Bertolt Brecht's Message in "The Good Woman of Setzuan"

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Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was one of the most influential poets and playwrights of the 20th century. Brecht was already a famous dramatist and theater director (Dramaturg), when he left his native Germany soon after Adolf Hitler assumed power in 1933. By 1941 he had settled in the U.S., where he became a Hollywood screenwriter. Although not a member of any political party, Brecht was a self- described socialist and a militant atheist. His play The Good Woman of Setzuan—which was completed in 1941 when the author was already an exile in Hollywood—satirizes religion (symbolized by the "three gods") for preaching high moral values like "virtue" and "goodness" to ordinary people (like the prostitute Shen Te) but doing practically nothing for the genuine improvement of society. In his other masterpiece Life of Galileo (a play about the clash between science and religion, first staged in Switzerland in 1943), he famously criticized religion, insisting that "The aim of science is not to open the door to infinite wisdom, but to set a limit to infinite error," with "error" specifically meaning organized religion. So did another of his famed dramas, Mother Courage and Her Children (1941), as well as his popular musical comedy The Threepenny Opera (1928). In Life of Galileo, Brecht attacks the Christian religion ("Unhappy the land where heroes are needed"), especially the Roman Catholic Church, whose Holy Inquisition persecuted Galileo (and even his daughter) by threatening him with deadly torture and with burning him alive—like fellow Italian scientist Giordano Bruno who was burned at the stake in the Vatican for supporting astronomer Nicholas Copernicus' heliocentric model of our solar system.

In the years of the Cold War and the infamous "Red Scare," Brecht was blacklisted by Hollywood's movie studio bosses and interrogated by the FBI and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Along with forty-one other well-known Hollywood writers, directors, actors and producers, he was subpoenaed to appear before HUAC in September 1947 to testify about the alleged "Communist infiltration" of Hollywood. Although he was one of nineteen subpoenaed witnesses who had publicly vowed that they would refuse to appear before HUAC, Brecht eventually testified under oath that he was not and had never been a communist party member. The remaining "unfriendly" witnesses, the so-called Hollywood Ten, refused to testify or "name names," so they were sentenced to various prison terms for contempt of Congress. The day after his coerced testimony, 31 October 1947, Brecht fled back to Europe, as Charlie Chaplin and other Hollywood celebrities had already done or were about to do. In 1949, he moved to East Berlin where along with his wife and collaborator, actress Helene Weigel, he formed his so-called "epic" or "non-Aristotelian" theater company (the world-famous Berliner Ensemble).

The first thing to mention about this emphatically political play is that the English translation of its title is rather misleading. In German, the title is Der gute Mensch von Sezuan—"The Good Person of Setzuan"—and thus the principle of "goodness" is completely gender-neutral in the German original. First performed in 1943 at the Zürich Schauspielhaus in Switzerland, the play takes place in the city of Setzuan, capital of the Chinese province of Setzuan. On the outskirts of the city, the water carrier Wang is awaiting the much rumored arrival of three important gods. He wants to be the first to greet and welcome them to his city. When the gods arrive, they ask Wang to find a place for them to stay for the night. They are exhausted, having traveled many a mile in search of good people who still live

by their moral precepts. Instead, the gods have found only greed, evil, dishonesty, and selfishness across the land. The same turns out to be the case in Setzuan: no one will take them in, as no one has the time or means to care for others—no one except the poor young prostitute Shen Te, who can turn away no one who is in need.

Patriarchal Capitalism

The Good Woman of Setzuan suggests that a society's morality is determined by its economic system. This theme is introduced in the play's Prologue. When Shen Te complains to the gods, "But everything is so expensive, I don't feel sure I can do it!," the second god responds, "That's not our sphere. We never meddle with economics" (Prologue.133-134, 145). However, the first god immediately contradicts him and in the end they all agree to give her some money to make it easier for her to be good to others. Their generosity ironically blurs the distinction between the morality of goodness that the three gods are searching for on earth and the "morality" of just bribing people to be good.

But the small tobacco shop, which is the three gods' gift of gratitude to Shen Te for having hosted them when everybody else in her home town had turned them down, begins to fail because she is, paradoxically, too good and kind-hearted, generously spending her business profits on all kinds of greedy and dishonest beggars and scroungers. To avoid bankruptcy, Shen Te invents a male alter ego, the heartless and selfish but financially efficient and prosperous "cousin" Shui Ta. At first, "cousin" Shui Ta only comes in when Shen Te is desperate but soon, unable to keep up with the business demands made on her, and overwhelmed by the favors she does for others, she has to bring him around for days and sometimes for weeks at a time until he threatens to take over her entire personality. Whereas Shen Te is soft-hearted, loving, and thus vulnerable to swindlers, Shui Ta is cold, cynical, and calculating. Only Shui Ta is fit for the world in which he lives, while she is barely coping with her numerous problems.

In Scene 5, for example, the unemployed pilot Yang Sun is trying to extort three hundred silver dollars from Shen Te by promising to marry the tobacco shopkeeper and take her with him to the national capital Peking. Yang Sun treats the male "cousin" Shui Ta far more honestly and respectfully than he treats Shen Te. He publicly denigrates Shen Te, telling Shui Ta that "Shen Te is a woman: she is devoid of common sense. I only have to lay my hand on her shoulder, and church bells ring" (5.104-105). He openly makes fun of Shen Te, claiming that she is "devoted" to him, "Because I have my hands on her breasts" (5.109). What the gold-digger Yang Sun means is that all he has to do to swindle Shen Te is lie to her that he loves her and promise to marry her ("church bells ring"). Even "cousin" Shui Ta begins to question whether his alter ego Shen Te has a head for business: "Yet her goodness has cost her two hundred silver dollars in a single day: we must put a stop to it" (5.138-139). Its ambiguous German title, Der gute Mensch von Sezuan, makes the play even more

ambivalent about the conflicting consequences from the mixed gender of Shen Te/Shui Ta, implying that only the “man” Shui Ta is a good “businessman,” but definitely not the “woman” Shen Te.

While at first “cousin” Shui Ta appears only intermittently, in the end he completely takes over Shen Te's personality and tobacco business, because he alone can function in the capitalist world which he inhabits—a dehumanizing “rat-race” world of avarice, dishonesty, evil, egotism, and uncompromising cruelty to others. How do the altruistic Shen Te (“The Angel of the Slums”) and her evil alter ego Shui Ta (“The Tobacco King of Setzuan”) feel about the play's political subtext? The core of Brecht's anti-capitalist message is contained in The Song of Defenselessness sung by Shen Te/ Shui Ta: “...Oh, why don't the gods do the buying and selling / Injustice forbidding, starvation dispelling / Give bread to each city and joy to each dwelling? / Oh, why don't the gods do the buying and selling? / 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” (4a.11-18). Scene 4a, which consists of The Song of Defenselessness, demonstrates the theme of patriarchal capitalism. Shen Te sings first with Shui Ta's mask in her hand, then sings as her “cousin” Shui Ta, with his mask on. The first part of the song is an appeal to the gods, pointing out that “even the gods are defenseless” against the evils of capitalism and asking, “Why don't the gods do the buying and selling”? As Shui Ta, she is even more bitter and cynical: “You can only help one of your luckless brothers / by trampling down a dozen others.”

By this time, poor Shen Te has realized that it is impossible for her to be both good to others and financially successful in the capitalist world in which she is operating. She needs the business skills, acumen and knack for trickery of her “cousin” Shui Ta in order to keep the tobacco shop afloat. In the end, he takes over not only her failing business but her life as well. Under “cousin” Shui Ta's clever and manipulative management, the tobacco shop grows into a big and prosperous corporation. In Scenes 7 and 8, “cousin” Shui Ta invents a new kind of “goodness” for Shen Te by giving paid jobs to the very same deadbeats who had come to expect free handouts from her. Being forced to work to earn his keep in Shu Fu's cabin seems to transform the pilot Yang Sun from “a dissipated good-for-nothing into a model citizen,” as his own mother puts it.

Brecht was a political writer, unashamed of openly preaching to his audiences. His didactic message in The Good Woman of Setzuan is that “being a good person and getting by in this world are mutually incompatible” (Puchner, p. 1053). I personally find the play's anti-capitalist message to be very clear and logically convincing. It is indeed impossible and unrealistic to follow the three gods' demanding and idealistic criteria for being “a good person” and at the same time survive and prosper in our unsentimental and materialistic “dog-eat-dog” world which is governed by capitalism's laws of supply and demand and rational cost-benefit-analysis (profitability), and where “there is nothing unusual about poverty” (Prologue.4-5). A coldly calculating, money-grubbing, and profit-oriented person like “cousin” Shui Ta is unavoidable in our private-enterprise and free-market economy, in which most private wealth tends to accumulate in the hands of a relatively few enterprising and ruthless individuals. As the young prostitute Shen Te regretfully complains to the visiting three gods in the opening scene, “I'd like to be good, it's true, but there's the rent to pay...everything is so expensive, I don't feel sure I can do it!” (Prologue.133-134, 145). That's why people often say, “Nice guys always finish last.” (And if you persist in your irrational folly and

delusions about “goodness,” you will only end up like the tragic heroine Blanche DuBois from Tennessee Williams' drama Streetcar Named Desire).

A “Parable” About Capitalism

Brecht presents his anti-capitalist message in quite an intriguing and entertaining way—including an engaging musical score and many lively songs. First of all, he employs a traditional didactic genre—the parable which, according to The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is “an allegorical story designed to illustrate or teach some truth, religious principle, or moral lesson.” Secondly, the entire plot is set in an alien, non-European, and almost abstract location—Setzuan, a very distant Chinese province, with which the reader or the audience would be totally unfamiliar—a kind of ”geographic displacement” (Puchner, p. 1052) intended to drive home the allegorical and universal subtext of Brecht's “anti-opera.” Like the parables of the Bible, Brecht's “epic theater” narrative is meant for all seasons and for all people. Thirdly, Brecht uses the Freudian concept of split (multiple) personality, in which the “ego” is splintered into two (or more) distinct and independent parts, each of which becomes predominant and controls human behavior from time to time to the exclusion of the other part(s) of the ego (as vividly depicted in Hollywood's two 1957 mystery dramas The Three Faces of Eve and Lizzie).

Here, in a nutshell, is Brecht's didactic message, with the water carrier Wang complaining to the three gods: “I'm so glad you've come, illustrious ones. It's Shen Te. She's in great trouble from following the rule about loving thy neighbor. Perhaps she's too good for this world” (6a.1-3). By scrupulously observing lofty religious principles (like “Love thy neighbor as thyself”), Shen Te is in danger of losing her small tobacco shop. According to Wang: “She had to call on her cousin again. But not even he could help. I'm afraid the shop is done for” (6a.10-11). There is obviously a contradiction between her (Buddhist/Daoist?) religion's ethical values and the inexorable economic laws of capitalism or, as the play's Commentary puts it, “between the conception of goodness imposed by the goods and the (economic) requisites of the world. It is clear that such a contradiction offers two lines of attack: to get rid of the gods or to get rid of the economic system that does not allow for goodness” (Puchner, p. 1054). It is clear from Scene 9 that Shui Ta has let his ambition for economic success get the best of him. It is not for nothing that he is called “The Tobacco King of Setzuan,” since he has continually and most ruthlessly expanded the small tobacco shop into a huge factory conglomerate. He has converted Shen Te's goodness, which is clearly a financial drain on her business, into hard-nosed misanthropy which has turned her tobacco shop into a capitalist success.

The play ends in a local courtroom, where Shui Ta is accused of murdering (“disappearing”) Shen Te. Shen Te finally reveals her duality to the judges, who are the three gods. The gods bless Shen Te and encourage her to continue to be good to others. The play concludes with their triumphant return to heaven, having justified their earthly mission and themselves, while leaving a distressed Shen Te to her own devices. In their “final judgment” of Shen Te/Shui Ta, the three gods/judges are confronted

with the unfortunate socio-economic circumstances they have inadvertently created on earth but in which they refuse to intervene politically.

At the end, it is the audience which is asked to find a solution to Shen Te's problems. How can a good person come to a good end? What in society might we change to invent a happy ending to this story? With a song, Brecht and the cast of his “non-Aristotelian” epic theater invite the spectators to think with them about this dilemma: “How could a better ending be arranged? / Could one change people? Can the world be changed? / Would new gods do the trick? Will atheism? / Moral rearmament? Materialism? / It is for you to find a way, my friends, / To help good men arrive at happy ends. / You write the happy ending to the play! / There must be, there must be, there's got to be a way” (10.240-247). “Materialism” in line 10.243 refers, of course, to historical materialism, a Marxist philosophy in which Brecht believed even though he was not a Communist. According to historical materialism, a society’s morality is determined by its socio-economic system—that is, whether the main productive forces of our national economy are concentrated in a few private hands (capitalism) or are common public property (socialism).

The theme of historical materialism manifest itself again in Scene 10, when Shu Fu testifies on behalf of the cold-hearted exploiter Shui Ta. Shu Fu tells the gods/judges, “Mr. Shui Ta is a businessman, my lord. Need I say more?” To which the first god answers, “Yes.” Their legal and moral disagreement arises because free-enterprise economics makes no sense to the three gods, as it is not their realm of expertise, after all. But the gods would never interfere with the workings of the private capitalist economy. For Brecht, however, it is ultimately up to us, the people, to change capitalism so that it benefits the many and not just the privileged few.

Conclusion

As the play's Commentary argues, The Good Woman of Setzuan is a "parable" about three gods who come to earth in search of a good person, whose existence could justify their own. In Setzuan, they are put up for the night by the young prostitute Shen Te, so they reward her for her goodness with a large sum of money which enables her to purchase a small tobacco shop. But Shen Te is immediately set upon by a collection of various cheats and swindlers, all claiming a piece of her fortune. She discovers that it is impossible to be good to others and financially prosperous at the same time, so she creates an alter ego to help her keep her tobacco shop. She invents the male “cousin” Shui Ta, who ruthlessly manipulates the system ad well as everybody else in order to protect Shen Te’s ownership of the tobacco shop. Eventually, Shen Te realizes that she cannot survive without Shui Ta's “help,” so he takes over her life and failing business. In order to be an efficient businesswoman capable of getting what she wants from others, Shen Te must “become” Shui Ta, a merciless and exploitative male capitalist.

This issue of gender and patriarchal capitalism comes to the fore in Scene 4, when Yang Sun treats male “cousin” Shui Ta far more respectfully than the way he mistreats and denigrates Shen Te—just because she is a woman! Shui Ta tries in vain to defend his female “cousin” (himself) by saying, “She is a human being, sir! And not devoid of common sense!” However, Yang Sun contemptuously responds, “Shen Te is a woman: she is devoid of common sense.” His misogyny is reminiscent of Norway's exclusively male political and cultural elite of the 19th century who hated the pro-women's rights ending of Henrik Ibsen's play Doll's House (1879) so much that they tried to force him into changing it.

I, for one, don't believe that this manifestly political drama is about the old psychological conflict between the Nietzschean “good and evil.” Brecht's The Good Woman of Setzuan is focused far more on the burning political, social, and economic issues of his day, than on everyday ethics and psychology. The play's Commentary says as much: “Brecht employs a split character to show not psychological conflict but social conflict” (Puchner p. 1053). If there is indeed the potential in everyone to be both good and bad, then being either good or bad will depend upon the societal conditions we all live in. As happens often in Brecht's “non-Aristotelian” political theater, the audience/reader is asked in the Epilogue to find a solution to the crucial questions raised by this allegorical play.

Works cited

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