary crime. While ephemera like the broadsides may not have survived in personal libraries, the omnipresence of the *Newgate Calendar* on middle-class bookshelves,⁹ the references to criminal cases in authors’ correspondence and reported conversation, the extensive column space given to crime in the middle-class press, and the market in crime-related entertainments and artefacts targeted at the middle class¹⁰ are evidence of a widespread fascination with the topic.

Many Victorian authors and readers of poetry would have been just as, if not more, familiar with popular genres and the latest criminal cases as with the canon of Romantic poetry. I therefore propose to read dramatic monologues about crime in relation to what reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss terms the contemporary “horizon of expectation,” i.e. the framework of cultural and textual conventions and expectations regarding genre, style, moral codes, etc.¹¹ Jauss sees literary history as a “process of continuous horizon setting and horizon changing” (p. 13). It is the “aesthetic distance” between, on the one hand, reader expectations informed by genre, previous and contemporary works and the reader’s “wider horizon of experience of [...] life,” and on the other hand, the new work, which results in a “horizon change,” a change in reader expectations (pp. 13—14). In our particular case, the horizon of expectation is significantly informed by the conventions of the execution ballad and other fictional and non-fictional writings about crime rather than by the Romantic lyrics

which have long appeared as more salient from the perspective of later critics with their focus on canonical predecessor texts.

The characters and situations presented in these monologues are so strikingly different from the Romantic confessional lyric and so close to contemporary crime literature that it is fair to assume that the original audience would have compared the poems to the criminal confessions that were so present in their culture rather than to the private self-conscious reflections of middle-class poets. In what is still the most famous theorization of the dramatic monologue, Robert Langbaum describes the genre as defined by a tension between sympathy and judgment. Langbaum thinks of judgment in moral terms, but for Victorian readers of these poems judgment in the legal sense would also have been a prime consideration. I will argue that dramatic monologues about crime speak more to confession in the legal sense, as foregrounded in the execution ballad, than to the type of private confession associated with the Romantic lyric or with the spiritual confession which is the apparent occasion for the monologist's utterance in two of the poems I will consider.

Moreover, the Romantics themselves were of course responsible for the promotion of popular literary culture, with the ballad genre taking pride of place, as evidenced by Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). A poem like Wordsworth's "The Thorn" is both formally related to the oral ballad tradition and shares its theme of infanticide with a number of execution ballads, albeit with the crucial difference that the suspected murderous mother here is not brought to justice. More broadly, longer Romantic narrative poems involving murder, violence, punishment and repentance can be seen as influencing the topics of the dramatic monologues under discussion here.¹² While Browning and his successors certainly owed a debt to the Romantic literary ballad revival – a subject touched

upon in the analysis of “Porphyria’s Lover” below and which would benefit from closer examination in other monologues— I want to concentrate here on their response to the popular murder ballad.

Ellen O’Brien has demonstrated how execution ballads and dramatic monologues participate in the same debates about criminal responsibility and justice. This article builds on her work, focusing on how these monologues seem designed to surprise and challenge readers who approach them with certain expectations in terms of moral message, characterization and closure informed by the execution ballad. Focusing on Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover,” “My Last Duchess,” *The Ring and the Book* and “A Forgiveness” (1876), and on Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “A Last Confession” (1870), which is closely inspired by Browning’s work, the analysis will demonstrate how dramatic monologues about crime take key elements of the execution ballad but complicate them, subverting the ballad’s straightforward narrative pattern and social function.

Browning’s fascination with crime

Jauss cautions against the retrospective interpretation of literary history which privileges a diachronic perspective over a more synchronous perspective that takes account of the reading habits and lived experience of the text’s first audience and is, of course, harder to reconstruct for later critics (p. 29). How central this synchronous context of execution ballads and the widespread Victorian interest in crime is for an appreciation of Browning’s poems and his readers’ expectations can be glimpsed from his correspondence and reported conversation. “I believe I do unduly like the study of morbid cases of the soul,” he acknowledges in response to Julia Wedgwood’s charge that “the scientific interest in evil” and in “the physiology of wrong” is “unusually predominant” in him.¹³ His letters are

scattered with references to well-known crimes and *causes célèbres* of the day, with a particular focus on murder. He tells Elizabeth Barrett early in their courtship about his visit to an exhibition of murder weapons presented by the famous criminal turned secret police chief and private detective François Eugène Vidocq (1775–1857):

After seeing you, that Saturday, I was caught up by a friend and carried to see Vidocq—who did the honour of his museum of knives & nails and hooks that have helped great murderers to their purposes— [...] —thus one little sort of desert-knife did only take one life .. “but then” says Vidocq, “it was the man’s own mother’s life, with fifty-two blows, and all for” (I think) “fifteen francs she had got.” So prattles good-naturedly Vidocq—one of his best stories is of that Lacénaire—“jeune homme d’un caractère fort avenant—mais c’était un poète” [a young man of very pleasing character—but he was a poet], quoth he, turning sharp on me out of two or three other people round him.¹⁴

As *The Times* of 9 June 1845 noted, the exhibition in question featured, *inter alia*, “daggers, sanguinary weapons, knives, and other horrible implements of murder or mutilation, taken from the perpetrators of crime.”¹⁵ While Browning seems anxious to project to Barrett that the visit to this macabre exhibition was not his own idea, he clearly relishes the gory detail about the desert-knife murder and is tickled by Vidocq’s suggested parallel between himself and the notorious criminal poet Pierre-François Lacénaire (1803–36).

This lively interest in crime on Browning’s part is confirmed by Charles Kegan Paul, who reports that during a dinner party attended by both in the 1880s,

the conversation turned on murder, and to the surprise of everybody Mr. Browning showed himself acquainted with the minutest details of every *cause célèbre* of that

kind within living memory. He quoted a ghastly stanza on Thurtell's murder of Mr. Weare –

“His throat they cut from ear to ear,
His brains they battered in,”

and was rather piqued that another guest was able to complete the lines with

“His name was Mr. William Weare,
He lived at Lyon's Inn”¹⁶

Browning in his seventies is able to remember this doggerel about a murder in 1823 – a case which, at the time and decades later still, attracted comment among many literary luminaries, including Thomas de Quincey, Charles Dickens, Charles Lamb, Thomas Carlyle and Walter Scott, who collected publications about the case, visited the site of the murder and praised the very version of the ballad Browning cites.¹⁷ It is also telling that Browning is not the only one in the room who is able to recite the ballad. The anecdote illustrates how deeply engrained sensational crimes and their representation through execution ballads were in the memory and imagination of the middle classes. It suggests that Browning could count on a readership interested in crime and well versed in the conventions of the execution ballad genre.

[Execution ballads: a brief overview](#)

What, then, were nineteenth-century reader expectations of a typical execution ballad? These unsophisticated, anonymous, short, rhymed poems about topical real-life crimes were churned out *en masse* by popular printers like James Catnach or John Pitts, both of London's infamous Seven Dials slum. Printed on single sheets of cheap paper, they were

accompanied by crude woodcuts and sometime prose narratives and hawked for a penny or halfpenny in the streets or at the criminal's execution.¹⁸

"The Lamentation of Francis Courvoisier for the Murder of Lord William Russell" will serve as an example of the rigid ballad formula.¹⁹ This 68-line poem is one of a plethora of ballads about the notorious murder in 1840 of an aristocrat by his Swiss valet, after the master had discovered the servant was stealing his plate. The standard ballad opens with an apostrophe to the reader/listener, warning against emulating the criminal who is the subject of the narrative. In this case, the poem opens by setting the scene in Newgate prison. The admonition is placed slightly later in the chorus, but made more prominent through repetition when the ballad is performed:

So one and all, I pray take warning,

From these lines as you shall hear,

Let not the love of gold e'er tempt you,

As it did Francis Courvoisier. (9—12)

Throughout the text, the moral depravity of the murderer and the innocence of the victim are signaled very clearly. Courvoisier states "I am doomed to die a death of shame; / For the murder of Lord William Russell, / Who was a master good and kind" (4—6), acknowledging: "I see how base I have acted, / But ah, repentance comes to [sic] late." (19—20) He blames both greed ("My thirst for gold it was so great," 18) and temptation by the devil for his crime ("Sure Satan must my mind have tempted," 7).

After recounting the master's threat to dismiss the thieving valet and Courvoisier's "form[ing of] the horrid plan, / For to commit the awful crime" (29—30), the ballad's climax is the melodramatic murder scene:

I quickly gained my master's chamber,
And cautiously I closed the door,
And saw in peace Lord William sleeping,
But he was doomed to wake no more;
His throat I severed in an instant,
And as from the wound life's blood did flow,
The fiend exulting stood before me,
For he had worked my overthrow. (37—44)

It seems clear that graphic descriptions of recent crimes such as this one appealed to the public's hunger for the morbid and sensational, allowing them to indulge jointly and vicariously in criminal transgressions from a safe stance as a consumer of entertaining narrative rather than from the perilous stance of victim or perpetrator.²⁰

Courvoisier's attempt to divert suspicion from himself and fake a burglary fails. He is taken to Newgate

For to answer for the deed;
In my innocence I still protested,
But God ordained it otherwise,

A British jury found me guilty,

And I am to answer with my life. (56—60)

The final stanza depicts the convicted man in his cell, awaiting execution and reprising the themes of repentance and divine justice:

Then back they to the cell conveyed me,

There to await the fatal day,

When blood for blood will be required,

And I must the dread forfeit pay;

May God above some mercy show me,

When I before his bar shall stand,

Although I shew none here below,

To him who fell beneath my hand. (61—68)

The space allocated to the trial and its aftermath shows that the ballads were tales not just of crime but, crucially, of crime *and punishment*. This was consonant with the deterrent purpose of the public executions during which the ballads were hawked.

Twentieth-century critics of the genre like Victor Neuburg and V. A. C. Gatrell considered it as a cultural product reinforcing the values of law and order that underpinned the social order of nineteenth-century Britain.²¹ According to Gatrell, even those ballads mildly critical of the death penalty were so in conformity with opinions already aired in parliamentary debates.²² The ballads also serviced a wider moral agenda underwritten by the Church.

When Dickens in 1849 lent his support to the campaign for executions to take place within

prison walls, it was on the grounds that their moral and religious lessons as public spectacles were being perverted by the rowdy behavior of spectators.²³ Importantly, only convicted criminals are represented in the execution ballad, and the trial which asserts the power of the state is a pivotal moment in the text. The justice of the verdict is confirmed either by the voice of the judge and/or omniscient narrator (if the poem is in the third person) or by the repentant criminal (if it is presented as a first-person “Last Confession” or “Lamentation” like the above example). Religious and secular authorities are aligned, with the criminal, the judge and the narrator commonly delivering an admonition to the audience that crime has consequences for the life and soul of the criminal. The ballad subgenre of the “Last Confession” in particular thus brings together both the legal and religious meanings of the term “confession.”

However, more recent criticism has challenged the view of the genre “as an agent of ‘social control’ [...] and a means of keeping the working classes in their subordinate position in society,”²⁴ shining spotlights on those ballads which sympathize with the criminal, exposing social injustices experienced by the poor and young offenders, who often lacked legal representation, and highlighting the disproportion between criminal offences and the state-sanctioned violence of the execution. Thus Philippe Chassaing discusses ballads stressing the fortitude and dignity on the scaffold of John Bellingham, the assassin of Prime Minister Spencer Perceval, and the forger Henry Fauntleroy; James Hepburn pays attention to the rare ballads which denounce the harsh punishment of those being driven to commit crimes through poverty; O’Brien analyses the “Lamentation of Samuel Wright” (1864), whose working-class hero was denied legal counsel and as a result convicted of murder rather than manslaughter; and Cameron Nunn examines sympathetically portrayed juvenile convicts in the face of unduly cruel state justice.²⁵ The dramatic monologues inspired by execution

ballads situate themselves in this rarer, non-conformist vein of poems which interrogate social hierarchies and values.

On the face of it, the dramatic monologue is, of course, very different from the simple formulaic genre that is the execution ballad: instead of being presented with a mostly linear narrative, the reader has to piece together a chain of events and causalities from the hints contained in a single dramatic scene; instead of one-dimensional stock characters, the dramatic monologue presents a complex psychology; instead of witnessing a straightforward acknowledgment and repentance of wrongdoing, the reader is challenged to detect the speaker's inadvertent self-revelations; instead of presenting a clear moral judgment and punishment of the protagonist, the dramatic monologue obliges readers to judge for themselves and the protagonist's fate may remain unclear; and, finally, instead of addressing the reader, the speaker addresses a silent interlocutor within the text.

For all these differences, however, other core features of the dramatic monologues considered here – the focus on crime, the murderer as speaker, the confessional format, the theatrical quality – represent a form of performative poetry for which the “Last Confession” subgenre of the execution ballad furnished a well-rehearsed precursor. It is as much, too, in the distances between dramatic monologue and execution ballad as in their proximities that Browning (and Rossetti following his example) seeks ways to challenge readers to reconsider their preconceptions about crime, psychology and the function of poetry, rendering much more complex and ambiguous the restricted perspectives of the earlier genre. For an illustration of this, we can turn to Browning's earliest experiment with the dramatic monologue format, the poem now known as “Porphyria's Lover” but originally published in the *Monthly Repository* as “Porphyria” (1836).

“Porphyria’s Lover”

“Porphyria’s Lover” is often treated as a model dramatic monologue. Yet the absence of an in-text auditor – Porphyria is dead and the speaker does not address her – means the poem is not a perfect fit for common generic definitions. This deviation may be read as an indicator of what Browning responded to as he developed the genre. The accepted critical view, following Mason, is that the poem reflects Browning’s interest in the evolution of psychiatric discourse. The poem suggests the speaker may be suffering from the newly defined condition of “rational lunacy” or “moral insanity.”²⁶ Mason identifies two sources for the poem: John Wilson’s “Extracts from Gosschen’s Diary” (1818), a short prose narrative presented as an excerpt from the diary of a Catholic clergyman, in which a man who suffers from hereditary insanity confesses the murder of his mistress to the narrator in his death cell;²⁷ and a long poem entitled “Marcian Colonna” (1820) by “Barry Cornwall,” the pseudonym of Browning’s friend Bryan Waller Procter, Metropolitan Commissioner in Lunacy from 1832 to 1861.²⁸ Procter, who in his “Advertisement” acknowledges Wilson’s story as his inspiration (p. v), adds the scene of the mad murderer sitting with the corpse.

While the similarities to these two texts underline Browning’s concern with the depiction of murderous madness, the differences between his poem and Wilson’s and Procter’s texts suggest his simultaneous engagement with contemporary execution literature. Above all, Browning’s unmediated presentation of a murderer’s voice confessing his crime is markedly different from Procter’s distanced, heterodiegetic narration and is reminiscent of the narrative presentation so familiar to contemporary readers from the first-person “Last Confession” ballad subgenre. Browning’s poem comes closer to Wilson’s prose narrative, which frames the murderer’s confession with the confessor’s narrative and an editor’s note. The tale dramatizes the scene which lies at the heart of the “Last Confession” ballad, the

condemned murderer's death cell confession. However, the anticipation of the execution that is crucial to the ballad does not feature in the text, as Wilson's murderer seems to commit suicide just before the narrative comes to an abrupt halt. The fact that this unrepentant murderer blames God for his madness and that the framing narrative reports the public's growing sympathy with the condemned man further removes the tale from the conformist agenda of most execution ballads.

While "Extracts from Gosschen's Diary" does draw on elements of execution literature, it is primarily a Gothic text like other "Tales of Terror" published in *Blackwood's Magazine*.

"Marcian Colonna" likewise displays key Gothic devices, such as hyperbolic Romantic diction and the setting of events in culturally distanced, Catholic countries. Wilson's story is set in the south German city of Ratisbonne (Regensburg) and Procter's in Italy. By contrast, "Porphyria's Lover" contains no indication of the geographic distancing Browning deploys very deliberately in other poems, so that a contemporary British setting can be assumed. Browning also does not adopt another Gothic staple, the noble descent of Wilson's and Procter's murderers. Whereas Wilson's hero is "the last of a noble family" (p. 596) and Marcian Colonna is "of princely race" (p. 9), Browning's speaker, who lives in a cottage, is clearly lower-class. The changes in setting and class shift the plot from the exotic Romantic Gothic to the realistic realm of execution literature, where the vast majority of murders occur in the lower-class domestic space, committed by lower-class characters.²⁹

Browning's poem, moreover, draws on two particularly sensational and popular kinds of murder plot in execution literature. The first of these is the relatively rare but highly popular depiction of cross-class murder. Porphyria's "soiled gloves" (l. 12), her escape from "tonight's gay feast" (l. 27) and talk of her "pride, and vainer ties" (l. 24), which are

obstacles to their love, indicate her superior social status.³⁰ The murder seems motivated both by the speaker's patriarchal desire to usurp the female's atypically active role in the relationship – indicated by the way she arranges his passive body like a puppet (ll. 15–21) – and by his resentment at her social superiority, which arguably gives her the confidence to dominate him. Real-life nineteenth-century cases of cross-class murder tended to generate a greater volume of execution literature than other cases, both in terms of variety of publications and sales. They widened the appeal to middle- and upper-class audiences, tapping into fears of social unrest and of falling victim to lower-class criminals, as demonstrated by cases of murderous domestics like Courvoisier. Henry Mayhew lists Courvoisier's crime in his table of six best-selling broadsheet topics with an estimated 1,666,000 copies sold.³¹ The table contains a second lucrative cross-class murder, that of the mole catcher's daughter Maria Marten by her lover, the local squire's son William Corder (1827).

Drawing on a second type of plot reaching back to execution literature, Browning's monologue represents the popular murder motive of a crime of passion. Chassaigne identifies the *crime passionnel* as "the staple diet of broadside readers" in the second half of the century, despite the fact that deaths caused by pub fights, murders motivated by money and infanticide were in reality more frequent than domestic murders of women by men.³² In "Porphyria's Lover," the crime of passion is given added piquancy by the surprise turn from what the contemporary first-time reader of the poem would initially interpret as the scene of a love tryst. The reader should, however, suspect from the pathetic fallacy describing tempestuous weather in the opening lines that an ominous event is afoot, as confirmed by the central passage of Browning's 60-line poem – a length mirroring that of the standard execution ballad. This passage is, as in the execution ballad, devoted to the detailed, graphic

description of the murder: “and all her hair / In one long yellow string I wound / Three times her little throat around, / And strangled her.” (ll. 38—41)

In the ballad, the dispassionate description of violence arises from the genre’s rudimentary psychology in favor of a clear moral message, whereas in Browning’s poem the detached step-by-step description of Porphyria’s strangulation is an indicator of the speaker’s lack of insight into the true implications of his actions. Nonetheless, these lines, with their external focalization and factual recounting of the deed, represent the closest convergence of Browning’s poem and the execution ballad. While there do not seem to be any surviving early nineteenth-century ballads about murder by strangulation, it does feature in several ballads as the cause of death during execution, i.e. when the hanging did not break the convicted person’s neck but they died a slower death through asphyxiation.³³ In letting his speaker strangle Porphyria, Browning thus inverts the significance of strangulation as the authorities’ retributive act, blurring the opposition between illegal transgression and legitimate punishment.³⁴ Not only the speaker’s complex psychology but also the method of death thus challenge the black-and-white categories of the execution ballad.

After the climactic description of the murder, Browning’s poem and the ballad genre diverge again. Having already played with the reader’s expectations by shifting from an amorous encounter to murder, the poem does not satisfy the revised generic expectations that have been awakened. In the execution ballad, the confession of the act of murder is accompanied by the criminal’s acknowledgement of guilt and repentance, whereas the speaker of “Porphyria’s Lover” remains convinced that in killing her he has fulfilled his victim’s “utmost will” (l. 53). Moral and plot closure are provided in the execution ballad through the trial and judgment of the criminal, usually with the judge, criminal or omniscient narrator

commending the justice of the sentence and punishment both in legal and religious terms. Browning's poem defies this expectation of closure on both levels, illustrating Jauss's point that plot lines and textual closure are central to the horizon of expectation and to the strategies of new works in challenging these standards (p. 12). The poem ends before the murder has even been discovered, with no indication of whether the speaker will be put on trial and with what outcome. There is, however, an allusion to the horizon of expectation with the ballad's closure in a parodic appeal to God as supreme moral judge of the speaker's act in the closing couplet, "And all night long we have not stirred, / And yet God has not said a word!" (ll. 59—60). The reader must surely conclude that the speaker misinterprets God's silence as approval of the murder. The speaker's utterance is only a confession in the legal sense that he acknowledges having committed the act of murder, but he does not recognize it as a morally transgressive act requiring repentance.

For a reader used to the conventions of the execution ballad, Browning's poem is therefore a provocatively ironic reversal of the first-person "Last Confession." The sensational murder is not followed by the all-important triumph of moral and social order through the sentencing and repentance of the criminal, and the voice of moral authority is conspicuously, and ambiguously, absent. Yet despite lacking the execution ballad's explicit moral message, "Porphyria's Lover" does not eschew judgment of the speaker. The reader's realization that the speaker has done wrong, both in legal and moral terms and in his deluded deduction that Porphyria wished to be killed, is central to the reading experience. However, this judgment is balanced by the insight into the speaker's warped psychology which invites readers to empathize with him. This tension between sympathy and judgment, combined with the mixed messages over whether the speaker should be diagnosed as an

irresponsible madman or a responsible criminal,³⁵ pulls the contemporary reader out of the comfort zone of the unequivocally didactic ballad.

Jauss states that the “aesthetic distance [between reader expectations and a new work] can be measured historically through the spectrum of the reaction of the audience and the judgement of criticism” (p. 14). As “Porphyria’s Lover” and its companion poem, “Johannes Agricola in Meditation,” were first published anonymously in *The Monthly Repository* rather than in a collection, there remains no trace of their initial reception. Later reviews of collections which include “Porphyria’s Lover” have little to say about it, with the exception of Charles Kingsley, who in 1851 cites it in its entirety to make the point that “[i]n a poem [...] of uncommon pathos and beauty, though of that lurid and unhealthy tone, in which, we are sorry to say, Mr. Browning’s muse seems to work most freely, the whole effect seems to us spoilt by the irreverent attempt at naïveté in the last line.”³⁶ Kingsley concludes that the poet’s motivation for giving his speaker this final line is a challenge to religious orthodoxy. He cannot but read the absence of an authoritative voice as the poet’s rejection of authority.

A more revealing indicator of the poem’s reception might be found in Browning’s decision, when he reprinted the paired poems in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), to present them under the joint heading “Madhouse Cells.” The title not only settles the ambiguity over whether the speaker of “Porphyria’s Lover” is insane; it also makes the poem more palatable to readers used to execution ballads because it implies the reassuring containment of the transgressor – a containment highlighted by the lexical choice of “Cells,” which alludes to the penal detention that was such a stock feature of the execution ballad. Moreover, the joint title gives a narrative closure outside the text that the poem alone does not provide, as the

speaker's utterance clearly does not take place inside an asylum. In adding the joint title and thus making the poem conform more to the familiar and morally reassuring format of the execution ballad, even at the cost of historical accuracy for the companion poem with its sixteenth-century setting, Browning seemed to acknowledge that he might have strayed too far from the readership's horizon of expectation. However, his continued challenges to reader expectations, especially in relation to the absence of an authorial voice, meant that when republishing the poems from 1863 he withdrew the joint title, thus obliging readers once more to cope with the absence of moral and legal judgment and closure. The Preface to his 1872 *Selections from the Poetical Works* expresses his belief that he had at this stage managed through his persistence with the dramatic monologue to effect a horizon change among his readers, so that they could now measure his poems in relation to the conventions he had shaped rather than in relation to other well-established genres such as the execution ballad:

A few years ago [...] I might have been tempted to say a word in reply to the objections my poetry was used to encounter. Time has kindly co-operated with my disinclination to write the poetry and the criticism besides. The readers I am at last privileged to expect, meet me fully half-way; [...] I conceive there may be helpful light, as well as re-assuring warmth, in the attention and sympathy I gratefully acknowledge.³⁷

"My Last Duchess"

Browning's next murderous monologist is the Duke of Ferrara in "My Last Duchess" (1842). With its historically and geographically distanced setting in a Renaissance palace (highlighted by its original title "Italy"), the poem is much further removed from the topical

death cell confession of the execution ballad than “Porphyria’s Lover.” Criticism tends to focus on the poem’s portrayal of asymmetrical gender relations and the Duke’s abuse of patriarchal power, with the act of murder and the question of the Duchess’s guilt or innocence often overshadowed by broader consideration of gender power relations.³⁸ Yet this monologue, too, can be read as a provocation to reader expectations regarding the portrayal of murder as shaped by the execution ballad. Not only does it, like “Porphyria’s Lover,” resemble the format of the execution ballad in its use of rhyme and length (56 lines), but the poem is also a veiled confession in that the Duke hints at his responsibility for his first wife’s death: “I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together” (ll. 45—46). And as in “Porphyria’s Lover,” the reader’s moral standards are challenged because the crime is disclosed without contrition and outside a legal context which could sanction his behavior. More than that, the admission of the murder has the clear function of a warning to the Duke’s prospective next bride not to be seen to be defying her husband’s authority like her predecessor.

The poem flouts both the worldly and religious codes of the ballad. Firstly, it erases the opposition between criminal and judge through a speaker whose status as absolute ruler in his principality allows him to transgress without the risk of prosecution. However, rather than destabilizing the Victorian readers’ values, this is, as in the ballad, likely to confirm them in their trust of their own society’s rule of law over the feudal despotism of the Renaissance.³⁹ Secondly, the religious categories that are so central to the ballad are conspicuously absent from this monologue. It features the monk Frà Pandolf, but he is invoked not in his spiritual capacity but only in his role as the artist hired by the Duke to paint the Duchess. Moreover, if the Duke’s suspicions about a flirtation between Frà Pandolf

and the Duchess are founded, this monk too is a transgressor who has lost the moral authority of the cleric.

While the suggestion that the monk may be breaking his vow of chastity fits with the anti-Catholic tenor of other Browning poems, the Duke's failure to consider his actions in relation to a religious framework is likely to steer Victorian readers away from sympathy with him. The silent God from "Porphyria's Lover" is here replaced by the silent envoy from the Duke's prospective father-in-law. The presence of this auditor in the text seems to address the reader's desire for a clear judgment of the murderer, as provided in the execution ballad; but the envoy's silence obliges readers to fill the void with their own judgment rather than having a judgment handed down by an authoritative voice within the text. So while the poem remains aligned with the social and moral values of the ballad, it develops the emphasis of "Porphyria's Lover" on the reader's active participation in the constitution of meaning and judgment, rejecting the easy didacticism of the ballad and further destabilizing reader expectations.

"A Last Confession"

As the genre develops, dramatic monologues about murder situate themselves closer than "My Last Duchess" to the more explicitly confessional execution ballad. Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1847) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "A Last Confession" (published in 1870 but substantially drafted in 1848 when execution ballads still had much greater currency) present their speakers' narratives of murder in immediate anticipation of their death and/or punishment. Barrett Browning's filicidal runaway slave is about to be captured by her pursuers, while Rossetti's poem is the deathbed confession of a

mortally wounded Italian revolutionary who out of sexual jealousy murdered the orphan girl whom he brought up as his daughter.

Rossetti's title immediately situates the poem in relation to a horizon of expectation set up by the many first-person ballads labelled as "Last Confession." Although the possibility of criminal prosecution is never raised in the poem, much of the address to the priest which constitutes the speaker's utterance evokes a criminal confession more than a spiritual one. The sacrament of confession presupposes the confessant's acknowledgement of their responsibility for the sinful act and their repentance. Rossetti's speaker admits having committed the act and expresses sorrow at the death of the girl, but his utterance is an elaborate self-defense rather than an expression of contrition. He represents the murder as an act beyond his voluntary control. His agency is obscured by his disappearance as a grammatical subject when he narrates the stabbing:

And then came a fire
 That burnt my hand; and then the fire was blood,
 And sea and sky were blood and fire, and all
 The day was one red blindness; till it seemed,
 Within the whirling brain's eclipse, that she
 Or I or all things bled or burned to death.
 And then I found her laid against my feet
 And knew that I had stabbed her, [...] (ll. 532—539)⁴⁰

This descent of “red mist” is coupled with indicators of the speaker’s longstanding emotional instability and his conflation of his political and sexual passion earlier in the poem (ll. 252—263).

At the same time, he presents his murder as justified by the girl’s reprehensible behavior. He cites as triggers for his act his suspicion that she was having an affair with a soldier of the occupying Austrian army, based on the highly unreliable circumstantial evidence of her prayer to a new German statue of the Virgin rather than a traditional Italian one (ll. 381—392), and the resemblance he perceives between the sound of her laughter and that of a prostitute (ll. 511—526). He paints the girl as promiscuous and unfaithful to him and Italy, while styling himself as an agent of justice who metes out punishment for personal and patriotic disloyalty as well as for her rebellion against the patriarchal order he expects her to respect. Yet it is the speaker who is the more serious transgressor on two counts. Firstly, he exploits his position *in loco parentis*, trying to force (what seems to be) a minor into a sexual relationship from which she is not allowed to withdraw. Secondly, as a revolutionary, he is ready to use violence to further his political ends – although Rossetti’s Victorian readers might judge the latter fact less harshly, given the widespread sympathy for the Risorgimento. All of these justifications fail to demonstrate the contrition that is necessary to grant absolution.

Moreover, the speaker appeals to the celibate priest’s personal sympathy, suggesting that his response to the confession would be different if he too had experienced sexual passion: “O Father, if you knew all this / You cannot know, then you would know too, Father. / And only then, if God can pardon me.” (ll. 17—19) This transgresses against the format of the spiritual confession, in which the priest participates not as an individual to be won over but

as an impersonal agent of divine mercy. More than that, these lines also suggest (in a move reminiscent of the closing lines of "Porphyria's Lover") that God may have forgiven the speaker and that the priest should follow God's lead. This is reinforced a little later: "Father, you hear my speech and not her laugh; / But God heard that. Will God remember all?" (ll. 46—47). Again, the speaker implies, as Ronnalie Roper Howard sees it, "that the provocation would serve to justify the crime, in part at least, to God."⁴¹ Regardless of whether we read the speaker (with Howard) as intentionally misrepresenting his motivation or (with other critics) as revealing his psychic abnormality, his utterance does not fit the genre of the spiritual confession.⁴² He appeals to the priest as though he were a jury member in a criminal trial on whose personal judgment the murderer's fate depended.

Like the two Browning poems, "A Last Confession" acts as a development and critique of the criminal confession in the first-person execution ballad, further contributing to a horizon change towards greater ambiguity and complexity. Rejecting the ballad's rudimentary characterization and moral certainty, Rossetti presents a speaker with an intricate psychology, who leaves the reader uncomfortably poised between interpreting the murder as driven by mental abnormality or as criminally responsible action. Despite the death of the speaker, the restitution of social order so integral to the ballad is weakened, as the speaker escapes prosecution and continues to consider his murderous act as justified and condoned by God. Moreover, whereas the ballad presents murder as the disruption of a consensual social order, Rossetti's backdrop of the Risorgimento (highlighted by the year of revolutions, 1848, in the sub-title) presents a society in which such an unproblematic order does not exist. The reader may sympathize with the speaker's political dissent and rebellion against the occupying Austrian authorities. Yet his transgressive sexual desire coupled with his dubious pose as a defender of female virtue and his recourse to violence undermine his

moral authority. Like Browning in “My Last Duchess,” Rossetti uses geographical distancing to soften the impact of this moral and generic disorientation.

The Ring and the Book

A tale of “murder, trial, and execution,”⁴³ *The Ring and the Book* is the Browning poem most directly related to execution literature, and it too uses geographical, as well as historical, distancing. Although it is based on the poet’s find of a collection of Italian trial documents from the 1690s (known as the *Old Yellow Book*), it is – as Thomas Carlyle observed – essentially the historical equivalent of the “Old Bailey stor[ies] that might have been told in ten lines”⁴⁴ and furnished the subject of Victorian execution ballads. Count Guido Franceschini’s monologues in Books 5 and 11 are sophisticated elaborations of the confessions which inspired those ballads. The inclusion of two monologues by this murderer mirrors the not uncommon multiple confessions by Victorian condemned criminals. Both Courvoisier and Corder, as referenced above, made divergent confessions during and after their trials – though probably not like Guido in the hope of escaping their sentence but out of concern for their posthumous reputation.

Guido’s first monologue, spoken before the verdict, deploys arguments similar to those of Rossetti’s speaker in presenting himself as a defender of patriarchal values. He states that he acted in accordance with both human and divine laws, which the authorities did not enforce stringently enough when they imposed only light penalties on his runaway wife Pompilia and her suspected lover, the priest Caponsacchi, in an earlier lawsuit. Downplaying the murder of Pompilia as a mere “irregular deed” (Bk 5, ll. 99, 113),⁴⁵ he insists that he was within his rights to punish an adulterous wife who had reneged on her legal obligation to be loyal and obedient to her husband. In exercising his authority, he claims he merely pursued

the path which “taught from [his] youth up, [he] trod” (Bk 5, l. 434). Voicing his regret that he did not cut off Pompilia’s ring finger when he first suspected her of infidelity (Bk 5, ll. 947—986), Guido reverses his position as accused by setting himself up as both judge and jailor in the “domestic and institutionally-sanctioned torture of his wife.”⁴⁶ He thus defies the norms of the execution ballad, which presents the criminal as an unambiguous disrupter of social order. This defiance is also mirrored by his reversal of a common trope from the ballad which explains the criminal’s act as resulting from a temptation by the devil:⁴⁷ Guido, who for his insistence on his innocence compares himself to “martyred saints” (Bk 11, l. 423), repeatedly claims that he combatted a devil in allegiance with his wife (Bk. 5, ll. 1512—1513, 1575—1577, 1600—1601).

In his second monologue, the now sentenced Guido reveals himself to the two clerics who visit his death cell as the diametrical opposite of the execution ballad’s contrite criminal. His appeal to the Pope, based on his status as a minor cleric, to override the guilty verdict of the civil court has been rejected by Innocent XII. But averring that public opinion is on his side (“All honest Rome approved my part,” Bk. 11, l. 39), Guido still hopes to reverse the Pope’s decision. Yet at the same time he shows himself contemptuous of Christian values and denounces the hypocrisy of devout men. This he juxtaposes with his unapologetic pursuit of his own desires, suggesting that laws are the historic result of envy at seeing individuals indulge their pleasure: “So, let law watch for everyone, -- say we, / Who call things wicked that give too much joy, / And nickname the reprisal, envy makes, / Punishment” (Bk 11, ll. 531—534). He further defies established moral codes in stating that his evil character and inability to repent are not his fault, “who did not make [him]self” (Bk 11, l. 939), but God’s. He even states that his visitors’ mission to extract a confession from him is proof of the Pope’s need to present a convincing public narrative which eclipses his actual moral

innocence: “Morality and Religion conquer me. / If Law sufficed would you come here, entreat / I supplement law, and confess forsooth?” (Bk 11, l. 508—510) While the reader is unlikely to share Guido’s values and view of events, his monologues do raise questions about the seemingly indisputable guilty verdicts in execution literature and highlight the dramatic monologue’s more complex agendas.

While the execution ballad reinforces the deterrent function of public executions, this feature is also highlighted in relation to the two executions mentioned in *The Ring and the Book*. In Book 11, Guido retells his encounter with a bloody *mannaia* (the Renaissance precursor of the guillotine) after it has been used to execute a buffalo farmer for striking a nobleman who had abducted his sister and made her his concubine. Guido asserts that “the man-mutilating engine” had done “incidental good, ’twas hoped / To the rough lesson-lacking populace / Who now and then, forsooth, must right their wrongs!” (Bk 11, ll. 207, 211—213). His account captures the horror of the execution; he also emphasizes its didactic role for the common people. Since the law here protects the aristocrat although he is clearly in the wrong, the case ironically undermines the common justification of execution as a means of administering justice. This vignette contrasts with Guido’s own execution, which the Pope orders to be moved from “the customary place, by Bridge / Saint Angelo, where die the common sort; / But since the man is noble, and his peers / By predilection haunt the People’s Square, / There let him be beheaded [...] So shall the quality see, fear, and learn.” (Bk 10, ll. 2107—2114) Unusually, the execution’s lesson is now directed at the nobility, making them acknowledge that they are not above the law and re-establishing a sense of justice.

Through the detailed, graphic descriptions of the buffalo farmer's execution and of Guido's own beheading by a frivolous onlooker (Bk 12, ll. 70—206),⁴⁸ *The Ring and the Book* critiques executions as a cultural practice and the sensationalist literature that prospers from them. Composed between 1862 and 1868, the poem reflects concerns that led to the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment (1864—65), which recommended the end of public executions, put into law by the Capital Punishment Amendment Act of May 1868. In a direct reference to the execution ballad, Guido denounces the genre's power to shape public perceptions through its use of judgmental language, simplistic characterization and morality:

And eyes, on warrant of the story, wax
Wanton at portraiture in white and black
Of dead Pompilia gracing ballad-sheet,
Which, had she died unmurdered and unsung,
Would never turn though she paced street as bare
As the mad penitent ladies do in France. (Bk 11, ll. 1826—1831)

This explicit mention of the ballad within the monologue suggests not just a contextual cross-over but also a ready referential resonance on the part of the reader. Guido reflects on the ballad's appeal to a hunger for sensationalism, sentimentalism and simplistic values and its consequent power to shape public opinion —⁴⁹ a fear mirrored by his question whether Pompilia's suspected lover, the priest Caponsacchi, "hitched [Guido's] hap / Into a rattling ballad rhyme which, bawled / At tavern-doors, wakes rapture everywhere [...]" (Bk 5, ll. 1451—1453)

While the poem thus exposes the unsavory side of public executions and execution literature, *The Ring and the Book* is itself a development of this genre which benefits from its sensationalist appeal. Browning acknowledges his own fascination with the topic in Book 1, where he recounts how he found the *Old Yellow Book* in a Florentine market and was so riveted by his find that he read it during his entire walk home and could not put it down until he “had mastered the contents, knew the whole truth” (Bk1, l. 117). Moreover, in both of his framing monologues, the hitherto only moderately successful Browning expresses his hope that *The Ring and the Book* will be the work which will finally bring him popularity, converting his ironic, repeated address to the “British Public, ye who like me not / (God love you!)” (Bk 1, ll. 410–411, 1379–1380) to a more optimistic “British Public, who may like me yet, / (Marry and amen!)” (Bk 12, ll. 831–832).

It is not just the challenge to engage in the detective work of sifting the factual and moral truth of events from the poem’s multiperspectival narrative which should appeal to readers. It is also, as modelled by the character Browning for his readers in Book 1, the inherently fascinating subject matter which is bound to appeal to the Victorian readership’s taste for sensational murder. The poem can thus be read as an ironically self-conscious commentary on the allure of execution literature in Victorian culture, even when mediated through “high literary” poetry with its adaptations of genre and reader expectations. The middle-aged Browning is as enthralled by sensational murder as the younger self who learned the Thurtell ballad by heart, but now he has finally found a way of using this fascination to engineer his literary success. Through previous dramatic monologues he has shifted the horizon of expectation far enough to be confident of a better reception.

“A Forgiveness”

Browning’s final reconfiguration of the execution ballad is “A Forgiveness” (1876), another dramatic monologue which poses as a spiritual confession but is actually an unrepentant admission of murder. A Spanish nobleman speaks in a confessional, ostensibly seeking absolution for the cold-blooded murder of his wife whom he had caught almost *in flagrante* with an unknown lover. Following the discovery of her infidelity, the couple keep up the public façade of a happy couple for three years until the wife admits that she only committed adultery out of a desire for more attention from her busy husband. In a chilling act of revenge, he stabs her and lets her write her confession in her own blood before she dies.

The poem’s title is ironic on three counts. Firstly, the wife confesses her secret in the hope of obtaining forgiveness from her husband, who is in the role of judge and confessor, but he chooses revenge. Secondly, although he admits this murder in the confessional, the husband never even pretends to ask for forgiveness, thus mocking and abusing the sacrament in which he partakes. Thirdly, the final character in need of forgiveness is the confessor who, it turns out, was the wife’s lover, guilty both of her adultery and of breaking his monastic vow of celibacy. This twist is revealed in the poem’s final lines, in which the speaker prepares to complete his revenge by stabbing the monk through the confessional grate.

The function of this confession is the very opposite of that of the execution ballad. It is not an affirmation of social and moral order but displays instead the murderer’s sense of righteousness in killing a wife who has dared to disrespect his personal authority. What is more, rather than being part of the conclusion of the crime’s plotline, the confession is

merely the prelude to another transgression, and once more the reader is left in the dark as to whether the speaker will be held to account for this second murder. Like the Duke of Ferrara and (unsuccessfully) Guido, the aristocratic speaker exploits his class and patriarchal privilege to get away with murder. Yet, as in “My Last Duchess” and “A Last Confession,” this undermining of trust in the rule of law is attenuated through geographical distancing which flatters the British sense of superiority over South European cultures. The unambiguous *dramatis personae* of the execution ballad are also turned on their heads: the spiritual confessor is not in a moral position to forgive the speaker, as his own transgression provoked the wife’s murder; and while the wife turns from perpetrator to victim, both the monk and the husband as representatives respectively of religious and worldly authority (the husband is a politician and lawmaker) occupy the triple roles of judge/confessor, transgressor and victim.

The stock characters, plot line and moral certainties of the old execution ballad have all been distorted into a weirdly interchangeable new constellation in this poem which reflects how the representation of criminal psychology in poetry and ideas about crime and punishment have evolved since the 1830s when Browning first responded to the execution ballad. But as the anecdote about Browning’s recital of the Thurtell ballad in the 1880s reveals, this does not mean that readers this late in the century would have been insensitive to the poem’s reversals of execution ballad characteristics; it merely confirms Browning’s conclusion from *The Ring and the Book* and his 1872 Preface that his readership can now be expected to appreciate provocative deviations from the formula rather than simple conformity.

Conclusion

Reading these poems through a contemporary reader's horizon of expectation, informed by execution literature rather than by earlier Romantic lyric poetry, allows to explore a new facet of the dramatic monologue's varied genealogy. These poems build on a simplistic popular genre but offer a much greater linguistic and psychological sophistication than the execution ballad could. Studying these poems in sequence shows how they progressively complicate the original genre to effect a horizon change for readers who are willing to engage with this more demanding poetry. In representing speakers who literally get away with murder, the poems also undermine the rigid plot line of a primarily didactic genre designed to present society as ordered, moral values as unambiguous and crime as always justly punished.

In this respect these poems are also diametrically opposed to a genre which develops around the same time: detective fiction, which depicts the detective as the agent of social order and requires the strong narrative closure of the criminal's containment.⁵⁰ In dissenting from the neat moralities and narrative closures of execution literature and detective fiction that support the social *status quo*, these dramatic monologues raise broader concerns about justice and social order which transcend the literary sphere. Although they are fictional murder cases, they invite readers to reflect on the shortcomings of justice systems and the troubling moral complexity of real murders. This questioning of certainties which were glossed over by the other two more popular genres may go some way towards explaining why the more controversial genre of the dramatic monologue led a niche existence while first the execution ballad and later detective fiction thrived.

¹ See Judith Flanders, *The Invention of Murder: How the Victorians Revelled in Death and Detection and Created Modern Crime* (New York: Harper, 2011).

² See Philippe Chassaing, "Popular Representations of Crime: The Crime Broadside – a Subculture of Violence in Victorian Britain?" *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés* 3.2 (1999): 23–55, p. 24.

³ John Ashton stated that "art as applied to these Ballads was at its very lowest. Their literary merit was not great—but what can you expect for a half-crown?" (*Modern Street Ballads* [London: Chatto and Windus, 1888], pp. vii–viii). Francis J. Child judged that the broadsides were "products of a low kind of art, and most of them are, from a literary point of view, thoroughly despicable and worthless" ("Ballad Poetry", *Johnson's New Universal Cyclopedia*, Vol. 1 [New York: A. J. Johnson, 1875], p. 367). See also Ellen L. O'Brien, "Nineteenth-Century Broadside Ballads and the Poetics of Everyday Life," *Teaching Laboring-Class British Literature of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Kevin Binfield and William Christmas (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2018), pp. 43–50, pp. 43–44.

⁴ See Michael Mason, "Browning and the Dramatic Monologue," *Writers and Their Background: Robert Browning*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Bell, 1974), pp. 231–266, pp. 253–266; Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 82–86.

⁵ See Browning's letter of 19 September 1864 to Isabella Blagden (*Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden*, ed. Edward C. McAleer [Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1951], p. 193).

⁶ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 12. See also E. Warwick Slinn, *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique: The Politics of Performative Language* (Charlottesville, Va.: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2003).

⁷ Mason, "Browning and the Dramatic Monologue"; Ellen O'Brien, *Crime in Verse: The Poetics of Murder in the Victorian Era* (Columbus, Oh.: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2008).

⁸ Herbert F. Tucker, Jr., "From Monomania to Monologue: St. Simeon Stylites and the Rise of the Victorian Dramatic Monologue," *Victorian Poetry* 22.1 (1984): 121—137; E. Warwick Slinn, *The Discourse of Self in Victorian Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 33; Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*; W. David Shaw, *Origins of the Monologue: The Hidden God* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1999); Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*; Glennis Byron, "Rethinking the Dramatic Monologue: Victorian Women Poets and Social Critique," *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. Alison Chapman, *Essays and Studies* 56 (2003): 79–98.

⁹ The online edition of the *Newgate Calendar* claims that it "was one of those books, along with a Bible, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* and the *Pilgrim's Progress*, most likely to be found in any English home between 1750 and 1850." *The Newgate Calendar, Ex-Classics*. Accessed November 21, 2023, <https://www.exclassics.com/newgate/ngintro.htm>

¹⁰ See Flanders, *The Invention of Murder*, pp. 20—98 and 172—173.

¹¹ Hans Robert Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," tr. Elizabeth Benzinger, *New Literary History*, 2.1 (1970): 7—37.

¹² See e.g. the suggested influence of Byron's "The Giaour" on Rossetti's "A Last Confession" ("A Last Confession: Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Rossetti Archive*. Accessed November 21, 2023, <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/1-1849.raw.html>)

¹³ See Wedgwood's letter to Browning of 15 November 1868 and Browning's response of 19 November 1868 (*Robert Browning and Julia Wedgwood: A Broken Friendship as Revealed in their Letters*, ed. Richard Curle [London: John Murray & Cape, 1937], pp. 153 and 158).

¹⁴ Letter 1963 (1 July 1845), *The Brownings' Correspondence: An Online Edition*, eds. Philip Kelley et al. Accessed November 21, 2023, <https://www.browningscorrespondence.com/>

¹⁵ "M Vidocq's EXHIBITION," *The Times*, June 9, 1845, p. 6.

¹⁶ Charles Kegan Paul, *Memories* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1899), p. 338.

According to Charles Hindley, this ballad was attributed to Theodore Hook (*The Life and Times of James Catnach (Late of Seven Dials), Ballad Monger* [London: Reeves and Turner, 1878], p. 145).

¹⁷ Alfred Borowitz, *The Thurtell - Hunt Murder Case: Dark Mirror to Regency England* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 253—275; Jonathan Goodman, *Bloody Versicles: The Rhymes of Crime* (Kent, Oh.: Kent State Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 30—31.

¹⁸ See Leslie Shepard, *The Broadside Ballad: A Study in Origins and Meaning* (Hatsboro: Legacy Books, 1978), pp. 79—84; Victor E. Neuburg, *Popular Literature: A History and Guide* (London: Woburn Press, 1977), pp. 123—124 and 137—143.

¹⁹ "'The Lamentation of Francis Courvoisier, For the Murder of Lord William Russell'" (London, Seven Dials: J. Pitts, 1840). *Broadside Ballads Online from the Bodleian Libraries*. Accessed 1 December 2023. <http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/edition/23218>

²⁰ Chassaigne, "Popular Representations of Crime," p. 40.

²¹ See V.A.C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770—1868* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 156, 163—168; Victor E. Neuburg, "The Literature of the Streets," in H. J. Dyos and M. Wolff, eds, *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, Vol. 1 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 191—

210.

²² Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, pp. 164—165.

²³ Charles Dickens, “To the Editor of *The Times*,” *The Times* November 14, 1849, p. 4. See Una McLivenna’s emphasis on the moral and religious function of ballads “communicating ideas about death, punishment and redemption” as opposed to a merely secular deterrent function that is highlighted by many critics; Una McLivenna, “The Power of Music: The Significance of Contrafactum in Execution Ballads,” *Past & Present* 229.1 (2015): 47—89, p. 88.

²⁴ Chassaigne, “Popular Representations of Crime,” p. 23.

²⁵ Chassaigne, “Popular Representations of Crime,” pp. 41—43; James Hepburn, *A Book of Scattered Leaves: Poetry of Poverty in Broadside Ballads of Nineteenth-Century England: Study and Anthology*, Vol. 2 (London: Associated University Presses, 2001), pp. 332—73; O’Brien, *Crime in Verse*, pp. 90—95; Cameron Nunn, ““Come All You Wild and Wicked Youths’: Representations of Young Male Convicts in Nineteenth-Century English Broadside,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 20.4 (2015): 453—70.

²⁶ Mason, “Browning and the Dramatic Monologue,” p. 260. He concedes though that there is no tangible evidence of Browning’s “contact with current work on lunacy” (p. 258). See also Ekbert Faas, *Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the Rise of Psychiatry* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988), and O’Brien, who reads the poem as ambiguous, containing indicators of both moral insanity and responsible criminal malice (*Crime in Verse*, pp. 124—133).

²⁷ [John Wilson], “Extracts from Gosschen’s Diary no. 1,” *Blackwood’s Magazine* 3 (1818): 596—598.

²⁸ James Sambrook, "Procter, Byran Waller," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004.

Accessed 21 November 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/22835>; Barry Cornwall,

"Marcian Colonna," *Marcian Colonna: An Italian Tale with Three Dramatic Scenes and Other Poems* (London: Warren and Ollier, 1820), pp. 1—92.

²⁹ See the clear predominance of murderers from a popular background in Chassaigne's corpus ("Popular Representations of Crime," p. 31).

³⁰ All citations from Browning's short poems are from Robert Browning, *The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, 2 vols. (New Haven and Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).

³¹ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Vol. 1 (London: Griffin, Bohn, 1861), p. 306.

³² Chassaigne, "Popular Representations of Crime," pp. 28—31, 39.

³³ Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, pp. 45—46.

³⁴ This equating of transgressive and retributive violence mirrors William Makepeace Thackeray's argument against public executions after witnessing the hanging of Courvoisier: "I fully confess, that I came away down Snow Hill that morning with a disgust for murder, but it was for *the murder I saw done*" ("Going to See a Man Hanged," *Fraser's Magazine* 22 [August 1840]: 150—158, p. 158).

³⁵ O'Brien, *Crime in Verse*, p. 115.

³⁶ [Charles Kingsley], "Mr. and Mrs. Browning," *Fraser's Magazine* 43.254 (February 1851): 170—182, p. 174..

³⁷ Robert Browning, "Preface," *Selections from the Poetical Works of Robert Browning: First Series* (London: Smith, Elder, 1872), n.p..

³⁸ See e.g. U. C. Knoepfelmacher, "Projection and the Female Other: Romanticism, Browning, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue," *Victorian Poetry* 22 (1984): 139—159; Shifra

Hochberg, "Male Authority and Female Subversion in Browning's 'My Last Duchess,'" *Literature In Transition* 3 (1991): 77–84; Cynthia Scheinberg, "Recasting 'Sympathy and Judgment': Amy Levy, Women Poets, and the Victorian Dramatic Monologue," *Victorian Poetry* 35 (1997): 173–191; Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, "The Pragmatics of Silence, and the Figuration of the Reader in Browning's Dramatic Monologues," *Victorian Poetry* 35 (1997): 287–302.

³⁹ "The Laboratory," subtitled "Ancien Régime," makes a similar link between aristocratic decadence and unscrupulous murder.

⁴⁰ All citations from "A Last Confession" are from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jerome McGann (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2003).

⁴¹ Ronnalie Roper Howard, "Rossetti's 'A Last Confession': A Dramatic Monologue," *Victorian Poetry* 5 (1967): 21–29, p. 24.

⁴² Howard, "A Last Confession;" Faas, *Retreat into the Mind*, pp. 158–167; Carl A. Peterson, "Rossetti's 'A Last Confession' as Dramatic Monologue," *Victorian Poetry* 11 (1973): 127–142; O'Brien, *Crime in Verse*, pp. 147–164.

⁴³ Renée Fox, "Robert Browning's Necropoetics," *Victorian Poetry* 49 (2011): 463–483, p. 464.

⁴⁴ *Letters of D. G. Rossetti to W. Allingham, 1854 to 1870*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (London: Unwin, 1897), p. 284.

⁴⁵ All citations from *The Ring and the Book* are from Stefan Hawlin and Tim Burnett, eds, *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, Vols 7–9 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998–2004).

⁴⁶ Mary Ellis Gibson, "The Criminal Body in Victorian Britain: The Case of *The Ring and the Book*," *Browning Institute Studies* 18 (1990): 73–93, p. 88.

⁴⁷ See e.g. “The Lamentation of Francis Courvoisier, For the Murder of Lord William Russell” (London: Pitts, 1840), *Broadside Ballads Online from the Bodleian Libraries*. Accessed

November 21, 2023. <http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/edition/23218>, ll. 7, 51;

“Execution of Fish, the Murderer”, n.p.: n.d. [1876]. *Broadside Ballads Online from the Bodleian Libraries*. Accessed November 21, 2023.

<http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/edition/782>, l. 25.

⁴⁸ See Richard D. Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet: Murder and Manners in the Age of Victoria* (New York: Norton, 1970), pp. 113—114.

⁴⁹ See O’Brien, *Crime in Verse*, pp. 191—192.

⁵⁰ See Britta Martens, “Dramatic Monologue, Detective Fiction and the Search for Meaning,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 66.2 (2011): 195—218.