

‘Bringing great shame upon this city’: sodomy, the courts and the civic idiom in eighteenth-century Bristol

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ABSTRACT: During the 1730s, Bristol acquired an unenviable reputation as a city in which sodomy was endemic and rarely punished by the civil power. Although the cause lay partly in difficulties experienced in securing convictions, the resolve of magistrates was exposed to fierce scrutiny. Taking an effusive curate’s moral vindication of the city as a starting point, this article examines the social production of sodomy in eighteenth-century Bristol, analyses prosecution patterns and considers the importance of collective moral reputation in the forging of civic history.

The Saints Backsiding

In 1756, Emanuel Collins, curate, schoolmaster and doggerel poet, penned an extraordinary moral vindication of the city of Bristol, following the public disclosure of a pederasty scandal in the Baptist College and the flight of a number of suspects. In a rare flash of wit, he entitled it, *The Saints Backsiding*. Not for the first time, it appeared, Collins’ home city was being whispered about elsewhere as a place in which sodomitical transgression was both endemic and unpunished. ‘I am not unacquainted with the many foul reflections that have been cast on my Fellow-Citizens of BRISTOL concerning this most abominable vice’, Collins began, but ‘tis the fate of all cities to be the conflux of bad men.’ They go there ‘to hide themselves in the multitude and to seek security in the crowd’. It was no more the fault of the citizens of London that the capital attracted thieves, he protested, than it was the fault of those of the second city if it attracted sodomites. ‘Must the enormous vices of the provinces in our neighbourhood be charged to our burgesses?’¹

* I would like to thank Peter Rushton, Theo Van der Meer and Randolph Trumbach for their generous help with some aspects of the research for this essay.

¹ Emanuel Collins, *The Saints Backsiding: Or, The Remarkable Case of a Late Reverend, Holy, Anabaptistical Preacher Belonging to their Meeting in Bristol, who Had Been too Fond a Pastor of the Ram Lambs, to the Great Offence of the Young Neglected Ewes, to which Is Added an*

The idea of a prosperous and independent second city, raised upon the manly enterprise and genius of its own merchant elite, yet regarded with jealousy or indifference by hordes of plundering outsiders, was not a novel one at Bristol. In the boom years of the 1730s, Bristol had been nourished by two decades of peace, outgrown Norwich as Britain's second largest urban centre and come to dominate the tobacco, sugar and slaving trades.² Suggestions that its culture was materialistic and unrefined were countered by a self-confident Corporation, who fondly ordered the publication of sermons elevating merchants to the status of local and national heroes. Bristol was the modern Tyre, counselled the rector of St Stephens, 'the crowning city whose merchants are princes and whose traffickers are the honourable of the Earth'. Trade was the *cause* of cities, ran another, 'and cities are as well the nurseries of learning and schools of politeness as the centre of trade and the seat of magnificence'.³ Pride in their commercial inheritance led the Corporation logically to a parallel sense of satisfaction with the libertarian benefits of Whiggery. 'We, who have so much at stake (as a trading city) can never too warmly acknowledge what tends to secure us a free people',⁴ proclaimed the mayor in a speech on that theme in 1734, but civic liberty might require more robust securities if it was to survive the decade intact. Three times during the 1730s, Bristolians had been shaken from their collective reverie by the innovative and unwelcome arrival of gangs of extortionists, threatening (and attempting) wholesale arson against the property of the elite. These attacks spread later to adjacent counties and finally to London, but the significance of their first appearance at mercantile Bristol was not lost upon the local community, nor the intense frustration of their fruitless attempts to tackle it. Despite enlarging and reorganizing the watch and entreating every citizen to be vigilant for plotters, magistrates were able to briefly detain just one credible suspect but nobody was prosecuted.⁵ And while fruitlessly chasing shadows like these they simultaneously, by chance or design, launched a vigorous campaign of prosecution against

Historical Account of his Armours, Intrigues, Successes and Disappointments amongst his Male Sweethearts (Bristol, c. 1756). Little more is known of Collins. In the pejorative verdict of the chronicler George Pryce, however, he was 'one of the strangest fellows that ever wore a cassock . . . scribbling for inclination and publishing for gain'. See George Pryce, 'Emanuel Collins', *Notes and Queries*, 3rd ser. 8 (Sep. 1865), 214.

² In a little over two decades of continuous growth, the population within the city liberties had escalated from about 23,000 in 1712 to 30,000 in 1735; John Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1898), 194.

³ A.S. Catcott, *The Antiquity and Honourableness of the Practice of Merchandize: A Sermon Preached before the Worshipful Society of Merchants of the City of Bristol* (Bristol, 1744). See also the arguments presented in Andrew Hooke, *Bristolgia, or Memoirs of the City of Bristol* (Bristol, 1748).

⁴ *Samuel Farley's Bristol Newspaper*, 30 Mar. 1734.

⁵ *London Journal*, 14 Nov., 28 Nov., 5 Dec. 1730; *Read's Weekly Journal*, 17 Oct. 1730, 29 Jun. 1734, 5 Nov. 1737. Reporting the 1737 recurrence, the press contextualized it immediately against the initial outbreak of 1730, an indication of the indelible character of incendiarism on the city's collective memory.

men suspected of sodomy. Moreover, they did so as the first press reports arrived in English towns of the sweeping and vicious pogroms then being carried out against sodomite 'clubs' in the Dutch Republic, together with exaggerated rumours that hundreds of Dutch suspects were on their way, under cover, to claim sanctuary in English ports.⁶ In fact, a rhetorical association between the arsonist and the sodomite had been noted a few years earlier by Daniel Defoe. They were each non-clergyable offences, historically associated with Catholic otherness and intrigue, perpetrated (or so it was thought) by secretive and shadowy figures, and in practice inextricably linked to criminal extortion. At Bristol, the mental journey between imagined gangs of incendiarists and imagined sodomite coterie was negotiated without difficulty so that by 1734 sodomites too 'caused great uneasiness in that ancient and prosperous city' and had regrettably become 'the talk of the town'.⁷

In the years preceding Emanuel Collins' intervention, Bristol's imagined enemies had become legion, and, unlike arsonists and sodomites, prone to gathering openly in destructive crowds; weavers, colliers and 'country people' from the city's peripheries and across the county border. Weavers had been involved in major disturbances in 1729–30 and 1735, and colliers on a number of occasions following the introduction of turnpikes in 1727. More recent outbreaks had featured colliers and 'country people' (against turnpikes in 1749) or colliers and weavers (protesting bread prices and grain exports in 1753), a dispute during which the bridewell had been broken open and a number of colliers shot dead by armed citizens. Colliers in particular were prone to representation by the ruling Whigs as Tory hirelings and Jacobite conspirators. This was particularly pertinent during the 1730s when the determination of the local Whig oligarchy to steer a course independent of Walpole's government allowed the Corporation to take a leading role in provincial opposition to the Excise Bill, dividing the electorate to such an extent that Sir John Scrope, one of the city's two Whig members, unexpectedly lost his seat to the Tories. The colliers' occasional appearance during riots 'dressed in Women's Cloaths and high crown'd Hats', and their subsequent association with a convicted Bristol sodomite, Richard Baggs, who hired them as a protective guard at the pillory, only confirmed their alien status in the city. On that occasion indeed, the magistrates arrested and imprisoned nine of them for allegedly

⁶ For the Dutch pogroms, which caused a considerable moral panic in the Low Countries and an enormous number of executions, see L.J. Boon, 'Those damned sodomites: public images of sodomy in the eighteenth century Netherlands', and Theo van der Meer, 'The persecutions of sodomites in eighteenth century Amsterdam: changing perceptions of sodomy', in Kent Gerard and Gert Hekma (eds.), *The Pursuit of Sodomy: Male Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe* (New York, 1989).

⁷ Allegations of a popish plot to burn Bristol to the ground were revealed in 1679. For Defoe, see Ian McCormick (ed.), *Secret Sexualities: A Sourcebook of 17th and 18th Century Writing* (London, 1997), 49–50. For civic distress over sodomy see *Gloucester Journal*, 17 Feb. 1732; *London Journal*, 24 Sep. 1734.

'riotous' behaviour against the burgesses in front of the pillory and 'to let them see that they were not above the Authority of the Law'.⁸

We have become so accustomed in recent years to thinking historically about collective urban identities as manifestations of civic pride⁹ that it may come as something of a surprise to find contemporary voices like Collins' confronting the problems of collective civic shame. Yet local fears that outbreaks of moral degeneracy might reflect badly upon the reputation and future stability of the whole town were real enough, and by the 1750s, with economic growth tempered by stiffer competition from northern ports, Bristolians had grown wary of impending decline, and conscious of the debilitating effects of self-pride and 'luxuria'. These concerns had surfaced visibly some years earlier, first as a resurgence of local interest in Quaker prophesies of imminent eschatological disaster, and then in the attention devoted to Bristol's moral collapse by later dissenters. In the 1740s, John Wesley declared war upon the city's 'indolence, effeminacy and idleness' which 'effect trade in an high degree', and in Collins' day, printed exhortations to penitence and reflection in the wake of the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755 drew uncompromising parallels between the moral sins of urban modernity and the judicious destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.¹⁰ Moreover, the popular reputation of Bristolians for hostility to outsiders found an echo here in the 'arrogant, overfed and unconcerned' burgesses of the Biblical Sodom, condemned as much for false pride and inhospitality to strangers as for symptomatic acts of buggery.

The sodomite, in other words, was regarded as one effect of a wider malaise rooted in luxury, greed and indolence, a man identified as Theo Van der Meer has put it, with 'all disasters that were supposed to wreck the country, the decline of trade and the Bourse, and the decline of morals'.¹¹ Eighteenth-century urban centres were often careful to distance themselves from discoveries of degenerate sexual activity. 'To the honour of the county of Southampton it is to be remarked', observed a paper in that city after a conviction for sodomy, 'he is not a native thereof';¹² while in Bristol, Collins was at pains to identify the principal pederasts at the Baptist College as visitors from Wales and Wiltshire. 'I challenge the bitterest of our enemies to bring an instance to prove that ever a *Bristol*-man was

⁸ Serious incursions from the colliers occurred in 1727, 1731, 1735 and 1738. For their alleged political contexts see Robert W. Malcolmson, 'A set of ungovernable people: the Kingswood colliers in the eighteenth century', in J. Brewer and J. Styles (eds.), *An Ungovernable People: The English and their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1979), 93–5, 105–6. For the pillory episode see *Daily Journal*, 18 Sep. 1732.

⁹ On Bristol in particular, see Jonathan Barry, 'Bristol pride: civic identity in Bristol, c. 1640–1775', and Steve Poole, 'To be a Bristolian: civic identity and the social order, 1750–1850', in Madge Dresser and Philip Ollerenshaw (eds.), *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Tiverton, 1996).

¹⁰ For Wesley, see Peter Marcy, *Eighteenth Century Views of Bristol and Bristolians* (Bristol Branch of the Historical Association, Bristol, 1966), 20. For Quaker prophesies, see *A Collection of Sundry Messages and Warnings to the Inhabitants of the City of Bristol*, 2nd edn (Bristol, 1728).

¹¹ Van der Meer, 'The persecutions of sodomites', 283–4.

¹² *Hampshire Chronicle*, 25 Mar. 1776.

guilty of so black an offence', he continued; 'I would be understood not to mean one apprenticed here from neighbouring counties, or imported from islands with which we have a connection, but one of the Aborigines, whose ancestors had enjoyed the freedom of the place.'¹³ Sodomy, as the Bristol press would have it, was a 'vice of foreign growth imported from abroad', and Collins' determination to distinguish native genius from the perversions visited upon it by contact with the outside world reflected a local polity in which the consequences of ethnic and global dilution could be seen and heard in the course of a morning's walk along any of the port's teeming quays.¹⁴

'Devils in human shape'

Establishing the non-native origins of Bristol sodomites first required their disclosure of course. How easily might they be identified and exposed? Recent work on the emergence of homosexuality in eighteenth-century England has emphasized outward signs of sub-cultural activity; particularly in the representation of sodomites as highly visible and effeminate 'mollies' gathering together in 'molly houses' and identifying with exclusive homosexual desire.¹⁵ But substantial evidence of 'molly culture' as distinct from accusations of sodomy has yet to be unearthed outside London, and molly houses are hard to discern even in the capital after about 1730. The evidence available from provincial England, in which not a single molly house has been verified, suggests paradoxically that far from parading deviance overtly in feminine manners, speech or dress, the majority of men who attracted attention as suspected sodomites presented an unremarkable face to the world. Sodomites undermined masculine norms in a more figurative manner, by cloaking themselves in pretence, denying their true selves and failing to control or master transgressive sexual desire. In a crowded urban environment like Bristol, their potentially emasculating influence raised fears of collective contamination in the mercantile gene pool. Collins' concern, then, was not with effeminacy as display, but as an act of concealment; a fear further nourished by concurrent social anxieties about masquerade. Sodomites were 'devils in human shape', respectable on the outside but ruinous within. Collins imagined them everywhere, their amorality duplicitously masked, 'undaunted and upright they crowd our publick Walks, unaw'd

¹³ Collins, *Saints Backsiding*.

¹⁴ *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 15 Oct. 1768. The quotation is from an advertisement announcing a new edition of *Saints Backsiding*.

¹⁵ See in particular Randolph Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender Revolution*, vol. I: *Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London* (Chicago, 1998), 3–8, 14–15, or for a more essentialist engagement with 'gay' history, Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700–1830* (London, 1992). For an excellent overview of recent debates about the origins and nature of homosexual identity, see Cameron McFarlane, *The Sodomite in Fiction and Satire, 1660–1750* (New York, 1997), 7–20.

Table 1: *Recorded accusations against sodomites in south-west England, 1730–1800*

1730–1800	Acquitted, discharged or outcome unknown	Convicted (misdemeanour)	Convicted (capital felony)	Total indictments	Individuals reported but not apprehended
Bristol	36 (3 for bestiality)	16	6	58	9
Somerset	22 (7 for bestiality)	4		26	3
Gloucs	14 (5 for bestiality)	2 (both for bestiality)		16	
Wilts	15 (5 for bestiality)	7 (1 for bestiality)		22	2 (1 for bestiality)
Devon	11 (4 for bestiality)	17 (1 for bestiality)	2	28	1
Hants	22 (7 for bestiality)	9 (1 for bestiality)	1	31	

Source: Records of the borough courts at Bath, Salisbury, Portsmouth, Southampton, Gloucester, Exeter, Plymouth and Bristol; and from the county quarter session and assize courts in Gloucestershire, Bristol, Devon, Wiltshire, Somerset and Hampshire.

by Guilt, and unappal'd by the Fears of any Impeachment'.¹⁶ They were rarely what they seemed. One, 'an old lecher from Leicester', convicted at Bristol in 1737, had according to press accounts, 'infested this country upwards of five years lurking for his Prey under the different Characters and Disguises of a Solicitor, a Gentleman of an Estate, a Steward to a Nobleman, a Cook, a Tapster, and other Shapes'.¹⁷

Sodomy, it must be remembered, was severely punishable; a capital crime if the evidence was strong, but more easily prosecuted as a misdemeanour for attempted sexual assault, with exposure in the pillory a likely consequence of conviction. But patterns of prosecution were not uniform across the country, and anomalies are indeed suggested by the experience of England's south-western counties alone. The enormous discrepancies in the ratio between prosecution and conviction shown here (see Table 1) is unlikely to be the product of mere chance. Moreover, the relationship was stronger in counties with busy borough or city courts of session augmenting the county sessions and assize. Active borough courts like those at Bristol, Exeter or Plymouth, typically presided over by an aldermanic bench, were arguably an extremely suitable forum for the local reinforcement of moral prejudice and virtue, and were often amongst the busiest in hearing allegations of sodomy. Of course, borough sessions conviction rates were also dependent upon rules of jurisdiction – the only sizeable town with its own sessions in Somerset was Bath, but since it was debarred from trying felonies, and perhaps too because the City's economy was almost entirely dependent upon a tolerant attitude towards luxurious excess, the court was under-used and only one misdemeanour for sodomy was tried there by that name.

¹⁶ Collins, *Saints Backsiding*.

¹⁷ *Newcastle Courant*, 24 Sep. 1737.

It would also be wrong to assume that all towns were as keen as Bristol to reveal, convict and parade sodomites in the public sphere. Too much exposure, as Bristol's experience suggests, might prompt counter-productive reflections upon civic character, less for its stern attitude to retributive justice than for the moral vacuum that made it necessary. The very active borough sessions at Portsmouth, another port town with an extremely boisterous and rough sexual culture, heard no sodomy cases between 1730 and 1780, and only two went before the assize. Both were pilloried, but only one in Portsmouth, in 1749; indeed there was no further use of the pillory at Portsmouth for *any* offence, until 1802. By contrast, all but one of the six sodomites convicted and pilloried in Devon were tried before borough sessions at Exeter or Plymouth, and exhibited in the borough as well. By contrast with Portsmouth, then, but in common with the practice at Bristol, the exposure of Devonian sodomites to public shame can be understood as a local and urban matter designed to serve parochial ends. Even stronger disparities are revealed by comparing the south-west with the north-east, where the assize heard only two non-animal-related cases between 1718 and 1800, and the county sessions for Berwickshire, Northumberland, Durham and even the port city of Newcastle, heard none at all.¹⁸

Any city whose historical pre-eminence and sense of identity were centred upon the virtuous properties of trade might be expected to take a firm line against aspersions of moral laxity, but it is quite clear that the sheer volume of accusations and prosecutions for sodomy at Bristol are disproportionate. Interestingly, the purging of sodomites at Bristol began with the successful prosecution and conviction of a man called Richard Baggs for an attempted assault on a male servant in 1732. Baggs may not have been a native of Bristol, but neither was he a typical outsider. On the contrary, he was a wealthy woollen merchant in the city and a guardian at St Peter's Hospital for the poor; his appearance in the pillory left him roundly pelted despite his mercenary guard of colliers; and the whole event was subsequently immortalized and celebrated in verse. Baggs' case, which was compounded by the simultaneous disclosure that he had been embezzling hospital funds, became something of a benchmark, helping not only locally to model the sodomite as a specific danger to civic virtue, and feeding concern that sodomites might *appear* as virtuous citizens on the outside, but also confirming the diligence of the local bench in exposing and bringing them to justice.¹⁹ The city's consequent concern over the

¹⁸ The data referred to here and throughout this article was compiled from the surviving record of the borough courts at Bath, Salisbury, Portsmouth, Southampton, Gloucester, Exeter, Plymouth and Bristol, and from the county quarter session and assize courts in Gloucestershire, Bristol, Devon, Wiltshire, Somerset and Hampshire (Southampton). For the lone use of the Portsmouth pillory, see National Archives, Western Circuit Process Book, Southampton assize, winter 1748–49. For the north-eastern circuit record I am indebted to the generous help of Peter Rushton at the University of Sunderland.

¹⁹ *Gloucester Journal*, 4 Apr. 1732; *Reads Weekly Journal*, 9, 16 Sep. 1732.

next few decades with the uncovering and suppression of sodomites was extraordinary and unparalleled. 'The very Reason that our Town has been talk'd of', Collins thought, 'was because it always appear'd diligent and unwearied in discovering and prosecuting such Offenders, wheresoever they came from, that were found within our Jurisdiction', and the city press was in full agreement. 'If we take a survey of what had formerly passed', reflected *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* in 1753, 'we shall soon perceive how ardent, how zealous, the magistrates of this city were in bringing every Wretch of this stamp to condign punishment. They have condemned, – they have pillor'd, – they have punished in every shape, where the least evidence appeared to convict.'²⁰

Bristol's court of Oyer and Terminer was empowered to hear capital cases before the recorder and aldermanic bench, by which arrangement the magistrates were, in the words of one critic, 'the only judges of all disputes between citizen and citizen and of all crimes committed or pretended to have been committed within the city'. Notwithstanding the implication that such an incestuous jurisprudence was antithetical to civil liberties, the recorder, Sir John Scrope, had nothing but respect for 'the diligency of the magistrates and that he had often reflected with pleasure how they could keep so numerous a people in subjection'. One city clergyman considered it the magistrates' first duty to be 'vigilant and active in the suppression of faction and in the promotion of unity and concord', while for the MP Robert Nugent there were no magistrates in the kingdom with a 'more disinterested concern for the peace and prosperity of the city they have under their care'. Collins agreed. However disagreeable sodomy might be to the reputation of the city, however great the temptation to turn a blind eye or deal with it behind closed doors, the aldermanic bench had actively encouraged plaintiffs to bring cases and give evidence: 'the Evidences were neither Brow-beat nor otherwise influenc'd from fully giving in every Circumstance with which they could charge the Culprit: little did it avail, to whom related, or how situated in Life'.²¹ But the heavy emphasis placed in accounts like these upon the dutiful virtues of the city magistrates was not simply a reflection of civic contentment. On the contrary, they were indicative of a row that had been simmering since the 1730s about the actual record of the local courts in bringing sodomites to account.

As can be seen from Table 1, at least 58 allegations of non-animal related sodomy were made before magistrates at Bristol between 1730 and 1800, 61 per cent of them ending in conviction, a figure unequalled anywhere in the south-west except Devon. But the exceptionalism of Bristol's sodomite neurosis stands out more clearly if we now consider the decade of the 1730s

²⁰ *Felix Farleys Bristol Journal*, 17 Sep. 1752; Collins, *Saints Backsiding*.

²¹ *The Parliamentary History of England*, vol. XV, 1753–65 (London, 1813), Debate on the Bristol Nightly Watch Bill, cols. 477 and 493; Rev William Batt, *Union and Loyalty Recommended: A Sermon Preached at the Mayor's Chapel, 15th September 1754* (Bristol, 1754); *Daily Courant*, 11 Sep. 1733; Collins, *Saints Backsiding*.

Table 2: *Recorded accusations against sodomites in south-west England, 1730–39*

1730–39	Acquitted, discharged or outcome unknown	Convicted (misdemeanour)	Convicted (capital felony)	Total indictments	Individuals reported but not apprehended
Bristol	19 (1 for bestiality)	3	1	23	7
Somerset	1	1		2	
Gloucs	3 (1 for bestiality)			3	1 (bestiality)
Wilts		2		2	
Devon					1
Hants					

Source: Records of the borough courts at Bath, Salisbury, Portsmouth, Southampton, Gloucester, Exeter, Plymouth and Bristol; and from the county quarter session and assize courts in Gloucestershire, Bristol, Devon, Wiltshire, Somerset and Hampshire.

alone and contrast it once again with activity in neighbouring counties, as shown by Table 2. As the table shows, this was an extremely active decade at Bristol, accounting for 40 per cent of all prosecutions before 1800. Prosecution and accusation are one thing however; conviction turned out to be quite another. Here, only 4 men were convicted from a total of 23 prosecutions, giving a conviction rate of just 17 per cent. Between 1740 and 1756 when Collins' pamphlet was published, the pattern at Bristol changed – prosecution rates fell and charges were sometimes moderated to common assault (in which contentious and interpretable issues of *sexual* intention were no longer integral) to accommodate ambivalent evidence, but the outcome was 6 convictions from 11 prosecutions. Prosecutors were making less use of the courts in other words, but found greater success when they did.

Sodomites, the courts and the crowd

The performance of the borough courts at Bristol in the 1730s, and the interplay between the judiciary, public perception and the crowd, invites investigation. In the 1730s, when prosecution was more common but convictions rare, the apparent failure of the courts had been reflected in vigilantism. According to accounts published in the press, one suspect was almost 'torn to pieces before he could either be examined by a magistrate or committed to prison', another had his penis almost severed with a knife, and another found himself 'well mobb'd, confoundedly pelted, and beat thro' divers streets' where 'the butchers got him into their common Beast Penn, and dragg'd him thro' the filth, till the wretch was almost

suffocated'.²² Even when 'a devil of a blow among the sodomitical gang' caused 'a list of those Hell Cats, with their proper names and effeminate Titles' to fall into magistrates' hands, no suspects were prosecuted.²³ In keeping with popular notions about secretive coteries and gangs, accusations were sometimes made against associated groups of men rather than lone individuals and couples. Two multiple prosecutions, against a total of 13 defendants and which made use of the additional count of 'aiding, abetting and encouraging sodomy' were approved by the Grand Jury between 1733 and 1734, but no convictions were secured and no sworn affidavits have survived.²⁴

Difficulties experienced in mounting prosecutions and securing convictions at Bristol during these years were unlikely to inspire much praise for the alacrity of the magistrates or for the vaunted impartiality of the judicial system, whatever the retrospective claims of Emanuel Collins or Felix Farley. Impartiality was not always a popular cause in any case. When magistrates rejected the claim of Samuel Baber in 1737 that he had been sexually assaulted by a man, and instead convicted him for extortion on the evidence of his intended victim, it cut no ice with the city crowd. Instead of pelting Baber at his subsequent pillorying, they listened while he 'made an harangue to the People, desiring them to take warning by him, not to take a bribe to screen persons from justice, when a sodomitical attempt was offer'd'. Preferring to believe Baber's story, the crowd 'were so civil as to pelt themselves, and left him alone to be a spectator to their dirty sport'.²⁵ After another suspect, Adam Raffe, was acquitted at the same sessions following some inconclusive evidence and a string of young women who 'gave him a good character', popular frustration was temporarily assuaged by the first successful conviction of two consenting men, Thomas Hull and Robert Rawlings, for attempted buggery. Yet, although the court sentenced them to two stints in the pillory, they were so savagely beaten on their first exposure that magistrates intervened to take them down early and the second exposure was rescinded.²⁶

Matters came to a head in 1738 when the courts finally secured a capital conviction against David Reid, whose local unpopularity rested not only on allegations of sodomy, nor even upon his negative status as an outsider, but on his ethnicity as a Scot and his employment as a billeted soldier. Despite the reported readiness of the mayor to send Reid to the gallows,

²² *Read's Weekly Journal*, 22 Aug. 1730, 9 Sep. 1732; *Gloucester Journal*, 28 Dec. 1731, 18 Jul. 1732, 1 Feb. 1737.

²³ *Gloucester Journal*, 1 Mar. 1737.

²⁴ Bristol Record Office (BRO), Quarter Session Docket Book 1729–1733, JQS/D/7, entries dated Aug. 1732 and Mar. 1733; Docket Book 1733–1737, JQS/D/8, entries dated 4 Sep. 1733 and 9 Sep. 1734; *Gloucester Journal*, 13 Mar. 1733; *Read's Weekly Journal*, 3 and 17 Mar. 1733.

²⁵ BRO, Docket Book, JQS/D/8, 1733–1737, entry dated 16 Mar. 1737; *Read's Weekly Journal*, 29 Mar. 1737; *Gloucester Journal*, 12 Apr. 1737; *Sherborne Mercury*, 5 Apr. 1737.

²⁶ *Gloucester Journal*, 20 Sep. 1737; *Sherborne Mercury*, 5 Apr., 20 Sep. 1737; BRO, Quarter Session Docket Book, JQS/D/8, 1733–1737, entries dated 16 Mar., 7 Sep. 1737.

however, the local bench was over-ruled by interference from central government and Reid's execution respited on petition. The somewhat ambiguous later reputation of the aldermanic bench was forged in the controversy that followed. Reid himself, now languishing in gaol, became haunted not only by lynch mobs goaded on by the city press, but by a mayor who remained 'determined to hang me himself if I was the last man in England', so that despite clemency, he protested to ministers, 'I die hourly.' Public delight at the prospect of Reid's death is certainly reflected in much of the surviving literature. Possessed of an 'innate wickedness and malice... the people of Bristol Repine at the Royal Clemency', the prisoner wrote, while in the *Sherborne Mercury's* view, if Reid had not been reprieved, he would have been 'tucked up to the satisfaction of the whole city'.²⁷ But this slant on events is heavily dependent upon the trail of correspondence passing between Reid, his regiment, the authorities at Bristol and central government. It does not seem to have been disseminated on the streets of Bristol where, according to Collins at least, the finger of blame had come to rest on the mayor for apparently granting Reid his life, a rumour given strength by the disclosure that Reid would have hanged if the execution had not been postponed to accommodate the election of a new mayor. Reid's reprieve arrived the following day. The idea that the aldermanic bench had gone soft on sodomy at a time when the ruling oligarchy was still recovering from the loss of Scrope's parliamentary seat and the consequent revival in Tory fortunes was a further unwelcome challenge to the Corporation and the influence it appeared to exercise over local affairs, and its enemies well understood its vulnerability. The poet Richard Savage, for example, embittered at his gaoling for debt in the early 1740s and forced to share Newgate prison with the still incarcerated Reid, predicted disaster. 'Proceed great Bristol', he mocked, 'Still spare the catamite and swinge the whore / And be whatever Gomorrah was before.'²⁸

The fact that Reid's case, and the controversy surrounding it, was dredged up by Emanuel Collins 18 years afterwards says much about its impact on popular memory at Bristol. As Collins inferred, it was plausibly the single most damaging source of the city's sullied moral reputation amongst outsiders. Not only were prosecutions less forthcoming in the years following Reid's reprieve; press coverage declined too. It is possible of course that contrary to outward appearances, the rumour mill of accusations ground inexorably on. This possibility is given weight by an odd, yet unsupported remark in two newspapers that the arrest of a man

²⁷ The National Archives, SP 36/46, David Reid to the earl of Scarborough, 6 Sep. 1738; Brigadier General Roger Handersyde to the earl of Scarborough, 6 Sep. 1738; Abel Dagge (keeper of Newgate) to the earl of Scarborough, 16 Sep. 1738; David Reid to the duke of Montague, 20 Sep. 1738; and petition of David Reid (n.d.); *Sherborne Mercury*, 3 Oct. 1738.

²⁸ Richard Savage, *London and Bristol Compar'd – a Satire Written in Newgate, Bristol* (London, 1744). For the last minute nature of Reid's reprieve see *Sherborne Mercury*, 3 Oct. 1738.

in 1741 was 'the third . . . within these three months', and by an admission in another that 'the sound of SODOMY is so odious and offensive that we have occasionally omitted the little Thing sent us on that Topick'.²⁹

Importantly however, in the few years immediately prior to the publication of Collins' pamphlet, there had been a renewal of public interest in the prosecution of sodomy at Bristol. Most notably, there had been in 1753 the city's first public hanging for the crime, a sentence carried out before enormous crowds and on the very same day that another man was pilloried in the city for an unconnected sodomitical assault. As an answer to the charge of 'sparing the catamite', the spectacle of two consenting men going to their deaths on evidence only marginally stronger than that which sent the third to the pillory was also enough to draw confirmatory praise from the press for magistrates who had acted 'where the least evidence appeared to convict'. Indeed it was a day, in Collins' estimation, that no child in Bristol would or should ever forget. The efforts of both Felix Farley and Collins to historically situate the double hanging of 1753 as the natural culmination of an unceasing campaign to erase the 'stinking foul effluvia' of sodomy from the streets effectively drew a veil over the perceived failures of the past. 'Tis my ardent wish', wrote Collins in vindication of his excursion into print, 'that upon a strict and fair inquiry into the Dirty Deeds of these modern Offenders, the Honour of this Port may stand unsullied, and without Charge.'³⁰ In this wish he may not have been entirely gratified, for it was considered necessary to republish *The Saints Backsiding* in 1768 together with a renewed call to arms against a practice that 'can only be exterminated by the civil power and by the industrious detection of each offender'.³¹ Shortly afterwards, the disaffected poet Thomas Chatterton left the city for London, firing parting shots as he did so about cultures of 'hawking and peddling' compromised by 'Catamitish' activities.³² What Collins undeniably left behind him, however, was an unequivocal indication of the enormous importance of progressive moral narratives in the construction of civic stories, and of the primacy of appearances. Urban centres had not only to be properly governed, but to be *perceived* as properly governed; their moral reputations guarded as forcefully as the property of their burgesses. Rhetorically, Bristol was the nation's second city, its elite as anxious to protect the manliness of trade from luxurious and criminal contamination as from the growing threat of economic competition. But how were the open gates of a prosperous trading city to be protected from infection by the 'bad men' who resorted to it? In theory, the behaviour of those that

²⁹ *Sherborne Mercury*, 17 Mar. 1741; *Gloucester Journal*, 17 Mar. 1741; *Felix Farleys Bristol Journal*, 20 Sep. 1752.

³⁰ Collins, *Saints Backsiding*.

³¹ *Felix Farleys Bristol Journal*, 15 Oct. 1768.

³² Quoted in K.K. Ruthven, 'Forward', in Alistair Heys (ed.), *From Gothic to Romantic: Thomas Chatterton's Bristol* (Bristol, 2005), 7.

considered themselves natives might be moderated through discourses of civic inclusion and the heaping of blame for moral lapses at the feet of disinterested strangers, but the regulation and control of an artfully constructed 'other' involved a complex series of negotiations between the courts, public opinion and the crowd. Public concern about the influence of sodomites prompted a vituperative response from the aldermanic bench and the local press, but in drawing attention to a moral problem over which they finally had insufficient judicial control, Bristolians also risked accusations of 'protesting too much'.