



Damnably Practises: Witches, Dangerous Women, and Music in Seventeenth-Century English Broadside Ballads

Sarah F. Williams

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Seventeenth-Century English broadside ballads, single-sheet publications that related current events, politics, myth, history, morality, and gossip, combined decorative woodcuts, poetic verse, and orally circulating popular tunes. Ballads straddled oral and literate culture, the material and the ephemeral, and print and performance. They were sung by balladmongers in markets and referenced in dramatic works. Pasted to the walls of local taverns and homes, ballads also educated audiences on morality and gender hierarchies. Although contemporaneous writers published volumes on the early modern controversy over women and the English witch craze, broadside ballads were perhaps more instrumental in disseminating stereotypes of dangerous femininity and its acoustic qualities. Recent scholarship has explored the representations of witchcraft and malfeasance in English street literature; but until now the role of music and embodied performance in communicating female transgression has not been accounted for. Sarah Williams carefully considers the broadside ballad as a dynamic performative work situated in a unique cultural context. Employing techniques drawn from music analysis, gender studies, performance studies, and the histories of print and theater, she contends that broadside ballads and their music made connections between various degrees of female crime, the supernatural, and cautionary tales about and for women.

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