

Interlude Three

Stipple, sketch and song: Dibdin and John Raphael Smith as professors and gentlemen

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The 1790s witnessed a minor boom in ‘posture’ prints of subjects taken from Charles Dibdin’s songs. Posture prints were mezzotints measuring roughly 14 x 10 inches and advertised for sale in print shop windows for 1s. uncoloured or 2s. coloured.¹ In the early 1790s printmakers in the City of London issued cheerfully coloured pictures of subjects drawn from songs performed by Dibdin in his entertainments in the Lyceum theatre: ‘The Greenwich Pensioner’, ‘The Lamplighter,’ ‘My Poll and my Partner Joe’, (Fig. I3.1) ‘The Elopement’, (Fig. I3.2) and ‘Poor Jack’.² Such songs would constitute a major but feasible luxury for a skilled labourer such as a coachman with an income of 15 to 20s. per week.³

[Insert Figures I3.1 and I3.2]

The images were accompanied by a few lines from the key verses and aimed to reproduce the broad humour and vivid characterizations that made the songs so popular. The prints remained popular, being reissued (as was common practice) and also appearing in other forms such as on earthenware.⁵ David O’Shaughnessy’s essay on Dibdin’s periodical *The Devil* discusses his relationship with one such publisher, Samuel William Fores, and Harriet Guest’s essay shows that graphic humour such as that sold by Fores was both a source of material for Dibdin as well as a means of embellishing his own song sheets.

Posture prints were produced in large numbers and for a relatively short time and so help to define the period, but this interlude will suggest that the more sophisticated and expensive

prints after Dibdin's songs are just as important in helping us gain a rounded understanding of his world. Attention to high-art representations of Dibdin's songs is important for a number of reasons. It reminds us that subjects from Dibdin's work were popular with the higher echelons of late Georgian society as well as with those in the City, and at the same time too. By looking at how Dibdin's subjects were adapted we can also see that his songs, as well as being the subject of high art, were also transformed and parodied by the artists and the people who bought the prints. Into this conversation piece we can insert Dibdin himself and get a better sense of who he mixed with and the context in which professional aspirations were sketched out and executed. In particular I shall focus on three sets of prints after paintings by George Morland, published between 1789 and 1791, to explore the workings of sociable behaviours and networks of professional gentlemen. One set was a pair titled 'The Contented Waterman' and 'Jack in the Bilboes', showing scenes taken from Dibdin's song 'My Poll and My Partner Joe' (see Figs 8.12 and 8.13 for illustrations.) These engravings were preceded by a set of six prints called *Laetitia*, a narrative that 'represent the progress of a young female, from a state of innocence in the country, through successive scenes of depravity and distress, till she is at last received penitent by her parents' (see Figure 13.3).⁶ Both sets were followed by *The Deserter*, a quartet of plates that appeared in 1791. Unlike the posture prints sold by City print sellers, the mezzotint and stipple engravings done after Morland's work were published from fashionable addresses in the West End and 'bought by distinguished connoisseurs' at home and abroad.⁷ They were also expensive: *Laetitia* cost £2 5s. for the set of six, uncoloured and unframed, and the *Deserter* £2 2s. for the set of four. In other words each set was more than twice the weekly income of the coachman who transported Laetitia and her officer away from her parents' home in the dead of night.⁸

Laetitia was based on designs painted by Morland for John Raphael Smith, a well-connected printmaker who published a wide range of portraits and subject pictures after leading artists, as well as many of his own compositions. The six prints are similar in format to a posture print but in stipple engraving rather than mezzotint, which has the same tonal range but a finer appearance as can be seen by comparing Smith's and Coard's treatment of elopements, and are slightly larger. The story is a sentimentalized version of a glee club song, 'Beautiful Sally', first published in 1787 by the art dealer William Collins, who adapted it from Dibdin's song 'High Mettl'd Racer', which appeared in his two-act entertainment *Liberty Hall*.⁹ The connections between Dibdin's song and Morland's adaptation can be traced through the circulation of Collins' 'Beautiful Sally', which was performed at the Anacreontic Society (who also printed it in 1790), where professional musicians like Charles Bannister rubbed shoulders with amateur musicians like John Raphael Smith. Bannister was a frequent performer of Dibdin's theatrical works in various venues, and gave the first performance of 'High Mettle'd Racer' at Drury Lane in February 1785.¹⁰ Bannister and Smith frequently attended Anacreontic Society meetings, and would have known both Dibdin's song and Collins' parody.¹¹ Smith was at this time Morland's *de facto* employer, and most likely suggested adapting 'Beautiful Sally', which Collins had shown him in manuscript, to Morland, who may also have known it from Collins himself, as the two had been acquaintances since the mid 1780s.¹²

'The Contented Waterman' and 'Jack in the Bilboes' are paintings made by Morland after Dibdin's song 'My Poll and My Partner Joe', which he probably first performed on his 'farewell tour' in 1788.¹³ They were engraved as a pair of extremely fine mezzotints by his brother-in-law (and Smith's former pupil) William Ward. Given that a posture print by Robert Sayers of the same subject was published at the same time as Ward's prints (1790), it is possible

that the song also featured as part of Dibdin's entertainment *The Oddities* at the Lyceum. Morland's designs are much more sophisticated than Sayers' mezzotint. Like *Laetitia* they have ambitions to be regarded as what Collins termed 'the more exalted style of composition . . . called historical painting', an aspiration signified by the representation of narrative through gesture and expression and also through references to high art, especially Dutch painting and Thomas Gainsborough's cottage door scenes.¹⁴ Moreover, 'My Poll and My Partner Joe' is a four-verse song. Sayers' posture print, as well as Anne Dibdin's own aquatint of the song reproduced in volume two of *The Professional Life*, represents the climax in which the waterman returns from the wars to find that Joe and Poll have taken up together. But the prints after Morland's paintings only depict scenes from verses one and two. The genre of 'contrast' was popular for pictures featuring moral subjects, and Morland had already worked on a number of well-received pairs in which industry is contrasted with idleness, or cruelty with sympathy. A 'contrast' format may have been his way of instilling a measure of moral elevation into comic verse, and it also allowed him to demonstrate his mastery of contrasting passions of contentment and terror. At the same time the venture lacks Smith's business acumen, since in refusing the sentimental appeal of Smith's pictures and the cheerfulness with which Dibdin's characters tend to bear their misfortunes, the pictures become less marketable. Dibdin himself may have recognized this when he revisited the press gang theme later in the 1790s to give it a happier ending.¹⁵ When 'The Contented Waterman' was reissued in 1806 following Morland's early death, the publisher did not reissue its violent companion, 'Jack in the Bilboes'.¹⁶

The evidence points to Dibdin's work being interpreted and offered to a market for sophisticated and expensive images by a network of artists including Morland, Smith, Collins, and Ward. Dibdin and Smith were personally acquainted. Smith's father was a successful painter

but Smith was apprenticed to a linen draper and moved to London in 1767, having a shop in Exeter Change off the Strand. In the 1820s Henry Angelo recalled: ‘It was during [Smith’s] residence there, that he became acquainted with Charles Dibdin, and having then some practical knowledge of the arts, Dibdin [then at Drury Lane] advised him to sink the shop, and become a “professor and a gentleman”’.¹⁷ (By ‘professor’ he is most likely to have meant one who professed an art both as a living and as a gentleman.) Dibdin and Smith’s acquaintance may still have been warm in 1788 when Dibdin gave his first solo entertainments in an auction-room in King Street, Covent Garden, the same street in which Smith had his shop, and where he showed paintings by Morland and his prints after them.¹⁸ It is possible that Smith was one of the ‘friends’ who encouraged Dibdin to persevere with solo performance and to begin publishing his own work, a move Smith himself had taken in 1781, and which he followed with a solo exhibition in Norwich in 1784.¹⁹

We can see from the case of *Laetitia* that the activities of clubs played a vital role in mediating between song and print, as well as serving as a means by which singers and artists met one another. Smith was a member of the Anacreontic Society, a club for noblemen and professional singers that hosted semi-private concerts and met in the Crown and Anchor tavern, just east of Smith’s shops in Exeter Change and Exeter Court, which ‘contained one splendid room measuring no less than 84ft by 35ft’ where a large company could meet.²⁰ Dibdin himself composed many songs, and as we have already seen these were adapted and given new words by amateurs such as Collins. While there is no evidence that Dibdin attended meetings of the Anacreontic Society, he circulated in the same milieu: his songs were well known there, and he performed at the same venue in 1807 at a Royal Academy birthday dinner, where he ‘much pleased [the Academicians] with humorous songs’.²¹

For his part Dibdin was an accomplished draughtsman, as testified by his accomplished pen and wash landscape drawings in the contemporary picturesque style.²²

[Insert Figure I3.4]

Henry Angelo's comment that Dibdin had 'some practical knowledge of the arts' is borne out by these drawings; he may have been a member of a sketching club such as the Jack Harris tavern club, hosted by the West End frame-maker John Harris, which Smith also attended.²³ Shortly before *The Professional Life* appeared, Dibdin published his *Observations on a Tour*, 'two large and handsome quarto volumes, embellished with forty views and twenty vignettes'. In the 'Advertisement' which prefaced the volumes Dibdin exclaims: 'Painting, which had been only my private amusement, out of devotion to the public, I have in this instance made one of my professions.'²⁴ In other words his profession of painting was a public extension of his private character. Amateur drawing, as contemporary guides pointed out, was the exemplary private medium, and it was in the context of sketching clubs and the taking of a picturesque tour that the profession of an art agreed with the private status of a gentleman, something that Dibdin was no doubt eager to advertise. But the associations may reach further than that. Dibdin's views and vignettes conform in every way to the prescriptions laid down in manuals such as Rudolph Ackermann's *Lessons for Beginners in the Fine Arts* (1796). Ackermann was proprietor of a large shop called The Repository of Arts at 101 Strand, opposite the Lyceum Theatre and a few yards west of the Royal Academy's home in Somerset House.²⁵ Like Dibdin's own shop and theatre in Leicester Place, and Smith's shop and gallery in King Street, the Repository disguised its commercial functions in the garb of private leisure through the addition of a drawing school, a library, and (by 1801) a small gallery.²⁶ Aquatint, the method used by Anne Dibdin to turn her father's tinted drawings into print, was the same method used by Ackermann and other

publishers of ‘progressive’ drawing manuals to demonstrate the process of composing a landscape drawing.²⁷

[Insert Figure I3.5]

Publishing the aquatints in *Observations on a Tour* helped align the character of Dibdin’s shop and theatre with the kind of venture promoted so successfully by Ackermann. It also formed part of a broader and more longstanding claim to be a professional but leisured man of letters modelled by figures such as Charles Burney, a claim that was not without risk, as Jeremy Barlow helpfully explains in his essay on Dibdin’s tours.

For Dibdin and Smith clubs were an important medium for professional and social affiliation. For models of professional success they had David Garrick and Sir Joshua Reynolds, first President of the Royal Academy, with whom they had, respectively, close working relationships. While it is difficult to know how clubbable Dibdin really was—*The Professional Life* says little about informal friendships and he is quick to distinguish his own conduct from the masculine world of drinking, rural sports, and glees that inform his songs—we should note that male conviviality took a wide range of forms, and Burney, Garrick and Reynolds’s ‘Club’, and indeed the Royal Academy itself, had as good a claim as any to embody the ideal of sober male companionship adumbrated by Joseph Addison in *The Spectator*.²⁸ Dibdin’s self-fashioning as a gentleman-professor of picturesque scenery speaks to the explicitly clubbable male world of the Georgian theatre revealed in *The Professional Life*, but also to the more conspicuously female character of the leisure classes at the turn of the century. If, as Ann Bermingham has noted, these two spheres competed for cultural authority around 1800, we should also note that neither would question the broad truth of Dibdin’s assumption that the summit of professional achievement was to be known as a ‘professor and a gentleman’.

In this context, it is unsurprising that art had high ambitions. Different attempts were made in the eighteenth century to show how art could make people virtuous, and sociability was a key feature in most theories.²⁹ Clubs and commerce served as a means to transcend local associations and personal interest through cultivation of private character, which is precisely what art in its highest eighteenth-century form, the painting of exemplary virtue, also claimed to do. Given this association of private character and professional ambition we should not be surprised if a glimpse of private life sheds new light on the structure and ambitions of professional activity, as suggested by Dibdin's advice to Smith to become 'a professor and a gentleman'. Dibdin's shop in Leicester Square had the same refined character as Smith's shop in King Street. In fact the situation of their shops, performances, exhibitions and clubs along the principal thoroughfares of the west end—the Strand, King Street, Leicester Square—helps us see that claims to gentlemanly and professional status were facilitated by local contacts, but at same time had to divest themselves of any local character. In this context, Dibdin's exasperated 'I grew most intolerably sick of a traffic with music-shops' may be more than simply a metaphor, since it reveals a concern that the very topography of London and the sinews of its commerce was antithetical to the private character of a professor and gentleman, a combination whose best spatial analogy is the picturesque tour.³⁰

I'm pleased to acknowledge how much this Interlude owes to Ian Newman's helpful and very knowledgeable suggestions on earlier drafts.

¹ For ‘posture’ prints see Sheila O’Connell, ‘Humorous, Historical and Miscellaneous: Mezzotints, One Shilling Plain, Two Shillings Coloured’, *Publishing History* 70/1 (2011): 83–100.

² ‘Poor Jack’ was the subject of two posture prints in 1790, the first issued by Robert Sayer (BM 2010,7081.3129), the second by Carington Bowles II and Samuel Carver (BM 1935,0522.1.34). The other prints include: ‘My Poll and my Partner Joe’, Robert Sayer, 1790 (BM 1877,0113.162) and reissued by James Whittle and Richard Holmes Laurie, 1794 (National Maritime Museum PAF4034); ‘The Greenwich Pensioner’, Carington Bowles after Robert Dighton, 1790–91 (BM 1935,0522.1.35); ‘The Elopement’ (from *The Watchman*), J. Coard, 1795 (BM 2010,7081.993); and ‘The Lamplighter’, Carington Bowles after Robert Dighton, 1790 (BM 1935,0522.1.36).

³ For prices and wages see O’Connell, ‘Humorous’, 88–89; Marcia Pointon, ‘The Business of Portrait Painting in 1780s London’, *Art History* 7/2 (1984): 200.

⁵ Stella Beddoe, ‘Charles Dibdin and the Apotheosis of Jack Tar’, in Amanda Dunsmore (ed.), *This Blessed Pot, This Earth: English Pottery Studies in Honour of Jonathan Horne* (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2011), 108–12.

⁶ George Dawe, *The Life of George Morland, with Remarks on His Works* (London, 1807), 63.

⁷ Tim Clayton, *The English Print, 1688–1802* (New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, 1997), 274; see also O’Connell, ‘Humorous’, 92. *Laetitia* and *The Deserter* were published John Raphael Smith in King Street, the main thoroughfare from Covent Garden to Leicester Fields. ‘The Contented Waterman’ and ‘Jack in the Bilboes’ were published by Philip Cornman just a stone’s throw to the west in Great Newport Street.

⁸ For prices see Smith's 1798 stock catalogue, reproduced in Ellen D'Oench, '*Copper into Gold*': *Prints by John Raphael Smith (1751–1812)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 259–64.

⁹ The ballad appeared in William Collins, *The New Vocal Miscellany, or, a Fountain of Pure Harmony* (London, 1787), but compare D'Oench, who states that Collins' claim to authorship is 'highly dubious', 'doubtful', and 'wholly false': D'Oench, '*Copper into Gold*', 125, 145.

¹⁰ *Public Advertiser* (4 February 1785); Fahrner, 111.

¹¹ Julia Frankau, *An Eighteenth Century Artist and Engraver. John Raphael Smith: His Life and Works* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1902), 14.

¹² William Collins, *Memoirs of a Picture: Containing the Adventures of Many Conspicuous Characters*, 3 vols (London, 1805), 2:2, 19, 179; see also Angelo, *Reminiscences*, 1:243–48.

¹³ *Life*, 2:250. For the prints, see Julia Frankau, *William Ward ARA and James Ward RA: Their Lives and Works* (London: Macmillan, 1904), 172–73 and 217–18.

¹⁴ Collins, *Memoirs*, 2:43.

¹⁵ *Life*, 3:57–59.

¹⁶ See Frankau, *William Ward*, 172–73 and 217–18.

¹⁷ Angelo, *Reminiscences*, 2:241.

¹⁸ *Life*, 3:2.

¹⁹ D'Oench, '*Copper into Gold*', 150.

²⁰ E. Beresford Chancellor, *Annals of the Strand* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1912), 333; see also Ian Newman's blog on taverns and political space (accessed 6 July 2015):

www.1790salehouse.com. For Smith's membership see Frankau, *John Raphael Smith*, 17.

²¹ Joseph Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. Kathryn Cave, 16 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 8:3059, 5 June 1807.

²² E.g. BM 1876,0708.2372; BM 1876,0708.2373.

²³ Frankau, *John Raphael Smith*, 17, and Walter Thornbury, *The Life of J.M.W. Turner*, 2 vols (1862, repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1:108.

²⁴ *Observations*.

²⁵ For more on Ackermann's 'Repository', see Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 127–43.

²⁶ These parallels may have resonated in 1811 when Ackermann reissued Smith's *Laetitia* in a new series.

²⁷ Bermingham, *Learning*, 165–7.

²⁸ *Life*, 1:8. For a more detailed discussion of Dibdin's alignment with the *Spectator* see David O'Shaugnessy's essay in this volume.

²⁹ See especially Andrew Hemingway, 'The "Sociology" of Taste in the Scottish Enlightenment', *Oxford Art Journal* 12/2 (1989): 3–35, and David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).

³⁰ *Life*, 3:8.