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A Walk Through the Metropolis

**Exploring early eighteenth-century London
from the perspective of John Gay's *Trivia* and
*The Beggar's Opera***

Relatore

Ch. Prof. Flavio Gregori

Correlatore

Ch. Prof. Shaul Bassi

Laureanda

Agnese Rocconi
Matricola 865876

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Preface

The aim of this thesis is to study and discuss the ways and the degree to which two of John Gay's major literary works, the mock-georgic poem, *Trivia*, and the ballad-opera, *The Beggar's Opera*, express and are related to the environment of London in the early eighteenth century, a pivotal moment in the redefinition of the city's identity and in its transition towards the contemporary model of the metropolis. Gay's representation of London is also examined in light of its collocation in a literary context which was beginning to recognise and question the first cultural, social, environmental and psychological effects of the newly developed urban space. In particular, throughout both *Trivia* and *The Beggar's Opera*, instances occur of the difficulty of conciliating an ideal, harmonious relationship with humanity and nature, with the hustle and bustle of the artificial space of the city, in which an early consumerist economy is reconfiguring the ways of perceiving and treating the natural world as well as the field of human identity and relations. These concerns, which sound particularly relevant to the modern reader, were gradually introducing environmental, sociological and anthropological issues into the artistic and cultural discourse, suggesting a sensitivity much ahead of its times.

In the first part of Chapter 1, London's transition towards the metropolitan model is contextualised and explained through the analysis of the main political, economic and cultural developments of Britain during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, which laid the foundations for an unprecedented urban expansion, demographic growth, and social and cultural modifications of the city. The roots of such expansion can be traced back to some key events and processes of the late sixteenth-century: the first "real-estate boom", allowed by the Dissolution of Catholic monasteries during the Reformation, which continued for over a century; the shift and development of new trade routes and trading companies revolving around London, the seat of a stable Protestant monarchy, and its bustling marketplace which offered luxuries to the rich and a salary to the working ranks; the court's settlement in

the recently developed Westminster, attracting a social élite which needed appropriate lodgings, services and commodities.

These factors rendered the city attractive for the gentry as well as for the workforce, and resulted in a demographic doubling in the span of just the last fifty years of Elizabeth I's reign. The urban structure began to reach well beyond the ancient walls, but situations of overcrowding and social mixing were gradually becoming the new norm, as aristocrats, merchants, workers and poor were pressed together by mutual dependency. At the same time, the increase of employees in commercial activities, and the emphasis placed on education by the Protestant culture, promoted the flourishing of print and an impressive rise in literacy rates. By the second half of the seventeenth century, at the beginning of the Restoration, London's redefinition as a metropolis was underway.

The second section of Chapter 1 provides a framing context for Gay's lifetime and works, and summarises some distinctive characteristics of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, particularly as far as the rise of parliamentary and party powers are concerned, the city's social and structural adaptation to the population rise and diversification, and the evolution of the commercial and financial economy. As the Glorious Revolution reasserted the Protestant identity of the crown and the Parliament's authority over it, after the absolutistic tendencies of Charles II and James II, the foundations were laid for the development of a deeply engaged political culture which greatly affected life in the city and which would culminate in the "party rage" of the early eighteenth century and of Robert Walpole's ministry.

Meanwhile, particularly after the Great Fire of 1666, the urban architecture was furtherly expanded, rebuilt and modernised; trading companies began evolving into joint-stock companies, and the new economic mechanisms of finance was reshaping the very concept of money. London populace kept increasing, as did its economic power and its attractiveness for all ranks of society; the demographically predominant workforces and paupers lived side by side with the noblemen, the wealthy and various levels of a

dawning proto-bourgeoisie of merchants, in a social space which was confused, complex and in the process of being redefined.

Chapter 2 provides some information on Gay's biography and the main themes of his literary production, followed by an overview of the primary instances of city literature of the period, with a focus on the developing of the cultural, social and political space of the club, of journalism and the periodical essay. This section also proposes an overview of the contrasting representations of the urban space and its cultural scene by the two main literary ensembles of the city, the Kit Cat Club (Addison and Steele) and the Scriblerian Club (Swift and Pope), as well as the less polarised perspectives of Defoe (expressed particularly in his *Moll Flanders*, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, *The Complete English Tradesman* and *Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*) and of Ned Ward's *The London Spy*.

Chapter 3, dedicated to *Trivia*, the first of the two main topics of this analysis, begins with a general presentation of the poem and the main literary influences and techniques employed by the author, especially as far as regards instances of the use classic Latin models for the purpose of mockery and burlesque. Some considerations are proposed on the figure of the "Walker", his identity and the viewpoint of London he communicates through his behaviour and his remarks. The analysis then follows the Walker's steps through some selected main topics of the poem, which are combined with some detailed historical notions about the London environment in the early eighteenth century. In particular, the focus of this examination lies on the following themes: the recurring and persistent tropes of dirt and danger, also in light of their symbolic, social and psychological significance; the characteristics of city attire proposed by the Walker, explained through the economic and cultural state of fashion at the times and Gay's representation of the different social types which operate in the urban space (the working ranks, the aristocracy, the poor, and women).

The final section on *Trivia* proposes some concluding considerations on some issues which are quintessentially related to the individual's processing of

the new metropolitan space, and which can be perceived also between the ironic, mundane lines of the poem: the psychological difficulties in negotiating personal and public identity in a new, heterogeneous social environment that was increasingly based on laws of profit and convenience, and the dismay and alienation which arose in a person confronted with a vast, hectic crowd, and in a confused, hostile environment.

The first part of Chapter 4, dedicated to *The Beggar's Opera*, explores the peculiarities of the genre of the “ballad opera”, of which the play is the most relevant representative; specifically, the influence and parody of the Italian opera is sided by an analysis of the use and meaning of ballads and popular tunes as a substitute for extremely fashionable composers’ operatic music. The second paragraph provides an overview of the criminal world and the workings of the penal system in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, with a particular focus on the figures of highway robbers and informers, the most relevant characters in *The Beggar's Opera*, and on the phenomenon of the popularisation and heroization of the “crafty criminal”. The analysis that follows, of the three main characters of the play, Peachum, Lockit and Macheath, intends to explain the ways in which such characters were inspired and reflecting popular conceptions of the metropolitan criminal underworld – Peachum and Lockit representing the unscrupulousness and hypocrisy of the informer, and Macheath embodying the ideal of the “gentlemanly thief” . In the last paragraph of the chapter, the discussion of the play and its protagonists is broadened to encompass some of the period’s more general economic and sociological issues; in particular, the increasing role of profit and money as personal, social and moral definers, and the similarities, ironically highlighted in the play, between the vices, virtues and hierarchies which regulate the lower microcosmos of criminals and the “outer world” of politics, culture and commerce.

1. Historical Introduction

1.1 A Metropolis in the Making: Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Century

One of the aims of this thesis is the analysis of Gay's representation of his own time and particularly his city. Therefore, it is necessary to first describe the city environment; this overview, as is the case when discussing the historical evolution of society, economics and politics, includes the premises that engendered the context of the early eighteenth century. Furthermore, the period discussed in this paragraph allows to appreciate the historical and social foundations on which the first modern metropolis was built. As will be argued in later chapters, the metropolis as a concept is an interesting and relevant key in which Gay's major works can be read. For this reason, this short introductory section will attempt to summarise the complexity of changes that affected Britain, and London in particular, immediately before Gay's lifespan, and will be bracketed for convenience between the urban expansion which followed the English Reformation and the end of Cromwell's Interregnum in 1660.

1.1.1 The Real-Estate Boom, Demographics and Immigration

As Roy Porter (1994, p. 34) observes, London was the fundamental setting of the English Reformation, which found a firm ground in the social and political constitution of a City that had recently seen an exponential growth of mercantile expansion and commercial contacts with the leading countries of the European Reformation (namely the Netherlands and western Germany). Starting from Henry VIII's reign (1509-1547), Londoners went through a gradual and relatively organic shift towards Protestant beliefs, fuelled among other factors by a higher literacy rate which allowed for a better circulation of holy scriptures, translations and pamphlets by all kinds of Reformed faiths: unlike other capitals of continental Europe, where the Reformation brought with it violent imposition (and/or suppression) and religious civil wars,

“London was preached, not pummelled, into Protestantism” (Porter 1994, p. 36). Henry VIII’s policy of detachment from the Roman Church, initiated by his famous divorce from Catherine of Aragon, resulted in the subsequent Act of Supremacy that committed the rule of the Church of England, now inspired by European Protestant ideas, to the king. Most relevant to the structure of London, the Act brought also to the dissolution of monasteries started in 1536, which nationalised all former movable and immovable properties of Catholic institutions; these properties, now effectively belonging to the king, were then mostly bestowed as favours to members of the court and individuals close to the sovereign. This process, which continued through the reign of Henry VIII’s successor, Edward VI (1547-1553), released recently privatised real estate properties and plots into the London market, leading to a proper “real-estate boom” (Porter 1994, p. 37) and ultimately promoting an economic growth and an urban evolution of the city.

Favourable economic conditions in the capital, boosted also by its status as commercial crossroads for imported goods, naturally appealed to the lower workforces living in the rest of the kingdom, who flocked to the city in search for a higher income. As a result, the population of London doubled in less than fifty years¹, and the living space recovered from the Dissolution quickly became insufficient, overcrowding exacerbating hygienic conditions and risks of epidemics; major plague outbreaks occurred and would occur regularly (the worst dating 1564, 1603, 1625, and the Great Plague of 1665), but their tragic effect on demographics was compensated by the constant influx of migrants, also aided by a recorded raise of birth rates in the countryside and by the increasing number of foreign migrants coming from countries involved in religious conflicts (mainly from France and the Netherlands) who chose

¹ Although demographic records of the period are rather meagre, they are sufficient to infer that around the 1550s London was probably home to 70-75,000 people, which had increased to at least 140,000 (without considering another 40,000 living in the outskirts) by the end of Elizabeth I’s reign in 1603. For an in-depth record and analysis of London’s demographics, see Porter (1994, p. 42) and Sheppard (1998, p. 126).

London for its relative stability and freedom². Because of these premises, the city underwent a process of occasionally ruthless construction development which lasted well beyond the Elizabethan period and will peak in the second half of the seventeenth century together with ramping building speculation; houses and commercial buildings, as well as borderline slums, rose both within the walls, crowding the once-green spaces like Tower Hill, and without, expanding eastward with mariners along the Thames and lower workers in north-eastern Bishopsgate, and westward with the increase of luxury manufacturers and shops around Temple Bar, Fleet Street and Westminster. Furthermore, the court had completed its gradual settlement in Westminster and had been expanding its ranks and its richness since Henry VIII. This expansion contributed to attract noblemen and the gentry from outside London, who were eager to be part of the pulsing heart of power, politics, fashion and culture; this phenomenon boosted the development of high-grade housing (including palaces and terrace houses) and contributed to increase the consumption of goods and services, including luxury items and commodities, which in turn fuelled the demand for workforce. Not even the more exclusive, fashionable areas, however, were exempt from the effects of the increase of the working ranks and the poor, so much so that courtly aristocracy, the middle sorts, workers and beggars were everywhere condensed and shared the same streets and gathering places.

1.1.2 Market and Culture

As anticipated in the previous paragraph, particularly from the Elizabethan times, the role of England, and specifically London, in the large scheme of international commerce grew exponentially thanks to some relevant contributing factors such as the increasing shift of trading routes from the Mediterranean towards the Atlantic and the instability of some of the major

² Sheppard (1998, p. 129) underlines that the foreign presence in London increased to about 10.000 units after the Reformation, while it was attested at around 3.000 at the beginning of the century.

economic centres of continental Europe, undermined by religious conflicts (Porter 1994, p. 46).

The names of the major trading companies alone provide an overview on the trade routes which flourished from the Elizabethan period, and which provided London with goods which will be prominently present and relevant in one of the topics of this thesis, John Gay's *Trivia*: the very first, the Russia Company (chartered under Mary I in 1555, slightly before Elizabeth's accession) exported English clothes and imported, among other various items, fur, animal fat, wood and tar (History.ac.uk), and was swiftly followed by the Levant Company importing spices, silk, fruit and other luxury goods from Turkey (Epstein 1908, p. 18), the East India Company importing spices from India (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.), and the Virginia Company, the first transatlantic company (chartered in 1606 by James I), which instituted a colony for the exploitation of land and resources in North America (Encyclopediavirginia.org, 2018). Trading companies detained the monopoly over imports, triggered the investment of higher capitals and, broadly speaking, promoted the circulation of large sums of money; this resulted in them acquiring the status of joint-stock company and laying the foundations for a new-born financial system which found its natural centre in London and will develop through the seventeenth century.

In conjunction with the pivotal role of London in international trading, demographic growth (particularly, but not exclusively, of the wealthy) resulted in the capital city's being the main centre of distribution and consumption of all national produce, including grains, meat, dairy and coal, while the average higher incomes afforded an increasing number of citizens more purchasing power. As a consequence, systems of transportation of goods were improved to allow for more efficient restocking of products from the countryside, and communication channels such as the postal service were enhanced; the areas immediately surrounding London benefited from a development of specialised

production and became proper “market towns” (Sheppard 1998, p. 134), which found their sustenance solely in selling their products to the city³.

The predominance of the market economy, the importance attributed to education by the Protestants (particularly by the Puritans), and the rise of the printing industry, again boosted by the Protestant reliance on religious books and pamphlets⁴, were crucial determiners for the growth of basic literacy which spread in London particularly between the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century⁵. Occupation in the commercial sectors required some degree of education even from a small shop apprentice, if anything for simple tasks such as signing, accounting or maintaining business relations, and the fast-paced, competitive workplace of the metropolis certainly favoured the literate; furthermore, knowledge of specific fields such as geography, mathematics and languages became even more crucial in an economic system based on international exchange. As a result, schools of various levels, from grammar school to college, flourished during this period, and London could pride itself with new and renovated free schools funded by charitable organisations, commercial companies, or wealthy citizens. Hand in hand with participation in commerce and literacy, legal action also increased, with an increasing number of people from all walks of life being involved in trials or needing legal representation, which led to the institution of new courts. The Inns of Court experienced an unparalleled rise in enrolments: “between 1500 and 1600 the number of entrants to the Inns quadrupled” (Sheppard 1998, p. 159) and young aspiring law professionals,

³ Sheppard (1998, p. 134) highlights, among others, the centres of Farnham (supplying grain), Hatfield and Luton (malt), the southern Midlands (cattle) and Newcastle (coal).

⁴ As Porter (1994, p. 60) observes, “In 1585 twenty-four printers were operating in town; by 1649 there were sixty.”

⁵ Sheppard (1998, pp. 156-157) reports a research by Professor David Cressy which attests the unprecedentedly low percentage of complete illiterate by the last decade of the seventeenth century, among citizens involved in trade at any level (13%) and among lower-class working Londoners (18% for apprentices and 31% for servants). Significantly, even London-women literacy was on the rise, and by 1700 more than half of them will be able to sign their name.

mostly born and raised in outer provinces, poured in to benefit from its new social and cultural possibilities. Furthermore, this context of intellectual prosperity favoured the scientific community, peaking with the foundation of two renowned and prestigious institutions such as the Royal Society (1660) and the Greenwich Observatory (1675), and elevating the city to the status of intellectual European epicentre (Sheppard 1998, p.160).

1.1.3 London Administration, Rebellions and Civil War

The expansion of commerce and the demographic growth described in the previous paragraphs had important consequences not only for the urban organisation of London, but also for its administration, as well as playing a relevant role in the build-up to the mid-seventeenth-century rebellions and ultimately the Civil War.

As regards the city's administration, London citizens were organised by two major institutions working in parallel: on one hand, the guilds assembled and extended civil and working rights on members (called "freemen") of the twelve major commercial and manufacturing fields (e.g. Grocers, Goldsmiths, Clothworkers, Tailors etc); the guilds promoted civic unity, administered charitable activities and were involved in the social and religious life of the city. On the other hand, a governmental apparatus responsible for handling the city administration, laws and taxations was constituted by the Mayor, the Aldermen⁶ (holding most of the decision and executive power), the freemen-elected 200-members Common Council of ward representatives, and the Common Hall (a large assembly which elected city officials).

⁶ The city wards, i.e. the twenty-seven administrative divisions of the city, represented by one Alderman each, were Aldersgate, Aldgate, Bassishaw, Billingsgate, Bishopsgate, Bread Street, Bridge, Bridge Without, Broad Street, Candlewick, Castle Baynard, Cheap, Coleman Street, Cordwainer, Cornhill, Cripplegate, Dowgate, Farringdon, Farringdon Within, Farringdon Without, Langbourn, Lime Street, Portsoken, Queenhithe, Tower, Vintry and Walbrook; this list of city wards in the sixteenth century is reported in the Table of Contents of Beaven's *The Aldermen of the City of London Temp. Henry III -1912* (1908).

Divided into wards and parishes, the city's administration was rather self-organised and self-sufficient in demographic record keeping, public order and relief of the poor and disadvantaged. However, with demographic growth and urban expansion, a number of unregulated areas (including, but not limited to, the so-called "liberties" regulated by the Church before the Dissolution) had expanded or arisen towards the end of the century, both within and without the walls. These suburban areas, which included precincts such as Whitefriars, St. Bartholomew's Hospital, Black Friars, the Inns of Court and Bankside, were outside the Mayor's and the Aldermen's jurisdiction, and had a powerful effect on the public opinion which pictured them as proper "no man's lands" where criminals, prostitutes, vagrants and rogues could prosper; while underground legends and penny-dreadfuls thrived, however, this perception is not validated by court records of the period, which mostly register petty crimes or moral indecencies of a nature and rate fairly common for a large city (Porter 1994, pp. 54-55).

Up until the first decades of the seventeenth century, the relationship between the Crown and the City, particularly the merchant élite which directed guilds and Companies, had been balanced and mutually positive, with the first allowing the second a considerable operative freedom, which was rewarded with opulent public displays of allegiance and submissiveness to the king. Such relations were crucial for both sides, since the economic security of the city, from which the Crown profited particularly when in need of loans, was in part a responsibility of the Crown itself, granting charters and patronages to commercial endeavours. Nevertheless, these productive relations began to fall apart towards the 1620s; courtly partiality towards certain commercial groups (particularly the major joint-stock companies) enraged other excluded merchants, while the same powerful companies were dissatisfied by the Crown's intermittent support and frequent interferences on matters such as duties and monopolies. James I's court managed to endure the city's allegation of impairing a "commercial revolution" (Porter 1994, p. 74), but the economical points of contention were gradually being flanked by the religious

tensions which had been started in the essentially Puritan city by the Stuarts' too-tepid political attitude towards the Thirty Years War against the Roman Church and particularly the Catholic Spain. After Charles I's accession in 1625, anti-Catholic and anti-establishment stirrings began to mount from the pulpits as well as from the workshops; the king's personalistic attitude, marked by the enormous expenses of the court (which were often covered by loans from the wealthy London merchants), particularly manifested in 1629 when he dissolved the Parliament, and contributed to polarisation in the reign and the centralisation of discontent on the figure of the monarch.

In 1640 public dissent in the city degenerated into protests, rallies and public preaching, overwhelming the administrative government of London and its Mayor who had kept backing the Crown in fear of an anarchist turn of events. 1642 saw the precipitation of the tension between the king and the Parliament when five members of the House of Commons fled from Charles' arrest and took refuge in London, which effectively turned from riotous anti-monarchist capital to Parliamentary stronghold, gradually equipped with trenches and forts⁷; civil war unfolded through the country, the majority of battles concentrating away from the city, and ended in 1649 with the Parliamentary victory, the decapitation of Charles I and the institution of the republican and Puritan-oriented Interregnum, led by commander Cromwell. As Porter points out, London exited the Civil War apparently untouched, maintaining its institutions and its problematic management of the suburbs; however, the pivotal economic (and consequentially political) power of the city had been revealed particularly through the events preceding the war, enough to prove London "a force no future King or Parliament could afford to slight." (1994, p.79).

⁷ Francis H. W. Sheppard (1998, p. 163) reports the "huge scale" of "defensive earthworks" in 1643, which resulted in "London being entirely enclosed within a line of trenches 11 miles in length and strengthened by over twenty forts."

1.2 London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Century

The following paragraphs are intended to provide a more detailed framework of political, social and economical history from the years immediately preceding John Gay's birth to the end of his literary activity. After a brief overview on the political vicissitudes of the British crown, some clarifying notions will be included, regarding the demographic and social circumstances of London and its economic situation. The scope of the historical analysis presented in these paragraphs has purposefully been narrowed, and these subjects have been specifically singled out from the broader national frame of events, as their reflections and consequences are relevant and explanatory in regard to both the author's biography (see chapter 2) and the works hereby analysed.

1.2.1 From the Restoration to Robert Walpole: The Rise of the Parliament

After the failure of the Interregnum, accelerated by Cromwell's death, Britain underwent a period of monarchic Restoration which began in 1661 with the crowning of Charles II, Charles I's son who had been forced to take refuge in France during Cromwell's Republic. During his French stay, Charles II was inspired by the absolutistic principles of the king's godly nature and right, which would effectively enable the sovereign to be above any other earthly power, including the court and the Parliament. His reign was characterised by a lavish courtly life inspired by the grandiosity of his peers at Versailles, which earned him the nickname of "French king", and by a conflicting relation with the Parliament.

In 1673, in response to the previous year's Declaration of Indulgence proclaimed by the king in favour of all Catholics and Dissenters, the Parliament promulgated the Test Act, which prevented any citizen who dissented from, or refused, the sacraments of the Church of England from accessing any public position (including the army). As a direct result, Catholics were effectively excluded from civic life, the court, higher education etc.; as a natural consequence, it would be understood that the king himself could not be a

Catholic, which would collide and be at odds with the primacy of the absolute monarch and his lineage over any external requirement, including religion (this contradiction will in fact be called “Exclusion Crisis”).

While catholic stirrings following this Act culminated in the two Papist Plots against the king in 1678 (and again later in 1681), Charles II proceeded to dissolve the Parliament in 1679 and again in 1680, when the Exclusion Bill was promoted twice to exclude from succession his catholic brother the Duke of York (and future James II). From the Exclusion Crisis to Charles’ death in 1685, the Parliament remained dissolved. However, the events of the Bill had brought to light a fracture in the kingdom’s governmental élite which will be of paramount importance for the discussion of London’s political and social life, which will also be reflected in the writings of the time: the members of the Parliament partial to James II’s accession for the sake of the preservation of monarchy and the Church of England had in fact been named “Tories”, while promoters of the Exclusion were labelled “Whigs” by their opponents, who sternly reproached their supposedly republican, dissenting and anti-establishment tendencies. The opposition between Tories and Whigs would endure in the Parliament henceforth and would start an intense political and party activity which was concentrated in London, the seat of the government⁸.

After his brother’s death, with the Parliament still dissolved, James II found little or no obstacles to his accession, but, as Robert Ergang (1939, p. 418) observes, he appeared to not have learned from Charles’ mistakes, nor from his strategies: the philo-catholic king made little effort to mediate with a Protestant government and an essentially Protestant country, or to conceal his absolutistic tendencies particularly in matters of financial management; on the

⁸ Sheppard remarks that these definitions firstly came to extensive use during of the Exclusion Crisis, and the two opposing sides were from this moment “transmuted into permanent political parties” (1998. p.168). Ergang (1939, p. 417) provides some explanation concerning the origin of their names, which shed light on their derogatory nature: “the name Tories [...] had hitherto applied to a certain class of Catholic outlaws in Ireland [...]. [...] Whigs [...] used to designate rabid Scotch Covenanters”, i.e. Scottish Presbyterians refusing the imposition of the Anglican Church during Charles I’s reign (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

contrary, he went so far as to promulgate, without the Parliament's consent, another Declaration of Indulgence in 1687 to decriminalise Catholicism and religious dissent.

The Declaration, adding up to the rising debt of the crown and a series of other minor but significant displays of partiality towards the Roman Church, had disturbed the public opinion, which was seemingly tolerating the mature sovereign only because his daughter and successor Mary, the Protestant wife of William III of Orange, was presumed to soon take his place. Yet, when James's catholic second wife, Mary of Modena, produced a male heir, the tables turned: in 1688, a part of the Parliament set to overrule James II and sent for William of Orange to cross over to Britain and claim the throne.

After William's crowning, recalled as the "Glorious Revolution" because of its bloodless development, the Parliament's power was restored and evident: the governmental forces now united established the transition to a parliamentary monarchy, which maintained the aristocratic hierarchy of the court but implemented some degree of control over the ruler, i.e. any royal decision (particularly on matters of laws and taxes) would require parliamentary endorsement before entering into force; furthermore, the Parliament was granted more prerogatives (as well as more duties), such as more frequent meetings and more control over the financial budget. These measures, collectively included in the Bill of Rights of 1689, were followed by the Act of Settlement of 1701, which ratified that only a Protestant king could be crowned; since William was approaching old age without heirs and his sister-in-law Anne had recently lost her only son, the Act required to identify the successor to the last Stuarts in another lineage: the Hanovers.

William III's death in 1702 shortly postponed the beginning of Hanoverian reign since Anne was still living (albeit sickly) and first in line of succession. Although her health and meek character did not improve her decisiveness and authority, her deep Anglican roots granted her the benevolence of her subjects; under her rule, the Act of Union was passed which unified the previously separated Parliaments of England and Scotland and

ratified the birth of the United Kingdom of Great Britain. Furthermore, from 1702, England entered the War of the Spanish Succession against France, siding an anti-Catholic alliance, already favoured by William III's foreign policies, and constituted by the Holy Roman Empire and the Dutch Republic. The control of Spain was paramount for its numerous commercial routes and colonies in the Americas⁹, but notwithstanding numerous battle victories, the crowning of a French king, Philip V of Bourbon, on the Spanish throne could not be prevented. In 1713, however, the Peace of Utrecht ended the War of Spanish Succession between Great Britain and France and allowed the former a thirty-years *asiento*, a monopoly on slave trade with the New World, and outlined the two new European colonial superpowers, England and France; the following year, Anne died, and a long period of Whig supremacy unfolded under the government of Robert Walpole (1721-1742).

George I of Hanover, a great nephew of James I, accessed the throne in 1714 as decreed by the Act of Settlement. He was born and raised in Germany, was relatively detached from his newly acquired nationality, and could not speak any English, which led him to search for support from the Whig side of the Parliament, among whom he chose his ministers, rather than from the Tories. During his rule, the Parliament benefited from a strengthening of its authority through the implementation of the "cabinet government" (Ergang 1939, p. 547), in which the ministers' power was no longer submitted to the king, who would only attend meetings to approve or repeal their propositions; this tendency sprung from the crown's necessity to secure the Parliament's support, which could be achieved by electing ministers who could grant the Houses' consensus. With the cabinet working relatively independently from

⁹ Trading routes with the New World were particularly important due to the fact that they could grant an intake of gold, which in the monetary system of Europe up until the beginning early eighteenth century would determine the value of a country's currency (the more gold was contained in a coin, the more it was worth) and, consequentially, its richness and economic strength. After the War of Spanish Succession, with the development of finance economy, however, the concept of money and monetary value will begin to change (see paragraph 1.2.2).

the king arose the need of an “intermediary” (p. 548) between the two, a figure that would gradually evolve into the modern Prime Minister. The first of these figures in British history, Sir Robert Walpole, already Paymaster of the Forces, was appointed First Lord of the Treasury, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons in 1721. Consistently with his Whig orientation, during his twenty-years mandate Walpole strived to promote peace for the sake of economic prosperity, commerce and industry.

Walpole had been a prominent public figure well before his appointment as Minister, and his political stances and behaviour had been subject to a wide variety of commentaries particularly since his role in opposing, together with the Tories, a Whig majority who sided the king in his intent to involve Britain in European affairs, particularly in the interest of his home country and family (Black 1990, pp. 8-9). Walpole’s *Opposition*, which lasted from 1717 to 1720, found the support of future George II and confirmed the politician’s prominence in public opinion; Jeremy Black reports he was “an excellent parliamentary speaker, [...] a thoroughly political animal, adept at intrigue and ‘management’, the handling of the patronage without which the political system and administration could not operate” (p. 7). Particularly after his involvement in covering up the financial damage inflicted to the State by the “South Sea Bubble”, as well as his exaltation of the danger of Jacobite plots to safeguard Whig unity and dominance in the Parliament, Walpole and his government became the target of a persistent satire from the Tory members of the Scriblerian Club (Downie 1994, pp. 111-112). The most committed satirists included Swift, Pope, and, to a certain degree, Gay (see Chapter 4)¹⁰; they depicted Walpole as “unscrupulous, [and] self-seeking”, and denounced the “alleged corruption of his administration” (p. 111), in a strife to highlight the moral dangers of a new economic and political system which threatened to

¹⁰Opposition to Walpole, however, would not be limited to the satire of the Tories and the Scriblerians. In the Parliament, from 1725, a Whig fringe opposed to the corruption which permeated the Minister’s establishment formed the Patriot Whigs. In the 1730s, Henry Fielding followed the Scriblerian generation as a major satirist of Walpole’s government.

subvert the traditional social order and which was supported by the Whig majority.

When George II succeeded to his father in 1727, Walpole found a strong ally in the Queen, Caroline of Brandenburg-Ansbach; the two efficiently manipulated the strong-willed king's inexperience to further Walpole's policies, until the outbreak of the War of the Asiento against Spain (and subsequently France) in 1739 impelled Great Britain to defend and possibly expand its trade routes with Central America. Confronted with the downfall his peaceful economic strategies, Walpole lost the majority in the Parliament and was forced to resign in 1742, relinquishing his post to the newly empowered Tory party.

1.2.2 Life in the City: Development, Society and Order

Having broadly summarised the political events of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, it is now possible to return with more clarity to the topic of London, focusing firstly on its demographic and urban development since the end of the Interregnum and its social composition and order.

“The brew of government, trade and industry invigorated the metropolis” (Porter, 1994, p.131): the unprecedented demographic growth remained unaffected even by rising mortality rates and the Great Plague of 1665, and continued through the second half of the seventeenth century, when the population increased from 400.000 inhabitants (recorded in 1650) to 575.000 by 1700 (Sheppard 1998, p.126). Immigration provided the majority of the growth, with a notable increase of women moving to the capital to enter the workforce, particularly in domestic service. Due to the development of sea trade, the city needed an increasingly large amount of both skilled and unskilled labourers, who began to settle and spread eastwards along the Thames, populating the districts from Wapping to Poplar with seamen, dockers and other related professions; away from the river, the East End swarmed with the houses of craftsmen and mariners. North and South Ends were being gradually integrated in the city suburbs with the development of

building industry in the north and the markets, inns and theatres of Southwark, while the West End and Westminster became the new pole of attraction for the city (and the country) élite, being the seat of the Parliament as well as the fashionable, worldly district.

The Great Fire of London of 1666, which burnt to the ground four-fifths of the city¹¹ from Fleet Street to the edge of the ancient walls, was a decisive factor for the architectural organisation of the capital. The flames had spread so widely and easily because of the prevalence of wooden and perishable buildings, which were partly the result of the frenzied and incautious building speculations that had characterised urban development since Tudor times. As a consequence, the rebuilding plans established cautionary measures to enforce order and safety, including limitations to buildings height, the mandatory use of non-flammable building materials (i.e. stone and brick) and the paving of larger streets to facilitate the transit of carriages, sided by gutters (Porter 1994, p. 89). Architectural improvements extended beyond Fire rebuilding and continued well into the first decades of the eighteenth century, notably with the two Building Acts of 1707 and 1709, particularly concerned with the structural solidity and characteristics of terraced houses (Green 2011, p. 28). Renovations allowed for a further expansion of communication channels, mailing services, internal trading and the enhancement of passenger transportations both within and without the city, including the renowned burst of the coach business.

Particularly from the seventeenth century on, London began to mould into the suburb-dense metropolis known by the modern world; furthermore, consistently with the social trend of the previous century, the urban structure continued to project onto the organisation of the various social strata. Roy Porter recalls the major importance associated to “addresses” (1994, p. 95) as indicators of one’s social status: in the rebuilt London, Westminster and the

¹¹ Porter (1994, pp.84-88) reports the exact extension and dynamics of the Fire, which spread from a bakery in Pudding Lane and in the course of three days (2-5 September) destroyed over 13.000 buildings.

West End kept being synonyms of wealth, power, fashion, élite clubs, coffee and chocolate houses, and the London season¹², as much as the City and the East End embodied the lower workforces. However, as noted in the previous paragraphs, the number of inhabitants and the predominance of lower working classes still entailed a mixing of citizens from all walks of life, whose daily activities blended into each other and brought everyone in close contact from the gentleman to the cobbler, from the Lord to the beggar.

The poor kept increasing in parallel with the population, and the parishes, which were responsible for the relief of the older, ill and destitute, intensified their responsibilities so much so that they were allowed to manage workhouses from the 1720s. As mentioned in paragraph 1.1.3, the public opinion was easily worried by situations of irregularity, poverty and the possible proliferation of crime, and although such fears were probably exaggerated, the role of justice became prominent for a quiet city life. Public executions at Tyburn, and occasionally Newgate and Tower Hill, were originally introduced as deterrents for criminals, but quickly turned into spectacles, and the convicts, particularly the cleverer, to celebrities; jails proved equally inefficacious as they became themselves a breeding ground for corruption and bribery. Alongside pickpocketing, fights, robbery and prostitution, another form of public disorder began to emerge as a source of worry: the mob.

The recent political events had proven London to be a political force in its own right, capable of standing on its own feet, independent of the national government; this force was reflected in the citizenry being generally politically aware and participating, which could (and did) lead to public manifestations

¹² The London season, dating back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, lasted through autumn, winter and early spring, when the country-based wealthy landed gentry and the rich businessmen from other cities flocked to London with their families to participate in its fashionable social life (Sheppard 1998, p. 131). Following the policies of parliamentary reinforcement, another “season”, starting in November and ending in April, drew members of the Parliament to Westminster (Porter 1994, p. 134).

and riots with which political parts expressed their discontent in unruly and often dangerous ways. The rallies had grown particularly intense during the religion-based governmental conflicts of the Restoration, and later, with the increase of party opposition starting from the reign of Queen Anne. The Riot Act was passed in 1715, intended to contain the problem, but it produced little effect, particularly as it coincided with the first of the Jacobite rebellions which resurfaced the long-standing antagonism between Catholics and anti-Catholics (Porter 1994, pp. 157-158).

1.2.3 Economy and the Financial Revolution

The role of international commerce and joint-stock companies became paramount after the Glorious Revolution, boosted also by the predominance of Whig policies which favoured trade, finance and economic growth, promoted firstly by William III. London, also favoured by its geographical position, was the focal point of the economic growth and held a vast majority of the British trades¹³.

Mercantile economy most importantly had led to a cultural change in the conception of money with the spreading of the concept of “volatile money”, i.e. the financial value of the ownership of credits or interests, promoted first and foremost by the long-distance buying and selling which were at the base of international trade. The administrative system evolved with the introduction of new offices for accounting and handling volatile money, the stock market (which is founded exactly on the concept of non-tangible money) developed, and economy was on the process of earning its place among the sciences. Investments became a major feature of the city’s economy, as well as a number of other services and business, most notably insurance companies targeting predominantly seafaring and fire damage (in wake of the devastating Great Fire).

¹³ “In 1700, London handled 69 per cent of total exports, 80 per cent of all imports, and 86 per cent of re-exports” (Sheppard, 1998, p. 145).

The “financial revolution” which is the focus of this section can be traced back to the change of the relationship between the political and the economical power that was firstly introduced with the issue of the crown’s debt rising particularly during the reigns of Charles II and James II. As tax revenues and private bankers’ loans became insufficient to cover the increasingly urgent national debt, both monarchs tried to contain the damage with their own absolutistic means: Charles II by announcing the infamous Stop of Exchequer in 1672¹⁴, and James by trying to exploit his position of unconditioned power to simply wipe the debt out. Both measures led to a swelling reaction from the creditors that went so far as to precipitate the Glorious Revolution. William III in turn worked to stabilise and regulate the relationship between the crown and bankers; the Parliament was granted “monetary scrutiny of royal finances” (Ferguson, 2008, p. 75), and money lenders established a private group called the Bank of England in 1694, which became the proper “safe” of the kingdom. The crown’s debt exacerbated again during Queen Anne’s reign following the major expenses of the War of the Spanish Succession.

One remarkable effect and testimony of the debt issue, as well as of the concept of volatile money, as developed in the late seventeenth century, is represented by the case of the “South Sea Bubble” of 1720, which threw John Gay among many others in a considerable financial distress. In order to cover for part of the national debt caused by the war, the joint-stock South Sea Company, chartered in 1711 with the monopoly over trade with South America, offered a debt-equity swap for which one fifth of the national debt would be changed into shares of the company. To generate shares from the debt, the company sold obligations, which would grant the buyer the return of the sum paid plus a considerable amount of interests. The strategy seemed to be successful as first, as shares were sold out in a frenzy, also thanks to fraudulent or misleading advertisement and political bribes. By 1719, their stock value had increased by 70%, but the “bubble” exploded the following year when the

¹⁴ “with the Stop of Exchequer [...] Charles II had suspended payment of his bills” (Ferguson, 2008, p. 75).

Company's profits revealed to be insufficient to cover their investors' interests; the news spread among some politicians and investors who quickly sold their shares, decreasing the Company's capital even more and precipitating the rest of the shareholders into financial crisis.

The events of the South Sea Bubble, as well as attesting to the first steps of the shares and stocks market and the "financial revolution", also reflect the shift in the balance between politics and economy which resulted from the expansion of the commercial economic system. As the indicator of a nation's power was turning from the ownership of land to the ownership of trade routes, and consequentially the ability to capitalise on those routes, political power was gradually becoming subjugated to economic interest: for the first time, the State served the economy, not vice versa.

2. John Gay and the Literary Context of the Early Eighteenth Century

The following section means to deliver biographical references and an overview of Gay's writings, as well as their contextualisation in the broader artistic and literary tendencies of his time. In particular, paragraph 2.2 will provide an overview on the peculiarities and the representations of London as a literary place as well as a literary subject while it was undergoing a momentous social and political transition. The transformation of the city's territory, its demographic composition, its political function and its economic system, which have been discussed previously, introduced literature and the intellectual world to new perspectives, psychological and social processes, as well as unprecedented issues; all these factors, which are nowadays natural components of the environment of the metropolis, were just beginning to take shape in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cities, and understandably triggered intense reactions from Gay's contemporaries.

2.1 The Life and Works of John Gay

To portray in a nutshell John Gay's literary life and influences, the following description by Vinton A. Dearing appears particularly suggestive and efficacious: "Pope dealt with the origin of evil and the crimes of the intellect, Gay with the more controllable problem of political corruption. Swift's irony was savage, relentless, Gay's gentle and comic. [...] But his was the sweeter temper, and honey is as good a preservative as salt." (Dearing 1974, p.16). By comparing Gay with his more illustrious contemporaries and friends, Dearing highlights the relatively moderate and mundane nature of Gay's works, while inferring that such nature did not diminish the author's worth for posterity. Gay's most famous works, tied through their themes and style to his own political and social present, can furthermore invite a scholarly approach which recognises literature as being *in time*, generated, represented by and representing the historical moment in which it was composed.

The author's life itself, though rather sparsely documented, was deeply connected with his time and its dynamics.¹⁵ Born on 30 June 1685 in Barnstaple, Devon, John Gay attended the local Grammar school; at the age of ten he lost his parents, who both belonged to ancient but landless gentry families, and he and his three siblings were subsequently raised by an uncle. Their financial condition being well below their status, Gay moved to London for an apprenticeship to a silk mercer from 1705 until the following year, when he returned to his hometown for a brief period. Around 1708 he had moved back to London to work as a journalist for *The British Apollo*, a periodical which specialised in answering the readers' queries on miscellaneous subjects. On the same year, he published his first poem, *Wine*, a humorous ode to the alcoholic drink, inspired by John Philips' burlesque rewriting of Miltonian epic poetry *The Splendid Shilling* as well as by Milton's *Paradise Lost*.¹⁶

In the following three years, he divided his time between literary practice and a quite industrious although unsuccessful search for patronage from noble families, which relented from 1711 in favour of a more strenuous dedication to his writings. Between 1711 and 1713 he had three significant works published: *The Present State of Wit*, a review on contemporary press; *The Mohocks*, his first and unperformed drama about a popular violent clique of upper-class Londoners; *Rural Sports*, a didactic poem describing countryside hunting and fishing, inspired by Virgil's *Georgics* and Pope's *Windsor Forest*.

In the meantime, Gay continued his work as journalist and collaborated with Richard Steele, one of the founders of the popular *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, to his latest periodical endeavour, *The Guardian*. Gay's previous experience in the silk business and his recent involvement in the current affairs and mundanity of the city had nurtured his interest and competence in fashion, a theme which will be prominent in *The Fan* (published in 1713), a three-books

¹⁵ For John Gay's full biography and chronology of works, see, among others, Dearing (1974, pp. 1-26), Novak (1983, pp.78-79) and Wright (1889, pp. 1-11).

¹⁶ For an extensive commentary on *Wine*, see Dearing (1974, pp. 474-485).

mock-heroic poem in which he deploys a Virgilian style, drawing from both the amorous subject of the pastoral and the divine discourse of the epic, to describe the mythical creation of the ordinary object of the title.

In this period, Gay also came into contact with Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, with whom he initiated a long-lasting literary partnership and friendship, and, while still unsuccessful in his search for patrons, he established his first important connection to higher society by becoming a steward for the Duchess of Monmouth's household. In 1714, John Gay published his first masterpiece, *The Sheperd's Week*, a collection of six pastorals (*Monday to Saturday*) of Virgilian inspiration introduced by a *Proeme* and a *Preface*, written as a burlesque of Ambrose Philips's own pastoral poems and presenting the romantic trials of various couples of lovers in the countryside¹⁷. In the same year, an collective of influential writers including Pope, Swift, Thomas Parnell, the physician John Arbuthnot, the politician Henry St John and Gay himself, constituted the Scriblerus Club, which met regularly through the whole year and composed their satirical manifesto, *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, the account of his scholarly and scientific exploits given by a fictitious author supposedly versed in all kinds of knowledge but incompetent in all of them¹⁸. The literary aim of the club was in fact to expose, oppose and mock the pretentiousness, conceit and affectedness of their contemporary writers.

Gay's new acquaintances introduced him to the Tory environment as well as aiding him in a renewed pursuit for a patron. He managed to get close to Princess Caroline's (George II's future wife) female entourage, particularly to Henrietta Howard, but the effort brought no practical avail. With the help of the Scriblerians, he cultivated his taste in mockery and the bathetic and in

¹⁷For an extensive commentary of *The Sheperd's Week*, see Dearing (1974, pp. 511-540).

¹⁸On a similar subject, Alexander Pope will also compose *Peri Bathos, or The Art of Sinking in Poetry* (published in 1735), an essay on how to obtain the most ludicrous effects in writing referring to the "bathetic" effect, i.e. the anti-climax created by joining a high, serious tone to a baser or ordinary subject (Novak 1983, p. 76).

1715 he successfully presented *The What D'Ye Call It*, aptly defined by contemporary dramatist Richard Cumberland (1817, p. IV) as a “tragicomic pastoral farce”; around the same period, he was also finally allowed a patronage by the Earl of Burlington, and was working on his most memorable poem, *Trivia, or The Art of Walking Through the Streets of London*, which was published in early 1716 and was rather profitable according to his colleagues¹⁹.

1717 saw the production of the successful farce *Three Hours After Marriage*, to which Pope and Arbuthnot also brought their contribution; the comedy, relating two suitors' efforts to secretly court the young newly wed of a much older doctor, enjoyed a wide popularity with the audience, despite (or perhaps thanks to) critics' charges of indecency. From 1717 to late 1719, testimonies of Gay's endeavours are meagre: he followed another patron, William Pulteney, on a journey to France, after which he spent one summer back in the English countryside with Pope; in this period he probably composed the libretto for *Acis and Galatea*, a masque by Georg Friedrich Händel, then he proceeded to travel alone through France and Belgium.

Upon his return to London, he began to gather his *Poems*, a collection of his previous works, published in 1720; the considerable profits from the *Poems* were soon invested in South Sea Company stocks, which unfortunately crashed later that year causing him a substantial loss. For the two following years, he lived as a guest of the Earl of Burlington; in 1723 he started to recover some financial stability through investments and writing (notably the tragedy *The Captives*, represented in 1724) and, thanks to the Earl of Lincoln, he moved to Whitehall where he spent the following years hovering around Burlington and frequenting the court, though failing to obtain any major appointment.

¹⁹Arbuthnot notified in a letter to Parnell that “Gay has got so much money by his art of walking the streets, that he is ready to set up his equipage”; the equipage was a fully equipped carriage likely to be rather costly at the times. (see Dearing 1974, p. 546, quoting one of Arbuthnot's letters from late 1715).

Around 1725, Gay began to work on his *Fables*, another major work, which he planned to dedicate to the king's young child. The following year, he was joined by Swift in his lodgings at Whitehall, and the two spent most of their time with Pope, writing and visiting friends. 1727 saw the publication of Gay's *Fables*, which through allegory demonstrated the author's insightfulness and knowledge of the mechanisms of the court; he immediately began working on the ballad opera *The Beggar's Opera*, his most celebrated play, set in Newgate prison. It was first set on stage on 29 January 1728 and, after a briefly lukewarm reception, proved a tremendous success.

In the same year, Gay composed *Polly*, a "sequel" to the *Opera*, but his satirical insinuations against Robert Walpole, probably suggested by Swift and already manifest in his previous play, took their toll when Walpole himself prohibited the staging of *Polly*; however, in spite of severe illness and mental instability, Gay still managed to publish the play the next year and earn a remarkable profit off it. He accompanied his patroness of the moment, the Duchess of Queensberry, to Edinburgh, only to return and discover he had been evicted from his house in Whitehall for his political offences. He found employment as business manager for his patroness's family as well as for Swift, and continued writing, but his health was unstable and his mind perturbed by dissatisfaction, discouragement and reclusiveness.

Gay spent his last years, from 1729 to 1732, writing, notably two plays (*The Distress'd Wife* and *The Rehearsal at Goatham*) and a second volume of *Fables*, all three works addressing and criticising the corruption of politics and society of his time; he died of illness on 4 December 1732, while he was working on the staging of another ballad opera, *Achilles*, at Burlington Gardens.

2.2 Literature and Politics in the City

As the biographical notes of the previous paragraph report, Gay spent most of his literarily active years in London and/or was involved in the city's social and intellectual bustle, which is reflected in the two major subjects of this thesis, *Trivia* and *The Beggar's Opera*. As this section will show, Gay lived in a period of important structural changes in the way of living, moving and experiencing the city, and immersed in the social, cultural, ethic and aesthetic concerns risen by these transformations. While the proper exploration of London through his works, and the examination of what they can (or do not) tell about life in the city, will be the object of the next chapters, it is useful to consider first the intellectual milieu of such writings, which spared no effort in expressing opinions, praise and censure on the metropolis.

As seen earlier, the end of the Interregnum was the beginning of a series of political processes which led to an increase of the role and powers of the Parliament over the monarch; therefore, party politics introduced a new way of polarising ideas, governments and, ultimately, people. The Whigs and the Tories became the symbols of such polarisation: the former promoted the new "capitalistic" model, favouring trade, finance and the primacy of economic growth and power (including the social class fluidity this model entails), while the latter represented the landed gentry, the maintenance of the traditional political and social order and a closed economical model of national self-sufficiency. As the national government had its headquarters in the recently reborn Westminster, London was the first-hand witness of political action, unlike other powerful European capitals such as Paris, which had instead relinquished the seat of power to the town of Versailles; this factor certainly contributed to the heightened political awareness and participation of London citizens. The intellectual sphere, which thrived in the city also thanks to the rise of print and literacy rates, was naturally involved in the political and party discourse of the time, and participated actively to it, also by associating and connecting the subjects of the political and social debate to literary and aesthetic principles.

A strenuous political involvement was reflected in the social life of London particularly with the emergence of the club, a physical and ideological space which congregated and promoted communication, acquaintance and debate between politicians, writers, thinkers, businessmen and generally citizens of the major opposing parties. Clubs were in fact one of the many manifestations of the emergence of a new mode of experiencing community life which was proper to the metropolis, developed hand in hand with the political involvement, and centred on the social, the public sphere, the outward. The institution of “new sites for sociability” (Sussman 2012, p. 44) such as the coffee houses²⁰ in which clubs often met is a most tangible testimony of this developing public way of living, as is the spread of journalism, and particularly of periodical essays collected in the so-called “moral weeklies”, which commented and interpreted the current state of a variety of topical matters (including art, literature and philosophy). These commentaries related particularly to the closer world of the nation and the city, and were in turn the subject of discussion in the coffee houses; the readers’ response was immense and the popularity of the moral weeklies ultimately served as a fuel to the building of the concept of “public opinion” as we understand it (Habermas 1989, pp. 59-60).

The most relevant representatives of this pundit journalism *ante litteram*, Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, significantly belonged to the Whig-oriented Kit Cat Club and had started their journalistic activity in 1709 with *The Tatler*. Addison and Steele deployed the technique of delivering their and their collaborators’ essays via one or more fictional personas (e.g., *The Tatler* used the voice of the wise and old Isaac Bickerstaff) who were supposedly expressing their opinion and moral lessons on the way of the world.

²⁰ Serving more exotic drinks such as chocolate, coffee or tea, and occasionally alcohol, coffee houses provided a gathering place for all kinds of business, intellectual and social activity, and often offered the chance to peruse small libraries and collections of various objects (art pieces, historical artefacts and scientific tools) as well as organising public lectures, private meeting-rooms and gambling tables (Trolander and Tenger 2015, p. 271).

In 1711, Addison and Steele introduced another persona, Mr Spectator, and the homonym publication *The Spectator*, to the scene of periodical essays, accompanied by other representative characters among which stand out the old landed Tory Sir Roger de Coverley, and the merchant Sir Arthur Freeport (Steele 1891, No. 2). Given the Whig position of the publication and its authors, the inclusion of a Tory voice in their picture is a remarkable sign of toleration and inclination to dialogue, particularly in a place and at a time in which political expression and rivalry were so fervent they would occasionally burst into riot and disorder.

The Spectator's aim, declared by Addison in the first number of the paper, was “to enliven Morality with Wit, and to temper Wit with Morality” (Addison 1891, No. 10), to explore a variety of topics ranging from literature and philosophy, to social and moral issues (education, women’s role, etc), to more mundane problems such as hygiene or hunting, including also answers to readers’ inquiries. Some essays, such as No. 454, were concerned specifically with London and would present, for example, an itinerary of the writer in the city, reporting street names, means of transport and descriptions of the daily activities witnessed by the spectator (Steele 1891, No. 454); Addison’s No. 69 is on the same page and expresses his “delight” in the thriving of commerce, the usefulness of financial investments for personal enrichment and the circulation of goods, and the wonders of an international trading which complements the richness of his nation, bringing “Spices, and Oils, and Wines” on its tables and silks in its wardrobes (Addison 1891, No. 69). Those papers shed a light on the life of the city as well as on the whiggish authors’ opinion of it, which appears, perhaps unsurprisingly when considering their orientation, altogether positive and optimistic in their depictions of the “polite urban culture” (Whyman 2007, p. 43), fashionable passers-by, prosperous markets and convenient transportations.

A decidedly different view of the city was proposed by the poets, intellectuals and journalists operating on the opposite side of the political spectrum of the Kit-Cat Club, and namely by the Tory-inclined Scriblerians. As

mentioned in the paragraph dedicated to Gay's biography, the club, heralded by the fictional "virtuoso" Martin Scriblerus, dedicated particularly to revealing the artificialities, conceits and greed of popular contemporary writers who, also thanks to the printing and literacy boom, were flourishing during the period. The club opposed particularly to the dawning figure of the professional writer for whom literary activity was merely a mean of financial gain, and argued that value only lied in the "classic" literature produced by lifelong study and *otium litteratum* (Hammond 1988, pp. 110-111). The Scriblerian's aesthetics was in line with the literary and artistic tendency of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century named Augustanism, which saw the expanding and domineering colonial Britain as a direct descendant and parallel of the Roman Augustan Empire and consequently exalted both classical literature²¹ and the formation of a national identity through the aestheticization of British land, history and literature (Sussman 2012, p. 14). For the purpose of this thesis, the Augustan literary trend will be considered specifically in relation to its application to city writing, in which Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, Gay's lifelong friends and determined Scriblerians, were particularly acute and fostered the Augustan classical taste and genres to produce either intensely realistic depictions of London (Swift), an idealised imperialistic image of a heavenly city or a stingy satire of its proliferous and grubby writing scene (Pope).

Swift's *A Description of the Morning* was published by *The Tatler* in 1709. The poem offers a short array of unadulterated descriptions of the awakening of some of the city's activities and inhabitants, highlighting with occasionally crude realism the peculiarities of being part of the well-oiled mechanism of the metropolis, as well as its fundamentally different functioning in comparison to the countryside scene of traditional pastorals²².

²¹ Hence the renewed and widespread interest in classical Latin genres such as epic (also inflected to mock-epic for satirical or ironic purposes), pastorals and odes.

²² The first lines of the poem constitute a case in point as they depict young Betty (a servant of some sort) sneaking out from her master's bed in the morning, defying the

Various interpretations can be attributed to the meaning and aim of the text, ranging from the descriptive exercise of wit and sharp observation so admired by Steele²³ to a stern denouncement of the chaotic, immoral and impure world of the city (Manlove 1989, pp. 463-464). Nevertheless, the poem's focus on the lower characters of the urban scene (servants, thieves, cleaners etc) and their actions surely contributes a different perspective on *The Spectator's* founders' progressive, productive city. On the same note, Swift's other famous poem dedicated to London, the mock-georgic *A Description of a City Shower* (published in *The Tatler* in 1710) depicts the portents of an approaching rainstorm in the city and the consequences of the pouring rain which unites citizens from all places in society in the search for shelter, while bringing to light the grime and garbage of the streets as the water drags them down the sewers (O Hehir 1960, p. 195).

Pope's vision of London, as noted by Max Byrd, appears to follow a path of degeneration and "nightmarish contraction" (1978, p. 52) of the nationalistic ideal of the classical, orderly and prosperous London, the so-called "Augusta", outlined in lines 375-383 of his panegyric poem, *Windsor Forest* (1713). The poem, starting from an idyllic imagery of the Forest as a remnant of the garden of Eden, traces the descent of the nation into chaos and disorder from its submission to the Normans to the more recent domain of William III, only to prophesize its resurrection as the "world's great oracle" (Pope 1903, p. 33) towards the end, the centre of an empire for which Queen Anne will bear the guiding light of order to the world.

canonical, innocent and idyllic imagery of country maids and shepherds of pastoral poetry (Sussman 2012, p. 70).

²³ Steele expressed his admiration for the poem's "way perfectly new" which "described things as they happen" and "never forms fields, or nymphs, or groves where they are not, but makes incidents just as they really appear" (Steele et al. 1899, No. 9).

In *The Dunciad* ²⁴(published in three books 1728, and revised with the addition of a fourth book in 1742), however, the hopeful, majestic ideals of *Windsor Forest* are far left behind, as the mock-heroic urban poem depicts the triumph the goddess Dulness “daughter of Chaos and eternal night” (Pope 1903, p.226) and her Grub-Street²⁵ acolytes. The titular Dunces, the “vile class of writers” (p. 219) which included popular novelists, booksellers, literary critics, political pamphleteers, journalists, imitators, plagiarists, adulators etc., are endowed in the first book with a new king, Lewis Theobald²⁶ (substituted by playwright Colley Cibber in the 1742 version), who is mockingly celebrated through the second book with the grotesque and filthy distortion of the “heroic games”(p. 231). The third book of *The Dunciad* proceeds to illustrate a vision in the Temple of Dulness which enumerates the victories of the goddess and the proliferation of Dunces in the past and in the present, and ominously predicts its complete triumph in a future engulfed by darkness and oblivion. While *The Dunciad* has its concern primarily on the state of literature, which appears to be on the brink of annihilating all learning and value into an indistinct “cultural stew” (Sussman 2012, p. 58) made of worthless and disposable writings regulated only by the mechanisms of the marketplace, this preoccupation could be extended to the general cultural milieu of Pope’s times. The law of the market would become predominant in all aspects of city life.

²⁴ The title first and foremost indicates Pope’s mock-epical, satirical intent by adding to the pejorative “dunce” the suffix “-iad” which is usually found in classical epic, heroic narration such as *Iliad* or *Aeneid*.

²⁵ Grub Street, named after the gutter which ran along it, was dangerously insalubrious and harboured thieves, prostitution and other disreputable businesses, as well as destitute of all kinds, including writers; it was situated near Moorfields, outside the northern city walls. The place became so infamous that it was synonymous, particularly after the Restoration, for hack writers, a meaning it retains to this day and which was the one intended by Pope. The prefix “hack” was used originally for horses to hire, the Hackneys, then for prostitutes, and finally as a negative indicator of someone exchanging its services for profit (Clarke 2017, Chapter 1, *Grub Street Hacks*).

²⁶ Theobald had antagonised Pope after his publication of a negative commentary of the author’s editing and partial modernising of Shakespeare (Sussman 2012, p. 54).

Furthermore, the poem depicts some interesting aspects of the more practical conditions of the city, particularly when considering the focus on its most distinctively (and lower) urban features: slums, alleys, drainage infrastructures, all the non-natural and disharmonic which seemed to not exist in Augusta. This “vulgar” imagery carries with it all the related elements (i.e. the smell and mud of the sewer-river Fleet Ditch) which a modern reader would expect to be part of a disreputable quarter of a metropolis, but which constituted a new source of apprehension for the unacquainted with this new form of urban development.

As exemplified by the works commented in this section, the early eighteenth-century literary scene was deeply involved in the metropolitan discourse, and the reflections of the most prominent authors on both sides of the political spectrum highlighted different aspects and consequences of the demographic, economic and social factors at play in early eighteenth-century London. It is interesting, however, to notice that city writing did not revolve solely around political inclinations and intentions, and to observe, among many, two other particular perspectives on London offered by authors external to the Kit Cat club and the Scriblerians: Daniel Defoe and Ned Ward.

In order to understand Defoe’s perspective on London, it is useful to follow again Max Byrd’s study, which highlights two main constants of his form: the factuality of his style and the focus on the economic workings of the city, specifically the marketplace. His view of the city, whether from the journalistic point of view of *Tour thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain* (published between 1724 and 1726) or through the novelistic medium of the famed *Moll Flanders* (1722), mostly centre on unpoetic descriptions of places, lists of name and toponyms, to the point that Moll’s itinerary could be followed by a reader like a map, leading to the perception of London as a “network of traffic” (Byrd 1978, p.13), a web, a mechanic system. The only instance in which Defoe departs from his objectivity, particularly in the *Tour*, regards London’s monstrous size, its confusion and formlessness, contrasting with the traditional ideal city of Rome, which, despite its enormity, managed to

maintain some degree of uniformity and order. The focus on economical exchange as the ruling force of the city and its inhabitants, again a dominant theme in *Moll Flanders*, as well as in *The Complete English Tradesman* (1725), is heralded by a realistic, objective style, since the marketplace is in itself pragmatic. These features concur in the composition of an image of a London in which citizens relate with each other only through utilitarian *do ut des* and the commands of profit (hence the close relation between commerce and crime so present, for example, in the figure of Moll), anticipating the anxiety of alienation which inherently belongs to the city discourse and will be explored also in relation to *Trivia*. Furthermore, when Defoe merges these features together, his descriptions appear to point towards the representation of the city as a mechanism with an end in itself, almost a creature *per se* (particularly in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, published in 1722), with its own patterns independent of humanity, “a machine to be stoked, a giant to be pacified” (Byrd 1978, p. 41).

A decidedly lighter perspective emerges from *The London Spy*, a series of periodical reports taking on the form of the travel diary, published firstly between 1698 and 1700 and collected in a book in 1703. Edward (or “Ned”) Ward, hack writer and innkeeper, was a prolific humourist and a rather violent satirist of Tory orientation. In *The London Spy*, Ward adopted two fictional characters (like the strategy that would be deployed with the personas of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*): the inexperienced country gentleman who narrates his adventures in the city, and an expert Londoner who chaperones him in a veritable tour during which the narratives focus particularly on taverns, coffee houses, brothels and other places which expose the tourist to “the Vanities and Vices of the Town”, as the subtitle indicates. While the accounts of the Spy’s adventures are not necessarily true, they provide, notwithstanding all their “grossness of the language” (Hayward 1927, p. x), an interesting mapping of some of the lives and characters connected to each particular street, square and precinct, and contribute to the essentially

multifaceted picture of London which has been proposed by many authors and only broadly sketched in this chapter.

3. The Walker's London

Having placed Gay's works in their proper context, one of the two main topics of this thesis, *Trivia*, will be analysed in this chapter, with a particular focus on the aspects of the city that are described in the poem and how they correlate to or inform the reader on the actual features of London. Before beginning such analysis, however, it is necessary to introduce some cautionary considerations on the nature of the poem itself and its relation to its implied and its real author.

As can be understood from the observations made by, among others, Clare Brant (2007, p. 115), Mark Jenner (2007, pp. 90-91) and Susan E. Whyman (2007, p.45), most interpretations of the poem are and have been cautious if not adverse to identify the London described by the "Author" of *Trivia* (who appears to be an implied author, an identity not coincident with Gay himself) with the London as John Gay experienced it, and the London in which he actually lived. The city presented by the poem appears at a first glance altogether rather dangerous and dirty, and its dynamics complex to a Walker used to the different pace of the countryside and seemingly nervous about this new environment (Brant 2007, p. 109). It is important to remember Gay's Augustan approach to the matter, which would naturally purposefully highlight modern, metropolitan features as a negative opponent to the ideal, classical order of the countryside (which is coincidentally the place of the author's childhood), as well as the general assumption of scholars (particularly from the second half of the twentieth century) that literary, and particularly poetic, works cannot be comparable to or as reliable as historical and statistic documentation as a source of evidence (Jenner 2007, p. 90). The exemplary evidence of Gay enjoying and benefiting particularly from one of the features of the city which *Trivia* so sternly criticises, i.e. coaches and similar means of wheeled transport²⁷ should warn the educated reader that the implied Author

²⁷ "[...] one long quotation from *Trivia* [...] described the evil effects of London coaches (I 83-104). [...] In his private comments, however, Gay admitted the powerful attraction of coaches [...] [and] to this paradox in a letter to Thomas Parnell: 'What I

may be expressing feelings and principles with which the real-life author (“citizen Gay”, as it were) may not comply, or even disagrees.

Especially as far as regards *Trivia*'s realism, Whyman (2007, pp. 47-48) highlights the correspondence between the Walker's (and the Author's) attitude and some epistolary evidence by outsiders moving to London or commuters; in these letters, similar concerns about the poem can be found particularly with regard to dirt, traffic congestion and the daunting feelings generated by being surrounded with such a vast urban space and large number of inhabitants. On the other hand, Whyman also reminds that a large part of epistolary accounts from London visitors do not report any particular safety concerns (as opposed to the constant sense of impending nuisances and dangers in *Trivia*), with the thrill of the experience often obscuring the potential and actual problems of the metropolitan environment; these variations in seemingly more direct pieces of evidence such as letters furtherly warn the modern reader to consider with caution the reliability of both them and *Trivia*.

Jenner (2007, pp. 92-94) furtherly argues that *Trivia*'s approach to the dangers of the metropolitan space is even relatively unalarming and “light” when compared to contemporary points of view such as Defoe's in the pamphlet *Due Preparations for the Plague of 1722*, in which the denounce of the poor health and safety condition is much sterner; while Defoe's work has been taken as a more reliable source of the condition of London²⁸, Jenner remarks that the mode of the pamphlet itself, while presenting the subject more practically and presumably objectively, is not immune to the unreliability of the personal fears and intentions of the author.

All those considerations, only few among many, complicate the extent to which *Trivia* can be taken as a realistic account of the city, and to which Gay

got by walking the streets', he remarked, 'I am now spending in riding Coaches'." (Whyman 2007, p. 55).

²⁸ Jenner (2007, p. 91) reports especially critics M. Dorothy George, Stuart Copley and Ian Haywood supporting this approach.

himself can be a reliable descriptor of his times. Nevertheless, as is the intent of this analysis, they also highlight the importance of discerning practical and aesthetic concerns (which is ironically also one of the Walker's main duties), as well as combining disciplines and academic fields to inform the reader on what is true, what is exaggerated or diminished and why, to what extent literary form prevails over or exalts literary matter, and ultimately what relevance can *Trivia* have when discussing the early stages of the first modern metropolis.

3.1 *Trivia*: Genres and Meanings

Trivia, or The Art of Walking the Streets of London was published on 26 January 1716 and was expanded in 1720 with the digression on Cloacina (see below) for the publication of Gay's collection of *Poems*. The poem consists of 1005 lines divided into three "books" which explore three different main areas of aspects related to the practice of winter city walking: book one describes "the Implements of walking the Streets, and signs of the Weather" (Gay 1974, p. 135²⁹), book two, the longest, relates the experience of "Walking the Streets by Day" (p. 143) and book three of "Walking the Streets by Night" (p. 160).

To describe the genres to which the poem belongs to, it is useful to firstly look at the title as a primary indicator of some of the poet's most relevant intentions: firstly, the name *Trivia* refers to a minor connotational epithet of the classical goddess Hecate, who was associated with the underworld, the liminality between life and death and, consequentially, the occult, as well as with crossroads (Morton Braund 2007, p. 149). While tracing a direct connection to classical culture and literature as was customary for Augustan writers, Gay furtherly inflects this connection by introducing the reader to the non-classical, urban dimension of city roads. Moreover, the title implies a connection with the adjective *trivial*, which can indicate commonplaceness as

²⁹ All further quotes of *Trivia* refer to the 1974 edition of Gay's *Poetry and Prose* edited by V. A. Dearing with the assistance of C. E. Beckwith.

well as unimportance³⁰. This allusion is significant as it sets the ironic, mocking tone of the poem (see the next section) as well as hinting to a certain extent of self-deprecation from the author's part which is also suggested in the finishing lines of the poem³¹. As regards the subtitle, "the Art of Walking the Streets of London", while pointing towards the georgic tradition of giving instructions for daily activities, also introduces the text to the social context of the eighteenth-century city. The public distinguishability of the "civil" higher classes from the lower masses was even more relevant in a metropolitan setting which promoted instead mingling, confusion and blurring of boundaries, and performing one's living activities (walking, talking, dressing etc.) "artfully" was arguably perceived as a social divider from those who performed them practically (the "hoi polloi", i.e. "the many", as observed by Brant 2007, p. 106)³².

3.1.1 Mocking Genres

As can be appreciated from the brief analysis of the title of the poem above, it would be impossible to propose any analysis of *Trivium* without addressing its

³⁰ The word *trivial* derives from the Latin *trivialis* (i.e. "common"), which has its roots in the noun *trivium*, literally meaning "three roads". Clare Brant (2007, p. 115) among others also highlights the connection to the *trivium* of grammar, logic and rhetoric which, together with the subjects of the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music) constituted in the Middle Ages the curriculum of the Liberal Arts. This reference in turn hides an internal link between the "trivium of Arts" in the title and the "Art of Walking" in the subtitle.

³¹ Alison Stenton's (2007, p. 71) commentary reminds that the ending of *Trivium* pictures "the poem's final resting place in 'Grub Street'", which may "hint, perhaps, that this is an inferior piece by a *pedestrian* author".

³² William H. Irving (1928, pp. 62-69) reports the recurrence of the titular form "The Art of...", inspired by classical poets such as Horace (*Ars Poetica*, i.e. *The Art of Poetry*) and Ovid (*Ars Amatoria*, or *The Art of Love*) in numerous writings of the early eighteenth century, such as King's *The Art of Cookery*, *The Art of Love* and *The Art of Making Hasty-Pudding*, Dodsley's *The Art of Preaching*, Breval's *The Art of Dress* and *The Art of Beauty*, Bramston's *The Art of Politicks* etc. While the purpose and characteristics of such "manuals" were varied and with different levels of seriousness or irony, their frequency nevertheless suggest a sensibility towards mastering and perfecting as a means of cultural and social distinction.

quintessentially classical literary roots and references. Such influences are indeed so prominent that numerous scholars have highlighted imitative features and connections to multiple Latin genres, so much so that the connotations of “mock georgic” (Armens 1966, p. 72), “satire”, “pastoral” and “mock-epic”, (Morton Braund 2007, pp. 149-150, 156) have been equally applied to the multi-layered poem.

The technique of mocking, in the sense of parodically imitating classical style, was widespread among the Scriblerians, who defined the practice “heroic-comical”. It was particularly deployed for amusing, burlesque or satirical purposes (Brant 2007, p. 106). As noted before, the subtitle introduces the georgic tone of the text, which announces the intent of educating the reader on the most effective way of carrying out the activity of walking in the city with all its connected implications (what to wear, how to behave in traffic, how to be oriented, how to avoid unpleasant situations etc). The adjective “georgic” derives in fact from Virgil’s *Georgics*, dating back to 29 B.C. and illustrating instructions on the practices of agriculture, livestock rearing and beekeeping (Fantham 2006, p. xv), while implicitly discussing the less elementary trope of the relation between man and nature (Morton Braund 2007, p. 156)³³. Furthermore, Dianne S. Ames observes a similarity of intention in the poetics of Virgil’s *Georgics* and Gay’s *Trivia* for their successful endeavour in raising “low” topics to “a high level of art”, in compliance to the “aesthetic commonplace”, recurrent in early eighteenth-century literature, affirming that such topics are in fact the most demanding testing ground for “Genius and Inspiration”: succeeding in the poetical rendering of “Scanty subjects” (1978, p. 202) is thus a poet’s flagship.

While the association between *Trivia* and the georgic mode appears rather straightforward, the identification of other genres less overtly imitated

³³ Ames (1978, pp. 202-204) analyses the similarity between the proems of the two poems (lines 1-5), which present a parallel structure in listing the general topics to come and the use of the traditionally epic verb “to sing” (“I sing” and “canere incipiam”) in the last line.

by Gay is likewise relevant to enlighten his intentions in the composition of the poem. Following the textual order, Susanna Morton Braund (2007, p. 150) notices that before opening the poem Gay includes an epigraph³⁴ from Virgil's pastoral *Eclogue 9*, and not from the *Georgics*, to add another layer of meaning to those anticipated by the title and subtitle. The pastoral genre, concerned with the idyllic representation of the countryside and its inhabitants (often shepherds and maids in love), which adopted, already in ancient Greece, the hexameter of the epic poetry to describe common, "small" characters and situations (arguably a form of mocking in itself). To this practice, Virgil's *Eclogues* added the depiction of the harmful, domineering and tainting influence of the city over the idealised countryside, which is a recurring feeling in all Augustan tradition, including *Trivia*.

The topic of the city in the georgics is traditionally deployed as a negative term of comparison to exalt the rural ideal, which supports the numerous commentaries identifying the satirical nature of *Trivia* (Gregori 2005, p. 75). Irving and Morton Braund, among others, underline the presence of imitative features of Roman satirists, namely of Juvenal and his *First* and *Third Satire*, composed during the second century B.C., which endeavoured to offer a realistic depiction of the city as well as tackle the "influences which were working insidiously enough [...] upon the character of her people" (Irving 1928, p. 91). *Trivia* shares with Juvenal both structural and conceptual features: the choice of the perspective of the crossroads, which allows Juvenal to gaze upon the negative characters of Rome with *saeva indignatio*, is recalled in the title of Gay's poem as well as in his own illustration of a veritable parade of the much disapproved coach-users (a "beau", a "lawyer", a "fool" etc. *Trivia* II, 572, 579, 581); moreover, both Juvenal and Gay make a point of lingering particularly on the depiction of the congested, noisy and dangerous traffic of their cities (Juvenal in *Satire 3*, 232-67 and Gay in Book II, 227-32); finally,

³⁴ The epigraph reports the first line of the ninth *Eclogue*: "*Quo te Moeri pedes? An, quo via ducit, in Urbem?*" ("Where are you off to, Moeris? Are you following the path, headed to the city?")" (Morton Braund 2007, p. 150).

both poems differentiate between day and night in their observations (Morton Braund 2007, p. 154). As Ames (1978, p. 210) remarks, however, Gay's allusions to Juvenal's satirical tone do not bear the same graveness as the original, his denunciation is not as vehement and the general context of *Trivia's* reproaches on the troubles of the urban space is lighter and more pragmatic: witty entertainment, rather than censure, is overall the main sense conveyed by the poem. The same considerations can be applied to another classical genre for which instances of imitation can be found in *Trivia*, i.e. the epic.

As will be seen in the analysis of specific episodes (such as the epillions), many of Gay's poetical choices indicate his intention to deliver the ironic effect of the poem through mock-epic and mock-heroic techniques based on what Coleridge defined the process of "making the great little and the little great" (Brant 2007, p. 106)³⁵; this process generates in the readers a "perception of the opposite" ³⁶, the cornerstone of irony, as they become aware of the discrepancy between the high classical allusion and the lowness of the actual topic. Gay's poetic skill and mock-epic intention are particularly evident in the many instances of his poetic diction, e.g. the poet's use of unexpectedly lofty and convoluted periphrases or similes to connote common objects: fur is described as "the spoils of Russia's bear" (I, 50), the umbrella is characterised by its "oily shed" (I, 211), the curls of a wig, disarranged by the rain, resemble "*Alecto's* snaky tresses"³⁷ (I, 203). Discussing some examples of mock-epic practice in *Trivia*, particularly conveyed through allusions to Virgil's *Georgics*,

³⁵ The first lines of the poem are again significant in introducing this mock-epic intention, as the Author addresses the traditionally minor goddess, Trivia (rather than using the deity's main, higher name Hecate), in the same way Homer would address the Muses to aid him in his singing the heroes of Troy. ("Thou, *Trivia*, Goddess, aid my song", I, 5).

³⁶ The "perception of the opposite" was theorised by Pirandello as being the first stage, i.e. the Comic, of the process of understanding Humour, which is instead the "sentiment of the opposite" (Eco 1990, p. 167).

³⁷ *Alecto* was one of the Furies, divine creatures of the Greek mythology whose duty was to bring godly punishment upon humans for a variety of crimes; they are portrayed as possessing animal features such as snakes for hair.

Morton Braund (2007, p. 156) underlines that the Author's voice, similarly to the narrator of the *Georgics*, is authoritative and omniscient, his advice comes from above and it is particularly persuasive because it is based on empirical evidence and logic; these features denoted the "didactic epic" tone of Virgil's poem and the "didactic mock-epic" of Gay's. Furthermore, on the formal level, Gay's metrical choice of the heroic couplet, constituted by two rhyming iambic pentameters (Hobsbaum 1996, p. 22), connects the poem to the forms of epic poetry, and reflects Virgil's choice of the hexameter in the *Georgics* as they are both, in their respective tradition, employed in epic (Pope used the same metre for his translations of Homer).

The examples of classical allusion and imitation discussed so far indicate not only Gay's extreme knowledge of and competence in an extensive number of genres and Latin literary works, but also enlighten the poetic techniques he employed to convey such competence as well as his ironic intents. His ironical "displacement of allusions" (Brant 2007, p. 106) make the text simultaneously rich, witty and light, while his approach to the mundane issues of the city deliver an image of common-sensical practicality which, as argued by Philip Carter (2007, p. 35), would have been actually useful for his contemporaries.

First and foremost, however, as observed by Whyman (2007, p. 57) and Stenton (2007, p. 62), *Trivia* is an interdisciplinary work, and as such it requires to be examined in depth. Gay's cross-exploration of genres reflects his cross-analysis of social and cultural aspects, as the geographical space of the city evolves under the Walker's eyes into a compendium of eighteenth-century London, however personal, political or aestheticized it may be. The author touches on many different subjects which thus require, to be understood, not only knowledge of Latin and Augustan poetry and aesthetics, but also notions of urban architecture and functioning, the population's social composition, cultural behavioural practices and law, fashion history, economic history, crowd psychology and sociology; the following sections of paragraph 3.2 will adopt this approach.

3.1.2 *The Walker*

Before discussing *Trivia*'s representation of London, some introductory aspects need to be considered about the "protagonist" of the poem, the implied, ideal Walker who offers the reader his recommendations. As Carter observes, he is above all pragmatic and sensible in his way of being, behaving, and looking at the city: he wears well-made, practical and traditional clothes which will grant him shield and efficiency in the adverse wintery weather; he follows traffic rules and avoids all the different risks while moving about the streets, he knows when to claim or concede the protection of "the wall" (the part of the sidewalk closer to a building) and to whom; he looks for, and is aware of, clues and signs of bad weather, places to avoid or people to be wary of. His "dramatic tone" (Carter 2007, p. 29) gives away his scarce acquaintance and his discomfort with the metropolitan hustle and bustle, suggesting a countryside origin, and while he appears to value the traditional, georgic idea of hard work he is, at least in this situation, not a worker himself. In the act of walking, he identifies, however, many of the characteristics connected to a modest, healthy, honest and good citizen.

Irving connects the figure of the Walker to the literary trope of the "Wanderer" (1928, p. 109), and particularly the journey diarist, referring to examples of Latin tradition such as Horace's *Journey to Brundisium* as well as the English pilgrim tales, most notably Chaucer's. Chronologically closer to Gay, examples of travellers visiting London appear, among others, in D'Urfey's *Collin's Walk Through London and Westminster*, Richard Ames's *The Search after Claret: or, a Visitation of the Vintners*, Davenant's *The Long Vacation in London* and, as mentioned earlier, Ned Ward's *The London Spy*³⁸; walking and exploring the relatively new and unprecedented environment of London was evidently a popular topic and arguably generated a literary genre in its own right.

³⁸ Ward addressed the theme of city exploration in many other works such as *The Field-Spy: or, the Walking Observator* and *Vade Mecum for Malt-Worms*.

When considering the actual qualities and purpose of Gay's Walker, however, *Trivia* evidently sets itself apart from the works mentioned above: its protagonist is found *in medias res*, neither observing from the outside (or from above) nor fully involved in the life of the city (Gregori 2005, p. 72). He does not walk with a clear destination in mind, and in fact commentaries have highlighted the geographical incoherence and the impossibility of following his itinerary: he is neither a citizen nor a guide. The Walker traces instead what Stenton defines a "cultural geography" (2007, p. 62), a physical space which is defined by, and deeply intertwined with, its imaginative representation, which arguably also prevents the reader to take the Walker's observation as pure historical data. On the other hand, he is not strolling "about at leisure with no goal" (Gregori 2005, p. 71) either, which does not allow a straightforward connection with the more modern *flaneur*; yet, while his active and pragmatic attitude distances him from this figure, it is true to a certain extent that Gay's Walker's median ground theoretically allows him a better chance of understanding deeply the metropolitan cultural space and its dynamics, a position he will share with the *flaneur*. It is however unclear if the Walker makes good use of this advantage, as his advice is mostly cautionary, and his vision often appears regressive rather than progressive, more frightened than enlightened.

The one point the Walker appears to assert with strong conviction is also his defining activity, i.e. walking. Numerous examples from the poem stress the superiority of this defensive practice and its "moral" value, juxtaposed to the idleness of carriage-users which physically weakens and apparently numbs common sense³⁹. The titular *Art of Walking* in this sense is portrayed more as an "Art of Living", of mastering the new, difficult metropolitan space through solid, practical values (which could incidentally be said to belong to the sphere of the country): honesty, hard work, prudence and goodwill. (Gregori 2005, p. 78).

³⁹ These examples will be discussed more thoroughly in paragraph 3.2, particularly when discussing "The Costumes of the City".

3.2 London through the Eyes of the Walker

Following William H. Irving's intent in *John Gay's London* to take "a part of the poetry of the period and make(s) use of it for a special purpose – to throw light on the way ordinary people lived in London at that time" (1928, p. xi), it is the aim of this paragraph to discern, in *Trivia's* Walker's observations, the characteristics of the metropolitan space in which he moves. Such a path is articulated through the analysis of some of the main, pragmatic topics and features described and commented in the poem, which will lay the foundations for the understanding of some general observations which can be drawn from the text and will be explored particularly in the last two sections of this paragraph.

3.2.1 Dirt

The intent of this section is to provide an excursus on *Trivia's* most significant images of filth and their meaning. The metropolis explored by the Walker was terribly dirty by modern as well as eighteenth-century standards, and the unknowing visitor had to face the risk of having his clothes and shoes ruined by mud, garbage, soot and a variety of other substances; as signalled by Aileen Ribeiro (2007, p. 134), the high risk and inconvenience of staining one's clothes in the city was rather relevant, particularly due to the fact that, apart from the protective layer of linen undergarments, clothes, which were extremely expensive in comparison to present times, would be very rarely (or possibly never) washed, in order to preserve the fabric and not wear it out.

In the first lines of Book I, right from the invocation to the goddess *Trivia*, which opens the poem, the intention is set to instruct on "how to walk clean by day" (I, 2), and further on the author announces the prevalent presence of filth in the urban environment through the depiction of the "heaps of dirt" helped into the gutter by the street cleaners (15-16), as well as the omnipresent offer of shoe-cleaning (24) around the city; the Walker's recommendations on proper attire (which will be examined in the next sections) are followed shortly after by a dramatic complaint to the "vicious

walkers” (80) who stride with their canes under their arms and stain other passers-by’s clothes with the muddy tip. The first of the two epillions⁴⁰, short narrative “poems within the poem”, which covers the lines 223-282, exemplifies Gay’s mock-epic poetic diction while praising the fictitious mythical origin of the “female implement” (220) of the *patten*, an iron ring attached to a wooden sole which was fastened to the shoe to work similarly to a modern platform and raise the wearer a few centimetres from the mud of the ground (Ribeiro 2007, pp. 141-142).

In the narration, the beautiful young country maid Martha, “fondly call’d” (I, 230) Patty (hence the name “patten”), is seen by the roman god Vulcan as she carries a jug of milk through “a miry lane” (239), which wets her feet and stains them with “chalky clay” (240) up to her ankles. Vulcan falls in love with the girl and begins to court her but is unable to win her favours until she catches a cold from walking with wet feet in the winter; the god then uses his forge to make her a pair of pattens, “a new machine” (272) with which her feet can stay dry and warm. Finally, Patty surrenders to her divine suitor. As a result, “each frugal dame” (281) can now protect her feet from dirt as well as cold, which would go hand in hand in the London winter, when the frequent cold rains would turn dust into mud.

While the city’s dirt can rise from the ground, it can also come from other sources described particularly in Book II, in which the reader is warned of three trios of shopkeepers which could stain one’s clothes while walking amidst the crowded streets. Those wearing black should avoid being near “the barber’s apron” (II, 28), “the perfumer’s touch” (29) and the “baker” (30); those wearing colourful garments should instead beware of the “sooty stains” (34) that can be left when coming into contact with a “chimney-sweeper” (33)

⁴⁰ Literally meaning “little epic”, the form of the epillion was used by Virgil in the *Georgics*; both Virgil and Gay use this form to recount an *aition*, i.e. the mythical origin of an item. A similar strategy was also used by Ovid in some of the myths of his *Metamorphoses*, of which Gay follows the recurring structure for which when a deity spies and falls in love with a mortal, the genesis of something new (an object, a natural phenomenon, etc.) ensues. (Ames 1978, p. 212).

or a coal seller (35), as well as the “ashes”(38) from a “dust-man’s cart”(37); finally, in order to keep any kind of clothing clean, all should dodge the wax stains of the “chandler”(40), the “greasy tray” and blood-stained hands of “butchers” (42-43) and the fop’s “peruke[d] [...] head” which sheds copious amounts of powder (54-58). As Book I depicted in its digression the avoidance of dirt through the use of the patten, Book II includes a second epillion (103-216) regarding the origin of the bootblack, a remover of dirt (Brant 2007, p. 111). The goddess of sewers Cloacina, like Vulcan in the previous instance, falls in love with a mud-bespattered “mortal scavenger” (II, 118) and disguises herself as a “cinder-wench” (131) to meet him. After nine months, she returns on the Earth to birth their son, whom she abandons to the harshness of poverty. Having watched over her child for some years, and suffering for him, Cloacina prays the other gods teach him a profession by which he could sustain himself; with a bristle-brush from Diana’s “mighty boar” (158), a “fetid oil” (162) from Neptune and some soot from Vulcan, the god of fire, Cloacina answers her son’s desperate cry for help, she rises from the sewers drenched in water and grime, crowned with turnips and belted by an eel, she comforts the boy and gifts him the tools of his new trade.

The temporal setting of the poem in the Winter is also influential when discussing the issue of dirt in the city; while ice may provide some aid in freezing the mud, “crust[ing] the flabby mire” (II, 320) and making it less pervasive, it also increases the risk of slipping, and makes “kennels bind” (320), hampering the drainage of refuse; furthermore, the season is still prone to rain and sludge, which ultimately increment the mud. The pastoral, idyllic imagery of purifying snow and glistening frost which turn “the natural world into a glittering scene of beauty and art” (Brant 2007, p.109) does not find a place in *Trivia*’s London, coated instead by a “hoary”, greyish, “mantle” (II, 322) of snow which mockingly disregards expectations.

These are only some of the many references to dirt, mire, mud and other similar instances of pollution which Gay has scattered throughout the poem, but they are sufficient to appreciate the relevance of the trope while leading the

reader to wonder about the meaning and reason of such insistence. While the recorded presence of filth in the city can be linked to the conditions of overcrowding and overbuilding, slums, and a public system of infrastructures (such as the gutters) which was still in its infancy (see the introductory chapter), various interpretations can be derived from the literary and aesthetic significance of dirt in the metropolitan space. As mentioned previously, insalubrity and illness were main concerns of the time, the population of London having experienced tragic outbreaks of disease which were only worsened by the rising population and faulty health and safety conditions on which dirtiness played a major role.

However, *Trivia* seems less concerned with health risks caused by pollution than with the visible, momentaneous annoyance of dirty clothes and foul smells as, admittedly, overcrowding in the increasingly architecturally closed space of the city, could heighten other uncomfortable, albeit less deadly, consequences (Jenner 2007, p. 97). Mud and refuse, the dirt coming from the city itself, are a direct consequence of an industrious place, as Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* theorises, a "precipitate of economic vitality" (Brant 2007, p. 110). However, Gay's Walker is not involved in such an industry, and his economic detachment appears to direct his attention on the inconvenience of dirt more than on its necessity. Behind these apparently frivolous concerns, however, critics have noticed traces of a recurring anxiety which runs through the poem (Brant 2007, p.109; Stenton 2007, p. 65; Whyman 2007, p. 56), a sense of cautiousness bordering fear lying in some pivotal characteristics (such as pollution, crowding and social class mixing) of this dawning "monster" of a city, in the words of Defoe. The Walker's fear of being stained is expressed through the Author's exaggeration in the language with strong, religious terms referring to the damage of dirt such as "imprudent" (I, 75, referring to those who carry their cane under their arm), "disgrace" (I,78, on the effect of the "miry spots"), and also by amplifying the importance of the two grime-defying subjects of the epillions by granting them a divine origin and an epic form. While, as noted before, poetic diction is often

employed as a mocking device by Gay, his implied author and his protagonist, from whose perspective London is presented, take these mundane issues rather seriously. Arguably, their concerns may not be so insubstantial when considering the state of things, both physical and psychological, in the metropolis. Preoccupation with the “ungrateful odours common sewers diffuse” (171) is not directly linked to the potential for urban pollution to cause diseases (Jenner 2007, p. 94), yet dirt does represent, while not as alarmingly as in contemporary pamphlets, an issue to be wary of and to avoid.

Although certainly a “realistic” trait of London, also given the intense traffic of coaches and the movement of goods to and from the centre, mud may also take on a symbolic significance: its very nature, standing on middle ground between earth and water, is blurry, hybrid (Brant 2007, p. 109), and the abundance of such an imprecise item is significant in a context in which class fluidity and mixing were facilitated by the economic system and the urban structure. The streets of *Trivia* and of London were crammed with all kinds of citizens, and boundaries were muddled in a variety of ways: boundaries between social classes, between old and new social order, and between private and public identity. Unsurprisingly, in the crowd itself lies another herald of dirt: physical contact. The need to avoid touch, to reclaim one’s personal, “clear” (in the sense of definite as well as clean) space amidst the throng of the public, springs from an innate, cultural aversion for uncontrolled and unwanted physical contact (Brant 2007, p. 113), and anticipates issues belonging to the psychological dimension of the metropolis which will be explored towards the end of this chapter, but begin concretely with dirt, with a practical necessity of keeping one’s clothes clean from the careless’ muddy cane, the baker’s flour, the candlemaker’s wax or the chimney-sweeper soot. Clare Brant (2007, pp. 112-113) furtherly complicates the symbolic meaning of dirt in *Trivia* by proposing a psychoanalytical inflection. The “fascination” (p.113) with baser substances, mud, refuse and excrements coming from below, recorded also in Pope’s *Dunciad*, allegorise the surfacing of a multifaceted unconscious which ranges from the childish “pleasure of

exploring” (p.113) to a “psychosexual” (p.112), latent promiscuity, a reconnection to the “mire” of consciousness, which is tirelessly dodged particularly by middle and upper classes, most assiduous wearers of pattens and heels and regular clients of bootblacks.

3.2.2 *Danger Signs*

The comically exaggerated cautiousness the Walker suggests when dealing with potential sources of dirt is transferred to many other fields and situations into which a city dweller may fall. Instances of a lexicon which invites caution occur right from the second line of the first book, which declares the intention of teaching how to “walk [...] safe” (I, 2), while shortly after “prudence” is invoked (3) and reiterated when describing the “prudent walker” (31) and, contrastingly, the “imprudent men” (75) who shun the healthy exercise of walking in favour of coaches. Means of wheeled transportation around the city had increased drastically during the last half of the seventeenth century, following the improvements in the paving of the streets, the intensification of exchange of goods and the postal service, and the moving of the wealthy to the new fashionable districts of the West End. Susan E. Whyman’s investigation of epistolary sources of the period (2007, pp. 53-56) reports the congestion of traffic in a urban space not yet regulated by the modern street code.

The myriad of “coaches”, “chariots” (I, 103) and “chairs” (104)⁴¹ “wreaked havoc” (Whyman 2007, p. 53), taking up most of the space of the pavement, crashing, speeding and causing a considerable number of accidents. While Gay was reportedly keen on using coaches, his Walker severely criticises them. In Book I, he profusely praises the “*Gondolas*” (I, 98) of Venice, a city blessed with the absence of the noisy wheeled contraptions, and recalls nostalgically that “old *Britannia*’s city” (101) in which “pride and luxury” (102)

⁴¹ Coaches were the largest means of people transport and were usually pulled by four to six horses; chariots were smaller, while chairs, also known as “sedan chairs”, were “closed vehicles” designed to accommodate only one person; they were “introduced into England in 1634, probably from Italy” (Brant 2007, p. 222).

had not yet set their root and “perplex’d the way” (104) with the dreaded carts. While constituting an immediate threat to pedestrian safety by hitting them⁴², and tampering disciplined circulation, coaches in *Trivia* hide a subtler menace: their constant use is turning the citizens into lazy passengers, “loll[ing] at ease” (69) and renouncing the much beneficial and healthy practice of walking (Jenner 2007, p. 95). Physical exercise is praised by the Walker, and laziness disdained, as “rosy complexion’d health thy steps attends / And exercise thy lasting youth defends.” (I, 73-74). This is the case particularly for non-working, wealthier women, for whom walking is probably one of the few physical activities they commit to, as practical, heavy labour is reserved for servants, sellers and maids. With the spread of coaches, their “rosy cheek with distant visits glow” (107) no longer, and the natural flush of a good stroll does not enhance their beauties anymore. Because they do not need to walk long distances, their clothes have become unpractically long and delicate (shoes of “braided gold... and a long trailing manteau”, 109-110), preventing them to take hearty, energetic steps (“With narrow steps affects a limping air”, 112). This image strikingly contrasts with the “ruddy beauty” (231) of the pure and hard-working Martha/Patty, the young maid of the patten epillion, who, as a milkmaid of the countryside, had to cover long distances by foot to carry her produce. Her innocent, country charms even manage to win the love of a god without needing to showcase luxurious and precious garment. This praise of simple, natural prettiness can be read as a perfectly Augustan instance of pastoral exaltation of the countryside, the environment of Gay’s childhood, the place where health, beauty and honesty walk hand in hand with the dignity of labour and a close contact with nature; the city’s lavish habits, on the other hand, weaken physique, dull beauty and limp the spirit.

Another source of danger comes from the elements, as Winter showers (apocalyptically defined “deluge[s]” I, 131), fog and frost can impair vision and movement (“suffocating mists obscure the morn”, 125) and cause

⁴² In addition to risking being run over or cut off, the walker should also beware of the coach driver’s whip, as “oft with his flourish [he] cuts the heedless eye” (II, 312).

inconveniences for the appearance, such as ruining a garment with “spatter’d mud, (200), or a wig with rain, (202); they can also threaten health, as they can inflict “rheums and coughs” (123) to the unprepared.

One tragic episode exemplifies what is apparently the most dangerous feature of winter, ice, and narrates the untimely death of Doll, a fruit seller who drowned in the Thames after the too-thin ice shattered under her steps (II, 381-398). Viola Papetti (1971, p.81), in commenting the episode of Doll’s death, points out that the association of the image of the woman’s body floating in the Thames and her dying cry, “pip-pip-pip”⁴³ (II, 391) to Orpheus’s “sever’d head” which “floats down the silver tide” (395) while still invoking his “Eurydice” (397) interestingly elevates the former through the latter, mythical term of comparison. Arguably, the same could be inferred for the other lower characters connected with mythological beings, i.e. Vulcan’s lover Patty and Cloacina’s son, the bootblack; by highlighting the dignity of lower, working-class characters, Gay once again creates a positive, pastoral counterpoint to the lazy, fashionable modern city dwellers.

To avoid the nuisances of bad weather, the Walker invites to look for the “sure prognosticks [...] to know the skies” (I, 122) and avoid being surprised by the cold and rain. If a coal fire bears a blue, “sulphur tinge” (136), and the poor retreat close to sources of heat, snow and frost are approaching. If the ladies, apparently endowed with an innate “instinct, or by reason taught” (150) stroll around the fashionable Pall Mall⁴⁴ district “gayly dress’d” (144), the weather

⁴³ An onomatopoeia for “pippins” (a type of apple) and one of the instances in the text of the “cries of London” by which sellers advertised their goods (Brant 2007, p. 222, 232), attested also by the lines “and *clean your shoes* resounds from ev’ry voice” (I, 24), “damsels first renew their oyster cries” (I, 28), “When sleep is first disturb’d by morning cries” (I, 121) and the shoeshine’s invitation “*Clean your Honour’s shoes*” (II, 216).

⁴⁴ While being a fashionable focal point, Pall Mall reappears in *Trivia* also as one of the city’s few safe havens which are not tainted by dirt and smell (“O bear me to the paths of fair *Pall-mall*, / Safe are thy pavements, grateful is thy smell!” II, 257-258): the proximity with St James’s Park and the nobility’s city residences (Ribeiro 2007, p. 139) contributed to its tidiness and cleaner air, and the poem presents it as a veritable

will probably be “milder” (143). More visible signs of impending rain can be detected when observing the booksellers removing their goods from the “rails” on which they are usually exposed (161-163), the “stockings” hanging on “hosier’s poles” to dry flap in the wind (165-166), and “church monuments” appear to cry and sweat from the changes in humidity levels (167-169)⁴⁵. “Lower senses – smell, touch, hearing – express the city just as well” as sight (Brant 2007, p. 113), and the Walker puts them to good use to detect more signs: hearing the “creaking noise” (I, 158) of the “swinging signs”(157) hanging outside shops and taverns indicates the presence of wind which brings about rainy clouds, and “sewers diffuse” “ungrateful odours” (171) when weather changes. While these warnings are based on reason and observable proof, in compliance with the Walker’s empirical pragmatism (Carter 2007, p. 27), *Trivia* discourages London visitors from trusting superstitious beliefs and traditional proverbs about weather forecasting: traditional predictions of good weather following a sunny Saint Paul’s Day (the 25th of January), or forty days of rain following Saint Swithin’s (the 15th of July) are best left to the “cred’lous boys, and prattling nurses” (I, 176), since “Nor Paul not Swithin rule the clouds and wind.” (188).

Walking the streets by day hides other dangers, particularly the risk of being pickpocketed while distracted by a “sweet ballad” (II, 217) or being serviced by a shoeshine (218). “The furies of the foot-ball war” (348), described in thundering mock-heroic tone, threaten the careless passer-by who may be drowned by the “throng” (353) of the players. Cautiousness should be employed also when orienting oneself and asking directions, as some citizens are more trustworthy than others: “sworn porters” (II, 65) are generally

“rus in urbe”, a “garden” of pleasant order and tranquillity untainted by the dirty, foul-smelling business of the streets.

⁴⁵ The image of monuments “crying” is evoked through the classical mythological reference to “Niobe” (I, 168), whose transformation into stone is narrated in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; Niobe lost her children to the gods’ wrath and mourned so grievously that, although she was turned to marble, she kept shedding tears even as a statue (Dearing 1974, p. 553).

reliable, as is “the grave tradesman” (71), though only when he has nothing to gain from a lost stranger (“He ne’er deceives, but when he profits by’t”, 72). However, “prentices [...] , those fabling boys”, “will turn thy steps astray” (69-70), as will women (Hunt 2007, pp. 125-126), who, unlike Ariadne’s smart and honest guidance, will only try to seduce you to “dive in thy fob” (“your pocket”) and will abandon you randomly when she is finished (86-90).

It is however at night that the walker is most pressingly invited to “Summon at once” his “courage, [...] / Stand firm, look back, be resolute, beware.” (III, 23-24) and the goddess Trivia is once again invoked to “direct” his “footsteps” in the perilous “midnight hour” (8). While the working day comes to an end, traffic clogs the streets even more with cart drivers and coachmen angrily lashing their horses and hasty citizens returning home (25-40). In this chaotic evening “mob” (51), the pickpocket (a “subtil artist”, 54) thrives, his “unfelt fingers make thy pocket light” (60) and may swiftly steal small, precious personal items such as swords, wigs, watches, snuff-boxes and handkerchiefs⁴⁶ (53-62, 82). Again the “ballad-singer’s shrilling strain” (77) like “Syrens”(79) may entice to stop and listen to his song, which is even more dangerous in the approaching darkness and amidst such a crowd, as these minstrels often conspire with thieves to distract their prey (79-80). To move safely across the more trafficked areas, the Walker recommends rapidity, alertness and “constant vigilance” (111) and reminds that

Tho’ you thro’ cleanlier alleys wind by day,
To shun the hurries of the publick way,
Yet ne’er to those dark paths by night retire:
Mind only safety, and contemn the mire. (127-130)

⁴⁶ Ribeiro points out that items of clothing at the times were just as valuable as other accessories made of precious metals: “Clothing and accessories [...] were expensive commodities in proportion to other goods and services, and by the lower classes in particular they were regarded as a portable form of property.” (2007, p. 143).

The safe spaces of the day become treacherous in the dark: while minor alleys can provide shelter from the trafficked main road and its muddy pavements, they are also the darkest and more unsafe at night. The main street is described as a place of lawfulness, where light and justice alike illuminate the path and keep citizens safe: the “happy *Augusta*”, the classical Roman image of the city on which Augustan tradition is based, is here invoked as a paragon of “law-defended town” (145), opposed to the “*Spanish jealousies*” and “*Roman vengeance*” (147-148), in a patriotic tone which exalts the “liberty and justice” (150) of the capital and, by extension, of the kingdom. The hidden, dark alleys, on the other hand, are presented as spaces of unpunished vice and crime: the “lurking thief who [...] the day-light shone” (135) can lure walkers by disguising as beggars, only to hit them with his fake “crutch”(137) and rob them, often with the aid of an accomplice (the “link-man”, 139). Crooks may tempt the incautious with “Guinea-Dropping” (249-250), a fraudulent set-up to trick the victim into gambling large sums of money at games of cards or dice⁴⁷. “*Drury’s*⁴⁸ mazy courts, and dark abodes” (260) are home to the “harlot” (261), who like a spider attracts men into her “cobweb room” (292) and strips them of their fortune. Another cautionary tale is offered on the subject of prostitutes, about a naïve “yeoman” (285) who moved to the city in search of profit, and, having been seduced by a prostitute, ended up being detained for drunkenly attacking some watchmen and plagued by venereal disease (285-306). The watchman is incidentally one of the few friendly faces in the darkness of the streets, and their “friendly light” (307) will safely direct a lost walker home for a small charge.

⁴⁷ “Guinea-dropping (...) is a complicated manoeuvre requiring a confederate, and consists essentially in (...) pretending to find (...) a sum of money in the street, and offering him [the victim] a share; whereupon he grows incautious and the more susceptible to further manoeuvres, such as a friendly game of cards in a nearby tavern.” (Dearing 1974, p. 569).

⁴⁸ i.e. the surroundings of Drury Lane, near Covent Garden, a famous place of prostitution (Brant 2007, p. 242).

The list of criminals who roam the streets by night ends with some references to popular gangs of rakes, thieves and bandits who rallied in the city, such as the “*Nicker[s]*” (323), the “*Scourer[s]*” (325) and the “*Mohock[s]*” (326)⁴⁹. Towards the end of the third book, the Walker concludes his warnings and intervenes again to remind and hope that readers will appreciate all “the toils, the perils of the wintry town” (394) he has had to withstand, and that his “labours” (397) shall help “mankind/ their future safety from [his] dangers find” (397-398).

While *Trivia*'s obsessive focus on, and enhancement of, common dangers (such as being pickpocketed or caught in the rain) and altogether insignificant inconveniences (e.g. a spatter of mud on a shoe) of the busy metropolis follows the ironic and mocking intentions of the author, and are not meant to be read as dramatically and gravely as they appear, it is nevertheless interesting to look at the Walker's observations and warning as suggestions and indicators of the practices of common, daily life in the streets of London. His extremely prudent character, while effectively providing some degree of useful information to his contemporaries, also invites the attentive twenty-first-century reader to appreciate and investigate further the mundane subtleties, the details of every day which can throw a fresher light on factual history, enrich it and bring it to life before modern eyes. These details will be particularly relevant also in the following section, which will offer a parade of the most significant examples from the poem of fashion and costumes of the period and their meaning, both in the economy of *Trivia*'s poetics and in the real, social London.

⁴⁹ Gay also dedicated an entire play to the Mohocks (see paragraph 2.1), who rose to fame during the 1710s; while reputation defined them as “highly organised [...] and [entertaining] sinister political affiliations”, they were probably simple, common petty criminals (Dearing 1974, p. 570).

3.2.3 *The Costumes of the City*

As mentioned before, *Trivia* dedicates significant parts of Book I and II to the “Implements for walking the Streets”, i.e. the clothes, shoes and accessories better suited to avoid dirt and withstand the weather. As suggested by Aileen Ribeiro in her essay on the representation of fashion in the poem, which provides a valuable source of references for the subject of this section, Gay’s interest in clothing dates back to his first employment as a mercer’s young apprentice, and shines through the lines of the poem in the detailed depictions of fashionable garments, outfits, materials, accessories and colours (2007, p. 139). Furthermore, “by the early eighteenth century there was more emphasis on types of dress appropriate for out-of-doors and active pursuits” (p.132), which is certainly reflected by the Walker’s sensible, functional advice focused particularly on the items that come in closer contact with the elements and the streets, i.e. the shoes, the coat and the cane.

As *Trivia* is set in the Winter, the first concern is to “be [...] for ev’ry season, justly drest, / Nor brave the piercing frost with open breast” (I, 129-130): the cold, rainy season requires its own particular, appropriate “Implements”, of which the benefits are juxtaposed to the flaws of the inappropriate, starting from the shoes. Soft, luxurious imported leather (“*Spanish* or *Morocco* hide”, I, 30) is not sturdy and does not shield the feet enough from rain and snow; thus, it is best to employ the more local and resistant cowhide, preferably in the most widespread shade for men, black, best maintained by the bootblacks which appear numerous times in the text (Ribeiro 2007, p. 135). While a low heel may provide protection from the wet pavement, it should not be too high, or it may hinder stability and, along with very loose lacing, “thy cracking joint unhinge, or ankle sprain” (I, 38). Finally, shoes should not fit too tightly or be too short, in order to avoid painful “shooting corns” (i.e. calluses, 40).

Winter weather requires also a “*Surtout*” (58), a loose and long coat with a collar, “which from the shoulders full and low depends” (56). The sleeveless, knee-length “*Roquelauze*” (51) would impair hand movements such as

shielding oneself from harm; expensively decorated coats such as the “*Bavaroy*” are a prerogative of the “fop” (53), a fashionable, lavish, recurring male character of the city, highly disapproved for his laziness and lack of sobriety and common sense. The best material for the surtout, which should not be too expensive (59), is the “*Kersey*” (59), a coarse, solid woollen fabric (Brant 2007, p. 221), as other, common kinds of cloth present a number of inadequacies. The “*Doily*” and the “silken drugget” (I, 43-44), respectively a light summery wool and a blend of wool and silk (Dearing 1974, p. 550), are not thick enough to “fence the cold” (I, 44). The “nap”, made of light cotton, and the “camlet” (46), a textured wool, are too absorbent for a rainy day. The heavy wool from “*Witney*” (47) and the “spoils of *Russia’s* bear” (i.e. bear fur, imported mostly by the Russia Company, 50) are instead unnecessarily dense and would be uncalled for in a common city walk, while perfectly suitable for horse-riding (Brant 2007, p. 221).

Finally, the “strong cane” (I, 61) complements the attire, provides a device to attract coachmen’s attention and a light defence weapon when needed (Ribeiro 2007, p. 136). It is recommended that this implement is used as a real support for the healthy exercise of walking, rather than for “empty show” (68) as is common among the “beaus” (a French synonym for “fops”, 67) who uselessly carry their cane, adorned with amber knobs, under their arms while they “loll at ease” “in gilded chariots” (69). As far as regards wigs, commonly worn by men, *Trivia* suggests to “let thy worst wig [...] be worn” when bad weather approaches, as rain would ruin the curls of an item in prime conditions. To protect the wig from the rain and the head from the cold, it is useful to wear also a “flapping hat” (128) made with the impermeable fur of the “spacious beaver” (II, 277), imported from the recently chartered Hudson Bay’s Company from North America (Ribeiro 2007, p. 138).

Modesty and practicality, as well as being characteristic of the sensible walker, are also encouraged and praised as far as regards women’s attire: the “proud lady” (I, 105) who walked about the city before the spread of coaches appears energetic and pragmatic with her “tuck’d up petticoats” (106), and

contrasts with the modern, fashionable “lazy fair”(111) whose precious shoes and sweeping cloak only deter her further from taking a healthy brisk walk instead of a carriage. Similarly to men, women appear to dress more sensibly when they belong to a middle or working class (Ribeiro 2007, p. 142): the “good housewife” (I, 209) shields herself from the cold with a “riding-hood”(210), a “hooded cloak [...], voluminous [...], and with slits for the arms [...] made of sturdy wool or [...] camlet.” (Ribeiro 2007, p. 140). She avoids the rain by using the “oily shed” of an umbrella (I, 211), an exclusively feminine accessory until the second half of the century (Ribeiro 2007, p. 141), and she rises above the muddy pavement with her “clicking pattens” (I, 212). While the symbolic meaning of the patten has been analysed in the previous sections, the umbrella may also be allotted an ideological value: foreign, exotic “*Persian dames*” may use it to shield “their beauties” (214) from the sun, but the British umbrella, which needs to be oiled to repel water, is used by the honest, modest “walking maid” (218) only in the rain, to protect not her complexion but the health hazards of the cold and wet.

Having presented the attires of exemplary housewife and the lavish lady, *Trivia* finally offers the description of a third type of woman in Book III: the prostitute. This typically urban character, dishonest by nature, uses clothes differently from the other two kinds of feminine city-dwellers; she does not dress to show off her position and her refinement like a fashionable lady, nor to be able to carry out her daily errands safely like a modest maid. The prostitute dresses *up*: her clothes are part of the tricks she uses to weave her spidery web and attract a client. Her “tawdry ribbons” (III, 269) are cheap, “slatten” (270) imitations of luxurious adornments, her cloak bears the signs of the scrubbing needed to make it look brand new (270), her petticoat is frayed (271) and her “hollow cheeks” (272) are rouged to make her look much plumper and healthier than she is⁵⁰. She may dress up as a regular maid who is running errands (“feigns a distant errand”, 278), with a “riding-hood” (275)

⁵⁰ “prostitutes were represented as hollow-cheeked because venereal disease had rotten their teeth out.” (Dearing 1974, p. 569).

which conveniently hides her scandalous figure, not cinched by the stays, with its loose fit⁵¹, and shields her painted face with a big hood. The prostitute may even “the Quaker’s hood profane” (279) and dress as the parody of the demure, pious woman which, together with the mourning widow, was a popular impersonation to tempt the fantasies of potential clients (Ribeiro 2007, p. 143).

As can be appreciated from this short analysis, clothes played a significant role both in *Trivia* and in the real streets of London. The demographic growth and social composition of the city, as well as its thriving international commerce, enriched the urban fashion scene with all kinds of materials, styles and garments which were often indicators of one’s identity, wealth and occupation. With the concentration in the enclosed and relatively small space of the streets, squares and alleys of London, of a variety of representatives from all social categories, appearance became increasingly important as a personal and public differentiating feature, particularly as the mercantile expansion was fostering the rise of a wealthier middle class (mainly oversea merchants and luxury dealers), and social signifiers of affluency such as expensive, fashionable attires were becoming available to a wider part of consumers than just the landed nobility. As noticed by Ribeiro (2007, pp. 132-133), the general approach of *Trivia* to this period of social modification and evolution follows the steps of the Walker in suggesting that “in medio stat virtus”. The sobriety and functionality of the style of the honest worker of the lower middle-classes becomes a symbol for the founding values of Britain, also evident in the preference for British raw materials such as wool, against the “artifice and affectation of high society” (p. 132) and French authority in the field of fashion.

⁵¹ The stays were a female undergarment (the earlier form of the Victorian corset) stiffened with whalebone, which supported the bust and thinned the waist; while models and materials varied according to the price and the fashionable silhouette, it was the norm for respectable women of all social classes to wear stays, and not complying to the rule was considered scandalous and immoral (Ribeiro 2007, p. 143).

3.2.4 Social Types

The previous analysis of some of the recurring themes of *Trivia* consistently directs attention towards the social organisation of the city, and the poem provides many observations and assessments on social categories, behaviours and values. As pointed out by Carter (2007, p. 31), the Walker often appears to intend to map out the city not by its roads and squares but by its people, its “social types”.

Various levels of the middle and lower working class are represented positively in various instances, such as the “good housewives” (I, 209), the young shoeshine (II, 107-216) and the ill-fated fruit-selling “matron” (375), Doll. Carriage drivers represent an exception, perhaps unsurprisingly as they are employed in the dreadful business of coaches: they are described as temperamental, sprinting about the streets and furiously “lashing” their “whips” (II, 231), “barb’rous men” (233) ungratefully abusing the “gen’rous” horses (234) thanks to which they can earn their living. The brutality of the coachmen’s behaviour towards their animals is also arguably representative, in a mock-georgic sense, of a subversion of the balanced, mutual and idyllic relationship between nature and mankind which constituted the base of Virgil’s poetics in the *Georgics*: the horse, which would be respected and valued in the country, is exploited in the city as a mere means of profit, submitted to the frantic rhythm of human urban activity. Furthermore, in the poem, carriages are presented decidedly more as a commodity of the lazy and rich rather than as an economic necessity and a boost for commerce, thus the workers who profit from this business could not possibly be compared to the hearty, hard-working and more “traditional” workforce.

Diametrically opposed to the working classes, wealthier citizens, particularly social climbers and *nouveau riches*, are represented altogether negatively, especially in regard to their indulging in lavish, fashionable activities and seemingly forswearing Augustan ideals noble sobriety, integrity and honour. Straightforward examples of this social type are represented by the “fop[’s][...] empty head” (II, 53-54) and the “lazy fair” (I, 111), the

luxuriously adorned coquette who dresses to impress and “sigh[s] for the liv’ries of the embroider’d beau” (572). In the city, the last signs of true nobility, not only of lineage but of character, appear to reside not in its affluent society, but in the old, architecturally triumphant and impressive buildings of ancient aristocracy, to which Book II dedicates a series of reverent “ubi sunt”⁵² (II, 482-500). To honour the lost beauties of “Arundel’s famed structure” (II, 484), “Essex’ stately pile” (491), “Cecil’s, Bedford’s, [and] Viller’s” (492), only Burlington House⁵³ remains intact, a palace rich with artwork and “belov’d by ev’ry Muse” (500) in which the walker “oft [...] enter[s] (but with cleaner shoes)” (499) to preserve it from the base, unworthy filth of the streets.

While the metropolis hosts and promotes the definition of certain social types, there are instances of the mechanisms of the city influencing its citizens to such an extent as to modify, and even pollute, their social characteristics in the eyes of the Author. Margaret Hunt’s discussion of gender in *Trivia* highlights that, as far as regards women, the poem adopts a decidedly misogynist stance (2007, p. 121), which complicates the analysis of female characters proposed so far. While some working women present traits that constitute a positive, exemplary counterpoint to the fashionable ladies as well as to prostitutes (e.g. the housewife’s practicality), other passages underline the strain they undergo: the beginning of Book II reports other “ubi sunt” which long for the “milk-maid[s] of the plains”(II, 12), the “robust, pink-cheeked country cousins” (Hunt 2007, p. 121) of London’s fish-carrying “draggled damsel[s]” (II, 9) and “sallow milk-maid[s]” (II, 11). The harsh labour conditions which seem to afflict particularly the female workforce represented in the poem may be explained when considering the precariousness of their social condition. The lack or loss of a husband and/or of a sufficient income or dowry would likely precipitate a lower-class woman

⁵² Literally meaning “where are they?”, “where have they gone?”, “ubi sunt” is a rhetorical strategy consisting in evoking a glorious, lamented past which is no more.

⁵³ As mentioned in the paragraph regarding Gay’s biography, he was granted the patronage of the Earl of Burlington during the composition of *Trivia*, and since then sojourned with the Burlington family on multiple occasions.

into destitution, particularly if children were involved, also due to the limited access to well-paid occupations (lawyers, civil servants, merchants and shopkeepers were mostly if not all men). While the more fortunate could find employment in relatively respectable jobs (sellers, menders, ironers, waitresses etc), prostitution, petty theft and beggary often awaited the ill-fated. Hitchcock (2007, p. 80) reminds that “the historical evidence for eighteenth-century London beggary and street employment suggest [...] poverty was dominated by women, and characterised by illness, old age and pregnancy”.

While indigence and gender disparity can historically explain women’s harsh conditions in *Trivia*’s streets, their over-sexualisation and general downgrading belong exclusively to the poem’s ideology. Hunt (2007, p. 121) highlights some exemplary images from the text, such as the “vain virgin” (II, 571) lusting after beaux, the “sempstress” (337) symbolically keeping a “Belgian stove”(338)⁵⁴ under her skirts, the oyster-seller’s aphrodisiac goods (III, 185-194), and most notably the prostitute who seduces and ruins a countryman (285-306). The poem’s apparent intent of belittling the female characters of the city may find a contextual explanation when considering again the strikingly opposite examples of country women, particularly the Martha/Patty of the pattens epillion. Both Brant (2007, p. 224) and Dearing (1974, p. 555) stress the connection of the name Martha with the good, careful and dutiful housewife described in the Gospel of Luke (10: 38-42). As noticed earlier, the episode furtherly highlights Patty’s innocence and sexual restraint in accepting Vulcan’s courtship, as well as her hard-working, healthy and honest demeanour. The women of the city, with some occasional exceptions, are altogether different from Patty, and the main reason of their difference appears to reside not in their nature but in their environment, which makes them weak in their morality as well as unhealthy in their body, and consequentially distorts them from their ideal (or idealised) form.

As previously mentioned, a sizeable part of the urban social landscape of London was constituted by the poor; their presence is reflected in *Trivia*

⁵⁴ i.e. a “foot warmer” containing charcoal embers (Dearing 1974, p. 561).

through various sets of images, most of which, as noticed by Tim Hitchcock (2007, p. 76), are “included [...] in a continuum of street traders” and are neither exclusively thieving cheats, nor weak and marginalised destitute. A majority of the poor of the poem are instead as industrious as the space they inhabit, they offer services (such as shoe shining), sell goods (such as Doll’s apples) and try to insert themselves in the economic discourse of the city which resounds with their celebrated “cries”⁵⁵. Some of the business in which the poor are involved may not be lawful, such as the malicious “lurking thief” (III, 135) who uses his fake crutch to assault a compassionate benefactor; though it could be argued that this is a case of a robber only *imitating* a beggar, the author of *Trivia* sees it is plausible and even common that some cunning and certainly not weak destitute would rely on these types of trickery. Hitchcock (2007, pp. 83-84) observes that the spreading of the “unreliable” literary “stereotype” of the urban poor as a predominantly male, “not essentially vicious”, unoptimized workforce, was shaped by the literatures of Gay, Swift, Defoe, Ward, and the authors of *The Spectator*. This stereotype may have informed the administrative measures which led to the constitution of the workhouses (where this workforce could be put to good use), which flourished particularly from the second half of the century, but failed to take into account the actual predominance of women, children, weak and ill, with the consequent inadequacy of their work organisation. The more unfortunate citizens of *Trivia*, however, still need and benefit from the charitable acts of the privileged, and contributions to the relief of the poor is advocated, particularly at Christmas (II, 437-450), as “selfish Avarice alone is sad” (450).

The practice of charity perfectly fits the social image of the “good citizen” proposed by the Walker, which is also reflected in his meticulous

⁵⁵ The connotation of “crying goods” (i.e. advertising one’s wares or service by yelling in the streets) for the verb “to cry” began to be widely used in the first decade of the eighteenth century; *Cries of London* by Marcellus Laroon, published in 1687, was the first literary work to stereotype this category of poor which “bridged the gap between the most marginal denizens of London streets and more financially secure traders” (Hitchcock 2007, p. 76).

indications on the topic of “the wall”, i.e. the part of the street closer to the buildings and farthest from the carriageway, which will only begin to be paved with sidewalks with the Paving Acts of 1762 and 1766 (Cockayne 2007, p. 181). While keeping the wall is an essential protection against the rain and the spatters of mud coming from the trafficked street, and should be preserved from the arrogant “bully” (II, 59) and the “pressing throng” (52), “due civilities” must still be “strictly paid” (45), and the sheltered position should be surrendered to those who need it most, such as the “hooded maid” (46), the old (48), the fatigued “porter [who] bends beneath his load”(49), the “groping blind” (51) and the “lame” (52).

Although Gay’s tone is not as satirical or as severe a censurer as his contemporaries Pope and Swift’s, the straightforward values advocated by *Trivia*, “honesty, moderation, independence” and “acts of civic good” are still recognisable, particularly in the Walker’s observations, and broadly correspond with an Augustan patriotic ideal (Carter 2007, p. 28). However, Carter observes, the Walker’s attitude has been perceived by modern critics to be at odds with his own proposed models: he praises hard work but is not involved in it, he delivers an air of superiority by exaggerating the difficulty of navigating the city and the dangers of its environment and its people, he speaks either patronisingly or suspiciously of most of the citizens he meets. This behaviour has been defined “unsociable”, particularly by the scholar Alvin Kernan, for the Walker appears to detach himself from any real human contact and use his praised surtout as a shield to soberly distance himself from the whole urban society (pp. 29-31). While these observations may contribute to an unpleasant, “smug” (p. 30) depiction of the character of the Walker, they also point toward a pressing issue which regards the very nature of the metropolis, which will be the object of the following section: the mechanisms of social and personal identity in an “overwhelming”, undiscernible “mass” (p. 33) of citizens.

3.2.5 *Crowd, Alienation and the Public Space*

As observed by Brant (2007, p. 3), “the crowd may be considered an emblem of London in 1716”: demographics and urban development promoted social mixing, while the status of the city as a market, business and political focal point defined the fluidity of a space which was in constant movement. The Walker’s advice, particularly those regarding the dangers of being amidst the throng and the importance of keeping the shelter of the wall, are thus set in a context in which they are “needed to safely share public spaces” (Whyman 2007, p. 46). These were extremely cramped and busy for a population unacquainted with such dynamics, particularly in the case of outsiders. However, movement is essential for the metropolis, which by its nature requires a rapid, continuous economic activity to satisfy a large and diversified population, and, likewise, a substantial workforce to sustain its economy. For this reason, Alison Stenton records urban theorists Mumford and Jacobs’s suggestions for the adaptation and the submission of “individuality to the demands of a larger community” (Stenton 2007, p. 66).

The psychological consequences of the new metropolitan mechanisms, which are familiar to a modern reader, seem to inform, though more covertly, even *Trivia*, one of the first city poems dealing with a decidedly different urban environment. The association of human contact with filth, underlined by “dirty” characters such as the chimney sweep, the butcher, the dust-man, etc., as well as expressions such as “mingling Press” (II, 27), “mixt Hurry” (III, 30) and “rude throng” (87), point towards the definition of a context in which one’s private, intimate space is constantly menaced, not only in its sexual and moral dimension (as noticed in paragraph 3.2.1) but in the very essence of identity. For the Walker, the “moving crowd” is first and foremost dangerous, and his primary intention is to “find a way to get through whilst [...] keeping contact to a bare minimum” (Stenton 2007, p.66); this is the demeanour referred to as “unsociable” by Kernan, and is in fact, in the words of Carter, a reaction to a main concern of contemporary “city commentators and [...] biographers who questioned the possibility of knowing another’s character in an increasingly

populous urban culture, [...] effectively a public community of strangers.” (2007, p.31). The difficulty of social contact in the metropolis is also complicated by the quintessentially economic rules which seem to dominate human interactions in the public space, of which examples can be found in the typical “prostitute/client relationship” (p. 32) presented in Book III, the compensation asked by the merciless shopkeeper if “down you fall / and overturn the scolding huckster’s stall” (III, 123-124), and the tradesman who “ne’er deceives, but when he profits by’t” (II, 72). Courtesy, help and even love are regulated by economic exchange in the city, and, conversely, “a person’s need is viewed as another’s inconvenience”, which results in a “dehumanising effect”(Carter 2007, p. 33) and lays the foundations for the “alienation and isolation” often perceived by the inhabitants of both eighteenth-century and modern metropolis (Whyman 2007, p. 52).

As these issues began to form with the metropolis, however, new means of reconsidering personal and social identity were starting to take shape, and this negotiation is reflected in the poem through various instances and images. Whyman particularly underlines the role of coaches in the London streets as vehicles of social differentiation: their elevated position not only physically detaches the passenger from the crowd and the filth, but, due to the cost of acquiring a carriage, also separates socially the wealthier from the masses (2007, p. 54). Arguably, the same motives invited the visual distinction offered by clothes, which could communicate at a glance one’s social identity (or feigned identity). Nevertheless, this visual separation, much like the overall social status of the time, allows for a degree of fluidity when considering that coaches could be bought by anyone who could afford them (even Gay itself) (p.56). The Walker of *Trivia*, however, shuns the medium of coaches even if it may deliver him his much-sought after safety, and finds brief, happy moments of social affiliation elsewhere: a collective sense of solidarity occasionally shines through in the depictions of Christmas charity, the communal effort to “stop [a] thief” (III, 66) and the “imagined kinship network” (Carter 2007, p. 40) of “associate walkers” (II, 501). The “semi-public” spaces of more secluded

alleys, squares and buildings also can allow to reclaim some degree of private contact, such as the romantic intercourse between Cloacina and her beloved “scavenger” (II, 118); while these places may enhance the threats of being robbed or seduced by a prostitute, they still allow more space for a personal identity (even in its negative, degraded inflections) which is suffocated by the crowd (Carter 2007, pp. 40-41).

As can be appreciated from this thematic analysis, the position of *Trivia* with regard to London is multifaceted and not univocal: negativity and danger appear to dominate the Walker’s language, but his exaggerations often make him an object of the mockery in which Gay and his associates delighted. The Walker’s observations are not to be interpreted as a straightforward, impartial definition of the city, nor as a stern denounce, but with the lighter sense of his author, as a stylistic product of a capable Augustan intellectual, which, nevertheless, carries interesting hints of the context in which it was produced and which shapes it as much as the ordinary, real citizen. The recurring inconsistencies both in the Walker’s position towards the urban space and in Gay’s correlation to the character suggest that *Trivia* should not be expected to deliver a universal truth about the city or its inhabitants, but rather a set of impressions, some to amuse, some to educate, some to criticise. While early eighteenth-century London may not have been what an uninformed reader could deduce from the Walker’s character, his wanders about the city have sparked the interest of numerous scholars from various fields of study towards the vast array of subjects addressed, implied or touched upon in the poem: while ultimately a light, ironic and in many regards a “minor” product of its time, *Trivia*, if approached with curiosity, can invite reflection and deep investigation, a prerogative that can be traced in sophisticatedly humorous products of every age.

4. The Beggar's London

Having offered some insight on *Trivia* and the ways in which the poem relates to the metropolitan space, the last chapter of this dissertation is focused on another major city work of Gay: *The Beggar's Opera*. The first section of this chapter is dedicated to some general notions about the play (the plot, the genre and the dramatic techniques employed), followed by an overview on its collocation in the political and cultural environment of the early eighteenth century, and some notions about its reception. The second paragraph focuses on the main characters of the play to analyse topics which are significant in a broader analysis of eighteenth-century London prisons and the city's criminal underworld. Finally, the last part of the chapter considers some of the most relevant critical interpretations of the play and how they can inform the reader on both the author's intentions and the extent to which reflections of some social, economic and anthropologic mechanisms of the newly formed metropolis can be caught in the "microcosmos" of Newgate prison.

4.1 The Opera and Its Success

The Beggar's Opera is certainly the most successful of Gay's dramatic works as well as one of the longest running plays in British theatre. As documented by William Schultz, after the premiere on 29 January 1728 at the Lincoln's Inn Fields' Theatre Royal, the *Opera* ran for an unparalleled sixty-two nights in its first season (1967, p. 10) and fifty-nine during its second season in the autumn-winter of 1728-29 (p. 45). After an economically challenging period for both⁵⁶, Gay earned from the play an impressive sum of £800, and theatre manager

⁵⁶ Gay's finances had been drastically reduced by the South Sea Bubble as well as by failure to obtain a satisfactory appointment at court (see below). On the other hand, Rich's Theatre Royal, usually staging novelty works, was losing against his more successful competitors: the King's Theatre in Haymarket specialised in operas and was thus profiting from the popularity of the genre, while Cibber's Drury Lane Theatre (which will reject the *Opera* on Gay's first attempt to have it staged) had achieved a thunderous success by staging *Henry VIII* in honour of George II's coronation (Winton 1993, pp. 94-95).

John Rich £4000. The first interpreter of the female protagonist Polly, Lavinia Fenton, probably earned even more, as she reportedly obtained a fame comparable to a modern “diva” and proceeded to become the lover and wife of the Duke of Bolton (Boas 1953, p. 184).

The *Opera*’s success perdured throughout and beyond the eighteenth century, with “some record of its appearance in nearly every year between 1728 and 1886” (Schultz 1967, p. xxi). The success of the play spread beyond the borders of London and was first represented in Ireland and Scotland during the second season (pp. 46-47) and in various cities of North America from 1750 to 1870 (pp. 109-113). The 1920s saw a revival of *The Beggar’s Opera* both in the United States and in London at Hammersmith (pp. 99-107; 119), as well as its most celebrated adaptation in Bertolt Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera* (Nokes 1987, p. 135). The play has also been adapted for the cinema screen in 1953, with Laurence Olivier as Macheath, and for BBC television in 1983, with rock band The Who’s founder Roger Daltrey starring in the same role (IMDB, n.d.).

As will be explored in detail in the following paragraphs, with *The Beggar’s Opera* Gay expresses his taste and ability in the practice of burlesquing, mocking and mixing standardised genres. In particular, the play includes instances of the characteristics of the pastoral (in the love affair between the main characters), the Italian opera (with the large presence of music), and tragedy (with the “chivalric hero” Macheath who almost dies at the end). All those genres are explored, exposed and subverted, particularly by the low-grade setting of the prison underworld, the use of popular English ballads, the unlawfulness of the “hero” and his final reprieve. Gay had experimented the mixing of theatrical genres well before the *Opera*, particularly in 1715 with his second most successful play, *The What D’Ye Call It*. The “tragi-comi-pastoral farce”, set in the countryside, exploits the technique of the “play within the play” to burlesque the standard tropes of tragedy and intertwine them with those of comedy, with a moral similar to the *Opera* in affirming that “*the Sentiments of Princes and Clowns have not in reality that difference which*

they seem to have” (Fuller 1983, p. 18)⁵⁷. In *The Beggar’s Opera*, the audience finds the same taste for experimentation, this time amplified to include the Italian opera in the mixture of genres. As noticed by John Fuller, the recurring taste for mockery of grave, solemn genres shared by *The What D’Ye Call It*, *The Beggar’s Opera*, and Pope’s *Dunciad*, seems to respond to an accommodation to a urban cultural environment in which, with the flourishing of “the periodical essay, the novel, or the ballad opera, or even of the newspaper or the pantomime, tragedy and epic find fewer and fewer foothold” in their original, classical forms (1983, p. 17).

The reasons of *The Beggar’s Opera* perduring popularity, both in its times and after, can be best understood when considering its novelty, its originality and its wide range of subjects, which encompass the theatrical, cultural, political and social milieu of early eighteenth-century London, but include hints at broader, more general and enduring issues, such as profit economy, morality and human nature. The following analysis, preceded by a brief summary of the plot and the stylistic features of the *Opera*, includes and expand on this variety of subjects by presenting an overview of both their treatment in the play and the abundant critical commentary which has accompanied them over the last three centuries.

4.1.1 *The Play*

The plot of *The Beggar’s Opera* is set in and around Newgate prison, which stood by one of the western gates to the City, nearby the Old Bailey Court (today, the Central Criminal Court). The play opens with a short Introduction in which the Beggar-playwright presents his work to a Player, broadly explaining some of its features: the occasion of writing, “the Marriage of [...]

⁵⁷ Significantly, the two plays are also linked by Gay’s use of the ballad form; in *The What D’Ye Call It’s ‘Twas When the Seas Were Roaring*, the only ballad in the play, written to a tune by Händel, the female protagonist laments her lover’s departure at sea, anticipating a similar motif in the *Opera*’s Polly and Macheath’s love duet *Were I Laid on Greenland’s Coast* (Winton 1993, pp.45-46).

two most excellent Ballad-Singers” (Gay 1983, vol. 2, p. 3)⁵⁸, the presence of a “charmingly pathetick” “Prison Scene” (p.3) and of two female main parts, the absence of Prologue and Epilogue.

After the musical Overture, composed for the occasion by Johann Christoph Pepusch, who also arranged the sixty-nine songs of the play⁵⁹, Act I opens with Peachum, a dealer of stolen goods turned thief-taker, carefully reviewing his Book of Accounts (p. 4) with one of his subordinates, Filch. During their discussion, the audience learns about Peachum’s methods of assessing each criminal’s behaviour, skills and profitability and then deciding whether to continue protecting them and peddling their loots or turn them in to be trialled. Soon after, Mrs Peachum enters the dialogue and expresses to her husband her concern for their daughter, Polly, who seems to be having an affair with “Captain Macheath” (I. iv. 38), a highwayman. The two parents confront their daughter, learn that she has secretly married Macheath, and decide that the best way to profit from her outlaw husband is “to have him peach’d” (I. x. 31) and hanged, and inherit all his wealth while he still has some. Having been left by her parents, Polly meets with Macheath, warns him about their plan, and the act ends on the two lover’s heartfelt parting.

Act II begins in a “tavern near Newgate” (p.23) where Macheath’s gang of scoundrels is drinking and chatting; upon his arrival, he explains to them that he must keep a low profile for a while, as Peachum is after him. His colleagues leave him and are soon replaced by a group of prostitutes who begin to entertain and dance with Macheath, until Peachum and some constables burst into the tavern, having been tipped off by one of the prostitutes, Jenny Diver. Macheath is escorted to Newgate prison, where the corrupt jailkeeper Lockit offers him a more comfortable and well-made set of chains in exchange for a good tip. Here, Macheath meets his other, pregnant lover Lucy, Lockit’s

⁵⁸ All further quotes from *The Beggar’s Opera* refer to the 1983 edition of Gay’s *Dramatic Works* in two volumes, edited by J. Fuller.

⁵⁹ “Prussian composer, theorist and an early music antiquarian [...]. Pepusch came to England in 1704. [...]. He found work at the Drury Lane Theatre [...] [and] was a founding member of the Academy of Ancient Music.” (Sadie 1998, p. 300).

daughter, who is enraged because she has heard of him having married Polly Peachum. Macheath shrugs off the news as mere rumours started by the deluded Polly herself, and promises to marry Lucy. Meanwhile, Peachum and Lockit are discussing over their account book, from which becomes clear that the two are accomplices who exchange favours and share the profits of their illicit activities. Lucy desperately begs her father to release Macheath, to no avail, and the two lovers are soon joined by Polly; the two women fight with each other and with Macheath until he manages to persuade Lucy that Polly is insane. After Peachum has come to take his daughter away, Lucy steals her father's keys and sets Macheath free, ending Act II.

The final act of the play opens on Lockit discovering Macheath has escaped and worrying that he should lose his share of the highwayman's wealth if Peachum recaptures him by himself. He goes to his confederate, determined to clarify the situation and discover if he is plotting against him, and the two are joined by Diana Trapes, a dealer and launderer of stolen personal goods such as handkerchiefs, garments and watches. Trapes, while discussing her business, reveals that she has recently seen Macheath with one of the prostitutes, and the two men quickly depart in search for him. Meanwhile, Lucy tries to poison Polly, who suffers for Macheath's cold and cruel allegations of her madness. The attempted murder fails as Polly refuses to drink the liquor Lucy offers, and the girls' confrontation is interrupted by the recapturing of Macheath. The man is taken to the Old Bailey, followed by a veritable entourage of four more lovers and their respective children, and is sentenced to die, while Polly and Lucy's rage is pacified by the gravity of the situation. Just before his execution, however, the Player from the Introduction intervenes and reproaches the Beggar, "for an Opera must end happily" (III. xvi. 9-10); the Beggar agrees and quickly rectifies the ending, "for [...] in this kind of Drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about" (III. xvi. 12-13). Macheath is reprieved, chooses Polly as his wife, "for we were really marry'd" (III. xvii. 10) and the play ends with a dance.

4.1.2 *The Opera*

The dialogues of *The Beggar's Opera* are written in prose, using the standard English of the early eighteenth century. In parallel to them, Gay inserted sixty-nine songs, sourcing two thirds of the music from popular British ballads collected in Thomas D'Urfey's *Wit and Mirth: or, Pills to Purge Melancholy* and one third from other well-known composers (namely Händel and Henry Purcell), rewriting the lyrics to fit the topics, characters and messages of the play (Bevis 1988, p.169). This abundance of sung parts, typical only of the extremely popular Italian opera (written in Italian) and of serious, heroic English operas, was unprecedented in British lighter dramas, as was the use of the traditional, old music of the ballads *in lieu* of tunes composed especially for the dramatic work; these innovations earned the play the title of “ballad opera”, the first of its kind and the most successful. To clarify its relevance and some of the reasons of its popularity, it is useful to provide some notions on the state of musical theatre in London at the beginning of the eighteenth century, on Gay's literary attitude toward the genre, and on his use of music in his own comedy.

Imported on the English stage during the first years of the 1700s, Italian opera rapidly reached an immense popularity among the higher ranks of society as well as among prominent foreign composers of the time such as Händel (for whom Gay wrote the libretto of *Acis and Galatea*), whose moving to London in 1710 furtherly boosted the genre. However, because of the exorbitant costs of the rich and extravagant Italian performances and their relatively restricted circle of devotees, the genre's success was fluctuating, and the “democratic ballad play” (Schultz 1967, p. 134) probably profited from the scarce sustainability of its aristocratic predecessor. The Scriblerians, including Gay, were reportedly against Italian opera and its ubiquitous diffusion, considering it “a toy of the rich – another example of false taste and cultural decay” (Bevis 1988, p. 168). Gay himself had remarked in one of his letters that “People have now forgot Homer, and Virgil & Caesar [...] for in London and Westminster in all polite conversation's Senesino [one of the *castrati* opera

singers, ed.] is daily voted to be the greatest man that ever liv'd" (Fuller 1983, p. 46). The influence of the Scriblerian club may in fact have contributed in planting the seed of the *Opera*, as suggested by Swift's remark in a letter to Pope dated 1716, in which he proposed that Gay wrote "a Newgate pastoral, among the whores and thieves" (p. 42). However, Fuller highlights that there is no evidence in the play of contributions by other Scriblerians, a practice which was customary among club members (p. 43). Mock-pastoral elements are certainly present, particularly as far as regards the heartfelt, lyrical moments of the love relationship between two lower characters (the shepherd and the maid in pastorals, Macheath and Polly in the *Opera*), and they are appropriately subverted by the womanising nature of the highwayman as well as by the urbanised, crowded, filthy and essentially non-idyllic spaces of prison cells and taverns.

Nevertheless, one of the most widely discussed aspects of the *Opera* is not the mock-pastoral, but the mock-operatic. The play has often been interpreted as burlesquing, parodying, or even satirising the fashionable Italian opera, particularly in an effort to patriotically vindicate national identity through the use of English (as opposed to modish Italian) and traditional British songs, and to expose the pompous absurdities of the genre in typical Scriblerian fashion (Schultz 1967, pp.135, 144). As observed by Fuller, "the qualities which an opera may be expected to take seriously (love, ambition, loyalty) are continually undermined" (1983, p. 50). In particular, love is mocked by the very centre of amorous attraction of the play being an unrepentant womaniser, as well as by the Peachums who regard their daughter's marriage prospects only in terms of interest. Ambition, such as that of young Filch or Peachum's hoarding of "money as an end in itself" (Armens 1966, p. 60), is declined into a paradoxical aspiration to be the greatest criminal, "the best of the worst". Finally, loyalty appears flimsy in the hands of thieves, usurers and whores, and is often sold to the highest bidder (see Jenny Diver tipping off Macheath), to the point where one wonders if Macheath's

gang, seemingly the only set of relationships bound by true loyalty, could resist the strains of pecuniary temptation, security and survival (p. 61) .

The words of the Beggar at the end of the play perfectly summarise the sceptical and ironic attitude towards the popular foreign genre, as the character and pretend-author of the play is persuaded by the player to change the finale, and thus the intended moral of the story to satisfy “the taste of the town” (III. xvi. 16-17). Had he been able to follow his own taste, the Beggar would have served “strict poetical Justice” (4) to Macheath and the rest of the knaves and prostitutes, which, the Player observes, would be appropriate for a tragedy, not for an opera; in a paradoxical turn of events, the fashion dictates the moral. Furthermore, the subversion of the finale can be brought about by the author with particular ease and without having to provide much explanations or corrections: “in this kind of Drama, ‘tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about”, explains the Beggar before relieving Macheath, implicitly exposing the genre’s inconsistent, shaky plots and its sensational *coups de théâtre*. These burlesquing instances would have probably been more evident to an eighteenth-century audience which was more acquainted with the Italian opera “craze” (Nokes 1987, p. 136) than a modern reader. Nevertheless, it is necessary to remind that neither Italian Opera satire nor the political and social satire discussed below can be ascribed as the sole or prevalent intent of a play which contains such an intricate web of references, allusions and ironies towards an extensive set of topics.

4.1.3 *The Ballads*

When discussing references and allusions, Gay’s use of the ballad form serves a particularly explicative example for his techniques. The ballad was a form of popular poetry and music which had been, until the eighteenth century, traditionally relegated to the field of “street entertainment”; as mentioned in the previous chapter, Gay refers to ballads in *Trivia* as being performed by poor, simpleton figures equated to the likes of beggars and thieves. The lyrics were set to old, known tunes usually sprung from “rural Britain and Ireland”

(Winton 1993, p. 112) which were constantly re-used and rewritten over. This customary practice also lent them to the invention of topical songs about current events and, thus, contributed to the circulation of news and commentaries on current events among the illiterate (Forsgren 1964, p. 40); without having to compose a new music, songs could be written quickly and by all sorts of authors, and could be deployed also for ideological and political purposes: “By the means of songs eighteenth-century people processed the events, circumstances, sentiments, and ideas – both private and public[...]. Popular songs conveyed information, identified allegiances [...], argued political positions, [...] fomented resistance, and mustered support” (Dugaw 2001, p. 169).

From the second half of the seventeenth century, the genre had been revived outside the streets as a form of dancing music, as testified by the publication of ballads and ballad music in the multiple editions of *The Dancing Master* and other similar collections such as D’Urfey’s *Wit and Mirth: or, Pills to Purge Melancholy*; the ballad spread as dancing song from country tradition to the higher ranks of urban society, as Gay himself reports when describing a ball at Somerset House, nearby Covent Garden, in 1714: “the Prince and Princess... danc’d our English Country Dances” (Forsgren 1964, p. 44). Gay himself had experimented with the genre, having written and composed two ballads for the flute, an instrument he allegedly was able to play (Schultz 1963, p. 157), “A Ballad” for his *The What D’Ye Call It* (Forsgren 1964, p. 45) and, most importantly, the *Newgate Garland* for John Thurmond’s pantomime *Harlequin Sheppard*, performed at Drury Lane in 1724. The musical drama described the last deeds of the infamous thief Jack Sheppard, who had been executed two weeks before the premiere, and Gay’s song, set to the old tune “The Cut Purse” (which will also be used for the forty-third song of the *Opera*), focuses on Sheppard’s accomplice Joseph “Blueskin” Blake who had attempted to murder Jonathan Wild, the most famed criminal informant of the period (Winton 1993, pp. 75-78). As will be explained in the next section, Sheppard

and Wild respectively served as primary sources of inspiration for two of the main characters of the *Opera*, Macheath and Peachum.

The first audiences of the *Opera*, already exposed daily to ballads through all their lives, must have felt the “thrill one feels at meeting beloved old acquaintances in new and unexpected surroundings” (Forsgren 1964, p. 44). As can be appreciated by the exemplary analysis of Air XVI (I. xiii. 31-42) by Diane Dugaw (2001, pp. 176-181), Gay exploited the public’s familiarity with some ballad tunes as well as with their various lyric rewritings to evoke connections between different topics and produce witty or ironic subtexts.

With the love duet of Air XVI, *Over the Hills and far Away*, Macheath explains to Polly that his love for her would not be diminished if he was to be transported (i.e. sentenced to be transferred to one of the British colonies⁶⁰), as it would suffice to have his love with him to be “warm amidst [the] eternal Frost” (I. xiii. 34) of Greenland, to which the girl responds with mutual sentiments were she “sold on Indian soil” (36). While the lyrics alone contain numerous references to a “public history” (Dugaw 2001, p. 178) external to the personal dimension of the couple’s love, such as the practices of transportation and slavery which set the seemingly pastoral duet in a quintessentially colonial economic context, the music employed furtherly complicates the layers of significance of the song, providing a “cluster of counter texts and contexts that accumulated a political application” (p. 178).

⁶⁰ Transportation had been introduced in the English penal system in 1615 as an alternative to death sentence (Hitchcock and Shoemaker 2015, p. 64). The practice was implemented by the Transportation Act of 1718, which worked to ensure correct and efficient practices of transportations and prevent illegal repatriations or escapes along the way; it was issued following a surge of crime and public disorder which had caused jail-overcrowding triggered by post-Utrecht events such as destitute soldiers’ demobilisation and riots against the new Whig-Hanoverian government, as well as unfortunate waves of famine. Transportation had also become particularly favoured as a penalty more merciful than execution for the increasing ranks of female convicts, as well as an effective alternative to minor sentences which had a high escape rate such as workhouses. (pp. 78-80). The measure, which also provided fresh labour to British colonies overseas, proved widely successful: “Over the entire period from 1719 to 1775, transportations accounted for 66.4 per cent of all sentences” (p.81).

The tune has been identified as originally Scottish, first recorded in D'Urfey's collection as "Jockey's lamentation" for his beloved Jenny, and has in fact been used as a base for numerous pro-Jacobite songs, including "A Song on the Birth-day of King James the VIII, 10 June, 1709" dedicated to James II's son, the Pretender; Whig Hanoverian supporters, on the other hand, used the same tune against the Jacobite for "Granadiers, now change your Song", which criticised Queen Anne's dismissal of George I (the Elector)'s affiliate the Duke of Marlborough from his post of commander of the armies. Party politics connotations aside, the music had also been used in 1706 by George Farquhar for a "recruiting song" included the play *The Recruiting Officer*, which evoked the events of the War of Spanish Succession, as well as by D'Urfey for his "Hubble Bubbles", concerning the South Sea Bubble. Without retracing the chronicles of every song and tune of the *Opera*, the example of *Over the Hills and Far Away* is sufficient to appreciate the complexity of undertones which lie behind the seemingly less-sophisticated, folk form of the ballad, and recognise that, in resonating with the audience's personal experience on various levels, this genre certainly contributed to the play's success as well as to its literary value.

4.1.4 *The Beggar*

The figure of the beggar, as well as its interlocutor the Player, serves as a frame to the events of the play, of which he is the fictional author. His few words, inserted at the beginning and at the end, are also the repository of two main themes of the play, one concerning form and the other meaning, i.e. the ironical take on Italian opera and the similarity between higher and lower ranks of society, particularly "in their fashionable vices" (III. xvi. 20).

The Beggar being presented as the author of the play as well as explaining so directly its meaning, the question of whether Gay intended the character to represent himself does arise. Sven Armen's (1966, pp. 51-52) analysis of the play has particularly highlighted a possible, intentional correspondence between the fictional and the real playwright, due to Gay's

constantly precarious finances and particularly to the economically harsh period which had preceded the release of the *Opera*. Gay had suffered a considerable loss from the South Sea Bubble. Furthermore, in the years before and during the composition of the play, his aspirations as a patronaged author had been greatly frustrated: he had envisioned to dedicate his *Fables*, published in 1725, to the infant son of the Prince of Wales (soon to be George II), William, clearly hoping to boost his position at court. He proceeded to print the volume in a richly illustrated edition, “a gift fit for a king” (Winton 1993, p. 84), but when the newly enthroned George II released his new appointments in October 1727, Gay was offered a meagre £150-salary post as Gentleman Usher to baby Princess Louisa, which was nothing more lucrative than his previous employment as Commissioner of the Lottery (p. 85). Disenchanted with his patronage hopes as well as with the court, Gay refused the post and continued working on his *Opera*, ultimately succeeding. Armens, however, argues that “anxiety over his lack of money [...] [and] feelings of injustice” (1966, p.52) for his precarious and unsatisfactory patronages accompanied the author for most of his life; such pervasive preoccupations may indeed have played a role in identifying with a proper destitute, particularly as the search for patronage often entailed bending one’s literary aspirations to the dreaded “insincere flattery” of aristocracy – a process similar to the Beggar’s bowing to the dictates of fashionable operas at the end of the play. Armens’ *Gay is the Beggar* “who is independent of [the benefits of society ed.], and thus, like the ‘artist’, can criticise it with some degree of honesty and moral objectivity” (p. 51).

Conversely, Fuller (1983, p. 49) offers a decidedly different take on the character in suggesting that the Beggar, because of his mishandling of genres and the ending’s artless turning point, is in fact an incompetent artist, which is, incidentally, the reason of his poverty. Sustaining this interpretation is the parallel image of the “Cave of Poverty and Poetry” which Pope had inserted in his *Dunciad* as the reign of incompetent playwrights who disrespect the classic distinctions between Tragedy and Comedy; the Beggar apparently follows their

example in dedicating an opera, which usually pertained to the deeds of kings, heroes and nobles, to the lowest of all social and moral ranks – criminals. Gay may have followed his literary and personal friend in ironically representing his Beggar as one of the many inept intellectuals which were one of the Scriblerian's favourite subjects.

These two polarised interpretation of the framing character of the *Opera* aptly introduce the numerous ambiguities and subtexts which are present in the play and have been detected, registered and scrutinised by a number of literary critics in their efforts to explain and interpret a work whose multiple layers of arguments, witty connections, overt and covert ironies complicate the task and seem to defy an easy categorisation of Gay's intentions.

4.2 Inside Newgate

Having provided a general overview of the play, this section will focus on some of its main characters as a means of providing textual examples which introduce Gay's reflections on the social, political and cultural situation of London (partly discussed in the previous paragraph and furtherly described in paragraph 4.3), as well as including some additional, more specific notions about the play's context, its performance and its reception.

To contextualise the environment of the prison, which is represented in the play, it is useful to touch upon some general notions about the state of the criminal and penal system of the city during the first decades of the eighteenth century. As reported in the insightful overview by Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, *London Lives*, the demographic growth of the lower social ranks in London had contributed to an increase in related issues such as the management of the poor, the suppression of indecencies and the detention of criminals (2015, p. 27). The years of Protestant zeal which followed the Glorious Revolution had seen a growth in the social perception of the gravity of such issues which triggered the formation of the first societies for the Reformation of Manners and prosecution of vices, the supposed causes of crime, such as the proliferation of prostitution, vagrancy and general moral offenses (pp. 34-35); the methods of such organisations, however, were initially lacking in legal accuracy and evidence, which led them to introduce the figures of informers to identify and arrest offenders (p. 41). The implementation of workhouses for the destitute, managed not by the local parishes but directly by the City's authorities, apparently stemmed from the same moralistic fervour, as the spaces were intended to "train" the poor "to a religious and industrious life" (p. 51).

In parallel, legislation tried to contain the "apparent rising tide of crime" (p. 61), and particularly of crimes related to the misappropriation of properties, such as robbery, housebreaking, shoplifting and pickpocketing; consequently, a series of statutes was promulgated nationally between the 1690s and the 1710s to promote thief-takers and informers through financial

rewards, which “encouraged a form of symbiosis between them [and the criminals ed.], since thief-takers needed to be deeply acquainted with criminal networks and their activities in order to prosper.” In turn, “those who participated in crime grabbed this opportunity to sell their knowledge for a price” (p. 63). Legal authorities were also confronted with a considerable incidence of female outlaws, which, together with the defiance shown by a rising number of convicts when facing the gallows, led to attempts at relatively softening the punishments and to the increase of incarceration, transportation and hard labour as substitutes of execution (p. 64).

After the Treaty of Utrecht, the demobilisation of soldiers and some particularly bad harvests brought to a new tide of poverty and crime, accompanying and amplifying the public disorders, street demonstrations and riots encouraged by party politics. The government promptly responded with the Riot Act of 1715, which punished rioters with death, and the Transportation Act of 1718, which facilitated the efficiency of the criminals’ deportation overseas. Furthermore, from the 1720s, the practices thief-taking and informing were boosted with an increase in the rewards offered “for the capture and conviction of highway robbers in the London area” (p. 86). The proliferation of the figure of the thief-taker, as well as that of the defiant convict, is testified in official records as well as by their recurring presence in popular literatures of the period, such as Alex Smith’s *Lives of the Most Noted Highwaymen* (p. 91), the *Newgate Calendar*, originally a register of executions turned into a collection of criminal biographies, Defoe’s *Account of Jonathan Wild* (Diyen 1998, p. 16) and Thurmond’s *Harlequin Sheppard*. The rise of these two urban categories, and their two most prominent representatives in the London scene, the officer, informer and “receiver of stolen goods” (Armens 1966, p.59) Jonathan Wild and the highwayman Jack Sheppard, are particularly relevant in the following discussion of the characters of *The Beggar’s Opera*, as they heavily inspired two of the protagonists, Peachum and Macheath; furthermore, the public attention

devoted to criminals in the period, testified by this short overview, sheds some more light on the fortune and interest raised by the play.

4.2.1 *Peachum and Lockit*

Peachum is the main antagonistic figure of the play, responsible for having the “hero” Macheath imprisoned and almost hanged. Modelled after Jonathan Wild, he retains all the characteristics which made the informer adverse to the public: he is a double agent, a seller of information, directing, protecting, handling stolen goods and creating connections among thieves, launderers and outlaws as long as they can be useful to his business, and appeasing law authorities by turning them in whenever he can profit more by doing so. As he declares, “’tis now high time to look about me for a decent Execution [...]. I hate a lazy Rogue, by whom one can get nothing ‘till he is hang’d” (I. iii. 1-3). His very name, a play on words on the contracted form of “peach them”, gives away his profession, as the verb “to peach” used to bear the meaning of “to inform on or give incriminating evidence against” someone (Winton 1993, p. 118). His distinctive occupation, examining and compiling his Book of Accounts, immediately identifies him as a seasoned businessman whose sole concern is to make the most of any situation and anyone, including his own daughter. When he apprehends the possibility that Polly may want to marry Macheath, he shows his disapproval and declares that “A handsome Wench in our way of Business is as profitable as at the Bar of a *Temple* coffee-house” (I. iv. 75-76), showing that the value he attributes to the girl resides in how she could use her beauty to trick and manipulate men to her (and, thus, her family’s) advantage. Likewise, when he finally understands that the knot has already been tied, he immediately expresses his hopes that, as are the “common Views of a Gentlewoman” (I. x. 16-17), she had considered marrying the man for inheriting his money through “the comfortable Estate of Widowhood” (23-24).

Lockit (a pun on “lock it”, referred to the cells he locks in his job) is the jailkeeper at Newgate prison, a corrupt and ambiguous servant of justice who

gladly accepts bribes from convicts for a variety of benefits, from minor comforts such as a lighter pair of fetters, to helping them escape or elude their punishment. The two are presented as business partners acting in their own “mutual interest” (II. x. 56), and may be described as reciprocal alter-egos, or, as Calhoun Winton observes, two faces of the same coin of which “one [Peachum] represents commercial and the other [Lockit] judicial corruption” (1993, p. 120). A variety of ironical and satirical innuendos have been detected by critics particularly in these two characters; these insinuations can broadly be grouped either under politically charged humour towards Robert Walpole, or under more general, pungent observations towards the new economic and social order developing in the metropolis after the rise of international commerce, finance and the decidedly entrepreneurial middle ranks.

Peachum, because of his means of conducting business, would have been directly associated to Jonathan Wild by contemporary audiences; however, a further, satirical connection to Prime Minister Walpole would have also been implied, as in the collective consciousness “Wild’s methods were often compared to Robert Walpole’s, both being called ‘great men’⁶¹: Peachum, who buys and sells people, would suggest both” (Bevis 1988, p. 168). Textual references and connections to the expression “great men” are present in two notable instances: at the beginning of the play, Peachum sings “*And the Statesman, because he is so great/ Thinks his Trade as honest as mine*” (I. i. 7-8), a clearly mocking take on the “honesty” of great statesmen; in the fifth scene of the same act, Mrs Peachum declares that the young, novice pickpocket Filch “wilt be a great Man in History” (I. v. 5-6) if he is not executed first, implying that the concept of “greatness”, in the world of the play, is peculiarly tied with succeeding in lucrative crimes (Winton 1993, p. 118).

Records of the first performance of the play at Lincoln’s Inn Fields attest the presence of the Minister among the audience; Nokes describes one particular report, according to which, at Lockit’s singing

⁶¹ See also Winton (1993, p. 118): “Robert Walpole was being characterized in the Opposition press- especially from this time forth- as a ‘Great Man’.”

*When you censure the Age,
Be cautious and sage,
Lest the Courtiers offended should be:
If you mention Vice or Bribe,
'Tis so pat to all the Tribe,
Each crys - That was levell'd at me. (II. x. 21-26)*

the audience looked up to Walpole's box, clearly expecting a reaction from him (perhaps that he cried "That was levell'd at me!"). The politician tastefully and cleverly "encored it [...] [and] joined the general applause" (Nokes 1987, p. 136). Nevertheless, he would subsequently ban the *Opera's* sequel, *Polly*, from being performed, as a pre-emptive measure, having assisted to the public's reaction to its prequel (the *Opera*); the ban, however unnecessary, seeing the scarce instances of satire present in *Polly*, certainly proves the Minister's preoccupations and efforts to contain the ridiculing and questioning of his public persona. Walpole also allegedly promoted Gay's eviction from his lodgings at Whitehall. Scholars highlight the difficulty in defining Gay's satirical intentions as directed specifically to Walpole⁶²: it appears more probable that the playwright's "censure of the Age" was meant to be both lighter and more wide-ranging. Yet, authorial intentions seem to have succumbed to the audience's response, which, by creating suspense for the Minister's reaction, may have amplified the specificity of the attack and heightened its victim's awareness.

A variety of analyses of the two characters are decidedly unanimous in describing them as a satirical representation of the rising merchants and businessmen of the middle-class, whose "prime bourgeois evils" are "hypocrisy and avarice" (Armens 1966, p. 59). David Nokes highlights in particular the influence of the relatively new mechanisms of "banks and joint-stocks companies" which offered "models of successful capitalist enterprise" (1987, p.

⁶² "Modern scholars are divided in their opinions on whether Gay did indeed intend to affront Walpole" (Nokes 1987, p. 136).

144). Peachum and Lockit are “the brokers of [...] an order Gay portrays as brutally predatory”, their enterprises based on “the unlimited acquisition of wealth by whatever means necessary” (Canfield 1995, p. 325). This new order is accurately described in Lockit’s observation: “Of all Animals of Prey, Man is the only sociable one. Every one of us preys upon his Neighbour, and yet we herd together” (III.ii. 5-7); as it turns out, “herding together” (in friendship, partnership or marriage) is just another mean of profiting from others in the cultivation of one’s own interest.

Peachum and Lockit’s businesses are not only profitable but appear to seep into and permeate their worldview and moral perception: as a matter of fact, the two characters frequently observe that their ways are not different from the general ways of the world. During his first appearance on stage, for instance, Peachum compares his practices to those of a lawyer, as “he [too] acts in a double Capacity, both against Rogues and for ‘em” (I. i. 10). The satirical dimension of the two characters is reinforced by their use of the terms “honesty” and “honour”, which, when uttered by them, appear to assume a quasi-paradoxical meaning: in the first scene, Peachum declares that “A Lawyer” (as much as a Priest or a Statesman to which he refers shortly before in Air I) “is an honest Employment, so is mine” (I. i. 9). When Peachum confronts Lockit about Ned Clincher’s upcoming execution, for which he had bought a postponement, the jailkeeper complains that his “Honour” is being “call’d in Question” and attacked (II. x. 32-33, 38). Finally, when they learn Macheath’s ubication by Mrs Trapes, Lockit assures her that they will deal with him “like Men of Honour” (III. vi. 77). Apparently, being honest and honourable in the fundamentally economic system which rules the underworld of *The Beggar’s Opera* does not entail the moral values typically associated with the words, but rather “a form of mutual dependency and warranty” (Nokes 1987, 147) which encompasses the notions of pursuing one’s interest (like the lawyer), abiding to contracts (like the favour paid for by Ned) and safeguarding one’s business and business relationships (by arresting Macheath and securing Polly’s assets). Honour, as many other “abstracts –

whether moral, social or emotional can only be understood in cash terms” (p. 140).

4.2.2 Macheath

Like Peachum and Lockit, Macheath’s first identification is given by his name: “Son of the Heath – where highwaymen [robbers who operated in the main streets outside the city centres] plied their trade” (Winton 1993, p. 116). His title, “Captain”, characterises him as a quintessentially masculine and martial presence, and anticipates his association to the milieu of the noble, knightly aristocracy; his sexual assertiveness reinforces his manliness and decidedly distances him from the *castrati* of Italian operas (Fuller 1983, p. 46).

The character, as noted previously, is heavily inspired by the popular burglar Jack Sheppard, whose case is meticulously recorded in the *Newgate Calendar* as “having been more in the subject of public conversation than [...] almost anyone who ever underwent the sentence of the law, and his adventures being in themselves very remarkable” (Jackson 1795, p. 392). During his apprenticeship as a carpenter, Sheppard began stealing valuables from the houses in which he worked and delivering the goods to his friend and accomplice, a prostitute called Edgworth Bess. He soon began housebreaking, “became connected [...] with Jonathan Wild’s gang” (p. 394) and on one instance freed Bess from prison, “which acquired him a high degree of credit with the women of abandoned character”. Having himself been jailed at Newgate with Bess after an unsuccessful pickpocketing, he skilfully escaped with the woman by climbing down and over the walls of the prison. After another series of robberies and housebreaks, he was convicted but again managed to escape, with the help of two women, by cutting off one of the spikes that warded a small passage in his cell. On his third conviction, he performed his most difficult and extenuating jailbreak, having to break through numerous locked rooms in order to exit from Newgate, with the only aid of nails, chains and spikes found around the prison. He mostly hid in taverns and public houses and reportedly met with his much-preoccupied mother, until he was

peached by an alehouse boy and was, one last time, taken into custody. “His fame was now so much increased by his exploits that he was visited by great numbers of people, and some of them of the highest quality” (p. 406); nevertheless, not even his aristocratic connections or his escaping mastery could save him, and “he was executed at Tyburn⁶³ on the 16th of November, 1724, in the 23rd year of his age” (p. 407).

This short summary of the Newgate record concerning Jack Sheppard highlights some of the key aspects which inspired and characterised Macheath: like Sheppard, he too is particularly admired and loved by women, and one of his lovers, Lucy, help him escape from Newgate. Furthermore, his martial prowess is comparable to Jack’s dexterity in escaping which leads to presume he too must have been remarkably strong and agile. From other characters’ remarks and interactions, it is apparent that the Captain is “cheerful and [...] agreeable” (I. iv. 41), a “Gentleman” (42), courageous, honourable and loyal to his gang, generous and just (II. ii. 10-19); instances from the *Newgate Calendar* which record Sheppard’s popularity, his bravery and his intricate web of friends, helpers and fans, suggest that he too may have retained at least some of the traits attributed to Macheath. These characteristics place Macheath and Sheppard in the same tradition of mythicization and elevation to the status of celebrities of particularly “heroic” criminals who were admired by the public opinion for their non-violent, somewhat honest countenance towards their victims, their great endeavours and their extraordinary escapes from prison (Hitchcock and Shoemaker 2015, pp. 99-101). In fact, the success of the *Opera* itself played a decisive role in boosting the imagery as well as the “gentlemanly pretensions of highwaymen” (p.101).

If Peachum and Lockit can be interpreted as representing a kind of *ante litteram* “middle class”, the highwayman Macheath appears to embody the

⁶³ While Newgate was the place of conviction, most of the prisoners condemned to death were escorted in a “procession to Tyburn” (Hitchcock and Shoemaker 2015, p. 98), currently situated by the north-western corner of Hyde Park, where they would be executed.

gentlemanly aristocratic: in the criminal imagery of the times, “highwaymen [...] had long been regarded as the aristocracy of the underworld, since they did their work as equestrians” (Winton 1993, p. 116). Armens (1966, p. 58) defines him as a “sophisticated [...] chivalric knight-errant” who, in contrast to the informer and the jailkeeper, retains some “comprehension of honor or friendship” and is generous with his more unfortunate peers; his charismatic, leading abilities have procured him a seemingly loyal entourage of associates and a considerable following of lovers and admirers.

Macheath surely behaves like an aristocratic gentleman of the eighteenth century when considering his “vices” (p. 59) of gambling, drinking and womanising: “*Mary-bone*⁶⁴ and the Chocolate houses are his undoing” (I. iv. 48-49), as will be Jenny Diver, one of the prostitutes he assiduously frequents, and he “keep[s] Company with Lords and Gentlemen” (54). Nevertheless, some relevant ambiguities in his character suggest that, notwithstanding his presentation as the “hero” of the story, he too is in part complacent with the more cynical worldview represented by Peachum and Lockit, particularly as far as regards his behaviour towards women: he professes undying love to Polly and Lucy alike, and when his other lovers join him in the final dance, one is inclined to suppose they received the same treatment as the two main female characters. Furthermore, while musing on his misfortune in his cell, his declaration “I promis’d the Wench [Lucy] marriage. – What signifies a Promise to a Woman? Does not Man in Marriage promise a hundred things that he never means to perform?” clashes with his honourability and his loyalty, two characteristics which supposedly rely on keeping one’s word (Canfield 1995, p. 322).

His behaviour, as far as his vices are concerned, brings him closer to the typical figure of the rake. The libertine gentleman (an attribute he gains by birth more than by his behaviour), recalled by Gay also in *The Mohocks*, was particularly recurrent in the literature of the first half of the century and declined in a variety of shades: “fop, bully and gamester” (Irving 1928, p. 226),

⁶⁴ *Mary-bone*, today’s *Marylebone*, was “notorious for gambling” (Fuller 1983, p. 376).

atheist and lascivious (p. 231), “boasting soldier [...] [whose] uniform was popular with the ladies” (p. 241). As a last instance of the ambiguities of this character, it is interesting to notice that Macheath too, like Peachum, has been connected to the political satire directed towards Walpole, particularly due to his polygamous tendencies, as it was public knowledge that the Minister entertained an extra-marital relationship with Maria Skerrett (Nicholson 1994, p. 124).

4.3 Newgate Microcosmos

The final paragraph on *The Beggar's Opera* is dedicated to drawing, from the previous analysis of characters and techniques employed in the play, its main significances and observations, following the numerous scholarly insights on the world of Newgate presented by Gay. Both the following sections, while dealing with different aspects of the play (namely, economic and social order), have underlying proceedings in common, i.e. to consider the *Opera's* micro-system of Newgate and its surroundings as a mirrored image of some of the workings of the macro-system of the eighteenth-century metropolitan environment, of which the causes and motives have been explained in the introductory chapter of this dissertation. In this sense, the “Newgate microcosmos” of criminality, with its own peculiar economic, moral and social organisation, works in ways no longer ascribed to a world detached from the rest of London, but imbued and generated by the same, forceful changes which were restructuring the city as a whole.

4.3.1 Profit

As suggested in Nokes' insightful commentary, the language of the play is permeated by words related to the semantic field of commerce and profit: “The word ‘business’ occurs fifteen times [...]. ‘Money’ occurs nineteen times [...]. ‘interest’ [...] ‘profit’, ‘debt’ and ‘credit’ - run all through it.” (1987, p. 138). The characters of the play are constantly engaged in business transactions, be it Peachum's updating his account book or discussing the selling of stolen goods with Diana Trapes, Polly negotiating her own value with her parents, or Lucy and Lockit lamenting their very much financial “ruin” (III. i. 26, 50) which derives from marrying and (worse) having a child with a man in such precarious economic and social conditions as Macheath. “Money has become the standard by which town society judges all values” (Armens 1966, p. 56): as freedom can be bought, so can abstract values and moral attributes such as respectability, honesty, love and loyalty. Consequently, the people which inhabit the space of the *Opera* undergo an all-encompassing commodification.

Their freedom can be bought or sold, as is the case of Lockett's clients; lovers are submitted to laws of profit which establish whether it is lucrative to marry, and to whom. Even unborn children have a value in a self-interested sense, as female convicts are represented as paying for getting pregnant on purpose to avoid execution by "pleading their bellies"⁶⁵, a fairly common practice (Nicholson 1994, p. 130).

The most powerful of the characters, Peachum, who disposes of the fates of all those inscribed in his account books, aptly describes his and Lockett's self-interest in maintaining their business relationship as "the Interest of the World" (II. x. 56), because in the world of the play his own is the only interest which matters (Armens 1966, p. 66). The issues related to this early form of capitalism, in which money was gradually substituting and becoming a determiner of rank distinction and values, had become increasingly relevant during the early eighteenth century, as testified by the literature of the period. In particular, Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, published in 1705 and expanded twice during the 1720s, satirically described "Britain as a 'grumbling hive' in which various groups, professions and classes of bees have banded together to promote forms of beneficial vice" (Nokes 1987, p. 146). The proposed, stinging thesis of Mandeville's work is in fact that the necessary conditions for commercial success naturally involve forms of "vanity, vice, avarice and exploitations" (p.146), as well as of the "mutual dependency" (p.148) by which the lower ranks find sustenance by producing the higher's luxuries, and vice versa ("Luxury 'employed a million of the poor/ And odious pride, a million more', p. 148). These judgements and preoccupations on the social and moral implications of a new economic system evidently seeped into Gay's representation of the criminal underworld: it is not by chance that the villains of the play represent the emerging proto-bourgeois class, whose wealth

⁶⁵ In the second scene of the play, Filch and Peachum talk about a Black Moll, soon to be trialled, who "may plead her Belly at worst", as "she hath taken care of that Security" (I. ii. 16-17). In the third Act, the same Filch explains he has "pick'd up a little Money by helping the Ladies to a Pregnancy against their being call'd down to Sentence" (III. iii. 5-7).

rivalled with the noble ranks thanks to their cunning and industrious business strategies rather than to inheritance and patronage.

The issue of personal profit as a propelling force in the world of the play is also set, as noticed by Colin Nicholson (1994, pp. 126-127), in a context of complex philosophical reflection on human nature and its relationship with self-interest and common good, which was at the centre of the debate between Hobbes, Shaftesbury and Locke. In this regard, the *Opera* appears to sustain a Hobbesian perspective which favoured strong regulating institutions to contain humanity's "innate predatory nature" (p. 126) and the resulting condition of "war of all against all" (p. 127), the struggle to balance personal interest with the inevitable dependency on others; Shaftesbury, on the other hand, identified "self-interest" with "social interest", thus implying that the natural predisposition of man was towards, not against, a sociable state. Locke's contribution to the discussion, which appears to be ironically represented in the *Opera* by the views and behaviour of its main characters, proposed "justice and keeping of contracts" as the possible foundational common-ground of a human "innate moral principle", and the market economy as man's natural state issued by God, who "gave the World [...] to the Industrious and Rational" (p. 127). While Locke's moral principle does at a first glance appear "innate", as it is present even among the unlawful characters of Newgate (e.g. Peachum and Lockit's reliance on agreements and contracts, as well as Macheath's gang's professions of loyalty and unity), the *Opera* soon reveals the inconsistency and failure of this principle. Justice and contracts are submitted to economic gain like everything else, and as thus can decay when a higher chance of profit calls for it, not only in the case of Lockit and Peachum's endeavours, but also among the seemingly more "honest" gang of thieves and prostitutes, as they too, in the end, betray their loyal bound with Macheath for profit: these characters' "mutual trust has yielded entirely to the 'mutual Interest' [...] [which] is at base no more than enlightened self-interest" (Canfield 1995, p. 324).

4.3.2 Social Hierarchies

As observed in the paragraphs dedicated to the analysis of their characters, Peachum, Lockit and Macheath are portrayed and have been identified with particular social ranks, namely the rapidly increasing proto-bourgeoisie and the traditional nobility. Fuller's overview of the *Opera* highlights how thieves, prostitutes, usurers and cheats have taken up traits and characteristics of their diametrically opposed correspondents in society, i.e. members of the aristocracy, merchants and powerful public figures: "the highwaymen, prostitutes and fences speak and act like politicians, court ladies and lawyers" (1983, p. 50), which is also evident in the absence of street slang terms and vernacular language in their lines. Towards the end of the play, the Beggar himself provides a direct evidence of Gay's intentional insertion of such social parallelisms, and declares that "Through the whole Piece you may observe such a similitude of Manners in high and low Life, that it is difficult to determine whether (in the fashionable Vices) the fine Gentlemen imitate the Gentlemen of the Road, or the Gentlemen of the Road the fine Gentlemen" (III. xvi. 18-22).

With this process of "sophistication" of the Newgate underworld, Gay obtains an ironic reversal of social roles, which encompasses the instances of specific political satire towards Walpole, and effectively reconsiders the distinctions between the lawful and the unlawful, the honest and the dishonest, and, ultimately, the "good" and the "bad". Such process, which to some extent, bears some similarities to the public opinion's fascinated, almost idolising attitude towards borderline figures such as Wild and Sheppard, first and foremost lays the foundation for another layer of light satire which stands side by side with many others.

Evidently, by tracing parallels between noble and highwaymen, politician and informer, merchant and usurer, justice and corruption, Gay infers, as the Beggar reminds us, that the underworld of the *Opera* is not dissimilar in its social and economic mechanisms from the world "above". Armens notices that attributing to thieves an air of honour and loyalty similar

or even greater than the higher ranks of society “heighten[s] the social injustice in having them punished for crimes, committed on a small scale, which the aristocracy (as courtiers) and bourgeoisie (as politicians) commit on a grand scale, and from which they prosper rather than suffer.” (1966, p. 61). The only real difference between macro and microcosmos, in this sense, is the extent to which individuals can practice their vices without suffering the consequences.

Gay’s satire on the social hierarchies of his time takes on a more personal and specific form in the commentary proposed by Nokes’s meticulous biography of the author, *John Gay, a Profession of Friendship* (1995). As explained previously, Gay’s disenchantment with the courtly patronage system that charged the aristocracy with the responsibility to promote and safeguard artistic talent reached its peak during the composition of the *Opera*. Gay considered his recent appointment as Gentleman Usher to a two-year old, Princess Louisa, as “ignominious” and disappointing (p. 401). Furthermore, his straightforward mockery of the Italian opera, of which his former patron, the Duke of Burlington, was an enthusiastic promoter (as well as being one of the directors of the Royal Academy of Music), allegedly severed the relationship between the two (p. 428), and suggests that “Gay [...] had grown increasingly weary of the sense that his own talents were undervalued in comparison with the huge salaries” of Italian opera stars (p. 431). In this context, the *Opera*’s parallels between usurers and statesmen, gentlemen and thieves, and even beggars and writers, take on a more personal stance and show Gay’s recognition of his own involvement in a new, economy-based system which encompassed courtly politics and the aristocracy, as well as literature and the arts in general. Some examples from *The Beggar’s Opera* are significant and support this perspective.

The character of the “courtier” recurs in various characters’ conversations and is portrayed as disloyal and self-interested; even the gang of thieves detach themselves from him through a couple of rhetorical questions to which the answer is “no one”: “Who is there here that would not die for his Friend? [...] Who is there here that would betray him for Interest? [...] Shew

me a Gang of Courtiers that can say as much.” (II. i. 18-21). On another instance, Macheath ironically likens his attachment to Polly to “the Hands of a Courtier” clinging on to his “Pension” (I. xiii. 27-28). This greedy, selfish figure is also easily offended, and one of Lockit’s song invites caution in satirical practices, “*Lest the Courtiers offended should be*” (II.x.23): such recommendation is fit for an artist under patronage such as Gay, and resonates even more when considering the pre-emptive censure Walpole inflicted on *Polly*, the *Opera’s* sequel. Finally, through the last dialogue between the Beggar and the Player, Gay concludes his string of courtly satire with an ironic blow to his own category and to “the taste of the town” (III. xvi. 16-17), to which the Beggar must submit his original ending, Macheath’s execution, and change it into a reprieve. The Beggar, i.e., at least in part, the Author, must yield to the “taste of the town”, which not only entails the utilitarian, “perfect businessman’s conclusion, giving the public what they want” (Nokes 1995, p. 442) to gain more from his work, but also represents his condition of economic dependency on his patrons, whom he must satisfy at the expense of his own artistic integrity, again for the sake of the omnipotent law of Profit. In fact, the “taste of the town” could be said to coincide with the taste of the upper ranks, particularly when considering their predilection for the inoffensive, fashionable and lavish Italian opera, another target of Gay’s irony, as we have seen, and another contributor to his discontent with patronage’s incapability of recognising and supporting valuable literature.

As has been the case for *Trivia*, *The Beggar’s Opera* too offers a variety of inputs for the modern reader and scholar, while shunning a univocal categorisation of themes and messages. Gay’s multiple ironies touch upon culture, society, economy and politics, opening the way to a variety of observations without focusing on an exclusive, definite point of view.

The effect of the play is likewise multifaceted: with its topical references, it is strongly collocated in its own time, and invites investigation with its intricate webs of references, hints and connections hiding behind the simplest

of ballads, as the paragraphs dedicated to the satire against Italian opera has exemplified. On the other hand, its particular socio-economic setting and lightly-expressed concerns, situated at the beginning of a new order which will become extremely relevant in the following centuries, has prompted scholars to explore the characters of Newgate by shining a retrospective light on the earliest stages of the modern economic system and understanding them through the notions of capital and social class.

However, while all these interpretations, nuances and references testify the author's considerable knowledge, intelligence and wit in producing a work so extensively relevant, the subtlety and inoffensiveness of Gay's irony, his playfulness and his generally moderate attitude towards the issues of his time all suggest that his intentions were directed towards a lighter, sophisticated entertaining product: ultimately, as Winton reminds, "The morality of *The Beggar's Opera* [...] is the morality of comedy, which is designed to laugh us out of our follies and vice" (1993, p. 127).

Conclusions

As can be appreciated from the analysis of the main topics of the works discussed in this thesis, Gay's interest and participation in the evolving urban environment of early eighteenth-century London are thoroughly reflected in *Trivia* and in *The Beggar's Opera*. The very fact that Gay dedicated two of his most important works to the city indicates his interest in its dynamics, of which he offers his interpretation with accuracy and abundance of details. In both works, Gay deploys a variety of techniques, images and tropes which show his competence in navigating different styles at their height in his time, from the classical genres of georgic, pastoral and satire, to the contemporary musical theatre, comedy and traditional ballad. Parodic mockery, in particular, is a distinctive trait in both works and is employed successfully to deliver a variety of layers of ironies, double-entendres and references, some more evident, some remarkably subtle.

These features, while still maintaining a generally lighter and milder tone than in most of Gay's contemporary satires, are nonetheless successful in raising interest in the subjects presented in his works. While it may be argued that Gay's relative inoffensiveness, the mundanity of his topics, and the topicality of his remarks have been shadowed by some more celebrated and engaged authors, such as Swift, Pope, Defoe etc., it was the purpose of this thesis to consider Gay's major works as an equally precious testimony of his times. The peculiar historical period in which *Trivia* and *The Beggar's Opera* are set, in the aftermath of the development of a new urban model and on the threshold of a new socio-economic system, render them particularly interesting to a modern reader. The fact that both works invite the investigation onto subjects which are less frequently known by the general public, makes them even more interesting.

The issues discussed in *Trivia* encompass the knowledge of the daily life of Londoners, their clothes, their habits, their jobs, the practical aspects of the city as well as its psychological understanding. Although Gay's representation of the negative aspects of the urban space is often ambiguously exaggerated, as

explained at the beginning of Chapter 3, the very process of discerning the extent of his realism entails the examination of a variety of disciplines which encompass the activities and features of “everyman’s every day”, and are crucial to the understanding of a particular culture in a particular timeframe. The examination of *The Beggar’s Opera* invites the exploration of the underworld *par excellence*, the milieu of criminals, beggars and prostitutes, and its recognition as a mirror-image of a deeply transformed “upper world”; the implications are, as can be appreciated in the last parts of Chapter 4, much more multifaceted than those a simple ballad opera may suggest, as the play has been recognised as a significant and witty social analysis.

As emerges from the brief overview of the main tendencies and features of city writing, and more specifically from Gay’s portrayal of the urban environment, the development of the metropolis faced not only literature but society as a whole with a series of novelties and challenges which would reshape the way in which citizens and individuals perceived the world, and themselves in it. Both *Trivia* and *The Beggar’s Opera*, in their ironic and topical ways, represent this transition: the Walker reacts with fear and mistrust, the new, labyrinthic urban dimension discombobulates him, makes him overly anxious to master an unpredictable environment, and longing for a tradition which would never be recovered. Peachum and Lockit adapt their personality and business management, paradoxically in the best way, following the stream and profiting by it, eating rather than being eaten, taking up agency and power over a new economic and moral system. Macheath, while still representing a figure of tradition, the knight and gentleman, acknowledges and adopts the new laws of money, balancing valour and interest with the same skilfulness which he employs to juggle with justice and with his lovers.

Gay’s stance on the subject of the metropolis, as has been made clear, is complex, occasionally contradictory, less definitive than his more celebrated fellow Scriblerians, and, naturally, cannot be deduced only by the analysis of his city works. In including such a variety of perspectives, views and sketches of the urban environment, however, he certainly succeeds in proving his

awareness of the extent to which such environment was evolving, and highlights this awareness through his ambiguous irony, the process of mocking so extensively employed by him, which makes “the great little, and the little great”. The reason for my choice to analyse these two particular literary works lies precisely in their shared focus and portrayal of mundanity and the ordinary, i.e. “the little”, as gateways to a deeper knowledge, “the great”, the bigger picture. Gay’s focus on the daily, the small, the “trivial”, even the low and the dirty, have inspired to this thesis a more holistic historical study of his period, and have contributed to – I hope – a better understanding of it. Likewise, Gay’s lightness and use of irony, rather than downplaying the work’s subjects, have enriched them with meanings and nuances that invite to look beyond and deeper to interpret them, and to delve into a more immersive reading of the dawning metropolis of London.

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