# The Threepenny Opera

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BERTOLT BRECHT

Born into a middle-class family in Bavaria at the turn of the 20th century, Bertolt Brecht enjoyed a comfortable childhood—though later in life, he'd claim to have roots in the peasant class. At the onset of World War I, Brecht avoided conscription into the army by enrolling in medical school. His interests soon turned to drama, and in 1918, he wrote his first full-length play, *Baal*, a drama about a degenerate young poet. In the early 1920s, Brecht moved to Munich, where he continued writing plays and found himself hailed by critics as a harbinger of a new era in the theater. As Brecht's star rose, his first marriage began to deteriorate—he sought the company of his lovers Elisabeth Hauptmann and Helene Weigel in Berlin, where he formed theatrical connections and built artistic collectives in the thriving cultural center even as the sun began to set on the Weimar Republic. Brecht and his collaborators sought new methods of theater-making which pointed out the hypocrisy of capitalism and the absurdity of art as escapism. *The Threepenny Opera* premiered in 1928, becoming a verified hit in Berlin and the impetus for a new experimental era in musicals worldwide. In 1933, when Hitler assumed power, Brecht fled Nazi Germany for Denmark and spent the subsequent years moving throughout Scandinavia as the Nazis occupied country after country, eventually fleeing to Los Angeles. Despite the tumult of the period, Brecht produced many of his most famous anti-fascist work during it: *Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage and her Children*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* are hailed today as emblematic of German Exilliteratur, or literature of the exiled. In the late 1940s, as the Red Scare took hold of America, Brecht found himself blacklisted by Hollywood and on trial for Communist sympathies (though a Marxist ideologically, Brecht was never a member of the Communist Party.) His testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee was controversial, and the day after testifying, Brecht returned to Europe. Back in East Berlin in 1949, Brecht established the famous Berliner Ensemble, but his own individual artistic output slowed. Ongoing political strife in East Berlin distressed and disillusioned Brecht, and in 1956, he died of heart failure. His artistic contributions to drama remain influential to this day, and the epic theater movement's reverberations can be felt throughout contemporary theater, film, and opera.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Threepenny Opera* is set in London at the dawn of the Victorian era, just before the coronation of a new queen who is never named, but who is understood to be Victoria herself. The Victorian era, roughly consisting of the period between 1837 and 1901 was marked by progressivism and innovation, but also by social and political strife: the industrial revolution, British imperial expansion, and population booms throughout England, Scotland, and Wales all signaled prosperity, but were undercut by the darker realities such changes created not just in England, but throughout the world. Industrialization and imperialism meant more wealth, money, power, goods, and ease for the upper classes—but they also heralded starvation, death, occupation, and overwork for untold millions of people. Brecht's opera highlights the greed and corruption inspired by capitalism, the hypocrisy of the pomp and heraldry of the monarchy (and the upper classes more largely,) and the gritty reality of life in poverty—all of these things were true of life in Victorian England, but were also parts of life in Weimar-era Berlin. With World War I barely a decade past, the Nazi Party on the rise, and the Wall Street Crash of 1929, which would have global implications, just around the corner, the Berlin of 1928 was in a tenuous social, political, and economic position—and people like Brecht were determined to expose the greed, corruption, and danger simmering below the surface of daily life.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*The Threepenny Opera* is based on Englsih dramatist John Gay's 1728 work *The Beggar's Opera*—a satirical ballad "anti-opera" which poked fun at Italian operas of the 17th and 18th centuries. Brecht and Weill's adaptation preserves much of *The Beggar's Opera*'s original plot—a lusty, conniving highwayman named Macheath draws the ire of Peachum, a fence who buys and resells stolen goods, after marrying Peachum's daughter Polly. Over the course of the play, it's revealed that Macheath has at least two wives, and has impregnated at least four women throughout London. In *The Beggar's Opera*, Macheath also avoids hanging at the last moment when the narrator steps forward to pardon him and award him a happy ending. *The Threepenny Opera* itself has inspired adaptations and re-imaginings, such as a 1931 film directed by G.W. Pabst and a 1989 movie called *Mack the Knife* starring Raul Julia (who famously played the role of Macheath in a 1976 production of the opera at Lincoln Center.) Stephen Sondheim's 1979 opera *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, based on source material dating back to the Victorian era (the same in which *The Threepenny Opera* is ostensibly set,) is another operatic musical which highlights and satirizes social ills relating to political and social corruption, industrialization, and poverty. Mark Hollman and Greg Kotis's 2001 Broadway musical *Urinetown: the Musical* satirizes capitalism, bureaucracy, and the corruption of

the police, purposefully employs many fourth-wall-breaking aspects of epic theater and contains songs which imitate the musical stylings of Kurt Weill's score for *The Threepenny Opera*.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Threepenny Opera* (German: *Die Dreigroschenoper*)
- **When Written:** 1927-1928
- **Where Written:** Berlin
- **Literary Period:** Epic theater
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** London, circa 1800s
- **Climax:** Macheath is freed from the gallows at the last minute through a decree from the newly-crowned Queen of England
- **Antagonist:** Mr. Peachum

## EXTRA CREDIT

**A New Standard.** Kurt Weill composed "Die Moritat von Mackie Messer," or "The Ballad of Mack the Knife," at the very last minute, just days before the show's 1928 premiere, after the actor playing Macheath grew angry that his character did not have a theme, demanded one. The song, which opens and closes the opera, has now become a beloved standard widely known as "Mack the Knife" after a 1954 translation of the song with catchy lyrics made waves stateside. Bobby Darin, Louis Armstrong, Frank Sinatra, and Ella Fitzgerald are just a few of the stars who recorded the song throughout the 1950s and '60s and made it the popular jazz standard it is today—many aren't even aware of its origins.

**Beg, Borrow, Steal.** Innovative theatrical mind though he was, Bertolt Brecht was not the originator of the idea to transform John Gay's 18th-century work *The Beggar's Opera* into a modern-day, German-language play. In 1927, Elisabeth Hauptmann—a German writer and, at the time, Brecht's lover—began translating Gay's opera herself. When a wealthy producer, Ernst Josef Aufricht, rejected one of Brecht's ideas for a new commission for the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, Brecht quickly claimed he had another idea—and stated that he himself had been working on a translation of *The Beggar's Opera*. Aufricht loved the idea, and Brecht presented his lover's work to the producer—as his own.

## PLOT SUMMARY

In a brief prologue, a ballad singer entertains a bustling crowd in the London neighborhood of Soho with a moritat, or murder ballad, about the exploits of the city's slickest, most notorious gangster Macheath, or Mackie the Knife. At the end of the song, a well-dressed man in white gloves and spats slips away from the crowd. A prostitute named Ginny Jenny exclaims that Macheath has gotten away once again.

In Act One, Brecht introduces the audience to Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum—the owner of The Beggar's Friend, an emporium where down-on-their-luck individuals seeking to break into begging can haggle with Peachum for a license to beg in one of London's neighborhood and purchase dirty clothes, cardboard signs, and even faux stumps meant to give one the appearance of an amputee. After Peachum helps a young man named Filch pick out some beggar's rags and stake a claim to one of the fourteen begging districts of London, Peachum's wife, Mrs. Peachum, comes downstairs in a tizzy. She's worried about their daughter Polly, who's been spending all her time with a suitor known only as "the Captain." As Mrs. Peachum describes the man to her husband, Peachum realizes the man his wife is describing is none other than Macheath. Elsewhere, in an empty stable, Macheath and Polly celebrate their elopement with a group of Macheath's thugs. As the "wedding" celebration unfolds, Macheath demands entertainment and well wishes from his gang—but they offer only ribald jokes and halfhearted songs. The kind, generous Polly steps forward and sings a showstopping song about a barmaid who imagines herself to be a dangerous, vengeful pirate queen in order to cope with the cruel, thoughtless treatment she receives from her customers. At the end of the number, one of Macheath's men bursts into the room and announces that the cops are on their way. Macheath is unbothered, and as the sheriff of London, Tiger Brown, steps into the room, the two men greet each other warmly. The two are old army buddies who have an arrangement in which Macheath pays Brown off to let his crimes go unsolved, while Brown warns Macheath whenever a raid is coming. Macheath nervously asks Brown whether Scotland Yard has any records on him, explaining that his new father-in-law won't be happy about the marriage and might try to dig up some dirt on Mactheath. Brown assures Macheath he's in the clear. The next day, Polly returns home to announce her marriage to her parents. Both Peachum and Mrs. Peachum chide Polly for throwing her life away. Polly begs her father to accept her love for Macheath, reminding him that Macheath can provide for her. Mrs. Peachum tries to get Polly to understand Macheath's promiscuous nature by stating that if the man is ever hanged, half a dozen women will show up to mourn him. Peachum declares that a hanging is a great idea. Peachum and his wife come up with a plan to catch Macheath at his favorite brothel in Wapping and report him to the authorities. Polly insists Macheath would never cheat on her and warns her parents they'll have trouble trumping up charges against the man. Peachum, however, declares that Macheath has broken the law in taking Polly from her home and having relations with her. As the Peachums approach the front of the stage to sing the Act 1 finale, they lament how rare happiness is, how base human

beings are, and how the whole world is little more than a "heap of junk."

In Act Two, Polly returns to the stable to warn Macheath that her father and Brown are plotting against him. Macheath is reluctant to flee, but when Polly produces a lengthy list of charges the police have against Macbeth—including statutory rape—he flies into a panic. Macheath orders his men to start moving money out of their accounts and makes plans to hide himself away in the countryside. Before leaving, he urges Polly to take good care of his business—and orders his men to listen to her and do whatever she asks of them. Polly worries that a portentous dream she had recently about the **moon** looking worn and thin signals Macheath's infidelity, but Macheath promises he'll always be true to Polly. Meanwhile, Mrs. Peachum meets with Ginny Jenny, who works at the brothel in Wapping. She urges Jenny to report any sighting of Macheath to the police. Jenny is skeptical that the newly-married Macheath will show his face in Wapping, but Mrs. Peachum declares that a man like Macheath can't help himself when it comes to women. Later, Macheath arrives at the brothel, just as Mrs. Peachum predicted. Macheath and Jenny reunite and sing a song about their checkered past together—they used to be lovers, but Macheath would pimp Jenny out to other men and beat her when she didn't earn enough. They nearly had a child together, but Jenny miscarried, and their relationship dissolved. While still singing, Jenny slips outside, where Mrs. Peachum is waiting with a policeman named Constable Smith. Macheath remains lost in his and Jenny's duet, and doesn't notice the police entering the establishment. Smith nabs Macheath. One of Macheath's most loyal thugs, Hook-finger Jacob, runs off to alert the rest of the gang to their boss's strife. Smith brings Macheath to the Old Bailey, where a nervous Tiger Brown is waiting to apologize to Macheath for his role in the man's capture. Macheath wards Brown away with a punishing stare. As Macheath sits alone in his cell, Lucy Brown—Tiger's daughter—enters and begins lambasting her "husband" for leaving her alone and pregnant. As Lucy and Macheath squabble, Polly enters—the two women, realizing that Macheath has double-timed them both, lob insults at one another. Macheath tries to calm both women down by professing his love for each of them. After Mrs. Peachum arrives to drag Polly away, Macheath promises Lucy he'll send for her once he escapes. He asks her to fetch him his hat and walking stick, which conceals a large knife, off of a nearby hook. She obliges him, then departs. Smith arrives and enters Macheath's cell to take back the weapon, but the armed Macheath seizes the opportunity to escape. Brown arrives and realizes what has happened. He becomes despondent over the authorities' inability to catch Macheath. Peachum enters, asking for his reward—but finds the coppers embarrassed by their failure. Bemused, Peachum warns Brown that if he doesn't catch Macheath soon, the new Queen of England—whose coronation is in just a couple days—will surely have her incompetent sheriff put to death. Macheath and Jenny step forward to sing the second-act finale, a song which describes how mankind must deny his humanity and turn to "mortal sin" just to survive.

In Act Three, Peachum organizes a gang of beggars whom he plans to have disrupt the coronation the following morning with a public protest. Ginny Jenny and several other prostitutes arrive, and Jenny demands her payment from Mrs. Peachum for her role in apprehending Macheath. Mrs. Peachum tells Jenny there's no reward, as Macheath has escaped again. Jenny admits she knows that already—earlier that morning, Macheath visited her room, as well as the rooms of several other prostitutes. Rumor has it, she says, he's now staying at the home of a prostitute named Suky Tawdry. Mrs. Peachum laments Macheath's incorrigible nature. Filch enters and warns the Peachums that the police are nearby. Some of the beggars have instruments, and Peachum instructs them to begin playing when he says the word "harmless." Tiger Brown enters, ready to arrest Peachum for his part in inciting a protest. Peachum chides the policeman for arresting an innocent man when real criminals are still on the loose. Brown, though, orders his men to arrest everyone in the establishment. Peachum tells Brown he's more than welcome to arrest the "harmless" beggars. The band begins playing, and Peachum sings "The Song of the Futility of All Human Endeavor," warning Brown that all his machinations will likely come to nothing. He reminds Brown how bad it'd look for the police to arrest innocent beggars—or to beat or obstruct them at the coronation parade the next day. Brown realizes his hands are tied. He orders his men to find Macheath and arrest him. Meanwhile, back at the Old Bailey, Lucy receives a visitor in her quarters—Polly Peachum. Polly begs Lucy's forgiveness. The two women realize how much energy they've put into loving the no-good Macheath and decide to put aside their differences. Lucy reveals she's not really pregnant, and says that when Macheath is found, Polly is free to have him to herself. The women hear voices outside—Macheath has been arrested again. The next morning, as the bells ring out five o'clock, Smith warns Macheath that he's to be hung at six. Macheath attempts to bribe Smith, offering him a thousand pounds in exchange for release, but Smith says he doubts Macheath can get the money within the hour. Two of Macheath's thugs, Money Matthew and Hook-finger Jacob, enter the hall and demand to see Macheath. Macheath begs the men to head to the bank and withdraw all that's left in their gang's account. The men tell Macheath they laundered the money away but will do their best to get what they can. A distraught Polly enters, fawning over Macheath's bad fortune and professing her enduring love for him. Macheath, however, only asks Polly if she has any money. Polly breaks down in tears, and Smith drags her away. Tiger Brown enters with Macheath's final meal and sits with his old friend as he eats it. Macheath offers to settle debts with the man—but when Brown actually takes out his ledger and begins tallying

what Macheath owes, Macheath becomes enraged and lambasts Brown for repaying his years of friendship by sending him to the gallows. Brown, offended, calls for Smith to come lead Macheath to his execution. As Smith enters, he slyly reminds Macheath that there's still time to escape—if he's got the money. Macheath admits no one has been able to scrounge up the funds. Smith calls for the audience to Macheath's hanging to enter the hall. Peachum, Mrs. Peachum, Polly, Lucy, Matthew, Jacob, Jenny, and many others flood the room and begin saying their tearful goodbyes to Macheath. Even those who professed to hate him are now sad to see him die. As the bells strike six, Macheath sings a song begging for mercy for them all—the outlaws, bandits, whores, burglars, pimps, and even detested coppers. Smith leads Macheath to the gallows, but as the man is strung up, Brown enters with a pardon from the Queen herself. The missive demands Macheath's release, appoints him to the nobility, and grants him a castle and a pension for life. Everyone rejoices. Peachum reminds the audience that they've been watching a play—and that in plays, no one ever comes to the "generally bad" endings that exist in real life. The company comes together to sing a song which reminds the audience that the real world is nothing but a cold and lonely "vale of tribulation."

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Macheath** – Also known as "Mackie the Knife," Macheath is the slickest gangster in London—a notorious thief, murderer, and rapist who gets away with every crime he commits due to his symbiotic, transactional relationship with the sheriff of London, Tiger Brown. Macheath has a reputation for violence and thievery, yet all the denizens of London know that he's slippery as a shark. In this way, Macheath is held up throughout the play as an emblem of someone who has, rather cynically, found a way not just to survive but to thrive in a corrupt, greedy, capitalistic society by becoming a greedy, corrupt capitalist himself. Macheath commands a somewhat ragtag gang of thugs who are deeply loyal to him, if occasionally bumbling or incompetent—while his men Money Matthew, Hook-finger Jacob, Robert the Saw, and Wally the Weeper steal antiques, launder money, and cover up their group's crimes, Macheath is free to romance (and occasionally, the text implies, violently rape) women and focus solely on himself. In spite of his heinous crimes, Brecht makes Macheath the physical and emotional center of the play's action—and allows Macheath to be redeemed at the last minute in spite of his two-timing ways toward Polly and Lucy, his unrepentant bribery of both Tiger Brown and Constable Smith, and his incorrigibly violent, unattached, and disaffected nature. In the end, Macheath is made a nobleman and rewarded with a castle and a pension by none other than the newly-crowned Queen herself in a moment that serves as Brecht's statement on the fundamental injustices of a society which rewards those who stoop as low as they can to survive. Macheath's comical lustiness, narcissism, and bravado make him a compelling character—and yet Brecht is careful to remind audiences that if they root for Macheath's survival, they are rooting for the survival not just of a corrupt individual but a corrupt system.

**Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum** – The proprietor of an establishment called "The Beggar's Friend," a London outfitter which sells shabby clothes, cardboard signs, faux stumps made to give one the appearance of being an amputee, and other accoutrements of poverty meant to make people into more effective beggars. Peachum is, like many of the characters in the play who find themselves involved in the London underworld of crime and subterfuge, a product of his environment; the ravages of capitalism and the values of greed, selfishness, and corruption that proliferate throughout every level of society have forced Peachum to stoop as low as he can in order to survive and provide for his family. Peachum rejoices in the social and economic power he wields over the career beggars he outfits and extorts, and takes glee in the "futility of all human endeavor." Peachum is a practical man who sees love and sex as distractions from life's primary directive: making money off the rich. He openly mocks his daughter Polly's forays into love and romance, and when he finds she's eloped with the notorious gangster Macheath, his rage over his daughter's virtue being stolen is quickly replaced by excitement about a new opportunity to have Macheath arrested and thus inflate his own control over the London underworld. In this way, Peachum is one of the play's most transparently archetypical characters: he is a socialist's critique of a capitalist system, and his entire existence within the world of the play is meant to highlight the dissociation of the rich, the plight of the poor, the cruelty of the world, and the need to "never be too eager to combat injustice" if one is to survive in a harsh world. Peachum's cynical perspective seems to echo the worst and most pessimistic shades of Brecht's own beliefs about society's organization—in this way, he comes to represent the soul of the play's ethos and the foundation of its theses on capitalism, greed, and the function of the bourgeois institution of the theater itself.

**Polly Peachum** – Peachum and Mrs. Peachum's only daughter, and Macheath's newest lover. Polly embodies the archetype of the naïve ingenue—turned by the tides of the **moon** and enraptured by the slick, charming Macheath's attention toward her, Polly agrees to elope with the man in spite of his reputation as a notorious and violent gangster. The two are married, but the text implies that their union has not been sanctified or legalized in any way—though aware of their nontraditional commitment, Polly feels that their unorthodox love story makes their romance even more pure and their bond even more true. Polly is infatuated with Macheath, and truly believes the best of him—she ignores his propensity for sexual violence, his thin

morals, and indeed the fact that he's more concerned with the survival of his and his gang's business than the health or longevity of his and Polly's relationship. Ever the optimist, Polly rarely wanes in her affections for Macheath even when he jilts or shorts her—she discovers his many infidelities (including a second "marriage" to Lucy Brown which may or may not be legitimate,) his violent tempers, and his shaky hold on the shady business of his own making, yet remains dedicated to him until the very end. Polly's unshakeable love for Macheath draws out the artifice of the play—she is a stock character with one directive, and due to that purpose she comes to thematically represent the ideas of love and sex as distractions from larger societal needs, corruption, greed, and selfishness (by being their opposites,) and indeed the archetypes and artifices that are part of theater.

**Mrs. Peachum** – Polly's mother and Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum's wife. Mrs. Peachum is one of the shallower characters in the play—as an archetypical (or stereotypical) vision of a nagging wife and concerned mother, she mostly exists in relation to her husband and daughter. Mrs. Peachum is rather dull, and believes that her daughter's most recent suitor is a fine upstanding gentleman—never mind that the man she knows only as "the Captain" bears a strong resemblance to the notorious gangster Macheath. Once Mrs. Peachum discovers who her daughter is really seeing—and, later, learns that they have eloped—she becomes concerned for her daughter's well-being, and joins her husband in his plot to have Macheath jailed once and for all. Mrs. Peachum is concerned about her daughter's budding sexuality—this arc ties in with the play's theme of love and sex, which dissects the ways in which romance and infatuation distract men and women from their personal self-interests and larger societal duties and obligations.

**Tiger Brown** – The corrupt but genial sheriff of London and an old army buddy of Macheath's. The two old friends, who were stationed together in India years ago, love each other dearly and have a symbiotic relationship in which they support and help one another—Macheath gives Brown a percentage of his gang's takings from their various "jobs," and, in exchange, Brown warns Macheath when a police raid is coming so that he has the chance to prepare, hide, or make things look right for the authorities. Brown cares about Macheath and, in spite of the different paths their lives have taken, regards him nearly as a brother—at the same time, Brecht shows how in spite of their close relationship, at the end of the day Brown sees Macheath as just another thug and debtor. When Macheath is captured and sent to the gallows, Brown tries to settle up accounts with the man and secure the outstanding briberies he's owed before Macheath is put to death. Brecht uses the close but fundamentally incompatible relationship between the two men—one on the side of the law, one a criminal, both desperate simply to survive in their chosen worlds—to demonstrate how corruption and capitalism ravage not just societal structures but intimate relationships as well.

**Ginny Jenny** – A prostitute at a brothel in Wapping and a former lover of Macheath's. Ginny Jenny seems to look back on her past with Macheath with a mixture of longing and revulsion—she was forced to let him pimp her out and often suffered brutal treatment at his hands when things got rough, but claims to have truly loved him and the bizarre life they shared for a time. Still, Jenny has no qualms about conspiring with Peachum to turn Macheath over to the authorities—like everyone else in the play, Jenny is a product of the society in which she lives, and will do whatever it takes to get by in a corrupt, capitalistic world. Jenny expresses herself primarily through song—in "The Song of Solomon," she laments the ways in which men and women throughout history have tried to transcend their lots in life only to fail and suffer. In some productions, the Act 1 number "Pirate Jenny," traditionally sung by Polly, is instead given to Jenny herself, providing even more insight into her quietly unhappy, vengeful, yet against all odds hopeful personalty.

**Lucy Brown** – Tiger Brown's daughter and one of Macheath's "wives," though whether her marriage to the man is or ever was legitimate is never revealed. She comes to visit Macheath when he is jailed at the Old Bailey, only to find that Polly Peachum has had the same idea. As she discovers Macheath's infidelity, she becomes angry and vindictive, but turns her rage onto Polly more than the lover who abandoned her. Eventually, during a private conversation, Lucy and Polly put aside their differences and actually bond over their shared love for Macheath—and their shared frustrations over the ways in which he's mistreated them. Fiery, clever, and possessive, Lucy resents inhabiting the role of the jilted lover—and yet in spite of her pride, she remains loyal to the slick, charismatic Macheath until the very end.

**Constable Smith** – A corrupt London constable who is summoned (and, the text implies, paid) by Peachum to arrest Macheath at the brothel in Wapping. When Smith takes Macheath to be jailed at the Old Bailey, Macheath attempts to bribe him—and it's clear that Smith is willing to be bought. Smith demands a huge sum of money in exchange for letting Macheath go—a sum that even Macheath and his gang struggle to procure quickly. Smith is emblematic of the corruption and greed which infect every level of society—he has no morals, no scruples, and no beliefs, and instead owes his allegiance only to the highest bidder.

**Money Matthew** – A member of Macheath's gang, and seemingly the one of the thugs highest up in the pecking order. Matthew is a gifted thief and liar, and is always willing to put himself on the line for his boss. Matthew seems eager to test what he can get away with, though, and occasionally incurs Macheath's anger for his saucy comments.

**Hook-finger Jacob** – One of Macheath's most loyal thugs.

Jacob frequents a brothel in Wapping and, like Macheath, is often distracted from his own self-interest (and from protecting his boss) by the compay of women. Still, Jacob is always there when Macheath is in trouble, ready to do whatever needs to be done to keep Macheath from the gallows just a while longer.

**Filch** – A young man who visits Peachum's shop "The Beggar's Friend" in hopes of purchasing clothes and accessories that will help him be a more successful beggar. He makes a deal with Peachum, as the play implies a significant number of London's beggars have, to give the man a percentage of his revenue in exchange for permission to panhandle in certain sectors of the city. Filch is introduced early on in order to set up for audiences the world of this play—one in which nothing, not even begging, comes free. Filch expresses loyalty to Peachum even though the man transparently takes advantage of him, demonstrating just how low the characters within the play have to stoop just to get by in such a greedy, corrupt, capitalistic world.

**The Queen** – Though never seen onstage, the new Queen of England's upcoming coronation provides the background for the action of the opera. At the end of the play, a message from the Queen arrives at the Old Bailey just seconds before Macheath's execution—the missive pardons him for his crimes, appoints him a nobleman, and entitles him to a house in the country and a lifelong pension. Brecht includes the Queen as part of the drama in order to show how insulated the rich and powerful are from the ordinary suffering and consequences that are part and parcel of the lives of common men and women.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**Reverend Kimball** – A reverend who shows up at Polly and Macheath's "wedding" not to sanctify or consecrate their marriage, but simply to participate in the festivities. The text implies that Kimball is in the hands of Macheath and his gang, a kind of on-call associate for whatever the thugs might need.

**Suky Tawdry** – A prostitute and lover of Macheath's. Though never seen onstage, the other characters talk about Suky Tawdry and Macheath's insatiable lust for her.

**Robert the Saw** – One of Macheath's thugs.

**Wally the Weeper** – One of Macheath's thugs.

**The Ballad Singer** – A balladeer who entertains London's market day crowds with clever songs.

## 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.

### GREED, SELFISHNESS, AND CORRUPTION

*The Threepenny Opera* is full of greedy, corrupt characters—men and women who lie, steal, cheat, and bribe their way through the world. Yet as Bertolt Brecht introduces these assorted denizens of the London underworld, he refrains from casting judgement upon their survival tactics, even when those tactics are unfair or immoral. In The Threepenny Opera, Brecht ultimately argues that a society built on greed, selfishness, and corruption essentially forces its people to become similarly greedy, selfish, and corrupt in order to get by.

Throughout the play, Brecht uses a cast of characters who are corrupt in both practices and morals to outline the different ways in which a capitalist society run by greedy, selfish individuals breeds a new crop of greedy, selfish individuals from the bottom up. In doing so, Brecht shows how living in a debased and immoral society forces people to sink to the level of the status quo in order to survive. Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum's run-down emporium, The Beggar's Friend, is a major example of dishonesty and greed as a means of survival. The establishment is a place where people seeking to outfit themselves as beggars—whether out of necessity or experimentation—can buy dirty clothes, cardboard signs, and even false stumps designed to give one the appearance of being an amputee, all designed to elicit pity from wealthier people. Peachum profits off of other people's woe and misfortune as he sells licenses to beg, yet he's gleeful about his total financial control over the beggars of London. The cold and calculated Peachum takes a percentage from every beggar he licenses and analyzes which Bible verses, when scrawled on signs, might induce the most "misery" in passersby and convince them to spare some change. Peachum is a corrupt, greedy individual through and through. He selfishly thinks of emotion and empathy only in terms of how they might financially benefit him. Yet Brecht is careful to show how Peachum is a product of his environment. With poverty and disaffectedness so rampant throughout London, it makes sense that the only way to survive is to find a way to profit off the suffering of others. Peachum knows the kind of world he lives in: in Act 3, he declares that as he's spent many "sleepless nights working out how to extract a few pence from [...] poverty," he's realized that the rich are "weaklings and fools." Peachum has nothing but contempt for the rich, but also knows that they have nothing but contempt for the likes of him. Therefore, he's come up with a way to provide for his family and profit off the status quo—even though he's had to stoop to a new level of corruption to do so.

Macheath and his gang represent yet another example of how individuals living in a corrupt society must turn to corrupt means in order to get by: the gang members steal and kill,

commit arson and larceny, and generally create mayhem. But Brecht often appears to celebrate their gains throughout the opera, showing how Macheath and his thugs have found a way to gain not only material success, but the fear and thus respect of their community. In a corrupt society obsessed with a monarchy that cares nothing for the working class, Macheath and his gang have found a way to profit off of society's fixation on the upcoming coronation of the queen, committing crimes while the masses are distracted. Macheath and his gang know that their society is unfair and unjust—and figure that they might as well make out like bandits while they can. Macheath is a former army man who has witnessed society's corruption from the an insider's perspective: he's seen how the royal army recruits good men and sends them to their deaths, how the police turn a blind eye to injustice, and how the rich ignore the plight of the poor. Thus, he knows that the only way to make something of himself is to become a major player in the London underworld, amassing a reputation built not on the bourgeoisie's arbitrary markings of success, but instead on the hard-won respect and fear of others like him.

Another way Macheath and his gang turn to corruption within an already-corrupt society is by making bargains with the cops of London—most notably the sheriff Tiger Brown, an old army buddy of Macheath's, and the changeable Constable Smith, always eager to accept a bribe. The thugs and the cops form a symbiotic bond: the cops agree to let Macheath's gang get away with their crimes as long as the thugs give them a percentage of their earnings. In return, the cops tip Macheath off when a raid is coming. This relationship is a symptom of a corrupt society which moralizes without actually pursuing justice, thus creating individuals who know they can get away with nearly anything if they offer the right price.

As Brecht parades a set of characters of loose moral values and behavior before his audience, he is careful never to pass judgement upon them. Brecht shows how a society which is corrupt at every level breeds individuals who have no choice but to resort to greed, subterfuge, and crime just to survive. *The Threepenny Opera* is a scathing social critique of societies and governments which skate by on immorality—never stopping to consider the wider, deeper effects of institutional corruption.

## LOVE AND SEX

In *The Threepenny Opera*, the slick, cunning, and magnetic gangster Macheath has recently married Polly Peachum and thus angered her father, the powerful and corrupt Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum. Peachum, furious with Macheath for absconding with his daughter, devises a plan to send Macheath to jail once and for all. Macheath gets word of Peachum's plan and goes on the run from the law—but because he decides to pay a series of visits to former mistresses and prostitutes, he misses opportunity after opportunity to get out of London and hide out in the country. By illustrating Macheath's insatiable and often ill-advised lust contrasted against the suffering of his jilted lovers Polly, Lucy, and Ginny Jenny, Brecht argues that love and sex are destructive forces which render men and women alike incapable of making sound, smart choices—a dangerous handicap in a world where a person must constantly have their wits about them in order to outmaneuver the forces of capitalism and corruption.

As *The Threepenny Opera* unfolds, Brecht incorporates elements of the sex farce or "bedroom farce," a kind of light comedy which focuses on multiple iterations of romantic and sexual pairings throughout a bumbling cast of characters. Macheath's exploits, albeit humorous for the audience, show how lust and love create diversions and conflicts which distract men and women alike from the real enemy: corrupt capitalism. Macheath is the central character around whom other players in the sex farce subplot revolve. In his romantic entanglements with Polly Peachum, Lucy Brown, Ginny Jenny, and the offscreen presence Suky Tawdry, Macheath finds himself distracted from his directive to evade a raid by the police drummed up by Mr. Peachum. Instead, Macheath is repeatedly drawn into whorehouses, reminiscences of past relationships, and spats with present and former lovers.

In the middle of their nontraditional wedding ceremony in an abandoned stable in the heart of Soho, a London neighborhood, Macheath and Polly Peachum get news from Macheath's old army friend Tiger Brown—the sheriff of London—that Polly's father, Peachum, wants Macheath hanged for absconding with his only daughter. Macheath attempts to go on the run—but winds up stopping off at a brothel in Wapping, another London neighborhood, to reconnect with his former lover Ginny Jenny. Jenny once allowed Macheath to work as her pimp, but has (unbeknownst to the gangster) conspired with Peachum to turn Macheath into the authorities. As Macheath prepares to seek shelter in the country after his wedding to Polly, he promises that he'll be true to her and refrain from wasting his time with "secondhand goods." However, as Macheath departs, Polly's mother Mrs. Peachum steps forward to the front of the stage to serenade the audience with "The Ballad of Sexual Submissiveness"—a song in which she laments Macheath's inability to resist the pull of his own lust. Macheath proves himself easily distractible from his own self-interest: his lust is too much to contain, and there is perhaps a part of him that also finds sexual gratification in close calls with the law. As Macheath tempts fate by running off to a brothel—and subsequently finds himself jailed,—Brecht shows how love and lust distract from survival in a dangerously corrupt world.

In jail, Macheath finds himself visited by Lucy Brown—Tiger Brown's daughter, who is revealed to be Macheath's first "wife" (though whether their marriage is or ever was legitimate is never revealed). A distraught Polly arrives and finds out about

Macheath's betrayal—but before the women can settle their spat, Macheath gets broken out of jail and goes on the run again. This time, however, he stops at the house of Suky Tawdry—yet another former lover and prostitute—and is apprehended and brought back to jail once again, this time to face the gallows. As Macheath seems to face certain death toward the end of the play, the other characters chide him for stopping off to visit Suky Tawdry rather than seizing his second unlikely chance at escape. The other characters make a fool out of Macheath for his frivolous choices—thereby demonstrating Brecht's contempt for the ways in which the pull of "sexual submissiveness" distracts otherwise scrappy, intelligent people from their own self-interest.

Throughout *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht shows how love and lust easily make fools out of men and women alike. This argument, however, is not the play's most radical one—the deeper assertion Brecht makes is that in a society governed by the corruption and greed, lust and love are distractions and indeed liabilities meant to keep the impoverished working class from focusing on what truly matters: revolution.

## THE RAVAGES OF CAPITALISM

In *The Threepenny Opera*, ordinary people from all walks of life make extra cash by posing as poor beggars. They do so by purchasing the accoutrements of begging (cardboard signs, faux stumps to give themselves the appearance of being amputees, and oily, shabby clothes) at The Beggar's Friend, a shop run by Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum. However, "the poorest of the poor," those who have actually been forced into begging, are never seen onstage. As the rich literally profit off of the poor, Brecht—a politically divisive figure whose career often suffered because of his radical outspokenness concerning his anti-capitalist values—uses *The Threepenny Opera* to show how capitalism has ravaged society. He ultimately argues that until a better economic system takes its place, all human life is doomed to be a "vale of tribulation" marked by sorrow, corruption, and coldness—not just in society, but in the very soul.

Throughout *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht supplies many scenes, songs, and lines which further his assertion that capitalism makes futile and hopeless all human endeavor toward personal or collective progress. Two songs in particular (taken from Act 3, the height of the play's commotion) stand out as emblematic of Brecht's messaging about the cruelty and banality of capitalism. "The Song of Futility of All Human Endeavor" (sung somewhat triumphantly by Peachum at the start of the Act 3) is a tune whose message is exactly what the song's title suggests. In the song, Peachum warns against making plans for one's life or even attempting to live "by [one's own] head," or one's intellect. Men's "ideal ambitions / Are one great big cheat," Peachum asserts. He is straightforward and unemotional as he delivers his sardonic number. Brecht includes "The Song of Futility of All Human Endeavor" to show how life under capitalism has warped not only his characters' morals, but their outlooks as well. Peachum has found a way to survive in a corrupt capitalist society that lets him live—but this number suggests that his survival comes at great cost not just to his own sense of self-worth but to his belief in any kind of happiness, fulfillment, or meaningful success. Brecht's characters reflect his own disillusionment with the offerings of life under capitalism—but also with people's collective inability to pull themselves out of their despair and find a workable solution that allows for the possibility of a better world, just treatment, or fair pay for fair work.

Shortly after Peachum delivers his thesis on the "futility of all human endeavor," Ginny Jenny steps forward to address the audience and offer her own take on the same subject. In "The Song of Solomon," Jenny recounts how famous people throughout history strove for too much, and fell from grace as they did—man is "better off without," Jenny resignedly sings. Her song even makes reference to "the inquisitive" Brecht's own struggles against capitalism: "His songs—you loved them so," she sings; "but when too of the asked where from / The riches of the rich did come / You made him pack his bag and go." The "consequence[s]" Brecht himself faced throughout his career as a result of his anti-capitalist beliefs is held up against the cruelties done unto Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, King Solomon, and indeed the fictional Macheath. Jenny's song, like Peachum's, serves as Brecht's own commentary on the ways in which capitalism has ravaged not just the organization of society but the individuals within it. People like Jenny—down and out, shunned from the mainstream, filled with self-loathing and a sense of insufficiency—believe that man should do "without" rather than strive for anything within the confines of a society rigged against individuality, progress, and nontraditional success.

*The Threepenny Opera* is an outright critique of capitalist society. In the mid-1920s, Bertolt Brecht and many of his contemporaries living in Germany's Weimar Republic dared to dream of a world organized around something other than money—and were often vilified for their beliefs. Almost all of Brecht's work in some way indicts capitalism—but The Threepenny Opera represents perhaps his most vital, direct assertion that until society finds a better way to organize itself, all human effort toward real progress or happiness will be futile.

## THEATER, ARCHETYPES, AND ARTIFICE

During his lifetime, Bertolt Brecht became well-known as one of the foremost (and most experimentally-minded) practitioners of "epic theater"—a theatrical form in which the audience is constantly reminded of their role as spectators, and in which the play or opera makes frequent nods to its own dramatic structure.

Throughout *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht deepens the self-referential aesthetic of epic theater by employing the use of character archetypes which add to the moralistic, cheeky plot. Through the twinned use of archetypes and artifice—artifice in this instance representing the contrived nature of the opera's plot, and the ways in which the work repeatedly recognizes itself as a construct—Brecht argues that theater should not be an institution of or for the bourgeoisie. Rather, it should be a way for common people to see themselves and their plights represented by the actors—a similarly working-class group of peers who are equally angry about the social, economic, and political injustices of the world.

All of Brecht's theatrical works involve some measure of artifice—revealing the mechanics of theatrics, after all, is one of the key tenets of the epic theater movement. In *The Threepenny Opera*, however, Brecht also makes use of character archetypes—the slick gangster, the lovestruck ingenue, the "ginny" whore, the beggar, the corrupt policeman—to highlight the inequity inherent in theater: the very people the play is, or should be, for are often barred from seeing it due to being priced out or shunned from "polite" society. By creating an opera—traditionally regarded as a high art form—about and for the lower classes, Brecht put a radical message onstage: theater should be a form for the masses rather than the privileged few. To hammer home his message, he created a play about the London underworld, and the beggars, thieves, and prostitutes who populate it. Many of the characters in the play are archetypes or even stereotypes, rendered in broad strokes so that they translate to less-educated audiences as well as lampoon the idea that the bourgeoisie often see those of the lower classes as one-dimensional people. Macheath, for instance, is a slick and womanizing gangster. Polly Peachum is a virtuous, virginal ingenue constantly insecure about her position in her lover's heart. Filch, a street beggar, has a sob story about his life which is so hackneyed and predictable that Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum is able to finish his sentences for him as he tells it. The sheriff, Tiger Brown, is stereotypically corrupt—he willingly takes bribes from Macheath, and as Macheath readies himself to go to the gallows toward the end of the play, Brown even takes out his notebook to settle accounts with the gangster and get paid what he's owed. Brecht trades in these stereotypes—which might, in another context, be seen as harmful or demeaning—in order to signal contempt not for the class of people on which his play focuses, but for the class of people who might come to the theater to be entertained by flat, satirical portrayals of them. In a rousing number toward the end of the opera, "Ballad in Which Macheath Begs Pardon of All," Macheath sings about how "wenches," "urchins," "outlaws, bandits, burglars, gunmen [as well as] abortionists and pimps" deserve "mercy one and all." Brecht's sympathies are made crystal clear in this number—while coppers are "sons of bitches" and those "who will live long and die [comfortably] in bed" tend to "harden [their] hearts" against the less fortunate, the lower classes are made up of individuals who are worthy of mercy, deliverance, justice, and kindness. Though Brecht's outlook on society's capacity to give those things to the overlooked and downtrodden is decidedly less than optimistic, he subversively uses the framework of epic theatre to tell a tale about the inherent worthiness of those people whom bourgeoisie society ordinarily "cannot bear to see."

In *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht employs the constructs of epic theatre to create a theater piece which actively forces audiences to feel complicit in the crime, corruption, and calamity unfolding before them. At the same time, he seeks to constantly remind his viewer that they are sitting comfortably in a theater watching others sing and dance for their entertainment as a way of lampooning the activities and diversions of the bourgeoisie. The result is a political statement about the role of art in activism, the place of arbitrary class distinctions in corruption, and the possibility of revolutionizing society from the inside out and the bottom up.

## SYMBOLS

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

### THE MOON

Because of the nature of epic theater and its straightforward, fourth-wall-demolishing, stark method of storytelling, there aren't a lot of symbols in *The Threepenny Opera*. One recurring image that does, however, serve a kind of symbolic purpose is that of the moon. Throughout the opera, several characters notice the brightness of the moon over their London neighborhood of Soho—and the effect the moonlight has on one another's behavior. Polly's parents, Peachum and Mrs. Peachum, worry that the moon is inspiring their daughter to pursue romance with an inappropriate suitor; Macheath, the thief and scoundrel, uses moongazing to draw Polly in and inspire amorous feelings within her; Polly later admits to her parents, somewhat triumphantly, that the moon has played a large role in her being drawn to Macheath. Later on in the play, after the furious Peachum has had Macheath jailed for his crimes, Polly visits her new husband in prison to lament that she's had a dream that the moon was "quite then, like a penny […] all worn away." Thus the moon emerges as a symbol of the frivolity of romance and infatuation—and the changeable nature of love, sex, and lust. As one of the major themes of the play concerns the ways in which love and sex distract men and women from the more pressing social issues of corruption, greed, capitalism, and bureaucratic abuse, it makes sense that Brecht would work in a symbol which paints the pull of infatuation as something inconstant,

ever-changing, faraway, and mysterious.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *The Threepenny Opera* published in 1994.

### Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

PEACHUM: Something new — that's what we must have. My business is too difficult. You see, my business is trying to arouse human pity. There are a few things that'll move people to pity, a few, but the trouble is, when they've been used several times, they no longer work. Human beings have the horrid capacity of being able to make themselves heartless at will.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 5

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the first scene of Act One, the play introduces its audience to Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum. The proprietor of a shop called The Beggar's Friend where those seeking to start working as street beggars and panhandlers can purchase dirty clothes, cardboard signs, faux stumps, and other accoutrements, Peachum is often the play's most direct mouthpiece for Brecht's tirades against the emotional and economic insulation of the upper classes, the futility of human endeavor, and the ravages of capitalism. In this passage, Peachum sets up one of the play's central concerns: as the rich have gotten richer, they've become better at making themselves "heartless at will"—a trait even the average human being can easily summon. Peachum laments that people aren't good to one another anymore and often seek to turn away from a fellow person in need—but he nonetheless goes on to explain how he intends to continue turning a plum profit off of the base disaffectedness of his fellow men. In a corrupt, unfeeling world, one must be corrupt in order to survive.

MRS. PEACHUM: You've got a nice opinion of your daughter!

PEACHUM: The worst! The very worst! She is nothing but a mass of sensuality.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum, Mrs. Peachum (speaker), Polly Peachum

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 11

**Explanation and Analysis**

As Peachum and his wife discuss their daughter, Polly, who has recently been out every night with a new suitor they know only as "the Captain," Peachum declares that Polly is going to get herself in trouble by running off with a man. He describes his daughter as "a mass of sensuality," thus demonstrating his disdain for feelings of love, lust, romance, and infatuation. One of the play's central thematic concerns is the ways in which men and women find themselves besotted and thus distracted from what should be the primary projects of their lives: resisting capitalism and corruption and inspiring revolution amongst their fellow people. Peachum, while not necessarily focused on the betterment of society or promoting the freedom of the disenfranchised, expresses his belief that being too sensual, too emotional, or too easily susceptible to the forces of love and lust is "the very worst" way to move through the world.

### Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

POLLY (*crying*): All those poor people, just for a few bits of furniture!

MACHEATH: And what furniture! Junk! You're right to be angry. A rosewood harpsichord — and a Renaissance sofa. That's unforgivable. And where's a table?

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

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 16

**Explanation and Analysis**

As Polly and Macheath celebrate their marriage in an abandoned stable in the heart of Soho, members of Macheath's gang bring stolen furniture, food, and pieces of décor to help make the dank, dark barn feel more cozy. As they march through the space depositing stolen goods all around—goods obtained through thievery and murder—Polly laments that "all those poor people" have had to suffer for her own happiness. Macheath, however, is simply upset that his thugs weren't able to procure finer, more expensive things. There is a lot to unpack in this

passage, as Polly and Macheath's divergent reactions to the presence of stolen goods spell out a lot about two of the play's major themes: greed, selfishness, and corruption, and the ravages of capitalism. Polly's exclamation unwittingly contains the central problem, in Brecht's view, of modern capitalism: "poor people" are made to toil laboriously to create goods for the rich—"just a few bits of furniture" that the people who receive them might not even like. To expose a system which exploits the poor and caters to the rich, Brecht employs the symbolic metaphor of Macheath and his gang procuring stolen goods in order to abstractly examine how much turmoil comes from every stage of consumerism.

MACHEATH: We were boyhood friends, and though the great tides of life have swept us far apart, although our professional interests are quite different — some might even say diametrically opposed — our friendship has survived it all. […] Seldom have I, the simple hold-up man […] undertaken the smallest job without giving my friend Brown a share of the proceeds (a considerable share, Brown) as a token and a proof of my unswerving loyalty to him. And seldom has the all-powerful Sheriff […] organized a raid without previously giving a little tip-off to me, the friend of his youth. […] It's all a matter of give and take.

**Related Characters:** Macheath (speaker), Tiger Brown

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 29

**Explanation and Analysis**

As Tiger Brown, the sheriff of London and a "boyhood friend" and army buddy of Macheath's, shows up to Macheath and Polly's wedding, the rest of Macheath's gang is nervous—but Macheath himself explains to Polly that he and "the all-powerful Sheriff" actually have a symbiotic relationship in which each of them helps the other through bribery and subterfuge. This passage is important because it shows that Macheath is not a particularly good thief, nor is Brown a particularly good cop, though they both have reputations for being the best in their respective fields. Instead, the versions of them the public understands are false and artificial. Brecht points out the corruption not just of a cop who takes bribes from criminals—but of a criminal who knows he can get away with any crime just because he's bought off the authorities. Though Brecht clearly finds issue with this arrangement, Macheath's assessment that "it's all a matter of give and take" reflects the play's morally ambiguous worldview.

## Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

PEACHUM: Well, what *do* you want? What can *I* do about it if people have hearts of granite. I can't make you five stumps! In ten minutes I can make such a wreck out of any man that a dog would howl if he saw him. What can I do if *people* won't howl? There, take another stump, if one's not enough for you.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 35

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Peachum confronts a beggar who has come to The Beggar's Friend, complaining that even with a false amputated limb, he still can't arouse enough pity in the passerby of London to make a decent living. Peachum, frustrated, declares that even with "five stumps," one might not be able to elicit the desired attention, let alone money, they want from a member of the upper classes. Peachum can't make people feel guilt or solidarity—even the artifices he provides to his beggars can't do that. Frustrated with the world's ambivalence, Peachum declares, in a roundabout way, that people are worse than dogs—incapable of empathy, self-concerned to the point of sociopathy, and utterly unmoved by humanity's collective plight. Brecht is using the artifice of theater to attempt to wake people up to the suffering of the masses—Peachum's attempt to use the artifice of poverty to make a buck is presented here as being perhaps just as futile as Brecht's endeavor.

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

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** POLLY AND MRS. PEACHUM: We do not mind confessingThe whole thing is depressing.The world is poor and men are bad And we have nothing more to add. 40

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the first act finale, the Peachum family approaches the front of the stage to sing a song to the audience directly. Their lives are in shambles—Peachum is having trouble wrangling his army of beggars, who are dissatisfied with their work and frustrated by the upper classes' inability to empathize with their plight; Polly is married to a man her parents disapprove of and are scheming to have arrested;

Mrs. Peachum laments not having been able to prepare her daughter better for the pitfalls of love, lust, and life as a woman. All three of the Peachums, in a classically Brechtian scene, break the fourth wall as they declare that "the world is poor and men are bad." This confessional to the audience reflects not only the characters' personal concerns, but Brecht's aesthetic and existential concerns as a writer as well. Many of the characters in *The Threepenny Opera* are megaphones for Brecht's anti-capitalist discontent and his nihilistic misanthropy—in this scene, the Peachums fulfill their duties as characters and thus demonstrate their part in the artifice that is such a fundamental part of Brechtian theater.

## Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

POLLY: Mac, last night I had a dream. I was looking out of the window and I heard laughter in the street, and when I looked up I saw our moon, and the moon was quite thin, like a penny that's all worn away. Don't forget me, Mac, in the strange cities.

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

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 47

### Explanation and Analysis

As Polly goes to Macheath to warn him that her father and Brown have settled on a list of charges against Macheath, she urges him to flee London and lay low for a while to avoid the cops, who have been backed into a corner by Peachum's threats of leading a beggars' revolt. In this passage, Polly confesses to Macheath that she's worried about the state of their relationship—and what will become of their marriage when they are parted. Polly invokes a dream about the moon—a symbol, throughout the play, of the pull of the forces of love and lust—in which the moon appeared thin, "like a penny that's all worn away." Polly's comparison of a symbol of love to a symbol of capitalist subservience and abject poverty alike—a single "thin" penny—reveals the ways in which society and her upbringing, both centered around money, have produced an inability in her to distinguish the desire for love from the desire for wealth.

MRS. PEACHUM: Let me tell you this, Jenny: if all London were after him, Macheath is not the man to give up his old habits.

Now here's a man who fights old Satan's battle:
The butcher, he! All other men, mere cattle!
He is a shark with all the world to swim in!
What gets him down? What gets 'em all down? Women.
He may not want to, but he'll acquiesce
For such is sexual submissiveness.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Peachum (speaker), Macheath, Ginny Jenny

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 48-49

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mrs. Peachum and Ginny Jenny, having newly hatched a plot to catch Macheath at Jenny's brothel in Wapping and turn him into the police, sing "The Ballad of Sexual Submissiveness." In this song, Mrs. Peachum laments that a man as powerful as Macheath—a criminal as slick as Satan and strong as a butcher—is brought down repeatedly by his own lust for the company of women. Macheath's "sexual submissiveness" is his core character flaw, and the reason that he gets into so much trouble over the course of the play as the opera morphs from anti-capitalist spectacle to bedroom farce and back again. In the number, which is again a direct address to the audience, Mrs. Peachum declares that she has no faith in Macheath's ability to control his basest impulses and "give up his old habits." She disdains his inability to resist the forces of lust and love—just as Peachum decried the same traits in their daughter Polly.

## Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

BROWN: I hope my men don't catch him! Dear God, I hope he's beyond Highgate Moor thinking of his old friend Jacky! But he's thoughtless, like all men. If they should bring him in now, and he were to look at me with those faithful friendly eyes, I couldn't stand it. Thank God, there's a moon: once he's out in the country, he'll find his way all right.

**Related Characters:** Tiger Brown (speaker), Macheath

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 55

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, as Tiger Brown waits at the Old Bailey to see whether Constable Smith and his team have been successful in apprehending Macheath, he prays privately for Macheath's safety. Brown wants for his friend to evade the law—partly, to be sure, out of his own desire to maintain the quid pro quo of their relationship, but also out of a genuine love for Macheath. This real love for his childhood friend is represented by Brown's invocation of the moon high about London—a symbol, throughout the play, of love and romance. While Macheath and Brown don't have a sexual relationship, they do perhaps have one of the most genuine partnerships in the play. Even though their relationship is based on mutual reward, their kinship with one another stretches back over the years—these men have known each other through thick and thin, and still choose to support one another in spite of their divergent lives. There's also a cynical perspective to be examined here: Brecht may be suggesting that perhaps the only real relationships that can thrive and endure throughout the years are those in which both parties get something material out of them, so motivated is the world by selfishness and greed.

MACHEATH: In spring I ask: could there be something to it?
Could not Macheath be great and solitary?
But then the year works round to January
And I reply: My boy, you'll live to rue it.
Poverty makes you sad as well as wise
And bravery mingles danger with the fame.
Poor, lonely, wise and brave — in heaven's name!
Good-bye to greatness! I return the prize
With this my repartee of repartees:
None but the well-to-do can take their ease.

**Related Characters:** Macheath (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 57

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Macheath has found himself imprisoned at the Old Bailey. As he sits alone in his cold cell, he sings a song in which he contemplates whether he could be happy, as some people are, living a quiet, simple, humble life in poverty and solitude. Macheath is a larger-than-life figure who loves dressing well, enjoying the company of women, and basking in the accolades and scandals that come with his profession. Only the "well-to-do can take their ease," Macheath ultimately decides—he does not want to abandon greatness (and can't afford to.) His life will not be marked by ease, as he's not one of the bourgeoisie—he has to work not just for cash, but for respect as well, and is now too deep into the life he leads to envision something other than it. This song is partly triumphant—but also a little sad, as it reflects Brecht's contempt for those who have stooped to the lowest of the low simply to make do in a society that privileges the corrupt, the selfish, and the flashy.

MACHEATH: What does a man live by? By resolutely
Ill-treating, beating, cheating, eating some
other bloke!
A man can only live by absolutely
Forgetting he's a man like other folk!

CHORUS OFF:
So, gentlemen, do not be taken in:
Men live exclusively by mortal sin.

**Related Characters:** Macheath (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 67

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the second act finale, Machaeth and an offstage chorus composed of the play's other characters sing a song about the ways in which man is forced to live in modern times—by betraying his fellow man and shoving down his own sense of humanity in order to get away with doing so. "Men live exclusively by mortal sin," the chorus states, hammering home Brecht's central thesis that the ravages of capitalism have inspired people to become so greedy, selfish, corrupt, and even downright soulless that they see no issue in doing evil to their fellow men. To suppress one's own humanity in the face of suffering—or to put even more suffering into an already bleak world—is nothing less than a "mortal sin" in Brecht's view. As sinners in this world seem to go largely unpunished, Brecht seems to implicitly recognize that the only incentive to be good is goodness itself—and he shows how unfortunately, common moral decency is not nearly a good-enough motivator to rescue people from their own basest instincts.

## Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

PEACHUM: Come on, come on! You'd all be rotting in the sewers of Wapping if I hadn't spent sleepless nights working out how to extract a few pence from your poverty. And I did work out something: that the rich of the earth indeed create misery, but they cannot bear to see it. They are weaklings and fools just like you. As long as they have enough to eat and can grease their floors with butter so that even the crumbs that fall from their tables grow fat, they can't look with indifference on a man collapsing from hunger — although, of course, it must be in front of *their* house that he collapses.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 72

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Peachum attempts to reason with a group of prostitutes led by Ginny Jenny who have come to The Beggar's Friend to demand payment for their role in giving Macheath over to the police. Peachum and his wife are reluctant to turn the payment over, as Macheath has escaped from jail again—but in this speech, Peachum attempts to show the women that their fellow working people are not the enemy: the rich who create such a dearth of resources are. Peachum uses this passage to instill in the prostitutes a sense of indignation toward those who are fine with the world spinning on as it is "as long as they have enough to eat." This passage is emblematic of Brecht's disdain for the self-centered bourgeoisie: those individuals who cannot look beyond their own nose for long enough to notice their own privilege.

PEACHUM: The law is simply and solely made for the exploitation of those who do not understand it or of those who, for naked need, cannot obey it. And who ever would pick up the crumbs of this exploitation must strictly obey the law.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum (speaker), Tiger Brown

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 74

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Peachum deals with a visit from Tiger Brown—the sheriff of London—who has come to arrest a group of prostitutes and beggars who've gathered at The Beggar's Friend. Peachum, however, stops Brown in his tracks and begins a negotiation. Peachum lays out his beliefs about the law and hypocrisy, describing his contempt for a system that "exploit[s]" those who cannot understand or interpret it—or who are forced to disobey it simply to survive in a corrupt, capitalistic, uncaring world. Peachum warns Brown that he, as a man who "pick[s] up the crumbs of [...] exploitation," should think carefully before making any moves against the poor. In other words, Peachum is saying that he doesn't believe Brown is above the law—and shouldn't act like it. Peachum seems to believe that men like Brown see the law as an artifice or a pretense, when they are the very individuals who should hold themselves to its tenets most steadfastly.

PEACHUM: Go make yourself a plan
And be a shining light.
Then make yourself a second plan
For neither will come right.

For the situation
Men aren't bad enough or vile.
Human aspiration
Only makes me smile.

Go running after luck
But don't you run too fast:
We all are running after luck
And luck is running last.

For the real conditions
Men are more demanding than is meet.
Their ideal ambitions
Are one great big cheat.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum (speaker), Tiger Brown

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 76

**Explanation and Analysis**

In "Song of the Futility of All Human Endeavor," Peachum leads an orchestra of beggars in a rousing oom-pah-pah number about how futile—and arguably stupid—it is to try at anything in life. "Human aspiration" makes Peachum—a cynical man who has structured his life around profiting off

of humanity's basest instincts—positively giddy with laughter, and he feels that whether one relies on luck or carefully-laid plans, everything amounts only to "one great big cheat." This song is, like most of the songs in the play, relatively tongue-in-cheek—but at the same time, reveals a deep cynicism and nihilism inherent to the aesthetics of Brechtian theater. Peachum is the character who most directly voices many of Brecht's own beliefs, and here, his words reflect Brecht's frustration with the ways in which capitalism and corruption have turned society into a rigged game which only the richest of the rich can hope to "win."

GINNY JENNY: You know the inquisitive Bertolt Brecht
His songs — you loved them so.
But when too oft he asked where from
The riches of the rich did come
You made him pack his bag and go.
Oh how inquisitive was Brecht!
But long before the day was out
The consequence was clear, alas!
Inquisitiveness had brought him to this pass:
A man is better off without.

**Related Characters:** Ginny Jenny (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 79

**Explanation and Analysis**

In "The Song of Solomon," Ginny Jenny steps forward to provide a treatise on human endeavor that echoes Peachum's earlier song, "The Song of the Futility of All Human Endeavor." Jenny, however, has her own take on the matter—and as she invokes various historical figures such as King Solomon, Cleopatra, and Julius Caesar, a pattern emerges: those throughout history who have strived to be greater, do better, and feel more deeply should have recognized that they'd be "better off without." In this passage from the song, Ginny Jenny invokes "the inquisitive Bertolt Brecht," the playwright himself, in an act of artifice which shows the seams of the play and lets Brecht's own identity as the puppet master of each character shine through. In this stanza, Brecht-as-Jenny laments that his anti-capitalist values and questioning of society's organization around "the riches of the rich" have resulted in his being shunned or cast out of certain parts of society. Brecht-as-Jenny goes on to cheekily suggest he would have been "better off without" inquisitiveness, politics, or perspective. This tongue-in-cheek assertion uses irony and cynicism to mark a very real dissatisfaction and even an emotional disappointment in the ways in which society fails those who go against the grain and seek more from life.

## Act 3, Scene 3 Quotes

POLLY: Mackie, are you very nervous? Who was your father? There's so much you haven't told me. I don't understand it at all: you were really always quite healthy.

MACHEATH: Polly, can't you help me out?

POLLY: Of course.

MACHEATH: With money, I mean.

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

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 88

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Polly comes to visit Macheath after he has been apprehended a second time. Polly knows that both times her husband has been caught by the law, he's been caught in the company of prostitutes—but the devoted Polly is still horrified by the idea of being separated from her beloved Macheath. In this scene, she tries desperately to use their final moments together to learn more about the man—to ask him questions about his childhood and get to the root of his humanity. Macheath, though, is only concerned about money. This passage calls into question the foundation of Polly and Macheath's entire relationship—which, according to Macheath's behavior here, has been little more than artifice. Polly must contend with the fact that her husband is more interested in his own survival than anything else—and always will be, even if he does manage to escape the looming shadow of the gallows.

MACHEATH: The outlaws, bandits, burglars, gunmen
All Christian souls that love a brawl
Abortionists and pimps and fun-men
I cry them mercy one and all.

Except the coppers — sons of bitches —
For every evening, every morning
Those lice came creeping from their niches
And frequently without a warning.

Police! My epidermis itches!
But for today I'll let that fall
Pretend I love the sons of bitches
And cry them mercy one and all.

**Related Characters:** Macheath (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 94

**Explanation and Analysis**

Just before Macheath is led to the gallows to be hung, he sings one final song of his own. In this ballad, he begs forgiveness for all the low-lives of the world, declaring that everyone—even the poor, the downtrodden, and the outcast—deserve forgiveness, grace, and even goodness. Brecht knows that many bourgeois audiences might see the "outlaws, bandits, burglars," and other subsets of the underworld Macheath calls out in this song as archetypes or stereotypes—but through Macheath, Brecht calls for their humanization and their mercy. If even Macheath can forgive loathed coppers and beg for their souls, Brecht is saying, it shouldn't be so hard for the upper classes to recognize the inherent humanity of their fellow men—and actually do something to support them, even if it comes from an impulse to simply "pretend" or give in.

PEACHUM: Therefore all remain standing where you are now and sing the chorale of the poorest of the poor, of whose difficult life you have shown us something today. In reality their end is generally bad. Mounted messengers from the Queen come far too seldom, and if you kick a man he kicks you back again. Therefore never be too eager to combat injustice.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 96

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the play's final moments, Macheath is saved from the gallows at the last moment when a royal decree arrives from the Queen of England herself. The message declares Macheath cleared of all crimes—what's more, it appoints him to the nobility and bestows unto him a castle to live in and a huge yearly pension to life off of. Everyone rejoices as Macheath escapes hanging—but Peachum steps forward to address the audience and remind them that "mounted messengers" don't come for everyone. Only the privileged get such miracles—the rest of the world must face a future that more often than not seems "generally bad." Readers and audiences can agree that Macheath's end is not just—he does not pay for the crimes he's committed, and is instead rewarded for his bad behavior. Brecht's frustrations with a capitalist, corrupt world which celebrates (and compensates) those who are "never [...] too eager to combat injustice" are here laid bare—and by pointing out how unjust most things in life are, he hopes to rouse his audiences to action (even if his characters are too badly-behaved to change their own behaviors or points of view.)

ALL: Combat injustice but in moderation:
Such things will freeze to death if left alone.
Remember: this whole vale of tribulation
Is black as pitch and cold as any stone.

**Related Characters:** Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum, Hook-finger Jacob, Money Matthew, Constable Smith, Ginny Jenny, Lucy Brown, Tiger Brown, Mrs. Peachum, Polly Peachum, Macheath (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 96

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the play's very final lines, the entire company steps forward to address the audience as they sing this brief coda. The play's final moments embody its bleak ethos. Brecht has his characters entreat the audience—slightly cheekily—to "combat injustice but in moderation" only. The entire play has been a screed against the ways in which the upper classes harden their hearts to the plight of the poor—and in this moment, Brecht's cynical characters, who are all only out for themselves, suggest that for human society to continue onward, this pattern of self-concern must continue. After all, the world is only a "vale of tribulation"

marked by darkness and coldness—what's the point, the company asks, of putting one's neck out for someone else? Brecht uses artifice and direct address to force the audience to consider these questions. The answer, of course, is that one should always seek to combat injustice—but Brecht knows that an audience of bourgeoisie Berliners need to be faced with the absurdity of a message endorsing and encouraging selfishness and corruption in order to be shaken out of their complacency and moved to action.

# 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.

## PROLOGUE

On market day in the London neighborhood of Soho, a ballad singer entertains the bustling square with a moritat, or murder ballad, about a recent spate of killings. Though everyone knows a gangster called Macheath, or "Mackie the Knife," is responsible, the man is so slick and accomplished that he can never be tied to his crimes. Whereas sharks' teeth are on display and their fins are spattered with blood after they kill, Macheath keeps his knife concealed, wears fine white gloves, and "slips round [...] corner[s]" with ease after he's killed his victims. Mackie kills the rich and the poor alike, murdering children and raping women with impunity. As the crowd delights in the ballad, a man slips from the crowd and walks away. A prostitute named Ginny Jenny exclaims that Macheath himself has just walked past, escaping once again.

*The prologue introduces not just the character of Macheath and his exploits, but the kind of environment in which such a person thrives. Macheath seems to have no qualms about committing violent crimes as long as he gets away with them. Brecht is creating a character who does what he needs to do to survive in a corrupt world—and, for better or worse, that means living a corrupt existence.*

## ACT 1, SCENE 1

Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum has created an establishment called The Beggar's Friend—it is a shop where the poor can by clothes and accessories to give them an "appearance that will touch the stoniest of hearts." As Peachum opens up shop for the day, he addresses the audience and tells them that his business is a hard one. The business of "trying to arouse human pity" is difficult because of humanity's capacity to "make themselves heartless at will" when exposed so constantly to their fellow man's hardships.

*Peachum's introduction continues to set up the world in which the play takes place. It is one where there is a large gap between the rich and the poor—and where there is money to be made off both classes, if one's willing to stoop low enough to exploit others with abandon.*

To hammer home Peachum's point, a large piece of cardboard is lowered down onto the stage. Upon it is written the phrase "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Peachum laments that it's harder and harder for beggars to think up "stirring sayings" to paint on their signs when there are only "four or five" Biblical phrases that can really touch the heart. Beggars always have to be coming up with something new to get through to people.

*Peachum's comic monologue continues as he laments that there is nothing real that can get through to people anymore—his speech is a commentary on the degree of isolation and artifice that characterizes both his own society and Brecht's as well.*

Someone knocks on the door. Peachum opens it, and a young man called Filch enters. He delivers a sob story about having been neglected by his drunkard mother and gambler father in childhood, forced to fend for himself all his life. As his speech goes on, Peachum starts finishing the man's sentences for him. Peachum asks if Filch ever gives this speech in public. Filch says that just yesterday, on Highland Street, he had a "nasty little incident" while reciting it. Peachum chastises Filch for begging in such a spot. He warns Filch that if he's is seen there again, he'll "have to use the saw" on him. Without a license—which is only granted to "professionals"—Filch will have to watch where he begs.

*This passage makes it clear that Peachum is just as bad as the rich snobs he excoriates. He has no empathy for anyone—but in a world like this one, where anyone might be spinning a story to make a quick buck, it's hard to blame him for his cynicism or the ways in which he's attempted to profit off the corruption all around him.*

Peachum points to a large map of London in the corner of the shop and explains that the city is divvied up into 14 districts—without a license from Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum and Company, no one can work the "begging-trade" in any of them. Filch offers Peachum two shillings in exchange for a license, but Peachum demands one pound. When Filch protests, Peachum points to another cardboard sign bearing the trite phrase "Give and it shall be given unto you."

*This passage shows how Peachum uses his own rhetoric, constructed to wheedle money out of the rich, for the converse purpose as well: to extort money from the poor and desperate.*

Filch offers Peachum ten shillings. Peachum demands that plus a percentage of Filch's weekly earnings. Finch agrees. Peachum calls for his wife, then urges Filch to get started right away, before the Queen's coronation. He pulls back a curtain revealing several shabby outfits designed to induce the "unnatural state of mind in which a man is actually willing to give money away." Peachum describes the outfits one by one, then assigns Filch Outfit C: "Victim of the Industrial Boom. The Pitiable Blind." When Filch himself displays empathy for the blind, however, Peachum changes his mind and assigns Filch Outfit D. He hands the clothes over to Filch, who balks at putting them on as they're "rather dirty."

*This passage shows how empathy is a liability in this world. Filch himself is not as badly off as he could be—he still has his sight. When he refuses to exploit the plight of the blind for his own purposes, Peachum grows frustrated with him—Peachum doesn't understand how anyone could possibly put real empathy over their own self-interest.*

As Filch gives in and changes behind a screen, Peachum works to add stains to another outfit in the lineup. He asks his wife, who has come downstairs, where their daughter Polly is—and whether she's with the suitor who only comes by when Peachum is out. Mrs. Peachum defends the gentleman, whom she refers to as "the Captain," and his interest in Polly. Peachum rails against the idea of Polly—who is "nothing but a mass of sensuality"—marrying. Peachum sees marriage as a "disgusting business."

*Peachum's disdain for his daughter's budding identity as a woman reflects the play's own contempt for the forces of love and sex—distractions, in Peachum's eyes and perhaps in Brecht's, from the real work of keeping oneself alive.*

Mrs. Peachum insists that the Captain is a perfect gentlemen who always wears immaculate white gloves. Peachum asks if the man carries a stick with an ivory handle, wears spats, and has a scar. Mrs. Peachum asks how her husband knows all this, but before he can answer, Filch comes out from behind the screen, thanking Peachum for the clothes. Peachum tells him to get out on the streets and start begging—the days before the coronation are lucrative and not to be wasted. As soon as Filch is out the door, Peachum tells his wife that the man she's describing is none other than Macheath.

*This passage shows how Macheath has developed the perfect artifice to disguise who he truly is. As Peachum and his wife realize that their daughter is entangled with none other than Macheath, Brecht sets up the play's central moral quandary (if it can be called that, given all the characters' lack of morals.) Peachum is a corrupt individual, but still sees himself above the likes of the dangerous Macheath—the tension between the two men and their claims of ownership to Polly will form the central drama of the opera.*

Peachum runs upstairs to look in on Polly's bedroom. He comes back down and reports that her bed is undisturbed. Mrs. Peachum says she hopes that Polly is having dinner with another suitor. Peachum says he hopes so, too—for all their sakes. Peachum and his wife together sing "The I-For-One Song," describing their fears about their daughter's penchant for going out and having "fun"—they worry the **moon** is to blame for her restless spirit.

*This passage introduces the play's only symbol—the moon—and ties it to the theme of love and sex. Peachum and his wife hope they can save their daughter from corruption before it's too late—an ironic point of view, given the morally devoid household in which she's come of age.*

## ACT 1, SCENE 2

In an empty stable in the heart of Soho, Macheath and Polly Peachum are looking for a place to celebrate their marriage. Polly, in a wedding dress, laments having to be in such a dingy space, but Macheath insists that he loves Polly so much he doesn't care where they're wed. One of Macheath's thugs, Money Matthew, carries a lantern and a gun as he checks the stable out and makes sure it's empty. Polly continues complaining, but Macheath promises her he's going to gussy up the space.

*This passage—the first real introduction to both Macheath and Polly—shows that Polly, having been influenced by both her father's corruption and the trappings of capitalism, longs for nice things. Even though she's not in a nice situation, she wants to create an artifice of luxury and comfort.*

Sure enough, a wagon arrives, and thugs carrying stolen furniture, carpets, and all the tools to transform the space arrive. Macheath hates filling the room with "junk," but he knows it's what Polly wants. As they arrange the furniture, the men—Macheath's thugs and cronies—greet the happy couple one by one. Hook-finger Jacob, Robert the Saw, Wally the Weeper and others gleefully deliver presents they've stolen or killed for, and Macheath is furious—he wanted them to "avoid bloodshed." Polly cries as she realizes that so many people died for her wedding furnishings—and that, even so, there still aren't tables or chairs.

*Polly's comical reaction to realizing that her husband's thugs have stolen and killed for her wedding presents reflects the banality of her desire for nice things. She doesn't want to know that her possessions have been gotten by ill means—but if they're going to be gotten that way, she'd at least like some nice stuff. This reflects the ravages of capitalism and consumerism, and shows Brecht's contempt for those who believe that there is any just or ethical consumption under capitalism.*

Macheath's henchmen begin making an improvised table, apologizing profusely to Polly for their oversight. When Wally the Weeper offers to "go out again" for more furnishings, however, Polly stops her fussing and admits that "it could be worse." The men sing as they create a makeshift bench for the couple. Macheath asks Polly to get the wedding breakfast ready. She asks if it's stolen—he tells her "of course." Polly, frustrated, asks what Macheath would do if the police came to the door. Macheath tells her he'd "show [her] what [her] husband can do." Money Matthew tells Polly to rest easy—the police are busy securing the streets ahead of the Queen's coronation.

*Polly is adjusting to her new life and learning the rules of Macheath's existence. Polly is learning not to be concerned with criminal acts—and not to fear the police, who are clearly in her husband's pocket.*

Everyone sits down to eat the stolen wedding breakfast, served on stolen plates from the Savoy Hotel. As the men begin stuffing their faces, Macheath urges someone to sing a song—he says he'd hoped his men would know enough manners to sing something for the newlyweds before tucking into their food. As Macheath berates the men for making today "another damn, sad, ordinary, dirty day like any other," a knock comes at the door. The men are afraid the cops have arrived after all—but instead, Reverend Kimball enters.

*Macheath's whole life is about crime, theft, and danger—on his wedding day, he wants pomp and circumstance, not just more of the same. Macheath's gang can procure him any material thing he wants at the drop of a hat—but they're such a bunch of low-down degenerates that they don't know how to treat people well or go out of their way on an emotional level.*

Macheath and Polly welcome the reverend warmly. Macheath asks his men to sing a song for Kimball, and three of them stand to sing a "Wedding Song for Poorer People." The song tells of a poor but amorous couple who decide to get married even though the bride is a prostitute and the groom is a criminal. Macheath rails against his men for singing such a "paltry" song. Before another argument can break up, Polly stands up and offers to sing a song of her own—one she once saw a barmaid sing. Though the "filthy dirty" barmaid's customers often teased her, once they heard her sing this song, they revered her.

*The song that Macheath's men choose to sing reflects the world they live in: a world in which people shunned by society make connections in the face of terrible circumstances. The song that Polly chooses to sing, however, will reflect a very different kind of ideology about the world.*

Polly begins singing "Pirate Jenny." The song is a character song about a poor barmaid who smiles each day as she rinses dirty glasses, scrubs floors, and makes beds at a dingy inn. Though her customers wonder what she could possibly have to smile about, the barmaid harbors a great secret. "One fine afternoon," she predicts, a ship will come to the harbor and blast the neighborhood to bits, sparing only her—for she has all along been the queen of the pirates, hiding out under a false identity. The pirates will raze the town violently, then bring her the surviving men in chains and ask her which is to be killed; "All of them!" she'll reply, before boarding her ship and sailing off with her crew. Macheath applauds his wife's artful song but tells Polly it's wasted on the "swine" she's sung it for.

*In this song, Polly is essentially masquerading as a different character—a woman who herself is playing a role. The many layers of artifice in this song reflect the ways in which Brecht uses archetypes and artifice to point out the ludicrous nature of trying to solve very real problems of social and economic injustice through a traditionally bourgeois art form. "Pirate Jenny" shares a name with the character in the play Ginny Jenny, and, in some productions of the opera, Ginny Jenny sings this song in the second act instead of Polly's first-act rendition.*

One of Macheath's men bursts into the room and announces that the cops have come to bust up the wedding after all—and the sheriff, Tiger Brown, is leading them inside. Macheath's men are terrified, but Macheath seems pleased. As Tiger Brown enters, Macheath greets him warmly, calling him "Jacky." Brown playfully chastises Macheath for stealing furniture and squatting in a stable. The two men embrace—they're clearly friends. Macheath introduces Polly to the sheriff and points out all his friends—whom the sheriff has no doubt, Macheath says, "seen [around] before." Brown greets the men warmly, explaining he's here in a "private capacity" and will forget their crimes for the day.

*This passage makes clear the levels of corruption throughout society which allow Macheath to operate as he does. His ability to get away with any crime isn't so much due, as the ballad singer claimed earlier, to his slick and sly nature, but rather a calculatedly symbiotic relationship with the corrupt London police force.*

Macheath urges Brown to sit down and enjoy himself. He then begins reminiscing about their old days together serving in the army in India. Macheath suggests they regale the others with a song they used to sing—the "Song of the Heavy Cannon." The two men sing the satirical song, which speaks of the army's disinterest in individuality, racism, and brutality. The song ends by demonstrating how service to the "heavy cannon" kills men or turns them "barmy;" still, the army will never start recruiting.

*This satirical song represents yet more of Brecht's social commentary. Brecht himself narrowly avoided service in World War I, and clearly states here his belief that the armies of the world recruit young men only to destroy them in service of killing others.*

When the song is over, Macheath continues telling his men about the close friendship between himself and Tiger Brown. The two were "boyhood friends," and though their lives have taken them in different directions (to say the least,) they are still as close as Castor and Pollux, the twins of Grecian myth. Macheath reveals that he doesn't undertake even the "smallest job" without giving Brown some of the proceeds, while the sheriff always warns Macheath when a raid is coming. "It's all a matter of give and take," concludes Macheath.

*Macheath and Tiger Brown's symbiotic relationship reveals the corruption they both embody—and even enjoy. Flouting the rules of society makes both their lives easier, and so in order to get by (and make money,) they do so with aplomb. Brecht reveals the hypocrisy inherent in this kind of corruption: in a way, Macheath isn't a real thief and Brown isn't a real cop, considering they're both playing stacked games.*

Brown says he has to be off—he can't allow anything to go wrong with the upcoming coronation. Before he goes, Macheath asks if Scotland Yard has any records that could be used against him—for his new father-in-law is a "repulsive old swine" who might try to dig something up on him. Brown assures Macheath there isn't a single record against him—he's seen to it. Macheath urges everyone to stand at attention as Brown exits the barn.

*Macheath seems to sense that there could be trouble for him, given his marriage to the young and virginal Polly—but Brown assures Macheath that he's protected by Scotland Yard's corrupt practices.*

After Brown goes, Money Matthew tells his "Captain" that he has a surprise for him. Macheath's gang heads to the back of the room, where a large carpet is hanging. They position themselves behind the carpet and begin singing "Wedding Song for Poorer People" again. At the end of the first verse, they tear down the carpet to reveal their gift—a magnificent stolen wedding bed. They finish the song at the top of their voices, then leave Macheath and Polly alone. Alone at last, the two exchange sweet nothings and sing to one another. Even though their marriage has been a decidedly nontraditional one—and will be illegitimate in the eyes of many—they pledge to make their love last forever.

*This passage shows that both Macheath and Polly are happy to embark on a life together—even if it's one filled with crime, uncertainty, and even illegitimacy. Brecht is poking fun at the ways in which sex, love, and infatuation influence people to make choices counter to their own self-interest, and sometimes even put their very lives in danger.*

## ACT 1, SCENE 3

Polly returns home to Peachum's Establishment for Beggars and loudly, starkly announces to her parents that she is married to Macheath. Mrs. Peachum laments that after all the money she and her husband have spent on fine dresses and hats for their daughter she has now thrown herself into the gutter "like a rotten tomato."

*Peachum and his wife hate the idea that their daughter has wound up in the gutter—even though their entire business involves profiting off the poor, they clearly have a deep disdain for the very people they depend on for their own livelihoods.*

In response to her mother's tirade, Polly begins to sing a song about her marriage to Macheath. Polly reveals through song that she's always known she'd turn down a "rich" or "nice" fellow who courted her in the right way and asked for her hand. The only man who has ever interested her is Macheath—who never asked for her hand or her permission, but rather "hung his bowler hat upon the nail inside [her] bedroom / And applied himself to his task." Now, though she's not a proper lady, she's found the one person she could never tell "No."

*Polly's song reveals that there is more to her than meets the eye. Her parents, it seems, brought her up to crave nice things and aspire to a life of luxury—instead, Polly has always found herself drawn to the rough edges of life. She disdains being treated by a lady, and loves Macheath because of his roguish, dastardly personality. Polly doesn't fit into the archetype her parents have imagined her into.*

After Polly concludes her song, Peachum and Mrs. Peachum continue lamenting that their big-headed daughter has married a thief and a criminal. Mrs. Peachum is so scandalized she believes she will faint. Peachum derides Polly for becoming a "crook's trollop" and breaking her mother's heart. Polly, wearing a "radiantly happy expression" even in the face of her parents' tirades, fetches her mother some brandy to calm her nerves.

*Polly seems to delight in how scandalized her parents are. She's pursuing a life with corruption, greed, and crime at its core—the example they've always set for her, yet are horrified to find she's internalized and tried to emulate.*

Several beggars enter the shop. One begins complaining about the quality of the false stump Peachum has sold him. He says that if he wanted to receive "junk," he'd just cut off his own leg. Peachum offers the beggar a second stump to add to his pitifulness, which the beggar happily accepts. Peachum moves on to examining the other beggars, chiding them for letting their bruises and scabs fade and for eating when they should be starving themselves thin. Peachum tells the beggars that what he needs are "artists" who can give people "the right sort of shock." None of them has delivered on that front so far—and so he declines to offer them his services any longer. The beggars leave.

*In the middle of excoriating his daughter for marrying a criminal, Peachum turns around and engages in some corrupt, lowly, cruel behavior himself—lambasting a group of beggars for not being good enough at inspiring pity in the cruel hearts of the rich. Brecht uses this transparent instance of irony to show how corrupt and two-faced Peachum truly is.*

Polly begs her father to accept her marriage to Macheath. Though the living he makes is non-traditional, she says, he's able to support her—he's a "first-class burglar" who has a lot of money saved. Peachum, however, suggests Polly get a divorce right away. Polly insists she loves Macheath. Mrs. Peachum asks how Polly isn't ashamed of herself. Polly again insists she's in love—and won't let her parents "rob" her of "the greatest thing in the world." Mrs. Peachum laments that when Macheath is hanged, "half a dozen" of his other women will show up to mourn him.

*This passage demonstrates an interesting interpretation of the intersection of the themes of greed and selfishness and love and sex. Polly has been raised by a pair of corrupt, greedy people, and has chosen to marry a corrupt, greedy man. Polly's outlook on love, then, of course involves greed—and she sees anyone trying to put a stop to her following her heart as a thief themselves.*

Peachum declares that a hanging is a great idea. He sends Polly outside, and she leaves the room. Peachum and Mrs. Peachum begin hatching a plan to get Macheath hanged. Mrs. Peachum says that Macheath is probably at a brothel with his whores—she plans to go to one in Wapping, talk to the prostitutes there, discern Macheath's whereabouts, and report him to the sheriff. Polly, who has been listening at the door, bursts into the room and tells her mother that Macheath would never even speak to a whore—what's more the sheriff is his boyhood friend, and so there is nothing in Scotland Yard's records that anyone could use to indict Macheath.

*Even though Polly defends Macheath's honor and intentions, her parents seem to know better. They're aware of what it really means to live in such a cruel, corrupt world—they don't have the optimism and innocence that Polly's still clinging to.*

Peachum, however, declares there is evidence against Macheath—for he has "enticed [...] Polly Peachum from her parental home under the pretext of marriage." Mrs. Peachum admits that she fears her husband will never be able to best "the greatest criminal in London." Polly defiantly says she'll be glad to accompany her father to the sheriff—to prove that there's nothing that can be held against her husband.

*This passage makes clear the action that will motivate the rest of the play: Peachum's determination to bring Macheath to heel for his crimes once and for all. No one has been able to stop Macheath so far—but Peachum, a seriously corrupt individual who knows how to think like a criminal, might just be the one person who can game the system in a way that brings Macheath down.*

Polly and her parents walk to the front of the stage to sing the "First Threepenny-Finale on the Uncertainty of Human Circumstances." Polly sings that her aim is to "reward a man's persistence" just once in her "dark existence." Mrs. Peachum sings about how she wishes she could be the one to help Polly through the sadness of being alive. Peachum sings about how though "the right to happiness is fundamental," few actually are able to attain that right. People want to be good, he believes—but the world is not the sort of place where goodness can be embodied, since "supplies are scarce and human beings base."

*In the act one finale, a direct address to the audience, the characters break the fourth wall and state plainly what they each have on their minds. Polly and Mrs. Peachum despair about the unfariness of being in love, while Peachum's concerns are a little more broad—he believes that everyone is doomed to strife and turmoil because of how corrupt humanity is. Without any good examples, or any incentive toward goodwill, people will always seek to hurt each other.*

Polly and Mrs. Peachum admit that they, too fear that "the world is poor and men are bad"—and that there is "nothing more to add." Peachum triumphantly declares that he knows he's right, and always has been. He elaborates further on how terrible people are to one another, positing that loyalty, gratitude, and goodness are simply too much to ask of humanity. All three members of the Peachum family step forward and sing about how "the whole thing is depressing," ending the act by declaring that "everything's a heap of junk."

*The first act ends on a decidedly bleak note as the Peachum clan declares the conclusion which their travails so far have brought them to: the world is worth nothing, and life is "depressing." This outlook reflects Brecht's own frustrations with the themes that have been at work throughout act one: the futility of romance, the cruelty of mankind, and the widespread effects of social, political, and economic corruption.*

## ACT 2, SCENE 1

It is a Thursday afternoon, and Macheath is waiting in the stable, reclining on his and Polly's stolen bed. Polly enters in a tizzy, warning Macheath that Peachum has met with Brown—the two of them are now plotting to catch Macheath. Brown "gave in" to Peachum but has apparently urged Polly to give Macheath a heads up and warn him that he should "disappear for a while." Macheath insists he won't flee—Scotland Yard has nothing on him, and he refuses to hide like a coward.

*Macheath lives his life without fear of retribution for his crimes becausehe knows that everyone around him is just as corrupt as he is. He hasn't accounted, however, for another rogue individual's entry into the ecosystem he and Brown have created—and doesn't want to believe that Peachum could actually bring him down.*

Polly, however, produces a list of charges against Macheath she wrote down during Peachum and Brown's meeting—it includes two murders, thirty burglaries, twenty robberies, and assorted charges of arson, forgery, perjury, and statutory rape—all in the course of less than two years. In response to the laundry list of charges, Macheath replies only that the underage girls he bedded "told [him] they were twenty-one." Polly warns Macheath that Brown has told her there's nothing more he can do to protect the thief.

*This passage confirms several things: Macheath's lusty, unscrupulous nature; Polly's devotion to him in spite of his wrongdoings; and Peachum's power over Brown. Though it's unclear as of yet just how Peachum has gotten Brown to produce a laundry list of the charges he's been letting Macheath avoid for untold years, what's certain is that Peachum is able to sway even the corrupt Brown.*

Macheath tells Polly that if he's to flee, she must take over the "business." Polly begs Macheath not to talk about business, but he pushes ledgers and account books into her face. He enumerates the money and stolen goods each of his thugs have brought in and begins telling her which men to turn in and send to the gallows for being unproductive—and which ones to promote. Polly, however, is still distracted by her grief—she begs Macheath to remain true while he's away. Macheath makes several declarations of love, and Polly thanks him for thinking of her even when the police are after him.

*As Macheath realizes that things are more serious than he realized, he begins making plans to leave—but his first priority is not comforting his new wife or reassuring her of his love, but rather making sure that all his money is in the right place (and that none of his thugs are in a position to snitch or take advantage.)*

Macheath gives Polly instructions as to how to launder money from the "business" to clear suspicion. In four weeks, he tells her, it'll be time to turn in a number of thugs to take the heat off Macheath. Polly asks how Macheath will bear to look his men in the face when he knows he's going to betray them—at that very moment, the gang enters, excited by their plans to rob the coronation parade. Macheath orders the men to go ahead with their plans alone—he is taking a "short trip" out to the countryside. Matthew and Robert lament that Macheath will miss the coronoation. Macheath orders the men to obey Polly in his absence. The men are skeptical about taking orders from a woman—but when Polly yells at them loudly and profanely for underestimating her, they clap their hands and welcome her as their "new captain."

*This passage offers a deeper glimpse into the relationships between men and women in the play. Macheath and his men clearly don't see women as their equals, and while Macheath appoints Polly to a role of power out of necessity, it seems to be a rogue, idiosyncratic move on his part to involve a woman in his business. The other men clearly don't respect her either—but at the same time, they're willing to follow anyone who displays potential for being as low-down, dirty, and assertive as Macheath is.*

Macheath laments missing out on the coronation—it is sure to be a "gold mine" for crime between all the empty houses and drunk aristocrats roaming the streets. He makes a veiled threat to his men, warning them that if they try to take credit for their own crimes—rather than attributing them to Macheath, to make it look like the legendary gangster can get away with anything—while he's gone, there will be consequences. The men agree, and remind Polly that payday is on Thursday before leaving the stable.

*Macheath has built his reputation as the slickest, slipperiest gangster in town on false pretenses—it's not his skill as a thief but rather his arrangement with the police that allows him to get away with anything. Macheath wants to double down on that public image by getting credit for a series of outlandish crimes committed in his absence.*

As Macheath prepares to leave, Polly grows increasingly anxious. She is afraid that he will forget her—or seek the company of another woman in the countryside. Macheath promises Polly that he loves only her and would never bother with "secondhand goods." Polly begs Macheath to stay, but he says he must go. Polly tells Macheath of a strange dream she had about the **moon**—in the dream, the moon looked "thin, like a penny that's all worn away." Macheath ignores Polly's omen, promises he loves her, and hurries away. Alone in the stable, Polly sings a lament in which she confesses her fear that Macheath will never return—and that their marriage, so recently begun, is already ended. She regrets failing to listen to her parents, who knew this would all come to pass.

*In this passage, Polly's portentous dream about the moon symbolizes her fears that the love and allegiance between herself and Macheath is waning. The moon is a symbol of love and infatuation—and now that Polly and Macheath are experiencing their first true crisis as lovers, their relationship is being put to the test.*

In a brief interlude, Mrs. Peachum and Ginny Jenny step toward the front of the stage. Mrs. Peachum urges Jenny to report any sighting of Macheath to the police in the next few days or weeks to the police at once. Jenny says that surely Macheath won't be wasting his time in whorehouses with the police after him, but Mrs. Peachum predicts that Macheath is not one to give up old habits. Mrs. Peachum begins singing "The Ballad of Sexual Submissiveness." In it, she sings about how a man like Macheath—"a shark with all the world to swim in"—is repeatedly brought down by his basest instincts. He has no regard for the Bible, for the law, or for anything but women. When night falls, Mrs. Peachum insists, men like Macheath "are rising."

*The risqué and comical "Ballad of Sexual Submissiveness" allows two women to mock a man for his senselessness and poor judgement in the face of his own lust. While Polly wants to believe the best of her new husband, her point of view is naïve—Mrs. Peachum and Ginny Jenny know better not just about Macheath but about all men like him, and are counting on his own foolishness to pull off their plot.*

## ACT 2, SCENE 2

At a brothel in Wapping, a group of prostitutes in their shifts sit around busying themselves with ironing, preening, and card games. One of Macheath's thugs, Hook-finger Jacob, is there; he laments that he doesn't think Macheath will ever come to the establishment again. Just then, Macheath bursts through the door, asking for his regular coffee. Jacob, startled, asks why Macheath isn't hiding out in Highgate—Macheath insists that he can't let "trifles" disturb his routine. He hangs his coat on the door and tosses his charge-sheet to the ground. Ginny Jenny picks it up and begins reading all the charges against Macheath and his gang. Alarmed, she asks for his hand so that she can read his palm.

*Just as Mrs. Peachum and Ginny Jenny predicted, Macheath ignores the danger he's in and retreats to a brothel where he's a well-known customer rather than hiding out in the countryside. It's clear that he visits this place often—and that his vows of love and fidelity to Polly have all been a farce.*

The other prostitutes gather around and ask Jenny what she sees. She declares that she sees darkness and "a little bit of love," plus a line which indicates that Macheath will be betrayed by a woman whose name begins with J. Macheath suggests the woman's name begins with P. Jenny warns Macheath that when the coronation bells begin ringing, things will turn ugly for him. As Macheath laughs off the palm reading and begins flirting with another girl, Jenny slips out of the room.

*Macheath is clearly so devoted to Jenny that he's even more willing to believe that Polly would betray him than to believe that Jenny would, which shows where his true allegiances lie.*

When Macheath finishes flirting, he notices Jenny's absence and asks where she's gone. He begins reminiscing about his past relationship with Jenny by singing a song called "The Ballad of the Fancy Man"—sometimes translated as "The Ballad of the Pimp" or "The Ballad of Immoral Earnings." As Macheath sings, Jenny slips out to the street and beckons Mrs. Peachum and a policeman, Constable Smith, from the shadows. Macheath tells the whores of how he and Jenny lived together many years ago—Jenny turned tricks to support them, while Macheath arranged clients for her. Macheath seems to remember the arrangement as fun and idyllic.

*In this duet, Macheath and Jenny will sing about their past relationship. It's clear that they both remember it very differently—while Macheath remembers the arrangement as being fun, romantic, and mutually beneficial, Jenny will have an opposing memory; one that helps explain why she doesn't feel guilty about turning Macheath over to the authorities.*

Jenny begins singing—her recollection of things is very different. She recalls Macheath beating her when she didn't earn enough and selling her possessions for extra cash. Still, Jenny concludes that "life was all honey from the honeycomb" then. The two of them then begin singing together, recalling a time when Jenny got pregnant—the two of them reversed their regular sexual position in order to keep from "crushing" the fetus, but Jenny lost the baby anyway. Soon after, they parted ways. Still, the two of them conclude that their makeshift bordello was their "home from home."

*Jenny has a very dark recollection of her time with Macheath, and yet still seems to have some wistfulness for what they shared. Brecht perhaps uses the transactional nature of their relationship to show how capitalism ravages everything, even love—Macheath and Jenny were so desperate to make ends meet that their relationship was ruined by Macheath's greed and violence.*

Lost in song, Macheath barely notices when Constable Smith enters the brothel and taps him on the shoulder. As Smith attempts to cuff Macheath, Macheath pushes the Constable back and jumps out the window—only to find Mrs. Peachum and more policemen waiting outside. Macheath tacitly congratulates Mrs. Peachum for cornering him, then allows the police to lead him off. Jacob, who has been otherwise engaged, emerges from the brothel, realizes what has happened, and runs off to fetch the rest of the gang.

*Even when caught, Macheath is calm and cool as ever—he perhaps doesn't believe he'll face any real consequences, given how charmed his experience as a thief and criminal has been so far. Macheath knows the system is broken—and is counting on its brokenness to let him off scott-free once again.*

## ACT 2, SCENE 3

Tiger Brown paces the halls of the Old Bailey. He speaks to himself anxiously, saying that he hopes his men haven't been able to catch Macheath—he prays that Macheath is already far away beyond Highgate Moor. Looking out the window, Brown sees the **moon** high in the sky and hopes it will guide Macheath's way through the dark country night. Just at that moment, Macheath enters tied up in heavy ropes, guarded by six men at once. Macheath is proud and haughty as he thanks his jailers for bringing him "home."

*As Brown spots the moon and hopes it will light Macheath's way out to the country, his invocation of the symbol of love demonstrates that he really does care for his friend Macheath. He doesn't see the thief just as a partner in crime—he loves him truly as a friend.*

As Macheath spots Brown, Brown instantly begins apologizing, insisting that he did "everything he could" to stop his friend's capture. Macheath doesn't say anything in response, though Brown begs the thief to absolve him. Frustrated and sad, Brown begins weeping, then leaves. Macheath says under his breath how angry he is with the "miserable Brown"—and how glad he is that a simple "punishing stare" made Brown break down.

*Macheath knows that everything in his life is a power play—and in order to keep Brown in his debt, he knows he can't be seen forgiving Brown right away, even if the sheriff actually did fight for Macheath.*

As Constable Smith enters with a pair of heavy handcuffs, Macheath reaches into his pocket and pulls out a checkbook. He asks if he can buy a more comfortable pair. Smith tells Macheath that there are a number of different cuffs available for all kinds of prices. Macheath asks how much "none" cost—Smith tells him fifty pounds will do, and Macheath writes out a check. As he does, he worries that when Brown hears about what Macheath has done to the man's daughter, Lucy, he'll turn into a "real tiger."

*Macheath is comfortable gaming the system at every turn—or at least almost every turn. He's able to bribe his way out of nearly any situation, but also seems to recognize in this passage that there may be some things he can't come back from—including some business involving Tiger Brown's own daughter.*

As Macheath settles into his cell, he announces his intention to have a "fine time" while he awaits execution. He begins singing a song called "The Secret of Gracious Living," a raucous song in which he lambasts those who want to live the "simple life" and says that "only the well-to-do can take their ease." He could never live a simple, solitary, impoverished existence—he'd rather be "great" than "poor, lonely, wise and brave."

*Macheath still believes that he is above the law and that he'll soon be back to living a great life—even as he sits alone in a prison cell awaiting a trip to the gallows.*

Lucy, Tiger Brown's daughter, enters the Old Bailey. She approaches Macheath's cell, calling him a "miserable wretch" and asking how he can even bear to look her in the face. Macheath asks if Lucy has a heart at all, to act so coldly upon finding her "own husband' in such a condition. Lucy threatens to tear Macheath's eyes out—she knows what he's been up to with Polly Peachum. Macheath tells Lucy she shouldn't be jealous of Polly, whom he says is a "silly bitch" so hopelessly in love with him that she goes around lying about having married him. Lucy appears to forgive Macheath a bit, telling him tiredly that all she wants is to be an "honest woman." At that moment, Polly enters, calling for her husband as she approaches Macheath's cell.

*In this passage, Brecht introduces another foil in Macheath's plans—Lucy Brown. Macheath has apparenty "married" Lucy, just as he "married" Polly—it's clear now that both marriages are shams, and that Macheath is incapable of forming any monogamous relationship at all.*

Polly berates Macheath for visiting the brothel and allowing the prostituetes there to turn him in. Lucy calls Polly a "trollop." Polly asks who Lucy is, and urges Macheath to tell her to respect his "wife." Lucy realizes that Macheath has played both of them and calls him a "treacherous swine." Polly and Lucy both begin berating him, even as Macheath begs them to hush up so that he can explain everything. As tensions between the two women escalate, they burst into song, singing "The Jealousy Duet."

*At first, as the women discover their shared "husband"'s infidelity, they turn on him—but quickly round on one another, seeing the other woman as the enemy rather than the man whose lust is so insatiable and whose respect for women is so nonexistent that he betrayed them both.*

Lucy and Polly debase, deride, and insult one another as they each sing about how Macheath loves them best. Both profess that with Macheath, they have "a bond that lasts forever." They brag about their beauty and their power over the gangster, calling one another ugly and accusing each other of harlotry. At last, Macheath manages to calm the women down. He accuses Polly of "adding to [his] misery" by spreading news of their marriage all over town. Lucy threatens to beat Polly up if she continues trying to "start a row." As the fight escalates once again, Polly declares herself "too good" for such behavior. Lucy sticks her belly out, claiming she's pregnant—though whether she is or isn't is not immediately clear, the provocation makes Polly break down in tears.

*As Lucy and Polly argue and demean one another, their twinned infatuation with Macheath becomes abundantly clear. They both believe that winning his love will prove something about them, perhaps—that they were each the one to tame Macheath's nature and claim him as their own. The women, greedy for Macheath's love, will stop at no trick or insult to prove their individual superiority.*

Mrs. Peachum arrives. Calling Polly a "filthy trollop," she pulls her daughter away from Macheath's cell and accuses her of embarrassing the family with her dramatic behavior. Lucy teases Polly for being a mama's girl. As Mrs. Peachum drags Polly away, Polly begs to stay, but she is no match for her mother, who boxes her ears and orders her to be quiet.

*Mrs. Peachum, again, demonstrates that she has no patience for the ravages of love and infatuation—she thinks Polly is ridiculous for believing Macheath loves her, and even more ridiculous for performing expressions of love herself.*

After Polly is gone, Macheath begs Lucy to believe that there is "no truth" in what Polly said about being married to him. Lucy declares her love for Macheath, and Macheath promises that after he escapes from prison, he will send for her. He asks Lucy to fetch him his hat and stick. She does. He thanks her and bids her farewell, urging her to remember that the "fruit of [...] love" she carries in her womb binds them together forever. Lucy leaves.

*Macheath uses words of love to get Lucy to hand over his weapon to him. Declarations of love, to Macheath, are like everything else in his life—false, transactional, and designed only to get him what he wants or needs in the heat of the moment.*

Constable Smith enters, goes into Macheath's cell, and demands he return the stick. A fight ensues, and Macheath escapes. Tiger Brown enters—when he sees that his friend has escaped, he collapses on the bench in Macheath's cell. Peachum enters, demanding his reward for Macheath's capture. He is bemused to find Brown sitting in Macheath's cell, with Macheath on the run again. Brown tells Peachum how upset he is, and Peachum agrees that things are bad for Brown—if he were the sheriff, he says, he'd retire. Brown, becoming defensive, states that the police are helpless in the face of Macheath's cunning.

*Peachum wants Macheath captured and hanged, to be sure—but he also knows that Macheath's escape presents an opportunity for him to get his hooks into Brown even deeper by preying on the man's failure and self-pity.*

Peachum asks Brown if he thinks the police will be able to catch Macheath and bring him back. Brown shrugs. Peachum says that what is about to happen to Brown is a "horrible injustice." He tells Brown a "historical" (so probably fictional) anecdote dating back to 1400 B.C. After the death of Rameses II in Egypt, the chief of police—who was guilty of "some petty injustice toward the lower classes"—suffered mightily during the coronation of the new queen. The procession was, according to the history books, "a succession of catastrophes caused by the all too lively participation of the lower classes," and the new queen tortured the chief of police to death. Peachum says he hopes that the Lord protects Brown before swiftly exiting. Brown, terrified, calls for a conference with the sergeant.

*Peachum knows that Brown is bound to Macheath through their mutually beneficial arrangement—and that the only way to get Brown to turn against Macheath is to make Brown fear for his own well-being. Men will turn against other men, Peachum knows, to protect themselves and get by. Peachum uses a likely-false story about a queen killing her chief of police for his failure to contain the poor in order to essentially threaten Brown with a class uprising on the day of the new Queen of England's coronation—an event that will definitely make Brown look bad. Brown falls for Peachum's plot and begins desperately trying to save his own skin.*

Macheath and Ginny Jenny step out in front of the curtain and sing the "Second Threepenny-Finale." Macheath sings a verse in which he states that those who wish to lead men from "mortal sin" must feed the poor before beginning to preach. It's in men's nature, he says, to beat, cheat, and eat "some other bloke." Ginny Jenny sings a verse similar to Macheath's—she declares that before men begin preaching to whores, they ought to feed them first. She, too, agrees that the only way mankind can live is by "forgetting he's a man like other folk." The whole company delivers the song's coda: "Men live exclusively by mortal sin."

*In the fourth-wall-breaking act two finale, Macheath and Ginny Jenny offer up yet another bleak summation of what the second act has to say about human nature. Brecht has designed the entire opera to showcase the worst of humanity and to demonstrate how people hurt and cheat one another just to get by—the only way to do so, he suggests, is to dull oneself to one's place in the human experience and "forget" about the suffering of others. Brecht implicitly argues that capitalism and the pursuit of its rewards is the engine which allows this willful forgetfulness to proliferate throughout every level of society.*

## ACT 3, SCENE 1

In the wardrobe room of The Beggar's Friend, a group of beggars have gathered. They are hard at work painting boards with inscriptions such as "I gave my eye for my king"—Peachum is hoping to "disorganize the coronation procession" with a public protest of misery. The beggars are excited about the demonstration.

*Peachum has a plan to disrupt the coronation in order to point out to the masses how disdainful they are of the poor—a means to the end of making a killing off the wealthy coronation crowds.*

Ginny Jenny and several prostitutes enter, demanding their fee for helping in Macheath's arrest. Mrs. Peachum refuses to give the women their fees, stating that Macheath has vanished once again. Mrs. Peachum tries to get Filch to push the women out, but when they raise a ruckus, Peachum comes in and asks what's going on. Ginny Jenny says that for days she's been tormented over her role in Macheath's arrest—she's been losing business because she's too upset to focus on her clients. This morning, though, after she'd finally managed to cry herself to sleep, a whistle woke her—Macheath was below the window, and asked to come up to her room, lie in her arms, and "forget the wrong [she] had done him." After absolving Jenny, Macheath went from room to room, forgiving all the other women their parts as well—including one woman called Suky Tawdry.

*Even though Macheath has escaped from the Old Bailey, Ginny Jenny and her coworkers still want their fee for their role in his arrest—which they probably see as a monumental achievement, given Macheath's reputation for evading the law at every turn. Their betrayal of Macheath is just business—they all have to make ends meet. As Ginny Jenny reflects on her morning with Macheath, she confirms that he is the victim of his own insatiable lust—and has again refused to flee, deciding instead to seek the company of a prostitute he likes.*

Peachum urges Filch to go to the police station and tell them that Macheath is with Suky Tawdry. To placate the prostitutes, he offers to pay them, and orders Mrs. Peachum to fix up a pot of tea. Mrs. Peachum, disgruntled, moves to the front of the stage and reprises "The Ballad of Sexual Submissiveness." Even at the foot of the gallows, she says, Macheath wants to make "woman's orifice [...] his tomb." She storms out in a huff to make tea.

*Mrs. Peachum laments that not only Macheath—but her husband, as well—are drawn in by the allure of other women. She believes that men are completely beholden to their desires—and she may very well be right.*

Peachum tells the prostitutes that they should be grateful to him for creating a business out of manipulating the indifference of the rich. Though the rich create misery, he posits, they can't bear to see it—it's only when it's happening directly in front of them that they even stoop to notice it. As Mrs. Peachum comes back in with teacups, she promises the women they can have their money tomorrow, after the coronation.

*Peachum's belief that the suffering of the poor only matters to the rich when it is hyper-visible will become important later on in this scene as he devises a plan to exploit this sad fact for his own gain.*

Filch returns to report that there are a large group of policemen on their way to the establishment. Peachum orders the prostitutes and beggars to hide. He tells Mrs. Peachum to ready the orchestra—when he says the word "harmless," that's her cue to play music. Everyone hides, and soon, Tiger Brown comes to the door to arrest Peachum. As Brown is about to put Peachum in cuffs, however, the businessman warns Brown that he'd better be careful about arresting innocent men when a "notorious criminal" is allowed to be at large. Peachum explains that Brown is "on the verge of the worst hour of [his] life."

*In this passage, Peachum, like Macheath, almost seems to relish the arrival of the police—he is prepared to make both a physical and ideological stand against them, and clearly has a bargaining chip in his back pocket which he plans to use against the corrupt Brown and his equally-corrupt men.*

Peachum invites the prostitutes to come out of hiding and share some tea with the sheriff. He is a law-abiding citizen, and the law itself, he states is "made for the exploitation of those who do not understanding or [...] cannot obey it." Those who "pick up the crumbs" of such exploitation, must obey the law themselves. Peachum calls for his "troops" of beggars to begin lining the coronation parade route. Brown, however, orders his constables to round up the beggars and arrest them—he tells Peachum that whatever the man is plotting is now foiled. Peachum tells Brown he's welcome to arrest the *harmless* beggars.

*Peachum has been presented as a man who has few morals or beliefs apart from ensuring his own survival at any cost. In this passage, however, part of his worldview becomes more clear. He sees the law as a corrupt institution designed to corner and pigeonhole those unequipped to full understand it—and he believes that lawmakers and law enforcement should be held to the same standards as the people their professions allow them to so easily exploit.*

Music begins—the orchestra of beggars begins playing "The Song of the Futility of All Human Endeavor." Peachum sings the song—it is a brief ditty about how foolish plans and aspirations are. Men who try to chase down luck, he says, will end up "cheat[ed]" by life.

*Peachum's grim outlook on life is always underscored by happy little songs—Brecht's way of creating a dissonance that highlights the artifice of theater and the silliness of opera's form while reminding his audience that the bleakness of the world awaits them just outside the theater doors.*

Peachum tells Brown that there are no real beggars here—only a few people in costumes to celebrate the coronation. The real poor, Peachum says, have not yet arrived—but when they do arrive in the thousands to stand before Westminster Abbey, Brown will be in trouble. No one, Peachum says, wants to look upon crippled or "mutilated" people—and yet if Brown and his men try to knock them down or scatter them with violence, the police will look terrible. Brown laments that Peachum is blackmailing him—he can't do anything, and his hands are tied. Peachum warns Brown, essentially, never to mess with the poor.

*Peachum has no qualms about profiting off the poor—even when he's merely using them as a bargaining chip in a negotiation with the police. Peachum knows that no one recognizes the humanity of the truly poor unless they're made to—and that cops beating away the unwashed masses would create a scene. Peachum has spent his life studying the ways in which people react to the presence of beggars, so that he can profit off of it—and in this scene, his life's work becomes even more valuable.*

Brown, knowing that he is being blackmailed into arresting Macheath, asks what he can do when the man is nowhere to be found. Ginny Jenny steps forward and states that Macheath is with Suky Tawdry on Oxford Street. Brown orders his men to go arrest Macheath again and bring him once more to the Old Bailey. Peachum warns Brown that he'd better hang Macheath by six the next morning—or else the poor will make a scene at the coronation. As Brown and his constables leave, Peachum excitedly orders his army of beggars to march on the Old Bailey. He reprises "The Song of the Futility of All Human Endeavor" cheerfully before following the beggars out.

*Peachum has Brown in a corner. He knows that the police would look terrible if they assaulted a group of the poor at the Queen's coronation—and that Brown doesn't want to fall out of favor with the new monarch. By blackmailing him, he's able to secure Brown's allegiance—and Macheath's capture—seemingly once and for all.*

As the curtain drops, Ginny Jenny appears in front of it playing a stringed instrument called a hurdy-gurdy. She sings "The Song of Solomon," in which she recalls various figures of human history and declares that they were all "better off without." From King Solomon to Cleopatra to Caesar—all the way up to Bertolt Brecht himself and Macheath, Brecht's invention—Jenny repeats the refrain "a man is better off without" as she tells the sad stories of how these historic figures were brutalized, bullied, and often made to feel disillusioned or self-loathing in spite of their fame.

*This song breaks the fourth wall, exposing the play as artifice—and a vehicle for Brecht's own political, social, and artistic frustrations. Jenny's sad song serves a double purpose. It functions as her own lament about the pain and difficulty of surviving in a corrupt system, and its conclusion that people are "better off without" striving for anything reflects Brecht's frustrations with capitalism, consumerism, and art itself.*

## ACT 3, SCENE 2

Lucy sits alone in an attic bedroom in the Old Bailey. Constable Smith knocks at the door and tells her that "Mrs. Polly Macheath" would like to see her. Lucy tells Smith to send Polly in. Polly enters the room, greets Lucy pleasantly, and begins to apologize for her behavior the previous day. She begs Lucy's forgiveness, and suggests that their fighting was all Macheath's fault—he's the one who put the women in such a dreadful position. Lucy tells Polly that Macheath is fond of her, and Polly tells Lucy that she can tell how much Macheath loves her—at the same time, Polly knows that "a man always fears a woman who loves him too much." Lucy suggests they have both loved Macheath too much, and Polly agrees.

*In this scene, Polly and Lucy begin to bond—however tenuously—over the ways in which they've both let their feelings of love and infatuation for Macheath control their lives and blind them to everything else that's important.*

Polly begins explaining how her love affair with Macheath started—she admits that she first saw him only ten days ago, and that they were married only the day before yesterday. Polly says that just twelve short days ago, she never could have imagined her present situation. She says that since yesterday, when she first discovered just how many crimes Macheath was wanted for, she has been thinking a lot about the man—she now believes he has no heart, but "a stone in its place." Polly weeps—she knows she's made a mistake, but now feels Macheath is all that she has.

*It's impossible to tell whether Polly's sob story—or any of the details in it—are real. Polly has grown up in a house of schemers and is prepared to say whatever she needs to in order to get what she wants out of a situation. Polly may really feel that her life revolves around Macheath—or she may be using the lessons she's learned from her father and his gang of beggars to spin a story that she believes will get to Lucy's heart.*

Lucy tells Polly that the misfortune of bad luck in love can befall any woman—even the cleverest of them. She leaves the room to get Polly a snack to comfort her. When Lucy is gone, Polly devilishly mutters, "The silly little fool!" Lucy returns with coffee and pastry. As the women eat, Polly notices a picture of Macheath in the corner of the room—she asks when he brought it. Lucy insists he didn't bring it, then accuses Polly of having come to spy around—in turn, Polly accuses Lucy of knowing Macheath's whereabouts. Lucy insists she doesn't know. Polly, distressed, says she doesn't know where he is, either. She can't believe he's run out on both of them—but says that she's at least happy that the "tragedy" with Macheath has brought Lucy to her.

*Even after appearing to have made up and set aside their differences, there is still a degree of subterfuge and one-upping happening between Lucy and Polly. The two women—Polly especially—are so expert at affecting artificial personalities that it's difficult to let their true selves shine through.*

Lucy reveals that she's been faking her pregnancy to ensnare Macheath. Polly applauds her trickery. Lucy tells Polly that when Macheath is found, Polly should feel free to take him for her own. At the sound of voices outside, both women go to the window. Lucy reports that Macheath is outside—he's been arrested. Mrs. Peachum appears at the door with widow's clothes for Polly—Macheath is to be hanged. As Polly changes sheepishly, Mrs. Peachum tells her daughter how beautiful she'll look once she's a widow.

*Mrs. Peachum never approved of the marriage between Polly and Macheath—and can hardly conceal her joy over the fact that it will soon be over. She's looking forward to helping her daughter embody the archetype of a widow, in keeping with the Peachum family's obsession with appearances, faux or not.*

## ACT 3, SCENE 3

At five the next morning, as the city bells ring outside, Constable Smith and his men bring Macheath into a cell to await hanging. Smith flings Macheath in the cell, telling him to act like a man in his final hours—when the six o'clock bells ring, Macheath will be hung. Another constable reports that rumor of Macheath's apprehension—and execution—have spread throughout London. Crowds are already forming, and at the rate they're growing, there will be more people at Macheath's hanging than at the coronation.

*This passage sets up the idea that Macheath is a more popular figure in London than the Queen herself—an idea which supports the play's thesis that in a corrupt world, the most corrupt individuals are the ones who thrive and receive recognition.*

As Smith shuts Macheath in his cell, Tiger Brown enters. Smith asks if Brown would like to see Macheath, but Brown says he can't bear to, and quickly leaves again. Macheath begins accusing Smith of having taken a bribe to kill him—Macheath promises that if Smith releases him, Macheath will get the man a thousand pounds by noon. Smith accuses Macheath of talking nonsense and retreats to the side of the stage—Macheath calls to him, begging him to let in any visitors who want to come see him. Macheath then sings a short song lamenting that he has been struck down by "angry Fate's decree." He prays that his friends will lend him their aid while he's still alive to receive it.

*Macheath attempts to exploit the corruption of the police in this passage by calling out the ways in which bribes dictate the behavior of law enforcement. Though Macheath knows he's now trapped within a rigged system (which he himself has helped to perpetuate,) he's so despondent over having been captured that he starts praying for a miracle.*

Money Matthew and Hook-finger Jacob enter the hall. Smith stops them from approaching Macheath's cell. Matthew physically threatens Smith. Smith, intimidated, lets the men pass. Macheath asks the men if they can rustle up 400 pounds within the hour. The men tell Macheath that after laundering all the money away, hardly any is left. Macheath accuses the men of making excuses. Matthew reminds Macheath that he's only back in prison because he sought the company of Suky Tawdry rather than getting out of town. Macheath angrily orders the men to go get the money, warning them that if they're not back by five minutes to six, he'll hang. The men say they'll do their best to beat the gathering crowds.

*Macheath's men have no money to offer him—they lament that his last orders were to get rid of all the money and hide it away. Still, the men prove their loyalty by promising to venture into the gathering crowds and do their best to secure the sum for their boss. A bribe, they know is the only way to secure Macheath's release—without money, all of them are of no value in the eyes of the law.*

Constable Smith comes in to ask Macheath what he'd like for his last breakfast. Macheath asks for asparagus, and says he wants to speak to Tiger Brown. A constable enters and tells Smith that there's trouble with the gallows. Smith follows him out to go have a look at it. Macheath sings another lament, wishing someone would go to the Queen on his behalf in his hour of need.

*As Macheath awaits execution, he prays for a deus ex machina—a theatrical device in which an unlikely happenstance saves the protagonist from certain doom at the last minute. Brecht is deliberately having his characters acknowledge that they are in a play, pointing out the seams of theatrical artifice.*

As the song finishes, Polly enters. Smith reappears and tells Polly that she is sixteenth in the queue of people waiting to see Macheath and must wait her turn. Polly insists that as Macheath's wife, she deserves more time with him. Smith agrees to let her stay. begins asking Macheath questions about his life, trying to learn all she can about him in his final moments. Macheath asks Polly if she can help him out with money—Polly reiterates that she sent all the money away as part of the laundering scheme, but says she wishes she could go to "the Queen herself" and get it. Polly breaks down in tears, and Smith pulls her away from the cell and sends her out of the hall. Another constable brings Macheath some asparagus on a plate. Brown and Smith reenter and carry the plate and a small dining table into Macheath's cell. Smith leaves, and Brown and Macheath are alone.

*Polly comes to Macheath in emotional turmoil, devastated about his fate and desperate to make the most of his final moments—but all he wants is money. This scene demonstrates how corruption, greed, selfishness, and capitalist desire decimates genuine relationships—and how unthinking infatuation with one's partner can blind someone to the truth of who they're really dealing with.*

Brown tries to talk to Macheath, but Macheath is cold toward his friend as he eats his final meal. Macheath asks Brown if they can settle their accounts so he can see what he owes the man in bribery money. As Brown produces a notebook, the sounds of Smith and his men securing the gallows can be heard. Brown enumerates the moneys due—and Macheath becomes angry that his boyhood friend would actually try to get money out of him at such a time, even though Macheath was the one who wanted to have a conversation about debts. Eventually, he deduces that he owes Brown thirty-eight pounds.

*Macheath wants to do the right thing and make a gesture toward repaying his friend—but when he learns that Brown is actually so corrupt as to willingly take money from a man on his deathbed, he becomes hurt and upset. This moment represents Brecht's lampooning of social graces as well as the irresistible pull of capitalist fulfillment.*

Brown breaks down in sobs, lamenting that after a "life-time together," he and his friend are at last being forced to part. Macheath is upset, too—after three years of fighting alongside Brown in India and five years of scheming together in London, he can't believe hanging is the "thanks" he receives. He sings briefly about being betrayed by Brown. Brown, upset, accuses Macheath of attacking his "honor." He leaves the cell and calls for Smith to begin the execution.

*Brown and Macheath have been so close for so many years because of the transactional nature of their relationship. Now that they have nothing to offer one another, Brecht cynically points out, their "life-time" friendship crumbles.*

Smith enters and whispers to Macheath that there's still time—if he's got the money. Macheath says that his thugs haven't returned with it. Smith decides to go through with the execution. He admits the audience for the hanging: Peachum, Polly, Lucy, the whores, Reverend Kimball, as well as Matthew and Jacob. Peachum begins speaking to Macheath, lamenting that though he is the man's father-in-law, they are meeting for the first time on the occasion of Macheath's hanging. Polly begins sobbing. Matthew and Jacob tell Macheath that though they tried to get the money, they couldn't push through the crowds. Macheath asks if his men are positioned to earn well today—Matthew and Jacob say they are, and Macheath seems satisfied. Mrs. Peachum, Tiger Brown, and Ginny Jenny all approach the cell, too, lamenting that Macheath has to die.

*Even though so many of these characters hated Macheath for the entirety of the play—and though some even longed for his arrest or his death—now that the moment of truth has arrived, everyone laments that he has to die. This demonstrates both the loose, fluid, changeable moral center many of these individuals inhabit, and also sets up the comparably small influence of Macheath's crimes. As Brecht will go on to demonstrate, Macheath has become a beloved figure in his community because he's a corrupt individual in a corrupt world—he's done what it's taken to survive this long, and thus given others permission to do the same.*

As the bells strike six, Smith eagerly orders Macheath out of the cell. As Macheath emerges, he addresses the gathered group. He tells them that they are about to see "the vanishing representative of a vanishing class." He declares that next to bankers, corporations, and capitalism, simple theft and murder are nothing—implying that the institutions of the rich are far more deadly and evil than common criminals. He thanks the crowd for coming and says he's been close to many of them in life—but makes a final dig at Jenny by calling her out for giving him up to the police. Macheath ends his speech my saying that though his fall has at last arrived, he's ready for it.

*This passage contains a monologue which seems to express Brecht's entire ethos: the death of one criminal is nothing in the face of a world that has been corrupted by capitalist, consumerist institutions, crooked lawmakers, and a rigged economy. Macheath is bad, to be sure—but there are things much worse than he which will face no consequences for the ravages they've inflicted on the world.*

Macheath then steps forward to sing a song—"The Ballad In Which Macheath Begs Pardon of All." In the dirge-like song, he begs those who are gathered not to "harden [the]r hearts" against criminals and to not be, "as the Law [is]" to them, unkind. He describes the grisly death he'll face as he hangs from the neck, pointing out how outsized his punishment is compared to his crimes. Macheath declares that wenches, urchins, outlaws, bandits, burglars, gunmen, abortionists, and pimps, are all deserving of mercy—but "coppers—sons of bitches—" who have made life miserable for Macheath, are not. Still, he decides that on this day—the day of his fall—he'll beg mercy for them, too. Macheath attempts to apologize to Polly and Lucy, but Smith leads him off to the gallows.

*In his final big number, Macheath begs mercy for everyone around him—even the corrupt, despised cops. Just as everyone who once hated Macheath now mourns his death, Macheath now asks forgiveness for even those individuals he himself has most reviled. Brecht is poking fun at the effects that actually facing consequences for one's terrible actions have on a person.*

The whole group proceeds to the gallows. As Macheath stands upon the platform, Peachum speaks. He declares that while Macheath's fate proves that nothing in life is "granted," Macheath will actually not be hanged today. This is an opera, after all. Peachum predicts that a royal messenger will soon arrive with good tidings. Sure enough, a royal messenger enters as "The Third Threepenny-Finale" begins. The messenger is none other than Brown, who reads a dictum from the Queen herself that commands Macheath's release. Everyone cheers. What's more, the message reads, Macheath is to be made a nobleman and given a castle and ten thousand pounds a year for life. Macheath and Polly rejoice.

*Macheath's life of crime, scheming, and philandering has resulted not in any consequences or retribution, but indeed in an uneven reward for his bad behavior. This nihilistic ending reflects Brecht's own frustrations with society: the rich get richer while the poor get poorer, and those rewarded by the unfair systems of corruption and capitalism have hardly ever done anything worthy of the praise, money, and preferential treatment they receive.*

Peachum speaks once more. He asks everyone to sing "the chorale of the poorest of the poor"—whose end, in contrast with what has been shown on stage today, is "generally bad." There are not mounted messengers from the Queen herself for everyone, and if one tries to defend oneself, there are often consequences. Therefore, Peachum declares, one should "never be too eager to combat injustice." The entire company walks forward and sings together. They warn the audience to "combat injustice but in moderation," and to remember that life on earth is a "vale of tribulation" that is black, cold, lonely, and bleak.

*In the play's final moments, Brecht exaggerates his cynical outlook on the world: he ostensibly doesn't believe it's worth trying to fight injustice, as the world is such a miserable place to begin with. Of course, Brecht's real-life point of view was far more nuanced than that, but as he's written an opera which lampoons the bourgeois institution of theater and seeks to call out the rich on their complicity in the suffering of the poor, his final coda reflects his very worst assumptions about humanity and society.*

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