

John Gay

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John Gay's memorial reads as follows: "Life is a jest; and all things show it / I thought so once; but now I know it" (Westminster Abbey). Born 30 June 1685 in Barnstable, England, John Gay was the son of a respectable and Dissenting family with little money. Gay's education was limited to his local grammar school. He was then apprenticed to a London silk mercer (textile merchant) but left and was tutored under his uncle. Among his early writings, he published the *State of Writ* (1711), a pamphlet that surveyed contemporary periodicals and authors. This work led to a friendship with Alexander Pope. In 1714, Gay joined the Scriblerus Club, a gathering of London-based satire writers. Gay would remain a member until his passing. Gay's work as a poet is only second to his fame as a playwright. Most biographies of Gay will mention *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), a parody which found such success that it temporarily ousted Italian operas from England. In 1732, after suffering with fever, Gay passed away in London and is memorialized in Westminster Abbey next to medieval satirist Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Beggar's Opera* inspired numerous imitations over the centuries, including Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* (1928).

The Scriblerus club and by extension Gay were advocates of the Tories, a conservative political faction. Gay would work as secretary to the Earl of Clarendon until 1714, when, after the death of Queen Anne and the succession of George I, the Tories were ousted from politics, and Gay was shut out of further political roles. "The Wild Boar and the Ram" is from Gay's *Fables*, written in 1727. The *Fables* (in imitation of Aesop's) were addressed to the six-year-old Prince William, Duke of Cumberland in an attempt to garner patronage. Gay was already long acquainted with the newly ascended King George II and Caroline of Ansbach (William's parents). Despite being offered a position to serve one of the royal daughters, Gay refused for unspecified reasons. According to Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, Gay's *Fables* had a mixed reception upon initial release (157), but it would become a staple of English education for the young. This poem is the fifth fable in the collection of iambic tetrameter poems. The debate between the wild Boar, who calls for vengeance against what he views as oppression, and the Ram, who calls for further thought and reflection, is a philosophical perspective on social violence and a political statement (see Lewis 169–171).

Further Reading

- Colley, Linda. *In Defiance of Oligarchy: the Tory Party, 1714-60*. Cambridge UP, 1982.
- Palmeri, Frank. "The Autocritique of Fables." *Humans and Other Animals in Eighteenth-Century British Culture*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2016, pp. 83–100.

References

- Lewis, Jayne Elizabeth. "Risking Contradiction: John Gay's Fables and the Matter of Reading." *English Fable: Aesop and Literary Culture, 1651–1740*. Cambridge UP, 1996. pp. 156–184.
- Westminster Abbey. "John Gay." *Westminster Abbey*, www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/john-gay/.

The Wild Boar and the Ram¹⁴⁴

AGAINST an elm a sheep was ty'd,¹⁴⁵

The butcher's knife in blood was dy'd;¹⁴⁶

The patient flock, in silent fright,

From far beheld the horrid sight;

A savage Boar,¹⁴⁷ who near them stood,

5

Thus mock'd to scorn the fleecy brood.¹⁴⁸

All cowards should be serv'd like you.¹⁴⁹

See, see, your murd'rer is in view;

With purple hands and reeking knife

He strips the skin yet warm with life:

10

Your quarter'd sires,¹⁵⁰ your bleeding dams,¹⁵¹

The dying bleat of harmless lambs

Call for revenge. O stupid race!

The heart that wants¹⁵² revenge is base.¹⁵³

I grant, an ancient Ram replies,

15

We bear no terror in our eyes,

Yet think us not of soul so tame,

Which no repeated wrongs inflame,

Insensible of ev'ry ill,

Because we want thy tusks to kill.

20

Know, those who violence pursue

¹⁴⁴ *Fables*, London, J. Tonson and J. Watts, 1727, pp.16–17; *Eighteenth Century Poetry Archive*

¹⁴⁵ *ty'd* tied or bound

¹⁴⁶ *dy'd* coloured

¹⁴⁷ *Boar* a male wild pig

¹⁴⁸ *fleecy brood* flock of sheep

¹⁴⁹ *be serv'd like you* receive a fate like yours

¹⁵⁰ *quarter'd sires* male animals cut into fourths

¹⁵¹ *bleeding dams* female animals being drained of blood

¹⁵² *wants* lacks

¹⁵³ *base* reprehensible, cowardly

Give to themselves the vengeance due,
 For in these massacres they find
 The two chief plagues that waste mankind.¹⁵⁴
 Our skin supplies the wrangling bar,¹⁵⁵
 It wakes their slumb'ring sons to war,
 And well revenge may rest contented,
 Since drums and parchment¹⁵⁶ were invented.

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¹⁵⁴ *The two chief plagues that waste mankind* military men and lawyers

¹⁵⁵ *wrangling bar* wrangling here is arguing; the bar is a court of law, which argues over documents written on sheepskin (parchment)

¹⁵⁶ *drums and parchment* drumheads for military regiments and legal documents are both made of sheepskin, so the sheep get their vengeance on humans more effectively than by resisting the butcher, as the Boar would