

The Political Peter Pan of the Literary World on the Stage with His Beggars: Educational Analysis

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Abstract

Little is known about the 'Peter Pan' of the literary world of eighteenth-century England compared to his contemporary authors. Even though some of the authors of his age have thick volumes of correspondence to their credits, John Gay's correspondence is as thin as his social position and literary fame. Had it not been for the recent efforts of the editor of *The Letters of John Gay*, even the present petite volume of Gay's correspondence would not have been available for any research work and this paper alike. His high ambitions in political preferment destroyed his literary dignity. This paper intends to investigate the socio-cultural background of the young indefatigable literary figure of English literature against which his political role is foregrounded. The descriptive method is used to meet that aim. Given the results, *The Beggar's Opera*, as a true, actual and direct manifestation of national detestation of the corrupt political situation and the individual thought to be responsible for it, endorsed its 'suspected success' and led 'Peter Pan' to be the nightmare of ministers.

Keywords: Peter Pan, politics, *The Beggar's Opera*, literary world, social position

1. Introduction

John Gay's rich circle of friends helped him compensate for his immaturity in literary production. Alexander Pope, for the nearness of their age and the adjacency of their social classes, played an important role in reaching name and fame at an early age. Being English gave them the opportunity of living for a longer time in the same country. This closeness of the relationship resulted in the composition of three literary works. The fruit of the early literary collaboration was the production of one partly successful play, *The What D'ye Call It* and one utterly unsuccessful play, *Three Hours after Marriage*. The third important play was the outcome of Johnathan Swift's suggestion to the Pope in which he asked Pope to persuade Gay to trigger his talent in the composition of *The Beggar's Opera*:

"It gave me a hint that a set of Quaker pastorals might succeed if our friend Gay could fancy it, and I think it a fruitful subject; pray to hear what he says. I believe; further, the personal ridicule is not exhausted; and that a porter, foot-man, or chair-man's pastoral might do well. Or what think you of a Newgate pastoral among the whores and thieves there?" (Barthes & Battestin, 2016).

Gay's literary achievement has always been thought to be indebted to this letter and especially to Pope: "Unquestionably Gay was grateful for Pope's early literary assistance and advice." (Loveridge, 2018). His literary aptitude is believed by critics to have been tutored under Pope's poetic tutelage.

On the other hand, Swift-Gay's relationship silhouetted a diplomat and a politician out of Gay's character. Gay, like his political master, Johnathan Swift, and unlike his poetic one, Pope, pursued his ambition of preferment in political affairs, for which Swift effectively lobbied with Arbuthnot and Lord Oxford. Pope, as a close friend of Gay, thanks Swift for his help:

"I can't name Mr. Gay, without all the acknowledgements which I shall ever owe you on his account. If I write this in verse. I would tell you, you are like the sun, and while men imagine you to be retired or absent, you are hourly exerting your indulgence and bringing things to maturity for their advantage. Of all the world, you are the man

(without flattery) who serve your friends with the least ostentation; ...” (McGeary, 2022).

Having done a favour to a younger friend, Swift adhered to his role as a tutor and gave the necessary instructions to Gay:

“... learn to be a Manager, and pick up Languages as fast as you can, and get Aristotle upon Politicks, and read other Books upon Government; ...be a perfect Master of the Latin, and be able to learn everyting of the Court where you go” (Brewer, 2013).

The abundant use of imperative verbs in the quotation above is an example of teacher-student stratification of their relationship. And Gay, like a faithful pupil, followed his schooling and conveyed his gratitude. Swift, proud of his success, received those thanks and went on to accomplish his teaching role:

“You begin to be an able Courtier, which I know from two Instances, first for giving me thanks for your preferment, to which I only contributed by saying to Dr Arbuthnot and Mr Lewis that I wished it. Secondly, for wheedling My Ld treasr with an Epigram, which I like very well,...” (Nokes, 2014).

However, Gay's intoxication with the pleasure of his diplomatic mission soon nauseated him due to a great disappointment. Like Swift, Gay's political desires for promotion did not know any fulfilment. Gay, as a man of literary prestige, once wrote a series of verse fables, known as *Fables*, to a four-year-old prince with the hope of receiving a considerable preferment, but only the post of gentleman usher to a two-year-old prince was offered to him. Gay, having felt the contemptuous nature of this offer, standing on his dignity, rejected it daringly.

It would be worth mentioning that the political figure behind almost all of Gay's disappointments in occupying a proper official post, except for some cases which were due to his own ill luck, was nobody except Walpole, who was to be blamed for setting up obstacles in the path of Gay's promotions. Therefore, a piercing hatred towards the cruelty of the court and the betrayal of the board of ministers got deeply rooted in his soul like his political master, Swift. However, Gay also decided to let his anger break “...at the End of a Pen” (Christensen, 2018) as Swift did. That was how the composition of *The Beggar's Opera* began.

Consequently, Gay, as a literary figure, was brought up under the supervision and close care of two political and poetic patrons, Swift and Pope respectively. Naturally, Gay's literary work, which satirized politics, knocked down those of his masters and the effectiveness, bitterness, immediacy of its impact and success of *The Beggar's Opera* surpassed the fame and literary qualities of *The Dunciad* (by Pope) and *Gulliver's Travels* (by Swift):

“The Beggars Opera hath knocked down Gulliver; I hope to see Popes Dullness knock down the Beggars Opera, but not till it hath fully done its Jobb,” (Stilwell, 2010).

This was Swift's prediction which never came true because the sixty-two performances of *The Beggar's Opera* in the first season smashed all previous records.

It deserves well to consider that Swift and Pope were fully equipped with their tact and skills, gained in the passage of many years, compared to young John Gay with his immature literary and political competence. But having received the proper education from professional masters, little Gay stroke a great many blows against the contemporary literary and political corruption, which was much more severe than his masters. Therefore, in addition to the vital task of rescuing literature from the quagmire of Grub Street, the swamp of party writers and slough of court flatters and the sincere endeavours of its members in opposing political, religious, educational and cultural corruption, they could prove their positive impact in educating one another, especially John Gay, whose success was greatly indebted to the training he received from his friends.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Italian Opera

A thorough study of Italian opera had so far been intentionally suspended in order to spare time for John Gay, as the young admiral of literature, having his troops positioned under the command of Peachum and Macheath and his singers represented by Polly and Lucy, ready to launch his major attack against foreign literary invasions (Feldmeyer, 2017).

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Europe witnessed a vast and rapid expansion of Italian opera among the fashionable society of its capital cities. The cultural merchandise of Italy was swiftly occupying the art marketplace of Europe. Italian composers were being exported to the courts and palaces in order to quench the thirst for fashion in the hearts of royal families. These foreign cultural invaders were being received as heroes and

champions in the territories occupied by literature.

"In early 1730 Metastasio moved to Vienna, where he took up the post of the imperial poet, succeeding Zeno" (Nedbal, 2016).

This new fashion in literature ruined and infected the social structure from its upper layers, and from thence, it sank down to aristocratic levels. At first, it was kings and queens who were contaminated with this European cultural plague; for example:

"The young German Johann Adolf Hasse (1699-1783) ...became a favourite of the future empress Maria Theresa" (Brewer, 2013).

In early eighteenth-century Europe, Rome, Venice, Vienna, Prague, Dresden, Hamburg and Paris were hosting Italian source operas in their theatres. London was not an exception. Royal Academy of Music in 1720, the Second Academy at the King's Theatre and Opera of Nobility in 1733 were successively inaugurated in order to provide more room for this new and alien but exotic genre in English literature. The motto of these institutions, especially that of the Royal Academy of Music was: "...Encouragement of Operas" (Stilwell, J. (2010). In this regard, the unrelenting efforts of young George Frideric Handel (1685-1759), who was a German, should not be underestimated. Handel, a German, landed in the vacant literary territory of England as the music director of the Academy, holding the banner of Italian opera.

"... (Handel) scored a decisive triumph on his first visit to London in 1711 with his *Rinaldo*. This opera was revived many times during Handel's years in London" (Barthes & Battestin, 2016).

The flourishing function of an Italian opera heavily depended on the proficiency of its singers, so native actors, actresses and singers could not make a contribution to opera due to their incompetence in the Italian language. Therefore, Handel was sent to Italy "...to recruit the best available artists" (DelDonna, 2016) in Italy. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that Handel was sent to import these artists. Consequently, famous Francesca Cuzzoni, Faustina Bordoni and Sensino were lured to London with a salary ranging from £2500 to £2000 for a season. If this sum of money for one-fourth of a year is compared to £150 per year for Gay's position, one can easily understand what a fabulous amount it was. Rich decorations, expensive costumes and lavish styles can be added to these awesome salaries in order to find out the budget consumption of Italian operas. This was happening to a war-clouded country in which begging was a profession; brothels were swarming with poor and cheapest prostitutes, and gin houses were spilling over with drunkards who thought alcohol was "the readiest relief from the squalor of life..." (Hischak, 2011).

Serious opera had some limitations of its own. It belonged to the upper, wealthy classes because of its luxuriousness. It dealt with "...the more exalted human passions in figures from ancient history..." (Menei, 2013) as its subject matter. The language of serious opera employed more literary vocabulary in terms of its literary tone, so training its executants was not an easy profession.

Gradually, some comic episodes were added to serious operas which consisted of a sub-plot carried on among a few servants. These comic episodes were performed in front of the curtain while the serious scenes were still enjoying the embellishment of the main enriched scenery; "...these comic interpolations came to be called intermezzi" (Christensen, 2018). In the second decade of the eighteenth century, full-length comic opera, which was later on called 'opera buffa', developed alongside the intermezzi and was performed as an independent work of art. The language, subject matter and even the costume of the actors of comic opera were close to everyday life; therefore, it had a relaxed atmosphere; it was less expensive to produce and it cost much less to attend (Jerzak, 2016).

Again, like serious opera, comic opera moved from its birthplace, Italy, to the rest of Europe. In France, Théâtres de la Foire was known for comic opera and in 1715 'Opéra-Comique' was established in Paris. Between 1718 and 1729, players from Théâtres de la Foire visited London. It is believed the original idea of *The Beggar's Opera* could have come from this French model either through the intervention of Swift or it directly inspired Gay himself.

After having talked, in brief, about the emergence and invasion of the Italian opera, the appreciation of Gay's strategy in the manipulation of comic opera against serious opera – as corruption with a foreign source as well as his contemporary domestic political, cultural, social corruptions – becomes more appropriate. The young admiral or better to say, our Peter Pan, rightly chose Polly and Lucy from low social class to engage in a fight with its outward literary appearance with Cuzzoni and Faustina of high social class in which not only the two Italian singers were forced to leave England in the same year, but the domestic corruption was terribly beaten as well. The dissolution of the Royal Academy of Music in 1728 which was established for the promotion of Italian opera, could be judged as an appropriate result of record-breaking performances of *The Beggar's Opera*. So, the smell of early conspiracy

against Gay's play can be detected from his letter to Swift dated 20 March 1728:

"The Beggar's Opera hath now been acted thirty-six times, ... there is a discourse about the town that the Directors of the Royal Academy of Music design to solicit against it's being play'd on the *outlandish* Opera days," (Brewer, 2013).

2.2 Literary Background

Although Italian opera was the main front of literary corruption for Gay, as his major work, *The Beggar's Opera*, suggests, other humiliating issues in relation to literature seemed agonizing and unbearable for him also. Like his literary friends, Pope and Swift, or perhaps more than them, Gay was very much concerned and greatly worried about the new epidemic of public tastelessness and inelegancy in accepting and welcoming inferior and despicable materials in the name of noble and exalted literature. In a letter to Swift, four years before the publication of *The Beggar's Opera*, Gay took a splendid stand in support of ancient literature and sided himself with it:

"Everybody is grown now as great a judge of Musick as they were in your time of poetry... People have now forgotten Homer, and Virgil and Caesar." (Barthes & Battestin, 2016)

This sentence reminds one of Swift's intention in having the ghosts of Homer and Aristotle called from death in Gulliver's third voyage, where Homer and Aristotle were complete strangers among their commentators whose manners and conducts had caused both Homer and Aristotle 'all out of patience. Gay believed that Homer, Virgil and Caesar were aliens among public obsessed by ostentatious likings and cursed with pompous preferences. In his play, *The Beggar's Opera*, Polly is the only character who has fallen in love. In the eighth scene of the first act, Polly reveals her love for Macheath, which is higher than 'honour or money' for her. Immediately after, a bombardment of scornful accusations from her parents kept addressing her. Then, Mrs. Peachum pointed her finger at literature for Polly's love: "Those cursed Play-books she reads have been her ruin." (Act I, Scene X). This statement by Mrs. Peachum proves that conservative-minded people always place blame for the happening of immorality or deviation from the norm among the youth on newer forms of art, culture, literature etc. Mrs Peachum's present statement has a parallel in what Mrs. Malaprop in William Congreve's *The Way of the World* says about the circulating libraries and their circulation of newly-published novels, then a fashionable and new form of literature: "The circulating library in a town is a diabolical tree of knowledge." In scene twelve, Polly made a shoddy confession of her love. Lucy's shoddier confession, embellished with animal imagery, comes afterwards in Air XL:

"I like the Fox shall grieve,
Whose mate hath left her side,
Whom Hounds, from morn to eve,
Chase o'er the country-wide,
Where can my lover hide?
Where cheat the wary pack?
If Lover be not his guide,
He never will come back!" (Act III, Air XL)

If these poor-quality love confessions and the limited quantity of passages given to it were compared to the poetic handling of love in literary tradition inherited from Shakespearean plays and sonnets and handed over through Spenserian "Epithalamion", the insufficiency and insignificance of it in *The Beggar's Opera* become apprehensible even though this much of it was also intolerable in the social context of the play as well as in the context of the eighteenth-century England.

2.3 Economic Background

Either after having gained a substantial amount of wealth by his *Beggar's Opera* and *Polly* in his middle age or before that, in his youth, struggling to receive a pension, Gay can be categorised as a businessman involved in poetry. If such a categorization is allowed, Swift can be seen as a politician and a religious man drawn into literature while Alexander Pope can be seen as a conscious poet responding to the corruption of all kinds surrounding him. Therefore, in the study of Pope's works, literary issues are of more importance whereas in the study of Swift's works political issues were given a larger portion as well as an additional section to religious ones and in the study of Gay's works economic issue is added to other issues.

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If rationality and the faculty of reasoning of mankind determine one’s size in Gulliver’s world, the lack of wit, but the pretence of having it makes Pope announce that he was the perpetual inhabitant of the Kingdom of Dullness, whereas wealth and richness ensure one’s destiny in Gay’s world. Therefore, the practicality of Gay’s world that originated from his materialistic point of view gives way to the construction of a fictitious world in which having or lacking in money becomes a measure of one’s social stratification. Thus, the spirituality of Dean’s attitude, the literariness of Pope’s approach and the materialistic outlook of Gay are the three-dimensional (3-D) portrayal of a creature called man.

The majority of the letters written to Swift by Gay have financial issues raised in them. Gay tried to fulfil his fraternal duty towards Swift by taking care of Swift’s money and its interests while Swift was away from London. On the other hand, Swift shouldered the responsibility of taking care of his younger friend, Gay, by assuring a convenient income for him. Swift’s recommendation of Gay to men in power continued from the very beginning of their friendship. It could be said that their intimacy grew stronger whenever Swift helped Gay in his preferment. On 13 February 1723, five years before Gay became rich, Swift wrote to Charles Ford:

“Why will they not give poor Gay Employment. This a wofull Case to be under the necessity of writing a Play for Bread when perhaps a Mans Genius is not at that time disposed of (Gay’s tragedy, *The Captives*, had just been produced). I am sure it is an ill way of making a good Poet” (DeDonna, 2016).

‘Writing for Bread’ is a precise expression, to sum up Gay’s literary career. It appears Gay invested much of his talent in literature in vain in order to gain financial benefits. Gay, in his *Beggar’s Opera*, confesses his annoyance at the hardship that one has to undergo to receive a pension.

“Is there any power, any force that could tear me from thee? You might sooner tear a pension out of the hands of a Courtier, a fee from a Lawyer, a pretty woman from a looking-glass, or any woman from *Quadrille*. –But to tear me from thee is impossible.” (Act I, Scene XIII)

The practicality of business life weighs one’s relationship with others on the basis of the interest that one can gain. Self-interest comes first. Love, family, filial, parental or matrimonial ties, sympathy or enmity, are measured by ‘gain’ factors. How much one can gain from his wife, daughter, friend or enemy seems to determine the level of amicability or hostility of one’s relationship with them. In Gay’s world ‘gaining’ determines the looseness or the tightness of social relationships. In the Air ‘O the Broom’, Macheath wishes to grab his love avariciously as a greedy man:

“The Miser thus a shilling sees,
Which he’s oblig’d to pay,
With sighs resigns it by degrees,
And fears ’tis gone for aye” (Act II, Air XVIII)

The taboo of irreconcilability of two heterogeneous concepts of poetry and economics is artistically knocked over by Gay in *The Beggar’s Opera*. The hardship of such a task might have been the mystery behind all his previous unsuccessful literary attempts. Therefore, Swift’s literary portrayal of political and religious corruption and Pope’s depiction of literary and cultural dishonesty seem to be uncomplicated targets compared to the fatiguing efforts necessary for Gay’s portrayal of economic corruption. Swift’s protest of Wood’s Coinage Patent and Pope’s annoyance at the poverty substantiates their awareness of the malfunctioning of the economic system of the English society. However, the artistic yoking of these concepts has proved to be difficult, which Gay could handle flawlessly.

2.4 Social Background

Swift, except for some short, scattered passages in all his works, did not spend much of his talent on marriage, married life or familial issues. Neither Swift in the real world nor his Gulliver in the fictitious one was a committed husband or father. Swift's undisclosed marriage with Stella and secret flirtations with Vanessa do not provoke any smell of seriousness in the maintenance of family ties. Similarly, Gulliver's brief allegiance towards his family in the intervals of his voyages deprived him of any right to either comment explicitly on the importance of the family bond or referred to it implicitly. The three brothers' marriages mentioned in *A Tale of a Tub* with proud, covetous and ambitious wives are not so inspiring at all.

In *The Beggar's Opera*, the concept of womanhood is allied with whores, sluts, guilt, crime, stealing, profit, cheating, gold, business, wench, prostitutes, fools, tavern, brothel, rogues and sex. Polly is encouraged to take care of her self-interest, "make the most of her beauty" (Act I, Scene IV), "to be mercenary" (Act I, Scene VII), to toy and trifle with the customer in the way of business and think about "The comfortable estate of widowhood" (Act I, Scene X) after the death of her husband. Her duty as a wife is solely limited to "...support the expense of a husband, hussy, in gaming, drinking and whoring..." (Act I, Scene VIII). The comparison between the encouraging tone of Monica's poetry and the scornful nature of Gay's drama first reveals the severe setting of family bonds in the then West and secondly depicts different approaches of two discrete cultures to a single issue – the importance of family as the fundamental institution of every society either in the West or in the East.

Pope placed husbands in the category of lapdogs and they might have agreed among themselves that Gay would better invert the equation and come forth with a novelty in the social riddle of then England. Gay associates women with whores and wine: "Women and wine should life employ" (Act II, Scene I), "... very good to their whores, but ...very devils to their wives." (Act I, Scene IV) or "money, wife" (Act I, Scene IX). Finally, Pope's perception of the deficiencies in familial ethics from a paternal perspective, accompanied by Gay's inferences of the maternal role in the collapse of family union, provides critics with almost a complete picture of parenthood in eighteenth-century England half of which was given about husbands in *The Rape of the Lock* and the other half was occupied by wives in *The Beggar's Opera* – "Whore and Rogue they call Husband and Wife" (Act I, Scene I).

Psychologically, the rituals and ceremonies such as weddings, birthday parties, wedding anniversaries, welcome or goodbye parties, graduation ceremonies, new year celebrations held during one's lifetime in the framework of one's family structure inspire joy and happiness. The inhalation with the hope of living, an inclination towards vitality and a tendency for being and continuing to be alive are embedded in all these rites. Therefore, one's existence and survival are always celebrated with festivity and through such festive occasions, hopes for the continuation of one's life are strengthened. The presence of such a bright horizon in a family life results in the commitment, dedication, loyalty, devotion, assurance and obligation of its members towards one another, whereas the thought of death blackens one's rejoicing; its presence deadens one's hopes and any allusion to death blockades even the weakest source of happiness.

The world that Gay portrays in *The Beggar's Opera* is full of death images. 'Hang or be hanged' and 'kill or be killed' were the laws of survival in this play. Almost everyone, by and large, closely escapes death in everyday life, but the continuous mentioning and repeated remembrance of death kill one before dying. Polly's life is to begin not with the hope of life, but with the fear of death. Peachum, more interested in the death reward of his would-be-son-in-law, Macheath, than in considering him as the love reward of his daughter, says: "...we should get the reward for his death sooner than a stranger" (Act I, Scene X). Like a bird of prey, he lives on the dead corpse of his species. It is his duty "to take Robbers" (Act I, Scene X) and not surprisingly, his wife's advice to his daughter is "Hang your husband, and be dutiful" (Act I, Scene X). Polly is asked to think about "The comfortable estate of widowhood" (Act I, Scene X) before even marrying the groom. The result of such a life intermingled with 'death wish' and overshadowed by fatality is nothing but whoring, faithlessness, discrepancy, disloyalty, deceit, dishonesty, betrayal, treachery and fraudulence from which not only the poor characters of *The Beggar's Opera*, but also the society of the eighteenth century England and Europe were suffering.

It appears Europe in general and Britain, in particular, have always been suffering from a lack of affection between married couples. Marriage seems to have been thought of as an external and unnecessary compulsion upon the sexual attraction and instinct pairing desires between two sexes. Husbands and wives have appeared to have got more of their lives and been happier if they had not been obliged to certain rules and conditions of mutual matrimonial responsibilities foreseen in the backbone of cultural and religious norms of any society under marriage as an institution. Therefore, Peachum's advice to his daughter Polly in *The Beggar's Opera* is a continuation of a cultural and social code conveyed in most of both ancient and recent English literary texts. He says:

“Do you think your mother and I should have liv’d comfortably so long together, if ever we had been married?” (Act I, Scene VIII)

Such a socially loose but individually comfortable relationship may have been preferable in terms of its rejoice affordable to both opposite sexes involved in the act of coupling, but at the end of the day it becomes a hazardous enterprise towards the social structure of a nation.

Looseness of relationship is, by and large, a characteristic of non-human creatures, while the sociality of human beings requires more discipline, order, and hierarchy of systematic attachment, which would enable a social organism to function properly and smoothly. Therefore, Gay's acknowledgement of the importance of marriage by having its ignorance satirically condemned through the precepts of thieves and 'Highwaymen' can be considered as a new version of Chaucer's gentle touching of the issue in *The Prologue*. Polly, the wife of Bath and Madam Eglantine, could be named as the victims of an identical social disorder. Moll Flanders in *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe, sexual approaches to Pamela in of Richardson's *Pamela*, Joseph, Lady Booby and the maid in *Joseph Andrews* by Henry Fielding, all the characters in *The Way of the World* by Congreve, Scobi, his wife, Louise, and Helen in *The Heart of the Matter* by Graham Green, Ellie Dunn, Hesione and Hector Hushabye in *The Heartbreak House* by Bernard Shaw, Stanley in *The Birthday Party* by Pinter, Ursula in *The Rainbow* by D. H. Lawrence, Marie, three Thames daughters and the typist in *The Wasteland* by T. S. Eliot can be seen as the old and new readings of the same communal anarchy. These codes seem to keep repeating themselves in the literary tradition of conscientious writers of all ages, either ancient or modern.

Marriage, as an institution, should be seen as a social challenge that, by and large, remained unsolved in the Western culture for the support of which poets indefatigably have been fighting in their writings, but without much hope of success. Political complications might have been deciphered immediately after being attacked, but in spite of the centuries-long commitment to this issue, West is still suffering from this social conundrum. Uncompromising adherence to the family structure as the topmost scheme and venture in the East is an 'Everest of Achievements' which every Westerner, especially their assiduous writers and poets, could have been envious of.

Such approaches towards life, with an understanding of coexisting from the concept, would lead not to the inversion but to the conversion of social norms and values. The context of robbery, theft and stealing would determine the true implications of conceptual words such as honour, reputation, bravery, education, leisurely hours, courage and valour. It must have left a shocking impact on high social class audience of John Gay's time to have a thief call himself and his gang members "A man of courage" (Act II, Scene IV), "a man of honour" (Act II, Scene IV), "My honour and truth to the gang?", "Have I ever shown the least marks of avarice or injustice!" (Act II, Scene II) etc. These terms were used only among upper classes who were involved in the hidden and scandalous activities which thieves committed openly.

Religion and spirituality are left untouched in *The Beggar's Opera*. The world of *The Beggar's Opera* is a godless one. The only mention of religion is a short and superfluous chat about the prison chaplain (the Ordinary) at Newgate. When God is marginalized in the social context of a nation, then the consequent result is that immorality, wickedness and corruption become inevitable, run amok and play havoc with that society. This is precisely what John Gay seems to hint at in *The Beggar's Opera* through the absence of God from the scene. It is the handling of this aspect of English society by Gay that, I think, could take him close to German philosopher Nietzsche who declared the Death of God a long time after Gay did it in his *Beggar's Opera*. This could also further serve as Gay's far-sightedness and right perception of the direction in which the English society moved in a certain period of time that Gay is talking of in his *Beggar's Opera*.

3. Methods

To accomplish the objectives of the current study, a descriptive method is utilized and several relevant sources and articles are taken into consideration.

4. Results and Discussion

John Gay, full of hopes, joys and ambitions, commenced his diplomatic mission in Hanover. Being designated to this post was not only a source of pride for his friends, but it was a sudden actualisation of what Gay had long dreamt for. Gay did not hesitate to call himself a diplomat, politician or foreign minister as soon as he landed in Hanover while he was just given the eighth or the lowest rank in the hierarchy of diplomats according to his own categorization. In a

letter dated 16 August 1714, which he did not know to whom he should send, Gay reveals his thought of preparing “a Dictionary of terms of state... useful for young Politicians” (Barthes & Battestin, 2016). This letter and the letters alike provide a strong stance to any claim on Gay’s immeasurable ambition and hasty delight to put his oar in political affairs and to blow his own trumpet of understanding politics and the capacity of performing it. The spring of Gay’s longing for politics was kept under the pressure of unstable political parties and personalities, especially Walpole, and once it was released in his literary writing, it bounced too high beyond estimation in *The Beggar’s Opera*.

The preparatory attacks on Walpole made in Swift’s and Pope’s works had laid the ground for the destructive satire of *The Beggar’s Opera*, because of which Gay was named as ‘the terror of ministers’. Gay’s assault on Walpole was launched on two different fronts: Walpole as the head of the political party then in power and Walpole as a lecherous individual.

George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, as is commonly accepted by now, allegorically denotes Russian Communism and its gradual deviation from the initial pious commandments. Similarly, Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera*, can also be interpreted as an allegorical depiction of the political situation of then England. In Orwell’s fictional world, pigs stood for the founders and the successors of Marxism whose nation consisted of dumb creatures such as horses, sheep, asses, cows etc. Orwell reduced an ideology to a farmhouse and humiliated it by equating its adherents with animals. Similarly, Gay degraded a kingdom to Newgate Prison and disgraced it by associating it with theft and pilferage whose monarchs were Peachum, a salesman of stolen goods and Lockit, a keeper of prison whose subjects were whores, drunkards, thieves, pickpockets, shoplifters and jailbirds.

Gay pushed forward the two real and dramatic worlds parallel to each other through an artistic amalgamation of real-world incidents with fictitious ones. In eighteenth-century England, justice was administered behind closed doors. Gay devoted both the opening and the closing scenes of *The Beggar’s Opera* to the malfunctions and deficiencies of the judiciary of then England. In the first scene, Peachum, an inborn thief and an active criminal who thinks of himself as a judge, lawyer and executive agent of justice, goes through ‘a large Book of Accounts before him’ and with the assistance of another thief, studies, the profiles of other thieves decides whether to ‘soften the evidence’ or to find them guilty and finally issues verdicts either of ‘saving them from Transportation’ or having “him peached like the next Session” (Act I, Scene XI). If the governing system fails to implement law and order, then individuals rise to fabricate their guidelines of themselves with fallacious evidence: “I know the evidence is in your power” (Act III, Scene XI).

In the last scene, another side of the ugly face of politics is shown. It was a fact that only laymen were punished for their crimes and nobles could easily escape the clutches of law and order machinery. Likewise, having refuted poetic justice, the Beggar, condemning ‘the way of the world’ facilitated Macheath’s release from the death penalty:

“Had the Play remained, as I at first intended, it would have carried a most excellent moral. ’T would have shown that the lower sort of people have their vices in a degree as well as the rich: And that they are punished for them” (Act III, Scene XVI).

However, Macheath, like the upper classes, ultimately managed to defeat righteousness. In doing so, the widespread sales of church indulgences were equally ridiculed.

The corrupt political situation of eighteenth-century England had bred a base species of mankind, ‘Child-getter’, whose profession was to impregnate convicted women to save them from being hanged. Even among animals such immorality is condemnable and also rare. The result of social bewilderment caused by the vacuum of authority and the pursuit of self-interest by ministers, courtiers and politicians rather than the pursuit of national interest was the emergence of some gangsters whose absolute power over the majority of the society superseded the power of even the then central government of England. Jonathan Wild, “...the most famous criminal of the period, the self-styled Thief-Taker General of Great Britain and Ireland” (Loughery, 1986), for whose fame Henry Fielding wrote a novel, is the inevitable product of the corrupt political system of the period. Depending on and having command over an underground world of murderers, burglars and criminals, Wild had gained a considerable influence over the ruling party as well as common people under the disguise of a respectful citizen to whom Gay refers by having Peachum confess:

“I expect the gentleman about this Snuff-box, that *Filch* nimmed two nights ago in the Park. I appointed him at this hour” (Act II, Scene X).

Like Wild, Peachum is supposed to return big-heartedly others’ properties that he had got them already stolen.

There are many direct allusions to the political corruption of the age in *The Beggar’s Opera*, for which Walpole, as

the Prime Minister of then England, must be blamed. Through these references and specificities, Gay manages to connect his dramatic world to the world outside and bridge up the gap between them. He refers to the brutality of political life by having Mrs. Peachum give advice: "he should leave them (lords) to prey upon one another" (Act I, Scene IV). The internal corruption of politicians' lives are commented as:

"If the girl had the discretion of a court lady, who can have a dozen young fellows at her ear without complying with one" (Act I, Scene IV).

The Volpone-like victimization of females for the sake of self-interest is stated as follows:

"My daughter to me should be, like a court lady to a minister of state, a key to the whole gang" (Act I, Scene IV).

Politics makes a man blind not only to the public who elect him to power but also to his own family members like wife and children:

"Why thou foolish jade, thou wilt be as ill we'd, and as much neglected, as if thou hadst married a Lord!" (Act I, Scene VIII)

There is an unspoken intrinsic understanding going on between corruptors either in power or out of power. It can also be referred to as 'the brotherhood of the wolves'. Lockit calls Peachum "brother Peachum" and continues to assure him of their mutual interest in the death of a man of their own breed: "...we are agreed. You have consented to go halves in *Macheath*" (Act II, Scene X). Not only do these wolves prey on their own species hard-heartedly, but they also do not have even the least possible clemency towards each other:

"-we shall be both losers in the dispute- for you know we have it in our power to hang each other... 'Tis our mutual interest" (Act II, Scene X).

The ties which bound men in power to each other can be encapsulated as their sense of being a source of mutual fear and interest to each other. They gain by their alliance and lose, even their own lives, by variance.

Another secret of their unity lay in the severance of others. A successful politician must follow the strategy of wiping out his rival party by having it splintered. Consequently, a political culture of betrayal is to be cultivated in the heart of public administration. Gay considers it as an unavoidable principle in running a country:

"...our employment may be reckoned dishonest because, like great Statesmen, we encourage those who betray their friends" (Act II, Scene X).

The devastating power of bribes has destroyed both the world of politicians and thieves:

"The fees (Garnish=the bribe demanded by jailers from newly-arrived inmates) there are so many and, so exorbitant, that few fortunes can bear the expense of getting off handsomely, or of dying like a gentleman" (Act II, Scene VII).

This again goes back to the principle of self-interest. The temptation of benefiting from the state of affairs makes a briber out of a politician and squashes the dignity of the post he occupies. The temporal limit of occupying a political post has been considered as an advantage for democracy, but the appeal for gaining more in a shorter period increases the possibility of one's indulgence in bribery and inducement. The widespread avarice and rapaciousness of the ministers and courtiers of Gay's time may have impelled him to refer to it as:

"Lest the Courtiers offended should be:

If you mention vice or bribe," (Act II, Air XXX)

The commonality of bribe and the high frequency of its occurrences in the communications of the upper-class society in the eighteenth century had created a euphemistic use of the word "bribe". The bribe was referred to as a 'perquisite':

"Your father's perquisites for the escape of prisoners must amount to a considerable sum in the year. Money well timed and properly applied, will do anything" (Act II, Scene XII).

It is emphasized in the following Air: "You must quicken the Clerk with the perquisite too" (Act II, Air XXXIII). Bargaining on bribe as merchandise was also barefacedly committed: "Perhaps, you have made a better bargain with him than I could have done" (Act III, Scene I). Giving and taking a bribe was practised to such an extent that the tainted political system of then England brought about the destruction of all confirmed ancient concepts of dignity and honour and began the construction of a new civilization based on new notions such as bribery and betrayal. Other concepts had, then, to attune with and adjust themselves to the "modern" interpretation of old values.

Gulliver prescribed a remedy for forgetfulness, one of the incurable diseases among ministers, in his third voyage. After meeting them, ministers must be given:

“...Kick in the Belly, or tread on his Corns, or lug him thrice by both Ears, or run a Pin into his Breech, or pinch his Arm black and blue; to prevent Forgetfulness” (Christensen, 2018).

Gay, apparently disappointed and fed up with their untreatable and, hence, incurable diseases, avoids and declines their friendship: “I am not a meer Court friend, who professes everything and will do nothing” (Act III, Scene IV). It is emphasized in the succeeding Air:

“The modes of the court so common are grown,
That a true friend can hardly be met;” (Act III, Air XLIV)

A beggar must have been chosen to be the imaginary composer of an opera for degrading the highness of the social class of Italian opera and ridiculing it. The poverty of poets, the poor conditions of their standards of living and their negligence by authorities could also be inferred by having a play written by a beggar writer. Whatever the reason, begging and beggars were the undeniable issues of the day to which Swift also alluded explicitly in his *Drapier's Letters* and *A Modest Proposal* and implicitly in his other literary works. The presence of begging as a profession in the social scene of a country connotes the defective, flawed and deficient governing system, which allows excessive accumulation of wealth in one section of society and produces scarcity of it in another. In such a context, as the consultation among the gang members in the first scene of the second act of *The Beggar's Opera* suggests: “We are for a just partition of the world, for every man hath a right to enjoy life” (Act II, Scene I), the embodiment of a group or a gang which wishes to fight for an equitable distribution of wealth by the application of 'Robinhood technique' gains legality. It is unbearable for conscious beholders to observe the panorama in which an excessive embellishment is applied to a luxurious but superfluous ceremonial coronation celebration of, perhaps, George II while the beggars, like an open wound of a society, are left unattended. Gay may have the intention to refer to the stolen goods robbed on the day of Coronation, but he could have been of aim to introduce the court as the ultimate factual burglar who robs the national wealth for an extravagant ceremony as such:

“The Coronation account, brother *Peachum*, is of so intricate a nature that I believe it will never be settled” (Act III, Scene V)

5. Conclusion

The political difficulty of eighteenth-century England is inventively and attractively caricatured through all the allusions mentioned above to politically-rooted corruption, bribe, and betrayal, whores and thieves in Newgate Prison's context. As the Prime Minister of then England, Walpole is implied to be blameworthy. As an individual who was said to have been in the audience for one of the early performances of *The Beggar's Opera*, Walpole himself was the second target of Gay's satire. Walpole's immoral indulgence in lust and lechery is continuously touched upon in the play. The audience was aware of the excessive indulgence in sensual pleasure of Walpole; so, when this couplet was sung in the Air: “If the heart of a man is deprest with cares, / The mist is dispell'd when a woman appears;” (Act II, Air XXI). Audience's awareness of its referent in the real world could have resulted in defaming Walpole, delighting the audience and adding to the satirical value of the play. He was also referred to as “The Cock by Hens” (Act II, Air XXIII). Public abhorrence of this political figure had brought about a widespread opposition towards him and generated a feeling among them that if they could get rid of him sooner, the better. Therefore, the satirical implication in the play made the audience feel sharp as never before that the unwanted existence of Walpole in the administrative affairs of the country was going to be extremely destructive: “Truly, if that great man should tip off, 'twould be an irreparable loss” (Act III, Scene III).

A very long time of his being in office, from 1708 till 1742 (i.e. for almost thirty-four years), made people refer to Walpole using many aliases. The most well-known alias for Sir Robert Walpole was “Bob Booty” (Act I, scene IV). He was also called as ‘Robin of Bagshot’, ‘Gorgon’, ‘Bluff Bob’ or ‘Carbuncle’. When Mr. Peachum was talking about the gang of thieves, he uttered the names known to the audience.

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