

E. H. Gombrich, A Classical 'Rake's Progress', Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, Vol. 15, 1952, pp.255-6 [Trapp no.1952A.1]

In a famous passage, of which the import is discussed in the preceding articles by H. Kurz [1] and F. Antal,[2] William Hogarth speaks of his programme of "painting and engraving modern moral subjects." Its wording may be taken to imply that he knew of "ancient moral subjects" and, indeed, there was no shortage of examples of this *genre* mentioned in classical literature. The most famous and most influential of these is the *Tabula Cebetis*—a dialogue purporting to describe a vast panoramic painting of human life in allegorical terms.[3] Among the episodes depicting the dangers besetting the path of the frail human pilgrim occurs a description of the temptations to which Fortune's favourites are exposed. It may be quoted here in an eighteenth-century translation which should facilitate a comparison with Hogarth's tale.

Do you see then, continues the Gentleman, how the Passage through this Gate, leads you into another Court upon an Ascent, and that there are several women dress'd like Wenches, standing at the Portal? I see them. I must tell you then, their quality is very Coarse, two of them are Lewdness and Luxury, and the other Flattery and Covetousness.

And what do they Stand staring here for? To spy out those to whom Fortune has been any thing kind. And what then?

Then they appear mightily transported, make up to them with great Endearingness, and ply them strongly with Compliment and Flattery : They invite them to settle them in Satisfaction ; and that without the least Intermission, or Incumbrance whatsoever. Now those who are gain'd to Libertinism with this Courtship, think themselves in a delicate way, and are strangely pleased with their choice at first. But after some time when they begin to recollect, they perceive the Entertainment was nothing but a Visionary Cheat; and instead of a Regale, they have been pray'd upon, and ill used.

Now when Men come to this pass, and have spent all that *Fortune* had furnish'd them with, they are forced to go to service to these *Women*; and here all manner of Affronts and scandalous Practises must be digested : They must bear with every thing, and boggle at nothing : They must Cheat, or betray their Trust, pick a Pocket, or rob a Church, as occasion serves. And when all these Tricks fail them, they are sent to the House of Correction.

And how are they handled? Dont you see, says *he*, a little Door opening into a narrow, dark place? I do; and several ugly, sluttish Women in Rags, are the Inhabitants. You are right. And to describe them to you; she with the Whip in her Hand is called *Discipline*, she with the Head bending down to her knees is *Grief*, she that tears her Hair is *Pain*: But pray, said *I*, whatt ill-look'd Skeleton of a Fellow is that, with ne'er a Tatter to his Limbs, and that Woman too by him, that is Beauty enough to be his Sister?

You have guessed the Relation exactly, and to satisfy your Question the Man is *complaining Sorrow* and that Sister of his is *Despair*. To this Company the *Rakes* above mention'd are sent, where they are maul'd and mortified sufficiently, and after they have gone through their Exercise in this *Bridewell*, they are committed to Gaol, where *Unhappiness* is their *Keeper*. and here they are fast for their Life-time, unless they happen to light upon *Repentance*." [4]

Did Hogarth know this description? The elements of its cautionary tale are too generalized and too widespread for us to be certain.[5] Indeed some of its episodes are closer to Hogarth's pictorial source, the 'Vita del Lascivo,'[6] than to Hogarth's own series, the 'Rake's Progress.' For in the Italian series, as in the classical author, the main emphasis is on the victim's loss of fortune and consequent enslavement and crimes. Since the *Tabula Cebetis* was a popular moral tract in Italy as well as in Germany and England it was very probably among the fountain heads of this general tradition on which Hogarth drew.[7]

Did he also know it directly? Here the evidence is somewhat elusive, but there are two indications which suggest that the prestige of the classical picture may really have encouraged Hogarth in his new departure. One concerns the tradition of the text, the other that of the illustrations. Following eighteenth-century practice, the translators of the text had already gone a certain stretch of the way towards "modernizing" the "moral subject" of the *Tabula*. The dwelling of sorrow and despair in the classical text is called Bridewell, the place where Hogarth's Harlot has to suffer under the whip of discipline, and the hero is called a *Rake* without licence from the text. Nor is this tendency to transform the allegory into a genre picture of contemporary temptations confined to the one translation quoted. Six years later, in 1707, there appeared a versified paraphrase of the *Tabula* by "a Lady"[8] which reads even more like Hogarth, particularly if we keep in mind that it purports to describe an actual painting:

"These Tawdry things the Vices do display
Who do to Fortune's Fav'rites Homage pay
Invite their strutting Worships to partake,
The luscious Banquet sensual pleasures make.
Drunk with Deceit they post to Promis'd Joy,
Gorge to Excess their greedy stomachs cloy,
Then surfeited like Beasts lie down and sprawl,
Sleep, grunt and snore, then wake and yawning call
Their dear She Friends, but all in vain they find
Their Pockets pick'd, not one poor souse behind . . ."

To re-translate such a verbal picture into paint would be a challenge to a mind like Hogarth's.[9] Moreover, if he rummaged in bookshops and at the print sellers, he would soon find earlier attempts to reconstruct the Philosophic Picture.[10] One of them, dated 1670, is by the Dutch artist whose work foreshadows Hogarth in more than one respect Romeyn de Hooghe.[11] Despite their crudeness the "characters" with which he peoples his panorama of human life seem to be closer to Hogarth's personages than the protagonists of the Italian series (Pl. 53a). Among the followers of Fortune, in particular, are some which seem ready to step on to Hogarth's stage (Pl. 53b).

There is no need to overstress this connection. Hogarth's scene remains firmly set in the England of his days. Yet it may add to our sense of perspective if we realize that somewhere behind the well-designed London stage-props the vista extends not only to Italy but even to ancient Greece, to that far distant Temple of Kronos where the mysterious Cebes first instructed a painter how to translate the perils and triumphs of human life into visual terms.[12]

1 p. 136.

2 p. 169.

3 The Catalogue of the British Museum lists no less than 56 editions in Greek and Latin and 13 in English before 1800. The frequency of bilingual editions may be due to their use in the teaching of Greek. Cf. L. C. Stevens, "How the French humanists of the Renaissance learned Greek," Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, 65, 1950.

4 *The Emperor Marcus Antonius His Conversation with Himself . . . to which is added the Mythological Picture of CEBES the Theban, translated into English from the respective Originals by Jeremy Collier, M.A.*, London, 1701, p. 248.

6 Cf. e.g. the cautionary tale in the form of contrasting biographies of the good horseman (on a white horse) and the bad (on a black one) in a lost fresco cycle of about 1570, P. Boesch, "Tobias Stimmers allegorische Deckengemälde im Schloss zu Baden-Baden," *Zeitschrift für schweizerische Archäologie*

and *Kunstgeschichte*, XII, 1951.

6 Cf. H. Kurz, *loc. cit.*, p. 156.

7 I am greatly indebted to Dr. Hilde Kurz for evidence supporting this connection, the possibility of which had not escaped her. There are at least two Venetian woodcuts of the *Tabula* preceding the *Vita del Lascivo* in time. One, from the middle of the 6th century, is described by Pass. VI. 239, 80. A fragment of a slightly earlier version, so far unrecorded, exists in the British Museum, 1860-4-1-213. The first Italian edition of the *Tabula* was published in Venice in 1538, which also saw the publication, in several editions, of Agostino Mascardi, *Discorsi Morali su la tavola di Cebete Tebano*, 1627, etc.

8 *The Porch and Academy opened or Epictets Manual, Newly turn'd into English verse by J.W. late of Exon College in Oxford, student, to which is added CEBES's Table never before translated into English verse, by a Lady*, London, 1707.

9 For the challenging influence of the classical ekphrasis on later art cf. my articles on "The subject of Poussin's Orion," *The Burlington Magazine*, February, 1894, and "Botticelli's Mythologies," this *Journal*, VIII, 1945, P. 29.

10 M. Boas, "De illustratie der Tabula Cebetis," *Het Boek*, XII, 1920, pp. 1 and 805, gives a survey of the most important of these illustrations, the earliest of which seems to be a woodcut illustrating the Frankfurt edition of 1507 (H. Green, *Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers*, London, 1870, p. 12); the most influential is Holbein's title-page of 1521. Cf. also *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, s.v. Cebes; R. v. Marie, *Iconographie de l' Art Profane*, The Hague, 1932, II, p. 151; B. Knipping, *De Iconografie van de Contra-Reformatie in de Nederlanden*, I, 1939, pp. 96; and R. Lebegue, "Le peintre Quentin Varin et le tableau de Cébès," *La Revue des Arts*, II, 1952.

According to D. Lampsonius, *Lamberti Lombardi apud Eburones vita*, Bruges, 1565, Lambert Lombard was commissioned by Cardinal Reginald Pole to paint such a tabula in grisaille which Englishmen considered the best painting ever done by a non-Italian. The same Lampsonius urged F. Floris in a poem to paint a tabula, cf. Dominici Lampsonii Brugensis "*Typus vitae humanae ex tabula Cebetis*" Lugd. Bat. 1612. Dr. Hilde Kurz has kindly drawn my attention to a large 16th century tabula at Loseley Park (Surrey). Cf. also above, p. 255, n. 5.

11 Romeyn de Hooghe's satirical prints and political allegories must have been familiar to Hogarth, for their author was in the service of William III and thus, in a way, the predecessor of Thornhill, Hogarth's teacher and father-in-law.

12 One wonders whether the claims of the dialogue to describe a real painting have not been somewhat too lightly dismissed by classical scholars? (cf. R. Hinks, *Myth and Allegory in Ancient Art, Studies of the Warburg Institute No. 6*, London, 1939). The argument of A. Brinkmann, *Rheinisches Museum*, 66, 1911, who discusses the tombstone from Lydia with the Pythagorean 'Y' and contrasting images of the good and evil life as evidence of the existence of such a genre, has hardly been effectively answered. For this tombstone cf. now F. Cumont, *Le Symbolisme funéraire des Romains*, Paris, 1942, p. 422.



a—Romeyn de Hooghe, "The *Tabala Gebiti*," 1670 (p. 236)



b—Romeyn de Hooghe, "The *Tabala Gebiti*," Detail (p. 236)