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High and Low Culture

The literature, and particularly, the poetic satire of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century is obsessed with the distinction between high and low art forms, and with shoring up the frontier between genuine literature, and mere ephemeral hack work. It is the period that, critics have argued, sees the invention of the category of ?literature?: that is, the idea that some select native literary texts could be compared with classical greats. The rest, by implication, would never stand the test of a week, let alone centuries of literary history. Yet it was also a period in which we see the creative exploitation of low cultural forms, literary works whose effect was dependent upon the juxtaposition of high and low within the same text.

In this period, the perceived relationship between high and low literature is intrinsically linked to questions of literary merit. Writers such as Jonathan Swift, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and John Gay are trying to make firm distinctions between classic works of literature, and ephemeral rubbish. Pope?s *Dunciad*, Dryden?s *Macflecknoe*, Swift?s *Tale of a Tub* all relentlessly satirise what they see as low culture ? the proliferation of popular and populist pamphlets, poems and novels that they saw as saturating the marketplace. They attacked the work of most of their contemporary poets and novelists as the short-lived rubbish of greedy and talentless hacks, whose most likely fate was to end up as the wrapping for a pie, or toilet paper.

So why were people so concerned with making these distinctions between the high and the low? Part of the reason for this anxiety about distinguishing between good and bad writing was to do with the commercialisation of literary culture, and the rise of professional writing. Literature had formerly been associated with leisure and privilege. It required reserves of learning and an intensity of concentration possible only for those who could combine a gentleman?s education with freedom from the need to earn a living. Those writers without independent means needed patronage, but nonetheless assumed an elite readership associated with the patron. This changed with the creation of a literary marketplace, in which authors wrote for money, rather than patronage, and in which writers were increasingly able to make a living from their writing, rather than being either men of independent means, or tied to the demands of an aristocratic patron. The world of literature was opened both to authors, and to readers, that had previously been denied access.

This is the period that sees the emergence of the class of professional writers collectively known as Grub Street. It also witnessed the rise of the professional woman writer, and of the labouring class author. The combination of the proliferation of printed material, combined with a rise in literacy, created a body of readers who consumed voraciously the thousands of pamphlets, poems, and novels emerging from the presses. While these developments may from our perspective seem like social advances, to many contemporaries they seemed deeply frightening. The rise of the professional writer made these matters more pressing: how was one to distinguish true literature from the masses of rubbish coming off the presses? In a market-driven cultural economy, who would now legislate for good and bad writing? These moves seemed

to threaten the hierarchy of literary forms, based on classical models, and to threaten the elite white male as the guardian of the nation?s literary culture. We might compare what was happening in the early eighteenth century with modern claims for the dumbing down of culture: when the consumer is king, is popular appeal the only driver in cultural production? Is success the only indicator of merit?

The exploitation of culture

[1]Title page of first edition of Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift. [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons One of the most fascinating aspects of this era is that many of the generic forms distinctive of the period are forms that exploit the perceived distinction between the high and the low: they draw on the low cultural forms that they so forcefully attack in order to create their satire. So, for example, looking at the drama of the period, perhaps the most successful play of the period is John Gay?s comic opera, *The Beggar?s Opera*, which offers political satire by taking the elite form of an opera, but filling it with highwaymen and whores, and setting it in prisons. The ballads and popular songs that were the embodiment of popular music and poetry provide the arias in this transformation of operatic form, traditionally associated with the political and social elite, but now linked to the low life of contemporary criminal London. We can see a similar fusion of opera and native ballad in Henry Carey's *The Dragon of Wantley* and Cibber's *Patie and Peggy*.

Jonathan Swift?s *Gulliver?s Travels*, now considered as a literary classic is a work which relentlessly parodies the popular travel writing of the period. In depicting Gulliver?s implausible but, he emphasises, authentic voyages to the lands of the Lilliput and Brobdignag, Swift mocks the truth claims and outlandish exaggerations of the travel narratives that were so popular with contemporary readers. Yet it is the ingenious elaboration of these imaginary worlds that make *Gullivers Travels* such a compelling read. It is a work which draws on the shock value and novelty of its low brow antecedents, whilst at the same time parodying their claims to shock and entertain. And Pope's *Dunciad*, possibly the most influential poem of this period, takes as its subject the intersection of the high and the low, using the elevated epic form to satirise the low life of the contemporary London literary scene. Some critics have seen an irony in the fact that Pope's most imaginative work gets its creative energy from the texts and authors that it attacks.

Another aspect of this intersection between high and low culture is the newly emergent periodical press. One of the big inventions of this period is what we might call ?lifestyle journalism?. Right at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Joseph Addision and Richard Steele began to publish the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, the first generalist periodicals that eventually paved the way for the magazines and journals we read today. Their periodicals took the form of an essay published once or twice a week in which a persona such as ?Mr Spectator? or ?Isaac Bickerstaff? would discuss, in a conversational way, some aspect of modern culture: this could range from a play currently being performed at the theatre, to the latest fashion for hooped petticoats, to the nature of modern manners, or the relative merits of coffee versus alcohol drinking, or some general matter of ethics. They were essentially designed to introduce key debates for a readership who was often female, often at home, who did not have access to the clubs, societies libraries and universities where one might traditionally get this kind of knowledge.

In terms of literature, they effectively gave their readers essays which showed them how to appreciate literary texts: how to be a literary critic. So, for example in the *Spectator*, Addison wrote a series of essays explaining and showing the merits of Milton?s *Paradise Lost*: showing those readers who didn?t have Greek and Latin how the poem worked as an epic; which particular passages demonstrated Milton?s verbal ornament, or his Christian adaptation of pagan mythology. In terms of the reception of *Paradise Lost*, it provided the first important popularisation of the poem, and paved the way for its acceptance into the English literary canon: for the first time, it was presented as a work of genius by an English poet, not the dubious offering of a regicide and republican.

So in terms of access, the new periodicals represented the popularisation of high literary culture: they showed middling class people the vocabulary, the ideas, the framework of reference that they needed to

appreciate high literature. It gave them ideas, and it gave them opinions, all carefully presented in a conversational, approachable way to enable them to feel part of the republic of letters, which had up till now been associated with aristocratic gentlemen amateurs, men with the time and education to devote themselves to these rarified pursuits. But one of the interesting things about the *Spectator* was that in addition to these essays on how to approach ?high? literature, it also contained a series of essays on the English ballads, emphasising the existence of a native literary tradition that should be taken as seriously as that imported from classical Greece and Rome. We can see the influence of this kind of literary revival and antiquarianism in the many editions of ballads published later in the century. This was a time before ?English Literature? existed as a concept, let alone a discipline. It is only during the eighteenth century that people start to see Shakespeare, Chaucer, Spenser as literary greats, and start to take seriously the idea that there might be a tradition of English literature worth talking about. There definitely wasn?t a sense of the transition from Anglo Saxon, to Middle English, to the Renaissance that you have now. So it was a big deal to assert the literary merit not just of earlier English literature, but of popular cultural forms like the ballad. Those essays in the *Spectator* anticipate the wider take up of English ballads and popular tradition in the late 18C and romantic period, like Coleridge?s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Wordsworth?s *Lyrical Ballads*, or Keats?s *Eve of St Agnes*, which are all rooted in a sense of the imaginative potential of native popular cultural forms. So we can see again that at the same time that satirists were policing the boundaries of the popular and the polite, there was also a groundswell of interest in the truly popular: ballad forms, earlier oral culture ? and the ways in which it could be read as literature, rather than cultural detritus.

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