CHAPTER FIVE

‘WANDERING WITH PAMPHLETS’: THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF NEWS CIRCULATION IN CIVIL WAR ENGLAND

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This paper focuses upon English pedlars, hawkers and chapmen during the 17th century. It explores the role of various kinds of itinerant traders in the distribution and sale of cheap printed texts, whether from carts, stalls and baskets on the streets of London (hawkers), or from packs carried across national distribution networks (pedlars). Such men and women have obviously received significant scholarly attention over many years, not least from Margaret Spufford and Tessa Watt, who have made three broad contributions to our understanding of the itinerant trade in cheap print.1 Firstly, they have emphasised the importance of printed wares within the packs carried through provincial England by pedlars and chapmen, and they have done a great deal to draw attention to the kinds of genres which were circulated by them, in terms of ‘small books and pleasant histories’, and in terms of ballads, pious pamphlets, and moralising tales, which could be consumed by a popular audience, and even displayed publicly in private houses and public places. Indeed, although it has been widely noted that Richard Baxter remembered acquiring more substantial religious works from pedlars, like Richard Sibbes’s Bruised Reed, this is taken to have been exceptional rather than normal.2 Secondly, Spufford and Watt have emphasised the connections which existed between pedlars, booksellers and publishers in both provincial and

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metropolitan contexts; the fact that pedlars often worked as agents for stationers both in London and beyond; and the possibility that by such means printed works could reach even the most humble readers at fairs and in alehouses. Thirdly, Spufford and Watt have stressed the importance of recognising that pedlars served a range of customers, from the gentry and social elite to the lowly and the poor, and as such they have done much to prove that pedlars provided a means by which centre and localities were connected across the socio-economic spectrum, and an important mechanism by which the lower orders were introduced to the world of print, and the ideas that it could relay, and by which they were integrated into a common culture, at least for certain types of books. As Watt concluded, studying pedlars reveals that ‘printed wares were becoming increasingly familiar objects in the daily lives of those on the fringes of literacy’.

In many ways, my intention here is not to challenge such findings, and I certainly have no intention of analysing the nature of the print genres upon which they focused, or of addressing the recent debate regarding possible distinctions between the kinds of ballads which were aimed at, and reached, different audiences. Rather, I hope to supplement their work by focusing upon the period after 1640, and to argue that, to the extent that this has received scholarly attention hitherto, important dimensions of the peripatetic print trade have been overlooked or underplayed. Most importantly, this chapter addresses the apparent disjunction between the work of Spufford and Watt on the one hand, and that of a scholar such as Maureen Bell on the other. Bell has focused very specifically upon the late 17th century, and has highlighted the degree to which official concern regarding the itinerant book trade became focused upon the possibility that pedlars and hawkers were responsible for distributing seditious political literature, in the form of pamphlets and newspapers. As Bell has shown, it was this concern about political literature in the pedlar’s pack which generated a determination to introduce mechanisms for licensing such traders individually. There was certainly plentiful evidence to support such worries. In October 1682, for example, a female hawker was arrested ‘for crying and vending a paper’ entitled A True Account of the

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4 Watt, ‘Publisher’, 62; Spufford, *Great Reclothing*, 85–6, 154, 163, 168, 197, 204, 226.