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Love Pleasant, Love Unfortunate: Women in Seventeenth-Century Popular Prints

Sheila O'Connell

THIS ESSAY EXAMINES the very bottom of the seventeenth-century visual-arts market in England: prints and illustrated ballads sold in the street for a penny or so. They are usually described as popular prints, but it should be understood that these prints were not only of interest to those who were unable to appreciate more sophisticated prints. The term "popular" is a Romantic one, invented in the late eighteenth century, and it misleadingly suggests an aspect of culture exclusive to the uneducated. The printed images discussed here were the mass media of their day. They would have formed part of a common experience of everyday life, offered for sale in the street or at fairs, as well as displayed on tavern walls. The audience was broad. Ronald Paulson's definition of popular printed material is a useful one: "read or seen by almost everybody; [therefore,] part of the consciousness of the learned, or educated, as well as the uneducated."¹

The most common category of cheap print in England before the nineteenth century was the ballad illustrated with simple woodcuts. During the seventeenth century, ballads were normally printed horizontally on a half-broadside or "pot" sheet (more or less the modern British A4 size). As we will see, the style was conservative, and until about 1700 ballads were printed in "black-letter" (Gothic) type, though modern "white-letter" type was already in use for other sorts of printing. Even at the bottom of the market, purely pictorial images might be printed from copperplates, but woodcut was used as the medium for ballad illustration so that type and image could be printed in one operation.

There is a long history of ballad collecting; many examples survive, and the literature is extensive. But survival alone does not make the case for the predominance of the ballad in English popular print production. This is confirmed by visual evidence: ballads appear frequently in contemporary views of cottage or tavern interiors. They are also the subject of many literary references: for instance, in Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* (1653), Piscator takes his friend to an "honest alehouse, where we shall find a cleanly room, lavender in the windows, and twenty ballads stuck about the wall."²

The majority of popular prints in England were produced to accompany text. This was not the case in continental Europe, where cheap images (such as vast numbers of prints of saints in Roman Catholic Europe) appeared with little or no text. The explanation for the contrast must be the comparatively high levels of literacy at all strata of English society. Research in the last few decades makes it clear that literacy in Britain was much higher than has often been thought: the remarkable level of nearly 40 percent adult male literacy was reached in the third quarter of the seventeenth century—women, of course, were not so well educated.³

Many of the woodcuts used to illustrate ballads also appeared in chapbooks. These were little books of sixteen or twenty-four pages, made by folding a sheet or a sheet and a half of poor-quality paper and simply sewn together without covers. They sold for about 2d. or 3d.—roughly one-quarter of a day's pay for a laborer.

Evidence of the enormous amount of cheap printed material sold in the Restoration period appears in an inventory made at the death of the publisher Charles Tias in 1664.⁴ The inventory gives details of stock in Tias's warehouse awaiting distribution: thirty-five thousand ballad sheets—roughly one for every ten Londoners, or one for every 140 people in the country; reams (bundles of five hundred each) of what are described as "pictures," presumably large pictorial prints; hundreds of titles of chapbooks, the most popular titles appearing also as broadsides, as well as in the form of books in several formats; more than nine thousand copies of books ready for sale for under 6d. (most under 4d.); and a further eighty thousand copies awaiting binding. Such figures give an indication of the scale of the trade in popular prints and cheap illustrated texts.

Ballad sheets were sold on the streets by "chanters," who drew attention to themselves by singing the ballads. Passersby would join in singing—and, perhaps with purse strings loosened by a few pints of beer, would part with a penny to purchase the sheet. It would be stuffed into a pocket or pinned or pasted onto a wall. Before too long it would have disintegrated or been used in some other way, such as to block a broken window, mend a hole in a shoe, or serve as lavatory paper. The result is that, although print runs would have been large, the vast majority of cheap prints have been lost. But fortunately for posterity there were those who preserved examples with care. Samuel Pepys owned nearly eighteen hundred ballads.⁵ The collection of Pepys's contemporary and Oxford historian Anthony à Wood, now in the Bodleian Library, includes nearly three hundred ballads, numerous chapbooks, and more than five hundred broadsides. The most comprehensive collection of everyday prints of the later part of Charles II's reign was assembled by Narcissus Luttrell, who used this ephemeral material in compiling his daily chronicle of contemporary events, published more than a hundred years after his death in 1732 as *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs from September 1678 to April 1714*.⁶

Pepys's organization of his ballad collection provides a useful indication of popular subject matter. Women are a major theme. They appear chiefly under such headings as "Love Pleasant," "Love Unfortunate," "Marriage, Cuckoldry, &c.," and "Love Gallantry" related to the navy.⁷ Whether Love is Pleasant or Unfortunate, the point of view is always male; women are stereotyped as willing wenches or shrewish adulteresses.

The prevailing attitude is summed up in the emblematic image known in England as "Bulchin and Thingut" or "Fill Gut and Pinch Belly,"⁸ where one creature has grown fat because his diet consists of good husbands and they are plentiful, while the emaciated other creature is able to eat only good women and so she starves. These creatures had been known since the Middle Ages, not just in England but throughout Europe. The starving creature who eats good women is referred to as "Chichevache" in Chaucer's tale of Patient Griselda. The poet tells wives that they must not "let humility nail their tongues" and must not gain reputations for kindness or patience—for a woman to develop such uncharacteristic qualities would simply be inviting Chichevache to swallow her.⁹ The attitude that engendered such images had not decreased by the late seventeenth century; Kevin Sharpe points out that lustful, shrewish women were "a stock in trade of early modern misogyny."¹⁰

The Happy Marriage (fig. 9) is an image of domestic harmony from about 1690. The marital relationship shown is a model one—but the image originally appeared as a pair with *The Unhappy Marriage*, in which, according to the accompanying verse, death is the only escape for the man "yoked with a brawling shrew."¹¹ The idea of the embattled couple was so familiar that it could be stereotyped both visually and verbally as "the fight for the breeches," a seventeenth-century version of the conflict over which one of a couple is "wearing the trousers." The standard image was a literal interpretation with a man and a woman tugging at a large pair of breeches. It appears in the form of a woodcut illustrating a ballad entitled "The Jolly Widdower" (fig. 10), from the "Love Unfortunate" section of Pepys's collection, which tells the story of a man who rejoices at the death of his unfaithful scold of a wife. Adulteresses were usually shown as scolds, and scolds as adulteresses; bad temper and sexual promiscuity appear to have been closely allied in the seventeenth-century mind. Women seen as guilty of such behaviors were condemned, and their husbands were despised as henpecked cuckolds.

Prints like these relate to such popular manifestations as the Skimmington, an English version of the French Charivari, where those who contravened the social norms were punished by raucous processions. They might be forced to ride backward on an ass, accompanied by "rough music" played on bones with butchers' cleavers.¹² The crowd would hold up horns, symbolizing cuckoldry, and petticoats



11. Anonymous, *The Contented Cuckold*, etching (ca. 1660), 10 x 7¼ in. (25.4 x 18.5 cm). The British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

What may be this print or a version of it was advertised as “The Silly Contented Cuckold” by Peter Stent in 1662 and by his successor John Overton in 1673.¹⁴ Like many English prints, the etching is based on a Continental prototype, in this case a contemporary French print, *Le Cornard Content*,¹⁵ the title of which is a pun, describing the cuckold as both content and counting. The image appears also in the form of a small woodcut illustrating a ballad entitled “The Dyers Destiny” (fig. 12). The wife in this case justifies taking lovers because their money compensates for her husband’s poor earnings. There was a traditional association between cuckoldry and the trade of the dyer, perhaps because the unpleasant smells of dyestuffs clinging to his person were thought likely to drive a wife away.

Punning—a favorite form of early-modern humor—appears again in an illustration to the ballad “Rocke the Cradle John” (fig. 13), in which a horned cuckold holds up a hornbook.¹⁶ Versions of this woodcut were used to illustrate a whole series of ballads from about 1635 to the end of the century. By the 1680s the blocks were worm-eaten and damaged; the hornbook and the top part of the cuckold’s horns disappeared, and eventually he appears alone.¹⁷

Publishers of cheap prints and ballads clearly did not set great store by originality. Woodblocks were reused for as long as they held together and copperplates for as long as the faintest image could still be printed from worn metal. Old plates would be reworked and old blocks copied, rather than any effort being put into making new designs. If images did not quite fit the subject, publishers—and presumably buyers—did not seem to be too concerned.

To illustrate bawdy ballads entitled “Love in a Mist” and “The Jovial Maypole Dancers,”¹⁸ the publisher Jonah Deacon used a woodcut that was surprisingly incongruous even by the careless standards of cheap publishers: a small fifteenth-century woodcut of the Visitation. This is no cunning attempt to import Roman Catholic visual propaganda; a century and a half after the Reformation, the iconography of the Life of the Virgin was so unfamiliar in Protestant England that the image could be read simply as two figures embracing, and it would serve to illustrate a bawdy text. One verse from “Love in a Mist” will demonstrate just how inappropriate the image was:

She put this youngster to his trumps
till he began to blow,
But up and down she briskly jumps,
for sometimes ’twill be so:
Quoth she, I’ll never after miss,
such opportunities,
For this is perfect Lovers bliss,
with a mist before mine eyes.

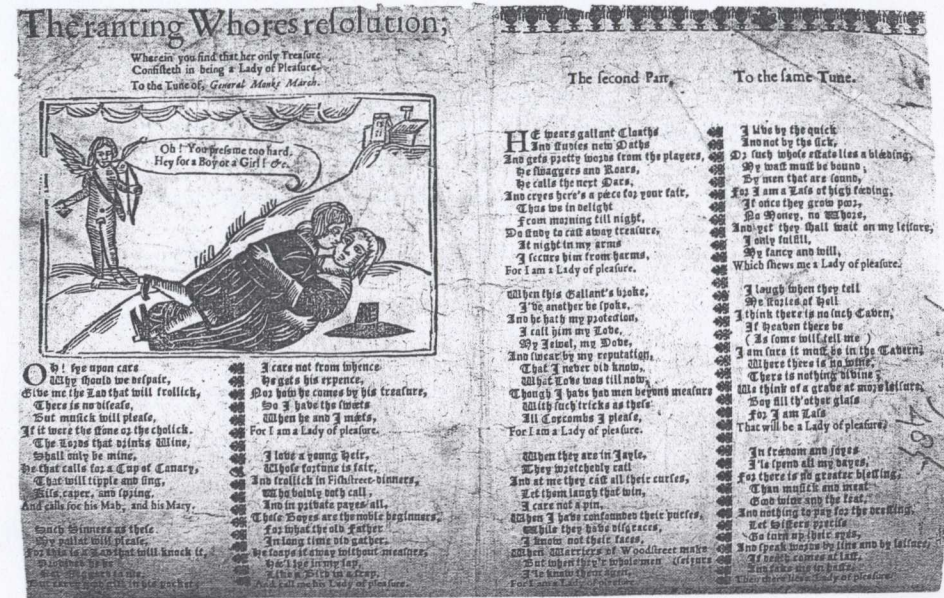
Woodcuts of soberly dressed men and women are the norm for illustrations of bawdy ballads, however immodest the text. Erotic prints appeared only at the upper end of the market in the seventeenth century, and the most suggestive cheap ballad illustrations are woodcuts of fully clothed couples embracing, whether on a bed or in the countryside.¹⁹ An example is the illustration to the ballad entitled “The Ranting Whores Resolution” (fig. 14), where the verses are in the words of a so-called “Lady of pleasure” who moves from man to man in the London taverns:

When this Gallant's broke,
I've another bespoke,
And he hath my protection,
I call him my Love,
My Jewel, my Dove,
And swear by my reputation,
That I never did know,
What Love was till now,
Though I have had men beyond measure.

The same woodcut was used to illustrate two other Pepys ballads, “The Jovial Lass, or Doll and Roger” and “The Mourning Conquest,”²⁰ in both of which eager country girls seduce naive young men. The notion of naïveté in young women does not appear in English popular visual culture until late in the eighteenth century.

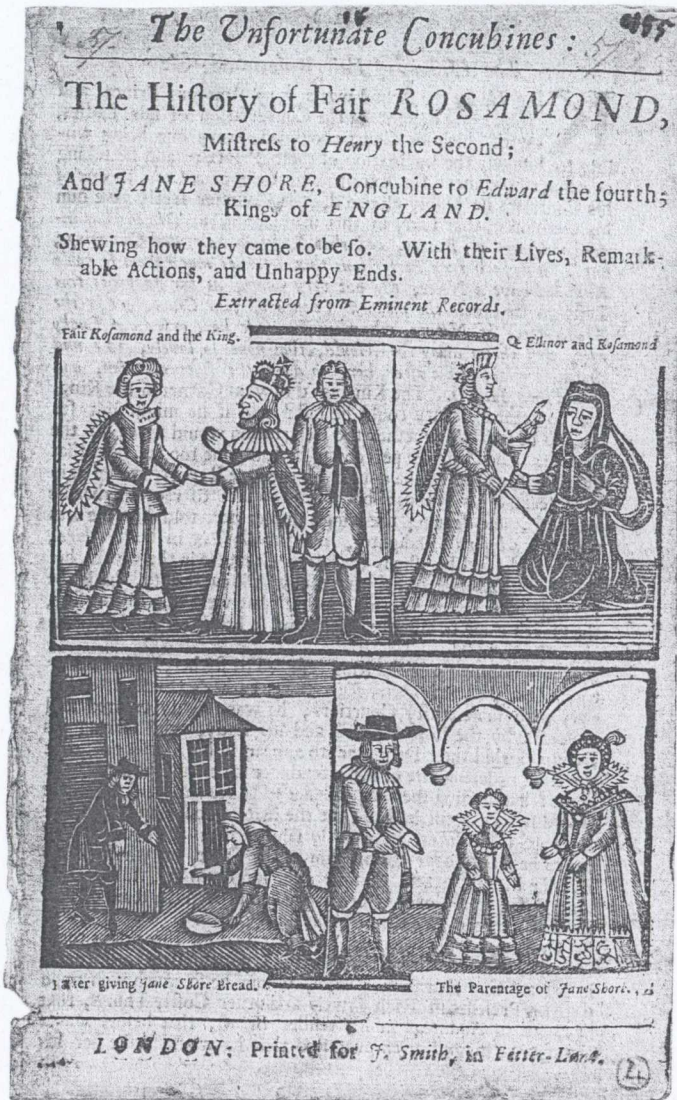
The rare occasions when women who are guilty of sexual transgression are treated sympathetically involve the abused mistresses of powerful men—in particular, Jane Shore and Fair Rosamond. Jane Shore, mistress of Edward IV, was, according to legend, made to parade in public penance after his death and became a figure of popular mythology. In one ballad of 1682—unfortunately not illustrated—Charles II's notorious mistresses Nell Gwyn and Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland, are visited by Jane Shore's ghost, who warns them that kings' mistresses can come to sorry ends. Fair Rosamond, Henry II's mistress, was allegedly murdered by Queen Eleanor. Her story engendered its own iconography in a number of illustrations to ballads and chapbooks, extending over several scenes set in the house at Woodstock, Oxfordshire, where she was kept: in the first scene the king arrives at the house in full regalia; in a later scene the queen forces Rosamond to her knees and makes her drink a cup of poison (fig. 15). The familiarity of this latter composition is attested by its clear echo in William Hogarth's *Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn* of the 1720s.²¹

Seventeenth-century popular prints of women tend to concentrate on sexual misbehavior, but women also are sometimes shown critically as wasting their time



14. Anonymous, *The Ranting Whores Resolution*, woodcut and letterpress (1672), 7 7/8 x 11 1/8 in. (20 x 30.2 cm). The Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge.

with gossiping, drinking, and fashion. One particularly long-lived image went through several incarnations. It was published in France about 1560 as an etching with the title *Le Caquet des Femmes*,²² and as two early-seventeenth-century German etchings, one by Wenceslaus Hollar and both illustrating broadsides entitled *Schaw Platz*.²³ A woodcut, which was probably cut in Holland about 1600, appears in two English versions: one, entitled *The Severall Places Where You May Hear News* (fig. 16), would have been published toward the end of the seventeenth century; the other, entitled *Titlle Tattle; or, the Several Branches of Gossiping*,²⁴ dates from several decades later, by which time the block had sustained considerable damage. Gossip is the female vice that is exposed here: groups of women are shown gossiping while attending church, fetching water at the conduit, drinking at the alehouse, washing clothes, and so on; gossiping leads to arguing, then to physical fighting both at the conduit and by the river.



15. Anonymous, title page to *The Unfortunate Concubines: The History of Fair Rosamond*, woodcut and letterpress (ca. 1700), 7½ x 4½ in. (19 x 11.7 cm). Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



16. Anonymous, *The Severall Places Where You May Hear News*, woodcut and letterpress (late-seventeenth-century impression from a block of ca. 1600), 14½ x 19½ in. (36.5 x 50.1 cm). The Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge.

Luttrell for 2d. on 5 March 1684, is a schematic illustration of the choice between the paths leading to heaven or hell. The heading "Necessary to be set up in all Houses" indicates that it was aimed at God-fearing families. The lengthy text—"a Dialogue, Between a Virtuous Young-Man, and the [Devil]"—avoids explicit descriptions of temptation. Serious moralists realized the risk of describing—let alone portraying—the vices they warned against; women appear here only as tiny figures among the "bad company" into which the Devil can tempt a young man. Naturalistic representation is avoided; just as in the bawdy ballads we see only symbols of cuckoldry, and as in the prints of Bulchin and Thingut, male virtue and female vice are portrayed emblematically.

The emblematic approach to imagery is a major distinction between the art of the streets of later-seventeenth-century London and the art of the court. By this time naturalism was the norm at the top end of the art market, but the popular audience maintained a conservative preference for the emblematic. This is partly a continuation of medieval modes of expression and partly a result of Reformation anxiety about the use of religious imagery, which had a far-reaching effect on printmaking in England. In the German Protestant states, printmakers were able to switch their production from Catholic to Protestant imagery: Lucas Cranach's largely naturalistic woodcuts, for instance, were used to elucidate Martin Luther's works. The English print trade was not so well developed as its German counterpart—there was no Cranach, let alone a Dürer, able to adapt to new circumstances. Printed images became mere adjuncts to text, whether in religious contexts or in popular ballads. They were used emblematically to reinforce the word or to visualize abstract ideas. A well-known image might draw attention to the godly distinction between the paths to heaven and hell (see fig. 17), or it might signal a tale of marital disharmony as in "the fight for the breeches" (see fig. 10). In neither case was naturalism required. If naturalism was irrelevant, then less discrimination might be needed in the choice of image. Consumers of these prints saw illustrations simply as signifiers. As we have seen, images might not relate precisely to textual narrative; they could be printed from blocks that were worm-eaten and cracked—clearly decades old, and with characters wearing the fashions of an earlier generation. Such inconsistency between image and word was irrelevant in the seventeenth-century popular context, and the demand for naturalism was to emerge only gradually in successive decades.³⁰

1. Ronald Paulson, *Popular and Polite Art in the Age of Hogarth and Fielding* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1979), x.
2. For further literary references to popular prints, see Morris Martin, "The Case of the Missing Woodcuts," *Print Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (Dec. 1987): 342–61.
3. Lawrence Stone, "Literacy and Education in England 1640–1900," *Past and Present*, no. 42 (Feb. 1969): 69–139.
4. Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and Its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Methuen, 1981), 91–110.
5. Helen Weinstein, ed., *Ballads*, vol. 2 (bks. 1 and 2) of *Catalogue of the Pepys Library at Magdalene College, Cambridge*, ed. Robert Latham (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1992–94); W. Geoffrey Day, ed., *The Pepys Ballads: Facsimile Volume*, 5 vols. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987).
6. Luttrell's collection was sold by his descendants in 1786 and is now dispersed. Large numbers of the sheets are to be found in the British Library, the British Museum, and major American libraries, including the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University; they are easily identifiable from Luttrell's annotations. See Stephen Parks, "The Luttrell File," *Yale University Library Gazette*, Occasional Supplement 3 (Dec. 1999).
7. Pepys's categories, listed at the beginning of the first volume of his ballad collection (see note 5 above), are: "1 - Devotion & Morality / 2 - History - True & Fabulous / 3 - Tragedy - vizt. Murd[er]s, Execut[io]ns Judgm[en]ts of God &c. / 4 - State & Times / 5 - Love - Pleasant / 6 - D[ist]o . . . Unfortunate / 7 - Marriage, Cuckoldry, &c. / 8 - Sea - Love, Gallantry, & Actions / 9 - Drinking & Good Fellowship / 10 - Humour, Frolicks, &c. mixt."
8. Two English prints of the subject are known: an etching in the Morgan Library and Museum, New York (see Sheila O'Connell, "The Peel Collection in New York," *Print Quarterly* 16, no. 1 [March 1998]: 67), and a woodcut in the Society of Antiquaries, London (see Sheila O'Connell, *The Popular Print in England: 1550–1850* [London: British Museum Press, 1999], 48).
9. Author's modernization of Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Clerk's Tale," *The Canterbury Tales*, lines 1183–88.
10. Kevin Sharpe, "Restoration and Reconstitution: Politics, Society and Culture in the England of Charles II," in *Painted Ladies: Women at the Court of Charles II*, ed. Catharine MacLeod and Julia Marciari Alexander, exh. cat. (London: National Portrait Gallery, London, in association with the Yale Center for British Art, 2001), 19.
11. Reproduced in O'Connell, *Popular Print*, 110.
12. Violet Alford, "Rough Music or Charivari," *Folklore* 70, no. 4 (Dec. 1959): 505–18.
13. Samuel Butler, *Hudibras: The Second Part; by the Author of the First* (London: John Martyn and James Allestry, 1664), 121, 122; *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. R. C. Latham and W. Matthews, 11 vols. (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 8:257.
14. Alexander Globe, *Peter Stent, London Printseller, circa 1642–1665: Being a Catalogue Raisonné of His Engraved Prints and Books with an Historical and Bibliographical Introduction* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1985): 123, no. 52.
15. Reproduced in O'Connell, *Popular Print*, 112.
16. A hornbook was an early educational aid: a printed alphabet was mounted on a tablet of wood with a handle and protected by a thin sheet of transparent animal horn.
17. Examples of later uses of the same block include "Advice to Batchelors," "Hen-peckt Cuckold," "The Poor Contented Cuckold," and "My Wife Will Be My Master," in Day, *Pepys Ballads*, 4:103, 129, 133, 143.
18. British Library, London, C.22.f.61/56, 57. For an illustration of "Love in a Mist," see O'Connell, *Popular Print*, 117.
19. See, for example, "The Wheel-Wrights Huy-and-Cry after His Wife," in Day, *Pepys Ballads*, 4:115.
20. Day, *Pepys Ballads*, 3:116, 139.
21. A group of ballads and other popular materials illustrating the story of Fair Rosamond is kept in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, pressmark Ib 57 + t4; for Hogarth's echo of the traditional iconography, see Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth's Graphic Works*, 3rd ed. (London: Print Room, 1989), 72–73, 282, no. 113.

22. André Linzeler and Jean Adhémar, *Inventaire du Fonds Français: Graveurs du Seizième Siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1967–71), 2:193–94, inv. Tf.2, fol. 49.
23. Richard Pennington, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Etched Work of Wenceslaus Hollar, 1607–1677* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), 95, no. 596; Wolfgang Harms and Michael Schilling, *Deutsche Illustrierte Flugblätter des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, 7 vols. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1985–2005), 1:300–301, no. I. 145.
24. Frederic George Stephens and M. Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Dept. of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, 11 vols. (London: British Museum, 1870–1954), 1:31–32, no. 61.
25. Men are also mocked at times when fashion is particularly extravagant. The elaborate male clothing of the late 1620s was satirized in a number of prints of “Monsieur A-la-Mode,” which include a surviving English example, *The Funeral Obsequies of Sir All-in-New Fashions*, published by Thomas Geele (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford Univ., Douce Prints, Portfolio 138, no. 89); “macaronis,” “*incroyables*,” and dandies from the 1770s to 1820s were the subject of much satire.
26. British Library, London, “Roxburghe Ballads,” 3:64–65, 806–7; Day, *Pepys Ballads*, 2:66; Chetham’s Library, Manchester, Halliwell-Phillips Collection, cat. 28, <http://www.chethams.org.uk> (accessed Sept. 2007).
27. Day, *Pepys Ballads*, 4:365.
28. Day, *Pepys Ballads*, 3:338.
29. A. Griffiths, *The Print in Stuart Britain* (London: British Museum Press, 1998), 24.
30. For an account of the effect of Reformation iconoclasm on English art, see Margaret Aston, *The King’s Bedpost: Reformation and Iconography in a Tudor Group Portrait* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993).