

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-07025-6 - Hogarth's London: Pictures of the Manners of the
Eighteenth Century
Henry Benjamin Wheatley
Excerpt
[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To those who live in the twentieth century a study of the manners of the eighteenth century is singularly fascinating, as that is near enough for its aims to be understood and its philosophy to be sympathised with, and yet distant enough to be fresh and piquant to those of a later age.

It may be said to have been, not so very long ago, the Cinderella of the Centuries, inasmuch as many writers have not tired in declaiming against it. Mr. Frederic Harrison is its most valiant defender, and completely answers the unmeasured abuse of Carlyle.¹ He justly styles it 'the turning epoch of the modern world,' and asserts that although it was an age of prose, it was not prosaic. We are just at the right distance from this period to judge it without bias. At present the nineteenth century is too near us to be treated historically. Therefore we ought to understand the eighteenth century better, and to admire it in spite of its glaring faults. We know it better than most other centuries, because

¹ 'The age of prose, of lying, of sham, the fraudulent bankrupt century, the reign of Beelzebub, the peculiar era of Cant.'

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-07025-6 - Hogarth's London: Pictures of the Manners of the
Eighteenth Century
Henry Benjamin Wheatley
Excerpt
[More information](#)

its authors have painted the manners and social life of their times more minutely than the authors of previous periods have done theirs. It was specially a friendly social century, and as we read the pages of Fielding, Richardson, Boswell, Walpole, Cowper, Fanny Burney, and Jane Austen we follow the life of the time in all its phases with breathless interest.

What is most striking in this body of literature is that all classes are depicted. We never tire of reading of the men and women who were divided by artificial barriers into different worlds. What did Walpole's world know of Johnson's world? what did Cowper care for either?

There was, however, one man who did more than all the others put together to help us to understand the life of the eighteenth century—at all events how it was lived by Londoners, for he appeals to the eye as well as to the intellect; and that man was Hogarth. He was seldom absent from London, and no day passed without his eye finding something to record—a line if not a picture, perhaps a thumbnail sketch for future enlargement. Hogarth was immediately recognised by his contemporaries as a great pictorial satirist, and it was not long before his engravings became well known abroad. It has, however, taken longer for his other great qualities to be universally acknowledged.

Horace Walpole had a great admiration for Hogarth, and he was one of the first to set the fashion of collecting Hogarth's prints. In com-

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-07025-6 - Hogarth's London: Pictures of the Manners of the
Eighteenth Century
Henry Benjamin Wheatley
Excerpt
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

3

mencing the chapter on this great artist in his *Anecdotes of Painting* (vol. iv. 1771), he writes: 'Having dispatched the herd of our painters in oil, I reserved to a class by himself that great and original genius, Hogarth; considering him rather as a writer of comedy with a pencil, than as a painter. If catching the manners and follies of an age *living as they rise*, if general satire on vices and ridicules, familiarized by strokes of nature, and heightened by wit, and the whole animated by proper and just expressions of the passions be comedy, Hogarth composed comedies as much as Molière; in his "Marriage à la Mode" there is even an intrigue carried on throughout the piece. He is more true to character than Congreve; each personage is distinct from the rest, acts in his sphere, and cannot be confounded with any other of the *dramatis personæ*.'

Carrying on his comparison of Hogarth with the great French dramatist, Walpole writes: 'Molière, inimitable as he has proved, brought a rude theatre to perfection. Hogarth had no model to follow and improve upon. He created his art and used colours instead of language.'

Mr. Austin Dobson has drawn attention to an article in the *Gray's Inn Journal*, Feb. 9, 1754, apparently written by Arthur Murphy, in which Walpole's description of the painter as a 'writer of comedy with a pencil' is forestalled. Replying to Voltaire, who had been accusing the English of a

lack of genius for Painting and Music, the author of this article wrote: 'Hogarth, like a true genius, has formed a new school of Painting for himself. He may be truly styled the Cervantes of his art, as he has exhibited with such a masterly hand the ridiculous follies of Human Nature. . . . He may be said to be the first, who has wrote Comedy with his pencil. His "Harlot's Progress," and "Marriage à la Mode" are, in my opinion, as well drawn as anything in Molière, and the unity of character which is the perfection of Dramatic Poetry, is so skilfully preserved, that we are surprised to see the same personage thinking agreeably to his complexional habits in the many different situations in which we afterwards perceive him.'

Mr. Dobson also quotes from a literary case in July 1773, when Lord Gardenstone, a Scottish judge, after defining Hogarth as 'the only true original author which this age has produced in England,' went on: 'I can read his works over and over . . . and every time I peruse them I discover new beauties, and feel fresh entertainment.'

Fielding was one of Hogarth's greatest admirers. The first time we find their names united was in 1731, when Hogarth engraved a frontispiece for Fielding's *Tragedy of Tragedies*. In the preface to his first novel, *Joseph Andrews*, the novelist takes the earliest opportunity of introducing a brilliant criticism of the artist's insight in his own remarks on the Ridiculous: 'He who should call the ingenious

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-07025-6 - Hogarth's London: Pictures of the Manners of the
Eighteenth Century
Henry Benjamin Wheatley
Excerpt
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

Hogarth a burlesque painter, would, in my opinion, do him very little honour: for sure it is much easier, much less the subject of admiration, to paint a man with a nose, or any other feature of a preposterous size, or to expose him in some absurd or monstrous attitude, than to express the affections of men on canvas. It hath been thought a vast commendation of a painter, to say his figures seem to breathe; but surely, it is a much greater and nobler applause, that they appear to think.' In *Tom Jones* the references to Hogarth are continually occurring as illustrations of some of the characters.

Three great writers, about the same time, claimed the highest position in his art for Hogarth: Coleridge in 1809, Charles Lamb in 1811, and Hazlitt in 1814. Hazlitt classes Hogarth with the Comic Writers, and Lamb says: 'His graphic representations are indeed books. They have the teeming, fruitful, suggestive meaning of *words*. Other pictures we look at—his prints we read.'¹ Coleridge beautifully expresses his appreciation of that sense of beauty which many ignorantly denied to Hogarth. He writes in *The Friend* (No. 16, Dec. 7, 1809): 'One of those beautiful female faces which

¹ A great friend of Charles Lamb was amusingly enthusiastic on Hogarth's art. This was Martin Burney, son of Admiral James Burney, and nephew of Dr. Charles Burney. Barry Cornwall (B. W. Procter) in his *Memoirs of Lamb* (1866) thus refers to Martin: 'The last time I saw Burney was at the corner of a street in London, when he was overflowing on the subject of Raffaele and Hogarth. After a long and prolonged struggle, he said he had arrived at the conclusion that Raffaele was the greater man of the two.'

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-07025-6 - Hogarth's London: Pictures of the Manners of the
Eighteenth Century
Henry Benjamin Wheatley
Excerpt
[More information](#)

6

HOGARTH'S LONDON

Hogarth, in whom the satyrist never extinguished that love of beauty which belonged to him as a Poet, so often and so gladly introduces as the central figure in a crowd of humorous deformities, which figure (such is the power of true genius!) neither acts nor is meant to act as a contrast; but diffuses through all, and over each of the group a spirit of reconciliation and human kindness; and even when the attention is no longer consciously directed to the cause of this feeling, still blends its tenderness with our laughter; and thus prevents the instructive merriment at the whims of nature or the foibles of our fellow-men from degenerating into the heart poison of contempt or hatred.'

Walter Savage Landor wrote to John Forster: 'What nonsense I see written of Hogarth's defects as a colourist. He was in truth far more than the most humorous, than the most pathetic, and most instructive, of painters. He excelled at once in composition, in drawing and in colouring; and of what other can we say the same? In his portraits he is as true as Gainsborough, as historical as Titian.'

The need of acknowledging the realism of Hogarth's art is very important for our present purpose, as half the value of it to us would be lost if we did not understand the truthfulness of his work. We have the authority of Walpole for this.

In a letter to Sir David Dalrymple (Lord Hailes), Dec. 11, 1780, he writes, 'I believe, Sir, that I may have been overcandid to Hogarth, and that his

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-07025-6 - Hogarth's London: Pictures of the Manners of the
Eighteenth Century
Henry Benjamin Wheatley
Excerpt
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

7

spirit and youth and talent may have hurried him into more real caricatures than I specified; yet he certainly restrained his bent that way pretty early.’¹

Although so just and full of praise, for one side of Hogarth's art, Walpole was singularly blind to his merits on the technical side, for he says, ‘As a painter he had but slender merit.’ The distinction of his paintings was strangely ignored in his own time, and was not generally acknowledged until 1814, when fifty of his original pictures were exhibited at the British Institution. Richard Payne Knight, the writer of the preface to the Catalogue, ventured to praise the high qualities of his work, and he somewhat timidly wrote, ‘His pictures often display beautiful colouring as well as accurate drawing.’

When the public had the opportunity of seeing Hogarth's original pictures, and were able to criticise them as distinct from his engravings, they began to realise that the painter was a great master worthy to rank with the chief of his predecessors; they found that, besides being a writer of comedy with a pencil, he was a brilliant artist in colour as well as in draughtsmanship.

During a severe illness when James Whistler was little over twelve years old, he had the opportunity of studying a large volume of Hogarth's engravings. His mother relates that he said on one occasion, ‘Oh how I wish I were well, I want so to show these engravings to my drawing master,

¹ *Letters*, ed. Cunningham, vol. vii. p. 472.

it is not every one who has a chance of seeing Hogarth's own engravings of his originals,' and then added, in his own happy way, 'And if I had not been ill, mother, perhaps no one would have thought of showing them to me.'

Mr. and Mrs. Pennell remark: 'From this time until his death Whistler always believed Hogarth to be the greatest English artist who ever lived, and he seldom lost an opportunity of saying so. The long attack of illness in 1847 is therefore memorable as the beginning of his love of Hogarth, which became an article of faith with him.'¹

In an article by Mr. Sidney Colvin (*Portfolio*, iii. p. 153), Hogarth's high qualities as a painter are ungrudgingly praised:

'Hogarth, in his best works, catches with a perfect subtlety the colour of rich or poor apparel, indoor furniture and outdoor litter, the satin, bows, jewels, ribbons of the bride, the fur coat and hose and waistcoat of the beau, lace, silk, velvet, broadcloth, spangles, and brocade, rich carpets, rich wall hangings, the look of pictures on the wall; or, on the other hand, the coarse appurtenances of the market-place or the street crossing: he catches them, and their tone and relations in the indoor or outdoor atmosphere with a perfect subtlety and sense of natural harmony. And not only so, but without a school, and without a precedent (for he is no imitator of the Dutchmen) he has

¹ *Life of J. M. Whistler*, by E. R. and J. Pennell, 1908, vol. i. p. 21.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07025-6 - Hogarth's London: Pictures of the Manners of the Eighteenth Century

Henry Benjamin Wheatley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

9

found a way of expressing what he sees with the clearest simplicity, richness and directness.'

Sir Walter Armstrong, in his Essay prefixed to Dobson's folio edition of his *Hogarth*, has done full justice to Hogarth's claim to a high place as a painter. He styles him a creator of beauty, a master of grace and a perfect craftsman, affirming that his 'supreme achievement as a painter lies in the completeness with which he gave artistic expression to ideas which were not essentially pictorial in themselves.'

Now his position as a painter has been completely established, and we can forgive the ill-judged remarks of Walpole, in the spirit of which, by the way, he was supported by the opinion of many of his contemporaries.

While pointing out Hogarth's high position when he followed his natural bent, we have regretfully to acknowledge that he had his limits, and it is necessary to refer to the mistake he made when he endeavoured to essay a style entirely unsuited to his genius, although even in his religious subjects there are merits which have been unfairly overlooked.

Mr. Dobson quotes the painter's extraordinary utterance respecting the great style of history painting, where he appears to value the Scripture scenes at St. Bartholomew's Hospital (1736) more than such pictures as the 'Harlot's Progress.'

Hogarth in his autobiography writes—'I have endeavoured to treat my subjects as a dramatic

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-07025-6 - Hogarth's London: Pictures of the Manners of the
Eighteenth Century
Henry Benjamin Wheatley
Excerpt
[More information](#)

10 HOGARTH'S LONDON

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. Before I had done anything of much consequence in this walk, I entertained some hopes of succeeding in what the puffers in books call the great style of History painting; so that without having had a stroke of this grand business before, I quitted small portraits and familiar conversations, and with a smile at my own temerity, commenced history painter, and on a great staircase at St. Bartholomew's, painted two Scripture stories, "The Pool of Bethesda" and "The Good Samaritan," with figures seven feet high.¹

It is impossible with any success to compare Hogarth with other painters, as he stands absolutely alone. Mr. Dobson writes: 'He was an exceptional genius, not to be conveniently ticketed off, by any preconceived theory respecting his race, his epoch, or his environment.'

We can now pass on to consider Hogarth as a delineator of manners and an illustrator of London Topography.

The manners and morals of a period form complex subjects for consideration. In order therefore to obtain any true understanding of the time, it is necessary to sort out the various subjects into classes, and when we have done this we shall find

¹ *Anecdotes of W. Hogarth, written by Himself.* Edited by J. B. Nichols. London, 1833, p. 9.