

“So Shall She Now the Softest Couloours Chuse | To Paint thy Fate & Shadow out thy Woes” Poetry and Emotion in the Abergavenny Scandal of 1729

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Abstract This article will explore the ways in which literary forms empower emotional response to public events, using as a case study the wide range of literary texts – published and circulated in manuscript – inspired by the notorious Abergavenny scandal of 1729. Lady Abergavenny’s beauty, adultery and death, followed by a trial in which her husband was awarded a staggering £10,000 in compensation, stimulated poetry, drama and opera, giving voice to desire, remorse, pity, despair and contempt. Drama and poetry intersect in their treatment of the scandal, and while poetry offers its writers and readers an opportunity to explore a single viewpoint, and to circulate it privately, drama re-imagines the causes and conversations, and exposes them to public judgment. The alternating prose and verse of opera thus offer us a self-contained sample of the uses of different literary genres in expressing emotion and presenting the social and moral debates provoked by the affair.

Summary 1 Responses to the Abergavenny Case in Manuscript Poetry. – 2 Poetic Interactions Between Manuscript and Print. – 3 The Case on Stage. – 4 The Uses of Genre in an Operatic Depiction of the Case: *Calista*.

Keywords Abergavenny. Scandal. Emotion. Genre. Poetry.

My discussion of the poetry generated by the Abergavenny scandal of 1729, in which Lord Abergavenny was awarded £10,000 in compensation for his wife’s adultery, centres on a private collection of manuscript verse, accumulated by Lady Anne Coventry, one of the daughters of the Duke of Beaumont, during her exceptionally long life (1673-1763), and now kept in the Muniment Room, Badminton House, Gloucestershire. The part of the collection containing the Abergavenny poems is distinguished by being addressed to Lady Anne directly, and without covering notes, as discrete commentary on the events to which they respond.¹ The poems are not exclusive, however, and, as I will show, participate in both manuscript and print circulation at the time. They also intersect with contemporary

1 All quotations from the collection are given in the footnotes.

drama: names, images and ideas cross and re-cross between the genres in revealing and provocative ways. That these poems, however, should end up in the possession of a widowed 56-year-old in self-imposed rural seclusion suggests the power of the situation, and the efficacy of poetry as a means of thinking about it.

1 Responses to the Abergavenny Case in Manuscript Poetry

The first poem on the subject to appear in the bundle is carefully written out on a folded piece of paper, making a sheet of 8" by 6".² The sheet is cut after the end of the poem. This excision is particularly frustrating given the debate about the authorship of the poem. It was first published in *The Odes of Charles Hanbury Williams, Knight* (1775; titled "On the Death of Lady Abergavenny, by a Lady"). Also the Digital Miscellanies Index attributes it to him. However, Tone Dagny Sundt Urstad in her unpublished thesis, *The Works of Charles Hanbury Williams, which Was Submitted at Cambridge in January 1987*, is utterly dismissive of the attribution (Urstad 1987). Her thesis, though thirty years old, remains the only current comprehensive discussion of Charles Hanbury Williams' work so far completed, which makes me inclined to accept her verdict. His Williams' age, however, remains a suggestive factor, even while it makes the pseudonym unlikely, as will be seen in my discussion of some of the other poems on the subject, which take a similarly sympathetic tone.

There is nothing in the poem itself, or its appearance in the correspondence of Lady Anne Coventry to suggest that it was not written, in fact, by a lady. Lady Anne was famously interested in female education, supporting and corresponding with Mary Astell (Perry 1986, 175). A notebook miscellany of copied and original poetry belonging to and written by a female servant in her own household has recently been discovered in the Fellows' Library of Winchester College (Quinault 2015). She may therefore have been particularly interested in a female perspective on the case.

The poem relates the Abergavenny story by working backwards from the tomb of the dead woman, insisting on her penitence, and coaxing the reader into sympathy. It begins "Ye Muses all and pittyng Virgins come | And pour yor. Tears on poor Calista's Tomb'Tomb", suggesting that it could be a response to the longest and most famous Abergavenny poem, - "An Epistle from Calista to Altamont'Altamont", which was also sent to Lady Anne Coventry. The names of the husband and wife are taken from Nicholas Rowe's play, *The Fair Penitent* (1703), one of the many interesting interconnections between poetry and drama in this story, which suggests again

2 Muniment Room, Badminton House, Fm T/B 1/4/4.

the extent to which the case seems to have captured a particular moment in popular debate about the sexual and social responsibilities of the sexes.

In the poem, though, the most distinctive feature is the use of the “pitying Virgins” as chief mourners – an idea that not only appears nowhere else in the Abergavenny poems that I have found, but is actively different from their more worldly, experienced speakers. The identification of the poem’s voice with the virgins is emphasised later:

for her Woes my pitying Tears shall flow
A worthless Gift, but all I can bestow:
My pensive Muse her Sorrows still shall Mourn
And Move Distress in Lovers yet unborn;
Who while her hapless Story I relate,
Shall learn to shun the snare & weep her Fate
(Williams 1768, 31)

This suggests to me that this is a poet for whom marriage is the beginning, and partial cause, of the possibility of the ‘Crime’; as a matter of fact, the author says “Let none her Crime upbrayde | By Love and too much Gentleness betray’d”, and places the responsibility for her unhappiness and death firmly on the shoulders of the lover and, to some extent, the irrational jealousy and harshness of the husband:

forever may his Name be Curst
Of spotted Villains be he ranked the first
Who with a base Revenge & Malice fired
Fiercer Jealousy in her stern Lord inspired
In humane Wretch! Sure now thy woes begin
And thou already hast thy Hell within,
While pitying Heaven with Mercy sees her Fate
And kindly takes Her to a happier State.
(30)

The lover is in fact clearly compared to Satan, both in the adjective “spotted”, suggesting not only his sinful state, but also Shakespeare’s “spotted snakes with double tongue”, and even more explicitly, in the author’s employment of Milton’s description of Satan at the beginning of Book IV of *Paradise Lost*: “from the bottom stir | The Hell within him, for within him Hell | He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell | One step no more then from himself can fly | By change of place” (*Paradise Lost*, Book IV, ll. 19-23). The speaker compares those who condemn “Calista” – “ye Railers” – to those who wished to stone the adulteress in John, Chapter 8,

and her sympathy is with the sinner in human as well as religious terms: she calls her 'the trembling Creature', and interestingly gives a new turn to Christ's forgiveness with the revealing word 'freedom':

With Majesty he rais'd his Awefull Head,
And mildly to the trembling Creature Said
Again thy Life, & ffreedom I restore,
Now go thy way: & Look thou sin no more
(Williams 1768, 30)

Once again, it is possible to read into the language the virgin's dread of marriage as an unhappy and confining state which makes both sin and death more likely. Whether or not it is by a real lady, and not an assumed one – the use of "your sex" to describe the correct female response suggests both that it probably is was not written by a woman, and that the true author had not thought through the implications of his assumption of female gender – the conceit shows that this was a debate in which a female perspective was not only permitted, but seen as a distinct and separate contribution, enabling a different and more personal treatment of Lady Abergavenny's situation.

There are other poems that are sympathetic to Lady Abergavenny's case, of course, and it is interesting to compare their stance with the virginal pity of the Badminton House manuscript, Fm T/B 1/4/4 f.6, not least because it seems possible that two of them were written by young men at Oxford University, though the evidence is only circumstantial. One is preserved in the Grenville papers in the British Library.³ This is also a bundle of miscellaneous literary material, the property in this case of George Grenville, and the poem is titled "'Elegy on the Lady Ab-r-n-y'". It is interesting that the innuendo of the name survives, even in a manuscript exchanged between friends, or at least acquaintances, where one would imagine the discretion unnecessary – but perhaps the conceit adds to the titillation.

The speaker's focus in this poem is on Lady Abergavenny's beauty, particularly by contrast with the faded prudes from whose "female Malice' Malice" she has escaped through death:⁴

No prude reform'd by wrinkles & threescore
Branding ye passion she inspires no more
Does with malicious joy thy story tell

3 British Library Add MS 57836 f.76.

4 Compare to Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*: "Here stood *Ill-nature* like an *ancient Maid*, | Her wrinkled form in *Black and White* array'd; | With store of Pray'rs, for Mornings, Nights, and Noons, | Her Hand is fill'd; her Bosom with Lampons" (Canto IV, ll. 27-30).

And curse the Crime she better could conceal.
(BL Add MS 57836 f.76; see also *The New Foundling Hospital for Wit* 1769, 28)

While his superficial agenda is to pay a “sad tribute’tribute”, summoning the Muse to mourn the fate of one who has fallen “by Love”, lubriciousness is never far from the surface. He compares her to Dido, to Rosamond, Cleopatra and Monimia,⁵ and the relish with which he imagines her adulterous acts is clearly visible both in his particular use of the Calista story – ‘No more Calista her Lothario name | Nor call on the dear cause of all her Pain’ – which seems to refer to the pleasures and pains of both sexual love and childbirth, and in his portrayal of the aged gossips who condemn her:

Such are the virtuous patterns of the town
Who speak thy guilt but to disguise their own
Friends to the vice tho desperate Foes to shame
Pant for each night that every day they Blame.
(28)

His use of ‘virtuous’ is reminiscent of the ‘virtuous gang’ of William Wycherley’s Restoration play *The Country Wife* (1665), those consummate sexual hypocrites.

This poem also, like the example at Badminton, refers to Lady Abergavenny’s name as having been ‘mangled’, but while the Badminton poem addresses the accusers directly, with an imperative – “But amongst those who mangle thus her Fame | how many Crimes, tho not their Fate: the Same | Henceforth forever cease her Name to tax. | nor with foul Calumny debase your Sex” – the Grenville text retreats again behind the sympathy of the “Muse”:

Still would the Muse at thy Loud Greifs Command
[obscured by a drip: ?Faint?] is her Voice & tho unskill’d her Hand
[drip: ?Som?] bare Reproach thy mangl’d name retrieve
And: what she dares not justify Forgive.
(28)

The poem seems aware of its own position here: Lady Abergavenny’s actions are not justifiable, but they are forgivable, particularly in someone so attractive. The final lines comment self-referentially on the artifice of

5 The last is the heroine of Thomas Otways’s tragedy, *The Orphan, or, The Unhappy Marriage* (1680), which will be discussed in ch. 4.

poetry (and perhaps, by association, make-up an idea harshly deployed in another re-writing of the story in *The Grub-street Journal*) and its ability to highlight what is beautiful in any situation, or face:

So shall she now the softest Coulours Chuse
To paint thy fate & shadow out thy Woes
Call [water drop again: ?you/it a?] tender tho a Lawless Flame
Think on thy Beauties and forget thy shame.
(28)

These lines can also be read as an explicit discussion of the ability of poetry's role in depicting – or indeed describing – the ways in which emotion affects judgement. Both poetry and emotion colour events, and the poem's language here conflates artistic and linguistic persuasion: “call” and “paint” are used as equivalent verbs in their active power to change the way the reader, or viewer, thinks.

We do not know whether or not Grenville wrote this poem himself. The pencilled attributions at the top of the folio suggest “Mr L?etleton”⁶ (crossed out) and “Wm.Pitt” – but but it seems to me to be made more likely by the fact that another Abergavenny poem is attributed by some to a Christ Church contemporary of his, Charles Sackville, Earl of Middlesex. The likelihood of Pitt's having written a poem commenting on the affair is seriously diminished by the fact that in 1728 a violent attack of gout compelled Pitt to leave Oxford University without finishing his degree. Sackville, on the other hand, had been at the college just over a year when Grenville matriculated on 6th February 1729/30, and they were of very similar ages. Like the previous poem, this also appears in the 1822 version of *The Works of Charles Hanbury Williams* (ed. Jeffries), titled “On Lady Abergavenny: by Charles, Duke of Dorset”, and Urstad implicitly supports this attribution to some extent. A copy preserved among Hanbury Williams' own papers carries an attribution to Lord Hervey, an attribution supported by its inclusion in Bill Overton's recent definitive edition of Hervey's complete poems (Overton 2016).

As Urstad's remark suggests, this is the poetic response to the Abergavenny scandal that received the most prolonged public attention in print, as it became the subject of a sequence of articles in *The Grub-street Journal* in the spring of 1730, culminating in its being substantially re-written by a “Maeuius” in order to turn the spotlight away from the inevitable fall of a frivolous society belle, and onto the morally more serious fault of disloyalty in friendship among men: from Lady Abergavenny to Lyddel. The

6 George Lyttelton was also at Christ Church and was 20 years old at the time. He may in fact be the most likely author, in defiance of the pencillings.

first lines suggest a more conflicted view of Lady Abergavenny than the uncomplicated sexual praise of the previous poem. This author is aware of the difficulties and dangers of being a beautiful woman living in a sensual and superficial society:

Young, thoughtless, gay, unfortunately fair,
Her pride to please, and pleasure all her care;
With too much kindness and too little art,
Prone to indulge the dictates of the heart;
Flatter'd by all, solicited, admir'd;
By women envied, and by men desir'd.
(Pope 1776, 155)

Lady Abergavenny is both culpable and excused in this description: it seems to emphasise a child-like heedlessness above all, as the placing of the word 'Young' suggests. The poem's original version goes on to devote several lines to the way in which her story has been used didactically, though again the lines push together lascivious gossip and wholesome moralising, so closely that it can be difficult to tell the difference:

By ev'ry idle tongue her story told,
The novel of the young, the lecture of the old.
(156)

The "scoffer" or the "prude" both tell the tale, he says, but "good-nature" will be compassionate, though not blind: "weep her ruin while it owns her fault". The final section rather illogically (as *The Grub-street Journal* gleefully points out in its comprehensive demolition of the poem on May 14th 1730, no. 19) seems to suggest - that she was immune to guilt, but not to shame, and that in the end, she died as a love-offering to Lyddel:

Yet dying, still she shew'd so dear her fame,
She could survive her guilt, but not her shame;
Her honour, dearer than her life she prov'd,
And dearer far than both, the man she lov'd.
(Pope 1776, 156)

The case lends itself inevitably to images of fall - "at once from full prosperity she's torn, | By friends deserted, of defence forlorn" in the Sackville, and in the Grenville, "High plact as young Ambition could Aspire | You sink at once depriv'd of Fame [and] Breath"- and to the characterisation of malicious gossip as emanating from a 'prude' (both poems). The Sackville is shorter, simpler and more direct; the Grenville calls on a female "Muse" to depict the situation and direct our response. Perhaps all that can be

securely deduced is that this is a case that made a surprising number of people respond in personal and revealing verse, regardless of whether or not they had any knowledge of the details apart from what was in the public domain.

2 Poetic Interactions Between Manuscript and Print

A version of this poem was first published by *The Grub-street Journal* on 16th April 1730. They were already interested in the case, and in the dangerously persuasive poetry about it that was circulating, but while they dismissed with heavy irony the importance of a case about a “vulgarly reputed Crime [... is] approved and practised by all who have any taste of politeness”, they could not resist returning to the “commission of what all well-bred persons esteem a piece of Gallantry” in their very next issue, publishing a heavily edited version of Sackville’s poem, and thus unwittingly illustrating precisely the combination of salaciousness and hypocritical moralising that the poem in its full version describes, keeping the case alive in their readers’ minds, while purporting to find in it only an opportunity for mature reflection on the wages of sin, as shown in the amended last lines:

She could not long, depress’d with guilt and shame,
Survive the death of virtue and of fame [*sic*].
(*The Grub-street Journal*, no 19, 14th May 1730)

Four editions later, however, they dealt with the Abergavenny scandal again, and this time devoting several closely-written columns to the poetry it had engendered. The climax of their analysis, however, was a corrective poem of their own, which further reinforces my theory that this was perceived as a case to be more properly discussed in verse, and that the editors therefore needed to fight fire with fire, or, as they put it, quoting from Pope’s *The Dunciad*:

Maggots half-form’d in rhyme exactly meet,
And learn to crawl upon poetic feet.
(Rumbold 2007, 24)

The editors seemed appalled at the ways in which poems “divert[ed] the Town”, springing up like mushrooms, and being composed by those who were ‘needy’, ‘malicious’ or possessed with “an itch of rhyming, or a desire

to see their works in print". They repudiate the way in which "These verses are generally very low, frequently loose and immoral, and sometimes levelled against persons, who in no wise deserve to be treated in a satirical manner". Nevertheless, when it comes to a corrective, nothing could do but verse, and the editors let their own maggots crawl freely in their re-writing, which was longer than the original by 29 lines.

There are two major changes in the content of the story as presented by this version, written six whole months after the scandal originally broke, and three after Lyddel's trial. They both emphasised the suffering the writer requires from both the wife and her lover. In Maevius' version, Lady Abergavenny suffers anguish for 14 long lines before dying of a broken heart, caused by an excess of silent grief "raging within". The author luxuriates in the detailed portrayal of grief, something conspicuously absent from the other poems discussed thus far, and makes explicit the parallel with sexual excitement:

The grievous pangs of one such dismal day
Who'e years of highest, sensual joys outweigh.
(*The Grub-street Journal*, no. 19, 14th May 1730)

The second change echoes the legal outcome of the case, making it not a question of a frivolous dead woman "improv'd by art'art", as the very first line is altered to say, but of a terrible betrayal of friendship and hospitality by Lyddel, Lord Abergavenny's friend. "For crimes like these is any mulct too high?" refers the reader specifically to the jaw-dropping sum that Lyddel was fined at his trial (see *The Whole Tryall of Richard Lyddell*, 1730), in spite of his lawyers' pleas of extenuating circumstances: that "this Action was not laid for an Assault in debauching the Plaintiff's Lady, but for destroying the Health, Satisfaction and Comfort of the Plaintiff"; that "the Lady's coming into Mr Lyddel's Chamber" made her "a Temptation unto him, and was a Temptation hard to be resisted".

As the report of the trial of Richard Lyddel suggests: the situation "might as well have been prevented as discovered [...] but that it seemed as if an Agreement was made to lay a Snare and a Temptation to draw him into a Criminal Action" (Liddel 1730, 8). *The Grub-street Journal* is firmly on the side of the jury, however, who "after a short Stay brought in their Verdict for the Plaintiff, 10,000l. Damages". As the poem puts it to complete the couplet, "For less the Criminal deserves to die", and the final lines condemn him to exile, and to hell:

Think not of pleasure, or of ease below:
Thy doom is sorrow here, or future woe.
(*The Grub-street Journal*, no. 19, 14th May 1730)

The longest and most detailed of the Abergavenny poems, “An Epistle from Calista to Altamont”,⁷ is in the Badminton bundle written out on a large sheet of paper folded to 8” by 12”, in the Badminton bundle, and then folded again, addressed on the back and sealed with the coat of arms that appears most frequently in the collection. Like f.6, “Ye Muses all & pitying Virgins come”, the “Epistle” is in a female voice, though almost certainly written by Charles Beckingham, and published anonymously in 1729.⁸ The introit is taken from Nicholas Rowe’s play *The Tragedy of Jane Shore* (published by Lintot in January 28 1714) and is the final speech in Act One. After this affecting curtain-raiser, however, the “‘Epistle’ Epistle” takes a different tone, with the thrust of its thesis – that everyone’s everyone is doing it – immediately obvious in the defensive word “‘detected’”:

To jealous Love, and injur’d Honours Ear,
What words can a detected Woman clear?
(Lyddell 1730, 9)

The poem as a whole in fact reads as a compendium of recent marital scandals, suggesting that *The Grub-street Journal* editors may not have been wrong to suggest that the majority of the poems written on current news are written by those who have “no other view but to divert the Town, and thereby bring a little ready money into their own pockets”. Its length and range of reference imply that this particular case of adultery is simply the culminating example, which offers the author a chance to remind an avid public of the frequency with which those whom *The Grub-street Journal* calls “persons of distinction” seem to behave in this ‘polite and free’ manner. It is therefore particularly interesting to find it carefully copied out for, and preserved by, Lady Anne Coventry, whose pedigree places her socially well above the Abergavenny – and indeed almost any – family. It means that her interest cannot be characterised as a desire to see the high and mighty brought down, though it is also true that Horace Walpole has had no scruples in filling in the gaps in the adultery section of Pope’s poem “Sober Advice from Horace, to the Young Gentlemen of the Town”:

Oh love! Be deep tranquillity my luck!
No mistress H-ysh-m near, no Lady B-ck!
For, to be taken, is the dev’l in hell;
This truth, let L-----l, J-----ys, O-----w tell.
(Pope 1776, 29)

7 Muniment Room, Badminton House, Fm 1/4/4 f.8

8 The Folger First line Index of English Manuscript Poetry also suggests Lady Mary Wortley Montagu as a possible author, though it was certainly printed under Beckingham’s name.

Walpole's marginalia annotate this with 'e', 'a' and 'u' written respectively over the dashes, and at the bottom:

Mrs Heysham & Lady Buck were friends of Lady Hilsborough who had long had an Intrigue with Mr Jefferies, & went abroad with him & Ld Hilsborough, as it was supposed in concert with him too, to detect the Intrigue, which my Lord had long known and winked at, but now blew up to extort a sum of money from Jefferies. The two Ladies were deservedly abandoned by all their acquaintance & retired into the Country. Mr Liddel was detected with Lady Abergavenny. (Quoted in Sherburn 1938, 477)

The author's desire to include so very many vindicating examples of adultery tolerated and forgiven blurs the voice of the poem, however; Calista tells these stories with evident relish, then abruptly denies that she herself could ever take this flippant view:

Let the gay Wantons I've been bold to Name
Triumph o'er Infamy, and conquer Shame,
Not Altamont! is such Calista's Soul,
She knows her late offence, and knows it foul.
(Lyddell 1730, 10)

Rather than staying around to be a reproach and an embarrassment to her husband, she bids him a "Last Adieu", though also makes a tasteless pun on their only alternative means of separation in her last line:

Deaths the best Law to set the wretched free;
Death shall divorce me from My Self and Thee.

Beckingham makes very obvious use of the morally fortunate fact of Lady Abergavenny's death, which is perhaps the feature of the scandal that makes it so particularly conducive to poetic response: the woman cannot speak for herself, and is also conveniently sacrificed to her own unlawful desire, thus making it safe to pity her without upsetting social and religious convention. His use of "wretched", however, to describe Calista's state could imply that in this poem too it is the state of marriage itself that can be 'wretched', and from which only death will provide deliverance.

Confused though the poem's moral message seems, however, there is clear evidence of its power in the British Library copy. Indeed, the annotation below this version of the poem in the British Library suggests that it is the poem itself that demands our grief, in the place of the original events to which it responds:

Tho my lady Abergavenny was a scandalous loose woman, and lost her life upon the detection of her amour with Mr Lyddall, for which her Lord refusing to see her more, & her Father abandoning her, She died with concern, yet I cannot but be affected with the solemnity and seriousness of ye following verses made on that occasion.⁹

3 The Case on Stage

Poetry here is both a private and a public medium for communicating emotion; but plays can more efficiently unite a large number of people in pity or censure with a single performance. Several plays already written were pressed into the service of this case, in particular two by Nicholas Rowe, *The Fair Penitent*, first published in 1703 and rushed back into print by Jacob Tonson in 1730, and *The History of Jane Shore* (1714), which as we have seen, provides both a prologue for “An Epistle from Calista to Altamont”, and many of the images re-used and negotiated by the poem:

Such is the fate unhappy women find,
And such the curse entail'd upon our kind,
That man, the lawless libertine, may rove,
Free and unquestion'd through the wilds of love;
While woman,—sense and nature's easy fool,
If poor, weak, woman swerve from virtue's rule;
If, strongly charm'd, she leave the thorny way,
And in the softer paths of pleasure stray;
Ruin ensues, reproach and endless shame,
And one false step entirely damns her fame;
In vain, with tears the loss she may deplore,
In vain, look back on what she was before;
She sets, like stars that fall, to rise no more.
(Rowe 1714, 3: 12)

The Fair Penitent was performed twice at Drury Lane during the criminal conversation trial of Richard Lyddel, both times “at the particular Desire of several Persons of Quality”, and on 21st February, “the Concourse was so great, that several Ladies of the first Rank were excluded for want of room” (*The London Stage* 1960). As its popularity suggests, it does much more than provide the sentimental pseudonyms for Lady Abergavenny and her lover: the play itself defies the conventional narrative that the official (and officially recompensed) story of the affair attempts to regulate. Its resurgent

9 BL Add MS 47128 f.43r.

popularity at the time of the case reinforces the sense that the affair gives voice to a powerful and socially transgressive alternative reading of events. Rowe's Calista is pugnacious and defiant, and yet uses language instantly recognisable in the more tear-stained poems discussed above:

For 'tis the solemn Counsel of my Soul,
Never to live with publick Loss of Honour:
'Tis fix'd to die, rather than bear the Insolence
Of each affected She that tells my Story,
And blesses her good Stars that she is virtuous.
To be a Tale for Fools! Scorn'd by the Women,
And pity'd by the Men! oh insupportable!
(Rowe 1730, 17)

The same concerns are conspicuous: the unendurable "publick Loss of Honour"; the contempt for the hypocritical prudes who condemn behaviour they long to commit; the self-fulfilling prophecy that this is indeed a 'tale for fools', and a very popular one. She is the villainess, of course, and has to die, but Rowe gives her the chance to engage in highly emotive declarations about male tyranny and the prison of incompatible marriage along the way:

Force, and the Wills of our Imperious Rulers,
May bind two Bodies in one wretched Chain;
But Minds will still look back to their own Choice.
So the poor Captive in a Foreign Realm,
Stands on the Shoar, and sends his Wishes back
To the dear Native Land from whence he came.
(31)

Imprisoned by their desirability and forced into bondage, Calista makes an early claim for the equal rights of women and slaves to be recognised as having been, just like free men, "born with high souls", and she takes control of her own "unfortunately fair":

This fatal Form, that drew on my Undoing,
Fasting, and Tears, and Hardship shall destroy.
(51)

By contrast, the squalid details of Lord Abergavenny's machinations to catch his wife and friend *in flagrante delicto* were the aspect of the case that inspired Henry Fielding in 1729 to write his play *The Modern Husband*, published in 1732, called *The Modern Husband*. Isobel Grundy draws attention to Fielding's preoccupation with the suspicious financial transactions of the case: it dramatises a husband who deliberately uses

his wife's attractiveness and discontent with their marriage to entrap and blackmail her potential lovers - a situation that some contemporary observers opined had been the fate of Richard Lyddel (Grundy, 1999, 296-7).

Fielding's play, contemporary with events rather than used allusively, pays less attention to the all-excusing beauty of Lady Abergavenny than to the poetic responses, but it certainly has a vivid scene of the servants discussing the profitable remuneration of their spying on the illicit couple which owes a great deal to the published account of the criminal conversation trial:

JOHN Then my master is to give me an hundred Pound to swear that he is a Cuckold.

LATELY What's this?

JOHN Why, my Master has offered me a hundred Pound, if I discover my Lady and Mr Bellamant in a proper Manner; and let me but see them together, I'll swear to the Manner, I assure you. (Fielding 1732, 56)

Overall *The Modern Husband* is less concerned with the grief attendant on adultery than the poems are, but it nevertheless shares some of the other emotional concerns. The servants' dialogue here could be dismissed as comic relief, but in John's clinching argument - "which would you choose, a Husband with a hundred Pound, or a safe Conscience?" - we can see the shadow of Lord Abergavenny's £10,000 compensation. for, awarded because he was willing to assert his own cuckolded statecondition. Money also provides the metaphor for the emotion of the exchanges between the middle-class couples in the play:

MR MODERN In short, Madam, you shall not drive a separate Trade at my Expence. Your Person is mine, I bought it lawfully in the Church, and unless I am to profit by the Disposal, I shall keep it all for my own Use. (45)

The imperatives of this speech show once again that the issue that arouses greatest emotion in the men - both fathers and husbands - is possession; the chief prompt for the women is reputation:

MR MODERN You will never persuade me. My Reputation is dearer to me than my Life.

MR. M. Very strange, that a Woman who makes so little Scruple of sacrificing the Substance of her Vertue, should make so much of parting with the Shadow of it.

MRS. M. Tis the Shadow only that is valuable - Reputation is the Soul of Vertue. (5)

Fielding's ironies interweave with *The Grub-Street Journal's* commentary

on proper and improper emotional attachments: it is conspicuous in many of these literary responses that the appropriate performance of female grief for the loss of reputation is counterbalanced with the suggestion that the only thing really worth of their lamentation is being found out.

4 The Uses of Genre in an Operatic Depiction of the Case: *Calista*

The drama, however, which best serves as a case study of the uses of genre, however, is another contemporary work: an anonymous opera called *Calista*, which came out in 1730. Its characters speak in prose dialogue, but they sing in poetry, fashionably set to well-known dance tunes and ballads in Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1719). The resulting, combination of forms and the two media expresses very different emotions. The text play begins with yet another type of prose: a discussion between a "Player" and the "Poet" about the truth of what we are about to see and hear:

PLAYER Are we then to look upon this Performance as a true Representation of Things which have really been transacted; or speak justly and deal freely, is it only the Overflowings of your own Invention.

POET Faith, Sir, I have scarcely taken a Poetical Liberty, - Things have been really and bona fide transacted exactly as I represent them.

The Player also makes a metatheatrical point about the interaction between fact and a literary representations of it:

PLAYER The Guilty will come to make the rest of the Audience believe they are not the Persons pointed at (which Custom is now become genteel and fashionable) and at the same Time their presence will be a Farce within the Operas. (*Calista* 1731, "Introduction")

Unlike the *The Grub-street Journal*, whose heavily ironised prose assumed a shared moral view, the prose exchange here reflects on the capacity of theatre to show different realities simultaneously, and consciously withholds persuasiveness, urging us only to observe as the audience absorbs the very different emotional messages of prose dialogue and poetic song.

Song is established as having a particular role in the transmission of scandal by a scene in Otway's tragedy *The Orphan* (1680), another play that was pressed into service to contextualise this affair:

PAGE Oh!
You never heard the last new Song I learn'd;

It is the finest, prettiest Song indeed,
Of my Lord and Lady you know who, that were caught
Together, you know where.
(Otway 1733, 44)

In Rowe's *The Fair Penitent*, too, Calista claims – in blank verse – her freedom from forms of didactic and prosy instruction, dismissing a book that she has been offered:

He teaches holy Sorrow, and Contrition,
And Penitence; – is it become an Art, then?
A Trick that lazy, dull, luxurious Gownsmen
Can teach us to do over? I'll no more on't;
I have more real Anguish in my Heart,
Than all their Pedant Discipline e'er knew
(Rowe 1730, 61)

In the passage, poetry is therefore implicitly claimed as artless, spontaneous and emotionally powerful – 'anguish' is set against 'contrition' in the extract –, an idea reinforced in the opera, *Calista*, by the demotic associations of the dance tunes to which the songs are set, and by the absence of the heavy classical allusions which give "Gownsmen's" weight and artificiality to the prose dialogue, like the following rather overloaded speech:

I am sensible, there are few Families in which there is not a Judas; but I would rather be a Slave with a noble Mind, than creep to an Attendant – Fear not, my Lothario, Love, like ours, must have some superior Protector; and it is time enough to think of Death, and Despair, when we have out-lived our mutual Affection. Let us imitate Paris and Helen, and not dream of a Wooden Horse 'till we see Troy in Flames; and then die Martyrs to Venus in each others Arms. (*Calista* 1731, 46)

Most revealing, though, is the contrast at the start of the opera between the formal expressions of humility and obedience that Calista uses in speaking to her father in prose dialogue about her forthcoming marriage, and the powerfully opposing imagery of her song. Poetry is here being used as an active tool of private transgression, and one that facilitates a more complex and vivid expression of emotion, while theoretically 'hidden' in jaunty, popular music. Thus she speaks:

There's a Reverence due to Age and Understanding, which makes so deep an Impression on my Mind, that I leave all to the Judgment of my Superiors, believing that Discretion may be often wanting in our Sex, who are too frequently blinded by Prejudice, Passion and Chimera. (12)

But Calista sings:

AIR X

Provident Damsel.

I'm something, yet nothing, tho' sought and admir'd,

A Plaything, a Toy and a Bauble:

There's something indeed, for some time I've acquir'd,

But fear in deep Waters to dabble;

But fear in deep Waters, &c.

I hop'd at the first for myself I should chuse,

But Virgins are often mistaken;

And what is allotted I will not refuse,

Least I should my Character blacken;

Least I might, &c.

But if I shou'd miss of the Joys I conceive,

The Man I should curse that betray'd me;

And be quickly revenged in some way, I believe,

However the World might upbraid me.

(*Calista* 1731, 13)

Calista's sense of her own worthlessness in this male-dominated world makes her words surprisingly poignant, and her thought process internally mirrors the external acts for which she is condemned: she "hop'd" to be allowed to make a free choice of spouse, feared society's judgment on her stubbornness if she refused what her "Superiors" provided, but cannot in the end lose sight of the power inherent in her own desires, "however the World might upbraid me".

The opera's final conjunction of prose dialogue and song vividly juxtaposes two versions of the world's verdict on the actions of Calista, Lady Abergavenny, and by extension, all unfaithful wives. The prose register is exalted, incorrigibly noble, though to our ears also comic in its dismissive summing up of the melodramatic events:

COUNT HERMIO No truly; there is a tragical Scene in Altamont's Family.

PRINCESS DEL CARMEL What is it?

COUNT HERMIO Calista intrigued with Lothario, and, as it has been revealed; the Thoughts of being reproached by the World, have killed her. Lothario is distracted, Altamont and the Marquis del Fogo rave, and wish the World on fire, that they may perish in the Flames.

COUNT DE ULTO Remorse of Conscience, from what Cause soever it arises, does frequently produce such Effects; and an heroick Spirit will Die, rather than live in Disgrace. (*Calista* 1731, 59)

Calista's 'heroick Spirit', thus glossed, is then summarily contradicted by the song, to the tune of "Lord Byron's Maggot", which appears to put her back into the everyday pattern of the uncontrollable headstrong woman. The appearance of orderly coupledness is re-established with a closing 'Dance', but this is inevitably undermined by the passionate actions of the verse:

Hot-headed she wedded, her Father to please,
 But Women are Women, and will have their Ways;
 She sigh'd before Marriage,
 But after Miscarriage
 She griev'd to the Heart and Soul.
 In Bed she would tumble,
 At Table would grumble
 Her Life was a Scene of War.
 She would tear,
 And would swear,
 Then cry,
 Pish, fie,
 Your Riches and Toys, Sir,
 Are none of my Joys, Sirs,
 My humours you shall not control.
 [Here a Dance].
 FINIS.
 (*Calista* 1731, 60)

In the poem from which I take the title quotation is taken, "So shall she now the softest Couloours Chuse | To paint thy fate & shadow out thy Woes" the implication is that poetry can make the sordid events of the everyday world 'soft, beautiful, beautiful and sad' - to paraphrase the lines - through its conscious artistic skill. An examination of the literature surrounding the Abergavenny scandal, however, suggests instead that the poetry - both in discrete and embedded forms - could subvert conventional and patriarchal views of female behaviour with striking vivid, complex and, above all, memorable depictions of spontaneous emotion.

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