

John Gay Biography

John Gay

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Contents

[John Gay Biography.....1](#)

[Contents.....2](#)

[Biography.....3](#)



Biography

The English playwright and poet John Gay (1685-1732) is best known for "The Beggar's Opera," a skillful blend of literary, political, social, and musical satire.

John Gay was born on June 30, 1685, in Barnstaple, Devonshire. Orphaned at age 10, he was sent to the local grammar school until, aged about 17, he was apprenticed to a silk dealer in London. Possibly because of illness, he was released from this apprenticeship in 1706 and returned to Barnstaple. In 1708 he became Aaron Hill's secretary, helping especially with Hill's question-and-answer periodical paper, the *British Apollo*. That year Gay published his first poem, *Wine*; his first published prose, *The Present State of Wit*, a critical account of all the current journals, appeared in 1711.

Gay was domestic steward in the household of the Duchess of Monmouth from 1712 to 1714. Something between a secretary and a wit in residence, Gay gained financial security and freedom to write without loss of independence. As a result, 1713 was a most productive year for him, with the publication of six poems, at least two essays, and a play. The play, *The Wife of Bath*, was a failure; one poem, *The Fan*, was popular enough to establish a poetic fad.

The Shepherd's Week (1714) is a set of six pastorals in which English rural life is realistically portrayed. Gay's literary burlesque *The What D'ye Call It* (1715) was moderately successful. His wonderful three-book poem *Trivia: or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London*, published by subscription in 1716 to much acclaim and to the financial relief of the unemployed Gay, was deservedly praised for its originality, humor, and vivid accuracy.

Another play, *Three Hours after Marriage*, was produced in 1716 without great success. The next few years were marked by the successful publication of his collection *Poems* (1720), the libretto for G. F. Handel's *Acis and Galatea* (1722), and a tragedy, *The Captives* (1724). *Gay's Fables* (1727) was long popular with both adults and children.

The Beggar's Opera opened on Jan. 29, 1728, and ran for 62 nights--an unprecedented number--in its first season. This ballad opera, with music by John Pepusch, is a satirical picture of life among London's pickpockets, prostitutes, and highwaymen. Though the sequel, *Polly* (1729), also with music by Pepusch, was banned from performance, its publication brought Gay £ 1,000. Plagued by ill health, he died on Dec. 4, 1732.