The Good, The Bad and The Wealthy: Fake Beggars and the Obsession with "Correct" Charity
in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Britain
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Britain faced a massive identity crisis and moral reckoning after their loss of their American colonies in 1783. 'God's favored people' faced a huge blow to national identity and religious and moral security in the aftermath of such a decisive and surprising defeat.[1] As the nation simultaneously urbanized and searched for virtue in their national identity urban poverty, beggars in particular, became an object of societal fascination. Street beggars became a more present figure in popular culture, from newspaper articles to poems to prints. As a highly visible example of the wealth inequality in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, the beggar comes to be an iconic figure of contemporary poverty and an object of both disdain and sympathy in the eyes of the upper classes. Along with the dislike of the poor due to the perception of them as dirty, unsightly or dangerous, there was also a widespread suspicion of beggars as being fraudulent in some way, either through their narrative of the cause of their need to beg, their clothes, the mention or presence of their children. The British notions of categorized "deserving poor" in the period were pervasive and influenced by the search for a path towards a more virtuous England.[2] The highly curated relationship between the donors and beggars that formed in the period after the American Revolution reveals a tension in the British understanding of poverty and charity. Giving money to the poor is sensationalized as a moral obligation with a significance specific to the period and the ways to most "correctly" engage in charity both influenced the wealthy and the beggars who asked for this charity. The existence of fake beggars reveals the elements of charity and morality that had to be performed as part of Britain's moral reflection and reform in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The fear of fraudulent beggars and the simultaneous pressure to give charitably among the wealthy demonstrates the

[1] Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?: England 1783-1846* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2006), 1.
[2] Tim Hitchcock, "Begging on the Streets of Eighteenth-Century London," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 3 (2005): 479.

presence of and the obsession with "correct" versus "incorrect" charity in the period, both on the part of beggars and of donors, and the attempts to use charity to encourage virtuous behaviors in all classes.

Poverty and beggars were present in all forms of media in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and much of this fascination stemmed from fears about dishonest begging. The published narratives of beggars varied greatly from sympathetic, patronizing and paternalistic to full of contempt and disdain and everything in between, and within these sentiments the significant presence of morality in regard to begging and charity comes through. In "The Beggar Man", an article published in *The Odd Fellow*, a weekly newspaper from London with little reservations about being inflammatory, it is not the beggar who is wretched, but those who "in the pursuit of wealth, forgot the nobler acquisition- charity".[3] The article decries the selfishness among the wealthy as inherently un-British, and as "the boasted land of humanity, the residence of heaven-born pity, the refuge for the persecuted stranger…" Britain can only be proud when the wealthy give to the beggar.[4] The understanding of Britain specifically as a place of exceptional merit and virtue is significant to the moral reckoning the people were in the midst of at this time. This insistence that sympathy for the poor is not enough, and that "pretended pity" without giving money to the beggar fails to meet the moral obligation of the rich to give reveals the attempts in Britain to prescribe and enforce a single, correct moral doctrine around the giving of charity for the wealthy.[5] The attempt to connect virtue and Britain as inseparable ideas reveals the particular emphasis placed on tying British identity to upstanding morals. The paternalistic celebration of the generous people who give to beggars and the wholehearted condemnation of

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[3] "THE BEGGAR-MAN." *Odd Fellow* [London, England] 31 Oct. 1840: n.p. *British Library Newspapers*. Web. 31 July 2019.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

those who do not demonstrate the clear endorsement of giving money as the only way to correctly gain moral reward, as a proper Brit ought to, from an interaction with a beggar.

Another representation of fraudulent beggars comes in *The Auld Beggar Man*, a poem from one of Scotland's oldest and most respected newspapers, based in Edinburgh. *The Auld Beggar Man* which is highly critical of the titular beggar and his deceit. The old man, who "lives like a king in the midst o' the lan'-/ he's a slee 6 pawkie 7 bodie the auld Beggar man", is not only more wealthy than the way he presents himself, he is conniving and manipulative.8 The wide mistrust of the poor, particularly beggars (who, not coincidentally, tended to be women) made performing charity correctly more difficult for the upper classes.9 Whenever an example of a secretly wealthy beggar defrauding donors was investigated, confirming this commonly held suspicion of all beggars, it was widely covered in the press. The sensationalized reports on the discovery and details of fraudulent beggars, such as "A Beggars Riches", an article published about a man that was found to have £123 in savings after he was imprisoned for begging, were common in newspapers in major cities.10 The article "A Fortunate Beggar" is situated at the intersection of xenophobia and fear of dishonesty of beggars,

> "An Irishwoman, who has been begging for the last two months in this town and
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> neighborhood, has actually within that time remitted two sums of £5 each to her
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> husband in Ireland. She is most eloquent in her tale of distress, has always a child

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6 [Sly], "SLEE," Dictionary of the Scots Language, accessed July 31, 2019, https://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/slee.

7 [Cunning, crafty] "PAWKIE noun and adjective," Scots Language Centre, accessed July 31, 2019, https://www.scotslanguage.com/articles/view/id/4740.

8 "THE AULD BEGGAR MAN." *Caledonian Mercury* [Edinburgh, Scotland] 21 Mar. 1836: n.p. *British Library Newspapers*. Web. 31 July 2019.

9 Sarah Lloyd, "'Pleasure's Golden Bait': Prostitution, Poverty and the Magdalen Hospital in Eighteenth-Century London," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 41 (1996): 66.

10 "A BEGGAR'S RICHES." *North-Eastern Daily Gazette* [Middlesbrough, England] 10 Jan. 1893: n.p. *British Library Newspapers*. Web. 31 July 2019.

in her arms, and wears an old blue cloth cloak. It is to be feared that many of the

Irish mendicants now prowling about the country are far from being destitute,

although not many may, perhaps, be so lucky in their begging excursions".[11]

This condemnation of the immoral deception of secretly wealthy beggars feeds into the

perceived moral superiority of the wealthy classes as fake beggars fail to subscribe to their

assigned "correct" role in their status. The beggar woman is demonized for performing her

poverty and desperation through the presence of her children when she is "wealthy" enough to

send remittances to her husband. The xenophobia in "A Fortunate Beggar" also reflects this

moral concern in that to give to fraudulent beggars fails to be actual charity as it deprives those

in real need, potentially even sending the alms to other countries, and therefore failing to

improve the moral standing of Britain. This deep-rooted suspicion of poor and foreign people

perpetuated by the article and the contempt these fears created for beggars complicated the moral

obligation to the rich. This disdain was justified, however, through the understanding among the

upper classes of themselves as morally superior to the people asking for their help, and that their

paternalism or contempt was normal and natural. "The Auld Beggar-Man", "A Fortunate

Beggar" and "A Beggar's Riches" present a "correct" and "incorrect" way to beg loaded with

moral meaning. They each center begging and charity as issues about virtue, both of the beggars

and the donors, that can be done correctly to bring about moral reward or incorrectly and bring

about vice. These concerns about the morals of begging and giving to beggars are a symptom of

the moral obsession of the period and how entangled charity became with this British national

consciousness of virtue and pride.

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[11] Preston Chronicle. "A FORTUNATE BEGGAR." *Blackburn Standard* [Blackburn, England] 16 June 1847: n.p. *British Library Newspapers*. Web. 31 July 2019.

This fixation on the risk of fake beggars and the moral solution to the problems they create reveals a great deal about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British conceptions of poverty. The paternalistic way poverty and lower-class people are regarded by the wealthy demonstrates how poverty and charity were viewed as a moral issue presented to the upper classes as an opportunity to perform moral good deeds in order to benefit the donor. Charles Lamb, and English essayist and frequent defender of the highly criticized urban spaces of newly Industrial Britain, illustrates the understanding of extreme wealth inequality as inevitable through his point that "In tale or history your Beggar is ever the just antipode to your King".[12] This perspective of charity as a transaction, where the beggar attains money and the donor attains moral reward, is a product of the moralistic and repentant obsession of Brits in the period, and how regulating this moral interaction was seen as a positive that could more efficiently replicate the transaction and could encourage certain virtuous behaviors in both the givers and the receivers of charity.[13] Because "'Benevolence', a term that had very specific cultural value in the eighteenth century, was the quality that took man… closest to God", encouraging charity benefited the moral character of Britain as a nation.[14] Since the desperation of the poor meant they could be manipulated, charity also enabled the wealthy to force subscription to their moral codes in order to receive charity, which was also an attempt to benefit the moral character of Britain by reforming the immorality of the poor.

The moral superiority felt by the upper class is reflected in the complicated process to engage in giving to beggars "correctly", and "For the bewigged and tutored, leisured, and

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[12] Charles Lamb, "A Complaint of the Decay of Beggars in the Metropolis," Elia and The Last Essays of Elia / Charles Lamb, by Charles Lamb, 1883.
[13] Gregory Dart, "Romantic Writers in the City" (lecture, Davidson College Cambridge Program, Cambridge, UK, July 18, 2019).
[14] Lloyd, "Pleasure's Golden Bait", 52.

fashion-conscious denizens of eighteenth-century London, the calls of pity had to be answered with just the right combination of sympathy and disdain, just the right flourish of lace and charity".[15] The moral regulation of charitable giving was not contained to the lower classes, and the moral obligation to give in order to maintain the superior status in the elite classes was self-enforced, and despite their contempt of beggars "there was also a strong counterculture of criticism directed at those who would deny the Christian duty to relieve beggars wherever they were found."[16] The significance of regulations on the "correct" way to perform charity also being placed upon the upper classes is found in that it reveals the contemporary awareness of the potential of the upper classes to influence the morality of the lower classes in their choices of who to give money to and who to ignore. This power to shape the behavior across classes by self-regulating the upper classes was seen as the key to turning individual actions of charity into a collective effort to direct Britain towards a wide scale increase in virtue as part of the moral identity crisis of the period. This effort happened both informally through private choice of who to give a few coins to and who to ignore, but increasingly by the middle of the nineteenth century through the increase of formal private charity organizations.

The correct way for beggars to behave can be seen both in private conceptions and by what was encouraged by the charity organizations that eventually form. Beggars walked a very delicate line as "This was a culture in which gender, age, and physical dis/ability played crucial roles in the creation of a compelling case for relief. It was a culture in which location, accent, and time of year could determine whether a few pence were doled out or the heavy hand of the law used to take up the supplicant as a vagrant" and beggars needed to carefully subscribe to the

[15] Hitchcock, 478.
[16] Hitchcock, 480.

expectations of the wealthy in order to deserve charity.[17] The existence of "agreed social mores that used the time of year, gender, age, race, and dis/ability as complex markers of a legitimate beggarly status" informally regulated the practices of beggars long before private organizations did.[18] These regulations were heavily based on the encouragement of virtue on both sides of a charitable transaction. Fears of beggars as "idle" in contrast to the contemporary emphasis placed on "usefulness" shows one virtue demanded of beggars, and how the wealthy avoided giving to idle beggars as to not encourage their idleness.[19] Devout religion was also expected of beggars, and begging around Christian holidays as an appeal from one Christian to another was one of the most common and successful methods of begging.[20] Repentance and humility were also widely expected of beggars, as was intense gratitude towards those who gave them alms.[21] The carefully selected acceptable behavior for beggars had been casually molded and formed for centuries through the success or failure to receive a donation from passersby on street corners. As Britain urbanized and searched for a more virtuous national identity this process became systematized.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the process of creating systems to formally encourage the virtues selected by the upper classes amongst the poor had begun. The beginnings of the shift from small scale, individual charity on street corners and on holidays to official, formal organizations in the period is a result of the effort to more strongly enforce the moral regulations and incentivize the "correct" methods of charity. This project to better regulate the vices and virtues of beggars and the poor through the use of charitable organizations, such as the Magdalene and the 'beggar ticket system' excluded people who were not deemed acceptably or

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[17] Hitchcock, 479.
[18] Hitchcock, 483.
[19] Gary Harrison, "Wordsworth's "The Old Cumberland Beggar": The Economy of Charity in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Criticism* 30, no. 1 (1988): 25.
[20] Hitchcock, 486.
[21] Lloyd, "Pleasure's Golden Bait", 54.

deservingly poor from the benefits of the charity.22 Charity was also used to enforce and encourage the acceptable moral order through events such as services, celebrations and dinners as they "enabled each charity to project and display its objectives, and these included not just the productive outlay of money and effort on the poor, but also appropriate sentiment and behavior among the charitable themselves".23 The ability of charity organizations to effect change on a wider scale lended themselves to the effort to improve British morality immensely, and for organizations like the Magdalene, which attempted to reform prostitutes "success lay in the skill with which its supporters played these themes, stressing Christian duty, the pleasures of doing good and national advantage."24 The culture around charitable giving changed as ways to more efficiently exclude those who did not beg "correctly" from charity formed, and "casual charity given at the roadside was increasingly condemned and the provision of more discriminating institutions advocated", lest the "undeserving" poor be encouraged.25 The concerted efforts of various charities to improve the moral nature of Britain altogether comes as a direct consequence of centuries of grooming beggars to perform certain roles, punishing them for being "disingenuous", and then excluding them from the formal systems of charity that developed.

The contemporary concern about the moral path of England both rewarded and punished beggars for playing the virtuous role they were supposed to. The relationship between begging and virtue was complicated and required a certain amount of performance in order to persuade the wealthy that beggars deserved charity. The media fixation on these "fake beggars" reveals how pervasive and specific the "correct" role for a beggar was in this period. Fake beggars were

22 Dart, Lecture.
23 Sarah Lloyd, "Pleasing Spectacles and Elegant Dinners: Conviviality, Benevolence, and Charity Anniversaries in Eighteenth-Century London," *Journal of British Studies* 41, no. 1 (2002): 26.
24 Lloyd, "Pleasure's Golden Bait", 52.
25 Hitchcock, 480.

the result of the moral pressure on the poor to be virtuous and in need enough to deserve charity and the moral pressure on the wealthy to give to those who deserved it, and "the complex forms of self-presentation deployed by beggars and responded to by almsgivers can be understood as a fragment of the "moral economy" of the English crowd."[26] Charity was specifically used to reward what the upper classes saw as virtuous amongst themselves and the poor and to discourage what they saw as vice, particularly in the lower classes, in order to set Britain back on the desired moral path. As fake beggars represented a perceived highly immoral and incorrect way to engage in charity they were systematically sensationalized and mythologized as part of this moral reckoning. In order to benefit the moral character of a frightened and self-examining Britain the poor and the wealthy were held to strict and finite moral rules on how to engage in charity that were dictated by the wealthy who saw themselves as morally superior. Britain reconciled its revulsion towards poor Brits and the myth of British national exceptionalism through the belief of moral superiority of the upper classes and the strict moral code surrounding charity that applied to all classes. These rules reveal the obsession in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain with moral character and encouraging "correct" charity and preventing "incorrect" charity, and fake beggars expose the orchestrated and performed nature of this moral distinction between the "correct" and "incorrect" in the period.

[26] Hitchcock, 483.

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Abstract: Britain underwent intense self-reflection and a moral reckoning after the loss of their
American colonies at the end of the 18th century. The development of the national interest in
improving British virtue impacted people in many ways, particularly those involved with charity
in some capacity. Strict rules of how to engage with begging, either as a beggar or a donor, were

applied and self-regulated, curating specific parts for both the givers and receivers of charity to play. Concerns over begging and giving 'correctly' pervaded and the fixation on fraudulent beggars reveals the conscious effort to use charity to encourage virtue across classes.