

# Shen te's pursuit of self-interest



Lennox (1978) argues that Brecht was “ unable to see real women in their full dimensions” perhaps due to “ a terror of women like that possessed by many men”. Accepting this, Brecht’s portrayal of women is in terms of stereotypes only slightly modified by his “ political concerns” (ibid). Brecht’s policy of “ making strange” (Williams 1987, pp. 279) is therefore opposed to portrayal of stereotypes, as stereotypes can be defined by their familiarity. Williams (ibid) states that Brecht’s aim was to show men “ in the process of producing themselves and their situations” in keeping with the Marxist theory of history where man “ makes himself”. To assess whether Shen Te represents a weakness in Brecht’s play, then, it must be considered whether she produces herself and her situations or if she conforms to stereotypes. The Good Woman of Setzuan is one of Brecht’s fable plays in which the familiar and simplistic elements of good, evil, justice etc are present but shown in a new way, as “ cases for debate” (Williams 1987, pp. 284). In this mindset, Lennox may be missing the point of the requirements Brecht makes of his spectators to think “ above the flow of the play” (ibid: 279) as the presentation of the familiar (in this case, stereotypes of women) is for the purpose of “ making strange” and presenting the issue for debate. Lennox states that, across Brecht’s work, women are represented in two ways; as either a child-woman or a mother. From this perspective, Shen Te fulfils the mother role, for example by supplying others with rice and shelter. When Shen Te discovers she is pregnant, her selflessness is shown in her promise to the child that she will sacrifice her goodness and be a “ tigress to all others” (Lennox, 1978 pp. 92). Lennox argues that this represents a selfless willingness to sacrifice her defining characteristic (her goodness) to fulfil her mother role. By having Shen Te behave in a stereotypically female way,

Lennox argues that Brecht fails to alienate (or “ make strange” to use Williams’ phrasing) the behaviour of women in the same way as he alienates other human activity. With regards to women, then, Brecht does not regard their problems in the same ways as he does those of society as a whole. Whilst it is a man’s goal to define himself in his situation, it is a woman’s to fulfil her role and Brecht views “ the tragedy of their situation in their incapacity, because of the conditions under which they exist, to perform their roles properly” (Lennox, 1978). As the stereotypical woman, Shen Te struggles to fulfil her mother role because of the conditions (society) in which she exists. However, she differs from the female stereotype by one major exception; Shui Ta. Shen Te may have the problem of being a mother stereotype struggling to perform her role, but as Shui Ta she is seeking to define her situation by the efforts to create conditions in which other people can be good (creating the tobacco factory, providing employment). In political terms, then, Shen Te may fulfil stereotypical gender roles but, as a product of her situation preventing her from successfully fulfilling said role, she seeks to change her situation and does so as a man. The Marxist tradition of a man defining himself (for in creating Shui Ta, he is wholly defined) and his situation is adhered to as Shen Te/Shui Ta represent the struggle to create change. Lennox argues this as a weakness because Brecht does not cause his audience to “ reflect upon the historical causes of sex-linked psychological traits” and so confirms this behaviour as natural. However, this point fails to recognise that Shen Te does not behave normally; she impersonates a man to create changed situations. Such behaviour does not fit with the definition of a stereotype, regardless of its potential for being sexist. Lennox makes many arguments to show Brecht as

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sexist, including some analysis of his personal life, but the aforementioned argument seems unfounded for it can reasonably be argued that Shen Te is an illustration of expected female behaviour rather than an embodiment of that behaviour being in any way natural (for the changing/changeable element of human nature is fundamental to a Marxist perspective of art). Regardless of whether Brecht is sexist or not, Shen Te's representation can be evaluated from the above reasoning as a political strength for those ready to read "above the flow of the play" (Brecht, trans. in Williams 1987, pp. 281). Having the character shown on stage would allow such a critical stance as an audience questions the reasons Shen Te has for changing; Lennox's argument rests on a false analysis of Shen Te and Shui Ta as separate embodiments of human nature. Such an analysis can significantly alter perspectives on the play, as shown in the various translations of the title; The Good Person can be said to indicate the idea of the Shen Te and Shui Ta being separate, The Good Woman to show us that Shen Te acts as Shui Ta rather than becomes him. In this way, splitting the person illustrates how morals and ethics create an incompatibility with the situation of capitalist society that is exemplified in a woman being unable to fulfil a mother role. Given this, Brecht would have had no desire to present Shen Te as adhering to natural laws, but rather as a character confined by society expectations of natural behaviour. Brecht may indeed have been sexist, and Lennox leaves us in no doubt that he was a womanizer. However, whether he chose a woman becoming a man to show us the changeability of human nature or presented us with his sexist view of a normal woman who is exceptional in her ability to think (the inclination to think is what Lennox argues defines the woman in a 1922 Brecht poem as rare and "emancipated") is irrelevant

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because of what he does with the character by showing the audience alternatives to human nature that disregard sex. The argument for Shen Te's representation being a political strength is broadly supported by Zimmerman's (out of print, but partially quoted in Lennox) argument that the play wishes: to show that, under capitalism, the efforts of woman...to realize her qualities can only surface in terms of a 'male principle'...which distorts that realization...to show that the man/woman polarity is simply another ideological instrument of capitalism" and that by merging these values the "polarities can be transcended (Zimmerman 1976 cited in Lennox 1978). Lennox's main criticism of Brecht is that his sexism is not a matter of different preoccupations but "gravely impair[s] his entire conception of human liberation" (Lennox 1978, pp. 84) because he fails to "consider issues involving the liberation of half the human race", but it must be remembered that Brecht does not, in his plays, consider issues but presents them. For example, the epilogue asks spectators to find a way for "good men [to] arrive at happy ends" (Brecht, 1966) rather than Brecht seeking to offer suggestions himself. Ruppert (1976) suggests that the appalling conditions in Setzuan are representative of this fact, citing Esslin's point that: it is irrelevant what [Brecht's] political convictions were outside his work...the truth can be contained only in the concrete action of his plays...but these never give concrete evidence of the feasibility...they are wholly negative attacks on the existing order.(Esslin, cited in Ruppert 1976). This split of Shen Te/Shui Ta is therefore representative not only of the struggle between morals and survival, but also shows a woman struggling in appallingly bad conditions to be good. Even if this is a stereotype desire of women, it works for Brecht in his attempts to attack the existing order; her <https://assignbuster.com/shen-tes-pursuit-of-self-interest/>

final cries of “ help!” as the play ends highlight the tragic in the play as Shui Ta is exposed to be a woman, once again suffering from the expectations of her. Evaluating Shen Te's representation as a political strength means it must now be analysed for possible dramatic weaknesses, and the previous point provides a useful starting point. Shen Te shouts for help at the end of the play, and the empathy this causes was clearly undesirable to Brecht (Bentley notes that the epilogue was only added after the Viennese premiere of the play when Brecht was motivated by misunderstandings of the media). Brecht's aim for spectators to analyse rather than to feel was not therefore fully met by the character of Shen Te and required an epilogue delivered “ out of character” (Bentley in Brecht, 1966 pp. 109). This undesired response may be due to the familiarity of Shen Te, she is not “ made strange” because she is as much of a stereotype mother role as Lennox argues, and therefore was too familiar to the audience and consequently caused them to feel empathy for her at the end. Bentley (ibid) discusses the various options for delivering the epilogue, stating that the actress of Shen Te usually delivers it, but as the actress. This further highlights how the character of Shen Te needs to be disjointed or broken at the end, and so implies an inherent weakness in the character or actions of Shen Te as these are incapable of delivering the desired response alone. That Shen Te fails to pursue self-interest as a female furthers this dramatic weakness as it perpetuates her stereotype as a “ mother role” (Lennox 1978) female; her cries for help at the end show that she has not broken this stereotype and developed as a person, she has not changed because she continues to have the conflict between being good to herself (and now her child) and being good to others. Providing a more emancipated version of a woman who can think and

change may have removed some of this dramatic weakness, for example if Shen Te learnt from her experiences as Shui Ta and became a compromise between the two (e. g. more confident, better at business, but still kind). Instead, she reverts to mother role and this makes it difficult to believe in her character when she cries out for help, because the audience has seen her help herself as Shui Ta. However, lack of believability in characters is not so much of a dramatic weakness for Brecht as it would be for other playwrights. The whole nature of the play is to make the action seem strange to the audience, and while Shen Te may contain certain stereotypical traits, she is not a simple character because of the way Brecht demands she is played. For example, the actress steps out of character to deliver the epilogue, and comes partially out of role to address the audience with asides analysing other characters in the play (" of course, when my small purse was empty, they put me out on the street, and they may be afraid I'll do the same to them." Brecht 1966, pp. 30). In conclusion, Shen Te's inability to change from her mother role can be argued a political necessity to the point of it being a political strength; the division and desperation of Shen Te is representative of the conflict between being good to oneself and being good to others, and this is made starker by the appalling conditions of Setzuan. However, what makes Shen Te work for Brecht politically is also what weakens her dramatically, as shown by the need to add an epilogue to the play. Regardless of whether it was done with sexist intent, the character of Shen Te is highly familiar to an audience despite the various complications (being a prostitute, dressing as a man, ability to think outside the play) Brecht employs. As such, her inability to break from this role can be evaluated as a dramatic weakness, but one that is acceptable given the

added political strength it brings to the play, and a weakness that is redressed when the audience behaves as the spectators Brecht desires them to be by thinking above the flow of the play and analysing the issues; in the case of Shen Te, to think about and analyse the natures of her stereotype/expected behaviour in that situation rather than to feel any empathy or sympathy for the character herself. Word Count: 2, 031

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