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18th Century Theater and the Legitimacy of the Lower Classes

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George Lillo's 1731 play *The London Merchant* and John Gay's 1728 *The Beggar's Opera* both equate the struggles of the middle and lower classes with those of the elite through elevated language typically associated with the drama of the wealthy and powerful in order to legitimize the plights of the non-elite through theater. As a tragedy, *The London Merchant* uses historical and contemporary references as well as religious language to elevate merchant's apprentice's experiences to an almost mythical status to valorize his struggles. *The Beggar's Opera* similarly uses cultural references as well as language of honor and nobility as satire as one strategy to liken the actions of the elite to the criminals. Both plays use the juxtaposition between elevated language and base actions to take the stories of the lower and middle classes as seriously as those of the wealthy and powerful. By comparing how tragedy and satire work in differing ways to draw attention to the middle and lower classes, my essay will argue that these 18th century plays reflect similar goals of using the medium of theater to acknowledge the power of the middle and lower classes.

The culture of 18th century theater audiences provides important context for the increased influence of the middle class. The space of the theater can be conceptualized as a collective experience shared by an economically broad range of Londoners. Critic Jim Davis quotes the scholar John O'Brien who describes theater as "an ideal "mimic state" that resembled the political state not only in its frequent dramaturgical focus on dynastic affairs but in its material form" (Davis 57). The theater itself, as well as the action on stage, was a space in which people from varying backgrounds could come together as a collective and watch a mirror be held up to the society in which they all lived. O'Brien states that the theater had been concerned with "dynastic affairs" of royalty and the elite. However, the 18th century sees a shift in a concern with middle-class values being depicted on stage, which is evidenced by events off-stage that promoted the accessibility of theater to the working class. There were violent protests in the decades shortly after these two plays were

published against policies that barred access to performances: the removal of free gallery seats to footmen, the ending of half-price tickets for arriving late, and raising pit seat prices, to name a few (58-59). These instances of riots against higher ticket prices throughout the mid to late eighteenth century reflect not only the general concern over financial accessibility to theater, but also shows the ability of the working classes to exercise their right to a place and display their investment in the theater.

Keeping those emerging concerns in mind, *The London Merchant* begins with a Prologue that serves to justify the scope of Barnwell's tragedy as equal to those of royalty and myth. The speaker references theatrical tropes and rhyming verse in order to legitimize the story he is about to tell. The Prologue opens with an explanation of how "The tragic muse, sublime, delights to show/Princes distressed and scenes of royal woe" (Lillo Prologue 1-2). The speaker begins with "The tragic muse" a goddess associated not just with storytelling, but with elevated, even mythical, stories of "royal woe"— the emotion being modified and specified by status. The speaker establishes that tragedy as a concept is typically reserved for royalty. Additionally, the entire Prologue is written in rhyming verse, giving it a sense of older forms of theater that these references to the muse recall.

However, as the Prologue continues, the speaker quickly dismantles the assumption that tragic stories are exclusive to the elite. He goes on to cite a shift in theatrical practices, that "Upon our stage indeed, with wished success,/ You've sometimes seen her [the goddess] in humbler dress,/ Great only in distress...,(13-15) going on to note the contemporary playwrights Southerne, Rowe, and Otway. These stories are still from the "tragic muse", but in a more modest appearance. Despite that humility, though, her distress is still just as "Great." The "distress" in the middle of line 15 rhyming with the end words of lines 13 and 14 further draw attention to the importance of the emotion alongside material "success" and "dress". These plays retain that sense of morally high status regardless of the more superficial aspects like class because tragedy goes beyond the material. Further, by making specific references to contemporary playwrights, the Prologue displays what O'Brien calls a "mimic state", showing the audience that tragedy can be reflective of the audience, not just a distant class of nobility. Similar to how ticket price-related riots of the 18th century reflected the social power of the working class to have a place as theater patrons, this Prologue also justifies their right to be subjects of theater. The Prologue's awareness of its own theatricality mixes older tragic tropes associated with royal and mythological drama with references to contemporary playwrights in order to preview how the tragedy of a merchant's apprentice can

be simultaneously equated to both the humble audience and the elite tragedies of older tradition.

Moving on to the play itself, the tragic gravity with which Barnwell's moral dilemmas are depicted reflect the play's investment in the significance of the middle class. In his speech after murdering his uncle, Barnwell self-aggrandizes his actions by using historical references and religion, which mirrors the equation of elite ideas of honor to working-class people established in the Prologue. After stabbing his uncle, Barnwell cries out "Expiring saint! Oh murdered, martyred uncle" (III.iii.36)! "Let Heaven/ from its high throne, in justice or in mercy, now/ look down on that dear, murdered saint" (52-54). To Barnwell, his uncle being a father figure makes him a saint as well as a martyr because his life is a sacrifice in the dark destiny that Millwood has set into motion. He uses alliteration on "murdered, martyred uncle" to continuously emphasize the pedestal that he is placing him on, along with the repetition of "murdered" as he tries to express his inexpressible guilt — these are likely the biggest emotions Barnwell as ever felt and uses the only language available to him (religion) that matches the scale of his guilt, even if it is incongruous with the literal scale of impact.

Further, because Barnwell sees his uncle as this high figure of a saint, he sees himself as an equally evil villain. Filled with regret, he laments that "Cain, who stands/ on record from the birth of time and must to its/ last final period as accursed, slew a brother favored/ above him. Detested Nero, by another's hand, dispatched a mother that he feared and hated.../This execrable act of mine's without parallel. Oh may it ever stand alone, the last of/ murders as it is the worst" (58-67). The murder is so horrible in Barnwell's own mind that he compares himself to the likes of the biblical Cain and emperor Nero, using historically mythologized references to elevate his acts. But again, to Barnwell, his uncle was "a brother,/ mother, father, and friend" (63-64), meaning so much to him that the level of evil he felt by killing him can only be fathomed by comparing himself to these cultural figures. The murder is nowhere near the "worst" nor will it be the last, but it is the worst thing Barnwell has ever done. Turning back to this antiquated form of soliloquy by ending the speech in rhyme, Barnwell is furthering this sense of grandeur by recalling back to older theatrical traditions that deal with kings and gods. Big ideas like evil and sainthood have a sense of scale that Barnwell's status as a merchant's apprentice does not afford him. Much in the same way that the Prologue draws together the seemingly oxymoronic image of a humble Muse, Barnwell's agony over the murder of his uncle, which has little impact besides his own guilt, is raised to royal and mythical status. Barnwell's dilation of his own emotions should be taken seriously because even though he himself is just

a blip on the map, all of these actions and feelings are huge and justified from his point of view. By emphasizing these contradictions between the scale of Barnwell's story and the language used to depict them, Lillo highlights the right of the working class to be depicted on stage by affirming the legitimacy of their struggles.

The Introduction to *The Beggar's Opera* serves a similar purpose as the Prologue of *The London Merchant* in that it sets up the idea of class as a central concern of the play and establishes the premise of a lower-class comedy told through classical and contemporary references. The Introduction opens with a Beggar and Player on stage. As the first person to speak, the inclusion of the Beggar as a dramaturgical equal to the Player recalls the instances of protest that Davis cites, demonstrating the ability of the non-elite to make their voices heard in the world of theater on and off-stage, much like the Prologue of *The London Merchant*. The Beggar says to the Player, "If poverty be a title to poetry, I am sure nobody can/ dispute mine. I own myself of the Company of/ Beggars, and I make one at their weekly festivals at/ St. Giles's" (Gay Introduction 1-4). In the first line, the Beggar draws a relationship between "poverty" and "poetry," establishing from the start that the lower classes are fully capable of being the subject of art. He mentions a line later a "Company of Beggars" performing at "St. Giles's," which is glossed as a parish for the patron saint of beggars and lepers as well as a hub of crime and poverty. Similar to how Lillo cites specific contemporary playwrights, Gay's Beggar makes locational references that the audience will be attuned to, further drawing a connection between the stage and life of the non-wealthy patrons. The title of the group is capitalized, giving it the sense of being official and calls their gatherings a "festival." Similar to how the Beggar's and Player's stage presence are equal, the Beggar equates criminal activity with a kind of theater, giving it an air of validity through the language of drama in order to demonstrate how theater has this legitimizing power. When the dialogue switches to the Player, he mentions humble Muses, just like in the Prologue of *The London Merchant* to similarly draw together the seemingly opposing forces of beggars and classical artistry. He says that "The/ Muses, contrary to all other ladies, pay no/ distinction to dress and never partially mistake the/ pertness of embroidery for wit, nor the modesty/ of want for dullness" (9-12). Just like Lillo's "tragic muse," the Player's Muses are ignorant to class because poetry and art can be represented by anyone regardless of status or wealth. Poverty does not mean that their stories are any less rich, nor does wealth make others' lives any more worthy of depiction.

Similar to how Barnwell exaggerates the scale of his actions through language of classical tragedy, Macheath exemplifies the values established in the

Introduction when he creates a kind of code of honor for himself and his band of thieves in order to draw parallels between the criminal underground and legitimate business. He satirizes the heroic mythical status of the highwayman, similar to how the Beggar equates criminal activity with theater. When Macheath enters the tavern to address his men, he asks them, “Is there any man who suspects my courage?/...My honor and truth to the gang?/...In the division of our booty, have I ever shown the/ least marks of avarice or injustice?” (II.ii.12-18). Macheath specifically asks his men about his “courage,” “honor,” and “truth”, fishing for confirmation of these noble qualities, qualities that would not be associated with a criminal. He tells his men, in reference to his dispute with Peachum, that “Any private dispute of mine shall be of no ill/ consequence to my friends” (33-34). He sees himself as the king of this gang and that elite status he assigns himself makes him bound to the same codes of honor as a true hero of romance, even if it is all a show. Macheath falls into the trope of the dangerously handsome highwayman that is built on the contradictions between his criminal behavior and gentlemanly appearance. Revealing insincerity in Macheath’s and his followers’ honor illuminates the same qualities in the rich and powerful who are as surface level in their honor as him. As opposed to Barnwell who exaggerates the scale of his actions out of the sheer extremity of emotion endemic to tragedy, Macheath uses his exaggeration as a way to draw out the satire of the lower classes being taken less seriously despite how similar they act to the glorified elite. Although *The Beggar’s Opera* uses the lower-class to satirize the upper-class, it does so by drawing attention to the incongruent parallels between noble language and criminal actions, one’s appearance and one’s true qualities. Those opposing forces ultimately illuminate how the wealthy are no more worthy of being depicted on stage than the poor.

George Lillo’s working-class tragedy *The London Merchant* and John Gay’s criminal satire *The Beggar’s Opera* use opposing genres of tragedy and satire to respectively draw out the shared themes of the two plays — the investment in the working and lower classes and their right to be depicted on stage. In each Prologue and Introduction, the speakers use cultural references to history and mythology to argue that class should not be a distinguishing factor of whose stories deserve to be on the stage. Further, both Barnwell and Macheath use heroic, historical, and noble language that makes their rather base and small-scale actions seem grandiose. For Barnwell and his tragic fall from mercantile grace, this expansive language reflects how deeply and intensely he feels his guilt, adding to the sense of tragedy of his tale. Macheath, on the other hand, uses this language to reflect his disingenuousness, adding to the comedic satire. What both these plays display in different ways is 18th century theater’s

deep investment with class and the access of the non-wealthy to the theater. Working class patrons were making their voices heard and these plays work in tandem with those off-stage events to create a larger picture of an interest in how the middle classes have every right to consume and be portrayed in theater.

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