

HE STOOPS TO CONQUER: FIELDING AND ENGLISH SONG

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As the author of some of his era's best-loved airs, Fielding's skill as a songwriter is beyond dispute. In fact, so quickly did he establish himself as a lyricist that in 1731 no fewer than four works by the 24-year-old were featured in John Watts' *Musical Miscellanies, Being a Collection of Choice Songs [...] by the Most Eminent Masters*. In the face of this achievement, however, two puzzling issues arise. First, how could he prove so successful with musical verse when it has long been acknowledged that his poems are less than impressive? Indeed, F. Homes Dudden dismissed them as no more than "average examples of uninspired eighteenth-century verse" (1966: 414-415) while Henry Knight Miller termed poetry "a mode essentially alien to him" (Fielding 1743a: xxvii). It might be added that they had good authority for doing so since Fielding himself frankly admitted, "my Talents [...] lie not in Versification" (1993: 24).

Secondly, why did he become so immersed in a genre that he spoke of dismissively, with him placing balladeers on a par with "Tumblers" (1732: 234)? It is true that some in Fielding's classically minded age tried to counter the idea that ballads were of lesser stature by arguing that they had roots in antiquity. For example, the editor of a 1723 collection of songs attempted to claim that the form could trace its origins back to authors like Homer (Aspden 1997: 28-29), but Fielding resolutely and repeatedly rejected that position (1742a: 91; 1743d: 37-38; 1749: 399). In fact, when later in life he was proposing legal reforms, he classed balladeers with gamblers, prostitutes, and drunkards as suitable targets for arrest (Battestin 1989: 709).

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Given their importance to an understanding of Fielding's musical achievement, it is surprising that these issues have never been fully addressed, but the timeline of events on the London stage suggests at least why Fielding initially became so involved with the 'lowly' ballad. On January 29, 1728, Gay's innovative *Beggar's Opera* opened and met with monumental success. Two weeks later on February 16, Fielding's far more conventional first play appeared, only to close after four performances. Gay's ballad opera, on the other hand, went on to have the longest run yet seen in London. The often impecunious Fielding took note and, referring to Gay's heroine Polly Peachum, wrote:

A Bundle see beneath her Arm she brings
New Ballads that to former Tunes she sings
You too might hear the Soft enchanting sound
Were not its murmurs in applauses drown'd. (1972: 52)

His brother Sir John Fielding would later go on to attack *The Beggar's Opera* as an encouragement to crime (Fiske 1973: 402), but he himself proceeded to embrace the genre it spawned with such gusto that he became the country's most prolific composer of ballad operas.¹

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Tellingly, his first foray into the form centers on a cash-strapped playwright whose first name is Henry and who authors a musical entertainment simply to pay his bills, with one of the songs beginning, "How unhappy's the Fate/ To live by one's Pate,/ And be forc'd to write Hackney for Bread?" (1734a: 324).

There were, however, also less mercenary reasons for Fielding's attraction to Gay's new genre. Prominent among them was the fact that *The Beggar's Opera* represented a homegrown response to Italian opera, a genre that Fielding himself frequently attacked on nationalistic grounds (Trainor 2009). In fact, the lyrics to his most famous song stand as testament to his outspokenly jingoistic stance:

When mighty rost [sic] Beef was the *Englishman's* Food,
It enobled [sic] our Hearts, and enriched our Blood;
Our Soldiers were brave, and our Courtiers were good.
 Oh the Rost Beef of Old *England*,
 And Old *England's* Rost Beef!
Then, *Britons*, from all nice Dainties refrain,
Which effeminate *Italy*, *France*, and *Spain*;
And mighty Rost Beef shall command on the Main,
 Oh the Rost Beef, &c. (1734b: 42)

That Fielding favored the traditionally English in matters musical as well as culinary is clear from a singing competition that he stages in *Miss Lucy in Town*. Vying for the heroine's favors, the patriotic Mr. Ballad warns his Italian rival Signior Cantileno,

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Be gone, thou Shame of Human Race,
The Noble *Roman* Soil's Disgrace;
Nor vainly with a *Briton* dare
Attempt to win a *British* fair.
For manly Charms the *British* Dame
Shall feel a fiercer nobler Flame:
To manly Numbers lend her Ear,
And scorn thy soft enervate Air.

Needless to say, Mr. Ballad triumphs and leaves Signior Cantileno cursing “dat dam *English* Ballad-singing Dog” (1742b: 488, 490). If Fielding once claimed he was uncomfortable with verse since his muse was “a free born Briton & disdains the slavish Fetters of Rhyme” (1993: 24) in the service of ballad opera his verse reinforced his standing as a Briton.

Another reason that *The Beggar's Opera* would have attracted Fielding involved the way in which Gay used his ballads. At the conclusion of Fielding's very first theatrical air, a character comments, “the Song is not without a Moral” (1728: 96), and he in fact was a firm believer in the neoclassical precept that art should improve and educate; he notes that Plato “considered the Application of [music] to Amusement only, as a high Perversion of its Institution; for he imagin'd it given by the Gods to Men for much more divine and noble Purposes” (1745-1746: 166).

This was a score on which Fielding believed that many popular entertainments failed. For example, in *The Author's Farce*, he has Witmore tell the poverty-stricken playwright, “when Learning is decried, Wit not understood, when the Theatres are Puppet-Shows, the Comedians Ballad-Singers: When Fools lead the Town, [...] If you must write, write Nonsense, [...] write Entertainments, [...] and you may meet with Encouragement enough” (1734a: 234-235). Gay's play, on the other hand, featured a number of ballads that had a satirical edge and brought home a social message, and this was a model Fielding wholeheartedly embraced.

For example, his *Grub-Street Opera* features a comic air that catalogues the groups that take pleasure in a pipe. A typical stanza says of the medical profession,

The doctor who places
Much skill in grimaces,
And feels your pulse running tick-tack-o;
Would you know his chief skill?
It is only to fill,
And smoke a good pipe of tobacco. (1731b: 109-110)

However, after five lively verses filled with Fielding's characteristic humor, the song ends by explaining why one group avoids rather than enjoys a pipe. Referring

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to those who practice politics, or as he labeled it elsewhere “Pollitricks” (1741: 190; 1743c: 67), Fielding concludes,

The courtiers alone
To this weed are not prone;
Would you know what 'tis makes them so slack-o!
'Twas because it inclin'd
To be honest the mind,
And therefore they banish'd tobacco. (1731b: 110)

Indeed, while many writers of ballad operas gradually moved away from incorporating a social message, Fielding maintained that focus so strongly that two of his efforts may have been suppressed by political pressure from above,² much as Gay's sequel to *The Beggar's Opera*, *Polly*.

Consequently, while Fielding may have regarded ballads in general as a lesser genre, Gay's method of using them would have had a distinct appeal for him. However, if that helps explain his involvement in this 'inferior' form, the overriding question remains: how could he have succeeded so well in setting verse to music when by his own admission the kindest word for his non-musical verse was “tolerable” (1743a: 3)? The answer has its roots in Fielding's musical aesthetic.

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While the musical knowledgeability of other eighteenth-century English writers has sometimes been questioned,³ Fielding's is undeniable. He collaborated with accomplished singers like Kitty Clive and John Beard, and his closest friend was James Harris, the leading musical theorist in England. In fact, Fielding read his treatise on the subject in manuscript, even inviting Harris to come to his residence to complete it while he himself worked on *Tom Jones* (Probyn 1991: 115). A close examination of his songs, combined with his comments on the topic, reveals some of Fielding's guiding principles and provides insight into why his musical verse proved superior to his poetry.

Since the Renaissance, the neoclassical position had been that music was “the handmaiden of poetry” (Phillips 1953: 2),⁴ and although by the eighteenth century this belief was fading on the Continent, many in England still clung to it. This included James Harris, whose treatise contended that “*Music*, when alone, can only raise *Affections*, which soon *languish* and *decay*, if not maintained and fed by the nutritive Images of Poetry. Yet must it be remembered, in this Union, that *Poetry* ever have the *Precedence*” (1744: 102).

Fielding shared his friend's faith in the supremacy of words over “Musick for soft Brains” (Fielding 1731a: 106), and his references to musicians repeatedly stress the verbal aspect of their craft. For instance, when in one play an opera singer is awarded a court position, the title he assumes is “Arch-poet”; and in *The Champion*, the Ptfghsiumski show their contempt for poetry by placing a fool's

cap on the head, not of a poet as one would expect, but of “the worst Ballad-Singer who could be found” (1734a: 350; 1739-1740: 429).

Consequently, it is not surprising to find that in his own songs, the focus is on the lyrics with the meaning of individual words often buttressed by the notes with which they are paired. This was very much in line with Harris’s belief that the singing of poetry afforded “a *noble Heightening of Affections*” that enabled listeners “to enter into the Subject with double *Energy and Enjoyment*” (1744: 101), or as George Lillo poetically put it, “with sweet, but simple Notes, good Sense convey’d,/ Loses no Force, but is the stronger made” (1730: 33).

If this was the neoclassical ideal, it was one that Fielding realized in his songs, and in doing so, he added a dimension to his lyrics unavailable to his poetry. For example, in an air from *The Intriguing Chambermaid*, Valentine expresses his love for Charlotte by comparing the two of them to turtledoves:

Thus when the Tempest high,
 Roars dreadful from above,
The Constant Turtles fly
 Together to the Grove:
Each spreads its tender Wings,
 And hovers o’er its Mate;
They kiss, they cooe [sic], and sing,
 And love, in spite of Fate. (1734c: 615-616)

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In this air Fielding’s use of word-painting is striking, as both the word “high” in the first line and “fly” in the third come at the end of an identical series of rising notes. Similarly, when the birds go “Together to the Grove”, the phrase is set to beamed notes reflecting their union while each “hovers o’er its Mate” in a sequence of slurred notes in which the first is always higher than the second, suggesting a fluttering motion. In fact, if the penultimate line speaks of the doves’ cooing and singing, the air as a whole is filled with melismas and rising and descending musical gestures that give it a flowing and mellifluous tone.

It should be added, though, that if Fielding did place primary emphasis on the lyrics, it was not merely out of principle; it was out of practicality as well. The “most extreme” among the early musical humanists had sought to “return to the naked monody which had been the Greek norm” (Winn 1981: 174), thereby enhancing the audibility of the text, and Fielding himself was well aware that excessive musical embellishment could render words unintelligible. Thus, in *Jonathan Wild*, he jokingly refers to the fact that when too many women speak simultaneously with their “delicate but shrill Pipes, [...] all is Sound only, the Harmony entirely melodious, but conveys no Idea to our Ears” (1743c: 170).

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In some ballad operas this might not be especially problematic given Edmund Gagey's assertion that the genre employs music simply as "décor", sprinkling tunes, "like so many raisins, into the text" (1965: 100). Such a statement, however, does not do Fielding justice. As the most successful playwright of his era, he had a strong theatrical sense, and if his songs are often more successful than his poems, one cause of this is their dramatic force, which is as evident in much of his music as it is in his dialogue. Indeed, many of his songs *are* dialogue and, as such, must be understood since they are integral to the action.

For instance, in *The Grub-Street Opera* Robin the butler challenges William the coachman to combat. However, when the latter instantly accepts and urges that the fisticuffs begin, Robin backs off and shows himself more inclined to sing than to spar, extending his characterization and confirming the play's assertion that "your heroes in words are never so in deeds" (1731b: 106). The coachman begins the air:

WILL	Robin, come on, come on, come on, As soon as you please.
ROBIN	Will, I will hit thee a slap in the, Slap in the, slap in the face.
WILL	Would, would I could see it, I would with both feet, Give thee such a kick by the by.
ROBIN	If you dare, Sir, do.
WILL	Why do not, Sir, you.
ROBIN	I'm ready, I'm ready.

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Robin, however, proves anything but ready, leading an exasperated on-looker to exclaim, "you must fight to some other tune, or you will never fight at all" (1731b: 96).

In point of fact, Fielding chose the tune with care. While he supplied new words for his airs, most of the melodies he borrowed from existing songs, a practice that was hardly original. Rather, in putting new lyrical wine into old musical bottles, he was simply following in the well-worn footsteps of the broadside ballad, the culturally vital tradition from which John Gay created the ballad opera. Indeed, in Pat Rogers's words, the defining characteristic of that dramatic genre was "the fitting of new words to existing music" (1979: 46).

This technique played directly into one of Fielding's great strengths. Throughout his career he was highly aware of and sensitive to audience reactions. For example, in *Tom Jones*, he takes the hackneyed comparison of the world to a stage and breathes new life into it by directing our gaze not at the actors but at the spectators instead, and then elaborating on how the galleries, the pit, and the boxes would each respond to the action his novel has placed before them (1749: 325-6).

Fielding was not only conscious of his audience's reaction but also eager to guide it, as is apparent in his novels with their intrusive narrators and even in his plays, which repeatedly feature on-stage observers who supply a running commentary on the unfolding scene (Hassall 1967: 4-18). The broadside tradition offered him a similar opportunity to steer his spectators' response since its practitioners would routinely select a well-known melody with an eye to its accrued meanings. In this way, they would place their lyrics in an interpretive framework, connecting musical texts to provide context as people in different settings were "literally, singing the same tune" (Dugaw 2001: 170-171). Fielding proved particularly adept at this, setting his air on the pleasures of tobacco, for example, to "The Free Mason's Tune", a ballad that celebrates male conviviality and so reinforces the spirit of his song.

In choosing the melody for Robin and William's failure of a fight, his intent was to provide not a reinforcing parallel but an undercutting contrast. For the tune, he chose Henry Purcell's "Britons Strike Home". In this song from John Fletcher's *Bonduca*, the warrior queen battles the Romans as the Druids urge her people on, and in the eighteenth century it was played on British warships as they sailed into battle. The result for the knowing listener was an ironic interplay that heightened the humor as the audience juxtaposed the song's heroic associations with Robin's halting words.

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Moreover, the significance of Fielding's choice of melodies runs deeper still. *The Grub-Street Opera* is a political allegory in which Robin represents Robert Walpole, the prime minister.⁵ The coachman is William Pulteney, the leader of the Opposition, which regularly attacked Walpole for pursuing a pacifist foreign policy. Indeed, if the coachman in the play bluntly asks the butler, "whence does your peace-making arise, but from your fears of getting a black eye or a bloody nose?" (1731b: 100) the Opposition equated Walpole's tactics with political cowardice. Consequently, the implied contrast between Robin's empty bluster and the original's patriotic fervor provided not merely comedy but commentary on how far the current leadership fell short of the nation's traditional ideals.

Clearly, whether through word-painting, dramatic force, or musical associations, Fielding took full advantage of the opportunities that ballad opera afforded him to enhance the power and complexity of his verse. Consequently, while his poetry may be less than impressive, his songs include some of the most famous of the age. "The Dusky Night Rides down the Sky", for example, with its refrain of "a-hunting we will go" achieved widespread popularity while "The Roast Beef of Old England" approached the status of a national anthem. It was regularly demanded by eighteenth-century theater audiences before the curtain was raised and, in some units of the British military, is still played in the officers' mess before the visitors'-night meal (Baldwin and Wilson 1985: 205, 207).

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It might be added that if his ballads were loved by the public, some of Fielding's characters also show a strong partiality for native airs. In *Tom Jones*, for example, he tells us that

It was Mr. *Western's* Custom every Afternoon, as soon as he was drunk, to hear his Daughter play on the Harpsichord: for he was a great Lover of Music [...] [although] he always excepted against the finest Compositions of Mr. *Handel*. He never relished any Music but what was light and airy; and indeed his most favourite Tunes, were *Old Sir Simon the King*, *St. George he was for England*, *Bobbing Joan*, and some others. (1749: 169)

Fielding himself employed "Bobbing Joan" in *The Author's Farce*, but the fact that the squire calls for his songs in a daily state of post-meridian intoxication must give the reader pause. In a contribution to his sister Sarah's volume of *Familiar Letters between the Principal Characters in David Simple*, Fielding declared, "there is a strict Analogy between the Taste and Morals of an Age; and Depravity in the one always induces Depravity in the other" (1747: 484). Consequently, with the squire's appreciation following hard on the heels of inebriation, there is a suggestion, if not of depravity, then at least of a certain debasement of musical judgment.

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In point of fact, if Fielding regarded popular ballads as an inherently lower form, this passage provides the ultimate proof. He continues:

His Daughter, though she was a perfect Mistress of Music, and would never willingly have played any but *Handel's*, was so devoted to her Father's Pleasure, that she learnt all those Tunes to oblige him. However, she would now and then endeavour to lead him into her own Taste, and when he required the Repetition of his Ballads, would answer with a "Nay, dear Sir", and would often beg him to suffer her to play something else. (1749: 169)

If Sophia is able to discern the superiority of Handel's sophisticated works to simple English tunes, so was Fielding. Especially after that composer moved away from Italian opera and toward English oratorio, Fielding became outspoken in his praise of "the greatest Master in *Europe*", and it is "the immortal Handel" (1739-1740: 237; 1752: 334) whom Fielding's best characters cherish, with Amelia even arriving at one of his oratorios a "full two Hours" early (1751: 189).

However, if Fielding did not regard popular songs as high art, that very fact may ironically have contributed to his success in the genre. A number of Fielding's attempts at non-musical verse suffer from the stiff and stilted style that he all too often assumed when he applied himself to serious poetry. Take, for example, these lines warning against a marriage made for the wrong reasons:

Marriage, by Heav'n ordain'd is understood,
And bounteous Heav'n ordain'd but what is good.

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To our Destruction we its Bounties turn,
In Flames, by Heav'n to warm us meant, we burn.
What draws Youth heedless to the fatal Gin?
Features well form'd, or a well polish'd Skin.
What can in riper Minds a Wish create?
Wealth, or Alliance with the Rich and Great. (1743e: 43)

With its tortured syntax and mechanical rhymes, this stanza leads one to concur with Fielding's own self-assessment: "so may you conclude that I am no Poet" (1993: 25).

When he turned to writing songs, on the other hand, the labored diction disappears. Popular music routinely employs the vernacular, and he embraced the form's use of everyday language energetically. For example, like the earlier poem, his lyrics to the opening air in *The Intriguing Chambermaid* advise against an ill-conceived match. As a woman is pressured to marry a rich older man rather than the young one she loves, the song warns:

When a Virgin in Love with a brisk jolly Lad,
You match to a Spark more fit for her Dad,
'Tis as pure, and as sure, and secure as a Gun,
The young Lover's Business is happily done:
Tho' it seems to her Arms he takes the wrong Rout,
Yet my Life for a Farthing,
Pursuing
His Wooing,
The young Fellow finds, tho' he go round about,
It's only to come
The nearest way home. (1734c: 587)

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It is as if the perceived lowness of popular song frees Fielding from constraint, and he no longer strives for elevation but relaxes into a colloquial and far livelier style. The result may not be great poetry, but it swings with a spirited rhythm that sweeps the listener along.

While Fielding understood that his songs were no match for Handel's oratorios, his airs—written without airs—nevertheless have charms of their own. Indeed, when he introduces the Handel-loving Sophia in *Tom Jones*, it is not that composer that he asks to provide the accompaniment. Rather, he beseeches the birds, "the feather'd Choristers of Nature, whose sweetest Notes not even *Handel* can excel, [to] tune your melodious Throats, to celebrate her Appearance" (1749: 154-155). Popular song may likewise be unsophisticated in its natural simplicity, but Fielding's achievement in it is nonetheless worthy of note. Embracing the freedom offered by its easy informality and capitalizing on the opportunities ballad opera afforded to frame meaning with melody, to reinforce words with music, and to incorporate

a sense of the dramatic, he met with a success that eluded him in poetry. If English song was a 'low' form, it was by stooping that Fielding conquered.

Notes

1. On Fielding's ballad operas, see Morrissey 1971; Roberts 1961; Roberts 1972; and Rogers 2008.

2. For the suggestion that *Deborah* was suppressed, see Battestin 1989: 164-165, and on the possibility that the same may have happened to *The Grub-Street Opera*, see Lockwood's introduction to Fielding 1731b: 18-22.

3. For instance, on Addison and Steele's lack of musical knowledge, see Betz 1945: 328-330, and on Pope's "alleged insensitivity to music", see Ness 1986-1987: 175, note 4.

4. To quote Dean Mace, "Poetry reigned supreme in the hierarchy of the arts, because the word was assumed to be synonymous with reason, and the most significant human experience was thought to be in some sense rational"; contrastingly, it was thought "that music is incapable of appealing to the understanding and is therefore merely a sensual art" (1970: 2-3, 23). For further discussion of the neoclassical view of music as subordinate to words, see Loftis 1950, Yates 1989, and Walker 1941-1942.

5. For the political background, see Lockwood's introduction to Fielding 1731b: 1-11.

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