

## The Case Is Altered: Brecht's Use of Shakespeare

I

Poet, dramatist, shrewd businessman, notorious magpie who borrowed and made better the work of others – the description fits both William Shakespeare and Bertolt Brecht. Artistic and even biographical similarities shared by the two authors have often been mentioned, usually in search of praise for Brecht. Shakespeare, who once made comic use of Pythagoras's opinion 'that the soul of our grandam might happily inhabit a bird,'<sup>1</sup> would surely have been amused by the *Observer's* obituary for Brecht which called him 'the nearest equivalent to Shakespeare ever to appear anywhere – indeed, if one believed in the transmigration of souls, one would be tempted to think that he was Shakespeare reborn.'<sup>2</sup> The German dramatist, who himself fought long and hard against what he perceived as the comforting fiction of heaven, would doubtless have also been amused at finding his life judged Shakespeare's final reward, for Brecht's own attitude towards Shakespeare was quite inconsistent.

He suggested in 1927 that we be 'prepared to admit that Shakespeare's great plays, the basis of our drama, are no longer effective.'<sup>3</sup> In 1955 he wrote: 'In order to treat of great actions we need to study the structure of the classics, particularly that of Shakespeare.'<sup>4</sup> Brecht, to the dismay of critics, was often inconsistent. And yet there is a kind of consistency behind the ambivalence of his attitude towards Shakespeare. He despised the archaic and brutal contents of Shakespeare's plays, proclaiming him the great poet of barbarian art.<sup>5</sup> Yet he admired and emulated Shakespearean form, style, and technique.

The intensity and frequency of Brecht's many direct and indirect references to Shakespeare suggest a literary influence too important to dismiss on the grounds of ambiguity, too ambivalent merely to affirm or deny Shakespeare's significance as a model.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps we should study, then, the nature of Brecht's determined ambivalence to the English playwright who had long dominated the German stage. Indeed, by studying the ambivalence of his response to Shakespeare we may also discover much about Brecht's dramaturgy in general, for such a study reveals that, consciously or not, Brecht struggled throughout his career with the organic relationship of form and content.

To say this is not to join early Marxist critics who often threatened

Brecht with the elusive charge of 'formalism.'<sup>7</sup> Brecht's admiration for Shakespearean form and his dismay over Shakespearean content did lead him to artistic experiments of a highly formal nature, but the conflict itself is rooted in a lifelong dialogue conducted by Brecht the intuitive artist with Brecht the political man. Brecht himself attempts to sustain rather than resolve this dialogue by incorporating the tension between his attraction to promising artistic forms and rejection of bourgeois content into the very method of his dramaturgy. The result is often that of complex parody. In a series of 'anti-plays' and adaptations Brecht rejects what he must of the past but, through parody, saves what he can. When most original, as in such plays as *A Man's a Man* and *The Good Person of Szechwan*, he is also most Shakespearean and moves beyond parody, transforming his source material (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*) into startling new plays for the modern stage.

The general indebtedness of the German stage to Shakespeare is now a commonplace of comparative studies. Lessing, Herder, Lenz – key figures of eighteenth-century German literature – commented on, were inspired by, and wrote under the acknowledged influence of Shakespeare. Schiller, Goethe, and Schlegel (whose translations completed the German naturalization of the English playwright) carried Shakespeare into the nineteenth century, where his influence on Georg Büchner and Frank Wedekind, Brecht's early heroes, has long been seen as paramount. In fact, as Max Spalter has written, after Lessing 'the literary apotheosis of Shakespeare became the rule rather than the exception.'<sup>8</sup> The German tradition of Shakespeare in production also grew in a fashion almost embarrassing to English-speaking nations. In 1917, despite the impact of World War I, there were 990 German performances of 25 different Shakespearean plays. In 1923 there were 2,020 performances of 26 plays; in 1927 the figures read 1,652 performances of 33 plays – almost the entire Shakespearean canon.<sup>9</sup>

Brecht was born and educated, then, in a Germany steeped in Shakespeare and Shakespearean studies. His years in Berlin (1924–33), the centre of German theatre, were marked by perennial and vociferous controversy over productions of the classics, particularly of Shakespeare. Leopold Jessner shocked an audience grown accustomed to Max Reinhardt's blend of realism and romanticism by presenting a version of *Hamlet* set against the Prussian war. Erwin Piscator, who exerted a strong influence on Brecht, rebelled against the sacrosanct attitude afforded classical texts in his efforts to establish a Marxist theatre. In 1929 Herbert Ihering, a well-respected critic who was also Brecht's friend and benefactor, delineated the crisis of the contemporary German theatre in his book *Reinhardt, Jessner, Piscator oder Klassikertod*, the title of which led Brecht to reply that it was not the classics, but German theatre which was dying: 'Sie [Ihering] schrieben Ihr Buch und wir reden über die Klassiker

nicht, weil die Klassiker in einer Krise sind, sondern weil unser Theater in der Krise ist.<sup>10</sup>

Brecht's declaration that the German stage, not the classics, was in crisis is an early reflection of his distaste for sustaining the outdated. The German stage, according to Brecht, was in crisis because it would not commit the sacrilege of *making modern* the classics – or of rejecting the classics if they could not be made modern. A living theatre must reflect 'a contemporary public that earns real contemporary money and eats real contemporary beef.' Brecht's own plays, he insisted, would be for such an audience, such a time. But many ghosts – none the less real for being ghosts – walked Brecht's contemporary stage. Brecht (not unlike Ibsen) attempted to banish them through parody, while at the same time introducing new, topically relevant subject-matter which would itself 'impose a new dramatic and theatrical form.'<sup>11</sup>

For all his theoretical inconsistencies, Brecht is quite consistent in one dramatic practice: from his first to his last days as a playwright he sought out dramatic models against which he could react – and to which he thereby gives new life. This is certainly true of his first play, *Baal*, written in 1918 when Brecht was a student in Arthur Kutscher's seminar on the theatre at the University of Munich. *Baal* was composed in explicit reaction to *The Lonely One*, a romanticized presentation of playwright Dietrich Grabbe's life written by the expressionist Hanns Johst. Brecht attacked Johst's play, tearing it apart in Kutscher's seminar, promising the irate professor an improved 'Gegenspiel,' an 'anti-play.' That anti-play is *Baal*, whose central character is an ugly, debauched, charismatic poet who so gives in to excess as to murder his best friend. Brecht's harsh play, though it makes use of some expressionistic techniques, obviously parodies Johst's sentimentalized story. In the very process of parodying Johst Brecht also emulates the dramatic techniques of Büchner and Wedekind, shaping his antagonistic response to Johst's story into an original play of great power.<sup>12</sup> While destroying Johst's image of the glorified poet, Brecht also introduces new subject-matter to the modern stage – the homosexual relationship. Here Brecht borrows freely from both the poetry of Rimbaud and the story of Rimbaud's relationship with Verlaine.

Were it not for Brecht's parody, Johst's play would be long forgotten; were it not for young Brecht's recorded promise of a 'Gegenspiel,' we might not see the source of Brecht's initial inspiration. *Baal* is but the first of many anti-plays written by Brecht. In 1932 he wrote *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* in which he parodies Schiller's *Maid of Orleans* and Goethe's *Faust*, while complimenting Shaw's *Saint Joan* and *Major Barbara*. In 1948–9 he worked on *The Days of the Commune*, writing in reaction to a Danish play, *The Defeat*. The list of Brecht's anti-plays expands further if we consider his many 'adaptations' as more subtle manifestations of his

need to react against as well as borrow from the work of other writers. What is of particular interest is that, in selecting models for adaptation, Brecht consistently chooses works which bring together the positive and negative influences we can see shaping his more explicit anti-plays.

Consider, for example, Brecht's first adaptation, *Edward II*. Brecht completed his work on Marlowe's *Edward II* as he prepared to move from Munich to Berlin. He was already quite concerned with the static nature of the German theatre and seemed drawn towards Marlowe's theatre by certain structural elements which promised new life and energy. Marlowe's narrative prologues and epilogues, his occasional use of a chorus, his tendency to interrupt the action of his plays with speeches made directly to the audience, all corresponded to and encouraged Brecht's evolving thoughts on an 'epic' theatre.<sup>13</sup> Though *Edward II* is, in some sense, the least epic of Marlowe's plays, its undercurrent of homosexuality also appealed to Brecht, who had delighted in exploring that taboo subject in both *Baal* and *The Jungle of the Cities*. But the Brecht who adapts *Edward II* is also that Brecht who had begun to reject not only hero-worship but the very concept of the hero. In his adaptation of Marlowe Brecht simultaneously serves his many needs. He sustains and emphasizes Marlowe's epic devices, coarsens the story, and highlights Edward's passion for Gaveston. In developing the theme of homosexuality Brecht also parodies Marlowe's somewhat sympathetic presentation of the king. By making subtle use of both expansion and suppression, the principal techniques of parody, Brecht destroys all possible audience sympathy for Edward.<sup>14</sup> At the conclusion of Brecht's play, as John Fuegi notes, 'Marlowe's Renaissance metaphysic has been displaced by Brecht's: all is vain.'<sup>15</sup>

Although Brecht, under the influence of Marxism, would soon alter his own metaphysic to a more optimistic vision of man's perfectibility, the pattern of adaptation evident in *Edward II* – emphasis on key structural elements; suppression, rejection, redirection of the vision of the play – would remain fundamental to Brecht's response to English Renaissance drama in general. And English Renaissance drama in general had much to attract Brecht as he evolved his 'anti-Aristotelian' theory of drama. Elizabethan repertory acting, with its emphasis on an ensemble and its perception of parts as roles rather than extensions of self, appealed to Brecht,<sup>16</sup> as did Elizabethan limitations on stage illusion and the episodic structure of chronicle plays. The proponent of theatre as sport also 'relish[ed] the fact that the early public theater in England had to compete directly with contests staged in bearpit and cockpit.'<sup>17</sup> Yet Brecht seems to have deliberately avoided the central figure of the Elizabethan stage until his apprenticeship had been served. The Munich Theatre had commissioned him to produce *Macbeth*, not the *Edward II* he adapted instead. Once ready, however, Brecht acknowledges Shakespeare as primary

interlocutor in his ongoing dialogue over the relationship of form and content as well as that of the stage and modern life.

In 1927 Brecht adapted *Macbeth*, in 1931 *Hamlet*, both for radio broadcast. Very little survives of either adaptation, but there is sufficient primary and secondary material to suggest that, as with *Edward II*, Brecht's method of adaptation is to highlight those key structural and minor thematic elements which appeal to him and to trivialize those elements which offend. When these two practices intersect, the outcome is a play which parodies the original, but not necessarily for comic effect. We perceive the parody only if we recall the original. The new work is quite serious in its intent – which seems to include provoking the audience to reject the outmoded ideas which we must hold in order to recognize the parody! The fragment of Brecht's *Macbeth* preserved in the Brecht Archives assigns the witches' prophetic speeches to both Macbeth and Banquo. Banquo stirs a 'hell Broth' in his helmet. Even in so small an instance as this, we can see Brecht undercutting the question of supernatural intervention so central to Shakespeare's text. Reports on the broadcast criticize it as Bolshevik and Marxist and indicate that Brecht emphasized the themes of power and the governmental abuse of power.<sup>18</sup>

The cool reception afforded *Macbeth* did not stop Brecht from following a similar method of adaptation when he turned to *Hamlet* at the end of 1930. He introduced *Hamlet* as 'a brilliant example of medieval drama,'

berichtend

Von Taten, fleischlich, blutig, unnatürlich,  
Zufälligen Gerichten, blindem Mord.  
Von Toden, durch Gewalt und List bewirkt  
Plänen, die verfehlt zurückgefallen  
Auf der Erfinder Haupt.

These words, taken from the Schlegel translation and set by Brecht as a prologue, are actually from the end of Shakespeare's play. Horatio promises Fortinbras a report, one telling

Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,  
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,  
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,  
And in the upshot, purposes mistook  
Fall'n on th'inventors' heads. (v.ii380-5)

Brecht shifts Shakespeare's emphasis with Shakespeare's own words. He draws out the dark, medieval shades of the original; he emphasizes the feudal nature of Shakespeare's Denmark and insists on human responsibility for the slaughters which conclude the play.

Notes on the *Hamlet* adaptation show that Brecht rearranged other important scenes (we jump from III.iv to v.i) and cut some almost completely. In doing so, he distracts our attention away from all abstract discussions of illusion, reality, fate, and providence. He also adds to Shakespeare's text in ways which both disrupt and parody tragic seriousness. For example, a voice breaks in at the end of III.iv (the bedroom scene) to announce: 'we interrupt our broadcast to bring you the extraordinary news of Ophelia's death.' At the conclusion of Brecht's play seven lines are added to two of Shakespeare's, transposed here from Fortinbras's concluding eulogy of Hamlet to a narrative epilogue. The addition and transposition render Shakespeare's lines 'That he was likely, had he been put on, / To have prov'd most royal' totally ironic. The passage further indicates Brecht's decision to emphasize the earlier scene of Hamlet's encounter with Fortinbras as the turning-point in the prince's struggle with the question of action:

Und so, sorgsam benutzend Schall zufälliger Trommeln  
Den Schlachtruf unbekannter Schlächter gierig aufnehmend  
Schlachtet er, durch solchen Zufall endlich ledig  
Seiner so menschlichen und vernünftigen Hemmung  
In einem einzigen schrecklichen Amoklauf  
Den König, seine Mutter und sich selbst.  
Rechtfertigend seines Nachfolgers Behauptung  
Er hätte sich, wäre er hinaufgeklommen, sicher  
Höchst königlich bewährt.

*And so, carefully exploiting the echo of chance drums,  
Taking in greedily the battlecry of unknown butchers,  
Finally free, by such a chance, of  
His so human and reasonable inhibitions  
He slaughters, in one horrible frenzy,  
The King, his mother and himself.  
Thus he justifies his successor's claim,  
That had he been put on,  
He would have proved most kingly.<sup>19</sup>*

Some of the parody we sense in these adaptations might appear as the unwitting by-product of Brecht's serious efforts to make Shakespeare modern. But Brecht is almost always playful, even at his most serious, and there is unquestionable deliberation behind the parody we sense in the 'performance exercises' he later wrote for his actors. In a scene parallel to the murder scene in *Macbeth* the original 'is equated with the pangs of conscience of a concierge's wife who has broken off the head of a china statue belonging to the lady of the house and finally blames the deed on a

passing beggar.' In a 'bridge scene' (a scene meant only for rehearsal) Hamlet learns that Claudius has ceded a strip of land to Norway in return for a trade agreement that guarantees the sale of Danish salted herrings to Norway; this puts him in the right mood to hear of Fortinbras's expedition to Poland and explains his change of mind in "How all occasions do inform against me".<sup>20</sup>

The principle of reduction at work in both these scenes (Danish salted herring?) is calculated parody. And yet there is something in each play which Brecht obviously admires, would save, even through his parody. It is, as Hannah Arendt observes, as if 'the parodistic element ... is turned less against the tradition itself than against those who with its help wish to lull us about our own problems, against the *classicist* – and not against the classical poets. Brecht's parody solves in the most concrete manner the problem of leading away from the tradition and at the same time conserving it.'<sup>21</sup>

Throughout his career Brecht would return to Shakespeare in search of material against which he would inevitably react. In his hands *Measure for Measure* becomes *Roundheads and Peakheads* (1931–2), 'a long parable play about Hitler's race theories,'<sup>22</sup> and *Richard III* is echoed in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941), the story of Hitler's rise set against gangland Chicago.<sup>23</sup> In both instances Brecht shatters the image of Shakespeare's hero (even his anti-hero) with and by the introduction of new subject-matter while preserving what he can of Shakespearean technique.

In objecting to Shakespeare's heroes Brecht initially seems to reject the cult of individualism. Ultimately, however, it is Shakespeare's tragic vision, the vision which shapes those heroes, against which Brecht reacts most violently. In attempting to exorcise, through parody, the ghost of tragedy Brecht does not reject Shakespeare's vision of Shakespeare's world, but the imposition of such a vision on his own world. He rejects as not viable for modern man any concept of 'great solitary figures, bearing on their breast the star of their fate, [who] carry through with irresistible force their futile and deadly outbursts: they prepare their own downfall; life, not death, becomes obscene as they collapse; the catastrophe is beyond criticism. Human sacrifices all round! Barbaric delights!' He calls for a new theatre: 'We know that the barbarians had their art. Let us create another.'<sup>24</sup> As Spalter notes, Brecht the political man looked forward to an age 'when plays like *King Lear* would be looked upon as examples of sadistic entertainment – for what civilized person would have the heart to watch a tragic hero being slowly cut to pieces?'<sup>25</sup>

Attracted to the greatness of Shakespeare, Brecht is unable to condone for his own age Shakespeare's tragic or even (as we shall see) his comic vision. But Brecht the artist will not deny the nature of Shakespeare's tragedies. Since his artistic and philosophical demands are at loggerheads, he solves his dilemma by placing the offending material in what is

explicitly a new perspective. Such tampering with the relationship of form and content may, in the end, amount only to 'small changes of emphasis' as Brecht would claim in one of his last interviews.<sup>26</sup> But those small changes in emphasis lead, finally, to strikingly original dramas.

## II

Consider the case of an early Brecht masterpiece, *A Man's a Man*, and its companion interlude, *The Elephant Calf*. For the most part written between 1924-6, they immediately follow *Edward II* and precede the *Macbeth* adaptation. *A Man's a Man* is a 'parable play,' presented in eleven scenes or episodes; the play is set in Brecht's version of British Colonial India and there are many parodic echoes of Kipling - his verse and his vision. The scene shifts are rapid and the action of the play is frequently interrupted by songs.

Eric Bentley summarizes the play in a prologue he wrote for a New York production: '[this is] the story of Galy Gay, a homey sort of fellow, a loyal and loving husband, but transformed, at last, into a citizen, a patriot, a soldier, a builder of empire.'<sup>27</sup> Four soldiers, Uriah Shelley, Jeraiah Jip, Polly Baker, and Jesse Mahoney go on a drinking spree; to fund their activities they rob a local temple, but Jeraiah Jip loses a patch of hair while making a hasty escape. His companions hide him, aware that his bald spot could be matched to the hair left on the temple door jamb. They leave him behind, planning to return and shave his head, thus eliminating the evidence. Here the action of the play shifts to its central concern: the three soldiers' efforts to convince the innocent and amiable Galy Gay that *he* is Jeraiah Jip and must return to camp with them so that the real Jeraiah's absence will not be noticed. Finally, the soldiers sell Galy a mock elephant (two men in an elephant suit) and then have him shot (with blanks) for purchasing stolen goods. When Galy recovers from his fainting spell, he is more than willing to become Jeraiah Jip and in fact becomes a most efficient fighting-machine. The theme of Brecht's play is presented best in the title song:

Herr Bertolt Brecht behauptet: Mann ist Mann.  
Und dass ist etwas, was jeder behaupten kann.  
Aber Herr Bertolt Brecht beweist auch dann  
Das man mit einem Menschen beliebig viel machen kann.

*A Man's a man is Mister Brecht's contention.  
But that is something anyone might mention.  
Mr Brecht appends this item to the bill:  
You can do with a human being what you will.*



Just as a synopsis of a Brecht adaptation underscores the parodic elements of those plays, a synopsis of one of Brecht's most original works tends to reveal a certain kinship between Brecht and the absurdists. This is true of *A Man's a Man* and even more so of *The Elephant Calf*, an interlude which Brecht insisted should be staged in the foyer during the intermission of the former play.

The interlude is a play staged by Polly, Uriah, and Jesse, joined by Galy as Jeraiah Jip. The men present their play for another group of soldiers who will not be quiet during the production. Galy-Jeraiah, as Pal Jackey the baby elephant, is put on trial for the murder of his mother, who is 'herself' (Jesse takes the part) called as chief witness by Polly, the Banana Tree, who serves as judge! The charges are brought by Uriah, who takes the part of the Moon. Through comic variations of rhetorical devices and the practices of jurisprudence Polly indeed proves that the elephant calf is a murderer. The soldiers are not happy with the ending, so audience and cast leave to fight things out - in a boxing match. Before this non-conclusion Polly seems to announce the theme of this inner play: 'I will prove anything you like.'

Brecht's comic investigation of personal identity, his succinct and witty gloss on the power of persuasion and the limitations of logic, his (for him) unusually explicit invitation to the audience to consider the relationship of illusion and reality anticipate the concerns of many modern dramatists from many different schools. Yet none of these points may be adequately pursued unless we reunite the two plays and consider the nature of their relationship to each other, to their Shakespearean source, and to the tradition of comedy.

Eric Bentley finds the connection between *A Man's a Man* and *The Elephant Calf* 'none too clear.' Martin Esslin considers *The Elephant Calf* 'a side-show based on pure clowning.' Claude Hill discusses *A Man's a Man* without even making reference to *The Elephant Calf*.<sup>28</sup> But Rodney Symington, though he fails to reunite Brecht's two plays, provides the necessary link by noting a connection between *The Elephant Calf* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Symington quickly establishes his improbable case by indicating the formal similarities between the two plays. Each has a prologue, each is played before a chatty audience. Both casts of players explicitly identify their roles as roles, which include Shakespeare's Moon and Brecht's Moon, Brecht's Banana Tree for Shakespeare's Wall. (One might also add that Brecht, like Shakespeare, takes full burlesque advantage of a man playing a woman's part in the case of Jesse as the Mother). Symington further discusses the way in which Brecht uses these borrowed structural elements to mock the tragic content of Shakespeare's *Pyramus and Thisbe*.<sup>29</sup> And here Symington stops.

It is quite true that, just as Brecht diminished the tragic hero by adjusting the relationship of form and content in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, so

too he mocks the tragedy of Pyramus by transforming him into Pal Jackey, the man-made elephant. In the instance of *The Elephant Calf*, however, the issue of Brecht's parody is far more complex than Symington allows. First, *The Elephant Calf* is part of a larger play, as is its model, Bottom the Weaver's play. More importantly, Shakespeare himself parodies the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by conducting some of the same experiments we see Brecht engaged in elsewhere. Moreover, Shakespeare's integrated play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is itself a comedy, not a tragedy. If, however, we consider Brecht's *A Man's a Man* and *The Elephant Calf* against the total backdrop of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and all that we know of his methods for adapting and reacting to Shakespearean tragedy, we gain new insight into both Brecht's play and his method of dramaturgy.

At first glimpse *The Elephant Calf* seems to have nothing to do with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But on re-examination we are pulled up short by the striking structural similarities between it and Act v of Shakespeare's play. We miss seeing the relationship initially because there is something we might think essential missing from *The Elephant Calf*: there are no lovers. But if we trust, for a moment, Brecht's clear invitation to see certain similarities between his and Shakespeare's play, we must complete the process and see each inner play in the context of its 'parent' play, each parent play in relationship to the other. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is full of lovers – Theseus and Hippolyta, Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, Oberon and Titania. Shakespeare's gentle satire of *Pyramus and Thisbe* – tragic content rendered comic by the method of presentation – mocks all the lovers of his play. This mockery, or rather the complex interaction between stage audience and inner play, inner play and outer play, all of these and the 'real' audience, leads to our acceptance of the folly of love, the comedy of being human.

Brecht's outer play, *A Man's a Man*, like the foyer piece, has no lovers. In fact, having no lovers, the action of that outer play must be dominated by the Quince, Flute, Starveling, Bottom characters – Polly, Jesse, Uriah, Galy. If we read from the centre of Brecht's play – and that centre is *The Elephant Calf* – back to the beginning and ahead to the end, we discover what Brecht has done: he has banished the court, the aristocrats, the woods, the fairies, and with these the theme of transformation through love. He has kept the mechanicals, the working-class men (a point he insists on by drawing our attention in *The Elephant Calf* to the fact that this performance is played purely for the money). Furthermore, Brecht has not completely suppressed Shakespeare's theme. He is quite interested in the idea of transformation, but not especially in the concept of love. He looks at Shakespeare's theme of metamorphosis from a new perspective, in a new context brought about by a few 'small changes in emphasis.'

Brecht is very insistent that we understand transformation as his central concern in *A Man's a Man*. The subtitle of the play is 'The transformation of the Docker Galy Gay in the Army Corps of Kilkoa in the year nineteen hundred and twenty-five.' In his production of the play Bentley uses a scrim between scenes to draw out Brecht's numerous 'metamorphoses.' For example, the projection for scene ix reads: 'Three more metamorphoses! *First*: a civilian turns into a soldier. *Second*: a soldier turns into a civilian. *Third*: a canteen turns into empty space.' These are the 'miracles' of everyday life. But though Shakespeare's theme of transformation is seen through the lens of parodic reduction, Brecht is seriously attracted by all the confusion of identity which plays itself out in the woods beyond Athens. He is intrigued by the way in which characters mistake each other, even seem to become each other. He is not attracted to the ideas of supernatural magic or the providence of love – concepts as archaic for Brecht as their own alter-identities, fate and tragic destiny. Brecht does find *some* place for these Shakespearean elements in his play: magic becomes sleight of hand as Bottom's donkey's head becomes a vaudeville elephant suit. And love becomes lust, exemplified by Bloody Five, a military officer of voracious sexual appetites (though only when it rains) who ultimately frees himself from bondage to his own desires by transforming himself – he shoots his sex off. In other words, just as Brecht mocked the tragic in *Edward II* or *Hamlet*, he mocks the comic – at least, Shakespeare's comedic vision – in *A Man's a Man*.

In breaking the link between the Shakespearean themes of transformation and love Brecht utterly transforms the meaning of metamorphosis. Man, not the gods (here also subject to explicit mockery when Jeraiah, robbing the temple poor-box from the inside out, is mistaken for a god-in-the-box), man, not grace or magic, transforms men. And not necessarily for the better. The conclusion, then, to the interlude anticipates the audience's response to the outer play. After Polly proclaims the Elephant Calf a murderer, soldiers from the audience complain: 'It's over? But it's so unjust! Does that make a good ending? You can't just stop there. Leave the curtain up. Go on with the play!' At the conclusion Galy Gay takes over Bloody Five's military leadership. The last line of the play is in response to roll call. He answers: 'Jeraiah Jip.'

Just as Shakespeare's audience should learn much about being an audience while watching his audience watch a play, so too we have been warned by Brecht not to complain about getting something other than what we expected as the ending to a comedy. Not only has Brecht parodied Shakespeare's most conservative and romantic comedy, he has transformed his own high spirited burlesque into a haunting new form of comedy, one totally lacking in the typical reassurances of traditional comedies.

## III

At one point in *The Elephant Calf* Brecht seems to tip his hand about the relationship of his plays to an older kind of theatre. Polly speaks to Jesse: 'You probably don't quite recall, Jesse, what it was like when we did it in regular theater. And the parts you've forgotten, Jesse, were the main things, I believe.' Brecht, of course, only seems to forget certain aspects of the plays he adapts. And, like Shakespeare, he constantly returns to old material and remembers what could be reworked, reconsidered. Such is the case of *As You Like It* in relationship to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Such is the case of *The Good Person of Szechwan* in relationship to *A Man's a Man*. Much more interesting for our purposes, such is the case with regard to *The Good Person of Szechwan* as a redaction of *As You Like It*.

Brecht worked on *The Good Person of Szechwan* from 1939 to 1941, years of exile and years of his most mature and original dramas. *Szechwan* opens with the descent of three gods in search of one good person. Man has called into question the possibility of being good in a world such as ours and the gods hope to justify the world by finding one good person. They come to Brecht's mythical and utterly impoverished Szechwan and convince themselves that Shen Teh, the kindly prostitute who lodges them for a night, is the person they seek. They reward her kindness with a thousand silver dollars. The next ten scenes trace and test the nature of Shen Teh's goodness.

Her money cannot go far enough in Szechwan. She is abused by the family she takes in, blackmailed by her landlady, and betrayed by her lover. Under these and similar pressures she invents a cousin, Shui Ta, a male alter-ego, who is hard, efficient, practical. He arrives whenever the compassionate Shen Teh needs these qualities to survive. Abandoned by her lover, Shen Teh discovers she is pregnant and hides the fact by becoming Shui Ta on a full-time basis. Shui Ta grows fat as he prospers. He runs a successful tobacco factory by exploiting cheap labour. Eventually, Shui Ta is accused of murdering Shen Teh. In a concluding scene, over which the gods preside as judges, Shui Ta reveals 'his' true identity and pleads for assistance in being good. The gods do not answer 'her' pleas. They return to heaven.

In *The Good Person of Szechwan* we see the fruition of Brecht's theories about the stage, his political convictions, and his habits of dramatic composition. Wang, the Water Seller, serves as epic narrator. The dramatic illusion is shattered by frequent direct address to the audience. Songs interrupt the action of the play, which is itself very episodic. The audience is constantly challenged to think about the issues being raised on stage, the central one being 'what are we going to do about the ways of our world?' The play is clearly a parable play, a form which is central to Brecht's theatre. We can even see the ever eclectic Brecht enhancing his

theories by linking them to the techniques of Chinese theatre, then popular in Europe.<sup>30</sup> And, as usual, Brecht plays with ironic inversions of cherished texts. In many ways the story of *Szechwan* is a parodic version of Sodom and Gomorrah. Within that frame Brecht mocks many other Old and New Testament parables, including Elijah's visit to a poor woman and Christ's miracle at Cana.

In *The Good Person of Szechwan* we can also see at work Brecht the conservator – the artist who, like Shakespeare, constantly returns to his own material and explores it further. There are, for example, rather obvious connections between this play and the much earlier *A Man's a Man*. The split character, Galy Gay/Jeraiah Jip is reconsidered as Shen Teh/Shui Ta. The mock trials of both Galy and the Elephant Calf are echoed in the trial of Shui Ta. The troublesome ending to *The Elephant Calf* finds a more troublesome reprise at the conclusion to *Szechwan*. There are also readily apparent similarities in the use of epic technique and parable structure, and though *Szechwan* may well be seen as the product of a mature artist's mastery of many earlier experiments, there are also a few amusing details of recycled material. The elephant from *A Man's a Man* and *The Elephant Calf* makes a cameo appearance in 'The Song of the Eighth Elephant' (Scene viii).<sup>31</sup> Even the three stooge-like gods come from 1926, when Brecht introduced them in an allegorical ballad he wrote to vent his anger at a snub by the Dresden State Opera.<sup>32</sup> More importantly, a diary entry from 1939 connects *The Good Person of Szechwan* to an earlier, unfinished work of the twenties: *Die Ware Liebe* or *Love as Merchandise*.<sup>33</sup>

In *Szechwan* Brecht also returns to the theme of love which he touched on so lightly in *A Man's a Man*. But it is Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, not the earlier *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (itself a model for *As You Like It*), which seems to have prompted the method of Brecht's return to the topic of love. In a case of artistic cross-pollination the relationship between *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *As You Like It* seems much like that between *A Man's a Man* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: at first we see no connection. We look again, and realize that we have missed a very real connection because of what isn't there rather than what is. At second glance we are struck by elements so similar that their relationship seems more than coincidental.

The nature of Brecht's episodic construction in this play is especially like the episodic arrangement of *As You Like It*. Both plays insist upon a dramatic movement dictated by the juxtaposition of varying personal relationships.<sup>34</sup> Brecht's use of songs, though generally Shakespearean, seems especially like Shakespeare's thematic use of songs in *As You Like It*. (Compare, for example, Brecht's 'Song of the Smoke' in Scene i with Shakespeare's 'Under the Greenwood Tree' in Act II, scene v.) In both plays gods or a god descend. Both plays conclude with not just an epilogue but an epilogue which draws explicit attention to the dramatic

illusion of the play just ended. These similarities converge at one crucial intersection of the two plays; both centre on lovely and loving women – Rosalind and Shen Teh – who, in order to protect themselves from the ways of the world, as well as to test the men they love (Orlando and Yang Sun), take on the disguise of men – Ganymede and Shui Ta.

The element missing from *Szechwan* which makes the ghost of Shakespearean comedy so hard to detect is Arden. Brecht dismisses the pastoral world at the heart of Shakespeare's play. He banishes that world, as usual, through suppression and parody. But, as with the question of his satire of tragedy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the issue of Brecht's parody of the pastoral is exceedingly complex. In *As You Like It* Shakespeare himself parodies pastoral conventions, though chiefly in order to rescue the pastoral vision. In his return to the topic of love Brecht reacts not so much against the form of pastoral as against the pastoral vision of a world in harmony. As with his reaction against tragedy, Brecht finds it necessary to alter the vision by mocking the form.

The multivalent satire of *As You Like It* has long awed critics who trace the way in which Shakespeare lays open the artificial conventions of earlier pastorals to find the truth which these conventions once served. Touchstone and Audrey, Phoebe and Silvius, Rosalind and Orlando, Celia and Oliver, mixed elements of low and high, earned and unearned grace, finally merge into one well-orchestrated dance blessed by Hymen, the pastoral god of marriage. Shakespeare rescues the tradition by revealing cruel lovers like Phoebe, displaying crude shepherdesses like Audrey, and mocking such scoffers as Jaques. Against the mock he places the true: Corin, Rosalind, Celia. Brecht, however, mocks the serious and takes serious the mockery, and in doing so rescues what he can of Shakespeare's comedy for the modern world.

The pastoral centre or setting of *As You Like It* is the forest of Arden, though Shakespeare is careful to remind us that this is Arden, not Eden – a green, not a golden world. Just as an audience watching *A Midsummer Night's Dream* knows that comic resolution means flight to the woods, so too we know that in the case of *As You Like It* love will flourish only away from the city. The necessity of flight from the city is even greater than in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* because in *As You Like It* the court is not merely repressive but corrupt. The concept of environment and the question of its influence on personal development are crucial to Shakespeare's plays, though these issues are usually discussed under the Renaissance terms of 'nature and nurture.'<sup>35</sup> In the opening speech of *As You Like It* Orlando draws our attention to his plight as the innocent victim of a vicious brother. In the next scene we meet Rosalind, another individual whose good nature lacks proper nurture in her uncle's corrupt court. The dilemma, then, with which Shakespeare so insistently opens his play – the problem of a good person caught in a bad world – is that which Brecht chooses to emphasize in his own work.

Shakespeare quickly moves his experiment with nature and nurture into the woods, the greater world of Nature. By doing so he extends the discussion of nature versus nurture by joining it to the Renaissance debate of natural versus artificial, which leads his play and us to the conflict between art and artifice. Shakespeare's great chain of arguments is not so much resolved as dissolved by his ongoing analysis of the nature and power of love, human and divine, which in turn leads players and audience to a comic acceptance of hierarchy.

Just, however, as Brecht chose in his earlier play to emphasize Bottom's scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, reducing the rest of the play to small moments of parody, so too he responds to *As You Like It*. He preserves much of the material of Act I with its original emphasis on environment and then begins an experiment in keeping with his own philosophical views. What, Brecht seems to ask, if our good natured people did not have an Arden to run to? As the audience to *Szechwan* we are led to wonder if under such circumstances Rosalind might not be pressured into the compromises of a Shen Teh. And might not Orlando become the callow Yang Sun? What, under such circumstances, would become of goodness?

If we consider *Szechwan* as, among other things, a response to *As You Like It*, we once more sense Brecht's ambivalent reaction to his source. For Brecht, Shakespeare took the easy way out – hermit uncles, benevolent gods, the reforming power of love, grace – but, also for Brecht, Shakespeare proceeded with his material in too brilliant, too artistically effective a fashion to ignore. Again, we see Brecht parodying that which he admires but cannot accept. The most blatant instance of this parodic impulse comes at the very opening of *Szechwan* – the arrival of the three gods. The descent of Hymen at the conclusion of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is, even in the original, easily turned towards burlesque if not staged as the wonderful culmination of escalating wonders. Brecht parodies the *deus ex machina* and the concept behind this technique, the thought that heaven holds solutions to earthly dilemmas. He splits Shakespeare's deliberately pagan god into a Christian trinity of divine keystone cops who both open and close his play. By exaggerating the role of the supernatural he makes laughable man's enervating hope for divine aid.

Brecht often achieves parodic effect through the displacement and relocation of material. Rather than leave us with the joyous betrothal scene which concludes Shakespeare's play, Brecht forces us to reconsider 'happy ever after' by moving the wedding feast to the middle of his play and giving us the 'after.' Shen Teh's wedding begins happily enough, but the joy is quickly transformed to sorrow. Yang Sun will not marry Shen Teh until Shui Ta arrives with the money he was told to bring to the wedding. But, barring a miracle, Shui Ta cannot come to the wedding. In the parallel scene from *As You Like It* (v.iv) Ganymede is able to perform

such a 'miracle' by ducking out to become the bride Rosalind. Brecht has reversed the situation. Shen Teh is divided against her self, for to go out and change identities will bring back, not the bride, but the bad man. And even if Shen Teh could bilocate, there is no money with which Shui Ta could perform the necessary magic of transforming the bitter Yang Sun into the happy pilot he hopes to be. In Brecht's world money (of which there is too little) is the parodic reduction and necessary secularization of that mysterious grace which transforms Orlando's wicked brother Oliver into a good man in time for his wedding to Celia.

Nowhere is Brecht's method of adaptation and parody more complex than in his treatment of Shen Teh. He seems, and leads his audience to feel, both repelled and attracted by her naïve goodness. Rosalind and Ganymede are presented to us as the good feminine and good masculine aspects of one nature. Shen Teh and Shui Ta depict the good and bad aspects of one nature, even though the need to protect virtue had called Shui Ta into existence in the first place, just as it had summoned Ganymede. Ganymede protects Rosalind's virtue by teaching virtue to her destined male counterpart, defender, husband - Orlando. In the happy world of Shakespeare's play Rosalind and Ganymede are finally integrated into the harmonious image of a whole woman entering into union with an equally integrated man. Brecht mocks the very notion of this miracle occurring in a world other than Arden.

In Act III, scene ii of *As You Like It* Rosalind, disguised as Ganymede, learns how much Orlando loves her. That love is immature, romantic, and, as Ganymede well realizes, idealized. It must be 'cured.' As Ganymede Rosalind sets about educating her lover. In Scene v of *Szechwan* Shen Teh, disguised as Shui Ta, has a similar interview with her lover. In this interview Shen Teh discovers that Yang Sun's love is as cynical as Orlando's is idealized. He and Shui Ta discuss Yang Sun's plans to leave for Peking without Shen Teh after the wedding:

SHUI TA And what do you expect my cousin to live on?

SUN Can't you do something for her?

SHUI TA I'll try. (*Pause*) I wish you'd return the two hundred silver dollars, Mr Yang Sun, and leave them here until you're able to show me two tickets to Peking.

SUN And I, dear brother-in-law, wish you'd mind your own business.

SHUI TA Miss Shen Teh ...

SUN Let me worry about her.

SHUI TA ... may not want to sell her shop when she finds out ...

SUN Never mind, that won't stop her.

SHUI TA And you're not afraid of my opposition?

SUN Come off it!

SHUI TA You seem to forget that she's human and has a certain amount of sense.



SUN (*amused*) It always hands me a laugh the way some people think they can make the females in their family listen to sensible arguments. Haven't you ever heard of the power of love or the itching of the flesh? You're going to appeal to her reason? She hasn't got any reason. On the other hand, she's been stepped on all her life, the poor little thing. If I put my hand on her shoulder and say: 'Come with me,' she'll hear bells, she won't know her own mother any more.

SHUI TA (*with difficulty*) Mr Yang Sun!

SUN Mr ... whatever your name is!

SHUI TA My cousin is attached to you because ...

SUN Let's say because I've got my hand on her bosom. Put that in your pipe and smoke it. (*He takes another cigar, then puts a few in his pocket, and finally puts the box under his arm*) You won't be going to her with nothing to offer: I said I'd marry her and I stick to it. She'll bring the three hundred or you will, one or the other! (*Goes out*)<sup>36</sup>

Rosalind's constancy in love is made to look more foolish – though not less attractive – in Shen Teh's insistence on marrying Yang Sun despite what she has just learned. Yang Sun is, after all, no worse than anyone else in Szechwan, including Shui Ta:

YANG SUN Did they tell you I was a bad man? (*Shen Teh is silent*) Because maybe I am, Shen Teh. And that's why I need you. I'm a low character. No money, no manners. But I'm not going to take this lying down.

Everyone in Szechwan needs, is attracted to, goodness – Yang Sun, Shu Fu the Barber, the People of Szechwan. But being good is very dangerous. The momentary heartache Rosalind endures when Orlando is late for an appointment (once for being thoughtless; once for being good in coming to the aid of his wicked brother) is magnified a hundredfold in Shen Teh's anguished cry:

What kind of world are we living in?  
 Caresses turn to strangling  
 A sigh of love becomes a cry of terror.  
 Why are those vultures circling?  
 A girl is going to a rendezvous.

Love, in Brecht's world, is not a good to be sought at all cost – it is goods, a merchandise which, if purchased, will be at all cost. Again it is important to remember the method of Brecht's ambivalence. There is something about this cliché called love he would save, as well as something he would gladly lose. His dual response towards love is at the centre of two of the most delicate scenes in *Szechwan*. Each, interestingly

enough, parodies the pastoral motif of *As You Like It* which is otherwise ignored by *Szechwan*. Much more interestingly, and sure evidence of Brecht's own mastery of form and content, we can detect the parody only if we consider the context of each passage, the total environment of the play.

The first instance is Scene iii. Shen Teh wanders into a park during a rainstorm. The municipal park is the Arden-like setting for falling in love. There she meets Yang Sun for the first time. Having despaired of ever finding a better life, Yang Sun attempts to hang himself. With fierce determination Shen Teh, clearly representing the comedic principle, opposes Yang Sun's suicide. She attempts to rescue him with her love, assuring him that 'meanness is just a kind of clumsiness. When someone sings a song or makes a machine or plants rice, he's actually being friendly. You're friendly too.' Yang Sun replies: 'But I haven't eaten in two days or had anything to drink since yesterday, so I couldn't love you, sister, even if I wanted to.' Behind Yang Sun's cry we can almost hear Orlando's 'Necessity must be served.'

As the scene continues, Brecht summons all the traditional symbols of life, love, and rebirth and allows Shen Teh, the comic woman, to wield these in her struggle to win Yang Sun, the tragic man. She buys a cup of water, despite the rain, from Wang the Water Seller, who cannot make a living in the rain, and gives the cup to the thirsty Yang Sun. Personified love saves and gives life. The scene is powerful, touching, seductive, and seems essentially rooted in its modest pastoral setting. But in the total context of the play we see that this one pastoral moment almost causes Shen Teh's destruction – not in the bountiful park, but in the 'real' world of *Szechwan*, to which she must return with Yang Sun. Given back his life by Shen Teh, Yang Sun will sustain that life by draining hers.

Brecht's objection is not to a pastoral vision of a pastoral world but to the false imposition of a pastoral vision on quite another world. When next we see Shen Teh, she is re-entering *Szechwan* after a night of love. In this second highly poetic passage Shen Teh transforms the city:

I'd never seen the city in the early morning. At this time of day I was always lying with my filthy blanket over my head, afraid to wake up. Today I've been out among the newsboys, the men who scrub the streets, and the ox carts bringing in fresh vegetables from the country. I've come a long way from Sun's neighborhood, but with every step I feel more light-hearted. I've always heard that you walk on air when you're in love, but the best part of it is that you walk on the ground, on asphalt. Let me tell you: in the morning the blocks of buildings are like heaps of rubble with lights lighting up inside, and the sky is pink and still transparent, because there's no dust. Let me tell you: you're missing a good deal if you're not in love and you don't see your city at the hour when it gets out of bed like a sober old craftsman filling his lungs with fresh air and reaching for his tools, as the poets say.

higher force. In the epilogue Shakespeare explicitly acknowledges the fact, the truth, of his play as play. But in having his boy actor who played a girl playing a boy seek our applause, he draws our attention to the instability of identity off as well as on stage. He draws us closer to a comic vision of the world which his stage reflects by revealing the illusion as something more, not less, than illusion. The person whom we've seen transformed into first Rosalind, then Ganymede, and who stands before us now dressed as Rosalind but speaking as a boy 'conjures' us in the name of love to be pleased with this play, to accept its ending as we like it. Thus Shakespeare, in insisting on the illusion of his play, most sustains it.

The epilogue to *Szechwan* suits Brecht's play as nicely as Shakespeare's does *As You Like It*. A character – perhaps Shen Teh, perhaps Wang (Brecht is unclear about absolute identity even here) addresses the audience:

Ladies and gentlemen, don't be annoyed  
 We know this ending leaves you in the void.  
 A golden legend we set out to tell  
 But then somehow the ending went to hell.  
 We're disappointed too, struck with dismay  
 All questions open though we've closed our play.  
 Especially since we live by your enjoyment.  
 Disgruntled spectators mean unemployment.  
 It's sad but true, the heavens defend us  
 We're ruined unless you recommend us.  
 Fear may well have blocked *our* inspiration  
 But what's *your* answer to the situation?  
 For love nor money we could find no out:  
 Refashion man? Or change the world about?  
 Or turn to different gods? Or don't we need  
 Any? Our bewilderment is great indeed.  
 There's only one solution comes to mind:  
 That you yourselves should ponder till you find  
 The ways and means and measures tending  
 To help good people to a happy ending.  
 Ladies and gentlemen, in you we trust:  
 The ending must be happy, must, must, must!

Brecht alters Shakespeare's focus ever so slightly – all that the stage is, is part of our world. You want a happy ending on the stage – provide the right context, provide a happy world. 'It is for you to find a way.'

'Shakespeare,' Brecht wrote, 'never flew in the air.'<sup>38</sup> Brecht brings Shakespeare into the world of airplanes, Einstein, Heisenberg, and Marx. One might say of his adaptations of Shakespeare what David Young has

said of Shakespeare's adaptation of Lodge, author of *Rosalynde*, the immediate source for *As You Like It*: 'The point is that [he] does not seem to have been bent on demolishing or ridiculing his source, but to have set about perfecting it, releasing it "to liberty and not to banishment".'<sup>39</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, iv.ii.52-3. All Shakespearean passages are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1974).
- 2 As quoted by R.B. Parker in 'Dramaturgy in Shakespeare and Brecht,' *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 32 (1963), 229.
- 3 John Willett, ed and trans, *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang 1964), p 20.
- 4 As quoted and translated by John Fuegi in *The Essential Brecht* (Los Angeles: Hennesse and Ingalls 1972), p 23.
- 5 Willett, p 189.
- 6 See, for example, Helge Hultberg's oversimplified argument against the importance of Shakespeare as a model for Brecht in 'Bert Brecht and Shakespeare,' *Orbis litterarum*, 14 (1959), 89-104. For a much more balanced discussion see Bernard Dort, 'Brecht devant Shakespeare,' *Revue d'histoire du théâtre*, 17 (1964), 69-83. For an essay which explicitly cautions us against resolving the ambiguity of Brecht's 'love-hate' relationship with Shakespeare see John Fuegi, 'Shakespeare's Haunting of Bertolt Brecht,' *Modern Drama*, 15 (1972), 291-303.
- 7 For a succinct discussion of what the term 'formalism' has meant to Brecht criticism see Claude Hill, *Bertolt Brecht* (Boston: Twayne 1975), p 144.
- 8 Max Spalter, *Brecht's Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins 1967), p 3.
- 9 Rodney T.K. Symington, *Brecht und Shakespeare* (Bonn: Bouvier 1970), p 23.
- 10 As quoted by Symington, pp 80-1. For a discussion of Ihering and his importance to the modern German theatre in general, Brecht in particular, see pp 25-56, 80-3.
- 11 Willett, pp 6-7, 30.
- 12 Hill, pp 41-3.
- 13 For an extended discussion of Brecht's adaptation of Marlowe see Fuegi, *The Essential Brecht*, pp 26-48.
- 14 See Richard Beckley, 'Adaptation as a Feature of Brecht's Dramatic Technique,' *German Life and Letters*, 15: 1 (1961-2), 275-7.
- 15 Fuegi, *The Essential Brecht*, p 36.
- 16 See Parker, p 233.
- 17 Fuegi, *The Essential Brecht*, p 27.
- 18 Symington, pp 86, 88-9.
- 19 Symington provides the German text of Brecht's prologue and epilogue to