



THEATRE CLASSICS
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MODERN READER

GAY

THE
BEGGAR'S
OPERA

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BEGGARS OPERA

BY

JOHN
GAY

EDITED BY

Benjamin W. Griffith, Jr.
Mercer University

ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

KEIGH

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THE PLAYWRIGHT

It was characteristic of writers in the eighteenth century to cater to the spirit of their age, but no writer reflected as many contemporary literary fashions as did John Gay. This amiable satirist wrote mock heroics, *vers de société*, pastorals, essays in the Addison and Steele manner, several of the few really fine lyrics of his day, fables, ballad operas, tragedies, and comedies. He penned three of the most popular works of the period: *The Beggar's Opera*, by all odds the most beloved play of the century; *The Fables*, of which there have been over 350 editions; and *Trivia*, which went into five editions during the poet's lifetime and which is generally acclaimed as the greatest poem ever written on London life.

But John Gay virtually has been overlooked when the literary laurels were handed down, and, curiously enough, this lack of critical favor is in part due to his positive genius for making friends. He was a close companion to Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, and it is as a friend of these giants of literature that he is most often given recognition. W. H. Irving entitled his excellent biography *John Gay, Favorite of the Wits* in deference to this manner of assessing the playwright. James Sutherland points out that "Gay's own friends rarely asserted his claims as a poet. They thought of him, and when he was dead they remembered him, as a man—gentle, good-natured, indolent, lovable in the extreme, shiftless, impracticable, innocent, volatile, a sort of Augustan Peter Pan riding in the coaches of his noble friends, dining at their tables, shooting their pheasants, but quite incapable of attending to his worldly affairs." But Gay was more than a lovable lapdog to his temperamental and sometimes difficult companions. He gave a good part of himself to his friends and was always ready to drop one of his schemes to assist with one of theirs

and to give of his time and affection unstintingly. Pope's famous epitaph for his friend Gay was a sincere and fitting tribute:

Of manners gentle, of affections mild;
 In wit, a man; simplicity, a child:
 With native humour temp'ring virtuous rage,
 Form'd to delight at once and lash the age:
 Above temptation, in a low estate,
 And uncorrupted, ev'n among the great:
 A safe companion, and an easy friend,
 Unblamed through life, lamented in thy end.
 These are thy honours! not that here thy bust
 Is mix'd with heroes, or with kings thy dust;
 But that the worthy and the good shall say,
 Striking their pensive bosoms—*Here lies GAY.*

Another side of the complex personality that was Gay's is found in the well-known epitaph—written by the playwright himself:

Life is a jest; and all things show it.
 I thought so once; but now I know it.

Gay had written this saucy epigram some years before, and, during his serious illness of 1729, he wrote to Pope, requesting that it be placed on his tomb. When Gay's monument was unveiled on May 1, 1733, many persons were shocked at the frivolity of the inscription. Gay would have been surprised at this reaction, for he had indeed been destined to play jester to the world. He knew that his greatest contribution had been the supplying of gaiety to his fellows. He knew too well that his efforts to be other than a jester had all ended in frustration and disappointment.

To relate that the jester Gay was born on Joy Street smacks of a great cosmic joke. But so it was; on June 30, 1685, Gay was born at that address in Barnstaple, Devonshire. Although the Gays of Devonshire were of moderate means—some were poor parsons, some soldiers, some tradesmen—there was a tradition of family gentility. John Gay was the youngest son of a youngest son,

but he could point proudly to a coat of arms on both halves of his family tree. In the large house on Joy Street Gay was apparently blessed with a happy early childhood. His hometown of Barnstaple was a large trading center, and, though it was seven miles upriver, had a considerable foreign trade in woolens and tobacco. Gay and his friends must have been interested in the exotic stories the sailors told down at the quay. Also Gay may have heard some tales from his Aunt Martha that would greatly influence his later life. His aunt, who had lost a fortune in a New World business venture, had been sent to Newgate Prison as a debtor for two or three years. Young John was later to use Newgate Prison as the setting for his most famous work, *The Beggar's Opera*. Although there was not a regular theatre in Barnstaple until 1768, the town supported what plays it could get, whether the actors were strollers or the traveling company of King's players. Also, Gay's schoolmaster, the Reverend Robert Luck, was a brilliant young High Churchman who wrote poetry and produced an annual Grammar School play. Schoolmaster Luck also insisted that Gay and his fellow students learn their classical languages, having them translate Latin verse into English. It was here that Gay's interest in poetry was kindled.

In 1694, however, life began to change for John Gay. In that year both his parents died—first his mother, and a few months later, his father—and an uncle, Thomas Gay, was given the responsibility of rearing the rather intractable ten-year-old boy who was given to carving his name on church pews. Seven years later Gay's uncle died, and the boy set out for London. Through the auspices of a cousin, Hester Pinney, who owned a lace shop, John was placed as an apprentice to a silk mercer on the Strand. William Ayre, in his *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Alexander Pope, Esq.* (1745), gives a contemporary account of Gay's activities as an apprentice: "The Trade which he chose to be put Apprentice to, was a Mercer, but he grew so fond of Reading and Study, That he frequently neglected to exert himself in

putting off Silks and Velvets to the Ladies, and suffer'd them (by reason of his wanting to finish the Sale in too few Words) to go to other Shops." Apparently Gay's interest in literature continued to interfere with his salesmanship, for in the summer of 1706, with only half of his apprenticeship completed, he was released by his master.

He went to Barnstaple temporarily, but he returned to London in 1707, where he obtained a post as secretary to Aaron Hill, a wealthy young dabbler in literature who was later to manage the Drury Lane Theatre for a short time. Hill, well known among coffeehouse literati, was Gay's entree into the society of London's wits and writers. Hill also helped Gay publish his first poem, *Wine* (1708), a rather artificial imitation of Milton. Gay had it printed in folio on expensive paper and was much annoyed when a pirated edition of the poem was published immediately on "brown sheets and scurvy letter." He was not annoyed, however, that the poem was considered important enough to be pirated.

Little is known of Gay's life from 1708-1711, but by the latter date the young aspirant to literary greatness had established a firm friendship with a true potentate of letters: Alexander Pope. It was Pope who encouraged Gay to turn his talents to the theatre, and in 1712 Gay published *The Mohocks*, a farce about a group of aristocratic young delinquents, named after a ferocious Indian tribe, who terrorized London by night. The play is marred by forced and somewhat derivative comedy. It is notable only for the well-delineated pictures of London streets and the molls, mountebanks, cinder wenches, watchmen, and ballad singers that inhabited them. The farce was never acted, but it helped to establish Gay with the literary clique of Pope, Thomas Parnell, and Nicholas Rowe.

Gay also tried his hand at pamphleteering during this period, but he had no real taste for it. Englishmen took their political pamphlets seriously in those days. Early eighteenth-century society was a seething arena of po-

litical strife, with the Whigs and Tories sitting on opposite sides of theatres and beautiful ladies displaying their party affiliations by special codes of wearing their beauty patches. As Gay described the situation in the poem *Rural Sports* (1713):

Faction embroils the World; and ev'ry Tongue
Is fraught with Malice, and with Scandal hung:
Friendship, for Sylvan Shades, does Courts despise,
Where all must yield to Int'rest's dearer Ties;
Each Rival *Machiavel* with Envy burns,
And Honesty forsakes them All by turns;
While Calumny upon each Party's thrown,
Which Both abhor, and Both alike disown.

In 1713 Gay at last found a sense of direction for his literary energies. One of the reasons for the sudden finding of himself was his employment as secretary to the Duchess of Monmouth in the last months of 1712. The sixty-two-year-old duchess, witty and good-natured, lived the life of a *bon vivant* in a mansion in Chelsea. Gay was now well situated, and his circle of friends at Will's and Button's coffeehouses was growing. He now had no financial worries, and the light routine of work at the mansion left him plenty of time for writing. Gay took advantage of his good fortune; the poem *Rural Sports* appeared on January 13, 1713; a play, *The Wife of Bath*, was produced on May 12; and a poem, *The Fan*, was ready for publication on December 8. *Rural Sports* is a descriptive poem, noted chiefly for the original concept of introducing country sports into the framework of a georgic. *The Wife of Bath* was unsuccessful; it ran for only three nights, and Gay referred to it later as his "damned" play. It hardly deserved any better, for it was a hopeless potpourri of ingredients borrowed brazenly from Chaucer, Farquhar, and Shakespeare. *The Fan*, although it was popular in the eighteenth century, is really little more than an ineffective and overly decorated retelling of Ovid's tales.

Although it was not completed in the year 1713, the

poem *The Shepherd's Week* was largely written during this *annus mirabilis*. The poem is a pastoral with a difference, for Gay broke with the ridiculous Arcadian tradition of nymphs and swains and sought to copy the simplicity of Theocritus. Although the pastoral form had been tried by all the young poets, including Pope, it was Gay, as usual, who came up with a new approach. Pope, in a facetious letter to Swift, speaks of Gay's efforts, calling the poet "an unhappy youth, who writes pastorals during the time of divine services; whose case is the more deplorable, as he hath miserably lavished away all that silver he should have reserved for his soul's health, in buttons and loops for his coat." *The Shepherd's Week* was published on April 15, 1714, and became immediately popular, going into three editions the first year of publication. Gay's pastoral brings the English village to life, with vivid pictures of country games, wakes, and fairs. The "Saturday" portion of the poem, with tipsy Bouzybeus singing his songs, dancing among the merry reapers, and kissing the girls, received the most popular acclaim. The work received a great critical acclaim also. Robert Shiels in 1753 wrote: "Of all Gay's performances, his Pastorals seem to have the highest finishing; they are perfectly Doric; the characters and dialogue are natural and rurally simple; the language is admirably suited to the persons, who appear delightfully rustic." Oliver Goldsmith praised Gay highly, stating that he "has hit the true spirit of pastoral poetry. In fact, he more resembles Theocritus than any other English pastoral writer whatsoever."

Also in 1713 Gay became secretary to the well-known Scriblerus Club, which included the leading wits of the day: Swift, Pope, Thomas Parnell, Dr. John Arbuthnot, and Joseph Spence. As Spence stated the Club's purpose, it was "to ridicule all the false tastes in learning." Under the pseudonym of Martin Scriblerus, the Club was to attack pedantry on all fronts. Gay enjoyed the Club's activities more on a social than a literary level, and apparently there was a great deal of pleasure to be derived

from the association. Goldsmith described the Club as "a society, in which, of all others, a wise man might be most foolish without incurring any danger of contempt." The Club was active from November, 1713, to June, 1714, when, for various reasons, the group became separated.

The year 1714 was a difficult one for Gay. He had been extremely fortunate in the friends he had made, but his literary success was limited to one poem: *The Shepherd's Week*. He now sought a political office that would provide him the wherewithal to live among the literary society he loved. He soon obtained the post of secretary to Lord Clarendon, who was heading a Tory public relations mission to Hanover. Clarendon, a poor choice in any public relations venture, had served as governor of New York and had been the laughing stock of the colonists when he appeared at state functions dressed as a woman in order to represent the Queen more exactly. Gay, however, made the most of his travels on the Continent from late June to the middle of September. The late months of 1714 he spent in attempting to cultivate court acquaintances and in writing *The What d'ye Call It*, a farce that was to be produced at Drury Lane the following February.

The What d'ye Call It was Gay's first theatrical success. He made a hundred pounds from it, and it was acted twenty-two times during the first two seasons and revived in almost every season until 1750. The farce was considered by many to be a new kind of play. The primary focus of it is literary burlesque, specifically directed against the tragedies of the day. So subtle was the parody that many of the patrons took the work seriously and found cause for weeping. A high point in the production was the beautiful ballad beginning, "'Twas when the seas were roaring," set to music supposedly written by Handel. The ballad has had a long-standing success apart from the play, having been reprinted down through the years. This ballad not only demonstrates Gay's gifts as a lyricist—a rare talent in the eighteenth

century—but it also points ahead to the songs which were to enliven *The Beggar's Opera*.

Gay spent the remainder of 1715 in attempting to procure a post at Court and in completing the poem *Trivia*, which was published on January 26, 1716. *Trivia*, subtitled "The Art of Walking the Streets of London," is unquestionably the greatest poem on London life in English literature. Filled with vivid and varied detail, the poem describes at least sixty ways of earning a living and more than thirty-five separate London locales. The poem is divided into three parts: the first sets out the implements for walking, and the latter two describe walking by day and by night. Throughout the work Gay is burlesquing classical forms and classical similes. The poem went into five editions during the author's lifetime and proved again that Gay was a master at inventing literary schemes and attracting the public with them. The poem was also a financial success. Arbuthnot commented that "Gay has got so much money by his Art of Walking the Streets, that he is ready to set up his equipage," meaning, of course, that Gay could now afford a carriage and horses.

Gay was soon involved with Pope and Arbuthnot in the writing of a satirical comedy, *Three Hours After Marriage*. Gay contributed the original idea as well as the structural organization of this farce, which was little more than a catch-all for the personal grudges of these three members of the Scriblerus Club. Three rival writers—Josiah Woodward, John Dennis, and Colley Cibber—are satirized in the play through the characters: Fossile, Sir Tremendous, and Plotwell. Because of the strength of the literary factions then in London, a riot occurred on the opening night (January 16, 1717) and recurred through the seven nights of its run. Perhaps because of its notoriety, the play had a longer run than any other play that season, and the playhouse was full at every performance. Another reason for its popularity was the fact that the pious Joseph Addison had charged that the play was obscene. The play was a source of

much embarrassment for Gay, and the forty-three pounds and odd shillings he received for the copyright was little enough recompense.

Gay spent much of 1718 and 1719 in traveling and in visiting his friends. In November, 1719, he returned to London after a trip to the Continent; he was badly in need of money. In an effort to improve his finances he wrote *Dione*, a pastoral tragedy now virtually forgotten. It was not accepted for theatrical production, but was published in the collected edition of Gay's poems in 1720. In August, 1720, Gay was working with several other lyricists on songs for Handel's first English oratorio, *Queen Esther*. He was also suffering a severe financial loss at this time through ill-advised investments in stock of the infamous South Sea Company. Now in dire financial straits, Gay's lot continued to worsen until the spring of 1723, when he was given a commissioner-ship of state lotteries at 150 pounds a year. At this time the Earl of Lincoln obtained lodgings for Gay at Whitehall.

Assured of a steady income and a place to live, Gay now found time to turn to further ambitious literary schemes, the first of which was a conventional poetic tragedy, *The Captives*. This play has all of the stock accoutrements, including a noble hero, the sentimental tyrant, and the love-maddened princess, held together with the scantiest of plots. With its stilted, florid blank verse and its many clichés, it is exactly the sort of play Gay had lambasted in *The What d'ye Call It*. Queen Caroline was interested in the play, however, and requested that Gay read it to her at Leicester House before it was staged. An embarrassing incident occurred at the reading: the corpulent Gay tripped over a footstool as he bowed to the Queen and fell onto a large screen, overturning it. And there was more embarrassment yet to come. When the play was opened on January 15, 1724, at Drury Lane, a custom was followed whereby the play was "christened." This christening took the form of distributing large quantities of brandy to the footmen

in the boxes. Many of these footmen were later carried from the playhouse dead drunk. Although the play ran only seven performances, the published version went into two editions in as many months.

Not being satisfied with his small annual salary, Gay continued to seek Court preferment. In December, 1725, he was able to combine his aspirations as a courtier with his ambitions as a writer; he began composing *The Fables* for the Princess Caroline's four-year-old son, Prince William Augustus. *The Fables*, which were finished by October, 1726, and published in March, 1727, bore an inscription indicating that they were written for the little Prince's amusement, but almost every reader in England was soon to share in the pleasure. The fable was a popular literary form of the period, but Gay's bold addition of still another work in the genre was amply rewarded. There have been over 350 editions of the work, most of them before 1890, and the book was widely used as a text in elementary schools for over a hundred years. Gay's epigrams and stories soon became household words. This is despite the fact that the "morals" in the original fifty tales of the first edition concern only the courtier; many of them warn young Prince William of the dangers of flattery and sychophancy. The verses are witty and well turned, as exemplified by Gay's reference to himself in the last fable:

A Hare, who, in a civil way,
Comply'd with everything, like *Gay*,
Was known by all the bestial train,
Who haunt the wood, or graze the plain:
Her care was, never to offend,
And ev'ry creature was her friend.

Gay's efforts to win Court favor met with little success. In October, 1727, when the list of preferments appeared, Gay was appointed Gentleman Usher to the two-year-old Princess Louisa, a post worth a mere 150 pounds a year. Gay, feeling that he was selling

his allegiance to the Court party at too small a figure, promptly declined the position. In a letter to Swift, explaining his decision, Gay stated that his freedom from Court entanglements would leave the way open for the production of *The Beggar's Opera*, a harsh satire on Walpole and Townshend. The basic satirical strain in the play implies, of course, that the rogues and thieves of Newgate operate in much the same way as those who run the government. *The Beggar's Opera* opened on January 29, 1728, to unprecedented applause and acclaim.

After this great theatrical success, Gay found himself surrounded by friends. He was financially secure, but his means were never more than moderate, and he found it increasingly difficult to resist the temptation to keep up with his extravagant companions. He spent the warm months of 1728 at Bath, but he continued to work at his writing. By November, when he suffered an attack of fever, he had nearly completed *Polly*, a sequel to *The Beggar's Opera*. Attempting to cash in on the public favor of its predecessor, Gay rushed *Polly* to the boards, but in December he received the first hint that the sequel was to meet with many obstacles. At that time John Rich, the theatrical producer, received orders from the Lord Chamberlain to delay rehearsals of *Polly* until further notice. The Lord Chamberlain was in error in assuming that *Polly* was as politically dangerous as *The Beggar's Opera*. The satire in the sequel is much blunted by Gay's transferring of the action from Newgate to a colonial plantation. Many of the attacks on flattery and insincerity seem inappropriately carried over from the preceding play. Macheath, in the sequel, is disguised as a Negro and is not at all presented as the hero who won all hearts in *The Beggar's Opera*. *Polly* has become a cardboard cliché, a mere reworking of the sentimental heroine type; she finally marries an Indian lover. The ballads, far beneath Gay's previous standards, are irregular and seem hastily contrived. Perhaps it is for the best that

the Lord Chamberlain prohibited the production of *Polly* and that it did not come to the stage until nearly fifty years after Gay wrote it. When the Lord Chamberlain's final decision to suppress *Polly* was announced on December 12, 1728, however, a great furor arose. Everyone who had a grievance against the government took up Gay's *cause célèbre* against this censorship. Although Gay suffered a severe attack of fever, pleurisy, and asthma in late December, he made plans to continue the fight by publishing the play, along with a preface to defend his position. A subscription list was started, and one of Gay's truest friends, Kitty Hyde, the Duchess of Queensberry, took the subscription list to Court and added names under the very eyes of the King. For this she was dismissed from the Court. The subscription list filled rapidly; Henrietta, Duchess of Marlborough, subscribed 100 pounds for a single copy. The final list totaled 1,200 pounds.

Most of the rest of 1729 was spent idly on junkets with the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry to Scotland and to their ancestral home in Oxfordshire. What little literary energy Gay could muster was spent in revamping an earlier theatrical failure, *The Wife of Bath*. When it was presented at Lincoln's Inn Fields on January 19, 1730, it was again a failure despite Gay's revisions. That year he spent a pleasant summer with the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry at their summer house in Amesbury. There he played with the children, shot quail on Salisbury Plain, and amused himself by laughing at the duchess's experiments in milking cows. He wrote little, telling Swift in a letter that since the doctors had forbidden him wine, no poetry should be expected of him. More likely, however, Gay was too contented in his indolence to turn back to writing.

Gay returned to London for about ten weeks in the winter of 1730–31 with his health apparently much improved. In March he supervised the first London performance of *Acis and Galatea* in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Gay had written this little operetta to Handel's