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Ancient Drama and Reception of Antiquity in the Theatre and Drama of the German Democratic Republic (GDR)

Theatre played an important role in the cultural policy of the German Democratic Republic. Probably nowhere in the world were there more state-subsidised theatres in relation to the size of the country and its population. The numerous theatres were heavily subsidised so that everybody could afford the low entrance fees, and, at the same time, they were closely supervised. To be sure, there were brief more liberal periods between 1953 (death of Stalin) and 1956 (the Hungarian uprising) and after 1971 (the replacement of the general secretary of the communist party Walter Ulbricht by Erich Honecker) and there were regional differences in the strictness of the controls. However, in general the close-knit network of supervision by two complementary institutions – state and party – which sometimes worked together and sometimes against each other – functioned perfectly. On the one side was the Ministry of Culture with its special advisory committee for the dramatic arts, which decided about all world premieres and GDR premieres of plays, but mostly acted through state officials at the district or local level. On the other side was the omnipresent party, perfectly organized in its tight hierarchical structure from the groups of party members within the theatres up to Politburo and Central Committee. Moreover, behind the scenes, there was a third player: the Ministry of State Security (MFS) or “Stasi”.

1 In the larger theatres there were several different party subgroups organized on an occupational basis: administrators, technicians, actors etc.
2 Christa Hasche, Traute Schölling und Joachim Fiebach, Theater in der DDR: Chronik und Positionen; Mit einem Essay von Ralph Hammerthaler (Berlin: Henschel, 1994), 187–93; in cases of doubt the party, of course, had the final say.
All theatres had to submit their annual programs and three-to-five-year plans, in which they had to specify the plays they intended to stage and outline the aesthetic and political conceptions of their productions. Time and again they had to justify themselves for particular productions during the rehearsals. Often productions were forbidden and directors and authors were not only criticised but penalised. Artistically the performances were to conform to the doctrine of socialist realism as developed in the Soviet Union by the odd pair of fathers of social realism, Maxim Gorky and Josef Stalin; and productions that failed to meet this standard were criticised as examples for western decadence and formalism.4

Politically, authors and theatres were required to produce plays that contributed to the building of a socialist state and presented socialist ideas and heroes as positive role models for their audiences.5 It is no wonder that for a fairly long time the staging of Greek and Roman tragedies and comedies played a marginal role.6 Even Bertolt Brecht – after his return from exile in the US – did not begin his work in East Berlin with a production of his adaptation of Sophocles’ Antigone, but with his Mother Courage,7 and the few ancient plays that were produced were exclusively anti-war plays: Aeschylus’ Persae, Euripides’ Trojan Women, and Aristophanes’ Lysistrata.8 It fits the picture that there were almost no productions of the ‘Greek’ plays by Eugene O’Neill, Jean Giraudoux, Jean Anouilh, or Jean-Paul Sartre, which were so highly successful in the West.9

4 The first example was the severe criticism of Carl Orff’s Antigonae (Dresden 1950) as ‘pure formalism’ and ‘cultural barbarism’; other key words of the criticism were ‘scepticism’ and ‘pessimism’. Cf. Walter Ulbricht, “Fragen der Entwicklung der sozialistischen Kultur und Kunst” (Rede vor Schriftstellern, Brigaden der sozialistischen Arbeit und Kulturschaffenden in Bitterfeld am 24. April 1958), in Zur sozialistischen Kulturrevolution: Dokumente 1957–59, ed. by Marianne Lange (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1960), 455–77, 456f. Ulbricht demanded an affirmative, idealising art, which showed that problems and contradictions were resolved; cf. Hasche, Schölling and Fiebach, Theater in der DDR, 55–57; Günter Agde, Kahlschlag: Das 11. Plenum des ZK der SED 1965; Studien und Dokumente (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991), 128–47 (for Ulbricht’s Philippica at the 11th plenary session of the central committee in 1965), and the documents of the formalism-debate in Helmut Kreuzer and Karl-Wilhelm Schmidt, Dramaturgie in der DDR 1945–1990 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1998), vol. 2, 1970–1990, 41–112. The discussion about the role and form of theatre in a future socialist state (after the victory over Nazi-Germany) had already begun in Moscow, where many communists and socialists had fled after 1933, and continued after their return to East Berlin. The goal was the constitution of a “Socialist National Theatre”, which had to present German classical drama and contemporary socialist plays; cf. Petra Stuber, Spielräume und Grenzen: Studien zum DDR Theater (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2000), 12–18; for the official function(s) of theatre in the GDR cf. Hammerthaler, n.2, 250–255.


6 11 January 1949; the ‘Churer’ Antigone was seldom performed in the GDR: first production in Greiz (1951); later Eisenach (1951/52) und Gera (1957/58), never in Ostberlin!

7 This is also true for new plays with a classical theme. Here we find almost exclusively plays about the home-comer Odysseus; cf. Trilse, Antike und Theater heute, 67f. The production of Euripides’ Ion in Meiningen (1960) is a rare exemption; about this Trilse, Antike und Theater heute, 143–47, who also, 130–43, discusses the frequently staged free adaptations of classical tragedies by Matthias Braun – Troerinnen (first 1957); Medea (first 1958); Perser (first 1960); Elektras Tod (1970), 130–43.


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This general picture did not change until the sixties. In 1962 the leading theatre of the GDR, *Das deutsche Theater* in Berlin, presented Peter Hacks’ adaptation of Aristophanes’ *Peace*, directed by Benno Besson, and celebrated one of the greatest successes in its successful history. In no less than twelve theatre seasons *Peace* was shown in more than 250 performances, and road tours spread the fame of the production throughout Germany, Europe, and beyond. The play was put on stage by a large number of theatres in the GDR and inspired other dramatists to adapt Greek and Roman comedy and tragedy for the contemporary stage.

In the following years the number of theatres that took part in the boom grew, the number of performances continued to increase, and, in the eighties, there were even extensive theatre festivals with ancient plays in Stendal and Schwerin. There were some favourites (marked with an asterisk), more or less the usual suspects, one is tempted to say:

Aischyllos: *Persians,* *Prometheus Bound,* *Seven against Thebes* (1969); *Agamemnon* (1982);
Sophokles: *Antigone,* *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1965); *Electra* 1979, 1980; *Trachiniae* (1989);

Productions of Roman comedies, such as the *Miles Gloriosus* of Plautus,

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were the exception; Seneca's tragedies were not played at all. In addition to the plays of the great ancient playwrights, there were a fairly large number of modern plays based on ancient myths and history, which, however, often could not be staged.15

For Peter Hacks the adaptation of Aristophanes' Peace was 'the beginning of a wonderful friendship' with antiquity, attested by the long series of Greek and Roman plays that he wrote in the following three decades.16 The other famous dramatist of the GDR, Hack's contemporary Heiner Müller, experimented similarly with ancient plays and subjects,17 and a number of younger dramatists followed suit: Stefan Schütz,18 Hartmut Lange,19 Jochen Berg,20 and Karl Mickel.21

From a later perspective, the 1962 production of Hacks' adaptation of Aristophanes' Peace appears to have been the starting-signal for the rich reception of antiquity both in the dramatic literature and on the stages of the GDR.

The astounding breadth and variety of the reception of antiquity, which besides theatre and drama included lyric poetry and prose, as well as music and the visual arts,22 cannot be explained, however, by a single theatre-event.23 There were other and stronger stimuli: one of the main reasons was that the

15 Cf. notes 16–21.
20 A tetralogy, consisting of Niobe, Khlytaimestra, Iphigeneia, and Niobe am Sipylos (between 1975 and 1979), as well as a free translation of Euripides' Phoenissae (1980).
22 Jürgen Dummer and Bernd Seidensticker, "DDR" in Der Neue Pauly, ed. by Hubert Cancik, Helmut Schneider and Manfred Landfester.
23 Of some importance for the development were the guest performances by the Piraikon theater under the director Dimitris Rondiris in 1962. His productions of Sophocles' Elektra and Euripides' Medea (with Aspasia Papanathanasiou in the leading roles) made a strong impression.
reception of antiquity allowed authors and artists to evade the aesthetic constraints of “Socialist Realism”, the official artistic concept of the regime from its beginning in 1949 until the end of the GDR.

The evasion or retreat into Greek myth or Roman history could be defended by a reference to the great father figure of GDR literature Bertolt Brecht, who throughout his life worked with ancient history and literature. Or to classical socialist thinkers and writers, such as Marx and Engels, Lenin and Liebknecht, who repeatedly stressed the importance of the Greeks for the development of humanism. Of special importance was Lenin’s fourth thesis on proletarian culture. It proclaimed that “Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture.”

The program that is implied in this thesis was taken up by the leading cultural ideologists of the GDR and developed into the official concept called Kulturelles Erbe, “cultural heritage”. At a meeting of the central committee of the communist party Walter Ulbricht proclaimed “that given the decadence of late capitalism it is necessary that we diligently preserve the great tradition of our humanistic heritage for the benefit of our people.”

Ulbricht and his followers in the ministry of culture were, of course, talking about the affirmative socialistic interpretation and utilisation of the literary and artistic achievements of the great periods of our European past. However, it is obvious that – under the wide umbrella of the official cultural (or rather ideological) policy – authors (and theatres) could put the classical tradition to quite different uses.

For the retreat into antiquity did not only offer artistic alternatives but also opened up interesting political possibilities. It could be used as a vehicle of more or less open criticism aimed against political or cultural developments. Socialistic utopias could be sketched as a contrast to the much shabbier reality of the contemporary GDR; the history or the present state of the communist party could be discussed, and one’s own position and situation as an intellectual within the regime could be defined.

In 1902, in his essay “What is to be done”, Lenin stated: “In a country ruled by an autocracy, in which the press is completely shackled, and in a period of intense political reaction in which even the tiniest outgrowth of political discontent and protest is suppressed, the theory of revolutionary Marxism suddenly forces its way into the censored literature, written in Aesopian language but understood by the ‘interested’.” It is the paradoxical irony of history that fifty years later many authors in the GDR resorted to Lenin’s tactical concept

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of Aesopian language (also called slavish tongue), and turned it not against the capitalist enemy, but against shortcomings and failures of communism and undesired developments within the GDR.  

Theatres had to be cautious, though, since their repertoires and productions, as I outlined at the beginning, were closely monitored by the cultural bureaucracy and by the party. There were many cases in which production was forbidden before the first performance or directly after it, or where the directors were forced to change their conceptions considerably. At the end of this article I will briefly discuss an especially interesting example of this, a production of the Seven against Thebes at the Berlin Ensemble (the BE) in Berlin.

Hacks and Besson in their production of Peace made sparing use of allusions to politics, politicians, or censorship, and there are only traces of Aesopian language. Hacks at the beginning of the sixties had considerable problems with the mandarins of the department of culture. Twice he had to rewrite his play Die Sorgen und die Macht (The Worries and the Power). Other plays of his could not be staged or were quickly taken off the program. So the poet had reason to restrain his criticism if he wanted to be staged. At the end of

25 Plays by the German classical authors Goethe and Schiller and others were used in the same way; cf. Wolfgang Engel, “Eine Art von indirektem Siegel,” in Michael Raab, Wolfgang Engel: Regie im Theater (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991), 37: “Die DDR Bürger hatten gelernt, zweisprachig miteinander zu leben oder aber eine Sprache zu sprechen und eine andere zu meinen, man könnte das in einem negativen Sinne als die Sklavensprache bezeichnen, die es offensichtlich auch war. Auf diese Weise konnte unter Gleichgesinnten eine Verständigung hervorgerufen werden, mit der man aber nicht aneckte. Anhand eines alten Stückes Machtsstrukturen der DDR aufzudecken bzw. die Beschädigung des Individuums durch Machtsstrukturen zu erzählen, war bis zur Beendigung der DDR eine vornehme Aufgabe des Theaters, es bildete so eine Art von indirektem Spiegel.”


27 The problems began with the premiere in 1960 (in Senftenberg) and did not end with the production of an amended version at Das Deutsche Theater in 1962, which was severely criticised. Hacks lost his position as author and dramaturgue at the DT; cf. Hasche, Schölling und Fiebach, Theater in der DDR, 45–47, and the material published by the DT after the fall of the wall in 1991: “Der Fall die Sorgen und die Macht 1962/63: Dokumente,” Blätter des Deutschen Theaters 19, 1991, and in Kreuzer und Schmidt, Dramaturgie, 259–97; cf. also Rischbieter, Durch den eisernen Vorhang, 92.

28 The few satirical remarks about critics and censorship certainly were understood by the audience as his answer to the criticism of his work, and the same holds true for the parabasis: Where the Aristophanic chorus praises the poet’s fight against the monster Cleon, Hacks, to evoke his own controversies with the cultural bureaucrats, only had to cut Cleon and generalize the lines into “the eternal battle of art against the mighty, which the artist always loses, but which art always wins.”
the first part of the *parabasis* of *Peace* there is an inconspicuous, but significant change. Whereas the Aristophanic chorus asks the jury to honour the poet’s poetic and political achievements, i.e. to award him the first prize in the competition, Hacks adds an idea that can be found in many ancient texts from Ibycus to Horace, but not in Aristophanes:

Honour him, you authoritative bald heads, and honour yourselves in honouring him.

... Make your changes, by supporting him, eternal.

The bald heads, which Hacks’ chorus here addresses, clearly, as the attribute *authoritative* shows, refer to the leading politicians of the regime, whose “changes”, i.e. the socialist revolution, Hacks promises to make immortal if his art is not restricted but supported and promoted. Already the ironical mocking of politicians, critics, and censorship are rather general and lacking real bite; and here it appears that Hacks does not use the ancient text to criticise the mighty and their politics. To be sure, the chorus praises the poet who dares to attack the powerful and speaks of the perpetual battle between art and power, but then all it does is asking for acknowledgement and support. Hacks’ final goal is not “the perpetual fight against the mighty”, but the patronage of the regime. Moreover, Hacks’ wish became true; not immediately perhaps, but in the long run. The sensational success of his adaptation of *Peace* certainly contributed to the fact that after all his problems with the cultural bureaucracy Hacks was finally accepted and honoured. Since the seventies he was the most-played contemporary dramatist in the GDR.

Heiner Müller, the most important dramatist of the GDR, was less adaptable – and less successful on the stage. Born in 1923, he began his career in the fifties with realistic plays about social and economic problems in the early GDR. After difficulties with political censorship that increasingly hampered the production of his plays, Müller turned to antiquity. He produced two translations – first of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* for Benno Besson’s production in 1967, which was almost as successful as Hacks’ adaptation of...
Aristophanes’ *Peace*, and then of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus* (in 1969) for a production of the play in Zurich. And he wrote *Philoktet*, his best ‘Greek’ play, based on Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, followed by a satyr play-like farce about Hercules’ cleaning of the stables of Augias, (*title: Herakles 5*) and by a short didactic play in the Brechtian tradition called *Der Horatier* (*The Horation*). The Akmé of Müller’s Antikerezeption was in the sixties, but he continued to work with Greek myths until the end of his life in 1995.

I will first look at *Philoktet* and then concentrate on *Der Horatier*, both plays being highly instructive examples for Müller’s use of Aesopian language. However, before focusing on these two plays, which Müller wrote in the sixties, I want to should look at an early poem by Müller that can be read as a programmatic statement about the necessity of using Aesopian language.

The hexametric text is called *Tales from Homer* and uses a famous episode in the second book of the *Iliad*. There, Thersites attacks Atreus in the general assembly for always taking most of the booty for himself and suggests to the Achaeans that they no longer fight for such a bad leader, but return home. He is then not only sharply criticised by Odysseus, but badly beaten up.

In the first part of the poem Homer is asked by his pupils why he puts the bitter truth about the Trojan war into the mouth of Thersites and then discards this truth by having Thersites criticised, walloped, and derided:

How is that with this Thersites
You let him say the right words but then with your own words
You prove him wrong. This seems to be difficult to understand.
Why did you do it?

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31 Müller tried, “verzweifelt und vergeblich,” to persuade Benno Besson, to use the play, which was written 1964/65, as a satyrf play for his production of *Ödipus, Tyrann* (cf. note 30).
32 Cf. note 17.
And Homer answers: “To be liked by the princes.” And when they ask, why he would have wanted to be liked by the princes, he explains: “From hunger.” And when they still do not quite understand him, he adds that it was not the hunger for laurel, i.e. for glory and fame, but for food that made him do it. The poet cannot write as he pleases, at least if he wants to publish and to eat. Political circumstances and power structure can prevent the open advocacy of the political truth.

Already here the political topicality is obvious, but Müller in the second part of the poem goes one step further; the most intelligent of Homer’s disciples is not satisfied by the answers of his master and repeats the question when the two are alone. And now Müller’s Homer gives a second and more profound justification for not saying openly and directly what he thinks. It is not only that the truth leaves pot and pan empty and that it does not provide any laurel: the truth is dangerous, and already to bend the bow to shoot the arrow of truth is an accomplishment. For “the arrow is still an arrow if one hides it in the reed”. Namely, even if the author hides the truth among his lies – as the truth of Thersites is hidden among the lies of the context – it remains a potentially deadly weapon that can be understood and used by others. Müller thus – practising the lesson of his fable in his poem – gives an eminently political comment on the situation of poets, or intellectuals in general, who live and work under a totalitarian regime.

Müller had personally experienced what he was talking about: In 1962, after a heated ideological discussion about his second play, he was expelled from the writers union of the GDR, which meant that he had serious problems in earning his living through writing.35

Let us now look at two of Müller’s dramatic texts, which are instructive examples for his use of Aesopian language: first Philoktet and then Der Horatier.

Philoktet is a free adaptation of Sophocles Philoctetes (staged in 409).36 Müller cut the chorus, eliminated fate and the gods (including the deus ex machina Heracles), and significantly modified the characters (especially Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, who both are much less appealing than in Sophocles); but for more than three quarters of his play he follows the dramatic action of the Sophoclean tragedy fairly closely. He finally breaks away from

35 In 1961 Die Umsiedlerin, a play about the land reform in the GDR, was severely criticized as reactionary, the director B. K. Tragelehn and others who were part of the production were expelled from the party, and Müller was excluded from the Schriftstellerverband; cf. Marianne Streisand, “Chronik einer Ausgrenzung: Der Fall Heiner Müller, Dokumente zur ‘Umsiedlerin,’” Sinn und Form 43 (1991) vol. 3; Hasche, Schölling und Fiebach, Theater, 43f.; Matthias Braun, Drama um eine Komödie (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 1996); Reinhard Tschapke, Heiner Müller, 1996, 24–27.

Sophocles at the moment when Philoctetes gets the bow back from Neoptolemus and is about to kill Odysseus. In the Sophoclean play Neoptolemus stops Philoctetes so that Odysseus can escape. In Müller’s version of the story neither Neoptolemus nor Odysseus, who does not run away, but stays and faces Philoctetes, can overcome Philoctetes’ burning hatred towards Odysseus and all Greeks, and Neoptolemus, finally, to prevent Philoctetes from killing Odysseus, is forced to kill him. (Stage direction: he picks up the sword and runs it through Philoctetes’ back.)

In both plays it looks – for a moment – as if the goal of the action cannot be reached: Sophocles uses a deus ex machina to resolve the impasse, as Heraclès appears and persuades Philoctetes to go to Troy. Müller dispenses with a divine solution and has Odysseus come up with yet another trick, with the help of which the dead Philoctetes will achieve what the living Philoctetes was supposed to bring about. By lying that the Trojans killed Philoctetes (and from behind), they will be able to trick his men into returning to the battlefield that they abandoned because of their chief’s exposure.

The play was published in the prestigious monthly journal Sinn und Form (17, 1965, 733–65), and Müller’s dramatic rival Hacks was full of praise. However, the official reaction was critical, and the play could not be staged for a long time. In fact, for more than ten years – between 1957 and 1968 – only Müller’s translations of Sophocles’ Oedipus the King and of Aeschylus’ Prometheus were played in the GDR, whereas in the West he was quickly recognized as the most important dramatist of the GDR and was staged regularly. But Müller did not leave the GDR – as his younger colleagues and friends Stefan Schütz and Hartmut Lange – because, as he put it himself, “to live in the GDR meant to live within a material.”

If one reads the analyses by critics and academics in the GDR, it is not evident why Müller had to wait twelve years to see his Philoktet performed by a major theatre in the GDR. For the play was taken as an anti-imperialistic anti-war play, and Müller at first played along with this official reading by stating that Philoktet was “a parable about events and processes that are only possible in a class society with antagonistic interests” (i.e. not in socialist

37 It was first produced in the West (1968, Residenztheater München); first productions in the GDR: 1974 by a student theatre group, Karl-Marx-Stadt, and 1977 by Das Deutsche Theater, Berlin; for the history of production cf. Jan Christoph Haushild, Heiner Müller oder Das Prinzip Zweifel: Eine Biographie (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2001), 253–55.

38 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 3. 9. 1994: “Der Aufenthalt in der DDR war in erster Linie Aufenthalt in einem Material.” In his poem Ausreisen 2/3/4/5 Müller speaks of his ”wütende Liebe zu meinem Land”; there was a joke in the GDR about Müller remaining in the GDR, because the tax return forms were easier to fill out than in the BRD; cf. Tschapke, Heiner Müller (Berlin: Morgenbuch, 1996), 39–43.

39 Cf. e.g. Werner Mittenzwei, ”Eine alte Fabel neu erzählt: Heiner Müllers 'Philoktet',” Sinn und Form 17 (1965): 948–56; Trilse, Antike und Theater heute, 85–110, 89; Rüdiger Bernhardt, ”Antikerezeption im Werk Heiner Müllers,” Weimarer Beiträge 22 (1976): 83–122; Wilhelm Girnus, in ”Gespräch mit Heiner Müller,” Sinn und Form 38 (1966): 42; Girnus refers, however to (anonymous) critics, who believe that Philoktet was a decidedly anti-party play.
societies). The real reason, however, for the rejection of the play by the cultural bureaucracy most probably was, that *Philoktet* is much more than an anti-imperialistic anti-war play and that Müller was not – or at least not only – writing about problems in pre-socialist societies, but about past and present problems and aberrations in the world of communism. Critics in the West had immediately read the play as a parable about the power-struggles within the communist party (Rischbieter). The Trojan war was understood as a symbol for the still undecided class struggle (Schulz) or a metaphor for the world revolution (Schivelbusch), in the course of which everybody and everything is instrumentalised and measured by its usefulness for the common goal. Moreover, after the first production of the play Müller openly agreed with this reading: “In my version of the play the battle for Troy is nothing but an image or picture for the socialist revolution in stagnation.” ... In the early sixties one could not write a play about Stalinism; one had to use a kind of model if one wanted to ask the real questions. The people here understand that quite quickly.” And in his autobiography Müller revealed a biographical aspect of the play by comparing *Philoctetes’* situation with his isolation after the political storm about *Die Umsiedlerin*. *Philoktet* is a complex play, and there is not enough space here to give a detailed introduction to Müller’s explosive political parable. The second text of Müller’s is a similar parable, but shorter and somewhat simpler: *Der Horatier*. Müller wrote *Der Horatier* (*The Horatian*) in 1968. The play is based on the famous story from Rome’s mythical past, which Livy reports in 1.22–26,


41 Henning Rischbieter, “Ein finsteres Stück. Heiner Müllers ‘Philoktet’”, *Theater heute* 9 (1968): 28–31 (anti-Stalinist critique of the power-struggles in the central committee); Genia Schulz, 71 (analysis of the internal problems of the communist politics); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Sozialistisches Drama nach Brecht* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1974), 125f. (a parable about the totality of contradictions regarding both the communist history and the socialist present).


45 Cf. note 34.
and which before Müller had already been used by Aretino, Corneille and by Brecht for his _Lehrstück Die Horatier und die Kuriatier_. Müller turned the story into a short epic text in the tradition of Brecht’s didactic plays, the so-called “Lehrstücke.”

Whereas Brecht put the fight between the three Horatians and the three Curiatians into the centre of his didactic play about revolutionary cunning, Müller concentrates on the aftermath. He compressed the first four chapters of Livy’s report – from the beginning of the war to the victory of the Horatian – into a short exposition, which, while preserving the gist of Livy’s narrative, comprises only about a tenth of his text. The killing of the Curiatian is immediately followed by the killing of the sister, which in turn, as in Livy, is followed by the trial of the “doer of the two different deeds”. Which is to say by a debate over whether “the Horatian should be honoured as a victor or punished as a murderer”, but the form, result, and function of the trial have little in common with the ancient source.

In the first part of the proceedings the indissoluble antithesis of _merit_ and _guilt_ leads to a deadlock. However, then the people decide – “with one voice” – to distinguish the identity of conqueror and murderer and to give to both what they deserve:

Let each receive his due:
To the conqueror the laurels,
To the murderer the sword.

Thus the Horatian is first honoured for the victory over Alba and then put to death for the murder of his sister.

In the second part of the trial the assembly faces the question of how to treat the corpse of the victorious murderer or murderous victor, and again the Romans vote “with one voice” to preserve the “double truth”. The corpse is first honoured by all Romans, but then, despite the pleas of the old father, thrown to the dogs. In answer to the father’s appeal not to punish his son beyond death, the dramatic narrator stresses the paradigmatic character of the event and insists that only the radical analysis and documentation of the truth can set an example:

46 The narrative form (the story is told in the third person and in the past tense) creates epic distance; the rhythmical language, the detailed description of gestures and movements of the characters, the composition by scenes and the ample use of direct speech lend the text a distinct dramatic quality.

47 And the one who bore the laurels said: / His service quits his crime. / And the one who bore the axe said: / His crime undoes his service. / And the one who bore the laurels asked: / Should the victor be punished? / And the one who bore the axe asked: / Should the murderer be honoured? / And the one who bore the laurels said: / If the murderer is punished, / The victor is punished. / And the one who bore the axe said: / If the victor is honoured, / The murderer is honoured. / And the people looked upon him / That had committed the two deeds, one man, undivisible / And were silent.

Longer than Rome shall rule over Alba,  
Shall his Rome be remembered and the example  
It gas given or not given,  
Weighing one against the other in the scales  
Or cleanly marking service from the crime  
In what one man, indivisible, had done,  
Fearing the impure truth or not fearing it.  
For half an example is no example.  
What is not taken to its proper end  
Crawls to nothing.\textsuperscript{49}

The short last part of the text develops the question of the preservation of the event for posterity. One of the Romans asks:

What shall we call the Horatian for those after us?\textsuperscript{50}

And the people answer, for the third time \textit{“with one voice”}:

He shall be called the victor over Alba.  
He shall be called the killer of his sister.  
In one breath both his service and his crime.\textsuperscript{51}

The reasoning added in support of the decision shows that Müller is aiming at the preservation of historical truth in words, whether this be through literature, historiography, journalism – or theatre:

For our words must remain pure. Because  
A sword can be broken, and a man  
Can also be broken, but words  
Fall irrevocably into the wheels of the world,  
Making things known to us or unknown.  
Deadly to humans is what they cannot understand.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{49} “Länger als Rom über Alba herrschen wird / Wird nicht zu vergessen sein Rom und das Beispiel / Das es gegeben hat oder nicht gegeben / Abwägend mit der Waage des Händlers gegen einander / Oder reinlich scheidend Schuld und Verdienst / Des unteilbaren Täters verschiedener Taten / Fürchtend die unreine Wahrheit oder nicht fürchtend / Und das halbe Beispiel ist kein Beispiel / Was nicht getan wird ganz bis zum wirklichen Ende / Kehrt ins Nichts am Zügel der Zeit im Krebsgang.”

\textsuperscript{50} “Wie soll der Horatier genannt werden der Nachwelt.”

\textsuperscript{51} “Er soll genannt werden der Sieger über Alba / Er soll genannt werden der Mörder seiner Schwester / Mit einem Atem sein Verdienst und seine Schuld.”

\textsuperscript{52} “Nämlich die Worte müssen rein bleiben. Denn / Ein Schwert kann zerbrochen werden und ein Mann / Kann auch zerbrochen werden, aber die Worte / Fallen in das Getriebe der Welt unehinholbar / Kenntlich machend die Dinge oder unkenntlich. / Tödlich dem Menschen ist das Unkenntliche.”
The epilogue is given to the actors who have narrated the events and now add a closing commentary:

Thus, expecting the enemy, they set – not afraid
Of the impure truth – a provisional example
Of clean distinction, and didn’t hide the rest,
That was not resolved in the irresistible change of things.  

This conclusion once again underlines the thesis of Müller’s paradoxical paradigm. The solution propagated by Müller’s Romans is paradigmatic because by the clear distinction of merit and guilt they do not cover up, but uncover the *impure truth*, i.e. the ambivalent truth of political reality in which positive and negative, necessary and unnecessary violence are indivisibly intertwined, both in individuals and in historical processes.

Many critics have felt that the moral of *Der Horatier* to bear and preserve the impure truth of the inseparable mingling of merit and guilt, of necessary and unnecessary violence, is yet another of Müller’s contributions to the Stalin-debate of the sixties.  

I agree. However, as a later statement by Müller shows, there was a more specific political impulse behind the conception of this text. In his autobiography published in 1992, Müller wrote: “The text was my reaction to Prague. *Der Horatier* could not be staged. There was an attempt by the Berliner Ensemble to put it on stage, but it was prohibited by the political secretary in charge. The argument was that the text reflected the Prague-position, the claim to give the power to the intellectuals.”

In this sense, the adjective *vorläufig* (*provisional*), used by Müller to limit the validity of the example the Romans tried to set, unveils its true meaning. The text is a presentation of the Czechoslovak ‘provisional’ attempt to set an example. At the same time, it was Müller’s appeal not to suppress the truth about the events in Prague in the necessary debate about the merits and guilt of communist socialism.

No wonder that the production of the text, planned by the Berliner Ensemble (BE) in Berlin, was forbidden. The play was first produced five years later in Hamburg and had to wait no less than twenty years before it was finally staged in the GDR.

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53 "So stellten sie auf, nicht fürchtend die unreine Wahrheit / In Erwartung des Feinds ein vorläufiges Beispiel / Reinlicher Scheidung, nicht verbergend den Rest / Der nicht aufging im unaufhaltbaren Wandel."


My last short example for the use of Aesopian language in the theatre of the GDR is a production of Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes* at the *Berliner Ensemble*, which also was intended to be understood as a reaction to the events in Czechoslovakia.\(^{56}\)

The play was chosen for production already in 1967,\(^{57}\) i.e. sometime before Dubček’s attempt to create a “socialism with a human face” and the brutal repression of all hopes. The first version of the play, which the two young directors, Matthias Langhoff and Manfred Karge, had produced on the basis of all available German translations,\(^{58}\) met with general approval, and the only reason, why the play was not produced in the season of 1967/68, was that the theatre first decided to produce Peter Weiss’s *Viet Nam Diskurs*. When Langhoff and Karge started with rehearsals in 1968, however, the so-called Prague spring lent the production much greater topicality. The fraternal conflict of the Aeschylean tragedy had turned into a metaphor for the growing tensions between the two communist ‘brother states’ and its climax, the invasion of ‘big brother’ USSR, joined by troops of the Warsaw Pact, which included troops of the GDR. The parallel suggested itself, but the two young directors, Matthias Langhoff and Manfred Karge, added a new ending, which left no doubt about their intention to present the Aeschylean play as a parable for the events in Prague and the conclusions to be drawn by the development. When the messenger, who had brought the news that Eteocles and Polynicebs had killed each other, invites the chorus to sing the funeral dirge, a vivid controversial discussion begins about who was responsible for the war and the tragic death of the brothers. It is agreed that both sons of Oedipus are to blame, because Eteocles did not have the right to keep the power and to drive his brother into exile and Polynicebs did not have the right to attack his country, and the chorus declares: “So let us bury them and be silent.” However, two of the women of the chorus object and criticise their earlier silence:

I remained silent for a long time, and now I am to do the same
And remain silent, if it happens again,
the same, the disaster, the one without a name?\(^{59}\)

Moreover, when the chorus argues that he could not speak up, while the enemy threatened to attack Thebes,\(^{60}\) another woman asks:

56 I would like to thank Petra Hübner from the archive of the Berliner Ensemble for letting me look at the rich material about the production and for her generous help.

57 In the light of Brecht’s lifelong interest in antiquity it is astonishing that *Sieben gegen Theben* was the first Greek tragedy that the *Berliner Ensemble* produced.

58 The text is a quite free adaptation with many cuts, additions, and transpositions of lines; cf the three versions of the text (I 1967; II 1968/ III 1969) in the archive of the *Berliner Ensemble*.

59 *Lange schon schwieg ich und soll dabei bleiben / Um wieder zu schweigen, wenn wieder geschehe / Das Gleiche, das Unheil, das ohne Namen?*

60 *So hätt’ ich reden sollen, als der Feind / Mit Pferd und Wagen, Eisen und Geschrei / Verwüstung schwor der Stadt und Todt! / War’s richtig nicht, zu schweigen? – The same motif can be found in Müller’s *Der Horatier*, where the Romans discuss whether it is the right time to discuss the punishment of the Horatian in the face of the impending attack of the Etruscans (cf. also note 55).*
And before the enemy came?
Why have I been silent then?
Did he not come, because I was silent? And now I am to do it again?61

And the chorus concedes its failure:

Now I realise – shamefully – my own guilt.
The lie turned into truth; I accepted it silently.
And by my silence, I nurtured the unlawful rule
Until my silence turned against myself.62

The chorus promises to speak and search for the hidden truth and demand an answer, whatever it may be.

Now, I wish to talk, even if it causes distress,
To banish the shadow that hangs over us,
To search for the truth that lies buried,
To demand the answer, whatever it may be.63

The new scene, which Langhoff and Karge substituted for the spurious Aeschylean ending, does not put most of the blame on the attacker Polyneices, as the first version does, where only the dead Eteocles is brought on stage and lamented, whereas Polyneices is cursed.64 Now both brothers are brought on stage and the chorus, while some of its members want to blame only Polyneices, insist that both are guilty.65 Of course, already the fact that Polyneices was blamed at all could be understood as criticism of the official position of the GDR, that had participated in the invasion. But the fact that Langhoff and Karge in the second version put much greater emphasis on the equal guilt of Eteocles suggests that their main political concern was not to condemn the Russian aggressor. Their main point is the announcement of the chorus to no longer remain silent, but

62 Schamvoll entdeck ich die eigene Schuld / Lüge wurde Wahrheit, ich folgte ihr schweigend / Nährte durch Schweigen die rechtlose Herrschaft / Bis daß mein Schweigen sich gegen mich kehrte.
63 Reden will ich nun, entsteht auch Bedrängnis, / Den Schatten beschwören, der über uns lastet. / Suchen nach der verschütteten Wahrheit, / Die Antwort verlangen, wie immer sie ausfällt. – It is hardly by chance that this proclamation is similar to the ending of Der Horatier. Langhoff and Karge were close friends of Heiner Müller. – The second version then concludes with a request to the chorus that they bury the brothers, before the new power (i.e. the people) takes the helm in the polis: Das Volk erwartet dich, komm, Tochter Thebens / Der Brauch verlangt, daß du zu Grabe trägst / den toten König, oh die neue Macht / An Bord der Stadt das Steuer nimmt.
64 Only in the last six lines of the play does the chorus, while praising Eteocles as the saviour of the polis, concede that he was responsible for the attack on his brother: Ihr, die ihr mit angesehen diesen Mann Eteokes / Wisst, dass wir ihn ehrend betten, ihn, der Thebens Retter war / Wenn er auch den Feind getötet, den er selber uns gebar.
65 Beide war'n Könige. Gleich ist die Schuld. / Grausame Rache suchte doch der, / Den grausamen Unrecht davontrieb ... Der Streit war verbannt nicht, als er ihn verbannte. / Unrecht schuf Unrecht, wie Schlechtes das Schlechte.
to raise their voice and ask questions. This request would have been taken by
the audience as a call for participation in open political discourse, something
unheard of not only in the context of the events in Prague but in general.66

No wonder that censors, as soon as they were briefed by informers from
within the theatre, intervened, stopped the rehearsals, and forced the directors
to cut the new ending67 and make other smaller changes in the text and the
staging. If it had not been for Helene Weigel, Brecht’s wife and artistic director
of the Berliner Theater, the play would not have reached the stage.68 There were
just ten performances, spread over a period of six months, and the ‘tamed’
third version without the explosive ending Langhoff and Karge had added at
the height of the Czechoslovak revolution did not encounter any political ob-
jections from party or state authorities. Theatre reviews both in East and in
West Germany even criticised the production’s lack of political relevance.69

However, I must come to an end. The history of the theatre in the GDR
shows that, when the theatre is under tight control – artistically and politically
– authors and directors will try to undermine censorship with ever new forms
of Aesopian language and, if I may say so, Aesopian performances; the audi-
ences will become particularly sensitive to allusions and double meanings. We
know of many cases in which the GDR audiences responded with applause to
seemingly innocuous sentences or lines because they took them as a hidden
comment on a politician or a current political or social problem. Moreover, I
remember authors and theatre people who welcomed the new personal free-
dom after the unification of Germany, but complained that they had lost their
wonderfully receptive audience for their manifold forms of Aesopian language.

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66 In the production concept the two directors stated their conviction that theatre in the GDR, like
ancient Greek theatre, should discuss political and social issues.
67 Langhoff and Karge returned to the ending of the first version, but this time stayed closer to
the Aeschylean original, except for the very last lines. When the chorus has lamented both
brothers and decided to bury them both, a spokesman of the city council insists (as in the
pseudo-Aeschylean ending) that only Eteocles, the defender of the polis, would be buried, while
Polyneices, the enemy would be left unwept and unburied.
68 For the censorship process and the role of Helene Weigel cf. Bradley, Cooperation and Conflict,
100–107; cad., “Prager Luft at the Berliner Ensemble: The Censorship of Sieben gegen Theben,
69 Cf. Bradley, Prager Luft, 52f. – In the leaflet for the production Langhoff and Karge tried to explain
the political topicality of the Seven against Thebes on the basis of an interpretation of the tragedy,
which is based on George Thomson’s book Aeschylus and Athens: A Study in the Social Origins of
Drama. Thomson understood the battle between Polyneices/Argos and Eteocles/Thebes as a battle
between clanship and democracy. The play ends with the victory of polis order over blood bonds
and family relations. Langhoff and Karge argue that the play, despite the fact that the socialist re-
volution is quite different from this change, can stimulate the audience to think about the contem-
porary ‘Epochenumbruch’: “Diese Sicht ist für uns, die wir eine ganz andere Revolution durchle-
ben, bedeutsam, da sie uns dazu anregt, unser sozialistisches Bewusstsein zu forment durch die
Erfahrungen, die es aus einer Epochenkonfrontation zwischen damals und heute gewinnt.”
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SUMMARY

_Ancient Drama and Reception of Antiquity in the Theatre and Drama of the German Democratic Republic (GDR)_

Theatre in the German Democratic Republic was an essential part of the state propaganda machine and was strictly controlled by the cultural bureaucracy and by the party. Until the early sixties, ancient plays were rarely staged. In the sixties, classical Greek drama became officially recognised as part of cultural heritage. Directors free to stage the great classical playwrights selected ancient plays, on one hand, to escape the grim socialist reality, on the other to criticise it using various forms of Aesopian language. Two important dramatists and three examples of plays are presented and discussed: an adaptation of an Aristophanic comedy (Peter Hack’s adaptation of Aristophanes’ _Peace_ at the Deutsche Theater in Berlin in 1962), a play based on a Sophoclean tragedy (Heiner Müller’s _Philoktet_, published in 1965, staged only in 1977), and a short didactic play (_Lehrstück_) based on Roman history (Heiner Müller’s _Der Horatier_, written in 1968, staged in 1973 in Hamburg in West Germany, and in the GDR only in 1988). At the end there is a brief look at a production of Aeschylus’ _Seven against Thebes_ at the BE in 1969.

POVZETEK

_Antična dramatika in recepcija antike v gledališču in dramatiki Nemške demokratične republike (NDR)_