The Beggar's Opera

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN GAY

John Gay was born to a prominent merchant family in the southwestern English town of Barnstaple. After becoming an orphan on his 10th birthday, Gay went to live with his uncle, a local minister. He couldn't afford university, so he became a silk merchant's apprentice in London, but he found the profession uninteresting and quit after four years. Instead, he went to work for his former schoolmate Aaron Hill, a London writer, publisher, and theater producer. Soon, Gay stared writing comic poems and plays for Hill's newspaper *The British Apollo*. He quickly realized that, whether he liked it or not, he could only make a living as a writer if he found a wealthy patron. Fortunately, the Duchess of Monmouth, Earl of Clarendon, and Earl of Burlington were happy to employ him for most of his early career. Thanks to his connections with the nobility, he even got to live rent-free in central London and become the Commissioner of the State Lottery. But he was always ashamed to have survived through these connections rather than on literary merit alone, and he frequently mocked himself to this effect in his work. Still, he began receiving modest recognition for his writing the mid-1710s, particularly with the long poem *Trivia; or the Art of Walking the Streets of London* and the racy 1717 play *Three Hours after Marriage* (which raised a brief moral panic in London). His 1720 book *Poems on Several Occasions* made him a small fortune, but he promptly lost it all in the stock market. In the mid-1720s, he finally decided to start writing for the broader public, instead of the nobility. In 1728 he wrote and staged *The Beggar's Opera*, which remains his best-known work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Beggar's Opera was largely a response to the fast-changing political, social, and economic conditions of London in the early 18th century. London had just become the center of a global empire and would soon become Europe's largest city. Colonial trade and finance enriched the elite, but the Industrial Revolution hadn't yet occurred, so most Londoners—like those depicted in *The Beggar's Opera*—were poor and desperate. The city was crowded, filthy, and deeply unequal; city leaders didn't provide basic services like streetlights, sewers, and a police force until the second half of the century. Crime was rampant, and the "Gin Craze" made them worse: after new policies made gin extremely cheap, production and consumption started doubling every decade from the 1680s to the 1730s. As depicted in *The Beggar's Opera*, many Londoners were drunk all the time—even in the notorious Newgate Prison, where prisoners were frequently starved, tortured, and abandoned in dungeons, unless they could afford to pay off the guards. In this lawless era, men like Jonathan Wild (the thief-catcher and crime boss who inspired the character of Peachum) and "Honest Jack" Shepard (the famous thief and prison escape artist who inspired Macheath) became popular folk heroes.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Besides *Polly* (1729), the sequel to *The Beggar's Opera*, John Gay's best-remembered works are probably satirical poems like *Trivia, or The Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716) and the collection *Fables* (1727). In fact, contemporary audiences are most likely to know *The Beggar's Opera* via Bertolt Brecht's adaptation of it, *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), which was his first major success and possibly the most popular German play of the 1920s. Several other acclaimed playwrights have also adapted Gay's musical to contemporary contexts, including John Latouche (*The Beggar's Holiday*, 1946) and Dario Fo (*L'Opera dello Sghignazzo*, 1981). In turn, *The Beggar's Opera* was also inspired by the popular literature, news, and urban legends of its time, which were collected in widely read books like *A General History of the Lives and Adventures of the Most Famous Highwaymen, Murderers, Street-Robbers* (1734, authorship unknown). Henry Fielding's novel *The Life and Death of Jonathan Wild, the Great* (1743) focuses on the same famous criminal who inspired Gay's character Peachum. And the early 1800s saw the rise of a whole genre of "Newgate novels" about the London criminal underworld, including Charles Dickens's famous *Oliver Twist* (1837) and William Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* (1840), which focused on the infamous criminal of the same name (who inspired John Gay's Macheath).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Beggar's Opera
- **When Written:** 1727–1728
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** January 29, 1728 (premiered at Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre in London)
- **Literary Period:** Augustan Drama (Early 18th-Century Drama)
- **Genre:** Ballad Opera, Satirical Play, Jukebox Musical
- **Setting:** London in the 1720s
- **Climax:** Macheath gets arrested and brought to Newgate Prison for a second time. Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit beg their fathers to free Macheath, but they refuse, and he prepares for his execution.
- **Antagonist:** Macheath

EXTRA CREDIT

Rich and Gay. John Rich, the director who staged the first performances of *The Beggar's Opera*, was so eager to turn a profit that he filled the theater to the brim—he even sat as many as 100 audience members on the stage itself. Critics famously announced that *The Beggar's Opera* "made [John] Gay rich and [John] Rich gay."

Rags to Riches. *The Beggar's Opera* was such a hit that it changed its actors' lives forever. For some time, the actress Lavinia Fenton (who played Polly Peachum) became the most recognizable celebrity in London. She was once a child sex worker and barmaid, but she eventually married into nobility, becoming the Duchess of Bolton.

PollyThe Beggar's OperaTrivia, or The Art of Walking the Streets of LondonFablesThe Beggar's OperaThe Threepenny OperaThe Beggar's HolidayL'Opera dello SghignazzoThe Beggar's OperaA General History of the Lives and Adventures of the Most Famous Highwaymen, Murderers, Street-RobbersThe Life and Death of Jonathan Wild, the GreatOliver TwistJack Sheppard

PLOT SUMMARY

John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* follows a band of hard-drinking, double-crossing thieves, rogues, and sex workers in the criminal underworld of 1720s London. The play centers on crime kingpin Peachum's quest to exact revenge on Macheath, a womanizing highwayman who has secretly married Peachum's daughter, Polly. While little-known today, the play was a huge success in its era—by some accounts, it was the biggest theatrical hit of the 18th century. Technically, it is a "ballad opera," which is similar to a modern musical. In John Gay's time, most operas paired sophisticated classical songs with serious, high-minded plots about mythology or nobility. Instead, *The Beggar's Opera* is a musical comedy designed for the masses: it focuses on lower-class antiheroes, and its 69 "airs" (arias, or songs) are all satirical adaptations of well-known folk tunes. Throughout the piece, Gay mocks London's criminal underworld, England's corrupt political system, and most of all, opera itself.

Fittingly, *The Beggar's Opera* opens with a Beggar talking about opera. Dressed in rags and claiming to be the work's author, he briefly tells a Player (actor) that he has adapted the grand conventions of Italian opera to the harsh realities of life in London's slums. Then, Act I of the play really begins. Peachum sings that everyone in society cheats and abuses everyone else all the time, which makes him no worse than anyone else. As he goes through his **account book** with his henchman Filch, his business model becomes clear: he works with a band of thieves, buying the valuables they steal and reselling them at a profit. But when his thieves stop bringing in enough revenue, he turns them in to the authorities at Newgate Prison. He gets a £40 reward, and they get executed.

As Peachum debates whom to turn in this year, Mrs. Peachum explains that their daughter Polly is in love with Macheath, a particularly adept and gallant thief. Peachum declares that marriage is a sham that men use to manipulate and control women. Mrs. Peachum agrees, but also believes that Polly should have the same rights as a man: she should be able to love her husband *and* sleep with other men on the side. Next, Filch admits to Mrs. Peachum that Polly and Macheath have *already* gotten married in secret.

When Polly gets home, her parents confront her in a fury. They insist that Macheath is using her for money, but she says that she truly loves him. Mrs. Peachum faints in distress, but Peachum hatches a plot. Since Polly is Macheath's wife, if he dies, then she will get all of his property. So if Peachum can turn Macheath in and get him executed, then the Peachums will get rich. Unsurprisingly, Polly finds this plan appalling. She goes to her room, where Macheath is hiding, and warns him. They sing about their love and sorrow at separating, and then Macheath sneaks off.

Act II opens with a group of thieves drinking in a tavern, praising their own virtues and arguing that it is honorable to steal from the rich. Macheath joins them and sings that Polly is foolish for loving him because he can't resist the temptations of "free-hearted Ladies." Surely enough, eight such ladies—sex workers who also rob their clients and turn them in for bounties—join him in the tavern. While they distract him with kisses and flirtatious songs, Peachum and the police enter and arrest him. Two of the women, Jenny Diver and Suky Tawdry, boast that Peachum paid them to turn Macheath in.

Macheath arrives at Newgate Prison, where Lockit, the aptly named jailor, immediately demands a bribe. Macheath reluctantly pays him, and Lockit gives him lighter shackles. Macheath sings about how women trick men, leading them to ruin. Ironically, at just that moment, he sees Lockit's daughter Lucy—who is pregnant with his child, and whom he promised to marry. Aware of Macheath's second marriage to Polly, Lucy calls him a "perfidious Wretch" and "Insinuating Monster!" But he insists that Polly is lying.

Meanwhile, Peachum and Lockit debate how to split the £40 reward for Macheath's capture. They complain about corrupt politicians holding up their bounty payments, until Peachum accuses *Lockit* of breaking agreements with prisoners and stealing bounty payments. Furiously, Peachum and Lockit each threaten to turn the other in. But they remember that this would destroy their business, so they agree to disagree instead.

Lucy begs her father (Lockit) to release Macheath, but he

refuses. Then, Polly Peachum comes to Newgate to see her "dear Husband" Macheath, only to find Lucy with him. Lucy and Polly realize that Macheath has lied to them and sing an angry duet. However, Macheath then takes Lucy's side and calls Polly a liar. This turns Lucy and Polly against each other. Before their fight can escalate, though, Peachum finds Polly and drags her home. Meanwhile, Lockit takes a nap, and Macheath pleads with Lucy to steal his keys. She agrees, and Macheath escapes.

Act III begins with Lockit confronting Lucy. He's less angry about her letting Macheath escape than about her forgetting to solicit a bribe for it. She admits that Macheath was probably manipulating her, and Polly was probably telling the truth about marrying him. Lockit concludes that Peachum planned the whole thing—he convinced Lucy to free Macheath so that he could turn Macheath in *again* and claim the whole £40 reward.

After escaping, Macheath drinks and gambles with two other thieves, Ben Budge and Matt of the Mint. They all complain that common criminals like them get punished for lying and stealing, while the rich and powerful get rewarded for the same thing. Then, they leave to commit some robberies and visit some of their favorite ladies.

Meanwhile, Lockit visits Peachum at his warehouse. They discuss Macheath's escape and agree that their daughters are foolish for trusting him. The madam Mrs. Diana Trapes visits Peachum to buy some clothes for her workers, and she casually mentions that Macheath has gone to visit one of them (Mrs. Coaxer). Peachum eagerly heads to Trapes's brothel to capture Macheath again.

At Newgate Prison, Lucy Lockit sings about her "Jealousy, Rage, Love and Fear." She decides that, if she wants Macheath to herself, she has to murder Polly Peachum. After Polly arrives, Lucy repeatedly offers her a glass of poisoned cordial—but Polly refuses it. (She assumes that Lucy wants to get her drunk to "pump some Secrets out of [her].")

Peachum and Lockit find Macheath with Mrs. Coaxer, arrest him, and lead him back to Newgate for his trial and execution. But before he goes to trial, Lucy and Polly both beg him to choose them as his true wife. He refuses. Lucy and Polly also beg their fathers to free Macheath, but they refuse, too.

After his trial, Macheath drinks alone in his prison cell and sings several songs about women, drinking, and society. Ben Budge and Matt of the Mint visit him to pay their last respects, followed by Lucy and Polly, who say they wish they could die along him. Then, "four Wives more" come to visit Macheath, each with a child. Fed up, Macheath decides to go straight to the gallows.

But just before Macheath's execution, the Beggar and Player from the opening scene come back onstage. The Player announces that Macheath cannot die, because a good opera needs a happy ending. The Beggar agrees and promises to rewrite the final scene. Instead of being executed, then, Macheath inexplicably goes free. The play ends with a joyous song and dance scene, in which Macheath tells Polly that she is his one true wife.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Polly Peachum – Polly Peachum is Peachum and Mrs. Peachum's young daughter, who falls hopelessly in love with the swindling highwayman Macheath before the play begins. She agrees to marry him, as she naïvely believes that he will stop consorting with other young women and hiring sex workers. But even after she learns that he *won't* stop, her feelings don't change. Thus, at the end of the play, she is still in love with Macheath, despite knowing how immoral he is and how little he really cares about her. So the play's supposedly happy ending ends up being an ironic tragedy for Polly: Macheath promises that he loves her and that she *is* his real wife, but the audience knows that his ways will never change, and he is just roping her back into an exploitative relationship. Surely enough, John Gay's next play, *Polly*, depicts Polly shortsightedly following Macheath to the West Indies in an attempt to win him back—and then enduring misfortune after misfortune. Nevertheless, she is arguably the only character in *The Beggar's Opera* who is motivated by sincerity, compassion, and principles instead of mere money and power. While her moral purity shows that even the most corrupt societies cannot ruin everyone, her agony and misfortune show how, when most people in society abandon moral principles, the few who *do* hold on to them get exploited and hurt.

Peachum – Peachum, Mrs. Peachum's common-law husband and Polly Peachum's father, is the criminal mastermind whose quest to capture Macheath forms the core of the opera's plot. Peachum's business is based on two complementary functions. First, he buys stolen goods from a band of thieves and sex workers, then he resells them at a profit (or even returns them to the original owner for a fee). Second, he turns in his thieves to the government, which pays a £40 bounty per head and executes them (or sentences them to transportation). Thus, Peachum has a ruthless system: he pushes thieves to steal more and more, and as soon as they stop making him enough money, he turns them in for the bounty. Scheming, callous, and extremely greedy, Peachum has no qualms about sending friends and business partners to death, so long as it's the most profitable thing to do. He even insists on doing the same to Macheath, who is technically his son-in-law. His intention is both to punish Polly for marrying in secret and to get her to inherit Macheath's wealth. Even when Polly begs Peachum to let Macheath go free, he has absolutely no sympathy for her. (He doesn't have much sympathy for Mrs. Peachum, either, in the rare moments when she disagrees with him.) Ultimately, Peachum represents the deep corruption and moral rot that

John Gay saw throughout his contemporary London society. In fact, Peachum's profession is based on the real-life merchant and thief-catcher Jonathan Wild, and Gay carefully draws parallels between Peachum and England's deeply corrupt, hypocritical ruling class. Most of all, Peachum shows how England's emerging capitalist economy made it legal, ordinary, and seemingly respectable to treat people as disposable commodities, like nothing more than lines in an **account book**.

Lucy Lockit – Lucy Lockit is Lockit's daughter and Macheath's former lover. Macheath once promised to marry her and even got her pregnant, but then he ran off with Polly Peachum instead. When Lucy first appears in the second half of Act II, after Macheath returns to Newgate, she is furious at him for what he has done. But he convinces her that Polly is lying and wins back her trust—which he certainly doesn't deserve—so she becomes furious at Polly instead. Throughout the rest of the play, she constantly goes back and forth between these two modes—blaming Macheath and blaming Polly. In fact, half the time, she is miserable because Macheath is cheating and deceiving her, and the other half, she is miserable because she thinks that she and Macheath are in love but knows he is about to be executed. (She repeatedly begs her father, the prison warden, to save Macheath, but he refuses.) At the end of Act II, Lucy steals her father's keys and lets Macheath go, and in Act III, she tries and fails to murder Polly with a poisoned glass of cordial. Like Polly, she is emotional and intense—whereas the rest of the characters are cold and detached. But unlike Polly, Lucy is not honest or innocent: it seems that her misfortunes have already corrupted her.

Lockit – Lockit is the warden who runs Newgate Prison. Even though he is supposed to represent the law and enforce justice, he is actually lazy, greedy, and sadistic. He constantly solicits bribes from his prisoners and delights in abusing and executing them. He and Peachum collaborate to turn thieves in and collect the bounties for doing so. Both Lockit's daughter, Lucy, and Peachum's daughter, Polly, are in love with Macheath, who, tellingly, is just as wicked as their fathers. Just as Peachum rejects Polly's love for Macheath, Lockit completely rejects Lucy's, except if there is money to be gained through it. He is even unmoved when she comes to him in tears, which demonstrates how corrupt and cold-blooded he is. Because of their jobs and their daughters, Lockit and Peachum also serve as character foils for one another in the play. There is no moral difference between the two men, even though Lockit technically works for the law and Peachum against it. This reflects how corrupt England's legal and political system had become in 1728.

Macheath – Macheath is the charming, respected thief whose love triangle with Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit forms the central plot of *The Beggar's Opera*. Even though others call him "Captain" Macheath, there's no evidence that he ever belonged to the military, and despite his larger-than-life reputation, he seems to spend most of his days drinking and visiting the local "free-hearted Ladies." Similarly, he and his gang constantly talk about honor and loyalty, though they don't exhibit much of either. He lies constantly, sends his henchmen off to steal alone, and loses all of his money gambling. Nevertheless, despite his countless hypocrisies, Polly, Lucy, and many other women fall madly in love with him, and Peachum recognizes him as a skilled and profitable thief. Over the course of *The Beggar's Opera*, he gets arrested twice, makes three great escapes (one at the end of each act), and successfully convinces both Polly and Lucy that they are his only true beloved. At the end of the play, he is supposed to be executed, but the Player convinces the Beggar to rewrite the play's ending and let him live. Throughout the play, he also serves as a character foil for his pursuer, Peachum: Macheath is spontaneous and overconfident, while Peachum is calculating and shrewd, and Macheath gets punished for the same kinds of improprieties that earn Peachum a hefty profit. He is largely based on stories about figures like Jack Sheppard (an English criminal and prison escape artist) and Claude Duval (a French highwayman), which John Gay's 18th-century audiences would have known quite well.

Mrs. Peachum – Mrs. Peachum is Peachum's common-law wife and Polly Peachum's mother. She plays a minor but significant role in Peachum's criminal enterprise and shares his interest in money above all else. She is markedly more sentimental and less sadistic than he is, but she still agrees with most of his decisions—including his plot to foil Polly's marriage to Macheath. Of course, even though Mrs. Peachum scarcely cares about Polly's feelings, her warnings about Macheath's womanizing, swindling ways are all correct. Similarly, while she echoes misogynist ideas about women's fickleness and irrationality, she also has a pro-equality streak, in that she believes women should have the power to make their own decisions and live independent lives (rather than being owned and controlled by their husbands). In fact, the play suggests that she lives out this idea by having affairs with other men or even doing sex work on the side. After all, like the play's sex workers, her place as a woman in London's criminal underworld both denigrates her in society's eyes and gives her many freedoms that respectable middle-class women don't have.

The Beggar – The Beggar is a man from the famously poor, crime-ridden London slum of St. Giles who is supposed to represent the opera's author. He briefly appears onstage in the first and second-to-last scenes alongside the Player. At the beginning of the play, he explains that he did his best to write a true Italian-style opera by including features like similes about animals, a love triangle with two women, and a scene in a prison. Later, he agrees to change the play's ending—and save Macheath rather than having him executed—in order to conform to the conventions of opera. Of course, in both of these cases, Gay uses the Beggar's combination of earnestness and ignorance to mock both his audience, who likely know little

about serious opera, as well as opera itself, which is full of stuffy rules and conventions that limit its appeal. In fact, John Gay also uses the Beggar to make fun of *himself* for daring to write an opera, despite lacking the elite connections and formal musical training of most serious opera composers.

The Player – The Player is an actor who appears alongside the Beggar in the first and second-to-last scenes of *The Beggar's Opera*. He is probably supposed to represent the play's director. Together, the Beggar and the Player represent the two worlds that come together in this work: the Beggar represents London's seedy criminal underworld, and the Player represents the refined world of London high culture and Italian opera. Just before the end of the play, the Player enforces this serious artistic world's rules by telling the Beggar to give his opera a happy ending. Of course, this ironically makes the play look far *less* serious, because its new concluding scene is obviously out-of-place. In this way, John Gay uses the Player to mock opera's snobbishness and rigid conventions.

Mrs. Coaxer – Mrs. Coaxer is one of the sex workers who appears in Act II. While she has few lines, she plays an important role in the opera as a whole because she repeatedly gets involved in other characters' drama. She accuses Lockit of stealing her bounty, refuses to pay what she owes Mrs. Diana Trapes for clothes, and most importantly, is with Macheath when Peachum captures him the second time, partway through Act II.

Filch – Filch is Peachum's loyal sidekick. He takes care of many of the day-to-day tasks involved in running Peachum's business, from sending messages to prisoners at Newgate to receiving stolen goods. However, he also expresses reservations about continuing a life of crime—he worries about getting executed and tells Mrs. Peachum that he wants to be a sailor instead. In Act III, he takes over the unusual, exhausting job of sleeping with women prisoners at Newgate (because they cannot be executed while pregnant).

Robin of Bagshot ("Bob Booty") – Robin of Bagshot is a thief in Macheath's gang. He only has one insignificant line when he appears onstage at the beginning of Act II, but in Act I, Peachum and Mrs. Peachum get into a lively argument about whether or not to turn him in to Newgate. He also goes by several aliases, including "Bob Booty," which 18th-century audiences would have immediately recognized as a nickname for prime minister Robert Walpole. This allusion makes it clear to the audience very early on that *The Beggar's Opera* was also an allegorical critique of the English ruling class.

Mrs. Diana Trapes – Mrs. Diana Trapes is a madam who employs most of the sex workers in the play. Like Peachum, she also buys and sells stolen goods. In Act III, when she visits Peachum to buy some clothes, she ends up giving away invaluable information about Macheath's location (he is with Mrs. Coaxer).

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ben Budge – Ben Budge is one of the most loyal thieves in Macheath's gang (along with Matt of the Mint). He meets Macheath at the tavern, the gambling hall, and Newgate Prison.

Black Moll – Black Moll is a thief who works with Peachum. While she never appears onstage, she is imprisoned and on trial at Newgate during the opera, and Peachum promises to get her out.

Molly Brazen – Molly Brazen is one of the eight "women of the town" (sex workers) who drink with Macheath in Act II.

Crook-Finger'd Jack – Crook-Finger'd Jack is a thief in Macheath's gang who works with Peachum.

Jenny Diver – Jenny Diver is one of the sex workers who turns Macheath in to Peachum in Act II (along with Suky Tawdry). She also sings two arias.

Betty Doxy – Betty Doxy is one of the sex workers who meet Macheath in Act II.

Wat Dreary – Wat Dreary (or Brown Will) is one of the thieves who work with Macheath. Peachum considers him untrustworthy.

Matt of the Mint – Matt of the Mint is the most talkative and loyal thief in Macheath's gang. Along with Ben Budge, he meets Macheath at the tavern, the gambling hall, and Newgate Prison.

Nimming Ned – Nimming Ned is a thief in Macheath's gang. According to Peachum, Ned is an expert at robbing houses that are on fire, before they burn down completely.

Harry Padington – Harry Padington is a member of Macheath's gang. Peachum thinks he's a talentless good-for-nothing.

Mrs. Slammekin – Mrs. Slammekin is one of the sex workers in Act II. She argues that Jewish men make excellent clients and brags about turning other clients in to Peachum for a share in his bounty.

Suky Tawdry – Suky Tawdry is one of the sex workers who turns Macheath in to Peachum (along with Jenny Diver).

Dolly Trull – Dolly Trull is one of the sex workers in Act II.

Jemmy Twitcher – Jemmy Twitcher is a thief in Macheath's gang. At the tavern, he gives a speech about morality and argues that thieves live by "the Right of Conquest." Later, he becomes an informant and testifies against Macheath at his trial.

Mrs. Vixen – Mrs. Vixen is one of the sex workers in Act II. She likes to seduce young men, steal their money, and get them arrested and transported overseas.

TERMS

Cordial – Cordials, now called liqueurs, are alcoholic drinks flavored with herbs, spices, and/or fruits. They have been used

as medicine for centuries but became recreational beverages by the 18th century, when *The Beggar's Opera* is set.

Newgate Prison – Newgate Prison, London's main prison from the late 1100s until 1902, is the setting for half of Act II and most of Act III of *The Beggar's Opera*. It was famously cruel and unsanitary, with prisoners frequently starved and tortured, and everything from alcohol to lighter chains and better treatment was on sale. It was also the site of the nation's Central Criminal Court (nicknamed "Old Bailey") and London's public executions.

Transportation – Penal transportation is a form of punishment in which criminals are shipped away to faraway colonies. It was frequently used in the British Empire between the late 1600s and the mid-1800s, especially for thieves. The most common destinations were North America, the Caribbean, and Australia.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MORAL CORRUPTION AND HYPOCRISY

John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* is set amidst a band of criminals and sex workers in early-18th-century London. The band's mastermind, Peachum, profits from two jobs on opposite sides of the law: he buys and sells stolen goods, and he turns in the thieves who work for him. Peachum eventually learns that his daughter Polly has secretly married a dastardly highwayman, Macheath, so he carries out several ill-fated plots to have Macheath captured and executed. Though this is certainly nefarious, Peachum has good reason to worry: Macheath spends his free time partying with the "women of the town" and already has several other wives, including Lucy Lockit, the prison warden's daughter. Lucy, for her part, tries to murder Polly, and her father, Lockit, accepts all kinds of bribes. The play's other characters are no better, as many of Macheath's close friends inform on him for a slice of Peachum's reward. In short, the play illustrates how greed and selfishness drive people to act immorally and betray their friends.

Indeed, almost all of the characters have no qualms about using one another for personal gain, since *all* of their relationships are based on self-interest. Peachum makes this dynamic clear in the play's first song, when he announces that "*Each Neighbour abuses his Brother.*" His song ultimately reflects the central moral logic at the heart of *The Beggar's Opera*: namely, that everyone thinks that, though their own actions might be immoral, it doesn't matter because *everyone else's* are, too. When the play's characters *do* talk about morality, it's never to make amends for their actions, but only to point out how other people have wronged *them*. They often speak emptily about justice and morality to excuse their own misbehavior.

Of course, John Gay certainly played up his subjects' vice and corruption for comic effect, as well as to satirize popular Italian operas' obsession with virtue. But he also was making a serious point about the world—after all, his portrait of London's criminal underworld and corrupt legal system was closely based on real life in the early 1700s. With this portrait, then, Gay suggests that humankind is inherently inclined towards corruption, evil, and hypocrisy. Yet, in a signature ironic twist, Gay also warns that it's dangerous to accept this very principle: when we decide that *everyone else* is evil, we can too easily let *ourselves* off the hook for evil behavior, as well.

GENDER, LOVE, AND MARRIAGE

The Beggar's Opera centers on an unconventional love triangle: the young Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit each claim Macheath as their husband. Both foolishly expect Macheath to abandon his life of crime, debauchery, and mistresses for an honest marriage with them. And while they spend much of the play trying to get rid of one another, by its end, they realize that the man they call "our Husband" has been manipulating them all along (though they remain hopelessly in love with him). In contrast, the women's parents (Peachum, Mrs. Peachum, and Lockit) have a much less rosy perspective on romantic relationships. To them, men only care about sex, and women only care about money—in other words, monogamy and true love are illusions. By setting up these opposing views, the play invites audience members to consider the highly transactional—but still emotionally complex—nature of marriage in the 18th century.

To that end, the Peachums see marriage as little more than a long-term kind of sex work that only benefits women if they can inherit their husbands' property. In fact, in the 18th century, wives legally *were* their husbands' property—which is why Peachum opposes Polly's marriage. Needless to say, his pessimistic theory of marriage seems justified when Polly's love for Macheath ends so poorly. But Macheath himself also gets burned for his romantic—or, more accurately, *lustful*—feelings, since the sex workers who populate the play end up outsmarting him and turning him in as part of their ruthless business strategy. In turn, *The Beggar's Opera* takes a rather cynical but pragmatic view on love and marriage, especially since Macheath ultimately ends up somehow escaping the ire of his multiple wives, thus illustrating how an exploitative, patriarchal society makes it possible for even the most morally corrupt men to get what they want while women aren't afforded this luxury. And by highlighting this dynamic, the play also mocks the theatrical convention of treating pure love as a divine ideal that makes all other goals and concerns disappear. Instead, the play affirms that women can and should have the

power to make their own choices and live their own free lives—something that conventional marriages often denied them in the 18th century.

CLASS, CAPITALISM, AND INEQUALITY

In *The Beggar's Opera*, John Gay satirizes a depraved criminal underworld where everything has a price, from stolen goods to human life. Guided by **account books** rather than conscience, this underworld's power players—like Peachum and the madam Mrs. Diana Trapes—have learned how to turn theft, exploitation, and violence into profit. Gay depicts these criminal entrepreneurs as little different from ordinary businesspeople: they spend their days calculating costs and prices, hiring and firing employees, trying to expand into new markets, and so on. In fact, Peachum takes capitalist best practices to an extreme: all he thinks about is business, and he constantly points out that he has to be as ruthless as possible to make a profit and outcompete his rivals. This is why he turns his thieves in for the £40 reward as soon as they stop bringing in enough loot, and why he uses as much violence as necessary to stay in power. As he puts it, "if Business cannot be carried on without [murder], what would you have a Gentleman do?"

While set in a poor district of London, *The Beggar's Opera* is really a commentary on English society as a whole. In the 1720s, a few decades before the Industrial Revolution, politicians, nobility, and businessmen were reorganizing the economy and building a vast colonial empire primarily to serve their commercial interests. John Gay was not fond of this new system: it bankrupted his family, it created a profoundly unequal class system, it made relationships increasingly transactional, and most of all, he hated having to flatter wealthy barons in order to win financial support for his art. So he mocks and criticizes this system throughout *The Beggar's Opera*. For instance, one of Macheath's associates is nicknamed "Bob Booty"—which was also a common nickname for Robert Walpole, England's notoriously corrupt prime minister. Similarly, a character named the Beggar—who is supposed to represent the playwright—directly tells the audience that the opera is about how the rich and the poor both make their money through crime, but only the poor go to jail for it.

OPERA, HIGH ART, AND PERFORMANCE

The Beggar's Opera is in large part a response to Italian operas, which were popular in early 18th-century London. John Gay decided to write a new opera for the masses, which would both build on the Italian operas' popularity and satirize their elitist conventions. When most operas focused on royalty or characters from mythology, Gay chose to write about thieves and sex workers from London's lower classes—the kind of folklore antiheroes whom theatergoers would have instantly recognized from popular literature. And while most operas were written around carefully arranged classical music designed to show off singers' technical abilities, *The Beggar's Opera* featured popular folk songs (and a few well-known arias from other operas) with new, often ironic lyrics. Thanks to this innovative approach, *The Beggar's Opera* transformed theater forever: it was the most popular play of the 18th century and arguably the first musical.

Like the music, the humor in *The Beggar's Opera* relies on mixing opera's "high culture" with the "low culture" of the play's setting. This is already clear from the play's opening moments, in which a Beggar rushes onstage and thanks a Player (theater director) for putting on his opera as a form of charity. Later, just before the play's last scene—in which Macheath is supposed to be executed—the Beggar and Player come back onstage. The Player demands a happy ending "to comply with the Taste of the Town," and the Beggar obliges. Instead of dying, Macheath survives and the play ends with a joyful song and dance. The Beggar's interventions allow Gay to simultaneously namecheck Italian opera and distance himself from it. In this way, Gay ensured that his opera was accessible and exciting to London theatergoers but also poked fun at them for so often paying money they couldn't afford to watch plays they didn't understand in a language they didn't speak.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

ACCOUNT BOOK

Peachum's account book represents the way modern economies corrupt people by making them care more about money than morality or other people. Peachum carries his account book with him everywhere and meticulously records every purchase, sale, and bounty in it. He is obsessed with profit, which he demonstrates to the play's audience by constantly going over his accounts. In fact, the audience even learns about Peachum's nefarious occupation by watching him flip through his account book in the opening scene. He reads off each thief's name and decides who gets to live and die, based on how much profit they bring in. Notably, the audience never even sees the people who die—instead, they see what each execution means to Peachum: another £40 on another line in his book. Between stolen goods and executions, Peachum's accounts are a tabulation of other people's suffering, and his life goal is to make the numbers go as high as possible.

Of course, John Gay also uses Peachum's profit obsession to criticize English society as a whole. While 18th century England was not yet capitalist in the modern sense—the Industrial

Revolution hadn't even happened yet—it *was* already growing rich, mainly by plundering its overseas colonies. (This is how wealthy Londoners got all the gold, jewels, and fine silk that Peachum and Macheath steal.) In turn, Gay suggests, this newfound wealth was changing English society by encouraging everyone to become thieves and scoundrels. Put differently, once people get a taste of wealth, they often become willing to harm and exploit other people in order to get more of it. And once whole societies start to base themselves on the logic of the market, it's not long before exploitation, violence, and immorality become the cost of doing business.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *The Beggar's Opera and Polly* published in 2013.

Introduction Quotes

If Poverty be a Title to Poetry, I am sure No-body can dispute mine. I own myself of the Company of Beggars; and I make one at their Weekly Festivals at St. *Giles*'s.

Related Characters: The Beggar (speaker), The Player

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

John Gay introduces *The Beggar's Opera* with a curious frame story that gives the work a sense of mock authenticity and explains its main stylistic innovation: building comedy out of a marriage between high culture (the grandiosity of Italian opera) and the low culture (the sensationalism of London's criminal underworld). Before the play's first real scene, a Beggar comes onstage and explains that he originally wrote the work for a troupe of homeless actors in the notorious slum of St. Giles. Then, according to his story, a benevolent director (the Player) stumbled upon his work and decided to stage it in a major theater, too.

Thus, the Beggar presents his opera as an accurate depiction of life among London's criminals and sex workers. While the audience knows that this claim isn't true, it still allows Gay to identify *The Beggar's Opera* with the wildly popular genre of true crime stories that was taking 18th-century London by storm. Similarly, the Beggar goes on to explain how he took key elements from Italian opera—but then lists several elements that aren't central to it at all, like prison scenes and similes about flowers. Thus, the Beggar shows that he is earnest but unpolished, naturally gifted but uncultured. This combination gives *The Beggar's Opera* its comic edge, because it enables the play to simultaneously mock the rich and the poor, the high culture of opera and the low culture of folk songs and true crime. After all, when the play's sordid plotline and profanity-laced dialogue clashes hilariously with the operatic form it's squeezed into, the audience can never quite tell whether they're laughing *at* the Beggar or if he's in on the joke too. Notably, the Beggar is also John Gay's way of poking fun at himself—he often compared himself to a beggar because he could only afford to be an artist thanks to patronage and favors from his wealthy friends.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

Through all the Employments of Life
Each Neighbour abuses his Brother;
Whore and Rogue they call Husband and Wife:
All Professions be-rogue one another.
The Priest calls the Lawyer a Cheat,
The Lawyer be-knaves the Divine;
And the Statesman, because he's so great,
Thinks his Trade as honest as mine.

Related Characters: Peachum (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Act I begins with Peachum singing this, the opera's first aria (Air 1). Like all the others, it's based on a common folk song that Gay's 18th-century audiences likely would have recognized. And given the widespread corruption in England's politics and economy, they likely would have agreed with Peachum's lyrics, too.

Peachum introduces himself by describing his pessimistic, dog-eat-dog view of human nature. He thinks that everyone is out for themselves, and most people willing to take advantage of others to get ahead. Thus, the wisest people are calculating and ruthless, and only fools place their trust in others—including even their families. Society tries to cover up this grim reality with flimsy formalities, like laws, professional titles, and marriage agreements, but wise people know how to manipulate all of these for their own purposes. For better or worse, Peachum's song *does* describe the world of this play—although perhaps it is only

so brutal because everyone else is trying to keep up with *Peachum's* brutality.

In fact, Peachum puts everyone in society on the same moral plane before he even reveals his own profession. When the audience learns that he spends half his time reselling stolen goods and the other half turning in the thieves who work for him for bounties, his real motive for singing this song becomes clear: by claiming that everyone else is just as evil as he is, he justifies his own corruption.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

❝ *Robin of Bagshot*, alias *Gorgon*, alias *Bluff Bob*, alias *Carbuncle*, alias *Bob Booty*.

Related Characters: Peachum (speaker), Robin of Bagshot ("Bob Booty")

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Peachum goes through his account book, debating which of his thieves to turn in to the law for a bounty. (He also calls this *impeaching* them, or just *'peaching* them—which is the source of his name.) The last name in his book is Robin of Bagshot, who also goes by several colorful aliases.

Robin of Bagshot is an irrelevant minor character with no real role in the plot, but this line still speaks volumes about John Gay's intention as a playwright. Above all, it helps explain why the play was so incredibly popular in 18th-century England. Namely, "Robin of Bagshot" and "Bob Booty" are both references to England's prime minister, Robert Walpole. The public nicknamed him "Robin" because of his flagrant corruption, Bagshot was a place near London where highwaymen frequently robbed travelers, and "booty" is stolen treasure. So Gay's 18th-century audiences would have instantly recognized "Robin of Bagshot" and "Bob Booty" as insults directed specifically at Robert Walpole and his excesses. In fact, after learning that *The Beggar's Opera* criticized him, Walpole decided to attend it and censor its sequel, *Polly*.

Of course, similar references to England's corrupt politics (and Walpole in particular) are scattered throughout the whole play. Their main purpose is to rile up the public and signal that Peachum and Macheath's antics are a metaphor for the way that England's ruling class was robbing ordinary people—and getting away with it. This political commentary was a key reason for the play's wild popularity and wide cultural influence.

Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

❝ You would not be so mad to have the Wench marry him! Gamesters and Highwaymen are generally very good to their Whores, but they are very Devils to their Wives.

Related Characters: Peachum (speaker), Polly Peachum, Macheath, Mrs. Peachum

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

When Mrs. Peachum tells Peachum that their daughter Polly is planning to marry the highway robber Macheath, this is Peachum's initial reaction. Like so many of this play's apparent lessons about morality, Peachum's line is comical because it is totally upside down. Whereas 18th-century society would have generally encouraged women to get married for the sake of family and financial stability, Peachum wants Polly to avoid marriage at all costs. He has a good reason, though: he thinks that, as soon as she gets married, her husband will start taking her for granted and focusing his attention on other women. (Clearly, Macheath has a reputation for this—although his behavior over the course of the play will surpass even Peachum's wildest dreams.) Of course, Peachum's advice isn't just funny because it shows that he lives in a world where morality has been inverted: it's also funny because it's totally hypocritical. It makes sense that he doesn't want his daughter to marry a criminal, but he and Mrs. Peachum are *also* criminals. Whether he realizes it or not, when he complains that criminals make poor husbands, he is clearly insinuating that he is not a particularly good one to Mrs. Peachum, either.

❝ I would indulge the Girl as far as prudently we can. In any thing, but Marriage! After that, my Dear, how shall we be safe? Are we not then in her Husband's Power? For a Husband hath the absolute Power over all a Wife's Secrets but her own. If the Girl had the Discretion of a Court Lady, who can have a dozen young Fellows at her Ear without complying with one, I should not matter it; but *Polly* is Tinder, and a Spark will at once set her on a Flame. Married! If the Wench does not know her own Profit, sure she knows her own Pleasure better than to make herself a Property! My Daughter to me should be, like a Court Lady to a Minister of State, a Key to the whole Gang. Married! If the Affair is not already done, I'll terrify her from it.

Related Characters: Peachum (speaker), Polly Peachum, Macheath, Mrs. Peachum

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Peachum explains his opposition to Polly's marriage in a bit more detail. He says that there's no harm in her meeting different men, or even sleeping around with them—but marriage is a bridge too far. He even highlights his point with another clever political reference that his audiences would have loved: the "Minister of State" (Robert Walpole) manipulated many noblewomen in order to get his way in Parliament. What he means is that Polly should remain under his control instead of passing into Macheath's.

To fully grasp Peachum's point, audiences must understand how marriage worked in the 1700s. In England at that time, upon marrying, wives literally became their husbands' property: everything they owned, including their inheritance and their very identity, passed into their husbands' ownership. This means that, if he marries Polly, Macheath could conceivably gain control of Peachum and Mrs. Peachum's whole estate. Thus, despite all his lies and misogyny, Peachum is actually making a reasonable point: he doesn't want his daughter to sign away her rights to a man she just met. While he doubtlessly cares more about his money and property than his daughter, he's right to be skeptical of such a sexist, unequal marriage system.

Act 1, Scene 5 Quotes

❝ Why must our *Polly*, forsooth, differ from her Sex, and love only her Husband? And why must *Polly*'s Marriage, contrary to all Observation, make her the less followed by other Men? All Men are Thieves in Love, and like a Woman the better for being another's Property.

Related Characters: Mrs. Peachum (speaker), Polly Peachum, Peachum, Macheath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

After discussing the rumors of Polly's marriage to Macheath with her husband, Mrs. Peachum explains her own opinion on the matter in a brief monologue. Her view is progressive, even by modern standards: she thinks that women should have the same rights and privileges as men. But instead of using this principle as a basis to argue that men should be loyal to their wives and treat them as equals, she instead uses it to argue that society should accept women who cheat on their husbands, just like it does men who cheat on their wives.

In other words, marriage shouldn't stop Polly from having affairs any more than it will stop Macheath. Mrs. Peachum even suggests that men *prefer* married women because they feel like they are taking something that belongs to someone else. (In the 18th century, the law literally treated women as property owned by their fathers or husbands.) Of course, Mrs. Peachum seems to be speaking from experience: she heavily implies that marriage hasn't stopped *her* from seeing other men, either.

Thus, Mrs. Peachum argues for women's equality in one of the least intuitive ways possible. And her ideas dramatically fall apart within a couple of scenes, when the audience finally meets Polly and learns that she has no intention of loving other men besides Macheath. Rather, she plans on being a perfect, faithful, supportive housewife to him.

Act 1, Scene 8 Quotes

❝ POLLY. I did not marry him (as 'tis the Fashion) cooly and deliberately for Honour or Money. But, I love him.
MRS PEACHUM. Love him! worse and worse! I thought the Girl had been better bred. Oh Husband, Husband! her Folly makes me mad! my Head swims! I'm distracted! I can't support myself—Oh!
[Faints.]

Related Characters: Polly Peachum, Mrs. Peachum (speaker), Peachum, Macheath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Peachum and Mrs. Peachum are horrified to learn that Polly didn't even marry Macheath for the right reasons—which, for them, means money. Instead, Polly insists that she got married for true love. The idea is so scandalous to Mrs. Peachum that she faints in distress.

Once again, Gay turns conventional morality upside down for comic effect: the Peachums are just as dedicated to the principle of using other people for profit as ordinary people are to the storybook ideals of chivalry, monogamy, and romance. In fact, the Peachums don't believe in love at all: they see it as a dangerous delusion that leads naïve young people to ruin. To them, even the closest family relationships are ultimately just business transactions.

Of course, by showing that the Peachums approach love this way, Gay was also making a broader point about how English society's increasing focus on profit and self-promotion was destroying people's ability to have genuine, loving relationships with one another.

Act 1, Scene 9 Quotes

❝ Money, Wife, is the true Fuller's Earth for Reputations, there is not a Spot or a Stain but what it can take out. A rich Rogue now-a-days is fit Company for any Gentleman; and the World, my Dear, hath not such a Contempt for Roguery as you imagine.

Related Characters: Peachum (speaker), Polly Peachum, Macheath, Mrs. Peachum

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Peachum hatches a nefarious plan to turn Polly's impulsive marriage to Macheath to his own benefit. Namely, if Peachum can turn in Macheath to the law and get him executed, then Polly (and therefore the Peachums) will get to keep everything he owns. Here, just before explaining his plan to Mrs. Peachum, Peachum briefly praises the power and beauty his favorite thing in the whole world: money.

Like "Fuller's Earth," a clay that takes stains out of fabric, money clears the moral stains of the people who possess it. In the early 1700s, Peachum suggests, as Englishmen are making new fortunes through colonial trade and plunder, money has become its own justification. Everyone respects it, and nobody asks people with it what they had to do to get it. Thus, Peachum concludes that violence, cruelty, and all other sorts of immoral behavior are perfectly acceptable as long as they lead to profit. Needless to say, this would excuse him killing Macheath (as well as all the other countless evil acts that make up his business). And John Gay clearly uses Peachum's love for money and disdain for morality as a tool to criticize the whole English elite, which he believes has fallen victim to the same dangerous mindset.

Act 1, Scene 10 Quotes

❝ POLLY. What, murder the Man I love! The Blood runs cold at my Heart with the very Thought of it.
PEACHUM. Fye, *Polly*! What hath Murder to do in the Affair? Since the thing sooner or later must happen, I dare say, the Captain himself would like that we should get the Reward for his Death sooner than a Stranger. Why, *Polly*, the Captain knows, that as 'tis his Employment to rob, so 'tis ours to take Robbers; every Man in his Business. So that there is no Malice in the Case.

Related Characters: Polly Peachum, Peachum (speaker), Macheath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

When Peachum tells Polly about his plan to turn Macheath in to the authorities, she is understandably horrified. Her father is asking her to help him kill her husband, just for money. Worse still, he acts as though it's obviously the right decision, and he has the gall to claim that "there is no Malice" involved in it at all. He even comes up with an elaborate rationalization for the plot: someone will turn in Macheath eventually for the reward, he says, so it might as well be them. For all intents and purposes, he is claiming that murder is acceptable because everyone dies at some point in time. Not only does he deny that his behavior is evil, but he uses the language of justice to do it. This demonstrates how profoundly corrupt and disconnected from humanity he has become—and it suggests that the society that produced him is much the same.

Act 1, Scene 13 Quotes

❝ *[Parting, and looking back at each other with fondness; he at one Door, she at the other.]*

MACHEATH. *The Miser thus a Shilling sees,*
Which he's oblig'd to pay,
With Sighs resigns it by degrees,
And fears 'tis gone for aye.

POLLY. *The Boy, thus, when his Sparrow's flown,*
The Bird in Silence eyes;
But soon as out of Sight 'tis gone,
Whines, whimpers, sobs and cries.

Related Characters: Polly Peachum, Macheath (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Act I, Polly and Macheath sing a duet (Air 18) about their love and their agony at having to part. Polly has told Macheath about her father's plan to kill him and helped him escape from her bedroom, where he was hiding. But now, she worries that she may never see him again, and she laments that the only way to truly stay with him in the future is by separating from him now. Macheath at least claims to feel the same way. Of course, the audience doesn't yet know that he's a cheat, liar, and womanizer—although they have heard rumors to that effect from Peachum and Mrs. Peachum. Thus, while this passage may appear to be a heartfelt love scene at first, later in the play, audiences will retrospectively realize that Macheath was lying all along.

In fact, Air 18's lyrics foreshadow this later context. It's a remarkably unusual love song: instead of comparing their separation to real tragedies, Polly and Macheath compare it to minor losses that appear to be far worse than they really are. A miser (like Peachum) may hate to lose a shilling, but it's still not very much money; a boy might cry when his sparrow flies away, but he probably won't still agonize over it years later like people do over a broken heart. While audiences may initially view these inconsistencies as irony, or evidence of the Beggar's middling artistic talent, in reality they're evidence that Polly and Macheath aren't losing nearly as much as they seem to be when they separate, since he's a terrible, corrupt manipulator who doesn't really love her at all.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ We retrench the Superfluities of Mankind. The World is avaritious, and I hate Avarice. A covetous fellow, like a Jack-daw, steals what he was never made to enjoy, for the sake of hiding it. These are the Robbers of Mankind, for Money was made for the Free-hearted and Generous, and where is the Injury of taking from another, what he hath not the Heart to make use of?

Related Characters: Matt of the Mint (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Act II opens with Macheath's band of highwaymen drinking in a tavern, chattering about their exploits and adventures. They end up talking about *why* they choose to steal, and they explain why they actually think it's ethical to do so. Jemmy Twitcher talks about "the Right of Conquest," and then Matt of the Mint makes this point about why, as thieves, they are actually *helping* humankind. He claims that the thieves "retrench the Superfluities of Mankind"—meaning that they compensate for other people's excesses. Specifically, they correct for the "avarice" (greed) of the rich, who are the *real* "Robbers of Mankind," and who don't even know how to use their wealth properly. Thus, Matt claims, robbery is just a fair system of redistribution: it amounts to taking things from people who don't appreciate or deserve them and giving them to people who do.

Of course, Matt's argument is totally absurd—but it also contains a kernel of truth. It's absurd because it's clearly a rationalization designed to help the robbers avoid accountability. Just like Peachum justifies his plot to murder Macheath by arguing that *someone* will turn him in to the law eventually, Matt justifies theft by arguing that the things he is stealing don't really belong to the people he's stealing from. Yet the thieves are obviously just as covetous and selfish as the rich, and they obviously don't have any right to keep the things they steal. Yet the kernel of truth in Matt's speech is that the rich probably don't deserve their wealth, either. In fact, most of them are only rich because they have exploited their workers and plundered Britain's colonies. Thus, while Matt is right to criticize England's unjust economic system, he is wrong to suggest that other people's immorality makes his acceptable. Indeed, this passage shows how people use moral thinking not to seriously guide their actions, but rather as a system for rationalizing what they have already decided to do.

Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

What a Fool is a fond Wench! *Polly* is most confoundedly bit.—I love the Sex. And a Man who loves Money, might as well be contented with one Guinea, as I with one Woman. The Town perhaps hath been as much oblig'd to me, for recruiting it with free-hearted Ladies, as to any Recruiting Officer in the Army. If it were not for us and the other Gentlemen of the Sword, *Drury Lane* would be uninhabited.

Related Characters: Macheath (speaker), Polly Peachum

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

After he escapes from the Peachums' house at the end of Act I, Macheath heads straight for his usual tavern, where he catches up with his robber buddies and then meets a group of his favorite "free-hearted Ladies." Before they arrive, he gives this speech mocking Polly's desperate love for him and making it clear that he has no intention of being a faithful husband. In fact, he ends up sounding just like Peachum: he declares that she's a fool for taking love seriously and believing that he would even consider monogamy. In reality, he spends his time "recruiting [the Town] with free-hearted Ladies," by which he means that the city's sex workers (who operate out of Drury Lane) owe their jobs to him and "the other Gentlemen of the Sword." Of course, these "Gentlemen" are thieves, although it sounds like he's talking about honorable soldiers—which is another joke on the corruption in England's military and government, just like Macheath's fake military title ("Captain").

Act 2, Scene 4 Quotes

Before the Barn-door crowing,
The Cock by Hens attended,
His Eyes around him throwing,
Stands for a while suspended.
Then One he singles from the Crew,
And cheers the happy Hen;
With how do you do, and how do you do,
And how do you do again.

Related Characters: Jenny Diver (speaker), Macheath, Molly Brazen, Mrs. Coaxer, Betty Doxy, Mrs. Slammekin, Suky Tawdry, Dolly Trull, Mrs. Vixen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Eight sultry "free-hearted Ladies" (sex workers) meet Macheath in the tavern during Act II. This scene, in which Macheath is surrounded by women and honest about his desire for nothing more than sex, contrasts starkly with his scene with Polly in the first act, when he pretended to love her just so that he could evade Peachum.

Macheath asks one of the women, Jenny Diver, why she isn't as warm to him as usual today. She responds by singing this racy aria (Air 23) about a cock picking one "happy Hen" from a flock. This is clearly a metaphor for Macheath choosing which of the women he will take to bed. It's also a comment on the way that gender and sex function in 18th-century English society: men have virtually all the power in love and marriage, so women end up at the mercy of their choices.

Of course, the women in this scene skirt this norm by separating love and sex from marriage. In contrast, Polly and Lucy try their best to take control of their own love lives, but they ultimately fail, since Macheath isn't interested in giving up the power that he has over them. Finally, the song also foreshadows the end of this scene, in which Jenny and one of the other women turn Macheath in to Peachum. (There's no doubt that this is the real reason why Jenny is acting so reserved.)

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

Your Case, Mr *Macheath*, is not particular. The greatest Heroes have been ruin'd by Women. But, to do them justice, I must own they are a pretty sort of Creatures, if we could trust them.

Related Characters: Peachum (speaker), Macheath, Jenny Diver, Suky Tawdry

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Peachum captures Macheath with help from Jenny Diver and Suky Tawdry, then tells him this. Macheath's great error was to trust the women who ended up informing on him. In reality, Peachum insists, women are no more trustworthy than men—but their special power is their ability to disarm men by pretending to be innocent, harmless, and stupid. By

comparing Macheath to "the greatest Heroes," of course, Peachum mocks the way that everyone else (Polly included) talks about him.

In this speech, Peachum also points out the key difference between himself and Macheath. While they are both corrupt, immoral liars, Macheath foolishly assumes that he's smarter than everyone else, and Peachum doesn't. Thus, Macheath ends up trusting people he shouldn't—especially when it gives him a chance to indulge his lust—while Peachum carefully plans for every contingency and covers all of his bases. This is why, although Macheath repeatedly manages to escape, he fails to stay free for long.

Act 2, Scene 7 Quotes

❝ The Fees here are so many, and so exorbitant, that few Fortunes can bear the Expence of getting off handsomly, or of dying like a Gentleman.

Related Characters: Macheath (speaker), Lockit

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

When Macheath arrives at Newgate Prison, the jailor (Lockit) immediately welcomes him back yet again and demands a bribe (or "Garnish") from him. The amount of this bribe will determine which kind of shackles he gets. At first, Lockit gives Macheath the heaviest, most uncomfortable ones imaginable, but after he pays a hefty fee, Lockit switches them out for a pair that "sit as easy as a Glove."

Just before getting the new shackles, Macheath makes this complaint about how the prison is run: it's so expensive to get dignified treatment that criminals like him will have to spend all their money on bribes. Lockit ends up profiting from what *they* stole; in fact, he's just as much of a crime boss as Peachum. This is rather ironic: Macheath is supposed to be the criminal and Lockit the agent of justice, but in reality, Lockit is just as corrupt as Macheath. Of course, Lockit's behavior suggests that England's legal system is no more virtuous than the criminals it controls and punishes. It amounts to wealthy criminals punishing and exploiting poorer ones. In fact, this is really how Newgate was run in the 18th century: prisoners could buy anything they could dream of, from alcohol to freedom, and there was practically no oversight.

Act 2, Scene 8 Quotes

❝ But I promis'd the Wench Marriage.—What signifies a Promise to a Woman? Does not Man in Marriage itself promise a hundred things that he never means to perform? Do all we can, Women will believe us; for they look upon a Promise as an Excuse for following their own Inclinations.

Related Characters: Macheath (speaker), Polly Peachum, Lucy Lockit

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

After his imprisonment, Macheath sits alone in his cell and contemplates what went wrong. (Of course, he's not worried about whether he did something *immoral*—just how he managed to get *caught* for it.) He starts to complain about women and marriage. The problem, he concludes, is that women actually believe him when he promises to marry them. His argument is ridiculous and convoluted: he argues that women should know better than to trust men's promises, but they should also do what men want them to (rather than "following their own Inclinations"). His worldview is as unsophisticated as a toddler's: whatever is good for him is right, and whatever he doesn't like is wrong.

Yet this passage is also a clever joke, based on a double meaning. Macheath appears to be talking about Polly Peachum, the wife whom the opera has followed thus far, but he's actually talking about his other wife, Lucy Lockit. (Since Lucy is the jailor's daughter, she's always at the prison, and he knows he will soon have to face her.) This is easy to overlook, but it points to a concerning truth: Macheath has used the same tactics to seduce and exploit women so many times that it's easy to forget who he's actually talking about.

Act 2, Scene 9 Quotes

❝ *How cruel are the Traytors,*
Who lye and swear in jest,
To cheat unguarded Creatures
Of Virtue, Fame, and Rest!
Whoever steals a Shilling,
Through Shame the Guilt conceals:
In Love the perjur'd Villain
With Boasts the Theft reveals.

Related Characters: Lucy Lockit (speaker), Polly Peachum,

Macheath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

After Macheath gets locked up in Newgate Prison, Lucy Lockit dramatically approaches him, accuses him of ruining her life, and sings multiple songs about his nefariousness (including this one, Air 28). In fact, this is the first time in the whole opera that anyone confronts him about his crimes at all. Lucy is pregnant with his child, but when he found out, he disappeared. He was supposed to marry Lucy, but now everyone knows about his marriage to Polly—Lucy included. Since he's locked in jail, it seems that he can't hide behind lies anymore (although, remarkably, he eventually finds a way to).

In this song, Lucy puts words to her rage and points out Macheath's fatal flaw: his lust. He may be able to cover up his robberies, but not his infidelity. After all, he shamelessly consorts with many different women, all in public, and does not even bother to make up alibis and excuses until after the fact. When it comes to women, in other words, he turns into a fool and all his self-preservation instincts disappear. Of course, Lucy is also talking about a broader trend in society: men are ashamed of committing crimes and don't talk about it, but they happily boast about their affairs. Put differently, they're ashamed to hurt men, but proud to hurt women—probably because they don't see women's feelings or interests as relevant to them.

Act 2, Scene 10 Quotes

LOCKIT. We are treated too by them with Contempt, as if our Profession were not reputable.
PEACHUM. In one respect indeed, our Employment may be reckon'd dishonest, because, like Great Statesmen, we encourage those who betray their Friends.
LOCKIT. Such Language, Brother, any where else, might turn to your prejudice. Learn to be more guarded, I beg you.

Related Characters: Peachum, Lockit (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

After they turn Macheath in to Newgate, Peachum and Lockit start complaining about how the government fails to pay their bounties on time. Lockit is quite offended at the government's corruption: he takes it as a personal insult, an insinuation that "our Profession [is] not reputable." Of course, audiences are likely to find this irony hilarious. Lockit's profession *isn't* reputable; it's completely dishonorable and corrupt. He spends his days turning criminals against each other and blackmailing prisoners for bribes. Apparently, in addition to honor, he completely lacks self-awareness, too.

But Peachum sees this irony and points it out: he admits that he and Lockit are really just as dishonorable as the officials and politicians they're complaining about. (Again, Gay's audiences would have loved this political joke about "Great Statesmen" like Robert Walpole.) Lockit objects: it can be dangerous to speak that kind of truth out loud. Ultimately, this exchange gets to the heart of John Gay's message about honor and corruption in 18th-century London: criminals are just as corrupt as the government, and most of the economy depends on exploitation and double-crossing. Yet everyone agrees not to mention it, because if they did, they would have to stop.

Act 2, Scene 13 Quotes

Where is my dear Husband?—Was a Rope ever intended for this Neck!—O let me throw my Arms about it, and throttle thee with Love!—Why dost thou turn away from me?—'Tis thy *Polly*—'Tis thy Wife.

Related Characters: Polly Peachum (speaker), Lucy Lockit, Macheath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Polly Peachum arrives at Newgate Prison, distraught that her "dear Husband" Macheath has been captured once again. Of course, she doesn't know *how* he was captured—her father caught him consorting with sex workers—or that he has spent much of the day arguing with Lucy Lockit, who is pregnant with his child (and whom he also promised to marry). Thus, this scene is another classic example of how John Gay uses dramatic irony for comic effect: Polly only feels sincere distress over losing her husband because she doesn't understand the grim reality of what's actually happening. The audience knows that Macheath doesn't really love Polly, that she shouldn't trust him, and that her love is leading her down a path to ruin. But

Polly has no idea. Lucy only knows half of it, and Macheath certainly isn't going to tell Polly the truth. As a result, beyond contrasting Polly's innocence with Macheath's depravity for the sake of comedy, these lines also set up the dramatic love triangle between Polly, Lucy, and Macheath in the next section of the play.

❝ Be pacified, my dear Lucy—This is all a Fetch of *Polly*'s, to make me desperate with you in case I get off. If I am hang'd, she would fain have the Credit of being thought my Widow—Really, *Polly*, this is no time for a Dispute of this sort; for whenever you are talking of Marriage, I am thinking of Hanging.

Related Characters: Macheath (speaker), Polly Peachum, Lucy Lockit

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Polly and Lucy both approach Macheath in prison, claiming to be his one true wife and demanding that he agree with them. But he realizes that only one of them can really help him: Lucy. (Her father is the jailor, so she can get the keys to Macheath's cell—in fact, she has probably helped him escape before.) So he decides to take Lucy's side and accuse Polly of making everything up. It eventually works: Lucy agrees to let him go, and Polly leaves heartbroken.

Here, Macheath explains the situation to Lucy by making the exact same point that Lockit and Peachum have been making since the beginning of the play: whoever gets named as Macheath's true wife will get to keep his estate after his execution. Thus, Macheath declares, Polly is just pretending to be his wife in order to get Lucy's money. Yet again, the opera's humor depends on irony: Macheath is accusing the women who really love him of simply using them for money, something that their fathers want them to do but they are completely unwilling to consider.

Act 2, Scene 15 Quotes

❝ MACHEATH. I am naturally compassionate, Wife; so that I could not use the Wench as she deserv'd; which made you at first suspect there was something in what she said.

LUCY. Indeed, my Dear, I was strangely puzzled.

MACHEATH. If that had been the Case, her Father would never have brought me into this Circumstance—No, *Lucy*,—I had rather dye than be false to thee.

LUCY. How happy am I, if you say this from your Heart! For I love thee so, that I could sooner bear to see thee hang'd than in the Arms of another.

Related Characters: Lucy Lockit, Macheath (speaker), Polly Peachum

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 46-47

Explanation and Analysis

After Peachum drags Polly home from Newgate Prison, Macheath tells Lucy that Polly was making up the whole story about being married to him. But he offers a heartwarming explanation for why he wasn't crueler to Polly: he is such a humane and compassionate man that he could not bear to watch a young woman suffer. And he is so perfectly honest that he could never bear to lie to Lucy.

Needless to say, this is all absolute nonsense. Everything Polly said was true, and Macheath is only accusing her of lying so that he can manipulate Lucy into helping him escape from Newgate. However, what Macheath lacks in honesty he makes up for in charm. Lucy believes him, and she proclaims her love for him just as dramatically as Polly did a couple scenes before. Act II thus ends on a darkly comic note: Macheath once again manipulates a woman to his advantage by pretending to love her. Just as Polly helped him escape at the end of Act I, Lucy does the same here. Perhaps worst of all, Lucy actually *did* know that he was lying to her when she first approached him several scenes ago—but his charms simply proved too hard to resist.

Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ *When young at the Bar you first taught me to score,*
And bid me be free of my Lips, and no more;
I was kiss'd by the Parson, the Squire, and the Sot.
When the Guest was departed, the Kiss was forgot.
But his Kiss was so sweet, and so closely he prest,
That I languish'd and pin'd 'till I granted the rest.

Related Characters: Lucy Lockit (speaker), Lockit, Macheath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of Act III, Lockit confronts Lucy about why she helped Macheath escape. (He's not angry that she did it—only that she didn't make him pay a bribe.) Lucy explains that she's in love with Macheath, but Lockit angrily replies that Lucy should have learned that love is an illusion from her time working as a barmaid. She responds with this aria (Air 41), in which she muses that it was just the opposite. The men she met in the bar were dull and forgettable; they just wanted to enjoy themselves, but they weren't truly interested in *her*. Instead of destroying her desire for true love, this only fed it. And then Macheath came along. His kisses, Lucy sings, were different—and they were so enchanting that she "granted the rest" to him (had sex with him).

In addition to giving Lucy a sympathetic backstory and affirming that she really did fall in love with Macheath in the same way as Polly, this passage also emphasizes the stark difference between her and her father's views about romance. It's telling that Lockit thought Lucy would give up on men after working as a barmaid: he assumed that, once he saw how men treat women in bars, she would give up on them entirely. But instead, she merely decided that she deserved better. While some audience members may see this as evidence of John Gay repeating sexist tropes about women's need for love and attention. But others might think he is really pointing out how Lockit's corrupt profession has destroyed his ability to truly feel love.

❝ Love, Sir, is a Misfortune that may happen to the most discreet Woman, and in Love we are all Fools alike.—Notwithstanding all he swore, I am now fully convinc'd that *Polly Peachum* is actually his Wife.—Did I let him escape, (Fool that I was!) to go to her?—*Polly* will wheedle herself into his Money, and then *Peachum* will hang him, and cheat us both.

Related Characters: Lucy Lockit (speaker), Polly Peachum, Lockit, Macheath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

As she thinks through her actions, Lucy realizes that Macheath probably *was* manipulating her into helping him escape. She accepts that he isn't actually going to marry her, which means that all his escape has accomplished is to deprive her and her father of the bounty payment they were expecting. But then, Lucy takes her speculation a bit too far by deciding that Polly must be Macheath's real wife. Of course, this makes a certain kind of sense: Polly and Macheath could have acted out their whole fight in order to make Macheath's lies more believable and convince Lucy to help him escape. But in reality, *both* she and Polly were being honest, and Macheath played them off of each other so that he could break free without committing to either of them.

In the course of just one day, then, Lucy has gone from cursing Macheath's dishonesty to proclaiming her love for him and back again. Now, she echoes her father and Peachum's language by calling love "a Misfortune" and speculating that Polly and Peachum will get to keep Macheath's whole estate. This realization adds yet another layer of deception and drama to the opera, and it launches the plot into its next phase, as Lucy resolves to kill Polly and win Macheath back once again.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

❝ Lions, Wolves, and Vulturs don't live together in Herds, Droves or Flocks.—Of all Animals of Prey, Man is the only sociable one. Every one of us preys upon his Neighbour, and yet we herd together.—*Peachum* is my Companion, my Friend—According to the Custom of the World, indeed, he may quote thousands of Precedents for cheating me—And shall not I make use of the Privilege of Friendship to make him a Return?

Related Characters: Lockit (speaker), Peachum

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Lockit is convinced that Peachum helped Macheath escape in order to *re*-arrest him and then claim the full bounty. In this scene, Lockit ponders how to get his revenge. He decides to go cheat Peachum, just like Peachum cheated him. In fact, he justifies this decision by making the same point as Peachum, Macheath, the thieves, and the sex workers—namely, that it's just human nature for people to manipulate and steal from one another. (In fact, his claim

that "Every one of us preys upon his Neighbour" appears to be a specific reference to one of Peachum's lines from Air 1 at the very beginning of the play: "Each Neighbour abuses his Brother.")

It's curious that Lockit decides to theorize about human nature instead of just getting angry at Peachum. In fact, all of the play's characters follow this pattern: they don't just explain their behavior by talking about what other people have done to them; instead, they base it on a whole complex theory of human nature. Of course, this is Gay's way of showing that their misdeeds and corruption reflect something far greater than themselves. While it's not clear whether Gay believes that all humans are inherently corrupt—Polly is an obvious counterexample in the play—he clearly *does* believe that most of London is. Perhaps most importantly, he shows how characters who see *everyone else* as corrupt use this fact to justify their *own* corruption, too.

Act 3, Scene 4 Quotes

We, Gentlemen, have still Honour enough to break through the Corruptions of the World.—And while I can serve you, you may command me.

Related Characters: Macheath (speaker), Ben Budge, Matt of the Mint

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

After his second major escape, Macheath meets two members of his gang (Ben Budge and Matt of the Mint) in a gambling-house. Just like in the second act, they have a high-minded conversation about principles and honor. Macheath even sings a song about how hard it is to find true friends who care about more than money (Air 44). And then he says this utterly absurd line, which may be the purest example of how John Gay uses dramatic and situational irony to create humor.

Needless to say, Macheath and his gang are *not* honorable people; they do not "break through" the world's corruption, but rather embody it. Once again, Gay is using Macheath and his crew to comment on society more broadly: by showing a group of deplorable criminals talk about how they're morally superior to everyone else, he mocks *all* of the people in 18th-century London who claim to be moral when they really aren't, from the corrupt politicians who pretend to be ruling in the nation's best interests to the aristocrats who pretend that they're learned and sophisticated just because they go to fancy Italian operas.

Act 3, Scene 7 Quotes

I'm like a Skiff on the Ocean tost,
Now high, now low, with each Billow born,
With her Rudder broke, and her Anchor lost,
Deserted and all forlorn.
While thus I lye rolling and tossing all Night,
That Polly lyes sporting on Seas of Delight!
Revenge, Revenge, Revenge,
Shall appease my restless Sprite.

Related Characters: Lucy Lockit (speaker), Polly Peachum, Macheath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In this song, Air 47, Lucy Lockit announces that she wants to take revenge on Polly Peachum. She compares herself to an abandoned boat in a stormy ocean, while speculating that Polly is "sporting on Seas of Delight"—presumably because she is either with Macheath or enjoying the bounty she will earn when her father turns him in. Just after finishing this song, Lucy reveals that she is planning to murder Polly and doesn't even mind if she faces the death punishment for it. (Surely, she won't, since her father is the corrupt jailor.)

This passage shows how Gay's play truly does rely on many classic elements of opera—like love triangles and mistaken identity—which are still popular today (particularly in genres like TV soap operas). This passage is also another important example of how Gay uses dramatic irony to create tension and comic relief: Lucy is going after the wrong target, because Polly had nothing to do with Macheath's escape. And while Lucy and Polly continue to fight with one another, Macheath continues to get away with treachery.

Act 3, Scene 8 Quotes

Among the Men, Coquets we find,
Who Court by turns all Woman-kind;
And we grant all their Hearts desir'd,
When they are flatter'd, and admir'd.
The Coquets of both Sexes are Self-lovers, and that is a Love no other whatever can dispossess. I fear, my dear *Lucy*, our Husband is one of those.

Related Characters: Polly Peachum (speaker), Lucy Lockit, Macheath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

When Polly and Lucy meet at Newgate, even though Lucy is secretly trying to murder Polly, their conversation is unusually civil. They actually agree that Macheath has manipulated them both and appear to understand each other's perspectives. Then, Polly sings this song, Air 50, explaining why she thinks Macheath was the real problem. Her insight is surprising—for the whole play so far, she has been hopelessly in love with Macheath, and she hasn't questioned his character, even though every conceivable sign pointed to him being a liar and manipulator.

Now, Polly finally sees the bigger picture. As she explains here, Macheath isn't capable of loving her or Lucy because he's too busy loving himself. He constantly uses flattery and flirtation to get women's attention, but he doesn't actually care about those women—he just likes the way that their attention makes *him* feel. He thinks of women as playthings, and not as equals with their own rights, needs, and feelings. This is why he led both Lucy and Polly on, and why he continued lying to them so brazenly. Against all odds, then, Polly says what the audience has probably been thinking all along—although it doesn't actually change her decisions in the rest of the play.

Act 3, Scene 11 Quotes

POLLY. *Hither, dear Husband, turn your Eyes.*

LUCY. *Bestow one Glance to cheer me.*

POLLY. *Think with that Look, thy Polly dyes.*

LUCY. *O shun me not—but hear me.*

POLLY. *'Tis Polly sues.*

LUCY. ----------*'Tis Lucy speaks.*

POLLY. *Is thus true Love requited?*

LUCY. *My Heart is bursting.*

POLLY. ----------*Mine too breaks.*

LUCY. *Must I*

POLLY. -------*Must I be slighted?*

Related Characters: Polly Peachum, Lucy Lockit (speaker), Macheath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

When Macheath returns to prison, Lucy and Polly fight for his attention, but he does his best to ignore them both. So they sing this dramatic duet, Air 52, proclaiming their love and asking whether he feels the same. This may seem confusing and contradictory: just a few scenes ago, Lucy and Polly agreed that Macheath does not truly love them. But while they have finally realized that he is a womanizing liar, they both still hope that he is still in love with them. In this song, their voices practically intermingle, as they complain in unison against Macheath's willingness to seduce and then discard them. But he doesn't pay them any attention—he just moans about his own bad luck, since he knows that he doesn't have much time left before his execution.

LOCKIT. Macheath's time is come, Lucy.—We know our own Affairs, therefore let us have no more Whimpering or Whining.

[...]

PEACHUM. Set your Heart at rest, Polly.—Your Husband is to dye to-day.—Therefore, if you are not already provided, 'tis high time to look about for another.

Related Characters: Peachum, Lockit (speaker), Polly Peachum, Lucy Lockit, Macheath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63-64

Explanation and Analysis

Lucy and Polly both beg their fathers to spare Macheath. Peachum could find new evidence to overturn Macheath's conviction, and Lockit could set him free, but they both refuse. The audience may be relieved, because Macheath's death will finally put an end to his misdeeds, but Lucy and Polly are devastated. Indeed, even if Lockit and Peachum have made the right decision, they have made it for the wrong reasons: they want their £40 reward from the government once Macheath is executed. This underlines how cruel and self-interested they both are—they put their own profits above their daughters' hearts. In fact, as Peachum's suggestion that Polly just "look about for another" husband shows, he and Lockit scarcely consider their daughters' heartbreak relevant at all. Their own lack of

emotions and their frequent comments about women's fickle hearts help explain why. Thus, the play ends with heartless men condemning another heartless man, all while women—the only characters in the play who actually feel anything at all—watch on, devastated and powerless.

Act 3, Scene 13 Quotes

❝❝ *The Condemn'd Hold.*
MACHEATH, *in a melancholy Posture.*

AIR 58. Happy Groves.
O cruel, cruel, cruel Case!
Must I suffer this Disgrace?

AIR 59. Of all the Girls that are so smart.
Of all the Friends in time of Grief,
When threatning Death looks grimmer,
Not one so sure can bring Relief,
As this best Friend, a Brimmer.

Related Characters: Macheath (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Macheath languishes on death row, singing as he awaits his execution. Contrary to the image of courage, honor, and strength that he projects to the world, he actually faces death with desperation and cowardice. He gets comfort not from his fellow thieves or any loved ones, but rather from his "best Friend, a Brimmer" (a drink that is full up to the brim). And he doesn't repent for his crimes or lies—he just drinks and complains about his woes. In fact, Macheath doesn't seem interested in accountability at all: he leaves behind a trail of chaos and destruction everywhere he goes, and then he blames others for failing to clean it up. He is the poster child for the kind of corruption, indulgence, and immorality that Gay saw at the heart of 18th-century English society, and even when facing death, he completely refuses to recognize it.

Act 3, Scene 15 Quotes

❝❝ POLLY. How can I support this Sight!
LUCY. There is nothing moves one so much as a great Man in Distress.

AIR 68. All you that must take a Leap, &c.

LUCY. *Would I might be hang'd!*

POLLY. ––––––––––––––––––*And I would so too!*

LUCY. *To be hang'd with you.*

POLLY. ––––––––––––––––––*My Dear, with you.*

MACHEATH. *O Leave me to Thought! I fear! I doubt!*
I tremble! I droop!—See, my Courage is out.
[Turns up the empty Bottle.]

POLLY. *No token of Love?*

MACHEATH. ––––––––––––––*See, my Courage is out.*

[Turns up the empty Pot.]

LUCY. *No token of Love?*

POLLY. ––––––––––––––*Adieu.*

LUCY. ––––––––––––––––––*Farewell.*

Related Characters: Macheath (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 67-68

Explanation and Analysis

Lucy and Polly visit Macheath while he is on death row ("the condemn'd hold") and lament his sorry state. Arguably, this scene is the climax of the whole play, because the Beggar and Player intervene shortly after it and change the entire pace of the play's final act.

Perplexingly, even though they have figured out Macheath's pattern of seduction, manipulation, and lies, Lucy and Polly still call him a "great Man" and declare their love for him. Absurdly, in this Air 68, they sing that they even wish they could die *with* him. But he barely gives them the time of day—he simply doesn't care. Instead of dealing with them, he would much rather be drinking, if he had any alcohol left. Indeed, whereas in the past he claimed to love them so that they would be willing to help him escape, now, he has no such hope. So now, the more they profess their love for him, the less interest he takes in them.

Audiences must decide what to make of Lucy and Polly's inconsistency. Why have they returned to declare their love for a man they know was cheating them? One clear explanation is that, like so many of the play's male

characters, Gay simply thinks that women are fickle and foolish. This misogynistic belief would not have been at all unusual in the time and place where Gay lived. But it's also possible that Gay's depiction of Lucy and Polly is partially tongue-in-cheek: perhaps he is reproducing the sexist stereotype in order to mock it. Perhaps their desperate return to Macheath is meant to demonstrate how deeply he deceived them and encourage the audience to see how men's misbehavior often gets blamed on the women it affects.

[Enter Women and Children.]
What—four Wives more!—This is too much.—Here—tell the Sheriffs Officers I am ready.
[Exit MACHEATH guarded.]

Related Characters: Macheath (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Just before Macheath goes to his execution, the jail guards announce that he has several more surprise visitors: four more women who call themselves his wives, plus their four children—all of whom belong to him. Of course, these women are visiting for some unspoken combination of reasons: to say goodbye, to proclaim their love, to ask Macheath to recognize their children, and to make their own claims on his estate. Frustrated, Macheath decides that he would rather just die than have to face them—which goes to show how deeply he cares about the women he gets involved with.

Besides emphasizing how much of a scoundrel Macheath is, these lines' main effect is to throw a comic wrench into the play's otherwise dramatic closing sequence. It's easy to imagine Gay's audiences reacting to the four new wives' arrival with uproarious laughter, only to be surprised once again when the Beggar and Player rush onstage in the next scene to derail Macheath's execution.

Act 3, Scene 16 Quotes

PLAYER. But, honest Friend, I hope you don't intend that *Macheath* shall be really executed.

BEGGAR. Most certainly, Sir.—To make the Piece perfect, I was for doing strict poetical Justice.—*Macheath* is to be hang'd; and for the other Personages of the Drama, the Audience must have suppos'd they were all either hang'd or transported.

PLAYER. Why then, Friend, this is a down-right deep Tragedy. The Catastrophe is manifestly wrong, for an Opera must end happily.

BEGGAR. Your Objection, Sir, is very just; and is easily remov'd. For you must allow, that in this kind of Drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about.—So—you Rabble there—run and cry a Reprieve—let the Prisoner be brought back to his Wives in Triumph.

PLAYER. All this we must do, to comply with the Taste of the Town.

Related Characters: The Beggar, The Player (speaker), Macheath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68-69

Explanation and Analysis

Just before Macheath is to be executed at the end of *The Beggar's Opera*, the two characters from the work's meta-theatrical introduction—the Beggar and the Player—rush onstage to stop it. The Player insists that "an Opera must end happily," and the Beggar gladly obliges by changing the final scene, so that Macheath lives and goes free instead of facing execution. As a result, the Beggar's "strict poetical Justice" falls apart, and Macheath manages to escape certain death once again, just as he did at the end of Act I and Act II.

This exchange raises the question of what it would mean for *The Beggar's Opera* to have a happy ending at all. If Macheath survives, the ending is certainly happy for *him*, but it's unhappy for Peachum, Lockit, and the interests of justice. Less clear are its implications for Lucy and Polly, who would certainly be delighted to watch Macheath walk free in the short term but would probably keep wasting their time chasing him. Of course, when the Player talks about a happy ending, he really means an ending in which the two romantic leads end up together. And while Macheath and Polly will get the opportunity to marry, given Macheath's romantic history, it's quite unlikely that they will end up together happily ever after.

BEGGAR. Through the whole Piece you may observe such a similitude of Manners in high and low Life, that it is difficult to determine whether (in the fashionable Vices) the fine Gentlemen imitate the Gentlemen of the Road, or the Gentlemen of the Road the fine Gentlemen.—Had the Play remain'd, as I at first intended, it would have carried a most excellent Moral. 'Twould have shown that the lower Sort of People have their Vices in a degree as well as the Rich: And that they are punish'd for them.

Related Characters: The Beggar (speaker), Peachum, Macheath

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of his conversation with the Player, the Beggar directly tells the audience what his work's primary moral was supposed to be: society is unjust because, even though the rich and the poor are equally corrupt, the rich get away with their crimes, while the poor get punished for theirs. Naturally, the audience would have understood this as yet another criticism of England's political and economic system. In fact, the Beggar's talk about the "similitude of Manners in high and low Life" confirms that audiences are right to interpret other elements of the play as metaphors for the corruption among England's "fine Gentlemen." And this merger of "high and low Life" also speaks to the play's style: it puts stories from low culture into a form generally associated with high culture, both for comic effect and to highlight how people from all walks of life tend to cheat and harm one another in precisely the same ways.

Yet the Beggar's willingness to change the play's final scene only adds insult to injury. Because of it, the play's moral ends up being precisely the *opposite* of what it's supposed to be: instead of showing how the rich get away with their crimes but the poor get punished, it shows that *everyone* can get away with their crimes in the right circumstances. Much like Peachum and Macheath, then, the Beggar talks about high-minded moral principles and then completely fails to live them out.

Act 3, Scene 17 Quotes

MACHEATH. *Thus I stand like the Turk, with his Doxies around;*
From all Sides their Glances his Passion confound;
For black, brown, and fair, his Inconstancy burns,
And the different Beauties subdue him by turns:
Each calls forth her Charms, to provoke his Desires:
Though willing to all; with but one he retires.
But think of this Maxim, and put off your Sorrow,
The Wretch of To-day, may be happy To-morrow.

Related Characters: Macheath (speaker), Polly Peachum

Related Themes:

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Explanation and Analysis

The Beggar's Opera ends with Macheath going free and leading the whole cast in an unexpectedly jovial song and dance number. His song satirically celebrates his infidelity and makes it clear that he'll never change: he loves being surrounded by "Doxies" (mistresses or sex workers), and he admits that "his Inconstancy burns" (meaning that he will not stay with any of them). He will take turns with "the different Beauties" and "retire" (go to bed) with one at a time, but the basic pattern will never break: he will never stay faithful, and none of them will ever be happy with him. (As he puts it, "*The Wretch of To-day, may be happy To-morrow.*")

With this final song, Gay brings the opera to a tenuous conclusion and sets up the plot of its sequel, *Polly*, which follows Macheath and Polly as they move to the West Indies together. (Unsurprisingly, his womanizing doesn't change.) Gay also takes the opportunity to implicitly mock his two favorite targets: the elite, who get off without taking accountability for their actions, just like Macheath, and Italian opera, which often uses ridiculous plot twists to bring dramatic situations to improbable, uninspired conclusions.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

In front of the lowered curtain, a ragged Beggar tells a Player (actor) that he writes poetry and songs for a troupe of actors in seedy St. Giles. The Player affirms that the Muses bestow literary talent on the rich and poor alike, and he promises to stage the Beggar's play as best he can. The Beggar explains that his play has everything a great opera should: literary similes, a prison scene, and a rivalry between leading ladies. But there's no recitative (sung dialogue) or Prologue and Epilogue. He thanks the Player for putting on his play. The Player says the actors are ready and rushes the Beggar away. The Overture plays as the curtain rises.

This introductory scene explains the opera's title and sets the audience's expectations for its tone and subject matter. Of course, the Beggar's appearance is supposed to give the work a tongue-in-cheek sense of authenticity by suggesting that it really comes straight from St. Giles. In this way, John Gay is really mocking his own decision to write exploitative, sensational stories about London's urban underclass. In fact, by using the Beggar as a stand-in for himself, he makes a self-deprecating joke about artists' role in 18th-century English society: they were forced to beg for money and recognition from the English elite. But he is also mocking the conventions of Italian opera, which was extremely popular in London in the 1720s—and which he deliberately invoked in order to receive attention for his work. Similes and love triangles are not *the key features of Italian opera, but the Beggar's misunderstanding comically suggests that Italian opera had become dull and predictable: it had lost its artistic value and become little more than a status symbol for the elite.*

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Sitting at home with his **account book**, the thief-catcher and crime kingpin Peachum sings an aria (or *air*) about how everyone cheats everyone else to get ahead, including lawyers, priests, and statesmen (*Air 1*). Like a lawyer, Peachum declares, he is scoundrels' foe and friend at the same time. After all, his livelihood depends on them.

Gay introduces his opera's protagonist, Peachum, and highlights his moral depravity—which he views as just the cost of doing business. While Peachum's complaints about other people's immorality are a flimsy excuse for his own, they are also a serious critique of English politics. Indeed, this opening song sets up the extended metaphor at the heart of this opera: Peachum's band of criminals also represent England's ruling elite, who were just as corrupt and immoral as common criminals. Like all the 69 songs in The Beggar's Opera, *which are labeled and numbered in this guide, Peachum's opening aria is an adaptation of a common folk song that most audience members would have recognized.*

ACT 1, SCENE 2

The servant Filch arrives and updates Peachum on his band of thieves. Black Moll is on trial, but Peachum agrees to help her get off. Tom Gagg is sentenced to execution; Peachum curses Tom and adds £40 to his **account book**—his reward for turning Tom in.

Filch and Peachum's conversation shows the audience that Peachum makes money by both trading with thieves and turning them in to the law. Eighteenth-century audiences would have quickly recognized Peachum as a fictionalized version of the notorious criminal Jonathan Wild, who famously controlled London's whole legal system by combining the same two businesses.

Betty Sly is Peachum's top thief, so he'll do anything to save her from transportation (punishment by deportation to the colonies). He loves helping women escape, since there's no bounty for turning them in. Filch praises Betty, who trained him in thievery. He sings about how women seduce men to get money, and men use money and lies to manipulate women into sex (*Air 2*). Peachum sends Filch to visit the detained thieves at Newgate prison, and Filch replies that he loves being the bearer of good news.

Peachum's second song introduces the play's other main preoccupation besides crime and immorality: sex and gender relations. In Peachum's view, relationships between men and women are actually just business transactions—and this is very much the case in the criminal underworld where he lives and works. Finally, Peachum's reference to transportation *should remind modern audiences that this play takes place against the backdrop of England's growing colonial empire. While it's unclear whether Gay intended* The Beggar's Opera *as a critique of empire, his sequel* Polly *certainly is, and his characterization of England's ruling class can help modern audiences understand the greed and corruption at the heart of England's colonial exploits.*

ACT 1, SCENE 3

Peachum privately debates which of his men to turn in for execution (and a £40 reward). Crook-Finger'd Jack has raked in plenty of gold and silver, and he's witty and personable. Wat Dreary can't be trusted, but he deserves a few more months to prove himself. Harry Padington is such a terrible thief that nobody will pay for his capture. If Slippery Sam quits stealing to become a tailor, Peachum will definitely turn him in. Matt of the Mint is new and promising. But Tom Tipple is "a guzzling soaking Sot" and should be hanged. The next name is Robin of Bagshot, who has several aliases, including *Bob Booty*.

Peachum's soliloquy further underlines how immoral and depraved he is: he does not see any inherent value in human life, and he decides whom to save and kill based purely on profit. Of course, this is meant to reflect England's overall moral degradation in the 18th century: John Gay surely thought that his nation's political and economic elite behaved in just the same way as Peachum. In particular, Gay suggests that an economic system based on profit at all costs will inevitably brutalize and exploit people.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

Upon hearing Bob Booty's name, Mrs. Peachum cuts Peachum off in protest: Bob is "a favourite Customer." But Peachum says he wants to turn Bob in before one of Bob's many lady-friends does. Mrs. Peachum responds that women are too fickle to make life-and-death decisions. She sings about how, just as Venus's mythical girdle can make any woman attractive, a noose can do the same for men (*Air 3*).

"Bob Booty" is a clear allusion to Robert Walpole, England's first prime minister, who was famously corrupt. Meanwhile, Mrs. Peachum's line about her "favourite Customer" is intentionally ambiguous: it's unclear whether she is working as a prostitute on the side or whether she is just referring to Bob selling her and Peachum the goods he steals. And her song about criminals' attractiveness foreshadows the rest of the opera, which focuses on Polly Peachum's love for the condemned highwayman Macheath.

Mrs. Peachum declares that Peachum's current crew is unusually fine: nobody has murdered anyone else in seven months! But Peachum insists that murder isn't always bad—it's sometimes necessary for business. Mrs. Peachum apologizes for her "over-scrupulous Conscience," and Peachum calls murder the most "fashionable" crime.

John Gay uses Mrs. Peachum's comments about Peachum's crew, like her comments about women's fickleness, for a kind of sexist reverse psychology. His characters claim that women are inferior to men because they are not capable of ruthlessness, but the play is designed to show how ruthlessness degrades society. Thus, Gay is really suggesting that women often maintain the moral and emotional integrity that men lose in a competitive market society. While the characters of Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit support this interpretation, the opera's sex worker characters will show that women can be just as ruthless as men.

Peachum asks Mrs. Peachum if Captain Macheath has stopped by to pick up his stolen checks. She says yes—the bank cancelled the checks, but Macheath is still graceful and charming. Tonight, Mrs. Peachum will play cards with him, Bob Booty, and her and Peachum's daughter Polly. She asks Peachum if Macheath is wealthy, but Peachum replies that he lost his money gambling.

Gay introduces the opera's other two central figures: Polly Peachum and "Captain" Macheath (who is not really a captain at all). Mrs. Peachum's feelings about Macheath are contradictory: she admires and respects him, but also recognizes that he is irresponsible and wants to profit from his gambling addiction. Later in the opera, it becomes clear that this is a trend: everyone praises and admires Macheath, even though he is not admirable at all, even by the depraved standards of London's criminals.

Mrs. Peachum says that she feels sorry for Polly, who is in love with Macheath. But Peachum says that they shouldn't marry: gamblers and thieves may be "very good to" their sex workers and mistresses, but they are "Devils to their Wives." Worried about Polly, Mrs. Peachum sings a song comparing her to a moth dancing around the flame of love (*Air 4*). Peachum declares that "a handsome Wench" like Polly can make a lot of money if she stays single. But if she marries, her husband will treat her like property and have power over the whole family. Peachum will "terrify" Polly away from marriage and asks Mrs. Peachum to warn her, too.

The Peachums' feelings about their daughter are hypocritical and contradictory. On the one hand, they are clearly right to worry about Macheath's morals. On the other, their own morals are no better. (Of course, they are also a couple of married gamblers and thieves—although they later clarify that their marriage is just common-law and not legally valid.) Indeed, they appear to care less about Polly's wellbeing than about her pocketbook. So while their critique of marriage is legitimate—in the 18th century, women literally did become their husbands' property—their motivations for making this critique are questionable at best.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

Now alone, Mrs. Peachum remarks that her husband is wrong to treat for Polly differently just because she is a woman. Polly should be able to love her husband *and* other men. After all, "All Men are Thieves in Love," and they like married women better. Mrs. Peachum sings a song comparing women to gold ore and their husbands to the mint, which turns them into money (*Air 5*).

Mrs. Peachum's song and monologue once again show off John Gay's skill with satire: Mrs. Peachum recognizes society's double standard regarding marriage and fidelity, but she takes it in the opposite way of the audience's expectations. Instead of condemning cheating men, she argues that women's cheating should be tolerated, too. Similarly, while her song may appear to be about how men bring out what is beautiful and valuable in their wives, actually, she is criticizing the way that they take ownership over women.

ACT 1, SCENE 6

Mrs. Peachum calls Filch over and remarks that she loves him like a son because he's such a great thief. Filch brings her the seven handkerchiefs and gold snuffbox that he stole at the King's Theatre last night. She remarks that sailors will buy the handkerchiefs, and the snuffbox is beautiful.

The King's Theatre was the center of 18th-century London's Italian opera scene. Thus, Filch's reference to stealing from the King's Theatre is a clever joke about the way that The Beggar's Opera *stole from Italian opera.*

Filch explains that he was caught trying to steal a gold watch, so he had to make a daring escape. He's afraid that he will get caught and executed, so he is thinking about becoming a sailor. Mrs. Peachum tells Filch to toughen up at the Beargarden (where blood sports like bear-baiting are held). She promises that, if he gets caught, he'll get transportation, not execution, so he'll be able to sail anyways. And she tells him to go read his Bible (because prisoners who know it get their sentences reduced).

Filch's ideas about quitting thievery show that he knows that not even his steadfast loyalty to Peachum is enough to save him from the gallows. But Mrs. Peachum's response about transportation underlines how arbitrary the 18th-century English legal system is: it may kill Filch, or it may give him exactly the life he wants (albeit as an indentured servant). Similarly, Mrs. Peachum's comment about the Bible shows how deeply corrupt the Peachums and their associates are: the jail's policy is supposed to reward prisoners who work on improving themselves through religion, but the Peachums teach their followers to fake it and game the system.

Mrs. Peachum asks Filch if he knows anything about Macheath and Polly. Filch says that he's promised Polly not to reveal anything. Peachum and Polly are coming home, so Mrs. Peachum invites Filch into her room for a cordial if he agrees to tell her everything.

Like her comments about Bob Booty and her monologue about how women should be able to cheat on their husbands, Mrs. Peachum's invitation to Filch is intentionally ambiguous: it's not clear if she truly just wants information out of him or if they have other plans.

ACT 1, SCENE 7

As they arrive home, Polly tells Peachum that she will be a good wife to Macheath: she will give him "some trifling Liberties" in exchange for gifts. She sings that a virgin is like a beautiful, blooming flower—which "rots, stinks, and dies" after getting picked (*Air 6*). Peachum responds that he doesn't mind Polly sleeping with different men for money or information—but he will kill her if she gets married.

Audiences will immediately notice that Polly is not at all like the other characters in the play—she is motivated by idealistic love, not greed and self-interest. Of course, she's still familiar with the transactional side of relationships, just like her parents: her comment about "trifling Liberties" shows as much. It also suggests that she doesn't have any illusions about Macheath's honor or loyalty. Still, the audience must wait and see whether she is still being too naïve for her fabled highwayman husband. Lastly, her song about virgins and rotting flowers is deeply ironic: in it, she seems to be pointing out how men mistreat women and foreshadowing her own demise.

ACT 1, SCENE 8

Mrs. Peachum meets Peachum and Polly. She sings that Polly is stupid and ungrateful for "*fling[ing] herself away*" to Macheath (*Air 7*). She reveals that Polly has *already* married Macheath. Furious, Peachum says Macheath is using Polly for money. He comments that he and Mrs. Peachum have only lived well because they never married. Mrs. Peachum warns that Macheath will squander Polly's money "gaming, drinking and whoring," and she asks why Polly had to marry a common thief. Peachum notes that Macheath is still a military captain—which hopefully means that he'll either get rich or die fast.

Peachum and Mrs. Peachum appear to view all relationships—including their own—exclusively through the lens of money and power. It simply doesn't occur to them that people might want to be together for the sake of love. This once again shows how fixated on money (and, really, corruption) they are. At the same time, they certainly may be right about Macheath's honor and intentions—after all, he's one of their thieves, so he's likely to share their questionable values. Peachum's comment about Macheath's military service is ironic in two different ways. First, it suggests that the government and its armed forces are just as corrupt as the criminals it punishes. And second, it is totally wrong: Macheath doesn't actually belong to the military.

Peachum pinches Polly and asks if she is really Macheath's "bound Wife," or just planning to live with him. Mrs. Peachum cries that Polly has cheated and betrayed her parents, and Peachum says that he'll know the marriage is real if Macheath stops coming over. Polly sings that love is stronger than reason: she feels like her heart was frozen like ice, but the fire of Macheath's love melted it, so she decided to marry him (*Air 8*). Peachum and Mrs. Peachum lament that Macheath will take all their money, but Polly insists that she married for *love*. Mrs. Peachum desperately rages at Polly, then faints. Peachum sends Polly to bring her mother a cordial.

Peachum and Mrs. Peachum's anger reflects the way that women were literally considered property in the 18th century. By marrying, Polly effectively transfers herself—and everything she has—from her father's ownership to Macheath's. This means that, once her parents die, Macheath *will be able to take control of her inheritance. Because of this grim reality, her song about love falls on deaf ears. Of course, this song is also a reference to Italian opera, which usually involved dramatic plots about love, deception, and betrayal. In a way,* The Beggar's Opera *can be seen as a satire about what happens when an archetype from the fantasy world of Italian opera (Polly) lands in the gritty reality of John Gay's London (and gets taken advantage of by Macheath).*

After coming to, Mrs. Peachum sings that Polly "*might have toy'd and kist*" with men, because "*by keeping Men off, you keep them on.*" Polly sings back that Macheath "*teaz'd*" and "*pleas'd*" her, and that her mother must have done the same thing (*Air 9*). Peachum tells Mrs. Peachum that women have *always* married against their parents' wishes. He blames "the Frailty of Woman," and Mrs. Peachum agrees—but she still thinks Polly chose the wrong man. Peachum tells Mrs. Peachum to calm down: he has a plan to "make the best of" Polly's decision.

The Peachums continue to defend what 18th-century Londoners would have viewed as an upside-down moral compass: they encourage Polly to date several men with no strings attached, or even have sex for money, but never to commit herself to one man and settle down. Like most of the jokes in the play, this is a combination of comedy and social criticism: Gay wanted his audiences to laugh at the characters' twisted sense of morality but also see how their economic conditions led them there. After all, the Peachums are right to worry that marriage will destroy Polly's independence.

Mrs. Peachum tells Polly that she forgives her, and Polly joyously sings that she feels like a ship that has arrived safely to port (*Air 10*). Peachum comments that his customers (people looking for their stolen possessions) have arrived, and he sends Polly to update them on their watch and sword.

It's unclear whether Mrs. Peachum truly forgives Polly or is just pretending to, because she trusts Peachum to fix the situation with his secret plan. (Or perhaps she has some other motive altogether.) After all, by juxtaposing this conversation with "customers" coming to buy back stolen goods, the opera reminds its audience that all of the characters are deceiving one another all the time.

ACT 1, SCENE 9

In private, Peachum tells Mrs. Peachum that, even though Polly's decision was "rash," Macheath has money, which cures all ills. But Mrs. Peachum doesn't think they can get Macheath's money—after all, he probably has other wives, who will also go after his assets in court. Peachum agrees. He sings that women can steal a man's health, money, and sanity, but a lawyer is even worse because "*He steals your whole Estate*" (*Air 11*).

The Peachums want to get Macheath's money before he can get theirs. Of course, their conversation once again makes their true priorities clear: to them, even their daughter's marriage is just another business transaction. Still, Peachum's misogynistic song reminds the audience that this kind of thinking is everywhere in their society: there is little difference between petty criminals like Peachum and the lawyers and statesmen who run England.

ACT 1, SCENE 10

Polly returns to report that the visitor was actually Nimming Ned, who brought in valuables that he stole during a house fire last night. Mrs. Peachum asks what Polly will do now that she's married. Polly says Macheath will support her, but her mother disagrees. Peachum proposes making Macheath's possessions common marital property, so that they go to Polly if he dies. (After all, Peachum says, women only get married because they want "the comfortable Estate of Widow-hood" later on.) Polly is confused and asks what Peachum means. Peachum explains that he'll turn Macheath in and get him executed ("have him peach'd"). That way, Polly can keep all his money.

Peachum reveals his plot to end Polly's marriage and take control of Macheath's wealth. Of course, he does not even pretend to care about Polly's needs or feelings—he feels justified in derailing her plans because he assumes that maximizing profit is always the right decision, no matter what. Indeed, his notion that women only marry to get rich when their husbands die is based on the same distorted assumption. By portraying Peachum in this way, John Gay was also taking aim at England's emerging capitalist culture, which led the nation's economic and political elites to value profit and not life—just like Peachum.

Polly is outraged: she refuses to murder her husband. But Peachum says it's not *murder*: Macheath is a thief, so he'll eventually die at the gallows no matter what. Mrs. Peachum agrees—she says she will only forgive Polly if they can get Macheath executed. Polly sings that her parents should "ponder well" their plan to ruin her life (*Air 12*). Then, she sings a song about a turtle dove crying over its lover's death (*Air 13*). Mrs. Peachum says that Polly is stupid and shameful for falling in love, like in a foolish storybook. She threatens Polly: "I shall knock your Brains out, if you have any." Peachum tells Polly to consider their plan.

Peachum's speech about murder shows that, to him, morality is only relevant as a rhetorical tool to manipulate other people. In other words, he does not care about what is good and evil—but he knows that Polly might, so he uses moral language to try and win her over. And while Peachum manipulates Polly with arguments, Mrs. Peachum manipulates her emotions. Polly's songs about birds and her distress again mock operatic conventions—in fact, they give the audience the quaint bird similes that the Beggar promised in the introductory scene.

ACT 1, SCENE 11

In private, Mrs. Peachum tells Peachum that they have to turn Macheath in, even if Polly doesn't agree. Peachum complains that he doesn't want to kill such "a great Man"—a skillful, profitable thief—but agrees that they have no choice. Mrs. Peachum will deal with Polly and Peachum with the courts.

Peachum and Mrs. Peachum agree that their bottom line matters more than Polly's love, and they make a plan to manipulate Polly and the legal system alike to achieve their aims. In fact, Peachum takes this to an absurd extreme by complaining that turning in Macheath will eat into his profits. Once again, John Gay satirically exaggerates his protagonists' brutality both for comic effect and to criticize his contemporary English society's immorality and corruption.

ACT 1, SCENE 12

Alone and distraught, Polly laments her fate. She imagines Macheath going to the gallows as everyone weeps for him. But she realizes that she can still help him escape. Even if she couldn't see him, this would give her time to change her parents' mind. So she goes to let him out from her room, where he's hiding.

Polly's heartbroken soliloquy sets up the conflict in the next section of the play, as she tries to save Macheath from her parents' wrath. It also would have given 18th-century operagoers the drama and romance they were expecting. After all, Gay's opera was so influential in part because he incorporated these high-minded romantic tropes while also mocking them by making the rest of his characters shamelessly corrupt.

ACT 1, SCENE 13

Polly and Macheath sing together: Macheath asks if Polly was with anyone else while he was away, and Polly says that her heart is "constant" on him (*Air 14*). He affirms the same thing, and she concludes that, like the "great Heroes," he must be telling the truth. He sings about how he floated from woman to woman until he met her (*Air 15*). She asks what will happen if he gets transportation, and he says that nothing can separate them. They sing that their love will carry them through, even if they're banished to some hostile, faraway land (*Air 16*).

The audience finally meets Macheath, whose spirited, triumphant duet with Polly is a clear gesture toward Italian opera's excesses. Of course, there's something obviously absurd about their proclamations of love and their promise that they won't even separate if Macheath gets transportation (is sent to the colonies as punishment). As the audience already knows—or will soon find out—Macheath is a womanizing liar, and his declarations of love are no truer than the notion that he is a "great hero."

But Polly tells Macheath that they *have* to separate, because her parents are planning to turn him in. She sings that parting will be painful, but it's necessary to save his life (*Air 17*). And he says that he can't bear to leave her. She asks if he will stop loving her; he replies that he'll stay and die if it's the only way to prove his love. She tells him to go and promises to contact him once it's safe. Standing at opposite stage doors, they sing a final song: Macheath compares his sorrow to a miser paying a shilling; Polly compares hers to a boy releasing his pet sparrow and crying once it's out of sight (*Air 18*).

This scene's dramatic tension and satirical tone build together: each time Polly and Macheath declare their love for each other, they sound more desperate, but also more absurd (and, in Macheath's case, more dishonest). Gay's audiences would have understood that he was mocking the drama of high-minded opera, and therefore giving them permission to enjoy this drama without having to take it (or themselves) so seriously. For instance, the metaphors in Polly and Macheath's final love songs are forced and childish: instead of comparing their separation to some truly tragic event, they compare it to losing a small amount of money or losing a childhood pet. In fact, by comparing helping Macheath escape to freeing a sparrow, never to see it again, Polly foreshadows his questionable behavior as a free man in the opera's next act.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

A group of thieves is drinking and smoking in a tavern. Ben Budge asks what happened to Matt of the Mint's brother Tom. Matt explains that Tom ended up at Surgeon's Hall after an "accident." (He was executed, and scientists took his body for experiments.) Jemmy Twitcher laments that the law targets thieves, even though they are no worse than other men. They deserve what they take, he says, by "the Right of Conquest." The men praise their own honor, courage, and loyalty. They declare that they would never turn each other in, and they have a right to enjoy themselves, just like everyone else. Matt insists that they are making up for the greed of the wealthy—who are the real thieves, and who don't know how to appreciate their wealth. He sings a drinking song about wine and women (*Air 19*).

The audience finally meets Peachum and Macheath's band of thieves. Like Peachum, even though they like to talk about principles and morality, they are in fact completely immoral. After all, their main belief is "the Right of Conquest"—anything they can take rightly belongs to them. Unsurprisingly, their talk about honor, courage, and loyalty is also completely empty—as later events in the opera show, they absolutely are *willing to turn one another in if they stand to gain from it Still, there is a kernel of truth in their worldview: as a matter of fact, the rest of society* is *just as corrupt as they are, and the wealthy* do *derive their wealth from theft and brutality (especially in Britain's colonies). Thus, John Gay asks his audiences a troubling question: is it possible to be moral in an immoral society? Or does such a society inevitably trample on anyone who tries to act ethically, such that cheating and corruption are the only realistic ways to get ahead?*

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Macheath reaches the tavern and greets the other men. Matt of the Mint invites him to rob travelers on the Western Road out of London. Macheath asks if the other men have ever questioned his honor, courage, or morals; Matt says no, then asks if Macheath suspects them of something. Macheath explains that the problem is Peachum. Matt says that he'll kill Peachum if necessary, but Macheath says that the thieves can't make a living without Peachum, so should keep working with him. Macheath just needs a week to fix the situation. In the meantime, he'll take a break from thievery, and the others should just tell Peachum that he left the Gang. (But they can keep meeting in secret.) Matt agrees and sings about robbing carriages and getting rich (*Air 20*). The thieves load their guns and run offstage, singing.

Rather than truly going into hiding, Macheath goes straight back to his old life of crime and revelry. The other thieves clearly respect him, but audiences will notice that he doesn't really seem to deserve their praise: he isn't actually honorable, moral, or courageous at all. What he does *seem to have is confidence: he's sure that he can change Peachum's mind, so that he doesn't lose his best customer. Indeed, just like Peachum, he puts profit above all else. The parallels between the two men don't end there: just as Peachum plans to kill Macheath, Macheath considers killing Peachum (but decides that it would be more profitable not to). Ironically enough, Matt turns out to be right: by the end of the play, it becomes clear that Macheath's best course of action would have been to kill Peachum. (In fact, this would let Macheath inherit Peachum's whole estate, too.)*

ACT 2, SCENE 3

Alone, Macheath muses that Polly is a fool for falling blindly in love with him. Perhaps he's capable of loving just one woman, but he's used to dividing his time among many "free-hearted Ladies." He sings about how women make men's worries disappear through kisses, caresses, and more (*Air 21*). He asks the drawer (barman) where the women are; the drawer says they're on their way.

Macheath shows his true colors: he was manipulating Polly all along and would have never stayed loyal to her. Ironically, this means that the Peachums are right to worry about his true motives and try to stop him. Just like Peachum, he views relationships as a mutually self-interested transaction—although one key difference is that he is largely motivated by lust, while Peachum only cares about money and power.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Eight sex workers arrive at the tavern: Jenny Diver, Molly Brazen, Dolly Trull, Betty Doxy, Suky Tawdry, Mrs. Coaxer, Mrs. Vixen, and Mrs. Slammekin. Macheath provocatively greets and compliments each one. They dance while Macheath sings that they should enjoy themselves before their youth and beauty run out (*Air 22*). The women sit, drink, and praise each other's thievery skill. Mrs. Coaxer, Mrs. Vixen, and Molly Brazen steal from textile merchants, while Jenny Diver picks men's pockets. Macheath complains that Jenny isn't fawning over him, like usual, but she reminds him that she's surrounded by "Rivals." She sings a racy song about a cock picking his favorite hen from the flock (*Air 23*).

The audience learns why Macheath really *chose to stay behind in the tavern instead of following the other thieves. It's not because he needed time to plan his revenge on Peachum, but rather because he was expecting a visit from these eight ladies. Clearly, this is not what Polly had in mind when she helped him escape. The women's flirtatious banter would have seemed scandalous and hilarious to 18th-century audiences. And their names are all comical double-entendres that refer to their profession (just like the thieves').*

The women discuss the men who have "kept" them as mistresses. Suky Tawdry explains that her "last Friend" threw her out after she foolishly stole from him, and Mrs. Slammekin comments that Jewish men treat their mistresses well. Suky Tawdry likes old men, who pay well, while Mrs. Vixen has a strategy for profiting from young men: she bankrupts them, leads them into a life of crime, gets them transported to the colonies, and then repeats with a new man.

The women's conversation shows that they are just as manipulative, ruthless, and self-interested as Macheath, the Peachums, and their thieves. Similarly, the women also view sex and romance primarily as a way to make money, and they take pride and pleasure in their ability to pull confidence tricks and ruin other people's lives. Of course, this conversation also cleverly foreshadows the events that immediately follow it.

Jenny Diver asks if Macheath has money, but he says he lost it gambling. Jenny sings about how lawyers and gamblers steal men's livelihoods (*Air 24*). She declares that honest men gamble with their lives, but not their money, and she and Suky Tawdry grab Macheath's pistols to make their point. They start kissing him on the neck and make a hand signal to someone waiting outside. It's Peachum. He rushes into the tavern with the police to arrest Macheath.

In a surprising, dramatic, but quite logical plot twist, the women follow their stories about taking advantage of unwitting men by turning Macheath in to Peachum. This is really a kind of poetic justice: just as Polly underestimated how corrupt and manipulative Macheath could be, Macheath underestimated the same about Peachum and the women. This scene also underlines the major difference between Macheath and Peachum: while they are both self-interested liars, Peachum is calculated and rational, whereas Macheath is naïve and lets his lust get the better of him.

ACT 2, SCENE 5

Peachum and the police arrest Macheath, who curses the women for entrapping him. Peachum proudly declares that "the greatest Heroes have been ruin'd by Women," who are "pretty" but cannot be trusted. Macheath sings that he will "suffer with pleasure" at the hanging tree and compares the women to the Furies, the Greek goddesses of revenge (*Air 25*). Peachum promises that Macheath will be punished, and the police lead him away.

Curiously, Macheath immediately blames the women for his capture instead of Peachum, who actually orchestrated it. In fact, Peachum and Macheath's conversation quickly veers into misogyny: they blame women's self-interest and corruption for all of their problems, even though they are obviously just as self-interested and corrupt.

ACT 2, SCENE 6

The women discuss Macheath's arrest. Even though Jenny Diver and Suky Tawdry struck the deal with Peachum to turn Macheath in, Mrs. Vixen thinks all the women should share the profits. Mrs. Slammekin boasts that she has just turned in three men to Peachum, but Dolly Trull objects that one of those men was in her bed at the time of his capture. And Jenny Diver says that she and Suky Tawdry absolutely won't share their profits. On their way out, Dolly Trull and Mrs. Slammekin jokingly insist that the other must leave first, and then all the women leave "*with great Ceremony*."

The women's good-humored debates about how to share their profits resemble Peachum's conversations with Filch and Mrs. Peachum over his account-book. Essentially, all of these characters' corruption is based on the way they are willing to treat organized brutality as an ordinary business. The women's banter on their way out of the tavern, which mocks England's aristocracy, is John Gay's reminder to his audience that their kind of organized brutality is common up to the highest levels of English society.

ACT 2, SCENE 7

The jailor Lockit welcomes the "Noble Captain" Macheath back to the Newgate prison after a year and a half and asks for "Garnish" (a bribe). Lockit removes Macheath's shackles, and Macheath asks for lighter ones, but Lockit says that will depend on the Garnish money. Macheath pays him and complains that nobody can afford to die with dignity anymore. Lockit gives Macheath new shackles, which he boasts are the finest ones in all of England.

Lockit is more interested in using his position of power for his own benefit than in actually rehabilitating criminals. In this sense, he is no better than Peachum. In fact, his behavior suggests that the law in general is just as corrupt as the criminals it catches. And Gay's depiction of him was historically accurate: Newgate prison was run on a system of semi-organized bribery, in which prisoners could buy any privilege imaginable (and those without money were left to die of starvation).

ACT 2, SCENE 8

Alone in prison, Macheath sings that men can escape violence and disease unscathed, but "*He that tastes Woman, Ruin meets*" (*Air 26*). He complains that the woman he promised to marry will now blame him for ruining *her* life. But he admits that his promise to marry her was meaningless. He laments that women use men's promises "as an Excuse for following their own Inclinations." Then, he sees Lockit's daughter Lucy approaching and remarks that he'd rather be deaf than talk to her.

Macheath's complaints about the woman he promised to marry are a clever plot twist: he appears to be talking about Polly, but he's actually talking about Lucy. Meanwhile, his attitudes about gender are even more absurd and hypocritical than Peachum's. He blames women for men's misbehavior, and he suggests that men should be able to lie and manipulate women, but women have no right to do the same to men. This all shows that Macheath has no concept of morality or justice—like a child, he only wants what is best for himself, and he grows furious when the world doesn't give it to him.

ACT 2, SCENE 9

Lucy Lockit calls Macheath a "perfidious Wretch." She is pregnant with his child—he has ruined her life, and she hopes he gets tortured. She sings that, when a "*good Huswife*" traps a rat, she takes pleasure in watching the dog or cat tear it to pieces (*Air 27*). Macheath asks why Lucy doesn't pity or respect her husband—they never formally married, but they don't need to, because "a Man of Honour['s] Word is as good as his Bond." Lucy sings about how men can get away with stealing, cheating, and lying until their love lives reveal their true colors (*Air 28*).

Lucy's arrival shows that Macheath's love life clearly follows a pattern: he charms women into sleeping with him, and then disappears as soon as he has to take some responsibility for his actions. Unlike Polly, Lucy clearly understands what he is doing. Needless to say, he is no true "Man of Honour"—he is just using empty sweet-talk to try and manipulate her once again. Clearly, Polly is lucky that her father turned in Macheath before she ended up getting pregnant, too.

Macheath proposes that he and Lucy marry as soon as possible, but Lucy calls him an "Insinuating Monster!" because she knows about his marriage to Polly. Macheath says that he and Polly aren't really married—Polly is just spreading rumors to ruin his reputation and make Lucy jealous. He promises to prove his honor by marrying Lucy. Lucy accepts that Macheath didn't actually marry Polly—whom he calls vain and conceited. He sings about how women convince themselves that they're beautiful even when everyone else can see that they're not (*Air 29*). Lucy decides that her father (Lockit) will help her decide whether to trust Macheath. She admits that she "long[s] to be made an honest Woman."

Macheath manipulates his way out of Lucy's accusations by telling lies so egregious that it seems like they have *to be true. In particular, he tailors his lies to appeal for her burning desire for romance—or, as she puts it, her need "to be made an honest Woman." She feels this way because she sees love as the only thing that could save her from an otherwise dreadful life as a corrupt jailor's daughter. Of course, this scene's suspense and comic effect depend on dramatic irony: the audience already knows that Macheath has promised Polly exactly the same things as he is promising Lucy here.*

ACT 2, SCENE 10

Peachum and Lockit agree to split the bounty for capturing Macheath. As they go through last year's **account book**, Peachum complains that the government isn't paying him his bounties on time. He even threatens to start letting thieves go free. Lockit agrees: the government doesn't trust men like them. But Peachum notes that they are no more dishonest than politicians—their jobs are also based on betrayal. Lockit tells Peachum to watch his language, then sings about the dangers of offending people (*Air 30*).

It's little surprise that Peachum, the crime boss and thief-catcher, is working together with Lockit, the corrupt jailer. As they point out, there is no justice even at the highest levels of the government: everyone is just as corrupt and self-interested as they are. While Lockit takes offense when Peachum points this out, Peachum thinks it's best to look squarely at the truth. This highlights the one major difference between Peachum and all of the play's other corrupt characters: Peachum understands that everyone around him is greedy and selfish, and he does not hold others to a higher moral standard than himself.

Peachum comes across the name Ned Clincher in his book. He recalls that Ned paid Lockit to delay his execution, but Lockit didn't follow through with the agreement. Lockit furiously accuses Peachum of attacking his honor. Peachum notes that Mrs. Coaxer has accused Lockit of stealing her commission for turning someone in. Lockit and Peachum attack one another and threaten to have the other hanged, until Peachum points out that it's in both of their interests to reach an agreement. Lockit agrees and promises to forgive Peachum, who leaves to go home.

Lockit and Peachum's argument shows that their partnership is purely opportunistic—it isn't based on trust, friendship, or anything else of the like. It also demonstrates that, at best, a corrupt society can hold together because of mutually assured destruction: people keep their promises only because they know that breaking them will invite revenge. Unfortunately, like Macheath, Lockit takes self-interest a bit too far, to the point of undermining his whole business—and when confronted, he reacts through lies and denial.

ACT 2, SCENE 11

Lucy approaches Lockit in tears and admits that she still loves Macheath. Lockit declares that Macheath can't be saved from execution—and that Lucy should be grateful, since most women look forward to becoming widows. In a brief song, Lucy asks whether Macheath is really condemned and cries that her heart is breaking (*Air 31*). Lockit replies with a song about how he's going to hang Macheath, and Lucy should get over it (*Air 32*). He also tells her to get as much of Macheath's money as she can.

Unsurprisingly, Lockit's attitude toward marriage is exactly the same as Peachum's: he cares about money, not love. He can't make sense of Lucy's feelings for Macheath and doesn't even bother to try. Thus, the play's humor once again depends on juxtaposing the sincere, dramatic flourishes of a conventional ordinary opera (Lucy) with the nonchalant, seedy cruelty of 18th-century London (Lockit). The play sets up Lucy and Polly to fight for Macheath's heart in the coming scenes, while Peachum and Lockit will fight for his money.

ACT 2, SCENE 12

Lucy comes to tell Macheath that Lockit won't budge about the execution. Macheath asks if he could get out by bribing Lockit and sings about how "the Perquisite" (bribery) helps men get paperwork done and charm women (*Air 33*). Lucy promises to try.

This exchange shows that Macheath's real motive for seducing Lucy is to convince her to help him escape. In fact, he's repeating the exact strategy he used on Polly in Act 1.

ACT 2, SCENE 13

Polly arrives at Newgate in search of her "dear Husband" Macheath. She proclaims her love for him, declares that his imprisonment is devastating her, and promises to never leave his side. Meanwhile, Macheath laments his bad luck and Lucy Lockit calls him a villain. Polly sings a tune comparing Macheath to a caged bird (*Air 34*).

Polly's arrival adds another layer of both drama and humor to the play, but she is completely unaware of it. Ironically, she doesn't even realize that Macheath and Lucy are talking about Macheath's bigamy—instead, she assumes they are talking about his imprisonment.

Macheath mutters that he "must disown" Polly, then insults her for being "distracted." Lucy calls Macheath a lying villain. Polly asks why he is so rude to her—"tell me," she asks, "am I not thy Wife?" Then, she realizes what has happened. Lucy and Polly start insulting Macheath together, and they both say they wish he were already dead. Lucy directly asks Macheath if he has really taken two wives. He rudely cuts them off, then sings that he wishes just one of them were around, and not both (*Air 35*). Polly complains about Macheath using her, and Lucy says she wishes she were the one to turn Macheath in. Together, Polly and Lucy sing that they are "bubbled" (cheated) and "troubled," and their "Distresses are doubled" (*Air 36*).

Macheath opportunistically sides with Lucy over Polly because he knows that only Lucy has the power to get him out of prison. Meanwhile, Polly finally realizes that her father's warnings about Macheath were right, and she turns against Macheath for the first time. Thus, the dynamics of the opera's conflict shift once again. Of course, Gay uses these constantly shifting loyalties to make the play as dramatic and exciting as possible (and to show how corruption and disloyalty leads to chaos). The characters are constantly at one another's throats, but it's impossible to predict what this tension will lead to and who will ultimately fight whom.

Macheath accuses Polly of making everything up in an attempt to turn Lucy against him and eventually take over his estate. Lucy turns against Polly and calls her "barbarous," but Polly sings that Lucy is trying to manipulate her and steal her husband. Macheath accuses Polly of "carrying the Joke a little too far," and Lucy threatens to have her father kick Polly out of the Newgate prison. But Polly insists that she will stay with Macheath. Lucy and Polly share a song: Lucy calls Polly "*Madam* Flirt" and accuses her of "*flinging Dirt*"; Polly calls Lucy "*saucy Jade*" and accuses her of being drunk (*Air 38*).

Within minutes, Macheath manipulates Lucy and Polly into believing him instead of one another. They forget their complaints against him and turn against each other instead. While this underlines how clever and manipulative he is, troublingly, Gay also seems to suggest that Macheath's manipulation works because Lucy and Polly are fickle, gullible, and naïve. Eighteenth-century audiences may have understood this as praise for young women's purity and innocence, but contemporary ones will likely see it as an insult to their intelligence.

ACT 2, SCENE 14

Peachum arrives at Newgate to take Polly home. He insults her and tells her that she deserves to be hanged for dishonoring the family. Polly begs Peachum to let her stay with Macheath. Peachum responds that women are doubly foolish: they get involved with unscrupulous men, then make a point of telling everyone about what they have done. He drags her away while she sings about the beauty and power of her "Sacred Love" for Macheath (*Air 39*).

Peachum's tirade is ugly and misogynistic, but in one important way, it's also correct. Namely, in a society as corrupt as 18th-century London, it is dangerous for young women like Polly to place so much trust in charming criminals like Macheath. At best, Polly's dreams of true love are unattainable; at worst, they will lead her to ruin. Of course, this dynamic illustrates how immorality and corruption spread across society: when everyone else is corrupt, people like Polly have to adjust their expectations and behavior, too.

ACT 2, SCENE 15

Macheath and Lucy continue their conversation after Peachum and Polly leave Newgate. Macheath tells Lucy that he was too compassionate to give Polly the harsh treatment she deserved. This, he says, is why Lucy believed Polly at first. Lucy agrees—she affirms that she loves Macheath deeply and couldn't stand to see him with another woman.

Macheath keeps playing into Lucy's fantasies by telling her exactly what she wants to hear. His claim to have spurned Polly out of compassion *may be his most egregious lie of all—but Lucy is more than willing to believe it. In reality, as the audience should have long since realized, he's purely self-interested and scarcely capable of compassion at all.*

Macheath asks Lucy to help him escape. She notes that her father is sleeping, so she can steal his keys to open Macheath's cell. Macheath warns that Lucy cannot follow him, as that would raise suspicions. She mentions that she can't stop thinking about Polly, but Macheath comments that they shouldn't let one argument ruin the rest of their lives. Lucy sings about how Macheath will be like a fox being chased by hounds, and she will be like the fox's mate, grieving and waiting for him to come back (*Air 40*).

Act 2 ends in much the same way as Act 1: Macheath's beloved helps him escape, all while lamenting having to see him depart. The only difference is that this time, the audience knows the truth about Macheath's character and intentions. Thus, the scene takes on a darkly ironic undertone. It's no longer clear whom the audience should be rooting for: Macheath is a villainous rogue, Polly and Lucy's desire for him is only leading them to ruin, and Peachum and Lockit are clearly no heroes, either.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

Macheath has just escaped from Newgate, and Lockit accuses Lucy of helping him. Lucy blames Peachum and Polly instead, but Lockit doesn't believe her. She insists that she is innocent. Lockit asks how much Macheath paid her to get out, and Lucy replies that she loves Macheath and would have paid *him* to spend time together. Lockit chastises Lucy for forgetting everything she learned about men from her days as a barmaid. In song, she explains that meeting men in the bar led her to long for true, deeper love (*Air 41*).

Lockit's self-interested worldview once again clashes with Lucy's idealistic fantasies about true love—which is the opposite of self-interest because it means that two people agree to elevate each other's needs above their own. Lockit can only imagine one reason why Lucy would free Macheath: money. In contrast, Lucy would give anything (money included) to live out her impossible fantasy of marrying him. Lucy's worldview may look foolish and lead her to ruin, but only because she lives in a society that puts profit above everything else. Indeed, her song about the bar is also a critique *of such a society, because she points out how it limits people to superficial, opportunistic relationships.*

Lucy admits that she helped Macheath escape. He sweet-talked her into doing it because he knew that she loved him. Lockit calls Lucy a stupid fool, but she replies that "in Love we are all Fools alike." Actually, she knows she made a mistake: she has since realized that Polly Peachum was telling the truth. Now, she thinks, Polly and Peachum will turn Macheath back in for the bounty, and Polly will get all of Macheath's estate too. Lucy threatens to murder Polly and curses Macheath. She sings about how her "*Madness and Folly*" has left her wretched but made Polly happy (*Air 42*). Lockit tells Lucy to go away and "fast and mortify [her]self into Reason."

Lucy finally admits that Macheath was manipulating her and recognizes that she made a mistake. But ironically, in the process, she starts to overestimate Polly: she suggests that Polly is carrying out some sinister moneymaking plot, when in reality, Polly is actually just as naïve, lovestruck, and uninterested in money as Lucy. In this way, errors and misunderstandings continue to drive the play's action: everyone assumes that everyone else knows what they're doing, but really, nobody has a plan at all (expect perhaps Peachum).

ACT 3, SCENE 2

Now alone, Lockit plans his revenge on Peachum (whom he thinks helped Macheath escape). He comments that this is only fair, because everyone cheats their friends and neighbors, Peachum included. He sings about how gamblers can become friends, even though they're all trying to profit at each other's expense (*Air 43*).

Lockit's comments about morality and corruption closely resemble Peachum's in the play's very first scene. Peachum has long made money by heartlessly sending his friends and colleagues to their deaths; now, he will get a taste of his own medicine, as Lockit plans to do the same to him. In fact, both Lockit and Peachum know that the men they kill are morally no different from themselves.

Lucy comes in and Lockit asks if anyone from Peachum's gang is at Newgate. Lucy says that Filch is drinking with Black Moll next door, and Lockit asks her to bring him over.

Lockit wants to talk to Filch so that he can get the information he needs to take revenge on Peachum. Fortunately for Lockit, doing so should be easy—all the criminals in this play are selfish and opportunistic, which means that they're always willing to betray their friends and even bosses for the right price.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Lockit and Filch meet. Lockit tells Filch that he looks hungry and exhausted. Filch explains that he has taken over for the "favourite Child-getter"—he is constantly sleeping with one woman prisoner after another because the law prohibits executing them while they're pregnant. Lockit praises "the Vigor and Prowess" of the man who usually does the job, and he asks Filch where Peachum is. Filch explains that Peachum is at his lock (the warehouse that serves as his operation's headquarters). Lockit resolves to go find him there.

Through Filch's absurd new job, Gay piles on the dark humor and once again highlights how deeply twisted and corrupt England had become. The policy of sparing pregnant women from execution may have been well-intentioned, but in reality, the prisoners twisted it into yet another strategy for getting away with their crimes. Ironically, this seems to be the only situation in which anyone in this play actually wants *to get pregnant.*

ACT 3, SCENE 4

Macheath meets Ben Budge and Matt of the Mint at a gambling den. He gives them money, then sings about the difference between true friends who really care about each other and fake friends who use one another for personal gain (*Air 44*). Ben laments that noble, generous Macheath is struggling and surrounded by lowlifes. Matt complains that the worst criminals get away with their crimes, while lesser ones, like Macheath, get punished.

Every line in this Scene 1s dripping with irony, as the characters' actions obviously contradict all the principles they claim to believe. Macheath's song about true friendship is ironic because he's exactly the kind of opportunistic fake friend that he criticizes. This indicates that Macheath knows *the difference between moral and immoral behavior but doesn't care about actually acting morally. Instead, he just talks about this difference when it happens to benefit him. Similarly, Ben's speech is ironic because* he *is one of the lowlifes surrounding Macheath, while Macheath* isn't *struggling: he keeps getting off without punishment. And Matt's speech is ironic for the same reason: Macheath* isn't *actually getting punished for his crimes. Audiences would be right to wonder whether the characters lack the self-awareness to understand that they don't live up to their values, or whether they're just joking when they talk about these values in the first place.*

Macheath explains that their plan for the evening is to rob the gamblers on their way home. Matt proposes targeting the man with a gold-lined brown coat, but Macheath says that this man is "one of us." Instead, Macheath proposes robbing gold coins from the moneylenders. Besides, one of them owes him money.

This last exchange reveals even more ironic holes in Macheath's worldview: somehow, it's fair game to rob moneylenders, but not "one of us" (presumably, a fellow thief). Even more absurdly, Macheath claims to have lent money to *a moneylender (although this is probably a lie). Again, Gay's comedy depends on constantly turning things into their opposites. He also uses this technique to emphasize his characters' immorality.*

ACT 3, SCENE 5

Peachum and Lockit sit at Peachum's warehouse, going through their **accounts** of stolen goods from King George II's coronation. There are brocades and pocketbooks, watches and snuffboxes, and plenty of jewels (which get exported, so have their own separate account book). But it will take a long time to finish writing everything down, so the men decide to leave it for another day and spend today drinking.

Gay both pokes fun at England's elite by referencing the coronation. After all, they are just as corrupt as Peachum and Lockit, and their wealth is just as ill-begotten. Peachum's obsessive accounting makes his business look just as legitimate as the joint-stock corporations that enriched the elite. Indeed, he's deadly serious about maximizing his profits—even if he occasionally takes a whole day off to drink.

Lockit tells Peachum that both of their daughters are fickle fools, but they can recapture Macheath if Peachum just keeps Polly under control. He sings that men are like stupid birds or fish, whom women can lure to their ruin (*Air 45*). Peachum points out that Lucy was the one who let Macheath out of Newgate, but Lockit replies that it's unfair to blame men for their wives and daughters' mistakes. Then, a servant announces that Mrs. Diana Trapes is visiting, and Peachum and Lockit agree to meet her.

Peachum and Lockit manage to agree on something: *love is a sham, and they should lure Macheath back to jail by using their daughters as bait. But in the process of hatching this plan, they seem to get their sexist prejudices confused: they describe both men and women as both fools and predators. Ultimately, they are really pointing out how love gives people power over one another, and that power can be used for evil.*

ACT 3, SCENE 6

Peachum and Lockit greet Mrs. Diana Trapes and compliment the excellent gin they taste in her kisses. Trapes sings that she used to love freely as a young woman, like a sparrow or a dove, but now she's more interested in drinking (*Air 46*).

Mrs. Trapes is a madam who manages the sex workers from Act 2. This makes her a kind of female counterpart (or character foil) to Peachum, who manages the thieves. As their employees often use one another's services, it's no surprise that they work together to increase both of their profits.

Mrs. Trapes explains that she is looking to buy mourning clothes for her sex workers, but Peachum complains that she pays him too little. She claims that times are hard: Parliament started sending the police to her district and stopped imprisoning people for small debts (so some women, like Mrs. Coaxer, stopped reimbursing her for clothes). Peachum warns that he's barely making a profit, and his thieves might quit if they don't earn more. Trapes asks for black velvet scarves and explains that well-dressed sex workers can charge more. She repeats that her business is struggling: people steal her commission, and many customers are "under the Surgeon's Hands" after catching diseases.

In an obvious metaphor for the notion that there is no moral difference between petty criminals and the rich, Trapes's sex workers dress in fancy clothes stolen from the aristocracy. Mrs. Trapes's comments show many other ways in which her business is like Peachum's—and, Gay suggests, 18th-century London's economy as a whole. Trapes never forgets about the bottom line, and she thinks about suffering, exploitation, and manipulation only in terms of the profits they produce for her. She also has a complicated relationship with the law: even though her business is illegal, she uses law enforcement to her advantage by using the threat of imprisonment to get her sex workers to pay back debts. (This is just like how Peachum's revenue depends as much on turning in his thieves to Newgate as actually reselling what they steal.)

Peachum asks about Mrs. Coaxer, and Mrs. Trapes explains that she left Mrs. Coaxer with a special client: Captain Macheath. Peachum promises that, if he can meet Macheath today, he will give Mrs. Trapes all his velvet scarves at a discount and even cover Mrs. Coaxer's debt tomorrow.

Macheath could have easily chosen to leave London after escaping Newgate, but instead, he let his lust get the better of him. So Peachum and Lockit's prediction about women luring Macheath to his ruin comes true—just not in the way they expected.

ACT 3, SCENE 7

Back at Newgate, Lucy is torn apart by "Jealousy, Rage, Love and Fear." In song, she compares herself to a boat abandoned in the ocean with no anchor or rudder—all while Polly is "*sporting on Seas of Delight*" (*Air 47*). Lucy has hatched a plan: she will pour rat poison in Polly's gin and kill her. She doesn't even mind if she gets hanged for the crime. Then, Filch comes in and announces that Polly has arrived.

In another characteristic example of dramatic irony, the audience knows that Macheath manipulated Lucy into helping him escape all on his own, but Lucy still blames Polly for it—and hatches a nefarious plan to murder her. Clearly, Lucy and Polly don't want to admit that Macheath is deceiving them—they would rather blame one another for his misdeeds.

ACT 3, SCENE 8

Polly meets Lucy at Newgate. Lucy apologizes for her anger the last time they met. She sings that women sometimes lose their tempers and need a drink to calm down (*Air 48*). Polly apologizes for her misbehavior, too. Lucy offers Polly a cordial as a token of friendship, but Polly refuses because alcohol gives her headaches. Lucy insists that the cordial is top-quality and will help Polly feel better, but Polly again says no. She argues that Lucy should pity her for the way Macheath treated her. But Lucy views *herself* as Macheath's "unhappy Wife" and Polly as just his mistress. Polly quips that Macheath neglects and ignores her because "A Man is always afraid of a Woman who loves him too well."

Lucy's apology is just a dishonest attempt at getting Polly to let her guard down and drink the poison. But it's not yet clear whether Polly realizes this. Regardless, Polly's reluctance to drink also symbolizes her moral purity: everyone else in the play is corrupt and drinks almost all the time, but she is the only one who isn't interested. Still, she and Lucy continue to fight over who is Macheath's true wife. However, the fact that they are both waiting for news of him after his escape means that he clearly doesn't want to be with either of them.

Polly and Lucy agree that they have "have [both] been too fond" of Macheath. They sing about how men prefer chasing unavailable women to loving the women who are in love with and dedicated to them (*Air 49*). Polly says she envies Lucy, whom Macheath treated tenderly when he left her. Polly sings that some men flirt with everyone just because they are self-absorbed and want validation (*Air 50*). She tells Lucy that "our Husband is one of those." Lucy once again offers Polly a drink, and then she sings about how it will make her worries and sorrows go away (*Air 51*).

Lucy and Polly finally admit that Macheath isn't exactly husband material, but even this realization isn't enough for them to give up on him. Rather, they act as though they have no choice but to keep pursuing him—even though they know that it's pointless. Of course, by mocking Lucy and Polly's foolish dedication to Macheath, Gay plays up sexist tropes about irrational, fickle women. At the same time, Polly's comment that Macheath seeks novelty and validation through romance shows that she may be the wisest character in the whole play when it comes to love. She understands Macheath's motives even better than he does; in fact, she's the only one who does at all.

ACT 3, SCENE 9

In private, Polly remarks that Lucy is clearly pressuring her to drink because she wants to "pump some Secrets out of me." So she won't drink at all.

Polly correctly notices that something is wrong with Lucy's cordial, but just like she has done with Macheath throughout the play, she naïvely underestimates exactly how *evil Lucy can be.*

ACT 3, SCENE 10

Lucy again asks Polly to drink, but Polly declines. Lucy tells Polly not to be squeamish about drinking "Strong-Waters" in front of a woman and warns that she will be offended if Polly refuses. Then, Polly sees Macheath in the distance: he has been arrested again and is returning to Newgate. She drops the glass of cordial and says she is even more distraught now. Lucy privately tells the audience that she's happy Polly didn't drink, because "she was not happy enough to deserve to be poison'd."

Macheath's arrest shows that Polly has not taken him away from Lucy, and Lucy will no longer win him back if she kills Polly. Thus, it permanently shifts the play's tone and plotline, and Lucy's murder attempt turns out to have been a red herring. (Still, it built up a sense of suspense and dramatic tension that will carry on for the rest of the play.)

ACT 3, SCENE 11

Lockit and Peachum lead Macheath into Newgate, where Polly and Lucy are waiting. Lockit tells Macheath that he's going straight to trial, so he won't be able to escape again. Peachum tells Polly and Lucy to go away, but both call out for Macheath. They sing together, each begging Macheath to look over and prove his love for them (*Air 52*). Macheath says there's no point, since he will be put to death soon. But Peachum proposes that Macheath choose between Polly and Lucy, so that they can avoid a lawsuit over his estate later on. Macheath sings that nobody could choose between two wives, as whatever comforts one of them would hurt the other (*Air 53*).

When Macheath arrives at Newgate, all of the characters' differing biases and priorities start to clash. Polly and Lucy obsessively try to prove their love, somehow still unaware that Macheath couldn't care less about either of them. Meanwhile, Lockit looks forward to Macheath's execution and Peachum wonders about what will happen to his property (but not his life). This scene, in which Polly and Lucy ask Macheath to choose between them, is also a reference to a well-known scene from John Dryden's play about Antony and Cleopatra, All for Love, *which was wildly popular in the early 1700s.*

Polly sings to Peachum, begging him to save Macheath out of pity for her (*Air 54*). Lucy sings to Lockit, asking him to shut down the trial so that she can be with Macheath (*Air 55*). But Lockit insists that he won't tolerate more "Whimpering or Whining." He sings that he, Peachum, and men like them have to give up their fellow criminals to survive, and that even they might go to the gallows one day too (*Air 56*). Peachum tells Polly that her husband is going to die and maybe she should find another.

Despite all their rivalry and disagreements, Polly and Lucy take on parallel roles, begging their fathers to put profit aside in the name of love. (Unsurprisingly, both men refuse.) This parallel arrangement also highlights the way in which Peachum and Lockit serve as character foils for one another. Even though they work on opposite sides of the law, they are equally cruel and corrupt. Through this parallel, Gay argues that England's political and legal system was just as completely morally rotten as its criminal underworld.

Lockit announces that it's time for Macheath to go to the gallows. Macheath sings that he is ready to die, which will pay his debt to society and finally end the dispute between his wives (*Air 57*).

When he points out how his death will be good for the world, Macheath appears to have a moment of moral clarity. But unsurprisingly, the subsequent scenes will show that this doesn't last. Indeed, his comment demonstrates that he understands *what is morally right—he just doesn't* care.

ACT 3, SCENE 12

Polly sends Filch to attend Macheath's trial while she waits back in the jail with Lucy. They hear the prisoners playing music; Polly says she loves music but doesn't want to ruin her sorrow with joy. The women leave to "indulge [their] Sorrows," and a group of prisoners dances onstage.

The women's "Sorrows" and the prisoners' dance indicate that the opera is headed for a bombastic, dramatic conclusion. Of course, Gay has repeatedly used plot twists to break the audience's expectations, and the remaining scenes will be no exception.

ACT 3, SCENE 13

Macheath sings a series of short songs while drinking in his prison cell. He laments the "cruel Case" that has left him in "Disgrace" (*Air 58*). He sings that alcohol is the only thing that can still give him comfort (*Airs 59-64*). He sings about women's beauty and kisses (*Airs 65-66*). Finally, he sings that society is unjust for executing him, while letting the rich and powerful get away with crimes just like his (*Air 67*). Then, the jailor enters and reports that Macheath has visitors.

Macheath's final solo Scene 1s designed to draw out the tension in the play's final moments and give the actor playing him an opportunity to show off their vocal skills. While everyone else views Macheath as a tough, fearless hero, this scene once again shows that he is really a desperate coward who refuses to take responsibility for his crimes.

ACT 3, SCENE 14

Ben Budge and Matt of the Mint visit Macheath in Newgate, where Macheath explains that he is going straight to the gallows. Macheath also points out that Jemmy Twitcher is testifying against him, which suggests that nobody can truly trust anyone else, including their friends. He warns Ben and Matt that they might be next and implores them to take down Peachum and Lockit as soon as they can. They agree. Then, the jailor enters and reports that Polly and Lucy want to speak with Macheath.

Ben and Matt's visit brings the band of thieves' plotline to a close. Jemmy Twitcher's betrayal shows that, despite all the thieves' empty talk about honor and loyalty, they are just as willing to undercut one another as Peachum and the sex workers. Of course, when Macheath pleads with Ben and Matt to help him enact vengeance on Peachum, he only adds an extra layer of dark irony to the scene: if he can't expect loyalty from his friends, as he has already learned, then why would he expect Ben and Matt to actually help him? (After all, as Macheath himself pointed out in Act 2, their livelihood as thieves depends on working with Peachum.)

ACT 3, SCENE 15

Lucy and Polly visit Macheath, who tells them to put the past behind them and go look for new husbands in the West Indies. Distressed, Lucy and Polly sing that they wish they could die alongside Macheath, while Macheath shows them his empty liquor bottle and sings that "my Courage is out" (*Air 68*). Then, the jailor announces that four more women, each with a child, have come to see Macheath. Unwilling to face "four Wives more," Macheath asks the jailor to take him straight to the gallows, and he exits.

Apparently, no matter how badly Macheath mistreats and betrays Lucy and Polly, they will always keep loving him. Troublingly, with this pattern, Gay seems to endorse Peachum's idea that love is just a foolish illusion—and one to which women are particularly susceptible. Macheath's comments about looking for a new husband foreshadow this play's sequel, Polly, *in which Macheath and Polly actually do go to the West Indies together. And the "four Wives more" just add comical insult to injury. Macheath's willingness to die rather than meet them (and face the consequences of his actions) shows how cowardly and immoral he truly is.*

ACT 3, SCENE 16

The Player and the Beggar enter the scene. The Player says he hopes the play doesn't actually end with Macheath's execution, but the Beggar says that it must. In fact, all the other characters should be transported or hanged, too. The Player says that this would make the play a tragedy, but operas are supposed to have happy endings. The Beggar admits that the Player is right and declares that the ending will be easy to change, since "this kind of Drama" always has bizarre plot twists. So instead of being executed, Macheath will reunite with his wives. The Beggar explains that, with its original ending, the play was supposed to show how people from the lower and upper classes misbehave in the same ways—but only the poor get punished for it.

Through this surprise scene, Gay once again returns to metatheater—or a theatrical performance that comments on the very fact that it's a performance. In particular, he reminds the audience that his play represents England's unjust political and economic system, and he highlights the way he is both taking from and mocking Italian opera. The Beggar, who represents London's lower classes, explicitly describes the play's message about justice: the rich and powerful (like Peachum) don't pay for their crimes, while the poor (like Macheath) do. While the Beggar wants to end the play by serving justice, however, the Player (who represents the elite) insists on a superficially happy ending. Thus, their conversation plays out the precise kind of injustice that the Beggar is criticizing. Gay also uses this scene to mock the very operatic conventions that the Player insists on following—especially the common trend of ending a play through a deus ex machina *(an unlikely plot device that gives a work of art an unexpected, usually happy ending). Thus, the play ends on a deeply ironic note: instead of letting the plot play out and lead to a just conclusion in which* everyone *gets punished for their crimes, Gay uses a* deus ex machina *to create an even* more *unjust conclusion, in which* nobody *gets punished at all.*

ACT 3, SCENE 17

Surrounded by a massive crowd, Macheath announces that it's time to dance and be merry. He says that, rather than him choosing a wife, his wife will choose *him* by dancing with him. Then, *all* of the women in the crowd start dancing. He announces that he will pair them off for the dance, and that he will dance with Polly. As they dance, he privately tells Polly that they really did get married and that she's his real wife, but she can't tell anyone. He sings one final song about being surrounded by beautiful women who get to take turns seducing him; he can love them all, but he'll only take one to bed, so that "the Wretch of To-day may be happy To-morrow" (*Air 69*).

John Gay gives his audience the happy ending that the Player demanded, but only ironically. While everyone acts *merry and satisfied, only one person actually* ends up *better off: Macheath (who arguably least deserves happiness of anyone). Like at the end of Act 1 and Act 2, he inexplicably gets away with his crimes and learns absolutely nothing in the process. He cheekily promises that he'll only be with one woman at a time—by which he appears to mean on any given night. Of course, what he really means is that he will continue stringing Polly along, promising to be faithful while consorting with other women and barely even making an effort to hide it. Thus, the play's apparent happy ending is really a tragic miscarriage of justice: a criminal once again getting away with his crimes.*

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