

Introduction

William Hogarth (1697-1764) has received so much critical attention of late¹ that another book on his work seems hardly liable to break new ground. Yet in the *Hogarth Code* the approach is original in so far as it gives a coherency to fragmented explanations that make sense in a hitherto neglected, or underestimated, hermeneutic framework. A brief survey of the criticism devoted to the artist's work from his own times to nowadays evidences the growing awareness of his technical excellence.² The famous eighteenth-century painter and engraver's interest in the society he lived in is undeniable and the analyses of his social realism have been many and brilliant.³ A staunch promoter of English art and values, Hogarth has been described as a moralist although the ambiguity of his two-fold satire was resented by many, notably in the Victorian age. True enough, his series of engravings are peopled with erring characters but society is clearly held partly responsible for their shortcomings. As with Defoe, irony cuts both ways – Colonel Charteris, the “Rape Master of the Kingdom” who awaits Mary (in the series *A Harlot's Progress* 1732) on her arrival in the wagon from York, is a debauchee, yet the harlot is not long in taking a young lover when she becomes the kept mistress of a rich Jew. If one sticks to the surface interpretation, she is, like Moll Flanders, both sinned against and sinning. The artist's irony uses such an ambivalence to develop and multiply its targets. This is probably why the issue of his libertinism has been hotly debated, together with his latitudinarian proclivities. Referring to the “Sister Arts” theory, the relationship between Hogarth and Fielding and other playwrights,⁴ has often been analyzed, supported by Hogarth's assertion that his painting was his stage and the characters his actors. Attention has also been paid to the love-hate relationship he had with the Old Masters he copied and parodied. Parallels have been drawn between his work and the iconography of Old Testament, of the New Testament and of mythology.⁵ Holding the very prestigious position of Serjeant Painter to the King (1757), Hogarth was considered seminal in England's taste.⁶ He, who in 1725 had joined the academy set up by James Thornhill in 1725, took his pedagogical role very seriously and the huge variety of formats,⁷ of styles⁸ and of subjects⁹ in prints and paintings reveal both his competence and originality.

Analysing images exposes the critic to the multiple dangers of ekphrasis. “I write upon painting.... I translate forms into words, and words cast their light and shadow, and forms fuel the spring of verb”, wrote Nicole de Pontcharra (227). Keeping in mind the extent to which words reorganise a painted surface already structured by its own language (lines, perspective, colours, etc.), one must remember that “the aesthetic discourse is essentially self-referential, whatever the mimetic issue self-referentiality ultimately subsumes” (Wahl 61). Using words to describe images is even trickier in the case of Hogarth since his paintings and prints already superpose narrative upon iconic meaning on the very canvas or plate.¹⁰ Charles Lamb’s famous comment about Hogarth sums it all: “Other pictures we look at – his prints we read.”¹¹ Hogarth defined himself as a “dramatic writer” and as both a playwright and stage director. This is why there are almost as many interpretations of Hogarth’s works as critics.¹² Dabydeen was absolutely right when he defended Ronald Paulson who was criticised for his a priori method, consisting in searching for just those details that would support his thesis:

But Hogarth himself challenges us to speculate and to indulge in a hectic chase after meaning. He invites us to unlock his narrative puzzles and sees this as providing essential intellectual fun for the interpreter of his work. Hence in the caption to his *South Sea Scheme* having explained for us the details of the print, he concludes, “Guess at the Rest, you find out more.” He dares us to find out more, to discover his intentions. For Hogarth, “barking up the wrong trees is a necessary adventure”. (Dabydeen, *Hogarth, Walpole and Commercial Britain* 12)

Introducing the 1998 Hogarth exhibition (January 28th, 1998-April 19th, 1998) held for the 300th anniversary of his birth,¹³ Bindman wrote: “Despite Hogarth’s outspokenness-made-visual in prints such as *Gin Lane*, where a drunken mother drops an infant from her lap; *The Rake’s Progress*, in which a profligate abuses his way through society into debtor’s prison and the madhouse; and *The First Stage of Cruelty*, whose young boys commit acts of terrible cruelty on domestic animals – Hogarth’s own attitudes were elusive, giving rise to different interpretations by subsequent generations. “It is for this reason that the exhibition opens, not with the work of Hogarth himself, but with the contemporary English artist David Hockney”. Hockney adapted the notion of the rake as social-climbing ne’er-do-well to the artist as outsider, creating a character who parallels Hockney’s own progress through the New York of the 1960s, suggesting such modern attributes as fascination, threat, and alienation. The exhibition moves back in time, from the work of Hockney, to nineteenth-century followers of Hogarth, to contemporary imitators, to Hogarth himself. Thus, we see the artist named William Hogarth as containing multiple identities imposed on him over the centuries: witty satirist, stern moralist, libertine, aggressive self-promoter, detached observer, and man of the people. The Hogarth student who conscientiously reads as many books and articles as possible, very speedily loses countenance because the varied interpretations show a wide range of divergences, inconsistencies, contradictions or even unexplained elements.

In discussing for instance the clock in the breakfast scene of *MM* where the husband and wife are sitting on either side of the fireplace, thus indicating their

alienation from each other, most critics were highly puzzled. “The incongruity of fish stranded high out of their element with a cat between them recalls the earlier incongruity of Pharaoh drowning in a ceiling painting” (Cowley 23).¹⁴ Divergences also appear between commentators of the same detail. Concerning the fourth plate of *AHP*, which portrays the harlot in the prison of Bridewell, Bindman writes: “her future is represented by the hideous harlot behind who fingers her garments and grins” (*Hogarth* 59). In Burke’s and Caldwell’s opinion the same woman is the leering jailer’s wife who gropes the harlot’s fine clothes, thinking they will be hers (137). The identity of characters is differently construed by the various critics. In *MM*, the man who is looking out of the window in the first plate, that of the marriage contract, is either an architect supervising the building work, or a town lawyer, amazed by the earl’s building. In the same series, at the occasion of the visit to the quack doctor (Plate 3) by the earl who has caught VD, the fat woman has been described as a prostitute showing how varied the earl’s tastes are (the other girl is thin and looks young and innocent), as a bawd (like Mother Needham in *AHP*) or as the doctor’s wife (if it is Misaubin who is represented in this scene he did have a fat wife, although he does not look at all like another character some critics think to be the same Misaubin in the death scene of *AHP*, Plate 5). The author of these lines would personally opt for the hypothesis of the older woman as procuress, since, on the painting the material of the fat lady’s sleeves is the same as that of the young prostitute’s skirt. Sheer absurdities have also been written: for example the branch of evergreen in the plate before the orphan boy sitting at the feet of his mother’s coffin in the wake scene of *AHP* has been described as neatly picked fish-bones. Some details are not explained or not given any satisfactory interpretation like the squirrel on the prostitute’s hand in the painting hanging against a tapestry in the duel scene of *MM* (Plate 5).

Polysemy is only too natural when such “talkative” works are concerned. The symbolic perspective on Hogarth is so striking that it has been neglected by none of his commentators since the literal sense naturally gives way to a figurative one. It is both a matter of technique and of significance. “The use of signs and symbols had increased his sense of emblematic meanings as well as leading him to a careful filling-in of details” (Lindsay 16). The comparison with Goya is relevant as both integrate emblems into everyday life reality.

As with Hogarth, the emblematic element is transformed, given a new and urgent application to reality, to immediate experience. Only by holding fast to these points can we enter Hogarth’s world and pass beyond the superficial view of him as a social commentator. (Lindsay 21)

My contention is that meaning can be, if not rendered unequivocal, which would present no kind of interest, at least organised in a coherent whole if the “reading” of the images is carried out with the awareness that emblems are used like symbols, organised in latent networks.¹⁵ The right level of reading is hermeneutics applied to an esoteric object. Mircea Eliade’s approach – the pattern which has become traditional in the history of religions, i.e. the historical, phenomenological and hermeneutic perspectives seems particularly fruitful in the case of Hogarth.

Emblems, in the sense of pictures of objects, conventionally used to represent a particular person, group or idea – like the rose as the national emblem of England – literally invade Hogarth’s works. Often inspired by emblem books, they are radically different since they are not only particularised by their relation with specifically modern characters and situations but they also participate in the advancement – patent and latent – of the drama. Hogarth’s non-conformist religious background probably helped mould this peculiar perspective and technique. “The idea of the emblem or symbolic object which, if grasped truly and deeply, provided a clue to man’s destiny, had a long history, both learned and popular, and had played a potent part in the dissenting tradition to which the Hogarths belonged...” (Lindsay 19). Now symbols, apart from referring to the Creed of the Apostles, are “things regarded by general consent as naturally typifying something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought” (lion as royalty and strength) or “mark or character taken as the conventional sign of some object or idea” (letters standing for chemical element). Interestingly enough this definition of symbols combines tradition – in its double sense of history and consensus – with religion and faith on one side and science and empiricism on the other. These are all elements that will have to be kept in mind when the time comes to unveil the hermeneutic approach selected.

“There was a feeling that the object in its symbolic nature had some fascinating power over men, an animist energy which could surge out and affect or control them...” (Lindsay 19). Hogarth used all the symbolic means at his disposal to convey and enrich the apparent meanings of his paintings and prints. “He followed De Lairese who ruled that the only solution open to a painter was to ‘have recourse to emblematic figures, which will clear the meaning’” (Cowley 23). He repeatedly and consistently commented upon and within his own icons by multiplying mythological and Biblical visual references, either through paintings hanging on the walls of the scenes he depicted or by hinting at scenes already painted by his forerunners through the attitudes of his characters or compositions. These commentaries may develop as reinforce the meaning, may be counter-punctual or burlesque. Besides, allusions, direct or indirect, to such subjects are opportunities for Hogarth to pay off old scores with foreign painters. His intention is made clear in *The Battle of the Pictures* (Feb. 1744/45), inspired by *The Battle of the Books* Swift appended to his *Tale of a Tub* (1704). It was a bidder’s ticket¹⁶ for the auction sale of nineteen of his paintings: *AHP*, *ARP*, *4 Times*, *Strolling Actresses*. Counterfeit Old Masters from Cock’s and the auctioneer (on the left), are off to attack Hogarth’s paintings of “Modern subjects”. From bottom to top, a *St. Francis* has pierced the prude in Hogarth’s *Morning*, *Magdalena* has cut the third painting of *AHP*, and the *Aldobrandini Wedding* has stabbed the breakfast scene in *MM*. Up in the air, on the other hand, Hogarth’s paintings are victorious. The *RP*’s orgy scene has made a hole in a *Feast of Olympus*, *A Midnight Modern Conversation* has pierced a *Procession of Bacchus*. The snag, in a reversal from *Battle of the Books*, is that the Old Masters are much too numerous as there are many more lining up in battle ranks.

Hogarth’s response is to include them in his paintings and prints, apparently with their traditional symbolic meaning but in fact with a rather different intention.

In *ARP, The Choice of Paris*, a painting on the back wall of Tom's grand mansion (Print 2) foreshadows his choice of Venus (love) to the detriment of Hera (faithfulness) and Minerva (wisdom). The portraits of Roman emperors arrayed in a Kit-Cat style¹⁷ all around the walls of the orgy scene obliquely comment on the rake's decadence (Plate 3). Icarus's wings resting on the canopy of the bed of one of Tom's cellmates in the prison scene strike the tocsin of his hopes (Plate 7). In *MM*, mythological subjects are diversely represented: the earl is portrayed as Jupiter in the first scene of the series; an apparently all-powerful father, he is the promoter of disaster and despair and will soon die: Prometheus is being tortured by a vulture. Cupid is playing a bagpipe in a painting hanging over the fire-place in the breakfast scene, ironically commenting upon the loveless husband and wife, while a noseless Roman bust suggests venereal disease, notably syphilis which caused nose damage (Plate 2). The portrait of a reclining naked Danaë partly hidden by a curtain is hung side by side with the grand portraits of three saints. Erotica like *Io and Jupiter, The Rape of Ganymede* and a statute of Actaeon in the black page's hands in the countess's chamber scene create a lecherous atmosphere reflecting and emphasising the relationship between the countess and her lover (Plate 4). Deepening characterisation and using inter-iconicity¹⁸ for the sake of parody and satire are two good reasons for such a secularization of mythological subjects.

The same functions can be attributed to the Biblical subjects and references which are more numerous than mythological ones. Apart from the four series, Hogarth represented Biblical subjects such as Moses and the Pharaoh's Daughter or Paul before Felix. In *AHP*, a painting of David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant with Uzzah who is stabbed in the back because he attempted to touch it and one of Jonah outside Niniveh hang on the wall of the harlot's bedroom, heralding impending doom (Print 2). The Sacrifice of Isaac is a prelude to her fall (Print 3) and the harlot's position during her death is that of Dormitions of the Virgin (Plate 5). The mourning prostitutes, caretaker and priest, twelve in all, are reminiscent of the Last Supper (Plate 6). The same allusion is to be found in the orgy scene of *ARP* (Plate 3), the anointing of Christ in the arrest scene (Plate 4), the *Nativity* hanging on the walls of the church where the rake marries an old but rich woman (Plate 6), and the last scene at Bedlam evokes a Pietà (Plate 8). The first plate of *MM* literally teems with Biblical subjects repeatedly taken up in Italian painting. *David and Goliath, Judith and Holophernes, The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, The Massacre of the Innocents, Cain Killing Abel* and *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* decorate the earl's drawing-room walls. On the ceiling one sees *Pharaoh's Armies on the Red Sea* (Plate 1). All these tragic scenes have been analyzed as omens of the fate awaiting the bride and bridegroom. The portraits of three saints (Ss. Matthew, John and Andrew) are in the back room of the breakfast scene, and are an ironic counterpoint to the couple's loose manners (Print 2); *Lot and His Daughters* in the lecherous countess's chamber accompanies the mythological erotica alluded to above (Plate 4); *The Judgment of Solomon* is a tapestry on the back wall in the brothel where the duel scene and the earl's death take place, while the portrait of *St. Luke* is above the door in the same room. In this scene the husband and wife's attitudes recall those of a "Descent from the Cross" with the strange position of the earl's body and Mary Magdalena kneeling down at the foot of the cross.



Figure 1: *The Mystery of Masonry Brought to Light by the Gormogons* (1724)

Hogarth's ambiguous religious positions will be dealt with at length, notably in the study of *AHP*, but the link between mythological and Biblical motifs may well lie in Shaftesbury's recommendation to painters to replace Jesus Christ by a classical hero such as Hercules (Paulson *The Beautiful* 11). In mythology, characters and situations are typical and their relation with the qualities, defects and themes they stand for is fixed forever. What Hogarth was probably trying to do by mixing them with Biblical symbols was to subtly displace both their meaning and that of the Old and New Testament motifs. Using emblems as symbols, the artist replaces, or rather doubles immediate legibility by a code to decipher. Only a certain number of initiates are meant to break this code, because they have seen these emblems elsewhere in another secret symbolic framework. This was true for the early Christian period when "An emblem was originally an ornament, but it has come to mean a symbol.... The use of emblems under which the truths of Christianity were veiled from the heathen, but presented vividly to the mind of the faithful, is probably as old as Christianity itself" (B.E. Jones 426). They "are believed to have used symbols – a fish, a dove, etc., engraved on their rings and seals – as a means of revealing their faith to fellow Christians without betraying themselves to their persecutors" (B.E. Jones 427). This is also true for another symbolic system, which heavily relied on visual symbolism, and with which Hogarth was very much conversant to the point of having its motifs in mind when holding the burin: freemasonry. British masonry, the first of its kind, was of Christian inspiration and both the fish and the dove, for instance, have been used as masonic symbols (B.E. Jones 427). Hogarth's paintings and plates are full not only of mythological and Biblical references but also of masonic hints.

The interpretative process is made complex since "The initiate learns that freemasonry is a peculiar system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols" (B.E. Jones 426). It is all the more complicated as the mythological and

Biblical meaning and inter-iconicity are part and parcel of the masonic framework of interpretation, which integrated them from its very creation. The quest for meaning is part of the viewer's progress. This is why the masonic symbol "must offer all the interpretations possible" (Nefontaine 198). Never does the masonic symbol constitute an answer, but always and everywhere the symbol is a 'question sower'" (Nefontaine 199). A good starting-point are the three Masonic prints:¹⁹ *The Mystery of Masonry Brought to Light by the Gormogons* (1724),²⁰ *The Sleeping Congregation* (October 1736) and "Night" (1738) in the *Four Times of the Day*. The first print, *The Mystery of Masonry Brought to Light by the Gormogons* (1724),



Figure 2: *The Sleeping Congregation* (October 1736)

whose third state is kept in the British Museum, presents a breakaway group of masons suspected of Jacobitism, the Gormogons. A processional scene, pouring out of the Grapes Tavern and led by Chin Quan and Confucius, features an old woman on an ass having her bare bottom kissed;²¹ Sancho Panza and a drawer, laughing at the procession, are figures copied from Coypel's design of *Don Quixote's Adventure at the Puppet Show*. The woman on the ass seems to be suggested by the mystery-image of Isis carried by the ass in Apuleius. (Lindsay 29). Masonic rites and paraphernalia are caricatured and made ludicrous by the presence of the white gloves and the apron, the ladder, the mop and pail, the sun, the ass and the swan.

The Sleeping Congregation (October 1736) portrays a sleeping audience at church, the most conspicuous of whose members being a beautiful young girl who, in the abandon of sleep, exposes her attractive bosom. The priest was apparently drawn in the resemblance of John Theophilus Desaguliers (1683-1744), third Grand Master,²² and the upside down triangle on the wall has been construed as a masonic sign by many, who sees in it a suggestion of "the secularization of the church into a lodge" (Paulson, *The Catalogue* 140). The hour-glass indicating that the sermon is far too long is also a masonic symbol found on some old tracing boards (B.E. Jones 357). In "Night" (1738) in the *Four Times of the Day*, two masons, and perhaps four, if we follow some critics who included the two men turning their backs on the viewer (one of whom who is holding a broom) are portrayed.²³ In all three prints, free masonry is depicted through ludicrous characters eliciting laughter, sleep or contempt. They function as "autocatégorèmes", which is how we are represented by others and nobody will be able to be more satirical than this.



Figure 3: “Night”, from *The Four Times of Day* (1738)

My conviction is that masonry, its rituals and icons, was a source of inspiration for Hogarth even in some of his less overtly Masonic paintings and prints. Thornhill had been an early mason²⁴ and according to Calvert, “It is fairly conjecturable that the masonic example of his prospective father-in-law, who was Grand Warden in 1728, led him to become a member of the Craft” (Calvert 107). Hogarth became a member on November 27th, 1725 at the tavern At the Hand and Apple Tree, Little Great Queen Street. Some believe it might have been a little earlier (C. Révauger “William Hogarth et la Franc-Maçonnerie”). His name is to be found on the registrar of the lodge At the Bear and Harrow, Butcher’s Row, in 1730. He was appointed Grand Stewart for the years 1734 and 1735. His name appears in the list opposite and he designed what came to be known as “Hogarth’s jewel” for the Stewart’s lodge of the Grand Lodge of which he was a member. Its pattern had been approved on the previous June 24th when “the right of wearing it ‘wherever they appear as mason’ was conceded to them” (Calvert 107). He tried to defend the dignity of the Grand Lodge against its opponents, such as the Duke of Wharton who, after his conversion to Catholicism and support of Jacobitism, is said to have set up the Gormogons Society as a parody of the Grand Lodge of which he had been the

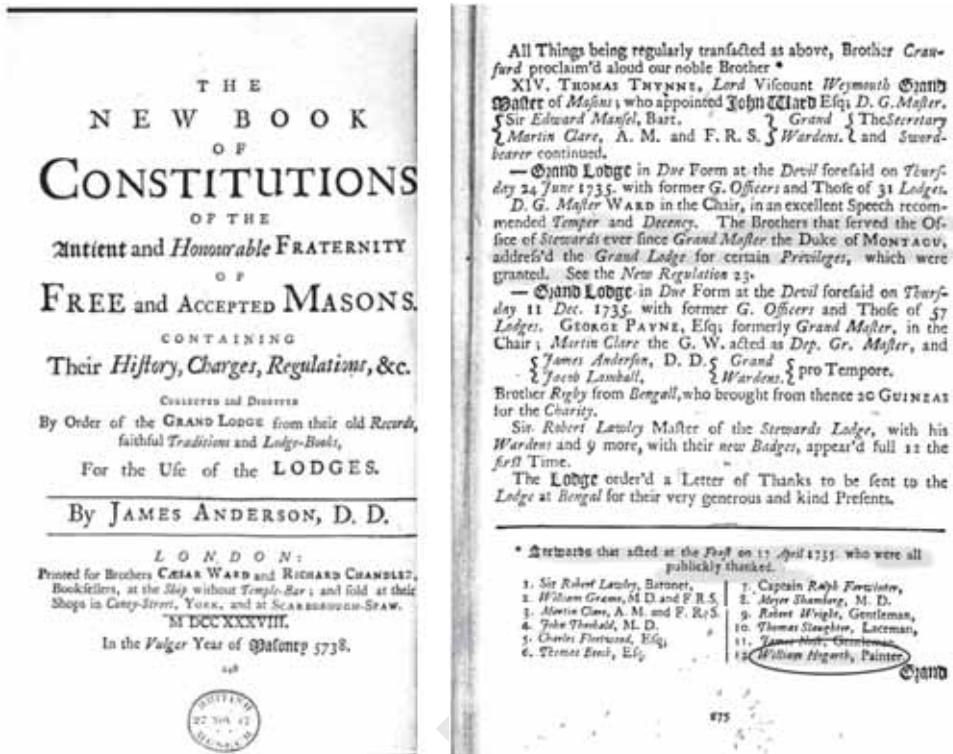


Figure 4: Cover of Anderson's *Constitutions* (1723), and page 275, upon which Hogarth's name appears



Figure 5: Hogarth, William. *The Grand Steward's Jewel*

Grand Master (in 1723). The Gormogons Society organised parodies of masonic processions and, as an answer, Hogarth published his *The Mystery of Masonry Brought to Light by the Gormogons* in 1724.²⁵ Dr. James Anderson and the Duke of Wharton are depicted in it. According to Cécile Révauger, the monkey with its masonic apron enabled Hogarth to caricature the opponents to masonry, to wink at

his brethren and to amiably mock Anderson who had written a scientific preamble on the origins of freemasonry (C. Révauger, “William Hogarth et la Franc-Maçonnerie” 286). Hogarth’s perspective on free masonry is that of a humorist. He seems to have been very active in lodges in the 1730s and 1740s, but afterwards he was probably less interested by masonic life as the Grand Lodge began to adopt the opinions of the established church and the aristocracy. The four “major” series go in chronological pairs, *AHP* (1732) and *ARP* (1735) belong to the 1730s, and *MM* (1745) and *II* (1747) to the 1740s, the latter definitely belonging to the period when Hogarth was a Mason.

Free masonry had a certain number of attractions for Hogarth it did not have for others who were more interested in its festive and snobbish dimension. Proud of his craft to the point of demanding – and obtaining – the acknowledgment of intellectual property for engraving, he probably considered masonry as, among other things, a gathering of craftsmen. “Mystery comes from ‘métier’ or ‘mestere’ in the language brought over to England by William the Conqueror; Saxons adapted it to ‘mystery’. In ancient writings, when masonry is termed ‘mystery’, it essentially means that masonry was a trade and craft” (B.E. Jones 66). Secondly the masonic emblematic method and iconography probably went hand in hand with the sense of symbolism he had to develop as an apprentice to the silversmith, Ellis Gamble, an engraver of Blue Cross Street, Leicester Fields, at the sign of the Golden Angel. Here he had to copy and use signs and symbols and he took the habit of carefully filling in the details (Lindsay 16). Thirdly the indestructible link between symbolism and secrecy had a peculiar appeal to the artist. “Hogarth, to whom this esoteric language had become second nature as a result of his training as a silversmith, his study of paintings, and his enthusiastic participation in freemasonry, became exasperated when only a few followers responded to his veiled meaning” (Cowley 23).

Masonic regulations were so strict, however, that allusions had to be both clearly visible for initiates and carefully dissimulated for outsiders. To prevent misplaced curiosity and to satisfy the trained eye of his brethren, Hogarth drew on masonic symbols,²⁶ playing on their two-fold dimension, that of marks or objects with a stable meaning in their original context, which are given new substance by their inclusion into a profane background and their combination with the visible mythological and Biblical symbols. To cite only a few in each series, the rose, the goose, the bell, the hush sign, the Ark of the Covenant, twelve o’clock, the broom, the gavels, the halter, the apron, the gloves, the coffin, the tears and the acacia branches are to be found in *AHP*. *ARP* includes the scales, the metals, the Bible, a double planisphere, (a figure head of) David (on harp), Hermes, the drawn swords, the cocks, the hexagram, the sun, the three lights, the athanor, the telescope, the hanging key, the halter and the rough stone. A Palladian building, Cupid, Hermes, the Quatuor Coronati, the androgyn, Acteon, Solomon and the compasses are scattered all through *MM*. Finally, *II* includes two apprentices, a master, the winding staircase, the coffin and skulls, the shoeblock, gloves “shaking hands”, a widow’s son, the broached thurnell, the Fire of London Monument (quoted in Anderson’s *Constitutions* of 1723 as an example of what “genuine masonry” is), the lewis (-shaped ear-rings), the tessellated pavement, the murder, the gallows, the dove and to “crown” all, the Prince of Wales, made a mason in 1737.²⁷ Examples are too



Figure 7 (above): *Marriage-à-la Mode*, Plate 2;
Detail of head of Hermes

Figure 6 (left): Deacon's emblem: Hermes
with winged feet (1790-1820)



Figure 8: Arms of the United
Grand Lodge (1813). Detail of
Ark of the Covenant



Figure 9: *A Harlot's Progress*, Plate 2;
Detail of of Ark of the Covenant

numerous to be discarded as mere coincidences. On the page opposite, examples of symbols taken from a Masonic background are paralleled with symbols taken from Hogarth's prints: Mercury on a deacon's emblem and as an ornament on the mantelpiece of *MM2*, the Ark of the Covenant in the Arms of the United Grand Lodge and also visible in the painting hung on the wall of Print 2 of *AHP*, shaking hands on General William S. Schuyler's apron and the ones on the table in Print 4 of *II*, an acacia branch on a wooden tracing-board and one on the coffin in Print 6 of *AHP*.

Many of those symbols are multi-layered like the rose in *AHP* or the cocks in *ARP*. The rose is the emblem both of Venus and of the Virgin Mary (with the lily) as she is the "thornless rose", but it is also the symbol of Christ's Passion and that of the necessary secrecy for brethren who must speak *sub rosa*. As for the cock, connected with the sun in Pagan rites, it is closely linked with Christ's Passion

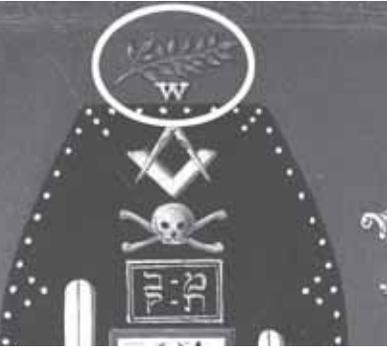
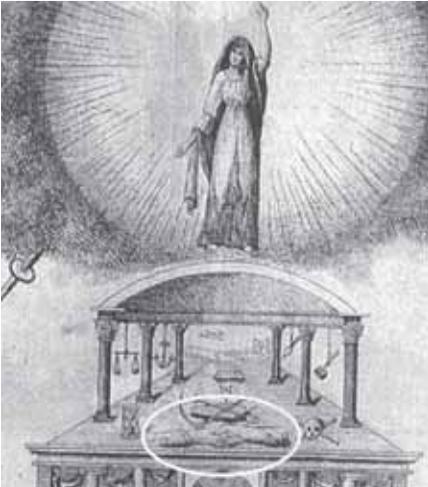


Figure 12 (above): Wooden tracing board (1819); Detail of Acacia

Figure 10 (left): General William S. Schuyler's apron (c. 1770); Detail of shaking hands



Figure 11: *Industry and Idleness*, Plate 4; Detail of shaking gloves



Figure 13: *A Harlot's Progress*, Plate 6; Detail of Acacia

(because of Peter's denial) and for freemasons, it stands for vigilance and the initiatory light. Both Testaments influenced the creation of masonic symbolism in which "Biblical symbolism mainly comes from Old Testament even if references to the New Testament already exist: the two St. Johns, St. Andrew, etc..."²⁸ But that is not all. A last framework included in masonry has to be taken into account for an exhaustive reading of the artist's work – that of alchemy. The links between masons and alchemists are denied by some of the contemporary masonic scholars, while they are accepted by others. They seem undeniable in eighteenth-century Britain. John Hancox published (1992) an analysis of the geometric, architectural and symbolic drawings (late 17th to early 18th century) collected by John Byrom (1691-1763), a member of the Royal Society and a freemason, which leaves no doubt about the connection. In it, European architects and hermetists, including Newton,²⁹ are referred to in terms of alchemical and kabbalistic symbols. Elias Ashmole (1617-1692) himself, a favourite of Charles I, was made a mason in the early 17th century and was a member of the Royal Society.³⁰ "It thus seems probable that free masonry was not born in the 'direct' wake of builders' lodges, but in that of those hermetists, rosicrucians and kabbalists very keen on architecture and almost



Figure 14: Masonic symbols on the reverse of a miniature portrait belonging to Frances Cornelia, wife of W. Bro. James Ames (1776)

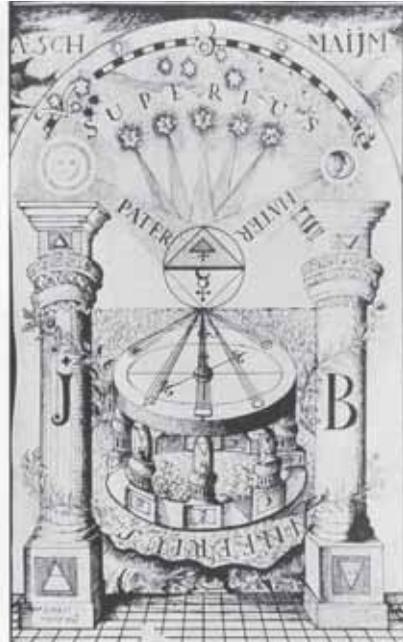


Figure 15: Alchemical symbols in the Frontispiece to *Compaß der Weisen* (1779)

all involved in the founding of the Royal Society” (Jean-Michel Mathonière, *Historia* 17).³¹ In his *Freemasonry, A Journey through Ritual and Symbol*, MacNulty gives side by side representations from masonry and from alchemy (69), that of the reverse of a miniature portrait belonging to Frances Cornelia, wife of W. Bro. James Ames of Lodge of Innocence and Morality, 1776 and the frontispiece to *Compaß der Weisen*, 1779 (see opposite): the similarities are striking. The genealogical (Jesse) tree of the first print of *MM* or the presence of the athanor and of the alchemist in the prison scene of a *ARP* are much easier to explain if one keeps this alchemical strain of free masonry in mind.

“In eighteenth-century England, masonic symbolism reconciled science and religion through philanthropic deism tinged with christianism” (Nefontaine 168).³² My conviction is that the symbols from mythology, the Bible, freemasonry and alchemy are not just scattered at random in Hogarth’s prints as simple occasional winks to his brethren. They are intertwined to create a coherent, though veiled, meaning. Their network has to do with the idea of progress, and of perfectibility, underlying apparent downwards paths and eventual falls. Different types of processions organised in eighteenth-century London staged the idea of oriented progression, for example the Lord Mayor’s procession on the day of his taking office from the Guildhall in the City to Westminster Hall (echoed in *II*), and the condemned criminal’s final journey from Newgate prison in the City to the gibbet at Tyburn, in the open country, not far from the current Marble Arch (Georgel 78-79 also echoed in *II*). There were also the masonic processions until 1745.³³ They were not actually technically prohibited until 1747 by the Grand Lodge itself.³⁴ They roused the public’s attention and from 1741

to 1745 sham processions were arranged through the Strand with persons dressed in mock regalia.³⁵ Genuine Freemasonry, born in a protestant context – Anderson (1684?-1739) was a priest of the Presbyterian Scottish Church – placed improvement at the core of its doctrine. “Besides hearing Presbyterian sermons in early years, Hogarth must have known Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), which dramatically sets out the idea of man’s life as movement along a narrow path between heaven and hell” (Lindsay 32). In the most widely available book in England after the Bible, the hero’s journey is internal and spiritual, taking place within the mind of the Christian wrestling with his conscience in a wicked world (Georgel 78).

The corpus selected is made up of the four great series engraved by Hogarth: *A Harlot’s Progress* (April 1732), *A Rake’s Progress* (June 1735), *Marriage-à-la-Mode* (June 1745) and *Industry and Idleness* (October 1747) because the characters, taken at a certain point of their life, are apparently advancing to their ruin, both worldly and spiritual, an unsatisfactory depiction of what was also meant by the artist for most critics. The seventeen small book illustrations (April 1726) for *Hudibras* (first published in parts from 1662 to 1678 and based on Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*) are arranged in succession but cannot be properly termed a “series” as the plot they follow is that of the book itself. Two series, one of six prints, *A Harlot’s Progress* (April 1732) and the other of eight prints, *A Rake’s Progress* (June 1735) open the march and before the next two of some length, *Marriage-à-la-Mode* (June 1745) in eight prints and *Industry and Idleness* (October 1747) in twelve prints, nearly ten years elapsed. In between, two shorter series were published: the two prints of *Before and After* (December 1736) where “conversation” has been taking place between the two lovers in-between the two prints³⁶ and *The Four Times of the Day* (May 1738) from morning to night. The two prints of *Beer Street* and *Gin Lane* (February 1750-51), the first showing a beneficial place for its beer-drinking inhabitants and the second showing hell on earth for its gin-drinking ones, *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (February 1750-51) leading Tom Nero from cruelty to animals to murder, *Four Prints of an Election* (1755-58) from the banquet to the chairing of the newly elected members, *The Invasion* (March 1756) in two prints opposing the soldiers on the British and the French sides, and the two prints of *The Times* (September 1762), staging an apparent opposition between Britain torn apart by factions and a well-ordered country, are all published after *MM*.

The main theme linking the series is of a two-fold nature. It is chronological in *Four Times of the Day* and *Four Prints of an Election* and oppositional in *Beer Street and Gin Lane*, *The Invasion* and *The Times*. Only *The Four Stages of Cruelty* depicted the fall of one character who, sociologically and morally determined from the start, went to ruin and suffered the ignominious death reserved to unrepentant hanged criminals, i.e. being publicly dissected by surgeons. In this perspective it is akin to the four “major” series on which this analysis focuses for various reasons. They are full of the numerous mythological and Biblical references alluded to above which are given new light by their inclusion into the esoteric framework of freemasonry and alchemy which they contribute to hiding. Their length allowed the detailed, but synthetic staging of a life-span, making it natural that, in three out of the four series, death is at the end of the path. In all initiations there is “a symbolic death and a figurative resurrection or rebirth” (B.E. Jones 320).



Figure 16: *La deploration du Christ* (1525), Correggio (1489-1534)

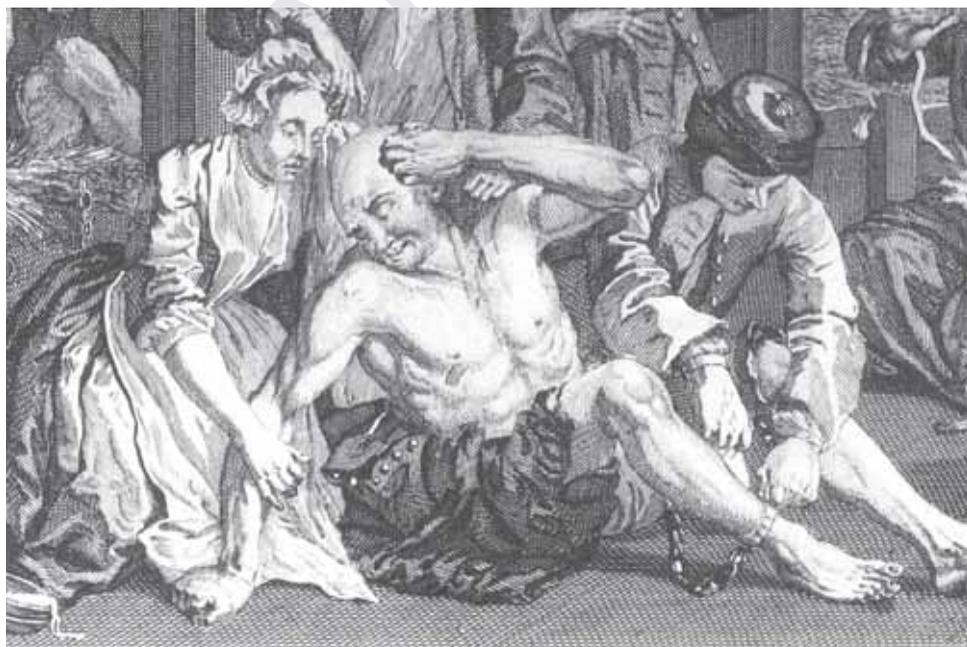


Figure 17: *A Rake's Progress*, Plate 8; Detail of earl

If a hidden meaning is to be read in the series, alterations from the painting to the prints and from one state of the print to another must be carefully studied. Comparing the different states of a print to the successive editions of a book, D. Ferrer argued that the meaning is eventually altered by modifications.³⁷ Can some of the changes brought from the painting to prints and from one state of a print to another be made in order to bring into relief or to subdue some Masonic details considered too invisible or too prominent? Exactly as Richardson's female admirers to whom he read his fiction, did Hogarth's brethren influence him to make the adopted changes? Masonic symbols were (and still are) not to be exposed to uninitiated eyes as in the oath reported by Prichard, which although probably caricatured, retained a basis of truth: "I furthermore Promise and Vow, that I will not write them, Print them, Mark them, Carve them or Engrave them, or cause them to be Written, Printed, marked, Carved or Engraved on Wood or Stone, so as the Visible Character, or Impression of a Letter may appear, whereby it may be unlawfully obtain'd" (12). Special precautions must be taken concerning *MM*, since it is mainly the work of French engravers. Yet Hogarth drew the matrix himself and could thus include whatever details he wanted. Besides, Paulson himself took up the conclusions of J. Ireland's and of other commentators when they saw Hogarth's burin in the later states of the prints.

This study argues that, to Hogarth's visually and aesthetically trained imagination, subjects probably presented themselves as much through the contemplation of reality he greatly insisted upon as through paintings and prints. Italian paintings were his source for mythological and Biblical scenes (satirical or not), Dutch painting inspired his domestic episodes, contemporary prints like the South Sea pictures (see Bindman's *Hogarth and His Times*) enabled him to pass harsh satire on the manners of the time.³⁸ Painters such as Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Antonio Allegri Correggio (c. 1489-1534), Tiziano Vecelli Titian (1490-1576), the three Carracci, Michelangelo Merisi Caravaggio (1573-1610) and Guido Reni (1575-1642) are not only responsible for the original paintings Hogarth hung on the walls of his prints, they are also direct sources of inspiration of attitudes (*Pietà*) and compositions (*Last Supper*) of his, even if the mode is most of the time burlesque.³⁹ A. Van Dyck (1599-1641) who lived in London from 1630 to his death and Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) inspired him for the treatment of both religious and mundane subjects. Van der Helst (1611-1670) and his riotous banquets, Jan Steen (1626-1679) and Adrian van Ostade (1610-1685) among others had depicted village life and tavern scenes. Fed up with the bloody Christs of Italian painters, Hogarth mocked their ideological and aesthetic portent by including them in scenes directly inspired by Dutch masters and contemporary English life. Scattering his paintings and prints with symbols and images from freemasonry – and, more marginally, of alchemy – which crowded his mind at the exact time of the engraving of the four series (1730s and 1740s) presented the advantage of topically recycling Biblical and classical subjects. Because of their unequivocal meaning for the Craft they were easily readable by initiates as emblems, but also as symbols because a multi-layered meaning given by the non-masonic context was also decipherable. Masons were and still are trained to see the invisible behind the visible, to the point sometimes of giving an interpretation which is the very reverse of what is



Figure 18: *Le monde a l'envers* (c. 1660), Jan Steen (1626-1679)



Figure 19: *A Rake's Progress*, Plate 3

commonly accepted, for instance death as the sign of rebirth. Within the four main series then, what sort of latent progress is traced by hidden Masonic references, recombining influences from the Bible, classical mythology and alchemy? Is it the inverse of the surface one?⁴⁰ Or are things not that simple?

SAMPLE