Chinese Orphans and the Social Contract from Swift to Brecht

Joseph Roach

Abstract: In *God, Gulliver, and Genocide: Barbarism and the European Imagination* (2001) and *Swift's Angers* (2014), Claude Rawson returns to a touchstone of his critical practice as first set forth in *Order from Confusion Sprung: Studies in Eighteenth-Century Literature from Swift to Cowper* (1985): "my concern is as much with the ironic energies contained in the assertions of order as the assertion itself." Nowhere are those energies more astringent than in Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729). Taking its cue from Chapter 3, "Killing the Poor: An Anglo-Irish Theme?" from *God, Gulliver, and Genocide*, this essay extends Rawson's Swiftian genealogy of "unsocial socialism" in George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and Bertolt Brecht and applies it to Anglo-Irishman Arthur Murphy's *The Orphan of China* (1753), showing how Murphy's transcultural adaptation, the first of its kind in English, shares a source in the great *zaju* dramas of Yuan Dynasty China with Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944). Like Swift in *A Modest Proposal*, both Murphy and Brecht foreground the social question posed by the unprovided young. By deploying the estrangement-effect of Asian and Caucasian settings and narratives, they defamiliarize the plight of the orphan as ground zero of social-contract theory in the Enlightenment, probing the Chinese originals to elucidate an increasingly urgent ethical dilemma of modernity: the necessity and yet the scarcity of intentional acts of sacrificial altruism on behalf of social unification.

Keywords: orphans; social contract; defamiliarization; Enlightenment; *zaju* drama; adaptation

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> Terrible is the temptation to do good!
>
> —Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948)

The calm of the Modest Proposer, as he advocates cannibalism, on the other

> hand, implies no hope that right will prevail, and presupposes instead a universal solidarity of the wicked.
>
> —Claude Rawson, *Swift's Angers* (2014)

Jonathan Swift, George Bernard Shaw, and Oscar Wilde join together as a trio of fierce compatriots in Chapter 3 of Claude Rawson's magisterial *God, Gulliver, and Genocide: Barbarism and the European Imagination* (2001). Even though the title of the book warns of genocide and barbarism, the chapter heading still shocks: "Killing the Poor." Its interrogative subtitle, however, provokes: "An Anglo-Irish Theme?" (Rawson 183-255) In their astringent versions of an unsocial socialism, the chapter goes on to reveal, Shaw and Wilde emulate the soul-chilling calm of Swift's "Modest Proposer," who would feed his countrymen with the misbegotten offspring of the poor. Killing the poor? Eating their children? Even if the two Anglo-Irish satirical successors to Swift do not adopt his cannibalistic suggestion, they at least harbor vestiges of his murderous plan for reducing excrescent populations. Shaw would have the poor killed because they are unproductive; Wilde, because they are ugly. "Killing the Poor" makes authors we thought we knew well appear very strange again even as it makes unthinkable ideas seem appallingly familiar.[1] This is revelatory literary criticism illuminated by moral imagination.

In tribute to Professor Claude Rawson, therefore, whose extraordinary scholarship stands as an inspirational model for eighteenth-century studies and literary history writ large, I will revisit the question he poses about Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729) as the grim keynote to an "Anglo-Irish Theme," which has ethical implications that resonate far beyond Ireland. At the same time, I also wish to acknowledge and honor another theme, Professor Rawson's own, one that often recurs in his critical thinking. It likewise derives from an only apparently celebratory phrase of Swift's: "Order from Confusion sprung." In those four words, even though the poet makes the couplet that contains them rhyme with "Dung," some might too readily find an assertion of Enlightenment "optimism," but our greatest Swiftian cautions: "my concern is as much with the ironic energies contained in assertions of order as with the assertion itself."[2] Understanding, elucidating, and communicating the constantly

1 Another Anglo-Irishman puts a similarly eliminationist sentiment in mouth of a character in his most famous work: "The truth is you can't drive such creatures away," says the lordly Pozzo of the wretched Lucky: "The best thing would be to kill them." See Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, New York: Grove Press, 1954, 21.

2 See Claude Rawson, *Order from Confusion Sprung: Studies in Eighteenth-Century Literature from Swift to Cowper*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985, ix, quoting a couplet from Swift's *Lady's Dressing Room*: "Such Order from Confusion sprung/Such gaudy Tulips rais'd from dung."

regenerative power of those "ironic energies" have been Professor Rawson's life's work.

If a more humble Hibernian author might be nominated to make the trio of Swift, Shaw, and Wilde into a more charitable quartet, I would modestly propose Roscommon-born Arthur Murphy (1727-1805). A late and reluctant convert to Anglicanism, the Jesuit-educated playwright, biographer of Fielding, Johnson, and Garrick, and apologist for Lord Bute brings a different but complementary perspective to the ethnological question about the Irish response to the ethical dilemma of surplus populations. He does so by changing the locale to China and foregrounding the figure of the orphaned child. In *The Orphan of China* (written 1753, premiered 1759), Murphy offers his tragic version of Ji Junxiang's thirteenth-century *zaju* drama *The Orphan of Zhao*. He does so by dramatizing the moral pressure exerted by the claims of dispossessed children on the consciences of those who are not their kin. Although theatre historians typically characterize his efforts as a translation of Voltaire's *L'Orphelin de la Chine* (1753), Murphy minimized the dependence of his adaptation on that of the *philosophe*.[1] But the questions raised by both Voltaire's and Murphy's versions do not confine themselves to the literary relations of the mid-eighteenth century. In "Killing the Poor," Professor Rawson contrasts Shaw's Swiftian critique with Bertolt Brecht's (Rawson 194-195, 242). By putting forward *The Orphan of China*, I want to explore that suggestion further by showing the ways in which Murphy's tragedy anticipates the "ironic energies" of Brecht's epic-theatre *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (*Der kaukische Kriedekris* 1944), itself an adaptation of *The Chalk Circle*, a *zaju* drama by Li Qianfu.

Both the crypto-Catholic Anglo-Irishman and the German Marxist turned to the theatre of the Yuan Dynasty to remake classical Chinese masterpieces into contemporary social dramas. For the Jesuit-educated, French-speaking Irish expatriate with a global world view, the Chinese original had philosophical as well as theatrical value. "Enough of Greece and Rome," William Whitehead's Prologue to *The Orphan of China* exclaims, commending Murphy for bringing "Confucius' morals to Britannia's shores." Such a departure represented a radical break from the Christianized norms of neoclassical drama. It also offered another contribution to the development of social-contract theory from Hobbes to Locke to Rousseau to Kant. Western philosophy is not the only font of the idea that prosocial cohesion requires sacrifice. In addition to Whitehead's allusion, four different characters

1 See Arthur Murphy, *The Orphan of China, a Tragedy as it is performed at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane*, London: Printed for P. Valiant, 1759, appended "Letter to M. Voltaire." Subsequent references to *The Orphan of China* are given parenthetically.

in Murphy's play cite Confucius by name and paraphrase what they understand to be his teachings. They associate him with "laws founded on the base of public weal" (Murphy 6), invoke his name to plead for mercy in the face of barbarity (Murphy 48), and assert his authority to insist that "the spirit of the laws can never die" (Murphy 66). The echo of Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* (1748) suggests that Murphy, following Voltaire, freely adapts and even reinvents Confucianism to harmonize with the questioning attitudes of the contemporary European Enlightenment.

One of those questions concerned the fundamental organizing principle of human societies, dominant biological kinship, which yielded ground during the eighteenth century to the elective affinities that Goethe called "kinship of choice" (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*). As tribes and dynasties became communities and then nations, representatives by right of election challenged the primacy of kings by right of birth. As patriarchy waned along with bride price and dower, companionate marriages, which principally united couples rather than families, increased at the expense of arranged ones. As traditional extended family ties weakened and urban factory labor supplanted rural cottage industry for large portions of the working classes, the number of imperiled children—neglected, exploited, or discarded—multiplied. The rational brutality of the Modest Proposer's solution reverberates ominously in Thomas Malthus's analysis of the scope of the problem in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798). With Greece and Rome out of the picture, however, where to look for guiding precedents that might point toward more tolerable outcomes?

The Caucasian Chalk Circle also begins with an allusion to the ancient wisdom of China, but with more energic ironies than those of the eighteenth-century tragedy. When asked what play the Georgian farming collective's resident theatre troupe will put on, the Singer in Brecht's framing prologue answers, "A very old one. It is called *The Chalk Circle* and comes from the Chinese." He then touts the currency of the twentieth-century update: "We hope that you will find that the old poet's voice still rings true, even in the shadow of the Soviet tractors. It may be wrong to mix different wines, but old and new wisdom make an excellent mixture."[1] Both Murphy and Brecht thus seek to extract from their source plays more than just engaging stories, although they help themselves to those as well. Each adaptation probes its original to elucidate an increasingly urgent ethical dilemma: the necessity and yet

1 Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. *Collected Plays* Vol. 7, edited by Ralph Mannheim and John Willett, New York: Random House, 1974, 144. Subsequent references to *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* are from this edition and given parenthetically unless otherwise noted.

scarcity of intentional acts of sacrificial altruism on behalf of social unification.

Neither the royal title character of *The Orphan of China* nor the "Noble Child" of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is born poor. But both find themselves dispossessed and vulnerable in a perilous world. Both ultimately owe their lives to figures of great rarity in human affairs: truly self-sacrificing benefactors who act not on the basis of blood kinship but rather on that of an implicit social contract. Confronting the Hobbesian war of all with all at its ultimate ethical vanishing point, *A Modest Proposal* devastates the idea of the social contract even as it makes a final appeal to those who still might hold out hope for the possibility of one. The plight of both Murphy's and Brecht's Chinese orphans reanimate the disturbing issues surfaced by Swift's most mordant satire, except that the murderous proposition in the two plays threatens only one symbolic character. In both plays a noble child is orphaned by a coup d'etat. To escape death at the hands of a merciless new regime, he must be hidden and protected. But an insidious question quickly arises in the hardened hearts of the adults who comprise the society around him: What good is he to anyone now?

In Murphy's *The Orphan of China*, two self-sacrificing parents, the "mandarin" Zamti (played at the opening by David Garrick) and his wife Mandane (Mary Ann Yates), secretly adopt the orphaned royal infant, whose true name is Zaphimri, in order to conceal him from the invading Tartars, whose ferocious leader, Timarkan, brooks no sovereign rivals. Zamti and Mandane solemnly vow to pass Zaphimri off as their own child under the name of Etan. Completing the deception, they send their own infant son off to Korea to be raised in secret under the name of Hamet. Twenty years pass, and both boys grow into exemplary young men unaware of their real identities. When Hamet returns in the midst of the all-out Tartar reign of terror, he is mistaken for the royal Zaphimri. This misidentification puts at risk either his life or that of his clandestinely adopted brother if the truth comes out. For one son to live, the redundant one must die. But which one is which? The public-spirited Zamti persuades Mandane to renew their vow to protect Zaphimri's secret at any cost, even if it means their natural child's death. In a ritually formalized duet, they kneel piously to pledge their fidelity to the sacrificial pact (Murphy 7-8). But as the violent tyranny closes in around them, neither father nor mother can easily keep such a terrible vow. After several protracted scenes of tormented indecision, Zamti concludes that he must sacrifice his own child to preserve the life of the royal heir, and so he urges his wife:

> Then make with me one glorious effort,
> And rank with those, who, from the first of time,

In fame's eternal archives stand rever'd,
For conqu'ring all the dearest ties of nature,
To serve the gen'ral weal. (Murphy 33)

The father thereby abjures blood kinship and affirms the social contract that obligates the parties to sacrifice individual interests to the common good. As both birth mother and adoptive mother, however, Murphy's Mandane cannot be reconciled, and despite her vow she finds herself in the center of her own chalk circle, metaphorically speaking, pulled from both directions, unable to let go left or right, tearing her heart asunder. Rather than sacrifice either child, she takes her own life. Subjected to torture, Zamti dies slowly of his wounds without disclosing the secret. Then Timarkan, his latent humanity touched by the nobility the parents' sacrifice, lets both Chinese orphans live, enforcing by fiat a revolutionary version of the social contract as the final curtain falls. Reducing plausibility and risking unintended irony, Murphy stops short of full poetic justice in the wake of these sacrifices, but he offers instead a certain measure of poetic hope.

The dilemma in Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* is similarly excruciating. The Noble Child has been abandoned in the panic during a palace coup. The self-sacrificing Grusha, a kitchen maid, ill-advisedly takes pity on him, and at great risk to herself, she saves his life by passing him off as her own baby. After Grusha has given up every chance of her own happiness to raise the infant in safety, however, the birth mother returns to claim him. Such a fable has roots as deep as story-

Figure 1 *The Chalk Cycle*, an adaptation of Li Qianfu's *The Chalk Circle*, Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and the protracted Sino-American custody battle over Anna May He (1999-2015), presented by the Music and Theater Arts Department, MIT, devised and directed by Claire Conceison (2018) Photo: Claire Conceison

telling itself: two women quarrel over their maternal rights to a child; deadlocked, they put their dispute before a wise judge; the judge devises a clever test—put the child under some threat of harm, as Solomon did with his raised sword, and the true mother, presumably the birth mother, will reveal herself (1 Kings 3: 16-18)—or so the story goes. Li Qianfu stages the Chinese version of the tale as *The Chalk Circle*. Told that the one who pulls the child out from inside a chalk circle will win possession, the birth mother proves herself to be the true one by letting go of the child—love's wishbone—while her spurious rival keeps yanking on the boy's arm. Brecht's version, however, makes a profound change to the plot of both the Biblical and Chinese originals: the *adoptive* mother lets go first.

Underlying both Mandane's and Grusha's dilemma is the push and pull of natural versus adoptive parenthood, highlighted by a growing sense that there is a self-evident obligation mandating collective solutions for the problem of the unprovided young. While no actual contract dared stipulate the impossible terms offered by Swift's Modest Proposer, others ranged from bleakly utilitarian to benignly philanthropic. The highly visible project of London's Foundling Hospital, for instance, founded in 1739 by Thomas Coram and dedicated to raising and educating deserted children, embraced both utility and philanthropy. The foundling girls it saved prepared for domestic service while the boys trained for the navy or merchant marine. In "Coram's Fields," the figure of orphan, redeemed and made useful to society, thus emerged as a moral touchstone. Order, it was sincerely hoped and charitably expressed, might spring from intolerable confusion. But there were always more foundlings than places, and admission discreetely favored the babies of unwed mothers from good families who could donate generously in recompense for the service.

At the same time and not coincidently, a growing number of authors made ambitiously productive use of orphans in literary representations of social life: Defoe's Moll Flanders is a fostered infant; Fielding's Tom Jones, "a Foundling;" Haywood's Betsy Thoughtless, orphaned; Burney's Evelina, unacknowledged; Austen's Jane Fairfax, bereft of both mother and father; ditto the whole chorus of orphans protected by Walpole's Countess of Narbonne, the mysterious mother whose intentional incest with her son adds an extra frisson to the utmost extremity of dramatized kinship relations unrivaled even by Sophocles (Nixon 23-26). "To have lost one parent may be considered a misfortune," Wilde's Lady Bracknell scolds the foundling hero of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), which reprises the Oedipus plot of self-discovery while making a joke of the kind of artfully articulated insensibility epitomized by the Modest Proposer, "to have lost both looks like carelessness" (Wilde 70). Despite her Ladyship's disapprobation,

however, more generous sentiments historically prevailed in eighteenth-century drama if not in life. In the paradigmatic "she-tragedy," *The Orphan* (1680), for instance, Otway's Monimia, despite her undeniable carelessness, extracted sympathetic tears from audiences for more than century.

In popular culture, those tears became a river. Another eminent Anglo-Irishman, Oliver Goldsmith, is credited as the likely author of the enduringly popular *History of Little Goody Two Shoes* (1765). This masterpiece of children's literature adumbrated a story type worthy of Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928): facing the cruel world apparently alone, the parentless child struggles bravely and eventually finds happiness. But the orphan child is not entirely alone. Success often depends on timely interventions by benign agents such as Fairy Godmothers acting *in loco parentis*. Let the Fairy Godparent, therefore, stand in hypothetically for the wished-for efficacy of the social contract. And in the spirit of Propp, let the gates of literary judgment swing wide to admit more of the kind of stories that most people want to read or hear told repeatedly. Heathcliff and Jane Eyre are both orphans, as are Quasimodo, Cosette, and Topsy, along with an apparently unending parade of waifs in Dickens, led off by David Copperfield, Oliver Twist, Pip, and Estella. While not for a moment forgetting George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke, let it be recalled that Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, Anne of Green Gables, Mowgli, Peter Pan, and Heidi are orphans, but no more so than Harry Potter, Frodo Baggins, and Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Among


THE
HISTORY
OF
Little GOODY TWO-SHOES;
Otherwiſe called,
Mrs. MARGERY TWO-SHOES.
WITH
The Means by which ſhe acquired her Learning and Wiſdom, and in conſequence thereof her Eſtate; ſet forth at large for the Benefit of thoſe,
Who from a State of Rags and Care,
And having Shoes but half a Pair;
Their Fortune and their Fame would fix,
And gallop in a Coach and Six.
See the Original Manuſcript in the *Vatican* at *Rome*, and the Cuts by *Michael Angelo*. Illuſtrated with the Comments of our great modern Critics.
LONDON:
Printed for J. NEWBERY, at the *Bible* and *Sun* in St. *Paul's Church-yard*, 1765.
[Price SIX-PENCE.]
Little Goody Two Shoe

Figure 2 *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes*

folkloric protagonists, the parentally bereft include Snow White, Rapunzel, and (for all practical purposes) Cinderella. Among comic-book characters and action heroes, Superman, Captain America, Spiderman, Batman and Robin remain as out of touch with their birth parents as Little Orphan Annie. And let the poignant truth be disclosed to everyone as adulthood approaches, Santa Claus is just another name for the orphaned St. Nicholas. Almost all these imaginary orphans in one way or the other make good. Such wish-fulfilling outcomes, which in each case follows many trials and tribulations, salve a modern anxiety of conscience that makes the sharp edge of Swift's *A Modest Proposal* cut to the bone and into the marrow.

Western antiquity has no comparable assembly of parentless children in myth or literature. Even in the sanguinary *Iliad*, for instance, Homer features bereaved parents while ignoring what must have been a multitude of orphans, except perhaps, in a highly technical sense, Athena. The *zaju* orphans of Yuan China, however, spring up not fully armed but desperately imperiled. Whitehead rightly foregrounds Murphy's priority in bringing them to Britain along with the outline of a practical philosophy for preserving their lives. The playwright dramatizes that philosophy by repeatedly staging voluntary offers of vicarious sacrifice. Zamti and Mandane promise to surrender their own child if necessary to "humanize the world" (Murphy 15). Quoting Confucius, Hamet, believing at that point that he is Zamphiri, volunteers to die for his people (Murphy 27-29). Later, Zamphiri (formerly Etan) gives himself up to Timarkan to save Hamet (Murphy 70). The vicarious sacrifice of Zamti and Mandane gives *The Orphan of China* its tragic ending, and it also gave Garrick the opportunity to indulge in one of his specialties, a tear-jerking dying scene surpassed in protracted detail only by the one he wrote to insert into his performance as Macbeth, which choreographer Jean-Georges Noverre needed two printed pages to notate in *Lettres sur la danse, et les ballets* (1760) (Noverre 84-85).

Such effusions of eighteenth-century sentimentalism might seem worlds apart from the hard-bitten skepticism of Bertolt Brecht, whose Swiftian art of excoriation spat out envenomed parables of systemic corruption. Modernist priorities of style and topical reference certainly do differ after two-hundred years: "Petroleum," Brecht famously said, "resists the five-act form" (Brecht, "On Form and Subject Matter" 30). The cost-benefit dramatization of the social contract in *The Orphan of China*, however different generically and tonally, is not a world apart ethically. On the contrary, like the Enlightenment itself, Brecht's Marxist theatre pierced the darkness of his satirical misanthropy with an occasional beam of light from his meliorist hopes for progress as the historically inevitable outcome of class struggle. Brecht's Enlightenment descended from the original eighteenth-century one in

an even more explicit way. The plays of Diderot, Lessing, Gay, and Farquhar, which he admired as examples of "bourgeois revolutionary aesthetics," proved to his satisfaction that there was no necessary conflict between "entertainment and instruction" (Brecht, "On Experimental Theatre" 131). They confirmed that the popular theatre could serve class interests in the cause of revolutionary change. Translated in collaboration with Brecht by Elisabeth Hauptmann and supplied with a new score by Kurt Weill, John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* of 1728 became *The Threepenny Opera* (*Die Dreigroschenoper*) of 1928 and then the *Threepenny Novel* (*Dreigroschenroman*) in 1934, which repurposes the character of highwayman-gangster Macheath into a real-estate tycoon and investment banker. Moreover, Brecht adapted George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* of 1706 as *Drums and Trumpets* (*Pauken und Trompeten*) for the Berliner Ensemble in 1955. He specifically names Diderot and Lessing as his progenitors in "On Experimental Theatre," his generative lecture on the Epic Theatre delivered in Stockholm in 1939, and elsewhere he proposed the founding of an international "Diderot Society," dedicated to the experimental advancement of knowledge about the theatre and modeled on scientific bodies such as those that share research in physics and chemistry (Parker 353). Lessing's enlightened *Nathan the Wise* (1779), with its parable of the disputed magic ring and the true paternity of the righteous, may have been Brecht's supplementary source for *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (White 149).

The prime connection between Murphy and Brecht, however, resides in their similar dramatizations of the social contract and its cost to the altruists who suffer in its performance. As with Murphy's self-sacrificing Zamti and Mandane, Brecht's agent of uplift in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is the fairy-godparent-like Grusha, whose only magical power is selflessness. When she happens on the son and heir of the Governor of the province of Gruzinia by chance, he has just been effectively orphaned by the assassination of his father and desertion by his mother, his nurse, his physicians, and all the other servants and guards amidst the chaos of a palace coup. Now he lies unprotected and uncared for on the ground. The cynical Cook, before she flees in the general panic, gives Grusha some practical if hard-hearted advice (as Brecht's cooks tend to do): "They'll be hunting him more than his mother. He's the governor's heir. Grusha, you're a good soul, but you are not very bright. Take it from me, if he had leprosy it couldn't be worse. Just save your skin." But Grusha can't quite bring herself to abandon the sleeping infant to its fate and flee along with everyone else. "He hasn't got leprosy," she says with guileless obstinacy. "He's looking at me. He's somebody" (Brecht 158). Understandably fearful and conflicted, Grusha starts to go, but then, unable to resist the terrible

temptation, she returns with a piece of cloth to wrap the child against the cold. She tries again to leave, but imagining the child crying for hunger when he wakes, she goes back in the still-smoldering palace and returns in the gathering twilight with a lamp and some milk. As she settles in for the night to watch over the child until morning, the Singer, the onstage narrator of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, exclaims "*in a loud voice*" the line that gives Brecht the thesis for his play, "Schrecklich ist die Verfürung zur Güte," or "Terrible is the temptation to do good!" (160 / *Der kaukasiche Kreiderreis* 116)

Following the aphoristic German sentence word for word, literal translators offer "Terrible is the temptation to goodness." Others turn a happier prepositional phrase with "Terrible is the temptation of goodness." Fredric Jameson changes one word for emphasis: "*Hideous* is the temptation of goodness" (Jameson 173). Ralph Mannheim, in the standard English edition, which is also followed by most acting versions, renders it, "Terrible is the temptation to do good" (Brecht 160). The adjective *Schrecklich*, whether translated as "terrible" or "hideous," reminds alert historians of the noun *Schrecklichkeit*, "terribleness." On the lighter side, falling somewhere, phonologically speaking, between "shriek" and "dreck," the word gives to popular culture the name "Shrek," the cranky green ogre from the animated film by DreamWorks and the Broadway musical. But dropping the name of DreamWorks in the middle of a nightmare is no joke. *Schrecklichkeit* explicitly refers to the announced policy of the German high command at the outset of World War I to terrorize the civilian population as the invading army advanced through Belgium. Executioners shot thousands of hostages, including adolescent children, to discourage resistance before it could get started, and officially sanctioned vandals burned libraries for no apparent reason whatsoever except to say to all the world: "We will stop at nothing, and we are capable of anything."

What kind of world was that? In a tangible way it is the estranged world of scenes 2 through 6 of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, in which those tempted by goodness, like the Han Chinese protagonists of *The Orphan of China*, face terrible consequences. Just imagine, long ago and faraway—"in feudal Georgia before the invention of firearms" (55), as John Willett describes it—there is an awful place in which those who will stop at nothing seem to be capable of anything. Greedy oligarchs who have almost all the wealth already gain public office to get the rest. Military police in body armor terrorize refugees seeking sanctuary and separate them from their children. Youngsters march to their death following incompetent orders from generals who got their commands by paying the largest bribes, while corrupt judges convict rape victims of assaulting their rapists. What a strange world that was.

The experimental drama of the Enlightenment, for which Voltaire and Murphy pioneered intercultural translation of Asian plays, like Brecht's Epic theatre in more recent times, discovered large tectonic plates of social value, moving ubiquitously yet invisibly under the feet of contemporary Westerners. Both then and now, these playwrights brought such movements to the surface more effectively (because more surprisingly) by deploying the distancing effects of "the Oriental tale" and its episodic intensification. Estrangement (or "de-familiarization") is the enemy of habit or of habitual ways of seeing the world; it interrupts routines by insisting on the strangeness of familiar things and then demanding an explanation of their newly discovered unfamiliarity. Brecht's overarching theoretical tenet, the *Verfremdungseffekt*, most frequently translated as "Alienation effect," is better rendered as "estrangement," "defamiliarization," or "dis-illusion." In any case, the *Verfremdungseffekt*, according to Brecht,

> consists of turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something striking, and unexpected. What is obvious is in a certain sense made incomprehensible, but this is only in order that it may then be made all the easier to comprehend. Before familiarity can turn into awareness, the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation. ("Short Description of the New Technique in Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect" 143-144)

That Brecht's formulation owes a heavy debt to Enlightenment dramaturgy is the argument of Joel Schechter's *Eighteenth-Century Brechtians: Theatrical Satire in the Age of Walpole* (2016). Schechter points to the raucous, formally innovative political theatre of Henry Fielding and the satires of Swift as especially proto-Brechtian, speaking truth to power by ridiculing its corruptions and daring it to confront its contradictions (Schechter 75-113). Professor Rawson's *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal under Stress* (1972) preempted *Eighteenth-Century Brechtians* by tracing the criminal antiheroes of the *Threepenny Novel* and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (*Der Aufhaltsame Aufsteig des Arturo Ui* 1941) back to Fielding's *The Life and Death of the Late Jonathan Wild, the Great* (1743). Fielding's satire lives in Brecht's thesis that a great man is a national calamity.[1] What Schechter does not

1 See Claude Rawson, *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal Under Stress*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, 171-227. See also Rawson's preface to Fielding's *Jonathan Wild*, edited by Hugh Amory et al., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, xxiv-xxvi.

develop is the way in which the eighteenth-century European repertoire favored the distancing effects of geographically novel locales, especially Asian ones, to point the moral of its productions by estranging the settings.

Figure 3 Tilly Kettle, Mary Ann Yates as Mandane in Arthur Murphy's *The Orphan of China* (1765), Tate Gallery

Mrs. Yates began the Epilogue to *The Orphan of China* with a compliment-inviting faux apology: "Ladies, excuse my dress—'tis true Chinese." She played Mandane fabulously enrobed and bejeweled in svelte black silk, doffing the panniers and towering headdress of conventional tragic costume, re-drawing the shape of the fashionable female silhouette of the period. As captured by portraitist Tilly Kettle, she makes her character strange by evoking the faraway as well as the long ago. In his frequently cited essay "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," Brecht begins with a note on the effectiveness of heavily stylized costuming and masks in service of estrangement ("Alienation Effects in Chinese Acing" 91). In the unfamiliarity of her garb, Mrs. Yates as Mandane acts a role that is—on critical reflection—very familiar indeed: a self-sacrificing woman on whom society imposes an impossible choice. Tempted by goodness, she will have to choose which child, her natural son or her adoptive one, to let go of in order to save it—a chalk circle inside a chalk circle.

For Brecht, emotion leading to more emotion doesn't get an author or an audience anywhere. Emotion leading to an idea, however, might point the way

forward by predicating action on critical understanding. When Grusha has no more money to buy milk, she offers the starving child her dry breast, the only thing that she has to give, which is not nothing. Her sacrifice has already meant giving up Simon, her betrothed, to marry an elderly man who pretends to be near death but who in the event deceives and then enslaves her. In Scene 4, "In the Northern Mountains," Simon returns from the wars to find Grusha minding the adoptive child and married to the old man. The two lovers stand on opposite sides of a brook. There is sparse dialogue, but the Singer supplies their unspoken thoughts. "So many words are left unsaid," the Singer explains (Brecht 193). After a long silence accompanied by music in which Grusha's thoughts are sung but not spoken by her, Simon turns to leave. Grusha blurts out that the child is not hers. He turns back. At that moment, however, the military police suddenly show up in search of the Noble Child. The only way Grusha can save him now is to claim him, falsely, as hers. The soldiers demand, "Is this your child?" True to the unwritten social contract that binds her to her obligations in spite of her desires, Grusha replies, conscientiously, "Yes." Simon leaves immediately. Unconvinced, the soldiers seize the child anyway. Terrible is the temptation to do good.

In the end, however, another fairy-godparent arrives in the nick of time as deus ex machina. He is none other than the corrupt but entertainingly unpredictable judge Azdak, whose magical power consists of unembarrassed malfeasance. Azdak ultimately sets all to right when he sees through the crocodile tears of the mercenary birth mother, who has returned only when the coast is clear to reclaim her child for his inheritance. After putting the claimants to the trial of the chalk circle, he awards the toddler to Grusha, who has lovingly cared for it for so long under terrible duress. He then divorces her from her egregious husband so that she can marry Simon after all, proving Brecht's point that the advantage of a corrupt judiciary is that the innocent can get off at least sometime. Illusory solutions to real problems have the additional virtue, known to both Brecht and Murphy, that they can excite aspirations toward justice that might prove more than poetic, if only more people would be willing to sacrifice a little something so that a few don't have to risk everything. Brecht, like Swift, knows how unlikely that is as long as people behave as they usually do, presupposing what the extraordinary Professor Rawson, in his elucidation of Swift's angers, calls "the universal solidarity of the wicked" (79). But even in the face of all that, the Epic dramatist, who restaged the parable of the adoptive mother who lets go first, was immodest enough to propose the potential benefits of at least one good example. On such slender threads of hope as that, the life of the social contract, like those of the endangered Chinese orphans dramatized

by Murphy and Brecht, depends.

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