

The Hamletmachine
by Heiner Mueller, 1979

Translation: Dennis Redmond © 2001

Translation notes: Mueller's original text quotes a number of English words and phrases. These are outlined below by rectangles, rather than an alternate font or italics, so as not to disrupt Mueller's deliberate use of capital letters and spacing.

1

FAMILY ALBUM

I was Hamlet. I stood on the coast and spoke with the surf BLABLA at my back the ruins of Europe. The bells sounded in the state funeral, murderer and widow a pair, the town councilors in goose-step behind the coffin of the High Cadaver, wailing in badly-paid grief WHO IS THE CORPSE IN THE MEAT-WAGON'S STY / FOR WHOM IS THERE SUCH A HUE AND CRY? / THE CORPSE IS OF A GREAT / GIVER OF ESTATE The pillar of the population, work of his statecraft HE WAS A MAN WHO ONLY TOOK ALL FROM ALL. I stopped the corpse-train, sprang the coffin with my sword, broke it to the hilt, succeeded with the blunt remains, and distributed the dead progenitor FLESH ENJOINS HAP'LY FLESH to the surrounding faces of misery. Grief gave way to joy, joy into munching, on the empty coffin the murderer mounted the widow SHOULD I HELP YOU UP UNCLE OPEN THE LEGS MAMA. I lay on the ground and heard the world revolving step by step into putrefaction.

I'M GOOD HAMLET GI'ME A CAUSE FOR GRIEF
AH THE WHOLE GLOBE FOR A REAL SORROW
RICHARD THE THIRD I THE PRINCEKILLING KING
OH MY PEOPLE WHAT HAVE I DONE UNTO THEE

LIKE A HUNCHBACK I DRAG MY OVERBRAIN
SECOND CLOWN IN THE SPRING OF COMMUNISM¹

SOMETHING IS ROTTEN IN THIS AGE OF HOPE
LET'S DELVE IN EARTH AND BLOW HER AT THE MOON²

Now comes the specter who made me, the axe still in the skull. You can keep your hat on, I know, that you have one hole too many. I only wish my mother had one too fewer, when you were yet in your flesh: I would have been spared myself. One should sew the wenches shut, a world without mothers. We could slaughter one another in peace, and with some consideration, if we wearied of this world or if our necks were too narrow for our cries. What do you want from me. Is one state funeral not enough for you. Senile old fool. Don't you have any blood on your shoes. What's your corpse to me, anyway. Just be happy that the executioner is delayed, maybe you'll still make it into Heaven. Why are you still here. The hens have been slaughtered. Tomorrow has been cancelled.

SHOULD I

BECAUSE IT'S EXPECTED STICK A PIECE OF IRON INTO
THE NEAREST FLESH OR THE NEXT-NEAREST
HOLDING ME FAST BECAUSE THE WORLD SPINS AROUND
LORD BREAK MY NECK FALLING FROM A BEERHALL

BENCH

Enter Horatio. Co-conspirator of my thoughts, which are full of blood since the morning was draped with the empty sky. YOU COME TOO LATE MY FRIEND FOR YOUR WAGE / NO PLACE FOR YOU IN MY TRAGEDY-PLAY. Horatio, do you know me still. Are you my friend, Horatio. If you know me, how can you be my friend. Do you want to play Polonius, who wants to sleep with his daughter, the alluring Ophelia, she's about to get her cue, see how she shakes her rump – a tragic role. HoratioPolonius. I knew that you're an actor. I'm one too, I play Hamlet. Denmark is a concentration camp, between us grows a Wall. See what grows from the Wall. Exit Polonius. My mother the bride. Her breasts a bed of roses, her lap a nest of snakes. Have you forgotten your text, Mama. I stage-whisper WASH THE MURDER FROM THY FACE MY PRINCE / AND MAKE A CHEERFUL FACE FOR THE NEW DENMARK. I'll make you into a virgin again Mother so that the King has a bloody wedding THE MOTHER'S LAP IS NO ONE-WAY STREET Now I tie your hands behind your back with the bridal train because I loathe your embrace. Now I tear apart the bridal gown. Now you must scream. Now I smear the rags of your dress into the earth which my father has become with the rags your face your belly your breasts. Now I take thee my mother in his, my father's invisible trace. I strangle your cry with my lips. Do you recognize the fruit of your flesh now go, go to your wedding, whore, broad in the Danish sun shining on the living and the dead. I want to stuff the corpse in the drainhole so the palace drowns in kingly shit. Then let me eat your heart, Ophelia, which sheds my tears.

2

THE EUROPE OF THE WOMAN

Enormous room. Ophelia. Her heart is a clock.

OPHELIA [CHORUS/HAMLET]

I am Ophelia. She who the river could not hold. The woman on the gallows The woman with the slashed arteries The woman with the overdose ON THE LIPS SNOW The woman with the head in the gas-oven. Yesterday I stopped killing myself. I am alone with my breasts my thighs my lap. I rip apart the instruments of my imprisonment the Stool the Table the Bed. I destroy the battlefield that was my Home. I tear the doors off their hinges to let the wind and the cry of the World inside. I smash the Window. With my bleeding hands I tear the photographs of the men who I loved and who used me on the Bed on the Table on the Chair on the Floor. I set fire to my prison. I throw my clothes into the fire. I dig the clock which was my heart out of my breast. I go onto the street, clothed in my blood.

3

SCHERZO

University of the Dead. Whispers and murmurs. From their gravestones (cathedrals) dead philosophers throw their books at Hamlet. Gallery (ballet) of the dead women The woman on the gallows The woman with the slashed wrists etc. Hamlet observes them with the attitude of a museum(theater)goer. The dead women tear his clothing from his body. From an upright coffin with the inscription HAMLET 1 enters Claudius and, clothed and made up as a whore, Ophelia. Striptease of Ophelia.

OPHELIA Do you still want to eat my heart, Hamlet. *Laughs.*

HAMLET *Head in his hands:* I want to be a woman.

Hamlet puts on Ophelia's clothes, Ophelia paints a whore's mask on him, Claudius, now Hamlet's father, laughs soundlessly, Ophelia offers Hamlet her hand to be kissed and steps with Claudius/Hamlet Father back into the coffin. Hamlet in pose of a whore. An angel, the face in the back of the neck: Horatio. Dances with Hamlet.

VOICE(S) *from the coffin:*

What you killed you should also love.

The dance becomes wilder and wilder. Laughter from the coffin. On a swing a Madonna with breast-cancer. Horatio opens an umbrella, embraces Hamlet. Freeze in the embrace under the umbrella. The breast-cancer shines like a sun.

4

PEST IN BUDA BATTLE OF GREENLAND³

Room 2, destroyed by Ophelia. Empty armor, axe in the helm.

HAMLET

The oven smokes in cheerless October

A BAD COLD HE HAD OF IT JUST THE WORST TIME
JUST THE WORST TIME OF THE YEAR FOR A REVOLUTION

Through the suburbs blooming cement goes

Dr. Zhivago in sorrow

for his wolves

IN THE WINTER SOMETIMES THEY CAME INTO THE VILLAGE TORE APART
A PEASANT

puts costume and mask down.

HAMLET-ACTOR

I am not Hamlet. I play no role anymore. My words have nothing more to say to me. My thoughts suck the blood of images. My drama is cancelled. Behind me the scenery is being taken down. By people who are not interested in my drama, for people, to whom it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter to me either. I'm not playing along anymore. *Stagehands install, unknown to Hamlet-actor, a refrigerator and three TV sets. Humming of the refrigerator. Three programs without sound.* The scenery is a monument. It portrays a man who made history, a hundred times life-size. The petrification of a hope. His name is interchangeable. The hope has not been fulfilled. The monument lies on the ground, razed three years after the state funeral of the Hated and Honored One by those who now rule us. And the stone is inhabited. In the spacious nose and earholes, in the folds of skin and uniform of the shattered icon dwell the poorer population of the metropolis. At the fall of the monument followed, after an appropriate time, the Rebellion. My drama, if it could yet take place, would happen in the Time of the Rebellion. The Rebellion begins as an urban promenade. Against the traffic regulations during working hours. The streets belong to the pedestrians. Here and there an auto is overturned. Evil dream of a knife-thrower: the slow journey down a one-way street to an irrevocable parking-spot, which is surrounded by armed pedestrians. Police who get in the way are simply pushed aside. When the procession approaches the district of the rulers, it is brought to a halt by a police cordon. Groups form, out of which speakers arise. On the balcony of a Government building appears a man with a badly fitting suit and starts to speak. When the first stone hits him, he draws back behind the double-doors fitted with bulletproof glass. From the call for more freedom comes the cry for the overthrow of the Government. People begin to disarm the police, storming two three buildings, a jail a police station an office of the secret police, hanging a dozen quislings of the authorities by the feet, the Government deploys troops, tanks. My place, if my drama ever took place, would be at both sides of the front, between the fronts, over them. I stand in the sweating masses and throw stones at the police soldiers tanks bulletproof glass. I glance through the double-door outfitted with bulletproof glass at the oncoming crowd and smell the perspiration of my fear. I shake, choked with nausea, my fist against myself, standing behind the bulletproof glass. I see, choked by fear and loathing, myself in the oncoming crowd, foam licking at my lips, shaking my fist against myself. I hang my uniformed

flesh by the feet. I am the soldier in the tank-turret, my head is empty under the helmet, the strangled cry under the chains. I am the typewriter. I tie the noose, when the leaders are hanged, kick the stool away, break my neck I am my own prisoner. I feed my data into the computer. My roles are spit and spittoon knife and wound teeth and gum neck and gallows. I am the data-bank. Bleeding in the crowd. Exhaling behind the double doors. Wordslime bubbling in soundproof speech-balloons over the battle. My drama has not taken place. The script was lost. The actors hung their faces on the nails of the garderobe. The stage-prompter rots in his box. The overstuffed plague-corpses in the audience don't move a finger. I go home and kill time, at one / with my undivided self.

Television The daily revulsion Disgust
at prefabricated babble At manufactured merriment
How do you spell FRIENDLINESS⁴
Give us our daily murder
For Thine is Nothingness Revulsion
At the lies which are believed
By the liars and noone else Revulsion
At the lies which are believed Revulsion
at the faces of the power-brokers lined and seamed
from the struggle for posts votes bank-accounts
Revulsion A cart of scythes crackling with one-liners⁵
I go through the streets malls faces
with the scars of the shopping blitz⁶ Poverty
without dignity Poverty without the dignity
of the knife of the boxing ring of the fist
The brutalized bodies of the women
Hope of the generations
Strangled in blood cowardice stupidity
Laughter of dead bellies
Heil COCA COLA
A kingdom
for a murderer

I WAS MACBETH THE KING HAD OFFERED ME HIS THIRD CONCUBINE I
KNEW EVERY BIRTHMARK ON HER HIPS RASKOLNIKOV AT HEART UNDER
THE ONLY OVERCOAT THE AXE FOR THE / ONLY / SKULL OF THE
PAWNBROKERESS

In the loneliness of the airports

I exhale I am

Privileged My revulsion

is a privilege

Screened by a wall

Barbed wire prison

Photograph of the author.

I don't want to eat drink breathe love a woman a man a child an animal anymore. I don't want to die anymore. I don't want to kill anymore.

Tearing up of the photograph of the author.

I break open my sealed-off flesh. I want to live in my veins, in the marrow⁷ of my bones, in the labyrinth of my skull. I withdraw into my intestines. I take refuge in my shit, my blood. Somewhere bodies are being broken, so that I can live in my shit. Somewhere bodies are being carved open, so that I can be alone with my blood. My thoughts are wounds in my brain. My brain is a wound. I want to be a machine. Arms to grasp legs to walk no pain no thoughts.

*Television screens go black. Blood from the refrigerator. Three naked women: Marx Lenin Mao. Speak simultaneously each in their own language the text IT IS A QUESTION OF OVERTHROWING ALL SOCIAL RELATIONS, IN WHICH HUMAN BEINGS ARE...*⁸ *Hamlet-actor puts on costume and mask.*

HAMLET THE DANE PRINCE AND FEAST FOR WORMS STUMBLING
FROM HOLE TO HOLE TO THE LAST HOLE, LUSTERLESS
IN THE BACK THE SPECTER WHICH MADE HIM
GREEN LIKE OPHELIA'S FLESH IN CHILDBED
AND SCARCE AFORE THE THIRD COCK'S CROW TORE
A FOOL THE CLOWN-COSTUME⁹ OF THE PHILOSOPHER
THEN CRAWLED A WELLKEPT BLOODHOUND INTO THE TANK

Steps into armor, splits the heads of Marx Lenin Mao with the axe. Snowfall. Ice Age.

5

WILDSTRAINING / IN THE FEARSOME ARMAMENTS / MILLENIA¹⁰

Deep sea. Ophelia in wheelchair. Fish wreckage corpses and body-parts stream past.

OPHELIA

While two men in doctor's smocks wrap her from top to bottom in white bandages.

Here speaks Electra. In the Heart of Darkness. Under the Sun of Torture. To the Metropolises of the World. In the Names of the Victims. I expel all the semen which I have received. I transform the milk of my breasts into deadly poison. I suffocate the world which I gave birth to, between my thighs. I bury it in my crotch. Down with the joy of oppression. Long live hate, loathing, rebellion, death. When she walks through your bedroom with butcher's knives, you'll know the truth.

Exit men. Ophelia remains on the stage, motionless in the white packaging.

Footnotes

1. Reference to the great philosopher and Marxist theologian Ernst Bloch (1885-1977).
2. Note that none of these English phrases are actual quotes from Shakespeare.
3. “Pest”: literally means “plague”, but used here as a pun on the Budapest uprising of 1956, which was crushed by Eastern bloc tanks. Note the intriguing reference to Greenland and some sort of 1970s-style environmental radicalism; Mueller’s next play, The Mission, practically overflows with ecological references.
4. “Gemuetlichkeit”: stronger than friendliness, also cosiness, warmth, good cheer.
5. “Pointer”: one-liners, also sharp points.
6. “Konsumschlacht”: consumption-battle, violence of consumerism.
7. “Mark”: bone-marrow, but also a pun on the two official German currencies, i.e. the East German Ostmark and the West German Deutschmark.
8. Opening lines of the introduction to Karl Marx’s Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law.
9. “Schellenkleid”: reference to the carnival costumes worn during the annual spring street festivals common to Central Europe.
10. Quotation from a poetic fragment by the 19th century German poet Hoelderlin, entitled simply, Shakespeare. The term translated as armaments, “Ruestung”, can also mean armor.