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Two Possible Sources of *The Beggar's Opera*: A Brief Note

Masao Kaiho

John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* is, in part at least, a literary satire designed to ridicule literary principles like poetic justice and make fun of some popular plays including Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth* and *Twelfth Night*. So much, however, has been written about the originality of this first ballad opera that one is inclined to forget that *The Beggar's Opera* is a burlesque play as well, maintaining a tradition almost as old as the theatre itself. It must also be noted that the unprecedented success of *The Beggar's Opera* in 1728 revived a climate highly favourable to this type of dramatic form and that actually burlesque plays in the form of an afterpiece were much in vogue during the succeeding quarter-century.

It seems rather strange, therefore, that in the commentary on *The Beggar's Opera* appended to the Oxford edition of Gay's dramatic works are listed only nine plays as his butts for ridicule⁽¹⁾. In the case of Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* which was the first major milestone in the tradition of English theatrical burlesque, the fact has long been known that the author alluded to no fewer than seventy different plays in all. This relative paucity of detected allusions in the case of *The Beggar's Opera* can only be explained by assuming that there remain some other allusions still undetected. It is most probable that Gay was working from some undiscovered sources. The purpose of this short essay is to call attention to the burlesqueness of *The Beggar's Opera* by

suggesting that Gay may have had in mind two more plays at least in the writing of this musical play. In spite of the importance usually attributed to this aspect of the work, it has never been treated in sufficient detail.

Slammekin. Dear Madam—

Trull. I would not for the World—

Slammekin. 'Tis impossible for me—

Trull. As I hope to be sav'd, Madam—

Slammekin. Nay, then I must stay here all Night—

Trull. Since you command me.

[*Exeunt with great Ceremony.*]⁽²⁾

This passage is quoted from Act II, Scene vi of *The Beggar's Opera*. Here two prostitutes are vying with each other in offering precedence on leaving a tavern near Newgate. As is generally known, one of the principal devices adopted in *The Beggar's Opera* consists in comparing people of fashion to criminals, thus sneering at the pomposity of the upper classes. The passage in question is a typical example based on this device.

So far as is known, no argument has ever been put forward as to whether this curious dialogue between the two prostitutes is a borrowing from some unknown literary source or Gay's own invention. The origin of this passage, however, may be found in Nathaniel Lee's *The Princess of Cleve*, the main plot of which was taken from an English translation of Madame de La Fayette's celebrated romance, *La Princesse de Clèves*. The following passage is quoted from Act II, Scene ii of this unjustly neglected tragicomedy.

TOURNON —Come, my carnations.

[*Celia and Elianor wait for Tournon to take precedence*]

Nay, I protest I will not go before ye.

CELIA But, madam, we're at home.

TOURNON O lord, beauties, I know not the way.

ELIANOR Indeed, madam, you must—or we shall use violence.

TOURNON Well, ladies, since 'tis your command, I dare not but obey.

Exeunt, [Tournon taking the lead] ⁽³⁾

Here, as in the above-mentioned extract from *The Beggar's Opera*, three bourgeois women parody the manners of the polite world by behaving in exactly the same way as the two prostitutes. What is immediately apparent is that there exists a close resemblance in content and tone between the two passages cited. Although there is no known record in which Gay acknowledged his dependence on Lee's work, this resemblance and the word "command" used in both extracts seem to prove almost undeniably that Gay took the hint directly from *The Princess of Cleve*. There is one further thing that might help to confirm this surmise. Alexander Pope who contributed a number of ideas to the composition of *The Beggar's Opera* is likewise indebted to *The Princess of Cleve* for a famous line of *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*. "Is it, in heav'n, a crime to love too well?" of this poem⁽⁴⁾ is a very effective modification of "Is it a fault to love?"⁽⁵⁾, a line addressed by the hero to the heroine of *The Princess of Cleve*, although it must be admitted again that no mention is made of this possible source in the footnote of *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Pope*.⁽⁶⁾

To what extent Gay was familiar with Lee's dramatic works is

uncertain, but it is generally recognized that in *The Beggar's Opera* he twice alluded to *The Rival Queens, or the Death of Alexander the Great*, one of the most important plays by Lee. Besides, as can be seen from such typical burlesque plays as Gay's *The What D'Ye Call It* and Fielding's *Tom Thumb The Great*, the moral and emotional falsity of heroic assumptions which pervaded Lee's heroic tragedies was a suitable target for criticism among burlesque writers in the Augustan Age. Examples abound where sneering glances are cast at the bombastic heroic elements so glaring in Lee's dramatic works. Considering these circumstances, it is a wonder, one must confess, that with the masses of commentators on *The Beggar's Opera* no hint has ever been offered by any of them about the possibility of Gay's borrowing from *The Princess of Cleve*.

In the preceding discussion an attempt has been made to prove that there exists an apparent relationship between *The Beggar's Opera* and *The Princess of Cleve*. The next question to be discussed is whether or not Gay owed a hint to a French comedy in the writing of *The Beggar's Opera*. The first passage of the following is quoted from Act II, Scene xiii of *The Beggar's Opera*, and the second is from Act II, Scene iv of Molière's *Dom Juan ou Le Festin de Pierre*.

Macheath. Be pacified, my dear *Lucy*—This is all a Fetch of *Polly's*, to make me desperate with you in case I get off. If I am hang'd, she would fain the Credit of being thought my Widow - Really, *Polly*, this is no time for a Dispute of this sort ; for whenever you are talking of Marriage, I am thinking of Hanging.

Polly. And hast thou the Heart to persist in disowning me ?

Macheath. And hast thou the Heart to persist in persuading me that I am married ? Why, *Polly*, dost thou seek to aggravate my

Misfortunes ?

Lucy. Really, Miss *Peachum*, you but expose yourself. Besides, 'tis barbarous in you to worry a Gentleman in his Circumstances.⁽⁷⁾

CHARLOTTE

Est-ce, Monsieur, que vous lui avez promis de l'épouser ?

DOM JUAN, *bas, à Charlotte.*

Vous vous raillez de moi.

MATHURINE

Est-il vrai, Monsieur, que vous lui avez donné parole d'être son mari ?

DOM JUAN, *bas, à Mathurine.*

Pouvez-vous avoir cette pensée ?

CHARLOTTE

Vous voyez qu'al le soutient.

DOM JUAN, *bas, à Charlotte.*

Laissez-la faire.

MATHURINE

Vous êtes témoin comme al l'assure.

DOM JUAN, *bas, à Mathurine.*

Laissez-la dire.

CHARLOTTE

Non, non : il faut savoir la vérité.

MATHURINE

Il est question de juger ça.

CHARLOTTE

Oui, Mathurine, je veux que Monsieur vous montre votre bec jaune.

MATHURINE

Oui, Charlotte, je veux que Monsieur vous rende un peu camuse.

CHARLOTTE

Monsieur, vuidez la querelle, s'il vous plait.

MATHURINE

Mettez-nous d'accord, Monsieur.⁽⁸⁾

These two passages are very much alike in that both heroes, Macheath and Dom Juan, are respectively faced with enormous embarrassment, being placed between two girls who claim to be their legitimate wife or fiancée. Considering that Molière's comedies still had a great influence on the English stage in the eighteenth century, it seems more than likely that the above-mentioned passage of *The Beggar's Opera* derives directly from Molière.

True, Gay referred to Molière only once⁽⁹⁾, but it is interesting to note that Scene V of *The Rehearsal at Gotham*, Gay's last dramatic work, bears a certain similarity in situation to Act II, Scene ii of Molière's *Les Fâcheux*. Besides, it has been traditionally believed that *No Fools like Wits* produced in January 1721 was Gay's revision of Thomas Wright's old comedy, *The Female Virtuoso*, which in its turn was adapted from Molière's *Les Femmes savantes*. On this subject, it may be granted, opinions are divided among modern critics. Since no copy of *No Fools like Wits* survives, it is impossible to be conclusive about Gay's authorship. To return to the main question, it may be asserted (with some justice, one must admit) that the idea of rivalry between Polly and Lucy was obtained not so much from *Dom Juan* as from Lee's *The Rival Queens* or Dryden's *All for Love*. At any rate, in the light of the absence of external evidence, it would be dangerous to find in *Dom Juan* anything more than a highly interesting parallel.

An enterprise of discovering sources must always submit to harsh critical scrutiny by experts and is usually laughed off as fruitless

labour. A source-monger has no other excuse to offer for his audacity than this truism: in the case of a burlesque play the tracing of allusions to their origin is essential to its appreciation.

NOTES

- (1) John Gay, *Dramatic Works*, ed. John Fuller (Oxford,1983), Vol.II, pp. 373-383.
- (2) Gay, Vol.II, p.32.
- (3) *Four Restoration Marriage Plays*, ed. Michael Cordner with Ronald Clayton (Oxford,1995), pp.115-116.
- (4) *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson (London,1954), Vol.II, p.340.
- (5) *Four Restoration Marriage Plays*, p.166.
- (6) *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, Vol.II, p.340.
- (7) Gay, Vol.II, p.41.
- (8) *Oeuvres complètes de Molière*, édition de R.Jouanny (Paris,1962), Tome 1, pp.739-740.
- (9) John Gay, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Vinton A. Dearing, (Oxford,1974), Vol.I, p.214.