Bawdy Beautiful

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Bawdy English exports such as the *Carry On* films (1958–92) and saucy seaside postcards from the Victorian era onwards have come to exemplify the nation's attitude to sex. That their plots and scenarios drip with innuendo and froth with lewdness has been put down to the perennial awkwardness and reserve of the English, for whom humour is the default mode of discomfiture. Surely, though, if the apparatus and acts of the body turn us perpetually purple, wouldn't we rather cast cerebral voluptuaries than grotesque sensualists as our heroes and heroines?

The particular strain of bawdiness that pervades kitsch smut might be better described as an echo of carnival than evidence of repression. While the traditional Victorian seaside holiday was not exactly rampant, the loosening of collar and corsetry released a faint whiff of the beastly cavalcade. Codes of behaviour were partially suspended as holidaymakers enjoyed a relaxation of the moral muscle, the postcard offering a glimpse of the warm rock pool of abandon to those back at home, as even mild innuendo draws us closer to the breach of the self-contained individual that sex entails. Perhaps, then, it is more a thumbing of the nose to isolating social conventions than personal awkwardness that the bawdy enacts.

Both the *Carry On* films and classic seaside postcards hinge on a procession of blunt stereotypes that trample over decades of hard work to achieve equality through identity politics: buxom dizzy blondes, hen-pecked weedy husbands, domineering overweight wives, shy newlyweds, kilted Scotsmen, sozzled toffs, gossiping spinsters,

brazen nudists, lecherous plumbers and so on. Characters and plots generate instances of profound recognition that compel us to commit a litany of crimes of incorrectness, from sexism and racism to ageism and jingoism. In this way the bawdy also highlights an innate, and universal, duplicity – namely the conflict between private thoughts and public behaviour. While this clash is by no means confined to the English, the Victorian era is notorious for such hypocrisies and it was precisely in the rarefied atmosphere of nineteenth-century gentlemen's clubs that bawdy songs and imagery prospered. One such popular song describes an aristocrat's weakness for sex:

> The family took it much to heart
> When Lady Jane became a tart;
> But blood is blood and race is race
> And so, to save the family's face,
> They bought her an exclusive beat
> On the shady side of Jermyn Street.

The lady in question appears in less grotesque form in D.H. Lawrence's *John Thomas and Lady Jane* – an earlier version of his controversial novel of inter-class intercourse, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), which was published posthumously in 1972 – where both protagonists have since lent their name to popular genital personifications. The bawdy, despite its questionable employment of stereotypes, is traditionally a great leveller, condoning consenting sex across classes and, most markedly in the case of barroom songs, portraying women not as unobtainable goddesses but as rampant and

insatiable, ultimately in control of their brimming sexuality. Perhaps this fulfils yet another male heterosexual fantasy, but it can certainly be noted that bawdiness emphasises the mechanics of the act of love, rather than the metaphysics of idealised romance, replacing courtly love with something more befitting an era of pneumatic machinery.

In contrast to the common currency of the barroom, saucy postcards and mainstream films represent the commodification of social prohibition or the admittance of taboos into the commercial realm. This threshold is ambiguous, however, with the line between acceptable bawdiness and outlawed obscenity being redrawn from era to era and place to place. We may regard Donald McGill's postcards affectionately now, for example, but in the 1950s the British government considered them to epitomise a perceived slump in morality following the war. A writ was brought against them and many censored or destroyed, with the artist himself brought to trial and fined for contravening the Obscene Publications Act of 1857. However, the view of society as constituted by a cold shower of fixed institutional structures, behavioural norms and stable identities has withered throughout the second half of the twentieth century. A new perception of societies as contingent, constructed and localised problematises definitions of totalities and margins: if centres are defined by their outer limits and boundaries established by their interior, then received ethical codes and internally generated moral imperatives are interdependent but not necessarily coincidental. Transgression and deviance are no longer universal but local, temporary and up for debate.

Bearing this in mind, distinct parallels (beyond the recurring motif of huge cocks) can be drawn between the grotesque erotica of Aubrey Beardsley and Grayson Perry,

despite the century that has elapsed between them. Both confront received social and moral codes of their day. While Beardsley's vignettes of vice and decadence spotlight the unbridled duplicity of the late Victorian era, Perry operates in a time when art is no longer simply a window on to the world out there, but a public arena within which transgression can be performed. Throughout his practice Perry champions the male member as an emblem of the freedom of expression, 'decriminalising the penis', as he puts it, championing it as a symbol of emotional engagement rather than a gesture of obscenity, and redrawing erotic fantasy as a landscape for legitimate experience.

The word 'obscene' comes from the Greek for 'off stage'. It is the flipside of aesthetic, signalling that which has been banned from the proscenium arch presiding over the proper. If we recall anthropologist Mary Douglas's well-aired remark that dirt is simply matter out of place, then the dirty joke perfectly fulfils the condition of the obscene, as exemplified by Sarah Lucas's plucked and gutted chicken – a vaudeville love tunnel on the wrong side of her knickers. Whereas carnival inverts or suspends the norm, obscenity re-centres the outcast, challenging ethical frameworks head-on, as well as the legal structures that support them.

Although we may be tempted to think of the history of acceptability as a gradual development from the restrictive to the liberal, with the aperture of the permissible gradually dilating as we become more honest, tolerant and worldly, in actuality the domains of high and low, private and public, romantic and carnal, sensual and cerebral have been more fluctuating. The eighteenth-century satirical caricatures of James Gillray, Thomas Rowlandson and Richard Newton, for instance, were emblematic of a culture of ridicule and malicious satire that was as knowing and sardonic as that of the late

twentieth century. The lowest of manners and mores were at times exposed in the spirit of corrective satire, while at others the artist capitalised on the events of the day for the titillation of the populace. Such sexual candidness in the times of high manners might be attributed to a different organisation of the public and the private, just as the prevalence of scatological humour was in part due to the visibility of shit in the streets of London.

Contemporary satirical ribaldry is synonymously a function of public pronouncement on private behaviour; although, if we compare the targets of Newton's cartoons censuring the slave trade and nationalist stereotyping with the Fat Slags cartoons in *Viz*, the moral high ground of the artist is buried in a briar of cruel irony that is rather more difficult to defend. Again, though these may seem excessive, grotesque and hyperbolic, they are not necessarily destructive, as exceeding accepted limits stirs up cultural stagnation, requiring boundaries to be reaffirmed or relocated through productive debate. The bawdy also makes much of the fact that sex is experienced, for better or for worse, as a basic biological function for us all. The orgasm – also called the *petit mort*, or little death, due to the brief arresting of the heart that brings it into being – is a small flowering of triumph in the battlefield of mortality, and the bawdy blows this trumpet loud and hard as a rallying cry to the self-aware.

Humans are one of the few creatures that engage in sex for pleasure, and, what is more, it is thought that we are the only ones that laugh, weep and blush, too. Aristotle suggested that this is because humans can understand the difference between how things are and how they should be. The bawdy human, indulging in an excess of all of these biological functions, addresses the threshold between how things are and how they could

be if only we could get over the hang-ups and letdowns of daily life. It signals a release of the private animal spirit into the public forum of human self-consciousness.