

*The
Politics of
Reputation
in British
America*

**The
Lord
Cornbury
Scandal**

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Published for the

Omohundro Institute of
Early American History
and Culture,

Williamsburg, Virginia,

by the University of

North Carolina Press,

Chapel Hill and London



employed by colonial assemblies in the years ahead. And in another tactic soon to become familiar, Thomas Byerly, New York's dissident receiver of customs, had by 1707 slowed payment of the governor's salary and expenses in that colony: "I must send ten times before I can get one Warrant paid," complained Cornbury, "and that three or four months after it is due." Meanwhile, Byerly "tells every body over his Cups, that I and the Council have nothing to doe with him, nor his accounts." Cornbury apparently believed he had no alternative but to borrow money in New York to pay administrative expenses in New Jersey.⁴⁷ On the private side, Lord Cornbury and his family lived well, as patricians were expected to do in the eighteenth century, but not necessarily beyond their means as understood at the time.

Little that happened in New York and New Jersey in these years makes sense outside a political context. Appointments, salaries, land grants, personal debts — all were subject to political manipulation. Nor could those in the public eye escape the climate of rumor, gossip, and suspicion that colored most political, and many personal, transactions in early modern life, a climate further poisoned by bitter party animosities during Queen Anne's reign when the Tories briefly regained power in England. Some attention to that larger Anglophone political culture, particularly the scurrilous underside of the Country opposition, may make the charges against Cornbury more comprehensible.

{ 5 } "One Tale Is Good Till
Another Is Told"

Gossip and Satire in Anglo-American Politics



Rising concern about civility and the reform of manners in English public culture around the turn of the eighteenth century was in good part a reaction against the increasingly corrosive tone of political disputation.¹ Gossip, backbiting, and defamation permeated the vocabulary of English politics from the Restoration through the reign of Queen Anne. The sharpest peaks of political invective were scaled between 1695 and 1714, owing to the convergence of the new moneyed state with two especially pungent elements in English public life — party rage and the Grub Street press. Personal slurs against public figures reached a wider audience after press licensing laws lapsed in 1695, with most such attacks emphasizing sexual or pecuniary misadventures, often both, much in the manner of the assault on Lord Cornbury. A look at the forces that contributed to this high age of calumny and at the forms such gossip and satire took will provide a context for measuring what was done to Cornbury.

THE POLITICS OF CONSPIRACY

English political life underwent extraordinary strains over the seventeenth century, as one Stuart king lost his head in the Civil War and another his throne in the Glorious Revolution. If historians once cast the Revolution of 1688–1689 as the terminal point of a chaotic political age and the dawn of a stable constitutional monarchy, scholars have now rec-

ognized that even “glorious” revolutions do not bring peace and stability all at once. Clashes between the defenders of royal prerogative and the champions of parliamentary power continued after the Revolution as the power relationships of a new constitutional era were painfully adjusted. Nor did the struggle fall into a neat pattern of Whigs versus Tories. A tract published in 1701 listed “State Whigs and Church Whigs, State Tories and Church Tories, King William’s Tories and King James’s Tories, Court Whigs and Country Whigs.”² Party rage was also manifest in the ten general elections called between 1694 and 1714, a record still unequaled today.³

The first post-Revolutionary monarchs, William and Mary, demonstrated sound political instincts, vigorously safeguarding the ancient powers reserved to them under the Bill of Rights by reaching out to Whigs and Tories alike. Nonetheless, in 1702 the Tories gained manifest ascendancy with the accession of Queen Anne, chilling the hearts of all good Whigs. Having been the target of Tory muckrakers in the 1690s, the Whigs now sought revenge. “The most extraordinary feature of the age of Anne was the unprecedented extent to which party strife . . . invaded and finally took possession of the very lives of the politically-conscious” (fig. 23).⁴

Early-eighteenth-century politicians had no tradition of bipartisanship to ease them through this troubled time. Indeed, the few “Mod’rate Statesmen,” as one satirist tagged them, who attempted to mediate between the variant factions were vilified as unprincipled trimmers:

Then in their stead let *Mod’rate* Statesmen Reign,
Practice their new pretended Golden Mean.
A Notion undefin’d in Virtues Schools,
Unrecommended by her sacred Rules.
A Modern Coward Principle, design’d
To stifle Justice, and unnerve the Mind.
A Trick by Knaves contriv’d, impos’d on Fools,
But Scorn’d by Patriot and Exalted Souls.⁵

Moderates, lacking the heroic virtues, compromised high principles and opened the door to subversion.

True Whigs, by contrast, with the treason trials and Jacobite assassination plots of the 1690s fresh in memory, saw Tories as a pernicious

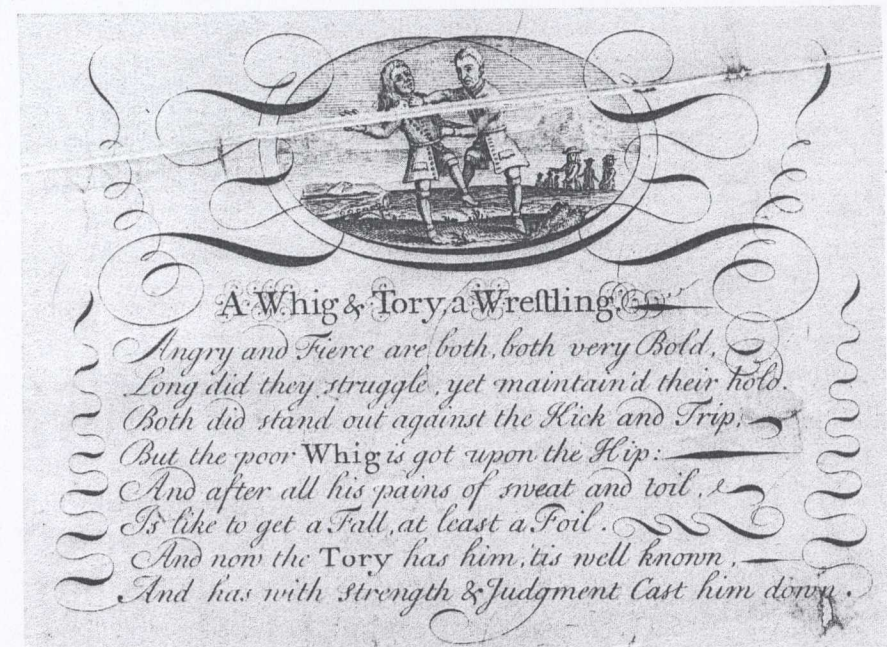


Figure 23. *A Whig and Tory, a Wrestling*. Montage engraving from *The Whig's Medley* (1711). From the Bowditch Collection, Courtesy of the Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

force bent on undermining the still fragile Revolution Settlement. Even that proponent of polite civic discourse, the third earl of Shaftesbury, described the Tories as a “malignant party” with “poysounous Principles.” Tories, in turn, perceived Whigs as mere panderers to commercial and Dissenting interests, sapping the traditional structure of English society. Neither characterization was true, Whigs and Tories of all stripes being drawn from the elite echelons of society with every reason to promote the well-being of the state. But the notion that any political group, when out of power, might function positively as a loyal opposition simply lay beyond the mental horizon of these premodern leaders.⁶ The other side could not be seen as equals in a legitimate contest of party politics; it was a disloyal presence that threatened the very existence of the nation, a wicked faction of conspirators that must be put down by good and faithful statesmen. “For that different, distant world the question asked of an event was not ‘how did it happen?’ but ‘who did it?’”⁷

That most politicians of Queen Anne’s reign could picture the struggle

for office and power in such Manichean terms gave a kind of license to whatever weapons came to hand in the battle to exterminate the opposition. And it was in this charged climate, abetted by a newly liberated press, that gossip and satire, much of it seasoned with sexual innuendo, pervaded the political life of the realm.

THE RISE OF GRUB STREET

Ribald slander was not new to English life. The rough wit of Juvenal provided the prime model for satirists from Elizabethan times to the era of Dryden, as society's vices were exposed and its follies derided in caustic lampoons. And though such writings usually had a didactic, moralistic intent, with the Restoration they became more political, "more obscene and less obscure," as persons still living were aspersed by name in both privately circulated manuscript satires and in print.⁸ Nor were kings and queens excepted. Indeed, assaults on the monarchy are of special interest, given the metaphorical structure of Restoration satire, which can now be seen as considerably more than a post-Puritan explosion of gamy pornography. To show the great either as unable to govern their lusts or as impotent to consummate them was to exhibit them as unequal to governing the state. Thus Charles II was lampooned for both his supposed appetites and his imagined inadequacies. The contradiction lessens when the innuendoes are read as an attack on his thirst for power and, power once gained, his incapacity for wielding it.⁹

Charles's satyriasis, as mocked by John Lacy:

The seaman's needle points always to the pole,
But thine still points to ev'ry craving hole,
Which wolf-like in your breast raw flesh devours,
And must be fed all seasons and all hours.

But at least one of the king's mistresses, the duchess of Cleveland, seems to have required a great deal more than he could provide:

Cleveland, I say, was much to be admir'd,
For she was never satisfi'd or tir'd.
Full forty men a day have swiv'd the whore,
Yet like a bitch she wags her tail for more.¹⁰

Attacks on the king's leading ministers were equally marked by salacious metaphor, as in this verse mocking the second duke of Buckingham and his mistress:

She knew his ways and could comply
With all decays of lechery;
Had often lick'd his am'rous scepter
Until the jaded stallion leapt her.¹¹

Crowned heads who failed to produce an heir made easy targets for their political enemies, who were sure to charge them with impotence or "sins against nature." William III, for example:

Lets pray for the good of our State and his Soul
That He'd put his Roger into the Right Hold.

Ah who wou'd have thought that a low Country Stallion,
And a Protestant Prince shou'd prove an Italian.¹²

To skirt the libel laws, most Restoration satire was handed about in manuscript. Only in the later reign of William and, especially, that of Queen Anne did printed lampoons come to dominate. This shift brought a significant broadening of the political audience, as gossip and scandal laid the basis for a new development in English cultural life: the emergence of the Grub Street press. In 1695 the law that required all printing presses to be licensed by Parliament, increasingly observed in the breach, was finally allowed to lapse. This opened new commercial opportunities and led to a spectacular rise in the volume of printed matter (London alone had twelve newspapers in 1705). A freer press combined with the strident politics of the time to produce a tribe of hack writers who actually managed to eke out a meager living with their pens, scratching out coarse verse, novels, newspapers, broadsides, and pamphlets steaming with political gossip and prurient tattle. The Grub Street writer was not immune from legal action; as Sir William Blackstone later wrote, he had to "take the consequences of his own temerity" if convicted of civil or criminal libel.¹³ Yet the lifting of prior restraint on print was sufficiently liberating to release a torrent of sensational journalism after 1695, notably in the City of London. As one observer put it in 1711: "You may go



Figure 24. *The Coffeehouse Mob*. Frontispiece to [Ned Ward], *Vulgus Britannicus: or The British Hudibras*, Part IV [1710]. Permission, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

into a coffee house and see a table of half an acre's length covered with nothing but tobacco, pipes and pamphlets, and all the seats full of mortals leaning on their elbows, licking in tobacco, lies and laced coffee, and studying for arguments to revile one another with" (fig. 24). At about this same time Jonathan Swift wrote a friend in New York: "I could send you a great deal of news from the *Republica Grubstreetaria*, which was never in greater altitude."¹⁴

Thanks to the work of Robert Darnton and others, we know a good deal about the effect of Grub Street writing on late-eighteenth-century French politics. Yet the original Grub Street was of course in London.¹⁵ And although most of its denizens never rose above their squalid beginnings to gain recognition in the polite world of letters, Defoe got his start there, and even Swift was known to make occasional appearances in the neighborhood (fig. 25). But being primarily Tories with no place at court, Grub Street's larger geniuses like Edward "Ned" Ward and Tom Brown proceeded to fashion "a literature of the impolite." That so little has been written about the political dimensions of this first full-scale era of English yellow journalism may in part be owing to its very excesses. Besides churning out the usual tales of adultery in high places, cuckoldry at all levels, and sodomites at play in the "mollyhouses" of London, hack writers festooned it all with endless scatology, flatulence being among the milder themes (fig. 26).¹⁶ This material, though piquant and hilarious to an eighteenth-century public meeting it for the first time in print, does not inspire the jaded modern reader to trace any sort of pattern in it. Nonetheless, the larger body of satire and gossip that issued from this corps of professional defamers merits attention. Without it, the political language of late-Stuart times would not have been what it was.

William III was attacked by both Whig and Tory writers, depending on which way he leaned. In *The Foreigners: A Poem* (1700), the Whig John Tutchin scorned the king and his Dutch courtiers as alien to English ways. William "rob[bed] our Treasure, to augment his State," while one of his favorites rose by "Whoring, Pimping, or a Crime that's worse." The Tory Tom Brown was rebuked in 1700 for writing lampoons that "affronted kings, libelled princes, [and] scandalized the court and city." He explicitly attacked William in *An Essay on the Late Politics; or, The Government out of Joynt* (ca. 1701) and with robust indiscriminate denunciation corrupt officials, cuckolds, women, displays of learning, fops,

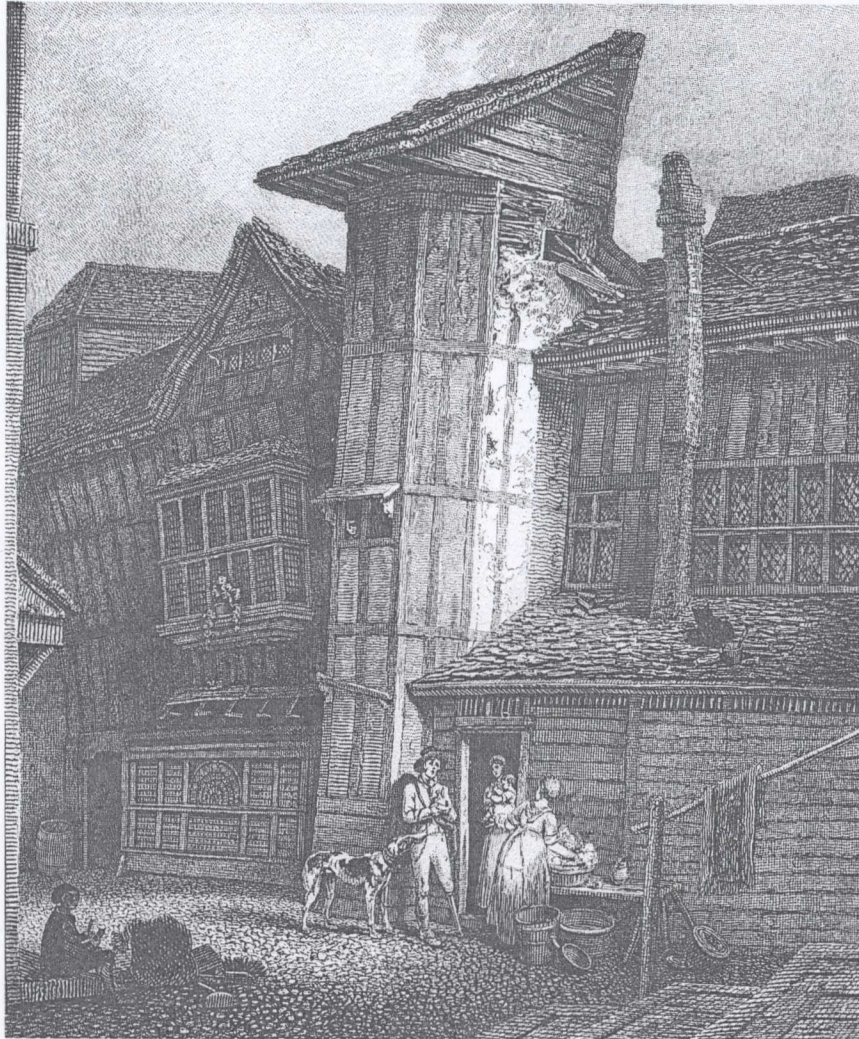


Figure 25. A Scene in Grub Street. *Domestic Architecture: North East View of an Old House Lately Standing in Sweedon's Passage, Grub Street.* By J. T. Smith. 1791. Etching. *Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection*

specific clergymen, and politicians generally (fig. 27). When Ned Ward, a firm churchman, thought Queen Anne had betrayed the church to favor Whigs and Dissenters, he was so indiscreet as to avow in *Hudibras Redivivus* that “woman’s words are only wind,” for which he was arrested on June 13, 1706. John Tutchin was also arrested for a seditious paper that, the government charged, attacked Anne’s councillors: “that the



Figure 26. *The Maiden Granadeere.* Circa 1700. Engraving. *The cross-dressed female grenadier discharges a grenade at a French fort. Harleian 5944-f319, by permission of the British Library*



Figure 27. Frontispiece to the *Works of Mr. Thomas Brown, in Prose and Verse, I* (London, 1707). By Permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library



Figure 28. Queen Anne. Circa 1711. From *Playing Cards of Various Ages and Countries, Selected from the Collection of Lady Charlotte Schreiber*, 3 vols. (London, 1892), I, plate 35. One of many prints glorifying the reign of Queen Anne. Photo courtesy of the Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. Courtesy, the British Museum

Ministry was corrupted with French gold, and that great men in offices took bribes (as it were) to betray the nation, and several other scandalous expressions.”¹⁷

On the whole, Queen Anne, unlike her predecessors, was largely exempt. That ponderous lady, whose life was blameless, might have given an example comparable to that of Queen Victoria for the morals of the English nation had she lived longer and in a different age. As it was, she gave the hacks of her own day little to work on. Anne’s self-image as “a nursing mother” to her people was reinforced by her serial pregnancies, her willingness to bestow the “royal touch” on victims of scrofula, and the domesticity of her rather dull court. Yet for all these maternal traits, Anne was no cipher in politics. She could be forceful in dealing with her ministers and as a female sovereign had their respect. Anne’s right to rule was never seriously challenged on the ground of her sex (fig. 28).¹⁸

This does not mean, however, that Anne’s court was devoid of sexual tension. With party strife at full pitch, both Whig and Tory leaders were suspicious of backstairs intrigue and anxious about the possible manipu-

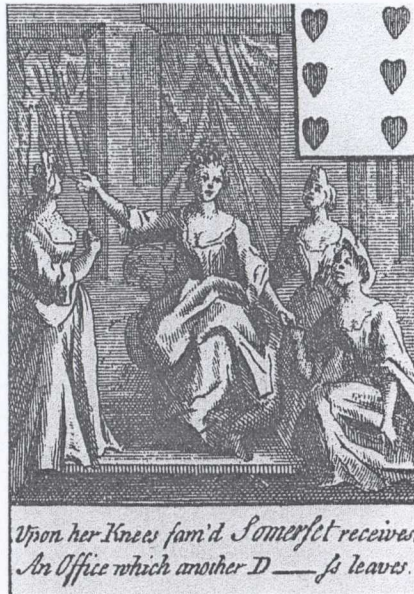


Figure 29. Queen Anne's Bedchamber Favorites. Circa 1711. From *Playing Cards of Various Ages and Countries, Selected from the Collection of Lady Charlotte Schreiber*, 3 vols. (London, 1892), I, plate 39. *A comment on the dismissal of the duchess of Marlborough from Queen Anne's court and her replacement by the duchess of Somerset.* Photo courtesy of the Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. Courtesy, the British Museum

lation of Anne's political affections by her bedchamber attendants. Sarah Marlborough was Anne's closest female confidant from the 1680s into the early years of her reign, and Sarah was not only first lady of the bedchamber and wife of a powerful duke but a woman of pronounced opinions. By the time Anne became queen, Sarah was a dedicated Whig, and she aggressively strove to turn Anne from her Tory councillors, repeatedly painting them as treacherous Jacobites. But Anne, who questioned Sarah's political acumen and ignored her advice, would have none of it. With rising impatience she rebuffed Sarah's political meddling and, finally, in January 1711 dismissed the duchess from court (fig. 29). Meanwhile Abigail Hill, Lady Masham, cousin of the moderate Tory leader Robert Harley, had become the queen's new favorite, an elevation that outraged the wounded Sarah. It mattered little to court gossips that Anne did not in fact consult these women on matters of state. Their mere proximity to the throne, and their occasional role as messengers or conduits for politicians seeking access to the queen, was enough to imply sinister doings.¹⁹

Throughout English history the sovereign's favorites had been seized upon as choice targets of opposition invective. Now, deprived of a

crowned head to assault, the scribblers of Anne's time set to work on her court with unprecedented gusto. That a number of the queen's favorites were women suggested a ready-made line of attack. Sarah, duchess of Marlborough, attracted by far the most comment, being depicted in a cascade of ballads, pamphlets, and novels as a prostitute and a devotee of adultery, incest, and witchcraft. Her imagined assignations with such figures as Lord Treasurer Godolphin and the earl of Kent were of course portrayed as schemes to further her position at court. In one especially reeky bit of doggerel, the duchess was cast as having a corrupting influence on her supposed lover Godolphin (Volpone):

So closely they united lay
That really 'twere uncivill
For any, to distinctly say
Ones Witch or t'other Devil

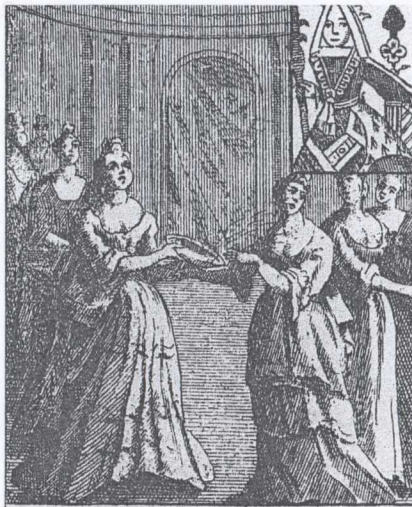
Oh were the sage Volpone bound
His head her Thighs betwixt Sir
To suck from thence his Notions sound
And Savr'y Politicks Sir²⁰

When Sarah Marlborough was displaced from the queen's side by Abigail Masham, and when Masham helped Robert Harley gain access to the queen, the occasion was too good to miss:

Harley and She each Night do meet,
And drink to the Pretender,
And hug and kiss, and are as great,
As the Devil and Witch of *Endor*.

Oh! that some truly zealous Friend
Would give the Bitch a Potion,
While *Harley's* Mouth at lower End
Were set to meet the Motion.²¹

The closest any lampoon came to striking directly at the queen was *A New Ballad* (1708), probably written by the Whig hack Arthur Mainwaring, an ally of Sarah Marlborough, who very likely aided in its produc-



*Kept from insulting a too bounteous Queen,
She on the faithfull Mas-m sheds her Spleen.*

Figure 30. The Rivalry between the Duchess of Marlborough and Abigail Hill, Lady Masham. Circa 1711. From *Playing Cards of Various Ages and Countries, Selected from the Collection of Lady Charlotte Schreiber*, 3 vols. (London, 1892), I, plate 40. Photo courtesy of the Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. Courtesy, the British Museum

tion. Though it skirted dangerously near the throne, its primary target was Abigail Masham (fig. 30):

Whenas Queen *Anne* of great Renown
Great Britain's Scepter sway'd
Besides the Church, she dearly lov'd
A Dirty Chamber-Maid.

O! *Abigail* that was her Name,
She starch'd and stitch'd full well,
But how she pierc'd this Royal Heart,
No mortal Man can tell.

However, for sweet Service done
And Causes of great Weight,
Her Royal Mistress made her, Oh!
A Minister of State.

Her Secretary she was not
Because she could not write
But had the Conduct and the Care
Of some dark Deeds at Night.²²

A later favorite of Queen Anne, the duchess of Shrewsbury, was depicted in one pasquinade as "bauding for whores" and in another as being led by her husband into the bed of an amorous Louis XIV:

The Duke o'erjoy'd, that his *Italian* Dame
Could in so Old an Hero raise a Flame,
With an ambitious Pleasure, as 'tis said,
Led her himself unto the Royal Bed.²³

The political satirists of Queen Anne's time also took on the leading ministers of state. Mary de la Rivière Manley, a Tory writer, published *Secret Memoirs and Manners of Several Persons of Quality, of Both Sexes: From the New Atalantis* (1709), lewd tales about the highborn featuring seduction, rape, incest, and homosexuality, male and female. Her targets, unnamed but easily identified, included the earl of Portland, the duchess of Cleveland, and, of course, John Churchill, duke of Marlborough. Though one of the most illustrious and envied men of the age, Marlborough was held up as a prevaricator, a skimmer of public funds, and an adulterer. He greatly resented "the villanous way of printing which stabs me to the heart" (fig. 31). Harley was also depicted as a schemer and a bribe-taker. And when Robert Walpole lost his parliamentary seat in the election of 1713, he blamed it on the hacks' depictions of him as a debauched office seeker who made a prostitute of his sister to gain preferment.²⁴

Thus did a new era of press freedom after 1695 combine with the rancorous parties of Queen Anne's time to foster not only a literature of high satire but one of muckraking defamation. From 1702 on Parliament tried without success to legislate against the spread of libels and lurid tales, while Anne's speeches "deplored the licentiousness of the press." The Tory Charles Davenant warned in 1703 that "the liberty of the press will be the ruin of the nation"; others bemoaned the "Reams of Scandalous and impious Lies" propagated by party hacks. In 1712 the ministry and Parliament, horrified by the torrent of scandalous writings, placed a tax on newspapers, pamphlets, and broadsides in the vain hope that it would spell the death of Grub Street. But nothing could slow the presses at a time when the intense struggle for power and office meant that "just about every prominent politician was the victim of a savage attack in the public prints."²⁵ The smut and scandal of Grub



Figure 31. The Alleged Peculations of the Duke of Marlborough. Circa 1711. From *Playing Cards of Various Ages and Countries, Selected from the Collection of Lady Charlotte Schreiber*, 3 vols. (London, 1892), I, plate 35. *The Duke counts his ill-gotten gains.* Photo courtesy of the Print Collection, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. Courtesy, the British Museum

Street had become indispensable as each side strove to smear and discredit the other.

THE ENGLISH GOSSIPS

Spoken gossip and common rumor drove the wheels of politics with a force at least equal to that of the printed satires, as is evident from the correspondence of some of the leading political families of the time. Their letters abound with conjectures about who was in or out of favor, along with rumors of courtship and marriage, of dalliance and seduction. These stories tended to be governed by certain conventions of their own. They moved via indirection; they were conditional; their truth could seldom be certain, and their purveyor knew this well. But once the whisper had reached the ear, it was hardly thinkable that the hearer should simply leave it there. The device for keeping it going was one that allowed the gossip to have it both ways, "'Tis said . . . tho' I doubt how truly . . ."²⁶

John, Lord Berkeley, one of the most engaging gossips of his day, passed along the latest scraps to everyone he wrote to. He did not give full credence to it all. He graded and qualified the authenticity of each item. But Berkeley left little out; whatever he heard offered some kind of

interest. The queen went to church three times a week; the duke of Ormond was in deep mourning at the death of his daughter; there were rumors of great changes at court. Berkeley could not be sure whether the duke of Marlborough was up to mischief abroad; he did not have it "upon any good ground." Was Queen Anne making changes in the ministry from her deathbed? He had been out of town when the rumors began and could provide "no certain account of anything," though doubtless "a great deal more being said than is true." Of a rumored visit to the Stuart Pretender by Lord Sussex and his son, Berkeley was becomingly cautious. "There is a story goes about, which tho I believe nothing of, yet I cannot help sending you." But a scandal that was on everyone's lips could allow him to cast caution aside, as with "an odd story of Mrs. Dormer, whom you may better know by the name of Die Kirk[,] that a footman of hers pretending to have had great familiarities, being refus'd money beat her very unmercifully. The story is so publickly told that there needs noe great scruple in repeating it." Berkeley's consort seems to have followed a similar principle. In a letter filled with the gossip from London, Lady Berkeley observed, "You desire scandall and this town at present will suply you, for Lady Linsey is with child and the town says if she knows the fathere 'tis Lord Lumley."²⁷ "The town says" and a story "soe publickly told" may have been something short of the full warrant of truth but were enough to keep the tale going.

Another prime source of gossip was manuscript newsletters. These were weekly series composed in London and sent to subscribers in the city and the country. Over the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, newsletters grew in number as rising party competition excited a hunger for political news. They also could be more efficiently distributed with the founding of the Penny Post, which delivered them to individuals and the newly popular coffeehouses approximately three times a week. The various series of newsletters totaled many thousands of pages and were intended primarily as reports on diplomatic and military happenings in Europe. But bits of trivia and gossip were often tacked on to fill whatever blank space remained. A death, a woman with child, duels, brigands executed, a duchess suing for divorce, a rumor of incest, or what must have been a very old tale naming one of the supposed lovers of Queen Elizabeth — all were typical entries. These newsletters, because handwritten, were less often subject to libel action than

printed newspapers and so flourished as a fairly systematic means for satisfying the public appetite for the latest coffeehouse gossip.²⁸

How, then, did the reputation of the Hyde family, and of Cornbury in particular, fare in this culture of calumny and scandal? Remarkably well. Some abuse was inevitable, considering the family's prominence during the years Cornbury's grandfather was chancellor to Charles II and his father and uncle were politically active. But there was strikingly little in the way of sexual innuendo or attacks on character. The first earl was himself a ready critic of the licentiousness of Charles's court, and the worst he or his sons were accused of was a certain stiffness in political and religious principles and a tardiness when it came to repaying personal debts. The single exception concerned the chancellor's daughter, Anne Hyde, who allowed the duke of York to get her pregnant before their marriage. Her severest critic was her father.²⁹

As for Cornbury, Jacobites naturally went after him following his defection from James II in 1688. In their satirical doggerel, he was the second earl's "pocky son" (a common slur of the time), and he and Marlborough were paired as "cowardly villains." But no such insults appear in the many subsequent reports of his appointments to office or of his ordinary comings and goings (though from 1689 to 1702 when he was out of favor and pinched for money he would have been an unlikely target). And to date not one English newsletter or bit of Grub Street doggerel has been found to contain any reference to Cornbury as effeminate, a fop, or a cross dresser, even after rumors of his supposed transvestism in North America were received at home.³⁰ As Queen Anne's first cousin, and especially had he shown any peculiarities of behavior, Cornbury would have offered an obvious mark for the ridicule of Grub Streeters and the Whig opposition. But gossip gathers real momentum only if it corresponds in some way with the reputation of the person being gossiped about. Could it be that, like most other members of that straitlaced High Church family, Cornbury failed to provide any ground for those attacks?

GOSSIP AND SATIRE IN AMERICA

Americans visiting England during these years professed astonishment at the climate of slander and gossip they encountered there. Isaac Norris of Pennsylvania wrote from London in 1707: "Every Coxcomb,

Either from Envy, Malice or the Vanity to be thought Somebody . . . takes the Liberty of telling and Improveing[,] and I perceive by Some Companies I've been in, nobody's Reputations Vallued over a pott."³¹ Yet back in America things were not so very different. In the colonies, too, an embryonic Grub Street press was developing and with it a politics of slander nearly as inflamed as that of England. Two sorts of public figures were the principal targets: government officials, notably the imperial-minded crown appointees in the royal colonies, and, in that contested religious terrain, clergy of all denominations — especially the Anglican, who were considered part of the imperial state.

Massachusetts, Virginia, and New York — all royal colonies of strategic importance in King William's and Queen Anne's Wars — attracted the most attention among otherwise preoccupied officials in England. To those colonies were posted men accustomed to command and with appropriate military experience: Joseph Dudley to Massachusetts, Sir Francis Nicholson to Virginia, and Lord Cornbury to New York. All were strong imperialists and hence prime targets for the gossip and calumny of American Whigs or of any faction that supposed its interests imperiled by the rod of state. Governor Dudley, though Massachusetts-born, was not spared the malice of his provincial enemies. They excoriated him in print for trading with the enemy in wartime, appointing avaricious men to government, and nepotism; he was a covetous and treacherous "Criminal Governour" under whose administration "without Money, there is no Justice to be had."³² Nicholson's opponents diligently forwarded vicious reports to London charging him with acts of "Lewdness and rudeness to Gentlewomen" in Virginia. They also held him up first as a tyrant and then as a laughingstock for his supposed infatuation with "a handsome young lady of this country" who spurned him.³³

Certain members of Cornbury's opposition in New York, and especially New Jersey, were equally abusive. Given his zeal both for the empire and for the Anglican church, he was a marked man. So, too, was Peter Fauconnier, the governor's secretary and receiver of revenues (and of French descent, which did not help), who was execrated for his ostensible mishandling of public funds. Powerless to strike back, Fauconnier finally vented his frustration in an emotional petition to Governor Cornbury himself — six closely written pages — accusing the opposition of engaging in a slanderous conspiracy against him. A secret "combination

between the Deputy Auditor [George Clarke] and other complainants" had been devised to cover their own neglect of duty. With no proof of any misconduct by Fauconnier, they had proceeded "to publish it as true, in most Taverns, and such other like Publik places in Town." This proceeded from an "Inveterat hatred against Him, and Tend but to the entire Ruine of your Petitioners Credit and Reputation" — crucial assets for an ambitious placeman making his way in the new world of finance. Most galling was his enemies' "Barbarity and filthy Baseness" in spreading the rumor that he had bought a fine plantation in South Carolina, to which he planned to abscond with his family. Swearing before God and men that it was all "Base, malicious and false," Fauconnier promised to sue in court if the slanders were not withdrawn.³⁴ The impassioned language of Fauconnier's petition was typical of an age that possessed few resources for a graded management of political conflict.

The experience of Peter Sonmans of New Jersey, agent for the East Jersey proprietors and Cornbury's ally on the colonial council, offers another example of how gossip and rumor poisoned provincial politics. Once Cornbury was safely out of office, the New Jersey Assembly publicly turned on Sonmans, charging him with corrupting the administration of law and attempting to pack juries. The assembly further accused him, in an unprecedented public remonstrance, of adultery: "He openly Cohabits with a Scandalous Woman [and] has had one Bastard by her," setting an "evil Example" for her majesty's subjects. This last was apparently in extenuation of the assembly's decision to make Sonmans's private behavior a public issue. Sonmans prepared a detailed response to the charges (the modern printed version covers twenty-eight pages), examining and refuting each item in turn. The allegations that he had abused his authority were deliberate misrepresentations by a party of men "known to be my professed Enemies." The adultery charge was "False, Scandalous, and Malitious, invented for a handle to fling dirt." If provincial assemblies were permitted to proceed in this manner, Sonmans declared, "any Gentleman who has the honour of Serving the Queen, or any other Officer of the Government, shall be Turned out, Ruined in his Reputation (which ought to be dearer to him than his Life) and treated as a high Criminal, Convicted with out being heard, or any Proof against him."³⁵

Sonmans's alarm about colonial officials' being exposed to ruin by

mere gossip was fervently seconded by another of Cornbury's men in New Jersey, Councilman Daniel Coxe. As Coxe and probably every other politician in the region knew, the attack on Cornbury's supporters in New Jersey was being managed by Lewis Morris, leader of the local opposition. In January 1709, Coxe reported to an acquaintance in London that the latest "masterpiece of Mr. Morris, and that Confederate Gang" was to pack a grand jury at Perth Amboy and deliver up indictments against Sonmans and two other Cornbury partisans. Thus did they go about "murdering the Reputation and good names" of gentlemen, though fortunately Cornbury's replacement, Governor John Lovelace, had put a stop to their proceedings. "New Jersey," Coxe continued, "is become A meer Pandora, out of which . . . issue such uncouth absurdities and monstrous Villanys, both in Church and State, that I may defy any Collony in America to produce the like." The worst part of it was that "False and Villanous Storyes . . . hatcht and Contrived . . . by Scandalous men" were too often heard and believed at home. It all reminded him of the "old Saying, one tale is good till another is told." If the victims were given no opportunity to defend themselves, Coxe declared, they would lose their rights as Englishmen.³⁶

Character assassination was certainly not the monopoly of any single faction in colonial America. In 1714 opponents of the liberal Governor Robert Hunter spread the rumor that he "had to doe with Lieutenant Riggs wife," which supposedly caused his own wife to miscarry. In another instance, Lewis Morris himself, the calumniator of Cornbury and Sonmans, was on the receiving end. An Anglican cleric politically opposed to Morris sent the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel a long list of complaints, including charges that Morris had publicly denied the authority of Scripture and had argued for "the Lawfulness of Polygamy." Morris meanwhile wrote the SPG to defend another clergyman with whom he was closely associated: "To tarnish his Character, an impudent whore has been prevailed upon to lay a Child to him," though "for my part I do believe he is most falsely accused." The Anglican minister at Jamaica, Queens County, was charged with similar misconduct, the stories having been floated by "a very wicked and Scandalous Wench" who purportedly was put up to it by the Dissenters of Long Island.³⁷

All this was now standard fare in the colonies, especially those with

Dissenters. In a time of flux and confusion, and during a popular reign when open criticism of those in power was particularly liable to be answered by severe measures, the opposition tended to remain underground. In the confined space its passions boiled and tumbled the stronger, finding occasional outlets in rumor and, increasingly, in anonymous printed satire.³⁸

Thus far we mainly have noted spoken gossip. But, though the colonial press was still relatively undeveloped, Grub Street also had its denizens in early-eighteenth-century America. Many of their initial productions, like those in England, took the form of handwritten ditties and squibs that circulated among the gentry or were posted up in taverns and coffee-houses. In 1702 "A Satyr upon the Times" leveled a belated though now safe shot at the deceased former governor Bellomont and his minions:

Twas Gold (that curst Tempter) that did bribe
The grand Ringleader of this hellish Tribe
Great by his Title[,] Vile in every action
He's gon but has entail'd a Curse on's faction.³⁹

Similar manuscript satires on Cornbury may have made the rounds, though none seems to have survived.

In the early eighteenth century such lampoons increasingly took aim at politicians. Lewis Morris in 1709 sought preferment with Lord Lovelace, briefly royal governor of New York and New Jersey, with a fulsome private address, "which made a Poeticall Spiritt, rise in some Gentlemen who on the next morning made the following Verses thereon which were all about the Town by noon":

As Jack-puddings on Stages have different waies,
From the rest of the Actors to meritt the Bayes [laurels],
So Tall-Lewis-Morris o'retops all the rest,
And by playing the fool Shows his Character best;
He addresses alone, because tis his Part
To differ from the Councill in Manner and Heart.

Urged to respond lest his silence "be a Reflection upon his Witt and Poetry," Morris, or possibly a member of his faction, retorted as follows:

As Ravens and Night-owls their Voices betray,
So asses are certainly known when they bray.

The Pests of the Country, whose Practise has been
To flatter the Governor, and Lie to the Queen,
Have right to no favour in a well-govern'd State
But to Swing in an Halter, or peep through a Grate.

This in turn elicited a response wherein a prideful Morris is made to lament "that Grubstreet writers should pervert my Muse":

In fam'd Augusta's streets I am well known
My Muse allow'd the Darling of the Town;
It paints the Miser, and the Spendthrift Beau,
Tea-table-Scandal, and the Cuckolds row.⁴⁰

Printed satire began to appear with some regularity around the end of the seventeenth century, despite the scarcity of printing presses and the government scrutiny of those that existed.⁴¹ In the Middle Colonies, the first sustained pamphlet war took place in the 1690s between the Society of Friends and the Quaker reformer George Keith. The earliest pamphlets contained no sexual slurs, but their language was bitterly personal. A Presbyterian observer, detached from the fray, remarked that Keith's accusers presented him as a "Reviler of the Brethren, Brat of Babylon . . . Pope, Primate of Pennsylvania, [and] Father Confessor," whereas Keith in turn vilified his opponents as "Fools, Ignorant Heathens, Infidels, Silly Souls, Lyars, Hereticks, Rotten Ranters, [and] Muggletonians."⁴² In the end, Keith's rationalist program led him and a number of followers into the Anglican fold, where they soon became allies of the new royal governor, Lord Cornbury. West Jersey Quakers, by contrast, joined the opposition to royal government, inciting a new pamphlet war between religious rivals now turned politicians.

Perhaps the best surviving example of early Middle Colony scandal-mongering is the work of Daniel Leeds, a former Quaker, now Anglican, whom Cornbury appointed to the New Jersey Council. A printer by trade, Leeds, with a convert's zeal, led the effort to discredit the Friends in New Jersey. His initial foray in the Grub Street style — perhaps prompted by the repeal of the Licensing Act — was a pamphlet titled *News of a Strumpet Co-habiting in the Wilderness; or, A Brief Abstract of the Spiritual and Carnal Whoredoms and Adulteries of the Quakers in America* (1701) (fig. 32). Offering twenty examples from his “Cage of Unclean Birds,” Leeds raked Quaker history for subjects, whom he then listed along with their alleged unclean deeds. Samuel Jennings of New Jersey displayed intolerable pride and cheated the Indians of their land; Thomas Lord looted his children's estate; John Moon got his maidservant with child; Robert Ewer short-weighted his customers and was found on a bed with his neighbor's wife “with her Coats up”; Christopher Holder of Rhode Island was an “effeminate loving Preacher” who was taken “lying with another man's wife in a field of Corn”; John Talbert was “charged with lying both with a white woman and a Negro woman”; Thomas Williams “had gotten his wifes Daughter with Child,” and so on. The Quaker Caleb Pusey issued a hot denial: *Daniel Leeds: Justly Rebuked for Abusing William Penn, and His Foly and Falls-Hoods . . . Made Manifest* (1702). Leeds, undeterred, next published a pamphlet with a purported reprinting of two letters by George Fox, a founder of the Society of Friends, whose spelling and sentence structure he showered with ridicule. This “Minister of Anti-christ,” Leeds jeered, could write “scarce Two lines good Sence.” Leeds declared that Fox had hired others to do his public writing, giving “one Jew Thirty Pounds to do the greatest part” of his book, *A Battledore* (a child's primer).⁴³

Pouncing on Fox's own concession that there were some “bad Spirits” among the Quakers, Leeds jubilantly supplied local examples, such as that of one lascivious brother who had “led a Sister into a Swamp after Meeting” and another who had “closed in with W. C.'s Wife in a Cornfield.” Then there was “*Mary A*— of *Long-Island* [who] left her Husband to exercise her Talent [as a preacher] in Barbados, and became Pregnant in that fruitful Island, and returned to her Husband with Increase.” Challenged by relatives and friends of the maligned woman,

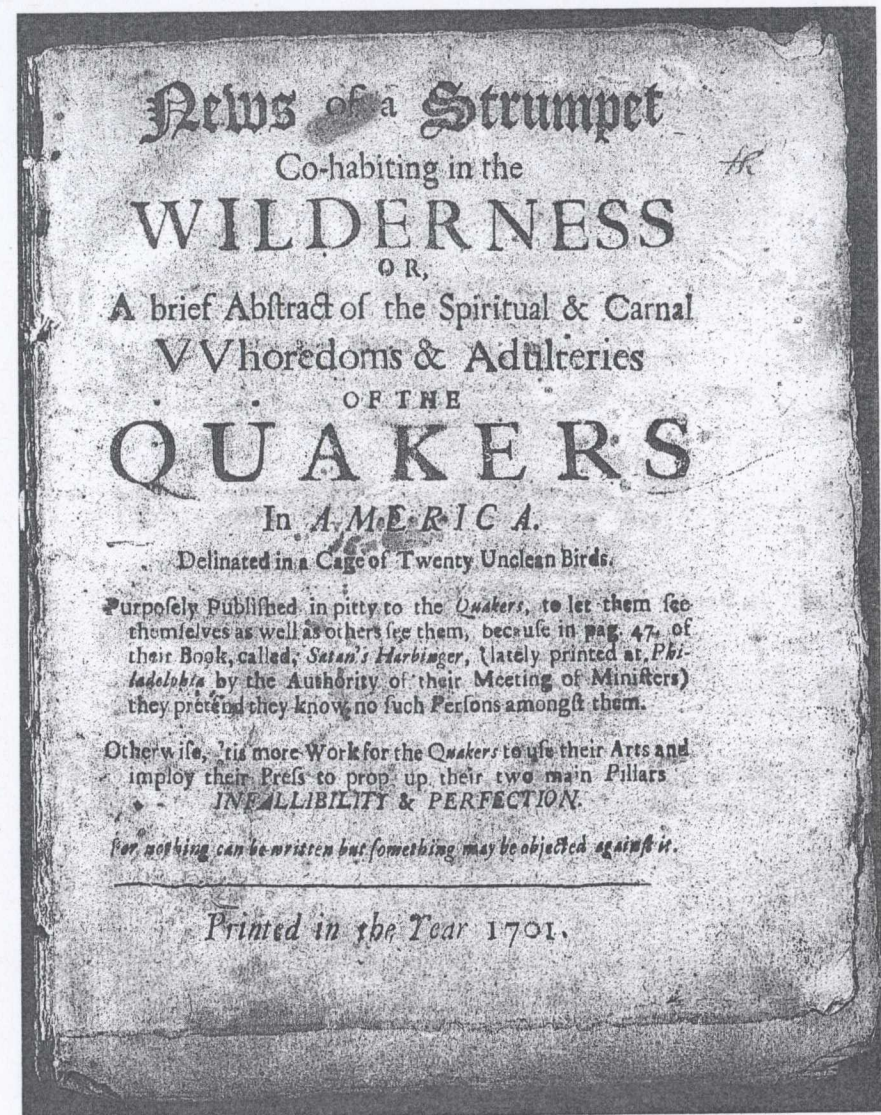


Figure 32. *News of a Strumpet Co-habiting in the Wilderness*. . . . Title page of Daniel Leeds's pamphlet. 1701. Permission, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

Leeds backed down somewhat, acknowledging that Mrs. A—— might have been impregnated by her own husband.⁴⁴

If the Quakers were no match for the muckraking Leeds, such was not the case with other scribblers for the opposition. At the height of the New Jersey Assembly's assault on Governor Cornbury in 1706–1707, there appeared a tract bearing the title *Forget and Forgive, the Best Interest of New Jersey*. According to the imperial officer Robert Quarry, "The heads of the faction in both Divisions [East and West Jersey] agreed on a most scandalous libell, of which they got a vast number printed, and took care to disperse them through the whole Province." He thought "perhaps there was never a more scandalous libell published." No copy of *Forget and Forgive* survives, so one can only wonder what was in it. At any rate, Cornbury was infuriated. After William Bradford, printer at New York, denied publishing the tract, Cornbury wrote to Governor Dudley of Massachusetts entreating him "to direct some inquiry to be made whether any such paper has been printed at Boston." For a time the Presbyterian preacher Francis Makemie came under suspicion as the author, though he wrote Cornbury denying any part in it.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, several members of the New Jersey opposition had been pointed out as the likely culprits. When the grand jury of locals — who reflected a broader spectrum of opinion than the Court party alone — refused to indict them, the attorney general brought suit via information (a common device in England) against the four men and two women "for publishing and dispersing a false and Scandalous Libelle intituled forgett and forgive." One of the accused, when entering his plea, demanded that the charges against him be read; and so, as Lewis Morris gloatingly informed two political confederates, "forget and forgive was read in Open court from End to End to the Satisfaction of all."⁴⁶

About this same time, informations were filed against another New Jerseyan for saying "the Church of England is a Carnall Church and none but Devils incarnate pretend to itt," and against still another for slandering Cornbury. When the accused slanderer pleaded guilty, he was ordered to apologize to the governor — a ritual similar to the French *réparation d'honneur* — and was then "committed prisoner for three months."⁴⁷

Whether Cornbury was any more persistent than other colonial officers in using the courts to suppress libels and slanders is difficult to say,

for such cases appear frequently in the legal records of all colonies. Lawsuits constituted the main defense such officials had against their provincial defamers, and Cornbury, perhaps more litigious than most, did not shrink from employing them. In a representative example, the governor of Pennsylvania in 1705 initiated a two-thousand-pound suit for slander against one William Biles, whose alleged attack was fairly tame: "He is but a boy and not fitt to be Our Gouverneur[;] we'll kick him out we'll kick 'm out." The jury awarded the governor three hundred pounds.⁴⁸

Satirists sometimes avoided lawsuits by giving their targets fictive names. This technique was used in that notable example of early colonial Grub Street, the play *Androboros* (fig. 33), composed in 1714 by Cornbury's successor, Robert Hunter, from gossip fed to him by Lewis Morris, who had become the Whig governor's "peticular favorit." With Cornbury's supporters still dominating the New York Assembly during the early years of Hunter's administration (1710–1719), the new governor — disposed in any case to shift blame for present troubles to his predecessor — apparently decided to vent his frustrations in satiric wordplay.⁴⁹

Grub Street is perhaps too low a term for *Androboros*. Its subject matter is sufficiently coarse — focusing as it does on a real incident, the defiling with excrement of Trinity Church's clerical robes. But its deft prose has an almost Swiftian flair.⁵⁰ Most of Hunter's New York opponents are held up to high ridicule in the thirty-one-page script. The action centers on stratagems employed by the outraged Anglicans to place blame on "The Keeper" (Governor Hunter) for the desecration of their vestments. They decide to dispatch an address to "Lord Oinobaros" — the sot (Cornbury) — since he, "being a Devotee to Long Robes of both Gendres, must highly Resent this Affront." A long argument ensues: what word best describes the soil on the robes? One side favors *ordure*, while the other prefers *turd*, "for a T—— is a T—— all the world over." They finally compromise on "Turdure."

A character named "Coxcomb" (Cornbury's New Jersey ally Daniel Coxe) suggests that they urge the return of Lord Oinobaros in place of the Keeper:

Aesop [of Hunter's faction]. If you should, my mind Forbodes you would repent the Change.

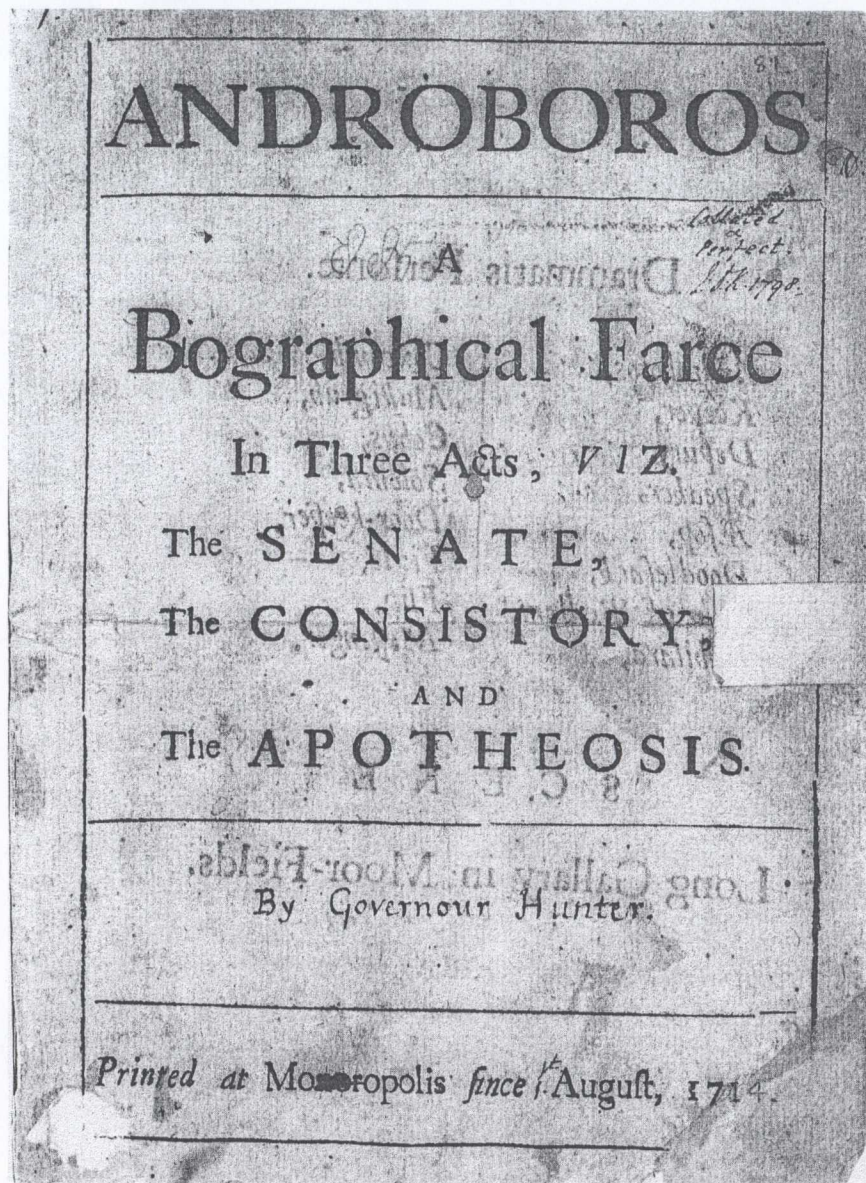


Figure 33. *Androboros*. . . . Title page of Governor Robert Hunter's satirical play. 1714. Permission, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

Coxcomb. Why?

Aesop. Why! why because a man who could never yet Govern himself, will make but a sorry Governour for others.

Coxcomb. Have a care what you say; That is *Scandalum Magnatum* [a libel].

[Offstage] *Doodlesack* [a Dutchman]. Pray, Mr. Tom. Wat is dat Lating [Latin]? Ick forestae't niet.

Tom [the English folk figure, Tom o'Bedlam]. He say, my Lord is in a very great Post, call'd, *The Scandalum Magnatum*.

Doodlesack. Is it given him lately[?]

Tom. No, he has it by inheritance.⁵¹

But wait. What was that about "Long Robes of both Gendres"?