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The Beggar's Opera as Social and Political Satire: Origin, Development and Popularity

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ABSTRACT

This research paper revolves around the origin, development and popularity of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* when taken as a significant social and political satire. Historical representations are required to set up the shaping factors and origin of this play. Besides, the paper sheds light on the influences that have prompted him to attempt this kind of dramatic art. Furthermore, it can be assumed that that play is the production of Gay's satirical attitudes towards the social and political systems prevailing in his time that are facilitative to this artistic production. The researcher will make certain touches upon Gay's innovative mind to create a genre unprecedented in his time—the ballad opera tradition—that has gained immense popularity in the literary media and influenced many major dramatists such as Thomas Beckett and others to follow his example.

المستخلص

يتناول البحث أصل وتطور وحظوة وشعبية (أوبرا الشحاذ) للكاتب المسرحي جون كي باعتبارها تمثل نقدا إجتماعيا وسياسيا ذو أهمية بالغة. لذا يتطلب وضع المعطيات التاريخية وصياغة العوامل المكونة والتقصي عن أصل هذا العمل الدرامي إضافة إلى المؤثرات التي حفزت الكاتب المسرحي لتناول مثل هذا النوع من العمل المسرحي. وإلى جانب ذلك وعلى سبيل الافتراض يمكن القول بان هذه المسرحية هي نتاج لمواقف جون كي التهكمية الساخرة من الانظمة الاجتماعية والسياسية السائدة في عصره التي سهلت إنتاج هذا العمل الادبي. وسيضيف الباحث لمسات محددة للقابلية الفكرية المبدعة في خلق نوع من الانواع الادبية لم يسبق له مثيل في عصره والذي حظي بشهرة واسعة في الاوساط الادبية وترك آثاره على الكتاب المسرحيين الكبار نحو توماس بكت وآخرون من الذين أتبعوا ذات النهج ألا وهو أسلوب الغناء الشعبي للأوبرا.

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INTRODUCTION

Opera can be defined as a dramatic work of art which comprises one or more acts and which is set to music for singers and instrumentalists. To use the definition of Merriam Webster dictionary, opera is defined as a sort of “performance which actors sing all or most of the words of a play with music performed by an orchestra.” As to the performances of opera in England, it is indicated that it was confined in the first place to short periods of time on certain occasions. Its history in England indicates that it was performed as an afterpiece—a little delightful performance presented after a play in the sixteenth century, which was regarded something unprecedented at that time, being a performance of reciting certain dialogues with music of popular melodies. Hence, in England eighteenth-century ballad opera is rooted in this kind of dramatic afterpieces set for entertainment.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* is a ballad opera that consists of three acts written in 1728 and sung to tunes of popular music. It is regarded as one of the turning-point dramas written in the prevailing form of poetry that is the heroic couplet. It has been generally accepted that it is one of the most successful and developing drama genre mainly related to a satirical approach

still remaining popular at the present time. Ballad operas are then satirical musical plays that make use of the operatic elements such as lyrics, operatic arias, folk tunes and hymns sung in churches.

Gay's innovation and satirical intention against the social and political system along with the Italian opera can be traced to the “historical and socio-political development of English drama” (Schlemm, 1985: p. 21). Thus, the study of the social and historical context, together with the personal intention of the dramatist helps to discern the shaping factors of Gay's operatic art which finds its origin in the Italian opera and which he develops into a new genre due to the English tendency to have unique arts and the dramatist's wish to acquire peculiarity and universality insofar he has invented the ballad opera tradition: “It seems likely that it was Gay's intention to create something that would be an aesthetic experience, an 'objet d'art, something that would be peculiarly his, and that would at the same time gently jolt the passive and selfish members of society into an awareness of the realities of their society” (Verna Tandan, 1971: p. 2).

Gay's satirical approach is unique in that he relies on depicting the evils of the lowlifes in an attempt to satirize the evils of the aristocrats, and he manages to make

his opera very influential and popular as well when the readers and spectators feel the great gap between the two evil categories—the poor and the rich—which prevail in his time and permeate many aspects of the English societies—social and political. Thus, his tendency to be special in the operatic art, unfold facts about the Londoners' underworld and envision the social and political ills has culminated in the production of his ballad opera that is *The Beggar's Opera*, his masterpiece, which meets the demands and taste of audiences at all times:

Along the historical development of the English drama, we can observe an ever growing tendency towards the national, an attempt at minimizing foreign influences. This is, in fact, a natural tendency of all arts and literatures - to become national in character as they mature.

(Schlemm, 1985: p. 21)

It is worth mentioning that *The Beggar's Opera* was first premiered in Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre in 1728 and continued to be run for 146 performances to be the second longest run in the history of the theatre in its time:

Of the scores of classical and modern tragedies, comedies, pastorals, burlesques, and adaptations of foreign plays written for the London stage in the first half of the eighteenth century only one, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, has remained a standard repertory piece in the twentieth century.

(Andrew Sanders, 1999: p. 299)

The Beggar's Opera has become a fashionable performance in the late nineteenth century at the main London theatre that is the Queen Royal House Opera presenting its shows for the sake of entertainment. Major London theatres witnessed in the late nineteenth century short seasons for opera that lasted as a popular vogue of entertainment.

It can be assumed that the ballad opera is an eighteenth-century innovation which developed in the subsequent two centuries and later as well. Its musical tunes based on popular song style and popular dialogues are characteristic features that distinguish it from any other kind of opera. Therefore, the ballad opera can be regarded as a new trend in the course of the development of the genre as a whole. Peter Gammond declares that this kind of opera is “an important step in the

emancipation of both the musical stage and the popular song” (Gammond, 1991: pp. 35-36). Besides, the ballad opera comprises a daily English dialogue in which songs are inserted and made very short on purpose so as to avoid breaking in the normal continuation of the story. Lower class characters—often criminals—that reflect the opposite of the righteous merits of the contemporary Italian opera. *The Beggar’s Opera* was a great success in its time: “It is generally accepted that the first ballad opera, and the one that was to prove the most successful, was [The Beggar's Opera](#) of 1728” (J. Milling et. al., 2004: p. 131).

What prompts this study is the notion that *The Beggar’s Opera* has become not only a landmark in the English dramatic arts, but also the source of influence and inspiration for significant operatic works. This opera reflects a duality in that it is an opera and a ballad simultaneously, which appears to be something new that gratifies the taste of theatergoers and their demands for new theatrical arts, not to mention its satiric intentions on the part of the dramatist. Martha Dias Schlemm (1985) points out that that kind of the

incongruous duality inherent in the title of the play provides us with the device through which we can build up the theoretical

basis to support the discussions related to the creation of the new genre, and the questions involving both the establishing and the following up of the new dramatic tradition”

(Schlemm, 1985: p. 2)

The twentieth century witnessed the regression of opera performances that were made during limited parts of the year. The Royal Opera House, for instance, presented at the time some operas and it confined its activities to presenting plays, pantomimes and other shows related to ice sports during the rest of the year. Opera witnessed its revival during the World War II when the dance halls presented English talented singers such as Eva Turner, but the “turn of the century saw a revival of interest (mostly by small, specialist societies) in 17th- and 18th-century opera, some of which had not been performed for over 200 years” (Schlemm, p. 2). Until then opera has acquired its publicity throughout the activities of the Moody-Manners Company or the Carl Rosa Opera. Opera has acquired more publicity at the hand of Sir Thomas Beecham who established the British National Opera Company. Thus, he came to know and communicate with the very well-known and accomplished musician called Austen

who made him to declare that it was his “first encounter with a wholly modern and up-to-date type of musical mind, adventurous, impressionable, and yet coolly analytical and tolerant” (Schlemm, p. 2). Thanks to Beecham and Austen, *The Beggar’s Opera* has been revived and allowed to take its due position among literary media as a well-made work of art, a play, for they have exerted much effort in this regard:

Most of the operas in the Beecham Company's repertory were performed in English and Beecham took a lot of trouble over the translations. He went over each phrase with his leading singers to see which words they could most easily sing on each note. Austin was particularly skilled at matching verbal sound to musical sound. After the Beecham Company folded, Austin went to see Nigel Playfair and over tea they devised the idea of a revival of *The Beggar's Opera*. Austin rearranged the music for what went on to become one of the most popular productions of the 1920.

(Schlemm, p. 2)

The Popularity of *The Beggar’s Opera*

The declining of the popularity of the art of the opera may said to have been started in 1741 when Georg Frideric Handle abandoned writing this kind of art, who was considered the most productive well-known artist of the eighteenth century who used to compose music and who felt at the time the changing taste of the theatergoers that once liked this art. The opera’s waning publicity might be attributed to the notion that the Italian prominent singers were given high wages at the time that they were rude in the use of language, artificial, as it were, which exposed unrealistic stories. This was, of course, a frustrating situation which as a matter of reaction was conducive to the appearance of a new genre instead that was called the ballad opera. Hence, the first enactment of Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* very much appealed to the praise and special interest of the English publicity:

The first run of the performance lasted 62 nights! Today, this sounds like a lot, but in the 18th century, it was an unprecedented touchstone. Later, the opera was performed internationally in Dublin, Glasgow, Jamaica and New York. In 1750, *The*

Beggar's Opera was one of the earliest musical comedies produced in America; appropriately, it was produced in New York, which today is the mecca of musical comedy.

(<http://umich.edu/~ece/student...>)

Furthermore, the characters of this drama are chosen from the underworld of London which gives it a tinge of curiosity on the part of the audience and a social and political satire on the part of the political system that was represented by Horace Walpole at the time, who then banned the production of its sequel *Polly*. *The Beggar's Opera*, besides its being an innovation to point to a new tradition that links the opera genre with the ballad form producing what is called as the ballad opera, parodies the Italian opera which was lavishly staged and which rarely told a story and just concentrated on human emotions and sentimentality within the framework of an allegory based on mythology—a form that greatly distances this kind of opera from reality, and at the same time it created little interest in it. On the other hand Gay closely approaches one aspect of the real life of the lowlifes living in London with their likes and dislikes and the kind of life they are leading which is presented within the framework of songs

telling of a popular story. Thus, the use of a popular story related to the criminals of London that might be known by the majority of spectators is the reason why Gay's ballad opera has created a sudden success: "There is nothing in this record to prepare for the astonishing success of *The Beggar's Opera*..., a ballad opera poking fun at Italian opera and inverting the heroic values of polite society by translating hypocrisy into the underworld of London's criminals" (Ian Ousby, 1996: p. 156). Furthermore, this opera comprises sixty-nine tunes that have been chosen by the dramatist from those once familiar to the audiences, especially those found in old ballads such as "The Children in the Wood," "Chevy Chase" and others. The tunes are selected in such a way that they strengthen the sentiments the dramatist wants to create, which in turn soften the satiric mode of the opera and they can fill the gap between what should be moral and the social conventions as reflected in the opera: "We must bear in mind simultaneously that the music works to bridge that distance. Even Peachum, Walpole, and Wild are redeemed by this circle of song" (Yvonne Noble, 1975: p. 12).

The new start of the opera with its new apparel, the ballad opera, has been endowed with more popularity inasmuch

as it is a new form of theatre delight for all the English classes—the lower, the middle and the upper. Contrary to the Italian opera and the opera that stimulated the upper class and nobility, the new form of the opera is characterized by the kind of realism and social and political criticism that have very much attracted the mind of the Londoners, for they “left the theater talking about it and singing the familiar tunes... . Evidence of its popularity in the 18th century, *The Beggar's Opera* was performed every year of the 18th century after 1728,” and it thusly gave the opportunity for the native music very well known and enjoyed by the public to acquire more popularity (<http://umich.edu/~ece/student/>).

It can be assumed that there is a link between the popularity of *The Beggar's Opera* and the dramatist's intention in that he aims to satirize the Italian trend in the field of operatic arts and the corrupted political regime of the Prime Minister Sir William Walpole. The trend of the Italian opera has been mocked by Gay for its extremely virtuosic aspirations and artificiality, and its concentration on dialogues rather than recitatives. Besides, the Italian opera tradition considers, in the first place, the characters of kings, heroes and great leaders. But Gay's opera presents the characters of thieves, bawds

and other evil characters usually found in the domain of the underworld. Another factor that has inspired the realism of *The Beggar's Opera* is the fact that its female characters, Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit, especially in their quarrelling scene, are based on the two divas, Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni—very well known two enemies—that once quarreled on stage, scratching and pulling one another's hair because of their rivalry. Hence, the latter factor has much more contributed to *The Beggar's Opera's* popularity:

The year before John Gay's opera premiered, the two leading prima donnas in London, Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni, were well known to be enemies. In 1727, their rivalry escalated to a fight on stage; the two divas scratched and pulled out each other's hair! The rivalry between these ladies inspired Gay's leading female characters, Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit, and their quarreling scenes.

(<http://umich.edu/~ece/student...>)

It may be suggested that the political satire in *The Beggar's Opera* is a major task as set by Gay who has addressed many and various subject matters such as the satiric connotations in relation to the heroic ideals of the West, its position as a predominant yet successful English opera that has preceded the musical works popular in Germany in the latter part of the eighteenth century that was characterized by the kind of dialogue interweaved by songs as intervals, not to mention "its theatrical nature, and even its possible interpretation as a metaphor of the —Christian myth," (Ian Gallacher, 2006: p. 2), in addition to mocking the Italian vogue of the opera enacted in London. Nevertheless, little attention has been given to the entire background of the play which envisions the satirical, misanthropic and peevish implications related to the love stories and betrayals witnessed in the felonious world of crimes and criminals in London.

At the beginning of the play, it is indicated that *The Beggar's Opera* is about the lowlifes of the underworld that are living in London:

TROUGH all the Employments of Life
 Each Neighbour abuses his Brother;
 Whore and Rogue they call Husband and
 Wife:
 All Professions be-rogue one another:

The Priest calls the Lawyer a Cheat,
 The Lawyer be-knaves the Divine:
 And the Statesman, because he's so great,
 Thinks his Trade as honest as mine.

(Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*, 1992 : p. 7)

As indicated hereinabove, the play is a bitter satire against cheaters, be whatever they may. Harassments and bogies can be expected from neighbors, brothers and even spouses. Professionals abuse one another at the time they show double behavior. Lawyers, for instance, are made to behave for the sake of and against rogues simultaneously. They are all living by cheating one another. Mr. Peachum is quite cynical when he says that the statesman, the politician, is as honest as he is. It is generally accepted that it is a direct satire, be cynical as it may, against the Prime Minister William Walpole: "Gay's ballad opera also satirized Walpole and his government" (t/articles/t/opera-in-england/index.html).

Macheath and Peachum that are the major characters in the play are representatives of two famous criminals that were executed in 1725. The political satire is indicated by the fact that Peachum satirizes Walpole: "And the Statesman, because he's so great, / Thinks his Trade as honest as mine" (Gay, 1992: p. 10). It seems that Peachum, a thief, a womanizer

and a double-dealer, attacks Walpole “who was known as a corrupt leader as well as an adulterer” (t/articles/t/opera-in-england/index.html). For this reason, Walpole tried many times to ban free press, employing all sorts of evil wrongdoings such as spying, bribery, imprisonment and bribing journalists. As a matter of fact, the very well-known newspaper *The Craftsman* presented many reviews complimenting *The Beggar's Opera* and commenting on its success after having been premiered. As a result, this ballad opera's sequel, *Polly*, was banned in 1729. After its publication, numerous copies of *The Beggar's Opera* were sold on behalf of its author. A very good element that should contribute to the popularity of the ballad opera is the fact that it has become the cause for the appearance of many ballad operatic works following its example:

From the analysis of certain seminal elements, such as social satire and parody of previous theatrical forms, among others, it has been possible to establish that *The Beggar's Opera* has given rise to a series of beggar operas, such as Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *Frank V*, and Chico Buarque de Hollanda's *Opera do Malandro*.

(Schlemm, p. vii)

To add to this point of view, it should be noted that Gay's new operatic art has greatly influenced the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht who finds in it so significant elements in that it becomes conducive to the appearance of his *Three Penny Opera* which is regarded as a “new source from which stem the anti-Brechtian *Frank V*, and the Brechtian *Opera do Malandro*” (Schlemm, vii). Besides, it has been pointed out by Noble that Jonathan Wild, a professional criminal lawyer, may be incarnated by the character of Peachum, for the early audiences of the play already knew who Wild was, and they were reminded through Peachum's speech of his famous sentence in which he compared himself to a lawyer: “This would have been plain to early audiences immediately in Act I from Peachum's appearance, ledgers, and words, which include Wild's familiar comparison, ‘A Lawyer is an honest employment, so is mine’” (Noble, 1975: p. 6).

The Beggar's Opera exhibits a new dramatic tradition. It does not only acquire popularity in its own time, but it also has its impact on other writers who have adopted the same genre to which it has contributed too much due to its success in

1728. It has been declared that the closer to it in success and popularity is the Irish ballad opera *The Devil to Pay* written by the Irishman Charles Coffey: “The success of the ballad opera not only inspired other writers, it also contributed to enlarging the audience for theater to include more of the social classes. This created a greater need for theaters and contributed to the increasing use of the theater (Noble, 1975: p. 6). Thus, it is significant to notice that the year 1728 marked the appearance of a noticeable yet conspicuous play that achieved tremendous success in its time. Noble declares that *The Three Penny Opera* has been a most original and most remarkable play in the history of the English theatre, and that it figures out in history in an unmatched and unprecedented way, for it is centered on an event explaining political satire against Walpole. The play “attained a popularity in its first seasons so widespread and so sustained that even careful Pope could call it “unprecedented, and almost incredible” (Noble, 1975: p. 1).

It is worth noting that the influence of the ballad opera has extended into the twentieth century, for this genre has also its influence on the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht who has written *The Three Penny Opera* which is an adaptation of *The Beggar’s Opera*: “Gay’s opera’s lasting influence is confirmed by the fact

that it remains the most famous ballad opera in existence today, and some believe it is the only notable one as well” (Noble, 1975: p. 1). In a word, the ballad opera innovated by Gay has initiated a new tradition in the field of drama that is the ballad-opera tradition, being the inception of many and various operatic works following its tradition:

The ballad opera was the idea of the writer and dramatist [John Gay](#) (1685–1732). He wrote the play and chose a wide variety of popular tunes for the ballads for which he provided the words. London audiences were used to evenings of mixed entertainments, in which tragedies or comedies (sometimes both) had singing, dancing and specialty turns between their acts. Some plays included interludes of singing and dancing, but a play with songs throughout, which were also an integral part of the drama, was entirely new.

([Maira Goff](#), 2018)

It has been pointed out that the musicality of *The Beggar’s Opera* is one significant factor to contribute to the

innovatory new tradition followed by Gay that gives rise to the appearance of many operas, “for when we speak of John Gay as being the creator of the ballad opera, it is exactly this very point that marks the nature of his innovation, and where the controversy around it can be dissipated” (Martha Dias Schlemm, 1985). Moreover, *The Beggar’s Opera* finds its extension in time and place; that is, it finds its glowing presence in two centuries extending from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century, and it has its impact on world theatre in many significant countries. Interestingly enough, *The Beggar’s Opera* stood “ancestor to Mozart’s comic operas, to Gilbert and Sullivan’s operettas and to American musical comedy” (Yvonne Noble, 1975: p. 1).

The tradition followed in *The Beggar’s Opera* has been taken up by other playwrights who have adopted the same tradition comprised in both the opera and the ballad simultaneously. Thus, *The Beggar’s Opera* points to an innovation, transformation, revitalization and originality. Gay is, therefore, an exceptional dramatist in that he is regarded as the initiator of a school of ballad operatic playwrights such as Sheridan. Its spectacular impact is related to features of dance and drills, which indicates that it finds its presence in the modern musical comedy (Arnold Huaser, 1972: p. 693).

Hence, the satire set against certain groups of society that are of particular professions—thieves and politicians—has become something delightful when cleverly presented within the framework of a melodious ballad with the aid of the verbatim rhetorical elements such as simile, metaphor, irony, etc. renders Gay’s opera into “combination must however end up as an aesthetic entity, a polished and cleverly made artifact that could not fail to be admired. Foremost in his mind then seems to have been audience response” (Verna Tandan, 1971: p. 3).

Social and Political Satire

It may be suggested that the title *The Beggar’s Opera* can be taken as a parody to mock the Italian opera that lacks the story inherent in a ballad and thus the play forms what is called to be duality: it is both a parody and a new genre that has outdone the Italian opera that is supposed to be the origin of all opera in the literary media. In its time, *The Beggar’s Opera* acquired a very strong political tinge in that it was regarded as a bitter satire against the political system that gave rise to the appearance of rascals, rogues and vagabonds. In 1725, the Opposition to the political system represented by the Prime Minister Robert Walpole found its relief in his fall. Many serious changes appeared with Walpole’s ascension into power in

1721 that affected the affairs of the public in general and those of Gay in particular:

The courtly role of patron changed hands after the Revolution (1688), and it became the privilege of political parties (Tory and Whig). The writers found themselves engaged in a fierce political battle.' They then had to obtain their favors from politicians and were forced to take sides. This created in the period a strong literary tendency towards satiric writing, of which the *The Beggar's Opera* is an example.

(Schlemm, p. 26)

The Beggar's Opera's representations and overtones come in line with the aspirations of the Opposition in that the public opinion could be discerned from the subject matter. Both Peachum and Lockit mention what is called as "the Coronation account" in Act III, Scene v, especially in the phrase which is an expression contemporary to the hearer of the expression who "smacked of Walpole's scandalously great recent expenditures on the election and of the large amounts of public money set aside for the new monarch's use" (Yvonne

Noble, 1975: p. 5). Furthermore, Gay tries to make the audience delight in the taunting words such as "Statesman," "Great Men," and "Rober(t)s" which he inserted to cause laughter. In addition, the portraits of Wild and Walpole are satirized when they were represented by the satirical yet disparaged characters Macheath and Peachum respectively, which gave the audience, especially the opposing pole, a chance to delight. Thus, comic scenes are mingled with burlesque ridiculing both Walpole and Jonathan Wild between whom Gay wittingly makes a comparison bringing Wild on the surface when cynically saying in Act I the following: "A lawyer is an honest employment, so is mine." Wild was hanged in 1725 for his many and various criminal deeds such as licensing thieves and pickpockets to form gangs bringing him stolen goods to be kept in certain warehouses. He also used to push rebels to the authorities for a price of £40 each, which was an event that was never forgotten by the audience at the time. Yvonne Noble comments that "Gay's wit lies in bringing out the more submerged likeness between Wild and Walpole—their success at attaining and retaining command over their societies; their brazenness; their duplicity; their bland materialism: 'All these men have their price,'" which is reminiscent of Walpole's note: "Wild notes in his

accounts, ‘One man, hanged, £40’’ (Yvonne Noble, 1975: pp. 6-7). Moreover, Peachum considers himself better than politicians whom he regards as being inferior to his character in that they have outdone his profession as a thief. Thus, the comparison between grand leaders and corrupt simple thieves reinforces Gay’s accusation of the politicians of his time, which is a notion reminiscent of Geoffrey Chaucer’s famous line “If gold rust, what should iron do?”:

The political force of Gay’s comparison, carried out to such length, lies in its clear indictment of the leader who cares for nothing but the material, the commercial, and the expedient, both by showing us such a man in the figure of Peachum and by reminding us by over and over that the Peachums flourish in the example of, and the moral climate set by, the Court, the aristocracy, the First Minister—leaders of the society at large. When those in power are not better than we but worse, how far has corruption spread!

(Yvonne Noble, 1975: p. 7)

It has been pointed out by Maynard Mack that the memento of Walpole’s new nation is represented by the character of Peachum, which points to the notion that people for him are nothing but “goods” insofar as they keep on living by what others can benefit from their works and “interests.” To him, if they do not behave as toughly as possible they will become victims, and ideals such as faithfulness, good behavior, amity, and all that which endows men with the attributes of decency are made to mean shortcomings in man’s character:

Through all the Employments of Life
Each Neighbour abuses his Brother;
Whore and Rogue they call Husband and
Wife:
All Professions be-rogue one another.
The Priest calls the Lawyer a Cheat,
The Lawyer be-knaves the Divine;
And the Statesman, because he's so great,
Thinks his Trade as honest as mine.

(Gay, *The Beggar’s Opera*, p. 7)

Mack proceeds to observe that the natural way of animals’ life is to prey upon one another and that the weak must naturally disappear in one way or another (Maynard Mack, in Noble, 1975: p. 7).

It may be concluded, therefore, that *The Beggar’s Opera* points to a conflict between the bourgeois ideals represented

by the Peachums and the aristocratic ones represented by Macheath who has been made a victim by Peachums and is supposed to be hanged because he has been betrayed to the hand of the authorities as a condemned person. This conflict can well be expressed in Polly's idea that her life wholly depends on the rope that may kill Macheath. The audience may sympathize with Polly's hypothetical remarks when she recites the respective song as she realizes that she cannot live anywhere but within the Peachums' domain. The audience realize that she "cannot exist without the protection of those who can move effectively within the system of a Peachum and yet see goodness beyond self-interest" (Noble, 1975: p. 7).

Apart from the domain of the underworld, it can be noted there is a conflict between Peachum and his daughter Polly whose ideals both show that they have principles different from hers concerning the good and evil as it is shown in the alternative endings of the opera—one with the execution of Macheath and another with setting him free as being innocent. The first ending shows exactly the real world in which Walpole lives that is represented by Peachum trying to feed on the benefits he and his daughter may get due to Macheath's death, which points to the triumph of immorality—a triumph realized

in everyday life situations in which criminals would escape penalties and live free as if they were innocent. It can also be said that the ending that saves Macheath is one fictionally created by the author to achieve poetic justice in a world void of justice:

Gay has enlisted all our affection for Macheath and Polly to serve in his indictment of Walpole, in whose world they must inevitably perish, and he makes an impressive demonstration of the power of art by showing that it can successfully combat the strength of a Peachum or a Walpole's single-mindedness both by creating and by saving them....Perhaps Walpole's system is the final conqueror after all, if even the Beggars and Poets cannot stand apart from the corruption.

(Noble, 1975: p. 8)

The Beggar's Opera gains immense popularity from the fact that it exposes dramatic and political overtones showing both an amalgamation of both topical social and political satire that meets the taste and the demands of the Restoration

audiences. John Loftif comments that Gay in a musical play manages to present wonderful satire against Walpole represented by Peachum and Macheath as well—the kind of characters that act a mock-heroic world where “peculation, bribery, and treachery are conditions of life. The fusion of topical denunciation with generalized social criticism gives intensity to the whole” (Loftif, 1975: p. 49).

The mock heroic mode of *The Beggar's Opera* should point to a hero represented by the Highwayman who manages to present significant art out of the ideals in which he believes and which are outside the benign domain of the real world. Gay presentation of a hero such as Macheath in the opera is to give him the opportunity to ridicule the Italian Opera and to make the audiences concentrate on his characters. It may be suggested that *The Beggar's Opera* has attracted the mind of the audiences across time that approved its naturalness, reflections on everyday life and credible representations—they were those audiences that lived and felt the events that happened during the reign of Walpole with his corrupted regime. Thus, audiences' national self-respect was very much excited by *The Beggar's Opera*, for the social and political criticism is made conspicuous “by its creation of community, emboldened them [audiences]

to testify—first in laughter, then in speech and print—against Walpole and the times” (Noble, 1975: p. 14).

As a matter of fact, the play does consist of a literary parody in that the typical conflict between Lucy and Polly is representative of the theme of revenge and that the love relationship between Macheath and Polly represents the essence of a conflict between love and duty. Polly's duty is to follow her father's advice to betray Macheath, but her love for him prevents her from doing so. Though appearing to be a tragic hero in the Aristotelian sense, Macheath's illicit relationship with Polly and the other crimes done by the Peachums and their gang look like something ordinary, which shows that the society in which they move—steal, kill, lie, betray and otherwise—“honors any values except money. The satire of Macheath, in short, turns into satire of a world where everything is for sale” (Maynard Mack, 1975: p. 42). Many and various words inserted in the dialogue show a sense of business on the part of the Peachums and their followers—words such as Peachum's lodger, his book account, property, profit, interest, credit, bank notes, etc.

In an attempt to justify their corrupt state, Peachum and his servant Lockit compare themselves with the rest of society,:

PEACHUM AND LOCKIT. When you
censure the Age,
Be cautious and sage,
Lest the Courtiers offended should be:
If you mention Vice or Bribe,
'Tis so pat to all the Tribe;
Each crys- That was levell'd at me.

(Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*, p. 8)

Peachum and Lockit proceed to sing the following lines suitable to their way of thinking and necessary for the social satire the author intends to cynically preserve in the play:

PEACHUM AND LOCKIT. Thus
Gamesters united in Friendship are found,
Though they know that their Industry all is
a Cheat;
They flock to their Prey at the Dice-Box's
Sound,
And join to promote one another's Deceit.
But if by mishap They fail of a Chap,
To keep in their Hands, they each other
entrap.
Like Pikes, lank with Hunger, who mi.\$1
of their Ends,
They bite their Companions, and prey on
their Friends.

(Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*, p. 10)

PEACHUM A Fox may steal your Hens,
Sir,

A Whore your Health and Pence, Sir,
Your Daughter rob your Chest, Sir,
Your Wife may steal your Rest, Sir,
A Thief your Goods and Plate.
But this is all but picking;
With Rest, Pence, Chest and Chicken,
It ever was decreed, Sir,
If Lawyer's Hand is fee'd, Sir,
He steals your whole Estate.

(Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*, p. 10)

Interestingly enough, Gay lets the characters use false pious expressions pretending to serve people at the time when they steal them. For instance Peachum says that he usually makes his friends "easy" (I ii). Filch assuredly comments that he feels happy when assuming the job of being "the messenger of comfort to friends in affliction" (I ii). Mrs. Peachum confesses the "frailty of an over-scrupulous conscience," (I iv), demanding from Filch not to lie because she hates liars. To add, Peachum and Filch identify themselves with the whole society, especially the aristocrats: "We and the surgeons are more beholden to women than all the professions besides"; "What business hath he to keep company with lords and gentlemen? He should leave them to prey on one another"; "My daughter to me should be, like a court lady to a minister of state, a key to the whole

gang” (I iv); “A lawyer is an honest employment; so is mine” (I i). Even the thieves who rob travelers on roads are not an exception in this regard: “Why are the laws leveled at us? Are we more dishonest than the rest of mankind?” “The world is avaricious, and I hate avarice” (II i). All these examples of irony create a sense of laughter and loathsomeness simultaneously on the part of the audiences that are going to laugh at thieves and despise them as well. Besides, the thieves ironically show that they enjoy a high standard of ideals such as not betraying a friend, altruism; they are, ironically speaking, frank and unreserved when it comes to the question of money:

Dramatically, this standard of price serves the purpose of discriminating between the characters. Peachum and Lockit are wholly infected, and accept their world quite frankly on its terms. The thieves, ironically, are somewhat less tainted, mitigating the price standard with ideals of courage, magnanimity, and (for a time) loyalty.

(Maynard Mack, 1975: p. 42)

Furthermore, the thieves represented by Peachum’s gang are human beings having

two aspects of character—the good and the evil. The good is found among their inmates which endows upon them a sense of morality, and the evil represents the world of the outlaw. This pertains to the element of realism because this is usually found in actual life, for Gay exposes the idea that competing for money is a feature of the honored such as the aristocrats. They are interchangeably relying on each other for the sake of safety, which requires them to be loyal to each other: “they live by a code of honor to which they trust their survival” (Martin Price, 1975: p. 45).

Due to his perfect awareness and understanding of the social and political ills permeating through the social and political systems of his society Gay has been disillusioned and disenchanted with society, especially the upper class. For this reason and for others, he finds it necessary to present his points of view of the entire social and political scene in a way that is humorous in presentation but satirical and cynical in essence. *The Beggar’s Opera* has given him the chance to raise his voice in the face of those iniquitous rulers and unfold what he considers to be evil. In a word he announces to the public what the English man cannot express publically. As a conclusion, Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* has endowed him with multidimensional privileges; that is to say, it places him as an innovator within the literary media for

his invention of the ballad opera that has received tremendous approval by universal audiences; he manages to present serious subject matters within the mold of humor,

which makes his work more delightful; he gains the fame which he deserves; his new invention has been influential and is satisfying the taste of audiences at all ages.



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