



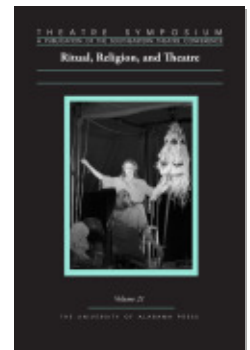
PROJECT MUSE®

When Satire More Than Closed on Saturday Night: Henry Fielding and the Licensing Act of 1737

Steven Dedalus Burch

Theatre Symposium, Volume 16, 2008, pp. 75-88 (Article)

Published by The University of Alabama Press
DOI: 10.1353/tsy.2008.0005



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/tsy/summary/v016/16.burch.html>

When Satire More Than Closed on Saturday Night

Henry Fielding and the Licensing Act of 1737

Steven Dedalus Burch

GEOERGE S. KAUFMAN once famously defined satire as what closed Saturday night. This comment renders satire, among other comedic forms, to be uncommercial, not ready to support the weight and economic obligation of a mainstream comedy. Besides, satires become dated and irrelevant very quickly—hence, the warning to would-be producers and authors. In eighteenth-century England, however, Henry Fielding wrote satires that closed not only Saturday night but virtually everything within the London theatre.

In the 1730s, after some false starts, Fielding began to find his mature voice as a playwright, through literary burlesque and, only later, political satire. Burlesque, defined as an exaggerated parody of a literary form or style, had been around since the ancient Greek theatre of Aristophanes, especially his parodies of Euripides. (*Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria* [411 BCE] and *The Frogs* [405 BCE] are among the earliest burlesques.) Fielding began his career with a succession of burlesques on such topics as Shakespeare and heroic tragedy, neoclassicism, Italian opera, and Colley Cibber with such audience favorites as *The Tragedy of Tragedies; or, The Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great* (1731), *The Welsh Opera* (1731), and *Covent-Garden Tragedy* (1732) and within a few short years could claim to be the most popular playwright in London.¹ These burlesques opened up in Fielding a channel for his anger at the banal, pretentious writing and musical fads of the day. But, more important, they were to provide him with a platform for his political revulsion at the open corruption of the court of George II, his chief minister Robert Walpole, and the Parliament.

Robert Walpole, who had become Fielding's chief opponent and sa-

tirical target, had become the first Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer under George I, a position he maintained when George II ascended to the throne. He quickly became the king's favorite and, subsequently, the most powerful and influential of the king's ministers. In point of fact, most historians date the birth of the modern British prime minister to Walpole's administration.

Throughout his ministry, which lasted more than two decades, Walpole exercised extraordinary cunning in his manipulation of the House of Commons, exerting a profound influence on the structure of eighteenth-century politics. But that cunning was seriously undermined by his open and blatant use of patronage and even outright bribery in maintaining his political power. His opposition included many writers of the day, and several, including Fielding, wrote for the opposition newspaper, *The Craftsman*. These writers scathingly lampooned Walpole's ministry in pamphlets, ballads, and newspapers, helping to bring about a complete and utter contempt by the public toward Parliament and politics.

In 1736 Fielding wrote a five-act masterpiece of inspired, sustained comic invective, *Pasquin*, and it was a box-office and critical sensation. So much so that Fielding was encouraged to pursue a newer, looser form of writing, merging the literary burlesque he had recently mastered, especially in *The Tragedy of Tragedies*, with a scattershot satirical approach to the politics and culture of England. Sadly, the result of Fielding's growth as a dramatist helped to bring about the Licensing Act of 1737, which abruptly terminated his career in the theatre. The effects of the Licensing Act have been well documented and will only be summarized here. Leading up to that summary, this essay will look at three of Fielding's last plays, beginning with *Pasquin* (1736) and then turning to *The Historical Register of 1736* and *Eurydice Hiss'd* (both 1737) and examine how Fielding blends burlesque with topical satire in addition to breaking new ground in the drama.²

Pasquin

Pasquin is a rehearsal play of the type established by George Villiers in his *The Rehearsal* (1671). In *The Rehearsal* we watch the ego-inflated author, Mr. Bayes, rehearse a company of actors in his new play as invited guests observe. "As Bayes screams directions and simpers foolishly to his guests, the poor players stumble through their parts."³ By the play's end there have been so many mishaps the guests have sneaked away and the actors are "ready for mutiny" (ibid.). While there is much biting satire of the theatre, and it is generally acknowledged that Villiers's play killed off the entire form of the heroic tragedy, the focus of the play was the

inflated writing style of John Dryden, especially his *The Conquest of Granada*. In *Pasquin* Fielding uses the theatrical rehearsal as a venue from which to take off and go after a multitude of targets, both literary and nonliterary, for his indignant, malicious wit.

Fielding advertised his play as “By the Great Mogul’s Company of English Comedians, Newly Imported . . . The Cloaths are old, but the Jokes intirely new.”⁴ He had recently taken over at the New Haymarket, an unlicensed theatre, as an impresario, referring to himself as the “Great Mogul,” and formed his own company in which to perform the kind of theatre he cared passionately about. Fielding was intensely patriotic, and in play after play of his we find sharp verbal jabs at the importation of foreign culture, especially Italian opera and its singers (most notably the famed castrati Farinelli, adored by London high society, ridiculed as Fairbelly in *Pasquin*).

In *Pasquin* Fielding goes Villiers’s play one better: he presents two plays in rehearsal. The first is a farce by Trapwit called *The Election*; the second is a tragedy by Fustian, *The Life and Death of Common-Sense*. In both, he sends up the Bayes-type playwright, by now a familiar figure of fun. Trapwit and Fustian are both extremely full of themselves and, underneath the inane polite chatter and fawning flattery, have no regard for the other’s work. At the play’s beginning Fielding presents us with a group of actors milling about and complaining about their late rehearsals (in Fielding’s rehearsal plays the actors are always complaining). Fustian arrives, ready to rehearse his tragedy, but one of the actors is indisposed. Trapwit arrives even later, after we have been informed that he had been arrested for nonpayment of a bill. After many polite bows, Fustian implores Trapwit to begin his rehearsal first.

Trapwit’s play, *The Election*, begins on the eve of an election, and we are shown the candidates of both parties (Whigs and Tories) as they court votes among the town’s mayor and aldermen. The courting is by bribery. The court candidates, Lord Place and Colonel Promise, shower the mayor and aldermen with cash. The country candidates, Sir Henry Foxchase and Squire Tankard, bribe through gifts and business brought to town, all the while decrying those who would openly bribe with cash. Donald Thomas writes, “The audience filled the Little Theatre night after night to hear Mr. Trapwit directing his players in bribery, as though it were one of the most exalted arts in human history. . . . The play exploited and magnified a public weariness of political parties and the cynicism was widespread.”⁵

In 1736 the target of this satire was unmistakable: Walpole was well-known for his ability to buy politicians, and the corruption of the court was an open secret. Also the Whigs, though they were the dominant

party, were factionalized into court and country politicians. In *The Election*, after the town officials have been bribed by both parties, the court candidates then pursue power through the mayor's wife and daughter by promising them places in court. So keen is she of being at court that Mrs. Mayoress even agrees with Lord Place ("every one is keeps and is kept; there are no such things as marriages now-a-days") that her daughter's virtue is salable:

MISS MAYORESS. But must I go into keeping, mamma?

MRS. MAYORESS. Child, you must do what's in fashion.

MISS MAYORESS. But I have heard that's a naughty thing.

MRS. MAYORESS. That can't be, if your betters do it; people are punished for doing naughty things; but people of quality are never punished; therefore they never do any naughty things.⁶

Later, Place attempts to bribe a voter with another position at court:

2ND VOTER. I am a devilish lover of sack.

LORD PLACE. Sack, say you? . . . you shall be poet-laureate. (*ibid.*, 184)

After this two-line swipe at Walpole and Colley Cibber, Trapwit sets up a familial conflict with the mayor, leaning toward Foxchase while his family is determined to support Lord Place.

Fielding has great fun with the neoclassicists and other academics about the rules governing playwriting. When, interrupting the action, Fustian asks Trapwit about the moral of his play, Trapwit replies, "I really will not tell you. . . . [S]ince you cannot find that out, I'll try whether you can find out the plot" (*ibid.*, 187). At the play's end, in accordance with the "rules" of comedy, Trapwit contrives a sudden love affair between Miss Mayoress and Colonel Promise. After a prolonged comical silence of looks between the two, they speak of their love for one another, and she begs his forgiveness for her behavior. Both apoplectic and befuddled, Fustian demands of Trapwit how this can be since neither character had been seen onstage with the other. Indeed, this is the first time they have spoken to one another. Not so, replies Trapwit, they had spoken to one another offstage. He continues, "[W]ould you have everything brought upon the stage? I intend to bring ours to the dignity of the French stage. . . . [T]he French, you know, banish all cruelty from the stage; and I don't see why we should bring on a lady in ours, practicing all manner of cruelty upon her lover" (*ibid.*, 197). In a final jest Trapwit's marriage unites all the rival political factions.

In act 3 Fielding introduces Sneerwell, a critic who arrives only in time to catch Trapwit's act 5 and who therefore understands nothing of what

he sees. By act 4, as Fustian is about to begin his rehearsal, Trapwit finds a convenient excuse to not watch it and sneaks out of the theatre, leaving Sneerwell to make his fatuous remarks throughout the play.

The Life and Death of Common-Sense is an allegory about the overthrow of Queen Common-Sense by Queen Ignorance. Fielding begins by showing Fustian ridiculously defending his flattering dedication to his patron, insisting that he has used no flattery: "I abhor the least imputation of flattery. . . . [O]nly [your Lordship] give me leave to say, that you have more wit, sense, learning, honor, and humanity than all mankind put together" (ibid., 201). By playing up Fustian as buffoonish and somewhat hypocritical, Fielding gives himself the distance needed to target his enemies in Fustian's tragedy.

In this second play-within-a-play Fielding sets up Law, Religion (in the character of Firebrand), and Medicine (as Phycis) as seeking to escape the "lethargic sway of Common-sense" (ibid., 206). Firebrand declares himself an enemy to Common-Sense and requests Law to assist him in enlarging the worship of the Sun. Queen Common-Sense then enters and upbraids Law for allowing those who are poor to go unredressed in their grievances. Word suddenly comes that Queen Ignorance has invaded the realm with an army from Italy and France of singers, fiddlers, tumblers, and rope-dancers. The climax of Fustian's tragedy is the face-off between the two queens. Ignorance claims Common-Sense's subjects complain that Common-Sense imposes a tax of thought, "for thinking only makes men wretched" (ibid., 219). At this point Firebrand stabs Common-Sense, and she dies. But she comes back as a ghost to haunt her subjects, and Ignorance and the others run offstage screaming with fright. The play-within-a-play, as well as the play itself, ends with the Ghost of Common-Sense giving the epilogue.

Pasquin was the smash hit of the season, running for more than sixty performances, rivaling the earlier success of *The Beggar's Opera*. All of London was talking about *Pasquin* and clearly loving it, satirical thrusts notwithstanding.⁷ Goldgar suggests that it is twentieth-century critics who have elevated *Pasquin*'s standing as satire: "there is really little evidence to suggest that *Pasquin* was regarded as the daring political satire it is now said to be, much less a stepping stone toward the Licensing Act."⁸ Robert Hume rebuts this, however: "Fielding provides a steady flow of local and topical allusions. . . . [T]hough he intermixes some innuendoes . . . he is careful never to force the audience to make hostile identifications. The play quite clearly says that England is politically corrupt and culturally degenerate, but the message is conveyed in a round-about way and softened by theatrical high jinks. . . . *Pasquin* manages to be funny, boisterous, pointed, subtle and highly effective."⁹

The success of *Pasquin* encouraged Fielding to go further, in both his pointed commentary and in his groundbreaking merging of literary burlesque with satire. His next play was a minor afterpiece, *Tumble-Down Dick* (1736); it, too, was a success, especially as it played following *Pasquin*. But Fielding was saving up for his next attack, which would be even more stinging, grander, and revolutionary.

The Historical Register of 1736

As he did in *Pasquin*, Fielding opens with a rehearsal: actors milling about, complaining about their parts, and waiting for the author/director to show so that they may begin. Before the author arrives, a critic, Sourwit, and a patron, Lord Dapper, enter. On their inquiries they are informed by the actors that the piece cannot be typed as a comedy or a tragedy. Finally the author, Medley, shows and explains to his audience the intent of the piece and its irregular structure. Sourwit questions how the author can get the actions of an entire year into twenty-four hours (to satisfy the French neoclassical ideal). Fielding/Medley retorts, “[I]f I comprise the whole actions of the year in half an hour, will you blame me, or those who have done so little in that time?”¹⁰ When Sourwit asks if the play’s components “conduce to the main design” and what they are, Medley’s answer is yes, the main design being “to divert the town and bring full houses” (ibid., 242). Clearly Fielding is setting up his audience not to expect a traditionally structured play. And he does not disappoint.

In fact, what Fielding did give his audience was a metatheatrical play that by postmodern standards seems to approach the anarchic spirit of such twentieth-century topical satire/reviews as *The Goon Show* and *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*. *The Historical Register* is made up of six skits that are only connected tangentially, “unhampered by the constraints of plot and character development.”¹¹ In fact, biographer Ronald Paulson argues that *The Historical Register* “[sums] up the strands that have developed in Fielding’s plays over the last several years, all of which tended toward the genre of satire, and the metaphor of life as theatre.”¹² Fielding might as well have titled his play *Scenes from London Life*. After opening with a thoroughly banal “Ode to the New Year” (a ripe parody of the trite odes being composed by England’s then poet laureate/playwright Colley Cibber), Medley sets his first scene in a meeting of the political ministers of Corsica.¹³

As the scene is about to start, Sourwit spots a problem with Medley’s play. “Here’s a mistake in the print. . . . I observe the second politician is the first person who speaks.” Medley replies patiently, “Sir, my first and

greatest politician never speaks at all. . . . [T]he chief art of a politician is to keep a secret."¹⁴ Medley then plunges into the politicians' debate, which consists of two items: the Turks and money. As to the first, no one seems to know anything that is happening. After much hemming the Fifth Politician speaks the primary line: "Hang foreign affairs, let us apply ourselves to money" (245), a line that Medley has his actors repeat with emphasis. They next debate how to get it. A tax is agreed upon. But what to tax? Learning, someone suggests. But the Third Politician complains that learning is only a "property of but a very few" and agrees to tax ignorance instead as it "will take in most of the great fortunes in the kingdom" (246).

This scene ends, and Medley turns to his audience and explains this scene was "the full account of the whole history of Europe" (246). The next satiric target is a council of society ladies in London, where Fielding indulges in one of his favorite japes, Italian opera and the immensely popular castrati singer Farinelli (here called Farinello). After his brief ridicule of society's culture vultures, Fielding then sweeps us into his *pièce de résistance*: the Society Auction.

This third skit of Fielding's is set in an auction house and is based on the fashionable auction sales conducted by Christopher Cock, which were always well attended by the beau monde. In *The Historical Register* the auctioneer has been rechristened Christopher Hen (and was played by Charlotte Charke, Colley Cibber's estranged daughter, who specialized in transgendered roles), and the auction consists of "such things as were never sold in any auction before" (251). Among the items on Hen's auction block are a "most curious remnant of Political Honesty . . . [a] most delicate piece of Patriotism . . . three grains of modesty . . . one bottle of Courage . . . all the Wit lately belonging to [a] composer of entertainments for the play-houses . . . a very clear Conscience . . . a very considerable quantity of Interest at Court . . . all the Cardinal Virtues . . . a great deal of Wit and a little Common Sense" (253–56). As each item is put up for sale, the bidders comment, and Fielding makes quite clear that each is considered of no great worth, except the item listed as Interest at Court, which is sold for one thousand pounds.¹⁵ In the end, in an echo from *Pasquin*, Common-Sense does not get sold, as no one is interested.

The fourth episode interrupts the action with the arrival of Pistol exclaiming with great bluster (in a caricature of Theophilus Cobber) and allowing Fielding to deflate the artistic pretensions of the Cibbers, father and son. This target is carried into the fifth skit, which presents Apollo in a dialogue with Ground-Ivy, Pistol's father, about Ground-Ivy's rewriting of Shakespeare's texts.¹⁶

The sixth skit, with which Fielding ends his play, is the most damning against Walpole and his government. Four false Patriots are presented, and all are bribed by Quidam to do his bidding, and all for gold. At the end he has the Patriots dancing off the stage and losing their bribes through holes in their pockets. Quidam sweeps up and regains “so not to lose one halfpenny by his generosity; so far from it, that he will get his wine for nothing, and the poor people, alas! out of their own pockets, pay the whole reckoning” (267).

Like *Pasquin*, *The Historical Register* was immediately and hugely successful. Its fiercely open hostility toward Walpole, as well as its radical extension of the “rehearsal technique,”¹⁷ gave it a depth few other works possessed during this period. It also made Fielding a prime target of the government. In *Pasquin* his satire was solid and clearly aimed, but his anger was under control. As Donald Thomas writes, *Pasquin* and some of his earlier burlesques were seen as “schoolboy lampoons on the Prime Minister and his failings.”¹⁸ Now, however, his rage became too open to dismiss. Robert Hume writes, “Denying the acid factionalism . . . would be difficult. The bribes Quidam gives the false patriots in Act Three are not exactly a subtle comment on Walpole’s modus operandi. . . . The work is devastatingly nasty about Walpole, and no minister benefits from being made to look both craven and crooked.”¹⁹ And Thomas points out that the audiences for *The Historical Register* were not only laughing; they were also applauding.²⁰

Additionally, for those readers and viewers unable to determine Fielding’s intended target, Fielding, in his published preface to the play, coyly leads his readers to the heart of his satire: “Who is this Quidam, that turns the patriots into ridicule, and bribes them out of their honesty? Who but the devil could act such a part? . . . Gold hath been always his favorite bait wherewith he fisheth for sinners. . . . Indeed it is so plain who is meant by this Quidam, that he who maketh any wrong application thereof, might as well mistake the name of Thomas for John, or old Nick for old Bob.”²¹ In an age when literally everyone, educated or not, would understand “old Nick” as one of Satan’s nicknames, the joining of his name to Walpole’s (“old Bob”) was as blatant an attack as could be conceived. Walpole did not need any more ammunition to counter-attack, but Fielding, on a roll, provided him with more, just the same.

Eurydice Hiss’d

The last play in this study came on the heels of the success of *The Historical Register*.²² A one-act afterpiece, to play in concert with *The Historical Register*, *Eurydice Hiss’d* begins as another rehearsal play. Once

again Fielding broke the “rules” that bound other playwrights, and this play both dazzles and dizzies the imagination. In *Pasquin* he began by giving us two different plays in two different styles that coalesced into a single vision. In *The Historical Register* he dispensed with plot and characters altogether and painted a canvas that broadly caricatured and condemned much of English society and culture. In *Eurydice Hiss’d*, although he returned somewhat to plot and characters, Fielding created a play within a play within a play and served up two delirious layers of satirical characterizations of himself: first as an author called Spatter, then a character created by Spatter, meant to represent himself, now called Pillage.

In 1736, following the success of *Pasquin*, Fielding wrote a delightful and very funny burlesque called *Eurydice*. In tone it is pre-Shavian, very light, breezy, and humorous, presenting Hades as a livelier and wittier alternative to London society, and Eurydice and Orpheus as a squabbling couple (she resents Orpheus’s attempt to return her to the duller society of London aboveground). On its opening night, however, a demonstration broke out in the audience caused, in part, by an audience member’s consternation at the sight of a British army officer in hell. The demonstration was uncontrollable, and the performance could not continue. Subsequently, Fielding withdrew the work, and it was never performed again in his lifetime. He did publish it, though, and the title page reads, *Eurydice, a Farce, As It Was D-mned at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane*.

At the beginning of *Eurydice Hiss’d* Spatter is presented as the author of *Eurydice*, and the play that will be rehearsed is titled *The Damnation of Eurydice*, which will present Spatter’s version of the opening night with Spatter’s *Eurydice* author, Pillage, standing in for him. Into this highly intricate and convoluted plot, Fielding gives us his critic pair from *The Historical Register*, Sourwit and Lord Dapper. Spatter entreats them to watch his rehearsal, presenting his situation as

a beautiful image of the instability of human greatness, and the uncertainty of friends. You see here the author of a mighty farce at the very top and pinnacle of poetical or rather farcical greatness, followed, flattered, and adored by a crowd of dependents: on a sudden fortune changing the scene, and his farce being damned, you see him become the scorn of his admirers, and deserted and abandoned by all those who courted his favour.²³

Spatter then has Pillage deliver a monologue in which he likens his fate to Cardinal Wolsey, Henry VIII’s chief minister: “who’d wish to be the author of a farce . . . / Perhaps a damned one, too. ’Tis all a cheat, /

Some men play little farces, and some great” (298). Spatter then tells Sourwit and Dapper that he’s made his “great man not only a poet, but a master of a play-house,” whose levee is composed of actors, printers, box-keepers, scene-men, fiddlers, and candle-sniffers all soliciting jobs and favors from him. He promises to them all that they seek: “Sir, one farce cannot find parts for all; but you shall be provided for in time. . . . I intend to exhibit several farces, depend on me you shall have a part.”²⁴ Among the hangers-on, he buys their loyalty with jobs and orders. When asked by Sourwit what he intends from this scene, Spatter replies, “I intend to warn all future authors from depending solely on a party to support them against the judgment of the town. . . . I hope greater persons may learn to despise them.”²⁵

Spatter then introduces the character of Honestus, a true friend and a fair and trustworthy critic, upholding just treatment and moral integrity. Pillage attempts to bribe him to get his support, but Honestus will respond only to “good tragedy for our money” and ends by telling Pillage:

I go impartial to your cause,
Like a just critic, to give worth applause,
But damn you if you write against our laws. (302–3)

Next, Spatter introduces Pillage’s Muse, who accuses Pillage of being unfaithful to her:

Neglected, slighted for a fresher muse?
I, whose fond heart too easily did yield
My virgin joys and honour to thy arms,
And bore thee Pasquin. (304).

Pillage seduces her, and they go off to produce their offspring, which will be *Eurydice*. Then Spatter, in the true neoclassical style of keeping all action offstage, introduces three gentlemen who inform each other—and the audience—of the disastrous opening night. Pillage enters, bereft. His trustworthy friend Honestus attempts to educate Pillage as to the falsity of the hangers-on, and the scene (and the play) ends with Pillage getting drunk.

When Fielding coupled this play with *The Historical Register* in April 1737, the effect was devastating. Now Walpole was being attacked in three different ways in a single evening. The references were unmistakable. Fielding portrayed Walpole as a “failed farce writer,”²⁶ and the

audience would have easily understood the parallels between Pillage's levee and the daily workings of Walpole's office, between Pillage's Muse and Walpole's mistress, and between Pillage's failed farce and Walpole's failed Excise Bill of 1733, one of his rare Parliamentary setbacks. Perhaps sharpest of all, as Peter Lewis notes, "Fielding's simultaneous presentation of himself and Walpole both as Pillage is certainly unexpected . . . but it is also ingenious. By pretending to treat the damnation of Eurydice as a tragic calamity, [he] invites his audience to laugh at him. . . . By making them laugh at him, he trapped them into laughing at Walpole as well."²⁷ It is astonishingly clever. It would also be Fielding's last play.

The Licensing Act of 1737

Fielding's open hostility toward Walpole resulted in an increased series of attacks by the pro-Walpole newspaper the *Daily Gazetteer*. This latest assault by Fielding on Walpole carried with it an unmistakable challenge. Lewis writes, "Since taking over the New Haymarket, Fielding had become progressively more daring in his assaults on Walpole, and these culminated in Pillage's fall with its implied assumption that Walpole was about to follow suit."²⁸ Fielding miscalculated badly. His was not the only voice raised against Walpole's government, but it was, or seemed to be, the most arrogant, the loudest, and the most popular. In addition, since Fielding had taken over the New (or Little) Haymarket Theatre, his satirical burlesques on the managements of the Drury Lane and Covent Garden over the years left him with few friends and fewer venues. As England's most popular playwright, and with hit plays running at the New Haymarket, Fielding took out an extraordinarily provocative advertisement on May 25, 1737, two days after his theatre's final performance of *The Historical Register* and *Eurydice Hiss'd*. In the ad he announced the productions of two new plays. One of the new plays was John Gay's sequel to *The Beggars' Opera*, *Macheath Turn'd Pyrate or Polly in India*. In 1729 Gay's *Polly* had been banned amid great controversy. Since that time, no company had "ever risked performing the piece. But to advertise *Polly* was to issue a direct challenge to Walpole."²⁹

Walpole's response, however, had been planned months earlier. In March 1737 an anonymous satire against Walpole, *The Vision of the Golden Rump*, was printed in an anti-Walpole journal, *Common Sense*. Though no surviving copy has been found, the satire purportedly portrayed a religious figure "identifiable with Walpole [who] led his fellow worshippers in adoration of gigantic golden buttocks."³⁰ At the time, many wondered

who had written what was agreed to be an exceedingly lewd allusion to Walpole, with Walpole himself under suspicion as possibly having instigated the satire for the purpose of whipping up support for government regulation, especially as its sudden existence seemed too fortuitous at that time. Walpole's son, some years later, claimed that Fielding himself had written it, but Thomas dismisses this suggestion, wondering that if Fielding did write it why he did not seek a production for it.³¹ As Pagliaro notes, "We know that the government's plans for some kind of Licensing Act were well developed long before Fielding's became explicitly anti-ministerial, but his earlier spoofs of the royal family and his biting partisan plays of 1737 must have helped to keep the pot boiling."³² Even so, the movement for government suppression and regulation of the arts had been growing for nearly four decades, ever since Collier's 1698 attack on Congreve and Dryden.³³

By June 1737 all the pieces were in place, and Parliament passed the Licensing Act of 1737 without much resistance. In the bill were two central provisions:

1. Any person involved in performing plays for money, except by authority of a Royal patent or a license from the Lord Chamberlain, "shall be deemed to be a Rogue and a Vagabond" and subject to applicable "penalties and punishments."
2. A "true Copy" of all plays, entertainments, prologues, and epilogues must be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain two weeks before intended performance for his approval. Any company presenting material not so approved is subject to a fine of [fifty pounds] and the loss of authority to perform.

These two provisions put Fielding out of business and removed political and social controversy from the British stage.³⁴ The Licensing Act remained imposingly on the books for the next 231 years before being dismantled in 1968. On June 21, 1737, the three unlicensed theatres of London, including the New Haymarket, were closed. Only two theatres were licensed, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, and they were not going to risk their licenses to defend Fielding.

At the height of his fame and his powers as a dramatist and at a time of intense creativity and experimentation with form, Fielding, the most popular and critically acclaimed playwright of his day, was silenced from the stage. Whether or not Fielding's satire brought down the government's wrath and instigated the censorship laws,³⁵ it is perhaps instructive that other theatres and writers saw what these powers could do and

were sufficiently cowed by Fielding's silencing. Fielding was only thirty years old, and he never wrote another play.

Notes

1. Fielding was more popular than either Coffee or Carey, and "in terms of performances he was second only to Cibber among the authors of his era" (Brian McCrea, *Henry Fielding and the Politics of Mid-Eighteenth-Century England* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982], 57).

2. Bertrand Goldgar cites *The Historical Register of 1736* as "Fielding's most open and unmistakable satire of Walpole" (Bertrand Goldgar, *Walpole and the Wits: The Relation of Politics to Literature, 1722-1742* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976], 151).

3. Brice Harris, ed., *Restoration Plays* (New York: Modern Library, 1953), viii.

4. *London Daily Post*, and *General Advertiser*, March 5, 1736.

5. Donald Thomas, *Henry Fielding* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), 127.

6. Henry Fielding, *Complete Works: Plays and Poems*, vol. 4 (New York: Crosscup and Sterling, 1902), 181.

7. Harold Pagliaro, *Henry Fielding: A Literary Life* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 104.

8. Goldgar, *Walpole and the Wits*, 153.

9. Robert Hume, *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre, 1728-1737* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 213.

10. Fielding, *Complete Works*, 4:241.

11. Hume, *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre*, 235.

12. Ronald Paulson, *The Life of Henry Fielding: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 67.

13. Obviously Fielding decided that topical, political satire would work best if he could present the events in a far-off country. Fielding, as Medley, in 1736 writes of Corsica as "the chief scene of politics of all Europe" (Fielding, *Complete Works*, 4:244). In one of history's lovely coincidences, in just six decades a Corsican would be at the center of all European politics: Bonaparte.

14. Fielding, *Complete Works*, 4:244.

15. A disgruntled bidder complains that "I know a shop where I can buy it for less" (*ibid.*, 256). To Fielding's audience this was a very obvious jab at Walpole.

16. Colley Cibber had recently rewritten Shakespeare's *King John*. Fielding has Ground-Ivy proclaiming that "it was a maxim of mine, when I was at the head of theatrical affairs, that no play, though ever so good, would do without alteration" (*ibid.*, 262).

17. Hume, *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre*, 234.

18. Donald Thomas, *Henry Fielding* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), 132.

19. Hume, *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre*, 237.
20. Among those in the audience, laughing and, more important, applauding, was the heir to the British throne, the Prince of Wales. Thomas, *Henry Fielding*, 132.
21. Fielding, *Complete Works*, 4:236.
22. Although not technically the last play he ever wrote, *Eurydice Hiss'd* was the last play Fielding ever produced.
23. Fielding, *Complete Works*, 4:298.
24. *Ibid.*, 299. Paulson, among many others, notes that Fielding had taken over the Little Haymarket Theatre, which offered him the “opportunity of an ad hoc situation of a sort that was ideal for his improvisational genius . . . in which he could try out not only his new plays, but those of others” (Paulson, *The Life of Henry Fielding*, 68).
25. Fielding, *Complete Works*, 4:301.
26. Hume, *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre*, 238.
27. Peter Lewis, *Fielding's Burlesque Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1987), 195.
28. *Ibid.*, 200–201.
29. Hume, *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre*, 243.
30. John Loftis, *The Politics of Drama in Augustan England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 140.
31. Thomas, *Henry Fielding*, 134. Loftis also dismisses this suggestion and argues it unlikely that Fielding would have composed “such a coarsely vulgar piece” (Loftis, *The Politics of Drama in Augustan England*, 141).
32. Pagliaro, *Henry Fielding*, 112.
33. See Jeremy Collier, “A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage,” in *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*, ed. Bernard F. Dukore (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 351–58.
34. Hume, *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre*, 248.
35. This is still a point of contention among historians. Loftis (*The Politics of Drama in Augustan England*, 139) and Goldgar (*Walpole and the Wits*, 156) argue that Fielding was not responsible for the Licensing Act, and others have also taken up that refrain.