The Caucasian Chalk Circle

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BERTOLT BRECHT

The German playwright, poet, and theatre director Bertolt Brecht is perhaps best known as a pioneer of epic theatre—plays and musicals which, in stark opposition to naturalist or realist drama, often employ choruses and narration to highlight the artifice of the theatre and to clearly and methodically describe for the audience both the characters' innermost thoughts and the major themes and lessons of the work itself. Brecht began writing drama in 1918. Heavily influenced by the violence and injustice of the First World War, his early work had strong anarchist overtones, and rejected both societal norms and artistic ones. Brecht made a name for himself in the Berlin theatre scene, and his career soared to great heights with the success of *The Threepenny Opera*—but in 1933, as the Nazis rose to power, Brecht fled Germany and sought refuge in Denmark, Sweden, and Finland while he waited for approval to live and work in the United States. As a writer in exile, he composed some of his most famous work: *Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* were all written abroad. Brecht's career was again threatened when he was named as a suspicious individual during the "Red Scare" in the early years of the Cold War, due to his Marxist leanings and his outspokenness about his political views. In 1949, Brecht returned to Berlin and established the Berliner Ensemble. He lived in the Mitte neighborhood of Berlin until his death in 1956. The Berliner Ensemble continues to perform innovative and groundbreaking work to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Caucasian Chalk Circle was written while Brecht was in exile during the Second World War. Having witnessed the violence, injustice, and destruction of two world wars in a span of under twenty years, Brecht set *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* against a background of war, corruption, and political tumult. The play is a rarity among Brecht's compositions in that it ends on a happy note, as goodness shines through and justice is restored, at least for Grusha and her adopted son. This hint of optimism, and the triumph of good over evil and reason over chaos, perhaps speaks to Brecht's Marxist politics and his desire to witness true revolution, lasting change, and an end to the systems of violence and corruption which oppress the poor, the downtrodden, and those targeted by unjust regimes.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Brecht is perhaps the most famous writer of epic theatre, but he was not its sole creator. The poet Vladimir Myakovsky (who is quoted in the prologue of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*) and the director Erwin Piscator were instrumental in developing and disseminating the ideals and aesthetics of epic theatre. Piscator, as the director of a major theatre company in Berlin, urged writers to address actual societal and existential issues, and would then stage the written works in a style which incorporated sometimes heavy-handed narration and description (such as Brecht's use of Arkadi and his chorus of singers in *Chalk Circle*). This approach to writing theatre would come to influence work by later playwrights, such as Augusto Boal, who coined the term "The Theatre of the Oppressed" in the 1950s. Boal devised a mode of analyzing and producing theatre which leaned heavily on audience interaction and the creation of spectacle. The drama of Caryl Churchill, a major British playwright still working today, and the films of Jean-Luc Godard, Hal Hartley, and Lars Von Trier have all been described as Brechtian in terms of their use of theatrical devices, direct address, and detached performances from their actors.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*
- **When Written:** 1944
- **Where Written:** United States
- **Literary Period:** Modernist
- **Genre:** Historical drama; Fable; Epic theatre
- **Setting:** Georgia, or "Grusinia"
- **Climax:** Azdak draws the titular chalk circle on the courtroom floor and instructs Natella and Grusha to engage in a tug-of-war over young Michael to determine who should be given custody
- **Antagonist:** The Fat Prince; Natella; wealth; injustice

EXTRA CREDIT

Alternate Ending. In the Chinese play which serves as the source text for Brecht's play, it is the child's birth mother who is unable to harm him during the test of the chalk circle, and who is awarded custody in the end. Brecht's play, which features themes of class warfare and the corruption of the wealthy, ends with Azdak granting custody to Grusha, the servant girl whose goodness and selflessness outshine the vanity and narcissism of the child's birth mother.

PLOT SUMMARY

It is the summer of 1945. Amidst the ruins of a Caucasian village which has been decimated by the Second World War, the members of two Collective Farms meet with a delegation sent from the State Reconstruction Commission. The Collective Goat Farm Rosa Luxemburg, forced to vacate their lush valley when Hitler's armies approached, now want their land back. Meanwhile, the Collective Fruit Farm Galinsk wants the valley assigned to them. Members from each farm present their case to the delegation, and finally a member of the Fruit Farm Galinsk announces plans for an enormous project to irrigate the valley, grow more fruit, and plant vineyards. She shows her blueprints to the delegation, who marvel at the ambitious plans. Even the Rosa Luxemburg farmers agree that the valley should go to the fruit farmers, as they will put the land to better use. The delegation, along with the members of both farms, decide to spend the night celebrating this triumph of reason with a performance from the renowned singer Arkadi Tscheidse. Arkadi arrives and announces that he will perform an updated version of a very old Chinese legend called The Chalk Circle.

The play-within-a-play begins as Arkadi tells of a wealthy governor, Georgi Abashwili, who rules a city in Grunisia with his beautiful, vain wife Natella and pampered infant son Michael at his side. Though his country is at war, the Governor allows himself and his family many indulgences, such as a pair of permanently on-call doctors to attend to Michael and plans for a large expansion of the Governor's Palace. One Easter Sunday, Arsen Kazbeki—known as the Fat Prince—stages a coup, overthrowing the reviled Grand Duke and all his Governors. When Georgi is taken prisoner, his servants prepare the palace for a siege while his wife, Natella, is hurried away to safety. Natella has packed extravagantly for her flight from the city, and while she orders her servants to bring her even more clothes and finery from her bedchamber, the servant tasked with watching Michael sets the baby down on the ground in order to fetch Natella her things. Meanwhile, a servant-girl named Grusha and a soldier named Simon Shashava declare their love for one another amidst the chaos of the coup. As a **red sky** rises over the city, Simon gives Grusha a silver cross on a chain as a token of their engagement, and Natella flees, forced to leave her belongings behind. In the madness, however, Michael is left behind too. Grusha picks him up, and even though her fellow servants tell her to abandon the child—reminding her that the Fat Prince's Ironshirts will certainly be looking for him—Grusha carries him away from the palace toward safety.

Grusha bonds with Michael as the two of them make their way into the mountains. Grusha has very little money, and begs at the cottages she comes across for milk and shelter. At the home of a peasant woman and her husband, Grusha feels she can carry the child no farther, and abandons him on their doorstep. Grusha leaves, but soon runs into two Ironshirts and their Corporal, who ask her if she has heard of or seen a missing baby "from a good family," who is sure to be dressed in fine linens. Grusha, realizing that the men intend to harm Michael, panics and returns to the home of the peasant woman, whom she begs to remove the baby's fine linen swaddling and claim that he is her own child. When the Ironshirts arrive to ask Grusha why she ran away, the Corporal notices the child wrapped in fine linen, and the peasant woman panics and confesses that the child is not hers. As the Corporal makes to lift the child from his crib, Grusha knocks the Corporal over the head with a log. She once again takes Michael and runs. When Grusha arrives at a glacier which leads to the mountain villages, she finds that the bridge which allows passage over a deep ravine is in poor shape. Although the merchants gathered at the bridge warn Grusha that passage is dangerous, she hears the Ironshirts approaching, and runs across anyway. The Ironshirts arrive, but know they cannot cross the rotten bridge. Grusha takes Michael further into the mountains.

Grusha travels for seven days through the frigid mountains on the way to her brother's house. As she goes, she anticipates the warm welcome she will receive from her brother and his wife, and the delicious food that she and Michael will be served. When she arrives, though, she is desperate and weak, and her brother Lavrenti and his deeply religious wife Aniko question what Grusha is doing alone with a child. Though Aniko is skeptical of Grusha's presence in the house, Lavrenti allows her and Michael to stay. After six months, however, the snow has begun to melt, and Lavrenti tells Grusha that it is time for her and Michael to leave. Lavrenti has arranged for Grusha to marry the son of a local peasant woman. Grusha protests, as she is betrothed to Simon Shashava, but Lavrenti insists that this man will be her husband only on paper—he is sick, and very near death, and once he dies Grusha will inherit his land and his home. Grusha agrees to go along with her brother's plan. When she arrives at the home of her new husband-to-be, her new mother-in-law hurries the ceremony along, having hired a local monk to ensure that the marriage is made official as soon as possible, since her son is taking his last breaths. As more and more neighbors show up to observe the strange scene, some begin to gossip about the political unrest in Grusinia, saying that the Grand Duke has returned to power and all the soldiers will soon be coming home from war. Grusha, distressed, realizes—just as she has wed herself to another man—that this means Simon will soon be back. Just then, Grusha's new husband, Jussup, sits up from his deathbed, suddenly alive and alert.

As months go by, Grusha must deal with her new husband's distaste for her and for Michael, as well as his increasingly harsh demands. He taunts Grusha daily, and tells her that her beloved Simon will never come for her. As time passes, Michael

grows older, and Simon fades from Grusha's memory. One day, Grusha washes linens in a nearby stream while Michael plays with some of his friends from the village. Simon arrives at the river, and Grusha is overjoyed—though she breaks the sad news that she can never return to Nuka, as she has assaulted an Ironshirt and married another man. Simon, noticing a child's hat in the grass, asks if Grusha has a child. She replies that she does, but insists it is not hers. Simon tells Grusha to throw the cross he gave her into the stream, and leaves. Nearby, the children shout that a pair of Ironshirts have seized Michael, suspecting that he is the son and heir of the late Governor of Nuka. Grusha follows the soldiers back to the city, knowing she will face trial.

The singer Arkadi backtracks to tell the story of Azdak, the judge who will preside over Grusha's case for custody of Michael. Years ago, after sheltering an old man he believed to be a beggar, Azdak realized the old man was actually the recently-deposed Grand Duke. Filled with shame for having sheltered such a corrupt and reviled political figure, Azdak branded himself a traitor and turned himself in to the authorities in Nuka to be judged. When he got there, he found that, in the coup, all the judges had been hanged. The Ironshirts, thinking Azdak a just man, appointed him the new judge in Nuka. Since then, Azdak has made a name for himself as a nontraditional judge who often hears two or more cases at once, and delivers unlikely but nevertheless just verdicts. He becomes known throughout the land as "the poor man's magistrate." When the Grand Duke returns, however, and the Fat Prince is executed, Azdak fears that his unconventional methods and years of surprising decisions will come back to bite him. Instead, when Natella returns to Nuka to reclaim her husband's estates, she approaches Azdak to take on the case, and he willingly obliges.

In court in Nuka, Grusha reunites with her servant friends amidst continuing chaos and revolt. One of the palace cooks tells Grusha that she is lucky Azdak is hearing her case, explaining that Azdak is not a "real" judge, since he stands up for the poor. Simon appears, and offers to swear in court that he is the father of Grusha's child. Grusha nearly bumps into the Corporal she assaulted back at the foot of the mountains, but he does not recognize her. Natella arrives at court, flanked by lawyers and speaking openly of her hatred for the common people. Azdak finally takes his seat as the presiding judge and, after hearing Natella's testimony and accepting a bribe from her lawyers, implores Grusha to explain why the child should be given to her. Grusha replies simply that the child is hers, saying that she brought him up, clothed him, fed him, and taught him how to be friendly and hardworking. Natella's lawyers then bring up the issue of Michael's status as the Governor's heir, arguing that it's in Michael's best interest to inherit the Governor's estates.

Grusha, Simon, and the cook attempt to argue Grusha's case, but Azdak holds them all in contempt and fines them. Grusha accuses Azdak of being a hypocrite and a sycophant, and calls him a "drunken onion" and a "bribetaker." Azdak adjourns the case for fifteen minutes. He pulls Grusha aside to ask why she wouldn't want her son to grow up in the lap of luxury. Grusha does not answer, but Arkadi sings what she is thinking: if Michael grows up wealthy, he will grow up to be cruel. Michael is brought into the courtroom, and Azdak announces that he has devised a test which will allow him to determine the child's true mother. He draws a circle on the ground, places Michael in the middle of it, and instructs Grusha and Natella to each grab one of Michael's hands and pull. Whoever can yank the child from the circle is his true mother. When Azdak instructs the women to pull, Natella easily yanks Michael onto her side—Grusha does not pull at all. Grusha begs Azdak to allow her to keep the child just a little while longer, and Azdak orders the women to complete the test again. Again, Natella yanks Michael roughly from the circle, while Grusha cries that she cannot harm the child she has brought up from infancy. Thus, Azdak declares Grusha to be Michael's true mother, and advises her to take him and leave the city. Moreover, he declares that the Governor's estates will fall to the city, and will be converted into a playground for children. Natella faints, and is carried away by her lawyers. Azdak then removes his judge's robes and invites all present to join him outside for dancing and drinking. As his final act, he divorces Grusha from Jussup, allowing her and Simon the freedom to be together at last. As Michael, Simon, and Grusha dance, Azdak stands alone, "lost in thought." Arkadi sings his story's lesson, which mirrors the lesson of the peasant farmers in the prologue: "That what there is shall go to those who are good for it."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Grusha Vashnadze – The protagonist of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and an emblem of goodness, righteousness, and justice, the servant-girl Grusha represents Brecht's desire for a society built on the success and triumph of the lower classes over their wealthy and powerful overlords, as well as his desire for a world built on lovingkindness and compassion. When Grusha discovers that the noble infant Michael Abashwili has been abandoned by his mother Natella during the coup, Grusha reluctantly realizes that she must take the infant into her care if he is to survive. She flees with him into the mountains, pursued by the Fat Prince's soldiers, and though the child is a burden to her at first and she initially attempts to abandon him with a peasant-woman and her husband, Grusha realizes once again that she is the only one who can properly care for the child. Grusha is deeply concerned that Michael should grow up "right"—she wants to keep him away from the corruptive forces of wealth and power, and raise him to be just, good, and

hardworking. When the Fat Prince's regime is overturned and Natella sends soldiers to take Michael away from Grusha, Grusha stands trial against Natella and is eventually proclaimed the child's true mother after she refuses to cause him bodily harm during the test of the chalk circle. Azdak, a judge who stands up for society's poor, recognizes the depth of Grusha's commitment to Michael and her desire to keep him from corruption, and devises a test which (it is implied) he knows she will pass. Thus the play concludes with the triumph of the lower class as Grusha is reunited with her son as well as her betrothed, the soldier Simon Shashava. The play's narrator, Arkadi, thus proclaims "that what there is shall go to those who are good for it: children to the motherly, that they prosper." The play's overtly moralistic conclusion highlights the ways in which Grusha's character symbolizes not only motherhood in general, but the idea that responsibility should be given to those who have the greatest capacity for care and compassion.

Azdak – A village scrivener—or writer and handler of official and legal documents—who by a twist of fate is appointed judge in Nuka during the play's second half. After unwittingly sheltering the Grand Duke in the days following the Princes' coup, Azdak is so ashamed at having protected the reviled leader that he travels to Nuka, accompanied by his friend Shauwa, to turn himself in for treason. Once there, Azdak realizes that all the public officials have been killed, and the judge has been hanged. After squaring off against the Fat Prince's nephew in a mock trial to determine who was better suited to be the judge, Azdak is appointed judge by the Ironshirts despite the Fat Prince's nepotistic desire to appoint his own nephew. As a judge, Azdak becomes known throughout the country as an iconoclast who stands up for the poor. Although Azdak regularly accepts bribes from the rich, he rarely rules in favor of the wealthy, and often steps outside the bounds of law and precedent. In the trial between Grusha and Natella, Azdak accepts a bribe from Natella's sycophantic lawyers, but still rules in favor of Grusha after she passes the test of the chalk circle. At the end of the play, Azdak invites all present at the trial to join him for drinking and dancing, but while the others lose themselves in revelry, Azdak stands alone and inert, "lost in thought." Similarly, Azdak stands alone in the world of the play, a singular figure whose dedication to justice is, to many, difficult to understand or pin down. Azdak's arc ties in most directly with themes of corruption and justice vs. injustice, though he is certainly an arbiter of chaos and chance as well.

Arkadi Tscheidse – A renowned singer who has been brought to entertain the members of the dairy farm and the fruit farm as they gather together to celebrate the triumph of reason in their deliberations over which farm should be assigned dominion over a lush and fertile valley. Arkadi narrates the story of The Chalk Circle for the farmers, creating the play-within-a-play framework of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Arkadi's story of the Chalk Circle is essentially an extended parable which celebrates the decision the farmers came to—the moral being that things should be given to those who will take the best care of them. The fruit farmers would be the best stewards of the valley, and would cause it to flourish even further, just like Grusha, the peasant-girl who is the protagonist of the Chalk Circle myth, would be the best mother to the noble child Michael, whom she adopted after he was abandoned by his biological mother. Arkadi frequently relays the inner thoughts of the characters he sings about, and his songs create a direct link between the inner lives of the characters and his audience.

Natella Abashwili – The wife of Georgi Abashwili and a similarly vain and uncaring individual. Whereas her husband's main concern is an architectural project which will expand their lavish palace, Natella's main concern is her dressing and finery. When Georgi is captured and killed, Natella's servants and staff urge her to flee the palace with her infant son, Michael. Natella packs too much for the trip, stuffing several trunks with her finest garments and accessories. When her servants tell her she can't possibly take everything with her, Natella begins fussing over which of her things she should bring along, and instructs a servant-girl who is holding the child to set him down and fetch Natella a pair of **saffron shoes** she left behind inside the palace. When Natella sees the **red sky** overhead, signaling fire from the peasants' riots, she allows herself to be swept away from the palace, leaving her child behind. Later in the play, after the old regime has been restored to power, Natella orders her soldiers to hunt down her child and bring him back to her. His adoptive mother, Grusha, follows Michael back to Nuka after he is taken away by Natella's soldiers. There, Grusha and Natella stand trial against one another. During the course of the trial, it is revealed that Natella only wants her son back because he stands to inherit his father's estates. When the unusual judge Azdak proposes that the two women place Michael in the center of a chalk circle and yank on one arm each to try pulling Michael out of the circle and thus be proclaimed his true mother, Natella pulls on her child while Grusha refuses to cause the boy any bodily harm. Grusha is declared Michael's true mother, and Natella faints when Azdak rules that all of Michael's inheritance will be dissolved, and will instead go to the city. Thus, Natella represents themes of corruption, injustice, and the vanity of the wealthy and powerful.

Georgi Abashwili – A Governor of Grusinia who lives in a lavish palace in the town of Nuka. Despite the fact that his country is at war and his constituents are mired in filth and poverty, Georgi is concerned only with expanding his wealth. Early on in the first act, Georgi is deposed from power and executed when the Fat Prince and his brother stage a coup and take control of Nuka and all of Grusinia.

Michael Abashwili – The "noble child" who is at the very center of the play's action, the role of Michael is a non-speaking one

which is, in productions of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, often portrayed by a puppet or a doll. Michael is attended in his infancy by a staff of doctors who are constantly on-call and fuss over his every sneeze and cough. His mother, Natella, abandons him when she flees the capital, and the servant-girl Grusha takes Michael into her care, unwilling to leave him for the Fat Prince's Ironshirts to find and kill. Michael is a burden to Grusha at first, but she soon resolves to raise him herself, and to do so the right way—with an emphasis on kindness and hard work. Brecht uses the fact that Michael, as a young child, can either be raised "right" or easily corrupted by wealth, greed, and power to signify the precipice he saw society facing at the time he wrote the play, with social and economic inequality on the rise. Michael thus represents the potential of the future of society, and his character arc ties in with themes of motherhood, justice vs. injustice, and corruption.

The Fat Prince – The Fat Prince, along with his brother (who is alluded to but never seen onstage), stages a coup early on in the play, dethroning the Grand Duke of Grusinia and all his government officials. One of the dethroned officials is the Governor of Nuka, Georgi Abashwili, whose head the Fat Prince cuts off and displays over the palace entryway. The Fat Prince and his brother's regime is later overturned, after the Fat Prince has shown himself to be a ruler whose regime is marked by nepotism, and cruelty just like the Grand Duke's regime. The Fat Prince instigates a relentless campaign to find and kill Michael Abashwili, an attempt to wipe out the previous ruling party's bloodline that ultimately fails.

Simon Shashava – A foot soldier who is in love with the servant-girl and protagonist, Grusha. After proposing marriage to Grusha early on in the play, before the Fat Prince's coup, Simon is quickly separated from his beloved when he is called away to war. Grusha promises Simon she will wait for him, but after she adopts Michael Abashwili as her own, she finds herself helpless and needing to secure a husband and a home for herself and her child. When Simon returns from war years later, he finds Grusha living in the Northern mountains, married and caring for a young son (which he assumes is a product of the marriage). Simon is distraught, but later supports Grusha when she is brought to trial in Nuka. In the end, Simon and Grusha are happily reunited, and the judge Azdak divorces Grusha from her husband so that she is free to marry Simon.

Corporal – A commander in the Fat Prince's army who attempts to steal Michael away after recognizing the child due to his being swaddled in fine linens. Backed into a corner, so to speak, Grusha smacks the Corporal over the head with a piece of firewood, knocking him unconscious. Grusha thus becomes an official enemy of the regime, and flees deep into the mountains, knowing she can never return to Nuka. When she eventually must return, however, to stand trial against Natella, she sees the Corporal once more. He has a giant scar across his face, and seems for a moment to recognize Grusha as the woman who attacked him.

Lavrenti Vashnadze – Grusha's brother, who lives in the Northern mountains. Grusha travels to her brother's house after fleeing Nuka, imagining that her brother will welcome her and her adopted son with open arms, giving them meals and a comfortable bed. When Grusha arrives, however, she finds that Lavrenti is married to a devoutly religious woman who both frowns upon fatherless children and fears that Grusha and Michael will infect her with scarlet fever or some other infectious disease. Thus, Grusha and Michael are forced to live in a dank basement, so that they are kept out of Aniko's sight and out of her thoughts. Lavrenti eventually arranges for Grusha to marry a nearly-dead man named Jussup who lives in the nearby mountains in order to get her out of the house but still keep her safe and sheltered from the soldiers who are hunting her and her son. Lavrenti is a weak man, but not a corrupt one, and though his wife is judgmental, Lavrenti seems in his heart to accept Grusha and Michael.

Aniko – Lavrenti's judgmental, devoutly religious wife. She is concerned that Grusha is traveling alone with a child, as she does not approve of having children out of wedlock, but Lavrenti assures her that Grusha is simply traveling to meet her husband. Aniko is neither corrupt nor unjust, but is simply vain and moralistic.

Jussup – The man Grusha marries. He seems to be on his deathbed when the marriage is arranged and when Grusha says her vows, but shortly after the wedding he is inexplicably revived. In the years that Grusha is forced to live with him, he proves himself to be a difficult and unkind man, obsessed with forcing Grusha to perform her wifely duties, though she refuses to sleep with him.

Grand Duke – The ruler of Grusinia, who is removed from power by the Fat Prince's coup at the start of the play. It is revealed in the fourth act that Azdak unwillingly sheltered the Grand Duke, who was disguised as a beggar, when the Grand Duke first fled from his seat of power. At the end of the play, the Grand Duke is rumored to have returned to power, backed by mercenaries from the Persian army.

Girl Tractorist – In the play's prologue, the "girl tractorist" is one of the fruit farmers who successfully makes a case that the disputed territory should be given to the fruit farmers instead of the dairy farmers who owned it originally, since they have a comprehensive plan to develop the land and make it more fertile. At one point she suggests that perhaps the laws should be reexamined to ensure that they are righteous, thereby introducing one of the play's central themes—that justice and the law are not always one and the same.

Chorus – The play relies heavily on narration, much of which is delivered by the chorus. Throughout the play, peasants, soldiers, government officials, merchants, servants, lawyers, and doctors are all portrayed by the chorus. By employing an

amorphous, shape-shifting chorus to inhabit the many lesser roles throughout the play, Brecht crafts a commentary on the possibility of a less rigid social structure with a greater degree of social mobility.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Shalva – A commanding officer in the Governor's army.

Mother-in-law – Jussup's mother and Grusha's mother-in-law. A fussy, griping woman who is in a hurry to marry off her son before his death, and who seems less than overjoyed when he makes a sudden recovery.

Shauwa – A policeman and a confidant of Azdak. He is described as a "weak man" who accompanies Azdak to Nuka, and remains there with him once Azdak is appointed judge.

Cook – The Cook is one of Grusha's allies in her trial, who catches Grusha up on what has been going on in Nuka during the years she has been away, and advocates for her during her legal battle against Natella.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MOTHERHOOD AS LEADERSHIP

The story at the heart of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is the story of Grusha's adoption of Michael Abashwili. Michael, the pampered son of the Governor of Nuka, was carelessly left behind by his biological mother, Natella, when a coup swiftly and violently removed the Abashwilis from power. Although Grusha is initially uncertain of whether she should rescue the child and is afraid to take on the liability of being the protector of a "noble" child, her conscience compels her to take the child into her own care. Over the course of the play, Grusha struggles with the burdens and joys of motherhood, and the responsibilities of bringing a child up the "right" way. Although Grusha is not the child's mother by blood, she ultimately earns the status of his rightful mother when she wins custody—one of Brecht's rare happy endings, and a divergence from the plot of the Chinese myth on which the play is based. In ending the play with Grusha retaining custody of the child, Brecht sets up the concept of motherhood as a metaphor. Only those who are good and just, and who are aware of the corrupting influence of power and wealth, are fit to be "mothers"—and for Brecht, "mothers" are a metaphor for those responsible enough not only to care for others selflessly, as a mother would, but to lead society as a whole and remold it to better serve all people.

Brecht used his work to advance his political message—one which advocated for dismantling capitalism in favor of a more egalitarian social and economic system. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is rife with allusions to revolution and depictions of the upper class's cruel treatment of the poor. Natella and Grusha—both "mothers" to Michael—are, in different ways, at the center of these conflicts, and Brecht uses the two very different mothers to model the behaviors of an unfit mother (i.e., an irresponsible member of society) and a fit mother (i.e., a "comrade," an exemplar of egalitarianism). Natella, the Governor's wife, is so distracted by her need to bring her finest possessions, including a pair of treasured **saffron shoes,** along as she flees the city that she leaves her child behind and does not come back for him later. Grusha scoops the child up and takes him into her care. As time passes, power is restored to the Grand Duke, and Natella, in command of the Ironshirts once again, tracks down and seizes her son back from Grusha. Grusha is brought to trial, and as Natella argues to regain custody of her son, she uses over-the-top language to describe her sorrow and pain at having lost her child. Her story of woe is revealed to be false, however, when it comes to light that her true motive in reclaiming her child is to secure her wealth, as Michael stands to inherit his father's estate. Thus, Natella was an unfit mother when she lost her child, and, years later, she remains unfit to love or care for him. In the end, custody is restored to Grusha and Michael is stripped of his inheritance—a fact which does not matter to Grusha, but which causes Natella to faint on the spot. Thus, Brecht shows that Natella's narcissism, vanity, and obsession with wealth and finery lead to her downfall, even after power has been restored to the regime she and her husband served.

Grusha is a humble servant girl who, somewhat reluctantly, takes Michael from where he was left in the palace courtyard and runs away with him into the mountains. Although Grusha later attempts to abandon the child with a peasant woman and her husband, she quickly realizes that she is the only one who can be the boy's protector. Her commitment to his safety is cemented in that moment, and Grusha risks imprisonment and danger to ensure that her adopted child is kept from the clutches of those who would do him harm. Over the course of her journey through the mountains, Grusha sings again and again of her worries for the boy. She wants him to grow up to be kind, and hopes that she will be able to raise him "right." Years pass, and Michael is eventually seized by Natella's soldiers, at which point Grusha follows him to court in Nuka at her own risk; having assaulted a Corporal in the process of saving Michael, she has reason to fear that she will be recognized and punished if she returns. Once the trial begins, Grusha tells the judge plainly that she believes Michael is hers because she raised him. She taught him to be kind and a hard worker. In the test of the chalk circle, when Grusha is unable to

bring herself to harm Michael even though the judge has told her it is the only way she can prove her worth as a mother, Grusha is ultimately victorious, proving that she is Michael's rightful mother.

If mothers are the symbols of leadership in the world of the play, then children—particularly Michael—are symbols of the future of society, and its potential for goodness and justice. Grusha's fierce desire to protect Michael from corruption, and the corruptive forces of wealth, power, and greed, mirrors Brecht's utopian vision of a world in which the future of society is steered away from evil and, in the capable hands of those who are good and just, groomed for a future in which hard work and righteousness are prized above all else. Both Natella and Grusha have a "right" to the "noble child" at the center of the drama, just as both the wealthy elite and the common people have a stake in the future of society. In the play, Brecht imagines a world in which the question of who should lead society isn't a matter of blood but of merit. Brecht envisions a social structure in which nepotism is overturned, dynasties and cycles of power are demolished, and leadership is given to those who have the greatest capacity for compassion and the fiercest desire to do good.

CORRUPTION

The Caucasian Chalk Circle is, at its heart, a work that forces its audience to reckon with the harsh realities of economic and social inequality. In keeping with Brecht's Marxist political leanings, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* depicts the narcissism and carelessness of the rich and the goodness and diligence of the poor in stark contrast. He sets this social critique against a backdrop of political turmoil in Grusinia (the Russian name for Georgia), as the nation weathers a long, bloody war, as well as several smaller coups and transfers of power. Written while Brecht was in exile during World War II—and had already witnessed the horrors of World War I as a young man in Berlin—*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is a treatise against political, social, and economic corruption. In it, Brecht argues that wealth, privilege, and power lead to both political and moral corruption, which takes the form of evil deeds, war, and the perpetuation of the lower class's suffering.

The first example of moral corruption in the play comes early on, with the introduction of the Abashwili family. The Governor, Georgi Abashwili, and his wife Natella employ two doctors to look after their baby Michael's every need. Although the baby is healthy, Natella is constantly worried that he will fall ill, and forces the doctors to minister to the child's every cough or cry. Meanwhile, Georgi is planning to expand add a new wing his palace, even as a war rages through his country and peasants approach him on the street to beg for lower taxes and an end to the fighting. The Abashwilis are only concerned with themselves and their life of luxury. Their power and wealth has corrupted them and blinded them to the plight of the poor. When the Fat Prince leads a coup against the Governor and beheads him, Natella is forced to flee. Because she does not take the coup seriously, she struggles with several trunks stuffed full of fine dresses, shoes, and other accessories, even as the **sky over Nuka turns red with fire** from the peasant's riots and Natella's servants urge her that her life—and the life of her child—is at stake. In fact, Natella is so focused on bringing the right pair of **boots** along with her (themselves a symbol of wealth and decadence) that she leaves her child behind in the courtyard. Natella is completely corrupt, and is the worst kind of narcissist—deeply obsessed not only with herself, but with the material possessions she has amassed despite the despicable living conditions of the people she and her husband supposedly serve.

When Natella finally brings Grusha to trial in an attempt to get Michael back for herself, it comes to light that it is not even the child himself that she is set on repossessing—it is his inheritance, as he is the heir apparent to all his father's estates. That Natella waxes poetic about how deeply she has missed her child when she is only after his inheritance demonstrates how corrupt she really is. Grusha alone seems aware of the tendency of wealth and power to corrupt, and sings several times of how she hopes her child will grow up free of the trappings of luxury. In the end, she knows that if her child is returned to his birth mother, he will grow up to be cruel and narcissistic, and it is her wish to continue to raise him up right, which helps to sway Azdak in her favor.

Political corruption, too, is rampant in Grusinia, and Brecht intentionally shields his audience from ever knowing who the "most" corrupt party is. The Abashwilis work for a regime led by the Grand Duke that is revealed to be deeply hated, and yet the peasants riot in the street when they are deposed and replaced by the Fat Prince. Grusha learns, while she is seeking shelter in the mountains, that the Grand Duke has returned, and has brought mercenaries from the Persian Army to help him fight against the Fat Prince and his brother, but all of this information is delivered in a second-hand and gossipy manner. Brecht does this intentionally, to prevent the audience from being able to keep up with the waves of corrupt power-grabbing that are sweeping Grusinia, and to show that ultimately it doesn't matter who is in charge, since corruption will mar each and every regime that takes power. Brecht uses the theme of corruption in this play to comment on the times he was living in—a moment in history during which the world was war-torn, disparities in wealth were deeply felt, and unspeakable violence and corruption were taking hold of his homeland. In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Brecht sought to argue—through the play's climax and denouement, when justice and reason finally triumph—that corruption must be overturned and eradicated completely if the suffering of the world is ever to be lessened.

JUSTICE AND INJUSTICE

The climax of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* takes place in a courtroom, as a rather unconventional judge named Azdak employs a very unusual method of determining who should get custody of a small child. Brecht portrays Azdak as a madcap iconoclast who accepts bribes from the wealthy but often lets poor, downtrodden defendants off the hook in favor of prosecuting those who have sinned or broken the law in other, less obvious ways. Thus, justice in this play is not always by the books, and Brecht uses Azdak's unorthodox approach to administering justice to show that justice—and not necessarily the law—should be prized above all else.

Azdak, the slightly kooky judge, is the character whose political views seem to most closely resemble Brecht's own: Azdak believes in taking from the rich and giving to the poor, and in honoring justice even if it means subverting the law. Azdak is the arbiter of justice in the world of the play, and his character's arc is the clearest example of this theme in action. Azdak—who is neither just nor unjust as an individual—is appointed judge in Nuka over the Fat Prince's nephew, and immediately begins running his court rather like a funhouse. Azdak, during each case he hears, pads his judge's chair with a "booster"—at the start of each hearing, he selects his worn copy of a **statute book** as the object he will sit upon. He puts it underneath his bottom, and in this way makes the silent statement that statutes and legal precedents are beneath him. He feels that justice by the book, so to speak, is inadequate, as the laws contained in the statute book would force him to punish individuals who are already punished daily by systemic inequality. Justice, to Azdak, means correcting this inequality in whatever way he can, by ruling in favor of the downtrodden and attempting to level the playing field on which the rich and the poor approach him in court.

Although Azdak regularly accepts bribes from wealthy plaintiffs, he almost always rules in favor of the poor—or at least in favor of serving justice, even when those who have brought the case before him cannot see what true justice means. For instance, when an elderly woman who believes she has been blessed with a series of miracles is charged with theft, it becomes clear that the "miracle" objects which have been appearing in her home overnight have been stashed there by a wily but desperate bandit hoping to take advantage of her old age and ignorance. Rather than charging the woman or the bandit, Azdak fines the plaintiffs for "godlessness" and refusing to believe in miracles, knowing that to sentence the elderly woman or the desperate bandit would be a great disservice to true moral justice.

Azdak is the closest thing to a stand-in for Brecht himself in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Azdak's "radical" approach to justice, and to ensuring that the voices of the poor and downtrodden are not erased in favor of appeasing the rich, earns him great renown throughout the land. At the end of the play, Azdak, having exonerated Grusha and taken away Natella's wealth, invites all present in court to dance. While they swirl around him, he stands alone, "lost in thought." Similarly, Azdak stands alone in the world of the play, a singular figure whose dedication to justice is, to many, difficult to understand or pin down. Azdak's insistence on singlehandedly attempting to mitigate the inequalities that the poor or lower-class individuals who come before him in court must face each day mirrors Brecht's desire for a society in which justice and righteousness reign, and society is free of the social and economic inequalities which enable the corrupt to act unjustly with impunity.

CHAOS AND CHANCE

Chaos and chance rule the world of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* from the very first scene. From the prologue set in a ruined valley in the wake of World War II to the main action (i.e., the play-within-a-play set in the war-torn Grusinia of long ago), Brecht creates an atmosphere of tumult, revolt, and pandemonium. He does so in order to reveal the ways in which chaos can be both destructive and generative, and suggests that chaos and chance can be forces of renewal and redemption, for they hold the potential to precipitate and even hasten the arrival of change.

The peasants in the prologue have had their lives turned upside down in the chaos of wartime. Forced to vacate a lush and fertile valley to escape the approach of Hitler's armies, both the fruit farmers and the dairy farmers are now both physically and emotionally displaced. The tumult they have endured, however, stokes their desire for justice and reform. This is attested to in a scene in which two large groups of farmers from opposing camps attempt to win over a delegation from the government. The situation seems ripe for an outbreak of violence, but in the end the delegation sides with the fruit farmers, and the dairy farmers see the truth in the fruit farmers' argument: they will put the land to better use, so it should go to them. The meeting was necessitated by the general state of chaos, but chaos did not define it, and as a result the peasants are able to return to their respective farms in peace, and know that not only has the land has gone to those who are "good for it," but that the land will flourish and prosper and yield even more bounty than it did in the years before the war.

It is solely a matter of chance that Grusha, a servant girl, is in the palace courtyard when one of her fellow servants sets the Governor's son Michael down on the ground in order to fetch his mother Natella's **saffron boots**, only to have Natella and her coterie flee the palace to escape the approaching riots. In a moment of total chaos, Grusha finds that she is the only one willing to stay with the child through the night. Realizing that the child will no doubt be killed if captured by the Fat Prince's soldiers, Grusha shoulders the burden of taking the child into

her own care, and flees to the mountains to protect him. As Grusha's relationship with the child deepens, she realizes that she is all that stands between him and a life of either certain death, or otherwise (once the political tides change and the Grand Duke returns to power) a life of corruptive luxury and the cyclical patterns of injustice that have kept the ruling class in power for so long. Chaos and chance converged to make Grusha Michael's mother, and Grusha graciously accepts the opportunity.

The chaos of war—the backdrop for Brecht as he wrote the play—is also the backdrop of the play's main action. Intentionally designed to be faceless, causeless, and confusing, a long and bloody war rages on in the background of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and the atmosphere of uncertainty and discord it creates affects several of the play's main characters. Simon Shashava, the soldier to whom Grusha is betrothed, is called away to war at the start of the play and does not return until its middle. By this time, however, chaos and chance have already made Grusha into a mother, taken her on a long journey through the mountains, and forced her to marry a man she does not know in order to carve out some measure of stability and safety for her child. Though the audience does not witness Simon's own journey, it is safe to wager that his time at war has also been marked by chaos and disarray. When he returns home, his first action is to seek out Grusha, whom he believes has been waiting for him and who ostensibly stands to provide comfort, familiarity, and a safe haven. When Simon finds out that Grusha has married another, and learns that she has a child, he assumes the child is hers by blood and will not stick around long enough to hear the truth or to try to understand. Simon is unable to see that Grusha's life, too, has been dominated by chaos and chance in the years they have been separated. Nonetheless, Simon is there for Grusha during her trial, and even offers to falsely claim that he is Michael's father if it will allow Grusha to keep him. After the chaos of the trial is over and Grusha has been awarded custody of the child—and has also been divorced from her husband, slyly, by Azdak himself—Simon and Grusha are free to return to the life they had always wanted together. They now find themselves free of the chaos that has marked their lives for so long, and grateful for the perspective it has given them.

Although justice is one force for bringing about change in the play, chaos and chance are harbingers of change in their own right. Chaos and chance force stagnant circumstances forward, and often herald a reorganization of those circumstances. For Grusha, Michael, Simon, and the farmers in the prologue, circumstances actually improve from the beginning to the end of the play. In using chaos and chance to throw his characters' lives into disarray, which in turn forces their lives to change and actually improve, Brecht argues that chaos can be useful. Chaos and chance force the characters within the play to adapt to discord and embrace randomness, and finally come together around the shared purpose of recreating a new and perhaps even better order.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE SAFFRON BOOTS

After Governor Georgi Abashwili is overthrown by the Fat Prince, Georgi's wife Natella is urged to flee the city before the rioting peasants, or the newly-in-power Fat Prince, can get to her and harm her. Her servants urge her that time is of the essence, but Natella is less concerned with fleeing for her life than she is with ensuring her prized possessions come along with her. Of particular concern are a pair of saffron-colored boots, which she has forgotten to pack in her overflowing trunks. Natella orders the servant-girl holding her son, Michael, to put the child down and run inside to collect the boots. While the servant-girl is in the palace, Natella notices that the **sky has turned red with fire** from the nearing riots, and is so struck by fear that she allows herself to be swept away from the palace on horseback, leaving her child behind. The saffron boots symbolize Natella's vanity, narcissism, and corruption. She is so disconnected from what matters, and so obsessed with the trappings of her wealth and privilege, that she abandons her own child over a silly pair of shoes. Later on in the play, during the trial, Azdak asks Grusha, who raised Michael, why she would not want to surrender her son so that he can grow up in the lap of luxury. Grusha, silently, considers that if Michel "had golden shoes to wear he'd be cruel as a bear." Thus, the saffron boots appear again as a symbol of corruption and narcissism, and Grusha fears that her child could forget all that she has taught him. In a play which is deeply concerned with the power of wealth and luxury to corrupt people, the saffron boots serve as a physical symbol of corruption.

THE RED SKY

When Governor Georgi Abashwili is removed from power, the sky over the town of Nuka turns red with fire as the peasants, far from the palace, begin to riot. Later in the play, when Grusha returns to Nuka to await her trial, the sky is still red—it has remained all these years a symbol of social unrest, chaos, and the common people's desire for an end to corruption at any cost. In the world of epic theatre, theatrical devices such as projections were commonly used to communicate the themes and motifs of the play to the audience. The red sky is one of these devices, which signifies the play's themes of chaos, corruption, and political turmoil.

THE STATUTE BOOK

Azdak, the unconventional judge of Nuka, becomes known throughout the land as a Robin Hood figure who champions justice for those deserving of it—not for those corrupt individuals who attempt to bribe or sway him to rule in their favor. In each case he hears, he sits in his judge's chair atop an unusual cushion—a Statute Book, full of laws and legal precedents. Azdak's custom of sitting on top of the Statute Book while judging a case symbolizes his idiosyncratic nature, his unusual methods, and his desire to topple precedent in order to do what is right and just at any cost.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the University of Minnesota Press edition of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* published in 1999.

Prologue Quotes

"As the poet Mayakovsky said: 'The home of the Soviet people shall also be the home of Reason!'"

Related Characters: Girl Tractorist (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

The prologue to the play, set in a Caucasian village in 1945, sets up the central question of the fable of the Caucasian Chalk Circle—"the play-within-a-play" which is about to unfold for the entertainment of a gathering of farmers who have just settled a dispute over contested territory by deciding that the valley in question should go to the fruit farmers because they will make better use of the land than the goat farmers. As the farmers collectively celebrate the triumph of reason in the debate between them, the girl tractorist from the fruit farm lauds both group's ability to listen to one another and use common sense to arrive at a just outcome, which both groups can see is best for the land and the country itself. The central action of the Caucasian Chalk Circle fable will ultimately boil down to a similar question: who will best care for, and therefore who is most deserving of, a child whose custody is in dispute?

Act 1 Quotes

"O blindness of the great! They go their way like gods, great over bent backs, sure of hired fists, trusting in the power which has lasted so long. But long is not forever. O change from age to age! Thou hope of the people!"

Related Characters: Arkadi Tscheidse (speaker), Natella Abashwili, Georgi Abashwili

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, as Arkadi introduces the noble, wealthy, and powerful Abashwilis, he poetically laments the "blindness of the great," alluding to the ways in which the powerful cannot see the unrest and discontent that surround them because they are so narcissistically involved in their own lives of privilege and luxury. "The great" walk through the world like "gods," Arkadi says, feeling themselves to be both elevated and revered. They are great only because of the "bent backs" on which their privilege rests—that is, all the servants, beggars, and downtrodden poor who work tirelessly in their service. "The great" are always "sure of [their] hired fists," relying on soldiers to protect them without considering that societal discontent may have infiltrated their armies' ranks, and that those "hired fists" might turn against them at any moment. Finally, Arkadi points out that the rich trust blindly in the "power which has lasted so long," implying that the social structures and often corrupt leadership which keep the "great" in power are often less stable than they may seem. Arkadi ends the quotation by stating that "long is not forever," foreshadowing a great "change" and upheaval which will unseat the Abashwilis, and will give much-needed hope to the common over whom they rule.

"Know, woman, he who hears not a cry for help but passes by with troubled ears will never hear the gentle call of a lover nor the blackbird at dawn nor the happy sigh of the tired grape-picker."

Related Characters: Arkadi Tscheidse (speaker), Michael Abashwili, Grusha Vashnadze

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Arkadi is describing Grusha as she looks upon the abandoned baby Michael in the Governor's palace courtyard and hears him, in a way, speaking to her. Although Michael is an infant, and is not literally saying these things, Grusha's moral compass is warning her of the ramifications of turning a blind eye to injustice and not taking action to right the wrong. Michael's crying is thus a warning to Grusha that if she ignores him and leaves him to die, she will never again know peace—her ears will be forever troubled, and will only hear his cries for help for the rest of her days. The prospect frightens Grusha deeply, and sways her toward making the decision to take Michael into her care.

"Fearful is the seductive power of goodness!"

Related Characters: Arkadi Tscheidse (speaker), Michael Abashwili, Grusha Vashnadze

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Grusha somewhat reluctantly decides to pick up the infant Michael Abashwili and take him into her care, the singer Arkadi, narrating Grusha's innermost thoughts, describes the "seductive power of goodness." Grusha is afraid of the "seduction" Michael has engaged her in; over the course of the night, as she has considered whether or not to abandon him in the palace courtyard, she has heard "the child" calling to her and warning her of the unhappiness and regret that will haunt her if she should abandon him. Really, this is Grusha's inner moral compass speaking to her, and not Michael—but nevertheless, by morning, the slightly "fearful" seduction is complete, and the "power of goodness" has overtaken Grusha.

Act 2 Quotes

"She who carries the child feels its weight and little more."

Related Characters: Arkadi Tscheidse (speaker), Michael Abashwili, Grusha Vashnadze

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

At the start of act two, Grusha has taken Michael into her care out of guilt and fear, and sees him mostly as a burden. Here, Arkadi describes the "weight"—both literal and figurative—which Michael has imposed onto Grusha's life. Grusha can feel hardly anything other than the pressing reminder of the burden she has willingly lifted onto her own shoulders, and as she treks farther and farther into the mountains the weight of the child grows heavier and heavier. She has nothing to feed or clothe the child, and only the faint promise of a place where she might find shelter. All the care and responsibility Michael needs has fallen to Grusha, and she struggles in the early part of the second act to feel like she has made the right decision.

"Deep is the abyss, son, I see the weak bridge sway. But it's not for us, son, to choose the way. The way I know is the one you must tread, and all you will eat is my bit of bread. Of every four pieces, you shall have three. Would that I knew how big they will be!"

Related Characters: Grusha Vashnadze (speaker), Michael Abashwili

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41-42

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation—a song that Grusha sings to Michael as she prepares to cross a rickety bridge over a deep ravine—demonstrates Grusha's growth over the course of act two, from a reluctant and occasionally sour custodian of an abandoned child to a loving, anxious, and committed mother. Grusha has saved Michael from harm's way, and now is certain that her role must be to take care of him at any cost. In this passage, she acknowledges that their path is set, and that they must travel that path together though they do not know what lies ahead. Although Grusha is implicitly apologizing to Michael for bringing him along on such a dangerous journey, she promises that she will do whatever it takes to care for him, and to ensure that his safety comes first—even before hers. Grusha promises Michael the lion's share of her "bread" (that is, everything she has). Michael will always eat first and be comforted first—Grusha just wishes she could promise her son that there will always be enough, that he will never want for anything, and that she will always be able to predict what's coming next.

Act 3 Quotes

"While you fought in the battle, soldier, the bloody battle, the bitter battle, I found a helpless infant. I had not the heart to destroy him. I had to care for a creature that was lost. I had to stoop for breadcrumbs on the floor. I had to break myself for that which was not mine, that which was other people's. Someone must help! For the little tree needs water. The lamb loses its way when the shepherd is asleep and its cry is unheard!"

Related Characters: Grusha Vashnadze, Arkadi Tscheidse (speaker), Simon Shashava, Michael Abashwili

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Arkadi narrates Grusha's thoughts. While washing linens in the stream, she has been approached by Simon Shashava, her betrothed, who has very recently returned from war. During the years they were apart, Grusha has adopted a child and married another man in order to provide shelter for herself and her new son. It is too difficult for either Simon or Grusha to share with one another what they are really feeling after so much time apart, and so Arkadi intervenes to narrate their thoughts. Grusha wishes she could describe the events of the past several years to Simon, and all that she has had to endure in order to care for the "lost creature" she came upon in the palace courtyard back in Nuka. She wants Simon to know the sacrifices she has had to make, and the ways in which she has had to "break [her]self" in order to keep Michael safe from violence and corruption.

Act 4 Quotes

"If you don't treat it with respect, the law just disappears on you."

Related Characters: Azdak (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is a funny one coming from Azdak—a decidedly unconventional judge, who is appointed to the position of judge in Nuka despite having no experience as a judge. Though Azdak's methods of administering justice are definitely "out there," he recognizes the importance of the law, and the "respect" with which it must be treated in order to function and remain relevant. Azdak does not have much respect for tradition—he sits on a book of statutes during court proceedings in order to express his disdain for precedent—but he has immense respect for justice itself, and this commitment to protecting what is good and fair is what makes him a great and widely-loved judge despite his oddities and his flaws.

Act 5 Quotes

AZDAK: "I've noticed you have a soft spot for justice. I don't believe he's your child, but if he were yours, woman, wouldn't you want him to be rich? You'd only have to say he wasn't' yours, and he'd have a palace and horses in his stable and beggars on his doorstep and soldiers in his service. What do you say—don't you want him to be rich?"

Grusha is silent.

ARKADI: "Hear now what the angry girl thought but did not say: Had he golden shoes to wear, he'd be cruel as a bear. Evil would his life disgrace. He'd laugh in my face."

Related Characters: Arkadi Tscheidse, Azdak (speaker), Michael Abashwili, Grusha Vashnadze

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Arkadi once again does the work of narrating aloud the things that the main character, Grusha, wishes she could say but does not dare speak out loud. Azdak, during a brief recess in the court's proceedings, asks Grusha why she would not want her child to grow up with every privilege and luxury. Grusha, aware of the ways in which power and wealth corrupt people, wants to explain that if she did surrender Michael to Natella's care, he would grow up to be cruel and evil just like Natella, and would no longer love Grusha or remember all she strove to teach him. The thought of her child being corrupted and turned against her is more than Grusha can bear, and she keeps the thought to herself and remains silent in the face of direct questioning from Azdak.

"You, you who have listened to the story of the Chalk Circle, take note of what men of old concluded: That what there is shall go to those who are good for it. 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."

Related Characters: Arkadi Tscheidse (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

In the last lines, the play and the prologue which framed it come full circle, as Arkadi reveals the moral of the fable of the Chalk Circle. Arkadi has chosen to perform this story for the farmers in order to congratulate them on the triumph of reason in a potentially divisive and difficult situation. Reason won out in the prologue when two divided groups reached the conclusion that the fruit farmers would use the land best, and that it should therefore be given to them. Similarly, reason and justice prevail in the fable of the Chalk Circle when the peasant girl Grusha is given custody of the noble child Michael Abashwili. Although she is not his mother by blood, she is the one who is "good for [him,]" and the one who will "prosper" him and help him to grow and flourish in the most positive way.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

It is the summer of 1945 in a war-ravaged Caucasian village. Workers from two farming collectives sit in a circle smoking and drinking. The dairy farmers are arranged on the right, and the fruit farmers are on the left. A delegation from the State Reconstruction Commission is also among them. A peasant woman from the left side—a fruit farmer—points out the place where, during the war, she and her fellow farmers stopped three Nazi tanks in their tracks, expressing sorrow that the tanks had already destroyed the apple orchard by the time the farmers stopped them. Meanwhile, an old man on the right side of the stage laments the ruin of his beautiful dairy farm.

Brecht begins the prologue to his play in a village which has recently been decimated by the violence and atrocities of World War II. As the play was written when he was in exile in the 1930s and 40s, he is attempting to ground the main action of the story of the chalk circle within a setting that's more immediately relatable to his audience, and also to create a dialogue about the unjust and chaotic effects of war.

One of the delegates urges his "comrades" to pay attention to the matter at hand: the dairy farm—the Collective Goat Farm Rosa Luxemburg—was once located in the valley where the characters are all now gathered, but moved East after the government warned them of Hitler's approaching armies. They now want to return their farm to the valley. However, the members of the fruit farm (the Collective Fruit Farm Galinsk) want the empty valley to be assigned to them instead. The delegate charges the two collectives to decide between themselves who should rebuild in the valley.

The conflict between the two farming collectives is tied in with themes of chaos. The farmers simply want to get back to work after having endured a long war, but the order of their lives has been upended and forever altered by the chaos of wartime. Now, they are forced to struggle against one another to impart order once again.

The old dairy farmer offers to explain just why the dairy farmers need their valley back, and urges a nearby peasant woman to unpack some goat cheese from a basket. He tells the gathered group to help themselves and insists that all he wants from the group is an honest answer as to whether or not they like the cheese. A fruit farmer tastes the cheese and replies that he likes it, but the dairy farmer says that cheese is subpar compared to what their farm produced in "the old days," as their goats do not like the new grass and are unable to find good grazing land.

The land that the dairy farmers have occupied "from all eternity" has been thrown into chaos and dispute due to the war, and nothing is as it once was. The dairy farmers are unable to produce what they feel is quality cheese, and this small change—barely perceptible to the fruit farmers—is symbolic of how the dairy farmers' lives have all been upended, and are now unrecognizable compared to the world they once knew.

The old dairy farmer tells the delegation that the valley has belonged to his family "from all eternity." A wounded soldier argues with him, stating that nothing has belonged to anyone for "eternity," so the dairy farmer amends his statement, saying that the valley belongs to him "by law." A girl tractorist suggests the laws be reexamined, to make sure they are still right.

In this passage, Brecht's characters argue whether birthright or legal right reigns triumphant. As the play will come to be concerned with subverting traditional notions of ownership and complicating the idea of justice, Brecht sets these ideas up early through the farmers' arguments.

Next, the fruit farmers speak up. One woman says that they have not had the chance to say their piece, and that while their valley has been ravaged, the dairy farmers at least still have the foundations for their land. Even so, the peasant woman from the fruit farm admits that she understands why the dairy farmers want their land back. She acknowledges that, even though the dairy farmers' situation may objectively be better, they still prefer their "own" land and their own home.

Even though she is opposing the dairy farmers over the disputed land, the peasant woman from the fruit farm is still able to see their side of the argument and understand where they are coming from. She offers them the grace of acknowledging the veracity of their claims.

As the gathered crowd begins to grow agitated, the delegation attempts to settle everyone down. The delegation acknowledges that even though a piece of land is only a tool to help provide something useful, "there's also such a thing as love for a particular piece of land." A member of the delegation reiterates that all he needs to know from both the fruit farmers and the dairy farmers is what they would do with the valley if it was theirs.

Though it's a tense situation, people on all sides of it—fruit farmers, dairy farmers, and government representatives alike—are able to see the intricacies of the matter at hand and offer empathy and the promise of a just solution.

A woman named Kato, in military dress, speaks up on behalf of the fruit farmers. She has planned an irrigation project to turn seven hundred acres of infertile land into arable land, in order to grow more fruit and support vineyards as well. To make the plan work, though, they are in need of adding the disputed land to their property. She hands over the schematics for the endeavor to the delegation. The girl tractorist proclaims that the fruit farm's plans were made while they were taking cover in the mountains in between fighting the enemy, and both sides—fruit farmers and dairy farmers—applaud her. Even the old man from the dairy farm thanks the Comrades of the Galinsk farm for helping to defend the country. He shakes the girl tractorist's hand and embraces her, conceding that the fruit farmers should have the land. The girl tractorist quotes the poet Mayakovsky, who said that "The home of the Soviet people shall also be the home of Reason."

The dispute between the farms—which was so tense just moments ago—is resolved when both sides realize that it is fair for the land to go to those who will use it best. The fruit farmers toiled endlessly through the chaos of warfare, making plans under cover of darkness while besieged by violence. Thus, even the dairy farmers can acknowledge the fruit farmers' commitment to the disputed land, and their desire for it to flourish more than it ever has before. For both sides it seems that the takeaway from the brief dispute is that ownership and leadership should be given to those with the greatest sense of stewardship and responsibility.

The delegates begin to study Kato the agriculturist's schematics, commenting aloud on the plans amongst themselves. A young worker urges the old dairy farmer to look at the project plans. The old man refuses to look, but states that he always knew that whatever project the fruit farmers had planned was bound to be good. The delegation asks the dairy farmers to confirm that they are going to give up the valley—the old man asks for copies of the fruit farmers' blueprints, and agrees.

In this passage, the head of the dairy farm acknowledges the worthiness of his "opponents." Justice has won out, and though the dairy farmers are a little stung about the decision, they are well aware of the fruit farmers' desire to improve the land and want for them to have the chance to do so.

The fruit farmers wish the dairy farmers well, proclaiming "Long live the 'Rosa Luxemburg." One of the women from the fruit farm says that in honor of their shared guests—the delegation—they will hear a singer that evening, Arkadi Tscheidse. The girl tractorist leaves to retrieve him. The woman from the fruit farm assures the dairy farmers—who are still just slightly bitter—that Arkadi will sing something that bears directly on their shared problem.

The dairy farmers and fruit farmers continue to show their mutual respect for and support of one another in this passage, as they wish each other well and announce their intention to celebrate together despite the tense interaction earlier.

Arkadi Tscheidse, accompanied by the girl tractorist and four musicians, enter the gathering. They are all greeted with applause. Even the delegation proclaims that they are honored to meet him, and asks if Arkadi will sing one of his old legends for them. Arkadi says that he will sing an old Chinese legend called The Chalk Circle, but he will be presenting a "changed" version. Arkadi asks if there will be food before the performance, and all of them—delegates, dairy farmers, and fruit farmers—enter the Club House for a meal. One of the delegates confesses that he hopes the performance won't take too long. Arkadi remarks that he is actually going to tell two stories, and that his performance will take a couple of hours. The delegate asks if Arkadi can make it any shorter, and Arkadi replies that he cannot.

Arkadi has selected the perfect story to sing; though the farmers don't know it yet, the story of the Chalk Circle will illuminate and celebrate the triumph of reason and empathy in the decision they have come together to make. Arkadi refuses to tell a shortened version of his story, hinting that its moral message is too important to be abbreviated.

ACT 1: THE NOBLE CHILD

Arkadi the singer sits on the floor with a notebook in his hand. A group of listeners surround him. As he begins to tell his story, it becomes evident that he has told this particular story over and over again. Arkadi sings of a bloody time, long ago, during which a Governor named Georgi Abashwili ruled a Caucasian city which was nicknamed "City of the Damned." The Governor was wealthy and prosperous, with a beautiful wife, Natella, and a healthy baby named Michael.

It is clear that this story is well-known to Arkadi—it is both one he cherishes and one he perhaps must sing again and again in order to instill the lessons about justice and reason that it teaches. The story begins with the wealthy Governor of a "damned" city, establishing as a major theme the injustice of the gap between the rich and the poor.

On Easter Sunday, the Governor and his family attend church, where they encounter commoners and beggars who implore the governor to lower taxes and end the war their country is fighting. The governor, flanked by Ironshirts—his soldiers and guards—approaches the church with Natella and Michael, who is pushed through the crowd in an ornate carriage. The crowd of peasants scrambles and struggles to catch a glimpse of the child.

The wealthy Governor and his family push through a crowd of their poor and downtrodden constituents. These people are desperate for a glimpse of the "noble child," whose life even as an infant is far more opulent and luxurious than theirs will ever be.

As the family enters the church, the Fat Prince greets them, and wishes a happy Easter to Georgi, Natella, and their Michael, playfully tickling the child. Natella tells the Fat Prince of her husband Georgi's plan to tear down a cluster of "wretched slums" in order to make room for a garden and a new wing of their residence. The Fat Prince proclaims the decision "good news after so much bad," and asks about the war, which does not seem to be going well. The Fat Prince insists that even "minor reverses" in the tide of war are to be expected, and do not mean a thing.

As the Governor and his family converse with another wealthy, powerful individual of the noble class, they discuss the wretchedness of the poor and the banality of war, even as their desperate and starving citizens surround them. The scene is a bitter commentary on the callousness of the rich and powerful to the suffering of others at the hands of poverty and war.

The baby begins to cough, and Natella grows concerned. She turns to Michael's doctors—who are with the family always—and the doctors vow to pay more careful attention to the child's health, ushering the family into the church as they think that perhaps a draft has caused the child's cough.

Michael's every cough and sneeze is treated as a serious issue, and he is pampered and cared for every second of the day—in stark comparison to the poor and unwashed who live in the "wretched slums" nearby, and whose lives are not valued by the Governor at all.

While Natella, Michael, their servants, and the Fat Prince proceed into the church, the Governor is held behind by an officer named Shalva to receive a confidential message, which has just arrived from the capital via a rider on horseback. The Governor tells Shalva that he will hear the message after services, and confesses his suspicion over the Fat Prince's kind words toward him and his family.

The Governor's ignorance will be his downfall. He has ignored the suffering of his people, and now chooses to ignore a potentially important bit of news despite his suspicions about the Fat Prince.

Arkadi turns the focus of the story to a kitchen maid and a solider from the palace guard who flirts with her as she returns to the city from the river with a bundle in her arms. The girl's name is Grusha Vashnadze. The soldier, Simon Shashava, teases her about not attending church. She tells him that she had to fetch another goose for the Governor's Easter banquet. When he is suspicious, she shows him the goose. The two exchange flirtations, and Simon expresses his desire to watch Grusha dip her legs in the river the next time she goes down there. Grusha, embarrassed, runs off toward the palace.

Simon and Grusha are members of the servant and soldier class. Thus, while the wealthy attend church services, Grusha and Simon must attend to preparing their meals and ensuring their safety. Still, they manage to find human connection with one another despite the difficult and often dehumanizing nature of their assigned roles in the society they inhabit.

Arkadi turns his focus back to the Governor's palace, where he says a trap has been laid for the governor. The Fat Prince signals to a group of soldiers, and orders them to surround the palace. As church bells ring in the distance, the Governor, his family, and their entourage return home from the service. Natella continues talking about the expansion to the palace, while a group of prominent architects arrive to attend the banquet. The architects express their surprise that the Governor intends to add onto the palace, since they have heard that the war in Persia is not going well. Shalva assures the architects that these are only rumors.

As unrest closes in on the palace and it becomes clear that the Fat Prince is planning an assault, the ignorant Natella continues to dream of the ways in which she can improve her own already-luxurious life, with little thought for those suffering abroad at war or even in her own town. In this way, the impending assault is shown to be a consequence of the painful naïveté of the ruling class regarding what actually goes on in the world.

Inside the palace, there is "the shrill scream of a woman." When Shalva approaches the palace gates, an Ironshirt soldier emerges and points a lance at him. Shalva is confused, but the architects proclaim that there has been a coup, led by the Fat Prince and his brother. The Princes met last night in the capital, and decided that they were against the Grand Duke and his governors. The architects rush off to save themselves. Shalva reprimands the Ironshirt, urging him to attend to the Governor, whose life is in danger, but the soldier, clearly having sided with the Fat Prince, does nothing.

The Fat Prince's coup is well underway, and as he seizes power over the Governor's palace, those present either flee for their lives or commit to a side—both of which seem utterly corrupt, concerned only with amassing and asserting power. As Brecht will demonstrate over the course of the play, it barely matters who holds power in a world where every leader is equally as corrupt and lacking in concern for their constituents.

Arkadi begins to sing of the "blindness of the great," and the ways in which those in power perceive themselves to be gods. They trust in "hired fists" and do not realize that just because a certain power has lasted a long while, that does not mean it will last forever.

Arkadi sings of the Governor's "blindness" to the situation around him, and of how he could have perhaps predicted the unhappiness and the unrest that surrounded him if only he had not been so self-obsessed and unconcerned with the plight of others.

The Governor is brought out from the palace in chains, led by two Ironshirts who are "armed to the teeth." Arkadi sings tauntingly of the Governor's fall from power. He does not need an architect now, Arkadi says, but perhaps only a carpenter. The Governor is led away, while an alarm begins to sound from within the palace. Arkadi warns that when a great house collapses, often the "little ones" are slain.

As the chaos of the coup swirls through the Governor's palace, the singer Arkadi warns of the casualties of war. Often it's the innocent and the young who are unjustly slaughtered in the messy process of bringing about the end of a certain line of power.

The palace servants pour into the courtyard, nervously discussing their fates. Some fear they will be slaughtered, while others are certain that the Governor is simply being called to a meeting between the Princes, and that everything will be all right shortly. The doctors enter the courtyard and fight amongst themselves. One doctor expresses loyalty toward the family, while the other plans to leave and save his own skin; he does not want to stay behind on the account of a "little brat," and he leaves.

Those close to the noble family have, in some cases, been corrupted by their proximity to power. They no longer care about loyalty or the needs of others, having been exposed to the Governor's narcissism for so long. Corruption, Brecht suggests, rots the moral core of society beginning at the highest levels.

Simon appears, and searches for Grusha. He finds her and asks her what she plans to do. She tells him that she is going to stay put for as long as she can, but that if things worsen, she has a brother in the mountains she can go to for help. Simon expresses his loyalty to Natella, despite the fact that the Palace Guard has mutinied against the Abashwilis. Grusha tells Simon that he is running headlong into danger for no reason at all, and she attempts to leave for the third courtyard, where the servants are assembling food and supplies.

Grusha and Simon, both good and just individuals, express their intention to remain loyal to the rulers they serve—despite the fact that those rulers themselves are corrupt and unjust, and despite the fact that remaining loyal to them puts Simon and Grusha themselves in greater danger.

Simon stops Grusha from leaving and asks if she still has living parents—Grusha tells him that it is just her and her brother. Simon asks if Grusha is healthy—she tells him that although she has a bad shoulder, she is still young and strong. Simon asks Grusha whether she is an impatient person, and she tells him that she is not. Simon tells her he has one final question for her, and she tells him hurriedly that her answer to his next question is yes. Embarrassed, Simon continues with his questioning. He assures Grusha that he is healthy, makes a good deal of money, and then asks for her hand in marriage. Grusha accepts.

Grusha and Simon know little about one another, but their love for one another and commitment to one another is shown to be a pure and good side effect of a chance encounter. Their brief courtship and nontraditional engagement demonstrate Brecht's desire to cast off and reinvent traditional rituals and customs in society.

Simon shows Grusha a cross on a chain made of silver, and asks her to wear it. He urges her to head for the third courtyard, and tells her that he is going to take Natella to the troops that have remained loyal to the Governor's family. Simon assures Grusha that he will be back for her in just two or three weeks. Grusha promises Simon that she will wait for him. They bow to one another, and Simon leaves.

Simon and Grusha pledge themselves to one another despite the chaos and unrest swirling around them. Although the immediate future is uncertain, they know that they will be true to one another, and this promise seems to be a balm against the uncertainty and discord that has rapidly consumed their world just as they were beginning to fall for one another.

Natella emerges from the castle, surrounded by servants who carry her many belongings. One servant woman carries Michael in her arms. Natella asks Shalva if any news has come from the capital. Shalva tells her none has come, but that there is no time to waste—she needs to be on her way, and cannot take so many things with her. Natella orders her servants to open her trunks, and she begins picking her favorite things out of them. As the servants hurriedly unpack Natella's belongings, she becomes frustrated with their clumsiness, and begins beating one of her young servants.

Natella's cruelty and self-obsession are highlighted in this passage, as she seems concerned only with preserving her comfort and appearance, even in the face of real, imminent danger to her family. She is cruel to her servants in a desperate and chaotic time, even as her servants continue to show loyalty toward her in the midst of a coup. Brecht clearly does not take a very high view of the rich and powerful.

Shalva tells Natella that shots have been fired in the city, and that it is time to leave. Natella continues rummaging through her trunks, and tells the servant holding Michael to put the child down and go retrieve a pair of **saffron boots** from her bedroom—she cannot find them in the messily-packed cases. Shalva attempts to pull Natella away from her expensive dresses, telling her that riots are breaking out and there is no time to pick through her belongings. Natella calls to one of her servants to get the baby ready to leave, seemingly having forgotten that she sent the girl who had been in charge of Michael upstairs to retrieve her boots. Shalva tells Natella that they have waited too long, and now there is no time to even take the carriage. They are going to have to proceed on horseback.

Natella takes her cruelty one step further and orders the servant girl charged with watching her child to abandon him in order to procure something frivolous and unnecessary: her saffron boots. She seems completely unaware of the misery and chaos that surround her, or of the riots that are beginning just outside the palace walls.

The **sky has turned red** with flames from the city, and when Natella sees this she goes "rigid" with fear. Shalva pulls her onto his horse and takes her away. When Natella's servant returns with the **boots**, she realizes that Natella has left Michael behind. She picks him up and holds him, then passes him off to Grusha so that she can run after Natella and Shalva and perhaps call them back to retrieve the child.

Realizing the severity of the situation, Natella freezes up. She has begun to understand the gravity of the moment, but is still unable to care for her child or those around her, and she allows herself to be carried away from the chaos without a second thought for her infant son's well-being.

Some more servants emerge from the palace, and tell the rest that it is time to clear out. Grusha asks what has befallen the Governor, and one of the servants mimes a throat-cutting. A young serving-girl sees the baby in Grusha's arms, and asks what she's doing holding the child. Grusha tells her that Michael was left behind. One of the servants tells Grusha to put the child down and leave him, saying that he'd "rather not think" about what would happen to anyone who was found with Michael.

Grusha feels that she should take some responsibility for the abandoned child, but is warned of the harm that could befall her if she is found with him in her care. In this way, her decision about whether or not to take the child is framed as a question of what she is willing to risk to help those who can't help themselves.

All the servants except for Grusha and two women—one young, and one old—leave. The women both warn Grusha to leave Michael behind, but Grusha tells them that Natella's servant girl is going to come back for him. The women tell Grusha not to be stupid, and the older woman offers her a ride out of town on her husband's ox cart. The two servants then hurry off to pack their things, and Grusha puts the baby down in a concealed place. When the women return with their bundles, they urge Grusha to hurry and pack. Grusha goes inside to gather her things. Then there is "the sound of horses," and the two other servant women flee, without waiting for Grusha to join them.

Grusha decides to look out for herself and make sure that she gets out of the palace safely, but after she leaves Michael in the courtyard, she misses her chance. Brecht seems to be saying that cruel or selfish actions will never be rewarded, and that chance will always intervene to punish those who are only concerned with themselves.

The Fat Prince has arrived, flanked by drunken Ironshirts. One soldier has the Governor's head on a spike. The Fat Prince orders the soldiers to nail the Governor's head above the entry to the palace. The Fat Prince laments the fact that Natella took the "brat" away and says that he needs Michael "urgently." The Fat Prince and his soldiers once again retreat through the palace gates and leave.

The Fat Prince has staked his claim to the Governor's territory, and displays the man's severed head above the entry to the palace he once owned as a statement of force. He expresses his desire to find Michael so that he can dispose of him, thus ensuring that the Governor's heir is no longer a threat to his claim to power.

Grusha pokes her head out of the palace to look around and screams when she sees the Governor's head. She gathers her things and prepares to leave, but suddenly she is "rooted to the spot." Arkadi begins to sing. He describes in poetic words how Grusha hears the infant Michael calling to her for help and warns that those who ignore a cry for help will be cursed to never again hear a pleasant sound. Grusha, feeling guilty, goes to sit with the child. Arkadi says that she plans to sit with the child just for a moment, until someone returns for him, or until the city becomes too dangerous for her to stay any longer. As night begins to fall, Grusha settles in to watch the child overnight. When morning comes, Arkadi says, "the seduction [is] complete," and Grusha carries the child away from danger.

After a difficult and emotional night, Grusha decides to take the abandoned infant Michael into her own care. In doing so, she expresses her selflessness and her commitment to justice, even in the midst of extreme chaos and terrible violence. Grusha, in this passage, establishes the concept of motherhood as a metaphor for leadership, such that one's fitness as a mother can be seen as a direct commentary on their fitness as a leader and their goodness or justness as a person.

ACT 2: THE FLIGHT INTO THE NORTHERN MOUNTAINS

As Grusha flees into the Northern Mountains, she sings Michael a song—The Song of the Four Generals. The song tells of four generals who set out for war in Iran. War did not agree with the first general. The second never won a fight. The third felt the weather was "never right," and the fourth could not command his men to fight for him. The song praises a man named Sosso Robakidse, who marched into battle in Iran and triumphed in ways the four generals could not.

Grusha sings Michael a song which is about war and violence, but whose message is one which praises leadership, confidence, and triumph over chaos—all qualities which Grusha herself is beginning to embody as she heroically and compassionately takes charge of a human life in need of protection despite the dangers it poses for her.

Grusha comes upon a peasant's cottage. It is noontime, and, according to Grusha, time for a meal. She sets Michael down in the soft grass outside the cabin and knocks at the door. An old man opens, and she asks to buy a pitcher of milk and a corn cake. The old man tells her that he has no milk, as the soldiers from the city have taken all of his goats. Grusha asks the man if he has just a small bit of milk to spare for a baby, and offers to "pay like princes" for it. However, when the old man tells her how much it will cost her—three piasters—she is unable to pay, and the man shuts the door in her face.

In this passage, Grusha observes the effects of war on the peasants outside the city. Everything is scarce, and more expensive due to that scarcity. Thus, she begins to realize that having the child with her may be a bigger burden than she had anticipated—especially in a world where others are often less compassionate than Grusha herself.

Grusha brings Michael to her breast, thinking that even though no milk will come the child might at least think it is being nourished. When the child stops sucking, Grusha returns to the cabin door and knocks again. She offers him one piaster, and he demands two. Grusha relents, and the man gives her the milk. After feeding Michael, Grusha continues on.

Grusha becomes desperate to provide for the child she has taken into her care, and haggles with a similarly desperate peasant man in order to do so.

Arkadi and his chorus sing about Grusha's journey. The Fat Prince's soldiers are after her, and her "pursuers never tire." Two Ironshirts trudge down the highway into the mountains. Their Corporal berates and insults them, and forces them to sing a soldier's song about leaving loved ones behind. He tells them that a good soldier puts his heart and soul into war, and chides them for not committing to their roles with more enthusiasm. The Corporal wonders aloud how he will ever find the Governor's "bastard" with the help of such fools.

Things are worse than Grusha knows, with the Fat Prince's army hot on her trail. This scene reveals the soldiers tailing Grusha to be incompetent but overseen by a cruel and driven man, whose only goal is to find and retrieve the innocent son of the Governor. The stakes are thus raised, as Grusha's life appears to be on the line.

Grusha arrives at another farm, telling Michael that she is going to leave him here. He has wet himself, and over the course of the journey has become a heavy burden. She tells the child that although she would like to keep him, she cannot. She sets the child down on the doorstep of the farm's cottage and hides behind a tree. A peasant woman opens the door and sees the bundled child. She calls her husband to the door, and notes that the child looks to be from a wealthy family, as he is swaddled in fine linens. The husband tells his wife he does not want to take the child in, and that they will bring it to the village priest. The peasant wife disregards her husband's protests, and brings the child into the house. Grusha runs off.

Grusha, finally understanding how difficult caring for Michael will be, plans to leave him with a peasant couple in order to relieve herself of the burden. She expresses regret at having to leave Michael behind, but seems secure in her choice and eager to get on with saving her own life. Although this decision is more self-serving than it is selfless, it is also perhaps the most sensible thing for Grusha to do for both herself and Michael.

Arkadi and his chorus sing a small song expressing Grusha's competing happiness and sadness at having left the child behind. After walking for a short while, she runs into the two lazy Ironshirts and their Corporal. The Corporal asks her where she is coming from and where she is headed—she tells him the truth, that she is going to meet Simon, one of the Palace Guards back in Nuka. The Corporal teases Grusha rather lewdly before he reveals his official business: he is looking for a baby from the city—a baby from a fine family, likely wrapped in fine clothes. He asks Grusha if she has seen or heard of any such baby. She tells him that she hasn't, and then runs away, frightened.

Grusha is both relieved and saddened to have abandoned the child after all. When she meets the band of soldiers and their cruel, creepy Corporal, she realizes what is in store for Michael if she does not rescue him, and is immediately overcome with a sense of urgent need to right the wrong she has committed in leaving the child behind. Yet again, Grusha's impulse toward care and compassion wins out against her self-interest.

Grusha returns to the cottage, where the peasant woman has placed Michael in a crib. Grusha urges the peasant woman to hide the child, informing her that there are soldiers coming, and they are looking for the baby. She confesses that she was the one who left the child on the doorstep, though she is not his mother. Grusha urges the peasant woman to remove the baby's fine swaddling, as it will give him away. The peasant woman chastises Grusha for having committed the "sin" of abandoning a baby.

Grusha attempts to undo her mistake, but causes the peasant woman anger in the process. Rather than cooperating with Grusha, the peasant woman seeks to shame her, creating chaos and stress and wasting precious time that should be used to prepare the child for the Corporal's arrival.

Grusha looks out the window, and sees the soldiers approaching. The peasant woman looks, too, and finally understands the gravity of the situation. Grusha warns the woman that the soldiers will kill Michael on sight if he is discovered, so she begs the peasant woman to lie and say that the child is hers. The peasant woman agrees to the scheme, and promises that she will tell the soldiers that Michael is her own son.

As the chaos of the moment peaks, Grusha and the peasant woman come together, both of them acting as provisional "mothers" to Michael, in order to try and ensure his safety in the face of corrupt and cruel "hired fists." This is as much a stand-off between women and men as it is a stand-off between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless.

The Ironshirts knock at the door, then let themselves into the cottage. The Ironshirts ask Grusha why she ran away, and she replies that she suddenly remembered she had left milk on the stove. The Corporal asks Grusha if she's sure she wasn't afraid of the "carnal" spark between them. Grusha denies having noticed such any such spark.

The Corporal continues to bully and objectify Grusha, further cementing his status as a cruel and corrupt individual willing to wield his power in unsavory ways. However, his fixation on Grusha will perhaps distract him from discovering the truth.

The Corporal asks the peasant woman why she isn't busy with a task, and the peasant woman, overcome with nerves, gives everything away, telling the soldiers that Grusha told her to lie and say the child was hers. The Corporal orders his soldiers to take the peasant woman out of the house while he questions Grusha. Grusha insists that the child is hers, but the Corporal notices the baby's fine linens and begins to bend over the crib to take Michael out of it. Grusha attempts to pull him away, but he throws her off. Grusha finds a wooden log and hits the Corporal over the head, causing him to collapse. She takes the baby from the crib and runs out of the house.

As Grusha's last-minute scheme begins to fall apart, she grows desperate to save Michael from the Ironshirts' clutches, and she puts herself in danger in order to remove Michael from harm's way. Grusha, who just a little while ago wanted to abandon the child, now would put her own life on the line for his, suggesting that care and compassion are like muscles that a person can develop and strengthen over time rather than innate qualities.

Grusha and the chorus sing a song in which Grusha announces that she has finally decided to adopt the helpless child in earnest, and promises she will never be without him again. She takes off the baby's linens and wraps him in rags to disguise him.

Grusha has committed herself entirely to caring for Michael, no longer concerned with whatever burden or danger he might bring upon her.

Grusha comes to a glacier which is passable only by way of a "rotten" bridge in terrible condition. Several merchants are already gathered at the bridge, attempting to fix one of its broken ropes. They tell Grusha she will not be able to pass, but she tells them that she must cross to the eastern side of the bridge in order to get to her brother's house. The merchants advise her strongly against attempting to cross, but just then Grusha hears the band of Ironshirts approaching in the distance.

Grusha comes to the "ultimate test" of her commitment to Michael—a rickety bridge which seems completely impassable, ready to collapse at any moment. As the Ironshirts bear down on Grusha, she must decide, in a tense and chaotic moment, what it is she will do.

Grusha looks down into the two-thousand-foot-deep abyss, and proclaims that being caught by the Ironshirts would be worse for both her and Michael than falling to their deaths. The merchants urge her to cross the bridge alone, so as not to risk the child's life, but Grusha proclaims that she and the child belong together. Grusha sings a short song expressing her determination to get herself and her "son" across.

Grusha knows that being caught, at this point, would be a far worse death than falling while trying to escape to freedom. She is committed to Michael, whom she now sees as her son, and acts in a way that shows she will do whatever it takes to keep the two of them together.

Grusha crosses the bridge just as the Ironshirts and their Corporal—whose head is bandaged—appear on the western side. The men know they cannot cross, and Grusha, from the eastern side, waves Michael above her head to taunt them. She walks on, and sings the child another small song about her hopes for his survival and his great destiny.

Grusha is triumphant, and Michael is now hers. She has escaped danger and proven her commitment to her child's safety, and together the two of them abscond into the mountains.

ACT 3: IN THE NORTHERN MOUNTAINS

Arkadi sings of Grusha's journey across the glacier. She traverses its icy surface and makes her way down the slopes that surround it for a week, comforting herself all the while with the thought of how, when she reaches her brother's house, she and Michael will be embraced and welcomed.

Grusha has sacrificed her own safety and comfort for Michael, but no longer begrudges him this fact or sees him as a burden. Instead, she dreams of how together they will soon make it to safety and warmth.

When she finally arrives at her brother Lavrenti's house, Grusha is so pale and weak that she has to be held up by a servant as she enters her brother's home. Lavrenti introduces Grusha to his wife, Aniko. They are in the middle of eating dinner. They ask Grusha why she has left Nuka, and she tells them of the unrest there. Lavrenti asks Grusha if her baby has a father, and Grusha, weakened, can only shake her head "no." Lavrenti tells Grusha quietly that the two of them will soon have to make up a story, as his wife is religious and will not have a fatherless child in her house.

Grusha does not receive the warm welcome she was expecting. In fact, her brother's wife is judgmental and her brother is a coward, beholden to Aniko's opinions and afraid to challenge her in order to make Grusha's difficult journey any easier.

Grusha nearly faints, and Lavrenti rushes to her side. He tells his wife that she is on her way to her husband's house. Grusha asks if she can lie down, and Aniko worries that Grusha is sick with consumption. Aniko asks if Grusha's husband has a farm, and Grusha tells her that he is a soldier. Lavrenti, expanding upon the lie, adds that Grusha's husband is about to inherit a small farm from his father. Aniko, confused, asks why Grusha is going to her husband's house if he is away fighting in the war, but Lavrenti assures Aniko that Grusha plans to wait for her husband at his house on the other side of the mountain. While Grusha murmurs feverishly, trying to keep up with her brother's lies, Aniko worries that Grusha has been stricken with scarlet fever.

Lavrenti lies to his wife in order to ensure that his sister has a place to stay. Aniko is obsessed with the ruin Grusha and the child stand to bring into her household, either in the form of sickness or shame. Brecht uses Aniko's obsession with self-preservation to demonstrate the hypocrisy and corruption of the rich. Brecht felt it was important to highlight the ever-widening gulf between the rich and the poor, and the ways in which the rich attempt to fuel and expand that rift.

When Aniko leaves the room to check on dessert, Grusha hands Michael to her brother. Lavrenti holds the child, but tells Grusha that she cannot stay for long—he reiterates that his wife is a religious woman. Grusha collapses, overcome by weakness.

Grusha's difficult journey has been put on pause for a moment, but she is overcome by the chilliness of the welcome she has received and its stark contrast from the warm, loving environment she'd envisioned for herself and her child.

Time passes. Grusha and Michael stay with Lavrenti and his wife through the winter. One day, while weaving in the basement, Grusha sings a song to Michael about a pair of lovers separated by war. Grusha tells Michael that the two of them must make themselves "as small as cockroaches," so that Aniko will practically forget they are in the house.

Grusha and Michael have been able to hide themselves from Aniko within her own house, but life in hiding is hardly a life at all. Grusha compares herself and her son to cockroaches, realizing how small, vulnerable, and repulsive they must be to Aniko.

Lavrenti enters the basement, and, after checking to make sure that Grusha and Michael are not too cold, begins to tell Grusha that Aniko is very concerned about Grusha's "husband." Grusha and Michael have been in Lavrenti's house for six months. Lavrenti tells Grusha that she and Michael must leave once the snow melts and spring arrives, and that Aniko has begun to wonder whether Michael is an illegitimate child. All throughout their conversation, raindrops have been falling steadily on the roof, but suddenly they become very loud, and Lavrenti warns Grusha that spring has already come.

Lavrenti seems to have love in his heart for his sister, but is so afraid of upsetting his wife that he puts a cap on Grusha's stay. Almost as soon as he declares that they must leave when spring arrives, he notices that it already has, demonstrating his desire to get them out of the house as soon as possible.

Lavrenti tells Grusha that he has made some inquiries, and has found a man who can be her husband. Grusha protests—she wants to wait for Simon, her betrothed—but Lavrenti insists that Grusha needs a "man on paper." He has found the son of a peasant woman who owns a nearby farm to pose as Grusha's husband. The man, Lavrenti says, is about to die; he is practically "at his last gasp." Grusha admits that she needs a "father" for Michael, at least on paper, and agrees to the arrangement. Lavrenti leaves the basement, and Grusha tenderly but bitterly tells Michael that her life would be easier if she had just left him alone in the palace courtyard on that fateful Easter Sunday.

Lavrenti, though unable to help his sister by allowing her to stay any longer, has at least attempted to arrange a situation for her which will allow her to keep her child and remain hidden. Grusha is reminded of the ways in which her life has been made more difficult by Michael's presence, but she loves him a great deal nonetheless and continues to sacrifice for him as she agrees to her brother's plan.

Arkadi changes the scene to the cottage of a peasant woman and her dying son. Grusha's new mother-in-law pulls Grusha into the cabin quickly, afraid her son will die before they can marry him to Grusha. When she sees Michael, though, she hesitates, worried that bringing a woman who already has a child into her family will bring her great shame. Lavrenti offers to pay the woman extra for Grusha's dowry, and promises that the woman (and not Grusha) will inherit her son's farm when he dies—Grusha simply needs a place to stay for a couple of years. The peasant woman goes off to find the monk she has hired to perform the marriage.

Grusha is thrust into a chaotic scene as she is forced to quickly marry a dying man. Her new mother-in-law is entering into this deal to save herself and her farm and to earn a bit of money while she's at it. Grusha is similarly desperate; thus, both women enter into a mutually beneficial contract that exploits the unfortunate circumstances of a dying man.

Grusha asks Lavrenti to promise her that he will send Simon right to her, if Lavrenti should find him. Lavrenti agrees to do so. The peasant woman returns with the monk, and finds that some curious neighbors have gathered outside her cottage. She shoos them away, and the marriage ceremony begins. Although the dying man cannot answer his marriage vows, his mother assures the monk that he said "I do" very quietly. Once the marriage is official, Lavrenti departs. Grusha's new mother-in-law introduces her to all the neighbors, who have already begun to gossip about Grusha's origins and the presence of her illegitimate son.

The marriage is hasty and certainly questionable, though it becomes clear from the way the wedding guests immediately begin to gossip about Grusha that she needs whatever help she can get in hiding her son from the prying eyes of those who might wish to do the "noble child" harm.

The monk makes a speech in which he proclaims that all the wedding guests also stand before a funeral bed. Grusha's mother-in-law laments having hired such a cheap and tactless priest. Meanwhile, Grusha's new husband sits up in bed for a minute to stare at his mother and his bride before sinking back down into unconsciousness. Three musicians arrive, and tell Grusha's mother-in-law that the monk has sent for them. The peasant woman, infuriated, asks the monk how he could have possibly brought a band to a funeral, but then calms down and tells the musicians they might as well play.

The scene grows even more chaotic and absurd as the low-rent monk and his motley band, hired to perform the wedding, attempt to double things up and also prepare the gathered guests for a funeral. In this comical and farcical bit, Brecht is commenting on the absurdity of both the legal ritual of marriage and the religious ritual of a funeral by showing the monk attempting to combine the two.

The musicians play for a while and then stop. When the music ends, the guests at the wedding are gossiping loudly about some news: the Grand Duke has returned, but the Princes remain against him. Apparently, the Grand Duke has been lent a large Persian regiment to help him restore order and reclaim his dominion over Grusinia. Thus, the war is over, and all the soldiers will soon return home. Grusha, overhearing the news, drops a cake pan on the ground.

Grusha realizes that perhaps she has married for nothing. No sooner than her vows have been sealed, news comes that the war is over, and she realizes that Simon will perhaps soon be on his way home to her. In this way, the characters' lives seem dictated more by chance and chaos than by order and reason, and nothing is stable for long.

Grusha, stunned, sits down and asks weakly if the news is true. A guest assures her that it is. Grusha kneels and begins to pray, kissing the silver cross she wears around her neck. The wedding guests continue to discuss the war, and Grusha's new husband sits upright once again. He begins berating his mother for serving so many cakes, and asks her if she thinks he's made of money—while his mother looks at him "aghast," the man demands to meet the woman to whom he has just been married off. He climbs out of bed and begins staggering through the house. The guests, all alarmed, begin to leave, and the man—named Jussup—urges them to go, telling them they won't get any more free food from his house.

Events take an even more startling turn when the dying man (whom Grusha has married with the intention of immediately bidding him farewell) suddenly awakens from his state of unconsciousness and begins ordering her and her new mother-in-law around. It seems that, in a whirlwind of new developments, chance and chaos have intervened once again, and once again Grusha's life is going to look very different than she thought it would.

While Jussup eats cake, Arkadi sings about the awkwardness of the situation. Grusha is newly married, even as her lover, the soldier Simon, is on his way home to her.

Grusha is caught in a swirl of chaos and irony which, for the sake of her child, she cannot escape. Not only has the war ended sooner than planned, but Grusha's "dying" husband suddenly seems alive and well.

Some time has passed. Jussup takes a bath, aided by his mother, but he calls for Grusha, stating that the task of bathing him is now his wife's work. He demands that Grusha scrub his back, and asks her where her child came from. He has more or less ignored Michael for a while, but now his patience has run out. He berates and belittles Grusha, whom he claims is both his wife and not his wife. He tells her that Simon is never coming for her, and expresses his disgust for the fact that Grusha is "cheating" him out of sex and intimacy.

Grusha's new life is difficult and demanding, and she has sacrificed her independence and happiness for the sake of her son's safety in a larger sense than ever before. Brecht uses Grusha's downward spiral to highlight several of the problems he sees in society: misogyny, individual selfishness, and normative expectations for marriage and family, to name a few.

Arkadi, signaling the passage of even more time, sings a song in which he describes Grusha waiting and waiting for Simon to come for her, but he never does, and with each "passing moon" his face and voice grow dimmer in her mind.

Grusha, though she waits and waits for Simon, feels her faith in the idea that he will ever return to her growing fainter and fainter as she accepts the reality of her new situation.

Grusha washes linens in a stream while, nearby, an older and more grown-up Michael plays with some other children his age. The children play a game in which the Fat Prince cuts off the Governor's head. In the game, Michael is the Governor, but he longs to be the Fat Prince. The children allow Michael to switch parts, and Michael mimes cutting off another boy's head. Grusha watches the children's violent game, and when they all scatter and begin to chase each other, she notices Simon standing on the opposite bank of the river.

Grusha watches as the children play a violent game which glamorizes the events of the Governor's violent removal from power. Her child plays along innocently and enthusiastically, unaware that the story he is playacting is the story of his father's death, and thus also of his own misfortune. That he plays this game unaware of these truths highlights the dramatic way in which his fate was altered by the coup.

Simon and Grusha greet each other happily but with a stiff formality. Grusha thanks God that Simon has returned from the war in good health. Simon and Grusha warm up to one another and begin to flirt a little bit as Simon asks Grusha if she has forgotten their love, and Grusha assures him that she has not. She tells him, however, that she can never return to Nuka, since she assaulted an Ironshirt and has since been married. She asks Simon to cross the bridge between them so that she can better explain all that has come to pass, but Simon is despondent, and realizes aloud that he has come for her too late.

Simon and Grusha, initially thrilled to see one another, both realize that perhaps things have changed too much for them to be together. Too much time has passed, and Grusha was unable to wait for Simon to return to her—though not for the reasons he may think. As the audience knows, Grusha never stopped loving and waiting for Simon, but chaos, chance, and circumstance intervened and forced her hand.

Arkadi sings the things that Simon and Grusha cannot say out loud to one another. He sings the story of Simon's time in the war, witnessing bloody battles and the deaths of his comrades. Simon notes that there is a small hat in the grass, and asks if there is already a child. Grusha admits that there is, but that it is not hers. Arkadi then sings Grusha's private thoughts. He sings of how Grusha found Michael while Simon was away at war, and did not have the heart to abandon him, though in order to raise him she has had to "break [her]self for that which was not [hers.]"

Simon and Grusha cannot say all that they would like to say to one another, so it is up to Arkadi to clue the audience in to how each of them really feels. There is too much hurt and angst between Simon and Grusha, but Arkadi makes it clear that they still long deeply for one another. Brecht shows that such love has the potential to be a healing force after the destruction of war, but leaves it open as to whether their love will ultimately be enough.

Simon tells Grusha to give him back the cross he gave her on the day of their engagement. Then he changes his mind, and tells her to throw it into the river. Grusha begs Simon not to leave, again imploring him to believe that the child is not hers. She hears the sound of Michael and the other children calling in the distance. In reply, she asks what the matter is, and the children's voices cry that soldiers have come to take Michael away.

Grusha's fears about disappointing Simon and losing him once again are interrupted when her child's life—for which she has sacrificed everything and "broken" herself—is once again at risk despite all her efforts to protect it. In this moment, it seems she must choose which is more important: romantic love or motherly love.

Two Ironshirts appear, with Michael held captive between them. The soldiers ask Grusha if Michael is her child, and she tells them that he is. At this, Simon turns and leaves. Grusha calls out for him to stay. The soldiers tell Grusha that they have orders to take the child back to the city, and that they know his true identity. They hand Grusha a sealed warrant, and lead Michael away. Grusha runs after them.

The soldiers catch Grusha in a lie—a lie, moreover, which only serves to hurt Simon and make him run away. As Grusha realizes more fully what is happening to her, she follows the soldiers back toward Nuka, willing to do whatever it takes to protect her child.

Arkadi sings again, narrating that, as the Ironshirts take the child back to the city, Grusha follows them back to the "dreaded" Nuka to fight against Natella for custody of the child. Arkadi wonders whether a good judge or a bad one will be assigned to the case, noting that the city is "in flames," or in great ruin. A man name Azdak, Arkadi says, will be in the judge's seat.

Arkadi is about to leave aside Grusha's narrative for a moment in order to better explain who Azdak is, and in doing so, to show what kind of judge Grusha will face when she arrives in Nuka to sit trial.

ACT 4: THE STORY OF THE JUDGE

Arkadi calls upon the audience to listen to the story of Azdak the judge and learn "what kind of judge he was." Arkadi sings that on the Easter Sunday of the revolt against the Grand Duke, Azdak hid a fugitive in his hut in the woods.

Arkadi is setting the audience up to listen to the story of an entirely new character, and to learn how his journey will come to connect him to Grusha's.

Azdak helps an elderly beggar into his home. He feeds him some cheese, and asks the old man why he was running. The old man says only that he had to. Azdak watches the old man eat, noting that he "lick[s] his chops like a Grand Duke." Suspicious, Azdak asks the old man to show him the palm of his hand, which he then sees is white and clean. Azdak realizes he has been swindled and tells the old man that he knows he is a landowner, and asks again why he was running.

Azdak is bitterly surprised and indignant to learn that he has been tricked into sheltering and feeding a wealthy fugitive. As the character closest to a stand-in for Brecht himself, Azdak share's Brecht's suspicion of the upper class and disdain for the cruelty and corruption of the wealthy and powerful.

The old man tells Azdak that he will pay him a hundred thousand piasters a night to stay hidden in the hut, and that although he does not have the money with him right now, he will ensure Azdak gets it. Azdak refuses the man's proposition, and tells him to get out. As the old man shuffles over to the door, a voice from outside calls Azdak's name.

Azdak is not tempted by the corruptive force of money, though the fugitive offers him an enormous sum. (Recall, by comparison, that Grusha could barely afford to buy milk for two piasters.) This immediately establishes him as a character of strong principles.

The old man hides in the corner while Azdak answers the door. A policeman named Shauwa is there, and Azdak asks him what he is doing "sniffling around." Shauwa accuses Azdak of having caught yet another "rabbit," and laments the fact that he must now arrest Azdak. One of the Prince's "rabbits" has been stolen, Shauwa says, and as a policeman, he has no choice but to arrest the "offending party."

When Shauwa accuses Azdak of catching "rabbits," he is using a thinly-veiled metaphor to accuse him of sheltering vulnerable yet quick and wily enemies of the new rulers of Grusinia—which Azdak is unknowingly doing by feeding the old man.

Azdak argues with Shauwa, warning him that one day God will pass judgement on him for hunting down men on behalf of the Fat Prince. He urges Shauwa to go home and repent, then closes the door on him. Azdak asks the old man if he is surprised that Azdak didn't hand him over, and instructs the old man to finish his cheese but to eat it like a poor man. Azdak then realizes he will have to teach the old man how to do so, and talks him step-by-step through how beggars eat food—that is, hungrily and in an unrefined manner.

Azdak has defended the man from the police, even though he knows that the man is a wealthy landowner. Although he seems to have a strong sense of justice, he feels no allegiance to the Fat Prince. The old man, for his part, has evidently never been hungry and therefore must be instructed in the ways in which the poor move through the world, prompting Azdak to realize he is in over his head—deeper than he wants to be.

Azdak wonders aloud if this old man is being hunted for the right reasons, or whether the police are mistaken about him. He concludes that he does not trust the old man, but still he allows him to stay the night. Arkadi intervenes to sing of how Azdak, over the course of the evening, came to realize that the old beggar was in fact "the Grand Duke himself," and then felt great shame at having hidden him. Azdak immediately turned himself into Shauwa, and asked to be arrested and sent to Nuka to sit trial for sheltering such an evil man.

Azdak is so wary of the corruption of the wealthy and powerful, and so bent on upholding justice, that he turns himself into the police for having committed what he sees as an unforgivable crime, but which was in fact an honest mistake that anyone could have made. Unlike the corrupt people in power, Azdak doesn't see himself as being above the law, even when he has acted unknowingly.

Azdak arrives in Nuka in chains, shouting aloud about his guilt in having helped the Grand Duke—whom he refers to as "the Grand Thief, the Grand Butcher, the Grand Swindler"—escape justice. Shauwa is not far behind him. Azdak asks to be "severely judged" in a public trial, and denounces himself as a traitor and a criminal.

Azdak is despondent over having played a role in sheltering such a corrupt individual, and truly wants to face judgment and justice in the eyes of the law.

A group of nearby Ironshirts ask Azdak whether his neighbors back in his village judged him for sheltering the Grand Duke. Shauwa answers on Azdak's behalf, and tells the Ironshirts that everyone back in the village had either comforted Azdak or seemed indifferent. Azdak continues begging the Ironshirts to bring him to trial. The Ironshirts point out a judge, hanging from a gallows in the corner of the square. Azdak asks where all the other town officials have gone, and then realizes that they were all murdered as well, when peasants and commoners in Nuka rioted after realizing that they would fare no better under the Fat Prince's regime than they had under the Grand Duke's.

Azdak is so overcome by shame that he is unable to see that his crime—having unwittingly sheltered the Grand Duke—is not as big a deal to anybody else as it is to him. Nobody else's morals are as stringent, and with all the chaos and upheaval in Nuka, it seems of little consequence whether or not the Grand Duke was able to escape. In this way, Azdak's behavior reveals him to be one of the few people left with any true sense of justice.

Azdak references a time in Persia when "everybody" was hanged, and peasants and foot soldiers took upon themselves the duties of ruling. When one of the Ironshirts asks why all this happened, Azdak offers to sing a song his grandfather taught him. He begins to sing "The Song of Injustice in Persia," which speaks of the violence in Persia and also of the peace following the war, during which "those who cannot let down their own trousers rule countries."

Azdak shows himself to be against not just corruption but violence, as well, cementing his role as a character fixated on the ideals of justice, equality, and peace. Azdak has seen violence many times throughout his life, and laments the endless fighting between corrupt leaders and downtrodden commoners everywhere in the world.

One of the Ironshirts notices that the **sky is turning red** with fire, and says that on the outskirts of town the people are still revolting. The peasants are the ones who strung up the judge, he says, and the Ironshirts have been offered one hundred piasters for each rebel they kill. The Ironshirts discuss amongst themselves whether Azdak is a troublemaker who has come to the capital to get mixed up in revolt. Shauwa, however, attests to Azdak's good character, and Azdak himself admits that he does not know any longer why he came to Nuka. One of the Ironshirts asks Azdak if he is still angry with himself for not having killed the Grand Duke, and Azdak confesses that he let the old man run away. Shauwa attests to this fact. The Ironshirts, apparently realizing that Azdak poses no real threat to justice or order, release him from his chains.

As the Fat Prince's soldiers try to determine whether Azdak poses a threat to order or intends to revolt, Brecht is mirroring his own experience of espousing radical politics within a stifling and dangerous environment. Brecht's radical politics while he was in exile during the second world war later made him a target for those attempting to snuff out any Marxist or communist political threats in the early days of the cold war. Here, he demonstrates the terrifying and isolating effects of being seen as such a threat.

The Fat Prince enters with a young man at his side, and recounts the details of his coup of Grusinia. It was a success, he says, except for the fact that the Grand Duke escaped, and that a rebellion is simmering on the outskirts of town. The Fat Prince declares that there must be peace and justice, and wants to install his nephew as the new judge. While the Ironshirts confer amongst themselves and discuss the new regime's hypocrisy and incompetence, the Fat Prince whispers to his nephew that the job will soon be his.

The Fat Prince claims to want peace and justice, but really just wants to use corrupt methods to uphold his own wealth and power—and that of those close to him. He is blind to the fact that his coup has not, in fact, been a success, and that unrest and despair are still gripping the people he should be protecting and prospering.

The Ironshirts ask Azdak if he would like to put his name in the running for the position of judge. Azdak knows that the Ironshirts want to test the Fat Prince's nephew, and suggests they all hold a mock trial using a criminal from the dungeon—but then he second-guesses his own idea, deciding that it wouldn't be good to try any real criminals until it's a sure thing that the presiding judge will be appointed. Azdak reminds the men of the importance of respecting the sanctity of the law, and suggests that he himself serve as the defendant in the mock trial.

Azdak, in this passage, reveals that his respect for the sanctity of morals extend also to the sanctity of the law itself. The audience will watch as Azdak's faith in the law is tested and, in some ways, overturned over the course of the act, as Azdak realizes that it is not necessarily the law itself that is sacred, but the triumph of justice.

The Fat Prince accepts Azdak's proposal, but again whispers to his nephew that the proceedings are "a mere formality." Azdak, pretending to be the Grand Duke, presents himself before the "judge." He claims that the it was the Princes who forced him to declare war, and then "messed it up" by embezzling money and sending too few soldiers and sick horses into battle. He attempts to call the Fat Prince as a witness, alleging that the Princes did not fight in the war but only acted as warmongers. The Fat Prince protests "the Duke's" claims and demands he hang. The Ironshirts protest, but the Fat Prince's nephew, too, issues a verdict of hanging. Azdak argues, continuing to insist that the Princes orchestrated a war in which they would make profit out of loss. The Fat Prince stops Azdak's mock testimony and orders the Ironshirts to appoint the rightful new judge, assuming they will select his nephew. Instead, the Ironshirts pull the judge's gown off the hanged man and place it on Azdak's shoulders.

Azdak, before he has even been appointed as judge, begins exposing the corruption and hypocrisy that have defined both the Grand Duke's regime as well as the Fat Prince's. Although the Fat Prince and his nephew attempt to silence Azdak and punish him for his commitment to truth and justice, the Ironshirts actually band together to reward Azdak by appointing him judge. They dress him in the robes of the judge who was strung up by the revolting peasants, symbolizing the hope that Azdak will be the people's judge, and will not let the commoners down.

Arkadi sings of how Azdak remained the judge for two years, ruling justly as "cockroaches crawled out of every crack" while the war raged on and the court was filled with case after case.

Azdak is appointed judge at a difficult time, but deftly handles the influx of cases and exposes the hypocrisy and corruption of "cockroaches" throughout the land.

Azdak sits in his judge's chair, peeling an apple. As there are so many cases before him, he announces his plan to hear two cases at a time. The cases he is hearing today involve an invalid bringing a complaint of negligence against his doctor, and a blackmailer who attempted to find out from a landowner whether the landowner had raped his own niece. Azdak hears the citizens' complaints and defenses, and rules swiftly and decisively but with a sense of humor, essentially blackmailing the blackmailer, and pardoning the doctor even though he has "perpetrated an unpardonable error" by practicing for free.

In this passage, the audience is shown Azdak's unique approach to administering justice throughout Grusinia. He punishes those who have done wrong, even if they claim they were acting in the name of righteousness, and highlights the ways in which those who have not technically committed a crime or an injustice may nonetheless be shortchanging themselves and those around them.

Azdak travels to the country to hear the case of an innkeeper who wishes to bring action against his a stableman who raped his daughter-in-law while his son was away on business. After hearing the woman's testimony, Azdak questions her as to whether she enjoys eating sweet things and lazing about in the bathtub. Azdak rules that it is the daughter-in-law who has "raped an unfortunate man"—Azdak tells her she cannot "run around with a behind like that and get away with it in court."

In another case, the audience sees yet another example of Azdak laying blame where it might not have been seen by a different judge. In this case, however, his verdict is undeniably sexist and misogynistic, blaming a woman for her own rape because of her appearance (though it's unclear whether Brecht would have intended it to be read that way).

Arkadi and his chorus sing of Azdak's continuing travels throughout the countryside. He gains renown as "the poor man's magistrate." In yet another case, Azdak hears testimony against an old woman who has been accused by three men of stealing a cow and a ham, and of killing her landlord's cows when he asked her to pay rent on a piece of land. The old woman insists that she was visited by "the miracle-working Saint Banditus," who gave her the cow as a condolence after her son was killed in the war. When some men tried to steal the cow back, bumps sprouted on their heads, and the old woman began to believe in miracles.

In this third example of Azdak's unique take on the concept of justice, the audience watches as Azdak is placed in front of a case in which the obvious "guilty" party is a wily bandit who has deceived this old woman into accepting and hiding stolen goods. After seeing the last two cases unfold, though, the audience is probably able to intuit that a greater moral justice is at work in this case, and that the bandit may not be as "guilty" as he seems.

As for the ham, the old woman claims it came flying through her window one night and hit her in the back, and that Saint Banditus told her not to worry about paying her landlord rent—he would take care of it. Meanwhile, a roaming bandit has entered the proceedings to watch what's going on. The bandit, watching the old woman give her testimony, begins sobbing, afraid he will be caught. However, Azdak sentences the three plaintiffs to pay a fine for not believing in miracles, and invites the old woman and the bandit to join him for a glass of wine.

As Azdak gains a reputation as a friend to the poor and downtrodden, the audience watches him try a case in which he chooses to punish neither the guilty party (the bandit) or the accused (the innocent elderly woman,) knowing that to do so would be to ruin the lives of two poor and desperate individuals. Instead, he charges those who brought the case to court—though they have lost things, they at least had things to lose in the first place, and being fined for "not believing in miracles" will be a punishment they can easily overcome.

Arkadi and his chorus sing of how Azdak "broke the rules" to save the local populace, and gave out "broken law like bread." He becomes known as a Robin Hood figure, giving "beasts of prey short measure," and fighting on behalf of the "poor and lowly."

Azdak doesn't uphold the rule of law per se, but upholds the sanctity of justice. He is committed to the common people, and as they have likely never had so true an ally, Azdak is celebrated throughout the land.

Arkadi reveals that eventually the Grand Duke returned to Nuka, as did the Governor's wife, Natella. The Fat Prince was beheaded and deposed, and Azdak became seized by fear. Back in the court of justice in Nuka, Azdak confers with Shauwa while sounds of chaos filter through the chamber from outside. Azdak tells Shauwa that he will soon be free; Azdak has kept Shauwa with him for years, and Shauwa has stayed because it is his "nature" to "lick the hand of some superior being." Now, Azdak invites Shauwa to join him in singing The Song of Chaos in Egypt in memory of the confusion and disorder of the Fat Prince's reign. The men sing together of driving out the mighty, restoring the poor, and toppling the social order to benefit the downtrodden.

As the Grand Duke returns to power, Azdak fears he will be strung up or removed from his role as judge, just as the last judge was strung up during the last transfer of power. As Azdak and Shauwa contemplate what will happen to them, they consider the righteousness of their mission, and fear for its futility in the face of a seemingly endless cycle of chaotic upheavals of power.

Azdak calls for Shauwa to bring him his **Statute Book**, and begins looking through it to find out what punishment he might receive from the reinstated Grand Duke. He laments the fact that he cannot hide, nothing that, since he has helped virtually everybody, everybody knows him.

Azdak turns to his book of statutes to look for an indication of what injustice might befall him, thus symbolically linking the law to unjust violence against the righteous.

Shauwa announces that someone is approaching the chamber. Azdak plans to beg on his knees for mercy, as he is very afraid of death. Natella enters the chamber, flanked by Ironshirts. One soldier informs Azdak that Natella is looking for Michael, who was last seen being carried into the mountains by a servant girl. Azdak assures Natella that he will make sure the child is brought back, and that the servant girl is beheaded. He promises her that he is completely at her service.

Azdak is relieved that his life will be spared, and as the fourth act comes to a close he seems to betray his own commitment to exposing corruption and serving the common people as he agrees to be retained by the corrupt and narcissistic Natella.

ACT 5: THE CHALK CIRCLE

Grusha and Michael arrive back in Nuka, but Grusha is kept away from the child as he is led into the palace. There is a "**fire-red sky**" over the palace. Grusha stands with the former governor's cook, who tells her that she's lucky that Azdak is the one trying her case, since he is not a "real judge," but a drunk who lets even the worst thieves slip by without consequences. The cook asks Grusha why she wants Michael so badly, and Grusha replies that the child is hers since she has raised him. The cook asks what Grusha thought would happen when the governor's wife returned for the child, and Grusha confesses that she believed that Natella would never find them. The cook tells Grusha that she has wronged Simon, who has also arrived back in Nuka, and who is now approaching Grusha and the cook. Grusha replies that she cannot be bothered with Simon right now.

Grusha, after having sacrificed so much to ensure a quiet life of safety for herself and her child, is thrust into a chaotic and emotional whirlwind as she arrives back in Nuka. Not only is she concerned that her child will be taken from her, but after having been away so long, she has missed all that has happened in Nuka over the last several years and is therefore unaware of Azdak's infamous role in the city's justice system. Moreover, Simon is still hot on her tail, desperate for affection and answers.

Simon appears behind Grusha and offers to swear in court that he is the child's father. Grusha thanks him. Two Ironshirts arrive, asking where the judge is. Apparently, Azdak is not present. The cook says she hopes nothing has happened to Azdak, as Grusha's case will have very little chance with any other judge.

Brecht highlights the unfairness of the justice system by creating a series of circumstances in which Grusha's fate relies entirely on who will be judging her case.

Grusha worries aloud that she will run into the Ironshirt she hit over the head. Just at that moment, the Corporal, who has been standing in the background, turns to face her. He has a large scar running across his face. Another Ironshirt asks the corporal what the matter is, and whether he knows Grusha. After looking at her for a moment, the Corporal replies that he does not.

The chance encounters and swirling chaos that characterize the play's fourth act serve to disorient Grusha and remind the audience of the interconnectedness of all the moving parts of this story.

Natella and her two lawyers are on their way to the courtroom. Natella she says that she is grateful that no common people are present, since their smell gives her a headache. One of her lawyers bids her to be careful with what she says. Her second lawyer tells her that no common people have shown up to the trial because of the ongoing riots.

Natella remains as self-centered and as loathing of the common people as ever, completely blind to the suffering of the lower classes and the injustices they face each and every day.

Azdak and Shauwa are brought into the courtroom wearing chains. Three farmers are behind them. An Ironshirt chides Azdak for trying to run away, and then soldiers and farmers together tear off Azdak's judge's gown, beat him up, and put his neck in a noose. Natella laughs as Azdak is beaten. The Corporal and a messenger arrive with a dispatch from the Grand Duke stating that Azdak has been appointed as the official judge in the trial. The confused Corporal asks what is going on, and why Azdak has been beaten bloody. The Ironshirts answer that Azdak was already slated to judge the case, but that the farmers gathered together to denounce him as an enemy of the Grand Duke. The Corporal orders the farmers to be taken away, and proclaims that Azdak will be exposed to no more violence. Then he and his messenger depart.

Azdak is caught in the crosshairs of the political and social unrest that have gripped Nuka. In attempting to run away from the trial, he has exposed himself to the judgement of others, for once. The senseless beating of Azdak at the hands of suspicious farmers once again mirrors the hostile political environment in which Brecht found himself during the early ears of the Cold War, while the absurdity and confusion surrounding the physical and moral assault against Azdak represent the panic, disorganization, and danger of attempting to negatively expose or "root out" a political ideology.

Azdak dresses himself in his torn judge's robes and the Ironshirts unchain him. Azdak orders Shauwa to bring him some wine, and sends the Ironshirts out of his chambers, as he has a case to judge. Shauwa returns with the wine, and Azdak now asks Shauwa to bring him "something for [his] backside"—Shauwa places the **Statute Book** on the judge's chair, and Azdak sits down upon it.

Azdak sits down upon the Statute Book, expressing his disdain for the laws contained within it and his commitment to pursuing justice even if it means deviating from the law. In this way, Azdak's character represents the need the continually reassess laws in order to ensure their righteousness.

Natella's lawyers approach Azdak, and pass him a bit of money. Azdak counts the money and puts it away. Natella's lawyers proclaim that the "ridiculous" case is centered around Grusha, who has abducted Michael and now refuses to return him to his mother. Azdak looks at Grusha, and notes that she is an attractive woman. He demands truth from the entire court from that moment forward, and opens proceedings. Azdak asks Natella's lawyers what their fee is, but they refuse to answer. Azdak admits that he knows the question is unusual, but explains that he listens differently to lawyers when he knows they are good at their jobs and thus expensive to retain.

Natella's lawyers attempt to bribe Azdak, apparently unaware of his pattern of taking form the rich and giving to the poor. Considering that Azdak first swore allegiance to Natella, then attempted to run away and escape having to judge her trial, his motivations at this point in the scene are deeply muddied, and the audience and the characters alike are unsure of what to expect from this case. Azdak asks for truth and justice in his court, but also cheekily asks the lawyers if they have an expensive retainer, further adding to the confusion and chaos in the courtroom.

One of Natella's lawyers begins his opening statements, waxing poetic about the role of blood ties and the sacred relationship between mother and daughter. He paints Natella as a bereaved mother who has been "robbed of her young." Azdak interrupts the lawyer to ask Grusha what her answer to the lengthy statement is, and Grusha replies very simply that the child is hers. Azdak asks her to prove it, and explain why the child should be assigned to her. Grusha explains that she brought Michael up; she fed him, housed him, and went to great lengths to make sure he was safe.

In this passage Brecht is highlighting the ways in which society's traditional notions about motherhood can be damaging or destructive. Grusha is clearly the one who is fit to mother the child, and though she knows this plainly in her heart, she must defend herself against someone who is very obviously unfit for the role. Even though Natella is related to the child by blood, Brecht argues, her abysmal treatment of him should bar her from being considered fit to mother him.

Natella's lawyer resumes his speech. Natella cuts in to describe her "torture[d]" soul, and her second lawyer adds that in the wake of the unrest in Grusinia, Natella has nothing except for her son. Natella's lawyers then segue into discussing what the outcome of this trial will inevitably determine—that is, whether Michael will be the heir to his dead father's estates. Azdak proclaims that he is "touched" by the lawyers' mention of estates, and sees it as "proof of human feeling."

In this passage, Natella's true motivation for bringing Grusha to trial is revealed—she has had "nothing" after her husband's death, but that "nothing" extends only to wealth and power. Natella is not really concerned with getting her son back—just his inheritance. Azdak's remark implies that wealthy people's obsession with their own wealth only proves their lack of humanity.

Natella's lawyers explain that after Michael was left behind under "unfortunate" circumstances, Grusha stole him away. The cook, Grusha's friend, speaks up to defend her. She says that all Natella could think of as she prepared to flee was which dresses she wanted to pack. One of Natella's lawyers counters that claim by describing how Grusha fled into the mountains and got married, attempting to paint her as an irresponsible woman and mother.

The testimony each party offers against the other becomes more and more bitter, and Natella's lawyers attempt to shame and denigrate Grusha and bring her down to Natella's level.

Simon speaks up and says that he is the child's father. The cook once again speaks up and adds that she used to watch the child for Simon and Grusha. One of Natella's lawyers states that Simon's testimony is suspicious and biased, as he is engaged to Grusha.

Realizing that the case is already going off the rails, Simon and the cook attempt to sway things in Grusha's favor however they can.

Azdak asks Grusha why she married in the mountain village if she was engaged to Simon, and she confesses that she married to keep a roof over Michael's head while Simon was away at war. Azdak asks whether Grusha's child comes from whoring, and whether he is a "ragged little bastard" or a child borne "from a good family." Grusha insists that Michael is just an ordinary child.

Although now even Azdak is attempting to shame Grusha and imply that she is an unfit mother, Grusha stands defiant in her insistence that she and Michael are a unit, and that everything she has done was only to ensure his well-being.

Azdak announces that he will not listen to any more lies from either side. Grusha accuses Azdak of accepting a bribe from the opposing side, but Azdak tells her that everyone but "starvelings" like Grusha pays him off. Grusha exclaims that even though Natella is rich and refined, she would have no idea how to care for her own child. Azdak holds Grusha in contempt, and fines her twenty piasters.

Azdak attempts to restore order and integrity to the arguments in his court, even as Grusha accuses him of malpractice and bribe-taking. Thus, the courtroom grows more and more chaotic by the second.

Grusha goes on a tirade, admonishing Azdak by asking him how he dare speak to her so cruelly and calling him a "drunken onion." She accuses him of protecting the wealthy, who themselves stole their wealth from other people. Azdak, amused, grins widely, tapping out a beat with his gavel as Grusha continues her tirade. She tells Azdak that she has no respect for him, and that although he may take her child away from her, he is no better than "extortioners" and "men who rape children."

Grusha lays Azdak flat by exposing what she perceives as his unjust and corrupt approach to ruling. Azdak is amused and enlivened by Grusha's tirade, and is almost thrilled, it seems, to be ripped apart in such a manner. This demonstrates his contempt for normalcy and his desire to be seen and known as an iconoclast who is "above" the law.

Azdak adjourns court for fifteen minutes, telling Grusha that he has momentarily lost interest in her case. Natella's lawyers tell her that they have the verdict "in the bag." The cook laments that Grusha has ruined her chances by going off on such a tirade. Meanwhile, an elderly couple enters the courtroom and approaches Azdak. They want a divorce after having been married for forty years, and explain that they don't like each other, and haven't from the beginning. Azdak promises he will consider their request and let them know the verdict when he is through with his first case.

As another case enters the courtroom, the chaos continues to escalate. It seems as if Grusha has ruined her chances, and her allies worry whether things will be able to swing back in her favor.

Azdak proclaims that he needs someone to go and fetch Michael. He then calls Grusha to him, and asks her discreetly why she wouldn't want the child to grow up rich. If she only admits that he isn't hers, Azdak says, Michael can live in the lap of luxury and want for nothing. Arkadi intervenes to sing Grusha's thoughts aloud. She knows that if Michael grows up rich, he will be "cruel as a bear" and become evil.

Azdak tests Grusha's loyalty to her son in this moment in an attempt to see what her character truly is. The audience knows of Azdak's contempt for the wealthy, but Grusha does not, and sees him only as a corrupt money-grubber.

Shauwa enters with Michael, and Natella is appalled to see that he is dressed in commoner's clothing. Grusha replies that Natella couldn't even be bothered to dress her baby—on the contrary, she abandoned him. Natella attempts to physically attack Grusha, but her lawyers hold her back.

Natella and Grusha continue to fight amongst themselves over who is the more "fit" mother. Although Grusha has dressed the child in simple clothing, Natella could not be bothered to look after her child at all, underscoring the difference in the kind of care each woman is able to provide.

Azdak announces that as he has been unable to come to a decision about who the child's real mother is, he must choose one. He begins to devise a test. He calls to Shauwa to use a piece of chalk to draw a circle on the floor, and to place Michael in the center. Shauwa does so. Azdak then instructs Natella and Grusha to stand near the circle at opposite ends, and to each take the child by one hand. Natella and Grusha do as they have been told. Azdak then tells the women that the true mother is the one who can pull the child out of the circle.

Azdak has devised a test of physical strength which will determine who the child's true mother is. In the manner of all his other cases, his methods are unclear and unpredictable, but in a moment of such high emotions and high stakes it is easy to forget how wily Azdak really is, and how topsy-turvy his motivations and rulings often are.

Natella's lawyers object, but Azdak ignores them and orders the women to pull. Natella yanks Michael out of the circle onto her side while Grusha looks on in horror, not having made a move to pull on Michael at all. Natella's lawyers begin celebrating the "ties of blood" they had argued for earlier, while Grusha runs to Azdak and begs him to allow her to keep Michael just a little while longer.

Grusha is terrified to lose her child, and after it seems she has failed the test of the chalk circle, she desperately attempts to bargain with Azdak for just a little more time with the child she loves so dearly.

Azdak tells her to stop trying to influence the court, but agrees to let the women take the test once more. Grusha and Natella assume their position, but again only Natella pulls at Michael and yanks him out of the ring. Grusha, frustrated, asks whether she should be expected to tear her child into pieces—she couldn't possibly yank at him so, she says. Azdak announces that the Court has determined the child's true mother. He turns to Grusha, and tells her to take her child and go. He advises her to leave the city, and advises Natella to do the same before he fines her for fraud. He tells Natella that all her husband's estates will go to the city, and will be converted into a playground for children named "Azdak's Garden." Natella faints, and her lawyers drag her from the courtroom.

Grusha proves herself to be Michael's rightful mother through her refusal to cause him any harm, even though to do so would be to ensure her own success in the case. Even if it means giving him up, she will not hurt her child. This pure and unconditional love is the mark of a true mother. Azdak, true to form, devised a test which tested its subjects in unexpected ways. Moreover, he seizes the funds that Grusha so clearly does not care about and vows to use them for the betterment of Nuka's children. Although Azdak's approach to justice is chaotic, it is effective, and demonstrates his commitment to truth and goodness.

Azdak removes his judge's gown, stating that it has gotten too hot for him to wear it any longer—he signs the elderly couple's divorce papers and leaves the chambers, inviting all present to join him outside for a dance. When Shauwa checks the divorce document, he sees that Azdak has divorced the wrong couple—he has divorced Grusha from Jussup rather than divorcing the elderly couple. Before leaving, Azdak reminds Grusha and Simon of the forty piasters they owe him for speaking out of order in his court. Simon pays him off, and Azdak pockets the cash.

It is implied that when Azdak takes the robes off in this scene he is taking them off for good, having grown weary of the role. However, as his final act, he has once again subverted the law by divorcing Grusha from her cruel husband in order to make way for her and Simon to be together. Azdak still collects a fine, though, demonstrating the endurance of his wily and self-preserving instincts.

Simon, Grusha, and Michael rejoice at being all together at last. Grusha dances with Michael, Simon dances with the cook, and the old couple who had wanted a divorce dance with each other. Azdak stands alone, "lost in thought."

While the other characters celebrate the triumph of justice and goodness, Azdak stands alone, overwhelmed by all that has transpired and possibly demoralized by all the corruption that still remains in Grusinia despite the small goods he has done.

Arkadi intervenes one final time to announce that after that night Azdak was never again seen in Grusinia. No one forgot about him, and all remembered his time as judge as "almost an age of justice." Arkadi implores his audience to take Azdak's final ruling to heart: "What there is shall go to those who are good for it."

The moral of Arkadi's story mirrors the decision arrived at by the peasants and farmers in the prologue—that those who will make the best use of something and ensure that it prospers should be the ones to rightfully possess it. The fertile valley went to those who planned to improve it, and the noble child has gone to his true mother.

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