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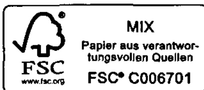

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Johannes Stier

71. Heiner Müller, *Die Hamletmaschine*

Rewriting *Hamlet*

It is well known that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest play. It is somewhat remarkable that one of the most famous contemporary responses to the work by a playwright numbers no more than ten pages in the standard edition (cf. Müller 2001, 545–54). *Die Hamletmaschine* by Heiner Müller was written and published in 1977, and was a response to his work on a translation of Shakespeare's play in the same year. *Hamlet* had been something of an obsession for Müller for reasons which were both formal and thematic. Müller was convinced that the play's strength stemmed from its awkwardness. Here he consciously followed T.S. Eliot's argument that Shakespeare had failed in his efforts to turn the problematic subject matter into drama. That is, the play is doing far more than its central themes might suggest; it includes so much material that the reader or spectator is overwhelmed by the multifarious avenues it explores. Müller was also inspired by the conservative thinker Carl Schmitt (→ Ch. 13 and 21) and his essay *Hamlet oder Hekuba: Der Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel* (1956). Schmitt's understanding is that *Hamlet* is one of the great works of art because of the amazing incursion that history makes into Shakespeare's writing process. The young intellectual caught between two epochs is mirrored in the English political history of the early 17th century. Consequently, the play, as it is often interpreted in the Marxist or New Historicist traditions, presents a rich confrontation between the modern and the medieval. And as we continue to live in the modern period, one inflected economically by capitalism and socially by individualism, the historical conflict still has much to stimulate the contemporary playwright. Müller drew inspiration from the two sources in different ways. From Eliot he exploited the value of the richness of the text, something that asks many questions but offers no answers of its own; it promotes a productive interaction between itself, its realizers and its audience. From Schmitt Müller took the potential for a dramatic confrontation between text and history. Müller was taken with the dynamic yet complex interaction of art and its socio-political context, and sought to reproduce a materialist meditation on *Hamlet* framed by his own experiences of capitalism, socialism and revolution.

The direct context Müller initially chose for his reworking of *Hamlet* was the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and the working title for the project was ›Hamlet in Budapest‹. These events allowed him to explore fundamental problems in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), of which Müller was a citizen. By the mid-1970s it was clear that hopes for reform, awakened, ironically as it may seem now, by the appointment of Erich Honecker as First Secretary of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, did not materialize. A liberalization in cultural policy, a »Literatur ohne Tabus« (Honecker, quoted in Rüß 1976, 287 f.), as Honecker promised in 1971 was disappointed, and finally laid to rest by the expatriation of critical *Liedermacher* Wolf Biermann in 1976. The context for Müller's writing was thus one in which socialist aspirations were being throttled by the very party entrusted to realize them. This contradictory motif, however, was one that he traced all the way back to the Russian Revolution itself (through allusions to Stalin and Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, 1957). Müller took up the *Hamlet* material as a way of exploring his own position, that of the intellectual in a society which he supported as progressive in theory but under which he suffered in practice (his plays *Die Umsiedlerin* and *Der Bau* had been banned in 1961 and 1965 respectively, and little of his work was performed in the GDR).

A central question he posed was how would an intellectual behave in a revolutionary situation in a socialist country: would he support the uprising and take the side of the people or defend the potentially liberating ideas of socialism and take the side of the government? Müller observed the GDR's own short-lived uprising on 17 June 1953 at first hand, but was not himself a participant. He preferred to use Hungary as a thematic node in *Die Hamletmaschine* because it had actually achieved change before the deployment of Soviet tanks. While these concerns inform the fourth scene, at the end of which history appears to have come to an end, a concrete reflection on the position of »ZWEITER CLOWN IM KOMMUNISTISCHEN FRÜHLING« (Müller 2001, 545) nonetheless appears in the first. This line is in fact a direct quotation from the Hamlet-like engineer Hasselbein in *Der Bau* (and thus the reference is not to the Prague Spring as the line predates it; however, its re-use in 1977 associates the line with 1968 after the fact). Initial drafts and sketches, found in the Heiner-Müller-Archiv (HMA), show that Müller was originally interested in the figures of Hamlet, Ophelia, Claudius, Laertes, Fortinbras and Old Hamlet (HMA, 3888) for his Budapest project. In the end, there are only two named speakers and a chorus.

The Dramaturgy of ›Character‹ in *Die Hamletmaschine*

Die Hamletmaschine is divided into five short scenes (or perhaps acts, as an ironic reference to *Hamlet*): »Familienalbum«, »Das Europa der Frau«, »Scherzo«, »Pest in Buda Schlacht um Grönland«, and »Wildharrend/In der furchtbaren Rüstung/Jahrtausende«. The first scene opens with the line »Ich war Hamlet« (Müller 2001, 545) and no character or speaker is attributed to the text. While commentators have often imputed that ›Hamlet‹ delivers the first scene, there is nothing in the text to support this view. From the start, then, the play is marked by dramaturgical uncertainty: the »war« maintains a connection with the past but is unable to confirm whether that past has ended (as would be the case with ›war gewesen‹) or continues. One of Müller's original plans names the scene ›Die Hamlets (coast)‹ (HMA, 3888) but the refusal to attribute a speaker to the text in the published version opens up a wider range of possibilities. Indeed, Ophelia recited the speech in a radio version of the play, directed by Müller in 1978 for Süddeutscher Rundfunk. While this decision told a certain story, the more radical possibility is that the text might be completely dissociated from the speaker and allowed to exist as text, as we shall see below.

»Familienalbum« is the scene which most closely engages with the *Hamlet* material and offers a distanced tour of many episodes from Shakespeare. It opens with a grotesque memory of the state funeral of old Hamlet but also references the meeting with his ghost, Hamlet's relationships with Horatio, Ophelia and Gertrude, as well as the murder of Polonius in the phrase ›Exit Polonius‹ (cf. Müller 2001, 546). The speaker's use of a stage direction is part of a metatheatrical discourse that runs through the play as a whole, something which continually casts doubt on the authenticity of both the world of *Die Hamletmaschine* and its players.

The radical questioning of precisely who is speaking and what they might be trying to say is extended and varied in the scenes that follow. The second scene is attributed to »Ophelia (Chor/Hamlet)«

(Müller 2001, 547). Thus the absence of a named speaker is replaced by a surfeit in which individuality is once again lacking. The third scene is akin to a dream, while the fourth contains a denial of identity when an attributed »Hamlet«, who speaks the first speech, is replaced by a »Hamletdarsteller«. The final scene, attributed to Ophelia, opens with the line »Hier spricht Elektra« (Müller 2001, 553), a change of role from suicide to conspirator. It should be clear from this summary that the position of the speaking subject in this play is always elusive. This approach has the effect of downplaying an interest in character (which might here be better termed ›figure‹ or ›voice‹) and focusing attention on what is actually said.

The Productivity of Intertext

The speeches themselves have a profoundly uneven texture; they are, in the case of the first, third and fourth, arranged in a series of blocks, and the connections between the blocks are often elliptical. However, in the speeches themselves, one finds material taken from many sources, something that gives the impression of a series of related thoughts, in the style of a stream of consciousness. The stream can get exceptionally wild as associative material is lined up and offered to the spectator as a deliberate collection of fragments.

References from *Hamlet* litter the short text. Aside from the figures themselves, (mis)quotations and allusions are to be found in every corner. »Familienalbum« both refers to key events and particular lines from Shakespeare. Some quotations are dreamlike, in that they remind one of the original but vary its terms. In »Familienalbum«, for example, one finds »WASCH DIR DEN MORD AUS DEM GESICHT MEIN PRINZ / UND MACH DEM NEUEN DÄNMARK SCHÖNE AUGEN« (Müller 2001, 546), which is not that far removed from Gertrude's ›Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off, / And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark‹ (I.2.68 f.). The contrast between the two provokes curiosity; in this case Müller concretizes relations between Gertrude and Hamlet in that ›Mord‹ is explicitly mentioned. Such details multiply in the barrage of modifications Müller makes to Shakespeare (and also with a number of other sources).

Elsewhere, the concrete gives way to the purely associative. The very title of the play includes a reference to Hamlet's letter to Ophelia, which is signed »Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him« (II.2. 123 f.). Here Hamlet's ›machine‹ is a synonym for the body, controlled by the mind in the dualistic Renaissance model of human agency. Later in »Pest in Buda«, the »Hamletdarsteller« says »ich will eine Maschine sein« (Müller 2001, 553), which suggests a link to Andy Warhol's line of 1963, »I'd like to be a machine, wouldn't you?« (quoted in Willett 2011, 54). Both influences on the title contribute to its enigmatic richness. Machines are to be controlled but the question arises, »by whom?«. Shakespeare proposes the individual, Warhol defers to automatism. And just to add to the complexity, there is also an allusion to Müller himself with the letters H and M as the points of connection.

Allusions to Shakespeare do not merely stop at specific textual references. There is an imagined dialogue between the speaker of the »Familienalbum« and the ghost, in which the speaker sympathizes with the dead figure and wishes that he, she or perhaps they had never been born. The associative relationship with *Hamlet* continues through the rest of the text: Ophelia, who has committed suicide, returns from the dead as victim-turned-perpetrator in »Das Europa der Frau«, yet even her shorter, more focused speech starts with a direct quotation from Müller's *Leben Gundlings Friedrich von Preußen Lessings Schlaf Traum Schrei* (1976) in which an actor playing Lessing talks about women's suffering. The speech also alludes to the life of Ulrike Meinhof. The Ophelia figure is thus recast as a corpse that will not die and that actively demands redress from an indifferent world. In the fourth scene, the »Hamletdarsteller« sees himself on both sides of the barricades during the uprising, a scene which echoes back to Laertes in *Hamlet* IV.5. It is clear that *Hamlet* sets up several central themes of the play: the role of violence in the political arena, the intellectual confronted with action, the tension between thought and deed. Yet *Hamlet* was written at the dawn of a new age, and Müller wanted to incorporate its features in a way that did not merely ›update‹ the play but recontextualized it from a contemporary perspective.

Hamlet forms the prerequisite for the play, but there are far more instances of intertextuality in the text: there are references to both *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, both models of usurpers, and the latter is associated with Raskolnikov from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) to elide two histori-

cally divergent characters who kill to achieve their ends. Material is taken from or allusions made to, amongst others, Marx, Eliot, Brecht, Hölderlin, Conrad, Artaud, Sartre, and, as already noted, Müller himself. The material is sometimes reproduced intact, but more often is modified to generate contrast between what one might expect and that with which one is confronted. Orthographically, some of the intertexts are presented exclusively in capitals, delineating them from the rest of the text, but here, too, the reader or the actor has to be wary: some of the capitalized sections have no source but merely sound like a foreign body within the flow of the text. The line »SOLL ICH / WEILS BRAUCH IST EIN STÜCK EISEN STECKEN IN / DAS NÄCHSTE FLEISCH ODER INS ÜBERNÄCHSTE« (cf. Müller 2001, 546) has never been traced back to a source but looks and sounds different from the previous lines. The insertion of pseudo-quotation adds further richness to the texture and short-circuits even the most well-read of scholars from identifying the reference. The text bristles with impulses that play with and play off each other as a way of placing each line in a maelstrom of material from the history of the West, politics, art, and theatre. The use of intertext produces irregularity and disparity; readers, directors and actors are invited to position themselves afresh after virtually every line of the play.

The Dialectics of Uncertainty

Müller noted (in English) in another draft: »end of literature (begin of game)« (HMA, 3899). ›Literature‹ here may be interpreted as an artefact which is readable and digestible, whereas *Die Hamletmaschine* presents a patchwork of impulses that generate conflict between a range of different interpretations. ›Game‹, while sounding like a trivial recreational activity, is anything but. Müller's game is the struggle to interpret on the part of the spectator; the ›rules‹ are provided by the play's form: the spectator is charged with resolving the myriad conflicts generated by the battling points of reference. And the stakes could not be higher: the play is concerned with human failure in the light of revolutionary promise. The play offers two models, which Müller glosses as: »Formel Hamlet: was man denken kann/ braucht man nicht zu tun/Oph: was man denken kann/kann man auch machen tun« (HMA, 3901). The problem is that Ophelia is not Hamlet's binary opposite, the doer rather than the thinker. Her deeds are covered in blood and her final line is a translated quotation from Susan Atkins, a member of the Manson family (cf. Müller 2005, 231). She is hardly a positive alternative. Müller's dialectics are left radically open; the synthesis of the contradiction is not even hinted at.

The unstable voices of the play and the patchwork of textual elements correspond to what Müller called a »Baukastenprinzip« (HMA, 3888) of dramaturgical organization. It should be clear that none of the material is arbitrary; it comes together as an angular whole, struggling with itself to generate meaning while short-circuiting any suggestion that the text is doing this itself. An absence of final meaning is the result of an irreconcilable series of tensions which keep each other in check. The tensions, however, are all concrete, all materialist: they contrast a spectrum of human responses with allusions to real historical moments. The play is specifically European: one of the first lines of »Familienalbum« is »im Rücken die Ruinen von Europa« and the second scene, as we know, is called »Das Europa der Frau« (Müller 2001, 545 and 547). Fragments of history combine to create a materialist complex of ideas and allusions which form a contradictory, antagonistic whole.

As such, the play exhibits a post-Brechtian dramaturgy in that Müller persists with both dialectics and materialism but dispenses with what he called »the ideological gaze« because »jeder ideologische Blick [...] ist ein falscher Blick und verhindert das Sehen von dem, was da wirklich ist« (Müller/Weigel 1993, 26). Müller's critique of Brecht was that Brecht reduced the richness of his material to the rigidity of the *Fabel*, the Marxist meta-narrative, which, to Müller, no longer accounted for the contradictions of history. Müller thus proposed retaining the dialectic (in the tensions generated by the different textual elements) and materialism (none of the material was idealist, fantastical or absurd) but dispensing with any kind of interpretive key. *Die Hamletmaschine* is a play in which dialectical contradictions exist alongside each other, seeking synthesis but never attaining it.

Resisting Interpretation in the Theatre

The almost perennial appeal of Shakespeare is that his plays are remarkably open. Is one to blame Hamlet for his vacillation or applaud him? Is the act of

revenge honourable or despicable? *Hamlet* gives no indication of what the correct answer might be and in doing so suggests that there may not be a correct answer. The problem, identified by Müller above, of writing political theatre, was that a particular ideological slant can collapse the material and make it readable in such a way that pat answers may, after all, be generated. Yet away from the means through which texts can prevent a spectator from creating meaning, the theatre itself can play this role, too. Brecht had written in 1931 that »[Theater] ›theatert‹ alles ›ein‹« (Brecht 1991, 58). This critical insight signals a wariness with respect to the processes and ends of theatrical production in the commercial theatre sector. It suggests that theatre as institution has the tendency to turn challenging text into marketable performance, thus nullifying any possible effect it might have in activating the audience. What Brecht was suggesting was that plays need in some way to protect themselves from the institution of the theatre if they are to retain their productivity. His own work at the Berliner Ensemble, with its sometimes lengthy rehearsal periods and its attempts to undermine hierarchical structures among producers of theatre, sought to evade the strictures of commercial theatre, although the plays themselves have often become products on the non-subsidized stages of the rest of the world. That is, Brecht's plays were often unable to guarantee their own freshness, and this is a predicament which Müller confronted in a different way from Brecht.

If a theatre has difficulty in staging a play, it may arrive at different solutions to textual problems and thus offer a production that surprises an audience to the point that they are forced to see that play with fresh eyes. As we have already seen, *Die Hamletmaschine* does not even attribute a speaker to its opening scene, and thus a theatre must decide what it is to do with such an open but insoluble challenge. The intense problematization of the very category of character, described above, asks a series of questions which will reverberate through the production as a whole, yet Müller creates other practical problems for directors as well.

The third scene, the »Scherzo«, is almost entirely made up of stage directions. They show Hamlet in an »*Universität der Toten*« in which dead philosophers throw books at him as he contemplates dead women as if in a museum. More dreamlike imagery follows: an angel with its face on backwards who is also Horatio, and the Madonna with breast cancer which »*strahlt wie eine Sonne*« (Müller 2001, 548f.). It is clear that the stage directions cannot be performed literally which further asks directors how the scene is to be staged. Some impossible stage directions, such as those of Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1901), which features a castle that grows like a plant, for example, can be approached by a good scenographer. Müller's, however, resist such a strategy and confront the theatre with its own inability to stage a dream live on stage. While digital media may now be able to offer such illustrative solutions, the question nonetheless arises of what a digitally enhanced presentation of the scene might achieve.

The play in itself lacks internal coherence, even if its structure parodies the five-act play and offers a certain symmetry. Its texture is uneven and so Müller's ›game‹ is not necessarily one in which a solution is the desired outcome. This point can be illustrated with reference to two much-debated stage directions, when Müller asks in the fourth scene for the production of »Photographie des Autors« and, shortly after, »Zerreißung der Photographie des Autors« (Müller 2001, 552). Critics have taken narrow interpretations of the directions and broader ones, such as Doris Perl who writes: »die Bemühungen des Autors, seine eigenen Privilegien zu eliminieren, finden wiederum aus einer privilegierten Situation heraus statt« (Perl 1992, 162). The image is a paradox. The point here is that the stage direction requires no interpretation on stage for its multivalent associations to function. If one then proceeds to the texts themselves, a similar staging strategy can be discerned. The material is so diverse that the category of representation becomes reductive and redundant. The play lives from its openness and its ability to connect its many impulses to the many experiences of the audience. In this way, Müller attempts to ape the freedom of the Shakespearean text but approaches it from a radically different perspective. Whereas *Hamlet* has been interpreted in the theatre in ways which have sought to limit potential meanings, *Die Hamletmaschine* has been designed to make the very activity of interpretation in the theatre intensely problematic; the aim is rather to maintain its openness.

Postdramatic or Post-Brechtian?

Hans-Thies Lehmann's paradigm of the postdramatic has been an important way of locating much

work for the theatre of the past few decades. Müller is one of Lehmann's prime examples of a playwright who exemplifies his postulate that theatre should reflect the position that »simultanes und multiperspektives Wahrnehmen ersetzen das linear sukzessive« (Lehmann 1999, 11). The postdramatic resists representation, much as Müller's textual material does. In such a reading, other critics have sought to establish *Die Hamletmaschine* as an insoluble enigma which offers itself to the spectator as postdramatic. Take, for example, Douglas Nash's position that »sublime images [...] only serve to accentuate the incapacity of the human mind to fathom and give representation to a world made incomprehensible by the immensity of multinational capitalism in its current ›late‹ form« (Nash 1989, 300). This reading anticipates Lehmann in that it views the text as pure surface; a bafflement of impressions which can never be resolved and which offers a picture of political helplessness.

It is clear that Müller offers no resolution to his play. The final lines of the fourth scene allude to the killings at the end of Shakespeare's play when the ›Hamletdarsteller‹ is directed to enter old Hamlet's armour and split the heads of Marx, Lenin and Mao, who are played by naked women. Brechtian metaphors of coldness follow: »*Schnee. Eiszeit*« (Müller 2001, 553). The alternative is the Ophelia of the fifth scene who is bandaged up from top to bottom by two men in doctor's coats during her final monologue. Her text itself is extensively intertextual and violent, and so her solution to the »Eiszeit« is at least called into question. What Müller does offer, however, is a form which does not simply present a world that is hide-bound to nowhere, as Nash suggests. Instead he widens Brecht's dialectical lens and writes a play alive with dialectical tensions, but tensions which engage the full ambit of the dialectic. In this sense the fourth and fifth scenes, which appear negative and insoluble, can be read as historicized pessimism. That is, this is indeed a play which offers no hope, but such hopelessness is not in some way timeless but anchored into a set of historical reference points which pepper the text. Ophelia's desperate response to a world in which she is systematically abused is terrorism, whereas it might have been a plea for female suffrage sixty years before the play was written.

Müller's form is presentational, as discussed above: the status of the text as material suggests that it should not be interpreted but passed on to the audience for its own responses. That does not mean, however, that the material is inaccessible to interpretation. On the contrary, Müller seeks to stimulate relationships with the material in his audience but he, as we have seen, is dealing with questions for which simple solutions are not available. So, it is possible to talk of a post-Brechtian aesthetic at work here. That is, the dramaturgy is still dialectical and it is still materialist, and this is the salient difference that delimits it from the postdramatic. While both types of theatre offer material to the audience, the post-Brechtian retains a link between that material and a dialectical understanding of the world, and dialectics do not permit stasis. The offer rather than the interpretation of material is what differentiates the post-Brechtian from the Brechtian; the dialectic is complicated and complex, and cannot be read simply; Müller primes his material to avoid the »ideologischen Blick«. There is still a relationship between human beings and their environment; the problem is that this relationship may transcend the exegeses of the logical mind alone and so the material is passed on to the audience both to consider and to experience.

Die Hamletmaschine on Stage

The production history of *Die Hamletmaschine* is a curious one. The first attempt at staging the play ended in failure. A major reason for the cancellation of the world premiere in Cologne, 1978, can be found in the rationalist stance of the actor playing the Hamlet figure who considered the play »ein normales, ein verstehbares, erklärbares interpretierbares Stück« (Gerhard Winter, quoted in Girshausen 1978, 56). Further hesitant attempts to produce the play followed until it became a surprisingly often performed favourite in experimental theatres around the globe. That is, the play initially presented such an innovative yet opaque dramaturgy that theatres had difficulties in negotiating its tenets, but once approaches were developed, the play's appeal spread.

While it would be a mistake to describe Robert Wilson's well known production of the play in 1985 as ›definitive‹ (because such an adjective suggests that there is one ›proper‹ way of staging the text), it is worth considering his ideas as exemplary before I turn to some of the other notable productions. In short: Wilson presented text and gesture as autonomous sign systems. That is, there was one ›master sequence‹ of gestures which was performed and then

repeated three further times, and each iteration saw the actors' positions on stage rotated through ninety degrees so that the audience could see the movements from a different perspective each time. The texts of scene one, two, four and five were delivered in time with the gestural sequence in a neutral but precise fashion, so that the sequence would extend or contract to accommodate the different lengths of the speeches. The rotation and the repetition gave the production a machinelike quality while the human voices offered the fragments to the audience. The third scene, which is almost exclusively formed of stage directions, was projected onto a screen. The scene was fairly static and the text of the scene scrolled from right to left. Small changes occurred with the projected actors at particular points of the text but what is important to note is that the stage directions were not performed but used as associative material for the film. Indeed the only stage direction to be performed was the one discussed above which concerned the photograph of the author.

What Wilson's production demonstrates is how directorial imagination can offer an engaging presentation of the material without attempting to interpret it. Müller himself directed the play within a production of *Hamlet* in 1990, shortly after the Berlin Wall had been opened (→ Kap. 33). He attempted to make his *Hamletmaschine* abstract as well but, within the production as a whole, it was generally thought to have been superfluous because he had already applied non-representational techniques to the frame play. A more successful staging followed in the provincial town of Schwerin in 1993. Here director Sabine Andreas used the text to reflect on the demise of the GDR, again, however, without interpreting the speeches but by placing certain emphases on the aspects of the text which connected to the majority of her audience's own biographies. Indeed, reviewer Horst Köpke noted: »ein rätselhaftes Stück, doch nicht so abseits der Realität, wie wir im Westen gemeint haben« (Köpke). That the play allowed certain aspects to be highlighted did not signal a return to representation: the actors on stage did not attempt to ›play‹ characters but rather tailored the material to suit the audience.

Die Hamletmaschine, like *Hamlet*, is not a play that gives away interpretive hints. Unlike its predecessor, Müller's play also resists attempts to reduce its suggestive richness to specific meanings in performance. It is never clear how many actors will deliver the speeches – the whole ensemble in Wilson's production or single speakers in others – or how the stage directions will be handled. The text calls the most fundamental aspects of dramaturgy (character, plot and language) into question and by doing this seeks to open the minds of directors and actors alike to the possibilities of staging the play.

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