



John Gay  
The Beggar's Opera *and* Polly

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*Polly*

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*Edited with an Introduction and Notes by*

JOHN GLADFELDER

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THE BEGGAR'S OPERA  
AND  
POLLY

JOHN GAY (1685–1732) was born in Barnstaple in Devon, to a socially prominent Dissenting family involved in trade with the West Indies. Orphaned at ten, Gay was educated at the Barnstaple Grammar School and later apprenticed to a silk mercer in London, but he broke off his apprenticeship early, and in 1707 joined forces with the literary entrepreneur Aaron Hill. Through Hill, Gay was introduced to the London literary and theatre worlds, and began to make a name for himself as a poet with *The Shepherd's Week* (1714), a set of six comic-pastoral eclogues. In this period he became friends with Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, with whom he remained close for the rest of his life. In search of a courtly sinecure, Gay was successively steward to the Duchess of Monmouth and secretary to Lord Clarendon, and was supported by such patrons of the arts as the Duke of Chandos and Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington, who helped Gay to the post of Commissioner of the State Lottery, which he held from 1723 to 1731. With *Trivia* (1716), a mock-georgic poem on 'the Art of Walking the Streets of London', and *Poems on Several Occasions* (1720), Gay secured his reputation as a poet, although he lost most of the profits from the latter with the collapse of the 'South Sea Bubble' investment scheme. In his parallel career as a playwright, Gay wrote such minor hits as the 'tragi-comi-pastoral farce' *The What D'Ye Call It* (1715), but his greatest theatrical success was *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), a raucous, biting satirical 'ballad opera' or comedy with songs, which had a record-breaking first season and proved the most popular play of the century. Its sequel, *Polly*, was barred from the stage for political reasons, but Gay made a small fortune from publishing it; along with his first volume of verse *Fables* (1727), it brought him wealth at last. After three years as the special guest of the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry, Gay died in December 1732.

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## INTRODUCTION

SHORTLY before the opening night of *The Beggar's Opera*, 29 January 1728, John Gay's friend Alexander Pope, in a letter to Jonathan Swift, expressed uneasiness as to what audiences would make of it: 'Gay's Opera', he wrote, 'is just on the point of Delivery. It may be call'd (considering its Subject) a Jayl-Delivery. Mr Congreve (with whom I have commemorated you) is anxious as to its Success, and so am I; whether it succeeds or not, it will make a great noise, but whether of Claps or Hisses I know not.'<sup>1</sup> As things turned out, Pope need not have worried: *The Beggar's Opera* was to prove the most successful dramatic work not just of the year but of the century. It did indeed 'make a great noise', and if there was no shortage of hisses, claps far outnumbered them. In its first season, at the Theatre Royal, Lincoln's Inn Fields, it ran for a record-breaking sixty-two nights, and the theatre manager, John Rich, crammed as many spectators into the theatre as he could possibly fit, including, on one night, ninety-eight on stage and two wedged into what Rich labelled 'pidgeon holes'.<sup>2</sup> No wonder that, as the weekly newspaper *The Craftsman* put it on the day of the play's fifth performance, 'the Waggs [wits] say it has made *Rich* very *Gay*, and probably will make *Gay* very *Rich*'.<sup>3</sup>

Despite its runaway success, however, Pope, Swift, and the great Restoration playwright William Congreve were right to be anxious about the play's reception, for Gay had created a work that left even his friends puzzled. Charles Douglas, Duke of Queensberry, who with his wife Catherine was Gay's most loyal patron, was at a loss when he first read the manuscript, remarking, 'This is a very odd thing, Gay; I am satisfied that it is either a very good thing, or a very bad thing.'<sup>4</sup> But oddness was Gay's authorial trademark. His first play, *The Mohocks*, was billed as a 'Tragi-Comical Farce', while his

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Pope, *Correspondence*, ed. George Sherburn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 2:469.

<sup>2</sup> Calhoun Winton, *John Gay and the London Theatre* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 102.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in William Eben Schultz, *Gay's Beggar's Opera: Its Content, History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934-50), ii. 368.

first theatrical success, the one-act *What D'Ye Call It*—whose title draws attention to its strangeness—was subtitled a 'Tragi-Comi-Pastoral Farce', as if to emphasize its unclassifiability. The collision of incongruous literary forms that these subtitles announce would be most fully realized in *The Beggar's Opera* and its sequel *Polly*, which veer from raucous satire to poignant lyricism, from cynicism to sentimentality, in the space of a few lines, continually wrong-footing their audiences. But it was precisely that unpredictability, the juxtaposition of clashing styles and generic expectations, which struck a chord with theatre-goers.

First, they might have wondered, what could a 'beggar's opera' possibly be? Opera, to London audiences in the early decades of the eighteenth century, was a musical and theatrical form for the cultural elite: expensive to produce and attend; composed and performed by foreign artists in a language, Italian, that few but those who had made the grand tour to Italy could understand; musically and dramatically sophisticated and abstruse. Along with its formal complexity and its prohibitively high ticket prices came the elitism of opera's subject matter—stories of gods and heroes taken from classical history and mythology, the worlds of epic and romance. Gay was no enemy of Italian opera, and *The Beggar's Opera* is not an attack, even if it is in part a burlesque of conventional operatic devices and scenes. But opera was not—could not possibly be—either by or for beggars. The very thought was absurd.

No less absurd was the name of the dramatic form that Gay, with *The Beggar's Opera*, invented: the ballad opera. This term only came into common use in the 1730s, and Gay did not coin it, but it was applied retrospectively to *The Beggar's Opera* and *Polly* as the founding texts of a new theatrical genre. More than one hundred ballad operas were published or staged in the twenty years after *The Beggar's Opera*'s first performance, many of them slavish imitations, but some the work of major comic authors such as Henry Fielding. Gay himself wrote a third, *Achilles*, first performed shortly after his death, in 1733. Like 'beggar's opera', the term 'ballad opera' suggests the hybrid, contradictory nature of the form, which mixes high and low, opera and ballad, the antithetical social worlds of the metropolitan elite and the folk. As Gay conceived it, the ballad opera intersperses spoken dialogue with newly written songs set to familiar tunes, chiefly folk tunes or street ballads, but also songs stolen or parodied from



other, current plays and operas.<sup>5</sup> While many of the later ballad operas simply copy Gay's formula—the same tunes, the same lowlife settings, the same romantic triangles—his work had wider repercussions over the long term. Gay showed that original work could, paradoxically, be generated out of a dialogic assembly of disparate, incongruous pre-existing materials and forms: comedy, opera, folk song, country dance, pirate tale, tragedy, street ballad, ballet, and farce. Like that other hybrid eighteenth-century genre, the novel, the ballad opera is a form predicated on continual formal recombination and play, a form without form. It would lead, over time, to the German Singspiel, the Savoy operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, and the twentieth-century musical: from Brecht and Weill's relocation of Macheath to 1920s Berlin in *The Threepenny Opera* to Stephen Sondheim's bitter, bloody horror show *Sweeney Todd*. It could even be claimed that, with *The Beggar's Opera*, Gay invented modern theatre.

Samuel Johnson, in the short life of Gay he wrote in 1780, described 'the Ballad Opera' as 'a mode of comedy which at first was supposed to delight only by its novelty, but has now by the experience of half a century been found so well accommodated to the disposition of a popular audience, that it is likely to keep long possession of the stage'.<sup>6</sup> Johnson's last prophetic words have been borne out over the past 230-odd years by both the ballad opera in general (the musical comedy form) and *The Beggar's Opera* in particular. Although performances became less frequent in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was spectacularly revived by the producer Nigel Playfair at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, in 1920, running for over three years (1,468 performances in all); and even though Playfair and his collaborators, Frederic Austin (music) and Arnold Bennett (script), cut out much of the play's most daring material, their revival proved it had lost none of its ability to entertain and provoke.<sup>7</sup> It was

<sup>5</sup> See the Appendix to this edition for notes on the sources of the 140 tunes Gay incorporated into *The Beggar's Opera* and *Polly*.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Gay* (1780), in *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), iii. 95–102, at 100.

<sup>7</sup> Cuts were especially severe in the third act. Among the airs absent from the Playfair production were some of the most popular original tunes, including Air 67, perhaps Gay's most politically incisive lyric, set to the most popular tune of all, 'Greensleeves'. See *The Beggar's Opera, as it is performed at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith*, with music by Frederic Austin (London: Boosey & Co., 1920).

the success of this staging that inspired Elisabeth Hauptmann to translate the text into German, and then, with Bertolt Brecht and the composer Kurt Weill, to transform it into the corrosively lyrical, cynical, sleazy *Threepenny Opera*, which opened in Berlin exactly 200 years after *The Beggar's Opera's* first season.<sup>8</sup> Hauptmann, Brecht, and Weill's political updating, set in Victorian London but reflecting the conditions of Weimar Germany, was the model for similar rewritings by such playwrights as the Czech dissident Vaclav Havel and the Nigerian author and activist Wole Soyinka in the 1970s, while Weill's modernist flirtation with American jazz was to be followed by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's multiracial reimagining of the original as *Beggar's Holiday* (1946; book and lyrics by John Latouche).<sup>9</sup> These and other adaptations attest to *The Beggar's Opera's* cultural resonance, its continuing power to unsettle and captivate.

The action of the play unfolds in and around Newgate prison in London, and the plot, an uneasy compound of the comic and the tragic, is structured by a pattern of secrets, betrayals, and lies. When the play opens, the female romantic lead, Polly Peachum, has secretly married the charismatic highwayman and gang leader Macheath, and concealed him in her room. Her parents, partners in the business of thief-taking and receiving stolen goods, discover what Polly has done when she is betrayed by their apprentice, Filch. Worried that Macheath might betray them in turn for their money, and avid to get their hands on the reward for having him arrested or 'peached', they resolve to turn him in; but Polly warns him, and the first act ends with his escape from the Peachums' house. The second act opens in a tavern nearby, where Macheath's gang are preparing to take the road. Excusing himself from joining them because of his trouble with Peachum, Macheath stays behind with a select group of his eight favourite whores; but two of them, led by his 'dear Slut' Jenny Diver,

<sup>8</sup> See Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 213–26; Calhoun Winton, 'The Beggar's Opera: A Case Study', in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume 2: 1660–1895*, ed. Joseph Donohue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 126–44, esp. 140–1.

<sup>9</sup> On Havel, see Roach, *It*, 213–14; Winton, 'Case Study', 142–3; Dianne Dugaw, 'Deep Play': *John Gay and the Invention of Modernity* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 41–7. On Soyinka, see Roach, *It*, 213, 216. On Ellington and Strayhorn, see Winton, 'Case Study', 143–4, and David Hajdu, *Lush Life: A Biography of Billy Strayhorn* (New York: North Point, 1996), 101–5.

betray him to Peachum, who has him arrested and taken to Newgate. Once there he is confronted by Lucy Lockit, the prison-keeper's daughter, whom he has made pregnant and promised to marry. She is enraged at first by news of his marriage to Polly, but even though Polly bursts into his cell and claims him as her husband, Macheath assures Lucy that Polly is 'distracted', and after Peachum carries his daughter away, Lucy steals her father's keys, to finish the second act with Macheath's second escape. In the third act, Lucy, imagining Macheath united with Polly, plots to avenge herself by poisoning her rival; meanwhile, Peachum and Lockit learn where Macheath is hiding from Diana Trapes, another receiver of stolen goods, and have him arrested a second time. As he is brought back to Newgate, Polly, in shock, drops the poisoned glass. She and Lucy plead by turns with their fathers to spare Macheath, but he is tried and convicted on the evidence of one of his gang mates, Jemmy Twitcher. As he awaits execution, Lucy and Polly visit, still vying for his love; but when four more 'wives' show up, each with a child, Macheath declares himself ready to die. No sooner is he carried off, however, than the action is interrupted by the Player, who demands that the play's author, the Beggar, reprieve Macheath and give the audience the happy ending they expect—and so the play ends with Macheath's third escape.

But *The Beggar's Opera* by itself tells only half the story. Within a year of its opening night, Gay and Rich were preparing to start rehearsals of a new play, *Polly*, 'the second part of The Beggar's Opera'. But the Walpole government, stung by what its leader took to be Gay's ad hominem attacks in *The Beggar's Opera*, stopped Rich from rehearsing the new work, and ruled 'that it was not allow'd to be acted, but commanded to be suppress' (p. 75). In the short term, the banning of *Polly* actually worked to Gay's advantage, for within a few months he published the play at his own expense, along with an account of its prohibition, and the scandal of its suppression made it an immediate best-seller. Gay earned £1,200 from subscriptions alone, far more than *The Beggar's Opera* had brought him, and the play's initial print run of 10,000 copies was quickly followed by a spate of pirate editions. Yet in the long term Walpole's ban achieved its aim. *Polly* was not performed until nearly fifty years later, in George Colman's recomposed and defanged version of 1777, and the delay meant that *Polly* had no chance to engage

with the audiences it was written for, or to develop a living performance tradition.<sup>10</sup>

But perhaps *Polly*'s time has come round again. With its West Indian setting and its cast of transported outlaws, Indian princes, rebel slaves, rapacious colonials, and cross-dressing female adventurers, *Polly* transplants the thieves and whores of *The Beggar's Opera* into the new world of British colonial expansion, and broadens the earlier play's critique of a culture in which all human relationships are reduced to commercial transactions. It also compounds *The Beggar's Opera*'s formal innovations, folding elements of tragedy and masquerade into the first play's mixture of knockabout comedy, popular song, and bleak, even misanthropic satire. Read (or seen in performance) alongside *The Beggar's Opera*, *Polly* compels us to rethink our views of the celebrated captain Macheath and Polly Peachum, calling Macheath's heroic glamour into question while complicating Polly's seemingly artless simplicity. Disrupting any straightforward notions of sexual or racial identity, *Polly* features a romantic heroine passing as a pirate recruit and a white outlaw passing as a black slave leader, and adapts theatrical conventions of travesty and blackface to stage scenes of both same-sex and cross-race erotic desire which challenge the prevailing ethos of commodification. Diverting and discomfiting in equal measure, *Polly* is both a continuation and an undermining of *The Beggar's Opera*, and only by bringing the two parts together can we get an adequate sense of Gay's theatrical and moral vision, as he explores many of the same issues that Defoe and Swift confront in such contemporaneous works as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*.

### John Gay

John Gay's life and authorial career exemplify the variety and haphazardness of the writing trade in the eighteenth century. Best known today for such quintessentially urban works as *The Beggar's Opera* and the long poem *Trivia: or the Art of Walking the Streets of London*, Gay was born in the West Country, in the Devonshire market town of Barnstaple, to a socially prominent Dissenting family involved in

<sup>10</sup> Following on the success of his 1920 revival of *The Beggar's Opera*, Nigel Playfair produced a new, completely rewritten version of *Polly* at the Kingsway and Savoy Theatres in London, which ran for 324 performances in 1922-3.

trade with the West Indies, among other enterprises.<sup>11</sup> Orphaned at ten, Gay was the youngest of five children; and while he received a good basic education, with an emphasis on Latin and Greek literature, at the Barnstaple grammar school, there was no money to send him to university, nor any property or business to inherit, so in 1702, aged seventeen, he was apprenticed to John Willet, a draper or silk mercer in London. He was evidently unhappy with his work as a shop assistant, for he broke off his apprenticeship in 1706, about halfway through the usual period of seven years, and returned to Devon. But after his uncle's death the next year he took the first opportunity to come back to London, and took on the role of amanuensis—secretary, sidekick, and collaborator—to his former Barnstaple school-mate, the author, literary entrepreneur, and later theatre manager Aaron Hill. Through Hill, Gay made his way into the thick of the vibrant but often tumultuous and fractious London literary scene, publishing his first poem, *Wine* (characteristically, a burlesque of Milton); writing for Hill's periodical, *The British Apollo* (consisting mainly of answers to readers' questions on topics ranging from mathematics to medical complaints); and meeting Alexander Pope, who was to become his closest literary collaborator, sponsor, and friend. Although he fell into a literary career as much as he deliberately pursued one, within a few years of returning to London, Gay had begun to establish himself as a distinctive new voice in a range of genres.

But authorship for Gay was never only about literature: it was also bound up with the struggle to find a secure social footing. In another of his early works, a pamphlet-length survey of contemporary periodicals titled *The Present State of Wit*, Gay says nothing at all about *The British Apollo*, for which he had only recently stopped writing, until a postscript, in which he claims that he had 'quite forgot' it, but notes, 'I am inform'd however, That it still recommends its self by deciding Wagers at Cards, and giving good Advice to the Shopkeepers, and their Apprentices'.<sup>12</sup> His most recent biographer asserts that this is a 'condescending gesture', which reflects 'the intensity of

<sup>11</sup> Biographical information, unless otherwise noted, is derived from David Nokes, *John Gay: A Profession of Friendship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), and William Henry Irving, *John Gay: Favorite of the Wits* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1940). Some of the dates from the years before he became an author are conjectural.

<sup>12</sup> Gay, *The Present State of Wit*, in *John Gay: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Vinton A. Dearing with Charles E. Beckwith, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), ii. 455–6.

Gay's desire for social status' and misleadingly distances him from the social world and ethos of 'Shop-keepers, and their Apprentices', of which he had been part only five years before.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps so; and Gay may indeed be trying to cover up his own recent past as apprentice and hack author. But it might also be a gesture of self-mockery, a wry acknowledgement of his distinctly unglamorous and even 'low' origins. In later years, Pope tried to play down Gay's time as a draper's apprentice, but the authorial self-portraits in Gay's work—such as the Beggar, and the mercenary Poet in *Polly*—are anything but self-aggrandizing, and suggest that Gay was as ready to turn his satirical lens on himself as on others.

In any case, his letters make clear that Gay saw writing as a means to a particular social end. The end he had in view was a paradoxical kind of independence—paradoxical because it depended on the will of a wealthy or politically powerful patron.<sup>14</sup> Gay, one biographer wrote, 'wasted his life' seeking a well-paid position at court, and he describes himself doing exactly this in *A Letter to a Lady*, a poem of 1714 written in honour of Caroline, Princess of Wales.<sup>15</sup> It is, typically, a work that both praises the princess and mocks the poet for writing such a panegyric. Portraying himself roving from room to room in St James's Palace, Gay writes, 'Still ev'ry one I met in this agreed, | That Writing was my Method to succeed; | But now Preferments so possess'd my Brain, | That scarce I could produce a single Strain'.<sup>16</sup> His failure to write mirrors his failure to find a courtly post: 'Places, I found, were daily giv'n away, | And yet no friendly Gazette mention'd *Gay*' (ll. 95–6). For all his complaining—and his letters dwell obsessively on such frustrated hopes—Gay was actually rather successful in finding patrons: from 1712 to 1714 he was secretary and steward to the Duchess of Monmouth; in July 1714 he became secretary to Lord Clarendon, envoy to the court of Hanover; for much of the time between 1715 and the late 1720s he lived with, or at the expense of, Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington, who probably

<sup>13</sup> Nokes, *John Gay*, 72.

<sup>14</sup> On Gay's search for patrons, see Brean Hammond, "'A Poet, and a Patron, and Ten Pound": John Gay and Patronage', in Peter Lewis and Nigel Wood, eds., *John Gay and the Scriblerians* (London: Vision Press, 1988), 23–43.

<sup>15</sup> Austin Dobson, 'John Gay' (1889), available under 'DNB Archive' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online* (Oxford University Press, 2004–).

<sup>16</sup> Gay, *A Letter to a Lady*, ll. 127–30, in *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Dearing and Beckwith, i. 133.

secured Gay the lucrative and easy post of Commissioner of the State Lottery which he held from 1723 to 1731. Burlington, along with another patron of the arts, James Brydges, Duke of Chandos, was chief among the subscribers to Gay's *Poems on Several Occasions* (1720), which netted some £1,000, a small fortune at the time. Another aristocrat, the Earl of Lincoln, obtained rent-free lodgings for Gay in 1723 in the gatehouse to the royal garden in Whitehall, where he lived until 1729, by which time *The Beggar's Opera* and *Polly* had made him rich. He then spent the rest of his life as the favoured guest of another aristocratic couple, the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry. By any outward measure, Gay was well provided for, but his very success in securing patronage only underlined his dependency, the slavish obligation to please. And professional authorship was no better: to succeed as playwright or poet he had to comply with the tastes of a paying public, to sell his work at market, turn himself into a hack.

No wonder, then, that Gay's writing is infused with what Margaret Doody has called the 'double-tongued utterance, or quality of double-mindedness' of much Augustan poetry.<sup>17</sup> The poet both seeks a patron and scorns patronage-seekers; both strives to be a courtier and mocks the ways of the court. He denounces others as he unmask himself. This combination of moral denunciation and self-exposure came to a head in a letter to Pope from October 1727, around the time he was finishing *The Beggar's Opera*. For much of the previous two years he had been writing and overseeing the production of a volume of fifty verse *Fables*, which he dedicated to George II's younger son, Prince William, six years old when the *Fables* appeared. Even though Gay had written to Swift during this period that 'I still despise Court Perferments so that I lose no time upon attendance on great men', his dedication of the *Fables* to William was manifestly intended to win him a sinecure at court, and in fact it did so: in October 1727, Gay was offered the post of Gentleman Usher to the two-year-old Princess Louisa, at £150 per year.<sup>18</sup> Along with his Lottery post, this would have brought Gay an income of £300 for very little work, more than enough to make him 'independent'. But Gay found the offer

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Anne Doody, *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 211.

<sup>18</sup> Gay, letter to Swift, 22 Oct. 1726, in *The Letters of John Gay*, ed. C. F. Burgess (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 59.

demeaning, perhaps infantilizing, and was thrown into bitterness and despair. 'There is now what *Milton* says is in Hell,' he wrote to Pope: 'Darkness visible.—O that I had never known what a Court was! . . . Why did I not take your Advice before my writing Fables for the Duke, not to write them?'<sup>19</sup> Gay's rather theatrical outburst conveys both injury and moral outrage at the perfidy of the court: he should never have stooped so low as to place his trust in the nobility. Pope endorsed this view in his reply, urging Gay to 'enjoy . . . your own Integrity, and the satisfactory Consciousness of having *not* merited such Graces from them, as they bestow only on the mean, servile, flattering, interested, and undeserving'.<sup>20</sup> But Gay was too ironically self-aware to fully buy into Pope's stark contrast between courtly servility on the one hand and his 'own Integrity' on the other. Indeed, after regretting that he hadn't taken Pope's advice 'not to write' the *Fables*, he corrects himself: 'Or rather', he asks, why did he not 'write them for some [other] young Nobleman?' His fault was not to have sold his work for a place at court, but to have sold to the wrong buyer. In his next work, *The Beggar's Opera*, he would seek his fortune by selling himself at another market, that of the theatre-going public.

### *The Beggar's Opera*

Gay's recognition—at once ironic and rueful—that he was no less complicit in the culture of the marketplace than the courtiers and politicians he equates with pimps and thieves in *The Beggar's Opera* and *Polly* gives both plays their distinctive tonal complexity, which derives from Gay's practice of taking 'double-mindedness' to its limits. *The Beggar's Opera* signals this from the start, in the dialogue between Beggar and Player who, although collaborators on the performance we are about to watch, represent distinct social worlds, those of the theatre and the prison ('our great Room at St. *Giles's*' alluding to the Roundhouse or jail in the disreputable St Giles district of London). Introducing a Beggar as his authorial alter ego, Gay affiliates himself with the legion of impoverished hacks who were also compelled to live in St Giles, while the Beggar's 'small Yearly Salary

<sup>19</sup> Gay, letter to Pope, October 1727, *ibid.* 66.

<sup>20</sup> Pope, letter to Gay, in *Correspondence*, ii. 453.



for my Catches' parallels the political rewards Gay scraped for at court. The very term 'beggar's opera' is oxymoronic, a fusion of contraries, as is the pairing of street-ballad singers with 'our two Ladies', the opera divas parodied in the contest between Polly and Lucy. The Beggar who writes 'Catches' for his 'Dinner', like the Player who agrees to 'push his Play as far as it will go', stand in for Gay and his producer John Rich, but as men of business they also pave the way for Peachum, who opens the play proper sitting at a table with a theatrically oversized 'Book of Accounts' before him.

As we soon discover, Peachum is what audiences of the time would have recognized as a 'thief-taker', who works the reward system then in place, turning in criminals for the forty pounds blood money they brought, but also using the threat of betrayal as a method of control, a form of labour management. All the criminals listed in his account book work on his behalf. If, like Black Moll and Betty Sly, they are 'active and industrious', Peachum will 'soften the Evidence' to spare them from hanging or transportation, for as he says of Betty, 'I can get more by her staying in *England*' (p. 6). But if the thief in question, like Tom Gagg, is a 'lazy Dog' who brings no money in, the price is 'Death without Reprieve'. Playing the parts of both crime boss and police agent, Peachum acts 'in a double Capacity, both against Rogues and for 'em'; but in his case, the 'double Capacity' serves but a single interest, his own.

Through Peachum, then, Gay introduces one of the principal thematic strands running through both parts of *The Beggar's Opera*, the idea that everyone, in all walks of life, acts only out of self-interest, conceived of almost entirely in economic terms; and, intertwined with this, a corollary idea that for each of us, other people exist only as commodities to be bought, sold, or otherwise exploited. Peachum makes this claim in the play's opening lines, the words to its first song: 'Through *all* the Employments of Life | *Each* Neighbour abuses his Brother' (emphasis added). No one is immune, not even those pillars of society, the Statesman, Lawyer, and Priest, for all that they embody the institutions—state, law, and church—on which the whole social order rests. By equating them with rogues, cheats, and knaves, Peachum mocks their moral and social pretensions: the statesman may be 'great' in terms of status or power, but is not even as 'honest' as a thief-taker. And private life is as corrupt as public: the words 'Husband and Wife' are only respectable masks for