Hidden Depths: Cultural, Political, and Social Commentary in Eighteenth-Century English Comic Opera Libretti

Author: Nichla Smith 522154
Supervisors: Dr Suzanne Cole and Professor Kerry Murphy

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Abstract

In the late eighteenth century, comic opera was among London’s most popular and profitable musical cultures. Despite the extraordinary success of the genre, however, various events have caused it to be all but lost to the canon of performed repertoire. Examination of the thematic content of many of the operas reveals thoughtful and often provocative engagement with subjects more serious than might be expected of such a ‘light’ genre. This thesis discusses these thematic anomalies, as they are manifest in four of the operatic works of composers Samuel Arnold and William Shield, with librettos by Francis, O’Keeffe, Pilon and Brooke. It aims to contribute to the literature on what is a largely-unexplored musical genre, and to demonstrate its inherent literary and cultural value.
Acknowledgement.

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Chapter 1. Introduction and Review of the Literature

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, English comic opera rose to the forefront of London’s musical scene. The last quarter of the century saw each of the three major theatres with its own ‘house’ composer: Samuel Arnold at the Little Theatre, Thomas Linley and Stephen Storace at Drury Lane, and William Shield at Covent Garden. By 1800, some one hundred and twenty major works of English comic opera, along with countless minor works—afterpieces, pantomimes and the like—had played to appreciative London audiences, and the demand for printed editions of songs and plays was high.1 Articles about the key composers, librettists, singers and theatre managers littered the social pages of the newspapers, and the opera houses were frequented by royals and commoners alike. And yet, despite their enormous popularity, these works and their creators have been— as Roger Fiske put it— ‘consistently played down or ignored by both music and theatre historians.’2

The study of this genre raises two questions: what has caused its descent into obscurity; and does it warrant further historical, literary and musicological research? Several people have attempted to answer the first of these, citing the dismissive attitude of the contemporary musicologists (especially Charles Burney),3 a German-American hegemony of thought,4 and even a fundamental incompatibility between popular taste and critical aesthetics,5 as possible reasons. The sudden increase in the sheer number of operas being produced in the latter half of the century necessitated changes to publication practices, and the consequent scarcity of scores is a major obstacle to modern scholarship. Few full scores were printed of these operas, and orchestral parts were rarely printed at all. Instead, musicians were expected to copy their parts from a single master score. Orchestras in the provincial theatre houses either approximated the original arrangements, or hired manuscript sets from the London publishers,6 and vocal scores for private use were issued with simple piano/harpsichord reductions. This set of circumstances has left the modern scholar with a tiny fraction of the theatre music of this period to analyse, and in many cases, surviving incomplete

3 Fiske, English Theatre Music, vi.
6 Fiske, English Theatre Music, 2.
scores show only partial realisations of the composers’ intentions. Much of the music that does survive seems somewhat simplistic in comparison to contemporaneous genres in other parts of Europe. Their arguably limited significance as autonomous artworks, however, should not preclude these operas from their due social and cultural acknowledgement. My study of this genre has yielded amusing plays, pleasant airs and rousing overtures, and any number of engaging anecdotes about its key players; but an in-depth study of the operas’ libretti has also uncovered references to aesthetic discourse; commentary on contentious social issues such as slavery and land rights; and subversion of the stereotypical portrayals of racial minorities, women, and the disabled. I have conducted a detailed analysis of four operas—Arnold and Francis’ The Enchanted Wood, Arnold and O’Keeffe’s The Birthday, Shield and Pilon’s The Siege of Gibraltar, and Shield and Brooke’s Rosina, from the perspective of the operas’ topical thematic literary content. In the following two chapters, I will unpick the reflections of the contemporary culture, politics and social tensions within these operas; and discuss them at length within their social and historical contexts, in order to serve the purpose of answering the second question in the affirmative.

... England is not generally perceived as having an indigenous operatic tradition; perhaps this is because much of what is commonly called ‘English opera’ is closer in style to operetta than to opera seria. Certainly this is true of the English comic opera of the late eighteenth century. Most of the ‘operas’ of this period are not sung through, but are rather spoken plays, opened with full overtures, and littered with intermittent airs, duets, trios and choruses. Yet, although Howard Mayer Brown defines the term ‘opera’ as ‘a drama in which the actors sing throughout,’ he continues: ‘There are, however, so many exceptions among the operatic works of the West—so many works popularly called operas in which some parts are spoken or mimed—that the word should be more generically defined as a drama in which the actors sing some or all of their parts.’

It is difficult to decide on the most appropriate terminology for describing works of the genre referred to in this thesis, since the works themselves vary so greatly in form, length and

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7 Francis’ exact identity, and first name remain unknown.
8 ‘Gibraltar’ is spelled incorrectly in both the libretto and the score.
10 Mayer Brown, ‘Opera (i)’. 
construction, and yet were treated similarly by the contemporary composers, managers and reviewers. Jane Girdham discusses this in her thesis:

Unfortunately there has never been a consensus about what constitutes an English opera, nor any consistent terminology with which to discuss the genre… In eighteenth-century London there was no compelling need to distinguish an English-language opera from a play with music, because both were performed in the same theatres with cast members in common, and usually on the same programmes. Critics used a variety of descriptive terms, each appropriate to individual works but not necessarily applicable to a broader group.\textsuperscript{11}

In his pioneering work on the subject, Roger Fiske used the umbrella term ‘English theatre music’ to describe works of the genre, whereas others such as Girdham, Linda Troost, and Robert Hoskins have used various terms including ‘English opera’ and ‘English comic opera’. Throughout this thesis, I will follow Troost’s example in my use of the umbrella term ‘English comic opera’ to describe the genre of theatre music popular in the last four decades of the eighteenth century in England, comprising a new or adapted libretto in English, a newly composed score, or combination of adapted and original songs, and encompassing the sub-genres of pastiche, ballad, all-sung, comic and afterpiece opera.

The birth of English comic opera can be traced to the 1728 premiere of John Gay’s ballad-style work \textit{The Beggar’s Opera}, which debuted to enormous critical and public success. The show ran for a ground-breaking sixty-two performances at Drury Lane in the first half of the season.\textsuperscript{12} Soon ballad opera was overtaking its rival, Italian opera, in both popularity and financial viability. As the genre developed, composer Thomas Arne was perpetually at its forefront. In 1760, when all-sung operas were still very much associated with \textit{opera seria}, Arne’s \textit{Thomas and Sally} became the first successful all-sung comedy, and in 1762, his \textit{Love in A Village}, although not the first of the pastiche operas, set a lasting model for the form, which was to be used extensively to the end of the century.\textsuperscript{13} Like ballad opera, pastiche borrowed most of its music, but rather than simply setting


English lyrics to popular folk tunes, it incorporated music from a much wider pool, often including operatic arias and featuring a fully (or mostly) orchestrated score. After *Love in a Village* came *Artaxerxes*, which made use of the well-known (and commonly set) Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782) text *Artaseres*, but translated to English (presumably by the composer himself). It was an all-sung, English-language opera in the Italian style, which debuted with outstanding success, and enjoyed frequent performances, becoming the first of a brief series of successful serious all-sung English operas. In 1764, Arne led the way once more with the production of *The Guardian Outwitted*, which, while largely unsuccessful, was the first true example of the comic opera that was to become exceptionally popular. The main distinguishing characteristic of this form was its mostly original score, tailored to accommodate the English libretto.

This thesis is primarily concerned with the work of two specific composers: Samuel Arnold and William Shield. Both reached their compositional prime slightly after the end of Arne’s, and both owe him much in the conventions of style and form. Arnold composed several examples of all four genres—ballad, pastiche, all-sung and comic operas—while Shield’s operas all included some spoken dialogue, and were generally pastiche or ballad in style, averaging about one third original to two thirds borrowed musical content.

A typical night at one of the English opera houses in the second half of the eighteenth century featured the performance of one full-length, and one afterpiece opera, although the program varied, especially on charity and artist benefit nights, of which each principal singer was allotted at least one per season. On such nights, the singers had some control of the program, and consequently chose works that showed their talents to best advantage. Each of the major theatres had a ‘house composer;’ a position that allowed a composer some degree of security, as well as the chance to gain a musical following. The mismanaged state of the theatres however, meant that house

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composers were often faced with significant financial risk. Georg August Griesinger described such a situation in Haydn’s *London’s Notebook*, narrating the saga of Arnold’s 1781 opera *The Banditti* (later *the Castle of Andalusia*).

Since the backers were afraid that it would not be successful, Dr. Arnold agreed to give (the opera) three times at his own expense. He spent over seven hundred pounds on it; the backers, however, paid a lot of people each time to hiss the opera. Finally, Arnold let the backers have the opera and the costumes for two hundred pounds, and they thereupon performed it, with some alterations —better costumes and scenery—and earned twenty-thousand pounds with it in the course of one year; the publisher alone earned some five-thousand pounds—and the poor composer lost five-hundred. O, what swindlers!  

In spite of bad management, financial compromise and inattentive audiences (Fiske describes the common perception of music as of ‘aural wallpaper’) both Arnold and Shield remained theatre composers for the greater part of their respective careers. According to Robert Hoskins, Arnold began his musical education with the patronage of the Princess Amelia in 1750 as a Child of the Chapel Royale, where he studied under a musical staff that included, amongst others, Maurice Greene and William Boyce. As a young organist, he was admitted as a professional member to the Royal Society of Musicians in 1764, and was elected to the position of governor of that society in the year 1767, sharing the position with Stephen Storace and Charles Burney.

Arnold was first engaged to a theatre in 1764 when John Beard employed him as harpsichordist and composer at Covent Garden. While there, he compiled several pastiche operas, including the popular *Maid of the Mill*. In 1769, Arnold became the proprietor of Marylebone Gardens, one of London’s popular outdoor entertainment facilities, and, until its sale due to financial instability in 1775, composed a series of short, all-sung burlettas aimed at an audience little acquainted with opera. In 1777, Arnold was engaged by theatre-manager George Colman the elder (whom he had befriended during his time at Covent Garden) as composer and music director for the Little Theatre in the Haymarket. Arnold composed for the Little Theatre for twenty-five years, collaborating with

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20 Princess Amelia was the youngest daughter of HRH George II. There is some conjecture that she was Arnold’s mother.

21 Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, 4.
various librettists, and it was during this period that he wrote *Polly*, his only opera with a surviving orchestral score, which joins his output of sixty-eight other operas, seven pantomimes, three ballets, and seven scores of incidental music.22

William Shield, as the son of a music teacher, learned the rudiments of music early, but, following his father’s death, was made a boat builder’s apprentice, which event diverted the course of his musical education for some time. Following the recommencement of his violin studies under Charles Avison, Shield began to flourish musically, and in 1772, he moved from Newcastle to London to play second violin at the Kings Theatre. He was promoted to principal viola in the season of 1773, and maintained that position for the next eighteen years, in spite of a rapidly expanding compositional career.23

In 1778, Shield drew notice as a theatre composer for *The Flitch of Bacon*, which became one of the most profitable and often performed afterpieces at the Haymarket Theatre.24 It is a pastiche opera, and is fairly typical of Shield’s work: nine of the fourteen musical numbers within it are original, and the others are borrowed from various other sources. Perhaps Shield’s most famous opera (and one which will be discussed in detail below) was his 1782 *Rosina*. The work was composed for Covent Garden and features a pastoral plot and a thematic idealisation of nature, capitalising, as did several of his ‘pastoral’ operas, on rapidly-industrialising London’s escapist interest in ‘the simple life.’25 Following the success of *Rosina*, Shield was appointed as house composer to Covent Garden in 1784, for which he was paid a wage of £7 per week.26 During the following thirteen years at Covent Garden, Shield produced a multitude of popular works, many of which were vehicles for social commentary, the latest opera often mirroring current political or social events unfolding in London. Later, an interest in the preservation of folk song led Shield to create various theatrical works that could serve as vehicles for the performance of traditional songs and ballads, with a particular emphasis on the Celtic tradition. He also incorporated sea-shanties and songs committed

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22 Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, iii.
23 Troost, ‘Shield, William’.
24 Troost, ‘Shield, William’.
26 Troost, ‘Shield, William’.
to memory during his boat-building years into his operas. Shield’s operas were striking for their originality and their tendency to reflect the fashions and politics of the day.

... The balance of power between the composers of English comic opera and their librettists seems to have varied considerably. In the preface to his 1780 collaboration with composer William Jackson, The Lord of the Manor librettist John Burgoyne opined that music—

should always be the accessory, and not the principal subject of the drama; but at the same time spring out of it in such a manner, that the difference can hardly be discerned, and that it should seem neither the one nor the other could be spared.

Linda Troost supports this notion, proposing that ‘the story—not the music—was really the most important thing in a comic opera,’ and citing Bickerstaff and O’Keeffe’s libretti, which read like ‘straight plays with songs tipped in.’ And yet, the musical component of these operas was by no means a minor consideration, and contemporary audiences certainly did not regard operas as plays with songs, but rather as works in which music was an essential part of the whole show. Girdham discusses at length the differences between English comic opera and similar contemporary styles of opera across France and Italy, in terms of their musical and literary content, and concludes that:

The role of music (in English comic opera) is secondary only in purely dramatic terms... and London audiences, for example, responded equally vigorously to enjoyable music as to a clever plot.

27 Shield’s inclusion of the song ‘O the Bonny Fisher Lad’ in his speaking pantomime, The Lord Mayor’s Day (1782) is an example of his incorporation of sea shanties into his operas.

28 Troost, ‘Shield, William’.


30 Fiske, English Theatre Music, 261.

31 Girdham, English Opera, 126.

Some theatre critics, reflecting the trends of serious opera, went as far as to imply that the libretto took second place to the music. *The Thespian* magazine’s scathing review of Storace and Cobb’s *The Pirates* exemplifies this.

The dialogue of operas nowadays is thought of little consequence, and in this instance, the author has certainly strictly adhered to that opinion; however, by the aid of Painter, Composer, Taylor and Performers, (*The Pirates*) will certainly long continue to attract admiration.\(^{33}\)

Librettists’ names were seldom listed on playbills, while those of composers were always included; on the other hand, newspaper reviewers and critics referred to the plays by the author’s names, and tended to allot considerably more space to discussion of the plot and performers than to the music.

Troost suggests that composers may have had little influence on the structure of their operas, since the librettists commonly wrote the song lyrics, and handed them to the composer to set, sometimes without even explaining the songs’ contexts in the opera. We know that Sheridan, for example, gave his composers for *The Duenna* directions for how the music should sound, while at once refusing to reveal the plot, and that O’Keeffe even sang some old Irish songs to William Shield for inclusion in *The Poor Soldier*.\(^{34}\) Occasionally, however, as was the case for Arnold and O’Keeffe’s *The Castle of Andalusia*, the composer would decide on existing songs, for which the librettist would write new lyrics.\(^{35}\) Girdham explains that most of Storace’s English librettists were active collaborators. The composer commented on this issue in the early 1790s, declaring that it was

impossible for any author to produce a good opera without previously consulting his intended composer; for…the songs must be introduced as he pleases, and the words (which are a secondary consideration) must be written agreeable to his directions.\(^{36}\)


In the case of the four operas discussed in this thesis—Arnold and Francis’ *The Enchanted Wood*, Arnold and O’Keeffe’s *The Birthday*, Shield and Pilon’s *The Siege of Gibraltar*, and Shield and Brooke’s *Rosina*—the librettist-composer relationships are representative of those apparent in the genre generally, in that they are varied. *The Enchanted Wood* would almost certainly have been selected and presented by Arnold, who was at the peak of his career at the time of its premiere, while its librettist, Francis, was according to various accounts, ‘a very juvenile author.’ Conversely, I would suggest, based upon references in his *Recollections*, that O’Keeffe (or Coleman on O’Keeffe’s behalf) probably commissioned Arnold’s talents for the musical setting of *The Birthday (or the Price of Arragon)*, as per the former’s usual practice. Shield composed the music for Frances Brooke’s two opera manuscripts, *Rosina* and *Marian*, both of which she wrote after having returned to England from Canada as an author of considerable fame. The libretto and music for *Rosina* complement each other so perfectly, that it seems possible that a collaborative approach was taken to its creation, although Brooke’s preface to the printed edition of the play seems to imply otherwise: ‘nor can I say too much of the support it has received… from the music, admirably adapted to the words…” Perhaps *Rosina* was the result of a collaborative relationship, albeit with the score composed to the mostly completed libretto. A similar arrangement seems possible in the case of Pilon and Shield’s *The Siege of Gibraltar*.

William Shield and Samuel Arnold, both being composers of considerable influence and fame at the time of the composition of these four operas, would no doubt have had some degree of input into the content of the libretti, or at least the liberty of selecting those plays and authors that they wished to compose music for. Nevertheless, the thematic and literary content of the operas was primarily the responsibility of their librettists. Consequently, a detailed examination of these librettists’

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37 *The Diary*, 25 July 1792, described the author of the anonymous libretto as ‘Mr. Francis, a very juvenile author, who captured by the irresistible charms of Shakespeare’s manner, has commenced his career by following the footsteps of that great master.’ The preface to the 1956 Debrett edition of the libretto states the authors age as 15.

38 ‘On the 12th of August 1783 the day the Prince of Wales reached his twenty first year, I brought out at the Haymarket Theatre my two act opera of *The Birthday or The Prince of Arragon* which I had written at Acton purposely to commemorate that happy occasion.’ (John O’Keeffe, *Recollections of the life of John O’Keeffe: written by himself* (London: H. Coburn, 1826), 58.)


40 Pilon predominately wrote non-musical plays, but, according to various contemporary anecdotes, including Michael Kelly’s memoirs, was well-acquainted with Coleman and with various composers. Michael Kelly, *Reminiscences of Michael Kelly, of the King’s Theatre, and Theatre Royal Drury Lane, including a period of nearly half a century: with original anecdotes of many distinguished persons, political, literary, and musical* (London: Henry Colburn, 1826).
histories and contexts is essential to my study, and will be presented at some length alongside my discussion of their works across the next two chapters.

... Since comic opera was such a well-established genre, and its proponents such celebrities in London’s social circle, it seems unusual that so little has been written about it. Perhaps this is more easily understood when viewing English comic opera as but one disregarded genre within a larger period of frequently-overlooked musical history: namely the English eighteenth century, which has been portrayed throughout history as musically barren. Indeed, the whole concept of the nineteenth-century ‘English Musical Renaissance’ is built around the notion that the period immediately preceding it was a sort of musical dark age. In the introduction to his book Modern British Music, Otto Karolyi describes the ‘renaissance’ as the ‘revival of an art-form that, for complex and not easily verifiable reasons, had been dormant since the end of the seventeenth century,’ Peter Pirie says of post-Handelian London: ‘English music entered its darkest hour,’ and Roger Fiske, one of the few musicologists to have granted the period considerable study, describes it as ‘a little below greatness.’ Perhaps most cutting is Pirie’s assertion that ‘English music led the way in the fourteenth century… and made a decent show from then until the appearance of a major composer in Purcell. But from his death until the first works of Elgar, almost exactly two hundred years later, we were virtually silent.

The great shadow cast by Handel undoubtedly obscured other musical offerings of his time, and the contemporary fashion for foreign musicians meant that German and Italian composers and virtuosis tended to dominate London’s concert scene, making it difficult for English performers and composers to find patronage. Some have theorised that a focus on industrial and colonial concerns at the expense of the arts, and even that a clash between critical and public tastes in art, were

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44 Pirie, English Musical Renaissance, 18.
45 Fiske and Johnstone, The Eighteenth Century, 11-12.
46 Fiske and Johnstone, The Eighteenth Century, 7.
contributors to the period’s musical decline.\textsuperscript{47} Regardless of the reasons, however, the fact remains that very little music written by eighteenth-century English composers is performed, or even acknowledged today.

In spite of this, the assertion that eighteenth-century English musicians were ‘virtually silent’ is thoroughly misleading. In fact, England enjoyed a number of manifestations of musical culture throughout the century, and alongside concerts in private homes and pleasure gardens, glee clubs, community orchestras and church music, opera—of both the Italian and the English variety—was prolific, profitable and popular.

Many of the most prominent modern scholars of eighteenth-century English comic opera have commented on the genre’s undervalued status in modern scholarship. In her book, \textit{English Opera in Late Eighteenth-Century London: Stephen Storace at Drury Lane}, Girdham states: ‘The role of music in the London theatres towards the end of the eighteenth century has been woefully underplayed in modern theatrical histories.’\textsuperscript{48} Troost echoes this sentiment in the introductory pages of her doctoral thesis on the genre: ‘considering its widespread nature … precious little has been written about English comic opera,’\textsuperscript{49} and Hoskins comments: ‘In the twentieth century (Samuel Arnold) has remained known as the editor of Handel’s works, but his reputation as a composer, strong in his own time, has suffered a critical eclipse.’\textsuperscript{50}

The casual disregard for the musicological and historical value of eighteenth-century English music began in the period immediately following its peak. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the genre was all but ignored by historians and musicologists alike. The opening passage to the chapter on the eighteenth century in Henry Davy’s 1897 \textit{A History of English Music} is a typical example:

\begin{quote}
We have now reached the prosaic period, when England, for 300 years distinguished by its musical skill, sank so far from its old repute as to acquire the name of an unmusical
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{47} Gilman, ‘Arne, Handel’, 531.

\textsuperscript{48} Girdham, \textit{English Opera}, 37.


\textsuperscript{50} Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, ii.
country, a disrepute which it still retains so far that many read with astonishment and even incredulity of its glorious achievements in the past.51

In the chapter on the eighteenth century (which, incidentally, is entitled ‘The Decline of English Music’) in Ernest Ford’s 1912 *A Short History of English Music*, the author opines ‘with the death of Purcell began the long decline that resulted in the practical decay of English music.’52

In the preface to his 1911 book, *Music and Nationalism: A Study of English Opera*, Cecil Forsyth states that no book has endeavoured to give

an account of the forces which have influenced the Musical Stage in England, or even to (draw) up that catalogue of operatic names, dates, and places which, with a few personal likes and dislikes, generally does duty in this country for a serious aesthetic.53

And yet the book skims over eighteenth-century opera in the briefest and most condescending of ways. R.W. Babcock, in a 1937 article for the Modern Language Association of America, alerting the musicological and literary community to the discovery of eighteen unstudied eighteenth-century comic opera manuscripts in the British Library, refers to the time when ‘the definitive history of this form in the eighteenth century is finally written.’54 I would suggest that that time would not eventuate for some thirty-six years, with the 1973 publication of Fiske’s *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century*:

Since the mid-twentieth century, there has been a general revival of interest in the subject of eighteenth-century English theatre history, and a number of authors have added to the wider scholarship. Among these, Michael Winesanker’s contribution has been considerable. Winesanker’s area of interest centred on the key dates of the genre: 1750-1800. Following a doctoral thesis on the subject, he published two articles in the late 1940s, both in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, the first discussing the phenomenon and effects of the new culture of

critically reviewing operas in the newspapers and magazines,\textsuperscript{55} and the second, providing an overview of the genre, its origins, stylistic features and historical contexts.\textsuperscript{56}

In 1968, George Winchester Stone Jnr. published an important volume: a pioneering catalogue of theatrical performances (including operas) in London from 1600 to 1800, compiled through analysis of original sources, and providing ‘a critical introduction’ to the listed works.\textsuperscript{57} He later contributed the foreword to Ross Schneider’s 1979 companion volume, \textit{Index to the London Stage}\textsuperscript{58} and in the same year published a biography of theatre manager and playwright David Garrick.\textsuperscript{59} In 1981, Stone published a third work, a collection of twelve essays discussing various elements of ‘the whole show’—from literary genres to stage, theatre and scenic design, to music, dance and critical theory in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{60}

In 1973 Robert Fiske published his \textit{English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century}, with which he provided the musicological community with the first comprehensive overview of what had been basically uncharted territory for some two hundred years.\textsuperscript{61} The book covers the years 1695 to 1796 and is separated into sections corresponding to chronological movements within the genre, covering not only stylistic and logistical issues, but delving with impressive detail into relationships, compositional trends and the reception and merits of various operas. Being the first work of its kind, it is not exempt from errors and gaps, however, and scholarship throughout the intervening years has produced both additional and contradictory information. Fiske’s \textit{English Theatre Music}, in combination with such books as Eric Walter White’s \textit{A History of English Opera} (which devotes a significant section of its content to the eighteenth century, without attaching the stigma that some


\textsuperscript{58} B. Ross Schneider, \textit{Index to The London Stage, 1660-1800} (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979).


\textsuperscript{61} Fiske, \textit{English Theatre Music}. 
other overviews of its kind seem to favour), provides a very solid introduction to the genre, but leaves room for more specific study.

From the 1980s onward, interest in the genre began to gather momentum. In 1982, Robert Hoskins published his doctoral thesis entitled ‘Samuel Arnold: An Historical Assessment’. Hoskins’ dissertation gathers information from previously unexploited eighteenth-century texts—memoirs, obituaries and notes written by Arnold’s contemporaries—in order to summarise ‘all the known facts’ about the composer. Beyond a paragraph or so in various encyclopaedic volumes, it remains the sole contemporary text on the life of Samuel Arnold. Hoskins has since published a book cataloguing Arnold’s theatre music, several editions of his operas, and a number of related articles in Grove Music Online, and has also made editions of several of Arnold’s (and Shield’s) non-theatre works, as well as publishing various articles on Arnold’s pantomimes and ballets, keyboard sonatas, and songs.

Jane Girdham’s 1988 doctoral thesis, ‘Stephen Storace and the English Opera Tradition of the Late Eighteenth-Century’, and her resultant book, English Opera in Late Eighteenth-Century London: Stephen Storace at Drury Lane, made extensive inroads into the unraveling of the genre, albeit with more of a focus on framing the key subject of her inquiries: composer Stephen Storace. She makes much use of original documents and provides a comprehensive picture of theatrical life in the later-eighteenth century, as well as a detailed study of Storace’s operatic works.

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62 White, A History of English Opera.
63 Hoskins, Samuel Arnold.
64 Hoskins, Samuel Arnold, Vol 1, ii.
66 Notably Polly (Artaria, 2004), Obi or Three-Fingered Jack (Stainer & Bell, 1996), and The Castle of Andalusia (Stainer & Bell, 1991).
71 Girdham, ‘Stephen Storace’.
72 Girdham, English Opera.
Roger Fiske and Diack Johnston’s eighteenth-century volume of the *Blackwell History of Music in Britain* was published in 1990, and draws together essays dealing with various manifestations of contemporary musical life, including a section on theatre music comprising two essays. The first, tackling the period 1700 to 1760 is authored by Richard Platt, and the second, discussing theatre music from 1760 to 1800, by Hoskins. Platt’s essay traces the birth of ballad opera simultaneously with, and in reaction to, Italian opera in London. He discusses the careers of John Gay and (fellow English ballad opera composer) Johnson, as well as those of several migrant musicians who became truly ‘English’ in musical style, such as Johann Ernst Galliard and Johann Friedrich Lampe. Hoskins’ essay traces the birth of the genre as the natural development of the ballad form, and discusses general elements of theatrical life, including legal issues such as the changes in licensing rules in the London theatres, changes to musical and literary trends, and the logistics of theatrical operations. The essay pays special attention to five of the most prominent opera composers of the time—Arne, Arnold, Linley, Shield and Storace—describing the composers’ histories and styles in some detail, and analysing one or two of each of their operas. It also discusses librettists John O’Keeffe and Isaac Bickerstaffe, as well as singer and theatre manager Michael Kelly.

Throughout the late twentieth century, an enormous amount of work was done on the British theatre, and in a number of cases, such work has intersected with scholarship on English comic opera. Three significant works must be mentioned: Allardyce Nicoll’s exhaustive *A History of English Drama 1600-1900*, which was published in 1952, provides a thorough coverage of the English theatre world and some discussion of the literary aspects of English comic operas, although it pays little attention the important role of music and spectacle in the development of the action. Southern Illinois University Press’ 1965 *The London Stage* is a five-part work that spans the period 1600-1800 in great detail, providing a calendar of the performed works as well as related newspaper clippings and contemporary notes. Finally, Robert D. Hume's 1980 *The London Theatre*

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73 Fiske and Johnstone, *The Eighteenth Century*.


World, 1660-1800, is a collection of twelve essays covering various elements of the workings of the theatre, which provides a detailed overview of the genre, and makes reference to some operas.\textsuperscript{76}

Since the 1990s, several scholars of English theatre have made reference to English comic opera libretti in an incidental or exemplary way. This latter group includes Felicity Nussbaum, whose works on early-modern perspectives of anomaly, gender and race occasionally cite operas of this period as examples or case studies,\textsuperscript{77} as well as Hazel Waters, whose study of the Victorian stage’s portrayals of race occasionally references eighteenth-century examples to provide a history of her subject.\textsuperscript{78} In his chapter, ‘Invasion of the Afterpieces: Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Frederick Pilon, 1778-9,’ Daniel Ennis discusses the playwrights’ almost-propagandist interaction with contemporary military and naval phenomenon. In the chapter, Ennis examines Pilon’s The Invasion and Sheridan’s The Camp, both of which comment on the ongoing threat of the French invasion of Britain. Ennis notes Pilon’s method of providing drama so farcical as to alleviate any sense of real danger through the power of satire, in contrast with Sheridan’s more earnest duality of illusion and realism.\textsuperscript{80}

The analysis of the controversial literary themes within these operas has, however, garnered relatively little modern scholarship. With the exception of Linda Troost, no one seems to have looked specifically at the thematic literary content of these operas, and how it is dually informed by, and reflected in its historical contexts.\textsuperscript{81} Troost’s 1985 thesis, ‘The Rise of Comic Opera’, \textsuperscript{82} and


\textsuperscript{78} Hazel Waters, Racism on the Victorian Stage: Representation of Slavery and the Black Character (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).


\textsuperscript{80} Ennis and Slagle, Prologues, Epilogues, 222.

\textsuperscript{81} Canfield and Fisks’ Cultural Readings of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century English Theatre looks at theatrical works of 50-80 years earlier, although it is not specific to opera. J. Douglas Canfield and Deborah Payne Fisk, Cultural Readings of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century English Theatre (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

\textsuperscript{82} Troost, ‘The Rise of English Comic Opera’. 
her subsequent journal articles, come closest to addressing the issues I wish to approach here. Troost’s thesis is unique in that, as well as an extensive chapter tracing the ‘birth’ of the genre (discussing developments in practices, style and structure over the latter half of the century, and incorporating lists of performances in the relevant theatres), it is comprised primarily of the literary and musical analysis of three operas: Linley and Sheridan’s The Duenna, Shield and Brooke’s Rosina, and Arnold and Colman’s Inkle and Yariko.

Troost’s discussion of The Duenna is essentially a critical review, exploring the value of the work, especially the thorough character development and moral undertone, as they are woven through both the libretto and the music, and defending the opera against the critics’ accusations of frivolity. Her chapter on Rosina explores the opera from the perspective of its unique status as both a sentimentalist text, and one that is gently scornful of sentimentalism. The final chapter, on Inkle and Yariko, however, is the one that most closely resembles my direction in this thesis, analysing the opera as a deliberate vehicle for social reform. In this last chapter, Troost places the opera (which was produced in 1787) within its various contexts (the philosophical duel between the concepts of natural and civilised man, the evil culture of slavery, and the climate of the French revolution), and concludes that its more serious themes mark a turning point in the transition from comic opera to melodrama. My thesis supports Troost’s notion that there are examples of serious thematic material scattered throughout this light genre. Like Troost, I examine works of the genre from a holistic perspective, and conduct an analysis of their librettos, framed by their political and social contexts. I also suggest (contrary to Troost), that some earlier operas, such as Rosina (1782), The Siege of Gibraltar (1780) and The Birthday (1783) also ‘reflect the new trends of political and philosophical thought,’ and suggest that this qualifies them to be viewed more seriously both as works of opera, and as works of literature.

... When I first began to read through the libretti of these operas, I was surprised by the gamut of styles and the varying quality of the work. I found many plays that followed predictable conventions, but several that did not. In Shield’s Rosina (discussed in chapter 3.2), I noticed one or two deliberate


allusions that seemed to express an subversive preference for the beautiful over the sublime in nature. Arnold’s *The Siege of Gibraltar* (chapter 2.2), is flavoured with a pervasive abolitionist ideology. ‘I certainly will take you with me to England,’ the protagonist Zyade proclaims to her father’s slave, Muley, ‘with regard to your freedom, I may be silent; the moment you set foot on the island, you are no longer a bondsman; the charter of England is liberty; you cannot breathe its air and be a slave.’ Reading the impassioned speeches of Julian, the hunchbacked hero of Arnold’s *The Enchanted Wood*, (chapter 2.1), I noted the subversion of the common stereotype of disabled characters on the eighteenth-century stage, in his eloquent soliloquies on the irrelevance of his physical disability in the face of his moral fortitude.

Rustic labourers, casting off the cloak of social oppression; liberated slaves, independent women, and morally corrupt royals litter the pages of these operas. When one begins to examine them within their historical contexts—that *Rosina*, for example, an opera about, and in support of the practice of gleaning should premiere during the heated legal battle that would eventually lead to the practice being outlawed forever; or that *The Birthday*, (chapter 3.1), written to celebrate the coming-of-age of the future George IV should be full of subtle derision of the over-indulgence of its fictional ‘Prince’—these operas become more interesting still. And when coupled with a study of the works’ composers and librettists, the ‘plot’, so to speak, thickens.

I have divided my discussion of the four relevant operas into two chapters. The first, encompassing my analysis of *The Siege of Gibraltar* and *The Enchanted Wood*, addresses issues of discrimination and equality under the banner ‘Portrayals of ‘Otherness’ in Late Eighteenth-Century English Comic Opera.’ The second, which includes my examination of *The Birthday* and *Rosina*, explores social tension in a pastoral context; socioeconomic commentary, and thematic reflections on aesthetic discourse, and is entitled ‘Social and Cultural Tension in Late Eighteenth-Century English Comic Opera.’ Each chapter includes a study of the relevant operas and an overview of their historical and social contexts, and, where possible, a discussion of the lives, thoughts, and political persuasions of their creators. I briefly describe the music of each opera, and make further comment where it is relevant to my discussion, but focus my study primarily on the libretti. I aim to demonstrate these operas’ deliberate and progressive interaction with contentious contemporary events and ideologies.
Chapter 2. Souls Are All of One Colour: Portrayals of ‘Otherness’ in Late Eighteenth-Century English Comic Opera

2.1 Arnold and Francis’ *The Enchanted Wood.*

*How vain are all these Glories, all our Pains,*

*Unless good Sense preserve what Beauty gains:*

*That Men may say, when we the Front-box grace,*

*Behold the first in Virtue, as in Face!*\(^85\)

The central action of Arnold and Francis’ *The Enchanted Wood* revolves around the discrimination and violence suffered by its two manifestations of ‘deformed’ characters: Julian, the play’s physically disabled hero; and its physically-weak female protagonists, viewed at the time as ‘defective men’ (a concept that I will explain in more detail below). The sympathetic way in which these dual concepts of deformity are explored within *The Enchanted Wood* is quite unusual in its literary and social context. Simon Dickie notes, for example, that while there are rare examples of the compassionate treatment of disabled characters in eighteenth-century English literature, they are almost entirely confined to prose fiction. Such figures, he suggests, were rarities on the stage. Dickie conjectures that due to the very nature of the novel, one becomes much more intimately acquainted with the mind than the body of the characters, so that ‘by the end of *Amelia* or *Bleak House*, one has all but forgotten about the heroine’s deformity.’\(^86\) In contrast, the visual representation of characters, being crucial to the medium of the play, occasions the inevitable obsession with the physical limitations of disabled characters and their consequent exploitation for comic relief. ‘One looks in vain for anything like these sentimental representations on the late-eighteenth century stage.’ He explains, ‘Indeed it is hard to think of any idealised deformed characters anywhere in the canon of mainstream drama.’\(^87\)

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\(^{87}\) Dickie, *Cruelty and Laughter*, 89.
In this chapter, I will show that *The Enchanted Wood* is a rare exception to this rule. After briefly introducing the opera, and providing a synopsis of the plot, I will discuss eighteenth-century attitudes toward disability, both on the stage, and in the lives of real people with disabilities, such as Alexander Pope, William Hay and Pricilla Pointon. I will explore the concept of the ‘nexus of gender and disability, of women being viewed as defective men,’ and its relevance to the female protagonists in *The Enchanted Wood*. I will then discuss in some detail the depiction of physical deformity in *The Enchanted Wood*, and describe the ways in which the portrayal of the disabled hero differs radically from the norms of the time.

... 

The music for *The Enchanted Wood* was composed by Samuel Arnold, and includes a number of popular airs, a children’s fairy chorus and a well-developed overture, that incorporates motifs from the whole opera. Hoskins describes the opera as ‘successful, from both a dramatic and a literary point of view.’ *The Enchanted Wood* is arguably the most musically-exciting of the four operas examined in this thesis. Like *Rosina*, (discussed below), it features an original overture, and a number of pretty airs and choruses; unfortunately, unlike *Rosina*, there is no surviving full score, and so it has never been revived or recorded.

The three-movement overture introduces a number of motifs which are woven throughout the opera. Hoskins describes the opening allegro’s two themes: the first, ‘busily evocative of the opera’s fairy world,’ (see Mus. Ex 1.1) and the second, based upon a charming ‘reel’ which ‘casts the spell of the Scottish Highlands.’ (see Mus. Ex 1.2.) The second movement is a duet for horn and bassoon, and the final movement, a rondo in 6/8 with scalic embellishments. The opera’s final chorus is based on the main theme of this last movement.

Hoskins notes the centrality of the opera’s various fairy choruses. He suggests ‘You That Join Our Nightly Trade’ as the finest of these, citing its lucid texture, the thoughtful balance between solo


89 Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, 235.

90 Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, 235.
voices and chorus, and the orchestral accompaniment, which is ‘very rich in characteristic figuration.’

As well as the choruses, *The Enchanted Wood* includes a fairy ballet, and a number of pretty, lyrical songs, which contrast pleasingly with the rousing comical numbers, some of which are adapted from English folks tunes. Cues for trebles in the vocal score suggest that the choral and ballet scenes were performed by children; Hoskins conjectures that the high sounds of the children’s voices would have heightened the sense of the strange and unearthly.

Mus. Ex. 1.1. The Enchanted Wood Overture.

Mus. Ex. 1.2 The Enchanted Wood Overture.

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91 Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, 237.
92 ‘Owen is given two gay, somewhat bucolic strophic songs, the second of which is a version of the English folksong ‘The Ram of Derby.” Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, 237.
93 Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, 235.
Very little is known about the author of the libretto for *The Enchanted Wood*. *The Diary of 26 July 1792* referred to him merely as ‘Mr. Francis, a very juvenile author,’ who, captured by the irresistible charms of Shakespeare’s manner, has commenced his career by following the footsteps of that great master. The opera certainly owes some of its literary and thematic elements to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but, as Hoskins points out, is much more comparable to Thomas Parnell’s poem *A Fairy Tale*. The opera’s story is taken almost entirely from that of the poem, although Francis developed the characters more fully than Parnell, altered the chronology for dramatic effect and added contrasting protagonists and antagonists amongst the ‘fairies.’ Parnell’s poem and Francis’s libretto convey the same key message, exemplified in the closing stanza of the former:

> Thus some are born, my Son (she cries)  
> With base Impediments to rise,  
> And some are born with none.  
> But Virtue can it self advance  
> To what the Fav'rite Fools of Chance  
> By Fortune seem'd design'd;  
> Virtue can gain the Odds of Fate,  
> And from it self shake off the Weight  
> Upon th' unworthy Mind.

The changes Francis made within the libretto serve to strengthen and develop this premise: that the imperfections of the body have no bearing on the worthiness of the mind; that it is possible for one to transcend the limitations of the body.

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96 The Advertisement at the beginning of the play script testifies to *The Diary*’s ‘very juvenile’ label—the editor gives the author’s age as fifteen.

97 Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, 235.

98 Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, 235.

99 Aulnoy, *Queen Mab: Containing a Select Collection of Only the Best, Most Instructive, and Entertaining Tales of the Fairies; Written by the Countess D’aulnoi to Which Are Added, a Fairy Tale, in the Ancient English Style, by Dr. Parnell: and Queen Mab’s Song* (London: Vernor and Hood, 1799).
The Enchanted Wood opens to reveal the genial spirits Transit and Sylphinia trysting in the woods. Orion, the spirit king, and his servant Cymbriel enter and discuss their purpose: to ‘counteract the unequal hand of fortune, and raise up drooping merit from the dust.’ The spirit chorus reiterates this sentiment until their celebrations are interrupted by the entrance of a stranger to the woods. Julian, the hero of the play, who suffers from a disfigured back and an unrequited love, enters, and is immediately taunted by Pytheon, the most diabolical of the spirits:

Hunch-back’d—a merry fight!
Say master, what is’t we must do with him?
Fling him upon the wood-fire for log-wood, or
Make him a footstool, or a mat to wipe
My feet upon? Or take him by the shoulders
and use his crook’d legs for a pair of tongs?\textsuperscript{100}

Sylphinia protests ‘Fie, Pytheon, on thy thoughts. Look spirits, look: the tears are in his eyes thro’ some ill-fortune.’ Julian, observing his reflection in the water, reveals in soliloquy the extent of his desperation and self-loathing, and his shame in the love he cherishes for the unattainable Una:

O thou unform’d, whose vilifying burden
Rests to disgrace my back, yet feels more heavy
Upon my heart; thou murderer of beauty!
Which, tho’ a chance that nature blunder’d on,
Outweighest merit, love, esteem, and honour.
Can any living quality or genius
Appreciate they default? Which is no fault
But the fortuitous hand of nature, that,
Moulding my form too hastily, forgot
To trim me up sufficient for the world.
Yet I could bear all mockery with patience
Were there but one (O, shame! She shall be nameless)

Who would but hear my sighs, and heal the scars,
Given by scoffing fools, with her chaste love.
But ’twill not be: she, too, despises me.—
O! dignifying beauty,
Thou priviligest every soppyr;
How high does the world prize thee! Yet this excellence,
Claiming a pre-respect beyond all others
I am quite lost to —Devil, even to sight!
Abhor’d by all; scorned by the angel-form
Where my love harbours; —my vows spurn’d away
Like suitors’ prayers by courtiers. Tell me, Heaven!
Why was I made to be a jest, a mark
For ridicule to fix its shafts in? Una!
Ah, Una! Wer’t thou mine, I could forswear
All other mortal joy or happiness.—
But my deform’d, forbidding, mis-shaped body,
Scorn’d and rejected, must unpitied die. 101

Transit and Sylphinia, taking pity on Julian, tell him of a magical ribbon, hidden in the forest, which causes the recipient to fall in love with the giver, and Julian rallies, having received directions to find it. Overhearing this exchange, Orion becomes angry, and after threatening and insulting Julian, he turns on Transit, who claims ‘pity, love’s sister,’ as a justification for his betrayal of the secret. Orion sends Cymbriel to hide another magical ribbon, which will have the opposite effect. In response to Sylphinia and Transit’s petitions, Orion grants them permission to watch over the hapless Julian, and protect him from ‘the daily insults he is subjected to.’

Act II opens in the house of Julian’s rival, Etheldred, who gives a lengthy soliloquy revealing the low and shallow nature of his character. Etheldred’s servant, Owen enters, and Etheldred asks him: ‘what says that fond slut, Una?’ The use of the insult, which, while slightly less inflammatory in the contemporary vocabulary, still carries the modern implications of promiscuity and slovenliness,

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101 Francis and Arnold, The Enchanted Wood, 8.
seems to be used deliberately to demonstrate Etheldred’s derogatory attitude, which is shortly afterward reinforced in the dialogue:

_Etheldred._ This morning I conversed with Una for two hours, three quarters, and five minutes.

_Owen._ About what?

_Etheldred._ About nothing. ‘Tis the best conversation in the world for a woman.\(^{102}\)

Owen reveals that his beloved donkey, Gabriel, has disappeared into the woods, and begs leave to search for him. Etheldred too departs, to go to ‘that loving fool, Una,’ and the scene concludes.

The next important scene reveals a dialogue between Una and Julian wherein the former reveals her mother’s deathbed wish that Una should not marry him. Julian applies the corrupt magical ribbon, and Una’s pity changes to disgust. Julian exits, distraught, and Etheldred entreats Una to be ‘devilish fond’ of him until he is ‘as deformed as Julian.’ Una leaves, and Etheldred instructs Owen to ‘set the blackguards in the village to shout after Julian.’ \(^{103}\)

Meanwhile, Pytheon, finding Sylphinia alone, declares his love for her, and when she rejects his advances, attempts to rape her. As Orion intervenes to rescue Sylphinia, Pytheon defends himself with a disturbingly familiar justification:

_Dark. It was as much her fault for being handsome,

As it was mine for trying to possess her.

She was the cause, tho’ I was the effect.\(^{104}\)

The play concludes with the proper combination of resolutions. Having been expelled from the woods, Pytheon is entrapped forever in a rock formation after attempting to force his advances again, this time on Una. Transit and Sylphinia are united, as are Owen and the donkey. Orion tests the compassion of Julian and Ethelred, by adopting a disguise and entreatting their help. Julian passes the test, but Etheldred is found wanting, and is consequently shamed and exposed. The

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\(^{102}\) Francis and Arnold, _The Enchanted Wood_, 14.

\(^{103}\) Francis and Arnold, _The Enchanted Wood_, 28.

\(^{104}\) Francis and Arnold, _The Enchanted Wood_, 33.
spirits cure Julian, who is then united with Una, and disfigure Etheldred’s back as a punishment for his cruelty.

... It is important to address the contemporary meaning and application of the terms ‘disability’ and ‘deformity,’ before further discussion is begun. While the term ‘disability’ has existed with its present meaning since the sixteenth century,\textsuperscript{105} Turner explains that, until the nineteenth century, it was but one concept, ‘subsumed under other categories, notably deformity and monstrosity.’\textsuperscript{106} The members of the group labeled ‘deformed’ included ‘people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, and people with unusual attributes.’\textsuperscript{107} Discrimination against deformed persons was an accepted and entrenched phenomenon in the social order of England’s eighteenth century. The terminology found in contemporary sources is self evident—‘monsters’ and ‘errors’ are common terms, but further elucidation can be gleaned by reviewing both the fictional literature, and the writings of various contemporary disabled public figures.

Turner’s \textit{Disability in Eighteenth Century England} describes the changing perspective on disability, from a superstitious or religious reasoning to a rationalist concept of biological ‘error’:

\begin{quote}
Over the course of the century, it is argued, monstrous births came to be understood not as ‘unnatural conceptions’, that defied conventional understanding and invited super-natural explanations, but as ‘errors’ in creation or ‘sports of nature’ with physiological causes.\textsuperscript{108}
\end{quote}

Felicity Nussbaum and Helen Deutsch have published a number of books and articles (individually, and collaboratively) which explore in detail Thomas Laqueur’s suggestion that, until some time in the eighteenth century, the female body was understood as an imperfect version of the male body,\textsuperscript{109} and that the eighteenth-century conception of deformity included ‘the physically deformed, non-

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{105} Gabbard, ‘Disability Studies’, 84.
\end{footnotes}
Europeans, and... all of womankind.” In her chapter ‘Feminotopias: The Pleasures of “Deformity” in MidEighteenth-Century England,’ Nussbaum examines a number of contemporary texts that demonstrate that in the eighteenth-century imagination, deformity ‘is often linked with race as well as with femininity, since the category of the monstrous in the eighteenth century loosely refers to the many varieties of unfamiliar human beings’

Gabbard suggests that the contemporary terms ‘defect, deformity, and monstrosity,’ are best understood as descriptions of general ‘bodily anomaly,’ and this seems an apt way in which to approach the dual issues of ableism and sexism presented in The Enchanted Wood. Throughout the opera, the audience’s allegiance is to Julian: they are given to appreciate his moral superiority and thus to lament his persecution. The incidents of sexism and violence within the play are presented with similar bias, invoking disgust and distaste for their perpetrators. In light of the perception that ‘women (and) the disabled... are defined as lacking the complete common form,’ The Enchanted Wood’s various physically-compromised protagonists are particularly striking. In his chapter, ‘Representing Physical Difference: The Materiality of the Monstrous,’ Kevin Stagg explains that while ‘there is no simple correspondence between the overlapping discourses of disability and monstrosity’ and its related expressions ‘deformity’ and ‘defect,’ ‘physical difference lies at the core’ of all of them. In The Enchanted Wood this difference is manifested in its multiple abusive relationships. The two attempted rape scenes, in which Pytheon uses his physical strength to intimidate and overpower first Sylphinia and then Una seem to mirror able-bodied Etheldred’s continual persecution of the disabled Julian. At the same time, Etheldred’s derisive comments about Una are balanced by Pytheon’s ritual mockery of Julian, creating a complicated power structure, underpinned by the deliberate oppression of the emotionally and physically vulnerable characters. ‘Thy power is weak,’ Pytheon cries, as he drags Una across the stage, ‘and thou canst not withstand me.’ In the end, both Python and Etheldred receive appropriate retribution. Both are stripped of their respective physical advantages, and thus, of their power.


111 Nussbaum, Torrid Zones, 167.


113 Nussbaum, Torrid Zones, 169.


Turner describes the contemporary model for the portrayal of disabled characters in literature as ‘provid(ing) entertainment, fuel(ing) patriotic sentiment, or offer(ing) an opportunity for elite and middling commentators to demonstrate their refined sensibilities of compassion’. He outlines the stereotypically debasing representations of disabled characters in comic literature, the tendency for jovial speculation about their ability to marry and/or procreate, and the anomalous fact that in spite of these persistently negative depictions, such characters are consistently portrayed as ‘contented with (their) lot and meeting life's vicissitudes with a cheerful smile.’ These conventions are unequivocally defied in The Enchanted Wood. The protagonist Julian is presented as a worthy hero, and yet his character is complex: he is neither entirely noble nor entirely pitiful. He swings between moods of passionate determination and deep self-loathing throughout the course of the unfolding action. In this regard, his feelings about his own disability bear less resemblance to those of the typical stereotypes of the contemporary fictional literature, than to those of the real-life disabled writers who published works about their disabilities, such as Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, Elizabeth Inchbald, Pricilla Pointon, and William Hay.

Hay’s Deformity: An Essay, in which he endeavours to inform the public of the effects of disability, effects ‘known to very few, intimately known to none but those who feel them,’ provides valuable insight into the contemporary treatment of the disabled. Hay describes himself as ‘scarce five feet high’ and as having ‘a back bent in my mother’s womb.’ His accounts of early childhood shed light on the upper-middle class attitude toward disability:

Those who had the care of me in infancy … tried every art to correct the errors of nature; but in vain … when they could not do that, they endeavoured to conceal them: and taught me to be ashamed of my person.

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119 Hay, Deformity, 7.
For the most part, Hay’s essay is quite objective, intending simply to communicate clearly the little known realities of what he describes as an ‘uncommon subject.’ But there are several highly emotive passages, such as one where he describes his experience of meeting a regiment of soldiers:

I was never more humbled then when I walked with him among his tall men, made still taller by their caps. I seemed to myself a worm and no man: and could not but inwardly grieve, that when I had the same inclination to the service of my country and prince, I wanted their strength to perform it.120

The sense of shame, humility and fear of persecution, evident in excerpts such as these, is a recurrent theme throughout the canon of writing by disabled authors in eighteenth-century England, and one that is reflected in Julian’s musings in The Enchanted Wood. Compare for example, the following excerpts from Priscilla Pointon’s On Her Blindness, and Julian’s reflections in The Enchanted Wood.

Pointon: Nor frown indignant on my night-struck strain,
   But for amusement bid me write again.121

Julian: Why was I made to be a jest, a mark
   For ridicule to fix its shafts in?122

Pointon: Since liberal pity all the wise commend,
   Be then for once an helpless woman's friend123

Julian: A fly has greater amplitude of soul than he
   who mocks the undeserv’d unfortunate.124

120 Hay, Deformity, 16.
121 Priscilla Pointon, On Her Blindness.
122 Francis and Arnold, The Enchanted Wood, 8.
123 Pointon, On Her Blindness.
Julian’s shame is deepened by the cruel taunts and insinuations of his peers. The sympathetic but inexorable rejection of his lover, however, is what makes his condition unbearable:

*Julian.* Ah, Una! Wer’t thou mine, I could forswear
All other mortal joy or happiness.—\(^{125}\)

…

*Una.* I love your virtues, but I can’t your person
The head, the hand are more mechanical
but the heart will be master of itself,
and like a tyrant o’er the other senses.
I think you full of courage, sense and and modesty;
and hope that courage and sense will teach you
to scorn a barren hand without a heart.
I can never be yours.\(^{126}\)

It is interesting to note that Thomas Parnell, author of *a Fairy Tale*, was a close friend and colleague of Alexander Pope, whose published correspondence demonstrates the ridicule he routinely endured as a result of his disability. The work of Pope’s biographers provides many confronting examples of discrimination and ill-treatment:

He reviled Pope for his personal defects; insinuated that he was a hunch-backed toad; declared that he was the very shape of the bow of the god of love; that he might be thankful that he was born a modern, for had he been born of Greek parents his life would have been no longer than that of one of his poems, namely, half a day; and that his outward form, however like a monkey's, could not deviate more from the average of humanity than his mind.\(^{127}\)

\(^{125}\)Francis and Arnold, *The Enchanted Wood*, 8.

\(^{126}\) Francis and Arnold, *The Enchanted Wood*, 23.

Parnell would have been acquainted with the limitations and difficulties posed by Pope’s condition, as well as the verbal and written abuse issued by his peers. Perhaps this acquaintance provided the motivation for the moral of his *A Fairy Tale*.

... 
Simon Dickie’s book, *Cruelty and Laughter, Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century*, compiles innumerable examples of the colloquial mockery of the disabled that was rife in eighteenth-century folklore, jest books, newspapers, stage comedies and novels. Dickie describes the relentless rehashing of old jokes and anecdotes, but also the production of original works partaking in the ritual mockery of the less fortunate, and cites as a particularly apt example Smollett’s 1751 *Peregrine’s Pickle* which, as he explains ‘seems to work almost systematically through the established scenarios—invalids, hunchbacks, lame matrons, wooden legs, nonsensical conversations with the deaf.’

Dickie describes one excerpt from the book wherein a hunchbacked German school master is ridiculed through a series of escalating pranks culminating in his path being made slippery with bean shells so that ‘his heels slipped from under him, his hunch pitched upon the ground, and the furniture of his head fell off in the shock; so that he lay in a very ludicrous attitude for the entertainment of the spectators.’ Dickie conjectures that this conclusion is the hallmark of deformity humour: all ends ‘to the infinite satisfaction of the spectators.’

In the syntactic fluency of these formulas—their utterly satisfied sense of comic closure— one suddenly senses the guiltless, intoxicating pleasure of tormenting the disabled in early modern culture.

There are certainly passages within *The Enchanted Wood* where Julian is mocked and tormented with ribald jokes and insults, and yet his firm stance as the hero of the play, and his eloquent responses to his tormentors seem to defy the conventions of this sort of simplistic humour:

*Julian.* Where can I fly? All hell is after me! They follow me, shouting at and reviling me.
Tell me, what have I done to injure thee, that thou shoulds’t set them thus to persecute me?

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Owen. Toad! Fiend! Crab! Devil! … Don’t touch me, for ugliness may be catching… Thou owl of men! A magpie is a handsomer beast. You frighten all our wives and children with your looks.\textsuperscript{131}

It is possible that a contemporary audience would have laughed at the spectacle of Julian running from the pursuant thugs, with Owen shouting raucous insults after him, but it is certain that they would have laughed when as punishment for his cruelty, the spirits cause a pair of horns to grow from Owen’s forehead.

In the end, Owen is relieved of the horns when Orion leaves his fate to Julian’s benevolence. And here is the lynchpin of the play’s complicated sense of morality. Varying degrees of bad behaviour are punished, and good behaviour is aptly rewarded. For his attempted rapes, Pytheon is sealed forever inside a rock, that he might be unable to further abuse his physical power. For his selfishness, cruelty and persecution of the weak, Etheldred is proportionately weakened and deformed. Julian, whose basic goodness has been the justification for his status as the play’s hero throughout, and who has demonstrated his worthiness in his compassion for the disguised Orion, and then once more when he excuses Owen’s cruelty, is rewarded with a strong and healthy form, to match his strong and healthy character. To the modern reader, this conclusion is uncomfortable; but in the context of contemporary works of theatre, the overall message conveyed in \textit{The Enchanted Wood} is decidedly progressive.

The audience experiences the depth of Julian’s passion and shame, they see his worthiness of character and his struggle for equal treatment, and they never waver in their preference for him and their condemnation of his persecutors. The opera’s engagement with gender politics and rape seems to reflect its overall theme of disability, in a time when such a comparison was particularly notable, given the contemporary perception of femininity as a kind of deformity. Turner describes the eighteenth-century’s focus on the ‘aesthetics’ of deformity: the opposite of beauty, departure from the norm, and the ‘outward show’ of defect, deformity, and monstrosity.\textsuperscript{132} Dickie applies this idea to the contemporary literature, describing the its audiences’ inability to see beyond the overt physical anomaly of such figures on the eighteenth-century stage. And yet \textit{The Enchanted Wood}

\textsuperscript{131} Arnold and Francis, \textit{The Enchanted Wood}, 36.

defies this premise, and makes a deliberate point of exploring Julian’s nature, in contrast with his body: ‘a sour nut, with a sweet kernel.’

*The Enchanted Wood* presents a number of ideas: that the advantages or impediments of the body have no bearing on the worthiness of the mind or character, that physical oppression or abuse of the naturally weak is abhorrent, and that the ‘punishments’ of nature are not necessarily justly bestowed. After all, Orion asserts from the very first scene, that his role is to “counteract the *unequal* hand of fortune…”

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2.2 Shield and Pilon’s *The Siege of Gibraltar*

“This is the first time I ever knew you was a barbarian.
-And it is the first time I knew it myself.”

Shield and Pilon’s *The Siege of Gibraltar* premiered on April 25, 1780, just months after a British fleet under the command of Admiral Sir George Rodney defeated a Spanish squadron by moonlight in a successful bid to bring relief to besieged Gibraltar, in the first major naval victory for the British over their European enemies during the American War of Independence. *The Siege* is a prime example of William Shield’s commitment to providing Covent Garden with topical operas, and is one of many works, such as *Omai* (1785), and *The Highland Reel* (1788), that he presented with the deliberate intention of keeping his audience abreast of recent political, social and military events.135

*The Siege of Gibraltar* features an original overture, marked ‘Allegro con spirito.’ The first half of the overture, in C Major, features frequent passages of parallel thirds over bright harpsichord arpeggios (See Mus. Ex. 2.1). The second part, a rondo, modulates to C Minor. Solos are traded by the oboes and bassoons, leading into an lengthy solo passage for the violins, before the overture ends with an extended perfect cadence.

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135 The pantomime *Omai* (1785) is an embellished version of Captain Cook’s *Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*, published in 1784 and *The Highland Reel* (1788) borrows its story from Boswell’s *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, published in 1786. (Troost, ‘Shield, William’).
There are a few interesting musical moments in *The Siege*. Beauclere’s demonstrative love song, ‘The Moment I Saw Her My Heart Took Alarm,’ blends the timbre of tenor voice and horn (see Mus. Ex. 2.2). It is a plaintive air, replete with florid scalic passages emphasising the particularly romantic sentiments, interspersed with comment from the solo horns and clarinets. A similar technique is employed in the duet ‘How Sweet The Lovers Meeting Proves’ (Mus. Ex. 2.3), although here the featured soloists are the woodwinds. The harmonised melody line is first played by the flutes alone, then split between one singer and the grouped flutes and bassoons, before the second singer enters, and the duet is heard in full.

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Another duet, ‘How Stands The Glass Around,’ which is harmonised in a similar manner to the overture, with an abundance of parallel thirds, features a diverting interaction between singers and

137 Shield, The Siege of Gibralter, 8.

trumpets at the line ‘the trumpets sound,’ and the comical air ‘Ye Silly Loon’ is accompanied by horns and bassoons to ‘imitate bagpipes.’ The score is pretty and pleasant, and provides a lively accompaniment to the libretto.

Frederick Pilon (1750-1788), author of *The Siege of Gibraltar* was an eccentric Cork native, who had turned to writing following the failure of his theatrical career. He was employed at Covent Garden from 1778, where he collaborated with Shield on various operas, including *The Siege*. Like Shield, Pilon’s work consistently reflected current political and social events well known to the contemporary audiences. Gilliand said of him:

> He generally caught whatever subject was floating uppermost in the public mind, and immediately adapted it to the stage: of course his pieces contained more ingenuity than correctness, more temporary entertainment than permanent humour.

Pilon worked for Drury Lane from 1782, producing two further operas before his flight from England, following his indictment for liability after the bad reception of an unpopular libretto. Friends arranged for his return to England from France, and he married a Miss Drury in 1787 but died in 1788, at the age of thirty-eight.

Pilon may have decided to write *The Siege* after talking with his friend Richard Cumberland, a fellow author who had been sent to Spain as a British negotiator to try and resolve the dispute over

139 Frederick Pilon and William Shield, *The Siege of Gibraltar* a *Musical Farce in Two Acts; as it is Performed at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden* (London: G. Kearsly, 1780).


143 Michael Kelly’s memoir features several charming Pilon anecdotes, portraying the playwright as a slightly unbalanced, but endearing rogue. Kelly, Reminiscences.
Gibraltar. He may also have had nationalistic motivations. In a chapter of his book, *Prologues, Epilogues, Curtain-Raisers, and After Pieces*, co-edited with Judith Bailey Slagle, Daniel Ennis discusses the role of military afterpieces such as those of Pilon and Sheridan in the climate of nervous anticipation about the war. Ennis notes Pilon’s adamant propagation of the idea that ‘everything was under control’, that although drama might unfold on the stage, it was removed from the reality of Britain’s unshakeable military power.

This certainly holds true for *The Siege*. The story opens in ‘An Officer’s Mess Room’, where Major Bromfield, Mr. O’Bradley, Beauclere and the officers are enthusiastically toasting Britain’s initial naval success in the breaking of the siege. Here, already, is an illustration of Ennis’s observation, as the officers toast the impending battle and Beauclere exclaims:

> They can raise no batteries to make any impression; our works are actually impregnable, and if the strength of this fortress be considered, it may without fable be called one of the pillars of Hercules.

The opera’s presentation of the war effort, however, is the lesser of its principal themes. Although it provides the setting, and even the title for the piece, the siege itself is but a backdrop for a situation-based drama, which explores the issues of race and slavery in a way which is both progressive for its time, and striking in its genre. I will begin my discussion of *The Siege* with a brief outline of the plot, and will then discuss the work within the context of late eighteenth-century attitudes to race and slavery, in order to demonstrate its subversion of contemporary conventions of the theatrical representation of both slavery and ‘blackness.’

In the opening scene of *The Siege*, the supposed hero of the plot, Beauclere, confides to his superior, Bromfield that his love, Zyade, is to be sent to Barbary by her father to marry ‘Solomon the Jew,’

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144 Richard Cumberland (1732-1811) was an English dramatist and civil servant. During the American War of Independence he acted as a secret negotiator with Spain in an effort to secure a peace agreement between the two nations. In 1780, he was sent on a confidential mission to Spain to negotiate a separate peace treaty in an effort to weaken the anti-British coalition. His plays are often remembered for their sympathetic depiction of those generally considered to be on the margins of society.

145 Ennis and Slagle, *Prologues, Epilogues*.

146 Ennis and Slagle, *Prologues, Epilogues*, 222.

147 Pilon and Shield, *The Siege of Gibraltar*, 2.
having been informed of as much by Muley, ‘an Arabian slave in whom she places great confidence.’ Bromfield grants Beauclere permission to temporarily absent his post in order to rescue Zyade, and he departs accordingly.

Scene two reveals Zyade and her servant Jenny in their garden, awaiting the return of Muley. While they wait, Zyade sings of her bravery in the face of danger, in an attempt to soothe Jenny, who is terrified of both the impending military and matrimonial action. Muley soon arrives, and he and Zyade discuss the unique position of trust he has gained in the eyes of his master, as a result of having been raised and educated within the Hassan household. It is revealed that Muley plans to use this position to help smuggle Beauclere in to the house, in return for which, Zyade will eventually deliver Muley to England, and freedom, thereby assuaging the ‘natural passion of a man for liberty.’ It is here that Zyade expounds on England’s benevolent and sympathetic treatment of slaves, and *The Siege* first reveals its abolitionist agenda.

The overt discussion of slavery is interrupted at this point by the entry of Beauclere, only moments before Ben Hassan. The quick-thinking Muley disguises the former in Arabian dress and spins an elaborate story, casting the disguised Beauclere as his long-lost dumb brother from Cairo, come to reunite Muley with his family. Hassan eventually accepts this explanation, and suggests that Muley take his ‘brother’ inside for some refreshment.

Act II is where the most interesting portrayal of Muley’s character unfolds, since it is primarily concerned with the execution of his plan for Zyade and Beauclere’s union. The Hassan family and attendants set off on the journey to Barbary, but are arrested by the soldiers, and Hassan is thrown into a dark room with dire warnings about his fate as he is accused firstly of being spy, and secondly of shirking his duties as a Gibraltarian. Beauclere and Zyade are happily reunited and she urges Muley to ‘use her father gently.’ Muley sets off to do so, and enters the room where Ben Hassan is tied, blindfolded, and under the impression that he is soon to be put to death. After doing what he can to encourage this belief, Muley secures the key to Hassan’s safe, which he delivers to Zyade, as insurance of her rightful inheritance. All then enter, and Hassan is released, but his fury is quelled with a little gentle blackmail from Major Bromfield about his ‘correspondence with the Spaniards.’ The last scene reveals that the siege has been broken ‘in the night’, and the general assembly erupts

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148 This air was omitted in the staged version.
with merriment, the successes of the battle are relived, the king is saluted, and everyone sings the finale.

The eighteenth century saw the birth of a strong movement in Britain to abolish the purchase and sale of human beings. In 1785, the English poet William Cowper wrote:

We have no slaves at home – Then why abroad? Slaves cannot breathe in England; if their lungs receive our air, that moment they are free, They touch our country, and their shackles fall. That’s noble, and bespeaks a nation proud. And jealous of the blessing. Spread it then, And let it circulate through every vein.¹⁴⁹

Although not exactly accurate, Cowper’s sentiment is a noble one. And it is strikingly similar in wording to that expressed in Zyade’s discussion with Muley:

I certainly will take you with me to England; with regard to your freedom, I may be silent; the moment you set foot on the island, you are no longer a bondsman; the charter of England is Liberty; you cannot breathe its air and be a slave.¹⁵⁰

Hazel Waters discusses the various reflections of the work of abolitionists in the political mirror that was the London stage, describing the late-eighteenth-century plays dealing with slavery as ‘not completely reductive.’¹⁵¹ Listing some seven plays (including several with scores by Arnold and Shield), she describes the reconstruction of England’s national image as ‘the home of inalienable liberty for all—in contrast to those upstart Republicans in America,’¹⁵² and declares that this image was reflected on the stage for years to come.

In contrast, Felicity Nussbaum, who writes extensively on the ‘anomalous’ body, rejects the notion that plays of this type in this era can be perceived as anti-slavery dramas. She claims that while some plays inadvertently serve the goals of abolition, more often they are highly-contradictory.


¹⁵⁰ Pilon and Shield, *The Siege of Gibraltar*, 11.


efforts to ‘cleanse England of its racial impurities and reconcile itself to a slave history.’\textsuperscript{153} Taking both of these perceptions into consideration, the above passages from Cowper’s poetry and the dialogue in \textit{The Siege} can be explained as the (possibly subconscious) propagation of a popular ideal, with or without the intention to initiate change.

In spite of Nussbaum’s arguments, however, there \textit{is} a direct link between the abolitionist movement and the writers of British comic opera in the form of the personal memoir of John O’Keeffe (the librettist of many English comic operas, including \textit{The Birthday}, discussed in Chapter 3 below), which details the playwright’s strong anti-slavery perspective. Although long, I think it worth quoting the following passage from the second volume of O’Keeffe’s recollections:

I had also a motive for wishing Lewis to play young Sadboy, my sincere desire that my opinion of the Slave Trade, in two speeches in that comedy, might be spoken on the boards of the great winter house, particularly on Lewis's benefit, when I knew the Theatre would be full. These are the words: –

“\textit{Chronicle}. Well since you’re restored to your father's favour, you’re welcome to mine, whilst you have fields of tobacco, and droves of Negroes to hoe them. \\
\textit{Reuben Sadboy}. Then I hold half your favours on a very loose tenure: while Liberty is the boast of Englishmen, why should we still make a sordid traffic of our fellow creatures? – No my good Sir! On my return to America, every slave of mine shall be as free as the air he breathes.”

I wrote the above speeches forty-four years ago: – but the chain has many links, and while clemency and humanity \textit{talk}, the sable hand and foot are still galled by the manacle and fetter! In my piece of the Basket-Maker are these four lines in the finale:–

“Hail fellow! \textit{Black}, yellow, \\
Souls are all of one colour.”\textsuperscript{154}

\textsuperscript{153} Nussbaum, \textit{The Limits of the Human}, 217.

\textsuperscript{154} O’Keeffe, \textit{Recollections}, 55-56. Original emphasis.
While there are no such clear statement of opinion from the pens of either Pilon or Shield, the libretto of the Siege seems to demonstrate a decided abolitionist agenda. At the conclusion of the opening scene between Zyade and Muley, the former sings the following air:

Generous Britain scorns to bind,
In servile chains, the freeborn mind:
Her sons are brave, her daughters fair,
And freedom lives a phoenix there.
Generous Britain, good as brave,
Bestows that blessing on the slave.

How slight are gems, how poor is gold,
In climes where man is bought and sold!
A brighter jewel in Freedom shines,
Than ever glowed in Indian mines
Generous Britain, good as brave,
Bestows that blessing on the slave.  

Since Britain was, at this time, deeply dependent on the slave economy, and since British traders were selling Africans into slavery in the Americas and throughout the world, Pilon’s words seem calculated to make his audience a little uncomfortable. Passages such as this one however, are only one aspect of the way The Siege addresses the concept and constructs of slavery. The other, much more meaningful way, is through the development of the plot itself, and the agency of its central character, Muley. To understand why Muley is such a unique character, we must first review the history of the theatrical portrayal of black figures throughout the preceding decades.

In the course of her research on the role of the black character on the nineteenth-century stage, Waters has written about the theatrical representation of ‘blackness’ throughout the preceding centuries. Drawing on the work of A.G. Barthelemy, she traces the evolution of the various accepted roles for black characters on the early eighteenth-century stage, beginning with the

\[155\] Pilon and Shield, The Siege of Gibraltar, 11.

\[156\] Anthony G. Barthelemy, Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).
stereotypes set by theatrical works throughout the preceding two hundred years: the villainous, terrifying moor and the later-developing ‘noble negro.’

Some of the earliest representations of the black—apart from black-faced devils in the mystery plays—are to be found in late sixteenth and seventeenth-century masques and Guild pageants featuring ‘Moors’…In their stage presence during this period, in plays like Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (1589), Dekker's *Lust's Dominion* (1600), Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust* (1619) and Behn's *Abdelazer* (1677) they were given over, as Barthelemy has shown, almost wholly to monstrous evil and driven by overwhelming lust.

Othello, who is arguably the most culturally enduring representation of a black character on the British stage, might appear as a notable exception to this early portrayal of the vengeful, lust-driven moor, but as Waters (and others) have concluded, even he cannot escape his destiny. Although his character is initially noble and morally upright, he must inevitably succumb to the murderous stereotype that is his fated lot.

Waters claims that while these early portrayals of black characters reflected a fear of, and contempt for otherness (perhaps born out of the long struggle between Christianity and ‘Mohammedism’ and the perceived threat of Moorish rule in Europe); the portrayal of black characters on the eighteenth-century stage, though informed by its precursive archetypes, came to be solely defined by the context of slavery. Thus, works of this period can be seen as a reflection of the English public’s struggle to navigate a reconciliation between two dichotomous systems: the economy of the slave trade and the growing understanding of its religious and moral evils.

The first major text informing this new direction in the portrayal of black characters on the stage was Southerne’s 1696 adaptation of Aphra Behn’s novel *Oroonoko*, which has been described as originating the idea of the ‘noble negro,’ and providing the mould in which many subsequent abolitionist dramas were cast. The play follows the tragic descent of the central character,

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159 Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race*, 160.

Quentin Tarantino’s 2012 film ‘Django Unchained’ can be viewed as a contemporary example of this genre.
Oroonoko, a high-born African nobleman who is wrongly enslaved. After a failed attempt at rebellion Oroonoko is forced to kill his wife, the governor who has enslaved him, and himself in order to protect his wife from rape, and himself from torture.

However, by the late eighteenth century, black characters on the English stage were appearing in yet another form. With a rise in the popular demand for spectacle and exoticism, the inclusion of ‘negro’ characters and foreign settings became an increasingly profitable feature of London theatrics. Theatre manager George Coleman the younger in particular, capitalised on this trend, staging a large number of works that cast black characters in the crude and farcical roles that would later develop into the extremely popular phenomenon of blackface pantomime. Julia Carlson addresses this shift in her chapter, Race and Profit in English Theatre:

The model black male shifts from Othello to Mungo, the comic, and frequently intoxicated servant in Bickerstaffe’s The Padlock who became a ‘popular obsession, celebrated in prints, silver tea caddies’ and masquerades by persons of fashion. Even granting his spirited challenges to white mastery (Mungo’s name would become a ‘synonym for any rude and forward black man in England’), he serves his master’s interests by voicing his critique from a decidedly menial position.

The Siege, however, circumvents all three of these models. Although it is never exactly clarified, it is apparent that The Siege’s heroine Zyade, and her father, Ben Hassan, are wealthy and aristocratic Gibraltarian natives, probably of the Islamic faith. Gibraltar came to be occupied by Arabs and Northwest Africans during the expansion of the Umayyad Caliphate in its conquest of Hispania between 711 and 718. The origins of the name ‘Zyade’ are Moroccan, and ‘Hassan’ is a prevalent Arabic first name, although it is also a surname of both Jewish and Irish origin. In Act I Scene II, Ben Hassan swears ‘by the tomb of Mohamed.’ Muley the slave is probably also a Muslim—he mentions having been bought as a baby from a slave trader in Cairo. The slave market in Cairo sold both African and Arabic slaves; Bernard Lewis describes the difficulty in sourcing Arabic slaves

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under Islamic law (slaves had to be born, or captured in warfare), causing traders to import increasing quantities of slaves from East Africa down the Nile to Egypt.\textsuperscript{164} However, Muley describes himself in the first act as ‘Arabian.’ The name ‘Muley’ is also shared by a Moroccan prince of the sixteenth century. While Muley’s racial background is not one that is typically associated with the Atlantic slave trade, he would nonetheless have cut an anomalous and controversial character in the context of the contemporary abolitionary dialogue.

The racial backgrounds of the various main characters in \textit{The Siege} create an immediate deviation from the norm: here we have not only a foreign slave owner (which was uncommon, although not unheard of), but the more unusual case of a foreign heroine, who is the object of love of a white hero. Of course, the various gradations of ‘blackness’ certainly play a part in the way this drama fits into the contemporary conversation on slavery and abolitionism. At this time, twelve years after the premier of Isaac Bickerstaff’s \textit{The Padlock}, which introduced the first comical blackface character to the English stage, audiences were accustomed to seeing black characters portrayed in this genre. Jeffrey Cox suggests that a ‘regular London theatregoer would have seen depictions of African characters or of slavery during perhaps every season of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.’\textsuperscript{165} Given the conventions of the time, the actors playing the roles of Muley, Hassaan, and perhaps even Zyade would most likely have been wearing blackface makeup as part of their costumes, but the particular shade of blackface probably had a significant impact on the way they were perceived by contemporary audiences.

In his article, ‘The Inventions of the Negro’, Cedrick Robinson explains that the term ‘Negro’ was appropriated by slave traders in the seventeenth century to describe ‘Black Africans, the Indians of India, Native Americans, Japanese, and slaves of whatever ancestry.’\textsuperscript{166} Carlson deciphers this broad term as functioning primarily to separate ‘whiteness’ from ‘otherness’:

> The broad range of national and ethnic types that ‘Negro’ comes to designate paradoxically indicates the precision of its signifying function: to elevate whiteness so that it can appear


distinguishable from the host of gradations that not only complicate the binary of black and white but also display their prior mergers.\textsuperscript{167}

Nevertheless, the question of just why the character of Muley is cast as an Arabian rather than a more unequivocally ‘African’ slave remains to be answered. The setting of \textit{The Siege} provides a justification for the race of both the Hassans and Muley, and yet does not preclude the latter from a different heritage. Interestingly, the Hassans share both race and religion with their slave, and the British soldiers interact with both aristocrats and slaves of a single race. Thus, as in the case of \textit{Orookono}, we are provided with a complex set of systems for the examination of the way issues of race are dealt with, encompassing three divisive elements: colour, religion and class. And yet, in contrast to the example of \textit{Orookono}, where the title character’s high lineage is the justification for his noble character and ready intelligence, \textit{The Siege} bestows these qualities on Muley, the slave, while portraying the aristocrat Hassan as both morally corrupt and easily fooled. No doubt the intelligence, moral integrity and power bestowed on the character of Muley would have been less palatable to a contemporary white audience if he were ‘blacker,’ and similarly the love between Beauclare and Zyade would have been less believable. However, there can be little doubt that Muley is a representation of the character of the black slave, and a product of the hugely political economic structure that was the Atlantic slave trade, even if the incredulity of the audience could not allow him to be more overtly so.

Waters describes the simplification of black characters throughout the eighteenth century as they became increasingly defined by the context of the slave trade:

\begin{quote}
Henceforth, (after \textit{Ooroonoko}) what all black characters have in common, what fundamentally shapes them, is the institution of slavery. They are white creations, born out of and relating to slave-trading, slave-holding, slave-owning. As such, they have, with only rare exceptions, no independent imaginative life; they convey no sense of the unexpected.\textsuperscript{168}
\end{quote}

I would argue that the \textit{Siege of Gibralter} then, is one of these rare exceptions. When reading the libretto of \textit{The Siege}, especially the second act, one cannot help but notice Muley’s status as the

\textsuperscript{167} Carlson ‘Race and Profit’, 177.

\textsuperscript{168} Waters, \textit{Racism on the Victorian Stage}, 21.
only character possessed of plot-progressing initiative. The siege itself is really just a backdrop for Muley’s elaborate plans for Zyade’s liberation, the reunion of the lovers, and his own eventual freedom. Every major event is motivated by his actions: the disguise of Beauclere, the cooperation of the soldiers, the arrest of Ben Hassan, the attainment of the family fortune; Muley orchestrates them all, while Beauclere himself does little for the cause of his lover’s emancipation beyond obtaining a day of leave from the military, and maintaining a stoic silence while Muley does all the fast-talking.

Although it is not uncommon for servant characters to be portrayed as more capable and intelligent than their masters in eighteenth-century opera,169 Waters explains that this is rarely the case for black characters.170 In The Siege itself, Muley’s genius is deliberately contrasted with Jenny’s naivety and ignorance:

   Jenny. I vow, Mr. Muley, that this is the first time I ever knew you was a barbarian.
   Muley. And it is the first time I knew it myself.
   Jenny. I thought you barbarians had generally two heads at least!171

Further, Muley’s innate intelligence is explicitly referenced when Zyade innocently attributes his capabilities to his education. Pilon contrives to have Muley describe his intelligence not only as unique from his education, but as associated with his race:

   Zyade. He [Hassan] took uncommon pains with your education.
   Muley. I am an Arabian, madam, and perhaps may thank my faculties more than my preceptors.172

In addition to the portrayal of Muley’s mental faculties, Pilon takes a unique tack with his moral character. Rather than being represented as either the noble negro, deferentially loyal to a white

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169 Take for example, Paisiello’s La Serva Padrona. For a full discussion see: Mary Hunter, The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart’s Vienna: A Poetics of Entertainment (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 83.

170 Waters, Racism on the Victorian Stage, 21.

171 Pilon and Shield, The Siege of Gibraltar, 10.

172 Pilon and Shield, The Siege of Gibraltar, 10.
leader, or as the villainous, lustful moor, or even as the comical, obedient servant, Muley is presented as nothing more nor less than a human being, possessed of his own independent notions of right and wrong, and free to follow his own conscience. Consequently he lies to, betrays and manipulates the technically faultless Hassan, who is nonetheless clearly portrayed as the more morally corrupt of the two. It is important to note that Hassan is also the recipient of racist slander: O’Bradley addresses him by the disrespectful designation ‘You Old Moorish Spalpeen’ during the revelations on Hassan’s immoral and unscrupulous nature. This points to a progressive take on ethics: Muley is essentially good, so his specific transgressions (lying, double-crossing, manipulating and the like) can be overlooked in the face of the larger fundamentally moral purpose for his actions. Muley is not bad because he is black, nor good because he is black, but good because he behaves accountably, whereas Hassan is bad because he behaves reprehensibly.

*The Siege* has its inconsistencies, and it is certainly conservative in its presentation of otherness: it is littered with casual racism, Muley is cast as only somewhat black, and, like many other enslaved characters of the late-eighteenth century, he is given no love interest of any colour, nor any dreams or complexities of nature outside his desire for freedom from the institution of slavery which defines him. And yet, amidst the countless plays of its time which portray black characters and slave characters in the most simplistic and reductive of ways (take for example Matthew Lewis’s *The Castle Spectre* (1797), Bickerstaff’s *The Padlock* (1768), William Macready’s *The Irishman in London; or the Happy African* (1792) and Frederic Reynolds’s *Laugh When You Can* (1798) among many, many more), *The Siege*’s lofty sentiments and unconventional characters and relationships stand out even more starkly. Reexamining Waters’ comment that the typical black character of this period had ‘no independent imaginative life; they convey(ed) no sense of the unexpected’ in the context of an analysis of *The Siege of Gibraltar*, demonstrates just how unique this opera is in its perspective on slavery and its presentation of the black character on the eighteenth-century English stage.

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173 Such as the four black slaves in Matthew ‘Monk’ Lewis’s *The Castle Specter* (1797).

174 ‘Spalpeen’ is an Irish term meaning ‘rascal’ or ‘rogue.’
Chapter 3. Love In A Village or (Social) Trouble In Paradise: Social and Cultural Tension in Late Eighteenth-Century English Comic Opera

3.1 Arnold and O’Keeffe’s The Birthday or The Prince of Arragon.

I’ve as much respect for the Prince as you;
I esteem, I love him; and were there a cause,
the last drop of my blood should write my loyalty.
I’d die to serve him.\textsuperscript{175}

The Birthday (or The Prince of Arragon), was dedicated to George, Prince of Wales,\textsuperscript{176} and premiered on his twenty-first birthday, 12 August 1784 at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket. The work, which Hoskins classified as ‘an after-piece opera with spoken dialogue,’\textsuperscript{177} was a collaborative effort between composer Samuel Arnold and playwright John O’Keeffe. The Morning Chronicle report of 13 August reviewed the opera:

The Prince of Arragon, …without exciting much mirth, affords some interest and some amusement; perhaps it would have a better effect, if it had less of the grave and more of the gay in its composition. It is, if anything, too serious for an after-piece.\textsuperscript{178}

The Birthday features a short, new-composed overture in two movements: a bright allegro followed by a stately minuet (see Mus. Ex. 3.1). Both movements begin in D major, although the minuet, which features the oboe and bassoon as soloists, progresses through several modulations, and finishes in the tonic minor. The overture was met with the following somewhat chilly review:

The airs… are well set, and well sung… Dr. Arnold has been happy in the duet, and several of the songs, but has been more successful in the overtures of other pieces.\textsuperscript{179}

\textsuperscript{176} Later to become George IV of England.
\textsuperscript{177} Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, 219.
\textsuperscript{178} The Morning Chronicle (London, 13 August, 1783).
\textsuperscript{179} The Morning Chronicle (London, 13 August, 1783).
Hoskins suggests that Arnold’s choices in the setting of the various original songs as well as the borrowed arias contained within *The Birthday* demonstrate more than anything else he composed, his minute understanding of the abilities of his singers. He notes that the two da capo arias for Seraphina ‘gain vitality with some lightly florid music for the soprano’ and that Don Leopold’s airs, written in patter style, are ‘suited to a comic-actor rather than a singer.’ An example of one of these airs, ‘When First an Arragonian Maid’ can be seen below in Mus. Ex 3.2.


182 Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, 219.
The final allegro chorus ‘Hail! Happy People Now Rejoice!’ is harmonised with a simple triadic structure over a bright accompaniment, and reflects the joyous triple celebration depicted in the closing scene (see Mus. Ex. 3.3). Of all *The Birthday*’s songs and duets, the only one to receive marked fame and popularity was Florina’s air ‘Your Wise Men All Declare’, (later published as ‘The Je Ne Sçai Quoi’, and discussed in detail below). Hoskins describes it as ‘charming and characteristic of Arnold's simpler songs: the vocal line is smooth and shapely,’ but over all he does not find much to commend in the music of this particular opera, describing it as ‘discouragingly bland and naive.’


184 Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, 219.
The Birthday is one of many operas to emerge from the collaboration of Arnold and O’Keeffe, several of which (including The Agreeable Surprise and The Son In Law) were among the former’s most popular works. O’Keeffe based the libretto on Germain de Saint-Foix’s Le Rival Supposé, which in turn was written under the influence of Rousseau’s Le Devin du Village. It uses a popular pseudo-pastoral plot, calculated to flatter both the middle and upper classes: on his travels, the prince of Arragon meets, falls in love with, and—after a predictable rigmarole of confusion and a masked-ball-finale—marries Seraphina, an innocent country maiden.

The Birthday is an interesting opera on a number of counts. It engages with contemporary aesthetics — apart from the its general implications of preference for the beautiful over the sublime in nature, Florina’s air ‘The Je Ne Sçai Quoi’ alludes, in a typically light-hearted way, to several serious contemporary theories of art criticism. The opera’s undertone of censure of the behaviour and values of the fictional ‘prince’ are also notable. Given the title, dedication and the timing of its

premiere, they come across as a thinly-veiled criticism of the unpopular Prince of Wales, the future George IV of England. In this chapter I will provide an introduction to John O’Keeffe, the librettist of *The Birthday*, and a brief synopsis of the play, before examining each of these points of cultural interest in turn.

... John O'Keeffe (1747 –1833), author of *The Birthday*, was known to have used his plays to disseminate his personal political and cultural opinions. An Irish-born actor and dramatist, O’Keeffe was the author of a large catalogue of farces and comic plays, the collective popularity of which made him the most produced playwright in London in the last quarter of the eighteenth-century. O’Keeffe penned a volume of ‘Recollections’ in his latter years, and this, combined with a memoir by his daughter, prefacing her edition of his collected poems, provides a fairly comprehensive, if subjective picture of his life. Several persons (notably Frederick M. Link) have combined these with various other sources to construct a thorough biography.

In 1778, having retired from the Irish stage and moved to London with his children following the collapse of his marriage, O’Keeffe’s career as a writer was launched when George Colman the elder produced his *Tony Lumpkin in Town* (a sequel to Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*) at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket. The play was successful, and O'Keefe regularly wrote for the Haymarket thereafter. Over the next twenty years, O'Keeffe produced more than fifty plays and comic operas, and formed relationships with various London theatre notables, particularly Shield and Arnold, both of whom set many of his librettos. He had many friends in the industry, chief amongst them Colman the elder, who endeavoured to provide him with an adequate income, and helped to secure him several pensions.

In spite of this, O’Keeffe struggled financially, and suffered many disappointments, both professionally and personally. He struggled to cope with the death of his estranged wife and later, his son, and having retired after the failure of his last play in 1798, lived his later years in financial...

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189 O'Keeffe, and Link, *The Plays*.
190 It was probably Colman that told O’Keeffe about *Le Rival Suppose*. (Hoskins, via email correspondence.)
difficulty, nearly blind, and with no means of providing for his daughter’s future. According to Adelaide’s memoir, and various contemporary sources, O’Keeffe’s youth was characterised by ‘gaiety, wit, and cheerfulness.’ By the time of his middle-age, he was more likely to be described as austere, melancholy and isolated. A sketch in the *Monthly Mirror* described his altered character: ‘His former gaiety is fled–disappointment has depressed his spirits. His sole amusement consists in having his daughter read to him, or in occasional walks.’

Adelaide describes the event of her father’s death in 1833 in her *Memoir*, painting the writer not as an object of pity, but as a great man. The only attendees at his funeral were Adelaide, her maid, the priest and the surgeon. In spite of the somewhat melancholy events of his own life, O’Keeffe’s prolific output remained determinedly light: his work was characterised by its gaiety and exuberance. An article about him in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1873 included the following passage:

O’Keeffe had been an actor, and his plays fully disclose his intimate acquaintance with stage artifices of all kinds. He was bent upon amusing his audience and obtaining their applause at any cost. With this view he pressed much extravagance, sham sentiment, and patriotic clap-trap into his service ...Still he was humorous and inventive, he possessed a keen eye for character, could write very lively dialogue, and was able to provide the actors of his time with most effective occupation.

At a glance, the above description seems quite accurate in the case of *The Birthday*. The characters are either excessively light and lively, or excessively good and moral, and the plot is peppered with much confusion, double-handling and conspicuous deference to ‘the prince’. And yet, there is more to this opera than what is first suggested by the dialogue. In *The Recollections*, O’Keeffe describes his love of politics from childhood, his wish to become a member of parliament and his habit of observing parliamentary debate. Adelaide’s memoir reiterates this, describing her father’s reversion to political writing after his retirement from the stage, as following ‘the early bent of youth.’

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191 In 1798 O’Keeffe had attempted to secure his children’s future through the publication of his collected plays, but the venture struggled to break even.

192 O’Keeffe, and Link, *The Plays*, x.

193 *Monthly Mirror*, January 1798.

194 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 25 September 1873.

also mentions O’Keeffe’s having penned a regular *Morning Chronicle* column, under the pseudonym ‘the Seer.’ She muses:

> Little could the play-goer imagine, that the absurdities of Lingo,\(^{196}\) which convulsed him with laughter the previous night, and the masterly political essay he was the next morning gravely pondering over in deep cogitation, were from the same pen!\(^{197}\)

O’Keeffe’s autobiographical writings provide scholars with a clear picture of his philosophical, literary and moral viewpoints, of his education, interactions and perspectives. They demonstrate that he was ignorant neither of contemporary critical debate in the arts, nor of political happenings in London and the wider world. The reference in his memoir, which I referred to in my chapter on *The Siege of Gibraltar*, wherein O’Keeffe describes an occasion on which he deliberately incorporated a specific piece of dialogue expressing his disapproval of the slave trade into a libretto in order to have it receive the largest possible audience,\(^{198}\) demonstrates the deliberate intersection of his private views with his public writings. It is natural to assume then, that *The Birthday* might be similarly flavoured by a personal political agenda.

...  
The curtain rises on *The Birthday* to a telling discussion between the prince and his attendant Frederick, which outlines the setting for the story: the prince has searched high and low for the original lady after which was painted a portrait that he has in his possession. Having, against all odds, found and rescued the lady, Seraphina, from a wild boar, and won her heart and hand under the guise of his own attendant, he plans to test her love before marrying her and revealing his true identity. Seraphina’s father, Don Leopold, enters, and expresses his consternation at Seraphina’s desire that he move with her and her future husband to the city.

The prince exits in pursuit of Seraphina, and the latter’s maidservant Florina enters and begins a lively discussion with the true Frederick, exposing her cunning and materialistic core in the air ‘Je Ne Sçai Quoi.’ Seraphina and the prince re-enter, and Seraphina voices her confusion at his recent

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\(^{196}\) Lingo was a popular character of O’Keeffe’s: an absurd, Latin-speaking butler from his libretto for *The Agreeable Surprise* (another collaboration with Samuel Arnold.)

\(^{197}\) O’Keeffe and O’Keeffe, *O’Keeffe’s Legacy*, xxv.

\(^{198}\) O’Keeffe, *The Recollections*, 55.
reserve, singing in plaintive air of her love for him. The prince (still disguised as his own manservant) informs Seraphina that his mood stems from guilt, since he knows that her hand is sought by the ‘prince,’ who is on his way to the castle to celebrate the wedding of his servant, unaware that the bride is the object of his own affections. In much confusion, Seraphina discusses her predicament with the artless Florina who encourages her to abandon the old love for the new, more profitable one. The two sing a lively duet arguing the contrasting values of the ‘sylvan’ and the ‘courtly’ scene. The masked ‘prince’ arrives and Seraphina begs his pardon, saying she cannot return his love as her heart belongs to another. The mask is flung off, the prince reveals himself, explains his plot to test her fidelity, and the pair are finally united, as the chorus begins a joyful closing number.

A close analysis of the libretto and song lyrics of The Birthday demonstrates several notable connections to contemporary critical discourses on aesthetics. It is commonly understood that throughout the late eighteenth, and certainly by the early nineteenth century, it was regular practice for critics and commentators to quantify art as adhering to various identifiable categories, namely: the beautiful, sublime, and ornamental. These categories were not all perceived as equally valuable: according to Todd Gilman, ‘we have evidence from as early as 1734 that audiences responded to Handel’s achievements by identifying the sublime as the highest peak to which music could ascend.’ There is some conjecture that the division of art into these categories, which were not only qualitative, but hierarchical, is one of the reasons why so much music of England’s eighteenth century has been lost to the canon of performed repertoire. Gilman traces the virtual evaporation of Thomas Arne’s music in part to the nineteenth-century preference for the more ‘sublime’ works of Handel. He asserts that in spite of changing terminology, music criticism in the intervening years has maintained the same intrinsic hierarchical beliefs that have kept lighter works firmly repressed for several hundred years. And yet several of the operas of Arnold and Shield, which are the very casualties of this alleged snobbery, seem to exhibit a perverse preference for the beautiful over the sublime in their pastoral themes, and to comment playfully on complex issues of art criticism commonly considered beyond their reach. An example of the former is addressed at length below in my discussion of Rosina in chapter 3.2, and an example of the latter is to be found within The Birthday, in Florina’s air ‘Je Ne Sçai Quoi,’ (see Mus. Ex 3.4 below) in which she attributes the

intangible charms of the female race to the ‘grace’ of ‘nature’—both terms that are quite specific to
the contemporary discourse on taste and genius. To illustrate this, I must provide a brief background
to the development of this cultural conversation.

Edmund Burke’s 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Inquiry into our Ideas of the Beautiful and the
Sublime*, had disseminated the idea that works of human endeavour as well as of nature could be
assigned to one of these aesthetic categories according to their adherence to various qualities; it also
argued that the aesthetic tastes of humans were generally aligned:

I mean by the word taste, no more than that faculty or those faculties of the mind, which
are affected with, or which form a judgment of, the works of imagination and the elegant
arts… And my point in this inquiry is, to find whether there are any principles, on which
the imagination is affected, so common to all, so grounded and certain, as to supply the
means of reasoning satisfactorily about them. And such principles of taste I fancy there
are.  

This idea of taste—the taste of the audience, and of the artist—was a point of interest in the
discourse on the meaning and source of art early in the century. A new aversion to the religious
notion of ‘divine’ or ‘supernatural’ gifts as an explanation for the source of art led to the
development of the idea of an author’s ‘fancy regulated by judgment.’ Since the origin of fancy
(or genius) could not be traced, discussion focused on that which could be studied— the art (craft)
of art—and emphasis was placed on the ‘rules’ that governed form and structure. Alexander Pope
was an interesting contributor to this conversation, given that he argued on behalf of genius and art
by turns. He also introduced into his discussion, a third term, ‘grace,’ which had been in use by
Longinus and his contemporaries, and resurfaced in the eighteenth-century to mean a defiance of
the rules; some intangible factor, descendent from genius. This is a common thread throughout
Pope’s *Essay on Criticism*:

Some Beauties yet, no Precepts can declare,

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for J. Dodsley, 1767), 4.


For there's a Happiness as well as Care.
Musick resembles Poetry, in each
Are nameless *Graces* which no Methods teach,
And which a Master-Hand alone can reach.

... And snatch a Grace beyond the Reach of Art,
Which, without passing thro' the Judgment, gains
The Heart, and all its End at once attains.

... *Learn* then what *Morals* Criticks ought to show,
For 'tis but half a Judge's Task, to Know.
'Tis not enough, Taste, Judgment, Learning, join.\textsuperscript{204}

The term ‘grace’ (and its French counterpart, *je ne sais quoi*) did not simply spring from the ether into Pope’s *Essay on Criticism*. It was, at this time, so frequently used in the realm of painting as to be almost a technical term.\textsuperscript{205} Pope must have known this, having studied painting for a time with Jervas\textsuperscript{206} and having also read Rodger de Piles’ discussion *L’idée du Peintre Parfait* (1699)\textsuperscript{207} and Du Fresnoy’s *De Art Graphica*,\textsuperscript{208} which de Piles had translated from Latin into French. This ‘grace,’ the evanescent factor outside the realm of studied art, became associated with the aesthetically sublime in its fledgling state. Later, when the sublime developed into an aesthetic principle unique from the beautiful through discourses such as those of Burke and Kant, it was applied to works of art as a lens through which to evaluate their value, as the cornerstone of the hierarchal system which placed the genre of English comic opera at the bottom of the ladder. Thus,


\textsuperscript{205} For illustration, see Dryden’s translation of Du Fresnoy’s *De Arte Graphics*.


\textsuperscript{207} Stephan, *Alexander Pope*, 55.

\textsuperscript{208} Stephan, *Alexander Pope*, 55.
given the etymology of Florina’s name, her casual allusions, linking as they do the terms ‘grace’, ‘nature’ and ‘the rules,’ all within an air entitled ‘Je na sçai quoi’, hardly seem coincidental:

Your wife men all declare
Of the things so strange and rare,
The beautiful sublime in great nature’s law,
A woman bears the belle;
Yet why they cannot tell;
‘Tis the mystical charms of the je ne sçai quoi.209

... 

*The Birthday*’s pastoral theme provides an apt setting for its casual allusions to critical concerns dealing with ‘nature’ and ‘the natural’, but can also be seen as the metaphorical representation of its exploration of the tensions between the rural ideal and the moral-corruption of courtly life. Terry Gifford describes ‘pastoralism’ as taking three forms: the first an historical form, derived from Greek and Roman poetry about the idyllic life of the shepherd; the second a literary form wherein the country is either implicitly or explicitly contrasted with the urban.210 *The Birthday* fits into this second category. The conversation opens between the prince and Don Leopold:

*Prince.* Sir, you seem angry

*Don Leopold.* So I am, Frederick.

*Prince.* What’s the matter, Don Leopold?

*Leop.* My daughter wants to carry me to Court.

*Prince.* And why not, Sir? A nobleman of your birth and distinction should not thus bury himself in the country.211

Don Leopold expresses his opinions on urban living in the opening vocal number, which describes his impression of courtly life’s sordid foundations:

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210 The third is the use of ‘pastoral’ as a sceptical term, implying that the pastoral vision is an overly simplified one, that ignores the realities of life in the country in favour of an idealised version of it. Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London, New York, Routledge, 1999), 1-2.

A Court is a fountain of Honour and Fame,
And sweet and sweet are the waters that flow,
Yet say if our throats or the water’s to blame?
As we drink, as we drink, the more thirsty we grow.
Yet the court to be sure is a fine place,
A gay, a polite, a divine place

I’m the man can tell you how, if there you wish to rise;
With your ev’ry step a Bow, on your tongue, a thousand Lies.\(^{212}\)

The song continues to comment on the greed, self-awareness and ruthlessness of the courtier. However, the most explicit example of this comparison is in the duet between Seraphina and Florina, who despite her name, is the antithesis of natural purity and lusts after the shallow artifice of courtly life.

\[Seraphina.\] Bless with joys the sylvan scene,
Peaceful, tranquil and serene.
\[Florina.\] Quit the lifeless grove and field,
Courts alone can pleasures yield.
\[Seraphina.\] Peaceful joys!
\[Florina.\] Rattling noise!
\[Seraphina.\] Morning bright!
\[Florina.\] Up all night!
\[Seraphina.\] Waterfalls!
\[Florina.\] Routs and balls!
\[Seraphina.\] Shepherd’s lutes!
\[Florina.\] Fiddlers and flutes!\(^{213}\)

In her book, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valéry*, Annabel Patterson explains her reluctance to define pastoralism; an endeavour that she claims is a cause ‘reduced to total confusion by modern criticism’s search for ‘versions of the pastoral’ in the most unlikely places.’ Instead, she continues,

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\(^{212}\) O’Keeffe and Arnold, *The Birthday*, 15.

the focus should be on ‘how writers, artists and intellectuals of all persuasions have used pastoral for a range of functions and intentions.’ In *The Birthday* it is used metaphorically, almost as an idyllic antithesis to the shallowness represented by courtly life, and perhaps this is more pointed than it first appears. Here we arrive at perhaps the most intriguing point of cultural interest within *The Birthday*: the moral criticism of its central character, the prince.

*The Birthday* was, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, written in honour of the Prince of Wales’ twenty-first birthday, and premiered on that auspicious date. The dedication at the beginning of the printed edition reads as follows:

TO HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS
GEORGE, PRINCE OF WALES
SIR,

WHEN I consider the insignificancy of this trifle, I am surprised at my own temerity; my reason would have recoiled, and left nothing but my presumption to attend it to your Royal feet, had not your gracious condescension in permitting it to approach you, encouraged me in the laudable attempt to celebrate (though by humble means) an era auspicious, great and glorious.

The guardian genius of Britain having placed a BRUNSWICK on the throne, saw, and self-approving, smiled upon her work. And Victory, when determined to bestow her richest wreaths of laurel upon British valour, to perpetuate her bounty, wisely chose that point of time which she foresaw must be the darling theme of future ages, the period that gave birth to the PRINCE OF WALES.

The combination of momentous circumstances conducive to the advantage of England, attending your Royal Highness’s dawn of life, promised zenith of glory; and the shining qualities of your youth justify our hopes, and give an ample satisfaction to our expectations. As you were the early blessing, so will you prove the latter comfort of your Royal Parents, the patron of science the promoter of virtue, the delight and joy of a happy people, whose affection, respect, and admiration may you ever possess, as you do those of your Royal Highness’s

Most humble,

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In *The Recollections*, O’Keeffe refers to George IV (as he was to become) as his ‘patron’, and describes himself as ‘the King’s poet’; of the Prince’s earlier life he says very little. Any biography of George IV, however, will demonstrate that he was a controversial figure, particularly at this time. Few would have described his youth as ‘shining’, or as ‘giving ample satisfaction to our expectations.’ At the time, the Prince was in disgrace with his father for his radical political companions, especially Whig Charles James Fox. He had had a string of unsuitable mistresses (in spite of his parents’ plan that he marry his cousin Caroline and thus preserve both family honour, and the family fortune), and was already exhibiting the tendency for staggering debt that was to follow him for the rest of his life. His idle and expensive lifestyle made him almost unanimously unpopular among the general public. In 1783, the parliament had suggested to the King that the Prince be paid an annual sum of £100,000 to meet the burgeoning expenses of his lifestyle. His majesty asserted that he had ‘little reason to approve of any part of his son's conduct for the last three years’; his neglect of every religious duty was ‘notorious’, while ‘his want of even common civility’ to his parents was ‘not less so’. The outrageous idea of granting an income of £100,000, as long as the Prince remained unmarried, was ‘a shameful squandering of public money besides an encouragement of extravagance.’

O’Keeffe’s many writings are unswervingly deferential to the Prince: he wrote various poems in George’s honour, and made profuse dedications similar to the one transcribed above. But perhaps, as in the case of his comments on slavery as made public by the character of ‘Sadboy,’ he used his librettos to offer his true opinions. The points of criticism of the fictional ‘prince’ character in *The Birthday*, seem to reflect the most marked indiscretions in the life of the real Prince of Wales:

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218 Smith, *George IV*, 281.

enormous debt; a frivolous lifestyle, association with various persons deemed unsuitable by his family; and dalliance with unsuitable women in opposition to his father’s wish that he marry his cousin.

At the beginning of the opera, Don Leopold discusses his conspicuous solvency with the prince: ‘tho’ I live at great expense, I keep within my income; …and tho’ I am a Lord, I am as free from debt as the poorest commoner.’ On the shallow and frivolous life led by the prince at court, Don Leopold remarks: ‘I’d rather walk about my park, gardens, and my own improvements, than to slide and amble through an anti-chamber, like a cypher of great importance, in a group of idle busybodies, illustrious profligates, and right honourable sharpers, the whole forming a villainous picture, a curious court calendar,’ and observes in reference to the prince; ‘he sees bad company enough already.’ In the midst of the play’s finale, when Seraphina finally understands the situation, and has won the prince’s trust and love, she remarks ingenuously: ‘I should have thought that the pursuit of a great Prince… would have taken a nobler course than to seek an humble recluse like me, and receive honour by conferring it, with his address, on some princess, whose birth might dignify the throne that waits him; and whose alliance might extend his fame, and add strength to the interest of his kingdom.’ This last reference in particular, when examined against the king’s desire that the real Prince cease his unsuitable dalliances in order to enter into a marriage with his cousin Caroline, seems too overt to be coincidental.

In the final scene of The Birthday, the couple are finally united, Seraphina’s love and faithfulness having been proven beyond all doubt, and each character is destined for urban or pastoral life as best fits their inclinations: everyone is consigned to their rightful place. Don Leopold advises Florina that ‘the greatest monarch that ever lived will find sufficient glory in supporting properly the dignity of man,’ and the curtains close on a wedding, a birthday, and a masked ballet, accompanied by the following provocative proclamation:

20 O’Keeffe and Arnold, The Birthday, 15.
21 O’Keeffe and Arnold, The Birthday, 15.
22 O’Keeffe and Arnold, The Birthday, 14.
23 O’Keeffe and Arnold, The Birthday, 32.
24 O’Keeffe and Arnold, The Birthday, 30.
May the present great and good possessor of the throne, and his amiable consort, reign for many, many years, the delight of his family, and a blessing to his pope.²²⁵

... Frederick Link conjectures that O’Keeffe’s plummet from raging popularity to virtual obscurity can be attributed to his production of ‘popular’ rather than ‘high’ art.²²⁶ And yet, as has been discussed, Adelaide’s memoir, and O’Keeffe’s own recollections both hint at an interest in politics, literature and social commentary. While The Birthday was certainly not designed solely as a vehicle for the propagation of O’Keeffe’s political and moral agendas, I believe it is not unreasonable to suggest that references to the prince and life at court within the play might be more deliberate than accidental. Coupled with its smattering of aesthetic references and manipulations of the pastoral form, The Birthday does, even within its rigid costume of ‘popular art’, have something more complex to say about life, people and the world than one might initially assume. Hoskins puts it quite succinctly:

For all its wit and exuberance O’Keeffe’s drama reflects a genuine concern with the realities of late eighteenth-century life. He has assembled a collection of eccentrics caught up in a “rapid stream of extravagant whim”, but his purpose is fundamentally serious—he proposes nothing short of the triumph of humanity and love in an often squalid, unsympathetic and perplexing world.²²⁷

²²⁵ O’Keeffe and Arnold, The Birthday, 34-35.

²²⁶ O’Keeffe, and Link, The Plays, lx.

²²⁷ Hoskins, ‘Dr. Samuel Arnold’, Vol 1, 204.
3.2 Shield and Brooke’s \textit{Rosina}

\begin{quote}
\textit{And O! When summer’s joy’s are o’er
and autumn yields its fruit no more,
New blessing be there yet in store,
for winter’s sober hours to glean.\textsuperscript{228}}
\end{quote}

William Shield’s \textit{Rosina} is a love story centred around a group of gleaners and their patrons in a rural English village. Authored by novelist and playwright Frances Brooke, after Charles Favart’s \textit{Les Moissonneurs} (which in turn takes the plot from the biblical story of \textit{Ruth}), the libretto is witty and humorous, and contributes largely to the opera’s success. It is complemented by Shield’s vibrant score, which features a joyful overture, sparkling orchestral arrangements, and a number of airs that were to become popular parlour songs.\textsuperscript{229} Linda Troost’s 1985 thesis describes Rosina’s immediate success, identifying some one hundred and fifty-two performances between its premiere in 1782, and the close of the century.\textsuperscript{230}

Ten of the opera’s eighteen songs are original to the work,\textsuperscript{231} as is the overture which features warm strings, grounded by the harpsichord accompaniment, and conversational lines in the woodwinds and horns, sometimes heralding brief modulations to the tonic minor (see Mus. Ex 4.1). The setting of the opera is underpinned by the inclusion of incidental instrumental numbers borrowed from Scottish and Irish folk tunes, and the pastoral dance-like choruses for the labourers and gleaners. A number of the airs are very pretty, especially Rosina’s melancholy ‘The Morn Returns’, which is borrowed from composer Stephen Paxton, and set sympathetically with solemn strings (see Mus. Ex. 4.2.) The final rousing chorus, ‘To Bless And To Be Blest,’ reinforces the pastoral theme of the work, with its shimmering 6/8 strings evoking the rustic feel of a country dance (see Mus. Ex. 4.3).

\textsuperscript{228} Francis Brooke, and William Shield, \textit{Rosina} (New York: David Longworth, 1809), 36.

\textsuperscript{229} Troost, ‘Rosina’.


\textsuperscript{231} Arnold borrowed one song each from John Garth and Stephen Paxton, and from Sacchini’s \textit{Armida} (staged in London as \textit{Rinaldo} in 1780) and found five additional melodies in Scottish, French and Irish sources. (Troost, ‘Rosina’.)
Mus. Ex 4.1, Overture to *Rosina*.\textsuperscript{232}

Mus. Ex. 4.2 Rosina’s Aria ‘The Morn Returns.’\textsuperscript{233}

\textsuperscript{232} William Shield, *Rosina. A Comic Opera ... Composed and Selected by W. Shield. [Vocal score.]* (London: J. Dale, 1790), 2.

\textsuperscript{233} Shield, *Rosina*, 10.
Rosina is the only one of Shield’s operas with a surviving score, and it has consequently enjoyed considerable ongoing success. The opera has been revived numerous times over the intervening years, and even recorded.

Aside from its continued popularity, Rosina is notable for its status as a vehicle for various manifestations of socio-cultural tension, and this is the lens through which I shall examine it in this chapter. It is the work of a female playwright in a male-dominated industry, who is described variously as both a feminist author and an author of sensibility literature. It is also a work which explores and comments on the notions of the beautiful and the sublime, both in nature and in human emotion. Perhaps most interestingly, Rosina explores the concept of ‘gleaning’: in its manifestations as an economic, agricultural and a moral construct.

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234 Shield, Rosina, 36.

235 The score is held at the British Library.

236 There is a 1965 recording (on modern instruments) by conducted by Richard Bonynge for Decca, featuring the LSO, with Margreta Elkins singing the title role, alongside Elizabeth Harwood, Robert Tear, Kenneth MacDonald, and contralto Monica Sinclair in the trouser role of ‘William.’

Rosina opens with detailed stage directions, demonstrating its pastoral setting:

SCENE opens and discovers a rural prospect: on the left side a little hill with trees at the top; a spring of water rushes from the side, and falls into a natural basin below: on the right side a cottage, at the door of which is a bench of stone. At a distance, a chain of mountains. The manor house in view. A field of corn fills up the scene… The door of the cottage is open, a lamp burning just within. Dorcas, seated on the bench, is spinning; Rosina and Phoebe, just within the door, are measuring a bushel of corn.238

Phoebe’s lover, William, appears from upstage, and the group sings a choral number saluting nature. Rosina shows the corn gleaned the previous day, and Dorcas, her guardian, is pleased, but laments the lowly place in which Rosina finds herself, since she is really an orphan of noble parentage. Rosina describes her love for Dorcas and her contentment with life, and goes, with Phoebe, to join the gleaners. Phoebe sings of her love for young William, who presently joins them, and Rosina, aside, sings an air lamenting her own fruitless, doomed love for an unnamed person.

Rosina’s air is followed by a chorus of the reapers, as Belville, the landowner, supervises his Irish workers, who are harvesting corn. His assistant, ‘the Rustic,’ berates Rosina for gleaning too closely behind the harvesters, but is reprimanded by Belville, who offers her as much corn as she can carry, revealing both his generous nature and his secret love. (This bit of by-play comes directly from Ruth.) He proceeds to sing of his love, until his brother, Captain Belville enters, and a dialogue between the two reveals (to the audience) that the Captain also has amorous intentions for Rosina, albeit of a less noble nature.

As Belville gives orders to his staff to prepare dinner for him out among the reapers, William notices Phoebe talking closely with the Rustic. He instantly becomes jealous and denounces her. Meanwhile, Captain Belville follows and pesters Rosina until she becomes flustered. In the course of their conversation, she expresses again her contentment with her station and her life, and manages to reveal the shallow nature of Captain Belville’s attention. She leads him to her house and disappears inside, leaving him to contend with Dorcas who berates him thoroughly before slamming the door. He retires, but in the belief that he will be able to change their minds.

238 Brooke and Shield, Rosina, 5.
Captain Belville gives the Rustic a purse to take to Rosina with the message that ‘there is a person who is very much interested in her happiness.’ The Captain urges the Rustic to do this without his master’s knowledge, but as soon as he is alone, the Rustic takes the purse and the message straight to Belville. Belville assumes that his brother is in love with Rosina, and resigns himself to gallantly stepping aside.

The second act opens with the Rustic lamenting ever having gained possession of the purse. He waits until Dorcas and Rosina are conversing outside the cottage, and then lays it by their front door. As he exits, he meets Captain Belville, and assures him that the money has been delivered. The Captain, lingering in the bushes, overhears Rosina and Dorcas talking, and discovers that Rosina will be home first and alone. He slips into the house and hides, just before Rosina returns to lock the door. Just then, Dorcas notices the purse, and exclaiming, insists that Rosina must take it to Belville. After Dorcas exits, Rosina manages to convince William, who is passing by, to take it in her stead.

William encounters Phoebe and the two have another argument before relenting and reuniting. Belville enters and sings of his love for Rosina. William tries to give him the purse, but Belville insists it be returned to Rosina and Dorcas. William exits again and Belville lies down to rest on the grass and falls asleep. Rosina, happening along, and seeing that Belville is asleep in the sun, uses her ribbon to tie the branches of a tree to shade his face. He wakes as she stands gazing upon him, and she runs for refuge in the cottage, where, however, she encounters the devious Captain and is forced to return to Belville, much upset. Belville dismisses her anxiety, ensuring her that his brother can have meant no harm, and after establishing that it was indeed her ribbon he found tied in the tree, expresses tenderness through a song which is just modest and vague enough that neither party yet realises their mutual affection.

Belville takes Dorcas aside to question her about Rosina’s past, while the latter takes a basket of thread to the weavers, and the Captain makes sinister plans with his assistants. Belville discovers from Dorcas the secret of Rosina’s noble birth, but a misplaced hint makes him believe even more strongly that her affection has been won by his brother. Calling the Captain over, he encourages him to propose marriage to Rosina. The Captain is shocked, and finally reveals the improper nature of his intentions toward her. He shortly changes his mind, however, upon hearing about her true
parentage and the inheritance to which she is entitled. Just then, the pair are interrupted by Dorcas, who enters, highly distressed, having seen Rosina being abducted by a group of men. Both Belville and the Captain rush to the scene, only to find Rosina has already been rescued by Belville’s Irish farmhands, who expose the Captain as the orchestrator of the plot, having used his French valet for the dirty work.

The Captain is denounced first by his brother and then by Rosina, to whom he attempts, halfheartedly, to propose marriage amidst the chaos. Finally, Belville admits his love, and Rosina reveals hers.

... 

Frances Brooke (née Moore), the play’s author, was born in 1724 in Lincolnshire. She spent her childhood in the houses of various relatives with her younger sister, Sarah, and by the 1750s, was writing poetry and plays and moving in literary circles in London. Between 1755 and 1756, she produced a weekly periodical, published under the pseudonym Mary Singleton, Spinster. The series, entitled ‘Old Maid’ followed the style of Addison and Steele’s The Spectator, and was made up of essays and lively letters addressing issues from politics to theatre. In 1756, she married John Brooke, rector of Colney, and several other parishes in Norwich, who soon after left for North America in his capacity as a military chaplain. Frances was to follow him in 1763, but during the intervening years, she published The Letters of Lady Juliet Catesby, to Her Friend Lady Henrietta Campley, a translation of Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni’s epistolary novel first published in French in 1759, followed by her own first novel, The History of Lady Julia Mandeville. The latter, which was also epistolary in style, was published in 1763 and reprinted eight times before Brooke’s death.

In July 1763, Brooke travelled with her sister, Sarah to Canada and was reunited with her husband, who was by now chaplain at Quebec. The sisters moved in the social circle of the local politicians and notables, with whom John Brooke had become acquainted. Frances Brooke became a prominent figure in the social scene at Quebec, and whilst in Canada, wrote her most famous novel,

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239 The collected essays have been printed in book format. Francis Brooke, The Old Maid (London: A Millar, 1764).

The History of Emily Montague, published in England in 1769, which is widely accepted as the first novel written in Canada, and indeed, in North America.241

Upon returning to England, Brooke published several translations, essays and plays, and wrote a tragedy,242 as well as two comic operas: Rosina and Marian (the latter premiered at Covent Garden in 1788.)243 Brooke was, by all accounts, incredibly self-possessed. She moved in Samuel Johnson’s literary circle and received the flattering description from Fanny Burnley: “Mrs. Brooke … is very well bred, and expresses herself with much modesty upon all subjects; which in an authoress, a woman of known understanding, is extremely pleasing.”244

Brooke is touted as a contributor to sensibility literature, and yet she tempers her sensibility with liberal doses of wit and a collection of liberated, intelligent characters.245 Interesting then, that she should choose to turn her hand to a project like Rosina. The essential storyline, as mentioned, well predates Favart’s Les Moisseeoneurs. It is taken almost in its entirety from the biblical story of Ruth, and at first glance, seems an unlikely choice for appropriation by an author who is considered to have been a feminist by the standards of her era.

In the original version, Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi are poor, dispossessed widows. They are respectable, and are entitled to certain properties but cannot access their rightful entitlements without a male relative to speak for them. Consequently, they rely on the patronage of a landowner, Boaz, who allows Ruth to glean in his fields, and shows her kindness. Ruth notices that Boaz has a preference for her, and Naomi encourages Ruth to endear herself to him further. Ruth, motivated by her loyalty to Naomi, does so. Eventually Boaz decides to marry Ruth and states at a public meeting: ‘Today you are witnesses that from Naomi I acquire everything that used to belong to Elimelech, and everything that used to belong to Mahlon and Chilion and that I am also acquiring

241 Cox and Riches, ‘Brooke, Frances’.


243 Brooke’s Marian shares many themes and devices with Rosina, and also features music by William Shield.


245 The character of Anne Wilmot in Brooke’s first novel, Julia Mandeville is often viewed as having feminist qualities by the standards of the era.
Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon’s widow, to be my wife.246 While Favart’s version of the story does not stray far from the original, Brooke’s adaptation features various important changes.

Firstly, the character of Rosina does not desire to have her true social status recognised, nor to be liberated from her state of poverty, and thus be separated from Dorcas and Phoebe, whom she loves: especially not at the price of binding herself to a man she does not love. Rosina’s loyalty to Dorcas resembles that of Ruth’s to Naomi, and yet the means by which that loyalty is demonstrated is fundamentally different. She stresses on numerous occasions that she is content to work hard and live with her loved ones. The first example of this is in Act I, Scene I:

Ros. Why should I repine? Heaven, which deprived me of my parents and my fortune, left me health, content, and innocence. Nor is it certain that riches lead to happiness… I want nothing: you have been a mother to me.247

Moreover, when presented with the idea of patronage by the wealthy Captain Belville, Rosina once again asserts her contentment, while at once exposing the Captain’s admiration as shallow and unworthy.

Ros. Why do you stop me, Sir? My time is precious. When the gleaning season is over, will you make up my loss?
Capt. Bel. Yes.
Ros. Will it be any advantage to you to make me lose my day's work?
Capt. Bel. Yes.
Ros. Would it give you pleasure to see me pass all my days in idleness?
Capt. Bel. Yes.
Ros. We differ greatly then, Sir. I only wish for so much leisure as makes me return to my work with fresh spirit. We labour all the week, 'tis true; but then how sweet is our rest on Sunday!
Capt. Bel. Mere prejudice, child: you will know better. I pity you, and will make your fortune.


247 Brooke and Shield, Rosina, 6.
Rosina. Let me call my mother, Sir. I am young, and can support myself by my labour; but she is old and helpless, and your charity will be well bestow'd. Please to transfer to her the bounty you intended for me.

Capt. Belville. Why—as to that—

…

Rosina. I understand you, Sir; your compassion does not extend to old women.

Finally, when the Captain does propose marriage, she rejects him with the reprimand; ‘Whoever offends the object of his love is unworthy of obtaining her.’ When pressed, Rosina continues to assert her preference for independence over marriage to an unworthy suitor: ‘Do not, Sir, envy me the calm delight of passing my independent days with Dorcas, in whom I have found a mother’s tenderness.’ It is only in realising that Belville, whom she loves, returns her love that she softens.

Secondly, Belville loves Rosina, but acknowledges her autonomy. In the story of Ruth, Boaz consults a closer relative who is more entitled than himself to acquire Naomi’s property, and her daughter-in-law Ruth, before he decides to marry her himself. In Rosina, this element of the story is fundamentally changed: Belville vows to step aside because he believes that Rosina’s attentions are engaged elsewhere. The comic lovers, William and Phoebe, are also presented very much as equals, giving and taking insults and compliments in perfect equilibrium. In short, Brooke empowers her female characters, and places higher value on independent integrity than on financial security or social status based on matrimony.

…

Troost’s analysis of Rosina in her 1985 thesis addresses Brooke’s unique take on sentimentalism, opining that the latter’s careful manipulation of the original Les Moissonneurs, especially in terms of timing and characterisation, ensures the play’s success from both a literary and a moral point of view. Brooke’s adaptation makes several changes to the storyline, other than those mentioned above. She brings Rosina and Belville much closer together in age, and focuses on the development of their characters rather than on that of the supporting characters of Dorcas and the Captain. She also introduces the second, comical love plot between William and Phoebe, which provides a vehicle for humour, and relieves the high moral tone propagated by the two principals.

248 Brooke and Shield, Rosina, 14.

249 Brooke and Shield, Rosina, 34.
The modest and reticent behaviour of Rosina’s hero and heroine are the cause of much confusion, and much delay to their happiness. Of course, this is essential to the plot structure, heightening the tension throughout the work, and increasing the audience’s satisfaction in the final untangling, but it is rather unfortunate for the characters themselves. Troost suggests that Brooke intends to show that an excess of modesty and naivety is no good thing, and that by providing an example of the other extreme in William and Phoebe, insinuates that some sort of balance between the two is desirable.250

Contrast between the relationships of the two principal couples does not cease here, however. It is also a vehicle for the opera’s critical commentary. After they resolve their argument, William and Phoebe sing a duet, which opens:

In gaudy courts, with aching hearts,
The great at Fortune rail:
The hills may higher honours claim,
But peace is in the vale…
So they that will, may take the hill,
Since love is in the vale.251

This lyric raises an interesting tension in imagery. Phoebe and William’s duet certainly expresses a preference for the ‘beauty’ to be found in the vale over the ‘great’ and ‘higher’ lures to be found elsewhere. Compare this, however, to the text of Belville’s love lament, which occurs immediately afterward:

Ere bright Rosina met my eyes,
How peaceful pass'd the joyous day!
In rural sports I gain'd the prize,
Each virgin listen'd to my lay.

But now no more I touch the lyre,

251 Brooke and Shield, Rosina, 26.
No more the rustic sport can please;
I live the slave of fond desire,
Lost to myself, to mirth, and ease.

The tree that in a happier hour
It's boughs extended o'er the plain,
When blasted by the lightning's power,
Nor charms the eye, nor shades the swain.252

Belville has lost his pleasure in the ‘peaceful’ and ‘rural’ and finds himself ‘the slave of fond desire’, like a once-pleasant tree, ‘blasted by the lightening’s power.’ Apparently, William and Phoebe are enjoying emotions pertaining to the beautiful, whilst Belville and Rosina are wracked with the passions of the torturous sublime. This dichotomous imagery is consistent throughout all the romantic conversations between the two principal couples. Rosina, for example, experiences ‘ardent… rapture all divine,’253 while Phoebe is satisfied with ‘sweet… love.’254

Although contrasts between the comical interests of lower class and the dramatic passions of upperclass characters are common in comic opera genres across Europe, Rosina’s example is unique in that the triumph of William and Phoebe’s perspective does not come at the expense of Belville and Rosina’s, but rather at the latter’s own preference. Despite presenting the heroes’ love as sublime, the opera itself seems to reiterate an overt overall preference for the beautiful. Almost every song and air within the work makes some subtle reference to it. The opening trio for example, salutes contentment and humility, and portrays nature as a gentle provider:

    See, content, the humble gleaner,
    Take the scatter’d ears that fall!
    Nature, all her children viewing,
    Kindly bounteous, cares for all.255

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252 Brooke and Shield, Rosina, 26.
253 Brooke and Shield, Rosina, 34.
254 Brooke and Shield, Rosina, 17.
255 Brooke and Shield, Rosina, 6.
The reaper’s chorus refers to the joy of honest work, and reiterates the necessity of simple duties:

As we reap the golden corn,
Laughing Plenty fills her horn:
What would gilded pomp avail
Should the peasant's labour fail? 256

And Rosina’s air values ‘mild content’ above stronger emotions:

Whilst with village maids I stray,
Sweetly wears the joyous day;
Chearful glows my artless breast,
Mild Content the constant guest. 257

The overall feeling is summed up best perhaps in Belville and Rosina’s duet in the closing chorus of Act I:

Taste our pleasures ye who may,
This is Nature's holiday.
Simple Nature ye who prize,
Life's fantastic forms despise. 258

The pastoral mode of the work makes this preference not unusual. But the constant repetition of ‘beautiful’ imagery is strengthened by its juxtaposition with the ‘sublime’ imagery associated with Belville and Rosina’s love. It seems as though a conscious decision has been made to defend the beautiful as worthy: an apt sentiment, since it occurs within a medium that is generally perceived as categorically ‘beautiful.’ Phoebe makes the point quite concisely when she says to William:

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256 Brooke and Shield, Rosina, 8.
257 Brooke and Shield, Rosina, 14.
258 Brooke and Shield, Rosina, 18.
Mind how the storm bow’d the great trees on the hills, whilst the little shrubs in the valley ne’er bent a head.259

... Among the many levels of social tension present in this opera, however, the most notable is its exploration of the concept of gleaning itself. In eighteenth-century England, gleaning, the process whereby peasants were entitled to pick over the harvested fields of landowners in their local parish, was a legal right. The foundations of the concept had been laid in the biblical ‘Law of Moses’ and had been somewhat solidified by Anglo-Saxon Law.260 Numerous local laws and regulations had also been made over the centuries within which the practice was common. The notion of gleaning itself is eminently symbolic and imbued with moral dilemma. In her article ‘Construing the Harvest’,261 Liana Vardi discusses the various frames through which gleaning as a practice has been viewed from a distance. She claims that years of interpreting and reinterpreting the figure of ‘the gleaner’ has left it irrevocably imbued with (perhaps unwarranted) cultural meaning.262 This is evident even in the way the verb ‘to glean’ itself serves as both a literal and a figurative term. The culmination of this phenomenon can be seen, she claims, in the 1867 painting by Millet, The Gleaners, which depicts a group of hardened working women, gathering stray stalks of wheat, while in the background, the bounteous mountains of golden harvest, and the mounted figure of the landowner seem to mock their toil. Vardi states: ‘The contrast between wealth and poverty, power and helplessness, male and female spheres is powerfully rendered.’263

Brooke is certainly another author (with O’Keeffe) who has clear-cut literary agendas. Apart from liberalism and feminism, Brooke’s Julia Mandeville conveys strong opinions on the political entanglements of England and Canada, and descriptions of the author suggest that she was not hesitant to opine on subjects she felt warranted attention.264 Since Rosina’s librettist was both

259 Brooke and Shield, Rosina, 25.


261 Vardi, ‘Construing the Harvest’.

262 According to Vardi, until the nineteenth century, gleaning always had more to do with agricultural practices than with charity. Vardi, ‘Construing the Harvest’, 1428.

263 Vardi, ‘Construing the Harvest’, 1424.

264 ‘The governor, who found John Brooke irascible, with a tendency to be politically and socially meddlesome, had hoped that the presence of Frances and her sister “would have wrought a change” in the chaplain, but found that “on the contrary they meddle more than he does.”’ McMullen, ‘Moore, Frances’. 
eloquent and socially-minded, and its composer, William Shield, similarly renowned for producing
works that reflected major political and social events (take *The Siege of Gibraltar* for example), it
seems likely that *Rosina* was designed as a deliberate comment on the rising tensions over the
legalities of gleaning. Especially given that after hundreds of years of gleaning throughout Europe,
the opera premiered just six years prior to the rights of gleaners in England being officially and
finally revoked.

In his book, *Crime and Law in England 1750-1840*, Peter King discusses the 1788 ruling against
gleaning at length. The relevant case, *Steel vs. Houghton et. Uxtor* is considered landmark in
property and trespass law, concluding that ‘no person has, at common law, a right to glean in the
harvest field.’ At the time, it sparked much public debate and was later rechristened ‘the Great
Case of Gleaning,’ but the case, which saw Timworth gleaner Mary Houghton successfully sued
for trespass, was the culmination of a lengthy dispute. Most sources describe mounting tensions
between landowners and gleaners in the preceding three years, and cite an earlier case, *Worllege vs.
Manning* (1786), which was won by the landowner on a technicality. King, however, claims that
the tensions between gleaners and landowners had much deeper roots, which are obscured in the
court records (which describe moral and legal precedents rather than specific localised conflicts.)
King turns instead to local records from the parish of Timworth, and finds that *Steel vs. Houghton*
was not an isolated personal conflict, but rather the result of larger changes to social and economic
relations. It is evident from various letters and documents as well as newspaper archives that neither
Worllege nor Steel were acting independently; rather they had the support of certain subscribers
who had a vested interest in setting a precedent challenging the rights of gleaners. He concludes
that these cases and the others like them were the culmination of three major contemporary
processes: ‘the proletarianisation of the rural poor, the closure of the parish, and the enclosure of
land.’

University Press, 2006).


Edward Palmer Thompson, in the preface to his book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, states: ‘In the years between 1780 and 1832, most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers.’ Records show that in the decade preceding *Worllege vs. Manning*, the communal spaces such as the village green in Timworth had been cordoned off for farming by the four big farming families of the Parish. The sense of communal property was diminishing, and with the contrasting agendas of unionism and the move to enclose property, a deep social tension between landowner and labourer was fast developing. It is within this context—the organised movements of farmers to disallow the poor to glean, and the determined attitude of the labouring classes to claim their common right—that *Steel vs. Houghton* eventually came to pass.

At the time that *Rosina* was being met with enormous success on the London stage, social changes were dividing farmers and the rural poor in an entirely new and bitter way, and conflict was developing throughout rural England between landowners and would-be gleaners. Shield had once again brought out an opera dealing with highly contentious issues. And given Brooke’s penchant for social commentary, there can be little doubt that the timing of its premiere was intentional. After all, the opera does not end on a chorus about love, or even about nature. Instead, it concludes with the following observation:

To bless, and to be blest be ours,
Whate'er our rank, whate'er our powers,
On some her gifts kind fortune showers,
Who reap, like us, in this rich scene.

Yet those who taste her bounty less
The sigh malevolent repress,
And loud the feeling bosom bless,
Which something leaves for want to glean.

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273 Brooke and Shield, *Rosina*, 36.


Conclusion

William Shield and Samuel Arnold worked within a popular genre with well-established traditions: the forms, characters and casts of their operas were fairly firmly locked into place, and artistic decisions were largely limited to the setting of lyrics, the composition of additional songs and incidental music, and most importantly, the choice of text and librettist. Shield and Arnold’s England was awash with local and continental ideas on the principles of taste, genius, sublimity, beauty, and nature. It was a place of social volatility; of the unionising of the underclasses, and a social justice movement bent on removing fetters to human rights. Farmers and the parish poor were beginning to openly clash. Voices raised in protest at the Atlantic slave trade were beginning to have some impact. Democracy was growing in meaning and the monarchy was held in some disapprobation. The industrial revolution was underway and the concept of ‘nature’ had taken on an idealism of hitherto unparalleled meaning. All of this provided the context for composers and librettists working within a musically difficult society, where a relationship with the stage provided one of few means of generating a viable income. Against this lively backdrop, Shield and Arnold’s prolific outpouring of comic opera stands in stark silhouette. The operas examined in this thesis demonstrate a shift in thinking, wherein the operatic stage mutates from a space expressly for entertainment, to a canvas for the exploration of complex and often controversial ideas.

Linda Troost acknowledges this in her 1985 thesis, suggesting that from the 1790s onward, ‘deeper social issues enter(ed) the genre, song began to lose its importance— dialogue alone could really grapple with difficult issues— and comic opera gradually metamorphosed into the melodrama, a serious play with a large assortment of atmospheric musical numbers.’\(^{274}\) I would suggest that this process was begun even earlier, perhaps even a decade earlier, since, with the exception of The Enchanted Wood, all of the operas discussed in this thesis were premiered in the early 1780s.

In the introduction to this thesis, I referred to Jane Girdham’s description of the role of eighteenth-century English comic opera as being ‘woefully underplayed’\(^{275}\) in musicological accounts of the period. She asserts that the ‘musical’ theatre of this period has been ‘virtually ignored by literary

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\(^{275}\) Girdham, English Opera, 37.
historians. But Girdham’s use of the term ‘underplayed’ is testament to her belief in the importance of English comic opera; and my study of the genre has upheld this belief. This thesis has looked in some detail at just four operas among hundreds of examples of contemporary works. And yet, despite its limited scope, it has discovered numerous subversions and contradictions of popular conceptions of opera —and even theatre— in this period of England’s history. What wealth of other historically and culturally relevant manuscripts remain as yet unread, unpublished, unstudied? In 1950, George Hauger wrote an article on William Shield for Music & Letters wherein he stated:

No one has thought fit to raise a literary memorial to this boat builder who became a Master of the King’s Music and was one of the most prolific composers of English opera… It is true that Shield is a minor figure; yet because of what his life reveals to us of English music during a particular age, he should escape oblivion.

276 Girdham, English Opera, vii.

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