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NEWSLETTER



**A ‘FAM’D ORATORIO ... IN OLD ENGLISH ... SUNG’:  
ESTHER ON 16 MAY 1732**

Among music scholars, Handelians are privileged to tap an inexhaustible, it would appear, well of data. Such happy strength of information – a by-product, really, of an artist’s engagement with new institutions – signals Handel’s modernity and, equally important, helps disentangle the composer from the field of a ‘Bach and Handel’ titanic (and Teutonic) alliance.<sup>1</sup> The poem below, a specimen of the treasures hidden in early English newspapers, appeared in *Read’s Weekly Journal, or, British–Gazetteer* for Saturday 20 May 1732, p. [2], and allows us to reassess London’s theatrical prodigy of that month, *Esther*.

A DIARY of the Week’s News in VERSE.

ON MONDAY died *Pit* [*sic*], the Keeper of *Newgate* at home;  
On TUESDAY came News that *Thomson* was taken at *Rome*;  
The same Day a Soldier was dang’rously hurt in the *Park*  
By a Ball, perhaps, aim’d at some other Mark;  
In the Ev’ning the King, whom God bless, and the Queen,  
At the fam’d *Oratorio* were both to be seen,  
Th’ *Oratorio* which all in old *English* is sung;  
And on WEDNESDAY was christened the young \* Mr. *Young*.  
A *Lawyer* and *Lord* went to it Pell-Mell,  
But who had the better’s not easy to tell.  
Last THURSDAY, at *Epsom*, was a Day of great Sport,  
The *Prince* grac’d the *Downs* with half of his Court:  
Among the Nags enter’d was swift *bonny Kate*,  
But the Horse of Squire *Rich* went off with the Plate.  
YESTERDAY there was publish’d a very learn’d Book,  
Where answers to *Atheists* you’ll find, if you look,  
By the *Rector* of *Exon*, well vers’d in the *Greek*  
What happens TO-DAY, you shall hear of next Week.

\* *Sir William Young’s Son*.

The diary lists memorable events reported in London during the week of 15-19 May 1732, infusing poetic life into dry journalism under the commercial imperative for innovation (the format was retained in the following two issues). Given that weekly papers typically drew their news from the London dailies, we can readily test its accuracy against contemporary newspapers

and journals.<sup>2</sup>

‘Mr. Pitt’ (also ‘Pitts’) was ‘Head-Keeper’ (or ‘Master Keeper’) of Newgate prison, a lucrative post (‘worth 5 or 6000 l.’) he had ‘possessed many Years’; he expired at his house in Newgate Street on the night of 15/16 May ‘after a short Illness’ (*LEP*, 16-18 May, [1]; *DA*, 17 May, [1]). The wide coverage of his decease has much to do with the

jail’s ghastly reputation (‘an Emblem of Hell itself, and a kind of an Entrance into it’<sup>3</sup>) and the financial rewards of the position.<sup>4</sup>

On 16 May newspapers reported the confinement in Rome of ‘Mr. Thom[p]son, late Warehouse-Keeper to the Charitable Corporation’,<sup>5</sup> a company offering low-interest loans to the ‘Industrious Poor’. Over a number

<sup>1</sup> They were equated only as organists by John Hawkins (*A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, 5 vols (London, 1776), iii, 209; v, 255) and Charles Burney (*A General History of Music*, iv (London, 1789), 590, 593).

<sup>2</sup> The following abbreviations are used: *The Comedian, or Philosophical Enquirer* (C); *The Country Journal: Or, The Craftsman* (CJ); *The Daily Advertiser* (DA); *The Daily Courant* (DC); *The Daily Journal* (DJ); *The Daily Post* (DP); *Fog’s Weekly Journal* (FWJ); *The Gentleman’s Magazine, Or, Monthly Intelligencer* (GM); *The Grub-street Journal* (GSJ); *The London Evening-Post* (LEP); *The London Gazette* (LG); *The London Journal* (LJ); *The London Magazine, Or, Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer* (LM); *The Universal Spectator, and Weekly Journal* (US); the year 1732 is assumed.

<sup>3</sup> [Daniel Defoe], *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (London, 172[2]), 337. See also *Hell upon Earth ... otherwise (vulgarly) called Newgate* (London, 1703).

<sup>4</sup> See DC, 17 May, [2]; DP, 17 May, [1]; GSJ, 18 May, [3]; CJ, 20 May, [2]; US, 20 May, [3]; GM, ii, 775; LM, [i], 97.

<sup>5</sup> DJ, 16 May, [2]; LEP, 13–16 May, [2]. See also DA, 17 May, [1]; DC, 18 May, [2]; GSJ, 25 May, [1].



of years John Thompson had embezzled 'upwards of Half a Million, most Part of which was the Fortunes of Widows and Orphans'.<sup>6</sup> According to the Duke of Chandos, who had strongly invested in the company, the fraud 'has ruined a vast number of Familys and made in proportion almost as many unhappy people as did [the South-Sea 'Bubble' in] ye Year 1720'.<sup>7</sup>

The disappearance of Thompson and his colleague Robinson in October 1731 alarmed his supervisors, and subsequent audits of the company's books revealed the massive fraud.<sup>8</sup> In early March 1732, and after the Crown had put a 500-pound bounty on his head (*C. i* (April), 20), Thompson volunteered 'to return home and discover whatever he knows relating to the Company's Affairs' (*LJ*, 11 March 1731/2, [2]). One David Avery, 'discharged out of the Custody of the Serjeant at Arms upon Bail', was sent to Paris to negotiate with him but came back empty-handed (*US*, 22 April, [2]; *FWJ*, 29 April, [2]).

The arrival of Thompson in Rome together with a ludicrous effort to negotiate his safety (by offering back the company's books)

created a furore in London.<sup>9</sup> What is more, the apparent assistance he received from the Pretender's banker in Rome turned the affair into a political crisis (*C. iii* (June), 26). Rumours of Thompson's links with the Jacobites and a putative meeting with Charles Stuart (*LM*, i, 138-9) ignited conspiracy theories and kindled anti-Catholic sentiment.<sup>10</sup> On 4-5 May the House of Commons expelled two MPs and former directors of the company – Sir Robert Sutton, Knight of the Bath and member of the King's Privy Council, followed by Sir Archibald Grant – and a couple of weeks later it ordered the incarceration of a third culprit, William Burrows, Esq.<sup>11</sup> Political action reached a peak on 1 June, with the King assenting to bills for the arraignment of the Corporation's board members and for the financial relief of those affected (*LG*, 30 May-3 June, [1-2]).

The accident in Hyde Park occurred in the morning of 16 May during a military exercise of the first regiment of Foot Guards under the direction of 'the Right Hon. Sir Charles Wills, Knt. of the Bath' (*DA*, 17 May, [1]). While firing was

in progress, a musket 'Ball was discharged from a Piece in the Second Battalion, which graz'd on the Brass-work of a Soldier's Pouch, and went through the Pouch of his Left-hand Man against his Thigh; but he having some Money in his Pocket, prevented the Ball from entering' (*DC*, 17 May, [2]). Reports on the soldier's condition range from 'only bruised' to 'much bruised' and 'dangerously wounded'; there is agreement, however, that the ball 'was design'd [to hit] elsewhere'.<sup>12</sup>

Sir William Young (or 'Yonge'; ca 1693-1755), MP for Honiton, in Devonshire, Knight of the Bath and close associate of Sir Robert Walpole, was a Lord of the Exchequer (he would later become Secretary at War, member of the King's Privy Council and Governor of the Small-Pox Hospital).<sup>13</sup> Strong dedication to Walpole together with forays in poetry made him an easy target for the caustic pens of Pope and Swift.<sup>14</sup> Weeks before the diary's appearance, his public profile received a boost with the poem 'Of modern Wit. An Epistle to the Right Hon. Sir W. Young',<sup>15</sup> one of many copycats inspired by (or better, reacting to)

<sup>6</sup> *A Short History of the Charitable Corporation* (London, 1732), 13-5. The affair is described also in *A Letter from a Member of the House of Commons ... to his Friends ... at Rome* (London, [1732]), 11-19.

<sup>7</sup> Letter of 25 November 1731 to Mr Pitt of Fort St George: Huntington Library, Brydges Papers, ST 57, vol. 38, p. 337.

<sup>8</sup> *The Historical Register*, xvii (1732), 108-9; *The Report of the Gentlemen appointed by the General Court of the Charitable Corporation ... to inspect the State of their Affairs, &c.* (London, 1732).

<sup>9</sup> See *The Resolutions of Both Houses of Parliament, in Relation to Seignr Belloni's Letter from Rome, May the Fourth, 1732*; *DJ*, 26 May, [1] and 27 May, [3].

<sup>10</sup> *A Letter from a Member*, 7-8. See also *The Practices of the Pretender and his Agents at Paris and Rome, with Relation to the Charitable Corporation, and their late Warehouse-keeper John Thompson*, announced in *LG*, 27-30 May, [2].

<sup>11</sup> *LEP*, 4-6 May, [1]; *C. iii* (June), 26; *FWJ*, 20 May, [2]. They also attracted public ridicule in Alexander Pope's *Of the Use of Riches. An Epistle to the Right Honorable Allen Lord Bathurst* (London, 1733), 6.

<sup>12</sup> *DP*, 17 May, [1]; *LEP*, 16-18 May, [1]; *DC*, 17 May, [2]; *DA*, 17 May, [1]; *CJ*, 20 May, [2].

<sup>13</sup> *LEP*, 13-16 May, [1]; John Chamberlayne, 'A General List ... of all the Offices and Officers ... of his Majesty's Government', in *Magnae Britanniae Notitia* (London, 1726), 111, and the same list for the year 1735 (42, 132); 'The Court Register', in *The Court and City Register for the Year 1743*, 2; *Alexander's Feast ... By Mr. Dryden. Perform'd on Friday the 2d of March, before the Presidents, Vice-Presidents, and Governors of the Small-Pox Hospital* (London, 1753), 24.

<sup>14</sup> *Characters of the Times* (London, 1728), 10-12.

<sup>15</sup> See *The Monthly Chronicle*, v/3 (no. 51, March), 72.



Pope's *Epistle* to Lord Burlington.<sup>16</sup> The widely reported birth (26 April) and baptism (17 May) of Young's 'Son and Heir' may have been part of the same publicity campaign.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, his house in Pall Mall was well prepared to meet the happy occasion. The year before (3 June 1731) his new-born daughter had also been baptized there with 'his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales [standing] Godfather in Person, the Duchess of Newcastle and the Lady Guilford Godmothers'.<sup>18</sup>

Three horses competed in the 18 May race on Epsom Downs, Surrey: 'Mr. Rich's Galloway, [*i.e.*] Young Harlequin, Old Harlequin, (formerly Lord Tankerville's, and since Mr. Metcalfe's) and Mr. Griffin's Grey Horse' (*DP*, 19 May, [1]; *LEP*, 18–20 May, [2]; *LJ*, 20 May, [3]). The diarist mistook the latter for 'Bonny Kate', also owned by Griffin, who had won a race on the 16th.<sup>19</sup> Luck shifted sides on Thursday, however: Griffin's horse 'threw his Rider the first Heat, so was distanced, and Young Harlequin won the two first Heats' (*DP*, 19 May, [1]) and also the Galloway Plate, valued at a reported 20 or 30 Guineas (*DJ*, 19 May, [1]; *DC*, 19

May, [2]). The arrival of the Prince of Wales, announced in Tuesday's *Daily Journal* and *London Evening Post*, transformed the race into a glamorous event, drawing 'the greatest Appearance of Company there that ever was known'. 'Lord Tankerville, Lord Malpas, and others' accompanied the Prince in his sojourn, and after dinner at Lord Baltimore's house they went to the race (*DP*, 19 May, [1]; *LEP*, 18–20 May, [2]). Responding to Epsom's allure, His Highness would later establish a country residence close by.<sup>20</sup>

The theological attack on atheism, finally, is 'A DEFENCE OF REVEAL'D RELIGION, against the EXCEPTIONS of a late Writer, in his Book, intituled, CHRISTIANITY as OLD as the CREATION, &c. ... By JOHN CONYBEARE, D. D. Rector of Exeter-College in Oxford'.<sup>21</sup> Our diarist probably confused Exeter College with the homonymous city and definitely missed the announcement of the book on Thursday (*DJ*, 18 May, [1]). Such minor points cannot, however, affect the overall accuracy of the poem, which now emerges as a reliable

source on matters Handelian.

Our attention here focuses, predictably, on the 16 May performance of *Esther*. The new data corrects Deutsch's claim that, in addition to the première, 'the Court also attended the performances on 6th, 13th and 20th May'.<sup>22</sup> A thorough examination of the London dailies shows, indeed, that all six performances of the oratorio were given 'By His Majesty's Command' and promptly attended by the royal family.<sup>23</sup> It is remarkable that the monarchs attended this non-staged production for a fifth time in two weeks and only three nights after their last visit to the King's Theatre (one more would follow on the 20th). Did they relish the use of Coronation anthems in *Esther*?<sup>24</sup> or were they taken by the enthusiasm of Handel's strong-willed pupil, the Princess Royal? According to Burney, Princess Anne encouraged the composer to present *Esther* to the public;<sup>25</sup> I have suggested elsewhere that Anne, publicly known as the Prince of Nassau's future consort, might have attached herself to the virtuous heroine.<sup>26</sup> However that may be, describing *Esther* as a 'fam'd

<sup>16</sup> [Alexander] Pope, *An Epistle to the Right Honourable Richard Earl of Burlington. Occasion'd by his Publishing Palladio's Designs of the Baths, Arches, Theatres, &c. of Ancient Rome* (London, 1731). For the scandal this poem caused and its possible links to Handel's production of *Esther*, see my *Early Reception of Handel's Oratorios, 1732-1784: Narrative-Studies-Documents* (Ann Arbor, 2004), 458-63.

<sup>17</sup> The birth is reported in *US*, 29 April, [2]; *GM*, ii, 725; *GSJ*, 4 May, [2] (which reproduces the news from the *Post-Boy* and the [*Daily*] *Courant*), the baptism in *LEP*, 13–16 May, [1]; *DA*, 17 May, [1]; *DC*, 18 May, [2].

<sup>18</sup> *The Weekly Register*, 5 June 1731, [3]. Maybe the Prince honoured a Walpole associate because of George II's dislike of Young: see Romney Sedgwick, *The House of Commons, 1715-1754*, 2 vols (London, 1970), ii, 567-8.

<sup>19</sup> *DJ*, 18 May, [1]. The horse is identified as 'Merry Kate' in John Cheny's *Historical List of all Horse-Matches run ... in 1732* (London, 1732), 110.

<sup>20</sup> Kimerly Rorschach, *Frederick, Prince of Wales (1707-1751) as a Patron of the Visual Arts: Princely Patriotism and Political Propaganda*, 2 vols (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1985), i, 180-81.

<sup>21</sup> *DJ*, 19 May, [2]. Another attack on the book came from Thomas Braughton [*sic*], a future collaborator of Handel: *DP*, 18 May, [2].

<sup>22</sup> Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London, 1955), 290.

<sup>23</sup> *DJ*, 6 May, [2], 9 May, [1], 13 May, [2], 16 May, [2], 20 May, [1]; *DA*, 3 May, [1], 8 May, [1], 10 May, [1], 15 May, [1], 17 May, [1], 22 May, [1].

<sup>24</sup> See Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge, 1995), 281-4.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Burney, *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster-Abbey ... in Commemoration of Handel* (London, 1785), 100.

<sup>26</sup> *US*, 6 May, [2]; Chrissochoidis, *Early Reception*, 25-7.



*Oratorio* clearly indicates that the production was still the talk of the town two weeks after its opening.

A core engagement with the diary could easily stop here. The inquisitive scholar may, nevertheless, wish to enter the marvellous land of informed speculation. For all its emphasis on personal names, the poem lists neither Handel nor *Esther* (a probable reason why Deutsch missed it). The author presumably had poor knowledge of London's musical life and culled the performance on account of its royal glamour. He may also have been a Whig sympathiser, given the reference to Sir William Young (Conybeare also was a Whig) and a juxtaposition of royal taste that casts unfavourable light on the Prince of Wales (an enemy of Walpole).<sup>27</sup>

More important is the reference to the work's linguistic type ('old English'), which confirms English as 'the chief selling-point of [Handel's] new venture'.<sup>28</sup> That the Crown sanctioned this effort at the temple of London's Italophilia must not have escaped notice. In addition, the italicized contrast (if not paradox) between the Latin ('*Oratorio*') and vernacular ('English') signifiers of Handel's novelty allows us to grasp the role of typeface in enhancing (or even undermining) word meaning. Indeed, the poem offers a wonderful example of organizing data through typographical inflection: full capitalization marks the temporal frame of weekdays, whereas italics

are reserved only for names (a setting inverted in the footnote), places, titles, and certain evocative words (e.g., '*Atheists*').

Above all, the diary exudes a spirit of modernity. Royal entertainment and private incidents, sports and politics, theological debates and death notices – all coalesce into the dough of newsworthy material for the consumption of a ravenous general public. The reality and experience of people and events acquire new layers of meaning, *i.e.*, as representation concurrently available to readers across the kingdom. Nothing captures this novel condition better than the following:<sup>29</sup>

A noble Lord, in a high Station,  
that is pretty far advanced in  
Years, never rises from his  
Bed, but asks, *Am I in the  
Papers?* For it has been an  
Observation made by most  
People, that his Name has been  
made use of for being *greatly  
indispos'd; finely mended;  
dangerously relaps'd; in a fair  
way of Recovery; going to, and  
returning from the Country*  
[...] in one Paper or other, for  
several years together.

The story antedates – by two-and-a-half centuries – a standard joke of the comedian George Burns ('Every morning when I get up, I read the obituary page. If my name's not there, I shave') as much as the fraudulent practices in the

Charitable Corporation foreshadow the scandal of ENRON and the fugitive John Thompson anticipates the banker Nick Leeson.

English oratorio emerged at a time remarkably similar to our own. Of all factors responsible for its eventual success, public representation is possibly the least appreciated (it stands outside Handel's *oeuvre*). 'A DIARY of the Week's News in VERSE' shows that, even to people unaware of *Esther*'s title and composer, the new genre was clad in royal prestige from the outset. During the 1730s and '40s it would assemble a full armour of connotations projected to the public through the press and other channels – e.g., the public letter of 18 April 1739 on *Israel in Egypt* and chapter 9 in book 4 of Fielding's *Amelia* (1751), '*in which Amelia, with her Friend, goes to the Oratorio*'. These helped shape a unique British profile that insulated Handel's creation from changing musical fashions and carried it through to future generations. If anything, English oratorio fulfilled, beyond anyone's expectation, the promise of secular immortality in the diary ('What happens TO-DAY, you shall hear of next Week'). What happened in May 1732 (and for the next twenty years) we still hear of to this day.

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<sup>27</sup> On Conybeare, see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 60 vols (New York, 2004), xiii, 69. A poetical tribute to Walpole appeared in *Read's Weekly* on 10 June.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, 74. For the political connotations of the word 'English' in advertisements of *Esther*, see my *Early Reception*, 451–74 (esp. the excerpts on p. 473).

<sup>29</sup> *The Tricks of the Town: Or, Ways and Means for getting Money* (London, 1732), 49.