The Royal Sign and Visual Literacy in Eighteenth-Century London

Stephanie Koscak

Abstract This article argues that the commercialization of monarchical culture is more complex than existing scholarship suggests. It explores the aesthetic dimensions of regal culture produced outside of the traditionally defined sphere of art and politics by focusing on the variety of royal images and symbols depicted on hanging signs in eighteenth-century London. Despite the overwhelming presence of kings and queens on signboards, few study these as a form of regal visual culture or seriously question the ways in which these everyday objects affected representations of royalty beyond asserting an unproblematic process of declension. Indeed, even in the Restoration and early eighteenth century, monarchical signs were the subject of criticism and debate. This article explains why this became the case, arguing that signs were criticized not because they were trivial commercial objects that cheapened royal charisma, but because they were overloaded with political meaning. They emblematized the failures of representation in the age of print and party politics by depicting the monarchy—the traditional center of representative stability—in ways that troubled interpretation and defied attempts to control the royal image. Nevertheless, regal images and objects circulating in urban spaces comprised a meaningful political-visual language that challenges largely accepted arguments about the aesthetic inadequacy and cultural unimportance of early eighteenth-century monarchy. Signs were part of an urban, graphic public sphere, used as objects of political debate, historical commemoration, and civic instruction.

Yet indulge me, Gentlemen, but a few Words more, to excite you to stand up in the Defense of these precious Signs; the Ornament of our Houses, and the Glory of our Capital.[1]

By the early eighteenth century, the commercialization of visual and material culture, along with the expansion of print, allowed English subjects unprecedented opportunities to see and possess images of rulers.[2] And yet, how cultures of consumerism affected royalism, and how commodified representations

[1] Zachary Zeal [pseud.], *A Seasonable Alarm to the City of London, on the Present important Crisis* (London, 1764), 31.

[2] See Hannah Smith, *Georgian Monarchy: Politics and Culture, 1714–1760* (Cambridge, 2006), 123–41; Angela McShane, "Subjects and Objects: Material Expressions of Love and Loyalty in Seventeenth-

24

of kings and queens were incorporated within everyday spaces of urban and domestic encounter, are questions that have received little critical attention. I begin with an example of a print, which, while from the early nineteenth century, provides a useful opening for thinking through representations of sovereignty and monarchical iconography in the eighteenth-century marketplace. On 7 August 1821, just months after the divorce proceedings initiated by George IV were withdrawn, Queen Caroline of Brunswick died in London. Although the current of Whig and radical support for Caroline had mostly dried up following Parliament's abandonment of the divorce bill, her death provided an occasion for the renewed outpouring of sentimental commemoration in print, including this cheap broadside published by John Pitts (figure 1).[3] The central letterpress text of *An Elegy* includes an abridgement of Katherine of Aragon's final lines after the invalidation of her marriage in William Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, as well as two short elegies and a brief biography of the queen culminating in an emotional deathbed scene. Surrounding the text a collection of woodcut decorations includes emblems of mortality. Skulls, scythe, angel, hourglass, cross-bones, coffins, and a generic funeral procession are combined with six images of what appear to be shop signboards stacked in two equal columns on either side of the text.

Why include pictures of shop signs on a broadside lamenting a recently deceased monarch? There can be no doubt that these woodcuts depict commercial signboards. In his index of London signs until the mid-nineteenth century, Bryant Lillywhite cites no fewer than twelve businesses operating under variations of the Royal Bed, a sign used almost exclusively by upholsterers. The sun, whether alone or combined with other objects, adorned a miscellany of signboards for merchant ventures, public houses, and inns, while the anchor was a favorite sign among tavern keepers, clothiers, and tradesmen.[4] One possible explanation for the inclusion of signage in this broadside is rather simple: perhaps these were old plates cluttering the print shop, recycled to produce a cheap and timely graphic print to capitalize on the outpouring of affection for the deceased queen. Were these, in other words, empty signifiers characteristic of an ephemeral visual culture that failed to appropriately memorialize the passing of royalty as mourned by London's crowds?

Countering the hypothesis that these are meaningless signs, however, is the fact that this particular combination of images evinces deliberate authorial choice: many function as emblems of monarchy, and they are arranged in such a way that sketches out a sympathetic history of Caroline's marriage, trial, and death. The Royal Cabinet and Royal Bed suggest the queen's august pedigree, as well as the sacred bonds and cruel injustices of her matrimonial and domestic life. The heraldic sign featuring crown, cross, and three embattled towers resembles the Order of the Garter Star and, combined with the sun, a traditional regal device, defends the moral and political legitimacy of Caroline's claim to the throne. Finally, the anchor might

---

Century England," *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 4 (October 2009): 871–86; Kevin Sharpe, *Rebranding Rule: The Restoration and Revolution Monarchy, 1660–1714* (New Haven, 2013).

   [3] John Pitts, *An Elegy. To the Memory of Our Illustrious and Lamented Queen Caroline of England* (London, 1821).

   [4] Bryant Lillywhite, *London Signs: A Reference Book of London Signs from Earliest Times to about the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (London, 1972), 464, 220.

Figure 1—John Pitts, *An Elegy. To the Memory of Our Illustrious Queen Caroline of England*, 1821. © Trustees of the British Museum, London.

refer to Caroline's extensive travels during her long exile from England, discussed in the body of the broadside, as well as the steadfastness of her subjects' affection and support. Still, tracing the emblematic and narrative possibilities of Pitt's broadside does not explain why he found signboards to be fitting objects for memorializing monarchy. Indeed, even while the print calls self-referential attention to the medium and pictorial vocabulary of the sign by displaying each visual object within its own carved frame, the accompanying text provides scarcely any clues about the significance of signboards for the representation of royalty.[5]

   This article sets out to examine how urban signage and royalism intersected in eighteenth-century London. Aesthetics were central to the exercise of power in the early modern state; ceremonial spectacle, sartorial display, ritualistic behavior, and artistic patronage collectively rendered the monarch's body an object of art.[6] Here, however, I examine the aesthetic dimensions of royal culture reproduced outside of this traditionally defined sphere of art and politics by exploring the variety of royal images, symbols, and devices depicted on marketplace signs in metropolitan streets. Despite the overwhelming presence of the monarchy on signboards, little attention has been given to signage as a form of regal visual culture; the ways in which these everyday objects impacted representations of royalty have not been interrogated. There is no comprehensive examination of the royal brand in the early years of commercialization, and few scholars consider how the expansion of the marketplace altered the public face of the monarchy beyond asserting an unproblematic process of declension during the first half of the eighteenth century.[7] Although recent scholarship has reassessed the popularity of early Hanoverian kings, historians continue to argue that before the reign of George III, the monarchy and its main supporters mostly overlooked opportunities to promote a popular culture of royalism. According to this narrative, the king and court remained culturally isolated, locked into premodern rituals of spectacular regality that were physically and culturally inaccessible

---

[5] On visual polysemy and the intertwined relationship of word and image in graphic prints, see Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), 32–51; W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, 1994); Peter Wagner, *Reading Iconotexts: From Swift to the French Revolution* (London, 1995); Mark Hallett, *The Spectacle of Difference: Graphic Satire in the Age of Hogarth* (New Haven, 1999).

[6] On the centrality of painting to aristocratic and royal authority, see David Howarth, *Images of Rule: Art and Politics in the English Renaissance, 1485–1649* (Berkeley, 1997). The term "object of art" comes from Mary Vidal, *Watteau's Painted Conversations: Art, Literature, and Talk in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France* (New Haven, 1992), 185.

[7] Although scholars have studied popular cultures of royalism and the commercialization of the loyalist political calendar under George III, few examine commercial expressions of monarchism before 1760. Of notable exception is Smith's *Georgian Monarchy*. See also McShane, "Subjects and Objects," 871–86; Bob Harris and Christopher A. Whatley, "'To Solemnize His Majesty's Birthday': New Perspectives on Loyalism in George II's Britain," *History* 83, no. 271 (July 1998): 397–419. For the history of commercialized royalism in pre-Revolutionary British North America, see Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal American, 1688–1776* (Chapel Hill, 2006), especially 131–37. The seminal study of royalism in the late eighteenth century remains Linda Colley's "The Apotheosis of George III: Loyalty, Royalty and the British Nation, 1760–1820," *Past and Present* 102, no. 1 (February 1984): 94–129. On the relationship between the monarchy and nationalism, see Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992), 195–236. For the history of mass media and monarchy in the nineteenth century, see John Plunkett, *Queen Victoria: First Media Monarch* (Oxford, 2003).

to the vast majority of Britons.[8] Alternatively, those who do examine the commercialization of royal images and objects in the eighteenth century, particularly Brendan McConville in his study of British North America, assert that consumerism undermined regal sovereignty. It fostered "subjective" royalisms; the multiplication of commodified monarchical representations encouraged spectators to appropriate the king's image for their own purposes, leading to the decay of royal authority and the multiplication of sovereignties.[9]

A perfunctory reliance on the historiography of the French monarchy to understand the commercialization of British royalism might explain in part why scholars have not more fully explored this subject. As part of the intellectual disinvestment of the monarchy in eighteenth-century France, for instance, Roger Chartier identifies the casual and commonplace use of royal images, trappings, and discourse that "desacralized the attributes and symbols of royalty, depriving it of all transcendent significance." In particular, he singles out royal branding in advertising and the proliferation of badly painted monarchical shop signs as indices of this decay in regal culture.[10] Thomas Richards, examining later nineteenth-century England, persuasively argues that commercial spectacle and mass-produced souvenirs used to commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee appropriated the twin-bodied theory of monarchy—that the monarchical body was both a living, material body and a transcendent, immaterial political body—through a "reification of transcendence, or an embodiment of transcendental signification in the dead matter of material culture." Regal charisma, then, was materialized as kitsch, substituting cheap, mass-produced objects for real political engagement.[11] Although we lack close studies of commercialized royalism in the eighteenth century, Murray Pittock cites Richards in his study of Jacobite material culture during this period. Because Jacobite images and objects were clandestine they avoided mass circulation and retained their sacred aura, resisting the transformation into kitsch that Pittock argues characterized loyalist iconographies.[12] Thus it is convenient to read this earlier intersection of the monarchy and the marketplace through the reifying lens of nineteenth-century commodity spectacle.

It is possible to understand why contemporaries might object to representations of royalty on marketplace signs and objects. Bonnell Thornton, writing under the pseudonym Philip Carmine, a fictional London sign painter, offered a tongue-in-cheek critique of signboards in a letter published in the *Adventurer* in 1752, asking "why must *Queen Anne* keep a *gin-shop*, and *King Charles* inform us of a *skittle-ground*? Propriety of character, I think, requires that these illustrious personages should be deposed from their lofty stations."[13] But did this commercial representation of royalty only diminish transcendence, desacralizing the visual iconography of regal

---

[8] John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1997), especially 3–55.

[9] McConville, *The King's Three Faces*, 9.

[10] Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of The French Revolution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chapel Hill, 1991), 85–86.

[11] Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford, 1990), 99, 88.

[12] Murray Pittock, *Material Culture and Sedition, 1688–1760* (New York, 2013), 21–22, 145.

[13] Bonnell Thornton, *Adventurer*, 5 December 1752, ix: 51.

authority through the trivializing display of kings and queens? Did the monarchical sign fail as a repository of cultural and political memory, eclipsing the majesty and civic importance of royal symbols—making them empty signs—by using them to advertise the sale of objects of desire and trade services? Reading signboards dialogically as part of an excessive graphic culture of the urban street reveals the demotic potential of the visual sign but also demonstrates the centrality of monarchical imagery to the creation of popular political meaning.

Although a handful of observers celebrated English signage, royal signs were the subject of extensive censure and satire from the Restoration onwards. This article first explores why regal signs attracted such negative attention, arguing that they were criticized not because they were insignificant commercial objects that depleted monarchical charisma, but because they were overloaded with political meaning. They emblematized the failure of iconicity and the inadequacy of baroque representation in the age of party politics by depicting the monarchy—the traditional center of representative stability—in ways that troubled interpretation and defied attempts to control the royal image. Nevertheless, I demonstrate that the popularity of regal images and artifacts circulating in urban spaces comprised a meaningful public visual language that challenges largely accepted arguments about the aesthetic weakness and cultural unimportance of early eighteenth-century monarchy. Part of a decentralized graphic culture of commercial royalism that incorporated depictions of kings and queens into urban sites of quotidian encounter, hanging signs were deployed as objects of political debate, historical commemoration, and civic instruction.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Made obsolete by the spread of literacy and urban planning in the mid-eighteenth century, signs—heavy and brightly painted, often with ornate carving, gilding, and metalwork—cluttered the streets of the metropolis, situating professional location within the congested spaces of the city. One of the earliest forms of visual advertising, signboards were routinely engraved upon merchant trade cards and billheads, depicted on trade tokens, and printed alongside or above newspaper advertisements.[14] London's trade in both cheap and pricey painted signboards was centered in Harp Alley, near the area where Fleet Street meets Ludgate Hill, with a concentration of painters ready to undertake commissions and selling ready-made signs from their studios and shops.[15] Sign painting was a thriving commercial pursuit entered by apprenticeship, although we know little about the large number of sign painters

---

[14] The majority of the graphic evidence for the signs discussed here is gathered from collections of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century trade cards held at the Huntington Library, the Lewis Walpole Library (LWL), and the British Museum (BM). For recent scholarship on eighteenth-century advertising and merchant trade cards, see Barbara Benedict, "Encounters with the Object: Advertisements, Time, and Literary Discourse in the Early Eighteenth Century Thing-Poem," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 193–207; Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, "Selling Consumption in the Eighteenth Century: Advertising and the Trade Card in Britain and France," *Cultural and Social History* 4, no. 2 (April 2007): 145–70; Chloe Wigston Smith, "Clothes without Bodies: Objects, Humans, and the Marketplace in Eighteenth-Century It-Narratives and Trade Cards," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 23, no. 2 (Winter 2010–11): 347–80.

[15] Gerald Millar, Jacob Larwood, and John Camden Hotten, *English Inn Signs: Being a Revised and Modernized Version of the History of Signboards* (New York, 1985).

Figure 2—Thomas Bowles, *A View of the Church of St. Mary Le Bow in Cheapside, London.* **London, c. 1752. © Trustees of the British Museum, London.**

operating during this period.[16] Thomas Bowles's mid-century engraving of the church of St. Mary-le-Bow records the intrusive variety of Cheapside signs, which overhang the sidewalks and almost outnumber living inhabitants of the city (figure 2).[17] Prior to the 1762 Westminster Paving Act, which legislated the removal of signposts, fixed signs flat against building walls, and established serialized street numbering, geographic space in London was charted visually and designations of place were established by dangerously heavy and invasive signboards that made the city "visually negotiable."[18] Across the period, confectioners, hat makers, publicans, and stationers alike hung pictures of kings, queens, and the royal family from their signposts, staging through commercial display the revolution, unification under Queen Anne, the Hanoverian succession, and the ultimate defeat of a Jacobite-backed Stuart restoration at Culloden.[19] Among the discernable signs in the foreground of Bowles's print are a variety of royal symbols, including a bust of Queen

---

[16] For example, the celebrated coach and herald painter Charles Catton (1728–98), who became master of the Painter-Stainers' Company in 1784 and a founding member of the Royal Academy of Arts, also painted London shop signs earlier in his career. See Sheila O'Connell, with Roy Porter, Celina Fox, and Ralph Hyde, *London 1753* (Boston, 2003), 53–55; *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, rev. ed., s.v. "Catton, Charles, the elder (1728–1798)," accessed 14 July 2013. doi:10.1093/ref:obnd/4901.

[17] Thomas Bowles, *The Church of St Mary le Bow* (London, c. 1762). Topos L847 no. 84+, LWL.

[18] Cynthia Wall, *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London* (Cambridge, 1999), 120; see also eadem, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 2006), 149–77. On the history of London and the expansion of retail, see Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), chap. 6.

[19] William, Duke of Cumberland, became a popular sign after the prince's role in putting down the Jacobite uprising in 1746. "For the *Mirror*," *Mirror* 2, no. 82 (19 February 1780), 122.

Anne, a griffin, lion rampant, and crown. This image regulates city space according to the rules of linear perspective, positioning spectators of the picture at an idealized and unnaturally elevated viewpoint that encompasses the entire street. Dense and jumbled urban spaces are here rationalized and rendered transparent, celebrating London as an expansive site of busy—but orderly—commercial exchange, made navigable by the battery of signs receding into the distance.[20]

In reality, however, hanging signs were part of a cacophony of urban clutter—including gaudy building ornamentations, placarded handbills, and a generous culture of graffiti—used to establish location, advertise wares, and attract the eyes of urban perambulators. And London proprietors often found it necessary to adopt excessively large and extravagantly decorated signboards. As the *Universal Spectator* recorded in 1743, "walking down *Ludgate-street*, several People were gazing at a very splendid Sign of Q[ueen] *Elizabeth*, which, by far, exceeded all the other Signs in the Street, the Painter having shewn a masterly Judgment, and the Carver and Gilder much Pomp and Splendor: It rather look'd like a Capital Picture in a Gallery, than a Sign in the Street." This shop belonged to the mercer Joseph Trigge, and his sign featured a three-quarter-length portrait of the Virgin Queen in an elaborately carved frame (figure 3).[21] Nevertheless, this observation quickly turned to a condemnation of London's many garish and irregular signs, which, dripping with "Lacker and Leaf-Gold," "dazzled" the eyes but blocked city air and light.[22]

Yet others, most notably William Hogarth, appreciated signs as a native English art form that provided a shared visual language for political discussion and moral instruction.[23] Hogarth often incorporated depictions of signage in his satirical urban scenes, for instance, *Canvassing for Votes* (1755). It forms the second plate in a four-part series, *The Humours of an Election*, painted to satirize the corruption and bribery that plagued the 1754 general election and the continued party divisions that beleaguered the Duke of Newcastle's ministry (figure 4).[24] This image provides us with a sense of how signs were hung from buildings and signposts and how spectators were imagined to interact with public displays of royal iconography, albeit in this case outside of London. Here pictures of rulers and symbols of state form an intimate part of daily life—a woman leans against a large, carved British lion ready to devour a French fleur-de-lis, while politicking and peddling take place below a sign

[20] On perspectival vision and the rationalization of space, see Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in *Vision and Visuality: Discussion in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, 1998), 3–23; James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca, 1996).

[21] Joseph Trigge, Trade Card (c. 1742), Heal, 84.260, BM; Ambrose Heal, *The Signboards of Old London Shops: A Review of the Shop Signs Employed by the London Tradesmen during the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries* (London, 1947), 134.

[22] *Universal Spectator*, 8 January 1743, quoted in *London Magazine, and Monthly Chronologer* (London, 1743), 37.

[23] Hogarth also helped organize the fictional Society of Sign Painters' exhibition in London in 1762, which ridiculed connoisseurial disinterest and state-sponsored notions of artistic hierarchy that excluded the broader public from aesthetic evaluation. Ronald Paulson, *Popular and Polite Art in the Age of Hogarth and Fielding* (Notre Dame, 1979), 31–48; Jonathan Conlin, "'At the Expense of the Public': The Sign Painters' Exhibition of 1762 and the Public Sphere," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 1–21.

[24] Charles Grignion after William Hogarth, *Canvassing for Votes* (London, 1757), S.2, 131, BM. Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth: His Life, Art, and Times,* 2 vols. (New Haven and London, 1971), 2:222–27; idem, *Hogarth: Art and Politics,* 3 vols. (New Brunswick, 1993), 3:179–84.

Figure 3—Detail of draft trade card for Joseph Trigge, mercer, c. 1742. © Trustees of the British Museum, London. Trigge's shop sign featured a three-quarter-length painting of Elizabeth I in an elaborately carved and gilded frame.

commemorating Stuart monarchy and national history. The center foreground of the picture depicts Whig and Tory candidates bribing a country voter in front of a pub operating under the sign of Charles II hiding in the Royal Oak at the end of the Civil Wars. This sign is portrayed with sophisticated detail, placed within an intricately carved and gilded frame so that it resembles, much like Trigge's sign of Elizabeth, "a Capital Picture in a Gallery." Partly obscured by an anti-ministerial campaign poster that satirizes political bribery financed through the embezzlement of Treasury funds, the juxtaposition of placard and sign suggests a multiplicity of readings. Partisan politics threaten to overwhelm native expressions of popular royalism and national unity, an event also foretold by the rioting mob in the background that attempts to pull down the sign of the crown.[25] Such a future is linked to aesthetic

---

[25] Paulson, *Art and Politics*, 180–81.

Figure 4—Charles Grignion after William Hogarth, *Canvassing for Votes*, **1757. © Trustees of the British Museum, London.**

decay as the crudely painted political cartoon, an ephemeral visual object displayed for a single election cycle only, comes to replace the lasting and well-executed sign.

THE PROBLEM OF THE KING'S SIGN

For much of the eighteenth century, English commercial signboards remained objects of extended mockery and criticism, despite being appreciated by a handful of writers for their size and extravagance.[26] And quite often the sign bearing the king's effigy was singled out for censure. But we need to explain why this should be the case. One of the first—if not the first—sustained condemnations of the royal sign comes from John Evelyn's *Sculptura* (1662), a history of engraving. Recognizing the aesthetic dimensions of royal power, Evelyn warned King Charles about the depreciation of princely authority that accompanied the depreciation of the monarchical image through base and botched reproduction, focusing particular criticism on the publican's sign. To make his point, Evelyn juxtaposed Restoration England

---

[26] See François Maximilien Misson, *Mémoires Et Observations Faites par un Voyageur En Angleterre* (Hague, 1698); William King, *A Journey to London In the Year 1698* (London, 1699).

with Ancient Greece and Rome, where, he claimed, statues seemed to outnumber men, and rulers policed their representations with obsessive care. The cultivation of majesty required prudence, much like that exhibited by Alexander the Great when he declared "that none should … paint or cast him besides Apelles and Lysippus." As Evelyn explained, "[h]ad *Queen Elizabeth* been thus circumspect, there had not been so many vile *copies* multiplied from an ill Painting; as being call'd in, and brought to *Essex*-house, did for several years, furnish the *Pastry-men* with *Peels* for the use of their Ovens." Thus, he cautioned Charles to take as much care in the representation of his "sacred person" in paint and sculpture as he did "in his Coyne and Royal Signature." Evelyn continued,

> It is seriously a reproachfull thing only, to behold how it is profan'd by the hand of so many vile, and wretched Bunglers … as blush not daily to expose their own shame, in so precious and rever'd a Subject: And that the Heads of *Kings* and *Heroes* should be permitted to hang for *Signes*, among *Cats,* and *Owles, Dogs* and *Asses*, at the pleasure of every *Tavern* and *Tippling-house*, we have frequently stood in admiration of: But so did not that of *Alexander* as we noted; nor would *Augustus* make himself cheaper, then the great Master of his time, *Dioscorides* pleas'd, whom he particularly chose to preserve and derive his Divine Effigies to the after Ages.[27]

The power of the king was in constant danger of diminution via the visual, his sacred authority violated by the circulation of ill-executed and common pictures—especially poorly painted and publicly displayed signs—that cheapened the value of the real king, inviting dialogic comparison by drunken spectators with pictures of cats and asses. Signs supposedly captured so little of the regal aura (thereby becoming a threat to the lasting memory of the monarch) that they must be, like the pictures of Elizabeth, destroyed. For Evelyn, the royal gastronomic sign signified market glut and representational inadequacy; from the king's status as an object of art, he became an object of retail consumption that failed as a repository of memory.

But if monarchical signboards had hung at taverns for hundreds of years, why did these only become a problem requiring a solution in the later seventeenth century? Before the 1660s, writers might take notice of monarchical signs, but they were never objects of invective. For example, the publican and poet John Taylor published a 1636 pamphlet in which he counted and catalogued London's tippling devices, interpreting the city's many King's Head signs as reminders of royal authority and admonitions to temperance.[28] Charles II, it should be noted, never took issue with his likeness rendered on signboards or other visual-material objects, and his only "positive policy" in regards to his representation was to ensure its wide-scale circulation and availability.[29] The legitimacy of Restoration monarchy required the restoration of regal images and symbols across the realm, and by early April 1660 the royal insignia began reappearing around London as expectant subjects fixed up the returning

---

[27] John Evelyn, *Sculptura: Or the History, and Art of Chalcography and Engraving in Copper* (London, 1662), 24–26.

[28] John Taylor, *Taylors Travels and Circular Perambulation, Through … the Famous Cities of London and Westminster* (London, 1636), 19–20. On Taylor, see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v., "Taylor, John (1578–1653)," accessed 14 July 2013. doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/27044.

[29] Katherine Gibson "'Best Belov'd of Kings': The Iconography of King Charles II" (PhD diss., Courtauld Institute, 1997), 198.

king's arms.[30] Similarly, a number of London tradesmen set up shop under the sovereign's picture, such as one Thomas Cole, who opened his millenary store in Ludgate Hill in 1663. His carved signboard displayed the king's bust, with Saint Edward's crown, ermine robes, scepter, orb, and the Lesser George of the Order of the Garter (figure 5).[31] Thus, in part Evelyn's caution betrays broader anxieties about the meanings of regality early in the Restoration, marking an attempt to replace popular inconstancy with lasting reverence through the production of court paintings, statues, and coins that transmit authorized and accurate representations of the king. Still, this does not fully explain why he found signs to be an inappropriate medium of royal representation and popular loyalism.

If it is difficult to understand *why* monarchical signs became a problem requiring a solution, it perhaps seems easier to explain *how* they impacted perceptions of majesty. In *Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, Chartier names the royal sign as a desacralizing object that undermined kingly transcendence, one element of a broader intellectual disinvestment that made the monarchy common and revolution possible. He cites Louis Sébastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* (1781–88) and its description of cluttered warehouses full of old and unused signs from which Parisian tavern owners indiscriminately selected images for their shop fronts. "There all the kings of the earth sleep together," Mercier wrote, "Louis XVI and George III exchange fraternal embraces; the king of Prussia lies with the empress of Russia; the emperor is level with his electors … A tavern owner arrives, pokes all these crowned heads with his foot, examines them, and picks at random the likeness of the king of Poland; he bears it away, hangs it up, and writes underneath, *au Grand Vainqueur*." The king of the shop sign is no longer the picture of the king; he, Chartier argues, "demanded no particular reverence and evoked no fear."[32] As Louis Marin contends, the official portrait of the absolute monarch produces his authority and presence: spectators do not so much gaze upon the painting—thereby turning king to object—instead they are enthralled by the awe-inspiring gaze of the king and constituted as political subjects of the sovereign.[33] According to Mercier, however, signs fail to capture the monarch's mystique or particular identity; even as commercial objects they are accorded little value, scattered about the warehouse floor awaiting the poke of the publican's shoe. He illustrated a kind of monarchical representation that was entirely at the whim of consumer desire and replaced royal semiotic specificity with gaudy, generic characterizations. Each picture existed solely for the gaze of the crowd: "all the princesses of Europe" were painted with large breasts ("il veut que sa gorge soit boursoufflée"); kings and queens were captured with "strange physiognomies" that show them "eternally pouting" at spectators; and individuality was replaced by the generic so that a quick daub of paint transformed Louis XV into Caesar.[34]

[30] Nicola Smith, *The Royal Image and the English People* (Aldershot, 2001), 67–68, 78; Kevin Sharpe, *Rebranding Rule: The Restoration and Revolution Monarchy, 1660–1714* (New Haven, 2013), 122–23.

[31] Heal, *Signboards*, 135; Thomas Cole, Trade Card (c. 1663), Heal, 86.18, BM.

[32] Chartier, *Cultural Origins*, 85–86 (author's translation).

[33] Louis Marin, *Food for Thought*, trans. Mette Hjort (Baltimore, 1997), 189–217, especially 196–200; see also idem, *Portrait of the King*, trans. Martha M. Houle (Minneapolis, 1988), especially 206–14.

[34] Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris, Nouvelle Édition Corrigée & augmentée,* 8 vols. (Amsterdam, 1783–88), 5:118–21 (translation mine).

Figure 5—Draft trade card for Thomas Cole, milliner, c. 1663. © Trustees of the British Museum, London. Original at Ashmolean Museum, Sutherland Collection, extra-illustrated Lord Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*, 2 vols., ed. W. D. Macray (Oxford, 1702–04), 3:324.

Similar concerns are present in other early criticism of the English monarchical sign. Charles hiding in the Royal Oak tree after the 1651 Battle of Worcester became a popular tavern and inn sign during the Restoration, and the image was widely replicated on a variety of media, including earthenware, plaques, and

broadsides.[35] Published accounts of the king's miraculous preservation—disguised as a commoner and smuggled out of England—were available at all levels of the print marketplace from 1660. The Royal Oak sign would have evoked a whole range of associations about Protestant providentialism, royalist military adventure, and folktales of kings in disguise who befriend (and get drunk with) ordinary subjects.[36] Yet one anonymous defender of the regime argued in a 1667 poem that this sign jeopardized monarchical authority almost as much as anti-state satire. The author compared pamphlet scribblers and tavern-room politicians to daubing painters of alehouse walls and signs, such as the Royal Oak: they "paint[ed] all Kings and Princes like themselves."[37] The monarch as the subject of tippling signboard or broadside debate cheapened the value of royalty, erasing the reverential distance between subject and sovereign—a point underscored by a sign commemorating a real incognito king, forced to adopt the guise of a country servant to avoid capture. Although it celebrated Stuart kingship, the Royal Oak sign is ambiguous in that it represents sacred monarchy momentarily and successfully unmarked by majesty. "Princes are Gods," the poem warned, "As Gods, 'tis Sacrilegious to present / Them in such Shapes as may bespeak contempt."[38] Indeed, the Restoration had brought with it the return of mystified monarchy, a baroque ethos of dense allegorical representation, exemplified, for instance, by Antonio Verrio's Windsor Castle ceiling panels that glorified Charles by identifying him with gods, heroes, and virtues of antiquity.[39] Yet a decade of republican rule meant that things had changed; the renewed symbols and spectacle of divine kingship might ring hollow, and, for some, the royal signboard collapsed the reaffirmed distinctions between king and commoner.

Just as importantly, however, signs indexed the issues wrought by the wider reproduction and circulation of royal images through engraving, which, beginning in the Restoration, publicized the monarchy in new ways and allowed subjects new opportunities to possess royal images.[40] In the above passage, Evelyn slipped between two different modes of pictorial evaluation, moving from an aesthetic critique of the "ill" painting to a larger condemnation of vernacular image reproduction that devalued both the king's picture and the king himself. If we compare this passage with the original anecdote about Elizabeth in Walter Raleigh's *History of the World* (1614), the extent to which Evelyn emphasized multiplication through graphic reproduction becomes increasingly apparent. Raleigh simply described "Pictures of Queen

[35] Sharpe, *Rebranding Rule*, 111–13. Lillywhite's index includes at least 30 different London shops, inns, and taverns conducting business under the sign of the Royal Oak between the Restoration and the end of the eighteenth century. Lillywhite, *London Signs*, 466–67.

[36] See Harold Weber, *Paper Bullets: Print and Kingship under Charles II* (Lexington, 1996), 25–49; Brian Weiser, "Owning the King's Story: The Escape of from Worcester," *Seventeenth Century* 14, no 1. (Spring 1999): 44–63; Sharpe, *Rebranding Rule*, 88–90. For a popular contemporary example of kings in disguise, see the chapbook *The Pleasant and Delightful History of King Henry 8th. and a Cobler* (London, 1670).

[37] *The Answer of Mr. Waller's Painter To His many new Advisers* (London, 1667), 7.

[38] *The Answer of Mr. Waller's Painter*, 5.

[39] Gibson, "Best Belov'd of Kings," 135. Hannah Smith uses the term "representational in ethos" to describe the spectacle of divine monarchy that was gradually abandoned in the post-Revolutionary period. Smith, *Georgian Monarchy*, 62, 81–83.

[40] For an overview of these changes, see Sharpe, *Rebranding Rule*, 114–18, 136–47, and Smith, *Georgian Monarchy*, 131–41. On the expansion of London's engraving industry, see Antony Griffiths, *The Print in Stuart Britain, 1603–1689* (London, 1998); Timothy Clayton, *The English Print, 1688–1802* (New Haven, 1997).

Elizabeth, made by unskilfull and common painters: which by her owne Commande-ment, were knockt to peeces and cast into the fire."[41] Whether these pictures were inferior imitations of a badly executed original, he did not say, avoiding any mention of copying or the copy. Evelyn's ambiguous language leaves open the pos-sibility that both paintings and engravings of Elizabeth were condemned as disfig-ured, and in his telling the copies were used for the production of other consumables. The political benefits of royal image circulation, according to Evelyn, must be balanced by the king's assertion of reproductive authority, the ability to control the marketplace in monarchical representation, thereby preventing his image from becoming a vacant signifier open to retail appropriation. The repro-duction of princely images here cannot be classified as mechanical in the Benjaminian sense—not only was line engraving slow and labor intensive, but the copied images Evelyn complained of were just as likely to be the product of the dauber's clumsy paintbrush as the engraver's burin. Nevertheless, the multiplication of royal pictures, by removing them from their ritualistic context in the adulation of monarchy, threat-ened the auratic sacrality of the actual sovereign.[42] Thus the royal sign signified the depreciation of value as representations of monarchy circulated promiscuously through the marketplace.

The value, meaning, and management of royal signs continued to interest Evelyn, and he returned to these issues thirty-five years later in *Numismata* (1697), his "Dis-course on Medals." Unlike hanging signs, medals were a legitimate and lasting medium of sovereign representation that commemorated the official history of the regime and circulated among a limited, privileged audience.[43] Against the instabili-ties of time and decay, they transmitted authorized representations of rulers, states-men, and heroes. By combining the picture of the king stamped upon the obverse (which Evelyn called the "body" of the medal) with a reverse that featured emblem-atic figures and detailed inscriptions (which he called its "soul" or "character"), medals united the image of the monarch with the great deeds of his reign.[44] Further-more, they could be collected, collated, and deciphered by communities of virtuosi schooled in the arts of aesthetic evaluation and emblematic interpretation. For readers "Curious of Prints" or numismatists with gaps in their collections, Evelyn rec-ommended the acquisition of faithfully rendered portrait engravings inscribed with the name, character, and accomplishments of the person represented, thereby

---

[41] Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World* (London, 1614), B2 verso. On Elizabethan representation, see Anna Riehl, *The Face of Queenship: Early Modern Representation of Elizabeth I* (New York, 2010); Kevin Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 2009).

[42] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 19–55. Dror Wahrman makes the opposite argument about the desacralization of monarchy in the works of the Dutch painter Edward Collier; see *Mr. Collier's Letter Racks: A Tale of Art and Illusion at the Threshold of the Modern Information Age* (Oxford, 2012), 96.

[43] McShane, "Subjects and Objects," 873.

[44] Evelyn, *Numismata. A Discourse of Medals, Antient and Modern* (London, 1697), 1, 176; Louis Marin, "The Inscription of the King's Memory: On the Metallic History of Louis XIV," *Yale French Studies,* no. 59 (1980): 17–36, at 27; see also idem, *Food for Thought*, 220.

stabilizing meaning by uniting visual sign and textual description.[45] Again, he praised the aesthetic control exercised by ancient rulers like Alexander and Augustus, which meant that antiquarian medals could be taken at face value—not only did they provide an unerring historic record, but their obverses were so accurate that physiognomic and metoscopic conclusions could be drawn about each subject. Such examples should "raise ones indignation," Evelyn continued, "against the presumptuous Exposures, which Kings and Princes at this day suffer of their Effigies, by every wretched Dauber on every Sign-Post among Cats and Monkeys!"[46]

The above passages from *Numismata* reveal Evelyn to be deeply concerned with issues of sovereignty, representation, and the marketplace. If reproducibility was a problem that threatened royal display and regal veneration, it was also part of the solution, informing new ways of imaging how the king might assert his authority through representation as baroque court spectacle and allegory were gradually abandoned in the post-Revolutionary period. No longer was it enough to glorify the king by depicting him in classical costume or identifying him with heroes of antiquity: in the age of commercial reproducibility princes had to manage their representations as fiercely as an Alexander or an Augustus. Evelyn's ideas about the utility of numismatic and print collecting drew upon emerging discourses of civic humanism. He claimed that seeing such images presented viewers with opportunities to contemplate and emulate the characters and exploits of great men.[47] But medals and coins were also tools of state in that they revealed and constituted the king's authority, declaring his status as the maker and guarantor of value. Indeed, this was a moment of acute representational uncertainty, made urgent by political revolution, the "explosion" of print culture after 1695, the dislocations of an expanding commercial marketplace, and virulent debates about recoinage and currency debasement in 1696.[48] Evelyn responded to these transformations by reconfirming the sovereign's power to establish standards of representation. On the topic of currency debasement, for example, he warned readers that it would lead to total economic and social collapse. Putting the royal effigy on "unweighty Money … render[ed] the Prince himself a *Faux Monyeur*," he asserted, violating the public trust placed in the king to declare "real and intrinsic Value."[49] The historic and exchange value of coins and medals, respectively, was assured by the identical imprint of the sovereign on the obverse.[50] But the medium also affected the message: just as cheapening the coin cheapened the worth of the real king, the free circulation of royal images, multiplied across objects and within prosaic contexts, did the same. One only had to look to Louis XIV's

---

[45] Ibid., 257. Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 1998), 64–66.

[46] Evelyn, *Numismata*, 44–45.

[47] Ibid., 67–69. On civic humanism and art theory: John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* (New Haven, 1986); David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 1993); Carol Gibson-Wood, *Jonathan Richardson: Art Theorist of the English Enlightenment* (New Haven, 2000).

[48] Mark Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain: Partisanship and Political Culture* (Oxford, 2005), chap. 5; Wahrman, *Mr. Collier's Letter Racks*, 20–22; Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, 1998), 17–56; Deborah Valenze, *The Social Life of Money in the English Past* (Cambridge, 2006), 39–46, 85.

[49] Evelyn, *Numismata*, 228, 224; Valenze, "Social Life of Money," 85.

[50] Louis Marin, "The Inscription of the King's Memory," 27; see also *Food for Thought*, 220.

France, Evelyn cautioned, where "they have render'd the present Monarch as cheap as Counters, every Stonewall and Sign-Post bearing the Head and Effigies of Lodovicus Magnus, radiated like a young Apollo."[51]

Evelyn penned these warnings about commercialized royalism at the very moment when public desire for political commodities began to expand, as did the marketplace in images of the royal family and other loyalist visual-material objects. The later Stuart period was a time of rapid growth in the production of cheaper royalist items that disseminated representations of the monarchy across a wider social scale than ever before. Goods such as metal lockets, delftware plates and mugs, and woodcut ballad broadsides that sold for less than a penny "domesticated the monarchy," materializing affection for the state and incorporating the royal family within the private space of the home.[52] Furthermore, by the 1680s London's engraving industry swelled to almost unrecognizable proportions, and new technologies—particularly mezzotint, which Prince Rupert brought back to England early in the 1660s and Evelyn first described in *Sculptura*—increased the speed with which plates could be produced to meet consumer demand.[53] This growing graphic print trade made possible the wider reproduction of royal effigies, and the demand for loyalist pictures reciprocally fed the commercialization of monarchical representations, with engravers working both in tandem with and independently of court painters like Peter Lely and Godfrey Kneller to reproduce likenesses for consumers.[54] Collecting portrait prints became a fashionable pastime from the later seventeenth century, and engravers and publishers produced highly successful engraved galleries of "illustrious" men and women, especially kings and queens.[55] By the mid-1730s, England had witnessed a dramatic shift in the reach of the visual arts, and almost anyone could afford to buy well-executed reproductions of past and present rulers sold at print shops, booksellers, and pamphlet venders around the metropolis.[56]

Although signs also replicated official images of rulers, they worked by a different logic whereby a generic symbolism of regal identity is extracted from the physiognomic specificity of monarchy as captured by master painters. Signboards functioned through a kind of abstraction and translation of official portraiture: the essential qualities of a court painting must be reproduced, simplified, cropped, and enlarged to make the sign legible to hurried urban spectators.[57] As Mercier warned, such abstraction might be carried further, with the royal head becoming a generic signboard type that bore little resemblance or reference to the actual sovereign. Kings and queens

---

[51] Evelyn, *Numismata*, 41.

[52] McShane, "Subjects and Objects," 885.

[53] Griffiths, *The Print in Stuart Britain*, 23, 217–43; idem, "Early Mezzotint Publishing in England—I. John Smith, 1652–1743," *Print Quarterly* 6 (1989): 248–51; Carol Wax, *The Mezzotint: History and Technique* (New York, 1990); Ben Thomas, "Noble or Commercial? The Early History of Mezzotint in Britain," in *Printed Images in Early Modern Britain: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. Michael Hunter (Burlington, 2010), 279–96.

[54] Griffiths, "Early Mezzotint Publishing," 248–51.

[55] Smith, *Georgian Monarchy,* 139; Griffiths, "The Pepys Library," *Print Quarterly* 12 (1995): 411–12; Pointon, *Hanging the Head*, 62; Clayton, *The English Print*, 57–62.

[56] Individual half-sheet prints of the monarchy by George Vertue and Robert Sheppard, engraved to illustrate Paul de Rapin-Thoyras's *History of England* (1726–31), were advertised at between three and six pence apiece. *London Daily Post and General Advertiser*, 29 March 1736.

[57] Millar, Larwood, and Hotten, *English Inn Signs*, 310.

were not the only individuals featured on signboards of course: authors, military leaders, and religious figures all achieved signboard fame. Ben Johnson's and Shakespeare's portraits adorned publishers' and booksellers' shop fronts, for instance, while Saint Christopher, patron of travelers, was standard signboard material for publicans and innkeepers. The first duke of Marlborough graced many a tavern and coffeehouse sign because of his martial heroics.[58] Yet there is little evidence to suggest that these signs attracted the same kinds of attention or criticism leveled against regal signboards. The royal sign also remains unique in that it represents both a specific person (King Charles II or Queen Anne, say) and a generic type (the King's Head, the Queen's Head). Thus, if royal portraits are like sacred or religious visual-material objects in that they aim to produce presence—a sense of the sign becoming the thing it refers to, the spectator bowing before the painted king—here we have the image of the sovereign emptied of aura, a free-floating signifier open to the proliferation of meaning.[59] We can perhaps detect just such a lack of specificity in the varieties of London's Queen's Head signs, which seem to replicate the iconographic symbolism of royalty without actually representing an identifiable or named queen. For example, it is difficult to determine which specific sign of the queen John Sutton operated under, since his trade card depicts the monarch in regalia and formal posing that perhaps could be read as either Queen Anne or Queen Caroline of Ansbach, both of whom were depicted on contemporary signs (figure 6).[60] Similarly, eighteenth-century collectors of trade cards might clip the image of the sign from the surrounding text advertising the merchant or shop, making identification difficult and suggesting an absence of the kind of classificatory impulse that often motivated collectors of engraved portraits (figure 7).[61] This is an economy of image reproduction that far exceeds the sovereigns' ability to police his or her representation, and many feared that it eroded royal mystique through indecorous display and aesthetic inadequacy.

Royal signs, then, came to signify irreverent and profane use of the king's picture as it circulated among an increasingly mass audience. This was the very issue the fictional sign-painter Philip Carmine raised when he complained of Queen Anne's gin-shop. Similarly, in a 1762 letter to *St. James's Magazine*, one William Ironside explained why royal signs were such dubious political objects, so badly painted as to make spectators question whether the picture was intended as a compliment or an insult. "When I see before the door of an ale-house, a Harp-Alley daub of the king and queen (which might pass as well for the Little Carpenter and his Indian Squaw, if George and Charlotte were not subscribed)," he wrote, "I am forced to enquire whether the landlord is a loyal subject to the king, or a Newcastle man, before I can determine what is to be understood by the sign."[62] Commonplace and haphazardly displayed representations

[58] Lillywhite, *London Signs*, 37, 487–88, 472, 352.

[59] On Protestant religious visual-material objects, see David Morgan, "The Look of the Sacred," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (New York, 2012), 296–318; *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (Oxford, 1999); *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley, 2005).

[60] John Sutton, Trade Card, Heal, 111.144, BM. For a similar example of the Queen's Head sign that could be read in multiple ways, see the trade card of Samuel Wrather, 66 726 T675 Quarto, fol. 42, LWL.

[61] Page from "Trade Tokens and Bookplates" (1705–1799), 66 726 T675, fol. 143, LWL.

[62] William Ironside (pseud.), "To the Editor of the St. James's Magazine," in *St. James's Magazine*, ed. Robert Lloyd, 4 vols. (London, 1762–64), 1:278. Thomas Pelham Holles, the duke of Newcastle (1693–1768) resigned his office as prime minister in 1762 and joined the political opposition to

Figure 6—Trade card for John Sutton, eighteenth century, depicting a generic sign of the Queen's Head. © Trustees of the British Museum, London.

of rulers subvert the semiotics of royal objects since they can be read both as expressions of loyalism *and* as signs of mockery. Such thoughts led Ironside to question the broader commercialization of royalism that multiplied the monarchical effigy across an entire range of everyday material objects:

> I was ever disgusted at the thoughts of blowing my nose in his majesty's face upon my hankerchief; and it lately went much against me to see a waiter throw two shillings worth of hot rum and brandy-punch over his sovereign at the bottom of the bowl.

George III. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v., "Holles, Thomas Pelham, Duke of Newcastle upon Tyne and First Duke of Newcastle under Lyme, 1693–1768," accessed 1 August 2015. doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/21801.

Figure 7—Page from "Trade Tokens and Bookplates, 1705–1799 (bulk 1757–1758)," Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. According to the 1962 introduction to the collection, the clippings were collected by a Mr. Legge of St. James' Market, who "used to wander into shops, look about, and get the shop's card."

> But I can scarce reflect, without the utmost confusion, that the queen lay prostrate under me, for the whole night, at the bottom of a piece of Chelsea china in my bedchamber, which I broke in the morning, as soon as I discovered my indignity.[63]

London had become so saturated with pictures of the royal family, Ironside alleged, that even Covent Garden prostitutes and inmates in the city's prisons decorated their walls with prints of the king and queen. On a broader level, then, what Ironside objected to was the democratization of regal images, finding it puzzling to encounter pictures of rulers displayed within disorderly urban spaces and reproduced on intimate (and obscene) decorative objects. He imagined that mass-produced goods, like official court paintings, still produce the presence of majesty. Rather than creating political subjects, though, this immediacy subjects the monarchy to debauched crowds, erotic puns, and bodily excrement, and Ironside's humorous juxtapositions of the lofty and the low make it unclear whether his essay is an earnest defense or a parody of royal sacrality.

The monarchical sign became a problem because it stood for the dangers of commercial reproduction and consumer appropriation, exposing the ways in which absolute and sacred models of kingship were at odds with England's changing political culture. The popularization of the royal image helped fill the void left by the decline of baroque court spectacle, yet multiplication lead to generic abstraction, irreverent familiarity, and the failure of veracious interpretation when royal symbols were encountered outside of traditional sites of reverence. This was all, however, part of a much larger problem of representation and misrepresentation in early eighteenth-century Britain, as virulent and entrenched party politics called into question all notions of truth and credibility.[64] Take, for instance, Jonathan Swift's *City Cries, Instrumental and Vocal* (1732), a satire of Whig political hysteria in which ordinary market cries and shop signs in Dublin and London are interpreted by the paranoid narrator as evidence of popular Jacobitism and urban conspiracy. Listing the "many abuses relating to Sign-Posts," Swift censured the seemingly innocuous sign of George II for championing the Stuart cause at the expense of the Hanoverian succession. "Whoever views those Signs, may read over his Majesty's Head the following Letters and Cyphers, *G. R*. II.," Swift explained,

> which plainly signifies *George*, King the Second; and not King *George* the Second, or *George* the Second King; but laying the Point after the Letter G. by which the Owner of the House manifestly shews, that he renounces his Allegiance to King *George* the Second; and allows him to be only the second King, In-uendo that the Pretender is the first King; and looking upon King *George* to be only a Kind of second King, or Viceroy, till the Pretender shall come over and seize the Kingdom.[65]

Clearly, no one was actually reading the sign of George II as a treasonous symbol, and the royal cypher was always written in the above order.[66] Hyperbole aside, Swift's

---

[63] Ironside, "To the Editor of the St. James's Magazine," 1:279.

[64] Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, especially 272–91.

[65] Jonathan Swift, *City Cries, Instrumental and Vocal: or, an Examination of certain Abuses, Corruptions, and Enormities, in London and Dublin* (Dublin and London, 1732), 29–30.

[66] On the royal cypher, see Wahrman, *Mr. Collier's Letter Racks*, 91.

point was that in the age of representational politics all symbols could be read through the lens of party, undercutting standards of interpretive truth. But what made the monarchical sign such an apt example of this problem was that the king, traditionally, was a site of representational authority—the monarchy, with the church, validated meaning in the well-ordered polity.[67] Here, however, the monarchy is made illegible through a never-ending process of factious, overloaded interpretation, and loyalist iconography becomes a medium for the emergence of an oppositional—and irrational—public sphere.

For other writers, signboards came to signify an unregulated, failing system of visual representation that frustrated reason and legibility through its reliance upon coded and unrealistic iconography. In the *Spectator* on 2 April 1711, for example, Addison published a fictional letter from a "projector" who sought to rid London's streets of the "daily Absurdities hung out upon the Sign-Posts." These included "irregular" and "incongruous" combinations of bad puns and unnatural figures that had little to do with the businesses to which they were attached—"blue Boars, black Swans, and red Lions; not to mention flying Pigs, and Hogs in Armour" were to be viewed throughout the city. Not only did such signs supposedly impede commercial navigation by confusing spectators, they resulted in a kind of visual overload, "thrusting themselves out to the Eye, and endeavouring to become visible."[68] Lacking iconicity, signs were both brash and illegible. Addison and Steele had earlier proposed in the *Tatler* that the fictional Isaac Bickerstaff serve as a subscription-based orthographic and iconographic inspector of tradesmen's signs, which they claimed were overrun with incorrect spelling and indecipherable imagery. Quickly, though, the essay shifted from signage to other examples of urban confusion, and they introduced the character of a frustrated Scotsman whom Bickerstaff chanced upon outside the Royal Exchange: this

> worthy North-Britain was swearing at Stocks Market, that they would not let him in at his lodgings; but I knowing the gentleman, and observing him look often at the king on horseback, and then double his oaths, that he was sure he was right, found he mistook that for Charing Cross, by the erection of a like statue in each place.[69]

The failure of signboard representation, then, was linked to the failure of an earlier culture of baroque adulation signified by the illegibility of the equestrian statues of Charles I and II erected at Charing Cross and Cornhill, respectively. Thus, Addison and Steele conflated garishly decorated, defective urban signage with the hollow spectacle of court culture—both overwhelmed perception resulting in a kind of false taste and faulty knowledge that they and their contemporary Whig theorists of urban politeness aimed to reform.[70]

But here the story becomes even more interesting: not only did these statues look nothing alike since that of Charles II included the figure of a Turk being trampled by

---

[67] Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, 273.

[68] Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *Spectator*, 2nd ed., 1, no. 28 (London, 1713), 2 April 1711, 104.

[69] Richard Steele, with Joseph Addison, *The Tatler: By Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq.*, 1, no. 18 (London, 1709), 21 May 1709.

[70] See Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994), 175–94.

his horse, but his statue actually started out as a representation of an entirely different monarch. It was carved in Italy to depict the famous King of Poland, Jan Sobieski, defeating a Turk in commemoration of his victories against the Ottomans. Thomas Vyner and his nephew Robert purchased it with the intent of transforming Jan III into Charles II, and a stonemason was hired to make the conversion once the statue arrived in London.[71] Unveiled for the king's birthday on 29 May 1672, the statue became an object of ridicule—Andrew Marvell declared it a "disfigur'd" representation of the monarch, "show[ing] him a monkey more like than a king."[72] Even worse, many Londoners knew the statue had originally depicted the Polish king, and later observers misread the figure being trampled as Oliver Cromwell rather than a Turk. As James Ralph wrote in his *Critical Review of the Public Buildings, Statues and Ornaments in, and about London and Westminster* (1734), the statue was "exceedingly ridiculous and absurd." It altered Jan into Charles in order to celebrate the Restoration "the cheapest way" possible by "convert[ing] the *Polander* into a *Briton*, and the *Turk*, underneath his horse, into *Oliver Cromwell*." And, worst of all, the artist forgot to remove the "turbant" that remained upon the head of the Cromwellian figure.[73]

If the sign's illegibility symbolized the breakdown of an earlier system of visual representation that placed the monarchy at the center of epistemological certainty, it also drew attention to the ways in which new standards of visual credibility or certitude could never fully solve the problems wrought by the later seventeenth-century crisis of representation.[74] One outcome of this search for stability and order in an increasingly heterogeneous and socially mobile society, Marcia Pointon argues, was the British rage for portraiture in the eighteenth century—expressed not just through painting, but especially through the commercial reproduction of engraved heads that could be collected, catalogued, and hierarchically arranged.[75] Portraiture, according to the painter Jonathan Richardson, was not simply the "Tame, Insipid Resemblance of Features," but it was an expression of exact likeness and individuality: the true "Portrait-Painter must understand mankind, and enter into their Characters, and express their Minds as well as their faces … or 'twill be impossible to give Such their True, and Proper Representations."[76] Popular signs, on the other hand, subverted this entire system. As their critics alleged, signboard pictures of kings and queens were ephemeral, open signifiers that could be read in multiple ways and easily altered from one person into another. If official state portraits and historical medals memorialized the regime for posterity—they "preserve and derive … Divine Effigies to the after Ages"—the royal sign, in Oliver Goldsmith's estimation, illustrated the

[71] Gibson, "'Best Belov'd of Kings,'" 174–75, provides an authoritative account of the purchase and alteration of this statue; see also Smith, *The Royal Image*, 124–25.

[72] Andrew Marvell, "On the Statue at Stocks-Market," in Andrew Marvell, *A Collection of Poems on Affairs of State* (London 1689), 111.

[73] James Ralph, *A Critical Review of the Public Buildings, Statues and Ornaments In, and about London and Westminster* (London, 1734), 12.

[74] Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 110, identifies a "representational crisis of authority" in England by the mid- and late seventeenth-century, tracing the origins of this crisis to unease engendered by "England's increasingly boundless market." For Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation*, esp. 1–8, this was a crisis of credibility and public discourse during the shift to a representative society.

[75] Pointon, *Hanging the Head*, 83.

[76] Jonathan Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* (London, 1715), 21–22.

transience of worldly grandeur and popular acclamation. Citing the example of an alehouse keeper in Islington who replaced his signboard of Louis XV with Maria Theresa during the War of Austrian Succession (1740–48), only to replace the empress with Frederick the Great at the beginning of the Seven Years' War (1756–63), Goldsmith predicted that the king of Prussia would "probably be changed in turn for the next great man that shall be set up for vulgar admiration. Our publican, in this, imitates the great exactly—who deal out their figures, one after the other, to the gazing crowd."[77]

More importantly, the signboard's representational inadequacy meant not only that George III might be read as "The Little Carpenter" or Queen Charlotte as "The Indian Squaw," but also that their portraits could be—like the statue of Jan III—metamorphosed into pictures of other people. The serialized "A Sentimental Journey, by a Lady," appearing in the *Lady's Magazine* between 1770 and 1777, introduced the character of an "eminent" London sign painter who was moments away from embarking on a continental grand tour. This self-promoting Harp Alley hack revealed that his special sign-painting expertise was "a peculiar talent in altering portraits to make them represent different persons." Boasting that his metamorphoses surpassed even those of Ovid, he claimed to have converted the sign of the Saracen into that of Prince William, Duke of Cumberland, and that of Queen Charlotte into the Maidenhead, John Wilkes into the Green Man, and Lord North into Shakespeare's Head.[78] According to this view, the sign displayed as a form of popular commemoration or political expression was actually an object of complete impermanence and instability, confusing rather than confirming individuality, hierarchy, or history. Yet the juxtapositions enabled by the absence of specificity provided the fodder for satirical speculation—"Bloody" Cumberland was as violent as the Saracen, Wilkes was as wild as the Green Man, North's silver tongue rivaled Shakespeare's. It was not that the commercial signboard lacked meaning, the problem was that its meaning was never stabilized, it was constantly available for reformulation and reinterpretation according to the vicissitudes of the riotous urban crowd. Yet the protean character of the royal sign is precisely what made it such a salient object for debating representation in later Stuart and Hanoverian England. For some it signified the dangers of commercialized royalism, for others the epistemological uncertainties of partisan politics, and still for others the vacuousness and inauthenticity of absolutist visual culture.

THE ROYAL SIGN AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Is this all to say that despite the signboard's national particularity and invasive physicality, and regardless of the royal sign's overwhelming presence within London's streets, signage ultimately undermined regal authority through the frivolous display of kings and queens as commercial referents? We need to consider not just how signs represented the monarchy, but also how ordinary Londoners used and

[77] Oliver Goldsmith, "On the Instability of Worldly Grandeur," in Oliver Goldsmith, *The Bee: Being Essays on the most Interesting Subjects* (London, 1759), 184–89, at 184.
[78] "A Sentimental Journey. By a Lady," serialized in *Lady's Magazine or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex* (September 1774), 455–56.

viewed the images depicted on signboards. Why might one display the king's head on a shop sign, and did its use as a commercial signifier necessarily hinder its ability to communicate political or historical value? Was the shop-sign king, in other words, a meaningful object? These are difficult questions to answer—although the city was saturated with publicly displayed images of monarchy, the sheer multiplicity and commonplace nature of signs meant that the majority of Londoners never recorded their perception of or interactions with these graphic objects. Yet a closer examination of urban signs as they were mentioned and discussed in newspapers and periodicals—paying particular attention to the ways in which signage, the crowd, and partisan politics were often linked by writers—can help us begin to formulate an answer.

Perhaps it is best to start with the short history of a particularly royalist London cheesemonger operating during the reign of George I, a ruler whom historians have traditionally viewed as unpopular, unintelligent, and culturally unimportant.[79] At his cheese shop in Shoreditch, Henry Barnes used for his signboard a picture of the king, having hung up a new pewter sign to coincide with the monarch's sixty-third birthday on 28 May 1723. Days later, however, a group of unknown vandals disfigured Barnes's sign by covering it with "dirt" and "filth," an event that was widely covered in the metropolitan press.[80] Barnes was "well known for his Zeal and Affection to his Majesty King George, the Royal Family, and the present happy Establishment," the *Weekly Journal* reported on 8 June 1723, and he "resent[ed] more the seditious Disloyalty of the Design, than the Affront to himself."[81] However, there is more to this story than the popular commemoration of a Hanoverian king's birthday by the erection of a sign or the defacing of the monarch's effigy by a fractious late-night crowd. Barnes had earlier in the year been involved in giving evidence against a William Unton for speaking treasonable words against the king, for which he found himself "much abused, and injustly charged with Perjury" by another cheesemonger, William Clendon.[82] The *Weekly Journal* had covered the story at the urging of a reader who asked that the newspaper "acquaint the Public" with the late trial "between William Clendon a High Church Cheesemonger Plaintiff, and Henry Barnes a Low Church Cheesemonger Defendant."[83] Here, then, the monarchical signboard possessed partisan political meaning, signifying to passersby and potential cheese consumers Barnes's own loyalty to the Hanoverian and Anglican establishment and his personal investment in defending the sovereign against those who exposed him to subversive and seditious ridicule. Following up on Barnes the next year at the anniversary of George I's accession, the *Weekly Journal* reported that the loyalist cheesemonger could still be found "at the Sign of King George's Head," where he had entertained his friends and passing spectators with a "noble Bonfire," window illuminations, and the drinking of loyal healths to the royal family.[84]

[79] For a summary and criticism of these histories, see Smith, *Georgian Monarchy*, especially 1–15.
[80] *Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer*, 8 June 1723; *Evening Post*, 6–8 June 1723.
[81] *Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer*, 8 June 1723.
[82] Ibid., 30 March 1723.
[83] Ibid., 24 February 1723.
[84] Ibid., 8 August 1724.

Barnes was not the only proprietor to engage in partisan politics and church controversy through sign display. A John Shudall in Holywell Street offered a 10 shilling reward for news leading to the apprehension of 3 sword-carrying ruffians who, on the night of 3 June 1711, "did Deface the Sign of Dr. Sacheverell's and also the Bishop of London's Head" that were used by shops in the street. It was Shudall himself, a maker of "Ministers Gowns," who operated his business under Henry Sacheverell's sign.[85] Another church "Robe-maker" near Lyon's-Inn Gate in 1715 also operated at "Dr. Sacheverell's Head," although the local Justices of the Peace, worried that his signpost might incite disorder, commanded that he "pull down his Sign, as offensive, on Pain of their Worship's high Displeasure."[86] Sacheverell, a clergyman and High Church Tory, had come to national attention for denouncing the Revolution and Whig ministry in a series of 1709 sermons, leading to his 1710 impeachment trial and a three-year suspension. Support for Sacheverell not only caused widespread rioting, but also resulted in an outpouring of a voluminous, partisan-backed consumer culture that included graphic prints, playing cards, fans, handkerchiefs, and even ceramics.[87] Until quite recently, the commercialization of politics has been explored almost solely from the perspective of oppositional political culture in the second half of the eighteenth century. Yet support for Sacheverell reveals an earlier, broad-based commercialization of loyalist and Anglican Tory politics; in other words, the commercialization of politics need not be oppositional or secular.[88]

As discussed above, Hogarth celebrated signs as a native, popular art form able to convey complex messages about politics and society, and other of his contemporaries agreed, arguing that signboards materialized a distinctly British political temperament. As Henry Fielding wrote in a 1738 essay published in the doggedly anti-Walpolean *Craftsman*, "The People of *England* are a nation of *Politicians*, from the *first Minister* down to the *Cobbler*, and peculiarly remarkable for hanging out their Principles upon their *Sign-Posts*. Of this almost every Street in *London* gives us abundant Instances."[89] And what kind of political principles were these? It was a politics of faith and monarchy, which Walpole was betraying by refusing to declare war on Spain: "The *Religion* and *Loyalty* of the *English People* are continually discover'd upon their *Signs*, and the *Mottos* upon them … . [W]hat is so common as the Sign of the *King's Head*, or the *King's Arms*? And, when we happen to have a *popular Prince of Wales* … the *Feathers* are equally common, and sometimes predominant."[90] Such

[85] *Post-Boy*, 2–5 June 1711.

[86] *Weekly Packet*, 30 July–6 August 1715.

[87] Eirwen E. C. Nicholson, "Sacheverell's Harlots: Non-Resistance on Paper and in Practice," in *Faction Displayed: Reconsidering the Impeachment of Dr Henry Sacheverell*, ed. Mark Knights (Malden, 2012), 69–79, at 77–79, with the quotation at 77. Mark Knights makes a similar point in "Possessing the Visual: The Materiality of Visual Print Culture in Later Stuart Britain," in *Material Readings of Early Modern Culture: Textual and Social Practices, 1580–1730*, ed. James Daybell and Peter Hinds (Basingstoke, 2008), 85–122.

[88] See John Brewer, "Commercialization of Politics," in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb (Bloomington, 1982), 197–262. Nicholson, "Sacheverell's Harlots," 79.

[89] "A Sequel to the Dissertation on Sign-Posts," *Craftsman*, 30 September 1738, 638. On broader opposition to Walpole, see Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), 117–36.

[90] *Craftsman*, 30 September 1738, 638; Conlin, "'At the Expense of the Public,'" 4.

observations about the political importance of signage quickly turned into a satire of the Walpole ministry expressed through the medium of an invented signpost. According to Fielding, the "most curious" political sign he had ever witnessed was "at a little Alehouse, on the Road to *Greenwich*, where there is a Sign of a Man pretty corpulent, with his Legs straddling upon *two Hogsheads*, and this Motto under it, *Stand fast Sir Robert*." The sign, of course, burlesqued Walpole, suggesting he was "in a *tottering Condition*" and that the oppressive and unpatriotic government would soon fall.[91]

One of the key debates that divides historians of graphic satire is the issue of readership—not only is it difficult to gauge the popularity and circulation of engravings, but prints were read differently by different people and we often do not know who comprised the intended or real audience. Diana Donald contends that mid-eighteenth-century graphic satire reflected popular political culture: engravings "articulated opinion without doors," having "adopted (whether instinctively or willfully) a graphic language which would then have been closely associated with the common people," including an "overwhelmingly emblematic" visual culture of the streets. Eirwin E. C. Nicholson, on the other hand, argues that the political print's audience "was geared to that within doors at Westminster," limiting its accessibility and impact.[92] An analysis of the contemporary discussion of political signboards and the connections between signs and satirical prints, however, suggests that a heavily emblematic visual literacy was more widely available to common audiences than Nicholson's cautious account would have it.

Signs, whether real or imagined, supplied a visual iconography for graphic satire. In 1718, for instance, the pro-Jacobite Nathaniel Mist used the satirical discussion of a fictional signboard in his *Weekly Journal* to satirize the Quadruple Alliance against Spain.[93] Mist published a letter from an individual who had "observed a confused Mob staring and gaping in the Air" in Billingsgate, enraptured by a new sign supposedly set up by the owner of the Salutation Tavern.[94] This tavern is recorded to have existed as early as 1509, and originally its sign represented the angel Gabriel saluting the Virgin Mary.[95] The sign was changed during the Commonwealth to the Soldier and Citizen, a casualty of Puritan iconoclasm, and during the Restoration it was altered to represent two citizens bowing to each other.[96] According to the *Weekly Journal*, it recently had been altered again (in reality, it had not) to depict two well-attired figures exchanging a greeting, one surreptitiously reaching into the other's pocket. "I must confess the Oddness of the Figures gave me some Diversion,"

[91] *Craftsman*, 30 September 1738, 638.

[92] Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (New Haven, 1998), 57; Eirwin E. C. Nicholson, "Consumers and Spectators: The Public of the Political Print in Eighteenth-Century England," *History* 81, no. 261 (January 1996): 5–21, at 14. See also Douglas Fordham and Adrienne Albright, "The Eighteenth-Century Print: Tracing the Contours of a Field," *Literature Compass* 9, no. 8 (August 2012): 509–520, at 515–16.

[93] *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v., "Mist, Nathaniel (d. 1737)," accessed 15 July 2013. doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/18822.

[94] *Weekly Journal, or, Saturday's Post*, 13 September 1718, 545.

[95] Lillywhite, *London Signs,* 478.

[96] Richard Flecknoe, *Rich. Flecknoe's Aenigmatical Characters. Being Rather a new Work, then new Impression of the old* (London, 1665), 84; Jacob Larwood and John Camden Hotten, *The History of Signboards: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London, 1866), 264.

the author continued, "but the many Explications and Observations the Mob made upon them pleased me more." One member of the crowd, more brazen than the rest, declared it to show an Englishman being robbed by a Dutch merchant, a satire on contemporary trade relations. But in an extended reading of the figures' habits and countenances, he determined that each signified specific individuals: the "jolly bluff Man so handsomely dress'd" was meant to represent the British ambassador to the Netherlands, Lord Cadogan, and the grave "figure with his Hat on" was the Dutch Grand Pensionary, Anthonie Heinsius. Thus the sign revealed itself as a commentary on Britain's entanglement in Continental politics and military conflict. "Observe with what Gracefulness and Respect the English Figure approaches the Dutch, and seems very earnest in his Solicitations," the sign interpreter continued, "I warrant you he is speaking about the Quad[ruple] Alli[ance]; but pray mind how sly the Dutchman looks and claps both his Hands on his Pockets. I don't like that, it looks as if he was scrupulous of coming in."[97]

The sign, here, was an object for collective reading and discussion, debated by spectators and compared with contemporary political events until its meaning was determined. It emblematized party difference and the divisions wrought by contemporary diplomatic relations, and readers were invited to engage in political decoding through "serious contemplation" of the invented sign. Indeed, those who agreed with Mist's criticism of the Quadruple Alliance might purchase an engraved half-sheet of the signboard satire to show their support.[98] The story did not rest there: The following week the pro-Whig *Weekly Journal* decried Mist's denunciation of the alliance, urging the "constantly lampoon'd and ridicul'd" ministry to "punish such Libellers" for abusing "the best Government on Earth." Getting Mist at his own game, the paper mocked his Jacobitism through the description of an fictional sign in Westminster's King Street that depicted a man—supposed to be Mist—"s----tt----g Jacobites, *and wiping his A--se with* Mist's Saturday's Posts."[99]

Signboards were employed as "emblems of, or as sharp hits at, the politics of the day,"[100] and such instances of signs serving as a medium of political satire could be multiplied. Despite complaints about their aesthetic inferiority and regardless of their commercial uses, urban signboards were part of a wider culture of visual symbols within eighteenth-century London streets, which collectively produced a common language of political discussion and a source of civic instruction. Like metropolitan graffiti—chalked and carved upon buildings, privy walls, and monuments—these pictures, symbols, and words comprised an impolite public sphere that transcended decorum and social divisions.[101] Choosing to operate under the sign of the King's Head could, as in the case of Henry Barnes, express political affiliation and popular royalism, and signs themselves were read—at least satirically—as reflections

---

[97] *Weekly Journal, or, Saturday's Post*, 13 September 1718, 545.

[98] None of these engravings survive, but pro-whig newspapers claimed that the print was produced by Francis Clifton, and "several Hawkers were corrected at the Whipping-Post for crying them." *Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer*, 20 September 1718.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Larwood and Hotten, *The History of Signboards*, 12.

[101] Lisa Cody, "'Every Lane Teems with Instruction, and Every Alley is Big with Erudition': Graffiti in Eighteenth-Century London," in *The Streets of London: From the Great Fire to the Great Stink*, ed. Tim Hitchcock and Heather Shore (London, 2003), 82–100.

of political difference played out among urban crowds forming the broader "Nation of Politicians."

But the use of royal signs did not always need to be a partisan act; it could also be historically commemorative, and it is likely that the monarchy, at least tacitly, condoned the use of royal effigies on signposts. For instance, in 1702 the *Flying Post* reported that the wife of a "Mr. Beal, Victualler at the Queen's Head in Harp-Alley" gave birth to three sons. The triplets were brought to St. James's Palace, presented to the queen, and given six guineas. Anne, it was noted, "order[ed] the eldest to be Christened George, the 2d Charles and the third William"—this was certainly a very loyal family.[102] The birth and survival of triplets was a very rare occurrence, and readers wishing to verify the truth of the story or meet the Beals could easily locate their shop by its sign. Similarly, to celebrate Anne's assent to the Union Bill, a Mr. Aylmer opened the Royal Union Coffee House near the Exchange, operating under the "sign of … the three Protestant Queens, *viz.* Queen *Elizabeth*, the late Queen *Mary*, and our present Gracious Sovereign Queen *Anne*, curiously Painted."[103] Once erected, this sign was incorporated into a popular symbolic repertoire of signboard figures, ready to be employed by other publicans and merchants (figure 8).[104] Thus, national history and the monarchical succession were also represented for spectators on signposts throughout the city. With the Revolution, Londoners fixed up shop signs bearing the image and insignia of William III, though this did not necessarily mean that signs of former kings and queens were taken down or painted over (figure 9).[105] As the *Looker-On* explained, "Sometimes … on fresh painting the sign, the old king is deposed, and a new monarch reigns in his stead; but no landlord that feels for the antiquity of his house will suffer this revolution to take place."[106]

The importance of London's signage as a site of popular loyalism and civic education was, perhaps, only realized with the beginning of widespread signboard reform in the 1760s. The 1762 Westminster Paving Act supplied satirical fodder for the author of *A Seasonable Alarm to the City of London* (1764). Although "Zachery Zeal" claimed his pamphlet would further expose the "*Scotch Administration*" headed by Lord Bute, he equally mocked the ridiculousness of the radical opposition's anti-Scots tone through an extended discussion of the ill effects that paving the streets and removing hanging signboards were alleged to cause. Street reform was here presented as yet another type of Scottish tyranny: "by *razing* our *Streets,* and *pulling down* our *Signs*," Zeal declared, "in a short time we shall not have a Foot of *English* ground to walk upon, nor will there be a *Sign* of an *Englishman* left, in the Metropolis of *England*."[107] Whereas most would argue that paving roads, creating sidewalks, and clearing away obstructive signs and signposts improved urban health and navigation, Zeal affirmed the very opposite; rough streets built bodily strength and the removal of signage damaged morality and "considerably

---

[102] *Flying Post*, 31 March–2 April 1702, quoted in William Bragg, ed., *Rogues, Royalty and Reporters: The Age of Queen Anne through its Newspapers* (Boston, 1956), 25–26.

[103] *Post Boy*, 6–8 March 1707, quoted in ibid., 51.

[104] Heal, *Signboards*, 94; Heal, 70.141, BM.

[105] Banks, 28.135, BM.

[106] *Looker-On*, no. 32, 15 December 1792, 253.

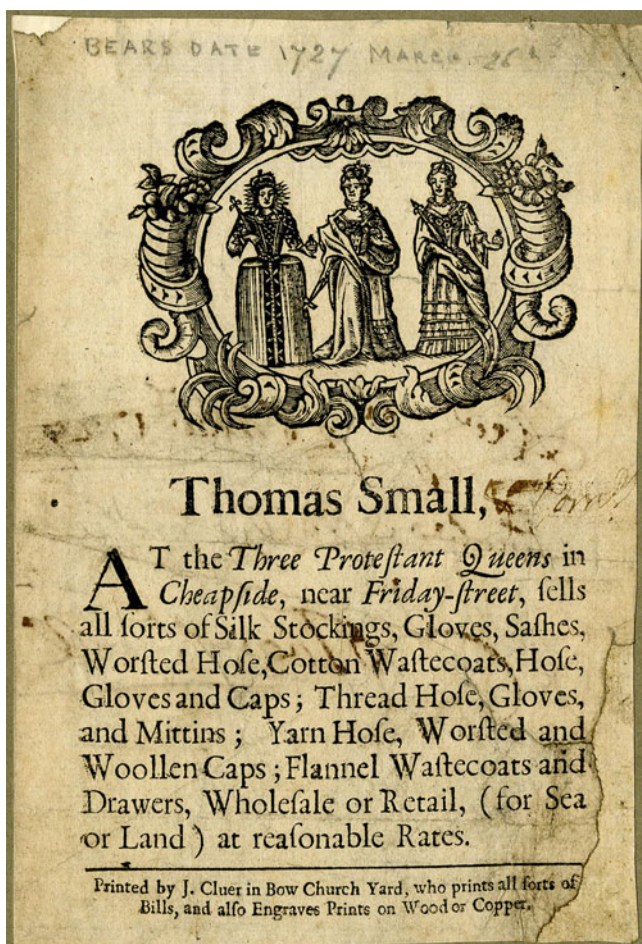[107] Zeal, *A Seasonable Alarm*, 11, 2–3.

Figure 8—Trade card for Thomas Small, haberdasher, "at the Three Protestant Queens in Cheapside, near Friday Street," 1727. © Trustees of the British Museum, London.

abridge[d] the *means* of *Knowledge* in this Metropolis." Signs were everywhere and yet, he lamented,

> [W]e learn only the Value of our Signs, when we are about to lose them! People of Fortune, Gentlemen, have it in their Power to go abroad, to see, with *their own* Eyes, the Works of Nature, and of Art: But … the inferior Classes of People, have it neither in their power to purchase nor to see these masterly Representations of Nature by a *Titian*, or a *Raphael*: True, they cannot; and *here* it is, that the Utility of Signs most evidently appears; for upon them are depicted *Likenesses* of these *deceitful Representations* of Nature, to be seen by all, at no Expence: *They* are equally faithful Images of the Objects they are intended to exhibit, and I doubt not contribute equally to *Devotion*, as *those* more expensive Copies: In this View, I have long considered this Metropolis, as the *Museum* of the lower sorts of People; and that to a plain Farmer,
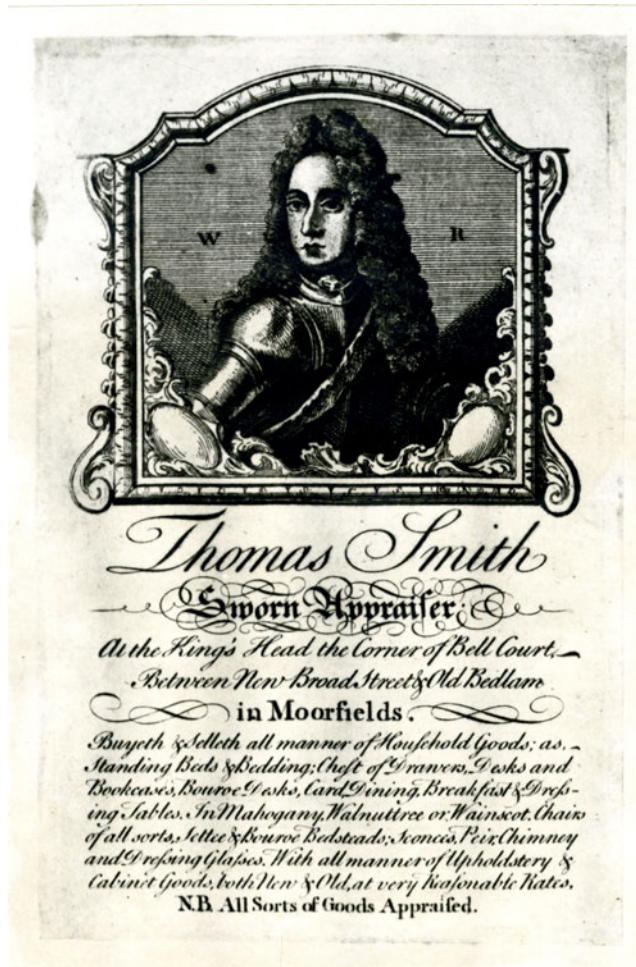
Figure 9—Draft photograph of a trade card for Thomas Smith, cabinetmaker, late seventeenth century. © Trustees of the British Museum, London. Smith's King's Head sign depicted William III flanked by the royal cypher.

coming up from the Country, the Tour of *London*, might be *nearly* as useful, as the Tour of *Europe*, to his young Master, from *Eton*.[108]

Clearly Zeal's enthusiasm for signboards was partly facetious almost no one would avow that painted signs were as "equally faithful" in the representation of people and things as the master paintings of Titian or Raphael. And yet, despite seemingly widespread derision, the signboard could still be defended as a useful public visual medium, a civic museum available to all who chose to look up while walking the

[108] Ibid., 29, 31–32.

streets and squares of the metropolis. "The *Effigies* of all our former Monarchs, thus constantly presented to our Eyes," Zeal explained, "tends to preserve that Reverence and Respect, which good Subjects should ever retain for *deceased* Sovereigns; *however little they may have for the living*." Not only did signposts bearing the king's arms signify "the Loyalty of such as hang them out," but they "remind others that they should not be deficient in this public Virtue."[109]

CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of British royal signage, this article demonstrates that the commercialization of monarchical culture is much more complex than existing scholarship suggests. Later Stuart and early Hanoverian queens and kings were neither unchanging exemplars of ancien régime authority nor were they entirely marginalized by the commercialization of culture and the rise of the public sphere.[110] The commodification of royalism transformed the public face of British monarchy during the early eighteenth century, yet even individual authors could manifest multiple reactions to this process, attesting to the inadequacy of existing histories of the monarch in the marketplace. While the shop-sign king evinced the problems of monarchical representation as absolutist and sacral models of sovereignty were rejected during the post-Revolutionary period, the royal sign remained an important object for the creation of political meaning. In the age of party politics and heightened anxieties about representational instability, it came to symbolize the multiplication of regal images and symbols that could no longer be read as straightforward evidence of loyalty. As I argue above, however, such material expressions of royalism became objects of extended criticism not because they were meaningless, but because they were overloaded with political meaning, frustrating attempts to reestablish standards of visual credibility and representational certainty.

Yet, signs were part of a densely emblematic visual culture of the eighteenth-century street. Their prevalence within public sites of urban encounter, some asserted, were constant reminders of loyalty and reverence, and we have only started to uncover this exhibitionary culture of commercialized royalism. When we look beyond the sphere of official artworks, we become aware of the ways in which regal images and symbols increasingly permeated the places and transactions of daily life, encompassing new media, new consumer practices, and new ideas about the role of the people and public opinion in political affairs. As officially sponsored cultures of monarchism came under suspicion for their association with absolutism, tyranny, and false taste, ordinary Britons—people like Thomas Foden, Henry Barnes, and Joseph Trigge—renegotiated and reimagined traditional forms of veneration, creating a jubilant culture of spontaneous, decentralized royalism. Merely because a visual object was inexpensive or familiar it does not follow that it engendered irreverence or reveals evidence of desacralization.[111] Further studies should explore how average consumers displayed, deployed, and interpreted regal images and texts

---

[109] Ibid., 37, 39.

[110] J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics during the Ancien Régime*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2000). On the inability of the early Georgian court and monarchy "to represent themselves effectively on the public stage," see Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, 28.

[111] Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York, 1996), 233.

within the private and public spheres. To return to the print with which we began, the shop signs surrounding Pitt's broadside symbolized both the commercial culture of monarchy and the ways in which visual representations of royalty had become public property during the eighteenth century. This fact was highlighted by London's crowds, who forced Caroline's funeral procession to abandon its circuitous route around the city so that they could honor their dead queen. As one newspaper reported, the whole town had turned out in "deep mourning" and most of London's shops were closed in "an expression of feeling [that] was wholly spontaneous."[112] Such manifestations of popular royalism, however, drew upon much longer traditions, created in and through Britain's growing consumer marketplace.

---

[112] *Leeds Mercury*, 18 August 1821.