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“ANTIQUÉ” DRAMAS BY HEINER MÜLLER ADAPTATION OF MYTHS OR A NEW DRAMATIC AESTHETICS

ANTIKE DRAMEN HEINER MÜLLERS
ADAPTION DER MYTHEN ODER EINE NEUE THEATERÄSTHETIK

Der Artikel analysiert die Tragödienkonzeption Heiner Müllers im Kontext seiner Antike-Adaptionen. Interpretiert werden drei Stücke, die aus formaler Perspektive verschiedene Wege der Antike-Rezeption präsentieren. Der kurze Text *Der Horatier* übernimmt den Stoff aus Livius *Ab urbe condita* und erzählt die Geschichte der Horatier in einer Form, die man auch als Verserzählung bezeichnen könnte. Das Drama *Philoktet* stützt sich vor allem auf die Vorlage von Sophokles. *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten* ist eine sehr freie Adaption des Medea-Mythos und nur in Grundzügen ist sie dem antiken Stoff treu. Trotz dieser formalen Unterschiede zeigen die drei Texte – offensichtlich gegen die Intention ihres Autors, der nach grossen, tragischen Problemen in der kommunistischen Gesellschaft der DDR suchte – Züge einer Poetik, die die Nähe zur Mitleidsästhetik des bürgerlichen Trauerspiels offenbart. Die nähere Analyse deckt Widersprüche auf, die das Individuum, das persönliche Leiden zum Hauptproblem machen. Die private Tragödie der Protagonisten scheint die Tragödie zu verdrängen, die im öffentlichen Raum angesiedelt ist. Dies ist ein überraschendes Ergebnis, bedenkt man Müllers Selbstdeutung sowie seine Rolle im DDR-Kulturbetrieb.

Keywords: Heiner Müller, Tragödie, bürgerliches Trauerspiel, DDR-Literatur

The work of Heiner Müller is a one of a kind phenomenon of German-language literature. Müller made his debut in the 1950s as an author of plays that are today defined as “propagandist dramas”. The staging of one of them, *Die Umsiedlerin oder das Leben auf dem Lande* in 1961 at a student stage of Berlin Karlshorst concluded in a scandal, questionings and not only in a ban on staging the text, but also in a ban for the author on working in the theatre, his expulsion from the writers’ association and a ban on publication¹.

¹ Information concerning the crisis related to *Umsiedlerin* can be found in the autobiography of Heiner Müller: H. Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht. Leben in zwei Diktaturen*, Köln: KiWi 1992, p. 160–187,

After he regained favour of the party apparatus, Müller for a long time did not resume the issues rooted in the GDR reality. He concentrated on motifs that had occupied him for a long time but had not been properly reflected in his work. Propagandist dramas were replaced with plays based on tragedies of European literature and large historical themes. The GDR writer devoted many of his writings to adaptations of mythological motifs, mainly-ancient tragedies, and, apart from them, to Shakespearean tragedy. His most acknowledged – also in Poland – plays comprise inter alia: *Philoctetes*, *The Hamletmachine*, *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts*, *Titus Anatomy Fall Of Rome* and a cycle entitled *Germania*.

From the second half of the 1960s, Müller organized his cooperation with communist authorities. He was too well-known and respected a writer to be prevented from publishing. He became an export product of the GDR and used a unique privilege – freedom to travel, he could stage his dramas in West Germany and there he enjoyed more popularity than in his socialist homeland, where censorship blocked premieres and interfered with texts.

Müller did not try to leave the GDR although he had many occasions to do that. He claimed he needed social background he could experience in a communist country. Only there did he have at his disposal material he could call truly tragic, while in West Germany he could only write the so-called Bourgeois tragedies (“Trauerspiel”)². It is also important that Müller’s tragedy – according to Hans-Thies Lehmann³ – does not present a conflict of stage characters that are as if enclosed in their monologues, but rather creates tension between the stage and the audience: the tragedy takes place here. In this respect, Müller’s texts are models of political texts.

Adaptation of mythological motives became in the GDR a popular strategy intended to avoid censorship. Owing to parable, which the censor was not always able to comprehend, one could reach educated readers and achieve complete creative freedom⁴.

as well as in many papers, inter alia, monographies: J.Ch. Hauschild, *Heiner Müller oder Das Prinzip Zweifel. Eine Biographie*, Berlin: Aufbau 2001; N. O. Eke: *Heiner Müller*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1999; U. Schütte: *Heiner Müller*, Köln–Weimar–Wien: UTB 2010. A lot of valuable information is collected in the interview and discussions published as: H. Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer*, Frankfurt/Main: Verlag der Autoren, 3 vol. 1986, 1991, 1994.

² About “bürgerliches Trauerspiel”: F. Schöbler, *Einführung in das bürgerliche Trauerspiel und das soziale Drama*, Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft 2003; B. Greiner, *Die Tragödie. Eine Literaturgeschichte des aufrechten Ganges. Grundlagen und Interpretationen*, Stuttgart: Kröner 2012, pp. 313–346.

³ See H.T. Lehmann, *Zwischen Monolog und Chor. Zur Dramaturgie Heiner Müllers*, edd. I. Wallace, D. Tate, G. Labrousse, *Heiner Müller: Probleme und Perspektiven*. Bath Symposium 1998, Amsterdam–Atlanta: Editions Rodopi 2000, pp. 11–26, p. 16.

⁴ The best known adaptations of Greek myths that clearly referred to the socio-political situation in GDR are: *Cassandra* a novel by Christa Wolf, poems by Günter Kunert (in particular *Ikarus 64*), a collection *Preußischer Ikarus* by Wolf Biermann, *Iphigenie in Freiheit* by Volker Braun,

One could, hence, suspect that also Müller used myths as a smokescreen and, thus, smuggled works that in a socialist country would not find a publisher in any other way. The assumption of this paper is a conviction that in his adaptations Müller uses myth as a type of “alienation effect” (“Verfremdungseffekt”). He does not “adapt” myths but quotes them as archetypical examples of recurring social situations and exposes not only the cynical and pragmatic GDR system, but also the “Western” instrumentalisation of values for ad hoc political or economic purposes. In the FRG, the critical potential of his works was received with enthusiasm, while in the GDR it met with a lot of reserve and dislike, alleviated only by Müller’s recognition linked to his consequent fidelity to the GDR. Plots taken from mythology and Shakespeare additionally enabled deeper reflection over the form and meaning of tragedy in totalitarian society.

Norbert Otto Eke writes that following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the final loss of political utopias, Müller revised his notion of tragedy, reaching the conclusion that this genre burnt out since political constellations of our world lost their tragic stigma. Eke reminds though the sentence by Ilya Ehrenburg Müller quoted in one of interviews: “When communism wins and all economic problems are solved, the tragedy of man will begin: the tragedy of human mortality”⁵.

Müller’s concept of drama is formed between the two theses: the thesis about vanishing of tragedy due to absence of huge social and political conflicts, and the strength of tragedy resulting from the very essence of humanity. This concept began to develop already in the second half of the 1960s, so a long time before the fall of the Wall, following the crisis connected to *Umsiedlerin*. I would like to illustrate it using two works as a showcase that staged in Poland, though remain unknown to a wider audience: *Philoctetes* and *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts*.

In the first part of this paper, I will use the paradigmatic example of a tragic conflict, namely the short drama *Der Horatier: Horatius*. I choose *Horatius* as a paradigm of changes in a Müller-inspired theatre since this work combines

numerous prose works of Franz Fühmann, dramas of the 1960s by Peter Hacks: *Die schöne Helena* (1964) and *Amphitryon* (1968), last but not least, the stage plays by Heiner Müller. To this topic.: M. E. Lüdde, *Die Rezeption, Interpretation und Transformation biblischer Motive und Mythen in der DDR-Literatur und ihre Bedeutung für die Theologie*, Berlin, New York: de Gruyter 1993; S. Georg, *Modell und Zitat: Mythos und Mythisches in der deutschsprachigen Literatur der 80er Jahre*, Aachen: Shaker 1996; I. Crăciun, *Die Politisierung des antiken Mythos in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*, Tübingen: Niemeyer 2000; S. Jentgens, *Kassandra. Spielarten einer literarischen Figur*, Hildesheim: Olms 1995; E. C. Huller, *Griechisches Theater in Deutschland. Mythos und Tragödie bei Heiner Müller und Botho Strauß*, Köln–Weimar–Wien: Böhlau 2007.

⁵ N. O. Eke, *Furcht und Schrecken im Theater der Erinnerung oder “Man sollte Komödien schreiben/Leben in diesem trüben Menschenbrei”*. Heiner Müllers Tragödie, edd. V. C. Dörr, H. H. Schneider, *Die deutsche Tragödie. Neue Lektüren einer Gattung im europäischen Kontext*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis 2006, pp. 235–254, p. 248.

a few seemingly contradictory features: it is written more in the form of an epic poem than a theatrical text, thus it meets requirements of a post-dramatic work. On the other hand, it uses a clear plot meeting by this token Brecht's postulate of the comprehensiveness of a play's action. This work falls into the category of the so-called "Lehrstücke"⁶ – a form Müller took over from Brecht – namely plays with a moral, teaching plays, but, on the other hand, it is very open and can be interpreted in various ways and adjusted to different situations. *Horatius* was staged in 1973 in West Berlin and in the GDR was allowed on the stage first in 1988⁷. Müller paraphrases a tale of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*.

Rome and Alba Longa are at war. Since both city-states are expecting the attack of the Etruscans, they opt for a symbolic battle via their proxies. In Livy's tale, three Horatius brothers are chosen on the side of Rome and three Curatius brothers on the side of Alba. Horatius – the last to remain alive – wins. Müller shortens this part of the story: in his play one Horatius fights against one Curatius. In the text of the GDR writer, the narrative of struggle and victory serves only as an introduction to the proper subject matter of the play, which is the trial Horatius is put to by Romans. The victor over Alba committed an unnecessary crime: in a fit of patriotic officiousness he killed his sister who was crying over her fiancé – one of the Curatius brothers. In Livy's narrative Horatius is acquitted, or – under influence of pleads of the father who had already lost his three children during one day – he is subject to only symbolic punishment. "What influenced men most of all in that trial was the assertion of Publius Horatius, the father, that his daughter had been justly slain; otherwise he should have used a father's authority and have punished his son, himself"⁸. Moreover, the whole incident is mythologized to illustrate precedence of public welfare over private one:

And so, that the flagrant murder might yet be cleansed away, by some kind of expiatory rite, the father was commanded to make atonement for his son at the public cost. He therefore offered certain peculiar sacrifices, which were thenceforward handed down in the Horatian family, and, erecting a beam across the street, to typify a yoke, he made his son pass under it, with covered head. It remains to this day, being restored from time to time at the state's expense, and is known as 'the Sister's Beam'⁹.

⁶ Wolfram Ette writes that these plays bring close the form of a drama to the point where teleological gesture is overflowed. See W. Ette, *Kritik der Tragödie. Über dramatische Entschleunigung*, Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft 2011, p. 507. This is an important comment: Müller takes the moral message of these text to the absurd, thanks to which one can clearly see the emptiness of each persistently pursued ideology. Ette writes on to say that these plays (*Horace*, *Philoctetes* and *Mausier*) negate all hope of progress [civilization, moral]. See *ibidem* 509.

⁷ See Eke: *Heiner Müller*, p. 122.

⁸ B. O. Foster, *Livy in Fourteen Volumes, I: Books I and II, with an English Translation*, vol. 1, Harvard University Press, London: William Heinemann LTD, first printed 1919, reprinted 1988, p. 93.

⁹ *Ibidem* 95.

Corneille in his play *Horace* achieves a similar result. Also here – in a significantly extended plot – the key role is played by a father who convinces the king that merits of his son outweigh the crime. Heiner Müller also introduces the figure of the father, but it has a totally different function than in Livy, possibly in Corneille? Initially, the old man seems to be afraid he might partake in his daughter’s fate: he bewails her covering “his face”¹⁰ and at the same time praises his son’s victory over Alba. Yet, when he notes that the Romans want to sentence young Horatius to death for the murder of his sister, he pleads them for mercy, convinces with rational arguments and, when not successful, offers his own life in exchange for the life of his child. But in vain: in Müller’s play, the Romans want a totally just trial: therefore, at first they decorate Horatius’ forehead with a laurel wreath, then take his life; at first they honor the dead body with a state funeral, then they let the dog devour the corpse. Only the father recognizes the absurd symmetry of this seemingly ideal verdict on victor /murder and murder / victor¹¹.

This work was interpreted, as suggested by the author himself, as a reaction to events in Czechoslovakia in 1968¹². The text seemed to call for honest settlement with fighting methods used by communist authorities in order to save the political system: victory and consequent benefits should not become a pretext for hiding and sweeping under the rug dubious political practices and unnecessary victims. Such change of Livy’s and Corneille’s versions, in which Horatius is forgiven for the killing of his sister, seems to suggest that the joy and pride of victory over the enemy in a just country should not acquit criminals who simultaneously earned their merits as heroes. However, this interpretation does not account for the role of the father who in Müller’s play has a key part. The father, guilty of nothing himself, is punished along with his son. Although he does not lose his life, he has to watch his last child’s death. He is left without even a grave: he refers to himself as the first in suffering “I, who am the most bereft”¹³. He tries to explain to the Romans that death annihilates all laurels, that Rome, by the killing of the young Horatius, deprives itself of its collective memory. But the Romans, in their just blindness, do not hear the father. Horatius himself does not try to defend or justify himself. His silence seems to exclude him as the protagonist of a drama; according to Schiller, pleading guilty of one’s own mistake and the need to make amends for it became the source of moral satisfaction (Schiller writes about pleasure), which was the *sine qua non* precondition of Schillerian tragedy¹⁴.

¹⁰ H. Müller, *The Horatian*, H. Müller, *Three Plays: Philoctetes, The Horatian, Mauser*, translated by N. McBride, with an introduction by U. Schütte. London: Seagull Books 2011, p. 73.

¹¹ *Ibidem* 76.

¹² See Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht*, p. 259.

¹³ Müller, *The Horatian*, p. 79.

¹⁴ See F. Schiller, *Über den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen*, F. Schiller, *Gesammelte Werke*. 8: *Philosophische Schriften*, Berlin: Aufbau 1955, pp. 164–177.

If in Livy's and Corneille's plays the father can convince the people (or the king) and manages to save the son's life, then in Müller's drama he loses everything: both children and unity with Rome. His tragedy is not of national nature but is a personal affliction because the people of Rome believe in their victory and are not shaken by the fate of the Horatius family. Thus, against his own intentions and poethologic declarations, Müller presented in *Der Horatier* a bourgeois tragedy. Ideal justice destroys the individual and ruins the grounds of its existence. A very clearly narrated plot and, at the same time, the narrative method, depriving the director of interpretative freedom, mean that the spectator sympathizes with the despairing father and does not identify with the just rigor of the Romans. The play relies on truly Lessing's "Mitleidsästhetik"¹⁵.

Similar contradictions between the theoretical assumptions and the concept of drama Müller developed since the 1960s to his death and presented plot accompany most adaptations of ancient tragedies.

Philoctetes appears to imitate the pathos of Sophocles' play¹⁶ and seemingly to a small degree updates its content. Yet, a few minor interventions into the tale about Odysseus and Philoctetes on Lemnos and a major change of the end modify the meaning of the myth and turn it into a modern political drama. It is understandable that Müller resigns from the choir, the division into prologue, parodos, epeisodions, exodos, etc. He also resigns from most of typical paraphrases such as "Laertes' son". The action is denser, he often uses longer sentences similar to monologues, not only quick dialogues between two or three characters – apart from Philoctetes, Odysseus and Neoptolemos there are no other protagonists in Müller's play. Despite the difficult blank verse of the text and its linguistic abundance, *Philoctetes* is comprehensible. The above listed formal measures cause that the protagonists are more expressive than those of Sophocles. Sophocles' Odysseus is a cold pragmatist but he basically has the welfare of Greece on mind¹⁷:

¹⁵ Notion of "Mitleid" and "Mitleidsästetik" is explained in many publications. One can recommend: H. J. Schings, *Der mitleidigste Mensch ist der beste Mensch: Poetik des Mitleids von Lessing bis Büchner*, München: Beck 1980; ed. I. von der Lühe, N. Gülcher, *Ethik und Ästhetik des Mitleids*. Freiburg i. B.–Berlin–Wien: Rombach 2007; P. Szondi, *Die Theorie des bürgerlichen Trauerspiels im 18. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1973; Schößler, *Einführung in das bürgerliche Trauerspiel*.

¹⁶ Most analyses of drama pay attention only to the inspiration with Sophocles' drama. Eva C. Huller, in her very thorough and detailed interpretation, indicates additionally other pretexts: most importantly *Philoctetes* by Euripides (75), *Illiad* by Homer, *Eneid* by Virgil and the myth of Prometheus (57) and Ajax (63). See Huller, *Griechisches Theater in Deutschland*, pp. 46–102, especially pp. 49–50.

¹⁷ Huller notes the subjection of Odysseus' actions to an obligation towards his homeland, which – according to the rules defined also by Plato – should justify the use of lie. See *ibidem* 54 and 55. Huller emphasizes – by reference to relevant subject literature the fact the Sophocles' Odysseus is a political 'par excellence' and act according to rules of 'instrumental reason' Huller recalls Horkheimer and Adorno – but nevertheless his behaviour meets with the Gods' approval. See *ibidem* 85ff.

he resorts to deceit as he knows that Philoctetes will not willingly go to Troy and the Greeks will be doomed to fail in the war that has already been fought for ten years. Müller portrays Odysseus as a cynic who subjects human life to abstract and inhuman ideology. Odysseus in Sophocles’ play with relative ease convinces Neoptolemos that a lie is necessary. Müller introduces, apart from arguments familiar from the Greek drama, also additional, unfair: Odysseus reminds, for example, that both he and Achilles, Neoptolemos’ father, used trickery to reach success. Yet, the most crucial is the change concluding the drama. Sophocles introduces Heracles that appears as *deus ex machina*, forces Philoctetes to participate in the attack on Troy and instructs him how to behave after the victory. Also Neoptolemos receives instructions. They both agree easily with Heracles’ instructions and there is no further dispute. “PH. You make your appearance after a long time / and speak with a voice that I have longed for; / and I shall not disregard your words. NE. I, too, am in agreement”¹⁸. Odysseus’ arguments receive support from the gods and it turns out that although he did not act morally, his cold and pragmatic solutions are effective, they win over honesty and honor.

Müller chooses a totally different conclusion. Philoctetes wants to kill Odysseus. Neoptolemos puts a sword in his back and saves Itaka’s son but now has a weaker person’s blood on his hands. Not Heracles but a kettle of vultures come from the sky to devour the corpse. Neoptolemos is shaken by his act while Odysseus uses Philoctetes’ death for current political purposes: he wants to tell the Greeks who are waiting for their excellent archer and chief, that the Trojans murdered him. By doing so he will fuel the Greeks’ hatred and use the prisoner of Lemnos even after his death. Odysseus uses logic of instrumental reason, the rules that the end justifies the means.¹⁹ One is, thus, not surprised that Odysseus lied to Neoptolemos:

NEOPTOLEMOS

You told me if he didn’t come with us
Then Troy would raze our cities to the ground.

ODYSSEUS

I did. And now I’m telling you something else.
Which is, this man we needed in seven storms
We need no longer, and must be left behind
Beneath these rocks, with both his feet now healed
And we without him must conclude the war²⁰.

¹⁸ Sophocles: *Philoctetes*. With an Introduction, Translation & Commentary by R.G. Ussher. Warminster: Aris & Phillips 1990, p. 109.

¹⁹ See Huller, *Griechisches Theater in Deutschland*, pp. 86ff.

²⁰ H. Müller, *Philoctetes*, H. Müller, *Three plays: Philoctetes, The Horatian, Mauser*; translated by N. McBride, with an introduction by U. Schütte, London: Seagull Books 2011, p. 65.

And immediately he invents a clever lie, a lie he wants to tell the Greeks that Philoctetes was murdered by the Trojans. Neoptolemos replies that if this was what happened, then also Odysseus might have got killed, which threat the latter cynically fends off, suggesting that nobody would believe Neoptolemos; a naïve youth cannot protect himself against the wit of an excellent politician.

No wonder that Müller's play – according to the author's intention – was interpreted as a parable of the communist system, in which an unfeeling and inhumanly rational party activist is ready to trade any moral rule for the so-called "idea", distant and abstract, but presented as the only right one. Neoptolemos is in this interpretation a cheated idealist, not able to protect himself against the betrayal of his own rules. The murder of Philoctetes is an ideological initiation of Achilles' young son who shall from now wade in lies because Odysseus has him now fully in his grasp²¹. Philoctetes loses the role of the main hero, he is a fool blinded in his hatred of the Greeks, gullible and naïve²². The connotation with stasi methods was very obvious in the GDR. Western critics and literary scholars – a pre-premiere took place in 1968 in the Munich Residenztheater – emphasize that the radical de-heroisation of Odysseus can be understood also in a universal way: as the reduction of man to his immediate usefulness²³. Not only the party apparatus of the GDR instrumentalised basic moral standards, but modern concerns, corporations and media do the same.

Subject literature has, so far, attributed little importance to the private tragedy of Philoctetes or Neoptolemos²⁴. Such political mainframe matched Müller's declaration and the politicizing of German literature of that time.

This is a correct interpretation, though it does not account for deepened personalities of both Odysseus' "victims". After all Achilles' young son²⁵ murders Philoctetes not because he wants his bow, but to save Odysseus from death. He acts spontaneously and in a good cause. He seems shattered with his deed, he un-

²¹ This is how the character of Neoptolemos is interpreted by an expert in Heiner Müller's work, Norbert Otto Eke. See Eke, *Heiner Müller*, p. 111, also G. Schulz, *Heiner Müller*, Stuttgart: Metzler 1980, pp. 71–83, especially p. 81.

²² This is also how – as basic conflict between an individual and totalitarian political system – Karol Sauerland interprets the drama that appeared in Poland in "Literatura na świecie" already in 1976. Karol Sauerland. K. Sauerland, *Smutna prawda*, "Literatura na świecie" 1, 57 (1976), pp. 108–111.

²³ E. Lefèvre, *Sophokles' und Heiner Müllers Philoktet*, ed. S. Gödde, T. Heinze, *Skenika: Beiträge zum antiken Theater und seiner Rezeption; Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Horst-Dieter Blume*. Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft 2000, pp. 419–438, p. 425. Lefèvre refers to M. Kraus: *Heiner Müller und die griechische Tragödie. Dargestellt am Beispiel des Philoktet*, "Poetica" 17 (1985), pp. 299–339.

²⁴ Huller emphasises that characters are also victims of tragedy. Along with the rejection of destiny and fate one also negates the meaning of Greek tragedy. See Huller, *Griechisches Theater in Deutschland*, p. 88. Yet Huller does not see in *Philoctetes* features of the "bürgerliches Trauerspiel".

²⁵ Huller points out inter alia the problem of identity of Müller's characters, which played no role in their ancient predecessors. See *ibidem* 62ff.

derstands he committed a murder. Also, Odysseus seems to trust more in a morally clear nature of the young man than in contemporary rottenness. Immediately after Philoctetes' murder he says to Neoptolemus: “You learn your lessons quickly”²⁶, but when the latter threatens him with death, Odysseus turns his back on him and is sure Neoptolemos could not have murdered in cold blood. He knows he killed to save another life, maybe thoughtlessly but without malice aforethought. We cannot, therefore, be sure that the young warrior was corrupted by the skilled politician, that he was deprived of his moral innocence. Also, Philoctetes is blind in his hatred for the Greeks, but he is not without a mind of his own. He loses because he trusted in Neoptolemus, which proves his correct moral instinct, deceived not by Achilles's son but by Odysseus who knows his enemies and uses the fact that none of them would act against their honor. In the GDR, *Philoctetes* was finally allowed on the stage in 1974 in a student theatre in Leipzig, and only in 1977 in Deutsches Theater in East-Berlin; it was also staged in Poland²⁷. The open message of the play, enhanced by complex and contradictory dialogues enabled also an interpretation according to the party's reasoning: public welfare wins over hesitation, insecurity and interests of an individual. Still, neither Western nor Eastern interpretations took into consideration the “Trauerspiel” taking place amidst great, national tragedy. The triumph over Troy or defeat outshadow the misfortune of an individual presented directly on the stage, which individual – cheated, betrayed and humiliated – does not find satisfaction in meeting social needs.

*Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts*²⁸ can serve as an example of “post-dramatic” theatre²⁹, in which one has rejected both the plot and typical stage dramaturgy. From the Medea myth it only, generally, borrows its basic motifs. The text – created over many years and reflecting many stages of Müller's work – is a triptych³⁰. The first part or the first scene, *Waterfront Wasteland* is a description of post-war, deteriorated landscape, against which a portrayal of degenerated society is shown. Allusion to the end of World War II is obvious: “SOME WERE DANGLING FROM THE LAMP POSTS TONGUES / HANG-

²⁶ Müller, *Philoctetes*, p. 64.

²⁷ In Poland *Philoctetes* was played once in Toruń in 1976 (as conclusion of Days of GDR Theatre, Music and Art.), and in 1980 in Warsaw (Teatr Adekwatny). Specific data about origin and creation of the drama as well as publication of plays in Eke, *Heiner Müller*, p. 106, Hauschild, *Heiner Müller oder Das Prinzip Zweifel*, pp. 253ff., Huller, *Griechisches Theater in Deutschland*, pp. 46ff. (chapter about *Philoctetes*, pp. 46–102); Greiner, *Die Tragödie*, pp. 780ff. (chapter about *Philoctetes*, pp. 780–798).

²⁸ Prepremiere: Bochum 1983; Poland: 1985: Teatr Studio im. Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza Warszawa.

²⁹ H. T. Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*, Frankfurt/Main: Verlag der Autoren 1999.

³⁰ The same description is applied by Ewa Szymani, who devoted to Müller's works, inter alia. *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts* a monograph, one of the very few publications about Müller written in Polish. E. Walerich-Szymani, *Godzina aktora. Poszukiwanie utopii w dramaturgii Heinera Müllera*, Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka 2004.

ING OUT THEIR MOUTHS IN FRONT OF THEIR / BELLIES THE CARD-BOARD / SIGNS I'M A COWARD"³¹. The Argonauts' journey to Colchis, marked with only a few characteristic words, seems to be in this vision of a horrid world, a model of all wars and acts of aggression. *Waterfront Wasteland* in the final sentence indicates only Medea: "On the bed though Medea her carved-up / Brother in her arms Expert / In poisons"³². The second part is opened by three voices: Medea, the Nanny, and Jason, who appears only at the beginning and very briefly at the end of the scene. In Deutsches Theater in Berlin, in the stage version of Dimitrji Gottschew, the whole second part is recited by one actress, playing Medea, because it is her monologue that dominates the second part. It is a cry of despair of a betrayed woman that cunningly takes revenge and murders her husband's new fiancée:

Now go to your wedding Jason / I want to turn the bride into a wedding torch / Just watch your mother's drama / Want to see her burn the new bride / The wedding dress worn by the woman of blood / On her own wedding day is talented with murder at / The touch of another's skin / Wounds and scars maid good poison / Medea experts in poisons From out of the ashes / That were my heart flames will belch³³.

As children are not laughing and rejoicing, but crying, Medea kills them. Müller not only summarises in the heroine's monologue the main plot which is the basis for later literary versions of the myth – the conquest of Colchis, Medea's help for Jason (along with the murder of her brother), the rejection of Medea by her husband in Corinth, the lethal gift for Glauke and eventually infanticide – but also depicts the progressing madness of the hurt and rejected Medea. Only under the influence of Jason's betrayal does Medea seem to gain awareness of the crimes she committed of love for the strange Greek. She repeatedly says: „You still owe me a brother JASON"³⁴. It appears that the monologue is not only going into psychosis and madness but also constitutes therapy and enables Medea to return to Colchis with 'wild' identity – the cost is breaking off all relations with Jason:

Now she screams Have you ears caught / The sound of her screaming Colchis screamed / Like that when you lay in my womb and is / Still screaming Have you ears caught her screaming / [...] Today is payday Jason Today Medea is / Trawling in her debts / Now can you laugh Death is a gift / From my hands you shall receive it / The place I once called home now a foreign land / I broke with utterly with these my hands so that / I would never be a home for you to scorn me from / If only I'd remained the animal I once was / Before a man made a woman of me /

³¹ H. Müller, *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts*, ed. M. von Henning, *Heiner Müller: Theatremachine*, translated by: M. von Henning, Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1995, p. 48.

³² *Ibidem* 48.

³³ *Ibidem* 52.

³⁴ *Ibidem* 50, 51, 52.

Medea the woman of blood Now cast out / With these the human hands of the woman of blood / Evaporating hands grazed punctured many times / I want to cleave mankind I two / And live in the empty centre [...]³⁵.

The scene ends with Medea’s question: „Maid Do you know this man”³⁶ – this suggests that the Colchis princess has returned – paying twice the price – to her homeland.

The final scene of the triptych *Landscape with Argonauts* once again depicts a vision of war or of permanent catastrophe. At first it begins with Jason’s monologue, then develops into a universal vision of annihilation, processed by modern media – true and created at the same time.

The play *Waterfront Wasteland Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts*, likewise *Philoctetes*, met with numerous interpretations. They try to account for the suggestions of Müller himself, included in his comments, an autobiography and also a short note at the end of the drama. Most interpretations follow this trait and understand Müller’s text as politically committed. Yet, the longest, most expressive and having a plot part is the middle scene of the triptych which presents Medea’s tragedy. Gottscheff (one of Müller’s favourite directors) in his stage version followed these hints and showed Medea in the centre while other parts remained abstract images. The Bulgarian director, though, chose the convention of post-dramatic theatre, playing with the body, imagery, colour and, finally, also with the voice of Medea blaming Jason – but not with the plot. The play acquired universal dimension and partially lost its original connection to the myth.

However, if we want to extract from Müller’s text its very essence, then the basic tale with which the reader or the spectator are confronted is the story of a betrayed and rejected woman, who in her despair seeks cruel revenge: this tale is familiar mainly from “Trauerspiel”, according to Müller – the worse brother of tragedy.

Summary

Heiner Müller’s adaptations, in particular, the adaptations of ancient tragedies, indicate obviously the universal *conditio humana* – which was and is the function of myths, and, in particular, update familiar plots, adapting them to the needs of polemics with totalitarian systems (the GDR comes to mind naturally) and with problems of all humanity. In this sense, Müller’s dramas are political, committed tragedies and constitute important input in this – small – sphere of GDR culture, which we might refer to as contesting. But this is not what makes Müller’s

³⁵ *Ibidem* 53.

³⁶ *Ibidem* 54.

plays masterpieces. Their topicality and aesthetic attractiveness results from an openness with which the author – maybe against his own intention but led by an exceptional stage instinct – could relate tragedy to the “Trauerspiel”. He managed to avoid direct relation to the genre tradition and inadequate sentimentalism to expose the thesis – unacceptable in the GDR – that the tragedy of an individual will always outweigh the tragedy of the collective.