

Assaulting the Canon: *Hamletmachine*

Heiner Mueller's *Hamletmachine*, written in 1977, challenges everyone involved on many levels. In the first place, the play re-enacts one of the most canonical works in Western literature, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. But how should the re-enactment take place? Should the characters appear in period costumes? Should there be a setting for them to inhabit? What about the machine element of the play? Beginning with the title and through to the end of the work, the play provokes many questions. I will argue that Mueller's play constitutes an assault on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and all that it represents. The very desire to preserve *Hamlet*, the wish for any state to imagine itself in canonical terms, even the desires of the actors, writers, directors or audiences to participate in the staging of canonical works, all must be rethought in light of *Hamletmachine*. Yet, as the ending shows, the most revolutionary acts remain frozen or buried underwater.

The first character who appears is Hamlet, but in a profoundly deranged way. He doesn't do anything, he just tells of his actions. The tension between acting and speaking throughout the play is extreme. In Hamlet's opening monologue, the language itself is a patchwork of citations from various sources, some of which include nonsense sounds like "Blahblah." This is no real Hamlet, but one composed of borrowed fragments from other works and events, authentically synthetic. As he tells it, Hamlet is attending his father's funeral. But along the way he commits horrible acts of violence.

Some may show these

actions, others just allude to them. In any case it is clear that Hamlet the character is angrily, fiercely attacking himself, his kingdom, his family and his role. The rottenness from Shakespeare's Denmark has been intensified in Mueller's version to the point of rampant, violent destruction. The combination of borrowed phrases, unspeakable acts and nonsense sounds drives the audience to question its participation. We submit to such an assault, at least in part, because of the thrill of witnessing the demolition. In Mueller's work the idea of alienation from Brecht is twisted into carnage.

For all the chaos of each

scene, the play is well organized into a five-scene structure. If there were action, each scene could be imagined as an act. Instead each scene is very static, with the speakers basically motionless. It is as if the scenes were tableaux, snapshots, or frozen moments in time. These frozen moments incorporate the articulation of highly dramatic action.

Ophelia

appears in the second scene, and carries out the destruction of her role. The description she gives of her actions is just as violent as Hamlet's. Seeking to break away from the chains of her role, she smashes the signs of her domesticity. By the end of the second scene, Ophelia has outdone Hamlet in twisting out of her accepting, subservient role. Now she rivals Hamlet in revolution. The movement from scene one to two shows Ophelia overcoming the role that Hamlet, her family, the state, and Western literature have foisted upon her. By the end of the second scene the play could be taken as a powerful statement in favour of violent, feminist revolution.

The third scene shows Hamlet and Ophelia together. Indeed, there is a rhythm to the sequence of

the scenes: from Hamlet in one and Ophelia in two, to the two together in three, to Hamlet in four and Ophelia in five. The movement of the first two scenes offers a rising action to the encounter between the two in scene three.

Scene three adds another new dimension to the relationship between the two: Hamlet wants to change places with Ophelia. This is not just a role reversal, but involves a sex change and a complete reimagining. Hamlet wants to get out of his own skin, and to become Ophelia. It is a kind of colonization, invasion or takeover. In my view the third scene depicts the heightening of Hamlet's frustrated desires. Ophelia remains aloof, only partially concerned.

As a result, Hamlet in scene four carries out the destruction of himself as a character, an actor, and even as a playwright. Enthralled by consumer society, but outraged by the remnants of the Lord's Prayer and the failed hopes of the Communist revolution, Hamlet tries to step out of his role, tears up a picture of Heiner Mueller, whose initials H.M. match the abbreviated title of the play, and climbs into his armour from the past. Despite his noisy and threatening speech, he disarms himself and entombs himself in the armour. The fourth scene carries out the entombment of consumerism, Christianity and communism.

In scene five we see the confinement underwater of Ophelia. Surrounded by floating bits of ruined dreams, she is tied to a wheelchair while proclaiming violent resistance. The passage embodies the stagnation of feminist hopes of revolution. As Heiner Mueller suggested elsewhere he offers neither hope nor dope to his audiences. Instead there is a disturbing, surreal quiet that descends on the fantasies of both Hamlet and Ophelia.

When the play was written, in the German Democratic Republic of the late 1970s, Mueller was criticized for his pessimism. This was not an emotion supported by the government at the time. The practitioners of Socialist Realism should write plays to encourage the masses to pursue their dream of a utopian future. But Mueller would not support that approach. Instead he challenges us to rethink our commitments and our traditions. As he assaults the canon, he questions us as well. It remains to be seen what we can make of his challenge.