

John Gay (1685-1732), *Beggar's Opera* Lecture

Gay was much associated with other intellectuals of the time such as Swift but his lifestyle caused some concern - he was keen on gambling and drinking and was quite at home in the tavern world he depicts in the play - rather keen on researching the effects of alcohol! The epitaph he wrote for himself is indicative of his humorous attitude to life and its foibles:

'Life is a jest, and all things show it;
I thought so once - and now I know it'.

The Beggar's Opera (1728) is by far his most important work and was immensely successful.

Newgate Pastoral

Swift suggested to Gay in 1716 that he write a 'Newgate pastoral, among the whores and thieves there'. The term 'Newgate pastoral' combines the urban and burlesque pastoral, 2 literary forms which were being developed at the time.

Pastoral tradition: presents a rather idealised view of rural life, concentrating on the lives and loves of shepherds and shepherdesses who seem to spend all their time singing and dancing rather than mucking out after sheep! Rural idylls constitute an alternative moral universe. The moral implication of the pastoral tradition is that rural life is simpler and more wholesome than that experienced in the court or city.

The pastoral traditionally celebrates country idylls and old values, stability, both political and domestic eg in marriage, reconciliation of long lost family members. However, Gay wants to challenge as well as celebrate so he has to rework the dramatic conventions of the pastoral to take account of the priorities and problems of the relatively new urban world - far from the comfortable certainties of the old regime.

The apparent incongruity of taking the pastoral form and applying it to a corrupt urban environment, suggested in the seemingly mutually exclusive words of the term 'Newgate pastoral', provides a suitably comic context for satirising contemporary political and legal corruption.

Politics

The immediate political context is provided by the recent Walpole administration. Swift wrote to Gay, 'Does Walpole think you intended an affront to him in your opera? Pray God he may'. Walpole concealed any offence he may have felt, famously applauding at an early performance of *The Beggar's Opera*. However, he did prevent Gay from staging the sequel to *Beggar's Opera*, *Polly*.

Walpole was a leading Whig minister from 1721-42, widely recognised as 'prime minister', although that title didn't exist at the time. The 18th century political system was very different to our own. Women of course couldn't vote; not until 1929 were women given the vote, provided they were over 21. In the 18th century, every male freeholder with 40 shillings a year was allowed to vote. Freeholders were usually tenants and voting was done openly so squires could check that their tenants had voted according to their landlord's wishes - most did, particularly when given quantities of free beef and beer!

There were 2 main parties: Tories and Whigs - see handout.

Political offices were in the gift of influential men so there was inevitably a complex system of bargaining and blackmail. Hence the sustained parallel throughout the *Beggar's Opera* and *Jonathan Wild* between thieves and statesmen; see in particular *J Wild* Book 1, ch.5, pp.52-5. Both Gay and Fielding comically present politicians as more harmful than thieves because their power is more far reaching and so they can damage more lives. Wild makes the association quite explicitly: 'suppose a prig had as many tools as any prime minister...would he not be as great...? Undoubtedly he would'(Bk 1 ch 14, p.79).

Walpole

He supported the interests of the monied classes by avoiding war and working for low taxation to ensure stability and prosperity. He had a great appetite for power and immense skill in dealing with people, flattering and rewarding or eliminating as necessary. The last paragraph of *J Wild* Book 2 ch 5 is ostensibly a description of Wild but clearly fits Walpole: 'With such infinite address did this truly great man know how to play with the passions of men, to set them at variance with each other, and to work his own purposes out of those jealousies'(p.102). In case we haven't picked up the obvious reference, Fielding likens Wild to a prime

minister: 'with that noble, bold, great confidence with which a prime minister assures his dependent that the place he promised him was disposed of before'(p.108).

Perhaps things haven't changed that much: Conservative MP Alan Clark once asked a Whip how he was keeping the new MPs under control; he replied, 'By offering them your job'. Clark wrote in his diary, 'There are no true friends in politics. We are all sharks circling, and waiting, for traces of blood to appear in the water.' A rare moment of political honesty!

Walpole had control of the Crown's patronage in deciding who got political posts. It was Walpole's obvious exploitation of this system for personal power which brought the institutions of government into grave disrepute. Hence the parallel between Walpole and men like Peachum and Wild, who controlled gangs of criminals. Wild is described appropriately as a puppet master in Book 3 ch 11, p.154 - obvious relevance to senior political figures such as Walpole, who had a network of spies and informers.

There are a number of things in *The Beggar's Opera* which would make a contemporary audience think of Walpole, for eg Peachum's confederate, Robin of Bagshot, alias Bob Booty. Walpole was often accused of enriching himself at his country's expense; the name 'Bob Booty' was clearly appropriate and stuck with him for the rest of his career. Peachum tells us that Bob Booty 'spends his life among women' (I,iv); Walpole had a reputation as a bit of a womaniser; Macheath's love triangle with Polly and Lucy was popularly viewed as an allusion to Walpole's position with his wife and his mistress, Maria Skerrett.

Title

The term 'Beggar's Opera', like 'Newgate pastoral', alerts the audience to Gay's intention to challenge and subvert traditional practices: opera was concerned with elevated characters who lived and loved in heroic fashion - nothing could be further from the world of beggars, taverns and Newgate prison. Gay deliberately mixes ideas of high and low culture. The opening conversation between the beggar and the actor makes us conscious of the incongruity and reminds us that this is the word of the burlesque; thus it begins, as it will end, with the absurd.

Opera was very fashionable at the time but it did come in for some criticism. See Swift's comment on handout. Its popularity was largely due to its spectacular costumes and stage effects and the exoticism of the Italian singers. Contemporary dramatists were concerned that the popularity of Italian opera would lead to a decline in English drama. Gay pokes fun at the imported fashion for opera and its artificiality and remoteness from real life. He parodies and inverts the values of the operatic world; rather than celebrating the lives of the great, he takes the hypocrisy, intrigue and power struggles of polite society and translates them to the criminal underworld. This is done partly through the complex parallels between figures of the criminal underworld and contemporary political figures but also through the use of music. Gay celebrates English ballads in contrast to Italian opera, exploiting popular airs such as Greensleeves, associated with traditional English values. David Nokes emphasises the importance of music in the piece, arguing in *Raillery and Rage* that the play's lyrical qualities give it the 'humour of a broader humanity, which transform[s] the attacks upon individual politicians into a festival of traditional values'(p.138) ie. The play works both on a specific contemporary level and on a wider timeless level.

Act 1 sc i

We're introduced to the Peachum family. Peachum's name is indicative of his job ie 'peach 'em. Impeaching refers to the practice of turning King's evidence, often against one's own confederates, in return for a reward or pardon. Impeaching is a central device in both *Beggar's Opera* and Fielding's *Jonathan Wild*.

Peachum buys stolen goods from thieves and, if they don't make him enough money, he sells the thieves to the law and pockets the reward for impeaching, just as Jonathan Wild did in reality. Defoe criticised the practice in his *True and Genuine Account of the Life and Actions of the late Jonathan Wild* (1725), which you will find at the back of the Penguin edition of *Jonathan Wild*. Defoe writes: 'All just governments discover a disposition to bring offenders to justice. And on this account they not only receive and accept of informations of the worst of crimes from the worst of criminals...but encourage such criminals to come in and confess the offence, and discover their accomplices, promising as well pardon for the crimes as a reward for the discovery, even to those who are guilty.'(Penguin edition, p.240)

Peachum's attitude is essentially pragmatic and business-like, evaluating everything in terms of

financial gain. Appropriately, when we first see him he's sitting with a book of accounts in front of him. There is a clear parallel with merchants and an implication that just as he is in one sense both criminal and businessman, so merchants may be both businessmen and criminals. There is also a clear comparison with politicians such as Walpole, who operated according to commercial principles; Walpole was often depicted in the 18th century as a criminal. The opening song exploits the popularly conceived parallel between politicians and criminals: 'And the statesman, because he's so great, / Thinks his trade as honest as mine.'

Bernard Mandeville's notorious poem, *The Fable of the Bees*, reprinted in 1724, ironically argued that the public benefit of commercial growth depended on private vices: trade is motivated by avarice, not virtue. *The Beggar's Opera* exploits the seeming paradox that commercial values, while providing employment, wealth and stability, also involve varying degrees of exploitation.

Macheath comically embodies the tension between mercantile and aristocratic ideals: he is on one level involved in the 'trade' of highwaymen, discussing his activities in business terms; yet he also tries to present himself as a sort of hero embodying aristocratic ideals of honour. Throughout his dealings with his criminal confederates, we have the ironic tension between ideals of 'honour' and mercantile gain. In Peachum, there is no such tension - he's motivated purely by money!

Sc 2

We become aware of Peachum's power: he promises to 'soften the evidence' for Black Moll and to save Betty Sly from transportation because they steal well for him; Tom Gagg brings in less and so he will happily sell him to the authorities. Money rules every area of the world depicted in *B's Opera*, including domestic relationships. Macheath provides a contrast to Peachum: both men are criminal in one sense but Macheath is considerably more human than the cold and calculating Peachum. Macheath represents a sort of freedom and courage; he may be intemperate but at least he shows human warmth.

Throughout the play there is a degree of tension between the idealism associated with the highwayman as hero and the love theme and the extreme financial pragmatism of Peachum, who will condemn a man to death for money: 'If business cannot be carried on without murder, what would you have a gentleman do?'

Macheath

Gay exploits the traditional popular association between highwayman and hero. Mrs Peachum declares, 'there is not a finer gentleman upon the road than the captain'(Act I sc.iv).

Think of Kevin Costner's Robin Hood film - no-one wants such a figure to go to the gallows - we appreciate his ingenuity and daring; half the audience wants to be him and the other half is probably in love with him. Forgive me if I'm showing my age here but you get the point! Imagine Brad Pitt or someone. What's important is the way we idolise certain individuals - the term outlaw still has a romantic ring - the connotation of law breaking is secondary in the public consciousness, even incidental. We also tend to make moral judgements about crime: we forgive Robin Hood for robbery and murder because myth has it that he gave the proceeds to the poor and was fighting to overthrow tyranny. Macheath and his followers justify themselves in similar terms, referring constantly to their code of honour and regarding themselves as redistributing wealth - taking from the rich and giving to the poor - ie themselves! Because they are in one sense honest about what they do, they see themselves as less criminal than the politician who effectively robs the public but does not admit it. Out of interest, some highwaymen were aristocrats whose estates had been confiscated because they were Catholic - so the phrase 'gentlemen of the road' has some truth to it.

Criminals are still often characterised by the media as heroes or monsters: the great train robbers are often treated sympathetically in films but mass murderers are regarded as monsters. The possibility of such evil both repels and fascinates the public mind; think of Jack the Ripper in 19th century London and the number of films and documentaries about him or the film *Silence of the Lambs*, based on a real serial killer.

It was much the same in the 18th century. We watch films about criminals; they watched or read trials or went to watch hangings. Attractive highwaymen had quite a following, particularly if their crimes had been daring - they were the media stars of their age and attracted a huge amount of sympathy. Crowds would throng the route to the gallows and people would cheer them as heroes, shout words of encouragement or endearment and pray for them.

Polly envisages such a scene in Act I sc 12:

'Methinks I see him already in the cart...I hear the crowd extolling his resolution and intrepidity! What volleys of sighs are sent...that so comely a youth should be brought to disgrace! I see him at the tree! the whole circle are in tears!' Less attractive criminals might be jeered and those who had committed particularly vicious crimes would be booed and stoned. *The Beggar's Opera* is steeped in this dramatic and colourful world of crime, a world calculated to appeal to the audience but which also facilitates satiric treatment of some of the most important issues of the time eg corruption in the political and legal systems.

Polly

Audiences respond to romanticised heroes of the Robin Hood school partly because of their daring and partly because of the associated love interest: for Robin it was Marion; for Macheath it's Polly (not a traditional 'heroinely' name - it's rather homely and more appropriate for a milkmaid than a heroine). Romantic heroines and their parents are of course traditionally always concerned with their honour. Mrs Peachum comments as one would expect: 'If soon she be not made a wife, / Her honour's singed.'(Act I sc 4)

Polly reassures her father in sc 7, 'If I allow Captain Macheath some trifling liberties, I have this watch and other visible marks of his favour to show for it'. Peachum's attitude is decidedly unorthodox, inverting the moral values which determined that women should be virtuous and that marriage was financially expedient - the underground works differently. He warns her, 'if I find out that you have played the fool, and are married...I'll cut your throat, hussy'(end of sc 7).

When it is revealed that Polly is married to Macheath, her parents berate her as one would expect them to do if she had NOT married him; the word 'ruin' usually refers to compromised virtue, not marriage! Polly is ridiculed for wanting to 'do like the gentry' and marry, unlike her parents, who aren't married. Polly replies in a song full of romantic idealism: 'Can love be controlled by advice? / Will Cupid our mothers obey?'

We sympathise with her but it is absurd - reminds us it's burlesque. Mrs Peachum comments, 'If she had had only an intrigue with the fellow, why the very best of families have excused and huddled up a frailty of that sort. 'Tis marriage, husband, that makes it a blemish.' A contemporary audience would have sniggered no doubt at the jibe against the upper classes who could afford to cover up affairs. Our sympathy for Polly deepens when her parents try to force her to sell Macheath to the authorities: they want her to effectively kill her husband for profit: 'Hang your husband, and be dutiful' (end sc 10).

The *B's Opera* gives us a dramatic presentation of the practice of selling criminals to the gallows; Macheath is a colourful and attractive character; even Peachum admits, 'When I consider his personal bravery, his fine stratagems, how much we have already got by him...I can't find in my heart to have a hand in his death', although these apparently fine sentiments are undercut by his final statement, 'I wish you could have made Polly undertake it', wanting his daughter to do his dirty work for him. The fact that even Peachum has qualms about betraying Macheath inevitably causes the audience to revolt from such a legal system.

Peachum's habitually materialistic language is calculated to alienate the audience from his views; youth and love in the form of Macheath and Polly contrast with the older, corrupt and calculating figures of her parents and the aspects of the legal system they represent.

Romance tradition often opposes generations in the form of young lovers and their parents, who generally represent systems which have failed in some way. The conflict between opposing value systems is usually resolved by marriage; the young lovers are often of noble birth and so represent future power; the marriage suggests social as well as domestic harmony: eg the son and daughter of 2 feuding rulers may marry and thus ensure future political stability: Miranda marries Ferdinand in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; Perdita marries the unfortunately named Florizel in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*. The world of the *B's Opera* is less comforting and stable: the motif of the young lovers facing opposition from parents is translated into a corrupt world where decisions are taken according to material profit.

Macheath's declaration of love makes reference to pistols and horses etc and so reinforces the idea of youthful energy and heroism but this is undercut by Polly's naive comment, 'I have no reason to doubt you, for I find in the romance you lent me, none of the great heroes were ever false in love.' Women were often accused of being unduly influenced by romances and later novels and of interpreting life on the basis of romantic ideas. Gay exploits this popular criticism for humour. The absurdity of their protestations of love

and the childish diction, undercut potential tragedy and reasserts the claims of satiric comedy on the audience's consciousness.

Act 2

Sc 1

Scene changes to a tavern near Newgate. Macheath is surrounded by highwaymen and prostitutes, all social outlaws in their way but they romanticise themselves as heroes, 'sound men and true'. They see themselves not simply as outside the law but above and beyond it, regarding their alternative world as in some respects morally superior to the so-called 'respectable' one.

Jemmy asks rhetorically: 'Are we more dishonest than the rest of mankind? What we win, gentlemen, is our own, by the law of arms and the right of conquest', suggesting that they live by an older code of honour. Gentlemen who insisted on resolving matters with duels rather than the law courts would appeal to 'the law of arms' - Jemmy is appropriating (or comically mis-appropriating) the language of honour.

Sc 4

Macheath is surrounded by prostitutes who parody the polite world of elegant women eg Mrs Vixen modestly accepts compliments concerning her skill as a shop-lifter - not the sort of 'accomplishment' ladies were supposed to pride themselves on! Gay mixes high and low culture in this topsy turvy burlesque world: the highwaymen in Act 2 ride off to the cultured strains of Handel's Rinaldo; the prostitutes dance a fashionable dance which had only just been introduced to England from the Continent. Such behaviour would normally align characters with high culture; in this world it's absurd, but the incongruity has an edge to it in that it underlines how superficial the cultural 'accomplishments' which defined the upper classes were. Miss Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) suggests quite seriously that for a woman to be accomplished, she must stand and move in a certain way: 'she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions'(ch 8). Here the prostitutes ape the behaviour of the upper classes and both classes end up looking rather ridiculous.

Sc 5

Macheath's arrest, betrayed by his friends in the tavern. Usually regarded as the central event of the play. Macheath's response parodies traditional romantic positions: he is the noble ranting warrior, with a hint of Restoration hero in the invective against women as 'jilts, harpies, furies, whores'. The reference to whores, while on one level a common means of abusing women in general and good for cheap laughs, is literally appropriate here and so deflates his heroic posturing. The mixture of what should be tragedy with ludicrously inappropriate language, is comic in an uncomfortable sort of way.

Peachum's reference to Macheath as one of the 'greatest heroes' is absurd but other aspects of the scene have serious overtones. The arrest is in one sense the dramatisation of the triumph of economically determined legal precepts over the heroic values of romance. However we view Macheath, he is in one sense a martyr; hence the kiss of betrayal and the reference to suffering on the tree. There is clearly an implicit religious image but don't make too much of it - religious overtones usually give dignity and depth to a scene but what could be a moving and tragic event is undercut here by the burlesque presentation, which prevents the audience from empathising too closely with Macheath.

Sc 7

The 2nd half of the play is set largely in Newgate prison and so the atmosphere is harsher. The Newgate underworld of course reflects in microcosm society as a whole. Gay presents an underworld where money rules (paralleling the world outside) and where one's ability to pay determines how tough one's experience of prison is. Macheath arrives in Newgate and negotiates to have lighter fetters for a fee - such practices were common in prisons of the time; such fees were known as 'perquisites' - Macheath refers to them in sc 12, 'Money, well timed, and properly applied, will do anything'. Gay is attacking some of the most serious abuses of the prison system of his time, issues which were subsequently raised by writers such as Fielding in *J Wild* and *Amelia* and later Godwin in *Caleb Williams* (1794). The problem was that officials bought their posts: the Keeper of Newgate, for eg, would have paid about £5,000 for his post - that's about £100,000 in our terms.

With that kind of investment, men were obviously keen to get as much as they could from the prisoners in their care.

Sc 8

We learn Macheath seduced Lucy Lockit (the jailer's daughter) by promising marriage - the sort of behaviour associated with Restoration rakes but also a real problem in the 18th century: a woman who had 'lost her virtue' would find it almost impossible to find a husband. Think of Moll Flanders being seduced and then abandoned by the elder brother.

Sc 9

Macheath flatters Lucy that he is her husband in every sense but in law, as if their relationship is above the usual legal one. He argues: 'For a man of honour his word is as good as his bond' - again, traditional rakish excuse! He tries to persuade her that he isn't married to Polly and promises, 'if we can find the ordinary (chaplain), I shall have no scruples of making you my wife; and I know the consequence of having two at a time', referring to the fact that bigamy was punishable by death.

Sc 10

Peachum and Lockit decide to split the money for apprehending Macheath. Peachum compares their role to that of politicians: 'like great statesmen, we encourage those who betray their friends'. Lockit warns him that corruption is so rife that if he accuses any aspect of the system of corruption, everyone will think his criticisms are levelled at them and he will gain a lot of enemies. They argue over allegations that they themselves have acted corruptly: Lockit accuses Peachum of having taken Ned's money but not arranging the promised protection; Lockit is accused of not giving Mrs Coaxer her share of money for apprehending a thief. Peachum makes the audience aware of their power: 'we have it in our power to hang each other' ie they could impeach each other. They see sense and make up.

Sc 11.

Lockit speaks to Lucy as if she were Macheath's wife, telling her to behave like other widows, 'moan over your dying husband' and then enjoy his money when he's dead. Widows were in a comparatively fortunate position in that they had a degree of financial independence after the death of the husband. Unmarried women under 21 were financially dependent on fathers; when they married any money they had became the property of their husbands and so only when they were widowed would they have any financial independence. For this reason widows throughout 18th and 19th century literature are often presented as being in an enviable position. The jocular image of the 'merry widow', enjoying her late husband's money, was a popular one.

It may not be surprising to hear a man advise his daughter to exploit her husband's death in the criminal underworld but a contemporary audience would have realised that this paralleled the practices of the polite world.

Sc 13

Polly and Lucy each try to establish their relationship with Macheath, who refuses to explain whether or not he's married to Polly (he doesn't want to anger Lucy because she's the jailer's daughter).

Sc 14

Polly is dragged away from Macheath by her father, articulating traditional laments of romance: 'No power on earth can e'er divide / The knot that sacred love hath tied'.

Sc 15

Polly and Macheath are hardly examples of sacred love; Macheath calls Lucy 'wife', promising 'I had rather die than be false to thee'. Yet he manipulates her love for him and gets her to help him escape, claiming that it isn't safe to go off together but promising that he will send for her. A contemporary audience would inevitably have thought of famous criminals like Jack Shepard escaping - accounts of such escapes were very popular, particularly if there was a love interest.

Act 3

Sc 1

Lockit isn't angry that Lucy's helped Macheath to escape - he just wants to make sure she got money for it and will give him his share!

Sc 2

Lockit believes Peachum has orchestrated Macheath's escape so that Polly can get his money and that he will then recapture him and hang him and obtain money that way too. Lockit plots revenge by using Peachum's own people.

Sc 3

Lockit meets Filch, who is earning extra money as a 'child-getter'. This refers to the real practice of getting female prisoners pregnant so that they could ask for a reprieve or respite from judgement until after the birth, by which time they could hope to gain a pardon. There were indeed male prisoners who charged for their services, although others were public spirited enough to do it for free! Gay exploits the situation for sexual humour: 'Since the favourite child-getter was disabled by a mishap, I have picked up a little money by helping the ladies to a pregnancy'. Filch is clearly exhausted: 'I am sure 'tis what I can't undertake for another session'. Lockit comments, 'The vigour and prowess of a knight-errant never saved half the ladies in distress that he hath done' - again we have comic juxtaposition of the romantic ideals of chivalry and the sordid world of Newgate and its prisoners.

Sc 4

Provides a picture of honour among thieves, with Macheath giving his friends money because they haven't been able to steal much. He presents himself as more honourable than many gentlemen: 'I am not a mere Court friend, who professes everything and will do nothing' - a sly comment on the system of political patronage, where people vied with each other for the attention of powerful men who could get them posts in government or the church. There were inevitably many complaints from those who had given their time and money to men who promised a good post but ultimately provided nothing. Gay himself had suffered in this way.

Sc 7

We return to Lucy and Polly. Lucy plans to poison Polly. Her language is elevated, ranting in a manner worthy of a classical heroine in Greek tragedy, 'Revenge, revenge, revenge, / Shall appease my restless sprite'. Such language is of course utterly incongruous here.

Scs 8-10

Lucy and Polly bemoan the inconstancy of men but their sisterly feeling is comically superficial: Lucy tries to get Polly to drink poisoned cordial but Polly realises something's amiss and refuses, thus averting potential tragedy once more.

Sc 11

Polly and Lucy both appeal to Macheath for recognition. Polly begs her father to save Macheath: 'sink the material evidence, and bring him off at his trial'. Lucy begs her father similarly, 'I know the evidence is in your power'. It may be absurd to have two women claiming to be Macheath's wife and begging for his life but it reminds us of the power of these men and the corruption of a system which could be manipulated so easily, a system predicated not on ideals of justice but on money and power.

Sc 13

Gay again balances potential tragedy with comedy as Macheath swings between courage and despair as he alternately drinks and remembers his desperate situation. One minute he comments heroically, 'Since I must swing [or hang] - I scorn to wince or whine', then he admits, 'But now my spirits sink, / I'll raise them high with wine', arguing, 'a man can die / Much bolder with brandy'!

He closes with a critique of the corruption of the penal system which condemns men according to their fortune, not their crime, arguing that if the law reached the upper as well as the lower classes, there would be a great many more executions!

'if rich men, like us, were to swing,
'Twould thin the land, such numbers to string
Upon Tyburn tree'.

Tyburn was the best known place of hanging. Even the mode of execution varied according to one's rank: the upper classes were beheaded, not hanged. It was of course extremely difficult to convict a member of the upper classes of anything, largely because they would be likely to know the Judge (all Judges came from the landed classes) and if they didn't know him personally, they were sure to have a friend or political contact who did.

Sc 14

Macheath has been sentenced to immediate death because he escaped from prison. He asks his remaining friends to turn evidence against Peachum and Lockett to avenge him by the same means Lockett and Peachum orchestrated his downfall.

Potential tragedy mingles with comedy once more. The heartbroken Lucy mourns the sight of Macheath as 'a great man in distress' and makes great protestations of wanting to die with him but as the scene progresses, it becomes more absurd, with not only Polly as a rival in declaring undying love for Macheath but four more women arriving, each with a child in tow. Macheath can't cope with all these 'wives' and so says he wants to die! The scene ends with Macheath preparing to go off and do just that.

Sc 16

Gay maintains dramatic interest during the play by Macheath's escape and recapture, the feud between Lockett and Peachum (like criminal gang leaders; 18th century audiences would have seen a parallel with a famous quarrel between Walpole and Townshend) and through Lucy and Polly's rivalry.

Yet in this scene we have a total break from the action, which dispels all suspense. The beggar returns to discuss the play with the player. The player articulates the feelings of the audience, 'I hope you don't intend that Macheath shall be really executed.' The Beggar replies that he had intended 'strict poetical justice' ie.all the characters 'either hanged or transported' but the player objects that this would be 'a downright deep tragedy', arguing that 'an opera must end happily', explaining, 'All this we must do, to comply with the taste of the town.' The play reaches resolution not through rational means but an absurdly improbable reprieve - as the Beggar reminds us: 'in this kind of drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about'. Perhaps it is also a rather darkly comic reminder that poetic justice in the form of punishing vice and rewarding virtue is fine in the world of neo-classical drama but in reality, it is all too often determined by wealth and power.

The beggar gives a short didactic speech on the implications of his work, commenting that it shows 'a similitude of manners in high and low life'. However, the work ends not with didacticism but a burlesque expression of hope, symbolised in the union between Macheath and Polly, who he acknowledges to be his wife.

Beggar's Opera is a vehicle for Gay's satiric wit as he seeks to expose the vices and hypocrisies of his society. The critique is wide-ranging, covering popular culture, politics, law, class and morality, seeking to explode myths of respectability and to expose the double standards of a society which judges people not according to their moral behaviour but their rank and, in particular, their money.

The subject matter is deeply serious and the criticism can be trenchant but this is not a polemical tract - Gay is trying to make us look at the less palatable aspects of human nature and the social systems we create but he criticises with a smile. His humorous presentation of the absurdities and inconsistencies of his society confidently invites the audience to laugh with him and through our appreciative laughter to concur with his critique. Laughter is an alternative and often subversive way of viewing the world; Gay encourages us to share both the humour and the morality of that view.