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Ballad Opera, Imitation, and the Formation of Genre

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ABSTRACT

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The enormous popularity of *The Beggar's Opera* gave rise to a remarkable series of plays known as ballad opera, a form that dominated the eighteenth-century London stage during the 1730s, a crucial decade in the development of English theatre. Although virtually every major playwright of the period, including Colley Cibber, Henry Fielding and George Lillo, experimented with the form, ballad operas have been dismissed as artless and insignificant imitations. Arguing that the failure to understand these plays stems from an inability to conceptualize them as a coherent dramatic form, I propose a theory of genre that regards literary categories not as logical taxonomies but as social institutions that constitute texts. I also develop a method for exploring the process of literary imitation, showing how numerous acts of varying an exemplar text combine to create a stable literary form. Drawing on evidence from not only the plays themselves but also eighteenth-century periodicals, dedications, letters, and advertisements, I demonstrate how ballad opera developed into a genre unified by an insistent effort to reveal of the arbitrariness of legal and cultural norms. Unified in its insistence that money is the sole arbiter of virtue, ballad opera explored corruption if every phase of public life, and gleefully championed insincerity, acquisition, and self-promotion as the only logical response to the emerging marketplace economy. Additionally, as the dominant theatrical genre of its time, ballad opera began to change the social function of theatre itself, enticing mass audiences to the patent houses, encouraging dramatic innovation, and using the stage for political protest. These transformations were not universally tolerated: ballad opera was the most frequently censored dramatic form and both the primary cause and main victim of the restrictive Licensing Act—legislation that brought an end to both ballad opera and theatrical experimentation in general. This dissertation therefore resolves a paradox that has troubled previous critics—namely, why such seemingly innocuous plays were the subject of so much government scrutiny. Once one recognizes the genre's influence on reception, ballad operas no longer can be dismissed as frivolous entertainments; they demand attention as social critiques of considerable power and ingenuity.

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Chapter One:

Pimps and Parsons: the Genre of Ballad Opera

After the third rehearsal of *The Restauration of Charles II, or the Life and Death of Oliver Cromwell* (1732), a messenger arrived at the New Theatre in the Haymarket and announced that the play must not be acted, for it had been decided that it had a treasonous title, and that the historical events portrayed were too recent to allow representation on the stage. The play was never again mounted for production, but its author, Walter Aston, managed to have it published, complete with a defensive Prologue, a peevish and insolent dedication to Walpole, and a rather boldly condemnatory epigraph from Hamlet: “Let the gaul’d jade Wince, our withers are unwrung." Although a few scholars have mentioned this remarkable story, no one has managed to explain why the play was subjected to such severe treatment in the early 1730's, a period relatively tolerant of theatrical performances. In fact, modern critics seem to agree that the only objectionable thing about Aston’s play is its incompetence; they hold it to be anywhere from ridiculous, if moderately amusing, to “inept and harmless" (Hume, *Fielding*, 82). To account for the play’s suppression, these critics have offered intuitively plausible but somewhat vague explanations, such as “Cromwell might be associated with Walpole” (Gagey, 205), or “tales of restoring Stuart kings to their rightful thrones were not popular with Georgian governments” (Loftis, 104), or “the play could be suspected of having Jacobite sympathies" (Hume, *Fielding*, 82). But eighteenth-century newspapers tell a different story, one that indicates both that the play itself was deliberately rebellious and that the authorities who censored it were far more outraged than these explanations suggest. A puff in the *Daily Journal* asserted that the new ballad opera was “much approv’d of by several Persons of Distinction. . . and all allow it contains much Satire”

(April 26, 1732). The very next day, the *Daily Post* carried an item in which Aston proclaimed he had "not any Manner of Concern in the said Theatre in the Hay-market," a disavowal so complete and disingenuous that it appears coerced (April 27, 1732). Finally, in an article from *Read's Weekly Journal* that looks like a reluctant response to a demand for an explanation, several of "his Majesty's Justices of the Peace" claimed that the work was "too scurrilous to be represented on any stage," and that it "carried with it such an evil tendency" that the only sensible response was to issue out warrants for taking up all the players (May 20, 1732).

Although Aston's play is a particularly spectacular example, *The Restauration of Charles II* is only one of many ballad operas suppressed and condemned in the eighteenth-century that look unobjectionable to critics today. *Polly,* for example, was deemed by Lord Hervey to be more direct and more abusive than the *Beggar's Opera*, but Hervey's editor calls it "very stupid and equally inoffensive" (Croker, 26), a view that has now become commonplace. Similarly, many critics find the notorious controversy created by Fielding's *Grub Street Opera* out of proportion with the play's "light hearted banter" (Brown, 32). Furthermore, the vast majority of plays written during the 1730's that failed to reach the stage, either because of governmental intervention or managerial caution, were ballad operas, and in fact, eighteenth-century critics did not limit their objections to particular plays. Instead, they considered the form itself unconscionable; all ballad operas contributed to public degeneracy and political instability, an opinion directly at odds with the current critical view that the form, though occasionally satirical, was "genial and rather innocuous" (Gagey, 10). Far from a curious anomaly, our failure to discern anything potentially offensive in Aston's play begins to look like a minor symptom of a more widespread critical blindness.

My contention here will be that our failure to understand these plays is caused by our inability to conceptualize ballad opera correctly as a genre. However diverse recent theorists of genre may be, they do agree that genre functions as an interpretative guide, that the meaning we assign to an utterance is dependent on the generic lens through which we view it. "All understanding of verbal meaning," declares E. D. Hirsch, is "necessarily genre-bound," and he continues by delineating a system by which readers can gain access to the proper generic framework for each text (76). Similarly, Alistair Fowler has coined the term "generic competence" to designate the learning process involved in understanding various literary types (44). For both critics, insufficient generic understanding can result in deeply flawed interpretations, and it appears at first that a lack of generic competence accounts for our misconception of *The Restauration of Charles II*.

However, ballad opera suffers further because most critics refuse to grant it the status of genre at all. Faced with what appears to be a dazzlingly diverse and even contradictory collection of plays, these critics argue that because "very different sorts of plays employed the technique that Gay had pioneered," ballad opera should not be considered a unified phenomenon (Hume, *Fielding*,106). Generic competence is thus regarded as irrelevant to ballad opera, because no one can specify a set of features that constitutes the form's generic norms. Critics thus divide ballad operas into discrete subgroups that do appear consistent, such as pastoral operas, low-life operas, historical operas, and even nautical operas, and the plays are then interpreted and evaluated on the basis of their accordance to these generic standards. More often than not, they end up appearing hopelessly inept, products of authors incapable of grasping the requirements of the sub-genres

they employed. The idea that ballad opera as a whole might have different prerequisites has not been considered a serious option.

However, a surfeit of eighteenth-century references to the form, in prologues to plays, periodicals, and personal communications, all make pronouncements regarding the form's methods, purposes, and effects; so perhaps it is our notions of generic unity that require adjustment. In what follows, therefore, I will first articulate a view of genre somewhat different from that of traditional theorists, one that regards generic coherence as a historical structure rather than a logical taxonomy. I will then introduce what I see as the general contours of ballad opera, and conclude by returning to Aston's play, demonstrating how, when looked at from a better-informed perspective, it appears very objectionable indeed.

I. Genre as Labeling

At first, my call to historicize genre theory might seem ridiculously belated. Critics such as Ralph Cohen, Alistair Fowler, and Tzvetan Todorov have, in slightly differing ways, argued that their classifications are empirical, not logical. "[Genres] are historical assumptions constructed by authors, audiences, and critics in order to serve communicative and aesthetic purposes" (Cohen, 210). "When we assign a work to a generic type, we do not suppose that all its characteristic traits need be shared by every other embodiment of that type. . . a literary genre changes with time, so that its boundaries cannot be defined by any single set of characteristics" (Fowler, 38). "[It would] provide a convenient and operative notion if we agreed to call 'genres' only those classes of texts that have been perceived as such in the course of history. . .genre is not in itself a purely discursive or a purely historical fact" (Todorov,162-5). These statements are united by each critic's willingness to view genre as a process susceptible to historical mutation,

and this adjustment allows each to contribute some original ideas. Fowler, by recognizing the potential for wide generic variation, provocatively asserts that the operation of genre is largely unconscious, thus urging critics to seek “unexhibited, unobvious, underlying connections between the features (and the works) of a genre” (43). Todorov invites us to consider the processes by which a speech act becomes a genre, emphasizing that “there is no abyss between literature and that which is not literature” (169). Finally, and most interestingly, Cohen tentatively suggests a connection between genre and ideology: “generic considerations do indeed suggest that they can shape how a critic looks at social life rather than merely reflect it” (216).

These are provocative and compelling notions, but unfortunately despite their efforts to historicize genre, these critics persist in conceptualizing genre as an organizational schema that posits an inherent trait (or series of traits) within texts as its basis. Fowler’s unconscious connections still rely on essential textual features, Todorov’s merging of the literary and non-literary still insists upon identifiable and immutable discursive properties, and Cohen’s focus on generic process involves noting how genres change as textual features are added and subtracted. In each case, the claim for a historical view of genre gets undermined by an essentialist definition of genre itself. In contrast, I want to claim that to truly historicize genre theory, one needs to abandon the notion of inherent textual traits altogether.

One of the sharpest critiques of genre theory is Derrida's "The Law of Genre," a frequently cited essay that is usually glossed as a complaint that texts participate in genres without ever belonging to them. What gets lost in these summations, however, is the fact that Derrida's critique is aimed at disconnecting the generic function from generic features. He begins with a pair of unmoored sentences: “genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres,” and continues by

launching into a lengthy analysis of their generic instability (202). In so doing, he means not only to emphasize the indeterminancy of discourse outside generic classification, but also to suggest that, to be stable, texts must additionally announce the genre that should guide the reader's interpretation. "Can one identify a work of art, of whatever sort, but especially a work of discursive art, if it does not bear the mark of genre, if it does not *signal* or *mention* or *make it remarkable* in any way?" (211, italics mine). Like Hirsch, Derrida sees genres as decoding machines, and because different decoders will produce radically different meanings of the same brute information, a text must somehow additionally communicate what cryptographers call the outer message, the instructions designating the proper decoding mechanism. But this fact implies a familiar paradox: the outer message cannot be part of the text, for then it could not be understood until it was already grasped; one would need a decoding machine to understand which decoding machine to use. Thus the outer message, the mark of genre, must be somehow separate from the text, and the problem is that the text itself can never signal that demarcation. The dividing line must always be imposed upon the text by the interpreter, and there can be no guarantee that the line has been correctly drawn. Anything that might be considered a trait of a particular genre must thus be positioned at the boundary of text and interpretation. For example, if one wants to call *Rome Excis'd* a heroic tragedy, one would point to features in the text that occur in other heroic tragedies, such as the blank verse opening lines. Once the blank verse is designated a mark of genre, however, its meaning, beyond the announcement of the play as heroic tragedy, becomes more limited (one would be less likely to consider it a symptom of the character's pretentiousness, for example). To call a trait generic (or conventional) is thus to take it outside the interpretable text.

I believe this is what Derrida refers to when he talks about "belongingness without belonging" (205). It is not that a text at once belongs and does not belong to a genre, as is sometimes claimed, it is that any trait or characteristic of a genre must be part of the text but also removed from it. This is why the efforts of Cohen, Todorov, and Fowler to reconsider genres as simple pragmatic conveniences do not solve all the difficulties. Although one can certainly define a literary trait and use it to assemble a group of texts, if the classification is to have any meaning, if it is to be convenient *for anything*, it must have interpretative effects beyond its function as a way to divide texts. One must be able to claim that the presence of trait 'x' implies that this work be read in a particular way, but in doing so the trait itself becomes separated from the work that's interpreted. Whether the trait is considered essential or contingent is inconsequential; it is still a part of the text that has arbitrarily been detached from interpretative examination.

For Derrida, this paradox seems to be the end of the story; because no consistent logical basis for ascertaining genre exists, literary essence gets redefined once again as irreducibility. There is, however, another way of looking at the issue. Despite this inconsistency, generic designations are made all the time; what needs to be recognized is that the arbitrator of generic designations is not any inherent marker in the text itself, but instead a determination by the reader as to the appropriate purpose the discourse should serve. The generic conflict is thus non-discursive, it occurs instead at the level of the potential consequences of generic determinations. The designations are not logical but political acts. A genre is not a literary mechanism that explains the meaning of texts, but instead a community's consensus regarding how certain texts are to be used. The question becomes, therefore, not one of analyzing a text in order to fix it within a genre, but of analyzing the extra-literary conditions that make readers so fix it.

Genres, in this view, are not inductively derived abstractions but are instead merely terms which endow texts with certain forms of institutional power by encouraging or confining interpretative practices. The term “tragedy” thus simply refers to all the works that a particular community has agreed to call tragedies. Any such consensus, however, invites continual challenge. A critic could nominate any older work to be newly considered a tragedy, and an author can label a new play a tragedy, regardless of the formal features of the text itself. If tragedy is nothing but a name for a collection of texts, then the characteristics of tragedy are open to infinite revision, because all that is necessary to alter the form is to convince enough people that certain texts should or should not be called tragedies. Furthermore, because certain genre names carry more cultural authority than others, the act of generic nomination can have far reaching political consequences. *The London Merchant*, for example, is significant not only because it staunchly defended the middle class, but also because it successfully endowed the middle class with tragic status; the change was not simply one of literary classification, but additionally a change in the way the social world was perceived.

To put this another way, the idea of generic competence gets the process backwards. Understanding texts, it is argued, requires developing the skills to interpret textual features correctly; one learns about sonnets by reading lots of fourteen line iambic pentameter lyrics. But Derrida's critique makes it evident that the shared features of a genre cannot specify textual meaning. One could read thousands of sonnets and still fail to grasp their import. In order to understand them, one needs instead to learn the sonnet tradition, the ways fourteen-line poems have been interpreted over time, the reasons authors wrote them, and the wealth of cultural connotations associated with the term "sonnet" itself, all of which I propose to call the sonnet's

"generic work." The key point is that the connection between the generic work and textual traits is arbitrary, established not by logic but by consensus. If William Carlos Williams, for example, had labeled his poem "The Lonely Street" a sonnet, its lines would not suddenly begin to rhyme, but the interpretative effects would nevertheless be enormous. Because sonnets are generally considered love lyrics, our focus would shift from the school girls to the voice that described them. What would be altered, in fact, is the poem's "radical of presentation" (the textual feature, incidentally that Northrop Frye considers a genre's essential defining characteristic). We would focus not on visualizing the poem's images, but instead on "the poet presenting the image in relation to himself" (Frye, 249).[1] We would see a man watching the girls progress up the street, noticing that his gaze moves from their frocks to their stockings to their lips. The phrase, "they have grown tall" would now become a marker of the speaker's history: he has been watching them all year. It would be difficult to remain unmoved as he describes them eating cotton candy, "touching their avid mouths/with pink sugar on a stick," and though we might debate whether the poem was sad and pathetic or just plain creepy, we would agree that Williams had perfectly wedded his form to his content and managed to make a profound claim about art's relation to life. This loneliness, he would be claiming, is what love looks like in capitalist America, and therefore this jerky, unrhymed, irrhythmic jumble of emptiness is the only kind of sonnet we deserve.

No one has ever read the poem this way, because of course Williams did not call it a sonnet. However, in order to perceive the immense flexibility of generic categories, and to understand better the mechanisms by which it changes, it is useful to note that viewing "The Lonely Street" as a sonnet does not require the poet's approval. I could nominate it myself. No one has ever noticed or cared that the poem has fourteen lines, but I could cite this indisputable

fact as evidence that he wanted us to read it as a sonnet all along. I could seek out other features in the poem commonly found in sonnets, noting for example that the penultimate line "like a carnation each holds in her hand" is, if not exactly iambic, exactly ten syllables. I could note how treating the lines with the iambic pentameter model in mind sharpens and clarifies their meaning, and I could argue that poem's lines divide neatly into the six/eight pattern of the Petrarchian model. I could then cite the fascinating interpretative effects outlined above, and find further confirmation in the large number of textual details that resonate with that perspective, such as the heat, the potential connotations of the words "sidelong," "mount," and "black sash," and the progressive accumulation of dashes that climaxes before the fatigued final line. To be sure, I would be rather astounded if this act of nomination were to succeed, particularly without some form of confirmation from Williams's biography. Williams, the great poet, is a voice that can be trusted; his literary word carries tremendous institutional authority, whereas mine wields precious little. But that fact itself demonstrates that the question whether "The Lonely Street" can become a member of the sonnet family is resolved not textually, but politically. Additionally, the example highlights that the generic work done by a form can undergo potentially limitless alteration. If a number of writers began producing such jerky lonely sonnets, enough of them so that that type of sonnet became commonplace, the associations we had with them would influence (or, depending on your perspective, corrupt) our readings of Elizabethan poems. Two consequences in this alteration of the term's generic work are worth noting. First, a proper understanding of older sonnets would require performing an act of historical recovery, determining what significance the genre name carried at the time of the poem's creation. Second, because there would no longer be a label designating the cultural work the term sonnets had previously performed, authors who

wished to create works that functioned the old fashioned way would face a much more difficult challenge.

This latter point helps to explain why disagreements over genre are so frequently contentious and emotional. Genres provide frames for cultural meaning; they map out a system that determines the authority of different types of expression. Debates over genre can thus be seen as ideological disputes disguised as formal ones. Generic rules and features do not simply describe a literary form, they also serve to police the boundaries of genres in order to maintain their cultural function. Such rules are particularly useful, moreover, because they are considered ahistorical truths; by invoking them a critic can enter into an essentially ideological debate without acknowledging his or her own political motivations. When John Dennis, for example, castigated Steele for confusing "Comedy with that Species of Tragedy which has a happy Catastrophe" (249), at stake was the fact that *The Conscious Lovers* threatened to transform a genre that Dennis desperately wanted to preserve. If plays like Steele's, plays in which the lovers' conflict is resolved by gradually acknowledging parental authority rather than undermining it, could be considered comedies, then plays that ridiculed abusive parents could vanish, lacking a generic space in which to retreat. Reconceiving *The Conscious Lovers* as tragedy, however, left a generic void that Dennis, more and more iconoclastically, wanted to fill with plays depicting the overthrowing of an absurdly tyrannical authority.

Dennis considered happy tragedy inferior to both proper tragedy and comedy, and by relegating *The Conscious Lovers* to this mode he hoped to limit the cultural effects that the popularity of Steele's play may have initiated. Genres considered inferior continue to be used to restrict the efficacy of potentially volatile meanings. When Fredric Jameson claims, for example,

that "any authentic artistic expression" must struggle against the "subliterary genres of mass culture. . .the drugstore and airport paperback lines of gothics, mysteries, romances, bestsellers, and popular biographies," he drains these works of cultural power, discouraging any reading of them that finds significance beyond their formal patterns (107). As John Huntington puts it: "material that has received the label popular literature. . .is studied for its formulas, its mythic structures, the way it broadly reflects culture. . .and behind these attitudes lies the general presumption that the experience of such literature is one of broad recognitions. . .that it never "says" anything, that it simply manipulates generic conventions" (35). High genres are allowed to speak universal truths; low genres silently replay formal patterns. Thus, there exists a continual struggle to preserve traditional genres (the conservative drama teacher who insists that *Death of a Salesman* is not a tragedy), to elevate disrespected genres (the coining of the term "graphic novel"), and to rename and make manageable disruptive texts, by creating either a docile subclass ("sentimental comedy") or a tamed fringe (the "Theatre of the Absurd").

II. Ballad Opera as a Genre

Genre is thus a kind of cultural gerrymandering, and we should expect that periods of great generic self-consciousness would also be experiencing significant ideological changes. In fact, the creation of a new genre might sometimes be more significant as a sign of a burgeoning cultural upheaval than as a literary transformation. The most important function of a genre name is not to signal formal characteristics, but to lend legitimacy to a set of social and political meanings that are not getting a hearing in more established modes. Generic conservatism implies political conservatism; works uncontroversially assigned to genres at the top of the hierarchy never challenge cultural standards. Critics content with the status quo, we have seen, can

frequently defuse the significance of works that depart from the ethos of traditional norms by authoritatively placing them in fringe or sub-genres, but when great experimentation becomes commonplace, when there is pervasive recognition that the most elevated genres are being neglected, when cultural authorities show no consensus in their generic pronouncements, then it makes no sense to discuss cultural norms at all; all social and political institutions must be the subject of intense scrutiny. And when a shocking and controversial new play can provoke the creation of a genre that in just a few years attained a status equal to tragedy and comedy, support for the meanings that genre articulates must have been widespread.

Proving that ballad opera acquired such prominence and beginning to articulate its cultural function are among the primary purposes of this entire work, but it is worth noting at the outset that there is general critical agreement that genre was a very contentious issue in the decades surrounding the opening of *The Beggar's Opera*. F. M. Kavenik argues that in these years "the very form of drama was subject to experimentation" (115); Albert Rivero tells us that "playwrights in the 1720s and 1730s were keenly aware that the traditional plots and techniques of regular comedy and heroic tragedy had run their course" (2-3); Allardyce Nicoll maintains that the period lacked "a dominant purpose and faith in any form of drama" (219); Laura Brown argues that the major forms of the period were only "coterie" productions that addressed the interests of a restricted and only "precariously reinstated social class"(290); and Brean Hammond contends that Fielding wrote his plays during a period in which "it appeared impossible to write in established dramatic genres" (80). Less frequently noticed is the paradoxical fact that literati on both sides of the political spectrum not only railed against the influx of pantomimes, masquerades, and Italian operas that were filling the void, but protested with equal vigor against the lack of

generic consistency in newly written tragedies and comedies. Although the traditional genres were no longer speaking to the needs of the general populace, the natural move of a playwright to experiment and mix the elements of these genres was also seen as perverse. The result was a decidedly moribund theatrical scene, rarely mounting plays less than thirty years old, and able to gain an audience for only one or two performances in a row (Hume, *Fielding*, 14-20). It is not insignificant that one of the most popular dramatic works, from its opening in 1715 and throughout the early 1720s, was *The What D'Ye Call It*, John Gay's first experiment in generic miscegenation. This play, a self-proclaimed "New Kind of Dramatick Entertainment," was dubbed a "Tragi-Comi-Pastoral Farce" and aimed to interweave "the several Kinds of the Drama with each other," in such a way that, unlike in Tragi-comedies, the distinct contributions of each form could not be "distinguish'd or separated" (Gay, 174). Although this conflation of forms attracted audiences, the play itself demonstrates the necessity of a secure genre to guide interpretation. Moving nonsensically from one dramatic convention to another, the characters never assume any stable identity, making it impossible for the audiences to confidently judge their behavior. In her discussion of the play, Lisa Freeman notes that this so disturbed Lewis Theobald and Benjamin Griffin that they published a tract demanding that Gay clarify his motives, and she convincingly argues that the play sought to show "just how deeply characters are motivated and shaped by the generic narratives in which they are found" (43). When a character's actions and essence come into conflict, genre serves as the final arbiter, allowing the viewer a means to prioritize and resolve such frictions. Gay's confounding of genres thus seems meant to ridicule, not promote, generic miscegenation, thus highlighting the conflicting demands for novelty and generic authority. The age seemed to be seeking a form of theatre that both addressed the

interests of the audiences newly drawn in to the theatre by pantomime and also carried the cultural weight of classical forms.

The Beggar's Opera proved a resolution to that quest, inaugurating a new beginning for the theatres. Its effect on the London theatre scene is well documented and undisputed, but the description of these effects tends to misrepresent the importance of ballad opera as a genre. Yes, the decade following the play's opening saw the proportion of new plays in company repertoires increased from about 3% to over 20%, but the vast majority of these were ballad operas. Drury Lane produced only one new play in the prior season (Hume, *Fielding*, 15), but from 1729 to 1731 an average of eleven ballad operas were produced per year, and from 1732 to 1733 an astonishing twenty-three reached the stage, more than plays in every other genre combined. Yes, the number of performances of new plays received grew considerably, but this is almost entirely attributable to ballad operas. *The London Merchant*, the only new tragedy given over 50 performances, had 98 showings by 1747, and *The Provoked Husband*, the most performed comedy, received 216. Compare that with the numbers for these ballad operas: *The Devil to Pay*: 525, *The Beggar's Opera*: 491, *The Mock Doctor*: 316, *An Old Man Taught Wisdom*: 261, *Flora*: 247, *The Lottery*: 138, *The Beggar's Wedding*: 130, *The Honest Yorkshireman*: 116 (Kavenick, 119-20). Yes, new venues for theatre were established or reinvigorated (Goodman's Fields opened in 1729, Covent Garden in 1732, and the Little Theatre in the Haymarket changed from producing mostly foreign entertainments in 1728 to primarily mounting new works), but ballad operas were claiming performances in much more intimate locales, such as "a Private Company near St. James" (*Vanelia*, tp), "a Polite Company of Courtiers" (*Rome*, tp), the great room on "Viller's Street. . .by a Company of [the author's] own choosing"(*Humours*, 5-6), and

even “the secret Apartments of Vintners and Tobacconists” (Smoke, tp). No one denies that far more fledgling playwrights emerged in these years than ever before, but almost all of them began by writing ballad operas, including George Lillo, Charles Coffey, John Hippisley, Thomas Walker, Robert Drury, Robert Dodsley, and James Ralph, not to mention the numerous anonymous authors of ballad operas. Finally, a surprisingly large number of the plays written in those years make a sharp turn away from moralizing idealism toward social and political satire, but ballad operas were the most overt, and the most frequently censored. Additionally, the form was not only a focus of the licensing debates, but also the most effected by the ban: only one ballad opera was allowed production in London following the passage of the Licensing Act.

These facts belie the notion that ballad opera was a passing fad to be lumped with pantomimes, burlesques and “rehearsals” under such a heading as miscellaneous minor forms. It was, in fact, the major genre of the decade, and playwrights, critics, and audiences recognized it as a form independent from *The Beggar’s Opera*. To be sure, the earliest ballad operas were very direct imitations of Gay’s play, and often signaled their indebtedness with phrases such as “after the manner of the Beggar’s Opera,” but this practice waned in 1729 and was almost completely discontinued by 1730. Furthermore, discussions of the form by both critics and playwrights display a remarkable consistency regarding the genre’s purposes and effects. Finally, once those effects have been properly understood, the plays themselves begin to look very compatible. The tremendous diversity of ballad opera is an illusion; though there are ballad operas taken from historical subjects or classical myths, set in shipyards or cities or prisons or pastures or playhouses, centered on lovers or beggars or madmen or merchants or thieves, these differences disguise the unity of the cultural message they transmit, the generic function that accounts for

both its tremendous popularity and threat it posed to the conservative establishment.

III. The Name of the Form: Title-Page Designations

Appendix 1 presents a list of ballad operas published from 1728-39, including the year of publication and the generic label given to each. What is immediately recognizable is that the most common name for the form, used almost universally in the first three years, was not "ballad opera", but instead simply "opera." *The Beggar's Opera* did far more than merely burlesque Italian operas, it virtually replaced them. The term "opera," in public consciousness, switched from designating a highly rule-bound form, designed to encourage virtue and patronized primarily by the upper classes, to a deliberately amoral, rule-flouting genre that filled the seats not only with those who regularly attended theatre, but also those who had gone only occasionally or never at all. To be sure, the distinction between ballad opera and Italian opera was not obliterated, but it was the foreign operas that became the marginalized sub-genre, not the other way around. The author of "On Operas, and the Force of Music" recognizes that he must clarify his intentions, and thus petulantly declares "I am not speaking of such scandalous rubbish as has followed the *Beggar's Opera*, the Success of which Opera is no Honour to the Nation, but of a grander Sort of Operas," indicating his preferences but also his recognition that his pet form was losing its generic identity (*British Journal*, January 9, 1731). Similarly, an article in the *Craftman* distinguishes the two modes in this way:

> We hear that the *British Opera*, commonly called the *Beggar's Opera*, continues to be performed at the Theatre in Lincoln's-Inn Fields with general applause, to the great mortification of the Performers and Admirers of the *Outlandish Opera* in the Haymarket. (February 17, 1728)

Nor was this derogatory reference to Italian opera limited to that journal, as Gay himself makes clear in two letters to Swift. In the first, he says that "the outlandish, as they now call it, opera" had become so uncommon that he worried there would be "remonstrances drawn up against me by the Royal Academy of Music," and only a month later declared that the Academy had begun to "solicit against [the *Beggar's Opera*] being performed on outlandish opera days, as it is now called" (Burgess, 70-1). Furthermore, in *The Touchstone*, a lengthy analysis of all sorts of entertainments, James Ralph expresses concern over the fact that ballad opera was becoming not an alternative, but a substitute for the Italian form (32), and the letters of Mrs. Delany repeatedly lament the decline of the "more studied" opera at the hands of the ballad singers (Schultz, 149). Moreover, there exist numerous poems about Polly Peachum and her relationship to the rivalry between the divas Cuzzoni and Faustina. In all of these, Polly does not simply mock the two opera singers, she quite literally ousts them, forcing these two notoriously bitter adversaries to unite against their common enemy. Finally, numerous "Just Published" lists of the period divided plays into three categories, tragedy, comedy and opera, and in all of them that I have consulted the term opera refers to ballad operas. When the rival form is mentioned at all, it is called "opera after the Italian manner" (Lillo, *Sylvia*, 79). Gay's intention may have been merely to ridicule the Italian opera, but his play managed to replace, in popular perception, the conventions and cultural meanings of a major generic label.

Beyond diminishing the cultural importance of Italian opera, ballad opera's appropriation of the generic term "opera" led to a new way of thinking about the categorization of theatre in general. Previously, discussions of drama had divided the form into only two categories, tragedy and comedy. Foreign modes, such as Italian opera and pantomime, drew audiences from proper

drama but were considered in a separate class, and other forms, like burlesques and rehearsals, got subsumed under comedy. During the 1730s, however, discussions of dramatic form begin, like the "Just Published" lists, to distinguish three major genres. *The Welsh Opera, The Footmen, The Progress of a Harlot,* and many other plays discuss tragedy, comedy, and opera as if they were equally important dramatic genres. *The Decoy* (1733) opens with Tragedy and Comedy debating who is the most important form. Comedy tells Tragedy to withdraw, but his victory is short-lived, for Opera immediately enters and dismisses Comedy with a slap on the shoulder. And Fielding's comedy *The Modern Husband* (1732), contains a lengthy discussion of theatre in which the fashionable Gaywit opines: "I don't think it would be an ill Project, my Lord, to turn the best of our Tragedies and Comedies into Operas" (Fielding, 86), an enterprise opposed only by the upright Mr. Bellamont. Later in the discussion, Lady Charlotte mocks a certain Lady Prue: "I saw the ridiculous creature cry at a tragedy. . . .I would as soon laugh at a comedy, or fall asleep at an opera" (87). Although here Fielding (whose relationship with ballad opera is particularly complex) seems to be ridiculing the taste for the new opera, he nevertheless has portrayed a society that sees ballad opera as not only an equal rival to the traditional modes, but one that was also considerably more interesting.

Before turning to the cultural meaning this new opera was meant to serve, a couple of additional points regarding Appendix 1 are worth making. First, until 1732, the phrase "ballad opera" is used only to denote afterpieces shortened from full length operas (e.g. *Damon and Phillida* from *Love in a Riddle, The Chambermaid* from *The Village Opera,* and *Pattie and Peggy* from *The Gentle Shepard*). The first full length play designated "ballad opera," the anonymously written *The Wanton Jesuit* (incorrectly dated 1731 on the title page and only

announced and performed in 1732), was overtly political and highly bawdy; with only one exception, all the full-length "ballad operas" were similarly topical and usually anonymous. The half dozen plays with ludicrous designations (i.e. "histori-tragi-comi-ballad opera" and the like) refer back to Gay's *What D'Ye Call It* and merely foreground the generic miscegenation found in all ballad operas; they do not seem to form a unique category. Finally, of the twelve plays called farces, comedies, or pastorals, six were by Fielding, who stopped using the term "opera" beginning with his installment at Drury Lane. Four of the others were also Drury Lane productions, suggesting that the conservative theatre shunned the term. *Love in a Riddle*, the lone "pastoral," was Colley Cibber's deliberate attempt to alter the meaning of the form and is discussed below. *The Intriguing Courtiers* is a five act comedy including only a brief interlude in ballad opera form. Thus, these exceptions do not undermine the consistency of the genre name given to plays based on *The Beggar's Opera*: "opera" was the standard, with "ballad opera" indicating either shortened operas or overtly political and topical works.

IV. The Aim of the Form: Discussions by Critics and Playwrights

If there was a cultural agreement regarding the labeling of these plays, there is an even greater harmony in discussions of the form by both its critics and practitioners. By examining the general pronouncements made about the form in the periodicals, coupled with the numerous meta-theatrical commentaries in the plays themselves, we can begin to get a better sense of the expectations audiences brought to a new opera. Unlike critiques of comedies and tragedies, which often dissected works in great detail, focusing on individual characters and speeches and how well they conformed to classical rules, the pronouncements on ballad opera rarely singled out individual plays for censure. To critique particular plays would require engaging in textual

specifics, opening up a debate (like the on-going one over *The Beggar's Opera*) over the works' social contents. Instead, critics sought to deprive the plays of individualized meanings by taking the rhetorical stance that works of the genre were self-evidently beneath contempt. Their pronouncements used a remarkably invariable list of charges designed to focus attention away from textual details. First, they claimed that ballad operas were simply poorly recycled versions of earlier texts. Secondly, they attacked the generic mingling in the works, arguing that such patched together monstrosities were by their very nature incoherent. By far the most common method, however, was to simply assume that everyone could recognize the plays' obvious turpitude. Ballad operas were said to create a public appetite for debauchery, and the harshest words were reserved for the theatre managers who authorized such atrocities. Interestingly, the prologues and prefaces of ballad operas not only do not dispute many of these charges, they actively celebrate them, slyly implying that the critics had simply missed the point.

I have already mentioned that Fielding has Gaywit proclaim his support for turning all tragedies and comedies into operas, but the notion that ballad operas were simply refurbishing older, better, works was commonplace. Thus Henry Carey, in his bitter verse on theatre managers, complained that "these handy hirelings can, in half a day,/ Steal a new Ballad Farce from some old play"(*Tyrants,*105), indicating his disgust with the writer's unoriginality and laziness. This view of the form persists to the present day, and indeed a large number of ballad operas borrowed plots and characters from existing works. Curiously, however, the introductions to ballad operas continually stress their novelty, even in those cases where the original source is admitted or apparent. Theophilus Cibber, reworking Allan Ramsey's *Gentle Shepard*, maintains he is bringing out something entirely new (*Patie*, 3), *The Jew D'coyed, or The Progress of a*

Harlot, based on Hogarth's prints, asserts its utter freshness (5), the author of *Momus and Fabulist,* after admitting a French source, has his Player character exclaim "I never receive a greater pleasure than when I am exhibiting something New" (A4), and the prologue to *Timon in Love,* also taken from an existent play, promises a "plentious Feast" for those who delight in "Change of Diet" (Kelly, A3). Newness, it seems, referred not to plots, but rather to treatment, and in fact the ballad opera versions of older works make significant departures from their sources and often end up looking more similar to each other than to the originals from which they sprang. *Patie and Peggy* and *The Quaker's Opera* (see Chapter 2), for example, transform their vastly different sources (*The Gentle Shepard* and *The Prison-breaker*) into compatible satires of pastoral idealism, and Robert Drury transformed Shirley's *Sisters* into *The Fancy'd Queen*, an insane intrigue foregrounding the arbitrariness of class status. Gaywit, after all, declared the transformation of canonized texts into operas a "Project," and it might not be entirely implausible to believe that authors turned to older sources not simply out of expediency, but as deliberate acts of reinterpretation (see, for example, the discussion of *The Stage-Couch Opera* in Chapter 2). In any case, the presence of so many classics reinvented by the techniques implied by *The Beggar's Opera* forced audiences to question and evaluate tradition, making the label "new" fully justifiable.

Regardless of how extensive the borrowing, ballad operas were unique because the perception of the genre was that it had no fixed rules, that it freely commingled standard forms. For the critics, this extreme generic miscegenation implied nonsense; it became commonplace to assert that the most favored new opera would be one that "had not one syllable of Sense in it from the first Page to the last" (Fielding, *Husband,* 88). And writers of ballad operas seemed to relish

announcing their own incoherence. “I’m the fashion, though I’ve little meaning” proclaims the character Opera in *The Decoy*, and numerous plays foreground themselves as “hodge-podge sport” (T. Aston,13) or “motley drama” (Potter, 8), freely admitting to be “Tragi-Comedy in one” (Potter, 4), and declaring themselves free from the strictures of dramatic codes:

> Sir, rules are out of fashion, method is a jest, and order in this age is taken for want of spirit; the stage is quite altered, ballad operas are an invention of our own times, and as they are compounded of comedy and farce, I have to solve [the problem of dramatic unities] made free with the chorus of ancient tragedy. (*Jew Decoy’d*, 7)

As in *The What d’Ye Call It*, there is a deliberate flouting of theatrical convention in order to create a new kind of dramatic meaning. If the critics contended that ballad operas were simply bad plays because their authors had no conception of the rules designed to guide a dramatic poet, the playwrights responded by openly declaring their awareness of and disdain for those rules. Rules are so yesterday: “What diff’rent Customs diff’rent Ages bring. . . our Author quite forsakes/ the rigid Percept” opines the Prologue “by a Friend” to *The Female Rake*, and in addition the author’s own prologue declares that critics, “such *Insignificants*, such *harmless* Things,/ May *hiss*, ‘tis true, but they have lost their Stings” (A1-2). Again and again ballad operas contend that generic miscegenation is part of their very purpose, and the playwrights frequently demonstrate superb control of the effects produced through mixing modes of representation. *The Jew Decoy’d*, for example, brutally re-envisions carpe diem lyrics by having a hoary harlot sing Herrick’s “Gather ye rosebuds,” and in *The Patron* Thomas Odell artfully balances tragic and comic expectations to advance the idea that marriage itself was absurdly out-dated. The notion that dramatic standards limited truth was implicit in ballad opera; meta-

theatricality was an important technique for voicing its societal critique. The rules and laws of genres, ballad opera implies, are not poetic necessities, but unspoken rules instituted to encourage or confine interpretative practices, to stabilize cultural discourse, or, as Gay put it, laws made "to curb vice in others, as well as me" (*Beggar*, 106). But Gay goes on to observe that "gold from law[s] can take out the sting," and writers of ballad operas, secure with the form's popularity, could gleefully promulgate a suspicion of other cultural norms:

> Since honesty now and compassion
> Are laugh'd at amongst the polite,
> Why should I maintain an old fashion,
> Or set myself up for a fight? (*Jew Decoy'd*, 53).

For the writers of ballad operas, the flouting of generic norms was not only not perverse, it mirrored the forms more generalized flouting of social conventions.

Because these willful violations of theatrical decorum went hand in hand with a more generalized critique of propriety, the public's appetite for the form was seen as a major social problem. Although the divisive political responses to *The Beggar's Opera* have been thoroughly investigated, the play's effects on public taste and morality were also frequently decried, and these objections did not divide themselves on partisan lines. Anti-Walpole publications shared with their rivals the concern that "Mr. *Gay's* turning *Highwaymen*, *Pickpockets*, and *Whores* into *Heroes* and *Heroines*" (*Daily Gazetteer*, May 7, 1737) was causing the stage to be littered with nothing but "arrant Bawds, Pimps, Whores, Rogues, Rakes and Cullies" (*Grub-Street Journal*, June 15, 1737). On both sides of the political spectrum, there was a growing awareness that ballad operas were a corrupting influence regardless of the plays' individual views of the

administration. As if to emphasize the non-partisan nature of their complaints, these critics often excused *The Beggar's Opera* while damning the form it inspired.

> A standard version of the indictment can be found in Cooke's remarks in *The Comedian*: The *Beggar's Opera* [is] a truly reasonable entertaining Piece, and a just and good Satire on a prevailing ridiculous Taste; yet it has given Birth to Rubbish more absurd than the Operas on which it is a Satire. . . we have many Instances of pleasing Tunes supporting what are called Ballad-operas, which have no Degree of Merit in the words which are sayed or sung. I am not blaming the Managers of the Theatres; whose great Expence makes it necessary for them to consult their Interest; and if they can reap an advantage from a Depravity in the Taste of the Public they must. (October, 1732)

Beyond condemning of the form, this passage also makes evident the very popularity of ballad opera, and the vehemence of this diatribe demonstrates the extent to which it was considered a public problem. Rhetorically, the passage works hard to curtail discussion of the merit of specific performances. The *Beggar's Opera* is excused because, as it was already the center of considerable controversy, it could hardly be said to be self-evidently corrupt, unlike its clearly debased imitators. Furthermore, although Cooke ostentatiously absolves the managers from censure, he slyly implies that they are well aware of the vileness of the works in question. Any readers who might want to defend the form are thereby disarmed; they are simply weak-willed dupes to greedy and manipulative producers. Cooke therefore attempts to train the public to become less susceptible by describing and promoting eloquence, in an effort, he says, to improve Public Taste, making clear along the way that he finds disaster in the current taste for theatre in general, and scandal in the taste for ballad opera in particular.

Such comments might not seem surprising given Cooke's sympathies for Walpole, but as Loftis notes he says nothing about political satire, and "throughout the essay he passes no judgement that can be attributed with confidence to political bias" (110). An article in *The Grub Street Journal*, a periodical that often defended John Rich, makes almost identical claims. Bitterly lamenting the rise of public stupidity, the author has even harsher words for the managers who encourage it:

> But then how much more are the better sort of people to be condemn'd, who encourage this practice! And it cannot but raise one's indignation, to see the two houses contending before such an audience. . .and representing such things which they cannot but despise any audience for approving. (July 20, 1732)

These are strong words from a journal generally favorable to Gay, but in fact a great many of the broad critics of general taste aimed their attacks directly at the public's appetite for ballad opera, and like Cooke they are careful to state their objections as non-partisan concerns. In a letter to *The Universal Spectator*, an author calling himself Crito calls the decay of public taste a harbinger of the degeneration of the British Empire, and thus "a Case of Real Importance to the Publick." Explicitly claiming to "waive any Observations that may wear the Look of Politicks," Crito paints theatre audiences as incapable of rational thought:

> The *Beggar's Opera*, and the loud Applause it receiv'd, is yet a nearer and stronger Instance, what Opinion must a Foreigner entertain of a Nation, who mistake keeping a String of Strumpets for Gallantry, and divert themselves with beholding the Debauches of a publick Robber? I say not this with any Design of reflecting on Mr. Gay; I am sensible he intended that Piece, as a Reproof for certain Follies into which the Age had given

> before: But his Audience, like Children reading *Esop's Fables*, take themselves up entirely with the *Story*, not so much as letting it enter their Heads, that there is a *Moral*. (April 10, 1731)

Although precisely how Crito believes this reproof functions and the exact nature of the moral he alludes to are somewhat difficult to ascertain, when he goes on to accuse "Dancing-Masters" of returning the nation to the primitive past, of not exposing folly but instead acting it, it is quite plain that he believes that ballad opera lacks even a satiric purpose. Like Cooke and the anonymous contributor to *The Grub-Street Journal*, Crito declares the form morally bankrupt, and considers its producers to be shamefully indulging an increasingly under-sophisticated public.

Comments in the plays themselves, however, clearly indicate that audiences expected ballad operas to be highly satirical, and sometimes even suggest that the satire was over-interpreted. This is particularly true of audiences' tendency to "dissect" plays, that is, to identify each character with a specific political figure. The numerous allegorical interpretations of *The Beggar's Opera* are well known, but similar pamphlets were published about other operas, such as "The Perspective, or *Calista* Dissected," and "*Achilles* Dissected." Although the former pamphlet presents a plausible interpretation, and seems designed to generate interest in a censored play, the latter seems somewhat far fetched. In any case, ballad operas frequently assert that though their intentions are satirical, the satire is aimed at vice in general and not at specific persons. Amusingly, the denials are most vehement in the plays, such as *Vanelia* and *The Humours of the Court*, in which the political references are least disguised.

Nor is it surprising that audiences sought out such allegorical interpretations, for ballad opera was often used to ridicule topical scandals and protest government policy. Three ballad

operas (*Vanelia, The Intriguing Courtiers,* and *The Humours of the Court*) savagely mock the philandering of the Prince of Wales, and many others (including *The Honest Electors, Rome Excis'd, The Commodity Excised*, and *The Sturdy Beggars*) attack the excise tax. Finally, a glance at nothing more than the titles of many ballad operas indicates how freely the form attacked Walpole: *Lord Blunder's Confession, or Guilt Makes a Coward; The Downfall of Bribery, or the Honest Men of Taunton*; *A King and No King, or The Polish Squabble*; *The Court Legacy*; *The Court Medley*; *The State Juggler, or Sir Political Ribband*; and *The Fox Uncas'd, or Robin's Art of Money Catching*.

However, many of the operas that critique Walpole contain equally damning portraits of Bolingbroke and the opposition, and this is why the critique of ballad opera's depravity ran across partisan lines. This impartiality is what has led critics to declare the form without purpose, but the authors insisted that their sweeping satire served a deeper objective, namely to challenge all forms of moral posturing. Thus in *Highland Fair*, written by "Sir Robert Walpole's Poet," Joseph Mitchell (Gagey, 202), the author, when asked "How do you hope to benefit Mankind by the Drama?" responds "as other Writers of Operas do by theirs" (4). To this, the critic replies in the manner of Crito and Cooke:

> There it is! What moral Precept, what noble Plot was ever pursued, or so much as intended, in such trivial Compositions? Sound has always prevail'd over Sense, and Plot and Moral been less regarded than pompous Show and impertinent Variety! (4)

But Mitchell's fictional author sharply rebukes the commentator, claiming that his "critical Judgment must be more Prejudic'd than Impartial" and proceeds to list all the vices, "sullen Pride, and imaginary State, Romantic Bravery and blind Superstition, starch Gravity and persecuting

Bigotry" that his play, and, by implication, the form in general, seeks to expose (5). The eclectic nature of Mitchell's catalog indicates that he was ridiculing not only specific vices, but also traditional notions of morality itself.

Other writers were equally dismissive of the critics. In *The Jew Decoy'd,* the fictional author responds that though some characters do not belong in comedy, they do "belong to the age," and parodies the commentators by providing a list of these types: "bawds, whores, pimps, bullies, constables, and parsons" (6). Like Swift's "mock catalogues" in *Gulliver's Travels* (Ehrenpreis, 105), the yoking of parsons and pimps turns the critique on its head. Fielding also sharply dismisses the laments of Mrs. Delany and Mrs. Granville about the demise of their prized Italian opera:

> Ladies, I own, I think your Judgments right
> Satire, perhaps, may wound some pretty Thing.
> Those soft Italian warblers have no Sting.
> Tho' your soft Hearts the tuneful Charm may win,
> Your still secure to find no Harm with'n.
> Wisely from these rude Places you abstain
> Where Satire gives the wounded Hearer Pain. (*Chambermaid*, A3r)

For Fielding and other playwrights, the seeming immorality of their plays was not a flaw but a virtue.

V. A New Satire

It would be wrong, therefore, to dismiss the eighteenth-century critics too lightly, for the form of satire in ballad opera was decidedly unique and considerably more disruptive than

anything else that had been seen on the stage. *The Beggar's Opera* was enormously innovative, and the early imitations are best seen as literary experiments, groping to uncover the secrets to Gay's success. The authors of these plays may have been motivated only by hopes of financial gain, but they still needed to pinpoint those elements of Gay's play that had made it successful. The first three imitations, *The Quaker's Opera*, *The Beggar's Wedding*, and *The Cobler's Opera*, attempted to incorporate as many elements as possible, including introductions by a supposed author, low life characters, and a celebration of drinking. Although each of these elements became, in a certain sense, standard in ballad operas, the form did not take shape (it did not acquire a generic name) until the principle behind such elements became clarified. It was not enough, for example, to simply present a fictional author introducing the play and calling for an overture, as in *The Cobler's Opera*; what mattered was that Gay's author-beggar provided a means to expose the arbitrary nature of dramatic conventions, a fact made use of in *The Author's Farce*, *Bays's Opera*, and *The Fashionable Lady*. Similarly, the inclusion of disreputable characters, as in *The Quaker's Opera*, would not ensure success; it was found that what delighted audiences were characters who voluntarily attempted to transcend their class status. Other elements, such as exposing the vileness of professions and critiquing other forms of modern abuse proved popular in such plays as *The Patron* and *Penelope*, and most of these sentiments are articulated by a character in *The Fashionable Lady*, significantly dubbed Mr. Ballad. By following these imitations and developments, one can construct an inventory of elements that tended to appear in plays of the genre, including a meta-theatrical critique of dramatic convention, a willful subversion of traditional class roles, a criticism of governmental or social corruption, a celebration of promiscuity and alcoholic indulgence, a targeting of specific public figures, and a

cynical and unflinchingly realistic portrayal of the ubiquity of greed and deception. But such a list, though not inaccurate, is somewhat misleading: like all catalogs of generic features, it fails to specify the interpretative principle that guided the understanding of the meaning of these details. I believe that principle can be well defined, and there seems no clearer way of doing so than by reexamining *The Beggar's Opera*, the most popular work of the genre, and the play that was viewed repeatedly not only throughout the form's reign, but well beyond the Licensing Act and into the present.

The *Beggar's Opera* opens with a ragged author announcing that he is bringing to the fancy London stage a work that has previously been presented on several occasions by a band of beggars at St. Giles's parish, a notorious eighteenth-century London slum. Thus from the beginning, Gay foregrounds not only the arbitrariness of class distinctions, but also notions of what can properly be considered high art. The power of money as sole determiner of social standing is also brought out by the "beggar" author's presentation of his qualifications: he can at least dine out (at St. Giles) whenever he likes, "which is more than most Poets can say "(1). As the opera unfolds, the stage fills with licentious highwaymen, competing suitors, meddling parents and duplicitous whores who further the plot using both dialogue and songs set to the tunes of the popular street ballads of the period. Gay's use of popular song not only (as frequently noted) allows for intertextual humor with the tunes' original lyrics, but also, particularly in combination with the frame narrative, situates culture as a medium which the characters struggle against in their attempts at self-definition. Coming from a world not quite the character's own, the airs, and the implicit original words, act as limiting impositions on identity, suggesting, in an almost post-modern fashion, the influence of cultural norms on self-construction.[2]

Gay's equating of "fine Gentlemen" with Gentlemen of the Road" may have been what made Brecht assume that the work "showed the close relationship between the life of the bourgeois and that of the criminal world" (Willett, 85), but in Gay's play the thieving Macheath is more of a pawn poised between the two pivotal and powerful figures allied in mutual self-interest. Gay represents the emerging collusion between government and financiers through the jailor Lockit and the market-driven Peachum, who systematically profit off the capture of thieves. Gay's presentation of corruption in a capitalist economy is thorough and unprecedented; Peachum would occasionally turn over highwaymen to Lockit who could then either punish them in a public display of respectability or free them to allow them to continue their services. Likewise, the stolen goods were sometimes restored to enact the benevolence of law enforcement, but they were just as frequently resold and divided between the two conspirators. Able to manipulate (like Walpole) both legal authority and public opinion, Peachum and Lockit exert nearly total control over everyone: "Business cannot go on without [Peachum]," Macheath declares (39). Peachum even sets himself above the laws of fashionable behavior, implying that seemingly beneficial institutions such as marriage are nothing more than methods of social control. "Do you think your mother and I should have liv'd comfortably so long together, if ever we had been married," he asks his naive daughter, when she defends her wedlock through protestations of genuine love (18). Polly, in a sense, has hoist her father with his own petard, for her sentimental and impractical notions are directly attributed to "those cursed Playbooks," a part of the culture manufactured, like notions of "honour," in order to stabilize the power of those in charge.

Although this backdrop of such sweeping corruption might have formed the basis for a reform drama, with the disempowered seeking to expose or overthrow the rulers, Gay chose a

strategy far subtler and ultimately more effective. Instead of critiquing the compromised system from some moral high ground, Gay has all of his characters embrace the system's mechanisms with joyous abandon. All the characters engage in opportunistic exploitation of any means available, turning self-interested betrayal into a kind of universal morality. As Peachum and Lockit barter with the underworld, Mrs. Peachum induces Filch to bring her stolen goods behind her husband's back, while Jenny Driver and Suky Tawdry betray Macheath, Madame Trull, and the other prostitutes with their "private bargain" with Lockit (50). Even the seemingly ingenuous Polly was not above suspicion, for the character soon became the subject of a large and heated public debate not unlike the one that surrounded Richardson's Pamela a few years later. Although some staunchly defended her purity, her detractors (and many of her admirers) accused her of using concepts such as love and virtue for self-interested and manipulative social climbing.

However, *The Beggar's Opera* offers no alternative to all the self-serving maneuvering and ruthless acquisition, but instead presents dishonesty as a sort of delirious celebration, a fact which has led many commentators to agree with Andrew Varney that it is "not readily accommodated within any ideological structure" (85). Nicholson contends that "there is no easy point of rest in Gay's text"(74), while Donaldson finds its mixture of Hobbesian competition and cheerful lightness "ambiguous and puzzling" (149). Even William Empson, whose view of the play as an endorsement of "Egoist ethical theory" is not far from my own, can only suggest its meaning through a series of quotations from other authors (196). Although I agree that Gay avoids any direct declaration of his ideological intentions, it seems clear that willful embracing of immorality serves as a model for subversive behavior in the newly emerging marketplace economy.[3] If virtue and honor are constructions and if money is the sole arbiter of value, then

anyone can access respectability simply through relentless accumulation undaunted by ethical norms. Macheath is a hero because of his completely free and unhypocritical ability to accommodate himself to anyone who proves useful, and audiences identified with him because he demonstrated how one could triumph over the Peachums, Lockits, and Walpoles of their world by using the masters' tools. The play's "maxim" (a term which at the time denoted more axiomatic certainty than moral normativity) is that "the wretch of today may be happy tomorrow," but only if he happily sets aside principles which were, after all, designed only to contain him. The *Beggar's Opera* is in a sense a *reducto ad absudum* of the emerging marketplace mentality, a critique by the presentation of excess, and the euphoria generated by it stems from the fact that at least everyone can be on an equal footing.

This attitude permeates ballad opera, uniting the form underneath all its apparent diversity. The subject matter of the plays was unimportant; because codes of conduct organize the acquisition of power in every realm, writers of ballad operas could remain faithful to the genre not only when their plots focused on beggars, thieves, merchants and aristocrats, but also when exploring pastoral themes, classical subjects, fairy tales, theatre life, or the turbulent ways of mariners. In fact, this idea does more than explain the diversity: it anticipates it. What other literary form encompassed such a wide range of topics in so short a period of development? Imitators tend to be conservative; generic change tends to occur very gradually, witness the relative uniformity of situations in Restoration Comedy. But the cultural message transmitted in *The Beggar's Opera* almost demanded expanding application, for corruption is omnipresent. Furthermore, once audiences become accustomed to the idea that laws and ethics are arbitrary constraints, it becomes harder and harder to assert them. That meant that audiences could read

this idea into another ballad opera whether the author intended it or not. It also made it harder for any play to be taken at face value. Sententiousness could always imply parody; Cooke discusses "the comical Incidents in the tragedys [sic] of *George Barnwell*," and Crito decries the fact that audiences are so corrupt as to be "past Cure": "like in Persons of a ruin'd Constitution, the Med'cine given to repress the Distemper, adds but Fury to the Disease." In fact, as I will detail in Chapter 4, viewing proclamations of moral probity ironically was necessary to be a competent consumer of the genre, and helps to explain what made the form seem so threatening. Ballad opera created an audience that was prone to regard even the most sincere looking assertions of uprightness as nothing more than tools for promoting self-interest.

Furthermore, the exhilarated embrace of artifice at the genre's core, and the self-serving manipulations of legal and moral codes practiced by so many ballad opera characters, began to trickle down into the behavior of the playwrights themselves. It is obvious in the mirthful generic miscegenation and in the plays' assertions that they speak nothing but nonsense (implying that nobody ever does), but also in the epigraphs, which range from Aston's posturingly aggressive equating of his play with Hamlet's Mousetrap, to Fielding's absurd equating of classical learning with harmonic choral belching in *The Grub Street Opera*: "Sing. Nom. Hic, Haec, Hoc./Dat. Hujus . . . ." One sees it in epilogues, which frequently undermine the plays' implied punishment of amoral characters (Miss Lure's merry strip-tease closing *The Female Parson* (Coffey, 55), or Chloe's rejection of her faithful husband in *The Lottery* (Fielding, 32)). One finds it in blatantly false attributions of authorship (*Chuck* is outrageously advertised as the work of Mr. Cibber), and in numerous outlandish and insincere dedications, such as Aston's plea to Walpole, or Thomas Odell's comically obsequious ode to the Earl of Sunderland that precedes his play about a vicious

statesman in *The Patron*. One sees it in cheerful divulgences that the author has hired "seconds" to ensure his play's success, seconds being defined as "a little Army of Friends in the Pit" that will intimidate any audience member who dares hiss (*Humours*, vi). In *The Mad Captain* the seventeen-year-old playwright Robert Drury sarcastically dismisses respect for his elders ("age itself is not infallible" (17)), and the attitude even seeped into governmental proceedings; Anthony Aston presented a wildly parodic petition against Barnard's playhouse bill (a precursor to the Licencing Act) before the House of Commons in 1735. The flouting of convention had become almost conventional; like a magical acid that eats even through things meant to contain it, ballad opera made its presence known everywhere, threatening to undermine beliefs in codes governing courtship, rules of commerce, and, in the case of *The Restauration of Charles II*, convictions regarding the glorious history of England.

VI. The Restauration of Charles II

To convert such dark and anti-authoritarian principles into a story about the restoration of law, order, and monarchy would have to be considered a rather clever trick, and if for nothing else, Aston should be marveled at for his remarkable ingenuity in accomplishing just that. At first glance, however, such subversion seems difficult to locate, for *The Restauration* appears tidy enough at the structural level. The play pits Cromwell, in league with Grimbald, the "foulest Spirit of the deep" (3), against an outcast Charles, guarded faithfully by his comrades and zealously by the Spirit Britannia who intercedes spectacularly on his behalf whenever necessary. Cromwell chases a somewhat ineffectual Charles through the first and into the second act, only to perish in Act III, descending to hell with the beckoning demon. It is then announced that Charles will soon triumphantly return, and during a joyous celebration, Charles enters, the rejoicing

commences, the Spirit Britannia descends singing of the glory of the nation, and the curtain falls. But such a summary obscures the details of Aston's unique representation; it assumes that audiences responded only to the work's broad outlines. A close look at these details, armed with an understanding of the attitudes typically expressed in ballad operas, reveals a very different sort of play. Aston, in his representations of both Cromwell and Charles, reveals both a distrust and a disdain for all figures of authority, he maintains a consistent portrayal of the unjust and destructive effects of money, his comic scenes are structured to allow the depiction of violence and lawlessness to produce the greatest pleasure, and the triumphant Restoration itself, we shall see, far from unambiguously joyous, is starkly contradictory and unabashedly anarchistic.

If the pleasure of undermining authority lies at the heart of Ballad Opera, one should expect the portrayal of representative leaders to be of particular significance, and in a play such as *The Restauration* one might expect to find the title character doing intelligent and noble acts while his rival exploited every wicked tactic against the king. Aston, to be sure, paints Cromwell as the very soul of wickedness, but his Charles demonstrates no capacity for leadership whatsoever, and not only does nothing at all to bring about his return, but also fails to take any initiative in preserving his own life. Aston structured his play around the rivalry between these two powerful figures of authority, and the characters of Cromwell and Charles represent two competing portraits of the nature of leadership. Although the strict and authoritative rule of Cromwell is savagely denounced, Aston’s portrayal of the ideal monarch is even more subversive, for the government instituted by Charles is hardly a government at all, and throughout the play Aston consistently represents the king as completely submissive to the whims of his populace. The Restoration itself is presented more as a revolutionary bacchanal than a return to order, but before

we turn to this remarkably dark scene, it is worth examining the portrayal of the rival leaders in greater detail.

Immediately following an expository narrative delivered by Brittania, patterned after Greek and Shakespearean tragedy and firmly rooting the action in the mid-seventeenth century, Cromwell takes the stage. Intriguingly, however, the Lord Protectorate does not begin by initiating an ambitious campaign, but rather by reflecting on his soul, and summoning the devil. There are occasional bright spots in Aston's pentameter (e.g. "Yet is my boundless Mind never content/ Ambition is an endless labyrinth" (3)), but more significant is the content of the conversation between Cromwell and Grimbald, which almost immediately turns into a lengthy and somewhat inexplicable contract dispute. Aston punctuates Grimbald's entrance by rewriting a song from *Macbeth*, complete with trumpets and kettle drums, and he clearly intends the appearance of the devil to produce great spectacle, but there seems to be no purpose to Cromwell's sustained defense of his contractual rights. One could, therefore, regard this interlude as evidence of Aston's incompetence, but I would suggest that Aston's invocation of legal language generates a comparison that enables the monologue to be delivered with great comic and satirical intent. The equation is a simple one: the devil is a lawyer, but Cromwell is a better lawyer than the devil, hence Cromwell is the exemplar of wickedness. This equation justifies the length of Cromwell's defense. The audience, while gradually recognizing Cromwell's senseless and rambling rhetoric as an example of contractual oration in general, comes to view all mechanisms of law as wholly self-serving and arbitrary. The random nature of his assertions, combined with his skillful employment of obsequious asides, encourages the interpretation that

not only Cromwell but all legal discourse is firmly entrenched in the realm of Satan and his minions, and there is even a hint of admiration at Cromwell's skillful playing of the game.

Thereafter, however, Aston takes pains to paint Cromwell as the merciless defender of a vicious and despicable judicial code. In one particularly barbaric scene, Cromwell, after learning that a potentially mutinous discontentment infects his troops, enforces his rule like a twentieth-century gangster:

> *Crom.* Who dares carve out his Terms of Servitude?
>
> Who's he that will not march without his Pay?
>
> *1 Sold*. Why – I won't, Noll!
>
> [*Going to Cromwell*]
>
> *Crom.* There, Dog –
>
> [*Cromwell shoots him*]
>
> Now – March! (12)

Here our assumptions regarding Aston's competence control our visualization of the scene. If we presume that the work is naive and hastily prepared we will regard the brevity of this encounter as hopelessly comical and ridiculous, but if we grant Aston a degree of rhetorical control, Cromwell's blunt execution of this soldier can be recognized in its complete and frightening brutality.

In a similar way, Cromwell's ruthless final scene can be read as either laughably bungling or inexorably logical, depending on the respect one gives its author. Near the close of Act III, Aston presents Lady Claypool in supplication before her father, begging that Cromwell spare the life of Reverend Doctor Hewit. There is a historical precedent; Hewit was an Anglican minister

whose services were often attended by Elizabeth Claypool and who officiated at the wedding of Mary Cromwell to Fauconberg; it is known that Cromwell had him executed over the protestations of both his daughters (Gregg,114-16). But in *The Restauration*, Cromwell's decision to execute Hewit is not delayed but accelerated by his daughter's intervention. Aston takes some time to establish Claypool as a fully sympathetic seeker of mercy, whose pleadings finally climax in a piteous, pleading ballad, clearly designed to elicit the audience's empathy. But no sooner does the ballad conclude than Cromwell sends the doctor to the axe:

> *Lady C.* Oh, pardon me, Sir, you are misinform'd.
>
> He's a plain-meaning Teacher, and no Traytor.
>
> Ill-minded men, wrest from his Words ill Meaning.
>
> AIR XVIII.
>
> Tune, *Be calm, you dread Parents*
>
> O spare my dread Father!
>
> This Rev'rend Divine,
>
> Which Suit grant the rather,
>
> Because it is mine.
>
> In return for the Favour, each night and each Day,
>
> For your Soul's Preservation, we'll fervently pray.
>
> *Crom.* Urge it no more, for by thy Cause he dies. What, Ho! Lead Hewit strait to Execution. (40)

Such a swift commencement of justice is heartless, and as the scene continues to unfold, events take place with a rapidity that strains verisimilitude to the breaking point. Claypool curses her

father and exits, and a mere six lines later she is pronounced dead, “with Grief for Dr. Hewit’s Death" (41). Next, Grimbald rises from hell, bringing with him a fiery storm that continues unabated until Cromwell’s demise. Here again, the modern reader might be tempted to attribute such rapidity to Aston’s artlessness, but I would contend that the speed with which the tragic events unfold contributes to the effective violence of the tempest, which, though difficult to image on the printed page, would surely have been the most visually prominent and compelling aspect of the representation. From the moment of Cromwell’s most ruthless act, his demise is inaugurated and proceeds with startling but logical rapidity to its conclusion. Aston uses both a powerful stage effect and a hyper-acceleration of chronology to emphasize the inexorable destruction of this merciless executor of law and order.

Following Cromwell’s demise, Aston begins a portrayal of mob lawlessness that remains in place until the final curtain, even after King Charles’s reinstatement. But lest the play begin to look as if it revolves solely around the two rivals, before I examine the portrayal of Charles it is worth discussing the themes Aston consistently reiterates through the minor characters that occupy so much of his attention. Not surprisingly, given the history of ballad opera, the most prominent of these themes is the damnable effects of commerce, and the corruption that inevitably follows dreams of wealth. Like Gay before him, Aston consistently represents promises of money as potent enough to effect a complete transformation of character. In two different scenes, Aston presents a minor character undergoing a complete personality change upon hearing of financial reward. The first is Sandy, a grumbling Scot who complains bitterly about the search for Charles until he learns the amount of Cromwell’s reward:

> *Sandy*. Out, out; nae fash your sele, I'de na betray my ande Father and Mother under hundred pound *Scots*.
>
> *Iret*. Why the Reward in 12000 Pound *Scots*.
>
> *Sandy*. Ay, Troth! – Gued Faith Meester Ireton, ye're a veery hoonest Mon, and Oliver is a Chrub, and Monarchy's the Deevill, the Covenant is Better nar a Sermon, and for aw' that Money. I'd sell my Father and Mother, and Broother and Sister, – and marry a Cow, or a Sow, for sike a Tocher; – Stand by a wie, I'll ca' tull him – Charles, my bonny, hear ye – Why do ye no come to me? – Troth you shall find me as honest as any lad of my Principles. (17-18)

The humor lies in the abruptness of the transformation (and later, in Sandy's ludicrous offer to share his reward with Charles if he would only offer his head), but the point lies in Sandy's pronouncement that he is no different from anyone else, a meaning reinforced by Aston's continual repetition of this same comic trope. Later in the play, Charles and Carlos, his colonel, having disguised themselves as Cavaliers, assuage the wrath of a certain Dame Sarah by presenting her with a purse of gold, upon which she immediately turns grossly subservient:

> *Sarah*. Oh! Dear Sir – you know my good Humour, and that's the Character all my neighbours will give me, tho' I say it – I am a little hot 'tis true; but soon hot, soon cold, as the saying is; – pray sitte down – you must needs be tyr'd of walking – how far dide come pray. . . . (25-6)

That Aston found the gag worth repeating is testament to the power such representations had during an era in which concerns of trade, credit, and commerce "percolated through all strata of

the nation's life" (Varney, 66), and it is worth noting that ballad operas consistently repeat such comic moments.

Another strong thematic current running through *The Restauration* is a distrust of legal justice and the belief in its fundamental corruption, arbitrariness, and failure to address the interests of the common man. We have already encountered this theme during Cromwell's encounter with Grimbald, so two other examples should suffice to demonstrate its ubiquity. The first occurs at the introduction of Dame Sarah. Aston has set up her entrance by generating the expectation that she is a friendly and obliging hostess, so it is hardly surprising that he has her sing a song to the tune of The Merry Hostess, a popular ditty praising a good woman's generosity:

> Come all that love good company
> And hearken to my ditty;
> 'Tis of a lovely hoastess fine,
> That lives in London City:
> Which gives good ale, nappy, and stale,
> And always thus sings she,
> "My ale was tunn'd when I was young,
> And a little above my knee." (Chappell, 307-11)

The lines Aston puts to the tune, however, contrast starkly with such merry sentiments, and instead consist of an uninhibited condemnation of Parliamentary corruption:

> If a Cavalier comes down to be chose,
> He tops his Honour upon ye,
> But a Roundhead's Interest further goes

With his budget full of Money.

A peck of Corn I give my Hen,

To sell her when she's plump,

They buy your Votes and Trade again

At the Market they call the Rump. (23)

Although it may be difficult to estimate the effect such intertextuality would have had on Aston's audience, this musical tirade is so explicitly damning that it is easy to see how contemporaneous audiences would have read it as a reflection of their own governmental procedures.

Nor is the effect diminished by the fact that Sarah is later hoist by her own petard, and sent to the ducking stool following her husband's rhetorical maneuvering before the authorities. Once Sarah learns that she has the King for a visitor, she immediately fetches the constables to arrest him and claim her thousand Pound reward. Her husband, meanwhile has facilitated Charles' escape, so that when the constables arrive, Dick is forced into an elaborate legal lie to protect the king:

Dick. I speak not unto thee, Cantorum Jobbernowl, I talk to [*Thrusts* MESS JOHN *away with his breech.*] my Neighbour Splatterface, the Constable: Your Worship knows, that you, and I and Goodman Howl'em, the Clerk, and 'Squire Addlehead, clubb'd our Twelve-pence a-piece last Night for Cyder and Brandy; at the Star and Gridiron; which got into my Head, and so reeling home, I fell asleep, and my Wife searching my Pocket (for she always picks my Pocket when I am drunk) misses a Shilling of my Week's Wages, and salutes me with a slap o'th'Face, which I (waking) return'd with a civil kick of the Breech: And finding

> she wou'd not go to bed, nor be quiet all Night --- I said I wou'd have two of her best Pullets for my Dinner To-day; and she swore, if I had, she wou'd inform against me, which you see she has, and made Fools of you. (32)

More ridiculous than Dick's transformation of legal discourse into a belligerent recounting of debauchery is the fact that it proves to be successful; the Constable and his aid are fully convinced of Dick's innocence, and calling to the neighbors, they lead Sarah off to the ducking stool with a merry ballad intended to delight not only the crowd assembled on stage, but also those assembled in the pit in the New Theatre at Haymarket. Ballad Opera delighted its audiences with scenes of wild, joyful lawlessness, and Aston obliges his spectators, here and elsewhere, with abandon.

If such a vision of carnivalistic mob rule is in fact the ideal espoused in *The Restauration*, the only possible positive representation of authority would be a leader so ineffectual as to tolerate such jolly relativity, and indeed, Aston's portrait of Charles fits that description exactly. Previous critics have noticed that Charles could never survive without the assistance of the Spirit Brittania, but they interpret this as yet another instance proving Aston's woeful lack of literary skill (Gagey, 204). In the reading I am giving, however, Charles' impotence is very purposefully the thematic message, and indeed, the consistency of Aston's portrayal argues against authorial artlessness. From the very beginning, Charles is portrayed as reluctant and indecisive; he remains unable to defend himself from even the mildest attacks, and his restoration paints him as nothing more than a tolerated figurehead observing a contumacious mob.

Charles, we are told during the play's introduction, has been mustering the support of the Loyalists in preparation for an attack on Cromwell's forces. One might expect first to see such a leader actively engaged in military pursuits, but instead Aston presents him idling passively on the

grass, musing romantically on the beauties of nature. In a long and rambling monologue, Charles praises the meadows and streams, the glorious sun and all the birds and beasts. If one assumes this is intended as a flattering portrait the speech looks ridiculous indeed, but the final two lines, in which he comments on the quickly arming usurpers, make it evident that the king's military incompetence is the very point:

> See Carlos, what a pleasant Spot the Rebels
>
> Have chose to form their advantageous Camp. (9)

Carlos, for his part, politely defers, but General Lesly has less patience, and at his insistence Charles reluctantly agrees to commence military action the next day. That he lacks all sense of military strategy is forcefully demonstrated by the arrival of a messenger who informs the troops that Cromwell is already marching on them. This then, is the King: a passive idler without an ounce of leadership.

The bulk of the first two Acts consists henceforth in showing Charles on the run from Cromwell and his greed-driven soldiers, but not once does the king make an appearance in which he is not shown as incompetent. He is pursued by Cromwell, lamely attempts battle, and is disarmed and nearly stabbed, saved only by Britannia descending on her chariot. He next appears lost in the woods, vainly pleading for someone to tell him what to do:

> *King*. But where I am, here's no one to enquire of;
>
> Or where to go, or which way to subsist,
>
> I'm in a Maze to know! (15)

Fortunately Providence obliges, sending his henchman Carlos to direct him. Carlos sends him first behind a tree, then up a tree, and finally orders him to sleep within the tree, and to all these commands, the great Charles willfully submits, always inquiring to Carlos "What next for Safety shall we go upon?" (19). Occasionally he has pleasant daydreams about his Restoration, but he does nothing to effect it, content rather to follow Carlos to the home of Dick and Sarah, happy to follow Carlos to the residence of Miss Lane, and gleeful to accompany the lovers to France, proudly disguised as a liveried servant. Significantly, Carlos seems to have been considered the plum role in play; Aston cast Mr. Giles, the most accomplished of his male performers.

Aston further highlights this ineptitude during scenes in which the king walks among the townsfolk in disguise. The model for such scenes might be Shakespeare's Henry V, but Aston's purposes are quite different; he delights his audience by showing the humble country folk dominating the King entirely. Taking refuge at the simple cottage of Dame Sarah, Charles is brutally chastised for his stupidity:

> *Sarah*. Why you Black, Tawny-face, Lanthorn-jaw'd, Charcoal brow'd, Wide-mouth'd, Long-nos'd, Lath-back, Spindle-shank'd, Awkard-Ninny, did'st thou never see a Jack before! Stand 'out o' my Way, you Booby. [*she cuffs him*] (24)

Eighteenth-century audiences might have laughed at Dame Sarah's vicious brow-beating, but a darker satire rests in the staged portrait of the monarch crying out piteously for help as she mercilessly bashes him with a three-legged stool.

Even the manner in which Charles becomes disguised is arguably ambiguous. Carlos, appreciating the need for Charles to travel unrecognized, decides he must shave his sovereign's head with a knife, the only tool in his possession. Although the lines at this point seem designed

to maintain the proper master/servant relationship, the visual image, in a moment given great dramatic import, is of a subject bringing a knife to the liege's head. Aston concludes the Act with the evocative image of the great leader being scalped.

Charles, having been safely carted to France by the end of Act II, does not return until the final scene of the play, and it is here that the deeply subversive intent of *The Restauration* is most clearly expressed. Following Cromwell's tempestuous demise, citizens pour into the streets, where they proceed to take matters into their own hands, upbraiding Ireton for his treacherous support of Cromwell, and gleefully setting out to hang all the members of the Rump Parliament. This madness climaxes with "the Mob round a Bonfire, over which is a Gallows with several Rumps roasting on it" (51). Here the mob sings a joyous drinking song, two verses of which should suffice:

> Pray, turn the Rumps well at the Fire,
> For turning was always their Way;
> So we, to oblige their Desire,
> Have turn'd em all – out this Day. [*Drinks*]
> A Rump is most delicate eating
> To fat them has drain'd Blood and Purse
> So they in their turn shou'd be treating,
> And shou'd not grudge to fatten us. [*Drinks*] (52)

It is upon this wildly debauched mob that the newly restored Charles II enters, but far from reestablishing order, he seems to condone and even encourage their behavior. The final lines of the play make it very plain who is in control. After the crowd dutifully chants "Long live King

Charles the Second," the king is rendered speechless, and the silence is broken only when some members of the mob decide to "pull old Oliver out of his Grave and fix his head upon Westminster-hall" to shouts of "Huzzah, Huzzah!" (54).

The Restoration of Charles II, therefore, appears in Aston's imagination as an anarchistic carnival in all its grisly detail. Aston presents lynching, beheading, and even cannibalism as the proper accompaniment to the reinstatement of Monarchy, and he draws his curtain with the spirit Britannia singing joyfully beside a raging fire roasting governmental authorities. Given the bizarre blackness of this final image, it is a wonder he managed to have any rehearsals at all, but even more surprising, perhaps, is that our current critical tradition has failed to see it as anything but innocuous.

Conclusion

The subversiveness of Aston's play and its challenge to all forms of authority, once recognized, seem deliberate and obvious, so much so that the failure to understand it looks somewhat obtuse. Deeply embedded assumptions of the form's artlessness have exerted enormous control over our perceptions of both Aston's text, which I argue has been the treatment of ballad opera in general, preventing the vast majority of these plays from receiving serious attention. Hampered by a literary tradition that views works of the genre as nothing more than second-rate imitations of *The Beggar's Opera*, and damaged by our presuppositions regarding the nature of genre, we have severely underestimated the influence the form wielded during the years leading up to the Licensing Act. Once we recognize that genres are not abstract categories that describe texts, but rather social institutions that constitute them, we can begin to recognize that the cultural significance of ballad opera lay not in the effect of a few influential texts, but

rather in the somewhat rebellious meanings for which the form stood. Labeling a text "opera" or "ballad opera" served a greater purpose than merely indicating that the play would include fresh lyrics joined with traditional songs; it also embedded the work within a cultural system that regulated how the text would be consumed and it encouraged interpretations focused on the willful transgression of ethical and political codes. The chapters that follow trace this development throughout the 1730s, from early experiments to an eventual demise at the hands of advocates for stage reform and licensing control. I begin by examining how the first imitators of *The Beggar's Opera* defined the characteristics of the genre by experimenting with which elements of Gay's text would be considered variable and which were deemed essential to the form. The emphasis here is on the choices made by writers, but as newer ballad operas began to grow in popularity, it became evident that audiences' expectations played a considerable role in shaping theatrical discourse. In Chapter Three I examine that influence by focusing on three ballad operas that explicitly foreground the role of the spectator in the creation of dramatic meaning. Chapter Four takes a broader perspective, noting that increased censorship led to the creation of two distinct branches of the form, one which was highly explicit in its political reference and designed primarily for print, and the other which, subtler in its satire, managed to avoid the fate of Aston's play and remain in performance. I argue that, because of the way it exploited audience's expectations, subtlety was more significant in bringing the issue of stage reform to prominence. Finally, I have included an epilogue that chronicles the debilitating effect that the Licensing Act had on ballad opera. In the course of this work I have made no attempt to provide a comprehensive reading of all the ballad operas written in the period, but I believe I have accurately described the development of the genre and brought to attention the most significant and interesting aspects of

its history. In so doing, I hope not only to begin a reassessment of the genre in theatre history, but also to renew an appreciation for one of the most creative and stimulating periods of dramatic experimentation, and to bring back an appreciation for a collection of plays of considerable power and ingenuity.

Chapter Two:

Literary Imitation and the Development of Ballad Opera

A beleaguered television executive, frustrated with the low ratings his new show has been receiving, has assembled his creative team to brainstorm ideas to repair the ailing program. His colleagues trot out a variety of hackneyed responses, from increasing the violence to hiring celebrity guest stars. As the disagreements among them mount, the executive begins to recognize that none of their ideas will work, and he quiets them with a directive showing true leadership: "No, no, no. To save this show is going to require *original* thinking. Quick, everybody pull out your TVs and start flipping around."

That gag comes from the "Helter Shelter" episode of *The Simpsons*, and it effectively articulates the institutionalized lack of imagination commonly associated with television. The executive's exaggerated incapacity to conceptualize genuine creativity rings true in an industry that seems to produce an endless stream of programs that at best look like mere variations on already tired formulas. It almost seems petty to point out that the gag itself lacks the originality it champions, for in the most celebrated restoration meta-drama Buckingham's fictional playwright lays out a his similar system of dramatic invention:

> *Bayes*. Why Sir, when I have anything to invent, I never trouble my head about it, as other men do; but presently turn over this book, and there I have, at one view, all that Perseus, Montaigne, Seneca's tragedies, Horace, Juvenal, Claudian, Pliny, Plutarch's *Lives*, and the rest, have ever thought upon this subject; and so, in a trice, by leaving out a few words or putting in others of my own, the business is done. (Villiers, 44)

Nor was *The Rehearsal* the only previous example. The joke was repeated with regularity throughout the eighteenth-century, in dozens of different plays.

It is not my purpose, of course, to accuse the writers of *The Simpsons* of plagiarizing a three-hundred-year old play. Nor am I interested in the self-consuming nature of the jest, the way it is undermined by its continual repetition. In fact, my concern is very nearly the opposite: why is it that the joke continued to be effective even as it was constantly repeated? Why did the message of originality persist even when the unoriginality of its medium was recognized? Although the writers of *The Simpsons* may not have known Buckingham's work, eighteenth-century playwrights unquestionably did. The contradiction involved in imitating a damnation of imitation seems quite obvious, but I know of no parodies exploiting it. And this is somewhat surprising given the eighteenth-century's interest in literary property, from the Copyright Act of 1710 through "a series of important court cases that gave [the concept] increasingly precise legal reality and definition" (Kernan, 11). Thus, in part, I am interested in the *cui bono* of the joke's persistence. Who benefits from the concepts of originality and imitation that were forged during the eighteenth century and remain largely unquestioned today? More specifically, however, I want to examine the process of literary imitation. I will argue in what follows that this view of originality obscures a number of profound issues about imitation and the creation of literary forms.

Even without constant reiteration, the joke presents an inconsistent ideal of creativity; both Bayes and the television executive are ridiculed for following their only option. Faced with a dearth of ideas, confronted by the necessity to invent, each of them turns to external sources, for they have no other alternative. Unless there exists some sort of mystical well of creativity that

resides inside every individual, some magical locus of originality, you cannot fault Bayes for turning to Pliny or Seneca for assistance. And once that is recognized, the difference between a true original and a cheap imitation begins to break down. Although one may still seek to maintain the distinction by defining a set of criteria specifying the degree of variation necessary for a text to count as original (Bayes' problem, perhaps, was simply that he did not put in enough words of his own), doing so reveals that the issue has always been a matter of subjective judgment. To deny that creativity sparks anew is to assert that the same mental processes are at work in producing imitations and works we want to call truly inventive. And given the way originality is valued and imitation scorned, that makes urgent the question of how to justify where to draw the line.

I begin with these reflections because this chapter focuses on the first ballad operas to appear following the success of *The Beggar's Opera*: plays have always been regarded as "superficial imitations," and therefore unworthy of analysis (Gagey, 48). Although I agree that many of them do seem highly derivative, they are worth investigating, and not in spite of their mimicry, but rather because of it. For ballad opera was defined less by Gay's originating play than by the manner in which that play was duplicated, and this process must be a necessary condition for the formation of any genre. As Alistair Fowler notes, "the contributions of successors, in fact, are quite as decisive as that of the 'originator.' That is obvious from the fact that if the originator had no successors, his achievement can only be an isolated one, without significance for genre" (155). Fowler abruptly abandons this line of thinking, but it raises a range of complicated questions, from the statistical (how many successors are necessary to establish a genre?) to the interpretative and historical (what counts as a successor? how must the successors relate to each other in order for the repetitions to create a genre? why are some textual elements repeated and

others ignored?). It may be true that the "patterns of cross-imitation become far too complex for any stemma of borrowings or influences" (Fowler, 155), but given that these patterns, at least in some cases, lead to the formation of a readily identified genre, that complexity seems worthy of analysis.

What follows is a preliminary attempt to understand how the earliest successors to *The Beggar's Opera* combined to specify the form that became known as ballad opera. My premise is that genres are formed through patterns of repetition: every imitation holds certain elements of the source text constant while varying others, and the continued repetition of similar choices regarding which elements remain fixed establishes the guidelines we recognize as generic. Beyond simply cataloging the types of variations used in these early successors, however, I hope to show that focusing on the process of imitation might enable more than the elucidation of the characteristics of a single literary form. It might also provide insight into the conceptual structure of a culture itself. To elucidate that claim, however, requires a theoretical excursion into the operation of imitation. Although literary theory has no models to describe the process I want to investigate, my exploration of the topic has led me to a number of closely related fields, such as parody, originality, forgery, and allusion, as well as the writings of a present-day cognitive scientist. Following these speculations, I will survey the earliest ballad opera imitations, taking an especially close look at *The Quaker's Opera*, *The Stage-Coach Opera*, and *The Patron*, and I will conclude by examining Gay's own imitation, the sequel *Polly*.

I. Myths of Imitation

I begin with a conundrum. *The Beggar's Opera* opens with the following stage direction: "Peachum, sitting at a table, with a large book of accounts before him." Curiously, an improbable

number of other ballad operas duplicate this image, even though the plots of the plays widely vary, and the character at the table only occasionally has a role similar to that of Peachum. Furthermore, unlike some of the other commonly duplicated elements, such as Gay's replacement of the standard prologue with a dialogue between a Poet and Player, this aspect is hardly innovative. Nor does it appear to be a particularly memorable feature of the original play, unlike the often mimicked dispute between Polly and Lucy. Nevertheless, a number of playwrights seem to have considered this tableau significant enough to replicate it. When attempting to reproduce the success of *The Beggar's Opera*, these writers seem to have believed that this initial image was an indispensable ingredient.

Although from a modern perspective this fidelity seems slavish, the number of texts where this occurs demands an explanation. However, the standard answer that the imitators chose the simplest path, unthinkingly duplicating obvious features of the original, remains so strong that it is difficult to see what a different interpretation might be. Literary imitation lacks a coherent theoretical framework on which to base a methodology for explicating the patterns of repetition and variation that occur during the development of a genre. In the course of studying these problems, I have come to believe that providing such a framework would be a mammoth undertaking, far beyond the scope of this chapter. However, the explications that follow require some justification, so I have attempted to introduce some of the concepts around which my interpretations of the early ballad operas are based. Because imitation is frequently regarded as beneath theoretical consideration, I have arranged this section around three of the most common misconceptions regarding literary imitation: that it is easy work, the province of second-rate writers; that it shallow, failing to produce anything genuinely original; and finally that it is easily

recognizable.

Myth I: "Imitation is Easy"

The account book example highlights a crucial point regarding the commonplace attitude toward imitation, namely, the assumption that it is easy. To create a variation, all one needs to do is fiddle a bit with the exemplar, leaving out some words and putting in a few of one's own. In fact, however, it is neither easy nor natural, as Leonard Bernstein discovered after performing the "revealing experiment" described in his aptly named essay "Why Don't You Run Upstairs and Write a Nice Gershwin Tune?" (56). He and a composer friend had labored at the task of creating a hit song:

> You think it's so simple to be simple?. . . . We went to work with a will, vowing to make thousands by simply being simple-minded. We worked for an hour and then gave up in hysterical despair. Impossible. We found ourselves being "personal" and "expressing ourselves"; and try as we might we couldn't seem to boil any music down to the bare feeble-minded level we had set ourselves. . . . Impossible. (55-6)

Bernstein, curiously, concludes that his failure resulted from his training as a composer rather than from the way he defined his task. He does not even notice the contradiction that the thing that prevented him from creating a hit (self-expression) is identical to that which he praises in Gershwin: "Inner meaning. Spirit. . . .because it is so sincere" (60). Of course he would later write a musical abounding in hit songs, songs moreover that show at least some influence of *Porgy and Bess*. Writing hit songs was not impossible, it was only when equating imitation with complete self-effacement that he could not even come up with a melody.

Theories of literary imitation tend to mimic Bernstein in assuming the possibility of unproblematic duplication. Andre Topia, for example, describes quotation and imitation as the "classical modes" of responding to an aesthetic model, claiming that in both cases the juxtaposition of texts produces no "true interaction." "Imitation," he continues, "neutralizes all real relationship in favour of a one-way filiation. The secondary text does not act on the primary text, which remains inaccessible and impregnable" (104). To this, Topia opposes the mode of repetition discovered by Flaubert and taken up by the modernists, in which the new version "contaminates and puts in perspective" the original, and it is only this mode that is worthy of analysis. Furthermore, in virtually all theories of seemingly more complex forms of rewriting, such as forgery and parody, imitation of the type I am discussing, imitation "in the manner of," serves as the natural ground against which the special cases are defined. Parody thus is imitation plus "exaggeration or distortion" (Highbet), imitation plus "conscious contrast" (Gilman), imitation plus "adaptation to some new purpose" (Johnson), imitation plus antithesis and a "higher semantic authority" (Morson), or imitation plus "ironic inversion" and "critical distanciation" (Hutcheon). In all of these theories, it is the added feature that claims all the attention; imitation alone, the unproblematic case, is considered too obvious to require comment.

The primary problem with these approaches is that simple cases of ordinary literary imitation, in the terms so defined, cannot be found. Only a text that is an exact duplicate of the appropriated source could lack contrast from the original. Any variation creates contrast, and the significance or insignificance of that distance is an interpretive matter, and thus always potentially disputable. Simple imitation may therefore be a more complicated type of parody: it is a reproduction that varies from the original but asserts equivalence rather than difference. But the

complex processes involved in the creation of the equivalence have not been theorized in literary criticism.

Theories of parody and forgery are grounded by non-existent ordinary cases, and are subject to an aphorism coined by Stanley Fish: “deviation theories always trivialize the norm and therefore trivialize everything else” (101). Consider, for example, Bakhtin's dismissal of imitation, which he opposes to stylization, parody and skaz:

> Imitation does not make the imitated form conditional, since it takes it seriously, makes it its own, it seeks to master another person's word. The voices merge completely, and if we do hear the other voice, it is by no means because the imitator intended us to do so. (157)

Although it seems reasonable to hinge the distinction on authorial intent, this passage moves too swiftly from intent to actualization. By taking the original seriously, Bakhtin implies, the imitator unproblematically creates a work in which two voices “merge completely.” Crucially, Bakhtin's admission that on occasion imitations fail foregrounds the primary problem. He implies that when we do hear the other voice, readers instantly recognize both 1) the author's failure to accurately imitate, and 2) the author's intention to erase all difference. Yet the criteria by which a reader accomplishes this interpretative feat remain unspecified. Furthermore, the idea of a successful imitation on these terms is equally troublesome. It implies that given a known original and an imitation, one can ascertain whether the imitator got it right. Getting it right could only mean repeating the essential characteristics of the original, and thus this certainty requires an a priori notion of those essentials. But it seems more likely that it is the imitation that allows us to perceive those characteristics as characteristics in the first place. As Deleuze has put it:

> There is *one* aspect, however concealed it may be, of the logos, by means of which intelligence always comes before, by which the whole is already present, the law already known before what it applies to: this is the dialectical trick by which we discover only what we have given ourselves, by which we derive only what we put there. (94)

Like a forgery, an imitation at least partially defines our conception of the original. And just as "every criteria for ascertaining whether something is the fake of an original coincides with the criteria for ascertaining whether the original is authentic" (Eco, 199), every test of an imitation's fidelity coincides with a procedure for determining a valid interpretation of the model.

I can put the point more concretely by examining the commonplace evaluation of early ballad operas. Schultz, for example, asserts that the imitators of *The Beggar's Opera* took "scrupulous pains to adhere to the formula Gay had perhaps accidentally discovered" (154). Without denying that they labored to duplicate Gay's success, one needs to question precisely what formula these writers went to such pains to follow. Because *The Beggar's Opera* exists as a complete play and not a set of rigid guidelines for which alternatives could be plugged in, the imitator had to draw conclusions regarding which aspects of the play were formulaic and which were inconsequential. The fact that the authors were motivated by hopes of financial success does not alter the fact that they were engaged in a process of considerable abstraction. They were defining a model, not slavishly adhering to it.

This is not say, of course, that the writers were deliberately abstracting rules, but once one recognizes that an imitation implies an abstract definition of sameness, a intriguing space for analysis begins to open up. Literary imitation is not about duplication but is instead a form of

analogy making, a mapping of textual features from one domain to another. And though the making of an analogy requires no particular genius (Susan Blackmore has even argued that it is the basis of human thought), it engages mental operations of substantial complexity. Douglas Hofstader argues that the creation of a variation involves intuitively defining a rule present in the original object and transporting it to a new framework; during the process the pressures exerted by the new domain cause features of the original to slip into neighboring concepts. Although this seems straightforward enough, Hofstadter notes that studying the process leads to far reaching questions:

> What is meant by neighboring concepts? How much pressure is required to make a given conceptual slippage likely?. . .how far apart can two concepts be and still be potentially able to slip into each other? How can one conceptual slippage create a new pressure leading to another conceptual slippage, and then another? Do some concepts resist slippage more than others? Can particular pressures nonetheless bring about a slippage while another concept, usually more willing to slip remains untouched? (208)

These are the questions of a cognitive scientist, but they highlight the types of issues that are relevant to the interpretation of a historically given collection of literary imitations. What concepts were considered closely related at the time? What types of slippage were commonly generated by the original text? What pressures can be adduced to explain why certain types of slippage occurred?

Consider, for example, how a writer might chose to go about replacing the “Beggar” of Gay’s play. If one decides that the most significant aspect of this character is his poverty, one

would maintain the character's class but vary the character's dramatic function. This was the choice in Coffey's *Phebe*, in which the king of beggars takes a leading role, and to a lesser degree in *Flora* and *The Jealous Clown*.[4] More commonly, however, authors chose to vary the beggar's social position and instead keep constant his dramatic function: to introduce and claim responsibility for the opera as a whole, as in *The Cobler's Opera* and *The Quaker's Opera*. There were other, more idiosyncratic alternatives (Ralph, in *The Fashionable Lady*, chose to keep constant the fact that the opera was designed for a wedding), but every case involves an effort to maintain one aspect while varying another, and examining these instances of mental fluidity can clarify the historical interpretation of Gay's text, the associative nature of eighteenth century thought, and the reasons why certain textual features came to be considered essential to the emerging genre. By focusing on the variants, by noting what roles (cobbler, Quaker, etc.) form a constellation around the idea of a beggar, one might begin to grasp the interrelationships among conceptual structures that were common in the eighteenth-century, thereby gaining cultural insight beyond the literary texts in question. Alternatively, focusing on what was most frequently held constant reveals something about the nature of the writers' conception of dramatic structure (that the meta-theatrical function of the beggar became the norm for ballad opera, for example, seems to indicate that the eighteenth-century stage was less thoughtlessly character-driven than is occasionally asserted). In the readings that follow I pursue the latter method, seeking to elucidate what writers found most significant about the original text.

Myth #2: "Imitation is Shallow"

In the same year that *The Beggar's Opera* was produced, Edward Young published an essay that was to become the foundation for *Conjectures on Original Composition*. In it, he

begins his attack on imitation that would be that focal point of his later work:

> Originals only have true life, and differ as much from the best imitations as men from the most animated pictures of them. Nor is what I say inconsistent with a due deference for the great standards of antiquity; nay, that very deference is an argument for it, for doubtless their example is on my side in this matter. And we should rather imitate their example in the general motives and fundamental methods of their working than in their works themselves. (338)

Passages such as this have led critics to question the possibility of maintaining Young's distinction (how does one imitate the behavior of an author one only knows through written work), but as he develops his ideas Young argues that contemporary authors can outshine Homer by knowing his work and yet choosing to ignore it: "the first ancients had no merit in being originals: they could not be imitators"(340). What matters to Young is not so much the process of creation, but that the evaluation of a work depends on the absence of any predecessors. "Illustrious examples," he claims, "engross, prejudice, and intimidate," thereby preventing writers from reaching their potential. Furthermore, in a striking passage, Young implies that a work can be gloriously original even if it was created by imitation, as long as the original has been lost:

> Most of the Latin classics, and all the Greek, except perhaps Homer, Pindar, and Anacreon, are in the number of imitators. . .but [they are] accidental originals; the works they imitated, few excepted, are lost: they, on their father's decease, enter as lawful heirs. . .the fathers of our copyists are still in possession. . .very late must a modern imitator's fame arrive, if it waits for their decease. (340)

Thus, for Young, an imitation works precisely in the opposite manner to parody, for it increases in

value as its precursors vanish, whereas a parody of a forgotten original is fundamentally resistant to both interpretation and longevity. But I would argue that not only is an imitation equally dependent on its source text, but also that it is the very process of creating an imitation that gives depth to literary work. To explicate this idea, I will turn to an examination of one of the simplest cases of imitation, but which, by its simplicity, helps to underscore the complexity of the structures that imitations can produce.

In his efforts to understand the basic mental processes involved in imitation, Douglas Hofstadter invented a simple analogy game:

Let us define the original as:

ABC:ABD

Here is a series of imitations:

QRS:ABD

IJK:IJD

LMN:LMN

IJK:IJL

PQRS:PQRT

RSSTTT:RSSUUU

ACE:ACF

ACE:ACG

PQRS:PQTU

XYZ:XYD

XYZ:XYA

XYZ:WYZ

KJI:KJJ

KJI:KJH

PXQXRX:PXQXRY

PXQXRX:PXQXSX

PXQXRX:PYQYRY

MRRJJJ:MRRKKK

MRRJJJ:MRRJJJJ

At first glance, some of these imitations might appear perfectly natural and others perhaps look almost nonsensical. Additionally some look shallow and rigid while others seem almost elegant. Each, however, was formed by defining a rule present in the original and applying it in a new domain; when evaluating the shallowness or depth of any one these we are evaluating the depth of the rule perceived in the original and the manner in which that rule was maintained in the new context. The imitations QRS:ABD, IJK:IJD, and LMN:LMN, for example, seem particularly unsophisticated; they are formed by applying what seem to be overly literal-minded interpretations of the rule of the original. (The rules are: replace the opening letters with 'ABD', replace the final letter with 'D', and replace every instance of 'C' with 'D', respectively.) The most common type of imitation adduces from the original the concept of alphabetic successorship. Although in the simplest of these cases, IJK:IJL the application of the successorship rule is so straightforward as to be trivial, in others the manner of defining successorship is unexpected and artful. Two of the imitations in particular are worthy of discussion for they show how the process of imitation can revive unrecognized patterns from dormancy, or lead to unexpected but aesthetically satisfying

paradigm shifts. The imitation MRRJJJ:MRRJJJJ, for example, lacks the structure of alphabetic successorship found in the original, but it successfully imitates the original by generalizing the structure to include numeric successorship. Equally interesting is the imitation XYZ:WYZ, which involves reconceiving the idea of successorship. Importantly, in both of these cases the depth of the imitation can only be recognized by viewing it in relation to the original; the deeper structures emerge from the process of imitation.

These examples may seem to be far afield from literary study, but the simplicity of the domain highlights a number of issues involved in interpreting literary variation. First, contrary to Young**,** the aesthetic value of an imitation can be enhanced and not diminished by the continued presence of the original. As in parody, the existence of the source text serves as an indispensable guide to interpreting the original. Secondly, Hofstader's micro-domain highlights interesting aspects regarding the nature of conventions. In the examples I have given, the dominant convention, created by repeated instances in numerous imitations, was the notion of alphabetic successorship. What enabled that concept to emerge as primary was its flexibility in new contexts, the way an imitation could exploit the rule in a way that made it clearly apparent yet still surprising. I suspect that generic conventions share that characteristic malleability, and that as a convention gets repeated in more and more different contexts, its meaning grows in complexity, thereby creating the intricate collection of associations and expectations attributed to a genre.

Finally, I hope that the simple letter imitations belie the commonplace notion that imitations are by nature shallow. Hofstader has usefully spelled out the complex series of steps involved in creating even these very simplistic imitations. One has to decide the degree of literalness with which to take references, which structures of the original are worth perceiving,

what roles exist inside these structures, and how literally to take these roles (Hofstader, 567). This series of steps occurs frequently in literary imitation, and recognizing the process aids interpretation. To take a simple example, the ballad opera *Chuck, or the Schoolboy*, begins by re-envisioning Macheath as a boarding school student. What are the societal structures in *The Beggar's Opera* that the author chose to repeat? What types of character should fill the roles of Polly and Peachum in this new context? How does one construct a story of the young Macheath that mirrors the original play in a satisfying way? Does the new setting exert pressure on the language of the characters or on the types of ballads chosen for recycling? What events from the original are worth repeating; should the young Macheath undergo imprisonment; should he be reprieved? The anonymous author of *Chuck* weighed rival answers to such questions (and many more) in creating his play, and although some decisions seem more elegant than others, the play is not shallow simply because it was an imitation. In fact, a satisfactory reading of *Chuck* depends on our recognizing which solutions to these questions ultimately prevailed, and idiosyncratic aspects, such as Chuck's decision to abandon Polly in favor of Suky become particularly important interpretive cruxes, especially in those cases (unlike this example) where the unusual choices are found in a number of different imitations.

My analyses in this chapter attempt to make use of these ideas. In Section II I discuss how the imitations reapplied the two most dominant conventions. In Section III I show how *The Patron*, a text generally regarded as highly obscure, is clarified by recognizing the way it imitates *The Beggar's Opera*, and in Section IV I show how the subversiveness of *Polly* emerged from its status as a sequel.

Myth 3: "We know an imitation when we see one"

There is a well known play from the 1730s that was based on a popular ballad of the time and that opens, like *The Beggar's Opera*, with a tradesman discussing his business with a faithful apprentice. Like Peachum, the businessman teaches his assistant the finer points of his work, and then turns his attention toward his family, setting aside his work to discuss the value of marriage with his naive daughter. As the play continues, the similarities with Gay's play begin to multiply. The daughter is smitten with a thief and potential murderer, and she has a rival every bit as poisonous as Lucy is to Polly. We are introduced to selfishly manipulative servants, jailors, and constables, and the play climaxes with a threatened execution at Tyburn Tree. Additionally, it includes a seemingly gratuitous "entertainment of dancing and singing" and a number of highly cynical lines, such as "not to be guilty is the worst of crimes, and large fees privately paid are every needful virtue" and "[laws are] the instrument and screen of all your villainies, by which you punish in others what you act in yourselves" (Nettleton, 605-608). Finally, the author was very familiar with the form Gay inspired; his only previous play was a ballad opera that included an air deliberately referencing a number of other imitations.

Despite these apparent similarities, the play is not considered a ballad opera, and it is only rarely interpreted in reference to *The Beggar's Opera*. But Lillo's *The London Merchant*, as described above, seems highly indebted to Gay's precedent, and its interpretation is enriched by the comparison. Regarding Thorowgood as an alternative to Peachum seeks to reestablish merchants as honest tradesmen who "contribute to the safety [and happiness] of their country" (601), the extravagant musical entertainment Millwood employs to help seduce Barnwell shifts from a crowd-pleasing necessity to an ominous statement on the dangers of popular entertainment,[5] and the play's lengthy concluding discourse on personal redemption, the

contrasting behaviors of Barnwell and Millwood in prison, and their dolorous march to the gallows, are sharply colored both by our recollection of MacHeath's comic defiance and the fact that the visit to Tyburn Tree in the exemplar ended with an arbitrary reprieve. Furthermore, recognizing that Millwood consistently voices the moral ideas expressed by Gay's characters pinpoints a potential interpretive center. It may be that Millwood "is positioned in *The London Merchant* as the site for concealing the contradictions of bourgeois ideology" (Freeman,116), but the reading is deepened by noticing that the primary characteristic of Millwood, one she shares with her counterparts in ballad opera, is a complete lack of shame. Lillo's play is demonstrably obsessed with the idea of shame in all its forms, from Trueman's opening anxiety that he has spoken too boldly, through Maria's painful social shyness, up to Barnwell's reverent contrition. A complete reading along these lines might show that *The London Merchant* not only champions bourgeois culture, but also repeatedly articulates a mechanism that sustains it.

Whether or not this cursory reading is convincing, its plausibility illustrates one key issue regarding the analysis of imitations, and another concerned with their production. The reluctance to regard Lillo's play as an imitation (however antithetic) of *The Beggar's Opera* raises the issue of sampling in determining how imitations lead to the origin of a new genre. When examining the experimental imitations that would determine the direction a genre would take, how does one know one has assembled all the relevant texts? For example, Thomas Odell's 1729 comedy *The Smugglers*, based on the Hampshire privateers, was almost certainly inspired by *The Beggar's Opera*, but its distinctiveness makes it difficult to determine its potential influence. Similarly, when examining an imitation there is the danger of seeing it as leading teleologically toward an established end, falling into the trap that Mark Rose has discussed of "retroactively recomposing

the text under the influence of a generic idea that did not come into being until well after it was written" (5). It is a familiar hermeneutic circle, and as such a problem that probably eludes a completely satisfactory solution.

However, contemplation of this first issue also reveals a fact about the production of imitations that makes the sampling problem less troublesome. The potential difficulty of recognizing a text as an imitation plagues writers as well as analysts; an imitation cannot succeed unless it is regarded as such. This means that some elements duplicated from the source text may be included for no other purpose than to ensure that the new work be perceived in its proper imitative context. Thus the slavish fidelity of imitations can be regarded not as an accusatory sign of a lack of originality, but instead as a necessary stage in the foundation of a genre. It might be helpful here to return to Derrida's critique of genre. In Chapter One, I noted that Derrida's distrust centered on the way genre detaches textual elements from interpretative consideration; their meaning is limited by the fact that they are required to communicate a text's intended generic context. However, though they lack an established generic framework, the first successors still seek to associate their work with the source text, and the simplest method is to borrow flagrantly. Imitations that are too subtle risk failing to elicit a comparison with the original, so certain elements must be duplicated very closely. Thus it would be unfair to criticize the author of *Momus Turn'd Fabulist* and other writers for not using the opening discussion with the player and playwright as complexly as did Gay, for they included the section only as a mark of comparison to guide spectators in their interpretations. In this way the sampling issue is rendered less important because what matters is not that a text is an imitation, but rather that it is one of several similar imitations. If only one writer had employed popular ballads but many others had, like Odell in

The Smugglers, created farces based on famous criminals, an entirely different genre would have formed. It is difficult to resist the idea that putting new words to popular songs is somehow the most natural way of imitating *The Beggar's Opera*, but this is clearly not the case. None of the twentieth century imitations of Gay (Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, Havel's *Beggar's Opera*, Ayckbourne's *A Company of Beggars* and Soyinka's *The Beggars' Opera*) for example, duplicated the technique; they considered it an inessential accident. Finally, I might also suggest here that this provides a way of understanding the *cui bono* of our views on originality: our instinctive dismissal of obvious duplications creates a resistence to the formation of new genres. In any case, the fact that imitators must create their own generic markers helps to answer the conundrum with which I began this section. Plays frequently opened with a man in front of his account books because such an image immediately linked their works with a network of highly complex associations. Their slavish fidelity was in fact a way of accomplishing the tasks of generic work in the absence of a genre.

Conclusions

Although it falls far short of being a theoretical model for the study of literary imitation, my exploration of the concept helps to clarify some of the issues I will be exploring in greater depth in the readings below. First and perhaps most importantly, generic norms are not established by the exemplar, but are instead defined by repeated replications of an aspect discernable in it. This does not mean that every replicated element has significance; some duplications are simply signposts directing readers to make the proper comparison. Additionally, that comparison is necessary when interpreting imitations, for failing to do so is like reading established genres without having generic competence; one lacks the grounds with which to

interpret the significance of the variations. Finally, I have suggested that by analyzing what elements of the exemplar were subject to slippage and cataloging the replacements for the elements, one might gain insight into what the culture regarded as closely related.

Although these conclusions overlap, the analysis which follows is divided into three sections, each aimed at foregrounding one particular aspect of the imitations. I first attempt to define what I see as the persistently duplicated feature of *The Beggar's Opera*, that is, the ubiquity of corruption, an aspect that found reiteration in virtually every ballad opera and came to be one of its defining features. Then I examine how imitators dealt with an aspect that was less easily translated into other domains, focusing on one particularly elegant example of its duplication. Finally, I will discuss a feature that was not a part of the original text but is present in the vast majority of ballad operas from the genre's beginnings, speculating on why that aspect was such a natural fit.

II: The Dominant Norm

One of the first goals in understanding how imitations lead to generic norms is to define the aspects of the original that imitators consistently held constant, but a difficulty presents itself almost immediately. How can one determine whether a resemblance results directly from the influence of the source text or is simply a part of more general prevailing cultural attitudes? Although we can be relatively certain, for example, that the inclusion of ballad airs in *Penelope* was an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of *The Beggar's Opera*, more subtle similarities, such as the title character's debt to Polly, could instead result from a cultural penchant for portraying a certain type of female power, or even sheer coincidence. Without a way to isolate the effects of the source text's influence, there seems to be no way to be confident that the

patterns discerned are not simply a product of later critical assumptions. What is needed is a test case that separates influence from the general act of creation; ideally, one could compare a manuscript written prior to the exemplar to an emendation of it written after. Then the differences could more conclusively be said to spring from the influence of the model, and the claim that similar aspects found in other texts are also the result of influence would have more validity.

Fortunately, the penchant for re-writing existent plays as ballad operas provides a number of examples that come close to satisfying the demands of this ideal case, such as Theophilus Cibber's *Patie and Peggy* (a ballad opera version of *The Gentle Shepard*), and *Love and Revenge, or The Vintner Outwitted*, an anonymous ballad opera version of Marston's *Dutch Courtezan*. I will begin by examining the two such cases that seem particularly suited to tracing Gay's influence on subsequent ballad operas. *The Stage-Coach Opera* departs from *The Stage Coach* only in its addition of a number of ballads, allowing for a fairly precise understanding of the way music was seen to function in the imitations. Similarly, *The Quaker's Opera*, by Thomas Walker, is a ballad opera version of *The Prison Breaker*, a Newgate comedy that predates *The Beggar's Opera*.

Although George Farquhar's *The Stage Coach* had been quite popular in the years following its premier in 1704, interest in the after-piece had waned somewhat until a ballad opera version appeared, after which the play enjoyed something of a revival: *The Stage-Coach Opera* received almost two dozen performances from 1730-32, and continued to appear regularly throughout the decade. As W. J. Lawrence has noted, a large number of bibliographical problems surround the ballad opera version, primarily because there seems to have been no great care distinguishing the new text from the original in playbills. In fact, we would not have a copy of the ballad opera text at all had it not been erroneously printed in a collection of Farquhar's works

published in Dublin in 1761. Lawrence speculates that *The Stage-Coach Opera* premiered in London sometime before its first recorded performance in Dublin in 1730, and ascribes authorship to Rufus Chetwood, who had been writing ballad operas since 1728. However tangled the production history, it is evident that the opera version enjoyed at least moderate popularity on it own, and either continued to be frequently produced or at least created renewed interest in the original text.

What makes *The Stage-Coach Opera* particularly apt for my purposes, however, is the fact that the new version maintains Farquhar's dialogue without alteration; the only difference is that it has interspersed sixteen new ballad airs throughout the play. The revisor's work was therefore limited to deciding when to interrupt the text and providing lyrics for the ballads. Although this restriction isolates the influence of *The Beggar's Opera*, one might wonder how much could be learned, for the expectation would be that such a small alteration could hardly be more than cosmetic, an adding of flourishes to significant moments. Nevertheless, despite not altering a word of dialogue, the author of *The Stage-Coach Opera* manages to change the tone and meaning of the play considerably, transforming Farquhar's original from a good-natured intrigue romp into something far more skeptical and self-aware. The musical additions work to undermine the text; the ballads ironically comment on the characters and actions as often as they reinforce them. Minor characters burst into song with cynical critiques of the protagonists, the protagonists voice hidden selfish motives, and servants that were marginal in the original are allowed to take center stage to express their significance. Although hardly on the scale of the Wooster Group's deconstruction of *Our Town* (Savran, 9-41), *The Stage-Coach Opera* shares with *Routes One and Nine* an effort to expose the contradictions and disguised agendas of a

respected and more traditional precursor.

The Stage-Coach Opera voices its critique primarily through Dolly and Jolt, who are elevated from minor roles in Farquhar to interpretative authorities; they sing the majority of airs in the play and use each opportunity to express cynical views of the world. Farquhar's story centers on Captain Basil and Isabella, lovers who become secretly married at the inn in which Dolly is employed. Isabella has been taken to the inn by her wicked uncle who wishes to marry her against her wishes to Squire Somebody, while Basil, who had been rushing to London to rescue Isabella from her uncle, only chances to rest at the inn because of the weariness of Jolt, the stage coach driver. When the lovers discover each other, they successfully plot to wed, and the play concludes with the revelation that Isabella is the rightful owner of all her uncle's riches. From the beginning, the two servants are used as little more than comic foils: when the play opens, Fetch is securing rooms for himself and Basil, mocking Dolly with sly innuendos about his intention to debauch her. Farquhar ridicules Dolly's naive stupidity, presenting her as wholly unaware of Fetch's bawdy jokes, even as she accidentally contributes to them, innocently asking, as she gathers the luggage, "are your Pistols charged?" (B1r). At this point in the opera version, however, Dolly is given a song that turns the tables on Fetch. She not only indicates she is aware of Fetch's bawdy humor, but also states that men who so bluster are usually impotent (A2r). In a similar way, all of the ballads sung by Dolly and Jolt undermine the protagonists' claim to social superiority and highlight the ubiquity of moral corruption. Dolly notes later that "Bribes are Fashions. . .No Conscience makes a Doubt" (18), agreeing with Jolt's previous observation that gold fixes every election (8). They also both cheerfully assert their own depravation; Dolly worries that in searching her room they will discover one of her many lovers (22), while Jolt,

using Gay's trademark irony, opines that despite appearances the poor have as many base appetites as do the great (16). These emphatically satiric ballads intrude continually on the narrative action, threatening to overwhelm it completely. Through Dolly and Jolt, *The Stage-Coach Opera* reverses the figure and ground of the original; it is the wry and sarcastic observers who warrant our primary focus.

Elsewhere in the play, ballads are used to expose a character's true nature or critique an authority figure's motives. The Landlord, for example, who in Farquhar's text does nothing more than open a locked room, is transformed into "Authority Hardheart. . .a Constable famous for Might" (21). Isabella sings a ballad that shows that her abandonment of Squire Somebody in favor of Basil is less the result of her love for the latter than her inherent inconstancy (13), somewhat unsettling the security of the final marriage. In fact, Farquhar's tidy resolution is made particularly suspect in *The Stage-Coach Opera*. At the conclusion, Micher, Isabella's old uncle, refuses to accept the marriage without proof, at which point the Irishman Macahone steps forward to declare himself a witness to the transaction. The opera emphasizes Macahone's role as evidence of the validity of the union, giving him a song detailing the events he was supposed to have observed (24), but it also makes it clear that he could possess no such knowledge. Unlike in *The Stage Coach*, Macahone is placed center stage to sing about the universality of cuckoldry during the time the wedding was said to be occurring off-stage (21). Thus his evidence is worthless; the happy wedding is based on false testimony. Just as Dolly and Jolt's heightened presence disrupts the worthiness of Basil and Isabella as exemplary models of behavior, Macahone's apparent duplicity calls into question the moral certainties of the standard comic conclusion. *The Stage-Coach Opera* is a thorough unmasking of the mechanisms of *The Stage*

Coach, and it is particularly remarkable in that this was accomplished merely by adding a few ballad airs.

Of course, it is not possible to be certain that this was the author's intention, but in the choices of who would sing the ballads, when they would occur, and what they would express we can recognize patterns revealing what imitators saw as the essential function of the ballads in *The Beggar's Opera*. First, the lyrics highlight the universality of corruption; the smallest suggestion of bribery in Farquhar's text gets expanded through the ballads into a commentary that extortion is omnipresent, practiced by both the lowliest servants and the highest elected officials. One finds this tendency in virtually all of the earliest ballad operas, regardless of their plots. Even in simple pastoral love stories, such as *The Jealous Clown* or *The Village Opera*, the ballads pause to foreground universal selfishness at the slightest pretext. In fact, though in *The Beggar's Opera* ballads occasionally further the plot or emphasize a character's private emotion, the imitators employ them in these ways much less frequently, preferring to duplicate the most common function of ballads in Gay's text: to justify an individual's immoralities by claiming them as social absolutes. Whenever a character engages in adultery, jobbery, alcoholic indulgence, or blackmail, a ballad proclaiming that everyone practices such behaviors is likely to follow. The narratives may widely vary, but this use of ballads ensures that one of Gay's dominant themes gets sounded loudly.

Secondly, the parceling out of the ballads remains independent of a character's prominence in the narrative: Captain Basil and Isabella, the heroes of *The Stage Coach*, sing a total of only four ballads in comparison to the minor characters Jolt and Dolly, who collectively sing nine. In general the imbalance is rarely as pronounced as in *The Stage-Coach Opera*, but the

balance found in *Penelope*, in which the title character and Ulysses are given five songs, the same number as the far less narratively important Doll and Cleaver, is close to the norm. Curiously, this pattern is not present in Gay's text; Macheath, Polly and Lucy are given the majority of the airs. However, the plot of *The Beggar's Opera* placed low-life characters in the foreground of the plot, so emphasizing them with ballads was unnecessary; one sees the same thing in those few early imitations that centered on beggars and thieves, such as *Phebe*, *Chuck*, *The Jovial Crew*, and *The Quaker's Opera*. When the narrative was not centered on "highwaymen, whores, beggars and rustics" (which, contrary to the form's reputation, was much more common), authors compensated by giving the bulk of the airs to servants and outsiders (Ralph, *Lady*, 15). In this way, all of the early imitations of Gay can be seen as low-life operas.

The most important pattern in the use of music that can be discerned from *The Stage-Coach Opera* arises from a combination of these first two tendencies. By giving minor characters songs trumpeting the ubiquity of vice, authors created a musical structure that commented ironically on the main action rather than reinforced it. Ballads served as a distancing device; the norms the plot seemed to reinforce were undermined by the frequent musical reminders that the only reliable social norm was the power of money. The conventional narrative of *The Lover's Opera*, for example, concerns a greedy father who schemes to earn £4000 by marrying his two daughters to wealthy but repugnant suitors. When, with the help of an intriguing maid, the daughters are able to wed their chosen gallants, it appears to be a triumph of youthful sincerity over stodgy avarice. But throughout the text, the ballads consistently serve the cause of selfish acquisitiveness; we are told that love is always purchased by gold (6), that "without Money [marriage] will find no Favour" (9) and "Money, Money, only Money is the World's Delight"

(11), and that "Wealth o'ercomes all Griefs and Cares" (37). Particularly striking in this regard is Air X, in which one of the young swains assures his beloved of his constancy. He will prove true, he states, until "The Lawyer shall slight his Fee/ The courtier shall give/Much more than receive" and so on (14). To be sure, the tenor of his message is that it is impossible for him to be false, but the vehicle, an extensive catalog asserting that it is impossible for anyone to forgo his monetary interest, works against this, especially because the issue at stake is the power of love to transcend cupidity. Here, as elsewhere, the validity of a character's virtue is sabotaged by the portrait of the world attested to in the ballads, making the play far less "conventional and stupid" than Gagey assumes (103), and audiences blessed it by attending almost 100 performances.

The imitators, therefore, did not merely copy Gay's use of popular tunes, they copied the structural principles implicit in Gay's linking of text and music. The uneasy relationship between the ballads and the narrative was preserved. It is easy to forget that before ballad opera, English drama did not have a tradition of joining realistic narratives with songs. Unlike native dramatic opera, *The Beggar's Opera* assigned songs to realistic characters, not sprites and other supernatural beings, and unlike comic operas, in which the text and music were "kept fairly distinct and separate throughout– the musical and terpsichorean features being usually reserved for the end of the act" (Gagey, 20), Gay let singing erupt at any time, by any character. Furthermore, in the majority of cases, a ballad marks an occasion for philosophical generalization; each claims to depict timeless mechanisms that govern society. A tension is therefore created between the behavior of the characters as exhibited in their actions and the general motives as voiced in the songs; potentially noble actions are constantly undermined by the musical repetition claiming that noble motives do not exist. Gay's imitators repeated both the use of ballads to

depict the universal truths and the cynical vision that only self-interest is truly universal.

Of course, the influence of *The Beggar's Opera* went far beyond the use of music, and *The Quaker's Opera,* by Thomas Walker, is a particularly rich play to explore the early variations on *The Beggar's Opera* because it not only adapted an existing play into ballad opera form, it adapted *The Prison-Breaker,* a work some critics assume to have been Gay's primary inspiration (Pearce, 22, Shultz, 169-70). Walker's departures from his anonymous source are of course far less substantial than those of Gay, but it would be a mistake to attribute that to Walker's incompetence. In fact, the two men had far different goals. While Gay had simply attempted to write a new play and thus drew ideas from any available sources, Walker was quite deliberately seeking to duplicate the popularity of *The Beggar's Opera.* Regardless of whether Walker was aware of Gay's indebtedness (as the original Macheath, he might have been), he recognized that *The Prison-Breaker* required alteration if it were to match *The Beggar's Opera*'s success. Walker's changes, therefore, signal his perception of what *The Prison-Breaker* lacked, and by extension, what elements were necessary components of the new species of drama.

Another point, on similar lines, seems worth noting here. Imitation is only one of the forms of exploitation of an enormous success, and it is by no means the simplest, for neither revivals of source material nor accusations of plagiarism require work. Although one would imagine that a brief puff in a London journal proclaiming the opening of the "work that inspired *The Beggar's Opera*" could have drawn a substantial audience, *The Prison-Breaker* never reached the stage, not once throughout almost a century of continued popularity for Gay's play. Nor did its anonymous author, or anyone else, ever accuse Gay of plagiarism or even borrowing from the work, despite a number of accusations that Gay's work lacked originality. One writer,

for example, contended that with *The Beggar's Opera*, "Mr. Gay stole from Mr. Bullock, who only Borrowed it of Mr. Marston; and the Law says 'the receiver is as good as the thief' " (Pierce, 177). He was referring to *A Woman's Revenge*, Bullock's version of Marston's *Dutch Courtezan*, a play that resembles *The Beggar's Opera* only in having a scene set at Newgate (curiously, it too served as a source for the early ballad opera *Love and Revenge*). Although *The Prison-Breaker* had a far more plausible claim to precursorship (it includes a Peachum-like trader of stolen goods, collusion between thieves and prison officials, and even a musical number), its author brought forth no such charges against Gay, or against Walker, who copied pages of dialogue verbatim without acknowledgment. There seems to have been an assumption that the best way to exploit Gay's success was to write new ballad operas.

Opening in Newgate, *The Prison-Breaker* introduces Careful and Rust, a pair of unscrupulous jailers intent on exploiting their recent capture of John Sheppard by selling viewings of the notorious criminal. The motley collection that has paid for this privilege, including a gentleman, a doctor, an Irishman, and a lusty Quaker, are led to the cell only to discover that Sheppard has escaped. The play then follows Sheppard, who, entering with a song, rejoins his gang at the Public House owned by Coaxthief (who launders their pillaged goods). The gang decides to rob a rich Welsh lawyer, but when the constables arrive, Sheppard impersonates his victim and has the lawyer himself carted off to jail. By chance, he then encounters the drunken Irishman and robs him, quickly plunders a pawnshop, and returns to Coaxthief's, only to be captured by Jonathon Wile. The final scene shows the unrepentant Sheppard dragged to his cell under the eyes of the motley crew with which the play opened. Rather abruptly, the play ends with Rust announcing that they will have no more viewings until the next day, when Sheppard is

sure to be in better spirits.

For *The Quaker's Opera,* Walker made two types of significant changes. He altered the plot slightly, adding love interests for Sheppard, and he introduced several formal elements learned from *The Beggar's Opera,* including the addition of twenty-five songs. The bulk of Walker's dialogue, however, came virtually word for word from *The Prison-Breaker*, with only minor variations. So slight are these alterations that it is tempting to dismiss them as unimportant, but in fact these details may be more revealing of Walker's intentions than the higher structures. As John Huntington has pointed out, literary critics think of hastily written literature in the same way they think of pulp graphics. The coarse resolution of newspaper photographs deters examination of minor details. But with literature, he continues:

> Surface dullness does not mean that the text is unexpressive. . .It may be truer to the actual nature of popular literature to invert the analogy to the visual picture: it is at the level of linguistic detail that the text is precise; however clumsily used, the words are governed by the rules and requirements of English. . .It is at the broadest level— plot, character, setting, theme, style— that popular literature will depend most on recognition of preexisting shapes. . .characters will be conventional, settings and plots formulaic, themes trite. But whether or not the author is in artistic control, the linguistic details, however banal, are precise. (36)

This seems particularly relevant to *The Quaker's Opera*. Because Walker retained so many of the linguistic details of his source text, those places where he departed from the original acquire added significance. Just as one might closely analyze the errors of a medieval scribe to gain knowledge of his cultural prejudices, so too can we seek a pattern in Walker's smallest

emendations to discern his interpretation of the nature of ballad opera.

Once our attention is focused in this way, a pattern does indeed seem to emerge. Although some of Walker's changes seem to simply update the slang (he replaces “the Sweets of taking Money” (2) with “the Sweets of touching the Rhino”(2)), and some of his excisions merely display an actor's superior sense of stage timing, a great many of them seem designed to emphasize (and celebrate) the ubiquity of greed. If *The Prison-Breaker* could be read as a condemnation of its corrupt characters, *The Quaker's Opera* takes care to universalize corruption by constantly reiterating that poor and rich alike delight in selfish acquisition. When Walker adds his first new line, that stealing is “a Virtue peculiar to Men in Power” (2), it may seem a damnation of the rich, but the criticism gets immediately undercut by the Air that follows which cheerfully describes how everyone is “like Superiors” in their love of money. Throughout the opening discussion between the two jailers (and later Jonathon Wile), Walker gives his characters an unabashed honesty regarding their unscrupulousness. He changes the jailer's claim that Sheppard “is worth much to us” to the more cynical “he's worth to us as much as a rebellion” (2), implying that political events might be orchestrated for personal gain. He alters an exchange in which Rust chastises Careful for speaking Latin: in the original, Rust is told he must not speak Latin because he might be suspected of colluding with certain prisoners, but in *The Quaker's Opera* he is told that showing intelligence is bad for business, to which Rust replies “I'll keep my place— my Wit shall never ruin me” (4). Even more striking is the passage Walker adds to the conversation with Jonathon Wile. In both plays, Careful, commenting on Wile's favorite pistol, declares “that will demolish a thief as soon as you can take an oath, and that's pretty expeditious”(5). In *The Prison-Breaker* the comment passes without mention, but Walker

appends the following gratuitous outburst:

> *Rust*. Ah! thou art an unthinking Creature. Take an Oath! If it were not for a little moderate Perjury now and then, to wet the Way, as they say— Practice would be so dry, that some of our Topping Fellows would have no Shoes to their Heels. (5)

And this frank duplicity continues in the jailers' remarks on Wile himself. Compare this line from *The Prison-Breaker*:

> *Rust*. *Jonathon* is very well in his Way; but I have heard some Thieves, ay, and honest People too, say, he deserves hanging as much as *Sheppard*. But he's our friend, and I won't rail at him too much. (5)

To the same line in *The Quaker's Opera*:

> *Rust*. *Jonathon* is very well in his Way; but— he's our friend, therefore I won't rail at him; for tho' we have no Aversion to a good Man, 'tis often our interest to Wink at the Crimes of a bad one. (5)

Here, as elsewhere, Walker works to remove any hint of a moral order above the jailer's iniquity; it is as if he went through, line by line, seeking to increase the atmosphere of happy nihilism. *The Quaker's Opera* may have been hastily written and is perhaps artlessly imitative, but Walker seems to have taken particular care to clarify his thematic message.

Walker did not limit the unguarded cynicism to his jailers; all the characters he creates seem blissfully aware that the world is solely governed by the sweets of touching the rhino. Minor characters in *The Prison-Breaker* are often simple cullies, or at least, like the gentleman in the following scene, need to be educated in the new (anti-)ethics:

> *Gent*. I have a Desire, Gentlemen, to see this famous *Sheppard*, and if you'll gratify

me, 'twill oblige me.

Rust. Sir, 'tis not usual with us to make a Shew of an unhappy Creature. If you have Business with him, 'tis another Thing.

Gent. I have no Bus'ness with him, common Curiosity brought me hither. If you make a Difficulty of it, I shall not break my Heart to be disappointed.

Care. A Difficulty, Sir! You know we are but Servants; and if we oblige any Gentleman we run a Hazard; and a Body would not run a Hazard for nothing.

Gent. Oh, I understand you. Well, call for what drink you please.

Rust. Drink! O Lord, Sir, we never drink in a Morning.

Gent. Well, well, here's something to regale your selves with in the evening then.

Rust. Do you take the Gentleman's Favour. (5-6)

It is easy to overlook the elaborateness of this negotiation. Rust and Careful know what they want, but they also know they must speak in code to communicate their desires. The Gentleman is an utter neophyte; he responds with innocent candor, forcing Careful to become dangerously blunt. Even then he fails to understand completely, though by the end he has learned both their wishes and the code: to acknowledge that the money he gives them was for anything but a drink would show a lack of decorum.

In contrast, the world of *The Quaker's Opera* seems to have no concept of decorum:

Gent. I have a Desire, Gentlemen, to see this famous *Shepard*, and if you'll gratifie me, 'twill oblige me.

(*Gives Money*.)

Rust. Do you take the Gentleman's Favour. (5)

Like similar scenes in *The Restauration of Charles II*, the abruptness here may at first appear artless, leading one to prefer the earlier version. But I think Walker's text is not only much funnier, it is also a far stronger critique of human nature. The Gentleman assumes the need to give money and shows no embarrassment about doing so. No one gives even the slightest hint that an impropriety has occurred; bribery is as natural as buying a hat. Corruption is not corruption; it is an unquestioned fact. Furthermore, Walker seems to have had no doubt that his audience would get the joke. Less than a year after the opening of *The Beggar's Opera*, the attitude of gay anarchism had so penetrated public consciousness that it could be invoked with the smallest of gestures. Little wonder that ballad opera alarmed the moral guardians.

I could continue at length this elaboration of Walker's emendations, but I will conclude this micro-analysis with an example that best exemplifies the substantial thematic difference between the two works. It occurs in a conversation between the constable and his watchmen as they are investigating Shepard's plundering of the lawyer. In *The Prison Breaker*, a low-ranking watchman challenges the ethics of greed that seems to be all around him:

> *Con*. I could take my Oath that they went in at the *Green* Door; therefore follow me all, with the Courage that becomes your Cause, and secure Forty Pounds a Man, for the Honour of *Old England*.
>
> *2 Watch*. For my part, I don't value the Money, but for the Honour of O*ld England* I'll do anything.
>
> *Con*. Well then, since you are so brave, for the Honour of *Old England*, you shall go first. And I'll bring up the Rear for the Money.
>
> *2 Watch*. Adzook's. Done Master— I'm sure my Stars have us'd me very scurvily,

> to make me only a Watchman, when I know in my Conscience and Soul, if I were put upon it, I have the Courage enough to be Constable in one of the largest Parishes in *London*. But kissing goes by Favour. I must be contented. (23-4)

Unlike the other guards in the play (such as Nod-fast, who is constantly falling asleep), this watchman commands respect. The moral authority of his motives is nowhere undercut, and his closing aside shows him as the conscience of the play. His determined belief that courage makes a constable, unshaken even by his awareness that promotions are given by favor and not merit, gives the audience a standard from which to evaluate the other characters. The black deeds occurring throughout the work look blacker still when contrasted with the simple soul who can resist them. Furthermore, his final words imply that the virtuous response to unfair corruption in this world is to focus on the next: chalk your lot up to fate and remain content.

By this point it should come as no surprise that Walker's version has no time for such niceties:

> *Const*. I could take my Oath that they went in at the *Green* Door; therefore follow me all with the Courage that becomes your Cause, and secure a Hundred and Forty Pounds a Man, for the Honour of *Old England*.
>
> *Watch*. Adzooks, done Master.

Eliminating the virtuous watchman sharply alters the tenor of the play. No longer an arena in which honest people struggle against the villains that exploit them, the world of *The Quaker's Opera* is one without an ethical center. The conflict is not staged between good versus evil, but rather between equally amoral rivals each pursuing similar ends, leaving no criteria for evaluation but success in obtaining status, money, and power. Particularly interesting is Walker's choice to

raise the reward by an extra hundred pounds. Though the slight change could never be recognized, Walker decided that the original forty pounds was too paltry. In a joke no one could notice but the playwright himself, *The Quaker's Opera* slyly implies that everyone's virtue has a price.

Walker worked methodically to remove from his source text any presence of moral authority. Behavior is evaluated solely on the basis of its benefit to financial success. Regardless of how much we want to credit to authorial intention, the changes are too numerous and too patterned to be accidental. Seeking to imitate *The Beggar's Opera*, Walker felt that the least variable aspect of Gay's work was its unstable ethics. Moreover, Walker was not alone in this opinion; it runs throughout ballad opera. (The exceptions are Cibber's *Love in a Riddle* and Lillo's *Sylvia*, both plays in which the authors openly claimed to be defying the ballad opera norm, both of which were disastrous failures, and both of which, interestingly, were soon after turned into afterpieces that parodied the originals.) Characters freely announce their selfish intentions, and bribery, duplicity, theft, self-promotion, infidelity, lasciviousness, cowardice, drunkenness, pandering, jealousy, greed, and even, in some extreme cases, murder and rape, all get evaluated by the benefit they accrue the practitioner. These figures are filled with deceit but they lack hypocrisy; even the dupes know what they are doing, and often congratulate their deceivers for their cleverness. There is simply no recognition of the concept of shame in the vast majority of these plays.

This is certainly true of *The Beggar's Opera*, but it is not always seen today as the work's most important feature. But for the earliest imitators, it seemed to be the play's principal novelty, exceeding in importance even the veiled references to political figures (an aspect that was not

frequently repeated in the early imitations). Furthermore, just as the use of songs to express cynical sentiments became more important in the imitations than it had been in Gay's text, the glorification of selfishness was more pronounced in the successors. Finally, because this feature was duplicated with such consistency, it became more difficult to imagine a ballad opera that worked differently. And audiences therefore learned to expect such meanings whenever they encountered a work that signals its debt to *The Beggar's Opera*, so much so that they began rejecting those few operas that attempted to impart a different message. By this process, the generic expectations of ballad opera became more and more solidified.

III. The Reprieve: A More Complex Transformation

Perhaps because it could be applied without difficulty to virtually any type of plot, the expression of the ubiquity of corruption was the most frequently and most obviously repeated aspect of Gay's text. And many of the other elements I have mentioned above, such as the meta-theatrical critique implicit in the opening conversation between a poet and a player, and the poisonous jealousy of Polly and Lucy, found their way into a great many of the earliest imitations. Like the theme of corruption, both of these aspects are easy to apply to multiple circumstances; female rivalry can be worked into virtually any setting or plot structure. The frequency that these aspects were repeated is significant, especially when one notes that other similarly flexible elements, such as the betrayal of Macheath by the whores or the collusion of Peachum and Lockit, were seldom included in the successor's texts. However, more interesting transformations occur when the source element does not lend itself to simple replication, for then the imitator must discern (or perhaps more accurately, define) the rationale behind the element in question. The reprieve of Macheath is one such element, the arbitrary rescinding of an assigned punishment

would be difficult to work into a pastoral setting, for example. However, the manner in which Gay's use of the reprieve undercuts established notions of poetic justice is easily recognizable, and because poetic justice was deemed by many an essential element of any play, it would seem equally plausible that any text could work to subvert it. Poetic justice was widely regarded as an essential element of both tragedy and comedy, and the imitators' of *The Beggar's Opera* consistently challenged it, bringing into question the validity of any authority's parceling out of rewards and punishments. Although the manner in which this was accomplished seems obvious in some plays, other texts display remarkable subtlety and resourcefulness. After discussing Gay's initial challenge to it in the *Beggar's Opera*, I will briefly survey the variations on the reprieve as manifested in several other ballad operas before taking a more sustained look at the fascinating example of its function in *The Patron*, perhaps the only comic play of the period that ends in divorce.

Although Joseph Addison called poetic justice "a ridiculous doctrine [with] no foundation in nature, in reason, or in the practice of the ancients" (Addison, 271) this view was not shared by the vast majority of his contemporaries. In the writings of Lewis Theobald, George Farquhar, William Congreve, John Dennis, as well as countless essays in periodicals, one finds repeated assertions that good characters must prosper and evil ones must be punished. Without such a rule, audiences were likely to doubt the rational order of the universe, making them believe that the consequences of their actions "are to be imputed rather to Chance, than to Almighty Conduct and to Sovereign Justice" (Dennis, 70). Gay's deliberate violation of this rule caused more outrage than any of his other breaches of decorum,

but what is lost in the outcry is the fact that Macheath's reprieve was effected not in spite of

dramatic convention but because of it.[6] Gay's plotting set in motion a series of events that would naturally conclude with Macheath's execution, but because the rules insisted that "an Opera must end happily" Gay's Beggar cheerfully acquiesces, noting that "in this kind of Drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about" (52). More importantly, however, the play insists that Macheath's reprieve is the happier ending, thereby calling into question the notion of justice altogether. Pearce is mistaken when he claims the critics "would have been satisfied if Gay had tacked on a moral and sent Macheath to the gallows whining and repentant" (155), for such a conclusion would have been contrary to the desires the play had already established, making the distribution of justice itself tragic. This strategy was in fact attempted half a decade later. In October of 1777 a version was mounted at Covent Garden with alterations by Captain Thompson, and in 1773 *The Bow Street Opera* appeared: an anonymous retelling of Gay's play featuring a repentant Cock-eyed Jack in place of Macheath. The text of the former is lost, but it was a failure on stage. In the latter play, which was never produced, the execution of the thief turns him into a martyr. What mattered to Gay, and what is demanded by the structure he set up, is that the critique be leveled at the randomness of dramatic resolution in general; poetic justice, like social justice, is arbitrarily dispensed by those in power.

If the opponents of the *Beggar's Opera* chose not to notice this fairly obvious point, the writers who developed ballad opera quickly recognized the potentials in Gay's meta-dramatic critique and began structuring plays in order to foreground the haphazard nature of their resolutions. In general, the plays can be divided into two types, depending on what aspect of Gay's manipulation of poetic justice was placed in the foreground. The first group developed the notion that justice was arbitrary, while the second toyed with the notion that poetic justice could

run contrary to the audience's desires.

Least interesting are those ballad operas in which the reprieve of Macheath is imitated directly, but even these can create some uneasy tensions. In *Chuck*, for example, the conniving schoolboy saves himself from a severe whipping by bribing the schoolmaster (oddly named Dionysus), thus directly linking the reprieve with the play's primary theme that "Money always will bestead ye,/ all your fears and Cares compose,/ Button your briches, wipe your Nose" (29). Similarly straightforward, *The Cobbler's Opera* relieves its hero Harry from his responsibility to serve in the Navy by an "order from the Admiralty" (28). Though this arbitrary fiat does allow the lovers to wed happily, it fails to resolve many of the conflicts that the play had generated, leaving the villainous Peg and Lieutenant free to stir up further trouble. Additionally, the announcement of the Admiralty's order is made by the very unreliable Pyefleet, whose moral code seems to be that extortion and swindling are acceptable as long as they are done clandestinely.

Only slightly more sophisticated are those operas that poke fun at the tendency of both tragedy and comedy to bring about closure by suddenly revealing a character's noble parentage, such as *Phebe, The Village Opera*, and *The Contrivances*. Such disclosures, of course, were not uncommon in traditional comedies, but the ballad operas seem to foreground the instability of the discovery. *Penelope*, for example, only rescues its heros by the arrival of Minerva, who has come only to sample the Penelope's drink: "among the gods. . .we've no such Beer" (50). *Penelope* anticipates a large number of later operas, such as *The Welsh Opera* and *The Devil to Pay,* that reach a happy termination due to the last minute arrival of a goddess, witch, or sorcerer. If these solutions are less elegant than those found in other ballad operas, they do indicate that an arbitrary ending was considered an essential part of the emerging genre. As Fielding would put it

in his introduction to *The Welsh Opera*, "it is the Business of a Poet to surprize his Audience, especially a Writer of Opera's --- the discovery, Sir, should be as no one could understand how it could be brought about, before it is made" (ii). And this requirement led to variations that were more complex; *The Footman* and *The Lottery*, for example, explicitly equate the distribution of justice to a game of chance. Fielding's closing song in the latter play, which begins "that the World is a Lottery, What Man can doubt? When born, we're put in, when dead, we're drawn out" is typically cynical regarding the rewards of virtue (31).

Sometimes the last minute reversals do more than simply draw attention to the chance nature of poetic justice; the surprising reprieve is brought about in such a way as to contaminate not only an audience's sense of a just order, but also any possible claims to virtue and honor whatsoever. To be sure, the *Beggar's Opera* denied morality to all its characters, doing "strict poetic justice" (prior to the reprieve) by asking the audience to "suppose they were all either hanged or transported"(51), but in these plays the resolution demands such a severe reevaluation of a character's previous behavior that the audience's ability to make any rational moral judgments is brought into question. *The Wedding* and *The Patron* are designed so that the viewer's emotional involvement in happy marriages or appalling infidelities get proven to be terribly naive.

It can be more difficult to recognize the manipulation of poetic justice in plays of this type, and this helps explain Gagey's categorizing *The Wedding*, Essex Hawker's short but highly satirical opera, as nothing more than a cheery pastoral. The slight plot, focused on Peartree's sorrow that his love Margery is being forced against her wishes to marry a certain Mr. Ply does indeed seem to confirm Gagey's opinion that the treatment throughout is "light and romantic"

(95). However, were it as simplistic as Gagey implies it would be hard to explain its popularity. Hawker had no reputation as an author, but *The Wedding* has the distinction of appearing at several different venues; in 1729 it was produced at both Lincoln's Inn Fields and Drury Lane, and the former company revived it 1734 when their theatre was replaced with Covent Garden. A newly type-set edition accompanied each production (some going through multiple printings), and the printers seemed to spare no expense, including engraved copper-plates of the overture and, in one instance, an elaborate engraving depicting the "hudibrastic skimmington" at the play's climax. For a pedestrian idyll written by an amateur to receive such attention would be highly unusual.

If the bulk of the play does indeed seem wholly traditional, this is only so that the resolution can more greatly mock convention. Hawker carefully establishes empathy for his distressed lovers, painting Peartree and Margery as undoubtedly sincere and deeply pained at their misfortune. Margery's mother is cold and authoritative, and Mr. Ply is arrogant in temperament and grotesque in appearance. There are occasional touches typical of ballad opera satire,[7] but until the end our sympathies remain with the estranged sweethearts, and poetic justice demands their reunion and comeuppance for Ply. This does indeed occur, but the mechanism that arranges it is not only arbitrary, it seems to benefit Ply and damn the lovers. Early in the play, Hawker has led us to expect a surprise that will upset the wedding of Margery to Ply by having Peartree's companion Rako declare that he has "laid a Scheme. . .to Stop this Match" (7), but when the moment arrives Rako is nowhere to be found. Instead, the ceremony is interrupted by Ply's brideman, who announces the arrival of a skimmington: a lubricious processional intended to bring odium on an unfaithful husband or wife (OED). As the elaborate parade passes by, complete with drumming on pans and a chorus of women encouraging wives to be shrewish, the

brideman discourses on the evils of marriage, and then an officer arrests Ply and carries him off. Peartree and Margery remain to marry each other, but we are left with the prejudice that Ply has been given a reprieve and that Peartree is the one receiving punishment, a notion Hawker underscores by absenting Margery from the celebration, having Peartree sing the final chorus with her mother alone. The skimmington has overturned our initial desire with a tremendous din, and if poetic justice has been served, it has only done so by confounding our sense of what constitutes punishment and reward.

Critics have also failed to see the importance of poetic justice to *The Patron*, but unlike *The Wedding*, Thomas Odell's ballad opera has been seen as intriguing but baffling. Gagey declares it "profoundly disillusioned and cynical," but fails to provide an interpretation justifying this view, noting that parts of it seem obscure (135). Similarly, Loftis believes the play "to be rich in political satire, though the butt of its satire is not at all clear" (103). And Hume declares: "I do not know what to make of *The Patron* . . .from someone other than Odell one might take this as a nasty hit at the way business was done in the Walpole administration" (80). *The Patron* is complex and clever, but it is not muddled. These critics have been confounded by a misplaced focus; the satire is social, not political. Concentrating on Odell's variation on the reprieve reveals that the author's primary target was marriage, not business, though the message remains as pessimistic as Gagey implies.

Odell's play follows the fortunes of Merit, who despite assisting Lord Falcon in numerous elections is unable to secure from his patron a promised place in the patent office. He thus sends his wife Peggy to meet with Lord Falcon to do what she will to persuade him to secure the lucrative position for her husband. *The Patron* is thus one of a number of eighteenth-century plays

which, like Behn's *The Lucky Chance*, Haywood's *A Wife to Lett*, and Fielding's *A Modern Husband*, deals with wife-pandering. Unlike those other plays, however, *The Patron* never censures its hero, and instead presents Merit's act as a final, desperate, and ultimately understandable effort. Nor does Merit ever doubt that his wife will preserve her honor, despite the warnings and reproaches of his friend Stout. In fact, the plot develops tension by interweaving scenes between Peggy and Falcon with scenes between Peggy and her husband, skillfully leaving the audience in doubt as to whether she will survive the ordeal with her fidelity intact.

Odell takes pains to paint Peggy as a woman pathetically positioned between the potentially conflicting obligations of marital fidelity and wifely obedience. Before departing for her first visit with Lord Falcon, she tells her husband "I cannot mistake my Duty any more than my Interest," underlining her virtue and her submissiveness (2). We see her next tearfully upbraiding Falcon for his cruelty; his lack of gratitude has brought about the sad couple's ruin, she woefully laments. However, when Lord Falcon makes the slightest innuendo, promising to intercede for Merit if she will only command him, Peggy responds with a fury worthy of one of Richardson's heroines:

> Oh, hideous! Have you not already ruin'd us? An' would you destroy our domestick Peace? It is n't enough then that my Spouse has danc'd Attendance for so many Years to no Purpose, unless his Wife be dishonour'd too? I'm astonished a Man o' your Cast does not send some body to murder him likewise, and so compleat your Cruelty; or, perhaps you think it best he should live to understand his Misery. (6)

In the end, recalling her object, Peggy agrees to a later meeting with the wicked patron, but only

after he gives her a dagger as collateral to ensure that he will bring Merit's Patent along with him.

She also, however, accepts a purse of gold, but if that fact has made the audience begin to doubt her intentions, her next scene with Merit goes a long way to reestablish her integrity. Not only does she inform him of Falcon's willingness to give him the Patent Place, but she also informs him of the purse of gold. Their exchange at this point is entirely sentimental:

> *Merit.* What do I see? What do I hear? My better Angel, (*embracing her*) I must alwais love thee; and tho' I'm acquainted with his am'rous Vein, 'tis even cruel to ask what he expects from thee for all this.
>
> [*Peggy*]. Gen'rous *Merit,* I'll not keep thee in the Dark as to that neither. He has Hopes, I confess, of being very free with me; but I've so manag'd it with him, that even that too is left my Gen'rosity. I'll deal with him, Tom, ne'er fear me. (12)

Following that, the viewer is treated to two airs promoting trust and eternal marital harmony. Peggy sings "My Virtue shall govern with absolute Sway/I'll bring you the Prize unpolluted away," while Merit intones that "Marriage is a mutual Blessing where a mutual faith is seen/Pleasures unrestrained possessing, there no sorrows intervene" (12-13). Clearly Odell has gone to great lengths to leave his audience with an impression of the purity of the happy couple as his first act comes to an end.

It is therefore rather a shock when Act II opens with Peggy lounging with Lord Falcon in unrepentant post-coital satisfaction. Worse yet, we will soon discover that she had dishonored herself the night before, unbeknownst to either Falcon or Merit, with a certain Sir Jolly Glee for £500, by pretending to be a Mrs. Rhubarb. Odell works hard to garner sympathy for his hero, showing Merit blindly accepting his wife's declaration of innocence, joyfully passing the good

news on to his friend, and delightedly singing "Lovely Woman's Only Wise," an air praising her spotless virtue, based on a tune that underscores the moment's dramatic irony: "Whilst the Town's Brimful of Folly." The conclusion, likewise, is artfully designed to make inevitable Merit's disillusionment. Odell arranges for Falcon and Glee to enter into a debate over whose mistress is superior, and they make a wager on it. To settle the matter Falcon invites Glee along to meet Merit and his wife, ostensibly to congratulate him on his patent, but actually so that Glee might note the incomparability of the young woman. It is a tight structure; the audience can ruefully anticipate Merit's discovery of Peggy's infidelity and her blatant duplicity, but they cannot predict how the catastrophe will play out. It is certain that Glee, upon realizing Merit's wife and Mrs. Rhubarb are one in the same, will end up exposing himself and Falcon as her paramours, but what will be the result? All the characters, it seems, deserve punishing; the play is beginning to look like more of a "downright deep tragedy" than its progenitor.

Odell's solution is both ingenious and unsettling. As everything is revealed, Stout growing more and more indignant, Merit remains unfazed. It turns out that Peggy is not his wife at all but rather a woman of the town, so Merit has not been cuckolded after all. Falcon and Glee are a little distressed to be so ridiculed, but they are soon reconciled, Merit gets his position, Peggy ends up with £800, and everyone agrees that it was a mighty fine joke. All retire to join Merit for supper and a bottle of wine, merrily singing:

> Lay aside your Anger, let's be Friends,
>
> And be easie, easie, easie, easie,
>
> Easie whilst we stay:
>
> 'Tis certain every Man has private Ends,

> Tho' Pleasure, Gain, or Humour
> Make us different in the Way.
> Then let's not envy Others, but pursue,
> Each in his Course, with all his Strength
> And Skill his darling Game:
> For, were the Tables turn'd, the Worst we do,
> Ev'n those which most bespatter us,
> Themselves wou'd do the Same. (35-36)

However happy and clever this ending is, it nevertheless sits uncomfortably with the rest of the play, for Odell had not only disguised Merit and Peggy's actual relationship, he actively falsified it, never telegraphing the deception until the final discovery. By working to elicit his spectators' compassion, first for a virtuous but beleaguered wife and then for a shamelessly betrayed husband, Odell made fools of his audience just as Merit made a fool of Falcon. The plot has reached a coherent resolution, but the viewers have been denied catharsis; their empathy is simply irrelevant; their emotional energy has nowhere to go; to care about fidelity is to be hopelessly unrealistic. The abrupt ending of *The Patron* not only asks for an awareness of the randomness of poetic justice, it also forces spectators to confront just how deeply both their emotional responses and their moral judgments are manipulated by narrative conventions.

Our understanding of both *The Patron* and *The Wedding* depended on the recognition that they were aiming to imitate *The Beggar's Opera*. Out of context, aspects of Hawker's play, such as Rako's unfulfilled promise of an intrigue and Margery's absence from the marriage celebration, appear to be careless authorial oversights. When taken as deliberate imitations of Gay's

subversion of poetic justice, however, they are revealed to be artful reinforcers of the thematic message, a message, moreover that Hawker bluntly states in his epigraph ("there are no marriages in Heaven"). Similarly, Odell's play was incomprehensible until its deep structural similarity to *The Beggar's Opera* was made evident. Eighteenth-century audiences, however, had a heightened awareness of the controversy regarding poetic justice, and expected and desired ballad operas to create variations on Gay's themes, and thus may have had less difficulty recognizing these authors' intentions. We have, in fact, lost the generic competence for understanding ballad opera, but by taking the imitations seriously we can recover it. In the next section, I examine one of the most important of these imitations, one regarded as clumsy and derivative despite the fact that it was written by the master himself.

III. The Polly Effect

My micro-analysis of the details in *The Stage-Coach Opera* and *The Quaker's Opera* attempted to identify the aspect of *The Beggar's Opera* that was consistently repeated and that gave the genre its characteristic intent. My discussion of poetic justice sought to show how a much discussed feature of Gay's text developed complexity through repetition and variation. Both of these analyses investigated patterns that clearly originated in the source text, but when studying the imitations a commonality emerges that seems to have no precedence in Gay's exemplar: a large majority of these plays employed cross-gender casting. The pattern seems too pronounced to be coincidental, and it also seems unlikely that the imitations were duplicating each other, so some aspect of the reception of Gay's play must have indicated that such casting would be an appropriate way to exploit the connotations of the original.

That cross-gender casting was a commonplace among early ballad operas is difficult to

deny. The practice continued throughout the decade, but limiting the search to the twenty-six ballad operas produced by 1730, we find fifteen of them that used cross-casting and only five that did not (no casting information is available for the other six). Furthermore, two of those that did not employ cross-gender casting in their original form, *The Village Opera* and *The Beggar's Wedding*, began to adopt the practice when new casts were assembled for their revised forms as *The Chamber-maid* and *Phebe*. It is also worth noting that *The Beggar's Opera* itself was frequently produced with cross-gender casting, the first instance being the notorious "lilliputian" version produced in Dublin in 1728 with Peg Woffington as Macheath. Finally, though it is true that some of the actresses who portrayed men in ballad operas, such as Charlotte Charke and Mrs. Roberts, had occasionally played breeches roles in other genres, they did so much more frequently in ballad operas. Nor can the pattern be explained away by assuming that it results from the need for a large number of singers.[8] Even if this were the case, one would still want to explain how the practice altered reception, but an examination the cast lists for ballad operas quickly confirms that a shortage of singers cannot be the explanation. Theophillus Cibber could certainly sing and was also notorious for taking the plum roles in his own plays,[9] but he cast Mrs. Roberts as his male protagonist in *Patie and Peggy*, giving himself the minor role of Roger. Here, as in most of the cases, cross-gender casting looks like a deliberate thematic choice, one that demands an explanation as to what it was meant to achieve. There seems to have been something about Gay's play that made gender tampering pertinent in both reproductions and imitations. Here, I would like to suggest that although the text of *The Beggar's Opera* does not alone provide an explanation for all the cross-casting, the early reception history of the play does. The response to the character of Polly was heated and divided, and the tensions created by her character help to

illuminate the effect of the casting choices in many of these imitations. I can demonstrate this most clearly by describing the way Gay exploits that response in his own imitation. Although *Polly* was not performed until 1777 and thus there is no evidence of how it might have been originally cast, the text relies on gender instabilities to cast doubt on all notions of nobility and honor.

Gay begins *Polly* by noting that a sequel to a play is "a kind of absurdity" and he doubts that his new play will receive much attention, for imitations are not likely to earn respect and he "shall hardly be pardon'd for imitating myself" (v). He was mistaken. Although Walpole denounced the play and forbade its production only days before its scheduled debut, the printed text sold thousands of copies, earning Gay far more than he could have expected from a third night's benefit. And, like its predecessor, *Polly* generated a flurry of polemics. The public had anticipated the sequel for several months, so Walpole risked considerable public outrage when he banned it, yet the government remained adamant in its refusal to allow it on stage. The controversy generated by the prohibition sparked vehement debate, forcing all manner of public figures to declare allegiance to one side or the other. Lord Hervey defended the administration, calling the play "less pretty but more abusive" than the original, and even more thinly disguised (I,121). The Duchess of Queensberry took Gay's side; it was she who sold subscriptions for the printed text, and for this offense she was excluded from the Court and her husband was forced to resign his appointment as Vice Admiral of Scotland. The opinion in the journals was as divided as that at court. The *Craftsman* denounced the play (December 14, 1728) but also printed what appears to be a defense in the form of a mock damnation signed by "Hilarius" (February 1, 1728). In a similar way, *Fog's Weekly Journal* ridiculed everyone who found the play offensive by avoiding potentially seditious lines and highlighting clearly harmless ones (April 26, 1729).

Modern scholarship seems equally divided. Although the vehement opposition suggests that many in the eighteenth century considered *Polly* morally dangerous, ideologically subversive, and direct in its political satire, for most of the twentieth century the piece was relegated to a position of an obscure and unartistic curiosity, considered mediocre at best. John Fuller finds it "simplistic and harmless" (125), Shultz calls it "a pale shadow" of the original, "so stupid, so lacking in motivation [as to be] a veritable anticlimax"(223), and Irving agrees that it is a "sad deterioration" (270). Interestingly, however, these critics also express bewilderment at the play's suppression, and seem unable to locate any ideological critique at all. "We are justified in wondering why so simple and harmless a piece could provoke the wrath of the authorities and thereby be elevated to a hysterical prominence which on its literary merits," Shultz authoritatively declares, " it could never deserve" (220). Similarly, Spacks finds " the early history of *Polly* more interesting than the play," for the history is complex and the play is completely lacking in irony, "an essentially frivolous and meaningless exercise" (57-9). Irving even suggests that the play is pandering in its inoffensiveness, filled with "commonplace moralizing" and only slightly "disguised pruriency" (271). Finally, Croker manages to express both of these tendencies in a single sentence: "the piece seems to me to be as free from all political allusion as it is destitute of any kind of dramatic merit" (121). Gay appears to have been right after all; for some time *Polly* was believed to be no better than the other early ballad operas.

Because of its reflections on slavery and colonialism, *Polly* has been reevaluated by more recent scholars, who find its themes rich in political implications. These critics, somewhat repetitively, assert that *Polly* endorses the "radical notion that England's relentless acts of colonial appropriation are acts of piracy" (Dryden, 543). Thus Werthiem calls the play a severe critique of

"the surface romance of colonial expansionism to its true and sordid economic underpinnings" (203), Hawes opines that it "defines colonialism as nothing more than glorified piracy" (151), Dharwadker finds in it "the mechanisms of a postcolonial police state" (9), and Dugaw notes that "Gay insists upon the failure of European culture and its conquering enterprise" (210). Dabydeen and Greene voice similar convictions, and only Richardson dares disagree, though rather mildly: "[*Polly*] expresses a nagging sense that slavery is wrong as well as the comfortable reassurance that things are about as right as is reasonable to expect" (22). These essays rate the play's literary value more highly, but they share with the previous critics the view that unlike its progenitor it "portrays a society split into heroes and villains. . .and there is no doubt at all where one's sympathies are supposed to lie" (Spacks, 57). More importantly, though they argue that *Polly* is radically revolutionary, their discoveries don't manage to explain the play's suppression: esoteric critiques of colonialism were not the sort of thing Walpole worried about, and no eighteenth-century writer ever seemed concerned about these nuances.

Only Goldgar offers any real speculation on the cause of the censorship, and though his brief comments are not very convincing, they do reveal an interpretative tendency that pinpoints the reason that critics have failed to see the play's ironies. Goldgar believes that Walpole would have been associated with Ducat, whose ostentation could be read as a dig at Walpole's crass vulgarity, and whose philandering would highlight the minister's affair with Molly Skerrit. He also imagines that the execution of Macheath in the sequel "might be looked on as seditious wish-fulfillment on Gay's part" (81-2). However plausible this might be, it examines only two relatively minor character's in *Polly*, completely ignoring the heroine who dominates the action. And despite the play's title, Polly herself is virtually ignored in discussions of the play; she is

everywhere considered unambiguously virtuous and thematically unimportant. Thus Fuller bases his dismissal on the fact that "Macheath lacks charm" (56), Doughty laments that "Macheath himself has changed, and changed for the worse" (6), Gagey complains that Gay sacrificed "the glamour, the charm and the gallantry of his hero" (49), and Irving complains that Macheath, "tied helplessly to the apron strings of *one* doxy, can awaken no thrills and scarcely any interest" (270). Nor are the postcolonial readings any better in this regard. Dryden, most egregiously, fails to include a single discussion of the title character in his twenty-page analysis, and Richardson limits his discussion of her to a single paragraph. Dugaw is exceptional in this regard, but I think even she underestimates the significance of Gay's choice to make Polly his new protagonist. However admirable her analysis of its ideological tensions, Dugaw reads the play without acknowledging its relationship to the original. In the end she too finds *Polly* rather unsatisfying, and even accuses Gay of allowing his sentimental portrayal of Polly to undermine his political point in the closing scenes. Her reading, however, fails to recognize the richness of the cultural context Gay was exploiting in his sequel. The phenomenal success of *The Beggar's Opera,* Gay had realized, was in large part based on the public's extraordinary fascination with the character of Polly and the actress who had portrayed her. The numerous encomiums, equally numerous condemnations, and the public's seemingly insatiable appetite for "anything Polly" gave the character a notoriety almost as great as that which would later be bestowed on Richardson's Pamela. In *Polly,* Gay uses this publicity to critique the hypocrisy of conquest, both as a structure of imperialism and as a model for sexual relations, but he also suggests that all claims to virtue are suspect. Like *Oroonoko, Polly* ties together the politics of empire and the politics of gender,[10] but unlike Behn's royal slave, Gay's protagonist was already famous, and the author could use her hotly disputed

reputation as a vehicle to express his deeper point. Only by recognizing the thematic tensions generated by the public opinion of Polly rubbing against Gay's new projection of her can one recognize the full subversiveness of Gay's sequel, which ends up painting righteousness as just another tool for selfish acquisition.

Although the characters in *Polly* seem to bear only a slight resemblance to their namesakes in *The Beggar's Opera*, Gay was not simply exploiting the popularity of his earlier work to make a quick profit; he seemed to have wanted the new portrayals to resonate with their reputations. From correspondence, we learn that Gay earnestly desired his play to be staged, but not so much that he would be willing to sacrifice the thematic generated by its status as a sequel. Swift, sympathizing with his friend after the play was suppressed, wrote: "I had never much hope of your vamped play, although Mr. Pope seemed to have, but you should have done like the parsons and changed your text, I mean your title and the names of the persons" (Pearce, 251). It was advice Gay had persistently refused to accept; Polly just would not be the same were she not the Miss Peachum that had taken the town by storm.

Critics have yet to recognize that the success of *The Beggar's Opera* was in large part a result of the public's fascination with Polly and Lavinia Fenton, the actress who portrayed her. To be sure, Macheath also achieved celebrity, but not nearly as swiftly and thoroughly as his fictional mistress. The *Dunciad* includes a note regarding Polly/Fenton's immediate success: "her pictures were engraved and sold in great numbers, her life written, books of letters and verses to her were published; and pamphlets made even of her sayings and jests," and all of this during the show's first run, a period lasting less than six months (Schultz, 24). Fans, screens, and playing cards with her image could be found in shop windows everywhere; a child was named after her,

and a duel was fought over her honor, her offender getting mortally wounded for his trouble. One ballad that circulated freely explicitly credits the play's success to its charming heroine:

> Happy Johnny Gay
> Whose successful Play
> Is made the theam of all we say
> And our Pills for Melancholy;
> But this is all
> Due to Poll–
> When this house is full–
> Who drew them there but Polly? (Pearce, p. 133)

If Gay were simply cashing in on his previous success, then, it is hardly surprising that he would put the spotlight on Polly, but he was after more than increased money and fame.

The attention given to Polly was more complicated than a simple love of the character; she was a touchstone in a debate about the nature of power, particularly the manner in which the disenfranchised could manipulate social codes for their own betterment. For every favorable verse written to the virtuous Polly, one can find a contrasting document accusing her of sexual predation and manipulative social climbing. One series of engravings depicted "the principal Captives of the All-conquering Polly," and was accompanied with amorous declarations to the "celebrated Warbler of Ribaldry" (Wanko, 487). One ballad goes on for nine stanzas enumerating Polly's lovers in scurrilous detail, beginning with Gay and producer John Rich. Another well known verse, written by one Philander Flush-Cheek, begs to join the list of captives in a verse form Richardson would later use in *Pamela* to very different ends:

Oh that I was this happy Silk

(But wishing is a Folly,)

To kiss thy Breast as white as milk,

Oh, my enchanting POLLY!

Or that I was thy yielding Glove

To press thy Hand–ah, shall I?--

Or rather was thy dearest love,

Oh, my engaging POLLY! (Pearce, 141)

Of course, unlike Pamela, Polly was both a fictional creation and a flesh and blood woman (the actress Fenton), and could thus be seen as simultaneously angelic and demonic: the fictional Polly could maintain her purity because any fears of lasciviousness and manipulative aspiring could be deflected onto Fenton herself. As Wanko puts it, "social discourse, dramatic character, and the actress herself merge to create a media image called "Polly" that holds in tension the innocent modest Polly of the stage with the presumably sexual and socially ambitious actress who portrayed her" (487). She was thus a contradiction that expressed the intense cultural tensions surrounding such issues as the modifications in the sexual landscape and the new forms of social power made available in the emergent capitalist economy.

That Polly symbolized much more than the popularity of a specific performer is suggested by the vehemence of both the attacks and defenses. Recalling the excitement the character generated, Macklin notes that "not a print-shop or fan-shop but exhibited her handsome figure in Polly's costume, which possessed all the simplicity of the modern Quakers, without one meretricious ornament" (44). His fulsome praise was matched by Young's equally exaggerated

condemnation: “Polly a wench that acts in *The Beggar’s Opera* is the publica cura of our noble youth. . .she cannot be a greater whore” (Nokes, 419). Both men seem to have a greater stake in the debate than the circumstances require, but their passion was not unique. D’Anvers’s *Twickenham Hotch-Potch* contains verses both worshipful and damning, but they are all highly emotional. Thus Polly is dubbed a “raw-bon’d, large-featured Virago” (21) and “coquetting *fair*. . .who gives you an Insight into the merits of these Fools, Laugh at their foolish bite” (49) but is also vigorously defended as a “terrestial angel”:

> Some Prudes indeed with envious Sprite
> Would blast her Reputation
> And tell us that to Ribands bright
> She yields, upon Occassion.
> But these are all invented Lies
> And vile *outlandish* Scandal. (41)

The discourse reaches its highest pitch in *Polly Peachum on Fire*, which includes verses of high praise, a scandalous damnation, and an ambiguous concluding piece. The opening verse admits to Polly’s indiscretion with Macheath, but otherwise is steadfast in admiring her honor, while “Polly Peachum’s Description of a Horrible Hairy Monster” casts her as a relentlessly manipulative slut: it recounts her adventures, for forty unpleasantly graphic stanzas, from the point of view of her vagina. Finally, “A Dialogue between Polly and Punch William”, which closes the text, captures the tension precisely because it can be read as either a lascivious wolf taking advantage of a virtuous but highly naive young woman or as Polly skillfully cheating the lustful but unsuspecting Quaker out of his gold. That balance encapsulates what I am calling the Polly effect, a precursor

(and perhaps the cause) of the Pamela vogue, an image of feminine virtue at once laudably sincere and dangerously deceptive.

In *Polly*, Gay exploits this image to critique the inherent hypocrisy of commerce, fashion, and sexuality. A brief summary of the plot serves to demonstrate just how greatly Gay sought to transform the reputations of the characters created by his earlier play. It opens with Polly arriving in the West Indies, to which she had desperately journeyed hoping to reunite with Macheath, who had been deported there in punishment for his previous crimes. An accident at sea had robbed her of her fortune, however, so she arrives in the New World without money or fame. She offers herself as a servant to the wife of the Ducat household, but quickly discovers that she has been betrayed, and has actually been sold as a concubine for the husband. Before she is forced into submission, however, the country is attacked by a gang of pirates, led (unbeknownst to Polly) by Macheath himself, disguised as a "Morano," the "Neger" chief. In the confusion, Polly escapes from the Ducats by disguising herself as a young man, only to be captured by the pirates and led to Macheath, who is shown struggling with a Herculean dilemma, torn between his desire to fulfill the manly conquest and his love for Jenny Driver, who serves as Cleopatra to his Antony. In the battles that follow, Polly allies with a group of noble Native Americans, and together they defeat the pirates and execute Morano. Only after the execution does Polly learn that Morano was her beloved Macheath, and the play closes with her grieving her loss as the Indians perform a victory dance.

Even this terse summary reveals two crucial strands of Gay's intentions. First, by enslaving Polly first to the Ducats and then to the pirates, Gay structurally links the politics of conquest with the politics of domesticity, a tie further developed through Macheath and Jenny's re-

enactment of Dryden's *All for Love*, and emphasized by a constant intermingling of the discourses of the conquests of love with the conquest of nations. More important, however, is the thoroughness with which Gay has transposed the roles of his two protagonists: while Polly actively pursues her own interests, Macheath dithers passively over the conflict between his quest for glory and his matrimonial duty. Lest the point be missed, Gay repeatedly draws attention to this reversal in the songs and dialogue, including this hilarious burlesque inversion of the renaissance hunt motif, which seems to be a conscious parody of "Lyke as a huntsman after weary chace" in Spenser's *Amoretti:*

> The stag, when chas'd all the long day
> O'er the lawn, thro' the forest and brake;
> Now panting for breath and at bay,
> Now stemming the river or lake,
> When the treacherous scent is cold,
> And at eve he returns to his hind.
> Can her joy, can her pleasure be told?
> Such joy and such pleasure I find. (69)

By transforming Polly into the active Macheath, however, Gay is after more than just clever satire. For just as Macheath's "honesty" undermined every possible notion of justice in *The Beggar's Opera*,[11] Polly's virtue, combined with the already extant popular discourse surrounding her sincerity, subverts every possible notion of honor, so that even the noble Indians are revealed to be just as self-serving as their European counterparts.

In the play's Introduction, Gay makes clear the two themes he will develop. While the

Poet and the 1st Player discuss the dangers of presenting vice on the stage, an actor rushes in to inform them of the backstage quarreling. Signora Crochetta has refused to sing her part, for it is too low. When told that "by contract" she can be forced to sing it, she offers a rebuttal that comically links a mistreated worker to a compromised woman:

> Barbarous Tramontane! Where are all the lovers of Virtu? Will they not rise in arms in my defense? make me sing it! good Gods! should I tamely submit to such usage I should debase my-self through all *Europe*. (vii)

The troubles of the beleaguered producers do not end here, for a 4th Player soon enters, announcing that "the base voice insists upon pearl-colour'd stockings and red-heel'd shoes" (vii). Gay thus not only feminizes his actor and gives his actress a staunch and active aggression, he also alerts his audience to the distinction between actor and character. Signora Crochetta's reply, deliberately figuring the actress as a maiden in distress, at once invokes the Polly/Fenton media image and reminds the audience of that character's potential hypocrisy by enacting an instance of feminine virtue selfishly exploited as a weapon against the rule of law.

Although Gay never explicitly questions Polly's integrity, throughout the first act he voices scepticism by continually prompting his audience to attend to the dynamic of the Polly effect through other characters' sly innuendos. When the procuress Trapes mentions her for the first time, she informs Ducat that Polly "is not impudent enough to make herself agreeable to the sailors in a public house," and indeed "hath a behavior only fit for a private family"(4). By itself, this may seem innocent enough, but it comes in the middle of a lengthy conversation that completely dismantles any association a wealthy family might have with morality. Ducat is

convinced to acquire a mistress because it is fashionable, for an honest loving marriage is a sign of vulgarity: “poor people are happy in marriage out of necessity, because they cannot afford to disagree” (14). He cheerfully proclaims that “as to conscience or musty morals,” he has as few as any man of quality in England, and in that respect he is “not the least vulgar” (2). Like all great men, he builds and buys and collects merely out of ostentation, but he sadly admits that he still cohabits with his wife. Indeed, every virtue is only a mark of penury; Ducat is later told he is “too rich to have courage,” and that “‘tis only for poor people to be brave” (19). Polly’s modesty, therefore, is presented as potentially hypocritical from the beginning, a behavior that mistresses of the wealthy have the luxury to perform. Indeed, her ability to fulfill that role is what makes her unique in the New World, and ideally suited to Ducat. “To ruine a girl of severe education is no small addition to the pleasure of our fine gentlemen” (10), and Ducat is lucky to find a girl as “pure, as she was imported” (11), a rarity in the outside of London, where “fresh goods arrive every week by the waggon” (3).

Apart from Polly herself, no character in the first act doubts that she is skillfully using her beauty and chastity for financial gain. Trapes suggests that Madame Ducat might just “tip off,” so that Polly could become mistress of the house, and tells her “by beauty’s possession/Us’d with discretion/ Woman at all times hath joy in her power” (10). Even the servants respond to Polly’s protests of innocence with sly winks expressing awe at how thoroughly she continues to play the part. When Polly tells Damaris that a constant woman has but one chance to be happy, the maid replies that such constancy is a “much more agreeable way to be inconstant,” and bursts into song:

Love now is nought but art,

‘Tis who can juggle best;

To all men give your heart,

But keep it in your breast. (23)

Gay thus makes it impossible for Polly to express her integrity, because every display of virtue is immediately regarded as a simply another sign of the depths of her manipulative skill. By having Polly steadfastly deny any implication of deceit, he leaves open the possibility of her sincerity, but by not allowing any character to believe those denials he suggests that faith in Polly would be singularly unsophisticated.

If the first act centers on hypocrisy in sexual relations, it nevertheless begins to bring up the parallel issue of the hypocrisy of imperial and sexual conquests that soon becomes the play’s focus. Scene IV, a soliloquy by Trapes, serves no dramatic function other than making that connection explicit, and is worth quoting at length:

> *Trapes*. I wonder I am not more wealthy; for o’ my conscience, I have as few scruples as those that are ten thousand times as rich. But alack a day! I am forced to play at small game. I now and then betray and ruine an innocent girl. And what of that? Can I in conscience expect to be equally rich who betray and ruine provinces and countries? In troth, all their great fortunes are owing to situation; as for genius and capacity I can match them to a hair: were they in my circumstance they would act like me; were I in theirs, I should be rewarded as a most profound penetrating politician. (6)

This plundering of nations takes center stage for the remainder of the play, but the issue of Polly’s sincerity taints our interpretation of all that follows and undermines any claims of honest nobility

the play presents.

Having escaped from the Ducats by wearing men's garb, Polly recognizes that she must "put on the courage and resolution of a man" (26), and that means replacing her feminine virtue with masculine honor. Almost immediately she is confronted by three scheming pirates who have been parceling out Cuba, Mexico, and Peru amongst themselves, and she at once adopts the persona of a man disgusted by those who sacrifice their valor for profit:

> I hate those coward tribes
>
> Who by mean sneaking bribes
>
> By tricks and disguise,
>
> By flattery and lies,
>
> To power and grandeur rise. . .
>
> I would willing choose a more honourable way of making a fortune. (30)

However praiseworthy this may sound, it neatly parallels the stance she adopted in Act I. There, she clung to her virtue and expressed indignation at those who exploited their beauty for personal gain while here and throughout the rest of play, she tenaciously clings to her honor, and creates a stark contrast to the conniving and cowardly Europeans. Because the integrity of Polly's claims to virtue was placed in such an ambiguous light to begin with, however, we are warned that this honor may be an equally deceptive mask. She has claimed to "hate the clandestine pilfering war that is practiced among friends and neighbors in civil society," declaring that only an "open war with the whole world is brave and honorable" (36). Significantly, this is a victory she achieves, but not without encouraging a cynical view of the honor she continually invokes.

Others have done an admirable job analyzing the deconstruction of heroism Gay presents

through Macheath,[12] so I will limit myself here to correcting what I see as inaccuracies in their accounts. Chief among these is the critics' failure to see the Indians as anything but "most noble noble savages" (Winton, 137). What everyone regards as Gay's wholly sentimental portrait of the Native Americans gets blamed for destroying any claims to literary merit *Polly* might make. But given that they are associated throughout with Polly (they join with her battle, they express mutual admiration, etc.), they too acquire the mistrust that follows the title character. In fact, what distinguishes the Europeans from the Indians is that the former are openly dishonest. Sharing a prison with Polly, Cawwawkee expresses surprise that Europeans could be duplicitous: "Have you then hypocrisy among you? For all that I have experienc'd of your manners is open violence, and barefac'd injustice" (48). For Cawwawkee, it is the inability of the Europeans to disguise their violence that he finds shocking.

After Polly and Indians have captured the pirates, Gay presents a trial of Macheath which should at least alert us to the possibility that the tribe's honor might not be wholly selfless. Chief Pohetohee questions him on notions of property, honest industry, wisdom, honesty, and consciousness and shame, and each virtue Macheath calls foolish when practiced by the poor and hypocritical when found in the rich. He accuses the Indians of using their nobility to disguise their own faults, claiming "your great men will never own their debts, that's certain" (63). He excuses his acts by implying that they were only exposed because of his defeat ("Alexander the great was more successful, that's all" (64)) and his final song damns them for writing history to suit their fancy, also recalling the link with Polly's virtue that Gay has so tirelessly been painting:

> All crimes are judg'd like fornication;
>
> While rich we are honest no doubt.

Fine ladies can keep reputation,

Poor lasses alone are found out.

If justice had piercing eyes

Like ourselves to look within,

She'd find power and wealth a disguise

That shelter the worst of our kin. (64-65)

It is a charge that is never answered, and during the final minutes of the play, Gay unravels any claim to a different morality that Pohetohee and Cawwawkee might make.

Even sympathetic readers have failed to appreciate the final ironies of the play's closing scene. Winton calls it a moralizing "solemn dance to justice" (143) and Dugaw complains that Gay's inability to include "even one non-European woman" undermines his critique of heroic idealism (210). Both opinions, I think, miss the point, for after dispensing justice to Macheath and his compatriots, the Indians learn of Polly's disguise. Once they recognize her as a woman, they immediately begin wooing her in the fashion of London gentlemen, offering her nothing but promises of wealth. Pohetohee tells her "everything in my power you may command," and Cawwawkee plays the part of a completely smitten courtier: "And everything in mine. But alas, I have none, for I am not my own!" (67-68). Significantly, Polly responds to Cawwawkee's conventionally European marriage proposal ("By your consent you might at the same time give me happiness, and procure your own. My titles, my treasures, are all at your command") with a tune that ridicules the offer: "Frail is ambition, how weak the foundation! Riches have wings as inconstant as wind" (71). There follows a song about justice, but Winton is mistaken to regard it as solemn; Gay knew how to end a play— the tune is rather lively. Equally wrong is Dugaw's

wish for a female Native American, for the band of men, singing and dancing around the lone female is precisely the point. The stage picture is an exact inversion of the close of *The Beggar's Opera*, in which Macheath, surrounded by his "virtuous" women, stood like a Turk among his doxies. Here Polly stands alone, the conqueror of the New World, surrounded by the fawning Indians. Given the complicated vision of Polly that Gay has been taking such pains to replicate, it is hard not to see this picture as highly cynical, or at least deeply ambiguous.

Gay's use of cross-dressing in his sequel thus served to extend the controversy over Polly's virtue to manly honor and courage, endowing these realms with the same precariousness. Exploiting existent doubts regarding woman's insincerity, Gay cast equal suspicion on behavior in other realms. Just as Polly's displays of virtue were read as greater proof of her mendacity, any expression of nobility could be read as confirmation that the speaker possessed superb skill in artful manipulation. The "noble" Indians in Gay's sequel worshiped Polly not for her justness, but because she represented the paragon of proficient deception.

Although cross-dressing was not used in many of the imitations, cross-casting was very common and seems to have served a similar function. In *Patie and Peggy*, the casting of Mrs. Roberts as the male protagonist destabilizes that character's claims of bravery and honor. That this seems one of its principal purposes is evidenced by both the Prologue, which directly links virtue in marriage to patriotism, and the epilogue, in which Mrs. Cibber appears, dressed like a fop, and proclaims that women would be far more successful at male endeavors because of their superior skill at equivocation. John Hippisley's performance as the deceitful oyster woman impregnated by the hero of *The Cobbler's Opera* works similarly, because the actor also portrayed Pyefleet, whose artful duplicity was discussed above. Similar arguments could be made

about *Penelope*, *The Lover's Opera*, and *Phebe*, and many more examples will be discussed in the chapters to come.

This close examination of the imitations of *The Beggar's Opera* thus not only shows that many of the plays display considerably more ingenuity than has been assumed, but also has pinpointed those elements of the original that most resonated with the writers who sought to capitalize on its success. Both the meta-theatrical critique of poetic justice and the exploitation of doubts regarding womanly virtue were important, but by far the most significant feature of the successors is their constant reiterations of the power of money and the self-interested motives of even the most seemingly upright individuals. However, the writers alone cannot claim full responsibility for the meanings ballad opera would come to embody; a large share must also be given to the responses of the audience. The damning of the sentimental *Love and a Riddle*, for example, greatly contributed to the writers' decision to emphasize debauchery and corruption in their imitations. Indeed, the audience was beginning to be recognized as a force of considerable power, and writers understood that their labors needed to be tailored to suit the spectators' desires. The considerable tensions that created, and the effect that it would have on ballad opera, are where I next turn my attention.

Chapter Three

The Court of Nonsense:

Ballad Opera Rehearsal Plays and the Staging of Wit and Folly

Your Old-house, New-house, Opera and Ball;

'Tis NONSENSE, *Critick*, that supports 'em all.

– John Byrom

What would Aristophanes have said to a city with fifteen thousand lunatics in it?

–George Bernard Shaw

I: Hark to the Noise

With the "friendly intention" of providing a corrective to "the Extravagance and Absurdities" of the new opera being mounted in 1729 by the Little Theatre in the Haymarket, John Byrom wrote a mock epilogue for *Hurlothrumbo*, calling the work unruly nonsense (Byrom, 122). Although he admitted that the play's author (Samuel Johnson of Cheshire) was probably "out of the reach of *critical* Dominion," Byrom had hoped to influence the public, for he concluded by prophetically opining that if the piece were well-received, serious opera would be swiftly banished: "*Handel* himself shall yield to *Hurlothrumbo* and *Bononcini* too shall cry--*Sucummbo*" (124). He had been right about Johnson; the playwright "so far from perceiving the Ridicule, took [the epilogue] as a Compliment, and had it both spoken, and printed" (122). Worse still, the audience failed to heed Byrom's warning. More than just a successful production, *Hurlothrumbo* became a brief national obsession. Attracted perhaps by the antics of the author himself, who played the mad Lord Flame dressed in black velvet and a long white periwig, "speaking sometimes in one Key, sometimes in another, sometimes Dancing, sometimes Fiddling,

and sometimes Walking upon Stilts" (Whincop, 3), Londoners not only filled the theatre for over thirty performances, they also formed "Hurlothrumbo societies" and composed "verses in Hurlothrumbo" (Byrom, I, ii, 355). In her introduction to the work, Valerie Rudolph notes that a medical patient even used the play as "an anesthetic for an operation," making Hurlothrumbo jokes while undergoing throat surgery (Rudolph, xii).

Not everyone was so amused, however, and they wondered at the town that supported this work. The seemingly inexplicable support for what many considered little more than the ravings of a lunatic sparked an increased examination of public taste. Some seemed bewildered but amused. Rufus Chetwood noted that going insane might improve his play, since "what *once* was *Madness*, now is *Wit* and *Spirit*" (Chetwood, A3v), and Robert Baker cites *Hurlothrumbo* as proof that only madmen can write for the mad London public (Baker, 2). Others were horrified. After the failure of Handel's *Lotario* later that year, Mrs. Pendarves ruefully wrote that Byrom's prophesy had come true:

> The opera is too good for the vile taste of the town: it is condemned never more to appear on the stage after this night . . . . The present opera is disliked because it is too much studied, and they love nothing but minuets and ballads, in short the Beggars' Opera and Hurlothrumbo are only worthy of applause. (Delany, 120)

Many similarly complained about poets being usurped by dancing-masters, and some even hinted darkly that *Hurlothrumbo* had been a scheme of Walpole's designed to distract the town from his political maneuvering (Rudolph, xii). However varied the opinions of Johnson, however, his play was generally referenced with an aim to analyze his audience. The public obsession with *Hurlothrumbo* in 1729 led to an obsession regarding public opinion in the early 1730s. Poems

such as *Harlequin Horace* (1729) and *The Modern Poets* (1731) are only the most well known of numerous verses of the period cataloguing and critiquing popular entertainments. In 1731 Antony Aston's play *The Fool's Opera* was subtitled *The Taste of the Age*, and James Ralph reissued his work on popular diversions, changing its title from *The Touch-stone* to *The Taste of the Town*. And on March 29, 1730, precisely one year after the opening of *Hurlothrumbo,* each of the major London theatres produced ballad operas seemingly designed to denounce the degeneracy of British taste. Lincoln's Inn Fields opened *Hudibras, or Trulla's Triumph* in March. On March 30th, Drury Lane opened *Bays's Opera* by Gabriel Odingsells, the Little Theatre in the Haymarket premiered Fielding's *The Author's Farce, or The Pleasures of the Town,* and three days later Goodman's Fields produced *The Fashionable Lady, or Harlequin's Opera,* by James Ralph. Audiences had a choice of authors and venues, but the dramatic theme for the weekend was remarkably single-minded.

Although *Hudibras* was never published,[13] the other three share numerous characteristics**.** All three present anguished authors, all three disdainfully reference *Hurlothrumbo* and condemn public taste, and all three incarnate various dramatic forms, engaging them in some kind of allegorical struggle. Finally, all three are at least partially modeled after Buckingham's *Rehearsal*, relating them to a sixty-year tradition of plays about the theatre. That tradition has been analyzed (frequently with disparagement) before; Dane Farnsworth Smith's long study ends by characterizing these plays as harbingers for the decline of "great dramas in the old tradition" creating "an unfortunate condition that has persisted even to this day" (243), and Christopher Agnew's brief account essentially agrees, finding them "much more facile" than the "epistemological and ontological anxiety" evoked in Elizabethan drama (153). More helpfully,

Lisa Freeman's chapter on eighteenth-century plays about plays discusses the "serious purposes" behind these works, including the defense of national interest and the exposure of the means of construction of cultural and political capital (59, and *passim*). However, all of these studies focus on the production of dramatic forms, and the crucial distinctness of the ballad opera rehearsals is that they center on the consumption of cultural products. In Buckingham's play, the ridicule is all heaped on Bayes; the spectators are represented only by the savvy and sophisticated Smith and Johnson, whose witty remarks go over the head of the hapless and hopelessly extravagant playwright. In the ballad operas, however, the Bayes figure looks more like a cultural and moral authority, himself heaping scorn on everyone foolish enough to take pleasure in the absurdities he has created. At the same time, he acknowledges the immense economic power of the spectator, miserably lamenting his own financial inability to contribute to fine art. The popularity of pantomime, the vast new audiences clamoring for *The Beggar's Opera*, and the ridiculous passion for the seemingly lunatic ravings of *Hurlothrumbo* combined to alter the custody of the cultural heritage. No longer the obligation of the poet, the responsibility for preserving and developing British art and British tradition now seemed to lie at the feet of an inane and fickle public.

These plays thus uniquely mark a transition in the relationship between the playwright and audience. Although both the power of an audience to show approval or disapproval and the playwright's burden to combine both mirth and edification had long been noted, discussions from earlier in the century assumed that the audience's right was limited, that it would be exercised in accordance with dramatic principles, and that virtue itself produced pleasure.[14] The clear success of John Rich's blatant pandering to public appeal, however, had shattered the illusion of a shared ground between public preference and genuine artistry; the playwright's role had shifted from

knowledgeable guide to outright adversary. Pleasing the public remained necessary, but now required writing nonsense, forcing writers to adopt complex strategies to balance the demands of the audience with their own expressive desires. Furthermore, as the accusation that Walpole used *Hurlothrumbo* as bread and circuses makes clear, theatrical entertainments could be enlisted to serve unrelated political ends. Adapting to this new role produced more than a little discomfort, and these tensions are nowhere more manifest than in the ballad opera rehearsal plays simultaneously produced in the spring of 1730.

In addition, these plays mark a transition in what theatrical practice in general, and ballad opera in particular, would become. Their willful, and sometimes barely coherent blending of incompatible genres can be read as a desperate struggle to find the proper direction for dramatic production. Not certain how to write successfully, each of these playwrights attempted to synthesize the traditional with the newly popular, and other young writers, equally insecure, would attend to the results with interest. After describing the commonplace estimation of the eighteenth-century audience, therefore, I will provide close readings of each of these plays. The strategies, elisions, and contradictions used by Odingsells, Ralph, and Fielding in working through these issues were repeated throughout the decade, and the great success of *The Author's Farce* pointed the direction that ballad opera was to take during its enormous boom in the years that followed.

II: Offending the Audience

When George Lillo produced his first play, he included a epilogue of such bitterness that one could be excused for wondering why he had staged *Silvia* at all. Like *Love in a Riddle*, *Silvia* attempts to press the ballad opera form into the service of exemplary virtue, but unlike Cibber,

Lillo seems to have foreseen his play's failure.[15] Instead of politely teasing or flattering his spectators to curry favor, Lillo begins by savagely detailing their many imperfections, including their "forward Airs, and gawdy Cloaths" and other signs of their obvious stupidity and vanity (A4r). "You Shining Beaux" will certainly reject the repentant Sir John, for "You change your State– but never change your Lives– /You wed– but leave Repentance to your Wives." Similarly Silvia's "musty, moral Speeches" will only distress "you ever-blooming belles. . .whose Love is Int'rest, and whose Virtue, Fear." There follows pointed attacks on all the activities the audience enjoys, from balls and masquerades to passionate intrigues and destructive gossip, asking that Silvia be forgiven for not knowing these fashions: "let her untaught Innocence atone/ For Thoughts and Manners–so unlike your own." The plea seems calculated to fail, and the epilogue concludes by claiming that "if, remorseless, you deny Applause" he'll submit his case to the truly just people, people notably absent from the theatre, for the audience is made up of "the whole Herd our Foes/ of Gamesters, Rakes, Coquets, and empty Beaux." Lillo, it seems, has abandoned all hope of education or reform. He resembles (perhaps not coincidentally) the character of the opening Air in his play:

> The Man, by his Foes surrounded,
> Whilst with himself at Peace
> Dauntless, and unconfounded,
> Beholds their Rage increase. (2)

The spectators are beyond rehabilitation; the best he can do is stand firm as an ineffectual martyr to a truth that is greeted only with derision.

Lillo was a Dissenter, so his strong moral tone is hardly surprising. He was also already

thirty-seven and living in comfortable circumstances when *Silvia* opened his dramatic career, so he could afford to lash out at his spectators. James Ralph, on the other hand, was, like Fielding, barely twenty, but he too despaired at the possibility of marketing intelligent drama to typical theatre patrons. His chapter on audiences in *The Taste of the Town* delineates the limitations of every type found in the pit, box, and galley, from fashionable ladies to high minded critics to disruptive footmen. Ralph makes clear at the very beginning that his motives for reforming the audience are financial; after opening his diatribe by contending that "the Decay of our *Dramatic Poetry*" results solely from "the bad Taste, and little Encouragement of the Town for that Art," he declares that he is unconcerned if his readers consider him meddling, splenetic, or foolish (136). As a prose writer Ralph had the luxury of remaining "Insensitive to the Threats or Favours of the *Many*, so they do me the Justice, and pay for my book before they have read it" (137). This contrasts sharply with the poor dramatist, whose unsuccessful play might not even acquire "a Third night to recompense a year's Labour, by paying his Washing and Garret-rent" (157). The problem is not the insipidness or immorality of the plays themselves; instead, the playwright occupies this miserable position because audiences no longer attend to the play when they attend the theatre.

Ralph catalogues in detail the attendees' alternative preoccupations, from gossiping with one's neighbors, flirting with orange-wenches, to greedily scarfing down the leftovers of a recently purchased meal, implying that this occurs regardless of the dramatic content. Ralph envisions an idealized ancient audience, who attended to dramatic poetry in silence and awe: "no Prince there was too Great, no Philosopher too Wise, nor no Mechanick too ignorant to be pleas'd and instructed by the Stage" (150) but he never asserts that ancient writing was superior.

In fact, he assures the reformers of the stage that their vitriol should be reserved for the spectators, for anyone who pays attention cannot fail to notice "that sage Instruction, those Moral Percepts, that Love of Virtue, that Hatred of Vice, which every man must find in most *Entertainments* of the Theatre" (151). Ralph's complaint was not that his listeners were corrupted by vicious performances, but rather that no one was listening at all.

Ralph realized, however, that listening or not, audiences were attending the theatre in great numbers, and the most lengthy section of his book was therefore devoted to explaining why certain plays found favor over others. For Ralph, this had nothing to do with the content of the performance; what mattered was the way in which word of mouth generated mass interest, and thus his essay on criticism contains not critical percepts but is instead a treatise on how public opinion is manipulated to acquire large draws at the box office. Noting that "the Chocolate and Coffee houses, the Drawing-rooms, the Toilets and the Tea-tables are the Judgment-seats where Poetry and Musick are try'd" (152), Ralph proceeds to demonstrate that the judges are concerned only with maintaining and improving their own social status. He contends that this created an uncritical uniformity in dramatic opinion, for the primary method of evaluating a new play was to agree with what the fashionable people believed:

> There's no judgment in superior Sense, Superiority of Numbers alone is infallible: would you have me whipp'd round the town for a cross-grained puppy. . .when the whole cry of the pack is upon me? Thus a few imminent Ninnies may lead by the Nose the Judgment of half the Town, and when once they have fix'd the Stamp of Merit upon any dull work, every fashionable Body must come into it, or else stem the Current of popular opinion. (153)

Furthermore, one learned to anticipate popular opinion by comparing the responses of other spectators with their attire. Ralph includes what he claims to be an overheard conversation, in which Lady Plyant and Beau Modish noted the "rough hewn tramontane Fellows" who applauded a new production, and savagely mocked them for their bad haircuts, their awkward pattins and drangle-tails, their dirty gloves, and their inexperience with a razor. For Lady Plyant, the approval of such sloppy failures was a sure sign the play deserved to fail. If one is going to form a cabal, it seems, one had better ensure that they arrive well-groomed.[16]

Other forms of dramatic criticism were equally shallow, and include sleeping through a performance but vigorously applauding the (literally) rousing dance number, and hopping from theatre to theatre in a single night and judging each work by the size of the assembly. Others rely on the fame and rank of the author, and a few on how well the play lent itself to a display of pedantry. Ralph makes special mention of a subset of this last group, those who believe that "everything is to be purchas'd with Money" and have acquired their critical acumen by examining the title pages of ancient writers (161). According to Ralph, "of all bad critics, they are the best," for if a poet simply obsequiously seeks out their opinion, "he infallibly makes a Knot of them his best friends." It requires "nauseous Flattery," but it is better to suffer this "infamous Slavery" than to be proclaimed an "insignificant, stupid Dog" (163).

Success at playwrighting, therefore, entailed fawning to the pompous, repeating formulas established as fashionable, and including sufficient spectacle to provoke the attention of those otherwise engaged in snoozing, feasting, or philandering. This attitude was not unique to Ralph; a lead article in *The Grub Street Journal* on approaches to marketing new plays expressed similar cynicism (March 26, 1730), and Fielding's portrayal of audience behavior in *The Modern*

Husband also fits this model. This disdain for the audience makes it difficult to understand the motives such writers had for creating plays at all, were it not for the fact that the theatre business had become potentially more lucrative than ever. Although Fielding, Ralph, and Odingsells may have been highly skeptical of the value of pantomime, they attributed its success to the fickleness of the audience, who not only seemed not to care that the form was absurd, but who actually relished the nonsense, and handsomely repaid the indulgence of their tastes. The playwrights' appropriation of fashionable entertainment was therefore designed to win audience approval, and the interest of these plays lies not in their mockery of the forms but rather in the authors' struggles to achieve at once artistic dignity and a deliberate selling out. And that conflict constitutes an admission that truth itself is at least in part dependent on its reception. Unlike Lillo, who unflinchingly presented his message without regard to its acceptance, Ralph, Fielding, and Odingsells attempted to tailor their expressions to public taste, and this involved a considerable transformation of what was ultimately expressed. The authors recognized their inability to abandon their artistic principles without also forfeiting an authoritative moral stance, and in the plays their discomfort over this is manifested in a heightened awareness of the artifice of theatre and a conflation of the theatrical with the real. Far from simply watching and critiquing the rehearsal, the spectators exerted considerable control over it.

Each of the authors was differently affected by the power of the box office. Ralph, the most pedantic of the three, sought to educate his viewers by showing that popular forms were hollow, but in the process ended up evincing a similar absence of substance in elite cultural forms. Odingsells, deeply conscious that dramatic norms had a cultural reach beyond the stage, demonstrated that pantomime and ballad opera implied amorality, and ended up willfully

embracing hedonistic excess. Fielding discerned that all dramatic writing sought to manipulate the audience through artificial means, and actually empowered his audience by demonstrating that public opinion had the ability to alter far more than theatrical practice. These are a new form of rehearsal, in part burlesques of spectatorship, in part interrogations into the cultural purpose of dramatic art, and in part discourses on who controls the cultural production of meaning.

III. *The Fashionable Lady*: *"All Poets*. Ay, ay, any thing for Money." (66)

James Ralph's first play opened at Goodman's Fields three days after Odingsell's opera, and enjoyed a respectable run of nine performances despite receiving a damningly sarcastic review by the editor of *The Grub Street Journal*. *The Fashionable Lady, or Harlequin's Opera* blends ballad opera and pantomime with a traditional comedy of manners plot, all framed as a rehearsal written by Mr. Drama and performed for three opinionated spectators. Recognizing that Ralph's intention was to ridicule fashionable entertainments, the *Journal* condemned Ralph for failing to be precise. "The Duke of Buckingham," Bavius writes, "had hardly a single line which was not pointed against a particular part of some play. . .our author. . .contents himself with bantering them in the lump" (April 23, 1730). The criticism is just; the play never parodies specifics and treats ballad opera and pantomime as equivalent. Ralph had an all or nothing view of theatre: both popular forms were culpable because both were untraditional novelties. Although Ralph claims to have endeavored to please everyone, mixing traditional elements with dances and songs (43), he was acutely aware of the cultural status of dramatic forms and venues, even going so far as to apologize to his patron because his play "has not the Sanction of either of the establih'd Theatres" (A2r). For Ralph there existed only two types of theatre and two types of theatre audience, base and refined, a distinction *The Fashionable Lady* ends up inadvertently unraveling

in its attempt to appeal to both,.

Like Gay, who had his beggar inform the audience that his play was originally performed as a wedding tribute, Ralph frames *The Fashionable Lady* as a celebration of a marriage. Mr. Ballad, a lover of pantomime, ballad opera, and burlesque, has commissioned Mr. Drama to write an English opera to commemorate his son's nuptials. Ralph foregrounds the disparate tastes of theatrical audiences by opening with a debate between Mr. Ballad and two other guests at the rehearsal. Mr. Meanwell, who regards all new forms of theatre with disdain, calls opera a disgrace, only to be redressed by Mr. Modely, who damns the English form but vigorously defends Italian opera. The three quarrel with Mr. Drama throughout the performance, Mr. Ballad calling for more magicians and highwaymen, Mr. Modely wincing at the common tunes, and Mr. Meanwell damning it all as a passing fad. Mr. Drama strives to please Mr. Ballad, but he shares Mr. Meanwell's views on drama, claiming that he is equally ashamed of operas and farces, and that he only wrote his "humble Essay in this kind of Entertainment to prevent a worse" (94), his intention being to convince his viewers to abandon their love of all things fashionable.

Pursuing this aim, the inner play introduces the excessively modish Mrs. Foible, a woman who is "always the first in a new fashion" (69) and who follows trends so devotedly that she disdains eating because it is such an old style (21), and refuses to cry "because Tears are out of fashion" (37). Although her taste is insipid and her behavior cruelly mocking, she is nevertheless relentlessly courted by no fewer than five suitors, a collection of gentlemen as disparate as the spectators at Mr. Drama's performance. Captain Hackum, a rough-tongued sailor, is rivaled by both the virtuoso Mr. Trifle, "a Warehouse-keeper of Fragments" (26) and Mr. Whim, an incurable hypochondriac. Her most sincere admirer is Mr. Merit, "the unfashionable man of

Sense" (7), who recognizes Foible's flaws but cannot overcome his passion for her. The Lady's favorite, however, is the fashionable Mr. Smooth, a beau as up to the minute as Foible herself, an affinity highlighted by Ralph's cross-gender casting of Mrs. Thomas for the role. The plot centers on these two. Throughout the play Merit confess his infatuation with Foible to her cousin Mrs. Sprightly, who jealously plots to undermine the lady's popularity. Meanwhile, Mr. Smooth, in an effort to prove himself the most worthy, seeks the assistance of the man considered the most stylish in town, Signior Harlequin himself.

To the delight of Mr. Ballad, much of the action focuses on Harlequin and his entourage, a collection of other dumb conjurors, and an odd character called Voice, who speaks for Harlequin but also fancies himself a chanter of English operas. On Smooth's arrival, Harlequin and his gang terrify the beau by levitating him to the roof, but upon receiving his money they agree to assist him by seizing and incapacitating Captain Hackum. Smooth invites Mrs. Foible to this abduction, certain it will entertain her and win her favor. Mrs. Sprightly, however, seeking to torment her cousin, arranges to have Harlequin taken into custody by angry critics and poets. Thus after repeatedly tricking Hackum with spectacular wizardry, Harlequin magically binds him (delighting Mrs. Foible), only to be captured himself by the disgruntled poets. Sprightly's plan ultimately fails, however, when Foible, Smooth, and Merit secure the conjuror's release through pleading and bribery.

Undaunted, Sprightly hatches a second plan to ruin Foible, and this one proves successful. In private conversations she convinces each of the suitors to demand that Foible declare her favorite. As Foible reluctantly begins to make her announcement, Merit interrupts her, abruptly proclaiming he no longer desires her, and asks to be removed from consideration. Impressed by

Merit, Hackum also excuses himself, and Whim and Trifle in turn discharge her as well. Foible dismisses each of them coldly, saying she would have refused them anyway: her true love has always been the exceptionally fashionable Mr. Smooth. On seeing her departed admirers, however, Smooth rejects Foible as well, for she herself has evidently fallen out of fashion. Foible swoons, but she is rescued by Voice, who suggests Harlequin for a husband. Foible agrees, and the play closes with a grand dance celebrating the happy union.

Although Mrs. Foible was temporarily disconcerted, this hardly seems like the condemnation of modish behavior that Ralph claims to have intended. The jubilant dance of Foible and the conjurors contrasts favorably with Merit and Sprightly's sedate duet that serves as a dénouement. Furthermore, in his final song, Merit reveals that his passion for Mrs. Foible has not been quelled; he implies that a little attention would rekindle his everlasting fidelity. More interestingly, Ralph's plot concedes that fashion admits no alternative. Mrs. Foible is not rejected for her faults, it is just that rejecting her has become the new modish behavior; the paradigm of popularity remains firmly entrenched. This is because, for Ralph, fashion was a powerful but also a mysterious inexplicable force, capable of replacing natural inclinations with an arbitrary norm. He viewed artistic refinement as an important marker of class differences, and he damned fashion because it united social strata by creating conforming artistic tastes. But by viewing taste as nothing more than an emblem of social status, Ralph ends up conceding that all art is equally corrupt, differing only in the master to which it panders.

From the beginning of *The Fashionable Lady*, Ralph makes the point that popular entertainments appeal only because they have become fashionable. Mr. Ballad's opening number asserts that all the social classes join him in following whim and fashion to "crown with new

Honours the Opera Muse" because they are all "charm'd with our Numbers" (5). The details of the productions matter not, a puppet show would do as well if only it had fashion's recommendation, and "Fashion will recommend anything in the universe" (68). Fashion's ability to stamp anything whatsoever with approval is suggested throughout the play with tedious consistency, but nowhere is Ralph more explicit than in Voice's ballad on London audiences:

> 'Tis not the Music they admire,
> 'Tis not the Fancy, or the Fire;
> Alack there's no such Thing!
> 'Tis Fashion only wins the Town,
> 'Tis Fashion makes such stuff go down,
> And Fashion makes me Sing. (17)

Completely lacking in substance, ballad operas, in other words, succeed only because of the endorsement of fashion, a mystic force that compels approval. Thus it is no surprise that the play positions Harlequin as the embodiment of fashion; for Ralph the causes of popularity are as inexplicable as a wave of the mute sorcerer's magic wand. As he puts it later, "the success of these Novelties, these double-form'd Trifles, is entirely owing to Whim and Caprice, a kind of National Phrenzy" (30). Passion for popular forms is simply a form of madness.

In the portrait of the spectators of the rehearsal, Ralph remains consistent to this idea by depicting the lover of popular forms as not only lacking artistic principles, but also as a man verging on lunacy. Mr. Ballad primarily relishes the surface conventions of ballad opera and pantomime; he repeatedly calls for the stage to be filled with whores and highwaymen, and shallowly falls into raptures simply because of the presence of Harlequin, regardless of the content

of the scene. Additionally, he raves incoherently, gets drunk, and even fails to distinguish the play world from his own world (at one point he yells that if the characters "won't save poor Signoir Harlequin, I'll do't myself" (65) and at another he leaps into one of the dances (89)). But Ballad's obnoxious behavior cannot be attributed solely to the shallowness of his artistic opinions. Crucially, Modely and Meanwell are as superficial in their judgments as their rambunctious companion. Mr. Modely can appreciate nothing but Italian Opera, but only, he admits, because he has an inexplicable "antipathy to an *old* English Tune" (29). Similarly, although the sensible Mr. Meanwell damns the forms his friends advocate as "fashionable Absurdities" (2), he offers neither explanations for his distaste nor appropriate alternatives. His only specific critique of the rehearsal refers to the courtroom section, an entirely musical scene cleverly set to several different ballads. Meanwell complains that music is "the greatest impropriety imaginable in a Court of Justice," as if the fictional trial of Harlequin, Scaramouch and five other mutes could conceivably be true to nature. Meanwell's automatic and uncritical application of dramatic propriety is as arbitrary as Modely's hatred of English music and Ballad's appetite for spectacle. The comments of all these men remain less about what the rehearsal presents than about what they conceive should be their proper reaction to the form itself. They are the reactions of what Pierre Bourdieau calls "habitus," internalized conditioning that triggers stock responses based on superficial characteristics (12, 101, and *passim*). For all of them, taste is not a question of values but instead is merely an emblem of the particular community they have chosen. Meanwell is as much a slave to fashion as Modely and Ballad; by declaring himself a martyr to good sense over whim and caprice he is simply negotiating cultural capital of a different sort.

Similarly, in the end Ralph seems to object far less to the style and content of fashionable

performances (his own Harlequin scenes are lively and clever) than to the fact that their popularity was eroding taste discriminations based on class: distinctions that made his own position as a purveyor of high culture economically viable. One sees this in Mr. Drama's savage denunciation of Mr. Ballad's poetry (3-4), his parody of Mr. Ballad's pretensions as a playwright (60-61), and in his final assertion that the problem with the theatre was that "every little Creature" who has ever written an amorous song now thinks himself capable of "charming the politest audience" (94). That distinctions of taste rely heavily on class divisions becomes most pronounced in a scene in which Sprightly mocks Mrs. Foible's servant Prattle for enjoying pantomime:

> *Spright*. I find Signoir *Harlequin* hits your Taste, *Prattle,* as well as your Lady's.
>
> *Prat*. O Mem, I have as much Right to her La'ship's Taste, as her old Cloaths, or her old Fashions; and I protest, mem, by such helps I pass for a Wit all over our Family.
>
> *Spright*. A Wit! Ha! Ha! Ha!
>
> *Prat*. You may laugh, Mem, if you please.--- But I can tell you, Mem, I have the Vapours as well my Lady [sic], I laugh at good Sense as well as my Lady, I sing Opera Songs as well as my Lady, admire entertainments as much as my Lady, and—
>
> *Spright*. Hold! hold! Mrs. Prattle, for Goodness sake— I believe you heartily. . . you are as like your Lady, as a Footman, with a *Toupee*, is like his Master. (72-3)

Sprightly mocks Prattle's pretensions until she is made aware that the characteristics that currently define a Lady are easily imitated, a fact which leads her to reject the title herself:

> *Spright*. La'ship again? Prythee don't Burlesque me with such ridiculous

imaginary Titles.

Prat. La! Mem, there is not a single Person, at this end of Town, who has ever seen the Court, or rid in a Chariot, but takes that ridiculous imaginary title. . .

Spright. Their Pride and Folly would no more excuse me, than justifie themselves. . .tho' such gross Flattery appear like Respect, it insinuates we need such a Farce of Honour to make ourselves considerable.-- Our footmen do no more, than when they adorn themselves with their Masters Titles.

Prat. Indeed, Mem, that's what I was going to say before; 'tis as much a Question, in my Opinion, whether the Quality take up our Manners, or we theirs. (73-4)

The echo of Gay's fine gentlemen imitating the gentlemen of the road is unmistakable, but the emphasis here is tellingly reversed. Gay's line underscored the artificiality of class by assuming that the sinfulness of fine gentlemen was an asset beyond question, and ironically declaring that criminals were their equals because, lo and behold, they have vices also. Ralph, in contrast, condemns the wealthy for failing to maintain the symbolic codes that enable identification of a person's class. Sprightly acknowledges Prattle's point, and forgives the servants, stating "these Creatures are more pardonable—they Copy their Superiors, while the others too frequently take pains to degrade themselves below the Meanest." The sins of the wealthy include "indulging a false Taste," "despising the True," and "taking pleasure in Extravagance," all of which leads Sprightly to lament "how seldom are they distinguish'd but by their Quality, and their Vices." Ralph's disapproval of popular entertainments rests primarily on the fact that their universal appeal threatened one more barrier to class miscegenation. Class consciousness mattered to

Ralph because his education prepared him primarily to be producer of genteel comedies and fine tragedies, types of productions that had previously been patronized by the wealthy but were fast becoming less and less in demand.

If Ralph's experiment in popular forms pinpointed the significance of artistic taste in cementing societal differences, it also highlighted just how insecure was the basis on which those differences rested. And just as Merit could not reconcile his passion for Mrs. Foible with his reason, Ralph was unable to abandon his hope of producing a successful play. *The Fashionable Lady* aimed to criticize ballad opera and pantomime, but it also sought to appeal to the very audiences it condemned. Ralph's discomfort with the fact that by attempting to tap into fashion, he was betraying his principles in hopes of monetary rewards, gets manifested in the play's constant (though perhaps not consciously intended) reiteration of the idea that self-interest is the only game in town. London is filled with "Whores and Surgeons, Lawyers and Pick-pockets, Priests and Statesmen that grapple to one's Estate," Hackum claims, using a mock catalog typical of ballad opera (6), and similar sentiments are interspersed throughout. A lover, says Merit, is miraculous because marriage is always about money, and "without the Wealth the Passion's vain" (13). A short memory is natural, says Foible, "your Statesman forgets his Promises, your Courtier his Debts, your Priest his Morality, your Tradesman his Honesty" (21). "They say interest is the devil," announces Voice, "if it is, I am sure the Devil governs the World, beyond all dispute" (66). Ralph even recognizes that his own position as a defender of high culture was at root insincere: "If e'er a Poet praise the Great. . .'Tis interest forms the Wile" (67). Through all his denigration of ballad opera, he ends up endorsing the highly cynical world view at the genre's center. Ralph's failure to conceive of an alternative to following fashion finally leads to the

conclusion that cultural products are always created in service to a quest for economic or political gain.

IV. *Bays's Opera*: What is Truth?

For an epigraph to the published version of his play, Gabriel Odingsells chose an ambiguous line from Horace: "Ridentem dicere verum. Quid Vetat?" (Ridicule speaks the truth. What does it say?). The unanswered question proves particularly apt, for although *Bays's Opera* is undeniably satirical, the object of the invective is confoundedly difficult to ascertain. Odingsells himself seemed acutely aware of the potential for misinterpretation, but his solution was to add multiple levels of commentary which served only to increase the obscurity. To take the most extreme case, the center of the play contains an elaborate allegory showing the defeat of Apollo by Momus, but this itself is a display arranged by Pantomime for the benefit of Lord Briton and Crispin the cobbler, who critique and comment on the performance throughout. These characters, however, were all created by Bays, who with his guests Arabella and Belinda comments on both the display and the comments upon it. According to Odingsells, Bays and the two women were an afterthought, "thrown in to explain the Allegory to common Capacities" (2), but his intentions were apparently still unclear, and thus the published version adds an explanatory introduction, designed "to confute some Insinuations scatter'd about, injurious to my private Character" (1). Curiously, the central allegory of Apollo and Momus appears to be a relatively straightforward depiction of the downfall of dramatic poetry and the rise of satire, but the added levels of apparatus raise so many complications and are so rife with contradiction that the whole becomes highly unstable. Nevertheless, it is these complications that make *Bays's Opera* such a fascinating play; one that moves beyond a simple critique of popular entertainment into issues such as the

relationship between poetry and politics, the authority of the masses against the opinion of experts, the effect of multiple forms of spectatorship on dramatic production, and most particularly, the power of theatre to alter private behavior. This last leads to the play's surprising conclusion. In the end, Odingsells turns the commonplace equation on its head, discovering how the power of private behavior alters the theatre, conceding that an author's need for social acceptance outweighs both his artistic desire and moral dignity.

As *Bays's Opera* opens, the playwright Bays has just arrived at the theatre accompanied by two guests, Arabella, a morally upright traditionalist, and Belinda, a lover of all new theatrical styles, especially pantomime. They have gathered to watch a rehearsal of Bays's new work, an elaborate allegory in which personified artistic forms are engaged in a civil war over the throne of wit. That august chair is held at first by Cantato (Italian Music), who had secured it by making Tragedo his prisoner. Cantato's reign, however, is threatened by Pantomime, who has already garnered massive public support but lacks sanction for an official usurpation. After seeking and receiving authorization, therefore, Pantomime and his forces storm the palace, sentence Cantato and Tragedo to "enjoy free Liberty to starve" (62), and fill the stage with ostentatious processionals and pageants of deities. Odingsells makes this simple outline quite intricate by adding a number of intrigues. Cantato seeks to secure his position by marrying his daughter Dulcedo to Tragedo, an act which outrages the servant Bassoon, who therefore turns traitor and aids Pantomime in Cantato's downfall. Meanwhile Pantomime's daughter Farcia abandons her husband Crispin the cobbler in favor of the wealthy drunkard Lord Briton. These complications proved difficult for twentieth-century critics to follow. Gagey claims the plot is "far too involved" (152), while Smith calls it a "baffling incongruity of allegory, which at times shifts its fundamental

images as if they were figures in a troubling dream" (152). But *Bays's Opera*, as we shall see, is carefully written, fastidious in its attention to detail. Odingsells declared that the loss of a single speech could prove detrimental to the understanding of his intention, and if discerning that intention may be difficult, the textual specifics should not be regarded as accidental.

In his introduction, Odingsells repeatedly claims that his aim was "to expose the Folly and Absurdity of a prevailing (and as I thought, vitiated) Taste," arguing that his burlesque required the presentation of the "monstrous and absurd" in order to "alarm Men of Sense to a care of the Liberal Arts" (1-2). Most critics have taken this as the final interpretative word, assuming with Smith that the play is based on "the preposterous notion" that a playwright can successfully satirize stupidity by "writing stupidity himself" (123).[17] However, the introduction is less than wholly ingenuous, consisting of a rather disorganized rant against various charges that had been leveled at him following production. Odingsells begins by claiming he was determined to accept gracefully the criticisms of his play and "bury it in Oblivion" but that he was seduced by his "too partial Friends who. . . thought it incumbent on me to publish it," and he then proceeds to outline his horror and shock at the things that had been said about it. Most of his responses are vague and contradictory. To the "invidious Reflections industriously spread by a certain author" that the play was plagiarized, Odingsells claims that he had written the allegory a year earlier, but he admits that he added Bays quite recently, a justification hardly likely to appease Ralph, Fielding, or the anonymous author of *Hudibras*, whose objections most certainly would have been to the rehearsal form itself. To the serious complaint of "some persons" that ill-nature reigned in his temper, he asks "may not a writer set a Prude or a Coquet in a ridiculous Light, without being wanting in the highest points of Complaisance and Veneration for the Ladies?" carefully avoiding

the question of which of his contrasting characters Arabella (the Prude) or Belinda (the Coquet) he intended to be ridiculous. Odingsells also declares "no small amazement" that his character Lord Briton was interpreted as a specific person despite the fact that his play plainly links him (through explicit references to Polly Peachum) to the Duke of Bolton. Most interesting are Odingsells's reflections on ballad opera. Throughout the play, ballad opera is repeatedly linked to the reign of pantomime, so it is easy to believe the author's claim that the work was "not intended to entertain by ballad singing." But this plausible assertion is later seriously undercut:

> It has been urg'd in a Place where I cou'd wish Scandal and Defamation might never enter, that this performance was aim'd to expose the Celebrated Author of the Beggar's Opera and his Works; but to clear me from this abhorr'd Aspersion, I shall want no other Vindication than what I am sure to find from the candid Judgment of that ingenious Gentleman.

Odingsells's exaggerated resentment seems sincere, but the play itself consistently links ballad opera to pantomime, paints Lavinia Fenton as self-serving, and attends more closely to ballad opera's amorality than to pantomime's gaudy spectacle.

If these contradictions make Odingsell's declared purpose suspect, the play itself makes it virtually untenable. In fact, the prologue offers a completely different way of reading the piece, claiming it was designed "not to condemn the Age" but rather as a merry blend of dramatic styles meant "to sooth all Hearts. . .With Sense, gay Shew, Buffoonry and Wit. . . T'each different Palate we present a Taste" (3). The play's Satyr cares not if tragedy is rejected for Harlequin or if Jigs are favored over Music, but asks only "to be indulg'd in laughing with the rest." This good-natured attempt to accommodate everyone seems more closely matched to the text than to

Odingsells's invective, so the introduction is better regarded as a justification for the play's inability to gain favor. *Bays's Opera* was not a total failure; it received a three-night run, giving the author his benefit performance, and it was briefly revived the following year. But *Bays's Opera* was met clearly with the condemnation of the critics without bringing in the crowds for which Odingsells had hoped. The disparities between Odingsells's introduction and the text itself are therefore best explained by recognizing that they were aimed at different audiences. Unlike the play, the introduction is explicitly written only for "Persons of Taste," so its claims should not be expected to match a text proclaiming to please every palate. Odingsells's proclamation that he was attempting to correct a false taste seems suspiciously convenient.

In fact, though *Bays's Opera* is multifaceted, it is less concerned with artistic practice than with social behavior, specifically sexual behavior. The central narrative of Pantomime's victory over Cantato and Tragedo represents both an artistic and a moral shift, but it is the latter on which the playwright focuses by highlighting the nature of love under the two systems through a comparison of the relationships of Tragedo and Dulceda with Lord Briton and Farcia. For Odingsells, the throne of Wit governs both artistic taste and social norms, and thus the abandonment of poetic laws entails an equal renunciation of marital codes; the traditional union of Tragedo and Dulceda, one based on inherent and permanent value, is replaced with the coupling of Farcia and Lord Briton, a business transaction binding only as long as it remains mutually beneficial. Although it may be tempting to read this as a cautionary dystopia illustrating the consequences of discarding fine art, that interpretation is undercut by the third romantic relationship in the play, that between Bays and Belinda and Arabella. Brilliantly, Odingsells creates a narrative between his fictional playwright and spectators, one that unfolds as the action

of the play within the play progresses. When the play opens, the fashionable Belinda loathes Bays while the sensible Arabella seems prepared to enjoy a pleasant afternoon of dramatic poetry. As Bays's allegory progresses, however, Belinda becomes more and more enchanted while Arabella grows sarcastic and discontent, and by the end of the second act it begins to appear that this had been Bays's intention all along. Following a suggestive interlude, the third act shows us a highly bitter Arabella observing an overt flirtation between her companion and the playwright, while the allegory celebrates Pantomime's coronation with ostentatious pageantry. By adding this micro-narrative to his frame, Odingsells not only underlines the effect of art on behavior, but also implies that artistic value is measurable only by the extent of the public's blessing. What Bays calls his "more happy Genius" turns out to be the relinquishment of his artistic principles (14), and he is rewarded with financial success and sexual conquest.

The union of Tragedo and Dulceda is the first of the contrasting amorous affairs presented in *Bays's Opera*. In allegorical terms, this is meant to represent the sublime sympathy between music and dramatic poetry, but instead of emphasizing the pair's natural affection for each other, Odingsells emphasizes the conventional nature of their courtship. The couple does not exhibit instinctive passions; they play the roles of lovers in a court society bound by tradition. Set in an opulent palace (the ostentatious grandeur of which is underscored by the cross-gender casting of Mrs. Roberts as the emperor Cantato), their love is authorized because it is proper: Cantato arranges the marriage in an attempt to secure his flagging power. Their love is thus founded on a political ploy, and Dulceda and Tragedo revel in the affected mannerisms of royalty romance.

When we meet Dulceda, she is wallowing in the decline of her estate. Her father's servant approaches to woo her:

> *Dul[ceda]*: Fatal reverse of Fortune! Where now are those Crowds of admirers who used to beseige my person, and stifle my Senses with borrow'd Essences and Oratory?
>
> *Bas[soon]*: All fled to make room for the ardour of a more faithful Lover.
>
> *Dul[ceda]*: Hast thou taken the opportunity of my disastrous State to insult me again with thy Passion? Hence, presumptuous Slave! I banish you from my sight for ever. (11)

Displaying affected despair and extreme class consciousness, Dulceda continues by singing an air that spurns Bassoon and laments her fallen glory: "shall a Wretch who pin'd for Quarters,/ Dare to rival Stars and Garters?" The stress falls on her artificiality, a characteristic no doubt highlighted by the fact that she was portrayed by Kitty Clive, an actresses already famous for her comic impertinence. Even Arabella comments on Dulceda's extravagance, noting "this Lady is haughty enough for a Princess in full Power." Her pride is significant not because it is genuine but because it is appropriate to her position.

Similarly, Tragedo employs an equally contrived language to express his emotions:

> *Trag[edo]*: What need these lavish Strains? Was I to write with the Golden Pen of Apollo, cou'd I hope to inspire my Foes with a relenting Tenderness? Can Wit, which forfeited my Crown, regain it? Vain Attempt! I'll write no more! (14)

Playing the role of an outcast laureate to perfection, Tragedo breaks into song, and Odingsells further highlights the character's affectation by having Bays direct the most minimal gestures of the performer. "Take particular care in humouring this Air," he tells his actor, "for the Passion varies almost in ev'ry Line" (15). As Tragedo sings, Bays interrupts continually, telling him first

to rave, then to act smart. One strain "is not to be sung without Tears in ones Eyes" and another must be rendered with "a Boldness that becomes conscious Virtue." Just as in Macheath's lament in his cell, in which the highwayman undergoes ten different emotional states to ten different tunes, the presentational nature of Tragedo's emotions is accented by its rapid fluctuation, and Odingsells makes the scene even more ridiculous by exposing the manipulative nature of the actor's craft. Like Dulceda, Tragedo is wholly defined and governed by convention.

Bays calls the climactic meeting of this pair his "Coup de Maitre," arguing that "for Art, I venture to call [the scene] my Master-piece---'Tis the perfection of Art, for it hides it with so much Cunning, he must have the Eye of a Lynceus who finds it out" (16). In the scene, the lovers act with comically exaggerated convention, bursting into an operatic duet (the tune is from the Italian opera *Gasperini*, the only song not set to a traditional ballad) when they first set eyes on each other. During the duet they shun each other, alternatively singing "cease to torment me," but as soon as the music stops, they declare their everlasting love:

> *Trag[edo]*: Oh my Dulceda! Spite of the wrongs done me by thy parent, I am compelled by the impulse of Love, to seek my refuge in thy Arms.
>
> *Dul[ceda]*: And I, my Lord, by the same Impulse am compell'd to quit my Virgin Coyness, and own you for the Centre of my Joys. (17)

Once again, their formulaic rhetoric belies any genuine sympathy: "the scene may be artful," Belinda claims, "but methinks it wants Life" (18). Odingsells concludes the scene with an air set to the tune of "Windsor Terrace," the full significance will not be evident until later:

> *Trag[edo]*: Blest, yet afraid
>
> *Dul[ceda]*: Lest Fate my Joys oppose.

Trag[edo]: Sad doubts perswade,

Dul[ceda]: Sad Fears invade,

Both: And check my Heart's Repose.

Trag[edo]: Shou'd Parents Frowns affright,

Dul[ceda]: Shou'd Foreign Charms invite

Trag[edo]: If thou shou'dst change

Dul[ceda]: If thou should'st range

Both: Farewell all hopes of Rest.

Trag[edo]: No, no while you are true;

Dul[ceda]: No, no secure of you,

Trag[edo]: No wounds but thine,

Dul[ceda]: No Frowns but thine,

Both: Can move my faithful Breast. (17-18)

In addition to the stylized rhetoric, it is worth noting that even the worries of the lovers are firmly entrenched in tradition. That they must bid their love farewell "should Parents affright" in particular seems indicative of the fact that their emotions exist because they are sanctioned. Like dramatic poetry and music, Tragedo and Dulceda obey rules, and it is from rules that they've acquired both their behavior and their sensibilities. Furthermore, in addition to the ways already mentioned, *Bays's Opera* reveals the hollowness of their amours through an intertextual joke: Tragedo and Dulceda were portrayed by Mr. Charke and Mrs. Clive, who continued to appear together playing a pair of ironically sententious lovers in the hugely successful *Damon and Phillida*.[18] Thus, Bays's masterpiece of art seems quite deliberately unrealistic. "They are only fit

to live in Heav'n" Belinda complains, "the Sublimity of their Passions seems a little too refin'd for human Understanding" (17). She is overly generous; there is nothing to refine; their passions are nothing but polish.

Everything about the relationship of Farcia and Lord Briton seems designed to invite comparison with their rarefied opposites. Farcia is also the daughter of one of the allegorical antagonists, but Pantomime's realm is a lowly "dungeon of a Cobler's stall," amidst "only the Dregs of the People" (19). These lovers are from different classes, they are both already married to others, and though each has well-defined social roles, they seem neither willing nor content to play them. More significantly, perhaps, their affair is not officially sanctioned but instead results from a chance meeting during a theatrical production. Finally, their union, which occurs at the climax of the play, involves the happy severing of previous marital bonds in favor of transitory pleasure, and is explicitly contingent on the lovers' ability to continue to provide each other with sexual gratification and monetary rewards.

Unlike Dulceda, who embraced her role as tragic princess, allowing it to guide both her manners and her passions, Farcia not only rejects the proper morals of a peasant's wife, but she also maintains that such codes actually prevent self-improvement. Arguing with her husband Crispin, a humble cobbler, she claims that his notion of conjugal fidelity is "a good plain Method, and fit for a Cobler's Stall," but that she'll be "horridly asham'd" if he fails to change once Pantomime gains power (25). Crispin at first asserts that his morality is more important than his station in life, but he becomes convinced by the following exchange:

Cris[pin]: Don't tell me of fine Breeding, I aim at no such high matters.

Far[cia]: Nay, if you'll come up to them in one thing (which is in not concerning

> yourself with your Wife's Conduct) in all other things they'll come down to you.
>
> *Cris[pin]*: And so, Wife, you think I'm oblig'd in point of good Breeding to submit to your making me a Cuckold?
>
> *Far[cia]*: I think if I make a Lord of you, your Conscience may well digest the Honour, without being troubled about the means. (26)

Eager to play "the Statesman's part," Crispin submits and decides to "thrust in his Awl among the rest," but crucially it is the acceptance of infidelity that makes the couple acceptable to high society. "Conjugal duty" is "void of good manners" while promiscuity is ordained by "those of noblest Figure." For Farcia, the definition of nobility is the willingness to ignore rigid moral principles; all values are determined by social advancement.

Similarly, Lord Briton rejects notions of tradition in favor of instant fulfillment. Although as a general he is responsible for leading the English troops, he spends his time in erotic flirtations and drunken debauchery. He expresses his view of the role of the gentry in a song:

> To turn to Enjoyment the cares of Life
> Was all the Philosophers Aim and Strife
> Then for frolicksome Jigs let's declare,
> And the charms of an amorous Fair!
> And Wine that will Vigour repair.
> For only full Glasses
> Gay Mirth, and kind Lasses
> Can pay the Reward of our Care. (22-23)

Duty here is represented as a burden; the only value of tradition is in its endorsement of hedonistic

excess. Arabella notes that General Briton reveals Bays's notion of "Politeness and true Taste," but Belinda chides "I am sure, Arabella, you must think it just, or I shall think you a strange Excentrick Person" (25). To perceive value beyond self-indulgence is to be a social misfit.

Odingsells mocked Tragedo's and Dulceda's notions of abstract love, but he presents the practical amorous bartering between Farcia and Lord Briton as wholly concrete. Lord Briton first sees Farcia as he watches her perform Momus in a play presented by Pantomime, and he is immediately aroused: "If this young divinity had but as substantial Flesh and Blood about her, as her Appearance promises, she wou'd rival (Hick!) the Bottle " (38). Calling her "the Polly of the Skies" (a barely disguised reference to Lavinia Fenton and the Duke of Bolton), Lord Briton openly emphasizes that what he desires from her is nothing more than her exquisite flesh (42). Farcia, equally pragmatic, asks only for Lord Briton's money. Rejecting his watch and purse as mere "Bawbles distributed for Smiles to Orange-Wenches," Farcia demands a "Deed of Settlement" to insure continued access to his estate: "Before you think of Stamping your Seal upon a Lady's Heart, you must first fix it upon Parchment" (43). These negotiations continue over several scenes, but the sharpest contrast to Tragedo and Dulceda occurs in their final love pact:

Both: Spouses Alarms
Never shall fright me so,
To repent
Or consent
We shall e'er part.

Brit[on]: Shou'd you grow cold,

Far[cia]: Shou'd you want Gold,

Brit[on]: I shou'd defy thee,

Far[cia]: I shou'd soon fly thee.

Brit[on]: But fond Embracing

Far[cia] With Presents solacing,

Brit[on]: No other Beauty, Shall e'er tempt my Heart.

Far[cia]: No other Hero, Shall e'er tempt my Heart. (63)

Although the text fails to identify the tune for this air, its close parallel to Tragedo and Dulceda's duet to "Windsor Terrace" is apparent. The eternal vows have been replaced by a relationship sustained only by the continual exchange of worldly goods, and Odingsells further punctuates the fact that there is nothing to this union beyond the bargaining by another casting choice: Farcia was played by Mr. Heron. Significantly, this cheerfully cynical bond occurs just after the ultimate crowning of Pantomime as Emperor of Wit. For Odingsells, the abandonment of artistic principles implied the abandonment of all principles. Dramatic poetry is an abstraction sustained by a class-bound tradition, a tradition also responsible for sustaining notions such as love and matrimony, and if poetry is rejected everything else crumbles as well. As Bays puts it, Briton and Farcia's alliance may appear monstrous "according to the obsolete Schemes. . .but Wit's Commonwealth is a new Establishment, and Freedom the Magna Carta of it" (64). Taste for art is equivalent to taste for social structure, and the only choice Odingsells saw was between traditional love and honor and unfettered self-gratification.

Such is the moral of Bays's allegory, and, given the introduction, one might expect the playwright to give his endorsement to tradition over novelty. However, the rehearsal form provides us with unique insight into Odingsells's view of the playwright and audience, and his

portrait of Bays and the spectators shows a writer completely beholden to his viewers, even at the expense of his integrity. If the audience demands an immoral society, the playwright must submit, and Bays not only happily accepts the new morality, he quickly learns its rules and adopts them himself. Bays refers to his foolish past as a hopelessly unsuccessful writer of tragedies, but throughout the play he relishes his new freedom, he turns classical literature into an authorization for lewdness, and he uses his position as an artist to gain both money and sexual favors.

The play opens with Bays's arrival at the theatre with his two female guests, and from the very beginning Odingsells alerts the audience that Bays is a neophyte to the new artistic paradigm. As Bays introduces his opera, a servant arrives demanding payment for the coachman, and poor Bays, finding his pockets empty, is forced to abandon his guests to find someone to lend him money. Arabella, the more sensible of the two ladies, forgives this, but Belinda declares Bays a "nauseous fellow" (4). Although the first act placates Belinda by presenting Pantomime favorably, the majority of it focuses on Tragedo, and Bays directs most of his comments on his art to Arabella. He admits that he had followed the writing of Shakespeare and other tragic poets in the past, and declares "I might have starv'd with him too, had not my more happy Genius directed me, that the nearest way to Wit was to turn out the Road of Common Sense" (14). He expresses a little nostalgia for his former practice, but emphasizes his aim to please, reassuring his guests that he will soon "raise [their] Wonder and his own Glory." Noting Belinda's boredom with Tragedo and Dulceda, he quickly removes them from the stage "that they mayn't put politer Mortals out of Countenance" (17). Alluding to the soon to be presented affair between Farcia and Lord Briton, Bays ends the act by taking the women for chocolate in the Green Room, "where his Grace of Bamington tore his blue Garter, while he was on his knees to the pretty Miss Ogle." Bays admits

his first act lacks life, but promises that the play will swiftly change.

Bays gleefully fulfills that promise in Act Two, during which he attends closely to Belinda, dismissing Arabella's critiques of the lavish spectacles of Pantomime. He begins by criticizing the Muses, and when Arabella claims he owes them something Bays responds: "an arrant Mistake, Madam. The Muses indeed claim to themselves the Inspiration of poetry, but I always succeed best when I write without their Assistance" (21). Throughout the act, Bays damns the fine arts, calling them "irreconcilable rebels to Wit's Commonwealth," (33) and "fatal to my Fraternity [of playwrights]" (47). During the play-within-the-play within the play, Bays delights at how Crispin and Lord Briton make a mockery of criticism, turning the wisdom of the ancients to their own purposes:

> *Brit[on]*: I don't like the Moral of this Story. Apollo is no Philosopher to weep when he is vext—Bacchus had been a better Assistant than Jove– Drink and drive Care away, is my Maxim.
>
> *Bays*: Pray mind, Ladies, the good Sense of General Briton; he is wantonly imitating the Spirit of his Country in the Art of Criticism. Now I chuse to throw the Solutions into the Mouth of Crispin, to show that a Man by the pure force of natural Parts may confute all our Anti-Mimicks– Admirably Ingenious, ha!
>
> *Pant[omime]*: I must inform you once and for all. General, the chief design of these high flights of Wit is to surprize.
>
> *Cris[pin]*: Not but deep Thinkers can learn good Morals from them. Jupiter and Europa, for instance, has a double Moral in't– that a Man will shift all shapes and run all Harards for a handsome Wench– and that 'tis worthy of a Deity to do so.

> *Bays*: Ha, ha, ha–That's a Choak-pear for the Criticks. Let them deny our Morals after this, if they can.

Bays has found his voice in this act; he stands against the critic and in favor of the new morals.

Throughout the second act, Bays grows more and more unkind to Arabella and more and more obsequious toward Belinda. He calls Arabella "a little squeamish"(23), "a strange Churl" (33), a "grumbler" (34), and even "ugly" (38). For Belinda, however, he has nothing but praise; she is a "bright Ladyship" (23) who has "the finest notion of Wit" (29). He even makes explicit his new allegiance, telling Belinda he had initially planned on dedicating his opera to Arabella, but can now "easily discern" who deserves that honor (22). It is not until the act closes, however, that we discover what Bays had earlier called the "Delicacy of [his] Plan" (8). As Belinda begins to feel faint, Bays speaks an aside:

> *Bays*: If this should be a Love Qualm now.—What are the stars plotting for thee, little Bays? If I should win her, and be entitled to set up an Equipage. . .with a Harlequin for my Coachman, in commemoration of the Triumph of my Wit. . . Now or never, little Bays.—To heav'n in a silken String; or t'other Place, in one of Hemp. A Poet's Life may most emphatically be call'd a Thread.

Seducing Belinda, it seems, was the whole design of his opera, and he happily betrays dramatic poetry to achieve that end.

When the trio returns for the final act, Belinda and Bays begin flirting with increasing overtness, while Arabella grows bitter and spiteful. At one point, she all but calls him an ass, but Bays is too busy with Belinda to be bothered:

> *Bays*: You judge admirably Madam; if a Poet mounts Pegasus with Whip and Spur,

> he can only make him fly around the Globe. . . Now the Ass will leap you over the Limits of the Universe, with a Poet on his back, catch up to Jupiter before, then away to Hell --- Whip up Pluto behind, and in a trice come scouring away to Earth, and present you a God, a Devil, and a Poet, on the Stage at once.
>
> *Bel[inda]*: I fancy, Mr. Bays, the Ass wou'd carry a Side-Saddle too.
>
> *Bays*: With all Ease imaginable, Madam. (51-52)

And in a subsequent dispute, Belinda defends Bays against Arabella's objection that he has made Lord Briton a cully:

> *Bays*: What greater Glory can a Man of Wit and Quality aim at, than to be an humble Servant to the Ladies? 'Tis all Heroes fight for, Beaus dress for, and Poets write for.
>
> *Bel[inda]*: Nay Arabella, you'll forfeit your good Sense with me for ever, if you quarrel with Mr. Bays in this place. (56)

Bays admits that seduction was his purpose, and he has indeed achieved his goal; Belinda is transported. Arabella, on the other hand, finds both the play and their company unbearable; after Farcia and Lord Briton sing their final duet she hollers "Intolerable! This outrages all Morality and Decency" (64). It is her final line; one can imagine her leaving the stage in a huff. In contrast, after the opera concludes with a "Grand Dance of Gods and Goddesses," Belinda apologetically goes off to "see some new Toys just arrived from France," relishing the joys that Pantomime and Bays have bestowed. In a final reference to Buckingham's *Rehearsal* (in which the actors abandon the enraged playwright to have supper), Bays cheerfully sends his performers off to dinner, "happy if your Nectar will rise to a glass of Port" (65). He has embraced the new system of wit and he

has won his girl, and now he can contentedly wait for the riches to start rolling in.

Thus, far from critiquing popular art, *Bays's Opera* ends up promoting both it and the morality it implies. The epilogue even seems to forget the artistic allegory altogether; it consists of a glorification of the victory Farcia and Lord Briton have achieved over the "Matrimonial Yoke" (65). Odingsells recognized that more was at stake in the theatre than mere entertainment; dramatic poetry served as the foundation upon which a society had been built. Love, courage, and honor received their value from a cultural system that propped them up as timeless truths, and they became empty notions once that system began to be rejected. Similarly, untethered from tradition, the value of art could only be measured in terms of the audience's support, and Odingsells chose status and fame over scrupulous starvation. To be sure, when *Bays's Opera* failed to become the success he had hoped, Odingsells attempted to deny the values his work so carefully set forth. But even that underscores the ultimate point of the play, that all truth resides in the approval of others.

VI: *The Author's Farce*: Truth is Theatre

If Ralph revealed that the distinction between high and low forms of art was ultimately a tool of the cultural elite, and Odingsells recognized that a dominant dramatic paradigm influenced all manners of cultural norms, Fielding discovered the consequences of both of those facts. *The Author's Farce and The Pleasures of the Town* combines these insights, pointing out that the methods by which the cultural elite maintains its power are themselves theatrical techniques, reliant on the public's willingness to approve them. The spectators of the stage are no different, Fielding argues, from the spectators of the court and the Parliament, and just as the hierarchy of dramatic forms can be subverted by the audience's lack of patronage so too can the actions of the

powerful be altered by the force of public opinion. In its interrogation of the marketplace economy, *The Author's Farce* thus moves beyond a simple deliberation on popular genres to make a statement regarding the public's role in the distribution of authority. It is this message, one that I deem incontrovertibly political, that would become the primary theme of ballad opera throughout the 1730's.

In calling *The Author's Farce* political, I recognize that I am venturing into treacherous critical territory, for no aspect of Fielding's early career has been more hotly disputed than his political allegiance, or lack thereof. The traditional view had been that Fielding wrote because he wanted to endorse a specific party's political agenda, sometimes argued as pro-Walpole (Cross), sometimes as firmly part of the opposition (McCrea), but these opinions have given way to Hume's claim (backed by Goldgar) that Fielding was a careerist, writing only for financial gain. Although Hume's influential analysis has provided a common sense corrective to numerous dubious discussions of political allegory in Fielding's burlesques, it nevertheless remains deeply unsatisfying, for it provides no model for interpreting the details in the plays themselves. By repeatedly asserting that Fielding was always "peddling his plays where he could" (vii, 52, 254), Hume implies that nonpartisan plays lack any cultural commitments. To conclude that the point of *Tom Thumb* is nothing more than "amusement" is to regard amusement as everywhere identical and identically devoid of cultural meaning (80); to assert that *Rape upon Rape* shows only that Fielding realized "he could make a good thing out of topicality" is to consider the specifics of the topics in question irrelevant. By consistently equating politics with partisanship, Hume dismisses ideological readings by evoking such supposedly timeless notions as sheer fun and effective stylization, as if the only alternative to being devotedly Whig or Tory is to have no opinions on

culture or government whatsoever.

This shortcoming has been addressed by Brean Hammond, Lisa Freeman, and Peter Thomson, each of whom helpfully revises Hume's stance by arguing that Fielding promoted what Freeman calls "aesthetic politics that bolstered his own career in the theatre" (248n). But even here, the emphasis continues to define the author's interests as narrowly centered on financial gain. Although I don't dispute that Fielding wanted to be successful, that does not imply that he remained wholly uninterested in the mechanisms of cultural authority. In fact, I am suggesting that in attempting to understand the means to secure a career as a playwright, Fielding came to appreciate the means by which status is achieved in other cultural spheres. Furthermore, the current reluctance to investigate the ideological consequences of Fielding's early works has led to a paucity of opinion regarding their meaning.

However diverse their opinions of Fielding's politics, critics have been remarkably uniform in their interpretations of *The Author's Farce*. Fielding's primary concern, the consensus runs, was, like that of Odingsells and Ralph, to belittle the public taste for aberrant theatrical forms. "Fielding knew the entertainments of the town first hand, did not think much of them, and set about debunking them with enthusiasm," declares Hume, calling the play " part of a salvo of protests by 'serious' writers against Italian Opera, farce and pantomime" (63-7). Similarly, Rivero asserts that *The Author's Farce* seeks to "magnify the folly of all those presumably rational human beings who allow themselves to be manipulated by the purveyors of intellectually vacuous entertainments" (39). Likewise, Hammond claims that Fielding borrowed "all of the energy of lowbrow pantomime and comic or ballad opera while using the rehearsal framework to accuse it of meaninglessness, and to put an ironic distance between it and the standards of true drama" (87),

while Kavenik regards the work as an effort to prepare the audience "to accept their own implicit guilt in the ascendancy of Nonsense" (137). Even Freeman, to whose perceptive reading I am indebted, nevertheless emphasizes Fielding's desire to "act as a cultural Spectator, legislating taste and judgment and distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate forms" (59). This widespread agreement disguises the complexity of Fielding's text, particularly when one notes that the evidence mounted to support these claims is as unvarying as the conclusions.

I will present an alternative reading, arguing that the jabs at pantomime and opera serve not to advocate for traditional forms but rather are part of a larger project designed to show that all theatre is equally artificial. Fielding recognized that audiences supported the ostentatious spectacles of pantomime and opera not because they had embraced a new morality (as in Odingsells) nor because they had lost their minds (as in Ralph), but instead because these forms skillfully deployed dramatic technique. Furthermore, he realized that the traditional forms were equally guilty of pandering to the audience; tragedy did not simply express permanent truths; its success had been as reliant on artifice and technical acumen as its popular usurpers. The conflict was not between dramatic merit and dramatic nonsense; it was instead a dispute over which version of dramatic nonsense would hold sway. *The Author's Farce* begins with this realization, and then proceeds to generalize it, implying that eighteenth-century culture rested on theatrical artifice, a form of nonsense that succeeded only in so far as the public gave it credence. Although this idea is not identifiably Whig or Tory, it is certainly political, and it will serve as a key to interpret the vast number of topical and political ballad operas written in the wake of Fielding's success.

The idea that *The Author's Farce* was designed to endorse traditional forms is immediately

undercut by the text, for it opens by denouncing them. "Too long the Tragick Muse hath aw'd the Stage," the Prologue begins, and it goes on to describe how that form uses theatricality to manipulate the audience. The "skill'd Actress" wipes away her tears with an "artful Sigh" insuring that all present will invariably begin to weep, and the actor similarly depends upon artifice, using spectacular costumes, contrived gestures and stentorian intonation to garner applause. Reversing the commonplace critique, the prologue portrays audiences of high art as vacuous automatons:

> Like the tame Animals designed for Show,
> You have your Cues to clap, as they to bowe.
> Taught to commend, your Judgments have no Share;
> By chance you guess aright, by Chance you err.

By pointing out that audiences of tragedy are as mindless as the lovers of Harlequin, Fielding suggest that the notion of a hierarchy of dramatic forms is untenable, an idea he eventually makes quite explicit:

> Beneath the Tragick or the Comick Name
> Farces and Puppet-shows ne'er miss of Fame.
> Since then, in borrow'd Dress, they've pleased the Town;
> Condemn them not, appearing in their own.

The supposed dignity of traditional forms is illusory; the names differ but the content is the same. Fielding pleads that the audience forgive his untraditional play by designating tradition as nonsense in disguise, implying that his rehearsal will not be a scourge of public taste but a self-evident indulging of it.

Unlike the plays of Odingsells and Ralph, *The Author's Farce* devotes considerable time to

its frame narrative, not beginning the rehearsal until the opening of the third act. The two sections are generically distinct; the first two acts are structured as a typical comedy of manners while the third is ballad opera.[19] This sharp stylistic contrast serves to ground the frame narrative more firmly in realism, lending Fielding's fictional playwright a greater authenticity than those of Ralph and Odingsells. However, as will become apparent, Fielding sets up this firm opposition only to dismantle it more thoroughly.

The first act introduces Luckless, a pennyless poet struggling to get his new play accepted by a wealthy patron, a theatre manager, and a publisher. Luckless has earned the wrath of his landlady, Mrs. Moneywood, not only for falling several months behind in his rent, but also because he has fallen in love with her daughter, Harriot. Harriot returns his affection with comical cliches, but Luckless's fortune ends there, for the rest of his life is falling to pieces. When his play is rejected by both the patron and the bookseller, Luckless is forced to pawn his hat, and even his good friend Witmore advises him to abandon the writing profession:

> When party and Prejudice carry all before them, when Learning is decried, Wit not understood, when the Theatres are Puppet-Shows, and the Comedians Ballad Singers: when Fools lead the Town, wou'd a Man think to thrive by his Wit? If you must write, write Nonsense, write Opera's, write Entertainments, write *Hurlo-thrumbo's*—set up an *Oratory* and preach Nonsense; and you may meet with Encouragement enough. (8)

Given the prevailing view of *The Author's Farce* as an attack on corrupt entertainments, it is hardly surprising that Witmore's words are the most frequently quoted by critics. Combined with the misfortunes of the struggling author, these lines certainly seem to suggest a satire aimed at the

public appetite for debased forms. But Witmore turns out to be mistaken about what will succeed; Bookweight rejects Luckless's play only because it has not been performed and the author lacks a reputation. In fact, the publisher seems to prefer traditional writing. He explains to Luckless that there are "Acting Plays" and "Reading Plays," the former lacking sense and requiring the buffoonery of a performer, and the latter, those suitable for publication, endowed with "Wit and Meaning" (10). Furthermore, though critics tend to describe Luckless as a noble distressed poet, he is in fact as mercenary and self-centered as those around him. On hearing Bookweight's refusal, for example, he hurls the publisher down the stairs with a jocular laugh. Nor did his poverty result from a devotion to his craft; Mrs. Moneywood describes the clamor that occurred in his room back when he had money, when his doors would thunder every night until four or five in the morning (12). Additionally, he takes advantage of local eating-houses, dining on credit until he is barred (2). More damning, when Witmore bails our the author by paying his overdue rent, Luckless successfully contrives to steal it all. Finally, though his devotion to Harriot seems sincere, he has spent all of her money, pawned all of her clothes, and has convinced her that they should not marry until they have acquired reasonable wealth. Worse still, we learn from Witmore that Luckless had spent considerable time visiting Mrs. Lovewood, a woman notoriously skilled in "searching out Women of crack'd Reputations (7-8). Harriot is surely mistaken in her assessment of Luckless as a man who "thrown naked upon the World, can make his way through it by his Merit and virtuous Industry" (26). He is instead an opportunist who turned to writing only after squandering his fortune, and Harriot's blind refusal to recognize this obvious fact underscores the artificiality of their passion.

Act II shows Luckless pursuing his fortune, attempting to interest theatre managers in his

play and returning to the bookseller with a new venture. Fielding paints the business side of dramatic arts as corrupt beyond reform, but the industry is pragmatic regarding sense and nonsense, remaining indifferent to a work's literary value and seeking solely to maximize sales. Although the managers Marplay and Sparkish offer some ridiculous emendations to Luckless's text, they reject it simply because its author has no influence. Cheerfully admitting that Luckless's work might be very good, Marplay notes that "interest sways as much in the Theatre as at Court—And you know it is not always the companion of Merit" (18). As if to explain why such interest is so necessary, Marplay then details the theatre's recent expenditures: "some of it was given to Puffs, to cry up our new Plays, and one Half Guinea to Mr. *Scribler* for a Panegyrical Essay in the News-Paper" (18). Drawing audiences generates expenses, and an author with interest can support them, even if his play is horrendous. Marplay does not mind if audiences hiss a play, as long as the spectators are paying three shillings apiece for the privilege.

Similarly, the publishing industry is motivated wholly by profit, and Bookweight has created a virtual factory of letters, employing impecunious wits "to write Hackney for Bread." There is Mr. Dash, who composes hair-raising title-pages, Mr. Blotpage, who writes phony advice from fictional poets, and Mr. Quibble, who generates controversy by producing polemic political pamphlets–on both sides of an issue. They are joined by Mr. Index, who peddles Latin and Greek mottos on any subject for use in the pamphlets, and the newly hired Scarecrow, a translator who speaks only English, and who is "obliged to translate Books out of all Languages (especially French) which were never printed in any Language whatsoever" (22). The entire business is designed to manipulate public opinion for financial gain, and its range extends to all areas of society, commodifying imagination, scholarship, and even political action. Bookweight is so

beholden to the marketplace that he can engage in piracy and false attribution without guilt or even recognition that such acts are unethical.

Luckless responds to Marplay's rejection of his play with an endeavor as commercial as the world around him, mounting a new work entitled *The Pleasures of the Town*, hiring a drummer to stir up interest and printing playbills outlining the range of tastes it means to satisfy. It will be a puppet show including an "abundance of Singing and Dancing," "the comical and Diverting Humours of Somebody and Nobody," and several other entertainments, all "perform'd by living Figures--- some of them six foot high" (24). He is immediately rewarded, receiving not only a production at the Little Theatre but also a publication contract from Bookweight. The project is so mercantile that Witmore– who had previously found one of the ludicrous play-bills and planned to use it to further discourage his friend from writing– is shocked to discover that the puppet show is Luckless's own work. On discovering that his companion is disseminating nonsense, Witmore becomes philosophical:

> I have heard Sense run down, and seen Idiotism, downright Idiotism triumph so often, that I cou'd almost think of Wit and Folly as Mr. *Hobbes* does of moral Good and Evil, that there are no such Things. (25)

This comment has been ignored by critics, but it far better captures the central message of *The Author's Farce* than Witmore's often quoted harangue against popular entertainments. The reference to Hobbes implies that wit and folly are not natural qualities capable of being discerned by disinterested observers but are instead institutional categories established to protect some interests while discrediting others. The third act develops this theme to its logical conclusion, not only portraying all forms of writing as blatantly self-interested, but also demonstrating that power

and success emerge from societal structures that are both artificial and subject to alteration.

Before presenting Luckless's puppet-show, however, Fielding concludes his second act with a scene that destabilizes the realism of the world he had thus far created. As Mrs. Moneywood damns Harriot's devotion to Luckless, suggesting that her daughter may already be pregnant, Luckless's hireling Jack enters hurriedly with an announcement. The interruption is given great dramatic import, as the normally self-controlled servant has become horribly unsettled:

> *Jack*: Oh, Madam! I am frightened out of my Wits. . .there's the strangest sort of Man below enquiring after my Master, that ever was seen. . .I fancy it is the Man in the Moon, or some Monster—there are five hundred People at the Door looking at him— he is dressed up in nothing but Ruffles and Cabbage Nets.

If this wondrous apparition serves to prepare the audience for the excessive confusion of the play-within-the-play, it also promises that when we return to the frame it may not look as different from Luckless's fictional world as one might expect.

Allowing the appearance of this mysterious stranger to remain unresolved, Fielding separates his third act from the prior action,[20] commencing it in the playhouse at the opening of Luckless's puppet show. Harriot, Witmore, and the other fictional spectators are not represented, implicitly portraying Fielding's real Haymarket audience as attendees in his fictional world. *The Pleasures of the Town* turns out to be a ballad opera, including twenty-five popular airs and other elements beginning to be associated with the form, including an introductory dialogue between a poet and a player, a dispute between two women over a single man, some cross-gender casting, and, as we shall see, an improbable reprieve. Set in a vision of Hades populated by Charon, Punch and Joan, a graverobber, dishonest quadrille players, and sundry other characters, the play centers

on the appearance of a cargo of authors, all newly arrived seeking to win the approval of the underworld's most esteemed denizen, the Goddess of Nonsense. All of the contenders for the laurel, including Don Tragedio, Sir Farcical Comick, Dr. Orator, Signior Opera, Mounsieur Pantomime, and Mrs. Novell have recently died practicing their respective crafts, and in their wooing of the goddess, Fielding highlights the formal gimmicks of the various genres. Don Tragedio, for example, thunders his bombastic couplets, draws his sword against a rival, and is struck motionless by pathos, while Mrs. Novel evokes such cliches of romance as defending virginity, dying in childbirth, and sacrificing wealth for love. Signior Opera is a hybrid case, indicative of the instability of that generic term during this period. Although his foreign title and an indulgent swan song associate him with Italian Opera, he also encourages the others to take up ballad singing, references Polly Peachum, and introduces himself with cynical lyrics typical of ballad opera:

> But would you a wise Man to Action incite,
> Be riches propos'd the Reward of his Pain,
> In Riches is center'd all Humane Delight;
> No Joy is on Earth, but what Gold can obtain. (41)

Signior Opera's mixed generic status undercuts the traditional interpretation of the play as the playwright's lashing out against his enemies, a reading that requires each of the figures to be clearly associated with Fielding's contemporaries. If *The Pleasures of the Town* was a "revenge carried out on those who sought to destroy the theatre" (Rivero, 51) one would expect the targets to be clearly recognizable. Although direct references reliably link Sir Farcical Comick and Dr. Orator with Colley Cibber and John Henley, respectively, the other couplings are less secure.

Wilbur Cross, the editor of the modern edition of *The Author's Farce*, and the default authority on this matter, identifies the others as John Rich, Eliza Haywood, Lewis Theobald and Francesco Senesino. Because Rich was so frequently portrayed in Harlequin's garb his association with Pantomime seems reasonable, but Fielding adds no specific references to the portrait. The equating of Senesino with Opera is troubled by that character's ambiguous generic status, and Cross himself admits that Fielding includes "no individualizing touches" to Signior Opera (106), that Mrs. Novell is only associated with Haywood because her life "suggests the scandal and sentimentality of fiction" (103), and that "the identification of Tragedio with Theobald is not precise. . .parody of tragedy is almost necessarily generic" (107). Additionally, of these supposed targets, only Henley ever sought retribution for being satirized, unlike the outcry by writers pilloried in Pope's *Dunciad*. Finally, one would expect the Goddess of Nonsense to encourage these figures, but she scorns Tragedio, calls Orator a "polluted Wretch" and falls asleep during the antics of Sir Comick.

Viewing the contending authors as representatives of genre rather than specific persons alters the interpretation of the text, changing it from a simple diatribe against second-rate writers into an analysis of writing in general. Unmoored from a consistent foundation, the techniques of each of the genres appear more and more arbitrary. The cliches of tragedy, the techniques that Fielding earlier explained could lead audiences around like trained animals, are revealed to be mere artifice when juxtaposed with techniques from alternative forms. As Freeman astutely puts it, "to the extent that Fielding urges generic distinction to a point of collapse, he also abstractly foregrounds the extent to which those generic structures function as necessary bulwarks in the staging of meaning" (62). Furthermore, in revealing that those bulwarks are themselves supported

only by theatricality, Fielding indicates that meaning itself is manufactured through artifice. If the gestures of Tragedio are shown to be as devoid of content as the gimmicks of Harlequin, there remains no firm ground from which to distinguish wit from folly.

Or, for that matter, good from evil, for this critique of theatrical truth gets extended into social structures in general through Fielding's own skillful deployment of dramatic technique, specifically his artful blurring of Luckless's real world with his fantastical play. I have already noted how the mysterious stranger who arrives at the conclusion of the second act begins to disrupt the realism of the frame narrative, and the conclusion of the play, as most critics have noted, will conflate the two worlds completely. What has passed without comment, however, is that Fielding destabilizes the status of Luckless's play from the very beginning through his use of double casting. As *The Pleasures of The Town* begins to unfold, roles are filled by the actors who portrayed various people Luckless dealt with during his day, including Quibble, Bookweight, Blotpage, Jack the servant, Jack-Pudding, Sparkish, and Scarecrow. Although there seems to be no particular significance to the roles they play, the reappearance of so many performers from the frame narrative as residents of Luckless's underworld unhinges the play-within-the-play from its separate fictive reality. Nor can this doubling be easily dismissed as merely a performance necessity, for the most obvious overlap proves to be decidedly inconvenient. In the end, Mrs. Mullart, the actress playing the Goddess of Nonsense, must, without leaving the stage, revert to her former role as Mrs. Moneywood.[21] That Luckless's landlady, the most visible reminder of his poverty, becomes the arbiter of artistic worth suggests that the rehearsal is less a debate over aesthetic value than a competition designed to determine what dramatic forms are the most lucrative. The appearance of Mrs. Moneywood, Sparkish, and the others, coupled with its setting

in the underworld and randomly episodic structure, makes *The Pleasures of the Town* look like a dream of Luckless, a fantasy negotiating how an author might achieve financial independence. Furthermore, by undermining any secure fictive status of the play within the play, Fielding creates a strong desire for a resolution that returns to the realism of the frame narrative to clarify the ambiguities.

However, the ending not only fails to resolve the uncertainties, it actually multiplies them considerably. After the Goddess of Nonsense falls asleep during Sir Farcical's antics, the players all call for a dance to revive her, but before the orchestra can strike up, the play is interrupted by Parson Murdertext and a constable who demand that Luckless stop libeling the diversions of "People of Quality" (52). Although at first this may appear to be a return to the realism of the frame, it begins to look more and more like Luckless's design. The constable himself bursts out in song, and the actress playing Mrs. Novel sexually charms Murdertext (played incidently, by the actor who performed Dash in Act II) in a manner consistent with her role. The intruders agree to sanction the final dance, but just as Luckless calls for the music, he is interrupted again, this time by the entrance of Harriot, Witmore, the ruffle-garbed stranger, and Mrs. Moneywood. Precisely how Mrs. Mullart, already on stage as the dozing Goddess of Nonsense, transforms herself back into Mrs. Moneywood is not indicated in the printed text, but if this alteration confuses the frame with the play within the play, the discoveries which follow abolish any distinction. The mysterious visitor, it seems, has come from the land of Bantam, where he was tutor to the young Luckless until the author was lost in a tragic shipwreck. After searching the globe, the bantomite finally recognized Luckless's hat in a pawn shop and has come to announce that the pennyless playwright is in fact heir to the throne of Bantam. As Luckless embraces his lost companion, another

messenger arrives with news that his Majesty of Bantam has died: Luckless is now king. His first action is to declare Harriot his queen, and after a rejoicing song, Punch jumps up to announce that he himself is the son of the King of Brentford, that Mrs. Moneywood is his mother, and thus that Harriot is his sister: the wedding of the poor poet and his idealistic mistress turns out to be a union of royalty. The performer playing Joan (Mr. Hicks) declares himself wife to Punch, and Luckless rounds out the absurd conflation of the real world and play world by hiring Marplay and Sparkish to run his theatres, appointing the constable as chief of law enforcement, and commissioning Don Tragedio, Signior Opera, and all the other characters from his puppet show to entertain the Kingdom of Bantam.

As a parody of orthodox discovery scenes, this highlights, as did so many of the ballad operas previously discussed, the arbitrariness of the dispersal of rewards enacted in traditional dramatic genres, but it goes farther by implying that the arbitrariness is a function of what one is willing to frame as actual. Unable to disentangle the two generic poles Fielding has established, the audience is forced to acknowledge that puppets can be siblings with people, that an actor in a play can become the role he or she portrays, that a cross-dressed man can be happily married to another man, and that a poor but conniving playwright can become king, as long as everyone willingly affirms his sovereignty. Just as *The Pleasures of the Town* revealed that dramatic genres supported claims to truth through conventional gimmicks that the audience had been preconditioned to accept, the conclusion of the play suggests that society itself is maintained by a willful acquiescence to contrivances no more natural than their theatrical counterparts. Fielding's peculiar epilogue further reinforces this idea. Dissatisfied with the advice of Dash, Blotpage, and others on how the epilogue should be written, Luckless decides to have it spoken by a cat. The

actress playing Mrs. Novel enters on all fours, and as Luckless delights in her repetitions of "mew, mew" he is interrupted by the arrival of (the actress playing) Harriot, who demands an explanation. Before their eyes, the cat transforms herself into a woman, who discourses on the potential joys of such transformations, noting that most couples would love to turn their spouses into cats, and concluding that the idea that "all Mankind are Cats" might not be so far-fetched. Like the elevation of Luckless and Harriot into royalty, it is the acceptance of the transformations as fact that makes them possible.

In the introduction to his ballad opera, Luckless mentions that Drury Lane's production of *Henry VIII* was designed to satisfy "every one [who] could not see the real Coronation" of George II (29), but if the re-enactment served as a substitute for the real, it also accentuated that the actual coronation was just as deeply implicated in fictive representation. *The Author's Farce and The Pleasures of the Town*, from its exposure of Harriot's conventional love, Dash's title-pages to non-existent works, Scarecrow's translations lacking originals, and Quibble's duplicitous political pamphlets to the self-serving artificiality of dramatic forms and the final conflation of reality and theatricality, becomes a treatise on the wholesale manufacturing of truth. What passes as genuine does so only because public acceptance supports some forms of artificiality over others. Beginning with a recognition of the audience's ability to shape artistic value, Fielding's rehearsal, far from attacking public opinion, demonstrated its power to transform fictions far weightier than those that transpired nightly on the stage.

Conclusion

The Author's Farce was exceedingly popular, accruing over forty performances in its initial run alone and becoming the most successful play since *The Beggar's Opera*. As the

second ballad opera to achieve such success, its influence was profound. Not only did the number of ballad operas produced increase in the years that followed, the content of these works grew more tightly focused on the implements of authority and the public's power to influence society. Ballad opera would become the genre that interrogated manipulation, in smaller realms such as medicine, publishing, and law, and in the more obvious worlds of court scandals, religious intrigues, and Walpole's government. Fielding's next ballad opera would be *The Grub- Street Opera*, taking aim at George II. Like *The Restauration of Charles II*, Fielding's later work, and that of the many writers he influenced, would expose the myths that supported the elite while simultaneously affirming the ultimate power of the populace. At times, they would prove more effective at bringing about change; for example, ballad operas were one of the main forms responsible for the demise of the Excise Bill. In time, its success would lead to its downfall during the Licensing debates, but until 1734, it remained the most commonly written form of theatre.

Surprisingly, despite its immense popularity, *The Author's Farce* generated almost no comment from either the opposition periodicals or their pro-Walpole counterparts. The papers were usually silent about the ballad operas, but as I have noted, that silence should not be taken as sign that the plays lacked commitment. The message of *The Author's Farce* suited neither the opposition, who felt that the cultural elite by nature deserved a voice in government, nor the Whigs, who were not eager to have Walpole's corruption made the subject of so much attention. Ballad opera would be damned by both parties, but it would continue to bring patrons to the theatres and buyers to the book stalls.

Nearly twenty years later, after the boom in topical ballad operas, after the Licensing Act, and almost a decade after Walpole's resignation, Fielding would once again refer to

the play that had inspired *Bays's Opera*, *The Fashionable Lady*, and *The Author's Farce*, reiterating his notion that power stems from public displays that are both theatrical and artificial. In *Tom Jones* he writes:

> Thus the author of *Hurlothrumbo* told a learned bishop, that the reason his lordship could not taste the excellence of his piece, was, that he did not read it with a fiddle in his hand; which instrument he himself always had in his own, when he composed it. (119)

This remark occurs in a section that argues that all authors should be read in the spirit that they were written, and in addition to Johnson he references Butler, who claimed to be always drunk when he wrote and so should only be read in an alcoholic stupor. Fielding's alternative to Butler's tankard of ale turns out to be a rhetorical version of Johnson's fiddle: "whole sundry similes, descriptions, and other forms of poetical embellishment" (120). These serve, he declares, in the same manner as musical flourishes and other gimmicks work in the theatre, to make the heroes more heroic and the villains more villainous. He continues by noting that politicians have long since figured out this same technique, and such is the reason "that awful magistrate" the Lord Mayor contracts all of his dignity and reverence. Thus Johnson's nonsense sparked a movement that declared that political acumen was as counterfeit as dramatic spectacle. Gay taught playwrights that interest ruled the world, but it was Fielding who indicated how those in power orchestrated public opinion to transform individual interest into natural law. The ballad operas that followed *The Author's Farce* took aim at all those in positions of power, consistently unveiling how they wielded authority only through a skillful use of theatrical technique. A great man, these works in effect declare, always carries a fiddle in his hand.

Chapter Four:

Political Cynicism and Unrestrained Indulgence on the Page and on the Stage

A sharp increase in the number of ballad operas written and produced followed the success of *The Author's Farce*. Nearly as many were published in the second half of 1730 as had been the previous year, in 1731 that number doubled, and during the seasons from 1732 to 1734 over thirty-five new ballad operas appeared at theatres and booksellers. Among these was yet another meta-theatrical burlesque, this one written by a self proclaimed "Gentleman, Lawyer, Poet, Actor, Soldier, Sailor, Exciseman, Publican; in *England*, *Scotland*, *Ireland*, *New-York*, *East* and *West Jersey*, *Maryland*, (*Virginia* on both sides of the *Cheesapeek*,) *North* and *South Carolina*, *South Florida*, *Bahama's*, *Jamaica*, *Hispaniola*, and often a Coaster by all the same" (16). The well traveled man with the remarkable resume was Tony Aston,[22] and his play, *The Fool's Opera*, depicts the fortunes of a philandering poet who escapes his creditors by selling his unproduced play through subscriptions to a fine lady and her maid, both of whom he has seduced. The text is delightfully nonsensical and replete with clever tunes and witty double-entendres,[23] but it is more significant for the way it documents the changes that had occurred to the form since Fielding's first major success.

The increase in the output of ballad operas brought about a number of events that fundamentally altered the way in which these plays were written and consumed. Predictably, more of them achieved lasting success on the stage, most notably *The Jovial Crew* (1731), which played to consistently crowded houses (Baker, III, 288), and *The Devil to Pay* (1731), which became, in its shortened version, the most popular afterpiece of the century, with 525 recorded performances

(Kavenik, 120). More important, however, was the increase in plays that suffered the fate of Gay's *Polly*. Both *Calista* (1730) and *The Wanton Jesuit* (1731) were forbidden production during the year after *The Author's Farce*, but the censorship of Fielding's next venture, *The Grub Street Opera*, created the greatest uproar. In this case the authorities not only forbade the play's production, they also shut down the theatre that intended to produce it. The closing of the Little Theatre at the Haymarket generated heated debate, and Fielding took advantage of the publicity by orchestrating the publication of several versions of his notorious text to achieve maximum sales. *The Grub Street Opera* became the second ballad opera to achieve success in print rather than performance (the first, of course, was *Polly*), and other writers soon learned that a failure to secure production could lead to increased sales at the book stands. There thus developed a divergence in the form based on whether the texts were designed more for the stage or the page. Because success in print was contingent on a text's overt evocation of scandal, those who aimed their plays for publication grew more and more politically aggressive, while those eager for production learned to express the theme of universal corruption in ever subtler ways.[24]

The Fool's Opera evidences this shift in both its narrative and its exploitation of the print medium. Unlike the authors in the rehearsals of Ralph, Fielding, and Odingsells, Aston's Poet has no concern with whether his work will receive representation on the stage, and instead continually seeks to line his pockets with "Subscription Guineas" (11). And his confidence seems infections, so that even the maid decides she too is capable of producing songs of her own making and getting "descriptions" for them (3-4). Aston also shows considerable ingenuity in exploiting his paratext. To generate interest in his own work, Aston details how it "was first *Acted* with universal Satisfaction in a Person of Quality's House, by People of the first Rank," and he feigned excessive

concern with the authority of the published version. Additionally, he includes a note that insinuates that his play has already generated controversy, disingenuously asserting that none of his characters were meant to indicate specific individuals. All of these strategies were duplicated in other printed ballad operas, and Aston even includes a joke about the public's appetite for these texts, claiming to have received for his work "One Thousand Three Hundred Forty Pounds, Nineteen Shillings *and* Eleven Pence Three Farthings, – *All in Mr*. Wood's *Half-pence*" (A1-4). Although the substantial and ludicrously precise figure of compensation indicates that such texts were considered economically viable, Aston's reference to William Wood's copper coinage highlights the lack of inherent value in such works. The fact that Aston's textual strategies were not unique indicates that the publication-only ballad operas developed a set of practices independent of their staged counterparts.

To describe accurately the evolution of ballad opera throughout the 1730s it is therefore necessary to examine each of these groups of plays separately, and doing so leads to a surprising conclusion. It has often been assumed that the aggressively topical and political operas were more responsible for the Licensing Act than the seemingly more innocuous staged plays,[25] yet not only were very few overtly political plays were published after 1733, but the explicitness of their politics tamed their satire. On the other hand, because those plays designed for production needed to avoid partisanship, they developed strategies whereby the satire became more deeply encoded. By exploiting the audience's knowledge of earlier ballad operas, these plays were able to make their message clear to those in the know, while appearing highly innocuous to those less familiar with the form. The fact that the less obviously political plays contributed more to the calls for regulation thus becomes less counterintuitive, for encoded messages are more threatening in that

they create a more cohesive community and are not subject to direct rebuttal.

In what follows, I first examine the more overtly political texts, beginning with Fielding's manipulation of the publication of *The Grub Street Opera*, which helped open the market for unproduced plays. The rest can be divided into those concerned with social scandals and those more directly interested in party politics, and I will show that though the former group maintained ballad opera's social critique, the latter plays became more interested in partisan debate than satire. This group culminates in a series of plays written in response to the Excise Bill, which, however critical of Walpole's policies, lack any ironic edge. The staged plays, in contrast, never abandoned the message of universal selfishness. By examining their use of music and their distinctness from other theatrical genres, I will demonstrate that they were in many ways more subversive in intent than their unproduced counterparts. This will be made most apparent by my concluding look at the two operas written just after the Licensing Act. The first, *Britons Strike Home*, explicitly attacks Walpole's foreign policy, but was nevertheless allowed production. In contrast, the suppressed *Sancho at Court* avoids direct engagement in political matters, yet its ironic celebration of selfishness was enough to warrant its suppression. The administration seemed to have decided that its most threatening adversary was not the opposition call for a more traditional politics, but instead a social movement that saw all people, and therefore all politics, as equally and inevitably corrupt.

I. The Origin of Print-Only Ballad Operas

Although the numerous ballad operas that were never produced represent an important and fascinating part of the form's history, their significance has often been overestimated. Seeing titles such as *The Courtiers Sent Back with Their Bribes* or *Robin's Art of Money Catching*, critics have

naturally assumed that these aggressive critiques of Walpole were a primary factor in bringing about the Licensing Act. In "Henry Fielding and the Ballad Opera," for example, Morrissey implies that explicit ballad opera critiques of Walpole began to be published immediately following the suppression of *Polly* and continued to appear regularly until the passage of the restrictive Act in 1737. However, the rise of print-only ballad operas began with *The Grub Street Opera*, not *Polly*: after Gay's play was published in 1729, no other ballad opera was suppressed until Fielding's two years later. After this they began to appear regularly and in large numbers, but the phenomenon did not continue throughout the decade.

The Grub Street Opera was one of the boldest ballad operas in its social satire, and unparalleled in the obviousness of its political references. In the home of the Sir and Lady ap Shinkin's and their son Owen, Fielding obviously references George II, Queen Caroline, and Frederick, the Prince of Wales. The thieving Robin is Walpole, and there are also portraits of Pulteney, Molly Skerrit, and many others. So many other critics have analyzed the play that I will not include a lengthy description of the effect of these references here; I will note only my agreement with Goldgar that the piece is more an expression of "political cynicism than political commitment" (111). Its basic premise is that every one involved in political maneuvering cheats, lies, bribes, and steals, and in this (as well as in its critical portraits of both Walpole and Pulteney) it anticipated the themes of most of the print-only ballad operas that came after it. Though the play thus has no clear in partisan commitments, I think Hume is mistaken to see it as nothing more than a good-natured burlesque (101), and Rivero's claim that it celebrates "the moral necessity of lawful Christian marriage" strikes me as highly implausible (110). Rivero claims to be the first critic to "approach [the] drama in dramatic terms" (92) but he fails to consider that the abruptness of the

libertine Owen's "totally unexpected marriage to Molly" works against its sincerity, and worse yet he fails to notice how the supposed virtue of Molly is consistently undercut by Fielding's direct parody of the preachy songs in Lillo's *Sylvia*.[26] Although it does not mock the sanctity of marriage as aggressively as some of the social scandal operas, it nevertheless mirrors the genre's consistent distrust of fidelity. *The Grub Street Opera* thus shares characteristics of both the staged satires from later in the decade and the highly political print operas. But it is also notable for the attention its author gave to its publication, and because this is a relatively unknown feature of the print-only plays, I would like to take a brief tour of its complicated publication history.

Close attention to the textual differences among the three published versions of *The Grub-Street Opera* suggests that Fielding may have consciously orchestrated the tangled publication history of his play with the aim of increasing the profit he might gain from sales of the printed text. He certainly needed the money; at this time the Little Haymarket, Fielding's home theatre and most reliable source of income, was threatened with closure over its production of *The Fall of Mortimer*, and according to Robert Hume "with the possible exception of 30 June they apparently did not perform after 18 June" (99). Nor could he reasonably expect any success at other venues. Lincoln's Inn Fields was out of the question; even despite Fielding's "well-documented dislike for John Rich," that theatre had suffered through the production of *Rape upon Rape* the previous winter; it ran only four nights and was poorly attended (Burling,43). Nor was Drury Lane an option at the time, due in part to Fielding's rather vicious satirizing of the Cibbers in *The Author's Farce*. It was in this context, during the temporary shut down of the Little Haymarket, that versions of Fielding's play saw print: first *The Welsh Opera*, on June 26, 1731, followed shortly thereafter by *The Genuine Grub-Street Opera* in late August (dating the third version, also

imprinted 1731, is more complex, and will be discussed below). One can certainly imagine that Fielding, unsure of when he might again have an income from performance, might seek to get all the profit possible from his opera by issuing it in successive editions, each one more complete than the last.

Three publications, each dated 1731, comprise the entire documentation we have for Fielding's play. Combined with information gleaned from notices in the *Daily Post* and other periodicals, these texts create a situation of considerable complexity.[27] We know the following: on April 22, 1731, *The Welsh Opera* premiered as an afterpiece to the *Tragedy of Tragedies*, and was performed three more times that week. On 19 May, it was revived "with several Alterations and Additions," but it was still considered short enough to remain an afterpiece. Two days later, the *Daily Post* printed the following marketing tease: "We hear that the Grub-Street Opera, written by Scriblerus Secundus, which was to have been postponed till next season, will, at the request of several Persons of Quality, be perform'd within a Fortnight. . . . This is the Welsh Opera alter'd and enlarg'd to three Acts. It is now in the press, and will be sold at the Theatre, with Musick prefix'd to the Songs. . .on the first Night of Performance." There is no record of any such performance and no document which matches this description, but on 5 June the same paper announced that despite demand, *The Welsh Opera* would no longer be performed as an afterpiece because rehearsals for the long version were almost complete. Instead of the anticipated premiere, however, the company announced on June 12th that *The Grub-Street Opera* would have to be postponed a week due to an actor's illness, and only two days later they extended the deferment indefinitely: "We are obliged to defer the *Grubstreet Opera* till further Notice" (*Daily Post*). Six days later the company would perform for the last time before the temporary shut-down, and eight

days after that the *Daily Journal* announced the publication of *The Welsh Opera.*

This text, marked "Printed by *E Rayner,* and sold by *H. Cook,*" is usually considered a transcript of the afterpiece Fielding would later expand, and most critics believe that it was stolen. I believe there can be little doubt that at least part of it was taken from the prompter's copy, for at Air XXIV one finds the note "Thunder ready," an effect required at the end of the scene (29). Although this observation would seem to confirm the theory that the text was a piracy, the copy contains no other call or ready notes, only terse set descriptions, and a preface which was either composed by Fielding or by someone working skillfully to create that impression. This preface declares that "the performance of the *Grub-Street* Opera has been prevented by a certain Influence which has been very *prevailing* of late years," and goes on to account for the details of the play in language remarkable similar to that which Fielding later included in his preface to *Don Quixote in England*. Critics who believe that this preface was written by "Rayner or someone in his pay" fail to account for this stylistic similarity (Hume, 99). Instead, they point to the announcement which appeared in the *Daily Post* on 28 June, which stated that the "strange Medley of Nonsense" which Rayner published "is a very incorrect and spurious addition of the Welch [sic] Opera" and explicitly denied the publisher's "attempts to insinuate that it was stopt by Authority." However, there are a number of reasons why this announcement should be treated skeptically. First, it declares that the performance of *The Grub-Street Opera* was only being temporarily postponed, but the Little Haymarket was in such hot water at this time (they had been forbidden to perform *The Fall of Mortimer,* and depositions and affidavits were being systematically collected in an attempt to darken the space permanently) that it would have required an almost unfathomable optimism to believe it would reopen. Secondly, the announcement takes great pains to denounce

Rayner's text not so much for its errors as for its seditious politics. The actual Opera, so the notice declares, is so innocuous that "there could be no manner of Reason" for objection, and the public is urged to believe that anything "intolerable and scandalous" should be considered only the work of the "notorious Paper Pyrate" Rayner. In fact, however, the version published by Rayner is far less subversive than the longer versions which would soon appear in print, so if anything he was doing the company a favor by deleting political content. Those who believe the piracy theory paint Rayner as "a shady publisher with opposition ties, and certainly not one of Fielding's usual outlets" (Hume, 99). However, he is no where else accused of piracy, and though several of the texts he did publish were highly inflammatory, they were also carefully printed and less error riddled than many other plays I have examined. When printing *Vanelia,* for example, a shockingly cynical and overt portrayal of Walpole's affair with Maria Skirrett, he set the text with great care, including an elaborate frontpiece and detailed imprints of the airs. Rayner had also published *The Fall of Mortimer* for the Little Haymarket only one month before, so he certainly had connections with that company and thus also with Fielding. Finally, as I will show below, there is good reason to believe that *The Welsh Opera* was not simply an early draft of what would later be expanded, but instead a deliberate shortening of the already written longer piece. What seems most likely, therefore, is that Fielding contracted with Rayner to publish *The Welsh Opera* after the Little Haymarket had been shut down, and finding himself in some trouble because of it, attempted to disavow any connection between the printed text and his theatre.

In any case, the situation became even more complicated in the late summer, when a version entitled *The Genuine Grub-Street Opera* was published. No printer is listed; the title page simply declares that it was "printed and Sold for the Benefit of the Comedians of the New Theatre

in the *Hay-market*." This text greatly expands and improves upon the *Welsh Opera* and includes far more pointed satire, not only of Walpole, but also of George II. Again, announcements in the *Daily Journal* complicate interpretation considerably. On August 12th it reported that because the play had been suppressed, it had been printed for the benefit of the actors, but four days later the journal retracted this, claiming that the Company had no hand in its publication, and furthermore that "as to its being suppressed, the said Company knows no more than that the author desired it might not be performed." Most critics believe the retraction, seeing this text as yet another piracy, and they again attribute the theft to the much maligned E. Rayner. But if it was true that Fielding expressed a desire to not have it performed he must have done so well before the publication of the *Welsh Opera*, for his theatre had already been closed for over two months. Furthermore, though some evidence suggests that Rayner was its publisher, the matter is far less clear cut than normally assumed.

My own investigation into printer's marks reveals a situation too complex to lead to any firm conclusions. The primary similarities between *The Genuine Grub-Street Opera* and other texts printed by Rayner are the drop capitals and the division marks that open the first act; the opening page of the text does look remarkably like the opening page of Rayner's *Vanelia*. However, the first page of *The Welsh Opera*, printed by Rayner only months before, both lacks the ornate drop capital and uses a stylistically distinct division mark. Additionally, the marks in *The Genuine Grub-Street Opera* are far from unique to Rayner, as can be seen by examining the parallel pages in *The Author's Farce*, printed 1730 by J. Roberts; *The Fool's Opera*, printed 1731 by T. Payne; and *Calista*, printed 1731 by C. Davies. Davies' text is the most interesting; the drop capital that begins *Calista* is identical to that which opens *Vanelia*. Furthermore, the opening

dedication in *Calista* is headed with a symbol that matches the one used for the introduction to *The Welsh Opera*. From all this one could conclude either that Rayner published *Calista* with a false imprint impersonating Davies (and also Payne and Roberts), or that printer's marks are not reliable evidence in ascertaining a text's publisher. In addition to the absurdity of picturing Rayner as master masquerader, other evidence argues against Rayner as printer of *The Genuine Grub-Street Opera*. First, one would have to question why Rayner would completely reset a text he had only recently published, one which was identical to *The Genuine Grub-Street Opera* in many places. Secondly, designating Rayner as the printer of the second text requires the assumption that he possessed a strangely variable tin ear. *The Welsh Opera* incorrectly sets the ending of Air XX, an exchange of insults that matches the tune as unsung dialogue (25), an error corrected in the later version (36). However, *The Genuine Grub-Street Opera* erroneously sets the final verse of Air 29 as prose (38), but this misunderstanding is not present in the earlier text (27). Because it seems unlikely that Rayner could have so soon forgotten that these lines were verse, I conclude that *The Genuine Grub-Street Opera* was published not by Rayner but by someone else who employed similar printing devices, either Davies, Payne, or (most likely given Fielding's previous publications) Roberts.

As if all this was not complicated enough, we also possess a third version of the play, entitled *The Grub-Street Opera*, dated 1731 with the mark "printed and sold by J. Roberts, in Warwick-lane." This version contains two additional scenes, as well as a number of lines not included in *The Genuine Grub-Street Opera*. Because of its completeness, and because Roberts had handled the publication of most of Fielding's previous work, this edition is often considered authorative. However, there were no notices in the newspapers regarding this publication that

year, and the only thing we know for certain is that it was included in a collection published by Andrew Miller in 1755 (Roberts, p. xi). Additionally, the text includes a copy of *The Masquerade*, an easy satire of John Jacob Heidegger and Fielding's first publication, and there could have been little reason for Fielding to have wanted this republished at the time. Some scholars also believe that the text shows a typographical appearance too modern to have been published before 1740. At any rate, it is one more puzzle to add to an already confounding bibliographic narrative that raises far more questions than it answers.

The standard view is that E. Rayner pirated both of the early versions, and that the only authorized version is *The Grub-Street Opera*, which is assumed to have been printed sometime in the 1740s by Andrew Millar, who falsified the title page. My opinion differs significantly. I believe *The Welsh Opera* represents a deliberate rewriting of the afterpiece which Little Haymarket had performed, eliminating the most overt political content, and completely distinct from the piece which had been produced. When Fielding realized that even this watered-down version threatened his already struggling company, he disingenuously disassociated himself from it. Shortly thereafter, when the situation at Little Haymarket seemed beyond redemption, Fielding brought two versions of his text to J. Roberts. The first was the highly political *Genuine Grub-Street Opera*, designed to sell because of its highly inflammatory content, and the second was *The Grub-Street Opera*, a similar version, but one in which the political dissent had been significantly lessened by numerous additions. Roberts prepared this text for publication in case it became necessary for Fielding to disavow his contact with the politically charged version. Although prepared, it was not printed at the time, but when Andrew Millar acquired the rights to Roberts' texts in 1755, he simply used the plates Roberts had already created, tacking on the finished plates for *The Masquerade* as an added

sales incentive. Throughout, Fielding manipulated his text to control its political effects, once by deleting subversive content, and once by adding scenes which rendered any such critiques more oblique.

Critics of *The Welsh Opera* have noted that the piece contains "more mischief than malice" and lacks the sharp satire in the later versions (Thomson, p. 48). The explanation that Fielding had not yet written more inflammatory sections, however, is contradicted by both the nature of the revisions and evidence of excision in the text itself. *The Welsh Opera* was printed with the subtitle "The Gray Mare the better Horse," and though appropriate to the play's satire of a hen-pecked husband, the line appears to come from a song denouncing the perils of petticoat government only included in the later versions:

> With Men as Wise as Robin
>
> A Female Tongue may pass, Sir;
>
> For where th' Grey Mare
>
> Is th' better Horse, there
>
> The Horse is but an Ass, Sir. (40)

In addition to calling Walpole (Robin) an ass, this song also contains a dig at George II and Caroline. Fielding set these words to the tune "Of a noble race was Shenkin," and he called the characters most easily associated with the royal family the "Ap-Shinkins." The song itself, however, is not included in *The Welsh Opera*, and the likelihood that Fielding later wrote a song that both aped his sub-title and obliquely referenced the name he chose for his major characters seems slim indeed. Can we not more plausibly assume that the author deleted the song from the printed version out of fear of governmental reprisals?

In fact, most of the differences between *The Welsh Opera* and the longer versions are better explained as newly written, meant to disguise the excision of more explosive material rather than as incomplete early drafts. A detailed account of all the minor disparities is not necessary here, but I will note that *The Welsh Opera* alters Sweetissa's accusation against Robin to "he has lain with me" instead of "with Susan," mollifying Robin's rakishness (13); prints "boy's all" instead of "Bob's all" dissociating the epitaph rogue from Walpole (38); and eliminates Squire Owen's libertine motives for his deceptions, rendering this character's association with Prince Frederick unrecognizable, but also draining the character of any dramatic purpose (5). More significantly, the introductory dialogue between Scriberlus and a Player focuses on the differences between tragedy and comedy in a manner wholly unconnected to the themes of the play, and the ending lacks all dramatic sense and appears awkwardly shoe-horned in as an afterthought.

However frequently critics have dismissed the conclusion of *The Welsh Opera* as inadequate, no one has proposed that it was tacked on later, but this hypothesis goes a long way in explaining its dramatic failures. After carefully setting up a vastly complicated series of intrigues among the servants, Fielding introduces Goody Scratch, a witch, who reveals that all of the servants are of noble parentage. At this point Owen, who has appeared only once before and acted without motive, enters newly married to Molly, a servant who has not yet appeared at all. All the couples then perform a merry dance, despite the fact that none of their tensions have been resolved. Rivero notes that this conclusion solves the play's "moral ambiguities. . .by ignoring the moral issue altogether" (102), but the problem is not the moral issues (I have shown that ballad operas commonly left these ambiguous). The revelation that all the servants are really noble does nothing to alter the hatred and jealousies among them that had previously been developed. Owen,

who inexplicably forged the letters that caused this jealousy, never reveals himself as their author, leaving the problems intact. Additionally, Owen's father cryptically announces that his son is really the son of a tenant, and Molly is actually his own daughter, a report so structurally unmotivated that Robert Hume wonders "whether this speech belongs in the text, since it seems to fit nothing else in the play as we have it" (96).

If we assume this to be the ending as Fielding originally planned it, we must attribute to him a far greater incompetence than he elsewhere displays, but fortunately evidence exists that argues that not only did Fielding create this ending to hide the political content of his work, but he was also aware of its absurdity. In the exchange between Scriblerus and the Player which introduces the work, he includes dialogue that both highlights the ending's inadequacy and suggests that it was an afterthought:

> *Player*. I wish, Sir, you had kept within the Rules of Probability in your Plot, if I may call it so.
>
> *Scr.* It is the business of a poet to surprise his audience. . . the discovery, Sir, should be as no one could understand how it could be brought about, before it is made.
>
> *Player*. No, and I defy them to understand yours after it is made.--
>
> *Scr.* Well but I have a Witch to solve all that– I know some Authors who have made as strange discoveries without any Witch at all. . .
>
> *Player.* And it is a Question, which is the most Tragical end of the two.
>
> *Scr.* Smiles are also Tragical and Comical–the–so have I seen belongs to Tragedy–the–as then to Comedy, I think, I may say, the Smiles I have introduc'd in

this Opera are all entirely New, not like anything that has been produc'd before...

Player. Sir, I wish you would be so kind to stay here to comment upon your Opera as it goes on.

Scr. Hey– to be a sort of walking Notes. (i-iii)

The discussion of the probability of the plot foregrounds Fielding's awareness of its senselessness, Scriberlus's hinting that he knows authors who did not use witches could be read as a sly self-reference, and the phrase "not like anything that has been produc'd before" is similarly suggestive. Furthermore, the almost incomprehensible line in which he urges his play's novelty might hint that the ending was a later addition, and even more interesting is the declaration that Scriberlus will remain to comment on the action, for he might have subtly inserted himself into the final scene. Following the Introduction, Scriberlus apparently vanishes from the text, but he arguably reappears in the final section, just as the witch Goody Scratch enters. The text at this point displays a tension, visible nowhere else, in its designation of speeches. Parson Puzzletext, who throughout the play had been marked as 'Puz,' begins to alternate, seemingly at random, between 'Puz' and 'Puzzle.' The lines for Goody Scratch are similarly variable: she is 'Scratch,' 'Witch,' and occasionally, 'Scr.' None of the other characters suffer these transformations, and nowhere else in the text do similar transformations occur. Significantly, the lines labeled 'Scr' are precisely those which perform the false resolution, and open with a cryptic reference: "if you will be Secret, and preach nothing of this my Misfortune, I will discover a Secret," and one of the speeches given to 'Puzzle' states "I never believ'd one Word of Witches myself till this moment" (32). Although viewing this as an elaborate game indicative of authorial intrusion might seem overly ingenious and far-fetched, those who argue that the ending came from a stolen promptbook nevertheless need to

explain why such textual tension begins precisely with the troubling resolution. The notion that Goody Scratch was wholly a textual device is also supported by an examination of the Dramatis Personae, in which the role is given to a Mrs. Clark. Mrs. Clark does not appear on any of the other cast lists, despite a constant shuffling of roles throughout the three versions. Finally, even the name Goody Scratch is highly suggestive, as "scratch" denotes both the creating and the excising of text, and "goody" suggests a possible bias in the revision.

Thus, the suggestion that all of the versions display deliberate editing of the play with an eye on the political effects each such publication might have seems to fit the facts, and many other print only operas seem to indulge in similar textual games with great relish. Particularly spectacular in this regard is *The Ragged Uproar: or, The Oxford Roratory*. The title page alone carries its message that power is arbitrary by emphasizing how the text introduces the "a-la-mode SYSTEM of *Fortune-telling*. . .concluding with an important SCENE of *Witches, Gypsies*, and *Fortune-Tellers*; a long jumbling Dance of *Politicians*." It includes a ridiculously fulsome dedication, and even a series of fake actors in the dramatis personae, including Mr. Interest, said to perform the role of Justice Quorum, and Mr. Troublesome, who portrayed Lawyer Quibble (4). The play itself is a rehearsal, sprinkled throughout with explanatory footnotes. It ends by having Mr. Dash declare "I would sooner burn my Copy, and have the Publick *moan the Loss of it*, than I will have my Politicians altered. . .I introduc'd it to prove the *Strength of a certain Party*," an assertion so ridiculous, given the nature of the play, that it appears to be making a mockery of partisanship. *The Ragged Uproar* is the most extravagant in its exploitation of the print medium, but many of the plays I discuss below employ similar devices. It is also unique in that it attacks both marriage and party politics; most of them emphasize one or the other. Whatever the focus,

however, the message remains profoundly cynical, a trait the play shares with most of the print-only ballad operas that begin to regularly appear following the publication of *The Genuine Grub-Street Opera*.

II. Social Scandal in the Print-Only Operas

The social scandal operas put into dramatic form popular gossip about marital impropriety in high places. *Calista* portrays both the affair between Lady Catherine Abergavenny and Richard Lydell, a scandal brought to public attention when Lady Abergavenny died in childbirth shortly after her husband brought the case to trial, and the womanizing of Colonel Charteris, who was finally sentenced to death for the rape of a servant girl named Ann Bond. Similarly, *Vanelia,* like *The Grub Street Opera*, details the philandering of Walpole with his mistress Maria Skerritt, but centers on the story of Miss Vane, a maid of honor to Queen Caroline who, after having affairs with both Lord Hervey and Lord Harrington, became the concubine of Prince Frederick, eventually giving birth to a son in 1732. *The Humours of the Court* also represents Miss Vane, and additionally the trials of Catherine Weld, a lord's daughter who sued for divorce over her husband's impotence. Finally, according to Baker's *Companion to the Playhouse*, *The Wanton Countess* deals with "some Tale of Private Scandal in the Court" even if the personages represented are no longer recognizable (A22).

Baker disdains to discuss these controversies, noting that the details are neither his "Business to enquire" nor his Inclination to perpetuate" (A22), but this view was not universal; these scandals were frequently perpetuated by the journals, satiric verse pamphlets, thinly veiled "secret histories," and at least one traditional comedy (*The Intriguing Courtiers*). The ballad operas, however, are unique in that they seem to find the adulterous intrigues a cause for

celebration rather than censure. The accounts in periodicals, verses and other writings may indulge the reader's taste for naughtiness, but in doing so they ultimately affirm the value of marriage. Like celebrity magazines today, these texts produce pleasure by making the reader feel superior to great personages, whose very station in life seduces them into indiscretions that end only in unhappiness. They thus perform the dual social purpose of upholding traditional values and maintaining class divisions, for court society can be so dangerously corrupting that unhappiness seems inevitable. For example, *The Fair Concubine*, an anonymous secret history detailing the scandal involving Prince Frederick, titillates its readers with Miss Vane's correspondence to the Prince and the Queen revealing her pregnancy, but steadfastly maintains that wealth "renders a Woman miserable and contemptible" (xiv), and that "Beauty is rather a Curse than a Blessing" (xv), making the story a cautionary tale confirming marriage as the natural order.

In contrast, the ballad operas regard adultery as both natural and more desirable then wedlock, so much so that marital relations seem to exist only so that husbands and wives can delight in breaking them. Thus in *The Wanton Countess*, Lady Woodmore, desiring a child and frustrated by her husband's lack of sexual interest, cheerfully seeks the services of Count Wriggle, who is happy to oblige. They are interrupted before they can begin, and Lady Woodmore makes a second visit, but this time her husband is presumed dead and the Count thus loses all interest. The eventual consummation occurs in a case of double mistaken identity, each of them believing they are philandering, and the discovery pleases neither of them. Similarly, the title character of *Calista* seemingly marries Altimont only to enjoy better her affair with Lothario, and the Countess de Ulto has intrigues with Count Hernio, Melanthus, and Beau Nation, behavior which her mother claims shows "Vivacity and Spirit," calling adultery "a greater Step to humane Happiness than the

greatest Estate or Title" (4). In *Vanelia*, Prince Alexis, although in an affair with Vanelia and having a new one arranged by Lord Supple, nevertheless offers to make love to both Skiressa and Flirtilla the moment he meets them. The attitude is taken to the extreme in *The Humours of the Court*, a play that goes to great lengths to demonstrate its thesis that it is better to "venture twice *upon* another Man's Wife, than once *upon* your own" (36). Although most of the characters in this play are married, their spouses are left off-stage; marital betrayal is without consequence; the plot consists in elaborately over-lapping intrigues. Thus Theodore has affairs with both Eurydice and Ismonda, each of whom, it is rumored, has also had affairs with Marmillio. Marmillio proceeds to have an affair with Arilla, and she, pleased with this love but desiring "somebody *en passant* to trifle with" takes up with Aldemar (67). Aldemar himself was in the process of wooing Morantia, and had already had an affair with Vanessa, but both these women end up falling into the arms of Adonis, happy with an arrangement to be alternating concubines. Throughout all of these affairs, characters find that they are rewarded most when their behavior is most insincere; the ability to artfully manipulate social conventions creates the greatest desire in others.

Although it may be tempting to read such excess ironically, the plays prevent one from disdaining the promiscuities by consistently ridiculing those who cling steadfastly to marital fidelity. Thus Altimont, Calista's spurned husband, is portrayed as weak and womanly; the author highlights his comic pathos by having him sing a version of "Ponder Well ye Parents Dear" from *The Beggar's Opera*, evoking Polly's famous moment of self-pity. In *Vanelia*, Flirtilla becomes the villain because she believes that exposing affairs will make lovers abandon each other. Similarly, Adrastus, the one spouse who does appear in *Humours of the Court*, is damned less for his cuckoldry than for his insistence that adultery is a serious matter. In the same play, Helena

despises her husband Impotentio, but refuses to have affairs until she gains a divorce, despite being repeatedly advised to do so by both her own mother and her mother-in-law. In the end, the courts force her to remain married, and only then does she seek fulfillment elsewhere, something Impotetio claims he wanted her to do all along. The only positive marriages in any of these plays are those between the servants Abraham and Betty in *Vanelia,* who both regard their union as a preliminary to begin behaving like their philandering masters, and between Hamilcar and Ariadne, who are both devoted to the bottle and only appear on stage drunk.

It is important to note that this difference in attitude is rooted in genre. The rules governing tragedy and traditional comedy could not accommodate the message of *Calista,* only the viability of ballad opera allowed the theme articulation in dramatic form. Indeed, the generic work of ballad opera helped to constitute the message; it was the tailoring of the scandals into a form that glorified hypocrisy that produced such uniquely expressive texts. Tragedy's need for a catastrophe would have dictated a disavowal of promiscuity as sharply as did comedy's insistence on a concluding marriage. Similarly, a burlesque of Lady Avergavenny's amours would make the behavior contemptible by exaggerating the character's buffoonish personality. Ballad opera offered the opportunity to infuse the scandals with a different meaning, a meaning given greater dissemination because the conventions of the new form had been sanctioned by public approval.

The power of genre in arbitrating meaning can be seen quite clearly by examining *The Intriguing Courtiers,* a traditional comedy that, like *Vanelia* and *The Humours of the Court,* centered on the scandal involving Miss Vane and Prince Frederick. In fact, it may have been written in reaction to the ballad operas, for its scheming villain, Fentonia, obviously references the original Polly Peachum, and like the other plays includes a large number of characters engaged in

various intrigues. However, by the play's conclusion, all of the adulterers have been punished or reformed, fully satisfying the author's promise that "the Moral of the Comedy is good" (3). Like many traditional marriage comedies of the period, *The Intriguing Courtiers* contains its own contradiction, for to sustain a plot that will lead inevitably to happy marriages, it must unleash energies that can only undermine the sense of stability evoked by the tidy conclusion. The disjunctions between plot and resolution can be so great that a number of critics view these comedies as deliberately ironic, but as Milhous makes clear in her discussion of *The Beaux Stratagem*, such readings ignore eighteenth-century production histories that show that most members of the audience would be "determined to take the happy ending straight" (95). This does not mean that the ironic reading is not present in the text, rather it shows just how powerful generic concerns work to disallow certain forms of meaning. In *The Intriguing Courtiers*, for example, the marriage of Chevalier and Millmonde seems to be in jeopardy; the author includes numerous scenes in which Millimonde and Count Orianus declare their everlasting love, and freely "withdraw to the next room" to satiate their desires (28). However, Chevalier's bond with Millmonde is reaffirmed with a final resolution indicating that the couple has staged the whole affair to dupe Orianus out of 4000 crowns. On one level, therefore, marriage is exalted because it facilitates wife pandering, but the play works to conceal this potentially troubling fact by linking it to numerous other marriages, all confirming the "goodness" of the author's moral. The dictates of comedic form work to disallow what seems a rather blatant contradiction

Of course, every genre disguises its contradictions, and in ballad opera the generic necessity to glorify the achievement of goals through skillful manipulation of social codes leads to unique dramatic difficulties. The challenge of making dissembling the norm is that there remains

no secure ground in which to represent a character's actual desires. Violent anger or piteous weeping may seem too instinctual to be feigned, but it is that very fact that makes the presentation of such pretense dramatically interesting. Because in ballad operas even the most primary emotions are potentially insincere, the audience's judgments regarding a character's behavior must be always provisional; interpretation remains contingent on whether it will later be shown that a particular emotional display was all for show. The playwrights encourage this uncertainty by claiming to be presenting actual behavior unaltered by artistic concerns. Thus the author of *Vanelia* claims to have discovered a transcription recorded by his uncle, and asserts there was "no altering to make it more fashionable. . .I can't find a way to vary the Sense, without displaying a want of Spirit" (v). And the introduction to *Calista* is even more explicit:

> *Player*. Are we then to look upon this Performance as a true Representation of Things which have really been transacted; or speak justly and deal freely, it is only the Overflowings of your own Invention.
>
> *Poet*. Faith, Sir, I have scarcely taken a Poetic Liberty, –Things have been really and *bona fide* transacted exactly as I represent them, which in some Measure has clog'd the Beauty and Sublimity of the Diction, whereas had I swerv'd from Originals, I might have given it better Grace and Language; but for once I was resolv'd to introduce Truth upon the Stage in its native Simplicity. (B1-2)

If this assertion paints poetic craft as artifice it also, paradoxically, renders the characters' motives more suspect, for the more a character's diction does rise to graceful sublimity, the more likely it will be read as mere theatrical chicanery.

Such supremely artful duplicity seems to be the major source of pleasure in these texts,

particularly when the outward show is one of moral probity. Thus Calista, in agreeing before her father and suitor to wedlock, acts the part of a virtuous daughter to perfection:

> *Calista*. There's a reverence due to Age and Understanding, which makes so deep an Impression on my Mind, that I leave all to the Judgment of my Superiors, believing that Discretion may be often wanting in our Sex, who are too frequently blinded by Prejudice, Passion and Chimera. I therefore give up myself entirely to the disposal of that Parent, whose Conduct has made him Shine in the World . . . My filial Duty obliges me to please you, and contribute my poor Mite to encrease your Honour and Satisfaction; and I shall joyfully lay hold of every Opportunity that shall offer, to improve both. (12-13)

The audience is well aware that she has no such intentions; the scene is designed to mock the joy of the Marquis del Fogo and Altamont. But the poised harmony of Calista's discourse– the lack of outward clues of her insincerity– makes the father's credulity understandable, so to share in the joke the viewer must ascribe to the notion that even the most apparently genuine forms of expression are hollow. And if that were not enough, in the very next scene the author shows Count Hermio and Countess de Ulto ending their adulteress affair to pursue new ones. Here, their language is frank and unadorned, but the process includes a mock wedding: they exchange rings as a promise that "when we happen to be tired of a future Intrigue, we may again find some Pleasure in renewing former friendship" (17). Consistently throughout these plays, important social ceremonies are reduced to theatricality while sordid affairs are graced with the trappings of reverent ritual.

In their joyous portrayal of infidelities, the social-scandal plays discussed so far avoided political critique. The courtly figures are not attacked for their behavior but become almost

exemplars; even the portrayal of Walpole and his mistress in *Vanelia* avoids any hint of the affair's influence on policy. Following Walpole's highly unpopular championing of the Excise Bill, however, these plays began to take on a more explicit oppositional stance, and in the process they abandoned the celebration of insincerity that characterizes the form. Thus the two final scandal operas, *The Court Legacy* and *The Court Medley*, present the intrigues of the court as intolerably depraved, equate the social corruption with political treachery, and include unshakably honest heros as alternatives to the debauched government. This is hardly surprising, because one could hardly oppose the Excise bill as corrupt, as in *The Court Legacy*, while championing corruption, or, as in *The Court Medley*, critique Walpole's self-centered arranging of the match between the Princess Royal and The Prince of Orange while exalting self-interest as the norm. By advocating a specific political stance, these plays were required to alter the message that had given ballad opera such force, and it is perhaps significant that they were the last of the social-scandal ballad operas to be published.

III: Cynicism in the Excise Operas

If the social scandal operas lost their power when they began to advocate more specific political agendas, one would expect that plays which dealt directly with the workings of government would be even more likely to abandon the theme of universal corruption and begin to advocate a more partisan stance. The fact that virtually all of these operas deal with the controversy over the excise would seem to make this even more likely, but here too one finds a pattern not unlike that seen in the development of the social scandal plays. The earliest of these highly political operas paint the maneuvering of both Walpole and the opposition as motivated entirely by self interest, but they celebrate those characters that learn to manipulate both sides for

personal gain. Only with the defeat of excise, amidst the great outpouring of rejoicing poems and pamphlets, did these ballad operas take pains to show that the merchants who opposed Walpole's bill did so only out of the purist of motives.

All of these operas center on the controversy created by Walpole's attempt to alter the way taxes were paid on tea, coffee, wine and tobacco. Walpole's problem was that the current system for collecting these taxes relied on collecting these fees at the ports where the imported goods arrived, and this system was consistently thwarted by smugglers who would land in areas outside the reach of custom officials. Walpole attempted to correct this problem by replacing the customs fee with excise, taxes levied when the goods were actually purchased, and he managed to implement this scheme for tea and coffee without much controversy. However, the proposal to expand the plan to include liquor and tobacco was met with tremendous resistance, and petitions that demanded that citizens be heard in Parliament to voice their displeasure began circulating. Opponents of Walpole exploited this controversy by disseminating all sorts of vituperative literature, and Walpole countered by hiring writers to represent his side of the story. In the end, however, so many people signed the petitions that it became clear that enforcing excise would cause rioting, and Walpole reluctantly abandoned the scheme.[28]

The authors of the earliest ballad operas did not fail to notice that the motives of the merchants who opposed excise were hardly beyond reproach, and these plays also seem delighted by the idea that writers could make money by creating propaganda supporting either side (or both) regardless of their beliefs. Thus *Lord Blunder's Confession*, the earliest of these, spends the first act following the fortunes of Dick Dash, a writer employed by Lord Blunder "to abuse his Adversaries, and write daily Panegyricks upon him" (4). Dash squabbles with his companion

James Trimwell, who has refused to write any further praises, but only because he has not been paid as handsomely as his friend. Trimwell ominously declares that Dash will be abused by Blunder's enemies, but no such tragedy comes to pass, and Dash concludes his adventure cheerfully scribbling an attack on the leaders of the opposition, half drunk, and anticipating a wonderful frolic with several strumpets who have surrounded him. Contrasted to Dash is Mr Gaylove, who "diverts himself with answering Lord Blunder's Writers," but his incentives are no nobler than those of Dash. He makes it clear that he abuses Blunder primarily to win the affections of the Lord's dissatisfied Mistress, and he is amply rewarded when she both lies with him and pays him for his pleasure. If the text damns Walpole for his stupidity, it is also dismissive of the opposition. The two characters who seem to reap the greatest rewards are Walpole's servant Graspall and Lady Meanwell's attendant Clara. These two take advantage of their masters' obsession with politics to fill their own pockets so that they may marry in wealth. Thus, though explicit in its political references, *Lord Blunder's Confession* portrays partisan debates as little more than an opportunity for the gleefully cynical to enrich themselves. If the play has a moral, it is that Walpole's foolish excise proposal enabled clever people to live carefree and happy lives.

The Sturdy Beggars likewise paints characters on both sides of the controversy as dishonest and greedy, and it also depicts lighthearted writers happily pocketing payments for their pamphlets and poems. Walpole, represented here as Sir Simon Wronghead, proposes excise as a way to line his own pockets, and he sends his assistant Scammony to offer the merchants small bribes in exchange for support of his scheme. His two panegyrists, Thickhead and Numscul, occasionally quibble with each other over who most excels in "similes and other Flowers of Rhetoric" (21), but they write their verses solely for money:

Since we are well paid for our Scribbling

Let's give our Patron Applause;

I'm always well-pleased when I'm nibbling

The Gold, that we get by the Cause. Fol de rol, &c.

And whether 'tis right or 'tis wrong,

Or whether the Scheme be well laid,

The Inquiry don't us belong,

We always write as we are paid. Fol de rol, &c. (23)

If this caricature of Walpole is savage, it is balanced by an equally cynical portrait of the merchants. Although the play does include a lengthy ballad on the virtues of these "sturdy beggars," which extols their honesty and love of country in twenty-three tiresome stanzas (55-9), the author makes it abundantly clear that ballad's praise of them is deceptive. Elsewhere they are shown to cheat their customers (36) and they announce that they could deal with excise by simply bribing those who come to collect the tax (27). Furthermore, the singers of the ballad, who are as mercenary as Thickhead and Numscul, are only too happy to accept the guineas offered them by these men, whose names, Traffick, Killcow, Smokeall, and Mixum, are as unflattering as those given to Walpole's subordinates. Once again it is the man who skillfully manipulates both parties that reaps the greatest profit, and he also gives expression to this primary theme:

For ev'ry Man now does consult his own Ends,

And for Profit betrays Father, Brother, and Friends;

'Tis Matter of Fact, you may trust to my Word,

Poor Tradesmen are Bites, and so is the Rich Lord. (39)

Though highly cynical, the sentiment is not condemnatory; like *Lord Blunder's Confession*, *The Sturdy Beggars* sees politics as roundly corrupt and easy to exploit.

Perhaps the most interesting of these operas is *The State Juggler: or, Sir Politick Ribband*, which is notable both for its portrayal of Walpole (the title character) and its equally condemnatory depictions of Bolingbroke and Pulteney. Here not a single character can be regarded as trustworthy, with the possible exception of Chevaliere Wou'd-be, a blundering idiot, a cuckold, and a coward, and one who spends most of the play taking beatings from his betters. *The State Juggler* also follows the pattern of rewarding the character who plays both sides of the partisan divide for personal gain. Additionally, the play remains neutral on the excise controversy, noting that it is possible that the scheme "is calculated for the Good of the Publick" but equally likely that it has been "varnish'd over with such a specious Pretence" (8). The play focuses instead on the way all persons with power seek to promote themselves, and because of that it might even said to be sympathetic to Walpole, for at least he understands the ubiquity of self-interest.

When we first meet Sir Politick, he sits like Peachum, before a table covered with papers, and sings a song that frankly declares that all of mankind, from the priest to the lawyer to the fool, contrive to further their own ambitious. We then see the many ways he maneuvers to "arrive at the Summit of Ambition" (18). These include hiring Spywell to spy on Don Gulimo (Pulteney) and San Jean (Bolingbroke), and Scribble to write propaganda. He gives secret instructions to his writer, and in this the play suggests that Sir Politick's treachery may be very thorough indeed, for at a later point San Jean, who is having an affair with Gulimo's wife, gives his paramour a love poem he had previously purchased, an act that ultimately proves his undoing. Politick also cheerfully manipulates public opinion, making alterations in the excise scheme to "conceal the Bitterness of

the Golden Pill" and he bribes freely, noting that to be a success in politics requires a frequent display of one's purse (21-22). However great his perfidy, he is also equally adamant that anyone in his place would behave the same way.

As if to emphasize the truth of that assertion, the author introduces Gulimo sitting in front of an identical table, gloating about his own skill in manipulating the public. He also freely admits his selfish motives:

> Though I profess to have the Interests of my Country at Heart, yet if I could cast him out of the Saddle, and seat myself there, I would consult my own private Advantage, and laugh at those who would call me a *False Patriot*. (29)

His actions prove his maxim that "Men who Patriotism boast, Have private Ends in View" (30) and he even claims he would sacrifice 50,000 of his countrymen if only to take Politick's place. Though less interested in politics, San Jean is equally vicious: he has an affair with Gulimo's wife, and contemplates murdering his friend so that he may enjoy her pleasures "without Interruption" (37). The play is filled out with characters who are similarly relentless in their pursuit of power, most notable Sarina, a wealthy old lady who opposes Politick because he once appropriated a scheme she devised and gave her only £4000 in return.

The results of all of these characters' conniving vary, but the play implies that they are barely consequential; the names of those in power may change, but corruption is a natural law. Instead, the author's sympathy lies with Spywell, a crafty rascal who pockets large bribes from both Politick and Gulimo. The play delights that this "Second *Machiaval*" is able to "over-reach the two long-headed Politicians," and he is given the play's most lively tune, a hornpipe[29] that can be considered the anthem for all of the excise operas I have discussed so far:

If you expect to thrive amain,
The Double Dealer play;
Both Parties please, then both you'll gain,
And each to each betray.
Then both cajole,
And both controul,
Be merry, frank, and free;
Their Purses drain,
And heavy Gain
Shall fill your Heart with Glee. (33)

Spywell's self-evident merriment contrasts refreshingly with the bitter diatribes we find all around him, making him the most agreeable character in the play. Furthermore, his shameless delight at his own duplicity parallels the message I have been tracing throughout the genre. Although the nation was divided over excise, ballad opera remained neutral in the partisan debate, secure in the fact that corruption was both rampant and profitable.

The exceptions are the four ballad operas written after Walpole abandoned excise, and these, in their unctuous portraits of honest, hard-working, and patriotic tradesmen, depart so greatly from the ballad opera norm that one wonders if the authors were familiar with the tradition at all. Even the titles of these plays, *Rome Excised*; *The Honest Electors, or The Courtiers Sent Back with their Bribes*; *The Commodity Excised: or, The Women in Uproar*; and *The Downfal of Bribery: or, The Honest Men of Taunton* betray their uniqueness; these are virtually the only truly honest men in the entire ballad opera canon. The plots all follow a similar pattern: Walpole,

desperate to curtail the petitions being generated against excise, sends out several henchmen to persuade the townsmen to support his scheme, a scheme that exists only to enrich himself. Threats are made and great sums of money are offered, but nothing can shake the integrity of the merchants. Walpole's notorious licentiousness is contrasted with the unwavering fidelity of such worthies as Mr. and Mrs. Freeman, Mr. and Mrs. Constant, and Mr. and Mrs. Firm, who love each other as much as they do their country. They all conclude with a defeat for excise followed by a rousing hymn. This single verse from *The Downfal of Bribery* will suffice to show their character:

> May our Examples Means sufficient prove,
> For more in the same shining Path to move.
> To stop Corruption bravely let's essay,
> Mar Bribes, and give fair Liberty the Day. (31)

These operas are so slight in plot, so fulsome in the dedications, and so similar to each other that it is hard not to believe that they are the work of hired pamphleteers. In any case, these plays, written from 1733-34, were among the last of the print-only ballad operas, so to discover the role played by ballad opera in the calls for regulation that led up to the Licensing Act we must return to the stage.

VI: In-Jokes and Group Cohesion: the Staging of "Dutch Skipper"

Although I will later examine a number of the most successful ballad operas staged prior to the passage of the Licensing Act, I would like to begin my discussion of staged ballad operas by focusing on the unique ways in which ballad opera created both a loyal and supportive audience base and an equally adamant group of detractors. In particular, the use of music acted as a cohesive force, drawing appreciative audiences together by allowing them to share in numerous

inside meanings. Additionally, the genre remained consistent in the themes it explored and the types of characters that populated it, and as the decade progressed it seems that only ballad operas expressed those concepts, a fact that further polarized the already divided public. These two factors— the possibilities inherent in the form's use of music and the consistency of its message— led to increased bluntness in the plays' glorifying of self-indulgence, and that led to increased outrage at the form and ultimately contributed to the passage of the Licensing Act.

Colley Cibber seems to have been particularly distressed by the ease with which audiences responded to music:

> If therefore the bare speaking Voice has such Allurements in it, how much less ought we to wonder, however we may lament, that the sweeter Notes of Vocal Musick should have so captivated even the politer World, into an Apostacy from Sense, to an Idolatry of Sound. Let us enquire from whence this Enchantment rises. I am afraid that it may be to naturally accounted for: For when we complain, that the finest Musick, purchas'd at such vast Expense, is so often thrown away upon the most miserable Poetry, we seem not to consider, that when the Movement of the Air, and Tone of the Voice, are exquisitely harmonious, tho' we regard not one *Word* of what we hear, yet the Power of the Melody is so busy in the Heart, that we naturally annex Ideas to it of our own Creation, and, in some sort, become ourselves the Poet to the Composer; and what Poet is so dull as not to be charm'd with the Child of his own Fancy? (*Apology*, 65)

English critics of the early-eighteenth century displayed a widespread and almost unanimous distrust of theatrical spectacle in general and music specifically. Joseph Addison thought that opera's only design was to "gratify the senses, and keep up an indolent attention in the audience"

(5). Similarly, John Dennis felt that music in theatre, if not properly subordinated to an ennobling text, was “mere sensual Delight, utterly incapable of informing the Understanding, or reforming the Will, and for that very reason unfit to be made a publick Diversion” (385). Although seemingly nothing more than a reiteration of the opinions of Addison and Dennis, Cibber's remarks, which awkwardly interrupt a lengthy discourse on elocution in his *Apology*, diverge from the earlier views in two important ways. In the first place, they disagree about the linking of sound and sense. For Addison, the trouble occurred when the sense failed to line up with the sounds. When he argues that in too many operas piteous words get paired with angry sounds, that an air's finest notes fall "upon the most insignificant words in the sentence, and that “the most beautiful graces, quavers, and divisions” are wastefully bestowed upon “the eternal honour of our English particles” (18), he implies that a more artful accompaniment could better serve to reinforce an author's intended meaning. In contrast, Cibber seems to contend that music naturally overpowers its textual accompaniment, preventing the audience from hearing any words at all. There's a curious twist in Cibber's assertions: he begins with the complaint that music has been paired with inferior words, but he goes on to imply that the words are inconsequential because spectators ignore them anyway, instead allowing the music to excite their private passions.

This wholesale damning of the spectator is his second departure from the earlier critics. Addison and Dennis sought to instruct their readers to avoid nonsense, but for Cibber, the problem was already beyond repair:

> So that there is even a kind of language in agreeable Sounds, which, like the Aspect of Beauty, without Words, speaks and plays to the Imagination. While this Taste therefore is so naturally prevalent, I doubt, to propose Remedies for it, were but

> giving Laws to the Winds, or Advice to Inamoratos. . . . it is not to the Actor, therefore, but to the vitiated and low Taste of the Spectator, that the Corruptions of the Stage (of what kind soever) have been owing. (67)

Although Cibber here is no doubt deflecting blame for any of his own questionable productions, he also suggests that spectators corrupt virtually everything they see. Just as noble words were ignored in favor of private musical fantasies, attempts to unite Instruction and Pleasure either failed or became perverted by a debased public.

Cibber's remarks are significant because they highlight the complexity of the use of music throughout the ballad opera sequence. In Chapter One, I mentioned that the use of fresh words to popular songs suggested the influence of cultural norms on self-construction, but the idea is worth fuller treatment. The melodies, though both familiar and meaningful to the audience, appear in the play world as highly complex but arbitrary patterns that control expression and even manipulate a character's psychology. For example, when Macheath, melancholy and alone in his cell, laments his sorry state, he rapidly goes through several different emotional states, each one to the tune of one of the ten different melodies Gay employs in the brief (30 line) scene (49-50). The quickly shifting airs not only emphasize the fickleness of the highwayman, they also imply that the orchestra is pulling all his strings.

That effect might still have been present if done to original music, but it was certainly heightened by the intertextual play with the original tunes, which both allowed spectators to add their own associations to the scene and encouraged constant recollection of the moods and themes of the play, which could reappear whenever the popular song was heard. Allusion is a commonplace idea when discussing ballad opera, but it is rarely noted that there are at least three

different types of intertextuality at work in these plays. The first is *literary* intertextuality, a term I use to denote the resonances that occur between the new lyrics and the tune's most familiar words. Although these are the most commonly (and often only) discussed associations, their importance is overestimated; I believe they are also the least powerful. The comparative process is simply too complex. When Macheath's morale drops in his lament and he sings "but now again my spirits sink" audiences may have recalled the rousing concluding stanza in *Chevy Chase* which begins "God save the King and Bless the Land," but any other of the multiple and diverse stanzas might have come to mind. Furthermore, as Mark Booth points out in his excellent study *The Experience of Songs,* a song's lyrics are recalled as a unit, not word by word, and so "a comparative examination of two texts as one is heard and the other is summoned from memory, however officious and automatic that memory may be to the idle mind, is not easy" (120). Finally, it is a fact of language that even two unrelated texts will produce interpretative associations when examined side by side, so however ingenious the subtleties we uncover, we should be somewhat skeptical of whether they were acts of conscious authorship and even more dubious about their effect on the spectator in a crowded theatre.

Far more consequential is what I will call *conceptual* intertextuality, which refers to the clash between the standard cultural connotations of a song and the meanings generated by the author's positioning of the song within the play's milieu. Conceptual intertextuality is not gauged by close textual analysis. Instead, the original song is regarded as a marker of a system of cultural connotation; attention is given to the situations in which the song was generally heard, the dances or other behaviors that tended to accompany it, and the mood it tended to inspire. Taken together, these things can be summed up to describe the cultural function of the music as a unit,

and this is then compared to the function it serves in any given play. This type of intertextuality is closer to what Julia Kristeva means by the term; it involves the "passage from one sign system to another," thereby altering the text's "thetic position" (its "enunciative positionality," in short, its connection to a culture's ideology), causing "the destruction of the old position and the formation of a new one" (59-60). Note further that these types of associations are more effective because they are grasped intuitively. If Gay's use of *Chevy Chase* did not inspire a literary comparison, his decision to use the tune in a moment in which Macheath happily summoned courage with liquor, coupled with the delightful punning on the word "spirits" ("But now again my spirits sink;/ I'll raise them high with wine"), attempted to transform the "exquisitely noble" heroic song into an exhortation to binge (Addison, 85).

Gay's transformation of *Chevy Chase* seems to have been only partially successful; the tune was used to similar effect in *Lord Blunder's Confession* and *Penelope*, but with different nuances in *Calista*, *The Lovers Opera*, and *Chuck*. But this fact foregrounds the significance of the third type of connotative layering in ballad opera, *canonical* intertextuality. Canonical intertextuality examines the recurrent patterns in the use of particular songs as they progressed through the ballad opera canon. Unlike previous critics, who have accepted the commonplace notion that because the supply of popular tunes was limited "their repeated use became a factor in the degeneration of the form" (Gagey, 3), I believe that the repetition of songs was often deliberate, and even bolstered the form's popularity. Because the same tunes frequently appeared in successive ballad operas, there developed a system of interrelations among the plays themselves: by recycling a particular tune, playwrights could not only engage with the social values moored to the original song, they could also critique or expand upon the way those values were articulated in other ballad operas. By

examining these relationships, we can draw conclusions regarding how widespread a particular transposition became, and thus better evaluate the effectiveness of these shifts in cultural meaning.

The utility of examining these latter two types of intertextuality can be exemplified through an analysis of the fascinating history of the song "Dutch Skipper," a history that, moreover, may help explain Cibber's virulent dislike of musical theatre. Recognizing early on the potential of *The Beggar's Opera* to transform cultural attitudes, Cibber wrote a ballad opera:

> upon a quite different Foundation, that of recommending Virtue, and Innocence; which I ignorantly thought, might not have less Pretense to Favour, than setting Greatness, and Authority, in a contemptible, and the most vulgar Vice, and Wickedness, in an amiable Light. (*Apology*,134-5)

True to this intention, *Love in a Riddle* never wavers in its display of exemplary morals. The plot follows the fortunes of three couples, one a poor shepherdess pursued by three suitors, the other two a pair of brothers and sisters who have had their social status interchanged at birth. The fathers scheme to test their children's integrity, spying incognito and arranging their virtuous destinies. The title refers to the punishment that Iphis must undergo for deceptively stealing a kiss from his love, Ianthe. No “Prayers, Excuse, or Pentitence” will suffice for her to forgive this heinous crime, and he must therefore solve a riddle from the shrine of Diana in order to regain her favor (13).

This attempt to sentimentalize ballad opera was a resounding failure; it was “vilely damn’d, and hooted at” and was forced to close after two performances (Cibber, *Apology*,135). Cibber contends that this was due to his previous rejection of *The Beggar’s Opera* and a false rumor that he himself had a hand in the suppression of Gay's sequel, *Polly*, but a notice in the *Craftsman*

seems to repudiate this: “we doubt not that the Publick will give [*The Village Opera*] a favorable Reception, and shew that their late treatment of *another Piece* did not proceed from any Prejudice against *That Company* in general” (January 25, 1728). In any case, Cibber condensed the play into a ballad opera of one act entitled *Damon and Phillida*, which he published anonymously and had produced at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket. This shortened version was an astonishing success, receiving 187 performances by 1747 (Kavenik, 120), and most critics take this as proof that *Love in a Riddle* was damned merely because of party prejudice (Baker, 288; Gagey 79; Nicoll, 16; Whincop, 197). Interestingly, however, despite going to great lengths to prove that unbiased audience members were moved by *Love in a Riddle*, Cibber himself fails to mention the shortened version at all. What could explain the omission of this crucial and persuasive bit of evidence? Why would the notoriously boastful Cibber remain silent about one of the most successful productions of his career?

I would suggest that *Damon and Phillida* was enjoyed for reasons Cibber was loath to endorse, that far from recommending virtue and innocence, the play was taken as a mockery of marriage and fidelity. Although numerous aspects of the play and its reception history support this assertion,[30] here I will focus on a single, but nevertheless convincing, piece of evidence: the closing song and dance of *Damon and Phillida*, during which the title characters promise "to the Priest away, to bind our vows" (31), was set to the tune of “Dutch Skipper.” Cibber was the first to use this song in a ballad opera, but through the 1730s it would appear in ten more plays, most of them quite popular. These later plays employed the air in a manner that consistently undermined Cibber's ode to constancy, but before tracing this history, it is worth detailing the cultural connotations the song carried outside of its use in ballad opera.

"Dutch Skipper" was one of the most popular dance tunes of the early eighteenth century, and although it is not clear whether it always employed identical scores, the structure of the music was always bipartite, beginning with a slower section in common time followed by a jig in 6/4. Richard Noble observes that this structure places the song "in a class with a small number of tunes. . .associated with game or kissing dances" (627). The Cushion Dance, as it was commonly called, was highly popular, and the ritual connected to it was commonly performed at weddings. *The Dancing Master* describes the game as opening with a single person (male or female) who dances alone with a cushion in hand through the end of the first section. At that point the dancer pauses, claiming to be unable continue without a partner. Then, with the encouragement of all participants:

> he lays down the cushion before the woman, on which she kneels, and he kisses her. . .then she rises, takes up the cushion, and both dance. . . .then, making a stop, the woman sings 'This dance will no further go'. . . and so she lays down the cushion before a man, who kneels upon it saluting her. . .then he taking up the cushion, they take hands, and dance round, singing as before. And thus they do till the whole company is taken into the ring. (Chappell, 288)

Following this, the process was repeated, this time subtracting participants from the circle.

Although "Dutch Skipper" appropriately evokes marriage ceremonies, Cibber's use of the tune otherwise appears distinctly revisionary, for the Cushion Dance has a decidedly ribald tone. *The Dancing Master* includes a highlighted note explaining that "the women are kissed by all the men in the ring at their coming and going out, and likewise the men by all the women," a behavior hardly in keeping with Cibber's lyrics "in One, only One, is the Joy" (31). The general sexual

connotations of the piece are further evidenced in Aphra Behn's *The Roundheads*, in which a man is slapped for his insolence in proposing the dance at an inappropriate time (420). Furthermore, the dance willfully subverted the class divisions ("all the company dances, lord and groom, lady and kitchen-maid, no distinction") Cibber had taken care to try to uphold (Chappell, 227). Finally, it is hard to imagine the riotous Haymarket Theatre closing its evening with a pair of solemn and solitary lovers declaiming their steadfastness to such lively and unsuitable music. Cibber's attempt at cultural transformation looks too massive to have been taken seriously.

And indeed, "Dutch Skipper" seems to have become a highly popular joke; the following year the song appeared in two very popular new plays, *The Stage-Couch Opera* and *The Fashionable Lady*, both of which suggest that proclamations of honesty always imply ulterior motives. In the former, the heroine Isabella sings the air in the presence of her wicked guardian uncle, the foolish squire he has selected to be her betrothed, and her secret lover, boldly declaring that a Lady will use any form of deceit to secure her beloved: "she will frame a Trick,/To cheat a dull Fool, and a sordid Knave" (13). Ralph's lyrics are even more explicit:

> If e'er you see a Villian smile,
> An Atheist pray, a Miser pay,
> A Statesman give his Wealth away,
> A Lawyer his own Guile;
> If ever a Poet praise the Great,
> A whore among the Godly wait,
> 'Tis Int'rest forms the Wile. (66-7)

Additionally, both of these plays have multiple characters present during the number, suggesting

staging possibilities reminiscent of the associated dance.

Cibber had one ally in the battle for “Dutch Skipper,” for in 1731 George Lillo also used the song to close his highly didactic play focused on a spotlessly moral title character. Lillo at least seems to have had his eye on the Cushion Dance, for *Silvia* concludes with all of the characters present. After a promise of marriage, "Dutch Skipper" begins with each of the male characters in turn communicating how the perfect purity of Silvia has transformed them into virtuous men, singing the jig in chorus to sentiments such as "Truth to the Mind her own Likeness reflects" (77). One can imagine a cushion dance staging in which the men are each in turn reformed, rather than kissed, by the heroine. As noted above, Lillo seemed certain his play was doomed to failure: his epilogue declares that his spectators will despise his heroine's “musty, moral, Speeches,” and seems certain they will “remorseless. . .deny Applause” (A4). He was right: it was greeted by "continual hissing and Catcalls" (Gagey, 95).

Over the next few years, “Dutch Skipper” appeared in ballad operas too numerous to describe in detail here. In every case, however, the song was used in situations that emphasized dishonesty, usually dissimulation regarding characters' amorous intentions, but occasionally a more general use of deception for monetary gain. Fielding savagely parodied *Silvia* in *The Grub Street Opera*, giving the song to the dallying Owen relishing his conquests (6-7). In 1733 John Gay himself joined the game, using “Dutch Skipper” for an argument over a husband’s philandering (14-15). *Rome Excised* parceled out the air to four conniving courtiers bested by the even more mendacious Cyrenius, a clear portrait of Walpole (30). In *The Lottery* Fielding situates the song in a scene where a group of anxious lottery players watch the drawing of their tickets, and of course that drawing is corrupt (31).

The popularity of "Dutch Skipper" seems to have peaked during the years 1736-37. As an unattached dance the number was performed almost nightly at Goodmen's Fields that season, and despite increased legislative pressure curbing the production of full length ballad operas, two plays using the tune came out in those years. In 1736 Abraham Langford became the first playwright to open a play with the tune, unprecedentedly writing a musical prologue. He gave the song to the actress Mrs. Roberts in the role of the manipulative maid in *The Lover his Own Rival*. Langford suggestively notes that in this performance Mrs. Roberts "has even *outdone her usual Out-doing*" (A3), and her character sings freely of the delights of trading favors for gold, showing just how far Cibber's intentions had become corrupted. *The Rival Milliners* climaxes with "Dutch Skipper," as the two competing seamstresses quarrel, Mr. Pleadwell, their duplicitous suitor (played by Mrs. Talbot) eggs them on. Robert Drury, the author, describes the ill treatment his play received at the hands of "Mr *Infallibility*. . .the Grand Seignor of *Drury Lane*" (vii), and one wonders if Cibber would have prevented its production if he could have done so. Interestingly, a revival of *Silvia*, reduced to an afterpiece, was also mounted this season. The revision was perhaps written by Benjamin Hoadly, who "truly thought there would be some real true fun in it, if the taylor's sorrow for his drunken wife were made all hypocritical, and not real as in the original" (Noble, 17). Lillo's play, it seems, was to be exploited in the same way *Love in a Riddle* was mocked by *Damon and Phillida*.

Perhaps not surprisingly, "Dutch Skipper," even as an isolated dance, fell out of the production calendars following the passage of the Licensing Act. The Cushion Dance itself also seems to have lost its appeal. Mrs. Drugger, an older character in the play *The Pantheonites* (1773), sighs regrettably that the dance had fallen out of fashion (37), and Pye, in his discussions of

jealousy, notes approving that the "cushion dance is laid aside" (29). It thus seems that both the tune and the dance retained their association with the immorality of ballad opera long after the genre itself had come to an end. But whatever the reasons for the song's demise, it remains a particularly telling example of the ways in which audiences read satire into even apparently innocent ballad operas. The tune became an in-joke, and the delight of knowledgeable spectators would be enhanced by the recognition that they were part of a unique group. Additionally, those unfamiliar with the song's intertextual ironies would seem isolated, and they might attribute the delight of other spectators to a form of madness, just as Cibber did in his Apology and a number of others bitterly complained in the newspapers. "Dutch Skipper" is only one of a number of songs that appear to have had multiple resonances, so it is hardly surprising that the genre so divided public opinion.

V: Genre and Thematic Emphasis: *The Lottery* and *The Modern Husband*

The consistency of the themes found in ballad operas also served to solidify the opinions of those who liked (and those who despised) the genre, and Fielding's practices is this regard are quite interesting. Comparing *The Lottery* to *The Modern Husband* highlights both the thematic and technical differences that arose due to the assumptions Fielding brought to bear when writing the plays. Both works were completed in 1732, not long after *The Grub Street Opera* was suppressed and he had turned to Drury Lane to produce his work. Critics have tended to treat the two plays together, and have usually dismissed *The Lottery* as "a charming but trivial vehicle," inferior in every way to the more complex comedy (Lockwood, 267). Fielding's audiences, however, took the opposite view, making his opera one of the most successful of the age while hissing *The Modern Husband*. I tend, against critical consensus, to agree with the early detractors,

but evaluations of dramatic quality aside, there is much to be gained by examining them side by side, with an eye on their generic divergence.

Much has been made of Fielding's return to Drury Lane following the Lord Chamberlain's decision to close down The Little Theatre in the Haymarket. Most critics have followed Brian McCrea in asserting that "as Fielding's political views changed, so did the plays he wrote. . . he shifted mercurially between opposing political and literary camps" (51). Thus Goldgar declares that in 1732 "Fielding unmistakenly and publicly aligned himself with the Walpole camp" (113) and Thomas Cleary describes the "sharp break in Fielding's career between *The Grub Street Opera* and the theatrical season of 1732" as "a retreat from politics" (54). Fielding's biographers have reached the same conclusion, stating that the author "meant to make peace with Walpole {and} shake off the reputation he had earned at the Little Haymarket"(Battestin,128-9), and announcing that "for the time being, there was to be no more political satire" (Thomas, 88). Only Robert Hume dissents, arguing that Fielding's decision was entirely pragmatic, motivated by increased status and financial gain, but even he admits that the plays were of a markedly different tone from the early satire. Whether the cause was politics or pragmatism, the Drury Lane productions are widely acknowledged as less blatantly critical than those accepted at the Little Haymarket.

What tends to be obscured in these discussions is that the Drury Lane plays are quite distinct from one another. All critics draw a dividing line of some sort in 1732, lumping *The Author's Farce* and *The Grub Street Opera* on one side and *The Lottery* and *The Modern Husband* on the other. In fact, however, *The Lottery* is far closer to the earlier works than generally assumed, and I would argue that the sharp break so universally acknowledged is less a result of Fielding's move to the government endorsed patent house than of his move from ballad opera to

the more established genre of comedy. That Fielding himself considered his switch to comedy a significant departure is evident from the prologue to *The Modern Husband*, where he describes all of his earlier works as "unshaped monsters of a wanton brain" (9). Although critics have focused on Fielding's use of the term "monster," more significant is his choice of adjective, for the structural looseness of ballad opera gives it its force. In the broadest terms, ballad operas center their narratives on characters who voluntarily attempt to transcend class definition, often rewarding them for their presumptuousness. The legitimate comedy of the period, in contrast, not only presents characters that unquestioningly remain within their class, but it also employs a tight structure in which the outcome is more or less inevitable. Because comedy must proceed toward a predetermined end, "to give reward its virtue, vice its punishment," the characters in *The Modern Husband* have no genuine volition, its plot resolves because of external coincidence rather than a character's action, and the bulk of the dialogue consists of intrusive authorial moralizing (98). In contrast, the plot of *The Lottery* is driven entirely by the decisions the characters make, and the author seems completely unconcerned with casting judgment upon any of them. All of the other differences between the plays result from this generic distinction: comedy was required to serve a normative purpose, while ballad opera was at heart subversive.

Fielding intended *The Modern Husband* as a work of high moral seriousness, and he admitted that he was a newcomer to the form, stating it was "written on a Model I never yet attempted" (Woods, 362). Like earlier plays by Behn and Haywood, (*The Lucky Chance* and *A Wife to be Lett*), Fielding targets the "crim.con" law that enabled a man to bring a civil suit against his wife's lover. Fielding was aware that this statue was sometimes abused by husbands who deliberately prostituted their wives for profit in court; a probable source was the trial Lord

Abergavenny vs. Richard Liddell. Thus he opens his play with Mrs. Modern, who has been conducting an affair with Lord Richly, an unrepentant womanizer, and sharing his lavish gifts with her husband. From the play's commencement, however, Lord Richly has grown tired of Mrs. Modern and is seeking instead to corrupt the most virtuous woman in London, Mrs. Bellamant. Mr. Modern proposes that they therefore publish his wife's shame in order to recover damages, but she instead seeks to encourage a new affair with Mr. Bellamont. Mr. Modern thus schemes to spring the same trap on her new paramour, hiring a servant to catch the unfortunate pair alone together. The demands of morality are satisfied in the end, however, as Mrs. Bellamont rebukes Lord Richly, forgives her husband, and helps procure witnesses to Mr. Modern's willing trafficking in his wife's dishonor. In the midst of this, Fielding introduces a host of minor and essentially irrelevant characters, including the Bellamants' children, Emilia and Captain Ballamont, who participate in traditional love stories with two relations of Lord Richly, Mr. Gaywit and Lady Charlotte Gaywit, as well as the mysterious Captain Merit, who seeks to lead a new regiment.

As even this brief summary makes obvious, Fielding had enormous difficulties integrating his sub-plots, and it was this flaw that prompted a writer called “Dramaticus” to pillory the play in *The Grub Street Journal* (July 13, 1732). Modern critics have almost unanimously condemned this as biased ignorance, but as Hume has pointed out, Dramaticus’s strictures “are not unfounded charges: the secondary characters have at best marginal relevance to the main action, and a large part of the endless conversation could be dropped without loss” (127). Most important for my purposes, however, is that the play's major weaknesses, its lack of cohesion and inadequate psychology, stem precisely from Fielding's adherence to the generic conventions. Because he aimed to “restore the sinking honour of the stage,” making “modern vice detestable,” Fielding

oversimplified his vile characters, making them such wretches that they become nothing more than objects of our opprobrium. Similarly, his heroes remain so above censure that one cannot fathom why they would have anything to do with the Moderns and Richly in the first place. No conflict can exist between such exaggerated extremes; they simply oppose each other directly, leaving them nothing to do but preach. To fill out the (generically required) five acts, the author is forced into both the unconnected subplots, which appear and disappear purposelessly throughout, and an enormous amount of idle chit-chat concerning such things as the resale value of tea chests.

Rivero defends the play by arguing that Fielding was attempting to radically "break the conventions of traditional comedy," comparing it to his "irregular experiments" such as *The Author's Farce* (119). This analogy strikes me as exceedingly bizarre, for when one examines the structural details of *The Modern Husband*, Fielding's attempt to adhere strictly to these conventions comes into sharp focus. He needed a hero to reform at the end, so he created an entirely implausible liason between Mr. Bellamont and Mrs. Modern, allowing him formulaic self-reproaches ("What a wretch am I! How do I injure her!") but no motivation for the sin; the pair can hardly treat each other civilly, despite Bellamont's claim that he feels "time flies with wings of lead" until their next meeting (54-6). The reform itself is so ridiculous that one would suspect parody were Fielding's intention not so certain; Bellamont castigates himself, howling "Oh! Thou ungrateful fool, what stores of bliss hast thou in one vicious moment destroyed," but on learning of his wife's immediate forgiveness (ten lines later) he practically bursts with joy: "Oh! Let me press thee to my heart; for every moment that I hold thee thus gives bliss beyond expression, a bliss no vice can give!" (74-5). It seems almost inconceivable that the author of *Tom Thumb* intended this straight, but the epigraph from Juvenal, his correspondence to Lady Mary Wortley Montague, and

his defenses of the play, all forbid our registering a parodic intent. If his “reiterated partiality for the play is no credit to his judgment,” his failure to recognize his own pompousness also underscores the powerful influence of generic expectation (Hume,128).

Other symptoms of Fielding's struggle to conform with standard comedic convention are less glaring but nevertheless notable. A typical device of the form is the recognition token, and Fielding invents a cleverly contemporary variation in his use of the £100 note that passes from Mr. Bellamont to Mrs. Modern to Lord Richly to Mrs. Bellamont before returning to the hero. Rivero disingenuously claims that the bill “brings about the discovery of Mr. Bellamont's infidelity,” but in fact it only serves to pointlessly make Mr. Bellamont mildly curious, and seems awkwardly shoe-horned into the play (124). Fielding also imitates plays such as *The Careless Husband* and *The Conscious Lovers* by closing many of his scenes with sententious verse, remarkable only for its incompetence, such as “When innocence can scarce our lives defend/ What dangers must the guilty wife attend,” which is inexplicably spoken by the wholly blameless Mrs. Bellamont (58). Finally, he seems to have enormous difficulty getting his characters off the stage, and he frequently resorts to suggesting future encounters that never materialize. Thus Mr. Bellamont tells Gaywit he needed to “be with him alone,” and requires that he promise him to give him a chance, but the nature of this business is never revealed (34). Similarly, early in the play Captain Bravemore suggests that Captain Merit apply to Mr. Gaywit for assistance in securing his post, and offers to introduce him. Perhaps we can forgive the fact that this meeting never occurs, but it makes almost no sense when Captain Merit appears three acts later with the Bellamonts, whom he had never met. These examples show a playwright unable to maintain the tight, inevitable structure dictated by standard comedic form.

Interestingly, none of these problems, inadequate plot integration, overly static characterization, or pompousness, occur in *The Lottery*, despite the fact that it was quite hastily written. Here, Fielding takes on the corruption of dealers in State Lottery tickets, particularly the highly exploitative practice of selling "horses," temporary rights to tickets for a single drawing. The plot is straightforward and unified. Chloe, a simple country lass, has taken up residence in London because a psychic convinced her that her lottery ticket would earn her £10,000. Mr. Stocks, the ticket jobber, attempts to take advantage of her perceived fortune by becoming her financial manager, while his brother Jack seeks the same by posing as a Lord to gain her hand in marriage. Lovemore, Chloe's ardent admirer from the country, follows her into town, but arrives too late, for she has already wed Jack Stocks. When her ticket comes up a blank Jack wants nothing to do with her and upbraids his brother for deceiving him, but Lovemore offers to buy the marriage rights for £1000, satisfying Jack and reconciling the siblings.

Although the brevity of the play no doubt made it easier for Fielding to maintain its focus, the action is also enabled by Fielding's indifference to the morality implied by the resolution. All commentators on the work regard it as a critique, but it must be noted that the criticism is slight. His evil characters end up at least as well off as they began, and the two rivals close the play with a duet. Had Fielding felt the need to instruct, he would have been required both to punish the Stocks and paint them throughout as unflinchingly wicked. Instead, however, the brothers are likable and unrepentant, and at least as much satire is directed at the virtuous Lovemore. Even the bartering of marriage rites is treated as wholly acceptable.

The Lottery is also filled with barbs directed at the bombastic language of traditional comedy. Jack Stocks's remarkable apology to Chloe only slightly exaggerates the self-reproaches

the author would give to Bellamont in his serious play, and Fielding even makes his critique of the stage explicit:

> *J. Stocks.* I shall never forgive my self being guilty of so great an Error; and unless the Breath of my Submission can blow up the Redundancy of your Good-nature, till it raise the Wind of Compassion, I shall never be able to get into the Harbour of Quiet.
>
> *Stocks*. Well said, Faith—the Boy has got something by following Plays, I see.(14)

Less obvious is the fun Fielding has with the sententious Lovemore. Critics seem to have missed the broad parody inherent in his final song:

> Smile, smile, my Chloe, smile;
>
> Lift up your charming
>
> Charming,
>
> Charming,
>
> Char—ming Eyes;
>
> Charming,
>
> Charming,
>
> As Phoebus' brightest Rays in Summer Skies. (30)

Hume calls this "vapid" and every other commentary seems to take it seriously, but even if the words alone don't convey parody, other factors make plain this intent (120). For one thing, the words are set to “Si Caro,” an up-tempo waltz employing several rising and falling arpeggios in sixteenth notes. Thus, the performer was required to move up and down the scale on each

"charming," and the result is a ridiculous mocking of both opera and Lovemore's sincerity. Furthermore, Chloe herself ignores the song, and it is not hard to imagine Kitty Clive, who played the role and was considered the one of the finest comic actresses of the age, reacting to this with great effect. Finally, like "Dutch Skipper," the song had meanings generated through canonical intertextuality; Fielding had even used it himself in *The Grub Street Opera* to foreground Squire Owen's promiscuity (Moss, 225). Fielding must have recognized that having Chloe happily reunite with Lovemore would be hopelessly contrived.

There are other large differences, beyond plot structure and language, that indicate how greatly generic requirements influence not only a play's construction, but also its themes. Both *The Lottery* and *The Modern Husband* focus on money, but the attitudes expressed toward it are strikingly different in the two works. In the traditional comedy, many characters seek to increase their wealth, but its possession makes little difference to a person's class status. The Bellamonts may be in danger of financial ruin, but they are never concerned about losing their position. Likewise, the Moderns are not seeking money to alter their station, for they are firmly entrenched in high society throughout. Indeed, the manner in which great sums are exchanged in friendly card games makes money seem almost inconsequential; the winners gloat, but the losers hardly care. In the ballad opera, however, money is the only ticket to friendship and society, and all the characters seek it so that they may become "people of quality," and thus freed from the dictates of standard morality. The opposing ideologies are nowhere more evident than in Fiedling's differing treatment of servants in the two works. In *The Modern Husband*, Modern's servant John agrees to commit perjury for a measly £100, and that only so he can marry another servant. Furthermore, this gain does not even come from his own initiative, and the social order is thus strictly maintained. A

servant might be able to gain a small amount by assisting a wicked master, but the worst thing that could happen would be a marriage between two servants, hardly a disruption to society. Chloe's servant Jenny, in sharp contrast, has a will entirely her own, and seeks to become Lovemore's wife, thereby freeing herself from servitude. Admittedly, these are minor characters in unimportant scenes, but because they are peripheral Fielding's opposing treatment is significant. One should expect that a writer be consistent when dealing with inconsequential details; the fact that Fielding handles them so differently argues that more was at stake than personal taste.

Finally, comparing the two plays brings to light another aspect that differentiated ballad opera from traditional comedy, namely the former were highly topical, and expected to refer to political scandals. Although *The Lottery* is tamer than many ballad operas, it makes numerous attacks on political bribery and electoral corruption, as well as referencing the Charitable Corporation, an institution designed to lend small sums to the working poor that was looted by its directors and left with liabilities of £450,000 by the end of 1731 (Cleary, 55). *The Modern Husband* has in Lord Richly a character that might easily be taken as Walpole, but no reader at the time documented the connection. Although this might seem surprising, given the tendency of audiences to find political significance in the most innocuous of works, the quest for political allusion was limited to interpretations of opera. No one drew a parallel between Richly and Walpole because generic convention disallowed it, and Fielding safely dedicated his comedy to the statesman without irony.

It may be true that Fielding wished to align himself with the Walpole camp in 1732, but this is not marked by his move to Drury Lane, but rather by his switch to a traditional genre. Walpole himself may have sensed that he was most threatened by ballad opera as a form; L. J.

Morrissey has argued that the Licensing Act destroyed it. Fielding's own attitudes are far harder to assess. His two traditional comedies, *The Modern Husband* and *The Universal Gallant*, are preachy and sentimental, while his operas are sustained political satires or sharp critiques of abuse. Were it not for Fielding's continuing belief that his two comedies were his best works, we would likely regard them as insincere attempts to gain favor, but it might be plausible that the operas were nothing but an attempt to capitalize financially on a popular craze. In any case, the generic distinction is clear. When Fielding wrote comedies, he was maudlin and righteous, but when he wrote operas, he was outrageous and subversive.

VI: Staged Ballad Operas and The Licensing Act

If the way Fielding altered his practices when writing ballad operas and comedies shows how the new genre worked to generate certain types of meanings, tracing the career of another prolific author of ballad operas is equally instructive. Charles Coffey began his career in Dublin, shortly after *The Beggar's Opera* opened in that city. Coffey's first play, *The Beggar's Wedding*, did not succeed in Ireland, perhaps in part because the managers at Smock Alley deleted the most rustic and satirical scenes from the final act (Lawrence, 401). But Coffey's publication of the play led to a showing at the Haymarket, and this in turn encouraged the managers at Drury Lane also to produce the piece. The Drury Lane production, however, shortened the work and greatly amplified its satiric content; in its new form as *Phebe*, the play ran for over fifty performances and it continued to be revived throughout the decade. Between the Haymarket and Drury Lane productions, Coffey wrote two short operas both of which are only mildly satirical, but the success of *Phebe* seems to have sharpened his social critique, and there followed *The Female Parson* and *The Devil to Pay*. The latter play is particularly overt in its celebration of self-interest and

deception, and it would become the most successful ballad opera of the decade. The choice of music in this and his following two plays (*The Boarding School* and *The Merry Cobbler*) shows how greatly Coffey had internalized the methods the form used to express its subversive message. Throughout his career, Coffey's politics look as mercurial as those of Fielding; he dedicated *The Boarding School* to the Duchess of Queensbury but offered *The Merry Cobbler* to Lady Walpole. If his interest in partisan political debates was inconsistent, however, the development of his plays shows a clear development in their social politics.

Although *The Beggar's Wedding* shows touches of the kind of satire found in *The Beggar's Opera*, to which it is clearly indebted, its ending turns toward sentiment. The play follows the affair between Hunter, reputed son of Chaunter, the king of all beggars, and Phebe, supposed daughter of Alderman Quorum, a Justice of the Peace. The fathers' bickering hinders the lovers' hope for a union, but in the end the men reach an understanding. In Coffey's version of the reprieve, it is discovered that Hunter is actually Quorum's son, and Phebe an adopted orphan. Coffey opens the play by declaring that his work lacks both rationality and instruction (A2), and there are a number of cynical touches, such as the implicit collusion between the law and the thieving vagabonds, Quorum's song that bribery is rampant that happily declares "the Worlds' but a Che— at" (8), Phebe's maid's assertion that "Interest still should be Ascendent o'er the Soul" (37), and Chaunter's nostalgia for a lawless state of nature in the speech "when if a poor Man wanted anything his rich Neighbour possess'd he might take it without further Ceremony, and be in no danger of Gaol" (26). In the end, however, Phebe's innocence proves triumphant and her marriage to Hunter is depicted as a rejection of the corruption of her duplicitous father, a meaning given further emphasis by Chaunter's concluding air praising the link between poverty and purity.

In *Phebe*, however, the wedding celebrates the fortunes Hunter and Phebe acquire from their union, and makes their behavior throughout seem motivated more by wealth than love. The title itself serves to link Phebe with the notoriously unstable reputation of Polly, and throughout the play foregrounds the artfulness with which she manipulates her father by appearing obedient. Hunter's motives are questioned, and his insincerity is further emphasized by the choice to have the character portrayed by a woman. The wedding itself seems decidedly unromantic; the ceremony includes the instruction that when "of Wedlock ye're tir'd, then part Whore and Rogue" (45) and a new song is added that makes note of the lovers' newly acquired fortune (46). Finally, Chaunter's final hymn to the virtues of poverty is replaced by an air that states that beggars, priests, courtiers, and lawyers all acquire riches through the art of leeching from others. The meaning is thus altered considerably, and it was this new version that brought Coffey his first lasting success.

If *Southwark Fair* and *Devil on Two Sticks* resemble *The Beggar's Wedding* in their sentimental view of marriage, *The Female Parson* exploits the uncertainties so visible in *Phebe*. The plot centers on Captain Noble, an officer in love with a Lady Quibus, who is married to an old debauched justice, and his scheme to rescue her. The Justice keeps a prostitute named Mrs. Lure, who also gulls the typical fop, Modley, and eventually teams up with her brothers to have him plumped in a vat filled with suds. A further subplot concerns the affair between Noble's clever servant and Pinner, maid to Lady Quibus. All this intrigue seems to resolve in an unequivocal praise of virtue: Lady Quibus reveals that she was only apparently married, for the parson was Pinner in disguise, and she remains a virgin. Pinner, who throughout had been seeking a gentlemen of high station, is tricked into marrying Noble's servant, and Mrs. Lure ends violently rejected by both her men and is led off to jail by the constables. But Coffey casts doubt on this apparently

moral ending. Both of Miss Lure's suitors abandon her primarily because they want to spend the rest of their lives drinking, and Pinner does not rejoice in her new husband, but considers herself undone. Additionally, Coffey creates a subtext through the intertextuality of some of the songs. The final happy air is to the tune of "Do not ask me charming Phillis," Quibus sings his joy at his ended marriage to the tune of "jockey has gotten a wife," and Miss Lure's cynical air on marriage is joined to a most rousing hornpipe. Finally, there is the epilogue, spoken by Miss Lure. Having just escaped from the police, she enters in a torn dress and pleads and searches the audience for a "friendly coxcomb" who she hopes will treat her "fairly and at his own expense, with oysters, wine, and downright impudence." In requiring his audience to side with the saucy jade, Coffey somewhat undoes the sentiments in the concluding marriage, perhaps even suggesting that Noble's motives were as mercantile as those of Miss Lure.

Even more than *The Female Parson*, *The Devil to Pay* is boisterous, unsentimental, and sharp in its satire throughout. The innocent Nell, a country girl who is continually beaten by her husband, magically trades places with Lady Loverule, "a proud, canting, brawling, fanatical Shrew" (A4). Lady Loverule's primary faults, however, are her hatred of pleasure, her insistence that the servants stop stealing her provisions, and, as her name indicates, her strict insistence on the letter of the law, so the piece takes great delight in Jobson beating this sanctity from her. In Contrast, Nell's rule at the home of Sir John delights the servants, who take advantage of her good nature by plying themselves with good food and drink. Even Sir John seems to prefer the rowdy atmosphere she helps create, and the play thus endorses hedonistic chaos over pharisaical propriety. Over half of the forty-two airs are little more than praises to the bottle, and its reputation as an especially vulgar celebration lasted into the nineteenth century.[31] Coffey's final

two plays continue in this vien. Particularly interesting is *The Boarding House*, which voices approval of debauchery and infidelity as well as elopement. Coffey's closing air celebrates the deliberate flouting of boarding school rules:

> The World's like a Boarding-school, common to all,
> And so ev'n let it pass;
> Where great Knaves are brib'd to devour the small,
> Which is daily the case. . .
> For the lord apes his footman, the footman his Grace,
> In this pantomime age
> Fawning and sneaking, promises breaking,
> Oh, rare Work for the Stage! (33)

The complete four stanzas are all similarly devoted to ranting and swearing, and jilting and flaunting, indicating that Coffey was conscious of the kinds of depictions audiences of ballad opera would readily devour.

Coffey's progression toward sharper satire was mirrored in the careers of other authors. I have already discussed how Odingsells willingly abandoned his aims of creating idealistic tragedy with *Bays's Opera*, but a similar pattern could also be adduced from the works of Henry Carey and Edward Phillips. Similarly, John Kelly attempted a tone of "delicate decorum" in his unsuccessful premiere *Timon in Love*, but achieved greater success with the more highly satirical *The Plot*. Robert Drury wrote four operas of increasingly overt satire, the first when he was only eighteen years old. Fielding's ballad operas were more consistent, but *Tumble-Down Dick*, his final venture in this form, is especially sharp. Additionally, ballad opera attracted a number of

novice writers, particularly in the years 1733-7. Most notable are Abraham Langford, an auctioneer whose play *The Lover his Own Rival* (1736) exploited both cross-gender casting and the implicit irony of "Dutch Skipper," and Robert Baker, the lawyer who hazarded *The Mad-House* (1736), which Gagey calls a satire of "unusual social consciousness" (162) and which Freeman regards as one of most subversive rehearsal plays of the first half of the century. It seemed that ballad opera both helped career authors develop a sense of what audiences desired, and encouraged sympathetic laymen to venture to the stage.

Drury's *The Rival Milliners* is worthy of a bit more attention because it is one of the last operas to be produced before the Licensing Act, and also one of the most blatant in its celebration of intemperance. The impertinent preface, in which Drury freely attacks the pretensions of the managers of both Drury Lane and Covent Garden, sets the tone for the work, which opens with a Prologue that cheerfully admits that the stage no longer aims "to improve Mankind" (A4). The title characters, Sukey and Molly, begin by announcing their hatred of work, but it hardly troubles them for they each freely abandon it to pursue an attractive man named Pleadwell. Drury delights in Pleadwell's artful hypocrisy, showing him offering the most sincere sounding declarations of love first to Molly, then to Sukey, and finally to Mrs. Plainstitch, their boss, and, as in so many other ballad operas, the casting of Mrs. Talbot as Pleadwell highlights the character's duplicity. After a rollicking scene in which all three women end up in Pleadwell's bedroom, Drury has his hero convince each of them to marry boring but wealthy suitors, noting that "Gold makes more tender Maids than Love comply" (45). Of course these marriages are hardly meant to be stable; Pleadwell makes it clear that he will visit all the wives whenever the opportunity arises (46). The opera closes with a familiar anthem detailing how court, law, religion, and chastity are nothing but a

farce.

As if this were not enough, Drury also applauds the lawlessness of two philandering scoundrels named Goosequill and Fieri Facias who flirt with the milliners by day and spend their nights in reckless indulgence. After murdering a Constable, the pair retire to a tavern where they toast:

> Here Swearing, Bullying, Yielding, huffing, Lying,
> Here's one Whore Singing and another crying
> Here's Fooling, Laughing, Shifting, Sinking, Damning,
> Bilking, Bambouzeling, Bubbling, Blundring, Bamming;
> Here's Quarelling without design to Fight,
> In short, there's every thing that is Polite. (26)

The play leaves them happily at the tavern, where they sing a rousing song about breaking windows, bilking whores, and making Constables yield to their might. At no point is their behavior repudiated, and audiences voiced their approval by attending over twenty performances and buying enough copies of the text to require five separate printings.

Plays such as *The Rival Milliners*, *The Mad-House*, and *Tumble-Down Dick* offered their gleeful depiction of debauchery even as attacks on the degeneracy of the stage were increasing. Often, ballad operas were singled out for opprobrium. Thus, in 1733, *The Grub Street Journal* published two critiques of theatrical licentiousness, the first on August 13 singling out *The Stage Mutineers*, and another three days later attacking Drury's *The Fancy'd Queen* and *The Mad Captain*. The following year that same journal called for regulation of the stage, using as its prime example the immoral songs in *Chrononhotonthologos* (March 21). From 1735-7 Hill and Popple

began regularly including attacks in *The Prompter* on both immoral entertainments and the audiences who patronized them, including specific attacks on *Macheath in the Shades* (March 25, 1735) and *Tumble-down Dick* (April 2,1736). The audience's tendency to laugh at any display of virtue is a common theme in these attacks, noting that given the debased "Character of the *Spectators*, who *are to be pleased*, can we wonder that the mercenary *Poet*, as licentious, as the *Desires* of Those, from whom he expects his *Gratification*?" (August 15, 1735). But condemnations of audience taste can also be found outside *The Prompter*. *Fog's Weekly Journal* specifically focused operas as one of the prime symbols of the public's folly (April 26, 1735); a lament on bad taste and behavior appeared in *The Weekly Register* (August 16 1735), and a writer in *The Daily Advertiser* complains that the public enjoys only degenerate works, noting that however indecent *The Rival Milliners*, it has "less Filth and Obscenity" than most works of its kind (January 31, 1736). As usual, the writer shows great concern that the prevalence of "Ballad and Buffoonery" makes it impossible to appreciate "great and noble Performances."

The increase in the number of attacks on ballad opera in general and its ill effects on the audience provides an important context for understanding the passage and the effects of The Stage Licensing Act of 1737. Whatever Walpole's political motives for introducing the bill, the renewed attention on the lasciviousness of ballad opera must have contributed to the ease with which the act passed. Indeed *The Golden Rump*, the (perhaps fictitious) playscript that Walpole cited as proof of the need for regulation, is shocking at least as much for its licentiousness as its political references (Thomson, 61-5). Furthermore, though the attacks on the Licensing Act focused on its curtailing of Liberty and seem closely related to opposition propaganda (Goldgar, 154-62), the defenses urged that the Act was only designed to curtail the favorable depiction of vice. To be

sure, a number of these defenses appeared in *The Daily Gazetteer* and *The London Journal*, both decidedly pro-Walpole, but both *The Craftsman* (July 30, 1737) and *Fog's Weekly Journal* (June 18, 1737), included among the numerous attacks on the bill essays that expressed hope that the act would improve the standards of the stage. Furthermore, as Kinservik convincingly argues in *Disciplining Satire*, the enforcement of the Licensing Act aimed not to eliminate political expression, but to teach playwrights how to produce morally uplifting satires. Kinservik includes an interesting account, written by Thomas Cooke, author of the ballad operas *Penelope* and *The Battle of the Poets*, of the kinds of things the Deputy Licencer sought to prevent:

> [H]e stood there to see if any words were spoke on the stage that were not in the book. What, in the name of Wonder, could the man be apprehensive of! Did he imagine that any of the actors would obtrude the words *Forage, Don Carlos, Italian Dominions, Convention, Bribery, Blunder, Halter*, and the *Devil*, for other words? And if an actor should happen by mistake to say *the grey mare WAS the better horse*, I am sure it would be no treason. (119)

Although the inclusion of Fielding's subtitle may be coincidental, many of the other objectionable words also seem to point at ballad operas.

Two operas written following the Licensing Act clearly indicate that the chief concern of the Lord Chamberlain's office, at least with regards to ballad operas, was to restrict lewdness, not political invective. *Briton's Strike Home*, by Edward Phillips, resembles *The Honest Electors* in its praise for "the true Hearts of Oak" who oppose the Spanish practice of interfering with British trade by searching their boats for contraband. Gagey recognizes that the play has "little satire but much patriotism," and indeed even the character portrayed by Kitty Clive remains the portrait of

modesty and pure love of country " (162). For all its morality, however, the play would nevertheless be objectionable to Walpole, for the Prime Minister's passive foreign policy was the major target of opposition literature in 1739. Goldgar, who does not mention *Briton's Strike Home,* claims that "Patriot poets attempted a concerted campaign on the stage" and argues that the other plays calling for war with Spain are part of a "planned, organized literary attack" (180). Phillips makes explicit his political intent:

> *Kitty*. Yes Sir, there's a great deal in having Politicks set to a proper Tune. . .I have observed that tunes and Songs have a great effect on Public Affairs, And I know of no better way of proving the Truth of an Observation than by a Song. (5)

Despite this manifest statement of political intention, *Briton's Strike Home* opened at Drury Lane without interference.

Sancho at Court, written the same year, was not so fortunate. Though it was not refused a licence outright, it seems to have been prohibited nevertheless. The Preface describes how the play initially seemed to have appealed to the managers of Drury Lane; they had Chetwood shorten the work and assured the author that "it would do, provided it pass'd the Chamberlain's Office" (A4). The author bitterly complains that despite making several inquiries, he got no answer for almost eight months, and when he finally asked for his copy to be returned he was told he "could not have it, it being left at a Place not then to be came at" (A4). The text itself is decidedly non-partisan. If Sancho's manipulative secretary Alonzo could be seen as Walpole, he is nevertheless rewarded for his cleverness in the end. There also seems to be a repudiation of the opposition in Air XV, which damns a Patriot writer for his "distant, pointless Spite" (38). In its social satire, the play is filled with the types of meanings one would expect from a ballad opera, included numerous hymns on

the power of money, an appealing portrait of a bawdy and amoral young woman who disdains marriage, and a chaotic portrait of a lawless mob reminiscent of *The Restauration of Charles II*. The play owes a lot to *The Grub Street Opera* in its depiction of Sancho's devious advisors and its recycling of Fielding's Tantarara, here changed from "Bob's All" to "Rogues All" (21), and the closing song is modeled on Coffey's conclusion to *Phebe*. If it is therefore not particularly original, it is nevertheless a virtual exemplar of ballad opera's themes, and that in itself seemed to have led to its suppression.

Thus the Licensing Act , at least with ballad opera, does not seem to have enforced Walpole's politic agenda, but it did work to silence the genre's celebration of self-interest, duplicity, and drunken revelry. I will discuss in the epilogue just how greatly the bill changed satire by looking at *Love in a Village*, a comic opera of 1762 modeled on a ballad opera of 1729. Perhaps this change was inevitable given the form's candid encouragement of lawlessness and vice. Tony Aston himself seems to have anticipated that ballad opera could not last forever; in *The Fool's Opera* he altered Gay's maxim from "The wretch of To-day may be happy To-morrow" to " Take of your Bottle, and never be vext; What pleases this Age will be burnt in the next" (11). Gay's wretches had their day throughout most of the 1730s, and the plays they created were among the wittiest of the century. But Aston's maxim also proved prescient, for though ballad operas were never set on fire, the message they sought to impart was certainly forgotten.

Epilogue

Ballad Opera did not survive the Licensing Act. Apart from *Britons Strike Home*, most of the ballad operas to reach the stage in the next decade were highly moralistic revisions of the form (along the lines of Lillo's *Sylvia*). These include James Peterson's *Raree Show* (performed in York in 1739); *The Sharpers*, by Matthew Gardiner (Dublin, 1740); and Joseph Yarrow's *Love at First Sight* (York, 1742). Although each of these plays contains elements of intrigue that could potentially lead to the satirical effects typical of the form, they resolve by exposing the stratagems and punishing the deceivers (in *The Sharpers*, for example, the exposure of a Macheath-like highwayman paves the way for a happy marriage). Two ballad operas produced in London, both by James Dodsley, are even more strikingly revisionist. *Sir John Cockle at Court* (1738) and *The Blind Beggar of Bethnal Green* (1740) are both so filled with sentimental moralizing and so steadfast in their praise of sincerity that they almost appear to be deliberate attempts to alter public perception of the form. Finally, the only satirical operas to receive production were both swiftly denounced and withdrawn. James Miller's *Coffee House* (1738) outraged the Templars, who damned both that production and every subsequent work the author attempted, and Henry Brooke's *Jack the Gyant Queller*, a sharp critique of corruption, was immediately suppressed by the Lord Justices of Ireland after its Dublin premiere. Brooke's subsequent career also suffered; his next play, *Gustavus Vasa*, was denied a license.

Miller and Brooke at least got their plays produced, but in this they were exceptions; most writers who wrote aggressive ballad operas following the Licensing Act suffered the same fate that James Ayres did with *Don Sancho at Court*. *Don Sancho, or The Students Whim* (1739), *The False Guardians Outwitted* (1740), *The Operator, a Ballad Opera* (1740), *The Rival Priests, or*

The Female Politician (1741), *The Whim, or The Merry Cheats* (1741), *The Ragged Uproar, or The Oxford Roratory* (1742?), *Court and Country, or The Changlings* (1743), *The Sailor's Opera, or A Trip to Jamaica* (1745), and *The Conspirators* (1749) all continued ballad opera's typical mock celebration of hypocrisy; none of them secured a production. Although these plays were not explicitly prohibited, the ban on non-patent theatres and the self-regulation of Drury Lane and Covent Garden were sufficient to prevent them from finding a venue.[32]

Although *The Beggar's Opera* continued to be revived throughout the century, the other popular ballad operas of the 1730s fell out of the repertoire by the end of the decade. Apart from Gay's play, full length operas were not revived, and only the most popular ballad opera afterpieces were reproduced. *Damon and Phyllida*, *The Devil to Pay* (shortened version), *The Lottery* (shortened version) and *An Old Man Taught Wisdom* sporadically continued to appear as afterpieces until about 1750, when they too began to fall out of the repertoire. Without an influx of new work to give life to the genre, it seems, these works lost their relevance.

The lack of fresh ballad opera productions also contributed to a critical reappraisal of the form, one which not only denied artistic merit to any of the successors of *The Beggar's Opera,* but also considered the genre devoid of any serious intent. Unlike the condemnations of the form published during its heyday, these later appraisals find nothing morally objectionable in the plays; they simply condemn them as frivolous. The dismissals are so sweeping that it is difficult to imagine the authors had any but a passing familiarity with the actual plays they condemn. The essay "Observations on the Stage" in the *London Journal*, for example, states:

> Our *Ballad Operas* I shall take no further notice of, than that they are absurd, when they are taken in any other Sense than as a burlesque on the *Italian*, which

> undoubtably was Mr. Gay's design in his Beggar's Opera, the only good piece of the Kind ever publish'd or likely ever will, since none but Witlings and Dablers in Poetry from that Time attempted them. (September 1745, p. 437)

It is doubtful whether the author would wish to include in his collection of "Witlings and Dablers" virtually every playwright who wrote during the 1730s, including Lillo, Cibber, Fielding, Charles Johnson, and Gay himself, as well as the talented playwrights who specialized in the form, such as Charles Coffey and Robert Drury. But similar dismissals of the form would become commonplace, occurring whenever Gay's work was discussed. Thus Joseph Warton, in his *Essay on Pope* calls *The Beggar's Opera* "the parent of that most monstrous of all dramatic absurdities, the Comic Opera" (315), and Genest is equally damning:

> Notwithstanding all the merits of [*The Beggar's Opera*], it is much to be wished that it had never been written, as its success has entailed on us from that time to this, those bastard Comedies styled Operas–most of which have been miserably inferior to the Prototype, and many of them little more than mere vehicles for the Songs. (224)

The idea that all ballad operas apart from the original were insubstantial fluff seemed to have become an orthodoxy by the end of the century.

It is likely that the pronouncements of Warton and Genest reflect less on ballad operas than on the sentimental comic operas which succeeded them. This speculation is supported by the fact that Dr. Johnson claimed that the form Gay invented continued to be popular in his own time (*Lives of the Poets*, III: 13-14), an assertion that only makes sense if one includes such plays as Bickerstaffe's *Love in a Village* as legitimate successors. Bickerstaffe's play, though founded on a

ballad opera of 1729, differs considerably from the operas that held the stage before the Licensing Act. I examine those differences in detail below; here I would just like to emphasize that it was the absence of satirical ballad operas on the stage that led, in the second half of the eighteenth century, to the notion that most musical plays were nothing more than trivial romps.

Moral objections did continue to be raised regarding the only ballad opera that did remain in the repertoire. *The Beggar's Opera* drew fire every time it was revived, most notably in 1773, when Sir John Fielding attempted to prohibit its planned production at Drury Lane.[33] In general, the accusations mirror those from earlier in the century: Gay portrayed vice in the most amiable light, his representation of prostitution was offensive to delicate taste, his attack on authority destroyed all respect for government, and Macheath's reprieve encouraged youth to pursue the life of a highwayman (the myth that crime increased after every production of the play was repeated regularly). Although the lack of other ballad operas eliminated the accusation that Gay had created an immoral theatre, this did not lessen the passion of the objections. In some ways, it made the criticism more severe, for without successors to bear the responsibility for encouraging corruption, *The Beggar's Opera* stood alone to take the blame.

If the moral objections seem somewhat repetitive and overly shrill, it would nevertheless be a mistake to dismiss them too quickly. Dr. Johnson's opinion that the play had no moral purpose because it was written merely to divert may have been frequently repeated (from Hazlitt, to Shultz to Kidson and Gagey), but it is not particularly convincing. There are moral consequences to any diversion, and the critics often detailed those consequences with precision. John Hawkins seems eloquently on the mark in his comment that the play entertains "by inculcating that persons in authority are uniformly actuated by the same motives as thieves and robbers," a tendency that

works "to destroy all confidence in ministers, and respect for magistrates, and to lessen that reverence, which, even in the worst state of government is due to laws and public authority" (316-17). What is noteworthy about this remark is the idea that Gay's satire leads to a questioning not merely of one particularly corrupt administration, but of any authority whatsoever, including legal standards and cultural norms. He goes on to state that Macheath's licentiousness is defended "by example drawn from the practice of men of all professions" and that in the play the rights of property, the rule of law, and standards of behavior "are disputed on principle." And even more alarming was that breaches of ethics were endowed with a veneer of gentlemanly respectability, creating scores of "young men, apprentices, clerks in public offices and others" who, disdainful of genuine industry, had learned "to affect politeness in the very act of robbery."[34] Although he was writing in 1776, long after ballad opera had vanished from the stage, Hawkins correctly identifies those aspects of Gay's play that the successors not only imitated but actively celebrated. Rejecting any natural basis for laws and morality, and scornful of the idea that class distinctions were bestowed only on those who were inherently superior, the ballad opera canon portrayed a world in which the only sensible behavior was to exploit whatever resources were available for one's own betterment. For the servant class, this meant accepting bribes, enabling ones employer's intrigues, betraying an employer to a rival if the price was higher, or pitting the two against one another, pocketing assurance money from each while feigning fierce loyalty to both. It could also entail using inside knowledge of social forms to transcend one's class by impersonating a fine lady or gentleman, for it was taken as a given that societal distinctions were not inherent but were merely forms, and advantages accrued to those best able to duplicate them. Those in power, on the other hand, were shown both to ruthlessly exploit their positions for financial gain and sexual

gratification, and to champion publicly legal standards and moral codes while privately eschewing both. More important, neither set of practices was portrayed as reprehensible. Deceitful servants were occasionally rebuked but rarely severely punished, and more often than not they were praised or rewarded for their cleverness. Similarly, corruption in high places was seen as inevitable. Ballad opera taught that the only losers in life were those who clung to a creed of prescribed ethics; such characters were repeatedly mocked. As Hawkins noted, everyone's motives were those of a highwayman; no principles were so sacred they could not be bought and sold.

Ultimately, ballad opera presents a world in which all public behavior is artificial. Displays of loyalty were useful because they could increase the graft (*The Footman)*; ostentatious filial obedience could secure a more favorable inheritance (*Calista*); outward piety could enable private conferences with desirable young women (*The Wanton Jesuit*). Furthermore, due to the huge increase in audience, this message was delivered to a much wider segment of the population than had previously been conceivable. The emerging middle class was being bombarded with the idea that class divisions were arbitrary and the key to advancement was deception. Although the claims of increasing numbers of highwaymen were chimerical, the most ambitious of the footmen who attended the theatres in large numbers would hardly have been discouraged from dishonesty by the ethos presented on the stage.[35] It is difficult to imagine what society might have become had this rhetoric of insincerity remained a prominent part of popular culture.

But if ballad opera took the celebration of deception too far, its message did not lack truth. Displays of propriety often mask rampant corruption, greed is far more common than selflessness, and social norms do limit social mobility. While celebrating hypocrisy, it was also exposing it, and the attack on everything sacred was founded on a principle that was fundamentally egalitarian, that

everyone should be held to the same standards. In contrast, the plays that were favored following the Licensing Act look like behavioral guides, and their unfailingly well-intentioned, well-behaved characters are so pious as to look almost absurdly unrealistic, more cardboard exemplars than living creatures. Although Kinservek has uncovered satirical impulses in some plays from later in the century (notably among the works of Foote and Macklin), he admits that they were both uncommon and rather tame (209 and *passim*). The vast majority of these plays much more closely resemble *Love in a Village*, a work that suffers greatly when compared to its ballad opera source.

Although the 128 performances of *Love in a Village* far surpassed the seven recorded for *The Village Opera*, the earlier play is livelier, more interesting, and more coherent that Bickerstaffe's adaptation. Both Gagey and Schultz are lavish in their praise of Johnson's play; Schultz believes it is "one of the best of the ballad opera sequence" (290), and Gagey claims that though the text is "utterly different" it may be considered second in excellence to *The Beggar's Opera* (85-9). Although I concur with his high evaluation, Gagey's repeated assertions that the play is almost entirely sentimental and devoid of satire are incorrect. Despite its pastoral setting, *The Village Opera* consistently questions the foundations of class divisions, contains numerous cynical airs in praise of the power of gold, and is driven throughout by the antics of two dishonest but charming footmen who impersonate their betters in an attempt to steal their fortune. The action takes place at the country home of Nicholas Wiseacre, who is determined to marry off his daughter Rosella to Freeman, whom she has never met. Rosella is in love with Heartwell, however, and she plots to run off with him at her first opportunity. Freeman also deplores the arranged union, for he has fallen in love with Rosella's servant Betty, and in an effort to steal her away has disguised himself as the gardener Colin. To facilitate this plan, he unwisely confides in

his footman Brush, who, seizing a fine opportunity, steals his master's clothes and attempts to marry Rosella and take control of both family fortunes. Both Brush and his conniving partner File are eventually exposed, but in typical ballad opera fashion are praised for their ingenuity rather than punished. Johnson follows Gay's example by having the footmen attribute their practices to examples learned from the upper classes:

Sir Nich. Sirrah, where did you learn to lye thus?

File. I was two Days and a half in Lady *How-d-ye*'s Service.

Sir Nich. And where did you get this trick of forging Persons and Letters?

Brush. I was once, Sir, a great Dealer in Stock, Sir. . .

Sir Nich. And how come you both thus accomplished in Impudence?

File. We never copy'd our inferiors.

Sir Nich. And as to your Sincerity and Truth--

Brush. We have been in several Courts in *Europe*. (70)

Johnson skewers infidelity, fawning, and the South Sea Bubble in just a few lines, and he concludes their defense with a lively song, ensuring that it all maintains a cynical flippancy:

Brush. The World's a Deceit
The False are the Great,
For Poverty Plain-dealing follows;
The Crime lyes no doubt,
In being found out,
While we bid for the Plumb or the Gallows.

File. We are but the Mimicks,

Of those vers'd in Chimicks,

Who extract from the People their Riches.

They empty their Pockets,

While gaping the Blockheads,

For their Money, are paid with fine Speeches. (70-1)

The gleeful hornpipe to which this air is set encourages the notion that the thieves are wonderfully merry, and Sir William seems to agree, promising to set File up as an attorney and Brush as a broker. Nor is this attitude unique to this scene; the text is filled with similar sentiments. Thus the play Gagey calls "romantic and sentimental" champions disobedience to one's parents, inter-class marriage, and the relentless pursuit of gold by any means available. Bickerstaffe's extensive alterations remove any trace of this satire, transforming the play into a virtual indoctrination of inherent class distinctions. First, he eliminates the characters Brush and File entirely. In Bickerstaffe's vision there is simply no place for deceitful servants, and indeed the notion that a servant could even conceive of transcending his or her station would be completely foreign to the world of *Love in a Village*. Secondly, he tames Rossella's[36] passion for Heartwell by bringing her paramour to the stage. In Johnson's play, the fact that their interactions take place entirely offstage gives the affair a lewd suggestiveness, but Bickerstaffe presents Rosella conversing with her lover with a prim prudery that destroys any sense of sexual appetite. Finally, the later play disposes of any possible subversiveness in Freeman's pursuit of a servant girl by revealing Betty's status as a women of high birth in the very first scene. These changes remove all the scheming that gave *The Village Opera* a plot, and in their place Bickerstaffe fills the time with moral dilemmas. Thus, instead of having Rosella continually contrive to arrange an elopement she is ardently

determined to bring about, Bickerstaffe shows her grappling with her conscience. She struggles to reconcile her love for Heartwell with her need to be a dutiful daughter, and she leans toward accepting her father's choice, wistfully hoping that "perhaps he has quality in his eye" and has selected an adequate mate (16). In the end she renounces any plans for elopement and instead convinces Heartwell to work with her to convince her father of the propriety of their match. Similarly, instead of having Betty and Freeman intrigue to surmount the barriers to a marriage between a servant and a gentleman, Bickerstaffe has each of them fight against their desire. Although they acknowledge their passions, they each believe the object of their affections is a servant and thus inherently unworthy. Betty, for example, attempts to convince herself she feels nothing for him, asking "now let me put the case, if he were not a servant, would I or would I not, prefer him to any man I ever saw? Yes, if he were not a servant" (35). She dithers in this way throughout the play, completely at a loss for what to do, concluding only that she is in a most lamentable state, sadly declaring that "had I not looked upon him as a person so much below me, I should have had no objection to receiving his courtship" (59). Freeman likewise damns his own infatuation, declaring "I am angry with himself for it and strive all I can against it" and agreeing that "when people's circumstances are quite unsuitable, there are obstacles that cannot be surmounted (36-7). And when they finally do learn that they are in fact social equals, their union receives an added social sanction, for it is Freeman's authoritarian father who arranges the happy revelations. Thus, while both plays present social codes as obstacles to love, the attitudes toward the codes could not contrast more starkly. In Johnson's work, obedience to parental authority and adherence to class distinctions in marriage are seen as arbitrary strictures that impede happiness and should be circumvented without remorse. In *Love in a Village* on the other hand, these same

strictures are basic truths, and have been so deeply internalized by the characters that even questioning them brings on an almost obsessive guilt.

The differing treatments of the principal characters create significant contrasts, but it is in the depiction of servants that the plays' most visible social divergences are most apparent. In *The Village Opera*, the deceitful Brush and File are hardly exceptional; all of the servants voice a deep cynicism about their social position. Lucas, for example, describes his master as one who "thinks, because he hath Money, that he is ignorant of nothing" and opines that "those Creatures they call Gentlefolks" are fit for nothing but idleness (5-6). Similarly, the humble townsman Hob, though portrayed as comically rustic, nevertheless knows and emulates the airs of the great, declaring he has "no desire to be thought an honester Man than my Neighbours; I do not care to be quite out of Fashion, d'ye see" (45). In contrast, Bickerstaffe not only eliminates the roguish footmen, he also paints all the lower class characters as wholly satisfied with their station. The rustic Hawthorne, for example, sings a happy song chronicling his contentment to be free of the responsibilities of the great (13), and the servant Hodge cheerfully admits he "knows the length of [his] tether" (16) and even refuses to accept money for his services, claiming "I'd go through fire and water for [my mistress], by day or by night, without ever a penny" (47). All of Bickerstaffe's servants are equally submissive, even to point of being forthright about their own inferiority.

Followed closely, Bickerstaffe's portrayal of the servant class begins to look deliberately revisionist, and nowhere is this more true than in his treatment of the Statute, which he transforms into a piece of propaganda for docile domestics. A Statute, or "Country Mop," Johnson informs us, is "a Sort of Fair where Servants are hired. . . among the Trees upon a Green Maids and Men ranged on each side to be hired" (19). Although it has no relevance to the plot, Johnson has Sir

Nicholas visit one of these markets, and the playwright uses the scene to paint a cynical picture of mutual class exploitation. He begins with a creepy exchange between Susan Holiday and two gentlemen who are ostensibly interviewing her for hire as a maid. Their questions make clear however, that they are not seeking dairy hands, but sexual favors, and they proceed to size up each of the young women in turn:

> *2 Gent.* Hum, what pretty filly is this?
>
> *1 Gent.* Are you to be Lett or Sold, my beautiful little Pad?
>
> *2 Gent.* She has an excellent Forehand.
>
> *1 Gent.* Very well let down, and treads firm on her Patterns. (20)

The maids' apparent helplessness to silence the pair's bawdy innuendo seems to leave the gentlemen in complete control, but the power soon shifts when they are interrupted by a Steward, who explains how he manipulates his position to his own gain:

> Why, sir, when any Gentleman is uneasy in his affairs, I take his Estate into my Possession: I allow him a Pension out of it; I rack his Tenants, cheat his Creditors, steal his Timber, starve his Servants, and keep him constantly in Debt to me with his own Money, which I lend him at about so *per Cent*. Discount: This keeps him humble; this makes him pliant and silent. (21)

Despite the reference to starving the servants, the steward makes clear that each domestic has "Arts of Profession" that procure advantage, and he proceeds to lead the group in a rousing song that reveals each of their wiles:

> *Cook*. With Soups and Ragouts your dead Palates I please,
>
> And drive down your Throats the pleasing Disease.

Butler. Your Wine I refine, and your Napkins I Pinch;

Coachm. I rattle, whip Cattle, and drive to an Inch. . .

Stew. Your acres, and Purse,

I take me to Nurse,

While you from all Troubles are free,

'Till by dint of Accounts

Your yearly Amounts

Shall all be transferr'd o'er to me, to me. (22)

Thus all of the hirelings' outward submissiveness masks their manipulative selfishness, even calling into question the maids' coyness. Nor are the gentlemen appalled, or even surprised, by this state of affairs; indeed, they applaud the song and compliment the steward on his cleverness. In Johnson's vision, theft by employees is both accepted and celebrated.

Bickerstaffe might have simply eliminated this scene, but he chose instead to sterilize it to portray his own version of proper class behavior. He retains the bawdy innuendo toward the dairy maid, showing the men "chucking her on the chin" and delighting that she will do "any work you put her to," and he also heightens their severity toward the underlings, showing Justice Woodcock striking a commoner and threatening to put him in stocks for the sin of standing in his way (20-1). And rather than protest this rough treatment the servants take it as their due, becoming even more subservient in an effort to prove their worthiness. In the rousing concluding song, each in turn emphasizes their compliant humility, offering to "labour every day" to make the garden perfect, the home immaculate, the meals wholesome, the stables groomed, and the laundry so spotless that "no driven snow will be more white" (22-3). Their choral finale is astonishingly cloying:

My masters and mistresses hither repair

What servants you want you will find in our fair;

Men and Maids fit for all sorts of stations there be;

And, as for our wages, we shan't disagree. (24)

Bickerstaffe's Statute is a ruling class fantasy, where the help is both supremely competent and supremely submissive, and where even modest disputes over salary have been entirely banished.

Viewing these two plays sides by side, it is difficult not to feel a sense of loss. Politically, Bickerstaffe seems to take a step backwards. Johnson's servants may be dishonest and cynical, but they are fully drawn individuals, confident that their station in life is no reflection on their value. In Bickerstaffe, inferior classes are inferior people who deserve beating when they (literally) step out of line. Dramatically, one feels a shift from vibrancy to monotony. Bickerstaffe's guilt ridden heros and their impeccably loyal servants look artificial and lifeless not only next to Johnson's energetic creations, but even beside some of the most amateurish ballad operas from the thirties. This does not, I think, result from some vast discrepancy in talent, nor even from profound differences in their moral outlook. Both men were successful, career-minded dramatists, and there is no evidence that Bickerstaffe was particularly doctrinal or Johnson especially satirical. In fact, some of Johnson's earlier work seems closer to Lillo than Gay, and Bickerstaffe's *Spoild Child*, though not exactly satirical, is anything but a reform drama. Instead, the stark differences are testament to the power of genre. When Johnson choose to attempt to capitalize on the growing vogue for opera, he had *The Beggar's Opera* and the earliest imitations to guide him, and, as we have seen, what most dominated these imitations was the playful triumph of deception. He also had an example of notorious failure when an opera failed to deliver satire: *Love in a Riddle* had premiered

only a few months before. Bickerstaffe had surely seen *The Beggar's Opera* (it had had a very successful run at Covent Garden in 1759, and in 1760 both Covent Garden and Drury Lane opened their seasons with it), but it is possible he had never seen a performance of any other ballad opera, and the political climate that made Gay's first imitators focus on corruption had changed. Thus he was probably not seeking to reform the original or even comment on *The Beggar's Opera*; he was simply trying to earn a living by reproducing the type of theatrical practice to which he was accustomed. His decision to inform the audience of Betty's high birth shows he missed the irony of the original, and his scene between Rosella and Heartwell are painfully modest simply because that was how lovers behaved on stage in 1760; he may have been completely unaware of the bawdy suggestiveness of the original. He was, after all, interpreting the text in a new generic framework. He may even have seen his Statute scene as an accurate representation of that in *The Village Opera*. Focusing more on the delightful country fair, he might not have detected the sharp cynicism of the steward and his companions.

If it seems implausible that Bickerstaffe could have been unaware of the different way he was presenting the servants, that he might have found Brush and File not objectionable but simply irrelevant, it is only because the immersion in the ballad opera canon I have been following brought the satirical aspects to the foreground. Gagey, too, considered Johnson's play a wholly romantic pastoral, and throughout this dissertation I have described similar tendencies in numerous other ballad operas from *The Quaker's Opera* through *The Wedding* to *The Lover his Own Rival* which have gone unnoticed in modern criticism. The assumption that ballad operas were cheap imitations devoid of serious purpose has been remarkably powerful; Gagey believed he would find frivolity, and thus that was all he saw. This is not meant to disparage him; I have noted often that even the

most careful critics have shared this presumption. If there has been a primary goal to this dissertation, it has been to provide a more convincing framework from which to view these fascinating texts. And this framework has not only uncovered the subversively sardonic notions in plays previously thought superficial, it has also made legible texts previous described as incomprehensible, such as *The Patron* or *Bays's Opera*, and offered a plausible explanation for the suppression of such works as *Polly*, *The Restauration of Charles II*, and *Don Sancho at Court*. I hope too that I have been able to demonstrate how textual imitation works, through repetition and variation, to create a space in which certain types of meanings can be central. By the time ballad opera became identified as an independent form, as viable a dramatic category as tragedy or comedy, Gay's delirious spin on dishonesty was not only expected, it was natural. Ballad opera's ascension to the status of genre brought with it changes in attitudes toward ambition, marital fidelity, and class consciousness.

Perhaps the most important lesson gained from the comparison of Johnson with Bickerstaffe is the political power of literary norms. The Licensing Act was possibly the most arbitrary curtailing of literary development in the history of drama, and it enables us to see clearly the powerful effects of generic conventions. It brought to a close one of the most exciting periods in theatre history, one whose experimental energy was not duplicated until the rise iof artistic cabaret almost two centuries later. More important, once the energy of the 1730s was forgotten, the subversive message of ballad opera became virtually invisible. Bickerstaffe's portrayal of class is deplorable, but it is worth noting that even Brecht chose to portray Macheath as villain; his version of Gay's play bears the message that collusion between the powerful can appear so charming that the public can do nothing to combat it. But ballad opera sought to articulate just the

opposite, and its lesson bears repeating. Although greed may be ubiquitous, and the powerful may be corrupt and exploitative, they depend on your adherence to the norms they establish, and you may always decline to play by their rules.

ENDNOTES

1. This contrasts sharply with the more orthodox view: "[In "The Lonely Street"] the poet's consciousness, his lyric "I", is suggested through attention to craft. . . the reader's attention in terms of the poet's presence, however, is directed outward to the scene described" (Morris, 5).

[2] This effect can be even more pronounced when unintended and undesired. Robert Graves's 1925 "ballad opera," *John Kemp's Wager*, seems intended as a sentimental and joyous portrait of country life, but because Graves introduces traditional songs with revised lyrics, his characters begin to look like mere pawns in a game they neither recognize nor understand.

3. For a discussion of the interactions between theatre and the marketplace, see Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, pp. 153-174.

4. It was also, incidently, part of Brecht's procedure for *The Threepenny Opera*.

5. This idea gains credence from the fact that the first two printings of the text showed "Barnwell and Millwood at an Entertainment" (Nettleton, 605n).

6.The numerous thrusts and counters in this debate, beginning with Herring's notorious sermon and Swift's vigorous defense, are helpfully collected in Shultz, pp. 226-270.

7.Peartree's friend Rako bemoans Margery's goodness, noting "What Pity 'tis, so ill a Woman shou'd/ a daughter have so dutiful, and good" (4) and a Frenchman named Razoir, also in love with Margery, is introduced as a comic parody of Peartree, lamenting "Adieu de Hope of living upon Sallad!" (14).

8. "One wonders why it was so often necessary for Mrs. Charke, Mrs. Roberts, and others to play masculine roles. Perhaps the ability to sing had something to do with the practice" (Gagey, 203).

9. *The Harlot's Progress, or Ridotto al 'fresco*, for example.

10. See, for example, Laura Brown's essay "The Romance of Empire: *Oroonoko* and the Trade in Slaves," in *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth Century Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

11.See, for example, Empson's discussion of the term in The Structure of Complex Words (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951).

12.See especially Dianne Dugaw, "The Anatomy of Heroism: Gender Politics and Empire in Gay's *Polly*." in History, Gender, and Eighteenth-Century Literature, Beth Fowkes Tobin, ed.,Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994.

13. Only its title and genre are given by Nicoll. Gagey, however, points out that its title relates it to a later play, *Hudibrasso*, which personifies various dramatic forms in a manner not unlike that of Ralph, Fielding, and Odingsells (150).

14. See, for example, the claim in *Cato Examined* that "the rules and what pleases are never contrary to each other" and Steele's remark in *The Theatre, 1720* that spectators are reserved "their full Right of Applauding, or Disliking the performance of any particular Actor, whenever his Care, or Negligence, shall appear to deserve either the one, or the other" (10).

15. *Silvia* managed three performances in 1730, and *The Grub Street Journal* made reference to "the continual hissing and catcalls" which accompanied the performances (November 19, 1730).

16. The precarious unreliability of this evaluative method was noted elsewhere. A letter in *The Grub Street Journal* damned shopkeepers and other members of the lower classes for their inappropriately luxurious standard of dress at a Goodman's Fields production (December 14, 1732).

17.See also: Hume 67, Freeman, 79, and Rivero, 45.

18. For the discussion of *Damon and Phillida*, see Chapter 4. Theophilus Cibber, who produced *Bays's Opera*, may have continued the joke a couple of weeks later by casting Mrs. Roberts (Cantato) and Mrs. Clive as mock pastoral lovers in his own *Patie and Peggy* (April 20, 1730).

19. The first two acts do include two ballad airs, but this seems to be an afterthought, for the first edition indicates them only by a stage direction, printing the lyrics separately with the introductory material.

20.The printed text explicitly marks the distinction by changing the running title head from *The Author's Farce* to *The Pleasures of the Town*.

21. Three additional factors argue strongly that this choice of casting was deliberate: 1) Fielding employed this duplication of roles in every production of *The Author's Farce*, including the 1734 revision; 2) Other actresses were available for the role, including Miss Wind and Mrs. Blunt, each of whom instead only had a single line in the final production; 3) Luckless himself refers to Mrs. Moneywood as "the golden Goddess" in the final section (57).

22. Father of Walter Aston, who wrote *The Restauration of Charles II*, discussed above.

23. This view is not shared by Gagey, who calls it "a wretched piece of work, entirely devoid of merit" (151).

24. Significantly, there even developed a split in generic labeling that mirrored this division. The texts designed for publication, for the most part adopted the label "ballad opera," while those that reached the staged tended to maintain the more general term "opera".

25.See, for example, L. J. Morrissey, "Henry Fielding and the Ballad Opera."

26. For an thorough discussion of Fielding's travesty of Lillo see Moss, Harold, "Satire and Travesty in Fielding's *The Grub Street Opera*."

27.Much of the compiling of information from the daily papers was done by Robert Hume, in his admirably thorough *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre*.

28. For a detailed account of the excise controversy, including a discussion of some of the literature it generated, see Langford, Paul, *The Excise Crisis: Society and Politics in the Age of Walpole.*

29. Although the source tune is uncertain, its undeniable relation to “Dutch Skipper” is significant (see below).

[0] *Damon and Phillida* is in fact quite distinct from the original work. The afterpiece drops the virtuous lovers entirely, focusing solely on the philandering Damon. Although in the end Damon abruptly accepts marriage, the bulk of the text is a celebration of free love, so much so that the conversion could easily be read ironically. It is even possible that audiences were cued to view his lover’s declarations of steadfastness as less than earnest, for a popular tune, "Phillida Flouts Me" recounts the infidelity of a cruel mistress. Furthermore, that role was taken by the only performer from *Love in a Riddle* to appear in the afterpiece, Kitty Clive, who alone received applause for her first performance, and who would soon earn a reputation for her skillful portrayal of "the foolish and vitious Characters of [her] Sex" (Fielding, *Chambermaid,* A2).

31. Gagey notes the disapproval of the 1824 editor of play, who was appalled that audiences took such delight in “the romps and revelries of the kitchen” (108).

32. Very few plays were actually denied a license. For an excellent discussion of how the Licensing Act nevertheless managed to effectively eliminate objectionable plays, see Kinservik, *Disciplining Satire*, pp. 96-106.

33.See *Gentlemen’s Magazine,* September 1773, for an account.

34.According to Boswell, Gibbon also noted this effect, though with amusement rather than alarm. Noting that *The Beggar’s Opera* might in fact have increased crime, he added that “it has had the beneficial effect in refining that class of men, making them less ferocious, more polite, in short, more like gentlemen” (quoted in Shultz,. 252-53).

35.For accounts of complaints against footmen in the theatre, see *The Weekly Register* March 25, 1732 and March 10, 1733, and *The Daily Advertiser* December 30, 1734.

36.In *Love in a Village* she is called Lucinda. Bickerstaffe altered the names of all the principal characters: Colin is Young Freeman, Betty is Rossetta, Heartwell is Eustace. Although some of these changes might influence the plays’ minor nuances (“Betty” sound much more like a servant than “Rossetta” for example), I have retained Johnson’s names to ease comprehension of this comparison.

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Appendix One:

Ballad Opera Genre-Names: Title Page Designations

YEAR	TITLE	GENRE
1728	The Quaker's Opera	Opera
1728	Penelope	Dramatic Opera
1728	The Beggar's Opera	Opera
1729	The Country Wedding	Tragi-Comi-Pastoral-Farcical Opera
1729	The Wedding	Tragi-Comi-Pastoral-Farcical Opera
1729	Love in a Riddle	Pastoral
1729	Southwark Fair	Opera
1729	The Patron: or, The	Opera
1729	Momus turn'd Faulist	Opera
1729	Love and Revenge	Opera
1729	Flora	Opera
1729	Chuck	Opera
1729	The Cobler's Opera	Opera
1729	The Contrivances	Ballad Opera
1729	The Beggar's Wedding	Opera
1729	Polly	Opera
1729	The Village Opera	Opera
1730	Hurlothrumbo	Opera
1730	The Fashionable Lady	Opera
1730	The Authors' Farce	Farce
1730	Colonel Split-tail	Opera
1730	Robin Hood	Opera
1730	The Jealous Clown	Opera
1730	The Chambermaid	Ballad Opera
1730	The Lover's Opera	Opera
1730	Bays's Opera	Opera
1730	The Prisoner's Opera	Opera
1730	The Female Parson	Opera

1731	Chrononhotonthologos	Tragical Tragedy
1731	Patie and Peggy	Scotch Ballad Opera
1731	The Generous Free-Mason	Tragi-Comi-Farcical Ballad Opera
1731	The Battle of the Poets	Ballad Opera
1731	The Highland Fair	Opera
1731	The Wanton Jesuit	Ballad Opera
1731	The Jovial Crew	Comic-Opera
1731	The Devil to Pay	Opera
1731	The Welsh Opera	Opera
1731	Calista	Opera
1731	The Grub Street Opera	Opera
1731	The Genuine Grub-Street	Opera
1731	Silvia	Opera
1732	The Lottery	Farce
1732	The Devil of a Duke:	Farcical Ballad Opera
1732	The Intriguing Courtiers	Comedy
1732	The Restauration of Charles II	Histori-Tragi-Comi Ballad Opera
1732	The Humours of the Court	Ballad Opera
1732	The Mock Doctor	Comedy
1732	The Footman	Opera
1732	The Disappointment	Ballad Opera
1732	Achilles	Opera
1732	The Cobler of Preston	Opera
1732	Vanelia	Opera
1733	The Mock Lawyer	None
1733	The Commodity Excised	Ballad Opera
1733	The Stage-Mutineers	Tragi-Comi-Farcical Ballad Opera
1733	The Decoy	Opera
1733	The Downfall of Bribery	Ballad Opera
1733	Rome Excised	Tragi-Comi Ballad Opera
1733	The Boarding School	Opera
1733	The Fancy'd Queen	Opera
1733	The Fox Uncas'd: or, Robin's	Ballad Opera
1733	The State Juggler: or, Sir	Excise Opera
1733	The Harlot's Progress	Grotesque Pantomime Entertainment

1733	The Oxford Act	Ballad Opera
1733	The Opera of Operas	Opera
1733	The Court Medley	Ballad Opera
1733	Lord Blunder's Confession	Ballad Opera
1733	Timon in Love	Comedy
1733	The Livery Rake	Opera
1733	The Sequel to Flora	Opera
1733	The Jew Decoy'd	Ballad Opera
1733	The Mad Captain	Opera
1733	The Court Legacy	Ballad Opera
1734	The Keepers	None
1734	The Intriguing Chambermaid	Comedy
1734	The Wedding	Ballad Opera
1734	The Fortunate Prince	Ballad Opera
1734	Sturdy Beggars	Ballad Opera
1735	Macheath in the Shades	Serio-comico-farcical-Elysian Ballad Opera
1735	An Old Man Taught Wisdom	Farce
1735	The Merry Cobler	Farcical Opera
1735	Trick for Trick	Comedy
1736	The Royal Marriage	Ballad Opera
1736	Don Quixote in England	Comedy
1736	A Wonder: or, an Honest	Ballad Opera
1736	The Happy Lovers	Opera
1736	The Beggar's Pantomime	Comic Interlude with Ballad Songs
1736	Lover his OWn Rival	Ballad Opera
1736	The Whim:or, The Miser's	Farce
1736	The Female Rake	Ballad Comedy
1736	The Fall of Phaeton	None
1737	The Lucky Discovery	Opera
1737	The Mad House	Ballad Opera
1737	The Disappointed Gallant	Ballad Opera
1737	The Rival Milliners	Tragi-Comi-Operatic-Pastoral Farce
1737	The Rape of Helen	Mock Opera
1739	The Shepard's Opera	Opera
1739	Britons, Strike Home	Farce

1739	The Trepan	Opera
1739	Don Sancho	Ballad Opera