

2015

Childhood Innocence, Childhood Complicity, and Questions of the Future in *Mother Courage and Far Away*

Tamara Spencer

Western University, tspenc2@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/ungradawards_2015

 Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spencer, Tamara, "Childhood Innocence, Childhood Complicity, and Questions of the Future in *Mother Courage and Far Away*" (2015). *2015 Undergraduate Awards*. 22.

https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/ungradawards_2015/22

Childhood Innocence, Childhood Complicity, and Questions of the Future in
Mother Courage and Far Away

Abstract

Drawing primarily on the theoretical works of Sara Ahmed and Robin Bernstein, this paper explores how children's complicity and victimhood in the wars within Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* and Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* become symbolic of humanity's demise. The essay uses *Far Away* and *Mother Courage* as case studies to examine broader social scripts on childhood. The paper argues that the children in each play are characterized by social expectations that children are meant to be ignorant to the worlds around them, as well as embodiments of the hope that the future will be better than the present. Finally, this paper argues that social scripts of childhood ignorance and innocence place unrealistic expectations onto children that ultimately limit their agential choices.

Key words

children; social scripts; Brecht; Churchill

In her essay "Happy Futures, Perhaps," Sara Ahmed argues that children "bear the weight" of the fantasy that the future will be better (174). In Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, while young Joan is repeatedly lied to about the realities of her world, she quickly becomes implicated in the violence that takes place literally in her own backyard. Similarly, Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* is set in a world ravaged by war. In *Mother Courage and Far Away*, there is a lot at stake in imagining that children have the capacity to 'make things better.' As *Mother Courage and Far Away* demonstrate, putting the onus on children to make the future better conflates children

with an ideal state of innocence. Since they are meant to be responsible for the prosperity of the future, the limits of children's actions are always already decided for them. In both plays, children become the embodiments of the remaining shreds of humanity left in worlds destroyed by war. When these children become implicated in and victims of war, it becomes symbolic of humanity's irreversible degeneration.

In order to examine the ways that both *Mother Courage* and *Far Away* posit the complicity and deaths of children as symbolic of an unrecoverable humanity, I want to first bring in the work of Sara Ahmed. In her essay "Happy Futures, Perhaps," Ahmed explores the ways that social scripts ultimately shape how it is that we conceive of happiness. Ahmed defines happiness as "*intentional* in the phenomenological sense (directed toward objects), as well as being *affective* (contact with objects). To bring these arguments together we might say that happiness is an orientation toward the objects we come into contact with" (163). In this way, happiness can be thought of as directional; it is a feeling *toward* something specific. If happiness is directed toward objects, then, as Ahmed argues, "[o]bjects that promise happiness are passed around, accumulating positive affective value as *social goods*" (164, emphasis added). Some objects are deemed to be acceptable transmitters of happiness, and they are conferred the status of "social goods." One primary example of an object that is accepted as a social good is children. Ahmed argues that children become synonymous with the future, and a world without children "signifies the loss of a fantasy of the future as that which can compensate [us] for [our] suffering; it is the very fantasy that there is something or somebody who [we] suffer for that is threatened" (174). It is the idea that children

become embodiments of the possibility for a better future that I want to use to ground my analysis of *Mother Courage* and *Far Away*.

Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* chronicles a mother and her children's experiences during the Thirty Years' War. While horribly tragic in many respects, the war actually ends up being quite beneficial for Mother Courage, who makes a living selling wares to the soldiers from her wagon. Despite Mother Courage's economic success, her children become complicit in, and ultimately victims of, the very war from which she profits. In the play's opening scene, two officers approach Mother Courage's sons, Eilif and Swiss Cheese, in an attempt to recruit them to join the ranks. Mother Courage tells the officers to target "[s]omebody else's kids, not [hers]" but Eilif, her oldest son, insists that "the war doesn't scare [him]" (*Mother Courage* 17). Both Eilif and Swiss Cheese enlist in the war, and eventually, Eilif becomes a well-decorated soldier, celebrated for his 'heroism,' and even becoming the General's "right hand" (*Mother Courage* 159). Eilif is praised for massacring a group of farmers, and he describes in great detail how he "cut their heads off, HUH! HUH! HUH! HUH! All four of them" (*Mother Courage* 37). Toward the middle of the play, Eilif kills a farmer's wife during a ceasefire. He is sentenced to death for his actions, which Eilif describes as the "[s]ame as [he's] always done" (*Mother Courage* 157). While at first Eilif's extremely violent behaviour can be contextualized within the parameters of war, the horrific murder during peacetime illustrates that he not only becomes complicit in the war, but that his time in the war has taught him to justify his violence. First described by his mother as a "kid," Eilif soon becomes culpable, internalizing the attitudes of war to an alarming degree.

Children's complicity in violence is not only a central theme in *Mother Courage*, but it is also a critical element in Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*. The play opens with Joan, a young girl, questioning her aunt Harper about violent acts she has just witnessed her uncle committing in their backyard. Joan utters the first words of the play: she tells Harper that she "can't sleep" because of the noises that she heard outside (*Far Away* 1). At first, Harper tells Joan a multitude of stories to try to explain what is happening in the backyard, but as Joan reveals that she has witnessed more than what Harper originally thought, it becomes harder for Harper to formulate credible lies. Eventually, after Joan tells her aunt that she saw her uncle hitting adults and children with a metal pole inside the shed, Harper concedes to finally "trust[...] [Joan] with the truth" (*Far Away* 18). Harper tells Joan that she is "part of a big movement now to make things better" and that she is "on the side of the people who are putting things right" (*Far Away* 20). Whether or not what Harper has told Joan is accurate remains to be seen, but in this moment, Harper is endowing Joan with the responsibility to 'make things better.' In this way, Joan "bear[s] the weight" of the fantasy that the future will be better than the present because she is meant to go on to "put things right" (Ahmed 174). Harper defers her hope onto Joan. This hope is attached to "forms of expectancy or anticipation of what follows" (Ahmed 172). Joan has been verbally placed on a specific "side," and along with this comes specific expectations about what she is supposed to do in the future. In this way, she becomes the embodiment of a future that places her in a specific socio-political position. At this point in the play it is not clear what these expectations on Joan entail, and even Joan herself does not know. As the play progresses, however, Joan fulfills the future that was pre-determined for her as a child and becomes complicit in the war.

Eilif and Joan's complicity in and internalization of the attitudes of war is an aversion from the trope of childhood innocence. Robin Bernstein argues that nineteenth century discourse drastically shifted conceptions of childhood away from the eighteenth century views of children as depraved and evil (Bernstein 4). Instead, nineteenth century views understood children "not as innocent but as *innocence itself*" (Bernstein 4, emphasis added). The conflation of childhood with innocence, and the idea that childhood is innocence embodied, is a trope that still shapes modern discourse. Childhood innocence is "to be innocent *of* something, to achieve obliviousness" (Bernstein 6). In other words, childhood innocence is not just the embodiment of a naturalized, 'pure' essence, but it is also characterized as "a state of holy ignorance" (Bernstein 6). As *Far Away* opens, Harper repeatedly lies to Joan about her uncle's behaviour in the backyard. Harper's refusal to tell Joan the real story is an act that is meant to 'preserve' her innocence; because she is a child, she is believed to occupy "a state of holy ignorance" that the truth will effectively shatter. Similarly, Mother Courage's aversion to her sons joining the war is an attempt not only to preserve their presumed innocence, but it is also done with the hope of keeping them alive. Children in *Mother Courage* and *Far Away* deviate from the trope of childhood innocence but not because their behaviour is sanctioned. Rather, they are still meant to be innocent because they are the embodiments of the future. The adults in *Mother Courage and Far Away* do not want to imagine a future that is worse than the present. Despite profiting from the violence, Mother Courage wants "[s]omebody else's kids" to be the ones to enter into the war (*Mother Courage* 17). Conversely, Harper tries to keep Joan in a state of "holy ignorance" by lying to her about what is really happening inside the shed. In this way,

children become conflated with innocence in order to preserve the idea that they can and will “make things better” in the future. The children in both plays, however, resist this association with innocence.

While the adults in *Mother Courage* and *Far Away* do what they can to try to preserve childhood innocence, the children in both plays ultimately decide to forge their own paths. As the plays progress, children become the victims of horrible acts of violence, and this becomes symbolic of the overall degeneration of humanity in each play. Kattrin is an interesting figure to investigate in relation to this deviation from innocence and a move toward death. In Scene Five, Kattrin runs into a home destroyed by cannon fire to save a screaming baby, cradling the infant in an attempt to soothe it once she has brought it to safety (*Mother Courage* 111-113). In Scene Eleven, after the Farmer’s Wife tells Kattrin that soldiers are about to invade a town filled with “little children,” Kattrin begins pounding on a drum she pulls from the wagon in order to try to warn the townsfolk of the imminent attack (*Mother Courage* 189). Kim Solga argues that Kattrin’s devotion to saving young children is not done out of a legitimate desire to become a mother but, rather, it is an attempt to reap the “spoils” of motherhood (346). Ahmed’s concept of objects as social goods classifies children as falling under the spectrum of ‘happy’ objects, as those that “promise happiness” (164). Kattrin, however, does not desire children for the ‘right’ reasons. Rather, Kattrin “desires not a baby as such but rather the sanction that she recognizes babies can bring – the viable, socially recognized position children offer women, a position from which she might *become* a woman, from which she might speak and be heard” (Solga 345). Kattrin desires a baby, the ‘right’ object, but she does not desire a baby for the ‘right’ reasons. She does not want

a baby so that she has “somebody to whom [she] can defer [her] hope” (Ahmed 174). Rather, Kattrin takes on the role of martyr for young children because she thinks of babies as material objects that, if she saves them, will allow her to reap what she perceives to be agential benefits (Solga 345). In this way, Kattrin deviates from social scripts because she does not desire the “social good” of children as a means of continuing on her family line (Ahmed 165).

While Kattrin makes it her mission to save babies, Joan is complicit in killing them. In Act Three, Harper, Joan, and Joan’s husband Todd discuss the intricacies of the world war that has animals, people, and machines all fighting one another. As they talk about the war in a conversational tone, Harper asks Todd if he has heard that cats in China have started “killing babies” (*Far Away* 36). Now an adult, Joan joins the conversation, remarking that “child[ren] under five” have become a part of the war and how she had to kill one on her journey back home (*Far Away* 43). As Elaine Aston argues, the juxtaposition between “the dispassionate, conversational register and the ‘frightening’ world at war of which [the characters] speak... makes palpable the idea of a nature caught up in and violated by the self-same, dehumanizing flows of global capitalism” (161). In this way, the world at war, which has brought children into the fold of fighting, is meant to signify how capitalist enterprise has the power to destroy not only humanity, but also nature. Furthermore, it is the precise implication of “children under five” which makes this connection so alarming. The Joan of Act One, whose “holy ignorance” was protected in the name of innocence, chafes up against the Joan of Act Three, who accepts and even kills children that are a part of the violence. The false attempt to preserve an

imagined innocence in Act One leads to a lack of ethical and agential awareness, preventing adult Joan from making ethical choices as an independent subject.

The worlds of *Far Away* and *Mother Courage*, both of which depict characters that are “unable to think against capitalism,” demonstrate that economic systems that thrive on disparity and violence have the power to bring humanity to a point of unrecoverable degeneration (Aston 159). In *Far Away*, the characters are either unable or unwilling to see the destruction that their world at war ultimately produces. In *Mother Courage*, Cook takes the news that people in small villages have begun eating children in desperation as a sign that “[t]he world’s dying” (*Mother Courage* 167). Both Churchill and Brecht utilize the trope of childhood innocence to illustrate how children are not immune to being implicated in capitalist enterprise and violence. Children “bear the weight” of the fantasy that the future will be better than the present (Ahmed 174). When these same children become enactors and victims of violence, it becomes symbolic of the ultimate human degeneration, “a symptom of the loss of the capacity for a future” (Ahmed 174).

Children in *Mother Courage* and *Far Away* become the embodiments of the *impossibility* for a better future. The children in both plays do not exist outside dominant discourses on childhood. Despite living inside war zones, the children in both plays are still expected to become placeholders for futurity, to embody purity and innocence, and to remain ignorant about the realities of the worlds around them. It is the fact that the children in both plays do not adhere to their prescribed social roles as innocents that gives them political potential. The children in *Mother Courage* and *Far Away* defy social expectations on childhood by actively engaging in acts of violence despite attempts to

shield them from the harsh realities of the world at war. The children in both plays defy the fantasy that children are always innocent and must occupy “a state of holy ignorance” (Bernstein 6). Eilif, Katrin, and Joan illustrate that forcing children to be the embodiments of perfection, to “bear the weight” that they will make the future better than the present, is an immense amount of pressure (Ahmed 174). Furthermore, this pressure to simultaneously embody innocence, ignorance, and a responsibility for the future limits children’s agential choices. By making the demise of children symbolic for the demise of humanity, both Churchill and Brecht illustrate that the ideal construct of childhood is unrealistic, because children’s lived experiences often put them in a position where they become complicit in the horrors of the world.

Works Cited

- Aston, Elaine. "But Not That: Caryl Churchill's Political Shape Shifting at the Turn of the Millennium." *Modern Drama* 56.2 (2013): 145-164. Print.
- Ahmed, Sara. "Happy Futures, Perhaps." *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*. Ed. E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011. Print.
- Bernstein, Robin. "Introduction." *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. New York: New York University Press, 2011. 1-8. Print.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *Mother Courage and Her Children*. London: Methuen Drama, 2010. Print.
- Churchill, Caryl. *Far Away*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2000. Print.
- Solga, Kim. "Mother Courage and Its Object: Reading the Violence of Identification." *Modern Drama* 46.3 (2003): 339-357. Print.