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Re-Working Shakespeare: Heiner Müller's *Macbeth*

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Abstract

This article focuses on particular meanings of the term “work,” as related first to the process of adapting Shakespeare and secondly to the ideological and philosophical resonances of this term as employed in the socialist propaganda in East Germany and which Heiner Müller introduces into Shakespeare's text and gives an ironical twist to. In the first part it points to a few aspects of East German doctrinaire readings of Shakespeare, which were further contested and deconstructed in Müller's translation cum adaptation. The final part zooms in on the reconfiguring of the established meanings attached to the concept of work in Müller's rewriting of *Macbeth* and on the relation between these meanings and the philosophy of history he proposes in his adaptation.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Heiner Müller, *Macbeth*, rewriting, Jan Kott, violence, socialist realism, GDR

I.

On April 22, 1964, on the occasion of the celebration of the quartercentennial of Shakespeare's birth in Weimar, Alexander Abusch, a high ranking official in the former GDR, gave a talk fulminating against the “reactionary positions” that “falsified Shakespeare” (Abusch 38). Abusch's references to the decadent, “nihilistic readings of Shakespeare” that equate “the great, humanist Shakespeare with the absurd à la Beckett” (36) were directed against any temptation on behalf of local critics or playwrights to depart from the sanctioned socialist-realist approach to Shakespeare. Alexander Abusch was at the time the cultural minister of the GDR and deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers. Next to him at

the Shakespeare festivity sat Walter Ulbricht, secretary of SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands – the Socialist Unity Party of Germany), whose hard-line policy was responsible for the delay in the de-stalinization process in East Germany until the early seventies. The presence of the two weighty officials was indicative of the political importance attached to Shakespeare. Shakespeare mattered very much to the preservation of the oppressive cultural and political system, at a time when this system was being questioned and relaxed in the other socialist countries. The leadership of the GDR maintained a siege mentality and the theatre, the cultural heritage and Shakespeare were some of its heavy weapons. The blunt intervention of the political in the aesthetic as witnessed at the Shakespeare festivities was designed to reinforce the established doctrinaire approach to Shakespeare against the increasing influence of novel, revisionary literary approaches that had emerged in the other socialist countries.¹ The guardians of socialist realism had to defend their Shakespeare particularly from the harmful influence of Jan Kott's hugely successful book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, which though not mentioned in Weimar was obliquely brandished in all the official speeches.

In Abusch's words, the correct approach to Shakespeare should highlight his humanism, his popular character and realism (the latter understood as a foreshadowing of socialist realism). Most of all, it should underscore the "progressive" working of history as represented in his plays. Readings of Shakespeare, whether in criticism or on the stage, should show how "in den Werken Shakespeares schreitet die Geschichte mit dem ehrenen Gang der Notwendigkeit, ihrem Gesetz folgend, aus der feudalabsolutistischen Vergangenheit durch Zeiten des Überganges, der Garung, des Umbruchs zu einer höheren Stufe der Entwicklung" (in Shakespeare's work history advances with the iron gait of necessity, observing its rules, from the feudal absolutist past, through periods of transition, of ferment, of discontinuity, to higher stages of development). This teleological progressive movement of history was precisely what Jan Kott's views contested. He displaced it with an understanding of history as circular action produced by the grand mechanism of power. The "humanist" character that socialist criticism promoted programmatically,

was, in Kott's view, a "myth," which was the euphemism for a lie. What was at the core of the historical plays and of the tragedies was the violence of various power games. Kott's reading of Shakespeare was transgressive on account of his "presentist" critical positions, which deployed a political perspective that questioned the system, norms and ideological prerequisites of Stalinist socialism.²

II.

Shakespeare criticism in the GDR by and large towed the line, with the notable exception of Robert Weinman's work, which, while not actually subverting the dominant political positions, found ways of circumventing them. The theatre did make more audacious attempts and fell back on Brecht's innovative theatrical thinking. A case in point was Alfred Dresen's 1964 *Hamlet*, using Maik Hamburger's re-translation of the play in Brecht's more abrasive and concrete idiom. Its stylistic and theatrical innovations were sensed as departures from the norms of socialist realist Shakespeare; consequently, the play ran only a short period and was soon suppressed.

Heiner Müller's transgressive adaptation of *Macbeth* in 1972 signals the first significant break with the official approach to Shakespeare. It was published shortly after the 1971 change of regime from Ulbricht to Honnecker, which inaugurated a short lived detente in the GDR. The critical reading of the oppressive dominant ideology of the Stalinist period that the adaptation injected into Shakespeare's play produced a large scale scandal at that time, yet Müller's work was not altogether banned. Nor did he suffer the same consequences as in 1961 at the publication of his comedy *Die Umsiedlerin oder das Leben auf dem Lande*, when he was expelled from the Writers' Union and had to turn to translations to make a living.

Mention must be made that Müller's engagement with translation work (the *Macbeth* adaptation was initially programmed as a translation) offered him an escape route: as had been the case with a large number of censored writers in the socialist countries, freely translating canonical texts was the only option. At the same time Müller did not properly stop

being a political writer when he was translating or adapting Shakespeare. He employed Brecht's approach of re-writing, that is, of politically appropriating and recasting Shakespeare. Müller's using Brecht against Shakespeare enabled him to question the rigid readings of Shakespeare that had been imposed by the socialist realist (Soviet) discourse. Like Brecht in his *Coriolanus*, Müller replaced the elevated diction of Tieck's canonical translation with a "flat and mundane idiom" (Guntner 193) or rather with "a deflation of East German idiom" (Kalb 81), and used an abrupt, almost harsh-sounding German. Most importantly, like Brecht, he undertook the task of "*Umfunktionierung*," of trans-valorizing Shakespeare's text by introducing micro-textual changes and interpolations (*Hinzufügungen*). The latter could range from only a few lines to full scenes, seamlessly inserted into the source text.

Müller's interpolations re-contextualize the Shakespearean text and subvert it from within. To give an example: Müller changes the stage directions for Duncan's speech on the pleasant surroundings of Macbeth's castle (1.6.1-3) and introduces a peasant in the stocks, who is being punished for failure to pay taxes. The visual image of the tortured peasant radically re-contextualizes and thereby recodes Duncan's speech, while the whole scene is recast in a cruelly ironic tone. Müller's game was double edged: he seemed to be towing the official line, there was little that his censors could have objected to in the insertion of peasants. This chimed in with the orthodox socialist reading of Shakespeare which emphasized the low class, popular, "plebeian" factor. The critic Robert Weinman had published a highly successful and at the same time innovative book on the plebeian elements in Shakespeare's theatre. Equally ideologically "correct" was the shifting of the focus away from the aristocracy onto the peasants. At face value, the adaptation seems to "politically correct" Shakespeare with the establishment of a more inclusive social perspective.³

At the same time, however, the presence of the tortured peasants subverted the socialist canonical reading of the play: in the GDR Duncan was seen as the embodiment of humanistic virtues and values. This reading would be bluntly contested if he was shown delivering the speech on the wholesome air of the area, while ignoring the tortured peasant in

the background. The juxtaposition on the stage of two opposed actions, reinforced the transgressive meanings conveyed by a previous stage image of Duncan, sitting on a throne propped up on a pile of bodies. The figure of the ideal ruler as promoted by the official discourse was thus subverted by means of visual images introduced via stage directions.

The ubiquitous presence of the oppressed peasants, who are shown to be the true victims of the political conflict, also conveys ambivalent meanings. The peasants' presence introduces a Brechtian perspective from below (*von unten*) into Shakespeare's play. At the same it is un-Brechtian because it deconstructs the political meanings of the very demotic move it introduces. Brecht's own strategy of rewriting Shakespeare is subverted in Müller's play,⁴ since the peasants do not offer a political or a moral counter power like the "people" did in Brecht's adaptation of *Coriolanus*. Müller's peasants are just as ruthless and cruel as their masters. They are clearly a far cry from the idealized "positive" images of peasants required by the socialist-realist norms. Anselm Schlösser, an East German hard-line critic who provided the most serious attack on the play, complained about the absence of any glimmer of humanity in the oppressed (Schlösser 46-47). What is further aggravating in Müller's rewriting is that by introducing the peasants and having them interact with characters that were officially deemed "positive" and "progressive," the latter are projected in a negative light and appear to act like callous villains: Duncan ignores the groaning peasants, Malcolm gives orders to have them drowned in the marshes, Macduff cuts off the tongue of a peasant who voices a political opinion. As a consequence, there are no "positive characters left." This was unacceptable from a socialist political perspective, which organized the reading of Shakespeare's plays around the moral opposition between positive and negative characters, between the representatives of "legitimate" power and the rebels, lusting for power. No inspiring educational message could be derived from Müller's adaptation of Shakespeare. Back in 1964, at the time of Ulbricht and Absuch, such a reading of the play would have been tantamount to corrupting the national heritage.

Müller rejects the dominant orthodoxy along with Brecht's Marxist, dialectical thinking and draws dangerously close to Kott's views on

Shakespeare and history. Though Müller never mentioned Kott, the latter's reading of the play did provide a powerful subtext to his adaptation and contributed to the overall critique of the doctrinaire socialist readings of the play as part of the "heritage" of socialist culture.

According to Kott, "There is only one theme in *Macbeth*: murder. History has been reduced to its simplest form, to one image and one division: those who kill and those who are killed.... *Macbeth* begins and ends with slaughter" (Kott 69-70). This comment can be said to sum up the gist of Müller's reworking as well.⁵ Violence is the hallmark of Müller's adaptation. The world it projects is the nightmarish world of Stalinist power, which after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia seemed to have been reintroduced in some of the East-European countries.

III.

Particularly interesting in the context described above is Müller's reading of *violence as work* and the trans-valorizations of concepts that derive from there. I would like to argue that Müller plays with the Hegelian thesis on the relationship between lord and bondsman, thereby inverting the traditional significance that Marxist Leninist discourse attached to the role of work in the attainment of autonomy and self-consciousness.

A major point of reference in Müller's rewriting is the propaganda model of the new type of work in the socialist state. This propaganda campaign took place against the background of the violence and terrible abuses of the citizens' work as the state attempted to fully own and control all economic activities. Müller's reference to the oppressed and tortured peasants could not fail to remind his audience of the fate of the Soviet kulaks (as well as other East-European peasants) who were viciously punished for their resistance to collectivization. Furthermore, the centralized organization of economic activity in five- or seven-year plans turned work into a form of political oppression. In the GDR, the pressures of the first Five-Year Plan (1951-55) caused an exodus of East German citizens to West Germany, while the increase in work quotas led to the workers' protest in the 1953 uprising. This situation is echoed in one of the significant changes Müller introduces in Shakespeare's text, namely

the transformation of Macdownald's rebellion into a rebellion of the population.

Most shocking is the equivalence between work and violence, "bloody work" (*blutige Arbeit*) that Müller's adaptation develops. Slitting Duncan's throat, commissioning Banquo's and Fleance's murders or nailing a porter to the door and slicing off his tongue are instances of this "work." Lawrence Guntner reads the equation of killing and torture with "work" as "a sinister satire of the trivialization of the Marxist notion of work in official GDR jargon" (186). Müller, I would argue, not only makes reference to the earlier periods of the history of socialism in Europe and the GDR, but sets out to look for the sources of the association of work with violence in the philosophical discourses appropriated by socialist propaganda. It is my contention that he proposes an iconoclastic re-writing of the definition of work in socialist ideology, which employed Hegel's thesis on bondage and freedom.

As an echo to Hegel's terminology ("*Knecht*" and "*Herr*")⁶, Müller introduces the word "*Knecht*" (meaning bondsman or even slave) to define the relation between Duncan and Macbeth. For example, Müller introduces the word "*Knecht*" and displaces the word "*Diener*" (servant), when translating Macbeth's expression of loyalty and duty to Duncan in 1.3.23-26: "The service and the loyalty I owe / ...and our duties / Are to your throne and state, children and servants." The "servants" in Shakespeare's text become "*Knechte*" in Müller's version, though he strays away from the meaning the word "servants" has in this particular context. The word "*Knecht*" keeps recurring and is alternated with the term "*Fleischer*" (the literal translation of butcher) in Macbeth's references to himself. Furthermore, the verbs "*schlachten*" (to slaughter) and "*schinden*" (to maul) are obsessively used to define Macbeth's actions in the service of the king. Müller's text bluntly calls "slaughter" the "legitimate" violence employed in support of the state.

Müller's stage directions convey the idea that the state is founded and consolidated upon violence. He replaces Shakespeare's stage directions to 1.4, "Flourish. Enter King, Lennox, Malcolm, Donalbain, and Attendants," with an image of Duncan sitting on a throne made of a pile of corpses. The temptation of the witches is further rewritten so as to

involve Macbeth's new awareness of the importance of his "bloody work" (*blutige Arbeit*) in consolidating Duncan's power⁷ ("Ich hab seinen Thron ihm / Befestigt und erhöht mit Leichenhaufen" – I have consolidated his throne, erecting it on a pile of bodies). The relation between "*Knecht*" / bondsman and "*Fleischer*" / butcher is made explicit in the interpolation that precedes the soliloquy "if it were done when 'tis done, than 'twere well / It were done quickly..." (1.7.1-2).

"ich war sein Fleischer. Warum nicht sein Aas / Auf meinen Hacken. Ich hab sein Thron ihm / Befestigt und erhöht mit Leichenhaufen. / Wenn ich zurücknähme meine *blutige Arbeit* / Sein Platz wäre lange schon im Fundament." (Müller 193, my emphasis)

I have been his butcher. Why not have his corpse hanging on my peg. I have consolidated and raised his throne with a pile of corpses. Were I to withdraw my bloody work, he would long have been in the basement.⁸

The work as the king's butcher seems to justify Macbeth in turning against the king. Müller thus radically re-writes the psychological motivation for Macbeth's murderous desires, which the latter admits to be propelled merely by ambition: "I have no spur / to prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself / And falls on th'other" (1.7.25-28).

Both Duncan and Macbeth, lord and bondsman, regard the "bloody work" of slaughtering the enemies of the established power as legitimate violence. As long as Macbeth acts as Duncan's instrument, or to quote Müller, as Duncan's sword, his hands appear to him to be white even though he wades in blood (199). He does not feel guilty since he does not take responsibility for the murders he commits, but neither does he act as an autonomous subject – as an agent or a "being for itself," in Hegel's terms. Macbeth's temptation is rewritten in Müller's version as the kindling of the bondsman's desire to overcome his condition and become his own master. Lady Macbeth spurns him with these very words: "Ist es so schwer, dein eigener Herr sein" (Is it so difficult to be your own master?) (200).

The socialist appropriation of the Hegelian/Marxist dialectics defines work as the pathway to the attainment of self-determination and

independent agency. Müller gives this reading a further twist, showing that in the political power games self-determination can only be achieved by *bloody work*, that is, by means of violence. Macbeth can become an autonomous agent, thus overcoming his condition as a dependent and instrumentalized bondsman, “*Knecht*,” only if he stops being Duncan’s sword and becomes his own sword. Lady Macbeth puts it in plain words when she sums up the meaning of killing Duncan: “Zum erstenmal dein eignes Schwert warst du. / Nimm unter deinen Stiefel dieses Schottland / Und Schwarz ist Weiß” (You were [then] your own sword for the first time. Put this Scotland under your boot / And black is white) (198).

The sword in Müller’s text is a synecdoche both of the “bloody labour” and of the Hegelian emancipating labour that enables the bondsman to become independent, to exist in his own right and on his own account (“an und für sich”). However, contrary to Hegel’s view, this type of agency is utterly destructive. Since it is achieved not via the creative labour of fashioning things, but by recourse to naked power and violence, it involves the “unmaking” rather than “the making of the world.”⁹

One of the perverse results of this “bloody work” is moral relativity and anomie. Lady Macbeth assures her husband that once he has asserted his power over Scotland (once he has Scotland under his boot), “black is white.” The inversion “black is white” echoes the witches’ famous phrase “fair is foul” in Shakespeare’s text. At the same time, it makes an oblique reference to the way violent actions were made public in the demagogical discourse of the Stalinist terror.

Müller’s notion of work as violence is related with his denial of the official definition of history, which as Abusch described it, was conceived in terms of development and growth.¹⁰ Müller’s vision of history as a non-dialectical repetition comes close to Kott’s view. Both writers highlight the recurrence of violence and terror.¹¹ In blatant contrast to the official socialist discourse, history becomes “a continuous chain of violence,” “no more than a gigantic slaughter” (Kott 37).

Given the transgressive quality of Müller’s reworking of the established canon, it is no wonder that the adaptation received devastating reviews in *Theater heute*, the major theatre journal of the GDR.¹² Müller

was accused of “*Geschichtspessimismus*” (historical pessimism), which was another word for the revisionist attitudes that were circulating in Eastern Europe at that time. He was further charged with excess of violence on the stage, with having abandoned the basic tenets of socialist humanism and having betrayed Shakespeare’s “humanity.”¹³ The issue of Müller’s play as a “genuine adaptation” was raised again in a roundtable discussion organized in 1973 and published later in *Shakespeare Jahrbuch (Ost)* 1974. Kuckhoff, one of the most important doctrinaire Shakespeare critics of the time, questioned Müller’s “*Umfunktionierung*” of Shakespeare. Kuckhoff emphasized the static worldview in Müller’s adaptation, which differed widely from Shakespeare’s “*geschiteoptimistisches*” (historically optimist) tragedy. There is no progressive movement, as in Müller’s text conflicts and cruelty are not superseded in a dialectical move. The humanistic substance of Shakespeare’s source play is thereby affected and the public’s identification with Shakespeare’s humanism is hampered. Robert Weinman was alone in defending Müller, but he, too, expressed concerns (*Beunruhigung*) about the transgressions “against the position of socialist humanism in relation to classical heritage” (Schlosser 18-20). The play was not performed on East German stages until 1982.

The 1974 production in West Germany did not meet with greater success. The director Hans Gunther Heyme hoped to make the play resonate with trade unionists in the Ruhrgebiet and insisted on Müller’s projection of Duncan as a totalitarian ruler responsible for the instrumentalization of work (Hortman 243-4). The representation was shown before participants in an industrial action. Unfortunately, they failed to get the political message or to identify their own concerns in Müller’s adaptation. The subversive meanings inserted into the Shakespearean text did not cross the border over to West Germany. They could be best enjoyed by a socialist audience, adept at decoding the dissident “double speak.” This would confirm Müller’s view that “Shakespeare is unthinkable in a democracy” (qtd. in Guntner, “Rewriting Shakespeare” 191).

Notes:

¹ One year later, in 1965, at the Plenum of the Central committee of the party (ZK der SED) an even stronger position was advanced against departures from the norms of socialist realism. Such departures (mostly smacking of foreign influence) were labelled “modernist, sceptical, anarchistic, nihilistic, liberal and pornographic trends in art and literature” (Walenski 22).

² For a reading of the politically subversive understanding of Shakespeare and the orthodox philosophy in high Stalinism see Nicolaescu, 130-153.

³ See Gomes 68.

⁴ Müller saw Shakespeare as an antidote (a *Gegengift*) to Brecht. See the discussion of this issue in Gomes 66-67.

⁵ As Kott has fallen into a critical disgrace, readings of Müller tend to avoid mentioning Kott’s influence as critics fear it might detract from the prestige Müller has acquired. Discussing the influence of Walter Benjamin on Müller seems nowadays a much more productive and critically acceptable stand than that of coupling Müller with Kott, or, in the case of rewritings of *Macbeth*, with Ionesco. However, there is no denying the transnational circulation of influences and motifs established in the early seventies between Kott’s critical reading, Roman Polansky’s film adaptation of *Macbeth*, and Müller’s and Ionesco’s rewritings of the play. Just as obvious is the political impact of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which these adaptations respond to and comment on.

⁶ In Hegel’s famous explanation of the dialectics between Herr and Knecht, the former stands for an independent consciousness and the latter for a dependent one, whose essential nature is simply to live and be “for an other.” The two (Herr and Knecht) are locked in struggle. The lord/Herr asserts his force (Macht) over the bondsman/Knecht, and achieves recognition through the latter, who is posed as inessential (unwesentlich). The bondsman is given the chance to recognition, to “being for itself” (*sich als für sich sein*) via creative work. Thereby servitude does not simply turn into its opposite, continuing the struggle between the two opposite forces/types of consciousness. In fashioning things, the bondsman becomes aware that *being-for-itself* (independent status and consciousness) belongs to him and that he himself exists essentially and actually in his own right. By rewriting work as “bloody work,” rather than creative work, Müller evacuates the dialectical possibility posited by Hegel’s notion of formative work as well as his notion of dialectical progress. See Hegel 92-93, 189-196.

⁷ Compare Ionesco’s similar treatment of the temptation in his adaptation *Macbett*, which was first published in 1971. There the witches unambiguously launch an awareness raising action, opening Macbett’s eyes to the reality of power. Müller might have read the play or seen a production of it while working on his own adaptation.

⁸ This is my translation, to be compared with the published one: “I was his butcher. Why not his carrion / Upon my hook. I have his throne / Raised and supported with heaps of corpses. / If I took back my bloody work / His place would have long been in the basement” (qtd. in Hortman 239).

⁹ Cf. Elaine Scarry's book, *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1985).

¹⁰ According to Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, history just like "nature," "is in a state of continuous movement and change, of continuous renewal and development... the process of development should not be understood as a movement in a circle, not as a simple repetition of what has already occurred but as an onward and upward movement, as a transition from an old qualitative state to a new qualitative state."

¹¹ Miguel Gomes has argued that Müller's vision of history is indebted to Walter Benjamin's essay "Theses of History" rather than to Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Müller understands history as a succession of catastrophes, which according to Gomes, would differ from Kott's circular notion of history. However, Miguel himself admits that the distinction may be rather a case of scholastic hairsplitting (Gomes 71-81).

¹² Particularly devastating were Anselm Schlosser's review "Die Welt hat keinen Ausgang als zum Schinder: ein Diskussionsbeitrag zu Heiner Müller's Macbeth" in *Theater der Zeit* 8 (1972): 46-47, and Wolfgang Harich's thirty page essay "Der entlaufene Dingo, das vergessene Floss: Aus Anlass der *Macbeth*-Bearbeitung von Heiner Müller," *Sinn und Form* 1 (1972): 189-218.

¹³ The East German tradition of Shakespeare emphasized Shakespeare's humanistic "*Menschenbild*," the continuity between Renaissance and socialist ideals – according to Abusch, Shakespeare's positive view of humanity anticipated a socialist culture. Hence he was to be appropriated as an element of "positive national heritage." See Guntner, "Introduction" 35, and Abusch.

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