

# Bertolt Brecht and the Elizabethan Stage: A Note on Epic Theatre and **Edward II**

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## Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of Christopher Marlowe's (1564-1593) Elizabethan play **Edward II** (1593). The contemporary German playwright, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) translated Marlowe's play into German but he purposely intended to depart from the Elizabethan heritage of the original text in order to make his version of **Edward II** compatible with the theatrical theory of **Verfremdungseffekte**, 'Alienation Effect.'

Moreover, the paper analyses Brecht's version of the Elizabethan play and attempts to show, by means of contrast and comparison, the extent into which the German text has departed from the original play. It tries, also, to demonstrate whether Brecht's theory of the 'Alienation Effect' has benefited from the Elizabethan theatrical heritage, and how much of Brecht's 'Epic' theory is there in his **Edward II** (1924), a play he wrote early in his career as a dramatist.

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In examining Brecht's adaptation of Marlowe's **Edward II**, I shall try to assess Brecht's early anticipation of the theory of the "Epic" theater in his **Edward II**, and also, to investigate the possibility of whether the Elizabethan stage was among the essential inspirers of Brecht's theory and practice.

Like most Elizabethan playwrights, Brecht never created a plot. Instead, he depended totally on **borrowing** as a medium of endless supply of plots for his plays. He did that quite openly and shamelessly. When he was once rebuked, he impudently but truthfully answered: "Shakespeare? He was a thief too." (Willett, 1967: 124) In this manner, Brecht was truly an Elizabethan, for the Elizabethans, and among them Christopher Marlowe, never felt uncomfortable on borrowing or stealing material for their dramatic work. If the above analogy is correct, then we must assume that Brecht is not content to act Elizabethan in playwrighting and disregards the Elizabethan tremendous theatrical heritage. Brecht, too, like the Elizabethans, emphasizes the element of distancing in both time and locale. His argument is that spectators tend normally to treat a contemporary episode with subjective perspectives rather than judge the actions in the play objectively. Like Ben Jonson, who, in his prologue to **The Alchemist**, hailed his audience as "judging spectators," Brecht believed that, in the case of an episode drawn from the past, the time factor would help control the subjective tendency of the audience and set them as judges rather than passionate followers. In order to convey the morality advocated in **The Alchemist**, Ben Jonson accentuated the importance of having an alert audience capable of comprehending the satirical tone and active enough to grasp the intellectual argument of the play.

Furthermore, an Elizabethan actor had to learn several different roles, if not paradoxical in nature, they were simply contradictory to the extent that it was impossible for the same actor to identify himself with any role the way a modern actor would do. Moreover, Brecht's use of placards was actually an Elizabethan device. In **Henry V**, Shakespeare could not fuse on the stage all the play's vast battlefield actions, instead he announced to his audience, through the means of placards, the names of various places in England and France. He even reminded his spectators that what they were about to see was a representation of reality and not a depiction of it:

O for a muse of fire, that would ascend  
The brightest heaven of invention;  
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act  
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!  
Then should the war like Harry, like himself,  
Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels

Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire  
 Crouch for employment. But pardon, gentles all,  
 The flat unraised spirits that hath dar'd  
 On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth  
 So great an object: can this cockpit hold  
 Within this wooden O the very casques  
 That did afright the air at Agincourt?  
 O, pardon! since a crooked figure may  
 Attest in little place a million;  
 And let us, ciphers to this great accompt  
 On your imaginary forces work.

(Prologue, 11. 1-18)

Therefore, the essence of theatrical alienation existed, most probably unintentionally, among Elizabethan actors. Brecht's job was to consciously exploit this situation in his production of his plays. With modern technology, Brecht was able to abridge the extent of his spectators' imagination by presenting film shots of different places such as battlefields as was the case in **Edward II** and **Mother Courage**, stockyards as in **St. Joan of the Stockyards** etc.

Moreover, like the Elizabethans, Brecht used songs as a means of furthering the effect of alienation but he also took it a step further and made his songs an autonomous body separate from the main stream of the plot. And in order to sharpen the effect of songs on the audience, he insisted on using songs as a platform for critical comments on the plot. In a note to **The Threepenny Opera** (1928), Brecht remarked:

Nothing is more revolting than when  
 the actor pretends not to notice that  
 he has left the level of plain speech  
 and started to sing. The three levels--  
 plain speech, heightened speech and  
 singing-- must always remain distinct.  
 ...As for the melody, he must not  
 follow it blindly: there is a kind of  
 speaking-against - the - music which can  
 have strong effect; the result of a  
 stubborn, incorruptible sobriety which  
 is independent of music and rhythm.<sup>(1)</sup>

In Shakespeare's **Twelfth Night**, for instance, the clown's song at the end of the play serves no thematical purpose unless one looks at it in the light of

the Brechtian theory of alienation as a separate independent entity. Only then does it follow the general trend of the play.

Finally, the Elizabethan theatrical tradition of boys taking the roles of women constitutes an important element of alienation. From the Brechtian point of view of "alienation effect" nothing is distancing as a boy who plays the part of a girl disguised as a boy as is the case in **Twelfth Night** when Viola disguised herself as the eunuch Cesario. It is interesting too, to note that Brecht chose a girl to play the part of Young Edward in his first production of **Edward II** (Fuegi, 1972 : 218).

In adapting Marlowe's **Edward II** for his German audience, Brecht resorts to the early Elizabethan technique of writing scenes rather than acts. Almost none of Brecht's plays is structurally divided into acts for he finds that scenes serve his purpose best. He captions each scene with a title that announces, beforehand, the important issues the scene is going to deal with. However, in **Edward II**, Brecht allowed himself greater freedom with history than Marlowe did and he condensed the historical events into small short scenes in order to sharpen the argument. The main episode of **Edward II**, for instance, is the fabricated battle of Killingworth fought on 15 and 16 August, 1320. It stands as the climax of a war between Edward and his barons which has raged for nine years and is destined to continue for another four. Brecht structured his play according to the rule of cause and effect: the first half of the play, for instance, emphasized the intimate and close relationship between King Edward and Gaveston. Early in the play, Gaveston stressed the fact that the barons hated him because the king decided to appoint him "Lord Chamberlain, Chancellor, Earl of Cornwall / And Peer of the Isle of Man"<sup>2</sup>. The second half of the play, however, dealt with the rise of Mortimer and the fall of Edward. But somewhere between these two halves of the play, there is an interval where the king is for a short time strong. Each half retained several technical climaxes. The return of Gaveston from Ireland to England marks the first technical climax. Then several climaxes follow: Edward's refusal to banish Gaveston; the Peers' revolt and the death of Gaveston. In the second half the climaxes are: Edward's capture, Mortimer's triumph, the death of Edward and the fall of Mortimer.

Structurally and episodically, Brecht followed Marlowe's text. But because in the "Epic" theatre the argument is always important, Brecht apparently decided to deviate tremendously from Marlowe in casting his characters; for his main interest is not in the characters per se but in the kind of social relationship that exists among them. Accordingly, Brecht reduced the number of the characters in his play. Both Senior Mortimer and Spencer

were left out. The peers were referred to and only Lancaster and Kent played active roles. In the plot, Brecht did away with some minor sections such as the capture of Senior Mortimer by the Scots, Gaveston's marriage to the daughter of the Duke of Gloucester, and the Queen's journey to France.

In addition, Brecht demoted his characters for alienation purposes. His Gaveston is a butcher's son and his background is always emphasized. Animal images are scattered throughout the play in order to ascertain the fact that **realpolitike** is the art of living by killing in the upheaval of the political life in Germany after World War I. King Edward described himself as "tiger" after he had his brief victory over the peers. Mortimer, in another part of the play, emphasized the king's description, "toward five o'clock when England's king turned tiger" (Brecht, 1966 : 39). After Edward had been beaten, he indulged himself in the same image to describe his agony:

The wounded deer  
Runs for a plant that closes up the wound  
But when tiger's flesh is torn, the tiger  
Digs deeper into it with savage claw.

(Brecht, 1966: 58)

After King Edward's imprisonment Kent described Westminster as a place where "A lustful wench is living with a bull" (Brecht, 1966:79). The bull, which is Mortimer, is a symbol of cuckoldry in Elizabethan tradition. Confusion spreads from the individual to the State and Mortimer uses the same image to describe the social upheaval in the country, "Can one predict on which side the wild bull / -- The State -- will next roll over on" (Brecht, 1966:91). He himself is referred to as "Eel!" The Queen desires to be a "she-wolf / Hurtling through the bushes with teeth / And not rest" (Brecht, 1966: 46).

The beast images in the play help emphasize the chasm between emotion and reason. Emotion is clearly behind Edward's refusal to abandon his friend Gaveston and thus plunges the whole country into a civil war. Rice Ap Howell realizes it is emotion that is guiding Edward and accordingly advises Abbot: "You are speaking to his heart and not to his head" (Brecht, 1966: 58). Reason, on the other hand, is shown in Mortimer. Unlike Marlowe's Mortimer, Brecht's one is not ambitious and the peers could hardly persuade him to stand against King Edward:

You've come to the wrong man.  
Who starts to pluck a chicken  
Either to eat it or because its clucking

Was such a nuisance  
When he is done the job  
May have acquired such an itch in his fingers that  
He's got to skin a tiger.

(Brecht, 1966: 12)

He warns them of the grave consequences of their action. Mortimer is a reasonable man compared to his fellow peers. He wants to avoid all confrontations with the king which will certainly trigger an endless war. He knows the triviality of the peers' cause and he tries to diagnose the problem outside the battlefield:

Because a few hats are off and on the ground  
Before a son of a bitch, the English people  
Push their island over the precipice.

(Brecht, 1966: 12)

Likewise, when King Edward obstinately refuses to sign the paper of Gaveston's banishment and tears it up, Brecht minimizes the tension and instead of violence erupting as a result of the King's refusal he makes Mortimer sing a song:

The English girls wore black and cried  
When their lovers died at Bannockbride  
Aheave and aho!  
The English King ordered his drummer boys  
To drown out the Bannockbride widows' noise  
With Arom Rombelow.

(Brecht, 1966: 21)

Throughout the play, Mortimer is depicted as a person who is reluctantly plunged into a war he hates.

On the other hand, Brecht deliberately made his Edward active and aware of his political status. This had been carefully established early in the play when he, unlike Marlowe's, refused to dispense with Gaveston. Brecht was keen to show this quality in the king. The scene was captioned:

9 May 1311: Since King Edward refuses  
to sign his name to the banishment of  
his favorite Gaveston, a thirteen - year  
war breaks out. (Brecht, 1966: 16)

Moreover, King Edward, in Brecht's version, never abdicates. He went on

struggling for his political survival. His imprisonment along with the miserable condition he fell into had not broken his spirit. His strong will to resist the pressure brought upon him to abdicate his throne culminated in the following lines uttered just before he was murdered:

The hole they keep me in's the cesspool.  
Upon my head has fallen for seven hours  
The offal of London.  
But such water hardens my limbs: which  
are now like cedar wood.  
The stench of excrement gives me  
boundless greatness!  
And the good sound of the drum keeps me awake,  
Though weak, so death won't find me  
fainting but waking.

(Brecht, 1966: 87)

He is aware of the fact that "he is physically fenced in but spiritually liberated" (Brecht, 1966: xxvii).

When the play was produced in 1924, Brecht reduced suspense and sharpened the action of the play. In a brief review of **Edward II's** first production, Thomas Mann noted:

The part of the favorite, whom we  
must imagine as a winsome,... was  
obviously here again out of sheer  
malice - taken by an actor whose  
personal tediousness placed the king  
in a position beyond all human comprehension,  
no matter how well - disposed  
one might have been. And when the  
dear "Gav" was already loaded with  
honors and dignities, when he was  
Lord Chamberlain, Chief Secretary,  
Earl of Cornwall, Lord of Man, he  
still wore the abominable and unhistoric  
sack coat in which he had  
returned from Ireland. (Mann, 1960: 24)

Brecht, of course, attempted to accentuate the triviality of the cause of the war between the king and his peers. To do so, Brecht deliberately shortened the appearances of the Queen in the early stages of the play so as to shift the focus toward Gaveston. She was continuously overshadowed by Gaveston until he died. The dramatic significance, of course, was to put Gaveston at

the center of the problem in the play.

At the same time, Brecht exploited the Marlovian political scene and treated it differently so as to fit into his own political views. He changed the royal aristocratic language of Marlowe's **Edward II** to a "down - to - earth language" inflamed with nihilistic overtone; and the beautiful Elizabethan images to a lower class images of beasts. He forced upon his audience a coarse texture along with poetic materialism.

In sum, Brecht believed that the theatre should not imitate real life, it should always present clearly the problems discussed in the play. Moreover, the playwright should always attempt to emphasize the chasm between the past and the present and should not treat historical events with modern comprehension. The spectator should be led to believe that if he experienced similar circumstances in real life, he would act objectively. A playwright of the "Epic" theatre is required to use "Verfremdungseffekt" i.e, "alienation effect" in order to prevent self-identification between audience and characters. Brecht uses songs, film shots, and narration in order to alienate his audience. The coherence of his scenes is always interrupted by placards, songs, and unrelated music. He argues that real theater entertainment is always possible if the audience are in a position to judge the action on the stage and are able to practise the same judgement outside the walls of the theater.

Furthermore, the producer must use all available means to create a distance between spectator and the subject shown on the stage. Hence, in a Brechtian theater, the scenery on the stage is a representation of a place and not a creation of it:

The theater of the scientific age  
is in a position to make dialectics  
into a source of enjoyment. The  
unexpectedness of logically progressive  
or zigzag development, the instability  
of every circumstance, the joke  
contradiction and so forth: all these  
are ways of enjoying the liveliness  
of men, things, and processes, and  
they heighten both our capacity for  
life and our pleasure in it....  
Every art contributes to the greatest  
art of all, the art of living (Willett, 1964: 277)

As for actors, they are advised not to identify themselves with the characters they impersonate. Indeed, Brecht, the producer, trains his actors to maintain a distance from the characters of the play. Accordingly, actors become demonstrators. During the rehearsal, an actor is encouraged to transfer his speech into the third person and describe his action in the past tense. With this kind of "alienation effect" the actor is turned into a reporter whose job is to report the action in the play and, therefore, he is free to comment on the role while he is "reporting" it to the audience. In **Edward II**, Brecht overshadowed the spiritual spheres of the Marlovian play with sharp yet novel visions of everyday objects which constituted one of the roots of the "alienation effect."

## Notes

1. Bertolt Brecht, "Note to **The Threepenny Opera**," quoted from John Willett **The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht**, P. 132.
2. Bertolt Brecht, **Edward II**, Trns. by Eric Bentley New York: Grove Press, 1966, p. 7. This copy will be cited throughout.

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