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Unmasking Polly: Race and Disguise in Eighteenth-Century Plantation Space

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Unmasking Polly: Race and Disguise in Eighteenth-Century Plantation Space

Abstract

John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* has influenced popular culture since its debut. Its 1729 sequel, *Polly*, has been understudied by literary critics, perhaps because of its suppression in Gay's lifetime. However, *Polly* offers scholars new views on British imperialism before an active abolition movement in Britain. Gay confronts the evils of colonialism through his theatrical use of disguise. While other Caribbean plays of the period allow white characters to reinvent themselves abroad, in *Polly* disguise only intensifies the self, while the higher stakes of plantation space are where the characters meet the fates originally designated for them in *The Beggar's Opera*. Although the play contains a slave rebellion and many white characters referred to as slaves, the absence of actual Black characters suggests an inability to deal directly with the effects of chattel slavery on Britain and its victims as well as the impossibility of Black guilt in a system that otherwise indicts all participants.

Keywords

Polly, John Gay, race, slavery, gender, disguise, pirates, eighteenth century, blackface

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Cover Page Footnote

i. See John Richardson, "Alexander Pope's 'Windsor Forest': Its Context and Attitudes Toward Slavery." ii. For more on the 1777 performance and its specific political context, see Peter P. Reed's "Conquer or Die: Staging Circum-Atlantic Revolt in *Polly* and *Three-Finger'd Jack*," *Theatre Journal* 59.2, 2007. iii. *Polly*'s inheritance following her father's hanging is what propels her to the Caribbean. iv. The epilogue to Thomas Killigrew's seventeenth-century play *The Parson's Wedding*, cited by Janet Todd in *Aphra Behn: A Secret Life*, begins "When boys play'd women's parts, you'd think the Stage, Was innocent in that untempting Age. No: for your amorous Fathers then, like you, Amongst those Boys had play-house Misses too: They set those bearded Beauties on their laps, Men gave 'em Kisses, and the Ladies Claps" (Killigrew 141; Todd 156). v. Macheath is instead saved by the *Beggar* narrator after the *Beggar* is told that the audience will want a happy ending. vi. Cawwawkee, had the play been performed, would have been a standard blackface character, in which darkened skin was meant to represent dark skin. vii. "Cape of Good Hope." Noelle Chao, in *Ballads and Broadides in Britain, 1500-1800*, says that, "While the ballad's title refers to an African port known for facilitating the movement of goods from East to West, its national origin establishes a subtle connection between the Indian prince and the French, recalling other Franco-Amerindian alliances in the New World." Vanessa Rogers, in a 2014 article for *Eighteenth-Century Music*, has convincingly shown that this, and other musical selections from *Polly*, were taken from French vaudevilles. viii. As has been explored elsewhere, the Indians in the play fulfill the Rousseauian role of noble savage, so Cawwawkee's masculine ideal is tempered by a racist assumption of naivety in his honor. See: Canfield, Rob. "Something's Mizzen: Anne Bonny, Mary Read, *Polly*, and Female Counter-Roles on the Imperialist Stage." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2001, pp. 45-63. ix. Bill Knight notes the pun on transport and transportation in his thoughtful reading of how the legal act of transportation interrupted the experience of the sublime (443). x. Original lyrics: "In the softest moments of love, Melting, panting, oh how she moves... Pray don't trifle, my dearest, forbear, I shall die with transports, I fear..." (Nokes 462) xi. Indeed, Cawwawkee does not even know the name of his lost friend. *Polly* never gives a name in her disguise, and it seems that none of the people she encounters ever ask for one. Cawwawkee always refers to the disguised *Polly* as "the youth," or as a "friend." xii. Turtledoves were known for their

"constancy to a single mate" and were believed to waste away and die if their mate was killed. Polly evokes the turtledove in *The Beggar's Opera* in her own interludes, though those are ironically contrasted both to Macheath's behavior and Mrs Trapes' self comparison to the dove (Ladd 98-9). xiii. "With this song Polly is won; both the education and judgment are fulfilled, and in the marriage dance beyond reprieve Gay at last celebrates the triumphant choice of unambiguous moral virtue" (Owen 405). "[Polly] marries the Indian prince and they will live happily ever after" (Dryden 552). xiv. Barbados is a plausible location for Polly. Besides the fact that it was a common location for transportation more generally in the early eighteenth century, it was also the location to which many pirates were transported (Appleby 215). xv. Because of the circumstances of her servitude, Bill Knight refers to Polly as a "de facto transportee" (442). xvi. Although the *Craftsman*, an anti-Walpole publication, and Walpole himself, interpreted Macheath as a reference to the Robinocracy, some scholars, including Gay biographer David Nokes, have suggested that Macheath in *Polly* is "less a mock Alexander than an Antony manqué," and agree with Gay's own protestations that he was not attempting bold political satire in *Polly* (Nokes 456). Nokes claims that while there are a few pointed references to Walpole, attached to the characters of Mr Ducat and Mrs Trapes, it is the "symbolic importance" of Gay's work, rather than the "specific content of the opera itself" that led the government to fear its publication (456). Unfortunately, "[i]n choosing to ban such a relatively harmless entertainment Walpole showed a lack of his usual political finesse, and managed to turn a minor theatrical embarrassment into a full-blown political scandal" (Nokes 456). xvii. In the *Polly/Cawwawkee* duet, "what we witness on stage is a passionate embrace between a 'black' man and a white 'man'" (Nokes 462), suggesting the ways that Europeans sexualized men of color much as they sexualized European women. xviii. Gay does not once use the words "Africa" or "African". ix. The pirate Henry Every participated in the slave trade in the late seventeenth century, for instance (Appleby 225).
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The Beggar's Opera (1728) introduced the English public to a new generic theatrical form, the ballad opera. Gay's first opera, a send up of Italianate pretensions and Whig politics, is still studied and performed, while his 1729 sequel *Polly*, remains comparatively unknown. In *Polly*, I argue, disguise takes on a role new to the British stage, one that destabilizes the constructedness of racial and gender identities by revealing the ways in which disguise is aided by partial failure. *The Beggar's Opera* catapulted Gay to fame and controversy; its critique of de facto Prime Minister Robert Walpole's administration and focus on urban crime made it enormously popular at the same time as it threw Gay into the sights of his political enemies. It has been performed regularly since its debut nearly three hundred years ago. From Bertholt Brecht's 1928 adaptation *The Threepenny Opera*, which introduced the popular standard "Mack the Knife," to the McDonald's late-eighties spokescharacter Mac Tonight, the play has remained a persistent cultural influence, permeating three centuries of pop culture, and introducing its leading man, Macheath, as the standard for the Atlantic antihero.

In contrast to *The Beggar's Opera*, *Polly* was banned from performance in Gay's lifetime, and though it sold well as a printed play, it has never entered the popular or critical canon. In *Polly*, Macheath and his lover Polly find themselves in the British Caribbean, where Macheath has turned blackface pirate and wages war on the planter class and their native allies. Although Gay comments on London life even as he sets his play in the West Indies, the Caribbean setting raises the moral stakes. It is impossible to entirely separate Gay's theatrical slavery from the very real chattel slavery and colonialism the British empire practiced on sugar plantations: the corrupting influence of London may be thousands of miles away, but the problems created in London are only fulfilled abroad. Macheath's execution, deferred in *The Beggar's Opera*, becomes inevitable and unstoppable in the Caribbean, while Polly's greater agency cannot be used to fulfill her own desires and indeed destroys the object of her desire. Rather than offering characters a chance to begin anew, in *Polly*, plantation space is where characters meet their delayed fates. Gay's play offers a moral (dis)engagement with chattel slavery before a recognized British abolition movement as well as the anticipatory anxieties of delaying confrontation with the systemic wrongs of colonialism.

By hiding their persons, characters in *Polly* reveal the shifting status of humanity in a colonial plantation space; at the same time, characters' disguise reminds us that Gay's Caribbean is London in disguise. Gay's engagement with plantation politics becomes clearly visible when compared to existing plantation plays. A generation earlier, in 1696, as Britain was expanding its role in the slave trade, Thomas Southerne adapted Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* for the stage. Like *Polly*, Southerne's *Oroonoko* makes use of blackface and breeches roles in plantation

space. Unlike *Polly*, those roles perform according to pattern. Blackface is a straightforward representation of Blackness and the masculine-attired Charlott Welldon successfully uses her deception to win husbands for herself and her sister Lucy, the object of their decampment from London to Surinam. While the sisters' reputation is destroyed in England, they are an unknown quality in the plantation space and can reinvent themselves as marriageable. *Oroonoko*'s success suggests it as a model for the plantation play, in which going abroad offers white English women a release from the gendered restrictions of home. In reality, though plantation space offered a chance for some white travelers to reinvent themselves abroad, the racialized and gendered limits were there from the beginning, enforced by chattel slavery and brutal colonialism. Rather than reinventing themselves through disguise and distance, in *Polly* the characters experience an intensification of their flawed selves even as they permanently leave the visuals of self behind. By the time *Polly* was published, Britain had entered into the Peace of Utrecht (1713-1715) and taken the Asiento de Negros, the monopoly on the supply of enslaved Africans to the Spanish colonies. This official role was both celebrated and sublimated,¹ and Britain was kidnapping and selling an exponentially larger number of Africans yearly. Although there was no formal British abolition movement in the 1720s, it was harder to ignore that British wealth was at odds with the British self-image of a society founded on liberty. Unlike *Oroonoko*, blackface is blackface in *Polly*, and the breeches role fails to win Polly her husband. Although the play contains many characters referred to as slaves, as well as a slave rebellion, the absence of actual Black characters suggests an inability to deal directly with the effects of chattel slavery on its victims or on Britain itself. *Polly*'s generic departures from convention reveal the hope of reinvention colliding with the reality of colonial space.

Polly uses the same ballad opera format as Gay's wildly successful *The Beggar's Opera*, as well as several of its characters, but moves the setting from London to an unspecified location in the British West Indies. Prime Minister Robert Walpole had been the target of the first opera, conflated with the notorious thief-taker and thief Jonathan Wild, and *Polly* was expected to be similarly subversive and similarly popular. Although not actually banned, it was forbidden from theatrical performance while still in rehearsals and would not appear on stage until 1777, forty-five years after Gay's death.² Gay, however, cleverly capitalizing on this setback, released the opera as a printed text with an introduction explaining the opera's suppression. The printed *Polly* sold so well that he made "£1,200 from subscriptions alone, far more than *The Beggar's Opera* had brought him" (Gladfelder xi). Indeed, the censorship made *Polly* "a *cause célèbre* and the subscription list quickly became a symbolic rallying-point for Walpole's political opponents. Following the Duchess of Marlborough's example, Bathurst,

Bolingbroke, Pulteney, Sir William Wyndham, and Lord Oxford all ‘contributed very handsomely’” (Nokes 465). Robert Phiddian argues that *The Beggar’s Opera* and *Polly* were “an almost continuous political event central to a broad programme of satirical dissent against the regime of Sir Robert Walpole” (133-4). *Polly* cannot be fully separated from *The Beggar’s Opera*, and indeed does not make sense as a stand-alone work; Gay assumed his readers’ familiarity with *The Beggar’s Opera*. Moreover, an audience’s “perception ... of satirical intent” in *Polly* (Phiddian 135) depended on familiarity with *The Beggar’s Opera*; it could not be experienced through theatrical performance of *Polly*.

Briefly, the events of the play are as follows: Polly Peachum searches for her errant highwayman husband, Macheath, who has been transported and placed in forced servitude for his crimes. On her arrival in the West Indies, Polly learns that Macheath has fled his master, polygamously wedded Jenny Diver, a fellow transported servant, and become the leader of a group of pirates who are preying on the local plantations. After she is nearly raped by a plantation owner, Polly sets out on her quixotic search disguised as a man. Meanwhile, we learn that Macheath is presumed dead and has been replaced by a Black pirate leader called Morano, who turns out to be Macheath in blackface. Both Polly and Macheath/Morano are so successful in their disguises that though they repeatedly interact with one another, neither recognizes the other, nor even the fact that they are disguised. Both characters remain in their disguises through the end of the opera, and Macheath/Morano, captured by disguised Polly, is executed without revealing his true face and name. Disguise in *Polly* is always nearly complete, removing the risks associated with unmasking and presenting new risks associated with the assumption of new habits.

The characters might assume that the plantation space is unbounded, the strictures of home removed, but London is never far. Janet Sorensen, examining the use of cant in *The Beggar’s Opera* and *Polly*, argues that between the two plays, “transatlantic movement in particular signifies nothing” (88). It is certainly true that the West Indies, rather than offering an escape from London corruption, “replicates the immoral profiteering” of *The Beggar’s Opera* (Sorensen 89). However, despite the fact that Gay mires his characters in the classed miasma of criminality, there are differences between the two spaces that are notably shaped by proximity to slavery and distance from London’s formal structures. In *Polly*, Gay follows through on Bernard Mandeville’s claim that “private vices are necessary complements to public virtues” (Frohock 159) and portrays the small society of the West Indies as a place where criminality can be conducted more openly than in London’s broader lanes (Frohock 150-1). Though Gay is “direct[ing] satire back at England” in *Polly*, Richard Frohock argues that “it is

possible to view the play's depictions of vice as equally relevant to colonial society" (152). The Caribbean acts not merely as a reflection of London but an intensifier of its immorality with far more realistic consequences attached. Macheath will in the Caribbean finally meet the end foretold in London, while Polly's gendered reinvention, though hardly free of the corruption that marked her beginning as heiress to a family legacy of impeachment³ (here meaning "to give accusatory evidence against; to 'peach' upon" [OED]), will imbue her with greater personal agency and marriageability without allowing her to achieve her desired end. Reinvention is not entirely possible anywhere, but the Caribbean forces pretense into consequence.

Polly: The breeches role

The more conventional of the disguised characters, Polly takes on the breeches role long prescribed by theatrical custom. The tradition of a female character in masculine disguise precedes the advent of women actors on the British stage, with famous examples in Shakespeare's Portia or Viola. The breeches role creates an acknowledged disguise, one understood by the audience *as* disguise rather than costume representing reality, when a female character must take on masculine dress to perform with greater agency, though often still constrained by the sexual desires she excites.⁴ In *Polly*, Polly's presentation is the problem. Mrs Trapes, in *The Beggar's Opera* a dressmaker for prostitutes, here a procurer of servants and slaves for a plantation master, sees Polly's looks as a means of making money, Mr Ducat, the plantation master, sees them as an enticement to rape, and Mrs Ducat, his wife, sees them as a threat to her marriage. Polly's very appearance of innocence testifies against her, for Mrs Ducat says, "By that over-honest look, I guess her to be a horrid Jade..." (106). A look of honesty in the context of Polly's class is a sign of dishonesty, since honor in a woman can only refer to her sexual standing, and a servant can never be sexually circumscribed. It is only when Polly reveals herself as an already-married woman that Mrs Ducat sympathizes with her: one unhappily married woman can understand the plight of another. Donning the disguise Mrs Ducat gives her, Polly tells herself, "With the habit, I must put on the courage and resolution of a man; for I am every where surrounded with dangers" (110). Danger is meant to be offset by masculine performance. A plethora of roles are only open to men, offering Polly new possibilities.

In *The Beggar's Opera*, Polly acts to save her rake husband, Macheath, and though her pleas, in concert with the pleas of another of his wives, Lucy, are not what saves the highwayman,⁵ her love and loyalty act as a sign of her goodness. However, even in *The Beggar's Opera*, Polly's language shows that though she

may be loyal, she is still a member of a criminal society. Her love speeches are peppered with criminal cant: “‘sweeter’ and ‘lovely’ mix with ‘Jack Ketch’ and ‘tree,’” and Polly’s longing for Macheath’s “conversation” is imbued with “its untoward sense of sexual intercourse” in context with the criminal meaning behind many of her words, as Janet Sorensen points out in her chapter on Gay’s criminal cant (97). This Polly, that is, is already more complicated than the audience embrace of her character implies. In the Caribbean, rather than acting as her husband’s savior, Polly will be the direct cause of his death, and her more active role comes with a physical transformation through her change of clothes. Moreover, her disguise is complemented by her direct lies, which contrast with her songs praising honesty. As Jochen Petzold points out, Polly, while decrying “mean sneaking bribes,” “tricks and disguise,” and “flattery and lies” makes use of all of these mechanisms in her interactions with the pirates (348). All of this seems like a great change from Polly, the virtuous wife of *The Beggar’s Opera*. In fact, the Polly of *Polly* in many ways fulfills her criminal legacy.

Though Polly the *character* takes on disguise to avoid sexual advances, her disguise only enhances others’ desire for her, a predictable result to those literate in theatrical convention. When she is taken before Morano and his wife, Jenny sees “a mighty pretty man” (121) and begins scheming to initiate a sexual intrigue. Polly has to balance the dangers of displeasing Jenny, who has been given the authority to judge the young man’s trustworthiness, against the dangers of being seen as a seducer of the chief’s wife, or, perhaps worst, being exposed as a woman if she cannot head off that seduction. A too-chaste kiss rouses Jenny’s suspicions, leading to a seductive kiss, but too chaste and too seductive are both perils to a disguised woman. The queer tones of this scene are later modified by the homosocial desire shaded with sexual undertones that occurs between the disguised Polly and the Indian Cawwawkee. Polly, in masculine habit, has an androgynous beauty that attracts women and men alike. The dangers of her body are changed, but not eliminated. When Polly refuses Jenny sex, Jenny vows vengeance, crying, “I must be his aversion! go, monster, I hate you, and you shall find I can be reveng’d” (124). Polly’s still-sexualized body is still endangered, but the hazards are bounded by the different sexual mores for men, who are expected to be sexual without punishment. The implied sexuality that Janet Sorensen notes in Polly’s references to “conversation” becomes more visible in the plantation space, where her assumed sexuality is no longer mediated by her femininity.

Sexual misunderstanding is a convention of the breeches role; the disguised woman encounters new dangers based on different sexual desires and her fear of discovery. Nonetheless, the breeches role is changed by the plantation space, as we see when Polly accidentally supervises the execution of her own husband. It is

Polly who fights and captures the disguised Macheath without recognizing him, Polly who hands him over to the Indians, Polly who stands by as he is executed. The comedic possibilities of disguise, and the new genre of the ballad opera itself, are transformed into tragedy. In the urban setting of *The Beggar's Opera*, misunderstanding is funny, and the charming scoundrel must be reprieved for the sake of the audience. In plantation space, misunderstanding has more serious consequences. The execution, which can be disguised as transportation in England, is here unavoidable. Worse, Polly, who as a wronged wife in London could plead for the life of her husband, here proves unable to separate herself from her family business of impeachment, in which her father (a parody of Jonathan Wild) turned criminals, often his nominal friends or allies, in to the authorities in exchange for rewards and the criminals' execution. Disguised, far from home, Polly finally and truly is a Peachum.

The ways in which Polly's virtue, like her gender, becomes shifty in the Caribbean are displayed in her interactions with Cawwawkee, the son of the Indian chief.⁶ In discarding her pretended alliance with the pirates for a real alliance with the Indians, Polly seems at first to join the one group excluded from the general corruption of the West Indies. As Richard Frohock observes, "[i]n sharp contrast to the English characters in the play, the Indians also practice the virtues they profess" (155), and the play would initially seem to confirm this interpretation. Cawwawkee, introduced as a pirate captive, is threatened with torture or death. To the tune of the ballad "Cappe de bonne Espérance,"⁷ he declares that "The body of the brave may be taken [...] But the noble soul is unshaken," leading Morano to mock him as a "[m]eer downright Barbarian" for holding a primitive belief in honor (127). His introduction establishes him in opposition to the European project of colonialism performed by both the plantation owners and the pirates, and yet his capture is the result of his tribe's choice of ally in the ongoing battles between the two. Between the white landowners and the purportedly multiracial pirate coalition, the tribe has sided with the slave-owning landowners, who have "covet[ed] and invade[d] the properties of others" (127), the crime Cawwawkee attributes to Morano. The alliance troubles the otherwise straightforward portrayal of the Indians as the only moral figures in an immoral plantation space, as well as Polly's role as innocent idealist. Her alliances place her on the same side as Mr Ducat, her attempted rapist. Polly's masculine disguise, rather than simply breaking boundaries, affiliates her with the patriarchal order even as it heightens the criminal and delusional aspects of her original identity that are heightened as her person is masked.

Cawwawkee, the play's most honorable portrayal of masculinity apart from the disguised Polly,⁸ shows a deep attraction to Polly in disguise, queering the play's masculine ideal. In his immediate attachment to the male-coded Polly, Cawwawkee sings about how romantic love, which is "blooming and dying," is surpassed by friendship, which "lasts on the year" (140) and how "transport fills [his] breast" through Polly's friendship (149).⁹ This duet, sung while embracing, is to the tune of "Clasp'd in my dear Melinda's arms," which "make[s] the sexual nature of Cawwawkee's 'transport' quite explicit" (Nokes 462).¹⁰ And when Polly is missing after the battle, Cawwawkee's happiness is destroyed by his longing for his lost friend, despite an acquaintance of only a few hours¹¹ (148). He sings a ballad in which he imagines the two as mated turtledoves who have been parted.¹² Heather Ladd suggests that the surfeit of Cawwawkee's grief, as well as his "evocation of this sentimental creature can [...] be read as comically excessive, potentially, but not necessarily, undermining the seriousness of the natives' position of ethical superiority or underlining the artificiality of their Golden Age virtue" (105-6). As soon as Polly announces herself "the most unhappy of women," Cawwawkee is already speaking of his heart and wishing her unmarried for his own happiness (154-5). While he has previously declaimed romantic love in favor of friendship, his friendship with Polly is recognized as romantic love the moment she reveals her gender and creates the heterosexual space for socially acceptable love.

Polly's second marriage, foretold by Cawwawkee's proposal and Pohetohee's approval, is by no means as certain as it might seem; desire for a bad man is not erased by the desire of a good man. It has, however, been read by some scholars not merely as inevitable, but actually achieved, by play's end.¹³ Yet not only does the still-disguised Polly not marry the prince, she phrases her answer so that she makes no commitment at all. Cawwawkee declares to Polly that "My titles, my treasures, are all at your command" (160). After singing a verse about her virtue's proof against temptation of either ambition or wealth, both of which Cawwawkee has just offered her, Polly replies to Cawwawkee's proposal with:

I am charm'd, Prince, with your generosity and virtues. 'Tis only by the pursuit of those we secure real happiness. Those that know and feel virtue in themselves, must love it in others. Allow me to give a decent time to my sorrows. But my misfortunes at present interrupt the joys of victory. (160)

Both Cawwawkee and Pohetohee respond as though this is a promise of future acceptance, but a closer examination shows that it is not. Polly admits that she should love Cawwawkee's virtues but does not yet. The "decent time" Polly must

give to her sorrows announces not an acceptance of a second marriage but the delaying of a currently unwelcome proposal that has come immediately following the execution of the husband she pursued across the Atlantic. Moreover, the proposal and non-answer follow a duet in which Cawwawkee begs Polly to forget Macheath, and Polly sings of her continued love for the dead highwayman, who might have been reformed to virtue through her love (159-60). The duet is set to the tune of “The Buff-Coat Hath No Fellow,” which was rewritten between 1686 and 1688 as “The Coy Maids Repentance; Or, The Old Maids Wish, Notwithstanding her often good Proffers in Marriage, and her present Resolution,” a ballad from the point of view of an old maid who turned down offers of marriage when she was young and handsome, and now wishes she had accepted (“EBBA ID: 21162”). In context, Polly may be an object of queered desire, but her own desire, for the unworthy Macheath, never wavers, even as it fails to recognize its object. As in London, where Polly loved Macheath without seeing him as the rake he was, so in the West Indies Polly continues to love him without seeing him, but with far more dire consequence. Though Polly’s assumption of the breeches role is the more conventional of the play’s two disguises, her ending undermines the expected result of a breeches role, as well as the comedy more generally, in which the now-undisguised woman reassumes her feminine garb and marries the man she wants.

Racial formation in deliberate absence

Turning from Polly’s conventional disguise to Macheath’s *sui generis* blackface requires attention to the play’s setting and its strange absence of chattel slavery. The historical setting of an unspecified West Indian island to which convicts are transported suggests a slave society, and the play uses the language of slavery while avoiding a direct depiction of actual slavery. Macheath and Jenny Diver are referred to as slaves by Mrs Trapes. Mrs Trapes sells Polly to Mr Ducat, who calls Polly a slave. The pirates are largely escaped transported Europeans from local plantations; they are also called slaves at various points in the play. Conspicuously missing are any enslaved Africans. In their excellent historical debunking of recent references to supposed “white slavery” in the Caribbean, Jerome S. Handler and Matthew C. Reilly use seventeenth-century Barbados as a case study for differences in treatment between indentured Europeans, including transported criminals, and enslaved Africans. They write that “[b]y the mid-1670s, when Barbados had reached the zenith of its sugar-based prosperity, its enslaved population of African birth or descent was approximately 33,000, and with about 21,500 Whites, *indentured and free* [emphasis mine], Barbados had become ‘the richest and most populous colony in English America’” (33).¹⁴ By

the early eighteenth century, the enslaved Black population in the Caribbean significantly outnumbered the white population (Engerman and Higman 45), so the play's lack of actual Black characters is historically incongruous. It is true that some white Europeans referred to their conditions in the Caribbean as slavery; Handler and Reilly point to the 1659 case of Marcellus Rivers and Oxenbridge Foyle who "petitioned Parliament for their freedom 'on behalf of themselves and three-score and ten more free-born Englishmen sold uncondemned into slavery'" (38). But, as Handler and Reilly also point out, the very terms on which the men make their petition indicate that there are social and legal distinctions between indentured servants, including transported Europeans, and enslaved Africans (38). The white men still expect "slavery," when applied to white Englishmen, to be understood as a wrong and to be able to access rights that were denied enslaved Africans. While the transported were subject to ill treatment as servants, their period of servitude was either seven or fourteen years (Knight 433): a long and difficult period, to be sure, but a far cry from the lifetime servitude of slavery. The play would seem to make similar hyperbolic use of the term "slavery" in applying it to Macheath, the pirates, and Jenny Diver, transported for various crimes, and Polly Peachum, a voluntary migrant who enters into indentured servitude because her money is lost or stolen on the voyage over.¹⁵ But the hyperbole is strained by its proximity to actual chattel slavery. The Caribbean in the early eighteenth century was at the beginning of its role as a "laboratory of racism," as Walter Rodney would term it, and it was "the experimentation that took place within them to create one of the most unjust forms of human oppression ever known—chattel slavery" (Kamugisha 77). To the extent that the modern concept of race was birthed in the eighteenth century, the Caribbean plantation space was a "race-making social system" (Giovanetti 15). To acknowledge Blackness in the West Indies without invoking Black people is to participate in the race-making process. As Sylvia Wynter argues, the "blocking-out" of Black voices and Black self-conception "is itself a way of defining the way in which being human, in the terms of our present ethnoclass mode of sociology, dictates that Self, Other, and World should be represented and known" (268). Gay blocks out not just Black voices but Black bodies, creating a racial formation in which Blackness exists as a signifier but Black *people* do not.

Janet Sorensen points out that "[h]istorically, beggars and slaves were closely aligned," and that Gay equated the two in some of his other works (101). It is possible for the eighteenth-century reader to link the Beggar of the first play to the slaves of the second, but the historical reality of chattel slavery transforms this connection. In the first play, the Beggar serves as the narrator and author, a powerful if degraded figure who controls at least some of the action of the play, including its implausibly happy ending. In the second, there is no narrator, and

though we meet many white characters who refer to themselves as slaves, the very real traffic in enslaved Africans is occluded. The white “slaves” of *Polly* are transported criminals and indentured servants, people who are oppressed, but who lack the life and heritable status of chattel slavery. The differences between indentured servants and enslaved people are stark. Enslaved people could only be freed through manumission, which was rare, while servants were free after their term of indenture (Handler and Reilly 39). While “[b]oth groups were itemized as property along with cattle and other goods in deeds of sale and wills, [...] if servants were ‘sold’ [...] it was for the time remaining in their indenture periods” (Handler and Reilly 39), while enslaved people served for life and the condition of the mother was forced on the child. And finally, the physical punishments that could be legally inflicted on indentured Europeans were far less harsh than those allowed on the bodies of enslaved Africans (Handler and Reilly 45). On the plantations, enslaved Africans far outnumbered indentured servants by the mid seventeenth century. Slavery, a pervasive background to *Polly*, heightens the stakes and requires our attention. If London allows a narrator and a distance from the consequences of the colonial project, in the Caribbean, that gap is closed.

This sleight-of-hand regarding slavery extends to the play’s slave revolt. Although Morano “participat[es] in the slave uprising, which occurs near the end of the opera” (Dryden 541), there is no evidence that the revolting slaves are Black, since all of the people presented as slaves in the play are white. Historically, the context for the revolt is also unclear. Though most successful slave rebellions occurred later in the century, there had already been several Black rebellions in British colonies by 1729, including the 1712 New York Slave Revolt (Foy 47-9). By putting Macheath in blackface, Gay is pointedly *not* ignoring the presence of enslaved Black people in the colonies, but he also includes no African characters and presents slavery as a problem that afflicts white criminals and the poor. The effect is a highly visible erasure that both seems to attack slavery as unjust because it affects poor white people, and to accept it as fair when the characters marked as good and honorable, including the Indians, send the rebels back to “slavery” at the end.

Morano/Macheath: Unconventional blackface

In contrast to Polly’s more traditional disguise that is disrupted in colonial space, Macheath’s own masquerade is unconventional, since blackface here signifies not Blackness, but is understood by its audience *as blackface*. If the breeches role conventionally advertised itself as disguise, blackface was generally used in British theater to represent actual Blackness. Macheath’s disguise, however, like

Polly's, is acknowledged as disguise in the world of the play. Peter Reed writes that it may be the first "instance of self-conscious racial mimicry on Atlantic stages" (248). Though Macheath's costume is complete as a disguise, it hides none of his character, which is utterly unchanged.

Macheath is introduced three times, each introduction modifying the previous information. In the first introduction in Act I, Scene V, Mrs Trapes tells Polly "'Tis now above a year and a half since he robb'd his master, ran away from the plantation and turn'd pyrate. Then too what puts you beyond all possibility of redress, is that since he came over he married a transported slave, one *Jenny Diver*, and she is gone off with him" (90). (Polly will, of course, soon redress.) Mrs Trapes secretly plans to sell Polly as a sexual commodity and hopes to discourage the girl from seeking Macheath, but the facts that she lays out are implicitly confirmed by subsequent exposition from other characters. Since Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera* had at least six wives, as well as a penchant for robbery, his continued polygamy is entirely consistent with his established character, although the knowing reader might be surprised by the name Jenny Diver. Jenny, a prostitute and one of Macheath's doxies in *The Beggar's Opera*, betrayed Macheath, directly leading to his transportation when his gallows sentence was reprieved. That Macheath would tie his fate to Jenny of all women raises some questions that the opera never answers. Nonetheless, the character traits established in London are solidified abroad; Macheath continues to rob and to marry.

It is in the second introduction that expectations fail, as previous knowledge of Macheath is buried under the weight of new information. This second introduction closely connects to the alliance between the local tribes and the English colonists, united in enmity against the pirates. Mr Ducat, the rich West-Indian-born Englishman to whom Polly is sold, is interrupted in his attempted assault on Polly by the news of a pirate attack. He asks the unnamed Indian messenger whether the pirates are led by Macheath, but is told, "Report says he is dead. Above twelve moons are pass'd since we heard of him. *Morano*, a Negro villain, is their chief, who in rapine and barbarities is even equal to him" (103). This introduction of Morano simultaneously distinguishes Morano from Macheath on the basis of skin color and equates the two pirate chiefs through their actions. This exchange demonstrates the surface-level understanding of identity in which the characters of the opera traffic; what a man appears to be is more important than what he does.

Appearance is underlined once more in Morano/Macheath's third introduction, from his men. After they give their own backstories, all of which end in

transportation to the West Indies, one of them, Culverin, muses on their chief's backstory, ending with the telling remark that "tho' he is black, no body has more the air of a great man" (113). Eighteenth-century readers understood "great man" to refer to Walpole;¹⁶ regardless, its unspoken subtext is the whiteness that the disclaimer about Morano's Blackness implies. To be Black is, here, not to be a "great man," so Morano can rise only to possessing the "air of a great man," since his Blackness disqualifies him from actually being one. Culverin ties this air to the mother country, beginning with the claim that, "Our chief, *Morano*, brothers, had never been the man he is, had he not been train'd up in *England*" (112). Morano's Englishness becomes an offsetting of his Blackness, allowing his men to explain to themselves how they came to be commanded by a Black man. His Englishness is additionally the source of his violence and criminality; as Richard Frohock points out, Morano/Macheath is known in the West Indies for his "rapine and barbarities" (155).

We don't meet Morano face-to-face, as it were, until Act II, Scene III. Because the opera was not performed, no visual cue can suggest that Macheath and Morano are one and the same, as might be the case in a theater if the same actor who played Macheath last year was playing Morano this year, or if the costuming was identical to Macheath's highwayman dress in *The Beggar's Opera*. Instead, it is Morano himself who must announce his compounded identity, alone with Jenny, reminding her that it was for her sake that "I disguis'd my self as a black, to skreen my self from women who laid claim to me where-ever I went[.] Is not the rumor of my death, which I purposely spread, credited thro' the whole country?" (117). That he is "laid claim to" by women in the West Indies suggests that he continued his multiple marriages and impregnations in the Americas, and indeed, Jenny points out to him that he still runs after women, even if they no longer recognize him. His Blackness does not have the feminizing effect that is lightly suggested through Cawwawkee's implied queerness.¹⁷ The disguised white man is still generally treated as a white man. His disguise does not change his nature, as suggested by the parallels between Macheath and Morano already drawn by other characters.

What is not explained is why Macheath chose this particular disguise. As scholar John F. Campbell notes, during the early eighteenth century most manumitted people in the British West Indies were elderly or infirm, "their manumission... a simple way for planters to avoid the cost of their upkeep" (144). The depth of this problem was great enough that in 1739, ten years after *Polly* was published, Barbados set a manumission fee of fifty pounds plus an annuity of four pounds to be paid to the formerly enslaved person as a disincentive toward manumissions that would offload cost onto the white community (Campbell 157). A free Black

man in the prime of his life and health would be an aberration in the British West Indies in the 1720s, and, even with manumission papers, free Black people were still subject to disregard of their rights and seizure of their persons by short-handed plantation managers, meaning that even free Black people were often limited in their movements by a need to stay close to white people who could vouch for them (Campbell 150). Moreover, as Robbie Shilliam argues, slavery interrupted the patriarchal structure of English society, so a Black man, separated from the “patriarchal hierarchies” took on “the characteristics associated with the undeserving poor: idleness, licentiousness, and anarchy” (10). In painting himself black, Macheath is not simply appropriating an identity that is not his own and contributing to lazy shorthand for Blackness; he is choosing a role that limits his ability to pass unnoticed and accepted in colonial plantation society. All evidence suggests that Blackness in the British West Indies of the 1720s was inevitably associated with slavery.

The theatrical space for which *Polly* was intended already had a tradition of blackface for roles like Othello or Oroonoko, as white British actors typically portrayed African and Indian roles onstage in London. A role calling for an actor to play a white man in blackface, however, is something different, since it calls attention to details that theater usually strives to make invisible. The contemporary understanding of theatrical blackface pushed a suspension of disbelief in which a white man in dark makeup was meant to be seen *as* a Black character. But Morano/Macheath is a white man playing a white man in black paint, and the audience knows this by the end of the first scene in which Morano appears. The result is that the audience of readers is taken backstage, where the construction of character is always visible. Forced to see Morano/Macheath as a fabrication, the audience cannot suspend disbelief and see the same Morano that the characters in the opera see. His self-presentation is always visible.

Robert Dryden has argued that by choosing to remain disguised, even in death, “Morano is no longer disguised as a black pirate; he has become a black pirate” (541), but this view overlooks the ways in which characters onstage must force themselves to downplay evidence of Morano and Macheath’s sameness. As noted, the first mention of Morano equates him with Macheath, and throughout the opera, characters notice the essential Europeanness, not Africanness, of his behavior.¹⁸ Just before his execution, Morano is interrogated by Pohetohee, the Indian chief allied with the colonial English. Pohetohee addresses him as a European, demanding, “Would your *European* laws have suffer’d crimes like these to have gone unpunished!” (151). Although Morano is supposedly in opposition to European rule, he is still identified as explicitly European, just as Culverin more specifically notes his Englishness. The crew that, in Morano’s

words, has not the “least suspicion” of him, is the same pirate crew that served under Macheath, a white man with the same leadership qualities who was also married to Jenny Diver. That the two characters are one and the same is something that other characters must force themselves to ignore although similarities continuously make themselves known despite the evidence of skin color.

Although pirate crews were the site of racial mixing, the relationship between piracy and colonialism is complex. Srinivas Aravamudan posits the intersection of the legal and illegal plundering of tropical locales: “[b]uccaneers were vigilante settlers...who acted violently on their own initiative in ways that enhanced the colonial presence of the British. Like Sir Henry Morgan, governor of Jamaica, a noted buccaneer who sacked Panama, they were frequently rewarded for their prescient services after the fact” (83). By the 1720s, however, piracy was no longer legally sanctioned, and pirate culture, though threatening, was on the decline (Appleby 228-9). Pirate crews often targeted slave ships, and although some of the enslaved people on board might be able to join up with the pirate crew, in a colonial space those same people could become pirate booty¹⁹. A Black pirate did not present the pure face of resistance to colonial rule, since the actions of pirates often contributed to colonial expansion, but a Black pirate was also always the potential victim of that selfsame expansion. Macheath’s occupation of that role, as Morano, although successful in making his true identity unknown, is an incomplete occupation, in which his origins are always somewhat visible, and a complete occupation would be more dangerous than recognition.

Traces of this danger are visible in the one moment when any of his crew questions their allegiance to a Black man. Culverin, the man who earlier asserted Morano’s Englishness, later complains, “But I don’t yet see, Brother *Hacker*, why we should be commanded by a Neger. ‘Tis all along of him that we are led into these difficulties.” (142). While the pirates are successful, Morano’s assumed Blackness is subservient to his Englishness, but as the fortunes of war turn against them it is Morano’s Blackness that is blamed, showing the vulnerability of a successful racial masquerade. The full implications of this turn toward mutiny are ultimately dropped and unexplored, for the white pirates so quickly turn on one another that no organized uprising is realized. In the one instance in which Morano/Macheath is fully seen as Black, his leadership is endangered, suggesting that the success of his disguise always relies on a partial awareness of his whiteness. Antiblackness is pervasive, what Christina Sharpe calls “The Weather,” and it is through the maintenance of his whiteness that Morano/Macheath survives his assumed Blackness.

Macheath ultimately relies on the incomplete assimilation of his alternate identity as Morano in order to pass as dead without giving up all the privileges of his life. Though to others Macheath cannot be Morano because choosing Blackness is unthinkable in a world of concrete racial stratification, Morano's Blackness must continuously be viewed as secondary to his European character in order for Macheath to continue in a position of leadership and marriage to Jenny. In this sense, Macheath makes use of the conventions of the masquerade, in which, as Elizabeth Hunt states, "the costumed body misdirected sexual and social status" (98). Hunt finds in this misdirection a threat to the established hierarchies of eighteenth-century British culture. The threat comes not just from those of lower status aping their betters, but from those at the top of the social pyramid who choose to descend. Macheath, in becoming Morano, may not be a peer in the guise of a Quaker, but by setting aside his whiteness, his one privilege as a transported servant, he throws the social order into disarray while still relying on that social order to ensure the subliminal awareness of his real place within it.

Conclusion

Every character in *Polly* participates in some form of complicity with the system of colonial imperialism in the British West Indies, although some gain more from it than others. In the end, it is Polly who captures Morano/Macheath and indirectly sends him to his death, a death he could have avoided had she recognized him. But it would not have been his whiteness that would have saved him, because the other white leaders of the uprising are executed. It would instead have been the specificity of his person as Macheath in particular, since Polly is searching for her husband and no other. If he had been himself, Macheath would have been recognizable as the man who robbed his master and fled his sentenced servitude, but he would also have been subject to the claims of the many women who pursue him. Polly, in this instance, as in *The Beggar's Opera*, is one of a crowd. While the opera ends in Macheath/Morano's death, there is no evidence that it would have ended happily if Polly had found him in time. She is better off at the opera's end despite herself. Unmarried once more, her future status is uncertain, but hopeful.

The result of an opera that both centers and deflects Blackness is to inscribe the centrality of Blackness to the plantation space while refusing to encounter the problems raised by Black slavery. The answer to the question of why Macheath takes on Blackness is because Gay needs him to be Black without being African. Without a recognizable abolition movement in place, Gay's opera seems to denote the impossibility of moral engagement with the sale and forced labor of Black

people. And yet, by transferring the problem of slavery onto white bodies, Gay anticipates an abolition argument that will be used in the nineteenth century: that slavery is wrong because some enslaved people are indistinguishable from their white kin. It is an argument that still dodges the problem of Black chattel slavery, still circles around it without touching it, and perhaps the real revelation is that some monstrosities are so immense that those who inflict them must see them and then choose to avert their eyes at the sight.

By opposing Polly's conventional urban theatrical disguise and female masculinity with Macheath's unconventional donning of blackface, Gay's opera foregrounds the ways that colonial space changes convention, without ever quite upsetting the patriarchal order or engaging with the most fundamental change, that of enforced lifetime labor, passed on to descendants. Disguise, whether of person or location, serves only to highlight the true nature it is meant to hide. For Polly and Macheath, as for others, the colonial Indies are a place to change shape and remake their destinies, but they cannot escape the limits imposed by London and enhanced by plantation space. One can be banished from or flee London, but the result of colonialism is a London that stretches around the globe. By making all his characters complicit in the colonial project, Gay implicitly suggests that the guilt of its evils can be shared. Avoidance, the play tells us, can only work for a short while, as it pointedly avoids the coming reckoning with chattel slavery.

¹ See John Richardson, "Alexander Pope's 'Windsor Forest': Its Context and Attitudes Toward Slavery."

² For more on the 1777 performance and its specific political context, see Peter P. Reed's "Conquer or Die: Staging Circum-Atlantic Revolt in *Polly* and *Three-Finger'd Jack*," *Theatre Journal* 59.2, 2007.

³ Polly's inheritance following her father's hanging is what propels her to the Caribbean.

⁴ The epilogue to Thomas Killigrew's seventeenth-century play *The Parson's Wedding*, cited by Janet Todd in *Aphra Behn: A Secret Life*, begins

"When boys play'd women's parts, you'd think the Stage,
Was innocent in that untempting Age.

No: for your amorous Fathers then, like you,
Amongst those Boys had play-house Misses too:

They set those bearded Beauties on their laps,
Men gave 'em Kisses, and the Ladies Claps" (Killigrew 141; Todd 156).

⁵ Macheath is instead saved by the Beggar narrator after the Beggar is told that the audience will want a happy ending.

⁶ Cawwawkee, had the play been performed, would have been a standard blackface character, in which darkened skin was meant to represent dark skin.

⁷ "Cape of Good Hope." Noelle Chao, in *Ballads and Broadsides in Britain, 1500-1800*, says that, "While the ballad's title refers to an African port known for facilitating the movement of goods from East to West, its national origin establishes a subtle connection between the Indian prince and the French, recalling other Franco-Amerindian alliances in the New World." Vanessa Rogers,

in a 2014 article for *Eighteenth-Century Music*, has convincingly shown that this, and other musical selections from *Polly*, were taken from French vaudevilles.

⁸ As has been explored elsewhere, the Indians in the play fulfill the Rousseauian role of noble savage, so Cawwawkee's masculine ideal is tempered by a racist assumption of naivety in his honor. See: Canfield, Rob. "Something's Mizzen: Anne Bonny, Mary Read, *Polly*, and Female Counter-Roles on the Imperialist Stage." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2001, pp. 45-63.

⁹ Bill Knight notes the pun on transport and transportation in his thoughtful reading of how the legal act of transportation interrupted the experience of the sublime (443).

¹⁰ Original lyrics:

"In the softest moments of love,
Melting, panting, oh how she moves...
Pray don't trifle, my dearest, forbear,
I shall die with transports, I fear..." (Nokes 462)

¹¹ Indeed, Cawwawkee does not even know the name of his lost friend. Polly never gives a name in her disguise, and it seems that none of the people she encounters ever ask for one. Cawwawkee always refers to the disguised Polly as "the youth," or as a "friend."

¹² Turtledoves were known for their "constancy to a single mate" and were believed to waste away and die if their mate was killed. Polly evokes the turtledove in *The Beggar's Opera* in her own interludes, though those are ironically contrasted both to Macheath's behavior and Mrs Trapes' self comparison to the dove (Ladd 98-9).

¹³ "With this song Polly is won; both the education and judgment are fulfilled, and in the marriage dance beyond reprieve Gay at last celebrates the triumphant choice of unambiguous moral virtue" (Owen 405).

"[Polly] marries the Indian prince and they will live happily ever after" (Dryden 552).

¹⁴ Barbados is a plausible location for *Polly*. Besides the fact that it was a common location for transportation more generally in the early eighteenth century, it was also the location to which many pirates were transported (Appleby 215).

¹⁵ Because of the circumstances of her servitude, Bill Knight refers to Polly as a "*de facto* transportee" (442).

¹⁶ Although the *Craftsman*, an anti-Walpole publication, and Walpole himself, interpreted Macheath as a reference to the Robinocracy, some scholars, including Gay biographer David Nokes, have suggested that Macheath in *Polly* is "less a mock Alexander than an Antony *manqué*," and agree with Gay's own protestations that he was not attempting bold political satire in *Polly* (Nokes 456). Nokes claims that while there are a few pointed references to Walpole, attached to the characters of Mr Ducat and Mrs Trapes, it is the "symbolic importance" of Gay's work, rather than the "specific content of the opera itself" that led the government to fear its publication (456). Unfortunately, "[i]n choosing to ban such a relatively harmless entertainment Walpole showed a lack of his usual political finesse, and managed to turn a minor theatrical embarrassment into a full-blown political scandal" (Nokes 456).

¹⁷ In the Polly/Cawwawkee duet, "what we witness on stage is a passionate embrace between a 'black' man and a white 'man'" (Nokes 462), suggesting the ways that Europeans sexualized men of color much as they sexualized European women.

¹⁸ Gay does not once use the words "Africa" or "African".

¹⁹ The pirate Henry Every participated in the slave trade in the late seventeenth century, for instance (Appleby 225).

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