

Hogarth in drag: Acts of transvestism in *The Grace of Mary Traverse* and *Mother Clap's Molly House*

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Although Hogarth's ongoing conversation with the London theatre scene and its dramatic subjects has long been established as a major feature informing and enlivening his art and aesthetics,¹ the theatrical afterlife of his work has yet to become the focus of sustained critical enquiry. More specifically, Hogarth's presence in contemporary British theatre – arguably a significant aspect of the continued relevance of his vision – has gone virtually uncharted in the growing body of scholarship that has engaged with the cross-cultural and cross-historical reception of his oeuvre and thinking. Preliminary research for this essay, however, has yielded significant evidence of the recycling of Hogarthian images, motifs and models by British playwrights and directors over the last few decades: in addition to the two instances examined in the present study, other relevant examples include Nick Dear's biographical play, *The Art of Success*, first performed in 1986 at the RSC and recently revived at the Rose Theatre in Kingston as the first part of a "Hogarth's Progress" double bill;² April De Angelis's take on the age of Garrick, *A Laughing Matter* (National Theatre, 2002), also double-billed with Oliver Goldsmith's eighteenth-century masterpiece, *She Stoops to Conquer*; and, though in a less manifest way, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* (1988), another play that looks back on eighteenth-century stage practice with a view to refunctioning it.³ Hogarth's influence is by no means limited to work that engages specifically with his historical context: a distinctly Hogarthian vein has been detected, for example, in Edward Bond's particular brand of surrealism in *Early Morning* (1969), a play set in the Victorian age;⁴ and many more examples attesting to Hogarth's pervasiveness might emerge from a comprehensive survey of the field.

My focus here falls on two plays penned, respectively, in 1985 and 2001 by two key figures of contemporary British drama, Timberlake Wertenbaker and Mark Ravenhill. Both plays are set in the eighteenth century – the 1720s for Ravenhill's *Mother Clap's Molly House*, the 1780s for *The Grace of Mary Traverse* – and both use this historical frame as a device to elucidate some tensions about present-day Britain. Wertenbaker adopts a feminist slant and her play is deeply steeped in the cultural debate of the 1980s; Ravenhill, for his part, looks at the eighteenth century from a typically post-millennial, (post-)gay perspective.⁵ My analysis aims to shed light on the extent to which the two dramatists' cross-historical dialogue is mediated by Hogarth, a prime conceptual as well as aesthetic guide that they turn to in order to dress up a contemporary

¹ For links between Hogarth and the London stage see Mary Klinger, "William Hogarth and London Theatrical Life", *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, 24 vols (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), V, 11-27; and Mary Klinger Lindberg, "Stylistic strategies in William Hogarth's theatrical satires", in Caroline Van Eck, James McAllister, Renée Van de Vall, eds, *The Question of Style and Philosophy in the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 50-69. Jenny Uglow's monumental study of Hogarth's "life and world" devotes a chapter (7: "Imitation games") to the painter's ongoing conversation with the drama and theatre of his contemporaries. Uglow specifically concentrates on the impulse given by the encounter with Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* to the development of Hogarth's art and aesthetic vision. See Jenny Uglow, *William Hogarth: A Life and a World* (London: Faber, 1997), 130-150.

² The second play, *The Taste of the Town*, received its world premiere on this occasion. On Nick Dear's Hogarth-related work see Mariacristina Cavechi's essay in this volume.

³ The play's director, Max Stafford-Clark, acknowledges his debt to Hogarth in the rehearsal diary of his 1988 joint production of *Our Country's Good* and George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* at the Royal Court Theatre in London: see Max Stafford-Clark, *Letters to George. The Account of a Rehearsal* (London: Nick Hern, 1989).

⁴ See D. Keith Peacock, *Changing Performance: Culture and Performance in the British Theatre Since 1945* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 261.

⁵ See David Alderson, "Postgay drama: sexuality, narration and history in the plays of Mark Ravenhill", *Textual Practice* 24/5 (2010), 863-882.

narrative in historical garb and in this way sharpen its critical edge. As I show, the plays' narratives and the social and cultural critique they articulate are deeply indebted to Hogarth's series with their ironical reversal of the Bunyanesque notion of "progress". Hogarth, moreover, has proved an invaluable resource for realizing the playwrights' vision on stage and providing scenic support to their bold acts of historical transvestism. Conversely, Wertebaker's and Ravenhill's sustained focus on different forms of cross-dressing – male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, literal and metaphorical – reflects back to us an image of Hogarth "in drag", bringing to the fore the complex, multifaceted, and quintessentially performative construction of identities within his oeuvre.

1. Progress revisited

Staged at London's Royal Court Theatre in 1985, *The Grace of Mary Traverse* was overtly inspired by Hogarth and particularly by the question of "what would the *Rake's Progress* be if the rake were a woman".⁶ Timberlake Wertebaker's charts the "progress" of the titular character, the daughter of a wealthy London merchant who escapes her cloistered girlhood to plunge into the male world of coffee houses, gambling dens and political power. Mary's uncompromising quest for knowledge and experience ends in pain, disillusionment and massive destruction, but at the same time leaves her with an unquenchable desire for alternative paths to grace and beauty.

At the opening of the play we see Mary practicing hard to become the kind of "amiable woman"⁷ that eighteenth-century society prescribes for her. The first scene is a lesson in conversational etiquette, with the young woman talking to an empty chair under her father's supervision; in the following scene we see her alone in the same drawing room, walking back and forth across the carpet and striving to leave no mark on it. But Mary is hungry for knowledge and experience and she is easily drawn into a Faustian pact by her housekeeper, the aptly named Mrs Temptwell. In defiance of societal norms, Mary leaves the protection of her father's house and metaphorically dons a male identity, experimenting successfully with whoring, gambling and eventually political action, when she becomes involved in the Gordon Riots of 1780⁸ by championing the people in Parliament and instigating a popular rebellion that ends in carnage.

As she also explains in a Note to the published play text, Wertebaker deploys the past as a framing device, a "valid metaphor" to address contemporary concerns.⁹ Her historical method turns the spot onto some uncanny parallels between the 1780s and the 1980s, between Georgian and Thatcherite Britain. In 1981, London saw another summer of riots where parts of London went up in flames and fear of the mob led to

⁶ Wertebaker quoted in Sophie Bush, *The Theatre of Timberlake Wertebaker* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), 85.

⁷ Timberlake Wertebaker, *The Grace of Mary Traverse*, in *The Love of the Nightingale and The Grace of Mary Traverse* (London: Faber, 1989), 62. Subsequent quotations from the play are taken from this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

⁸ On 2 June 1780, a huge popular crowd nearly 50,000 strong marched to Parliament to present a petition against the Catholic Relief Act. Events soon descended into chaos, with violence raging across London for a week. Catholic houses and chapels were pulled down but the mob also set fire to the private houses of members of parliament and to central London prisons. At some point the Bank of England itself came under attack, until the revolt was quenched in blood, with hundreds of rioters shot dead by troops, many more arrested and executed.

⁹ "Although this is a play set in the eighteenth century, it is not a historical play. All the characters are my own invention and whenever I have used historical events such as the Gordon Riots I have taken great freedom with reported fact. I found the eighteenth century a valid metaphor, and I was concerned to free the people of the play from contemporary preconceptions" (57).

more repressive measures by the government.¹⁰ For audiences at the time, the bleak view of collective action in the play would also have had an obvious resonance with the failure of the miners' strikes of 1984-85. Arguably, however, the key linkage with 1980s Britain is in the play's questioning of Mary's achievements, of her apparent "progress" as a woman. Despite her resolve, Wertebaker's heroine fails to gain fulfilment from participating in the world as a man. Her successful experiments in male behaviour promise to lead towards her goals, but she ends up crushed by the brutality of the world she has forced her way into, and by the painful knowledge of her unwitting complicity in its operations. Mary's libertarian and proto-feminist endeavours are irremediably marred by her inability to envisage an alternative to existing gender models: her potentially liberating transvestism is ultimately doomed to replicate and indeed reinforce existing power structures. As is also typical of other plays by women written in this period, Wertebaker's feminist revision of the rake's progress can be seen as a response to the age and the figure of Margaret Thatcher, herself a "traverser" of identities, particularly those related to class lines, but especially an "Iron Lady" who with her premiership dealt a fatal blow to the naïve feminist assumption that once women came to power, the world would change for the better.

Wertebaker's reliance on Hogarth's world as a metaphor to excavate the contradictions of present-day Britain is shared by Mark Ravenhill's *Mother Clap's Molly House*, an ambitious "fantasia on historical themes" which premiered at the National Theatre in 2001 and again returned to the eighteenth century in order to "ask fresh questions about sexuality and the market place".¹¹ Drawing on historical sources, Ravenhill focuses on the thriving gay subculture in 1720s London and particularly on its central institution, the molly house or club for male cross-dressers. In the second part of the play, past and present become woven together; eighteenth-century mollies double as participants in a modern-day, drug-fuelled and largely joyless sex party, their subversive sexuality significantly curbed by the straitjacket of "gay" identification and the forces of commercial interest.

The central narrative of Ravenhill's play is based on the work of Rictor Norton, a social historian specializing in gay history, and on his groundbreaking study on the rise of a gay subculture in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, also entitled *Mother Clap's Molly House*. The gist of Norton's research is in his identification of the 1720s as a key turning point in the history of gay identity and gay visibility, the moment when homosexuality began to be associated with a social rather than a specifically sexual behaviour. As he argues,

it was not until about 1700 that gay men began to gather together within a structured social organisation which we can properly call a subculture. [...] 250 years ago there was a thriving gay subculture in England, and [...] there were actually more gay clubs and pubs in the heart of London in the early 1720s than there were in the 1950s when Parliament began to debate the consequences of reforming the laws against homosexuality.¹²

A large section of Norton's book is devoted to one of the most popular of these clubs, the molly house run by Mother Clap in Field Lane, Holborn. Ravenhill follows quite closely Norton's reconstruction of the goings-

¹⁰ The dramatist herself has drawn attention to this correspondence: see Timberlake Wertebaker, "Dancing with history", in Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi, eds, *Crucible of Cultures: Anglophone Drama at the Dawn of a New Millennium*, (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2002), 20. For an early appraisal of the play as a mirror for Thatcherite times see Martha Ritchie, "Almost 'Better to Be Nobody': Feminist Subjectivity, the Thatcher Years, and Timberlake Wertebaker's *The Grace of Mary Traverse*", *Modern Drama* 39/3 (1996), 404-420.

¹¹ Mark Ravenhill, "Introduction", in *Mark Ravenhill. Plays: 2* (London: Methuen, 2008), x. All quotations from the play are taken from this edition and will henceforth be noted parenthetically in the text.

¹² Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: the gay subculture in England, 1700-1830* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1992), 9.

on inside the molly house, adding however an imagined back story to it. In the play, the molly house is initially a tally shop, a dress hire shop for prostitutes, which Mrs Tull transforms into a more lucrative molly house for cross-dressing men after her husband dies and leaves her in charge of the business. The first act charts this transformation through a series of scenes prefaced by Hogarth-like titles such as *The Widow Carries On; The 'Prentice Led Astray; A Bargain With a Whore; The Widow Finds New Trade;* in parallel, the plot follows Mrs Tull's development from a meek middle-aged wife oppressed by gender-induced social limits to the mollies' Mother Clap, at once a liberated woman and the shrewd manager of a thriving sex business.

This "progress" reaches its flamboyant climax in the mollies' chorus that closes the first act on a mock-Handelian note of triumph:

All We are the future
 We are the light
 This is our time
 This is our right

 This is our Happy End
 But this is just the start
 This is a marriage
 Of purse and arse and heart. (56)

In Ravenhill's reimagining, the eighteenth-century molly house comes across less as the manifestation of a specifically gay subculture, as depicted in Norton, than as a fragile utopia where everybody – man or woman, gay or straight – is free to experiment with a whole range of subject positions. Significantly departing from his main source, Ravenhill has his molly house accommodate not only homosexuals but also the character of Princess Seraphina – a London molly who is gay in the historical record but is here refigured as a straight transvestite – as well as a female cross-dresser, the former prostitute Amy.¹³ Inside Ravenhill's molly house, cross-dressing is ubiquitous and generalized, again deviating from Rictor Norton who insists instead on its occasional nature. Clearly intrigued by the sheer theatricality of the mollies' ceremonies as detailed by Norton – including marriage nights, christenings and even mock births – the contemporary dramatist accentuates the freedom to role play and the gender fluidity that are afforded by the quintessentially performative space of the molly house; but he is also clear-eyed about the exploitative side to the "marriage / Of purse and arse and heart" (56) celebrated by Mother Clap and her cronies.

This vein of social criticism becomes sharper in the second act. In an even more significant departure from documented fact, the play does not end with the raid upon Mother Clap's house in February 1726 and the ensuing legal process, which resulted in Mother Clap's imprisonment and in the hanging of three "sodomites" at Tyburn – all events which are given special relevance in Norton's study. Ravenhill is ultimately not interested in providing a historical narrative of State repression or of the other oppressive conditions the mollies would have experienced: like Wertenbaker with her female rake, he is rather more intent on following the present-day reverberations of the mollies' struggle. During the second act, the play shifts between the eighteenth and the twenty-first centuries, inviting comparison between the two time frames. The same cast alternates between playing Mother Clap's mollies and playing participants at an all-male sex party set in the present day, their remarkably joyless routines now watched over by a far less inventive master of ceremonies,

¹³ Amy is a virgin newly arrived from the country, bent on making stellar profits as a top London prostitute. When we first meet her, she is in the tally shop being fitted as a shepherdess for her debut. Eventually, she becomes pregnant, has an abortion which almost kills her and as a result decides to dress up as a man and become Ned, Mother Clap's assistant: a Harlot's progress with a transvestite twist.

the coke dealer Charlie. In liberated, post-millennium Britain the molly house has morphed into a posh London loft, but as Charlie is quick to recognize, gays are still good for business: “Not like before, is it? Now it’s your poofs know how to enjoy themselves, it’s your poofs with the money nowadays...” (p. 60).

In pointing to these historical continuities, the contemporary scenes convey a strong sense of shrinking possibilities, with the subversive sexuality of the mollies now safely contained and neutralized by the shackles of “gay” identification. The second act to a large extent pivots on the sharp contrast between the sense of experimentation and genuine discovery in the eighteenth-century characters and the alienating repetition of fixed patters of behaviour by their present-day counterparts. In what might be seen as the theatrical equivalent of the increasing restriction of the Harlot’s freedom of movement in Hogarth’s series – as she journeys from outdoor to indoor spaces and finally ends up in a coffin – in the National Theatre performance this progressive curbing of their mollies’ subversive sexuality was visually encoded in the sharp contrast between the flamboyant, extravagant dresses of the eighteenth-century mollies and the standardized dress code at the sex party, with male underwear functioning as the sole uniform and token of identity.

By placing the mollies’ story within a larger historical frame that reaches up to the present day, then, the notion of their “progress” becomes inflected with dramatic irony of a distinctly Hogarthian flavour. Through the play’s juxtaposition of past and present, Ravenhill draws attention to the fact that the emergence of a gay identity in the 1720s coincided with the dawn of consumer capitalism – that the birth of a modern notion of sexuality cannot be disentangled from the commodifying impetus of the market. If the molly house is indeed a moment of origin, the play suggests, then we should rather see it as marking the beginning of the “promiscuous interpenetration of sexuality and capitalism”¹⁴ that has then gone on to underpin the construction of gay identity.

2. Hogarth, the transvestite

To the best of my knowledge, Hogarth never depicted a molly in his prints and paintings, but he certainly had an eye for the deep imbrication of sex and cash and for the fabrication or fashioning of selves in his society. The closest equivalent to a molly house that we find in his work is probably in *Masquerade Ticket* (1727), a satirical attack on the highly popular masquerade balls organized by John James Heidegger at the Haymarket Theatre. **PLATE 1** These commercial masquerades were “licensed” forms of public transvestism which provided many people in 1720s London with the opportunity for gender playacting (with male participants dressing up as nursing maids and shepherdesses) and, concomitantly, sexual encounter (as indicated in Hogarth’s print by the two “lecherometers” measuring the sexual temperature of those who are about to enter). With this connection between (illicit) sex, transvestism and public visibility, Hogarth’s masquerade shows its close kinship with the molly house, an institution which marked the theatrical turn in homosexual identity: in Alan Bray’s words, the character of the molly involved “an extension of the area in which homosexuality could be expressed and therefore recognized: clothes, gestures, languages, particular buildings, and particular public places”.¹⁵

A more metaphorical form of transvestism can be located in the performative and multiple construction of identities that characterizes Hogarth’s artistic vision, the distinctly modern note that is increasingly being foregrounded by recently scholarly work on his “aesthetics of difference”, to borrow the subtitle of Fort and Rosenthal’s volume, *The Other Hogarth* (2001). Contributors to this collection suggest ways to read Hogarth “in drag” and thereby become aware of the transvestite undercurrent within his oeuvre. In his analysis of A

¹⁴ Dan Rebellato, “Lust and Business”, in National Theatre, programme for *Mother Clap’s Molly House*, 2001, n.p.

¹⁵ Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men’s Press: 1982), 92.

Rake's Progress, for example, Mark Hallet underscores the rake's ambiguous kinship with effeminate figures such as the one of the dancing master and the castrato. On a similar note, Richard Meyer discusses Hogarth's tendency to register different forms of effeminacy in his depiction of masculine identities and specifically connects it with popular curiosity surrounding the rise of a gay subculture.¹⁶

Ravenhill's creative intervention in *Mother Clap's Molly House* is clearly aligned with these critical readings and the way they throw light on Hogarth's transvestite face. A similar posture informs Wertenbaker's feminization of the rake *The Grace of Mary Traverse*. Jenny Uglow has remarked on the affinities between Hogarth's rake and his harlot. In the first plate, Tom is depicted as a trembling youth, innocent and weak; throughout the story, he continues to cut a very different figure from the typical sexual predator one would expect: more than a seducer, he comes across as an outsider who is easily seduced and ruined by the city, therefore "a curiously passive, feminine figure".¹⁷ Like Wertenbaker's *Mary Traverse*, Tom follows a man's path – he surrounds himself with artists and wits, gambles, whores – but his behaviour is essentially imitative. Revealingly, the first image shows him being measured for a suit, fitted for the part he is to play – a part that entraps him even when he thinks himself rich and free. The way in which Hogarth's rake is actually taken over by his identity, consumed by it in the process of consuming it, rings a distinctly modern, almost Foucaultian note that strongly resonates with the "long march backward"¹⁸ of Ravenhill's mollies, as well as with the illusory freedom of Wertenbaker's role-playing heroine, who likewise acts in apparent defiance of gender and societal norms, but actually turns out to be that system's highly representative subject. After all, Mary is wholly dependent on her father's money to shake off gender constraints; when her funds run out and she becomes pregnant, she is no longer able to sustain her male act and is quickly re-routed into the time-honoured female role of the prostitute.

With her shape-shifting heroine, whose identity continually changes depending upon her circumstances, Wertenbaker is clearly intent on foregrounding the constructed nature of the poses Mary adopts throughout her "progress", as well as the efforts and sacrifices required to maintain them. As also shown by Ravenhill's cross-historical dialogue in *Mother Clap's Molly House*, the pervasive theatricality that informs Hogarth's exploration of identities turns him into a powerful ally for contemporary dramatists as they continue to grapple with the relationship between economic, sexual and gender oppression.

3. Hogarth, the playmaker

This leads me to consider another way in which Hogarth has assisted the theatre-makers in their acts of historical transvestism, namely, the extent to which they have relied on his art and aesthetics in order to give concrete scenic shape to their dramaturgical vision and dress up a new play as a period piece.

Mark Ravenhill has explained that while researching his subject, he was immediately attracted by the performative possibilities of the molly house, by the fundamental overlap with the playhouse involved in a large number of men, some of them wearing dresses, putting on scenes such as mock-marriages, christenings and even birth ceremonies.¹⁹ During the creative process, however, the dramatist found himself working

¹⁶ Mark Hallet, "Manly Satire: William Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress*", Richard Meyer, "Satire and Homosexual Difference in Hogarth's London", in Bernadette Fort and Angela Rosenthal, eds, *The Other Hogarth: Aesthetics of Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University, 2001), 142-161 and 162-175.

¹⁷ Uglow, *William Hogarth*, 424.

¹⁸ Matt Wolf, "Mother Clap's Molly House" (review), *Variety* (9 September 2001).

¹⁹ "Nicholas Hytner and Mark Ravenhill on *Mother Clap's Molly House*", Platform discussion, National Theatre, 3 September 2001; audio recording available from the NT archive, ref. no. RNT/PL/3/707.

from verbal reconstructions only: basically, Norton's study, which was itself based on the spoken evidence collected in trial records.

It is at this point that Hogarth's work came into play as a powerful visual aid for Ravenhill as he penned the script, and for the National Theatre director, Nicholas Hytner as he set about staging it. In Jonathan Croall's account of the production process, the director is very explicit on the need to equip the contemporary audience with a visual guide to the world of the play:

in a show like this, where most members of the audience are not likely to be able to draw on their past theatrical experience to get their bearings, it's going to be a challenge to (...) give them a roadmap to find their way through the play (...)²⁰

That this roadmap was supplied by Hogarth is already clear from the programme, where his work features as a backdrop to the front page and as a visual supplement to the background material that follows.²¹ Hogarth's name surfaces time and again in the production diary, where he is credited as a direct source of inspiration for various elements composing the theatrical vocabulary of the performance: decor, props, blocking, choreography and so on.

Reportedly, moreover, Hogarth's collaboration was especially crucial for the numerous ensemble scenes which also incorporate song and dance, with his compositional technique setting a very important precedent for the multifocal quality and the "visual variety" that the NT production sought to achieve.²² This is apparent from the very opening of the play, a musical number that introduces eighteenth-century London as a city of business and enterprise, teeming with street sellers, lively and messy in its whirlwind of activity. The influence of the Harlot's series is palpable in the following scene, a funeral wake attended by whores and apprentices and featuring a sudden transition from solemn mourning to riotous, drunken dancing. The definitive example, however, is provided by the birthing scene in Act Two. Explicitly designated as a "Hogarthian tableau"²³ in the rehearsal diary, this is probably the most difficult ensemble scene in the play to stage on account of its complex layering: in his new identity as Susan, Mrs Tull's apprentice, Martin, acts the pregnant mother giving birth to her child in a scene devised and staged by Mother Clap for the benefit of the other mollies. In the performance, the sofa was turned round so as to enable Martin/Susan to deliver the baby upstage while the mollies created for the NT audience a picture of another group of onlookers watching the miraculous event.

Quite appropriately, the Hogarthian imagery that is deployed as a visual prop for this elaborate scene is equally multiple and over-layered. The sham birth in Act Two is anticipated by a verbal reference in Act One, Scene Three to another prodigious feat involving, this time, a woman who gives birth to rabbits:

Orme Can we go up Bartholomew Fair tomorrow?
Philips He wants to see the Rabbit Woman.
Kedger With the rabbits coming out of her cunt? That's all a trick if you ask me.
Philips Hush. Let the boy have his illusions. Grow up and he'll lose them soon enough.
Kedger Alright then, Bartholomew Fair it is. (34)

The National Theatre programme reveals the Hogarthian provenance of this image by reproducing a detail from *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism* (1762), **PLATE 2** a satire of religious fanaticism which was itself a

²⁰ Jonathan Croall, *Inside the Molly House: The National Theatre at Work* (London: NT, 2001), 29.

²¹ Specifically, the programme features a detail of the woman giving birth to rabbits from *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism*; plate 1 from *A Harlot's Progress*; and plates 6 and 7 from *Industry and Idleness*.

²² Croall, *Inside the Molly House*, 44.

²³ *Ibid.*

reworking of a slightly earlier print, *Enthusiasm Delineated* (1761). In the new version, the convulsed woman is replaced by Mary Tofts, the historical “rabbit woman” whom Hogarth had already portrayed in the *Cunicularii, or the Wise Men of Godliman in Consultation* (1726) at the time when her story was first made public. After the Surrey woman claimed to have given birth to rabbits, she was brought to London where she was repeatedly examined by the more prestigious doctors of the time and turned into a curiosity for fashionable visitors. Eventually, she confessed her hoax, but that was only after her seventeenth birth. Jenny Uglow interestingly detects an element of class and also gender critique in Hogarth’s 1726 satire of public gullibility, showing a circle of self-important, learned and presumably rich men being duped by a lower-class woman lying supine on a bed.²⁴

If Hogarth’s *Credulity* is basically three paintings in one, the same also holds true for the birthing scene in the National Theatre’s staging of *Mother Clap’s Molly House*. The programme reproduces a detail from *Credulity*; the scene as staged, though, is more of a recreation of the 1726 satirical print, in that it features the same domestic setting and tableau of credulous male spectators. By designating the Rabbit Woman as a fairground attraction, moreover, the earlier exchange between the two mollies (see above) also drags into the picture *Southwark Fair*, a further visual hook that paves the way for the heightened theatricality of the subsequent birthing scene.

Conceivably, Hogarth’s function as a “roadmap” into the eighteenth century was of even greater importance during the production of *The Grace of Mary Traverse* at the Royal Court in 1985. For her first venture into the theatrical mainstream, Wertebaker received the rather uncommon accolade of a high-profile production on the Court’s main stage, with Danny Boyle²⁵ directing and rising star, Janet McTeer playing the lead role to rave reviews. The play marked a turning point in the writer’s career, establishing her as one of the lead playwrights of the 1980s, but the Court director was forced to adopt a very different style of production from the lavish visuals and large cast which would later be deployed by Nicholas Hytner for his staging of *Mother Clap’s Molly House* at the National Theatre. Indeed, the gap between the two London venues in terms of resources was even wider in the mid-1980s, a period of severe funding cuts that hit very hard on new writing theatres like the Royal Court.

Accordingly, Danny Boyle staged the play using period costumes and wigs but on the whole the production relied on suggestion to recreate a picture of 1780s London. In part, this minimalism was consistent with Wertebaker’s approach to the eighteenth century as a metaphor for the present; in his review for *The Listener*, however, Jim Hiley voiced his misgivings about the “shrinkage brought about by a progressive depletion of resources” and argued that this “enforced aesthetic modesty” was visibly at odds with the play’s epic ambitions:

Unwanted minimalism and enforced aesthetic modesty are eating up sizeable areas of our theatre. (...) Timberlake Wertebaker’s *The Grace of Mary Traverse* (Royal Court) is a splendidly picaresque, almost epic work that’s been compressed into a chamber production and bursts at the seams. Set in a smoky London in during the grim turmoil of the 1780 Gordon riots, it cries out for crowd scenes that never materialize. Eighteen named roles are played by a cast of eight. They perform with exemplary sharpness in a fluent production by Danny Boyle, but multiple casting which stretches credulity (...) is no longer a novelty. It’s a drag.²⁶

²⁴ Uglow, *William Hogarth*, 211.

²⁵ At that stage, Boyle was a Royal Court associate artist with some recent productions of Howard Barker’s and Hanif Kureishi’s work under his belt. This was before he went on to gain international fame as a filmmaker with *Trainspotting* (1997), *28 Days Later* (2003) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2007).

²⁶ Jim Hiley, *The Listener* (31 October 1985); reproduced in *London Theatre Record* (October 9-22 1985), 1055.

Unlike Hytner with his 2001 production of *Mother Clap*, the Court director could not rely on Hogarthian tableaux to assist the audience as they followed Mary's journey across eighteenth-century London. This visual deficit, however, was at least in part offset by the dramatist's sustained reliance on Hogarth's work as a trigger for the imagination. In one of the early scenes of *The Grace of Mary Traverse*, Hogarth is mentioned as one of the eminent eighteenth-century scholars and artists gathered inside the London coffee house to which Mary, as a woman, is denied admittance, even though – she protests – she has been engaged in an imaginary conversation with them for a long time (12). It is indeed Mary's indignation at being excluded from this all-male cohort that prompts her gender-bending quest. This is a largely anachronistic gathering – Hogarth was long dead by then, and Wertenbaker's aptly named "Universal Coffee House" (70) is jointly patronized by Fielding, Goldsmith, Hume, Boswell, Garrick, Johnson, Sheridan and an equally improbable assemblage of "foreigners" including Piranesi, Tiepolo, Hayden, Voltaire, Leibniz and Goethe.

By the same token, Wertenbaker's script bears clear traces of the imaginary conversation that she, in turn, has entertained with Hogarth. Although Mary's quest takes place in the 1780s, the play's landscape is punctuated by familiar Hogarthian landmarks, a very detailed verbal topography that can easily be traced to the artist's urban imaginary. Mary's journey across London begins with the Cheapside slums that form the setting for her first outing and Lord Gordon's attempted rape, in a clear parallel to Moll (or Mary) Hackabout's arrival at the Bell Inn in Cheapside, fresh from the countryside, in the first plate of 'The Harlot's Progress'. We then follow her to Fleet Street, the location of Wertenbaker's "Universal Coffee House" but also of the debtors' prison where Hogarth's father was jailed; Newgate (the starting point of the Idle Apprentice's journey to Tyburn in Plate 11 of *Industry and Idleness*); Bridewell (in Plate 4, Hogarth's harlot is shown beating the hem in Bridewell prison); Clerkenwell (where Hogarth's father ran his coffee house); the Holborn distilleries (featuring in Hogarth's *Gin Lane*, which shows the St Giles slums on the road from Holborn to Tyburn); and finally Tyburn where Jack, one of the riot leaders, is executed just like the Idle Apprentice.

At least two of the interior scenes, moreover, are directly modelled on Hogarth's work. The political meeting prior to the revolt, in Act Three, Scene Eight, is entitled "A midnight conversation, the last stages of a drunken dinner", with an overt reference to Hogarth's drinking scene in *A Midnight Modern Conversation* (1733) and its connection to another episode of popular turmoil in London, the Excise Riots. In contrast to Hogarth's satire of male politicians and "lusty" English freedom, however, in Wertenbaker's version the drunken assembly also includes Mary and the two women who travel with her, Mrs Temptwell and her maid Sophie.

In the paratext, Wertenbaker is even more explicit about the Hogarthian derivation of this image as well as of an earlier scene set in "a large den in Drury Lane" (Act Two, Scene Four) and showing Mary intent on gambling. These references are detailed in a "Note on Staging" included in the 1987 acting edition of the play:

The cock fight in Act Two, scene 4 and the 'Midnight Conversation' in Act Three, scene 7 are illustrated in Hogarth prints and the staging should reflect those prints. Hogarth is in any case a very good guide to the world of the play.²⁷

With regard to the first scene, however, Wertenbaker's note is slightly misleading, in that it indicates only one Hogarthian reference when in fact the activities in which Mary engages in the Drury Lane gambling den are not limited to the one depicted in Hogarth's *Cockpit*. Over the course of the same scene, Mary also plays a game of piquet and wins an incredible amount of money from the men there, and then proceeds to organize

²⁷ "A Note on Staging", in Timberlake Wertenbaker, *The Grace of Mary Traverse* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1987), 78.

a race between two crippled old women, savagely beating her “hag” (90) when she loses to the other contestant.

Enacting the same process that is operative in Ravenhill’s molly birth, then, the gambling scene in *The Grace of Mary Traverse* reads as a conflation of at least three art works by Hogarth. In addition to its more evident antecedent, *The Cockpit* (1759), the variety of the games being played in the Drury Lane den recalls the gaming house in Plate Six of *A Rake’s Progress*, whereas the game of piquet likewise finds a match in Hogarth’s conversation piece, *The Lady’s Last Stake* (1759). Indeed, Lord Exrake’s reassurance to Mary that “a beautiful young lady can always pay, one way or another” (82) is wholly consonant with Lady Gentle’s predicament in the comedy by Colley Cibber to which the title of Hogarth’s painting refers.²⁸ To these three references I would also tentatively add, as a visual peg for the hags’ race, *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (1751) with its escalation from the mistreatment of animals in “scenes of sportive Woe” to the depiction of brutally mangled human bodies.

The fact that Wertenbaker only mentions *The Cockpit*, however, works to strengthen the association with *A Midnight Modern Conversation* and draw attention to a specific thread in Hogarth’s production which also underlies the two scenes in the play. *The Cockpit* is the last in a long line of Hogarth pictures showing men gathered round a table; as Uglow pointedly observes, these compositions tend to have a sinister quality even when they are celebratory.²⁹ When we remember that Hogarth’s *Cockpit* was a satirical jab at the blindness of political leaders and their irresponsible ventures, then we also begin to see the scene in the gambling den as prefiguring Mary’s calamitous political action as she, too, falls prey to the intoxication of power.

4. Epilogue

Wertenbaker’s ending provides a final and conclusive attestation of the persistence and pervasiveness of the Hogarthian palimpsest in *The Grace of Mary Traverse*. In the play’s epilogue, the cross-historical conversation between the contemporary dramatist and the eighteenth-century artist stretches to also encompass his aesthetic theory in *The Analysis of Beauty*, a move which effectively entrusts him with the final word over the meaning and potential outcome of Mary’s personal, sexual and political struggle.

The epilogue stands out from the rest of the play for its country setting and subdued, almost lyrical atmosphere. The much-abused Sophie, Mary and her little daughter sit reconciled with Mary’s father in a sunlit garden in the Potteries. The first word to be uttered in the scene is “beauty” (129), and it is spoken by the protagonist, a woman whom the title associates with “grace”. The short dialogue that ensues revolves around the ability of the human eye to apprehend and appreciate beauty in the natural world. As is typical of Wertenbaker’s drama, the ending does not provide an answer to the question of whether Mary (and the rest of her characters) will ever understand the intricacies of this world and learn how to love it or, even more difficult, “make it just” (130). Yet the unmistakable Hogarthian overtones of this conversation about “grace”, “beauty” and their pursuit³⁰ seem to suggest that Mary’s reward is to be found not so much in the unattained,

²⁸ The original title was *Piquet, or Virtue in Danger*. Hogarth renamed the painting after Cibber’s popular play about a married aristocratic woman who, having gambled away everything to an army officer, considers a final wager of her own virtue in order to regain her fortune.

²⁹ Uglow, *William Hogarth*, 620-621.

³⁰ See the famous opening passage of Chapter V, “Of Intricacy”: “The active mind is ever bent to be employed. Pursuing is the business of our lives; and even abstracted from any other view, gives pleasure. (...) This love of pursuit, merely as pursuit, is implanted in our natures, and designed, no doubt, for necessary, and useful purposes. Animals have it evidently by instinct. (...) The eye hath this sort of enjoyment in winding walks, and serpentine rivers, and all sorts of objects, whose forms, as we shall see hereafter, are composed principally of what, I call, the waving and serpentine

and perhaps unattainable, goal of her quest, but in the pursuit itself: a whirling, transformative journey with Hogarth on her side as a valiant ally and a trustworthy guide.

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lines. Intricacy in form, therefore, I shall define to be that peculiarity in the lines, which compose it, that leads the eye a wanton kind of chace, and from the pleasure that gives the mind, intitles it to the name of beautiful: and it may be justly said, that the cause of the idea of grace more immediately resides in this principle, than in the other five, except variety; which indeed includes this, and all the others." William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, London, ed. by Ronald Paulson (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1997), 32.

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