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**EN330 Eighteenth Century Literature**

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**“A public sphere that functioned in the political realm arose first in Great Britain at the turn of the eighteenth-century.” (Jürgen Habermas)**

**Discuss the relationship between satire and the concept of public opinion in the eighteenth-century**

The eighteenth-century has been identified by historians and sociologists as the period in which public opinion and the unrestricted exercise of public reason first emerged. Jürgen Habermas’ sociological-historical study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), is a seminal work which has contributed massively to Eighteenth-Century Studies’ understanding of the origins of public opinion. This essay explores the relationship between the concept of public opinion and the practice of satire in the eighteenth-century, using the work of satirists John Gay and Jonathan Swift to evaluate Habermas’ argument that the birth of a bourgeois public sphere led to the flourishing of a rational-critical public debate. It argues that satire in the eighteenth-century was a critical component of the newly-formed, politically engaged public sphere due to its dual-function of both reflecting and shaping public opinion.The importance of satire to public discourse is examined in two ways. I will initially examine the dual-function of satire, assessing the role of the satirist in both representing and shaping public opinion. This analysis will demonstrate how satiric tropes reflect the emergence of a party-political culture in which power is no longer concentrated in the hands of the monarch. A focus on the theatre will then seek to place pressure on aspects of Habermas’ historicization of public opinion, speculating on the significance of his omission of the theatre-house from his theoretical framework.

Habermas locates the origins of public opinion in England at a historical moment when the centrality of the monarch’s court was undermined by the foundation of urban spaces which initiated the functioning of a bourgeois public sphere. He states that after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the court ‘lost its central position in the public sphere,’ commenting how the ‘great ceremonial gave way to an almost bourgeois intimacy’ (Habermas, 31). He argues that the court was transformed from an establishment symbolic of glory and ceremonial splendour to an exclusive, secluded domain, leading to a transferral of political authority to new urban spaces in the town. These places, including coffee-houses and salons, assumed the ‘social function’ of the court and became hubs for political discourse (32). The prevalence of rational-critical public debate in the bourgeois public sphere was compounded, however, by the rise of a literary opposition or ‘fourth estate’ constructed by the Tories in their political exile under George I. Lord Bolingbroke spearheaded the formulation of a political journalism which enabled the ‘ongoing commentary on and criticism of the Crown’s actions and Parliament’s decisions’ (60). The Tory press was part of a much wider literary opposition in which satire played a vital part in its function of both reflecting and shaping public opinion.

The role of satire in the mirroring and shaping of public opinion demonstrates its importance to the rational-critical discourse which, as Habermas states, held the actions of King and Parliament up for public scrutiny. Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728) offer both vehement, caustic critiques of the corruption of the Hanoverian Whig regime as well as more playful, mocking caricatures of public officials, namely the first Prime Minister of Great Britain, Robert Walpole. The distinction between Juvenalian and Horatian satiric tropes in both texts offers a useful means of assessing the relationship between satire and public opinion, as the dark, vehement diatribes characteristic of Juvenalian satire contrast with the more tolerant, ironic nature of Horatian satire. Horatian satiric tropes primarily mirror public opinion. Subtle innuendo and ambiguous allusions express popular discontent at the corruption of Robinocracy yet there is seemingly no driving call for political change. The episode of the Lilliputians in *Gulliver’s Travels* is an archetypally Horatian satiric parody of Hanoverian Whig politics. The depiction of Flimnap, the statesman who is the royal favourite in Lilliput, is an explicit allusion to the favour shown by both George I and George II to Robert Walpole. The custom of dancing on a rope to gain political office ridicules Walpole’s rise to power and the suggestion that on one occasion he would have broken his neck if the King hadn’t intervened alludes to how Walpole avoided censure during the 1720 South Sea Bubble Crisis and was able, after the deaths of Whig leaders Sunderland and Stanhope, to consolidate his position as first minister. In making subtle, mocking references to Walpole, Swift’s satire reflects the critical discussions of the coffee-houses which, as Habermas identifies, assumed the social function once held by the King’s court.

F. P. Lock has controversially argued that scholars have persistently misread *Gulliver’s Travels* in viewing such allusions as metaphorical substitutions for specific historical figures. Criticising the ‘wild goose-chase’ to illuminate the real-life figures behind the fictional facades, Lock argues that Swift’s intention was ‘to attack political corruption, not just its particular contemporary embodiment in the Walpole administration’ (89). The essence of Lock’s argument is that the nature of Swift’s satire is more general rather than specific in its critiques. This argument is rendered questionable, however, when considering the way in which Lock downplays the striking similarity between episodes in *Gulliver’s Travels* and historical reality. The articles of impeachment drawn-up against Gulliver by Flimnap and his subsequent escape to Blefuscu, for example, undoubtedly mirror the fates of Tory leaders Oxford and Bolingbroke who took refuge in France after being impeached on charges of Jacobitism in 1715. The fact that there was a relaxation of censorship laws at the turn of the century with the passing of the 1695 Licensing Act further undermines Lock’s argument. Habermas states how the legislation ‘made the influx of rational-critical arguments into the press possible’ and writers revelled in this newly granted freedom, poking fun at maligned public officials when their actions, such as the impeachment of Jacobites, caused moral outrage in sections of the public sphere (58).

A more explicit reflection of public opinion on the issue of impeachment is seen in *The Beggar’s Opera*, a play which presents a society in which human life is assigned a monetary value in the form of an impeachment fee. The mercenary actions of Peachum reflect the public’s condemnation of Walpole’s corrupt means of maintaining power and the voicing of this public opinion, as in Swift’s satire, is achieved through Horatian satiric tropes. In Act 2 Scene 10, Peachum philosophizes on the nature of his profession to Lockit, commenting: ‘our employment may be reckoned dishonest, because, like great statesmen, we encourage those who betray their friends’ (2813). The audience recognize the obvious allusion to Walpole, the subject of a great deal of public criticism. The playful nature of the Horatian allusion is emphasized by the fact that Walpole himself laughed at the reference when he was in the audience at a performance. As implicit and playful as the reference is, however, Gay is hyperaware of the risks involved when mocking public officials. After Lockit criticises the government’s slow payment of impeachment fees, he leads an air which is highly self-reflexive: ‘when you censure the age, be cautious and sage, lest the courtiers offended should be’ (2813). In a highly self-conscious moment of metatheatre, Gay suggests that satire has its boundaries and that it is wise to cloak references to specific political figures in ambiguity so as to avoid censorship, implying that the power of political authority hasn’t been completely undermined by the flourishing of rational-critical public discourse in the bourgeois public sphere.

In both Gay and Swift’s Horatian allusions to the corruption of the Hanoverian Whig regime, there is a mere reflection rather than a shaping of public opinion. It is in the more biting, Juvenalian critiques that satire’s influence on the public sphere is revealed, with the development of a party-political culture enabling these critiques to shape public opinion. For writers of Habermas’ fourth estate of literary opposition, the instigation of social change was a tangible reality at the beginning of the eighteenth-century as the political system of constitutional monarchy emerged. As J. Paul Hunter observes, the development of a party-political culture meant that every writer was bound to a political agenda in the public eye: ‘simply to name them called up strong positions and associations in the public mind’ (219). Swift and Gay, as members of the Scriblerus club, were vehemently opposed to the Hanoverian dynasty and their work often made the public sympathetic to the Jacobite cause. Swift even provoked civic unrest with an account of the uprising of the Lindalinians in part three of *Gulliver’s Travels*. Gulliver recounts how the Lindalinians refused to offer petitions to the King of Laputa and demanded political independence, threatening to destroy the flying-island if their demands weren’t met. The episode represents a caustic and potentially seditious attack on George I’s economic policy towards Ireland, alluding specifically to the ‘Wood’s Halfpence’ affair.

In 1722, the Whig government tasked William Wood with the minting of new copper coinage for the Irish economy. Swift was a fierce critic of the decision to grant Wood a patent and produced a series of pamphlets entitled the *Drapier’s Letters* which roused Irish opposition to the implementation of the policy and led to the British government cancelling its proposals. Combining emotive rhetoric with clinical economic rationale under the pseudonym of M.B. Drapier, Swift was unambiguous in his message to the Irish people: ‘stand to it One and All: refuse this *filthy trash.* It is no treason to rebel against Mr. Wood’ (Swift, 45). This spirit of defiance and fearlessness is replicated in the Lindalino passage as Gulliver recounts how ‘the Citizens were determined to fix it forever, to kill the King and all his Servants, and entirely change the Government’ (160). Swift, in the style of Juvenal, offers a damning denunciation of Whig economic policy and the reference to the killing of a monarch was considered particularly inflammatory given the fact that at the beginning of Walpole’s administration in 1722, the Whig authorities foiled an Irish Jacobite plot to assassinate George I.

Swift’s scathing criticism of Wood’s Halfpence undoubtedly reflects satire’s capacity to shape public opinion as it inspired Irish opposition to the implementation of government policy. Habermas’ argument that print opposition held the actions of parliament and monarch up for public scrutiny for the first time is substantiated with the Lindalino episode, although it is important not to overlook the significance of the newly emergent party-political culture as its establishment of the very concept of ‘opposition’ within a system of constitutional monarchy enabled Swift’s attack on the Hanoverian regime to take place. Political power, once concentrated in the hands of the King, was transferred to a public sphere in which writers were, as Hunter observes, closely affiliated with political parties. A simple reading of the passage as demonstrative of Habermas’ public sphere is problematic, however, considering the fact that it remained unprinted during Swift’s lifetime. In both Motte and Faulkner’s editions, the provocative passage was omitted, suggesting that the bourgeois public sphere hadn’t quite developed to the stage where the unrestricted exercise of public reason could flourish. Ian Higgins views the omission as a ‘cautious castration of the political attack on the established monarchy,’ an opinion which is more than credible given the fact that a Jacobite rebellion was crushed just 11 years prior to the publication of *Gulliver’s Travels* (62). The decision to remove the passage suggests that although satire influenced public opinion, the power of the court was not completely diminished in the way Habermas describes. Just as can be seen in the self-reflexive contemplation on censorship in *The Beggar’s Opera*, this omission from *Gulliver’s Travels* shows that satirists, on occasion, still had to soften their critiques.

In contrast to Swift’s seething attacks on Robinocracy, Gay’s satire appears, on the surface, to be less effective in its capacity to shape public opinion. Its tone is certainly more playful than it is denunciatory but it is in the specific *social* function of the theatre-house, an urban space equal to the coffee-houses of eighteenth-century England, that the influential quality of Gay’s satire is revealed. This is not to imply that *The Beggar’s Opera* is totally lacking in darker portrayals of human vice and corruption. Sven Armens comments that ‘beneath the laughing irony and jocular airs lies the spirit of the Tory satirists,’ a spirit characterized by gloom and pessimism (55). The pessimistic undercurrent to the play that Armens identifies is seen most clearly in the perverse commodification of social relations. Gay offers a proto-Marxist account of the reification of social relations in which relations between people have been transformed into relations between things. As lives are traded for impeachment fees with chilling indifference, social institutions such as marriage and human values such as love are rendered wholly incompatible with a world in which extortion and bribery rule. Peachum’s outrage on learning of his daughter’s marriage to Macheath, for example, represents how moral standards have been inverted: he rails against her foolishness, asserting that he doesn’t mind Polly ‘toying and trifling with a customer in the way of business’ but is vehemently opposed to the idea of marital monogamy (2796). The father-daughter relationship has been transformed into a commodity relation in which Polly is a sexual object to be profited from and her virginity has a monetary equivalent. The casual objectification of a daughter by her father would have induced moral outrage in the audience, a stark contrast to the playful, ironic references which induced laughter.

This dark undercurrent to the play represents a biting satirical jibe on the Walpole administration. Gay emphasizes how these perverse commodity relations in society mirror those of the court. Polly, when defending her marriage to her father, asserts: ‘a woman knows how to be a mercenary, though she hath never been in a court or at an assembly’ (2795). Gay shows how the ‘mercenary’ activities of characters in the play replicate those of politicians within the Hanoverian Whig government, an administration which was rife with the use of sinecures to buy-out potential political opponents. This criticism reflects Gay’s political beliefs as a member of the Scriblerus Club and it is within these darker, Juvenalian elements of Gay’s satire that the desire to influence public opinion is seen. Gay’s satire, however, is nowhere near as damning as Swift’s in its tone and this is due largely to the fact that his animosity towards Walpole wasn’t as virulent as Swift’s. At one point in his career, Gay hoped to gain preferment at court and it was only when he was overlooked that his allegiance to the political agenda of the Scriblerians grew stronger. As William McIntosh comments: ‘it was Swift who saw Walpole as damned, not Gay… Gay had been hurt, but not to the point of wanting to destroy himself’ (431). Even though he was bitter that his plans to become a statesman had been thwarted, his satirical jibes are less fierce than Swift’s as his hatred of Walpole wasn’t as deep-rooted and he didn’t wish to provoke the wrath of the most powerful politician in the country. Despite this, however, there is still a desire to influence the public sphere, as the audience’s unease at the reification of social relations implies that Gay wanted his audience to contemplate the effects of a corrupt Hanoverian government on society.

Yet the influence of Gay’s satire on public opinion is revealed more fully when focusing specifically on the social-function of the theatre-house in eighteenth-century England. In his historicization of public opinion, Habermas underestimates the importance of the theatre in the functioning of a public sphere, failing to acknowledge the specific social function of the theatre-house which, just like the coffee-houses and salons, was a central component of the bourgeois public sphere in its status as a centre of political engagement. Compared to the private, personal practice of novel-reading, the experience of going to the theatre is fundamentally a *social* experience as the audience gathering to see a play form a collective and it is within collectives that rational-critical public discourse can occur. Habermas identifies the threat posed to political authority by collective social organisation when he states that as early as the 1670s, the government considered coffee-houses to be ‘seedbeds of political unrest’ where universal feelings of disenfranchisement could be expressed (59). This observation is supported by the fact that increased urbanization led to a heightened political self-consciousness in eighteenth-century towns and cities. The historian H. T. Dickinson argues that rapid urban growth in the 1700s established the politically-mobilized crowd as a major force. He describes how ‘the most common and the most effective form of plebeian politics was the crowd demonstration and the riot’ (Dickinson, 125). The absence of a police force increased the severity of the threat posed by collectives causing disturbances.

Within such a context of heightened political self-consciousness in urban spaces, it seems short-sighted of Habermas not to include theatre-houses in the same category as coffee-houses within his theoretical framework. The seemingly playful, ironic nature of Gay’s satire can be seen to tap into collective feelings of political disempowerment through portraying universally recognized weaknesses in the political system as well as in society more generally. The air of ‘Green Sleeves,’ for example, seems to vent frustration at the universally recognized truth that the wealthy are always able to bribe their way out of punishment. Macheath, as he awaits execution, comments how ‘gold from law can take out the sting’ (2831). Gay can be seen to draw upon collective frustrations and the heightened awareness of inequality within the public sphere, stimulating discussion within the politically mobilized ‘crowd’ of the audience. This is not to suggest that he aims to provoke riots and demonstrations but, rather, that he treats the audience as a collective capable of engaging in the kind of rational-critical debate present in the coffee-houses.

The social function of the theatre-house also explains why Gay’s satire is more tolerant than Swift’s. Kate Loveman argues that Swift’s works were not written to be ‘silently pondered by an isolated reader’ but rather were ‘designed to cause a social sensation’ (154). This implies that Swift was *forced* into making his critiques biting and provocative, such as in the inflammatory Lindalino episode, in order to generate conversation in the public sphere. Gay, meanwhile, didn’t need to be inflammatory to instigate social discourse because his audience were already assembled as a critically-engaged, politically self-aware collective. The framing of the play by a beggar is an ironic reminder, however, that the collective assembled in the theatre-house is a *bourgeois* one very different to the ‘plebeian’ masses identified by Dickinson as the source of civic unrest in the towns and cities.

In conclusion, satire was instrumental to the functioning of a bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century English society. The vehement diatribes against the Whig government as well as the more playful caricatures of public officials reflect the dual-nature of satire in its capacity to both represent and shape public opinion. Swift and Gay were key figures within Habermas’ fourth estate of literary opposition and their stimulation of rational-critical discourse can be seen to reflect the emergence of a party-political culture in the eighteenth century. Habermas’ account of the history of the public sphere is clearly a seminal work in the understanding of the origins of public opinion yet some aspects of his theory are short-sighted in the way they overlook the significance of the theatre-house as a space in which, just as in the coffee-houses and salons, the exercise of public reason could flourish.

(3223 words)

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