At Westminster, where next I go,
Except that cold the wind is;
A novel sort of raree-show,
Reflects our Eastern Indies.

For lo! the Com—ns of G——t B——n,
Bring forth a man ill-fated;
Whom rising Speakers try their wit on,
And so the Bull is BAITED.

“What has he done,” as there we sat,
I ask’d a knowing neighbour,
“He stole, he said, the RAJAH’S PLATE,
“And eke his DIAMOND SABRE.

“Dire plunder, massacre, and rape,
“He proudly sought his fame in;
“Yet, fear’d Religion might escape,
“So made his Groom, a BRAMIN

Surely, I cried, his hapless fate
No other scarce can equal;
He never had the SWORD or PLATE,
And so I doubt the sequel.

God bless, our Sov’reign Lord the K——g,
May no nice points perplex him;
No Patriot’s roar, nor Pindar sing,
Nor Peers protest, to vex him.

“London; or, The Morning Lounge.
Ode the First,” Morning Post, 7 March 1788
Following the disintegration of the Fox-North coalition in 1784, the long process of bringing Warren Hastings to trial was staged from the opposition side of the house. Hastings was the first governor-general of Bengal appointed according to the strictures outlined in the Regulating Act of 1773 and remained in power until he was recalled in 1785. During that period, Hastings’s interpretation of the Regulating Act and the powers conferred to him resulted in ambitious acts of military and diplomatic conquest in the Asian subcontinent that greatly enhanced the opportunities both for the consolidation of the East India Company’s profits and for the pursuit of private gain. As Rajat Kanta Ray states, “for the civil and military officers of the Company it was a question of ‘whether it should go into a blackman’s pocket or mine.’ Warren Hastings’s opponents in Council found upon inquiry that ‘there is no species of peculation from which the Honourable Governor-General has thought it reasonable to abstain.’” However, despite the potential for increased revenue, the Company did not fare particularly well during this period and the state of Bengal became increasingly impoverished. In contrast, Hastings amassed a conspicuous private fortune during his tenure and thus opened himself to charges of corruption. But it was Hastings’s often disruptive pursuit of military conquests against the Maratha confederacy and the sultans of Mysore that generated the fiercest metropolitan criticisms because these military operations seemed to be at variance with the East India Company’s commercial charter.

Henry Dundas, the rising Scottish politician who was becoming an expert on India, observed in the House of Commons in April 1782 that, “As matters stood, military exploits had been followed till commercial advantages were in danger of being lost.” With Warren Hastings in mind, he then reminded the House that no Company servant had the “right to fancy he was an Alexander, or an Aurengzebe, and prefer frantic military exploits to the improvement of trade and commerce of the country.”

Dundas failed to have Hastings recalled in 1782, but the pursuit of Hastings was taken over in earnest first by the Fox-North coalition and then the Whig opposition under the strategic guidance of Edmund Burke. Burke became a master of the labyrinthine affairs of the East India Company and schooled himself on all aspects of Indian society. From his initial involvement in the Secret Committee, which inquired into the actions of Clive and the Company directors in the winter of 1772–73, his
response to the economic problems of integrating Indian trade into the empire was filtered through a constitutional lens. By the early 1780s his earlier reluctance to regulate the Company during the debate surrounding the Regulating Act transformed into a desire to bring the Company under direct parliamentary control. His close association with Hastings’s archenemy Philip Francis not only gave him access to a great deal of information regarding the internecine warfare within the East India Company but also colored his interpretation of Hastings’s actions.3 He quickly reached the conclusion that British misrule was a species of despotism that not only “destroyed the very fabric of the Indian economy and society” but also threatened to contaminate the British Constitution.4 This recognition that colonial corruption would eventually destroy metropolitan governance fit well with Burke’s and Fox’s already existing conclusion that George III’s advocacy of Hastings was a further sign of an absolutist threat. Setting himself up both as a guardian of Indian peoples from the extortion and oppression fostered by Hastings’s rule and as the moral protector of the British Constitution, Burke slowly introduced evidence against Hastings into the parliamentary record until the Commons, against extraordinary odds, initiated impeachment proceedings against Hastings in the House of Lords by a strong majority. This was the first time an opposition party forced a formal impeachment in the history of the English parliament, and many observers understood the entire affair as a Whig assault on both the Ministry and the Crown.

The Whig campaign against Hastings generated some of the most important oratory of the period, but the printellers consistently countered these efforts with images that rendered the entire affair either as a skirmish in the party or as theatre of the lowest order. The anonymous The Common Stage Wagging from Brooke’s Inn of 1 April 1786 (fig. 4.1) translates Whig tactics into itinerant theatre. Burke’s strategy for the parliamentary session of 1786 aimed to “spin out proceedings and delay a decisive vote on which they could be summarily terminated. He would not introduce his charges immediately and call for a vote of impeachment on them as precedents suggested, but he would ask the House to receive evidence first in the form of papers laid before it.”5 The traveling troupe of impoverished comedians hauling their props marked “India Papers” are under the direction of a demon from Brooke’s Inn, the seat of Whig strategem. The asses which pull the stage coach of evidence have the faces of Burke, Fox, Sheridan, and North. A poster on the right of the composition advertises that “For a Few Days will be Performed a COMEDY called IMPEACHMENT by a Ragged Company (late) of His MAJESTY’s Servants. . . .
Laughing between the acts to conclude with ALL in the WRONG.” The print questions the legitimacy of the Whig’s actions, for the performance of impeachment is undertaken by actors no longer working by sanction of the Crown. This is reinforced by the explicit invocation of Sheridan’s and Fox’s financial embarrassments so that the entire campaign is recast as an elaborate ploy to resolve the debts of prominent Whigs. What had lain dormant in the earlier print battle over Fox’s East India Bill in 1783 returned to undercut the seriousness of the Whig’s allegations by figuring them as at best poorly performed comedy or at worst vulgar farce.

The impeachment before the House of Lords started with great fanfare in the winter of 1788 and concluded with Hastings’s acquittal in 1795. Despite a steep falling off in public interest as the trial progressed, the opening season from January to June of 1788 was the most widely reported event in the London papers. Of Burke’s original nineteen charges against Hastings in the House of Commons, only six were pursued before the House of Lords. Unlike the campaign against Hastings in the House of Commons, the impeachment was to follow the rules of evidence pro-
scribed by the common law. This decision severely disabled the manager’s case because the charges themselves were drafted not with an eye on legal protocols, but rather with a sense of their capacity to figure forth Hastings’s inhumanity. And the managers themselves were not lawyers, but politicians. Saddled with Burke’s rhetorically excessive charges and confronted with the Lords’ decision to hear all the charges before asking for Hastings’s defense, the managers found themselves in a situation where everything turned on their limited capacity to circumvent legal procedure through the sheer power of oratory. After Burke’s bristling four-day opening speech, the first season of the impeachment commenced with Fox’s masterful speech on the Benares charge, which dealt with Hastings’s extortion of Chait Singh, and concluded with Sheridan’s extraordinary summation of the charge pertaining to Hastings’s treatment of the Begams of Oudh. These three oratorical moments and their reception are the primary focus of this chapter and are handled as performative events whose significance goes far beyond the immediate concerns of the impeachment. For these few months in early 1788, the trial became a public sensation like no other. Much has been made of the theatricality of the impeachment of Warren Hastings.

In keeping with the Enquiry [into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful]’s definition of the functioning of “real sympathy,” the impeachment at Westminster Hall became the most spectacular stage in London: as one of the managers, Gilbert Elliot described it, “[The audience] will have to mob it at the door till nine, when the doors open, and then there will be a rush as there is in a pit of the playhouse when Garrick plays King Lear. . . . The ladies are dressed and mobbing it in the Palace Yard by six or half after six, and they set from nine till twelve before the business begins. . . . Some people and, I believe, even women—I mean ladies—have slept at the coffeehouses adjoining Westminster Hall, that they may be sure of getting to the door in time.”

Elliot’s remarks are typical of representations of the impeachment both in the popular press and in the multitude of satirical prints that were published prior to and during the proceedings. Despite the ubiquity of correlations between the impeachment and the theatre, there has been little sustained discussion of why theatrical tropes dominate not only the contemporary print media but also more recent analyses of the event. Even Elliot’s description contains intriguing but largely ignored points of entry.
into the trial’s significance. The only antecedent to this kind of “mobbing” of a trial was for the scandalous proceedings against the Duchess of Kingston for bigamy and adultery a few years earlier. Whereas in that case the interest was principally voyeuristic, the Hastings trial promised scandal and entertainment of a different order. This distinction is marked in Elliot’s comparison of the trial to Garrick’s performance of Lear. If, as Elliot suggests, the audience throngs to Westminster for a cathartic performance of tragic hubris, then he clearly projects the audience’s desire not only for the humbling of a great man but also for a working through of colonial guilt. But his supplemental remarks indicate that something else is at stake in London society’s heated desire for tickets to the impeachment.

Elliot’s fascination with the presence of women in Westminster Hall is shared by virtually all accounts of the proceedings. The day after the trial’s opening, the *Times* “Bon Ton” column reported that

Yesterday the great *World* attended the trial of *Warren Hastings*, Esq.—and whether he be convicted, or whether he be acquitted, his accusers are entitled to the thanks of the ladies mantua-makers and milliners.

They have raised many a fair one from her drowsy pillow to snuff the morning air; but many a fair one they have deprived of rest. About twelve at night *hair-dressing* commenced. What an hour for *hair-dressing!* and the operators continued *twisting of curls* till nine the next morning. . . . Above, and all around, there was a blaze of beauty. The stile of dress was more gay and less brilliant than when *Kingston’s* Duchess stood at the bar. There were few feathers, and these very low—but a profusion of artificial flowers ornamented the ladies heads—Many wore chains, and strings of pearl, or of beads of various colours from their ears—there were a few of cut steel—Bracelets adorned every arm.—There were no hoops, and the bosom, which formerly projected out of all symmetry, nearly retreated to the proportion of nature.—The gowns were full and flowing, with long trains—the fabric mostly of sattin—the colours dark or white.¹⁰

Both the *Times* and Elliot recognize that the presence of women in the hallowed halls of the state make for a spectacle of gendered performativity that is rivaled only by London’s pleasure sites: Vauxhall Gardens, Ranelagh, and the Theatres Royal. This has significant implications because the styles of gender performance through which Elliot and others understand the presence of women at the trial are modeled on those exhib-
ited in the theatre. As is well known, women’s roles in the audience of Covent Garden and Drury Lane were proscribed by their styles of visibility, for these were sites equally suited to aristocratic display and prostitute performance. This distinction is registered in Elliot’s remarks on the audaciousness of women sleeping in coffeehouses to ensure their seats. His slip between “women” and “ladies” indicates that there is something vaguely improper about their desire to see the public shaming of Hastings. Elliot’s description and the Times catalog of sartorial display subtly indicate that the impeachment proceedings, like all theatrical events, are traversed by their own specific erotics.

This chapter and the following clarify these axes of desire and articulate why they are so important to our understanding of this unprecedented moment in the history of imperial self-scrutiny. However, a full appreciation of this issue requires a prior meditation on the politics of visibility both in the managers’ performance of the trial and in the trial’s satirical reception. The importance of the obsessive displacements of self and other on display in the theatre of Westminster Hall lies less in its inherent inability to render satisfactory judgment of the historical processes of colonial and commercial conquest than with its ancillary productions—the racialized and sexualized countertheatres offered by the satirical prints. The three sections of this chapter roughly follow the chronology of the trial’s first season, but each handles a different aspect of theatricalization. The first section looks at how tropes of theatrical illegitimacy were deployed to raise questions about the devolution both of the state and of the impeachment’s audience. The second section examines how tropes derived from precinematic display captured how the trial’s representation of imperial relations produced phantasmatic projections and mystifications of sovereignty. And the final section deals specifically with the troubled performance of imperial statesmanship in Burke’s and Sheridan’s oratory.

The Raree Show of Precedence: Space and Legitimacy

A party of Horse Guards, under the command of a Field Officer, with a Captain’s party from the Horse Grenadiers are ordered to attend daily during the trial.

A body of three hundred Foot Guards have also orders to keep the avenues clear, and a considerable number of constables are to attend for the purpose of taking offenders into custody.

From the scarcity of accommodation at every part of the West
end of the town, the trial of Mr. Hastings is supposed to have drawn
more people to London than have visited the metropolis at any one
time for several years past.

Times, 13 February 1788

From the trial’s outset, the newspapers and printsellers were obsessed
with how the scene of impeachment literalized the power relations that
defined not only the state but also fashionable society. Newspapers pub-
lished the order of precedence in the realm so that observers would be bet-
ter able to interpret the room’s spatialization of power.11 These lists were
helpful keys to the widely circulated nonsatirical representations of West-
minster Hall at the time of the impeachment. These images emphasize the
crowd and the spectacle of the event, but the way that they organize space
is illuminating. In most cases, the architecture of the hall is used to de-
define the axes of power in a fashion that emphasizes the relationship be-
tween Lord Chancellor Thurlow, who presided over the proceeding and
who was widely believed to be in the pocket of both the king, and the
defendant. T. Prattent’s A View of the Court Sitting on the Trial of Warren
Hastings of 1 May 1788 offers a typical view of the hall in two-point per-
spective from the Lord Great Chamberlain’s Box for the Ladies (fig. 4.2).
In fact, most of the illustrations of the impeachment put the viewer in the
position of the women observers. At the center of the composition is the
seat of Lord Chancellor Thurlow and along the vertical axis running
through his chair at equidistant points are the empty Throne and “War-
ren Hastings, Prisoner.” This distorts space to emphasize the links between
these three personages. It should come as no surprise that views of the
proceedings that deviate from this strict axis between the state and Hast-
ings are confined to satirical attacks on Burke, Fox, and Sheridan. A sim-
ilarly subtle visual device is used in the famous map of the proceedings
(fig. 4.3). Both literally and figuratively, the empty spaces of the map des-
ignate types of people and their distance from the throne. What remains
unclear, despite the generally exonerating quality of the text, is the relation-
ship between the generic figure representing Hastings and the empty
chair of George III. The hyperembodiment of Hastings in the image un-
derlines the contradiction implicit in prosecuting one man for the crimes
of empire,12 but the cancellation of George III’s body, and indeed of the
bodies of the entire legislative apparatus, also crystallizes a fear regard-
ing precedence: namely, that Hastings and not the king is the real ruler
of the empire.
If these nonsatirical mappings of state power are subtly realized, then the bulk of the visual representations of the trial are not. The anxiety regarding George III’s subordination to Hastings was given ample treatment in prints such as *The Bow to the Throne* (fig. 4.4). An entire subgenre of prints presents Hastings buying his acquittal from Thurlow and the king with Indian plunder (see fig. 4.5).\(^{13}\) As Dorothy George notes, this print and Dent’s *The Surprising Stone Eater* of 28 March 1788 satirize Hastings’s gifts of diamonds to the king and queen by comparing the royals to a much-advertised performance of a stone eater in London in 1788.\(^{14}\) This deployment of visual tropes derived from the theatre and from less-exalted forms of performance is a recurring satirical device during the impeachment. And no single print compares with William Dent’s *The Raree Show* of 25 February 1788 for understanding the representational strategies for dealing with the crisis of imperial self-scrutiny instantiated by the trial (fig. 4.6). The print was published less than two weeks after the commencement of the proceedings and it superimposes the full range of visual tropes employed to ridicule the theatricality of the trial. As Dorothy George summarizes, “the Trial of Hastings in Westminster Hall is trav-
FIG. 4.3. From Anonymous, *The History of the Trial of Warren Hastings, Esq. Late Governor-General of Bengal, before the High Court of Parliament in Westminster-Hall, on an Impeachment by the Commons of Great-Britain for High Crimes and Misdemeanours* (London: Debrett, Vernor and Hood, 1796) (by permission of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto)

A raree show or rare show is an early form of the peep show that could be transported and exhibited throughout the city. As a form of entertainment it constitutes the lowest form of spectacle and is often considered a subtheatrical form of display.

In Dent’s print, the fashionably dressed audience that dominates the foreground of the illustration struggles to gain access to the rather temporary-looking booth in the left of the frame that stands for Westminster Hall. The mob of gentlemen and ladies outside refers directly to the
excitement during the early phases of the trial. The bills on the front of the booth refer to specific speeches and sketch in the spatial deployment of the managers and the prisoner in the hall. The bill on the left is headed with a pair of spectacles and is inscribed “From the left side of the booth may be seen Alexander the Little.” As the previous illustrations of Westminster Hall indicate, the managers’ table is situated to the left of the hall’s central axis; therefore, looking from the left, one sees through Burke’s spectacles. If one looks from the right one takes the viewpoint of Hastings’s defense team and hence, as the bill indicates, “from the right may be seen Alexander the Great.” In contrast to the shortsightedness signified by Burke’s spectacles, this bill is headed by an opera glass that allows the viewer to have a long-range prospect. But the opera glass is also a metaphorical device linking the defense to George III, who is frequently caricatured holding an opera glass.

These two opposing optical devices are trained on the same object, and Dent’s reference to Alexander the Little and Alexander the Great invokes

![Image of The Bow to the Throne—Aleas—the Begging Bow, 6 May 1788](image)

*Fig. 4.4. James Gillray, The Bow to the Throne—Aleas—the Begging Bow, 6 May 1788 (courtesy of the Department of Prints and Drawings, The British Museum, London; BM 7312)*
Fox’s speech on the Benares charge of 22 February 1788. In a digression on making the punishment suit the crime, Fox refuted Thurlow’s comparison between Hastings and Alexander the Great:

Mr. Hastings had lately been compared to a conqueror, whose fame filled the universe;—a character [Thurlow] so exalted as to dispute precedence with the second personage in the kingdom [the Prince of Wales] had assimilated Warren Hastings to Alexander the Great. But if any resemblance were found, it could not be to Alexander when his mercies and his victories kept an equal pace;—it could not be to the generous or forgiving conqueror;—the likeness must be meant to Alexander the maddened after a debauch; to Alexander in petu-

FIG. 4.5. Anonymous, The Diamond Eaters, Horrid Monsters, March 1788 (courtesy of the Department of Prints and Drawings, The British Museum, London; BM 7288)
lant wantonness setting temples on fire—to Alexander when his fol-
lies and his crimes had excited horror and contempt sufficient to ob-
scure the radiance of former glories.—In the first points of the com-
parison there was not a shade of resemblance; in the latter part of
the parallel there was all the justice that could be required.  

The bill above the door of the raree booth in Dent’s print operates as a
highly condensed sign for the political allegiance between Thurlow,
George III, and Hastings. Fox’s insinuation regarding Thurlow’s claim to
precedence is visualized in the extreme foreground of the print. As part of
the crowd, one finds the Prince of Wales in a fit of rage and Thurlow cast
as a devil riding on the shoulders of George III, asking that the prince
“Make room for precedence.” The king’s garter ribbon is inscribed “Bulse”
in recognition of his susceptibility to Hastings’s bribes.

The chief satirical elements of the bottom half of the image are struc-
tured by the passage from Fox’s speech that took place three days prior
to the publication of Dent’s print. But beyond the quick turnaround time
in image production, there are other aspects of The Raree Show that war-
rant careful attention. By depicting Westminster Hall as a raree booth,
Dent not only diminishes the proceedings but also allows for the spec-
tacle to be visually contained. But it is a containment that paradoxically
allows for an exponential increase in the theatricalization of the trial. The
rare booth is actually a prop in a much larger performance that includes
the audience, the street, and, most important, the antics of Burke, Fox, and
Sheridan now rendered as three clowns or zanies performing on a balcony.
The clowning of the principal managers and the banners that dominate
the top third of the image draw the entire print into the theatrical econ-
omy of what Jane Moody has recently designated “illegitimate culture.”

The significance of these banners requires a brief digression on the leg-
islation of different kinds of entertainment during the eighteenth century.
As Moody summarizes, following the Licensing Act of 1737 “Any individ-
ual performing an ‘Interlude, Tragedy, Comedy, Opera, Play, farce or other
entertainment of the stage’ not previously sanctioned by letters patent
or licensed by the Lord Chamberlain . . . would now be liable to punish-
ment as a rogue and a vagabond.” This criminalization of the nonli-
censed performer is crucial to the print’s attack on the managers, but
Dent’s street theatre invokes a more complex set of tropes. The Licens-
ing Act also generated a system of textual censorship for the patent the-
etres that left a wide range of bodily performance including ropedanc-
ing, acrobatics, music, and singing unregulated by the lord chamberlain.
In 1752, legislation was introduced to curtail “the spectre of political radicalism, the promotion of plebeian immorality and the uncontrollable reproduction of urban criminality” that was ostensibly associated with these forms of performance.18

This legislation unwittingly established an enduring division in the regulation of London theatre. The Act of 1752 was based on the assumption that the public entertainments offered at Sadler’s Wells and other unlicensed theatres within a 15–mile radius of Westminster represented a non-dramatic sphere of bodily performance utterly distinct from the drama staged at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. No provision was made for the textual scrutiny of political subversion but rather the moral and social pollution spilling out from plebeian pleasure.19

From this strange distinction, a series of strategies, often shared with legitimate pantomime, were developed for introducing text into productions for which it was legally assumed there would be no text. Foremost among these strategies were the deployment of text on banners and the accompaniment of text with music. As long as words were not spoken, then the productions were not subject to the political censorship of the lord chamberlain.

This form of regulated but uncensored production, with all its inherent potential for political subversion, lies at the heart of Dent’s theatricalization of the trial. The raree booth is a small part of a larger form of bodily performance of which Burke, Sheridan, and Fox are the central musical performers. The banners present versions of Hastings’s activities that clearly could not receive royal sanction. On the left-hand placard, a ravenous Hastings devours an Indian woman and tramples the prostrate bodies of women and children. The central placard features Burke half-submerged in the tears he has elicited from his audience. In a reenactment of Mrs. Sheridan’s fainting fit during Burke’s opening speech, a man is applying smelling salts to a fainting lady. And the right-hand placard, inscribed “Dancing on the Tight-Rope,” portrays Hastings the “ropedancer” hanging from a gibbet. All three placards indicate that the production is traversed by the managers’ view of the case. In this light, the tussling crowd and the foot guards attempting to control them gain a new significance, for the emotions elicited by the managers’ performance are understood to be not only plebeian but verging on the criminal. In other words, the raree show and the spectacle within which it is contained occasion a devo-
olution in the cultural and social life of the city. With aristocrats fighting in the street, Dent insinuates that the antics of Burke, Sheridan, and Fox and the multiple shows they are peddling transform polite society into a mob in need of forcible restraint. It is a complex satirical gesture, for it allows Dent to simultaneously attack the managers and visually render Hastings as the unequivocal exponent of evil.

By rendering the trial as illegitimate performance, Dent not only diminishes the managers’ oratory, but also attacks the audience itself. For example, the print presents two Burkes. Despite the fact that the Burke on the placard is perhaps more realistically rendered, it is the second Burke on the scaffolding that Dent proffers as the more accurate portrayal of the trial’s chief agent. Cast in a hybrid of Jesuitical and Oriental costume, this second Burke’s vaunted oratory is rendered as a species of musical performance. Burke’s costume, his pose, and his horn are based on Say-ers’s famous caricature of Burke in Carlo Kahn’s Triumphal Entry into Leadenhall Street (see fig. 3.2), but Dent’s alteration of the banner hanging from the horn is instructive. In the earlier print the banner shows a map of Bengal whereas the later print is simply inscribed “Sublimity.” This captures one of the most famous elements of Burke’s Indian sublime—namely, his rhetorical invocation of the map of India in the speech on Fox’s East India Bill discussed in chapter 3. Suleri’s argument that Burke’s method of exemplification devolves into a repetitiveness that tends “to dissolve rather than consolidate the image of India that Burke seemingly wishes to create” is here anticipated by Dent’s print, for one is forced to ask how much of Burke’s “music” can be heard in the cacophony of represented sound. As if in dialogue with Burke’s account of the sublimity of sound, Dent’s print, seems to suggest that Burke’s audience cannot “forbear being borne down, and joining in the common cry, and common resolution of the crowd.” Contrary to his intentions, Burke’s sublime oratory in this analysis fails to consolidate his audience because it lacks the “temper” to resist this devolution.

If Burke’s music is marked by its repetitiveness, then the caricature of Fox as Punch captures both the violence and the perceived indebtedness of Fox’s speech on the Benares charge. Because so much of the knowledge regarding Indian affairs resided with Burke, it was a common conceit throughout the trial that Fox was merely mouthing the words of his colleague. It is therefore not surprising to find Fox portrayed as a puppet whose clothes are inscribed “Argument,” “Wisdom,” and “Knowledge.” He is literally wearing the erudition in which Burke the puppeteer has clothed him. What Fox contributes to the proceedings is not knowledge
but style, and here the characterization as Punch gains its resonance. Commentary unsympathetic to the managers’ cause characterizes Fox’s performance as less skilled than Burke’s and emphasizes its combination of violence and repetition: “For individual passages, separable from their novelty, or their original importance, in idea or diction, Mr. Burke is the mighty master. This speech of Mr. Fox was not so distinguished. It abounded, however, in distinctions of its own kind, of which the best was vehemence; the worst, unnecessary repetition of preliminary words.” 23 These backhanded compliments suggest that Fox, like Punch, has little to offer beyond repeated violent outbursts. This allegation has its visual counterpart in two parodies of the tickets for the proceedings by Sayers.
and Gillray that were circulated roughly at the same time as *The Raree Show* (see figs. 4.7, 4.8). The images are pro- and anti-Hastings, respectively, but they both feature Fox waving a clenched fist over Hastings head. These tickets refer explicitly to Fox’s angry response to the Peers’ decision to follow the rules of common law in regard to the hearing of evidence.24 Fox’s profession of allegiance to the *Lex et Consuetudo Parliamenti* in the face of this decision is satirized as merely an oratorical posture.25 Whether figured as Punch or as the embodiment of vehemence, Fox becomes a grotesque figure able to perform, but not feel, Burke’s combination of sympathy and outrage.

Dent’s caricature suggests that such oratory can only sustain the in-
interest of audiences of the most vulgar or childish taste and this implies that the taste of the aristocracy has degraded into that of the mob. At the heart of this figuration of impeachment as illegitimate theatre lies a fascination with the relationship between the audience and the space of performance. The presentation of the aristocracy mobbing Westminster Hall in *The Raree Show* makes explicit the specter of mob violence that haunts much of Burke’s political thought both prior to and following the impeachment. Dent makes visible the class politics that flow beneath the surface of the managers’ oratory, for the Whig commitment to oligarchical fantasies of British society discussed in chapter 3 infused much of Burke’s analysis of Hastings’s governance and became operative in the figural economy of his speeches. As we will see, there is a complex relationship between the excessively figured Indian multitudes and the underrepresented specter of the metropolitan laboring classes who silently threaten Whig fantasies of political legitimacy that can be excavated not only from Burke’s dramatic theory of politics but also from the print satirists’ tropological investment in the distorting qualities of Burke’s spectacles.

*Burke’s Spectacles*

Foreigners are extremely affected by the magnificent solemnity of Mr. Hastings trial; but they, at the same time, cannot avoid expressing their surprise, that the first women should be the last to add to it. A Spanish gentlemen enquired on Friday last of the person who sat next to him, whether the Peeresses were privileged to laugh as loud in Westminster Hall, as they do at the playhouse?

*Times, 5 March 1788*

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, much of the reception of the Hastings impeachment explicitly engaged with the Whig attempt to rein in the East India Company four years earlier. This engagement derived from a widespread recognition that the impeachment was a continuation of political and constitutional battles that remained unresolved despite Pitt’s attempts to put them to rest. From the political struggle over Fox’s East India Bill of 1783 there emerged two sets of tropes that exerted heavy influence on the Hastings impeachment. The first has been admirably explicated by Sara Suleri in her discussion of Burke’s famous speech on Fox’s East India Bill:
The paradigm that he establishes can be schematized as follows: India as a historical reality evokes the horror of the sublimity, thus suggesting to the colonizing mind the intimate dynamic it already shares with aesthetic horror; such intimacy provokes the desire to itemize and list all the properties of the desired object; the list’s inherent failure to be anything other than a list causes the operation of sublimity to open into vacuity, displacing desire into the greater longevity of disappointment.26

In Burke’s theorization of tragedy in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, the individual and society form different moments of the same assemblage. As Burke states, “most of the ideas which are capable of making a powerful impression on the mind . . . may be reduced very nearly to these two heads, self-preservation and society.”27 Because he attaches these ideas to the sublime and the beautiful respectively, the aesthetic as such in Burke’s account preserves the self, in the instance of the sublime, and ties these selves together, in the passions associated with the beautiful. But below or behind this assemblage there flows another relationality that melts individuals into masses that cannot be named “society” but rather must be designated as the crowd. In this undifferentiated mass one can locate that which must remain the constitutive outside of Burkean aesthetics and politics. What is crucial for us to recognize is that the representational distance that Burke introduces in his theatricalization of politics is necessary not only to constitute both society and the individual but also to put the melting crowd in temporary abeyance. In this particular case it is the “Indian millions” that surface momentarily to consolidate both Burke and the nation he represents and then disappear into compensatory tropes.

In Burke’s related discussions of sympathy and tragedy, the primary link that joins individuals in “the great chain of society” swings back and forth between two examples of our pleasure in sympathy—public execution and tragedy. Burke argues that the sympathy for the plight of others elicited both by tragedy and execution varies only in degree, and that the passion felt for others is constitutive of our humanity.28 He also emphasizes, however, that whatever pleasure joins us in this common humanity relies on a representational distanitation: “When danger or pain pass too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we everyday experience.”29 This distance pre-
serves the immanence of the individual and establishes mediate spacings between individuals in the social. But it also installs fundamental, yet almost unmentionable, distinctions between these social individuals and their rhetorically constituted class and colonial others. These other constituencies enter Burke’s discourse as subsocial or extrasocial entities, which are either too proximate or too distant to fit comfortably into Burke’s largely visual examples of the sublime scene.

Burke’s discussion of the sublimity of sound and loudness presents an instance where this minimum representational distance is contravened. Instead of the spectacle of execution, Burke invokes another mass formation that haunted the imagination of community in the eighteenth century: “[T]he shouting of multitudes has a similar effect; and by the sole strength of the sound, so amazes and confounds the imagination, that in the staggering, and hurry of the mind, the best established tempers can scarcely forbear being borne down, and joining in the common cry, and common resolution of the crowd.”30 This passage indicates that there is an experience beyond that of the sublime when one confronts the roaring mob. If a proper distance is maintained, if one’s temper is resolute, the loudness of the crowd will open onto an aesthetic experience of the sublime and the self will be preserved. However, the passage also recognizes an inclination to give up one’s self-preservation and melt into the mass. One’s experience in this case is no longer aesthetic or political in Burke’s terms—one enters into a relationality in which neither individuality or society signifies, in which one is “borne down” out of humanity. And the specificity of Burke’s example is resonant, for it is precisely in the acoustic, rather than the visual, that representational distance is difficult to stabilize. As we will see, Burke’s specular instruments come under attack as the trial unfolds.

The class relations encoded within these two political scenographies are extremely important. Public execution in the eighteenth century was primarily occupied with killing the laboring poor.31 Likewise, mob formation has historically been aligned with the underclass, as can be seen in Burke’s spatialization of crowd melting—that is, one is borne down into the common cry. The distinction between the aesthetic experience that posits the individual in society and the “communal” experience of melting into the crowd can be polemically stated as the difference between killing the underclass for one’s self-consolidation and becoming the underclass. It is also the difference between killing the body of the other and becoming embodied. This is why, when Burke gives us an example of execution, he specifies the person to be executed is “a state criminal

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of high rank.” This elevation of the hanged facilitates the analogy between tragedy and execution by focusing on the sympathy elicited by the plight of an uncommon individual. It is via this analogy that Burke introduces the representational distance required for his theatricalization of the political. One could argue that the analogy between the tragic hero and uncommon criminal is one of the limits of Burke’s political thought. This misrecognition enables Burke to erase all sympathy between the emergent bourgeoisie and the abjected laboring poor, thereby allowing him to consolidate the great chain of society by excluding the threatening fluidity of the crowd.

This misrecognition both deforms and informs the theatre of the impeachment. It is clear from Burke’s earliest engagement with the Indian question, that he recognized that the triadic relationship between the British state, the East India Company, and the Indian principalities it controlled was beset with structural problems that often put the interests of the state in opposition to those of the Company. In the impeachment, Burke chose to filter these structural critiques through a series of exemplary dramas between Hastings and selected Indian victims of his “arbitrary power.” This not only focalized colonial relations through the actions of one man; it also drastically reduced the number of Indian characters in the drama. For example, the two most spectacular charges, the Benares charge, which was handled by Fox, and the Begams charge, which was handled by Sheridan, quickly resolved into conflicts between Hastings and Chait Singh and between Hastings and the Begams of Oudh, respectively. With a limited number of supporting players, the managers radically simplified the complex relations of treaty, taxation, rebellion, and commerce into tragic intrigues between noble subjects. This involved a controversial equation of caste and rank in Burke’s discourse that is crucial for his aestheticization of politics, for it simultaneously ejects the mob and the largely Hindu peasantry. In both cases, this ejection is carried out at the level of figuration, as in the famous resolution of the sublime vastness of the Indian subcontinent into the figure of a hungry mouth: “Through all that vast territory there is not a man who eats a mouthful of rice but by permission of the East India company.” With this ejection, the relationship between the managers of the impeachment, the narratives they tell, and the audience in Westminster Hall is carefully circumscribed in order to maximize identification between the audience and the victims of Hastings’s alleged tyranny. And this narrowing of purview is aimed at consolidating the Peers and the Commons against Hastings in a fashion that nevertheless avoids the question of unequal distribution of wealth both
in the colony and the metropole. In short, the placement of the laboring poor and the colonized peasantry is carefully maintained while all attention is focused on Hastings’s style of governance.

The act of historical simplification described here was counterbalanced by the oratorical excess of the managers, which frequently mobilized sensational description to consolidate opinion against Hastings. Perhaps most instructive is the famous description from Burke’s “Speech on Opening of Impeachment of Warren Hastings” of the tortures promulgated by Hastings’s minion Devi Singh at Rangpur. The extraordinary violence of the account was packaged to maximize its emotional effect. In reading the following passage it is important to consider how the controlled delivery of such material operates in the theatre of impeachment:

The innocent children were brought out and scourged before the faces of their parents . . . This was not all. They bound the father and son face to face, arm to arm, body to body; and in that situation they scourged and whipped them, in order with a refinement of cruelty that every blow that escaped the father should fall upon the son, that every stroke that escaped the son should strike upon the parent; so that where they did not lacerate and tear the sense, they should wound the sensibilities and sympathies of nature. . . . But Lords, there was more. Virgins whose fathers kept them from the sight of the sun, were dragged into the public Court, that Court which was the natural refuge against all wrong, all oppression, and all iniquity. There in the presence of the day, in the public Court, vainly invoking its justice, while their shrieks were mingled with the cries and groans of an indignant people, those virgins were cruelly violated by the basest and wickedest of mankind. It did not end there. The wives of the people of the country only differed in this; that they lost their honour in the bottom of the most cruel dungeons, where all their torments were a little buried from the view of mankind. . . . Here in my hand is my authority. For otherwise one would think it incredible. But it did not end there. In order that nature might be violated in all those circumstances where the sympathies of nature are awakened, where the remembrances of our infancy and all our tender remembrances are combined, they put the nipples of the women into the sharp edges of split bamboos and tore them from their bodies. Grown from ferocity to ferocity, from cruelty to cruelty, they applied burning torches and cruel slow fires (My lords, I am ashamed to go
those infernal fiends, in defiance of every divine and human, planted death in the source of life.\textsuperscript{34}

I have quoted this passage at length to emphasize not only Burke’s careful use of repetition but also his physical performance of horror. Contemporary accounts of the trial indicate that Burke had to pause because he was overcome by his own description and we know that at least one audience member, Mrs. Sheridan, had to be revived after this passage. One could well argue that the crucial distance needed for aestheticizing these events was contravened in these moments and paradoxically the full force of the violated colonial multitudes suddenly erupted into the theatrical space of impeachment only to be displaced by acts of metropolitan revivification. Burke continued his discourse after a pause and after the smelling salts were applied to Mrs. Sheridan. As in the substance of the speech, Hastings becomes the occasion for a bodily enactment of natural humanity and of sympathy for these unnamed virgins and mothers.

But regardless of Burke’s performance of this material, the necessity of “a criminal of high-rank” for the containment of more threatening multitudes both at home and abroad introduces a theatrical element outside of Burke’s control. Within the visual space of the trial, Hastings too is an actor and his impassivity at the bar was the object of much discussion. As both the \textit{Times} and the \textit{Public Advertiser} observed early in the trial, “Whatever perturbation of mind Mr. Hastings may inwardly suffer pending this business, his exterior deportment is allowed, on all sides, to be very becoming—affecting no levity on the one hand, nor discovering any marks of confusion or embarrassment on the other.”\textsuperscript{35} His lack of emotion was interpreted as a sign both of guilt and innocence, but it also needs to be considered as a derealization of the tragic economy mobilized by the managers. By refusing to react, to show emotion, the central figure becomes an enigma. This evacuation of emotion is key because the passions are such a fundamental part of Burke’s understanding of the subject. To be affectless is in a sense to be outside the realm of the human but not in the sense that Burke, Fox, and Sheridan would like. Far better for the managers if they could demonstrate an unnatural expression of emotion. Rather than an “infernal fiend,” Hastings sits in Westminster Hall as an impassive cipher. As the criminal of high rank, Hastings is necessary to the aestheticization of the political, but he has to exhibit some particularity or his very exemplarity will ultimately defuse or subvert the political efficacy of the impeachment. It would have been far better for the
managers if Hastings could be provoked somehow to contradict the laws of natural sympathy.

We can get some sense of the strategy behind Burke’s oratorical performance by looking briefly at the way in which *Reflections on the Revolution in France* frequently mobilizes the power of emotion by conforming historical events to the form of sentimental tragedy. His representation of Marie Antoinette as the threatened woman prepared to defend her honor attempts to evoke an emotional response similar to that drawn by Sarah Siddons’s performances at Drury Lane. The theorization of emotional affect that follows Burke’s presentation of the crowd scene in Marie Antoinette’s boudoir insinuates that the failure of Dr. Price and the Revolution Society to be drawn into sympathy with the queen’s distress is a sign of their perversion. Defending his own tears, Burke argues that he feels for the queen because it is *natural* I should; because we are so made as to be affected at such spectacles with melancholy sentiments upon the unstable condition of mortal prosperity, and the tremendous uncertainty of human greatness; because in those natural feelings we learn great lessons; because in events like these our passions instruct our reason. . . . We are alarmed into reflexion; our minds (as it has long since been observed) are purified by terror and pity; our weak unthinking pride is humbled, under the dispensations of a mysterious wisdom.

This litany of justifications insists that Burke’s feelings regarding the queen’s vulnerability and his judgment of the French Revolution itself are natural. Significantly, this double naturalization insists that “in events like these our passions instruct our reason.” The key gesture in Burke’s political analysis is to declare the normativity of specific passionate responses in order to pathologize those who do not share his feelings of sympathy.

This famous passage in the *Reflections* has its precedent in Burke’s sudden expression of emotion during the account of torture. As the violence of the passage accelerates, so too does the figural despecification of the victims. At the beginning of the passage, Burke is speaking about the torture of a recognizable category of victims—that is, the men, women, and children of Rangpur—but as the passage unfolds Burke moves to the more general category of mothers and then finally ventures forth on his description of what amounts to a crime against the breast. This simultaneous focalization and generalization leads to a fetishization of the breast as the
signifier of maternality “where the sympathies of nature are awakened, where the remembrances of our infancy and all our tender remembrances are combined.” This important gesture allows Burke not only to enact the “natural” response to such acts before his audience in Westminster Hall in a manner that attributes normative masculinity to himself while at the same time denying it to Hastings, but also to re-territorialize the breast itself, which plays such a vital role in Burke’s theorization of the social. As Frances Ferguson has observed, the breast is Burke’s iconic sign of the beautiful, and for Burke the beautiful is precisely that which elicits those passions which bind individuals together in society. It is not an exaggeration to assert that a crime against the iconic breast is for Burke a symbolic violation of the sympathy that defines human society. As we will see, the breast becomes a crucial sign that ties together much of the first season of the trial: from Burke’s opening speech to Sheridan’s apostrophe to filial piety in the summation of the Begams charge, the social bond implied by the relationship between mother and nursing child figures for civilized humanity.

What we see in both the Reflections and the “Speech on Opening of Impeachment of Warren Hastings” is the centrality of the enactment of a moment of spectatorship to both Burke’s analysis and his presentation of historical events. As an orator, Burke performs as someone who has seen atrocity—albeit at second hand—and who carries the responsibility of making both the Peers and the audience “see” Hastings’s depravity. And yet in Burke’s visualization of the atrocities at Rangpur what we discover is that the very medium of oratory forces him to rely on figurative substitutions that despecify and hence distort the view of events in India. The tortured breasts of the women of Rangpur, like the threatened figure of Marie Antoinette, both exemplify and occlude the historical events that Burke is trying to bring into presentation. The illuminating effect of figurative exemplification, therefore, also distorts or conceals these historical events.

This entire problematic was captured by the visual satirists in the recurring trope of Burke’s spectacles. These spectacles or extensions thereof make frequent appearances in the satirical prints either as impediments to vision or as mechanisms of phantasmatic projection. The former is most vividly figured in Johann Heinrich Ramberg’s Sublime Oratory—a Display of It of 5 March 1788 (fig. 4.9). As Robinson notes, “the sublimity of Burke’s oratory is jeered as deriving from the street filth which, like Fox to his right, he hurls at Hastings.” But it is Burke’s black glasses that prevent any of the hurled charges from hitting Hastings whose extraor-
dinary Oriental costume is conspicuously unmarked by dirt. The correlation between Burke’s blindness and the ineffectiveness of his oratory is intriguing because it suggests that the failure to inflict damage on Hastings derives not from a profusion of words but rather from their misdirection. Burke’s sublime oratory, quite literally, is off the mark.

As the trial dragged on, Burke’s spectacles were deployed in an increasingly complex fashion. The rather blunt trope of blindness is replaced by a much more troubling and subtle set of visual tropes that emphasize varying degrees and kinds of projection. Optical mechanisms begin not only to proliferate in the prints but also to be applied to Hastings. In No Abatement of 31 May 1791, William Dent re aplics the trope of the glasses, but now five years later the satire, like the composition itself, is far more convoluted (fig. 4.10). Burke holding a cross marked “Charge” is the largest figure in the print and effectively divides the visual field in two. To the right of him are images corresponding to key scenes from the oratory of the trial’s first two years. Along with emblematic figures of mutilation, starvation, and death, Dent has provided images of the Begams of Oudh shown chained with wasted dugs, Nandakumar hanged, Chait Singh holding another hangman’s noose, and, at the center of it all, a fe-

FIG. 4.9. Johann Heinrich Ramberg, Sublime Oratory—A Display of It, 5 March 1788 (courtesy of the Department of Prints and Drawings, The British Museum, London; BM 7270)
male figure with mutilated breasts that corresponds to Burke’s sensational description of the atrocities of Rangpur in his opening speech to the impeachment. All of these images are framed by clouds indicating that they are delusional and only visible through the enlarged spectacles which Philip Francis places before Hastings’s eyes in the extreme left of the composition. Before Hastings are caricatures of Pitt, Sheridan, Fox, and Grey, each of whom offers a different choice of death. The dislocation of Burke’s spectacles from his own eyes to those of Hastings is glossed by the caricature of Burke himself: “Ay, now you are my good Spirits, Black, White, Blue and Grey torment him with a choice of deaths, let him not rest night or day, whilst I raise up those Shades, and those my chief Spirit F[ranci]s, Source of the Charges, thou Imp of Envy strip him of his Plumage and hold my Spectacles to his Eyes, that he may See as I do, confess, die and be dam’d for hoarding his Riches.”

Aside from the long-standing suggestion that the Whigs are after Hastings for “hoarding his riches,” the key phrase here is “that he may See as I do,” for it invokes the Burkean notion of sympathy almost to the letter. The entire scene amounts to a visual rendering of the theory of sympathy: only the optical mechanism of the spectacles introduces a distortion, which underlines the spurious naturalization of such a notion as the commutability of spectatorship. In making Hastings see as Burke does, Dent insinuates that Burke is promulgating versions of events that not only further his own political subject position but also erase those of his enemies. The reductive quality of Burke’s model of reception, which too quickly generalizes audience response, is captured vividly by the dislocation of the spectacles. Such an insinuation strikes to the heart of a politics based on the affective demonstration of sympathetic feeling, for it indicates that the ostensibly “natural” feelings shared with others in response to political or aesthetic events are subject to mechanical distortion and psychic projection. The managers’ repeated assertion throughout the first year of the trial that the Peers only need be shown Hastings’s crimes to convict him is here undercut by the double assertion that vision is not only perspectival but also subject to artificial manipulation. Dent’s print also carries the further connotation of desperation on the part of the managers for it seems to suggest that if they can’t convince the Peers to convict Hastings, then maybe Hastings can be convinced to execute himself. In other words, the spectacles, dislocated from Burke, lead whoever looks through them to summary judgment.

But what precisely are we to make of the suggestion that the events Burke forces Hastings and the English nation to see are phantasmatic con-
structions arising from the shortsightedness of his own political identity? At one level, Dent and others are simply arguing that the managers’ account of Hastings’s activities are biased by party. There is no shortage of prints that make precisely the same claim with regard to Hastings’s defense: especially the large number of prints that depict Hastings bribing the king, the queen, and Lord Thurlow with diamonds and ruppees. But by invoking spirits “White, Black, Blue and Grey,” Dent equates Burke’s actions with Hecate’s invocation of the spirit world in eighteenth-century versions of Macbeth. In this context, Burke becomes not only a diabolical accessory to the murder of the rightful king, but also one who deals in phantoms and prophecies. In spite of the critique of the managers inherent to this figuration, Burke’s magic here conjures scenes of violent depredation that haunt the trial, and the entire scene focuses attention on the problem of figuring forth Indian atrocity.

The question of how to present persons and events in the Indian subcontinent is a continuing problem in the managers’ case for a variety of reasons. First, in his opening speech Burke argued that the conduct of Mr. Hastings “had been distinguished for an adherence, not to the general principles which actuate mankind, but to a kind of GEOGRAPHICAL MORAL-
ITY—a set of principles suited only to a particular climate, so that what was peculation and tyranny in Europe, lost both its essence and its name in India. In countering Hastings’s “geographical morality,” Burke and the managers were committed to a model of governance that operated according to European values, here understood as universal principles of morality, by refiguring Indian social institutions as somehow equivalent to English traditions. By taking the position that colonial rule required different strategies of governance, Hastings’s initial defense before the House of Commons forced the managers to demonstrate forms of similarity that were at best rhetorical and, more often than not, highly strained. As Anna Clark states,

Neither Burke nor Sheridan believed that Indian men could enjoy the same rights as British men. Burke argued for a notion of natural rights, by which he meant the right to be governed by laws, to enjoy liberty, to have one’s customs, traditions, and inherited privileges respected, but not the right to participate in politics. Sheridan declared that the instinct of liberty was “less active in the Indian than in the Englishman,” so someone had to save them.

Second, their audience, with the exception of the East India Company agents and functionaries, had little or no experience or knowledge of Indian affairs. This is evident from the outset of the trial, for Burke found it necessary to discuss at length the broad historical and cultural features of Indian society prior to and during Hastings’s term as governor-general. Third, at the level of evidence many of the key players were either dead or, like Hastings’s Resident at Lucknow, Mr. Nathaniel Middleton, unable or unwilling to remember key events necessary for establishing Hastings’s legal culpability. For this reason, oratory came to play a more central role in the managers’ strategy than the evidence, making, as P. J. Marshall argues, Hastings’s acquittal inevitable.

But Sara Suleri is more to the point when she discusses how Burke sees the inability to understand the Indian situation as a problem of representation itself. In Burke’s “Speech on Fox’s India Bill 1 December 1783” he states that

All this vast mass, composed of so many orders and classes of men, is again infinitely diversified by manners, by religion, by hereditary employment, through all their possible combinations. This renders the handling of India a matter in an high degree critical and delicate.
burke’s recourse to this visual trope is crucial because it simultaneously recognizes the inaccuracies generated by the remoteness of the “object” and the distortions endemic to the very mechanisms used to see the “object” more clearly. as suleri goes on to argue, india’s supposed sublimity renders it epistemologically inaccessible except through the distortions of the sublime’s retroactive consolidation of the object. at the heart of burke’s own rhetoric is a recognition of the inevitability of the “truth” being replaced by distorting figurations.

as the first season of the impeachment wore on, the visual satirists specified these conceptual shortcomings in the presentation of evidence in terms of the mechanical distortion of optical information. like dent’s satire of the trial as illegitimate performance in the raree show, other satirists invoked the nebulous world of precinematic display. the most extraordinary examples of this specification are to be found in a pair of related prints by sayers and gillray. james sayers’s galante show showed burke as a showman manipulating a magic lantern (fig. 4.11). the composition places the viewer behind burke and members of the impeachment audience watching them watch the projection. projected on the sheet draped in the background from left to right are an elephant labeled “a benares flea,” mount ossa labeled “a begum wart,” four eyes half-submerged in their own tears labeled “begums tears,” and a spouting whale labeled “an ouzle.” in the foreground to the right of the lantern “are the heads of two spectators in back view who are applauding; one says ‘finely imagined’; the other ‘poor ladies they have cried their eyes out.’ the profile perdu of lord derby appears on the extreme right, saying, ‘very like an ouzle [weasel],’” quoting polonius from hamlet 3.2. leaving the shakespearean quotation aside for a moment, the satirical attack turns on the optical distortion of scale. by magnifying objects out of all proportion, burke’s lantern exercises a persuasive force on the unidentified audience members, but the effect on the viewer of the print is precisely the opposite. by providing a viewpoint behind the lantern, sayers makes the
apparatus of distortion visible. Of perhaps equal importance is the subtle conversion of the space of the impeachment itself, Westminster Hall, into the space of projection. This transformation of the space from that of the state to that of the theatre is exemplified by the audience’s aesthetic response to the show.

Sayers’s print was brilliantly parodied a few days later by Gillray in his Camera Obscura of 9 May 1788 (fig. 4.12). The composition and viewpoint of the print precisely replicates that of Galante Show, but Gillray casts Hastings as the showman manipulating a camera obscura. The substitutions are grounded on the same questions of scale that provide the logic
of Sayers’s satire, but subtle distinctions push the parody away from simple reversal. In *Galante Show*, the optical mechanism takes small objects in the foreground and magnifies them on a clearly marked screen in the background. In *Camera Obscura*, the images in the background directly correspond to each of Sayers’s visual tropes: from left to right Gillray represents

(1) an “Elephant” chained to a British flag devouring an Indian and trampling on the body of another; (2) “Mount Ossa,” a conical mountain. (3) “Begums in Tears”: a British officer raises his sword to smite a kneeling Indian woman whom he holds by the hair; other women kneel at his feet; on the ground is a decapitated infant. A wagon, with a British flag, inscribed “Plunder” drives off in the background. (4) a “Whale” spouting.49

But now the optical mechanism takes these large images, inverts them, and contains them within a box. In the process, the extraordinary violence of the large images is filtered out and the audience, now facing the viewer of the print, is presented with a flea, a wart, skin’d mice, and an ouzle. The inversion inherent to the camera obscura mechanism is deployed by Gillray to figure the erasure of atrocity. Beyond the simple optical inversion, which insinuates that Hastings is reducing events of extreme import into trivial matters, the redeployment of the audience is crucial because we are now able to identify the viewers as Lord Thurlow; Queen Caroline, be-decked in the jewels given to her by Hastings; and George III, manipulating an opera glass or telescope. Thurlow’s response to Hastings’s show emphasizes the charm of Hastings’s diminishment, and Queen Caroline states that she shall cry her eyes out for the poor mice. In both cases, the responses emphasize the beauty of reduction as opposed to the sublimity of magnification in Burke’s magic lantern show. At this level, Gillray argues not only that Hastings counters Burke’s show by bribing those most in power over his fate, but also that he does so by resorting to a different form of aestheticization. Within the terms set forth by Burke himself in *A Philosophical Enquiry*, the depicted Hastings counters the sublime consolidation, so crucial to Burke’s vision of Indian affairs, with an aesthetic tactic of miniaturization aimed at preserving the bonds of society here figured by the corrupt royal couple and its chief minion.

But something else happens in Gillray’s parody that may be of even more significance. Despite its careful mimicry of composition, Gillray’s image demarcates a fundamentally different space than that of Sayers’s *Galante Show*. In Sayers’s image, Burke’s magic lantern show is staged in
the interior space of Westminster Hall and the placement of the optical mechanism, screen, and audience are all clearly demarcated. This spatial containment confines the satirical import of the image to a critique of Burke’s alleged exaggerations. But Gillray’s image does not inscribe such an interior space except for that of the camera obscura itself. The violent images in the background and the images of Hastings, the camera, Thurlow, and the royal couple in the foreground appear suspended in abstract pictorial space. This suspension is of singular importance because it means that the atrocities figured in the background are not understood as distorted images but rather as merely remote. The overall pictorial space of the print figures the space of empire itself and the background images op-

FIG. 4.12. James Gillray, Camera Obscura, 9 May 1788 (courtesy of the Department of Prints and Drawings, The British Museum, London; BM 7314)
erate as signs of world historical events. Thus, the foreground witnesses are involved in an altogether different scene of viewing than in the *Galante Show*. Gillray presents Hastings, Thurlow, and the royal couple observing the trial from outside the scene of impeachment. This is significant because the king was never present at the proceedings, but the fact of his external interest in the trial was everyday emphasized by the centrality of his empty throne. In Gillray’s scenario, the enclosed space of the camera obscura itself figures for Westminster Hall. The shift is subtle but activates a crucial set of allusions regarding the role of the king and the visualization of guilt.

As we have noted, both prints allude to a seemingly cursory speech from act 3, scene 2 of *Hamlet* shortly after the performance of “The Mousetrap.” The allusion is both complex and instructive, for in this scene Hamlet watches Gertrude and Claudius in order to read culpability in their response. After the royal couple demands the cessation of the performance, Hamlet feels that he has evidence of guilt. Eventually, he is summoned by Polonius to see his mother. The following dialogue ensues:

**Polonius:** My lord, the queen would speak with you, and presently.  
**Hamlet:** Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a camel?  
**Polonius:** By th’ mass and ’tis, like a camel indeed.  
**Hamlet:** Methinks it is like a weasel.  
**Polonius:** It is backed like a weasel.  
**Hamlet:** Or like a whale.  
**Polonius:** Very like a whale.  
**Hamlet:** Then I will come to my mother by an by. [aside] They fool me to the top of my bent.—I will come along by and by.⁵₀

Within *Hamlet* this brief moment indicates Polonius’s utter corruption in the face of power—in the process of bending to Hamlet’s princely status, he will see things as Hamlet presents them—and his strategy for dealing with Hamlet’s supposed insanity. In *Galante Show*, the allusion is deployed to figure Lord Derby as a foolish toady. But the implication is that he is also going along with Burke’s either real or feigned madness. This wrinkle suggests that Burke’s oratorical magnification is part of a larger strategy of entrapping not only Hastings but the administration and the king that support him. This subtle undercurrent carries with it the implication that Hastings and his royal supporters are tainted like Claudius and the added recognition that Burke’s strategic manipulation of events is aimed at real corruption at the highest levels of the state.
In Gillray’s hands the *Hamlet* allusion takes on less hyperbolic significance, but its deployment illuminates the anxiety generated by Hastings himself. In *Camera Obscura*, George III misquotes Polonius and thus suddenly emerges as both subservient and confused. This complex gesture refigures the relationship between Hastings and the Crown. In this recasting, Hastings becomes the royal prince and the real king is degraded into his subservient employee. Like many of the prints that show the king, queen, and Thurlow accepting bribes from Hastings, Gillray aims to uncover corruption, but the suggestion that the king is Hastings’s servant implies that the seat of the king, both literally in Westminster Hall and figuratively at the head of the nation, is empty. The emptiness of the throne and the subtle elevation of Hastings to princely status activates the ubiquitous anxieties regarding not only Hastings’s near sovereign status while in India but also his extraordinary wealth. The fear expressed here helps to explain why Gillray’s print eschews a representation of Westminster Hall for the theatre of world history. From this wide-angle view, Hastings becomes a dangerous threat because of a power vacuum in the British state. He is excessively visible because the British monarch is everywhere missing. In Gillray’s view, there may be some anxiety that the “body” of Hastings is more visible than the body of the king. In a single image, Gillray captures both the uncertainty regarding imperial sovereignty at this historical moment and the anxious perception that the East India Company is exhibiting a form of hybrid sovereignty beyond that defined by King-in-Parliament.

Thus far in my discussion of the trial, the specter of theatrical illegitimacy and the distortion endemic to precinematic display have come to figure for the devolution of the audience and the mystification of state and Company power, respectively. These figurations have both attempted to control the reception of the managers’ oratory by recasting it as something other than an embodied speech act. As we have seen, diminishing the trial into visual spectacle still allows for a substantial engagement with the impeachment, but it also obviates the complex problem of acting. In the following section, my analysis of the theatrical relationship between the impeachment and its audience shifts from the visual incorporation of the audience in Westminster Hall to the oratorical performance of Burke and Sheridan in various speeches pertaining to the Begams charge—that is, from the spectacle of imperial sovereignty to the much more troublesome performance of imperial statesmanship.
The Begam’s Tears: Performing Imperial Statesmanship

While Mr. Sheridan was animadverting on the conduct of Sir Elijah Impey, the countenances of some of the East India Nabobs, who were present, strongly depicted the anticipating fears of Charles, in School for Scandal, “If they talk thus to morality and sentiment, what will they say when they come to me?”

Times, 5 June 1788

After the highpoints of Burke’s and Fox’s speeches of February, the trial devolved into a miasma of incomplete testimony provided by largely hostile witnesses. The daily newspapers dutifully reported the events and managed to generate some interest in Nathaniel Middleton’s tendency to forget any important details that might incriminate Hastings. In their interrogation of witnesses, the managers often lost control of the testimony and, as the trial moved toward recess, both the managers and the public eagerly awaited Sheridan’s summation of the evidence of the Begams charge. The former group hoped that Sheridan would consolidate opinion against Hastings in much the same fashion that his earlier speech on the same topic in the House of Commons pushed the inquiry into Hastings’s activities to a formal impeachment. The latter group’s anticipation of Sheridan’s speech undoubtedly had much more to do with the desire for a reprise of what was arguably his most famous theatrical role.

In the period between Sheridan’s first delivery of the Begams speech on 7 February 1787 and its second performance during the trial proper, however, a number of things happened to the popular representation of the Begams that altered both the speech’s reception and its role in the theatricalization of imperial culpability. Sheridan’s famous deployment of the family in the Begams speech involved a suspect sexualization that was the grounds for a far more disturbing racialization of both the Begams and Nawab Wazir of Oudh in the print media. The foundation of this counterhistory of the Begams’ plight was reinforced by material brought forward by the managers themselves and filtered through emergent fantasies of interracial sexuality, which can be traced back to the dissemination of Oriental tales in both print and theatrical culture.

The Begams charge focused on events in 1781 leading up to and including the seizure of the property of Sadr al-Nissa and Bahu Begam, the grandmother and mother of the Wazir, Asaf al-Daula. The two Begams were the mother and wife of Shuja al-Daula whose amity with the East India Company had resulted in a prior agreement guaranteeing the pro-
tection of lands and treasures to the widows. After the uprising of Chait Singh, Hastings and his primary agents in the affair, Nathaniel Middleton and Sir Elijah Impey, accused the Begams not only of supporting the uprising, but also of promulgating rebellion in their own territories. The managers of the impeachment argued that this accusation was contrived as a pretext for plundering the Begams’ fortune. As Sheridan famously put it in his great speech to the House of Commons, “their treasure was their treason.” However, in part because so much of the evidence necessary to prove conclusively a breach of treaty between Hastings and the Begams was missing and in part because of the difficulty of proving Hastings’s foreknowledge and direction of Middleton’s and Impey’s actions, Sheridan’s speeches on the charge emphasize the criminality of Hastings’s violation not of contract but of “filial piety.” This tactical move alleged that Hastings forced the Nawab Wazir to resume the jaghires of his mother and grandmother, seize their treasure, and divert the funds collected from both actions to Hastings and eventually to the Company. In this context, Hastings’s compulsion of Asaf al-Daula became a crime against human nature. This crime was aggravated by a detailed account of the violation of the sanctity of the zenana, but on this issue the comparison between the Begams and English ladies, which was so crucial for the elicitation of sympathy for the Indian women, fractured in a fashion that demands careful scrutiny. What emerged in this moment of fracture was a crisis in the representation of the violation of both sexual and social mores that impinged on the precarious definitions of feminine propriety and masculine violence that ultimately engulfed the actions of the managers.

The complex rhetorical gambit at the heart of the Begams charge had its foundation in Burke’s “Speech on Fox’s India Bill 1 December 1783.” The published version of the speech, which is no doubt quite distinct from what actually transpired in the House of Commons, nevertheless records two crucial moments where Burke folds the response to his argument into his own discourse. In both cases, Burke’s remarks on the extortion of the Begams of Oudh and on the similar confiscation of property of Panna, the mother of Chait Singh, provoked the laughter of “some young members.” In the first instance, Burke’s account of the plunder of the Begams is interrupted and his rebuke is only cursory:

The instrument chosen by Mr. Hastings to despoil the relict of Sujah Dowlah was her own son, the reigning Nabob of Oude. It was the pious hand of son that was selected to tear from his mother and grandmother the provision of their age, the maintenance of his
brethren, and of all the ancient household of his father. [Here a
laugh from some young members]—The laugh is *seasonable*, and the
occasion decent and proper.\(^{53}\)

But when he is interrupted a second time, the earlier moment becomes
a setup for a symptomatic interweaving of colonial and metropolitan af-
fares. The scene is instructive as much for what it shows about the British
assumptions regarding Indian femininity, as for what it demonstrates
about Burke’s tactics:

This *antient matron, born to better things* [a laugh from certain
young gentlemen]—I see no cause for this mirth. A good author of
antiquity reckons among the calamities of his time, *Nobilissimarum
faeminarum exilia et fugas.*\(^ {54}\) I say, Sir, this antient lady was com-
pelled to quit her house with three hundred helpless women, and a
multitude of children in her train; but the lower sort in the camp it
seems could not be restrained. They did not forget the good lessons
of the governor general. They were unwilling “to be defrauded of a
considerable part of their booty, by suffering them to pass without
examination.”—They examined them, Sir, with a vengeance, and the
sacred protection of that awful character, Mr. Hastings’s maitre
d’hôtel, could not secure them from insult and plunder.\(^ {55}\)

This narrative of Hastings’s sanction of the insult and plunder of Panna
and the women of her zenana made its way into the Benares charge, but
what interests me about this scene is the degree to which it encapsulates
both the substance and the style of Sheridan’s later oratorical rendering
of the Begams charge.

It is of key strategic importance that the audience be able to recognize
the Begams—or, in the preceding passage, the mother of Chait Singh—as
women of quality worthy of the same respect as an English lady. Yet, as
in the earlier interruption, precisely this claim provokes the laughter of
the “younger” members. The age of these parliamentarians is significant
because all through the speech Burke, like Clive in his earlier account of
the Company’s shortcomings, focuses on the immaturity of the East In-
dia Company functionaries:

The natives scarcely know what it is to see the grey head of an
Englishman. Young men (boys almost) govern there, without society,
and without the sympathy of the natives. . . . Animated with all the avarice of age, and all the impetuosity of youth, they roll in one after another; wave after wave; and there is nothing before the eyes of the natives but an endless, hopeless prospect of new flights of birds of prey and passage, with appetites renewing for a food that is continually wasting. . . . There is nothing in the boys we send to India worse than the boys whom we are whipping at school, or that we see trailing a pike, or bending over a desk at home. But as English youth in India drink the intoxicating draught of authority and dominion before their heads are able to bear it, and as they are full grown in fortune long before their heads are ripe in principle, neither nature nor reason have any opportunity to exert themselves for remedy of the excesses of their premature power.56

Burke’s castigation of the young members of Parliament partakes of a similar charge of immaturity and suggests that their lack of sympathy and respect for the “antient lady” and her household makes them comparable with the birds of prey that are laying India to waste. Both the trope of the predatory bird and the transference of it to the laughing parliamentarians effectively establish that metropolitan support for Hastings’s government is already tainted by the same lack of humanity.

The allegation is sustained by the allusion to Tacitus, which invokes the specter of Rome’s decline, and is reinforced by a digression on the degradation of metropolitan economic and political life by precisely the returned East India Company employees with whom one assumes Burke’s adversaries are associated:

In India all the vices operate by which sudden fortune is acquired; in England are often displayed, by the same persons, the virtues which dispense hereditary wealth. Arrived in England, the destroyers of nobility and gentry of a whole kingdom will find the best company in this nation, at a board of elegance and hospitality. . . . They marry into your families; they raise their value by demand; . . . there is scarcely a house in the kingdom that does not feel some concern and interest that makes all reform of our eastern government appear officious and disgusting; and, on the whole, a most discouraging attempt. . . . [I]t is an arduous thing to plead against abuses of a power which originates from your own country, and affects those whom we are used to consider as strangers.57
So the laughing interruption becomes an occasion for Burke to mobilize an antinabob discourse that focuses on precisely the sites of cultural anxiety marked by Foote ten years earlier. The double specter of nabobs marrying into aristocratic families and of their destabilization of the domestic economy is evoked as the cause of the degradation of metropolitan culture whose proof is manifest in the laughing young men seated across the House from Burke. In short, the interruption is turned into a sign of why Fox’s India Bill is necessary not only for the alleviation of Indian oppression but also for the reclamation of the virtues of the British Constitution and the national character.

After the failure of Fox’s bill and the fall of the Fox-North coalition, the pursuit of Hastings unfolded according to a different set of tactics. The evidence against Hastings was laboriously introduced into the House piecemeal until Sheridan’s speech on the Begams of Oudh ensured the impeachment. As the editor of Sheridan’s speeches states,

Every prejudice, every prepossession were gradually overcome by the force of this extraordinary combination of keen, but liberal, discrimination; of brilliant, yet argumentative wit. So fascinated were the auditors by his eloquence, that when Mr. Sheridan sat down, the whole house, the members, peers, and strangers, involuntarily joined in a tumult of applause, and adopted a mode of expressing their approbation, new and irregular in the house, by loudly and repeatedly clapping with their hands.58

This account of both specific and general responses to the speech emphasizes a sudden spatial transformation in which the seat of government momentarily takes theatrical shape. This account of Sheridan’s speech shows us something about the effectivity of oratory itself that resonates with Gillray’s Camera Obscura print. At the height of its enactment, oratory has the capacity to take its audience out of the spatial and temporal constraints imposed by the state’s legislative and legal apparatus and effects an abstraction which obviates precisely that which stands in the way of convicting Hastings—namely, the particularity of English common law. The “irregularity” of the outburst of applause marks a rupture in the decorum of the venue that is matched by a perceived historical rupture in the remarks of Burke, Fox, and Pitt:

Mr. Burke declared it to be the most astonishing effort of eloquence, argument, and wit, united, of which there was any record or tradi-
tion. Mr. Fox said, “all that he had ever heard—all that he had ever read when compared with it dwindled to nothing, and vanished like vapour before the sun.” Mr. Pitt acknowledged, that it surpassed all the eloquence of ancient or modern times, and possessed every thing that genius or art could furnish, to agitate and controul the mind.59

All three politicians take the speech out of its present moment and evaluate it in relation to the entire record of Western civilization. Such a gesture is fitting because part of Sheridan’s strategy was to hold Hastings accountable not only for specific breaches of contract with the Begams but for acts against humanity itself, here defined by the sanctity of filial piety. Julie Carlson and others have noted that indicting Hastings for crimes against the family was a tactical move aimed at avoiding key evidentiary problems in the managers’ case.60 But it also involved a restaging of material first articulated in Burke’s “Speech on Fox’s India Bill.” The fact that Sheridan was able to take the same material that prompted laughter from Burke’s audience in 1783 and refashion it to evoke sympathetic tears and universal admiration in 1787 and 1788 can be understood as a strategic refashioning of Burke’s earlier interchange. One could argue that Dent’s *The Long-Winded Speech of 4 June 1788* is visualizing precisely this form of discursive indebtedness (fig. 4.13). But, unlike Dent’s caricature in which the phrases of the impeachment spew out of Sheridan’s mouth as unconnected syntagms from the pressure of Burke’s and Fox’s ministrations, Sheridan’s refinement of the material is anything but random. Burke’s reverence for the “antient lady,” his figuration of the laughing parliamentarians and the East India Company functionaries as impetuous children corrupted by premature power, and his image of the bird of prey laying waste to the land all make their way into Sheridan’s speech, but in his hands these gestures take on different connotations. Sheridan characterizes the testimony and actions of Impey, Middleton, and Hastings as childishly amateur. Impey’s inconsistent affidavits, collected after the fact of the plunder to establish retroactively the Begams’ rebellion, are presented as embarrassments to the judiciary. Middleton’s lies and lapses of memory are sarcastically presented as those of a schoolboy. And Hastings’s arrogance, avarice, and, above all, the inconsistency, both in his dealings in India and in the management of his own defense, are symptoms of interrupted development.61 Sheridan’s satiric reduction of these three figures elevates Parliament into a site of venerable wisdom and hence constructs it as an embodiment of the very gravitas that Burke himself was trying to perform in the India Bill speech. It is a crucial reversal because it sub-
tly corrals the force of laughter and mobilizes it against Hastings, Impey, and Middleton while emphasizing the connection between present parliamentarians of whatever age and the tradition of the state they represent.

With this established, Sheridan then activates Burke’s bird-of-prey trope to indicate that such immature instruments of governance, unless corrected, develop into deformed characters that undermine the respect due to British colonizers. On the last day of his four-day speech, after his

sudden theatrical collapse on the previous day, Sheridan wound the audience up for the climactic apostrophe to filial piety. In the process, he once again invoked the same set of tropes and allusions that had animated much of Burke’s earlier rhetoric:

This was British justice! this was British humanity! Mr. Hastings ensures to the allies of the company, in the strongest terms, their prosperity and his protection; the former he secures by sending an army to plunder them of their wealth and desolate their soil! His protection is fraught with a similar security; like that of a vulture to a lamb; grappling in its vitals! thirsting for its blood! scaring off each petty kite that hovers round; and then, with an insulting perversion of terms, calling sacrifice, *protection!*— an object for which history seeks for any similarity in vain. The deep searching annals of Tacitus;—the luminous philosophy of Gibbon;—all the records of man’s transgressing, from original sin to the present period, dwindle into comparative insignificance of enormity; both in aggravation of vile principles, and extent of their consequential ruin! The victims of his oppression were confessedly destitute of all power to resist their oppressors; but that debility, which, from other bosoms, would have claimed some compassion, with respect to the mode of suffering, here excited but the ingenuity of torture!62

By applying Burke’s image of birds of prey desolating the land specifically to Hastings, Sheridan not only figures him as a predator, but he also constructs the Begams as docile victims. This ancillary construction of the Begams as passive led to a series of contradictions in the oratory because the evidence demonstrated both women to be able politicians and rulers in their own right, and because conventional British fantasies of the power structure of the seraglio were transferred to the zenana and, hence, to the Begams themselves.63 Since these fantasies thoroughly intertwined despotic governance with sexual and gender identities outside British norms, Sheridan’s and the managers’ attempts to construct the Begams as passive victims were always already compromised.

Most discussions of Sheridan’s speech focus on how Hastings’s crimes against the family substitute for the less provable crimes against contract. There is no question regarding this aspect of Sheridan’s performance, but I want to draw attention to a different set of substitutions that effectively erase the Begams from the scene altogether. In a seemingly cursory move, Sheridan directs the audience’s attention to Hastings’s counsel’s attempt
to prevent a private letter between Hastings and Middleton from being introduced as evidence “because it was manifestly and abstractedly private, as it contained in one part the anxieties of Mr. Middleton for the illness of his son.” In a gesture that replays Burke’s deployment of the laughing parliamentarians as the sign of inhumanity during the India Bill speech, Sheridan uses this attempt to suppress evidence of Middleton’s parental concern as a sign of Hastings’s, if not Middleton’s, lack of respect for the parent-child bond. The attempt to suppress the private letter, which no doubt was intended to prevent other more material evidence from being admitted, is brought forward as a repetition of the earlier disregard for filial tenderness in the act of compelling the Nawab Wazir to plunder the Begams. Sheridan’s segue is stunning for the way it transports the crime from its colonial venue to a present metropolitan locale—literally, the site of the impeachment itself:

This was a singular argument indeed; and the circumstance ... merited strict observation, though not in the view in which it was placed by the counsel. It went to shew that some at least of those concerned in these transactions, felt the force of those ties, which their efforts were directed to tear asunder;—that those who could ridicule the respective attachment of a mother and a son;—who would prohibit the reverence of the son to the mother who had given him life;—who could deny to maternal debility the protection which filial tenderness should afford;—were yet sensible of the straining of those chords by which they were connected.

This subtle gesture illustrates some of the key problems faced by Sheridan in the Begams charge. By suggesting that Middleton was sensible in contravening the parent-child bond, Sheridan can argue that Hastings’s actions against the Nawab Wazir and the Begams were not a particular example of what Burke had earlier called “geographical morality” but rather the manifestation of a universal principle. In other words, what Hastings did to the Nawab Wazir, his counsel was effectively doing in the impeachment proceedings. Furthermore, it suggests that the Nawab and Middleton were similarly compelled to pervert their natural sense of justice. Acting for Hastings, both men are significant to Sheridan as examples of corrupted human nature. In this light, the Nawab Wazir’s seizure of the Begams’ property and Middleton’s incomplete and biased testimony become examples of former rectitude that is perverted by association with Hastings.
This comparison between the Nawab and Middleton is forced because both the evidence and Sheridan’s speech indicate that the relationship between the Nawab Wazir and his family was far from a model of filial tenderness. Sheridan acknowledges that there was standing enmity not only between Sadr al-Nissa and the Nawab Wazir but also between Asaf al-Daula and his father. These facts were damaging to Sheridan’s overall strategy because they reintroduced the question of social and cultural difference which the invocation of the family was supposed to override.66 The speech therefore activates a set of tactical displacements, only some of which were successful. The substitution of Middleton’s concern for his son for the Nawab Wazir’s concern for the Begams is one of these tactics and it works primarily by deploying one set of expressions, Middleton’s letter and his faulty testimony, as a model for interpreting another—that is, Asaf al-Daula’s own letter stating his reluctance to do Hastings bidding and his subsequent capitulation. Middleton’s actions in Westminster Hall reductively stand in for the Nawab Wazir’s complex actions in Oudh and hence the foreign is made comprehensible by a present example. But this substitution is only secure in the enactment of Sheridan’s oratory. As P. J. Marshall states, “Sheridan . . . played havoc with Hastings’s embarrassments, but his own version of events was so over-simplified that it cannot have carried much conviction after the effect of the oratory had worn off.”67

A similar and even more powerful displacement emerges as Sheridan enters his apostrophe on filial piety. What is crucial to recognize in the following passage is how the address and the deixis turn his present audience into those wronged by Hastings’s actions:

There was something connected with this transaction so wretchedly horrible, and so vilely loathsome, as to excite the most contemptible disgust. If it were not a part of his duty, it would be superfluous to speak of the sacredness of the ties which those aliens to feeling,—those apostates to humanity had thus divided. In such an assembly as that which I have the honor of addressing, there is not an eye but must dart reproof at this conduct;—not a heart but must anticipate its condemnation. “FILIAL PIETY! It is the primal bond of society—it is that instinctive principle, which, panting for its proper good, soothes, unbidden, each sense and sensibility of man!—it now quivers on every lip!—it now beams from every eye!—it is an emanation of that gratitude, which softening under the sense of recollected good, is eager to own the vast countless debt it ne’er, alas! can pay,
for so many long years of unceasing solicitudes, honourable self-denials, life-preserving cares!—it is that part of our practice, where duty drops its awe!—where reverence refines into love.\(^{68}\)

Although the apostrophe continues a good deal longer, its crucial moment occurs when Sheridan first draws attention to the audience itself and then states that the sensibility of the primal bond of society is evident “now” on every lip and in every eye in that same assembly. It is important to think through this deictic moment as a performative act through which the speaker mobilizes the feelings of his audience in a fashion that equates its response to the situation of those wronged on the other side of the world. The entire rhetorical assemblage turns on a very specific familial trope: not simply the parent-child bond is being invoked, but the bond between mother and son. The Begams are being depicted first and foremost as mothers, and Sheridan implies that the Nawab Wazir, like each of the parliamentarians before him, is naturally indebted to his mother for her maternal care, and that Hastings forced him to renounce that relationship. But this specification also erased the women in the audience, and this failure to recognize the gendered qualities of his address generated significant problems before a mixed audience. Sheridan’s treatment of this renunciation of the maternal takes us back to Burke’s invocation of the damaged breasts of the women of Rangpur as signs of Hastings’s depravity, but Sheridan’s deictic gestures incite the audience to reconstitute the signs of damaged maternality with their own sympathetic familial emotions. What had elicited horror at the outset of the impeachment has been reactivated to generate sentimental identification. In short, the Begams’ tears, so distant and so difficult to bring forth as evidence, are replaced in the oratorical moment by the self-evident tears of Sheridan’s audience.

Rather than a straightforward expression of the shared humanity of Indian and British subjects, the apostrophe offers a figuration of the former by the latter that effectively erases the key distinctions between them. Furthermore, the transience of the oratorical bonding of listening subjects poses significant problems for Sheridan’s strategy of displacement. Because of its performative qualities, each displacement must be superseded by another in order to keep the differences between Islamic and Christian society and culture in abeyance. It is precisely this insatiable need for figuration that makes the speeches so voluminous and so prone to recoiling on themselves. The most vivid and instructive examples of the unraveling of audience consolidation revolve around Sheridan’s attempt to
figure the violation of the Begams’ zenana as rape. The discourse of rape is pervasive through the speech and is aimed at eliciting tears in a fashion akin to that of she-tragedy. The only difficulty is that Sheridan, despite all his oratorical skill, is not Mrs. Siddons, and hence must describe violation rather than enact it. Unlike the instance of filial piety, Sheridan’s performance of affect can generate sympathetic feeling, but it cannot enact the substitution of present for distant humanity. If the audience identifies with the “great feeling” expressed by Sheridan on this point, then its identification is not with the experience of violation but rather with an observer’s pity for the violated. This is a direct result not only of his performance of sentimental masculinity, which ensures that he is at best an observer of the violated woman’s suffering, but also of the culturally distinct understanding of feminine propriety and normative sexuality that interrupts direct identification between the women in the audience and the women of the zenana, a point noted by Julie Carlson:

Special difficulties accrue around the effort to gain sympathy for the Begums, either as elderly women or persons whose private quarters have been invaded. As a way of linking Hastings’s invasion of the zenanas with rape, Sheridan emphasizes testimony regarding the sanctity with which the “sequestration” of Indian women is viewed, especially by the women themselves who elect to retire from the public eye because they view being viewed as “profanation.” . . . This was gross miscalculation according to the court recorder who observes that “the female part of the audience did not seem to feel his distress.”

What this indicates is that conflicting understandings of gender and sexual propriety short-circuit the speech’s intended effect or, more precisely, divide the response along gender lines. The implication of the court recorder’s observation is that Sheridan’s performance of distress established a homosocial bond between himself and his masculine auditors but alienated him from the ladies in the audience. This alienation suggests that for the women in attendance a boundary between Indian and English femininity had to be maintained in part because it was so effectively dissolved in Sheridan’s paternalistic gaze.

Of course, the boundary being enforced carries all the significance of cultural difference because it is the very different definitions of public and private, and the fantasies of sexuality projected onto each category, that animate this distinction. For Sheridan’s imputation of rapacity to resonate,
he carefully distinguishes the zenana from the widely held notion of the seraglio:

The confinement of the Turkish ladies was in a great measure to be ascribed to the jealousy of their husbands; in Hindostan the ladies were confined, because they thought it contrary to decorum that persons of their sex should be seen abroad: they were not the victims of jealousy in the men; on the contrary, their sequestration from the world was voluntary; they liked retirement, because they thought it best suited to the dignity of their sex and situation: they were shut up from liberty, it was true; but liberty, so far from having any charms for them was derogatory to their feelings; they were enshrined rather than immured . . . . Such was their sense of delicacy, that to them the sight of a man was pollution; and the piety of the nation rendered their residence a sanctuary. What then would their lordships think of the tyranny of the man who could act in open defiance of those prejudices, which were so interwoven with the very existence of ladies in that country, that they could not be removed but by death?73

Sheridan’s closing question draws his audience into the ethical scene in much the same fashion as the filial piety passage, but here the address to “their lordships” carries a number of connotations that alienate the women viewing the trial. As Julie Carlson emphasizes, women attending the trial “may also have experienced the testimony as fighting words aimed at their interest in seeing and being seen at the trial.”74 As we have already noted, the visibility of women at the trial and in the street outside Westminster Hall was the site of some anxiety. Sheridan’s hyperbolic assertion of the purity and delicacy of the inhabitants of the zenana seems to cast aspersion on the far more public lives of the women in the audience. As attendees, the foremost women in London were exposed to accounts of sexual violence and sexual practices that were outside the realm of polite conversation.

But more important, this view of the zenana is counterintuitive to the audience, because their sense of the sequestration of women is grounded, as Sheridan himself acknowledges, on the prevalent notion of the Turkish seraglio as a site not only of sexual dissipation but also of gender insubordination. This is a problem because a significant portion of the contemporary representations of the seraglio emphasized the power of the foremost women over the sexually dissipated sultan, and hence any cor-
relation between the zenana and the seraglio short-circuits the construction of the Begams as passive victims by reasserting their political agency. Sheridan’s attempt to ignore the seraglio and all of the sexual fantasies associated with it relies on the desexualization of the Begams and the inhabitants of the zenana. But this desexualization of the Indian women, like Sheridan’s representation of their passivity, was subject not only to internal but also to external contradictions. In the space between Sheridan’s first speech on the Begams of Oudh in the House of Commons and his summation of the Begams charge at the impeachment, the managers’ opponents resexualized the Begams and their zenanas in a fashion that arguably disabled this section of the speech for part of his audience at least. And this symptomatic breakdown in the rhetoric of the charge was facilitated by none other than Edmund Burke.

In one of the strangest moments in the entire trial, Burke introduced as evidence a passage from Prince Demetrius Cantemir’s History of the Turks to prove the respect with which feminine modesty and maternal status are held in Moslem society. On 22 April 1788, Sheridan and Burke were introducing written evidence largely aimed at establishing the invasion of the zenana by East India Company soldiers as a species of rape. Sheridan brought forth testimony from Sir Elijah Impey—Hastings chief judicial official and a key player in the transactions at Oudh—that “nothing could be more sacred than the character of a woman, nor more venerable than that of a mother, in India,” and Burke bolstered Sheridan’s position with the following passage from Cantemir:

The Sultans have always treated their mothers with great respect, in compliance with the divine precepts, and those of the Koran. They can not only introduce and change many things at pleasure in the Seraglio, but also the Sultan is forbid by the laws to lie with any of the women kept there, without his mama’s consent. Every day, during the Feast of Bairam, the Sultan-mother presents a beautiful virgin, well educated, richly dressed, and adorned in precious stones, for her son’s use. . . . If the Sultan has a mind to chuse a concubine unknown to his mother, he may indeed do it without opposition; but he is reckoned to act contrary to the rules of the Seraglio, and against his mother’s honour! Very often, the Sultan communicates to his mother the affairs of state, as Sultan Mahomet is known to have done.75

The Morning Post reports that Hastings’s counsel Mr. Law objected to the “reveries of Prince Demetrius Cantemir . . . unless it could be proved that
the customs of Musselmen all over the world were the same as at Constantinople,” but it is hard to imagine anything better for undercutting Sheridan’s claim of sexual propriety both here and in the subsequent version of the speech on the Begams charge. The Morning Post’s account of the reaction to this text is telling:

The part of the passage, which related to the blooming virgins provided for the Sultan, was not worded by Prince Cantemir in the manner in which he probably would have written it, if he could have foreseen that it would ever have been read before most ladies of England. Whether they were pleased or displeased at it, they can best tell; but their blushing shewed, that they felt the force of the moving description of the Sultana’s authority.

For Burke’s audience, the sultana both emerges as the bawd for her own son and accedes to a position of authority over not only his state but also his desire. Considering the fact that one of the connotations of the word “mother” during this period is proprietor of a brothel, a whole series of connections adverse to the managers’ containment of the erotics of the scene start to proliferate. If we transfer this narrative to the Begams charge, then the former implication essentially constructs the zenanas as brothels and the latter implication suggests that the Nawab Wazir’s willingness to plunder the Begams is due less to Hastings’s coercion than it is to the Bahu Begam’s private but no less excessive power over him. In this scenario, the Nawab Wazir’s invasion of the zenana becomes a liberation from his mother’s excessive control over his public and private affairs.

Burke’s tactical error was quickly satirized four days later in Sayers’s A Reverie of Prince Demetrius Cantemir, Ospidar of Moldavia of 26 April 1788 (fig. 4.14). This image of Burke’s supposed fantasy life is the precursor to Dent’s No Abatement discussed earlier, both in its figuration of the elderly Indian woman and its suggestion that Burke’s pursuit of Hastings is delusional. But Sayers’s illustration, framing and embellishment of the events of 22 April, not only probe the sexual fantasies that everywhere threaten to undermine the Begams charge, but also enforce a sense of “geographical morality” by emphasizing signs of sexual, social, and racial difference. Sayers’s ascription of desire to Burke does not mobilize the spectacles trope seen elsewhere in the satirical prints. The visualization of Burke’s oratory as a species of optical distortion or magnification gives way to a dream image whose broad contours conjoin the “facts” drawn from the public reading of Cantemir’s text and the fantasies prom-
ulgated by Oriental tales. If the latter were not already active enough in the reception of the evidence, Sayers adds a number of crucial details. Burke sleeps next to his speaking notes, which place Cantemir’s text above the following commentary: “Note Begum—The Viziers Mother frequently procures one of the most beautiful Virgins whom she adorns with Pearls and precious stones and brings to the Vizier whom she calls her Lion and desires him to take her to his Arms, this he most religiously performs and she is afterwards consig[ned] to the Zenana with 200 others whom he never sees a second Time.”

Sayers’s additions to Cantemir are symptomatic for he attacks Islamic social mores, here figured by the bust of Mahomet, the lamp, and the image of the Koran and by emphasizing the sexual profligacy of the sultan. It is a tired trope, but one that is adorned in this instance by a rather scurrilous pronoun slippage which makes it unclear which woman calls the Sultan “Lion and desires him to take her to his Arms.” The sugges-
tion is that by procuring virgins for her son, the mother, in this case Bahu Begam, not only acts out of displaced incestuous desire for her son but also identifies with the two hundred discarded wives. Over and against Burke’s and Sheridan’s deployment of the maternal as an icon for the sympathetic bonds of society, Sayers constructs not only a bad mother but also a nonmaternal relationship between mother and son. In a single xenophobic gesture, Sayers constructs the domestic life of the sultan as one of multiple perversion, undercuts the purity of the Begams, and counters the managers’ protection of filial piety as a displaced form of incestuous desire. What is crucial to recognize is that both the “facts” introduced by Burke and the sexualized Orientalism of the discourse of the seraglio are equally damaging to the managers’ presentation of the Begams charge.

However, what remains equally unclear both in Sayers’s print and in the introduction of Cantemir’s text to the trial is Burke’s relation to the depicted scene. In the Sayers print, is Burke identifying with the sultan and hence with the sexual coercion of the conspicuously white virgin brought for his pleasure, or is the relationship that of a voyeur to a particular sexual transaction? And what are we to make of Burke’s flowing robes and his pasha-like slipper? The costume both orientalizes and feminizes the great orator and seems to draw him into the scene of the dream. In terms of the trial, the passage from Cantemir was introduced as evidence of veneration for the mother, and it would seem that Burke favored a reading of the seraglio scene that focuses exclusively on the power dynamics of the transaction rather than on the sexual nature of the exchange. The effectiveness of the Cantemir evidence, like Sheridan’s later attempts to depict the sanctity of sequestration, relies on an abstraction of the scene that de-sexualizes the mother and, by extension, the entire zenana. What Sayers’s print allows us to see, in its blunt ethnocentric gestures, is the degree to which the managers’ handling of the Begams charge relied on a discursive containment whose fragility owed as much to sexualized fantasies of the East as it did to equally volatile fantasies of widowhood.

This latter problematic becomes evident in the more direct representations of the Begams in prints and in the press. If the relationship between Burke and the sexual transaction of his dream is unclear in A Reverie of Prince Demetrius Cantemir, then subsequent images are much more precise in their ascription of desire. In subsequent prints such as Sayers’s The Princess’s Bow Alias the Bow Begum of 1 May 1788, the managers are portrayed as suitors or obeisant subjects of Bahu Begam (fig. 4.15). The undecidability of their relation to Bahu Begam is itself important because
it is precisely this combined desire for and subservience to women that marks the dissipation of the sultan’s—and the managers’—masculinity for the European audience. But the image does more than refigure the managers’ case as a symptom of Oriental profligacy that resonates with other allegations of Foxite excesses. The fact that Sayers retains the image of Burke with his eyes closed and basically reworks his image of the procuring sultana as a withered hag from the earlier print suggests that Burke’s respect or desire for the Bahu Begam is grounded on his inability to see her. With his spectacles off and his eyes closed, Burke is blind to her palpable undesirability. The suggestion that desiring Bahu Begam is itself somehow odious is underlined by the subtitle “Bow wow wow,” which puns on the Anglicization of her name, and more subtly by Fox’s half-bow which arguably represents a certain reluctance. In all subsequent visual representations of the Begams of Oudh, this combination of decrepitude and racial difference is deployed to insist on the cultural difference between Indian and British society. Burke’s inability to see here stands in for an inability to distinguish between a bawd and a reputable lady, between the violation of a space and the violation of a body, and ultimately between Indian and English subjects. And this failure to distin-

FIG. 4.15. James Sayers, The Princess’s Bow Alias the Bow Begum, 1 May 1788 (courtesy of the Department of Prints and Drawings, The British Museum, London; BM 7309)

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guish is presented as symptomatic of aberrant social and sexual relations. Throughout the satirical images of the Begams, intersexual relations between English men and widowed Indian women are signs of the managers’ departure from normative sexuality, but what remains unstated is the relationship between British men and young Indian women. It is crucial for his critique that Sayers’s emphasis on the age of the Begums remain at the forefront of their representation because it allows for the fetishization of young Indian women in the zenana to remain operative. And as we have seen the presence of the desirable, yet sacrificed woman is crucial to the critical ascription of Orientalized desire to Burke and the other managers.

These visual images of the widows’ undesirability are counterbalanced by no less sexualized textual representations that imply that the Begams have more in common with the demireps of London society than the sequestered nuns of Sheridan’s speech. The most remarkable of these is a faux newspaper report of a “Masquerade Extraordinaire” published in the Times during the recess just prior to Sheridan’s summation of the Begams charge. The masquerade joke is a fitting place to conclude our discussion of the theatricalization of the trial because it renders political theatre as mock social theatre and offers some perspective on the representational strategies of both the managers and their satirists. The “Masquerade Extraordinaire” extends through two issues of the paper, and its detailed accounts of the costumes of prominent personages are the occasion for sometimes mild, sometimes bristling satire on contemporary London society. The passage relevant to the Hastings trial sexualizes the relationship between the Begams and the primary male actants in the trial according to the tale of Daniel and Susanna from the Apocrypha:

Mr. Hastings and Sir Elijah Impey, as the two elders in the Apocrypha, charging one of the Princesses of Oude, who is habited like Susanna, with adultery. Mr. Burke, in the person of a Daniel, as the Lady’s council. The arguments and cross questions were inimitably well supported, and afforded fine entertainment. How the Princess of Oude got over to this kingdom in a manner unknown to the public, is a mystery yet to be unravelled. Certain it is, however, that she was at this Masquerade, and in such a habit as Susanna wore before she undressed herself to bathe. Daniel had spectacles on his nose and though the event represented a time long antecedent to the christian aera, yet he often crossed himself and seemed to look, with a friar-like leer, on the beauties of Susanna.78
Casting Hastings and Impey as the elders from the Daniel and Susanna story simultaneously captures their combined efforts to accuse the Begams of rebellion and the contradictory quality of their testimony. In the process, the allegory refigures Hastings’s and Impey’s avarice as lust and thus turns the breach of contract into an act of sexual violence. The masquerade enacts the managers’ tropological strategy almost to the letter, except that it eroticizes rather than desexualizes the Begam. And the moment of eroticization is telling; by casting the Begam as Susanna on the verge of undressing herself, the text presents her not only at the height of her desirability to the elders but also at the point of her most intense vulnerability. The text implies that Burke’s arguments, like those of Daniel, will succeed, but focuses the reader’s attention on the sensational moment prior to both her refusal of sexual relations and her subsequent vindication from the elders’ calumny. In short, she is simultaneously hypereroticized and endangered.

Significantly, the masquerade scene suggests that Burke’s gaze—once again figured by his spectacles—is not all that different from that of Hastings and Impey, for he too “leers . . . on the beauties of Susanna” through his spectacles. The image of Burke as a leering friar plays on both the conventional satirical representation of Burke as a Jesuit and Sheridan’s portrayal of the zenana as a sacred sanctuary akin to a monastery or a convent. The entire gesture intersects with the popular anti-Catholic satire of convents as sites of libertine excess and “unnatural” practices.

This ascription of “leering” desire is clarified by the subsequent invocation of Fox and Sheridan:

Mr. Fox and Mr. Sheridan, as Neptune and Boreas, planning a general shipwreck by a convulsion of the elements. These were two capital masks—Neptune’s trident and Boreas’s face displaying what their intentions were. Mrs. Armstead, in a mask of Venus, stood close to Neptune—and in truth she had much need of the mask, for when she shewed her real face at supper, she looked more like Neptune’s mother than a daughter of the sea.

The throwaway line on Fox’s lover—the celebrated demirep Mrs. Armstead—invoives a different kind of widow for the reader’s consideration. In the context of what we have seen thus far, an implicit comparison is being drawn between Fox’s relationship with Armstead and the fantasized relationship between Burke and Bahu Begam. In this light, the portrayal
of the Begam before being accused and vindicated of adultery is significant because it places her in a different place than Armstead. She is eroticized, not sexualized, and despite—or perhaps because of—her visual fetishization, she becomes a wife to be protected, not a widow to be propositioned. And the eroticization and dematernalization of the Begam turns on the contrast with the aging Armstead.

Oddly enough, this complex assemblage of attributes allows us to isolate the rhetorical problem faced by Sheridan in his oratorical attempt to render the violation of the treaty between the Begams of Oudh and the East India Company as a sexual violation. The Begams need to be figured as eroticized, yet innocent, subjects in order to activate them as possible victims of rape; but this figuration is blocked not only by the countervailing figuration of the Begams as desexualized mothers that is so crucial for the allegations regarding Hastings’s neglect of filial piety, but also by the hypersexualization attendant upon the long-standing equation between Eastern women and courtesans like Mrs. Armstead. This points to a fundamental inability even among the managers to imagine the Indian women of the zenana as wives. As we have seen, Sheridan attempts to manage the erotics of modesty in his description of the zenana, but the centrality of the crime against the family to both the speech and the overall charge intervenes and forces a retroactive rhetorical containment of the sexual fantasies of Orientalism that effectively cancels this erotics. In a sense, this failed containment only points the way for the satirists to move in and literally dismantle the Begams charge by hyperbolically rendering the managers’ desire for conviction as a displaced sexual fantasy. In this light, the rendering of Hastings’s and Impey’s avarice as lust in the “Masquerade Extraordinaire” has its counterpart in the satirists insinuation from the earliest phases of the Hastings affair that the managers’ lust for conviction was a displaced form of avarice. And, in the end, it is this complementarity, so vividly captured in the faux masquerade, that makes the performance of imperial self-scrutiny at the trial so instructive.

As P. J. Marshall and Sara Suleri argue, the trial’s attempt to see the crisis in imperial policy in a fashion that could generate an accommodation between national, commercial, and colonial governance was doomed from the outset by the fact that such historical processes cannot be visualized in such reductive terms. But of equal importance to this epistemological rupture at the heart of colonial relations is the proliferation of intertwined tropes aimed at suturing the social fabric of the metropole. The satirical prints that have been the focus of this chapter, with their crude diminishments of the oratorical feats of Burke, Fox, and Sheridan, indi-
cate that the question of imperial culpability, even in the most pro-
Hastings prints, is always already answered in the affirmative. It is hard to
imagine that anyone following Nathaniel Middleton’s incoherent testi-
mony or at all cognizant of the manipulation of East India Company stock
could believe that British activities in India were benign. There were too
many indicators in the metropole that the opposite was true. The real con-
test being played out in Westminster Hall was whether, in the face of such
culpability, it was possible for metropolitan society to continue to oper-
ate according to the rules that had structured social interaction since the
Glorious Revolution. At the heart of Burke’s attack and Hastings’s defense
was a complex argument about the performance of honorable masculin-
ity at home and abroad, about the deployment of femininity in the scene
of politics, and about the volatile sexualization of metropolitan and colo-
nial spaces. What the satirical prints indicate is that in spite of the ele-
vated oratory and august surroundings, the audience in Westminster Hall
was witness to a conflict that worked according to many of the same tropes
as the lowest forms of theatrical presentation and the tactics of everyday
scandal. And this conflict generated a concatenation of racial and sexual
figures that allowed the process of metropolitan self-consolidation to con-
tinue apace, but in a mode different than that defined by earlier forms of
governmentality. It is from this recognition—that the trial produced styles
of imperial subjectivity in spite of its failure to convict Hastings—that I
wish to turn to Frances Burney’s complex critique of the proceedings.