

## BRECHT IN NEVERNEVERLAND: *THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE*

Raymond Williams in his chapter on Brecht in *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* is perspicacious and just except for the single paragraph in which he dismisses *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. He finds the framework of the collective farm dispute "arbitrary and distracting; the issue it raises is not followed through." The stories of Azdak and Grusha he finds "again quite arbitrarily related." Azdak he sees as living out a preposterous negation of justice, "a survival from the earlier vision of anarchic paradox" who blunts the point of Grusha's story. All these faults he ascribes to "a central confusion of experience" in the play. I should like to offer here an alternative reading.

The collective farm dispute is omitted from Eric Bentley's translation and from many productions, so I will begin by summarizing it.

A certain valley has been left desolate by war. The goat-breeding kolchos which formerly occupied it has settled further east and now wishes to return. But a nearby fruit-growing kolchos has submitted plans to irrigate the valley and plant orchards and vineyards. An expert presides over a meeting to decide the fate of the valley. An old man from the goat-breeders distributes cheese which is generally agreed to be excellent. His intention had been to demonstrate the inferiority of the cheese produced in the new valley, but this is shown to exist only in his own imagination ("it doesn't even smell of morning there in the morning").<sup>1</sup> His case is no more than the rationalization of the nostalgia of the old people for familiar surroundings. The young are perfectly happy. The old man appeals to the law, but a girl replies:

The laws will have to be reexamined in any case, to see whether they are still valid.

When the agriculturist outlines the irrigation project, the old man grudgingly gives way and asks for a copy of the drawings to take home with him. In honour of the visiting goat-breeders the fruit-growers have arranged a play "which has some bearing on our problem."

The issue which this scene has raised is the issue of justice. The law of property and hereditary rights is here abandoned in favour of a new kind of justice whose principles are to be worked out in the play and celebrated in the epilogue:

But you, who have listened to the story of the Chalk Circle  
Take note of the meaning of the ancient song:  
That what there is shall belong to those who are good for it,  
Thus the children to the maternal, that they thrive;  
The carriages to good drivers, that they are driven well;

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from *Bertolt Brecht: Plays*, vol.1, Methuen 1996.

And the valley to the waterers, that it shall bear fruit.

It is a strange reading of the play which sees this issue as "not followed through."

The law, at the beginning of the play, is merely a prop for injustice, exploitation and corruption. Great care is taken of the Governor's heir, more care indeed than is likely to produce a thriving child, but this care springs not from parental love, but from the knowledge that the child guarantees the perpetuation of injustice for a further generation. It is heavily ironic that the crowd of beggars and petitioners should forget their complaints in their obsequiousness:

God bless the child. Your Grace!

The "apple of the Governor's eye" is quickly abandoned when danger threatens. The province itself is lightheadedly lost through blindness and complacency:

Oh, blindness of the great! They wander like gods  
Great over bent backs, sure  
Of hired fists, trusting  
In their power which has already lasted so long.

The old law is at last overthrown. The town Judge is strung up by the carpet-weavers. For a time there is chaos. The princes and soldiers in uneasy alliance keep up a semblance of authority.

This is the point at which both Grusha and Azdak enter the story. Each seeks to salvage from this chaos some sort of valid order — Grusha an order based on love and kindness, Azdak an order based on his own idiosyncratic notion of justice. The two orders are to meet and marry at the end. The two so different careers run parallel courses not only in time. Grusha and Azdak each gets into difficulties through an act of rash goodness. Against her instinct for self-preservation, Grusha succumbs to her maternal instinct. Like Shen Te, her good nature makes her permanently vulnerable and at odds with the world:

Terrible is the temptation to be good.

Azdak denies that he has a good heart and claims to be a man of intellect, but he too succumbs to the temptation to shelter a fugitive, although he has recognized him as one of the "well-born stinkers." Grusha wanders in search of unusual justice; Azdak wanders dispensing it. The story of Azdak is introduced as the story of the Judge and we are asked to listen

How he turned Judge, how he passed judgment, what kind of  
Judge he is.

He is obsessed with justice. He professes to believe that a new age of spontaneous justice is at hand:

Everything will be investigated, brought into the open.  
In future a man will prefer to give himself up. Why?  
Because he won't be able to escape the people.

He insists, on discovering that he has sheltered the Grand Duke himself, a murderer and tyrant, on being taken into Nukha in chains to be judged. His appetite for justice sorts ill with his self-indulgence, cowardice, and self-protective cunning. He insists on being punished as much in the hope of avoiding excessive punishment as of furthering justice. The stresses and paradoxes of his character are similar to those of Galileo, and, of course, of Brecht himself. In Galileo it is the appetite for knowledge which battles with his grossness and occasionally wins, as where it induces him to remain in Florence during the plague. When Azdak learns that he has miscalculated in assuming the proletariat to be in control, he recants his revolutionary song, cringes and whines. Yet even in the presence of Prince Kasbeki himself and the gallows with which he has already been threatened, he cannot resist the lure of justice when invited to play the part of the Grand Duke in a mock trial. He launches into a savage and brilliant attack on the conduct of the war by the princes, which, but for the nice balance of power between Kasbeki and the soldiery, would certainly have cost him his life. Kasbeki shrieks "Hang him" but dare not contravene the soldiers, who have taken a fancy to Azdak, and, perhaps, perceived some justice in his account of the war:

War lost, but not for princes. Princes have won their war. Got themselves paid 3,863,000 piastres for horses not delivered. 8,240,000 piastres for food supplies not produced. Are therefore victors. War lost only for Grusinia, which is not present in this Court.

Azdak's strange justice is always to be at the service of Grusinia, of the old peasant woman ("I almost called you Mother Grusinia") for whom a ham is a miracle, rather than of the vested interests of the ruling cliques and landowners. "The Judge was always a rascal. Now the rascal shall be Judge." Azdak manages to remain a Judge for two years. His judgments are presented as high comedy, but the basic justice of them is clear, and the presence of the gallows on stage serves to remind us that Azdak's career may end as quickly as it began.

To feed the starving people  
He broke the laws like bread  
There on the seat of justice  
With the gallows over his head  
For more than seven hundred  
Days he calmed their wails  
Well, well, well, did Azdak  
Measure with false scales.

Two summers and two winters  
A poor man judged the poor  
And on the wreck of justice  
He brought them safe to shore.

Grusha's adventures too become gradually funnier, culminating in her ludicrous marriage. But we are not allowed to overlook that the marriage is likely to ruin her future with Simon. And the Ironshirts might come tomorrow. One day they do come:

The Ironshirts took the child away, the precious child.  
The unhappy girl followed them to the city, the dangerous place  
The real mother demanded the child back. The foster mother  
faced her trial.

Who will try the case, on whom will the child be bestowed?  
Who will be the Judge? A good one, a bad one?  
The city was in names. On the Judgment Seat sat Azdak.

Thus the question which introduces the Azdak story is: "What sort of justice can give Grusha the child she deserves?" We are reminded of this question again when Azdak, speaking of the old justice, refers to a Judge who "throws a woman into the clink for having stolen a corncake for her child." And again in his Song of Chaos:

The child of the mistress becomes the son of her slave.

The judgement of the Chalk Circle, which only Azdak could have given, is that the child shall go to the maternal that it thrive; and the disinherited lands shall be a public park.

To put *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in perspective we need to see it as a companion piece to *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. Love, kindness, friendliness is the basic human instinct which gives life its only meaning; as it is common to all men it is the only possible basis of a happy society. But in Shen Te's world goodness is literally impossible: 'How can I be good when everything is so expensive?' The gods reply: 'We cannot meddle in the sphere of economics'. In a society without justice, kindness is vulnerable, love doomed. The victim can only survive by becoming the exploiter:

Henceforth I  
Shall fight at least for my own, if I have to be  
Sharp as a tiger. . . .  
What I have learnt from my schooling, the gutter  
By violence and trickery now  
Shall serve you, my son; to you  
I would be kind; a tiger, a savage beast  
To all others if need be. And  
It need be.

Before the need arose to save her own child from the world's horrors, Shen Te had been moving towards a different kind of militancy:

When an injustice takes place in a town there must be an uproar  
And where there is no uproar it is better the town disappears  
In flames before the night falls.

Brecht leaves the issue open, but says in his epilogue

There's only one solution that we know.

His foreword clearly implies what that solution is:

The province Setzuan in this parable, which stood for all places where men are exploited by men, is such a place no longer.

Communism will resolve Shen Te's predicament. But this is not, in fact, what we bring from the play. The play is about a human being suffering at a particular time and place. The fact that some decades hence people in that place may not be subjected to quite that kind of suffering is irrelevant to her. In any case this "fact" is hardly present in the play, even as the most fragile hope. Brecht's vision of an absurd, because unjust, world, has been so forcefully communicated that we take his ending as tragic, the future as holding out nothing for Shen Te:

But for the young, they say, the gates are open.

They open, so they say, on nothingness.

Against this Brecht's own hopes must be asserted with almost hysterical insistence:

There must be happy endings, must, must, must!

The note of hope is here as completely submerged in the chord of despair as it is in the closely parallel ending of Chehov's *The Three Sisters*. Brecht himself later called it "a bitter ending."

If we bring from *The Good Woman of Setzuan* a vision of future bliss, it is much more likely to be in the form of Sun's song of St. Nevernever Day than of a communist state:

On a certain day, as is very well known,  
Everyone will cry "Hooray,  
The poor woman's son is on the golden throne!"  
On St. Nevernever Day  
He'll sit on the golden throne.

And on that day goodness will pay  
And badness will cost you your head  
And merit and gain will smile and play  
While exchanging salt and bread.  
On St. Nevernever Day  
While exchanging salt and bread.

And the grass will look down at the sky  
And the pebbles will roll up the stream  
And men will be good without batting an eye  
They will make of our earth a dream.  
On St. Nevernever Day  
They will make of our earth a dream.

Azdak is clearly that poor woman's son; and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* might have been called *St. Nevernever Day*. For behind all

the comedy lies the knowledge that under normal justice Grusha would never have retained Michael, would have had no more chance of happiness or even survival than Shen Te. The happy ending of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is made possible only by a series of coincidences as miraculous as divine intervention. The manipulation is so blatant—the last-minute arrival of the messenger who saves Azdak, the confusion of the divorce papers—that it makes an ironic comment on the real world where these things could never happen. The world is here transformed for a short time into a Neverneverland where natural goodness thrives, virtue is rewarded, the lover gets his lass, and something like justice is done:

And after that evening Azdak disappeared and was never seen again.  
But the people of Grusinia did not forget him and often remembered  
His time of Judgement as a brief  
Golden Age, almost an age of justice.

The conception of Azdak seems to derive from Scene 10 of *The Life of Galileo*. The scene is an April Fool's Day Carnival. It is a superbly conceived scene where the old custom of reversing social roles for a day and electing a King of Chaos is used to link Galileo's revolutionary astronomy to the idea of social revolution. Galileo is seen as having destroyed the Great Order, the Rule of Rules, whereby social roles were considered to be as immutable as the fixed stars. Galileo's giant effigy is brought on in the procession. He is the King of Chaos. The ballad-singer's song of the future "as the learned Doctor Galileo Galilei predicts it" is almost identical with Azdak's 'Song of Chaos.' For Azdak too is an agent of social reversal. But he knows that social justice is little more than the jest of a licenced Fool's Day. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is a dream of earthly bliss.

Azdak knows that the bubble will soon burst, and slips away from the dancing couples.

The delightful vision of love and joy with which the play ends is poignant, because it is all as unlikely as pebbles rolling upstream. It reveals to us, however, a side of Brecht's character which he had been at pains to eliminate from earlier works. We are more used to the voice from the dark ages:

Ah, what an age it is  
When to speak of trees is almost a crime  
For it is a kind of silence about injustice!  
(To Posterity)

In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* Brecht found a way to talk about trees and also, obliquely, about injustice. There is a new relaxation and serenity, a flow of warmth and kindness never before so free. Brecht himself marvelled afterwards that he could have written such sentimental mush. But the play is sentimental only if we regard all utopianism as sentimental; for despite the prologue, the play is

frankly Utopian. I hope I have shown that the relaxation is not in structure or imaginative control. And Azdak, a character of almost Falstaffian proportions, keeps the cutting edge of Brecht's dialectic as sharp as ever.

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