

The Ambitious Pursuit: Pope, Gay and the Life of Writing

DAVID NOKES

And the same road ambitiously pursue,
Frequented by the Mantuan swain, and you.

(*Rural Sports*, 1713)

1

I SHOULD LIKE to begin with an anecdote.

Mr. Pope brought some of *The What D'Ye Call It* in his own handwriting to Cibber . . . When it was read to the players, Mr. Pope read it though Gay was by. Gay always used to read his own plays. Cibber after this, seeing a knife with the name of J. Gay upon it, [asked,] 'What, does Mr. Pope make knives, too?'¹

In a story like this, Gay is the invisible author, a kind of human pseudonym, not so much a ghost-writer as a ghost that is written. Hostile witnesses, like Cibber, chose to regard him as little more than a cipher, dismissing Gay's name on a title-page as a mere Popeian subterfuge. Gay was frequently represented not merely as Pope's ally, but as his alias, his alter ego, or in a favourite well-worn simile, as a burly Ajax shielding a malevolent and diminutive Teucer. In his verse farce *The Confederates* (1717), J. D. Breval (himself adopting the pseudonym 'J. Gay') pictured Pope gloating secretly over his skill in making Gay take responsibility for the 'failure' of their play *Three Hours after Marriage*.

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¹Cibber, 1748; see Joseph Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes and Characters of Books and Men*, ed. J. M. Osborn, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1966), I. 103. (Hereafter, Spence.)

Safe from the cudgel, [I] stand secure of praise;
 Mine is the credit, be the danger Gay's.

With monotonous regularity Gay was, (and often still is) denied responsibility for his 'own' works. In 1730 the *Universal Spectator* assured its readers that 'Mr. Gay was not the sole author of *The Beggar's Opera*'. In 1733, the *Daily Courant* ascribed Gay's posthumous play *Achilles* to an unlikely theatrical collaboration between Bolingbroke, Pulteney, Sir William Wyndham, the Duke of Queensberry, Arbuthnot and Pope. 'Mr. Gay', it pronounced, 'could not deviate into so much dulness'. In these, and many similar comments, the name 'John Gay', like the names 'Isaac Bickerstaff' or 'Nestor Ironside', seems to identify not an individual but a clubland institution.

This tradition of condescending to Gay's own literary achievements is obvious in Johnson's 'Life of Gay'.

Gay was the general favourite of the whole association of wits; but they regarded him as a playfellow rather than a partner, and treated him with more fondness than respect.²

Undoubtedly Gay himself was largely responsible for perpetuating this image of himself as a genial literary nonentity. Authorship implies authority; yet Gay's most characteristic literary persona is self-effacing and self-mocking. A man who gives his works titles like *Trivia* and *The What D'Ye Call It*, seems determined to subvert his own claims to serious literary recognition. Moreover, Gay was a natural collaborator, and several of his most well-known works were both inspired in their inception and polished before publication by his fellow-Scriblerians, Pope, Arbuthnot and Swift. Where other authors seek to stamp the mark of their individual identity indelibly on every page, Gay chose the anonymity of a composite literary persona. Throughout his life he played the role of unassuming friend, a man so instinctively deferential in his tastes and opinions that he seemed almost to surrender his own identity. 'What will become of me I know not', he once confessed to a friend, 'for I have not and fear never shall have a will of my own.'³ More often than not it was Pope who supplied the literary will-power that Gay lacked. 'Gay they would call one of my *élèves*', he liked to boast, despite the fact that he was actually three years younger than his 'pupil'.⁴ Early on in their relationship Pope assumed the habit of

²Johnson, 'Gay' in *Lives of the English Poets*, 1779–81.

³*The Letters of John Gay*, ed. C. F. Burgess (Oxford, 1966), p. 47 (hereafter *Letters*).

⁴Spence, item 150, vol. I. p. 62.

deploying Gay as a willing literary lieutenant, happy to fight his battles (physical perhaps, as well as verbal) by proxy. In the dedication to *The Mohocks* Gay delivered a gratuitous snub to John Dennis for no other reason than that Pope was feuding with Dennis at the time. Three years later it was Ambrose Philips that Pope was feuding with, and Gay cheerfully chipped in with his mock-pastoral burlesque, *The Shepherd's Week*. 'It is to this management of Philips that the world owes Mr. Gay's pastorals', Pope declared, as if showing off his clever pupil's work.⁵

Gay's response to such charges was itself typically self-effacing. In the advertisement to *Trivia* (1716) he affected to regard them as a form of back-handed compliment. The critics, he suggested, had 'allowed me an honour hitherto only shown to better writers: that of denying me to be the author of my own works'. If anything, he seemed almost to invite, rather than discourage, such misattributions. In the Advertisement to *Three Hours after Marriage*, he boasted of 'the assistance I have received in this piece from two of my friends' (i.e. Pope and Arbuthnot); but when, in the event, the honour of having their names joined with Gay's turned to disgrace, he promptly volunteered for the scapegoat role. 'I will (if any shame there be)', he told Pope, 'take it all to myself.'⁶ One wonders whether J. D. Breval ever caught sight of this letter.

Throughout their correspondence, there is ample evidence of Pope's fondness for acting as Gay's unofficial literary agent, arranging introductions, advising on contracts and generally supervising his more indolent friend's career. And, in death, as in life, it was Pope who took responsibility for safeguarding Gay's public reputation through a determined policy of careful censorship. 'Our poor friend's papers are partly in my hands', he told Swift, 'and for as much as is so, I will take care to suppress things unworthy of him.'⁷ Swift happily concurred in this policy of suppression. 'I would be glad to see his valuable works printed by themselves', he wrote; 'those which ought not to be seen burned immediately.'⁸ Actually this was merely an extension of a form of Popeian censorship which had operated for much of Gay's life. For

⁵*The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. George Sherburn, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1956), I. 229. (Hereafter, Pope, *Correspondence*.)

⁶*Letters*, p. 32.

⁷Pope, *Correspondence*, III. 365.

⁸*The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1963-6), IV. 133, 153. (Hereafter, Swift *Correspondence*.)

example, when *Three Hours after Marriage* fell victim to a concerted campaign of critical vilification. Gay was not so entirely contrite as his penitent letter to Pope suggests. His main emotion was fury, and he was determined to take his revenge. He quickly wrote a retaliatory lampoon which ridiculed celebrated passages from plays by Addison and Steele. What happened to this lampoon? Pope suppressed it.

Had it been published — he told Spence in 1738 — it would have made Mr. Addison appear ridiculous, which he could bear as little as any man. I therefore prevailed on Gay not to print it, and have the manuscript now by me.⁹

Not only Gay's writings, but also the details of his early career were subject to the same rigorous policy of selective disclosure. In 1736 Pope did all he could to dissuade Savage from publishing information about Gay's early career. 'As to that of his being apprenticed to one Willet, etc', he protested, 'what are such things to the public? Authors are to be remembered by the works and merits, not accidents of their lives'.¹⁰ Instead of inconvenient facts Pope preferred the sublimity of symbols; witness his epitaph for Gay's monument in Westminster Abbey.

Of Manners gentle, of Affections mild;
In Wit, a Man; Simplicity a Child: . . .
A safe Companion, and an easy Friend,
Unblam'd through Life, lamented in thy End.

This depiction of Gay as a personification of childlike innocence has had a lasting influence on his posthumous reputation; less than fifty years ago James Sutherland could still describe him as an 'Augustan Peter Pan'.¹¹ And, in his *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735) Pope established another honorific myth, casting Gay in the role of neglected genius.

Blest be the *Great!* for those they take away,
And those they left me—for they left me GAY,
Left me to see neglected Genius bloom,
Neglected die! and tell it on his Tomb;
Of all thy blameless Life the sole Return
My Verse, and *QUEENSB'RY* weeping o'er thy Urn.

(ll. 255–260)

⁹Spence, item 238, vol. I, p. 104.

¹⁰Pope, *Correspondence*, IV. 38.

¹¹James Sutherland, 'John Gay', in *Pope and His Contemporaries: Essays Presented to George Sherburn* (Oxford, 1949), pp. 201–14.

As Brean Hammond has written, Pope's verses 'create an impression of the great man perishing in Mozartian poverty.'¹² But the facts tell a rather different story. At his death Gay left an estate worth more than £6,000 (somewhere near £200,000 at current values); and, far from being buried in a pauper's grave, Gay's funeral at Westminster Abbey was something of a grand occasion. He died, as Arbuthnot noted 'as if he had been a peer of the realm'.¹³

Our view of John Gay's life and works has thus been enormously influenced by Pope's conscious endeavours to fashion them into a form of moral myth. Gay's own words were subtly reshaped to accord with Pope's perspective on the world; Gay's own epitaph for himself ('Life is a jest and all things shew it. I thought so once, but now I know it') displaced in favour of Pope's solemn sentimentality. But was Gay really as childlike as Pope liked to present him? Was their friendship as close as it appears? And how closely did Gay follow the example of his young literary mentor?

Unquestionably Gay was grateful for Pope's early literary assistance and advice. But there is ample evidence of Gay's frustration at being regarded as one of Pope's literary under-strappers, another Broome or Fenton; or an Ajax to Pope's Teucer. And, in his later years, it is clear there was something of a rift between them. This is what I want to explore.

2

As we know, *The Beggar's Opera* was a runaway, record-breaking success, performed for sixty-two nights in its first season, 1728. Swift's attitude to Gay's triumph was unambiguous. In letter after letter he enthused over the opera's success. 'Get me . . . Polly's mezzo-tinto', he demanded. 'Lord, how the schoolboys at Westminster, and university lads adore you at this juncture. Have you made as many men laugh as ministers can make weep?'¹⁴ By contrast, Pope's reactions were more guarded. There is a tinge of jealousy in the arch way he ironically compares the new self-importance of the 'courtier' Gay with the upstart dignity of a royal boatman.

¹²Brean Hammond: 'A Poet and a Painter, and Ten Pound: John Gay and Patronage' in (Peter Lewis and Nigel Wood eds.) *John Gay and the Scriblerians* (London 1988), p. 25.

¹³Swift, *Correspondence*, IV. 101.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, III. 277.

The only courtiers I know, or have the honour to call my friends, are John Gay and Mr. Bowry; the former is at present so employed in the elevated airs of his own opera, and the latter in the exaltation of his high dignity (that of her majesty's waterman) that I can scarce obtain a categorical answer from either to anything I say to 'em.¹⁵

Even in Dublin Swift could detect the signs of a growing estrangement between the two men. 'Mr. Pope talks of you as a perfect stranger,' he told Gay in early 1730.¹⁶ Similar remarks can be found in many other letters. My own suspicion is that the Earl of Burlington was partly responsible for this estrangement. Throughout the early 1720s Burlington had been Gay's most generous patron, providing board and lodging for him, as well as William Kent and Handel at his mansion in Piccadilly. In a previously unpublished letter, sent to Burlington in October 1722, Gay gives expression to his intense gratitude for the Earl's favour.

... whatever I might say or do can never sufficiently acknowledge my obligations; I believe I need not say this for I hope your lordship knows me; if you do, you must know that I love you. . . . If you knew how often I think upon your lordship you would now then think of me (*sic.*) I hope you will not forget me, for I know my heart so well that it will be always sensible of your favours, though I must own I love you more for what I see in yourself than for what you have done for me, wch is more than I can ever deserve.¹⁷

There is something rather doggy-like about such slavish expressions of love; particularly in their explicitness. When Gay says 'I believe I need not say this', he clearly says the opposite of what he means. He obviously *does* feel a need to convince Burlington of his affection in language which suggests not the informality of an intimate but the desperation of a hanger-on. However, by the time he came to write *The Beggar's Opera* Gay had achieved at least partial independence with his job as commissioner for lotteries and his lodgings in Whitehall. And among the many motives which drove him to write such an original and mischievous mock-opera, one at least was a desire to liberate himself from the abject feeling of dependence which he had experienced at Burlington House. Burlington was a founder director and chief shareholder in the Royal Academy of Music which sponsored and promoted Italian opera in London. And in parodying Italian

¹⁵Pope, *Correspondence*, II. 473.

¹⁶Swift, *Correspondence*, III. 380.

¹⁷Chatsworth MSS 173.0.

opera, Gay was ridiculing Burlington's pet project. As Pat Rogers and others have shown, many of Gay's friends were opera-fans, and most of them entered heartily into the joke of Gay's affectionate pastiches. But Burlington was not amused. As audiences dwindled and the Academy went into financial collapse, Burlington turned decisively against Gay. In January 1732 Gay began a letter to Swift thus:

It is now past nine o'clock. I deferred sitting down to write to you in expectation to have seen Mr. Pope who left me three hours ago to try to find Lord Burlington, within whose walls I have not been admitted this year & a half but for what reason I know not.¹⁸

This is more than a little disingenuous. The reason for Burlington's displeasure was not hard to guess. But Pope, as this letter indicates, was still *persona grata* with the Earl and keen not to jeopardise this relationship by seeming to be too closely associated with Gay. And Burlington was not the only person whose goodwill Pope was unwilling to forfeit on Gay's behalf. Despite his reputation as a high-profile satirist, Pope was currently, as he told Swift, being 'civilly treated by Sir R. Walpole'.¹⁹ All such diplomatic relations were put at risk by Gay's sudden political notoriety. The banning of *Polly* in December 1728 and all the subsequent political fall-out, including the banishment from court of Gay's new patrons, the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry, for soliciting subscriptions for a printed version of the play, only increased Gay's dangerous reputation. Throughout February and March 1729 *Polly* enjoyed the status of a *cause célèbre* and quickly became a symbolic rallying point for Walpole's political opponents. The Duchess of Marlborough pledged a subscription of £100; Bathurst, Bolingbroke, Pulteney, Sir William Wyndham and Lord Oxford all 'contributed very handsomely'.

Actually, although much is said about the 'subscribers' to *Polly*, it was not, in a formal sense, a subscription edition at all. *Polly* was printed privately at Gay's own expense, so his is the only name you find at the front; there is no proud display of well-wishers and supporters set out in a public subscription-list. Some of the confident pronouncements that have sometimes been made, claiming to identify individual subscribers, must consequently be treated with caution. It would though be very interesting to know whether Pope offered his support, since he clearly regarded this latest provocative venture by Gay with extreme

¹⁸Letters, 119.

¹⁹Pope, *Correspondence*, III. 81.

concern. Currently, Pope was putting the final touches to his *Dunciad Variorum*, and he was obviously mindful of the damaging repercussions of *Three Hours after Marriage*, a decade earlier. What he most feared was that some rash or heedless action by Gay might be seized on by the dunces as an opportunity for revenge against Pope himself. And so he took some tactical steps to dissociate himself from Gay's work. In a cautious, diplomatic letter to Burlington, he requested the Earl's help in obtaining legal advice on the *Dunciad* from the distinguished lawyer Nicholas Fazakerley.

I could be glad of the decisive opinion of Mr. Fazakerly, it will otherwise be impracticable to publish the thing before Mr. G's, and I am grown more prudent than ever, the less I think others so.²⁰

'Mr. G' is certainly Gay, and the implied criticism of his 'imprudence' over *Polly* could hardly be clearer.

In fact *Polly* was published on 25 March, less than a fortnight after the appearance of Pope's revised and annotated *Dunciad Variorum*; but the two satires enjoyed very different receptions. Pope's poem was presented by Walpole himself to the king and queen who had already expressed approval of the earlier draft. By contrast, Gay's banned play provoked a minor court revolution, best described in Arbuthnot's facetious account.

The inoffensive John Gay is now become one the obstructions to the peace of Europe, the terror of ministers, the chief author of the *Craftsman* and all the seditious pamphlets which have been published against the government . . . He is the darling of the city; if he should travel about the country he would have hecatombs of roasted oxen sacrificed to him . . . And I can assure you this is the very identical John Gay whom you formerly knew and lodged with in Whitehall two years ago.²¹

Arbuthnot drew deliberate attention to the very different reputations currently enjoyed by Gay and Pope. Far from appearing as 'the terror of ministers' Pope, whose satire had been carefully vetted by Fazakerley, was now something of a court favourite.

Mr. Pope is as high in favour as I am afraid the rest are out of it. The king, upon perusal of the last edition of his *Dunciad* declared he was a very honest man.²²

In much of his later poetry, Pope liked to cast himself and Gay in

²⁰Ibid., III. 4-5.

²¹Swift, *Correspondence*, III. 326.

²²Ibid., III. 326.

two distinct mythological roles. He is the fearless crusader, the lone champion of truth.

Yes, the last pen for freedom let me draw,
When Truth stands trembling on the edge of Law.

(*Epilogue to the Satires, II, 248-9*)

Gay, on the other hand, is presented *either* as a childlike innocent:

Of Manners gentle, of Affections mild;
In Wit, a Man; Simplicity, Child . . .

or as a helpless victim:

Left me to see neglected Genius bloom,
Neglected die! and tell it on his Tomb . . .

The reality, I suggest, was rather different. Gay, despite Pope's wishes, was clearly capable of maintaining a defiant adult pose; while Pope's public boast of independence ('Tories call me Whig, and Whigs a Tory') was only made possible by a degree of diplomatic compromise or, to use his own term, 'prudence' in his private dealings with Walpole and the court. One thing is clear. Pope's instinct was always to tone down or suppress the more provocative or eccentric expressions of Gay's imagination. He warned Gay against including the crocodile in *Three Hours after Marriage*; he suppressed his intended lampoon on Addison; he censored 'unworthy' items in Gay's posthumous papers. For whatever reason, Pope saw it as his role to discourage or deter Gay from assuming the kind of adversarial literary role that he happily adopted for himself. Gay's words should be used to entertain the world with songs, not vex it with dangerous satires. There is no need to suspect ungenerous motives in this attitude of Pope's, which was no doubt well-intentioned and most probably proceeded from a concern for Gay's always precarious health. But its effect was to reinforce the impression of Gay's literary immaturity. After the *Polly* episode Gay spent increasing amounts of time with the Queensberrys at their Amesbury estate in Wiltshire. Pope seems to have distrusted the intimacy of this new friendship. 'I can give you no account of Gay', he told Fortescue in September, 'since he was raffled for and won back by his duchess, but that he has been in her vortex ever since.'²³ This reductive description of the subscriptions to *Polly* as a 'raffle' seems to suggest a certain irritation. As far as Pope was concerned, Gay's act of political

²³Pope, *Correspondence*, III. 52.

defiance had merely reduced him to the status of a rich woman's toy, like a prize in one of his own lotteries. And, conscious of Gay's acknowledged lack of 'a will of my own', Pope suspected he would be tempted into acting as the headstrong duchess's agent in her current whim for anti-ministerial gestures. Three months before Gay died, Pope was still trying to wean him away from the duchess's subversive influence, and urging him to 'try his muse' at some nice safe ingratiating panegyric on the subject of the Royal Hermitage. 'Every man, and every boy,' he told him, was doing it, and 'the Queen is at a loss which to prefer. . . . Several of your friends assure me it is expected from you'; he went on, and concluded: 'one should not bear in mind all one's life, any little indignity one receives from a Court; and therefore I'm in hopes neither her Grace will hinder you, nor you decline it.'²⁴ It is to his credit that Gay, who had wasted too much of his life with such time-serving pieces of flummery, did decline it. His last letter to Pope includes this passage.

As to your advice about writing panegyric, 'tis what I have not frequently done. I have indeed done it sometimes against my judgement and inclination, and I heartily repent of it. And at present as I have no desire of reward, and see no just reason of praise, I think I had better let it alone. There are flatterers good enough to be found, and I would not interfere in any gentleman's profession.²⁵

Such a dignified response to what Gay clearly felt as a humiliating invitation (virtually a 'command performance') to busy himself with what 'every man and every *boy*' [my italics] was supposedly doing, is a measure of his maturity. This is not the voice of a Peter Pan, but of a man who had found himself forced into a final self-denying accommodation between the truth of his own words and the ways of the world. During his final years at Amesbury, Gay wrote several angry and outspoken works; *The Rehearsal at Gotham*, *The Distressed Wife*, *Achilles* and the final volume of the *Fables*. But he made no serious attempt to publish any of them during his lifetime. As Peter says at the end of *The Rehearsal at Gotham*: 'There is nothing to be done here; they have the power, and we must submit.' In the end Gay chose silence, rather than compromise. What he would *not* submit to was the kind of poetic acquiescence that Pope recommended. After his death, of course, his papers passed into Pope's safe keeping, and we can only

²⁴*Ibid.*, III. 318.

²⁵*Letters*, 130.

guess at the effects of Pope's declared policy of suppressing 'things unworthy of him'. Some works undoubtedly have been lost. But many remain, and they are more unusual, more *individual* than we have often been led to believe. We will only gain a true understanding of the originality of Gay's talent if we can see past Pope's well-intentioned myth-making to distinguish Gay's own voice, and trace his own elusive strategies for dealing with the ever-fickle tastes of the town.²⁶

²⁶For further discussion of these points see David Nokes, *John Gay, A Profession of Friendship* (Oxford, 1995).