

5

Loyalism, Celebrity, and the Politics of Personality Dibdin in the 1790s

David Kennerley

On 12 May 1792 William Locke, the printer and publisher of *The Observer*, found himself before the Court of King's Bench on a charge of publishing a 'libellous paragraph reflecting upon the character of Mr. Charles Dibdin'.¹ The paragraph in question implied that the playwright Isaac Bickerstaff was the real author of the songs Dibdin was currently performing to great acclaim at the Sans Souci theatre and, in a series of innuendos, insinuated that their relationship may have consisted of more than just plagiarism:

The reports circulated of Mr. BICKERSTAFF's death, we are extremely happy to contradict; the more so, as it might probably deprive the public of Mr. DIBDIN's exertions to amuse them. Men of *fine feelings*, are not apt to forget their *dearest* friends.

Poor DIBDIN, with all his genius and talents, cannot succeed, although, it is said, he is *backed* by some persons of fame and Notoriety.

BICKERSTAFF is lately arrived from Italy—he was last night *behind* the scenes at his old friend DIBDIN's Sans Souci.²

These allusions stemmed from the fact that Bickerstaff and Dibdin had formerly been close associates in a highly successful theatrical partnership, producing operas such as *The Padlock* in 1768. However, their joint endeavours had come to an abrupt end in 1772 when Bickerstaff fled the country following accusations of sodomy.³

Locke's trial eventually concluded in a conviction in February 1793, but, knowing that Locke was only the publisher and not the author of the paragraph, Dibdin struck a deal to mitigate the sentence Locke would receive on condition he would stand as a witness against the author, Isaac Swan, in a subsequent prosecution.⁴ Swan, a lawyer and hack writer for *The Observer* and *The World* newspapers, had continued during Locke's trial to taunt Dibdin through a series of paragraphs repeating and embellishing upon the same themes—revenge, perhaps, for Dibdin's

¹ *The Diary; or Woodfall's Register* (14 May 1792).

³ Tasch, *The Dramatic Cobbler*, Chapter Twelve.

² *The Observer* (18 March 1792).

⁴ *Life*, 3:222–4.

own journalistic assault on *The World* a few years earlier, as detailed in Chapter Four of this volume.⁵ Having secured Locke's promised testimony, Dibdin launched a second, and this time civil, suit against Swan in the Court of Common Pleas on 18 May 1793, which terminated in victory and an award of £200 damages.⁶ In a subsequent, more embarrassing episode, he again went after Swan and the printer of *The World*, Robert Bostock, for another paragraph, still asserting plagiarism from Bickerstaff, but also describing Dibdin's *Sans Souci* shows as badly performed, poorly attended, and only applauded by paid *claqueurs*. This suit, heard at the Court of King's Bench on 25 June 1793, was found in Dibdin's favour, but with the humiliating award of only one shilling in damages, effectively a victory for the defendants.⁷

Why did Dibdin respond to these press attacks by launching libel trials, especially given the expense of such proceedings, rather than simply ignoring them? What was he trying to prove or to defend? The answers to these questions lie in the form of solo performance that Dibdin had pursued since 1787, which depended for its success on the cultivation of a carefully controlled sense of intimacy with the persona of the performer. As we shall see, key traits in Dibdin's public image were his supposed naturalness, sincerity, independence, and manliness. The intended effect of this persona was to underwrite the veracity and honesty of the opinions and sentiments contained in the songs and anecdotes he performed at the *Sans Souci*, casting Dibdin as a plain speaking, open, independent voice on current affairs that his audience could trust. Given the rising political temperatures of 1792–3, this performance of personality had a pressing significance, one that complicates the received picture of Dibdin as the tub-thumping loyalist songwriter par excellence. Certainly his songs espoused loyalist values, sometimes very overtly and forcefully, but he was also keen to point out the vices of contemporary authority figures, targeting ministers, aristocrats, and bishops as hopelessly corrupt, hypocritical, and failing in their duties. His was therefore an 'independent loyalism', ready to affirm the merits of the British constitution and especially the virtues of the ordinary soldier and sailor striving to defend it, while also eager to counter any suggestion that expressing such values was simply a servile pandering to the dictates of a corrupt and incompetent Establishment. Appreciating this exposes numerous resonances between Dibdin's political language and that of contemporary radicals and reformers, since their calls for constitutional reform were frequently based on similar claims that they spoke from a position of true independence and could thus offer a sincere and honest assessment of the political reality to the British public. These libel trials were consequently far from an insignificant spat. Exploring Dibdin's response to them offers important insights into the influence of celebrity upon late-eighteenth-century performance culture and allows us to uncover more fully the diverse and multivalent strands of loyalism in this most turbulent era of British politics.

⁵ *The World*, issues for 13, 15, 20, 22, and 25 October 1792.

⁶ *Diary* (20 May 1793).

⁷ *Diary* (26 June 1793); *Morning Chronicle* (26 June 1793).

THE PERFORMANCE OF PERSONALITY

In recent years, the eighteenth century has increasingly been seen as witnessing the birth of modern ‘celebrity’, distinguished from earlier types of fame through its non-dependence on birth or rank, its use of the new media made available by the emergence of the public sphere, such as newspapers, magazines, and cheap visual prints, and its emphasis upon a sense of intimacy with the private personality of the public individual.⁸ As several scholars have observed, particularly in relation to Georgian theatrical culture, the obsession with personality and its dissemination through a vast range of media marks out this period from its predecessors. Whether through the explosion of theatrical biographies, the subtle language of the theatrical portrait, or even through the collection of porcelain figurines of actors and actresses, the communication of personality and the desire for intimacy were basic and distinctive elements of Georgian performance culture.⁹

Dibdin’s solo shows carried the influence of celebrity upon theatrical performance to new heights. As contemporaries attested, the success of these shows depended upon creating a sense of intimacy between performer and audience. The actor and playwright John O’Keeffe recalled how, at one of Dibdin’s performances in 1792, ‘he ran on sprightly and with nearly a laughing face, like a friend who enters hastily to impart to you some good news’.¹⁰ Similarly, George Hogarth, a juvenile attendee of Dibdin’s performances, drew a distinction between the friendly, intimate style Dibdin adopted and the more distant feel of a public theatre: ‘His manner of speaking was easy and colloquial; and his air was more that of a person entertaining a party of friends in a private drawing-room, than of a performer exhibiting to a public audience.’¹¹ The Gresham Professor of Music, Edward Taylor, who as a youth in Norwich saw Dibdin perform, concurred that his performance ‘was related with great ease and effect: no attempt at oratory or declamation, but simply as if he was relating his travels to a party of friends’.¹² This friendly, informal, intimate style, perfectly suited to the small-scale cosiness of the *Sans Souci* (as shown in Figure 7.1), seemed to engender a feeling of privileged insight into private space, both physically and psychologically, as Judith Hawley describes in Chapter Six of this volume.

⁸ Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion, 2001), 13–14, 19, 28–9; Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame & its history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 361–89; Simon Morgan, ‘Celebrity: Academic “Pseudo-Event” or a Useful Concept for Historians?’ *Cultural and Social History* 8/1 (2011): 95–114.

⁹ Joseph Roach, ‘Public Intimacy: The Prior History of “It.”’, in Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (eds), *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 15–30; Cheryl Wanko, *Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2003), 9–16; Laura Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity: Eighteenth-Century British Actresses and Strategies for Image-making* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 14–20; Heather McPherson, ‘Theatrical Celebrity and the Commodification of the Actor’, in Swindells and Taylor, *Handbook of the Georgian Theatre*, 192–212.

¹⁰ John O’Keeffe, *Recollections of the Life of John O’Keefe, written by himself*, 2 vols (London, 1826), 2:322.

¹¹ Hogarth, xx.

¹² Taylor, f.8.

Loyalism, Celebrity, and the Politics of Personality

81

This sense of a privileged glimpse into Dibdin's personality as a unique selling point of the Sans Souci performances is reinforced by numerous comments that the anecdotes, lyrics, and music of these performances reflected and revealed the private feelings of their author. A correspondent of *The Oracle* observed of Dibdin's serious songs that they 'do his feelings credit', while the *London Recorder* felt his compositions reflected 'the highest honour on Mr. Dibdin's mind and abilities, as an author and a composer'.¹³ Other critics wrote of Dibdin's songs as doing 'equal honour to the head and heart of their author' or of 'words and music [that] possess mind, character, and taste'.¹⁴ As Isaac Land observes in Chapter Eleven, such ideas would later develop into the Victorian moralizing gloss given to Dibdin's songs and character by admirers such as Hogarth. A few contemporaries found this emphasis on the personality of a single individual distasteful—the short-lived satirical paper the *Tomahawk or Censor General* branded Dibdin one of the 'three greatest egotists of the age'—but most members of Dibdin's substantial audiences appear to have been eager to catch the glimpses of his personality interwoven in the fabric of his anecdotes and songs.¹⁵ In essence, then, Dibdin's performances traded on the carefully controlled disclosure of a public persona, perhaps a form of the 'interiority effect' that Felicity Nussbaum has observed in the performances of contemporary actresses, and the manufacturing of a sense of physical and psychological intimacy at the Sans Souci.¹⁶

PROJECTING A PERSONA

Dibdin's now irrecoverable performances were his most direct method of creating the right impression of his personality in his audiences' minds, but clear traces of this process are captured in his autobiographical and other writings and in the responses of contemporary audience members. He places great emphasis, for instance, upon 'nature', 'sincerity', and cognate terms in describing himself and his work. 'In my songs', he writes, 'I have gone for truth, for nature, for simplicity, for strength, for sentiment and for character.'¹⁷ In writing a ballad, Dibdin observes, 'the mind shuns every thing affected and fantastic, and seeks an asylum in the bosom of nature', while he laments that 'every attempt to establish simplicity and nature has been considered [by the public] as paucity and imbecility'.¹⁸ As well as emphasizing his own straightforward sincerity, he condemns those unwilling to state their opinions openly and honestly. In his chapter on 'Anonymous Letters' in his *Observations on a Tour*, Dibdin writes of the 'palpable and malignant deception'

¹³ *The Oracle and Public Advertiser* (13 October 1794); *The London Recorder, and Sunday Gazette* (22 March 1795).

¹⁴ 'Lyceum', *The General Magazine and Impartial Review* (December 1789): 562; 'Mr. Dibdin's Wags and Oddities', *The General Magazine and Impartial Review* (February 1791): 86.

¹⁵ *The Tomahawk, or Censor General* (21 January 1796).

¹⁶ Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 20.

¹⁷ *Life*, 1:xxiii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:41–2.

practised by those who wrote such anonymous criticism. ‘Truth loves the light,’ he declares, ‘it never skulks; it scorns to lurk in whispers and inuendoes [*sic*]; it is honest and open. It does not insinuate; it proclaims.’¹⁹ In defending his total rejection of all the ‘advice’ contained in these letters, Dibdin asserts defiantly that ‘nature has permitted me to be exactly what I am and neither more nor less’.²⁰ Furthermore, such personal qualities were an explicit subject of his performances; an advertisement for his entertainment for the 1793–4 season, *Castles in the Air*, declared the anecdotes and songs would discuss topics such as ‘Simplicity’, ‘Truth’, and ‘Candour’.²¹ Nor need we take Dibdin’s word alone: one contemporary journalist commended Dibdin’s performances by observing that ‘the light and superficial, may applaud the *trick of art*—but a manly and well-ordered taste, will ever prefer *the touch of nature*’.²² Similarly, Taylor later reflected that the things that most distinguished Dibdin from his many imitators were ‘those genuine touches of nature and unaffected feeling which appeared to flow from him without effort’.²³

Alongside the natural and sincere, Dibdin constantly, almost obsessively, declared his sense of ‘independence’, which was inextricably tied, as for many men in this era, to his sense of his masculinity. Linda Zionkowski, citing the examples of Savage, Pope, and Johnson, has noted that celebrated authors often found themselves in a predicament regarding their relationship with the public: although largely dependent upon them, to acknowledge this fact threatened the independent masculine identity deemed essential to successful authorship.²⁴ Dibdin seems to have adopted a similar position, writing, ‘[W]hen I speak of the public, I shall certainly not condescend to use any of the fawning, cringing terms that are in general made use of upon these occasions. They are degrading to the man, and insulting to his protectors.’²⁵ Although he admits ‘I get my bread by the public’, he nonetheless insists, ‘I will not be a servant to any one. I am no minion, no dependant [*sic*].’²⁶

Most notably of all, yet rather duplicitously, Dibdin emphasized his manly independence by rejecting ‘puffing’. ‘I never wrote nor connived at a single puff in my life,’ he declares, though he quickly adds ‘if exaggeration be meant by the term puffing’.²⁷ Elsewhere, he elaborates on this belief: ‘I had always determined to stand or fall by my own fair pretensions. In all that I ever directly, or indirectly, suggested to the public, I demanded fair justice, and sought candid investigation; and, above all other revolting ideas, I disdained the vice of puffing.’²⁸ As he implies, the puff threatened not only a performer’s independence, but also his sincerity and candour with the public. Of course, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Dibdin cultivated alliances with important press figures, such as William Woodfall,

¹⁹ *Observations*, 2:157. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:158.

²¹ *Morning Post* (7 November 1793).

²² [Original emphasis], ‘Sans Souci’, *The General Magazine and Impartial Review* (November 1791): 582.

²³ Taylor, f. 2.

²⁴ Linda Zionkowski, ‘Celebrity violence in the careers of Savage, Pope and Johnson’, in Tom Mole (ed.), *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 168–85.

²⁵ *Life*, 2:91.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4:9–10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:219.

and that these brought him a string of immensely favourable reviews and plugs for his song publications.²⁹ Nevertheless, even if Dibdin was as mired in the swamp of press manipulation as any of his theatrical contemporaries, it remained absolutely vital to him to prove to the public his ‘independency of mind’, which, as he declares at the close of his *Professional Life*, he had ‘made it my pride and happiness to adopt’.³⁰

It was to defend his reputation for naturalness, sincerity, independence, and manliness that Dibdin went to court in 1792–3. His openness, honesty, and independence as a creative artist were a callous deception if his songs were the labours of another passed off as his own. Dibdin’s motives during the trials are most clearly displayed in the letters he wrote to the press during these months and the remarkable ‘Preface’ to the second volume of his *Collection of Songs*, published in 1792, in which he took the opportunity to explain his conduct.³¹ Contrasting his own sincerity with the public with the duplicity of his enemies, he argues that in seeking to destroy his reputation, they ‘knew they could not do so honestly, and therefore they attempted it by villainy’.³² Through their accusations, Dibdin complains, they sought to depict him as ‘a man void of faith or honour’ and ‘an impostor’, thereby encouraging the public ‘not only to damn my works, but my character’.³³ He refutes the accusation of plagiarism by pointing out how different both his works and his character were from those of Bickerstaff. In the process, he associates Bickerstaff with the antithesis of all the character traits of sincerity and independence that Dibdin so greatly prized. ‘Am I enamoured of that insincerity for which he was remarkable and notorious?’ Dibdin asks his readers, or ‘for that profligacy and immorality which characterised his opinions?’³⁴ ‘Have I not uniformly rejected all assistance,’ he continues, ‘nay the assistance of much better poets than he—and did not he court assistance from any body who would lend it him? Were not the suggestions of GOLDSMITH, KELLY, GARRICK, nay even SHUTER, and many others, caught at by him with avidity?’³⁵ Far from Dibdin being the plagiarizer, it is Bickerstaff whose life and work are a fraud upon the public.

Furthermore, as Dibdin liked to insist, this press slander had been caused by his own determined, independent stance. It was his refusal to give ‘the editors of newspapers, or their understrappers, general tickets’ that produced these ‘contemptible paragraphs’.³⁶ In this opinion he was vehemently reinforced by William Woodfall in *The Diary*, who asserted ‘Mr. Dibdin has boldly broken through the paltry practice of sending free-admission tickets to every petty scribbler in a newspaper; and to this circumstance we may fairly ascribe all the scurrility of one or two of our daily prints.’³⁷ This was also the main argument given in court; Dibdin’s lawyer at the trial of Swan and Bostock argued that ‘no other reason

²⁹ *Morning Chronicle* (14 January 1789); *Morning Herald* (17 January 1789); *The World* (9, 16, and 21 May 1789, 15 November 1790); *Diary* (26 and 29 March 1791).

³⁰ *Life*, 4:328.

³¹ Dibdin’s letters to *Diary* (23 March and 18 October 1792); Charles Dibdin, ‘Preface’ to *A Collection of Songs, Selected from the Works of Mr Dibdin*, 2 vols (London, 1792), 2:v–xv.

³² Dibdin, ‘Preface’, 2:vi.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2:vii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:xii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:x–xi.

³⁶ Dibdin’s letter to *Diary* (18 October 1792).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

could be assigned for this conduct than that he [Swan] had been refused a free admission-ticket to the *Sans Souci*.³⁸ As both a refutation of plagiarism and of the practice of giving free tickets to ensure favourable reviews, the trials were a forceful attempt by Dibdin to assert his independence and honesty to the public.

Yet, at the same time, they also underlined his very dependence upon the public for support, since by suing for damages Dibdin was forced to demonstrate that the harm caused by such paragraphs to his reputation had led to loss of income from the public. His indictment of Swan states that the paragraphs had conveyed ‘insinuations injurious to the fair fame and character of the Plaintiff, by endeavouring to ruin him in the opinion of the Public on which he altogether relied, for present subsistence and future fortune’. On this basis, Dibdin requested £2,000 damages (in the end, he was awarded a still generous sum of £200).³⁹ This, plus the fact that witnesses at the trials had an unfortunate habit of revealing that he had retained the practice of giving free tickets to some favoured journalists, while selectively refusing others,⁴⁰ meant that Dibdin felt compelled to issue a series of public pronouncements explaining that he was not suing out of narrow, commercial self-interest, but rather as a principled defender of the public’s honour. ‘Though I hold it arrogant and reprehensible lightly to obtrude private grievances on the public,’ he wrote in a public letter to *The Diary*, ‘yet I could have no sense of the benevolence that supports and protects me, if I did not with manliness and determination resist an insult in this instance offered more to them than to me.’⁴¹ He could quite happily have ignored the ‘noisome stuff’, he claimed disingenuously in the ‘Preface’ to his song collection, ‘but it has annoyed the public, and therefore it is my duty to put on the extinguisher’.⁴² Dibdin thus acknowledged his close and intimate relationship with the public, but recast his role from that of dependant to that of defender of the public’s honour. Both Dibdin’s determination to go to the expense of prosecution and the rhetorical spin that he put upon his motives for doing so demonstrate the importance to him of maintaining his reputation for sincerity, honesty, independence, and manliness before the public. They are a telling sign of the importance of persona, of celebrity, to Dibdin’s solo shows, perhaps to a greater extent than any other contemporary performer, given the intimacy and individuality upon which his performances were based. Moreover, appreciating the performance of personality in which Dibdin engaged also holds the key to understanding the political resonances surrounding these trials and the wider brand of loyalist politics that Dibdin espoused.

THE POLITICS OF PERSONALITY

In the febrile political climate of 1792–3 areas once considered far from politics, such as private life and personal character, were acquiring increasing significance in public debate. As John Barrell has noted, the Royal Proclamation against Seditious

³⁸ *Diary* (26 June 1793).

⁴¹ *Diary* (18 October 1792).

³⁹ *Diary* (20 May 1793).

⁴² Dibdin, ‘Preface’, 2:v.

⁴⁰ *Diary* (26 June 1793).

Writings in May 1792 and later the Two Acts of 1795 led to a ‘sense that everything had suddenly been or could suddenly become politicized . . . Activities and spaces which had previously been thought to be private, in the sense not just that they were “outside” politics but were, by general agreement, positively insulated from it, suddenly no longer enjoyed that protection.’⁴³ Adopting a broader perspective, Matthew McCormack has observed the increasing emphasis placed in the second half of the eighteenth century upon an understanding of politics, and especially the contrast of loyalty and disloyalty, as intrinsically tied to emotional expression and states of feeling.⁴⁴ In this environment, Dibdin’s particular brand of loyalism, advocated most especially through his songs at the Sans Souci, was underwritten by the supposed naturalness, sincerity, independence, and manliness of the performer. If this persona could be shown to be false, then the loyalist sentiments Dibdin advocated might equally become insincere, unnatural, servile, or effeminate. More was at stake, therefore, in Dibdin’s defence of his reputation than simply his own commercial interests.

To appreciate this, we need to pin down the precise nature of Dibdin’s loyalism. As Isaac Land explores in Chapter Eleven of this volume, a Victorian caricature of Dibdin’s politics, based on a nostalgic reading by conservative moralists of only a small part of Dibdin’s *oeuvre*, primarily the sea songs, has proved widely influential in cementing the impression among subsequent scholars that Dibdin was a highly effective part of the government’s propaganda machine. He has even been branded by some as ‘the real laureate of the Great Terror’, supposedly orchestrated by Pitt’s government in these years.⁴⁵ Recently, however, a more rounded picture of Dibdin’s politics has begun to emerge, which has suggested a much more equivocal stance towards the government and its policies.⁴⁶ This has underlined not only the need to examine the full range of Dibdin’s works, but also to recognize these works not simply as texts, but as performances, in which the personality of the performer and the interrelationship between the songs and anecdotes in an evening’s performance all had a role to play in shaping a rather different brand of loyalist sentiment. So far, this new research has largely focused on the period after 1803, when Dibdin was directly employed by the government to write ‘war songs’. As we shall see, this ambivalence and his resistance to toeing the government line were already important themes of Dibdin’s politics during the 1790s and earlier.

On the face of it, Dibdin’s songs are avowedly loyalist in their sentiments. Indeed, Dibdin boasted that his songs were so persuasive regarding the duties of

⁴³ John Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

⁴⁴ Matthew McCormack, ‘Rethinking “Loyalty” in Eighteenth-Century Britain’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35/3 (2012): 407–21, esp. 416–19.

⁴⁵ Originally coined by H. F. B. Wheeler and A. M. Broadley, *Napoleon and the Invasion of England: The Story of the Great Terror*, 2 vols (London: John Lane, 1908), 2:293, this epithet has recently been repeated by Mark Rawlinson, ‘Invasion! Coleridge, the defence of Britain and the cultivation of the public’s fear’, in Philip Shaw (ed.), *Romantic Wars: Studies in Culture and Conflict, 1793–1822* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 124, while a similar interpretation is offered by Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 88.

⁴⁶ Cox Jensen, *Napoleon*, 19, 56–9.

servicemen and loyal subjects that they could instantly quell mutinies upon being sung to the troops.⁴⁷ Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that Dibdin intensified his overtly loyalist writing during 1792–3. In one of the anecdotes from *The Quizzes; or, a Trip to Elysium*, the solo show that he performed during that autumn and winter, he used a characteristic nautical metaphor to argue that the ship of state cannot sail upon the principle of absolute equality. As a sailor explains, equality is ‘a thing you see that cannot [*sic*] easily be—Englishmen are equally brave, equally honest, and equally loyal but as for the rest the boatswain to the rigging and the purser to the slops . . . whether the vessel be a ship or a kingdom—She cannot expect to make a prosperous voyage—unless all the crew keep their proper station.’⁴⁸

In his songs from these months too, the same sentiments can be traced. ‘The Compact of Freedom’, which he first performed in late November 1792, directly advocates loyalty, which Dibdin portrays as the foundation of British liberties:

Rejoice ye Britons!—Freedom’s sons rejoice!
Laud in your grateful lays a patriot king:—
Fir’d with one soul, one sentiment, one voice,
To ratify the glorious compact, sing,
So may we taste the sweets of Liberty;
As we are loyal, so may we be free.⁴⁹

To emphasize and facilitate the song’s association with the patriotic defence of the nation, the published score features accompaniments for a military band of clarinets, horns, and bassoons. Appearing amidst the fervour of the loyalist reaction, spearheaded by the foundation of John Reeves’s Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers in November 1792, the song was praised by *The Diary* as a ‘timely sacrifice to loyalty’, while a later issue felt it to be akin to an ‘oath of allegiance’ embodying the sentiment that ‘Britons are free only in proportion as they are loyal’.⁵⁰ Another song, ‘Ninety Three’, written to mark the start of the new year, was similarly lauded in the press for its loyal sentiments.⁵¹ It is striking for being one of the few songs in Dibdin’s corpus that directly attacks the principles of the French Revolution:

Some praise a new freedom, imported from France,
Is liberty taught them like teaching to dance?
They teach freedom to Britons! our own right divine!
A Rush-light might as well teach the sun how to shine.
In famed ninety three
We’ll convince them we’re free
Free from every licentiousness faction can bring
Free with heart and with voice to sing God save the King.⁵²

⁴⁷ *Life*, 1:8.

⁴⁸ BL, Add. MS 30962, C. Dibdin Table Entertainments, vol. 3, f. 95v. For another example, see *ibid.*, f. 9.

⁴⁹ Charles Dibdin, ‘The Compact of Freedom’ (London, [1793?]).

⁵⁰ *Diary* (3 and 10 December 1792). ⁵¹ *Diary* (3 January 1793).

⁵² Charles Dibdin, ‘Ninety Three’ (London, [1793?]).

Most striking is the fact that, amid a background of rising political tensions and impending war with France, reviewers were eager to interpret the success of these songs as signs that the sentiments contained within them naturally coincided with the feelings of Dibdin's audiences. The audience, recorded one paragraph in the *Morning Chronicle*, 'always require a repetition of the song ["The Compact of Freedom"], [so] that sentiments, so congenial to their feelings, should be the more forcibly impressed on their minds'.⁵³ *The Diary*, meanwhile, reflected that 'in the present moment every touch at the times becomes in some degree interesting; and the operation of a mere song on the feelings of a mixed and casual [*sic*] audience, may form a tolerably true test of their real sentiments'. The writer then goes on to note that 'Ninety Three' had been encoired (almost twice) and called for again at the end of the evening.⁵⁴

This desire to record the visible effects of such patriotic songs upon the feelings of audiences attests to an anxious impulse to associate such sentiments with the natural and sincere feelings of the British people. However, the fact that it was the Whig reformist *Morning Chronicle*, rather than any pro-ministerial print, that proved the most vocal admirer of a song such as 'The Compact of Freedom' should alert us to the fact that Dibdin's patriotism could be read in far from straightforwardly 'loyalist' ways. Indeed, while he was keen to exploit the loyalist mood for commercial gain, for Dibdin this did not entail a servile kowtowing to the government. His language of loyalty was continually underpinned by assertions of independence—of independent judgement and feelings leading naturally to loyalist sympathies—rather than simply following what the government instructed people to think. As Mark Philp and others have shown, he was not alone in adopting such a position, but he presented an especially forceful articulation of this way of thinking.⁵⁵

This 'independent loyalism' is most noticeable in his strongly critical stance towards those in authority, frequently accusing them of corruption and hypocrisy. Much of this material can be traced back to his earlier journalistic work in publications such as *The Devil* (1786–7) or *The By-Stander* (1789–90). Both periodicals took a very dim view of politicians; in Chapter Four of this volume David O'Shaughnessy discusses *The Devil's* criticism of William Pitt and especially the Commercial Treaty with France (1786), but politicians of all stripes were subjected to withering criticism.⁵⁶ Moreover, alongside this irreverence towards politicians, these periodicals attacked other familiar targets: the aristocracy and the Church. *The By-Stander* contains an essay calling for aristocratic titles to be based on personal merit rather than inherited privilege. It concludes, 'Since then high birth imposes an obligation to possess great merit, it ought rather to inspire diffidence and modesty, than haughtiness and pride. Thus to many has nature been very cruel; for not contented with refusing

⁵³ *Morning Chronicle* (10 December 1792). ⁵⁴ *Diary* (3 January 1793).

⁵⁵ Mark Philp, 'Vulgar Conservatism, 1792–3', *English Historical Review* 110 (1995): 42–69, and Donald E. Ginter, 'The Loyalist Association Movement of 1792–3 and British Public Opinion', *Historical Journal* 9/2 (1966): 179–90.

⁵⁶ *Devil*, 1:93; 2:148–52, 194–200; *By-Stander*, 2, 10–11, 31–2, 141.

them every kind of merit, she has taken care they should be well born.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the periodical played with particular relish upon another stock trope in a poetic account of the behaviour of a greedy prelate who invites a poor curate to a truly gargantuan dinner:

As he [the bishop] sipt, and turn'd over each morsel he eat [*sic*]
Of the jellies, and trifles, and ices, and whips,
Which seem'd pleas'd to salute his right rev'rend lips,
Scarcely deigning to cast on the curate his eyes,
He belch'd out—'here mister—nay friend do not rise,
I was going—Jack give me some wine—do you see,
To ask of what value your living may be?'

The curate, who sat all the time and admir'd
And eat from this feast just what nature requir'd,
Full of innocence, answer'd him pat at a word—
'Just as much as your bishopric, rev'rend my lord:
If the measure we hold of our consciences even,
Both rewards will be great—for our treasure's in heaven.'⁵⁸

One satire in particular brought many of these themes together into a far-reaching condemnation of Britain's contemporary ruling elite. The second volume of *The Devil* contains a serialized account of a circumnavigator's 'Trip to the Antipodes of England', the conceit of which is that Antipodean society is the inverse of that of England. In the Antipodes, all is corrupt and dissolute, whereas England, the narrator continually reminds the reader, is a paragon of moral perfection. Antipodean bishops, for instance, are portrayed as grasping after 'plurality of benefices', while their ministers of state show a total disregard for the 'public good'. 'But is it so in England?' Dibdin's narrator asks:

Oh no—the bishop there lolls in no unfeeling splendour, deaf to the petitions of miserable curates and large families . . . Nor is the Antipodean statesman less a foil to the English one, who—GLORIOUS CHARACTER—has the good of his country constantly at heart—who never makes a promise but he keeps, never betrays the public for his private views, never encourages the flattery of sycophants, never abuses his master's confidences, never merits the execration of the people; . . . he makes no blunders, levies no unreasonable or oppressive taxes, frames no unwholesome laws, nor does any one thing either partial, rigorous, puerile, ineffectual, ungenerous or unjust.⁵⁹

Crucially, these themes of gluttonous bishops, corrupt politicians, and oppressive taxes were not confined to Dibdin's journalism of the late 1780s, but remained a vibrant and much discussed theme of his solo shows throughout the crisis years of the 1790s. 'The Trip to the Antipodes' story from *The Devil*, for instance, was reworked as the basis of Dibdin's show for the 1794–5 season, *Great News; or a Trip to the Antipodes*. One reviewer in *The Oracle* observed that the show relayed the 'great news . . . that, at the *Antipodes*, people practise every vice and folly; and, in *England*, every thing sensible and good'. 'The irony generated by this idea', the

⁵⁷ *By-Stander*, 135, 137.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵⁹ *Devil*, 2:73–5.

journalist remarked, 'is pleasingly new, and had a most pleasant effect,' while the songs were 'more pointed and marking than any Mr. DIBDIN had before produced'.⁶⁰ This reviewer's comments may refer more to the social satire contained in these songs, since (at least in the versions subsequently published by Dibdin) their lyrics are not obviously political. Instead, it would seem that Dibdin's political satire was mostly confined to the anecdotes that threaded the songs together. A close comparison of the satire quoted above from *The Devil* with the (unfortunately fragmentary) manuscript documents in the British Library which appear to be Dibdin's performance notes reveals a close resemblance of theme and political resonances.⁶¹ This contrast between anodyne songs and politically biting anecdotes is no contradiction, but rather a careful strategy; the anecdote, in comparison to the printed text of a song lyric, was safely evanescent and thus the ideal medium in which to convey material that might irritate the authorities. The moment of performance therefore permitted a wider range of political stances to be adopted than published texts of those performances imply.

The political uses of the anecdote can be seen in another example from the previous season's show, *Castles in the Air*, in which Dibdin used an impersonation of the innocence and simplicity of a country bumpkin to offer a comic satire of authority figures in rural society. Asked what he had seen on a trip to the capital (in which he appears to have visited the exotic animals kept at the Tower of London), the rustic replies:

Why nought but what I had zeed before. I sawed the wild beasts; there were a bear that I wish I may die if I did not take for our parson; and, as to the monkees, I a zeed a whole posse of sutch as they go to dinner at the Squires. The man shewed me a Hyena, I think twas, and he twold me that he seizes upon people and so moans over em, as if he were sorry to eat them up. I said that were nothing at all; for that, about our village, we had the same sort . . . but we call em lawyers and excisemen; that seizes upon people too, but, so far from making bones about the matter, they eats them up without being sorry at all.⁶²

Such complaints about greed and corruption in high places and of the harsh burdens of heavy taxation, far from casting Dibdin as the 'real laureate of the Great Terror', instead bring him much closer in sympathy with the work of more radical songwriters such as John Freeth, a member of a Jacobin club that met at his public house in Birmingham, who likewise highlighted government corruption and the miseries of heavy taxation in his highly popular political songs.⁶³ Dibdin and Freeth also shared a patriotic identification with ordinary soldiers and sailors, praising their heroism in service to the nation.⁶⁴ Yet there were important differences too. Dibdin never strayed anywhere near the radicalism of Freeth's song 'Blood Royal':

⁶⁰ *Oracle* (13 October 1794).

⁶¹ BL Add. MS 30960, C. Dibdin Table Entertainments, vol. 1, f. 142v.

⁶² *Ibid.*, ff. 45–46.

⁶³ John Horden, *John Freeth (1731–1808): Political ballad-writer and innkeeper* (Oxford: Leopard's Head Press, 1993), 8–9, 14, 24–5.

⁶⁴ See, for example, *ibid.*, 150–1 ('British Volunteers'), 161–2 ('Britain's Glory'), 200 ('The Tars of Old England').

The blood which some boast of, from this or that quarter,
A Knight of the Thistle, or Knight of the Garter,
Was ne'er any better, or is at time present,
Than what freely flows in the veins of a PEASANT;
'Twi'x't that of a MONARCH and that of a BEGGAR,
When shed to distinguish a DOCTOR 'twould stagger.⁶⁵

Rather, the collective effect of Dibdin's work is to suggest that the British constitution and social order remain the best guarantors of liberty and happiness, but that those in power are too often guilty of failing to live up to the high standards required to maintain the nation's dignity and strength. Such indictments are perhaps at their most damning in his numerous sea songs that draw contrasts between hard-working, honest Jack Tars, and aristocratic officers more concerned with making a dashing fashion statement in their military regalia than with defending the nation.⁶⁶

This interpretation sets Dibdin's government pension, which might otherwise reinforce the idea of Dibdin as a key part of the ministerial propaganda machine, in a new light. The details of this £200 pension, awarded in June 1803, remain unclear, and our only substantial source is a self-justificatory pamphlet, published by Dibdin in 1807, in protest at its revocation by Lord Grenville's 'Ministry of all the Talents'.⁶⁷ While he makes little secret of his willingness to accept a pension, Dibdin's portrayal of his motives for doing so suggests this was hardly born out of a desire to serve the government's interests. In the first place, as he repeatedly observes, he was simply being pragmatic; now in his late fifties, and with retirement increasingly desirable, such a pension would secure a comfortable old age.⁶⁸ Furthermore, he clearly implies that being known to be in the pay of the government could only harm his future commercial prospects. Even before receiving the pension, he was already suffering, he claims, from a reputation for being 'outrageously loyal'. 'People were tired with what they called being schooled by me', he wrote, 'when they ought to be considered as competent to judge for themselves.'⁶⁹ Evidently, Dibdin was well aware that to divert from the 'independent' style of loyalism through more outright support for a particular ministry was to risk public displeasure. In addition, rumours that he was a government agent had previously done severe damage to his commercial success in the more disaffected parts of the provinces and, unsurprisingly, in post-Rebellion Ireland.⁷⁰ Of course, he had a strong interest in portraying himself as having suffered in the loyalist cause, but his demand for a regular annuity was in part, as he suggested, to offset the losses he anticipated making on the *British War Songs* series that the government desired him to write, since he feared they would be 'scouted' by the public.⁷¹ In confirmation of

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁶⁶ For examples, see D. A. B. Ronald, *Youth, Heroism and War Propaganda: Britain and the Young Maritime Hero, 1745–1820* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 126–7.

⁶⁷ Charles Dibdin, *The Public Undeceived, written by Mr Dibdin; and containing a statement of all the material facts relative to his pension* (London, [1807]).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 11–12, 25.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 12–13, 18.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

this prophecy, his entertainment, *Britons Strike Home*, based on these ‘war songs’, ran at a ‘very heavy loss’.⁷² His awareness that obviously propagandistic works did not sell well is also apparent in the songs themselves, which, as Oskar Cox Jensen notes, display a remarkable reluctance to engage in the kind of savage Francophobia and demonization of Napoleon common in the more straightforward loyalist propaganda songs of the era.⁷³

Above all, Dibdin sought to persuade the public that he was entitled to a pension, not because of his pandering to the whims of a particular minister, but as a reward for loyal service to the nation and to the public. To make this point, he cites testimonials from members of the public, such as a group of gentlemen of Yarmouth, who had written to him stating their belief he should be rewarded in some way.⁷⁴ He compares his situation to that of Greenwich and Chelsea pensioners, or to literary figures such as Dr Johnson, who were rewarded with a comfortable retirement for their duty to the national interest.⁷⁵ In particular, he insists he is no sinecure-hunter, comparing his deserving situation to that of the cronyism that, he implies, had surrounded Grenville’s ministry. Indeed, he hints that it was the number of ‘candidates for *private* favour’ clamouring at the Treasury door during Grenville’s time in office that had forced the government to cancel Dibdin’s reward for his *public* services.⁷⁶ At times, he even adopts the language of reform, declaring ‘the burdens of the people call loudly and imperiously for every exercise of economy’ and ‘the most diligent care ought to be taken that the public money is not lavished away’ on individuals who did not truly merit such reward.⁷⁷

While much of this may well be a desperate attempt to save a public reputation in tatters by a performer now forced by the cancellation of his pension to return from retirement to the stage, it is nonetheless significant that he chose to do so by insisting he was the same, independent-minded loyalist in 1807 as he had been back at the height of his success in 1792–3. Far from indicating his closeness to the government, this episode reveals on the one hand an unsurprising, self-interested pragmatism with an eye towards retirement, and on the other a firm and continuing belief that writing straightforward ministerial propaganda could only lead to commercial failure.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷³ Cox Jensen, *Napoleon*, 57–9. Another possible example of Dibdin’s propagandistic work from this period is a fragmentary manuscript held in the Theater Collection at the Houghton Library, University of Harvard (MS Thr 198.55), which appears to be a rough draft of a pamphlet or public address Dibdin was preparing during his years as a government pensioner. Although fairly incoherent, it exhorts British subjects to show loyalty to their king, know their place, and perform their duty, while roundly condemning all schemes for reform of the constitution. Nonetheless, it too avoids any Francophobia or demonization of Napoleon, preferring instead to focus on British ‘virtue’ and the blessings of British laws, which, Dibdin reminds his audience (and indeed any potentially over-mighty government ministers), were ‘formed for the security of us all nor can any be above or below them’ (f. 2).

⁷⁴ Dibdin, *Public Undeceived*, 14–16.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 33–4, 50–2.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

INDEPENDENT LOYALISM

Recognizing this persistent ‘independent’ strain to Dibdin’s loyalism furthers our understanding of the complexities of political culture in the 1790s in important ways. Through his performance of personality, he was competing with radicals and reformers, who also liked to claim their cause was supported by their openness, sincerity, and independence, in the face of government duplicity and repression. Jon Mee has observed that radicals focused intensely on the issue of sincerity and openness in their conversation as a defiant response to government attempts to police private speech through the Gagging Acts.⁷⁸ Yet the natural sincerity of the persona Dibdin projected in his performances suggests attempts from a loyalist perspective to claim and contest the politics of openness and genuine feeling. Equally, Matthew McCormack has portrayed radicals and reformers as the most vocal proponents of ‘manly independence’ in the first half of the 1790s, offering it as a sign of the integrity and virtue of their political critique. Meanwhile, he argues, loyalists were unable to do anything more compelling than reiterate the merits of dependency and hierarchy, as epitomized by Hannah More’s *Village Politics*.⁷⁹ Dibdin’s brand of loyalty, however, was inseparable from his public persona of manly independence. In contrast to the passive obedience encouraged by many loyalist propagandists, Dibdin offered a means for individuals to affirm their loyalty to the constitution and social order while refusing to surrender their right to criticize those charged with the administration of it. If the popularity of his entertainments and the wide circulation of his songs is anything to go by, it was a recipe that proved highly successful with the public.

It was this that made Dibdin’s defence of his personality through the libel trials all the more pressing. Accusations of plagiarism undermined Dibdin’s claim that his songs were the outpourings of natural feeling and independent loyalist sympathies. Instead, they became an open deception, their ability to persuade the public of the virtue of the loyalist cause undermined by their revelation as the work of a known sodomite. Indeed, the insinuations of sodomy slung at Dibdin also contained political overtones. Dibdin was not the only actor in this period to have been accused of improper relations ‘behind the curtain’, the very same phrase also appearing in William Jackson’s poem, *Sodom and Onan*, which accused Samuel Foote of committing the same offence.⁸⁰ As Matthew Kinservik and others have shown, in Foote’s case and in other high profile accusations in this period, sodomy was particularly associated with corruption and cover-ups in high society and government.⁸¹ Hence the charge levelled by Swan at Dibdin, that he was ‘backed by some persons of fame and Notoriety’, may well have had a particular resonance.

⁷⁸ Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Chapter Three.

⁷⁹ Matthew McCormack, *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 2, 120–47.

⁸⁰ William Jackson, *Sodom and Onan, a satire* (London, 1776), 7.

⁸¹ Matthew J. Kinservik, ‘The Politics and Poetics of Sodomy in the Age of George III’, *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29/2 (2006): 219–36; Charles Upchurch, ‘Politics and the

As his entanglements in the politics of personality show, interpreting Dibdin and the contemporary political culture he inhabited cannot be done through a purely textual analysis. Instead, we must appreciate the nature of his works as performances in which the person speaking, the manner of delivery, and the juxtaposition of texts as part of an evening's bill of fare mattered as much as the words spoken. This approach uncovers more fully the nature of Dibdin's 'independent loyalism' and its part in the complex interweaving and contesting of political languages of sincerity and independence, loyalism and reform. In doing so, it highlights the public's antipathy towards overt government propaganda. For Dibdin's audiences, loyalty to King and Constitution had to be carefully packaged alongside clear criticism of the government and the ruling elite if it was to be persuasive, commercially successful, and popular. His stance makes the so-called 'loyalist reaction' after 1792 seem a lot less sure-footed, dominant, and pro-ministerial than some historians have suggested.⁸² Instead, the appeal of Dibdin's performance of loyalism appears contingent upon fragile, and thus carefully defended, claims to speak independently, critically, and honestly to the public. With its cutting edge of social and political satire, and its sense of discontent and distrust of authority, Dibdin's loyalism was far removed from the aims of other prominent loyalist organizers and writers.⁸³ As such, it lends further weight to the arguments of Philp and others about the profound diversity of uses for the language of loyalty in the 1790s.⁸⁴ In short, while Dibdin's mastery of the politics of personality and the appeal of his brand of critical 'independent loyalism' made the job of those seeking to win support for more radical measures of reform more difficult, it was far from easy listening for anxious ministers and their allies struggling to keep the public inside in a tumultuous decade of war and revolution.

reporting of sex between men in the 1820s', in Brian Lewis (ed.), *British Queer History: New Approaches and Perspectives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 17–38; A. N. Gilbert, 'Sexual Deviance and Disaster during the Napoleonic Wars', *Albion* 9/2 (1977): 98–113.

⁸² See H. T. Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution 1789–1815* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), Chapter Two; Frank O'Gorman, 'Pitt and the "Tory" Reaction to the French Revolution 1789–1815' in H. T. Dickinson (ed.), *Britain and the French Revolution, 1789–1815* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 21–37; Ian R. Christie, 'Conservatism and stability in British society' in Mark Philp (ed.), *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 169–87.

⁸³ For comparison with other contemporary forms of conservative opinion, see Kevin Gilmartin, 'In the Theater of Counterrevolution: Loyalist Association and Conservative Opinion in the 1790s', *Journal of British Studies* 41/3 (2002): 291–328; Jennifer Mori, 'Languages of Loyalism: Patriotism, Nationhood and the State in the 1790s', *English Historical Review* 118 (2003): 33–58; Michael S. Smith, 'Anti-Radicalism and Popular Politics in an Age of Revolution', *Parliamentary History* 24 (2005): 71–92.

⁸⁴ See Philp, 'Vulgar Conservatism'; Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain*, Chapter Three; David Eastwood, 'Patriotism and the English State in the 1790s' in Mark Philp (ed.), *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 146–68; Nicholas Rogers, 'Burning Tom Paine: Loyalism and Counter-Revolution in Britain, 1792–1793', *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 32 (1999): 139–71.