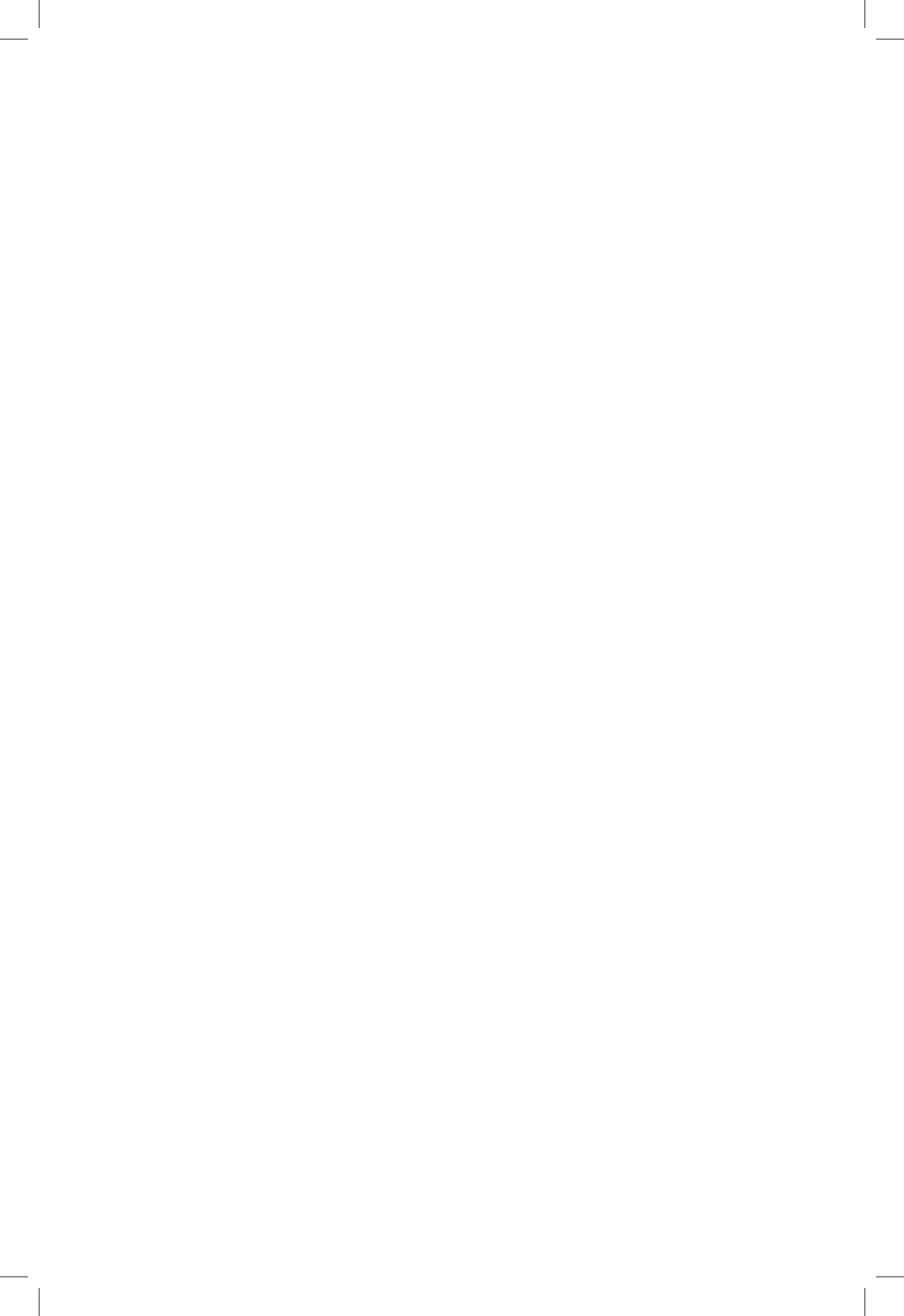


# **Popular Culture in History**



## 'Punch and Judy' and Cultural Appropriation

Scott Cutler Shershow

It is a drama in two acts, is Punch. . . . Ah, it's a beautiful history; there's a deal of morals with it, and there's a large volume wrote about it. (Mayhew, 1967 [1861–62] 3: 46)

In *The New Yorker* magazine of 2 August 1993, a cartoon depicts two grotesque, hook-nosed figures, male and female, fighting with cudgels while sitting at a table at an elegant restaurant, while a waiter stands by asking, 'Are you folks ready to order?' The cartoon prompts me to ask: why should Punch and Judy still be recognizable icons of domestic violence and social transgression at the end of the twentieth century, even to readers who may have never seen an actual 'Punch and Judy' puppet show? Versions of this question have, of course, been asked before. In answering them, however, scholars typically claim a primeval or archetypal status for Punch, pointing to his alleged cultural descent from a whole constellation of ancient sources including, for example, 'the religious plays of medieval England', 'the improvised farces of the Italian comedians', and 'the folk festivals of pagan Greece' (Speaight, 1970: 230). I will take the opposite position, attempting to locate 'Punch and Judy' in the actual processes of social life and cultural transmission in a particular period, and in the dynamic interaction of cultural practices and their discursive reinterpretation. Such an approach may do more justice to the cultural meaning of figures who still apparently embody, as they do in the cartoon, anxieties about status, class, gender, and relative social power.

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Indeed, I will argue in this paper, as I have elsewhere, that puppet theater in general is a uniquely useful example of the interaction of 'popular' and 'elite' forms of culture.<sup>1</sup> From at least the Renaissance, various forms of puppetry have always existed side by side with a drama of direct human representation. Histrionic performance in the broadest sense thus divides along the lines of an irresistibly obvious opposition: between the puppet and the player, the physical object and the corporeal body. Onto this opposition, as I will argue, some of the many other 'dichotomous distinctions' that characterize what Pierre Bourdieu (1990) calls 'the logic of practice' – between 'high' and 'low', 'popular' and 'elite', 'folk' and 'literary' – have often been projected. In practical terms, European puppet theater was typically 'popular' in that it was oral, ephemeral, and itinerant, functioning at the margins of the market economy, and accessible to the broadest possible spectrum of audiences – not only in terms of class but even in terms of *age*. More broadly, the puppet has also been repeatedly inscribed in Western culture as a marker or rubric of the 'low': as a cultural practice literally situated in the marginal social spheres of carnival, fairground, and market-place; as a parodic or degraded form of performance which is subordinate, as such, to the 'legitimate' or 'literary' drama; as an inanimate object associated with the merely material in its conventional opposition to the spiritual; and even as sign, trope, and metaphor on a hypothetical hierarchy of being and representation, the passive vehicle of a mastering authorial form.

Nevertheless, the relations between the puppet stage and the 'literary' drama across the centuries also demonstrate what Peter Burke calls the 'two-way traffic' between high and low modes of culture (Burke, 1978: 58). In the early modern period, for example, puppets were still performing the biblical stories that had been performed by actors in the Middle Ages; in the eighteenth century, similarly, puppets were still performing some of the popular favorites of the Renaissance stage such as *Doctor Faustus*. Correspondingly, in a wide variety of bourgeois discourse from an extended historical period, the puppet theater has been described, defined, disparaged, celebrated, and, in short, *appropriated* by theorists and thinkers, playwrights and performers, who inscribe this ephemeral form of 'popular' performance in texts that also declare their own contrary status as 'legitimate' or 'literary'. What Susan Stewart observes of 'the miniature' applies perhaps even more intensely to the puppet, which has often seemed to possess an inescapable theatricality not only on the diminutive stages where it literally performs, but also as an imagined object in a discursive space 'on which we project, by means of association or textuality', the anxieties and constructions that shape our social lives (Stewart, 1984: 54).

My observations here will thus join with those of many other historians, social theorists, and literary scholars who, in the last few decades, have also argued that cultural production and consumption are alike inseparable from cultural appropriation. From the broad surveys of historical social practice

by historians such as Michel de Certeau (1984), Roger Chartier (1984; 1988) and Natalie Zemon Davis (1975), to the specific readings of contemporary literature, television and lifestyle by John Fiske (1989a and 1989b), Stuart Hall (1976), Dick Hebdige (1979), Janice Radway (1984) and others, scholars have suggested, in different ways, that cultural consumption always 'creates ways of using that cannot be limited to the intentions of those who produce' (Chartier, 1984: 234).<sup>2</sup> Most of this work focuses on what de Certeau calls 'the ingenious way the weak make use of the strong' (1984: xvii) – that is, the reappropriation of 'élite' or, in some cases, 'mass' culture by people on whom such practices had been imposed by the imperatives of social aspiration or the strategies of the marketplace.

By contrast, I will focus here on the appropriation of an apparently 'popular' cultural practice in and by texts that embody the social aspirations of bourgeois culture. I will consider texts or practices in which 'élite' pretensions and 'popular' sources share an uneasy equilibrium – and in which, moreover, such categories may be viewed in the process of their discursive construction.<sup>3</sup> Such texts and their writers enlist the performing object as it were against itself in a much larger project of cultural subordination, as part of that vast, multi-hierarchical system of behavioral, cultural and aesthetic distinction that Bourdieu has anatomized so exhaustively in the last few decades (see, especially, 1984, 1990, 1991, and Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Indeed, I will be considering texts that participate, whatever their other goals, in the construction of a particular kind of reader and a particular kind of cultural *perception*. As I will also suggest, however, the same writers who thus subordinate the puppet on hierarchies at once ontological, cultural, and social also reveal an inescapable fascination for a mode of performance they sometimes reconstrue as the bearer of an indeterminate theatrical 'magic' or a transcendent, ahistorical cultural power. As such, the puppet may be seen to figure in that recurring cultural process described by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, in which 'high discourses, with their lofty style, exalted aims and sublime ends, are structured in relation to the debasements and degradations of low discourse'; and in which, more generally, the act of cultural appropriation becomes 'constitutive of the very formation of middleclass identity' (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 3–4, 201).<sup>4</sup>

But the specific instances of cultural appropriation I will observe here also suggest the broader conclusion that so-called 'popular' or 'élite' modes of culture not only interact in a specific dynamic of influence and allusion, but indeed, thoroughly interpenetrate one another in a process that finally problematizes the very terms I have used to describe it – by inviting us to question whether rival groups ever 'have' their 'own' coherent and autonomous 'cultures'. In the specific period I will be discussing, for example, the puppet's 'lowness' was often reinterpreted as an appealing preciousness for a bourgeois audience at once hungry for amusement and jaded by the conventions of the 'literary' drama; and playwrights and performers of the 'legitimate'

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stage, such as Henry Fielding, Charlotte Charke, George Alexander Stevens, Samuel Foote and others, sometimes turned to puppetry in their respective attempts to woo the fickle attentions of the London audience.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, so-called ‘popular’ puppeteers such as Martin Powell performed to great acclaim in Covent Garden, in the heart of London’s theater district, using traditional puppet characters and techniques in parodies of Italian opera and satiric treatments of contemporary politics. In either case, the cultural categories at issue are constructed and defined as such only *in* this process of mutual appropriation. As Frederic Jameson has recently suggested, culture itself ‘is not a “substance” or a phenomenon in its own right; it is an objective mirage that arises out of the relationship between at least two groups’; and culture must be seen, therefore, ‘as a vehicle or a medium whereby the relationship between groups is transacted’ (Jameson, 1992: 33–4). Thus, although ‘appropriation’ seems to denote precisely a dynamic which, in any case, one must consider almost entirely as described in the discourse of its participants, this term’s implied dualism of self and other, the appropriator and the appropriated, is finally inadequate to the complex intermingling, the ‘ground rending and re-mending’, that unfolds over time within the practices and representations of dominant and subordinate groups.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, I will continue to employ the term ‘appropriation’ so as to suggest at once the violence and the relationality with which so-called ‘popular’ and ‘literary’ modes of culture clash and co-operate in the discursive construction of distinction in general, the ‘transfigured, misrecognizable, legitimate form of social class’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 250).

In all of its manifestations, the central figure of the eighteenth-century puppet stage was Punchinello or Punch, whose name is apparently an anglicization of Pulcinella, a conventional Italian puppet, who, in turn, apparently derives from one of the conventional characters of the *commedia dell’arte*. Whatever his ethnographic origins (which are still debated), Punch clearly begins to perform in England as a marionette or stringed puppet in the early Restoration period, when he is frequently noticed by Pepys and other contemporary observers. As such records confirm, Punch was typically used as a carnivalesque interpolation within the conventional biblical or historical stories of the puppet stage: a kind of celebrity ‘actor’ whose character and presence remained constant from play to play, and who would pretend to disrupt a narrative within which he was, in fact, the chief attraction. Then, around the end of the eighteenth century, in a cultural development also frequently described, Punch the ‘fashionable’ and parodic marionette re-emerges as a glove puppet in a street puppet show known simply as ‘Punch and Judy’. This, in brief, is the cultural history I will address in this paper via three primary examples. First, I will consider how the first of the celebrated periodical essayists of the early eighteenth century repeatedly observes Punch, but only to enlist him in his ‘totalizing project of moral education’ (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 83) and the corresponding construction of an appropriate bourgeois readership.<sup>7</sup> Second, I will consider a few lesser-known aspects of the entwined

careers of Henry Fielding and Charlotte Charke – each of whom inhabit the cultural frontier between elite and popular forms of performance, and each of whom speak through Punch at different moments in their problematic but characteristic careers in the eighteenth-century theater. Finally, I will describe how 'Punch and Judy' develops as an apparent resurgence of carnivalesque festivity at the end of the eighteenth century, even while being simultaneously reappropriated as a target of bourgeois education and cultural nostalgia. I am conscious that in thus describing the constant reabsorption of the 'popular' into relatively more privileged forms of discourse, I may seem to be ignoring or disarming the power of the puppet to express for different times and places what Bakhtin calls 'the people's unofficial truth'. In fact, however, such regrets or apologies make sense only within the paradigm I am trying to destabilize. The impulse to celebrate an authentic and truly 'popular' culture finally replicates the cultural logic of domination which it critiques merely through inversion. On the other hand, to argue, as I will here, that Punch never wholly escapes discursive appropriation, and that popular puppetry is thoroughly imbued with the cultural and social hierarchies it seems to threaten, finally makes the duality of culture and 'sub'-culture, and thus the process of distinction itself, more difficult to maintain.

### 'Dominion over Wood and Wire'

My selective account begins in May 1709, when the journalist Richard Steele reproduced, in the pages of the *Tatler*, the text of a letter allegedly received by Sir Isaac Bickerstaff (his regular pseudonym in this journal) from the resort of Bath.<sup>8</sup> The letter (no. 16) describes a comic incident that embodies in miniature – a peculiarly appropriate metaphor – the issues I intend to address throughout. As the correspondent explains, 'two ambitious Ladies', Florimell and Prudentia, were just then competing for the favor and attention of fashionable society in Bath by bespeaking a pair of dramatic entertainments. Florimell commissions a 'Company of Strollers' or itinerant players to put on a play that the writer calls *Alexander the Great* – that is, Nathaniel Lee's well-known Restoration tragedy, *The Rival Queens*. But Prudentia, on the other hand, commissions a puppeteer named Martin Powell to perform his puppet show of *The Creation of the World*. The fictional letter-writer then describes at some length how the puppets succeed in engrossing the attention of the resort town:

On *Thursday* Morning, the Poppet-Drummer, *Adam*, and *Eve*, and several others who liv'd before the Flood, pass'd through the Streets on Horseback, to invite us all to the Pastime, and the Representation of such Things as we all knew to be true; and Mr. Mayor was so Wise as to prefer these innocent People the Poppets, who, he said, were to represent Christians, before the wicked Players, who were to show *Alexander*, an Heathen Philosopher. . . . All the World crowded to *Prudentia's* House, because it was giv'n out, no body could get in. When we came to *Noah's Flood* in the Show, *Punch*

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and his Wife were introduc'd dancing in the Ark. An honest plain Friend of *Florimel's*, but a Critick withal, rose up in the midst of the Representation, and made many very good Exceptions to the *Drama* itself, and told us, That it was against all Morality, as well as Rules of the Stage, that *Punch* should be in Jest in the Deluge, or indeed that he should appear at all. This was certainly a just Remark, and I thought to second him; but he was hiss'd by *Prudentia's* Party . . . Old Mrs *Petulant* desir'd both her Daughters to mind the Moral; then whisper'd Mrs. Mayoress, *This is very proper for young People to see.* *Punch* at the End of the Play made Madame *Prudentia* a Compliment, and was very civil to the whole Company, making Bows till his Buttons touch'd the Ground.

The passage is both an instance of and a commentary on the 'two-way traffic' between elite and popular forms of culture which it describes. Powell's performance, not unlike Steele's account of it, is torn between 'fashion' and parody, between the carnivalesque impulse (*Punch's* parodic intrusion into the biblical story) and the fleeting attention of a bourgeois audience who make elaborate (and erroneous) moral rationalizations for their enjoyment of the entertainment. *Punch* himself becomes, as it were, both a tool and an actor in an intricate game of social and literary distinction, transmuted from crude showman to 'civil' gentleman so as to mirror (and mock) the social aspirations of his audience. Steele intends the various comic nuances of the scene – the Mayor's identification of Alexander as a 'heathen philosopher', the critic's interpolation of a moral and critical judgement not unmingled with social prejudice, Mrs *Petulant's* self-important concern with education and propriety – to be observed and judged by a different but equally bourgeois audience: his readers.

In the months following, Powell apparently noticed and responded to his mention in the *Tatler*; for on 21 July (no. 44), Steele writes that Powell 'makes a prophane lewd Jester, whom he calls *Punch*, speak to the Dishonour of *Isaac Bickerstaff* with great familiarity'. For the next six months or so, Steele would refer several times to this alleged feud between Powell and *Bickerstaff*, and use it as the occasion for an elaborate political satire in which the histrionic process of literal in-spiration becomes a metaphor for political manipulation and power. As Steele declares to Powell in July:

I would have him know, that I can look beyond his Wires, and know very well the whole Trick of his Art, and that . . . there is a Thread on one of *Punch's* Chops, which draws it up, and lets it fall at the Discretion of the said *Powell*, who stands behind and plays him, and makes him speak sawcily of his Betters . . . therefore I shall command my self, and never trouble me further with this little Fellow, who is himself but a tall Puppet, and has not brains enough to make even Wood speak as it ought to do.

In this passage, the rhetorical categories of relative size evoke the assumptions of class: Powell is at once the authorial master of powerfully saucy puppets and merely a 'little Fellow', and his ventriloquistic craft potentially



subverts a hierarchical class structure which its own conditions resemble. The rest of this essay, however, is a satirical defense of Steele's friend, the young Benjamin Hoadly (later to become the Bishop of Bangor and a well-known Latitudinarian), who was then engaged in a pamphlet controversy with the Bishop of Exeter over the Tory doctrine of 'passive obedience'. By careful parodies of Exeter's language here and in a follow-up essay, Steele transforms Powell into a satiric analogue of the high churchman, who is then wittily accused of a design 'to have all Men *Automata*, like your puppets'.

In the follow-up essay on 4 August (no. 50), Steele prints the text of a pretended letter from the puppet-master that accuses Bickerstaff of 'sowing the Seeds of Sedition and Disobedience among my Puppets':

Your Zeal for the (good old) Cause would make you perswade *Punch* to pull the String from his Chops, and not move his Jaw when I have a mind he should harangue. Now I appeal to all Men, if this is not contrary to that uncontrollable, unaccountable Dominion, which by the Laws of nature I exercise over 'em; for all Sorts of Wood and Wire were made for the Use and Benefit of Man: I have therefore an unquestionable Right to frame, fashion, and put them together as I please; and having made them what they are, my Puppets are my Property, and therefore my Slaves.

As political satire, this is clear enough: the high Tory doctrine of a subject's passive obedience to sovereign authority is not only mocked by the obvious comparison to the literal passivity of the performing object but also correspondingly diminished in the contrast between the sententiousness of its own discursive formulations and the urbane wit of Isaac Bickerstaff. Eventually, however, the rhetorical momentum of this extraordinary passage starts to seem itself an instance of the 'uncontrollable' and 'unaccountable' domination against which Steele ostensibly writes. The carnivalesque power with which *Punch* speaks 'sawcily of his Betters' is unmasked, revealed as no more than servitude and contrivance; the inexorable rhythm of framing and fashioning, pleasure and property, with which Steele's rhetoric transforms iconic objects into veritable slaves, seems to take on its own implacable, demonic energy. A few lines later, Powell proposes to reduce his Dispute with Bickerstaff into two Propositions:

The First, Whether I have not an Absolute Power, whenever I please, to light a Pipe with one of *Punch's* Legs, or warm my Fingers with his Whole Carcass? The second, Whether the Devil would not be in *Punch* should he by Word or Deed oppose my sovereign Will and Pleasure?

The horrific imagery of this passage, even though distanced by an urbane rhetoric and childlike fantasy, evokes the violence of cultural appropriation itself – whose logic constrains Steele to confirm the Otherness of popular culture even as he uses it as a discursive tool in a project of liberal politics and bourgeois education.

Just as inevitably, the passage not only evokes but exaggerates for parodic effect the hypothetical model of theatrical authorship that has been called in our day the ‘theological theater’ (Derrida, 1978): one in which the sovereign intentions of an author-creator descend, like the divine *spiritus* into matter, downward into player-puppets who literally embody an authorial ‘inspiration’. Steele’s version of Powell grounds his authorial ‘dominion’ in the pure materiality of the performing object, and describes both in terms at once political and ontological:

Nor is there in Nature any Thing more just, than the Homage which is paid by a less to a more excellent Being: so that by the Right therefore of a superior Genius, I am their supreme Moderator, altho’ you would insinuate (agreeable to your levelling Principles) that I am my self but a great Puppet, and can therefore have but a co-ordinate Jurisdiction with them. I suppose I have now sufficiently made it appear, that I have a paternal Right to keep a Puppet-Show.

As this passage further illustrates, Steele’s explicit political satire is contingent upon a vision of authorship that, in other contexts, is frequently affirmed in the pages of the *Tatler*. In one of the first issues of the periodical, for example, Steele had lamented in the voice of one ‘Eugenio’ (who comments on Ravenscroft’s popular farce *The London Cuckolds*), that theatrical players ‘are oblig’d to repeat and assume proper Gestures for representing Things, of which their Reason must be asham’d, and which they must disdain their Audience for approving’ (no. 8). ‘The Amendment of these low Gratifications’, he continues, is to be found in ‘the Presentation of the Noble Characters drawn by *Shakespear* and others’; whose presentation would make the theater itself ‘the most agreeable and easie Method of making a Polite and Moral Gentry, which would end in rendring the rest of the people regular in their Behavior’. Notice how the discourse here implies a transparent series of hierarchies at once representational and moral (the contrast between the grotesque characters of farce and the ‘Noble Characters’ of Shakespeare) which are contingent upon the puppet-like passivity of the actor relative to the author, and which in turn are said to *produce* a corresponding social hierarchy. Elsewhere, Steele and the other essayists that joined him here and later in the *Spectator* frequently critique the alleged invasion of the ‘legitimate’ theater by the Italian opera and the carnivalesque variety entertainments of Christopher Rich – who, as Steele had previously written, ‘brought in upon us, to get in his Money, Ladder-dancers, Rope-dancers, Juglers, and Mountebanks, to strut in the Place of *Shakespear*’s Heroes, and *Johnson*’s Humourists’ (no. 12). By implication, Steele thus places himself, on the one hand, on the side of a cultural vision of the sovereign authorial voice while, on the other hand, defending the Whig doctrine of limited political sovereignty, using the puppet as satiric mouthpiece and discursive standard of reference in both cases. The puppet had, in Martin Powell’s hands, already inevitably evoked a tension between parody

and 'fashion', between its own carnivalesque roots and the fleeting attention of a bourgeois audience; and was thus already involved in an implicit process of generic and aesthetic distinction. In Steele and the other essayists (who also continued to allude frequently to puppet theater in the ensuing years),<sup>9</sup> the puppet is in effect reappropriated and re-parodied with an élite, 'literary' version of something like the same process.

### 'Borrowed Dress'

About twenty years later, two unusual figures of the eighteenth-century stage, Henry Fielding and Charlotte Charke, were both turning to Punch and puppetry in ways which further illuminate the shifting dynamics of bourgeois theatrical taste in the period. Both Fielding and Charke resorted to literal puppet performance at once out of pure financial necessity and with a keen awareness of the puppet's participation in a multi-hierarchical system of literary, class, and gender distinction. Fielding, indeed, repeatedly appropriated the puppet both in his discourse and in his theatrical practice, even while explicitly devaluing it against the 'literary' drama to which he also aspired. Charke (the daughter of playwright and manager Colley Cibber), an actress recently much discussed for her cross-dressing and possible bisexuality, turned to puppet theater when other avenues of theatrical work were closed to her; and seemed to discover in the performing object a symbolic equivalent to her own social and sexual marginality.

Henry Fielding's two major experiments with puppetry frame his career in the theater. At the age of twenty-three, after several moderately successful attempts to produce 'regular' five-act comedies at the patent houses, Fielding joined what Martin Battestin calls the 'band of rogue comedians at the New Theatre in the Haymarket', where his autobiographical satire *The Author's Farce* opened on 30 March 1730 (1989: 82). The play is a comprehensive satire of the allegedly degenerate taste of a cultural milieu in which, as a character puts it, 'learning is decried, wit not understood . . . the theaters are puppet shows and the comedians ballad singers' (1.5: 27–30).<sup>10</sup> As such, the young Fielding here joins with various other members of the literary establishment in this period who conventionally lament, as Steele does in the passage cited earlier, the popularity of 'Rope-dancers, Juglers, and Mountebanks' as against the 'legitimate' drama. The first two acts of Fielding's play depict the unsuccessful efforts of the playwright Luckless, an obvious analogue of the real author, to place his tragedy with Cibber and Wilks, two of the managers of the leading London theater, the Theatre Royal at Drury Lane.<sup>11</sup> In Act III, Luckless (and thus Fielding) capitulate to the town by producing a puppet show called *The Pleasures of the Town*, 'in which will be shown the whole Court of Dullness, with abundance of singing and dancing . . . also the comical and diverting humor of . . . Punch and his wife Joan' (2.8: 4–8).

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Fielding announces the obvious implications of this gesture in the prologue to the framing play:

Beneath the tragic or the comic name,  
Farces and puppet shows ne'er miss of fame.  
Since then in borrowed dress they've pleased the town,  
Condemn them not, appearing in their own. (Prologue: 31–5)

Puppet shows pleased the town in 'borrowed dress' – that is, by usurping the social and theatrical status of tragedy and comedy. Not just within their own field of representation, but *as* institution or cultural category, the puppets are interlopers within a hypothetical comedy of manners set within the real conditions of contemporary theater. As such, puppets have moved up one level of cultural distinction, and down one level of representation: they are 'beneath the tragic or the comic name', so to speak, both in the conventional cultural sense and because they have dressed themselves in the 'borrowed' status of generic and aesthetic privilege. But what does it mean, as Fielding claims, that puppets will now appear in their 'own' dress, as 'themselves'? Fielding's appropriative project illustrates the essential impurity of the cultural categories by which such a project defines itself. To strip puppets of their 'borrowed dress' (as Ben Jonson had suggested over a century earlier in a famous scene from *Bartholomew Faire*, when a puppet lifts his clothes to reveal 'we have neyther Male nor Female amongst us' [5.5: 99–106]) – is merely to reveal one more level of artifice. Similarly, this announced return to some hypothetical, originary mode of puppetry is a theatrical gesture that moves in at least two cultural directions at once: it appropriates and sophisticates the puppet performance it claims to purify, and shatters the limits of popular taste to which it pretends to surrender.

The puppet show which then occupies the entire third and final act of Fielding's play begins with the appearance of 'Punchinello', who sings a song which repeats the adversarial gesture of Fielding's prologue:

Whilst the town's brimful of farces,  
Flocking whilst we see her asses  
Thick as grapes upon a bunch,  
Critics, whilst you smile on madness,  
And more stupid, solemn sadness,  
Sure you will not frown on Punch. (3: 45–50)

Here, Fielding's own cultural critique merges with the carnivalesque voice of this most familiar of puppet characters, who at once invites and returns a gaze of critical judgement thus rendered utterly problematic. Punch and his wife proceed to fight and dance, just as they had in the shows of Martin Powell and other puppeteers of the period; but then resolve:

Since we hate, like people in vogue,  
 Let us call not bitch and rogue,  
 Gentler titles let us use,  
 Hate each other, but not abuse,  
 Pretty dear!  
 Ah! my chère! (3: 82–8)

Here, Punch has not only been marooned within a multiply parodic entertainment which explicitly lacks even a 'design or plot' (3: 25) for him to disrupt; but is also forced, as it were, to repeat his own cultural appropriation on the level of the bourgeois class dynamic. Later, at the end of the shapeless mixture of song, dance, and satire that follows, the 'real' characters Luckless and his mistress Harriot eventually prove to be, in an often-discussed parody of the 'recognition' scenes of contemporary drama, the King and Queen of Bantam, related by an ironic and impossible consanguinity to the puppets Punch and Joan – who similarly prove to be nobly born (see Rudolph, 1975). As the revelation of the two puppets' origins fulfills their previous aspiration to become people of fashion, so Luckless's familial relation to the puppets becomes a figure for Fielding's own inescapable connection to the popular culture he appropriates with such apparent ease. In the design of the whole multi-faceted show, the literal author masters representation by representing himself, and reinscribes the puppets within a legitimate literary context; but both the play within and the play without produce the same effect (the town's pleasure) that they also satirize, and both character and playwright achieve success by using the very modes of popular performance that their respective entertainments relentlessly mock.

Fielding's subsequent work as essayist and novelist, would, of course, eventually establish him as a canonical figure of the period. Charlotte Charke, by contrast, may seem a thoroughly marginal figure: a minor player specializing in sensational cross-dressing roles, and an occasional writer whose most famous work, an autobiographical memoir, resembles a rogue narrative. Yet in the 1730s, both Fielding and Charke inhabited more or less the same cultural space and, indeed, similarly turned to puppetry in their respective struggles to make a precarious living in eighteenth-century showbusiness. *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke* has been frequently discussed in recent years by critics considering more generally how women's autobiographical writings of the eighteenth century participate in the construction of a 'gendered female subject'.<sup>12</sup> The various forms of transgressive behavior narrated in the book – Charke's quarrel with her famous father Colley Cibber, her theatrical impersonations of Cibber in Fielding's *Pasquin* and elsewhere, her cross-dressing both on stage and off, her experiments with 'an exhausting number of professions' (Straub, 1992: 135) – have also attracted the attention of scholars newly sensitive to the marginal and subversive in eighteenth-century culture. Charke's recurrent activities as a puppeteer have, however, been virtually ignored by this recent work, a fact which itself illustrates the continuing

subordination of puppetry in the cultural equation. By contrast, I will suggest here that Charke's efforts at puppet performance, as reconstructed from contemporary advertisements and her own very brief accounts in *The Narrative*, embody in miniature the complex dynamics of class, gender, and culture that her whole difficult career has otherwise been seen to illuminate.

As other commentators have described in more detail, Charke acted a wide variety of different roles at Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields in the early 1730s, periodically quarreling with her father, her brother (the actor and manager Theophilus Cibber), and with Charles Fleetwood, the manager of Covent Garden. She began to act in Fielding's 'Great Moguls's Company of Comedians' at the Haymarket Theatre after the abortive production of her own play *The Art of Management* (1735), another parody of contemporary theatrical conditions and the taste of the town (Morgan, 1988). The Licensing Act of 1737, which strictly limited performance to the two patent companies where neither Fielding nor Charke were welcome, thus ended both their careers in the mainstream of London theater. At this point Charke began what would eventually prove to be a long list of commercial schemes to support herself and her daughter. First, as she describes it in her own narrative, 'I took it into my Head to dive into TRADE' and 'took a shop in *Long-Acre*, and turn'd Oil-woman and Grocer' (Charke, 1755: 70). When her self-confessed poor management and a ruinous theft plunged her into 'misfortunes and disgrace', she 'positively threw it up, possessed of a Hundred Pounds Stock, all paid for, to keep a grand Puppet-Show over the *Tennis-Court* in *James-Street*' (75). In this emphatic juxtaposition of the roles of fashionable urban grocer and 'grand' puppeteer, Charke's text not only suggests the intricate process by which, in this period, a whole constellation of class-based meaning attaches itself to consumer goods (Plumb, 1982), but also implicitly evokes that more general aura of commodification that seems inevitably to surround a theater of *objects*. By literally exchanging her stock of sugar, tea, and oil for a company of marionettes, Charke highlights the tangible exchange value of the latter within the economic field of urban entertainment.

Indeed, just as her puppets were quite literally objects of and for bourgeois acquisition, so they were also iconic representations of class aspiration. As she describes it:

For some Time I resided at the *Tennis-Court* with my Puppet-Show, which was allowed to be the most elegant that was ever exhibited. I was so very curious, that I bought Mezzotinto's of several eminent Persons, and had the Faces carved from them. Then, in regard to my Cloaths, I spared for no Cost to make them splendidly magnificent, and the Scenes were agreeable to the rest. (82)

Even these few sentences convey another multi-leveled process of cultural transmission and reception in which a variety of competing media and voices participate. The faces of 'eminent Persons' descend from actuality to commercial mezzotint engravings to a puppet show, which is then 'allowed', as

though by some impersonal process of collective judgement, to be 'the most elegant that was ever exhibited'. The overall theatrical project is an obvious appropriation not only of puppets in general but of the techniques of previous 'fashionable' puppeteers such as Martin Powell. At the same time, however, the 'eminent' figures represented by the carved puppet-heads were constrained, within the puppet show, to assume other roles and to act side by side with Punch and Joan: a kind of reverse cultural appropriation of the élite by the quasi-popular. Charke's puppets acted fully realized plays from the 'classical' repertory, including works by Shakespeare (*Henry IV*, with Punch as Falstaff), her father (*Damon and Phyllida*), and Fielding (*The Covent Garden Tragedy* and several others). Reproducing in miniature a conventional theatrical season of the period, Charke seems also to deliberately remind her audience of her stormy relations with her famous father and her previous participation in Fielding's controversial seasons at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket (which was virtually next door to what Charke called 'Punch's Theatre' on James Street). As such, she indirectly also represents herself within a performance that otherwise effaces her own identity behind the iconic mask of the histrionic object. Charke's puppet shows, in their deliberate invocation of her own theatrical notoriety, their incongruous mix of the carnivalesque comedy and the fashionable, must have had a particular theatrical charge to an audience otherwise now limited to the two patent houses.

Her performance of Fielding's *Covent Garden Tragedy*, for example, must have evoked for its original audience an absolutely dizzying spiral of meta-drama and cultural appropriation. Originally performed as an afterpiece at Drury Lane in the season of 1732, and set among the bawds, pimps, and whores of contemporary London, Fielding's play was already a metadramatic burlesque of pseudo-classical domestic tragedies such as Ambrose Philips's *The Distrest Mother* (1712). The play also repeatedly uses metaphors drawn from puppet theater. Parodying the discourse of classical tragedy, one character laments that 'Man is a puppet which a woman moves/And dances as she will' (Fielding, 1967: 118). Later, enjoining one of her girls against sending away Captain Bilkum, Mother Punchbowl explains that

A house like this without a bully left  
Is like a puppet show without a Punch (124).

Such lines would obviously reverberate with an additional comic effect when spoken by literal puppets. Moreover, Mother Punchbowl's name, as this passage seems intended to further underline, suggests a punning relationship with the most famous of puppet characters, just as her role in the play – which carnivalizes the *topos* of the suffering mother – broadly resembles the parodic function of Punch in conventional puppet shows.

*The Covent Garden Tragedy* also lampoons specific contemporary individuals: Captain Bilkum, for example, was intended to suggest Edward Braddock, a notorious bully; and Mother Punchbowl, the main character, was

intended to suggest Elizabeth Needham, a famous bawd also mentioned in *The Dunciad* and depicted in the first plate of Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress*. Shortly before the print and the play, the real Needham had been 'set in the pillory' and 'so ill used by the populace, that it put an end to her days'.<sup>13</sup> In reality a lurid spectacle for a sadistic mob, Needham becomes, in Hogarth's print, an emblem within a cautionary tale of bourgeois morality; and then, in Fielding's play, a satiric tool with which to *deflate* the moral pretensions of bourgeois theater. In Charke's puppet version, however, as she described it in a newspaper advertisement, 'the part of Mother Punchbowl' was played 'by Punch, being the first time of his appearing in petticoats' (Morgan, 1988: 64). Here again, the bizarre cross-dressing of a puppet whose protruding hump and nose otherwise suggests a grotesque, exaggerated masculinity must have inevitably suggested Charke's own celebrated cross-dressed roles on the stage. In political and social terms, however, the horrific punishment of the real Elizabeth Needham, in which the authorities literally employed the populace as the tool of its own punitive power, must be seen as the dark side of the popular festivity to which Punch so commonly gives voice.<sup>14</sup> In *The Covent Garden Tragedy*, Mother Punchbowl asks another character, and the audience:

Would it delight your eyes to see me dragged  
By base plebian hands to Westminster,  
The scoff of serjeants and attorneys' clerks,  
And then, exalted on the pillory,  
To stand the sneer of every virtuous whore?  
Oh, couldst thou bear to see the rotten egg  
Mix with my tears, that trickle down my cheeks,  
Like dew distilling from the full-blown rose:  
Or see me follow the attractive cart,  
To see the hangman lift the virgal rod. (Fielding, 1967: 115)

The audience of the original play as performed at the Haymarket may, in literal terms, have at least partially overlapped with the audience of Needham's brutal execution, just as they did for the public hangings at Tyburn. Yet this passage, with its witty deflation of tragic rhetoric, and comic skepticism about 'virtuous whores', participates in the implicit construction of a bourgeois audience that separates itself from the 'base plebian' actions of the London mob. Charke's version, however, goes perhaps even one step farther. In the transformation of a carnivalesque figure into the suffering victim of popular rage – the spectacle of Punch as at once cross-dressed actor, parodic mother and pilloried bawd – multiple forms of transgression seem, as it were, to cancel one another out.

Charke's own position, as she confronts her audience via the faces and voices of her performing objects, seems similarly suspended within a kind of multiply self-contradictory cultural space. Her own marginality (to which her current status as puppeteer further contributes) was reproduced in the doubly



transgressive figure of Punch, who is 'himself' both empowered and exploited, constrained to embody at once the mob's violence and its victim. Just so, the puppet-master who represents herself (in reverse) as a cross-dressed puppet both overcomes and merely repeats the forms of her own subordination (as daughter or as player). Charke seems to discover in puppetry an apparently free space within which, however, she merely recreates the theatrical and cultural hierarchies which otherwise excluded or subordinated her. In the end, her puppets were little more than a desperate and ultimately unsuccessful effort to exploit her own histrionic notoriety for financial gain – as Charke makes clear in *The Narrative*:

This Affair stood me in some Hundreds, and would have paid all Costs and Charges, if I had not, through excessive Fatigue in accomplishing it, acquired a violent Fever, which had like to have carried me off, and consequently gave a Damp to the Run I should otherwise have had, as I was one of the principal Exhibitors for those Gentry. (82)

The syntactic ambiguity of the final reference to the 'gentry' – which seems to refer to either (or both) her audience and her puppets, those icons of 'eminent persons' – embodies the ambiguity of Charke's position: at once the master of puppets who mirrored her audience, and the servant of an audience whose social aspirations mirrored her own.

Only three years later, Henry Fielding also returned to puppetry in a manner which recalls, for contemporary audiences as in modern retrospect, the actress and puppeteer with whom he had worked in his glory days at the Haymarket. Plagued by chronic financial problems and 'now more than ever in need of money' (Battestin, in Fielding, 1975: xxxi) following the birth of a son, Fielding adapted a public persona at once 'fashionable' and female, Madame de la Nash, who on 15 March 1748, announced in the *Daily Advertiser* that,

at her large Breakfasting-Room, for the Nobility and Gentry, in Panton-Street, near the Haymarket, will sell the very best Tea, Coffee, Chocolate, and Jellies. At the same time she will entertain the company gratis with that Excellent old English Entertainment, call'd

A PUPPET SHEW . . . With the Comical Humours of Punch, and his wife Joan, with all the Original Jokes, F-rts, Songs, Battles, Kicking, &c. (Cited in Leach, 1985: 28)

The unusual arrangement here described was a method of evading the Licensing Act: Madame de la Nash would claim to be merely serving breakfast while providing free entertainment for 'her' customers. Fielding also promises the 'gentry' that he will preserve intact all the scatological violence of the 'Original' entertainment. At least in modern retrospect, Fielding's puppet show seems, so to speak, the very primal scene of cultural appropriation. An audience explicitly defined as genteel consumes their tea and jellies (an attenuated version of carnivalesque consumption) and reproduces the popular festivity

from which they are also insulated within a carefully defined literal and cultural space. And on the first day, as a newspaper put it, 'a great many Persons of the politest taste . . . express'd the highest Satisfaction at the Performance' (Battestin, 1989: 435).

### 'Visions of Graver Puppetry'

I now move forward about a century to 1828, when a young scholar named John Payne Collier (later a famous and controversial Shakespearian) published a text of a puppet show performed by 'an old Italian wayfaring puppet-showman of the name of Piccini', with illustrations by George Cruikshank and a slightly tongue-in-cheek scholarly preface.<sup>15</sup> This well-known volume initiated what would prove to be a continuing process of transcription, investigation and celebration of 'Punch and Judy'. Various other memoirs and versions of this celebrated glove-puppet show appear throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in recent decades several full-length studies have documented its history and evolution in great detail. Here, I want to discuss not so much the show itself, which has already been exhaustively described and analysed; but, instead, the process by which Punch was finally reappropriated as a cultural icon of 'the popular'. For indeed, 'Punch and Judy' just barely emerged in its current form before it began to be positioned and re-visioned by commentators who construct its Otherness in the very process of analysis.

Broadly, what happens to Punch at the end of the eighteenth century is a double process that has proved almost impossible to describe without recourse to the hierarchical terms that so commonly accompany the analysis of 'popular' culture. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, for example, the anti-quarian Joseph Strutt mentions Punch's various appearances in fashionable London venues, but then concludes that:

In the present day (1801), the puppet-show man travels about the streets when the weather will permit, and carries his motions, with the theatre itself, upon his back! The exhibition takes place in the open air; and the precarious income of the miserable itinerant depends entirely on the voluntary contributions of the spectators, which, as far as one may judge from the square appearance he usually makes, is very trifling. (Strutt, 1903: 146)

In fact, of course, the conditions Strutt describes had probably characterized most forms of puppetry since at least the Middle Ages; but the exclamation point at the end of his first sentence is an index of the cultural weight he attaches to the change he mistakenly observes, a change for the worse. Both practically and economically, Punch is seen to 'descend' from the theater and breakfast rooms of fashionable London to the streets and 'open air', even as

he also changes from an elaborate and sometimes nearly life-sized marionette (like those of Martin Powell and his followers) to a crude and diminutive glove puppet on a movable booth stage.

Strutt also highlights the puppeteer's new dependence' on the voluntary contributions of the spectators'. Although all performers are in some sense so dependent, Strutt intends to contrast the uncertain rewards of 'passing the hat' to the rights and privileges of an organized system of remuneration, suggesting with some justification that the first method is 'popular' in a particularly literal way. As far as can be determined from the famous engravings of Cruikshank and Thomas Rowlandson, from Benjamin Robert Haydon's painting *Punch or May Day* (1846), and from a variety of other visual representations of the street show, Punch's audience leaned towards the lower classes, but also encompassed the full spectrum of society. Haydon's painting, for example, shows, among others, a streetsweep and a shoeless orange-girl listening delightedly to the show while a well-dressed couple in a passing carriage also crane their necks eagerly to see. In 1826, one writer observed that Punch's 'squeaking of those little snatches of tunes' had a 'talismanic power upon the locomotive faculties of all their peripatetics within hearing, attracting everybody to the traveling stage, young and old, gentle and simple' (quoted in Leach, 1985: 50). About a century later, another writer remembers among the spectators of the puppet show 'an errand-boy', 'several school children, several grown-up people, a policeman, a clerk, a postman, a bookmaker – in fact, a representative audience' (Baring, 1924: 4).

Although, as I have briefly mentioned, modern commentators still debate the ethnographic origins and evolution of Punch, they also typically portray the emergence of the street show as the glorious birth (or rebirth) of a vital, subversive, and truly popular form of performance. Having 'broken free from his strings and like some butterfly emerging from its chrysalis', writes Michael Byrom, Punch 'appeared, transformed, as a glove puppet' (Byrom, 1988: 12). At the end of the eighteenth century, Robert Leach suggests, 'there sprouted, awkwardly and haphazardly, what may legitimately be called a working class culture' out of which the puppet show 'was born' (Leach, 1985: 30). These and other scholars seem to reconstrue the puppet as, so to speak, the authentically illegitimate voice of the people, even as they abstract from an unruly cultural history an organic, teleological narrative of evolution and transmission – one of those stories that, as Donna Haraway summarizes, 'begins with original innocence and privileges the return to wholeness', and that, as such, is 'ruled by a reproductive politics – rebirth without flaw, perfection, abstraction' (1991: 177).<sup>16</sup> Punch is positioned as at once profoundly historical (the heir of an ancient and primeval European tradition) and vitally contemporary (the pure expression of working-class culture).

In fact, however, 'Punch and Judy' manifests, alike in its content and conditions, a complex dialogue between relatively more popular or more élite forms of culture. If, on a practical level, Punch descends from the theater back

to the street, he simultaneously ‘ascends’ from a mere interpolator within pre-existing stories to the hero of his own apparently unique and inimitable drama. As recorded by Collier and numerous subsequent writers, the show has a formulaic structure in which the central figure presents himself directly to the audience and then fights with or kills a series of antagonists. In the beginning, he kills his wife Judy and their baby, and then faces a series of other figures who come to call him to account – a constable, a beadle, a hangman and various others – prior to a concluding confrontation with the Devil. As early and recent commentators similarly observe, this show is a kind of condensed, vestigial version of various conventional dramatic stories. Its basic structure of confrontation between a central figure and a succession of opponents, leading to a theological climax, resembles a morality play or *Doctor Faustus*.<sup>17</sup> In the earliest transcribed version of the show, Punch dances and romances with a puppet named Polly who then sings one of the well-known airs from *The Beggar’s Opera*. The Punchman interviewed at length by Henry Mayhew in the 1850s asserts that he ‘frequently went to theatres to learn knowledge’, claims that ‘I took my ghost from Romeau and Juliet’, and observes that ‘Otheller murders his wife, ye know, like Punch does’ (Mayhew, 1967: 3: 48). Situated at the fluid boundary of culture and class, Punch embodies at once the aspirations of the ‘low’ toward the forms of a legitimate drama against which it still defines itself, and the ‘downward’ inertia with which conventions and stories of the ‘legitimate’ stage re-emerge and persist in the oral traditions of popular performance.

More broadly, I want to suggest that the ‘Punch and Judy’ show has never been as purely transgressive and carnivalesque as both early and recent commentators almost uniformly claim. To be sure, the show’s rapid emergence in the last quarter of the eighteenth century through the first quarter of the nineteenth is undoubtedly partially conditioned by the radical social restructuring that accompanied the Industrial Revolution. In the Punch who discomfits and beats a constable, a doctor, and a beadle; and who – in his most famous single bit of comic business – tricks ‘Jack Ketch’ into putting his own head in the noose to escape the gallows, it is not hard to perceive a festive, working-class inversion of authority. In the Punch who kills his wife and baby with comic nonchalance, it is not hard to see an element of sexual wish-fulfillment that might appeal to men of a class in which divorce was virtually impossible. Punch’s story seems inevitably to manifest what E. P. Thompson suggests were the ‘Brechtian values – the fatalism, the irony in the face of Establishment homilies, the tenacity of self-preservation’ – that characterized an apparent ‘working class culture’ (Thompson, 1966: 59). Modern critics similarly conclude that Punch ‘strikes out against family (wife, child), state (the constable and hangman), and church (the devil)’ (Twitchell, 1989: 83) and is thus ‘dangerously subversive’, ‘concerned with freedom from oppression . . . [and] a fierce assertion of disobedience’ (Leach, 1985: 125, 165).

But just as Mayhew's Punchman shows a keen awareness of his own subordinate position within a much larger cultural landscape, so the 'Punch and Judy' show seems to embody something more (or less) than its own manifestly transgressive content. Amid the considerable variations within surviving transcripts of the show, two incidents seem nearly universal: Punch's beating and killing of his wife and baby, and his subsequent escape from the gallows. To place these two parts of the show in historical context is to see once again the inadequacy of a cultural viewpoint which, in the Bakhtinian manner, simply naturalizes 'festivity' as the purely benevolent voice of 'the people'. For one thing, the show clearly in no sense represents liberation for its second titular character – an utterly obvious point to which commentators, with their celebratory rhetoric, often seem strangely blind. More specifically, Punch's violent relations with his wife clearly manifest what numerous recent historians suggest is a bourgeois attempt to displace wife-beating on to the lower classes. As far back as the seventeenth century, as Joyce Wiltenburg documents, a certain mode of 'popular literature' began to depict wife-beating as 'a plebian activity', thus offering 'respectable audiences a means of distancing themselves from the violence while still enjoying it' (1992: 128). By the eighteenth century, as Margaret Hunt suggests, 'wife beating became, for literate people, a particular mark of the inferiority and animality of the poor' (1992: 27). Even the name of Punch's wife seem inexplicably to change in the early nineteenth century from the earlier Joan to Judy – which is recorded in a dictionary of 1812 as meaning 'blowen', that is, a woman who cohabits with a man without marriage.<sup>18</sup> Thus when Punch knocks his wife's block off, he is not so much revolting against the constraints of authority as confirming a bourgeois vision of working-class brutality and immorality. Similarly, the miniature drama of Punch's arrest, imprisonment and impending execution that appears in most versions of the show is usually assumed to derive from the tradition of the so-called 'Tyburn Fair' – the popular festivity that surrounded the public hangings of the eighteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Here too, however, a focus on the Punch show as simply a wish-fulfilling vision of escape from punishment ignores the obvious. As Peter Linebaugh puts it, 'Punch and Judy' 'expressed class rage against family, police, courtiers, physicians and householders', but at the same time, 'Punch, in murdering friend and foe alike, suggests to us that the London working class was doing Jack Ketch's job for him' (1992: 404). The show is a miniature representation of violent crime and violent punishment that acknowledges their interconnection; embodying at once a working-class cynicism about Law and an authoritarian insistence on social control.

In its full social context, then, the 'Punch and Judy' show must be seen to express an impulse of undifferentiated aggression and thus to reproduce the impulse of domination against which it otherwise seems to rebel. Punch lords it over both Judy and the Hangman; that both figures become his precisely analogous antagonists and victims suggests the cultural and ideological

forces inevitably also brought to bear on a show which instantiates as well as overcomes (its own) Otherness. To construe the show as simply 'festive', subversive or liberational is to assume not only a masculine viewer but also a working-class and literally paternal one; whereas in fact the very breadth of the show's evident histrionic appeal must suggest, precisely as such, how hierarchies of class, age, and gender intertwine. Collier's version, for example, featured a run-in between Punch and a blind beggar:

*Punch.* Hollo! You old blind blackguard, can't you see?  
*Blind Man.* No Mr. Punch. Pray, sir, bestow your charity upon a poor blind man, with a bad cough . . . (*Coughs and splutters in Punch's face.*) *Punch.* Hollo! Was my face the dirtiest place you could find? Get away! you nasty old blackguard! Get away! (*Seizes the Blind's Man's staff, and knocks him off the stage. Punch bums a tune, and dances to it.*) (Collier, 1870: 86–7)

Another common figure of the show throughout its history was a black servant whom Mayhew's Punchman describes as 'a nigger' who 'says, "me like ebery body"; not "every", but "ebery", cos that's nigger' (Mayhew, 1967: 51). The black man was sometimes also presented as a vaguely Eastern or African foreigner who can only utter the single word 'Shalla-balla'.<sup>20</sup> The obvious alterity of such figures easily betrays the show's participation within the same process of cultural subordination which it has so often been seen to overturn. This conventional black character was eventually renamed 'Jim Crow' after a popular song sung by Thomas Rice the minstrel singer, who had been the rage in London in the summer of 1836. Here, in another dizzying spiral of mutual reappropriation (which moves freely between the boundaries of nation and race) a counterfeit version of African-American culture, transmuted via the black-face singer, re-emerges as a performing object that embodies a popular English fantasy of cultural Otherness. In a roughly analogous manner, Mayhew's text carefully reproduces the cockney's own reproduction of black dialect, and as such crystallizes a multi-leveled dynamic of linguistic distinction.

Moreover, if Punch's apparent festive rebellion slips, on the one side, towards mere brutality and xenophobia, it also slips, on the other side, towards a contrasting impulse of bourgeois self-containment. Across its various versions, the show incorporates within itself a precisely ambivalent moral judgement on Punch's festive license. The two most famous literary versions of the play, Collier's and Mayhew's, end with Punch destroying his last opponent, the Devil; but various other versions retain what seems to be an older conclusion in which the Devil carries Punch away as punishment for his crimes. In the 1930s, for example, two different writers remembered the show filtered through a similar veil of sentimental literary associations but, nevertheless, with opposite endings. 'Punch is the Beowulf, the St. George' who slays 'that old serpent' the Devil, writes Samuel McKechnie, with characteristic

rhetorical overstatement. 'He is the most powerful of all legendary heroes, the most human, the most amusing, the most imperfect, and the most lovable' (McKechnie, 1969: 82–3). The novelist Maurice Baring, on the other hand, remembers Punch finally meeting 'with the doom of Doctor Faustus' and 'crying out the Cockney equivalent for "O lente, lente, currite, nocti equi"' (1924: 4). Even in relatively more popular forms of discourse from the show's heyday, Punch's story was frequently construed in crude, moralistic terms. A surviving text of the late eighteenth century (1792), which summarizes the puppet show in verse, concludes of its final scene:

Here's a sad sight poor Punch is going  
To pay for all his former doing.  
Consider this and mend your lives.<sup>21</sup>

Mayhew's Punchman, similarly, repeatedly insists as he describes his show to the gentleman interviewer, 'that's moral', 'that's the moral you see', or 'that's well worded, sir . . . that the young children may not be taught anything wrong' (Mayhew, 1967, 3: 49, 57, 59). Punch's rampaging violence, in other words, is constantly being confined within the social existence of a performance that, so to speak, appropriates itself simply in being itself.

Even Punch's apparent practical freedom from an organized market economy – the essential characteristic of his 'popular' status – was only partial. To be sure, the typical Punchman often did perform in the street and earned much of his living through the 'voluntary contributions' earnestly solicited by his partner. But listen to Mayhew's Punchman describe some of the other financial details of his profession:

We make much more by horders for performance houtside the gennelmen's houses, than we do by performing in public in the hopen streets. Monday is the best day for street business; Friday is no day at all, because then the poor people has spent all their money. . . . We do most at hevening parties in the holiday time, and if there's a pin to choose between them I should say Christmas holidays was the best. For attending hevening parties now we generally get one pound and our refreshments – as much more as they like to give us. . . . It looks like rain this evening, and I'm uncommon glad on it, to be sure. You see, the vet keeps the children in-doors all day, and then they wants something to quiet 'em a bit; and the mothers and fathers, to pacify the dears, gives us a horder to perform. (Mayhew, 1967, 3: 46)

Such a description suggests how easily 'Punch and Judy' moves from the streets to the drawing room and nursery, where its apparent working-class rebellion becomes an amusement to 'pacify' children. This redefinition of the show's audience was thus shaped by a particular economy of exchange which literally expropriates it into a new, carefully insulated social space. As such, Punch participates both literally and figurally in the bourgeois construction of

childhood which takes place, as several scholars suggest, during the extended period surveyed in this essay.<sup>22</sup> By the Victorian era, Punch was sometimes even stripped of his histrionic status and transformed into a doll, a paper cutout, or a common subject for children's books: thus the show's commodification precisely intersects its redefinition as an entertainment for children, the status it enjoys today. Indeed, this cultural progress is perhaps adumbrated, on a psychic level, in the conventions and appearance of the physical puppet itself, whose overdetermined, parodic masculinity – the humped back, protruding nose, and omnipresent cudgel or stick – seems to clash with his 'eunuch voice'.<sup>23</sup> It thus might be said of Punch what Fielding once observed in a polemic against censorship: the most radical forms of theater are licensed for performance only 'after Castration'.<sup>24</sup>

I have been suggesting that the history of Punch is specifically a history of appropriation, in which the actual puppet show seems to recede against a backdrop of description and analysis. To turn back briefly through the same cultural landscape which I have been surveying throughout this essay, is to perceive a delicate balancing act: writers attempt, by turns, to domesticate the puppet (making it an 'instructive' and 'respectable' amusement) or, on the other hand, to celebrate its 'lowness' as a kind of home-grown treasure, a uniquely 'English' entertainment. Richard Steele, in one more of his intricately-nuanced satires of public taste from the *Spectator*, contrasted the Italian 'Opera at the Haymarket' with Martin Powell's puppet performances 'under the little Piazza in Covent-Garden'. These, Steele observes,

being at present the Two leading Diversions of the Town; and Mr. Powell professing in his Advertisements to set up Whittington and his Cat against Rinaldo and Armida, my Curiosity led me the Beginning of last Week to view both these Performances, and make my Observations upon them . . . I shall only observe one thing further, in which both Dramas agree; which is, that by the Squeak of their Voices the Heroes of each are Eunuchs; and as the Wit in both Pieces is equal, I must prefer the Performance of Mr. Powell, because it is in our own Language. (no. 12)

This comparison of high and low theatrical genres had actually been introduced by Powell himself, who designed his show, as he put it in an advertisement, 'in imitation of the Italian Opera' (Speaight, 1970: 94). If Steele's preference for the puppet show on the grounds of its language and subject is in part a joke which deflates the elite pretensions of the opera, nevertheless, the whole descending series of cultural frames (from opera to puppets to witty essay) itself participates in a process of cultural domestication. The oppositions of high and low, English and Other, here contradict one another, and the 'low' is reconstrued as acceptable to a bourgeois audience on the grounds of a kind of quasi-nationalist appeal. Several decades later, when Henry Fielding (as Madame de la Nash) turned puppeteer in what I have previously suggested was a gesture of complex, multi-leveled cultural reappropriation, he advertised



what he called an 'Excellent old *English* Entertainment, call'd A PUPPET SHEW' (my emphasis). Samuel Foote, announcing his 'Primitive Puppet Show' in 1773, similarly boasted that 'All our actors are the produce of England' (Foote, 1973: 19).

This ironic pride in English popular culture, of course, corresponds to the cultural construction of a British nationalism which, as recent historians such as Benedict Anderson (1991), and Linda Colley (1992) have recently argued, also dates from this period. It also corresponds to that bourgeois rethinking of popular culture that Stallybrass and White (1986) have described – and that, with puppet theater, manifests itself sometimes as deliberate reformation and control, and sometimes, conversely, as a 'defense' of a cultural purity allegedly threatened by the former. James Ralph, boyhood friend of Benjamin Franklin and later an associate of Henry Fielding, produced in 1728 a series of essays called *The Touchstone* which surveys 'the reigning Diversions of the Town'. Ralph's work is a largely serious disquisition on the moral and social effect of entertainment. He discusses puppetry in some detail near the end of the book, beginning with a proud assertion of its essential, if not quite historical Englishness:

The Mechanical Genius of the *English* is obvious to every body in many Cases, but in none more properly, than in the Contrivance and Conduct of our PUPPET-SHEWS: The Improvement of which is certainly owing to us, if not the Invention; and indeed, it has often prov'd our Province to refine upon the first Thoughts of others, in Works of Art and Ingenuity.

Ralph goes on to defend the native tradition of puppetry, much as he will also defend a variety of English festive customs such as sports and market fairs. Puppetry is, Ralph argues, a kind of reasonable facsimile of the legitimate drama which can thus bring the latter's advantages to the rural bourgeoisie:

These portable Stages are of infinite Advantage to most Country Towns, where *Play-houses* cannot be maintain'd; and in my mind, superior to any company of Strollers; the Amusement is innocent and instructive, the Expence is moderate, and the whole Equipage easily carry'd about; as I have seen some Couples of King and Queens, with a suitable Retinue of Courtiers and Guards, very well accommodated in a single Band-box, with Room for *Punch* and his Family, in the same Machine. (Ralph, 1728: 228)

Notice how what later writers would refer to condescendingly as the 'perambulatory' ability of the puppet show – its microcosmic accommodation of plebeian and patrician within the same miniature 'Band-box' – seems to become a figure for a bourgeois fantasy of thrift, comfort, and social harmony. About twenty years later, similarly, Fielding in *Tom Jones* both records and satirizes the moral self-consciousness of provincial puppet theater. Jones and his companion Partridge encounter a puppet-master on their travels, and accompany him to an inn to view the performance:

The Puppet-show was performed with great Regularity and Decency. It was called the fine and serious Part of the *Provok'd Husband*; and it was indeed a very grave and solemn Entertainment, without any low Wit or Humour, or Jests; or, to do it no more than Justice, without any thing which could provoke a Laugh. The Audience were all highly pleased. A grave Matron told the Master she would bring her two Daughters the next Night, as he did not shew any Stuff . . . The Master was so highly elated with these Encomiums, that he could not refrain from adding some more of his own. He said, "The present Age was not improved in any Thing so much as their Puppet-shows; which, by throwing out *Punch* and his Wife *Joan*, and such idle Trumpery, were at last brought to be a rational Entertainment." . . . 'I would by no Means degrade the Ingenuity of your Profession', answered *Jones*; but I should have been glad to have seen my old Acquaintance Master *Punch* for all that; and so far from improving, I think, by leaving out him and his merry Wife *Joan*, you have spoiled your Puppet-show. (Fielding, 1975: 2, 639)<sup>25</sup>

A project of bourgeois cultural discernment takes place both within and without this fascinating passage. Both Jones and 'Master Punch' must, as it were, single-handedly face down a whole spectrum of bourgeois values – education, moral improvement, aesthetic reformation, disdain for the 'low' – and both Jones and Punch are similarly construed as healthy voices of common sense silenced by the obsessive demands of middle-class distinction. Fielding also clearly invites his own reader to sympathize with Jones's preference for his 'old Acquaintance Master *Punch* . . . and his merry Wife *Joan*' who, in Fielding's discourse, are empowered precisely through their re-appropriation as figures of an implicitly redefined category of the 'popular'.

Throughout the period I have surveyed in this essay, the explicitly assumed cultural subordination of puppet theater seems to alternate with a particular sentimentality which attributes to puppets an imaginary transcendence of their real conditions, an enduring, carnivalesque social power. As a final example, one need only consider the most celebrated single appropriation of the voice and iconography of Punch: the magazine of that name founded by Mark Lemon, Henry Mayhew, Douglas Jerrold and others in 1841.<sup>26</sup> According to one of the most frequently told versions of the magazine's founding, the idea for the name came from Mayhew – who in the first decade of *Punch* magazine's life was also conducting the interviews that would comprise his *London Labour and the London Poor*, and whose extensive conversation with a practising Punchman I have frequently cited here. A relative of one of the founders remembers 'hearing Henry Mayhew suddenly exclaim, "Let the name be 'Punch'!" – a fact engraven on her memory through her childish passion for the reprobate old puppet' (Speilman, 1895: 24). In the founding manifesto of the magazine, published in its first issue, Lemon suggested that:

Few of the admirers of our prototype, merry Master PUNCH, have looked upon his vagaries but as the practical outpouring of a rude and boisterous mirth. We have considered him as a teacher of no mean pretensions, and

have, therefore, adapted him as the sponsor for our weekly sheet of pleasant instruction. When we have seen him parading in the glories of his motley, flourishing his baton . . . in time with his own unrivalled discord, by which he seeks to win the attention and admiration of the crowd, what visions of graver puppetry have passed before our eyes! (*Punch* 1(1))

In this often-cited passage, Punch is silenced by celebration: the figural music to which he flourishes his 'baton' is drowned out by the same rhetoric with which the writer re-visions and transforms him. Even the substitution of this word for the expected 'cudgel' or 'stick' itself declares and delimits the cultural space between the observer and the social fact. In the long ensuing history of *Punch* magazine, itself frequently chronicled and celebrated, the 'rude and boisterous mirth', the 'unrivalled discord' of the ephemeral performing object would be not merely described and appropriated in print, but literally flattened – into a logo, a cartoon, the very personification of the printed page. M. H. Speilman, writing just after the magazine's jubilee, concluded rhapsodically that its founders had converted Punch 'from a mere strolling puppet, an irresponsible jester, into the laughing philosopher and man of letters, the essence of all wit, the concentration of all wisdom, the soul of honour, the foundation of goodness, and the paragon of every virtue' (Speilman, 1895: 28). This particular act of appropriation evidently depends not just on Punch's alleged status as authentically popular, but also on childhood memories which engrave on the mind a sentimental fantasy of reprobation. Having been diminished into a denizen of the Victorian nursery, the puppet re-emerges as the very icon of a bourgeois intelligentsia who appear, as they might have put it, as pleased as Punch. If it is difficult not to regret the complacency with which the historian records and reproduces the transformation of carnivalesque performance into the 'graver puppetry' of (his own) discourse, to do so is simply to reverse the same process: attributing to Punch some imagined power or purity which his history disarms or contaminates. But cultural production and cultural appropriation, as the examples cited in this essay suggest, are not only inseparable but virtually coterminous. The sense of loss that seems to pervade the discursive history of 'Punch and Judy' is a nostalgia for something that was never there in the first place, and that is, in any case, still alive and well.

## Notes

1. See Shershow (1994).
2. For a broad anthropological inquiry into the mechanisms of popular resistance, see Scott (1985; 1990).
3. As such, these are similar to what Bristol calls 'The texts of carnival', in which 'reciprocal pressure, contamination, and the diversity of speech types and discursive genres is greatest' (1985: 58). Paulson, similarly, defines 'popular' works as those which contain 'traces of a subculture in which we can infer a mass of people below the level of the classics-reading, property-owning, and voting interests' (1979: ix).

4. The complex interdependence of categories of taste and social class has also been discussed by many other recent writers. Burke has described, for example, how the nineteenth-century scholars who 'discovered' popular culture 'came from the upper classes, to whom the people were a mysterious Them, described in terms of everything the discoverers were not (or thought they were not)' (1978: 9). Aronowitz similarly argues that, in the early modern period, 'the key to the historical preservation of the aesthetic hierarchy by which some modes of artistic production are called "high" lay in its important function with respect to maintaining the hegemony of the new bourgeois class in the wake of the demise of the aristocracy' (1993: 63). For Bourdieu, in perhaps the most sweeping sense, the bourgeoisie as a class is precisely constituted by their sense of propriety towards the distinctive signs and 'heritage' of high culture: thus 'the enterprise of cultural appropriation . . . is inscribed, as an objective demand, in membership of the bourgeoisie, and in the qualifications giving access to its rights and duties' (1984: 23).
5. I will discuss Fielding and Charke later in this paper; George Alexander Stevens, whose famous *Lecture on Heads* is virtually a puppet show using portrait-busts to represent hypothetical characters, claimed in the 1760s to have written 'several dramas for the proprietors of puppet-shows' (Kahan, 1984: 51); Samuel Foote, in 1773, produced in association with Stephens his 'Primitive Puppet Shew, or Piety in Pattens' (Trefman, 1971; Foote, 1973).
6. Scott Michaelsen's work-in-progress on Anglo-AmerIndian identity politics, from which I adapt the cited phrase, has powerfully influenced my thinking about cultural difference.
7. J. H. Plumb has similarly written that, in the periodical journals, 'Addison and Steele discovered the new and growing middle-class audience, an audience which longed to be modish, to be aware of the fashion, yet wary of its excess . . . to feel smug and superior to provincial rusticity and old world manners . . . in which a hunger for culture could easily be induced and one which had both the leisure and the affluence to indulge it' (1982: 269).
8. All citations from the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* are from the editions edited by Bond (Steele *et al.*, 1987; Addison *et al.*, 1965), identified in my text by number.
9. See also Steele's *Tatler* nos. 45 and 115, Steele's *Spectator* no. 14, and Addison's *Spectator* nos. 28 and 3.
10. All citations from *The Author's Farce* are from the edition edited by Woods (Fielding, 1966), identified by act, scene and line number or, in the case of the long and continuous third act, by act and line number.
11. On the autobiographical elements of the play, see Hassal (1974), Lewis (1987), Hume (1988), Battestin (1989) and Rivero (1989).
12. The quoted phrase is from Nussbaum (1988: 167). On Charke see also Smith (1987), who refers to Charke's career as a 'Masquerade of Self-Representation'; Friedli (1988); Morgan (1988); Mackie (1991); and Straub (1992).
13. The description is from Alexander Pope's note to *The Dunciad* (1742 version), in Pope (1963: 735). For more on the connection between Needham and Mother Punchbowl, see Paulson (1965) and Battestin (1989).
14. As Thompson suggests, in the eighteenth century 'the rulers of England showed in practice a surprising degree of license towards the turbulence of the crowd', and 'there is a sense in which rulers and crowd needed each other, watched each other, performed theater and countertheater in each other's auditorium' (1974: 402).
15. This famous book was first published in 1828; I am citing the fifth edition (Collier, 1870).
16. These common descriptions of *Punch and Judy* are also instances of what Stuart Hall has described as 'self-enclosed approaches to popular culture which, valuing "tradition" for its own sake, and treating it in an ahistorical manner, analyse popular

- cultural forms as if they contained within themselves, from their moment of origin, some fixed and unchanging meaning of value' (1981: 237).
17. On 'Doctor Faustus as puppet play, see Hedderwick (1887), and Palmer and More (1966: 241–65).
  18. See *OED*, s.v. 'Judy' and 'blowen'; and cf. Speaight (1970: 192).
  19. See Thompson (1966: 61), who calls Tyburn Fair 'the ritual at the heart of London's popular culture'; Laqueur (1989); and Linebaugh (1992). In the latter, Linebaugh suggests that Laqueur overstated the festive nature of the 'Tyburn Fair', and argues, conversely, that the lower classes attended public hangings to evince their 'scorn . . . against law and authority' (xvii–xviii). As some of my readings in this chapter will have suggested, I am inclined to think that both responses – a festive callousness to the suffering victim, and a class solidarity against the punitive power of authority – were possible and extant among the 'popular' spectators of executions.
  20. According to Speaight, 'from 1825 to 1939', a black man 'appears in eleven out of fourteen versions' (1970: 193).
  21. I cite this text from the original copy included in an 1890 extra-illustrated copy of Morley (1859) from the Harvard Theater Collection.
  22. In the eighteenth century, argues Plumb, children 'become luxury objects upon which their mothers and fathers were willing to spend larger and larger sums of money, not only for their education, but also for their entertainment and amusement'; and as such, children also become 'a field of commercial enterprise for the sharp-eyed entrepreneur' (1982: 310).
  23. In a Latin poem, Addison refers to Punch's '*Voces . . . tenues*' which a contemporary translator gives as 'treble voice and eunuch tone' (Addison, 1873: 149–51; see also Speaight, 1970: 90); and Steele refers to Punch as a 'eunuch' in the *Spectator* no. 14, which I will later cite. See also Kristina Straub's observation of the 'pervasive characterization of actors' in the eighteenth century 'as not quite "manly", even "feminine" by progression' (1992: 33).
  24. Cited in Battestin (1989: 218).
  25. Note the similarity between this account and Steele's description of Martin Powell in the *Tatler* no. 16, previously cited.
  26. The history of *Punch* magazine is chronicled and discussed in Adrian (1966), Jerrold (1910), Prager (1979), and Speilman (1895).

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