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**CLAPPING TO A CRIMINAL:  
THE JACK SHEPPARD CRAZE OF THE 1720s**

*Klára Škrobánková*

**Abstract**

Jack Sheppard, a real historical figure executed in 1724 London, became the focus of many biographical publications and theatrical pieces immediately after his demise. This article examines the earliest literary works featuring Sheppard and the way the character of a criminal entered London's stages. By analyzing the digression from the facts of Sheppard's life, the tendencies of the popular theatrical genres of the 1720s emerge. Based on two works of art, Thurmond's *Harlequin Sheppard* (1724) and Walker's *Quaker's Opera* (1728), one can trace the development of the theatre devices as well as the marketing strategies dramatic authors used to lure the audience into theatres. Both examined pieces were not particularly successful but Thurmond's pantomime significantly inspired John Gay to write *Beggar's Opera*, basing the character of Macheath on Sheppard. Walker then combined the two phenomena – taking the strategies of new ballad operas, he repurposed the story of Jack Sheppard and adapted it into *Quaker's Opera*.

**Keywords**

Jack Sheppard, pantomime, ballad opera, eighteenth century, *The Beggar's Opera*, biography

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THE figure of Jack (or John) Sheppard, a London-based criminal executed in the fall of 1724, has periodically emerged on the English stage, significantly influencing English popular culture. Beginning during his lifetime, Sheppard's popularity continued to grow throughout the 1720s, culminating with the publication and staging of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in 1728. The second wave of Sheppard's popularity came in the first half of the nineteenth century with the publication of William Harrison Ainsworth's novel *Jack Sheppard. A Romance* (published serially in *Bentley's Miscellany* from 1839 to 1840), which inspired nine new theatre adaptations (Moore 2014, 294). However, the popularity of the character was quickly cut short after "the murder of 72-year-old Lord William Russell by his valet, Courvoisier. At his

## *Clapping to a Criminal: The Jack Sheppard Craze of the 1720s*

trial, Courvoisier claimed he had gone to his master's bedroom to kill him after reading *Jack Sheppard*" (294). The murder led to the subsequent ban on staging and publishing of any work of art featuring the name of Jack Sheppard. The interest in the famed criminal was revived in the twentieth century not only with Brecht's adaptation of *The Beggar's Opera* entitled *Die Dreigroschenoper*, but also by the 1969 movie adaptation *Where's Jack*, which focused on the events of Sheppard's life.

Despite many books often mentioning Sheppard as the inspiration for Gay's Macheath,<sup>1</sup> very little attention has been paid to the collection of literary artworks that were published around the same time that shared a common interest in the re-telling of the exciting story of Sheppard, who was able to successfully evade the law. This article describes the tendencies in the 1720s writings about Jack Sheppard, focusing on the employed strategies of marketing such pieces and the development of the theatrical genres which featured the character of the famous criminal.

Criminality was a part of everyday life in early eighteenth-century London, as there has not yet been a police force, and "stealing, from people or houses, with or without violence, [was] the most common crime" (Picard 2004, 233). It is, therefore, not surprising that various depictions of criminal activities have found their way onto the stage. At the beginning of the century, the popularity of pantomimes featuring the beloved Harlequin was immense. As John O'Brien suggests, there has been close association between pantomime and criminality, "as early eighteenth-century harlequinades frequently cast their hero as a petty thief, and often brought him into contact with the criminal justice system" (O'Brien 2015, 150). London audiences were thus used to comical rendering of criminal characters, which later combined with political satire, which was growing in popularity. The often-published biographies of infamous thieves, burglars and other criminals not only offered an insight into London's criminal underground culture, but also provided a space for the subtle critique of societal development. "The criminal narrative functioned as a means of critiquing a developing commercial society in England," addressing the local government's inability to control the community's vices (Gonzales 2002, iv). The figure of Jack Sheppard as well as Sheppard, the dramatic character, stands witness to both forces behind contemporary popular culture. On one hand, he was a certain sort of short-lived celebrity, "a figure of widespread fascination and even admiration" (O'Brien 2015, 153). On the other hand, he and his life story

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<sup>1</sup> See Fiske's chapter on ballad opera in *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century* (1973), C. Winton's discussion of Gay's literary presence in Thurmond's *Harlequin Sheppard* in *John Gay and The London Theatre* (1993, 75–86), or D. F. O'Keefe's dissertation "Ballad Opera, Imitation, and the Formation of Genre" (2007, 85–92).

quickly became a platform for an amalgam of theatrical tendencies, such as the harlequinization of the main hero or the satirical depiction of the English society in the 1720s. The study of various texts, whose authors worked with the figure of Jack Sheppard, can then illustrate the way English popular theatre developed at that time and what appealed to the audience.

Jack Sheppard's life resembled biographies of many London criminals and low-lives. Born in 1702 in Spitalfields, London, as John Sheppard, he grew up in a carpenter's family and later became a carpenter's apprentice. This profession acquainted him with various tools that he later used for committing robberies and, most importantly, escaping from prisons, which made him famous all over London. He was commonly associated with petty criminals, prostitutes, and gamblers, but according to the available sources, was never a violent criminal, and only stole. One of the earliest mentions of Sheppard in the period press was published on July 25, 1724 in *The Daily Journal*. The short entry informed of the arrest of Sheppard, who previously escaped from the New Prison in Clerkenwell and was charged with several burglaries (Norton 2003). The succeeding pieces of news provide more information about Sheppard's fate, many attempts to escape from prison and three successful escapes, his associates, and the letters Sheppard allegedly wrote. On November 17, 1724, one day after Sheppard's execution, *The Daily Journal* lengthily describes the events of the hanging, but also advertises the upcoming publication of Sheppard's biography. The biography was implied to be a pamphlet written by Sheppard himself:

When he [Sheppard] arrived at the Tree, he sent for Mr Applebee, a printer, into the cart, and in the view of several thousands of people, deliver'd to him a printed pamphlet, *Entitled, a Narrative of all the Robberies and Escapes of John Sheppard, giving an exact Description of all his Robberies and Escapes, together with the wonderful Manner of his Escape from the Castle in Newgate, and of the Methods he took afterward for his Scurity, &c. which he desired might be forthwith printed and publish'd.* N.B. The said Narrative is now publish'd by John Applebee, Printer, in Black-Fryers; and sold by the Booksellers of London and Westminster. (Norton 2003)

The pamphlet was probably the work of Daniel Defoe, who had previously written *The History of the Remarkable Life of John Sheppard Containing a Particular Account of his Many Robberies and Escapes*, published by Applebee shortly before Sheppard's death. Although the new edition entitled *A Narrative of all the Robberies, Escapes, &c. of John Sheppard* promised the complete list of Sheppard's

crimes, its greatest feature was nevertheless the personal narrative of Sheppard. The title page of the publication claims that the text was “[w]ritten by himself [Sheppard] during his Confinement in the Middle Stone-Room, after his being re-taken in Drury-Lane” but it probably was the result of Defoe visiting the prisoner in Newgate prison and interviewing Sheppard out of personal interest (Defoe 1724b, 2). Both *The Daily Journal* and the frontpage state that *The Narrative of all the Robberies and Escapes* was published on Sheppard’s request; however, it seems probable that Defoe himself was invested in publishing the work as he significantly contributed to the criticism of the social state of London in the previously published pamphlet on Sheppard’s life, writing that:

*The Legislative Power has not been wanting in providing necessary and wholesome Laws against these Evils, the executive part whereof (according to your great Privileges) is lodged in your own Hands: And the Administration hath at all times applyed proper Remedies and Regulations to the Defects which have happen’d in the Magistracy more immediately under their Jurisdiction. . . . But here’s a Criminal bids Defiance to your Laws, and Justice who declar’d and has manifested that the Bars are not made that can either keep him Out, or keep him In, and accordingly hath a second time fled from the very Bosom Of Death. (Defoe 1724a)*

The *Narrative* then appears to be a continuation of the insight into the mind of the criminal and the ineffectiveness of the criminal system, which was not able to immediately arrest and punish Sheppard, letting him escape four times in total – firstly from St Giles’s Roundhouse and New Prison and then twice from Newgate Prison. These successful prisonbreaks led to Sheppard’s legendary status and distinguished him from the rest of London’s criminal underground culture. The story of Sheppard’s life and death quickly became popular and embedded itself in the minds of London’s citizens. The public had already been supplied with news reporting on Sheppard’s crimes, which was later followed by his biographies and portraits. The entrance of the Sheppardian character on the theatrical stages could be expected, as

[s]tories *continued* to thrive only when they were framed historically and/or supported by material evidence. Stories apparently need an association with a place or a date, an object or a person, to be believed, and to be transmitted, even if such stories can also be transplanted to another context when that suits the needs of the storyteller. (Pollmann 2017, 121)

The public awareness of Sheppard's life combined with many writings commemorating or describing his deeds, enabled the story of Jack Sheppard to spread freely. Following the publication of Defoe's accounts, many biographies of Sheppard emerged, narrating allegedly accurate events of his life. Such interest in the life of a criminal was, however, nothing unusual. Already in 1611, Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker featured the real-life character of Moll Cutpurse in their play *The Roaring Girl* and in 1662, bookseller William Gilbertson published the biography of this London petty criminal and an occasional performer Mary Frith, entitled *Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith. Commonly Called Mal Cutpurse*. Since the early seventeenth century, Frith appealed to English authors as she "dressed and acted like a man, visiting, 'alehouses'" (Wynne-Davies 2009, 21). Similarly to Sheppard, Frith's life and crimes have been gradually altered to fit the purpose of the writers. For instance, Alexander Smith, the author of the 1714 book *A Complete History of the Lives and Robberies of the Most Notorious Highwaymen, Shoplifts, and Cheats of Both Sexes*, fabricated "an episode in which she [Frith] is 'known' to have accosted and robbed the parliamentarian general Thomas Fairfax on the road to Hounslow Heath" (Mowry 2005, 27). The female outlaw, again like Sheppard, inspired Daniel Defoe to create the character of Moll Flanders (27). Moreover, during the life of Jack Sheppard, a comparably popular criminal emerged from London's criminal underground culture. Jonathan Wild, the double agent fighting crime while engaging in various criminal activities, gained considerable recognition, and led to the creation of Gay's Peachum in the *Beggar's Opera*. All three of these criminals were distinguishable within the scope of the London environment – a cross-dressing female thief, crime-fighting double agent, and serial escapist were certainly attractive characters to dramatize as the public enjoyed seeing such rebellious figures on stage. Yet, their greatest appeal was in their realness, in the thrill of knowing that the depicted crimes did indeed happen. It is no surprise then, that it was necessary to publish the criminal's biography and only then come with a play featuring the dramatic rendition of the said thief or burglar.

Immediately after Sheppard's death, the anonymous *Authentic Memoirs of the Life and Surprising Adventures of John Sheppard: Who was Executed at TYBURN, November the 16th, 1724. By way of FAMILIAR LETTERS from a Gentleman in Town, to his Friend and Correspondent in the Country* was published by Joseph Marshall and J. Roberts. This epistolary novel narrates the life of Sheppard with considerable accuracy but eventually turns to a rather fantastic retelling of certain moments. The departure from historical accuracy is suggested in the frontpage of the book, as it features an altered quote from Thomas Otway's tragedy *Venice Preserv'd*. Compare the two excerpts:

*Clapping to a Criminal: The Jack Sheppard Craze of the 1720s*

I've done a deed will make my story hereafter  
Quoted in competition with all ill ones:  
The history of my wickedness shall run  
Down through the low traditions of the vulgar,  
And boys be taught to tell the tale of Jaffeir. (Otway 1682, 47–48)

I've done such deeds, will make my story hereafter  
Quoted in competition with all ill ones:  
The history of my wickedness shall run  
Down through the low traditions of the vulgar,  
And boys be taught to tell the tale of – Sheppard. (*Authentic Memoirs* 1724, 1)

The change of name and the plural form “deeds” might seem a minor alteration, but it in fact suggests a major change in the understanding of the Jack Sheppard character. By choosing to stylize Sheppard as Jaffeir, the tragic hero of Otway’s play, the anonymous author of the *Authentic Memoir* deviates from the portrayal of Sheppard as a despicable criminal and ascribes some virtues to Sheppard’s doings. The shift in the depiction of the criminal is also apparent in Sheppard’s “suppos’d speech,” fabricated final words that the author of the memoir thought fitting for the death of his hero. The speech opens with the line “Like Doctor Faustus, I my pranks have play’d,” referring to the popular pantomime *Harlequin Doctor Faustus* (1723), emphasizing the theatricality of Sheppard as described in the *Authentic Memoirs* (*Authentic Memoirs* 1724, 70). The idea to write an entertaining piece of art rather than biography is further confirmed in the Letter VI of the *Authentic Memoirs*: “And as most of our modern poets have made it a standing rule, to dismiss their audience with something gay and airy, let the play be never so tragical and full of distress; I have put my invention on the wrack, to wind up my bottom after the same manner, and entertain you with something whimsical and novel” (*Authentic Memoirs* 1724, 74). Apart from the ironical description of the state of contemporary theatre, the author clearly states his ambition to produce a work of art that would have theatrical qualities. He continues with confessing his desire to create a sequel to the story of Sheppard’s life: “My next project was, to give you a long narration of *Sheppard’s* coming to life again, and (as most people thought he dealt with the devil) assert, his being seen with his gimlets, saws, and chisels, in a carpenter’s habit, hard at work upon the *Triple-Tree*,” but eventually decides to abandon this plan as it would be “all farce, and supernatural” and therefore a more fitting plot for the Italian opera (76). The bracketed mention of the popular belief that Sheppard was associated with the devil might again refer to the character’s similarity with the character of Faustus. This Faustus, however, differed

from the Marlovian academic, and merged with the ever-popular figure of Harlequin, coming from the lower classes, playing tricks on the wealthy.

The first theatre adaptation of the story of Jack Sheppard emerged shortly after his execution on November 16, 1724. Only twelve days after the hanging, Drury Lane theatre staged a new pantomime written/designed/created by their dance master John Thurmond entitled *Harlequin Sheppard. A Night Scene in Grotesque Characters*. The printed script of the pantomime was supplemented by another biography of Sheppard, repeating the well-known facts of his criminal life. Here the notion of Sheppard the hero is once again challenged, as Sheppard is compared to Alexander the Great, Caesar and Pompey Magnus. Thurmond is led to believe that the similarity between the quartet of historical figures stems from their untimely deaths, that were caused by the “envious people” (Thurmond 1724, 5). This hints upon the rivalry between various members of the London criminal underground, a theme later elaborated by John Gay in the *Beggar’s Opera*, where there is rivalry between the characters of Macheath, Peachum and Lockett, who all run their own criminal businesses, profiting either from theft and robbery, denouncing people or bribery. Thurmond further restrains himself from analyzing the life of Sheppard, providing a background information on Sheppard that would introduce the character to the reader.

The plot of the *Harlequin Sheppard* begins with the titular hero’s escape from the “Castle,” a highly secured cell in Newgate Prison. The pantomime showcases Sheppard’s prison-break, following the historical events, yet adding various slapstick elements – most notably the instruments which the hero uses for his escape, hidden in a pie. These scenes are followed by the scene on a street, where a procession of prisoners can be seen. Among the prisoners is another famous real criminal, Joseph Blake alias Blueskin, Sheppard’s colleague, on his way to the court of justice, the Old Bailey. Suddenly “the music changes. Enter two people as from the Old Baily in surprize, one with a pen-knife in his hand, who makes signs that one of the prisoners had cut a man’s throat. Immediately the prisoners re-enter, and Blueskin exulting, imagining that he has cut Jonathan Wild’s throat effectually” (Thurmond 1724, 15). The story of Blake attempting to murder Wild, a double agent fighting against crime but also engaging in many illegal activities, is historically accurate, yet is only vaguely connected to the events of Sheppard’s escape. Thurmond probably added the scene to the pantomime for its appealing characteristics, with Wild being one of the hated characters of London’s public life as he brought many criminals to justice (Moore 2014, 265). The scene concludes with the first of two songs included in the pantomime, “Newgate’s Garland,” sung by the prisoners, who rejoice



in the apparent death of Wild. “Newgate’s Garland,” which is sometimes attributed to Jonathan Swift,<sup>2</sup> is the work of John Gay, who wrote the text in 1724. As C. Winton suggests, the ballad is “a significant step on the way to *The Beggar’s Opera*,” both because of the pantomime’s specific humor and the setting among the London criminals (Winton 1993, 75). The interconnectedness with *The Beggar’s Opera* is striking especially in the third stanza, when Gay ponders on the corrupted nature of all professions:

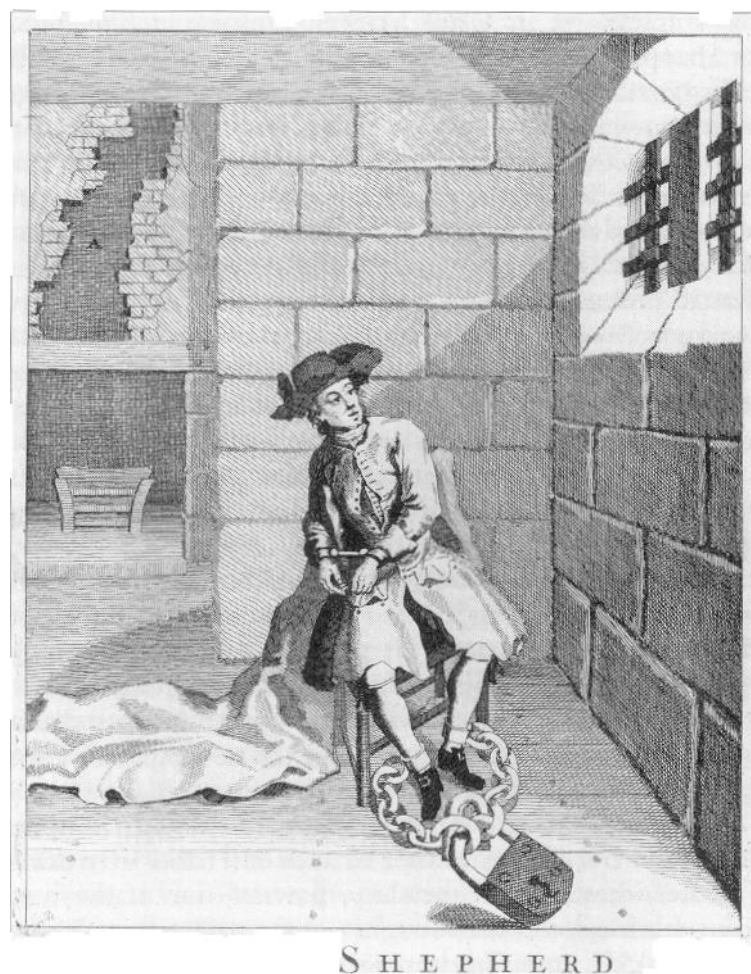
Knives of old, to hide guilt, by their cunning inventions,  
Call’d briberies grants, and plain robberies pensions;  
Physicians and lawyers (who take their degrees  
To be learned rogues) call’d their pilfering, fees;  
Since this happy day,  
Now ev’ry man may  
Rob (as safe as in office) upon the highway. (Thurmond 1724, 17)

Here, many verses echo the famous songs and lines from *The Beggar’s Opera*, most notably the opening air “Through all the employments of life,” where Peachum mocks cheating lawyers and statesmen, and Air XI (“A fox may steal your hens”), in which Peachum sings “If lawyer’s hand is fee’d, sir / He steals your whole estate” (Gay 2010, 29). The song was originally performed by Mr. Harper to the tune of “Packington’s Pound,” a melody later used by Gay for Air XLIII, “Thus gamesters united” sung by Lockit (Thurmond 1724, 16).

The plot of *Harlequin Sheppard* then continues by Sheppard’s escape by coach and a highly satirical image of prison wardens confusingly looking for Sheppard, who is long gone. In quick succession, the audience witnesses Sheppard’s burglaries, and his final arrest in a room in an alley house. The pantomime concludes with another song, “A Canting Song” sung by the character of Frisky Moll, Sheppard’s mistress, who mourns the loss of her lover, blaming alcohol to be Sheppard’s demise. The tune of the song is not specified, with Mr. Harper writing the lyrics characterized by the amount of criminal slang used to the point of Thurmond providing the reader of the printed edition with explanatory footnotes (22–23). The publication is supplemented by a drawing of Sheppard, sitting in his cell with shackles, fetters, and a big lock, dressed in a Harlequin costume – checkered suit, hat, ruff, and a half-face mask. This frontispiece is an allusion of the famous portrait of Sheppard in his cell, published alongside *The Narrative of all the Robberies and Escapes*.

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<sup>2</sup> See Moore 2014, 265.



**Figure 1:** Jack Sheppard in his cell, letter A on the wall in the upper left corner marking the hole through which the prisoner later escaped. First published in Defoe's *A Narrative of all the Robberies and Escapes of John Sheppard* in 1724. (Source: en.wikipedia.org)

*Harlequin Sheppard* was performed seven times (premiered on November 28 and reprised on November 30, December 1, 2, 3, 4 and 26, 1724) at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane (*The London Stage*). After the first four December reruns, *The Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post* published a review, stating that: “[It] was dismiss’d with a universal hiss.—And, indeed, if Shepherd had been as wretched, and as silly a Rogue in the World, as the ingenious and witty Managers have made him upon the Stage, the lower Gentry, who attended him to Tyburn, wou’d never have pittied him when he was hang’d” (*The London Stage*). The performance on December 26 was shown “at the desire of several persons of quality,” but it still was the last time *Harlequin Sheppard* was staged (*The London Stage*).

Despite the inconsiderable success of Thurmond's pantomime, the play emphasized an important movement within what O'Brien calls "urban mass culture to which the new phenomenon of entertainment appealed" (O'Brien 2015, 140). The general popularity of pantomimes with the character of Harlequin combined with the Sheppard-craze of the 1720s without a doubt seemed like a good entrepreneurial opportunity to Thurmond and the managers of Drury Lane theatre. What seemed like "a sign of degradation of traditional literary culture and the reduction of the theater's scope to mere spectacle and show," was also a step toward a certain theatre consumerist behavior, that would later continue with the quickly appearing ballad operas of questionable quality (140). The element of the harlequinade in *Harlequin Sheppard* is therefore only a marketing strategy as the pantomime contains only minor signs of the genre, most notably the physicality of the lead actor, who had to be able to perform various acrobatic tricks with the fetters and continuous escapes. Apart from this physicality, the pantomime does not possess typical signs of the genre, such as a double plot and other (Semmens 2016, 146). It was, nevertheless, the first occasion to present the life of Jack Sheppard on the English stage.

The character of Jack Sheppard appeared on the London stage again in 1728, shortly after the premiere and subsequent success of Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, which opened on January 29, 1728 in Lincoln's Inn Fields and "ran for a record sixty-two nights" in the first season (Gay 2010, vii). In August 1728, seven months after the debut of *The Beggar's Opera*, Thomas Walker's *Quaker's Opera* premiered in the Lee and Harper's Booth in Bartholomew Fair. Thomas Walker was an actor, famous for being the first performer of Captain Macheath. It is apparent that Walker wanted to use the popularity of the newly established genre of ballad opera for financial profit and had therefore decided to use the previously published but never staged farce *The Prison Breaker or The Adventures of John Shepard* (1725), which dramatized the life of Jack Sheppard, and combined it with tried and tested elements of *Beggar's Opera*, such as the portrayal of London lower classes, satirical depiction of law, and commentaries in the form of songs.

The plot of *The Quaker's Opera* focuses on the escapes of Sheppard as it was known from his biographies and *Harlequin Sheppard*, but it also adds a romantic subplot not unlike Gay's romantic triangle of Macheath, Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit. Sheppard has two lovers as well, Molly Frisky (an echo of Thurmond's Moll Frisk) and Nancy Hackabout. Sheppard's love interests are, however, only short episodes showcasing the hero's low morals as he takes pride in having many mistresses and is quick to confess this to Hackabout: "However, my dear, I pity thee and am now going to another mistress like a fine gentleman" (Walker 1728, 36).

The handling of the issue of criminality is one of the most notable differences between the two ballad operas. The entire second act of *Quaker's Opera* deals with Sheppard's plans to rob a wealthy Welsh lawyer's house. This burglary is later presented onstage in a slapstick manner: when discovered by a Constable, Sheppard poses as the lawyer and eventually has his victim arrested. Notwithstanding the wit and cunning of Sheppard, the ballad opera concludes with his execution. Walker's Sheppard is an amalgam of two approaches stemming from the two influences the author used when writing the play. On occasion, Sheppard stylizes himself as a noble, intelligent criminal. In Act II, the character even compares himself to Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Louis Dominique Bourguignon Cartouch, the French highwayman stealing from the rich and giving to the poor: "Activity is the soul of business – Alexander! Caesar! Cartouch and Shepard" (28). The mentioning of Alexander and Caesar furthermore confirms that Walker was familiar with *Harlequin Sheppard*, as the two politicians were mentioned in the pantomime's introduction. The noble criminal Sheppard is then contrasted with the mere rogue Sheppard, who spends his days stealing and drinking with his accomplices. Walker does not fully adopt the satire of Gay's work, choosing not to focus on the political implications and allusions. This is particularly striking in the finale of *Quaker's Opera*, when Walker stays true to the historical events and has Sheppard hanged. The chorus then sings and dances to the tune of Purcell's tune "Britons Strike Home":

*Rust.* Come, this affair is very happy for every body – honest people may sleep in safety now, therefore a little mirth will not be unseasonable.

Come, let's have a dance. [*Dance here*]

*Chorus.* AIR XXVI. *Britons Strike Home*

Let us rejoyce! Revenge and justice assume their seat:

Vice shall be punish'd, and virtue and virtue again be great!

Sing, sing and rejoyce, sing, sing and rejoyce,

Sing, sing with a general voice. (Walker 1728, 49)

In the world of Gay's opera, such justice would not be possible as his world is utterly corrupted, and the character of Macheath, despite being influenced by the life of the real Jack Sheppard, evades his execution in scene XVI of the third act as "an opera must end happily" as it must "comply with the taste of the town" (Gay 2010, 114). Walker's Sheppard, heavily influenced by the biography of the historical character, on the other hand, dies in accordance with the preceding Sheppardian writings.

### *Clapping to a Criminal: The Jack Sheppard Craze of the 1720s*

The remaining features of *Quaker's Opera* do not relate to the main plot and mostly serve as comical parentheses or borrowings from Gay's text. Walker introduces several stereotypical characters such as a Welsh lawyer, Irishman, and the titular Quaker, who appears only at the beginning of the play, serving as a satirical image of a lewd, alcohol-drinking clergyman. The influence of *Beggar's Opera* is visible in the Prologue, where the Beggar in the Beggar-Player duo is exchanged for a Quaker, and in the conversational dynamics of Mr. and Mrs. Coaxthief, who were influenced by the Peachums and their constant nagging and quarrelling. The title of Walker's ballad opera therefore corresponds with the marketing strategy employed by Thurmond. As Thurmond relied on the popularity of Harlequin, Walker named his work in order to resemble the title of Gay's *Beggar's Opera* and was not particularly concerned with the Quaker disappearing in the first third of the play.

Similarly to *Harlequin Sheppard*, *The Quaker's Opera* did not succeed on the London stage. After its premiere in August 1728, it was performed five times with little to no success. Many scholars dismissed the work completely, claiming that it has "no wit" and is a mere imitation of *Beggar's Opera* (Kidson 1922, 78). Yet, Walker's reworking of the story of Jack Sheppard serves as a key witness to the period practice of borrowing from both literature and contemporary drama. Even though today only Gay's *Beggar's Opera* remains performed, it is important to perceive the English culture of the early eighteenth century as complex, and acknowledge the interconnectedness of various dramatic pieces and genres. Neither *Harlequin Sheppard*, nor *The Quaker's Opera* were of high quality, yet they presented the main character of the criminal Sheppard with attention to diverse characteristics, thus highlighting the changing taste of the public. The change in the understanding of the figure of Sheppard demonstrates the transforming social preferences of the atreagoers, who in a matter of four years, were able to grow accustomed to both rogue criminal characters and the portrayals of the noble thieves.

In the transformations of the Jack Sheppard character, two tendencies can be observed. Firstly, it is the theatricalisation of the real-life criminal, that sprung from the popularity of Harlequin, who often stood at the wrong side of the law and performed acrobatic scenes, which J. Thurmond tried to utilize in his pantomime *Harlequin Sheppard*. Sheppard's prison breaks offered the possibility to showcase the performer's acrobatic skills, and his disdain for law and wit could be used for critique of the society and its structure. Furthermore, the figure of Sheppard harboured strong marketing potential. Similarly to the booksellers' attempt to use Sheppard's execution to promote the *Narrative of all the Robberies, Escapes, &c.*

of *John Sheppard*, Thomas Walker used the well-known character of Sheppard in the hope of creating a new popular ballad opera. After the premiere of Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, many started composing ballad operas with a wish to become equally successful. By making Sheppard the hero of the *Quaker's Opera*, Walker might have hoped to attract the audience's attention by using both the popular form of ballad opera and the criminal character, who earlier in the decade enjoyed certain popularity. Even though Walker's, and to an extent also Thurmond's, work of art did not ultimately succeed like their authors hoped, they nevertheless contributed to the transformation of the historical figure of Sheppard into a dramatic figure of a legendary criminal. Where Gay's Macheath functions as a predominantly thought-provoking, satirical character indirectly criticizing the political state of England, Sheppard's renditions present a popular folk protagonist whose aim was to entertain the audience. In theatre, Jack Sheppard represented the continuation of the comical tradition of country bumpkins, Pickleherrings and Harlequins. The Sheppardian figure was a powerful popular motif which, within a few years, inspired authors of pamphlets, farces, pantomimes and ballad operas alike, showing that rapid changes and genre adjustment were inherent features of the English popular theatrical culture of the early eighteenth century.

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*Clapping to a Criminal: The Jack Sheppard Craze of the 1720s*

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