

# ***The Threepenny Opera: The Ballad Opera and the Socio-political Criticism and Change***

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## **Introduction**

Bertolt Brecht's aggressive political idealism and determination in using art to pose challenging questions about the conflicts between society and morality generated intense controversy throughout his lifetime. Technically, by his late twenties, Brecht had begun to envision a new theatrical system that would serve his political and artistic sensibility. He saw the stage as an ideological forum for leftist causes and wanted to create theater that depicted human experience with the brutality and intensity of a boxing match. He rejected the conventions of stage realism and Aristotelian drama, which offer empathetic identification with a hero and emotional catharsis. Brecht did not want his audience to feel, but rather to be shocked, intellectually stimulated, and motivated to take action against an unjust society and to awaken them to social responsibility. (Brecht: 1957, 78) *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) is an early example of his "epic theater," consisting of theatrical innovations designed to sharpen the spectator's critical ability and to shake him out of his complacency and expect more from the theater than entertainment. (Cardullo: 2008, 75) Epic theater uses "alienating" devices, such as placards, asides to the audience, projected images, discordant music and lighting, and disconnected episodes to frustrate the viewer's expectations for simple entertainment.

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Ideologically, *The Threepenny Opera* grew out of its young author's experiences in Berlin during the Weimar Republic (1919–1933), when Germany struggled to establish a parliamentary democracy in the face of economic devastation, notorious decadence, and bitter military defeat. More than ten million Germans were without any source of income, and crime proliferated as citizens were reduced to begging on the street. Horrified by the poverty and mounting violence, Brecht took *The Beggar's Opera* by eighteenth-century English satirist John Gay and re-imagined it through the lens of his emerging dramatic theories. Kurt Weill was asked to compose the score, and *The Threepenny Opera* was born. The play satirizes class differences and moral hypocrisy in society as inevitable products of the political system.

Furthermore, *The Threepenny Opera* proclaims itself “an opera for beggars,” and it was in fact an attempt both to satirize traditional opera and operetta and to create a new kind of musical theater based on the theories of two young German artists, composer Kurt Weill and poet-playwright Bertolt Brecht.

### **John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera***

The term ‘ballad opera’ is used to refer to a genre of English stage entertainment originating in the 18th century and continuing to develop in the following century and later. The earliest ballad opera has been called an “eighteenth-century protest against the Italian conquest of the London operatic scene.” (Lubbock: 1962, 467-468) It consists of racy and often satirical spoken (English) dialogue, interspersed with songs that are deliberately kept very short (mostly a single short stanza and refrain) to minimize disruptions to the flow of the story, which involves lower class, often criminal, characters, and typically shows a suspension (or inversion) of the high moral values of the Italian opera of the period.

Brecht adapted *The Threepenny Opera* from *The Beggar's Opera*<sup>\*</sup> (1728), a brilliant and popular social satire

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(\* ) *The Beggar's Opera* is a ballad opera in three acts written in 1728 by John Gay .It is one of the watershed plays in Augustan drama and is the

written by British poet and dramatist John Gay (1685-1732) (reportedly with the encouragement or assistance of Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope). Brecht and his collaborator Elizabeth Hauptmann thoroughly reworked Gay's script and transferred the action to London in the 1920s. The original production used innovative theatre techniques and relied heavily on the musical genius of Kurt Weill, who wrote the score for the unusual 'opera.'

Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* is a comic farce, poking accurate fun at the prevailing fashion in Italian opera as well as the social and political climate of the age. It established a new genre, the "ballad opera," of which it remains the only really notable example, though its popularity led to the work Sheridan and eventually Gilbert and Sullivan. Gay cuts the standard five acts to three, and tightly controls the dialogue and plot so that there are delightful surprises in each scene.

The basis for *The Beggar's Opera* is that the thieves and other low social people that inhabit Newgate prison are the same as to be found in the government. The play was a theatrical success and became the most popular play of that century. It is a harsh satire that daringly strikes against class distinction and members of the royal court. The harlots, burglars, and cutthroats are more important than the national governors. These low-lives have the manners of proper English lords and ladies, and gain power in much the same ways, proving that human nature is a constant throughout the world. It also pokes fun at the judicial system of the period. There was a high crime rate at that time in English history. The death penalty was handed out for the theft of pennies from a person, but acts of murder and arson were mere misdemeanors. In John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, for

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only example of the once thriving genre of satirical ballad opera to remain popular today. Ballad operas were satiric musical plays that used some of the conventions of , but without recitative .The lyrics of the airs in the piece are set to popular broadsheet ballads, opera arias, church hymns and folk tunes of the time.

instance, the character Peachum was a lampoon of Sir Robert Walpole.\* This satirical element meant that many of them risked censorship and banning.

The leading character of *The Beggar's Opera* is the swashbuckler called Macheath. He is a smooth romantic with qualities of both a gentleman and a highwayman. He is a big womanizer. He says "I must have women" since "I love the sex." (Scene III, 30) A paradox of a character that speaks King's English and dresses well, but prefers to live in the faith and company of cutthroats. He is polite to the people he mugs and steers away from violence. Even though he cheats on the adorable Polly, the spectators still believe his love for her is true.

The opening prologue is a dialogue between The Player and The Beggar, who is posing as the play's author. They make humor of the Italian opera. The first scene takes place in Peachum's establishment. Peachum sings a hymn about the dishonesty of everyone. Peachum is alarmed at the marriage between his daughter Polly and Macheath. His objection is for purely business reasons, for Peachum is a "fence" of stolen goods who occasionally informs on his patrons for the reward. He fears both the loss of Polly from his business, who he related to a pretty bartender bringing in money from drunkards, and of Macheath's learning of any business secrets.

Act II has Macheath and his men outside Newgate. He states his problem with Peachum, but when his gang want to do Peachum in Macheath explains how he is a necessary evil and that "Business cannot go on without him." Macheath continues by giving justifications for cooperation with Peachum,

*He is a Man who knows the World, and is  
a necessary Agent to us. We have had a*

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\* *Robert Walpole, 1st Earl of Orford*, (1676 –1745), known before 1742 as **Sir Robert Walpole**, was a British statesman who is generally regarded as having been the first Prime Minister of Great Britain. (Encyclopedia Wikipedia)

*slight Difference, and 'till it is accommodated I shall be obliged to keep out of his way. Any private dispute of mine shall be of no ill consequence to my Friends. You must continue to act under his Direction, for the moment we break loose from him, our Gang is ruin'd.*

(Scene II, 29)

Macheath's goal is to trick Peachum into believing he has left the gang, but Macheath himself is tricked by eight ladies who call the constable and have him arrested. In jail he bribes Lockit, the jailer, for looser chains. Macheath however, is a lover of Lucy Lockit, the daughter of the jailer. He promises her marriage in turn for his escape and she agrees.

The Third Act begins with Lockit discovering his daughter's part in Macheath's escape. He and Peachum find Macheath's hiding place and go to re-capture him. As Macheath is brought back into custody, both Lucy and Polly beg their father for his life, but to no avail. Macheath is led off to Old Bailey for a trial. In prison Macheath drinks wine and sings portions of nine songs. Two of his gang come to pay respects and he instructs them to have Peachum and Lockit hanged. When Polly and Lucy come to visit he tells them to travel to the West Indies and have "a husband apiece." (Scene 14, 66) At this moment a jailer calls that four more wives have come to see him and a fellow gang member calls desperately for a hangman because at this moment Macheath will really need one. At this point the Beggar and the Player enter to argue whether Macheath dies or not. The Beggar states that Macheath must be hanged for poetic justice. The Player states that this would make the play a tragedy and operas have happy endings. The Beggar finally agrees and Macheath is released. The play concludes with Macheath stating that he is legally married to Polly alone and there is a joyful dance.

**Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera***

Gay's satire was an ironic reversal of the royal government and the criminals of old England, which could easily be converted to fit the Bourgeoisie and Proletariat of the twentieth century. In November of 1927, Elisabeth Hauptmann began to translate the English play to German for Brecht. Brecht's main dramatic contribution resides in transforming Gay's Macheath into his own Mackie Messier, also known as Mack the Knife. John Fuegi emphasizes Hauptmann's imperative role in presenting this dramatic work to the public. He says,

*Given the existence of this text, plus the fact that Hauptmann was the only person in the workshop to render such complex English into equally complex German, there can be little doubt that at least 80 percent of the fabric of the work that Felix Bloch Erben would soon globally market was hers. Both in a published article and in a recent interview with me, Klaus Volker, one of the most knowledgeable people in the world on the Brecht circle told me it was his view that "Elisabeth Hauptmann was responsible for as much as 80 or even 90 percent of the published text of The Threepenny Opera." Though, later, Brecht would work on the text and contribute songs primarily taken from other authors, though the lyrics of the song "Mack the Knife" are almost certainly wholly his, the fact remains that the text bought by Aufrecht and later sold to Felix Bloch Erben was almost exclusively written by Elisabeth Hauptmann. (Fuegi: 1995, 195-96)*

***The Threepenny Opera*** opens in the beggar shop owned by Peachum. Peachum has taken control of all the

beggars in London and runs a shop that outfits the beggars and provides them with a location to beg in. A young man comes in and asks for a job. Peachum makes the man pay him first and then shows the man the five states of human misery before giving the man a costume to wear.

When Mrs. Peachum arrives he asks her about his daughter Polly. She tells him that Polly has been seeing a gentleman lately. When she describes the man, Peachum realizes that it is none other than Macheath (alias Mac the Knife), London's most powerful criminal. He runs upstairs and sees that Polly did not come home that night.

Meanwhile, Polly and Macheath have just broken into a stable where they are getting married. The rest of Mac's gang arrives and they bring in wedding presents. Everything has been stolen, including the stable. Soon the parson arrives and they sit down to eat. Polly provides them with some entertainment by singing a song. After she is done Tiger Brown the Sheriff arrives, but instead of arresting them all he greets Macheath as an old friend. Mac explains that he and Tiger Brown served together in the war and that he has paid Brown kickbacks on every job ever since. After Brown leaves the men present Polly and Macheath a large bed to sleep in and then leave them alone.

Polly returns home to find her parents furious with her for marrying Macheath. She tries to defend the marriage, but they decide to take on Macheath and destroy him. Mr. Peachum tells his wife that he will go to Tiger Brown and make him arrest Macheath. Meanwhile, Mrs. Peachum agrees to go and bribe the whores whom Macheath goes to every week. She is hoping that the whores will turn in Macheath.

Polly goes with her father and watches as Brown agrees to arrest Macheath. She then goes back to the stable where Mac is staying and tries to warn him. He does not believe her until she produces the charges that are being levied against him. Instead of being emotional, Mac focuses on his business. He hands the business over to Polly and tells her what to do. Soon thereafter his gang arrives and Mac informs them that

Polly will be their boss while he goes away. Matthew tries to challenge Polly's authority, but she threatens to kill him if he opens his mouth again; the other thieves applaud her and accept her leadership.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Peachum approaches Low-Dive Jenny, a prostitute, and convinces her to turn in Macheath should he be foolish enough to show up at the brothel. The evening in the brothel one of Mac's men is trying to convince the whores that Macheath would not be so foolish as to show up. However, no sooner does he say this than Mac arrives and sits down. Jenny takes Mac's palm and reads it, warning him that a woman will betray him. He thinks she means Polly. Jenny soon sneaks out while Mac is talking with the whores and gets the police and Mrs. Peachum. Constable Smith enters and tries to arrest Mac, who knocks the man down and jumps out the window. Unfortunately for him, Mrs. Peachum is standing there with the other police officers. They take him away. Jenny wakes up Macheath's man who has fallen asleep while reading and missed the entire scene.

Now in prison, Mac is afraid that Tiger Brown will learn that he has been playing around with Brown's daughter Lucy. She soon arrives and is horrified to see him in jail. To complicate matters further, Polly arrives and also claims Mac as her husband. Both women argue; Lucy indicates that she is pregnant and therefore has a better claim to Mac, but Polly is "legally" married to him and she has papers to prove it. Mac chooses to support Lucy instead of Polly because he is more afraid of Tiger Brown. Mrs. Peachum then arrives and drags Polly away. Lucy, happy to finally be alone with Mac again, hands him his hat and cane and leaves. When Constable Smith returns he tries to get the cane, but Mac is faster than he is and manages to escape. Brown enters the cell and is relieved to see it empty. However, Peachum also arrives and threatens to disrupt the coronation if Brown does not find Macheath and arrest him again immediately.

That night Peachum outfits his beggars with signs and clothes in an effort to ruin the coronation parade the next morning. The whores arrive, led by Jenny, and ask for their



reward for turning in Macheath. Peachum refuses to pay them on the grounds that Mac escaped already. Jenny, in a fit of rage, tells them that Mac is a far better man than any of them. She then accidentally reveals that Mac had gone straight to her place and comforted her, and that he is now with another whore named Suky Tawdry. Peachum is elated by this information and promises to give the whores the reward money. He sends one of his beggars to get the police.

Tiger Brown arrives only a few minutes later. Brown has decided that rather than arrest Macheath it would be far easier for him to arrest Peachum and all the beggars, thereby preventing them from ruining the coronation. Peachum merely ignores Brown's threats and points out that there are far more beggars than there are police. He asks Brown point-blank how it would look if several hundred men were clubbed down on the day of the procession. Unable to arrest Peachum, Brown realizes that he is caught in a bind. Peachum then demands that Brown arrest Macheath and gives him the address where Macheath is staying. Peachum lastly send the beggars to the jail rather than that coronation.

Polly goes to visit Lucy in an effort to find out where Mac is. It turns out that neither of them knows his whereabouts, causing Polly to laugh and state that Mac has stood them both up. They soon hear a noise in the hallway and realize that Mac has been rearrested. Mrs. Peachum shows up with widow's clothing and makes Polly change into it.

The next morning, the same day the coronation procession is set for, Macheath is brought out of his cell and locked into a public cell. He is going to be hung at six in the morning, and has only an hour to live. He offers Smith one thousand pounds in cash if Smith will let him escape, but Smith refuses to make any promises. Jake and Matthew arrive and Mac asks them for money; they say that it will be hard to get anything so early in the morning but leave promising to find something. Polly also arrives and tells Mac that his business is going well but that she has no money on her. Brown finally enters the cell as well and he and Macheath

settle their accounts (recall that Mac pays Brown kickbacks for helping him). Having failed to get the money, Smith refuses to help Macheath.

Soon thereafter all of the characters return and stand next to the cage. Jake and Matthew apologize for not getting the money in time and tell Mac that all the other crooks are stealing elsewhere. Even the whores have showed up to watch him die. Mac gives a last speech in which he claims all the small crooks are being pushed aside by corporate interests. Peachum then stands up and gives the final speech, arguing that since this is an opera and not real life, they will save Macheath. Brown enters in the form of a mounted messenger and brings a special order from the Queen. She has decided to pardon Macheath and to also elevate him to a hereditary knighthood. Mac rejoices his good luck while Peachum remarks that such a thing would never happen in real life.

In spite of the general similarities between the two plays, Brecht took many liberties in *The ThreePenny Opera*. It is by no means just a translation of Gay's play. The London setting is replaced by Soho in Victorian England. Peachum becomes a beggar king, outfitting, taxing, and reporting on his beggars for the reward. He prays on people's sympathies and quotes Biblical verses with ironic dark comedy. Scenes are added, such as a wedding scene between Mac and Polly set in a stable with stolen goods for the reception. The police chief Tiger Brown, Brecht's Lockett, an old army buddy of Mac's, stops in to pay his respects. But most important is the changes that make Mack the Knife.

The adaptation by Bertolt Brecht was composed in the Weimar Period of post World War One Germany. The World War had harsh effects on society's view of the arts and was the final that toppled the kingdoms of Europe. Starting with industrialism and ending with the war, new classes were rising to replace the aristocracy and peasantry. These classes were the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat. New art movements called the avant-garde rose to address the new modern society. One of the big changes was in the concept of a "hero" in plays and literature. Before the outbreak, people thought of war as noble

and honorable, a statement of national pride. Wars had to this point been quick, from six to eight weeks in length. But World War One lasted for six long years, destroyed a generation of European youth, and left a dirty disfigurement across the earth between France and Germany that is still present to remind people today. After the disastrous war, in literature, including drama, a new understanding of the hero and heroism began to spring forth. ***The Threepenny opera*** was one of those great dramatic conversions into the avant-garde. Even though ***The Beggar's Opera*** was over a century old, this unusual play had everything the avant-garde looked for. Gay's rapid change of scenes was similar to the montage effect that Brecht and others were trying to achieve in drama.

Brecht's version of the character bears little resemblance to Gay's Macheath. Gay's Macheath is presented in ***The Beggar's Opera*** as a dashing romantic, a gentleman pickpocket, a Robin Hood type. Brecht's Mackie is unmannerly, cynical, and a toughened criminal. He is a gangster who refers to himself as a "businessman". He praises efficiency, organization, and even keeps books. He stated that the only difference between a gangster and a businessman is that the gangster "is not a coward." (Brecht: 1979, 92) Although he never enters the legitimate business world, he tells Polly that in a few weeks he will switch to banking because it is safer and more profitable. Thieves like himself are being edged out of the market by business and banks:

*We lower middle-class artisans who toil  
with our humble jimmies on small  
shopkeepers' cash registers are being  
swallowed up by big corporations backed  
by the banks. What's a jimmy compared  
with a share certificate? What's breaking  
into a bank compared with founding a  
bank? What's murdering a man  
compared with employing a man?*

(Scene 9, 76)

Furthermore, Brecht turns Mack into a scoundrel who kills eleven people, seven children, two women and two old men and rapes a young widow all in one song and he continues to be immortalized in this song. He has become thoroughly bourgeoisie, not like Gay's dashing romantic hero. In his notes to *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht states that, "the bandit Macheath must be played as bourgeois phenomenon." (Brecht:1979, 92) Therefore, Brecht presents him as "a short, stocky man of about forty with a head like a radish, a bit bald but not lacking dignity." (Brecht: 1979, 92)

Brecht's new style of theater allowed for the play to be more brutally harsh in its satirical attacks on the class than Gay's play could achieve. Brecht allowed the audience to observe, judge, and decide how things could and should be different whereas Gay's audience got too involved with the characters' follies. Brecht offers alternatives in life rather than Gay's mocking characters that just make the viewer laugh at their folly. Brecht wanted to make his characters amoral, but not immoral. Morality has nothing to do with action. To emphasize this point he switched the goals of his characters to be food and money, not power and like in Gay's play. If there is a choice between morality and bread, it would be bread. Mac himself declares that, "Food is the first thing. Morals follow on." (II, vi, 55) It is not just coincidence that this sounds like Marxist theory, but Brecht did not have a utopian view like communists in Russia. He did however, have strong anti-capitalist views.

In Brecht's version, Peachum is no longer just an underworld dealer of stolen goods. Now, he is a tight-fisted capitalist who has built an industry of begging and regulates his myriad panhandler and pickpocket employees in their various professional endeavors throughout the London streets. His business is based upon the principle that hypocrisy is a marketing technique:

*I discovered that though the rich of this earth find no difficulty in creating misery, they can't bear to see it. Because they are weaklings and fools just like you. They*

*may have enough to eat till the end of their days, they may be able to wax their floors with butter so that even the crumbs from their tables grow fat. But they can't look on unmoved while a man is collapsing from hunger, though of course that only applies so long as he collapses outside their own front door.*

(III, vii, 59)

Peachum thus reveals himself a player in the very system he seeks to exploit. In Act One, Scene Three, Brecht introduces one of the most ironic moments in the play by having Peachum fire a beggar for eating too much. The reader or observer does a double-take at this moment; after all, how can you become an out of work beggar except in a world where capitalism has taken over every aspect of society to such a degree that existence is no longer possible except within the system. Brecht subtly criticizes the excesses of capitalism by showing a world where even begging is a profession that has its own rules and ethics.

Brecht affirms that “the character of Jonathan Peachum is not to be resumed in the stereotyped formula ‘miser’, (Brecht: 1979, 91) otherwise this character will lose its implication as the sharpest critiques of bourgeois society, who does not seek to change that society, he simply exploits it. As usual Brecht avoids the crude propagandistic tactic of presenting an idealized opposition to capitalism; rather he concentrates on arousing our indignation and inspires us to action by simply showing us a brutal world. Consequently, the synthesis that will be formulated in the modern spectator's mind is definitely different from that dramatic presentation of Peachum in *The Beggar's Opera*. The basic conflict in *The Threepenny Opera* is based on Peachum and Macheath, the former is in charge of all of London's beggars, the latter is in charge of London's thieves. Stealing Peachum's daughter is thus a social insult, an attack on Peachum's status in the

London underworld. The theft of Polly will cause Peachum to openly declare war on Mac the Knife in an effort to regain his reputation. Thus, it is not an emotional conflict where Peachum is upset about losing Polly. Rather, it is a social issue.

Macheath makes a similar observation as to the hypocrisy of the commercially successful, but from the point of view of one outside of the capitalist establishment. He and Ginny Jenny share a duet commenting on the inherent problem with social moralizing separate from social equality. Macheath opens with the statement:

*You gentlemen who think you have a  
mission  
To purge us of the seven deadly sins  
Should first sort out the basic food  
position  
Then start your preaching: that's where  
it begins.  
You lot, who preach restraint and watch  
your waist as well  
Should learn for all time how the world is  
run:  
However much you twist, whatever lies  
you tell  
Food is the first thing. Morals follow on.*

(II, vi, 55)

The song that ends the act is one of the most famous. The line, "Food is the first thing. Morals follow on", serves as a basis for much of the action in this play. It is an attack on the audience. Instead of morally judging what Macheath, the beggars, the whores and the thieves are doing, the song tells the audience to sympathize with them. By putting food before morals, Brecht is issuing a call to his audience to consider the actual circumstances of the characters instead of judging them abstractly.

Brecht's criticism of the bourgeois society of the Weimar Republic, so elegantly set in Victorian England's Soho, remains one of the great plays today. "The Ballad of

Mac the Knife” became a popular jazz tune in the 1950s and the work has inspired numerous artists. Attempts have been made to update the play, but Brecht himself left it mostly in the original form. It is one of the more difficult Brechtian plays to interpret. It is hard to reconcile Brecht’s outspoken later Communism with the flippancies inherent in the production, and with the fact that it has had repeated successes in bourgeois theaters. The problems stem from the fact that when Brecht wrote the play he was only beginning to explore Marxism and he did not yet identify with the class struggle. The issue is confused, however, by the fact that Brecht’s notes were all written after the play and also after his adoption of a committed Marxist stance in 1929. Nevertheless, through its display of the base elements of society, the play brought theater to the people rather than to the elite society.

*The Threepenny Opera* is a commentary upon society from the vantage point of the underworld. The people that move across the stage are murderers, thieves, prostitutes, beggars, and corrupt officials. Each character is handled so as to arouse an emphatic response and at no point does the sordidness or immorality overshadow the inherent humanity, frailty, and lovability of each of the characters. One’s sympathy is with these people despite their open defiance of sexual proprieties, religious teachings, and the conventions of justice, marriage, and business. (Ullman: 1959, 430) Bertolt Brecht describes people caught, trapped, and debased by life. An unseen thread of implied identity connects them to the world of light. They harshly mirror the weaknesses and limitations as well as the corrupt practices that typify people generally then and now.

One of the main questions posed by Bertolt Brecht in *The Threepenny Opera* is: how are goodness and love possible amid so much misery? Indeed, this and some similar moral and socio-political questions preoccupied Brecht throughout his life. How, for example, can honesty and decency be demanded from people who have nothing to eat? And who, then, will be guilty of the evil they may commit?

The prologue is the “Ballad of Mac the Knife”, which is sung while beggars, prostitutes and thieves are all enjoying a fair in Soho. The ballad describes many of the things that Macheath, known as Mac the Knife, has done. He is compared to a shark with sharp teeth, but unlike a shark he keeps his weapons hidden. Mac the Knife always wears fancy “white kid gloves” in spite of the dreadful crimes he has committed.

*See the shark with teeth like razors.  
All can read his open face.  
And Macheath has got a knife, but  
Not in such an obvious place.*

*See the shark, how red his fins are  
As he slashes at his prey.  
Mac the Knife wears white kid gloves  
which  
Give the minimum away.*

*By the Thames’s turbid waters  
Men abruptly tumble down.  
Is it plague or is it cholera?  
Or a sign Macheath’s in town?*

*On a beautiful blue Sunday  
See a corpse stretched in the Strand.  
See a man dodge round the corner...  
Mackie’s friends will understand.*

*And Schmul Meier, reported missing  
Like so many wealthy men:  
Mac the Knife acquired his cash box.  
God alone knows how or when.*

*Jenny Towler turned up lately  
With a knife stuck through her breast  
While Macheath walks the Embankment  
Nonchalantly unimpressed.*



*Where is Alfred Gleet the cabman?  
Who can get that story clear?  
All the world may know the answer  
Just Macheath has no idea.*

*And the ghastly fire in Soho-  
Seven children at a go-  
In the crowd stands Mac the Knife, but he  
Isn't asked and doesn't know.*

*And the child-bride in her nightie  
Whose assailant's still at large  
Violated in her slumbers-  
Mackie, how much did you charge?*

(Prologue, 3-4)

The song indicates that Macheath is to blame for killing many men, stealing cash boxes, murdering a prostitute, setting a fire in Soho that killed seven children, and raping a young bride. At the end of the song the whores laugh and a man steps out of their group. As he walks away, Low-Dive Jenny cries out that that was Mac the Knife. The introduction of Mac the Knife immediately sets him up in paradoxical terms. He is represented as a shark with bloody fins and hidden teeth, but at the same time he is described in terms of "white kid gloves" in order to cover his bloody hands. These white gloves, signs of pure hands, serve as a symbol of bourgeois society. Brecht is essentially saying that Macheath covers his crimes by pretending to be bourgeois. Alternatively, this can also be interpreted as implying that bourgeois society commits the crimes and then pretends that nothing ever happened. By transforming the stable into an excessively luxurious room, Brecht again is using bourgeois decoration to hide the murders and thefts. The use of furniture is paralleled by the gang in suits, a comic image since they do not have the right manners. Thus we again see bloody deeds and bloody people parading around as if they were common, normal members of the

successful society. One may note that Macheath does not deny his crimes; instead, he acts as if nothing is wrong.

Another relevant fundamental theme that emerges is that business transcends love in this amoral, capitalist world. Love is made fun of by portraying it ironically. Normally a parent would be swayed by arguments of love, but Polly's parents instead advocate divorce for her. When she continues claiming that she is really in love with Macheath, Mrs. Peachum blames the books that Polly used to read.

*Polly: Look. Is he particularly handsome? No. but he makes a living. He can support me. He is not only a first-class burglar but a far-sighed and experienced stick-up man as well. I've been into it, I can tell you the exact amount of his savings to date. A few successful ventures and we shall be able to retire to a little house in the country just like that Mr. Shakespeare father admires so much.*

*Peachum: It's quite simple. You're married. What does a girl do when she's married? Use your head. Well, she gets divorced, see. Is that so hard to figure out?*

*Polly: I don't know what you're talking about.*

*Mrs. Peachum: Divorce.*

*Polly: But I love him. How can I think of divorce?*

*Mrs. Peachum: Really, have you no shame?*

*Polly: Mother, if you've ever been in love...*

*Mrs. Peachum: In love! Those damn books you've been reading have turned your head.*

(I, iii, 30)

This attitude converts “love” into a form of business deal; there is no point in marrying unless you gain something financially. Polly realizes this and tries to point out to her parents that Macheath is financially well off, however, since he is a competitor to her father, Peachum chooses instead to take this opportunity to ruin Macheath. The reduction of love to mere business is furthered by Polly in her dream. She remarks that she dreamt about the moon, a symbol of her and Mac’s love.

*Oh, last night I had a dream. I was  
looking out the window and I heard  
laughter in the street, and when I looked  
out I saw our moon and the moon was all  
thin like a worn-down penny.*  
(II, iv, 39)

The moon is equated to a “worn-down penny.” This gives love two meanings and references, the first being that it equates love with capitalism. Second, love is compared to something old and not worth very much. This belief that love is worthless is held by all of the characters except for Polly who seems to be the only character struggling to achieve worthwhile emotions.

In Act Three, Scene Eight, the falseness of love and marriage is dealt with throughout the scene. Lucy, the Sheriff’s daughter, admits that she lied about being pregnant and shows Polly the cushion. “Oh, that’s magnificent! Is it a cushion? Oh, you really are a hypocritical strumpet!” (III, viii, 68) At the end, Mrs. Peachum has the gall to enter and make Polly dress as a widow before Macheath is even dead.

*Ha, Polly, so this is where I find you. You  
must change your things, your husband is  
being hanged. I’ve brought your widow’s  
weeds. [Polly changes into the widow’s  
dress.] You’ll be a lovely widow. But  
you’ll have to cheer up a little.*

(III, viii, 69)

This brutal disruption of the sentimental interaction between Lucy and Polly serves again to make the audience feel less pity for Polly. The image of her as a sad, broken wife does not hold very long either; when Mac asks her for money in the last scene she is brilliantly evasive, implying that she has taken over his business and kept the money.

Another example of that business supercedes love, marriage and other sentimentalities are presented in the prison cell meeting between Brown and Mac. Brown visits Mac in the cell to settle up their business first. Mac even explicitly states, "The accounts, sir, if you please, the accounts. No sentimentality". (III, viii, 73) When Brown agrees, Mac yells at him for only caring about money. Mac then reads his own epilogue, infuriating Brown in the process by reminding his former friend that he has killed him. In addition, Mac's final speech is quite important. In the speech he accuses big business of doing exactly what he does, namely being a thief. The only difference is that the big companies do it with more money and legally. "What's a jemmy \* compared with a share certificate? What's breaking into a bank compared with founding a bank?" (III, viii, 76) Actually, this is what he was planning to do: Mac wanted Polly to take the money and set up a bank with it, thereby getting rid of his men and entering a more reliable business.

Lucy brings up the issue of class for the first time in the play. She tells Polly "You should have stuck to your own class of people, dear Miss." (III, viii, 67) Lucy is implying that Polly married outside of her own class. The question then is which direction did she marry, up or down? The answer is not obvious because her parents are actually in a similar profession to that of Macheath. However, Polly clearly interprets it as meaning that she married down. She elevates herself into the business class by stating, "I should have kept everything on a strict business footing." (III, viii, 67) This line

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\* Jemmy: a metal bar used by thieves to break open locked doors, windows, etc. (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*: 1989)

has another meaning, though it serves to accuse the bourgeois class, i.e. the business class, of being unemotional and marrying only for money.

The issue of class re-emerges when the Queen raises Mac to the hereditary peerage. By giving him a knighthood she elevates him into the highest class, the leisurely class of aristocracy with guaranteed income. This further undermines the issues of class present in the play; Mac manages to leapfrog the bourgeois society and lands comfortably in the aristocratic class. It also serves as yet another sardonic commentary on Brecht's own society which he saw rewarding people he considered to be criminals.

**Brown:** *I bring a special order from our beloved Queen to have Captain Macheath set at liberty forthwith [All cheers] as it's the coronation, and raised to the hereditary peerage. [Cheers] The castle of Marmarel, likewise a pension of ten thousand ponds, to be his in usufruct until his death. To any bridal couples present. Her Majesty bids me to convey her gracious good wishes.*

(III, ix, 79)

The songs in Brecht's plays deserve some discussion because they are as famous as the play itself. Brecht's use of songs does not represent any attempt aiming at intensifying or heightening the conflict of the play, rather it specifically intends to detach the spectator from suspense. Hence, when we argue that Brecht's songs are designed in such a manner we do not mean, at any arte, that these songs are forcibly injected as isolated parts into the structure of the play. An examined reading of Bertolt Brecht's songs makes one deduce that they are thematically linked to the action. Therefore, such technique helps the audience to question attitudes and behaviour which have been taken as expected and natural. (Gaskell: 1972, 145) The Brechtian songs always comment on

the main action of the play; furthermore, it gives the spectators time to think of what has been said by other characters or by the singer himself since the tempo of the song is slower than that of the normal dialogue. (Gaskell: 1972, 145) Brecht's final goal is that he wants the audience to leave his play with a logical desire to change society. By forcing the audience to not empathize with the characters, Brecht is trying to make people think about the play rather than feel emotions. This objectification of character is requisite for the "work" of art: Aristotelian forms which induce empathy, sympathy, and a perception of heroism, all create the illusion of reality (in actuality, an ideological construct), but only when the audience is at a distance, when they feel no personal kinship with the characters, can the destructive mechanisms of capitalist ideology be exposed and resisted. The songs are nonetheless bawdy, cabaret style works that invert the common perception of opera. The songs serve as social statements by combining high culture with low; they also are an attack on traditional Wagnerian opera.

This is evident in the first scene where Mr. and Mrs. Peachum sing a song under spotlight which has nothing to do with their real characters. Peachum sings a morning "hymn", basically a call for thieves and beggars to start their "sinful employment". Peachum runs an outfitting shop for beggars; he provides them with props and slogans and is paid a part of their daily "take". He laments the fact that humans are able to deaden their feelings, forcing him to constantly create new ways of arousing human sympathy.

*You ramshackle Christian, awake!  
Get on with your sinful employment  
Show what a good crook you could make.  
The Lord will cut short your enjoyment.*

*Betray your own brother, you rogue  
And sell your old woman, you rat.  
You think the Lord God's just a joke?  
He'll give you His Judgement on that.*

(Act, I, 5)

Brecht here tries to remind the spectators from the very beginning of the play that what they are watching is just a game not a slice of life; it is a mere presentation of actors on a stage in a theatre. (Ubersfeld: 1999, 27) This is, in fact, one of many Brechtian preliminary attempts of initiating an epic drama and theatre, which will reach its peak and maturity in the 1940's.

In Act Two, Scene Five, 'The Ballad of immoral earnings' makes fun of bourgeois society by attacking its nostalgia. One of the main attributes of the middle class is a preference for an idealized past. This is reflected in a great deal of literature, with concepts such as the "golden ages", the "golden years", or the Romantic period playing a key role.

*There was a time, now very far a way  
When we set up together, I and she.  
I'd got the brain, and she supplied the  
breast.*

*I saw her right, and she looked after me –  
A way of life then, if not quite the best.  
And when a client came I'd slide out of  
our bed  
And treat him nice, and go and have a  
drink instead  
And when he paid up I'd address him: Sir  
Come any night you feel you fancy her.  
That time's long past, but what would I  
not give  
To see that whorehouse where we used to  
live?*

.....  
.....  
*But in the end we flushed it down the  
sewer.  
That could not last, but what would I not  
give  
To see that whorehouse where we used to  
live?*

(II, vi, 44-45)

Brecht attacks this naive view of the past by having Mac sing about his life with Jenny. Mac makes the couple seem idyllic even though it they live in a whorehouse. Jenny also wishes for the past again even while telling us how Mac used to knock her down the stairs. Thus Brecht uses the two of them to combine elements of bourgeois nostalgia with lower class crudity.

Brecht's theater is intentionally extremely political. *The Threepenny Opera* places blame on the capitalist society for the criminal underworld that Gay presented merely in *The Beggar's Opera* as a mirror-image satire of eighteenth-century aristocracy. Brecht made some stylistic changes, transforming the protagonist, Macheath, into a morally ambiguous hero, emphasizing the parallels between Polly and Lucy Peachum, and creating the character of Sheriff Jackie Brown, a former army buddy of Macheath's who protects his friend's criminal activity in exchange for a percentage of his spoils. Brecht writes in his "Notes to *The Threepenny Opera*" that,

*The Threepenny Opera is concerned with bourgeois conceptions not only by content, by representing them, but also through the manner in which it does so. It is a kind of report on life as any member of the audience would like to see it. Since at the same time, however, he sees a good deal that he has no wish to see; since therefore he sees his wishes not merely fulfilled but also criticized (sees himself not as the subject but as the object), he is theoretically in a position to appoint a new function for the theatre.*

(Brecht: 1979, 90)

This means that Brecht is giving the bourgeois audience their fantasy of the criminal world, but, at specific moments, he gives them a dose of harsh reality.

Brecht exposes his understanding of death penalty in the play. The dancers will be the ones to face the rich spectators



with their hypocritical behaviour, demanding decorum today and abusing them tomorrow. And perhaps through that rudimentary feeling of moral tolerance towards the poor, the ray of hope which shines in this opera's chaotic closing moments could be explained. For when it seems that the leader of the gangsters is going to be executed, an unexpected pardon arrives, which moves the chorus to sing:

*Injustice should be spared from  
persecution:  
Soon it will freeze to death, for it is cold.  
Think of the blizzards and the black  
confusion  
Which in this vale of tears we must  
behold.*

(Act III, 79)

Notice finally how, already in this earliest of works, Brecht is proposing a notable correction of the merciless machinery of justice, and, more directly still, of the death penalty, for this positive penal law seems inhuman to him. Thus, Brecht is not only expressing a profound feeling of compassion and mercy towards that poor criminal, the victim of social injustice, but also a great respect and compassion for every human creature, however perverse he or she may seem.

Nevertheless, all these dramatic modifications have been made to suit and serve two main purposes: the Brechtian ideological attitude of how human relations are affected or determined by economic, social and political forces and that is one of the main themes of *The Threepenny Opera*, and to borrow from opera a dramatic form and adapt it so that it reached to a new audience; and in so doing they created a new type of musical theatre.

Other critical views mix admiration and doubts of this Brechtian adaptation of the play. Lotte Lenya, one of the stars of the original production (and wife of composer Kurt Weill), recollected about the play in the 1940s, "Respected Berlin theatre oracles slipped out to spread the word that Brecht and Weill proposed to insult the public with a ludicrous mishmash

of opera, operetta, cabaret, straight theatre, outlandish American jazz, not one thing or the other.” (Lenya: 1960, xiii) She asserts that he was eclectic and unabashed about borrowing from other cultural sources as part of his own creative genius. Lenya describes what was Brecht’s tendency,

*As his admirers have it: to adapt, reinterpret, re-create, magnificently add modern significance; or in his detractors’ eye: to pirate, plagiarize, shamelessly appropriate – to borrow at will from the vanished greats like Marlowe and Shakespeare and Villon, and even from his actual or near contemporaries like Kipling and Gorky and Klabund.*

(Lenya: 1960, V)

As such, when the idea came to him to resurrect *The Beggar’s Opera* but in a satirical manner that would ultimately highlight Brecht’s socialist ideals, the borrowing of Gay’s story and characters was not only convenient, it was quite appropriate. After all, Gay’s original production had been laced with political satire itself.

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أوبرا الثلاث بنسات لبرتولت بريخت : المسرحية الغنائية ودورها

في النقد والتغيير الاجتماعي-السياسي

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ملخص البحث

مثلت المسرحية الغنائية منذ مطلع القرن الثامن عشر وسيلة للنقد الاجتماعي والسياسي آنذاك ومثالنا في هذا البحث المتواضع هو مسرحية جون غي (أوبرا الفقراء). قام برتولت بريخت بعمل مسرحي رائع وذلك بتعديل النص التراثي الى نص حديث ليتماشى مع أهداف بريخت السياسية والاجتماعية في نقد النظام الرأسمالي.

إن أهم ما تم تعديله هو تحويل الشخصية الرئيسية للمسرحية (ماجيث) من لص وقاتل وقاطع طريق كما ورد في النص التراثي إلى رجل منمق ذي مظهر راق وحديث ولغة منمقة ولكنه لص شديد المراس يتراأس عصابة كبيرة في لندن. ويتحول هذا اللص إلى صاحب مصرف كبير. واستخدم بريخت أغانيه ووسائل الأغراب الأخرى في النص وعلى خشبة المسرح ليوطد هذا الفهم عند المشاهد من انه لا فرق بين لصوص الشوارع والرأسماليين، كليهما يسرق ويستغل ومن ثم يحتل المناصب بواسطة الأموال التي سرقها من الشعب.

يتناول البحث بالتحليل كل القيم السياسية والاجتماعية التي تتساقط وتتهاوى تحت مطرقة النظام الرأسمالي. فالمحبة والزواج يقومان على مصالح اقتصادية، والرئيس يخون مرؤوسيه حتى وان وصل الأمر إلى حتفهم، والزوجة تكذب على زوجها، ورئيس الشرطة يتعاطى كل أنواع الممنوعات مع قطاع الطرق والمجرمين في سوهو. كل هذا يستعرضه بريخت في مسرحيته محفزاً مشاهديه على رفض هذا الواقع المؤلم وإحلال البدائل المناسبة.

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