CHAPTER 12

“This Is Attested Truth”

The Rhetoric of Truthfulness in Early Modern Broadside Ballads

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If we are to judge by the interest they aroused in the London publishing industry, there were extraordinary sights to behold in Cork in 1621, sights that inspired several pamphlets and at least two broadside ballads. Locals apparently witnessed the strange occurrence of “an unusual multitude of birds called Stares” (starlings), who gathered near the city of Cork in order to:

fight together the most bitterest and sharpest battell amongst themselves, the like, for the manner of their fight, and for the time the battell did continue, never heard or seene at any time in any Country of the world.1

In an address to the reader, the pamphlet which supplies these details, The Wonderfyll Battell of Starelings, complains about other accounts of this spectacular sight:

so many poetical fictions have of late passed the print, that they [i.e. the pamphlet’s audience] have some cause to suspect almost every extraordinary report that is printed.2

In contrast to these “fictions,” the pamphlet’s narrative should be accepted as truthful since its author is in possession of:

Letters, from Right Honorable persons in Ireland where the accident fell out, to Right Honourable persons at Court, and divers in London at this present: as also by the testimony of Right Honourable and Worshipfull persons, & others of good reputation now in London, who were eye-witnesses.3

2 Ibid., sig. A2v.
3 Ibid., sig. A2v.
It is hard not to suspect that, amidst the generic complaint at the quality of sensational publishing (a common technique for asserting a writer or text’s own credit by comparison), the pamphlet is concerned with a particular ballad. *A battell of Birds* – or to give the ballad its full title, *A battell of Birds, Most strangely fought in Ireland, upon the eight day of September last, 1621. where neere unto the Citty of Corke, by the river Lee, weare gathered together such a multytude of Stares, or Starlings, as the like for number, was never seene in any age* – provides an abbreviated account of the same events.4 It is easy to imagine that the pamphlet’s criticism is implicitly directed at this alternative narrative owing to discrepancies in their accounts, not least the fact that they disagree on exactly when this incredible avian war is supposed to have taken place. Yet, as its closing stanza makes clear, the ballad manifests the same anxiety, equally concerned to establish its status as a truthful account, and its content as news that is worthy of a receptive audience: “What now for trueth is publisht forth | esteeeme it as a newes of worth” (l. 103–104).

These truth claims, and the types of reliability claimed by both texts, are central to the concerns of this chapter. Present in both pamphlet and ballad versions of this narrative is a concern with sight. This extraordinary occurrence is defined as something which has been seen, and which can be recounted and understood only thanks to the presence of eyewitnesses. It is through the testimony of trusted individuals that the truth of this fantastical sight can be guaranteed. The basis of the ballad’s truth claims is also the very fact of its having been “publisht forth,” an ambiguous phrase that relates to a ballad’s dual status as both an oral and printed text. The ballad is “publisht” therefore both in the sense that it is proclaimed and makes its narrative known, and in the sense that it is also disseminated to its audience through the medium of print. It implies that part of the reason the ballad should be accepted by its audience as “newes of worth,” both truthful and worth knowing, lies in its being a printed, and widely circulated, text.

Ballads that provide accounts of official or military events, natural catastrophes, or miraculous happenings, appear to have a greater concern to declare and authenticate their veracity than do other examples of popular song. If an event is labelled as ‘news’, it not only prompts the interest of its audience within a particular context, but declares that the reported events actually occurred, and that the account being offered is truthful and reliable. Any news text, whether newspaper or ballad, contains not only linguistic but paratextual

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