

بيرتولت بريخت والتاريخ

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ملخص

الفلسفة الكلاسيكية متمركزة حول الاعتقادات الميتافيزيقية، إذ يؤمن الكلاسيكيون بالقدر والقوة الإلهية والحقيقة. في المقابل ترفض فلسفة ما بعد الحداثة مفهوم الحقيقة المنفردة الخارقة. من جهة، الكلاسيكية فلسفة الحقيقة تقليدية ومطمئنة ومألوفة. من جهة أخرى، ما بعد الحداثة، فتصبح هذه الفلسفة عديمة المركز وغير مألوفة. الشاعر والمسرحي الحديث، بيرتولت بريخت، الذي مات في الخمسينات من القرن الماضي، كتب بعض المسرحيات التي تتبأت بفلسفة الستينات والسبعينات ما بعد الحداثة. كان لديه نظريات تحدثت الكتاب المعاصرين وألهمت الكتاب الذين تلوهم. إن التاريخ بالنسبة لبريخت مجرد نص يمكن أن يتم تأويله بشكل غير نهائي، وهذا ما يحصل بالفعل.

كلمات مفتاحية :

الكلاسيكية، اللامألوف، ما بعد الحداثة، التاريخ، الحقيقة، القدر

Bertolt Brecht and History

Abstract

Classical philosophy is centered on metaphysical beliefs, as classicists believe in fate, divine powers and 'Truth'. Postmodernist philosophy, on the other hand, rejects the concept of a single overpowering 'Truth'. On the one extreme, Classicism, the philosophy of 'Truth' and divinity, is traditional, serene and canny. On the other extreme, Postmodernism, is decentered and uncanny. The Modernist poet and playwright, Bertolt Brecht, who died in the 1950s, wrote some plays that foreshadowed the postmodern philosophy in the 60s and 70s. He had views that challenged contemporary writers and inspired the ones that came after. History, for Brecht, is simply another text that can be and is interpreted in endless manners.

Key words :

Classicism, uncanny, Postmodernism, history, truth, fate

Research problem:

This research is a brief critical study of some of Brecht's major works from a Postmodern perspective. It is an attempt to find Postmodern and new historicist elements in these works and compare them with theories on the topic.

Research goals:

The goal is to prove that Brecht was a Modernist playwright with a postmodernist view of history and truth. Modernists try to find 'truth' in historical texts; whereas Postmodernists don't seek to define 'truth' in clear unchangeable historical terms.

Research questions:

How are 'History' and 'Truth' defined in various schools of criticism?

How does Brecht define 'History' and 'Truth' in some of his major works?

The wheel of time never stops, and what is past cannot be realised after its passing. The only way to learn about history is to read texts from the past. Texts are never a reliable source of information. Moreover, we will look at the way Bertolt Brecht represented history in some of his major plays. But first, here is a brief introduction on the concept of history and the way it is seen by different schools of thought. Also, the idea of ‘truth’ will be briefly explored due to its close relation to history. Different texts explore truth in different ways. There has never been one basic form of truth that is fixed throughout the ages, and this is also explained here beginning with the traditional concept of the Classicists and ending with Brecht.

To begin with, Classicists adhere to the traditional principles of ancient Greek and Roman cultures. Classicist thinkers like Plato, Aristotle and Horace are the pioneers in theory and literature. Many celebrated works of literature and art were produced in the period we now call classical (which lasted from the year 500 BC to 320 BC). A classic, basically, is a work that is produced by following examples and adhering to tradition and accepted norms. It is also a work that has stood the test of time and is still relevant today. Many works that were not produced during the classical period are called classics simply because they have become so after surviving in our memories for many centuries. Some well-known classical writers are Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Aristophanes. (See: Barry)

In classical philosophy, maintaining the belief in the hierarchy of power is essential. People are subordinate to the gods and can live in peace only if the gods allow it. People’s life is also fated. Oedipus marries his mother after his failed attempts to escape this terrible fate, for example. Classical thinkers always base their work on the unquestionable belief that God is infinite, divine and unreachable. Likewise, ‘Truth’, in the Platonic sense, exists only in the divine realm and can be approached only by mathematical and logical means. A human being, in this sense, cannot exceed certain limits that bind him or her in his or her humanness.

Richard Dutton from Lancaster University gives a brief outline of Plato's opinions on literature. Plato expels poets from the Ideal Republic but accepts poetry only when it follows certain rules. This is a clear assertion that literature, according to classical thinkers that follow Plato, should be logical and approved by a select group of scholars. Plato also asserts that literature mustn't undermine the gods or their relations (16-17).

Aristotle, Plato's student and the most influential classical philosopher, also writes about 'Truth' in his *Poetics*. He explains the importance of representing "general truth" in art. He states that the difference between the historian and the poet lies in imitation. Poetry is an act of imitation of nature. He says that it is generated by our natural tendency to imitate and learn by imitation, and that it can help us channel our emotions. It is more important than history because it imitates "general truth" rather than tells facts. A historian is not a poet even if he [or she] uses rhyme and meter (50).

In Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy, 'Truth' is approachable, and poets must always aim to represent it. They, along with other Classicists, held poetry in high regard and agreed that if poetry is to be of any value, it must have certain features; representation must be worthy of 'Truth'. This is true for all the classical thinkers despite the minor differences they have. For example, centuries after Plato, Alexander Pope writes in his *An Essay on Criticism* that following the example of the "sunder few" is the best and only way to write good poetry. He emphasizes the importance of logic, moderation and universal laws (Dutton, 38-9). When poets follow these simplified rules, they will produce 'truthful' art. This is the general main belief in Classical thinking.

Moreover, as an admirer of classical art and 'Beauty', Aristotle provides a definition of good 'beautiful' art. He likens a 'coherent' work to a creature of some size that is neither too big nor too small (271-2). A plot in a classical work of literature is like this beautiful creature; it has a certain size, a beginning, middle and end. 'Unity' grants the story its 'beauty'. All of these classical principles

are meant to guide writers towards seeking ‘Truth’, respecting it and shaping the work of art ‘beautifully’.

In short, to represent ‘Truth’ is to represent the Universal or the Eternal. It is to understand the Laws of Nature and recognise ‘Beauty’ upon seeing it. Undoubtedly, there is an undertone of *generalisation* in these classical principles which were revived by Neo-classicists who, again, elaborated on them. John Dryden, a Neo-classicist, is not as dogmatic as classical thinkers that came before him, but he agrees that there are certain universal forms that best entertain the receivers either in drama or in poetry (Dryden, 84).

The opposite of Universalism, Individualism, is not celebrated by Classicists or Neo-classicists. Samuel Johnson, for example, thinks that individualism is not practical because not everybody is pleased by it (Johnson, “Preface to Shajespeare,” 89). For Classicists and Neo-classicists, works of art are great only when they have a universal quality. They need to stand the test of time and entertain many people from many different backgrounds. He does not deny that poets need to familiarize themselves with the state of their age, but they must do so in order to be able to “rise” above the particulars of their age to reach “transcendental truths” (Johnson, *The History of Rasselas*, 89).

However, classical rules are limiting; this is why most Modernists broke free from the austere classical adherence to ‘unity’ and ‘reason’, as well as the classical tendency to generalise and moralise. They did so in order to set their art free from dogmatic general guidelines which, in their view, so often objectified art and stripped it from the subjectivity of the artist. Bertolt Brecht was one of the poets who wanted to change the norms. Still, many modernist poets, who were contemporary with Brecht, expressed their longing for Nature, pure and simple. It is as if there was a time when humans were one with Nature and Nature was yet unharmed. The word ‘Nature’ can have multiple definitions and meanings. For the purpose of research, this word is used to allude to the classical meaning that is celebrated by Alexander Pope.

That is, Nature, in its purist form, is the ultimate source of ‘truth’. This meaning can be synonymous with the meaning of the world God. Modernists had a sort of nostalgia or longing for better (classic) times where Nature and God were celebrated. Though they experimented with the new anti-classical techniques, they were nostalgic for a time when authority was unquestioned and faith undamaged (Barry, 80).

Thus, classical thinking is ‘canny’, known, usual or unproblematic, being highly dependent on logic and the centralisation of power. It is juxtaposed to the uncanny thinking that this paper explores. The uncanny thinking is prominent in the world we live in. It problematizes the stabilised beliefs and makes them unusual. Things were believed to be connected in binary relations, each with a clear function. Man is subordinate to God; right and wrong are like black and white; the powerful rule the weak and so on. But these maxims wore off in time, and the Postmodern universe lacks the ‘unity’ and ‘harmony’ that the Classicists celebrate. It is chaotic and centerless. The uncanny is, thus, the Postmodern philosophy that, unlike the classical one, allows contradiction and undecidability (Bennett & Royle, 232).

Subsequently, though, it isn’t hard to see that the Postmodern view of the classical traditions is both liberating and uncomfortable. In this philosophy, nostalgia and longing for a faith and a centralising, grounding power are considered undesirable limiting influences. A Postmodernist is not irrational nor is he or she necessarily a radical atheist. Rather, a Postmodernist thinker is one who can live in a world with nothing certain and still be able to function and benefit from the radical freedom offered by unlimited possibilities rather than feel mercilessly crippled or lost.

This is the point that separates a Modernist from a postmodernist. Modern literary works are, ironically, ‘unified’ by their obvious lack of unity and fragmentation. Modernists acknowledge the lack of unity (or the loss of unity) in their texts but compensate for it by creating texts that are intertextual. Postmodernists, on the other hand, do not try to find unity.

Modernists express their nostalgia to the canny (classic); Postmodernists embrace the uncanny. Bertolt Brecht wanted his spectators to embrace the uncanny as well and become “active critic[s] of society.” He attempted to do that by representing all aspects of life as “conspicuous,” “requiring an explanation,” “not obvious” and “not simply natural” (“A Model for Epic Theatre,” 432).

Whatever is ‘conspicuous’ or unnatural cannot be classified as classical or generally acceptable because it does not enjoy the ‘harmony’ that a classic does. As he explains in several articles, Brecht was not a seeker of sentimental ‘Beauty’ or granted ‘facts’ of the world that anyone can agree with. In fact, he was against anything that is ‘timeless’ which is why he despised representing “general universal truths.” He thought that this kind of representation does not enrich the work nor does it teach the receiver anything new. He coined a term for what he does in his works which is “historification,” which is, basically, the opposite of universalism (“On Chinese Acting,” 135).

This original term entails the rejection of universal ‘Truth’ as represented by the Classicists. He noticed that so many works of literature seek to represent the ‘universal Man’, the human to whom anyone can relate, and whom anyone can understand. This ‘Man’ is the comforting character; it assures receivers that everyone makes mistakes and fate is inescapable. It is the character who reacts rather than acts, and to whom the world is mysterious and uncontrollable. Brecht protests that this method of representation assumes that people remain unchanged by their circumstances. Whatever a character’s background is, he or she acts “Eternally Human” (“On Chinese Acting,” 135).

Brecht replaced the “Eternally Human” by the historical character. It is ‘a human’ rather than ‘the Man’; it is a social creature whose destiny is not decided by what happens in the world around him or her; most importantly, it is not a hero. A hero is a classical character, and it is defined by Aristotle by reference to epics and tragedies. He is, says Aristotle, a man of a good social

status who falls from his grace due to some minor mistake, and who must inspire pity and fear in the audience, so that they may learn from his experience (Dutton, 23).

Brecht's 'heroes' and 'heroines' find themselves in difficult situations which are caused by others who are well off like government members or powerful, wealthy people. They are also often the victims of war and the constraints of the social system. For example, Courage, from *Mother Courage and her Children*, is the victim of war; Shen Te, from *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, is the victim of corruption; Galileo, from *The Life of Galileo*, is the victim of religious authority; Grusha, from *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, is the victim of a corrupt government. However, all these victims have the will and courage to fight for their lives and claim what they believe to be theirs. They, unlike the traditional hero of classic theatre, try to change their circumstances rather than discover them.

In view of that, epic 'heroes' are a defamiliarised version of dramatic or classical heroes; they are historically accurate (anti universal), and they fight for a better life (not to reach 'Truth'). There is a great emphasis in Brecht's articles on dropping the traditional way of looking at the past, and focus on the present to make it better. History is not something to long for, and we cannot continue bending historical texts so that they fit our perspective. Brecht elaborates:

[. . .] We must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different; so that they all look more or less like our own, which then acquires from this process a certain air of having been there all along, in other words of permanence pure and simple. Instead we must leave them their distinguishing marks and keep their impermanence always before our eyes, so that our own period can be seen to be impermanent too. ("A Short Organum for the Theatre," 190)

In other words, every story needs a 'hero', but not all heroes are the same. We cannot keep recycling the already spent plots and main characters pretending that they are immortal. The mere idea is a selfish one since it removes the possibility that what *was* is different from what *is*.

These ideas are explored in selected plays and articles by Brecht. Although his theory remained in development for the better part of his life, it always involved a bizarre opinion on stage representation. His representation of life cannot be labelled realistic or naturalistic, for he never claims that his plays are achievable under normal circumstances. His plays rest on the fine line that separates the real from the fantastic. They are like reflections on a mirror, but it is a distorted one:

If art reflects life it does so with special mirrors. Art does not become unrealistic by changing the proportions but by changing them in such a way that if the audience took its representations as a practical guide to insights and impulses it would go astray in real life. It is of course essential that stylization should not remove the natural element but should heighten it. (Dutton, 23)

Hence, Brecht seems to be hinting at a certain sweet spot where the work of art is both realistic and fantastical.

However, Brecht's style is neither consistent nor constant to the point that there can be rules that describe it. His plays have the air of spontaneity, and the stage, under his guidance, never lacked the laid-back atmosphere desirable at a rest day. Indeed, he wrote with a mind open to development and suggestions from fellow writers. He also approached the audience with the same mind-set allowing people to lay back and smoke during shows, so that they watch with maximum critical capacity (*The Threepenny Opera*, 99). When people sit at ease in the auditorium with a cigar in hand, they will feel as if they were in an amiable space or a friendly gathering. Therefore, they display better critical ability unconsciously.

With this attitude, Brecht was more interested in the work than in his authority over his works. Consequently, he allowed himself to borrow, rather too freely, from other works. He never deigned to explain why he did that. One of Brecht's most performed plays, *The Threepenny Opera*, is a rewriting of *The Beggars Opera* by John Gay. It was translated to German by Elisabeth Hauptmann who sent a copy to Brecht for him to modify as he pleased (Lenya, vi). In this play, there are many good examples on Brecht's view of history and truth.

The play is about an attempted uprising of the working class (the beggars) led by a nihilistic old Mr Peachum. It is also a parody of middle-class aristocrats who appear to be more crooked than the crooks of society. Mr Peachum runs an establishment called "The Beggars' Friend" in London. He separates the city into fourteen districts, so that his beggars 'work' each in his or her specified district. His wife and daughter help him with the business.

We see how he runs his business in the first scene when a beggar named Filch comes in to register at the Peachum Company. He is given a costume and sent to a district in which he can beg for money. The costume is designed to induce pity in people's hearts which have become hard as stone as Peachum keeps complaining.

Peachum has a gallery of costumes especially designed to make people sympathise with the wearer. There are five main costumes, and they show the devastating effects of modern life on people. The first outfit is for the "Victim of the Progress of Modern Traffic." He has to be a light-hearted person and, preferably, with a wooden arm. The second outfit is for the "Victim of the Art of War." The wearer should annoy people and make them feel disgusted and guilty.

The third outfit is for "The Victim of the Industrial Boom." The wearer must impersonate a blind man to make the greatest effect on the merciless public. Peachum seems to be proud of this one. To him, Filch is unworthy of this outfit, so he gives him the fourth. It isn't described in the text because Filch puts it on

immediately. Apparently, it is a very filthy outfit that can make people flinch at the sight. As for the fifth outfit, it is a comic and interesting one. It is for someone who has never thought he would come down to this state of misery.

It is only natural that people try to avoid blame for war and destruction. It is shameful to look at the results of one's own mistakes. That's the role of Peachum's beggars. They agitate people's consciousness towards the lives of the soldiers that died or were injured during the war. They remind people of the dangers of traffic and pollution. They make them feel appalled, pitiful or sometimes angry. For Peachum, this is the only way to get people to give up some pennies.

This is Brecht's extremely grim interpretation of the industrial age in Europe which was truly devastating. Brecht made sure to keep his representations specific to the modern era so that nobody makes the mistake of describing the works as 'universal' and 'timeless'. Another play by Brecht, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, is tragi-comedy that explores the state of the poor of the modern world. It also depicts an attempted uprising of the working forces.

Wang, the water seller, complains to the gods that, everywhere in China, trees are being cut and factories are polluting the air: "Nothing but misery, vulgarity, and waste! Even the countryside isn't what it used to be. The trees are getting their heads chopped off by telephone wires noise from all the gunfire, and I can't stand those heavy clouds of smoke" (126 - 7).

Karen Tsui notices that Brecht shows in this play how Setzuan enters "the international imperial system" through the processes of modernisation and technological advances (360). Thus, in his depiction of an eastern country, China, Brecht shows the results of Europe's intervention in the East. On the one hand, it is a good intervention because it helps China develop its industries. On the other hand, it is bad because it ruins both nature and the lives of millions of unemployed poor people in China. While Brecht was

very welcoming of technological improvements, he didn't want them to be the cause of suffering.

The beggars in *The Threepenny Opera* and the workers in *The Good Woman of Setzuan* represent the victimised society. They are the weaker party in the ruler-ruled conflict. However, this isn't always true as Brecht shows us. The relationship between the powerful and the weak is more complicated than is usually thought.

In *The Threepenny Opera*, the “antagonistic” character, Macheath, is described as the most powerful and most dangerous criminal in London. However, even he must cave in when all the weakened characters gather to face him. Macheath is represented in the introduction to the play with a song, “The Moritat of Mackie the Knife,” which has now become a classic. It starts like this:

And the shark he has his teeth and

There they are for all to see.

And Macheath he has his knife but

No one knows where it may be.

When the shark has had his dinner

There is blood upon his fins.

But Macheath he has his gloves on;

They say nothing of his sins. (3)

He is the image of a middle-class aristocrat who does all his misdeeds in broad daylight leaving no trace. The white gloves are a symbol of good social status, but they are also a disguise. His identity is shown in his looks and the way he speaks as that of a gentleman, but he, in fact, is a corrupt merciless man.

He becomes related to the Peachums through their daughter, Polly, as is shown in Act I. When Mr Peachum spares some time to know what his wife and daughter have been up to, Mrs Peachum announces that a gentleman is interested in their daughter. This means that Polly cannot help with the business anymore. Her father is furious, yet he doesn't seem too worried that the suitor is none other than the murderer, Macheath, or Mackie the Knife as he is nicknamed.

Mackie is not extremely different from the beggars that Peachum recruits. He has an outfit, and his outfit defines who he is. When Mrs Peachum describes him, she only remembers his title, "The Captain," and his pristine appearance. He is also like the beggars in that he doesn't do any job; he just recruits people to steal and hurt others.

Adam Smith, a prominent political writer in the 18th century, wrote about beggars and their 'contribution' to society. He, essentially, thinks that beggars don't deserve to be in a society because they don't participate in the economic activities that produce money; he does say that they participate in the act of spending money to buy things, but that is as far as their contribution goes. He asks whether they should beg or find another better way of gaining money and whether charity is a selfless act or just a way to feel self-fulfilled. Smith also thinks that the acts of begging and charity are perpetuated thanks to certain ideologies (Bennett & Royle, 116 – 7).

Similarly, the play goes to show that the acts of begging and giving are quite complicated. The beggars, *willingly*, dress up and change their outfits every now and then in order to force pity. All the beggars presented on stage are in a healthy condition. In Act I, scene three, one beggar is scolded by Peachum because he looks too fat to be a beggar (35). All the implications point at the beggars' physical ability to do honest work. Still, the playwright doesn't make an actual statement like Smith does. Brecht doesn't go as far as "dehumanize" beggars; however, he shows us a world where

even suffering has a market of its own. Begging is just another profession.

Moreover, when people are charitable, as Peachum complains, they are so only because they fall under the effect of a solemn Bible quote or a ragged outfit. It is a suggestion that the act of giving is only done subconsciously. Begging is a conscious action that needs preparation and practice. Giving is an emotional reaction, and it is conditioned by many factors.

These criminals are also like the beggars because they have no actual job to do. They follow Mackie mindlessly. They can't operate without him just as the beggars would fail without Peachum. They are also takers rather than givers, and they don't hesitate to kill and hurt people. They, obviously, have the strength to work, but they choose not to work.

The sense of dislike towards Mackie, or Peachum, is well-earned. These two are the authoritative figures who abuse their employees. They walk around shouting abuse and producing less than their own men. Brecht analyses Peachum in the end notes of the play and concludes that he is nihilistic and too frightened to work. In a traditional dramatic theatre, Peachum would be the villain (100). Here, though, he is a businessman and is fully assimilated into society.

Peachum uses the Bible to justify his crooked trade while shamelessly announcing that he is "the beggars' friend." Mackie, again, says Brecht in the end notes, is not a true gangster because he is not brave enough (101). When he is caught, he is revealed to be quite cowardly and uncertain of his power. He manages to escape prison only to be caught again and sent to the gallows.

The ideas of charity and authority are also explored in *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. Shen Te, who is the "good woman," is a very charitable person. She is the only good person left in Setzuan as the three gods find out. After receiving the gift from the gods, Shen Te does her best to help people and remain good. She rents a tobacco store in order to stop working as a prostitute.

Shen Te says she hopes she can help people in order to please the gods. She is represented as an honest almost naïve individual. She is also shown to want to help others sincerely even as they abuse her. For example, Mrs Shin, who used to own the store, takes some rice from Shen Te, yet she blames her for all her hardship. Still, Shen Te pacifies her and gives her some rice without any refrain. Then, an entire family comes to take shelter in the store. Shen Te speaks to the audience again. She explains that this family helped her when she first came to town, but, when she became penniless, the family kicked her out.

Nevertheless, Shen Te helps the intruders who have wronged her in the past. She is accused of pretending to be a “benefactress” by Mrs Shin to which Shen Te replies by laughing. This scene is meant to show the character of Shen Te and the people around her. Shen Te is represented as the only sincerely good person in a corrupt society. She is exploited by others, but she forgives them because they are hungry. The people who stay at her place are unashamedly dependant on others. They sing “Song of the Smoke,” and the second stanza is:

The straight and narrow path leads to disaster

And so the crooked path I tried to tread.

That got me to disaster even faster.

(They say we shall be happy when we're dead.)

So what's the use?

See the smoke float free

Into ever colder coldness!

It's the same with me. (35)

They are represented as lazy dependant people. Their excuse is believable, but it is hard to sympathise with them. By the end of the scene, even Shen Te exclaims:

The little lifeboat is swiftly sent down

Too many men too greedily

Hold on to it as they drown. (36)

The lazy family is like the beggars in *The Threepenny Opera*. They can work, but they don't. They "crooked bath" is more profitable than the righteous path which is Shen Te's path, or the gods' path. Again, this is a time in China's history when people suffered to make a living. Brecht wants to show us history from the perspective of the poor and the unlucky. They are the ones that need charity, but, alas, charity is impossible in this society.

Like Smith, who likens beggars to animals, Shen Te, at a certain point, likens her neighbours to animals. In scene four, Wang is assaulted by the barber who lives across the street from Shen Te's store. Everyone, except for Shen Te, sees the incident. Each of the characters on stage has to make a decision, now. They have to decide whether they will testify for Wang in the police station or not. Despite the fact that they are all witnesses, they refuse. They don't want to displease the barber who hit Wang. However, they are all already in a bad position, so they have nothing to lose if they were to testify for Wang. This is why Shen Te is horrified and decides to testify for him even though she didn't witness the incident. She scolds them saying:

Your brother is assaulted, and you shut your eyes?

He is hit, cries out in pain, and you are silent?

The beast prowls, chooses and seizes his victim, and you say:

"Because we showed no displeasure, he has spared us."

If no one present will be a witness, I will. I'll say

I saw it. (71)

This is incompatible with Shen Te's docile character. She describes the people with whom she greatly sympathises as blind and deaf to human suffering. Suddenly, these people sound as if they were strangers to her. In fact, the entire situation is leading these people to act like strangers. Due to their pitiful state, each of them feels that he or she should protect him or herself rather than each other as a collective. They are *estranged* from each other in their own community.

It is now that Shen Te likens these people to animals in yet another heated speech: "They've stopped answering/ They stay put/ They do as they're told/ They don't care/ Nothing can make them look up/ But the smell of food" (72). Indeed, when one is hungry, one can become quite selfish and defensive. Shen Te understands this, but she is unsatisfied. She wants to spread the sense of goodness, but she doesn't know how to do it.

This is the extent to which the poor have to go to in order to survive in the modern world. The poor are the ruled, and the authority does nothing to ease their suffering. In *The Good Woman*, the gods, who are the authoritative figures in the play, resemble three aristocrats who know nothing about people's struggle through daily life. They insist on the necessity of following their commandments, but they fail to see that people are too poor to do so. The gods give Shen Te the power by giving her money, and, through her, they intend to perpetuate their presence. They want to use the poor hardworking woman to insure that people remain loyal.

From the first scene, the gods seem to talk too much and do too little. They do give Shen Te the money she so needed, but they leave her to solve a heap of problems without help. The gods don't know the real conditions of people because they are not up to date

with all the economic changes; they even admit this to Wang when they say that they don't understand business (Karen Tsui, 361). Eventually, the gods leave having made the situation worse. They never actually yield power over the oppressor Shui Ta, nor do they punish the lazy people who exploit Shen Te.

In the appendix to scene four, Shen Te goes on stage to sing "The Song of Defenselessness [*sic*]." She sings the first two stanzas as Shen Te and the last one as Shui Ta. She complains that being good is so costly and hard in this country. She wonders why the gods wouldn't kill everyone who is bad and spare the good ones. Her speech is exaggerated, and her morality is shocking. One can only wonder how killing people would bring about peace and satisfaction. In the final stanza, the image is even more shocking as she sings in the voice of Shui Ta:

You can only help one of your luckless brothers

By trampling down a dozen others.

Why is it the gods do not feel indignation

And come down in fury to end exploitation

Defeat all defeat and forbid desperation

Refusing to tolerate such toleration?

Why is it? (74)

Shen Te can't understand what the use of the deity is if they can't save good men, but she doesn't define who a good person is. At this point, the audience can't tell if she is any better than the others. Sure, she gives food free of charge, but the act of charity is more complicated than it seems. When giving others what they need, the givers expect something in return; therefore, there is no "pure gift" (Bennett & Royle, 117). Perhaps Shen Te wants to atone for her previous profession. Perhaps the 'gods', who are represented as three men, were her last costumers, and she wants to avoid their

wrath. There are so many plausible theories for this play, which is why it is considered uncanny and alienating.

In any case, Shen Te manages to turn the tables and disturb the hierarchy of power. The gods think that Shen Te is their lawful follower who is actively spreading the commandments, when, in fact, she is spreading her own ideology. Shen Te *becomes* the authoritative power.

This example highlights the complexity of power relations in Brecht's plays. 'Authority' shifts from one individual to another in these plays, so it is never practiced by only one social group. In *The Opera*, Tiger Brown, who is the sheriff of Scotland Yard, is supposed to be the one endowed with the power of the government. However, he is friends with the most notorious middle-class gangster, Mackie, and he accepts money from him in exchange for information. Mackie is safe from being arrested, and Brown benefits from that. It is impossible to tell whether the one controls the other.

The play shows that Mackie can terrorise anyone whenever he wants; yet again, how would he even have any power without his men running around doing his chores? This is a complicated aspect of power relations that is explored by the philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss in his critique of myths. Jacques Derrida analyses Strauss's concept with a sociolinguistic twist in his article "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Here is Derrida's summary of Strauss's concept:

[. . .] in *The Savage Mind*, he [Strauss] presents as what he calls *bricolage* what might be called the discourse of this method. The *bricoleur*, says Lévi-Strauss, is someone who uses 'the means at hand,' that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at

once, even if their form and their origin are heterogenous [*sic*]
-- and so forth. (95)

This definition can be applied to non-other than the beggars or the employees of Mackie. They try their best to survive in their environment. They use ingenious methods to inch through daily existence. In the original concept, the “bricoleur” is dominated by the “engineer” who is the one that provided the “bricoleur” with the means of his or her existence. Now the interesting twist that Derrida adds is that the “bricoleur,” being crafty and ingenious, constructs the very idea of an engineer. Derrida continues: “The notion of the engineer who supposedly breaks with all forms of *bricolage* is therefore a theological idea; and since Lévi-Strauss tells us elsewhere that *bricolage* is mythopoetic, the odds are that the engineer is a myth produced by the *bricoleur*” (96).

If the followers are the “bricoleur,” then the authoritative figures are the “engineer.” However, according to Derrida’s deconstruction here, the “engineer” is only a product made by the “bricoleur.” By extension, power relations in this play can be easily inverted, and this happens in many situations.

In addition to deconstructing ‘authority’, Brecht questions the believability (‘authority’) of historical texts that define ‘truth’ and ‘power’. It will be seen that his concept is harmonious with new historicism. He reads, with a sceptic mind, the recordings of the past. Being a materialist, he agrees that texts are mere products of society, and history is a text written by the winner. Texts are produced by the “bricoleur” just as language is. Accordingly, it is legitimate to question all texts including historical ones and not excluding this very play.

Traditionally, people with the most money are considered the most powerful. History texts praise conquerors and leaders like Alexander the Great or Napoleon. Writers like Brecht beg to differ with the more popular written versions of history. New historicists, Bennett and Royle clarify, are aware of this complexity, so they see the past as always “textual” and always in development. We never

access the past but through texts which are inaccessible without interpretation. Hence, new historicism is compatible with Nietzsche's opinion on 'Truth'; that is, there are no "facts," only "interpretations" of texts (Bennett & Royle, 113).

In *The Opera*, Peachum reads a line from the Bible to prove two opposite points of view. "It is more blessed to give than to receive" says the Bible, and the quotation is projected on the stage on a board for emphasis. Peachum complains that people have very little mercy. The words of the Bible may ignite some enthusiasm for charity, but the effect is lost over time. The scene is not yet over before the beggar Filch asks Peachum to show him some mercy. Filch is assigned an outfit and a district where he can beg for money. The conditions are that he has to pay the fee for the outfit instantly as well as fifty per cent of his profit weekly. When he complains that he can't pay immediately, Peachum points to the board with the previous quotation on it to justify the demand for money.

In other words, texts are only as reliable as the situation allows, so they wouldn't be considered the ultimate source of 'truth'. Still, by using texts, people like Peachum and the cardinals manage to control others. Peachum is more knowledgeable than the beggars, so he can maintain a higher social class. It is mentioned, in the play, that he used to be poorer than the beggars who work for him, but he climbed the social ladder cleverly benefitting from his familiarity with trade and the Bible.

New historicists like Michelle Foucault regard knowledge rather than property as power. From a Marxist perspective, to which Brecht was inclined, the ruling class comes into power by controlling what the poor classes know, that is, by spreading ideology. Questions of power become those of knowledge: Those who know the most, can maintain their knowledge and use it properly are, indeed, the most powerful.

In *The Opera*, something similar happens with one of the most weakened characters. It is Ginny Jenny who is a common

prostitute. She doesn't appear immediately but her story is told by Polly in the second scene. Polly does that by performing the song "Pirate Jenny." The song is one of the most popular ones in this play. Polly tells the story of Jenny the bartender who has to work all day and take abuse from men:

Gentlemen, today you see me washing up the glasses
And making up the beds and cleaning.
When you give me p'raps a penny, I will curtsy rather well.
When you see my tatty clothing and this tatty old hotel
P'raps you little guess with whom you're dealing.
One fine afternoon there will be, shouting from the harbour
Folk will ask: what's the reason for that shout?
They will see me smiling while I rinse the glasses
And will say: what has she to smiling about?
And a ship with eight sails and
With fifty great cannon
Sails into the quay. (24)

In the song, Jenny hints at her profession as a harlot who is also a servant. She knows how to be courteous and well-mannered, but there is obvious sarcasm in her words. She doesn't speak like a victim even though she is in a weaker position. She ends this first stanza as well as all the others with three lines as a brief eerie description of her pirate ship. It is a short but precise threat. The lines are shorter than the rest, and sung at a slower pace for emphasis.

Jenny proceeds to describe how she will murder everyone in the city that wronged her for too long. She will order the pirates to bombard everything except for the “tatty hotel” where she works. Of course, this is a hyperbole, and she never actually does anything remotely as horrible. However, she does turn Macheath in not once, but twice. Despite her love for him, she manages to make the tougher choice, most likely due to her desire for revenge. Her story is another proof of how fragile Mackie is behind the horrific façade he keeps.

Jenny’s role comes later when she is given a golden chance for revenge. Mr and Mrs Peachum decide to turn Mackie in. Mrs Peachum is sure that Mackie will visit the brothel because he cannot suppress his desires. That will be her opportunity to ambush him.

In the interlude to act two, scene two, Jenny herself appears. She shows the same naïve trust that Polly shows towards Mackie. She thinks that Mackie will not be so stupid as to visit her while being chased by the police. Mrs Peachum, on the other hand, is sure that he will falter. She sings “The Ballade of Sexual Submissiveness.” In this song, she describes a man of power and education who is like a shark, and the world is his sea. She asks: “What gets him down? What gets them all down? Women” (49). This song hints at the amazing turn of events that is going to allow Jenny to achieve what she has dreamt of: revenge.

While Mackie sits among the whores, drinking coffee and laughing, Jenny reads his palm to tell his fortune. She says that he will be betrayed by a woman whose name starts with ‘J’. She shows brilliant irony when she warns him about the inevitable police attack which she already knows about. Jenny’s social position may seem insignificant; however, she manages to yield power over one of the most powerful men in London.

However, despite Jenny’s effort, Mackie escapes with the help of Brown’s daughter who is Mackie’s secret wife. It is Peachum’s turn now to take matters in hand proving, yet again, that power can be practiced by the weak over their oppressor. He threatens Brown

that if Mackie isn't caught again soon, Peachum will ruin the coronation by sending all his beggars to participate in it. He gets this idea from a historic event in Egypt in the year 1400 B.C. This is how he relates the event:

When the Egyptian king Rameses the Second died, the chief of police of Nineveh, or it may have been Cairo, was guilty of 'some petty injustice toward the lower classes. Even at that time the results were terrible. The coronation procession of the new queen, Semirarnis, was, as the history books state, "a succession of catastrophes caused by the all too lively participation of the lower classes" (66).

Peachum intends to recreate this scene. This is an example of the ingenuity of the lower classes and their ability to make a difference. Ruining the coronation may not be profitable, but it will be extremely inconvenient for the middle class.

Brown tries to save Mackie by arresting Peachum and the beggars; however, he is shocked by Peachum's answer:

Your plan was ingenious, Brown, but impracticable. All you can arrest here are a few young people who arranged a small fancy-dress ball to celebrate the Coronation of their Queen. But when the really poor ones come — there's not a single one here now — you'll see they'll come in thousands. That's the trouble. You've forgotten the monstrous number of the poor. (76)

Times and again, the weak are given the power to avenge themselves in this play. Their great number, not their wealth, is their advantage. This is an example of Brecht's brilliance in sarcastic mockery. The government is too careful to have a successful coronation celebration. It is ridiculous that the officials care about the appearance of the royalty more than the hundreds of beggars roaming London or a master criminal on the loose. In the final scene, the mockery is at its highest as Mackie is freed by decree from the queen herself. He is freed to avoid directing people's attention from the event of the coronation to the hanging of Mackie.

In *The Good Woman*, the power of the public is also at play towards the end of the play. In scene nine, Shui Ta is confronted by Yang Sun who is Shen Te's lover and the father of her unborn child. The latter finds out that Shen Te is pregnant and gets furious at his employer. Sun, one of the weakest characters, demands that he be given a higher position in the tobacco factory:

Shui Ta: What position would be more appropriate?

Yang Sun: The one at the top.

Shui Ta: My own? (Silence.) And if I preferred to throw you out on your neck?

Yang Sun: I'd come back on my feet. With suitable escort.

Shui Ta: The police?

Yang Sun: The police. (122)

Sure enough, a policeman bursts into the office supported by a crowd. Shui Ta is arrested under the charge of killing Shen Te. He has no choice but to accept the consequences of his actions silently.

The trial scene is the final scene. Shui Ta, in his eagerness to resolve the conflict, will admit that he is Shen Te. Every employee in the factory is present in the trial. They all accuse Shui Ta of different things. The homeless family members accuse him of kicking them out of the house. Wang accuses him of forcing Shen Te to leave her lover and friends. Shui Ta tries to reason with everybody; however, no one accepts his plea. He has been the most powerful man in Setzuan; however, with the sheer power of sun and the workers combined, he is forced to retreat.

Interestingly, *The Opera* also ends with a trial. It is, possibly, the best example to end this paper with. Mackie looks absolutely beaten while he awaits his execution. He sings to himself in despair. His song is called: "Ballad in Which Macheath Begs Pardon of All," and it starts like this:

All you who will live long and die in bed

Pray harden not your hearts against us others

And do not grin behind your beards, my brothers,

When you behold us hung till we are dead.

Nor do not curse because we came a cropper.

Be not, as was the Law to us, unkind:

Not every Christian has a lawful mind. (93)

His choice of words is interesting since he calls people “brothers” and “friends.” It means that he speaks as people’s equal; however, at the same time, he uses the pronoun “you” to address people and calls his group of peoples “others.” Mackie also tries to claim that he belongs in the group of the offended by the “unkind” law. He uses the pronoun “we” to talk about himself. Clearly, Macheath still thinks he is innocent. The alternation between the words “we,” “you” and “others” is a linguistic proof that it is impossible to identify each social group in this play clearly.

Finally, these plays show that society never operates without criminals and low-lives roaming the streets. As a result, power can be transferred to the meanest of people at the right time with the right tool. More importantly, ‘authority’ and ownership are also unstable terms. The most obvious proof is that Brecht borrowed texts from other writers; he recited them. As long as texts are being recited, it is impossible to compose one definition of truth. Whether the text in question is the Bible or a random play from a writer’s discourse, it is still a text. Its meaning can be infinitely deferred by citation and interpretation.

When faced with harsh reality, Macheath abruptly surrendered to death feeling helpless and powerless. When faced by the power of the masses, Brown had to give up his friend. Also, Shui Ta had to let go of his empire and go Back to being a weakened woman. The conflicts or dialectics between these characters, and many others of Brecht's, are complicated and contradictory. They are also realistic and true to their time. From hi platform, which is the stage, Brecht challenges the popular ideology of the bourgeois and faces them with a merciless representation of their own shortcomings.

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