

The Threepenny Opera

Steve Giles

Emeritus Professor of German studies and critical theory, University of Nottingham

The years from 1926 to 1932 constitute one of the most productive and problematic phases in Brecht's career. He wrote several major plays and numerous theoretical essays, and made significant progress in developing the practice of epic theatre. He was also involved in collaborative ventures with several avant-garde composers, among them Hindemith, Eisler, and of course Weill. *The Threepenny Opera*, the first major product of his work with Weill, was written and premiered in 1928. It occupies a central position in this phase in Brecht's career, a phase of particular importance in Brecht's shift to Marxism. Accordingly, *The Threepenny Opera* has tended to be seen as a transitional work, not only in terms of Brecht's politics, but also as regards his developing theory and practice of epic theatre. It is also a transitional work in the more fundamental sense that it was itself a work in transition, which Brecht rewrote in 1931, and it is this later version of the text that forms the basis for the 'standard' edition reprinted in the standard Methuen edition. In this discussion I shall concentrate on the three aspects just outlined (a) the problematic status of the text (b) the theatrical significance of *The Threepenny Opera* (c) the politics of *The Threepenny Opera*. I don't intend to comment in any detail on the work's musicological significance, as this is beyond my area of competence: may I simply recommend Stephen Hinton's excellent Cambridge Opera Handbook.

TEXT:

(a) The 1928 version: this version of the text is a collaborative reworking and adaptation of Elisabeth Hauptmann's translation of John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. Indeed, so many hands were involved in the final stages of the production of the text and theatrical premiere that this version of the text certainly cannot be construed as a play 'by Brecht'. In 1931, however, Brecht revised the 1928 version of the text in quite crucial ways; I shall first briefly outline the main directions which these changes move in, and then give some key examples.

(b) The 1931 version has generally been seen as an attempt to give a Marxist gloss to a work whose original politics were rather more vague. While there is some truth

in this view, the changes made in 1931 are more complex, and modify the text in four main ways:

1. Peachum and Macheath are endowed with a higher level ideological self-awareness, rendering more explicit the text's critique of capitalist society.
2. The development of Macheath's calculating and entrepreneurial tendencies is paralleled in Polly's enhanced independence, self-control and economic pragmatism.
3. Sexuality is presented as a potentially autonomous motivating force.
4. The relationship between self, role and discourse becomes much more complex. I shall comment on 3 and 4 when I discuss the text's theatrical and political dimensions later on: what I shall do now is look briefly at the changes to Macheath and Polly (though as we shall see, these changes also have implications for 3 and 4).

The revisions to Macheath's part mainly concern his status as criminal or bourgeois and his social image, and the most striking 1931 addition to the text underlines his bourgeois attributes, indicated in particular through his new career as a banker [see Macheath's final speech, scene 9, p.76]. As far as Polly is concerned, in 1931 she is presented as far more autonomous and self confident in her dealings with Macheath, who had been much more dominating and domineering in the 1928 version. Polly's increased autonomy and self-control is also bound up with the new emphasis on her economic rationality, indicated in her business-like exchanges with Macheath in scene 9 [pp.72-3]. At the same time, the fact that she breaks down at the end of this encounter illustrates a further key element in the 1931 conception of her role, namely the conflict between her affective and rational tendencies. As well as being more internally conflictual, though, her role also becomes more complex – her capacity for playacting and deception, and her highly self-conscious control of discursive levels in her encounters with Lucy, are particularly important here [scene 8].

THEATRE:

The comments I've just made on role play, on discursive levels, on role conflict, bring us to the theatrical dimension of *The Threepenny Opera*. It clearly isn't possible for me to give a detailed account of the theory and practice of epic theatre at this point, and so what I shall do is 1) give an impression of the direction in which Brecht's

views on theatre were moving 1928-31, 2) comment on aspects of the 'standard' 1931 version of *The Threepenny Opera* in terms of epic theatre.

As far as Brecht's views on theatre are concerned, there are four main tendencies in his thinking from the mid 1920s onwards, and the general trend between 1928 and 1931 is that his views become more explicitly Marxist.

1) Brecht constantly attacks the dominant institution of the theatre, which he wishes to see replaced by a more experimental and politicized form of theatre that pays detailed attention to the economic structures of capitalist society and to class struggle.

2) He advocates a radical shift in the role and response of the audience, which must become more critical and questioning.

3) He is acutely aware of the need for a new type of writing for the theatre, which must deal with the complexities of capitalist society.

4) He tends increasingly to use Marxist base/superstructure model in his accounts of cultural and social phenomena.

I shall deal with politics of theatre in the final section of this discussion: I shall concentrate now on the means by which Brecht wishes to provoke the audience into a more critical and questioning response, in particular through his use of self-conscious theatricality.

Brecht was particularly concerned that the audience should not be deluded into thinking that what they saw on stage was a slice of real life, and so one of his techniques is to expose and undermine traditional dramatic devices. In structural terms, *The Threepenny Opera* is a classic piece of epic composition. It constantly undermines the evolutionary dynamic of dramatic writing in that there is no causal or organic link between one scene and the next, and linear flow within scenes is disrupted because they are organized in terms of montage. Moreover, the spectator's awareness of the text's epic structure is reinforced by its defamiliarisation of traditional dramatic devices.

The Threepenny Opera consists of three acts, each of which has three scenes and culminates in a 'Threepenny Finale', but this symmetry is broken by the addition of a Prologue and an Interlude played in front of the curtain. Similarly, the text self-consciously plays with the temporal conventions associated with the neo-classical

unities [note the references to clock time in scene 9]. These self-reflexive tendencies also underlie Peachum's concession to the audience that the ending has been changed so that, in the opera at least, we will see justice tempered by mercy. *The Threepenny Opera's* most provocative piece of defamiliarisation is, however, Polly's thematisation of epic theatre as a demonstration or replay when she introduces the 'Pirate Jenny' song [scene 2, pp.19-20]. Her interpolation of epic theatre within epic theatre is particularly important in drawing the spectator's attention to the link between the text's defamiliarisation of dramatic discourse and its presentation of role play.

The opening scene of *The Threepenny Opera*, with its sardonic presentation of the rhetoric of woe, is built around the notion that acting involves a distanced display of behavioural attitudes, so that we are invited from the beginning to consider the relationship between figures in the work and their roles. Are they no more than the passive products of the roles they play, do they suffer from role conflict, do they actively play their roles with distance? In Polly's case, these questions are particularly difficult to resolve, presumably in order to frustrate any attempts at identification on the part of the spectator. While, on some occasions, she appears to be a rather adolescent and incorrigible romantic, on others she comes across as a hard-boiled business woman, lurching from role to role and even breaking down if the conflict between them comes too acute. At the same time, we are made aware from the 'Pirate Jenny' song onwards of an element of duplicity and deceit in her behavior that compels us to ask ourselves constantly whether or not she is playing a particular role with distance.

Role distance is also crucial in the presentation of Macheath. He appears to be able to compartmentalize his roles when they threaten to come into conflict, and this leads to the abrupt discontinuities in his behavior instanced in his shifting attitudes first towards Polly and then towards his men in scene 4. Nevertheless, even Macheath is not entirely in control of his behaviour, and this is because he is a character in transition. Although he aspires to exchange the status of criminal for that of banker, his incomplete adoption of bourgeois role attributes is signalled by the discrepancies in and between his verbal and physical behavior in the wedding

scene, ironically counterpointed by Mathias's repetitions of his high-falutin diction [scene 2, p.17].

The Threepenny Opera's highlighting of the link between role and discourse, graphically exemplified in Polly's ability to find the *mot juste* when she takes in the leadership of the gang [scene 4, p.38], is fundamental to its unmasking of ideology. The text is characterized by frequent collisions of discursive level, notably in the course of Polly's and Jenny's altercation after the 'Jealousy Duet'. Although in this latter case the text focuses on the figures' skill in manipulating discourse, it also exposes the inseparability of language and ideology and their saturation of interpersonal behavior. This applies particularly to its demystification of the rhetoric of romantic love, which is inaugurated by Mrs. Peachum's attack on the 'Can't-you-feel-my-heartbeat' text (subsequently taken up in the love duet at the end of scene 2), and reaches a harrowing climax in Brown's fond farewell to Macheath in scene 9.

Indeed, *The Threepenny Opera's* defamiliarisation of discourse informs not just its presentation of love, but its investigation of all 'natural' human sentiments from friendship to filiality. The tone is set in the opening scene, where Peachum laments the threadbare nature of texts which are intended to provoke pity and generosity, but which have become debilitated through over-use. The juxtaposition of the registers of sentiment and economics, both here and in Polly's comparison of the moon of love to a worn-down penny at the end of Scene 4, also invites us to consider the materialist dimension to *The Threepenny Opera's* account of social relation, so I shall now go on to consider the work's politics.

POLITICS:

Even since its premiere in 1928, *The Threepenny Opera's* Marxist credentials have been a matter of controversy. *The Threepenny Opera* was subjected to a devastating attack in the communist daily *The Red Flag*, according to which it contained not a trace of political satire and reflected its authors' inability to depict the revolutionary working class. As we've already seen, the 1931 version can be construed as an attempt to make amends in this respect, but it does so in a rather ambivalent manner. I shall try to bring out this ambivalence by looking at the work's account of

economic and sexual relationships, and I'll finish by considering the work's 'revolutionary' potential.

The exploitative nature of the capitalist economy is grotesquely demonstrated through the nature of Peachum's business, as his employees exchange a proportion of their labour power for begging licenses. Although Peachum's firm is a pre-industrial enterprise and the text does not address itself specifically to commodity production, it does emphasize the commercialization of all interpersonal relationships under capitalism, especially bourgeois marriage and prostitution. At the same time, it is precisely in the sphere of sexual relationships that the apparent primacy of economics is obscured. The 'Ballad of Sexual Slavery' [added in 1931] implies that Macheath's behaviour is determined by his sexual appetites, and despite Brecht's claim to the contrary ('Texts by Brecht', Methuen edition, pp.92-3), Macheath's virtual satyriasis is amply confirmed by the variety and frequency of his sexual encounters. Just as Peachum's relationship to his employees denotes the economic organization of capitalism, so Macheath's relationships to women and his implicitly homoerotic friendship with Brown indicate its sexual organization. *The Threepenny Opera* demonstrates that in bourgeois society, all forms of sexuality are defined in relation to the norm of masculinity. Thus, the sexual identity of women in particular, whether as wives, lovers or prostitutes, is presented as deriving from dependency on men, even though the precise nature of this dependency is mediated in socio-economic terms.

The text's detailed attention to human sexuality is complemented by its recognition of other biologically based material needs, most starkly in the 'Second Finale': 'Food is the first thing. Morals follow on' (scene 6, pp.55-6) At first sight, these words appear to lend credence to the view that Brecht's position in *The Threepenny Opera* is ultimately no different from Freud's in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, emphasising the primacy of biological needs and human viciousness, and implying that the conditions condemned in the 'First Finale' are natural and unchangeable rather than historical and political. However, this would be to overlook the fact that the immediate context of 'Food is the first thing' refers to the differential socio-economic distribution of the means to satisfy basic human requirements. There is a strong case for arguing that the text's overall presentation of social relationships

is consistent with Brecht's thesis that the physicality of human beings must be construed in terms of socio-economic processes in which it is set. While this involves a crucial modification of Brecht's more orthodox Marxist contention that the human essence is no more than an ensemble of societal relationships, it also means that *The Threepenny Opera's* approach to material needs involves a descriptive and explanatory model which avoids the pitfalls of both economic and biological reductionism.

The absurd *deus ex machina* which rounds off *The Threepenny Opera*, and underlines the *absence* of mercy and justice for all in the non-operatic world of capitalism, is put into perspective by Peachum's reminder that the King's messengers appear only infrequently and that the down-trodden will kick back. *The Threepenny Opera's* materialist account of the ideological and social relations of capitalism thus seems to be complemented by a confident assurance of revolutionary praxis; nevertheless, the models of resistance encountered in the work are problematic. Typically, whether in Macheath's 'Forgiveness' ballad in Scene 9, the 'Pirate Jenny' song in scene 2, or the First Finale, 'kicking back' simply involves recourse to physical violence generated by resentment or frustration of material needs: it may well be that this is why Brecht stated in 1945 that, in the absence of a revolutionary movement, the work's message was pure anarchism. There is certainly no attempt to present a revolutionary movement within *The Threepenny Opera*, but the work's failure to engage with the problem of generating collective political action ultimately derives from its analysis of capitalism. While *The Threepenny Opera* provides a compelling account of ideology and commodification, from a Marxist point of view it is far less adequate in its consideration of social class. While the lower orders of capitalist society are presented exclusively as members of the *Lumpenproletariat*, state power is embodied in the pathetic figure of Brown. Consequently, there is no real sense of class conflict in the work, nor of its grounding in the conflict between forces and relations of production. Although the final stanza of the 'Third Finale' ironically invites us to embark on a deconstruction of legal and religious superstructures, it seems to be oblivious of the fact that for Marx, the distorted conceptions of ideology can only be overcome *practically*, by changing the contradictory societal relations that generate ideology. *The Threepenny Opera*

presents a fascinating interpretation of the world: but from a Marxist point of view, the point is to change it.

References and further reading

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