

## **Dying to be Read: Gallows Authorship in Late Seventeenth-Century England**

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In one of the many striking entries in his diary, Londoner Samuel Pepys recorded on 13 October 1660 that he had gone to see his patron the earl of Sandwich, “but my Lord not being up I went out to Charing Cross, to see Maj.-Gen. Harrison hanged, drawn, and quartered—which was done there—he looking as cheerful as any man could do in that condition” (86). Pepys continued his entry describing the crowd’s reaction and later his own reflection on what he had witnessed: “[Harrison] was presently cut down, and his head and heart shown to the people, at which there was great shouts of joy. It is said, that he said that he was sure to come shortly at the right hand of Christ to judge them that now had judged him...Thus it was my chance to see the King beheaded at Whitehall, and to see the first blood shed in revenge for the blood of the King at Charing cross.”

This sparse narrative is unsettling for a variety of reasons. How does one react to this, to modern eyes, casual recording of a horrific act of violence on a human body, which after being partially hanged, is cut down alive, disemboweled and finally separated into pieces to be put on public display? And what is Pepys’s reference to “it is said, that he said” during the remarkable final moments of his life? And how do we, as opposed to Pepys the eyewitness, know what he said?

Upon further investigation, one discovers that indeed, Major General Thomas Harrison, one of the regicides who was convicted and executed upon Charles II’s restoration, said a great deal during his trial and immediately prior to his execution. Harrison was not unique in this, but instead he was participating fully in the peculiarly English custom of the condemned being permitted to address the gathered crowds from the place of execution and those speeches and writings subsequently finding their ways into print. Harrison, a member of the radical Fifth Monarchy sect which believed in the imminent arrival of Christ to rule the world, was recorded as remaining unrepentant for his part in the execution of Charles I, declaring to the crowd that “the finger of God hath been amongst us of late years in the deliverance of his people from their oppressors, ....Be not discouraged by reason of the cloud that now is upon you, for the Sun will shine and God will give a testimony unto what he hath been doing in a short time” (*Compleat Collection*, 17-19, 21).

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Shortly after their October executions, a collection of the dying words and final prayers of the regicides was published in pamphlet form by Simon Dover and Thomas Creeke; Dover would later be charged in 1662 with treason for this publication along with the bookseller Thomas Brewster and sentenced to stand in the pillory (Plomer, 205-7). In the epistle to the reader, the initially anonymous printer declares that the intent is not to “set forth (in a commendatory way) any thing concerning the persons, or their sufferings,” but “only to present unto thee the words of dying men, with some part whereof was occasional Discourses (betwixt them and some friends who visited them) in the Prison” (*Speeches*, A1). The publisher is at pains to assure the reader that every utterance had “sufficient Witnesses in this City, unto whom we can appeale” for the truth and veracity of the report and not all their discussions were printed as “that would have swelled into too large a volume”: “what thou hast here therefore are but some small mites, carefully taken out of their great treasury.” In addition to recorded conversations, the regicides left “letters copied from their own hand writings,” and at their executions, “their Speeches and Prayers (at the time and places of Execution) taken by exact short-writers, and divers of the best copies have been compared, and the worke (with much care and industry) hath been brought to this perfection” (A1). In the December following Harrison’s October execution, A “Person of Quality” one “W.S.” also published *A Compleat Collection of the Lives, Speeches, Private Passages, Letters and Prayers of those Persons Lately Executed* for the direct purpose of revealing the hypocrisy of the executed regicides in their final moments through their behavior and dying speeches.

In spite of W.S.’s scornful and dismissive life of Harrison which precedes and concludes the section taken from the section of Simon Dover’s pamphlet entitled “Memorable Passages of Major General Harrison’s, after his coming to Newgate. With his Speech upon the Ladder” from which he would be subsequently hanged, Harrison’s actual “Speech upon the Ladder” itself is a remarkable text, not only for its contents but also for its textual presentation. It opens with Harrison’s response to the call for silence in the crowd by the Sheriff, to which Harrison remarked that he had not prepared anything, but nevertheless addresses the crowd, “Gentlemen: I Did not expect to have spoken a word to you at this time, but seeing there is silence commanded, I will speak something of the work God hath in hand in our daies” (*Compleat Collection*, 17). The speech, which is four quarto pages long, is printed in Dover’s version with quotation marks in the outside margin to represent speech (and perhaps also serving as common-placing marks) and italics for explanation and description, while in W.S.’s version Harrison’s words are in italics, with the crowd’s responses in roman font.

Both of these typographical strategies are intended to capture the act of performance, a representation of the unfolding live event on the static page: “the people observing him to tremble in his hands and legs, he taking notice of it, said, Gentlemen, By reason of some scoffing that I do hear, I judge that some do think I am afraid to die, by the shaking I have in my hands and knees: I tell you no, but it is by reason of much blood I have lost in the wars, and many wounds I have received in my body.” Subsequently, “The Sheriff minding him of the shortness of time, if he had any thing to say to the people, he might,” Harrison exhorted the crowd to fear the Lord and recognize his love, exclaiming “Blessed be the Name of God that I have a life to lose upon so glorious, and so honourable an account.” The hangman at that point pulled the cap over Harrison’s face, but Harrison pushed it up again saying “I have one word more to the Lord’s

people, that desire to serve him with an upright heart," a continued for a further two pages before finally giving over his life to Christ and the executioner (21).

Such dramatic events, the execution of a regicide and his unrepentant behavior, were clearly of interest to contemporary readers, given the number of copies of Dover's pamphlet that survived and W.S.'s follow up edition of it, even if Pepys himself did not bother to record more than Harrison's demeanor on the scaffold. However, this ritual of final speeches performed at the execution spot was not reserved for political criminals or exceptional persons attempting to plead a case or rally a cause; they were instead a part of the English system of public execution dating from Henry VIII's time and were part of the experience available to even those we would consider common petty criminals who nevertheless faced the gallows in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. These "dying words" or gallows speeches typically printed in short one to four-page pamphlets have been carefully studied in recent years for several reasons: social historians have used them in analyzing the state's control of its subjects, like J.A. Sharpe's early work who saw in the executions and their formulaic rituals a type of Foucauldian "State Theatre," while others such as Thomas Laqueur have focused on the extent to which executions created a carnivalesque moment for the unruly crowds, who often seemed unaffected by any didactic messages being performed, and on the number of criminals who refused to perform appropriately, arriving dead drunk or simply in abject terror. Peter Linebaugh has used the criminal biographies which usually accompanied the speeches into print to analyze the nature of crime and criminality in Early Modern England, what he calls a discourse of "tyburnology." Literary historians such as Lincoln Faller, likewise, have found the accompanying didactic confessions and criminal biographies to be rich sources for early fiction writers including Daniel Defoe and his novels of English criminal life.

What has been overlooked or even dismissed in such studies, however, are the complicated ways in which these late seventeenth-century texts came into being and what they might tell us about the continuing development in England in the late seventeenth century of the interplay of media, the connections between oral performance, handwriting, print, and popular media—what I have called "performance texts" in another study. Existing studies of "Last words" pamphlets have typically viewed them as simple documents, cheap and crudely done. They also typically run into difficulties over the issue of who the authors actually were, as we shall see, often arguing over the veracity of the contents if its author is unidentifiable or its contents too formulaic.

If viewed from a different perspective, however, such gallows literature appearing in the 1670s and '80s prior to the lapse of the licensing act, I believe offer dramatic case studies of seventeenth-century authorship practices involving multiple layers of performances, starting with a person who literally must die in order to be read, the multiple texts handwritten and printed generated about the event, and the complex network of individuals involved in bringing such words in to print circulation in a variety of formats and utilizing a variety of dynamic textual practices. Before the condemned became a body on which the law enacted its drama of social order, that body, that person, spoke, often creating what the folklore linguist Richard Bauman defines as performed narrative, and often the condemned also took steps to ensure that their words if not their bodies would be preserved intact through leaving behind handwritten documents (ix, 3). Printers and booksellers and ballad mongers competed intensely through

their trades to preserve in print the words, image, and song that evoked the immediacy of the event. Instead of being simple, anonymous, formulaic documents of the state, dying words pamphlets highlight the complexity of seventeenth-century authorship practices.

First, a little background on the tradition of addresses from the execution ground and the changes in print publication practices in the latter part of the seventeenth century that might affect the ways in which the words of the condemned were preserved and circulated. Both social and literary historians have described the formulaic and ritual aspects of the prisoner's life after being sentenced to death, the exhortations by prison ministers called "Ordinaries," the twice daily sermons on salvation and damnation. The resulting gallows speeches do thus fall into the category of learning to die well, or making a "good death." We see, for example, the strong similarity between the published "Dying Words of Mr. Thomas Grantham," a noted Baptist minister who passed peacefully away in 1692 and William Disney, executed for high treason in 1685, or even those of Jane Longworthy, condemned for infanticide. Disney, whose crime had been to publish the proclamation of James, duke of Monmouth at the start of his short-lived rebellion, prayed with the minister who stood in the cart with him under the noose, like Grantham and Longworthy asking for forgiveness of his sins, but Disney also thanks God for having given him time to "bethink my self," and "so that though the dolour and the shame of this death having so many spectators (upon whom he looked) may somewhat discompose me, yet I have peace and comfort within" (3-4). The minister with him, Andrew Weston, states at the end of this text in a separate italicized block that "This according to the best recollection of my thoughts is the Sum, and as near as I can remember the words that passed between Mr. Disney and me." Likewise, at the end of Grantham's text is a list of eight witnesses to testify that these were the words "spoken by him within two Minutes of his Death."

This repetition of experience and of language has become a point of debate among historians, some of whom point to formulaic utterances and textual representations as invalidating the printed texts as historical evidence, while others such as Peter Linebaugh have argued equally strenuously that the accounts accompanying hangings and executions do indeed offer valuable sources of information about the lives of London's poor and also those who met their ends at Tyburn, information able to be confirmed by apprenticeship records and the like (xix). But what are the texts themselves claiming they offer? Has the print template distracted us from noticing the particularities of the page and its contents?

After sentencing prisoners were carefully prepared by visiting clergy to meet their maker with a clean conscience and also to assist in righting the wrongs they had committed while on earth. "Gallows' confessions," notes Gregory Durstan, "were considered important as they publicly demonstrated the correctness of the trial adjudication" (663). Peter Lake who sees last dying speeches as part of what he calls the "theatre of punishment," highlights the cultural significance of the printed accounts in articulating values and disseminating them in a society culture he describes, wrongly I feel, as being "innocent of modern methods of mass communications" (161). Likewise Lincoln B. Faller has written with insight into what he calls the "'sociopoetics' of criminal biography," and the ways in which "criminals in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England were made to play the central role in rituals of sacrifice and renewal" (x). "Their necks safely wrung," Faller observes, the criminals were "processed and packaged in ways that declared them fit for public consumption" (xi). Faller highlights the ways

in which “popular writers,” “shaped the fact of actuality into patterns convenient (and useful) to their imaginations,” and each text “was made to conform to a preexisting type, as certain features of their lives were emphasized, played down or suppressed...their individualities variously compressed and expanded, were ultimately denied” (2).

And who then were the writers of these texts? Lake in 1985 described them merely as “popular pamphlet writers,” “most often the usual hack writers of the ephemeral literature of the day” (161). Andrea McKenzie in a 1989 essay looking at crime writing between 1670 and 1770 points to “not only the act of reading criminal accounts but the act of writing even the most formulaic of them as an equally dynamic and significant process.” She highlights the sheer commercial appeal of such publications, noting of the serial publication begun in 1679 *The Ordinary of Newgate, His Account of the Behavior, Confession, and Last Dying Speeches of the Condemned Criminals...Executed at Tyburn*, that “confession is good for the soul (but also for sales),” and that the writers and publishers whom she only identifies as “the sons of Grub Street” were primarily in pursuit of the equivalent of modern tabloid sales (24, 26).

The formulaic nature of these texts is thus consistently highlighted by both social and literary historians to the point that the author simply disappears or is irrelevant to the discussion. The relentlessly similarity of the pamphlets’ titles suggests uniformity of content and experience and has drawn into question the use of these texts as historical documents—the sameness it is argued is imposed, the individual is recast in the shape of a socially approved larger narrative. In these studies, the condemned are frequently described in theatrical terms: they are taught their lines, they perform their roles, and their performance is preserved in highly stylized and not very interesting, in terms of literary style or technique, publication. Indeed, as we have seen, the actual authorship of the printed texts is deemed either unknowable or unimportant—the publications themselves are described as cheap and poorly printed, the publishers exploiting sensationalism with a thin veneer of didacticism for sales. Thus, dying words and gallows speeches can, and have, been profitably studied as authorless texts, the recitation of the ritual formulas revealing their particular societies’ anxieties, a revealing if limited glimpse into both the mechanism of state and the gritty details of the largely laboring classes who performed them.

But what happens when one looks past the nearly identical titles at the particularities of the recorded speech and actions? What happens when we realize that while these printed texts may have the same title, they have multiple authors with numerous agendas and authorial strategies? Instead of being seemingly “authorless” texts, these simple short pamphlets involve a complex network of human exchanges: as seen in my opening example of Major General Harrison, there is the condemned left after sentencing to be exhorted on a twice daily basis to reflect upon his or her life and to seek some form of redemption; there are friends who visit; there are the ministers demanding that the healing words must be spoken and performed publically; there are the ballad writers and ballad singers who are literally performing in front of both the condemned and the gathered crowd; and there are the printers and booksellers competing for readers of this both popular and highly specialized type of text.

It is undeniably true that the printed accounts of dying words and behavior are relentlessly uniform in their print appearance. *A True Account of the Behavior, Confessions, and Last Dying Words, of Abraham Bigs, Richard Cobourn, Jane Langworth, and Elizabeth Stoaks At*

*Tyburn* (1684) and are typical of the title pages, with certain title words being given prominence such as “confession,” “Execution,” and “Tyburn,” which typically are modified by being declared to be “true”; what is not emphasized are the names of the persons being executed, which are typically given in small italic font. As I will discuss a little later, in the 1670s and 1680s, the “True Account” print trade for Tyburn was dominated by the Mallet family, but even their competitors followed this same basic title page layout. This feels similar to a contemporary publishing phenomenon: those amongst us who had early experiences in designing their own websites may find this familiar, that while the content was individualized, -the limited number of template styles imposes a seeming uniformity. This seeming erasure of the individual is reinforced in these seventeenth-century templates, a print version of “A True Account.Com” website, by the presence of formulaic expressions of repentance.

The “why” or motive of such speeches and such pamphlets has been carefully examined. What has received almost no attention is the “how,” the ways in which prison writings and resulting gallows speeches were initially created and how they came to be in print. Foreign visitors were struck by the unusual nature of the practice as well as by the demeanor of the condemned. A late seventeenth-century French visitor, Francis Maximilien Misson, whose memoirs were translated into English in 1719, described in an entry headed “Hanging” how “the English are People that laugh at the Delicacy of other Nations, who make it such a mighty Matter to be hang’d” (124). Misson describes the care with which the prisoner attired himself and notes that in “general he studies a Speech, which he pronounces under the Gallows, and gives in Writing to the Sheriff, or to the Minister that attends him in his last Moments, desiring that it may be printed” (124).

This practice of handing over a copy of one’s dying words either at the jail or at the scaffold is found in other accounts as well. Edmund Kirke, convicted for murdering his wife Joan and executed in July 1684, wrote out his prayers as well as a confession which he desired to be printed (*An Exact and True*, 1-3); the Ordinary Samuel Smith used Kirke as example to attempt to persuade the solicitor John Hutchins to confess right up to the moment of the execution (*A True Account...Hutchins*, 3). Hutchins, who was executed the following December for murdering a waterman in an attempted robbery, acknowledged living a debauched life but denied any part in the crime he was convicted for; on the scaffold, “being urged to confess his sins, and beg pardon of the Great God of Heaven before who Tribunal he was shortly to appear, and with much devotion he kneeled and prayed.” But rather than the last minute confession so desired by the minister, he prayed instead for a general forgiveness “with a cheerful voice” and he “declared his Innocence, as to the Murther he was to Suffer for, and submitted to Justice being ready to undergo the Punishment his Sins had brought upon him” (4), before giving his hat and an orange to his brother who accompanied him. In another account published by George Croom, Hutchin specifically requests that the Ordinary “would Publish the same to the whole World”, a text dated and signed at the bottom by Samuel Smith (*Behaviour...Hutchins*, 2).

Thomas Watson, another man convicted for killing his wife, dominates the pages of the account of his execution and that of Thomas Gourdon for coin clipping in March 1687. Immediately prior to his execution, Watson, having given his books, cravat, and hat to friends, when asked if he would speak, replied, “he designed to say something, as he hoped for the good of the Spectators, who came to be Witnesses of his unhappy End, and thereupon having declared

that he had left the particulars of what he intended to say in Writing, with a Woman, a friend of his, in order to be Printed for the General Good and Satisfaction of the public" (*An Account... Thomas Watson*, 1). After his prayer, printed in italics, he repeated to the Minister and the sheriff his desire that his writings be published and "repeated the same with a loud Voice, to the People that came to be Spectators." At the end of the printed text it is again asserted in an italic block that this was "Written by me Thomas Watson, with my own Hand in the Marshalsea Prison. And it is my desire it may be made publick," which is further endorsed by three witnesses, "We, the Persons who have subscribed the Papers mentioned to be left by Thomas Watson, do testify of our own Knowledge, that they were Written in by the said Thomas Watson, and signed with his own Hand, it being his desire they should be Printed and Published. Joshua Ettry, Jonah Ballock, Judith Granger" (4).

Another convicted man on the gallows likewise refused to give the confession so eagerly desired by the Ordinary but chose instead to dramatize his innocence for the crowd, which is duly recorded in his "Last Dying Speeches" published March 1684. The Welshman Rice Evans, convicted of murdering his wife, maintained his innocence throughout his trial and prior to execution. Even the urgings of three ministers in the hanging cart with him "pressing...with all possible Earnestness, how necessary it was for him to Confess and repent the Cruelty to his wife" (*Last dying speeches...Evans*, 2) did not have the desired effect. He "very passionately answered, What do you think I am a Mad-man, to deny it now I am going to dye, if I was guilty. I tell you man, I am not guilty of the Blood laid to my Charge: It's true, I am a Welchman [sic], and have been angry sometimes, but I have done no Murder." "My wife," he declared, "was a green Woman, and might get her Death by Cold; but I have not kill'd her" and he concluded his address to the crowd by forgiving those who had sworn falsely against him and making "several Expressions in a Welsh Tone." More striking as the account concludes, "it was very observable of him, that he had procured a very white new Shirt, made of Callico, large enough to come over all his clothes, which he wore uppermost, and would be hanged in it, as is supposed, in Token of his Innocency" (3).

The condemned and the clergy and sheriff in the cart with the condemned frequently appear to have had equally dramatic exchanges. In *A True copy of the Speech of Mr. Francis Johnstons, alias Dormore, alias Webb, alias Wall; A Priest of the Church of Rome ...with Animadversions upon the same* (1679), the exchanges between the condemned catholic priest and those agents of authority with him are represented on the printed page in dialogue format, again textually highlighting the spontaneity of the exchange. The priest, whose name was actually John Wall, had been caught up in the Popish Plot fervor, and during his trial he refused to admit he had any knowledge of this fictitious event. On the scaffold, he confirmed that he had been offered his life by the judge if he would acknowledge the plot, but in his eyes such a lie would have damned him. He concluded "I would have said more, but that I gave my speech to a friend to be printed" (2). The Sheriff politely interjected "I Pray Sir, speak on what you have to say, and no one shall interrupt you," at which point Wall asked for the prayers of all Catholics present, prayed for God's blessing on Parliament, concluding "I have no more to say." Mr. Sheriff, however, did, stating "I give you no Interruption, but only whereas you said, That you Dyed for the Faith; that is not so: You do not Dye for that, but because you being his Majesties Subject, received Orders from the Church of Rome, beyond the Seas, and came again into England

contrary to the Law.” This is followed by a debate between Wall and the Sheriff over the period of time covered by pardon issued by the King; the priest finally states, “God Receive my Soul,” the Sheriff continued to assure him “Sir, You may take your own time, and you shall have no Interruptions. Sir, Will you be pleased to have your own turn” (ie turning off the ladder to be hanged), at which point the Jaylor’s voice is heard, “Sir, Pray give the Signe when you please to be Turned Off,” to which the priest responded “I will give you no Signe; Do it when you will.” The pamphlet concludes with the parenthetical statement “(And so he was Executed)” (2).

What we see when we look at the particularities of these individual’s last speeches and their conversion to print is an almost hypersensitivity to charges of fictional fabrication. In *A True Copy of Sir Henry Hide’s Speech on the Scaffold, Immediately before his Execution before the Exchange, on the 4<sup>th</sup> March, 1650. Taken in Short-hand from his mouth, by John Hinde* the reader is alerted “take notice, This Speech following is published in those very words that the Gentleman delivered them; and though there be some abrupt breakings off, and other expressions not so smooth as might have been, yet I could not with honesty alter a word; and therefore have tyed my self to his own Expressions, that I may neither abuse the World, or the dying man, or my self” (3). Simon Dover likewise emphasized in his epistle to the reader that the gallows speeches were recorded by “exact short-writers” and that several copies were compared to ensure accuracy, suggesting that more than one person present was taking short hand notes. As historians such as Michael Mendle have described, during the English Civil War, shorthand had become an important new “information technology” as a means of transcribing the parliamentary debates and enabling them to be put quickly into print and there were many popular versions printed in the 1650s. The same information technology is clearly being employed here. Why should this be? An obvious answer is that the writer is acting to preserve the individual voice of the speaker. The task for the pamphlet printer was to distinguish between representing the condemned’s performance accurately and the other competing voices, as we have seen, through the interventions of the Ordinary such as Samuel Smith or the Sheriff and executioner as well as the crowd.

To complicate the concept of authorship further, another voice ventriloquizing the original speaker at the very site of the execution was the apparently ever-present ballad seller. The eighteenth-century engraving by William Hogarth “The Idle Prentice Executed at Tyburn” (1747), nicely highlights the physical presence of the ballad singer/ hawker of dying words as a central performer, occupying the foreground of the scene, as the condemned in the cart is harangued by the minister. The contents of the pamphlets and the broadsides, however, differ in interesting ways. Historians of seventeenth-century broadside ballads have observed that ballads for significant events such as a “royal procession or an execution,” were often “composed before the event took place, and then sold among the crowd gathered to witness the spectacle” (*English Broadside Ballad*, web). When one compares, for example, the pamphlet account of *The Bloody Murtherers Executed; or, News from Fleet Street. Being the Last Speech and Confessions of the Two Persons Executed there on Friday the 22 of October 1675...Murthering the Knight, Sir R.S. in White-Fryers* printed for William Powell 1675 with the ballad version of it *Being a sad and true Releation of the Apprehension, Tryal, Confession, Condemnation, and Execution of the two barbarous and bloody Murtherers, who basely and unawares killed a worthy Knight of the North Country as he was going down to the Waterside; not giving them the least abuse, for which cruel*

and inhumane action they were both hanged in Fleet-Street, near White Fryers, 22 Octo. 1675. Tune is, *Bleeding Heart*. By W.P., it is clear that the ballad maker has used materials from the account of the trial:

A worthy Knight out of the North,  
 O pitty 'twas he e're came forth;  
 To London came to see his Friends,  
 Not thinking he was nigh his end:  
 But back he never did return,  
 Which caus'd his own dear wife to mourn:  
 Sir Richard so they did him call,  
 Pray listen how he came to fall.

It is also clear that W.P. could hardly sing the condemned murderers' actual final speeches before they had made them, and so the ballad switches from an account of the murder to a general moralizing didactic statement: "Consider well all wicked men,/ Fear God, repent, and surely then/ He'l keep you from such hanious crimes,/ Which rule too much in these our times:/ Abstain high drinking, do not swear,/ And of bad company be ware;/ Seek not in quarrels to contend,/ Then blest will be your latter end./ The cry of blood, etc." "Dying speeches" found in broadside ballads, I would argue, act as the didactic entertainment through images as well as sound that historians have claimed for pamphlet gallows literature in general, but they lack the characteristic insistence on accuracy and veracity found in the pamphlets.

As mentioned earlier, the publication of the trial sessions at Old Bailey and the execution literature was in the 1670s through the 1690s largely the province of a small group of printers whose shops were clustered along Fleet Bridge, near both Bridewell and Newgate (now available online at *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, [www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org)). Among the most prolific were the Mallets, Elizabeth and David, who faced competition from George Croom and Elizabeth Redmayne who printed for Richard Turner. Not only did the words of the condemned need a paratextual framework to provide legitimacy, but also the publisher did as well. Elizabeth Redmayne printing for Richard Turner at the Star at St. Pauls in a December 1684 *Account*, warned that "since the last Sessions there have been Published divers false accounts of the Execution of the Prisoners, pretended to be their last Confessions when indeed [they were] Printed before they went to be Executed," and to guarantee that henceforth this publisher will print accounts "the Morning after the said Execution," and that this "is as soon as any true account can be Printed" (*True Account...James Watts*, 4).

Elizabeth Mallet, publishing from Blackhorse Alley in Fleet Street next to Fleet Bridge in the 1680s, was engaged in a fierce exchange of insults with George Croom, publishing then on Thames Street at the Blue Ball, and afterwards moving to a location next to Bridewell. In a May 1684 pamphlet containing the last words of John Gower, Elizabeth Mallet, in a note to the reader at the end highlighted by an accusatory pointing finger in the margin, declares that George Croom is announcing that he will be publishing the only true accounts of Dying Confessions, but indeed, "that notwithstanding all his sober pretensions to Truth," he had printed "that abominable Story of the Devil appearing to a Wapping Waterman and smoking a Pipe of Tobacco

with him" (4). It was so gross a lie, Mallet observes, "that any body but the Author would be ashamed of Charging others with crimes he is guilty of" (*Last Speech...Gower*, 4).

The war of words continued and at the end of her account of the confession of Mr. Thomas Barney of Norwich in August 1684, Elizabeth Mallet's "Advertisement" to Readers, again alerts them to the perfidy of George Croom:

Whereas George Croom has at the end of his Sessions paper, promised a most true & exact Account of the Confessions and Speches of the dying Malefactors and has injuriously detracted from the Reputation of others who have better deserved from Truth than himself. These are to acquaint the world, that he has not kept his word with them, but is so forward to prefer his own Papers to the Publick, for his private advantage, that he often obtrudes falsities upon them; rather than wait with the same patience others do, to inquire out the truth of each particular Relation before they make it publick to the world, this is apparent in the last *Bold and Barbarous Murder* he published committed on William Culliford esq who, blessed be God is, only not dead, but in a very hopeful way of Recovery. This was desired to be advertised that the world may not be led into Error and Mistake by his false Reports (*Confession...Barney*, 4).

Croom, who successfully operated as a printer for nearly thirty years, appears to have yielded the field to the Mallets, who continued publishing Old Bailey session accounts and *Dying Confessions* into the early 1700s, with one "A. Mallet" publishing from Fleet Street Bridge the dying words of Thomas Sharp in 1704.

The competition among publishers working near Old Bailey and the prisons suggests not only the profitability of gallows literature, but also that they and their readers envisioned it as performing in a certain way that was different from that of the broadside ballad. The repeated insistence on the "truth" of the account—even with their formulaic title pages, accounts of repentance, and didactic applications—is combined with the gesture towards what we might call transparency in how the words of the condemned and the dying were obtained, the publication of the names of witnesses as to the veracity and the authorship of last words, and typographical effort to give the reader a sense of the event as being breaking "news" as the historian Daniel Woolf has described it, a past event which is kept current through mass media, driven perhaps by what J. Paul Hunter has called the "commitment to Contemporaneity." It also appears to me as if these texts and their paratexts are manifestations of the continuation of the belief by seventeenth-century writers and readers that print was less likely to be "true" than the spoken word or the handwritten document. As I have argued in another essay about publications in the 1650s and 1660s by public prophets such as Arise Evans and Abiezer Coppe, the preferred means of delivering the warnings from God to all was through the traditional pattern of petition to a person of power: oral performance, followed by a handwritten document ("Performance Texts"). Only if access was blocked for such a performance did these writers typically turn to print, and thus, like the dying words texts, such prophecies often existed and

circulated in a variety of media simultaneously. Not being in print was not a stigma, and being published in a variety of media and formats was considered an advantage.

Thinking about authorship in the context of these various late seventeenth-century dying words and gallows speeches reveals the enormous gulf between the later traditional model of the solitary writer carefully crafting his or her words for a receptive commercial audience, establishing the best text possible, and what was practiced in the past. Nor are these texts simply anonymous didactic “product” churned out by nameless, faceless, interchangeable hack writers and Grub Street publishers, of interest only to historians of crime and punishment. Through the involvement of multiple persons—the condemned, the Sheriff or agent of the law, the ministers and friends in attendance, the ballad singer, and finally the crowd—the dying words of one individual are refracted and broadcast through a variety of media, each serving to highlight the currency of the event and the immediacy of it. In ways remarkably similar to present-day internet information sources such as blogs, the use of electronic social media as news, as well as the anxieties these authorship practices pose for the reader, the latter part of the seventeenth century in England was filled with one-time authors, authors who literally were dying to be read.

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