

**Miguel Ramalhete Gomes. 2014**  
***Texts Waiting for History:***  
***William Shakespeare re-imagined by Heiner Müller***  
**Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi**

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While much has been published on the work of the German dramatist Heiner Müller since his death in 1995, much of this critical bibliography is in German and deals with either a particular play or his works in general. Hence, a book that focuses in depth and in English on Müller's adaptations of Shakespeare is a welcome addition to existing criticism on the playwright. When this book provides not only an immense wealth of scholarly analysis but also a singular reading of the importance of a philosophy of history to Müller's adaptations of Shakespeare, it becomes an even more valuable addition to a field dominated by an overtly existential approach to the violence and fragmented aesthetics that characterize Müller's work. This approach to Müller's Shakespeare adaptations builds upon the more political readings of the plays within the field of European Shakespeares by scholars such as Lawrence Guntner (1995, 1998, 2006, 2008) and Manfred Pfister (1994) as well as critical work in the field of presentism (Hawkes, 2002; Grady & Hawkes, 2007).

In his introduction, Ramalhete Gomes argues that "Müller's turn to Shakespeare resulted in some of his most complex and daring experiments with the theme of history and its aesthetic shape" (20). His book charts a movement from a focus on history and politics in Müller's early work to the elaboration of a philosophy of history through his adaptations of Shakespeare. It locates the aesthetic development of these adaptations within Müller's testing of the limits of the Brechtian didactic play and the development of

postmodern aesthetics, although the former is explored in more detail than the latter. Within this framework, Ramalhete Gomes avoids considering the plays as “pessimistic products of an existential worldview,” seeing them instead as “powerful interventions in a complex political and cultural context” (262). The book includes separate chapters on *Macbeth, after Shakespeare* (1972), *Hamletmaschine* (1977) and *Anatomy Titus Fall of Rome a Shakespeare Commentary* (1985), and these three chapters are positioned between, at one end, a first chapter on Müller’s initial experiments with *As You Like It* and his poetic/dramatic fragments and, at the other, a discussion of the rehearsal of Brecht’s *Coriolan* in *Germania 3 Ghosts at the Dead Man* (1995) and the “Frozen Tempest” fragments. Both chapters provide useful insights into Müller’s enforced movement away from contemporary political events in the GDR to a philosophy focused on the mechanisms of history and his use of Shakespeare as a way of shaking off the influence of Brecht without altogether abandoning the shape and form of the didactic play.

Throughout the book, Ramalhete Gomes adopts a prismatic rather than a prescriptive approach to his material. Nowhere is this more evident than in his chapter on *Hamletmaschine*, where he provides an intelligent survey of a critically overdetermined field. He brings together these varied approaches within a general argument that the play is “about in-betweenness – being caught in events that signal the end of one era and the beginning of another” (103), while presenting a useful corrective to a psychoanalytical view of Ophelia in his topical analysis of her as “a sociological and philosophical study of terrorism” (134). This combination of a clear general argument and innovative insight characterizes the book as a whole, while this materialist feminist reading of the women characters becomes more evident in his analysis of the rape of Lavinia in *Anatomy Titus*, where Ramalhete Gomes points to the problematic link between the aestheticization of violence and sexual pornography and the problems this raises for a didactic form based on critical distance. In this chapter, he is keen to rescue *Anatomy Titus* from critical neglect, a task that is undertaken with passion, but for me, it is his reading of *Germania 3* and the substitutability of Brecht (and by extension Müller) that quite literally lays Brecht to rest. The chapter’s emphasis on repetition as a philosophy of history and its reading of poststructuralist *difference* does not for me seem to justify the notion of the play as trapped in a “historical limbo” (257)

but his later suggestion that the “Frozen Tempest” fragments are Müller’s attempt to dramatize the flow of capital in a post-1989 Germany is fascinating, though perhaps insufficiently developed here.

The particular paradoxes of Müller’s position as a tolerated critical voice within the GDR and a writer who found it difficult to write about post-1989 Germany are organized around the notion of texts waiting for history that informs the title and that references Müller’s view of the Eastern bloc as a place where history had stopped. Yet perhaps the major paradox explored here is Müller’s own engagement with Shakespeare in the light of his pronouncement that “we will not have arrived at ourselves, as long as Shakespeare writes our plays” (18). Such a making explicit of this contradiction in the case of Müller, however, is something of a welcome relief from the blind allegiance to Shakespeare that has characterized many projects of rewriting Shakespeare and that use Shakespeare to further the reputations of individual writers or for more conservative political projects. Ramalheite Gomes’ insightful deployment of Günter Grass’ *The Plebeians* (1966) as a “vanishing mediator” (243) between Brecht and Müller in *Germania 3* illustrates effectively something of this distinction between rewritings that reinforce the status quo and those that seek to challenge it.

The most innovative feature of this book is the way in which Ramalheite Gomes combines comments on translation, literary analysis of the texts, comments by practitioners and audiences, and comments by Müller himself within his critical commentary in each of the chapters. In the discussion of *Macbeth*, for instance, he provides different perspectives on the literary and theatrical object that is *Macbeth*, after Shakespeare. These include literary analysis of the play, comments by theatre professionals, students and teachers, comments on translation as well as an analysis of the 1982 performance of the play and its anti-naturalist aesthetics. In such wide-ranging discussions, the reader is sometimes left with a sense that they would have liked to read more on how these different approaches relate to and interrogate each other, yet the value of such an approach is that it can account for the ways in which literature is sometimes ahead of theatrical conventions (as in the somewhat perplexed reaction of theatre practitioners and audiences to the appearance of *Hamletmaschine*) and in which social movements

sometimes overtake theatrical events (as, it could be argued, German re-unification overtook Müller himself). The often porous border between translation and adaptation is dealt with particularly well in the book, with perhaps the most notorious example being Müller's joint staging of his translation of *Hamlet* and *Hamletmaschine* as *Hamlet/Maschine* after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990. As Ramalhete Gomes points out, the two plays "infected each other" (168) to such an extent that *Hamlet* seemed the more contemporary play.

This excellently-researched and clearly argued book will be of interest to any Shakespeareans interested in Müller's adaptations of Shakespeare and those who are interested in the pleasures and paradoxes of rewriting Shakespeare more generally. It combines breadth with depth in an engaging and thoughtful way and argues for the centrality of Shakespeare to Müller's development as a dramatist without suggesting that this is an inevitable or necessary trajectory. As a comprehensive account of Müller's transformative engagement with Shakespeare, it will certainly become a key reference for future studies of these plays.

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