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The Lyric Repository: Literate Conviviality

Paper

Good afternoon, everyone.

The Lyric Repository is a book published in 1787 by Samuel French. As the title suggests, it's a collection of lyrics, "selected for their poetical and literary merit." Simply, the words of songs – about 225 of them, "intended for the perusal of the classical reader, and as an honour to our age and language", according to the anonymous Editor in his introduction.

Such books were not uncommon. They seem to have formed something of a literary sub-genre in their own right, and they were clearly designed to appeal to a literate bourgeoisie. The title page – "with etched vignette of harp, sheet music and laurel" – and the Latin quotations attest to the cultural narrative in which this publication wishes to situate itself; here are all the hallmarks of a venerable classical tradition. The allusion to laurel and lyre recalls classical iconography, and the Latin bits (the first from Horace, the second from Virgil) put the publisher's philosophy into a language for the cognoscenti: "Sometimes the lute inspires the silent Muse, and Apollo does not always stretch out his bow", and "Treasure is gathered here from all directions", which is true, because it is, as we'll see, an eclectic collection.

Latin pops up in the Editor's Introduction, too: "in the present age, songs are frequently considered as adapted only to subjects of an inferior nature [we're coming back to this], and improper for the celebration of virtuous or heroic actions: we find, however, that the greatest master of lyric poetry just mentioned [that's Horace] was far from excluding the most exalted subjects from this province of writing. This is evident from the following passage [[click for this text](#)]:

'Quem virum aut heroa, lyra vel acri
Tibia, sumis celebrare, Clio?
Quem Deum?'"

And to save you rushing off to look that up, this means something like "What man or hero, Clio, do you choose to honour on the lyre or passionate flute? Which god?"

In short, this is, clearly, a publication aimed very directly at the educated classes.

Although the authors of the lyrics in the collection are not always identified, those who are include the likes of Shakespeare, Sheridan and Jonson. And the subject matter embraces a range of content, helpfully organised under headings such as Elegiac, Pastoral, Pathetic, Convivial and Bacchanalian. This allows the Editor to run the gamut of human experience from touching pathos (Werther makes an appearance, along with other icons of the Pastoral, the Classical, the Courtly and the Gothic such as Damon, Sappho, Achilles, Chiron, Arthur, Cupid *et alia*) to deft nonsense verse, of which the following must serve as a brief example [[click for this text](#)]:

Tho' I can't walk quite straight
And in figures of eight
Still circling my legs do their duty;
You'll always observe

That a regular curve
Is reckon'd the true line of beauty.¹

Now let me briefly introduce the musical genres represented here by their lyrics. Catches, first [\[click for image of *Now We Are Met*\]](#):

The most famous use of the word 'catch' is to be found in Shakespeare, when, in *Twelfth Night*, Act 2, Scene 3, Sir Toby Belch greets the arrival of the Fool with a cheerful "Welcome, ass. Now let's have a catch." A catch is basically a round. I did write an explanation but honestly, I think if I just play this example by Samuel Webbe you'll see perfectly clearly how a catch works [\[click for audio\]](#). Now this one is perfectly innocent, but the catch has long had a reputation for being very rude: in 1795 one William Jackson described them as pieces of music which "when quartered, have three parts obscenity and one part music".² This reputation still holds: nowadays, that's what everybody thinks about the catch, and I don't have time to show you that this is not at all fair. What didn't help was the fact that the reputation of those who sang them – notably the Lay Clerks, or gentlemen singers in cathedral choirs – was pretty dreadful, as was the reputation of the drinking-houses in which they gathered. The best-known description of these singers comes from a silly book of 1628, written by a Church of England clergyman called John Earle: *Microcosmographie, or, A Piece of the World Discovered; in Essays and Characters*. His verbal caricature No. 30 is called *The Common Singing Men In Cathedral Churches*, and he has this to say about them [\[click for this text\]](#): "[They] are a bad society and yet a company of good fellows, that roar deep in the Quire, deeper in the Tavern." And a lot more unflattering stuff besides.

So much for the catch [\[click for image of *Discord*\]](#). The glee is an altogether more serious genre. The glee is the descendant of the madrigal – many late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century composers were scholarly enough to be keenly aware of its heritage – and we can now see how it contributed to the development of the English partsong. It's Englishness always was a very self-conscious part of its cultural identity, to which no less a luminary than Ralph Vaughan Williams later testified:

The 18th century, undistinguished as it undoubtedly was in the annals of music—oppressed as it was by the foreign fashionable domination of Italian operas and singers—was yet responsible for two exclusively English art forms—forces small in scope, and not of heroic build, but it was just in such forms as these that the English character found its true utterance; directly it went further it began to lose itself. These two forms are the Anglican chant and the glee. [...]

Quintessentially English it may be, but the glee is perhaps the least understood genre of music—even by comparison with the catch, which has been tragically, if understandably, misrepresented for several centuries. Its oddity is captured by Emanuel Rubin in his encyclopaedic study of the genre when he muses that the predominance of the glee in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries meant that "England turned left while the rest of the parade turned right."

The glee's musical features always were deeply conservative. Its key features are: careful attention to the musical expression of the text in an attempt to capture the true 'sentiment'—a word rather richer in intellectual weight than its vapid modern meaning now implies—therein; a sectional structure, much in the manner of a Baroque suite which matched the differing moods of the text but which usually felt the need to end with a lively, triple-time section (even when not

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1. Cobbe, *Anacreontic*, in *The Lyric repository. A collection of original, ancient, & modern songs, duets, catches, glees & cantatas. Selected for their poetical and literary merit.*, (London: J. French, 1787). GB-Lbma: 1880,0911.2051, 158.
 2. William Jackson, *Letters on Various Subjects: On Catches*, 3rd edn. (London: T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1795), p. 61-71 in <<https://archive.org/details/thirtylettersonv00jack>> [accessed 8th Feb 2016].

entirely appropriate, on occasion); an emphasis on essentially lyrical melody in the service of textual expression; the employment of limited harmonic resources beyond occasional use of a secondary dominant, an entirely functional diminished seventh, or modulation to a closely-related key from one section to another; even more limited use of dissonance apart from those associated with *galant* grace notes; and textural variety reminiscent of the madrigal but making less use of contrapuntal interplay between the voices except, on occasion, for learned display; and brevity. Few glees exceed 100 bars. Here is the opening of a fine example: Webbe's *Discord* [[click for music](#)].

That, then, is the music whose lyrics this book celebrates.

If this were all I had to show you, it might be interesting, but not particularly remarkable. Here's the thing: this slim volume is kept in the British Museum *Prints and Drawings collection*. You may wonder why it's there, and not with some proper books. The reason is this: that title page is not alone. It has a companion, and at first glance it makes an odd bedfellow. A drawing by Thomas Rowlandson adorns the volume, glued on to the page facing the title page. Here it is [[click for pic](#)].

Let's pause and take a look. It's a light-hearted sketch: although none too detailed, it is clear that an all-male group sits in relaxed pose around a large table, each with a goblet before him, whilst a waiter hurries in with a punch bowl to replenish the supply of alcohol. Hats adorn the walls, and faces are captured in expressions of effortful song. It's an amiable caricature of some sociable music-making.

Now this is pretty typical of the visual images we find depicting men singing in convivial settings. Such drawings might be said to be simply taking their cue from the conventional wisdom in treating this activity as something to be satirised, more or less gently. But they certainly contribute to this reputation as they do so. True, most of them are caricatures, and caricaturists never take anything seriously, but the fact that *serious* visual representations are so scarce (I only know of one) would suggest that catch singing was not regarded as a fit subject for a serious artist.

Here are a few examples [[click for Dighton pics](#)]. These two scenes of alcohol-assisted disorder and effortful amateurism are the work of one Robert Dighton (1752-1814). Dated 1786, they claim to represent a catch (*Une Chansonnette*) and a glee (*Une Allegresse*): the words of the songs are reproduced beneath each picture. Dighton's French titles seem to be a piece of whimsy, since both pieces are by English composers: the catch is *The Comical Fellows* by William Bates, and the glee is by Thomas Arne: *Which is the Properest Day to Drink?*

Dennis Rose puts the two pictures in context:

[These prints] are a humorous depiction of the Glee Club which used to meet in Mr Robert Smith's house in St. Paul's Church Yard where Dighton's publishers had their offices. The Glee Club used to meet informally from 1783 until it was founded officially in 1787. At the Club's meetings the members sang glees, catches and canons between the drinking of wine punch. [...] It was probably Dighton's involvement with the theatre that introduced him to the club.

As if the reputation of the catch weren't bad enough, there are a couple of caricatures which associate it with politicians. This one [[click for pic](#)], *The Rt Hon'ble Catch Singers* (1783), is by Gillray. He depicts Lord North sitting at a table with Fox. Even by the venal standards of eighteenth-century politics, the coalition government formed by these two men—who loathed each other—was a glaring example of political opportunism, and was deeply unpopular with

both George III and with the public at large; for once, the populace found itself in sympathy with their monarch. Gillray's dim view is made abundantly clear in visual terms by his generous depiction of their slovenly corpulence; by the obliteration of parts of the monarch's crown and the 'G' of 'G.R.' on the side of the tankard as North, "scowling with the effort", blows the froth off the beer onto a petition calling for parliamentary reform; and by their triumphalist poses as they sing. The satirical lyric makes the message clear: "Bring every Flow'r that can be got / Pinks, Hyacinths & Roses, / We two will drink out of one Pot / And Fuddle both our Noses. / With Treasury Juice the Pot shall Foam / For Reynard [Fox, obviously] & for N—h [equally obviously, North] / The People still may wish for some / And they shall have – the Froth." This representation of leading politicians of the day singing around a drink-laden board singing catches were not intended to flatter; and the association of catch singing with such reprehensible exploitation does nothing for the reputation of a genre already held in low esteem.

Political satire is the point of another caricature which, like Robert Dighton's pair of images discussed earlier, takes as its inspiration an actual piece of music. In fact, it's by Thomas Rowlandson, whose illustration for *The Lyric Repository* is the subject of this paper. So it's quite important that we realise that he knew this repertoire very well. Here's the political one [[click for pic](#)].

'*Twas You, Sir*, by Garret Colley Wellesley, Earl of Mornington (1735-1781), sets to music an argument about who kissed a "pretty girl". Since the catch is by definition a circular affair, this argument is never resolved amongst the three voices singing it. In Rowlandson's caricature version, two of the protagonists—two noblemen—eyeball each other with expressions of defensive antagonism while a slightly more relaxed woman looks on; the three of them locked in their Sartrean hell.

But the lyric printed in the speech bubbles above their heads is not the original; it has been manipulated for the purposes of political satire. The gentleman in the middle of the picture is the Duke of York, "a dim-witted buffoon who is now best remembered as the grand old Duke of York who marched his men to the top of the hill and then marched them down again."¹ The lady on the right is Mary Anne Clarke, with whom he had a spectacularly scandalous affair between 1803 and 1809 during which she took money from numerous lovers as payment for extracting military promotions from the infatuated Duke. Gatrell thinks that the man on the left is Arthur Wellesley—who became the Duke of Wellington later, in 1814. There is a nice irony in Rowlandson's use of a catch by Wellesley's father, in this print—which was one of 56 he (Rowlandson) produced on the subject. None of this does anything for the reputation of the two men, the woman, British politics, or the music.

There are two other caricatures inspired by pieces of music, which I'll show you briefly. *The Delights of Love—a Family Catch* takes a wry poke at the institution of matrimony. Its inspiration, as its title suggests, is a catch by Henry Harington [[click for pic](#)]. The last of Rowlandson's musically-inspired caricatures is simply called *A Glee*. This illustrates a relatively little-known piece by Maria Gasparo Sacchini, *How Shall we Mortals Spend our Hours?* [[click for pic](#)]. The answer to the question is threefold—in love, in war, and in drinking—and this is what Rowlandson chooses to depict by means of three figures: the lovesick youth, the recumbent general bedecked with medals, and the tippler. Again, his choice of subject is indicative of the extent to which this repertoire was known in the London of Rowlandson's time.

1. Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth Century London* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), 496.

Briefly and finally, here is the most revolting example of a caricature of this sociable musical activity [[click for pic](#)]. Gillray's *Anacreontick's in Full Song* presents a scene of inebriated anarchy whose focal point is the punch-bowl. Notice the mockery of a chandelier; a portrait (this of Bacchus, to whom the Anacreontics appealed for their classical credibility in song); glasses and bottles; and hats hung on pegs on the walls. The overall effect is a chaotic scene of thoroughly transgressive behaviour, and it's enjoyable to recall that the Anacreontic Song became the American national anthem.

You'll notice recurring features throughout all these prints. Drink is always to be seen. Whether the setting is a private house, an ale-house, or a sociable meeting, drink is always to hand. Inebriated or not, though, they all seem to be able to sing, or they're making a good show of it.

On this evidence, sociable singing was an alternative, subaltern phenomenon. The images—from Dighton's gentle mockery to the savage satire of Gillray—discourage serious regard for the activity itself, and the music so far presented has been light and frivolous. At this point, it is something of a surprise to find that any aspect of this culture might be taken seriously, so the publication of a book of lyrics associated with this music comes as a bit of a surprise. And yet here it is [[click for image](#)]. It would appear that not only were the texts of the catches and glees considered fit subjects for recreational study, but that such attention was not deterred by a playful reputation. And it's now clear, I hope, that when the publishers of *The Lyric Repository* decided to commission an artist to provide the signature image with which to preface their book, they must have known what to expect when they turned to Thomas Rowlandson to provide it. The disjunction which seems obvious to modern eyes—between the serious intention of the collection and the disrespectful informality of the caricature chosen to give it visual expression—seems not to have concerned the publishers of this small volume.

The point to which all this has been leading is this: I think we have something here which is a revealing glimpse of the eighteenth-century mentality. Such playfulness, sitting cheek by jowl with literacy and learning, has a long history. The best literary example of such learned wit was Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. It has a well-established intellectual lineage, and if I had the time I'd play you some examples which are its musical kindred spirits from the catch and glee repertoire. It's not just a matter of clever humour, however; there is here a celebration of intellect allied to a wit which could be not only deeply rooted in classical allusion and literary artifice but also, frankly, libertine, lewd, and lascivious. Whilst undoubtedly literate and argumentative—thanks to the development of a lively print culture manifested in the books, periodicals, and essays of the age—Georgian taste nevertheless saw nothing wrong with a celebration of good spirits in the raw. Vic Gatrell finds in Georgian caricatures “an ironic scepticism about power and high-minded affectation that was almost reflexive then, and that luckily still is, here and there. Peculiarly English, if metropolitan, products, they remind us where we come from. In 1791, Pastor Wendenborn remarked that ‘the respect paid to people of rank’ was weaker in England than it was elsewhere.”¹ I'm suggesting that this inclusive, eclectic, and quintessentially disrespectful character is a feature of the music and lyrics celebrated in this book.

Gatrell's narrative is forced to record that the qualities of the satirical print which he clearly wants to celebrate fell from favour as the eighteenth century turned to the nineteenth. For Gatrell, this is disappointing: ‘polite’ values came to the fore, evidenced in the cultural revival of provincial towns and cities and the proliferation of associations and improving societies. Gatherings like this

1. *Ibid.*, 15.

one seem quaint by comparison, and even allowing for the detachment of the caricaturist, we might feel that the culture captured in this title page, this image, and the juxtaposition of the two, has an inclusivity, a humanity, whose loss we might lament.