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The Cock Lane Ghost: Charles Churchill's Satire on Samuel Johnson

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This essay focuses on a relatively minor mid-eighteenth-century poet, Charles Churchill (1731-1764), and his mostly forgotten satirical poem *The Ghost*. The idea for this talk arose out of a disability-studies re-reading of Charles Churchill's poem *The Ghost*. I am deeply fascinated by the mutually informing histories of satiric representation on the one hand and cultural ideas about disability on the other. In the case of *The Ghost*, Book II, Samuel Johnson's disabled embodiment provides the satiric material basis for a poem whose subject is otherwise spectral and immaterial. The reader of *The Ghost* is presented with two bodies *writ large*: Johnson's debilitated body, tangible and factual, and the ghostly body that remains intangible and fictional. As the ghostly body is rendered airily fraudulent within the movement of the poem the fakery of Johnson's defective body is conversely made solidly 'factual'. Thinking through Churchill's use of Johnson's perceived debilitated embodiment in *The Ghost* requires some context about the Cock Lane Ghost (the subject of the satire) as well as some careful consideration of the use of the word disability in an eighteenth-century anglophone context.

The category of disability and its relationship to Samuel Johnson. Johnson's embodiment has been the subject of numerous contemporary critical studies ranging from the work of foundational disability-studies scholar Lennard Davis to the incisive literary criticism of Helen Deutsch. However, the question remains: was Samuel Johnson disabled? Paul Kelleher asks this very question in his enormously erudite chapter in *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson* (2022), entitled 'Johnson and Disability':

Was Samuel Johnson disabled? From one perspective, this question can be answered with an unqualified *yes*. Whether we turn to the biographies written and the anecdotes collected by his contemporaries or consult the literary, academic, and medical assessments rendered by generations of his admirers and more than a few of his detractors, the Johnson who appears before our eyes would seem to be unmistakably and multiply disabled. Indeed, Johnson's disabilities – among others, a childhood bout with scrofula (the “king's evil”); a nearly or totally blind left eye and a myopic right eye; partial deafness; uncontrollable tics, gestures and vocalizations; obsessive rituals; and a lifelong susceptibility to depression (“melancholy”) and hypochondria – get nearly the first and last word in James Boswell's monumental and monumentalizing *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LLD*. (1791).¹

¹ Paul Kelleher, 'Johnson and Disability', in Clingham, Greg (ed.) *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 206.

As Kelleher summarises, Johnson’s embodiment, and its representation, is enmeshed in a field of perceived impairments and debilities. Whilst this may appear to signal ‘disability’, Kelleher stresses the need for the careful historical and cultural plotting of what disability might mean in an eighteenth-century context. He notes how disability-studies scholars firstly “draw a distinction between an impairment (be it sensory, psychological, or bodily) and a disability” in so much as “an impairment ... only becomes and is experienced as a disability in a specific — historical, cultural, infrastructural, and ideological — context”.² Secondly, Kelleher makes clear how disability-studies scholars are “guided by the idea that the interplay of historical continuities and differences means that we can never assume that ‘disability’ is an unchanging, transhistorical thing waiting to be unearthed and exhibited”.³ I am indebted to Kelleher for so clearly outlining how it is that such an integral author and heavy-weight of eighteenth-century letters like Samuel Johnson *can* and *cannot* be labelled as *disabled*. If Johnson is disabled then he does not identify in ways that are available in our own time to some, but not all, people with impairments or disabilities. Crucially, too, as Kelleher argues, Johnson lives during a time – the Enlightenment era – which bequeaths us certain “... principles of autonomy, moral dignity, and justice that animate later forms of disability embodiment and activism, but the differences between Johnson’s time and our own are equally important”.⁴ With these qualifications in mind, I am not going to label Johnson as *disabled*. I am, however, interested in how satire as a mode reveals things about disability in the eighteenth-century and, moreover, how even minor satiric representations of Johnson trade on ideas about impairment. In what follows, I explore Churchill’s poem *Ghost* and Samuel Johnson’s part in it. The poem is a direct mockery of the Cock Lane Ghost Story, which I will now briefly gloss.

Johnson and the Cock Lane Ghost

² Ibid., p. 208.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The Cock Lane Ghost story⁵ was a focus of public controversy and, for many, amusement throughout London. The Cock Lane ghost was believed to be that of Fanny Lynes, who had died from small pox in 1760. Fanny had previously taken rooms at an address, which belonged to Richard Parsons in Cock Lane, residing there with her deceased sister's husband William Kent. At the centre of this ghost story is, seemingly, an actual dispute between Parsons and Kent, which involved a debt of £12 owed to Kent by Parson. Unwilling to repay, Kent proceeded to sue Parson for reimbursement. This financial disagreement also caused Kent and Lynes to relocate to a neighbouring address, where the latter subsequently died, in February 1760. In January of 1762, Parson claimed that his eleven-year-old daughter was functioning as a medium for Fanny's spirit. Under the guidance of The Rev. John Moore, lecturer of St. Sepulchre's, séances with Fanny were conducted, which ascertained that William Kent had poisoned and murdered his sister-in-law while she was suffering from small pox. As a result, Kent was publicly suspected of murder. London cultural life was nourished by the Cock Lane affair: ". . . the ludicrous part of the town has been diverted with smart paragraphs in the news-papers, some of them seasoned with wit, and the very theatre has joined in laughing this ridiculous affair out of the minds of the multitude. —Blessed times! when common sense itself is openly attacked, by ghosts, methodists, antinomians, and a long *et cetera* of foes to reason and true religion".⁶

The following extract from *The London Magazine* (January 1762) captures a sense of this public excitement:

The town has been greatly alarmed in the course of this month, by a strange, and yet unaccountable affair, in Cock lane, West Smith-field . . . The child upon certain knockings and scratchings, which seem to proceed from beneath her bedhead, is thrown into violent fits and agitations; and a woman attendant, or the father, Mr. P--- has put questions to the spirit or ghost, as it is supposed by the credulous to be, and they also dictate, how many knocks shall serve for an answer, either in the affirmative or negative: and though these scratchings and knockings, had disturbed Fanny before her death, it is now supposed to be her spirit, which thus harrasses the poor family and engrosses the attention of the public.⁷

⁵ See: D. Grant, pp. 483-85.

⁶ see: *V j g " N q p f q p " O c i c | k p g 0 " Q t . " I f e b r u a r y 1 7 6 2 p p 1 0 4 . " O q p v j n { " K p v g n n k i g*

⁷ STE. Aldrich and James Penn, *V j g " N q p f q p " O c i c | k p g 0 " Q t . " I f e b r u a r y 1 7 6 2 p p 5 4 . " O q p v j n*

Its popularity led The Rev. Stephen Aldrich, who had attended to Fanny during her illness, and was also supportive of Kent, to form a committee to investigate the affair. The investigative committee, endorsed by the Lord Mayor, Sir Samuel Fludyer, consisted of Samuel Johnson, Dr John Douglas, and Lord Dartmouth. The committee agreed upon a plan to ascertain the existence of the ghost, which involved a person entering the vault of St. John's and waiting for Fanny to knock on her own coffin. An account of the descent into the vaults of St. John's Church reads as follows: "The company, at one, went into the church, and the gentleman to whom the promise was made, went, with one more, into the vault: The Spirit was solemnly required to perform its promise, but nothing more than silence ensued. The person supposed to be accused by the ghost, then went down, with several others, but no effect was perceived. Upon their return they examined the girl, but could draw no confession from her. Between two and three she desired, and was permitted, to go home with her father".⁸ When the knock failed to manifest, the committee's interrogation of Parson's daughter "at such a distance from Cock lane, as will puzzle her familiars to exercise their wanted dexterity, and satisfy the gaping town" led Johnson to conclude in *Vj g " I g p v n g o c* that the "ghost was a deception. Nevertheless, the story still persisted, with Parson's daughter continuing to report the ghost. Her complaints eventually lead to an exhumation of Fanny's corpse. Kent brought legal proceedings against the Parsons and their accomplices. The trial occurred on the 10th of July 1762 and lasted only twelve hours. All accused were found guilty and Kent's name was cleared. Intriguingly, when Parson's stood in the pillory at Snow Hill on the 16th of March protesting his innocence, the crowd, did not receive him with hostility, but instead, provided him with a collection of money. Parson was still protesting his innocence at this stage, yet his reception, is clearly an indication of a widespread, public belief in Fanny's ghost.⁹ *The Ghost* lampoons Johnson as "Immane Pomposo", a sobriquet that signalled both pompousness and verbosity (II, 335) but also indicated an innate defectiveness.

The Ghost: fraudulent bodies, spectral or otherwise

⁸ *Vj g " N q p f q p " O c i c | k p g 0 " Q t . " I g p v n g o c* February 18, 1762, pp. 103-40 *q p v j n { " K p v g n n k i g p e*
⁹ See: S. Aldrich and J. Penn, *The London Magazine*, p. 51.

In early 1762, Fanny's ghost was a topic of ridicule in the theatrical pieces such as Garrick's interlude *The H c t o g t o (1762)* and Smith's "Prologue to the Drummer, or Haunted House":

If in this credulous, believing age,

We bring a harmless ghost upon the stage,

Some will perhaps conclude—in hopes of gain,

We've hir'd the knocking spirit from Cock-

lane;

— "Prologue to the Drummer, or Haunted House", *Occasioned by the Cock lane Apparition. Written and Spoken by Mr. Smith, at Covent- Garden Theatre.*¹⁰

The Ghost figures as simply another satire on Cock lane.¹¹ However, as Raymond J. Smith points out, "very little of the 4500 line poem concerns the Cock Lane Ghost, which is all but lost in a tangle of digression".¹² Book I of *The Ghost* was originally drafted from an earlier and unpublished prototype, entitled 'The Fortune Teller'. While Churchill demonstrates the same type of authorial self-awareness that characterises the later books (most notably in the form of unwieldy parenthetical digressions), the remnant of a more conventional prototypical structure in Book I reigns in the sort of digressive potential that becomes actualised throughout the following three books.¹³ Smith reads the first book as presenting a "capsule history of credulity"; while he also notes its lengthy satiric portraiture of the 'hero' William Talbot, Lord Steward of the household.¹⁴ Book II offers the most sustained reference to Fanny's ghost, with a mock account of Samuel Johnson's committee and its investigation into the Cock Lane ghost. Book III follows the investigative committee to the house of the Lord Mayor (Dullman) where they seek the suppression of the abstracted Fame from spreading word of their foolish conduct around town.¹⁵ Book IV offers a political critique of city politics, with the Mayor announcing the hoax as a plot and calling a public assembly to discuss it, before sending his chaplain Lewis Bruce (Crape) as a proxy to the citizen's meeting.¹⁶ Book IV concludes after a lengthy debate over the merits

¹⁰ V j g " N q p f q p " O c i c | k p g 0 " Q t . " I F e b r u a r y 1 8 , 1 7 6 2 p p 1 0 3 . " O q p v j n { " K p v g n n k i g p
¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Raymond J. Smith, *Charles Churchill* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p. 42.

¹³ L. Bertelsen. *The Nonsense Club*, p. 107.

¹⁴ R. J. Smith. *Charles Churchill*, p. 42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

of Reason and Fancy with the ethereal description of Crape's procession to the assembly ending with a portrait of Lord Chief Justice Mansfield.¹⁷

The Ghost is an English metropolitan mock epic, concerned with defensively demarcating a Wilkite Englishness, that is not, as Rounce rightly suggests, "mythic . . . [or] isolationist" but which relegates such mythicism to an Ossianic imaginary.¹⁸ The digressive mastery of the multiple authorial voices of *The Ghost* amounts to a formal, patriotic and sexual xeno-effeminophobic privileging of difference over sameness. Such a formal strategy is at the heart of a Wilkite project that is aggressively opposed to what Juliet Shields has identified as the feminized or sentimental model of masculinity that marks British identity as inclusive at mid-century.¹⁹ In the relegating the Ossianic to a mythical imaginary, Churchill presents Enlightenment empiricism as an English practice that provides the best defence against foreign superstition. Importantly, for Churchill, this is an empiricism that privileges the haptic over the cognitive, putting bodies where dominant Enlightenment narrative would place Reason, or the mind. As Thomas Lockwood notes, this empirical tendency is represented throughout *The Ghost* in episodes that are consistently *felt* rather than *thought*.²⁰ By contrast, abstraction and orality are designated as thoroughly Scottish systems of exchange.²¹ History for Churchill is haptic, being both felt through the body and perpetuated through bodies, which carry the mark of its passing.

Throughout the first book of *The Ghost*, Churchill groups together the following number of topical persons: Duncan Campbell, Elizabeth Canning, George Whitefield, Richard Baker, and most significantly, the disgraced military figure George Sackville Germain, 1st Viscount Sackville. The satiric inclusion of these popular, almost media, figures works to reaffirm Churchill's earlier poetic conflation of xenophobic and effeminophobic energies in his poem *The Rosciad*. The first stanza of book one begins with an historical overview of the development of Western occultism, which presents the figure of the "Sage" as a historical constant (*Ibid*, 14). Churchill proceeds to describe how "antient people" of "CHALDEAN" origins, "Gaz'd on

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ A. Rounce, "Stuarts without End", p. 25

¹⁹ J. Shields, *Sentimental Literature*, p. 18.

²⁰ T. Lockwood, *Post-Augustan Satire*, p. 52.

²¹ Archibald Hamilton and his "polish'd falsehoods into public brought" (*The Apology*, 46), is the first example of Churchill's imaging of a dubious, and unfixd, Scottish discourse.

the Stars, observ'd their motions, / And suck'd in Astrologic notions," (*Ibid*, 23-26). In a botanic metaphor, Churchill outlines a cross-fertilization of occultism from the Orient, moving geographically in the fourth stanza from Chaldee to Egypt.

In the following stanza, Ancient Greece and Rome are thus polluted through a climatic Mediterranean proximity to "fertile Egypt" (*Ibid*, 57). Churchill notes how the Grecian sages rhetorically and performatively borrowed from the Egyptians, a connection that undermines the "blind obedience pay[ed] to ancient schools" by an effeminate critical regime (*The Rosciad*, 185). The 'cult of breath' should be regarded within the context of a much earlier eighteenth-century philosophical and literary debate about the merits of ancient and modern learning, satirised by Jonathan Swift in his *The Battle of the Books*, as "the terrible fight that happened on Friday last, between the ancient and modern books in the King's Library".²² In general terms, the Ancients proposed that rhetoric and oratory with their allied skills of exegesis and persuasion could intellectually outweigh the Modern scientific study of material phenomena.²³ Within the first few stanzas, Churchill is therefore situating the "Bigots to Greece, and slaves to musty rules" as contemporary exponents of the cult of breath being historicised (*The Rosciad*, 186). The sixth stanza bridges the earlier section of the poem with the present through its reference to the cross-eyed George Whitefield, a Calvinistic-Methodist Church leader (*The Ghost*, I, 71-72). Spiritual rhetoric is particularly breathy, being bound up with the auralty of a preacher's sermon, rather than any material experience. Whitefield, or "the *squinting* Dame" possesses poor visual perception, which becomes an extended metaphor throughout *The Ghost* for the cult of breath's neglect of the visual or material stimuli (II, 645). Churchill proceeds in a lengthy seventh stanza to document how a system of prophetic readings shaped political culture in the Roman Empire: "And ev'ry Crow was to the State / A sure interpreter of Fate" (*The Ghost*, I, 77-78). Churchill describes how the Roman "holy Seer", thinly veiled as John Stuart, the Earl of Bute:

²² Jonathan Swift. Angus Ross and David Woolley (ed.) *Jonathan Swift: A Tale of a Tub and Other Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 108.

²³ In *The Ghost* and *The Prophecy* Churchill brackets the Ossianic text into the category of the Ancients, who worked to build on Classical knowledge through imitation. This implicit categorizing of the Ossianic text suggests its imitative and therefore inauthentic status. In his antagonism toward the cult of breath Churchill seems firmly Modern being concerned with observation and quantification as empirical practices. For a discussion of the debate in the eighteenth-century between Ancients versus Moderns see: Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: history and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 267-413.

Officiously would interfere,
With pious arts and rev'rend skill
Would bend Lay Bigots to his will,
Would help or injure foes or friends,
Just as it serv'd his private ends. (*Ibid*, 98-102).

In Rome, military matters are decided by esoteric readings of “*double tripe*” or of an “*C u u ø ù*” (*Ibid*, 90; *n n* 92). Usefully and playfully, the noun ‘tripe’ suggests both animal anatomy and verbal nonsense.

In an allusion to General George Sackville’s display of cowardice at the battle of Minden 1759, Churchill writes “When Gen’rals would their station keep / Or turn their backs, *in hearts of sheep*” (*Ibid*, I, 94).²⁴ Here, the extension of animal anatomical imagery suggests the effeminising capacity of the prophetic as a regulatory system, while the turning of backs crudely connect cowardliness with sodomy. The description of Rome segues into an extended commentary on the corrupted English state, which is presented as “a fortune-telling host” (*Ibid*, 115). Scotchmen “Possess the gift of *second-sight*” and can “By lyes prophetic heap up riches, / And boast the luxury of breeches” (*Ibid*, 137-138). Scottish second sight is a densely worked political critique in so far as Jacobitism operates on a prophetic narrative, on the belief that at some point in the future the Hanoverians will be overthrown and the Stuart lineage restored. This is also a clear satire on Bute’s extension of the culture of court preferment to parliament. Scotsmen are foreigners who can talk their way into positions that should be unavailable to them. Bute, who owes everything to Royal patronage, is assumed to exercise power even in retirement. Bute’s conferral of preferment is therefore postern—of the back door—a politics of patronage that is inherently and structurally sodomitical.

Disability abounds in *The Ghost*. In an effort to satirically historicise the source of England’s corruption, Churchill focuses on Duncan Campbell (1680?-1730), a popular Scottish seer, who was born

²⁴ George Sackville Germain, 1st Viscount Sackville (1716-85), held the position of commander-in-chief of the British forces on the Rhine serving under Prince Ferdinand of Brunswick. At Minden in 1759, Sackville neglected to obey the prince’s order to lead the British cavalry in pursuit of the French. Sackville was subsequently tried by court martial in 1760 and was found ‘unfit’ to serve in any military capacity. Churchill’s reference to Sackville is the first instance in his poetry of his recurring indictment against an aristocratic form of effeminacy, which differs from his earlier demarcation of a fribblish masculinity in *The Rosciad*; See also Grant, p. 487.

both deaf and mute. Campbell succeeded as a juvenile prophet in Edinburgh before coming to London in 1694 to practice fortune telling.²⁵ For Churchill, Campbell fits the profile of the Scot who quits his “barren heaths” to “never venture back again” (*Ibid*, 133-136). He is also someone who clearly defeats the odds stacked against him: “Who *blind* could ev’ry thing *forsee*, / Who *dumb* could ev’ry thing *foretell*” (*Ibid*, 142-143). By way of historical allegory, the inclusion of Campbell facilitates a critique of Bute:

CAMPBELL foretold, just what he wou’d,
And left the Stars to make it good;
On whom he had impress’d such awe,
His dictates current pass’d for LAW;
Submissive all his Empire own’d;
No star durst smile, when CAMPBELL frown’d. (*Ibid*, 163-168)

Churchill represents Bute as simply another Scottish “fav’rite” who has come to London “To tell *our* fortunes, make *their* own” (*Ibid*, 174; 182). Bute remains in focus in the next section of *The Ghost*, I, which describes male heroism as rhetorical and breathy, as opposed to embodied and performed. For instance, Churchill presents William Talbot as a man of pleasure who plays at being a statesman.²⁶ As an effeminately disordered aristocrat, the hero Talbot is better placed in fictional disorder “Amongst the chiefs of *Butcher-Row*” (*Ibid*, 203). Sackville is shown to exercise the same sort of prudence that Bute, in his tutelage of King George, advises at the close of *Night*. For both, heroism must be exercised with caution and discretion. Sackville “talks as he were cannon-proof” yet ultimately, when threatened his courage, as well as his body, fades (*Ibid*, 222).

²⁵ Grant, p. 486.

²⁶ In a letter describing his duel with Talbot, Wilkes articulates himself as “a private English gentleman”, before moving on to acknowledge his opponent as “superior in rank, fortune and abilities, . . . but . . . equal only in honour, courage, and liberty”.²⁶ While granting Talbot superiority in class and economic terms, Wilkes simultaneously deconstructs this superior image through effeminising language, when he describes how he first encountered Talbot “in an agony of passion” and “half frantic” before their duel see: Grafton, Augustus Henry Fitzroy, Duke of. *Letters between the Duke of Grafton, the Earls of Halifax, Egremont, Chatham, Temple, and Talbot, Baron Bottetourt, Rt. Hon. Henry Bilson Legge, Rt. Hon Sir John Cust, Bart. Mr. Charles Churchill, Monsieur Voltaire, the Abbé Winckleman, &c. &c. and John Wilkes, Esq. With Explanatory Notes.* (London, 1769), pp. 11-12.

The final couplet of the stanza elliptically arranges Bute with Sackville: “Whence *planet-struck* we often find / The - -, and SACKVILLES of mankind” (*Ibid*, 249-250). Heroic masculinity is shown to be of breath rather than substance. Sackville and Bute’s manliness is as phantasmic as the nominal subject of the poem, Fanny. In noting how “That this same HONOUR may be won, / And yet no kind of danger run)”, Churchill demonstrates how honour has become meaningless (*Ibid*, 235-236). Honour, considered as a particular code shaping masculinity, is posited as mere rhetorical construction. “The *Man of War*”, who Churchill depicts as both Sackville and Talbot, plays at ‘honour’ by projecting machismo publicly in order to conceal a lack of interiorised heterosocial privacy (*Ibid*, 289). Mystic schools of art provide men like Talbot and Sackville with ergonomic risk-assessment guides for all potential challenges to their masculinity. Through prophetic divining, cowards like Sackville and Talbot can ascertain who is honourable and who is merely playing at ‘manliness’ through rhetorical self-construction. Moreover, in an apt simile, Honour is sexualised as being: “like a *Maidenhead*, / Which if in private brought to bed, / Is none the worse, but walks the town, / Ne’er lost, until the loss be known.” (*Ibid*, 316-320). The Parson figure is equally duplicitous: “Fraid of detection, not of sin,” whose “*holy lust*” brings him “Thro’ some bye Alley, or Back-door,” (*The Ghost*, I, 327; 325; 330). Notably, the Parson’s prophetic ritualising fails as a prophylactic measure: “With the same caution *Orthodox*, / Consults the *Stars*, and gets a *Pox*” (*Ibid*, 331-2). Quack doctors and critics are the modern-day equivalent of the sages Churchill has been historicising.²⁷

The first book of *The Ghost* closes with references to the peculiar body of Mary Tofts, a woman who claimed to have given birth to rabbits, and to the peculiar case of Elizabeth Canning, a servant girl who claimed in 1753 to have been abducted by a gypsy named Mary Squires. Having brought her to the house of a procuress Mrs. Wells in Enfield Wash, Canning reported that Squires stripped her of her clothes, and forcibly held her in a cold garret room, with only a small amount of bread and water, for nearly a month. Canning claimed that her captors attempted to force her into prostitution before she could climb out a

²⁷ The *Critical Review* and the *Public Ledger*, as well as newspapers such as the *Gazetteer* and *London Daily Advertiser* are portrayed as disseminators of fanciful rhetoric (*Ibid*, 375-400). Richard Baker’s dubious *Chronicle of the Kings of England* is referenced at this point as a reminder that such discourse has the capacity to reformulate historicity, and that in some way, the overall imperative of historicising credulity in book one, is itself a response to contemporary authors, such as Baker, who are careless with factuality. Conversely, the later reference to Lord Lyttleton’s (1709-73) excessive reprinting of a *History of Henry the Second* (four editions, 1755-71) satirises the search for historical accuracy (*The Prophecy*. 78), see: A. Rounce (ed.) *Charles Churchill: Selected Poetry* (Nottingham: Trent editions, 2003), p. 96.

window and, in a state of undress, walk back to her mother's house.²⁸ Notably, there was also an erotic subtext to the scandal that figured the Sapphic desires of Canning's abductors. After the conviction of Squires and Wells, Sir Crisp Gascoyne, Lord Mayor of London, reopened the case, and the subsequent proceedings overturned Squires's conviction, eventually finding Canning guilty of perjury and sentencing her to transportation to America.²⁹ The Canning controversy had been revived around the time of the publication of *The Ghost* as Squires's death had been reported in 1762 and it was generally believed that Canning had returned from transportation to collect a legacy of £500.³⁰ The controversy generated a pamphlet war in the 1750s between 'Canningites', such as Henry Fielding, who constructed Canning as "an inarticulate but creditable Pamela" and the 'Egyptians', such as Sir Crisp Gascoyne, who viewed Canning in terms of "suspect female sexuality".³¹ Support for Canning skirted around the lack of material evidence for her incarceration, neglecting to offer an explanation for her unsoiled clothes, or specifically, for the absence of any signs of menstruation taken by her detractors as proof of perjury. Condemnations of Canning claimed that she was attempting to cover up venereal disease treatment or an abortion, and in these accounts, the female labouring-class body is figured as diseased and incapable of reproductivity.³²

As Sally O'Driscoll notes, depending on perspective, Canning could only either fulfil the role of pure and domestic womanhood, or its ill-defined 'Other'.³³ At a time when anxieties about English identity were routed through broader anxieties concerning women's sexuality (with gendered idealisations culturally available to contain both fears), the controversy exemplified what Straub terms "heteroanxiety": a fear concerning the "reified heterosexual configuration of desire that is core to eighteenth-century, modern conceptions of the social".³⁴ Canning's case complicated the idea of the chaste domestic woman by illuminating the instability of the role's definitional boundaries. In *The Ghost*, Canning's sexually suspect

²⁸ Kristina Straub, "Heteroanxiety and the Case of Elizabeth Canning", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 30, no. 3, Only Connect: Family Values in the Age of Sentiment (Spring, 1997), p. 296.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Tofts scandal occurred much earlier, in 1726, but was renewed in William Hogarth's satirical print *Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism* (1762), see: D. Grant. "Notes to the Poems", p. 488.

³¹ K. Straub. "Heteroanxiety", p. 298.

³² Sally O'Driscoll. "Queerness, Class, and Sexuality", in Chris Mounsey and Caroline Gonda (ed.) *Queer People: Negotiations and Expressions of Homosexuality, 1700-1800* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), p. 78; *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

³⁴ K. Straub. "Heteroanxiety", pp. 298-297.

labouring-class body becomes abstracted along with that of Fanny Lynes, as a non-presence, a non-entity. If the narrative of Canning's incarceration somehow troubled the parameters of the domestic woman (and of Englishness) as Straub suggests, then her conflation in *The Ghost* with Mary Tofts, the woman who gave birth to rabbits, signifies the sterile and incredible outside of the productive heterosocial. For Churchill, superstition is just another obstruction to liberty, which in turn fits into a wider moral and personal preoccupation with "freedom versus restraint".³⁵ Notably, while the labouring-class female body is defined as Other to middle-class domestic femininity, it is upper-class men, such as Sackville and Talbot, who provide a benchmark for middling-sort English masculinity. Just as Canning is conflated with Fanny, these men enact rhetorical performances of machismo for the courtly society that are by all accounts spectral. Just like Fanny, they too "only talks by sounds and signs," and significantly, "will not to the eye appear, / But pays [their] visits to the ear" (*Ibid*, 518; 519-20).

Book II of *The Ghost*, published alongside Book I in March 1762, begins with a discussion of the restraint of artistic convention, before Churchill, in a Shandean-like admission of textual disorientation, decides upon his mistress "Arrow" as a muse, who will help him to his "journey's end" (*The Ghost*, II, 119; 118). It is unclear whether or not Churchill's journey will end in orgasm, or finalised poetic expression, or both.³⁶ The conflation of sexual drive and poetic expression figures in book II with Churchill's rejection of contemporary poets who obsequiously bow to the pressures of tradition: "court an *antiquated Muse*?" (*Ibid*, 80). In contrast to this breathiness, Churchill's muse is present and tangible. Significantly, an epistemological privileging of the haptic emerges as the foundation of Churchill's antagonism toward the cult of breath, which is condensed in Book II into the figures of Pomposo (Samuel Johnson) and Trifle (William Legge, 2nd Earl of Dartmouth?). Both Pomposo's verbosity and Trifle's lengthy digressive oration marks their love of a "fluency of speech, / [that] Would various *mighty nothings* teach" (*Ibid*, 565-6).

³⁵ T. Lockwood. *Post-Augustan Satire*, p. 28.

³⁶ What is clear, however, is that Churchill considered (hetero) sexual and poetic expression as closely related practices. For example, John Wilkes states in a letter dated June 15th 1762 (after the publication of the first two books of *The Ghost*) "Pray remember the ghost for me to-night, and next monday we meet at Medmenham.", Churchill's drafting of at least book III and IV of *The Ghost* was contiguous with his attendance at Sir Francis Dashwood's debauched orgies at Medmenham Abbey. Churchill's reply, dated July 13th, humorously boasts that his writing is subsumed in frenzied heteroerotic exchanges: "Where is the Ghost. Faith I cannot tell—the flesh has engross'd so much of my care that I have never once thought of the Spirit.", see: E. H. Weatherly. *The Correspondence*, pp. 3-5.

In yet another Shandean admission, the speaker confesses, that he has been led by a “wild excursive FANCY . . . / Into a second Book thus far, / Like some unwary *Traveller*,” (*Ibid*, 106-8). The adjective unwary appositely suggests the attitude that digression amounts to an artistically courageous form of masculine assertion. What, perhaps, becomes clearest when reading Book II is Churchill’s desire to avoid the containment and restraint bound up with artistic emphasis on any one particular subject. The most coherent section of this Book, perhaps, is Churchill’s invocation of a “Solemnly dull, and truly sad!” form of ‘truth’ (*Ibid*, 168). Recalling Pope’s verse on Swift in *The Dunciad*, Churchill informs us that the truth he wishes to summon does not have the easy mien that won over Swift, nor is it Rabelais’s strumpet truth, or Cervantes’s ambiguous value.³⁷ This truth is a surprisingly sober one, entirely distanced from the humorous revelations of Sterne’s prose.

Truth, which appears as a rather dull value, is a “down-right *City TRUTH*” with “Deportment grave, and garments plain” which are opposed to the performative and deceptive pomp and ceremony of the Court (*Ibid*, 198; 210). The twentieth stanza is a rather long digression that situates Churchill’s particular truth is inherited from the patriarchal triumvirate of the scientific revolution: Francis Bacon, Robert Boyle and Sir Isaac Newton. In the same stanza, there is a digression concerning William Lauder, which intensifies the satiric attack on Johnson.³⁸ The particular truth Churchill calls on is akin to the desire for authenticity within the national canon that urged Douglas to expose Lauder as a ‘traitor’. The cruel jibe Polypheme signifies both a figurative and literal obscured perception. Johnson is charged with intellectual elitism and is depicted as removed from the main eddies of intellectual discourse: “Who, proudly seiz’d of *N g c t p t h r o n a*, / ~~Now~~ damns all Learning but his own” (*Ibid*, 665-6). Johnson is lampooned as egotistical and tyrannical: “Whose ev’ry word is Sense and Law,” (*Ibid*, 656). A decade later, Johnson would revive the Ossianic controversy by calling on Macpherson to produce the source texts in his *Journey to the Western Isles* (1775), an account of his tour of Scotland with James Boswell.

³⁷ See *The Dunciad Variorum*, i. 19-22; See also Grant, p. 489.

³⁸ Lauder infamously had attempted to prove, by forgery that Milton was a plagiarist and, as Churchill recalls, had secured the support of the “. . . *N g v v P O L Y P H E M E*,” Samuel Johnson “, who “Like a base Coward, Skulk’d behind.” after Dr. John Douglas disproved Lauder’s accusation in his pamphlet *Milton vindicated from the charge of plagiarism* (1751) (*Ibid*, 230; 232), see: Grant., p. 489.

There is an important transitory connection here between the fraudulence of Lauder and the charge of Macpherson's forgery. Another form of 'truth' inspires critics to "track FINGAL in the *Highland* snow," and to form their judgements, "From *Manuscripts* they cannot read." (*Ibid*, 234; 236). The very materiality of the English literary canon is shown as being under attack from the proponents of the cult of breath in the form of Lauder and, ironically, Johnson. Scottish literary culture, in its Gaelic orality, is threateningly amorphous. Scots like Macpherson can 'write' their own literary culture into a 'national canon', subsuming English literary culture into a reconceptualised British canonical framework. Here it would seem as if Churchill is aligning himself with Douglas as a defender of an English literary tradition, which now faces ruin from the cult of breath's undermining of print. This is a degeneration, which strategically has Scotland as its locus. Through the use of the disjunctive method, truth is presented as a semantically slippery value, one that alarmingly can be both invoked to defend and corrupt English cultural forms.³⁹

Churchill's marshalling of the crowd in *The Ghost* resonates with the "motley mixture" of dunces that Pope's Goddess Dulness summons in *The Dunciad* (II, 21). Yet upon closer examination the composition of the crowd assembled at Cock lane is revealing for its implied conflation of asexual or sodomitical sterility with the nothingness of the spectral:

Ladies, who to a *Spirit* fly,
Rather than with their husbands lie;
Lords, who as chastely pass their lives
With *other* Women as their *Wives*;
Proud of their intellects and cloaths,
Physicians, Lawyers, Parsons, Beaux,
And, truant from their desks and shops,
Spruce Temple Clerks, and 'Prentice Fops,
To FANNY come, with the same view,
To find her false, or find her true. (*Ibid*, 293-300)

³⁹ L. Bertelsen. *The Nonsense Club*, p. 114.

Sexually unresponsive women (who should be in bed with their husbands, as ‘Arrow’ is with Churchill); asexual Lords; middle-class artificial arbiters of ‘taste’; and lower-class effeminate shop assistants all wait to hear a scratch or a knock:

He said, no need to say it twice,

For THRICE she *m p q e* and THRICE, and THRICE. (*Ibid*, 327-8)

The crowd’s initial reaction (including Trifle, Pomposo and Patience) is one of genuine terror and silence. Even, Samuel Johnson, the “*Immane POMPOSO*” cannot compose himself sufficiently to “T’import one crabbed foreign word.” (*Ibid*, 335-6).

The verbal response, when it comes, is described in a series of dehumanising and xenophobic metaphors as unintelligible. The audience emit the noise of “chatt’ring Geese”, a noise that could also be described as the language that “Discord” speaks, which is geographically specified as belonging to “*Welch women*” or to the “confus’d and horrid sounds / of *Irish* in Potatoe grounds” (*Ibid*, 343-48). The sounds of the Celtic periphery are depicted here as unintelligible and inhuman. Such emphasis on the unintelligibility of the Celtic fringes is itself a reaction to the primitivism of Macpherson’s *Fingal* and *Temora*. As Luke Gibbons notes, Macpherson claimed that Ossian, against the “mere provincialism of the bards” wrote in more universal sphere, a fact that allowed Macpherson to gloss over the specificities of Gaelic culture that would, “prevent cross-cultural communication—and, by extension, citizenship, the capacity to become a citizen of the world”.⁴⁰ It is in response to Macpherson’s lack of context that Churchill specifies the sounds of the Celtic fringe, as a way of collapsing the Ossianic universality that would confer the title of ‘citizen of the world’ on its inhabitants.

What follows is Trifle’s long oration on the subject of the afterlife, which is, by any estimation, simply a waste of breath. He talks not for a set agenda or clearly defined purpose, but rather, in order to produce something to fill the void left by Fanny’s non-presence. Through Trifle, with his rhetorical regime of strategically placed coughs and pauses, Churchill mocks orators who “Talk not for *our* sake, but their *own*”

⁴⁰ L Gibbons, p. 217.

(*Ibid*, 372). Trifle's view of the afterlife involves a long specification of 'justice' and several visions of purgatory and heaven, one in which "*plaintive* FOPS, debauch'd by GRAY, / All sit together in a ring, / And laugh and prattle, write and sing" (*Ibid*, 518-20). The reference to Gray's same-sex debauchery clearly extends Colman and Lloyd's sodomophobic satirising of the poet in *Two Odes* (1760). Finally, Trifle arrives at some sort of agenda: "POMPOSO, PLAUSIBLE, and I, / With FANNY, have agreed to try / A deep concerted scheme. This night, / To fix, or to destroy HER quite." (*Ibid*, 589-92).

As mentioned earlier, in order to achieve this, the investigative committee must descend into the vaults to ask Fanny to sound out her presence with a knock. Once again, the noise emitted by the spectators upon receipt of this plan is unintelligible, and for an entire stanza, Churchill debates which simile might best convey this aural unintelligibility. Johnson's multi-syllabic verbosity, strengthened by research for his *Dictionary* (1755), is portrayed by Churchill as a means of strategic obfuscating: "Who, to increase his native strength, / Draws words, six syllables in length" (*Ibid*, 673-74). Rather than these breathy oratorical strategies, Churchill proposes to "Relate plain Facts; be brief and bold;" as opposed to the obscure "*Flounces* and *Furbeles* in Rhime" of the oracular poets (*Ibid*, 803; 802). Significantly, 'straight-talking' poetics leads to an anti-climax, with a brief description of the committee's descent "Into the vaulted womb of Death" (*Ibid*, 597): "SILENT ALL THREE WENT IN, ABOUT / ALL THREE TURN'D SILENT, AND CAME OUT." (*Ibid*, 807-8). Breathily rhetoric can never reach a satisfactory climax, as it is bound up with an economy of pleasure that must be continually deferred if it is to be, at all, sustained. The silencing of Samuel Jonson in this couplet reduces him to an 'immane' or huge state; he is purposefully rendered, as not a linguistic subject, but as finally an object, of flesh and of satire. Like the supposed forgery of Ossian and the fakeries of Duncan Campbell and Mary Tofts, Johnson becomes a peculiar body – though all body: corrupt and material.