New Books

Brecht and Tragedy: Radicalism, Traditionalism, Eristics. By Martin Revermann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. xvii + 474. £90/$120 Hb. Reviewed by David Barnett, University of York, david.barnett@york.ac.uk

Martin Revermann tackles a topic that, seemingly, requires little explication. In fragment B13 of Buying Brass, Brecht’s Philosopher observes, ‘The causes of a great many tragedies are outside the control of those who suffer them, or so it seems … [But] that which is human cannot be outside of humanity’s control.’ Brecht’s relation to tragedy is, as one might expect, a materialist one that seeks to dispel any sense of outside forces determining human behaviour. Revermann, himself a noted classicist, invites readers to probe Brecht’s position and reveals a great deal that derives from the lines I have quoted.

Before proceeding to the arguments themselves, I will linger on the book’s subtitle. Its first two terms are clear: as Revermann demonstrates, Brecht radically engages with various forms of traditionalism (from the Ancients, via Shakespeare, to Schiller and the Naturalists) to produce some remarkable dramatic and theoretical responses to what he perceives tragedy to entail. ‘Eristics’, however, is a term with which I was unfamiliar, and Revermann justifies it clearly in his Introduction as a ‘desire for something that is lacking’ (p. 6) which nonetheless includes ‘a certain degree of competitiveness’ (p. 7) and ‘productivity’ (p. 8). This is a well-chosen frame for the seventeen chapters that follow and articulates Brecht’s relation to tragedy fittingly.

The book, as the number of pages indicates, is comprehensive and reflects its author’s thorough engagement with his topic. Its three sections focus on Brecht’s intense year of engagement with tragedy, 1948, with a particular focus on his adaptation, staging and documentation of Antigone; Brecht’s positions with respect to tragic writers and traditions; and the reimagining and recasting of tragic tropes and devices in a selection of his plays. What characterizes all the sections is a critical rigour that is often supported by archival research. Thus when Revermann considers, for example, the presence of Aristotle in what he translates as the Small Organon for the Theatre, he not only offers insights into Brecht’s reception and construction of the philosopher in the influential treatise, but also notes some important absences and generalizations. The interpretation is also supported by a careful analysis of Brecht’s reading of The Poetics, featuring hitherto unpublished notes that Brecht made in his own copy. Indeed, Revermann offers several firsts for his readers, including fragments and essays that he has translated into English, and, even more significantly, all thirty-six colour photographs of Brecht’s production of Antigone in Chur, Switzerland, in 1948 – a first in any publication. Suffice it to say, they are a revelation.

A theme that runs through the book is Brecht’s somewhat easy understanding of the genre prior to his interventions as Schicksaltragödie, a tragedy of fate. This is a category that is entirely absent in Aristotle, but one Brecht developed from his reception of German idealist aesthetics and his experience of Leopold Jessner’s production of Oedipus in 1929. Revermann examines Brecht’s response to his own simplification and amply discusses just how ‘exceptionally varied and creative’ (p. 421) the playwright and practitioner was, finding not only a host of themes to explore, but also forms, in his limited knowledge of Greek tragedy, to engage with and repurpose. The insights into some of Brecht’s best-known works, such as The Good Person of Sezuan, Life of Galileo or Mother Courage and Her Children, as well as the little-known fragment The Judith of Shimoda, are fresh and lively.
Overall, the book appears to be pitched at postgraduates and researchers in that it mostly assumes knowledge of the plays and theoretical works under discussion, and some of Brecht’s terminology. For this reader, the only major lacuna in this exceptional monograph is a clear introductory survey of what tragedy might mean and how it developed over time, something only hinted at in various chapters. Without this reference point, ‘tragedy’ becomes something of a movable feast, and, while perhaps it was for Brecht, it still needs to be clearly articulated for the scholarly discussions that ensue. There is also an amount of repetition, but this is the product of the author’s desire for each chapter potentially to stand alone for readers (p. 9). Otherwise, the sheer breadth and depth of the study are exemplary and offer a cohesive and penetrating analysis of Brecht’s complex of responses to tragedy.

The Comic Storytelling of Western Japan: Satire and Social Mobility in Kamigata Rakugo. By M. W. Shores. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. xii + 261. £75/$99.99 Hb.

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Many comedians on Japanese television seem to hail from Osaka, sometimes referred to as Japan’s ‘second city’. In spite of the importance of humour to Osakan identity, its centuries-old comic storytelling tradition has largely escaped the attention of Western scholars. Matthew Shores’s groundbreaking study of Kamigata (Osaka) rakugo remedies this undeserved neglect. Lecturer in Japanese at the University of Sydney, Shores spent over a decade studying rakugo, a genre of professional comic storytelling that has drawn Japan’s urban masses since the early modern period (1600–1868) and continues to attract audiences to this day.

Shores based this study of Osaka rakugo on historical research on the art from its origins as street performance in the early seventeenth century to the present; on insights gathered from performing and from participant observation as an unofficial disciple of Hayashiya Somemaru IV; and on immersion in video and audio recordings, story texts and attendance at live performances. The introduction briefly defines rakugo as a whole, and explains some of the features that distinguish the Kamigata tradition, such as the fact that it is hade, flamboyant, and that its stories depict eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Osaka merchant culture and parody its ethos. The first chapter provides background on this merchant culture and on Osaka identity, key factors in understanding the repertoire and Shores’s argument regarding the nature of its satire.

Shores’s thorough history of Kamigata rakugo, the first to appear in English, is a welcome addition to Japanese theatre history literature. His history includes information on individual storytellers, as well as translations of a few published comic story texts. A discussion of the rise of the Yoshimoto entertainment company and its preference for booking two-person manzai comedy acts more than rakugo in its theatres helps explain some of the challenges faced by Kamigata rakugo performers in the twentieth century. Shores brings his history chapter into the present with a section on how Kamigata rakugo has benefited from television, CDs and DVDs. (A timely ‘author’s preface’ describes how some artists responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.)

The chapter on what constitutes a Kamigata rakugo story considers elements of performance practice such as music and props. It focuses on Kamigata rakugo’s textual characteristics, i.e. its recurring characters, the length of stories, intertextuality (citation of kabuki and other performance genres within certain stories), and what he calls the ‘realism’ (pp. 120–4) of storytellers’ depictions of Osaka merchant households. Manzai has come to be identified with Osaka, and Shores helpfully devotes a few pages to explaining its relation to rakugo.