

In the Copenhagen Theatre Journal, in the year 1936, Bertolt Brecht wrote, in regards to Shakespeare's play, *Measure for Measure*, "Those in positions of authority [...] ought not to demand of their subjects a moral stance which they cannot adopt themselves." From this idea came the play *Roundheads and Peakheads*. Written as a response to the rising Nazi movement, *Roundheads and Peakheads* is Brecht's attempt to impose the idea of moral responsibility on his audiences in a turbulent government. By mimicking the structure of Germany in the 1930's Brecht's characters show the audience their struggle as they attempt to balance their own power with their moral views.

The play takes place in the fictional country of Yahoo. Yahoo's government is currently struggling with the uprising of a group of disgruntled tenant farmers, known as the Sickle League, refusing to pay their rents to The Big Five, a group of wealthy landowners with a large amount of influence in the government. To calm this movement, the Regent turns to a man named Angelo Iberin. Iberin helps to quell the uprising by replacing the public's class struggle with a race struggle between those with round heads, called Czuchs, and those with peaked heads, called Czichs. With this distraction, the government is able to turn back the advances of the Sickle League and stop the uprising.

During the course of this uprising, each character struggles to gain as much material power or wealth as they can without losing too much of their own views on life. While some characters are purely interested in personal gain, regardless of the costs, others cling to their own moral views, and others still attempt to obtain their desires without giving up their beliefs.

This idea is first introduced to the audience by the Stage Manager in the prologue of the play. Here, in a breeching of the traditional fourth wall, the Stage Manager addresses the audience directly and lays out the major conflict of the play. He brings forward two actors, each holding balanced scales. On one scale are a set of rags and a set of fine clothing; on the other are a set of round heads and a set of peaked heads. The two scales represent the material and the objective. At the end of the prologue, he asks the various characters to select attributes from either side of each scale, warning them that, as Brecht implies, “Best choose your lot by picking out a gown/ And not a cranium,” (p169¹). From these choices, the balancing acts of each character come forth.

In Iberin’s case, the attainment of power, while something he aspires to, comes second to his strong personal beliefs. It is Iberin who preaches the idea of Czuchs and Czichs and, for the majority of the play, he is the one who clings to the belief zealously. While sitting in at a trial on a landowner’s being accosted in the street by a prostitute and his charging extortionate rent, Iberin decides to take over for the Chief Justice, arguing that he is missing the heart of the matter at hand. From Iberin’s perspective, the case does not revolve around rights and traditional justice, but rather around the fact that a Czichish man violated a Czuchish woman.

This point of view serves Brecht’s purpose with Iberin in two ways. First, it allows Iberin to stay true to the distinct moral philosophy (and obvious racism) he adapts in the play. Rather than rely on traditional morals, Iberin has adapted his own set and refuses to falter from them. Second, it serves to bolster Iberin’s power by improving his image in the eyes of the masses. The public does not see Iberin as someone who sides with the wealthy elite but rather as someone who sides with a higher power, namely the shape of one’s head.

¹ Quotes taken from the Grove Press 1966 edition of “Bertolt Brecht: Jungle of Cities and Other Plays”

This second idea becomes more prominent as the play progresses. In a later, but similar, trial, a dispute arises over horses belonging to the Czichish landlord stolen by the Czuchish farmer. The farmer, expecting Iberin to take his side because of the shape of his head, pushes the racist idea to the extreme during the exchanges. However, Iberin turns a blind eye to the plea. As the trial is not a public one, it is of no importance to him to support his old ideas as it gains him no publicity. Instead, rather than try and trample on the justice system without the support of the public, Iberin stays away from the trial and, thus, supports his own power rather than his original beliefs.

In contrast to Iberin is the Chief Justice, who also presides over both trials. Worn down by the general state of affairs and a lack of pay, the Chief Justice is nowhere near as zealous as Iberin is about his beliefs. Despite this, the Chief Justice still attempts to adhere to what is right. When the case of the Czichish landowner and Czuchish prostitute is first presented, he places the prostitute on the stand as the defendant for soliciting in public, despite the uproar from the crowd.

When told that, as a result of the uprising, the court should no longer follow the letter of the law, but rather the will of the people, the Chief Justice responds directly to the audience, “The strain is too much for me. I have become physically weakened... A man who has not had a proper breakfast can’t conduct a case properly. He has no spirit. His justice has no luster,” (p200). This is Brecht’s idea that one cannot follow a set of moral rules without a base amount of power. In this case, the power is the minimal amount needed for a decent meal. Because the Chief Justice cannot supply himself and his family with the food they need, he feels he is unfit to judge a case in court.

Despite this, the Chief Justice still agrees to preside over the case, if only to keep the mob outside the Regent's palace at bay. He begins the trial by conducting an investigation into the accosting of the landowner in the street, which the public protests saying that he should rather be focusing on the rent that the landowner charges. The Chief Justice continues to conduct the trial as normal, despite Iberin's increasing agitation at his short-sightedness. Finally, in a fit of agitation, Iberin exclaims "Can you think of nothing more to ask? Doesn't an inner voice tell you what the people really want?" (p205), before he dismisses the Chief Justice for no longer being "fit" to fill his position. Here, Brecht presents the audience with a clash of moral values: the idea of justice in two forms. While both ideals seem reasonable, only one can be dominant. In this case, the racist ideal of Iberin takes precedent simply because Iberin possesses more power than the Chief Justice.

Although a lot of the major plot ideas in the play focus around men of power, Brecht does not leave out figures of the lower class. In particular, he focuses on two tenant farmers, Callas and Lopez. Up until the start of Iberin's rule, both were good friends, but were discouraged by their inability to pay off their rent. Feeling the pressure, they decide to join up with the Sickle League, until Iberin's decrees of Czuchs and Czichs are heard. Lopez, being a Czich, decides to join the Sickle League while Callas, being a Czuch, decides to wait out his luck that his Czichish landowner will be done in and he will be free of rent.

Over the course of the play, the audience sees Callas throw away more and more of his morals and ideals as he seeks to free himself from his rent payments. First, Callas gives up his family. He allows his daughter, Nanna the prostitute, to be wooed by his landowner in exchange for the gifts he would receive. This relationship, along with his defiant cries of rack-renting in court, eventually lead to the death sentence of his landowner because the landowner was a Czich.

From this, Callas suddenly feels empowered because his head is rounder than his landowner's. And it is using this false sense of power that Callas attempts to justify the rest of his actions.

Later, when he stumbles upon two of his landowner's horses, he decides to steal them. At first, Callas is proclaimed a hero by the public for stealing horses from the Czich. Later, however, once the government has regained control and quelled the farmers' uprising, the idea of Czuch and Czich loses its power and Callas is brought to court for theft. When asked why he stole the horses, Callas, feeling cornered replies "I don't answer Czichs... Questions like that are only hatched under peaked skulls," (p235). While he expects applause for his racism, Callas is only met with empty silence. The power he thought he had, for which he threw away his morals, is gone.

Lopez, on the other hand, stays true to his convictions, fighting alongside the Sickle League. When the news of the landowner's arrest and of Iberin's new ideals reaches him, and Callas abandons him and the Sickle League, Lopez says "I can understand what the slightest hope means to you. But you'll see: nothing will come of it. I have yet to hear of anyone being given anything by these people for having a head of a certain shape," (p194). Lopez takes a realistic view of the situation. He sees joining Iberin as an abandonment of morals for false ideals. To him, there is no material value to the idea of Czuchs and Czichs. Instead, Lopez chooses to do what he believes to be right, despite the struggle that lies ahead of him.

In the end, the Sickle League is defeated by the government, and Callas and Lopez meet again as Lopez awaits the carrying out of his death sentence. Callas, having finally come to the realization that he will be unable to get out of paying his rent unless he goes straight to his landowner directly, is giving his final attempt to free himself. Callas is so desperate, that he says he is willing to hang himself if he is forced to pay rent and, in fact, agrees to take his landowners

place at the gallows in exchange for two years of no rent as the lawyers assure him that there is no risk involved. Lopez, on the other hand, refuses to submit saying to Callas “Those who won’t bow are made to swing./ You get the soup and we the string./ But we would rather meet this fate/ Than beg for soup from the master’s plate,” (p277). Despite facing death, Lopez refuses and is proud that he has not given up his convictions, as Callas has, for personal gain.

Lopez goes even further, calling Callas out on his actions. “Your fishing was a one-man affair./ You thought that way you’d secure your share./... You thought as a Roundhead you’d get some prize/ But you know now it was delusion./ See round and peaked heads hung before your eyes/ By round and peaked heads in collusion,” (p277). Lopez points out the flaw in the racist moral philosophy that Callas and the majority of Yahoo’s lower class had adopted. He shows that, in the end, the shape of everyone’s heads made no difference, what mattered was material power. To Lopez, since he lacked that material power, he saw no reason to give up his own sense of morality and goes to his death with few regrets. Callas, on the other hand, was left in exactly the same position he started in, only with the added realization of his mistakes. As Lopez is led off to the gallows, Callas cries after him “Lopez, Lopez, I wish it was the eleventh of September again,” (p278) referring to before all the events of the play took place. Callas sees that his choices were, in the end, wrong and wishes to go back and redo things.

Although the society of Yahoo is very much a patriarchal one, Brecht still includes the struggle to balance morals with power within his female characters as well. First, he presents the audience with Nanna, a prostitute and the daughter of Callas. Fed up with the poor, hard-working life she had on the farm, Nanna ran off to the city to pursue a different lifestyle. She ended up having sexual relations with her father’s landowner and has been sending money back to her

family on the farm to help them pay rent. Ultimately, it is her choice to forgo morals in order to gain power that sparks the series of trials that involves herself and her father.

In an attempt to aid her father in paying off their rent, Nanna attempts to, once again, seduce the landowner when she spies him in the street outside her brothel. When realizing that she is unable to convince him to let her father off of his payment, she calls out to the Huas in the street, searching for Czichs. Rather than let things go, she decides to endanger the landowner by exposing his peaked head in order to gain control over her father's rent situation. For her, power was more appealing than the idea of being a good person.

In contrast to Nanna is Isabella, the sister of the Czich landowner. To Isabella, the most important thing in her life is her chastity, and she is willing to hand over all of her material possessions to the Needy Sisters of San Barbaras in exchange for the solitude and abstinence of being a nun.

When brought to court over the theft of the horses, Isabella cannot stand being in a dispute over such things, exclaiming "if only this base wrangle for earthly goods were done!" (p233). When she sees Callas's behavior, she constantly berates him, telling him to remove his hat. Isabella is completely oblivious to the concept of Czuchs and Czichs as well as the idea of material power. For her, the ideals of right and wrong as well as propriety and respect are what come naturally, and her behavior in the courtroom exemplifies it.

Eventually, the paths of Nanna and Isabella cross directly when Isabella discovers that her brother has been sentenced to death. Realizing that the head of the prison guard has propositioned her in exchange for her brother's life, Isabella struggles with a major decision: what is more important to her? Her brother's life or her chastity. After hearing her brother's pleas for her help, she finds that she cannot bring herself to forsake her brother in order to

preserve her maidenhood. Being completely clueless in these matters, Isabella seeks out Nanna's help at the brothel.

When Isabella first appears asking for her help, Nanna is taken aback. Her dislike of Isabella soon subsides as Nanna realizes that she has an opportunity to profit off of the situation. Just like her father, Nanna agrees to take Isabella's place in exchange for a profit, allowing Isabella to both save her brother and keep her chastity. In the end, however, Nanna, just like her father, is torn down by this choice as she is assaulted and violated by all the soldiers in the prison and the profit is taken by the owner of the brothel.

Upon seeing the outcome of the situation in the final scene, Nanna recites the poem "Although both live, one shall sit down to eat,/ The other slave to furnish him with meat./ And if one's free to choose his own abode,/ The other's free to put him on the road./ You'd see the difference in their liberation,/ If you but knew their different destination," (p275) in reference to her father, Callas, and the landowner, who has been released. Nanna's words bring to light the oppressive fate that Callas has been unable to escape and, through them, Brecht suggests that perhaps, had Callas decided to follow his ideals instead of his desires, he might have ended up in a different situation.

Throughout the course of *Roundheads and Peakheads*, Brecht presents the audience with pairs of characters facing similar problems. In every case, one chooses to favor choices that lead to a gain in power or prestige, while the other chooses to stand as close to their morals and ideals as they can in the situation. In the end, the most successful characters in the play are the ones who have found a balance of power and morality that not only allows them to survive, but to be in a well-to-do position and style of life. Through this, Brecht suggests to the audience that one should not try to overdo either side of the scale, but rather attempt to find a perfect balance.

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