

Fielding and the Castrati

Charles Trainer

In his play *Eurydice*, Henry Fielding depicts Orpheus traveling to Hades to reclaim his dead wife. There, in an attempt to achieve his goal, the legendary Greek musician sings for the god of the underworld, who instantly melts into "Raptures", cries out "O caro caro", and surrenders with the words, "I am conquered; by *Styx*, you shall have her back. Take my Wife too, take every thing; another Song, and take my Crown."¹ In Fielding's retelling of the tale, his Orpheus is an Italian castrato.

In some ways that is not surprising. During the years in which he was writing for the stage, Italian opera had taken London by storm,² with rival companies locked in a bidding war for its most popular performers, the castrati. Fielding summed up the situation in his play *The Intriguing Chambermaid*:

"English is now below this learned Town,
None but Italian Warblers will go down.
Tho' Courts were more Polite, the English Ditty
Cou'd heretofore at least content the City:
That, for Italian now has let us drop,
And Dimi Cara rings thro' ev'ry Shop."³

1. *Eurydice*, in *Miscellanies by Henry Fielding, Esq. Vol. 2* H. Armory (ed.) (Middletown, CT. Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 137, 139.
2. For a summary of Italian opera's reception in England, see J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), 363ff.
3. *The Intriguing Chambermaid*, <<http://worldbooklibrary.com/eBooks/WorldBookLibrary.com/intrigcham.htm>> [accessed 23 February 2007] (epilogue).

Indeed, these "Italian Warblers" excited such adulation throughout Europe that audiences were known to greet them with cries of "Eviva il coltello" – "Long live the knife".⁴

Given the comparison to Orpheus, it is clear that Fielding himself fully recognized their skill, so one might readily assume that he shared the public's enthusiasm. Such, however, was far from the case. If he compares the castrati to Orpheus in one play, in another he brands them the "Shame of Human Race".⁵ If he refers to them as "Nightingales" at one point, the shortly afterwards calls them "Singing Vermin".⁶ As these wildly contradictory characterizations imply, Fielding was of two minds when it came to these performers. His appreciation of their talents was sincere, but he was nonetheless deeply troubled by these singers and their success.

As for why he would be opposed to the triumph of such accomplished musicians, the most obvious explanation would be sheer self-interest. As a practicing and frequently impoverished dramatist, his theatrical works were in direct competition with the performances of the castrati, on whom large sums were being expended. That this fact grated on him is clear from the epilogue to his play *Pasquin*, in which the Ghost of Common Sense addresses the audience with some bitterness:

*"With soft Italian Notes indulge your Ear,
But let those Singers, who are bought so dear,
Learn to be civil for their Cheer at least;
Nor use like Beggars those who give the Feast."*⁷

However, Fielding's criticism of the castrati continued long after the Licensing Act of 1737 had cut short his own dramatic career, suggesting that issues more profound than this pocketbook

4. E. Krimmer, "'Eviva il Coltello'? The Castrato Singer in Eighteenth-Century German Literature and Culture", *PMLA*, 120 (2005), 1544–1545.

5. *Miss Lucy in Town*, <<http://www.posl.info/m/misslucy.htm>> [accessed 22 September 2006] (epilogue).

6. *Author's Farce*, in *Plays, Volume One, 1728–1731* T. Lockwood (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 346, 350).

7. *Pasquin* O. M. Brach, Jr., W. Kupersmith, and C. A. Zimansky (eds) (Iowa City, IA, University of Iowa Press, 1973), 52.

were involved. Moreover, when one considers his prejudices and principles, it becomes apparent that, whatever their musical skills, for Fielding these foreign singers would have struck several negative notes indeed.

Their very foreignness supplies one reason for his animosity. Fielding was British to the core. When he formed his own dramatic troupe, he called it the Great Mogul's Company of English Comedians, with the word "English" meant as a direct appeal to the public's patriotism. The lyrics to his most popular song, "The Roast Beef of Old England", in themselves attest to his outspokenly anti-Continental stance:

"When mightily roast beef was the Englishman's food,
It ennobled our hearts, and enriched our blood,
Our soldiers were brave, and our courtiers were good.

Oh the roast beef of England,
And old England's roast beef!

But since we have learnet from all-conquering France,
To eat their ragouts as well as to dance,
Oh what a fine figure we make in romance!

Oh the roast beef of England,
And old England's roast beef!⁸

That very nationalism is a recurring theme in his criticism of the castrati, with him complaining on one occasion that if their popularity continues, the English of the future "may be more like the children of squeaking Italians than hardy Britons."⁹ In fact, his jingoistic opposition to the singers reached a fever pitch during the Jacobite uprising of 1745 when he published his aptly named journal *The True Patriot*. In it he resurrected one of his most beloved characters, the parson Abraham Adams, to offer the following definition of Italian opera: "[it], I am informed, is a Diversion in which a prodigious Sum of Money, more than is to be collected out of twenty Parishes, is lavish'd away on foreign Eunuchs and

8. *Grub-Street Opera* E. V. Roberts (ed.) (Lincoln, NE, University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 54.

9. *Historical Register for the Year 1736* W. Appleton (ed.) (Lincoln, NE, University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 25.

Papists, very scandalous to be suffered to any Time, especially at a Season when both War and Famine hang over our Heads."¹⁰

That linking of "foreign Eunuchs and Papists" is a telling one since Fielding viewed the English embrace of the castrati not simply as unpatriotic but as un-Protestant. Such an anti-Catholic component was not unusual in contemporary criticism of opera. For example, in Steele's play *The Tender Husband*, the epilogue damns the castrati by terming their performances "Popery in Wit. /The Songs [...] from Rome they bring; /And 'tis High-Mass, for ought you know, they Sing."¹¹ One particularly rabid writer even went so far as to issue a dire warning about a popular castrato in a tract entitled "A Protestant Alarm to Great Britain: Proving [...] Senesino [...] is no Eunuch, but a Jesuit in Disguise."¹²

While Fielding would have laughed at the specifics of that charge, its general sense of religious concern would have resonated. As children, he and his siblings were raised to be staunchly Anglican and anti-Catholic and were even the subject of a custody battle involving that very issue. When his mother died, his father married a Roman Catholic, much to the displeasure of Fielding's maternal grandmother. She feared that this woman would conspire to pervert the children to the anti-Christ. It was even alleged that the new wife locked up the King James Bible to prevent the children from reading it and then deliberately left "her own Romish Prayer Books in the Windows of the Roomes [sic] where the said Children used to go."¹³ The grandmother sued for custody and won.

Consequently, it is not suprising that Fielding found Italian musicians suspect on religious grounds. In fact, with Bonnie Prince Charlie advancing toward London, he wrote an essay linking the importation of opera singers with an attempt by the Pope to impose Catholicism on the nation. As Fielding has the Pontiff declare, "At

10. *True Patriot*, in *The True Patriot and Related Writings* W. B. Coley (ed.) (Middletown, Ct. Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 202.

11. R. Steele, *The Tender Husband*, in *The Plays of Richard Steele* S. S. Kenny (ed.) (Oxford. Clarendon Press, 1971), 273.

12. Cited in X. Cervantes, "'Tuneful Monsters': the Castrati and the London Operatic Public", *Restoration and Eighteenth Theatre Research*, 13.1 (1998), 19.

13. Quoted in D. Thomas, *Henry Fielding* (New York. St. Martin's Press, 1990), 28.

a Time when their Country is engag'd in a War abroad, and invaded at home, they [...] import *Italian Singers* [...]. If this be the Case, what think you of my Hopes, Brother?"¹⁴ In the essay, the Pope's brother is the devil.

It was, however, not simply on patriotic and religious grounds that Fielding was hostile to the castrati. He objected to them for musical reasons as well, and music was a subject he knew. Indeed, while other writers' expertise on the topic has sometimes been questioned,¹⁵ Fielding's knowledgeable ability is not in doubt. He may be remembered today primarily for his comic novels, but he was also his era's most prolific composer of ballad operas, a satirical form popularized by Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. Moreover, he published a total of 205 songs, with "The Roast Beef of Old England" becoming so popular that, for decades, London audiences would sing it as a theatrical anthem at the start and finish of every new play.

Consequently, Fielding could fully understand and appreciate the Italians' highly distinctive style. As a recent book on *The World of the Castrati* describes it, "The vocal art had to be continually creative and not frozen in notes written down on paper. So a knowledge of how to devise and perform ornamentation proved total mastery [...]. In this way *virtuosismo*, inseparable from baroque art, gradually developed during the seventeenth century, reaching its climax during the first half of the eighteenth [with] [...] the castrati, as the finest products of an art devoted to acrobatics and artifice."¹⁶ Indeed, their performances were renowned for inserted passages of spectacular high-pitched trilling, or what Pope unkindly terms "chromatic tortures".¹⁷

14. "The Devil, the Pope, and the Pretender", in *The True Patriot*, 97–98.

15. See, for example, on Addison and Steele's lack of musical knowledge, S. Betz, "The Operatic Criticism of the *Tatler* and *Spectator*", *The Musical Quarterly*, 31 (1945), 328–30; and on Pope's "alleged insensitivity to music", R. Ness, "The *Dunciad* and Italian Opera in England", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 20 (1986–87), 175, note 4.

16. P. Barbier, *The World of the Castrati: The History of an Extraordinary Operatic Phenomenon* (London: Souvenir Press, 1996), 94.

17. A. Pope, *The Dunciad*, in *Poems of Alexander Pope* J. Butt (ed.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 4.55.

That Fielding too objected on stylistic grounds is implied simply by the names with which he christens his fictional castrati, such as Signior Warblerini¹⁸ and Squeekaronelly.¹⁹ In fact, his play *Miss Lucy in Town* features a head-to-head musical competition between the operatic Signior Cantileno and the traditional Mr Ballad. In it Fielding has the unaffected Englishman drive his Italian rival from the field.

Rather than "acrobatics and artifice", it is a more natural musical style – even the melodies of nature – that Fielding extols. When he introduces Sophia Western in *Tom Jones*, he invokes the very birds to mark her entrance, with the words, "you the feather'd Choristers of Nature, whose sweetest Notes not even *Handel* can excel, tune your melodious Throats, to celebrate her Appearance".²⁰ Significantly, the adolescent Tom's first gift to Sophia is itself a singing bird, which the villainous Blifil, who is artifice incarnate, releases out of pure spite.

In Fielding the link between natural creatures and music is so strong that they not only create music but respond to it. For example, when Joseph Andrews is a boy in the country, his employer, Sir Thomas Booby, wants to use him in the fields as the human equivalent of a scarecrow. Unfortunately, however, since his voice is "one of the most melodious that ever was heard", it "rather allured the Birds than terrified them". Sir Thomas then transfers him to the dog kennel, but even there "the Sweetness of his Voice disqualified him: the Dogs preferring the Melody of his chiding to all the alluring Notes of the Huntsman."²¹

Consequently, the unnatural nature of the castrati's singing was a mark against them, and their unnaturalness in Fielding's eyes extended well beyond their operatic style. In *Pasquin* he has a country girl grow excited at the prospect of traveling to London. Hoping that she may get to hear Farinelli, the most famous castrato of them all, she bursts out, "Yes, Mama, and

18. M. Battestin, *Henry Fielding: A Life* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 202.

19. *Pasquin*, 50.

20. *Tom Jones* F. Bowers (ed.) (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), 154–155.

21. *Joseph Andrews* M. Battestin (ed.) (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 154, 21–22.

then we shall see *Faribelly*, the strange Man-Woman that they say is with child."²²

That remark points to an important element in the contemporary attitude toward these singers: they were regarded as beings of indeterminate gender. If the physical act of castration was viewed as symbolically stripping them of their manhood, the lack of testosterone during their formative years did indeed inhibit their development of secondary male characteristics. As a result, they were perceived "as blank canvases on which either sexual role could be projected",²³ and they routinely played both male and female parts. It followed that it was not simply the castrati's singing style that was seen as unnatural; rather, they as individuals came to be regarded as embodying the sexually unnatural in themselves and even as inspiring the sexually unnatural in others.

That they did inspire strong feelings in their admirers is well documented. In *Joseph Andrews*, the predatory Mrs. Slipslop may declare that she hates "the Sight of *Mophrodites* even singing in an Opera",²⁴ but more representative is the attitude of Fielding's Mrs. Novel. This parody of Eliza Haywood sings to Signior Opera:

*"Beauties who subdue Mankind
Thy soft Chains alone can bind;
See within their lovely Eyes
The melting Wish arise."*²⁵

Contemporary accounts suggest that there was some truth to Mrs Novel's words. In fact, when Farinelli sang in London, a woman in the audience was so overcome that she cried out in semi-blasphemous ecstasy, "One God, one Farinelli!"²⁶

To Fielding this romantic infatuation with castrated males seemed to fly in the face of nature, with him terming it "the most extraordinary accident that has happened in the whole year and

22. *Pasquin*, 13.

23. D. Keyer, "Cross-Sexual Casting in Baroque Opera", *The Opera Journal*, 5.4 (1987), 50.

24. *Joseph Andrews*, 43.

25. *Author's Farce*, 352.

26. Barbier, 183.

as well worth recording".²⁷ Indeed, in his last great stage success, he has a group of fashionable women indulge in the following conversation:

"All ladies: Was you at the Opera, madam, last night?

Second lady: Who can miss an opera while Farinello [*sic*] stays?

Third lady: Sure he is the charmingest creature!

Fourth lady: He's everything in the world one could wish!

First lady: Almost everything one could wish.

Second lady: They say there's lady in the city has a child by him. [...]

Third lady: Madam, I met a lady in a visit the other day with three!

All ladies: All Farinellos?

Third lady: All Farinellos, all in wax.

First lady: Oh Gemini! Who makes them? I'll send an bespeak half a dozen tomorrow morning.

Second lady: I'll have as many as I can cram into a coach with me. [...]

First lady: If my husband was to make any objections to my having 'em, I'd run away from him and take the dear babies with me."²⁸

Noteworthy in that passage is the progression from the women's infatuation with the castrato to their ultimate abandonment of their husbands since that was exactly the effect that many men worried this "unnatural" affection would cause. Moreover, the wives' odd mania for wax Farinellis may be Fielding's sly hint that this abandonment is specifically sexual since in St. James's Park women carrying baskets were known to sell wax "dolls" that were actually dildos in disguise.²⁹ If that is indeed the meaning here, then the passage would imply that these women no longer need their husbands even for physical gratification, highlighting the castrati's potential for disrupting the established order.

That this feared potential included a breakdown not simply of conventional marriage but of conventional sexuality becomes

27. *Historical Register*, 25.

28. *Historical Register*, 24–25.

29. T. McGeary, "Farinelli and the English: 'One God' or the Devil?", *La Revue LISA* (2004) <<http://www.radix.net/~dalila/singers/farinelli.pdf>> [accessed 1 October 2006] (17). For a different interpretation of the wax dolls, see J. Campbell, "When Men Women Turn": Gender Reversals in Fielding's Plays", in *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature* F. Nussbaum and L. Brown (eds) (New York: Methuen, 1987), 72.

even clearer in the depiction of the singers' power over men. If Fielding presents the god of the underworld dissolving before the operatic Orpheus, the literature of the period repeatedly depicts two types of males in particular as melting before the castrati.

The first is predictable. Since fashionable London's embrace of the singers was often dismissed as merely an "affected Fondness of foreign Musick",³⁰ it follows that the epitome of affectation, the fop, was regularly depicted as swooning over Italian opera.³¹ Thus, if Fielding's first play gives us 'the airy Sir *Plume*, who [...] converses in *Recitativo*',³² his first novel features a similar figure in the thoroughly Europeanized Bellarmine. This man, who traverses rooms "in a Minuet Step" while humming "an Opera Tune", comments to his lady love, "I positively assure you, at the first Opera I saw since I came over, I mistook the *English Ladies* for Chambermaids, he, he he!"³³

More surprising and significant is the second type of male who was shown as succumbing to the castrati's charms. That male was none other than the prototypical icon of masculinity, the soldier. For example, in a verse epistle allegedly written by the notorious Con Phillips, she declares:

"The well-drest Warriour, with the Lady Gay,
At ev'ry Trill shall faint and die away;
And 'stead of facing Cannon, or his Foes,
Shall hold a Smelling-Bottle to his Nose;
And he that would not start at Death, or Fire,
Shall like a Girl at thy soft Trill expire."³⁴

30. *Intriguing Chambermaid*, "An Epistle to Mrs. Clive".

31. See, for example, "The Beau's Lamentation for the Loss of Farinelli [sic]", in H. Carey, *The Poems of Henry Carey* F. t. Wood (ed.) (London. Scholartis Press, 1930), 110-111.

32. *Love in Several Masques*, in *Plays, Volume One, 1728-1731* T. Lockwood (ed.) (Oxford. Clarendon Press, 2004), 37.

33. *Joseph Andrews*, 112-113.

34. C. Phillips, "The Happy Courtezan: Or, the Prude Demolish'd. An Epistle from the Celebrated Mrs. C-P-, to the Angelick Signior Far-n-li", reprinted in T. McGeary, "Verse Epistles on Italian Opera Singers, 1724-1736", *Research Chronicle* 33 (2000), 77.

Fielding himself plays with this theme in one of his livelier exercises in Swiftian satire. In an essay in *The Craftsman*, he argues that for the benefit of the nation, the opera house should be put to new use after the season ends. There the army should be assembled along with a staff of doctors, who by performing the necessary surgery could move the soldiers from mere admiration to actual emulation of the castrati. As Fielding puts it, "In three Years, at farthest, the whole Operation might be compleated [*sic*], and *our Army* made to *out-sing* any Army in *Europe*, which would render Them of still greater Advantage to their Country."³⁵ He concludes by suggesting that the procedure then be repeated with a squadron of sailors, after which the cannons at the portholes could be replaced with bassoons.

Despite its clearly comic tone, the essay makes a point. To Fielding, the castrati's brilliant artistry was not a positive. Rather, it was a negative because of its consequent seductive power, a power so strong that he feared it could create a spreading chaos ranging all the way from the marital, as women abandoned their husbands, to the martial, as soldiers abandoned their weapons; and if the castrati could conquer even the defenders of the state, could the state itself be far behind? In Fielding's eyes the triumph of these singers, who had the English capital at their feet, was an "ominous" sign for the nation and marked its descent into "luxury, effeminacy, and debauchery".³⁶

If that seems an extreme reaction to what after all was merely the success of a small group of singers, one need only remember Pope's lines from the "Essay on Man":

"From Nature's chain whatever link you strike,
Tenth, or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike [...]
The least confusion but in one, not all
That system only, but the whole must fall."³⁷

35. *The Craftsman*, in *New Essays by Henry Fielding: His Contributions to the Craftsman (1734-1739) and Other Early Journalism* M. Battestin (ed.) (Charlottesville, VA. University Press of Virginia, 1989), 342.

36. *Historical Register*, 25.

37. Pope, "Essay on Man", in *Poems of Alexander Pope*, 11. 245-50.

In fact, much as *The Dunciad* ends as "Universal Darkness buries All",³⁸ Fielding ends *The Author's Farce* as the Goddess of Nonsense conquers the land and hands her beloved Signor Opera the crown.

As this suggests, the castrati were perceived as tantamount to enemies of the state, and that in itself points to a fundamental fact about them. In contemporary eyes, these exotic singers represented far more than a foreign musical form; they became the elemental alien, the elemental other. They were seen as neither English nor Protestant, as neither male nor female and yet somehow simultaneously as both male and female, ravishing alike the fashionable woman and the military man. In an age that valued order, they blurred boundaries and defied categorization, presenting a potential for confusion in which sexual anarchy could lead to social anarchy.

Thus, while Fielding clearly recognized the Orpheus-like artistry of these accomplished singers, it is not surprising that he was among their sharpest critics. To him England's embrace of these castrated singers from Catholic Italy seemed an affront to country, an affront to God, an affront to nature itself. Moreover, as a man who ended his days as a judge enforcing public order, he saw the very seductiveness of their siren song as a threat to social stability, and therein lies the paradox. If Fielding was opposed to the castrati, his antagonism was rooted, not in his deafness to the beauty of their singing, but in his fear of just how affecting, enchanting, and ultimately dangerous their "soft alluring Strain" could be.³⁹

Siena College, N.Y.

38. Pope, *dunciad*, 4.656.

39. *Author's Farce*, 352.