

## Howard Brenton and the Improbable Revival of the Brechtian History Play<sup>1</sup>

In a 2004 interview re-examining the possibilities and limitations of political theatre, dramatist David Edgar claimed that the so-called Brechtian history play, “set in foreign countries and/or the past, as a way of looking at the present,” had ceased to be a viable model. “That connection no longer works,” he said, “because the architecture that made that connection is now discredited” (48). Such architecture was, of course, Marxism, and on that point it is difficult to disagree with Edgar’s sobering assessment of the post-Cold War zeitgeist. However, the mid-2000s also saw the unexpected return to mainstream British stages of one of Edgar’s most audacious contemporaries, Howard Brenton, who arguably has been producing highly popular ‘Brechtian’ history plays. Focusing on two of Brenton’s recent works – *In Extremis: The Story of Abelard and Heloise* (2006) and *Anne Boleyn* (2010), both produced at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre in London – this article examines how this genre, favoured by radical playwrights post-1968, has been recast for a twenty-first century audience more sceptical of ideological discourses. Brecht’s historicisation, in the sense of “judging a particular social system from another social system’s points of view” (*The Messingkauf Dialogues* 103), was indeed underpinned by a Marxist belief in historical progress, but its emphasis on alternative courses of action also embraces the non-teleological openness which characterises the survival of political theatre today. Brenton has returned to history (and to Brecht) as part of his long-term search for a type of dramaturgy capable of addressing public concerns. In the process, I would argue, he is also highlighting the self-transforming powers of the modern project against the postmodernist milieu.

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<sup>1</sup> Sections of this article have been adapted from my (unpublished) doctoral study: Botham, Paola. “Redefining Political Theatre in Post-Cold War Britain (1990-2005): An Analysis of Contemporary British Political Plays”. PhD Thesis. Coventry University, 2009.

When *55 Days*, a play that traces the unsettling period preceding the execution of Charles I, opened at the Hampstead Theatre in London in October 2012, *Guardian* critic Michael Billington reacted with this statement: “Howard Brenton is turning into the history man” (1140). Michael Coveney went even further on the website *What's On Stage*, declaring that “the re-birth of Howard Brenton as a substantial historical dramatist [...] is one of the great theatre stories of our time”. This enthusiastic remark is hardly an exaggeration. In terms of scope, Brenton's recent work spans all the way from biblical times in *Paul* (National Theatre, 2005) through the mid-twentieth century in *Drawing the Line* (Hampstead Theatre, 2013) and *Never So Good* (National Theatre, 2008) to contemporary global history in *#aiww: The Arrest of Ai Wei Wei* (Hampstead Theatre, 2013). In terms of impact, *55 Days* follows the successful path started at the Globe with *In Extremis* and *Anne Boleyn*, both of which have been already revived (in 2007 and 2012, respectively).<sup>2</sup> The aforementioned reviews contain other useful comments that merit further consideration. Coveney reminds us that Brenton's fascination with history is nothing new, as “you can trace the evolution, from his earliest, scabrous plays about public figures and murderers,” while Billington stresses that “like Brecht, Brenton also uses the past as a means of examining the present” (1140).

### **Brenton's History**

After a long absence from the stage, the opportunity to work at the Globe represented an exciting prospect for Brenton, who regards the venue as a “democratic space” highly appropriate for the public theatre he has always strived to create but saw declining at the start of the new century. Writing in 2007 about the reconstructed Elizabethan/Jacobean venue, he said: “It may encourage playwrights to turn from the solipsism of individual alienation that has

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<sup>2</sup> Both plays were also toured by ETT (English Touring Theatre Company), *Anne Boleyn* in 2012 and *In Extremis* in 2014, albeit with the more box office-friendly title of *Eternal Love*.

dominated the best new writing of the past decade. If we follow Globe rules in playmaking, we can rediscover public optimism” (“Playing to the Crowd”). Brenton’s output as a whole oscillates between collective dreams and individual needs, but ‘public optimism,’ which is certainly a feature of his recent history plays (despite their protagonists’ personal fate) has only been found later in his career. This can be linked with a rediscovery of Brechtian drama in general and, as John Bull points out, with one of Brecht’s works in particular: *Life of Galileo*, “the most contemporary in its resonance, not the least reason being that it is a play that poses questions continually but resolutely refutes all attempts to provide answers” (179).<sup>3</sup>

Brenton was the first author of his generation to offer a version of *Galileo* in 1980 (both David Hare and David Edgar have since contributed their own) and this considerably altered his view on Brecht: “I used to say something fatuous like ‘I’m a Left anti-Brechtian’, to avoid having to think about his influence. With others, I was trying to write an epic theatre which was contemporary, not parable-like” (*Hot Irons* 63). After seeing his own *Galileo* performed at the National Theatre, however, Brenton came to the conclusion that Brecht was “the great playwright of our century” (64) and he even rewrote Galileo’s story for the late twentieth century in *The Genius* (Royal Court Theatre, 1983). Janelle Reinelt, in turn, considers Brenton the British dramatist who more than anyone “epitomizes the Brechtian legacy” (*After Brecht* 17), despite his early protestations. Although Brenton was conscious that in the 1970s he and his contemporaries had created their own “British epic theatre,” he then associated this form not so much with Brecht as with the home-grown Jacobean tradition (Preface to *Plays One* xi), which might also explain his later interest in the Globe. In any case, the history play – common to Jacobean and Brechtian – was also vital to post-1968 left-leaning playwrights in Britain, who were developing new forms of historical drama in synergy with the fresh historiographical

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<sup>3</sup> Bull persuasively connects the figures of Galileo and Tyndale – in both Brenton’s and Edgar’s recent portrayals – as standard bearers for the modern written culture, which is currently being threatened in the theatre (perhaps Edgar has created a contemporary Brechtian history play after all). In structural terms, however, Brenton’s medieval play *In Extremis* is closer to Brecht’s masterpiece than *Anne Boleyn*.

approaches emerging at the time. As Siân Adiseshiah explains, the challenge to the “liberal historical consensus” and the “reconstitution of hidden historical narratives” were shared objectives for socialist dramatists and New Left historians in the 1970s, both of whom resisted viewing the past as “bracketed off from [...] the present” (95).

Richard H. Palmer summarises the differences between ‘old’ and ‘new’ history (and, by extension, ‘old’ and ‘new’ history plays) thus:

At least as defined by the New Historians, Old History consists principally of a narrative, chronologically organized and presented as objective fact, of political and military events, whose importance is determined by the dominant hegemony, and of the men who shaped these events, all seen from a Eurocentric viewpoint. [...] The New Historians reject the possibility of objectivity, distrust the effectiveness of narrative as a device for analyzing history, stress the relative unimportance of chronology in understanding history, discredit the significance of political and military activities to the majority of people, question the power of individuals to shape events, repudiate the emphasis given in past histories to largely masculine activities, and repudiate the bias of an exclusively European viewpoint. (12-13)

As a result of this shift, biographical and/or seemingly ‘objective’ histories were challenged by specific interpretations, particularly Marxist and feminist ones. According to D. Keith Peacock, whose seminal 1991 study charts the ‘radical’ or ‘alternative’ history play,<sup>4</sup> the historical analyses that informed many performances produced in this period marked a change even from the models available immediately before: “political dramatists [...] began to move away from that utopian socialism or anarchism which had been communicated in the historical drama of the 1960s, towards a more politically self-conscious and radically revolutionary socialism and Marxism” (67). However, Peacock also concedes that “unwilling to view history merely in political and economic terms,” they searched for a theatrical formula able to convey “the inter-relationship of private and public experience” (59). This description is particularly relevant for

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<sup>4</sup> For a more recent taxonomy of the history play, cf. Berninger.

Brenton, whose work has critiqued not only his early sympathies with the Situationist movement<sup>5</sup> (derived from Anarchism) but, subsequently and conversely, the excessive determinism of Marx's original doctrine.

In his first 'mainstream' play *Magnificence* (Royal Court Theatre, 1973), part of Brenton's purpose was to break with so-called humanist conventions, which also characterise the traditional (biographical) history play. "Humanists have to believe that people basically love each other and an anarchist doesn't," he announced. "I'm not saying that one shouldn't be loving but that humanist ideas have become totally corrupt and their value has been wrecked by the people who run things" ("Disrupting the Spectacle" 23). In the theatre, the humanist tradition as Brenton perceived it was "always conservative [...] always with an attitude of dignified suffering," implying that the hero's position is the correct one. Consequently, in *Magnificence* he wanted to create a protagonist who "was manifestly wrong [...] his passion is right, but his actions are ill-judged and romantic" ("Petrol Bombs" 18). The character in question is Jed, who attempts to assassinate a Tory politician with a bomb that in the end goes off by accident, killing both of them, and who embodies Brenton's own disillusionment with Situationism. His friend Cliff, lamenting the "waste" of Jed's anger (*Magnificence* 106), represents the more rational – if orthodox – Marxist stance the playwright adopted in the mid-1970s. Yet, despite Brenton's intentions, "Cliff's relative silence gives the stage to Jed, and the play becomes simply his tragedy, its 'humanist structure' intact" (Boon 80).

Brenton did manage to avoid the dominance of the individual character by turning to history in *The Churchill Play* (Nottingham Playhouse, 1974), *Weapons of Happiness* (National Theatre, 1976) and *The Romans in Britain* (National Theatre, 1980), all of which fit Peacock's delineation of the 'radical' history play. Brenton's particular take on the genre heightened the

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<sup>5</sup> Inspired by Guy Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle*, the Situationists aimed at producing cultural disruption. However, as Brenton acknowledged in 1989, "[w]hen the May '68 dream of mass revolt, of a popular, celebratory transformation of Society proved to be merely that, a dream, it decayed into the nightmare of handfuls of 'urban terrorists', the Angry Brigade and the Red Army Faction" (rpt. in *Hot Irons* 42).

combination of “shock techniques”, “iconoclasm” and “demythification” with the “epic historical approach” that characterised the dramaturgy of this period (Peacock 114). In *The Churchill Play*, a caricatured Winston Churchill raises from the grave in a play-within-a-play performed by political prisoners from a dystopian near future; in *Weapons of Happiness*, the Czechoslovakian politician Josef Frank, executed for ‘treason’ in 1952, reappears in a present-day British factory occupation, and *The Romans in Britain* juxtaposes ancient imperialism to the British presence in Northern Ireland, ending its first act with Julius Caesar “in a jeep with Roman soldiers costumed in military uniforms of the 1970s” (Palmer 180). Given Brenton’s use of meta-theatrical devices and his drastic disruption of chronology, Palmer places most of his output within the category of the “deconstructionist and postmodern” history play (171-81). Although I would question this assumption below, it testifies to Brenton’s relentless interrogation of any kind of dogma. With *The Romans in Britain*, which generated scandal for the wrong reasons – not its political provocation but the male rape scene which triggered a court action by pro-censorship campaigner Mary Whitehouse – Brenton thought he had reached the limits of the epic style (qtd. in Boon 212). By 1992 he was convinced that this form had “died on us”, yet he did not mourn: “We need new ways of dramatising what people are thinking and feeling out there. Ironically, we could become rebels against the official orthodoxy we ourselves helped to make” (rpt. in *Hot Irons* 89-90).

Key to Brenton’s evolution at this point was his re-engagement with personal dilemmas. In the difficult decade of the 1980s his plays became “more localised in content and form” (Boon 2013), allowing space for individual development. Rather surprisingly in the light of the desperate political climate, Brenton’s final artistic response was the production of ‘Three Plays for Utopia’ at the Royal Court in 1988. The season included *Sore Throats* (originally staged in

1979), *Bloody Poetry* (a history play about the romantic poets Shelley and Byron,<sup>6</sup> originally staged in 1984) and *Greenland*, a project on which he had been working for seven years. In moving from dystopia to utopia, he was facing the decisive task of articulating a clear political vision. Yet for all its imaginative and political courage, *Greenland* suffers from the lack of historicity which almost inevitably comes with the utopian genre.<sup>7</sup> Michael Evenden reads *Greenland* and other British plays from this period as a direct retort to the right-wing triumphalism that would lead to Fukuyama's 1989 proclamation of the 'end of history'. He shows that left-wing playwrights were trying to counter this discourse by means of theatrical experimentation, particularly with time, but he argues that *Greenland* only replaces one "stasis" with another:

In recuperating the naive utopian tradition, complete with its rejection of historical contingency, fragility, and mutability in favor of a fantasy of a fixed plenitude, Brenton foregrounds the not-so-secret contradiction of classical Marxist eschatology – that the goal, or end, of dialectical materialism is the cessation of the dialectic in the worker's state. Fukuyama is not the only one who dreamed the end of history. (106)

Strangely, by highlighting the limitations of orthodox historical materialism *Greenland* pointed to the renewed necessity of searching for more appropriate forms of contemporary political theatre. Brenton's 'Greenlanders' may have reached a state of final contentment, but the playwright certainly hadn't. Like most of his generation, after the fall of the Berlin wall he turned to Eastern Europe and even employed previously dismissed 'psychological' strategies (*Hot Irons* 89). He then reverted back to uncomplicated satire as a critical response to the rise of New Labour, to the dismay of the critics. Reinelt suggests that his temporary absence from

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<sup>6</sup> Although the play creates a collective biography that includes Mary Shelley and Clare Claremont, Peacock considers it still a "male-focused exploration of the political features of that short period when the poets and their mistresses attempted [...] a new way of living" (160-61). This gender perspective has arguably shifted in Brenton's later work, as discussed below.

<sup>7</sup> Brenton himself is aware of this. His character Severan-Severan self-harms because the utopian world of *Greenland* does not lend itself to dialectical thinking.

the stage following this moment and his redirection to television (as a scriptwriter for the BBC popular spy series *Spooks*) was partly motivated by harsh reviews (“The ‘Rehabilitation’” 168). Nevertheless, by then he had already produced the first version of *In Extremis*, which – together with *Paul*, another play about Christianity – would mark his successful return to the big, public theatres. So, while his first shake-up of political theatre forms took him to a utopian future, he is now returning to the past, but not necessarily as before.

### “Here and Now”

Commenting on Brenton’s *Anne Boleyn* and Edgar’s *Written on the Heart* (RSC, 2011), two plays that conclude (chronologically speaking) with the preparation of the King James Bible four centuries ago, Bull ponders whether these political playwrights, “whose earlier work had largely grounded in the here and now”, could be seen as simply ‘retreating’ into history (170). In Brenton’s case, the fundamental difference between his recent treatment of Anne Boleyn and that of historical characters during the heyday of the ‘radical’ history play is clear. This time, says Bull, “his intent is not to debunk or deflate,” rather,

His play follows a trajectory begun with *Never So Good* [...], where the Conservative Prime Minister who had been in power through some of playwright’s most formative years (1957-1963) had received a far more sympathetic treatment than might have been expected from the example of Brenton’s earlier work. (172)

Is this, then, conclusive evidence that the Brechtian prescription for connecting past and present is bankrupt, as Edgar feared? Or has the political history play – relevant to the ‘here and now’ – been successfully revived for a new audience?

When the revised version of *In Extremis* (originally conceived at the University of California, Davis, in 1997) opened at the Globe in 2006, British critics compared it favourably with the last account of Abelard and Heloise’s twelfth-century love story seen in London, a 1970 play by Ronald Millar (who was one of Thatcher’s speech writers) famous only,



according to Paul Taylor of the *Independent*, for “the legendary nude scene by Diana Rigg and Keith Mitchell” (958). If some reviewers were expecting even more controversy from the author of *The Romans in Britain*, this is not what they found. *Time Out* printed: “‘In Extremis’ [...] is itself not without a certain shock factor: there’s vomiting, masturbation and a lusty bit of genital mutilation, but it is still pretty tame by comparison with the Globe’s current production of ‘Titus Andronicus’” (Shore 958). What Brenton offered instead, according to the *Evening Standard*, was “an admirable equilibrium [of] the elements of sexual desire, non-conformism and philosophical ideology that fuelled the couple’s relationship” (Mountford 957), themes that would later resurface in *Anne Boleyn*.

*In Extremis* starts with the rise of Peter Abelard as a philosopher in Paris and the beginning of the passionate relationship with his pupil Heloise, then only seventeen years old but his intellectual equal. Abelard becomes a dangerous figure because he preaches the application of Aristotelian logic to theology and the lovers cause scandal with their sexual encounters out in the countryside. Abelard is convinced that understanding faith will make it stronger, but the influential ascetic monk Bernard of Clairvaux, with the Church’s hierarchy, thinks his teachings “will only weaken belief” (Brenton, *In Extremis* 35). Eventually, Abelard’s enemies castrate him, and the couple separate to take their vows. The third act occurs twenty years later, when Bernard accuses Abelard of heresy causing his excommunication, but he is pardoned before falling fatally ill. After his death, the aged Abbess Heloise defiantly tells Bernard “You’ve lost, you know,” showing him a Penguin copy of hers and Abelard’s letters “eight hundred and fifty years from now” (89-90). This mischievous anachronism, a ‘radical’ device Brenton still employs, is a rare parabolic moment in a play that does not exaggerate its connection with the present and, in the view of *Daily Telegraph*’s Dominic Cavendish, even depicts the main conflict between Abelard and Bernard with “a blessed even-handedness” (959).

If the above praise might have been, paradoxically, enough to dampen Brenton's reputation as iconoclast and debunker of myths, more probing still was the charge levelled at him by Kate Bassett in the *Independent on Sunday*. The critic objected to Brenton's portrayal of Heloise as a sexually eager heroine when the letters themselves suggest that she "had on occasion resisted sex and been threatened with blows by Abelard". She concludes: "Perhaps the accusation of mythologising – directed at [her uncle] Fulbert and Bernard by Heloise – should be applied to Brenton's own playwriting processes" (959).<sup>8</sup> To be fair, the passage from Abelard's letter that Bassett quotes was available on the 2006 production programme, together with excerpts from Heloise's letters that justify Brenton's treatment of the character as extraordinarily unconventional for her time. In a section paraphrased in the play, Heloise wrote: "the name of wife may seem more sacred or more binding, but sweeter for me will always be the word mistress, or, if you will permit me, that of concubine or whore" (qtd. in "Partners in Guilt and Grace?" 2). However, it is not a secret that *In Extremis* deliberately combines history with the conventions of the literary love story, in particular Tristan and Iseult.<sup>9</sup> Brenton, former demythologiser, thus accepts the charge of mythologisation, although only to a certain extent: "I am, to a degree, mythologising their lives. But this is a process they encouraged in the way they wrote about themselves. They wanted to turn their lives into a song we would not forget" ("Howard Brenton's Passion").

The more structurally adventurous *Anne Boleyn* introduces anachronism from the very start, when the eponymous character enters "in her bloodstained execution dress" to speak directly to spectators and show them, first, her bible and then her severed head (11). It so begins with one of Brenton's old strategies to connect past and present: the contemporary 'resurrection' of a historical figure, considered by Peacock as a sophisticated technique which

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<sup>8</sup> Patrick Marmion in the *Mail on Sunday* made a similar complaint (960).

<sup>9</sup> The connection becomes explicit with a spark of anachronistic language towards the end of the play. In the last scene Abelard and Heloise are shown together, she is reading Thomas' *Tristan*. Abelard comments: "A trashy love story? [...] Though I must admit the brothers in my care have a copy" (76).

“displays the very mechanics of historical drama and reveals with dramatic economy that history is the artefact of those who create it” (114). In this case, however, the effect may be more festive than critical, as noted in Robert Shore’s *Metro* review: “With characteristic boldness, [...] Brenton gets the unpleasantness out of the way at the outset [...] Suddenly death doesn’t seem so bad or final after all” (842). As Cavendish put it in the *Telegraph*, the play “argues for Anne’s story to be read not as textbook tragedy but as something far more uplifting. Even though she failed to provide that much-needed male heir, Boleyn [...] assisted in the birth of the Church of England” (841). Given Brenton’s obvious sympathy for his protagonist, it would be easy to dismiss the play as a backward step towards conventional historical drama, yet – as Billington points out – this is, in fact, “a radically revisionist work that argues that Anne was more Protestant martyr than sexual predator” (841). Considering the measure of misogyny that characterises standard portraits of Boleyn as a whore or a witch, Brenton is allying himself here with another ‘radical’ branch, namely, the feminist history play, which “uncovers what has been hidden, straightens what has been twisted, and/or recalls what has been forgotten about the past of women’s communities” (Kelly 660). Although Henry VII’s second wife falls within the category of “‘major [female] players,’ [...] often queens, who exercised some political power” that typically populate pre-feminist history plays about women (Palmer 134), Brenton’s avoidance of the (personal) tragic mould in favour of emphasising Boleyn’s role as a Reformation campaigner ensures a collective dimension to the drama.

Brenton does not hide his admiration for Boleyn. In the prologue to the published text, he lists a number of divergent historical interpretations and then openly reveals where he stands: “I wrote the play to celebrate her life and her legacy as a great English woman who helped change the course of our history” (8). The future influence of the dead queen is underlined in the play by having her ghost teasing not only the audience but also King James I at the beginning of the seventeenth century, as he prepares to negotiate with opposing religious

factions which would eventually agree on an authorised English translation of the Bible. Apart from the juxtaposition of three different historical timeframes – the past (Anne’s life from an early meeting with Henry at the French court to her execution), the ‘present’ (James conjuring up Anne’s ghost by checking Elizabeth’s possessions after his coronation in 1603) and the ‘future’ (Anne’s direct address to the audience) – Brenton orchestrates two fictional meetings between Anne and her religious mentor William Tyndale, the other soon-to-be-executed visionary figure. Set in Farnham Forest in the presence of “COUNTRY PEOPLE, *poorly dressed*” (*Anne Boleyn* 41), these encounters contribute to “widen the social scope of the play” (Bull 174) while also raising Boleyn’s historical stature. Yet even Tyndale, on religious principle, finally rejects her pragmatic interpretation of the scriptures:

ANNE. Is there any hope you may change your opinion?

TYNDALE. It’s not my opinion, it’s God’s Word.

ANNE. But if... if the King... put me aside, declared Catherine his lawful wife, she’d have her Catholic way. She’s a very strong woman.

TYNDALE. As are you.

ANNE. She’d give the English Church back to the Pope. Do you want that?

TYNDALE. No. Course not.

ANNE. Then join us. Guide the King. Help us build a new Jerusalem.

TYNDALE. Your Majesty. Against what the world says, I think you have Christ within you. But the King must take back his true wife. (95-96)

Despite Brenton’s atheism, it is not surprising that he has chosen faith as a key subject for these plays. Religion has undeniably re-entered the contemporary political arena, and there is also a biographical connection, Brenton being the son of a policeman turned Methodist minister. Talking about his work in 1975, Brenton revealed an aspect that recurs in his otherwise diverse output: “I’m very interested in people who could be called saints, perverse saints, who try to drive a straight line through very complex situations, and usually become honed down to the point of death. [...] Many of my characters are like that” (“Petrol Bombs”

12). Some of these characters are fictional embodiments of particular ideas, like Jed in *Magnificence*, yet most of them are actual historical figures. Apart from John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, the eclectic list includes the serial killer John Christie (*Christie in Love*, 1969), Captain Robert Scott (*Scott of the Antarctic*, 1971), Violette Szabo (*Hitler Dances*, 1972), Percy Shelley (*Bloody Poetry*) and, more recently, Saint Paul, who becomes simply “Paul” in Brenton’s secularised play. However, Abelard, Heloise and Anne Boleyn do not belong to the same species. As Reinelt emphasises, the intense passion of the protagonists for each other in *In Extremis* is matched by a paradoxical passion for reason (“The Rehabilitation”) that eventually destroys them. Anne Boleyn, in turn, is indeed a devoted lover and a fervent protestant, but she keeps a cool head in court until – literally in this case – she loses it. The distinctive nature of these later characters can be better understood if the Globe plays are seen as “Enlightenment plays,” which is how Brenton himself describes *In Extremis* (“The Brilliant Couple” 9).

Complicating analyses of his work as postmodernist (hence, anti-Enlightenment), Brenton wrote the original version of *In Extremis* in America to address the rise of Christian fundamentalism, even before the religious right entered the White House. By the time the play was produced in London, after 9/11 and half a decade into the so-called war on terror, the ancient battles between faith and reason fought by Abelard and Heloise had gained a frightful topicality. Historicisation in the Brechtian sense is central to the meaning of the play inasmuch as Brenton’s interest in Abelard and Heloise sprung from them being “way ahead of their time”. He claims that the twelfth century witnessed a kind of Renaissance “200 years before it all actually began” and that Abelard, in his quest for understanding God through reason and the knowledge of nature, was a precursor of the Enlightenment six centuries in advance (Howard Brenton Interview). Anne Boleyn, as portrayed in Brenton’s prologue to the play, was also “ahead”: “She could not know the future, of course. But she helped detonate a religious

upheaval which culminated a century later in the Civil War, the breaking of divine royal power and the establishment of our Parliament” (8), which was to become the subject of Brenton’s subsequent work *55 Days*. In both cases, the short-lived historical moment of possibility experienced by the characters was soon suppressed by hierarchical forces. But in the long run there is cause for “public optimism,” to use Brenton’s own phrase: both Abelard and Anne lose their lives but win the argument. In other words, the overall narrative (beyond intradiegetic experiments with time) is still one of human progress by trial and error, albeit impossibly slow and plagued by struggle and co-option. Moreover, this progress is always a question of potential, not of teleological certainty. The prospect of actualising that potential, by no means assured, depends precisely on the possibilities of collective development, that is, on the possibilities of learning from history.

Brenton has always based his history plays on thorough research. Even the iconoclastic *The Romans in Britain* was underpinned by rigorous investigation. As Philip Roberts highlights in relation to this play, “Brenton’s account is verified by the standard works on the period and [...] his selection of detail for dramatic purposes neither distorts history nor manufactures it” (qtd. in Boon 182). What separates his current plays from the earlier ones is thus not a matter of methodological approach – cautious and meticulous in both cases – but of emphasis. Curiously, Brenton was more suspicious of history in the last century: while before he aimed at demythologising received wisdom, he is now prepared to add a dose of mythology and/or romanticism himself. This, in my view, relates to another significant change. Although Brenton’s dramaturgy has always preserved a touch of the fringe’s anarchic energy, he seems now reconciled with the modern humanism rejected in his younger years, albeit maintaining a captivating tension between rational ideas and extreme passions. In philosophical terms, this can be interpreted as a move away from pure ideology critique to a more affirmative position, where Heloise’s “war of ideas” (*In Extremis* 46) is allowed to take centre stage. If most of

Brenton's earlier output dismissed humanism as a cover-up (or a symptom of false consciousness, in Marxist terminology), he now takes humanism seriously as the basis for imagining a better future, akin to the open communication advocated by the Frankfurt School's second and third generations.<sup>10</sup> This does not represent a withdrawal into some sort of transcendental idealism, but a version of historical materialism rooted in the intersubjective structures of rationality. Abelard's last exchange with Bernard embodies the aspiration to connect human inquiry to both moral and material needs:

ABELARD. Cannot you see your cruelty? This staring at trees and stones, and letting your men starve and crawl round the fields of Clairvaux eating grass, stripping the white from their teeth... what way to God is that? Is your faith a living death?

BERNARD. And impregnating young women in locked rooms while teaching them holy scripture, and fornicating upon holy altars, is that a way to faith?

ABELARD (*suddenly desperately sick*). We must find Him within us. With all our senses. Body and mind.

BERNARD. God is dead in you, Peter.

ABELARD. Humanity is dead in you, Bernard. (86)

In his Globe history plays, Brenton employs dialectics not to confirm a philosophy of history but as a method for open argumentation, both within the play itself and between the play and its public. It can be argued that Brecht in his most complex work, *Galileo*, was already doing that. Defending (neo)Marxist thinking against postmodernist anti-Enlightenment philosophies, David Savran explicitly connects Brecht to the Frankfurt School's second generation, inasmuch as Galileo expresses their insight that "knowledge [...] aims to turn us all

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<sup>10</sup> The Frankfurt School's second generation rescued the emancipatory potential of modernity from the increasingly negative analysis carried out by the first (particularly in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). As the most prominent figure of this second generation, Habermas is credited with creating "a new Dialectic of Enlightenment – one which does full justice to the dark side of the Enlightenment legacy, explains its causes but nevertheless redeems and justifies the hope of freedom, justice and happiness which still stubbornly speaks to us" (Bernstein 31). For an illustrative work from the third generation, cf. Wellmer.

into doubters” (Brecht qtd. in Savran 280). An earlier reading of the play by Wolfgang Sohlich makes the same point eloquently: “Galileo’s belief in the gentle forces of reason [...] conveys the sense of using reason to think against the inherently determined power of reason, against the sacrificial violence of reason that takes itself for an absolute”. What Sohlich is describing are indeed the ‘self-transforming’ qualities of modernity:

After a century that, more than any other, has taught us the horror of existing unreason, the last remains of an essentialist trust in reason have been destroyed. Yet modernity, now aware of its contingencies, depends all the more on a procedural reason, that is, on a reason that puts itself on trial. (Habermas xii)

With their paradoxical ‘faith in reason’, Brenton’s new Enlightenment plays suggest not only a return to Brecht but also to the stubborn self-critical powers of the modern project. It is, perhaps, the playwright’s old anti-dogmatic instinct reacting against what have now become postmodernist orthodoxies.

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