The End is Always Nigh: LONDON and the Perpetually Impending APOCALYPSE

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Introduction:
As an undergraduate researcher for the EEBA team at a transition point between the archiving of two major collections, my job was primarily custodial—checking to ensure that older entries into the digital archive had the correct number of keyword categories, contained all the necessary data files, and were of overall sufficient quality to be matched to the standards applied in recent years. Due to the exceptional rapidity with which we scanned the database (on average, each of us could complete an assessment of two ballads a minute), vast swathes of history passed by almost visibly before our eyes—and in every century, a significant portion of the population seemed convinced that London—that sinful cesspool, that Babylon on the Thames—was about to face judgment day.

Discussion:
A running theme in the ballads indigenous to London is the end of the world, and most authors seemed to present the city's own wrong-doings either as the provocation for termination, or as the foremost concern for the city before that day arrived. In "A Wonderful Prophecy" (EEBA 20679), for instance, the body of a just-deceased woman of faith temporarily reanimates to warn her fellow citizens that "This is the last age of the world," and that London has become a "puddle of iniquity" due to all the unrighteous pride and general debauchery taking place, warning that all such excess is to be "burnt and wasted with Gods [sic] ire." In "ENGLAND'S New Bell-man" (EEBA 32512), meanwhile, the author doesn't bother with direct justifications for the timing of Judgement itself, and instead preoccupies himself with keeping people on their best behavior. As the end of the ballad, represented in its original print form on the right, asserts, the only logical course of action in the face of earthly death is to abandon all materialistic behaviors and, "Upon their Knees proceed." In each case, though the driving force behind its arrival may be more or less clearly defined, Armageddon serves as a tool for the author to inspire proper "Christian" (Protestant) behavior in their readers—the frequency of such publications therefore revealing both a strong, popular Protestant movement and its lack of theocratic dominion over London at large. After all, such texts are addressed to the population at large, and not specific, problematic minorities.

Conclusion:
London of the 17th and 18th centuries was a thriving commercial metropolis, cultural hub, holy city for the Church of England, and, occasionally, a heap of disease ridden cinders. Yet, for all the fire and death discussed in ballads like "The LONDONERS Lamentation" (EEBA 31925), the city managed to preserve its uniquely cosmopolitan flair. Indeed, for all of the injunctions to proper Christian morality contained within, the presence and popularity of ballads like "A Wonderful Prophecy" and "ENGLAND'S New Bell-man" that criticize more material modes of existence instead stands as a testament to the enduring vibrancy of both lifestyles, and the unique cultural dynamics that energize the city to this day.

Indeed, working with these ballads over the past ten weeks has inspired in me a fascination for both the contradictory city of old, and the process by which we try to preserve and understand its voice in the present. To join the EEBA team and assume, for a heartbeat, the stewardship of London has been an utmost honor.