John Gay's socio-political satire *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) was the most popular play of its time and has been recast by key satirists of the modern and postmodern eras. In this course we will study the original play and its background and context, beginning with tragic models by Shakespeare and Dryden. Gay's ballad operas critique inherited heroic prototypes in the context of emerging mercantile capitalism, colonial empire-building, and a modern nationalism premised on consuming individuals in a bourgeois family. Modern and postmodern reworkings reformulate Gay's satire as we shall see in Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928) (stage and movie versions); Václav Havel's *Zezracky Opera* (1975); Wole Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi* (1977); and Alan Ayckbourn's *A Chorus of Disapproval* (1984) (stage and movie versions). Critical reading of these variant *Beggar's Operas* opens to view pivotal moments and themes in 20th-century history: the imminent Nazi takeover of Germany, the Soviet invasion and repression of Eastern Europe, the corruption of African post-colonial oil politics, and 1980s corporate globalization and privatization in Britain. We will theoretically explore artistic adaptation itself as well as the interplay of (so-called) "high" and "low" culture.


**WORK:** Midterm Exam (25%); Participation (journal/class discussion) (25%); In-Class Presentation (25%); Paper (25%).

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**WEEK 1 – 9/29 PART THE FIRST—BACKGROUND:** Historical & Theoretical Concepts & Contexts

- **Introductions**—The course & readings; resources; literary & historical background; theoretical approaches
- **Concepts & Terms**—periods of Eng.Lit.: Elizabethan through Augustan; Renaissance; baroque; author & authorship; canon of literature; folklore; oral poetry; archetypal criticism; cultural studies; imitation; New Historicism (Abrams, *Glossary*)

****Listed readings for each class must be completed by the scheduled date****

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**WEEK 2 – 10/6 EARLY-MODERN HEROIC MODELS:** Myth, Tradition, & the Collective Imagination

- **Commentary:** Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Preface & Ch.1; Dugaw, "Multi-Media Dryden"; DNB biographies of Shakespeare and Dryden (BBoard)
- **Concepts & Terms:** drama; tragedy; blank verse; plot; protagonist/antagonist; heroic drama; setting; 3 unities; influence & anxiety of influence; textual criticism; myth (Abrams); Herculean dilemma

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**WEEK 3 – 10/13 PART THE SECOND—The Beggar's Opera in 18th-Century Context: the 1st Play**

- **Concepts & Terms:** satire, irony, burlesque, ballad opera, comedy, broadside ballad; paradox/oxymoron; pastoral; trickster; protagonist/antagonist; wit, humor, & the comic (Abrams);

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**WEEK 4 – 10/20: The Beggar's Opera in Cultural Context & in Literary History: the 2nd Play, Polly**

- **Texts:** John Gay, *Polly* (pckt); *Dangerous Examples* CD.
WEEK 5 – 10/27 PART THE THIRD—THE MODERN: Brecht & Weill’s Threepenny Opera: Marxist Critique (1)

**MIDTERM ESSAYS DUE**


Commentary: Hutcheon, Theory of Adaptation, Ch.2; Böker, Dettmers & Giovanopoulos, “From Gay to Brecht & Beyond”; Nigel Playfair, excerpt from The Story of the Lyric Theatre; Walter Benjamin from Understanding Brecht, “What Is Epic Theatre? [2nd version],” “Studies for A Theory of Epic Theatre” (BBoard)

Recommended: Wolf von Eckard & Sander Gilman, Bertolt Brecht’s Berlin (Reserve)

Required Film: Mack the Knife (1990) (Menachem Golan film adaptation of The Threepenny Opera) (Video 06689)

Concepts & Terms: modernism & postmodernism; Marxist criticism; epic theatre; alienation effect; satire; irony

WEEK 6 – 11/3 MODERNISM’S FILM TRANSFORMATIONS: Gay & Brecht in Celluloid: Marxist Critique (2)

Texts: Brecht & Weill (adapted by Pabst), The Threepenny Opera (pckt); P.Rotha on 3Penny Opera

Commentary: Hutcheon, Theory of Adaptation, Ch.3; Walter Benjamin from Understanding Brecht, “Brecht’s Threepenny Novel,” & “The Author As Producer”; Peter Baruth and Nancy West, “The History of ‘The Moving Image’: Rethinking Movement in the 18th-Century Print Tradition & the Early Years of Photography & Film” (BBoard)

Required Film: The Threepenny Opera (1932) (Otto Pabst film adaptation) (Video 02320)

Concepts & Terms: cultural studies; Marxist criticism; epic theatre; alienation effect; melodrama

WEEK 7 – 11/10 PART THE FOURTH—THE POSTMODERN: Havel’s Gay Critiques the Marxist World

Texts: Václav Havel, The Beggar’s Opera (1975) (pckt)


Concepts & Terms: formalism; Prague School; antihero; naïve hero; irony; satire

WEEK 8 – 11/17 POSTCOLONIAL—POSTMODERN (I): Soyinka’s Opera Amidst 1st/3rd World Oil Politics

Texts: Wole Soyinka, Opera Wonyosi (1977) (pckt)


Recommended: Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa”; Wilson Harris, “Frontier on Which Heart of Darkness Stands”

Concepts & Terms: postcolonial studies; protagonist/antagonist; myth; satire; irony

WEEK 9 – THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY

WEEK 10 – 12/1 A POSTMODERN BEGGAR’S OPERA: Ayckbourn’s Macheath & Privatizing Globalization


Required Film: A Chorus of Disapproval (1989) (Video on Reserve)

Commentary: Hutcheon, Theory of Adaptation, Ch.6; Anja Müller, “Alan Ayckbourn’s Beggar’s Opera as A Chorus of Disapproval”; Mel Shapiro, “Directing A Chorus of Disapproval; Algert Kalson, “Preface” & “A Chorus of Disapproval” from Laughter in the Dark; Malcolm Page, “A Chorus of Disapproval” from File on Ayckbourn (BBoard)

Recommended: Bernard Dukore, “An Interview with Alan Ayckbourn”

Concepts & Terms: protagonist; antihero; naïve hero; play-within-a-play

****FINAL PAPERS DUE by 5:00pm, Monday, 12/5 ****