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Article Doi: 10.1093/notesj/gjab095
Article Title: CANT IN HENRY FIELDINGS JONATHAN WILD
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Notes

CANT IN HENRY FIELDINGS *JONATHAN WILD*

The criminal slang, or cant, that Fielding deploys in his first and least lauded work of prose fiction casts new light on the dates that he readied it for publication, and on two possible effects he may have been attempting to generate in it. Ronald Paulson follows the critical consensus by estimating that Fielding presumably drafts *Jonathan Wild* in 1740, two years before Robert Walpole retired from office and three before it was first published in the *Miscellanies*.¹ The timing of *Jonathan Wild's* composition has coloured its critical reception. The equivalence between the great man, thief-taker Wild, with Walpole, the corrupt prime minister, so fruitfully exploited by John Gay in *The Beggars Opera* in 1728, is said to be, by 1740, a tired joke.² Wilds cant, however, provides us with an indication that this particular joke was already dead when Fielding readied his text for publication, which is revealing of his stated intention with the text: Roguery, and not a Rogue, is my Subject (p. xviii).

Wilds speech, along with his wife Laetitia's, is liberally peppered with comic cant. He notes that: the same Capacity which qualifies a a *Mill-hen*, a b *Bridle-cull*, or a c *Buttock and File*, to arrive at any Degree of Eminence in his Profession would likewise raise a Man in what the World esteem a more honourable Calling (p. 33). The cant is glossed at the bottom of the page, a A Housebreaker, b A Highwayman, c A Shoplifter, Terms used in the *Cant Dictionary*. Bertrand A. Goldgar suggests that Fielding has taken these phrases from the *New Canting Dictionary* (London, 1725).³ Bridle-cull does not appear in

the *New Canting Dictionary* of 1725, or indeed any other edition of that title, however. It seems far more likely that Fielding is instead borrowing these terms from the brief Marshalls List of Flash Words that was appended to Jonathan Wilds case in the *Select Trials*, the most complete contemporary description of Wilds trial. Here, Mill ken is given as House-breaker; three lines later in the same list Bridle-cull is given as Highwayman, and on the following page Buttock-and-File is translated as A Pickpocket Whore. The Marshalls List of Flash Words follows Wilds trial in both the two-volume 17345 and the four-volume 1742 London editions of the *Select Trials*.⁴ The latter edition is listed among the books of the Late Henry Fielding Esq sold at auction by Samuel Baker in 1755. Neither the 17341735 *Select Trials*, nor *The New Canting Dictionary* are listed in this sale.⁵ If Fielding was using the 1742 edition of the *Select Trials*, he would have had to have substantially revised at least this section of *Jonathan Wild* on or after this date. This would mean that Fielding was reworking his satire in full knowledge that Walpoles political supremacy would no longer be wounded by it. The untimeliness of his fiction complicates its relationship to the Newgate biographies from which it springs, and insists that while Wild might be long dead and Walpole recently deposed, villainy, which has already been shown to shift between these two historically identifiable figures, moves beyond both and remains scandalously at large.

Additionally, two of the three slang terms that Fielding uses in this instance are incorrect. Mill-hen, from the first editions, does not appear in contemporary cant dictionaries. The word is given in the corrected 1754 edition, and from the 1775 edition onwards as Milken.⁶ Mill-ken does appear in cant dictionaries, where it is ordinarily translated

⁴ *Select Trials at the Old Bailey* (London, 17345), II, 578; *Select Trials* (London, 1742), II, 2345.

⁵ *A Catalogue [...] of Books of the Late Henry Fielding, Esq; [...] sold at Auction by Samuel Baker* (London, 1755), 17, item 552.

⁶ In the second edition of the *Miscellanies* (London, 1743) the word remains Mill-hen, p. 33, as it does in the 1758 edition of *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great* (London, 1758), 19. In the corrected 1754 edition, the word first appears as Mill ken on p. 22, and in the 1775 edition the word is given, and thereafter remains, as Milken on p. 17. Milken is the form in which it appears in Hugh Amory's edition: Henry Fielding, *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great*, in Hugh Amory (ed.) (Oxford, 2003), 20.

¹ Ronald Paulson, *The Life of Henry Fielding* (Oxford, 2000), 100.

² Paula McDowell, Narrative Authority, Critical Complicity: The Case of *Jonathan Wild*, *Studies in the Novel* xxx:ii (Summer 1998), 21131. Wild is referred to as Great even on the title page. Henry Fielding, *Miscellanies: The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great* (London, 1743) III. All further page references given in the body of the text are to this volume and edition of the *Miscellanies*.

³ Henry Fielding, *Miscellanies*, Vol. 3, in Hugh Amory (ed.), and Bertrand A. Goldgar, *The Wesleyan Edition of the Works of Henry Fielding* (Oxford, 1997) III, n, p.23.

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as housebreaker.⁷ This is in all likelihood an error, then, either on Fieldings or his typesetters part in the original. However, Buttock and File is also erroneously translated as Shoplifter in every edition of Fieldings text. As noted above, in Fieldings probable source text, the *Select Trials*, it is translated as a Pickpocket Whore, and in the *New Canting Dictionary* of 1725, it is given as both Whore and Pickpocket.⁸ Nathan Baileys cant dictionary concurs: a Buttock and File is a Whore and a Pickpocket.⁹ This makes more immediate sense, since a woman in the act of baring the first is more readily able to deploy the second to sever the watch chain or purse strings of her distracted partner. What is curious about the misuse of cant here is that Fielding deliberately directs his readers to an external source, any generic, contemporary

canting dictionary, which would immediately illustrate his error. Given the sexually explicit nature of so much else of the text, this is unlikely to issue from a sense of moral prudery. Its effect instead is to comically undermine Fieldings editorial claims to be wrestling a slippery Newgate narrative into control, and, together with the pronounced untimeliness of his satire on Walpoles rule, to further destabilize the surface of his radically experimental text.

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doi: 10.1093/notesj/gjab095

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⁷ See for example, Nathan Bailey, *English Dictionary* (London, 1737), ii.

⁸ *Select Trials* (1742), ii, 235; *A New Canting Dictionary* (London, 1725) C3.

⁹ Bailey, ii.