

Robert Walpole: The Face of Moral Degeneration

In The Beggar's Opera, Memoirs Concerning the Life and Manners of Captain Mackheath and Polly



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Left: Wootton, John. *Sir Robert Walpole as Master of the King's Staghounds in Windsor Forest*. 1725.

Coll. Houghton Hall, Norfolk. *Culture Map Houston*. CultureMap LLC, n.d. Web. 14 June 2016. Retrieved from: <http://houston.culturemap.com/news/arts/06-21-14-the-fake-drama-of-idownton-abbey-is-no-match-for-mfahs-real-english-country-treasure-house/slideshow/#slide=1>

Right: Hogarth, William. *A Scene from The Beggar's Opera VI*. 1731. Coll. Tate Britain, London. *Tate*.

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Introduction

John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* is highly satirical. The play not only includes satire on English society, but also directs its satire at Robert Walpole, the prime minister at the time. As a result, Gay managed to criticise society as a whole by using a topical subject of interest as his main target. To achieve this, Gay paralleled another popular subject at the time, the lives of criminals, to the protagonists in the play. The lives of Jonathan Wild, the "Thief Taker General" (Defoe 63), and Jack Sheppard, a prison escape artist, were used as a base for the characters Peachum and Macheath, who in their turn reflected on Walpole's wrongdoings.

However, there is some disagreement on whether Walpole is represented as Peachum (Armens, Downie, Richardson), Macheath (Wanko), or both of the characters in the play. To answer this question it is also important to look more closely at the criminal biographies that the protagonists are based on to see whether, and how, they tie in with Walpole. The contrast between the popular Jack Sheppard and the despised Jonathan Wild also plays a role in the characterization of Macheath and Peachum, and therefore the satirization of Walpole in *The Beggar's Opera*.

Combining popular current events with timeless social problems made *The Beggar's Opera* into a success. However, others had their doubts on the play. The question arose whether the praise of the criminals in the play would have consequences for the morals of the general public (Wanko 489). The anonymous *Memoirs Concerning the Life and Manners of Captain Mackheath* was written as a response to the glorification of Macheath and criminals similar to him. To achieve this, Macheath is presented not as a fictional character, but as a real-life criminal who needs to be stopped, for the narrator claims that Mackheath "has robb'd many whom I know, and goes on still publickly to plunder" (5). Wanko claims that, as in *The Beggar's Opera*, the text continues satirizing Walpole (489). However, the *Memoirs* appear to be less humorous than *The Beggar's Opera*. Additionally, Walpole is never directly

mentioned in the *Memoirs*, therefore it is debatable whether Mackheath also refers to Walpole, as he appears to do in *The Beggar's Opera*.

Polly, the sequel to *The Beggar's Opera*, continues with the story of Polly, Peachum's daughter, and Macheath, who both find themselves in the West Indies. It becomes clear that Peachum has been prosecuted and hanged in the meantime (Gay P 1.5). This raises the question whether the absence of Peachum in the play means that Walpole is not a target of satire any longer, as it is most often claimed that Peachum represents Walpole in *The Beggar's Opera* (Armens, Downie, Richardson). This might be the case, as the public could have lost their interest in Walpole at the time. However, there are signs that the satirization of him is not completely omitted in the play. It must be noted, however, that the satire in *Polly* is much harsher than in *The Beggar's Opera*. The English society is criticised much more directly in the play, while the possible hints to Walpole are found in the details.

This thesis will therefore try to answer the question of what exactly is satirized in *The Beggar's Opera*, the *Memoirs Concerning the Life and Manners of Captain Mackheath* and *Polly*, and whether Walpole still plays a role in the latter two texts. To answer this question, firstly, a comparative analysis will be made of both Peachum and Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera* with Defoe's biography of Jonathan Wild and Jack Sheppard. This will also be contrasted with Walpole to find out his importance in the play. In the second chapter, the *Memoirs Concerning the Life and Manners of Captain Mackheath* will be looked at to see how Macheath developed, and to answer the question whether Walpole is a target of political satire in the text, or whether the text criticises society in general. Finally, *Polly* will be analysed to see if Walpole still plays a role in the play without the presence of Peachum and the different role of Macheath, or whether the play attacks other subjects.

Chapter 1

Walpole was a frequent target of satire in literature during his time of reign and beyond. He was even called “the poet’s foe” (Downie 171). His opponents found him to be a corrupt statesman willing to go to any lengths to maintain his power. Often, the negative opinions on Walpole were also fuelled by the writers’ personal disagreements with the Prime Minister. Gay was no exception to this. He lost a substantial amount of money during the South Sea Bubble crisis, which Walpole was held partially accountable for (Downie 172). Some even claim it caused Gay’s bankruptcy (Armens 110-113, Johnson 172). Additionally, Gay aspired to a career at court, but felt that Walpole thwarted him in his ambitions as he was only offered a disappointing position as Gentleman-usher to Princess Louisa (McIntosh 418). It is therefore generally accepted that Gay had his reasons to target Walpole in *The Beggar’s Opera*.

Even though Walpole was often a target of satire, he was usually not directly ridiculed. Instead, he was often paralleled with the infamous criminal Jonathan Wild. Reason for this is the popularity of the criminal biography at the time. Many works were published on the criminals’ tragic life stories, magnificent escapes and malicious crimes, Jonathan Wild’s being one of the most popular. However, Daniel Defoe felt that Wild’s criminal history was not to be taken lightly or laughed at, as many criminal biographies were at the time. Therefore, he took it upon himself to write a self-proclaimed reliable biography on Wild. He states that:

The following tract does not indeed make a jest of his story as they do, or present his history, which indeed is a tragedy of itself, in a style of mockery and ridicule, but in a method agreeable to the fact. They that would rather have a falsehood to laugh at than a true account of things to inform them, had best buy the fiction, and leave the history to those who know how to distinguish good from evil (Defoe 37).

Wild on the one hand acted a saint to the public, as he returned people's stolen goods wanting only a modest fee in return, for he claimed that he did it out of the kindness of his heart (Defoe 55). On the other hand, he was the criminal mastermind behind the gangs that robbed the people of their goods in the first place. Additionally, he promised the criminals a safe haven free of repercussions, until they disobeyed him, for which he turned them in and let them hang at the gallows (Defoe 50). It is no surprise then, that the public was abominated when his practices came to light. Therefore, Wild fell from being a public hero, to being regarded as the scum of the earth. From there on, his image was often used as the symbol of corruption (Defoe 60).

An example of paralleling a character to Wild can clearly be found in *The Beggar's Opera*, as Peachum, one of the protagonists of the play, parallels Jonathan Wild almost exactly. It becomes clear instantly in the play that there might be a connection between Peachum and Wild as it begins with Peachum "sitting at a table with a large book of accounts before him" (Gay BO 1.1). Wild was also known for his precise bookkeeping, as Defoe mentions: "He openly kept his counting-house or office, like a man of business, and had his books to enter everything in with the utmost exactness and regularity" (47). Most importantly, however, both Peachum and Wild are simultaneously thief-takers and gang leaders. Even though it is unclear whether Peachum also returns stolen goods to their rightful owners, he does impeach criminals who do not live up to his expectations in return for money, such as when he finds out Tom Gagg had been found guilty: "A lazy dog! When I took him the time before, I told him what he would come to if he did not mend his hand. This is death without reprieve. I may venture to book him. [*writes*] For Tom Gagg, forty pounds" (Gay BO 1.2). Additionally, Peachum controls the severity of the criminals' sentence if necessary. Either by softening the evidence (1.2), or by letting female criminals "plead their belly" (1.2), in other words: by letting them get impregnated for a milder sentence. Similarly, Wild betrayed his

gang members when they refused to obey him. As a result, Wild would “get a reward for the discovery, and bringing the poor wretch to the gallows too” (Defoe 42). Wild was also known for letting his gang members betray one another: “He had his ways and means to bring in others of the gang to come in and confess, that they might impeach the person so intended to be given up to justice” (Defoe 44). Similarly, Peachum asks his daughter Polly to turn her husband Macheath in so she (and therefore Peachum) will receive his inheritance (Gay BO 1.10).

Wild’s cunning behaviour also reminded the people of certain politicians’ actions at the time. As Swan states: “Wild headed a vicious gang of criminals but also manipulated the legal system itself; hence a clear parallel, much exploited at the time, with politicians, particularly Walpole” (1). After the South Sea Bubble, Walpole’s opponents had noticed that “he promised to seek out all those responsible for the scandal, but in the end he sacrificed only some of those involved in order to preserve the reputations of the government’s leaders” (Britannica SSB 1). He seemed willing to defend or betray anyone necessary for him to save his position at court, just as Peachum tries to protect his possessions from Macheath.

It is also claimed that Peachum directly parallels Walpole in the scene in which Peachum gets into a quarrel with Lockit over the fate of Ned Clincher (Gay BO 2.10). Some believe that Lockit stands in for Lord Townshend, Walpole’s brother-in-law, as Lockit addresses Peachum as his brother (Gay BO 2.10, Kern 412). It is also claimed that the quarrel is based on a real-life quarrel between the brothers-in-law, but this is not the case. Kern put this into perspective, stating that the quarrel between Walpole and Townshend happened after the play was written (412). However, it was also generally known that Walpole and Townshend did not see eye to eye, and a similar quarrel did occur between the brothers-in-law after the play had premièred (412). Therefore it can still be assumed that Peachum simultaneously stands in for Wild and Walpole (Richardson 24).

However, Peachum is not the only character in *The Beggar's Opera* who alludes to Walpole. Robin of Bagshot, a member of Macheath's criminal gang shows the clearest signs of the Walpole's presence in the play. The name Robin is a play on robber, and Robert: Walpole's first name (Gladfelder 191). Additionally, Robin of Bagshot has many nicknames that also refer to the Walpole: "Robin of Bagshot, alias Gorgon, alias Bluff Bob, alias Bob Booty" (Gay BO 1.3). According to Gladfelder, especially the latter was a favourite nickname of Walpole's enemies to call him, as it is said he ran off with the profit, or "booty", he made in the South Sea Company (8). However, the nickname most often used satirically by Walpole's enemies is that of the "great man" (Downie 171). This nickname also returns in *The Beggar's Opera*, where both Filch and Macheath are referred to as "great men" (Gay BO 1.6 – 1.11). On the one hand this can be viewed sarcastically, as Filch is a petty criminal in charge of impregnating impeached women. On the other hand, it has often been claimed Macheath is the hero of the play, which makes it seem odd that he would allude to Walpole (Wanko 489).

However, claims also exist that Macheath also loosely refers to Walpole (Gladfelder 8, Wanko 489). Similarly to Peachum, Macheath was also based on a famous criminal at the time, Jack Sheppard. However, in contrast to Wild, Sheppard was loved by the public. Sheppard, a petty burglar, rose to fame not for his crimes, but for his escapes. He managed to escape from each and every prison he was committed to. His escapes fascinated the public to the point that Sheppard became the talk of the town. Some even believed that he should remain unpunished, as he became a source of entertainment for the public (Defoe 35). Similarly, Macheath is imprisoned in each act, but always succeeds in escaping. However, Jack Sheppard's escapes were grand, as he escaped on his own while his "legs were chained together, loaded with heavy irons, and stapled down to the floor" (Defoe 60). Macheath, on the other hand, is not an escape artist himself as he relies on either Polly, Lucy or the public to help him escape. Even though the latter might reflect on Sheppard's popularity, as some even

“wished that a curse might fall on those who should betray him” (Defoe 35), it cannot be claimed that Macheath completely parallels Sheppard. Instead, Macheath appears to be somewhat of a parody of the escape artist. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that it can be argued that Macheath is loosely based on Wild as well. Macheath presents himself as a charming, but honourable thief during the play. However, in the end it becomes clear that he might not be the courageous man he claims to be. When Macheath is captured for the third time he realises that he will be executed, as neither Polly or Lucy will be able to save him. He is unable to face the consequences and turns to liquor to ease his mind: “Not one so sure can bring relief. As this best friend, a brimmer” (Gay BO 3.13). Similarly, Wild took laudanum, a narcotic painkiller which he smuggled into prison, almost to the point of unconsciousness before his execution (Defoe 54). Ultimately, both are unable to face their impending execution like the stately men they appeared to be. Additionally, it becomes clear that Macheath not only fooled Polly and Lucy into thinking they were married to him, but four other women as well (Gay BO 3.15). Similarly, it is claimed that Wild also had six wives (Defoe 2). Therefore, it can be argued that Macheath’s character contains elements of Wild as well.

This makes it more likely that Macheath also partially alludes to Walpole, seeing as Wild also alluded to Walpole in Peachum’s case. Even though Walpole did not have six wives, it was common knowledge at the time that he had a mistress. Additionally, McIntosh claims that there is a possibility, although unlikely, that Polly and Lucy might stand in for the battle between Walpole’s wife and mistress (427). Ultimately, it can be claimed that where Peachum’s weakness is wealth and power, Macheath’s weakness is women. Denning states that there is not much difference between money and women for the protagonists in the play (46). Peachum and Lockit lust as much for money as Macheath does for women, and ultimately Wild and Walpole (or statesmen in general) lust for both.

However, it must be noted that poking fun at Walpole is not the sole aim of the political satire in *The Beggar's Opera*. Instead, the play reflects on society as a whole. The high burlesque of the play causes the lowest classes of society, namely the beggars, thieves and whores to look down on the highest classes. Firstly, this achieves a comedic effect. However, the satire of the high burlesque also raises the question whether there might be truth in the criminals' point of view. This becomes clear in Air 1, in which Peachum sings that "all professions be-rogue one another" (Gay BO 1.1). In other words, respected professions such as lawyers, priests and politicians are no better than common thieves, as they only pursue what is best for their own interest. Furthermore, they all have a common goal: becoming as wealthy and powerful as possible.

The importance of personal relationships also seem to be replaced by money. For instance, the institute of marriage, and love in general have fallen off their pedestal in *The Beggar's Opera*. This becomes clear firstly as Mr. and Mrs. Peachum find out their daughter Polly married Macheath for love, and not for money. "Love him! Worse and worse! I thought the girl had been better bred" (Gay BO 1.8). Additionally, Peachum is afraid Macheath is after their wealth, as he "will risque anything for money, to be sure he believes her a fortune" (1.8). Finally, Macheath's profession as a highwayman worries the Peachums, as Polly will be "as ill us'd, and as much neglected as if thou hadst married a Lord!" (1.8). Ultimately, marriage is reduced to a financial contract, "for suits of love, like law, are won by pay" (1.2), which can be seen as criticism of the arranged marriages occurring in the higher social classes, who also married for money and status. Additionally, this shows how the importance of money damages the bond between parents and children. Polly is not allowed to marry Macheath, as her parents fear they will lose their wealth. Instead, they would prefer her to sell herself to men, because she should "make the most of her beauty" (Gay BO 1.4). Finally, friendship loses its importance when money comes into play. Peachum and Macheath had always

collaborated pleasantly. However, when Macheath becomes a threat to Peachum's wealth he does not have to think twice to send him to the gallows, even though it "grieves one's heart to take off a great man" (Gay BO 1.10). Furthermore, the previous examples also allude to lords, lawyers, and statesmen, making it seem as though this is a problem throughout all layers of the society.

Ultimately, all that seems to be left of norms and values in *The Beggar's Opera* is thieves' honour. Macheath might be a criminal and an adulterer, but he claims that a "private dispute of mine shall be of no ill consequence to my friends" (Gay BO 2.2). Furthermore, Macheath's gang members promise not to let Peachum know of their meeting, and follow through with it (2.2). However, the thieves also have their flaws, as Macheath is ultimately betrayed by Jemmy Twitcher, one of his own gang members (3.14). Additionally, Filch firstly does not want to betray Polly to Mrs. Peachum, as he is afraid to "forfeit my own honour by betraying anybody" (1.6), but he gives in after Mrs. Peachum offers him a few drinks (1.6). In the end, thieves' honour, just like other norms and values, also turn out to be a sham.

Even though *The Beggar's Opera* mainly criticises society, alluding to Walpole specifically also has a reason. Gladfelder argues that the image of Walpole is used to "startle the audience into recognising unexpected affinities: between thief-takers and ministers of state, highwaymen and courtiers, executioner and businessman" (Gay 8). Additionally, it seems only logical to satirize the person in charge of a degenerating society, as he is meant to be an example to the people. Furthermore, Walpole was the talk of the town as he was often accused of corruption and adultery, which people loved to gossip about. Therefore, satirizing Walpole throughout *The Beggar's Opera* made it instantly popular with the theatre-going crowd, while his image was simultaneously used to criticise society.

Chapter 2

The Beggar's Opera was without a doubt one of the most popular plays of the 18th century (Gladfelder 1). However, not everyone was pleased with the success of the play. Many people found it immoral to portray a “highwayman as a hero” (*Memoirs* 9). They were afraid that the popularity of *The Beggar's Opera*, and especially of Macheath, would result in rising crime rates (Glenn 122, Wanko 489). According to Backscheider, “Boswell noted, as Defoe had, that Gay made honest work seem tedious and even less certain of profit than theft” (519). Furthermore, it has been reported that criminals were caught while carrying a copy of *The Beggar's Opera* with them (McKenzie 589). Additionally, Macheath's lines were often cited by imprisoned criminals who found him to be an inspiration (596). As a result, many people expressed their criticism on *The Beggar's Opera*.

One of the most direct criticisms on the play is the *Memoirs Concerning the Life and Manners of Captain Mackheath*, in which the narrator takes one of Gay's protagonists, and claims to know the real story behind him. This makes the *Memoirs* somewhat of a mock biography, similar to the popular criminal biographies at the time. However, where most criminal biographies were often thrilling and humorous retellings of the criminals' lives, the *Memoirs* have a more serious tone to them.

The *Memoirs* begin similarly to Defoe's “The True and Genuine Account of the Life and Actions of the Late Jonathan Wild”, in which Defoe claims that he wrote Wild's biography “in a method agreeable to the fact” (37). Similarly, the narrator of the *Memoirs* states that he shall “not to dare to conceal a truth, or to publish a falsehood” (5), as both narrators believe that the actions of the protagonists of their work are too wicked to be used for entertainment purposes. Additionally, the narrator of the *Memoirs* claims that he is the right person to write the biography, because he is not biased towards Mackheath, as “he has never taken a shilling from me or mine upon the road” (5). However, even though the narrator

was never wronged by Mackheath, he still feels it is necessary to warn people about him, as he has noticed that “the common people mistake his vices for virtues; and those who are not in his gang, applaud him” (7). Therefore, the narrator makes Mackheath the face of the moral degeneration of society. The narrator continues by claiming that “the dramattick writer has indeed dress'd him out to Advantage” (7), meaning that Gay portrayed Macheath in too much of a good light, which only added to his popularity. The narrator continues criticising Gay by claiming that Mackheath “has been extremely misrepresented by the narrator of *The Beggars Opera*; he has indeed taken, I think, too great a poetical license” (20). Instead, he believes that Gay should have “confin'd himself a little more strictly to truth” (20). Surprisingly, he also feels that Gay made up some of Mackheath's flaws. For instance, he claims that Mackheath was not deceitful to women (*Memoirs* 20). Additionally, the narrator believes that Gay made up Mackheath's need for “Dutch courage” while he was waiting for his impending execution (20). Instead, it was Gay's way “to make way for a drunken sonnet or two at his going off” (20). At first sight it seems that the *Memoirs* try to defend Mackheath. However, it must be noted that Macheath's affair with Polly and Lucy and his emotional airs made him, to a great extent, the popular character he was.

However, the reason for the moral degeneracy of society does not lie entirely with Mackheath's popularity according to the narrator. Instead, he believes that the changes in society account for the rise in crime. He claims that the aftermath of the War of the Spanish Succession replaced norms and values by an immense greed for money and power, claiming that they are “the two great fundamentals of every evil” (11). As a result, this caused an “unequal division of the goods”, which evoked jealousy in characters such as Mackheath, making him believe that he should “remit himself to the original state where all men had a right to all things” (17). Coincidentally, Walpole “played a major role in England's conduct of the War of the Spanish Succession” as the secretary at war (Findling 16). Additionally, he was

the treasurer of the navy (Britannica RW 1, Findling 16), and an ally of John Churchill, the first Duke of Marlborough, who was known as the “great general” for his many victorious battles (Heritage 1). Therefore, the narrator of the *Memoirs* might also indirectly hold Walpole (partially) accountable for the degeneration of society, for he was a part of what the narrator believes started the degeneration.

The *Memoirs* portray Mackheath as a cold hearted businessman who thinks very highly of himself, instead of the charming emotional Macheath portrayed in *The Beggar's Opera*. This causes another parallel between Mackheath and Walpole (Beasley 425, Brewer 47, McKenzie 598, Wanko, 490), as the narrator gives Mackheath some stereotypical traits of a politician. For instance, the *Memoirs* portray Mackheath as an eloquent man, who from a young age, “understood the art of wheedling perfectly well; he knew to apply to the general passion of mankind” (21). Additionally, “he talk'd much, and he lov'd to talk; and it was his custom, when they met together, to declaim strongly, but particularly in his own praise” (31). He was also a man who “maintains himself there with great authority” (26), which is reminiscent of “the great man”, Walpole (Findling 16). However, when attacked, Mackheath “took flame immediately” (22), and then his true face came to light: “and then, and then only, it manifestly appear'd, that the two chief ingredients in the captain's composition were arrogance and avarice” (22). Similarly, *The Beggar's Opera* managed to anger Walpole to such an extent that he forbade its sequel, *Polly* (Gladfelder 3). Therefore, both Mackheath and Walpole can be seen as two-faced characters who do not accept any criticism from anyone.

Mackheath also parallels Walpole with his influence on society. Mackheath feels he has the right to “break thro” laws (*Memoirs* 16), and to create his criminal gang on the ground “that not only the whole community, but any part of it, had a right to dissolve it self and to erect another; and to form such regulations or laws for the society as they should think proper” (18). Similarly, Wanko suggests that “the threat of Macheath is that of Walpole and

the Whigs: each would reconstruct the social order in nontraditional ways” (490). Beasley confirms this by claiming that Walpole’s “politics and personality were undermining the moral structure of human society” (415), as he was “suspected of sacrificing the public good to the satisfaction of his desire for power and wealth” (414-15). For instance, by refraining from prosecuting those who would bring his position into danger (Britannica SSB 1).

Similarly, the narrator of the *Memoirs* claims that Mackheath not only stole from strangers, but also from his own gang. The gang had an iron chest, in which they all deposited a sum of their earnings for emergencies (29). However, the narrator claims that “there was a general rumour, that the captain had not observ'd this law, but had embezzled some part of this sacred deposit, which had like to have bred much ill blood” (30). Therefore, both Mackheath and Walpole are willing to go to any lengths to obtain as much power and wealth as possible, without keeping the well-being of their own society in mind.

However, the narrator of the *Memoirs* believes that Mackheath’s, and by implication Walpole’s, evil deeds will come back to them. In the final chapter, Monsieur Trapante is introduced in the *Memoirs*, a French trafficker of stolen goods, who succeeds in outsmarting Mackheath time after time, as he “invented many frivolous and idle pretences to defraud him” (52). At the the same time, Walpole attempted to maintain a close bond with the French, but his opponents saw it as a “betrayal of England’s interests” (Britannica RW 1). He was even accused of “becoming the dupe of France”, for he neglected England’s other allies as a result (1). Therefore, the introduction of Monsieur Trapante in the *Memoirs* might also be seen as a hint to Walpole. Furthermore, Mackheath also failed to carry out other great heists (58-9), leaving his gang to commit petty crimes such as ransoming pint pots, which according to Brewer is “a fairly transparent allegory for Walpole's efforts to shift the basis of the government's income from property to excise taxes” (46). As a result, Mackheath’s authoritarian image was weakened, and he continued living in “constant anxieties and fears”

(54). Even though Mackheath still managed to keep his gang together, the narrator of the *Memoirs* believes that “punishment; surely, tho slowly, stalks behind him” (62), and that Mackheath will be left on his own “when the evil hour shall come” (62). This ties in well with “the ‘folklore’ of political opposition to portray Walpole as a criminal destined for a bad end” (Beasley 426). Therefore, it is likely that Mackheath, just as in *The Beggar’s Opera*, stands in for Walpole in the *Memoirs* as well.

To conclude, the narrator of the *Memoirs* believes that “the direct paths to happiness are integrity and content, how ever mankind are led astray in the search of it, among the glare of wealth and imaginary dignities” (60). This is a universal rule which applies to thieves and politicians alike, and those who refuse to follow it will pay for it in the end. Ultimately, the *Memoirs* may have been written out of fear that Gay’s satire in *The Beggar’s Opera* went over people’s heads, but the message they both try to convey is similar. Namely, society is disintegrating, criminals are seen as virtuous as long as they are powerful and wealthy, and there are criminals in all layers of society. Even though Walpole is never directly mentioned in the *Memoirs* to emphasise the degeneration of society, he is hinted at throughout the text, which strengthens the idea that the narrator of the *Memoirs* does not disagree with Gay’s point of view, but only with how he expressed it.

Chapter 3

Polly, the sequel to *The Beggar's Opera* was never staged during Gay's lifetime as the play was banned by the Lord Chamberlain (Sutherland 292). Therefore, *Polly* failed to achieve the same level of fame as *The Beggar's Opera*. Instead, *Polly* was published in print as the rumours going around the banning of the play made the public curious (292). The rumours surrounding *Polly* arose as the play was banned "without any particular reasons being alleged" (Fuller 125). However, it is claimed that the real reason that *Polly* was banned had to do with Walpole's dislike of the criticism that he received in *The Beggar's Opera* (Gladfelder 1). Even though it has been said that Walpole "had responded splendidly to the hits against himself in *The Beggar's Opera* by applauding loudly" (Fuller 125), he was anything but pleased with the play's parallel of Peachum and Macheath to himself (125). Therefore, it is assumed that Walpole convinced the Lord Chamberlain to ban *Polly* out of revenge for *The Beggar's Opera* (125). Additionally, the satire in *Polly* is of a much harsher tone than in *The Beggar's Opera*, which might also be seen as a reason for Walpole to ban the play (Gladfelder 1). However, with the news that Peachum has been hanged for his crimes in the meantime (Gay P 1.5), and Macheath becoming the pirate leader Morano, the question arises whether satirizing Walpole still plays such a role in *Polly*, as it did in *The Beggar's Opera*.

While it is generally accepted that Macheath shares some similarities with Walpole in *The Beggar's Opera* (Gladfelder 8, Wanko 489), in *Polly* a different Macheath is shown. Firstly, *Polly* starts off in an entirely different setting, as it takes place in the West-Indies. This is reminiscent of Macheath's advice to Polly and Lucy in *The Beggar's Opera*, in which he tells them that: "If you are fond of marrying again, the best advice I can give you, is to ship yourselves over to the West-Indies, where you'll have a fair chance of getting a husband a-piece" (Gay BO 3.15). However, instead of searching for a new husband, Polly has made it her mission to reunite with Macheath, who was deported to the West-Indies to work as a slave

on a plantation. In turn, Macheath managed to escape the plantation, and adopted the alter ego of Morano, a black pirate leader (Gay P 1.5). Additionally, where Polly has no intent of living bigamously, Macheath already seems to have forgotten her, and made Jenny Diver, who betrayed him in *The Beggar's Opera* (Gay BO 2.4), his next wife (Gay P 1.5). Where this is in line with the expectations of Macheath, as he claims himself that “he was never treacherous but to women” (Gay P 2.3), the alter-ego of Morano also shows a more rigid side of Macheath. On the one hand Morano still attempts to hold the “thieves’ honour” ideal in his gang strong, as he proclaims that “we should be Indians among ourselves” (3.6), and therefore stay true to each other. On the other hand, he does not refrain from punishing those that do not comply, as he does not hesitate to put a pistol to one of his gang members’ head as a punishment for gambling (3.6). Furthermore, this is not the only example in which Morano behaves violently, as he commands his gang members to torture their prisoner, prince Cawwawkee, hoping that he will reveal where the Indians hide their gold (2.8). This differs from Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera*, as he did not seem to be very interested in acquiring as much wealth as possible, and he did not use any violence on-stage. However, in *Polly* Morano’s norms and values have been replaced by gold fever, as he admits to Pohetohee, Cawwawkee’s father, that he only feels shame “of being poor” (3.11).

However, the question remains whether Morano also parallels Walpole in *Polly*. Where it is claimed that Macheath parallels Walpole in *The Beggar's Opera* because of the Polly/Lucy conflict, which might stand for the conflict between Walpole’s wife and mistress (McIntosh 427), the Polly/Lucy conflict does not play a role in *Polly* any longer. Even though Morano has married Jenny Diver in the meantime, this is not a replacement for the Polly/Lucy conflict, as the two never come to a confrontation. Additionally, Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera* shared some similarities, such as the need for Dutch courage, with Jonathan Wild, a criminal who Walpole was often paralleled to (Gay BO 3.13, Defoe 54). However, these

similarities do not appear in *Polly's* Morano. Even though Morano appears to be greedier and more violent than the Macheath portrayed in *The Beggar's Opera*, there does not seem to be a direct connection to either Wild, Sheppard or Walpole.

However, *Polly* does hint at Walpole. For instance, Jenny advises Morano to “talk of honour, as other great men do: but when interest comes in your way, you should do as other great men do” (Gay P 2.9), as she tries to convince him to betray his gang. Furthermore, she starts singing “honour plays a bubble’s part” (2.9). Both of these remarks are reminiscent of “the great man” Walpole (Downie 171), as it is claimed that he sacrificed those whom he deemed necessary to save himself, after the collapse of the South Sea Bubble (Britannica SSB 1). Furthermore, Culverin, one of Morano’s pirates, believes that “Morano to be sure will choose Peru, that’s the country of gold, and all your great men love gold” (Gay P 2.2), as they discuss how they will split up the countries they will conquer. This might reflect on Walpole’s lust for wealth and power, especially as the South Sea Company, which Walpole was involved in, also had an eye on Peru’s “seemingly inexhaustible resources” (Bradley 190). However, it must also be noted that Cawwawkee is called a “great man” as well (Gay P 2.12), and Capstern, another one of Morano’s pirates claims that Cawwawkee “can make us all great men” (2.2). Therefore, “great man” might also be seen as a synonym for a wealthy man and might not always refer directly to Walpole. Furthermore, Morano disregards Jenny’s advice to “rob the crew, and steal off to England” (2.3), as it goes against his morals to betray his gang. Therefore, the parallel between Walpole and Morano in *Polly* can be called loose at best.

However, the theatre-going public still had the satire of Walpole in *The Beggar's Opera* in the back of their minds, and will have expected it to go on in *Polly*. Therefore, any mention of “the great man” or the South Sea Bubble were bound to be seen as a jab at Walpole. Additionally, Gay received much criticism of the portrayal of Macheath as a

criminal and a hero simultaneously (McKenzie 583). Therefore, Gay might have chosen to portray Morano in a different manner.

Interestingly, Morano's story is similar to that of Mackheath in the *Memoirs Concerning the Life and Manners of Captain Mackheath*. Firstly, both characters seem to have lost their charming ways. Where Mackheath "was a very innocent lover" and harsh businessman who only had money on his mind (20), Morano similarly refrains from sweet talking Jenny and Polly, and instead focusses on the war ahead while trying to get rich in the meantime. Secondly, where Macheath still had the status of a hero in *The Beggar's Opera*, he is described as "only a common robber" in the *Memoirs* (43). Similarly, Morano is being talked down to by Culverin, as he does not believe that their gang "should be commanded by a Neger" (Gay P 3.5), which refers to Morano's blackface. Thirdly, both seem to lose control of their gang: Mackheath needs to constantly reassure his gang that his way is the right one, even though he is losing his business (*Memoirs* 54), and Morano's gang plans to mutiny against him (Gay P 3.5). Ultimately, it becomes clear that both Mackheath and Morano are destined for a bad end. In the *Memoirs* it is only assumed that "the evil hour shall come" for Mackheath (62), but in *Polly* Morano is executed at the end of the play, as he was mistakenly betrayed by Polly, the woman who possibly loved him most of all (Gay P 3.10).

Polly continuously foreshadows Morano's death. Firstly, it starts by Polly looking back on her father's death, concluding that "my papa kept company with gentlemen, and ambition is catching. He was in too much haste to be rich. I wish all great men would take warning" (Gay P 1.5). Similarly, "the great man" Morano is heading down the same path with his pirate lifestyle (2.2). Secondly, Morano himself is not oblivious to his fate either, as he on multiple occasions realises that his ambition to become as wealthy and powerful as possible will kill him, claiming that "ambition must take its chance. If I die, I die in my vocation" (3.11). Additionally, he realises that "ambitious men like others lose their breath; like these, I

hope, they know a rope is but their natural death” (3.11). This also appears to be a warning to other ambitious and great men, as they are awaiting the same fate. Therefore, the similarity of the role of Morano to the *Memoirs*’ Macheath may also be a part of the “‘folklore’ of political opposition to portray Walpole as a criminal destined for a bad end” (Beasley 426). Even though Morano does not directly parallel Walpole, Gay might have intended to finish off what he started in *The Beggar’s Opera* with Macheath’s death. However, Walpole might also be replaced by any criminal with a high status, as the focus of *Polly* and *The Beggar’s Opera* does not only lie on Walpole, but on society as a whole.

The criticism of society becomes even clearer in *Polly* than it was in *The Beggar’s Opera*. As Spacks puts it, “society splits into heroes and villains; there is no doubt at all where one’s sympathies are to lie” (Dryden 539). It becomes clear instantly that the English lack norms and values in the conversation between Mrs. Trapes and Ducat, a wealthy plantation owner, as she tries to sell him Polly for a mistress (Gay P 1.1). She convinces him that he should leave “morals and honesty to the poor. As they do at London” and spend as much money on frivolities as possible (1.1). However, even though he is not English, Ducat also has questionable morals, as he tells Trapes that he indeed has “a fine library of books that I never read; I have a fine stable of horses that I never ride; I build, I buy plate, jewels, pictures or any thing that is valuable and curious, as your great men do, merely out of ostentation” (1.1). Additionally, Ducat is known for his cowardice, as his servant notices that Ducat is “too rich to have courage” (1.12). However, Ducat objects to this, by saying that “even the rich are brave when money is at stake” (1.12). Therefore, *Polly* not only criticises the London elite and the criminals, but the wealthy in general, as they all have money as their one and only priority. As Polly puts it “tho’ I was born and bred in England, I can dare to be poor, which is the only thing now-a-days men are ashamed of” (1.11), as anything is permitted to become rich and therefore respected.

This is in stark contrast to the honourable Indians, who play the role of the “noble savage”, as they are still untouched by the corruption of civilised society (Britannica NS 1), and live by the motto “with dishonour, life is nothing worth” (2.8). This contrast ultimately leads to a confrontation between the pirates and the Indians when they capture Cawwawkee. Vanderbluff, one of Morano’s pirates, is astonished by Cawwawkee’s talk of honour and virtue, and he believes that “we must beat civilisation into ‘em, to make ‘em capable of common society, and common conversation” (2.8), as any norms and values are seen as savage by the pirates. Furthermore, Polly reacts similarly, by stating “how happy are these savages! Who would not wish to be in such ignorance” (2.8). Even though Polly praises them for their virtuousness, she still sees them, instead of the English, as ignorant savages. However, Pohetohee turns the civil versus savage argument around, saying: “How different are your notions from ours! We think virtue, honour, and courage as essential to man as his limbs, or senses; and in every man we suppose the qualities of a man, till we have found the contrary. But then we regard him only as a brute in disguise. How custom can degrade nature” (3.1). Ultimately, it becomes clear that money is the root of all evil, as both the pirates and Ducat are in search of gold, while Cawwawkee wishes that “better it had been for us if that shining earth had never been brought to light” (2.8), As “‘tis so rank a poison to you Europeans, that the very touch of it makes you mad” (2.8). This is also reminiscent of the *Memoirs*, in which the narrator speaks of wealth and power as “the two great fundamentals of every evil” (11). Ultimately, Morano is executed and Cawwawkee hopes to marry Polly, who on the one hand grieves for Macheath, but on the other hand knows she was foolish for loving him, as she realises that “‘tis outward appearance alone that generally engages a woman’s affections” (Gay P 3.8). Finally, just as the *Memoirs* conclude that “the direct paths to happiness are integrity and content” (60), Polly realises the importance of the Indians’

“generosity and virtues”, saying that: “‘tis only by the pursuit of those we secure real happiness” (Gay P 3.15).

To conclude, at first sight it seems that Walpole is not satirized as much in *Polly* as in *The Beggar's Opera*, but the satirization of Walpole in *The Beggar's Opera* made people expect it to continue in *Polly*. Therefore, even the smallest detail was seen as satire on Walpole. Furthermore, *Polly* also deviates from *The Beggar's Opera* by refraining from glorifying criminals such as Macheath. However, the criticism of society, most importantly the influence of wealth and power on society, is all the clearer in *Polly*. It seems likely that Gay knew about the criticism of *The Beggar's Opera*, and made sure no one could miss the point of *Polly*. The similarities between *Polly* and the *Memoirs* strengthen this, as Macheath ultimately turns from the hero highwayman to a pirate who is punished for his avarice, and it becomes clear that not wealth, but virtue should be of the utmost importance in all layers of society.

Conclusion

What *The Beggars Opera*, the *Memoirs Concerning the Life and Manners of Captain Mackheath* and *Polly* all have in common is that they all criticise the same social problem: the importance of money over norms and values. This becomes clear in *The Beggar's Opera* through the high burlesque of the play, as the lowest criminals see themselves as elite members of society. They argue that they do not differ much from the English high class, as “all professions be-rogue one another” anyway (Gay BO 1.1). Ultimately, the poor are duped by this behaviour, which is demonstrated by the wealthy Peachum's power to send the petty criminals who did not live up to his expectations to the gallows (Gay BO 1.2).

The *Memoirs* also focus on this social problem, adding that norms and values have been replaced by “the two great fundamentals of every evil” (11): money and power. Therefore, a “common robber” (43), such as Mackheath, can imagine himself a statesman as long as his business is doing well (39). However, in contrast to *The Beggar's Opera*, in which the criminals Peachum and Macheath get off scot free, the narrator of the *Memoirs* believes that what goes around, comes around. Therefore, he predicts that Mackheath will “see himself totally abandon'd” in the end (*Memoirs* 62), as a punishment for his crimes.

Polly continues the story of *The Beggar's Opera* in the West-Indies. The new setting highlights the degeneration of English society even more than *The Beggar's Opera*, as it is contrasted with the Indian society. The Indians try to lead a noble life, which Morano's gang sees as savage behaviour (Gay P 2.8). In turn, Morano and his gang all succumb to gold fever, which causes their group to slowly fall apart (3.5). Additionally, it also becomes clear that money has the power to turn anyone bad, as is seen in the interaction between Mrs. Trapes and Ducat, who attempts to convince her that he is not as dumb as he looks, for he has adapted some proper English high class customs, such as marrying for money, and buying things for show (1.1). However, in contrast to *The Beggar's Opera*, virtue ultimately prevails

in *Polly*. Similarly to the predictions in the *Memoirs*, Macheath is punished for his avarice, as Polly unintentionally gives Morano/Macheath up for execution, causing him to be left all alone in “the evil hour” (Gay P 3.10 *Memoirs* 62).

It is clear that *The Beggars Opera*, the *Memoirs Concerning the Life and Manners of Captain Mackheath* and *Polly* satirize society. However, the image of Walpole has also often been used to strengthen the satire in the texts. Walpole was often seen as the face of corruption for his role in the South Sea Bubble (Paul 1). It is claimed that he not only ran off with the profit himself, but also betrayed those necessary for him to keep his position at the court (1). This is reminiscent of thief-takers, such as Jonathan Wild, to whom Walpole was often paralleled. Similarly, Peachum, the thief-taker in *The Beggar’s Opera* parallels Wild and Walpole. Additionally, Macheath also parallels Walpole, as his character contains elements of both Sheppard and Wild. Furthermore, he is also referred to as “the great man” (Gay BO 1.10), a nickname often used for Walpole (Downie 171). Ultimately, Walpole is satirized throughout *The Beggar’s Opera*, in its references to statesmen (Gay BO 1.1), the South Sea and the use of his favourite nickname (3.1, 1.1).

However, Gay received much criticism on the portrayal of Macheath as a popular character, with the *Memoirs* being one of them. The narrator believes that Macheath is an evil character at heart who does not deserve the praise he received after *The Beggar’s Opera*. However, the subject of Walpole is not completely omitted in the *Memoirs* either. Even though the *Memoirs* are less humorous than *The Beggar’s Opera*, hints to Walpole can be found throughout the text.

Similarly to the *Memoirs*, the satire on Walpole in *Polly* is also more implicit, as Peachum, who paralleled to Walpole the most, was executed in the meantime, and Macheath turned himself into Morano. However, the public had not yet forgotten the connection between Walpole and *The Beggar’s Opera*, therefore any work of Gay was thoroughly

examined to find any hint to Walpole. As a result, every instance of “the great man” was undoubtedly seen as a jab at him (Gay P 2.2).

Ultimately, Walpole embodied the idea of being untouchable because of his power and wealth. His image was used to a point that he became “the poet’s foe” (Downie 171). Therefore, a good subject for future research might be found beyond Gay’s work, as he was one of the many to have criticised society through Walpole’s image. Firstly, Gay was a member of the Scriblerus Club, a club of writers also including Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope (Power 1079). They were a close-knit group who “lunched with and satirized Sir Robert” (McIntosh 431), therefore it might be an option to see whether, and how the other authors of the Scriblerus Club incorporated the image of Walpole in their work. Secondly, apart from the *Memoirs*, other works have been written to criticise *The Beggar’s Opera* as well, such as *Thievery-A-la-Mode: or the Fatal Encouragement*, but the question arises whether they also criticise society and satirize Walpole in the same way as *The Beggar’s Opera* and *Polly*. Finally, the success of *The Beggar’s Opera* made the play lead a life of its own, and many adaptations have been made of the play since it was staged. Seeing as “the device of comparing statesmen to criminals is a contemporary device” (Denning 41), it might be interesting to conduct further research on these adaptations to see how this theme is applied throughout different time periods, for instance in *The Threepenny Opera*, or later theatre and film adaptations of *The Beggar’s Opera*.

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