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A Study of Peachum's Language in *The Beggar's Opera*

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I

John Gay's (1685-1732) *The Beggar's Opera* is one of the most successful comedies in the history of the London stage. The original production opened at the playhouse in Lincoln's Inn Fields on 29 January 1728. It ran for sixty-two performances in the first season.[1]. The popularity of the play was due to its power to bring the audience to life. It was a satirizing dramas showing "vigorous and powerful attacks on a government which most of London hated"[2] and using the device of comparing statesmen to criminals.

Gay puts a lot of lively and funny, but real, scenes of the eighteenth century London underworld into the play, with most of its scenes laid in Newgate prison. The playwright produces a kind of "an artistic heterocosm, a little world of its own, endlessly cheerful, yet always shadowed by betrayal, and pox, and the gallows."[3]

There appear a lot of rustic or rough characters such as highwaymen, lower officials, rogues, and whores in the play. In reality, as a rule, those vulgar characters did not speak like people in the polite world, but spoke with coarse expressions. Carey McIntosh comments on the eighteen-century lower class people's language:

> In the very lowest social classes, among non-literate working people and unemployed, English is entirely colloquial and entirely unregulated. Whatever got message across was acceptable, including slang, profanity, dialect, thieves' cant, grunts, signs, gestures, jargon, and quotations from the Bible.[4]

Strangely, even the vulgar characters partly speak in polite English in some scenes of the play, too. We have to guess those characters are conscious of the fashionable manners of the upper-class. This thesis is a study of the language of Peachum in the light of lower-class people's class-consciousness. We will also see the colloquial English language of eighteenth-century London.

II

There emerged a lot of newly elevated people, called middle class, in the century. Especially "London was more 'fashionable' than it had been before; and only too many of the richer middle class aped the manners and the vice of the People of Quality."[5] One way of aping the aristocrats' manners was using good literate language. "The cultivation of a standard English became the mark of a gentleman as outlined in his letter by Lord Chesterfield, who was regarded by many at the time as an authority on such matters."[6] Actually, the ambitious would-be gentlemen entirely followed the language regulations fixed by a plethora of grammarians. Charles Barber notes that there were not many books called a *Grammar* until the eighteenth century, but that in that century "there was an absolute flood of them."[7] The people rushed to buy "the large number of handbooks on 'correct' or 'polite' English usage."[8] Barber continues about the cause of the phenomenon:

> These prescriptive works had a quite overt class basis. They were written for the gentry, who represented perhaps ten per cent of the population, and aimed at codifying the usage of the upper class. There are frequent references to the depraved language of common people, compared to the noble and refined expressions of the gentry.[9]

The British eighteenth century strictly classified people in language as well as in class. We can assume that the ordinary people's language was different from the fashionable people's then. When lower-class people joined the middle class, they wanted to follow the model speech and performance of the upper-class people like gentlemen and ladies.

In those days, the social order called *gentlemen* existed in Britain. To think of *gentlemen*, we have to note the words *gentle* and *gentleman*. Pursuing the history of the changing meaning of those words is intriguing. The *OED* gives the explanation of the word *gentle*: "Of persons: Well-born, belonging to a family of position; originally used synonymously with *noble*, but afterwards distinguished from it, either as a wider term, or as designating a lower degree of rank" (s.v. *gentle* 1). The significance of the word had to be degraded according as the popular use of it as in *gentleman* and *gentlefolk*. As for the word *gentleman*, the *OED* says: "A man of superior position in society, or having the habits of life indicative of this; often, one whose means enable him to live in easy circumstance without engaging in trade, a man of money and leisure. In

recent use often employed ... as a more courteous synonym for 'man', without regard to the social rank of the person referred to" (s.v. *gentleman* 4a).

In the play, we find the phrase "the gentlemen of the road" meaning *a highwaymen* along with the phrase "a fine gentleman" meaning *a gentleman of fashion*. About the destiny of *gentlemen* in the century, Roy Porter mentions "What it took to be reckoned a gentleman was not legally fixed but negotiable, for by long tradition gentility in England was but ancient riches,"[10] and continues "People made bold to style themselves 'gentlemen merchants,' 'gentlemen clothiers,' 'gentlemen of the road."[11] "Wealth that dressed itself up in liberal behaviour and gave itself airs could muster for gentility."[12] Highwaymen were romanticized, with a hidden irony, as "gentlemen of the road" at that time.[13]

> Peachum: A rich rogue now-a-days is fit company for any gentleman (1.9)[14]
> Filch: when a gentleman is long kept in suspense, penitence may break his spirit ever after. (1.2)
> Peachum: How many fine gentlemen have we in Newgate every year, purely upon that article! (1.4)
> Mrs Peachum: Sure there is not a finer gentleman upon on the road than the Captain! (1.4)
> Beggar: the fine gentlemen imitate the gentlemen of the road, or the gentlemen of the road the fine gentlemen (3.16)

Peachum knows the condition of being *a fine gentleman*, and mentions:

> Marybone and the chocolate-houses are his undoing. The man that proposes to get money by play should have the education of a fine gentleman, and be trained up to it from his youth. (1.4)

In the century, to be *a fine gentleman*, one should have a particular education. "A fine gentleman" was fairly respected by lower-class people of the day, but he was despised for his education. The word *gentleman* was already debased by people's frequent use of it. We have to know the title of gentleman was commonly given in England to all that distinguished themselves from the common sort of people by a good garb, genteel air or good education, wealth or learning in that era.[15]

III

In *The Beggar's Opera*, we enjoy the hero Mr Peachum's speech and action almost in

every scene. He is a fence, an underworld receiver of stolen goods, and a master criminal leading his men in the play. The name of *Peachum* reminds us that his job is to impeach or inform on his criminal acquaintances for the sake of the reward.[16] He is also a kind of professional informer called "thief-catchers" or "thief-takers."[17] According to those professions of his and his class, we of course regard his speech as a vulgar one.

This is an example of how Peachum speaks:

> Filch: Sir, Black Moll hath sent word her trial comes on in the afternoon, and she hopes you will order matters so as to bring her off.
> Peachum: Why, she may plead her belly at worst; to my knowledge she hath taken care of the security. But as the wench is very active and industrious, you may satisfy her that I'll soften the evidence.
> Filch: Tom Gagg, sir, is found guilty.
> Peachum: A lazy dog! When I took him the time before, I told him what he would come to if he did not mend his hand. This is death without reprieve. I may venture to book him. [*writes*] For Tom Gagg, forty pounds. Let Betty Sly know that I'll save her from transportation, for I can get more by her staying in England. (1.1)

Peachum and his man Filch talk about some trials of some wretches. They speak in the same language of their profession. Here we see their use of the non-standard verb form "hath" and the phrasal verb "bring her off" meaning *acquit* and their cant "transportation" meaning *banishment*.[18] Those linguistic items are of their professional language. This type of language is used for satire, and is employed to give a greater realism and colloquial feel to the dialogue.[19] It becomes an important aspect of the portrayal of individual characters, and although by its nature it may be humorous, it is a humour which is affectionate rather than satirical.[20] Peachum often swears "A lazy dog!" without hesitation. The swear word plays an important role in the sound like the lower-class people's speech.

We have other examples of his vulgar language: (1) colloquial contractions, (2) the archaic verb ending *–eth*, (3) archaic second person pronouns, (4) swearing, (5) slangy phrases, (6) proverbial sayings.

(1) Colloquial contractions

Peachum says "Like me too he acts in a double capacity, both against rogues and for'em" (1.1). The contracted form "for'em" represents an informal manner of lower-class people's speaking.[21] We have another example: "I hear customers in t'other room. Go, talk with 'em, Polly" (1.8).

(2) Archaic verb ending *-eth*

Peachum uses *–eth* as a third person singular verb ending like ***hath*** in the play. Manfred Gorlach mentions " *-eth* could not function as a marker of respectable prose and the speech of uneducated country bumpkins at the same time."[22]

> If t'other gentleman calls for the silver-hilted sword, you know beetle-browed Jemmy hath it on, and he doth not come from Tunbridge till Tuesday night (1.8)

Here we have "hath" and "doth" though we have "calls." Peachum uses those two forms of verb ending *–eth* and *–s*, and his grammar is not consistent.

(3) Archaic second person pronouns

Peachum uses the archaic second person pronoun ***thy*** in addressing his men: "Truly, Filch, thy observation is right" (1.2). Here his use of ***thou*** sounds intimate or affectionate to his man. On the other hand, his use of ***you*** sounds formal or remote to other characters in the play: "Your case, Mr Macheath, is not particular" (2.5). We find his switch of them is motivated and has a change of his tone or attitude towards his addressees.

(4) Swearing

Peachum often swears to other characters in the play. He uses the oaths "dickens," "plague," and "Fie," and rarely address his daughter without calling her "hussy," "slut," or "Baggage." The swearing represents an important element in informal conversations,[23] and is not like a gentleman's expression.

> What a dickens[24] is the woman always whimpering about murder for? (1.4)
> What, a plague,[25] does the woman mean? (1.4)
> Fie,[26] Polly! What hath murder to do in the affair? (1.10)
> But I find out that you have played the fool and are married, you jade[27] you, I'll cut your throat, hussy. (1.7)
> If ever we had been married? Baggage! (1.8)
> Ah hussy! Hussy! Come you home, you slut (2.19)

(5) Slangy phrases

Peachum often uses a variety of such slangy phrases as "clean-handed," "going to keeping," "on the road," and "a petty larceny." Those phrases are very colloquial, and

sound popular among the underworld group in the century.

A mighty clean-handed[28] fellow! (1.3)
to trick out young ladies, upon their going to keeping[29] (3.5)
no man alive hath a more engaging presence of mind upon the road[30] (1.3)
Harry Padington, a petty larceny[31] rascal (1.3)

(6) Proverbial sayings

Peachum occasionally puts a moralizing proverb in his speech to persude others of his opinion: "A good sportsman always lets the hen partridges fly" (1.1), "For a husband hath the absolute power over all a wife's secrets but her own" (1.4), and "The greatest heroes have been ruined by women" (2.5). Lower-class people like putting in proverbial sayings effectively to give others their morality and sentiments.

However, to examine his speech, his speech does not entirely sound vulgar. He speaks as if he were not only a rogue but a gentleman. That is, he speaks in polite language, too.

Peachum switches the style of his speech into a polite one. As Mrs Peachum says of the highwayman Macheath, "Sure there is not a finer gentleman upon the road than the captain!" (1.4), adding that if her daughter Polly marries him she will be "as ill used, and as much neglected, as if thou hadst married a lord" (1.8). Peachum's family regard the young captain as a gentleman in an ironical way, and then they treat him politely in the play. Peachum is going to arrest Macheath.

Peachum: I seize you, sir, as my prisoner.
Macheath: Was this well done Jenny? Women are decoy ducks; who can trust them! Beasts, jades, jilts, harpies, furies, whores!
Peachum: Your case, Mr Macheath, is not particular. The greatest heroes have been ruined by women. (2.5)

Here Peachum uses the respectful modes of address "sir" to address Macheath politely, and also calls him his name added with the title "Mr." These modes of address suggest the addressee's social rank and relationship. K.C. Phillipps mentions "Among men, surnames were still the rank, with or without the title addition of Mr, according to formality."[32]

We have another example of his polite style. Mrs Diana Trapes is recognized a lady. Newgate jailor Lockit working with Peachum says, "She's a good customer, and a fine-spoken woman" (3.5). In the century, *fine* speech or writing was one of necessities

to be a fine gentlewoman.[33] When Peachum meets Mrs Trapes, he greets her as if they were members of the fashionable world.

> Peachum: Dear Mrs Dye, your servant. One may know by your kiss, that your gin is excellent.
> Mrs Tapes: I was always very curious in my liquors. (3.6)

Here Peachum uses the greeting phrase "Dear Mrs Dye, your servant." The phrase sounds courtly with his kissing her hand. He calls her with the title "Madam"[34]: "Madam, you had a handsome gold watch of us t'other day for seven guineas" (3.6). He uses the polite phrase "at your service": "We have at least half a dozen velvet scarfs,[35] and all at your service" (3.6). Also, the fence asks for her permission politely: "Will you give me leave to make you a present of this suit of night clothes for your own wearing?" (3.6)

Peachum makes the use of certain rhetoric such as *antithesis* and *simile* to persuade others effectively. His art of witty or satirical speaking sounds clever and sophisticated like a politician.

> Gamesters and highwaymen are generally very good to their whores, but they are very devils to their wives. (1.4)
> My daughter to me should be, like a court lady to a minister of state, a key to the whole gang. (1.5)

Also, he sometimes puts in Latinate words like "observation." Those words suggest his literacy and education.

> Truly, Filch, thy observation is right (1.2)
> But 'tis now high time to look about me for a decent execution.... (1.3)
> If the girl had the discretion of a court lady.... (1.4)
> You believe we can't get intelligence of it (1.8)

Thus, we can see vulgar or polite language from Peachum's speech in the play. Gay designed the character to be a "would-be" gentleman in the play, making him speak both in polite and vulgar languages. His design is one of his ingenious satiric devices to criticize the hypocritical speech and action of the then-fashionable class of people like lawyers, merchants, courtiers, and politicians. The playwright already knew the truth of his society and was tired of the eighteenth century "would-be" fashionable people in

London. He has the Beggar narrate at the end of the play:

> 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 fashionable vices) the fine gentlemen imitate the gentlemen of the road, or the gentlemen of the road the fine gentlemen. (3.16)

The beggar's speech is very ironical and indicates that the true position of *gentleman* in the society is to be degraded in the century. Truly, Gay was a clever and entertaining playwright who was able to pierce the high-class people's hypocrisy in the eighteenth century.

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1 Bryan Loughrey and T.O. Tredwell, Introd., *The Beggar's Opera*, by John Gay (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1986) 7.
2 J.H. Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century* (1950; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1955) 100.
3 Harold Bloom, Introd., *John Gay's The Beggar's Opera* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988) 1.
4 Carey McLintosh, *Common and Courtly Language* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Prs., 1986) 7-8.
5 Allardyce Nucoll, *Early Eighteenth Century Drama*, vol. II of *A History of English Drama 1600-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1961) 8.
6 N.F. Blake, *Non-Standard Language in English Literature* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1981) 108.
7 Charles Barber, *The English language: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1993) 204.
8 Barber, 205.
9 Barber, 205.
10 Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin Book Ltd, 1982) 64.
11 Porter, 65.
12 Porter, 65.
13 Porter, 115.
14 The edition used throughout is John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*, ed. Bryan Loughrey and T.O. Tredwell (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1986).
15 Porter, 65.
16 The verb *peach* is defined by the *OED*: "To accuse (person) formally; to impeach, indict, bring to trial" (s.v. *peach v.* 1a), and also the definition is obsolete now. The *OED* cites an example of the word from the play: "have him peached the next Sessions" (1.10).
17 Loughrey and Tredwell, 17.
18 The *OED* notes about the word *transportation*: "Removal or banishment, as of a criminal to a penal settlement; deportation" (s.v. *transportation* 2c).
19 Blake, 114.
20 Blake, 114.

[21] Filch uses another elided form "on't" (1.6).

[22] Manfred Gorlach, "Regional and Social Variation" *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, vol. 3 ed. Roger Lass (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1999) 490.

[23] Gorlach, *Eighteenth-Century English* (Heidelberg: Universitatsverlag C. Winter, 2001) 133.

[24] The *OED* defines the word *dickens*: "The deuce, the devil.... An interjectional exclamation expressing astonishment, impatience, irritation, etc.; usually with interrogative words...." (s.v. *dickens* a).

[25] The *OED* notes about the word *plague*: "In imprecations: ... ; also in exclamation of impatience" (s.v. *plague* 3d)

[26] The *OED* notes about the interjection *fie* "said to children to excite shame for some unbecoming action" (s.v. *fie* 1).

[27] The *OED* notes about the word *jade*: "A term of reprobation applied to a woman" (s.v. *jade* 2a).

[28] The *OED* defines the word *clean-handed*: "free from wrong doing," and cites this sentence (s.v. *clean* 2).

[29] The *OED* defines the word *keeping*: "The maintaining of mistress or lover" (s.v. *keeping* 5b).

[30] The *OED* defines the word *road* as "the highway" (s.v. *road* 5b).

[31] According to the *OED*, the phrase *petty larceny* is the larceny of property having a value of less than 12 pence (s.v. *larceny*).

[32] K.C.Phillipps, *The language of Thackeray* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), 187-88.

[33] The *OED* puts the first citation (1773) of the word *fine* meaning "Of speech, writing, etc.: Affectedly ornate or elegant" (s.v. *fine* adj. 18a).

[34] The *OED* notes about the word *madam*: "In oral use the title now rarely occurs; from the eighteenth century it has been, except in very formal use, largely superseded by the contracted form MA'AM, which has itself in recent years been greatly restricted in currency" (s.v. *madam* n).

[35] The *OED* notes about the word *scarfs*: "The original plural form *scarfs* has never gone out of use; but from the beginning of the eighteenth century the form *scarves* (on the analogy of *halves*. etc.) has been common, and in London commercial use it appeared to have become universal in the twentieth century" (s.v. *scarf* n,1).