JESL

Journal of Economic Studies in Literature

JESL, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2026, pp.1-24.

Print ISSN: 3107-3492; Online ISSN: 3107-3506

Journal homepage: https://www.jesljournal.com

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64058/jesl260101rsccf

HIEP Academic Publishing

Reward System, Commercial Crime, and Free Market Anxiety in Eighteenth-Century British Literature

Tao Jiusheng, Wu Libing

Abstract: In eighteenth-century Britain, commercial crime was rampant, and the mercantilist government, seeking to reduce crime and consolidate the emerging political order, instituted a reward system that rewarded citizens for reporting thefts, robberies, and other offenses. In effect, this system commercialized criminal activity and gave rise to a class of "commercial policemen". Characters in *The Beggar's Opera* and *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great* assume the role of these commercial agents, orchestrating "bloody enterprises", manipulating stolen goods markets, and accumulating wealth through the management of criminal gangs. Their operations serve as an allegory for the increasingly pervasive commercial crimes within Britain's free market. Under Prime Minister Walpole's corrupt regime, political processes and commercial activity were deeply intertwined. Corporations, merchants, and the mercantilist government commodified human beings and colluded with prison officials to exploit the populace for profit. These works portray the abandonment of moral sentiments in pursuit of economic gain, reflecting the disorder and instability of the free market and evoking eighteenth-century anxieties over the health of England's free-market economy and body politic.

Keywords: Reward System; Commercial Crime; Free Market Anxiety; *The Beggar's Opera*; *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great*

Received: 10 May 2026 / Revised: 15 May 2026 / Accepted: 01 Jun. 2026 / Published online: 15 Jun. 2026 / Print published: 25 Jun. 2026.

Author Biography: Tao Jiusheng (corresponding author), Ph.D, professor of Faculty of Foreign Languages, Hainan University; Principal Investigator of a Major Project funded by the National Social Science Fund of China; Research interests: English Renaissance literature, interdisciplinary literary studies. E-mail: taojiush@163.com. **Wu Libing**, postgraduate student at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ningbo University. E-mail: bingliwu1207@163.com.

标题：十八世纪英国文学中的赏金制度、商业犯罪与自由市场焦虑

摘要：18 世纪商业犯罪频发，重商主义政府为降低犯罪率及巩固新兴政权，颁布赏金制度，鼓励英国民众通过举报盗窃、抢劫等罪行获得高额赏金，这一制度在某种意义上使犯罪活动商业化，催生了“商业警察”这一群体。《乞丐的歌剧》与《大人物江奈生·魏尔德传》中的人物均担任“商业警察”角色，通过教唆或举报手下劫匪运营其商业犯罪集团，策划“血腥生意”、操控赃物市场以攫取利益、囤积财富，其商业运作方式隐喻自由市场中英国日益猖獗的各类商业犯罪案件。首相沃波尔腐败政权中，英国政治运作与商业活动高度交织，两部作品中的公司、商人与重商主义政府，为谋取经济利益将人商品化，与监狱狱警政商勾结，对百姓的肆意剥削，均展现他们沉迷商业利益而抛弃道德情操的情形，影射英国自由市场的混乱与失序，暗含 18 世纪英格兰社会的自由市场与政治（经济）身体健康焦虑。

关键词：赏金制度；商业犯罪；自由市场焦虑；《乞丐的歌剧》；《大人物江奈生·魏尔德传》

作者介绍：陶久胜（通讯作者），博士，海南大学外国语学院教授，国家社科基金重大项目首席专家，研究方向：英国文艺复兴文学、文学跨学科研究。邮箱：taojiush@163.com。**吴丽冰**，宁波大学外国语学院研究生。邮箱：bingliwu1207@163.com。

With “a large book of accounts before him” (I. i. 1), Mr. Peachum meticulously records, under the reward system, the monetary value of each criminal, as in the entry “For Tom Gagg, forty pounds” [①](I. ii. 12). As a London “commercial police officer” and the head of an underground criminal syndicate, Peachum runs his enterprise in a thoroughly commercialized fashion. He dispatches his subordinates to steal on his behalf and then, “in the common course of business” (I. ii. 18-19), calculates with precision their remaining utility. Once a thief’s profitability is exhausted, Peachum delivers him to the authorities to collect the reward. To prevent his son-in-law Macheath from exposing his operations out of greed for his property, Peachum resolves to “make gratitude give way to interest” (I. xi. 15), consigning Macheath to prison and agreeing with the jailer Lockit, as

[①] John, G. (1986). *The Beggar's Opera*, New York: Penguin Books, p. 43. All subsequent quotations from this work will be cited parenthetically by act, scene, and line number, and will not be otherwise noted.

customary, to "go halves in Macheath" (II. x. 3). Similarly, the "Great Man" Jonathan Wild assembles a large band of accomplices to carry out systematic robberies and establishes an "office" (130)[①] for the recovery of stolen goods. There he resells the plunder to its original owners at "the value only (or a little more) of their goods" (130), thereby constructing a "so thriving" (130) commercialized regime of organized crime. Within this ostensibly free market—sustained by deception and predation—the jeweller Heartfree, distinguished by his being "good-natured, friendly, and generous to a great excess" (69), falls victim to Wild's fraud and machinations and is unjustly imprisoned. In contrast to Wild's "insatiability" (75), Heartfree steadfastly maintains his commitment to "reason" (115) and "conscience" (127) even while incarcerated, and ultimately secures vindication, returning to the honest conduct of his trade. Heartfree's adherence to reason and conscience thus functions as a moral corrective to the anxieties surrounding the eighteenth-century English free market.

The foregoing discussion concerns episodes related to the reward system, commercialized crime, and anxieties about the free market in *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay and *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great* by Henry Fielding. Colin Nicholson (2004, p. 10), in his study of *The Beggar's Opera*, examines the ideology of monetary supremacy in the play and argues that it traces the transformation of money from a medium of exchange into the sovereign power and quasi-deity of the commodity world. James Thompson (1996, pp. 140-141), analyzing the criminal economy depicted in *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great*, contends that the thieves' economic activities constitute a zero-sum game in which money circulates continuously without generating any real surplus value. While these studies illuminate the conception of money and the nature of criminal economy in the respective works, they do not situate commercial crime within the historical context of the British reward system and the emergence of so-called "commercial police". In fact, both texts were composed at a moment marked by the rapid expansion of Britain's free market economy and the eruption of the Financial Revolution. Although the rise of this new economic order generated immense national wealth, it also intensified social problems of crime and corruption. In response to the increasingly severe threat to property, the reward system emerged as an institutional solution. Its implementation not only fostered a profit-driven class of "commercial police" but also accelerated the marketization of London's underground criminal networks. The criminal underworld portrayed in these two works should therefore not be read merely as a depiction of social marginality. Rather, it functions as a metaphorical microcosm of Britain's newly consolidated economic system in the eighteenth century. Against the historical backdrop of the reward system and the rise of commercial policing, this chapter examines how *The Beggar's Opera* and *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great* deploy the figure of the organized crime syndicate to allegorize the proliferation of commercial crimes within the free market economy. In doing so, they expose the extent to which

---

[①] Fielding, H. (1962). *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great*, New York: The New American Library, p. 130. All subsequent quotations from this work will be cited parenthetically by page numbers and will not be otherwise noted.

corporations, merchants, and government officials, absorbed in the pursuit of commercial gain, abandon moral sentiments, thereby registering a profound anxiety about the health of body politic and national economy in eighteenth-century Britain.

1. Reward System and Commercial Policing in Eighteenth-Century England

From the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth century, the economic transformation of Britain generated profound imbalances in wealth distribution and fostered a culture of luxury and conspicuous consumption, conditions that provided fertile ground for the proliferation of crime. The rise of the eighteenth-century free market economy and the deepening of the Financial Revolution enabled the rapid ascent of the gentry and the commercial bourgeoisie, who amassed substantial fortunes. By contrast, the lower orders faced rising prices, the loss of access to land, and persistently meagre wages. The widening gap between rich and poor created structural conditions conducive to criminal activity. The theologian John Wesley recorded in his journal the destitution of the urban poor in eighteenth-century England, observing that some “lay in their cells, others in their garrets, half starved with cold and hunger, added to weakness and pain”, yet he “found not one of them unemployed who was able to crawl about the room” (qtd. in Porter, 1982, p. 102). Against this backdrop, many impoverished laborers were driven to crime as a means of survival. In 1723, for example, three men apprehended for robbery on the road from Kennington to Clapham pleaded that their actions had been “occasion’d through want and necessity”, having been reduced by misfortune in trade and left “destitute of Friends and Employment” (Beattie, 1986, p. 234). Subsequent investigation confirmed that extreme poverty and the inability to support their families had compelled them to take such desperate measures. Historians such as Peter King have argued that much of the crime in London during this period was a product of an “economy of makeshifts”, in which what authorities defined as criminal behaviour was often regarded by offenders as a practical response to “poverty, scarcity, crisis, and underemployment” (Shore, 2003, pp. 138-139). Crime, in this sense, functioned as an improvised strategy of survival within a precarious social order. At the same time, some commentators contended that the accumulation of wealth among the upper ranks stimulated a broader culture of luxury and consumption. Consumerism and refined modes of living became markers of status and identity. This ethos not only accentuated social differentiation but also aroused aspirations among the lower orders for forms of material enjoyment beyond their economic means, thereby encouraging some to pursue lifestyles incongruent with their circumstances through illicit means. Henry Fielding attributed the dramatic increase in robberies in his own day to what he perceived as a growing tendency among ordinary people to abandon their prescribed social stations. In his view, many were no longer content to exchange “honest labour” for modest wages; seduced by the spectacle of luxury and the attractions of fashionable consumption, they aspired to modes of life that exceeded their social condition, and when the fruits of legitimate industry proved insufficient to sustain such ambitions, some lapsed into idleness and beggary, while others, endowed with greater cunning and daring, turned to theft, fraud, and robbery (Fielding, 1988, p. 77).

For a considerable period, Britain lacked a formalized police force, and the maintenance of public order relied primarily upon systems of communal self-regulation, a structure marked by evident institutional deficiencies. Prior to the eighteenth century, crime control in Britain was generally conceived as a local and communal responsibility, implemented through medieval collective practices such as the "hue and cry" and the "posse comitatus", as well as through the service of unpaid "watchman and constables" who rotated in office and exercised only limited law-enforcement authority (Spitzer and Scull, 1977, p. 19). In practice, however, the effectiveness of the hue and cry was severely circumscribed. By the eighteenth century it appeared to operate principally against isolated, unarmed, and conspicuous strangers. Its success depended on "a quarry being comparatively incapable of travelling with any speed to a refuge which might confer anonymity" (Rock, 1977, p. 242). While it might still prove effective in sparsely populated rural areas, in and around London the sheer density and mobility of the population made it difficult to distinguish a suspect from the mass of passers-by. The magistrate John Fielding (1755, pp. 22-23) observed that at a greater distance from London it might be "absolutely impossible for any villain in the country to escape justice", yet near the capital the hue and cry would lose its effect, not only because of the "vast variety of passengers on the road, mounted and dressed alike", but also because once the offender reached London, seeking him there by such means would prove entirely fruitless. Simultaneously, the powers of constables were severely limited, their authority to make arrests confined to narrow jurisdictions within a highly fragmented urban administrative structure, which in the City of London alone comprised as many as 676 independent precincts, leaving local law enforcement frequently isolated and without support (Rock, 1977, p. 238). The historian E. P. Thompson (1971, pp. 120-121) has noted that local enforcement institutions frequently existed in a condition of extreme isolation, so that when force was required from elsewhere it might take "two, three or more days" to arrive. The absence of a formal state police system further emboldened criminal gangs, with many large criminal organizations openly defying the law for extended periods and engaging in unchecked violence. Henry Fielding (1988, p. 145) remarked that constables could scarcely be blamed for refraining from hazardous intervention, since within certain districts a rogue's alarm might quickly summon "twenty or thirty armed villains" to his assistance. In this context, the structural inadequacies of Britain's policing arrangements not only facilitated the growth and diffusion of organized crime but also rendered comprehensive reform of the national system of law enforcement increasingly urgent.

For much of the late seventeenth century, the British government implemented reward system to protect citizens' property and to respond to the increasing prevalence of property crimes. John Locke (1988, pp. 350-351), in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689-1690), asserted: "The great and chief end therefore, of Mens uniting into Commonwealths, and putting themselves under

Government, is the Preservation of their Property". Adam Smith (1982, p. 5) similarly emphasized: "The first and chief design of every system of government is to maintain justice; to prevent the members of a society from incroaching on one anothers property, or siezing what is not their own. The design here is to give each one the secure and peaceable possession of his own property". Protection of property, therefore, constituted the very foundation of government and its authority. Against this intellectual backdrop, the government of William III enacted the *Act for the Encouragement of the Apprehending of Highwaymen* in 1693, aiming to address the escalating property crime and consolidate the nascent regime. The Act noted that "the highways and roads within the kingdom of England and dominion of Wales have been of late time more infested with thieves and robbers than formerly, for want of due and sufficient encouragement given and means used for the discovery and apprehension of such offenders" (Browning, 1953, p. 478). Accordingly, it stipulated that "all and every person and persons who shall apprehend and take one or more such thieves or robbers, and prosecute him or them so apprehended and taken until he or they be convicted of any robbery committed in or upon any highway, passage, field or open place, shall have and receive from the sheriff or sheriffs of the county where such robbery and conviction shall be made and done, without paying any fee for the same, for every such offender so convicted the sum of forty pounds within one month after such conviction" (ibid.). Over time, the scope of crimes eligible for such rewards was steadily expanded to include "burglary, housebreaking, horse-stealing, highway robbery and the like" (Rock, 1977, p. 242). Beyond these statutory rewards, the government occasionally issued proclamations offering additional rewards, primarily targeting highway robbery or murder in the metropolis, sometimes amounting to as much as £100, and scaled upward in proportion to the size of criminal gangs (Langbein, 2003, p. 149). The *Gentleman's Magazine* reported that in May 1732, four offenders executed at Guildford generated a total reward of £400 paid by the Treasury (ibid., p. 150). At the time, this represented an extraordinary sum, given that a craftsman's annual income averaged approximately £20, while a laborer earned less than £15 (ibid.). Therefore, the considerable financial incentives offered by the system of statutory rewards significantly encouraged public involvement in crime prevention, cultivating a culture of social self-discipline within English society.

The emergence of the British reward system gave rise to a substantial class of profit-driven "commercial police", who sought to generate economic gain through the detection, manipulation, or even fabrication of crime. In late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England, it was widely assumed that the primary motive of private individuals was the pursuit of "self-interest". Guided by this understanding, the government designed a system of statutory rewards that combined "incentives and deterrents—rewards and punishments, bribes and threats"—so to harness human greed and fear to maintain social order, thereby reducing reliance on the abstract notion of "public spirit" (Spitzer & Scull, 1977, p. 19). However, the designers of the reward system did not foresee that grounding crime control in a logic of profit would create a class of operators who treated the law itself as a means of personal enrichment. While statutory rewards offered substantial sums for the capture and conviction of criminals, the process was complex, costly, and required significant expenditures to investigate cases and cultivate the favor of officials, leaving the actual reward received by the apprehender considerably reduced (McMullan, 1995, p. 136). Confronted with these high operational costs, profit-driven commercial police frequently adopted more "economical" strategies for profit, such as "extorting money for not acting, or by practising the 'fit-up'" (ibid., p. 137). A tract published in 1737 further revealed that, under the lure of high rewards, prosecutors might "perjure themselves to accuse innocent Persons, when they are sure to get forty or fifty Pounds for each Convict" (qtd. in Langbein, 2003, p. 151). During this period, "the young, the inexperienced, the low life, the poor, and the newcomer to the city", were particularly vulnerable to being falsely accused of robbery or other crimes due to their limited knowledge of legal processes (McMullan, 1996, p. 92). Historical accounts record that commercial police such as John Waller and Bartholomew Harnet repeatedly accused inexperienced youths of robbery in order to secure statutory rewards (Langbein, 2003, pp. 152-156). As Ruth Paley observes, "the major effect of the provision of £40 rewards was to provide an incentive not to the detection of crime but to the organization of thief-making conspiracies" (ibid., p. 152). Consequently, crime control in eighteenth-century England increasingly evolved into a commercial enterprise. The statutory rewards system, originally intended to safeguard public security, became a mechanism driven by personal gain, cultivating conditions in which injustice and abuse of power could flourish.

The commercial police simultaneously played the role of receivers of stolen goods, incorporating numerous criminals into their own criminal organizations and constructing vast commercial crime empires. In late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England, the government also sought to regulate property crimes by targeting the receiving of stolen goods (Howson, 1958, p. 36). In 1691, a statute explicitly defined receivers as "accessories after the fact", making them liable to branding, whipping, or seven years' transportation (ibid., p. 37). Then in 1706, the law increased the penalty for receiving stolen goods to death and offered a £40 reward for informants. Defoe remarked that these measures dealt a severe blow to England's fencing networks, as "the Receiving Trade was spoil'd all at once. And when the poor Adventurer had, at the Hazard of his Neck, gotten any Purchase, he must run that Hazard over again to turn it into Money" (ibid., p. 36). Yet commercial police with keen entrepreneurial instincts were able to exploit the legal restrictions on fencing to their advantage. They provided criminals with secure channels for disposing of stolen property, thereby recruiting large numbers of thieves into their networks and directing them to continue thefts. When subordinates became "spent" or lost their utility, these commercial police could turn them over to the authorities to collect statutory rewards, effectively creating a commercial criminal enterprise capable of generating continuous profits from both fencing and reward collection. Jonathan Wild, the eighteenth-century London "commercial police" and crime boss, exemplified this business model. Wild astutely observed that "the original owners of stolen property were often willing to pay more for its recovery than a fence would be able to offer for its resale” (McMullan, 1995, p. 129). Thus, Wild established a “lost property house” to receive stolen goods and return them to their original owners for a fee, thereby legitimizing illicit gains. (ibid., pp. 130-131) When his subordinates had outlived their usefulness, Wild would exploit the reward system by turning them over to the authorities to collect the £40 rewards, all while maintaining the appearance of a public-spirited law enforcer. As Gerald Howson observes, Wild organized his network into a quasi-corporate structure of thieves and, although he claimed credit for detecting and prosecuting offenders, in practice he “procured such only to be hang’d as concealed their Booty, or refused to share it with him” (Howson, 1958, pp. 238-239). Thieves themselves, such as Morris Evans, acknowledged that their entrapment in the profession stemmed from the control and coercion exercised by commercial police, as they were compelled to commit theft across parishes and streets under threat of prosecution for “former Crime” or of having evidence brought to “swear away our Lives wrongfully” (ibid., p. 40).

The commercial police’s criminal enterprise undoubtedly fueled judicial officers’ revenue-generating activities, creating a symbiotic relationship between private policing and the criminal justice system. Since the seventeenth century, positions such as city magistrates and their subordinate permanent officials were commonly obtained through purchase, with the value of office fluctuating according to the government’s fiscal needs (Howson, 1958, pp. 28-29). Those who secured posts as governors, prison administrators, city marshals, or other officials often treated their positions as forms of “personal property” (Rock, 1977, p. 252). The government generally tolerated these officeholders reimbursing their initial expenditures and covering administrative costs through “bribery and extortion”, incentivizing officials to seek profit immediately upon assuming office (ibid., p. 253). For instance, Kent’s so-called “trading justices” deliberately provoked neighborhood disputes to extract fees through binding and loosing “recognizances”, or imposed fines on the public for offenses such as profane swearing, thus securing a steady flow of revenue from judicial proceedings (Landau, 1984, pp. 185, 198). An anonymous eighteenth-century commentator lamented that revenue-driven magistrates “turned the exercise of their authority into an iniquitous traffic, encouraging and sharing the extortions and scandalous profits of their agents” (Sidney & Webb, 1924, p. 328). Consequently, the commercial police’s reward-driven creation of crime provided magistrates, prison officials, and other officeholders with a continuous source of profit. John McMullan (1996, p. 89) notes that these activities were actively supported by city recorders, assize judges, and local clerks of assizes, all of whom benefited economically from private policing: “the former because they authorized the formal distribution of rewards to the parties making claims and the latter because they often charged multiple fees of the arrested felons and because they had wide discretionary powers in the distribution of award monies”. Therefore, “the so-called ‘economy of blood for blood' was a deliberately tolerated and shielded policing business, and it linked the underworld of London crime, the private trade in police services and the administration of criminal justice into a mutual toleration and protection society" (ibid., p. 93).

The growing corruption within Britain's policing system highlighted the urgent need for a sound, centralized police force, prompting elites such as Henry Fielding to take the initiative in establishing a new model of policing that combined investigative and preventive functions. In the eighteenth century, crime control in Britain relied primarily on unpaid volunteer constables and profit-driven commercial police operating under the reward system; the former proved largely ineffective, often regarded as synonymous with "corruption", while the latter, motivated by financial gain, frequently encouraged crime, exacerbating social disorder. By 1748, deeply concerned about the prevalence of criminal activity, Fielding launched his own reforms, aiming both to "eliminate existing crime and to prevent fresh outbreaks of crime in the future" (Collins et al., 2000, p. 14). To this end, Fielding assembled a group of capable thief-takers into what became known as the Bow Street Runners, assigning them to patrol the streets on a regular schedule, disrupt criminal gangs, confiscate stolen property, and apprehend offenders, thereby creating an early police system integrating both detection and prevention (Alpert & Stroshine, 2005, p. 21). During this period, Fielding actively leveraged emerging print media for crime detection and prevention. In the journal he founded, *The Covent Garden Journal*, he extensively disseminated knowledge of criminal penalties and published information about highway robbers, thereby promoting public moral education and strengthening law enforcement (Nemeth, 2018, p. 8). In 1754, John Fielding succeeded his brother as magistrate and further systematized these reforms. By exploiting new social resources—improved postal services, road networks, coaching trades, and the rapid expansion of print and information technology—he expanded the reach and effectiveness of crime intelligence and prevention (McMullan, 1996, p. 97). John McMullan observes that "the Fieldings' objective, like that of many subsequent police reformers, was to establish a preventive police force capable of securing society through a systematic understanding of its components and population movements. Their strategy was to contain illegality within a robust framework of surveillance and social control, thereby ensuring the prevalence of productive labor rather than crime or vagrancy" (ibid., p. 98). This surveillance apparatus corresponds to Foucault's idea of a "societal discipline", whose function is to "fix, arrest, or regulate movements… clear up confusion; dissipate compact groupings of individuals wandering unpredictably… and establish calculated distributions" (ibid.). The Fieldings' pioneering efforts laid a crucial foundation for the development of England's policing system, and their integrated model of detection and prevention was subsequently affirmed and disseminated by the government in later reforms.

2. Commercial Crime Syndicates and Metaphor of Free Market Commercial Crime in the Works

The Beggar's Opera is saturated with vocabulary drawn from the sphere of commerce, revealing the profound impact of Britain's commercial expansion on eighteenth-century society. The eighteenth century witnessed the rapid growth of trade and overseas commerce, during which Britain emerged as a preeminent "trading nation", whose people took pride in identifying themselves as a "polite and commercial" society (Porter, 2000, p. 388). Henry Fielding (1988, pp. 69-70) likewise praised the transformative power of commerce, asserting that "nothing hath wrought such an Alteration in this Order of People, as the Introduction of Trade. This hath indeed given a new Face to the whole Nation, hath in a great measure subverted the former State of Affairs, and hath almost totally changed the Manners, Customs, and Habits of the People, more especially of the lower Sort". During this period, the merchant, as an agent of commerce, was celebrated as "an agent of progress and civilization" (Dabydeen, 1983, p. 9). Society's identification with and pride in commerce also permeated literary production. In the play, Gay portrays Peachum, the mastermind of London's underworld, as a businessman who meticulously manages his criminal enterprise through his "book of accounts" (I. i. 1), carefully calculating the bounties he can extract from his criminals. Peachum's management of his accounts closely aligns with the strict bookkeeping principles emphasized by Daniel Defoe in *The Complete English Tradesman* (1725), where Defoe (1732, p. 14) argues that a tradesman's account books function as a "repeating clock", enabling him to assess his condition in the world, determine when to proceed or withdraw, and secure not merely the comfort but potentially the very survival of his trade. This representation reflects Gay's recognition of, and engagement with, the rational principles of commercial society. As the scholar David Nokes (1987, p. 138) observes, the play possesses a distinctly commercial tone: the word "business" appears fifteen times, "money" nineteen times—alongside variants such as "fees", "guineas", "price", and "garnish"—while "account" occurs nine times, and other financial terms, including "interest", "perquisite", "profit", "debt", and "credit", run throughout the text. Nokes therefore suggests that the work might more appropriately be titled *The Businessman's Opera* (ibid., p. 138). It is thus evident that Gay both acknowledged and responded to the rise of commercial Britain, incorporating the rational logic of commerce into his dramatic construction. As Colin Nicholson (2004, p. 4) notes, by the conclusion of the Nine Years' War (1688-1697), England had undeniably become a trading nation, and the concept of "Trade" rapidly entered political discourse to such an extent that virtually all writers engaged with its significance.

Both Peachum and Wild, in their pursuit of private gain, do not hesitate to manufacture what may be called a "bloody business", thereby dramatizing the pessimistic doctrine of human selfishness articulated by Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville, and alluding to those economic actors who, in their quest for exorbitant profit, deviated from the normative principles of the free market. In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes (1904, pp. 63, 83). argues that human beings are by nature self-interested and driven by insatiable desires; in their competition for "Riches, Honour, Command, power", they will, in pursuit of their ends, "kill, subdue, supplant, or repel the other", producing a condition in which society descends into "a warre…of every man, against every man" Mandeville (1732, p. 27) similarly adopts a pessimistic view of human nature, maintaining that "all untaught Animals are only sollicitous of pleasing themselves, and naturally follow the bent of their own Inclinations", without regard for the benefit or harm their pleasures may bring to others. This philosophical conception of selfish and acquisitive humanity finds concrete embodiment in both works. *In The Beggar's Opera*, Peachum coolly schemes to secure "a handsome execution for the next Sessions", expressing open contempt for "a lazy rogue, by whom one can get nothing 'till he is hanged" (I. iii. 1-2). Likewise, in *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great*, Wild bluntly declares that, "out of this gang I will prefer to my favour the boldest and most iniquitous (as the vulgar express it); the rest I will, from time to time, as I see occasion, transport and hang at my pleasure; and thus (which I take to be the highest excellence of a prig) convert those laws which are made for the benefit and protection of society to my single use" (66). The profit-driven manufacture of such "bloody business" by Peachum and Wild vividly reenacts a Hobbesian model of the economic actor within the eighteenth-century British market economy. At this historical juncture, certain morally unrestrained individuals, in their pursuit of extraordinary profit, departed entirely from the ethical standards of the civilized merchant. Exploiting the regulatory gaps of a relatively unrestrained market, they openly manipulated the stock market, disrupted the grain trade, and expanded gambling and prostitution as lucrative enterprises. As the scholar Bram Dijkstra observes, the eighteenth century was an age that established self-interest as the central axiom of human experience. As Bram Dijkstra argues, the English middle classes of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were "caught up in a feverish pursuit of gain from commercial enterprises which seemed capable of unlimited expansion" (Dijkstra, 1987, p. 7), inhabiting a world shaped by Hobbes and Locke, by competition and individual responsibility, and by the apotheosis of movement, change, and acquisitive selfhood.

Peachum institutes a meticulous division of labour within his underground criminal organization, thereby alluding to the emergence of specialization as a defining principle amid the expansion of Britain's free-market economy. In the early eighteenth century, as Britain's commercial and trading activities intensified, certain economic thinkers and members of the mercantile community increasingly recognized the importance of cooperative specialization. In the second part of *The Fable of the Bees* (1729), Bernard Mandeville (1733, p. 336) employs the example of watchmaking to illustrate the advantages of social division of labour, observing that the craft had attained a "higher degree of perfection" than would have been possible had the entire process remained the work of a single individual. Mandeville (1733, p. 336) further contends that the abundance, precision, and elegance of clocks and watches are chiefly attributable to the subdivision of the art into multiple branches. Building upon this foundation, Adam Smith (1952, p. 3) systematically articulated the theory of the division of labour through his celebrated example of pin manufacture in *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith notes that if each stage of production were carried out independently by a single worker, an individual might produce no more than one to twenty pins per day. By contrast, in a small manufactory employing ten workers engaged in specialized and coordinated operations, daily output could reach approximately 48,000 pins, equivalent to 4,800 pins per worker (ibid.). Without such specialization and training, each worker would scarcely have been capable of producing even a fraction of that number. Smith therefore concludes that the division of labour, wherever it can be introduced, "occasions, in every art, a proportionable increase of the productive powers of labour", and accordingly encourages enterprises to adopt specialization as a means of significantly enhancing productive efficiency (ibid., p. 4). In *The Beggar's Oper*a, Peachum deftly transposes this principle of labour division into the sphere of criminal enterprise, establishing in London's underworld a company composed of thieves with distinct roles and characteristics, including the resourceful Crook-fingered Jack, the furtive Wat Dreary, the clumsy Harry Padington, and the rash yet industrious Mat of the Mint (I. iii. 4-22). Members of the group operate in different districts of London to carry out theft, while Peachum, together with the jailer Lockit, oversees the disposal of stolen goods. In this manner, a clearly differentiated and tightly integrated criminal chain is formed, extending from the commission of theft to the fencing of illicit property. Vincenzo Ruggiero contends that Peachum's gang derives its principal profits from its extensive recruitment of underworld figures and its establishment of a division of labour predicated on the separation of planning and execution, resulting in an abstract "Fordist" mode of cooperation characterized by standardization, functional differentiation, routinization, and a paramount emphasis on efficiency (Ruggiero, 2003, p. 46). Consequently, Peachum's criminal gang epitomizes what historian Paul Langford identifies as the increasingly "organized" and "commercial" character of criminal activity during this period (Langford, 2000, p. 20).

The commercial criminal activities conducted by Peachum and Wild constitute a form of unproductive labour that generates no new value; as such, they represent a profound misallocation of labour power and a departure from the classical theory of the factors of production. Since the seventeenth century, a number of English economic thinkers had come to recognize that wealth was primarily "the fruit of human labour", arguing that mere ownership of natural resources was insufficient to secure national prosperity and that even a large population constituted only potential wealth unless effectively mobilized and activated through productive labour (Lis & Soly, 2012, p. 469). As William Petty (1691, p. 17) famously asserted, "labour is the Father and active principle of Wealth, as Lands are the Mother". Petty accordingly advocated that state policy should prioritize ensuring that labour resources were directed toward the creation of practically useful and economically valuable goods—that is, productive labour. Within this intellectual framework, individuals who refused to integrate themselves into the emerging economic order or to engage in gainful employment were increasingly denounced as “social enemies”. This term encompassed not only those who violated the law, but also those who offended against moral norms through “idleness, drunkenness, and prodigality” (Villadsen, 2024, p. 176). What united these figures was that, in different ways, they effectively “stole” their own labour power, thereby undermining the very foundations of social production (ibid.). Indeed, the refusal to work came to be regarded as more dangerous to society than property-centred crimes such as theft. In *The Beggar's Opera*, Peachum incites subjects who might otherwise have engaged in productive labour to steal wealth on his behalf, and angrily resolves to “dispose of” those unwilling to pursue thievery. He condemns Slippery Sam for having “the impudence to have views of following his trade as a tailor, which he calls an honest employment” (I. iii. 19-22). Through this episode, the play exposes the extent to which Peachum's economic criminality disrupts the processes of legitimate social production. It is particularly noteworthy that although Peachum, like a merchant, employs a considerable number of individuals, the labour performed by his organization generates no surplus value but merely appropriates the wealth of others; it is therefore a paradigmatic instance of unproductive labour. As Adam Smith (1952, p. 142) observes in *The Wealth of Nations*, “There is one sort of labour which adds to the value of the subject upon which it is bestowed: there is another which has no such effect. The former, as it produces a value, may be called productive; the latter, unproductive labour”.

The work employs the commercialized operations of an underground criminal syndicate as a mirror through which to allegorize the corrupt practices by which certain economic agents and corporations in eighteenth-century Britain manipulated the rules of the free market. In *The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great*, Jonathan Wild establishes in London a criminal “company” composed of thieves, where he first dispatches his subordinates to steal goods on his behalf and then, through his “office” for the recovery of lost property, resells the stolen items to their original owners at “the value only (or a little more) of their goods” (130). Although Wild himself is the mastermind behind the losses, he manages to present himself to the public as a respectable and public-spirited guardian of property, capitalizing on his office's supposed ability to recover stolen items and thereby expanding its “business”. His appropriation of wealth through the manipulation of public trust thus serves as a microcosm of the ways in which certain market actors in Britain's emerging free-market economy exploited and distorted commercial rules for private gain. From the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth century, the Financial Revolution and the rise of the free market not only accelerated Britain's economic development but also gave rise to a wave of commercial crime. As economic historian Edward Chancellor (1999, p. 48) observes, the London market of this period was rife with conduct that frequently crossed “the line between commendable self-interest and arrant fraud: sham companies were launched for the enrichment of projectors, share prices were manipulated, and false rumours were circulated”. During this period, three seasoned financiers of Exchange Alley—George Caswall, Elias Turner, and Jacob Sawbridge—joined forces with John Blunt, who had previously profited from insider dealings in a Welsh mining scheme, to form a commercial criminal syndicate that replaced traditional theft with financial manipulation (Levenson, 2020, p. 106). Under Blunt's leadership, Caswall and his two associates revived the long-defunct Sword Blade Company, using the charter of this shell corporation to issue shares and to launch a highly speculative yet alluring scheme to convert army debentures into company stock, thereby manipulating the market and extracting private capital (ibid., pp. 106-108). Daniel Defoe vehemently denounced them as "a true triumvirate of modern thieving", castigating them as Britain's leading capital swindlers (ibid., p. 106). Notably, the Sword Blade Company would later become closely associated with the South Sea Company, whose manipulation of market mechanisms culminated in the most devastating financial bubble in British history and inspired a proliferation of speculative bubble companies that emulated its model.

Like many of his contemporaries, John Gay was himself a victim of commercial speculation in the emerging free market. In his work, he channels his personal experience of deception through the voices of his characters, thereby reflecting the broader anxieties that eighteenth-century British society harboured toward the new market economy. In 1720, Gay earned £1,000 from his poetry collection *Poems on Several Occasions* and, at the height of the South Sea stock speculation, invested the entire sum in shares of the South Sea Company (Nokes, 1995, p. 310). Having purchased at the top of the market in late June, he soon found himself exposed to catastrophic losses. In reality, the South Sea scheme was fundamentally illusory. Although the company had secured a trading monopoly in parts of South America, none of its founders possessed practical experience in trade with South America or even the West Indies, and Spanish dominance in the region severely limited meaningful commercial prospects (Levenson, 2020, pp. 117-119). Consequently, in the decade following 1712, investors who exchanged government debt for South Sea equity failed to obtain substantial returns from the company's trading ventures (ibid., p. 121). The central objective of the company's leading director, John Blunt, was to raise the price of stock by any available means; he repeatedly declared that "advancing by all means the price of stock was the only way to promote the good of the company" (Chancellor, 1999, p. 67). Through collusion between company insiders and government officials, South Sea stock soared dramatically in early 1720, only to collapse within months, triggering mass panic selling and inflicting devastating losses on Gay and thousands of other investors. In *The Beggar's Opera*, Polly and Lucy, deceived by Macheath, lament, "I'm bubbled" (II. xiii. 1-2). Gay's pointed use of the term "bubble" exploits both its newly charged financial meaning in the context of the Financial Revolution and its specific historical association with the South Sea Bubble, thereby articulating his own indignation at having been duped in a vast speculative fraud. During the crisis, friends repeatedly urged Gay to liquidate part of his holdings in order to secure a steady income of £100 per year for life (Nokes, 1995, p. 311). Yet Gay remained deaf to such counsel, resolutely pursuing his dream of becoming a "great capitalist". As Samuel Johnson later observed, he "dreamed of dignity and splendour, and could not bear to obstruct his own fortune" (qtd. in Melville, 1921, p. 52). Thus, although Gay vented his resentment at being deceived by the South Sea Company through the voices of his dramatic characters, his earlier speculative enthusiasm reveals a fundamentally ambivalent attitude toward the free market economy, characterized by both reliance upon and skepticism toward its promises.

The work portrays the rampant disorder of commercial crime in the eighteenth-century English free market, thereby underscoring the indispensable role of law in safeguarding both market freedom and social justice. At the very beginning of the play, Gay has one of his characters declare, "through all the employments of life … all professions be-rogue one another" (I. i. 1-4). With this, Gay exposes the pervasive fraud embedded within British commercial society and gives voice to his indignation at the disintegration of free-market order. During this period, stimulated by the Financial Revolution, speculative "bubble" companies proliferated across England at an astonishing rate. Adam Anderson, a clerk of the South Sea Company, later recalled of the year 1720 that "any impudent imposter needed only to hire a room at some coffee house … having advertised it in the newspapers the preceding day, and he might, in a few hours, find subscribers for one or two millions (in some cases more) of imaginary stock" (qtd. in Levenson, 2020, p. 185). Estimates suggest that such bubble companies collectively absorbed approximately £1.5 million, ruining countless speculators while enabling their fraudulent promoters to amass enormous profits (Mackay, 1932, p. 55). The ensuing disorder of the English free market confirmed Adam Smith's insistence upon the centrality of justice to the maintenance of commercial society. Smith (1982, p. 16) maintained that: "the more improved any society is and the greater length the several means of supporting the inhabitants are carried, the greater will be the number of their laws and regulations necessary". Drawing upon his observations of Britain's economic and social realities, Smith argued that any sound legal system must fulfill four fundamental objectives: first, the preservation of justice; second, the orderly administration of government so as to promote prosperity and the creation of wealth; third, the augmentation of public revenue; and fourth, the organization of armed forces for national defense (Norman, 2018, p. 75). Among these aims, Smith regarded justice as the essential precondition for social stability. Without it, Smith (1966, p. 125) warned, "the great, the immense fabric of human society … must in a moment crumble into atoms". The ideal free market, therefore, is grounded in a system of "natural liberty" secured by the rule of just laws, under which, as Smith affirms, "every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way, and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with those of any other man, or order of men" (Smith, 1952, p. 300).

3. Political-Commercial Collusion and Eighteenth-Century British Anxieties over the Health of Body Politic and Economy in the Works

Gay puts into the mouths of thieves a caustic satire on the "dishonest" dealings of politicians, thereby exposing the ignoble collusion between government officials and joint-stock companies during the South Sea Bubble and their covert expropriation of public wealth. In *The Beggar's Opera*, the leader of London's underworld gang, Peachum, indignantly denounces the moral corruption of British statesmen, declaring that "the Statesman, because he is so great, / Thinks his trade as honest as mine" (I. i. 7-8). The line unmistakably alludes to the conduct of public officials during the South Sea Bubble, who, in pursuit of private gain, promoted the South Sea scheme while clandestinely profiting at the expense of the populace. In 1720, in order to secure political support, the South Sea Company distributed large allotments of company stock to members of Parliament, senior government officials, and even members of the royal household, amounting in total to the staggering sum of £574,000 (Soll, 2014, p. 179). As these shares did not in fact exist in tangible form, the bribe functioned in a manner analogous to a "modern executive stock-option scheme": should the share price rise, recipients could redeem their allotments and realize substantial profits (Chancellor, 1999, p. 65). Having received such fictitious shares or options, these influential beneficiaries possessed a powerful incentive to drive up the price of South Sea stock, regardless of the potential cost to the nation. Yet perceptive contemporaries discerned the latent dangers of the scheme and sought to halt its progress (ibid.). The Member of Parliament Robert Walpole sternly warned that the project encouraged the pernicious practice of stock-jobbing by "diverting the genius of the nation from trade and industry" and by luring the unwary "to their ruin by a false prospect of gain, and to part with the gradual profits of their labour for imaginary wealth" (qtd. in Churchill, 1965, p. 110). Similarly, Archibald Hutcheson demanded to know whether it was not "the Duty of a British Senate to take all necessary Precautions, to prevent the Ruin of many Thousands of families" (qtd. in Chancellor, 1999, p. 91). Nevertheless, corrupt officials remained deaf to such admonitions, and instead of fulfilling their obligation to safeguard the public interest, they openly endorsed the South Sea scheme, thereby conveying to speculators the impression that South Sea shares were a secure and profitable investment (Chancellor, 1999, p. 9). Their support fostered a deceptive aura of guaranteed prosperity and ultimately drove countless ordinary citizens into financial ruin. In this light, the clandestine collusion between government officials and the joint-stock company in plundering national wealth appears even more despicable than the ostensibly "honest" depredations of Peachum and his band of thieves.

Henry Fielding associates the figure of the "Great Man" with corruption and avarice, thereby alluding to the conduct of the prime minister Robert Walpole, who was styled a "Great Man" in his own time, and satirizing his protection of South Sea offenders and his abuse of political power for private gain. After the collapse of the South Sea Bubble in 1720, Walpole was entrusted with the formidable task of managing the financial and political aftermath. Yet in order to preserve the government's public image and consolidate his own authority, he deliberately suppressed the transaction records of the South Sea Company and shielded numerous corrupt officials and financial magnates who might otherwise have faced prosecution. The following year, Walpole successfully assumed office as First Lord of the Treasury and effectively became Britain's first prime minister. His accession did not alleviate governmental corruption; rather, it intensified its spread. During his long tenure, Walpole exercised comprehensive control over state affairs, and his administration was widely associated with bribery, nepotism, and the sale of offices (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 507). The political theorist Isaac Kramnick observes that during Robert Walpole's tenure, he consistently relied on the patronage of the Crown to consolidate his authority. Walpole not only exercised influence over royal appointments, compelling officeholders and their families to pledge loyalty to his leadership in the House of Commons, but also manipulated the patronage system to intervene in elections by distributing offices to the relatives, friends, and dependents of successful candidates, thereby bringing their political influence firmly under his control (Kramnick, 1968, pp. 111-112). Walpole's protection of financial criminals and exploitation of political resources for private gain provoked widespread public resentment, and the epithet "Great Man" gradually acquired a sharply ironic resonance. As the scholar John Wells notes, even a cursory reader of contemporary pamphlets and periodicals would have recognized that, throughout roughly the two decades preceding the publication of *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great*, the term "Great Man" in England had become virtually synonymous with Walpole (Wells, 1913, p. 14). In *The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great*, Fielding models his protagonist on the criminal mastermind Jonathan Wild, crafting a character defined by greed and depravity. He asserts that the hallmark of greatness is "insatiability" (77), and declares that "greatness consists in bringing many mischiefs on mankind" (22). Through this portrayal, Fielding draws a parallel between Walpole's corrupt manipulation of political resources and Wild's monopolistic control over the stolen goods market, thereby exposing the corruption and moral bankruptcy of the "Great Man" Walpole. As Fielding (1743, p. 59) declares in the preface to *Miscellanies* (1743), his true target is precisely these "Bombast Greatness" who, under the cloak of power and hypocrisy, enlarge their private interests while insidiously preying upon the public good.

The collaborative relationship between the gaoler Lockit and the merchant Peachum symbolises the collusion between administrative authority and financial interests in eighteenth-century Britain, thereby illuminating the political logic by which Robert Walpole's government sustained its rule through alliances with the moneyed interest. In *The Beggar's Opera*, Peachum, the head of the London criminal syndicate, represents the financial interest group of the urban underworld, while Lockit, as prison-keeper, embodies the legal and administrative apparatus that incorporates illicit economic activity into an ostensibly lawful order. United by what they call their "mutual interest" (II. x. 58), the two cooperate openly in tolerating and managing crime for private gain. Through this dramatic configuration, Gay exposes the intimate entanglement of government and financial interests during Walpole's ascendancy. Upon assuming office in 1721, Walpole, intent on consolidating his political authority, chose to ally himself with powerful financial groups, despite the potential threats that financial innovation posed to Britain's constitutional structure and social order. In doing so, he perpetuated and strengthened the new economic regime that had emerged from the Financial Revolution. During his tenure, Walpole publicly endorsed the national debt system, chartered financial corporations, and public credit, while both his public conduct and private dealings served to enhance the prestige and influence of the men of money and to confer official legitimacy upon their path to social and political power (Kramnick, 1968, pp. 49-50). The preferential policies and institutional protection that Walpole extended to the financial interest enabled it to exert sustained influence over British politics in the first half of the eighteenth century (ibid., pp. 50-51). Yet Walpole's reliance upon the financial system to buttress his regime provoked intense public resentment. The influential periodical *The Craftsman* depicted him as "a giant from whom hung huge bank bills, exchequer notes, lottery tickets, and tallies, but only a small bag of money" (ibid., p. 21). Elsewhere, the same publication denounced him as "the greatest monster of power and wickedness, that ever infected the face of the earth" (ibid.). Even his supporter Sir John Perceval, an independent Whig, lamented what he termed Walpole's "meanness", namely the degradation of a first minister's office in strenuously defending "dunghill worms", however unjust their cause, against men of honour, birth, and fortune (qtd. in Langford, 1989, p. 22). In this light, the play employs the London underworld as a mirror reflecting the systemic corruption of metropolitan high society, articulating Gay's indignation at Walpole's collusion with the financial interest.

In *The Beggar's Opera*, John Gay pointedly equates "money" with a cleansing agent, thereby exposing the doctrine of monetary omnipotence fostered by Britain's new financial order. Peachum bluntly declares, "But money, wife, is the true fuller's earth for reputations; there is not a spot or a stain but what it can take out" (I. ix. 8-10). The metaphor suggests that in the commercial society of eighteenth-century Britain, money had acquired the power not merely to purchase goods but to erase moral blemish and confer respectability. As the scholar Sven Armens (1954, p. 56) observes in his study of the play, "an examination of almost any part of this play shows conclusively that money has become the standard by which town society judges all values". The Financial Revolution of the eighteenth century unleashed unprecedented flows of liquid wealth—national debt instruments, stocks, and other forms of credit—into British society, thereby unsettling a long-standing social hierarchy grounded in landed property. Power gradually shifted from the traditional landed elite to the emerging financial interest, and money increasingly became the principal measure of individual identity and status. The Scottish economic thinker James Steuart (1966, pp. 203, 208) noted that in feudal society, the lower orders were compelled by subsistence needs to depend upon landed magnates; however, the immense wealth generated by modern commerce and industry enabled ordinary people to emancipate themselves from this dependency, with power consequently devolving from the aristocracy to the emerging moneyed interest. As Swift observed, "that power which according to the old maxim, was used to follow land, is now gone over to money" (qtd. in Kramnick, 1968, p. 209). The Tory statesman Henry St John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke likewise lamented that no phenomenon of recent years was more striking and astonishing than the elevation of people to the highest posts of power and authority "who had not, either from their obscure birth, or their low talents, or their still lower habits, the least occasion evey; to dream of such elevation" (qtd. in Kramnick, 1968, p. 76). In Bolingbroke's view, England's decline stemmed in large part from the displacement of a traditional order that had esteemed virtuous and learned natural leaders by a new ethos proclaiming that "he with the most money was the best man" (qtd. in Kramnick, 1968, p. 76). Thus, eighteenth-century Britain appeared increasingly enthralled by the cult of money. Popular maxims circulated widely: " It is money that sells all, money buys all, money pays all, money makes all, money mends all, and money mars all"; "Tis Money makes the Man"; "All Things are to be had for Money"; "Money, th' only Pow'r ... the last Reason of all Things"; "Money answers all Things" (qtd. in Dabydeen, 1983, p. 3). Such aphorisms reveal the pervasive faith in the omnipotence of money that accompanied the dramatic expansion of wealth in the age of the Financial Revolution.

The work depicts a highly commodified world, exposing the distortions and alienation produced by a market economy unrestrained by moral sentiments. From the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth century, under the combined influence of Enlightenment ideals of liberty, innovations in national finance, and the rapid expansion of commerce, England's economic life increasingly assumed the contours of a free market. Yet once detached from the moderating force of moral sentiment, this free-market economy encouraged unbridled speculation and fraud in the pursuit of profit, while human relations themselves were progressively reduced to mere commodity-money exchanges. As the scholar David Nokes (1995, p. 437) observes in his study of *The Beggar's Opera*, the play repeatedly invokes the language of trade and currency and reveals a marked tendency "to treat people and relationships in commodity terms", thereby capturing the atmosphere of commercial transaction and economic calculation—at once dynamic and fraught with the risk of corruption—that permeated urban life. Within the drama, Peachum, a merchant figure unrestrained by moral scruple, regards the lives of the criminals under his control as liquid assets to be realized at a profit. In his account book he meticulously records their respective "market values", noting, for example, "Tom Gagg, forty pounds" (I. ii. 12). For Peachum, all social relations can be abstracted into calculable and tradable economic units; even his daughter's marriage appears as nothing more than a transaction to be exploited for gain. Through such characterization, the play lays bare the alienation inherent in a free-market system deprived of moral regulation, while articulating the anxieties that Gay and his contemporaries harboured toward Britain's evolving commercial order. The Scottish Enlightenment thinker Adam Ferguson (1767, p. 29) candidly acknowledged that in commercial society individuals, in pursuit of profit, may treat others as they do their "cattle" or their "soil", valuing them solely for the returns they yield. Likewise, Adam Smith (1966, p. 119) observed that "every man is, no doubt, by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care", emphasizing the natural primacy of self-regard in human conduct. In the absence of moral sentiments capable of moderating this self-love, the free market readily descends into excess and disorder. As the writer William Pugh lamented, liberty when degenerating into licentiousness resembles "a rich cordial drunk immoderately, which intoxicates the brain, injures the best constitution, and will at length utterly ruin it" (qtd. in McGowen, 1987, p. 656).

The expansion of Jonathan Wild's criminal enterprise reenacts the corrosive spread of luxury as a social disease, revealing Henry Fielding's anxiety over the threat that a tide of extravagance posed to the health of the body politic and national economy. Eighteenth-century British society was undergoing profound transformation, as the nation rapidly developed into "a commercial empire, a great military power, and an advanced capitalist society founded on new and sophisticated banking and credit institutions that were altering both the way" (Bowers, 1995, p. 577). Yet while the rapid expansion of commerce contributed to the growth of national wealth, it also fostered conspicuous consumption, rising criminality, and growing instability within urban society. The ostentatious extravagance of the rich encouraged certain "irrational" members of the labouring classes to abandon disciplined and productive work in favour of speculative, parasitic, or even criminal pursuits in imitation of elite lifestyles. As Adam Smith (1966, p. 88) observes in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in striving to attain the "envied situation" of the wealthy and the great, candidates for fortune "too frequently abandon the paths of virtue", even resorting to crime and antisocial conduct in pursuit of imagined greatness. An anonymous pamphlet entitled *The Evils of London and Westminster* (1751) sharply declared that "Luxury, Prodigality, Idleness, and every Species of Wickedness" had spread "like a Deluge over the Face of the whole Kingdom", and that this "dangerous Malady" was preying upon "the Vitals of the Body Politic" (Anon., 1751, pp. 3-4). Fielding (1988, pp. 77-78) likewise perceived that the contagion of luxury could spread from rich to poor, eroding the moral fibre of the nation and corroding the health of its body politic. Fielding believes that, the prevailing culture of extravagance had already undermined the habits and discipline of Britain's labouring population, weakening the productive capacity of society as a whole (ibid., p. 77). In this sense, luxury was not merely a private moral failing but a social pathology with grave public consequences. In *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great*, large numbers of men "willing to live in luxury without labour" (89) join Wild's gang, embarking upon "so great and glorious an undertaking as that of robbing the public" (90). Through this portrayal, Fielding exposes the corrosive effects of luxury upon the work ethic and social order, while articulating his profound concern for the integrity of the kingdom's body politic. Fielding (1988, p. 228) warns English society that the unbridled spread of this affliction would inevitably transform ordinary citizens from "useful members of society" into "burthensome" liabilities, for "having nothing but their Labour to procure a Support for themselves, they must of Necessity become burthensome".

Fielding presents the conscience and reason embodied in the character of Heartfree as a remedy for the maladies afflicting the eighteenth-century body politic and national economy, thereby echoing Adam Smith's free-market theory, particularly his emphasis on the virtues of sympathy and the hypothesis of the impartial spectator. In *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great*, Fielding deliberately constructs the honest jeweller Heartfree as the moral antithesis of the rapacious and depraved Wild. Though cruelly deceived and wrongfully imprisoned through Wild's machinations, Heartfree steadfastly preserves his conscience and reason while in confinement, maintaining that there is "one thing the loss of which I should deplore infinitely beyond that of liberty and of life also—I mean that of a good conscience" (125). By adopting reason (115) in response to the vain and illusory objects of human desire, he avoids becoming enslaved to them. At the novel's conclusion, Wild ascends the gallows, whereas Heartfree is vindicated and resumes his honest trade. This narrative resolution underscores Fielding's earnest hope that commercial society might be sustained by moral self-regulation and rational restraint. It resonates with Smith's ideal of the economic agent who disciplines his conduct through sympathy and through the imagined perspective of an impartial spectator. Smith (1966, p. 26) accords central importance to sympathy as a mechanism for regulating behaviour: the spectator's effort to enter into the sentiments of the person principally concerned gives rise to the "soft, the gentle, the amiable virtues", such as candour, civility, justice, and benevolence; conversely, the agent's effort to moderate his passions to a level with which the spectator can sympathize engenders the sterner virtues of self-denial, self-government, and command of the passions. At the same time, Smith remains acutely aware that an "indulgent and partial spectator" may distort moral judgment (ibid., p. 217). Smith therefore advances the concept of the rational "impartial spectator", insisting that only by measuring one's conduct against this internalized, disinterested standpoint can the individual "humble the arrogance of his self-love, and bring it down to something which other men can go along with" (ibid., p. 120). In this sense, Heartfree embodies Smith's vision of the economic agent who unites rational calculation with moral virtue, pursuing commercial interests under the guidance of conscience and reason. As Fielding (1899, p. 144) remarks in his *An Essay on Conversation*, "real greatness" consists in "the union of a good heart with a good head".

Eighteenth-century Britain not only witnessed the rapid expansion of national commerce and trade but also confronted the erosion of public rationality and moral restraint that accompanied the dramatic accumulation of capital. Commercial crime and speculative ventures proliferated. As the historian P. G. M. Dickson (2016, p. 35) observes, many Britons of the period harboured deep anxieties about the social disorder generated by economic instability and the immoral practices it engendered. These sweeping transformations exerted a profound influence on literary production. The works of John Gay and Henry Fielding, among others, register a sustained unease toward the emerging economic system. Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* and Fielding's *The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great* both take London's criminal underworld as a distorted mirror of commercial society. By invoking what might be termed a self-judging "impartial spectator", these works reflect the turbulence and disarray of Britain's commercial order and implicitly call for a restoration of rationality and moral integrity. Gay places visibly identifiable criminal groups—thieves, prostitutes, and other denizens of the underworld—at the centre of the stage, while simultaneously inviting those less visible "criminals" seated in the audience—politicians, industrial capitalists, slave traders—to recognize their own reflection in the spectacle. In a similar vein, Fielding portrays Wild's manipulation of the reward system as a form of entrepreneurial criminality, reenacting within the free market the speculative and fraudulent practices of "irrational" economic agents. In doing so, both works reposition the public from passive spectators to critical observers of their own "irrational" and "immoral" economic conduct. It is important to note that Gay and Fielding themselves were active participants in the early development of Britain's market economy. Their writings therefore do not constitute a simple denunciation of the free-market system. Rather, through literary representation they seek to prompt reflection on how economic self-interest might be reconciled with the preservation of social order and moral restraint. In this respect, the two authors may be seen as anticipating—and in some measure contributing to—the classical economic theories later articulated by Adam Smith: an ideal vision of the free market grounded in rational moderation and moral sentiment.

Fund program: This study is sponsored by Major Project of National Social Science Fund of China "Economic Thoughts in English Literature" [22&ZD289] and Key Project of National Social Science Fund of China "Trade Empire Construction in English Literature of the Age of Great Discovery" [21AWW008].

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID

Tao Jiusheng ID https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1467-9306;
Wu Libing ID https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9583-7089

References

Alpert, G. P., Dunham, R. G., & Stroshine, M. S. (2005). *Policing: Continuity and change*. Waveland Press.

Anon. (1751). *The Vices of the Cities of London and Westminster*. G. Faulkner & R. James.

Armens, S. M. (1954). *John Gay: Social Critic*. King's Crown Press.

Beattie, J. M. (1986). *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660-1800*. Clarendon Press.

Bowers, T. N. (1995). "Tropes of Nationhood: Body, Body Politic, and Nation-State in Fielding's *Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon*." *ELH* (3): 575-602. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/ 10.1353/elh.1995.0022

Browning, A. (1953). *English Historical Documents, 1660-1714*. Eyre & Spottiswoode.

Chancellor, E. (1999). *Devil Take the Hindmost: A history of Financial Speculation*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Churchill, W. S. (1965). *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples: The Age of Revolution, Volume III*. Dodd, Mead.

Collins, P. A., Ricks, T. A., & Van Meter, C. W. (2000). *Principles of Security and Crime Prevention*. Anderson Publishing.

Dabydeen, D. (1983). "Commerce and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Literature." *Kunapipi* (3): 2-23.

Defoe, D. (1732). *The Complete English Tradesman: In Familiar Letters*. Printed for C. Rivington, at the Bible and Crown in St. Paul's Church-Yard.

Dickson, P. G. M. (2016). *The Financial Revolution in England*. Routledge.

Dijkstra, B. (1987). *Defoe and Economics: The Fortunes of Roxana in the History of Interpretation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ferguson, A. (1767). *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. A. Millar & T. Cadell; A. Kincaid & J. Bell.

Fielding, H. (1743). *Miscellanies, Volume I*. Printed for the author and sold by A. Millar, opposite to Catharine-Street, in the Strand.

Fielding, H. (1962). *The Life of Jonathan Wild the Great*. The New American Library.

Fielding, H. (1988). M. R. Zirker (Ed.), *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers and Related Writings*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Fielding, J. (1755). *A Plan for Preventing Robberies Within Twenty Miles of London*. Printed for A. Millar, in the Strand.

Hobbes, T. (1904). *Leviathan*. Cambridge University Press.

Howson, G. (1958). *Thief-Taker General: Jonathan Wild and the Emergence of Crime and Corruption as a Way of Life in Eighteenth-Century England*. Transaction Books.

John, G. (1986). *The Beggar's Opera*. Penguin Books.

Kramnick, I. (1968). *Bolingbroke and His Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole*. Harvard University Press.

Landau, N. (1984). *The Justices of the Peace, 1679-1760*. University of California Press.

Langbein, J. H. (2003). *The Origins of Adversary Criminal Trial*. Oxford University Press.

Langford, P. (1989). *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783*. Oxford University Press.

Langford, P. (2000). *Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Levenson, T. (2020). *Money for Nothing: The South Sea Bubble and the Invention of Modern Capitalism*. Head of Zeus.

Lis, C., & Soly, H. (2012). *Worthy Efforts: Attitudes to Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe*. Brill.

Locke, J. (1988). *Two Treatises of Government*. Cambridge University Press.

Mackay, C. (1932). *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. L. C. Page.

Mandeville, B. (1732). *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Public Benefits*. Printed for J. Tonson, at Shakespeare's Head over against Katharine Street in the Strand.

Mandeville, B. (1733). *The Fable of the Bees, Part II*. Printed and Sold by J. Roberts in Warwick-Lane.

McGowen, R. (1987). "The Body and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England." *The Journal of Modern History* (4): 651-679. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1086/ 243281

McMullan, J. L. (1995). "The Political Economy of Thief-Taking." *Crime, Law & Social Chang* (2): 121-146. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01298527

McMullan, J. L. (1996). "The New Improved Monied Police: Reform, Crime Control, and the Commodification of Policing in London." *British Journal of Criminology* (1): 85-108. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjc.a014079

Melville, L. (1921). *Life and Letters of John Gay*. Daniel O'Connor.

Nemeth, C. P. (2018). *Private Security: An Introduction to Principles and Practice*. Taylor & Francis.

Nicholson, C. (2004). *Writing and the Rise of Finance: Capital Satires of the Early Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge University Press.

Nokes, D. (1987). *Raillery and Rage: A Study of Eighteenth-Century Satire*. Harvester Press.

Nokes, D. (1995). *John Gay: A Profession of Friendship*. Oxford University Press.

Norman, J. (2018). *Adam Smith: Father of Economics*. Basic Books.

Petty, W. (1691). *Political Arithmetick*. London: Printed for Robert Clavel at the Peacock, and Hen. Mortlock at the Phenix in St. Paul's Church-yard.

Porter, R. (1982). *English Society in the Eighteenth century*. Penguin Books.

Porter, R. (2000). *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment*. W. W. Norton.

Rock, P. (1977). "Law, Order and Power in Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth-Century England." *International Annals of Criminology* (1-2): 233-265. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003445277001433

Ruggiero, V. (2003). *Crime in Literature: Sociology of Deviance and Fiction*. Verso.

Shore, H. (2003). "Crime, Criminal Networks and the Survival Strategies of the Poor in Early Eighteenth-Century London." In S. King, & A. Tomkins (Eds.), *The poor in England 1700-1850* (pp. 137-165), Manchester University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7765/ 9781526137869

Sidney & Webb, B. (1924). *English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act*. Longmans, Green.

Smith, A. (1952). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Smith, A. (1982). R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, & P. G. Stein (Eds.), *Lectures on Jurisprudence*. Liberty Fund.

Soll, J. (2014). *The Reckoning: Financial Accountability and the Rise and Fall of Nations*. Basic Books.

Spitzer, S., & Scull, A. T. (1977). "Privatization and Capitalist Development: The Case of the Private Police." *Social Problems* (1): 18-29. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/ 800464

Steuart, J. (1966). *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy*. Oliver and Boyd.

Thompson, E. P. (1971). "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century." *Past and Present* (1): 76-136. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/ past/50.1.76

Villadsen, K. (2024). *Foucault's Technologies: Another Way of Cutting Reality*. Oxford University Press.

Wells, J. E. (1913). "Fielding's Political Purpose in *Jonathan Wild*." *PMLA* (1): 1-55. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1632/456674

Yilmaz, H. (2013). "It Is a Wild Wild World: (Political) Satire in Fielding's *Jonathan Wild*." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* (11): 503-508. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5901/ mjss.2013.v4n11p503