

# Blind Realism and Commercialization in Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*

Fuhua Liu

School of Foreign Languages, Dalian Jiaotong University, Dalian, Liaoning 116028, China.

## Abstract

The present paper is an analysis of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* from the perspective of blind realism and commercialization. After introducing the theme and plot of the play, the paper continues to analyze the main character Mother Courage both as a blind realist and a commercialized victim. Through the analysis, Brecht's refutation of war and economic materialism is better exposed to his readers.

## Keywords

Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, blind realism, commercialization.

## 1. Introduction

Among Brecht's most famous plays, *Mother Courage* has got immeasurable positive evaluations from the critics as an anti-war work with the disclosure of the commercial essence of capitalist war. Attempting to show the dreadfulness of war and the philosophy that virtues are not rewarded in corrupted times, Brecht has made use of an epic structure so that the audience focuses on the issues being displayed rather than getting obsessed with the characters and emotions for the purpose of giving instructions instead of evoking sympathy.

## 2. Body

### 2.1. Theme and Plot of the Play

*Mother Courage and Her Children* was written in 1938 and 1939 at a particularly difficult time for "progressive" or "radical" writers. Politically, the aim of writing the play for Brecht is to counter the rise of Fascism and Nazism. In response to the invasion of Poland by the German armies of Adolf Hitler, Brecht has endowed this play with its theme of the devastating effects of a European war and the blindness of anyone hoping to profit by it.

Set in the 1600s in Europe during the Thirty Years' War, the story follows the fortunes and misfortunes of Anna Fierling, nicknamed Mother Courage, a wily canteen woman with the Swedish Army who is determined to make her living from the war for which she loses all three of her children. After the negotiation on a business deal, one of Mother Courage's sons, Eilif is led off by the recruiting officer. Two years later, Mother Courage and her son Eilif meet again, and Eilif is killed in a fight with the peasants. After three years, the other son of Mother Courage, Swiss Cheese, as an army paymaster, is captured and shot dead by the Catholics while attempting to return the pay box to his General. When war breaks out again, Accompanied by her daughter and her wagon, Mother Courage goes on with her business. Woken up by a search party that is taking peasants as guides, Katrin finds that the Catholic army is getting ready to attack the small Protestant town of Halle. To wake the townspeople, Katrin fetches a drum and climbs onto the roof to beat it. Although she succeeds in waking up the town, unfortunately she is shot to death by the soldiers. Singing sadly to her daughter's corpse, Mother Courage pulls her cart on her road again with no more children and little merchandise.

## 2.2. Mother Courage: A Blind Realist

It is Mother Courage who exposes the nature of war and heroism, and it is also Mother Courage who sets a typical example of a blind realist by making a profit from war. Mother Courage has often been described as a realist, and this is an important element in the interpretation of her complex and contradictive character. As Frederic Ewen claimed, “She sees and she does not see. She takes nothing for granted, not even the regularity of the seasons—except, unfortunately, war. Her occasional moments of lucidity are amazing” (356). By portraying the relationship of his main character with the Thirty Years’ War, Brecht reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of her realism.

On one hand, Mother Courage is far too clever to be taken by patriotic speeches or heroic assertions about the glory of war because she has clearly understood the economic essence of war. “To go by what the big shots, they’re waging war for almighty God and in the name of everything that’s good and lovely. But look closer, they ain’t so silly, they’re waging it for what they can get. Else little folk like me wouldn’t be in it at all” (Brecht *Mother Courage and Her Children* 743). She understands that economic motivations are more powerful than patriotism and feels that smart people are right to regard war as business opportunities. Only the stupid or idealistic people are enchanted by the speeches. This attitude prevents Mother Courage from being overawed by the vastness and destruction of war. Having learned from experience that victory and defeat are often meaningless terms, Mother Courage, as a realist, seldom becomes involved in the larger issues of the war, concentrating on her own affairs and following the course which seems most advantageous for her as an individual. For a large part of the play, this strategy seems to have worked. Her business dealings are tolerated or encouraged by those in authority, and her trade flourishes based on the fortunes of war. By following her own advice, Mother Courage seems able to survive and even make a profit from war.

However, Mother Courage’s prosperity is temporary. Throughout the play, Brecht tries to show the inherent flaw in the reasoning of Mother Courage. Her acceptance of the existing situation and determination to make the best of it blind her to the possibility of change: “I will not let any of you spoil my war for me. They say it wipes out the weaklings. But they’re done for even in time of peaces. War feeds people better” (749). Rather than questioning the need for a war which causes so much suffering and destruction, Mother Courage accepts it as a precondition, and tries to turn war into a profitable business. This dependence on war in the long run is an unrealistic attitude. The mistaken belief that she can be the exception finally prompts her to pay a heavy price. “With her acceptance of the realities of war preventing her from understanding the less obvious reality of her own situation” (Ewen 357), she never sees that her problems are caused by the war itself. Her son Eilif is brave and willingly joins the army, honored by the Swedish commander for an unscrupulous “heroic” act of looting cattle. But when he perpetrates a similar “heroic” act in time of temporary truce of peace, he is court-martialled. Her other son, Swiss Cheese, perishes because he is too honest to surrender the company’s strongbox to the enemy though her mother tries to save his life with money. The dumb girl Kattrin, a pathetic victim of soldiers’ violence, falls a prey to her love of children. And Mother Courage herself is also a victim of her business acumen because of her unshakable and blind boldness. From all above, we can approach an assertion that a change in the whole structure of society is the only possible solution, but Mother Courage remains unaware of this alternative, which places her as a sacrificial lamb in the corrupted war.

## 2.3. Mother Courage: A Commercialized Victim

“Treated by Brecht from the point of economic materialism, the mercenary character of war is brought out in the pathetic and hopeless activities of Mother Courage and figures her first of all a business woman living off the war” (Nussbaum 385). Certainly Mother Courage’s boldness is not inspired by patriotism. According to her own explanation, her appellation Courage is coined

due to the fact that she braved a cannonade for compelling mercantile reasons. In her case, there is no single alter-ego, but there are at least three major conflicting traits in her personality represented by her two sons and her daughter Yvette which help her form the commercialization under the turbulence.

First, Mother Courage is brave and clever, which can play a spiritually significant role in dealing with the business of war for a poor woman. These characteristics, enabling her to make a living as a camp follower, are represented by her eldest son, Eilif. She glorifies his intrepidity even though she chastises him for being a daredevil. She says to the Chaplain:

Poor folk need courage. Why, they're lost. Simply getting up in morning, takes some doing in their situation. Or ploughing a field, and in war at that. Mere fact they bring kids into world shows they got courage, cause there's no hope for them. They have to hang one another and slaughter one another, so just looking each other in face must call for courage. Being able to put up with emperor and pope shows supernatural courage, cause those two cost' em their lives. (Brecht *Mother Courage and Her Children* 751)

With Mother Courage's confession of the origin of courage, people can further their minds on Brecht's attitudes towards war and a woman's commercialization in the war.

Secondly, Mother Courage can also be naïve, like her honest but simple-minded second son, Swiss Cheese. This character type can prevent her from realizing the disaster of war upon her and her children and keep up her business as the parasitism of war. She herself describes her second son quite disparagingly as an innocent boy and a realist without realizing that it is just the similar amount of naivety on her own part that causes her loss of beloved Swiss Cheese to the recruiter.

Yvette, finally, represents the mercantile side of Mother Courage who has great feelings for the younger woman's way of life, since it parallels her own as camp follower in the pursuit of business. Both women do well in the war, showing themselves in manipulating the opposite sex. Unlike Mother Courage, Yvette never faces a critical situation that demands a choice or sacrifices anything to the war, which makes her far less likely to elicit sympathy. While it is not clear whether Mother Courage ever lives from prostitution, she certainly boasts a quick succession of lovers in her young years. To make her living, she would rather dedicate all her efforts to the bargain with war. Actually the nature of her business seems to be similar with Yvette's making money as a camp prostitute.

On the whole, as a brave, naïve and mercenary woman, Mother Courage's commercialization during the war is put into practice by her own characteristics. Mother Courage loses a great deal from her involvement in business. Brecht shows that whether she realizes it or not, she is constantly choosing between her role as a business woman and her other attachments. Her unwillingness to give up the former role ultimately leads to the loss of the very people whom she wants to protect---her three children. But instead of learning from these losses and renouncing the business dealings which caused them, Mother Courage becomes even more determined to hold on to her wagon and her business. The complex motivation for Mother Courage as a business woman makes her a far more interesting character than Brecht's earlier calculating women.

### 3. Conclusion

Based on the nature of economic materialism, "war is neither some supernatural power nor simply a rupture in civilization but one of civilization's preconditions and logical consequences" (Semmel 152). Fixing his sharp eyes on the very nature of capitalist war, Brecht has made Mother Courage's practices emerge from the social conditions that determine her striking characters. Brecht paves his way to the research of Marxist aesthetics on capitalist economy, revealing his refutation towards war and economic materialism.

## References

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