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The Search for Meaning

“The funeral procession is just starting out” (Brecht 73), notes the Chaplain. In the background of scene six of *Mother Courage*, the commander Tilly is laid to rest. Traditionally, funerals have been used not only to honor and commemorate the dead, but also to console the living; they employ religion to offer the mollifying message that life, and death, really does have meaning. A sequence of objects and events follow the funeral procession; some seem to have meaning of some sort while others do not. These items and actions serve to create a partial link from the material world to a realm of ideas and emotion. In the midst of these objects the specter of the war looms, made physical by the language of the characters. The war provides a link in the opposite direction, showing how the immaterial can affect the physical. Against this framework, *Mother Courage* struggles to come to terms with the tragedies in her own life. The nature of the duality between the physical world and the space of ideas suggests an answer: there is no underlying meaning behind Swiss Cheese’s death, Eilif’s abandonment, and Katrin’s muteness.

Some of the objects in this scene have powerful emotional meaning for the characters. The cook’s pipe and the red boots figure most prominently among these. To the Chaplain, the sight of *Mother Courage* smoking the cook’s pipe signals that he will not win her over into having a relationship. The pipe seems to spark violence. When the Chaplain decides that *Mother Courage* was aware of the pipe’s history, “he brings the axe down on the block with a crash” (Brecht 78). The pipe itself shows evidence of violence: as the Chaplain argues with *Mother Courage* about the cook’s character he notes that “it’s bitten halfway through! He’s a

man of great violence! It is the pipe of a man of great violence, you can see *that* if you've any judgment left! (*He deals the block a tremendous blow*)" (78-79). The pipe is not just a thing; it is instead *the* object of their argument and comes to represent violence, the Chaplain's jealousy and a source of information about character: "it tells all" (78). In addition to this implicit meaning, the hypocrisy of the simultaneity of the Chaplain's diatribe against the cook's violence with his vigorous wood chopping serves to associate a sense of contradiction to the pipe. This contradiction carries through to the meaning associated to the pipe. Yvette's red boots also have a meaning beyond their mere existence. In scene three, when Katrin donned them and imitated Yvette's walk (47-50), the boots represented sensuality and adulthood. But in scene six, after Katrin is wounded, the boots' meaning shifts. Mother Courage offers the boots in remorse for Katrin's wound: "now, I've got something for you, rest easy. I've been keeping them secret. (*She digs YVETTE's red boots out of a bag.*) Well, what do you see? You always wanted them. Now you have them. (*She helps her to put the boots on.*) Put them on quick, before I change my mind" (80). One might argue that Mother Courage gives Katrin the boots merely to comfort her: the boots have no other significance. Yet the fact that Mother Courage has second thoughts about giving Katrin the boots demonstrates that they have more significance than just an item of comfort. The previous connotations of the boots also support the claim that Mother Courage's gift of them endows them with significance: Katrin's wound has purportedly taken away all chance of future sexuality. The boots represent Mother Courage's effort to make good Katrin's loss. Like the pipe, the boots also work in multiple directions: Mother Courage urges Yvette to "put them on quick, before I change my mind" (80). Just as the pipe does, the boots suggest a struggle. Both the pipe and the boots set up a link between the material world and the realm of

emotions and ideas. They carry meaning in themselves in addition to existing physically on the stage.

In contrast, many of the other objects that appear in the scene do not possess the same significance as the pipe and boots. One class of such objects is the items Mother Courage lists in the inventory she performs at the beginning of the scene. As she converses with the Chaplain and Clerk, every so often she interjects with an item from the inventory: beginning with “pity about the Chief—twenty-two pairs of socks—getting killed that way” (Brecht 73) and “the Chief... ran smack into a bullet in the thick of battle—only four lanterns left” (73), continuing with “the poor Commander won’t be hearing any bells when they lower him into his grave. Instead, they’ll fire off three shots so the occasion won’t be *too* sober—sixteen leather belts” (74) and “the conquest of the world now, *that’s* a goal for a Commander, he wouldn’t know any better.... Lord, worms have got into the biscuits” (74), and finishing with “... Seventeen leather belts.... Then you don’t think the war might end?” (75). None of these goods are unique: all are either mentioned in a specific amount or in the plural. This lack of uniqueness doesn’t preclude the presence of a meaning for the object, but it does make it less likely. A unique object, such as a pipe, is more likely to have characteristics that give it meaning than a nondescript object of which there are a dozen copies. The casualness with which Mother Courage refers to these items also contributes to this impression: she breaks into her own sentences, mentions the items, and returns to her previous thought. They seem to make no impression on her. Yes, she cares about having the inventory done so that she can run her business better, but the items themselves hold no importance, certainly not in comparison to the pipe and the boots. Also note that the text surrounding these interjections focuses exclusively on war and death, even more explicitly than

normal for the rest of the play.¹ Perhaps this coincidence results from Brecht's efforts to turn the audience away from sympathy at these points. Yet it also has the effect of associating death with the physical objects most lacking in meaning. This linkage will become important later in this essay.

In the other direction, the scene takes a few abstract concepts, notably war, and endows them with physical existence. The Chaplain says:

You can't be sure the war will *ever* end. Of course it may have to pause occasionally—for breath, as it were—it can even meet with an accident—nothing on this earth is perfect—a war of which we could say it left nothing to be desired will probably never exist. A war can come to a sudden halt—from unforeseen causes—you can't think of everything—a little oversight, and the war's in the hole, and someone's got to pull it out again! The someone is the Emperor or the King or the Pope. They're such friends in need, the war has really nothing to worry about, it can look forward to a prosperous future. (Brecht 75)

Throughout this description the Chaplain refers to the war as if it were a person. The war breathes and must occasionally rest. A careless mistake could halt the war. The Chaplain even ironically describes the war suffering the same type of accident that often occurs to participants in a war. But neither of these events can actually end a war, because the war has powerful friends who will help restart it if it falters. Unlike so many of the people that it affects, the war “can look forward to a prosperous future” (75). The Chaplain even claims that “the war has your offspring and can carry on” (76). The Chaplain's description gives the war a body. And the war certainly has effects on the physical world: the commander's death and indeed the rest of the events of the scene are direct consequences of thirteen years of war.

Other aspects of the immaterial world reach out to the physical as well. Religion and its conflicts manifest themselves in a number of ways. Mother Courage heard that “they wanted to ring the bells for his funeral, which is natural, but it came out that the churches had been shot up

¹ This observation is due to Jocelyn Rodal.

by his orders, so the poor Commander won't be hearing any bells when they lower him in his grave" (Brecht 73-74). Of course, he wouldn't hear the bells anyway, but Mother Courage and the Chaplain and Clerk would have. Mother Courage proceeds to note that "there was unrest in the Second Regiment because he didn't pay 'em. He said it was a war of religion and they must fight it free of charge" (74). Religion and its conflicts affect the world just as the war itself does.

This scene thus sets up a framework of linkages from the material world to the immaterial, and back. The war wreaks havoc upon the world, causing death and chaos. The beginning of the scene associates these effects with objects that have no significance or meaning deeper than mere existence.

At the end of the scene, Mother Courage laments all the tragedies the war has caused her:

It's a historic moment to me when they hit my daughter over the eye.
She's all but finished now, she'll never get a husband, and she's so mad
about children! Even her dumbness comes from the war. A soldier stuck
something in her mouth when she was little. I'll never see Swiss Cheese
again, and where my Eilif is the Good Lord knows. Curse the war!
(Brecht 81)

Though her external impulse is to rage at the cause of Swiss Cheese's death, Eilif's absence and Katrin's mutilation, she must also wonder why. What meaning can this horror have? What significance? Certainly, the play pushes the audience to ask these questions of themselves. What is the import of casualties in war, of collateral damage? The linkage of the material and immaterial worlds set up in this scene provides a possible answer. Just as the items associated to death and the effects of war have no deeper meaning, Mother Courage's tragedies have no deeper explanation than that they happened. There was no reason for Swiss Cheese to die, or for Katrin to have been made mute by rape. These events just happened.

Senseless death and violence is not a pleasant experience, either for Mother Courage or for the audience. Yet it is a reality in Mother Courage's devastated Holy Roman Empire, in

Brecht's ravaged Europe, and today as well. Off stage though, we do not have a convenient script that gives meaning to certain objects in our play. We have to create meaning ourselves before death snatches away the chance.