

John Gay's 'Achilles': The Burlesque Element

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JOHN GAY has almost certainly been the victim of his own success, of his one undisputed masterpiece. For some reason, the great achievement of *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) has not usually encouraged the numerous commentators on this ballad opera to study Gay's other dramatic work in any detail. Even critics who have bothered to examine these plays tend to compare them, either consciously or subconsciously, with *The Beggar's Opera*, find them inferior, and simply dismiss them. This is perhaps why Gay's brilliant dramatic burlesque, *The What D'Ye Call It* (1715), has not received the recognition it deserves, and remains much less well-known than Restoration and Augustan burlesques of the same stature, such as Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* and Fielding's *The Tragedy of Tragedies*. Most of Gay's plays undoubtedly do look insignificant beside *The Beggar's Opera*, but this is not surprising considering that *The Beggar's Opera* is one of the peaks of English dramatic literature. It is true that Gay's attempts at tragedy¹ and comedy² are not particularly notable or successful, but his more unorthodox productions, like *The What D'Ye Call It*, the very eccentric *Three Hours after Marriage* (1717)³ and *The Beggar's Opera* itself, are not only highly original but also very accomplished. The more satire, literary, social, political or personal, that Gay's plays contain, the better they tend to be. Even *The Mohocks* (1712), a rather crude and undistinguished farce for the most part, is redeemed by the excellent burlesque of

¹ *Dione* (1720) and *The Captives* (1724).

² *The Wife of Bath* (1713), the radically revised *The Wife of Bath* (1730), and the two posthumous comedies, *The Distress'd Wife* (produced 1734, published 1743) and *The Rehearsal at Gotham* (published 1754).

³ Pope and Arbuthnot helped Gay with both of these, especially *Three Hours after Marriage*, but they are essentially Gay's plays.

both Milton and Augustan tragedy in the first scene. Apart from *The Mohocks*, the most neglected of Gay's 'unorthodox productions' is *Achilles*, which seldom receives more than a few disparaging remarks from historians of drama. F. W. Bateson in *English Comic Drama 1700-1750* (1929) and Sven Armens in *John Gay, Social Critic* (1954) have treated the play fairly sympathetically, but their examinations are brief and by no means exhaustive. *Achilles* deserves reconsideration.

By the time *Achilles*, Gay's third ballad opera, reached the stage at Covent Garden on 10 February 1733 (Gay died in December 1732), numerous other ballad operas had been performed in London. Dramatic hacks quickly realized the commercial possibilities of the ballad opera and were soon cashing in on the vogue begun by *The Beggar's Opera*. Gay may have hoped that *The Beggar's Opera* and its sequel, *Polly* (1729), would revitalize English opera, which had been in a moribund state since Purcell's death in 1695 and virtually displaced by Italian opera, but the host of very inferior imitations soon debased the ballad opera to the level of a fashionable entertainment like pantomime. *Polly* itself was not performed because Sir Robert Walpole, believing it to contain further ridicule of himself and fearing a repeat of the success of *The Beggars' Opera*, banned it. *Achilles* is certainly better than most ballad operas, but although much more humorous than the fairly solemn *Polly*, it does not often recapture the wit and brilliance of *The Beggar's Opera* and seems distinctly mediocre in comparison. The songs, in particular, lack the force and vitality of those in *The Beggar's Opera*. Nevertheless, *Achilles* does contain a few excellent burlesque scenes that are worthy of detailed attention.

Achilles is a comic version of the classical myth about Achilles's life on Scyros while dressed as a woman. On the surface, *Achilles* might be regarded as nothing more than a farcical ballad opera, and Armens, for example, in his book *John Gay, Social Critic*, treats it simply as a farce with a sprinkling of anti-feminist satire (pp. 142-6), but it is not devoid of burlesque significance. His conclusion that the 'mockery of fashionable attitudes toward sex is light' (p. 146) misses the real burlesque point of the play. The difficulty comes in deciding whether *Achilles* is a non-satirical burlesque of a classical story (a classical travesty in the vein

of Charles Cotton's *Scarronides* (1664), a satirical burlesque of contemporary tragedy and Italian opera, or a mixture of both. Allardyce Nicoll in his *Early Eighteenth Century Drama* (3rd ed., 1952, p. 241) seems to opt for the first of these alternatives, but Gay's Prologue, with its reference to contemporary tragedy, suggests the third:

*His Scene now shews the Heroes of old Greece;
But how? 'tis monstrous! In a Comic Piece,
To Buskins, Plumes and Helmets what Pretence,
If mighty Chiefs must speak but common Sense?
Shall no bold Diction, no Poetic Rage,
Fome at our Mouths and thunder on the Stage?
No — 'tis Achilles, as he came from Chiron,
Just taught to sing as well as wield cold Iron;
And whatsoever Criticks may suppose,
Our Author holds, that what He spoke was Prose.¹*

The conversion of the heroes of classical epic into comic characters clearly amounts to classical travesty; but since the subject-matter of both Italian opera and Augustan tragedy was frequently taken from classical literature, a classical travesty in dramatic form written at this time was very likely to be a satirical burlesque as well. In *Achilles*, it is virtually impossible to separate classical travesty from satirical burlesque. Gay's use of classical travesty to ridicule contemporary drama differs from the satirical techniques in his previous dramatic burlesques, and illustrates his considerable originality in finding new burlesque weapons.

After *The Beggar's Opera*, any play by Gay was liable to be interpreted as anti-Walpole propaganda, and when *Achilles* appeared in 1733 it was thought to be a political satire.² The method of classical travesty would certainly have allowed Gay to make veiled attacks on political figures and to include topical satire while maintaining the completely innocent appearance of lightweight entertainment. But if *Achilles* is a political satire, Gay has concealed his intentions so well that it is not possible to decipher them. There is no clue in his letter to Swift, dated 16 November 1732, in which he briefly mentions his 'present

¹ This and subsequent quotations from *Achilles* are taken from *The Poetical Works of John Gay*, ed. G. C. Faber (London, 1926).

² See J. Loftis, *The Politics of Drama in Augustan England* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 111-12.

project', *Achilles*.¹ By presenting the Greek nobles and leaders in burlesque terms, Gay may be alluding satirically to the important figures of Court and Government during Walpole's ministry, but there is no way of being certain. After the banning of *Polly*, Gay realized that any further attempts at political satire on the stage would have to be very subtle to escape the same fate. If he did plan *Achilles* as a political satire, he was over-subtle in putting his plans into effect. A pamphlet called *Achilles Dissected* (1733),² which John Loftis describes as 'an inconsequential parody of efforts to find political meaning in plays',³ is not very illuminating, but it does illustrate the futility of trying to discover specific political references in *Achilles*.

At the opening of the ballad opera, Achilles is disguised as a girl (Pyrrha) by his mother, the goddess Thetis, to prevent him going to the Trojan War, in which she knows he will be killed:

I can't bear the Thoughts of your going, for I know that odious Siege of *Troy* wou'd be the Death of thee. (1, 1)

Thetis leaves 'Pyrrha' at the Court of Lycomedes, who is immediately attracted by 'her' and, with the help of Diphilus, sets about plans for 'her' seduction. Lycomedes's wife, Theaspe, suspects that her husband is pursuing 'Pyrrha' and becomes very jealous. She plans to marry 'Pyrrha' to her nephew, Periphias, in order to put 'Pyrrha' out of Lycomedes's reach. Achilles's reaction to his predicament, especially after Lycomedes tries to rape him, is understandable:

When shall I appear as I am, and extricate my self out of this Chain of Perplexities! — I have no sooner escap'd being ravish'd but I am immediately to be made a Wife. (11, 10)

Theaspe employs her daughter, Deidamia, to spy on 'Pyrrha', but Deidamia falls in love with the disguised Achilles when she finds out who 'Pyrrha' really is, and becomes pregnant by him. In the

¹ *The Letters of John Gay*, ed. C. F. Burgess (Oxford, 1966), p. 131.

² The full title is *Achilles Dissected: Being a Compleat Key Of the Political Characters In that New Ballad Opera, Written by the late Mr. Gay. An Account of the Plan upon which it is founded. With Remarks upon the Whole*. The title-page names the author as Mr Burnet, and the pamphlet, written in the form of a letter, is signed 'Alex. Burnet', but Nicoll (op. cit., p. 241 n) says the real author was thought to be Guthry.

³ Op. cit., p. 111 n.

end, Ulysses discovers Achilles, who marries Deidamia and then sets off for the Trojan War.

Even from this very brief synopsis, it should be clear that the action centres on the mistaken identity and mistaken sex of Achilles-Pyrrha, a typical device of farce. Where one would expect dignified conduct, solemn situations, and lofty eloquence, one is presented with stereotyped comic figures speaking humorous prose in a series of ludicrous scenes. Instead of a noble or a tragic love, there are the unceasing marital quarrels of Lycomedes and Theaspe, Lycomedes's unsuccessful attempts at adultery with 'Pyrrha', and Deidamia's desperate efforts to persuade the reluctant Achilles to marry her. In every way Gay thwarts conventional expectations. He achieves burlesque by inverting the usual characteristics of Italian opera and Augustan tragedy, but in the opposite way to *The Beggar's Opera*. In that work, criminals are elevated to the status of heroes, whereas in *Achilles*, epic characters are deprived of their heroic attributes and rendered as vulnerable human beings. As F. W. Bateson rightly observes in his *English Comic Drama 1700-1750* (1929):

Gay has adopted the old myth and the legendary figures . . . but he has treated them as if they had been his own contemporaries of the eighteenth century. (p. 98)

Bateson adds that the 'effect is belittling', which is true, but that 'it is not belittling in the way a burlesque is', which is debatable, to say the least. It is surely impossible in the case of *Achilles* to interpret the 'belittling' except as burlesque. By reducing Achilles, Ajax and the others to human proportions, Gay is demonstrating that the extremely noble presentation of such characters in contemporary opera and tragedy is preposterous and unconvincing.

Although the deliberate debasement of epic material to the level of farce inevitably results in dramatic burlesque, there is no parody in *Achilles* and even less verbal burlesque than in *The Beggar's Opera*. There are also fewer situational parallels to contemporary opera and tragedy than in *The Beggar's Opera*. The satirical burlesque is therefore general rather than specific, more implicit than explicit, but on occasion it manifests itself so clearly that there is absolutely no doubt about Gay's intentions. The

scene in which Lycomedes attempts to seduce 'Pyrrha', one of the few really excellent parts of the play, is brilliant comedy, but much of the humour derives from the implied but unmistakable contrast with the serious treatment of similar situations in sentimental drama. Lycomedes believes that Achilles's determined rejections of his advances are those 'little Arts of Women' essential to a woman's pride and self-esteem and also employed to tantalize and excite men to extreme passion. Achilles is actually trying very hard to calm Lycomedes down in order to prevent the King from discovering the true identity of 'Pyrrha'. The situation itself is commonplace in sentimental plays. It is the struggle of innocence and virtue, represented by a naive virgin or a woman of honour, against corruption and vice, embodied in a sophisticated rake. In *Achilles*, the question of which is stronger is quickly settled because the 'naive virgin' turns out to be a heroic warrior. As in sentimental plays, virtue is triumphant, but the method here is brute force. When Lycomedes tries to rape 'Pyrrha', Achilles pushes him away violently, throws him to the ground, and pins him there while he sings a very moral song that is extremely ironical:

*What Heart hath not Courage, by Force assail'd,
To brave the most desperate Fight?
'Tis Justice and Virtue that hath prevail'd;
Power must yield to Right.*

(II, 4, AIR XXVII)

Lycomedes may believe that he has been 'got the better of' by a woman, but the audience knows exactly why justice and virtue 'hath prevail'd'. In producing a splendid piece of knockabout farce, Gay has achieved a superb burlesque of sentimental moralizing.

What makes this scene so effective is that the dialogue, particularly in the early stages, could almost be from a serious version of the same situation in a sentimental play. After the initial polite exchanges, Lycomedes makes clear to 'Pyrrha' exactly what he is after, but his manner is stilted and formal:

I know there are a thousand necessary Affectations of Modesty, which Women, in Decency to themselves, practice with common Lovers before Compliance. — But my Passion, *Pyrrha*, deserves some Distinction. (II, 4)

Achilles, keeping up his part of the innocent girl outraged by the King's suggestions, answers Lycomedes in an appropriately moral tone:

I know my Duty, Sir; and, had it not been for that Sycophant *Diphilus*, perhaps you had known yours. (II, 4)

The verbal humour reaches its peak with a mock love-duet immediately before Lycomedes's attempted rape and its vigorous repulse. The vocal line alternates between Lycomedes and Achilles in the manner of operatic love-duets, but the kind of love sung about, Lycomedes's uncontrollable lust, is the antithesis of the selfless and noble love usually found in opera:

LYCOMEDES	<i>Why such Affection?</i>
ACHILLES	<i>Why this Provocation?</i>
LYCOMEDES	<i>Must I bear Resistance still!</i>
ACHILLES	<i>Check your Inclination.</i>
LYCOMEDES	<i>Dare you then deny me?</i>
ACHILLES	<i>You too far may try me.</i>
LYCOMEDES	<i>Must I then against your Will!</i>
ACHILLES	<i>Force shall never ply me.</i>

(II, 4, AIR XXVI)

Another good burlesque of operatic love-duets is '*Then must I bear eternal Strife*' (I, 6, AIR XII), which is part of a typical husband and wife row between Lycomedes and Theaspe.

Gay's burlesque of opera and tragedy probably becomes most overt in his treatment of the code of honour and the concomitant conflict between love and honour. From the very opening of the play, Achilles exhibits enormous concern for his honour. His first words, 'But my Character! my Honour! — Wou'd you have your Son live with Infamy?', establish that he regards life without honour as considerably worse than death. He even seems to think that an honourable death is the highest state man can attain: 'Were I allow'd to follow my Inclinations, what wou'd you have to fear? — I shou'd do my Duty, and die with Honour. — Was I to live an Age, I cou'd do no more. (I, 1)

Achilles easily out-Hotspurs Hotspur. His mother's commonsensical replies to his outbursts have no effect on him, but they do expose his notion of honour as childish posturing. Her remarks consequently deflate the heroics of opera and tragedy. Thetis tells her son that she does have 'a tender Regard' for his honour, but

her conception of honour is much more down-to-earth than his; she regards life as rather more important:

My will, *Achilles*, is not to be controverted. Your Life depends upon your Duty; and positively, Child, you shall not go to this Siege. (I, 1)

Throughout this first scene, Gay is deriding the notion of honour upheld in Italian opera and heroic tragedy. He removes it from the hothouse environment of these forms and places it in a comic context that provides a way of passing judgement on it.

Achilles's involvement with Deidamia necessarily leads to a clash between his sense of honour and his love. In the only scene in which they are alone together, Achilles berates himself for not being true to his honour by compromising himself with a woman. He envies Periphas because 'His Honour, his Fame, his Glory is not shackled by a Woman'. At the opening of the encounter, the pregnant Deidamia's interpolations form an extremely ironic commentary on Achilles's self-pitying protestations, revealing his honour to be a heartless and egotistical vanity:

ACHILLES	Was there ever a Man in so whimsical a Circumstance!
DEIDAMIA	Was there ever a Woman in so happy and so unhappy a one as mine!
ACHILLES	Why did I submit? why did I plight my Faith thus infamously to conceal my self? — What is become of my Honour?
DEIDAMIA	Ah <i>Pyrrha</i> , <i>Pyrrha</i> , what is become of mine!
ACHILLES	When shall I behave my self as a Man!
DEIDAMIA	Wou'd you had never behav'd yourself as one! (II, 10)

By incongruously putting a typical hero into the 'low' situation of a man who has made a girl pregnant and who wants to avoid marriage, Gay has discovered an ingenious way of demolishing the usual operatic and tragic conception of honour. In Achilles's case, honour simply becomes an excuse for refusing to face up to his responsibilities to Deidamia and her unborn child. His argument that Deidamia cannot truly love him 'if in every Circumstance of Life you have not a just Regard for my Honour' is utterly specious. In the circumstances, true honour, as opposed to the highly theatrical honour represented by Achilles, would manifest itself in a compassionate response to Deidamia's physical and emotional state, as she herself recognizes:

But, my dear *Pyrrha* . . . only imagine what must be the Consequence of a Month or two. — Think of my unhappy Condition. — To save my Shame (if you are a Man of Honour) you must then come to some Resolution. (II, 10)

Gay approaches the subject of honour somewhat differently in his presentation of Ajax, another man obsessed with honour. Ajax does not make his appearance until near the end of the play, but he is known to have succumbed to the charms of 'Pyrrha' and to believe himself to be Periphas's rival for 'her' hand. Although Periphas is not at all keen on the match, Ajax is convinced that Periphas has slighted his honour. The scene in which Ajax confronts Periphas consequently gives Gay a fine opportunity to continue his ridicule of the operatic and tragic code of honour, and he makes the most of it. Ajax is so busy uttering all the clichés about honour expected of theatrical heroes that he is quite incapable of explaining to Periphas the reason for his anger. At first, Ajax is completely inarticulate:

This Renconter, *Periphas*, is as I wish'd. — The Liberties you have taken — you know what I mean — when my Honour is concern'd — an Indignity and all that! — 'Tis not to be put up; and I must insist upon an Explanation. — There is a particular Affair, my Lord. —

(III, 3)

The tone resembles that of a peevish child who is hurt because someone is playing with his toy. Periphas replies to Ajax's 'elevated' rant with a series of courteous and perfectly reasonable remarks that are as devastating as Deidamia's ironies at the expense of Achilles's honour in the scene mentioned above:

AJAX	Death, my Lord, I explain! I am not come here to be ask'd Questions. — 'Tis sufficient that I know the Affront, and that you know I will have Satisfaction. — So, now you are answer'd —
PERIPHAS	I can't say much to <i>my</i> Satisfaction, my Lord; for I can't so much as guess at your meaning.
AJAX	A Man of Honour, <i>Periphas</i> , is not to be trifled withal.
PERIPHAS	But a Man of Honour, <i>Ajax</i> , is not oblig'd in Courage to be unintelligible.
AJAX	I hate talking. — The Tongue is a Woman's Weapon. Whenever I am affronted; by the Gods, this Sword is my only Answer.
PERIPHAS	'Tis not, <i>Ajax</i> , that I decline the Dispute, or wou'd upon any Account deny you the Pleasure of fighting;

yet (if it is not too much Condescension in a Man of Honour) before I fight I wou'd willingly know the Provocation.

(III, 3)

That Ajax can keep a straight face and continue to take himself very seriously when answered so politely and intelligently reveals him to be little more than a thick-skinned, narcissistic and bad-tempered lout. He pays great allegiance to his honour, but in his mouth the word is synonymous with puerile resentment. He is the schoolboy bully trying to get his own back because someone has obtained an advantage over him. Stepping on his honour is virtually the same as stepping on his toe, as Periphas recognizes:

Now in my Opinion 'tis flinging away your Courage to fight without a Cause; though indeed the Men of uncommon Prowess, by their loving to make the most of every Quarrel, seem to think the contrary.

(III, 3)

Ajax is evidently a lineal descendant of Buckingham's Drawcansir.

In the final scene, Ajax is the source of more burlesque humour, but this is fairly insignificant. The happy ending demands a reconciliation of all the conflicts in the play, and Gay does not allow the burlesque element to obtrude, but the scenes immediately before the final scene are very different. As soon as Achilles's true identity is revealed, the struggle between his love and his honour becomes much more urgent than earlier in the play. The aim of Ulysses, Diomedes and Agyrtes, the three Greek leaders who unmask Achilles, is to transport him to Troy as quickly as possible so that the Greek assault can be given a new ferocity and impetus. Deidamia, on the other hand, is equally determined that he should not go. Her pregnancy is now impossible to hide, and she is greatly distressed at the thought of being abandoned by Achilles:

DEIDAMIA	Think of my Condition. — Save my Honour.
ULYSSES	Think of the Honour of <i>Greece</i> .
DEIDAMIA	Think of your solemn Oaths and Promises.
ULYSSES	Nations depend upon you. — Victory, Sir, calls you hence.
DEIDAMIA	Can you, <i>Achilles</i> , be perfidious?
ULYSSES	Can you lose your Glory in the Arms of a Woman?
DEIDAMIA	Can you sacrifice the Fame of your faithful <i>Deidamia</i> ?

(III, 11)

Achilles oscillates between these two forces like a pendulum. When Agyrtes blows a trumpet, Achilles is so enthralled at the prospect of battle and noble action that he is unaware of anything else, but after only one glance at the sad Deidamia, he unhesitatingly rejects honour for love. Yet as soon as the trumpet sounds again, he forgets Deidamia's existence and is instantly transformed into a militant warrior. The speed and ease with which Achilles transfers his devotions is extremely funny, but what makes the burlesque so successful is that the 'epic hero', trapped between love and honour, has no will of his own. Achilles responds like a automaton or a Pavlovian dog to whatever stimulus is provided:

AIR XLVII. My Dame hath a lame tame Crane.

ULYSSES *Thy Fate, then, O Troy, is decreed.*
 DIOMEDES *How I pant!*
 ACHILLES *How I burn for the Fight.*
 DIOMEDES *Hark, Glory calls.*
 ACHILLES *Now great Hector shall bleed.*
 AGYRTES *Fame shall our Deeds requite.*

(As *Achilles* is going off, he turns and looks on *Deidamia*.)

AIR XLVIII. *Geminiani's* Minuet.

ACHILLES *Beauty weeps. — Ah, why that Languish?*
 See she calls and bids me stay.
 How can I leave her? my Heart feels her Anguish.
 Hence, Fame and Glory. Love wins the Day.

(He drops the Sword and Shield, Trumpet sounds, and takes 'em up again.)

AIR My Dame hath a lame, &c. as before, Sung in Four Parts as a Catch.

ULYSSES *Thy Fate then, O Troy, is decreed.*
 ACHILLES *How I pant! How I burn for the Fight!*
 DIOMEDES *Hark, Glory calls. Now great Hector shall bleed.*
 AGYRTES *Fame shall our Deeds requite.*

(As they are going; *Achilles* stops with his eyes fix'd on *Deidamia*.
 (III, 10)

This scene is reminiscent of the best-known scene in *The Rehearsal*, that in which Volscius's struggle between love and honour is compared to the putting on and removing of his boots, but Gay is not merely going over the same ground that Buckingham had covered more than sixty years earlier, nor is he following Buckingham without reason. Despite the influence of neoclassicism,

heroic tragedies were still extremely popular at this time, and Gay's burlesque of the conflict between love and honour was as applicable to the theatre in 1733 as Buckingham's had been in 1671. Fielding's *Tom Thumb* (1730), later expanded into *The Tragedy of Tragedies* (1731), was also aimed at heroic tragedy and appeared only a couple of years before *Achilles*. Moreover, the presentation of Achilles's conflict in song at this point suggests that Gay's burlesque is directed particularly against Italian opera. Gay certainly handles the songs very effectively. His use of exactly the same words and music at each sound of the trumpet to demonstrate the temporary victory of honour over love makes Achilles's struggle seem completely mechanical, and therefore greatly enhances the burlesque humour. The next two songs continue the debate between love and honour, but these do not succeed in making Achilles such a ridiculous figure as the excellent ones just discussed.

In spite of a few excellent scenes, *Achilles* is not very satisfactory as either a play or a satirical burlesque. The burlesque of contemporary tragedy and opera is pervasive, but with the exception of the passages discussed, it lacks the precision of *The What D'Ye Call It* or even *The Beggar's Opera*; for the most part, it is simply not specific enough. Yet only on those occasions when the farcical humour is transmuted into fairly specific satirical burlesque does the play rise above the level of a rather facile classical travesty and become really worthwhile. *Achilles* would have been a better play if it had been a better dramatic burlesque. It lacks the clear sense of purpose and direction that makes *The What D'Ye Call It* one of the finest Augustan dramatic burlesques and that organizes the various strands of *The Beggar's Opera* into a coherent work of art. The powerful imaginative and intellectual pressure that lies behind these two works is only intermittently present in *Achilles*. Nevertheless, *Achilles* does not deserve to be dismissed or ignored as it usually has been by critics, who presumably have not examined the play closely enough to distinguish the admirable parts from their nondescript surroundings. The weaknesses of *Achilles* are obvious, but at its best it does extend the criticism to be found in his earlier satirical plays of the current dramatic forms and theatrical fashions that struck him as absurd and that violated the Augustan aesthetic values he treasured.