

The complicity and explicability of mother courage



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Berthold Brecht's explicit intention to impose an emotional distance between dramatic actors and the viewing audience stands in opposition to the use of propagandistic techniques intended to heighten sympathy and runs contrary to notions of theatrical realism. Brecht's distancing effect involves smashing any passive emotional response a viewer may have through a series of disconcerting elements: the explicit self-consciousness of players, heightened absurdity, deliberate paradoxes and perplexing contradictions, and an irreverent juxtaposition of humor and drama that borders on the offensive. While perhaps meaningful in themselves, these techniques effectively amount to the constant reminder that the performance being viewed is merely a performance, one which stitches together a panoply of nearly vaudevillian theatrical elements, including the slapstick, songs, and witty back-and-forth that flood the dramatic space between the audience and the essentially horrendous story of an impoverished mongrel family in the most devastating war in central European history. Brecht's epic theater was in a way a dialogue with the 1940s Germany that had been for decades surfeited with poverty, destruction, tragedy, and propaganda. East Berliners in 1948, the date of *Mother Courage and Her Children's* first performance on German soil, likely needed no theatrical reminder of the atrociousness of war, the universal suffering of innocents, and the horrendousness of militant nationalism. In that respect, *Mother Courage* neither patronizes nor sermonizes to the viewer. Rather, the play in itself prioritizes action and presents itself to the audience as a serious discourse for contemplation. Yet if the ambitiousness of alienation technique fails to arouse sympathy, it arouses a number of critical questions. Does Brecht, in both his script and his instructions for staging of the play, actually succeed in making this loaded

audience feel no emotion about the entirely familiar and plausible story of a tireless woman losing her children in a European bloodbath? Is the imposed distance between the audience and Mother Courage at all contingent on her supposed culpability – in other words, do we not feel for Mother Courage because she “deserves” what she got? Or is Courage’s complicity a conclusion that can only be reached through epic theater; if so, doesn’t the essential tragic situation of a character making a poor decision and consequently suffering a great loss nevertheless arouse pity? That is, despite the distancing effect, isn’t Mother Courage at its base still a story employing a traditional plot structure to which one can, for all the trappings, nevertheless relate? And could Brecht have effectively applied this lens to a recent horror such as the Holocaust? Regarding that last notion, it appears integral to the function of Mother Courage that the events take place in the distant past. But the point is that alienation technique is meant to override emotion, and if it could not be effective in describing the Holocaust, that implies certain “exceptions” or limitations to its capacities. Despite her faults, the raw tragedy and cruel ironies of Mother Courage’s life may very well be too powerful to be obscured. Even if the actual alienation effect could be so powerful as to leave an audience with blank expressions and dry eyes, the contemplation of Mother Courage’s position in itself ought to arouse powerful feelings of sympathy. In one sense, Mother Courage is sympathetic insofar as she experiences a profound misfortune that emanates from what is essentially just a wrong decision or poor speculation. From a standpoint of self-preservation, Courage trades the danger of avoiding or subverting the war for the danger of following and profiting off the war. Both choices offer profound inherent risks and potential benefits. The war threatens to

consume Mother Courage's family and leave them poorer than they started out, yet they earn the opportunity to make considerable profit and improve their station in life. Similarly, evading the conflict altogether would offer the family virtually no opportunity to earn enough money to survive in a harsh economy, yet they would be relatively secure from the threat posed by the conflict. The play's outcome suggests that in acting as a beneficiary of the war and profiting off corruption and atrocity both directly and indirectly, Mother Courage becomes complicit in the war and all of its negative effects. She, then, takes a share of responsibility both for specific events within the war and for the continuation of the overall conflict, from all of which she directly profits. For example, Courage exploits Eilif's cruel murder and deception in Scene 2, only rebuking her son for not surrendering. In Scene 8 when the specter of peace threatens Mother Courage's business, she reacts with modest appreciation but a great deal disappointment over a poor speculation she has made: " I'm glad about the peace even though I'm ruined" (84). After she is reproached by the Chaplain, Courage remarks, " Remember what one fox said to another that was caught in a trap? ' If you stay there, you're just asking for trouble'" (86), not just accusing the Chaplain of hypocrisy but as well indicating that she is entrapped by a war for which she does not take any responsibility. Yet at the end of this same scene, Courage sings of her wagon supplying a war that requires human participation, " If it's to last, this war needs you!" (94). However, on a practical level Mother Courage's participation does not have any effect on the war's extension. The machinations of generals and monarchs like Tilly and Gustavus Adolphus, men supposedly pious and beyond reproach, loom over the variously violent, drunken, and corrupt lower participants in the war

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who populate the play. The political situation and central religious conflict seem intractable and similarly distant, and despite the perceptiveness of the Cook and Mother Courage in discussing in Scene 3 the underlying profiteering and class struggle the war represents, the consensus is resignation. The Cook and Courage find themselves similarly trapped by two exigencies, and consequently they take for granted that their decision whether or not to accept the war and participate in it is an entirely personal one, as they do not view themselves as consequential actors in the conflict. The fact that Mother Courage switches her flag upon capture by Catholic forces further describes her inconsequentiality. She does not profess a serious fealty to either side and espouses no real political or religious purpose in her involvement; that is, Mother Courage acts as a neutral participant and beneficiary willing to temporarily align herself with either side. Moreover, Courage recognizes that “ the defeats and victories of the fellows at the top aren’t always defeats and victories for the fellows at the bottom,” placing herself at odds with both sides in the war (52). Mother Courage calls herself a prisoner to the Catholics, like “ lice in fur” (52), suggesting that despite providing the Catholics with a needed canteen, Courage considers herself a parasite who adds nothing to the war. How complicit could that make her in the atrocities caused by either side? In Scene 4 Mother Courage self-consciously teaches herself capitulation; in the next scene, she pits her meager self-interest against helping bandage peasants wounded by pillaging soldiers. Similarly her haggling over Swiss Cheese’s life is a self-inflicted wound again caused by competing interests with the overall aim of protecting and providing for her children by balancing the exigent needs of safety and sustenance. That Mother Courage realizes

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she has made a mistake in haggling for Swiss Cheese indicates that the certain poverty that would befall the family from pawning the cart is preferable to the death of a son. In these circumstances, she has simply made a poor estimation with insufficient information. But the fact that she bargains at all indicates her comfort and familiarity with such dealings, and the capitalist does appear just a little too adroit at times. Mother Courage could be seen as a bottom-rung analogue to the looting soldiers and the social elites driving the conflict. All of them seek profit in the virtual free-for-all imposed by total war. Yet the kings are unaffected by the need to provide, whereas Mother Courage must labor intensively to get by with her children. Courage is virtually forced to participate in an economic and social system where shrewdness and selfishness are necessary traits for one to survive. Furthermore, she believes she has no opportunity to rebel or avoid either war or poverty, singing “ Too many seek a bed to sleep in: / Each ditch is taken, and each cave / And he who digs a hole to creep in, / Finds he has dug an early grave” (82). In The Song of the Great Capitulation, she explains, “ Two children round your neck, and the price of bread and what all!” adding in verse, “ They had me just where they wanted me” (68). Her agency, thus, is extremely limited, particularly because of her gender. When Katrin martyrs herself, she reverses Mother Courage’s reckoning: if Courage overvalues her children against her own livelihood (e. g., taking the Cook’s offer) and the lives of others, Katrin corrects the market. Katrin ultimate duty can be viewed as an absolution of her mother: Kindness in service of peace where Honest and Brave acted in service of war. Even after the weight of these events, Mother Courage extraordinarily remains set in her ways, calling out to the sound of war drums, “ Hey! Take me with you!” (111). Yet <https://assignbuster.com/the-complicity-and-explicability-of-mother-courage/>

just as Mother Courage is a victim of her own lack of agency, she may very well be a victim of her own mentality, her almost preternatural inability to reverse course even as she is aware of the sickness that surrounds her. If Katrin is unambiguously heroic, it does not follow that her mother is unambiguously villainous. Even if in her own tragedy Mother Courage cannot be exculpated, she can be explicated. And although the function of the play may differ, the pockmarked life of Courage is at its base an eminently human story of struggle and resilience, the consideration of which leading simply to sympathy. Ultimately, the matter of whether or not alienation effect succeeds in Mother Courage may simply come down to personal taste. One who could personally relate to the situation may find it incredibly sad, if only out of empathy; likewise, anyone could be aroused by the frightening implications of the play and thus feel sympathy for Courage and her children if only out of the selfish fear of being thrust into the same situation. Does the play, then, successfully impel action? Fifty years after the second staging of Mother Courage, East Germany began its slow and uneasy transition to capitalism. The play's final haunting image of an indefatigable Mother Courage pulling up her cart and mindlessly going on alone, trudging unknowingly over her son's grave, is, in my view, deeply sadder than any number of Shakespeare's permutations of human tragedy, than the inexplicable death of Lear, or the gruesome mutilation of Livinia, or the asinine misunderstanding of Romeo and Tristan. I am led to believe - perhaps to feel - that no technique or convention employed in staging this play, not even the most offensive or preposterous or damning thing, could bury the raw emotion and sympathy aroused by Mother Courage's fate.