

March 1979

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Recommended Citation

Swaffar, Janet K. (1979) "The Ethics of Exploitation: Brecht's Der gute Mensch von Sezuan," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 13: No. 3, Article 10.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol13/iss3/10>

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The Ethics of Exploitation: Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*

Janet K. Swaffar

Depending on their respective persuasions, critics have been disposed to interpret *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* as a statement about the impossibility of ethical behavior in a venal world or, alternatively, as an overt critique of capitalism, an illustration that virtue cannot be practised until an inhuman economic system has been superseded. However, the play can also be viewed as a very different kind of indictment: an indictment of an absolute value system and of individuals who persist in adhering to an immutable morality. In short, it is possible to argue that in Brecht's *Sezuan*, the emphasis is on the inadequacy of the moral rather than the social system. *Sezuan* need not be read as a play about goodness. On the contrary, there are cogent reasons for considering it a Brechtian model illustrating the fallacy of an absolute concept of goodness. The closing scene of the play, in demonstrating an irresolvable conflict between Shen Te's moral aspirations and her material survival can be read as a *prima facie* case: she cannot begin to solve her problems until she eliminates her double standard. She must adopt an ethical position which she can acknowledge publicly. This vantage point resolves several interpretative dilemmas which have faced critics heretofore, not the least of these being the embarrassment of a seemingly sentimental, if not sententious Brechtian drama.¹

The distinction is a simple shift in emphasis. Heretofore, in Europe and the United States, *Sezuan* has been perceived as a parable about virtue. Shen Te's dilemmas have been analysed as inevitable and tragic. Critics have focused on her suffering, comparing her to Christian martyrs and even Christ himself² or relegating her to the role of the noble prostitute³.

I am suggesting that the play is a parable about the absurdity of adherence to an unrealistic standard of virtue. Such a shift in critical point of view significantly alters the implications of the play, leading to a reevaluation of the heroine's behavior and character. Contrast scholarly admiration for Shen Te's character with the wrongdoing and suffering for which she is actually responsible: she encourages her lover Sun to bribe government officials; the old couple risk and ultimately lose their home; the carpenter with starving children goes unpaid for his work, and Wang is left without a legal witness for the injury done to him.

This "bad" or "selfish" aspect of the heroine's character is commonly excused as an inevitable result of corrupting social circumstances⁴ which force her to resort to two entirely separate personalities. Critics and scholars have stressed the duality of the two separate entities, the "good" Shen Te and the "bad" Shui Ta. Brecht himself was concerned with the opposite impact: presenting the discrepant roles in terms of a single personality. In his notes on *Sezuan*, Brecht repeatedly stresses the need for merging Shen Te's and Shui Ta's character to avoid separation and stereotyping. Thus he writes in August of 1940: "Überhaupt sind die Elemente *gut* und *böse* für ein realistisches Verkleidungsstück zu sehr isoliert. Es müsste wohl Entgleisungen geben."⁵

Unlike Brecht, even those critics who perceive Shen Te as a less than perfect model of virtue criticize her for failing to live up to her aspirations rather than for having those aspirations. The scholarly mainstream tacitly accepts Shen Te's naive concept of virtue as a proper standard of goodness.

I submit that this assessment is a distortion of Brecht's intent; that the play should be viewed as an implicit condemnation of the ethical absolutes to which Shen Te aspires. This thesis is supported by two kinds of evicence: first, Brecht's own statements concerning a viable ethical system, and second, a comparison of Shen Te with Frau Wolff, the heroine of Gerhard Hauptmann's *Biberpelz*, which demonstrates that both women share similar culpability despite Shen Te's ostensible moral superiority.

As to Brecht's views on ethical systems in the years 1933-1945, his political essays are explicit. Stereotypes of good and evil represent a false ideological base serving to further capitalist aims. For Brecht, the entire value system represented by such terms as "humanist ideals" was an historical phenomenon whose time had come and gone. He viewed so-called historical ethics as a manifestation of capitalist superstructure and hence simply a stage in the evolution of moral standards. Brecht believed that allegiance to "absolute" ideals served to perpetrate the abuses inherent to the capitalist system. By way of illustration, in discussing fascism and capitalism⁶ he writes that before fascism can be destroyed, principles such as "freedom" and "justice" must be discredited, that is, recognized as illusory. Only then can attitudes about the sanctity of private property be modified. For Brecht, abandoning an outmoded system was a prerequisite for social and economic progress. Shen Te illustrates that, in her desire to be humanistically "good," she aspires to a standard of behavior which is anachronistic and, therefore, destructive.

Unmasking such self-destructive aspirations was a primary factor in Brecht's criticism of the German naturalist tradition. It was the failure to challenge ethical apathy which Brecht found to be the major flaw in some of German literature's most progressive works, among them Hauptmann's *Die Weber*. Brecht asserts in his essay "Über den Realismus" that although Hauptmann presented the weaknesses of the competitive system accurately, the impact of the dramas is impaired by their fatalistic conceptual framework. "Der Einfluß der Umgebung auf die Menschen wurde zugegeben, aber nicht, um auf diese den revolutionären Geist zu lenken; die Umgebung trat als Schicksal auf, wurde nicht als von Menschen aufgebaut und von Menschen veränderbar dargestellt" (GW 19. 366).

Brecht condemns Hauptmann because his dramas depict an inviable moral system without recognizing that the abortive remnants of this system actually encourage existing inequities. "Ganz naiv" Brecht writes, "sucht [die naturalistische Literatur] das Bürgertum zu überzeugen [seine] Besitzverhältnisse könnten auch ohne dies Maßnahmen unhumaner Art aufrechterhalten werden, mit mehr Güte, Freiheit, Menschlichkeit. Das Volk wurde wohl derlei Naivitäten, kämen sie hinein, ein wenig komisch finden. Es würde glauben, einer Unterhaltung darüber beizuwohnen, wieviel Unterdrückung nötig sei, um die Ausbeutung aufrechtzuerhalten" (GW 19, 331).

Evidently Brecht was convinced that a frame of reference which criticized social conditions must also critique the value system perpetuating those conditions. Brecht considered societal judgements of good and evil as much a reflection of the historical superstructure as peculiarities of dress or politics. He viewed ethical codes as relative, as products of a given historical context. Just as Marx saw religion as a weapon in the preservation of feudalism, Brecht found the bourgeois counterpart, the veneration of so-called humanist ideals such as those Shen Te has assimilated, the enemy of social progress. In the name of "Güte, Freiheit und Menschlichkeit" he saw inhumanity condoned. Naive adherence to such terminology inhibits change in society's base structure by concealing vital social and economic issues. Brecht's antidote to such obfuscation was to demonstrate the practical fallacy inherent to the terminology; to unmask "Güte, Freiheit und Menschlichkeit" by testing their legitimacy in a specific social context.

The German realist tradition had laid the groundwork for such an investigation. Its hallmark dramas from Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* to Hauptmann's *Vor Sonnenaufgang* depict individuals exploited in the name of decency and higher standards. An essential feature of the *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* is the inability of a Woyzeck or a Helene to successfully combat these standards. Hauptmann's *Biberpelz* represents one of those rare instances where the tables are turned, where the heroine victoriously confronts the system on its own terms as a complex web of self-deception, a vapid system of clichés. Frau Wolff recognizes that belief in honesty and fair play renders others vulnerable, that such convictions blind people to obvious realities. She exploits the rich, not only because they are rich and can afford it, but because she accepts the fact that they, too, acquired their wealth by exploitative means.⁷ Frau Wolff's sole standard of virtue is success: her consistent integrity is the forthright practice of deception.

Brecht depicts in Shen Te many characteristics, attitudes and problems which confront Frau Wolff in Hauptmann's comedy. The core issue in both plays is the same: exploitation as a prerequisite for survival. The female protagonists' modes of dealing with this issue are parallel. Both are successful businesswomen. Both engage in duplicity. Both are gifted in manipulating others for personal gain. Both are well-intentioned and wish to avoid injury to their fellows. There are, however, two significant areas of contrast and inversion in the Brecht play. The first is a contrast in the respective social settings. The second lies in the two women's personality adaptations to the dilemmas which they face.

The charm of *Biberpelz's* social context is that Mother Wolff introduces no adverse effects through her exploitative undertakings. She can operate as a congenial Robin Hood figure who rearranges her social order without disrupting it. Because Mother Wolff operates as the jovial redistributor of wealth in a relatively prosperous community, her activities do not deprive anyone of food, shelter or livelihood. The circumstances in *Sezuan* do not afford this comfortable Robin Hood frame of reference. Both Shen Te's relief measures and Shui Ta's business successes produce existential hardship because dire poverty

exists in *Sezuan*. In contrast to the felicitous outcome of Frau Wolff's deceptions, Shen Te cannot avoid the issue of a conflict between personal and social responsibility.

One major modification then, which Brecht makes when the heroine of Hauptmann's play is contrasted with Shen Te, is to place Shen Te in a situation calculated to exhibit the social repercussions of exploitation which Hauptmann's play had avoided. Whereas in *Biberpelz* there is the clear implication that everyone is getting his just deserts, in Brecht's play it becomes increasingly clear that what people get is not what they deserve at all. In *Sezuan* there is no meting out of reward and punishment in proportion to the deed. Shen Te, for example, can hardly be considered deserving of 1,000 silver dollars in exchange for one night's lodging any more than Wang deserves the loss of his hand because he made a nuisance of himself in the course of trying to earn a living.

The second major inversion by Brecht is the contrast between the single personality of Frau Wolff as opposed to the double personality of Shen Te/Shui Ta. In the context of *Biberpelz*, Frau Wolff operates successfully and appealingly in the guise of one and the same person, whereas Brecht emphasizes with the introduction of the Shui Ta role how unrealistic it is to hope to maintain a compatible combination of selflessness and ruthlessness. Yet withal, the latter role is clearly not a second, autonomous personality. Brecht carefully delineates Shui Ta as a mask of the character Shen Te. Recalling at this juncture Hauptmann's sequel to *Biberpelz*, it is striking that the character distinction between the jovial Frau Wolff and the lachrymose, self-pitying Frau Fielitz of *Der rote Hahn* is so extreme that critics have been hard pressed to recognize any similarity between the two figures. The fact that Brecht merged the plays for the Berliner Ensemble not only reflects a desire to rework their political implications, but also suggests the importance of recognizing that exploitative undertakings lead to drastic modifications in character.

In Brecht's reworking, the Wolff/Fielitz distinction is psychologically motivated. The same assertion can be made for his delineation of the heroine in *Sezuan*. Not only do Brecht's notes attest to the single character theory, but evidence in the play does also. Shen Te's recurring acknowledgements of her discomfort in the Shui Ta role—both to the audience and her confidante Madame Shin—point to intentional duplicity, not to a schizoid or split personality. This distinction is essential if *Sezuan* is to be interpreted as a critique of an inadequate moral structure rather than a tragic irresolvable dilemma.⁸

Interpreted as a "split personality," Shen Te cannot be held accountable for Shui Ta. Such terminology implies that the individual has no awareness of and is unable to deal with his or her alter ego. Shen Te's expressed concern, throughout the play, about being discovered in the guise of Shui Ta precludes such exoneration. Only a mentally competent individual is capable of acknowledging discrepant role behavior. Her own awareness renders the Shen Te/Shui Ta distinction a matter of one person consciously assuming two roles, not one person unconsciously alternating between two separate personalities.

When Shen Te is seen as a responsible single character, the focus of critical

concern can be upon her problem rather than identification with an ostensibly tragic situation. Shen Te's vacillation between the two ethical extremes of self-interest and altruism can be viewed as Brecht's criticism of a moral impossibility. Role vacillation becomes the concrete image of the play's thesis: namely that the double standard won't work.

Brecht's point is illuminated when the behavior of *Sezuan's* heroine is viewed as a revision of the ethical stance of Frau Wolff and Frau Fielitz. Both heroines are exploiters, Frau Wolff overtly, Shen Te inadvertently. Frau Wolff's sole ethic is blatant deception of others in her own interest and, as Frau Fielitz illustrates in *Der rote Hahn*, such behavior corrupts. Shen Te's double ethic necessitates self-deception as well as deception of others. As a result she is totally ineffective.⁹ She both victimizes and is victim of her social order because she equated the wrong terms: goodness with naivete, badness with self-interest.

Contrasted with Hauptmann's heroine, Shen Te demonstrates that an inviable ethical consciousness has consequences as destructive as Frau Wolff's unabashed improbity. A morality at odds with personal survival only compounds the failings of an inadequate social system. The elimination of Shen Te's problems must commence with adherence to a consistent, practicable ethic, one which can be acknowledged publicly and privately. In this respect *Sezuan* is an instance of a central theme in Brecht's work: the necessity for a new consciousness based on productive non-exploitative self-interest, a consciousness which can supplant absolute, abstract values with a feasible synthesis between individual and community well-being.

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NOTES

¹Reviews of a German performance of 1972 illustrate this problem aptly. Georg Henzel found the program quotation from Thomas Aquinas "Zu einem tugendhaften Leben ist ein gewisses Maß von Komfort nötig" representative because "Mehr steht auch im Guten Menschen von Sezuan nicht." Quoted from *Neue literarische Welt*, November 25, 1972, p. 7.

²Dietrich Meinert, "Die Problematik der Nachfolge Christi in der Gegenwart in der Darstellung von Gerhart Hauptmann's *Der Narr in Christo Emanuel Quint* and Bertolt Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*," *Acta Germanica*, II (1968), 35-53. Wilhelm Fahlbusch, "Der entfremdete Mensch: Eine Studie zu Bert Brechts 'Der gute Mensch von Sezuan,'" *Monatsschrift für Pastoraltheologie zur Verteilung des gesamten pfarramtlichen Wirkens*, 48 (1959), 39-47.

³Shen Te, with her understanding of 'goodness' as an everreadiness to give all of herself unreservedly and at all times, stands in the tradition of noble prostitutes from Zola to Sartre," Ernst Loeb, "Sartre's *No Exit* and Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 22 (1961) p. 290.

⁴Fritz Henneberg enunciates this position as follows: "Das Stück 'Der gute Mensch von Sezuan' diskutiert die Frage, ob die Schlechtigkeit der Menschen charakterlich oder gesellschaftlich begründet ist. Die Antwort bleibt offen, aber nur scheinbar; der Zuschauer findet sie: nicht verdirbt der schlechte Charakter die Welt, sondern die schlechte Welt den Charakter," quoted from *Materialien zu Brechts 'Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*," ed. Werner Hecht (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1968), p. 145.

⁵Quoted from *Materialien*, p. 14.

⁶Bertolt Brecht, [Faschismus und Kapitalismus] *Werkausgabe edition suhrkamp, Gesammelte Werke in 20 Bänden* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1967), 20, 188-189. Subsequent references to this edition will occur by volume and page number in the body of the text.

⁷Gerhart Hauptmann, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Hans-Egon Hass (Frankfurt a.M.: Propyläen, 1966), 1, 501.

⁸Walter Sokel's view that Shen Te's situation is tragic rests on the assumption that, like Puntilas, her dual roles are manifestations of truly schizoid behavior. "In *Puntila* the relationship between the split personality and tragedy differs only slightly from that in *The Good Woman of Setzuan*." "Brecht's Split Characters and His Sense of the Tragic" in *Brecht*, ed. Peter Demetz (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1962), p. 131.

⁹Brecht underscores this point by giving his heroine a name which belies her situation. Shen Te means "heavenly effectiveness." "Auf chinesisich bedeutet Shen Te 'göttliche Wirksamkeit'." Anthony Tatlow, "China oder Chima," in *Brecht Heute — Brecht Today*. Jahrbuch der internationalen Brecht-Gesellschaft, Jahrgang 1, 1971, p. 45. In a conversation which took place during the Brecht Symposium in Montreal (Oct. 4-6, 1974) Prof. Tatlow informed me that Shui Ta means "Hochwasser" or "dangerous waters" a translation which further illustrates the ineffectuality of the discrepant roles.