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Novel in the Literary Marketplace Assignment 2: *The Life and Adventures of Benjamin Brass. An Irish Fortune-Hunter.*

The Life and Adventures of Benjamin Brass. An Irish Fortune-Hunter, published anonymously in 1765, accentuates the condensed market of 'worthless novels'¹ that existed in the mid-eighteenth century. Very little is recorded about the book, to the extent that the acclaimed historian James Raven (an expert in eighteenth century literature) fails to note it in *British Fiction, 1750-70: A Chronological Check-list of Prose Fiction Printed in Britain and Ireland*. The author is shrouded in as much mystery as the book itself; various sources attribute the novel to John Oakman who was more prolific in the latter half of the century for his song-writing than his novels. Nevertheless the book has survived to this date. Considering there was no demand for any further editions and its scarcity in copies, it can be ascertained that the book was not particularly successful.

The anonymity of *Benjamin Brass* was not an uncommon occurrence in the eighteenth century; if anything *few* writers attributed their names to their works. In fact Robert Griffin in his article '*Anonymity and Authorship*' notes that 'nearly seventy percent of all novels published in the last thirty years of the eighteenth century were published anonymously' (that includes pseudonyms) and a further 'forty percent remain unattributed'², but why did Oakman choose to be part of this majority? It is possible that by distancing themselves from their work,

¹ Michael Brook, <http://www.surnamedb.com/Surname/Oakman> (Copyright ©: 1980 - 2010 Name Origin Research).

² Robert J. Griffin, '*Anonymity and Authorship*' in *New Literary History* (Virginia: The University of Virginia, 1999) p 883.

authors are free from the criticisms or fame that the book may endure. It could be speculated that like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Oakman may well have left his prose anonymous in anticipation of its reception. If the book turned out to be successful akin to Walpole, further editions would be a pertinent place to reveal the authorship, but such was the ever-changing nature of the novel's audience because it was still a relatively new form of writing, Oakman may not have wanted his name attributed to such vulnerable work. It was a form of protection. In Walpole's case it was to protect his already highly acclaimed reputation, whereas for Oakman it may well have been an attempt to protect his name for future employments, showing a lack of confidence in the book's potential for success. Unfortunately we can only speculate as very little is known about John Oakman.

The little fragments of material regarding the author John Oakman points to his potential for success, but although the resources are limited they reveal that a combination of his disruptive personality and being 'endued with such light abilities as rendered him too unsettled for any sedentary business'³, may have suppressed any rise to fame. There are contradictory accounts on the place of his birth; it is either Hendon in Middlesex in the year 1748 as documented by *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* or Farnham, Surrey in 1738 as exhibited in the *Articles of Neglected Biography*. This disparity highlights the little amount of concrete knowledge we have on the author. The Oxford Dictionary account should be regarded as more accurate as it was based on a memoir to the late

³ H. Lemoine, 'Letter and Memoir of John Oakman' in *The Gentleman's Magazine: And Historical Chronicle*, vol. 74 (Fleet Street, London: John Nichols, 1793), p 1081.

John Oakman by one of his literary and long-serving friends Henry Lemoine, this was their (i.e. the ODNB's) main reference. Lemoine was a well-established writer and bookseller by the end of the century 'and a well-known eccentric character of the city of London'⁴; he would have undoubtedly provided his friend Oakman with contacts into the publishing and book-selling trade.

The contemporary account of Lemoine in Granger's *Wonderful Museum* mentions John Oakman as one of the friends of his youth who helped him to indulge his taste for feasting and revelry; and as Lemoine and Oakman were kindred spirits, though unequal in talent, an intimacy so formed would be likely to prosper⁵

Therefore Lemoine's, albeit brief, account of Oakman's life is perhaps the best basis for a reliable resource in uncovering the mystery of John Oakman.

Lemoine recorded that Oakman was apprenticed to an engraver, a talent that would remain with him throughout his life, but did not complete his training for the 'volatility of his disposition'⁶. He then ventured into the world of shop-keeping with two compatriots Darley and Harry Howard, selling caricatures and humorous prints, however this did not last long either, and it was around this time that Oakman turned his hand to the rapidly rising profession of novel-writing. His first known tale, written anonymously in 1757, and one that should be tentatively associated with the author due to its unreliability of source (only Lemoine attributes the work to Oakman) is *The History of Sir Roger and His Son*

⁴ P. L. Carver, 'A Continuation of John Gilpin' in *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 8, no. 30 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), pp 205-210, (p 206). [Accessed via JSTOR database on 14/12/2010]

⁵ P. L. Carver, 'A Continuation of John Gilpin', p 206.

⁶ H. Lemoine, 'Letter and Memoir of John Oakman', p 1080.

Joe, which we can assume received some success due to its demand for a second edition. However a review deemed the tale worthy of only eight words of description ‘low, dull, and illiterate, to the last degree’⁷ so not surprising that Oakman’s first venture into the literary world did little to enhance his standing among his literary peers. He would write a string of other novels of similar weakness in an attempt to finance his unconventional lifestyle that saw him travel much of England and Wales by foot. A short, anonymous biography entitled an *Account of John Oakman* alludes to his careless attitude towards his quality of work:

The Nobles, booksellers, at that time in full business, were a sure market for such as could stoop to write such stuff as filled the shelves of a circulating library. He wrote for two guineas a set of two volumes; and such was his rapidity, that he could produce one a week.⁸

This short section alone tells a great deal about the literary market which existed in the 18th century. A young man, of apparent mediocre writing ability, could maintain a steady income through the production of vast amounts of feeble novels. This sort of writing has been dubbed “hack writing” and was prolific at this time as the standards of writing were yet to be cemented into literary culture. Other famed writers of the century such as Mary Davys do not feign in their drive for monetary gain. Furthermore, this attention to “quantity over quality” could be one of the reasons behind the dull, nondescript physical nature

⁷ ‘Art. 18, The History of Sir Roger and His Son Joe’ in *The Monthly Review*, ed. by Ralph Griffiths (London: Printed for Hurst, Robinson, and Co., 1757), p 563.

⁸ ‘Articles of Neglected Biography’ in *The Monthly Magazine*, ed. by John Aikin (London: Printed for R. Phillips, 1831), p 335. [First appears in *Gentleman’s Magazine*, 74 (1793) pp 1080-1081.]

of *Benjamin Brass* which will be explored later. His most notable successes in novel writing are the partially autobiographical *The Life and Adventures of Benjamin Brass* which received satisfactory reviews, and *The Adventures of William Williams, An African Prince* where he gained credibility amongst the Quakers due to the book's oppositional stance on slavery.

Away from the novel form, many considered John Oakman a talented lyric poet, with many of his songs performed at Vauxhall Gardens and Bermondsey Spa. Perhaps Oakman did not want his inadequate standing in novel writing to transfer into his world of verse, for an advertisement in *Trifles in Verse* written in 1767 read:

The author of these little pieces has not received any benefit from what is called a liberal education [...] he was scarcely taught to read in the common method, as most poor tradesmen's children are [...] This known, it is hoped will make the critics (if any should think it worthwhile to peruse it) to put on a calmer brow than otherwise they might.⁹

This explicitly shows Oakman's plea to handle his work in sympathetic view of his upbringing, which contrasts to the careless, mass-producing writer of the novel form who cared little for reputation. In another perspective these anxieties show the still unsteady position of the novel at this time. He may have been distancing himself from the novel form because 'the name of the novel was tainted and its popularity so shamefaced'¹⁰, hence why we do not see any

⁹ John Oakman, *Trifles in Verse* (London: Printed for the Author, and sold by W. Flexney, 1767), p 3 [My ellipsis]. [Accessed via ECCO database on 14/12/2010].

¹⁰ J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England 1770-1800* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1968), p 3.

attempt at novel writing in Brass's later years. He confines himself to the lyric form because its reputation was healthier and his talents better suited.

Unfortunately there appears to be no critical opinion on *Trifles in Verse* for us to view it's reception.

His last work of any significant mention was the poem *A Second Holiday for John Gilpin* published posthumously in 1795 as the title page relates 'written by the late John Oakman'¹¹. This work was written in partnership with Henry Lemoine's poem *A Second Part; Containing an Account of the Disastrous Accidents which Befell his Wife on her Return to London*. P. L. Carter values Oakman's attempt as inferior to Lemoine's in every way, lacking 'power of invention and no humour'¹², but the critic cannot help but mention Oakman's competent ability in handling rhyme and accent. It is clear that Oakman's talents lay in his ability to manipulate the poetic form, but he failed to gain a considerable wealth from this field of work and died 'in indigence'¹³ in 1793.

An interesting point to note is, that while it appears Oakman's indifference in personality and unwillingness to conform to a "nobler" way of life inhibited his rise in social stature, he was not devoid of prosperous friends; as Lemoine clearly states, if it were not for the very nature of Oakman then he could have easily compiled a considerable wealth and ease from his talents in song-writing and novels. He was regarded among notable contemporary writers as 'an

¹¹ John Oakman, 'A Second Holiday for John Gilpin' in *The Facetious Story of John Gilpin* by William Cowper (London: Printed for A. Lemoine, 1795), p 1. [Accessed via ECCO database on 14/12/2010].

¹² P. L. Carver, 'A Continuation of John Gilpin', p 209.

¹³ 'Articles of Neglected Biography' in *The Monthly Magazine*, ed. by John Aikin (London: Printed for R. Phillips, 1831), p 335.

entertaining narrative companion'¹⁴ and Christopher Antsey, successful author of *The New Bath Guide* which ran to no fewer than 18 editions over 34 years since its first publication, would commonly back Oakman financially in return for his accounts of comical misdemeanours he experienced on his travels. John Oakman could therefore be best glamorized by his good friend Henry Lemoine as 'one of the improvident sons of the Muses'¹⁵.

There is even less known about the bookseller W. Nicoll who sold *Benjamin Brass* in St. Paul's Churchyard. There are very few comments that can be made on his biography, except that he was a stationer as well as a bookseller. There are, however, numerous accounts of books that went through his stalls in the late eighteenth century, varying greatly in subject matter from *The Art of Cookery: Made Plain and Easy* to *A Catalogue of Trees, Shrubs, Plants, Flowers, Seeds and Fruits*, as well as a vast amount of novels, therefore Nicoll, it could be supposed, was a contributor to the vast amount of "worthless novels" that circulated in this era. We can assume that *Benjamin Brass* was simply another "bawdy" novel to fill the shelf, as the author and the bookseller never worked in collaboration again. There are a few accounts of reviews written by him on matters such as the national debt, the wool industry and poetry. Perhaps because of the diversity of books that were printed on his behalf, W. Nicoll was well read in such contrasting fields as these and therefore his opinion on matters was soundly regarded. Interestingly we see a letter written by W. Nicoll to an ointment seller advertising the efficiency of the lotion: 'I have for some time been troubled with a very acrid humour in my face, which terminated in a settled, violent eruption. I

¹⁴ H. Lemoine, 'Letter and Memoir of John Oakman', p 1081.

¹⁵ H. Lemoine, 'Letter and Memoir of John Oakman', p 1081.

have used but one bottle, the disorder is gone, and my face is perfectly cool, smooth and clear'¹⁶ signed W. Nicoll, bookseller in 1793; even though it holds no literary value, it is an interesting insight into the context of the time, and provides a glimpse at the physical appearance of Nicoll. Records show that Nicoll filed for bankruptcy in 1789, however by this time Nicoll had provided enough evidence of his worth in the trade for James Raven to locate him amongst a 'consortium of eminent booksellers'¹⁷.

This leads into a brief description of the book itself. After the mystery of the author and bookseller, can the physical presence of the book show us anything more about its position within the marketplace? The book is far from striking in appearance, it is plain brown, quite worn and with no ornamentation on the cover or bindings. It appears as typical and inoffensive as a book could get. This certainly would have struggled to find its way on to the shelves of any gentry because of its sheer humbleness; an antithesis to the term "grand". The paper appears cheap and grubby, and the only small printer's ornaments used for decorative value are far from elaborate. We can gather from the description that the book would have been commonplace among circulating libraries, where other cheap volumes of this kind could be found. The book's appearance goes synonymously with the characters and settings it holds within its sheets: low-life and unappealing.

¹⁶ Thomas Vincent and Robert Dickinson, *An Account of the Nature and Effects of Gowland's Lotion* (London: Printed by R. Cruttwell, 1792), p 15. [Accessed via ECCO database on 14/12/2010].

¹⁷ James Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade 1450-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p 244.

The narrative itself presents a succession of events and actions on the part of the central protagonist, the young Benjamin Brass, and his loyal cousin and compatriot James Fitzpatrick. The author attempts to be comedic in his portrayal of events as his two main characters consistently find themselves in lewd, uncomfortable situations. Simon Dickie coins the title “The Ramble Novel”: ‘sloppy and ethically careless, offering little more than a skeletal plot and a rudimentary central character as the scaffolding for a succession of broad comic incidents’¹⁸ which fits the structure of this book entirely.

The story starts in Ireland when Brass is but a mere squire’s apprentice, however not fulfilling Brass’s lust for “fortune” he steals money from his master and travels abroad to England in search of better prospects. He in turn meets with his cousin Fitzpatrick who has been described as similar in nature to Fielding’s Parson Adams in *Joseph Andrews* and Smollett’s Tom Pipes in *Peregrine Pickle*, presumably because of Fitzpatrick’s acts of loyalty. It is not unlikely that elements of both characters would have been in mind when creating Fitzpatrick; such was the fame of both these creations. The story then follows in a rather humorous, yet monotonous, succession of events that see the two protagonists get into trouble and then sneak their way out of it. Their main goal revolves around marrying a wealthy dame and then absconding with their money, a rather impious line of work. They are repeatedly unsuccessful in their attempts at “fortune hunting”, Brass makes a fool of himself amongst the gentry by drinking tar water he mistook for wine and eating a slab of butter he confused

¹⁸ Simon Dickie, ‘The Forgotten Best-Sellers of Early English Fiction’ in *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2011), pp 311-312.

as cake. Fitzpatrick, moreover, has an obsession with the spirit world and frequently exhibits his cowardice when left vulnerable to the Devil's work. However in the concluding chapters, Oakman's narrative looks to satisfy Brass and Fitzpatrick's aspirations in matrimony with a supposed wealthy widow. However, yet again, just as the reader is meant to believe in their successes, we are enlightened to a sudden demise in their plans. Unfortunately for these two characters this is how the book concludes, and Oakman satirically jokes about the manner in which he leaves his characters. In his opinion too many books of the age end in an unrealistic state of happiness that seldom finds its way into real life, 'but, in our opinion, misery is the natural conclusion of such adventures'¹⁹. We can speculate that this ending was a statement against such fantastical romantic novels that were in circulation at the time, but it also reveals Oakman's good sense of humour.

Interestingly, as already briefly mentioned, it was believed that Oakman relayed some of his own endeavours into the work of Benjamin Brass. As his biography demonstrates he was commonly in the presence of the lower classes on his travels, and therefore had first hand experience of the bagnios, pubs and backstreets of London. Ironically Oakman wrote to finance his extravagant lifestyle and so could be considered a "fortune hunter" himself. In the opening paragraphs of the text, Oakman stresses the importance of truth, he wants to show his work in a realist light, perhaps because of the autobiographical meaning behind it: 'we profess in the course of these memoirs, to adhere strictly

¹⁹ John Oakman, *The Life and Adventures of Benjamin Brass. An Irish Fortune-Hunter, vol. 2* (London: Printed for W. Nicoll, 1765), p 261. [Accessed via ECCO database on 14/12/2010].

to truth, we shall not impose upon our readers credulity, by inventing a series of ideal exploits'²⁰. By the time Oakman was writing this novel, the Romance style was well established, having come a long way from Aphra Behn's historical text *Oroonoko*, but we see Oakman employing strategic efforts to maintain realism. He places his characters in everyday circumstances and among opposing strata of society, as well as the realist ending. However, the title *The Life and Adventures of Benjamin Brass* allude to a collision of both romance *and* realism, the "life" connotes a historical perspective where "adventures" allows room for a sensationalized narrative. It is evident that Oakman has failed to maintain his promises of truth. Firstly, it was unlikely that a man of such poverty would be able to successfully masquerade as a gentleman and infiltrate so many circles of wealth without notice. Moreover, a dark gothic theme runs throughout the narrative, which in itself must abandon aspects of reality in its relations to witches, prophecies, ghosts and the Devil. Oakman may well have abandoned all attempts at realism to add essence and comedy to his text, we will never know, but it is clear that he incorporates both styles of writing in *Benjamin Brass*.

A year before *Benjamin Brass* was published, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* was published pseudonymously and is considered the first real work of gothic fiction; before then ghost stories were generally told in oral form, although we do see incidences of gothic conventions, in Shakespeare's plays for example. Only a year after Walpole's text, Oakman exhibits a great deal of gothic action in *Benjamin Brass*, highlighted perfectly in the title of chapter eleven in

²⁰ John Oakman, *The Life and Adventures of Benjamin Brass vol.1*, p 2-3.

volume two: 'An Adventure in a Haunted Room'²¹. It must be remembered that Walpole's work received mixed reviews and was not widely accepted as innovative and forerunning as it is now. Prophecy is a common theme in both these texts, alongside a distinct lack of moral and didactic purpose. The text at times is dark, with a brief encounter with a witch, as well as Fitzpatrick's constant battle with the Devil. However, unlike Walpole who uses the gothic traits for frightening effect, the majority of the time these encounters are used for comedic value; Fitzpatrick is forever being mocked for his superstitious ways. It cannot be concretely stated that Walpole had any direct influence on the gothic action that Oakman chooses to import in his novel, but because the timing is so close one could assume that Walpole opened an avenue for many budding writers to try their hand at the imaginative possibilities the gothic genre brings, as Emma Clery notes in the introduction to Walpole's novel '*Otranto* [...] was now reconstructed as a 'new route' for 'men of brighter talent to follow'²². It would be incorrect to classify Oakman's text as gothic, none of the reviews even mention the use of gothic traits in their critiques, but *Benjamin Brass* does show the movement towards a more imaginative style of writing within the gothic tradition.

No existing review places *Benjamin Brass* in comparison to Walpole, but in three separate accounts, Oakman's *Benjamin Brass* has been described in comparison to *Joseph Andrews*, *Peregrine Pickle* and 'a very feeble imitation of the manner of

²¹ John Oakman, *The Life and Adventures of Benjamin Brass*, vol. 2, p 161.

²² Emma Clery, 'Introduction' in *The Castle of Otranto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p xii.

Richardson'²³. It is clear that the reception at this time was forever in direct comparison to the classics. It appears that novelists had to completely break away from conventions in order to enhance their reputation. Horace Walpole's gothic classic succeeded, but even *his* novel received much criticism. If they could not break away, then the novel was discarded as simply another feeble attempt to fill the circulating libraries. It may well have been Oakman's intention to get his two-guinea reward for this work, or it may have not, in any case his novel was received with no such fanfare as Richardson or Fielding. We can therefore place *Benjamin Brass* in conjunction with J. Tompkins' comments on mass-production: 'The complaint over the "threadbare patterns of modern novels" is more than the irritation of a critic in face of the sameness of mass production'²⁴. It is perhaps a little harsh to simply dismiss Oakman's work in such a way as a "worthless shelf filler" but it appears the most accurate position of the book within the marketplace in the 1760s.

Another reason for *Benjamin Brass's* apparent disappearance from the literary world could be attributed to the social environment in which it is played out. Although the two protagonists often find themselves in places of wealth, they are themselves, lowly trades-children and do little to help the social prejudices of people from that line of society, and on top of that, prejudices against the Irish. If we take a look at the most successful novels of the time, and it must be forgiven in repeating the same works, but as the reviews relate back to these texts they make the best comparisons; *Pamela*, *Joseph Andrews*, *The Reform'd Coquet* all

²³ P. L. Carver, 'A Continuation of John Gilpin', p 206.

²⁴ J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England 1770-1800* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1968), p 4.

revolve around characters in an affluent state, and although in *Joseph Andrews* the protagonist is thrust among the “low-life’s” he does not embody their characteristics. There can be promising character comparisons between Parson Adams and Fitzpatrick in their loyalty to the protagonists, and also Fitzpatrick’s chastity which he retains throughout the novel. A man of troth, but far removed from a man of the cloth, he spends half the novel intoxicated in some way. The readership was mainly confined to people who had money who could of course afford better education, and afford the price of the book, for reading was not a cheap past time. Therefore the reading “genteel” which consisted of most of the reading public were perhaps more likely to praise a book of “nobler” setting and character than one such as Oakman’s. Finally, it may be worth noting that it is not only class that places these characters under a “villainous” visage, but racial stereotypes also lower this book’s status. Our central characters are both from Ireland, or at least Benjamin Brass is sure to have been born there, and yet if we are to treat this novel as semi-biographical one may ask why Oakman chose to portray his characters as Irish. He may have found the Irish acquaintances more amusing on his travels, or perhaps he felt comfortable making a mockery of two lowly Irish fellows. There was a large population of Irish living in London at this time who were constantly under threat from these racial prejudices. We see this social injustice clearly in *Benjamin Brass* when in a court of law Benjamin finds himself at trial: ‘The Hibernian accent with which Brass made his defence, proved, with Mr. Balance, an undoubted evidence of his guilt, and he once more declared him an inheritor of the halter’²⁵ which ultimately shows the injustice an Irishman faced in the 1760s. It is difficult to tell whether the tale is supposed to

²⁵ John Oakman, *The Life and Adventures of Benjamin Brass*, vol. 1, p 196.

sympathize with the Irish “fortune hunters”, or brands them all untrustworthy and unyielding to the law. There is little material on the portrayal of the Irish in works of English Literature before the great migration succeeding the year of 1840 (the potato famine), but Oakman sheds just a little light on the attitudes towards the Irish nation that existed in eighteenth century London. It could be deduced that the reading public were not enthusiastic about reading the iniquitous accounts of two Irish men.

The few references and little knowledge that we have on the author John Oakman and his text *The Life and Adventures of Benjamin Brass* can be attributed to the saturated state of the literary market place in the late 1700s. With a vast amount of works, from a diverse authorship of all walks of life, only few texts arise from this era of any note. From snippets of biographies of John Oakman’s life we can assume that he cared little for the success of *Benjamin Brass*, seeing it as simply another way to earn a living. However, *Benjamin Brass* must be considered Oakman’s greatest work in novel form because of its ability to cling to existence. Although it will never match the works of Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson, it offers just as much insight into life in the 1700s as these fine authors show.

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