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**John Gay's *Trivia* and *The Beggar's Opera*: Capitalism, Identity, and The Lost
Eighteenth Century Found**

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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
of the City College of City University of New York.**

December 9, 2013

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Prof. Gustafson for his care, guidance, and expertise in assisting with this thesis. I owe my interest in all things eighteenth century to his inspiring teaching.

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Introduction

The Beggar's Opera is undoubtedly John Gay's masterpiece. The seminal 1728 Newgate pastoral gave birth to the ballad opera, an alternative to its Italian counterpart in the use of traditional and contemporary tunes, political allusions, and acerbic social commentary; it also allowed Gay a spotlight beyond Scriblerian shadow. Twelve years earlier he gave us *Trivia: Or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London*, a mock-georgic with its own claim to notoriety. The cleverly disguised how-to guide illuminated a path through the alleys of St. Giles, introducing us to a singular London street cast. It remains surprising that the two texts are rarely compared; both represent eighteenth-century views of the city, the concept of which was rapidly changing as England achieved global prominence after the Glorious Revolution in 1688. An accompanying Financial Revolution further propelled the country into an economic future newly dependent on personal credit, national debt, and a capitalistic need to succeed. The new liquidity of money, redistribution of wealth from a landed-hierarchy to a growing citizenry, and the production and increasing influence of marketable objects dramatically changed the concept of eighteenth-century identity. Traditional social codes and relationships, thrown in flux by this cultural shift, were no longer reliable in determining personal or national identity.

Gay and his fellow Scriblerians, the prominent Tory satirists that included Jonathon Swift and Alexander Pope, were at all times concerned with exploring this uniquely eighteenth-century identity crisis. Ideologically rooted in a Roman classicism of traditional morality, incorruptible community, and substantive intellectualism, the group

viewed incumbent capitalism as utterly destructive to these ideals, and a stark departure from an idyllic past. The new economy reduced literature and learning to currency, both now marketable endeavors drained of meaning, while social relations were confused by a proclivity for self-interest that left one unable to gauge surface from truth. Perhaps the most disastrous effect of these changes for Gay and his literary confidants was the lost value of cultural community, impossible in an environment where rampant acquisitiveness made such identity both worthless and inaccessible.

Indeed, Gay's career as a satirist was consistently devoted to exploring the instability of identity that defined a generation (Freeman 16). Particularly in his two great works on the city, he never wavers in identifying the cause of this crisis: a new capitalism that in its promotion of greed and currency created an isolative individualism that threatened authentic personal identity and cultural connections. The perception of identity as a thing that may be lost, found, and altered was itself a revolutionary concept after 1688— John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* had ignited debate in defining the self as "changing, episodic, and multiple, held together only by consciousness" (Palmeri 335). This was counter to the traditional, theological assumption of the "self as substance," namely, identity as a permanently defining trait (Fox 11). The dual concepts of a static self dependent on history and of consciousness as central to the existence of personal identity are crucial in making meaning of Scriblerian satire¹. For Gay, identity is constructed on past experience and conscious choice: elements threatened by a financial system lacking historical perspective and discouraging substantive culture. As I later suggest, Gay contends that it is only by asserting this concept of identity that commercial culture may be marginalized.

Both the *Opera* and *Trivia* find Gay increasingly dismayed with the inauthentic, morally suspect self and its cause: an economic struggle for either prominence or survival that encouraged isolationism over community and commodification before intellectualism. As the epicenter of a new financial world, the rapidly-growing city provided the perfect setting for exploring the loss of “substance, depth, consciousness, and self-consciousness” that accompanied cultural decline (Freeman 16). Gay’s Newgate and St. Giles are populated by the morally ambiguous social archetypes that define an age lacking the sanctity of an idealistic past so revered by the Scriblerians. Self-interest motivated modern identity, making it illusory, trivial, and highly deceptive. The same incumbent capitalism that toppled traditional values and systems— the removal of monarchial landed men from power, the placement of literature in bookstalls for the consumption of the masses, and the allowance for the prominence of stockjobbers and politicians— also caused the loss of the substantive self.

In what follows, I will argue that Gay, to express his view of incumbent capitalism as destructive to a traditional ideal, re-appropriates genre to reflect both the decline of culture and the potential for its rebirth, resulting in an alternative portrait of an author typically described as solely a “satirist of the decline of culture” (Ames 199). The manipulation of genre was a trademark of Scriblerian satire; Gay’s genius in this has certainly been given its due consideration in modern criticism (Quintero 217). Genre provides a kind of artistic means of identification; as Lisa Freeman notes in a study of identity and character on the English stage, “the ‘rules of fixity’ that we depend upon for interpreting and understanding character... derive first and foremost from that epistemological frame of reference we call genre” (43). As Freeman importantly

contends, “Like any other institution, genres bring to light the constitutive features of the society to which they belong... they also have the potential to adapt to and address new social needs and anxieties” (44). Gay views genre, imbued with this epistemological power to identify and reflect its time, as a means to showcase both the crisis and cure for the unstable eighteenth-century identity. In *Trivia*, his urban georgic is a genre under the pall of capitalistic commodification. A once meaningful didactic genre has been commodified into a popular guide to traversing the streets, and in expectation of a modern-day didactic, his mainstream audience misses his satiric intent entirely. Here genre reflects the eighteenth-century moment, at the mercy of an insipid cultural decline, and made empty by literary commodification. In *The Beggar’s Opera*, Gay does much the opposite, replacing the ostentatious, senseless Italian opera of the day with fully-accessible popular ballads. With his *Opera*, Gay intends a return to generic depth that may be understood and shared. In this communal experience he hopes to reflect a new age of substantive identity. My approach suggests new insight into Gay’s generic strategy, and changes a critical conversation which has consistently allowed Gay only a satirical (and typically Scriblerian) view of eighteenth-century identity in flux. This novel exploration of Gay’s belief in cultural rebirth and the power of identification in overcoming a degenerative capitalism asks for reassessment of not only Gay, but perhaps of the eighteenth-century Augustan canon for strategies which seek to quell cultural decline through classicism and community.

Gay and the Scriblerians

Gay has been historically undervalued as a minor member of the Scriblerus Club, a less-talented friend of Swift and Pope whose works are wholly collaborative. Modern

criticism has rightly worked to establish an independent Gay: From Sven Armens' 1954 *John Gay: Social Critic*, which asked us to reevaluate Gay on the merits of his contemporary criticism, to David Nokes' extensive 1995 biography *John Gay: A Profession of Friendship*, many authors have worked to remove this tendency to underestimate and misattribute his work, a charge that plagued him throughout his lifetime. Gay's biography is certainly nothing if not singular. Well-equipped to comment on his historical moment, Gay was an orphaned apprentice who rose to prominence with a distinctly capitalistic drive. He fell under the spell of commodity culture as surely as those he criticizes; a costly investment during the South Sea Bubble left him also as financially vulnerable. Gay spent the majority of his professional and personal life pandering to aristocracy in the hope of court preferment and financial relief. These facts seem utterly contradictory to his life's work— while decrying the commodification of literature, he yearned to benefit from the very economic system he credits with cultural decline. Yet it this contradiction that distinguishes Gay from Pope and Swift. He never recedes from his apparent hypocrisy, always reminding us that despite a firm belief that financial success comes at the price of virtue, he too surrenders to its temptations. As often as he laments cultural decline, Gay is constantly at pains to define himself as a working author, fully recognizing his own complicity in its continuance. It is this self-implication that sets Gay apart; rather than instruct or preach, he seeks answers with everyone in this struggle to locate authentic identity in the new economy.

The Scriblerians, a literary group of wits at the pinnacle of their creativity in 1714, were Gay, Swift, Pope, John Arbuthnot, and Thomas Parnell.² The five shared literary tastes, Tory political loyalties, and a satiric vision for revealing the pretensions of

what they viewed as a new, shallow eighteenth century. In characterizing the club however, it is not the nature of the satire, but rather a particular idealism that remains most representative. Scriblerian ethic is located in a classical, traditional past, one that championed virtue, intellectualism, independent thought, and community—in its perfection a world possible only through nostalgia. Although the fragmentary work of the Scriblerians never admits that the existence of such a utopia is possible, as the eighteenth century moved farther from this ideal, their satiric anxiety was palpable (Brückmann 4). Patricia Brückmann describes of the Scriblerian ethos thus: “The group was in many ways out of step with its own time and much more attuned to ancient and traditional images of felicity, and to ancient authors who subscribed to these values, as well as to a satiric spirit and method to be displayed when these values were menaced” (4). Elements of society that threatened these “images of felicity,” namely a complexity of mind and generosity of purpose synonymous with Augustan ethic, were first and foremost the targets of Scriblerian literary attack. The machinations of the commercial city were therefore perfect fodder for Gay and his friends, their ideal “perpetually threatened by the monstrous corruption of uncivilized cities” (Brückmann 4). More specifically dangerous was a particular product of the city, a character nourished by a new marketability of learning and social pragmatism: the eighteenth-century pedant. *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* was the long-running collaboration of the club, written during 1713–1714 and finally published with Pope’s works in 1741. The *Memoirs*, of which only a single book was completed, detail the life of Martinus, reared in the same Seven Dials district of *Trivia* and facetiously educated to speak upon every subject without actually knowing much at all. Surely Pope himself best describes its inspiration: “The design of the

Memoirs of Scriblerus was to have ridiculed all the false tastes of learning, under the character of a man of capacity enough that had dipped in every art and science, but injudiciously in each” (Spence 10). The goal of the club then was to satirize the changing eighteenth century, the economically influenced values of which compromised the authenticity of literature, the nature of education, and the relationship of humanity to an authentic world.

Trivia

Trivia begins with an Advertisement, written sardonically by Gay to his critics, who have shown him the distinct honor “hitherto only shown to better Writers: That of denying me to be the Author of own Works.” Clearly Gay was well aware of his status as a chronically underappreciated member of the Scriblerians. More telling is the epigraph which opens the *Art of Walking the Streets of London*, a quotation directly from Virgil’s *Eclogue 3*, “Non tu, in *Triviis*, Indocte, solebas/Stridenti, miserum, stipula, disperdere Carmen?” (Was it not you, Master Dunce, who was always mangling your wretched song on your screeching pipe at the crossroads? (Morton Braund 151).) Virgil’s context involves a petty exchange of insults between two country peasants, perhaps a self-effacing remark by Gay on his own “screeching” at the crossroads of *Trivia*. More importantly, as Susanna Morton Braund relates, John Dryden (the author of the influential 1697 translation of Virgil’s *Georgics*) had cited this passage in an assertion of Virgil’s satiric impulse (152). Gay’s aptly named “Advertisement” therefore immediately reveals a multi-leveled intention in *Trivia*: for the popular marketplace, this is an “art-of” didactic advertised, and for those with knowledge of the Augustan canon, a nod to Virgilian satire. As Gay well expected, the majority of his mainstream audience, finding

Trivia in bookstalls among other guides (as he specifically requests their placement in the poem (“Let my Labours obvious lie,/Rang’d on thy Stall, for ev’ry curious Eye”), were ignorant of the satire’s finer points (II 565–566). *Trivia* was most often reviewed by its contemporary critics exactly as it appeared on the surface— as a lively guide to navigating the perils of city streets. One such reviewer, James Heywood, had high praise for its practicality:

I walk, in winding Alleys, Streets unknown,
 And lose my Way in this great Hive, the Town,
 By thy Directions, I shall fear no Ill,
 No Panick Terror shall my Bosom fill:
 Whilst I walk Streets, thy Precepts I’ll imbibe,
 Trivia shall be my Convoy, and my Guide (Brant 108).

Trivia guides the reader through the many wonders and perils of eighteenth-century London. Book I recommends the implements needed for such a task (shoes, coats, and canes among them) and ways to determine weather conditions. This may seem obvious enough, but not so here, as weather patterns in the epicenter of economy are concurrent with market transactions rather than natural signs. Book II instructs on city navigation during daylight hours, when the bustling marketplace and the working poor must be heeded most; how to determine days of the week and seasons are also included, again matters solely reliant on the market. Book III reveals the city at night, a place of pickpockets, prostitutes, and rakes, providing tips on surviving unscathed. In all three books, amid warnings, recommendations, and advice, we find the mingling of every manner of citizen jostling for a financial foothold.

Trivia is guided by the unnamed Walker, purportedly an expert in negotiating the physical and social mysteries of St. Giles. Superficially, the Walker brims with confidence in his well-rounded knowledge of classical literature and common street life. While being well-acquainted with both the higher and lower classes, he still manages to maintain a suitable superiority over each. He discourages the useless equipage of the fop, shunning wealth that encourages ostentation. He remains too above the lower class throng— his advice largely consists of how to avoid the filth produced by the working classes, and his constant deployment of classical literary references belies an elevated self-importance (Sherbo 1064). Thus the Walker fashions of himself a curiously detached spectator, free from both the trappings of wealth and also from the need to work for a living (Carter 29). Gay too then has created a guide designed for mass-appeal by detaching his protagonist from universally maligned associations: conspicuous wealth and abject poor. Yet the Walker's obvious disengagement and apparent hypocrisy in championing authenticity only to deign contact with the working classes provides a clue that *Trivia* is not the simple navigational didactic it appears. Still, the best proof of satiric intent is in the details. A careful reading of the Walker's continually bungled classical allusions to Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and others reveals a humorous absence of literary depth; he misunderstands original meanings, awards lofty verse to absurdly mundane situations, and plagiarizes often (Ames 200). Throughout the course of *Trivia*, Gay's Walker begins to take on the pedantic strut and false sense of authenticity of a distinctly Martinus Scriblerus sort.

Equally important is Gay's re-appropriation of Virgil's *Georgics* as a model, which highlights a curious subversion of the typical relationship between nature and man.

The Walker's advice is filled with a particular pride in modern economy's removal of nature's influence—the cries of sellers in the marketplace reveal the time of day while commercial objects inform of fair and poor weather conditions. Economic ingenuity has produced a god-like citizenry capable not only of defending against nature, but also of prescience for future conditions. The city's economic supremacy also includes the creation and circulation of products, literature chief among them. *Trivia* is Gay's portrait of the eighteenth-century city through the eyes of the representative Walker: economically advanced and culturally suspect.

The Beggar's Opera

The Beggar's Opera begins with the first half of a framing construction that, as in *Trivia*, gives a clue toward an ultimately satiric purpose. We are introduced to the Beggar, the *Opera*'s writer, in strictly economic terms—namely, his title to poverty. Although the Player with whom he converses “encourages Poetical Merit” in the Beggar's trade, we receive no such indication from the Beggar (Introduction). “I have introduced the Similes that are in all your celebrated Operas...” he begins of his orchestrated attempt to please without respect to meaningful poetics (Introduction). In his formulaic creative process, the Beggar, and Gay by extension, is contributing to the literary commodification that produces hollow art and cultural decline: both writers are slaves to the all-important “Taste of the Town” (3.5). The *Opera* that follows, however, reveals far more of Gay's complex satirical message than could any opera-for-profit. Unlike *Trivia*, which in its miscomprehension by the masses provided a lesson in contemporary intellectualism (and lack thereof), the meaning of the *Opera* is one that Gay fully intends and expects his audience to comprehend.

Within the operatic convention of three acts, we meet the Peachums, a husband and wife employing criminals to steal from the wealthy to later sell to victims. The couple is equally ruthless in dealing with their virtuous daughter Polly. Her recent marriage to the dashing criminal Macheath, for love rather than financial gain, has predictably displeased her economically pragmatic parents. They devise a plan to have Macheath hung to ensure a profitable widowhood for Polly. Meanwhile, Macheath's gang attempts to define itself as honorable in a cutthroat town, a claim cast in doubt after the rakish Macheath's own virtue is called into question: he has falsely promised marriage to Polly and Lucy, the jailer Lockett's daughter. After a feud of operatic proportions between the two (and a battle in which Peachum and Lockett quarrel over Macheath's reward as though he is little more than currency), the action culminates in Newgate prison, at the site of Macheath's hanging. The proceedings are interrupted by the second half of Gay's framing device: the Player enters to remind the Beggar that a conventional opera "must end happily" (3.5). The Beggar complies, at the cost of sense itself, as "in this kind of Drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about" (3.5). Thus the *Opera* ends with Macheath's inexplicable pardon, and a group dance.

The *Opera*'s characters (with the possible exception of Polly), are all reduced and commodified, bought and sold in a capitalistic environment that renders morality, virtue, and life itself trifling. Gay's critique of capitalism's effect on the individual is made clear, as is his point that although the misdeeds of all people may be evident, only the lower classes are punished for them. This is achieved through Gay's not-so-subtle comparisons of the immoral characters to politician Robert Walpole, the Whig establishment, and criminals Jonathon Wild and Jack Sheppard. Also important to Gay, as always, is the

question of literary commodification in the new economy—the Beggar appeals to mainstream demand and sacrifices literary quality for marketability, while Gay points to the shallow entertainment of the upper class. But the highlight of the *Opera* is surely the songs themselves. Its sixty-nine “airs” are lauded for their accessibility, as Gay adapts familiar ballads and traditional songs in lieu of senseless Italian recitative. Thus Gay transforms the genre from ridiculous upper-class entertainment into a meaningful new genre for the masses: the ballad opera.

Novelty and Aims of This Study

In this study, I will explore Gay’s anxiety over an incumbent capitalism, its corrosive effect on identity, and the commodification of literature by examining *Trivia* and *The Beggar’s Opera*. More crucially, I intend to create a new, alternative portrait of Gay through these two works on the city and his adept mingling of genre in both: that the satirist of decline is actually optimistic about the power of citizens to reclaim identity in a capitalistic environment. In *Trivia*, Gay uses classical allusion to point to a lost readership entrenched in eighteenth-century market culture. *The Beggar’s Opera* serves as a generic sequel—in his use of traditional ballads to make meaning, Gay suggests that genre may be used to unify and reclaim identity, in a return to a more idyllic classical past. This rebirth of personal and cultural identity begins through the shared, meaningful experience of art.

This study is divided into three sections. In “The “Other” Revolution: The Rise of Commodity Culture,” I provide historical context for the changes in English economy, politics, and society following the Financial Revolution of the 1690s. A new economy

dependent on the liquidity of capital, credit, and debt was associated with deceit, corruption, and ambiguous identity. This change particularly upended Gay's Tory political ideology, as a traditional social hierarchy with a monarch and landed gentry at its pinnacle gave way to the power of Parliament and the common man to decide the nation's fate. This section is important in defining eighteenth-century capitalism before exploring Gay's opinion of this system as a corrosive threat. The next section, "Capitalism and the Ideal: Gay's Arcadia and the Financial Threat," intends to construct Gay's conception of an ideal world, and how capitalism defies this world. In *Trivia*, the ideal world of Virgil's *Georgics* serves both as an overall generic model and an encompassing Scriblerian ideal. The didactic's commercial culture, which dominates nature and encourages social isolation, is the antithesis of the Augustan ideal of a hierarchical connection between man and the natural world, and the city as harmful to peace. In *The Beggar's Opera*, identity and independence are destroyed as people are commodified and made agents of exchange. This is counter to Gay's belief in the necessity of conscious thought and cultural ties in establishing identity, a concept made popular in the eighteenth century by Locke's then-controversial *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The third and final section of this study, "Generic Intentions," explores Gay's use and manipulation of genre in both pieces as a mirror held to eighteenth-century life. In *Trivia*, Gay subverts the Virgilian georgic and misappropriates Ovidian mythology to reflect a shallow readership that neglects his purposeful satire and carefully reused Augustan text. He also employs popular bookstall guides, all with the intention of revealing a society overcome with capitalistic commodification. In *The Beggar's Opera*, Gay intends instead to change genre's eighteenth-century epistemology,

with the purpose of reversing cultural decline. Here he alters Italian opera, the pastime of the wealthy and absent-minded, into an accessible piece powered by cultural ballads known to the lower classes. In doing so, Gay's new genre unifies his audience and asserts the potential for reclaiming an English identity lost to financial speculation. Through both works, Gay contends that genre's fluid epistemology reflects the society that gives it life. In adapting this epistemology as he does in the *Opera*, from commodified product to a meaningful cultural experience, Gay intends that genre may have a transformative effect on eighteenth-century identity.

I: The “Other” Revolution

The historical context of the Scriblerian canon is often viewed as exclusively political. Although Tory and Whig associations undoubtedly play a crucial role in this literature, often overlooked is that other watershed movement that affected all aspects of eighteenth-century English life: the Financial Revolution of the late seventeenth century. The advent of refined financial markets and a system of credit, coupled with the declining value of land ownership, affected the course of wars, the global supremacy of England, and most pertinent to this discussion, social relations and attitudes. Carl Wennerlind, in his most recent scholarship on the Financial Revolution, says of currency’s shift at its earliest stages in the 1640’s: “Instead of a device responsible for maintaining balance, harmony, and justice, money was... an instrument with the power to ignite industry and activate nature’s, society’s, and mankind’s hidden and dormant resources” (10). Indeed it was during the seventeenth century that money moved from intrinsic to symbolic valuable—a liquidity and circulation that changed the way people related to land, currency, and each other.

It is instructive to begin the tale of the foundation of capital economy during wartime, for its strong indication that, as Bruce Carruthers notes, “...fiscal strength was demonstrably the basis for external strength” (54). Economic might was the key to making England a dominant world power in the eighteenth century, as England’s defeat of France in the War of Spanish Succession (1701–1714), a nation with a population four times its size, can attest (Carruthers 54). Following the Glorious Revolution of 1688, there was a distinct shift in government funding for wars. Prior to 1688, public revenue in

the form of taxation provided the capital necessary for national defense. During wartime, short-term borrowing was undoubtedly a necessity, to account for the delay and unpredictability of tax collection. But Williams III's French objective in the Nine Years' War (1688–1697), and later the War of Spanish Succession, required more capital than short-term lending could provide alone: two protracted (and expensive) wars required an enduring solution. Long-term borrowing was the answer, as it allowed for the accumulation of revenue without the pressure of immediate reimbursement (Carruthers 73). The earliest forms of successful long-term borrowing were life-annuities and public lotteries, extremely popular during the reigns of William and Queen Anne; such domestic borrowing built the foundation of the national debt (Carruthers 75). Most importantly, the global influence of the country and its future success were now dependent on commercial development at home. Equally as crucial as newly instituted public borrowing was the lending of funds to the government by joint-stock companies. In exchange, the government provided companies with political and financial privileges. (The Bank of England, the newly merged East India Company, and the South Sea Company were the three largest of these joint-stock ventures.) Shares in the companies were also made available on the London stock market, as again the public gambled in investing to share in potential profits. The companies' influence on London's stock exchange cannot be understated; as the public invested, government spending could freely flourish.

The history of the South Sea Company and its eventual demise are important in uncovering Gay's view of capitalism: namely the corrosive and precarious nature of credit and its effect on the public sphere. Although the new economy proved robust during William's wars with France, signs of economic stress began to take effect by

1709. As short-term debts climbed higher, “public debt had skyrocketed from £14 million to £36 million” during this period (Wennerlind 166). The government and moneyed elite were therefore at risk of losing the economy’s most valued resource: public confidence. This was a political period of Tory prosperity, as Anne began replacing her Whig ministry with Tories, the Sacheverell affair³ was used to gain the support of a majority who feared an inverted political order where Parliament superseded the monarch and dissenters were prosperous, and a seemingly never-ending war with the French raised suspicions of intentional continuance by the Whigs. Robert Harley had been named minister, and founded the South Sea Company in 1711 in the hopes of reviving credit during this economic crisis. (Unlike what many Whigs had feared, the Tory Harley did not destroy commercial economy, returning to a system that benefitted landed men, but, like most modern Tories did by this time, understood its necessity.) He did so by obtaining exclusive trading rights in the South Seas of Spanish America. The founding of the South Sea Company was widely met with a patriotic optimism, the common belief that Harley had found a way to control a ballooning national debt (Wennerlind 204). As opposed to what they deemed harmful moneyed interests, the Tories used the traditionalism of trade as the foundation of their financial plan.

The Londoners that made up the pool of potential investors in the Company were treated to early tales of the exotic South Seas: a locale filled with untouched riches of gold, silver, and most notably, a lucrative slave trade to which they would have sole access (Wennerlind 206). Yet the duplicities of the scheme were evident from its start and attacked by Whigs as unconstitutional: the directors of the company gave themselves the right to additional money (up to 10% of investments) from shareholders when they

saw fit, and the validity of trading rights in a contentious region was called into question (Wennerlind 211). In 1714, the Company launched itself into the slave trade it had promised eager shareholders. However, the trade which the company believed would follow the end of the War of Spanish Succession and its Treaty of Utrecht reaped only moderate success at best, and an armed conflict between Spain and England in 1718 “abruptly terminated the company’s trade” (Wennerlind 223). Despite these setbacks, the Tories had clearly won the battle for public opinion. In the fall of 1720, prices and demand for South Sea stock reached a frenzied pitch, based purely on speculation. The company’s potential for profit was further bolstered when Parliament accepted their bid to assume the national debt that same year.

A financial bubble is defined as a “period when market prices systematically deviate from fundamental values” (Dale, *et al.* 223). The fundamental value of the South Sea Company was certainly in peril in 1720, as it now lacked any legitimate trading rights. Yet speculation for its stock was at its peak, an increase aided by the devious involvement of Parliament itself. To finance their new acquisition of debt, the company was allowed to increase their number of available shares; these shares were subsequently used to pay off the members of Parliament that had passed the bid. This duplicitous agreement involved numerous members of the government, a deal which also ensured future cooperation: “To the extent that members of Parliament held shares, they would have no interest in thwarting any commercial projects that the company might propose in the future” (Garber 112–113). Thus the speculative bubble was fostered by government deceit in the year it would eventually burst. To put into perspective the rate at which

people were buying South Sea stock, the price of shares at the beginning of 1720 was £128: by August 31 it was valued at £775 (Garber 118).

Peter Garber attributes the collapse to the startup of “bubble companies,” fraudulent groups attempting to capitalize on the success of the current market (119). Parliament’s passage of the Bubble Act in 1720 to thwart these companies resulted in a “scramble for liquidity,” and South Sea Stock was detrimentally affected (Garber 119). This, coupled with another catastrophic bubble in France that year⁴, encouraged frightened investors to sell immediately. Stocks were of course worthless: the value of South Sea shares exceeded the tangible assets of the company by more than £60 million (Garber 121). The backlash was immediate, as the company’s directors were held accountable for leading the nation to be “swallow’d by the damn’d *South Sea*” (Wennerlind 235). It was the less wealthy investors that suffered most. Wennerlind cites the author of a pamphlet following the crash who described post-Bubble conditions: “our middle Sorts of Persons in Multitudes shutting up their Shops; our Artificers and Poor starving; Children cursing their Parents that begot them, and Parents the Hour of their Nativity” (235). Importantly to Gay, the South Sea fiasco was representative of moneyed corruption coupled with the complicity of Parliament, and revealed the devastation that resulted in trusting one’s future to speculative, unpredictable interests. It also served as a clear illustration of government and corporate corruption on a grand scale, and the degree to which both entities were united in a single financial goal. Gay’s personal loss in the South Sea Bubble is well known. In 1720, after making his first large profit from the publication of his collection of poetry, *Poems on Several Occasions*, Gay was eager to invest his £1,000 sum. Caught in the South Sea fervor of the day, he invested everything

in stock. Lewis Melville, in his examination of Gay's personal letters, notes the irony of Gay's apparent "resolve to become a great capitalist" (52). While his friends encouraged caution and selling while demand remained high, the promise of imagined, immaterial wealth was too tempting a proposition. Gay then is as guilty as his contemporaries of the capitalist behavior he so often condemns, a complicity that he unflinchingly addresses in both *Trivia* and *The Beggar's Opera*.

The eighteenth-century English political climate is intimately related to the Financial Revolution. The ideology of the Tory party at this time can best be compared to that of the Scriblerians themselves: the Tories advocated the traditionalism of a pre-moneyed political, social, and financial hierarchy, where monarchial rule, a landed gentry, and trade represented the paradigm of each sphere. The Financial Revolution was then a threat to the foundation of the nation itself. The Whigs, ushered into power after the removal of James II from the throne in a "bloodless" Glorious Revolution that brought the Dutch William to rule, encouraged the rise of constitutional rights, Parliamentary power, and the dominance of a modern commercial economy. England after 1688 saw Tory interests assailed at every level—William, intent on war with France and representative of an originally Dutch system of commerce, was far from an ideal king. Any lingering Tory optimism from the Whigs' post-Revolution promises of "Liberty and Property in 1688" eroded as the landed gentry took on heavy taxation, all but guaranteeing the destruction of their class (Dickson 28). Beginning with the Land Tax in 1692, low rents, high interest rates, and heavy taxes ensured that traditionally land-based social hierarchy was at its end (Carruthers 88). Although they would later learn to adapt to the inevitable wave of early capitalism, from the outset Tories viewed public

investment and credit as a Whig scheme designed to consolidate political power: if the personal financial fortunes of the middling classes were intimately bound to the fate of the Whig economy, they had little choice but to support the regime (Carruthers 87). It is impossible to discuss Gay's work without the context of Whig Robert Walpole's (a chief target of satire in *The Beggar's Opera*) time as England's first "prime minister." Isaac Kramnick describes his twenty-one years of service as "an articulated system of corruption" (111). Walpole, undoubtedly a brilliant political mind whose impressive influence on kings and the Commons was built on an opportunistic campaign of bribery and patronage, also had an unmistakably absolutist will to consolidate power. The concept of a "prime minister" was itself thought to be "foreign to the English Constitution"—the position was then described as constituting "all the essential power of the monarch, without the pomp and name" (Kramnick 114). Perhaps the best proof of Walpole's corruption is in his own defense of the practice: in a 1732 speech in support of a contentious act he "told the members of the Commons that corruption marked a healthy political system" (Kramnick 121). The Whigs indeed supported such a tenet, forwarding the idea that it was "unjust and immoral to expect electors to vote against the man to whom they and their families were obliged" (Kramnick 121). Bribery was then an institutionalized practice under the new prime minister, and defended by the party of financial progress. For Gay, Walpole was the new age personified—a man who promoted and defended government corruption and, by extension, cultural decline.

To link these financial and political concepts to Gay's work fully, it is also necessary to put them in an eighteenth-century social context. To Gay, the Tories, and the middling and lower classes alike, credit, borrowing, lending, and debt all connoted an

irresponsible, unnatural, and immoral society— this new form and movement of currency, produced by questionable and clandestine means, was not clearly defined. Bubbles and the precarious nature of the market had proven that fortunes were fleeting and insubstantial, far from the reliable physicality that defined currency of the past. The enticement of the stock market was equated to gambling, a game ultimately lost when speculation caused collapse amid corruptive practices and a manipulated public. Such uncertainty allowed self-interested stock-jobbers (surely villains for a new age), politicians, and monopolies the freedom to control individual lives. Even success in such an environment was viewed with mistrust, as it had been generated by morally insecure means. As Julian Hoppit remarks of successful commercial ventures, “The wealth and income associated with such projects [was] viewed as transient and insubstantial, not permanently invigorating” (309). Transitory income and motivations were the products of a society that could no longer rely on the certainties of what had come before: a mercantile economy did not require knowledge or property of the past, as its success was wholly contingent on future movement of the market and the speculation of such activity. J.G.A Pocock describes the social shift that occurred alongside the creation of the national debt:

Not only must the [new] speculative society maintain and govern itself by perpetually gambling on its own wish-fulfillments; a new dimension was added to that dependence of all men upon all men which thinkers in the classical tradition wished desperately to avoid...every man was judged and governed, at every moment, by other men’s opinion of the probability

that not he alone, but generations yet unborn, would be able and willing to repay their debts at some future date which might never even arrive (99).

The social fabric of community, traditionally based in a historic present of clear intent and exchange, was now based on an uncertainty in people and circumstance. Thus the social problem of eighteenth-century identity is strongly linked to a reliance on an unknown future, the concept of which could no longer be grounded in either experience or reason (Pocock 98).

Class associations also provide important context in the study of Gay's literary city. Traditionally, the wealth or poverty of each class was relational to a moral class structure. The middle class and poor accumulated wealth from a rhetorical hard day's work— an honest living that could be physically accounted for and a simple exchange of labor for profit. The upper class also fit comfortably into this system with land-based affluence: land was quantifiable, employed the lower classes, and was itself based on a trusted system of inheritance. An incumbent capitalism had uprooted these traditionally moral conceptions of class. The middling and lower classes were now dependant on speculative financial considerations and forced to compete for capital, and the newly rich had achieved their station devoid of the moral considerations of the past. Also accompanying the rise of the *nouveau riche* was a distinct sign of the times: city luxury. As Hoppit notes, "...there was no surer sign of national decay and moral degeneracy than the presence of luxury in the nation" (311). Class associations were therefore removed from trusted cultural norms and moral sureties, a deeply unsettling proposition, not just for Tories. P.G.M. Dickson explains that the majority of the English populace shared a fear of social dislocation based on economic concerns and their associated unethical

manipulations, one with roots extending back to the Middle Ages (35). Class interaction was also radically changed by the Financial Revolution. Wennerlind shares a common assertion that credit “forged connections across social boundaries; the world of haute finance could be linked to the lowest echelon of the social hierarchy without there being any physical contact between gentlemen traders and the London riff raff... it had the power to connect people throughout the world and across the social hierarchy (9). It is true that the city allowed for the unprecedented mingling of classes, yet Gay would very much question the meaning of “connection” here. Financial growth may have promoted increased physical contact, but ideologically, starker divisions in classes and the self-interest inherent in a capital economy prevented a moral form of social exchange and communal relations.

At the heart of this new world rose the city, a dominating, perplexing center of commerce far from the pastoral setting that formerly determined economic well-being and social class. The cities of *Trivia* and *The Beggar’s Opera* are perilous precisely for their shifting identities—the inability to locate oneself or trust in fellow citizens amid a commodity culture that discouraged traditional authenticity. The strength of capital indeed threatened for many the concept of English national identity itself; England’s “ancient citizen, whose independence in arms and land assured his political virtue” was deemed outmoded and ignorant by new Whig moneyed interests (Pocock 195). The resulting financially-motivated nation was thus one with an immoral foundation, lacking a historical anchor. By examining this short history of the Financial Revolution and its cultural effects, we may begin to define Gay’s concept of the ideal, one far from the commercial world of the city at the center of *Trivia* and *The Beggar’s Opera*.

II: Capitalism and the Ideal

Before taking a closer look at Gay's use of genre to express questions of identity in an eighteenth century besieged by a new economy, it is necessary to examine first how Gay depicts capitalism as the cause of cultural decline. In *Trivia* and the *Beggar's Opera*, the new economy and its necessity for self-interest defies the Scriblerian moral ideal. This morality is located in a classical past— virtue, substantive identity, and moral community remain its most important tenets. In this section, I will refer directly to the text of Virgil's *Georgics* and the work of Robert Coleman to discover Augustan morality, and Gay's construction of the modern city as its antithesis. *Trivia*'s St. Giles offers topographical confusion, severs the traditional relationship between man and nature, and introduces commercial objects that threaten man's place in an expected social hierarchy. All of this works to further distance the eighteenth-century citizen from an ideal Scriblerian morality. Using the work of Pat Rogers on the navigational and etymological hurdles that impede one's natural progress through the city, and Barbara Benedict's on the concept of objects as the new center of culture as guides, this chapter will examine the role of commerce in severing humanity's connection with nature and confusing traditional hierarchy. I will continue by examining *The Beggar's Opera* to explore again how Gay depicts capitalism as contrary to his conception of an ideal self. Here I will return to Locke's theories on identity in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Although the Scriblerians attacked Locke's "philosophic speculation" with the same satiric edge devoted to false and pedantic learning in their *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, his theories on the existence of conscious identity and memory very much

reflect their own (Brückmann 74). Locke proposed the concept of identity as defined by one's past and present experiences, changing over time, and infinitely adaptable: in short, an identity generated from a thinking, mindful being that builds on history and experience. The existence and continuity of this conception of identity is a cornerstone of Gay's ethos, and as we have seen, the Scriblerians are also insistent on retaining a sense of history as a way toward a better world. In *The Beggar's Opera*, the capitalistic city demands that citizens sacrifice identity in a social equalization that bases value solely on market worth. In this section I will explore the chapter in Locke's *Essay* entitled "Of Identity and Diversity" and its relation to Gay's ideal of the conscious self. I will then discuss how Gay imagines a world without this crucial sense of identity in the *Opera* by expanding on William Bowman Piper's work on the undermining of distinguishable characterization in the opera. Erin Mackie's take on the figures of Macheath and Peachum as representative of old and new political and social values offers insight into Gay's declining ideal, and Armens' study of animal imagery highlights a de-evolution from moral identity to savage similitude. The negative effects of capital economy are clear in both city works, and in both cases, identity is destabilized as the connection to traditional ideals is dissolved.

In Trivia

The twentieth-century scholarship of Martin Battestin, Arthur Sherbo, and Dianne Ames has offered meticulous evidence of Gay's purposeful mirroring of Virgil's *Georgics* in *Trivia* (Ames 199). Yet rather than compare the two works stylistically or discuss Gay's thoughts on the genre itself (a focus in the following chapter), it is instructive to begin by understanding the moral ideal established by Virgil, and how Gay

works to create its opposition in the city of *Trivia*. The ancient Augustan poets, Virgil in particular, were instrumental in defining Scriblerian philosophy (Galinsky 121). In the *Georgics*, among Virgil's beautifully detailed verse on the tenets of husbandry—methods on working in concert with the land, advice on seasonality and natural conditions, how to nurture trees and raise animals—lies a satire on the nature of man and the precepts of war. Written following a brutal period of Roman civil war, the rise of Octavian, and a shift from republic to empire, Virgil speaks vehemently against war and city immorality, praising Augustus for ending this period of unrest. Perhaps most pervasive in the *Georgics* remains Virgil's shaping of the ideal life, located in and as a result of the natural environment. Shunning ostentatious wealth, political and economic ambition, and the evils of war, he instead glorifies the simple life of the country farmer, filled with honest husbandry and love of family. One such passage in the second book of the *Georgics* makes clear Virgil's ideal in a comparison with the city, one directly in line with Gay's vision:

Happy the Man, who, studying Nature's Laws,
Thro' known Effects can trace the secret Cause.
His Mind possessing, in a quiet State,
Fearless of Fortune, and resign'd to Fate,
And happy too is he, who decks the Bow'rs
Of Sylvans, and adores the Rural Powers
Whose Mind, unmov'd, the Bribes of Courts can see;
Their glaring Baits, and Purple Slavery...

Nor envies he the Rich their heapy Store,
 Nor his own Peace disturbs, with Pity for the Poor.
 He feeds on Fruits, which, of their own accord,
 The willing Ground, and laden Trees afford...
 The Senates mad Decrees he never saw;
 Nor heard, at bawling Bars, corrupted Law...
 The Peasant, innocent of all these Ills,
 With crooked Ploughs the fertile Fallows tills...
 Thus ev'ry sev'ral Season is employ'd:
 Some spent in Toil, and some in Ease enjoy'd...
 His Cares are eas'd with Intervals of Bliss;
 His little Children climbing for a Kiss...
 His faithful Bed is crown'd with chaste Delight...
 Such was the Life the frugal *Subines* led;
 So Remmus and his Brother God were bred...
 Old Rome from such a Race deriv'd her Birth...
 (Dryden II 698–781)

In Virgil's ethos, city men are prey to their own striving for fortune, and slaves to a hierarchical structure that promotes immoral acts of bribery and deceit. In contrast, the "happy" and "innocent" countryman is far from city immorality. His mind exists in a "quiet State," freed not only from city concerns, but also from others in general; neither the wealth of the rich nor the begging of the poor affects this inner state. The ideal man is notably sure of himself and his environment due to his lack of city exposure, a security

which allows self-identification in its purest form. This existence, filled with uncomplicated toil and pleasure, also results from a relationship with nature that spans history and antiquity: “Such was the Life the frugal *Subines* led;/So Remmus and his Brother God were bred...Old Rome from such a Race deriv'd her Birth” (II 777–781). The idyllic foundation of Rome itself is based on men who observed these “Rural Powers” without regard to immoral considerations. These powers are defined by a traditional relationship with nature akin to that of gods and men: the natural world requires toil and sacrifice, and in return the “willing Ground and laden Trees” support and sustain life (II 716). This image promotes a concept of natural community dependent on a predictable hierarchy. In referencing Virgil’s creation of an “Arcadia” (referred to specifically as “Arcady” in his later *Eclogues*), Coleman describes Virgil’s “myth of Arcady...as an embodiment of certain moral ideals that he could himself identify closely with the real countryside: a simple way of life, contentment with little, delight in natural beauty, homely piety, friendship and hospitality, devotion to poetry and peace” (32). In contrast, the anti-pastoral within city walls “represents a constant threat to Arcadian values” (Coleman 32). Thus Virgil’s moral groundwork in the *Georgics*, of city life as a direct threat to a traditional and ideal existence based on commune with nature, brings Gay’s satire into focus. Examining the text of *Trivia* with this in mind, it becomes evident that Gay adopts Virgil’s message of the city as directly oppositional to Augustan ideal. The Walker’s instructions for city navigation in varying weather conditions, seasons, and times of day are filtered through a commercial lens— here, the typical signs and functions of nature are preceded by the unending bustle of the new economy in motion. *Trivia*’s citizens have gained prescience and mastery over the natural world in a form of

capitalistic individuality that threatens a traditional moral order; market activity informs one of space and time long before natural conditions are able, and a new arsenal of objects combats any uncontrolled elements that remain. Thus we must examine *Trivia* as the antithesis of the *Georgics*: or rather, as the georgic of the new eighteenth century.

Navigation

The city environment of *Trivia*, so unlike the predictable, trustworthy natural landscape, is infernally difficult to navigate. Virgil's advice would prove fruitless in this city, where the cyclical rhythm of commerce determines one's position. St. Giles, described in *Trivia* where "An inrail'd Column rears its lofty Head,/Here to sev'n Streets, sev'n Dials count the Day,/And from each other count the circling Ray," was in reality a notorious crossing in a crime-ridden district enclosing Covent Garden⁵ at its center (II 74–76). Moreover, it was a topographical jumble; none of the seven roads extending from its center were major thoroughfares, resulting in a spider-like network of side streets (Rogers 24–25). Such close quarters, coupled with an increasingly diverse populace, produced the region of food markets, pickpockets, booksellers, horse carts, beggars, prostitutes, and fops that compose *Trivia*'s cast. It is easy then to imagine the hapless newcomer, who, as the Walker says, "dwells on ev'ry Sign with stupid Gaze,/Enters the narrow Alley's doubtful Maze,/Trys ev'ry winding Court and Street in vain,/And doubles o'er his weary Steps again"(II 76–82). The title *Trivia* itself also belies complication: the Latin *trivium* is defined as a crossroads, public highway, or gutter, and "trivia" had recently taken to mean inconsequential or inessential matters⁶. Gay also intended mythological connotations: Trivia was the Roman goddess of crossroads, and linked to the more sinister three-headed goddess Hecate. Topographically and etymologically, Gay

positions *Trivia*'s city as a place of confusion and potential danger, long before the Walker begins his tour.

This sense of navigational confusion is confirmed throughout, as the Walker advises on avoiding a crush of humanity and carts that threaten to sully clothing and knock one to the ground: sections detailing whom to give and refuse the wall warn of the various characters to be dealt with in order to simply walk the streets. In attempting to locate oneself in the city, the Virgilian precepts of sun, moon, and stars are of no use. The Walker instead instructs us to look squarely ahead, at the agents of industry and commercial signage, to find our way: "Be sure observe the Signs, for Signs remain,/Like faithful Land-marks to the walking Train" (II 67–68). For the Walker, traditional topographical landmarks are no longer necessary in a city of industry. Yet Gay points to the inherent danger of turning one's back on the natural order, as these commercial indicators are shown to be fraught with doubt, due to the finally dubious nature of the self-interested capitalist. In "Of whom to enquire the Way," the Walker advises not to follow the advice of the apprentices (Gay's own former position, satirically) who will "turn thy Steps astray," or "Ask the grave Tradesman to direct thee right," who "ne'er deceives, but when he profits by't" (II 70–73). Our narrator unknowingly reveals a snag in the efficiency of the economic capital: its agents cannot be trusted. Neither can its infrastructure, as the signifiers he describes as "faithful Land-marks" are also the signs of these tradesmen. Commercial corruption again threatens to mislead and exploit, as people and locations crafted in the furtherance of economy offer no genuine guidance. This untrustworthy location is truly contradictory to Virgil's, where nature is never in doubt,

physically or morally; thus the confusion of *Trivia*'s crowded setting communicates an increasing remoteness from Augustan Arcadia.

Weather and Seasons, Days of the Week

The Walker's advice on weather, seasons, and the passage of time similarly depicts the city as increasingly distant from this moral ideal. As in navigation, the Walker instructs us to allow the commercial world to be our guide. In Virgil's natural ideal, "The various Course of Seasons must be found;/The Weather, and the setting of the Winds...and what will thrive and rise,/And what the Genius of the Soil denies...This is th' Orig'nal Contract; these the Laws/ Impos'd by Nature, and by Nature's Cause" (I 76–92). Here, conditions are guided by nature itself and result in agricultural production. Their genesis is determined by a "contract" rooted in the very origins of time. In sharp contrast, *Trivia*'s commercial activity takes care to warn of coming rain, directs when to rise in the morning, or begins a new day of the week. The Walker is all too pleased to boast of this mastery over nature. He relates the beginning of a city day, when one awakens to the calls of human commerce: "When Sleep is first disturb'd by Morning Cries;/From sure Prognosticks learn to know the Skies" (I 121–122). The coming fall and winter are known by the similarly cyclical calls of Gay's shoeblack and oyster wench selling their wares, "Ladies gayly dres'd" inform one of calm conditions, and swinging signs of shops are harbingers of rain (I 145). Hinting at the crucial role of market objects in this new human ability to foresee natural occurrences, seasons and days of the week are determined through object production: "Sweet-smelling Flow'rs" are items of spring (flowers ironically uprooted from the earth for sale at the market), while Sundays are "Prophan'd by Mackrell Cries" (II 429, 432). Clearly the "Experienc'd Men, inur'd to

City Ways” have evolved beyond Virgil’s original contract. The economically driven evolution of the citizenry includes not only the ability to detect these conditions, but also to adapt. Unlike the farmer of antiquity, who used natural signs to determine agricultural activity, *Trivium*’s cast has developed modern defenses against nature. In the city, nature is always a threat to be quelled, as it impedes economic growth. Gay pertinently uses the example of the bookseller, who has learned all too well to “foresee[s] the tempest,” as he “with early Care/Of Learning strips the rails” (I 163–164). Books, made agents of exchange only in the unnatural environment of the city, are the first to be compromised in a defense against nature (Power 354). These acts of detection and defense again work towards Gay’s portrayal of the modern economic city as adverse to classical values. Capitalism effectively severs a connection between man and nature, one that the *Georgics* confirms is necessary for a moral world. Nature, essential in a traditional hierarchy of existence, is cast aside in the furtherance of a morally ambiguous economy. Like the city itself, this confuses human identification in a larger scheme.

Objects

Adding to this confusion of the natural order were the products of the new city. For the Scriblerians, the ascension of commercial objects to social prominence held dangerous implications for eighteenth-century morality and identity. As Benedict relates of the Scriblerian response to new commercialism:

...the thingness of objects opposes traditional spiritual or social values: the new, troubling ubiquity of objects in an urban world of shifting social relationships promotes competition, isolation, [and]

insignificance...humans are shouldered aside by the parade of commodities that are capturing the center of culture (204–205).

Gay features objects prominently in *Trivia* precisely to depict this opposition to traditional values: they again sever the all-important connection of man to his surroundings, to himself, and to others. Unlike the tools of Virgil's farmer, meant for growth and natural employment, the implements of the city are designed to repel nature. The Walker continually recommends objects to aid in traversing the city: proper shoes, coats, canes, and women's wear are tools to survive both weather and crowd. They serve as a comfort when dangerous elements prevail: people who wear practical shoes "...their guarded Feet/Defie the muddy Dangers of the Street," while of coats he advises, "Let thy Surtout defend the drenching Show'r" (I 193–194 and 132). The commercial shops where modern tools are born also work against natural offenses, as the Walker advises, "Shun ev'ry dashing Pool...To seek the kind Protection of a Shop" (I 196–197). Again, this product of capitalism literally separates humanity from a natural state of being.

As Benedict notes, new products of the commercial age are also socially isolative, inspiring a competition that prevents amiable class relations. The Walker's continual linking of social classes with specific objects promotes the idea of products as disruptive to a natural social order. For every implement touted by the middling Walker, an opportunity arises to delineate social class according to this new code of object fetishism. Upper-class nouveau riche are most frequently cited for their obvious connection to object possession and ostentation: *Trivia* finds them paired with useless, opulent objects, foppishly riding in coaches in avoidance of the masses. The Walker recommends that the

newcomer avoid the trappings of pointless luxury: “Let the loop’d *Bavaroy* the Fop embrace,/Or his deep Cloak be spatter’d o’er with Lace... That Garment best the Winter’s Rage defends...Be thine of *Kersey* firm, though small the Cost” (I 53–59). He does so hypocritically however, as the Walker abhors objects of the wealthy while simultaneously encouraging protection against the dirt of the lower working classes: “Three Trades avoid; oft’ in the mingling Press,/The *Barber’s* Apron soils the sable Dress;/Shun the *Perfumer’s* Touch with cautious Eye,/Nor let the Baker’s Step advance too nigh” (II 27–30). Here and throughout, the Walker obsessively instructs on how to keep clothes free of the dirt from various professions: the supposedly utilitarian clothing that identifies the Walker’s authenticity is now subject to the same fate as the bavaroy— its cleanliness is representative of social standing. Thus, as humanity’s historical place in an earthly hierarchy is for the first time being usurped by the importance of new commodity, so too does that commodity challenge class structure, now increasingly isolative and reified. Gay depicts city topography, cyclical commerce, and marketable objects as both isolative and culturally crucial. The interminable contract between human beings and nature that Virgil found to be the center of the moral world has been broken in favor of the self-interested, immoral signifiers of economic progress. Merchandise is central in this new landscape, and serves to further distance one from a traditional concept of self and society.

In The Beggar’s Opera

As *Trivia* focuses on the subversion of humanity’s relationship with the traditional world, *The Beggar’s Opera* focuses on the transformation of mankind itself into the agents and objects of exchange. Citizens have progressed beyond the commercial

signs and merchandise of *Trivia* to become the very currency itself, as authentic identity is worthless in a culture of capital and self-interest. The ideal Scriblerian identity represents independent personhood capable of resisting the material immorality of the city, while simultaneously embracing a place in a traditional social hierarchy. This is again very much a tenet of the Augustans, as Virgil promoted the singular man with a clear mind, at home in a natural community and unaffected by worldly immorality. But Gay's conception of identity goes farther to suggest that identity is contingent on conscious intellect and historical and cultural experience. (Promoting this identity is a possible impetus for his creation of the ballad opera, addressed in the following section.) It also recalls the revolutionary ideas forwarded by Locke. It is therefore instructive to examine Locke's 1689 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and its theory of personal identity to establish the grounds for Gay's ideal self. We may then explore how he depicts capitalism in the *Opera* as intruding on this ideal.

Although modern critics have associated Locke with the possessive individualism first proposed by C.B. Macpherson⁷, a view most certainly aligned with the capitalistic individuation that Gay and the Scriblerians view as corrosive, Gay instead responds to Locke's assertions that personal identity constitutes the conscious, collective thought of a reflective person. In a section of his *Essay* entitled, "Of Identity and Diversity," Locke describes his then-controversial idea⁸ about identity and multiplicity of the self:

...To find wherein personal identity consists, we must consider what person stands for; which, I think, is *a thinking intelligent being*, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; *which it does only by that*

consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it: it being impossible for any one to perceive without perceiving that he does perceive...For, since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes every one to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done⁹ (II XXVII).

Here Locke claims conscious thought is necessary in the creation of an authentic personal identity that distinguishes one person from another. Perhaps most controversially from an eighteenth-century perspective, he goes on to suggest that consciousness includes multiple identities, each representing past actions and thoughts. Again, such an idea was provocative in its defiance of the theological definition of a person as a “continuing substance, essence, or soul” in favor of identity as a changing consciousness (Palmeri 330). Yet a reading very much in line with traditional Tory republicanism and Scriblerian ethos is also to be found, and well describes Gay’s conception of ideal identity. Locke’s identity is fully independent, and incapable of being formed by anything other than personal thought and perception. It is also inherently dependent on a historical context constructed from past experience. Gay’s ideal Augustan identity is similarly independent, unaffected by the immoral capitalism that seeks to define it solely as

commodity. His ideal also consists of community built upon the morality and intellectualism of the past— antithetical to a financial revolution which necessitates only immediacy and future considerations without respect to history. Evidence of this interaction between Lockean and Scriblerian identity theory reveals that the two shared a basic belief in identity as conscious, independent, and historically fluid. Not surprisingly, the Scriblerians were wary of the pedantry in Locke's exercise, as they were of most institutionalized forms of education (Quintero 216). Brückmann turns our attention to a specific passage of *Martinus Scriblerus*, wherein the club openly mocks Locke's conception of multiplicity. Here the group describes Crambe, the equally pedantic childhood friend of Martinus: "Crambe would tell his Instructor, that All men were not singular...man is not the same he was, that madmen are beside themselves, and drunken men come to themselves; which shews, that few men have that most valuable logical endowment, Individuality" (Brückmann 74). Yet while the group mocks Locke's method, they are simultaneously in direct agreement with his theory. The pontification of Crambe is intended as evidence that he lacks intellect while superficially quoting impressive sources. Thus along with a satiric jab at Locke, they construct unperceiving characters, who in their desire to learn without the intent of gaining true knowledge lack cultural or historic ties; in their pedantry they are indistinguishable and without authentic identity. Brückmann describes these characters (Martinus, Crambe, and the Walker among them) as those who "become non-persons either because they have no ability to build from ancient experience or because they are rooted in a single obsession, like Martinus and his schoolfellow, so that they are unable to use knowledge to create normal human experience" (74). Scriblerian satire supports Locke's idea of as conscious, fluid and

aggregate, in the form of characters who, lacking consciousness and continuity, are less than whole (Palmeri 332).

This concept of identity is central in *The Beggar's Opera*, as it is lost amid city capitalism. Loss here takes the form of equivalence—characters are made indistinguishable, lone individuals motivated by a system that defines authenticity as a dangerous liability. Locke and Gay's criteria for the existence of identity are not met in *Newgate*: capitalism defines humanity as a whole, as opposed to the conscious mind forming identity, while the exclusion of historical associations leads to an inability to look to the past on questions of morality and intellectualism. Gay's financially motivated cast is made indiscernible through the equivalency of the economic world, stripped of identity, and led down a road to ruin.

Commodification and Equalization

Substantive identity is nearly impossible to locate in the *Opera*. As in *Trivia*, Gay intends a world that utterly defies a moral ideal—this time one in which the self carries no inherent value. This functions in the *Opera* through “assessing everything in monetary terms, making no distinction between human beings and things because both are disposable commodities” (Lewis 231). Gay's strategy for equalization and eventual commodification involves laying a tenuous foundation of oppositional classes and characters: Peachum and Lockit are middle-class businessmen with a profitable bottom line, as their daughters Polly and Lucy vie for marital recognition from one man. Macheath and his gang, charitable in their thievery and constant in their loyalty, take on both an upper class mien and a lower class sensibility, oppositional to Peachum and

Lockit in both degrees. This initial differentiation and supposed class structure make the progression from independent characterization to equivalence all the more stark. As Bowman Piper notes, “Again and again, the *Opera* presents the illusion of personal individuality, of particularity in nature and action, only to undermine it” (338–339). Gay establishes these early boundaries only to degenerate the function of all characters to a singular, monetary purpose. By its conclusion, we are left with dissolved conflicts and indiscernible identity.

The Peachums and Lockit, the nouveau riche products of a kind only eighteenth-century citified luxury and Newgate culture could produce, are presented as fiscally consumed from the *Opera*'s outset. As truly representative of the capitalistic immorality that threatens Gay's ideal, for the Peachums, coin is not only personally motivating, but also redemptive. Peachum advocates that “money...is the true Fuller's Earth for reputations: there is not a spot or stain but what it can take out” (1.9). Commodity alone therefore makes it possible to rise through social ranks (a system which effectively eliminates a traditional land-based social hierarchy), and to do so without moral consequence. Peachum introduces Macheath's gang by assigning every man a price: sentenced to death, Tom Gagg is worth forty pounds, while Bob Booty will be hung “for the reward, and there's forty pound lost to us forever” (1.4). Devoid of identity, men are reduced to the currency they strive for, priced accordingly, and prepared for the marketplace. The Peachums' conception of marriage is predictably similar; the couple views their daughter Polly's union according to the goals of a “gentlewoman in marriage,” defined as “a jointure and of being a widow” (1.1). Murder is merely an afterthought as it results in capital, “as fashionable a crime as man can be guilty of” (1.4).

Lockit, although he and Peachum quarrel over financial differences, is in every sense his equal. He shares Peachum's penchant for trivializing death when he bargains with the condemned Macheath over the price of lighter fetters, forcing him to pay to die "like a gentleman" (2.2). Lockit is also explicit in his tendency to commodify as he "halves" Macheath with his friend at the play's conclusion (2.2). The Peachums and Lockit are thus Gay's chief representatives of decline, and as a standard of the new financial world, are wholly interchangeable.

At the start of the *Opera*, Macheath and his gang of thieves are portrayed in an alternative light. The highwaymen believe that money is "made for the free-hearted and generous," and steal with the intent to redistribute wealth (2.1). Their complicity in a dishonest system is offset by this altruism, and also an indissoluble loyalty to one another; Macheath believes the group has "still honor enough to break through the corruptions of the world" (3.2). It is not surprising that Gay defines his hero as one who attempts virtue amid capitalistic immorality. Mackie defines Macheath as affiliated with the traditional elite whose reliance on "paternalism, customs, ancient rights, and discretionary system of law" is challenged by the Peachums of the emergent commercial society (32). Macheath's characterization lies in the gallant highwayman of the past rather than in the Peachums' eighteenth-century association: a persona constructed "not within artisanal and apprentice culture, but...around the social and political reversals of the seventeenth century...closely coupled with the Stuart cause and the mode of Cavalier masculinity associated with its adherents" (31). Macheath's positioning as a literary figure of the past makes his fall representative of the destruction of traditionalism. His defeat comes directly at the hands of a group of financially motivated women and

Peachum and Lockit, as he arrives at the inevitable conclusion that “the world is all alike and that even our gang can no more trust one another than other people” (3.5). Yet there are truly no heroes in the *Opera*, and Gay’s thesis of decline remains— this is a tale of equalization rather than true opposition. As the *Opera* progresses, Macheath’s status as the gentleman highwayman begins to fracture under the pressure of capitalistic necessity. That Macheath takes advantage of Polly and Lucy fits well within the description of the Restoration rake— yet what he says later of gender relations is distinctly of eighteenth-century commercial culture: “And a man who loves money might as well be contented with one guinea as I with one woman” (2.1). This degeneration of a traditional figure is another example of Gay feigning difference before gradually reducing to equivalence. The inability to discern hero from criminal also lends itself to another important aspect of his thesis: that in this arena, there remains no difference between hero, politician, thief, criminal, or murderer, except that only one group is punished for the same misdeeds.

The women of the *Opera* are equally compressed and commodified; Polly and Lucy are initially oppositional, Gay mocking the ridiculousness of real-life sopranos Faustina Brodoni and Francesca Cuzzoni¹⁰. Polly and Lucy’s characterization celebrates operatic absurdity with subplots of poisoning and battling over one man, yet this supposed opposition is neutralized through human commodification and equalization. Both women eventually dissolve into a single, indistinguishable character: Bowman Piper notes that “certain songs of Lucy’s...gradually flatten and reduce Polly, transforming her into an approximation of her rival... Lucy’s identity suffers, of course, the same fate as Polly’s, describing virtually the same curve of development” (339). This similarity reaches its crescendo in “Irish Trot” (Air XXXV), a mimicking duet that in its repetition

encourages equality. Although Lucy is clearly the morally reprehensible party of the two in her trivialization of murder and financial motivation (while Polly remains innocent of seeking superficial gain), both are still seeking the social validity available only through marriage, or the “legal possession” of Macheath (Bowman Piper 339). The women then instruct us on the fate of the marital institution in such a world; lacking traditional sanctity, it is a practice in which people must be owned and prepared for exchange in order to achieve recognition and a foothold in the new social hierarchy. Capitalism remains squarely at fault for this personal compression that defies any inherent value of human life.

In this discussion of extinguishing identity in the *Opera*, Gay’s use of animal imagery is an important one. As Armens notes, Gay employs satire to cast doubt on the assumption that “man, because of his reason, deserves a higher place on the scale of being” (209). As moneyed interests cause the collapse of independent identity, animal imagery allows us gauge the extent of such a cultural decay through an apparent de-evolution of species. Lockit likens the city’s populace to the animal kingdom: “Lions, wolves, and vultures don't live together in herds, droves or flocks. Of all animals of prey, man is the only sociable one. Every one of us preys upon his neighbor, and yet we herd together” (3.1). This is notably not a simple animal hierarchy, but describes animals of prey, each sustained by its own kill or by the kill of another. All classes are implicated in this suggestion of human to animal degeneration; Mrs. Peachum remarks of Macheath’s dalliances with the upper class: “Really, I am sorry upon Polly's account the Captain hath not more discretion. What business hath he to keep company with lords and gentlemen? He should leave them to prey upon one another” (1.1). Filch reflects on gender relations

in such a society: “For her like wolves by night we roam for prey, and practice ev'ry fraud to bribe her charms. For suits of love, like law, are won by pay, and beauty must be fed into our arms” (1.1). Similarly in “All in a misty Morning” (Air XXIII), Jenny describes Macheath’s situation with the gang of women: “Before the barn door crowing, the cock by hens attended, his eyes around him throwing...” (2.1). Humans, at their most base in a society that encourages savagery as a means of survival, are indistinguishable from animals, and more importantly, from each other.

Thus in both *Trivia* and *The Beggar’s Opera*, capitalism proves corrosive to the Scriblerian conception of an ideal world. In *Trivia*, Gay describes the breakdown of man’s ideal relationship with nature as the commercial world disrupts traditional hierarchy. This is antithetical to the ideal espoused by Virgil in the *Georgics*, the poem’s central inspiration. In *The Beggar’s Opera*, the ideal identity is threatened by the commodification and human equivalence inherent in capitalism. Gay’s concept of identity lies in conscious thought and continuous history, and is related strongly to Locke’s groundbreaking conception of eighteenth-century identity. As Freeman asserts, genre too is a fluid thing which reflects its time. The next section will discuss Gay’s use of genre to depict capitalism and its effect on the ideal. In *Trivia*, genre is a means to reflect eighteenth-century decline in its deceptive presentation and veiled literary references. Gay’s choices for the *Opera* achieve quite the opposite: intentionally inclusive, the genre defies capitalism’s ill effects. Here Gay unites readers in a meaningful enterprise, taking back genre from commodified interests to encourage the reclaiming of eighteenth-century culture and identity.

III: Generic Intentions

Both *Trivia* and *The Beggar's Opera* are perhaps best known for Gay's endlessly successful manipulations of genre: georgic, mock-epic, commercial didactic, Italian opera, and criminal biography are manipulated with their epistemological frameworks in mind. The ability of genre to again, as Freeman notes, reflect "the constitutive features of [the] society" and "adapt to and address new social needs and anxieties" made its mingling and subversion highly attractive to a Scriblerian group attempting to define a society newly changed by a market revolution that included literature among its wares. Genre offers a way to compare past to present— for example, "epics" may be grouped together in genre by a set of rules that must be adhered to in order to classify them as such, yet one could not reasonably claim overwhelming similitude in an ancient epic as compared to a contemporary one. It is in this space that we may begin cultural examination. Given the same prerequisites, how may a genre evolve to reflect its own time? This is precisely what Gay attempts in both works— imagining an eighteenth-century georgic and opera is to reflect on how society has changed. For Gay, as we have seen, this change is a cultural decline at the hands of capitalism. Yet Gay differs from his Scriblerian counterparts— his genre-play does more than point out the ills of a new eighteenth century. As Dianne Dugaw relates: "Gay's genre-confounding satire is markedly modern in its representing us to ourselves as individuals derived from social and cultural matrices" (27). Gay reminds us that genre is reflective of who we are: it is, at its core, built on our personal and cultural identity.

Trivia, a modern didactic designed to be bought and sold in the marketplace, is the advice of a pedant to an equally shallow readership that misunderstands disguised Augustan satire. Gay's generic intention is to hold a mirror to eighteenth-century society—the image reflected is a superficial culture of consumers without literary understanding. This Virgilian genre, birthed with cultural importance and sacred moral ideals, has been utterly commodified and thus stripped of meaning in its modern conception. Such a change is reflective of the empty commodification that has gripped the age, a fate genre itself suffers as well in its reflection of the time. Yet he does not doubt the strength of eighteenth-century identity, nor genre, to free itself from capitalism. *The Beggar's Opera* is Gay's message of optimism for the new age. Here he presents a modern genre, Italian opera, suffering from the same ill effects of empty ostentation. He alters the form from an unintelligible foreign pastime into a relatable, meaningful experience by substituting Italian recitative for contemporary ballads taken from well-known songs: tunes shared by the community in homes, taverns, and streets. By making this genre inclusive, Gay reverses the process of generic degeneration he began in *Trivia*, creating the ballad opera based not on empty consumerism, but on a classically moral conception of members of a community tied to and united by shared cultural experience. In the *Opera*, Gay offers genre as a transformative mirror—a way back to the substantive identity and cultural identification of a time before capitalism's ill effects.

In this chapter I will handle Gay's use of genre in both works, and his purpose in choosing each. First are the genres of *Trivia*, namely the georgic, Ovidian myth, and commercial didactic. The works of Dianne Ames and Henry Power offer ways in which to address the satiric comparison of the Augustan georgic to the poem. I will similarly

explore Gay's use of Ovidian origin myth as crucial to *Trivia* in highlighting the rise of the cultural importance of objects, and consequent deterioration of literary sense. In exploring Gay's use of commercial how-to guide, Darryl Domingo and Power offer insight into the physicality of the poem's publication, and the use of marginalia in advertising its placement as circulated commodity. Gay's purpose again in combining these genres is to reflect eighteenth-century decline through literary commodification. The final section will explore the genres of the *Opera*, and how Gay uses these in an ultimately optimistic message of regained identity. The central genres of *The Beggar's Opera* are Italian opera and the new ballad opera. The work of William McIntosh elucidates that, although Gay mocked the pretention and lack of substance in Italian opera, he did not dislike the form itself, but rather the form it takes in a financial context. In exploring the origins of the ballads themselves and Gay's creation of an *Opera* open to all, the research of source ballads by Hal Gladfelder, William Eben Schultz, and Claude Simpson provides a key to locating hidden messages only intelligible to those with cultural connection. Finally, Yvonne Noble aids my claim that the *Opera* is intended to unify the populace in a return to a moralized, native identity supported by Gay's ideal.

In Trivia

In a bit of advice for the pragmatic writer from *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, Martinus himself instructs: "Take out of any old Poem, History-book, or Legend those parts of a story which afford most scope for long Descriptions: Put these pieces together, and throw all the adventures you fancy into one Tale" (Domingo 948). The mockery of such obvious literary pedantry is crucial in understanding *Trivia*'s satire. From the seamless inclusion of lines directly from Virgil's *Georgics*, the repeated misuse

of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, and the influence of modern how-to guides, *Trivia* appears to follow Martinus' formula to the letter. While the Walker intends, as Martinus, to put forth the most superficially impressive guide possible (without regard to actual sense), Gay's purpose is to show how genre is transformed amid a literary commodification encouraged by the new economy. As genre is transformed in a capitalistic context, the once immortal canon of Virgil and Ovid becomes fleeting currency in a society newly rife with credit and "thingness" (Benedict 194). Similarly, the eighteenth-century commercial didactic is concerned with marketability rather than instruction. Gay's view of the status of literature and intellectualism in the eighteenth century is perhaps best described in Book II of *Trivia*. In a scene set amid rows of bending shelves at the bookseller's stall, "like a Bee that on industrious Wing,/Collects the various Odours of Spring/Walkers, at leisure, Learning's Flow'rs may spoil...Here saunt'ring 'Prentices o'er Otway weep/O'er Congreve smile...Pleas'd Sempstresses the Lock's fam'd Rape unfold..." (II 555–563)¹¹. In the marketplace, shoppers peruse Otway, Congreve, and Pope as they would any other shop's trifles. (*Trivia* itself would also be for sale among these.) As Gay's representative of the new age, the Walker uses these authors as casually throughout his own work, where classicism is condensed into a single memory, the origins or meaning of which he cannot seem to recollect. The effect of the eighteenth century on genre is thus a grave one. Its literature is without the substance of the Augustans, and its audience unaware of such a decline.

Georgics

The key to understanding Gay's choice of georgic and *Trivia* as a satire lies in characterizing the narrator himself. The Walker appears earnest enough on the surface:

excited by the innovation of the new marketplace, he relates the prescience of market activity and wondrous objects that guard against uncontrolled dangers. While doing so he presents himself as an authentic, responsible citizen, scorning the citified luxury of the fop (“In gilded Chariots while they loll at Ease,/And lazily insure a Life’s Disease”) and expounding on the necessity of city charity (“While Charity still moves the Walker’s Mind/His lib’ral Purse relieves the Lame and Blind”) (I 69–70 and II 453–454). He is also apparently well-versed in classical literature, referring to Augustan poets wherever remotely applicable. His use of language in general paints the portrait of an ideal citizen; an eighteenth-century audience purchasing *Trivia* in the London marketplace no doubt saw him as such. Yet an inspection of the text with generic choice in mind reveals a pedant in disguise: his language is a facsimile of the ancients, and his knowledge of literature does not extend far below the surface. *Trivia* begins with the Walker’s intentions in creating the guide:

Through Winter Streets to steer your Course aright,
 How to walk clean by Day, and safe by Night,
 How jostling Crowds, with Prudence to decline,
 When to assert the Wall, and when resign,
 I sing: Thou, Trivia, Goddess, aid my song (I 1–5).

This is quite similar to Virgil’s opening lines of intent:

What makes a plenteous Harvest, when to turn
 The fruitful Soil, and when to sowe the Corn;
 The Care of Sheep, of Oxen, and of Kine;

And how to raise on Elms the teeming Vine
 The Birth and Genius of the frugal Bee,
 I sing Maecenas, and I sing to thee (I 1–6).

This is the first passage which links the two works, and may perhaps be read as a simple homage to Virgil by the learned Walker. The obvious similarity reveals the Walker's source material, yet makes us doubt whether his understanding of Virgil is more than superficial. As I have previously shown, Virgil's satire discloses his aversion to the city's ostentation and propensity for senseless violence in favor of the Italian countryside. *Trivia's* opening invocation in praise of the city, in borrowing from a piece polemically set against the city, reveals that the Walker is oblivious to the inherent meaning of his source, casting all of his later knowledge in doubt. Ames also raises a point regarding the translation of this passage by Dryden that may disclose more about the nature of the Walker's pedantry. In his translation, Dryden elevates Virgil's more simplistic, direct Latin text: of an example she says, "Dryden does not tolerate a phrase as 'how great the skill of the thrifty bees'; he amends this to 'the Birth and Genius of the frugal Bee' ... Dryden's *Georgics* seem somewhat over-refined" (203). Gay's version, she continues, "comes closer to the lucid simplicity of Virgil's middle style" (204). It is significant then that the Walker's style mimics that of the ancient as opposed to the neoclassical author. Perhaps Gay found more potential for humor in his pedant's attempt to mimic the language of antiquity, yet this says something more about the Walker's persona: the Walker means to flaunt his knowledge of the ancients rather than that of a Dryden, whose work was widely available and popular with the masses (Ames 204).

Again as previously established, the Walker holds himself above the throng, and constant references to works he believes are impressive are a means to achieve this sense of superiority. The Walker's obvious misunderstanding of Virgilian satire, as well as the need to prove his skill with Augustan literature, points to Gay's parody of, as Domingo notes, "the typical scribbler's misapplication of classical knowledge—his bathetic proclivity to flaunt diverse sources and discrepant subjects" (950). The Walker's tendency to "borrow" from the *Georgics* continues throughout. Again at the start of Book I he augustly declares,

My youthful Bosom burns with Thirst of Fame,
 From the great Theme to build a glorious Name,
 To tread in Paths to ancient Bards unknown,
 And bind my Temples with a *Civic* Crown (I 17–20).

Ironically, this passage in which he vows to forge ahead where ancient Bards have not yet been is adapted from the *Georgics* itself:

Hail, sweet *Saturnian* Soil! of fruitful Grain
 Great Parent, greater of Illustrious Men.
 For thee my tuneful Accents will I raise,
 And treat of Arts disclos'd in Ancient Days (II 241–244 and
 Domingo 949).

This encourages the question of whether the Walker is even aware that he reuses Virgil's lines, a conclusion that would only support the point that the Walker is a satiric figure meant to mock vapid pretention. A third textual comparison again reveals the Walker's

need to exhibit knowledge of the *Georgics* while misunderstanding the satire entirely.

Virgil's first book contains a description of nature's effect on animals:

...their Airy Palaces they fly,
 To greet the Sun; and seiz'd with secret Joy,
 When Storms are over-blown, with Food repair
 To their forsaken Nests, and callow Care.
 Not that I think their Breasts with Heav'nly Souls
 Inspir'd, as Man, who Destiny controls.
 But with the changeful Temper of the Skies...
 So turn the Species in their alter'd Minds,
 Compos'd by Calms, and discompos'd by Winds,
 From hence proceeds the Birds harmonious Voice:
 From hence the Cows exult, and frisking Lambs rejoice (I 500–
 570).

Virgil here describes the spiritual and physical connection of nature and animals: nature directly causes movement and exultation. Nature's relationship with man is differentiated given the condition of the human soul, while that with birds, cows, and lambs lack such reciprocity. The Walker's version again seems to miss the meaning of the original:

Nor do less certain Signs the Town advise,
 Of milder Weather, and serener Skies.
 The Ladies gayly dress'd, the Mall adorn
 With various Dyes, and paint the sunny Morn;
 The wanton Fawns with frisking Pleasure range,

And chirping Sparrows greet the welcome Change:

Not that their Minds with greater Skill are fraught,

Endu'd by Instinct, or by Reason taught,

The Seasons operate on every Breast;

'Tis hence that Fawns are brisk, and Ladies drest (I 143–152).

As is clear in *Trivia* throughout, here the “Signs of the Town” appear to precede natural conditions: it is thus the gaily dressed ladies with their artificial dyes who usher in the milder weather. The fawns and sparrows appear affected too by the signs of the town initially—Gay makes the connection purposely vague—as opposed to the clear, direct relationship proposed by Virgil. The final line is Gay’s satiric flourish: remarking on the inclusion of artificial dress in the natural order, he invites us to question the alarming growth of market culture. Gay also again adds to his portrait of the Walker as a pedant in misinterpreting his source.

Thus through textual inspection, a clear picture of the Walker emerges, as does Gay’s intention for using a georgic model. The epistemological associations of the georgic genre involve man’s connection with nature and pastoral antiquity, and Virgil’s work being the generic paradigm further associates the georgic with eternal, substantive literature and the ideals he espouses within. The Walker is representative of the modern destruction of these principles, and thus the re-shaping of genre. The georgic, in its ability to reflect society, in the eighteenth century advocates the capacity of the commercial world to override nature, and also the solely monetary value of literature. As Power notes, “the *Georgics* is concerned with man’s place in the environment; by shifting Virgil’s didactic precepts from the ancient Italian countryside to eighteenth-century

London, Gay points up the rampant commercialism of everyday life” (340). For Gay, there is no more effective a way to highlight the commodification of literature and humanity’s growing distance from Arcadian ideals than by comparing Virgil’s georgic with the Walker’s.

Mythological Allusions

It is perhaps less difficult to locate the satire in Gay’s consistent references to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The Walker’s mythological references to mock-epic are absurd and numerous: the fate of an exposed wig in rain is compared to “fierce Alecto’s snaky Tresses...When Orpheus charm’d the rig’rous Pow’rs of Hell,” as Oedipus is invoked to describe a lost traveler as he warns, “thou doom’d in endless Night to stray/Through *Theban Streets*” (I 203–204, III 223–224). Virgil is also again borrowed for this purpose— his solemn tale of Orpheus’ decapitation at the conclusion of his fourth georgic is reworked by Gay to describe the apple-seller Doll, who falls into a frozen Thames after tradesmen have overburdened it with their stalls: “This cracking Crystal yields, she sinks, she dyes/Her Head, chopt off, from her lost Shoulders flies” (IV 754–764, II 389–390, and Power 359–360). In all cases, the use of lofty mythological verse to describe the mundane again makes the Walker appear ridiculous and ill-versed, his allusions “awkward and out of all proportion with the subject matter” (Domingo 949). Yet Gay’s use of the Ovidian epic serves another purpose in *Trivia*. In its description of products of the commercial world, he highlights the increasing importance of objects in “capturing the center of culture” (Benedict 205). This also works to demonstrate the

commodification of Ovidian literature itself, which is co-opted, satirically misunderstood, and made consumable by new capitalism.

Two of *Trivia*'s most memorable references to objects are those with detailed mythological origins: the patten shoe and the bootblacking profession. Significantly, both are used to rid the consumer of mire associated with natural conditions, Gay again defining objects by their ability to defend against nature (ironically this same dirt is also a remnant of the commercial economy that gives life to the objects themselves) (Brant 110). Recalling the *Metamorphoses*, both myths begin with a transfixed God or Goddess in love with a mortal (Ames 212). Pattens, shoes designed to ward off water and filth by elevating the wearer, spring from an "Art Divine," according to the Walker's lofty introduction (I 221). Vulcan's romantic interest in Patty, the simple yeoman's daughter, inspires him to create the shoes, to combat sickness through exposure. In the bootblack's origin myth, the goddess Cloacina¹², disguised as a cinder-wench, consummates her love for a mortal man. Their consequent offspring is orphaned until the goddess devises his profession, with the help of a host of other immortals. Gay's portrait of the goddess, "with wither'd Turnip Tops her Temples crown'd...Around her Waste a circling Eel was twin'd," citifies the Goddess even further (I 196, 199). The instruments of commerce, a simple shoe and method of cleanliness, have here been crafted beyond human means and therefore elevated to an absurd level of cultural importance. Simultaneously, the commonization of Ovidian myth points to the downward trajectory of the Augustan canon. The new commercial world pushes such sacred works aside to make way for the new immortal: the commercial object. As with the use of the georgic, Gay uses epic mythology to point out how genre has changed, and thus how the eighteenth century

differs from classical Rome and its associated ideal. Modern mythology is thus devoid of literary substance, and confirms the cultural importance of products.

Commercial Didactic

Trivia's contemporary influences must also be considered in a discussion of generic intent. Aside from the inspiration of Jonathon's Swift's poem "Description of a City Shower" (which is referenced in *Trivia*'s advertisement: "I owe several Hints of it to Dr. Swift"), Gay took much from the instructional guides that flooded the marketplace during the time of *Trivia*'s conception. Other "arts of" guides helped readers traverse everything from gardening to midwifery (Power 343). From such guides Gay takes the all-important marginalia of *Trivia*. Although Virgil also delineates the seasons and weather in the *Georgics*, Gay goes further to include an index of the type specific to contemporary guides. Gay's index, like the poem it refers to, proves of little practical help. One finds "Walker, *distress'd by a Foot-ball*" among "Hands, *their use*," and repetitive, unnecessary listings for one entry (fourteen entries are related to coaches themselves) in the deliberately ridiculous index, calling attention to the uselessness of the new market didactic in general (Domingo 953). Power notes that the index, along with *Trivia*'s many subheadings and marginalia "draw attention to its physicality: this is not just a text, but a material (and consequently consumable) object..." (343). Gay chooses this specifically eighteenth-century genre to again help define the age. The commercial didactic, due to its status as a new genre, does not have the epistemological associations of the georgic or epic. Rather, this is a genre birthed in a capitalistic environment: the only genre possible in a world where intrinsic literary value is secondary to commercial

success. Thus in *Trivia*, the how-to genre is meant for public consumption rather than prudent guidance.

Generic Strategy

Gay's ultimate generic purpose in *Trivia* is to reveal a society in capitalistic thrall— commodified genre reflects a society in cultural decline. He does so by employing a multilevel strategy. At the satire's most basic level, we find the Walker committing either the conscious or unconscious plagiarism of classical literature, in the process revealing that he completely misunderstands its meaning. These derivative lines are a comment on the Walker's pedantry and literary misuse. When we ascend to the satire's next level, beyond the interior world of *Trivia*, we find the majority of Gay's audience, which the commercial "art-of" packaging and circulation of *Trivia* ensure will be a mainstream audience, reading an instructional manual. Gay's seamless incorporation of these classical authors, without citation, ensures that the audience will miss the forgery and its Scriblerian undertones. They too overlook the intention of his generic choices; missing the intention of Virgilian subverted georgic, Ovidian mythology, or commercial didactic is to miss its core message of decline through commodity. On the outermost satirical tier we find Gay the author, who consistently implicates himself in what he condemns: this is most evident in Gay's similarities with the Walker. As the narrator attempts to sell us a false portrait of depth, Gay too admits that he is equally guilty of defying Arcadian morality. In a letter to Thomas Parnell after *Trivia*'s release (and subsequent success), Gay comically notes: "What I got by walking the streets, I am now spending in riding in Coaches" (Whyman 55). Coaches were, of course, antithetical to the Walker's supposed authenticity and also to Gay as a champion of Augustan values. Yet

the luxury of a coach was clearly attractive to Gay, as was the prospect of financial gain through his writing. This is revealed too in his choice to release a how-to guide with commercial appeal in mind. We also find Gay in the Walker's self-description. Though as a symbol of the new economic world the Walker is predictably without a personal history, we perhaps learn about his past in his relation of the bootblack origin myth: "But I, alas! hard Fortune's utmost Scorn,/Who ne'er knew Parent, was an Orphan born!/Some Boys are rich by Birth beyond all Wants...I thirsty stand..." (II 181–189). This certainly rings of similarity with the orphaned Gay. Gay thus implicates himself in what he condemns throughout *Trivia*: he is posturing Walker, the fop who enjoys riding in coaches, the opportunistic apprentice, and most importantly, a working author seeking profit. Gay's admission of himself as an author actively selling his wares in the marketplace is arguably what sets him apart among members of the Scriblerus Club. More than Swift or Pope, Gay admits that he is fully complicit in the commercial world (this is even more evident in *The Beggar's Opera*, after the South Sea Bubble had cost him dearly). The efficacy of Gay's satire lies in his ability to relate to the community on more than a didactic level—his lessons in cultural decline are as much for himself as they are for the mainstream reader. Thus Gay's generic strategy in *Trivia* is clear. The Walker is representative of the lost value of Augustan satire, the audience who misperceives the meaning is no wiser, the author's commercial presentation is a success, and Gay's thesis of decline is substantiated. This is achieved through generic choice; eighteenth-century genre is marked by a lack of substance and thus a growing distance from the Scriblerian ideal.

Yet to end a characterization of Gay's work there, as satire of a society in descent (as it often is), would be an injustice to Gay's most celebrated work. *The Beggar's Opera*, although similarly highlighting the destructive result of the new economy, is most importantly a work of optimism. In his *Opera*, Gay proposes that everything capitalism has stolen from England in the eighteenth century— morality, intellectualism, and identity itself— can be taken back.

In The Beggar's Opera

The Beggar's Opera opened in Lincoln's Inn Fields on January 29, 1728. The title itself was undoubtedly confounding to an English audience with very specific expectations of "opera." The eighteenth-century English opera was actually an Italian import and a firmly upper-class pastime. Opera was performed in Italian, thematically and musically bound to formality, and an expensive outing (Gladfelder viii). By 1728 it was also widely understood to be an art form short on substance, its trademarks pretension and inflated stage personalities. That an opera could be staged for a wider audience must have then been surprising — that a Beggar could be responsible for the form impossible. From its inception then, *The Beggar's Opera* was designed to counter generic expectations (Gladfelder viii). As all of England would soon realize, Gay's piece was something new: missing was the unintelligibility of Italian linguistics, the strict adherence to form, and the high-born subjects of epic and antiquity. These were replaced by popular tunes that invited theater-goers to sing along, a mix of forms that was always unpredictable, and characters of the middling and lower classes. The resultant form was termed a "ballad opera"— not one which Gay had invented, but surely a genre all his own. The audience responded resoundingly to this new inclusivity: the *Opera* ran for an

incomparable sixty-two nights, and was the most successful dramatic work of the century (Gladfelder vii). In the process, Gay had shaken the epistemological foundations of genre itself. More specifically, he had taken a genre distinctly of his eighteenth-century culture, one which sought profitability over quality, and transformed it into one that encouraged participation, understanding, and perhaps most importantly, cultural identification. As in *Trivia*, in the *Opera* Gay ultimately asks us to view the toll capitalism has taken on the eighteenth century. Yet instead of using his misinformed readership as evidence of the problem, here he invites that same mainstream audience to be fully complicit in his message, and to embrace the cultural associations that lead to such an understanding. In the use of his new form, Gay proves the promise genre holds when freed from capitalistic necessity: namely, a social unity not possible through commodified literature. As the epistemology of genre may change and adapt to reflect society, Gay intends that by reclaiming substantive genre, eighteenth-century identity may also be reclaimed. As Gay believed of identity, it must be formed by a conscious choice to forsake the inauthenticity of capitalism through continuous cultural experience.

Italian Opera

Gay's most obvious generic choice in the *Opera* is opera itself. Both Gay and the Beggar are responding to the popularity of an imported art form that offered ostentation over substance and unintelligibility over sense. By the 1720's, opera in England was generally recognized for its many absurdities (feuding divas, castrati, and overstated plots among them), ensuring that Gay's audience would be in on any jokes at its expense. Gay's very first scene recalls tired operatic tropes as the Beggar introduces his work:

I have introduced the Similes that are in all your celebrated Operas: The Swallow, the Moth, the Bee, the Ship, the Flower, &c. Besides, I have a Prison-Scene, which the Ladies always reckon charmingly pathetic....I hope I may be forgiven, that I have not made my Opera throughout unnatural, like those in vogue... (Introduction)

The swallow, moth, and other stock operatic elements are interspersed throughout the *Opera*, generally used to denote both naiveté and the lofty Petrarchan simile so common of Italian opera (Parker 404). These are undermined and inserted for broad appeal and obvious simplicity. Polly refers to the swallow in “All in the Downs” (Air XXXIII) in reference to Macheath’s disavowal of their marriage in the presence of Lucy, and the moth in “Why is your faithful Slave disdain'd” (Air IV) in reference to the innocence of Polly’s attraction to Macheath. The bee appears in “What shall I do to show how much I love her” (Air VI) to aid Polly’s contemptuous observation on virginity, while the ship in “Thomas, I cannot” (Air X) helps describe joy as her parents have seemingly accepted her marriage. The flower is used in Polly’s Air VI (in concert with the bee) and in Macheath’s “Pray, Fair one, be kind,” (Air XV) there in a false speech to Polly on his constancy. Tellingly, the lines containing these tropes are used almost exclusively in connection with Polly, to represent her idealized, rather unrealistic virtue in a comparably vicious environment. The fact that exaggerated tropes are used helps support the analysis of Polly as Gay’s lone innocent in the *Opera*. In this case, her exaggerated gullibility is the product of an inauthentic operatic aesthetic. This innocence may also be Gay’s proof that there is hope for such naiveté in the cutthroat city, but more importantly in this case,

with these similes Gay means to emphasize the Beggar's intent to create as commercially pleasing an opera as possible. In another intentional operatic trope, the Beggar does this with his "charmingly pathetic" revised ending, when Macheath's prison sentence is nonsensically revoked. The commercialism of authorship necessitates that Gay and the Beggar ultimately conform to operatic convention and comply with the all-important "Taste of the Town"—after all, as the Player says, "the Opera must end happily" (3.5). The one conventional operatic element not included by the Beggar, the recitative, has been replaced with common balladry. Italian recitative was directly linked to the language itself, a mix of singing and speaking mimicking linguistic inflection—such a form was distinctly Italian, and therefore particularly unintelligible to an English audience. Gay's use of balladry has the opposite effect of imported opera, its lucidity a collective experience.

Gay's thoughts on the Italian opera as a genre are instructive in understanding his reason for its use. Being the popular genre of the day, we cannot overlook the Beggar's (and Gay's) intention of appealing to the consumer by offering a mainstream sing-along (and the consequent comment on adapting literature to meet commercial needs). Yet at its core, Gay's use of the operatic form is to decry its misuse, and to point out its potential when commercial concerns are removed. Gay was indeed an admirer of opera. The long-held idea that Gay was criticizing Italian opera itself, or Frideric Handel¹³ exclusively, has been disproven by modern scholarship: McIntosh rightly supports the long-standing good will between Handel and the Scriblerians (421–422). Additionally, Gay and Handel had joined together words and music in the pastoral opera *Acis and Galatea* only a few years earlier, in 1719. Much has been made of Gay's letter to Swift in 1722, where he

laments, “People have now forgot Homer, and Virgil and Caesar, or at least they have lost their ranks, for in London and Westminster in all polite conversations *Sensino* is daily voted to be the greatest man that ever liv’d” (McIntosh 424). This proves only that the fault of the opera lies with a marketplace that has discarded meaning in favor of popular forms, and not with the operatic genre itself (McIntosh 425). The *Opera* and its continued vitality perhaps provide the best proof of Gay’s appreciation for the form; the rich, entertaining airs and lively dialogue could not be made but by an admirer. As he remarks in *Trivia*, “There Handel strikes the Strings, the melting Strain/Transports the Soul, and thrills through ev’ry Vein” (II 497–498). What Gay disliked was the form as it was brought to England, with its obvious intent to profit at the expense of artistic integrity and the public’s taste for such affectation. Much like *Trivia*’s point of literary commodification through the *Georgics*, the *Opera* points to the effect of economic necessity on the imported opera. As we shall see, Gay’s opera also represents the removal of this necessity: a newly substantive genre meant to encourage change in society, from modern capitalistic emptiness to authentic identity. As Noble observes of this usage, the effect of ballads “was to elicit in the audience a deep sense of community—partly by their testimony to the culture that all Englishman, of whatever class or occupation, have in common” (11).

Ballad Opera

Gay’s sixty-nine airs are truly based on songs of the people; these were cultural touchstones that included ballads heard since youth, drinking songs, pastorals, and popular songs of the day (Gay’s own previous work included). This source material then holds the key to understanding intent in the *Opera*. All of the origin works share a

common thread: recognizance. Gay knows that audience members of every class will understand his double meanings, role reversals, satirical implications, and true character intentions as they recall each familiar tune. As the Italian opera is a confusing exercise of the elite, the ballad opera is an enlightening general admission affair where the common man is rewarded for his traditional knowledge. While the *Opera*'s mirroring of the Italian form in typical tropes and an expected ending are affected and digressive, the one element that the Beggar claims as his own, not making the opera "unnatural, like those in vogue," is ultimately the ballads, which defy such ostentation (Introduction).

Modern critics may certainly be at a far greater disadvantage in attempting to understand the ballads than would an eighteenth-century audience. For example, Polly's innocence or complicity in city immorality is perennially debated by critics, but it is the origin of the successive ballads that shine a light on this and other matters more than context or conjecture. Gay's airs may be grouped into three overlapping types: those that belie the nature of the characters and their actions— a nod to the audience that what a character says is not the whole truth, as hinted at by the tune (Polly's case certainly fits rather securely into this category); those airs that intentionally flip the meaning of their origin song, most often by changing the singer's gender or circumstance (which allows for an effective social lesson in viewing the world from another's point of view); and finally, those songs with original meanings that may reflect exactly the *Opera*'s words, yet expand upon them, revealing Gay's further-reaching political and social purposes. All three types may only be unlocked by a mainstream audience bonded by cultural experience. The *Opera*'s many dimensions are only revealed to those with knowledge of

these common songs. At a staging of Gay's *Opera*, the pedant lacking cultural associations would surely be left in the dark.

For those ballads with origins that reveal the true nature of the characters, it is most instructive to begin with Macheath's, as we are well aware of his trajectory in the plot: the man we believe a virtuous lover to Polly deceives her on his path to Newgate, as the heroic highwayman descends into the same mire ensnaring most of the *Opera's* characters. Gay's source material reveals his intention before the dialogue can do so, as he illuminates meaning through a shared knowledge of familiar tunes. In "Pretty Parrot, say" (Air XIV), Macheath questions if Polly's commitment to him has remained strong during his absence. He then reaffirms his own, lovingly calling her "pretty, pretty Poll." What may seem a harmless play on her name is revealed to be far more sinister in Gay's source song from John Freeman. In the origin ballad, described in its title as "A Pleasant Dialogue between a Parrot and His Master," the bird tells its master that it too has been well in his absence (Schultz 315). This early air reveals Macheath's eventual domination and manipulation over Polly (now infused with the image of a subservient parrot), and defines the relationship to the audience before the later reveal. In, "Pray, Fair one, be kind" (Air XV), Macheath declares himself a changed man as a result of Polly's love: "My heart was so free,/It rov'd like the Bee,/'Till Polly my Passion requited." The air is adapted from George Farquhar's play *The Recruiting Officer* (1706), featuring lyrics as, "Come Fair one be kind...The World shall view, my Passion for you,/But never your Passion discover" (Gladfelder 167). While Macheath's air places control firmly with Polly in her ability to change the once roving Macheath, Farquhar's lover is utterly in control, allowing for a knowing audience to second guess his apparently honorable

intentions. In “Would You Have a Young Virgin” (Air XXI), Macheath’s treachery to Polly is revealed, and the origin tune maintains this trend of reflecting the true nature of his character. The original is from Thomas D’Urfey’s 1709 comedy *The Modern Profits*, and advises on seducing young girls: “Would you have a young virgin of fifteen years,/You must tickle her fancy, with sweets and dear’s” (Schultz 319). Macheath’s is less coarse, but in Gay’s introduction to Macheath within the gang, the tune illuminates that he is not the delicate lover we believed him to be, and that Polly is another piece of currency in a sea of exchangeable women.

Very much like Macheath, Gay’s true intentions for Polly are made clear through the use of sources for the ballads as well. Our early impression of Polly as virtuous amid a family of self-interested opportunists is cast in doubt by a single speech to her father, in defense of her marriage to Macheath: “I know as well as any of the fine Ladies how to make the most of myself and of my Man too. A Woman knows how to be mercenary...A girl who cannot grant some Things, and refuse what is most material, will make but a poor hand of her beauty...” (1.1). There has been well-argued contextual evidence that Polly is speaking in a language of commodity so against her nature in order to appease an angry father intent on ruining a beloved husband. Toni-Lynn O’Shaughnessy, in a thorough argument against a single Hobbesian capacity in the *Opera*, notes the error in counting Polly as just another indistinguishable capitalist. Polly is far from the trifling opportunist in her statement: she has married Macheath, and is attempting to smooth over a dangerous situation to protect him. O’Shaughnessy notes Air VI as further proof that Polly’s mercenary character is just that— a character: “[Air VI] functions to strengthen Peachum’s impression that his daughter is level-headed and realistic, not romantic; but

the fact that even while she sings Polly is secretly harboring Macheath...suggest[s] that air VI reflects her knowledge of her father more than her own conviction” (218). Indeed arguments to the contrary remain unconvincing, as this is the only moment in which Polly departs from her virtuous character. But examining the origins of Polly’s common ballads gives us more definitive proof that the *Opera* is not exclusively Hobbesian, and that Gay has a purpose in leaving our heroine unscathed. Following her uncharacteristic exchange with Peachum, all of Polly’s airs give us no reason to doubt her sincerity; whether professing love for Macheath or imploring her parents to preserve him, she remains the *Opera*’s lone source of moral integrity and restraint. A close inspection of the origins of four later Polly airs offers a wealth of evidence on this account. “Now ponder well, ye Parents dear” (Air XII), in which Polly implores her parents to “save a wretched Wife!” as Macheath’s life hangs in the balance, is derived from what Joseph Addison referred to in the *Spectator* as “one of the darling songs of the Common People... the Delight of most *Englishmen* in some Part of their Age,” “The Children in the Wood” (Schultz 314). This sixteenth-century ballad details the harsh retribution faced by an uncle who leaves his niece and nephew in the woods to perish. Polly is utterly helpless as she puts her life (through the extension of Macheath’s) in the hands of immoral parents. The origin of Polly’s very next air, “Le printemps rappelled aux armes” (Air XIII), is a lover’s “lament for her departing male beloved” gone to war (Gladfelder 166). Interestingly, Hal Gladfelder believes that Gay may have unearthed the song from *The Bird Fancyer’s Delight*, “a 1717 collection of tunes for flute meant to be taught to various kinds of songbirds” (166). Both interpretations hold true next to Polly’s “plaintive Crying” as she “Laments her Dove.” In “All in the Downs” (Air XXXIII), Gay borrows

from his own “Sweet William’s Farewell to Black-ey’d Susan” from *Poems on Several Occasions*. Immensely popular, this air is another sweet expression of Polly’s love, even when confronted with the possibility that Macheath has been unfaithful. In the original, William assures Susan that he remains steadfast: “Believe not what the landmen say... They’ll tell thee, sailors, when away,/ In ev’ry port a mistress find. /Yes, yes, believe them when they tell thee so, /For thou art present wheresoe’er I go” (Gladfelder 170). In “Irish Howl” (Air XXXVIII), Polly again defends her love amid difficult circumstances, further cementing the claim that her earlier lines to her father were meant merely to placate: “When Parents draw against our Mind,/The True-Love’s Knot they faster bind.” The source air, composed by George Vanbrughe, is sung by a woman who loved and was abandoned (Gladfelder 171). This is a nod to a knowing audience that foreshadows Macheath’s betrayal, but never do we doubt the love or sincerity of Polly herself.

These bring us back to Polly’s “What shall I do to shew how much I love her” (Air VI), which follows the contentious statement to her father. Knowing what we now do about Gay’s tendency to reflect a character’s true nature with a wink to an included audience absorbing the tune of a familiar ballad, we may shed more than a contextual light on the line. This is the song of a mournful pragmatist, distressed over the fate of virginity in a world where such innocence is quickly destroyed. Air VI’s source piece by Henry Purcell and Thomas Betterton is also a love song with a grounded realism (Simpson 754). The male speaker voices his devotion to his beloved, but realizes such simple joy is not eternal: “Since Gods themselves could not ever be loving...I wish my love could be always improving,/though eager love more than sorrows destroys” (Gladfelder 165). We are here left with an apt comparison between Polly and the lover of

the original song, although Polly intones a far harder sentiment: both are aware of joy and of its imminent demise. But the original lover's final stanza is finally one of hope, endurance, and the willingness to triumph over harsh reality in the name of love: "In fair Aurelia's arms leave me expiring,/ to be embalm'd by the sweets of her breath;/ to the last moment I'll still be desiring;/ never had hero so glorious a death" (Gladfelder 165). The original seems to continue where Polly leaves off—that although love exposes one to a harsh mortality, or in Polly's case to Covent Garden with the disgrace of sexuality, such awakening is worth a death met in knowing such glory. This sounds far more like the logical conception of the Polly who laments, "For on the Rope that hangs my Dear/Depends poor Polly's Life" (1.1). Again, the audience would have recognized this piece from the 1690 play *The Prophetess*, and understood Polly's full intention.

Gay's second type of air springs from an original which undermines it entirely; the audience is asked to reassess a well-known tune, now sung by the opposite gender. A great deal of dimension is therefore added to the songs of the *Opera*, again only accessible by knowledge of common tunes. The previously referenced "Irish Trot" (Air XXXV) is a duet by Polly and Lucy in which they discover Macheath's treachery ("I'm bubbled"). Simply described, this is one of a few obvious references to the South Sea Bubble found throughout the *Opera*, in a clear link between capitalistic treachery and the investors whose lives were ruined. The origin ballad however, has far more to say on both gender and politics. The original Broadside ballad from 1710 features a male singer who eventually abandons his pregnant lover—it also specifically "celebrates the kind of male sexual freedom Macheath also embodies" (Gladfelder 170). Spoken now in the *Opera* by two women who are at the receiving end of this masculine sexual freedom, Gay

points to the unspoken, disturbing effects of the celebrated male rake on those they victimize. Gay's political and social themes in the *Opera* are very much about exposing the hypocrisy of consequence: while Gay's audience may have enjoyed the bravado of the original ballad, society would not concern itself with those on the receiving end of such actions. The reference to the South Sea Bubble adds a further political element; as in the case of the injured women, the consequence of destroying the lives of investors (Gay's included) is lost in an economic system based on a similarly fast and loose audacity. In very much the same way, "O Bessy Bell" (Air XLVIII), performed by Lucy and Polly, is based on an original in which a dominant male singer is attempting to decide between two women (Gladfelder 173). This air seems a direct response by the women at the receiving end of his abuse: "What then in Love can Woman do:/If we grow fond they shun us./And when we fly them, they pursue:/But leave us when they've won us" (3.4). Again we begin with a song from the male perspective, and Gay offers the underrepresented feminine response. Another important air in which Gay explores role-reversal is "Would Fate to me Belinda give" (Air LIX). Originally a conventional love song performed by a male in which a typically coquettish woman is described, in Polly's hands it shows that men too exhibit such behavior: "Among the Men, Coquettes we find...And we grant all their Hearts desir'd,/When they are flatter'd, and admir'd" (Gladfelder 173). Polly follows this air with the summation that indeed, "The Coquettes of both Sexes are Self-lovers" (3.4). Again Gay turns a typical gender stereotype on its head, and at the same time reaffirms one of the *Opera's* most important messages: that although both groups may commit an equal wrong, only one is held accountable.

Gay's third type of ballad, and the most frequent throughout the play, comprises those wherein the meaning of the air and that of its source tune are similar, yet the former imbues the new with an expanded critique of political and social issues. In their cultural accessibility, only a middling audience would comprehend the full complexity of these airs. In Mrs. Peachum's "Oh London Is a Fine Town" (Air VII), she falsely accuses Polly of materialism: "For she must have both Hoods and Gowns, and Hoops to swell her Pride,/With Scarfs and Stays, and Gloves and Lace;/ and she will have Men beside" (1.1). The audience would have recognized its popular source ballad, which included the lyric "At every Door, there stands a Whore,/at Watten Towns End" (Simpson 461). The source belies Gay's intent to point out the rampant object worship and personal commodification of the city itself. Another of Mrs. Peachum's airs, "Of all the simple Things we do" (Air V), adds to Gay's exploration of gender issues. The original source, from D'Urfey's *The Mouse Trap*, depicts the general trappings of marriage: "We Sweat and Fret and try to Escape" (Gladfelder 165). A knowledge of the origin ballad is the only way then to perceive Mrs. Peachum's highlighting of female commodification specifically: "A Wife's like a Guinea in Gold,/Stamp't with the Name of her Spouse;/Now here, now there; is bought, or is sold;/And is current in every House" (1.1) A third ballad that reflects and expands on its original is "To old Sir Simon the King" (Air LXI). This is grouped with several brief songs performed by Macheath as he awaits hanging, all devoted to liquor and revelry. The audience would have understood it as such, as the ballad dates back to the sixteenth century as a song of this type. Yet its eighteenth-century use took on a distinctly political air, one origin ballad written after the Sacheverell affair featured the lyric: "Now the Whigs and their Friends are confounded" (Simpson 550). Thus the

audience could see beyond the seemingly innocuous references to drunkenness in the words: “The stronger Liquor we'er drinking;/And how can we feel our Woes,/When we've lost the Trouble of Thinking?” (3.5). Macheath's final airs, imbued with political sentiment, are now a potential comment on the state of independent thought in the midst of Whiggish immorality.

These three types of airs undoubtedly reward the audience for their cultural knowledge with an enhanced understanding of newly meaningful genre. Yet beyond making the play accessible, the airs and the characters they illuminate encourage a civic spirit crucial to Gay's ultimate goal. Gay's source songs are meant to inspire the power of traditional community and cultural identity in their own content and history. Perhaps the best example of this message is “Green Sleeves” (Air LXVI), unique as one of a few broadside ballads still popular in the modern era (Simpson 268). More than the content of the many variations of the origin song itself (the earliest version from 1580 features the lyric “Alas My love, you do me wrong,/To cast me off discourteously”), it is its function as a cultural barometer that Gay seizes upon. In his careful tracing of the course of the ballad, Claude Simpson concludes of the history, constancy and resilience of the tune that it “has been dependent on both oral and written avenues of transmission, that it has appealed to a wide variety of publics, and that it has kept its identity despite the disfigurements of decay and embellishment” (273). “Green Sleeves” is significantly performed by Macheath in his last defiant stand before execution, as he asserts that the rich too, equally guilty of the same crimes, should hang from the Tyburn tree: “Since Laws were made for ev'ry Degree,/To curb Vice in others, as well as me,/I wonder we han't better Company, Upon Tyburn Tree!” (3.5). Gay's lyric is significant in portraying

Macheath as a representative of the people: his distinction that “*we* han’t better Company” makes clear that he is sings on behalf of those in “ev’ry Degree.” Macheath is again presented as Gay’s traditional figure; both in his independent assertion of the wrongs in an immoral system and as a member of a larger community punished by capitalism’s subverted justice, his personal and social identity remains clear and uncorrupted. In “Green Sleeves,” Gay combines a song with nationalistic historical associations that retains identity through the ages with a characterization that supports authentic personal and community identification, using his airs to promote the possibility for overturning a future of financial corruption.

Gay’s choice of ballad opera, in its clarity and popular appeal, thus altered the epistemology of the genre. His operatic manipulation effectively destroyed its empty predecessor genre: in a letter to Swift during the *Opera*’s unprecedented run Gay remarked, “...there is a discourse about the town, that the directors of the Royal Academy of Music design to solicit against its [*The Beggar’s Opera*] being played on the *outlandish* opera days, as it is now called” (Melville 137). Yet the demise of the Italian form is not all this epistemological shift accomplished: the cultural nature of the opera, with its ballads and political satire, was distinctly English. Noble comments on the effect of the opera as an invitation to reaffirm a “native tradition”: the *Opera* is “a playwright’s opera with a vigorous English subject, performed in English by a native cast, and sung to native music” (11). Gay’s attempt in using genre to reify opera by dislodging it from an eighteenth-century culture consumed by financial immorality works in concert with the play thematically: the *Opera* intends to show the audience the aftermath of greed and Walpole’s politics, while its new generic characteristics remind them of who they are.

This identity is not the commodification newly thrust upon them by corrupt politicians, self-interested capitalists, and artificial objects— rather, it is an identity built on the incorruptible morality and social participation of Virgil’s Arcadia. We may then begin to address the *Opera* in a new way. It is surely satire of cultural decline. But it is also a celebration of nostalgia, and an optimistic reminder that English identity is alive, well, and poised to reclaim everything lost. Its popularity was proof of the people’s desire to revel in this identity and recognize the threat imposed by incumbent capitalism. Gay creates this new genre with the power to reflect the society he believes can be achieved, one in which members of the community “reaffirm their allegiance to what is native, natural, life-giving, and good” (Noble 14).

Conclusion

In the last significant contribution to Gay criticism, 2001's "*Deep Play*": *John Gay and the Invention of Modernity*, Dugaw focusses on Gay's special ability to look forward by glancing back. Gay's relevance to a modern audience, she proposes, is his recognition of a continuous cultural bond stronger than any new socioeconomic or political institutions that work toward individuation. Dugaw's focus on Gay's use of traditional lore and cultural custom in his assertion of continuous community is an important step in the future direction of Gay scholarship. My theory on Gay's use of reflective genre as a way toward strengthening cultural bonds and reasserting identity in commodity culture represents a possibility for the next phase of Gay study. While modern critics have successfully dispelled the myth that Gay was a Scriblerian sycophant with few of his own ideas, it is now necessary to further explore his role as more than a satirist on the decline of culture. Recognizing Gay's tendency toward an ultimately optimistic path back to Arcadian values allows us to reassess the use of genre in all of his works, and its capacity for reflecting social conditions. It also promotes further study of the impact of the financial revolution on eighteenth-century identity, and the ways in which Gay and his contemporaries dealt with the inevitability of a capitalism that threatened social, intellectual, and political tradition.

Footnotes

¹ Christopher Fox provides further evidence of Scriblerian attitudes toward Locke: “Pope seems to have been the most sympathetic to Locke” and Swift “took a strong interest—and not a wholly uncritical one at that—in the current controversy over Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*” (12).

² This list refers to the main members known to be responsible for Scriblerian literature. Robert Harley is often cited as a member of the group, though was largely uninvolved in authorship (Brückmann 3).

³ Henry Sacheverell was a fiery minister whose 1709 sermon against religious non-conformists, dissenters, and the post-1688 Whig policies that supported them, was published to popular support. When Parliament moved to impeach him that year, citizens took to the streets to protest “the state of religion... wartime taxation, the perceived growth of the ‘moneyed interest’... and other grievances against the Whig ministry” (Smuts). Sacheverell emerged a hero. The affair well-represents the multitude of Whig and Tory divisions early in the decade.

⁴ The Mississippi Bubble, a concurrent financial scheme of the Compagnie des Indes, was developed in France in 1719 by financial genius John Law. Much like the South Sea Company, the value of speculative shares was grossly out of proportion with the earnings of the company. The eventual collapse of the scheme had far-reaching effects on international finance (Garber 119).

⁵ Gay features Covent Garden in *The Beggar's Opera* as well, in Polly's Air VI (this is discussed further on page 72). In both cases, it represents a site of danger and moral ambiguity.

⁶ This meaning was familiar to readers for its recent use by Pope in “The Rape of the Lock” in the line: “What mighty Contests rise from trivial Things” (Rogers 22).

⁷ Macpherson stressed of Locke's identity theory that “The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of larger social whole, but as an owner of himself... Society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise. Society consists of exchange between proprietors” (3).

⁸ Fox's essay notes John Yolton's observation that Locke was “considered one of the more dangerous... writers of the day” (5). Locke's concept of the self as static defied theological concepts of the soul.

⁹ The emphasis here is mine, to highlight the similarity of Locke and Gay's thoughts on personal identity.

¹⁰ In 1727, their rivalry had erupted in a physical altercation as the women reportedly "tore off each other's coifs and hurled abusive insults in Italian before being escorted from the stage" (Akbar).

¹¹ The reference to the bee is purposely Virgilian; *Georgic IV* equates the ideal pastoral community with a hive of bees. Here the relationship is subverted, as Gay's shoppers are the city ideal.

¹² For the Romans, Cloacina represented a new age in city modernity: the then-revolutionary technology of a drainage and sewer system (Ames 213).

¹³ The master of Italian baroque opera in England was unquestionably George Frideric Handel, who after early success in Italy, began working for the crown under Anne in 1712.

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