

## Mother Courage

BERTOLT BRECHT

## Key Facts

**FULL TITLE** · *Mother Courage and Her Children*

**AUTHOR** · Bertolt Brecht

**TYPE OF WORK** · Drama

**GENRE** · Epic theater, social drama

**LANGUAGE** · German

**TIME AND PLACE WRITTEN** · Written during Brecht's exile in Sweden, 1939

**DATE OF FIRST PUBLICATION** · 1941

**PUBLISHER** · Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, Berlin

**NARRATOR** · None (though each scene includes a poster summarizing the future events)

**CLIMAX** · As a work of "epic theater," *Mother Courage* does not adhere to the Aristotelian model of plot and thus does not involve a structure of rising and falling action, climax, and catharsis. In some sense, each scene exists for itself.

**PROTAGONISTS** · Mother Courage, Katrin, Swiss Cheese, and Chaplain

**SETTING (TIME)** · The Thirty Years War (Spring 1624–January 1636)

**SETTING (PLACE)** · Throughout Europe (Germany, Poland, Bavaria, and Saxony)

**POINT OF VIEW** · Point of view is not located as there is no narrator figure

**FALLING ACTION** · Again, as a work of "epic theater," *Mother Courage* does not adhere to the Aristotelian model of plot.

**TENSE** · The play unfolds in the time of the present

**FORESHADOWING** · Most notably, Courage's game of fortune telling in the first scene foretells the death of her children

**TONE** · Tragi-comic

**THEMES** · War as business; virtue in wartime

**MOTIFS** · The *Verfremdungseffekt*, allegory, music, business practices, maternity, capitulation

**SYMBOLS** · The red boots

## Context

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was born to a middle-class family in Ausburg, Bavaria. After attending the University of Munich, he moved to Berlin, the center of contemporary German cultural life, and found work as assistant dramaturge at the Deustches Theater in 1924. There, he achieved his first great success in 1928 with the production of his *Threepenny Opera*, the most famous of his many collaborations with composer Kurt Weill. This modern morality tale on gangsters and capitalists won him massive popularity and would later ensure his place in both the German and Western cultural canon. Because of his Marxist and anti-fascist beliefs, Brecht would be forced to flee Germany with the rise of the Nazis in 1933, living in exile in Scandinavia and the United States for the next fifteen years. Though he attempted to establish himself both in Hollywood and on Broadway as numerous German expatriates had done, Brecht had little success with American audiences and was at one point even brought before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. His encounter with HUAC left him deeply disturbed with America, and Brecht moved back to East Berlin in 1948, living there until his death.

Brecht produced his first major play, *Baal*, in 1922, launching it as a critique against traditional, de-politicizing notions of the artist as genius and visionary. His conversion to Marxism resulted in a number of anti-capitalist works, including *The Measures Taken* (1930), a "learning play" aimed didactically at the education of its spectator, and *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* (1932). During this time, Brecht began to elaborate his theory of the epic theater, an avant-garde form that aimed at unhinging a dramatic establishment Brecht understood as complicit with the oppression of its audiences. In particular the epic theater challenged the notion of spectatorship as grounded in identification, seeing the identification between the viewer and character in the conventional theater as insidiously removing both from their political and historical contexts in the name of the "universal human condition." The epic theater strove to break the fascinating, trance-like effect of the dramatic spectacle, transform the spectator into its critical observer, and rouse him to thought and action.

The epic form's primary innovation was the *Verfremdungseffekt*, generally translated as the "alienation" or "distanciation" effect. This effect demanded an alienation of the spectator from the spectacle that would reveal the social relations—what Brecht dubbed the "*gestus*" or "gist"/"gesture"—underlying the narrative on-stage. A particularly well-known method for such alienation was Brechtian acting technique. In the epic theater, the actor would no longer seamlessly efface themselves in their role and "become" their character, but perform both themselves and the character at once. Brechtian acting would bring the relation between actor and character to light, forcing, in the name of a higher realism, the audience to examine the artifice of the spectacle and the tensions between its constitutive components. Brecht's staging techniques similarly aimed at such alienation, the epic theater making frequent use of unfamiliar settings, the interruption of action and dialogue, unsettling music, the use of banners to mark scene changes, and playing spaces divided by half-drawn curtains.

From 1940 onward, Brecht came to win international recognition for his most famous plays, producing the bulk of them with the East German Berliner Ensemble as directed by his wife, Helene Weigel. Briefly he returned to more traditional dramatic forms in his *Private Life of the Master Race* (1940), an attack on the Nazis, and then returned to the epic in the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1944), a piece on maternal sacrifice. *Galileo* (1947), a tale of the persecuted intellectual, then followed, along with the *Good Woman of Setzuan* (1948), a parable about a good-hearted prostitute who must live in the guise of her male cousin to survive the world. *Mother Courage* (1941) is arguably Brecht's masterpiece. Inspired by the invasion of Poland, it was written in five months during 1939 after Brecht had fled to Sweden. Too caustic for production in a Scandinavia soon facing Nazi occupation, it first appeared in Zurich in 1941. Brecht unfortunately missed the performance and then revised the play upon discovering that some critics had received it in a disappointingly sentimentalized fashion. He launched his own production upon his return to Berlin in 1948 at the Deutsches Theater, *Courage* marking both his homecoming and first successful directorial success.

## Plot Overview

*Mother Courage* opens in Dalarna, spring 1624, in the midst of the Thirty Years War. A Sergeant and Recruiting Officer are seeking soldiers for the Swedish campaign in Poland. A canteen wagon appears, bearing the infamous Mother Courage, her dumb daughter, Katrin, and her sons, Eilif and Swiss Cheese.

The Recruiting Officer attempts to seduce Eilif into the army. Courage demands that he leave her children alone. The Sergeant protests and asks why, since Courage lives off the war, it should not ask something of her in return. When Eilif admits that he would like to sign up, Courage foretells the fate of her children: Eilif will die for his bravery, Swiss Cheese for his honesty, and Katrin for her kindness. Courage readies to leave. The Recruiting Officer presses the Sergeant to stop them. While the Sergeant feigns to buy one of Courage's belts, the Recruiting Officer takes Eilif away.

In 1626, Courage appears beside the tent of the Swedish Commander, arguing with the Cook over the sale of a capon. The Commander, a Chaplain, and Eilif enter the tent, the Commander lauding his brave soldier for raiding the local peasants. Courage remarks that trouble must be afoot. If the campaign was any good, he would not need brave soldiers. Courage reunites with her son.

Three years later, Courage and Katrin appear folding washing on a cannon with Swiss Cheese, now a paymaster, and Yvette Pottier, the camp prostitute, look on. Yvette recounts the story of her lost beau, Peter Piper.

The Chaplain and Cook appear and they talk about politics. The Cook remarks ironically that their king is lucky to have his campaign justified by God: otherwise, he could be accused of seeking profit alone. Suddenly cannons explode; the Catholics have launched a surprise attack. The Cook departs for the Commander. Swiss arrives and hides his regiment's cash box in the wagon.

Three days later, the remaining characters sit eating anxiously. When Courage and the Chaplain go to town, Swiss departs to return the cash box unaware that an enemies are lurking about to arrest him. When Courage and the Chaplain return, two men bring in Swiss. Mother and son pretend to not know each other.

That evening, Katrin and the Chaplain appear rinsing glasses. An excited Courage enters, declaring that they can buy Swiss' freedom. Yvette has picked up an old Colonel who will buy the canteen; Courage only plans to pawn and reclaim it after two weeks with the money from the cash box. Thanking God for corruption, Courage sends Yvette to bribe One Eye with the 200 guilders.

Yvette reports that the enemy has agreed. Swiss, however, has thrown the cash box into the river. Courage hesitates, thinking that she will not be able to reclaim the wagon. Courage proposes a new offer, 120 guilders. Yvette returns, saying that they rejected it, and Swiss' execution is imminent. Drums roll in the distance. Two men enter with a stretcher, asking Courage if she can identify Swiss Cheese's body. Courage shakes her head, consigning the body to the carrion pit.

Courage then appears outside an officer's tent, planning to file a complaint over the destruction of her merchandise. A Young Soldier enters, threatening the captain's murder. Apparently he has stolen his reward for rescuing the Colonel's horse. Courage tells him to quiet down, since his rage will not last. Defeated, the soldier leaves, and Courage follows.

Two years pass, and the wagon stands in a war-ravaged village. The Chaplain staggers in; there is another wounded family of peasants in the farmhouse. He needs linen. Courage refuses, as she will not sacrifice her officers' shirts. The Chaplain lifts her off the wagon and takes the shirts.

The canteen sits before the funeral of Commander Tilly in 1632. Mother Courage and Katrin take inventory inside the canteen tent. Courage asks the Chaplain if the war will end—she needs to know if she should buy more supplies. The Chaplain responds that war always finds a way. Courage resolves to buy new supplies, and sends Katrin to town. Katrin returns with a wound across her eye and forehead, as

she was attacked en route. Counting the scattered merchandise, Courage curses the war. Immediately afterward she appears at the height of prosperity, dragging her new wares along a highway. She celebrates war as her breadwinner.

A year later, voices announce that peace has been declared. Suddenly the Cook arrives, bedraggled and penniless. Courage and Cook flirt as they recount their respective ruin. The Chaplain emerges, and the men begin to argue, fighting for the feedbag. When Courage defends the Cook, the Chaplain calls her a "hyena of the battlefield." Courage suggests they part company. Suddenly an older, fatter, and heavily powdered Yvette enters. The widow of a colonel, she has come to visit Courage. When she sees the Cook, she unmasks him as the Peter Piper that ruined her years ago. Courage calms her and takes her to town.

Both men are now convinced that they are lost. Eilif then enters in fetters. He faces execution for another of his raids and has come to see his mother for the last time. The soldiers take him away and cannons thunder. Courage appears, breathless. The war resumed three days ago and they must flee with the wagon. She invites the Cook to join her, hoping that she will see Eilif soon.

It is autumn of 1634. A hard winter has come early. Courage and the Cook appear in rags before a parsonage. Abruptly the Cook tells her that he has received a letter from Utrecht saying that his mother has died and left him the family inn. He invites her to join him there. However, they must leave Katrin behind. Katrin overhears their conversation.

Calling to the parsonage, the Cook then sings "The Song of the Great Souls of the Earth" for food. It recounts how the great souls meet their dark fates on account of their respective virtues—wisdom, bravery, honesty, and kindness. Courage decides she cannot leave her daughter. Katrin climbs out of the wagon, planning to flee, but Courage stops her. They depart.

It is January 1636 and the wagon stands near a farmhouse outside Halle. Katrin is inside; her mother has gone to town to buy supplies. Out of the woods come a Catholic Lieutenant and three soldiers, seeking a guide to the town. The Catholic regiment readies for a surprise attack. Convinced there is nothing they can do, the peasants begin to pray. Quietly Katrin climbs on the roof and begins to beat a drum. The soldiers shoot Katrin. Her final drumbeats mingle with the thunder of a cannon. She has saved the town.

Toward morning, Courage sits by Katrin's body in front of the wagon. Courage sings Katrin a lullaby. The peasants bring her to her senses and offer to bury her daughter. Courage pays them and harnesses herself to the wagon. "I must get back into business" she resolves and moves after the regiment.

## Character List

Note: *Mother Courage* features a multitude of minor characters, most of whom named by their social position or military position (e.g. Young Peasant or Sergeant), who encounter Mother Courage through the course of her journeys. This list does not include them.

**Mother Courage** - The play's wise woman. Courage delivers shrewd commentary on the realities of the war.

[Mother Courage \(In-Depth Analysis\)](#)

**Katrin** - Courage's dumb daughter. Undergoes a lot of trauma during the war, and ends up disfigured.

[Katrin \(In-Depth Analysis\)](#)

**Eilif** - The first child Mother Courage loses to the army. Eilif is the warlike son, eager to join the war and carry out its brutal business. Ostensibly, his fatal virtue is his Caesar-like "bravery," though the accolades he receives are certainly in question. His rise to power—reflected in his costume—involves nothing more than a series of cunning, murderous raids on the local peasantry, raids motivated by the need to keep his men fed.

**Swiss Cheese** - The first of Mother Courage's children to die. Swiss Cheese suffers from an excessive sense of duty and honesty and ultimately dies because of it—in other words, during the war, his virtues cost him his life. Courage instills these qualities in him because he is not particularly bright.

**Cook** - The Chaplain's rival for Courage's affections and bread. The Cook is an aging Don Juan, a bachelor long past his prime. Darkly ironic, he is all too aware of the war as a continuation of business as usual, continually unmasking the divinely inspired military campaign as another massive profit scheme. In understanding his social position, he bears no loyalty to the rulers who would exploit him: as he tells the Chaplain, he does not eat the King's bread but bakes it.

[The Cook \(In-Depth Analysis\)](#)

**Chaplain** - One of two characters dependent on Mother Courage as their "feedbag." The Chaplain initially appears as a cynical, wooden character. He remains loyal to the Swedish monarchy and the campaign as a war of religion though cannot but notice the horrors around him. The Chaplain also reveals more sympathetic qualities, particularly when he defies Courage and attempts to save the local peasants at the Battle of Magdeburg. At Magdeburg, the *Courage Model Book* shows him recalling a sense of his former importance and understanding himself as someone oppressed by the war. Indeed, as he will tell the Cook, his life as a tramp makes it impossible to return to the priesthood and all its attendant beliefs.

**Yvette Pottier** - Initially appearing as a camp prostitute, Yvette is the only character who will make her fortune through the war, marrying and inheriting the estate of a lecherous old Colonel. A woman ruined by the war, she mourns her lost love yet remains bent on securing her interests. Brecht underlines the price she pays for her wealth with her "disfigurement," Yvette returning obese and grotesque after her years of marriage. Notably, Yvette functions as both a sort of object lesson and object of fascination for

Katrin. She would at once harden Katrin to love and embody a feminine eroticism that Katrin playfully imitates.

# Analysis of Major Characters

## Mother Courage

Mother Courage is, to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin, the play's "untragic heroine." A parasite of the war, she follows the armies of the Thirty Years War, supporting herself and her children with her canteen wagon. She remains opportunistically fixed on her survival, winning her name when hauling a cartful of bread through a city under bombardment. Courage works tirelessly, relentlessly haggling, dealing, and celebrating the war as her breadwinner in her times of prosperity. As Eilif's song suggests, she is the play's wise woman, delivering shrewd commentary on the war throughout the play. For example, the defeats for the great are often victories for the small, the celebration of the soldier's bravery indicates a faltering campaign, the leader pins his failings on his underlings, and the poor require courage. She understands that virtues in wartime become fatal to their possessors. Courage will ironically see her children's deaths from the outset, foretelling their fates in Scene One.

Courage's Solomon-like wisdom does not enable her to oppose the war. The price the war will exact for Courage's livelihood is her children, each of which she will lose while doing business. Though Courage would protect them fiercely—in some sense murderously insisting that her children and her children alone come through the war.

Again, her courage is her will to survive; a will that often requires her cowardice. Unlike Katrin, Courage will sing the song of capitulation. For example, in Scene Four, she depravedly teaches a soldier to submit to unjust authority and then bitterly learns from her song herself, withdrawing a complaint she planned to lodge herself. In the scene previous, she refuses to recognize the corpse of her executed son, consigning it to the carrion pit. Katrin's death will not incite her to revolt. Instead, she will resume her journey with the wagon, in some sense damned to her labor for eternity. As Brecht notes programmatically in the *Courage Model Book*, Courage, understandably bent on her survival, does not learn, failing to understand that no sacrifice is too great to stop war.

## Katrin

Courage's dumb daughter, Katrin distinguishes herself as the character who most obviously suffers from the traumas of war. She wears these traumas on her body, since the war robs her of her voice as a child and later leaves her disfigured. Throughout most of the play, she figures as the war's helpless witness, unable to save her brother Eilif from recruitment or Swiss Cheese from the Catholic spies. Later, she will stand by Courage when she refuses to identify Swiss Cheese's body. As Courage continually notes, Katrin suffers the virtues of kindness and pity, remaining unable to brook the loss of life around her. This kindness manifests itself in particular with regard to children, Katrin's maternal impulses perhaps standing against Courage's relentless dealing and her resulting failure to protect her children. Ultimately Katrin will "speak," sacrificing herself to save the children of Halle, and it is appropriate that the play implicitly compares her to the martyr Saint Martin.

The war in particular impinges on Katrin's sexuality. As Courage notes, she is ever in danger of becoming a "whore"—that is, a victim of rape—and thus must lie low and wait for peacetime before considering marriage. Privately Katrin will "play the whore" in a sense in her masquerade as Yvette, the camp prostitute, in a bid for sexual recognition. Notably, her disfigurement will ultimately make her marriage impossible.

## The Chaplain

One of two characters dependent on Mother Courage as their "feedbag," the Chaplain initially appears as a cynical, wooden character. He remains loyal to the Swedish monarchy and the campaign as a war of religion though cannot but notice the horrors around him, for example, his reaction to Eilif's raid. This cynicism reaches its height after the surprise attack by the Catholics, which rips him from his social station and leaves him precariously dependent on Courage's wagon. Bitterly, the Chaplain will advise Courage to buy new supplies. The war can only prevail. After all, though degrading, it provides for all base human needs—eating, drinking, screwing, and sleeping. Like love, it will always find a way to go on.

The Chaplain also reveals more sympathetic qualities, particularly when he defies Courage and attempts to save the local peasants at the Battle of Magdeburg. To this point, he appears as a sort of outsider, refraining from intervening in Courage's practices for fear of jeopardizing his position. At Magdeburg, the *Model Book* shows him recalling a sense of his former importance and understanding himself as someone oppressed by the war. Indeed, as he will tell the Cook, his life as a tramp makes it impossible to return to the priesthood and all its attendant beliefs.

Eventually the Chaplain falls for Courage. Focused on survival, she denies him, refusing his demands that she drop her defenses and let her heart speak. The arrival of the Cook will spark a rivalry over both Courage's affections and bread. When both men believe that Courage has rejected them, they reminisce about the good times they shared together in the service of the Swedish Commander. Apparently, like Courage, they have learned little from their suffering during the war.



## The Cook

The Chaplain's rival for Courage's affections and bread, the Cook is an aging Don Juan, a bachelor long past his days as the dashing Peter Piper who seduced girls like Yvette. Darkly ironic, he is aware of the war as a continuation of business as usual, continually unmasking the divinely inspired military campaign as another massive profit scheme. In understanding his social position, he bears no loyalty to the rulers who would exploit him. As he tells the Chaplain, he does not eat the King's bread but bakes it. He comes to Mother Courage when penniless, their courtship consisting of their accounts of their respective ruin.

# Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

## Themes

### War as Business

Brecht states in the *Courage Model Book* that the play conceives of war as a "continuation of business by other means." War is neither some supernatural force nor simply a rupture in civilization but one of civilization's preconditions and logical consequences. In this respect, there are many dialogues—the most explicit one appearing in Scene 3—that cast war as another profit venture by Europe's great leaders. Mother Courage is the play's primary small businesswoman, parasitically living off of the war with her canteen wagon. As the *Model Book* observes the "big profits are not made by little people." Courage's commitment to the business of war will cost her children, the war taking back for what it has provided her in flesh.

### Virtue in Wartime

The *Model Book* also remarks that war "makes the human virtues fatal even to their possessors." This "lesson" appears from the outset of the play, prefiguring the fate of Mother Courage and her children. Telling each of her children's fortunes, Courage will conjure their deaths at the hand of their respective virtues: bravery, honesty, and kindness. Later, The Cook will rehearse this lesson in "The Song of the Great Souls of the Earth." As we will see, Brecht often attributes these virtues ironically. Courage, for example, is often a coward, and Eilif is more a murderer than a brave hero.

## **Verfremdungseffekt**

The *Verfremdungseffekt*, alienation or "distanciation" effect, is the primary innovation of Brecht's epic theater. By alienating the spectator from the spectacle, its devices would reveal the social *gestus* underlying every incident on-stage and open a space for critical reflection. Often alienation also means making the workings of the spectacle possible, and decomposing the unity of the theatrical illusion. Brecht called for the spectator's alienation to oppose the mystifying tendencies of the conventional stage, tendencies that reduced its audience to passive, trance-like states. The possible techniques of alienation are endless. Slight changes in pace, alternative arrangements of the players on-stage, experiments in lighting, gesture, and tone. The success of each scene in *Mother Courage* hinges upon these devices. For example, Courage's "Song of the Great Capitulation," when played without alienation, risks seducing the spectator with the pleasures of surrender rather than exposing the depravity in the submission to an unjust authority.

## **Allegory and the Morality Play**

As the name of its eponymous heroine suggests, *Mother Courage* poses the tradition of the morality play as its backdrop. Pedagogical in its intent, the morality play is conventionally organized around Everyman as its protagonist and various characters personifying Vices and Virtues. Action consists of their struggle, whether for the Everyman's soul or otherwise. Similarly *Mother Courage* offers Courage and her children as sense personifications the virtues that do them in during the war: wisdom, bravery, honesty, and kindness. Obviously, it is also profoundly pedagogical in its intentions.

Despite these similarities, it is clear that Brecht fundamentally departs from the morality play tradition as well. Certainly Courage—explicitly located in her particular socio-historical context as well as the context of the performance—is no Everyman. Moreover, the epic form militates precisely against a structure of ready identification between spectator and character that the universal Everyman clearly establishes. In the morality play, we are all "Everyman." Also, Brecht's play distorts the one-to-one correspondences (e.g. Kattrin is kindness) the morality play poses, exploiting the dissonances and arbitrary relations between the terms of its allegories. In the "Song of the Great Souls of the Earth," which awkwardly uses Socrates to figure for the simpleton Swiss Cheese, the spectator becomes conscious of the structures of figurative language that make these relations possible. By playing on the dissonances between song and action, song and character, the play would again distance the spectator from the spectacle and generate his critical reflection.

## **Music**

At times the reader of Brecht feels trapped in a Marxist Gilbert and Sullivan musical. Rather than accompany or integrate itself into the theatrical illusion, music largely assumes an independent reality in *Mother Courage*, standing apart from the action. Brecht often underscored this separation by lowering a

musical emblem whenever such a song would arise. Music is neither a simple accompaniment nor exclusively the expression of a character's current state, at times functioning instead in its autonomy as allegory, or as covert political commentary. Often it assumes a pedagogical function. Note, for example, how Courage teaches the soldier surrender through her song of capitulation or Yvette attempts to harden Katrin to love through her "Fraternization Song."

## Business practices

Deemed a "damned soul" in the *Model Book*, Mother Courage works tirelessly, resting only once in the course of the play. Her haggling, careful inventory, and so on frame and punctuate the action, emphasizing its underlying the social *gestus*. Courage always protects her interests shrewdly, inquiring into the fate of the war with only her profit in mind. Her practices emerge from the social conditions that determine the characters, committing her to the war. Ultimately she will lose each of her children as a result. Moreover, as the final scene chillingly shows, so ritualized are these practices that Courage will not learn from her losses.

## Capitulation

Written in the midst of the growing Nazi terror, *Mother Courage* would impel its spectators to oppose war. In this respect it features a number of moments of capitulation as object lessons: most notably, the withdrawal of Courage and the Young Soldier from the captain's tent in Scene Four and the submission of the peasants in Scene 11. *Mother Courage* emphasizes the ritual character of capitulation. Years of war have frozen the people into fixed patterns of surrender and lamentation. Standing against these surrenders is Katrin, disfigured and silenced by war trauma to which she continually bears witness, who risks both livelihood and life to save a town under surprise attack.

## Maternity

Against Mother Courage—a mother who fails to protect her children—the play places Katrin. Her kindness involves an impulse to mother in opposition to her mother's coldhearted business sense. As the *Model Book* notes, if Courage's war spoils consist of the loot she can scavenge, Katrin's are the children she saves. Notably, her heroic intervention—one that breaks her stony silence—is the salvation of the children of Halle.

## Symbols

Yvette's red boots are one of the play's most ready symbols. An archetypal fetish object, they represent femininity and feminine eroticism. Thus, it makes sense that they belong to the play's whore. Katrin dons these boots playfully in Scene Three, imitating Yvette's walk in a private daydream. The *Model Book*

argues that she does so because prostitution is the only way love remains available to her in wartime. In doing so, it perhaps overstates the case and, strangely enough, assumes Katrin's total identification with her friend. Katrin's masquerade as the whore does not necessarily mean she aims to become one.

# Scene One

## Summary

*Mother Courage* opens in Dalarna, in spring of 1624. A Sergeant and Recruiting Officer are recruiting soldiers for the Swedish campaign in Poland. They stand shivering on a highway outside a town. The Officer complains of the difficulty in recruiting soldiers from the untrustworthy townspeople. The Sergeant declares that the people could use a good war. Without war, there is no organization.

A harmonica is heard, and a canteen wagon appears on stage. The infamous Mother Courage sits on it with her dumb daughter, Katrin, and her sons, Eilif and Swiss Cheese pull it along. Introducing herself to the officers, she sings her trademark song. A "sales pitch" of sorts, it markets the wares that will help the soldiers march to their deaths. She calls the soldiers to wake: "Let all of you who still survive/ Get out of bed and look alive!"

The Sergeant demands to see her license. Fishing out a number of papers, Courage mocks his request. He again bemoans the lack of discipline in the army and asks the group's names. Courage reveals her family's rather colorful lineage, each of her children being the offspring of a different, and perhaps forgotten, father of a different nationality. The two officers deride her, and Eilif threatens to punch them out. Courage silences him and offers the men her wares.

The Recruiting Officer reveals his intentions and attempts to seduce Eilif into the army. Courage demands that he leave her children alone, ultimately drawing her knife. The Sergeant protests, saying that since Courage lives off the war, the war should not ask something of her in return. The war has not done him any harm. Looking into the future, Courage disagrees. To her, the Sergeant is a corpse on furlough.

To confirm her prophecy, she has the Sergeant choose his fortune. Courage puts two strips of parchment in his helmet, drawing a black cross on one of them. She mixes them, and he draws. To his horror, the Sergeant has chosen his death.

Unbeknown to Courage, the Recruiting Officer has continued his pursuit of Eilif. When Eilif admits that he would like to sign up, Courage similarly foretells the fate of her children. Each draw the black cross as well. She laments their fate. Eilif will die for his excessive bravery, Swiss Cheese for his honesty, and Katrin for her kindness. Sorrowfully, she readies to leave.

The Recruiting Officer presses the Sergeant to stop them. The Sergeant examines one of Courage's belts, taking her behind the wagon. Simultaneously the Recruiting Officer takes Eilif off for a drink. A horrified

Katrin leaps from the wagon and starts screaming. Courage emerges and stands still, realizing she has lost her child. Bitterly the family departs. Looking after them, the Sergeant delivers his own epigrammatic prophecy: "When a war gives you all you earn/ One day it may claim something in return!"

## Analysis

Despite all of Brecht's efforts, many critics received initial productions of *Mother Courage* as a tragedy bemoaning how people have little control over their fate and find themselves powerless before the forces of war. But no interpretation is further from Brecht's text.

As Brecht was fond of noting, *Mother Courage* is a "business play." War is not some fatidic entity but the "sum of everyone's business transactions," it is the continuation of business "by other means." Courage is all too aware of war as a set of business practices. For example, she charges that the Recruiting Officer only seeks her son for his five-guilder commission. Courage also makes explicit the brutality in these circuits of exchange—circuits involving the purchase and payment of blood and flesh. As she sings: "The blood they spill for you is red, sir,/What fires that blood is my red meat." Courage makes her living off this economy. As the sergeant notes, the war is her "breadwinner." Similarly, her participation in the business of war causes her to lose "blood and flesh."

Note that this "demystification" of the war's social underpinnings does not exclude war from what the mystifications of rhetoric. The war is anthropomorphized. For example, the Sergeant refers to a "poor war," who must ask nothing in return and look after itself. This anthropomorphism is necessary to the play's allegory of war as business. War is Courage's deadly partner.

War does not figure as an interruption of "business as usual": instead, it is both its precondition and consequence. Thus the Sergeant will declare that there is "no organization" without war. In his fantasy of peace, people eat what they will, leave their possessions uncounted, and even come to have no names. In war, "everyone registers," and all the goods are counted for the army to take away. He then concludes: "That's the story: no organization, no war!" War and organization are mutually constitutive. In other words, war brings the organization of society, and, more provocatively, perhaps, the organization of society brings war. Initially the wandering Courage appears to elude this system of organization. For example, note her derision at the Sergeant's request for her papers and the account of her children's uncertain lineages. At the same time, as the theft of Eilif indicates, she is also its victim.

This scene proceeds through a number of other allegories as well. Take, for example, the telling of the children's destinies, a sequence prefigured by the metaphor of war as a deadly gambler. In this sequence, Mother Courage plays seer, holding a helmet, metonymically evoking a skull, from which each of her children draws lots. As she tears the parchment for these lots, she cries that her family will be torn in two if they involve themselves too deeply in the war. These lots are in turn mixed together just as we are in the womb. The allegory seems clear enough, that the parchment represents the renting of the family, and each child's selection of his fate tearing him from the mother.

Courage then narrates the fatal flaws that will lead the children to their demise: bravery, honesty, and kindness. Thus, *Mother Courage* announces how war will make virtues fatal to those who exercise them.

Brecht clearly has the tradition of the morality play—which featured an Everyman as its protagonist and various characters personifying Vices and Virtues—in mind. There is obviously a reason why the heroine's name is Courage.

*Mother Courage* is no morality play. First, its heroine is not an Everyman, nor will Courage offer a "universal figure" with which the audience can immediately identify. Second, the play finds irony in its personifications. Courage, for example, becomes Courage for her mercenary nature when she drove through a bombardment to keep a cart full of bread. Similarly, *Mother Courage* subjects its allegories to alienation by exploiting allegory's most irritating features: its heavy-handedness and the apparently arbitrary relationship between its terms. Brecht makes the arbitrariness in an allegory evident. Katrin is a "cross in herself," war is a dice player. This revelation of the gap between allegory's terms functions to alienate or distance the spectator from the spectacle in hopes of generating his critical reflection.

The other major "distanciation effects" in this opening scene lie in Brecht's stage techniques. Again, recall that *Mother Courage* in large part offers a model for the epic theater. A key device in this scene is the emptiness of the stage. Brecht understood the void produced in this first scene as a horizon lying open to the enterprising family that prefigures the space of measureless devastation in which the play ends. Moreover, the spectator was to understand the void as the actors' *tabula rasa*. In seeing this void take shape, the spectator would in turn subject the actors' interpretations to scrutiny.

## Scene Two

### Summary

In 1625–1626, Mother Courage journeys through Poland with the Swedish army. The scene begins in the tent of the Swedish Commander and the adjacent kitchen outside the besieged town of Wallhof. Courage is arguing with the Cook over the sale of a capon, a castrated rooster. She cries that the soldiers are starving, chasing after field rats and drooling over boiled leather—no food is left. If the Cook does not buy the capon, the Commander will take his head. Nonplussed, the Cook begins to prepare an old cut of beef.

The Commander, a Chaplain, and Eilif enter the tent, the Commander lauding the young man for a recent raid on the local peasants. Angrily he calls for meat. Having overheard the conversation, Courage rejoices at finding her son again and forces the capon on the Cook for a pretty penny.

Eilif recounts the raid. Upon learning that the peasants had hidden their oxen, he began to deprive his men of their meat rations to make them desperate for food. When his company attacked, however, they found that the peasants outnumbered them. Four cornered Eilif. Laughing, he bid on the oxen to confuse them and then he retrieved his sword and chopped them to pieces. "Necessity knows no law, huh?" he chuckles.

The Commander asks the Chaplain what he thinks of the tale. Cynically, the Chaplain notes that Jesus told men to love their neighbor at a time when their bellies were full, but this is no longer the case. The Commander remarks that Eilif got his men meat, and any act done for the least of God's children is done for God. He celebrates Eilif's bravery, calling him Julius Caesar, and declares that he should be presented to the king. In the kitchen, Courage remarks that trouble must be afoot. If the Commander's campaign were any good, he would not need brave soldiers. Indeed, great virtues always signal that something is amiss.

The Commander declares that Eilif's father must have been a great warrior. The boy concurs and sings a song of warning Courage taught him called "The Song of the Wise Woman and the Soldier." It tells of a soldier who joins the fight against the advice of a wise woman and dies, vanishing like smoke and leaving nothing but glorious deeds that cannot console the living. Courage picks up the song from the kitchen, beating on a pan with a spoon. Eilif enters and embraces her. She boxes him on the ear for failing to back down when the peasants attacked him.

## Analysis

Scene Two continues to elaborate the brutal business of war. Simply put, the people are starving—to put it otherwise would probably contravene Brecht's dark antiwar humor. Note the trope of meat: the Commander screams for meat; for the Commander, the peasants stuff their priests with beef at both ends; the farmers want to make mincemeat out of Eilif. Everyone is out for flesh and the depravity of war is clear. Eilif's glorious deeds, told in the barest terms, are theft and murder. His ostensible bravery, the virtue that supposedly does him in, is more brutal than heroic. All too quickly in this war waged in the name of God does the Commander's religious sophistry justify his crimes, though certainly the Chaplain disapproves of the young murderer. Mother Courage exploits the situation to gain an extra buck.

Along with appearing as the opportunist ever bent on her survival, Courage figures anew as the wise woman, taking up her voice in Eilif's song as she foretells the soldier's death. Like much of the play's music, this song functions autonomously as a "plot within the plot" that once again foreshadows the son's demise. The Frankfurt School theorist Walter Benjamin notes the profusion of such thinkers and wise men in Brecht's plays, characters he describes as "untragic heroes." For Benjamin, these thinkers evoke an uncharted tradition of attaching a third party observer to the action. Such device generally remains artificial according to most standards of dramaturgy but appears consistent with the principles of epic form—in particular, with pedagogical intentions and its decomposition of the theatrical illusion.

In this scene, the thinker is an eavesdropper, commenting on the conversation in the adjacent playing space. Courage's reflections are once again on virtues during wartime. Here virtues serve as evidence that soldiers are unwittingly under the thumb of incompetent officers. The soldier's bravery can only cover over a leadership that needs it. In a well-regulated country, everyone could be ordinary, middling, and even cowardly.

Key staging elements include the use of the half-curtain, back projection, and poster. First, Brecht's famous half curtains serve to create various playing spaces on stage. This scene reveals one of its uses in

its construction of eavesdropping. As we will see, the multiplication of playing spaces will allow for dialectical confrontations between events on-stage. As noted in the *Courage Model Book*, the Berlin production set the stage for these confrontations by attempting to eliminate all romantic remnants of atmosphere. It primarily did so by replacing background projections, traditionally used to convey certain locales, with the countries' names in stark, black letters. This anti-illusion device would at once locate the action in its historical context and force the spectator to become the action's critical observer.

Also of note is the introductory poster sketching the scene. Mother Courage meets her son, successfully sells a capon, and learns of Eilif's exploits. For Benjamin, these posters exemplify the epic progression of the play. By emphasizing individual events, the epic "loosens the joints" of the linear plot and allows itself to cover vast spans of time. Suspense lies not in outcome but in the events themselves. Thus, for Benjamin, the epic puts itself in league with the true and decidedly non-linear movement of history.

## Scene Three—Part I

### Summary

Three years later, Mother Courage and Katrin fold washing on a cannon. At the same time, Courage bargains with an Ordinance Officer over a bag of bullets. Swiss Cheese, now in a paymaster's uniform, and Yvette Pottier, the camp prostitute, look on. Yvette's red boots stand nearby.

Courage declares that she will not buy military property, reproaching the officer for selling ammunition when his soldiers have nothing to shoot with. The officer encourages her to sell them to another regiment and Courage buys the bullets. Giving Swiss Cheese his underwear, Courage enjoins her son to balance the regiment books. Even if the seasons do not come, the books must balance. He leaves with the Officer.

Courage remarks to Yvette that the war is drawing in more countries, thus her business prospects improve as well. Yvette is desperate because of rumors that she is ill and none of the men will touch her. She starts recounting a familiar story of her Dutch army beau, Peter dubbed Piper for the pipe he always carried in his mouth. The story should harden Katrin against love. Yvette sings it in "The Fraternization Song," telling of his arrival, their affair, and his departure. She has spent the past five in a futile search for her lover. She moves behind the wagon, and Courage warns her daughter against military affairs.

The Chaplain and Cook appear. Eilif has requested money; Courage gives some to the Chaplain, chiding her son for speculating in maternal love. The Cook says she is too hard: her son may die at any moment. The Chaplain rejoins that to fall in a war of religion is a blessing to his skeptical interlocutors.

The three move behind the cart, talking of politics. This campaign has cost the Swedish King a great deal. Neither the Poles nor Germans wanted their freedom from the Kaiser, forcing him to subjugate if not execute them. He got nothing but trouble for his outlays and so he had to levy an unpopular salt tax back



home. In any case, his justification by God kept his conscience clear. Without it, he could be accused of seeking profit alone. Courage and the Chaplain chastise their friend for his disloyalty and he eats the king's bread. The Cook disagrees; he does not eat his bread, but instead bakes it.

While the three converse, Katrin's dons Yvette's boots and imitates her sashay. Suddenly cannons, shots, and drums explode: the Catholics have launched a surprise attack. The Ordnance Officer and a Soldier enter and attempt to move the cannon. The Cook departs for the Commander, leaving his pipe behind. The Chaplain remains, wringing a cloak from the reluctant Courage to disguise himself. Discovering Katrin, Courage rips off the boots and smears her face with dirt. When a clean face appears before a soldier, another whore comes into the world. To her horror, Swiss Cheese arrives and stupidly hides the regiment cash box in the wagon. They quickly take down the regiment flag.

## Analysis

Scene Three opens with a scene of haggling and ends with Courage nearly refusing the Chaplain a cloak, again presenting war as the continuation of business by other means. The metaphor appears most explicitly in a discussion of the war's politics by Courage, the Chaplain, and the Cook, a discussion that exemplifies the pedagogical intentions of the epic theater.

Initially Courage and the Chaplain share the received, nationalist opinions about the war, that the King only intended to liberate the Poles and Germans from the tyrannical Kaiser and had to retaliate when so unreasonably attacked by these nations. As Courage notes that the Cook is no Swede. The war, as the play suggests throughout, is about profit. Thus the economic metaphor is very appropriate, because the King got nothing but trouble for his outlays and goodness, forcing him to raise taxes back home. Religious serves to allay any guilt over his profiteering. The Cook's awareness of his social position contravenes any blind allegiance to the monarchy. As he tells the Chaplain, he does not eat the king's bread, he bakes it. The Cook understands himself in the service of the King's profiteering.

Ultimately Courage concurs, adding her own views. For example, the men serving the King are out for profit as well. Moreover, in such desperate times, the fact that men are simply out for money is their salvation, because it is the only means available by which the innocent can protect themselves. Later, like the Cook, Courage will note that the interests of the top and bottom socially are rarely synonymous, and often times the top's defeat is the bottom's victory. Ironically, the Chaplain protests these heresies by invoking the flag on Courage's wagon. As becomes clear in the sequence to follow, national loyalties change colors when survival is in question.

More important than the content of the trio's dialogue is that dialogue's staging. The talk takes place entirely behind the wagon. The play literally puts distance between the characters and the audience, hampering the spectator's tendency to identify with characters and thus hopefully impelling them to subject the dialogue to a new mode of analysis. This sequence, however, does not only confront the audience with disembodied voices floating across an empty stage. Instead, Katrin appears trying on Yvette's boots and imitating her sexy walk. Such explicitly polysemic staging, that is, staging that makes

use of multiple structures of Signification, has lead many critics to identify Brecht as a forerunner of postmodern drama.

In this case, the scene juxtaposes two apparently un-related forms of action. How a spectator might read them together remains unclear. In combining the most innocent character with a prostitute, Brecht notes in the *Courage Model Book* that Katrin tragically seeks love through the only means available to her during war: that of prostitution. This reading probably overstates the case and it assumes Katrin's identification with Yvette. It implies, in other words, that Katrin wants to become a whore.

Thus Brecht's reading reduces Katrin's fantasy to identification alone. Notably Katrin dons the boots, which archetypal fetish object that is Yvette's most memorable feminine lure, in fantasy, as if she is daydreaming. Katrin imagines herself in an erotic life that the war largely makes impossible. As we will learn later, the war will ultimately disfigure her, ruining her hopes of marriage. Moreover, Courage will intimate that her muteness is perhaps the result of some sexual trauma: "A soldier stuck something in her mouth when she was little." Certainly Courage herself would like her mute and stone-like, or free of any sexual desire. The condition she imposes on her daughter is a wartime necessity. As Courage notes, the boots and Katrin's pride in feminine self-display stand to make her a whore—a victim of rape.

## Scene Three—Part II

### Summary

Three days later, the remaining characters sit eating anxiously. Swiss Cheese worries that his sergeant is wondering about the cash box, and the Chaplain complains of having no one to preach to. Mother Courage has sworn herself a Catholic to keep the canteen safe. The Chaplain asks Swiss Cheese what he plans to do with the cash box. Spies are everywhere, the Chaplain even found a one-eyed fellow sniffing his excrement. Courage also commands her son to leave the cash box where it is. She leaves with the Chaplain, and Katrin clears the dishes.

Swiss Cheese resolves to return the cash box, daydreaming about his sergeant's reaction. Two men—an enemy Sergeant and the Man with the Bandage over his eye—confront Katrin. They ask if she has seen a man from the Second Protestant Regiment and she flees in terror. The men withdraw after seeing Swiss Cheese. Oblivious to the imminent danger, Swiss Cheese prepares to leave. Katrin does all she can to warn him but to no avail.

When Courage and the Chaplain return, Katrin desperately tells her mother what has happened. Suddenly the two men bring in a struggling Swiss Cheese. Mother and son pretend to not know each other. Nevertheless, Courage strongly suggests that Swiss Cheese give up the cash box. The men take him away, and Courage follows.

That evening, Katrin and the Chaplain appear rinsing glasses and polishing knives. The Chaplain sings "The Song of the Hours," a song that recounts the passion of Christ. An excited Courage enters, declaring that they must buy Swiss Cheese's freedom. Yvette has picked up a hoary old Colonel who might buy the canteen from her. Courage plans to pawn the wagon and reclaim it after two weeks with the money from the cash box. Yvette seduces the Colonel into the purchase. He exits. Stopping her as she counts the merchandise, Courage sends Yvette to bribe One Eye with the 200 guilders. She thanks God men are corruptible, as corruption is their only hope.

Yvette returns and reports that One Eye has agreed. She also relates that Swiss Cheese confessed under thumbscrews that he threw the cash box into the river when he was near capture. Courage hesitates and decides that she will not be able to reclaim the wagon. She asks Yvette to return with a new offer of 120 guilders.

Courage sits to help polish the knives. She muses that they will get Swiss Cheese back, that the war will never end, and that she was once offered 500 guilders for her wagon. Katrin flees, sobbing behind the wagon. Yvette returns, One Eye rejected her offer, and Swiss Cheese's execution is imminent. Desperately, Courage orders Yvette to tell him that she will pay 200. "I believe—that I've haggled to long" she murmurs.

Drums roll in the distance. Yvette appears and Swiss Cheese has eleven bullets in him. The army remains convinced that they are hiding the cash box. They are coming with the body. She asks if she should keep Katrin away and Courage asks that she bring her. Two men enter with a stretcher with a sheet over the top. Raising the sheet, the Sergeant asks Courage if she can identify the body. Courage shakes her head. The Sergeant orders that the body be thrown into the carrion pit: "He has no one that knows him."

## Analysis

Here Mother Courage loses another child while conducting business. Her haggling over the bribe poses a question prefigured in her joke earlier that Eilif has been speculating in maternal love: how much is a child worth to its mother. Using Yvette as a messenger, this carefully crafted scene raises the tension on-stage with each of her successive and increasingly angry entrances, entrances that foretell Swiss Cheese's demise. As if the butt of some grim joke, Swiss Cheese ends up riddled with bullet holes. He suffers twice over, dying a sort of "second death" in the presentation of Swiss Cheese's body, a death Yvette also announces. His mother refuses to identify him. This symbolic death, denying him recognition and his membership within Courage's family, exiles him to the carrion pit. This death is already prefigured in the first scene, where Courage and her son must pretend that they are strangers.

In some sense, if Courage cannot bear witness to her son's murder, the silent Katrin does so for her brother. Katrin first emerges as witness in Scene One with the recruitment of Eilif. Here, she functions as witness twice, helplessly watching Swiss Cheese walk off to his demise and standing by her mother when she refuses to identify the body. In a sense she bears witness to her brother with her silence in a way the garrulous Mother Courage, forced to lie twice for her survival, cannot. Left impotent in her muteness, the innocent Katrin appears as a sort of horrified bystander, literally silenced by the traumas of war. Raising

her voice against the war will ultimately mean her demise, the act of intervention demanding a self-sacrifice that brings the witness to martyrdom.

The play's investment in Katrin's martyrdom seems strange in its commitment to exploring the social contradictions at the heart of the war, since it remains critical of martyrdom almost everywhere else. The Chaplain's comparison of Swiss Cheese to the crucified Jesus seems awkward and overly pious at best. Swiss Cheese does not die a noble death, the irony of his demise lying in his stupidly unwavering honesty. Simply put, the audience wonders why he does not let the cash box go.

Interestingly, Brecht's production of *Mother Courage* underscored the strangeness of the play's music to the action by lowering a musical emblem on-stage whenever a song did not directly arise from action or arose from it but remained clearly apart nevertheless. This unrealistic element intended to break the illusion on-stage and raise the music to its own reality, a reality distinct from the action. This decomposition of the dramatic illusion, an effect Brecht pitted against Wagnerian notions of the "total work" of art, would again distance the spectator from the spectacle and force him to consider the interaction between the various elements of the play.

Along with the fatal haggle, this sequence features another extended scene of exchange: the pawning of the canteen. Yvette, the camp prostitute, figures as another commodity in this economy of flesh, exchanging her body by the money to buy the canteen which will in turn allow Courage to buy her son's life. In the *Model Book*, Brecht presents Yvette's Colonel as a "negative entity," a lecher whose primary function is to demonstrate, somewhat violently, the price Yvette pays for her work.

## Scenes Four and Five

### Summary

#### Scene Four

Mother Courage appears outside an officer's tent, complaining to a Clerk that the army has destroyed her merchandise and charged her with an illicit fine. She plans to file a complaint with the captain. The Clerk responds that she should be grateful they let her stay in business.

A Young Soldier enters, threatening the captain's murder. Apparently the captain has stolen his reward for rescuing the Colonel's horse, squandering it on food, drink, and whores. He is hungry and wants to eat. The Commander ordered the army into the fields the year previous, not thinking they would remain in the area. The soldiers ruined the crops, and famine has been the result.

An Older Soldier tries to calm the younger one. Courage tells him to quiet down, saying that the screamers never last long. His rage will not last. He wonders how much time it will take in the stocks

before he realizes that he can bear with injustice. Suddenly the Clerk announces the captain's imminent arrival and orders the group to sit. They follow and Courage remarks that it is better to not rise again.

Courage then sings "The Song of the Great Capitulation." It tells of a proud man who joined the army and quickly came to submit to its discipline and ultimate capitulation. The soldier leaves and the Clerk informs Courage she can see the captain; she exits as well.

## Scene Five

Two years have passed and the wagon crosses Poland, Moravia, Bavaria, Italy, and Bavaria again. In 1631, it stands in a war-ravaged village after Tilly's victory at Magdeburg. Mother Courage and Kattrin serve two soldiers at the counter. One wears a stolen women's fur coat. Victory marches play throughout the scene.

Courage demands that the men pay and they protest that their "humane" commander was bribed and only allowed one hour for plundering. The Chaplain staggers in and there is another family of peasants in the farmhouse. He needs linen, and an excited Kattrin tries to get her mother to fetch some. Courage refuses, as she has sold all her bandages and will not sacrifice her officer's shirts.

The Chaplain brings in a wounded woman and peasant who stayed behind to protect their farm. All look to the unmoved Courage. Kattrin threatens her with a board. The Chaplain lifts her off the wagon, takes out the shirts, and begins tearing them in strips. From the house comes the cry of a child in pain. Kattrin rushes into the collapsing building.

Torn in two directions, Courage anxiously watches for Kattrin and warns the Chaplain to go easy on her linen. Kattrin emerges triumphantly with a baby. Courage commands that she return it to its mother. Kattrin rocks the baby and hums a lullaby. Courage demands that the victory marches stop; the victory has only cost her money. She sees a soldier trying to make off with a bottle of schnapps and snatches his fur coat as payment. The Chaplain murmurs that there is still someone in the farmhouse.

## Analysis

Scene Four is a scene of education and capitulation is its lesson. As Brecht notes in the *Courage Model Book*, it features Courage as the soldier's teacher, instructing him on the impermanence of his rage and their automatic deference to authority that they share. This deference involves a collective submission. Thus, they will all sit when commanded and not rise again in revolt. Similarly, note how the pronouns of the "Song of the Great Capitulation" shift from "you" to "we." Courage herself learns by teaching, capitulating once she realizes the limit of her own rage.

For Brecht, this scene shows Courage at her most depraved. At the same time, she remains aware and angered by her depravity. Note in this respect the ironic parenthetical remarks that interject into the "Song." These remarks and other devices similarly "alienating" her lesson carry with them a certain political urgency. Brecht considers this scene especially dangerous if played without techniques of alienation, fearing that it might seduce the audience into the pleasures of capitulation.

Scene Five elaborates on Courage's depravity further. Brecht understands this scene as presenting a "new Courage." Having lost her son, she defends the wagon and its merchandise with her teeth bared. So attached is she to the wagon that she appears torn between it and her daughter. Bent on protecting her own interests, Courage becomes complicit in the suffering of the war's victims. Though ultimately the Chaplain tends to the wounded, the scene denies the audience any momentary relief, cathartic or otherwise, which this act might offer. Instead, it ends with Courage's crude act of theft and the indication that others remain in the crumbling farmhouse, refusing to release the spectator from the realities of war.

This scene also develops a number of characters. As noted in the *Model Book*, the Chaplain to this point has appeared as an ineffectual, pious, and wooden man who rather tenuously hangs onto the wagon as an outsider needing protection. Thus, he decidedly does not intervene into the horror around him. For example, recall Courage's haggling over Swiss Cheese. In deying Courage and attempting to save the victims of Tilly's victory, he regains a sense of his old importance and Brecht comes to understand himself as someone oppressed by war as well.

This scene is above all dependent, however, on Katrin, who, through mime, reveals her increasing rage at her mother's inhumanity. The scene insists on the intelligent, willful nature of Katrin's character. She is not prey to dumb animal instincts, and though she is ostensibly the most helpless creature in the play, she consciously decides to intervene. At the same time, there is something sinister in her self-sacrificing rescue of the baby. Brecht notes in the *Model Book* that if her mother's spoil is the fur coat, hers is the baby. Indeed, she almost plays the thief in her rescue of the baby, running out of the farmhouse with the child above her head. She coddles and comforts it, apparently ready to take it from its mother. Moreover, it appears she has done this before. One wonders if she stages revenge against Mother Courage, violently supplanting the "bad mother" by playing the good one herself.

## Scenes Six and Seven

### Summary

#### Scene Six

In 1632, the canteen sits before the Bavarian city of Ingolstadt during the funeral of Commander Tilly. Mother Courage and Katrin take inventory while the Chaplain and a Clerk play draughts. They sit inside the canteen tent and outside it rains.

Counting her merchandise, Courage ruminates on Tilly's death. Courage confesses her pity for the Commander: men of his stripe undoubtedly leave special plans unaccomplished, something worthy of a monument. These plans are always spoiled by the "littleness" of the underlings who should carry them

out. The Chaplain laughs at her subtly subversive speech. She asks him if he thinks the war will end; she needs to know if she should buy more supplies.

The Chaplain responds that heroes grow on trees and that, though the war might be imperfect, someone will always pull it out of the hole. A Soldier at the counter begins singing a cynical call to battle. Scandalized, the Clerk asks the Chaplain what he thinks of peace. The Chaplain responds that war has its islands of peace. Moreover, it satisfies all needs. You can take a crap, drink, screw, nap, and onward. War is like love—it always finds a way.

Courage resolves to buy new supplies. Kattrin bangs a basket of glasses on the ground and runs out, distraught. Courage has promised her a husband come peacetime. Courage goes back and consoles her daughter. She then sends her to town with the Clerk to fetch some supplies and they exit.

The Chaplain commends Courage on her courage. She replies that the poor need it because they need it to wake in the morning, plough their field during wartime, raise their children, face each other, and suffer rulers who would cost them their lives. She sits, smokes her pipe, and asks the Chaplain to chop her some wood.

He comments on the pipe. Upon learning that it comes from the Cook, he jealously maligns its owner's character, angrily bringing the ax down on the chopping block. Courage warns him against breaking the block. The Chaplain laments that he has no talent for physical labor. He is a great preacher, rousing his listeners out of their senses and providing them with warmth. Courage responds that she needs her senses, and that firewood provides warmth best. Brandishing his ax, the Chaplain pursues his courtship: he wants to cement his bond with Courage. Courage refuses him laughingly.

Suddenly Kattrin enters with wound across her eye and forehead, dragging the supplies behind her. She was attacked en route and permanently scarred. Courage attempts to console her, giving her Yvette's boots. Kattin leaves the boots and enters the wagon. Counting the scattered merchandise, Courage bitterly curses the war.

## Scene Seven

Courage appears at the height of prosperity, dragging the wagon and its new wares along a highway with the Chaplain and Kattrin. She wears a necklace of silver coins. She declares that she will not let "you" spoil the war for her; war feeds its people. She sings "The Song of Mother Courage" anew.

## Analysis

As in scenes previous, Scene Six is framed by Courage's tireless work, in this case an inventory. Courage work is inexorable like the war itself. Thus Brecht notes that the Chaplain's extended speech on the longevity of the war must not play separately from Courage's anxiety over supplies; she makes calculations during the entirety of the Chaplain's monologue. Her commonplace inventory dictates the

rhythm of the scene, punctuating its action. This action largely consists of two "historic moments," the funeral of Tilly and, in the "little people's" history of the war, the disfigurement of Katrin.

With regard to the death of Tilly, Courage appears as a sort of wise woman, wryly delivering what the *Model Book* calls her own funeral oration on the fallen Tilly. The stage notes indicate that the Clerk in this scene constantly watches Courage in hopes of catching her in some incriminating speech. Her sarcastic commentary on Tilly is far too subtle. Her taking of inventory through her oration, moreover, brings out the irony of her reflections. For Brecht, Courage's laughter upon these disruptions expresses the merriment she must hide in her evasively subversive speech.

Halfway through the scene, Courage interrupts her work, taking her first break in the play. Increasing prosperity has softened her. The Chaplain takes advantage of this pause to propose to her. Courage puts him in his place, deflating his appeals to her heart. She is simply trying to survive and he is her dependent. He would do best by making himself useful.

The war interrupts this failed courtship with Katrin's disfigurement. Notably, she incurs this wound while defending her mother's merchandise. As the *Model Book* indicates, Katrin blames her mother for her disfigurement. Prior to her final entrance, the scene heightens the tragedy of her mutilation with the allusions to her hopes of marriage and her flirtation with the singing soldier at the counter. For Brecht, these are the last moment she appears "capable of love." Scarred, she becomes a ruined woman, thus the poster introducing the scene ironically summarizes Katrin's wounding as her acquisition of the whore's boots. Katrin rejects this unthinkingly cruel gift, Courage suggesting in not so many words that she can now play the whore freely as no man will have her.

This "historic moment" leads Courage to curse the war. Nevertheless, as Brecht notes, the scene leaves us with a "contradiction." Courage bends to take the inventory of the very goods that cost Katrin her face. Scene Seven takes this contradiction to one of its logical conclusions. Once again, bedecked in the signs of prosperity, Courage fails to learn from her family's suffering and celebrates the war anew. Riding across the battlefields, she evokes allegorical representations of death and war itself, calling out against all those, the at once indeterminate and intensely personalizing "you" who would spoil her work. The all-encompassing nature of the war, in both time and space, become apparent in the new verses of her song. In war, both the man who stays at home and makes a bed to sleep in and the man who hurries along to some resting place dig themselves an early grave. The materialist allegory recurs as well, and Courage cries, "War is a business proposition."

## Scene Eight

### Summary



It is 1632. An Old Woman and her son appear in front of the wagon on a summer morning, dragging a bag of bedding. They attempt to sell it to an unwilling Courage. Suddenly bells starting ringing, and voices from the rear announce Gustavus Adolphus's fall at the battle of Lützen. Peace has been declared. Courage curses: she has just purchased new supplies. Crawling out of the wagon, the Chaplain decides to don his pastor's coat.

Suddenly the Cook, bedraggled and penniless, arrives. Eilif is expected at any moment. Courage calls Katrin from the wagon, but she has come to fear the light in the wake of her disfigurement. Courage and Cook sit and chat, flirting as they recount their respective ruin. The Chaplain emerges wearing his coat, and the Cook chastises him from urging Courage to buy new supplies. They begin to argue. As the *Courage Model Book* indicates, they are engaged in a "fight for the feedbag." When Courage defends the Cook, the Chaplain calls her a "hyena of the battlefield," a war profiteerer who has no respect for peace. Courage observes that the Chaplain has been living off her with little complaint and suggests they part company.

Upon the Cook's suggestion, Courage rushes off to town to sell as much as she can. The Cook removes his boots and the wrappings on his feet. Poignantly, the priest begs the Cook not to oust him. Suddenly an older, fatter, and heavily powdered Yvette enters with a servant in tow. The widow of a colonel, she has come to visit Courage. When she sees the Cook, she unmask him as the Peter Piper that abandoned her years ago, warning Courage of his history. Courage calms her and takes her to town.

Both men are now convinced that they are lost. They reminisce about happier days under the service of the Commander. Eilif, now a richly dressed lieutenant, then enters in fetters followed by two soldiers. He has come to see his mother for the last time. He has been arrested for another of his acts of plundering, now criminal under the new peace, one that left the wife of a peasant dead. He has no message for his mother. The soldiers take him away and the Chaplain follows, instructing the Cook to defer telling Courage for now.

Uneasily, the Cook approaches the wagon, asking Katrin for food. A cannon thunders. Courage appears, breathless, with her goods in arms. The war resumed three days ago. They must flee with the wagon; she wants the Cook to join her and takes hope that she will be seeing Eilif soon. With the Cook and Katrin in the harness, Courage sings triumphantly: "Report today to your headquarters! If it's to last, this war needs you!"

## Analysis

With the onset of peace, this scene ironically shows the characters—all of whom have built their lives around the war—in ruin. Courage will lose everything on her wasted supplies. Eilif is punished for the murderous acts that gained him accolades during the war, and the absurdity of the situation leaves him speechless. The Chaplain finds himself ousted by the Cook. Though at first he turns upon Mother Courage, hypocritically attacking her scavenger's investment in the war, he must ultimately beg the Cook to leave him his place in the wagon. Notably, he cannot return to the cloth and all its attendant beliefs even if new congregations undoubtedly await him. His time as a tramp has made him a better man. Brecht underlines this transformation as revealing the "dignity of misery." Though triumphing over the Chaplain, the Cook,

an aging Don Juan, must beg for food and is humiliated by his old lover. Notably, the Cook and Courage stage their courtship through the discussion of the ruin that defines their new lives.

In contrast, Yvette returns here as, to quote Mother Courage, the only character who makes her fortune through the war. The play's judgment of her is inscribed on her body. Fat, heavily made-up, and speaking with the affected accent of the Austrian aristocracy, she appears grotesque in her prosperity. As the *Model Book* indicates, "eating has become her only passion." Moreover, it is not for nothing that the character who makes it is the former camp whore. As Yvette trades her body for material gain, her disfigurement is the price she pays for her wealth.

Perversely, Brecht appears in some sense to consider her disfigurement in the same breath as Katrin's. Thus, Yvette appears as "badly disfigured by good food as Katrin by her scar." Their bodily mutilations are in no way analogous. Nevertheless, once again does the play Yvette and Katrin become doubles. In some sense, it compulsively twins the whore and its most virtuous woman, betraying a certain fantasy it holds of the feminine.

Despite this temporary hiatus, one of the "islands of peace" described by the Chaplain earlier, the war reasserts itself. Courage's closing song, celebrating the war anew as her breadwinner, emphasizes human complicity in the war's maintenance: "If it's to last, the war needs you." As her recruitment song makes clear, war is not a force of the elements, but the workings of men. The crushing dramatic irony of this celebratory song is of course Courage's ignorance of Eilif's death, an irony underscored by her references to an imminent meeting with her son and her musings about his new heroic exploits. Courage will never come to know this loss during the play. As the *Model Book* grimly observes, she will literally ride over her son's grave.

## Scenes Nine and Ten

### Summary

#### Scene Nine

By the autumn of 1634, the war has taken half of Germany's population. A hard winter has come early. Everyone is starving, the towns are razed, and only begging—rather than business—remains. Courage and the Cook appear in rags before a half-ruined parsonage in Fichtelgebirge. They ring to ask for food, but there is no answer. Courage suggests that they sing for their alms.

Abruptly the Cook tells her that he has received a letter from Utrecht: his mother has died of cholera and left him the family inn. Recounting the woes of the land, Courage confesses that she tires of wandering. "The world's dying out" the Cook responds, inviting her to join him at the inn. She must, however, decide whether she will join him immediately.

Courage calls Katrin and tells her of the plan. The Cook asks to have a word with her alone. Once Katrin has returned to the wagon, he tells her that they must leave Katrin behind with the wagon. There is no room for her, and the customers do not like to look upon disfigured mutes. Courage does not know what to do; Katrin overhears the conversation.

Calling to the parsonage, the Cook sings "The Song of the Great Souls of the Earth." It recounts the fates of Solomon, Julius Caesar, Socrates, and Saint Martin, all of whom meet their dark destinies on account of their respective virtues—that is, wisdom, bravery, honesty, and pity. Thus, a man is better off without such qualities. A voice calls them inside. Courage decides she cannot leave her daughter, and they enter the parsonage.

Katrin climbs out with a bundle, laying a skirt of her mother's and a pair of the cook's trousers on the ground as a parting message. Courage emerges with a plate of soup and stops her daughter. They toss the Cook's belongings on the ground, harness themselves to the wagon, and depart. The Cook enters, still chewing, and sees his abandoned possessions.

## Scene Ten

During 1635, Courage and Katrin follow the ever more tattered armies from central Germany. They come upon a prosperous farmhouse on the highway. A voice inside sings of the house's prosperity through the seasons. Courage and Katrin stop to listen and then start out anew.

## Analysis

In the midst of the world's "dying out," Scene Nine offers Courage her apparently last opportunity to settle down. This opportunity, however, demands the abandonment of her daughter. The *Model Book* insists that the Cook not appear brutal in imposing this condition; he only enumerates the practical considerations that make it impossible for Katrin to accompany them. On her own part, Courage genuinely considers his proposition. The stage notes indicate that in this scene she addresses Katrin as if she were deaf—just like the Cook might. This change in tone indicates her ambivalence at remaining with her daughter.

Standing apart from the scene's action is the "Song of the Great Souls of the Earth," a song partially taken from *The Threepenny Opera*. Though, like much of the play's music, it functions autonomously from the events on stage, we should not lose sight of the occasion for its singing. With the trio starving, the Cook must deliver the song for bread. The song attempts to hock virtue as merchandise, sell it for food: "try honesty, that should be worth a dinner" cries the Cook. The double entendre refrain—"A man is better off without"—is certainly ironic. That is, a man might be better off without virtues but not without bread.

The song is also an allegory for the play itself. Eilif, as his Commander notes earlier, is the brave Julius Caesar; Swiss Cheese is the honest Socrates; and Katrin the kind Saint Martin. Courage herself is the wise Solomon. The Cook's song thus rehearses Courage's game of fortune telling, in which her playing with fate

yields the demise of her children. Each narrative of ruin reaffirms a programmatic theme of the play, which is that, during war, virtues become fatal to those who possess them.

Despite the straightforward nature of this allegory, there is dissonance between the song and character. Certainly, Swiss Cheese is no Socrates. Again, these dissonances would ideally like the spectator to question the figure. We question whether Swiss Cheese dies because of his excessive honesty. Either way, it is certain Katrin's death and Courage's ruin are imminent. Thus, if occasionally figuring as a demon in the scenes previous, Courage and Katrin will appear here as what the *Model Book* describes as "damned souls." Courage conjures her damnation in her confession to the Cook, imagining herself driving through hell with her wagon and selling brimstone if not driving through heaven distributing provisions to wanderers. Courage's toil stretches into eternity.

Courage's "damnation" explicitly appears in terms of class in the subsequent scene. Courage and Katrin, harnessed to the wagon like workhorses, pass a farm that sings of its endless prosperity just after Courage has conjured a vision of their endless toil. The *Model Book* describes the voice within the farm as unfeeling, arrogant and self-assured, filled with pride of possession. Courage and Katrin listen in silence, leaving the audience to imagine their thoughts. Certainly this juxtaposition is intended as a provocation, inciting the spectator to react against the injustice of the class system.

## Scenes Eleven and Twelve

### Summary—Scene Eleven

One night in January 1636, the wagon stands near a farmhouse outside the Protestant town of Halle. Out of the woods come a Catholic Lieutenant and three soldiers in full armor. They have come from a guide to the town and the Lieutenant orders to kill anyone who makes a sound.

They knock and seize the Old Peasant Woman who answers. The soldiers bring out an Old Peasant and his son. Katrin appears on the wagon and her mother has gone to town to buy supplies because the shopkeepers are fleeing and selling cheap. The soldiers demand a guide; the son refuses, even upon the threat of death. The soldiers then threaten to destroy their cattle. The son complies and exits with the soldiers.

The Old Peasant climbs on the roof and spies a Catholic regiment, which has killed the watchman and readies for a surprise attack on the town. Convinced there is nothing they can do, the Peasant Woman begins to pray, asking God to protect their family members in the town.

When she learns of the Peasant Woman's grandchildren in town, Katrin quietly climbs on the roof. She withdraws a drum from under her apron and begins to beat it. The peasants command her to stop, threatening to stone her. The soldiers return, threatening to kill them all. Craftily, the First Soldier

promises Katrin that they will spare her mother if she stops and accompanies them to town. She ignores them, as the young man notes, and she does not beat for her mother alone. The Old Peasant begins maniacally chopping wood to conceal her drumming with an innocent peacetime noise. The soldiers consider setting the farm on fire.

Katrin listens and laughs. Enraged, the Lieutenant orders his men to bring a musket. The Peasant Woman suggests that they smash the wagon. The Young Peasant deal it a few blows; Katrin pauses in distress but continues. Suddenly he cheers her on and the soldier beats him with his pike. The second soldier returns and shoots the weeping Katrin. Her final drum-beats mingle with the thunder of a cannon. She has saved the town.

## Summary—Scene Twelve

Toward morning, Mother Courage sits by Katrin's body in front of the wagon. The drums and pipes of the marching troops are heard. The peasants order the parasite away and Courage must follow her regiment. Courage responds that Katrin has perhaps fallen asleep and sings her a lullaby. The peasants bring her to her senses. Courage fetches a sheet from the wagon to cover the body. She plans to go to Eilif. The peasants offer to bury her. Courage pays them and harnesses herself to the wagon. She is confident she can manage: "I must get back into business" she resolves. As she calls to the passing regiment, the soldiers sing her signature song.

## Analysis

As the poster introducing the scene indicates, here the "stone begins to speak." Contrary to the consolations Courage offers throughout the play, Katrin's muteness does not save her from involving herself in the war. She intervenes in spite of her silence, acting where those around her will not. The scene underscores her resolve. Unlike the hostile peasants, she will sacrifice her material possessions and life to rescue the town. Notably, Katrin again appears as a "good mother" in this respect, saving the children while her mother is off once more haggling for supplies.

In the *Courage Model Book*, Brecht emphasizes the importance of alienation in this one of the more conventionally "dramatic" scenes of the play, insisting that the director stage it without allowing the audience to be so easily taken up in its pathos. For example, the peasants carefully justify their failure to intervene, supporting each other in the belief that there is nothing they can do. Ultimately, the only action they can divine is prayer. The Peasant Woman's appeal to God and analogous groveling before the Captain can only recall the "Song of the Great Capitulation." Not only do the peasant capitulate but conspire in Katrin's murder, readily informing on her and participating in the attempts to bring her from the roof. For Brecht, the actors playing the peasants must underscore the ritual character of despair. In other words, the ways in which the years of wartime suffering have frozen them into fixed forms of begging, informing, and lamentation. This ritualization is the deeper horror underlying this episode.

The final scene is similarly unrecognizable without Brecht's techniques of alienation. Contrary to immediate appearances, Courage's lullaby resists sentimentality. Instead, she sings it murderously. By promising her child the extraordinary, she argues that this mother's child must fare better than all others. For Brecht, the lullaby to the corpse would reveal her persistent, treacherous hope of bringing her child and her child alone through the war.

Similarly does the staging demand rigorously realist details. In Brecht's production, for example, Courage mechanically subtracts a coin from the sum she gives the peasants for Katrin's burial. This "realist discovery" would reveal how Courage retains her capacity to reckon in all her grief. Along with this revelation about the contradictions and conditions of human nature, the undo emphasis on such detail would decompose the theatrical illusion for the spectator, critically breaking it into pieces according to the dominant narrative principle of the epic theater: "one thing after another."

Such techniques of alienation are paramount to the play's conclusion, a denouement that would illustrate how Courage has effectively learned nothing. Having lost another child while haggling and then initially denying her daughter's death, she quickly disposes of her corpse to return to the march: "I must get back into business." Thus, she takes up the wagon, hauling it across an empty stage recalling Scene 1. Courage comes full circle, remaining a "damned soul" who works endlessly at the business of war.