

Epic Character Evolution in the Threepenny Opera

Amra Raza

Brecht's method of characterisation is process oriented. It is effected through complex artistic manipulation of the actor-character dichotomy, and a skilful contrivance of relationships between illustrative action, theatrical or performative devices, and irony. The paper will examine the dynamics of Brechtian Epic character evolution in one of his earlier plays, The Threepenny Opera (1928), as a process of association, negotiation and combination.

Any comprehensive study of Brechtian characterisation must take into consideration his demands on actors and acting. In Brecht's notes to the Berlin production of A Man is a Man (1931) he records a new art of acting in which the epic actor should make, "certain events among human beings striking," and "point [to] human beings as part of the environment"¹. The actor must not be, "A single unalterable figure, but rather a constantly changing figure, who becomes clearer, 'through the way he changes'"². The empathic is therefore shifted from emphatic identification to demonstrating socially determined behaviour patterns. Thus the Brechtian actor would aim at comprehensibility in its historical relativity. This is because, "Historical events are unique, based upon events bound up with particular epochs.... Constant development alienates us from the behaviour of those born before us"³. And yet when we share the emotions of people of past ages and classes we participate in universal human interests. In his Essay: The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre (pp.121-9) Brecht drawing an analogy, states that actors should be

like witnesses, required to re-enact faithfully the scene of accident to facilitate a verdict.⁴

The critical evaluations of The Threepenny Opera have mainly focused on explicating Brecht's Marxist inspiration, his use of Epic dramatic form or parody of the Opera, and the bourgeois capitalist epoch. But this paper will explore the complexity of Brechtian characterisation to facilitate readers who may recognise similar techniques or even innovations made in his later plays.

The interactive nature of Brecht's character portrayal is initiated in the Prologue Song of The Threepenny Opera. The 'Moritat of Mackie the Knife' synthesizes two conventional methods of characterisation of showing : (i.e. character determined response) and 'telling' (i.e. narrator manipulated response). The Song identifies materialism as the common motivational denominator characterising the protagonist, the specific 18th Century historical context and the expedient pretentious bourgeois society, simultaneously. Thus, "the shark he has his teeth" becomes a metaphor not only for Macheath, but also Peachum; the survival strategies of the characters in the play; and also the dog-eat-dog competition of capitalist society as we know it today. Another example of Song used for characterisation is Polly's song 'Pirate Jenny', which gives the audience an insight into her adeptness at roleplay – a strategy she will employ when her husband, Macheath goes to prison. Even duets such as 'The I-for-one-Song', emphasize more effectively than dialogue, the discrepancy between past and present behavior patterns of the Peachums.

Nicknaming is another interesting device employed by Brecht for characterisation. We have Money Mathew, Mackie the knife, Hook finger Jacob, Robert the Saw, Wally the Weeper and Tiger Brown. Even Peachum is called 'King of Beggars'. Names are parental determinants but nicknames must be earned. They are not only functionally allocated but also have associations of past social accomplishments or failures. Thus Nicknaming emphasizes 'process' in character creation. The audience must make cognitive connections between socio-historical and motivational forces.

Therefore, a nickname fixes a character and yet allows it the fluidity of audience response.

The secret of Brecht's characters resilience and resourcefulness is in their adaptability. They often play a multiplicity of roles, adapting with fluid veracity like Mother Courage, but in rare cases also result in tragic split personalities as for example Shen Teh in The Good Person of Szechwan. In The Threepenny Opera role play is explored in all its subtleties and complexities: as inherent human nature, as expedient pretence, and even as actors prerogative. Each character has multiple personalities which coexist comfortably. Peachum is the entrepreneur of The Beggar's Friend Firm, the father of Polly and a husband. During the course of the play he becomes a father in law, to and in former on Mackie the knife. He adopts the role of lecturer informing Filch of 5 types of misery to be affected and even assumes the role of actor and director to demonstrate to his employees the art of effective beggary. He displays great business acumen in organising and directing his beggar force during the Coronation, even playing dresser, suitably adjusting a fake arm or lame leg where necessary. Similarly Polly is the " Beggar King's daughter," a " crooks hussy" and " Soho's beauty queen". She is the sentimental lover, but play acts as Jenny the pirate barmaid in the song, and even has to feign toughness in Mackie's absence assuming the role of the leader of gangsters. She plays the roles of bourgeois civility and propriety, a jealous wife, and even an authoritative manager (in her husbands absence). Even Mrs. Peachum is sentimental in her outbursts at her daughters marriage, ruthless and incisively disciplinarian in her management of the beggar firm, and wise in her insight into Mackie's habit of frequenting the whorehouse.

Mackie is also seen executing a variety of roles and role playing. He is the leader of gangsters, a husband to Polly and a son-in-law. He promises sexual gratification to both Lucy and Polly. He is a dangerous criminal, yet Sheriff Browns most loyal childhood friend. Thus it seems that the coherence of a character is created in the dynamic way in which its individual qualities

conflict with each other. In fact Brecht's characters seem to have a public and a private identity which coexist harmoniously. When Sheriff Brown arrives at Mackie's Wedding and the other gangsters express surprise, he clarifies, "I'm here in my private capacity, Mac!"

It seems that instead of viewing character choice as one possibility at the expense of other choices, Brechtian characters in The Threepenny Opera often choose simultaneously all possibilities. The character creates various futures at various times which start a chain reaction of multiple realities. Thus the logical cause effect result sequence of narrative, is broken down. The characters create their multiple futures through multiple choices resulting in an anti narrative sequence which is all the more realistic. Characterisation and reality are seen as interactive and constantly changing.

Interestingly role switching occurs not only with a character but also between characters. Peachum switches roles with Filch to demonstrate the art of begging, Polly switches roles with Mackie to become gangster, leader, and even Sheriff Brown cowers in the prison cage corner as Mackie reprimands him. Out of such roleplay, ironic situations arise which contribute to the characterisation. Peachum's complaint, "My business is too difficult," is ironic because a master exploiter is complaining against exploitation. Macheath's reprimand, "I don't approve of your doing this play acting," to Polly for becoming Pirate Jenny, is ironical coming from a master play actor and deceiver.

The central characters in The Threepenny Opera are multidimensional to facilitate the alienation effect and avoid audience identification. An actor portrays a character who acts out another role and then pretends to be someone else. Thus Polly is an actor, but also character acting as Pirate Jenny, and later assumes the role of gangster leader to direct the group of rogues. The actor playing the character of Peachum would also have to portray Peachum acting as a beggar, and director or producer of the

beggars carnival at the Coronation. This also gives a play-within-the-play effect.

Beast imagery adds to the complexity of Brechtian characterisation. Macheath calls his fellow criminals, "swine", "gutter-rats" and "goal-birds". Jacob is referred to as a "pig" by Macheath, and a "skunk" by Brown. Macheath is called a "shark" and the police force "bloodhounds". These animal names characterise not only the individuals but also the true bestial nature of the society they populate. This technique of using the animal fable element allows The Threepenny Opera to be read as a survival game of "Eat or be eaten", in a predatorial world.

Language is an important Brechtian characterisation device. A character in The Threepenny Opera can often switch styles with the same tenacity of switching roles in a Pinteresque manner. Polly switches from a romantic style of "Whither thou goes, I shall go with thee," to calling her husband, "son-of-a-bitch". And shift in style often signals bourgeois affection as when Mackie is heard cursing on his Wedding, "It's to be just another damed, sad, ordinary, dirty day like any other," and immediately switches to an affected genteel civility as Sheriff Brown enters to whom he says, "I'm delighted you could partake of old Macs wedding breakfast...". Even Ginny Jenny switches from the prophetic and fatalistic style of, "I see a narrow strip of darkness there and a little love...." to colloquial slang, "The coppers were here!"

Within one scene the characters often employ a variety of linguistic strategies as power struggle. In the Attic bedroom of old Bailey (III.ii.) both Polly and Lucy initiate a superficially courteous discourse as Polly says, "I've come to beg pardon..." The tone becomes argumentative and deteriorates into, "Don't talk such tripe... You came here to spy on me." A reconciliatory note creeps in when both realise their common interest, "Have some more? Another cake?"

In fact the way a character sometimes redirects or deflects a message indicates the intensity of conflict. In their only brief

meeting, Peachum informs Macheath of his imminent death to which Macheath replies by complimenting Polly on her widow dress. This linguistic strategy indicates a power struggle at multiple levels: between father and son-in-law, between two offenders of the law and pretenders, and also between bribery and blackmail.

Peachum's character often identifies itself with the Narrative voice. He says, "our judges are totally unbribable, no amount of money can bribe them to dispense justice," and, "I need artists. Today, only artists give people the right sort of shock." But very cleverly the same character often refuses to become an accomplice in the narrators fictional reality. This happens for example when Peachum comments on the irrationality of the messengers arrival at the end of the play saving Macheath from the gallows. He says, "In reality their end is generally bad... and if you kick a man, he kicks you back again". Thus Peachum's character performs a dual function. It acts as a mouthpiece for Brecht and at the same time makes an independent critical assertion, regarding the improbability of the abrupt happy ending of the Brechtian plot.

'Gestus' is another important component of Brecht's characterisation. It refers to, "the total persona the actor creates on stage by way of his physical demeanour, facial expression, vocal utterances, costume..."⁵ Mackie the criminal's white kid gloves are deictic signs which draw attention to his character and make him stand out in a group. But they are also iconic signs of bourgeois affection and are symbolic of pretended innocence too. Polly dressed in bridal white in a stable of stolen furniture indicates the absurdity of her union with a seasoned criminal. In fact she only elicits a compliment about her appearance dressed in "widow's weeds" from her mother and husband at his hanging. This costume as a meta dramatic device, indicates that in perpetual readiness for legal prosecution, widow black would perhaps be more suitable than virginal white for a gangster bride.

The accessories of individual characters are as significant as their costumes, and even produce a kind of framing effect. Peachum carries a bible as a sign of exploitation in the name of

religion. Mackie possesses a hat and stick, even in his prison cell, affecting bourgeois respectability. Even Smith has handcuffs to qualify his position as constable, but since Mackie never wears them, it may indicate that the hands of the law are tied instead of those of the lawless.

Characterisation is also interactively manipulated through 'gestic area' which includes the attitudes characters assume towards one another. Jacob's indifference is evident from his undisturbed reading while his boss is arrested. The whores play draughts and iron clothes giving sexual exploitation a routine work-a-day dimension. Even Macheath writes a cheque to Smith in his cell to keep his handcuffs off, thus distorting bribery to a respectable necessity of business ethics. A type of gestural dialogue, as in silent movies, with placards for subtitles also reveal character attitudes. In Act I sc.i. Peachum points to a large map of London with territorial pride. Filch in reply begs in the name of religion for employment gesticulating to a placard 'SHUT NOT YOUR EYES TO MISERY'. But Peachum refuses, subverting the biblical by pointing to the curtain which reads, 'GIVE AND IT SHALL BE GIVEN TO YOU!.

The Threepenny Opera thus demonstrates theatrical character evolution as an interactive process generated by socio-historical, economic and even political stimuli, producing an equally complex cognitive audience response.

All textual quotations from: The Threepenny Opera by Bertolt Brecht translated by Eric Bentley.

END NOTES

1. Bertolt Brecht. Man is Man: Notes to Berlin production 1931, in Brechts Dramatic Theory by Hans Egon Holthusen, Twentieth Century Views, ed. By Peter Demetz (Prentice Hall, 1962)p.107.
2. Ibid. p. 107.
3. Ibid.p.110.
4. Brecht, Essay: The Street Scene, A basic model for an Epic Theatre,(BT.pp.121.9).
5. Carl Weber, Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble, in The Cambridge Companion to Brecht, ed. by Thompson and Sack,(C.U.P.1994)p.182.