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## "Quartet:" Dissecting a Story

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“Quartet:” Dissecting A Story

Senior Honors Research Project

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From the beginning of my investigation of *Quartet*, the text has intimidated me; after all, the script is infused with a multitude of literary, historical, and philosophical references and quotes all of which Heiner Mueller, himself, prefers to dissociate himself from. “The theatre has nothing to do with ideas,” Mueller once stated. Paradoxically his theatre is one that is full of ideas and whether Mueller chose, in his own lifetime, to recognize the ideas of his theatre or not, it is precisely his provocative ideas and images that has been the basis for this paper. In his dramatic text, *Quartet*, Heiner Mueller negotiates an array of theatrical theories and aesthetics, philosophies, segments of history, literary personas, in addition to a powerful selection of images, thus generating a stimulating multi-faceted dramatic collage.

Early on in my investigation, however, I discovered that both the multitude of thought-provoking layers that Mueller had infused into *Quartet* and the abundance of academic resources on Mueller’s writing demonstrated the need for me to further specify the focal lens of my research. Therefore, in this paper, I have chosen to concentrate on what I consider the most fruitful aspects of Mueller’s work: his aesthetics, his employment of history and literature, his relationship to various identities, both national and personal, and his prolific use of imagery.

In the first section of my paper I discuss Mueller’s aesthetic approach to *Quartet*, which I believe to be greatly influenced by the two seemingly opposing dramatic theories of Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht. Artaud believed that the audience should be fully emerged in a theatrical experience, so much so that their senses and spirit can succumb to an almost drug-induced journey. Conversely, Brecht believed that the audience should be kept perpetually distanced from the action of a play so that their minds can constantly

reflect on the ideas that the theatrical performance in front of them presents. Although these two visions appear to be polar opposites, with one asking the audience to be part of the action and the other asking them to comment on the action, Mueller's aesthetic skillfully negotiates both of these notions, fusing elements of each into his text.

While I believe that the dramatic theories of both Artaud and Brecht have had a great impact on Mueller and his writing, the first section of my paper seems to, perhaps, favor Mueller's employment of Artaud's vision. This is for two reasons: the first being that I believe that under the umbrella of Artaud's aesthetic, elements of Brecht's are still welcome, but this is not necessarily true the other way around. The second reason is that Mueller's relationship with Brecht extends beyond the element of aesthetics and into other areas, such as the historical arena, which both Brecht and Mueller used extensively in their writing. Therefore, I believe that Brecht's influence on Heiner Mueller's work was deserving of its own discussion and have made that the focus of the second section of my paper.

Both Brecht and Mueller have been recognized for their inspirational use of history and mythology as the driving force behind their provocative socio-political texts and innovative aesthetics. Although Mueller found inspiration in Brecht's employment of history, he believed that he could continue to explore history in new ways to further enrich the historical aspects of the theatre. Brecht used history to illustrate that people and incidents of the past are perpetually transitory and changing and that, therefore, the present need not remain static either. The "desired effect, one might say, being to trigger change in the material world by changing 'interpretations'. . . in the analogous, experimental world of the theatre" (Brooker 186). By interpreting the past through his work, Brecht was able to demonstrate that while the past may have been one way, the

present and future need not remain that same way and therefore, that society has the ability to work towards change. Mueller, on the other hand, used history to generate a dialogue with the past and then, eventually, attempt to annihilate it completely so as to give the world a fresh start. Through his literary work Mueller successfully redefined, reconstructed, and modified Brecht's use of history as a dramatic tool, eventually demonstrating his ability to reconfigure history to support and strengthen his own socio-political dramatic texts.

In the same way that Heiner Mueller roots much of his text in history, he also utilizes literature as a resource for his work. In Carl Weber's introduction to his translation of *Quartet* he states that the play is "brimming with paraphrased or literal quotes, allusions and references from the eighteenth century Enlightenment; Schiller's idealism; Goethe's archetypal German, Faust; Buechner's portrait of the revolutionary hero, Danton; Nietzsche's view of Man . . . and the sensual imagery of Genet" (Weber 1984, 104). In his work, Mueller uses history in two ways. The first, being that he injects precise quotations throughout his text and the second, is that he puts on the mask of various literary figures by embracing their style, tone, and themes.

Throughout my research, I have found that Mueller's literary mask work to be especially intriguing because it is a symptom of a greater theme in Mueller's work: identity. The third section of my paper is devoted to a discussion on Mueller's own protean nature as a writer and the chameleon-like nature of his characters in *Quartet*. Just as Mueller tries on a variety of literary masks throughout *Quartet*, his characters, Valmont and Merteuil, also act as chameleons, varying their identities to develop a role-playing game in order to avoid their own destruction. Additionally, in the third section of

my paper I also illustrate the correlation between the multiple identities that Mueller's exposes, both in his writing and his public life, and Germany's seemingly perpetual identity crisis. As a native of Germany and a resident of East Berlin, Mueller was far from ignorant on the issues surrounding Germany's national identity crisis and the effects this crisis has had on individuals. In an interview with Marilyn Berlin Snell, Mueller once stated that, "clearly, Germany is in the throes of an identity crisis, though there has never been a national identity encompassing one Germany" (Snell 1). Like Mueller's homeland, Germany, the playwright, himself, was perpetually changing his persona and this extreme variable nature is, in my opinion, yet another indication of Mueller's strength as a writer.

In the fourth and final section of my paper I begin to discuss another strength that I have come to recognize in Mueller's work: his ability to present themes and ideas through images. In his texts Heiner Mueller skillfully weaves images together, layering them, to generate an elaborate textual landscape brimming with suggestive symbolism. The images that Mueller employs in *Quartet* are so powerful that they not only enhance the literary or dramatic environment, but they also come alive as alternate characters or driving forces in the plot. In *Quartet*, Mueller's images of time, animal behavior, and the orgasmic experiences of both sexual intercourse and death throughout the text take on their own presence in the script and force the character's of Valmont and Merteuil to engage with them as if they too are actors in the plot. Mueller's methods of lacing representative imagery together mirror the way in which he weaves a knowledgeable array of literature, history, and philosophy throughout his work. It exemplifies, once

again, how Mueller's style of writing creates a mesmerizing multi-faceted dramatic collage.

As I have progressively delved into my research for this project I have been forced to recognize that my initial instinct to tell the story of *Quartet* through different media is a direct reflection of Mueller's own style of writing. Mueller's method of writing pulls from a massive array of literature, philosophy, history, and dramatic theory to generate a multi-layered text. From an aesthetic standpoint, Mueller cleverly negotiates the theatrical theories of Brecht and Artuad to simultaneously alienate and entrance the viewer. Additionally, Mueller expertly steals from a wide variety of philosophical, historical and literal figures such as Nietzsche, Schiller, Goethe, Brecht, Beckett, Buechner, De Sade, Mann, Wagner, Genet, and Shakespeare by exercising their philosophies, visions, and even their words throughout his text. Mueller fleshes out his eclectic text with historical references to the Bible, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the ruins in which World War II left Europe. On top of his use of other people's material, Mueller also threads his own brilliantly stimulating patchwork of images and ideas together to produce a stimulating, but perplexing literary masterpiece.

While I recognize that there are some important references that I have been unable to fully delve into, (for example, the extent to which Mueller employed Nietzsche), the majority of my research has been extremely fruitful. As I have worked on this project over the past nine months it has been extremely rewarding for me to watch the performance elements and the research elements of my work begin to collide and simultaneously mirror each another. The amalgamation of the various elements of my work, both written and theatrically produced, have culminated in the discovery of Heiner

Mueller's exquisite literary collage, which interestingly enough supports my original idea of using the text of *Quartet* to create my own dramatic collage.

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“*Mise en scene* becomes an especially active agent of meaning. Directors, designers, and actors face a tremendous burden of supplying style without seeming to impose it, providing contexts for thematic questions without answering them.”

-Jonathan Kalb

“Drama has always been concerned with catastrophe. It needs catastrophe.”

-Jonathan Kalb

In his collection of essays, *The Theatre and its Double*, Antonin Artaud challenges and condemns theatre that behaves solely as a branch of literature and implores artists of the theatre to create theatre that fully embraces the human mind, body, and spirit. Artaud invites theatrical artists to break past the limitations of words and language and engage their audience on a journey that uses every ounce of human nature along with a complete use of lighting, spacing, dancing, singing, and other musical instrumentation. Heiner Mueller's understanding of Artaud's concepts and ideas are reflected in his play *Quartet*, which is “brimming with . . . the theatrical visions of Artaud” (Weber 1984, 104). Although Mueller did not use Artaud as his sole muse while



writing *Quartet*, the text does lend itself to an Artaudian approach to theatre. In *Quartet* Mueller embraces many of Artaud's theories on theatre and negotiates his way around others, thus creating a piece that asks to be examined under multiple microscopes.

One of the on-going themes in Artaud's written work, as outlined in his text *The Theater and its Double*, is that the task of the theatre is not to produce a literary commentary on social or political issues, nor is it to delve into the psychology of man and his inner conflicts, but rather it is the task of the theatre to generate a text that an audience can immediately associate with on a larger scale. Artaud believed that in order to affect masses of viewers on this extraordinary scale, the focus of the theatre must shift from the psychological to the metaphysical. In order to achieve this shift, the theatre must begin to tackle the colossal issues of Creation, Becoming, and Chaos (Artaud 90). He argued that these topics are the only ones that are heavy enough to influence all humankind and moreover, that they are the only ones that do not grow less important with age. Artaud stated that "if the public does not frequent our literary masterpieces, it is because those masterpieces are . . . fixed in forms that no longer respond to the needs of the time" (Artaud 75). While many stories have the potential to grow increasingly more and more outdated, stories pertaining to Creation, Becoming, Chaos, and Fatality never die or grow old because they are the fundamental issues of mankind.

In *Quartet*, Mueller adopts Artaud's metaphysical framework, by setting the story in a time frame that is reminiscent of the past, present, and future: "Drawing room before the French Revolution/Air-raid shelter after World War III." From this framework, *Quartet* leads us on a journey that begins with Chaos: Merteuil sitting alone in an ambiguous time frame, under the impression that she is the only person left in the world,

talking to herself. Eventually, from the Chaos, *Quartet* progresses through a moment of Annihilation (as demonstrated by the death of Valmont and suggestion of Merteuil's pending death), and then goes on to evoke the possibility of an entirely new Beginning: with everything destroyed, there is an opportunity for a new and untainted existence to begin. In *Quartet*, Mueller utilizes Artaud's template of Chaos, Fatality, and Creation, thus creating a text that is driven by the basic needs and experiences of mankind.

Mueller's employment of Artaud's theatrical aesthetic extends beyond his use of basic Artaudian subject matter and delves further into Artaud's vision of theatrical performance. Artaud's precise solution for the performance element of the theatre is clarified in his manifesto "The Theater of Cruelty," which Mueller skillfully embraces throughout his development of *Quartet*. When Artaud used the term "Cruelty" to define his vision of theatre, he was not referring to gruesome, bloody, murder, but rather to an implacable necessity that induces mankind to take real action. When Artaud stated that "without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theater is not possible," he meant that without an absolute necessity that drives man to take complete action, regardless of consequences, the theatre is powerless to affect mankind (Artaud 99). In his essay "The Theater and the Plague," Artaud draws a parallel between the way men act when death is imminent and the way that the theatre should illustrate actions. For example, only when people are in desperate situations do they live to their full potential: "the obedient and the virtuous son kills his father; the chaste man performs sodomy upon his neighbors [and] the warrior hero sets fire to the city he once risked his life to save" (Artaud 24). These actions are driven by a desperation, an implacable necessity, and it is at these moments, Artaud argues that the theatre is born again. Like the plague, the

theatre must not only pull people into extreme action, but it must also “disturb the senses of repose [and] free the repressed unconscious” (Artaud 28).

Mueller’s characters in *Quartet*, Valmont and Merteuil, are driven by an extreme circumstance. As the only two people left in the world, each of their actions is derived from an absolute need, an implacable necessity, to fight off their own annihilation. In order to do so, they engage with one another and distract themselves in a desperate attempt to avoid their nearing death. While Artaud might argue that the characters are fighting each other with petty psychological disputes, their arguments are driven by an absolute inner need to hold on to their lives, to resist the imminence of death. Each interaction with one another is a desperate attempt to avoid their impending annihilation. In *Quartet*, Valmont and Merteuil are quite literally faced with the plague that Artaud discusses in “The Theater and the Plague” and are therefore, forced into the extreme action of keeping themselves and the other alive. In their last moments together, however, they cannot meet each other’s needs or their own and, eventually, they are faced with their final destruction.

Throughout *Quartet*, Mueller expresses Valmont and Merteuil’s acute needs, desires, and feelings through long monologues that carry the weight of the character’s desperation: they simply don’t stop talking, so as to avoid the confrontation of death. However, these extraordinary chunks of text illustrate more than just Valmont and Merteuil’s implacable need to stay alive. They also begin to demonstrate how Mueller employs Artaud’s vision of the *mise en scene* in *Quartet*.

Artaud’s aesthetic approach to the *mise-en-scene* was to reconfigure the ways in which we communicate within the arena. Artaud suggested that simply relying on basic

language as the sole form of communication does not have an impact on the metaphysical world, mankind's spirit, or on the senses and unconscious. In order to truly communicate in the theatre man must base his work around the *mise en scene* rather than the dialogue and language of the production. For Artaud, the *mise en scene* includes, but is not limited to, sound, percussion, song, tone, instrumentation, lighting, movement and dance, use of space, use of masks, mannequins, puppets, and oversized props (Artaud 56).

Furthermore, Artaud asked that all of these elements work together to create a fluid unity that impacts all of mankind's senses and spirits. For example, the percussion and instrumentation should flow into the spoken word and vice versa and movements should lead into dance so that there is no clear break defining when one stops and another starts. In order to give the spectacle a sense of ritual and revelational appearance, modern day costumes and dress should be avoided and replaced with simpler age-old costumes such as cloaks. In an effort to create a mutual experience between actor and viewer, Artaud insisted that the presentational stage be removed completely, thus eliminating all physical barriers between performer and audience member. Behind these requests was the hope that with all of these elements combined and the focus no longer on text or language, the theatre could develop into a ritualistic experience that consumed the senses and the spirit of men, thus disorienting the audience into a new level of understanding.

Ironically, Artaud's concept that the theatre should venture beyond language relates directly to Mueller's text-heavy *Quartet*. However, it is precisely because *Quartet* is so abundant with words that it necessitates a complementary Artaudian approach to its *mise en scene*. In order to convey the themes, emotions, and attitudes in *Quartet*, a performance must embrace the many Artaudian elements of the *mise en scene*. While

Mueller's language tells a story through dialogue, it also, like Shakespeare's language, insinuates many stage directions and performance clues that can propel *Quartet* into a multifaceted performance piece. By combining Mueller's language with Artaud's vision of the *mise en scene* audience members are given the opportunity to connect with the story both intellectually and instinctually.

As a dramatic text *Quartet* draws from Artaud's notion of effective subject matter, his concept of implacable necessity, and his approach to a completely realized *mise en scene*. Additionally, by embracing Artaud's seemingly all-inclusive vision of the theatre throughout *Quartet*, Mueller is also skillfully able to sneak in hints of other theatrical aesthetics throughout the text without simultaneously betraying Artaud's vision. For example, by utilizing Artaud's idea that theatrical performances should echo a hallucination or dream, Mueller is able to negotiate elements of Brecht's notion of alienation into his work and have the two visions work together, rather than conflict. Whereas Artaud wanted the audience fully submerged in the theatrical experience, so much so that to their senses and spirit would succumb to an almost drug-induced journey, Brecht wanted to keep the audience perpetually distanced, thus expecting their minds to constantly reflect on the performance in front of them. By uniting these two concepts of the theatre together, Mueller strengthens Artaud's notion that the theatre should embrace all elements of the *mise en scene*, including, perhaps Brecht's alienation effect. Under the umbrella of a multi-faceted Artaudian aesthetic Mueller is able to weave in threads of various other theatre theorists and negotiate them in order to generate a multi-layered, multi-faceted text that compels a multi-faceted performance. Furthermore, Mueller's versatile approach to creating a dream-like aesthetic is an indication of how he utilizes a

variety of other literary and dramatic figures to generate a textual collage that mirrors Artaud's vision for a theatrical collage.

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“If history moves at a speed that would cramp thought, or outrun language, then only a text without punctuation, defying history by darting from it, could possibly keep up.”

-Daniel Listoe

In the aftermath of World War II, Mueller emerged as the preeminent disciple and, eventually, the dominant successor of Bertolt Brecht. While Mueller regarded Brecht as his primary influence and sole “literary father” (Kalb 1998, 18), Mueller's criticisms of Brecht perpetually influenced Mueller's work and pushed him beyond Brecht's initial concepts for the theatre. As Brecht's follower, Mueller strongly believed that “to use Brecht without criticizing him would be betrayal” (qtd. in Teschke 1999, 155). Although Mueller found inspiration in Brecht's work, he believed that as Brecht's successor, he should pick up “where Brecht left off” by continuing to explore history in new ways (Kalb 1998, 24).

Both Brecht and Mueller are notorious for their employment of history and mythology in their provocative socio-political texts and innovative aesthetics. However, the ways in which each author employed history in their work differ a great deal. Brecht used history in his theatre to look both backwards and forwards, to examine a changed theatre and society and, furthermore, illustrate that society need not remain static.

Brecht's work emphasizes this by producing "a double perspective on events and actions so as at once to show their present contradictory nature and their historical cause or social motivation" (Brooker 191). If Brecht was able to successfully exemplify the "contradictory, alterable course of history," than he could, consequently, demonstrate that the both the present and the future are also alterable (Brooker 197).

Conversely, whereas Brecht used history to exemplify the transitory nature of society and demonstrate the potential for further change in the future, Mueller used history to generate a dialogue with past and then, eventually, attempt to annihilate it completely so as to give the world a fresh start. Mueller successfully accomplished this by critically negotiating Brecht's legacy with his own artistic and political beliefs: "Mueller's criticism of Brecht promises . . . a way of fulfilling the Brechtian project while changing the approach to the past" (Listoe 96). Through his literary work Mueller successfully redefined, reconstructed, and modified Brecht's use of history as a dramatic tool, eventually demonstrating his ability to reconfigure history to support and strengthen his own socio-political dramatic texts. However, in order to recognize Mueller's work as an extension of Brecht's it is important to understand the fundamental way in which Brecht employed history as a theatrical tool.

One of Bertolt Brecht's most significant and influential approaches to his concept of theatre was his extensive utilization of mythology and history as a literary and dramatic means to a more socio-political theatre. In his texts, Brecht took myths and historical events and reworked them until they began to speak clearly to his contemporary audiences. For example, in his translation of the ancient myth *Antigone*, Brecht deviated from a traditional use of the tale and instead used the text as a "critical intervention"

illustrating the relationship of the GDR to history both “as a state and a supposed community of workers, [thus creating] a blunt text on state terror” (Listoe 96).

Brecht parallels *Antigone* with the divided post WWII Germany, by setting the beginning of the story outside a Berlin bunker in 1945 instead of in post-battle ancient Greece. However, later in the text he relocates the setting back to ancient Greece and therefore begins to create a direct line between Germany and ancient Greek mythology. Brecht also uses the division and ruin of the Labdacus house as an illustration of “a state divided—even at the level of family—in its attempts to purify itself after war” (Listoe 98). Finally, Brecht draws a comparison between some of the lingering questions in the GDR and Kreon’s problems: “How [do we] purge the past without mourning it? How [do we] purify present motivations? [How do we] escape . . . the process of any power’s inception” (Listoe 100). Through his dramatic variations of history Brecht creates a parallel between the past and the present, thus creating an open dialogue with the present about the state of the present and its relationship with the past and future. The power of Brecht’s *Antigone* “comes from its translation out of the past, a translation made to speak to the present . . . [it is a] critique of the present” (Listoe 98). Through history, Brecht asks us to consider the past, as it is relevant to the present and, consequently, the future.

Although Mueller agreed with Brecht that the use of the past could be an extraordinarily valuable tool for dramatic texts, Mueller’s techniques for employing history and mythology vary immensely from Brecht’s. Throughout most of his career, Mueller used history in two prevailing ways. As opposed to Brecht, who paralleled the past and present in order to generate a dialogue about the contemporary issues with the viewers, Mueller believed that the use of history was necessary because it could create a



dialogue with the past and, therefore, the dead. Mueller felt that the notion of democracy “should imply that we’re also thinking about the dead, after all there are more of the dead, than there are of the living—if there is such a thing as ‘the dead.’ Consequently, it is democratic to consider the problems [and needs] of the dead” (qtd. in Weber 1989, 160). By engaging with history in his texts, Mueller hoped to produce a theatrical dialogue with the dead that would illustrate the desires of the dead for both the actors involved and the audience.

The second fundamental way in which Mueller uses the past is as a means to annihilate history. Whereas Brecht concerns himself with translating history into a comparison between past and present in order to demonstrate the cyclical nature of history within mankind, Mueller attempts, in his texts, to destroy the past completely: “history demands . . . an annihilation through whatever artistic means are at hand” (Listoe 103). Mueller believed that the only way to work towards the future was to destroy our associations with our relationship to history and to find a hope for our future outside of our past. For instance, if we are always referring back to the past for answers, the decisions for today are simply muddled regurgitations of history rather than committed attempts to improve tomorrow. “Mueller’s stage pieces and provoking rhetoric reject the instructive potential of history. His goal seems to be the opening of new hopes still hidden below the horizon of inherited political discourse. The only hope for finding *that* hope, he says, is to lay bare history, churning up the rot and catastrophe so that nothing of the past remains intact” (Listoe 96).

In *Quartet*, which is loosely based on the 18<sup>th</sup> century French novel, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by Choderlos Laclos, Mueller employs history not only to create a dialogue

with the dead, but also to simultaneously annihilate the past. By basing *Quartet* on an 18<sup>th</sup> century novel, Mueller immediately opens the door to the past by embracing European aristocracy, the age of Enlightenment, and the French Revolution. Additionally, Mueller sets *Quartet* in “Timespace: Drawing room before the French Revolution/Air-raid shelter after World War III” which calls to mind images of both the past and the future. By setting the beginning of *Quartet* imminently before the French Revolution, Mueller begins to address what came directly before the great European call for democracy: aristocracy. Moreover, by simultaneously setting *Quartet* after WWII, Mueller indicates the potential for a global revolution in the future. Unlike Brecht, however, by suggesting the potential for mankind to move from a national revolution to a global revolution, Mueller is not advising that we repeat history. Instead, he is suggesting that we acknowledge the needs of the ghosts of the past and embrace the possibility of obtaining a fresh start from a global revolution, even if it first must extinguish the human race.

In *Quartet*, Valmont and Merteuil represent the last of the aristocrats, and quite possibly the last of the human race. Through Valmont and Merteuil, Mueller generates a literal dialogue between two characters of the past and, moreover, with a piece of pre-democratic history. Notably, Mueller is not the only one evoking dialogues with dead figures of the past. His characters Valmont and Merteuil also design a way of communicating with the dead through their intricate implementation of role-playing games. In their bittersweet games, Valmont and Merteuil take on the roles of their former lovers, who are now dead, and begin to communicate with them through their games, thus producing both a representational and a literal dialogue with the dead.

However, for Valmont and Merteuil, their role-playing game has a very different purpose. While for readers and viewers of *Quartet*, Valmont and Merteuil's role-playing game is a form of communicating with the dead; it is for Valmont and Merteuil a way to avoid the inevitability of their own annihilation.

As *Quartet* progresses, Mueller eventually leads to the elimination of Valmont and Merteuil's role-playing game and, therefore, the elimination of their former lovers. This elimination exemplifies Mueller's first step towards his annihilation of history in this text. With the rest of mankind obliterated and memories of the past dead, Valmont and Merteuil stand in ruins, as the only two beings left after a devastating history of the human race. However, there is no reason why they too should not face destruction; after all they are the only representations of history left to be destroyed in order to give the world a completely new starting ground.

For Valmont and Merteuil, the end of their games signifies the beginning of their annihilation; their time is up and they too must be destroyed. Ironically, however, the destruction of Valmont and Merteuil initially develops out of one of the games that they have been engaging in so as to avoid the end of their own existence. As Valmont and Merteuil's games begin to wind down, Merteuil, playing the role of Valmont, offers Valmont, who is playing the role of La Tourvel, a drink of wine. In the spirit of the game, Valmont, as La Tourvel, accepts only to discover that he has been poisoned. As he realizes this, the game draws to end, and he says his final words to Merteuil and then dies. A moment after the end of both the game and the death of Valmont, Merteuil confesses that she is now alone, waiting to die of cancer. With Merteuil's end

approaching and, consequently, the total annihilation of the world nearly complete, Mueller hints at the possibility of the world having a fresh start, free of its own history.

In *Quartet*, Mueller's use of history preserves a conversational quality throughout the duration of the text. He presents for the viewer a collage of history and asks them to engage with it in whatever way they feel necessary and then, ultimately, watch as it is destroyed. At times, it may seem as though Mueller, like Brecht, is drawing a parallel between the past and the present. However, that is not the aim of his work, but rather a consequence of Brecht's influence on him. The aim for Brechtian theatre was to use history as an instructive tool to draw parallels between the past and the present. Mueller, on the other hand, attempted to employ history as a means of generating conversation between the past and the present. If through his dramatic dialogues, a reflection of similarities between past and present develops, than it is a result of the nature of the conversation rather than the intended outcome of Mueller's work. Ultimately, although Mueller's belief of how history should be used in the theatre varies from Brecht's, through their work, both authors retain the fundamental notion that the use of history in theatre operates as a powerful socio-political tool that should actively engage viewers rather than simply entertain them.

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“A woman, alone onstage, suddenly speaks in the person of a man, as if she had summarily swallowed him, demonstrating complete knowledge of how to play this part, which includes a subtle, skillful seduction speech.”

-Jonathan Kalb

“The self cannot help but betray the Other, but in Mueller and Genet where the other *is* the self, betrayal also has a peculiar double edge: it becomes a circular game of dramatic masks, designed not to affect but rather ‘infect’ spectators with its insincerity and with seductive images of moral opportunism.”

-Jonathan Kalb

“The only national identity in Germany is the D-Mark.”

-Heiner Mueller

For centuries masks have been used in the theatre as a tangible and external form of disguise, a means for the possessor of the mask to conceal their identity and establish a new one for the audience. While masks are generally thought of as concrete, external objects, they can also be regarded in a figurative sense. Both in the theatre and in life people often sport non-literal masks either to hide or change their own identity or to mimic someone else's. In *Quartet* Heiner Mueller illustrates the figurative employment of masks; his characters, Valmont and Merteuil, act as chameleons, varying their identities to develop a role-playing game in order to avoid their own destruction. However, the way in which Mueller employs masks to change the identities of his characters is more than just a literal tool; it is also a reflection of Mueller's own protean existence as well as a statement on Germany's seemingly perpetual identity crisis.

The two characters in *Quartet*, Valmont and Merteuil, are derived from the French novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* written by Choderlos de Laclos. The novel

portrays a fictional correspondence between Valmont and Merteuil through which they discuss “their amorous, often sadistic, fantasies and indulge themselves in scheming the seduction and abuse of an innocent virgin and virtuous spouse” (Weber 1984, 104).

Mueller alters the French novel by establishing a role-playing game in which Valmont and Merteuil portray the virgin niece, Volange, and the virtuous wife, La Tourvel. For Valmont and Merteuil each mask that they wear and each identity that they take on is an avoidance of the reality that their own extinction is closing in on them. Their games act as desperate attempts to delay their inevitable annihilation, to fend off “the terrible Void which yawns before them” (Martin).

The characters in *Quartet* are not alone in their belief that varying their identities is necessary for their very existence. Mueller himself lived an extraordinarily protean life, constantly changing his own philosophies and opinions. The German public came to regard Heiner Mueller as “the Great Self-Contradictor” and Mueller rebuked by accusing them of “constantly trying to unmask him” (Kalb 1998, 4). In fact, in 1993 the public discovered one of Mueller’s most controversial masks: since at least 1978 Mueller had been “meeting with agents of the Stasi (*Staatssicherheit* – the secret police) to discuss fellow artists” (Kalb 1998, 3). Both Mueller’s political and personal personas changed incessantly over the course of his lifetime. And since his death in 1995, Mueller has been as difficult as ever, if not impossible, to unmask simply because he made sure that his masks were always changing; even in his literature Mueller opted for inconsistency. *Quartet* is a strong literary reflection of a variety of Mueller’s masks. In *Quartet* Mueller wears the masks of a variety of different literary figures, such as Nietzsche, Schiller,

Goethe, Brecht, Beckett, Buechner, De Sade, Mann, Wagner, and Genet, by exercising their philosophies, visions, and even their words throughout the text.

While all of these figures are important to recognize, Mueller's treatment of Genet is especially interesting because "Genet was of more practical use to Mueller" than many other literary and historical figures (Kalb 1998, 129). This is partially because Genet himself was known for his employment of masks and his use of role-playing games in plays like *The Maids* and furthermore, Genet like Mueller varied his personal and public identity frequently. "Both were so thoroughly committed to the idea of multiple or split selves, cultivating parts of themselves as Others or Others, that they never felt bound to maintain consistent viewpoints or smooth over their texts' jagged formal, tonal, or stylistic edges" (Kalb 1998, 128).

In *Quartet* there are multiple reflections of Genet and more specifically of his play *The Maids*. Genet's work is known for its raw debauchery, sexuality, and criminality in his work. In an introduction to Genet's plays, Jean-Paul Sartre writes that "illusion, betrayal, [and] failure [are] all the major categories that govern Genet's dreams" (10). Both these "categories" and this general depravity that Genet adheres to are equally demonstrated in Mueller's *Quartet* which has been "criticized for its veritable obscenity . . . amused detachment, and often mordant humor" (Weber 1984, 104). Moreover, both Genet and Mueller, utilized their personal talent of insincerity "as a dramatic strategy . . . a means of communicating their linked themes of betrayal and death" (Kalb 1998, 128).

Mueller's employment of Genet extends beyond general obscenities and into subject matter and character treatment. In Genet's play *The Maids* the characters Solange

and Claire engage in a role-playing game in which they take turns playing the part of their mistress, the head of the house. Moreover, in *The Maids* Genet suggested that the feminine “become an appearance, the result of make believe,” thus hoping that the female characters, Claire and Solange, would be dressed as men, playing females, playing dress up (Sartre 9). Mueller mirrors these games in *Quartet* through Valmont and Merteuil’s identity swaps that engender males playing females and vice-versa as well as characters playing other characters of the same sex.

The shadow of Genet is noticeable in other aspects of *Quartet* as well, such as references to the gap between society’s classes, a toying with the fake, and, additionally, the deaths at the end of the play. In both *The Maids* and *Quartet* a character dies at the end of the play, leaving the other “alone and drunk [left] to the magnificent destiny that awaits her” (Sartre 8). However, aside from the literal parallels to Genet, Mueller embraced Genet’s mask most openly when he directed a production of *Quartet* himself. A year and a half before his death, Mueller directed a production of *Quartet* that cleverly evoked Genet by adding characters dressed as maids to the performance and “planting them at the center of the action” (Kalb 1998, 196). In Mueller’s production of *Quartet*, the maids accentuated the societal gap between the classes even further; it is arguable that this statement too acted as homage to Genet, who lived a life of crime, which could be traced back to impoverished childhood (McMahon 2).

The setting of *Quartet* is also relevant to a discussion on identity as it pertains to the play, the playwright, and the playwright’s homeland. Mueller describes the setting for *Quartet* as “Timespace: Drawing room before the French revolution/Air raid shelter after World War III.” By placing the piece in a location that is both part of the past and



part of the future, Mueller produces a setting that lacks a graspable identity. The setting for the play is lost in an ambiguous and fantastical world somewhere between history and the future. Mueller's inaccessible and unidentified setting is a good illustration of Mueller sporting the literary masks of other literary figures. For example, his imaginative location mirrors Beckett's implementation of surreal environments in plays like *Endgame* and the performative nature of Valmont and Merteuil's characters echoes the "blackly sardonic . . . spirit [of] Didi and Gogo and Hamm and Clov" (Kalb 1998, 167). Additionally, the disordered timelessness of the setting alludes to Wagner's sentiment of wanting to "destroy the order of things" (Wagner) and Mueller's collage-like 'synthetic fragments' reflects Wagner's own ambitions in the theatre (Kalb 1998, 138). Additionally, Mueller's setting for *Quartet* is also a strong reflection of Germany's ongoing battle to find a national identity. Germany, like the setting for *Quartet*, has been caught between its history (a severely divided past) and its hope for a unified future for generations.

Germany's issues surrounding identity derive from a history of shifting borders, changing traditions, and racially motivated acts of exclusion. Up until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Germany's perpetually changing borders impaired Germany's potential to unite as a single nation-state (Craig)<sup>1</sup>. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Germany was deeply affected by the Thirty Years War, which dissolved the Holy Roman Empire leaving Germany split along religious lines with a more or less Protestant north and a Catholic south. The 18<sup>th</sup> century had an abundance of smaller territorial wars, which brought little clarity to Germany's still uncertain borders. In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a

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<sup>1</sup> The information in this paragraph and in the following paragraphs is a summary of the information found in the book *The Germans* by Gordon A. Craig.

German nationalist movement was formed to counter the Napoleonic rule that was sweeping throughout the divided German land. However, it was not until after the German-French War, which ended in 1871, that Germany was finally unified and could call itself a nation-state.

However, even after the unification in 1871, German citizens still felt fragmented and longed to form a strong, connected community. In order to counter the fragmentation the German Empire initiated an eastward expansion of Germany. As the unified Germany expanded, a movement to reinvent German tradition was also founded in the hopes of generating a solid basis for a collected nation-state. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Germany's strong sense of unity was continuing to evolve, a dangerous German hyper-nationalism began to emerge within the nation-state. As hyper-nationalism increased the concept of developing a strong national identity was used more and more to exclude those that did not fit the developing national criteria. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Germany's exclusion of Jews and other minorities was increasing, which over the next fifty years led to dramatic acts of segregation, abuse, and elimination. Born in 1926, Mueller was caught growing up in a country that was strengthening its national identity through racial and political exclusion; themes that would eventually be reflected in his work.

In the aftermath of the World War II German identity was once again significantly impacted. Poland's borders were shifted over onto what once was German territory, thus changing the shape of Germany once again and, more importantly, German land was divided into two sections: the East and the West. The division of Germany into East and West once again ruined Germany's attempts to grow as a united nation and

suddenly the German understanding of national identity was complicated once again by two entirely different ruling systems. Since Germany's re-unification in 1989, Germany has been struggling once again with its fragmented history and its desire to generate a strong, unified national identity; a desire that is currently rooted in its need to feel recognized by other countries as a legitimate, sovereign, and democratic nation.

As a native of Germany and a resident of East Berlin, Mueller was far from ignorant on the issues surrounding Germany's national identity crisis and the effects this crisis has had on individuals. In an interview with Marilyn Berlin Snell, Mueller stated that, "clearly, Germany is in the throes of an identity crisis, though there has never been a national identity encompassing one Germany. In the past, Germany has been united but only in opposition to some outside force; 'Germany' never constituted a natural, self-defined unit" (Snell 1). Mueller's manipulation of a setting that calls to mind both the past and the future, the two things that have most distressed German identity, indicates his hyper-awareness of Germany's struggle to find a national identity. Mueller's belief was that "only in theatre can identity be rescued" and, therefore, he used the concept of identity on many levels, through masks, games, manipulations, and settings to raise the issue of identity with the public.

As a piece that is intended to be staged and performed, *Quartet* is an intriguing work because the play itself has a strong tendency to take on a variety of different shapes when executed in a performance. Over the past twenty-five years the show has been presented numerous times in both the United States and Europe and each production has been "extraordinarily, even bewilderingly various, yet . . . letter-faithful [to the text] in its own way" (Kalb 1998, 175). Over the years, the setting for the piece has ranged from

dark crypts to ransacked historical museums and from devastated war shelters to bourgeois bedrooms; spaces have been filled with props and images or left almost completely bare. Costumes have varied from renaissance pieces to modern garb and the ensemble has numbered as few as two performers and as many as five. The piece has taken on a variety of supporting art forms, such as dance and mime and the intention of the piece has shifted from one director to the next. In discussing the various directions *Quartet* has taken, Jonathan Kalb wrote that, “the nine versions of *Quartet* that [he] saw between 1985 and 1996 led [him] to understand the enduring value of [Mueller’s] masks per se, the general importance of his aesthetic of malleability for the theatre” (1998, 174). Like the characters in *Quartet* and Mueller himself, like the play’s setting and Mueller’s homeland, Germany, *Quartet*’s identity is similar to that of a chameleon; it is designed to constantly change its colors and wear different masks.

*Quartet*, unlike most of Mueller’s plays, was written over a long period of time. Mueller began working on the piece in the 1950s, but did not finish writing it until the 1980s. The fact that Mueller wrote *Quartet* over a long stretch of time is yet another reason why the piece reflects such an enormous variety of masks. Due to Mueller’s protean nature, the playwright that he was in the 1950s is drastically different than the playwright he was thirty years later. His earlier plays, like *The Scab* (1956) and *The Correction* (1958), were inspired largely by Brecht’s *Lehrstück* (learning play) and in them Mueller tackled issues like the “futility of creating a socialist state in East Germany” (Calvert 1). Beginning in the late 1970s, Mueller’s work began to move beyond all traditional constraints of the theatre and his texts became increasingly more focused on the “body’s disintegration and dissolution, its merging with the landscapes . . .

and its submersion in [the] industrialized world of synthetic objects and technologization” (Fiebach 1). In addition to Mueller’s literary transformations from the 1950s to the 1980s, changes in his personal life also influenced his on-going work on *Quartet*. For example, as he finished his work on the text, he was living in Rome and staying on the top floor of a villa, directly above the room his ex-wife was residing in. As he sat at his desk, working on the text, he could hear his former wife fornicating with her new lovers (Kalb 1998, 176). However, his impact of his personal life as well as the span of time that it took Mueller to write *Quartet* ultimately strengthened the play’s already emphasized issues regarding identity and gave him the opportunity to make use of the various masks that he had explored in his own lifetime.

Throughout his life Mueller varied both his public and his private persona multiple times, but the one thing that Mueller did not swerve on was his belief and hope for the power of the theatre. Heiner Mueller, himself a great Shakespeare enthusiast, seemed consistent in his belief that “all the world’s a stage.” He once stated publicly that he felt as though “interviews are performances” (Kalb 1998, 4). Mueller’s performative mentality and approach to life is clearly mirrored in Valmont and Merteuil’s approach to their final existence, for they too opt for a performative lifestyle. “[Valmont and Merteuil] acknowledge the world as a theatre, in which they create roles of their own invention: and they create themselves” (Martin). However, every theatrical performance, whether it is in life or on stage, needs an audience of viewers to complete it. Even Heiner Mueller, who was resistant towards any sort of unmasking, believed that while his work could ask questions and raise issues, in the end “the audience must make the effort – they

must take some responsibility” (Snell 1). Even if they audience never succeeds in finding solutions, in unmasking the text, or identifying the playwright, they must make an effort.

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“The turn towards the image in the Mueller literature is part of a broader phenomenon within the human sciences. This phenomenon is confined not only to literary scholarship but one rooted in the changing nature of knowledge in modern society.”

-Matthew Griffin

In his texts Heiner Mueller skillfully weaves images together, layering them, to produce an intricate textual landscape brimming with suggestive symbolism. The images that Mueller employs in his texts are so powerful that they not only enhance the literary or dramatic environment, but they also have the potential to come alive as alternate characters or driving forces in the plot. In *Quartet* Mueller illustrates the commanding influence that images can have on a dramatic text. Throughout the text Mueller laces a seemingly eclectic array of images together to strengthen the plot and, also, to give Valmont and Merteuil alternate fixations besides one another. Mueller evokes images of time, animal behavior, and the orgasmic experiences of both sexual intercourse and death throughout the text. These visual themes take on their own presence in the script and force Valmont and Merteuil to engage with them as if they too are actors in the plot.

The element of time is brought into play from the onset of the text when Mueller sets the location as “Time: Drawing room before the French Revolution/Air-raid shelter

after World War III.” This setting of *Quartet* introduces the use of time as a non-linear, fantastical mechanism; it toys with the relationship of past to future and acts as another one of Mueller’s historical referencing devices. However, for the characters in *Quartet* time is a force to be manipulated and fought against in order to sustain their own existence. Mueller’s references to time occur frequently and regularly throughout the text accenting and, therefore, alerting Valmont and Merteuil of the passing of time while simultaneously heightening the viewers’ awareness of their own relationship to time and space. For Valmont and Merteuil “time is . . . relentless. Their time-machine of human manipulation is moving irreconcilably toward their extinction and they know it” (Martin). As time passes and Valmont and Merteuil’s annihilation grows closer the tactics in which they combat time increase.

In the opening scene of the play, Merteuil is alone playing an imaginary game in an effort to distract herself from the reality that she is alone, caught in the passage of time which will inevitably lead her to her death. However, after her game reaches its orgasmic peak time once again rears its ugly head. As Merteuil grows more conscious of the presence of time, the tone of her speech begins to shift, growing increasingly pessimistic, controlled, and mechanical and subtly referencing time by using words such as “ticking” and “speed” (106)<sup>2</sup>. However, with Valmont’s entry, which Merteuil exclaims to be “timed to the minute,” she finds a new hope and a new reason to fight off her end. Valmont’s entry is proof that Merteuil is not the only person left in world and, therefore, an indication that perhaps her end is not as close as she once thought it to be. In Valmont she finds an ally to help her in her battle against time and with this ally she begins to

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<sup>2</sup> The page numbers citing *Quartet* here and in the following pages refer to the Marc von Henning translation of Mueller’s text.

develop new ways to manipulate and combat time. For example, she attempts to freeze time or repeatedly relive moments of the past so as to avoid the future.

Mueller presents the notion of stopping time through incessant imagery of mirrors, stones, and museums which all suggest an ability to freeze time in their own way. In a speech to Valmont, Merteuil remarks that she could keep the aging Valmont looking young if only she “could turn him into a stone right now” (107). She then continues to indulge in the idea of creating a museum of past lovers, which would prevent time from changing and aging their lovers and, therefore, keep both time and, additionally, memories at a safe standstill. “The museum of our lovers . . . assembled chronologically . . . no more exposure to the horror of change” (107). Moreover, mirrors are referenced throughout the text to both support and juxtapose the notion of bringing time to a standstill. Depending on how Valmont and Merteuil are manipulating one another, mirrors either act as frozen pictures: a timeless version of the living, or as a reminder that time is passing quickly and Valmont and Merteuil are rapidly approaching their extinction.

In addition to Valmont and Merteuil’s attempts to fossilize time, they also resist the passage of time by engaging in games that relive moments of the past by replaying earlier scenarios. However, even as they desperately indulge in these games to avoid the reality of the future, the presence of time is evident. As Valmont and Merteuil’s fantastical diversions continue, Mueller demonstrates a literary acceleration of time by altering the pace of the text. As time increasingly threatens his characters’ lives, Mueller shifts the pace of the text from his consistently long passages to snappy one-liners (119).



This drastic change propels the text forward, reminding the audience of the quick passing of time, and proving Valmont and Merteuil's avoidance techniques futile.

Valmont and Merteuil's desperate attempts to evade time are driven by their fear of death. Through Mueller's use of imagery, death, like time, seems to take on its own abstract persona and become yet another force that Valmont and Merteuil must protect themselves from. In a speech dissuading Valmont from abandoning her Merteuil desperately evokes death as a manipulation tactic to keep Valmont engaged with her. By the end of her meticulous description of death she has tapped into Valmont's own fear of dying and, therefore, succeeded in persuading Valmont to stay with her and play another game to avoid reality.

Throughout the majority of the text Mueller develops a strong tie between the human experience of dying and the act of engaging in sexual intercourse. In her speech to Valmont, Merteuil sensually describes death as "tear[ing] the silk from [her] thighs as it heaves itself on top of [her]" (110). The correlation between sexual intercourse and death in *Quartet* demonstrates Valmont and Merteuil's need to flirt with their worst fear, death, and for their everlasting desire for the thrill of orgasmic release. For them, the mere thought of death, however scary it may be, produces a sensation similar to an orgasm. Although Valmont and Merteuil fear death's embrace in their present life as they press up against reality of it, they use death in their make-believe games with one another to get each other off. As Merteuil says to Valmont: "there's no man who wouldn't get a hard-on at the idea of his own precious flesh passing away" (109).

Valmont and Merteuil's yearning for orgasmic thrills extends from their basic animal nature. They are paradoxically representations of both bourgeois society, relying on

calculated logic and illustrations of human beings as beasts of prey, aching to fulfill their physical needs. Valmont and Merteuil's animal behavior is embodied throughout the text, once again, through Mueller's use of language and imagery. In her opening speech, Merteuil introduces the correlation between human beings and animal nature by likening hands to paws (105). Only moments later she likens Valmont to an animal when she states that "the greatest ecstasy in the ecstasy of animals [which he] did stir in [her] now and then" (106). In addition to the ceaseless references to animals and animal nature throughout the text, the use of words like "gamekeeper" and "poacher" draw and perpetuate parallels between lusting after another human and hunting for an animal. For Valmont and Merteuil love is a hunt for the best prey; it fulfills a physical need as opposed to an emotional one. As Valmont says, "what good is the prey without the voluptuous pleasures of the chase" (108).

Animal behavior is also reflected in Valmont and Merteuil's heightened senses. While they possess (and utilize) the mental human trait of logic, they seem void of complex human emotions belonging to the heart. In fact, they consider such feelings a weakness in the other person and attack one another for the slightest hint of vulnerability, after all, "virtue is an infectious disease" (110). In place of human emotions, however, Valmont and Merteuil have developed heightened senses, like those of an animal, capable of smelling out another's fear and closely eyeing each other's every move. Valmont and Merteuil's physical urges are driven by their animal instinct, for they have become slaves to their senses.

The animal imagery in *Quartet*, like the literary illustrations of time and death, not only strengthen the characters and the plot, but also reinforce a patchwork quality that

Mueller has skillfully injected throughout the piece. In his text, Mueller creates a collage of powerful images and weaves them together, connecting them in such a way that seemingly unrelated representations link together to enrich the language, plot, and characters. Moreover, Mueller's methods of lacing representative imagery together mirror the way in which he weaves a knowledgeable array of literature, history, and philosophy throughout his work. Mueller's style of writing cleverly pulls from all aspects of mankind and human nature, introducing the reader/viewer to a single drawn out moment of our eclectic, historic and, basic world.

The literary collage that Mueller produces in *Quartet* incorporates a vast array of aesthetics, ideologies, histories, identities, and images. The variety of material in Mueller's textual work seems to indicate that the performance elements of *Quartet* should be rooted in a similar collage-like methodology. In order to fully engage the viewer in the story of *Quartet* they should experience the play through a variety of different lenses. With the added performance elements of movement, color, sound, lighting, text, sensation, personal involvement, and artistic collage as an extension of Mueller's textual array of literature, history, and philosophy, Mueller's text can successfully be transferred from a literal collage to a dramatic collage in a performance that engages both intellect and instinct.

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