

Theorizing Orality and Performance in Literary Anecdote and History: Boswell's Diaries

Dianne Dugaw

In memory of Morris Brownell (1933-2007)¹

The diaries of the eighteenth-century literary figure James Boswell supply a rich source of materials useful not only for delving into period songs and their role in daily life, but also for interrogating our theoretical framework for reading such materials. Boswell's renderings of popular singing and song culture in the course of his activities—literary, political, amorous, familial, domestic, traveling, business, leisure—demonstrate in example after example the mixing of oral and written, of *belles lettres* and popular culture, in the life and discursive self-fashioning of one lively eighteenth-century gentleman. Recent theoretical framings propose that we rethink those assumptions and inclinations in the study of songs and oral performance that have often inclined to separate the oral and orality from literature and the literary. Such a conceptual division skirts the truly interpolated character of expressive modes, especially those that are customary and quotidian. In addition, the study of cultural expression came into being with a history of conceptualizing “folk” music in terms of misleading notions of a “purer” oral culture, in contrast to a less “authentic” realm of literacy, print, and media-infused popular culture. A further tendency in some studies of orality has at times been a focus on the present with a lack of historical depth in analysis, which gives less access to understanding the oral dimension of the arts and experience of the past. The anecdotes that Boswell recorded prompt us to take up newer models and tools for analysis as we explore his detailed panorama of oral contexts, informal musical performance, and collective cultural reference and experience in eighteenth-century Britain.

In March of 1776 James Boswell, Scottish barrister and literary figure, reports a rowdy coach ride through Oxfordshire. In his rendition, the rambunctious scene resembles a William

¹ Morris Brownell, scholar of eighteenth-century English literature and art, invited me to collaborate with him many years ago on a lecture performance on the singing of James Boswell. That collaboration, when I was a student, was the wellspring of this essay. In our performance at the Huntington Library, we sang and discussed a sampling of songs and conversations from Boswell's diaries, having located the texts and tunes. In the decades that followed, Morris and Melita Ann Brownell expanded this early investigation of a sampling to encompass all of the songs and song references that pepper the diaries, compiling a richly annotated collection of the nearly two hundred songs that appear in Boswell's journals. For a sampling, see Brownell and Brownell 1997. It is hoped that this catalogue and collection will be available to scholars in the Special Collections Division of the Library at the University of Nevada at Reno.

Hogarth painting (Boswell 1963:253):

There were two outside passengers, who sung and roared and swore as [the coachman] did. My nerves were hurt at first; but considering it to have no offensive meaning whatever, and to be just the vocal expression of the beings, I was not fretted. They sang “And a-Hunting We will Go,” and I joined the chorus. I then sung “Hearts of Oak,” “Gee Ho Dobbin,” “The Roast Beef of Old England,” and they chorused. We made a prodigious jovial noise going through Welwyn and other villages.

Reporting anxiety for his own safety in this vehicle which that very day “had been robbed by footpads in the morning near London,” Boswell notes that he swapped songs “upon the coach-box,” in a solidarity-inducing chorusing to ease his fear. For us the account supplies a momentary glimpse of oral interaction in Georgian England, carried out in the form of conversation and singing. This essay explores several dimensions of orality and popular song culture as these are revealed by entries in the diaries of James Boswell (1740-95), Scottish gentleman, lawyer, and writer.²

From the moment he arrived in London from Scotland in 1762, the then-young Boswell kept diaries about his life and contacts with the people around him. This detailed log indicates that he collected, quoted, alluded to, commented upon, sang, and composed popular songs on every conceivable occasion. As already noted, he sang on top of coaches. Elsewhere in the diaries he describes himself intoning, through the course of his life, in an array of settings: on horseback, in London taverns, in Edinburgh coffeehouses, in parliament, in court, on a skiff in the Hebrides, among soldiers and peasants in Sicily, at election dinners in Scotland, and at the Lord Mayor’s feast in London. In addition, throughout his reported conversations he mentions songs, clearly invoking lyrics and (implicitly) tunes as shared touchstones of sociocultural reference and meaning. Boswell’s journals present a panorama of conversational and singing contexts that serve the study of orality and performance, particularly as contextualized by social discourse. The very literate and literary Boswell represents conversations and activities that range from commonplace to formal and ceremonial. Especially as these accounts involve songs—both as references and as performances—they supply a useful antidote to the tendency to polarize oral and written as separate linguistic arenas. Reading these accounts offers an opportunity to consider oral performance as a constant practice in a highly literate and literary culture.

John Miles Foley’s analysis of traditional referentiality explores the immanent relation of the individual performance and performer to a knowing audience, delineating how in oral performance “structures and patterns exist not merely as mechanically useful items but as vehicles for meaning and artistry” (2002:113). He finds that meaning with regard to oral poetry is “idiomatic” and “indexical,” producing a range of implicative meaning (1991:6-8). To theorize such conversational matrices of performance and association as we find in Boswell, we might extend the concept of “register” by which Foley identifies stylistic modes “used both by oral

² The voluminous diaries of James Boswell are available in *The Yale Editions of the Private Papers of James Boswell*. For an overview of the twentieth-century discovery of these private papers, see the “Publisher’s Note” (Boswell 1950:ix-xiii).

poets to make their poems and by audiences and readers to hear and read them” (2002:114).

Proceeding from Foley’s findings, Thomas Dubois (2006:33) further characterizes this concept of immanent meaning and orally invoked resonance as “a process of association in the minds of knowledgeable audience members” by which in “any particular instance” performer and audience engage a shared “set of interpretive resources.” In his application of this typology of immanence and referentiality to Shakespearean lyric, medieval lament, and religious song, Dubois demonstrates the applicability of these ideas to the orality of songs and song performance in the lives of very literate and literary persons in diverse historical contexts. He identifies three matrices in the interplay of meaning and experience shared by singers and listeners in oral performance of songs: a generic axis determined by the song’s content and context, an associative axis by which the song offers a connection to a singer’s own life or that of an addressee, and a situational axis by which a song represents a particular person or group. In oral performance, singers and listeners inhabit together an experiential web of meaning and association.

At times, studies of oral tradition and performance assume a romanticizing focus on non-literate or marginally literate peoples and an exclusion of the highly literate and literary in the exploration of the meanings and mechanisms of oral expression and performance. However, as Foley (1998:5) observes, “the mere existence of literacy in a society may reveal nothing about the society’s oral art.” Victor Vich and Virginia Zavala observe (2004:41; my translation):

Indeed, in daily life oral and written discourse usually occur together, since they are used simultaneously rather than existing as polar opposites or separate linguistic modes. For example, observing the applications of literacy in households makes clear that a written document is usually a point of departure for speech, and that often times reading and writing take place collectively rather than in private.³

Rather, as they remind us (11; my translation),

Orality . . . is a performance, and in studying it we must always make reference to a particular type of social interaction. Orality is a practice, an experience that is carried out and an event that is participatory. Always situated in specific social contexts, orality produces a circuit of communication that is brought into being by numerous factors.⁴

Clearly, theorizing orality requires richly interdisciplinary approaches that proceed from a recognition of performance in order to reconceptualize what has been too restricted an analysis

³ The original is: “En efecto, en la vida cotidiana el discurso oral y el escrito suelen ocurrir juntos ya que sus prácticas están entremezcladas y no representan polos opuestos ni modos lingüísticos divididos. Basta observar el uso de la literacidad en los hogares para darse cuenta de que un documento escrito suele ser el punto de partida para discursos orales, y que muchas veces la lectura y la escritura no ocurren de un modo privado sino colectivo.”

⁴ The original is: “La oralidad . . . es una *performance*, y al estudiarla siempre debemos hacer referencia a un determinado tipo de interacción social. La oralidad es una práctica, una experiencia que se realiza y un evento del que se participa. Situada siempre en contextos sociales específicos, la oralidad produce un circuito comunicativo donde multiples determinantes se disponen para constituirarla.”

of “texts” or “items.” Further, the contextualizing of these moments of performance as social interactions enunciates processes not only of aesthetic response, but also of power dynamics between participants. If we widen our examination of oral performance to include the informal and quotidian realm of performed forms and traditions, as well as more markedly sanctioned rituals and occasions, we see a complex interplay of oral performance carried out among literate and literary individuals. In such constitutively social and communicating contexts as Vich and Zavala identify, James Boswell sang and invoked songs in complex ways, often disclosing dynamics of identity formation and relations of power.

While Boswell was no doubt exceptionally irrepressible in his love for singing, the eighteenth century in Europe was one of history’s great amateur music-making eras at all levels. We might think of the thousands of ballad broadsides on the streets and the then-emerging interest among intellectuals in the music and song traditions of people at the lower ranks. At the time, the higher ranks included the instrumentalist patrons of such composers as Bach, Haydn, and Mozart. Musicians numbered among literary figures—the flautists John Gay and Oliver Goldsmith, the keyboardist Jane Austen, the fiddling John Clare. In the middle classes, music making prevailed as a domestic pastime for men and especially for women, and outside the home in singing and performing clubs for men. This widespread amateur music-making spurred a burgeoning industry of new instruments, sheet music, music lessons, and concert venues.

Music was a form—a “language” with a range of dialects, if you will—in which most men and women had some degree of fluency. In addition, cultural groups and social levels intersected vibrantly in the performance of music, as we see exemplified in Boswell’s exuberant coach ride or in the runaway success of John Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* of 1728 and the dozens of imitative “ballad operas” that followed it for decades. This general vitality of eighteenth-century oral song culture and musical expression generated and to a degree shaped the way that the collection and study of music is conceived and conducted to this day. Song scholars have theorized popular songs in the study of ballad traditions, the relation of printing to oral songs, the dynamics of individual song making, and general aspects of performance practice (Dugaw 1995; 2006). However, much remains to be learned about how the meaning and function of songs play a role in the lives of individuals in any era.

Boswell’s diaries provide material for such an investigation. They are, as it were, a privately rendered staging of moments of orally enacted social intercourse. These journals, which only came to light in the twentieth century, seem to have served Boswell as personal reflection and self-scrutiny. They likely served as *aides-mémoires* to contribute to his public literary activities (for example, such writings as his acclaimed biographical treatment of Samuel Johnson), and their tone and content suggest a site for self-dramatizing rehearsal not only for future writing but perhaps for future social interactions as well. Performances of, and references to, songs thread throughout these accounts of Boswell’s everyday activities, especially in his anecdotes that record conversations. These episodes supply a wealth of material for considering Boswell’s everyday music-making moments as oral performances. My analysis draws on such tools of literary study as close reading and contextualizing interpretation, as well as considerations of oral performance such as we find in Foley, Dubois, and Vich and Zavala, in order to investigate the conventions of collective forms and audience expectations. In Boswell’s journals, politically and socially resonating encounters demonstrate how oral performances are

situated within and negotiate differences of rank, power, prestige, and possibility.

In November of 1762 Boswell, a young man of 22, records in his earliest journal his journey from Scotland and arrival in London. He reports that his first sight of the big English city inspired his recital of a philosophical speech from a well-known play by Joseph Addison (1672-1719) together with his exuberant singing and even composing of songs (Boswell 1950:43-44):

When we came upon Highgate hill and had a view of London, I was all life and joy. I repeated Cato's soliloquy on the immortality of the soul, and my soul bounded forth to a certain prospect of happy futurity. I sung all manner of songs, and began to make one about an amorous meeting with a pretty girl, the burthen of which was as follows: She gave me *this*, I gave her *that*; / And tell me, had she not tit for tat? I gave three huzzas, and we went briskly in.

Two culturally prevalent arenas of orality—high-ranking drama and popular folk-style song—shape this spontaneously histrionic moment in which Boswell stages himself with an ironic coupling of dramatic elevation and comic bawdry. A slightly masked anxiety mixes with exuberance as he projects “a certain prospect of happy futurity,” and playfully pictures himself as conquering London. First declaiming the well-known and ponderous dramatic soliloquy from Addison and then extemporaneously singing an exuberant and irreverent ditty of his own making, he steps into the performance of himself entering into his new life. His impromptu composition enlists the conventional predations, joking evasions, and sly innuendo of bawdy song, to figure forth by means of an eroticized exchange and sexual conquest his youthful hopes and justifications for success in his new life in the exciting but intimidating foreign city.

Soon after this arrival in London, Boswell became a member of the London Catch Club, a men's singing and drinking fraternity founded in part by Alexander Montgomerie, Tenth Earl of Eglinton, a fellow Scot from whom the young newcomer sought patronage and advice. In March of 1763, Boswell entertained hopes that his influential countryman would help him procure a military commission. He reports a conversation in which he playfully voices doubts about Eglinton's support (Boswell 1950:217):

I appointed to meet him at his house this evening at eleven, when we might talk my affair over fully. He promised he would do everything in his power for me with Lord Bute [John Stuart, Third Earl of Bute, a favorite of King George III]. “But,” said he, “Jamie, after all you will perhaps not believe me.” “No, my Lord,” said I. “Be not afraid of that. I always believe your Lordship in the past tense but never in the future. When you say, ‘I *have* done so and so,’ I make no doubt of it. But when you say, I *will* do so and so,’ your Lordship must excuse me. I believe you intend to do what you say, but perhaps the song of ‘Three blind mice’ comes across you and prevents you from thinking of it.” He smiled. We are now very well together.

Complex tensions of class difference and access to power inflect this interaction. The anecdote presents an evasively supplicating young Boswell, who seems to conjure the grisly little song as a buffer for the possibility of his hopes being curtailed (so to speak). Within the conversational

context by which the diary frames Boswell's reference to the song, the difference in rank, central to Boswell's petition, becomes leveled in this evocation of the collective experience of singing rounds. After all, each entrance in a catch is equal. For a song to function as a catch, such equalized multiple entrances are required. Boswell calls on a song that he and Eglinton sing *together*—in the catch club, in the tavern, in Eglinton's apartments, in a coach. He ameliorates the awkward moment by recalling their shared enjoyment of singing rounds, suggesting that his addressee be alert to the danger of a "catchy" tune taking hold and distracting his mind from what he surely otherwise intends to do—help Boswell.

These examples—the first, a celebratory Boswell bursting into song on the crest of Highgate hill; the second, a witty and intricately coaxing allusion—demonstrate the frequent, pervasive performance contexts for songs in everyday life in eighteenth-century Britain. They set before us interrelationships of "popular" and "polite" cultural levels as well as conversational and song-inflected jockeyings of class difference and power. Such recounted scenes in Boswell's anecdotes supply vivid footprints of oral expression and culture. In addition, they point up the social and communal aspect of European song traditions in which performances entail public contexts and co-participation that undergird the appeals to common interest that pertain to both of these anecdotes by Boswell.

When in 1765 and 1766 Boswell undertook the tour of continental Europe that was a requirement for aristocratic young men, he of course kept diaries of his travels. Autumn of 1765 found him in Corsica, which at the time was galvanized by a charismatic leader, Pascal Paoli, and was resisting domination by an alliance of France and the Republic of Genoa (that had controlled the island since the fourteenth century). Boswell, like many European intellectuals, saw in the Corsicans an idealized "noble savagery." As Frank Brady and Frederick Pottle put it (Boswell 1955:144), "what Europe saw was probably an uncomplicated feudal society; what it admired was a nation which seemed to embody in many ways Rousseau's idea of political and social liberty, a nation to which Rousseau himself had referred approvingly in his *Social Contract*." Boswell's accounts of his social interactions with the Corsicans resonate with a Rousseauvian estimation of the islanders. In his vivid depictions, cultural objects and expression—including songs and music—supply points of identification and interpersonal "alliance" that he hopes prefigure a larger political connection with England. Boswell published an *Account of Corsica* in 1768, with hoped-for political support of the Corsicans against France as part of his purpose. He represents his collective and participatory experiences—conversational interactions and performance of songs and music—as negotiations of both difference and alliance within a context that again resonates with dynamics of power. He says (1955:175):

The *ambasciatore inglese*, as the good peasants and soldiers used to call me, became a great favourite among them. I got a Corsican dress made, in which I walked about with an air of true satisfaction. The General (Paoli) did me the honour to present me with his own pistols, made in the island, all of Corsican wood and iron and of excellent workmanship. I had every other accoutrement. I even got one of the shells which had often sounded the alarm to liberty. I preserve them with great care.

The Corsican peasants and soldiers were quite free and easy with me. Numbers of them used to come and see me of a morning, and just go out and in as they pleased. I did everything in

my power to make them fond of the British, and bid them hope for an alliance with us. They asked me a thousand questions about my country, all which I cheerfully answered as well as I could.

His performances of music and song certainly depict a bridging of difference and creation of identification and community, as does his own enactment of “going Corsican” as he walks about in local dress. He opens this anecdote about exchanges of songs, tunes, costume, and other items of material culture with an oddly on-looking sentence that depicts himself in third-person point of view, “the *ambasciatore inglese*.” However, Boswell’s written (though private) staging of his performance goes on to mark cultural and social difference, as its framing of the oral episode constructs a pondered distance between that audience and the “genteel companies” with which he identifies in the writing of the memoir (1955:175-76):

One day they would needs hear me play upon my German flute. To have told my honest natural visitants, “Really, gentlemen, I play very ill,” and put on such airs as we do in our genteel companies, would have been highly ridiculous. I therefore immediately complied with their request. I gave them one or two Italian airs, and then some of our beautiful old Scots tunes: “Gilderoy,” “The Lass of Patie’s Mill,” “Corn rigs are bonny.” The pathetic simplicity and pastoral gaiety of the Scots music will always please those who have the genuine feelings of nature. The Corsicans were charmed with the specimens I gave them, though I may now say that they were very indifferently performed.

Within this depiction lies an intricate tapestry of inter-threading skeins of projected difference and similarity: the young and genteel Londoner, yet also self-consciously subaltern Scottish Boswell, identifies in and through the “pastoral” pathos and “simplicity” of “Scots music,” a complexly patronizing yet appreciative complicity with the “honest, natural” Corsicans around him and with whom he is in social converse.

The lineaments of power relations show increasingly as the incident continues. The reported collaboration of Boswell and the Corsicans in “quite a joyous riot” of cultural-linguistic translation interlaces in the written representation with the diarist’s contrasting fantasies of an ordering hierarchy of dominance and subordination that is inscribed into his recollection and commentary on the event. He goes on (1955:176):

My good friends insisted also to have an English song from me. I endeavoured to please them in this too, and was very lucky in that which occurred to me. I sung them “Hearts of oak are our ships, Hearts of oak are our men.” I translated it into Italian for them, and never did I see men so delighted with a song as the Corsicans were with the “Hearts of Oak.” “Cuore di quercia,” cried they, “bravo Inglese!” It was quite a joyous riot. I fancied myself to be a recruiting sea officer. I fancied all my chorus of Corsicans aboard the British fleet.⁵

Boswell’s “fancies” project onto this “joyous riot” of linguistic interpretation, and dynamic and

⁵ “Heart of Oak” was a popular mid-eighteenth-century English stage song from a stage pantomime with words by David Garrick and music by William Boyce.

interchanging collective performance, a sung image of “British” military rule. The jingoistic stage song aligns with the paradigm of dominance and subordination inherent in his earlier remarks that link “honest natural” Corsicans with the “pastoral” pathos of similarly subaltern Scots. Indeed, David Garrick and William Boyce composed the rousing “Heart of Oak” to serve a mustering of British patriotic feeling and military recruitment in response to rumors of the day that a French fleet of flat-bottom boats was preparing to invade England. Onto his encounter with his “good friends” in Corsica, Boswell overlays the theatrical-performance mode for the song on a London stage with himself in the stage role of lead singer, who in military costume begins to intone in solo before a hearty and collective chorus. “Come cheer up my lads, ’tis to glory we steer” opens this solo exhortation that will lead to the chorus of patriots responding after each stanza (Simpson 1966:299-301):

Heart of oak are our ships.
Heart of oak are our men.
We always are ready. Steady, boys, steady.
We’ll fight and we’ll conquer again and again.

For the eighteenth-century world the theater functioned in one form or another as an important reference point in social converse as well as in literary and journalistic commentary. Boswell was a particularly enthusiastic playgoer as well as an obvious “ham” who constructs himself theatrically in the scenes he depicts in his writings. He seems to have staged himself as prominently as possible in the “real life” the writings represent. However, Boswell’s histrionic personality aside, the omnipresent sway of drama as a ready cultural forum encouraged the theatricality, oral artfulness, and performance orientation of even the most private and informal of personal exchanges. Boswell’s declamation of the speech from Addison’s play mentioned above supplies an earlier example of this kind of conversational performative citation. John Gay’s song-filled drama, *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728), was one of the most recognizable playhouse touchstones and a particular Boswell favorite. We know that he dressed up as its rakish hero Macheath on more than one occasion and often referred to the play and its songs.

“Youth’s the Season Made illustrates the way that theatrical shared reference points in social journal entry of 30 March 1775 that “the Hon. Mrs. Stuart,” a friend of confidante as well and for whom The song in the original play by Gay *carpe diem* exhortation that is sung to betray the hero Macheath to the who could not withstand his desire alter-ego for the compulsively



“Youth’s the Season Made for Joys,” *The Beggar’s Opera*

for Joys” from *The Beggar’s Opera* figures, texts, and songs supplied discourse. The song figures in a depicts a breakfast conversation with Boswell’s wife who became his Boswell developed a great fondness.⁶ is a deceptively lilting and ironic by a chorus of whores who are about authorities. This dashing highwayman for women supplied an often-invoked womanizing Boswell. Used as an

⁶ Margaret (Cunynghame) Stuart was the wife of James Archibald Stuart, younger brother of Boswell’s friend John Stuart, Lord Mountstuart, later fourth Earl and first Marquess of Bute, who had traveled with him to Italy.

allusion in this account of his flirtatious conversation with Margaret Stuart on sexual promiscuity, the song brings to this social interchange between the two an associative crackle of invitation, resistance, irony, innuendo, and taboo. Such references typically work along the associative and situational axes outlined by Dubois whereby the song may be linked to one's own life or to a particular person or group of people as a figure or analogue.

Exemplifying the longstanding *carpe diem* literary motif of lyric poetry going back to classical times, "Youth's the Season Made for Joys" functions as a collectively known analogue whose meaning expresses in parallel and with the indirection of metaphor a meaning in the "real life" context of the conversation in which the reference occurs. The Latin phrase *carpe diem* ("seize the day") as a literary trope is a conventional invitation by a usually male speaker who asserts that life is short and time is fleeting and urges his usually female auditor—often represented as a virgin—to acquiesce to his invitation to make the most of sexual pleasures. The conversation with Margaret Stuart reported in Boswell's diary is redolent of the flirtatious parrying of the conventional motif represented in the song. He recounts (1963:109-10):

This morning we talked of gallantry. I explained or illustrated the manners of Italy; said that a gay society of people of gallantry there was like an orrery. The planets were in continual rotation: as one falls, another rises. If I grow indifferent to one lady, I catch a warmth for another, and my former *flame* beams kindly on some man who has grown cold to some other, and thus it goes round. That there is more immediate happiness is certain, for people are kept constantly in the delirium of love. But I told her that an Italian lady said to me that our ladies were much happier, who married from attachment and preserved a constancy, for when Italian ladies grow old, they are in a sad situation. "But," said I, "it maybe said age is a bad thing at any rate; and we are not to lose exquisite happiness while we can enjoy it, merely because we shall afterwards be worse in age." That one might reason according to the song in *The Beggar's Opera*: "Youth's the season made for joy, etc., Age is nought but sorrow." Mrs. Stuart said she did not think it was. I said the women were great cheats; they were so cold. That the men talk of them in such terms, and imagine them so much occupied with amorous inclinations, but they find very little reality of that kind. She said she had often laughed at the men on that account; and she really believed that very few women ever thought of it when young girls; that she used to have an aversion to the very idea of it; and that she never had any conversation with her.⁷

A mechanical apparatus, the orrery was very popular in the eighteenth century for representing the placements and motions of the planets revolving in the solar system. The song "Youth's the Season" supplies a text and tune that "circle" their theme, each stanza returning to and concluding with its opening two lines. The first stanza with its *carpe diem* words thus unfolds (Gay 1969:134-36):

Youth's the season made for joys,
Love is then our duty.

⁷ The conversation breaks off at this point because five pages were torn from the manuscript, according to the editors, "not earlier than 1912," whether by accident or from a desire to suppress the material is unknown.

She alone whom that employs
 Well deserves her beauty.
 Let's be gay while we may
 Beauty's a flower despised in decay.

At its conclusion, the song text and tune return—circling round, as it were—to the opening: “Youth’s the season made for joys, / Love is then our duty.” In this way, Boswell’s allusion to the song—and one can well imagine him singing, not just declaiming the reference in this reported conversation—enacts in its oral/aural performance the circularity of the orrery as well as its rising and falling (by means of the tune). With even more complexity, this familiar reference takes into the conversation the song’s ironic meaning within the original dramatic context: a scene depicting a rakish man being betrayed by his doxies.

By weaving dialogue and song, this moment in the conversation immediately deepens into resonating and complicating levels of communication and meaning for the two conversants on a literary and courtly model, evoked in the conventions of the song and its cavalcade of *carpe diem* analogues from Roman antiquity through the Middle Ages to Boswell’s day. Functioning in this way, songs become what I have elsewhere termed “critical instants” in social discourse (Dugaw 1989-90:157-75; 2001:169-85). Certainly Margaret Stuart’s laughter and retorts should be understood as operating with respect to the playful innuendo and ironic and seductive undertows that are present in the conversational exchange and its employment of shared cultural recognition and knowing. Once again, as Vich and Zavala encourage, we see the power dynamics of gender relations in this scene of parrying repartee between the rakishly suggestive Boswell and the flirtatiously fending-off Margaret Stuart, on the subject of gallantry and sexual promiscuity. Her rejoinder in this verbal match-up maintains a kind of equilibrium in this revisiting of the “tit-for-tat” theme of Boswell’s sexually inflected ditty at the top of Highgate hill. Remarking to her soliciting and complaining suitor that she often “laughed at the men on that account,” she maintains her equilibrium and keeps the orrery of the conversation in motion.

Boswell spontaneously composed songs, as we saw from his journal entry about his arrival in London, dipping into a stock of well-known texts, tunes, references, and commonplaces in a world of shared conventional forms in which the songs and singing of the day abounded. Boswell apparently used the tune for the traditional Scottish ballad known to scholars as “The Gypsy Laddie” (Child 1884-98:No. 200), for a humorous ditty that he and some Scottish friends improvised one cold November evening in 1782. He says in his diary (1981:14):

Walked to the village of Auchnleck and roused [auctioned the rental of] the farm of Stonebriggs; dined with Mr. Dun, and came home pleased with self and everybody. Found Mr. and Mrs. Hamiltons Was glad to see them, and spent the night in agreeable mirth, towards which an extempore verse of a song upon the Earl of Cassilis and Miss Coopers greatly contributed.

Boswell’s song satirizes the bachelor David Kennedy, Tenth Earl of Cassilis, Member of Parliament for Ayrshire. A certain pair of “Miss Coopers” arrived in the neighborhood from London with marriage plans for the unmarried Lord Cassilis. As the little ditty of Boswell and his friends relates, the ladies were not successful. Lord Cassilis died a bachelor in 1792. The text

for Boswell's song is (Johnson 1853:iv, 410):

The Coopers they came to Lord Cassilis at Colzean,
 With their hoops all tight and ready,
 From London they came down, baith the black and the brown
 And they wanted to give him a lady.
 'Your Lordship we pray, may not say us nae,
 For it's now full time you was girded.'
 Quoth the Earl, 'Faith my dears, so great are my fears
 In conscience I'd rather be yearded [buried].⁸

The impromptu "verse" of Boswell and his friends makes use of traditional images from comical lore and caricature, as the ladies with their sexually suggestive "tight hoops" arrive to noose a conventionally fearful and reluctant beau. The original "Gypsy Laddie," an anonymous popular ballad that flourished in oral traditions and on broadsides of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, supplies an ironic citation, for the song tells of a highborn lady who runs off in love with "Johnny Faa," a "gypsy." A version of the song in Allan Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany* (1740) reports the husband's discovery in the following stanza (Child 1884-98:iv, 65-66):

And when our lord came hame at een,
 And speir'd for his fair lady,
 The tane she cry'd, and the other reply'd,
 'She's away with the gypsie laddie.'

The use of the traditional tune of the "Gypsy Laddie" for Boswell's satirical little ballad about the unmarrying Lord Cassilis has particular resonance, for Scottish variants of the ballad identify the runaway wife as "The Earl of Cassilis' ladie" as in the following variant of the ballad, whose opening stanza states (66):

The gypsies they came to my lord Cassilis' yet,
 And O but they sang bonnie!
 They sang sae sweet and sae complete
 That down came our fair ladie.

This episode of convivial satiric song-smithing on a Scottish winter's night evinces the shared associations and lexical elements of oral performance art that we can look for in any context. Although perhaps more often reserved for formulaic and ceremonial performances in oral cultures of the present, the analysis of such concepts applies with equal usefulness to the song-making and performance of even so literary and literate a company as that of James Boswell and his genteel neighbors.

⁸ The verses were printed with the tune "Johnnie Faa, or The Gipsie Laddie."

The diaries of James Boswell supply a prolific and varied panorama of the oral circulation of songs and the vibrancy of oral performance in eighteenth-century Britain, as reported by a literate, imaginative, and musically enthusiastic member of the upper ranks. In these journal entries, with their vivid stagings of song performance in a wide variety of social settings and occasions, we see how levels of musical culture—traditional, popular, elite—coalesce both within Boswell’s sensibility and across his social relations and familial, collegial, amatory, economic, and political contexts. Folklore, literary history, cultural studies, and the theorizing of orality still operate with constraints that have come into being historically and keep this coalescence from being inadequately examined. The immediacies, dimensions, and dynamism of orality across time and societies call for deftly conceptualized theories of orality in all the contexts in which it occurs. As Boswell’s journals bear out, songs sung and cited invoke phenomenological spaces that people inhabit together. Songs are collective forms that can both mitigate and enhance differences, as aspects of relation among people emerge in a field of oral performance, aural reference, and shared experience.

A glimpse of this dynamic of oral exchange among individuals within a shared culture emerges in Boswell’s conversation in 1775 with Margaret Stuart discussed above. As the diary reports, she sang several songs. Trying to learn one of them from her, Boswell expresses his frustration at trying to learn this “fine plaintive Irish one on the subject of love . . . [that] was ill to catch being like a swallow’s flying, the notes wavered so and did so dip and rise and skim along.” But he determines to persist, his anecdote supplying a vivid metaphor for this dynamic of singing and song, as the diarist himself notes: “I resolved to get it from her. I was in the most pleasing spirits, and, as she sung, expressed my joy in metaphor borrowed from my favourite *liqueur*: ‘This is quite a dram. This is the very kernal taste’” (Boswell 1963:110).⁹

University of Oregon

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⁹ By “kernal taste” Boswell means apricot brandy.

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