

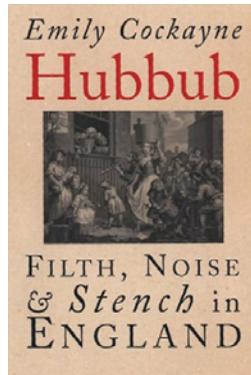


THE ROYAL COMEDIANS  
OR  
THE BEGGARS OPERA  
Machbeth by  
WALKER  
LY. by Mrs FENTON  
CHIEF by M. HENSLY

The Ladies Fall

# A disgusting history of England

Chris Berg reviews  
*Hubbub: Filth, Noise & Stench in England*  
by Emily Cockayne  
(Yale University Press,  
2007, 335 pages)



For Europe, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the rise of the nation state and the consolidation of sovereign power. It was a period in which the Baroque and Rococo movements celebrated the aesthetic potential of art, and in which we can first glimpse modernity in the fields of political theory, the media, commercial endeavours and industry.

But it was also very disgusting.

Two recent films graphically depict the repulsive squalor of urban Europe on the cusp of the Industrial Revolution. *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, based on Patrick Suskind's novel of the same name, describes the ghastly scent of eighteenth-century Paris—from its gruesome montages of fishmongers, rotting meat, manure, to the heat and stench of the tannery to which the protagonist is apprenticed. The perfume of the title is the ultimate contrast to the film's visceral portrayal of urban life.

In *The Libertine*, the 2nd Earl of Rochester—played by Johnny Depp—pursues his rakish lifestyle amongst the squalor of Restoration London. While wealth largely protects Rochester from the filth experienced directly by the protagonist in *Perfume*, his end is nevertheless gruesomely unglamorous. It is not revealing too much about the plot to write that

Rochester's debauchery leads to the macabre but inevitable contraction of syphilis.

Emily Cockayne's *Hubbub: Filth, Noise & Stench in England* keeps the attention firmly on all this unpleasantness. Influential and great individuals figure in her survey of everything that was repulsive about life in the period, but only incidentally.

Samuel Pepys is awoken in 1660 to discover that 'a great deale of foule water' had seeped into his parlour from his neighbour's house. Alexander Pope is disgusted by the 'large tribute of dead dogs' floating down the Thames. Jonathan Swift, frustrated by the roar of a vegetable merchant hawking his wares to passers-by, complained that

Here is a restless dog crying cabbages and Savoys, plagues me mightily every morning about this time. He is at it now. I wish his largest cabbage was sticking in his throat.

Thomas Hobbes also pops up in a section on the ugliness of growing old: 60 years old, but dressed in a manner inappropriate for his age, and a little bit 'French'.

As Cockayne writes in the first chapter, *Hubbub* is designed to provide an alternative to the customary histories of the period—which tend to focus on the pleasures of the times—by looking at all that is noisome and disgusting. Drawing from diaries, paintings and illustrations, court records, government archives, and even

maps and architectural drawings, Cockayne lovingly combs the margins of the period to document all the possible grievances that an individual could have with everyday life. No nuisance is left unacknowledged. She neatly divides the book into separate categories of complaints: 'ugly', 'itchy', 'mouldy', 'noisy', 'grotty', 'busy', 'dirty' and 'gloomy'.

Some of these grievances seem, at least upon their first citation, relatively petty. Hobbes may invite ridicule for having dressed too young and French for his age, but vanity certainly did not disappear with France's *ancien régime*. Ugly people were ridiculed, but being ugly did not seem to harm career prospects, at least for men; women were at a much greater disadvantage, and those with physical deformities even more so.

As Cockayne's sources are by necessity biased towards the literate upper class, it is not surprising that the din of everyday commercial traders and street sellers receives a great deal of attention. The poet Nicholas Breton summed up the situation well by noting that 'the cry of the poore is unpleasing to the rich'.

And some of the poor must be forgiven for perhaps thinking that this essentially aesthetic complaint had the backing of the force of law. Two individuals were convicted of vagrancy in 1685, despite their protestations that they were shilling for work: one yelling 'have you got any knives to grind?', the other 'have you got any worke for a tinker?'.

Similarly, satirists singled out ugly, scruffy and apparently atonal buskers for ridicule.

Cockayne notes that the wealth of the new merchant class combined with increased literacy had architectural consequences. In the early sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a study tended to be located on the outside of an urban dwelling to maximise light. The heightened sensitivity to noise felt by a literate occupant meant that, by the eighteenth century,

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*Chris Berg* is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs and Editor of the IPA Review.

studies were mostly located in the centre of buildings to minimise street noise.

Some of the complaints were mere nuisances. Others were certainly not. ‘Itchy’ and ‘mouldy’ make for very uncomfortable reading.

Sometimes the source of an itch was the ubiquitous wigs of the period. Wearers would shave their heads for fitting, but the rough underside of the hairpiece would have caused much discomfort. Wigs could accumulate dirt and become greasy and disgusting.

Poor quality clothing was not helped by almost non-existent hygiene. It is difficult to discern how often or how thoroughly people washed in this period, but what little evidence we have does not flatter—rare was the ‘wet wash’. (It is alleged that Louis XVI took just one bath in his life.) While the diarists of the period rarely mention bathing, Pepys manages to slip in a note that he ‘rubbed myself clean’. Soaps were either greasy irritants or extremely expensive.

Worse still was the food. It is no surprise that one of the most popular cookbooks of the era, Hannah Glasse’s 1747 *The Art of Cookery*, had a section to teach aspiring cooks how to clear a room of bugs. Cockayne’s descriptions of the deteriorating food quality of this period are as close to gut-wrenching as a history book can get. Her description of everything that could go wrong with pork is indicative of the culinary challenges of the time:

While rooting in the back alleys and dunghills, pigs picked up contamination from city industries and noisome ditches filled with night soil and street sweepings. Mingling with dogs increased the circulation of disease and intestinal worms. Pork from city pigs needed to be cooked thoroughly to ensure it did not cause illness or worm infestation. ...Pork with flabby fat and a hard ring, or with any part that felt ‘clammy’, should stay on the block.

Butcher shops open to the elements were susceptible to mud splashes and insect contamination. Fruit was prone to disease: apples were dismissed by one contemporary author as ‘unwholesome’.

But not all of the risk for food shoppers was unintentional. Shoddy merchants often knowingly disguised rotting meat or stuffed bread with filler—grit, wood, sand, and even stones were used to make up weight.

The list of unpleasantness is nearly endless. Choking smog so blanketed London that people detected house fires not by the smell of smoke, but by the crackle of flames devouring wood. The pavement was so uneven as to be dangerous. The wheels of carts bumping along poorly laid streets would shed their lubricating fat, which would combine with animal dung, soot and other filth.

The Thames was so ‘impregnated with the filth of London,’ said a character in Tobias Smollett’s *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, that ‘human excrement is the least offensive part’.

Cockayne’s catalogue of the filth of urban England is hardly balanced. There are scores of histories extolling the virtue of the polished and refined city lifestyle (albeit *upper class* city lifestyle), and to match each description of filth with a counter example of the luxuries of elaborate sixteenth century English gardens would be fatuous.

But she does address the overwhelming question that *Hubbub* raises—if the city was so bad, why did it continue to grow? City life was certainly filled with unpleasantness, but individuals were aware of the need to accept trade-offs in order to prosper. As Cockayne writes,

There were consolation prizes for those citizens prepared to put up with congested roads and grimy houses. The prospect of finding secure employment, with the opportunity to specialise and diversify, attracted migrants to the cities and induced them to settle, despite the risks and squalor.

‘Muck and money go together’ said a contemporary proverb. So too did the social interactions, arts and cultural life offered by urban density. And while the primary source for *Hubbub* is a seemingly endless list of contemporary complaints, individuals were able to acclimatise and cope with the vast majority of daily nuisances.

Furthermore, Cockayne rarely leaves the city limits. Rural life had its own share of complaints—urban unpleasantness was so visible to contemporaries because it was relatively new. Living and working in the English countryside was scarcely the idyllic life portrayed in Marxist anti-Industrial Revolution tracts, or even by John Stuart Mill or William Cobbett.

Even so, at the end of the period of Cockayne’s survey, London was progressing towards a cleaner, healthier place, despite the conspicuous acceleration of the Industrial Revolution in the last few decades of the eighteenth century.

Indeed, this period has modern political significance. Modern environmentalists point the finger at the Industrial Revolution as the originating point of today’s environmental problems—Leonardo DiCaprio’s upcoming *The 11th Hour* will reportedly do just that.

But as *Hubbub* reveals, long before even the most revisionist historian dates the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, Londoners were complaining of ‘duskie cloudes’ over the city. Traditional biofuels such as wood, coal and charcoal were big sources of lung damage. The shift towards electrification that came in the early twentieth century may have spurred a great increase in the use of natural resources for energy generation, but it also shifted noxious smoke out of the kitchen and the living room.

The improvements in sanitation, public works, masonry—Cockayne details how poor craftsmanship meant that buildings in this period tended to fall down without warning—medicine and food technologies achieved during the Industrial Revolution have increased living standards far beyond the imagination of seventeenth-century diarists. Whatever environmental challenges we face, we are not served well by naïvely utopian paens to pre-industrial Europe or by appeals to wind back development.

Annoyances such as toothaches, itchy clothing, excessive noise and drunken neighbours are all recognisable to twenty-first-century Australians, but to be so immersed in it is not.

**IPA**