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Theatre and Art: Gay and Hogarth  
(Art Imitating Life or Life Imitating Art?)

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*Restoration & Eighteenth-Century English Literature (ANGBA3- Literature Survey Course)*

# Theatre and Art: Gay and Hogarth

(Art Imitating Life or Life Imitating Art?)

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## SUMMARY:

This lesson is a look at the satirical take on corruption in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, both in terms of government (*The Beggar's Opera*) and metropolitan London (*A Harlot's Progress*).

Topics to be discussed:

- General idea on satire
- John Gay's *The Beggar's opera* (1728)
  - Popular reception
  - Critical reception
- William Hogarth's *A Harlot Progress* (1732)



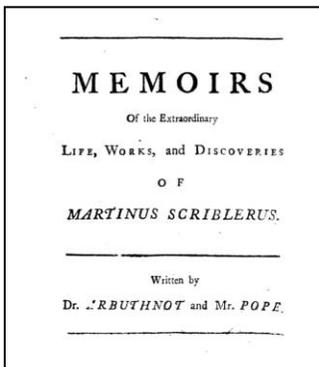
“comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire derides; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside the work itself” (ibid). It is important to note, that satire is predominantly an incidental element within all sorts of works (hence, our discussion of Hogarth’s satirical prints). However, “for some literary writing, verse or prose, the attempt to diminish a subject by ridicule is the primary organizing principle, and these works constitute the formal genre labelled ‘satires’” (ibid).

The subject of satire (whether constituting a formal genre or using a pre-existent genre for satirical purposes) bearing the brunt of the butt can be an individual, a type of person, a class, a society and its institutions, a whole nation, or even mankind itself.



Detail from the title page of Ben Jonson’s works (1616) — the centre figure of tragicomedy flanked on the left by the figure of satyr and on the right by that of the shepherd (representing the pastoral). [Click on the image for details.](#)

## 2 A NEWGATE PASTORAL



The idea of *The Beggar’s Opera* as “a Newgate pastoral among the whores and thieves there” was suggested by Jonathan Swift, who along with Alexander Pope, John Arbuthnot, **John Gay (1685-1732)**, Thomas Parnell and Henry St. John (1<sup>st</sup> Viscount of Bolingbroke) formed a loose, unofficial association called the **Scriblerus Club** with the primary intent to satirize the obdurate reliance of their age on false learning that generated a throng of pseudo-intellectuals and literary authors/critics. Their collaboration, through convivial gatherings and correspondence, created the fictitious character of a literary hack, Martinus Scriblerus, whose *Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus* were published under the name of Arbuthnot and

Pope, while the germinated ideas also contributed to passages in Swift *Gulliver’s Travels* and Pope’s *Dunciad*. (For more on the Scriblerus Club listen to a [BBC radio discussion](#) with Melvyn Bragg. [🔊](#))

 Samuel Johnson reports Pope’s account of the origin and popularity of Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* in his [Lives of the English Poets](#) (1771-81):

Dr. Swift has been observing once to Mr. Gay, what an odd pretty sort of a thing a Newgate Pastoral might make. Gay was inclined to try at such a thing for some time, but afterwards thought it would be better to write a comedy on the same plan. This was what gave rise to *The Beggar’s Opera*. [...] When it was done neither of us thought it would succeed. We shewed it to Congreve, who, after reading it over, said, “It would either take greatly, or be damned confoundedly.” We were all at the first night of it in great uncertainty [...] This piece was received with greater applause than was ever known. Besides being acted in London sixty-three days without interruption, and renewed the next season with equal applause, it spread into all the great towns of England; was played in many places to the thirtieth and fortieth time; at Bath and Bristol fifty, &c. It made its progress into Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, where it was performed twenty-four days successively [...] The ladies carried about with them the favourite songs of it in fans, and houses were furnished with it in screens. The fame of it was not confined to the author only. [...] Furthermore, it drove out of England (for that season) the Italian Opera, which had carried all before it for ten years.

The essence of *The Beggar's Opera*, as stated towards the end of the play by the Beggar/playwright himself is this:

Through the whole Piece you may observe such a Similitude of Manners in high and low Life, that it is difficult to determine whether (in the fashionable Vices) the fine Gentlemen imitate the Gentlemen of the Road, or the Gentlemen of the Road the fine Gentlemen — Had the Play remain'd, as I at first intended, it would have carried a most excellent Moral. 'Twould have shown that the lower sort of People have their Vices in a degree as well as the Rich: And that they are punish'd for them. (Gay 2018, 702).

A notion that has been expressed in the memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus too, who in his attempt to “find out the Seat of the Soul” confirms an observation

that Calves and Philosophers, Tygers and Statesmen, Foxes and Sharppers, Peacocks and Fops, Cock-Sparrows and Coquets, Monkeys and Players, Courtiers and Spaniels, Moles and Misers, exactly resembled one another in the conformation of the Pineal Gland. He did not doubt likewise to find the same resemblance in Highway-men and Conquerors: ... (Arbuthnot & Pope n.d., 77)



*A scene from The Beggar's Opera (Act III, scene 11) by William Blake commissioned by John Boydell from a painting by William Hogarth in the private possession of the Duke of Leeds (cf. Carlson 1975), published in 1790. In the centre (from left to right: Lucy, Lockit, Captain Macheat, Polly Peachum and Mr. Peachum). The satirical intention of the painting is manifest from **the satyr figure** on the right pointing at one of the aristocratic member of the audience, the Duke of Bolton, rumoured to having had an affair with Miss Fenton, the actress who played Polly (dressed in white). After the death of his last Duchess Miss Fenton became the Duke's wife & the reasons contemporary audiences were obsessed with accounts of her life. Also, Boydell published a key to the painting identifying its figures (Carlson 1975, 32-33).*

Despite the fact that all of the characters of *The Beggar's Opera* are representatives of the criminal underbelly of London, “**this opera is not a satire on low, but on high life** — not on highwaymen and pickpockets by profession, but on titled knaves and demireps, whom no law can reach and who ‘safe from the bar, the pulpit, and the throne / Are touched and sham’d by ridicule alone” (George 1849, 6). That it was recognized as such is attested by the criticism it sustained, and the fact that Robert Walpole, the leading Whig minister of the time, has suppressed the stage production of the sequel *Polly* written in 1729 (perhaps for good, as Johnson considered it a flop). However, the satire was painted in broad strokes, directed at corruption in general and not so much at individuals in particular, hence George’s astute observation that Gay’s opera “can never become obsolete, as long as the corruption that provoked it continues to flourish” (1849, 5).

*The Beggar's opera* is also a satirical take on the Italian style opera echoing the objections levelled against the latter mentioned in the previous lecture:

BEGGAR: This piece I own was originally writ for the celebrating the marriage of James Chanter and Moll Lay, two most excellent ballad-singers. I have introduced the similes that are in all your celebrated operas; the swallow, the moth, the bee, the ship, the flower, &c. besides, I have a prison-scene, which the ladies always reckon charmingly pathetic. As to the parts, I have observed such a nice impartiality to our two ladies that it is impossible for either of them to take offence. I hope I may be forgiven, that I have not made my opera throughout unnatural, like those is vogue; for I have no recitative; excepting this, as I have consented to have neither prologue nor epilogue, it must be allowed an opera in all its form. (Gay 2018, 659-660)

**Theater am Schiffbauerdamm**  
 Direktion: Ernst Josef Auffsicht

**Die Dreigroschenoper**  
 (The Beggar's Opera)

Ein Stück mit Musik in einem Vorspiel und 8 Bildern nach dem  
 Engländer des John Gay.  
 (Eingelegte Balladen von François Villon und Rudyard Kipling)

Übersetzung: Elisabeth Hauptmann  
 Bearbeitung: Brecht  
 Musik: Kurt Weill  
 Regie: Erich Engel  
 Bühnenbild: Caspar Neher  
 Musikalische Leitung: Theo Mackeben  
 Kapelle: Lewis Ruth Band.

**i** **🎵** *Playbill of the premiere performance of Bertolt Brecht's Die Dreigroschenoper (The Threepenny Opera) performed in 1928, the most popular adaptations of Gay's Beggar's Opera. The music was composed by Kurt Weill, influenced by jazz music of the time. The street singer's prologue "Mack the Knife" is probably the best-known songs of the play.*

**📖** & **📄** Note a reference to opera as an entertainment catering to wealthy patrons in the scene in which Mrs Peachum inquires after the post (i.e. pickpocketing location) of her favourite protégé Filch, to which he replies: “I plied to the opera, madam: and considering ‘twas neither dark nor rainy, so that there was no great hurry in getting chairs and coaches, made a tolerable hand on’t” (Gay 2018, 664).

The popularity of Gay’s comic opera is also due to its **choice of ballad tunes (orchestrated by John Christophe Pepusch)** which held a broad appeal among “Nobility, Gentry, and Commonality”, arguably creating a unique genre of the **ballad opera**. The source of 41 out of 69 airs in the ballad opera are from Thomas D’Urfey’s compilation of ballads and songs called *Wit and Mirth: or Pills to Purge Melancholy* published in several edition and eventually in 6 volumes (1698-1720). **Folk ballads** are songs transmitted orally, hence, popular among illiterate or partly literate people, and usually telling a story existing in many variant forms. Although many

**WIT and MIRTH:**  
 OR  
**PILLS**  
 TO PURGE  
**Melancholy;**  
 BEING  
 A Collection of the best Merry BALLADS  
 and SONGS, Old and New.  
 Fitted to all Humours, having each their proper  
 TUNE for either Voice, or Instrument:  
 Most of the SONGS being new Set.

**VOL. I.**

traditional folk ballads originate from late Middle Ages, their collection spurred by an interest in ancient music started in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The term “broadside ballad” refers to a ballad printed on one side of single sheet called the “broadside” and was usually narrating a current event sung to a popular and familiar tune. The tunes persisted and accumulated lyrics variations, some more popular than the other.

🎵 & 📖 Listen to Norman Wheatley’s recording of an interview with Ian Pittaway on the Myths & History of the 16th-century broadside ballad Greensleves. (for the February 2016 edition of the online folk and traditional music programme, GentleFolk2). With the tune in your ear, read the lyrics Gay wrote to it for his opera:

Air 67.

Since Laws were made for every degree,  
To curb vice in others, as well as me,  
I wonder we han’t better company,  
Upon Tyburn Tree!  
But gold from law can take out the sting;  
And if rich men like us were to swing,  
‘Twould thin the land, such numbers to string  
Upon Tyburn Tree!



Stone marking the site of the Tyburn tree — the location of capital punishment some three miles from Newgate — at the junction of Edgware Road, Bayswater Road and Oxford Street.

The ballades also contributed to the fictionalized and romanticized image of (gallant) highwaymen presented in the opera, for which there was a veritable demand in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Often written under a pseudonym, the accounts and histories of robbers, thieves, highwaymen, murders and pirates (of both sexes) captured the imagination of the contemporary populace the same way it does now. There were two contemporary criminal figures that ignited much of the fictional accounts of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century: **Jonathan Wilde, the Thief-Taker General**, who operated on both side of the law, running a gang of criminals and getting rid of his competition by snitching on them, and **Jack Sheppard** (allegedly apprenticed to Wild) who was renowned for escaping four times from prison making him a popular figure among disenfranchised classes who themselves were often criminalized. Both



THE  
HISTORY  
OF THE  
Lives and Actions  
OF  
*Jonathan Wild,*  
THIEF-TAKER.  
Joseph Blake *alias* Bluskin,  
FOOT-PAD.  
AND  
*John Sheppard, Housebreaker.*  
Giving a full and exact Account of *Jonathan Wild's* being Crown'd King of the Gypsies, the Wars and Means he made use of to reduce young People into Robberies, and afterwards hang them for their Liberties, And of the Actions that led to his Execution; with *Jonathan Wild's* Threat. As also a true Relation of the *Frank's Jack Sheppard's* play'd, and of his being Retaken.  
*Taken from several Papers found since Jonathan's Death, with Letters and Private Confessions to Friends, never yet Published.*  
L O N D O N :  
Printed for Edward Mearns, at the Looking-Glass, upon London-Bridge. 1745.

① The story of **Jonathan Wild** has generated quite a few published accounts, most of them anonymous but some of them by prominent authors of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, such as Henry Fielding and allegedly Daniel Defoe (although the provenance of Defoe’s many criminal histories — pirates, robbers, murderers — has lately come under scrutiny, cf. Bialuschewski 2004).

of them figure in Gay's opera as Macheath (Sheppard) and Peachum (Wild), the latter's name ("peach 'em") referencing his practice of impeaching (i.e. the legal term for accusing and bringing charges against someone). The figure of the highwayman was also employed in political pamphlets as a derogatory term describing one's political opponent, so the similarity between criminals and (fractions of) politicians had an established history long before and after Gay's opera.

 &  Read and compare the following: a) the representation of highway men in Gay's *The Beggar Opera* and b) Fielding's remarks upon Newgate as a possible metaphor (for what?). Check out also references to **robinocracy** in our historical overview. Consider why the 18th century is regarded by some as the Age of Satire!

JEMMY: ... Why are the laws leveled at us? Are we more dishonest than the rest of mankind? What we win, gentlemen, is our own by the law of arms and the right of conquest.

JACK: Where shall we find such another set of practical philosophers, who to a man are above the fear of death?

WAT: Sound men, and true!

ROBIN: Of tried courage, and indefatigable industry!

NED: Who is there here that would not die for his friend?

HARRY: Who is there here that would betray him for his interest?

MATT: Show me a gang of courtiers that can say as much.

BEN: We are for a just partition of the world, for every man hath the right to enjoy life.

(Act 2, scene 1)

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... I think we may be excused for suspecting, that the splendid Palaces of the Great are often no other than Newgate with the Mask on. Nor do I know any thing which can raise an honest Man's Indignation higher than that the same Morals should be in one Place attended with all imaginable Misery and Infamy, and in the other, with the highest Luxury and Honour. Let any impartial Man in his Senses be asked, for which of these two Places a Composition of Cruelty, Lust, Avarice, Rapine, Insolence, Hypocrisy, Fraud and Treachery, was best fitted, surely his Answer must be certain and immediate; and yet I am afraid all these Ingredients glossed over with Wealth and a Title, have been treated with the highest Respect and Veneration in the one, while one or two of them been condemned to the Gallows in the other.

(Henry Fielding *Miscellanies* vol. 1, 1743, [xx-xxi](#))

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 Suggested reading: "Why Hamilton reminds us of the roots of British musical theatre in political activism" *The Conversation* [December 4, 2017](#).

The popularity of the play was unprecedented at the time when a usual run for a successful play was a week or two. It run more than sixty times without interruption, with amateur troupe performing it even before the next season's rerun. As the saying went, "it made Rich gay and Gay rich" in reference to John Rich, the manager of the Theatre at Lincoln's Inn Field (who took up the performance once it was declined by Cibber at the Theatre Royal at Drury Lane) and John Gay the author (who was in serious need of money, having lost all his fortune in the South Sea Bubble a couple of years prior). But it also made a celebrity out of actress Miss Fenton, however, not merely for her

role as Polly Peachum, but for the scandals related to her life (hinted at in the Hogarth/Blake painting). One could claim that she became a subject of a RPF (**real person fiction**) as there indeed was a fictionalized accounts of her life ([The Life of Lavinia Beswick, alias Fenton, alias Polly Peachum](#), 1728).

### 3 CORRECTIVE OR INCENTIVE TO VICE? THE CRITIQUE OF THE BEGGAR'S OPERA



**i** A burlesque print on *The Beggar's Opera* printed for John Bowles and formerly attributed to William Hogarth, 1728 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession no. 32.35(74)) is a satirical response to Gay's own satirical take on the Italian style opera. On the stage on the left side the characters of *The Beggar's opera* are represented with animal heads (a barb at their singing?) as Harmony seems to fly off the scene towards a more traditional opera staged on the right. In the centre background there is a gallows for executing criminals, and just behind the Beggar's stage on the left a man is discharging excrement under a wall hung with ballad sheets (their "worth" being shown by their use as toilet paper). To see the details and the inscription [CLICK](#) on the image.

Satire has been often justified as a corrective of human vice and folly, however, in case of Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, many contemporaries saw it rather as an incentive to vice, especially given its ending (as nobody gets punished for their vices). The ambivalent reception and exaggerated conclusions are aptly summarized by Samuel Johnson in his *Lives of the English Poets* (1779-1781):

[Of *The Beggar's Opera*], when it was printed, the reception was different according to the different opinion of its readers. Swift commended it for the excellence of its morality, as a piece "that placed all kinds of vice in the strongest and most odious light;" but others, and among them Dr. Herring, afterwards archbishop of Canterbury, censured it as giving encouragement not only to vice but to crimes, by making a highwayman the hero, and dismissing him at last unpunished. It has been said, that after the exhibition of *The Beggar's Opera* the gangs of robbers were evidently multiplied.

Both these decisions are surely exaggerated. The play, like many others, was plainly written to divert, without any moral purpose, and is therefore not likely to do good; nor can it be conceived, without more speculation than life requires or admits, to be productive of much evil. Highwaymen and housebreakers seldom frequent the play-house or mingle in any elegant diversion; nor is it possible for any one to imagine that he may rob with safety because he sees Macheath relieved upon the stage. (Excerpt from the [section on John Gay](#))

There were **calls for an alternative ending** (a modified version of the one suggested in the play itself) that would uphold the morale of the play: Macheath would not simply escape capital punishment but be sentenced to "a three years labour as a ballast heaver" — the call and the implementation of such a plot change was indeed recorded in the *Lady's Magazine* ([1777, 8:541](#)) —

the subtitle of the magazine being: *Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex, Appropriate solely to their Use and Amusement*. This is worth noting as besides the general concerns regarding the opera's influence, there was a particular concern of its (and other plays') effect on the "fair sex." The belief in the general susceptibility of women and, therefore, them falling victim to the heightened emotions presented in plays and romances was often voiced and echoed. The hint of such gendered reading is present even in *The Beggar's Opera* itself. Note when in Act 1, scene 10 Mrs. Peachum cites the "coursed playbooks" Polly has been reading as the sources of her ruin (i.e. her obdurate love for Macheath). A claim sustained by Polly's naïve (and unwarranted) surety of Macheath's faithfulness, when she later says to him: "Nay, my dear, I have no reason to doubt you, for I find in the romance you lent me, none of the great heroes were ever false in love" (Act 1, scene 13). Which brings us to Hogarth and his most popular print series, *A Harlot's Progress*.

## 4 A HARLOT'S PROGRESS

William Hogarth's (1697-1764) first mature and successful work as painter-engraver, establishing his reputation not just in England but in Europe as well, was that of *A Harlot's Progress* (1732). Originally a series of six paintings (now destroyed), *A Harlot's Progress* is a series of **engravings** telling the story of young Molly Hackabout, a country girl arriving to London in hopes of better living (progress) but, instead, becoming a prostitute. The series and the narrative they tell was developed from Hogarth's painting of a prostitute in her bedroom (the 3<sup>rd</sup> plate in the series), establishing a direct link to Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*.

Thierry Smolderen in his monograph on *The Origins of the Comics* (2014) regards Hogarth's work "as a genuine novel in pictures" which offers its readers

a slow read, one that invites the eye to lose itself in the details and to return to them in order to generate comparisons, inferences, and endless paraphrases. Hogarth's series demand genuine interpretative effort, even detective work, on the part of a reader. They are intended to be read... (2011, 8)

📖 & 🖼️ You are encouraged to feast your eyes on [all six plates of Hogarth's A Harlot Progress](#) (1732) available with rudimentary description on its Wikipedia webpage. Note the three details from the 3<sup>rd</sup> plate shown here in relation to *The Beggar's Opera*.



From left to right: a print of Captain Macheath; Molly herself practicing pickpocketing; and picture of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, in reference to plate 2 (cf. also with Mrs. Slammekin's claim in *The Beggar's Opera*: "I, madam, was once kept by a Jew; and bating their religion, to women they are a good sort of people" (Act 2, scene 4)).

Hogarth created four more satirical “novels in prints”:

- [A Rake’s Progress](#) (1735)
- [Marriage-a-la-Mode](#) (1744)
- *Industry and Idleness* (1747) — see our lesson on the Historical Background
- [Four Stages of Cruelty](#) (1750)

 On the [process of engraving](#) and printing from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Hogarth’s “readable images situated themselves between *news* and the *novel* — that is, between journalism and the new literary form that had begun in England and revolutionized novelistic writing in Europe” (Smolderen 2014, 3). An important location for the brewing of these new developments was the coffeehouse where Hogarth’s prints were displayed generating debates and conversations.

 Test your knowledge with the following quiz: [07\\_R18CEL](#)

## 5 REFERENCE LIST:

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