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UNSHAP'D MONSTERS:
POLITICAL FARCE ON THE LONDON STAGE, 1717-1737

by

Melissa Ann Bloom

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

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Melissa Ann Bloom

Advisor: Professor Rachel M. Brownstein

This dissertation reexamines the role of John Gay's and Henry Fielding's anti-government satirical farces during the politically contentious 1720s and 1730s in London. Although their plays were and still are considered, variously, burlesques, entertainments, farces, and satires, I call them satirical farce for two reasons. First, contemporaries used the term farce as much to signify political and social stances as dramatic type or function. Those political and social stances are the central focus of this dissertation. Second, I see in this collection of plays—Gay's *Three Hours After Marriage* (1717) and *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), Fielding's *The Author's Farce* (1730), *The Grub-Street Opera* (1731), and *Pasquin* (1736)—a shared structural or functional set of characteristics, suggesting that generically they are all closer akin to one another than any of them are to traditional five-act comedy or prose satire. These characteristics relate directly back to social attitude, as they give farce its ability to spread beyond its plot and the borders of the stage, and to absorb cultural dynamics into its narratives and structures—to both reflect and affect the public sphere. Rather than attempting a comprehensive survey of the political

content of Gay's and Fielding's farces, this method elucidates their culturally embedded social context in order to discuss the productions as public events. I contend that farce as a genre is inherently social and interactive, and as such is always potentially political, with the ability to instigate and enhance the circulation of ideas and tropes throughout the public body.

This reevaluation has three goals: First, discussing farce as it was perceived in the culture illustrates underlying assumptions about the rising mercantile sensibility and attendant anxieties about class, concerns that infiltrate contemporary aesthetic disputes. Second, it establishes the participation of satirical farce in the transformation of English culture, countering the prevailing idea that theater failed its public mission during this turbulent period. Third, taking the popular culture seriously puts theater back into the larger social context from which current scholarly preoccupations often abstract it, and revalidates the question of what theater *does* in a culture, not only what it *says* to that culture.

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I am grateful to all of my family, especially my brother, Dr. Jeffrey Bloom, who first showed me it could be done—and showed the rest of our family that it can take a very, very long time to finish. I am most grateful to my mother, Marilyn Saltiel, whose daily love and support I will forever try to repay.

Contents

Introduction	1
Henry Fielding and the Licensing Act	1
Fielding and Farce	15
History of English Theater, 1712-1748	23
<i>The What D'ye Call It</i>	39
Chapter I. The Right to Write; or, Colley Cibber and <i>The Drury Lane Monster</i>	48
Colley Cibber's Career and Reputation	48
<i>Three Hours After Marriage</i>	58
Aftermath: Pope vs. Cibber	69
Fielding vs. Cibber: <i>The Author's Farce</i> , <i>Eurydice Hiss'd</i> and the <i>Apology</i>	85
Chapter II. Poetical Justice; or, The Audience as Jury	98
<i>The Beggar's Opera</i>	98
Prime Minister Robert Walpole	107
Ballads	115
Justice and Outlawry	118
Charlotte Charke as Macheath	143
Chapter III. The Politics of Grub Street; or, The Romance of Roast Beef	154
Introduction	154
Grub Street	160
Eliza Haywood and Amorous Fiction	167
<i>The Author's Farce</i>	172
<i>The Grub-Street Opera</i>	178
Rice Ap Shinken and "The Roast Beef of Old England"	188
Chapter IV. Wearing the Trousers; or The Travesties of Charlotte Charke at the Haymarket	201
Charlotte Charke on Stage in Breeches	201
<i>Pasquin's</i> politics	210
<i>Pasquin's</i> family politics	219
Lady Skimnington	225
Mr. Hen and Mr. Spatter	229
Conclusion: Reforming the Age	237
Afterpiece: Punch in Petticoats	242
<i>The Covent Garden Tragedy</i>	243
Bibliography	250

**Unshap'd Monsters: Political Farce on the London Stage, 1717-1737:
Introduction**

The Great Mogul: Henry Fielding, the legend

This project began as an exploration of Henry Fielding's responsibility for the passage of the Licensing Act of 1737, which placed a number of restrictions on the London theaters and effectively ended Fielding's theater career. The most prolific and daring playwright of the 1730s, Fielding relentlessly attacked abuses of power, via stage representations of theater manager Colley Cibber and Prime Minister Robert Walpole. The theater satire was more than an "all the world's a stage" metaphor, for Fielding explicitly conceived of the spectators as a public body and through them continually engaged the larger world. Especially in 1736 and 1737, Fielding wrote and produced political farces at an unlicensed theater attacking the theatrical and political establishments. In the eyes of many contemporaries and subsequent scholars, he single-handedly forced Prime Minister Robert Walpole to curtail the liberty of the stages.¹ That he later became the "Father of the Novel" as well as a respected and judicially innovative magistrate retrospectively suggests interpretations of those plays as part of a coherent ideal of righteous liberty and narrative experimentation.

Attractive as is this vision of a crusading young talent, it does not stand up to historical biographical, cultural, and theatrical realities. Fielding was neither an

¹ Throughout the 1730s, Fielding had written "several frank, and free Farces, that seem'd to knock all Distinctions of Mankind on the Head: Religion, Laws, Government, Priests, Judges, and Ministers, were all laid flat at the Feet of this *Herculean* Satyrist... who, to make his Poetical Fame immortal ... set Fire to his Stage, by writing up to an Act of Parliament to demolish it" (Cibber I.287). Martin Battestin writes, "That the satiric and theatrical skills he had acquired by his thirtieth year were considerable may be judged from the intensity of Walpole's ire, who was goaded into applying the most extreme methods of silencing him—not only filling his theatre with bricks and lumber, but bringing down on him the full weight of Parliament. For no one either in or out of the government doubted that, whatever other convenient uses the minister might put it to, the Theatrical Licensing Act was instituted to put a stop to Fielding's play-writing" (234).

unwavering crusader nor a furious force of one. He was less loyal to parties and more loyal to individuals, and while he generally acted according to his beliefs, he was also guided by his interests. In the same prosaic manner, the Licensing Act was not a reaction to a concentrated year of insults but the culmination of an anti-theatrical movement forty years in the making with goals beyond putting one satirist out of business.

And yet the fact that the question—Did Fielding cause the Licensing Act?—continues to be asked by theater and literary historians and biographers suggests that there is some unease with the question itself. That history and politics intersect with literature and the arts is an academic commonplace, but whether, and how, they *interact* is a more vexed question. Do and can the arts, in this case a popular theater, participate actively and noticeably in the process of social and political change, and if so, how do they do so? How does this effect differ from that of newspaper articles, speeches, or propaganda?

After the materialist theories of Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu there can be no doubt that historical and political conditions affect access to creating and enjoying art, and that such restricted access necessarily shapes the kinds of art any society produces.² That wary skepticism helps inform discussions of the cultural limitations within which any artist worked. Historical forces influence individual artists and larger artistic developments, as much of the “rise of the novel” scholarship attests. Robert D. Hume’s examination of Fielding’s theatrical career lays a heavy

² I am thinking particularly of *Culture and Distinction* respectively, which address the seeming transcendence of “high” art and reveal the “direct social processes of cultural production” (Williams 86). Bourdieu states it quite simply: “To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of ‘class’” (1-2).

emphasis on the economic and political conditions of the London theaters during the 30s. Yet it is more difficult to determine how particular pieces of art or more general art experiences affect history and politics. And to ask whether Fielding's plays in particular or the political farce in general *caused* the Licensing Act is to ask just that question. Paradoxically, the law can seem on its face primarily one to do only with the theater, and not the larger socio-political world, if the idea that art can proactively affect politics is seen as a presumptuous one. If, on the other hand, we suppose rather that the arts have a peculiar ability to mediate or moderate between the people and their world—that they sometimes reflect, sometimes agitate, and sometimes negotiate³—then the Licensing Act, in closing off a communication which the government could not control, was a social, political law beyond the aesthetic community it affected economically. To ask, now, if Fielding's works precipitated, or rather *how* Fielding's works precipitated this law is to ask how farce, theater, and the arts in general interact with their world. And once we begin examining the world in which Fielding wrote and presented his farces, in all its historical particularity, we see that he identified and enhanced techniques that John Gay's theatrical works began to develop a generation earlier. Fielding's audience had already been conditioned by Gay's works to be more self-conscious as an audience. Fielding is deeply indebted to Gay's method of equating questions of aesthetics with those of justice and to his

³ J. Douglas Canfield and Deborah Payne write in the introduction to their New Historicist collection on eighteenth-century drama that, "Formerly, to read the plays 'in context' meant to relate them either to the history of ideas or to the history of politics. In both instances, the drama was perceived as passively reflecting specific philosophies or topical events, a historical reading that assumes a grounding in a 'prior' reality. Recent theory, historiographical as well as aesthetic, challenges this mimetic assumption. Raymond Williams, for instance, would insist that drama is as constitutive of 'reality' as any other form of discourse. Moreover, to limit political meaning to specific topical references is to fail to analyze the broader ideological implications embedded in the plays" (6).

exploitation of the permeabilities farce enables (between stage and public, most notably) for political effect.

And so I rephrase my original question: at the apex of an already heightened political era, what did John Gay's and Henry Fielding's satirical farces actually do? How did their method of contributing to that atmosphere differ from the journals and pamphlets? How did it elicit different responses from its audience, and how did their reaction affect that method? And centrally, if contemporaries had the impression that these plays *did* cause the Licensing Act, how did those plays seem to threaten—not simply insult—the government?⁴

That works of art affect individuals is, paradoxically, as common as the idea that they only reflect, not shape, history. From Plato to Strom Thurmond the arts have been seen as deceptive, seductive, emotionally coercive distractions from rational and moral thinking.⁵ The question I ask is not if theater affects individuals—as certainly it does—nor whether it affects groups of individuals—as again, undoubtedly, it does. My question is rather how theater, here satirical farce, shapes the concepts by which a society thinks of itself, how it articulates the terms of a

⁴ Because of their plays, John Gay was the “terror of Ministers” and Henry Fielding the “scurrilous” author who “set Fire to his Stage” (respectively: John Arbuthnot in a letter to Swift, March 19, 1729; Eliza Haywood, *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* 45; Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber* 1.287).

⁵ In Jonas Barish's paraphrase of Plato, artists “pour fuel on the most combustible part of our nature... By fomenting our irrational selves, they carry us away from the true, the good, and the beautiful” (9-10). Barish discusses the anti-theatrical controversy begun by minister Jeremy Collier in 1698, and considers William Law's tone representative of the anti-theatricalists of the turn of the century. Law claimed that the discourses of the stage “entertain the Heart, and awaken and employ all our Passions” to “more fatally undo all that Religion has done, than several other Sins... Corruption and Debauchery are the truly natural and genuine Effects of the *Stage-Entertainment*” (234).

discussion national in scope, and how it becomes part of the intellectual experience of an age.⁶

The concept of a “legitimate drama” or a “legitimate stage” is understandable only by reference to that which is “illegitimate,” though that word is never used.⁷ That the term came to mean genres and performances that are both authorized and self-evidently superior—claiming while disowning the unnamed legitimating authority—is a peculiarity overlooked by generations of scholars. The pretence of a purely aesthetic distinction justifies the exclusion of politics and current events as subjects and of the talents of individual actors as elements in the experience; it also masks a social agenda. Rather than an inherently stable category, the legitimate—as a category—is deeply implicated in a particular legal, partisan action to discredit an aesthetics of community protest and popular opposition: the Licensing Act of 1737. The kind of theater thereby outlawed—physical, political, temporal, and social—would be relegated to the lower classes only by the century’s end, further dividing the public into discrete and controllable societies. Only at the end of the century, when London had largely forgotten about the Licensing Act and the plays which gave rise to it, could the term “legitimate” be used with a straight face to describe an apolitical theater.⁸

⁶ Habermas notes that later in the century the European theater was central to the blossoming public sphere; Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* attempts to recreate a theater that represented greatness before the people, but “was out of step, as it were, with the bourgeois public sphere whose platform the theatre had meanwhile become. Beaumarchais’s *Figaro* had already entered the stage and with him, according to Napoleon’s famous words, the revolution” (14).

⁷ Nor, according to the OED, was the term “legitimate drama” used until the end of the eighteenth century.

⁸ On some levels those plays not legitimate were literally illegal or somehow extralegal, but until the Licensing Act of 1737, their status was more vaguely understood. “Entertainment” rather was the word for all that was physical (rope-dancing, bear-baiting, physical farces, musical interludes, spectacles).

Historians of the early eighteenth century, especially new historicists, frequently draw on contemporary arts for metaphors or illustrations of dynamics central to their concern. Linda Colley repeatedly has recourse to ballads and to Hogarth's prints as emblems of a newly conscious national identity between 1720-1760, and E. P. Thompson inevitably returns to the language of theater to describe important social and legal activity.⁹ Colley both acknowledges and sidesteps Hogarth's role as more than an illustrator of a historical process, but part of its making, insofar as he is consciously forming those ideas and urging his visual shorthand on his contemporaries.¹⁰ By the same token, theater appeals to Thompson for its active, public character as much as for its tendency toward pageantry and exhibition.¹¹ Neither Colley nor Thompson addresses the usefulness of the arts to

John O'Brien discusses the "indeterminacy at the center of the concept" of entertainment, describing it as "a general term for diversions ... as something that is provisional... and resistant to hard-and-fast definitions or excessive specificity" ("Harlequin Britain" 488). While most scholars now simply call them "irregular," as the creators themselves often did, many still insist on hierarchical distinctions between farce and dramatic satire, burlesque, and entertainment. Ronald Paulson asserts that "In the action of a farce events are presented solely for amusement and literally have no meaning; ... reality is distorted to the point of sheer nonsense" (*Life* 46) and then suggests that Fielding's farces are actually parodies of bad farces, and so not farces at all. Theater historian Robert D. Hume, in a discussion of Fielding's farces versus his more regular comedies, writes that they are "not great literature, but they are brilliant theatre, and superlatively effective performance vehicles" and still needs to justify saying "His genius was for burlesque" with the follow-up "In saying this I do not mean to denigrate Fielding in any way" (61, 62). The denigration, however, is not only assumed but not reversed. John Loftis, Albert Rivero, and Peter Lewis, who along with Hume have done the closest examinations of Fielding's irregular plays, share this bias, but with far less struggle than Hume.

⁹ The ballads Colley cites are invariably written for and first performed in plays, though she does not remark on the role of the theater in fostering and propagating the ideologies she describes.

¹⁰ For a more articulated discussion of the process by which Hogarth interacted with his world, see Jonathan Conlin, "'At the Expense of the Public': The Sign Painters' Exhibition of 1762 and the Public Sphere." Hogarth stood as representative of "the British artist" who "was characterized as self-taught and forthright—one whose talents, though frustrated by treacherous connoisseurs, were equal to the challenge offered by Rembrandt, Michelangelo, and other justly revered masters" (9).

¹¹ Thompson speaks of law courts, hangings, and class hierarchies in terms of theater frequently; he justifies it here: "if we speak of it as theatre, it is not to diminish its importance. A great part of politics and law is always theatre; once a social system has become 'set', it does not need to be endorsed daily by exhibitions of power (although occasional punctuations of force will be made to define the limits of the system's tolerance); what matters more is a continuing theatrical style"

their discussions, but they share an approach which would, I think, welcome its inclusion. Both interpret the political trends of an era via the writings, worship, and changing habits of every-day people, tracing both how people are influenced by more powerful forces and how their responses affect those forces. Gerald Newman, in his exploration of British nationalism, amends Thompson's theater metaphor, writing that "[t]he 'theatre of greatness' was not just 'imposed' on the body of the people but also actively supported by them. It was theater-in-the-round, and mass participation was what gave it such a long run" (26). Newman is throughout more conscious of the arts as a kind of mediation or communication between the government and its people, saying that "*the artist-intellectual... creates and organizes nationalist ideology, the machinery at the heart of the nationalist movement*" (56) which he dates as beginning, in England, in the middle 1740s.¹²

Building on the awareness among historians that art is a force in the intellectual and emotional lives of the people, we must then ask how the people and the government responded to the arts or to any particular art work. Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) and Fielding's satirical farces are most suitable for such an exploration, as being overtly political, widely discussed by contemporaries in both aesthetic and partisan terms, widely imitated both as formal innovations and political viewpoints, and legally restricted. Almost all of the plays in the following study were

(*Customs in Common* 45, 46). Here theatricality is an "exhibition;" in other places community action is "public theatre."

¹² Nonetheless, until the 1790s, "the world of art was a mere Punch-and-Judy show on the corner of the great stage of daily existence and historical reality" (74). Although Newman argues that a nationalist movement in England begins in the 1740s and offers Fielding's fiction repeatedly as a source, he does not include the plays of the 1730s, and suggests that farces, prints, and ballads offer "strong evidence, evidence of a very primal sort ...[from] the 'folk mind,' a primitive half-conscious world of tribal dramas and fantasies" (79). We will see that this biased, class-based distinction between kinds of art carries over into literary and theater scholarship.

specifically prohibited or discouraged by the government or were followed by related government suppression. These aspects, which gave rise to the Fielding legend in the first place, must be accounted for in readings of those plays.

Bertrand Goldgar addresses the question most directly, reminding us that before mid-century—before the rise of the novel and before the Licensing Act—the attitude that “literary figures... have no special role in political life, and [that] literature itself is concerned with the private, not the public self” would have been foreign (8).¹³ To Swift, Pope, and Gay, “political discourses did not seem ... inevitably separated from literary modes of expression, and political events were clearly a fit topic for treatment in a literature that looked outward to society rather than inward to the self” (8).¹⁴ Rather, until the generation of his study, 1722-1742, which is roughly equivalent to my focus, writers not only wrote *about* politics but were themselves politicians; to call the age Augustan is to remember that Horace was an advisor to the Emperor, not a subordinate panegyricist. Or at least, that was the claim made by Pope and others in opposition to the Walpole administration.

Goldgar illuminates the actions of (and reactions to) the opposition journals which appeared with vigor and purpose around 1725 with the avowed purpose of deposing Walpole, and argues that they were responsible for the clamor one might

¹³ Goldgar's work, first published in 1976, presupposes a New Critical norm. The rise of New Historicism takes the impact out of his observations, yet his work remains the most thorough examination of the relationship between the literary and political worlds during the 1720s and 1730s.

¹⁴ Susan Staves, discussing Restoration drama, notes that the government had long kept a stern eye on political content in plays. “We know, moreover, that the government took the political implications of plays seriously enough to censor and to prohibit quite a number of them. At one time or another many Restoration writers had difficulty with the politics of a play they had written, either because their intention had been to touch upon a dangerous issue or to satirize a prominent political figure or because the censors had seen fit to discover a dangerous implication or parallel history” (50). Staves lists plays by Buckingham, Dryden, Lee, Tate, and Cibber that were stifled, harassed, or altered by the government.

think was caused by particular works of art. After the success of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* and the suppression of its sequel *Polly* (1729), these newspapers flooded London with "opposition propaganda ... that helped make Gay's opera a political touchstone to an extent he doubtless had not intended...it is claiming too much to attribute a train of prosecutions and new journals to the effects of *The Beggar's Opera*" (70, 71). According to Goldgar, Gay is responsible for the political *content* but not for the political *effect*. Goldgar's reading, which notes the conventional metaphors in the content of these plays, illustrates an entire socio-political sphere inflamed with a discussion of politics and aesthetics surrounding a play, following and confirming a Habermasian stress on the text-based coffee-house culture.¹⁵ Yet his assumption that the art and artist were somehow insulated from the debate, even while participating in it, is confusing.

In a time of such political bitterness it is not surprising that antigovernment innuendoes were again discovered in areas not overtly political. As a writer for *Fog's* complained, "Some People indeed will make us believe, that all the Farces in dumb Shew are so many political Satyrs; as if the Disaffected had a Notion that what they dare not speak they may venture to *dance*." But "some people" were quite correct in their suspicion, and the summer of 1731 saw the suppression of a number of minor theatrical performances. ... The real men of letters, of course, had no part in all this..." (88, 91)

¹⁵ Habermas's theory, broadly, is that a recognized "public opinion" arose from debates and discussions of national and international news which circulated in the papers, mostly read (in small groups) at the coffee houses. For Habermas, the growth of news journals was the necessary starting point for this development. See *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

One of the “real men of letters” he refers to is Swift, quite famous for his own antigovernment innuendo. Why it should be beneath him when on the stage, rather than in print, raises a different area of the original question. If prose writing—the essays in the *Craftsman*, the allegories in *Common Sense*—can be unquestioned as effective salvos, why not the dance and the ballad?¹⁶ Indeed, John, Lord Hervey, an intimate of Robert Walpole and Queen Caroline during the late 20s and early 30s, famously referred to Gay’s *Polly* as a “theatrical Craftsman” in his memoirs (20). As that play was not performed, perhaps the analogy was apt. Yet it was rehearsed and scheduled and intended for performance; it was not a political journal, an essay, or a treatise, and plays engage audience apprehension in an already social mode and situation.¹⁷

The arts, and particularly perhaps political theater, frequently mix strategies. They evoke emotional responses with love scenes as that between Macheath and Polly, whose pseudo-sentimental duet at the end of the first act was long considered by legend as the determining factor in the success of *The Beggar’s Opera* (Nokes 417-8). They deploy iconic images or satiric shorthand (the ubiquitous references to the Great Man), and often provide interpretation through a central speaker, such as Cato’s call for national liberty in Addison’s Whig *Cato* (1713). Such a mixture does not mean the play bypasses a spectator’s intellect, for the strategies and the mixtures were transparent to spectators of the time, who read the vocabulary of these strategies

¹⁶ O’Brien notes that “entertainments... have often functioned as loci of cultural conflict and confrontation; they are activities in which cultural values are contested, negotiated, and legitimated, and through which those values may become ... intelligible to contemporaries” (“Harlequin Britain” 488).

¹⁷ As Paulson notes, Fielding’s work is deeply involved with “the immediacy of a theatrical experience – the interplay of the actors on the stage and the audience as both live individuals and as volatile mob” (*Life* 92).

with more or less consciousness. Paula Backscheider, Susan Staves, and J. Douglas Canfield, in their readings of Restoration drama, take into account the ability of theatricality and the playhouses to consciously engage with ideology and to become themselves topics of informed conversation among all strata of society.¹⁸ Their work expands that of Jürgen Habermas, for whom the coffee houses provided “a forum in which the private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion” (Habermas 20).¹⁹ The citizen, formerly a relatively passive “receiver of regulations from above” became “the ruling authorities’ adversary” during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (25-6). Backscheider demonstrates that the culture of the coffee house and of the playhouse were both part of the larger “evaluative, critical, political public” whose increasing self-awareness as a public led to dramatic political upheavals later in the century (xv). Open to all classes, not just the bourgeoisie, the theaters (and the puppet shows, pageants, and parades) provided a much more accessible space, and a more representational sampling of the “public,” than the coffee houses.²⁰

¹⁸ Backscheider’s *Spectacular Politics* and Canfield’s *Tricksters and Estates* both elucidate the ideologies expressed in Restoration theater. Susan Staves’s *Players’ Scepters* more particularly explicates the allusions in “the Restoration political play” to contemporary legal questions as part of their overall response to the changes in government.

¹⁹ Michael Warner notes that “a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. It is not texts themselves that create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and a responding discourse be postulated, can a text address a public” (62).

²⁰ “It has become customary, in the wake of arguments over Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, to lament or protest the arbitrary closures of the publics that came into being with the public sphere as their background. The peculiar dynamic of postulation and address by which public speech projects the social world has been understood mainly in terms of ideology, domination, or exclusion. And with reason—the history of the public sphere abounds with evidence of struggle for domination through this means and the resulting bad faith of the dominant public culture” (M. Warner 77).

The theatrical moments Bakscheider and Staves examine involve the alterations of familiar tropes in order to communicate ideologies of dominance. I follow Bakscheider in examining the language of pageantry and symbols of power, although I look at intentional travesties of their use (Gay continually disrupts tropes of power and Fielding repeatedly inverts them). In Gay's and Fielding's choices—not only of plot, but of structure, device, and mode—we see a conscious manipulation of images of power which highlights the artificial and conventional nature of their legitimate use. Their almost deconstructive games shaped the way people thought about power itself. The overt consciousness and the enthusiastic public response to Fielding's increasingly political farces indicate that the theater itself generated the kind of critical discourse necessary for a self-actualizing public voice.

Bakscheider's materialist approach resonates throughout this work. One part of her study focuses on the "spectator-text" (xiv) of Lord Mayor's Day pageants and Royal Processions, in which she discusses the surviving scripts and production notes along with the history of the tropes deployed, the intended effect, and contemporary records describing the actual effect. Going beyond content to the functions of these processions, Bakscheider highlights the interaction and conversation implied, allowing her to situate the emergence of a public sphere a generation earlier than Habermas does. Canfield and Payne point out that "the drama has always been something of a foster child within the family of eighteenth-century studies, especially by comparison with such 'legitimate' progeny as satire and the novel" (*Cultural Readings* 1) specifically because of the difficulty reading what Bakscheider calls the "spectator text," Jones DeRitter calls the playtext, and Gerald Newman the "dumb

rhetoric of the scenery”: the social, temporal, physical context of theatrical productions that cannot be seen in scripts.²¹ In his study of the rise of the novel, J. Paul Hunter writes of a “structural tendency ... to bridge levels of discourse (with at least as much influence from below as above) and to blur the distinction between oral and written discourse” that came to characterize the coffee-houses (*Before Novels* 173). Theater, by its nature, blurs “distinctions between oral and written,” which makes it difficult to study using only the tools of literary analysis. In their *Producible Interpretations* Judith Milhous and Robert Hume outline a method of reading late Restoration plays specifically in the context of performances, past and future. They emphasize knowledge of original performance conditions to unearth as much as possible all the play communicated non-verbally, especially as playwrights had enormous influence over casting and other production choices. “A play demands both intellectual comprehension and emotional response... To agree that theatre is communication does not commit us to a procrustean demand for message/meaning; nor should it inhibit us from studying subjective and variable response in the audience. We must not refuse to recognize, however, that a significant part of the meaning is added in performance” (13). Along these lines, Hume’s own examination of Fielding’s *The Grub-Street Opera* (1731) pays considerable attention to what singers he had at his disposal, what their ranges and abilities were, and what the audience’s previous associations of them were. “[T]he theater,” as Hunter writes, “rather than being another world where one can contemplate in tranquility the symbols of the

²¹ What O’Brien writes of pantomime applies as well to the more stage-y elements of these farces; as indexes of a deep ambivalence, they “entertained their audiences, and scandalized their critics, by exploiting the theatre’s potential as the literary institution most thoroughly implicated in the material world” (“Harlequin Britain” 491).

active life, becomes a creative, live experience... Themselves part of the action, viewers must at once respond, and distinguish various responses, involving themselves in whatever evaluations they arrive at" (*Occasional Form* 66). By situating political critique within the context of the larger cultural world populated by ballads, masquerades, hanging "carnivals," and monster-mongers, Gay's and Fielding's farces replicate and enact the fullness of a "public sphere" where private persons gather to discuss and oppose the actions of the state.

Fielding in particular participates in some of the critical and political discussions of his time largely by confounding the terms of those discussions as he challenges the idea that the patent theaters are culturally "legitimate." We see the intense struggle for cultural legitimacy in the very dismissal of Fielding's irregular plays not only by contemporary critics but Fielding scholars throughout the critical history. As my exploration followed both political and unpolitical readings of Fielding's plays and career, and into the intricacies of the passage of the Licensing Act, it became clear to me that taking notice that the plays at issue were "irregular"—unconventional farces, burlesques, and afterpieces—becomes part of psycho-biographical readings or characterizations of the Haymarket and Drury Lane theaters and their respective audiences. That he sometimes had to "stoop" to farce devices in order to convey his transcendently important message, for example, is presented as evidence of the aesthetic paralysis of his age.²² In none of the scholarship—or, it must be said, contemporary reaction—has the *form* of these plays been explicitly connected to the reaction they fostered and their ability to contribute to the political foment of

²² See Albert Rivera 35. This was also the language some contemporaries used; see Battestin 171.

what were already highly partisan years. When Fielding himself calls them “Unshap’d monsters” he points to what I argue is the most important element of the farce—its ability to absorb a multitude of incongruous elements and its tendency to spread, grow, and expand itself beyond decorous boundaries (stage/audience, comedy/tragedy, male/female). This expansiveness *is* the threat this monster poses to polite society, aesthetically, socially, and politically. I have taken the phrase “Unshap’d Monsters” as the title for this study because it reflects both the expansiveness of the form and the social ambivalence it attracted, both of which kept it vibrant and dangerous. I suggest that the public perception that these farces caused the Licensing Act reflects the real social anxieties and instabilities attending their performances. The form Gay and Fielding developed and deployed, with its peculiar ability to mobilize large audiences of all ranks, was the only form of theater effectively banned by the 1737 law; it was this form, and not the particular playwrights or their political positions, that raised concerns among lawmakers, and it was this form that the law was intended to silence.

Unshap’d Monsters of a Wanton Brain: Dismissing farce as farce

Fielding is best known now as a novelist, and many scholars bring a novel-reading sensibility to his plays.²³ The distinction between reading and experiencing was one his contemporaries were much preoccupied with. For them it was morally inflected. Reading allowed reason to guide, whereas participating in a crowded theater audience was physically engaging and emotionally coercive. Jonas Barish, in

²³ For example, J. Paul Hunter writes that the self-reflexive element of Fielding’s farces raises “direct, self-conscious questions about the self-sufficiency of fictional worlds,” but it is Hunter, not Fielding or his contemporaries, who assumes such self-sufficiency (*Occasional Form* 49).