The English political broadside ballad in the second half of the Seventeenth Century

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Preface

'More solid things do not show the complexion of the times so well as Ballads and Libels'. This is how the lawyer and scholar John Selden (1584–1654) described an important characteristic of the songs that he collected in printed form, the so-called broadside ballads. This study is an examination of an aspect of popular culture that reached its zenith in the mid-seventeenth century. Among the issues that will come under discussion are the ways in which broadside ballads acted almost as a subversive subculture, with writers, engravers and printers drawing on a shared and allusive body of subject matter. Thus, while the broadside ballad may be a popular and unsophisticated form of literature, it is not a simple and straightforward song. Its message is often shaped to a considerable extent by allusions and references to other broadside ballads, and the seventeenth-century ballad audience was apparently expected to be familiar with a wide range of ballads in order to be able to interpret the – sometimes subversive – references to ballad literature. Issues such as the choice of a tune, and the printers' decisions on illustrations and layout are of great importance in this respect as they may considerably influence the message of the political broadside ballad. Related to this is the question whether political broadside ballads form a sharply defined group of texts that functioned independently of the non-political broadside ballads.

An understanding of the political ballad literature and of the way these broadside ballads were produced, used, and interpreted is important for studying seventeenth-century literature and culture. The enormous number of references to ballads in seventeenth-century literature suggests that broadside ballads permeated society to such an extent that trying to understand that society requires some familiarity with the broadside ballad, its appearance, its message, and its sound. These songs reflected the atmosphere of the period, the concerns of the people, and the views that were held on an enormous number of events, ranging from local incidents to affairs with a profound national or even international impact. The broadside ballad is a form of popular literature that emerged in the sixteenth century. In the course of the seventeenth century, the broadside ballad boomed. Ballads that commented on politics, too, were published in ever increasing numbers. This is probably a consequence of both the tumultuousness of this period, and of the rise of cheap print from the early sixteenth century onwards. Moreover, by the mid-seventeenth century, a politically interested public had arisen that was better informed about and possibly more fascinated by affairs of state than it had been ever before.[1] Furthermore, this period saw a number of shocking and – potentially – disruptive events, both at home and abroad, that supplied the subject matter for a stream of reports and debates in print media.

[1] Harris, 'The Problem of "Popular Political Culture"', 43.

In England, the war between Charles I and his Parliament, Charles's subsequent trial and execution, the eleven years of republican rule – with its numerous uprisings in Ireland and a war with the United Provinces (First Anglo-Dutch War 1652-1654) –, as well as the Restoration of the monarchy are for the most part unprecedented incidents in English history, all widely discussed in many forms of cheap publications in print. The coronation of Charles II in 1660 was only briefly seen as a return to stability – and not even by all. His reign saw a number of disruptive events, both at home and abroad. In England, the mounting political and religious tensions of Charles II's reign culminated in the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis of 1678 to 1681. Moreover, during his reign, England was involved in a number of wars (see below). After Charles II's death in 1685, James II, a Roman Catholic, ascended the throne. He managed to put down the uprisings by Monmouth, Charles II's illegitimate son, in the West Country, and by Argyll in Scotland in 1685. By 1688, however, when a Catholic successor to the throne was born, an invasion by William of Orange ended his reign, and he fled to France. William and his wife Mary, James II's daughter, subsequently ascended the throne. Their reign – a joint reign up to 1694 when Mary died – was far from peaceful. It started immediately with a war in Scotland and Ireland against the Jacobites, followed by war with France, as William joined the League of Augsburg.

In these years, it was not only the domestic upheavals and turnabouts that disrupted harmony and stability in England, but events on the European mainland were a matter of concern for many English citizens as well. After the Restoration, England was involved in the Second and Third Anglo-Dutch wars (1665-1667 and 1672-1674). Moreover, France, ruled by Louis XIV from 1643 to 1715, was almost continuously at war. The *Fronde* was fought from 1648 to 1653, and it was followed by a war against Spain, in which England sided with France (1653-1658), and the War of Devolution, in which England joined the Triple Alliance with Sweden and the United Provinces in order to try to stop Louis XIV from expanding into the Spanish Netherlands (1667-1668). In 1672, France, together with England and a number of German princes, started the Franco-Dutch war against the United Provinces. The war between England and the Dutch ended with the Treaty of Westminster in 1674. The Franco-Dutch war itself, and the smaller wars to which it had led, were ended with the Treaty of Nijmegen in 1678. Apart from the military threat Louis XIV posed to his neighbouring countries, his religious policies were also perceived as threatening by the bordering Protestant countries. In 1685, Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes, which had granted equality under the throne to Catholics and Protestants and a certain degree of religious freedom. With Louis's revocation of the Edict, numerous Huguenots fled the country. Many English Protestants perceived Catholic rule as dangerous and absolutist, and Louis's attempts to expand his territories as well as his revocation of the Edict of Nantes made them feel anxious about French military power and about Catholic rule in general, both at home and abroad.

Moreover, there were a number of conflicts on the European mainland in which the English were not directly involved, but which were nevertheless watched carefully. Continental aggression could seriously disrupt the balance of power and threaten the Christian Church in general and Protestantism in particular. The Ottoman-Habsburg wars, for example, which had begun in 1526, continued throughout the seventeenth century and beyond. The Turks, who were believed to pose both a religious and a political threat to the rule of Christian nobles, monarchs, and emperors in Europe, were prevented from expanding their territory further into Europe in 1683, when

their defeat at the Battle of Vienna marked the beginning of their – long – retreat out of Europe. At the same time, tensions between the Habsburg dynasties continued.

All these events in England and on the European mainland were reported, commented on, and discussed orally and in print in the streets, houses, and taverns of England. Broadside ballads inevitably took up these topics as well, explaining their significance for English politics and celebrating or denouncing the incidents and the persons responsible for them. National and international politics provided the subject matter not only for earnest reports in the form of songs, but also for humorous, coarse, or slanderous ballads. Domestic and foreign affairs presented the themes and subjects of this highly popular form of literature.