

Playing 'Polly':
The Aesthetic Influence of Eighteenth-Century Actress Lavinia Fenton

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Abstract

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For centuries, critics have viewed Polly Peachum as the moral centre of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728). Actress Lavinia Fenton's (1708-1760) influence on interpretations of Polly's character may be tracked in eighteenth-century sources and continues to be discussed in contemporary criticism. Common across these discussions is the suggestion that Fenton's performance embodied an innocent Polly possessed with moral virtue. This thesis argues that the misreading of Polly is largely owing to critics' projection of aspects of Lavinia Fenton's offstage experience onto Polly, and that this interweaving has had the effect of limiting our view of the actress, the character she made famous, and the creative agency it took to create the relationship between them. Rather than accepting and reiterating this outdated contextual frame, this thesis rereads several of Polly's airs in *The Beggar's Opera* as well as eighteenth-century accounts of Lavinia Fenton's stage presence as preserved in reviews, 'Polly' fanfictions, and 'Polly's' costume, to argue that it is more critically interesting, and more accurate, to focus on the pragmatic duplicity of these figures. Doing so sheds light on Fenton's significant literary and cultural contributions to *The Beggar's Opera* by establishing her investments in a campy performance style. This thesis also models a strategy for performance history that entails reading between the lines of historical sources in order to recreate the actions and motives they describe without the bias of sexism.

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Introduction

John Gay's most famous play *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) begins by introducing the audience to the unapproved marriage of Polly, the daughter of Peachum and Mrs Peachum, and Newgate's infamous highwayman Captain Macheath. By becoming Macheath's wife, Polly also becomes his "property" and can no longer be as useful to her father's schemes (Gay 1.4.10). As such, Peachum's disapproval of his daughter's marriage is entirely due to the financial loss her marriage will cause his "Thief-Tak[ing]" business (Gay 1.4.10). Taking matters into his own hands, Peachum suggests that the only way to remedy the economic loss of Polly's marriage is to make her a widow. However, his plans are interrupted when the Peachums learn that Lucy Lockit is also married to Macheath. The *Opera* parodies courtship by following Lockit and Peachum as they orchestrate a "sordid" plan to have Macheath arrested and killed while simultaneously showing Polly and Lucy's efforts to secure Macheath all for themselves (Gladfelder xxiii). In the final act, even though Macheath and Polly get their happy ending, it is revealed in a comedic twist how superficial their love story really is. Four of Macheath's other wives unexpectedly make an appearance at his hanging, and his eventual pardon requires him to choose "a Wife at last" (Gay 3.16.69). Ultimately choosing Polly, their relationship is celebrated with a dance in front of Macheath's other lovers.

The original and most successful Polly Peachum on the English stage was portrayed by actress Lavinia Fenton (1708-1760). During the *The Beggar's Opera's* first staging at Lincoln's Inn Fields, Fenton's performance inspired a common view that Polly was the moral centre of Gay's *Opera*. Fenton's influence on interpretations of Polly's character may be tracked in eighteenth-century sources, and continues to be discussed in contemporary criticism. Common

across these discussions is the suggestion that Fenton's performance embodied an innocent Polly possessed with moral virtue.

The criticisms that confuse Polly's pose of innocence with morality have become the foundation of ongoing critical debates that implicitly or explicitly reinforce a sexual double standard that equates women's moral virtue with their monogamy, sexual modesty, and passivity. This thesis seeks to move beyond these sexist so-called morality debates that have had the effect of foregrounding Fenton's appearance as the source of the aesthetic power in her performance. While there are no direct records of the many critical and creative decisions that Fenton made in her original interpretation of Polly, or of her intimate understanding of how those decisions would likely be received by her audience, I seek to infer these aspects of her artistry from reviews and texts that indirectly engage with her performance.

The biographical and critical texts that discuss Fenton as the most successful Polly are conscious of how playing Polly influenced the actress's life as a celebrity. Some criticism by Cheryl Wanko and Felicity Nussbaum, for example, discusses how Fenton's efforts to maintain her own status offstage within high society circles served Polly as well. As the work of Wanko establishes, talking about 'Polly,' in quotation marks, has become a critical convention used to suggest the interdependence of Fenton and Polly in the cultural imagination. However, even though less sexist frameworks like theirs have been formulated, criticism such as Jochen Petzold's "Polly Peachum, a 'Model of Virtue': Questions of Morality in John Gay's *Polly*" (2012) continues to draw inspiration from the eighteenth-century sexual morality debate and reminds us of the persistence of questions about Fenton, Polly, and 'Polly's' sexual virtue.

In the shadow of this morality-centred criticism, it is difficult to read the work of other scholars of eighteenth-century women such as Dianne Dugaw and Berta Joncus without noticing

the persistence of a binary view of Fenton/Polly's innocence and/or promiscuity. Rather than accepting and reiterating this outdated contextual frame, this thesis rereads several of Polly's airs in *The Beggar's Opera* as well as eighteenth-century accounts of Lavinia Fenton's stage presence as preserved in reviews, 'Polly' fanfictions, and 'Polly's' costume, to argue that it is more critically interesting, and more accurate, to focus on the pragmatic duplicity of these figures. Doing so will shed light on Fenton's significant literary and cultural contributions to *The Beggar's Opera* by establishing her investments in a campy performance style. It will also model a strategy for performance history that entails reading between the lines of historical sources in order to recreate the actions and motives they describe without the bias of sexism.

Lavinia Fenton and Polly Peachum

John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* includes the principal features of the Italian opera, such as formal arias, recitative dialogue, and dramatic action. Yet it simultaneously rejects the self-seriousness of opera. Influenced in part by "the *commedia dell'arte* troupe based in Paris" (Barlow and Goff 146), *The Beggar's Opera* is peopled with flat characters and charged with comic episodes that parody the elegance and customs of elite society. It is unabashedly dismissive of emerging bourgeois social codes such as marriage for love. Jonathan Swift, satirist, author, and friend of John Gay, dubbed the overall satirical structure that Gay invented for his opera: the "Newgate Pastoral"¹ (Swift in Melville 41). The Newgate pastoral ironizes the classical poetic tradition, demonstrating what happens to leisure and pleasure when they are far removed from the bucolic settings of pastoral life. Newgate prison is an apt setting and emblem of Gay's antipastoralism because it is a human-built space shut off from the natural elements and seasonal cycles of growth and regeneration. Against the general immorality or amorality of the Newgate pastoral, Polly Peachum appears to be the only character to mirror the values ascribed to eighteenth-century bourgeois and elite women. However, as I will argue, she adopts these values for the sake of strategy and, conveniently enough, the strategy also allows Fenton to "bribe [her] way" in the hearts of many audience members (Gladfelder xxii).

Fenton was catapulted into fame alongside the *Opera*. As Joncus tells us, historically the success of *The Beggar's Opera* was due in large part to the "public obsession with the seventeen-year-old Fenton" (27). The "famous" 1720 rivalry between opera divas Faustina Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni was revived in Gay's *Opera* through the conflict between the characters Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit, and, as Wanko points out, this appealing conflict also birthed a new

¹ Swift: *Works* (ed. Scott), XVI, p. 251.

celebrity: Lavinia Fenton (215). Notably, although Fenton spent little time on the stage, “her success as the heroine of the most popular play of the century was so extraordinary [that] no actress, either before or since, has ever been so much ‘the rage’” (Fyvie 27).

Fenton’s status grew in a very short span from “nobody’s child” to a member of the English nobility, Duchess of Bolton (Pearce 283). Fenton seems to have made an impression on the Duke of Bolton when playing Polly in the original production of *The Beggar’s Opera*. According to Berta Joncus, “Hogarth’s painting of *The Beggar’s Opera* show[s] Fenton with [The Duke of] Bolton gazing fixedly at her” (92). Evidently, in the midst of their affair, Fenton took to the stage as Polly for the last time on the “sixty-second night of the opera,” which “fell on June 19” 1728, only five months after her first performance (Pearce 223). The exact reason for her departure is uncertain, though the story that persists is that “Polly should leave the stage because she had become the mistress of the Duke of Bolton” (Pearce 223). Gay, “who in writing to Swift on July 6, 1728, [also] casually mentions that ‘The d— of — I hear hath run away with Polly Peachum having settled £400 upon her during pleasure, and upon disagreement £200’” (Gay in Pearce 223). Their relationship was an extramarital affair and, as Pearce notes, “few actresses of those days can be mentioned who had not had their lovers” (223). However, after living as his mistress for twenty years, Lavinia Fenton married Charles Powlett, 3rd Duke of Bolton, on September 20, 1751, shortly after the death of his first wife (Pearce 283).

This first part of my thesis establishes the importance of approaching Polly Peachum and Lavinia Fenton as interdependent figures. Notably, Fenton’s performance influenced the reception of Gay’s Polly as much as Gay’s Polly influenced Fenton’s cultural reception. Polly and Fenton are connected through ‘Polly,’ the celebrity figure who bridges the actress and the literary character. While separating Fenton from Polly could help to dismantle the sexist

narratives that have overshadowed both figures throughout three centuries of literary history, it would also understate Fenton's creative agency because it was through the role of Polly that she became famous.

In *The Novel Stage: Narrative Form from the Restoration to Jane Austen*, Marcie Frank explores how theatre in the long eighteenth century shaped literary conversations outside of the playhouse. Frank writes, "When the novel and drama are understood as opposites, only some of their characteristics will be captured...Rather than rivals or opposites, the novel and drama were allies and collaborators" (3). 'Polly' is a lively example of the way that, like the plays that launched them, specific performances were also continually moving across literary forms. This thesis, drawing on Frank's insights, approaches 'Polly' as a figure who passed between genres — from page to stage to page — as she surpassed the normative codes of gender and sexuality that were cohering during the eighteenth century. Though I introduce the actress and the character separately with reference to Fenton's anonymously written biography, *Life of Lavinia Beswick, alias Fenton, alias Polly Peachum* (London, 1728) and Polly's first appearance on stage in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, this thesis is interested in the fact that ultimately it is impossible for the literary historian to divorce these influential cultural figures from one another.

None of the known representations of Fenton were published before she took the stage as Polly Peachum: this is one of the primary reasons why any conversation about Fenton's legacy is inevitably intermingled with that of Polly. In the earliest memoir, Fenton's anonymous biographer describes her as a prostitute, claiming that she gave her "prize" to a "Portuguese Nobleman" in 1725 (16). This Portuguese nobleman is introduced as someone with whom Fenton's mother had already had an affair. According to this memoir, Fenton's relationship to this man, "which began at the Play-house and ended in the bed-chamber" (14), "generously

rewarded” her for a four-day weekend with him (16). Upon their return to London, it is alleged that the Portuguese nobleman promised Fenton’s mother that “he would make a Provision for her, suitable to the Merits of so fine a Creature,” a commitment that he upheld with such “appetite” that he spent money on Fenton he didn’t have and was eventually arrested for unpaid debts (16). This sex-work plot, narrated to play up its scandal and mystery, is one that has very often framed the life stories of eighteenth-century actresses. As Nussbaum explains, “question[s] raised about Fenton, as for other actresses in these [kinds of] life accounts, concern the legitimacy of the means by which they rose to wealth and whether their talent as players justified their apparent class mobility” (229). In this regard, the focus on Fenton’s promiscuity is hardly about her at all but is rather a standard sexist formula for explaining her social status.

If Fenton’s memoir is still regularly referenced today it is due to it being the only account of her life to survive, not because anyone believes it is historically accurate. Despite its inaccuracy, it holds value in the way it reveals the cultural codes that shape how Fenton was perceived in the eighteenth century. Nussbaum has shown that important feminist narratives may be decoded from Fenton’s and other actresses’ memoirs. For instance, citing Fenton’s biographer’s claim that, “For sure she was more than Woman” (42), Nussbaum reflects on the many eighteenth-century assumptions about femininity and female celebrities that it and similar memoirs helped to circulate. Nussbaum writes: “These early memoirs convey both the impulse to explain and to forgive; the impulse to condemn and yet to entertain the possibility that celebrated women of the theatre, in the first half of the eighteenth century, might prosper while living their ostensibly ‘private’ lives by an inconsistent moral standard that reigning definitions of ‘woman’ could not contain” (241). My thesis is informed by critical observations like Nussbaum’s about

how women like Fenton led observers to begin to think past the conventional sexual double standard.

Historian Lisa Hilton notes that “the only approach at a serious life of Lavinia Fenton of which [she is] aware is Charles E. Pearce’s *Polly Peachum and ‘The Beggar’s Opera’* (1913)...its narrative focuses on Lavinia herself” (187). I agree with Hilton that Pearce’s biography is more “serious” than previous efforts had been. Yet Pearce also relies to a significant degree on the *Life of Lavinia Beswick, alias Fenton, alias Polly Peachum*, even though he recognizes the historical uncertainty of Fenton’s memoir and regrets that it is virtually impossible to speak of Fenton’s legacy without referring to this source. Pearce writes:

Polly’s early history is very uncertain, and mainly rests upon the statements contained in a so-called biography published in 1728, after the young lady became famous. It is entitled *The Life of Lavinia Beswick, alias Fenton, Alias Polly Peachum ...* The ‘Life’ is one of a class peculiar to the period. The chief object of the biographer is to make up a racy story; fact and fiction are interwoven without any cause as to which is which, and actual names are rarely given, and the style is what no doubt in those days was deemed start writing...Polly was not the first damsel whose doings, real or imaginary, were dished up to suit the taste of the scandal-loving public... The ladies, whose memoirs’ were sold openly, could hardly have been ignorant of what was written about them, but they do not appear to have been sensitive (Pearce 44-5).

Reflecting on Nussbaum, Hilton, and Pearce, it is fair to proceed under the assumption that the contents of Fenton’s first memoir are fabrications of an author eager to capitalize on and justify her quick rise to fame. As Tiffany Potter points out, popular culture was one of the very few ways women could occupy a sphere of influence in eighteenth-century England without necessarily challenging the “patriarchal status quo or the masculine typification of high culture” (5). Looking back on eighteenth and early twentieth-century life writing about Fenton, it is easy

to see the level of sexual shame that actresses and other non-elite women necessarily faced if they quickly gained influence in British popular culture.

Given Fenton's early sexual notoriety, it is striking to observe that *The Beggar's Opera* places significant emphasis on Polly's lack of sexual experience. Whereas all the other women in the play are depicted as sexually knowing and sexually available, Polly's inexperience is at the forefront of her character from her first appearance on stage. In 1.7, Polly's difference from her mother, Mrs Peachum, with respect to her way of navigating men and sex is particularly noticeable when they start to sing together about the news that Polly has taken up with Macheath. As Dianne Dugaw explains, the irony in Air 9 turns on "the interplay between the mother's (coy) admonition to coyness and the daughter's ingenuous insinuations" (173):

Air 9. *O Jenny, O Jenny*, where hast thou been.

Mrs Peachum. O Polly, you might have toyed and kissed.
By keeping men off, you keep them on.
Polly. But he so teased me,
And so he pleased me,
What I did, you must have done

Mrs Peachum. Not with a Highway Man.— You sorry Slut! (Gay 1.8.16)

In the lyrics to this song, Polly's way of operating with Macheath "is intricately juxtaposed to her mother's experiences" (Dugaw 175). Gay is asking his audience to view their exchange through an ironic frame that refers to the tradition of popular ballads with which eighteenth-century audiences would have been very familiar. Popular street ballads "contained [and perpetuated] the sexual stereotypes of vigorous plebeians as opposed to an effete upper class" (Ganev 53). *O Jenny, O Jenny* follows the convention of mocking lower-class women for their uncontrollable promiscuity. What Gay is doing differently in this ballad, however, is that instead of placing Polly in a position to be shamed by her mother for having unmarried sex with

Macheath, Mrs Peachum punishes Polly for agreeing to marry Macheath in order to satisfy her sexual needs in a (conventionally) honourable way. Overall, Polly Peachum's relationship to her sexuality differs from that associated with the other women in the play and from that typically associated with the ballad tradition in Gay's song. However, this early scene, which might seem a prime example of Polly's sexual innocence or naïveté, situates Polly's sexual inexperience within a larger pattern of "double irony" that governs the whole plot of *The Beggar's Opera* (Empson 210). The double irony here is that the song, and her mother, mock not her sexual desire as such but rather her desire for sex within the bourgeois institution of marriage. Though a close reading of this opening scene reveals that Polly's character combines sexual inexperience and frank erotic desire, it was obviously difficult for her original audience to resist focusing on the sexual naïveté of her character. On the whole Gay's play, as Marie Lazzari describes it, puts forward "a darkly comic vision of the greed and self-interest of human nature, given free rein in a society which holds commercial values above all others" (2). Even though the *Opera's* operating systems clearly parody the bourgeois norms of England, audience members were less willing or able to perceive Gay's satire of Polly, and regularly reframed her as the moral "heroine" of the *Opera*, emphasizing her resistance to premarital sex (Larazzi 2).

The fact of the matter is that Fenton's embodiment of Polly generated an even greater incentive to situate Polly's morality within the familiar eighteenth-century patriarchal strictures, instead of within the inverted social and sexual economy that Gay created for his Newgate pastoral. The heightened fascination with Polly's sexual inexperience as it was informed and intensified by Fenton's original performance and contrasted with assumptions about Fenton herself inspired a third figure, 'Polly.' 'Polly,' a hybrid character that merges Gay's play with theatre-goers's experience of Fenton's performance, was judged according to eighteenth-century

British sexual codes but never entirely confined to them. As a figure that is neither entirely fictional nor entirely real, 'Polly' offers contemporary literary scholars a broader vantage on women's contributions to eighteenth-century culture than that offered by Gay's Polly alone.

Creating ‘Polly’

The meaning of “character” has expanded since the eighteenth century. This thesis relies on a variety of its definitions. It aims to establish the *character* of ‘Polly’ in the sense of “the complex of mental and ethical traits marking and often individualizing a person” (“Character,” def. 1.c). In order to understand ‘Polly,’ however, I do have to address to some extent the conversation about Polly Peachum’s *character* in the sense of her “moral excellence and firmness,” which was shaped both by Gay’s text and Fenton’s onstage performance (def. 3). The goal, however, is to shed light on the critical significance of Fenton’s active role in developing Polly as a *character*, “the personality or part which an actor recreates,” in order to invite further discussion released from the sexist dilemma of female sexual virtue (def. 2.b).

The following section of the thesis further describes ‘Polly’ as a persona and the cultural space she comes to inhabit by acknowledging her relevance to and prevalence in the English theatre. ‘Polly’ as a pseudonym for Lavinia Fenton’s on-and-off stage relationship to Polly Peachum came into widespread use shortly after the first performance of *The Beggar’s Opera* on January 29, 1728 (Pearce 83). According to Pearce,

Lavinia Fenton awoke to find herself famous. The town talked of nothing but the new opera and Polly Peachum. The name of the heroine- the daughter of a thief-taker!— tickled the fence of the public and found its way to their hearts. Henceforth it was to be ‘Miss Fenton’ no longer, but ‘Polly!’ After all, without prying too curiously into the why and wherefore, it may be said that the young lady had as much right to one name as the other (104).

The popularity of ‘Polly’ grew immediately, with Gay himself using the name ‘Polly’ to refer to Lavinia Fenton in his letters to Jonathan Swift. Specifically, Gay used the pseudonym when referring to Fenton having become more influential than the *Opera* as a whole. Gay writes: “There is a mezzotinto published to-day of Polly, the heroine of *The Beggar’s Opera*, who was

before unknown, and is now in so high vogue, that I am in doubt whether her fame does not surpass that of the opera itself”² (Gay in Melville). Despite the *Opera*’s popularity making Fenton popular, and Fenton’s popularity making the *Opera* more popular in return, Fenton was not necessarily content with her shared identity with Polly. On at least one notable occasion, Fenton was bothered by the extreme popularity of ‘Polly’ when the pseudonym was used to advertise a benefit performance of hers that was unrelated to *The Beggar’s Opera*. The advertisement for a benefit to support George Farquhar’s comedy *The Beaux’ Stratagem* appeared in *The Daily Journal* on 19 April 1728 (Pearce 194). Pearce surmises, “It would seem... that Miss Fenton did not consider it fair that all the glory should be given to ‘Polly’ and only a reflection descend upon herself, and maybe she gave [theatre manager John] Rich a piece of her mind, for the advertisement of April 27 is headed ‘for the Benefit of Miss Fenton,’ and announces ‘the part of Cherry by Miss Fenton, with singing by Miss Fenton.’ The lady, naturally enough, could not see why her benefit should be something like Hamlet with Hamlet omitted. ‘Polly’ was all very well in its way, but it was only natural that she desired to remind the public that she was also ‘Miss Fenton’” (194-5). In such social and cultural scenarios, the pseudonym ‘Polly’ carries more cultural capital than Fenton’s own name.

Quite a number of texts that were written about and influenced by ‘Polly’ are available. Today we might label the form of much of this ‘Polly’ literature, which immortalizes both the player Fenton and Polly Peachum as ‘Polly,’ as “fanfiction.”³ The extensive list of eighteenth-century texts in this category includes: *Letters in prose and verse, to the celebrated Polly Peachum: from the most eminent of her admirers and rivals* by multiple contributors printed for

² Swift: *Works* (ed. Scott), XVII, p. 180.

³ Urban Dictionary definition by Mistaki: “Fanfiction is when someone takes either the story or characters (or both) of a certain piece of work, whether it be a novel, tv show, movie, etc, and create their own story based on it.”

A. Miller (London, 1728), *A Letter to Polly: To One of her Tunes* printed for A. Moore (London, 1728), *Polly Peachum on Fire: The Beggar's Opera Blown Up and, Capt. Mackheath Entangled in his Dazzle-Strings* by anonymous printed for A. Moore (London, 1728), *A New Ballad Inscrib'd to Polly Peachum* by the author of Leheup's Ballad (London, 1728), *The Whole Life of Polly Peachum* written by one of her companions (London, ~1730), and *Polly Peachum's Opera or Medley of New Songs* by the alleged Polly Peachum (London, 1728).

While it is tempting to conflate 'Polly,' the muse of the fanfictions, with the 'Polly' made notorious by the anonymous author of *The Life of Lavinia Beswick, alias Fenton, alias Polly Peachum* (published May 1728), this memoir had not even hit the market when the first 'Polly' fanfiction was published. In fact, *A New Ballad Inscribed to Polly Peachum* (March 1728), *Polly Peachum's Opera* (April 1728), *Polly Peachum's Jest*s (April 1728), and *A Letter to Polly. To one of her own Tunes* (April 1728), which was accompanied by drawings and in a satirical etched print (April 1728), were all published before the memoir and either just before or concomitantly with the official print distribution of the script of *The Beggar's Opera*. Thus, 'Polly' narratives were circulating well before the anonymous biographer wrote about Lavinia Fenton as a kept woman. Notably, up until April 1728, when the *Opera* was printed, all the authors who were capitalizing on Fenton's celebrity and the success of the *Opera* were doing so on the basis of having watched or heard about her live performances. The author of *Polly Peachum's Jest*s confirms this timeline by recounting a conversation between the Duke of Argyll and Colley Cibber:

The other night his Grace the Duke of Argyll being at *The Beggar's Opera*, who says more good Things than anybody, met C – bb – r there behind the scenes; 'Well, Colley,' said he, 'how do you like *The Beggar's Opera*?' 'Why, it makes one laugh upon the stage, but how will it do in print?' (Pearce 138)

Although certainly influenced by the social construction of celebrity in general, the ‘Polly’ of these early ‘Polly’ texts also are reflections of Fenton’s interpretation of Polly.

To better understand the character of ‘Polly,’ it is necessary to challenge Cheryl Wanko’s contextualization of ‘Polly’ which is largely dependent on the sexualized narrative in *The Life of Fenton*. There is much to be admired in the way Wanko underscores the importance of ‘Polly’ as an entity who merges “social discourse, play character, and the actress herself” into one (59). However, I disagree with her claim that ‘Polly’ is a dichotomy, “that holds in tension the innocent, modest Polly of the stage with the presumably sexual and socially ambitious actress who portrayed her” (59). Wanko’s characterization of ‘Polly’ depends on a contrast between the sexual inexperience of Polly and the sexualized narrative attributed to Fenton in *The Life of Fenton*. Yet by the time Fenton’s memoir was published, the significant connotations, provocative or otherwise, associated with ‘Polly’ would have already been established to a large degree. Perhaps the anonymous biographer had himself been inspired by the town gossip to portray Fenton’s “role” as that of “the whore,” and not the other way around (Wanko 56). Fenton’s biographer was likely not a trendsetter in other words, but simply engaged in the sex-shaming of female players that was standard in the period.

Many actresses “had reputations for exchanging their sexual favours for a price” and sex scandals were appealing to any writer trying to make money of their own from actresses’ stage success (Crouch in Pullen 66). Where my ‘Polly’ differs extensively from Wanko’s ‘Polly’ is in the notion that the intimacy between ‘Polly’ and theatregoers was mediated through the stage and evolved into something even greater offstage. My ‘Polly’ is first and foremost a product of culture—of Fenton’s performance and the audience’s reception of it, and secondly a product of literature (not only Gay’s play but also the various fanfictions soon inspired by Fenton’s

performance) whereas Wanko's 'Polly' is primarily a product of the literature (and especially of the first biography of Fenton). But how might it be possible to assess the influence of Fenton's performance on the cultural reception of 'Polly'?

In seeking an answer to this question, we must consider the critical biases of eighteenth-century audiences as well. We know that there was a significant awareness of the "intimacy involved [with] performing within the public realm" (Nussbaum 44), but to what extent would theatregoers have been attentive to Fenton's own artistic intentions and creative risks in her interpretation of Polly? Since Polly does not neatly conform either to the period's gendered sexual codes or to the sexual license of the world of Gay's play, it is interesting to note that the extant sources that recognize and accept 'Polly' as a sexually desiring and layered character are the authors of the earliest 'Polly' fanfictions. Specifically, some early authors actively portray a 'Polly' that represents neither the ideal virtuous young woman nor the sultry sex-crazed player. Instead, the 'Polly' of the 'Polly' fanfictions manages to escape these limited cultural codes of gender and sexuality. That is, while the 'Polly' texts still sexualize her, they do so in a way that is respectful of her celebrity status and social mobility.

“Taste of the Town”

In order to illustrate Polly’s layered character, and rightfully situate her as a part of, and not above or below, the economy of mutual exploitation at the heart of Gay’s Newgate pastoral, first explore how ‘Polly’ influenced the audience’s opinion of Polly. Specifically, the following section will highlight varying opinions of ‘Polly’ as they begin to emerge in letters, journals, and fanfictions published in 1728, many of which reject Polly’s apparent sexual innocence and the starkly gendered moral/immoral binary of the period.

Because Polly Peachum is a *dramatis persona* and not a fictional character, her motives and actions may be variably charged in real time in every performance. That is, while an ensemble can either make or break a given play depending on its overall chemistry and collective skill, the creative decisions of each individual performer also have a significant impact. In *Theatres of Feeling: Affect, Performance and the Eighteenth-Century Stage*, Jean I. Marsden explains:

Theatre is unlike any other form of literary activity in that it is truly alive: it is three dimensional and exists in real time...It is communal rather than an individual experience and cannot exist without a performer. In this it could be said to be a collaborative venture between the actor who performs and the playgoer who responds. The two combine to create a symbiotic experience that is more than a sum of its parts, a response the eighteenth century understood as sympathy—a spectator’s involuntary emotional reaction to what he or she sees upon the stage (4).

Keeping this “collaborative venture” in mind, one might ask which affective sympathies exactly were exchanged between Fenton and her audience during her performances of Polly. Daniel O’Quinn discusses how “the aesthetic mediation of affect” may generate “a shared sense that something is happening even if that something cannot yet be named” (23). In the case of ‘Polly,’ the aesthetic mediation brings together Polly, the heroine of the comic plot of *The Beggar’s*

Opera, Fenton's portrayal of Polly with apparent "great moral seriousness" (Corman 199), and the celebrity 'Polly' who keeps "the inextricable bond between performer and audience" alive even after the performance is over (Marsden 7). I suggest that 'Polly' was able to generate new feelings about sexuality that exceeded the moral code of her social world: 'Polly' encapsulated the imaginative possibility of a woman being at once sexually assertive and sexually modest. As Joseph Roach explains, the "synthetic experience" of performer and character "must answer the human need, regulated by both curiosity and fear, to experience life vicariously as well as directly" (Roach in Marsden 7): 'Polly' provided a very rich version of this kind of synthetic experience.

There appear to have been three main responses to 'Polly'. A first category of responses emphasize 'Polly's' virtue by directly invoking Fenton's physical appearance in their judgements of the character. At the time of the *Opera's* first staging in 1728, "*The Daily Journal, The Daily Post*, and the rest of the newspapers had very little space at their disposal, and dramatic criticisms were almost unknown" (Pearce 126). Of the few reviews of Fenton's performances as Polly, several of them share a common point of interest in 'Polly's' youthful and "innocent" appearance. According to Lewis Melville, English actor James

Quin is recorded as having said that there was a disposition to damn [*The Beggar's Opera*], and that it was saved by the song, 'O ponder well! be not severe!' the audience being much affected by the innocent looks of Polly, when she came to those two lines which exhibit at once a painful and ridiculous image—

O ponder well! be not severe!
For on the Rope that hangs my Dear
Depends poor Polly's Life⁴ (80).

⁴ Boswell: *Life of Johnson* (ed. Hill), II, p. 368.

Though the tension between pain and ridicule in these lines may begin from Gay's script, significantly, Quin implies that Fenton's delivery—her “innocent looks”—is what brings Polly's character and this moment of tension to life against the moral dissoluteness of the *Opera* as a whole. While the specific details of what made this scene so striking are limited by our distance from the original performance, Quin's notes suggest that he, along with several other audience members, respect Fenton's ability to engage audience sympathy by drawing out tragic tension in the otherwise satirical plot through gestures and expressions that suggest her helplessness. As Polly is the only character of the *Opera* who projects this sense that she has little agency in relation to unfair social structures, ‘Polly’ is distinct from others; her “innocent look” lifts her character onto a pedestal that mirrors back the moralistic ideals the audience respects.

It was not only James Quin who credited Fenton's appearance for much of the *Opera*'s success. In 1728, a Frenchman by the name of Pierre-Jacques Fourgeroux described his experience of the original production of *The Beggar's Opera*. While Fourgeroux finds the play as a whole underwhelming, he admires a few of the players: “there were only two good actors, and a girl called Fenton who was quite pretty”⁵ (Fourgeroux in Barlow and Goff 152). Considering how flat the rest of the review is, the fact that Fenton is the only player whom he praises by name suggests that at the very least her physical appearance made an impression on him. Of course, we cannot know whether Fourgeroux praises Fenton's looks in order to conspicuously avoid praising her performance. However, what we can discern from this review is that, like Quin, Fourgeroux is charmed by Fenton's stage presence as Polly. In both Quin and Fourgeroux's remarks Fenton's physical appearance has an aesthetic effect that leads them to

⁵ As is cited by Barlow and Goff p.158. “This passage is part of a long letter, chiefly devoted to Italian opera in London. The translation is from Donald Burrows, *Handel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.462.”

temper their distaste towards the *Opera*. By taking Polly's charming innocent appearance entirely at face value, they miss the opportunity to reflect on the influence that Fenton's actual acting must have had on their emotional response to the *Opera* as a whole.

While these first reviews emphasize Fenton's "innocent looks" as the source of the power of her performance, later biographers, such as Pearce, have come to expand these early reviews into fuller critiques of Fenton's performance.

Pearce summarizes the opening night:

There was no chance of comparing *The Beggar's Opera* with anything that had gone before. It was *sui generis*. Gay, however, had already perpetrated a dramatic riddle in the *What d'ye call it?* and maybe the audience at first thought *The Beggar's Opera* was a freak of the same nature. But long before the first act was over it was seen that there was considerable method in the author's madness, and the wit, the sprightliness of the dialogue, the naturalness of the characters, the charm of the familiar ballads, the majority of which were household tunes, and, above all, the acting, with the unctuous broad humour of Hippisley, the quaint gravity of Spiller, the gay recklessness of Walker, and the naïveté, the mingled vivacity and pathos of Lavinia Fenton won every heart (86-7).

Pearce's notes tell us that although the audience did not quite know what to make of *The Beggar's Opera*, a significant factor in winning them over was the way Fenton captured Polly's inexperience by acting with both "vivacity" and "pathos." Pearce provides more complex terms to explain how Fenton's performance mediated and softened the overwhelmingly amoral world of Gay's satire. Pearce's description suggests that Fenton's acting successfully relays the "author's madness" and the "sprightliness of [Polly's] dialogue" in a seemingly "natural" "character." Through such claims, Pearce invites his readers to consider how Fenton's performance captures the dualistic traits of youthful exuberance, on the one hand, and self-awareness, on the other, that Gay's script implies the role should have.

While Polly's innocence was often noted, it is not the only quality of Fenton's performance to leave an impression. Pearce makes this point in passing when quoting a letter signed by "Æquus" cited in *The Daily Journal* of 13 November 1736:

...this letter is of special interest because it lets us know how Lavinia Fenton played the part. 'Æquus' says:

'It has been a matter of a good deal of surprise to me to see what a false Notion the Generality of spectators have entertained of the character of Polly; she is commonly thought to be a young innocent Girl made up of nothing but artless Simplicity and Nature, very fond and tender. Whether the appearance the first Polly made conveyed this Idea of artless Innocence in Polly, and stamped that character on her, I shall not determine; but certain it is that this is the conceived Idea of her; and all succeeding Pollies but one have copied from the first original exhibition of her, and given us, in spite of Nature and Truth, as tender, soft and fond a Fool as Heart could wish' (260).

Æquus observes that since Fenton's performance of innocence was given significant praise, it is not surprising that actresses in productions of the *Opera* following Fenton's retirement also emphasized this quality. Author and bookseller Thomas Davies in his *Life of Garrick* specifically remarks that actress "Miss Brent was deficient in beauty as well as form to represent the amiable simplicity of Polly Peachum" (Pearce 296). Furthermore, unlike Quin and Fourgeroux's reviews, Æquus is not so quick to concede that Polly, as Gay wrote her, is "nothing but artless Simplicity and Nature." In this statement, there is an underlying suggestion that Æquus regards Fenton's (and subsequent) interpretations of Polly as against the grain of Gay's script and strategically so. Responding to Æquus, Pearce writes, "Now the real character of Polly is very different from this; and I dare answer for Mr. Gay he never thought of drawing such unnatural Creatures as our Pollies have made of themselves" (260). Together, Æquus's note and Pearce's interjection invite us to consider not only how Fenton successfully built on the script of the *Opera* to create a

dualistic Polly but also how Fenton’s interpretation served to comment on larger off-stage concerns regarding female celebrity, status, and social influence.

The final part of this section will focus on one of the eighteenth-century fanfictions that reveal ‘Polly’ moving from the stage into the sphere of popular culture—a source that, I argue, provides us with the fullest picture of the complexity of ‘Polly.’ The following is a close reading of *A New Ballad Inscribed to Polly Peachum: To the Tune of Pretty Parrot Say* (March 1728), one of the earliest of the fanfictions, published only two months after the opening night of the *Opera*. The anonymous author opens his ballad by addressing the overwhelmingly positive reception of Polly Peachum:

Pretty Polly Say,
When did Jo - - y G- -
St - - h you, St - - ch you, for his Play,
In which you ‘pear so charming;
...
Or does he S - - - e you storming;
Whilst you do fondly loll,
Whilst you do fondly loll,
O pretty, pretty Poll (Author of Leheup's Ballad 3).

This ballad acknowledges the general consensus that ‘Polly’ is as likeable as she is attractive. However, the author also describes this “charming” and “pretty” ‘Polly’ as a character that “fondly loll[s],” ascribing to her a relaxed and indulgent personality. He goes on to complicate this description by referring to her as “wicked Poll” (4) and “nimble Poll” (6). The ballad then proceeds to detail the stories of several “Men of high Degree” who are “fond” (4) of ‘Polly,’ noting that ‘Polly’ is the woman who “as it’s recounted:/ ...dost serv’em all” (5). Since the ballad characterizes ‘Polly’ as a figure who begins her life inside *The Beggar’s Opera* but who ultimately lives outside of the *Opera* as a woman who entertains all the men she can, one might assume that the accusations of sexual immodesty will soon follow. However, the anonymous

author of the ballad in fact refrains from shaming ‘Polly’ on any gendered basis. Rather he warns her not to squander her new fame on the men of the town: “You’re in Prime/Use your time” (7), he advises her. Gay’s play “has raised your Grandeur” (8): ‘Polly’ should now make the most of her new status. While this is hardly a radical feminist account of ‘Polly,’ it is refreshingly unconcerned either with Polly’s innocence or with justifying ‘Polly’ sexual agency. The author perhaps invests in celebrity scandal for its profitability but does not patronize ‘Polly’ by subjecting her to his moral judgment.

The Londoners who loved the naïve and virtuous Polly of the stage perhaps found the ballad’s depiction of ‘Polly’ shocking. The author soon amended his initial publication of the ballad to include an additional four verses written in praise the Polly of the stage (10). The author writes, “The following Lines being sent to the Author as an Answer to the foregoing Ballad, he, to shew what he publish’d was not done out of Malice to POLLY PEACHUM, has annex'd them to this Edition, having so much Value for the Female Sex as to give Fair Play to a Fair Woman” (9). The first of the extra poems opens with a stark objection to the picture that the original ballad paints of Polly,

Pray, Sir, who are you
That this dares to shew
Polly’s Pranks to open View,
And so loudly expose her;
Cruel Bard,
This is hard,
No Regard
To Poll, nor those that knows her;
For you do Lampon’ em all,
For you do Lampon’ em all,
As well as pretty Poll (9).

Against this objection that the original ballad is a “lampoon” upon ‘Polly,’ I want to propose that in fact the ‘Polly’ of the ballad honours the duplicity highlighted by Fenton’s performance of

Polly Peachum. Unlike the narratives of 'Polly' that pit the likeable, innocent Polly Peachum and the promiscuous Lavinia Fenton against one other, this ballad embraces all the facets of the 'Polly' relationship, the satirical duality of Gay's character Polly, and Fenton's considerable aesthetic influence.

Camp on the Eighteenth-Century Stage

Although not her author in the conventional sense, Fenton effectively co-creates Polly in the original staging of *The Beggar's Opera*. Unlike previous critiques of Polly/'Polly' that offer moral evaluations of her character, this final part of my thesis shifts attention to an aesthetic frame—that of camp. Ultimately, I aim to show that engaging with Polly as an aesthetic presence better highlights Fenton's creative contributions to Polly and 'Polly' alike. In his seminal discussion of *The Beggar's Opera*, William Empson argues that “No sentence of the play is quite free from” “double irony” (210). This notion was also subsequently taken up by other critics, such as Ian Donaldson and Toni-Lynn O'Shaughnessy. Building on Empson's criticism, Donaldson argues that “The term ‘double capacity,’ with which Peachum describes his operations, ‘might also be said to describe the way in which Gay's own irony works’ to suggest ‘the manifold possible ways of looking at any set of actions’” (Donaldson in O'Shaughnessy 212). Donaldson's additions and Empson's original claim that “double irony” is the “trick” (210) of *The Beggar's Opera* also inform O'Shaughnessy's reading of the *Opera*. She explains that the “practical difficulty of actually performing *The Beggar's Opera*” has to do with successfully making the “irony and duplicity pervasive in all of the opera's language and characters” (O'Shaughnessy 220). There is a suggestion then, running through the criticism of Empson, O'Shaughnessy, and Donaldson, that the comedy at work in the *Opera* is very hard to perform. Indeed, O'Shaughnessy ultimately agrees with Empson that because of the “grammatical gymnastics” that support the comedy's doubleness it is “unproducible” as a performance and only comprehensible on page (221).

Yet the issues raised in these accounts of the difficulty of staging the *Opera* are neatly contested by the theory of irony in Susan Sontag's “Notes on ‘Camp.’” Notably, Sontag defines

“camp” as a “mode of seduction” “which employs flamboyant mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity, with a witty meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders” (281). Under this frame, Polly’s “double capacity” can be performed without compromising the tensions of her character (Donaldson 164). Empson's approach to Polly, like that of many critics before him, was limited by his wish to “solve” her duplicity: Empson concludes that “the fascination of [Polly’s] character” lies in the fact that there is “no means of telling whether she is simple or ironical” but the audience longs to know how to feel about her (242). Significantly, when Polly’s pose of innocence is viewed through a camp frame, there is no need to “solve” her or impart a moral critique as “camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, or appreciation—not judgment” (Sontag 291).

Looking for evidence of how Fenton drew out the potential for campiness in the character of Polly Peachum shifts critical focus from sexist notions of morality to questions of gendered satirical aesthetics. As Ula Lukszo Klein and Emily Kugler explain,

Camp is a blend of the silly and the extravagant that puts the serious into conversation with the ridiculous... It is also a concept deeply rooted in constructions of gender and, whether implicitly or explicitly, a vital element in the lives of long eighteenth-century artists, writers, and thinkers.... Camp ...[can be used] to understand how changing notions of sex, gender, and sexuality in the eighteenth century worked [and to study their] long-term effects on representations of women, women’s bodies, and concepts of femininity (1).

Especially useful to my reconstruction of Fenton’s performance of Polly’s pose of sexual innocence is Klein and Kugler’s emphasis on how camp “dra[ws] attention to artifice and the ephemeral gestures of sexuality” (4). Though camp is quite a layered “sensibility” with many moving parts, its essence can be simplified to a “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (Sontag 275).

Even though their writing tells us they experienced ‘Polly’ in vastly different ways, evidence of her campy qualities can be seen in Quin’s review and one of the ‘Polly’ fanfictions discussed in the previous section. Notably, when Quin critiques ‘Polly’s’ dominant aesthetic as her innocence, his interpretation presents her as a quintessentially campy “instant character” (Sontag 286). Sontag defines the “very 18th century” mode of the “instant character” as having “one, very intense” quality with limited “development” (286). In fact, it is through the “glorification” (Sontag 285) of ‘Polly’s’ “innocent look,” presumably enhanced by attributes such as Fenton’s teenaged face and physique, that Quin’s critique reduces Polly to a simple innocent girl (*Æquus* in Pearce 296). In this case, camp helps us to read between the lines of Quin’s review. Quin imposes judgements on Polly’s character as he is not able to merely appreciate it. In this way, it is evident that he fails to recognize that Fenton’s embodiment of Polly’s innocence is an artful pose.

On the other hand, with Sontag’s framework, we can return to *A New Ballad Inscribed to Polly Peachum: To the Tune of Pretty Parrot Say* to recognize that in that text the author’s fascination with ‘Polly’s’ doubleness, as it extends beyond the stage, is effectively an appreciation of the campy performance. The author reminds his readers that ‘Polly’ is perpetually in the public eye. He writes, “Thus the Stars we see,/Lend their Light to thee;/Bright and Glorious thou must be” (6). While he recognizes her celebrity, and how comfortable she appears in the spotlight, his ballad does not evaluate ‘Polly’s’ success— he sees her cultural visibility as the necessary consequence of her charismatic performance on stage. By keeping his comments towards ‘Polly’s’ fame morally “neutral” (especially as compared to her biographer who blatantly sexualizes her), the author reinforces in his ballad the camp sensibility that “neutralizes moral indignation [and] sponsors playfulness” instead (Sontag 290). Moreover, the

author's way of parodying "Polly" or "Poll" in rhyming couplets by pairing the name with words such as "loll" (3), "droll," "fall" (4), and even "maul" (6) shows that he recognizes her as a "playful" and "anti-serious" character (Sontag 288). As the author literally stretches and molds 'Polly's' name to fit his form, he simultaneously demonstrates 'Polly's' malleable character. Apparently very few of the original audience members caught on to Polly's pose of innocence as well as the author of this fanfiction did. Returning to it with a camp frame allows us to see 'Polly's' charm anew as a confident lack of concern with preserving her female virtue.

We can also apply Sontag's framework to the script of *The Beggar's Opera* itself to highlight additional moments of Polly's campiness and how it manifested both on and offstage. Polly, as Gay wrote her, is a campy character because most of her speech is "susceptible of a double interpretation" (Sontag 281). This feature of her campiness is most evident in the inconsistency between Polly's exaggerated compassion for Macheath and her stated intentions of her marriage with him. In the first act of the *Opera*, after Peachum and Mrs Peachum confront Polly about her marriage, they almost immediately begin plotting a way to financially benefit from it. Specifically, Peachum suggests that the most effective way to capitalize from the marriage is by having Macheath killed so that, as his widow, Polly can collect all his money and have even more financial freedom than ever before. As explained by Jon Lance Bacon, "Under English common law, the widow could own property, make contracts, and therefore engage in trade; as femme sole, the widow had a legal identity which was not merged with that of a man" (435).

Looking more closely at the scene where Peachum first tells Polly about his plans to use her marriage with Macheath to make money off his death, Polly's reaction to her father's request is quite suspicious. Although the script states that Polly is concerned by the proposed widow

plot, the following conversation between Peachum and Polly suggests a simple shift in tone and emphasis during the delivery of these lines could provide an entirely different way of conceptualizing the character and her response to this scheme:

Peachum. And had not you the common Views of a Gentlewoman
 in your Marriage, Polly?

Polly. I don't know what you mean, Sir?

Peachum. Of a Jointure, and of being a Widow.

Polly. But I love him, Sir: how then could I have thoughts
 of parting with him? (Gay 1.10.19)

Given Polly's knowledge of the way her parents make a living it is highly improbable that Polly's, "I don't know what you mean, Sir?," is sincere. In this exact moment in the script, the duality of Polly's character is put front-and-centre. However, a deer-in-headlight performance by Fenton could have had the effect of concealing Polly's duplicity not just from her parents within the world of the play, but from the audience as well. Gay never gives Polly words that reveal her actual stance on the matter, hence interpretation is in the eye of the beholder. In performance much of the audience response is shaped by the interpretation of the actress, whose face, gestures, and tone affect the range of possible meanings of her lines and subsequent actions. As it is Fenton who was responsible for how these lines were conveyed, she made the final decisions regarding her character live on stage during each performance. It is worth reflecting on the practical fact that "theatre [is] the most present of all the arts [and] performance is itself always in process, made and remade afresh with every staging" (Marsden 6). As such, to what extent Polly's duplicity was portrayed on stage depended on Fenton's consistency with Polly's pose of innocence as well as audience members' capacity to observe the pretense inside her performance.

Another feature of the plot is crucial to reference when imagining how Fenton developed her campy performance. Polly's loyalty to Macheath, which seems to uphold the integrity of an honest and respectable wife, should not be taken at face value. Throughout the *Opera*, Polly anticipates Macheath's hanging and over-exaggerates her despair when she is forced to comment on it. She is well-aware that her parents are plotting to turn him over to the law so that they can all capitalize on Polly's widowhood, yet she milks her predicament for all it is worth, indulging heartily in expressions of sorrow and despair. In the first act, Polly sings, "O ponder well! be not severe...For on the Rope that hangs my Dear/ Depends poor Polly's Life," and again a short while later imagines herself with Macheath, "Pair'd in Death, as pair'd in Love" (Gay 1.10.19-20). Polly's dutiful love to a non-monogamous man in an environment that doesn't value sexual or emotional loyalty stands as Gay's parody of bourgeois gender expectations; the irony of this dutiful love only deepens when Polly professes her feelings for Macheath through song. Steve Newman discusses how the ballads in *The Beggar's Opera* portray characters that are at once "round and flat" and how they play on an audience's softer feelings: the ballads "encourage the audience to sympathize with characters they imagine as lower, like Polly Peachum, the daughter of thieves who believes in love, and her beloved Macheath, a highwayman who fancies himself a gentleman" (266). While it is already disingenuous for Polly to perform love so dutifully in a world that doesn't value monogamy, it is an even greater performance of artifice for her to do so through song. Polly is well-aware that Macheath will not be a good husband because, as her father has warned her, "A Highwayman's Wife, like a Soldier's, hath as little of his Pay, as of his Company" (Gay 1.10.19). In this respect, it seems that not only is Polly's love artificial, but so are her intentions and motivations to marry in the first place.

According to “W. Cooke's Memoirs of Macklin” the confirmation that “[Fenton as] Polly made her great success with the audience in ‘O ponder well,’” the same scene Quin refers to in his review, lay “no doubt [in] ‘the eyes of ‘em’” which “showed that at this point the audience were being won over” (Pearce 93-4). The “O ponder well” song happens to come up in the scene where Polly tells her parents that she marries Macheath for love. If this scene was as influential on the audience’s enjoyment of the *Opera* as Macklin is suggesting, I wonder whether this was because this was a moment when Fenton decided to amp up the campy aesthetic of Polly’s pose of innocence, either through gesture or tone, and thereby convince (or trick) her audience to believe that her love for Macheath, and later her horror at the thought of his impending death, are sincere. To convey these emotions to her audience, and have them react sympathetically, Fenton’s portrayal of Polly’s innocence cannot be gimmicky or satirical. Camp is the ideal frame for describing a moment when Fenton seriously performed emotions that her character does not seriously have.

As mentioned above, Gay’s Polly strategically employs a pose of innocence to convince the audience that she is a heroine deserving of a happy ending. In Polly’s air 8, “Grim King of the Ghosts, &c,” there is a suggestion that Polly’s innocence is a mask put on for the audience to enjoy, and not a representation of Polly’s authenticity.

Polly sings,

Can Love be controlled by Advice?
Will Cupid our Mothers obey?
Though my Heart were as frozen as Ice,
At his Flame ‘twould have melted away
When he kist me so closely he prest,
'Twas so sweet that I must have comply'd:
So I thought it both safest and best
To marry, for fear you should chide (Gay 1.8.15).

Although she sings this air in a scene with her parents, both Peachum and Mrs Peachum are distraught and offended at the very thought that Polly would marry Macheath. Therefore, the “you” whom Polly “fear[s] should chide” can’t be her parents since the moral dangers of pre-marital sex are not at all their concern. On the contrary, Peachum would have rather Polly “had the discretion of a Court Lady, who can have a dozen young Fellows at her Ear without complying with one” since without ties to another man, Polly could have continued to work for Peachum (Gay 1.4.10). As Peachum considered Polly to be like “a Court Lady to a Minister of State, a key to the whole Gang,” her marriage represents an economic loss to his business (Gay 1.4.10). Accordingly, it is plausible that the “you” Polly is addressing in this air is the audience and not her parents who, unlike the Newgate criminals, are in fact concerned with morality and rationalizing passions.

While Fenton’s exaggerated acts of innocence during this scene may have helped her convince the audience that what Polly desires, and deserves, is a successful marriage with Macheath, today we can see that Polly really isn’t that different from the rest of the duplicitous Newgate crew. In fact, Gay’s decision to only slightly distinguish Polly from her peers—to underscore everyone’s extreme self-interestedness in this world—is an effect called “distortion” (Harris 6). Robert Harris defines this satirical strategy as one that results from “changing the perspective of a condition ...by stressing some aspects and deemphasizing others” (6).

The creative liberties that Fenton took to exaggerate Polly’s virtue and support her pose of innocence through costuming makes the aesthetic “mode of seduction” she employed to push the envelope of Polly’s duplicity even more concrete. According to Pearce, “Macklin described [Polly’s] dress as ‘very like the simplicity of a modern Quaker.’ Whether by accident or design, no dress could have furnished a more effective contrast to the spirit of the play. It was a stroke of

art to suggest innocence in the midst of vice and immorality” (Pearce 99). At the time of the original staging of *The Beggar’s Opera* costume design was not yet professionalized. Thus, it is fair to assume that the actors had more agency over what they wore onstage than they would have today. In this case, Fenton seems to have made the most of the duplicitous tensions introduced by her good-girl dress, heightening her pose of naïveté in deliberate contrast with Polly’s obviously disingenuous character.

Even though eighteenth-century audiences were eager to sex-shame Fenton and ‘Polly,’ Fenton’s exaggerated embodiment of Polly’s pose of innocence provoked them to idolize, and enjoy, a sexually confident and knowing female character. While it seems that much of the audience remained ignorant of what Fenton was up to, the time has come to appreciate that Fenton was likely purposefully invoking Polly’s manipulative strategy in her very own pose of innocence on the stage. Reading Fenton, Polly, and ‘Polly’ as campy characters represents a significant intervention in the critical history of *The Beggar’s Opera*. The aesthetic parameters of camp allow Fenton, Polly, and ‘Polly’ to move more freely across a spectrum of character that was previously constrained by the eighteenth-century cultural obsession with female modesty.

Conclusion

Characters, like people, are difficult to summarize. While some typified roles, such as the pantomime *Commedia zanni* characters, helpfully establish an audience's expectations for a given performance, this is not the case for all genres, especially not wildly innovative comedies like *The Beggar's Opera*.

As the script explicitly suggests, the *Opera* is written to offer the audience nothing but a good laugh. Seeing Fenton and Polly as "playing-a-role," and nothing more releases them both from the conventional gendered comic expectations that heroines' happy endings are rewards for their good behaviour (Sontag 280). Looking back, not only would a mindset of purely aesthetic enjoyment have allowed for a less contentious reception of the *Opera* by its initial audience, it also may have inspired more writers to reflect on their fascination with 'Polly' as a direct consequence of Fenton's talent.

I find the textual records of Fenton and Fenton's Polly fascinating. If her eighteenth-century peers could not conclusively define her performance, or her influence, perhaps Fenton's artistic contributions were ahead of their time? One question that has puzzled me from the very beginning is why Fenton's biographer described 'Polly' as "more than Woman" (42). For me, this phrase suggests that her biographer was unable to stretch his perception far enough to encompass the charisma of 'Polly' and what women could and did accomplish. Yet I'd like to end by affirming this proposition after all: this thesis has tried to show that, relative to the binary, judgmental way most eighteenth-century audiences and literary critics through the ages have construed us, 'Polly' was indeed "more than woman."

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