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Cuckoldry and the “Gone for a Soldier” Narrative: Infidelity and Performance among Eighteenth-Century English Plebeians

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IHRTLUHC

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Introduction

On February 5, 1720, a convoy of ships of the Royal African Company, escorted by HMS *Swallow* and HMS *Weymouth*, set sail from Spithead, in Hampshire, for the West Coast of Africa. Aboard, John Atkins, a naval surgeon and avid writer, documented the journey, and in 1735 published his writing as *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West-Indies*. Atkins opened his account by expressing a fear commonly shared among his fellow sailors: “to compleat our ill Luck, while we are thus contending with sinister Fate, the Rogues at home perhaps are stealing away the Hearts of our Mistresses and Wives. Are not these a hapless Race thus doomed!”¹ This anxiety was common for eighteenth-century husbands, and compounded by the absences intrinsic in martial life. He later tells a story of these anxieties reified.

Peter Anchicove, another Gold-taker of Cape Corso, assured me that being once at Succonda, a Fetish-man met him, and... bid *Peter* leave the Voyage he was upon, and return home, for his Wife had in this Absence kept a scandalous Correspondence with several men. Accordingly when he came home, he found it as the Fetish-Man had said....²

Looking at contemporary popular printed media, it’s not difficult to see why Atkins thought his companions’ wives to be so unfaithful. Perhaps he was aware of a popular ballad, “The Brutes,” and this verse which describes a similar misfortune:

The Merchant who venture o’er Afric’ to roam,

¹ John Atkins, introduction to *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West-Indies...* (London: 1735), iii.

² A “Fetish-man” was a shaman or mystic; Ibid, 103; Before giving Anchicove too much sympathy, it should be noted that Cape Corso was an infamous slave fort, and a “gold-taker” was responsible for checking the authenticity of coins provided by African merchants; Stanley Alpern, *Abson & Company: Slave Traders in Eighteenth-Century West Africa* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), 110.

In Hazardous search after luck,
 —Ne'er knows that his lady hath gallants at home,
 Who dub the poor Cuckold a Buck.³

The expectation fulfilled in this short narrative represents what I term a cultural script. By cultural script, I refer to an understanding intrinsic to identity, of how people and institutions will and should act or react to public social situations. These cultural scripts are recorded in contemporary fictional printed media, like “The Brutes.” Sailors were not alone in accessing these scripts. To eighteenth-century English men, cuckoldry represented the reversal of spousal roles, and the ultimate masculine and husbandly failure. Some believed that a cuckolded man could even grow horns if his wife’s offense was great enough.⁴ Contemporary fictional literature, theatre, ballads, and reference books were filled with references to cuckoldry.

The misogyny in these texts and the accompanying assumptions of feminine subordination, cannot be ignored. That many of his married comrades were likely sleeping with other women in ports along their journey was ignored by Atkins. However, men could be understood as unfaithful as well, though often in different circumstances. One such circumstance was husbandly abandonment, and the most famous accompanying cultural script was the narrative of the husband “gone for a soldier.”⁵ It is likely that among the sailors in Atkins’

³ This version was published in 1781, but the song may be much older. *The Union Song-Book.... To Which is Added, Toasts, Sentiments, and Hobnobs, &c. &c. &c.* (Berwick: W. Phorson, 1781), 204.

⁴ *The Horn Exalted. Or, Room for Cuckolds. Being a treatise concerning the reason and original of the word cuckold.... Also an appendix concerning women and jealousy* (London: Thomas Atkins, 1721), 9, <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco>.

⁵ David A. Kent, ““Gone for a Soldier”: Family Breakdown and the Demography of Desertion in a London Parish, 1750-1791,” *Local Population Studies* 45 (1990): 27, http://www.localpopulationstudies.org.uk/PDF/LPS45/LPS45_1990_27-42.pdf.

convoy were married men who had left home without consulting their wives, possibly to escape their lives ashore. It is even more probable that while their husbands were at sea, the wives of some sailors in Atkins' convoy claimed to parish officials that they had been abandoned by their husbands. It may also be true that, as Atkins said, some of his companions' wives were courting other men in their absence. I cannot know.⁶ However, through analysis of *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West-Indies* and similar texts, I can explore what these narratives of husbandly abandonment and cuckoldry tell about contemporary gendered expectations, and use these recorded experiences to determine how performance offered desperate plebeians an opportunity to reclaim their agency when their lives were disrupted by infidelity.

This paper will address existing historical arguments about the role of performance in eighteenth-century English plebeian infidelity cases, identify some of the cultural scripts available to married men and women from an analysis of public printed media, and apply them to investigate cases of infidelity in contemporary plebeian marriages. While scripts of husbandly abandonment deployed by wives followed the tropes presented in contemporary media, the scripts deployed by cuckolded husbands intentionally differed from available cultural scripts. Both marital infidelity as practice and the perception of cuckoldry constituted genuine threats to eighteenth-century notions of proper plebeian masculinity and, also, to the honor of individual men, all within a moral economy based upon popular notions of honor and shame. While examining contemporary popular printed texts of cuckoldry, I address how homosocial behavior appeared in narratives of cuckoldry, how the foundation of that behavior was misogynistic, and how cuckolded men found agency through their performative rejection of these narratives.

⁶ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 1-6.

Turning to husbandly abandonment, I argue that abandoned plebeian wives deployed cultural scripts of subordination and dependence to their advantage, gaining some financial and social agency through their performances. Understanding these texts as performances exposes the feminine agency exercised within them, a concept all too rarely encountered in historiography on the period.

Eighteenth-century English plebeian men and women deployed cultural scripts in their performed reactions to marital infidelity in an effort to regain agency, and historians should read texts recording these reactions as performances. Historical understandings of eighteenth-century English plebeian infidelity have relied too much on demographic studies using institutional records, and have therefore produced conclusions that do not recognize that reactions to infidelity were performed within a cultural understanding of cultural scripts available in contemporary popular print media. I seek to address this problem by analyzing these cultural scripts and how they influenced plebeians' performed reactions to infidelity in texts written by or about contemporary plebeians. Through this I can produce a narrative of the effects such infidelity had on a plebeian individual's social standing and relationships, and contemporary English understandings of plebeian marriage in general.

Terms

Plebeians in early modern England were the lowest of the social and economic classes. While aristocrats and wealthy merchants built financial dynasties, and the middling classes worked trades and ran businesses, plebeians worked in agriculture and industry, or did not work at all. Their vulnerability to external and internal forces make them of great interest to historical study, as institutions and structures are most reflected in their lives. It is that vulnerability, social and economic, that motivated the performances I examine here.

Historians argue about how the practical realities of plebeian life affected their marriages. The degree of parental control over children's marriages was greatly lessened among the laboring poor, according to Lawrence Stone, but whether the considerations in choosing a spouse were still predominantly practical, as they were in the middle and upper classes, is unclear. Property was the central concern in those arrangements, and the absence of significant property among the poor may have allowed for more "superficial" considerations when choosing a spouse.⁷ Stone, and other early gender historians, relied almost entirely on demographic data gathered from parish, baptismal, and court records. These, according to Stone, force the historian to "abandon any attempt to probe attitude and feelings, since direct evidence does not exist."⁸ I do not accept this conclusion. Though demographics can be useful, there do exist important texts of plebeian gendered experiences, not only in institutional records, but also in their own writings. These can be better comprehended in the context of contemporary understandings, found in popular print media.

Paupers were those plebeians who could not support themselves or their families at all. They relied on charity and the local parish for support. Because the English Poor Laws changed through the long eighteenth century and each parish had its own policies, this support could come in different ways, depending on the individual's circumstances, need and ability, and the setting. Parish relief was divided into "indoor" and "outdoor" relief. To those paupers who could not afford housing or were too sick to care for themselves, and had no relatives nearby to live with, the parish gave indoor relief. This meant living in a poorhouse, where they would be given necessities and somewhat cared for. After the Workhouse Test Act was enacted in 1723, some

⁷ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage: In England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 193.

⁸ *Ibid*, 603.

parishes required those on indoor relief to work doing menial labor, to help cover the costs of their relief and deter potential abusers from applying. These new policies converted poorhouses into workhouses. Most paupers received outdoor relief, given an allowance by the parish, and expected to keep their own living. In both cases, those that were given poor relief were considered “on the parish.”⁹

Historical understandings of *gender* have been shaped in the last three decades by the work of Judith Butler.¹⁰ Her book, *Gender Trouble*, is a foundational work to post-structuralist gender theory. Butler proposed that gender is the product of actions and performances, and is reified by cultural and social expectations of performance. She builds on Michel Foucault’s theory of “juridical systems of power” to explain how gender is created by the subjects of structures, like the courts and parishes, that form the gender regime. She writes “the subjects regulated by [juridical] structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures.”¹¹ The implication of this is that gender regimes constrain behavior, but are not rules that are applied, but rather systems that are performed. Women reproduce their subjective status by acting the part they are expected to by their peers and by institutions. That gender is performed is a less dramatic conclusion than that gender is performative. Butler makes this distinction to highlight the effects individual acts of performance have on the expectations of a society, and says that through these acts gender becomes performative, and therefore influence systems of power.¹² Performance may violate the

⁹ George Boyer, “English Poor Laws,” EH.Net Encyclopedia, edited by Robert Whaples, last modified May 7, 2002, Accessed April 19, 2019, <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/english-poor-laws/>.

¹⁰ Brian Dulgnan for Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Judith Butler.”

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 2.

¹² *Ibid*, 2-3.

self-conception of an individual's identity, but performative gender subordinates the subjects of the gender regime. This distinction can be observed throughout this paper. Through this understanding it becomes clear that gender is not a monolithic aspect of human identity, but is shaped by social acts in a social environment.¹³ This leaves gender historians to deconstruct texts of performance and develop understandings of gendered expectations and realities.

Therefore, what a marriage looked like, and what was expected of husband and wife, naturally changed depending on the time and class of people in question. In the eighteenth century, modern conceptions of marriage and gender were forming. Nevertheless, marriage in eighteenth-century England was a profoundly patriarchal institution for all classes. Sarah Chapone, a contemporary political writer, observed that "Husbands have a more Afflictive Power than that of Life and Death."¹⁴ As Lawrence Stone described it: "By Marriage, the husband and wife became one person in law—and that person was the husband."¹⁵ Wives were financially and physically bound to their husbands, and understood to be subject to them. Even the location where a couple took the vows of matrimony symbolized the dominance assumed by the husband. Almost always the exchange of vows took place in the house or workplace of those to which the bride was subject. Whether in her parents' house, or the house of her employer, a bride's governance was symbolically and legally transposed onto her husband.¹⁶ Her wellbeing and behavior were now his responsibility.

¹³ Ibid, 25-34.

¹⁴ Sarah Chapone, *The Hardships of the English Laws in Relation to Wives* (London: W. Bowyer, 1735), 10, <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco>.

¹⁵ Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, 195.

¹⁶ Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 123.

In exploring the gendered lives of eighteenth-century New Englanders, Lisa Norling offers a description of the status of married women in eighteenth-century Anglo-American society:

Women were told that they were restricted to but reigned supreme within the home. Their contributions to society were vital, though indirect; they were to dedicate themselves to loving, nurturing, and inspiring their husbands and children. ...with the rise of these domestic ideals came new worries about the potential for their perversion when women were left alone, which was common in maritime communities.¹⁷

These worries reflected an understanding that exposure to the public spheres of society was corrupting to married women.¹⁸

The prevailing moral attitude towards women in eighteenth-century England understood women as more susceptible to moral corruption than men. Fears of their supposed carnal nature and propensity for sexual deviance motivated strict control over their lives.¹⁹ This fear is evident when studying “women’s literature” in early modern Europe, in which chastity and subservience were emphasized above all else. By the eighteenth century, fears that women would be exposed to seductive themes often found in novels were accompanied by the particular further restriction of married women to the home.²⁰ Modeled husbandly masculinity was fulfilled patriarchy, political theory attributed to the home. However, recent historiography has emphasized that this

¹⁷ Lisa Norling, “How Frought with Sorrow and Heartpangs’: Mariners’ Wives and the Ideology of Domesticity in New England, 1790-1880,” *The New England Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (1992): 424, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/366326>.

¹⁸ McSheffrey, 175.

¹⁹ Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 24-30.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 150.

absolutism was fallacious, and women were not in practice the toiling subjects of their husband-masters.²¹ My argument is part of this discourse, revealing that marriage was indeed a conversation, but one in which the wife had far less say. It would be wrong, in a thesis that explores the agency plebeian women exercised when confronted with infidelity, to ignore that contemporary women exercised political and social agency on a grander scale as well. Sarah Chapone, quoted above, was a remarkable political thinker whose writing demonstrates that some eighteenth-century English women were not only aware of the oppressive nature of their political and social experience, but were defiantly outspoken against a legal system which did not recognize them as agents in their lives and families.²²

Chapone was born to an Anglican clergyman in Gloucestershire in 1699. At 26 she married a local vicar, with whom she raised five children. She recognized her own subjugation when she wrote of her husband and the allowances he made in her writing, claiming “God be thanked, I have an Husband who lets me be *alive*, and gives me leave to be *some Body*, and to tell other People what I think they are.”²³ In 1735 Chapone anonymously published *The Hardships of English Laws in Relation to Wives*, which vigorously argues against the laws which place women in a “Condition being of all others in his Dominions the most deplorable, we being the least able to help ourselves, and the most exposed to Oppression.”²⁴ She saw marriage as “a worse Condition than *Slavery* itself,” because the husband acquired property, in his wife, while

²¹ Karen Harvey, *The Little Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3, 134-135.

²² Jacqueline Broad, “‘A Great Championess for Her Sex’: Sarah Chapone on Liberty As Nondomination and Self-Mastery,” *The Monist* 98, no. 1 (January 2015): 77-78, <https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onu009>.

²³ Chapone, 51.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 2.

the wife acquired nothing but object-hood.²⁵ Such a dramatic comparison emphasizes the seriousness of her claim. She writes

By the very Nature of the Marriage Contract, the Husband and Wife acquire a Property in each others Person. Our Laws give the Husband the entire Disposal of the Wife's Person, but she does not seem to retain any Property in his.²⁶

Chapone argued that “Wives have no Property, neither in their own *Persons, Children, or Fortunes.*”²⁷ That emphasis on the relationship between property, freedom, and liberty is appropriate for a contemporary text of political theory, after Thomas Hobbes famously argued that external constraint precluded personal liberty in his 1651 work, *Leviathan*, and John Locke argued that personal liberty was a form of property in his *Second Treatise on Government* in 1690.²⁸ In the same work, Locke argued that women have an equal role in the upbringing of their children, and that “paternal rights” should be reclassified as “parental rights,” to reflect this reality.²⁹

The political turmoil of the seventeenth-century had repeatedly brought the question of political liberty into public debate in England. The Interregnum from 1649 to 1660, after the English Civil War and the execution of Charles I, and the political crises following the birth of James II's first son and culminating in the Glorious Revolution, had stirred feelings of the need for republican liberties as described by Hobbes and Locke. Yet these had not been considered for women, who Chapone believed lived in an absolute monarchy of the home.³⁰ She invoked

²⁵ *Ibid*, 2.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁸ Broad, 81; Chris Nyland, “John Locke and the Social Position of Women,” *History of Political Economy* 25, no. 1 (1993): 47-50, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00182702-25-1-39>.

²⁹ Nyland, 42-44.

³⁰ Broad, 81.

Plato's *Republic* and the Ring of Gyges, arguing that eighteenth-century English marriage law offered husbands the same immunity as Gyges' ring, and that "A good Husband would not desire the Power of Horse-whipping, confining, Half-starving his wife, or squandering her Estate; a bad Husband should not be allowed it."³¹

A wife's life was contained within a sphere of domesticity, and only when certain conditions allowed, was she able to escape this sphere and enter other aspects of social and cultural life. These conditions were most common for uncommon women. Nobility, wealth, and education were a few of the avenues that allowed some married women to leave the domestic sphere, to find new ways of expressing and promoting themselves. Rarely did married women from lower social statuses have an opportunity to leave their domestic roles without the express permission of their husbands. Most cities allowed a married woman to act with financial independence in certain circumstances with the permission of her husband, such as accepting credit and loans under her name, but this practice was frowned upon by many husbands, and uncommon.³² One group of lower class women that regularly defied custom and engaged in the public sphere, out of necessity, were those married to sailors and soldiers.³³

In this paper, I develop historical arguments about military husbandly abandonment beyond military husbands. Like the experience of all eighteenth-century plebeians, that of contemporary soldiers and sailors was not monolithic, but rather depended on the setting and branch of deployment. That distinction, between kinds of military service, also influenced the experiences of wives, both during and after a husband's deployment. Men in the militia could

³¹ Chapone, 50; Broad, 77.

³² Wiesner-Hanks, 45; Norling, "How Frought with Sorrow and Heartpangs," 424.

³³ Jennine Hurl-Eamon, "Did Soldiers Really Enlist to Desert Their Wives? Revisiting the Martial Character of Marital Desertion in Eighteenth-Century London," *Journal of British Studies* 53, no. 2 (2014): 356–377, doi:10.1017/jbr.2014.4.

expect a drastically different experience than those in the King's Army or the Guard, and so too could their wives and families.³⁴ What matters for this study are the effects militia life, as opposed to army life, Guard life, or life at sea, had on marriage.

The British militia was meant to maintain a well-prepared force to defend Britain and her government's interests domestically. To do this, men enlisted in the militia were usually only called to training for a few weeks once each year. The militia was particularly attractive to married men, since after the Militia Reforms of 1750, they received extra pay to support their families. The Guards also should be considered separately from the regular army, because though their service was fulltime, they were rarely sent abroad, and usually served in or around London.³⁵ In each of these cases, and for sailors in the Royal Navy, the ordinary seamen and soldiers, not officers, are the central subjects of my study. The term "sailor" has been used in historiography, and was used by contemporaries, to refer to any man serving on an English vessel. This includes civilian and merchant craft, and that is how I will use it here.³⁶ Sailors were almost exclusively men, and it's very rare to encounter sources about women on British vessels, though they do exist.³⁷ Military life cannot be understood as isolated from life ashore, and it is only where these two "worlds" met that interests me in martial matters.³⁸

The frequent absences intrinsic to the life of sailors and soldiers created opportunities for women to exercise agency over their families' finances, and fears that this agency would extend to the marital bed can be found throughout contemporary texts. The profound need to control and

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Elizabeth Christine Spoden, "Jack Tar Revealed: Sailors, their Worldview, and their World" (Master's thesis, Indiana University, 2010), 4-6.

³⁷ Ibid, 9-10.

³⁸ Ibid, 8-9.

lead the family was an intrinsic part of eighteenth-century husbandly masculinity, and any threat to this was a source of great anxiety for men. It is this anxiety, and the methods contemporaries used to deal with it, present in popular printed media, that motivates my partial focus on military marriages. So too, did wives have great sources of anxiety in their husbands' behavior. Martial abandonment was frequent, although often exaggerated, and this could have dire consequences for a plebian family. The popularity of public narratives dealing with these anxieties meant that cultural scripts reacting to infidelity were widely available, and these scripts served to shape the accompanying performances of those afflicted with marital anxieties or reacting to perceived infidelities.

Infidelity, as conceived by eighteenth-century English plebeians, encompassed a group of behaviors which violated marital custom, gendered expectations, and sometimes the law. This must be distinguished from adultery, which, though a kind of infidelity, was confined to extramarital sexual interactions, real or perceived, and carried legal consequences. One of the only legal and ecclesiastically acceptable justifications for divorce was adultery, and it carried the death penalty for a short time after the 1650 Adultery Act.³⁹ For my purposes, infidelity as a term works much better, because I want to study acts beyond the sexual—acts which were often much more public and performative. These included adultery, but also bigamy, abandonment, cuckoldry, wittoldry, and abuse. My focus will be on cuckoldry and abandonment, as it is these forms of infidelity that produced the most popular cultural scripts, and effected the most revealing performances.

Cuckoldry represented a different form of behavior than adultery. Rather than being a sinful act in religious terms, one of lust and depravity, it was a deflection of moral responsibility,

³⁹ David Turner, *Fashioning Adultery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

from the unfaithful wife to the incompetent husband. However, wittoldry, when a husband was complicit in his wife's adultery, was universally considered sinful and had different social consequences. This is apparent from the texts of popular cultural that propagated the narrative of cuckoldry as failed masculinity and husbandly duty.⁴⁰ It was emasculation incarnate, the ultimate proof that a wife had control of her husband. Public shaming of cuckolds, sometimes including violence, was popular. Cuckolds found agency, a way of reclaiming control of their families and social status, in the reification of cultural scripts through performance. These varied based on choice, situation, and availability.⁴¹ Sometimes violence was involved, sometimes lies or manipulation, and sometimes sympathy could be evoked. Anglican doctrine gained power during the eighteenth century as a method of redirecting blame from the cuckolded husband towards the unfaithful wife. The burgeoning print culture spread the ideal of forgiveness as "the very height of Christianity," and led to changes in public reactions to cuckoldry's representation.⁴² Sermons from Solomon's Proverbs, Solomon being a cuckold-maker, were popular among parsons who, on occasion, preached:

Since cuckolds all to Heaven go,
 Why should we Grieve for being so;
 Exalt your Horns, lead patient Lives,
 And praise the Mercies of our Wives.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid, 83-83.

⁴¹ Kellye Corcoran, "Cuckoldry as Performance, 1675-1715," *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 53, no. 3 (2012): 543-546.

⁴² Corcoran, 552-553.

⁴³ Dr. Make-Horns [pseudonym], *The Cuckold's Sermon Preach'd at Fumblers-Hall on Wednesday the 18th of October being Horn-Fair Day...* (London: Bookselars [sic] of London and Westminster, 1704), 2.

The sympathy and comradery expressed here were not ubiquitous, but does demonstrate that some attitudes towards cuckoldry were changing in the long eighteenth century.⁴⁴

Husbandly abandonment represented a different kind of infidelity, and had different consequences for the families left behind. An abandoned wife now had choice in how to proceed, but for the most vulnerable English, there were few options, sometimes none. Yet to survive, plebeian wives found agency in the performance of cultural scripts, obviating the worst consequences of an absent husband.

Previous Historiography

I must acknowledge the contributions of other historians in shaping the historiographical dialogue that influences this paper. David Turner has done perhaps more than any other historian to consider cultural representations of infidelity, and explore how they produced popular narratives. In *Fashioning Adultery*, he applies Butler's gender theory to adultery, arguing that like gender, adultery is created through performance and expectation. Turner wrote of his work:

[It] explores the multiple strategies of 'fashioning' or constructing the experience of marital breakdown and adultery and analyses the languages through which infidelity was conceptualized. It views these texts not as passive 'reflectors' or 'attitudes' towards infidelity, but rather as elements of a dynamic process of communication, not only describing but also constituting and shaping changing perceptions and understandings of conjugal disintegration.⁴⁵

I use the same understanding of cultural texts, as "elements of a dynamic process of communication," and similarly seek to understand infidelity as performed, rather than

⁴⁴ Corcoran, 445; Turner 110-112.

⁴⁵ Turner, 3.

“fashioned.” I do this because I am interested not only in the cultural texts Turner seeks, but also in texts recording individual reactions to infidelity.

Turner later explores the expected assignment of the responsibilities of marriage and consequences of infidelity that he claims were “a reflection of the ways in which honour and reputation could be gendered in early modern England, with an overwhelming emphasis in discussions of female dishonor on the effects of a woman’s unchastity.” He explains the model of household stability with “the body paradigm.” When cuckoldry occurred “a wife’s adultery corrupted the flesh, while the husband, as the head, was held in contempt for being unable to prevent it. Cuckoldry exposed the failure of manly reason to subordinate the (feminine) sensual parts.”⁴⁶ The assignment of responsibility in cases of infidelity, and its subsequent social and moral consequences, were of great concern to contemporary plebeian husbands and wives.

My thesis is a development of Turner’s argument. By using “infidelity” instead of “adultery,” I can address more actions that contemporaries would understand as violating marital responsibilities and expectations. In using cultural scripts, I explore how ideas about infidelity found in popular printed media influenced the performed reactions of contemporaries towards real or perceived infidelity.

Plebeian marriage and military service challenged ideas of husbandly duty in the eighteenth century. Stereotypes developed about married men in the military, and these narratives offered plebeian military wives a cultural script that benefited their situations. A historiographical discourse has developed in the last thirty years over the accuracy of accounts of husbands “Gone for a Soldier,” and some of the most recent conclusions of this discourse offer insight into a cultural script available to plebeian military wives. The most influential of these

⁴⁶ Ibid, 87.

recent works is Jeninne Hurl-Eamon's "Did Soldiers Really Enlist to Desert Their Wives? Revisiting the Martial Character of Marital Desertion in Eighteenth Century London." In the piece, Hurl-Eamon argues that previous historical studies of martial marital desertion have produced false conclusions by defining desertion too broadly.⁴⁷ I will return to Hurl-Eamon's argument as I examine her sources as cultural and performative texts.

This paper is in part an affirmation of Hurl-Eamon's ideas about husbandly abandonment, and it is as much an affirmation of Kellye Corcoran thesis in "Cuckoldry as Performance." In the piece, Corcoran argues that cuckoldry "demanded performance on the part of the cuckold," and that through studying texts of cuckoldry as texts of performance, historians can "begin to probe the shift in attitudes that occurred as sympathy toward cuckolds... began to infiltrate realms of culture where previously only derisive laughter existed."⁴⁸ While all the texts I examine support Corcoran's theory of cuckoldry performed, not all suggest that "sympathy toward cuckolds" was readily available in eighteenth-century England. The popularity of ballads, literature, and theater that explicitly mocked cuckolds throughout the long eighteenth century calls this conclusion into question.

Corcoran explores texts describing "scenes of discovery," the moment when a cuckolded husband discovered his wife's unfaithfulness. This influenced the understanding of the nature of the infidelity that had occurred, and what an appropriate performed reaction to it was. Walking in on your wife in bed with her lover elicited a different reaction than learning from a friend at the local pub. These scenes highlight just how theatrical reactions to infidelity were, and how that

⁴⁷ Jennine Hurl-Eamon, "Did Soldiers Really Enlist to Desert Their Wives?"

⁴⁸ Corcoran, 543.

theatricality shaped the consequences to the reputations and relationships of the parties involved.⁴⁹

Theory

Butler's understanding of gender has left historians to develop histories of gender that are not monolithic, but describe gender as performed in an actor's setting. How may I then conceive of plebeian masculinity and femininity in eighteenth-century England without acting it myself? If the reality historians attempt to craft is itself crafted, how am I to make claims about the gendered lives of individuals without inserting assumptions based on my own gendered life?⁵⁰

Here I develop my own theory of infidelity performed, integrating the ideas of other theorists, as an answer to this problem. I seek models of gender and infidelity in cultural texts, seeing them as performative cultural scripts in order to compare them with texts of individual performance, to see their effects. My language will be different, however, than that of Turner or Corcoran, as I seek to understand the cultural scripts available to plebeian men and women dealing with infidelity.

The concept of cultural scripts in history is borrowed from linguistics, where it is used to write typographic descriptions of social and cultural interactions untouched by the observer's language.⁵¹ My use is not as formulaic; I make no effort here to craft a typology, but I still use them to understand expectations or models beyond my lived experience. I employ cultural scripts to discover narrative content and to extract meaning from numerous untidy texts, while I explain where the language of performative infidelity is derived. Each text offers its own script, and

⁴⁹ Ibid, 545-546.

⁵⁰ Greg Dening, *History's Anthropology: The Death of William Gooch* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988), 1.

⁵¹ Anna Wiezbicka, "Russian Cultural Scripts: The Theory of Cultural Scripts and Its Applications," *Ethos* 30, no. 4 (2002): 401-402, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3651881>.

interacts with others, based on “their different social occasions,” as Greg Dening puts it.⁵² This allows me to reach for narrative where I may find none otherwise.

Dening explains cultural scripts well, though with different terminology than I use, as he examines the theatricality of interactions of Pacific “discovery” in “The Theatricality of Observing and Being Observed.”

Theatricality is deep in every cultural action. Even if our sign worlds seem unconsciously performed, in hindsight, in our vernacular history-making, we will catch our performance consciousness and know how we manage the signs, make distinctions in the level of their meanings. That theatricality, present always, is intense when the moment being experienced is full of ambivalences.⁵³

It is that knowledge and consciousness that I define as cultural scripts, and to contemporaries, experiences of infidelity were filled with ambivalence. The consequences to all involved could change dramatically depending on the circumstances, and theatricality, or performance, shaped these consequences.

These performances took place in the public sphere of plebeian life. This publicness produced the performative reactions that are the subject of this study, and what was perceived as public was another source of ambivalence to contemporaries. To those that had served or worked at sea, life in public was to be expected. Conditions on navy ships meant that privacy was unavailable for ordinary sailors, as Dening explains in *Mr. Bligh's Bad Language*.

⁵² Dening, *History's Anthropology*, 2.

⁵³ Greg Dening, “The Theatricality of Observing and Being Observed: Eighteenth-Century Europe ‘Discovers’ the 18th Century ‘Pacific,’” in *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, ed. by Stuart B. Schwartz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 454.

The nearest things a navy man could call private space were the number on the hooks for his hammock and the fourteen inches his hammock spanned when he slept in it. Creating some sort of private space was an art, a privilege for some and a right for all.... Privacy was not a matter of walls. It was a matter of behavior, closing the windows of one's soul. Except for this, the essence of a sailor's existence was to be utterly without space he could call his own, to have all his possessions calculated narrowly, to be a totally public man to his peers and to be totally public to superiors who could muster him twice daily at his quarters.⁵⁴

This experience influenced the attitudes of sailors when they returned to shore, and the assumption that domestic and public life were intertwined so inextricably influenced their reactions to infidelity in their lives ashore.⁵⁵ This lack of privacy was intrinsic to all plebeian households. Stone goes as far as to argue that “for the poor sexual privacy was a luxury which they neither possessed nor could have desired.”⁵⁶

What was desired by contemporary men, according to Eve Sedgwick, was homosocial bonding. In her book, *Between Men*, Sedgwick analyzes the relationship between patterns of male socialization, class, women, and the greater gender regime in seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century English literature.⁵⁷ One such pattern is cuckoldry, and Sedgwick offers a fascinating analysis of its appearance in some of the most popular contemporary literature. Later I will explore her analysis of *The Country Wife*, William Wycherley's wildly popular 1675

⁵⁴ Greg Dening, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 81.

⁵⁵ Spoden, 7-9.

⁵⁶ Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, 605.

⁵⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1.

comedy, and see what cultural scripts were available from that text. For now, Sedgwick's theory of homosocial desire, and the misogyny of cuckoldry are relevant to all my analysis.

Sedgwick's argument is founded on the understandings of women as property as introduced in the section above. She posits that men were driven, through desire, or "the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship." This she judges to be an inherent quality of patriarchy, but not an ahistorical one, and applies herself in *Between Men* to understanding the historical influences on this "force."⁵⁸

Cuckoldry appears in this discussion as a form of homosocial bonding, complicated by the power dynamics and exchange of property, women, inherent to it. "To cuckold" she writes "is by definition a sexual act, performed on a man, by another man."⁵⁹ That is not to say that cuckoldry necessarily implied homosexual desire, but that the sexual acts implicit in cuckoldry meant that men who engaged in it could be routing homosocial desire through heterosexual acts. Homosocial desire manifests itself in texts of cuckoldry in subtle ways, as it was not intended to be recorded. Masculinity was not often self-referential, so I must be careful not to impose Sedgwick's theory on the expressions of contemporary men.

An important distinction, then, must be made between abandonment and cuckoldry as performance, though I include both in my definition of contemporary infidelity. Cuckoldry usually was the result of a real or perceived act of infidelity. No motivation existed for men to make false claims of wifely infidelity and thereby label themselves cuckolds. The performative aspects of cuckoldry came in the reaction to real or perceived infidelity by a wife.⁶⁰ Reactions to

⁵⁸ Sedgwick, 2.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 49.

⁶⁰ Turner, 83.

husbandly abandonment to military service could also be reacting to real or perceived infidelity, but were more often reactions to circumstantial reification of cultural scripts to serve the needs of martial wives and their families. These were a manipulation by pauper wives, using the assumptions of parish officials to their betterment. To do this effectively, a performance of a compelling cultural script was essential.⁶¹

Contemporary Popular Printed Media

Increasing urbanization, changing religious attitudes, increased access to entertainment, and other social, moral and legal changes yielded a new abundance of opinions and “angles of vision” toward infidelity in the long eighteenth century. Most importantly, a rapidly expanding culture of print produced a plethora of cultural texts offering different understandings and interpretations of marriage and infidelity.⁶² I examine a few of these texts from the multitudes, and they are of ballads, fictional literature, theater, and reference books.

Ballads

Ballads were a form of cultural expression widely available in the long eighteenth century. Influenced by contemporary tropes, English ballads record the cultural scripts of infidelity most widely available. For those in military service, the ballad served an integral function. They were not only an expression of ideas and emotions, but set the rhythm of work, and fostered communal identity.⁶³ The fear of cuckoldry, ever present to married military men, was expressed freely in these ballads. Many ballads, such as “The Brutes” encountered above, dealt with soldiers’ and sailors’ anxieties about their wives’ unfaithfulness. The humor in many

⁶¹ Jennine Hurl-Eamon, “Insights into Plebeian Marriage: Soldiers, Sailors, and their Wives in the Old Baily Proceedings,” *London Journal* 30, no. 1 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006): 22-38.

⁶² Turner, 2.

⁶³ Spoden, 12-14.

of these ballads may have served to lighten the burden of these fears, but they also made cultural scripts of infidelity readily available to English sailors and soldiers, and fostered homosocial bonding.

One such ballad published in 1781, “The Soldier’s Medley,” uses the threat of cuckoldry to suggest that soldiers remain bachelors.

Those that live single they never wear horns,
 Those that live single are happy;
 Those that are married do lye upon thorns,
 They always go ragged and shabby.
 Sing cuckolds come dig, cuckolds come dig,
 Round about cuckolds come dance to my jig.⁶⁴

This encourages soldiers to avoid marriage, for they are only asking to be cuckolded. It echoes the British Army’s argument that soldiers should remain single, which was a moral appeal as well as a practical one. Some realities of military life could not be hidden, and the poor pay and danger were well-known. This ballad may mean to suggest that martial wives were motivated by need to seek a “gallant” to support them.⁶⁵ An ordinary sailor or soldier was in no position to support a family, and the Royal Navy explicitly expected that any family of a sailor would soon be “on the parish.” Though some wives followed their husbands’ regiments abroad, and a few followed their husbands’ ships to sea, military opinions on this practice were conflicting, and all thought that too many wives in camp or at sea would cause trouble.⁶⁶ Though this ballad appealed to selfish motivations, it provided a social service, discouraging soldiers, who could

⁶⁴ *The Union Song-Book* (Berwick: W. Phorson, 1781), 196, <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco>.

⁶⁵ In this context, a “gallant” was a “ladies man.”

⁶⁶ Jennine Hurl-Eamon, “Did Soldiers Really Enlist to Desert Their Wives?”

hardly support a wife or children, from marrying. This illustrates the assumption by these institutions that wives were utterly dependent on their husbands for financial support. The popularity of ballads like these clearly mocking cuckolds and their situation, illustrates that although ideas about moral responsibility had been shifting since the late seventeenth century, cuckolds were still a source of great comedy.

The chorus refers to the Horn Fair, a humorous celebration which traditionally had cuckolds dig out and lay paths for their unfaithful wives and their “gallants” to walk upon, using the labor of the cuckold for their comfort.⁶⁷ The homosocial bonding this ballad depicts appears in many contemporary texts of cuckoldry, particularly in reference to the Horn Fair. It appears that cuckolds could find masculine companionship in the company of other cuckolds, and in a shared distrust of women.⁶⁸

Fictional Literature

Early English novelist Eliza Haywood’s book *A History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* offers Hurl-Eamon a popular cultural script of martial husbandly abandonment’s effects on plebeian wives.⁶⁹ An unnamed woman in the work is offered a job by Miss Betsy after she discovers the woman’s situation.

The poor creature was unhappily married, -her husband was gone from her, and had listed himself for a soldier; -being born in a distant county, she had no relations to whom she could apply for assistance, -was big with child, and had no support but the labour of her hands.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Corcoran, 550-552.

⁶⁸ Sedgwick, 50-51; Corcoran, 550-552.

⁶⁹ Jennine Hurl-Eamon, “Did Soldiers Really Enlist to Desert Their Wives?”.

⁷⁰ Eliza Fowler Haywood, *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (London: L. Gardner, 1768), 135.

Her being in a “distant county” from her place of birth is significant as this character represents the kind of woman that appears most often in Poor Law settlement examinations. The English relief system was based on residence, and to claim need for poor relief from the local parish, one had to prove that they were a resident of that parish. This meant living there for at least several weeks, paying a minimum rent, marrying a resident, or being employed and earning over a minimum rate. To determine if an individual qualified, parish officials examined them, and the records of these examinations make up a large part of eighteenth-century poor relief records.⁷¹ So, the woman in *A History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* would have appeared in these records, had she not been fictional, when applying for aid. Hurl-Eamon argues that the picture Haywood paints of desperation misrepresents the situation many pauper women were in, and was likely influenced by the survival theater these women employed to better their situations.⁷²

“The Cuckold turn’d Confessor,” a short story that appeared in a 1703 collection of similar works, is another piece of contemporary literature that offers revealing cultural scripts, and illustrates one alternative way husbands were understood to be responsible for their wives’ unfaithfulness.⁷³ I have already shown that wifely chastity was understood to be the responsibility of husbands, but perhaps in reaction to this, an alternative narrative of the jealous husband being responsible for his own cuckoldry was well developed early in the long eighteenth century.

The story of the “Cuckold turn’d Confessor” follows the troubled marriage of a wealthy merchant and his beautiful wife, after “he became extream Jealous of her.”⁷⁴ His jealousy was

⁷¹ George Boyer, “English Poor Laws.”

⁷² Jennine Hurl-Eamon, “Did Soldiers Really Enlist to Desert Their Wives?”

⁷³ *A Banquet for Gentlemen and Ladies, Consisting of Nine Comick and Tragick Novels...* (London: 1703), 38, <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco>.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 38.

unfounded, but it drove him to keep his wife “in such a narrow Restraint, that many Persons Condemned to Death have enjoyed larger Liberty in their imprisonment.”⁷⁵ He kept her inside his house always, never even to go even to church or look out a window. Though masculine control of the household was expected in early modern Europe, this level of control was too much for this author, as he or she plots a wife’s revenge for her controlling, jealous, husband.

The young wife determines to make her husband pay for his abuses, first sending messages through a hole in her wall to the handsome bachelor next door. Here already, the cuckoldry of her husband has begun. The story goes on to detail the wife’s efforts, as she convinces her husband to allow her to attend confession, but his jealousy again leads him against conventional morality. He disguises himself as a priest, and takes her confession, but she, knowing her husband too well, recognizes him and deceives him, confessing to the “priest,” that she has been sleeping with another man for months. His reaction is to further restrict her, and he guards the door to their house every night. She takes this opportunity to invite the handsome neighbor to sneak in through a window, and they have “Amorous Conference.”⁷⁶

Here conventional morality is being subverted to overcome a spouse’s abuse. This story is a comedy with a moral. The couple being Catholic, and the jealousy motivated desecration of a sacrament, is likely a jibe at Catholicism in a time when Catholics, especially Jacobites, those still loyal to the deposed Catholic James II and his heirs after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, were understood as a threat to England.

Probably to most famous author of the eighteenth century to produce a popular text of husbandly abandonment is Daniel Defoe. His book *Roxana*, though not as contemporaneously

⁷⁵ Ibid, 38.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 38-51.

influential as some of his other works, is a narrative charged with Defoe's ideas about gender, politics, and marriage, and begins with the abandonment of the heroine by her husband. A young wife, Roxana, married to a "fool" is troubled as her husband's brewery begins to fail under his irresponsible ownership. After they are forced to sell the business to escape their debts, she finds herself raising her five children as her husband squanders their remaining fortune, refusing to give up the lifestyle he had become accustomed to. She is powerless to persuade him to reform his practices, and slowly the family approaches destitution. When their money is about to run out, her husband leaves on what she thought was a hunting outing, never to return.⁷⁷

Slowly, Roxana realizes he is not returning, and panics as she finds herself with no resources of support. Her only family that remains is an older brother, who doesn't live locally and is himself destitute. So, she begins selling her possessions, a traumatic act for her. Soon she is left in an empty house with five hungry young children. Her husband's family, most of whom possess substantial wealth, refuse to help her at all. At this moment, she is left alone except for the housekeeper who stays with Roxana without pay, and a woman whom she had supported financially when she had had the resources. These two women convince Roxana to assert herself in this desperate time, and to sell her home and leave her children on the doorsteps of her husband's family. They tell her that if these relations "did not think fit to take some care of the children, they might send for the churchwardens if they thought better..."⁷⁸ This leaves Roxana to find her own path out of destitution, and the story of that path is the subject of the rest of the book.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Daniel Defoe, *Roxana or the Fortunate Mistress* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1946), 11-15.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 21.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 15-22.

The supposed realities of absolute destitution and the lack of any ability to provide for one's self, though substantially challenged later in Defoe's work, are well represented here. In this part of the narrative, Defoe emphasizes Roxana's helplessness and emotional turbulence. This reflects the attitudes I have already described, which Defoe shares, of women's need to be subservient and their lack of the traits required by independence. Defoe, as a man, felt a need for women to be subordinate and not economically self-sufficient to support his understanding of their role in patriarchy.⁸⁰ For him, a woman like Roxana could only maintain herself independently "at the cost of a categorical denial of wife- and motherhood."⁸¹ The script presented by Defoe in *Roxana* fundamentally resides in a misogynistic understanding of women's agency. This is a fiction, of course, and I will later show that women used their agency to support themselves and their families, even when their husbands failed to do so.

Theater

Following the restoration of the Stuart Monarchy in 1660, a new kind of theater appeared on English stages. Restoration Comedies used infidelity as a common plot element. Debuting in 1680, Thomas Otway's *The Soldiers' Fortune* was wildly popular for its sexual innuendo and innovative plot.⁸² The play's cuckoldry narrative follows a recently returned soldier, Beaugard, who finds himself, along with his former comrade Courtine, in terrible debt and, as Royalists in the 1680s, political outsiders in their own country. He is enticed by a Sir Jolly Jumble to cuckold a Whig aristocrat, Sir Davy, and from there the narrative follows Beaugard, Sir Davy, and his young wife Lady Dunce as they manipulate and misunderstand each other. Lady Dunce and

⁸⁰ Shawn Lisa Maurer, "'I wou'd be a Man-Woman': Roxana's Amazonian Threat to the Ideology of Marriage," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 46, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 363, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40755418>.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 364.

⁸² *Four Restoration Marriage Plays*, ed. by Michael Corder and Ronald Clayton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), xiii.

Beaugard courted before she was married and he left for war, and while he was away, she was convinced by her family to marry the rich Sir Davy. Beaugard is a representation of the moral rake, the man who violates traditional morality yet maintains his masculinity. Though he himself is manipulated by Sir Jolly, he ends the play as the head of an unconventional household, controlling Lady Dunce, and through her Sir Davy.⁸³

Throughout the play, Sir Davy is the archetypal aristocratic cuckold; the older man who marries a much younger woman, who is already in love with a man her own age, and in doing so earns his cuckoldry.⁸⁴ The same cultural script can be found in many Restoration comedies. In *The Soldier's Fortune* it alludes to Sir Davy's political manipulability, as he is the pawn of his party, buying what Otway believed to be the outlandish fabrication of Whig ideology. Besides relying upon the aristocratic cuckold trope, the narrative delivers the audience an experience of an impoverished soldier famously well. This was based on Otway's own experience, as a former officer in an English regiment that was disbanded shortly after he joined in February 1678. Otway, like Beaugard and Courtine, was left with few options and little resources.⁸⁵

The army that Otway had joined was disbanded by Charles II after Parliament forced him to do so to weaken his authority. The fear of the "great Danger of *Arbitrary Power*" was the tool of the Whigs in pushing against the monarchy, but Otway saw this as a cynical power grab.⁸⁶ Otway's distrust of Parliament was furthered when the army that he had joined in 1678 was entwined in the Popish Plot, a false story of imminent Catholic invasion propagated by Whigs to

⁸³ Thomas Otway, *Plays written by Mr. Thomas Otway.... Containing, The Soldier's Fortune. The Atheist. Alcibiades. The Orphan.* (London: Strahan, [1750?]), 331-418, <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco>; *Four Restoration Marriage Plays*, xix-xx.

⁸⁴ *Four Restoration Marriage Plays*, xvi.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, xiv.

⁸⁶ John Nalson, *The Complaint of Liberty and Property Against Arbitrary Government* (London: Robert Steed, 1681), 1-2; *Four Restoration Marriage Plays*, xiv.

spread distrust of the monarchy, and as proof that the Stuarts could not be trusted to preserve Anglican supremacy in Great Britain.⁸⁷ These ideas, about liberty, lies, and the role of monarchy, would inform ideas of the politics of the home, and of infidelity.⁸⁸

The trope of the wealthy aristocratic cuckold wouldn't apply to plebeian circumstance, as they wouldn't have had the resources to attract "another man's woman" in that manner, but it's helpful to understand in its contrast to the plebeian experience, and as a source of a similar cultural script. A cultural script of a husband earning his own cuckoldry did exist among contemporary plebeians, though the way he earned that cuckoldry was different. Through abuse or unnecessarily controlling behavior, a plebeian husband could be understood to have earned his cuckoldry, and be held responsible for it. They had to avoid this fate to protect their masculinity, and so could not allow themselves to be understood as merely jealous. The performances I introduce later are efforts to deflect this responsibility.

William Wycherley's 1675 comedy *The Country Wife* is again not explicitly about plebeian infidelity, but it includes cultural scripts of cuckoldry-reactions that could apply to plebeian men. The play also displays a complex routing of homosocial desire through heterosexual relations, as Sedgwick explains in *Between Men*. Transactions between men, of the commodity of women, make up the play's plot according to Sedgwick. In it, cuckoldry is a tool that aristocratic characters use to humiliate the middle class men who had taken their political and economic power during the Interregnum.

⁸⁷ *Four Restoration Marriage Plays*, xiv-xv.

⁸⁸ The Whig and Tory parties, though not identified as such until 1681 by name, were firmly established in practice for Otway and politically aware contemporaries by 1680; *Four Restoration Marriage Plays*, xiv.

One character, Horner, uses impotency, and the accompanying assumed emasculation, to cuckold the husbands of the story. He has a friend, Doctor Quack, spread a false rumor throughout London that he is a eunuch to convince the wealthy husbands of London that he is not a threat to their masculinity, marriages, or property. His plan works, as soon after Sir Jasper Fidget seeks him to be his wife's, Lady Fidget's, companion, asking him to play cards with her that evening.⁸⁹ Horner is exuberant at his immediate success, saying to Doctor Quack "Don't you see already upon the report and my carriage, this grave Man of business leaves his Wife in my lodgings, invites me to his house and wife, who before would not be acquainted with me out of jealousy."⁹⁰ He is exceptionally misogynistic, constantly bragging about his use of women for his own social gain.⁹¹ From here, the story follows Horner as he makes his way through the marriages of London's elite.

There is debate about the meaning of the "Dance of the Cuckolds," a scene near the end of the play. It consists of the central characters standing on stage watching ballerinas dance to in a performance explicitly dedicated to them.⁹² The positions of the different characters are highlighted in this moment, as they are each reflected in their actions.⁹³ Laura J. Rosenthal has argued that the dance is a cynical message to forget about the upheaval of the Interregnum to focus on England's monarchical future, embracing the nation's political cuckoldry under Cromwell, while David Gelineau posits that it is a condemnation of English society as one where

⁸⁹ William Wycherley, *The Country Wife a Comedy, as it is Acted at the Theatre-Royal* (London: Benjamin Motte, 1731), 7-8, <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco>.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹¹ Sedgwick, 54.

⁹² Wycherley, 106.

⁹³ David Gelineau, "The Country Wife, Dance of the Cuckolds," *Comparative Drama* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 298-299, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/552426>.

liars and cheats succeed, and the trusting cannot do so.⁹⁴ Both are interesting conclusions about the significance of cuckoldry in early modern English political understanding.

Sedgwick sees *The Country Wife* as examining “a comprehensive range of responses to a social situation in which the routing of homosocial desire through women is clearly presented as compulsory.”⁹⁵ Men that locked away their wives were attempting to lessen the risk of being feminized through cuckoldry. They were trying to remove an object in their position from a social economy that they were already immersed in. As Sedgwick describes:

To misunderstand the kind of property women are or the kind of transaction in which alone their value is realizable means, for a man, to endanger his own position as a subject in the relationship or exchange: to be permanently feminized or objectified in relation to other men.⁹⁶

That is how *The Country Wife* depicts aristocratic marriage and infidelity. The economy among plebeians must have been substantially different, but it is still useful to a conceptualization of plebeian infidelity. If understood in this way, the clearest difference between a sexual economy of aristocrats and one of plebeians is the availability of potential partners and the social “rewards” a cuckold could attain through his pursuits. To plebeian and autocratic cuckolds, the honor and masculinity at risk after discovering one’s statues was more similar. All eighteenth-century English men could hold these as valuable to their identity and social standing.

Reference Books

Contemporary popular interest in stories of infidelity, particularly cuckoldry, was nothing short of extraordinary, though this declined as the eighteenth century progressed.⁹⁷ Nevertheless,

⁹⁴ Ibid, 277-278.

⁹⁵ Sedgwick, 49.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 51.

⁹⁷ Turner, 113-114.

Francis Grose's 1788 *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* is full of references to cuckoldry. One entry, though, stands out as a performance of cuckoldry. A ritual, explained as "Hoisting," was a "ludicrous ceremony formerly performed on every soldier, the first time he appeared in the field after being married." The practice is described as a kind of hazing, where "three or four men of the same company to which the bridegroom belonged, seized upon him and putting a couple bayonets out of the two corners of his hat, to represent horns, it was placed on his head, the back part foremost." The hat with "horns" represents cuckoldry, as the horns in "The Soldier's Medley" do. However, the symbolism here is quite different, as it is the new husband's comrades that place the horns on him. Both "The Soldier's Medley" and the described "Hoisting" ritual assume that marriage, for a soldier, brings the promise of cuckoldry.⁹⁸ Grose's book also offers an example of one of the uses of ballads in the early-modern English military, as the described ritual ends with the singing of the "Cuckolds March."

This text describes ritual homosocial bonding over a shared misogynistic understanding. The soldiers participating are channeling their desire for masculine companionship through mutual distrust of women. It illustrates the performance of ballads by soldiers and sailors as acts of self-deprecating humor, with social benefits. This may have served as a kind of "release valve" for anxieties about infidelity. It certainly illustrates the depths to which these scripts of infidelity were driven. The very men most implicated were propagating the assumption of their wives' infidelity. This also blurs the line between cuckoldry and wittoldry. When infidelity was culturally expected, were the husbands responsible or involved? What steps could be taken to free them from responsibility? What were the narratives they promoted in response?

Case Histories: Cultural Scripts Reified through Performance

⁹⁸ Francis Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (London: Hooper and Co., 1796), 115, <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco>.

Having now introduced some of the cultural scripts available to English plebeians in the long eighteenth century, I can begin to apply them to texts of individual reactions to infidelity as case histories. These texts will show how men responded to cuckoldry in a text recording the performance of discovery, and how they expressed the consequences to their marriage, social standing, and accompanying sense of personal betrayal. First, I will examine martial husbandly abandonment in texts of performance in institutional records, illustrating how deserted wives used performance to their benefit. Second, I will approach a contemporary piece of plebeian autobiographical writing, and the way husbandly abandonment is represented in it. Third, I will examine the *Athenian Mercury* as a source of cuckoldry narratives written by cuckolds as performance. Finally, I will investigate the records of London's Old Bailey, to find conflicting narratives of performance in reaction to cuckoldry discovered.

Poor Law Records

The system of welfare in early modern England relied on the parish. The Anglican Church oversaw the distribution of money to those in need, and ran the workhouses and poorhouses where those with no means lived and worked. This system was complex, often inefficient, and changed through the long eighteenth century. It needed to maintain a record of thousands of people, their locations, living arrangements, any medical conditions, their family structure and employment.⁹⁹ This monumental task was put before parish officials, who relied on testimonies to put together a picture of an individual's life and to determine if relief was warranted and to what extent.¹⁰⁰ With any such complex task, it is easy to see why stereotyped narratives emerged, which made classifying the English poor, and their needs, easier. Among

⁹⁹ George Boyer, "English Poor Laws."

¹⁰⁰ Jennine Hurl-Eamon, "Did Soldiers Really Enlist to Desert Their Wives?".

these narratives, that of martial marital abandonment was prevalent and could be manipulated by those applying for aid to their advantage.

Appealing to the parish relief-system should not be understood as women's only way of supporting themselves and their children in the absence of a husband. Plebeian women always contributed to the household's finances with or without a man present. Women did domestic and nondomestic work, and their financial contributions to their families have been too often overlooked.¹⁰¹ Still, a plebeian husband's absence usually meant financial difficulties for his wife and children. It was in these times that women often turned to the parish, using it as an additional source of support when they usually had others, including their own labor. To convince parish officials to support them, women with absent husbands presented themselves as helpless, to maximize their allowance. This act of performance is well documented through parish Poor Law records.

When examining these records, Jennine Hurl-Eamon argues that historians have failed to recognize women's agency. She finds that though many sources indicate wifely dependence on the state, the sources are distorted by deliberate attempts by wives to appear needier than they were. To support this, Hurl-Eamon introduces the proceedings of London's Old Bailey, where many of London's poor testified as witnesses, prosecutors, or defendants.¹⁰² I will explore the Old Bailey's records later as a text regarding cuckoldry, but Hurl-Eamon uses them to expose the

¹⁰¹Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1-9; "prosecutor" was the contemporary term for both the individual accusing the defendant of a crime, and any lawyers that represented them; Clive Emsley, Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, "Trial Procedures", *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 6.0, 17 April 2011).

¹⁰² These have been available since 2000 for public use at <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org>.

falsehoods or manipulations made by pauper wives that are also documented in parish poor relief examinations. She explains:

The petitions for wage increases and poor relief that stressed female dependence on a male breadwinner can be understood as a sort of theatre, recognized by all of the players as a necessary pretense. Because this artificial script dominates state and parish sources, it tends to dominate the historiography as well. Alternative sources like the *Old Bailey Proceedings* help us to expose these deliberate falsehoods.¹⁰³

Hurl-Eamon looks at examples of women testifying to the ways they supported themselves and their families in the Old Bailey's proceedings and contrasts them to the testimonies similar women gave to parish officials. The script that emerges, of "complete wifely dependence," which martial wives used to access parish funds, does not necessarily invoke infidelity. Many men joined the Royal Navy unwillingly through impressment, and men in all branches of the military could be sent to unexpected places, away from their families.¹⁰⁴ These men would not have been seen by contemporaries as unfaithful, as they had not expected to leave their wives and families. However, the presence of this script informs my understanding of the expectations an abandoned wife faced, and she could certainly invoke a version of this script to her benefit. These records illustrate Butler's politicized gender theory, showing how women reproduced their subjective status by acting the part they are supposed to.¹⁰⁵

Ann Candler: A Plebeian Poet

¹⁰³ Jennine Hurl-Eamon, "The Fiction of Female Dependence and the Makeshift Economy of Soldiers, Sailors, and Their Wives in Eighteenth-Century London," *Labor History* 49, no. 4 (2008): 481-501, accessed June 4, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00236560802376987>.

¹⁰⁴ Jennine Hurl-Eamon, "Did Soldiers Really Enlist to Desert Their Wives?"

¹⁰⁵ Butler, 2.

As a piece of English literature, *Poetical Attempts, By Ann Candler, A Suffolk Cotteger* [sic] is unremarkable, but as a text of performance responding to infidelity, it is a rich source for my efforts. Published in 1803 in Ipswich and London, *Poetical Attempts* was the culmination of over a decade of verse by Candler.¹⁰⁶ This kind of pauper poetry was a phenomenon in eighteenth-century Europe, as Susanne Kord explores in *Women Peasant Poets in Eighteenth-century England, Scotland, and Germany: Milkmaids on Parnassus*. As a text, the preface of *Poetical Attempts* represents an exceptional source, being a substantial narrative of infidelity written by an eighteenth-century plebeian woman. Illiteracy kept most plebeians from contributing to the booming print culture, but interest in their stories was present among those immersed in that culture. Candler's editor suggests that the thought behind publishing her work was "if she could publish a small volume by subscription, she might raise a sum sufficient to furnish a room..."¹⁰⁷ though there were certainly also financial motivations on the publisher's part. This introduces a rare alternative method of survival for plebeian women: patronage. The subscribers to Candler's work invested in the production and publishing of the work, and may have been expected to be the only audience *Poetical Attempts* would attract.¹⁰⁸ What I can gather about her audience, or at least her intended audience, may be their interest and apparent charity towards a pauper woman and her story. Candler's editor also claims, "The events of her life are,

¹⁰⁶ Susanne Kord, *Women Peasant Poets in Eighteenth England, Scotland, and Germany: Milkmaids on Parnassus* (Rochester: Camden House, 2003), 54.

¹⁰⁷ Ann Candler, *Poetical Attempts, By Ann Candler, A Suffolk Cottager; With A Short Narrative Of Her Life*, ed. Elizabeth Cobbold (Ipswich: John Raw, 1803), 16-17.

¹⁰⁸ Though it seems it did get a great deal more attention than that, it is difficult to tell how much or from where. The scale of her fame can be judged by her appearance in a *Dictionary of National Biography* from 1886, 72 years after her death; *Dictionary of National Biography Vol. VIII. Burton - Cantwell*, ed. Leslie Stephen (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1886), 405.

as may well be expected, few and uninteresting, except to those who, [make] the human heart their study....” I will take this discourtesy as an invitation for historical analysis.¹⁰⁹

Ann Candler was the child of a Yoxford glover and the daughter of a Woodbridge surveyor. Her parents fell into poverty when she was young, and moved to Ipswich. Her father was literate, as were the family’s friends, and this allowed Candler to defy the norms of plebeian poverty by learning to read and write as a young woman. She married Mr. Candler at 22 and moved to the nearby village of Sproughton. Within a year of their marriage, while Mrs. Candler was “far advanced” in the pregnancy of their first child, Mr. Candler “enlisted with a recruiting party of the Guards at Ipswich.”¹¹⁰ Enlistment in the Guards would mean years in London, but also extra pay for soldiers with families. Candler writes that this caused her great anxiety and shock as her husband had not informed her of his decision. She instead quickly learned through a friend, and “hastened to the town....” She convinced him to return and “had, at last, the satisfaction of bringing [her] young warrior back again.”¹¹¹ To forestall her husband’s enlistment in the Guards, Mrs. Candler convinced him to instead enlist in the Militia. This meant “he only made his appearance twenty-eight days every summer, during the three years” of enlistment.¹¹²

The young family had other troubles too, “and had long been wanting, for [Mr. Candler] was ever much addicted to drinking.” Nevertheless, Mrs. Candler says she supported the family, in part through the gifts of friends and some inheritance after the death of an aunt.¹¹³ The family grew, staying in this vulnerable state, until Mr. Candler’s younger brother, already enlisted in the Guards for four years, came to Suffolk. Mrs. Candler describes how she reacted upon hearing of

¹⁰⁹ Candler, 1.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 4-5.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 5.

¹¹² Ibid, 5.

¹¹³ Ibid, 6.

her brother-in-law's arrival: "I know not how it was, but the moment I heard that he was come, a sudden tremor seized my whole frame, and tears trickled down my cheeks."¹¹⁴ Later that week, she learned her husband had enlisted in the Guards.

Mrs. Candler now had six children, all too young to support themselves or marry, and as the news of her husband's abandonment spread around Sproughton, neighbors came to share sympathy. One man, a Mr. W., said to her "So, your husband is listed for a soldier; well, let him go, for he was always a rascal to you."¹¹⁵ Mrs. Candler describes how she quietly wished for her husband's return, knowing the difficulty of the situation she faced. Through the advice of friends, Candler decided to send four of her children to the Tattingstone House of Industry, a workhouse for the poor, keeping the eldest and youngest with her. Reflecting, she wishes she had not split her family further, and regrets "that I did not come in with them all."¹¹⁶

For the next two years Candler lived off her own industry as a cottager, making textiles at home, and through the generosity of friends. During this time, her eldest daughter found a job "in service," and Mrs. Candler took her next eldest daughter out of the workhouse.¹¹⁷ Her husband then returned to Sproughton, on leave from his post in London, and convinced her to join him there. When she arrived, with the two of her children now in her custody, she found him unable to support them, or spend much time with the family at all. Finding life in London unbearable and unsustainable, she returned to Sproughton, and spent her life, until *Poetical Attempts'* publication, in the Tattingstone House of Industry, the same workhouse she sent her children to after her husband's marital desertion.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 7.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 8.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 8.

¹¹⁷ This probably means as a servant.

¹¹⁸ Candler, 10.

The public nature of husbandly abandonment is well-defined in Candler's narrative. It delivers a new perspective, in the village of Sproughton's reaction to Mr. Candler's desertion, expressing outrage at his infidelity. That so many friends, neighbors, and family involve themselves in her situation illustrates the importance of a wife's reaction to such a personal calamity, and demonstrates the need for intentional performance in an abandoned wife's social interactions. Mrs. Candler follows the script of a wife and mother deserted by an irresponsible husband, and relying on the charity of others to survive the situation. This reflects the script encountered in *Roxana* and briefly in *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless*. It seems that an abandoned wife was especially eligible for acts of personal charity. That Mrs. Candler sends her children to the workhouse, and later goes there herself, also offers insight into the individual plebeian experience, and more clearly illustrates the point of view of women appealing to the parish for relief and the desperate consequences of their chosen performance.

The preface to *Poetical Attempts* is a narrative of feminine agency reclaimed. That a plebeian wife, without resources or the expected support of a husband, could survive through this narrative may appear to contrast that which Hurl-Eamon argues abandoned wives deployed. Candler says she was abandoned, and that she did not receive support from her husband. However, Candler clearly possess agency in the choices she makes after he husband's desertion. She does not fit the contemporary model of an abandoned wife substituting dependence on the parish for dependence of her husband.

The tone of Candler's narrative is also problematic to the arguments of Hurl-Eamon, arguments that I nevertheless find compelling. The succession of desperate concessions Candler makes, first to enlist her husband in the militia, then to send her children to the workhouse, and finally to move their herself, doesn't represent the kind of feminine agency Hurl-Eamon finds so

readily in poor relief examinations. Should Candler's narrative be filled with fabrication, then it would certainly support Hurl-Eamon's argument that pauper women deployed a cultural script of dependence to access resources, but as it is I do not find that it does so. Candler does adhere to a script through performance, as when she holds her tongue in reply to Mr. W., but nothing like the deliberate manipulation of the parish system that Hurl-Eamon argues was common. Perhaps this is because this text was intended for publishing, and intentional deceit would have made Candler less sympathetic as a character and author. However, Candler still does not fit the contemporary model of an abandoned wife substituting dependence on the parish for dependence of her husband. It is clear from her narrative that with and without her husband, Mrs. Candler uses social resources, and her own labor, to support herself and her family. The successive choices she makes, excessively difficult choices at that, are those of an independent agent rationally assessing her situation.

The Athenian Mercury

That the proliferation of printed texts through English society in the long eighteenth century influenced the scripts available to contemporary husbands and wives is apparent in contemporary periodicals like the *Athenian Mercury*, which allowed individual expression to reach large portions of the English public.¹¹⁹ The *Athenian Mercury* was most famous for its weekly "Questions and Answers" section, in which the editors of the *Mercury* answered questions about religion, law, global affairs, science, and relationships. There are issues with the *Mercury* as a source. The questions are invariably anonymous and sometimes offer little information about the inquirer's identity.¹²⁰ This sometimes makes it difficult to determine if

¹¹⁹ Originally the *Athenian Gazette*, later called the *Athenian Mercury*. I have used the *Athenian Oracle*, a published compilation of questions to the editors of the *Athenian Mercury*.

¹²⁰ They also don't include a date, but the *Mercury's* short publication history, from 1690 to 1697, gives an appropriate timeframe.

they fit into my efforts here. Nevertheless, when approached with caution they can be justifiably included.

David Turner engages with an anonymous query from the *Athenian Mercury* in *Fashioning Adultery*.

A sailor described in the *Athenian Mercury* for Tuesday 20 August 1695 how three years previously he had married a ‘young and handsome’ woman, ‘purely out of love’, but while he ‘loved her intirely’, she quickly ‘grew cold in her carriage’ towards him. Despite his trying ‘all the endearing ways imaginable to reclaim her’ from her ‘giddy’ behavior, she would insolently ‘put her fingers in her ears’ when he tried to reason with her. Discovering her adultery with one of his shipmates, he chose to pardon her in the hope that she would reform her conduct, but to no avail, for she continued her infidelity ‘and vows she cares not if all the world knew it, and seems not in the least sorry for it’.¹²¹

Turner argues from this text that periodicals like the *Mercury* gave husbands the opportunity to express the sense of betrayal that they felt upon discovering their wives’ infidelity. The sympathy they received from the editors of the *Mercury* may have been their only source of comfort in a society that still often ridiculed cuckolded men.¹²² In this the *Athenian Mercury* represented a new mode of expression for cuckolded men. The anonymity provided meant that public shaming, which had been intrinsic to a confession of cuckoldry, could be avoided entirely. This allowed husbands to express themselves without fear of social or domestic reprisal, and to receive the empathy apparent in some of the editors’ responses. Contrasting this with the tropes

¹²¹ Turner, 110.

¹²² Ibid, 110-112.

that appear in contemporary popular print media offers striking differences. Sir Davy's struggles as a cuckold in *A Soldier's Fortune* are not expressive of the betrayal he suffered in the same way as these men are.¹²³ The lack of sympathy in that narrative is striking when compared to those in the *Athenian Mercury*.

This anonymity also encouraged performance, allowing cuckolded husbands to regain agency by carefully crafting the narrative of their cuckoldry. Turner suggests that "some correspondents... chose to emphasize the underhanded behavior of the men who had made them cuckolds, bitterly presenting images of happy marriages destroyed by dangerous outsiders who had little concern with patriarchal household stability or conventional morality."¹²⁴ Husbands could also use performed narratives to justify action that would restore that stability and morality, as in the case of this next inquiry.

An anonymous husband, "marry'd (God help me) to a pretended widow who keeps a Publick house in this Town, for above these five Years," wrote in urgency to the *Mercury* about his wife's behavior, asking how he "may reduce her to a better Mind." He describes her many abuses, claiming "She drinks her self very plentifully, and exreamly abuses me when she's drunk, nor can I exuse her when she's sober, which does not often happen; she gives me very scurrilous Language, Rascal, Cuckold, (tho' Truth is not to be spoken at all times) and whatever else she can think upon." That this abuse is public acutely troubles the man, as his wife apparently abuses him "before all the Company that come to her House," and he "can't call it mine because I must ingenuously confess 'tis she the wears the Breeches, and I the Crest only." She beat and struck him regularly, "with Spit, Firefork, or what comes next to hand." The

¹²³ *Four Restoration Marriage Plays*, xviii.

¹²⁴ Turner, 111.

family's finances were controlled by her, but by law he was responsible for the debts she accrued. She was aware of this, and "declares she'll run me in Debt as much as possible, on purpose that I may rot and starve..." Through her control and abuse, this woman has turned her household's social structure upside-down.¹²⁵ She had attained the liberty Sarah Chapone would rally for a half century later, by ignoring accepted traditions of gendered power and property, and through violence.

The *Mercury* editor's response to this question is remarkable. In hearing of a household's structure reversed, and a husband cuckolded, they suggest he leave the city, and find somewhere "that she mayn't find ye (as you value your Nose, Ears, and all the rest of your Movables) and there make much of your self at a safer Distance from her, since she has it seems Feather'd her Nest so well already that there's no fear of so good a Creatures wanting."¹²⁶ This humorous reaction may refer to cuckoldry; that the wife's "Nest" has been "Feather'd" may intend to evoke the Cuckoo, the bird that lays its eggs in others' nests, and is the derivation of the word "cuckold." There is clear misogyny in the husband's letter and the editor's reply. Even when he has had his control removed, the husband feels entitled to power and his wife's property. The editor's reply mocks the wife's agency, and seems more troubled by it than the abuses she has committed. It's unclear to me whether the *Mercury*'s editors are sympathetic towards this husband. Though they are clearly joking about the abuse this husband has experienced, it is conceivable that this is the only way the editors could deal with this kind of power reversal and abuse directed at a husband. This reaction may be compared to that of the wife in the "Cuckold

¹²⁵ John Dunton, Richard Sault, John Norris and Samuel Wesley, *The Athenian Oracle: Being an entire collection of all the valuable Questions and Answers in the Old Athenian Mercuries* (London: Andrew Bell, 1704), 198, <https://archive.org/details/TheAthenianOracleBeingAnEntireCollectionOfAllTheValuableQuestions>.

¹²⁶ Dunton, 198-199.

turn'd Confessor." In both cases, an act against conventional morality, adultery or abandonment, was justified as a public reaction to one spouse unjustly exercising control over the other—in the "Cuckold turn'd Confessor," the wife's infidelity; in this correspondence, abandonment.

This text of performance presents an extreme example of the kind of cuckoldry English men feared: to have all power removed, to be without financial independence, to be humiliated and have his masculinity degraded publicly. To have his property, in his wife, stolen and spoiled. To be utterly emasculated. These were the possible consequences of cuckoldry to contemporary husbands. The wife has dethroned her husband, and taken the control he was expected to possess. Through writing theatricality, this inquirer rejects the traditional moral consequences of cuckoldry. By emphasizing his wife's misbehavior and abuses, he attempts to reject responsibility for her actions, at the cost of surrendering his responsibility for the household. By making public his wife's abuses and infidelities, this husband trades his traditional masculine authority and the accompanying responsibilities for moral vindication and potential homosocial sympathy.

The Trial of Andrew Hallgeel

Plebeians finding themselves before the court in eighteenth-century England could employ performance to their betterment. In a legal environment where claims of character and testimonies mattered more than any physical evidence, performance was an integral part of any litigation. When infidelity arose in these cases, eighteenth-century men and women deployed the cultural scripts available to them to protect themselves or those they cared for from punishment, to deliver justice and settlement, or to protect their dignity and social standing. In all instances, an act of performance in the courtroom offers insight into contemporary plebeian marriages and their gendered identities.

A recent addition to texts on the plebeian legal experience available for study, the proceedings of London's Old Bailey allow me to examine performances of infidelity in the courtroom as one of the few well documented plebeian public spaces. Historians have recently begun making extensive use of the Old Bailey's proceedings as they have been digitized and made freely available online.¹²⁷ The records available come in the form of trial proceedings and ordinary's reports, but for my purposes the trial proceedings are of greater interest. Clerks recorded the statements of witnesses and defendants, sometimes abbreviating what was said. They also shortened the bureaucratic start and ending of a trial. Still, records of witness and defendant testimony can be trusted to be close to the words spoken in court.¹²⁸

Trials relied on testimonies to understand if a crime had occurred, establish the responsible parties, and choose an appropriate sentence. The character of the prosecutor and defendant was also considered important in determining guilt and appropriate sentencing, so witnesses were often called to testify to those. Legal counsel was rarely available to plebeians in either role, and a trial usually consisted of the development of two narratives through a verbal confrontation between the prosecutor, usually the victim of the crime if they were alive, and the defendant. Trials were short, regularly about thirty minutes long, and juries deliberated on several cases at once. This put defendants at a notable disadvantage; their only hope was producing a compelling alternative narrative to that of the prosecutor.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Jennine Hurl-Eamon, "Insights into Plebeian Marriage: Soldiers, Sailors, and their Wives in the Old Baily Proceedings," *London Journal* 30, no. 1 (2005): 22-38, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

¹²⁸ Tim Hitchcock, Robert Shoemaker, Clive Emsley, Sharon Howard and Jamie McLaughlin, *et al.*, *The Old Bailey Proceedings Online, 1674-1913* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 24 March 2012).

¹²⁹ Clive Emsley, Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, "Trial Procedures", *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 6.0, 17 April 2011).

On July 15, 1767 Andrew Hallgeel was brought to trial in London's Old Bailey for the murder of William Cartwright, a London schoolmaster. Hallgeel as a boatswain, the lowest ranking officer on a Royal Navy ship, was likely an enlisted sailor who had risen through the ranks, and was responsible for disciplining the regular sailors. He had returned home from his posting on an English Man-of-War a few months prior and was reunited with his wife, who was employed as Mr. Cartwright's housekeeper, and lived in his house.¹³⁰

Though attitudes toward cuckoldry were changing throughout the long eighteenth century, generally becoming more sympathetic as forgiveness was emphasized by preachers and in print media, humiliation often still resulted from acts of cuckoldry that became public, and this is what happened when Hallgeel was accosted by the landlady of the Black Swan alehouse in early June 1767. Patrick Dermot, a witness for the prosecution and associate of Mr. Cartwright, tells the court what he saw after going to alehouse to wash an injury.

...words passed between the landlady and [Hallgeel]; he called her bitch; what she said I did not rightly hear, but she told me afterwards, that she bid him go home to the bitch his wife that cuckolded him; the prisoner told me the same thing when we were got out of the house; the landlady said to me, why do you bring such a person here; the prisoner told me, she bid him go home to Cartwright's whore, you cuckold....¹³¹

This interaction is one of cuckoldry discovered. At this moment, Hallgeel has little agency. His masculinity has been eroded and his marriage made socially illegitimate. His efforts to remedy

¹³⁰ *OBP*, July 1767, Andrew Hallgeel (t17670715-24).

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

this, both in the attack against his wife and Cartwright and in his court testimony, are a performance of masculinity.

The questions asked by the court reveal clearly what was the understood relevance of the alleged infidelity to the case. After Dermot told the story of the discovery at the Black Swan, the court asked him “Do you know of any intimacy between the deceased and the prisoner’s wife? Dermot responded, “Upon my word I know of none, nor never suspected none.” And then “Has it not made much noise in the neighbourhood?” Dermot said, “I do not know it has.”¹³² While these questions were probably motivated by the need to determine if the killing of Mr. Cartwright was premeditated, they also delve into the public nature of contemporary adultery. The expectation that such things would be publicly discussed gives insight into the performances the public were familiar with. A series of questions later in the proceeding, directed at Elizabeth Golding, one of the servants that worked and lived in Cartwright’s house, shows that the reality of the alleged affair was also important to the court. From her room under the stairs in Cartwright’s house, she heard him repeatedly sneak down into Mrs. Hallgeel’s room and “heard them move in bed together.”¹³³ This was all while Mr. Hallgeel was at sea. One of an English sailor’s greatest fears had come true.

It is the testimony of Andrew Hallgeel himself that discloses the most about infidelity as performance. He tells a story with substantial differences from that given by Elizabeth Golding and Patrick Dermot. Hallgeel leaves out the incident at the Black Swan, saying that he had suspected his wife’s unfaithfulness “as a boy told me before, that he caught my wife and Mr. Cartwright together.” Dermot tells the court that Mr. Hallgeel found Mr. Cartwright and Mrs.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

Hallgeel just inside the front door, talking about “a little family account,” but Mr. Hallgeel gives a different story. He says that after Ms. Golding couldn’t find his wife or Mr. Cartwright, he searched the house for them, and found his wife’s bedroom door locked. “I burst it open, there Mr. Cartwright was in action with my wife; he arose up, she could not cover her nakedness....”¹³⁴ This is a much more dramatic scene of discovery than the one Dermot describes, and represents a reclamation of agency by Mr. Hallgeel, of both legal and masculine significance. The emphasis on his wife’s nakedness highlights her responsibility and deceit.

The attack continued, as Mr. Hallgeel described in his testimony. Mr. Hallgeel testified “[Mrs. Hallgeel] came to clasp her arms round me; I said, you whore, do not go to take hold of me, and with the hanger as I held it, by her turning, pierced her thigh....” The misogyny of cuckoldry reactions is never more clear than here, and that this was meant as part of his defense, emphasizes the institutional misogyny in a patriarchal court system. He says that he “then... went and told Mr. Dermot that I caught them both in the action, and paid them pretty well for it....” Here Mr. Hallgeel represented his actions not as an emotional outburst, but as penance for the betrayal his wife had suffered him, and the damage Mr. Cartwright had done to his marriage and property.

The immediate legal benefits of this story for Mr. Hallgeel are clear. In claiming that he walked in on his wife and her lover, he rejects any notion of premeditation on his part, which was important in the distinction between a murder and manslaughter charge. However, I cannot ignore the benefits this performance and story of discovery had for Mr. Hallgeel’s masculinity. In claiming that finding his wife befouled he acted immediately and passionately to reclaim

¹³⁴ Ibid.

control of his marriage, Hallgeel is presenting himself as the master of his household, protecting his husbandly masculinity and his property, in his wife and her honor.¹³⁵

Had the Hallgeel's been wealthy this story could have ended quite differently. Criminal conversation suits, legal actions against defamation, became popular in the seventeenth century. For those wealthy enough to afford them, almost exclusively gentry and nobility, they "provided an alternative to less-structured forms of justice." Where murder and violence had been the only route to a husband's redemption of masculinity and resolution of his wife's disgrace, by the eighteenth century, conversation suits offered a substantive alternative conduit.¹³⁶

Two distinct narratives producing different conclusions are presented, and it is not my task here to decided which aligns with reality. That was the task of the jury in the Hallgeel trial, and they believed, at least to some extent, Mr. Hallgeel's narrative. He was found guilty of manslaughter, killing without premeditation, and sentenced to be branded with an "M" for "Manslaughter" on his finger. It is not clear from the text if Mrs. Hallgeel survived the attack.¹³⁷ She probably did, because Mr. Hallgeel was kept in prison after the trial to face further legal action for "assaulting his wife." But if she survived, why was she not called as a witness? There is not a record of a trial for that assault in the Old Bailey's proceedings.

Conclusion

The task I set myself in this thesis was a demonstration of a method of studying the lives of individuals who are not well recorded in traditional sources. Eighteenth-century English plebeians encountered many institutions, but the records of these interactions leave out important details of their lives, and do not produce a natural narrative. I have argued that by treating these

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Corcoran, 544.

¹³⁷ *OBP*, July 1767, Andrew Hallgeel (t17670715-24).

interactions as performances within a performative conception of gender, and that by comparing these performances with fictional printed texts, historians can develop an understanding of cultural scripts that offer narrative where there otherwise is none, or very little. This dialectic, between cultural scripts and performances, is the contribution of this study to existing historiography.

The great difficulties in analyzing texts of plebeian life, and making substantial claims about them, can be overcome through the judicious deployment of gender theory. Understanding popular texts as sources, and products, of cultural scripts, which were available to English plebeians and influenced their habitus, their intrinsic understandings, has allowed me to derive the conclusions I have from plebeian texts of performance. The sympathy husbands could find by emphasizing their wives' abuses and conventional moral transgressions came at the cost of their masculinity and dignity. This would not be clear without an understanding of the cultural scripts available in media like "the Soldier's Medley" and *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*.

The public nature of infidelity in the long eighteenth century produced the texts of performance I have examined. There would be no record of Andrew Hallgeel's act of discovery without his trial, nor of Ann Candler without her writings. I have argued that that publicness shaped individual performances as well. Hallgeel shaped his narrative around the theatricality of his discovery and his reaction. He would not have told the story he did, without being exposed as he was. The greater cultural setting also influenced plebeian performance. From the policies of the local parish, at the time of an examination, paupers borrowed their scripts, playing to the preconceptions and attitudes of parish officials. They borrowed also from cultural texts, some of which I have investigated, which offered scripts to better their situation, and garner sympathy.

The scripts presented in literature, theater, ballads and other media often differed from those deployed by contemporary men and women in reaction to infidelity. Sir Davy in *The Soldier's Fortune* and the husband in "The Cuckold turn'd Confessor" are not representative of the experiences of contemporary cuckolds. Their contribution to the experiences of contemporaries, however, was significant in the ways they shaped cultural scripts of infidelity. Both for cuckolded husbands and abandoned wives, alternative cultural scripts allowed them to retain agency while still aligning themselves with the gender regime, forging a path away from the narrow tropes represented in contemporary media.

The eighteenth-century cuckold benefited from religious and moral changes, evident in the *Athenian Mercury's* correspondents and the sermons of the Horn Fair, that resulted in increasing cultural backlash towards their mockery. Nevertheless, there were still considerable cultural and social energies put into their humiliation, and contemporary husbands still felt the threat of cuckoldry to their social standing as great. The violence of Hallgeel's reaction makes that clear, as does the anxiety and pain expressed by the husbands writing to the *Athenian Mercury*. The popularity of the cultural texts I have examined also demonstrates that mocking cuckoldry was a popular theme long after Turner and Corcoran claim it had been partially rejected. Plebeian marriage and infidelity must continue to be studied by historians, and it is through intersecting texts, like the institutional records, personal writings, and popular printed media I have examined, written for varying reasons and offering varying conclusions, that greater understandings of a gendered past can be gained.

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