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29 March 2021

Aspec Identity in *Mother Courage*

Introduction

In her presentation for the ACMRS Roundtable *Early Modern Asexuality and Performance*, Professor Cat Clifford says, “Just as a queer reading might look to a text for its queer possibility,... one way of reading asexually means reading for asexual possibility” (Clifford). As I have studied *Mother Courage*, I see the possibility for Mother Courage herself to be aspec (anywhere on the asexual and/or aromantic spectrums). My goal with this aspec reading of *Mother Courage* is not to cram Brecht’s work into a modern vocabulary, but to use aspec language to understand a different layer of the plot and Mother Courage’s interactions with other characters.

Definitions

As stated in my introduction, *aspec* refers to anything on the asexual and/or aromantic spectrums (Blake). *Asexual* or *ace* is a sexual orientation typically defined as a lack of sexual attraction, though there are over 100 diverse identities on the ace spectrum. Similarly, *aromantic* or *aro* is a romantic orientation generally described as a lack of romantic attraction, though again, the spectrum encompasses over 100 identities and orientations (Blake). *Compulsory sexuality* enforces the presumption that all people can and should experience sexual attraction (O’Mara). *Allonormativity* refers to the social norms and structures based around the assumption

that sexual experiences are essential to a healthy human life (Clifford). *Amatonormativity* covers sexual and romantic privilege. In their talk at the ACMRS *Early Modern Asexuality and Performance* roundtable, Aley O'Mara says, "...amatonormativity describes compulsory sexuality through a wider lens, one that encompasses the social privileging of monogamy, marriage, and romantic coupling in addition to sex."

Aspec History & Pop Culture

Asexuality and aromanticism have existed for much longer than their labels. Because the labels are so new, the expert research on these identities is limited. Much of the information on asexual and aromantic history has come from forums and other Internet groups. One of the first indirect references was in 1896, by physician Magnus Hirschfeld, in his book "Sappho und Sokrates" ("Asexual" LGBTQA Wiki). While Alfred Kinsey's sexual orientation scale included an "X" category to record people with "no socio-sexual contacts or relations," some scholars say this has less to do with asexuality as an orientation and more to do with a lack of sexual behavior (Lehmiller). Anthony Bogaert, a Canadian researcher, conducted a survey of the British population in 1994, in the wake of the AIDS pandemic. The study indicated that approximately 1% of the British population did not experience sexual attraction, but Bogaert believed the number to be much lower than reality. Since asexuals are less likely to participate in studies on sexual attraction, the number was probably underrepresented ("Asexuality"). The term "asexual" first surfaced in Aromanticism is an even newer label, with one of the label's first mentions appearing in 2005 on the AVEN forums ("Aromantic").

AVEN, or the Asexual Visibility and Education Network, was founded in 2001 by David Jay (“About AVEN”). Other events and groups, such as Ace Week, Aro Week, and International Asexuality Day have been founded to bring awareness and celebration to aspec identities.

Asexuality and aromanticism have little representation in modern pop culture and entertainment. In fact, asexuality is sometimes called “the invisible orientation” because of how underrepresented it is, even within the LGBTQIA+ community. After all, how do you look for something that is defined as an absence? Even some LGBTQIA+ people do not accept aspec people as part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Clues to Aspec Identity in Entertainment

An obvious clue to a character’s aspec potential is their attitude towards sex, romance, and relationships. Asexual characters may not be interested in sex, and may flat-out state that fact. Hamlet does this (“Man delights not me, nor woman neither,”). So does Beatrice in Act Two Scene One of *Much Ado About Nothing*: “He that hath a beard is more than a youth, and he that hath no beard is less than a man; and he that is more than a youth is not for me, and he that is less than a man, I am not for him” (No Fear Shakespeare). Aromantic characters might verbally or nonverbally express a lack of interest in romance. This often leads villains to be aro-coded, regardless of creator intention. A character might be confused by or annoyed with another character who is focused on pursuing a romantic and/or sexual relationship. They might not understand the point of things like makeup, sexy clothing, or high heels. An inaccurate depiction involves a character who is not interested in sex and/or romance at the beginning, but is converted to allosexuality by the end of the story. This furthers the misconception that asexuality and aromanticism are temporary, fixable problems or phases, and is not an accurate portrayal of

aspec identities. *Mother Courage* displays some of these characteristics, as I will discuss in a future section.

Brecht's background

Brecht did not want his theatre to provide escapist illusions like most theatres of his time. Instead, Brecht advocated the alienation effect (A-effect), which would constantly remind audiences that they were watching a changeable thing made by human hands. This A-effect included a presentational acting style (as opposed to a realistic one), exposing lighting elements and other stage machinery, an episodic dramatic structure (as opposed to a single linear plot), actor doubling, putting costume changes onstage, and projecting scene titles that explained what was going to happen in the following scene. Brecht hoped to bring the audience to a higher awareness of their own oppression through their distance from the characters in the play. He wanted the audience to be aware of what they were watching so they could “criticize constructively from a social point of view” (Brecht and Willett 125).

An aspec reading of *Mother Courage* can add to this A-effect. From an uninformed— or, at the extreme— aphobic perspective, adding an aspec identity to the titular character can compound the confusion and alienation already present in Brecht's work. Asexuality and aromanticism can be difficult to understand. And the fear of asexuality and aromanticism are still present today. Celibacy and abstinence are often confused with asexuality, despite the fact that celibacy and abstinence are choices and asexuality is a diverse spectrum of natural sexual orientations. And adding an aspec layer to *Mother Courage* presents an opportunity to criticize amatonormativity constructively, extending awareness beyond the allosexual.

Mother Courage specifics

Most summaries of *Mother Courage* mention the Cook's and Chaplain's battle for Mother Courage's affection. These summaries usually imply or outright state that Mother Courage reciprocates their attraction. If this is the case, why does Courage continue to return to her "strictly business" goal and rebuff both of them? Is it just a front? A game? An excuse to refrain from committing to either man?

In this asexual reading of *Mother Courage*, Courage does not hide a romantic or sexual attraction to any character because she does not experience those forms of attraction. She starts the play by rebuffing the Sergeant ("my ass is not for you," Brecht 10), and refuses the Cook and the Chaplain on more than one occasion. She has a contentious relationship with her daughter Katrin, especially when it comes to marriage and children. When faced with the loss of her entire business and her second son in Scene Three, her first thought is, "If I'm left without anything, any stranger who wants to can have me in a ditch" (Brecht 50). Throughout the play, Mother Courage balks at the idea of sex and romance. The following sections will break down Courage's interactions with a few key characters: the Cook, the Protestant Chaplain, the prostitute Yvette, and her own daughter Katrin.

Yvette and Mother Courage

On the surface, Courage and Yvette are two very different women. After all, Courage is a businesswoman and war profiteer, while Yvette is a prostitute. Their versions of femininity compete for Katrin's attention, with both women trying to influence Katrin's future. Mother Courage does not want Katrin to follow Yvette's career path, but she doesn't try to turn Yvette

herself away from prostitution. In Scene Three, Courage says, “[Yvette] does what she does to make a living, I understand that” (Brecht 40). Though Courage brushes off Yvette’s complaining about her exes, they have a mutual respect. Both of them are businesswomen, they’re just selling different things.

While Courage doesn’t try to dissuade Yvette from her career choice, she does try to prevent Katrin from following in Yvette’s footsteps. She tries to keep Yvette from talking about her past relationships: “Don’t start your filthy yowling where my innocent daughter can hear you” (Brecht 29). After Courage fails to stop Yvette from singing “The Song of Fraternisation,” (a song about her ex, Piping Pieter), Courage spins it to keep Katrin away from dating: “You heard, Katrin? Don’t start up with soldiers” (Brecht 31).

The Chaplain and Mother Courage

For most of *Mother Courage*, the Chaplain accompanies Mother Courage as the wagon’s “chief dishwasher and assistant drayhorse” (Brecht 74). When the Chaplain comments on Katrin’s attractiveness, Courage immediately shuts him down: “she’s not comely...and I don’t want clergy sniffing up my daughter” (Brecht 32). The cook adds to Mother Courage’s negative impression of the Chaplain by saying, “Keep a gimlet eye on this dirty dog!... Revolting!” (Brecht 32). From this introduction, Courage tries to steer herself and her daughter away from any potential intimacy with the Chaplain.

To look more specifically, let us break down the conversation surrounding the Chaplain's proposal to Mother Courage in Scene Six. Courage has just sent Katrin with the Regimental Secretary to retrieve a package, leaving Courage and the Chaplain alone. Almost immediately,

the Chaplain starts dropping compliments, flirting, and hinting at his desire for a closer relationship with Courage. He even takes care to discredit the Cook, a potential rival, to help secure his place. Mother Courage deflects, ignores, or misses his comments; monologuing about the courage of the poor, mentioning the distant funeral music, and repeatedly telling the Chaplain to get back to chopping wood. She doesn't even address the Chaplain's flirting until he outright tells her: "I'm proposing!" to which she says, "Give it a rest" (Brecht 68).

In this scene, Mother Courage exhibits some behaviors shared with the aspec community. The first time the Chaplain compliments her ("I sit back and watch you, amazed."), she notes, "You're talkative today," and launches into a monologue that deflects his comment about her courage. This could be active avoidance, or it could be Courage straight up missing the fact that the Chaplain was trying to start a conversation about herself. Both possibilities happen within the aspec community. When the Chaplain tells Courage, "Beneath your customarily brusque and businesslike manner you're human, a woman, you need warmth," she responds, "I'm warm, and all it takes is a steady supply of chopped wood" (Brecht 67). This exchange encapsulates the Chaplain's amatonormative assumptions and Courage's contradiction of compulsory sexuality. Later, when the Cook insinuates that Courage fell for the Chaplain's flirting, she says, "I fell for nothing" (Brecht, 74). Once again, Courage clashes with society's amatonormative expectations, arguing in her characteristic brusqueness.

The Cook and Mother Courage

The Cook is the Chaplain's competition for Courage's attention, and they verbally spar for it almost every time they meet. Both try to discredit the other, even—or especially—when the competition is not there to defend himself. In Scene Six, the Chaplain monologues about how the

Cook is “a boorish violent rat of a man,” calling him a “Don Juan” and using his pipe as an illustration (Brecht 66-67). In Scene Eight, the Cook returns the favor, saying, “give that dried-up-twig of a chaplain a wide berth... he’s sort of got a careless opinion of women, I tried to use my influence for moral improvements but in vain, the man’s absolutely unsolid” (Brecht 74). The irony in the Cook’s Scene Eight words comes with Yvette’s callback to her “Song of Fraternisation” in Scene Three. In the song, she remembers her sixteen-year-old self and her relationship with a thin army cook nicknamed “Piping Pieter:” a womanizer who left her and several other girls in town brokenhearted when his regiment moved out. When Yvette returns in Scene Eight, she reveals that the Cook *is* Piping Pieter and warns Courage to stay away from him (Brecht 79-80).

Courage meets the Cook in Scene Two. Right away, their banter over the price of a chicken shows their equal skill in capitalist negotiating. While their conversation in Scene Two is strictly business, Scene Three hints that the Cook’s motives might not be purely monetary.

The Cook returns in Scene Three, accompanying the Chaplain to Courage’s wagon. Although the Cook tries to play it cool, The Chaplain hints at the Cook’s interest in Mother Courage:

CHAPLAIN. I bring a message from your son Eilif, and the cook wanted to accompany me, you’ve made an impression.

COOK. I accompanied you for the exercise and air.

MOTHER COURAGE. Air’s free so breathe all you want, just remember your manners and if you forget, I’m ready for you. So what’s Eilif want?

...

CHAPLAIN. (*to Mother Courage, indicating the Cook*) I didn't want him to come with me, but he says he's dreaming about you.

COOK. (*lighting his pipe*) Brandy poured by a slender hand, nothing contemptible on my mind.

MOTHER COURAGE. Who'd say no to a drink? (Brecht 31-32)

In this exchange, we see the Chaplain and Cook hinting at the Cook's potential interest in Mother Courage, and Mother Courage sidestepping the matter entirely. She focuses on the surrounding issues: her eldest son's message, the commercial demand for brandy, and so on. Like with the Chaplain's proposal scene, Courage avoiding even mere conversations about sexual/romantic attraction and relationships is a clue to her aspect identity.

Katrin and Mother Courage

Mother Courage conflicts with her daughter Katrin when it comes to marriage, romantic and/or sexual relationships, and children. She repeatedly tries to dissuade Katrin from following in Yvette's career footsteps. Courage berates Katrin for stealing Yvette's shoes not because of the theft, but because Katrin tries to look like Yvette (Brecht 31, 40). In Scene Five, when Katrin saves a baby from a crumbling building, Courage scolds her for being attached to it. She intentionally downplays Katrin's appearance to avoid drawing attention to her daughter, covering her in soot and repeatedly telling her that she's not beautiful. Courage even says she wants Katrin to be like a stone, unnoticed and untouched, so that "nothing ever happens to her" (Brecht 36-37, 40). When the Chaplain notices Katrin, Courage immediately shuts him down: "She's not comely, she's stay-at-homey, and I don't want clergy sniffing up my daughter" (Brecht 32).

In Scene Three, Courage finds Kattrin wearing Yvette's hat and shoes as the enemy soldiers close in. She panics, tearing the hat off as she says, "You want them stumbling across you and making you their whore?" (Brecht 36). She makes Kattrin take the hat and shoes off. Yvette returns for her hat, but Kattrin keeps the shoes. Later, when Courage finds Yvette's shoes in Kattrin's things, she berates her daughter: "[Yvette] does what she does to make a living, I understand that. But you'll give it for nothing, hoping for a little fun. But until peace comes you have no business having hopes" (Brecht 40). In the chaos of war, Courage forgets to return Yvette's shoes and eventually gives them to Kattrin in an attempt to cheer her up. But Courage does not allow Kattrin to wear the shoes until after Kattrin has been physically scarred—and therefore less attractive (Brecht 69). Even as she hands Kattrin the shoes, Courage lectures Kattrin on how lucky she is to be unattractive to men: "If you're pretty you've got to be afraid of what's hiding behind every bush...It's the ones no one wants who manage to have a life" (Brecht 69). At every turn, Mother Courage tries to protect her daughter from exploitation by shutting down any hopes Kattrin might have of an intimate relationship.

While Mother Courage laments the economic drawbacks to Kattrin being single, she seems to oppose Kattrin's getting married like she opposes her sons being drafted into the war—"somebody else's kids, not mine" (Brecht, 13). Courage knows that the world of her play does not contain loving, faithful husbands who would care for Kattrin. She wants to protect Kattrin from exploitation and seems to view Kattrin's marriageability as a purely economic fact—a way to make sure Kattrin's future is financially secure. Note how similar this is to how she views her own relationships with the Chaplain and Cook.

Courage's Past Relationships and Her Asexuality

When explaining her family's origins, Courage says, "Four points on the compass and I've been pricked in every direction" (Brecht 10). However, Courage's banter with the Cook and Chaplain and her previous sexual relationships do not detract from her aspec possibility. According to The Asexual Visibility & Education Network (AVEN), "many asexual people are in relationships with sexual partners" ("Asexuals and Attitudes Towards Sex"). There are a number of different identities and attitudes within the aspec community that could include Courage's reality. She could be a sex-favorable asexual, meaning she open to finding compromises with a sexual partner ("Asexuals and Attitudes Towards Sex"). She could have participated in those relationships without realizing her ace-ness (another common aspec experience—see an example in Julie Sondra Decker's Time article: "Asexuality: How To Tell If You're Asexual, The Invisible Orientation."). As the Trevor Project states, asexuality is a spectrum. Some aces may have sex, others may not. Both can still fall somewhere on the ace spectrum ("Asexual" Trevor Project).

How An Aspec Reading Applies to Brechtian Theatre

Historicization & Unintentional Aspec Characterization

In his essay on street scenes, Brecht insists that an audience should apply their current-day criticism to the events of the show, regardless of the time period. He advocates for a presentational version of storytelling, as opposed to a realistic or representational style like Stanislavski (Brecht and Willett 121-128). His intentional approach to historicization—setting current-day events and systems in the past to open them up to critique—is part of what makes his

plays still relevant today. Brecht intentionally used this to attack capitalism and institutionalized religion, but it also applies to asexuality.

Given the limited awareness around the asexual community during Brecht's life, it is reasonable to assume that he did not intentionally code Mother Courage as an asexual character. This does not mean Mother Courage cannot be read as asexual. Shakespeare wrote several characters that can be seen as asexual, including Hamlet (O'Mara), Feste from *Twelfth Night* (Clifford), Jacques from *As You Like It* (O'Mara), and Benedick and Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing* (Blake). Sherlock Holmes and Gilligan from *Gilligan's Island* are other examples of unintentional asexual characterization ("Asexuality").

Performative Life

Brecht advocates the idea of performance in our everyday lives. He argues that societal roles like gender and class are performances that every individual portrays in their everyday lives. I would add sexuality to that list.

Western society operates under the heteronormative assumption that "straight" is the default or normal sexual orientation. Even when parts of the LGBTQIA+ community are accepted, asexuality and aromanticism are often not considered. As a result, young asexual people may perform straightness to avoid being called a prude, cold, or narcissistic. Unfortunately, when your daily life requires a performance that: a) you do not identify with and b) you do not have the tools or the knowledge to accurately portray that role, it exhausts the performer. Young asexual individuals often feel like there is something wrong with them. This misconception is reinforced by the myth that asexuality is a mental disorder and a lack of media representation that, when asexual characters *are* included, often villainizes them (how many movie villains are incapable of or dismissive towards true love?) or puts them in non-human bodies (think

SpongeBob or Data from *Star Trek*). To escape judgement from peers, aspec people will perform straightness. Pretending to have crushes. Going along with conversations about sexy clothes without drawing attention to their discomfort. Some aspecs use the phrase, “straight, but not interested,” or “straight, but not good at it” before realizing their identity (Asexuality Archive 5).

Conclusion

An aspec reading of *Mother Courage* can provide us with another layer of social commentary from Brecht’s already politically dense play. Seeing Courage as aspec puts her further down the power structure, making it that much more necessary for her to cling to what little social and economic independence she has. Please see my works cited for more information on asexuality and how it relates to performance.

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