

8 Thomas D'Urfey

TÔRU MITSUI

Thomas D'Urfey (1653–1723) was a very popular poet/songwriter and a productive dramatist in the period between the closing years of the reign of Charles II (r. 1660–1685) and the years of the reign of Anne (r. 1702–1714). Nevertheless, he lost his fame in the late eighteenth century, with the disparity between popularity and oblivion being exceptionally striking.

In the mid-nineteenth century, more than a hundred years after D'Urfey's death, William Chappell introduced him to the readers of his two-volume book, *Popular Music of the Olden Time* (1859).¹ Then, in 1923, two established literary periodicals published bicentennial memorial essays,² and a decade later, in 1933, a book of D'Urfey's songs was published. Twenty-six songs, selected out of some five hundred, were edited by Cyrus Lawrence Day, with music reproduced in facsimile.³ On the whole, the historians of English literature have paid only cursory attention to his poetry and songs, and, if he has been known at all, it has been as the editor of *Wit and Mirth: or Pills to Purge Melancholy* (1719–20), a six-volume collection of popular songs of the time.⁴

The works of D'Urfey

In addition to songs, the works of Thomas D'Urfey include dramatic works and poems of political satire.⁵ These total thirty-two in all and make him the most prolific dramatist of the time, and his plays did indeed enjoy great success around the decade 1691–1701,⁶ but his friends apparently preferred his songs. In the late seventeenth century he also wrote a variety of narratives both in prose and verse, whose literary quality is negligible.

It was in the genre of songwriting that D'Urfey showed himself at his best. In particular, he was blessed with the ability to grasp and express in his songs what the general public desired. His success was also due to his appropriate selection of tunes. According to the traditional method, he adopted the tunes of songs – popular songs and folk songs – with which the general public were already familiar, often also using tunes written by renowned contemporary composers, such as Henry Purcell. Moreover, he had an unparalleled gift not only in the writing of songs but also in singing

them in a resonant bass voice, and hence the term singer-songwriter can be applied to him, though not specifically in the way in which the term began to be used in the late 1960s. Day remarks that ‘Those of his songs that appear in more than one of his collections often show changes which represent the way he was in the habit of singing them,’⁷ and also ‘the titles of many ... songs in D’Urfey’s early collections record the names of the places where he entertained the court.’⁸

The popularity of D’Urfey

When his third play, and his first comedy, *Madam Fickle*, was staged in November 1676, both Charles II and Duke of Ormonde praised it highly.⁹ The praise led to him being presented to Charles by the Duke and to win a name for himself, after which, as ‘Tom Durfey’, he was increasingly favoured by the king and his courtiers. Bestowed with a ribald and unreserved wit, D’Urfey was happy to play antics and make himself a laughingstock, and Charles joyously kept him company. The songs D’Urfey wrote and sang were the kind of witty songs that appealed to the libertine king, who even sang with the singer-songwriter D’Urfey, as he himself delightedly boasts in the preamble to his song ‘Advice to the City’: ‘a famous song ... so remarkable, that I had the Honour to Sing it with King CHARLES at Windsor, He holding one part of the Paper with Me.’¹⁰

Charles’ successor James II (r. 1685–1688) was ‘of a temper too saturnine for the frivolous pleasures,’¹¹ and D’Urfey had difficulty in behaving in such a way as to enjoy his support, but patronage endured in the age of William and Mary who were jointly on the throne at the time of the Glorious Revolution (William III (r. 1689–1702); Mary II (r. 1689–1694)). Queen Anne (1702–14) also appreciated his competence in composing lyrical songs, and Caroline, the wife of George I (r. 1714–1727), showed quite an interest in them while her husband, who succeeded Anne, did not.¹² His popularity, particularly among the courtiers, gave him supreme confidence. As can be seen in the occasional attacks in his work on fellow poet Thomas Shadwell, he assumed that he, not Shadwell, would succeed John Dryden to the position of Poet Laureate.¹³

For nearly forty years, D’Urfey made himself agreeable to aristocrats at banquets and parties, while the general public also talked about him in an excited way. His popularity was not limited to London, as was evidenced by Addison: ‘Many an honest Gentleman has got a Reputation in his country, by pretending to have been in Company with *Tom d’Urfey*.’¹⁴ For their part, intellectuals of the time did not openly welcome his songs, and apparently any mention made of him was contemptuous – although in its way that contempt is a reflection of his immense popularity. The Duke of

Buckingham derided him: 'And sing-song Durfey, placed beneath abuses/ Lives by his impudence, and not the Muses.'¹⁵ Thomas Brown, his contemporary as a writer of abusive satires and his strongest competitor, refers to what D'Urfey said, without giving his name: 'The Town may dada – da – damn me for a Poet, says Chærilus, but they si – si – sing my songs for all that.'¹⁶ (D'Urfey had a stammer.¹⁷) Nevertheless, such denigration must have come, in large measure, from a moral standpoint, for D'Urfey wrote and sang scores of songs which are unreservedly licentious, easily incurring the displeasure of men of strict morals.

When D'Urfey became actively involved in writing, the England of Charles II, who had returned from exile in France to ascend the throne, was in reaction to the puritanical administration of Oliver Cromwell. Under the reign of this extravagant and womanising king, nicknamed 'Old Rowley' (after the then-famed stallion), the new age was characterised by a hedonistic lifestyle in which people laughed away chastity and virginity. This trend held up until the early eighteenth century, and, unusually, writers of witty and bawdy songs thrived as well as vintners.

Types of D'Urfey song

A considerable number of D'Urfey's songs were included in various collections of poems and songs published from 1683¹⁸ to the early eighteenth century, and his most popular songs were published repeatedly in many songbooks up to the end of the eighteenth century. Alongside these there were five books devoted solely to his songs, and D'Urfey himself put those songs together with other unpublished songs, making a total of three hundred and fifty in all, to form the two-volume *Songs Compleat, Pleasant and Divertive* (1719). Soon afterwards this became the first two volumes of *Wit and Mirth: or Pills to Purge Melancholy* (1719–1720). He tried his hand at any type of lyrical songs known to the age, and his songs can be classified, as Day suggests, in three groups – political songs, court songs, and country songs.¹⁹

The first group, political songs, is dominated by satirical songs as a matter of course, since the literary age in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, known as the age of Dryden, was distinguished by satires. Many of the tunes D'Urfey adopted were from long-lasting folk and popular songs as well as from other familiar songs sung in contemporary plays and operas, and his lyrics often retained some phrases from the verses which were originally combined with the tune. D'Urfey was apparently the foremost among the songwriters of political satires, aptly reflecting the spirit of the times in his songs and in his singing. In 'The King's Health' (written in 1681, when he was twenty-eight years old) he

extolled Charles II, likening the king to Cæsar and siding with the Tories, in four strains:²⁰

The First Strain.

JOY to Great Cæsar,
 Long Life, Love and Pleasure;
 'Tis a Health that Divine is,
 Fill the Bowl high as mine is:
 Let none fear a Feaver,
 But take it off thus Boys;
 Let the King Live for ever,
 'Tis no matter for us Boys.

The Second Strain.

Try all the Loyal,
 Defy all,
 Give deny all;
 Sure none thinks his Glass too big here,
 Nor any *Prig* here,
 Or Sneaking *Whig* here,
 Of Cripple *Tony's* Crew,
 That now looks blue,
 His heart akes too,
 The *Tap* won't do,
 His *Zeal so true*,
 And Projects new,
 Ill Fate does now pursue.

This song was as popular as 'Lilliburlero',²¹ a renowned satirical song set to an Irish jig, which appeared a few years later.

In the Restoration period, such prodigal courtiers as the Earl of Rochester (John Wilmot), Sir Charles Sedley, the Earl of Dorset (Charles Sackville), and Sir George Etherege wrote poems and songs as 'wits', and their jovial and sensuous works, typified by the idea of 'love is sex', established the Restoration style of lyrics which persisted until the early eighteenth century. D'Urfey competed with those courtiers in the technical approach to lyrical poems and songs. His subject matter also concerned love and his amorous songs are similar to those by courtly poets, as is evident in a song beginning with 'When first Amyntas', and the first stanza of which runs as follows:

WHEN first *Amyntas* su'd for a Kiss,
 My innocent Heart was tender;
 That tho' I push'd him away from the bliss,
 My Eyes declar'd my Heart was won:
 I fain an artful Coyness wou'd use,
 Before I the Fort did Surrender:

But Love wou'd suffer no more such abuse,
 And soon alas! my cheat was known:
 He'd sit all day, and laugh and play,
 A thousand pretty things would say;
 My hand he'd squeez, and press my knees,
 Till farther on he got by degrees.

Example 8.1. D'Urfey, 'When first Amyntas,' *Wit and Mirth* (1719–20), vol. 1, pp. 334–5.²²



It is now widely known that this tune was composed by Henry Purcell. Many amorous songs were given a country-life setting. These belong to the long tradition of pastorals which had been the mainstream of English lyrical songs, and the court poets frequently wrote in this style also. D'Urfey's songs of this type are generally vulgar but cheerful and robust, dealing with dalliance between country lads and lasses. However, the most outstanding of his songs in the courtly fashion, may well be 'A Dirge', a non-love song, which was inserted in his extremely successful play, *The Comical History of Don Quixote* (performed in 1694).

In addition to 'A Dirge', D'Urfey deserves immortality through some songs which can be classified as country songs. A wholehearted passion permeates the song which begins with 'The Night her Blackest Sable Wore', the popularity of which ensured the fame of the tune's composer, Thomas Farmer. The song 'The Farmer's Daughter' (generally known as 'Cold and Raw'), which unaffectedly expresses natural feelings, became so popular that John Gay used it in *Beggar's Opera*, while the song that begins 'Sawney was tall and of Noble Race', inserted in the third act of D'Urfey's comedy, *The Virtuous Wife* (1679), was printed as a broadside and grew in popularity in no time, not only in England but also in Scotland (as did many of his songs). Various songs, including political ones, were written to the tune of this song, which Farmer 'undoubtedly composed',²³ and ballad operas

continually used it. The final line in the first stanza, expressing melancholy without indulging in sentimentality, became the name by which the tune is known:²⁴

Example 8.2. D'Urfey, 'Sawney was tall and of Noble Race'



Sawney was tall and of Noble Race,
 And lov'd me better than any eane;
 But now he ligs by another Lass,
 And *Sawney* will ne'er be my love agen:
 I gave him fine *Scotch* Sarke and Band,
 I put 'em on with mine own hand;
 I gave him House, and I gave him Land,
 Yet *Sawney* will ne'er be my Love agen.

As a whole, D'Urfey's songs are coarse and unreserved but they are never devoid of lyricism, in contrast to the pseudo-classicism of the day, in which the display of refinement and formality was at the cost of emotional depth. If his modern-day readers find his songs dull and slovenly as verse, it must be, for one thing, because they do not sing them. An anonymous, sympathetic writer stressed in 1923: 'Read with the tunes, these songs explain their own popularity by their spirit, their vigour and their movement.'²⁵ At the same time, 'irregularities of rhyme and metre', often left in his texts, 'that interfere with the reader's enjoyment' disappear when the songs are sung.²⁶

Putting D'Urfey in historical perspective

D'Urfey's work belongs to a time in English cultural history when poems and songs were not yet clearly differentiated, though the division had begun to be made. For instance, Robert Herrick, noted for a song beginning with

'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,/ Old Time is still a-flying' and described by Swinburne in about 1890 as 'the first in rank and station of English songwriter',²⁷ died in 1674, when D'Urfey was in his early twenties. This division was in parallel with 'a dissociation of sensibility', as famously noted by T. S. Eliot: 'In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden.'²⁸ However, even Dryden himself, who died in 1700, can be regarded in a way as a child of his age. He wrote ninety-two songs, as admirably represented by *The Songs of John Dryden*, which Cyrus Day edited a year before editing D'Urfey's songs, affirming that 'practically all of Dryden's songs were set to music and sung in plays or at concerts before they were printed and offered to the reading public.'²⁹

As a leading songwriter, D'Urfey was shortly followed by the prolific Henry Carey (1687–1743), whose 'Sally in Our Alley' became an all-time favourite. Then Charles Dibdin (c. 1745–1814) wrote numerous songs among which patriotic sea-songs were particularly influential. Both Carey and Dibdin were also dramatists while being active to some extent in singing their songs. The tradition continued in Scotland with Robert Burns (1759–1796) and in Ireland with Thomas Moore (1779–1852). Subsequently, in the new English-speaking world, Stephen Foster (1826–1864) stood out as the greatest songwriter, shadowing another productive songwriter, Henry Clay Work (1832–1884) known for 'Grandfather's Clock'. In the twentieth-century United States, eminent singer-songwriters (e.g. Woody Guthrie (1912–1967)) came out of a folk-music tradition, foreshadowing the recognised singer-songwriter tradition from the late 1960s and 70s.

Notes

1 William Chappell, *Popular Music of the Olden Time*, vol. 1 (London: Cramer, Beale, & Chappell, 1859), pp. 305–9; vol. 2, pp. 490, 495–6, 611–12, and 618–23.

2 Anonymous, 'Thomas D'Urfey: died February 26, 1723', in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 22 February 1923, p. 121, and Montague Summers, 'Thomas D'Urfey (1653–1723)', in *The Bookman*, March 1923, pp. 272–4.

3 Cyrus Lawrence Day (ed.), *The Songs of Thomas D'Urfey* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933). Day wrote a PhD thesis at Harvard University in 1930 on D'Urfey entitled 'The Life and Non-dramatic Works of Thomas D'Urfey'. It should be pointed out that, in the introduction to *The Songs of Thomas D'Urfey*, Day oddly never refers to the two bicentennial memorial essays, with

ample information, to which he must have been indebted.

4 *Wit and Mirth: or Pills to Purge Melancholy* was first edited and published by Henry Playford in 1698. It was in such good repute with the public that it was repeatedly enlarged as well as being reprinted, and finally a definitive edition in six volumes, containing 1144 songs and poems, was compiled by Thomas D'Urfey in 1719–20 and published by J. Tonson in London. In 1876 this 1719–20 edition was 're-typed', page by page, by an unidentified printer in London. The reprint transferred the staff-notational conventions of the seventeenth-century to the modern notation, but it 'is in some cases obscure, ungrammatical or a mistake', according to Anonymous, 'Tunes and Traditions', in *Times*

- Literary Supplement*, 20 May 1960, p. 316 – a review of the facsimile reproduction of the 1876 reprint of *Wit and Mirth* in three volumes, published in 1959 by Folklore Library Publishers in New York.
- 5 With the exception of his songs, his other published output (e.g. satire and dramatic works) were of low quality. Montague Summers, a scholar of the seventeenth-century drama, laments at the beginning of the second paragraph of a bicentennial essay: ‘Tom D’Urfey! There are perhaps in the whole history of English literature few of any writers of equal output and such high contemporary fame, who have fallen into completer oblivion than “that ancient Lyric”, friend Tom’ – Summers, ‘Thomas D’Urfey (1653–1723)’, p. 272.
- 6 Day (ed.), *The Songs of Thomas D’Urfey*, pp. 19–22.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 10 D’Urfey, *Wit and Mirth* (1719–1720), vol. 1, p. 246.
- 11 Day (ed.), *The Songs of Thomas D’Urfey*, p. 9.
- 12 D’Urfey says that ‘I have perform’d some of my own Things before their Majesties King CHARLES the IIId, King JAMES, King WILLIAM, Queen MARY, Queen ANNE, and Prince GEORGE, I never went off without happy and commendable Approbation’, in the third page of the unpagéd ‘Dedication’ in the first volume of *Wit and Mirth* (1719–1720).
- 13 Day (ed.), *The Songs of Thomas D’Urfey*, pp. 15–16.
- 14 From *The Guardian*, no. 67 (28 May 1713) in *The Works of the Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1721), vol. 4, p. 131.
- 15 Quoted in Anonymous, ‘Thomas D’Urfey: died February 23, 1723’.
- 16 *The Fourth and Last Volume of the Works of Mr Thomas Brown* (London: Printed for Sam. Briscoe, 1715), p. 117.
- 17 ‘Contemporary allusions to his stuttering are very numerous’ in Day (ed.), *The Songs of Thomas D’Urfey*, p. 6.
- 18 This was the year when D’Urfey added an apostrophe to his name and capitalized the second letter to make known his presumably self-styled aristocratic French origin: Day (ed.), *The Songs of Thomas D’Urfey*, p. 17.
- 19 Day (ed.), *The Songs of Thomas D’Urfey*, p. 34.
- 20 *Wit and Mirth* (1719–1720), vol. 2, pp. 152–6. The music which precedes the lyrics is too long to be quoted here. The old long ‘s’ in the song text is here changed to the modern ‘s’ as well as in the following song-text quotations.
- 21 Day (ed.), *The Songs of Thomas D’Urfey*, p. 128.
- 22 Two notations in the present chapter are reproduced using Finale. However, it should be noted that the fourth bar in the present tune by Purcell is obviously misrepresented. The first note should be G♯ and the second one E.
- 23 Chappell, *Popular Music of the Olden Time*, vol. 2, p. 618.
- 24 *Wit and Mirth* (1719–1720), vol. 1, pp. 316.
- 25 Anonymous, ‘Thomas D’Urfey: died February 26, 1723’.
- 26 H. J. Byrom, review of *The Songs of Thomas D’Urfey*, in *Review of English Studies*, 10/40 (1934), p. 471.
- 27 Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘Robert Herrick’, p. 260, in *The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (London: William Heinemann, 1925–7), vol. 15 (1926).
- 28 Anonymous [T. S. Eliot], ‘Metaphysical Poets’, review of *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler* edited by Herbert J. C. Grierson, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 20 October 1921, p. 669.
- 29 Cyrus Lawrence Day (ed.), *The Songs of John Dryden* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), p. xiii.