

## 'An Irregular Dog': Gay's Alternative Theatre

PETER LEWIS

*University of Durham*

The phrase is Peachum's. Near the opening of *The Beggar's Opera* this middle-aged, upwardly mobile, double-dealing proto-capitalist, who aspires to the condition of bourgeois respectability on the basis of highly successful criminality, consults his register of Macheath's gang in order to decide whether the current stock of thieves and highwaymen are still sufficiently productive and profitable to justify his continued protection. If not, he can profit from them in another way by trading them into the law for the forty pounds reward given for information leading to a criminal conviction. Peachum's monologue is echoed towards the end of the play when Peachum and his partner in crime, 'Brother' Lockit, are consulting 'the Coronation Account' (III. 5. 1), an inventory of stolen property obtained during the celebrations surrounding the coronation of George II in 1727. The resemblance between the scenes is a dramatic embodiment of Peachum's way of assessing everything in monetary terms, making no distinction between human beings and things because both are disposable commodities. One of the rogues Peachum considers as a suitable candidate for betrayal and 'a decent Execution against next Sessions' (I. 3. 1-2) is Wat Dreary, alias Brown Will, 'an irregular Dog, who hath an underhand way of disposing of his Goods' (II. 13-15).<sup>1</sup>

Despite the self-reflexive element in *The Beggar's Opera*, in which the supposed author, the Beggar himself, is incorporated into the play and finally agrees to a total reversal of his intended dénouement, it would be stretching credulity beyond breaking point to suggest that Gay was surreptitiously including a thumbnail sketch of himself in Peachum's description of Wat Dreary. Nevertheless, as a practising dramatist Gay proved to be, amongst other things, 'an irregular Dog' and there is a sense in which he did have 'an underhand way of disposing of his Goods'. If an important part of the 'Goods' of *The Beggar's Opera* is its acerbic political satire and attack on Walpole, Gay succeeded particularly well in 'disposing' of it in a suitably 'underhand way' so as to circumvent the possibility of censorship. In the scenes mentioned above, for example, Gay suggests a close resemblance

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Gay's plays are taken from his *Dramatic Works*, edited by John Fuller, 2 vols (Oxford, 1983), a major repository of scholarly information.

between the arch-criminal Jonathan Wild and the arch-politician Robert Walpole through the figure of Peachum, manifestly modelled on Wild but frequently hinting at the First Minister. The banning in 1728 of the planned production of *Polly*, Gay's sequel to *The Beggar's Opera*, can be interpreted as Walpole's own testimony to how 'underhand' Gay had been in the earlier play, creating a minefield of innuendo and irony beneath a seemingly innocuous surface. The 'underhand', or ironic sleight-of-hand, usually is a feature of Gay's 'irregular' plays.

As a friend of Pope and Swift, a member of the Scriblerus Club (the only one to commit himself as a writer to the theatre), and a defender of Augustan values Gay might have been expected to have championed the 'regular' five-act forms of comedy and tragedy as opposed to the upstart 'irregular' forms which had become an integral part of theatrical entertainment since the Bettertonian secession in 1695 and the advent of the afterpiece. Yet Gay was no diehard neoclassicist and seems to have been as aware as Pope of the irony of his cultural situation: that in the eighteenth century the successful realization of the traditional forms most highly ranked in the neoclassical classification of genres (epic and tragedy), and therefore most desirable to create, was virtually impossible except in such radically mutated transformations as mock-epic. The great Augustan epic is an inverted epic, *The Dunciad*, an epic of negation. Throughout his twenty-year career as a dramatist Gay wrote 'regular' and 'irregular' plays, but he singularly failed to bring to any of his 'regular' work the originality and verve that characterizes the best of his 'irregular' work; in this he was not restrained by dramatic convention and formal propriety, and could invent his own structures to give free rein to his talent for satire, irony, burlesque, parody, and pastiche. Indeed, one of Gay's chief claims to fame is that with his masterpiece *The Beggar's Opera* he created a new dramatic form, the ballad opera, which was enormously popular in the ensuing decades and had a lasting effect on the development of comic opera and music theatre.

Gay's first attempt at tragedy, *Dione*, is a very literary effort written in rhyming couplets, and it was not performed, although there is some evidence to suggest that a production was planned at Drury Lane in 1720. In that year Gay published this 'Pastoral Tragedy' in *Poems on Several Occasions*, a more appropriate destination than the stage for what is a dramatic poem rather than a poetic drama. His other venture in the genre, *The Captives*, did reach the stage in 1724, and with its exotic and heroic ingredients is a much more theatrical piece. Even so, *The Captives* is an unexceptional and routine tragedy of the period, and is open to the criticisms of contemporary tragedy made by Gay himself nine years earlier in his admirable burlesque play *The What D'Ye Call It*. *The Captives* is one of the many Restoration and Augustan tragedies at which Fielding pokes fun in his first sustained burlesque of tragedy, *Tom Thumb* (revised as *The Tragedy of Tragedies*). In writing tragedy Gay seems to have been unable to avoid all the dangers he was acutely

conscious of in the work of his contemporaries. Gay's 'regular' comedies, the two substantially different versions of *The Wife of Bath* (1713 and 1730) and the posthumously produced *The Distress'd Wife* (1734, published 1743), have won few admirers because of their obvious weaknesses in structure, characterization, and stylistic consistency, but they do provide more compensations than his mediocre tragedies.

The comedies nevertheless confirm that Gay's imagination was not fully stimulated by 'regular' forms, needing instead for its full engagement, as some of his best poems confirm, a friction arising from the collision between opposed elements, such as pastoral and mock-pastoral in the non-dramatic *The Shepherd's Week*, or romance and anti-romance in *The Beggar's Opera*. Gay thrives on the tension of paradox and ambiguity, the linguistic uncertainties and reversals of irony, the interfaces where contraries meet (*town* eclogues, a *beggar's* opera, a *tragi-comical* farce), and 'regular' forms inhibited this potential. Apart from his tragedies and comedies Gay wrote eight works for the stage, including a brief libretto for Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, described in the first edition of 1732 as 'An English Pastoral Opera' and in the second edition of 1739 as 'A Serenata: or Pastoral Entertainment'. The remaining seven works constitute the 'irregular' portion of his dramatic canon (*The Mohocks*, *The What D'Ye Call It*, *Three Hours after Marriage*, *The Beggar's Opera*, *Polly*, *Achilles*, and *The Rehearsal at Gotham*), although *Three Hours after Marriage*, published as a three-act play but divided 'into five Parts in the Representation' by 'the Players in Compliance with the Taste of the Town', according to Gay's 'Advertisement' in the 1717 edition, suggests that the distinction between 'regular' and 'irregular' is not absolute. When editing the play for the Augustan Reprint Society in 1961 John Harrington Smith preferred the five-act 'regular' version even though this did not appear in print until the Dublin edition of *A Supplement to the Works of Alexander Pope* in 1758. Despite Smith's ingenious arguments, few scholars would endorse his eccentric judgement, and most would accept the 'irregular' text as the authorized version.

Gay calls attention to the irregularity of his first play, *The Mohocks* (1712), by labelling it a 'Tragi-Comical Farce', a generic mixture liable to reduce any right-thinking neoclassicist to apoplexy since tragicomedy itself violated the doctrine of the strict separation of kinds. The dedication to one of the most dogmatic and influential critics of the day, John Dennis, is insultingly ironic. Calling his play a tragedy, Gay claims to have rigidly adhered to Dennis's theoretical prescriptions concerning both form ('the exactest Rules of Dramatick Poetry') and content ('*Horrid and Tremendous*') and to have modelled his own work on Dennis's tragedy *Appius and Virginia* (1709), but *The Mohocks* is a short rollicking farce in three scenes, the first of which burlesques the pretentiousness of contemporary dramatic poetry, including Dennis's. Gay even turns the failure of his play to reach the stage to satirical advantage when he claims that 'I am not at all concern'd at this *Tragedy's*

being rejected by the Players, when I consider how many of your immortal Compositions have met with no better Reception'. The description on the title-page of the play being 'Acted near the Watch-house in *Covent Garden*' is a jokey reference to the action of the play itself.

It is tempting to dismiss *The Mohocks* as mere prentice work, a lightweight afterpiece which did not even achieve a production despite its topicality, but Gay was to some extent experimenting with the possibilities of mock-heroic and burlesque in a theatrical context, as he had earlier done in a purely literary context with the mock-heroic of his quasi-Miltonic poem *Wine* (1708). For Gay, the yoking together not of heterogeneous ideas but of discordant subjects and styles proved to be particularly rewarding, since it could function in two directions simultaneously, transforming the subject while also fracturing the style. *The Mohocks* therefore prefigures the most interesting developments in Gay's career as a playwright, which culminate in *The Beggar's Opera* itself.

*The Mohocks* deals with an adventure of a gang of London rakehells, currently known as Mohocks after the visit to England in 1710 of four Mohawk Indian chiefs from North America. After capturing the City Watch the gang accuse them in front of magistrates of being Mohocks. This subversive reversal is mirrored in the first scene, though not in the other two, in the discrepancy between the hoodlum activities and criminal aspirations of the Mohocks and their high-flown rant, as in the opening speech by Abaddon:

Thus far our Riots with Success are crown'd,  
Have found no stop, or what they found o'ercome;  
In vain th'embattell'd watch in deep array,  
Against our Rage oppose their lifted Poles;  
Through Poles we rush triumphant, Watchman rolls  
On Watchman; while their Lanthorns kick'd aloft  
Like blazing Stars, illumine all the Air.

The first two lines parody Maximin's opening couplet in Dryden's *Tyrannick Love* (1669), but the entire speech, with its elaborate rhetorical patterning, skilfully burlesques the ponderously inflated idiom of much contemporary tragedy (*Appius and Virginia* included) by incongruously applying it to a 'low' subject. Gay sustains this mock-heroic discrepancy between style and subject in the Mohocks' burlesque oath-taking ceremony, during which the gang swear allegiance to their 'most High and Mighty Emperor' and promise 'That we'll to Virtue bear invet'rate Hate, | Renounce Humanity, defie Religion' (1. 44, 46). The swearing of solemn oaths is a commonplace of contemporary drama from Lee and Otway to *Appius and Virginia* itself, in which the conspirators jointly vow to kill Appius.

Gay has some fun at the expense of the tragic pretensions and grandiloquent verbiage of his contemporaries in this scene, but his reversals suggest another possible satirical dimension. In applying a high style to low

characters Gay not only fractures the style but also transforms the subject. The hooligans paradoxically acquire some of the dignity of the heroic world, and the result is a disquieting indeterminacy. If hooligans can sound like heroes, might it not be the case that heroes actually behave like hooligans? The band of Mohocks, presented as an assembly with its own emperor, strict protocol, and standards of conduct, foreshadows in some respects Macheath's gang. The New Mohock's respectful greeting to the Mohock Emperor, 'Great Potentate' (1.29), anticipates the ironic reversals in *The Beggar's Opera*, such as 'great Man' repeatedly applied to Macheath, but in *The Mohocks* Gay does not develop the potential of his two-way irony as he was to do later. In any case Gay abandons blank verse for prose after the first scene, and with the introduction in the second scene of the City Watch, recalling *Much Ado about Nothing* in particular but also *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Mohocks* takes a different, more Shakespearian, direction.

In his next 'irregular' play Gay went one better than in the case of *The Mohocks* by adding pastoral to his generic potpourri: *The What D'Ye Call It* (1715) is a 'Tragi-Comi-Pastoral Farce'. The deliberate blending and blurring of the kinds results in tragedy designed to provoke laughter and also having a happy ending in accordance with the conventions of comedy; farce tending towards pathos; and pastoral defying the conventions of pastoral. One of Gay's three important poetic works between *The Mohocks* and *The What D'Ye Call It* is *The Shepherd's Week* (1714), a series of eclogues in which he creates a typically ambivalent uncertainty. At one level *The Shepherd's Week* operates as burlesque, mocking Ambrose Philips's anti-neoclassical *Pastorals* (1709), but Gay's poems also transcend burlesque to make an original contribution to the genre. Gay's shepherds and shepherdesses function as antitypes to those of Philips, but still manage to possess their own validity, independent of their burlesque purpose. In *The What D'Ye Call It*, which contains a number of verbal echoes of *The Shepherd's Week*, Gay achieves something similar.

The 'Preface' to the play is a more elaborate and sustained exercise in irony than either the dedication to *The Mohocks* or the 'Proem' to *The Shepherd's Week*. Following Swift's example in *A Tale of a Tub* Gay adopts the persona of a modern writer who claims his 'Tragi-Comi-Pastoral Farce' to be a major development in dramatic art because it fuses all the different genres into a completely new form. On this basis Gay's 'mask' or invented author can defend the work against any criticism by demonstrating that objections to it arise from a failure to understand this new type of all-embracing yet totally fluid drama, in which the same episode can be interpreted in terms of tragedy, comedy, pastoral, or farce: hence the open title. The attempt by Gay's 'persona' to justify his methods is utterly confused and specious, and amounts to a Swift-like undercutting of 'modern' pretensions.

Gay himself is not, of course, offering *The What D'Ye Call It* as a major step forward in serious drama. As in *The Mohocks*, he is particularly interested in

the burlesque potential of generic mismatching, but the play is significantly different from more purely burlesque works, such as Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* (1671) and Fielding's *Tom Thumb* (1730) and *The Covent-Garden Tragedy* (1732). Buckingham's framing device, involving the rehearsal of a much-interrupted inner burlesque play, serves to ridicule the author Bayes and to reinforce the satire of the Restoration heroic play. Fielding's two mock-tragedies have no framing device, and although dissimilar in tone both remain securely within the boundaries of parody and burlesque. In *The What D'Ye Call It* the minute frame play surrounding the uninterrupted performance of the inner play has little to do with burlesque and is a fragment of pseudo-Shakespearian comedy. Some of the mixed group of rural characters (with such comic Shakespearian names as Jonas Dock and Peter Nettle) who are preparing to stage a play for their social superiors resemble the unsophisticated 'mechanicals' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The parallelism between the frame play and the much more substantial inner play, in which the central pair of lovers who eventually marry are acted by a couple who are themselves married at the very end, creates an interest in the interaction between the characters of the frame and the roles they perform in the inner play. This means that an audience sees through the roles to the characters behind them, so that the roles, although primarily burlesque, do achieve a dramatic existence not circumscribed by their burlesque purpose. Deprived of the frame, the inner play would be more purely burlesque than it is. The playful 'Prologue' to the inner play indicates that Gay was well aware of the ambiguity:

This Comick Story, or this Tragick Jest,  
 May make you laugh, or cry, as you like best;  
 May exercise your Good, or your Ill-nature,  
 Move with Distress, or tickle you with Satyr.

(1. 5)

Pope records that his deaf friend Cromwell, 'hearing none of the words and seeing the action to be tragical, was much astonished to find the audience laugh', and also that 'the common people of the pit and gallery received it at first with great gravity and sedateness, some few with tears; but after the third day they also took the hint, and have ever since been very loud in their clapps'.<sup>2</sup>

Written in rhyming couplets, the inner play gives the superficial appearance of sombre seriousness and tragic intensity, but as in the first scene of *The Mohocks* there is a mock-heroic discrepancy between style and subject. By citing the numerous passages from tragedies since the late 1670s either parodied or alluded to in the inner play, the anonymous *A Complete Key to the Last New Farce The What D'Ye Call It* (1715), usually attributed to Lewis Theobald and the actor Benjamin Griffin (although it may have been an

<sup>2</sup> *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, edited by George Sherburn, 5 vols (Oxford, 1956), 1, 282-83.

ironic Scriblerian venture involving Gay himself), illustrates how closely Gay adheres to the rhetoric and stock situations of contemporary tragedy, especially the 'pathetic' variety: from Banks's *The Unhappy Favourite* (1681) and Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* (1682) to Philips's *The Distrest Mother* (1712) and Rowe's *Jane Shore* (1714). But for the court and city settings and the aristocratic and mythological personages of contemporary tragedy Gay substitutes a humble rural milieu and a collection of low-life characters, such as servants and soldiers. In the mouths of peasants the tender sentiments, torments of love, and spiritual anguish of high-born characters sound ludicrously incongruous, so that what in a serious play was supposed to tug at the heart-strings becomes a source of mirth. Gay's mockery is directed at all the facile methods, involving melodramatic situations and tear-jerking rhetoric, used by contemporary tragic dramatists intent on moving their audiences and providing at least a lump in the throat and, if possible, a good weep. Falsely accused by Dorcas of making her pregnant, and ordered by the Justices either to marry her or be forced into the army, Filbert rejects her with the grandiose rhetoric and vocabulary of a tragic hero: "'Tis false, 'tis false — I scorn thy odious Touch' (I. 1. 5). His true love, Kitty, responds to his fate with a promise of selfless loyalty and devotion which resembles those appeals to the emotions that in pathetic tragedy are intended to arouse moral admiration for virtuous actions and qualities, but the deliberate bathos of the final couplet is especially effective in transforming pathos into something risible:

Yes, yes, my *Thomas*, we will go together;  
 Beyond the Seas together will we go,  
 In Camps together, as at Harvest, glow.  
 This Arm shall be a Bolster for thy Head,  
 I'll fetch clean Staw to make my Soldier's Bed;  
 There, while thou sleep'st, my Apron o'er thee hold,  
 Or with it patch thy Tent against the Cold.  
 Pigs in hard Rains I've watch'd, and shall I do  
 That for the Pigs, I would not bear for you?

(I.1.73)

At one level Gay's characters are antitypes of those in contemporary tragedy, just as they are antitypes of the nymphs and swains of Golden Age pastoral. Yet at another level they possess a reality which relates to the actual world of tenant farmers, impressed soldiers, corrupt magistrates, and rural hardship; they belong to contemporary England, not to literary pastoral. Gay seems to be implying that their sufferings, however amusingly portrayed, are more genuine than the factitious ones of tragic heroes and heroines.

The inner play is built around two incidents: the forcible separation of the lovers, Kitty Carrot and Thomas Filbert; and the preparation for the execution of an army deserter, Timothy Peascod, who is Dorcas's brother. Parallels to both these situations abound in tragedies of the period, and they

are usually scenes of highly-charged emotions aimed at arousing pity and tears. Where Gay differs totally from the tragic stereotypes is in his burlesque reversal of the usual outcome: in his comic dénouement the lovers are happily reunited and Peascod is saved by an unexpected reprieve, a device prefiguring the last-minute rescue of Macheath from the gallows in *The Beggar's Opera*. As burlesque the inner play is so successful because it constantly recalls well-known scenes from contemporary tragedies. The rivalry between Dorcas and Kitty over Filbert alludes to that between Octavia and Cleopatra over Antony in Dryden's *All for Love* (1677) and also to that between Statira and Roxana over Alexander in Lee's *The Rival Queens* (1677). Kitty's sad speeches resemble Andromache's lachrymose outpourings in *The Distrest Mother*, while Kitty's and Filbert's declarations of love are similar to those of Belvidera and Jaffeir in *Venice Preserv'd*, and their farewell scene (partly adapted from Hobnelia's monologue 'Thursday', the fourth of the eclogues in *The Shepherd's Week*) recalls those of Essex and his wife in *The Unhappy Favourite*, of Oroonoko and Imoinda in Southerne's *Oroonoko* (1695), and of Hastings and Alicia in *Jane Shore*.

The same is true of the part of the play that is concerned with Peascod awaiting death, which has analogues in many plays of the period, including *The Unhappy Favourite*, *Venice Preserv'd*, *Jane Shore*, and Banks's *The Albion Queens* (1704). The mock-heroic distance between Peascod's trivial delinquencies and his sober remorseful language produces a superb burlesque of the maudlin and didactic speeches of penitence common in the dénouements of pathetic tragedies:

O Fellow-Soldiers, Countrymen and Friends,  
 Be warn'd by me to shun untimely Ends:  
 For Evil Courses am I brought to Shame,  
 And from my Soul I do repent the same.  
 Oft my kind *Grannam* told me — *Tim*, take warning,  
 Be good — and say thy Pray'rs — and mind thy Learning.  
 But I, sad Wretch, went on from Crime to Crime;  
 I play'd at Nine-pins first in Sermon time:  
 I rob'd the Parson's Orchard next; and then  
 (For which I pray Forgiveness) stole — a Hen.

(II. I. 5)

Yet Peascod, like Kitty and Filbert, survives his burlesque function to emerge as an appealing figure in his own right. The scene between Peascod and his illegitimate daughter Joyce does burlesque a stock-in-trade device of the dramatist intent on producing very touching scenes: the introduction of defenceless and innocent children, leading to extended reconciliations between erring parents and forgiving children. Octavia's gambit in *All for Love* to win back Antony by sending her two young daughters to him is a seminal example. But the non-burlesque level is near the surface in Joyce's lines about her upbringing, in which she exposes the corrupt reality that frequently underlies the righteous appearance of parish charity ('our

Church-Wardens | Feast on the Silver, and give us the Farthings' (II.4.13)), just as it is at the opening of the inner play with its attack on the petty officiousness and inhuman severity of country justices. *The What D'Ye Call It* contains more than a few traces of the social criticism more fully embodied in *The Beggar's Opera* and *Polly*.

As one of the finest plays in the Restoration and Augustan burlesque tradition, *The What D'Ye Call It* thoroughly deserved its popular success on the eighteenth-century stage. Despite its originality, Gay's next play, *Three Hours after Marriage*, enjoyed only a short-lived *succès de scandale*. This work bears little relation to its 'irregular' predecessors, its hallmark being extravagance and exaggeration rather than subtlety and obliqueness. Gay wrote the play in collaboration with Pope and Arbuthnot, two other members of the Scriblerus Club, but both the 'Advertisement' in the 1717 edition and a letter from Gay to Pope written after the first production in January 1717 suggest that Gay was the major contributor. As the sole dramatist of the triumvirate Gay seems to have been responsible for the narrative and the total dramatic conception, while Pope and Arbuthnot provided some of the Scriblerian satire. Nevertheless, it was probably Pope's participation which provoked the play's noisy reception during its Drury Lane production, the actors having to contend with choruses of hisses. In the same year John Durant Breval, using the pen-name of Joseph Gay, published a satirical account of the production in the form of a short farce, *The Confederates*.

Although *Three Hours after Marriage* does contain burlesque elements these differ considerably from the ironic mock-heroic of the two earlier 'irregular' plays, being situational and theatrical rather than verbal and literary. The plot supports a superstructure of wide-ranging satire and personal invective in true Scriblerian style. The palaeontologist and physician John Woodward, who had accused Pope and Gay of plagiarism, is mercilessly ridiculed as the foolish doctor, Fossile. The eccentric poet Lady Winchelsea is caricatured as Fossile's niece, Phoebe Clinket, who is busily writing an abysmal verse play, *The Universal Deluge*. John Dennis, the victim of Gay's irony in the dedication to *The Mohocks*, is portrayed as Sir Tremendous, 'the greatest Critick of our Age' (I. 382), who demolishes Clinket's 'monstrous', 'abominable', and 'execrable' play (II. 501, 537, 538) but is himself as much a satirical butt as she is. Such personal attacks can, however, be interpreted generally as well as specifically. Clinket represents a certain type of writer, by no means restricted to the female sex. Similarly, the treatment of Sir Tremendous satirizes obsessively doctrinaire and inflexible criticism as well as Dennis's personal mannerisms. Through the pseudo-scientific preoccupations of Fossile the authors make typically Scriblerian attacks on false learning and misdirected intellectual energy. *Three Hours after Marriage* is plainly a dramatic satire, foreshadowing Fielding's dramatic satires of the 1730s, but it is also a grotesque comedy, full of quasi-surreal humour derived from an unorthodox burlesque method.

The action of the play largely concerns the attempt by two beaux, Plotwell and Underplot, to cuckold Fossile during the three hours after his marriage to the notoriously licentious Townley, whom he naïvely believes to be an innocent. The two lovers are competing with each other to be the first 'horner' of Fossile and even have a bet on the outcome. *Three Hours after Marriage* resembles the kind of farcical intrigue-comedy written by Thomas D'Urfey, Edward Ravenscroft, and Aphra Behn in the late seventeenth century and by Colley Cibber and Susannah Centlivre in the early eighteenth century, and in their 1961 edition of the play (in the Lake Erie College series (Painesville, Ohio)) Richard Morton and William M. Peterson point to parallels with Shadwell's *The Virtuoso* (1676), D'Urfey's *Madam Fickle* (1676), Behn's *The Emperor of the Moon* (1687), and especially Ravenscroft's *The Anatomist* (1696). Yet the names Plotwell and Underplot provide a direct hint that the action of the play is a deliberately exaggerated burlesque version of the typical intrigue-plot, not a routine example of it. The role of Plotwell is a satirical personification of the overloaded intrigue-plots, replete with implausibilities and farcical actions, which minor dramatists of the time relied on to generate comedy. Underplot has a similar burlesque role, embodying comic subplots and episodes which interrupt the unfolding of the principal narrative without adding anything of consequence to it. Contemporary comedy was much harder to burlesque than tragedy, partly because its prose idiom was far less vulnerable to parodic criticism than was blank verse aspiring to the sublime. Gay consequently concentrates his burlesque on the plot mechanics of his targets.

The burlesque of intrigue-plots opens with a zany episode involving a series of forged love letters to Townley, organized by herself in order to dupe her old and jealous husband with a cunning double-take. The use of letters for complicating the action is a conventional device in comedy, but Gay here uses exaggeration to make fun of the excessive reliance by some contemporary dramatists on what had become a dramatic cliché. The ensuing attempts by both Plotwell and Underplot to gain access to their shared mistress Townley amount to an equally zany burlesque of the deceptions, disguises, concealments, and narrow escapes common in intrigue-comedy, especially in the treatment of amorous exploits. Plotwell's first ploy to enter Fossile's house is as a Polish doctor, but he is interrupted by Underplot in search of treatment for a feigned illness; foiled in his attempt on Townley, Plotwell decides to cure his rival with a red-hot poker, but Underplot makes his escape unharmed. Plotwell then has himself brought to Fossile's house in a large chest, but has to be rescued by Townley and hidden under her voluminous petticoats when Fossile rushes home after receiving a tip from Underplot about the contents of the chest.

The burlesque reaches its climax when Plotwell and Underplot disguise themselves as a mummy and an alligator and are delivered as new additions to Fossile's museum, in which Townley is now locked, supposedly to keep

her safe. The visually bizarre wooing of Townley by the mummy and the alligator is interrupted by yet another unexpected return by Fossile, this time with his fellow doctors, Nautilus and Possum, to examine the new 'specimens'. The surprised lovers pretend to be museum pieces until the scientists decide to probe them with a sword and a rusty knife. This prompts Plotwell and Underplot to resurrect themselves, but they are again saved from detection by the ingenuity of Townley, who manages with Clinket's assistance to concoct a plausible explanation for the presence of a living mummy and a human alligator: they belong to a dramatic masquerade which Clinket has supposedly been rehearsing. The play then ends with a burlesque of intrigue dénouements, as coincidences, unexpected arrivals, last-minute confusions, misleading confessions, and startling reversals follow one another helter-skelter. The dramatist Clinket comments, reflexively, that the events of the three hours after the marriage have provided her with 'the Plot for a Comedy' (III. 548), although 'comedy' is a bland description of *Three Hours after Marriage* itself, a farcical satire which transcends farce by burlesque exaggeration of even some of the absurd excesses of the form.

After *Three Hours after Marriage* exactly eleven years elapsed before Gay's next 'irregular' play, *The Beggar's Opera*, reached the stage in January 1728, but between then and his early death four years later he was very active as a dramatist, writing two more ballad operas, *Polly* and *Achilles*; another 'irregular' play, *The Rehearsal at Gotham*; a new comedy, *The Distress'd Wife*; and a revision of his early comedy *The Wife of Bath* so radical as to be almost a new play. So much scholarly energy has been expended on *The Beggar's Opera* that any further analysis is likely to be superfluous, no more than yet another restatement of familiar arguments. What does need to be said here is that *The Beggar's Opera* is the complete vindication and triumphant climax of the ironic and mock-heroic approach to burlesque which Gay developed in *The Mohocks* and especially in *The What D'Ye Call It*. The title itself is ironic to the point of paradox, because 'opera' at the time meant the elevated and stylized form of Italian opera with which beggars could have no possible link. Gay broadly adheres to both the form of Italian opera (three-act structure, overture, dances, plentiful supply of music and songs, though not continuous as in opera itself) and its usual content (love story, rivalry of two women over one man, prison scenes, poisoned cup, hero awaiting death, arbitrarily imposed happy ending). Through the Beggar's main speech in the short 'Introduction' preceding the overture Gay ironically draws attention to the resemblances: I have introduc'd the Similes that are in all your celebrated *Operas*: The *Swallow*, the *Moth*, the *Bee*, the *Ship*, the *Flower*, etc. Besides, I have a Prison Scene which the Ladies always reckon charmingly pathetick. . . . I have no Recitative: Excepting this, as I have consented to have neither Prologue nor Epilogue, it must be allow'd an Opera in all its forms. (I. 16)

Yet Gay actually turns Italian opera upside-down by using pre-existing tunes (mainly popular ballads) rather than elaborate and specially composed

music, and by substituting a low-life narrative of criminals, rogues, and whores set in contemporary London for the exalted figures of classical antiquity and mythology prevalent in Italian opera. In no other work is Gay's yoking together of contradictory elements so extreme, so daring, and so successful. This topsy-turvy treatment of Italian opera generates burlesque, but the burlesque turns itself inside-out to create a level that completely transcends burlesque. *The Beggar's Opera* is not just a mock opera but an alternative mode of opera or music theatre, soon to be known as ballad opera, English rather than Italian and comic rather than solemn.

Gay's characters are burlesque antitypes of those in Italian opera, Macheath paralleling such heroes as Alessandro in Handel's opera of that name about Alexander the Great, while Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit are the equivalents of the two women, Rossane and Lisaura, who battle over Alessandro. At the same time these antitypes are low-life characters in their own right, possessing a dramatic reality divorced from their significance as burlesque figures. This process of transformation is evident in *The Mohocks* and *The What D'Ye Call It*, but is taken a stage further in *The Beggar's Opera*, so that total unawareness of the operatic burlesque is no hindrance to enjoyment and appreciation of the play. In terms of Italian opera and conventional romance Macheath is an anti-hero, but he acquires something like heroic stature in Gay's alternative type of opera and alternative romance of the underworld. He is the unconventional hero of an unconventional form of drama. For a criminal to behave operatically as Macheath does when, for example, he exclaims to Polly 'Suspect my Honour, my Courage, suspect any thing but my Love' (I. 13. 12), or when he says to Ben Budge and Matt of the Mint 'But we, Gentlemen, have still Honour enough to break through the Corruptions of the World' (III. 4. 16), clearly amounts to ironic burlesque of opera itself, but the irony bounces back to undermine the 'honourable' conduct of the upper classes and those in government and the respectable professions, who are considered to be 'gentlemen'.

Through such reversals Gay builds up the social and political satire that pervades *The Beggar's Opera*. The ironic identification of thieves and businessmen, highwaymen and the military, criminals and politicians, Jonathan Wild and Robert Walpole is finally made explicit by the Beggar in the penultimate scene when he agrees to the Player's request to substitute a happy ending for the tragic one he originally intended, with all the characters hanged or transported: 'Through the whole Piece you may observe such a similitude of Manners in high and low Life, that it is difficult to determine whether (in the fashionable Vices) the fine Gentlemen imitate the Gentlemen of the Road, or the Gentlemen of the Road the fine Gentlemen' (III. 16. 18). In this scene, as elsewhere, mockery of operatic conventions ('in this kind of Drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about' (I. 12)) goes hand-in-hand with social satire.

Gay arrived at ballad opera by burlesquing Italian opera, but once established the new genre could continue as an alternative form of music theatre without resorting to any burlesque at all. Even *Polly* (1729), written soon after the unprecedentedly successful first production of *The Beggar's Opera*, confirms this point, although Gay's sequel is not completely devoid of burlesque interest. The 'Introduction', with its jibes at the notorious touchiness of operatic singers, seems to promise an extension of the burlesque of *The Beggar's Opera*, but *Polly* fails to fulfil this. Like most sequels *Polly* is disappointing, and after the rich ambiguities and subversive ironies of *The Beggar's Opera* it seems one-dimensional. Symptomatic is the title itself, stressing the heroine as in conventional romance and consequently not arousing any of the disorientating uncertainties that the title of its predecessor does. By moving the action to the exotic setting of the West Indies Gay forgoes the satirically fruitful blending of high and low life possible in the London of *The Beggar's Opera*. Instead there is a more straightforward and sentimental contrast between noble savages and corrupt Europeans.

The treatment of Macheath is in keeping with this major change. In *The Beggar's Opera* he is an inverted hero, an attractive and sympathetic anti-hero, but in *Polly* he is a conventional villain whose death by hanging seems appropriate, whereas in the earlier play it would have produced what the Player calls 'a down-right deep Tragedy' (iii. 16.8). Furthermore, Macheath appears only in disguise as a black, Morano, who leads a group of pirates, so that continuity with the character of *The Beggar's Opera* is largely negated. *Polly* is now associated with the exemplary Indian prince, Cawwawkee, rather than with Macheath, who is married to one of the whores, Jenny Diver, who betrayed him to Peachum in *The Beggar's Opera*. Burlesque in *Polly* is principally to be found in a couple of scenes (ii.4 and ii.9) where Morano is torn between 'love' and 'honour' in the well-worn way of protagonists in the Restoration heroic play and subsequent tragic drama. Morano's dilemma is a parody of the conventional one because what he calls love is his lust for Jenny, while his honour, like the glory he seeks, refers to his leadership of the pirates in their predatory attacks. Without the sustained burlesque of *The Beggar's Opera*, so crucial to its multi-layered irony and to its delicate balance between sentiment and satire, *Polly* emerges as a much more sentimental and morally orthodox play, at least as concerned with embodying admirable standards of behaviour in idealized characters as with satirizing departures from them.

Gay's third ballad opera, *Achilles*, produced posthumously in 1733, is more lightweight and farcical than its two predecessors, lacking their incisive social and political satire; but in it Gay explores a mode of heterogeneous yoking different from mock-heroic in order to create a burlesque friction between contraries. *Achilles* is a comic retelling of the mythological story about Achilles's life on Scyros concealed as a woman, and therefore has a close affinity with the line of classical travesty that descends

from Scarron's mid-seventeenth-century French burlesque of the *Aeneid*, *Le Virgile travesti*. Scarron's influential work, with its challenge to neoclassical orthodoxy, created a vogue for burlesque debasement of the classics, subjecting the original narrative and characters to a low treatment. After the Restoration in 1660 a number of English poets followed Scarron's example, notably Charles Cotton in *Scarronides*. Most classical travesties are poems, not plays, but as early as 1663 Sir William Davenant devoted the final act of his comedy *The Playhouse to Be Let* to a burlesque playlet about Caesar, Antony, and Cleopatra. In 1674, after making a serious translation of Seneca's *Thyestes*, John Wright published a burlesque version in crude Hudibrastic couplets, *Mock-Thyestes*, which closely travesties the original. John Durant Breval incorporated into his comedy *The Play Is the Plot* (1718) a fragment of burlesque tragedy called *Andromeda*, based on the love story of Perseus and Andromeda; he subsequently extracted a very popular afterpiece, *The Strollers*, from the comedy by isolating the inner play and the surrounding scenes about the travelling actors who perform it. The only ballad opera before *Achilles* to be a classical travesty is *Penelope* (1728) by John Mottley and Thomas Cooke, a low burlesque version of Odysseus's return home to his faithful wife at the end of the *Odyssey*. All these classical travesties in dramatic form are also in verse, whereas *Achilles* follows the pattern of *The Beggar's Opera* and *Polly* in being mainly in prose with only the interspersed airs in verse.

Because contemporary tragedy, opera, and pantomime often employed classical stories, a classical travesty in dramatic form could also be a satirical burlesque of one or more of these genres, although in most cases the travesty exists for its own humorous sake rather than for this other purpose. An important exception is Fielding's burlesque of pantomime, *Tumble-Down Dick* (1736), in which the parodic mockery of a representative pantomime, William Pritchard's popular *The Fall of Phaeton* (1736), which contains a solemn presentation of the mythic narrative, takes the form of a classical travesty. In *Achilles* Gay does have some fun, more than in *Polly*, at the expense of opera and tragedy, but this is intermittent rather than sustained, as in a similar and exactly contemporary ballad opera, Breval's *The Rape of Helen* (1733). The lack of systematic burlesque or close parody in both plays is an important reason for their genial playfulness and lightheartedness. The deliberate vulgarity of some classical travesties is conspicuous by its absence.

The entire action of *Achilles* derives from the mistaken identity and sex of Achilles when his mother, the goddess Thetis, disguises him as a girl, Pyrrha, and lodges him in the court of Lycomedes and his wife Theaspe in an attempt to prevent his going to the Trojan War. Violently attracted by Pyrrha, Lycomedes plans to bed 'her', causing the jealous Theaspe to try to outmanoeuvre her lustful husband by arranging a speedy marriage between Pyrrha and Periphas. Theaspe employs her daughter Deidamia to spy on Pyrrha, but this scheme backfires when Deidamia discovers the truth about Pyrrha and becomes pregnant by him.

In the characteristic way of classical travesty Gay undercuts expectations by a process of inversion, but this is the opposite of the mock-heroic technique used in other of his 'irregular' plays and is a new departure for him. The incongruity in *Achilles* arises not from a low subject receiving an elevated treatment but from an elevated subject receiving a low treatment. Characters from mythology and epic appear as comic stereotypes. Lycomedes and Theaspe squabble and bicker like married couples in many Restoration and Augustan comedies. Lycomedes's rakish attempts at seduction and even rape are thwarted not by the overpowering virtue of the intended victim, as they would be in 'exemplary' or 'sentimental' drama, but by Pyrrha's superior physical strength. Achilles tries to evade his responsibilities towards Deidamia after impregnating her, much as Macheath does his own towards Lucy in *The Beggar's Opera*. Obsessed with his honour, Ajax is no more than a stupid and puerile bully.

The reduction of superhuman classical heroes to human proportions reflects obliquely on the sublime presentation normally accorded such characters in both opera and tragedy at the time. Yet there are far fewer parallels here to the stock situations of Italian opera than there are in *The Beggar's Opera*, so that burlesque of the genre is implicit rather than explicit. The most successful fusion of classical travesty and dramatic burlesque occurs at the end of the play in an amusing version of the hero's internal struggle between love and honour, previously burlesqued by Gay in *Polly* but most famously ridiculed in Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* when Volscius conducts the debate in terms of whether to wear his boots or take them off. On one side of Achilles is Deidamia, representing love, and on the other, embodying honour and glory, are Ulysses, Diomedes, and Agyrtes, the three Greek leaders who unmask him and are determined to bring him to Troy as soon as possible. One sound of the trumpet is enough to drive all thoughts of Deidamia out of Achilles's mind ('How I burn for the Fight' (III. 10. 104)), yet one glance at her suffices to reverse the process ('Hence, Fame and Glory. Love wins the Day' (I. 111)), which is in turn reversed by another blast on the trumpet. These instant transformations make Achilles resemble an automaton responding to whatever stimulus is provided, not a great hero struggling to resolve a mental, emotional, and moral conflict.

Presumably because it is measured against *The Beggar's Opera* and deemed inferior, *Achilles* has attracted little attention, but it is a polished piece of farcical comedy and a lively stage play. Gay is inventive in developing the comic potential of all the misunderstandings, confusions, and dramatic ironies inherent in the plot. Lycomedes's determined wooing of Pyrrha, during which he mistakes 'her' desperate attempts to calm him down as the usual tricks of women to stimulate erotic excitement and drive men to sexual aggression, is particularly effective in theatrical terms. In comparison Gay's other posthumously published 'irregular' play, *The Rehearsal at Gotham*, generates little dramatic impetus, although it does exhibit his unflagging

talent for ironic ingenuity. This short one-act satire has never been performed and did not appear in print until 1754, more than twenty years after Gay's death. Despite its title the play does not bear any resemblance to Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* and contains no burlesque elements. *The Rehearsal at Goatham*, derived from the episode of Peter and his puppet show in *Don Quixote*, but transported to England, is partly about a projected performance of a puppet play at Goatham, but Gay focuses almost entirely on the reactions of the town corporation to a situation they interpret as a threat to their authority and dignity. When the puppet play is presented in outline to the assembled aldermen and their wives, in the final scene, all the ridicule is directed at them in their capacity as a self-appointed board of censors, not at the inner play itself.

Most of Gay's irregular plays, including *The Beggar's Opera*, have a topical range of reference, even if they also attain universality. *The Rehearsal at Goatham* is no exception, but its topicality, unlike that of *The Beggar's Opera*, is not transmuted into perennially interesting and provocative drama. In the later play there is no deliberate mismatching of form and content, and so none of the unsettling ambivalence and uncertainty which help to give *The Beggar's Opera* its permanent contemporaneity. The satire in *The Rehearsal at Goatham* is much more the be-all and end-all of the play, as Peter's final emphasis on 'Exposing Knaves and Fools' (10. 259) suggests, although by using a mode of allegory Gay succeeds as usual in being subtly tangential rather than vituperatively direct.

With its caricature of Robert Walpole as Sir Headstrong Bustle *The Rehearsal at Goatham* is partly an anti-Walpole lampoon in the wake of *The Beggar's Opera* and *Polly*, but more specifically the play is Gay's response to the government ban on the production of *Polly* in 1728, and possibly also to Colley Cibber's appointment as Poet Laureate in 1730. Cibber, who was thought to be involved in some way in the action against *Polly*, is satirized as Jack Oaf. Gay himself appears in the guise of Peter, while John Rich, who staged *The Beggar's Opera* at Lincoln's Inn Fields, is identifiable as Broach. The allegory operates in terms of both the London theatre world and contemporary political life, and indeed ties the two together. The attack on the ultra-sensitivity of Walpole's Whig government is cleverly articulated through the paranoid responses of Sir Headstrong and his appropriately-named associates, including Braywell and Sir Nathaniel Ninny, to the completely innocuous puppet show, which they grotesquely misrepresent as subversive propaganda, a veiled yet full-scale assault on themselves. Although there is no evidence of a production being planned before Gay's death the result might well have been the ironic one of a play about the suppression of a play itself being suppressed by government interference. *The Rehearsal at Goatham* is one of Gay's lesser plays, but it again illustrates the imaginative freedom which 'irregular' forms allowed him. All his dramatic successes belong to this alternative theatre.