

All's Boman! – The Cant Lexis in London in 1725

Cant in English appears in a series of disjunct moments. It is first extensively recorded in 1567 by Thomas Harman in *A Caveat or Warning for Common Cursetors*. For almost a hundred years afterwards, cant in English is predominantly the working out of the lexis described by Harman, until the work of Richard Head, first in his *The English Rogue* of 1665, and more importantly in the *Canting Academy* in 1673. This later work provided not only an expanded glossary of terms which had emerged in the period leading up to the middle of the seventeenth century, but also brought together a substantial number of cant poems. Nothing which had gone before, however, remotely matched in range and innovation a series of distinct but closely related texts which appeared in a twelve month period beginning in the winter of 1724.

When Jack Sheppard embarked on his final journey from Newgate prison to be hanged at Tyburn in 1724, he became the focus of several works, some of which were written about him, while others emerged from the milieu in which he had cut a prominent figure. As a result, we have a stereoscopic perspective on the cant lexis of a particular time and place – London during some twenty years at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The first of the specific Jack Sheppard texts appeared the very day that Sheppard was hanged, being published on the front page of *The Daily Journal* on Monday November 16th, 1724. If not the first fully authentic cant text – that honour probably goes to the song, “Of the Budge”, first printed about fifty years earlier in Richard Head’s *Canting Academy* – “John Sheppard’s Last Epistle” is the first poem to be written from a stance both by and for an audience of outliers, criminals and vagabonds. Not only is it attributed to a named criminal, which had been characteristic of Last Farewell broadside ballads since at least the middle of the previous century, but it is explicitly addressed to the Hundreds of Drury – the ladies of less than certain virtue who frequented the area surrounding Drury Lane and its theatre – and their male companions, the thieves, pimps, and bravos who accompanied them. It makes no attempt whatsoever to moralise the situation of the speaker about to be hanged, and is quite uncompromising in its use of cant, making no concessions to explaining what would not be understood in terms of reference, linguistic and otherwise, by an audience of the respectable.

The poem begins thus:

To the *Hundreds* of Drury I write,
 And to all my Filching Companions,
 The *Buttocks* who pad it all Night,
 The *Whores*, the *Thieves*, and the *Stallions*.
 I then who am now in the *Witt*,
 Does rattle my *Darby’s* with Pleasure,
 And laughs at the *Cullies* I’ve bitt,
 For I have still Store of their Treasure.

“John Sheppard’s Last Epistle” embodies a series of historical strata of the cant language. The earliest lexical fingerprints we find go as far back as the cant glossary found in Thomas Harman’s *Caveat for Common Cursitors*, while the latest show certain words which are found recorded first time – indeed, in three instances, words in this text pre-date their earliest citations in the OED and the major cant dictionaries, and seem to represent the first recorded usage.

To begin with those cant terms which reach back as far as 1567, in line two, we have Sheppard addressing his “filching companions”, which could easily be glossed from Harman’s -- “*to filch*, to beat, to strike, to rob”; the “Dudds” of line 18 are Harman’s “*duds*, clothes”; the “Peck” which Sheppard asks for in line 19 is Harman’s “*peck*, meat”, and the very name, possibly associated with Harman himself, the “Harman” of line 24, is Harman’s “*the harman-beck*, the constable”.

Harman’s “*chats*, the gallows” is found, slightly transformed, in line 30 -- “The *Nubbing Cull* pops on the *Cheat*,” which seems to reflect the way in which criminals would be conveyed to Tyburn with the rope with which they were to be hanged draped around their neck.

Even more interesting than the simple survival of cant terms first recorded a hundred and fifty years earlier are the transformations and juxtapositions. Harman’s cant term for a Justice of the Peace, “the queer cuffin” isn’t in the poem as such. What we have instead, in the third stanza of the poem, are “*Coffing Culls*” who are at the Old Bailey. A year after the poem appears, *The New Canting Dictionary* gives us these terms defined:

“CUFFIN, a Man”

... which is immediately followed by,

“CUFFIN-QUIRE. See QUIRE-CUFFIN”

which reference --

“QUEERE-*Cuffin*, a Justice of the Peace; also a Churl”

-- carries us back to Harman’s queer-cuffin. Finally, in *The New Canting Dictionary*, we have a cant term for a man yet again:

“CULL, a Man, either Honest, or otherwise.”

Literally, then, the poem’s “coffing cull” should be a man-man, but in context and transparently, it is best seen as term, referring to a justice of the peace or more generally any officer of the law, which has evolved in the course of a hundred and fifty years from Harman’s queer cuffin.

Perhaps strangest of all are the juxtapositions found in two other lines in the same third stanza.

III.

This Time I expect to be *Nubb'd*,
 My *Dudds* are grown wond'rous *Seedy*;
 Pray send me some *Peck* and some *Bub*:
 A *Slat* or a *Board* to the Needy.
 Pray now do not bring it your self,
 The *Coffing Culls* are at the *Old-Baily*;
 I'd rather you send it by half,
 If the *Harman* should touch you he'd nail ye.

In the second line of this stanza, “My *Dudds* are grown wond'rous *Seedy*,” “*Dudds*” goes back to Harman, but the term “seedy”, OED sense 2a, “Shabby, ill-looking”, hasn't appeared before. (The OED gives 1739 as their first citation for this.) Similarly, in the last line of the stanza, “If the *Harman* should touch you he'd nail ye,” we have “Harman” reaching back a hundred and fifty years to Harman's “harman-beck” or constable, while the conclusion of the line, with the risk of the constable arresting someone -- “he'd nail ye” -- is cited by the OED (nail v. 5. trans. To catch, capture, to secure) from the *Select Trials* of 1735, more than ten years after the “Last Epistle” first appears in print.

The author of “John Sheppard's Last Epistle,” then, is using a lexis which is at once up to the minute and as old as the hills.

These extreme disjunctions – terms reaching as far back as Harman, together with ones recorded in this text for the first time -- is more marked here than among the other Sheppard texts. Similarly notable terms, both here and in the other texts, are ones which can be found first appearing between roughly 1670 and 1700 -- “darbies” for manacles, “the Witt” for Newgate or other prisons, “nubbed” and “nubbing cull” for hanged and hangman, and “Tumbler” for the hangman's car, for example.

Finally, there are two more words which appear recorded here for the first time, both occurring in the second stanza of the poem in which a member of the Hundreds of Drury called Moll Frisky figures largely:

II.

Moll Frisky was here t'other Night,
 She *tipp'd* me a Quartern of Diddle,
 And swore she'd been dam—ble *tight*
 Upon *Pitchford* who plays on the *Fiddle*.
 She *snaffled* his *Main*, *Poll* and *T—l*,
 For which She was *rubb'd* to the *Witt*, Sir,
 And now the Wh—re *pads* it in Jail,
 And laughs at poor *Pitchford* She bitt, Sir.

(This singularly intractable stanza – Just who was Pitchford, with his fiddle? What exactly is meant by saying Frisky Moll had been “damnable tight” upon him? What exactly did she steal when she snaffled his Main? -- unlike many other elements of the text, doesn't survive beyond the original printing of the poem in *The Daily Journal*. It emerges in a more intelligible form when the poem is recycled as a broadside ballad with the title, “The Boman Prig's Farewell”:

Moll Spriggins was drunk th'other night
And tipped us a jorum of diddle,
And said she was stitched very tight
By Pitchford that plays on the fiddle.
He snaffled her clout, poll and tail,
For which he was hiked to the Whit, sir,
But now the bitch pads it in jail
And laughs at the culls she has bit, sir.

Pitchford remains, but much else has changed, even Moll's name. By *The Frisky Songster* of 1776, Pitchford has finally gone (though his fiddle remains) being replaced by:

Garnish is the prisoners delight,
We footed away to the fiddle ...

Finally, in 1791 in the town of Newport in Rhode Island, when another condemned prisoner is waiting to be hanged, this time Thomas Mount, condemned to death for burglary, he dictates before his execution some songs he remembers hearing in the course of his criminal career. By now, even Moll's name has gone, and she's been transformed into a generic female:

My blowen came here t'other night,
She fetch'd us a jorum of diddle,
To the prisoners it gave great delight,
And we hopp'd it away to the fiddle.
But our trade of diving doth fail,
My blowen has chang'd habitations;
For now she pads in the gaol,
And laughs at the flats of the nation.)

Moll Frisky, when she snaffles everything which poor Pitchford has, from top to toe, is the first to use the term “snaffle”, to steal, and in another incarnation, in “Frisky Moll's Song”, will use it again, along with the equally new-minted “snabbed”. And a snabbed poll will appear in the anonymous prose drama, *The Prison Breaker*, in 1725.

Finally, there's “a Quartern [or quarter of a pint] of Diddle” -- The OED for once would seem to have this predated, defining it, in sense 3, as a slang name for gin, and giving the first citation from c.1700 *Street Robberies Consider'd, Diddle, Geneva*,” only then following this with a citation from *The New Canting Dictionary* in 1725, “*Diddle*, the Cant Word for Geneva”. Fortunately for the reputation of the author of the “Last Epistle”, *Street Robberies Consider'd*, usually attributed to Daniel Defoe, wasn't published c.1700 but in 1728, and the second OED citation from *The New Canting Dictionary* draws directly on the glossary to “Frisky Moll's Song” in *Harlequin Sheppard*.

Indeed, if there is one defining word which knits together the various Sheppard texts, and indeed reflects in part of how he was seen at the time, it's “diddle”, which first appears in “John Sheppard's Last Epistle”.

Diddle, a.k.a. Geneva, in plain English, gin ...

In “John Sheppard’s Last Epistle”, Moll Frisky brings a quartern of Diddle to the imprisoned Sheppard. A few weeks later, in the course of the pantomime *Harlequin Sheppard*, Frisky Moll herself comments on how Sheppard ended up:

A Famble, a Tattle, and two Poppes,
Had my *Boman* when he was ta'en;
But had he not Bowz'd in the Diddle Shops,
He'd still been in *Drury-Lane*.

The “Diddle Shops” in the song is glossed in the original text as “Geneva Shops”, presumably on the assumption that reader would know that Geneva was another name for gin.

In the third and most extended of the Sheppard texts, the anonymous play, *The Prison-Breaker*, unacted but in print at least as early as January 1725 new style, Mistress Poorlean in response to an enquiring Quaker explains just what diddle is:

Quak. I find my outward Man wanteth Refreshment, I will therefore confabulate with that well-grown Damsel. ... What hast thou got?
Mrs. Poor. Sir, you may have what you please. Right *Nants*, or *South-Sea*, or *White Tape*, or *Meat*, *Drink*, *Washing and Lodging*, or *Diddle*; or, in plain English, *Geneva*.
Quak. That is a prophane Liquor, tho' its Name is holy.

Finally, later in 1725, the author of *The New Canting Dictionary* reprints “Frisky Moll's Song”, but shifts the glossing of the word there into the body of his dictionary, drawing attention to its lexical status:

DIDDLE, the *Cant Word* for *Geneva*, a Liquor very much drank by the lowest Rank of People.

In less than twelve months, then, the term “diddle” moves from raw text to a glossed term in a song, followed by a contextualised definition in the course of an unperformed play, before finally being formally incorporated in the cant dictionary tradition in *The New Canting Academy* of 1725.

Jack Sheppard could justifiably have said, in the words of a later folk song, “I spent all me tin on the ladies drinking gin.”

If not actually written by an actual cant-speaking criminal – and there is no evidence that it wasn't – “John Sheppard's Last Epistle” is written by someone accomplished enough to cast the song completely within a mode whereby it *could* have been written by Jack Sheppard himself. Someone in London in 1724 was a fine enough writer to do this. Whether this is the same person as the author or authors of the other texts associated with Sheppard is another matter. The next to be considered, “Frisky Moll's Song”, while much more intelligible and formally correct than “John Sheppard’s Last Epistle”, and also going, in terms of vocabulary, beyond what could already be found

in previous cant glossaries or accounts of criminal activity, is clearly the product of a fellow traveller rather than an actual criminal.

Frisky Moll's Song

At the time of Jack Sheppard's hanging in 1724, London was dominated by two theatre companies – John Rich's company, based in a theatre near Lincoln's Inn Fields, and Colley Cibber's Drury Lane company, in the Theatre Royal. It was in the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane that a dramatic spectacle, mostly dancing but with two songs included, was performed on the 28th November 1724, barely less than two weeks after Sheppard had been hanged.

Harlequin Sheppard. A Night Scene in Grotesque Characters was arranged by John Thurmond, the dancing master of Cibber's company at this time, mostly as a vehicle for his own terpsichorean skills, but also included two songs, one of which, described as “A Canting Song, *Sung by FRISKY MOLL. The Words by Mr. Harper,*” concludes the entertainment.

The first curiosity about “Frisky Moll's Song” is the name of the speaker, since it was that of neither of Jack Sheppard's two mistresses, either Elizabeth Lyons, alias Edgeworth Bess, who had been partly responsible for leading him into a life of crime in the first place, and whom he had once carried out on his back while escaping from prison – a considerable feat, given her large stature -- nor nor his more recent and less buxom conquest, Kate Cook.

The name first appears in a newspaper account of Sheppard's final capture, published on the 7th of November, nine days before Sheppard was hanged and only three weeks before Frisky Moll sings her song on the stage of the Theatre Royal.

The name isn't the only link between the song and the newspaper entry, since it's this, rather than any special knowledge on the writers part, which forms the basis for “Frisky Moll's Song”.

"Nov. 7.—John Sheppard, the famous thief, house-breaker and jail-breaker, ... was retaken on Saturday night last about twelve, ... A boy belonging to Mr. Bradford, a headboro' in Drury Lane, saw him at a butcher's shop near Newtoner's Lane, cheapening some ribs of beef, and meeting with an acquaintance of his of the hundreds of Drury, commonly called Frisky Moll, he went to treat her with a dram at a chandler's shop adjoining; in the meantime the boy, who knew him perfectly well, told his master what he had seen, who getting some persons to his assistance, apprehended him. When he was searched, they found a pair of pistols about him ready charged. He was equipped every way like a gentleman, having on a wig, worth about six or seven guineas, a diamond ring on his finger, a watch and snuff box in his pocket, and some gold; being also dressed in a suit of black, having furnished himself therewith on Friday morning last, by breaking open a pawnbroker's shop in Drury Lane, and taking from thence most of the said goods, and divers others to the value as we hear of about £60. ...

The name of Frisky Moll, the nature of Sheppard's capture in a drinking den, his robbing of a pawnbroker's shop, and most particularly, the items which are described as being on Sheppard's person at the time, show that the song in *Harlequin Sheppard* is largely a versification of the newspaper account.

A Famble, a Tattle, and two Popps,
Had my *Boman* when he was ta'en;

... says Frisky Moll, allowing us to see how exactly, “a pair of pistols ... a diamond ring on his finger” and “a watch” are transposed into cant – glossed in the published text as, “A Ring -- A Watch -- A Pair of Pistols.” It is rare to get such an immediate triple match between cant text, glossary, and standard English.

If “John Sheppard's Last Epistle” begins with an address to whores and pimps, Frisky Moll begins by addressing more overtly criminal characters:

From Priggs that snaffle the Prancers strong,
To you of the *Peter Lay*,
I Pray now listen a while to my Song,
How my *Boman* he hick'd away.

Here we have horse thieves and those who steal portmanteaux from the backs of coaches, almost the central figures of a criminal society, and Sheppard himself is called Frisky Moll's “boman”.

“Boman” (it is repeated three times in the short text) had only recently been recorded, and has already shifted in meaning. While there is no entry in BE in 1699 under “boman” itself, the entry on “*Ken*, c. a House” has “...a *Bowman-ken*, a good or well Furnished House, full of Booty, worth Robbing; also a House that Harbours Rogues and Thievs,” , and under “*Ken-miller*, c. a Housebreaker,” we have “*Then we'll pike, tis all Bowman*, c. we will be gone, all is well, the Coast is clear.”

“All Bowman” is found with a similar meaning in a passage attributed to Jonathan Wild which, while not printed till 1735 in a volume describing *Select Trials ... at the Old-Bailey*, if it had been uttered by Jonathan Wild in this context would have dated from the 1710s.

When you have been upon any *Lay*, and *spoke* to some Purpose, let me know the Particulars; and I'll engage to *pay-back* the Goods to the *Cull* that owns them, and raise ye more *Cole* upon that Account, than you can expect from the Rascally *Fencers*. And at the same Time take care that you shall be all *Bowman*.

Finally, and most immediately before *Harlequin Sheppard*, the word appears in Charles Hichen's *The Regulator* of 1718, in the body of the text, although the glossary gives a parallel sense to that attributed to Wild. By this point, the meaning has shifted from a generic “good” to more specifically a good *criminal*, a boman prig:

Quest. What are these three young Lads, that have got new Cloaths on ...?

Answ. Those three young Lads, altho' they are young, yet they are Boman-Prigs, and are such as go on the Lay call'd the Dub, that enter a House, Shop or Warehouse, with a Pick-lock-Key ...

All's Boman, *alias* all is safe.

In *The New Canting Dictionary* of 1725, we have both Bowman and Bowman-Prigg, but no longer the earlier sense of “boman” as it had first appeared in 1699 in B.E.:

BOWMAN; as *Bowman-Prigg*, an eminent Thief or Villain; a dextrous Cheat, or Housebreaker.

The treatment of “Boman” in “Frisky Moll's Song” suggests both the strategy and the nature of the author, one who is turning contemporary cant language to his own strategy and purpose, slightly sentimentalising and ameliorating his material in the process.

Even later, in a further echo of Hitchen, it will become the title of the broadside version of Sheppard's Last Epistle – The Boman Prig's Farewell”.

Coming back to the first line of “Frisky Moll's Song”, we have “snaffled”, and in the following stanza, the similar “snabbled”. In the printed text of *Harlequin Sheppard*, “Priggs that snaffle the Prancers strong” are defined as “Gentlemen of the Pad” and “snabbled again” is glossed as “Taken again”.

The New Canting Dictionary, published the following year and here partly drawing on *Harlequin Sheppard*, provides a more expansive definition of the two terms:

SNABBLE, to rifle, to strip or plunder. *To snabble a poll*, to run away with a Peruque or Head-dress ... *Snabbled*, is also used sometimes for being apprehended, seized, or taken.

Here, the sense in which “snabbled” is used in “Frisky Moll's song” is included as an afterthought, while the example given -- *To snabble a poll* – both partly echoes what Frisky Moll had done to Pitchford, he of the fiddle, in “John Sheppard's Last Epistle” -- “*snaffled his Main, Poll and T—l*” -- but more closely corresponds to a line from a passage of poetry uttered by the character Jack Sheppard in *The Prison-Breaker*: “I'll snabble his Poll, / As he pikes along the Street.”

The New Canting Dictionary definition of “snaffle” draws directly on “Frisky Moll's Song,” taking its example from the first line of the song:

To SNAFFLE, to steal, to rob, to purloin. *A Snaffler of Prancers* ; a Horse-stealer. *Snaffle*, is also a Highwayman that has got Booty.

Again, as with “snabble”, *The New Canting Dictionary* definition goes beyond what can be found in “Frisky Moll's Song” in its addition of a successful highwayman.

One last point about the first line of “Frisky Moll's Song.” When the author of *The New Canting Dictionary* came to transcribe it, he misread the fourth line, where the

original text has “my *Boman* he hick'd away” [glossed in *Harlequin Sheppard* as “Her Rogue had got away”] as “kick'd away” (a reading which is followed by Farmer in *Musa Pedestris*). As a result, he creates a completely fictitious cant term in the body of his general glossary:

KICK'D, gone, fled, departed ; as, *The Rum Cull kick'd away*, i.e. The Rogue made his Escape.

Not only is the definition made up to substantiate the mistranscription of the original text, but the example given is constructed as a variant, with “Rum Cull” substituted for “Boman”, of the line in the song. The ghost term is repeated in Farmer's *Slang and Its Analogues*, which quotes directly from *The New Canting Dictionary* and gives this as the only example, suggesting that Farmer took the text of “Frisky Moll's Song” in *Musa Pedestris* not directly from *Harlequin Sheppard* but from the transcription in *The New Canting Dictionary*.

This seems especially unfair as it is in “Frisky Moll's Song” that the term “hicked away” is first found, and further suggests that the examples of cant phrases given in *The New Canting Dictionary* should be treated with some slight degree of skepticism.

This mistake on the part of the compiler of *The New Canting Dictionary* has interesting consequences. Stephen Farmer incorporates the misread “kick'd” for “hick'd” both in his anthology, *Musa Pedestris*, and in the ghost definition of “kick” in *Slang and Its Analogues*. Eric Partridge in *A Dictionary of the Underworld* does incorporate the correct reading (and definition) from the original text of *Harlequin Sheppard* as the first instance of “hike, to go,” but also repeats *The New Canting Dictionary* definition of “Kick'd, gone, flew, departed,” suggesting that it is perhaps derived from “a foal's or a calf's giving a kick before running off,” thus adding an imagined etymology to what is already a ghost term. The OED doesn't have a citation for “hike v. 1. *int.* To walk or march vigorously or laboriously” till 1809, thus not only omitting the instance in “Frisky Moll's Song” but an intervening example present in *The Life and Character of Moll King* in 1747 -- “To hike, is, To go home.”

The most disconcerting consequence of *The New Canting Dictionary* misreading is, however, the OED definition of “kick”:

kick, v.1 SECOND EDITION 1989:
I. 1. b. slang. To die. ...
1725 *New Cant. Dict.*, *Kick'd*, gone, fled, departed.

Here, in locating a sense of “kick” as “to die” in 1725, the OED has produced a misinterpretation of a misreading.

To return to the song itself, the next stanza of the song offers some parallels with “John Sheppard's Last Epistle,” with “darbies” or manacles figuring in both, though in contrast to the earlier text's “rubbed to the Whit” for taken to prison, “rubbs” are now the prison bars:

II

He broke thro' all Rubbs in the Whitt,
 And chiv'd his Darbies in twain;
 But fileing of a Rumbo Ken,
 My *Boman* is snabbed again.

Rumbo is a word very much of the time, but perhaps misunderstood by the author of “Frisky Moll's Song”. It first appears in Charles Hitchen's *The Regulator* in 1718, where “Rumbo” is defined as a prison, or Newgate, and this sense is confirmed by its Jack Sheppard himself in *The Prison-Breaker* :

I was forc'd to break thro' the Wall, and by the help of the Blankets I took with me, I let my self upon the House next to the *Rumbo* ...

It seems most likely that the author of “Frisky Moll's Song” has simply misunderstood “Rumbo”, and illicitly transforms this into a pawnbroker's shop. Similarly, the first line of the stanza may be a miswording of the more attested “rubbed to the Whitt”, taken to prison, found in both “Of the Budge” and “John Sheppard's Last Epistle”.

All in all, this stanza, and the poem as a whole suggests that while the author had a fair knowledge of the specific cant of the time, some but not all of it derived from printed sources, and is able to provide a text which is very much of the 1720s, he's a fellow-traveler rather than a fully paid up member of the canting crew, and the lexis found here isn't as secure as that of “John Sheppard's Last Epistle”.

The final stanza of “Frisky Moll's Song,” while partly a simple recasting in cant terms of the newspaper description of Jack Sheppard's capture, presents an appropriate and succinct epitaph for him:

A Famble, a Tattle, and two Poppes,
 Had my *Boman* when he was ta'en;
 But had he not Bowz'd in the Diddle Shops,
 He'd still been in *Drury-Lane*.

CONCLUSION:

The various texts which cluster around Sheppard, and the language in them, become institutionalised – or ignored – in a variety of ways.

Among the Jack Sheppard texts of 1724 and 1725, much the most successful strategy was that adopted by Gay in “Blueskin's Ballad”, where there is relatively little cant, and a basically central social position is adopted. Gay developed this strategy in *The Beggar's Opera* in 1728. In the wake of the success of Gay's “Newgate Pastoral”, a re-animation of *The Prison-Breaker* was finally performed, as *The Quaker's Opera*, with the text rewritten by Tom Walker who had himself acted the part of Macheath in Gay's transformation of Jack Sheppard from burglar into the more romantic figure of a highwayman. Walker's rewriting of the text met with a singular lack of success.

Frisky Moll, the cant-speaking heroine, lightly characterised and heavily glossed, is adopted by *The New Canting Dictionary* and continues into Farmer's *Musa Pedestris*.

The uncompromising cant speech and relatively realistic presentation of the outlier figures in *The Prison Breaker* would seem to be one reason why it was never staged.

In one sense, “John Sheppard’s Farewell” would seem to be equally dead in the water, not even appearing in John Stephen Farmer's anthology, *Musa Pedestris*. It does, however, participate in a continuous oral transmission, morphing over the course of the eighteenth century. It was still a living text as late as the 1790s in America, and was transcribed by Francis Place in 1800, when he was recalling songs he heard on the streets of London in the 1780s.

One moral of this narrative would seem to be that the more fully a text is located in outlier groups, and the more uncompromisingly it manifests anti-language and anti-society, the less likely it is to be assimilated by the mainstream culture.

Give us criminals and beggars for our amusement – but, please, only safe criminals and picturesque beggars.

Robin Hamilton. 7th November 2010

The Prison Breaker

If “John Sheppard's Last Epistle” lies completely within the bounds of cant, and “Frisky Moll's Song” stands at the edge, then *The Prison-Breaker* suggests that the play's author is that strange and unlikely creature, one who while not a criminal himself, is able to get the language exactly right.

The Prison Breaker is a little known play, printed in 1725 but never acted, which is usually attributed simply to “Anon”. In fact, it seems to have been John Rich's unsuccessful attempt to cash in on the death of Jack Sheppard. In Rich's accounts, there is a note of a payment by Rich to the printer William Mears for “the Farce of Shephard Written and sold by Mr Walker and Leigh but never acted.” on January 5, 1725, new style. It's obvious why the play was never acted – when it was written, Jonathan Wild, who is negatively presented in the play, would still have been alive, and crossing him wasn't always a wise thing to do, as Jack Sheppard had discovered. More importantly, the play is entirely devoid of love interest (a fault which Tom Walker, who revised it as *The Quaker's Opera* in 1728, in the wake of the success of *The Beggar's Opera*, made an attempt to remedy), and the presentation of cant in the play is quite uncompromising, there being no attempt to make it intelligible to a lay, so to speak, audience.

The play begins in Newgate prison, but in the second scene shifts to a boozing ken, run by “*Coax-thief*, Master of a Publick House, where the Thieves resort,” as he's described in the cast list.

SCENE Coaxthief's House.

Coaxthief, Nym, File and Hempseed.

Nym. Come, bouze about, my Hearts; poor *Jack Sheppard!* Is the Dead Warrant come down yet?

File. Ay, ay, he'll be *nubbed* to Morrow, for he can ne'er make his Escape again.

Hemp. Does he go in a *Tumbler* or a *Rattler*?

Nym. Oh, he has *Spanks* enough, he'll go in a *Rattler* to be sure. We'll all be at the Tree. There will be a vast sight of People, and we shall *file* most gloriously. Come, here's to you *Prig's* easy Swinging.

As “John Sheppard's Last Epistle” had ended with the line, “The *Tumbler* wheels off and I *Morris*,” so our introduction to the world of the canting crew in the play begins with this discussion as to whether Sheppard will be conveyed from Newgate to Tyburn to be hanged in a “tumbler” or wagon, or in the more distinguished “rattler” (or “Coach” as it's defined in *The New Canting Dictionary*).

As it turns out, Sheppard is not to be hanged just yet, having performed his final escape from Newgate, and moments later he enters, cheerfully singing:

Enter Shephard singing.

And when we come unto the Whit,
Our Darbies to behold,
Our Lodging it is on the cold Ground,
And we bouze the Water cold.
But as I have liv'd to come out again,
If the merry old Roger I meet,
I'll tout his Muns, and I'll snabble his Poll,
As he pikes along the Street.
St. Martins, St. Giles's, we shall have Burial still,
And here the Bowman Prig stands buff,
And the Pimps have miss'd their Will.

There no attempt made here to make the song Sheppard sings intelligible to the audience, full as it is of quite up to the minute canting terms. The Devil is called “merry old Roger” by Sheppard, who will “tout his Muns”, and “snabble his Poll,” or see his face and steal his wig, and Frisky Moll's Boman” is now self-denominated, standing buff, as a Bowman Prig.

As if it weren't enough to present the audience with this uncompromising slice of cant verse, the song isn't simply a view of Sheppard in 1724 – it's also a neatly crafted *revision* of a stanza of an earlier cant song, “Of the Budge”, which had first been printed in 1673:

And when that we come to the Whit,
Our Darbyes to behold,
And for to do our pennance there
We booz the water cold;
But when that we come out again,
And the merry Hick we meet,
Weel file him of his cole,
As he pikes along the street.

As this song demonstrates, whoever he was, the author of *The Prison Breaker* was doubly accomplished, being a master of both contemporary cant, and aware of cant texts which had originated fifty years before.

A selection of cant terms found in *The Prison Breaker* would include the following:

Nubbed -- *Spanks enough* -- *we shall file most gloriously* -- *more Lap in the Cellar* -
- *the Rumbo* –

Nym: “*I have not snabbl'd above three or four Polls this Fortnight.*” -- *whiddle* --

Hempseed: “*Did you whiddle with him [Jonathan Wild] in the Whit?*” --

Sheppard: “*he is a smoaky Cull. I clark'd him as much as he did me*” --

Bulk: “*the Bum who has the Writ against you, swears he'll Nap you*” -- *a Mish* --

Blueskin bit me and himself once -- *pike off* –

Sheppard: “*I fancy the old Roger has taken Measure of me; and put it in my Head to come here and fit my self*” --

Sheppard: “*Give me the Quatern*” -- Sheppard: “*I had rather go thither than to Ireland by half*”

That last two phrases – “Quatern” and “I had rather by half” – while not cant, does carry us back to “John Sheppard's Last Epistle”, and together with the first occurrence in both texts of the terms “seedy” and “diddle” suggest that it's just possible that they were written by the same person.

The New Canting Dictionary

The anonymous compiler of the final text to be considered, *The New Canting Dictionary* drew his glossary mostly from B.E. in 1699, supplemented by current cant terms which had emerged in the mean time, and based his collection of cant songs on those found in Richard Head's *Canting Academy* of 1673, supplemented by two songs inserted into the sequence from *Harlequin Sheppard*.

These (the other song is “Blueskin's Ballad”) are introduced as follows:

The notable Exploits and Escapes of the late notorious *John Shepherd*, became, for the Time, so much the Talk and Entertainment of the Town, that the polite Gentlemen of a certain *Theatre*, thought it worth their while to lay aside Heroicks, and learn the *Canting Dialect*, and from being the awful Representatives of ancient Heroes and Monarchs, thought fit, for the Diversion of their Audiences, and to shew the Universality of their Genius, and that no Station of Life, misbecame their Capacity and Profession, to suffer themselves to dwindle into the Characters of *Sharpers* and *Pickpockets*; and accordingly the Town was presented with a *Night Scene* in *Grotesque Characters*, wherein that unhappy Felon's Misfortunes were re-acted, .under the Title of *Harlequin Shepherd*, for the Publick *Emolument* which was pompously embellish'd with the Expence of New Scenes, painted from the Real places of Action: To some of these celebrated Wits, it seems, the whole *Canting Fraternity*, are obliged for the following Song, sung on the Stage, as they tell us, by FRISKY MOLL, the supposed Representative Mistress of *Shepherd*, on Occasion of his being retaken the second Time : The Explanation of the Canting Terms whereof, may be found in the foregoing *Vocabulary*.

The New Canting Dictionary, while not providing any new material, does provide the contemporary context in which these texts were seen. The anonymous author includes this notice of *Harlequin Sheppard* as a separate section, reprinting both “Frisky Moll's Song” with the glossary in the original subsumed among the general vocabulary which takes up the first part of the book

This song, and John Gay's foreshadowing of *The Beggar's Opera*, “Blueskin's Ballad,” are inserted after twelve others taken from Head's earlier *Canting Academy* of 1673, and before songs which include further texts from Head and others in the style of Dekker's cant poems which appear for the first time in *The New Canting Dictionary*, and may even have been written by the compiler of that work.

The compiler draws specific attention to the two songs from *Harlequin Sheppard*, and these are seen as something new and distinct – what is ignored are “John Sheppard's Last Epistle” and *The Prison Breaker*.

Perhaps *The Prison Breaker*, which was in print at least as early as January 1725 new style, is ignored because it's mostly in prose, but one would have expected, considering the author's asserted and demonstrated familiarity with the wits of Drury Lane, that at least some mention of it would have been made. (Is it reflected in the terms in the glossary of *The New Canting Dictionary*?)

“John Sheppard's Last Epistle” is perhaps ignored since it is *too* much the product of actual cant speech, if not speakers, and crosses even the wide bounds drawn by *The New Canting Dictionary*, which do however include more than the narrower territory which will come to be defined, three years later, by Gay's *Beggar's Opera*.

