



**BERTOLT**  
THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE  
**BRECHT**

ENGLISH VERSION BY ERIC BENTLEY

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## The Caucasian Chalk Circle



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BERTOLT BRECHT

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

English Version by Eric Bentley

University of Minnesota Press  
Minneapolis



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## Preface

*Eric Bentley*

Bertolt Brecht wrote *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in California as World War II was drawing to a close. He thought of it (sometimes, at least) as a contribution to the American musical theater, and it had its world premiere in the United States in 1948 at Carleton College in Minnesota. The director was one of my graduate students at the University of Minnesota, and I myself directed the first professional production of the play, which took place later that year at the Hedgerow Theatre in Pennsylvania.

It was in that year too that the University of Minnesota Press published *Parables for the Theatre*, a volume that comprised both *Chalk Circle* and *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. That book proved to be Brecht's best seller down the years, and is still in print under the same title in British territory (a Penguin paperback). In the United States, after a while, the two plays were separately published, and they are so published again, now, in 1999.

The translation of *Chalk Circle* was revised for the production at Lincoln Center, New York, in 1966, but, unlike *The Good Woman*, it was never really "adapted" or abridged. Whereas the text of *Good Woman* seemed to beg for abridgment, the text of



*Chalk Circle* seemed to ask for the respectful handling of every speech, every line, almost every word. One exception to this rule, however, requires a degree of explanation.

This exception was a Prologue that actually had not been part of Brecht's original plan for the play, but was prompted by events in Russia at the time — by, in fact, the Russian victory over the armies of Hitler. Brecht decided to frame his play with a scene in which Russian land reclaimed by the Germans is to be assigned to whomever the Russians decide to assign it to. Brecht advised me not to include the Prologue in the first printing of the *Parables*, and indeed it was not to be included for another eleven years. The Prologue was first performed in Minneapolis when the Minnesota Theater Company staged *Chalk Circle* in 1965.

When the play was performed in Harvard's then new Loeb Drama Center in 1960, Brecht's Prologue had been prefaced by these words of mine:

Friends old and new, we ask tonight  
Who owns a child and by what right?  
There is a bit of Chinese lore  
About a circle chalked upon the floor . . .  
Two different women claim one child  
Their quarrel drives the neighbors wild  
So they betake them to the king  
Who with some chalk describes a ring  
Around the infant where he stands.  
“Take him,” the king says, “by the hands  
And pull! She who can get him out  
Must be his mother without a doubt.”  
One woman briskly goes to work  
And pulls the child out with a jerk.  
The other doesn't have the heart  
For fear she'll tear the child apart.  
“Which,” quoth the king, “proves that this other

Who would not harm him is his mother.”  
The logic’s bad. Only the blind  
Could hold that mothers all are kind.  
And yet one hopes the king’s surmise  
Chanced to be right for otherwise  
What a disturbing situation:  
The mother an abomination  
While the false claimant is a love —  
A crisis that won’t bear thinking of  
Like: who owns Natchez or Birmingham?  
Santo Domingo? Or Vietnam?  
The crisis spared the Chinese king  
We now shall face — this evening —  
And tell a touched-up tale in which  
The actual mother is a bitch.  
Even the circle chalked on the floor  
Will not be what it was before.

When in 1966 the play was slated to have a Broadway-scale production at Lincoln Center, there were lengthy discussions of the Prologue, pro and con. The pros carried the day, but I was asked to do an abridgment of it. As something of a Brecht loyalist at the time, I opposed this plan. Yet the result pleased me, and eventually (in 1983) I used the shortened version in print. It is used again here.



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Comments on  
*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*  
from *Bentley on Brecht*

*Eric Bentley*

The text of this section consists of an essay written at the time of the Lincoln Center production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1966) and then variously published until its eventual inclusion in *Bentley on Brecht*.

In the prologue to *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the people of two collective farms in Georgia debate their respective titles to the ownership of a piece of land. Up to now it has belonged to one farm, but now the other claims to be able to make better use of it. Who should own *anything*? Should possession be nine-tenths of the law? Or should law and possession be open to review? That is the question Brecht raises. In the first draft of the play, the date of this bit of action was the 1930s. Later, Brecht shifted it to 1945 for two reasons: so that the land can be approached as a new problem, in that the farmers on it had all been ordered east at the approach of Hitler's armies; and so that the farmers newly claiming it can have partially earned it by having fought as partisans against the invader.

The prologue is a bit of a shock for American audiences. Here are all these communists—Russians at that—calling each other Comrades, and so on. That is why, until recently, the prologue was always omitted from American productions. In 1965, however, it was included in the Minnesota Theater Company's production without untoward incidents or, so far as I know, outraged comment. With the years the prologue had not changed, but the world had. America had. The existence of the U.S.S.R. is now conceded in the U.S.A. That communists do use the title "Comrades" is taken in stride. There is even understanding for the fact that the playwright Bertolt Brecht sympathized with communism in those days, more consistently than Jean-Paul Sartre and Peter Weiss do today.

However, disapproval of the prologue is not caused merely by the labels. A deeper malaise is caused by the *mode* of the dispute over the land. Land has always been fought over, often with guns. The expectation that some individual should pull a gun, or threaten to, is part of our stock response to the situation, but in the prologue, this expectation receives a calculated disappointment. The conflict is, or has been, real, but a new way of resolving it has been found, a new attitude to antagonists has been found. Not to mention the new solution: the land goes to the interlopers, the impostors, because they offer convincing evidence that they will be able to make better use of it. Both the conclusion and the road by which it is reached imply a reversal of the values by which our civilization has been living.

And Soviet civilization? Were we to visit Georgia, should we witness such decisions being made, and being arrived at in Brecht's way? It is open to doubt, even in 1966, while, in 1945, nothing could have been more misleading than Brecht's prologue, if it was intended to give an accurate picture of Stalin's Russia. We hear that Soviet citizens have themselves complained that, quite apart from the political point, they find nothing recognizably Russian in this German scene.

Is it thereby invalidated? "The home of the Soviet people shall also be the home of Reason!" That is certainly a key line in the prologue, but the verb is "shall be," not "is." That Brecht aligned himself with socialism, and saw the Soviet Union as the chief champion of socialism, is clear, yet is only to say that he saw Russia as on the right path, not by any means as having arrived at the goal. Let the worried reader of the prologue to *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* also read Brecht's poem "Are the People Infallible?" in which the poet speaks in this vein of the death in 1939 of the Soviet playwright Tretyakov:

1

*My teacher  
Who was great, who was kind  
Has been shot, sentenced by a People's Court.  
As a spy. His name has been condemned.  
His books have been annihilated. Conversation about him  
Is suspect and has subsided.  
Suppose he is innocent?*

2

*The sons of the people have found him guilty.  
The collective farms and factories of the workers  
The most heroic institutions in the world  
Have found in him an enemy.  
No voice was raised on his behalf.  
Suppose he is innocent?*

3

*The people have many enemies.  
In the highest positions  
Sit enemies. In the most useful laboratories  
Sit enemies. They build  
Canals and dams for the good of whole continents and the canals  
Clog up and the dams  
Collapse. The man in charge must be shot.  
Suppose he is innocent?*

4

*The enemy walks in disguise.  
He draws a worker's cap down over his face. His friends  
Know him for a zealous worker. His wife  
Displays the holes in his shoes:  
He went through his shoes in the service of the people.  
And yet he is an enemy. Was my teacher such a man?  
Suppose he is innocent?*

5

*To speak about the enemies who may be sitting in the courts of  
the people  
Is dangerous. For the courts have to be respected.  
To demand papers with the proofs of guilt on them in black and  
white  
Is senseless. For there need not be any such papers.  
Criminals hold proofs of their innocence in their hands.  
The innocent often have no proofs.  
Is it best, then, to be silent?  
Suppose he is innocent?*

6

*What 5000 have built, one man can destroy.  
Among 50 who are sentenced  
One may be innocent.  
Suppose he is innocent?*

7

*On the supposition that he is innocent  
What will he be thinking as he goes to his death?*

In any case, to prove Brecht wrong about Russia would not necessarily be to prove him wrong about socialism.

A socialist play, is this play for socialists only? That is for non-socialists to decide. From Brecht's viewpoint, a lot of people are

potential socialists who might — at this time, in this place — be surprised to hear it. It is a play for all who are not identified with those it shows to be the common enemy, and it may turn out to be a play even for some of those who are identified with the enemy, since they may not recognize the identification, preferring a life-illusion. French aristocrats applauded *Figaro*. *The Threepenny Opera* must have been enjoyed by many who, very shortly afterward, voted for Hitler.

The prologue shows a country (forget it is Russia, if that offends you) where Reason has made inroads upon Unreason. Unreason, in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, takes the form of private property, and the laws that guarantee it. "Property is theft," and, by paradox, a private person who steals another private person's property, infringing the law, only reenacts the original rape of the earth, and confirms the law — of private property. The characters in *Chalk Circle* who most firmly believe in private property are most actively engaged in fighting over private property — whether to cling to it or to grab it.

Where is private property's most sensitive spot? One learns the answer when a businessman announces that his son will be taking over the business or when a spokesman for all things holy comes to his favorite theme of mother and child.

... of all ties, the ties of blood are strongest. Mother and child, is there a more intimate relationship? Can one tear a child from its mother? High Court of Justice, she has conceived it in the holy ecstasies of love, she has carried it in her womb, she has fed it with her blood, she has borne it with pain. . . .

This is the voice of one of the spokesmen for all things holy in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and so, when the possession of a child has been in dispute, whether at the court of Solomon in Israel, or before a Chinese magistrate in the year A.D. 1000, the question asked has been only: Which womb did it come out of? Which loins begat it? The ultimate *locus* of private property is in the private parts.



Plato had other plans. He knew that a given parent may be the worst person to bring up his or her child. Our concern, he assumes, should be to produce the best human beings, the best society, not to sacrifice these ends to an, after all, arbitrary notion of “natural” right. The point about an umbilical cord is that it has to be cut. Children should be assigned to those best qualified to bring them up. . . . Plato’s Republic *is* “the home of Reason.”

The Georgia of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is not. After a prologue which provides a hint of what it would mean to begin to create a home for Reason on this earth, the play transports us to a world which, for all its exotic externals, is nothing other than the world we live in, *our* world, the world of Unreason, of Disorder, of Injustice. Those who are upset by the idealizations of the prologue, by its “utopianism,” need not fret. The play itself provides an image of life in its customary mode—soiled, stinking, cruel, outrageous.

Even in a jungle, lovely flowers will spring up here and there, such being the fecundity of nature, and however badly our pastors and masters run our society, however much they pull to pieces that which they claim to be keeping intact, nature remains fecund, human beings are born with human traits, sometimes human strength outweighs human weakness, and human grace shows itself amid human ugliness. “In the bloodiest times,” as our play has it, “there are kind people.” Their kindness is arbitrary. No sociologist could deduce it from the historical process. Just the contrary. It represents the brute refusal of nature to be submerged in history and therefore, arguably (and this *is* Brecht’s argument), the possibility that the creature should, at some future point, subdue history.

For the present, though—a present that has spread itself out through the whole course of historical time—the sociologists win, and man is not the master but the slave of society. History is the history of power struggles conducted (behind the moralistic rhetoric familiar to us all from the mass media) with min-

imum scrupulousness and maximum violence. To give way to the promptings of nature, to natural sympathy, to the natural love of the Good, is to be a Sucker. America invented that expressive word, and America's most articulate comedian, W. C. Fields, called one of his films *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break*. Which is the credo of Western civilization as depicted in the works of Bertolt Brecht.

In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* a sucker gets an even break. That seems contradictory, and in the contradiction lies the whole interest of the story. Or rather of its second part. In the first part, we see the inevitable working itself out. The sucker—the good girl who gives way to her goodness—is not given any breaks at all. She is punished for her non-sin, her anti-sin. She loses everything, both the child she has saved and adopted, and the soldier-fiancé whom she has loyally loved and waited for. She is abandoned, isolated, stripped, torn apart, like other people in Brecht's plays and our world who persist in the practice of active goodness.

The Ironshirts took the child, the beloved child.

The unhappy girl followed them to the city, the dreaded city.

She who had borne him demanded the child.

She who had raised him faced trial.

So ends Part I: a complete Brecht play in itself. In Part II Brecht was determined to put the question: Suppose the inevitable did not continue to work itself out? Now how could he do this? By having a socialist revolution destroy private property and establish the rule of Reason? That is what he would have done, had he been as narrow and doctrinaire as some readers of his prologue assume. But what is in the prologue is not in the play itself. For the second half of his play Brecht invented a new version of the Chalk Circle legend, which is also a new version of another idea from literary tradition, the idea that the powers that be can sometimes be temporarily overthrown and a brief Golden Age ensue.

Who will decide the case?

To whom will the child be assigned?

Who will the judge be? A good judge? A bad?

The city was in flames.

In the judge's seat sat — Azdak.

Inevitably, necessarily, a judge in the society depicted in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* must assign a child to its actual mother. In that proposition, the law of private property seems to receive the sanction of Mother Nature herself—that is to say, the owners of private property are able to appeal to nature without conscious irony. Such an event, however, would give Brecht at best a brief epilogue to Part I. What gives him a second part to his play, and one which enables him in the end to pick up the loose ends left by the prologue, is that the judge is Azdak, and that Azdak is a mock king, an Abbot of Unreason, a Lord of Misrule, who introduces “a brief Golden Age, almost an age of justice.” As F. M. Cornford writes in *The Origin of Attic Comedy*,

The reign of Zeus stood in the Greek mind for the existing moral and social order; its overthrow, which is the theme of so many of the comedies, might be taken to symbolize . . . the breaking up of all ordinary restraints, or again . . . the restoration of the Golden Age of Justice and Lovingkindness, that Age of Kronos which lingered in the imagination of poets, like the afterglow of a sun that had set below the horizon of the Age of Iron. The seasonal festivals of a Saturnalian character celebrated the return, for a brief interregnum, of a primitive innocence that knew not shame, and a liberty that at any other time would have been licentious. Social ranks were inverted, the slave exercising authority over the master. At Rome each household became a miniature republic, the slaves being invested with the dignities of office. A mock king was chosen to bear rule during the festival, like the medieval Abbot of Unreason or Lord of Misrule.

In this case, how is the play any different from the prologue, except in the temporariness of Azdak's project? Its temporariness is of a piece with its precariousness, its freakishness, its skittishness, its semiaccidental character. Only with a touch of irony can one say that Azdak establishes a Golden Age or even that he is a good judge. The age remains far from golden, and his judging is often outrageous enough. But his *extraordinary* outrages call our attention to the ordinary outrages of ordinary times—to the fact that outrage *is* ordinary, is the usual thing, and that we are shocked, not by injustice *per se*, but only by injustice that favors the poor and the weak. Azdak did not rebuild a society, nor even start a movement that had such an end in view. He only provided Georgia with something to think about and us with a legend, a memory, an image.

So much for the ideological *schema*. The play would be too rigidly schematic if Brecht had just brought together the Good Girl with the Appropriate Judge, using both characters simply as mouthpieces for a position. But there is more to both of them than that.

Discussing the role of the Ironic Man in ancient comedy, F. M. Cornford remarks that “the special kind of irony” he practices is

feigned stupidity. The word *Ironist* itself in the fifth century appears to mean “cunning” or (more exactly) “sly.” Especially it meant the man who masks his batteries of deceit behind a show of ordinary good nature or indulges a secret pride and conceit of wisdom, while he affects ignorance and self-depreciation, but lets you see all the while that he could enlighten you if he chose, and so makes a mock of you. It was for putting on these airs that Socrates was accused of “irony” by his enemies.

This passage sets forth what I take to be the preliminary design of Azdak's character, but then Brecht complicates the design. Azdak is not simply an embodiment of an ironical viewpoint, he is a person with a particular history, who needs irony for a

particular reason — and not all the time. It is through the chinks in the ironical armor that we descry the man. *Azdak is not being ironical when he tells us he wanted to denounce himself for letting the Grand Duke escape.* He supposed that, while the Grand Duke and his Governors were busy fighting the Princes, the carpet weavers had brought off a popular revolution, and, as a revolutionary, he wished to denounce himself for a counter-revolutionary act.

What kind of revolutionary was he? A very modern kind: a disenchanting one. Those who like to compare Azdak the judge to Robin Hood should not fail to compare Azdak the politician to Arthur Koestler. Before the present revolt of the carpet weavers, decades earlier, there had been another popular uprising. Azdak maintains, or pretends, that this was in his grandfather's time, forty years ago, and not in Georgia, but in Persia. His two songs — which lie at the very heart of our play — tell both of the conditions that produced the uprising and of the uprising itself.<sup>1</sup> The pretense is that revolution represents disorder, and the suppression of revolutions, order; and that Azdak is appealing to the Generals to restore order. This last item is not a hollow pretense or a single irony, for Azdak has not championed revolt. He has withdrawn into his shell. His job as a "village scrivener" is the outward token of the fact. In a note, Brecht advises the actor of the role not to imagine that Azdak's rags directly indicate his character. He wears them, Brecht says, as a Shakespearean clown wears the motley of a fool. Azdak is not lacking in wisdom. Only it is the bitter wisdom of the disillusioned intellectual, and, in Brecht's view, a partly false wisdom prompted not alone by objective facts but quite as much by the "wise" man's own limitations.

Azdak has the characteristic limitation of the Brechtian rogue: cowardice. Or at any rate: courage insufficient to the occasion. He is Brecht's Herr Keuner saying no to tyranny only after the tyrant is safely dead. At least, this is how Azdak is, if

left to himself. Yet, like other human beings, he is not a fixed quantity but influenceable by the flow of things, and especially by the people he meets. A passive sort of fellow, he acts less than he *reacts*. Our play describes his reaction to a new and unforeseen situation, and especially, in the end, to a single person: Grusha. Which gives the last section of the play its organic movement.

Azdak needs drawing out, and what Brecht does is expose him to a series of persons and situations that do draw him out. (That he also brings with him into the Golden Age his unregenerate self creates the comic contradictions. It is hard, through all the little trial scenes, to tell where selfishness leaves off and generosity begins: this is a source of amusement, and also enables Brecht to question accepted assumptions on the relation of social and antisocial impulses.) The Test of the Chalk Circle with which the action culminates does not follow automatically from the philosophy of Azdak but is a product of a dramatic development. At the outset he is in no mood to be so good or so wise. He has just been mercilessly beaten, but then he reacts in his especially sensitive way to all that ensues, and above all to the big speech in which Grusha denounces him:

AZDAK: Fined twenty piasters!

GRUSHA: Even if it was thirty, I'd tell you what I think of your justice, you drunken onion! How dare you talk to me like the cracked Isaiah on the church window? As if you were somebody. You weren't born to this. You weren't born to rap your own mother on the knuckles if she swipes a little bowl of salt someplace. Aren't you ashamed when you see how I tremble before you? You've made yourself their servant so they won't get their houses stolen out from under them — houses they themselves stole! Since when did a house belong to its bedbugs? But you're their watchdog, or how would they get our men into their wars? Bribe taker! I don't respect you. No more than a

thief or a bandit with a knife. Do what you like. You can all do what you like, a hundred against one, but do you know who should be chosen for a profession like yours? Extortioners! Men who rape children! Let it be their punishment to sit in judgment on their fellowmen! Which is worse than to hang from the gallows.

AZDAK: Now it is thirty.

She could hardly know how she got under his skin. Her denunciation, quite guileless and spontaneous, happens to be couched in just the terms that come home to him. For she is representing him as a traitor to his class. Who does he think he is, who is now setting himself up as a Lord over his own people? Well, in his own view, Azdak *was* something of a traitor to his class, but he has been busy for a year or two trying to make it up to them, and now Grusha is providing him with the happiest of all occasions to prove this. His decision to give her the child grows out of his sense of guilt and out of his delight in opportunities to make good.

One could say, too, that his earlier confrontation with Granny Grusinia prepares the way for the later one with Grusha. Here, too, he has to be drawn out, partly by threats, but even more by finding again his original identification with the cause of the people. Between them, Granny Grusinia and Grusha are the Marxian, Brechtian version of the “eternal feminine” whom our blundering, uncourageous Faust needs, if he is to move “onward and upward.” Hence, although the Chalk Circle incident occupies only a minute or two at the end of a long play, it is rightly used for the title of the whole.

The incident not only clarifies the meaning of Azdak, it also brings together the various thematic threads of the play. In the first instance, there is the stated conclusion:

Take note what men of old concluded:

That what there is shall go to those who are good for it, thus:

Children to the motherly, that they prosper,  
Carts to good drivers, that they be driven well,  
The valley to the waterers, that it yield fruit.

But this was never in doubt. Any spectator who has spent the evening hoping for a surprise at the end courted disappointment. He should have been warned by the prologue. In an early draft Brecht planned to let the decision on the collective farms wait till the Chalk Circle story has been told. That, however, is politically ludicrous, if it means, as it would have to, that Soviet planners depend on folksingers in the way that some other leaders depend upon astrologers. And an infringement of a main principle of Brechtian drama would have occurred. In this type of play there should be no doubt as to what is going to happen, only as to how and why.

The valley is assigned to the waterers already in the prologue, and already in the first scenes that follow we see that Michael has had a bad mother but has been befriended by a better one. What remains to be said? On what grounds can we be asked to stay another couple of hours in the theater? One sufficient reason would be: to see Grusha *become* the mother. This is not Plato's Republic, and Grusha is no trained educator in a Platonic crèche. In the first phase of the action her purpose is only to rescue the child, not keep it: she is going to leave it on a peasant's doorstep and return home. We see the child becoming hers by stages, so that when Azdak reaches his verdict in the final scene, he is not having a brainstorm ("Grusha would be a splendid mother for this child") but recognizing an accomplished fact ("She *is* the mother of this child"). Another paradox: in this play that says possession is not nine-tenths of the law we learn that (in another sense) possession is ten-tenths of the law.

In the end, the child becomes Simon Shashava's too:

GRUSHA: You like him?

SIMON: With my respects, I like him.



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