

Mother courage's unnatural selfishness



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

While there is still confusion over the exact causes of the Thirty Years' War, everyone can acknowledge how horrific and devastating it was. Enormous amounts of civilians in besieged cities such as Magdeburg lost their lives, and those who survived lost everything else. The soldiers who sacked the city, described in the diary of the city's mayor Otto von Guericke, completely disregarded the suffering of ordinary civilians in an attempt to gain as much wealth and pleasure as they could from pillaging and rape. As Brecht tries to show through his play *Mother Courage and Her Children*, soldiers are not the only people whose actions based on economic attitudes and self interest can harm others. Brecht's representation of the siege in scene five of his play, rather than giving a large scale picture of the city's destruction, gives a more close up example and shows how the self interested actions of ordinary civilians can also be destructive. Brecht is known for "epic theater," a didactic form of drama in which the audience is supposed to be aware that it is watching a play. He uses "denaturalization," an element of epic theater that assists its didactic purposes, to call attention to things that he sees as unnatural and to distance the audience from the characters so that instead of feeling for the them, the audience thinks about their situation. Brecht wants the audience to think so they can understand and apply the message he wants the play to convey. Using his close up representation of the siege's destruction to focus on the selfish actions of his main character Mother Courage, and making her selfishness appear unnatural by using elements of epic theater, Brecht tries to warn his audience about the destructive consequences of individual self interest, and to influence them to respond to the war in a collective effort.

Mother Courage uses her economic attitudes and self interest to legitimate her incredibly selfish response to the effects of the war that surround her. Brecht denaturalizes her actions by satirizing her selfishness through exaggeration and juxtaposing her losses with those of other characters. He makes her responses seem absurd so the audience sees her self interested actions as unnatural, and so they are unable to sympathize with her. Brecht hopes that if they can not feel for a character, they will instead think about the character's actions and be able to act on what they learn. While her actions are very different than those committed by the soldiers described in von Guericke's diary, Courage and the soldiers both act out of some form of self interest, economic or otherwise. She and the soldiers both see the siege as something to profit from, the soldiers from looting and Courage from following the combat and selling wares to those who need and can afford them. While Brecht is not necessarily directly comparing her to the soldiers, he is trying to get his audience to see her in a similar way, as selfish and uncaring about the misfortune of others. After the Catholic army (which Courage has been following) is victorious in the siege of Magdeburg, she comes across a ruined home and a dying family of farmers. Seeing this, The Chaplain she has been traveling with asks her to spare linen to help bandage the family. Starting with a sarcastic refusal to help by saying " What should I do, tear up good officers' shirts to bandage farmers?" (Brecht 58), she goes on to explain that she will not help the farmers because " they'll never pay... because they've got nothing" (58). Courage shows her economic attitude to be one of extreme self interest. She will give absolutely nothing away if she has nothing to gain from doing so. Her selfishness is most clear in the lines " I'm giving nothing... I've got myself to think about" (59) and her ultimate

response, “ I’ve had nothing but losses from your victory” (60). While establishing her strong refusal to help, Brecht makes these extreme reactions seem absurd to the audience when they consider that Courage’s “ losses” only amount to four officers’ shirts. When juxtaposed with the losses of the farmers, which include their home and business, at least one limb, and possibly the lives of members of their family, Courage’s losses seem like nothing. Despite this, she complains more bitterly about what she has lost than the farmers do. The only complaint by either of the them is made when the man states the fact that his arm has been ripped open. While the farmers bleed to death in front of their ruined home, Courage withholds the shirts needed to make bandages because it would not be good for business and she would lose a half guilder for each shirt. Courage also shows herself as extremely selfish when she forces Kattrin to give the baby back to his dying mother, telling her to “ give it back to its mother... before you get attached and I have to spend hours pulling it away” (60), showing she is thinking only of herself when faced with the misery of others. She shows no sympathy whatsoever for the baby and his family or any care for the baby’s well-being. Brecht has Mother Courage respond to the misfortunes of the defeated civilian family in such an extreme way to denaturalize the scene.

The goal of denaturalization in epic theater is to make a scene appear unrealistic, and therefore unrelatable, so the audience thinks rather than feels. This is done so the audience can more clearly see the play’s message without having their feelings get in the way. Brecht also does this to things that he sees as unnatural and that he wants the audience to see as unnatural. If members of the audience sympathize with something or see

something as normal, he wants them to examine why they feel that way and why they have allowed it to become normal. In this scene, Brecht does this with Courage's responses to the war because he wants the audience to see that reactions like hers are not natural ways to react. He portrays Courage as unnaturally and unbelievably selfish so the audience is unable to feel sympathy for her. This way, the audience will think about her self interested actions and learn from their consequences instead of feeling for Courage's "losses."

However, because this play was written during World War II and shown in Germany soon after the war was over, there was always a risk that its intended audience, with war fresh in their minds, would still end up relating to the losses of characters such as the farmers and have their thoughts about the play's message muddled with sympathy and emotions. To try to make sure the audience learns the play's message about self interest instead of feeling for the characters, Brecht adds additional elements of denaturalization to the scene. One thing he does throughout the play to accomplish this is to add humor or nonsensical statements during sad or serious moments to interrupt the audience's emotions. In this scene, one of the first things a soldier says to Courage is "The general only allowed one hour of looting... It'd be inhuman to allow more, he said" (58), an odd claim creating a dark sense of humor about the destructive situation, incongruously implying that the one hour of looting was somehow "humane". Its odd logic and inappropriate placement should be surprising to the audience. Another darkly humorous and logically unsound moment is when the same soldier says "Too bad they wouldn't convert" (59) about the

dying family as if converting would have saved them. The audience should immediately see something wrong with this line and realize that had the peasants been Catholics, it would not have somehow stopped them from being injured or their house from being destroyed by the artillery. They were not given an opportunity to convert and then attacked because they refused. They were attacked because the conquest of their city was the army's goal and they happened to live in the way. The audience may be thinking this, and their concerns are addressed when it is revealed that the farmers actually are Catholics, like the army that attacked them. It obviously did not help the farmers in this situation. Illogical and inappropriately placed jokes like these create an effect of denaturalization in the same way as the oddly structured and performed songs in other scenes. They are meant to give the audience a bit of a shock by disrupting the play's action with absurdity, so the audience does not become lulled into accepting what they see on stage as a true representation of the war.

Brecht also disrupts the audience's expectations by leaving the fate of the farmers ambiguous. The scene ends and the characters move on while all we know about the family is that their home is destroyed and The Chaplain has not yet been able to stop their bleeding. The last line of this scene is "Someone's still inside" (60), leaving the scene purposefully ambiguous. The audience will never know what happened to the person still on the inside and whether the farmers and their baby live or die. This breaks the flow of the play and would upset the audience, who expects to know what happens to the characters. Also, by removing the farmers before they can die or be saved, Brecht gives the audience less emotions to sympathize with. Things

like this, similar to the satirization of Courage's selfishness, are supposed to make the play appear unrealistic to remind the audience that they are watching something staged, not an accurate representation of true events. Brecht gives this heavily denaturalized representation of the siege of Magdeburg to make sure that his intended message is not lost on the audience because of their feelings.

The message Brecht wants the audience to think about in this scene is that there are destructive consequences that come from acting as an individual through self interest and based on economic attitudes. Working as a collective to respond to the war is the best way to help. Von Guericke's diary gives a more general picture of the siege and how self interest affected Magdeburg's citizens. It describes the devastatingly high number of civilian deaths and describes the enormous piles of bodies left after the siege and pillage of the city. It tells of the families left in ruins after greedy soldiers took everything they had and of the women the soldiers violated. Von Guericke may not have intended to give this specific message, but his diary entry shows that the self interest of soldiers has horrible effects on the lives of civilians. Brecht's representation of the siege gives a more up close example of the harm done to Magdeburg's civilians with the description of the farm family. However, the focus of his representation is on the harm that the self interest of other civilians and their refusal to work collectively can do, rather than the harm done by soldiers. His representation shows the harm done by responses to the war along with the harm done by the war itself. While looting is briefly mentioned by a soldier, Mother Courage's refusal to give basic help to the dying family and the harm it does to them

dominate the scene. Though the fate of the family is not revealed, the audience is made aware that Courage's self interest prevented the family from getting the help they needed when they needed it. The audience is left to speculate about whether or not this could have killed the family. Brecht also wants his audience to realize that had Courage worked together with The Chaplain and her daughter Kattrin in a collective effort to assist the farmers, they might have been saved, or at very least been given what medical attention they could get. These messages are also evident in other scenes of the play. In scene three, Mother Courage's persistent bargaining over the life of her son Swiss Cheese takes too long, and he is executed while his mother tries to get a better price for him. As in scene five, this is also an example of Brecht using denaturalization to make Courage seem unnaturally selfish. While she needs her cart and some money for her family to survive and to keep her business going, the sequence of her bargaining over the price of her son's life is still shocking.

With this denaturalized representation of the Thirty Year's War, and of the siege of Magdeburg in scene five, Brecht distances the audience members from the characters so they can think about what they are watching and learn from the play. Brecht wants the audience of this play to learn that during war, acting through self interest and trying to profit from the war will cause harm to civilians, even in unintended ways, while working together with others is the best way to help. He uses his close up representation of the siege of Magdeburg in scene five to convey this view by focusing on the actions of Mother Courage, an ordinary individual civilian, rather than the actions of soldiers in a general manner as described by von Guericke in his

diary. Brecht satirizes Courage's selfishness through exaggeration to prevent her from being sympathized with, and denaturalizes the scene further by adding inappropriately timed and illogical jokes, and by ending the scene ambiguously. This denaturalized representation makes the audience unable to completely connect with the scene and increase their capacity to think, and later act on what they think about. By seeing the consequences of Mother Courage's self interest and refusal to work together through a critical eye rather than with sympathy, the audience is guided to the conclusion that individual actions based on economic self interest have harmful consequences, while a collective response to the war is the best way to respond helpfully.