

Poet and Dramatist

1685 to 1732

JOHN GAY



John Gay was born in Barnstaple, Devon. As a boy, he was sent to London to be a silk mercer's apprentice, but it didn't work out. So he returned home, received his education from his uncle, and then moved to London again as a young man.

In 1714, John was appointed secretary to the British ambassador to the Electorate of Hanover. But Queen Anne died before he could start his employment. So he stayed in London and turned his energy to writing.

Yet Burlington's fair palace still remains:
Beauty within; without, proportion reigns:
Beneath his eye declining Art revives,
The wall with animated picture lives.
There Handel strikes the strings; the melting strain
Transports the soul, and thrills through ev'ry vein:
There oft I enter (but with cleaner shoes),
For Burlington's belov'd by ev'ry muse.

In 1728, he wrote the "Beggar's Opera", with music by Johann Christoph Pepusch.

While the "Beggar's Opera" is his most famous work, we have enjoyed 'Trivia, or the Art of Walking the Streets of London'.

Written in 1716, this poem takes you on a walk across London, describing the sites, people,

markets and even odours that you'll encounter along the way. 'Trivia' is a satirical poem, and in it, John Gay playfully describes what he sees on his journey. He also gives tongue-in-cheek advice about dressing for the journey – which boots are best to walk through the mud-and-poo-covered lanes, how to avoid being drenched by chamber pots being poured out from first floor windows, and where to watch out for pickpockets and wig thieves!

In one passage, John mentions the silent buildings of the Temple, and in another, he praises George Frideric Handel's music – the composer with whom he created 'Acis and Galatea'!

We've included that passage here, and we encourage you to read the full poem.

'Trivia' is available at <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/gay-trivia/>

