

*V*ULGAR TONGUES:  
CANTING DICTIONARIES AND  
THE LANGUAGE OF THE PEOPLE  
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

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Eighteenth-century Britain, with its dictionaries, grammar books, and well-documented efforts to establish a standard form of English, also, surprisingly, witnessed a qualified new appreciation of cant and other nonstandard languages.<sup>1</sup> Defining a national standard meant devaluing certain linguistic practices and their speakers as outside of newly set linguistic norms, beyond the pale of polite, rational conversation, yet the end of the century saw the revaluation of substandard expressions, even what had been considered actual criminal (cant) languages, and their supposed speakers. Thus, while the *New Canting Dictionary* (1725) relegates cant language to “gypsies . . . from Bohemia,” who, through the use of cant, “render . . . their business of thieving difficult to detect,” the *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785) extols cant and vulgar languages as homegrown.<sup>2</sup> Its author, Francis Grose, touts the use of vulgar language as a reflection of British “freedom of thought and speech, arising from, and privileged by our constitution” in a nation where “ebullitions of vulgar wit” are not “checked by the fear of the bastinado” (CD,1). Grose’s startling reclamation of cant and vulgar expressions reconfigures the languages of putative outsiders as signs of British national culture, incorporating the people into the rhetorical space of the nation via those linguistic practices.

The meanings of that term, “the people,” were and are notoriously vexed; in eighteenth-century Britain they form a series of strangely concentric circles. In Johnson’s *Dictionary* the widest of these meanings is “A nation,” while less wide

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is “the commonality; not the princes or nobles,” and less wide still is “the vulgar.”<sup>3</sup> My chief interest is in that lowest definition of the people as the vulgar. For it is the location of the vulgar within the nation that is the most troublesome and in which later cant and vulgar dictionaries seem most interested in specifying. Eighteenth-century cant and vulgar dictionaries thus might offer important insight into early formations of what Antonio Gramsci called the “national-popular,” a concept Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith gloss as “a cultural concept, relating to the position of the masses within the culture of the nation.”<sup>4</sup> These dictionaries—comprising well over twenty repeatedly reprinted titles in the eighteenth century—suggest a rhetorical rehabilitation of the people. Often inserted into cheaply produced criminal biographies, accounts of “gypsies,” or entertaining collections of jests, palm-reading instructions, dream interpretations, and guides to writing winning love letters, cant and vulgar dictionaries, however, were also published as beautifully crafted freestanding volumes.<sup>5</sup> Yet the late eighteenth century also witnessed the repression of many of those who might fit within the category of “the people”—from agricultural laborers to the urban dispossessed. In a series of displacements, a speculative and largely constructed linguistic subculture came to be gendered male and made to represent an English people’s culture that had itself been criminalized, even as it was celebrated as “free.”

Cultural and literary historians of the period have often emphasized eighteenth-century divisions between high and low cultures, particularly between linguistic cultures.<sup>6</sup> Yet, as Peter Burke has argued, it was the separation of the cultures of the vulgar from the upper strata of society that produced an interest in the culture of “the people” across early modern Europe.<sup>7</sup> The significance of the culture of the people was even more politically and nationally charged within Britain. Kathleen Wilson writes, “since it was the (largely mythical) role of the people in the constitution that in most contemporaries’ minds distinguished English liberty from Continental absolutism, populist beliefs and discourses were a crucial plank in the construction of national identities and consciousness.”<sup>8</sup> Johnson’s *Dictionary* itself records the revaluation of the term “vulgar” in eighteenth-century Britain. The 1755 first edition is fairly unsparing in its derision of the vulgar, defining it first as “suited to the common people,” a meaning illustrated with a belittling quotation: “Men who have passed all their time in low and vulgar life, cannot have a suitable idea of the several beauties and blemishes in the actions of great men” (*JD*). The second definition, “mean; low; being of the common rate,” gets further negative nuancing from South’s quotation, “it requiring too great a sagacity for vulgar minds to draw the line between virtue and vice.” These conceptions of “vulgar” draw from early-eighteenth-century political and social theory, according to which the limited, particular experiences of the unpropertied imposed constraints on their perspective and understanding—and, consequently, on their authority to intervene in public society.<sup>9</sup> Olivia Smith has even documented Parliament’s exclusion of “the vulgar” as a legitimate political constituency precisely through their use of vulgar language. Between 1797 and 1818 Parliament rejected petitions for universal suffrage, the political enfranchisement of the “vulgar,” because of the unelevated language of those petitions.<sup>10</sup>

Such open social divisions would sit uneasily beside a nationalist rhetoric’s increasing strategic appeal to populist cultural and linguistic practices, and

the 1774 fourth edition of Johnson's *Dictionary* points to a more inclusive sense of "vulgar."<sup>11</sup> While "plebeian" and its unflattering illustration remain the first definition, the second now reads "vernacular; national," and the illustration, from Fell, values the terms differently and linguistically. It reads: "it might be more useful to the English reader, who was to be his immediate care, to write in our vulgar language." Johnson's reference in this quotation, of course, is to vulgar rather than classical language, but "vulgar" in this sense suggests inclusiveness on broad national, specifically linguistic, terms, a sense captured by Gramsci in his description of language as "beneath the cosmopolitan expression of musical, pictorial, and other types of language . . . the deeper cultural substance, more restricted, more 'national-popular.'"<sup>12</sup> "Substandard" expressions of the people did not make it into official dictionaries of the eighteenth century. Instead, cant and vulgar dictionaries in eighteenth-century Britain, pivoting between scornful and approving senses of "vulgar," position the people, particularly vulgar speakers, within a wider conception of national culture through these putative popular languages.

What I will trace in this essay are two stages in that positioning. The first stage, taking place largely in the canting dictionaries of the early to mid eighteenth century, sees a rather simplistic unification of a variety of overlapping "substandard" languages into one single cant language designated as inherently criminal. In this process the linguistic expressions of thieves, prostitutes, con artists, and sometimes other speakers of substandard English appear as a singular (and mixed-gender) subculture.<sup>13</sup> In the later part of the century and in these terms, oddly, dictionaries of cant and vulgar language redefine and revalue those same practices as of the common people—and worthy of jocular imitation by fashionable men.<sup>14</sup> Published on the heels of earlier efforts to criminalize nonstandard languages, Grose's best-selling dictionary renames criminal terms as the "vulgar tongue," includes a variety of low and crude terms, and emphasizes the sexualized character of this vulgar language for a male audience. In this second stage, print collections of cant and vulgar languages claim them discursively as part of a free national-popular culture but incorporate them only on those terms of fascinating criminality and masculine sexuality. Both stages, in their textual collections and descriptions of non-elite culture, represent early moments in a genealogy of popular culture studies, revealing how popular culture, defined through such practices as substandard languages finally attributed to common people, begins its life as an analytical category limited to the criminal and, by the 1780s, male.

Several cultural critics have analyzed the late-eighteenth-century revaluation of low cultures, but I want to think about the fact that the revaluation of low language in cant and vulgar dictionaries characterizes as popular a language that in the recent past had been associated exclusively with criminals.<sup>15</sup> For at the same moment, in a series of historical developments more familiar to students of the eighteenth century, aspects of popular culture, actual practices of the non-elite, were reclassified as criminal.<sup>16</sup> In the accelerated rejection of the authority of custom after the middle of the century, pitched battles were fought over the legal status of a variety of social practices. These practices, which might be loosely framed as "culture," range from more recognizably "cultural" practices such as festivals or superstitions to wider social practices guiding property relation-

ships such as common grazing and gleaning, market activities, and labor interactions.<sup>17</sup> Commonly accepted practices in various locales became national crimes, and, concurrently, customary cultural practices and beliefs became increasingly limited to what E.P. Thompson has called a “plebeian population,” becoming “invisible” in that process.<sup>18</sup> Thus, at the same time as a wide set of popular practices and beliefs were criminalized and rendered invisible, a set of “criminal” linguistic practices became highly visible and came to be understood as an expression of popular British culture and a uniquely British liberty in a dialectic of social repression and rhetorical rehabilitation of the people.

Quite significant about this projection of Britishness away from common customs and onto a once criminal, more ephemeral, and consciously invented culture is that it also offered a distinct, gendered, and unexpected model of social identification in the period. As Susan Stewart has demonstrated, the folk cultures becoming invisible were also increasingly feminized cultures.<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, the cultures “visible” in canting dictionaries present an urban-associated mode of cohesion quite different from custom and clearly gendered male. Neither organic nor natural—not, certainly, the mother tongue—cant is also a deliberately “artificial” language seemingly without any claims to “natural” national affinity. Such “natural” relations were relegated to a feminized and disappearing rural folk, found in the oral tales and ballad singing of a passing generation of women. Conversely, the erasure of social relations of production in late-eighteenth-century constructions of collective identity enabled a cross-class male homosocial identification—one that, by the end of the century, allowed fashionable young men to imitate the language ascribed to the urban vulgar in what might have been perceived as a shared moment of Britishness.<sup>20</sup>

Before moving into the eighteenth-century texts, I want to spend a moment with the fifteenth through seventeenth-century booklets describing “conny-catching,” the textual ancestors of eighteenth-century cant and vulgar dictionaries. These highlight, in their difference from their eighteenth-century counterparts, both the shifting gender dynamic and the later collapse of cant into vulgar language. These earlier depictions of criminal practices and argot were “popular” in that they sold well, as the multiple publications of such works attest, but in drawing attention to thieves’ and vagabonds’ differences both from their readers and from the vulgar, upon whom they were said chiefly to prey, they suggest the canting crews’ separation from anything like a culture of the people.<sup>21</sup> Prefaces to these works state that their purpose is to protect readers from cant speakers, and they emphasize the criminals’ difference in the sensational, “wondrous” quality of their activities.<sup>22</sup> Robert Green’s *Black Bookes Messenger* (1591) promises to reveal “strange pranks and monstrous villainies,” while Richard Head’s *Canting Academy, or, the Devils Cabinet Broke Open* (1673) entices with its pledge to expose “the mysterious and villainous practices of that wicked crew.”<sup>23</sup> Whether or not readers furtively identified with the criminal figures, the texts neither position the cultures they limn as of the people nor hold them up as worthy of playful imitation, two approaches to cant that will emerge in the later eighteenth century.<sup>24</sup>

These earlier books describe a world that is disproportionately male but nonetheless shared by men and women. The full title of *Fraternitie of Vacabondes* (1575) includes “*beggerly men and women, boys and gyrles,*” and the entry for

“Doxies” defines women who “go abroad working laces and shirt stringes.”<sup>25</sup> Head’s later *Canting Academy* (1673) includes a description “of Palliards or Clapperdungeons” as “jades [who] know how to screw their faces into what pitiful posture they please, and have melting words at their fingers [sic] ends; as for gods sake bestow your charity on these poor fatherless children” (CA, 73). Head’s work also features songs that portray men and women in criminal cahoots—the hero of one song apostrophizes his “honey”: “thou and I / Will to the ale-house swiftly fly / . . . Therefore to London let us hie / O thou my sweet bewitching eye, / There wee’l rob and kiss pell-mell, / Escaping Tyburn all is well” (CA, 21). In another song, a man recounts his exploits with a female friend “what goods we stole we straight did sell, / And then abroad did sally / . . . the bouncing trull can finely talk / . . . through every town which she doth walk / Fails not to filch from any” (CA, 24). This is a world separate from the vulgar, yet populated by both men and women.

The songs men and women sing to each other in Head’s *Canting Academy* are in cant—a “secret” language these men and women reputedly use to conceal their criminal activities. In emphasizing the separate, coded character of the language of petty thieves, these publications promise a window into, while reinforcing the myth of, a distinct, highly organized band of urban criminals. Early canting dictionaries served, as John McMullan has explained, to circumscribe an “outlawed, deviant population, to delimit those who spoke nonstandard English into a distinct and hostile subculture.”<sup>26</sup> Although “subculture” is a protean term, almost too much so to be useful, its sense as a group “positioned by themselves and /or others as deviant or debased . . . defined from above by the law” is useful here.<sup>27</sup> Such attempts at legal and cultural separation of criminals suggest instead what was, in fact, the dangerous slippage between common people and criminals in this period. In the early modern period’s shift to predominantly wage labor, the state, through a series of criminal statutes, enforced new restrictions on formerly acceptable forms of compensation and itinerancy.<sup>28</sup> Further, the position of agricultural and manufacturing workers was increasingly precarious due to market-driven social relations, and a worker might slip into vagrancy or petty theft fairly easily.<sup>29</sup> A settled worker might become a vagrant tomorrow, her status changing from law abider to law breaker. Yet early canting collections sketch a hidden, highly organized, and entirely separate social group of criminals, carving a deep wedge between potentially intersecting groups through that most basic of communal practices, language. This early instance of representing what, from a different angle, we might see as one highly permeable component section of “the people,” cleaves them from that wider body. If this separate identity falls short of the distinct, almost racialized identity Henry Mayhew would later assign to the poor, it does participate in a quasi-ethnographic discourse demarcating an “outsider” group based on linguistic practices.<sup>30</sup>

It is in even starker terms that early eighteenth-century canting dictionaries will repeat the move to depict a separate language and culture indelibly marking a covert criminal underworld. Yet what is most interesting about that continuity is its active opposition to a differently minded canting dictionary published at the threshold of the new century. I want to spend some time considering *A New Dictionary of the Terms, Antient and Modern, of the Canting Crew, in its several*

*Tribes of Gypsies, Beggars* [sic], *Thieves, Cheats, &C.* (1699) by one “B.E., Gentleman,”<sup>31</sup> because it is the first and most remarkable attempt to represent cant and vulgar languages as overlapping and even integrated, and represents a language more accurately reflecting an emerging national-popular. In its single-minded devotion to the language alone—this is the first freestanding dictionary of cant (unlike its predecessors, it was not a brief appendix to a larger work on the “canting crews”)—in its length (185 pages), and especially in its refusal to distinguish fully criminal language from other languages, B.E.’s *New Dictionary* is a very different animal from its forerunners and from those that followed it. While it includes a range of terms earlier canting dictionaries had deemed criminal, including all the terms found in Head’s *Canting Academy*, it sets these alongside terms used by sailors and other laborers and even terms common to English domestic culture without explicitly criminalizing them. B.E.’s *New Dictionary* reveals, not surprisingly, that the move from earlier criminalizing cant dictionaries to later celebratory ones did not follow a smooth chronology. As we shall see, no one pursued his particular lead—those immediately subsequent returned to the old criminalizing model and those appearing later in the century framed cant and vulgar language as both criminal and popular and gendered it as exclusively male.

Alongside the old cant words, in B.E.’s *New Dictionary*, one finds terms used by “the Tarrs,” such as “*Ambrol* . . . for Admiral,” or “*Groyne*, corruptly by the Tarrs for Coronna, a seaport of Galicia in Spain,” or “*Pinch-gut-hall*, a noted House at Milend, so Nicknam’d by the Tarrs, who were half starved in an East-India Voiage, by their then Commander who built (at his return) that famous fabrick, (as they say) with what he Pinch’d out of their bellies” (ND). Not criminal, mariners did use their own language, and they comprise a subculture in the wider sense of a “group of people that have something in common with each other . . . which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other social groups.”<sup>32</sup> The particular language of a world that was already an object of fascination to many readers, this mariners’ jargon would likely appeal to readers seeking out the unusual. B.E.’s inclusion of mariners’ terms in a cant dictionary, however, was an innovation, as was his addition of a host of terms specifically linked to labor and manufacture, such as

*Cabbage*, a Taylor, [sic] and what they pinch from the Cloaths [sic] they make up . . .

*Card-Wool*, to clean and prepare it for Spinning . . .

*Carriers*, . . . Milk-women’s Hirelings, or servants, that carry the pail Morning and Evening . . .

*Chare-women*, Underdrudges, or taskers, assistants to servantmaids . . .

*Hell*, place where the taylers [sic] lay up their cabbage, or remnants, which are sometimes very large.

*Hissing*, . . . the quenching of metals in the forge . . .

*House of call*, the usual lodging place of journey-men tailers [sic] . . .

*Poker*, one that conveys coals (at Newcastle) in sacks, on horseback . . .

*Shred* [or] *stitch*, a taylor . . .

*Smug*, a blacksmith . . . (ND)

In merging conventional “cant” terms, such as “*Anglers*, cheats, petty thieves, who have a stick with a hook at the end, with which they pluck things out of win-

dows, grates" (*ND*), with these terms describing production and trade processes, B.E. undercuts attempts to divide criminals into a completely separate segment.

The terms related to labor and production that B.E. assembles might have been considered outside of acceptable standard language—none of these terms appears in Nathaniel Bailey's *Universal Dictionary* (1724), for instance, although they were still in use then.<sup>33</sup> Yet it is debatable whether there was a sense of a standard language in place at this point, given that the definitive dictionaries dedicated to establishing such a standard were still several decades away in 1699. B.E.'s use of the word "cant" in the title of his work resembles Johnson's *Dictionary* entry for "cant," which lists not only "a corrupt dialect used by beggars and vagabonds" but also "a particular form of speaking peculiar to some certain class or body of men" (*JD*). For Johnson, the label of particularity would be fairly damning in light of a neoclassical privileging of the general. B.E.'s entries such as "*Black Indies*, Newcastle, from whence the coals are brought," or "*yarmouth pie*, made of herrings, highly spic'd and presented by the city of Norwich . . . annually to the king," (*ND*) would be a liability in collections of standard English and their claims of generality and noncolloquiality. But B.E. did not maintain the negative attitude toward the particular that Johnson would. If part of the work of Johnson's attitude toward cant and of canting dictionaries themselves is to make possible, by way of contrast to disreputable particular lexicons, the notion of a "general" language, B.E. problematizes that contrast by combining the language of "particular" communities, such as "*flogging-cove*, the beadle, or whipper in Bridewell, or any such place" (*ND*) with "common" terms related to food, fauna, and cultural concepts associated with a larger society. B.E. includes words that might even comprise a common linguistic culture, perhaps below an emerging official standard language but likely familiar to many, with words such as:

*Florentine*, a dish made of minced meats, currants, spice, eggs, &C baked . . .  
 Flummery, a cleansing . . .  
*Fool's coat*, or colours, a motley of incongruous colours too near a kin to match, as red and yellow . . .  
*Fuants*, excrements of all vermin . . .  
*Fubbs*, a loving, fond word used to prety [sic] little children and women; also the name of a yacht . . . (*ND*)

Including both male and female laboring terms as well as terms associated with an increasingly feminized domestic space, B.E. does not present his lexicon as an especially gendered one. In situating such common, downright prosaic terms next to expressions of "the tarrs" and of criminals, such as "*Fence*, . . . a receiver and securer of stolen-goods," B.E.'s *New Dictionary* suggests that the boundaries between groups might be fluid, not the fixed exclusive limits that the criminal cant of earlier glossaries would suggest. As well, B.E.'s maverick work includes many coarse or low terms, such as "*bear garden discourse*, common filthy, nasty talk," "*cacafuego*, a shite fire," "*cracker*, an arse," "*fizzle*, a little or low-sounding fart," and "*fewmets*, deer excrements"—clearly not the language of the disembodied, universal subjects inhabiting a Habermasian public sphere. While it might be a stretch to claim that B.E.'s lexicon represents a language of the people, B.E.'s combination evokes counterpublic spheres, embodied, cross-gendered spaces composed of networks of often overlooked speech communities.<sup>34</sup>

A prescient ethnographic work in its documentation of linguistic practices (although it does not put that ethnography to the stratifying work of earlier and later texts), B.E.'s *New Dictionary* also draws from the much reproduced lore surrounding the canting crews, and it weaves language back into that lore, linking "Beggars [sic] and the Proverbs together," an association stretching from classical writers through to Shakespeare (*ND*). In pointing to the literary custom of "put[ting] the Proverbs . . . in the Mouth of . . . Slaves," B.E. identifies in the language of the beggars (heirs of the slaves) the pithy collected wisdom of generations of speakers of the national tongue (*ND*). The beggars' relation to society is not outsider but ultimate insider; theirs not a limited particular view but an all-encompassing vision.<sup>35</sup> This link of language and the literary figure of the beggar, however, removes it from the material social world, relocating it to the realm of literary tradition. What the *New Dictionary* gives with one hand, it takes away with the other, revealing intersections between criminal, laboring, and common linguistic cultures only to limit those connections to a separate literary sphere and fictional figure. If this is one model of incorporating the people into the nation, it operates only and openly at the level of the literary-imaginary. Yet most important, unlike the earlier conny-catching texts, the prefatory material to B.E.'s *New Dictionary* bears little ill will or stark moral disapproval toward the "canting crew" whose language it claims to represent. If anything, it values the mere existence of these "beggars" as powerful symbols of a slave-free English society. B.E. speculates that beggars were formerly slaves, and they thus function as a symbol of the larger society's freedom from the institution of slavery. B.E. writes, obliquely anticipating Grose, "Christianity . . . ransom'd no less than all at once from Pagan slavery at first, at no dearer a rate, than the rent-charge of maintaining the beggars, as the price and purchase of our freedoms." In B.E.'s estimation, readers should cherish rather than rebuke beggars—a key sector of the "canting crews"—for this reason (*ND*).

In contrast, in increasingly vitriolic rhetoric against beggars in the early part of the century, canting collections after B.E.'s *New Dictionary* work hard to return to an understanding of cant and its speakers as external to national society. Subsequent titles, despite borrowing heavily from it, suppress B.E.'s work's alternative model of language and social communities. *The New Canting Dictionary* (1725) castigates canting language as that of menacing outsiders, "gypsies . . . from Bohemia" who emigrated to those perennial sites of internal outsidership, Ireland and the Highlands of Scotland. A pernicious, criminal practice, cant in this description is only ever the language of ill-intentioned enemies of the English. This hostility toward its subject represents a return to the model of the earlier descriptions of conny-catching and their glossaries. In a passage lifted almost word for word from Head's *Canting Academy*, the *New Canting Dictionary* asserts that cant, like its speakers, flouts society's general rules; the preface remarks, "the canting dialect is a confused jargon, and not grounded on any rules; and no wonder, since the practitioners thereof are the chief fathers and nourishers of disorder," emphasizing the necessarily criminal particularity of a language not regulated by general rules (*NCD*).

Despite its heavy debt to B.E.'s *New Dictionary*, the *New Canting Dictionary*, unlike B.E.'s work, seethes with hostility towards its cant-speaking—and

vulgar—subjects. The beggars that B.E. exonerates as freed slaves, the slight ransom for a grandly free society, become here “the dregs of the people, who have not virtue and industry without compulsion, to maintain themselves and their families by labour” and are “a perpetual rent-charge” which has “given rise to the numerous bands of pilferers and robbers” (*NCD*). The *New Canting Dictionary* bleakly sets “beggars” against their fellow English countrymen in the social geography of a burgeoning industrial nation. In the preface, the *New Canting Dictionary* notes:

no country in the world, has within it self, better opportunities than England, to imploy and make useful the poor of all degrees . . . by means of our woolen and other numerous manufacturers; and that notwithstanding . . . no country in the world abounds so much with vagrants and beggars . . . it is impossible to stir abroad in the streets . . . but one must be attack'd with the clamourous and often insolent, petitions of sturdy beggars.

The *New Canting Dictionary* explicitly juxtaposes canting crews—no longer safely located outside of British society—to honest laborers, thus participating in a disciplining regime redefining appropriate behavior for a retooled laboring class. Enacting what Judith Frank calls “the demarcation most characteristically made among the poor in the early modern period . . . between those who are respectable and laboring and those who are idle and profligate,” *New Canting Dictionary* makes a place for the people within the nation strictly predicated on their adherence to new forms of labor regulation and distinction from “criminal” elements.<sup>36</sup> In this scenario, vagrants exist despite of and not because of (as one might also see it) consolidating agrarian capital, and they are morally distinct from the worthy “vulgar.”

Similarly, the name of Captain Alexander Smith’s 1719 “Thieves New Canting Dictionary” and its placement at the end of his collection of robbers’ biographies, *The Highwaymen*, marks this language as unmistakably criminal. It lifts, often word-for-word, the explicitly criminal terms from B.E.’s *New Dictionary*, but deletes all other terms and definitions. B.E., for instance, had defined “Bob” as “a shop lift’s comrade,” “a short periwig,” and a pet form of Robert, but Smith includes only the first, specifically criminal, definition. Gone too are the references to labor practices. B.E. had noted that a “clicker” is “the shoe makers [sic] journey man or servant, that cuts out all the work, and stands at or walks before the door, and says, what d’ye’ lack Sir, what d’ye buy madame.” As Peter Linebaugh has discovered, before the constraint of compensation to wages alone, the clicker also took a customary form of compensation, known as “clicking,” by cutting extra leather for himself.<sup>37</sup> Smith, however, leaves out “clicker” altogether and records only that to click is “to snatch.” What had once been the name for a customary compensation becomes in Smith’s lexicon the name for an act of theft, thus helping to remap designations of honest and dishonest forms of compensation and working people and suppressing the productive relationships that were part of this linguistic culture.

*New Canting Dictionary* also reworks the material it takes from B.E.’s text, moralizing entries such as “Alsations,” which B.E. defines simply as “the

inhabitants, such as, broken gentlemen, tradesmen, &c, lurking there” (that is, in “White Fryers” or “the mint in Southwark” [ND]); *New Canting Dictionary* adds the judgmental observation that they are “extravagant spendthrifts . . . in defiance to their creditors and the laws.” To “Abram-men,” which B.E. defines as “the seventeenth order of the canting-crew. Beggars antickly trick’d up with ribbands, red tape, foptails, rags, &c pretending madness to palliate their thefts of poultre, linnen, &c” (ND), *New Canting Dictionary* adds “shabby beggars” and “itinerant hedge robbers and strippers of children”—making them much more reprehensible. Like books devoted to the canting crews before it, *New Canting Dictionary* includes “Songs in the Canting Dialect,” most of which had appeared, for instance, in Head’s *Canting Academy*. The songs included begin to register the sense of the canters’ world as a masculine one; only one song remains that references men and women as criminal teams. In *New Canting Dictionary*’s songs women are more often greedy widows or sleeping dupes. Also more moral in tone, *New Canting Dictionary* silently removes the ribald phrases found in Head’s songs. When *New Canting Dictionary* reprints Head’s song “Of the Budge,” the story of the capture and execution of the budge (“one that slips into an house in the dark, and taketh what next comes to his hands and marcheth off with it” [CA, 35]), it deletes the expression “son of a bitch” (CA, 12). *New Canting Dictionary*’s renamed “Life and Death of the Darkman’s Budge” ends with the rather harrowing image of the executed thief cut down and dropped unceremoniously in a hole, his friends too poor to bribe the hangman for his body: “For when that he hath nubbed us, / And our friends tips him no cole, / He takes his chive and cuts us down, / And tips us into the hole” (NCD). *New Canting Dictionary* ends here, dropping the final stanza of Head’s version, which had at least offered the glimmer of hope—a not insubstantial hope in this period—of proper burial in its final stanza: “But if we have a friend stands by, / A six and eight pence for to pay, / Then they may have our bodies back, / And carry us quite a way” (CA, 12).<sup>38</sup>

The *New Canting Dictionary* is merely the most thorough (and best-preserved) example of early- to mid-eighteenth-century dictionaries and their efforts to sequester one section of “the people” as outside of the nation. *The Scoundrel’s Dictionary* of 1754 continues the depiction of an organized cant-speaking subculture, outlining its rituals of initiation and membership in some detail. *Scoundrel’s Dictionary*’s dark portrait of this scheming society emphasizes their use of assigned code names—“the upright man demands his name; which known, he enjoyns him from that time to renounce it, and to take upon him one familiar to the canting strain, not understood by the vulgar,” again setting the canting crew not within but against the vulgar (SD, 11). *Scoundrel’s Dictionary* deploys new literary techniques to evoke a documentary quality in its depictions of this separate, criminal group: the title page claims that its word collection is “printed from a copy taken on one of their Gang, in the late scuffle between the watchmen and a party of them on Clerkenwell-Green; which copy is now in the custody of one of the constables of that parish.” The word list, however, is lifted word for word from Head’s *Canting Academy*, and the attitude toward users of this language is much the same. The scoundrels—in *Scoundrel’s Dictionary* they are ethnic outsiders: gypsies—“delight in this kind of life” because of “laziness” (SD, 3). Theirs is a “sin . . . so monstrous that the terrors of its visage would affright those that court it” (SD, 3).

Nonetheless, while the *Scoundrel's Dictionary*, like *New Canting Dictionary*, tries to distance its object—"scoundrels"—from the rest of the population, it also begins to anticipate that second stage that will use cant to position the people, as criminal, within the nation. Much of its description of "scoundrel" behavior and language is directed at warning readers off the charms of the sins of the gypsies, admonishing, "the devil too gilds over his allurements and temptations" and is in this way able to "infect souls" (*SD*, 3). *Scoundrel's Dictionary* protests too much, its heavy-handed moralizing hints not at the total separation of criminal acts from readers, vulgar or not, but at their temptation toward them, suggesting what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White deem "a striking ambivalence to the representations of the lower strata . . . in which they are both reviled and desired."<sup>39</sup> Significant in terms of this relationship is *Scoundrel's Dictionary's* listing of English words first, a form most useful to someone wanting to figure out how to say things in cant by looking up the word in English. The text's schizophrenic treatment of its material both conjures graphic allegorical images of the evils of crime and refers to its material as "pleasant" (*SD*, 3).

By the mid eighteenth century, collections of cant such as *Scoundrel's Dictionary* register ambiguity about the language and people they represent. This ambiguity might have something to do with the fact that the social meaning of "criminal" populations could itself be ambiguous. A commoner insisting on grazing rights might be a thief or a time-immemorial symbol of the English people. And vagrancy might be perceived divergently, either as evidence of delinquency or a sign of a disappearing British liberty. It is both strange and perhaps predictable that in some circles at this time gypsies, in their mobility and distinct form of governance, become the stand-ins for a once free British people and the reputed speakers of cant. The anonymously written *Apology for the Life and Adventures of Bampfylde Moore Carew* (1749) is a key text in this discourse of a marginal, outsider group that embodies a now lost British freedom. Space does not permit a full discussion of this important text, but it is important to note that its glossary of "very expressive" (*Apology*, 343) gypsy terms consists mainly of words simply lifted from early cant dictionaries. Cant language, once the sign of a criminalized outsider group, becomes in this text representative of a community enjoying a liberty once shared by all Britons.

By the early 1780s, the approach to cant languages becomes less ambivalent. Texts appearing around this time attribute cant and vulgar language no longer to outsiders, criminal or ethnic, but to the English vulgar themselves. George Parker, in his *View of Society and Manners in High and Low Life* (1781), which contains a glossary of cant terms, urges that studying "low" society and its language is necessary for a full "knowledge of his country" (*View*, vi). Rejecting the accepted dismissal of the low and the particular, Parker insists, "general discoveries . . . with regard to English men go a very little way toward an explanation of a people so various in temper, manners, and behavior as the English" (*View*, vi). Parker's work no longer isolates the language of "low" criminals and gypsies. In his list of characters he combines traditional cant terms, such as "queer bit-makers" (counterfeit coin makers), with terms for popular performers, such as "chaunter-culls" who will, for pay, sing "a ballad on a treasonable subject," and local terms describing activities of the vulgar, such as "jibber the kibber, a watch-word

made use of by the people . . . of Cornwall to point out a wreck. . . . [T]he inhospitable mob, who were in expectation of this event instantly plunder the ship" (*View*, 26, 58, 67–8). In this text, boundaries between vulgar and criminal populations and even between property owners and the propertyless (Parker includes "landlord phrases") are blurred.

The change is fully manifest in the 1785 *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* compiled by droll antiquarian Francis Grose, a man who had squandered his inheritance (his father had been royal jeweler) and found himself paymaster of the Hampstead militia. In his best-selling and often republished *Classical Dictionary*, Grose takes the final step of lauding cant language and associating it, especially its freedom of expression, not with a surrogate for "the people" in the figure of the beggar, the thief, or the gypsy, but with "the people" themselves. Grose's "common people," the signs and beneficiaries of British freedom, are comprised of formerly outsider low groups—the vulgar and the canting crews—not the literate, informed citizenry that composed one sector of "the people" (*CD*, 1). "Cant" and "burlesque" languages, whose "classical authorities" include "soldiers on the long march, seamen at the cap-stern, [and] ladies disposing of their fish" (*CD*, iv) form, as his book's title puts it, one "Vulgar Tongue." Grose relabels terms such as "back'd" (*CD*, 6), meaning dead, and "balsam" (*CD*, 7), meaning money, both of which had appeared in *New Canting Dictionary* as cant criminal terms, as simply "vulgar." Such redefinitions are the key move in that second stage which positions the vulgar within national culture. What was once coded as criminal is recoded as "vulgar," and attributed to a much wider social group, "the people," but only after a reduction of alternative language groups to the merely criminal has taken place.

Displaying the "witty equivoque" (*CD*, i) of the English, this newly compiled vulgar language serves as evidence of "the freedom of thought and speech [which] gives a force and poignancy to the expressions of our common people" (*CD*, i). Grose invokes, if half jokingly, the freeborn Englishman unfettered by the authoritarian laws of continental language academies. Here he draws from what Douglas Hay and Nicholas Rogers call the "constitutional rhetoric of the freeborn Englishman, free from Continental monarchical oppression and taxation . . . an established trope in national politics."<sup>40</sup> Yet that freedom is relegated to "popular" cultural practices of speech innovations and disassociated from property relationships—or the ability to intervene in public life. In Grose, the centrality of the vulgar to national culture is purely rhetorical. Like those parliamentarians who had excluded vulgar speakers from petitioning, Grose in his later *Grumbler* periodical essays wishes the vulgar would remain entirely outside of official political discourse; he mourns the "contrast between a tradesman or citizen of former times, and those of our days!" Those of former times, he explains, refused the "public life"—and folly—so gripping for his contemporary tradesmen.<sup>41</sup>

Grose, then, is not making a space for the people within legitimate national public life, but he is redefining them and their rhetorical value to national culture. Although earlier descriptions of London "low life" had included representations of the vulgar, they did not combine that language with cant and outright criminals, and they did not describe that language in anywhere near as ap-

precipitate a tone as Grose. Texts from earlier in the century, such as Ned Ward's *London-Spy*, and its representation of the "diverting conversation of the fish women," "every one as slender in the waste as a Dutch-Skipper in the buttocks [who] look'd together, like a litter of squad elephants," use terms so distasteful as to breed contempt for the vulgar.<sup>42</sup> One fishmonger displays her linguistic inventiveness by pledging "a health to mine A—s and a fart for those that owe no money," and another curses, "you white-liver'd son of a fleetstreet bumsitter, begot upon a chair at noonday" (41). Readers might well marvel at these women's aptitude for turning a quick and cutting phrase, but the imagery is too sordid to invite anything like national pride. In contrast, Grose's depiction of vulgar language is less repulsive. There are no descriptions of "common people" "grunting and snarling" or resembling animals as there had been in Ward (50).

Conversely, in Grose there are few women speaking in such tongues. As he celebrates the lexicon of ribald terms as a sign of British liberty, Grose also genders that language male, a fact that will not surprise anyone familiar with the boys'-own world of the rage for "flash" in the early nineteenth century. Where B.E. had included coarse terms for sex as well as other bodily functions, but arranged those beside domestic terms such as "*batter*, the ingredients for a pudding or pan-cake" (ND), Grose separates those words and worlds, excluding domestic terms and focusing on those of a sexual nature. Grose lists a vast range of terms particular to male homosocial society, such as "*Best*, to the best in Christendom, i.e. the best \* \* \* in Christendom, a health formerly much in vogue" (CD, 10) and "*A bite*, a cheat, also a woman's privities" (CD, 12). The later *Lexicon Balatronicum*, an 1811 enlarged version of *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, bearing the revealing subtitle "a dictionary of buckish slang," makes these gender dynamics explicit, assuring readers that "improper topics can with our assistance be discussed even before the ladies, without raising a blush on the cheek of modesty. It is impossible that a woman should understand the meaning of twiddle diddles (testicles), or rise at the table at the mention of Buckinger's boot (P—k, the virile member)."<sup>43</sup> Low and cant culture are now collapsed into a vulgar culture that is clearly gendered male (or at least excludes middle class and upper class women—Billingsgate fishwives still use it, according to Grose). In turn, Grose's *Classical Dictionary* and the many imitations that followed it invite male readers to perform an identity of collective affiliation in their mastery and trade in unfamiliar, if somehow also indigenous, words.<sup>44</sup> They might also hint at a sneering derision of middle-class aspirations, with their commitment to "improved" language and their associations with the feminine.<sup>45</sup>

In this second stage, after earlier cant dictionaries had cordoned off a section of "the people" and their language as criminal, vulgar dictionaries conflated that language with the language of the "common people" and gendered it male, making women the outsiders. Note the change in the word "baggage," for instance. In *New Canting Dictionary* it is defined simply as "a slut" and is deemed to be an exclusively criminal term. In Grose's *Lexicon Balatronicum*, "heavy baggage" is defined as "women and children. Also a familiar epithet for a woman; as, cunning baggage, wanton baggage"—and this divisive term is understood to be not criminal but vulgar. The word even makes it into Johnson's *Dictionary* as "worthless woman." While such shifts might indicate the ways in which a slang or marginal lan-

guage had been taken up into wider circulation, they also demonstrate the ways in which a once explicitly criminal-associated language was rendered “common” and suggest that these transformations enlisted and underwrote gender distinctions.

In legal discourse, political relationships, and literary representations, customary practices and cultures, in turn, were increasingly feminized (and ruralized) in this social climate, associated with a vanishing agricultural folk and specifically the female relationships believed to have sustained it. The erosion of the legal and social force of custom had consequences both for the image of age-old communities of freeborn Englishmen and for the rhetoric deployed as the basis of social cohesion. In the texts of Grose and Parker such alternatives to customary practices emerge. They predicate the liberty that characterizes and binds the canting crews and the English people, in part, on the ability to invent or imitate newly invented linguistic culture in an endless shape-shifting.<sup>46</sup> Such shape-shifting, with radical changes in clothing, language, and demeanor to suit new situations, is the opposite of a notion of custom that emphasizes continuity and repetition. For a working population whose lives were more and more mobile—and urban—this conception of malleable and performative identity might not be too far off.<sup>47</sup> If Parker and Grose highlight the brief temporality of cant, its novelty and mutability, Johnson, in his infamous legitimization of his exclusion of cant terms from his *Dictionary*, had railed against those very qualities, writing

Of the laborious and mercantile part of the people, the diction is in a great measure casual and mutable; many of their terms are formed for some temporary or local convenience, and though current at certain times and places are in others utterly unknown. This fugitive cant . . . always in a state of increase or decay, cannot be regarded as any of the durable materials of a language.<sup>48</sup>

For Johnson, the language of the vulgar, “the laborious and mercantile part of the people,” is based on temporary or local convenience, not on custom. Unlike custom, it is “mutable.” Johnson’s use of the word “cant” reveals its widening meaning, beyond the merely criminal, now including specific sectors of the vulgar; what they share is a distance from the use of a seemingly less ephemeral standard English. For Grose, it is this very mutability that must be embraced. To be full participants in the language and print culture of the nation, readers need to learn the new words generated constantly. He writes

The many . . . cant expressions that so frequently occur in our common conversation and periodical publications, make a work of this kind extremely useful, if not absolutely necessary, not only to foreigners, but even to natives resident at a distance from the metropolis, or who do not mix in the busy world; without some such help, they might hunt through all the ordinary Dictionaries . . . in search of the words. (*CD*, ii).

In a new model of social affiliation, the true national insider must perpetually keep up with phrases that might pop up anywhere (but most often in urban centers). As Grose says, “these fashionable words, or favourite expressions of the day . . . generally originate from some trifling event, or temporary circumstance” (*CD*, ii). He heralds the innovative and fleeting, the new mode of experience supplanting custom.

This dynamic of relentless change and sped up temporality is an analogue of the market logic that was itself overturning custom. Yet however compelling the market and its “laws” might have been in defeating the authority of custom, and even in providing an abstract model of invisible connections, it tended not to provide a forceful model for visceral social cohesion. Imitation of “vulgar tongues” facilitated by print, alternatively, could seize the novelty and fashion of market logic in the interest of just such a cohesion, at least as Grose and his contemporaries outline it. Grose stimulates the desire of readers to imitate these languages, and in adopting a mischievously humorous tone ushers in a series of works, such as Pierce Egan’s, that assume readers will want to mimic this language.<sup>49</sup> The *Lexicon Balatronicum* laments that while the merit of the *Classical Dictionary* had been universally acknowledged, still, cant and vulgar languages’ “circulation was confined almost exclusively to the lower orders” (*LB*, v). The text aims to expand cant’s circulation further, to “initiate” its readers “into all peculiarities of language” (*LB*, v). Grose and Parker, as author figures, themselves model this ability to imitate, foregrounding their skill at shifting positions and adapting to the communities in which they find cant language, even announcing their authorship of their work (unlike the mysterious B.E. or the anonymous author of *New Canting Dictionary*). Pierce Egan’s brief biography suggests Grose’s rambles into the worlds of the vulgar and criminal resembled those of such “pioneers” as Ned Ward and Tom Brown, but with the further aim of self-disguise—to appear himself as one of the vulgar—in these new environments.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in his preface to his later work, Parker prides himself on his ability to move between different communities, noting that throughout he remained “one of the vulgar.”<sup>51</sup> And Parker, like Grose, reserves moral commentary, blithely partaking in what those worlds have to offer with illustrious companions. In one entry, for “hot, a mixed liquor, of beer and gin, with egg, sugar, and nutmeg,” Parker regales his reader with his own memory of drinking this liquor, to be had only at “night-houses,” with Doctor Goldsmith (*View*, 131).

Oddly, although they boast of the lively creativity of cant and vulgar languages—and that of their speakers—these works are also, however, antiquarian projects of a sort, insisting, against Johnson’s claim that cant words have no history, that they have histories that must be preserved. Grose worries about and wants to change the fact that vulgar terms “vanish without leaving a trace behind.”<sup>52</sup> This move, of course, relegates the people, imputed inventors and users of vulgar language, to the past. And the past to which it relegates them, as I have been arguing, is one emptied of specific labor histories, bereft of the material connections of canting crews to laboring classes, and amnesic of the shared working lives of men and women.<sup>53</sup> The new appreciation of the popular in the vulgar language Grose playfully endorses is haunted by the association of the popular with the particular, criminal, outsider, and finally the historical, the past. This haunting is in part the residue of the criminal associations of the canting dictionaries from which Grose draws, but it might also be related to the actual increased literal criminalization of the laboring classes in the 1780s, the very period in which Grose was compiling his *Classical Dictionary*. During this time the line between workers and criminals dissolved in terms of the state’s treatment of them; Hay and Rogers note that in the 1780s, “penal sanctions were used as often against

workers as they were against criminals.”<sup>54</sup> At the same time, demobilization contributed to a “moral panic among the propertied classes,” and the 1780s marked the century’s highest number of “prosecutions, death sentences, and hanging.”<sup>55</sup> These circumstances led to the build up of the national militia in the period, to “the barracking of large numbers of soldiers, and their much more frequent use to deal with popular disorder.”<sup>56</sup> It is significant that captain Grose himself was paymaster for the Hampstead militia and was thus directly involved in those internally directed military operations. It was through this post, in fact, that he became acquainted with the wide body of nonstandard English terms he collected in the *Classical Dictionary* and in his 1787 *Provincial Glossary*.<sup>57</sup> That material position, as militia paymaster, administering the infrastructure formed to respond to the darker effects of the criminalization of the people, is compellingly connected to his ideological role in rhetorically revaluing once criminalized culture as “of the people.”

Finally, the representations of popular culture in cant collections limit a porous and messier understanding of culture. The definition of culture adopted over the course of the eighteenth century, and in evidence in cant and vulgar dictionaries, viewed culture, including popular culture, as isolated from property, market, craft, and domestic labor relations.<sup>58</sup> A new restricted definition of culture, away from property and production relationships, as Raymond Williams and Clifford Siskin have noted, emerged toward the end of the eighteenth century, reflecting and promoting a new understanding of social structure.<sup>59</sup> It was through this narrower sense of distinct cultural practices, such as the use of the “vulgar” language collected in Grose’s work, that the people were defined and positioned within the nation, and not through their social relationships to a wider system of ownership, production, and distribution.<sup>60</sup> Thus, it is important to remember that just as Grose and others celebrate British liberty in their representations of vulgar language, a set of material relationships and a wider understanding of culture that might arguably mark a deeper sense of liberty have disappeared. Those material relationships, and specifically the class divisions they bespoke, needed, in a sense, to disappear in order to allow for the associations between men of different classes that the vulgar dictionaries helped foster.

Imitation of the lower social ranks by the higher is an early modern phenomenon discussed by a number of writers, including Judith Frank, who studies the eighteenth century “imitation of the poor by gentlemen, an imitation ritualized in . . . social practices.”<sup>61</sup> Importantly, the interest in and imitation of “vulgar” language facilitates a “general” sense of the people through cross-class male gender alliances, and thereby offers one of the last possibilities for national unity in a British nation that was, with the drawing of ever starker class lines, becoming two nations.<sup>62</sup> Deracinated of property relations and contrasted with an increasingly feminized rural folk culture, the version of “popular culture” recorded in late-century representations of vulgar language displaced class affiliations for gendered national-popular attachments. In collecting and conserving a resolutely masculine “vulgar culture” that could be playfully adopted and taken up by better-heeled male compatriots, Grose and his followers embraced the illusion that if the communities and cultures of the people were in some senses becoming invisible, one aspect of them—an urban, male, quasi-criminal element—could be made visible, managed, and assimilated. Grose’s *Classical Dictionary*, in its promise to

represent the “vulgar tongue,” is a compromised moment in the construction of a “national-popular.” Its conflation of cant and vulgar language is an elision which, unlike B.E.’s suggestion of overlapping language communities, isolates its non-standard language as a curious object of amusement. A long history of isolating and criminalizing cant languages had laid the groundwork for the terms on which this vulgar language, when made synonymous with cant, would be taken up. The people are thus brought into national discourse on these already established terms of criminality and new terms of gender specificity. If the “vulgar tongue,” as Grose and his followers represent it, is too saturated with criminal connotations to bespeak a language of the people, it also bore little resemblance to the separate languages, the “secret oaths” of a militant trade unionism that might represent an alternative language of the people.<sup>63</sup> Those were the aspects of an emerging culture of the people too criminal to be made visible, popularized, and imitated, even as the linguistic culture of some criminals was jovially associated with the people of Britain and the liberty they were said to enjoy.

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#### NOTES

I would like to acknowledge the Newberry Library for support of this research. All primary text titles listed here are part of the extensive holdings of the Newberry Library’s Bonaparte Collection.

1. Studies of English standardization include R.F. Jones, *The Triumph of the English Language* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1953); Carey McIntosh, *The Ordering of English: Style, Rhetoric, Politeness, Print Culture, and the Evolution of Prose from 1700–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998); Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language: 1790–1819* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984).

2. [Anon.], *New Canting Dictionary* (London, 1725), not paginated, hereafter cited as *NCD*. Francis Grose, *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London: S. Hooper, 1785), hereafter cited as *CD*. In a forthcoming study I discuss urban pastoral literature, such as John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, and political satire, such as Henry Fielding’s *Jonathan Wild*, which also make use of cant.

3. *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Strahan, 1755), not paginated; hereafter cited as *JD*.

4. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 421.

5. Other titles include: [Anon.], *Golden Cabinet of Secrets*, (London, n.d.); [Anon.], *The Amorous Gallant’s Tongue Tipp’d with Golden Expressions* (London, n.d.); B.E., *A New Dictionary of Terms, Antient and Modern of the Canting Crews* (London, 1699), not paginated, hereafter cited as *ND*; [Anon.], *The Regulator* (London: T. Warner, 1718); Alexander Smith, “Thieves New Canting Dictionary,” in *The Highwaymen* (London: Sam. Briscoe, 1719); [Anon.], *Scoundrel’s Dictionary* (London, 1754), hereafter cited as *SD*; [Anon.], *An Apology for the Life and Adventures of Bampfylde Moore Carew* (Exon: Printed by the Farleys, 1745), hereafter cited as *Apology*; John Poulter, *Discoveries of John Poulter, alias Baxter* (London, n.d.); [Anon.], *The Triumph of Wit* (London, n.d. [seventeenth century, repr. eighteenth century]); Humphrey Potter, *New Dictionary of All the Cant and Flash Languages, Both Ancient and Modern* (London: Printed by W. Macintosh, n.d. [late eighteenth century]); George Parker, *View of Society in High and Low Life* (London, 1781), hereafter cited as *View*. The number of titles suggests that these texts sold well, as does the fact that profiteering booksellers pirated canting glossaries—sections of the same glossary show up in a variety of print contexts.

6. For instance, John Mullan and Christopher Reid write, “What we now . . . call ‘popular’ culture, the educated in the eighteenth century categorized in inherently judgmental terms as ‘vulgar’ or ‘low’” (*Eighteenth-Century Popular Culture* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000], 4). Olivia Smith argues that even late in the eighteenth century, “‘the vulgar and the refined’, ‘the particular and the general’ . . . were socially pervasive terms that divided sensibility and culture according to linguistic categories” (*Politics of Language*, 3).

7. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978).
8. Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 9.
9. For a discussion of these terms of cultural authority, see John Barrell, *English Literature in History: 1730–1780* (London: Hutchinson, 1983).
10. Smith, *Politics of Language*, 29–34.
11. Raymond Williams traces similar tensions in definitions of “common” in *Keywords* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), 70–1.
12. Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985), 123.
13. For two useful discussions of subculture, see Milton Gordon, “The Concept of the Sub-Culture and its Application,” in Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton, eds., *The Subcultures Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), 40–3; and Sarah Thornton, “General Introduction” in the same volume, 1–10.
14. “Common people” is Grose’s expression (*CD*, i).
15. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White note the late eighteenth century’s “miraculous [. . .] rediscover[ing] and hail[ing] [of the vulgar and barbaric] as a new life source”; *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986), 89. See also Barrell, *English Literature in History*, 21. Patricia Fumerton identifies an interest in rude language in earlier writings. I differ from her characterization of the incorporation of the “low” into national discourse as avoiding “hierarchy and conflict” (“Subdiscourse: Jonson Speaking Low,” *English Literary Renaissance* 25 [1995]: 83). Further, the interest in “vulgar” language in the late eighteenth century represents a populist national agenda not fully apparent in the earlier period.
16. E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York: New Press, 1993); Bob Bushaway, *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England, 1700–1880* (London: Junction Books, 1982); Robert Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973).
17. For a detailed discussion of these cultural and economic battles, see Douglas Hay and Nicholas Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), esp. 110.
18. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 9.
19. Susan Stewart shows that for ballad revivalists of the period, “the ballad needs rescuing not so much from ‘history’ as from a generalized oblivion of the feminine”; *Crimes of Writing* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 118–19.
20. For a reading of the different meaning of “radicals and romantics” and their trade in vulgar language, see Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, “The Affective Revolution in 1790s Britain,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34 (2001): 491–521.
21. The difficulties of the term “popular” already appear in this claim, because while these dictionaries were clearly “hits” in the market place, their readership, like that of the criminal biographies Lincoln Faller analyzes, might have been limited to the relatively well-to-do. See Faller, *Turned to Account* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987).
22. See, for instance, Thomas Harman, *Caveat or Warning, for Common Cursetors Vulgarely Called Vagabondes, or Notable Discovery of Coosnage* (London, 1591).
23. Robert Green, *Black Bookes Messenger* (London, 1591); Richard Head, *Canting Academy, or, the Devils Cabinet Broke Open* (London, 1673), hereafter cited as *CA*.
24. Faller (*Turned to Account*) notes the possibility of clandestine reader identification.
25. *Fraternitye of Vacabondes* (London: John Awdely, 1575), 6.
26. John McMullan, *The Canting Crew: London’s Criminal Underworld 1550–1700* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1984), 96.
27. Thornton, *The Subcultures Reader*, 4.

28. See Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992) and Hay and Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society*.

29. Here I agree with Judith Frank that “however controversial the measurement of quality of life . . . it is clear that the impetus of economic expansion uprooted many people from traditional types of community and labor”; *Common Ground: Eighteenth-Century English Satiric Fiction and the Poor* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997), 10.

30. Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols. (London: Charles Griffin, 1861–62). Christopher Herbert’s chapter on “Mayhew’s Cockney Polynesia” has relevance here: the themes of “vagabondage,” “performance,” and “ethnographies of primitive peoples” to which he refers also have a basis in earlier criminal literature, including canting glossaries; see Herbert, *Culture and Anomie: Ethnographic Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991).

31. *A New Dictionary of the Terms, Ancient and Modern, of the Canting Crew, in its several Tribes of Gypsies, Beggars, Thieves, Cheats, &C.* (London, 1699), not paginated; hereafter cited as ND.

32. Gordon, *The Subcultures Reader*, 41.

33. Nathaniel Bailey, *An Universal Etymological Dictionary* (London, 1724).

34. Michael Warner notes that the discourse of a counterpublic is not merely “a different or alternative idiom, but one that in other contexts would be regarded . . . with a sense of indecorousness” (“Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14 [2002]: 49–90).

35. For a discussion of this figure see Bruce Robbins, *The Servant’s Hand* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1986).

36. Frank, *Common Ground*, 2.

37. Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*, 233.

38. See Linebaugh, “The Tyburn Riot Against the Surgeons,” in Douglas Hay et al., eds., *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Pantheon, 1975).

39. Stallybrass and White, *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression*, 4.

40. Hay and Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society*, 123.

41. *The Grumbler* (London, 1791): 25.

42. Ned Ward, *The London-Spy Compleat, in Eighteen Parts* (London, 1698; reprint, London: Casanova Society, 1724), 41; hereafter cited in text. See also Thomas Brown, *Amusements Serious and Comical Calculated for the Meridian of London* (London, 1700).

43. Grose, *Lexicon Balatronicum* (London: C. Chappel, 1811), v; hereafter cited as *LB*.

44. Here I differ from Gary Dyer’s interpretation of cant’s use “to emphasize difference; to deny that there is some ‘we’ that can be appealed to easily” (“Thieves, Boxers, Sodomites, Poets: Being Flash to Byron’s *Don Juan*,” *PMLA* 116 [2001]: 574). While the “we” might not be appealed to easily, the wide circulation of print collections of cant, the attribution of cant to “common people,” and the remarks observing and encouraging its imitation suggest a complex assembly of a male homosocial “we.”

45. For the role of middle-class women in enforcing “improved” language use, see Lynda Mugglestone, “Talking Proper”: *The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

46. See Barrell, “Afterword: moving stories, still lives,” in Donna Landry and Robert Markley, eds., *The Country and the City Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 231–50.

47. I discuss this performativity in relation to the best-selling narratives of the “King of the Gypsies,” Bampfylde Moore Carew, in a forthcoming book.

48. This statement appears in the unnumbered pages of Johnson’s preface to his *Dictionary*.

49. See, for instance, Pierce Egan’s *Boxiana; or, Sketches of Modern Pugilism* (London: Sherwood, Neely, Jones, 1819), and *Life in London* (London: Jones, 1821).

50. Parker prides himself on his ability to “talk either ethics with a minor canon of St. Paul’s or cant and slang with a lumper of St. Giles” (*Life’s Painter of Variegated Characters* [London: R. Bassam, 1786], 125). Egan’s biography of Grose describes Grose “as affable and jolly as the rest of the motley crew among the beggars, cadgers, thieves” (“Biographical Sketch of Francis Grose, Esq.,” in Egan, ed., *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, 3rd ed. [London, 1823], xxvi).

51. *Life’s Painter*, 112. Parker’s glossaries more closely resemble older canting dictionaries in their catalogs of secret argot of thieves and con artists, yet they indicate a deep familiarity with that language, recording change in that lexicon: “Hands” are no longer “famblers” as they were in seventeenth-century cant dictionaries but are now “daddles,” for instance; and those who are easily taken or robbed are no longer “culls” but are now called “flats.”

52. CD, ii. The *New Canting Dictionary* had also made an antiquarian argument for cant, averring that “many [cant] words seem to retain something of scholarship as ‘Togeman,’ a gown, from Toga, in the Latin.” Grose was a fellow of the Society of Antiquarians, and his writings were colored with an antiquarian nostalgia. He agrees that “nothing is so indifferent to us, that we can say without a disagreeable sensation, ‘we have seen the last of it’” (*The Grumbler* [London, 1791]: 42).

53. The once explicit connection between cant and production relations disappears altogether as “flash” language becomes the rage amongst young workers as a foreign language that must be learned. George Robertson complains in his “Animadversions and Reflections on the Life of David Haggart,” a criminal “confessional” with a glossary of Scottish Cant terms: “there’s scarcely a tailor’s board or tradesman’s workshop in which the glossary isn’t made use of, to the no small edification of the rising generation . . . [who] not only are in the constant habit of using the flash language, but of practicing on each other”; see *The Life of David Haggart, Written by Himself* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne, 1821), 3.

54. Hay and Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society*, 132.

55. Hay and Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society*, 159, 149.

56. Hay and Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society*, 133.

57. Grose relates his militia position and word collecting in *A Provincial Glossary* (London: S. Hooper, 1787).

58. In raising the “culture” specter, I bring in a concept “infested with logical incoherence,” as Christopher Herbert has put it (*Culture and Anomie*, 21). Herbert addresses “immaterial phenomena, patterns of symbolic meaning and of moral and affective values.” My use of “culture” entails the ethnographic recording of material practices and early perceptions of “patterns of symbolic meanings.”

59. Williams, *Keywords*; Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998).

60. The restricted definition of culture continues to hobble the understanding of class today, as the study of consumer practices still displaces analyses of property relationships and social production in (appositely titled) cultural studies of class. See Siskin, *The Work of Writing*, for a genealogy and critique of the disciplines of English and Cultural Studies. An example of a recent study featuring the “cultural” definition of class is David Cannadine’s *Class in Britain* (London: Penguin, 2000).

61. Frank, *Common Ground*, 4.

62. See Simon Joyce, *Capital Offenses: Geographies of Class and Crime in Victorian London* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2003).

63. Hay and Rogers offer examples of groups making use of “secret oaths,” such as the “Black Lamp,” a militant underground labor movement organizing at the turn of the century (*Eighteenth-Century English Society*, 185).