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# Hogarth and his Unholy Age

Thomas M. Curley

*Bridgewater State College*, [tcurley@bridgew.edu](mailto:tcurley@bridgew.edu)

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# Hogarth

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Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection



*Gulielmus Hogarth.*  
*sculpsit 1740*

Samuel Johnson, that eighteenth-century English authority on human learning and life, had a surprisingly low regard for painting. But he knew the first great British artist, William Hogarth, and publicly applauded the first art exhibitions in England. Johnson would have found an equally good reason to applaud Bridgewater State College's Hogarth Festival in October of 1982. This exhibition of twenty-five, beautifully preserved prints was a splendid sampling of Hogarth's artistic legacy selected from the collection owned by the Judd Family of New Jersey and on loan from Monmouth College, New Jersey through Professor Vincent DiMattio. All in all, the Hogarth Festival afforded spectators a rare opportunity to glimpse the energies and excesses of Henry Fielding's England and Johnson's London.

To grasp the uniqueness of Hogarth's artistry is to take into account the more conventional aesthetic standards of Sir Joshua Reynolds, the century's most famous portrait painter. Reynolds hungered after the epic dignity of the grand style in painting and found nothing of it in Hogarth's works. Reynolds' later Discourses held up Michelangelo and the spectacular Sistine Chapel for veneration and imitation: "The style of Michael Angelo, which I have compared to . . . the language of the gods, now no longer exists, as it did in the fifteenth century." No doubt, the differences between Michelangelo of the Sistine Chapel and Hogarth of Leicester Fields, London could not be more dramatic. Whereas the Italian master executed his epic subject of the biblical history of humankind, the engraver captured extraordinary moral insights in the ordinary middle-class culture of England. Hogarth's contemporaries still respected classical-Renaissance grandeur, but a secular, fact-minded modern sensibility now flourished.

By Thomas M. Curley

Not until the eighteenth century did a truly native English tradition of painting commence. This was the era that witnessed the birth of the British empire, the emergence of a better educated populace, and the rise of the English novel -- the one literary form most directly relevant to Hogarth's artistic achievement. For, like the novel, Hogarth's art represented a tentative break with the past and a troubled acceptance of the present. Like the novel, his works inclined toward a democratic realism rather than toward an aristocratic idealization in style and content. As England's earliest native artist of international stature, he excelled as a moralist of the common man within the crowded cityscape of Protestant capitalists, each sharply defined by a specialized occupation and all of them driven by humankind's perennial hopes and fears. In his precisely detailed presentation of everyday heroes, fools, and villains, he created an allegory of middle-class individualism, the emblems and symbols of its limitations and aspirations, and the unfolding plot of the secular pilgrim's progress to earthly perdition or paradise.

**H**is Sistine Chapel was the bourgeois English marketplace.

The dates of Hogarth's life, 1697 to 1764, embrace the literary eras of Swift, Pope, Fielding, and Johnson, and, therefore, span the great periods of Augustan satire and moral realism in English arts and letters. Born in London, the son of a classical pedagogue-turned-businessman, Hogarth inherited from his father a humanistic, moral sensibility tempered by a city dweller's tough-minded outlook on human life. Unlike his father and unlike most of his colleagues, he enjoyed considerable financial success in his calling. Aided by a parliamentary act of 1735 strengthening copyright privileges, he curtailed the expensive interference of printsellers and counterfeiters of his works and sold directly to the public. And his prints became extremely popular. There was an especially strong demand for his narrative sequences, better known as Hogarthian "progresses" which remain among his acknowledged masterpieces: *A Harlot's Progress* in 1732 displayed the prostitution and death of a country girl, Mary Hackabout, in the big city; *A Rake's Progress* in 1735 chronicled Tom Rakewell's gradual corruption in London; *Marriage à*

... a middle course between the unrealistic extremes of heroic moral seriousness and vicious burlesque absurdity ...

*la Mode* in 1743 traced the tragic outcome of an unromantic alliance between a bored nobleman and an ambitious alderman's daughter; and *Industry and Idleness* in 1747 contrasted Francis Goodchild's industrious rise to prosperity and Thomas Idle's reckless fall into a life of crime and capital punishment at the Tyburn gibbet.

Only for a relatively brief period after the mid-1730s did Hogarth desert his satiric realism and try his hand at portraiture and historical painting. His skill in portraiture was distinguished and possibly influenced young Reynolds. But Reynolds later lamented Hogarth's abortive flirtation with historical themes. In one of the final *Discourses*, Reynolds in 1788 paid long overdue homage to Hogarth before the Royal Academy and yet made a point of criticizing him for emulating the very grand style that Reynolds practised and promulgated throughout his career:

After this admirable artist had spent the greatest part of his life in active, busy, and we may add, successful attention to the ridicule of life; after he had invented a new species of dramatick painting, in which probably he will never be equaled, and had stored his mind with infinite materials to explain and illustrate the domestick and familiar scenes of common life, which were generally, and ought to have been always, the subject of his pencil; he very imprudently, or rather presumptuously, attempted the great historical style, for which his previous habits had by no means prepared him.

Reynolds was right. In aspiring for the grand style, Hogarth was striving for the legitimacy and glory of the old Renaissance masters, an ambition suited neither to his real gifts nor to his unheroic milieu. His true Sistine Chapel was the bourgeois English marketplace; his tale of God's creation centered on the moral chaos of the English capital; and his epic seriousness took the form of a laughing last judgement on the contemporary human comedy.

Hogarth wisely avoided straying far from his unique talent for comic realism. Nor did he really emphasize topical political satire until the end of his career. As he recognized in his later *Autobiographical Notes*, his forte lay in a clear-sighted expose of humankind's universal follies and vices presented in eighteenth-century middle-class dress and in an ever darkening comic

manner: "I therefore turned my thoughts to a still more new way of proceeding, viz painting and engraving modern moral subjects, a field unbroke up in any country or any age. I have endeavoured to treat my subjects as a dramatick writer, my picture is my stage, and men and women my players, who by means of certain actions and gestures, are to exhibit a dumb show." His instinctive use of a literary analogy demonstrates that he realized the ties between his pictures and the comic literature of his day. In fact, in artistic aim and technique, he had affinities to Augustan satirists and even turned episodes of Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* into exquisite prints. But unlike these earlier satirists, Hogarth resisted aristocratic idealization, seemed more comfortable with middle-class values and realities, cultivated at least a slight strain of sentimentality, and, rather than indulge in single-minded satire against humankind, retained a comic openness verging on a moral ambiguity about human life. Even in his angriest protests against the *status quo*, his obvious relish for the vitality of a mundane, sometimes immoral humanity softens his visual satire and blurs its moral meaning.

His distinctive accomplishments bear close comparison with the newly emerging English novel. In inventing the pictorial "progress," Hogarth synthesized the essential elements of the popular novel: the dynamic evolution of scenes, the procession of characters, and an unfolding plot and theme unified around a central protagonist possessing freedom of the will and an often unreasonable perception of self and society in his passage through a world that shapes his destiny for good or for ill. It is not surprising that he drew on novelistic scenes for artistic inspiration and fashioned prints from episodes of *Don Quixote*, probably the first genuine novel. Nor is it surprising that Thackeray perceived a connection between the artist and novelists and discussed "Hogarth, Smollett, and Fielding" in a single lecture of *The English Humourists*. Perhaps least surprising of all is that Hogarth's major twentieth-century biographer and editor, Professor Ronald Paulson of Yale University, is also a scholar of satire and the eighteenth-century novel.

Hogarth proved to be an inspiration to authors. The plots of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) and John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749) resemble the action of *A Harlot's Progress*. John Shebbeare's novel, *The Marriage Act* (1754), and George Colman's play, *The Clandestine Marriage* (1766), capitalized on the theme of *Marriage a la Mode*. Tobias Smollett shared Hogarth's contradictory combination of moral wrath and comic relish for the seamier aspects of human life. He caricatured the artist as "Pallet" in *Peregrine Pickle* (1751) but made amends for the snub in *The Present State of All Nations* (1768): "In the comic scenes of painting, Hogarth is an inimitable original with respect to invention, humour, and expression." Above all, Henry Fielding espoused a theory of the novel that reads like Hogarth's own artistic manifesto.

A friend of Hogarth, Fielding, in his preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742) announced a new literary genre and designated it a "comic romance" or, more precisely, a "comic epic-poem in prose." This new form of prose fiction, like dramatic comedy and Hogarth's prints, was to steer a middle course between the unrealistic extremes of heroic moral seriousness and vicious burlesque absurdity that rendered human beings exaggerated caricatures of evil rather than credible characters with everyday follies. Fielding then listed other staples of his novel bearing directly on Hogarth's artistic achievement:

1. A humorous plot to dramatize moral themes aimed at correcting human extravagance and at exposing human affectation, which is the comic fruit of two human failings obstructive to a proper sense of reality -- vanity and hypocrisy;
2. A preoccupation with personages of inferior rank and manners;

3. An emphasis upon realism made famous by Hogarth himself: "let us examine the works of a comic-history painter, . . . where we shall find the true excellence . . . to consist in the exactest copying of nature;"
4. An occasional reliance on mock-heroic parody of the grand style. The satiric thrust of the parody can have the triple-edged effect of debunking the ideal as unreal, of chastening the real by comparison with the ideal, and of ennobling the real by equating it with the ideal.

Compared to Fielding's humor, Hogarth's comic realism is more unsparing, more seductively receptive to the raw facts of human existence, more appreciative of low life, less sympathetic to aristocratic values, and less optimistic about the dangerous

presides morally and geographically off-center at a degenerate round table of treacherous prostitutes. Here one can observe the comic action and moral themes which emanate from the vanity and affectation of Tom Rakewell as a would-be gentleman destroyed by extravagance. Here are the low characters and mean manners held up for moral ridicule. Here too is the dynamic depiction of mundane realities, so intensely vivid as to shade into symbols of Tom's progressive corruption and so shockingly vital as to arouse in spectators both a dangerous fascination with the bawdy scene and a contrary moral indignation at its sordidness. Here finally is a parodic allusion to the grand style in the wall portraits of the ancient emperors, mocking reminders of a departed Roman glory and an enduring imperial depravity. Thanks to the prostitute's phallic candle in the

background, the world is going to blaze, fueled by lust and unredeemed by love. This is Hogarth's *Last Supper*; Tom Rakewell's apostles are decadent disciples of the punchbowl, all of them Judases, all agents of hopeless disorder, and all participants in an unholy communion of midnight revelry. Amidst the disarray and dishabille' of the harlots, Tom -- almost supine in his vulnerability -- stands little chance of slowing his fated progress toward debt, despair, and death.



Plate 3 of *A Rake's Progress* (1735)

human condition. Barring these differences, the intellectual kinship between Fielding and Hogarth was substantial enough to permit each man to influence the comic creations of the other.

For the most part, what Fielding attempted in the novel, Hogarth came close to drawing in a work like *A Rake's Progress*, which may well have provoked literary imitation in both *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* (1749). There is in *A Rake's Progress* the striking example of Plate 3, the debauchery scene of Tom Rakewell, who

Rakewell's corruption surfaced in Fielding's tale of Mr. Wilson's loss of innocence in Book III, Chapter 3 of *Joseph Andrews*. The long lost father of Joseph Andrews, Mr. Wilson functions as the novel's moral norm, epitomizing in his youthful rake's progress through London everyman's passage into adulthood through the acquisition of prudence to protect virtue. What Wilson has learned about life, Joseph Andrews still has to discover. Although neither father nor son suffers Tom Rakewell's tragic end, Wilson's account of sexual misadventures in London

approximates Rakewell's encounter with prostitutes in Plate 3:

Covent Garden was now the farthest stretch of my ambition; where I shone forth in the balconies of the playhouses, visited whores, made love to orange-wenches, and damned plays. . . . I looked on all the town harlots with a detestation not easy to be conceived; their persons appeared to me as painted palaces, inhabited by Disease and Death. . . . In short, I had sufficiently seen that the pleasures of the world are chiefly folly, and the business of it mostly knavery, and both nothing better than vanity.

Mr. Wilson's escapades in Covent Garden recall another famous print, *Morning* (1738), the first of Hogarth's *Four Times of Day*. *Morning* displays the cold winter amusements of Covent Garden at daybreak. It makes an effective social statement by contrasting the aristocratic aloofness of the lofty red-brick buildings and church portal with the warm vitality of the commoners in the lower foreground. Church and state stand apart and yet provide a protective enclosure for the bustling common life in the marketplace below. Buildings huddle in the background as throngs of people and affectionate couples form islands of human warmth against the cold. In sharp contrast to the crowds that work, make love, beg, or brawl in the coffeehouses is the shriveled high-born lady. She is the human focus of the print. On her way to the chilly church, this cold woman sets herself apart from the earthy bourgeoisie in her disdain for her page, the poor, and the profligate. She certainly influenced Fielding's portrait of Bridget Allworthy, an affected gentlewoman with neither the wholesome charity nor the plebeian charm of her illegitimate son, Tom Jones: "I would attempt to draw her picture; but that is done already by a more able master, Mr. Hogarth himself, to whom she sat many years ago, and hath been lately exhibited by that gentleman in his print of a winter's morning, of which she is no improper emblem,

*Morning* (1738)



*The Industrious Prentice Lord Mayor of London* (1747)

and may be seen walking (for walk she doth in the print) to Covent-Garden Church, with a starved foot-boy behind carrying her prayer-book."

Just as early English novelists experimented with focusing on more than one protagonist, so too did Hogarth strive for increased narrative complexity in his progresses. Both *A Harlot's Progress* and *A Rake's Progress* concentrate on one person's follies. But later on, *Marriage à la Mode* probes a single domestic tragedy involving two wedded protagonists, and, finally, *Industry and Idleness* depicts two interrelated stories of two contrasting characters. The longest of Hogarth's progresses, *Industry and Idleness* praises in twelve prints the Protestant middle-class ideals of prudent enterprise and social mobility. The contrary destinies of Francis Goodchild and Tom Idle teach that hard work and wholesome ambition succeed in a cruel world where laziness and a career of crime do not. Whereas Idle ends his life as a thief betrayed to the gibbet by a prostitute, Goodchild follows the high road of virtuous prosperity, leading through marriage with his master's daughter to the offices of sheriff and mayor of London. The final print, *The Industrious Prentice Lord Mayor of London*, is a magnificent expose' of a class-structured British society. Alleviating the otherwise heavy didacticism of the series are numerous ambiguities casting doubt on the good man's rewards in this concluding scene, for the picture reduces Goodchild in the right carriage seat to visual insignificance and accentuates the potentially anarchic populace. There is above the church a portrait of George II, eyed enviously by his son, the Prince of Wales. The Prince presides over the scene above an unruly militia that seems careless of the king's peace and inclined to fire in the direction of the upper classes watching the procession from windows. Amidst this threatening chaos, is the new lord mayor lamenting the bitter fruit of virtue? Is he regretting the splendid misery of political office and public acclaim? Hogarth never tells.

Nowhere is there a more startling example of Hogarth's increasingly gloomy outlook on life than in *Gin Lane*, the bitter counterpart of his cheerful *Beer Street* of 1751. Intended as propaganda against the excessive lower-class consumption of gin, *Gin Lane* presents an urban wasteland with similarities to Dante's *Inferno*. Here demon drink reigns supreme, subverts normal parental and marital obligations, and destroys law, order, and civilization. The spectator's eye wanders



Gin Lane (1751)

downward from the distant church steeple through the ever-darkening levels of human damnation, exploitation, and starvation to the heavily shadowed gin-cellar below. Dominating the pandemonium is Hogarth's shocking *Pietà*, with a drunken madonna, who is oblivious to her son's fall into the nether pit or to the drunkard lying dead on the steps. The scene, Hogarth wrote, evokes "Distress even to madness and death, and not a house in tolerable condition but the pawnbroker's and the gin shop." London has become hell.

It was fitting that England's first important artist should have met England's foremost literary personality, Samuel Johnson, at the home of England's first true psychological novelist, Samuel Richardson, in June of 1752. At the time Johnson had little notoriety or money and still considered himself an outsider in the cultural establishment. He had little liking for the reigning King George II whom Hogarth made the mistake of praising before Richardson's guests. As Hogarth talked, he noticed a strange fellow -- Johnson -- at the window,

shaking his head, and rolling himself about in a strange ridiculous manner. He concluded he was an ideot, whom his relations had put under the care of Mr. Richardson, as a very good man. To his great surprize, however, this figure stalked forwards . . . and burst into an invective against George the Second. . . . In short, he displayed such a power of eloquence, that Hogarth looked at him with astonish-

Designed by Wm. Hogarth  
Published according to Act of Parliament Feb. 1, 1751.

ment and actually imagined that this ideot had been at the moment inspired.

In time Hogarth came to admire Johnson, "whose conversation," the artist later noted, "was to the talk of other men, like Titian's painting compared to [Thomas] Hudson's" mediocre art work. Johnson did not earn this fine compliment by eloquent conversation about painting or about Hogarth. For Johnson knew and cared little about painting and befriended Joshua Reynolds, the rising young star who undervalued Hogarth's contributions to English art.

Reynolds in 1770 still excluded Hogarth from the ranks of the greatest artists. Fortunately, what Reynolds refused to concede until years later, Johnson acknowledged by 1771 in a lovely epitaph on Hogarth. Doubtless, the best tribute to great Hogarth is the legacy of his novelistic prints. They remain the fullest statement of his life's work and worth and a brilliant pictorial mirror of eighteenth-century British civilization. But Johnson's little epitaph nicely sums up the high moral seriousness behind Hogarth's incomparable comic creations:

*The hand of art here torpid lies  
That traced th'essential form of grace,  
Here death has clos'd the curious eyes  
That saw the manners in the face.*

*If genius warm thee, reader, stay,  
If merit touch thee, shed a tear,  
Be vice and dulness far away  
Great Hogarth's honour'd dust is here.*

...the best tribute to great  
Hogarth is the legacy of his  
novelistic prints.

Hogarth in his final years saw his reputation eclipsed by new luminaries, like Reynolds who championed a grand style of painting so foreign to Hogarth's comic realism. Johnson became one of Reynold's principal intellectual mentors and went so far as to puff the portraitist by name in a moral essay of 1759, *Idler* 45: "Genius is chiefly exerted in historical pictures, and the art of the painter of portraits is often lost in the obscurity of his subject. But it is in painting as in life; what is greatest is not always best. I should grieve to see Reynolds transfer to heroes and to goddesses, to empty splendor and to empty fiction, that art which is now employed in diffusing friendship, in reviving tenderness, in quickening the affections of the absent, and continuing the presence of the dead." In three subsequent *Idler* essays Reynolds himself would make public his artistic ideals for the first time and ridicule Hogarth. Even as president of the new Royal Academy,



Thomas M. Curley, Professor of English at Bridgewater State College, delivered an abbreviated version of this article at the Hogarth Festival in the Wallace L. Anderson Gallery of the Art Building. A fan of Hogarth and of all eighteenth-century arts and sciences, Curley is the author of numerous articles and a book, *Samuel Johnson and the Age of Travel* (University of Georgia Press, 1976). With the support of several grants and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Curley will publish a two-volume edition of *Sir Robert Chambers' A Course of Lectures on the English Law written in secret collaboration with Samuel Johnson from 1766 to 1770*. To complement the edition, Curley is completing an authoritative biography, *Sir Robert Chambers: Law and Empire in the Age of Johnson*.