

Professor Jane O. Newman
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Reading Guidelines and Reading Questions – Week 5 / Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939 / 1949)

I would suggest that you read through these questions before you start reading the play, and think about the issues they ask you to address. Remember: Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus* (1668) was written just 20 years after the Peace of Westphalia that brought the Thirty Years' War to an end. Brecht's play was written almost 300 years later, and gives us another version of the war. It's also a different genre, a play (not a novel), and thus presents its message in a generically specific way (I'll talk more about that in lecture). Brecht's play was, however, like Grimmelshausen's picaresque novel, originally written in German. We are thus reading a translation; I'll also talk about this specific translation of *Mother Courage and her Children* by the contemporary playwright, Tony Kushner, in lecture!

1. Re-Presenting History / Brecht's Thirty Years' War: Like Grimmelshausen, Brecht uses a considerable number of historical dates and names of historical sieges and battles (including Magdeburg), as well as names of some of the actual combatants (Gustav Adolphus, Tilly), to draw us into his version of the (hi)story of the Thirty Years' War. What is the relation of these apparently "true" historical references to the *fictional* "close-ups" we get of *Mother Courage* and her family and their lives and deaths? What do the characters themselves think about these historical figures (see, for example, Eilif, on having seen "His Majesty," the King of Sweden (Gustav Adolphus), p. 24, and / or the funeral of General Tilly (p. 61) and the death of Gustav Adolphus (p. 71)? What is Brecht saying about how the "heroic" events of even a very un-Iliadic war like the Thirty Years' War are experienced by most of those involved?
2. "Bellum se ipsum alet" (The war feeds itself): In my lectures on Grimmelshausen, I discussed some of the more general features of the historical Thirty Years' War and Grimmelshausen's version of these features. As you read Brecht's WWII-era play, find examples of some of the seventeenth-century circumstances of war we learned about last week. For example, look for mercenary soldiering, "forced contributions," and pillaging in the play, and compare their enactment in the scenes themselves to the descriptions of the "historical" context that precede each scene. Think about how the ways in which the characters in the play describe these kinds of activities might have effected the historical audience of the play (and especially the audience in post-war 1949 Berlin, when the play received its German premiere), and influenced them to judge the characters in certain ways. How might *you* – as an even more modern reader – be effected by the descriptions of these activities by the characters and be led to judge them as a result?
3. Kushner's Brecht: You will note considerable profanity in Kushner's early twenty-first century English translation of Brecht's early twentieth century German-language play. In some cases, the English matches the original German, but in many others, Kushner's English is considerably more, well, "colorful." What is the impact of the coarse diction of the play on the characterization of the figures? On the "realism" of this otherwise very 'staged' play? Another way of thinking about this question – The play is in some ways quite unrealistic; the characters often burst into song or turn to the audience and address the audience rather than always sticking to the fiction that they are talking to one another

and the audience is just listening in. How does the earthy realism of Kushner's choice of words interact with the sometimes unrealistic action of the play?

4. "Staging" the War: Pay particular attention to the stage props called for in the stage directions to Brecht's play. How is Brecht using theatrical details to tell his story? Is the wagon continuously present on stage, for example? What does its presence signify in terms of the causes of the war and the means by which it is prolonged? Or consider the cannon that is on stage on Scene Three; what is it being used for and what happens to it? What about the "Catholic flag" (p. 43)? What about the costume that is Chaplain's "pastor's coat" (p. 75) that he takes off and puts it on repeatedly, as if he were himself an actor?
5. The Songs: Brecht introduces the songs (also called "ballads") sometimes as part of the action / plot (the characters seem to be singing them in the right context and out of the correct motivation) and sometimes as "unmotivated" commentaries on the action that seem implausible in the context (for example, Yvette's "The Song of Fraternisation," pp. 30-1). Compare and contrast two or more of the songs in terms of their function in the play. What is the impact of the songs interrupting the action of the play on the audience's experience of the plot?
6. "Fighting for God" (p. 23) and Religion in Brecht's Thirty Years' War: I asked you to think about the way that religion – which some scholars say was the main issues at stake in the Thirty Years' War – was represented in Grimmelshausen's Simplicissimus. Now I'd like you to consider the various ways in which the characters invoke religion / religious justifications and reasons for particular military actions in Brecht's play. What is Mother Courage's attitude toward religion (in terms of religiosity and in terms of the external signs of any particular denomination)? Analyze the character of the Chaplain in particular. What do you make of his "situational" explanation of the legitimacy of Eilif's slaughter of the peasants (p. 23) or the uses to which he claims he has put his preaching "talents" (p. 67)? Of his politics vis-à-vis the Swedish king (pp. 32-3)? (Compare the cynical Cook's claim that the Swedish king has "God going for him," p. 34.)
7. Agency and the Business of War: In the figure of Mother Courage, Brecht shows us how individuals can become "conditioned" by the economic circumstances by which they are surrounded. She is constantly "haggling" and "scared of financial ruin" (p. 9); she's thus pleased when the "war is going well" (p. 29) since the "wagon" is her "life" (p. 47). Compare the Chaplain's assessment of the "natural" inevitability of war ("war always finds a way," p. 64) with Mother Courage's relentless calculating of how to profit from it. What is Brecht saying about the "conditions" within which people caught up in a war act? *What kinds of action might he be trying to provoke his audiences to undertake?*
8. Truth and Irony: Early in the play, Mother Courage declares that "[y]ou only need brave hard-working patriot soldiers when the country's coming unglued" (p. 24). What does she mean here? Are there other lines that allow some of the playwright Brecht's views on the conduct of war to emerge? Consider Mother Courage's hesitation about taking bullets for liquor (pp. 27-8), the Cook's description of the Poles' refusal of "liberty" (p. 34), Mother Courage's insights into the usefulness of "corruption" (p. 49), and the Chaplain's assessment of how wars are kept going (p. 63) and of Mother Courage as the "hyena of the battlefields" (p. 76). What is the impact on the audience of creating characters who are so clear-headed about the way war is conducted and about who (other than themselves) profits from it, and yet, are ensnared, even crushed by it all the same?

9. Gender and War / Rape, Empathy, and Tears / Prostitution, Compassion and *Threnoi* in Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children* (p. 25): We learn in the course of the play about Yvette's prior experiences with the Cook and (very obliquely) about Kattrin's earlier trauma (as well as about the attack on her in Scene Six). These are the evils to which women are displayed as being particularly exposed in the play. Women are also represented as more prone than men to empathizing with others. "[S]he suffers because she pities," says Mother Courage of Kattrin (p. 88) (compare Kattrin's pity for the baby in Scene Five and her "heroic" act of drumming in Scene Eleven). (The Chaplain is also compassionate on occasion, however; compare pp. 58-60). Finally: Mother Courage is shown careening back and forth between a conventional "maternal" position as she tries to protect her children (and makes decisions that privilege them) and "survival" mode, which requires that she deny her children and their needs. What is the role of gender in Brecht's account of agency in war?

10. Agency and Action: Scene Eleven is a crucial scene for thinking about what kinds of "autonomous" actions are possible in war. Consider the impact on the action in play / on the audience of the play of what appears to be the bravery of the acts of the Farmer's Son and of Kattrin. (In this context, think also about the earlier integrity of Swiss Cheese.) What is the outcome of these acts? What does Brecht think about the "heroic" actions of individuals?