

On Being Had: Publishing an Article on a Literary Fake

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In 2002, I published an article in *Theatre Research International* called ‘Heiner Müller as the End of Brechtian Dramaturgy: Müller on Brecht in Two Lesser-Known Fragments’. I had written my doctoral dissertation on Müller, and, in the course of my studies, had come across two shorter pieces that, to my knowledge, had not been discussed by scholars. The first was *Philoktet 1979* (*Philoctetes 1979*), a short, parodic and grotesque treatment of the Philoctetes myth, something very different from Müller’s more sombre adaptation of the same material, published in 1965. I had heard Müller read the comic piece at the Berliner Ensemble in March 1995 and located the source in a copy of the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, printed in December 1978. The second piece was also parodic and also appeared in a newspaper. *Nachleben Brechts Beischlaf Auferstehung in Berlin* (Brecht’s Afterlife Intercourse Resurrection in Berlin) featured in the *Volkszeitung* in July 1990.¹ The title suggested that Müller was ironically quoting his own back catalogue, echoing his play *Leben Gundlings Friedrich von Preußen Lessings Schlaf Traum Schrei* (Gundling’s Life Frederick of Prussia Lessings Sleep Dream Cry) (1977) and *Germania Tod in Berlin* (Germania Death in Berlin) (1978). Stylistically, it looked like a heightened version of the technique employed in *Philoktet 1979*, in that it drew on and collided more Brechtian intertexts, and referenced Müller’s own work more extensively. My doctoral supervisor had found the short playlet in the *Volkszeitung*. It was one of five responses to Brecht from prominent German literary figures, including Peter Handke and Martin Walser, collected under the title ‘Brecht: Stimmen der Dichter’ (Brecht: The Writers Speak). In my article’s fifth footnote, I observed that while *Philoktet 1979* appeared in the only extant bibliography of the playwright at the time, *Nachleben Brechts* did not. It would be hard to conceal an amount of smugness in my observation. But such self-satisfaction is not a quality worth airing too publicly, as will become evident soon.

For some time, the relationship between Müller and Brecht had been the subject of scholarly study. Müller was widely regarded as a radical, postmodern Brecht, who accepted Brecht’s dialectical dramaturgy, but sought to liberate it of Brecht’s ideological shackles and expand its reach. The final line of an influential essay of 1979 gives a clear sense of Müller’s position: ‘Brecht gebrauchen, ohne ihn zu kritisieren, ist Verrat’ (‘to use Brecht without criticizing him is a betrayal’).² In this spirit I set about analysing the two short pieces, and found them to satirize and criticize Brecht, while retaining the centrality of dialectics to Müller’s playwriting. According to Google Scholar, the article has been cited six times. In the same year as the article’s publication, both *Philoktet 1979* and *Nachleben Brechts* appeared in the fifth volume of Müller’s collected works.

Eighteen years on, it was not a little surprising to receive an email alerting me to the lead article in *Die literarische Welt*, the literary supplement of the major German newspaper *Die Welt*. Entitled 'Wie man Heiner Müller wird' (How to Be Heiner Müller), Matthias Heine revealed that *Nachleben Brechts* was in fact a 'short literary parody', authored by one of Germany's most important Brecht scholars, Jan Knopf, in 1985.³ The article praised Knopf for his imitative talent: he had penned all five pieces that appeared together in the *Volkszeitung* in 1990. Heine also revealed that the stimulus for publishing the five-year-old pieces had been none other than Müller himself. Knopf had shown the playwright his playlet, and within a year all five 'satires', as Knopf called them in Heine's article, were in print. And it was Knopf who sent me the email, apologizing for potentially embarrassing me, as Heine explicitly referenced my article for *TRI*.

Initially, Knopf had wanted the five fakes to stand as they were written on the page, without acknowledgement of his authorship, but accompanied by a somewhat stuffy introductory note hinting at their confected status. The newspaper's editor insisted that Knopf showed his hand as their creator. So, at the bottom of the page readers found: 'The editor and author of all the texts is Jan Knopf'.

Without a doubt, I had been had by a literary fake. Why, then, had I taken it to be genuine? First, I would take issue with both Heine's categorization of *Nachleben Brechts* as a parody and Knopf's as a satire. Parodies are indeed imitations, but with a degree of exaggeration, and satires are written with the aim of exposing their target to criticism. As already noted, *Philoktet 1979* was an unusually comic treatment of a subject for Müller. He had moved into an unfamiliar mode of writing where he humorously explored his relationship with Brecht, mocking his master while acknowledging his influence. If Müller were the author of *Nachleben Brechts*, then he would have been employing a similar form to *Philoktet 1979*, which could not be considered a parody of himself, but a rediscovery of an approach taken over a decade earlier. On the other hand, Knopf's self-assessment of the piece as a satire is not wholly convincing because it is simply not critical enough to serve as an attack, however gentle, on Müller. Indeed, Müller's own response was remarkably positive. Not only did he encourage Knopf to publish the piece, but, in the email Knopf wrote to me, alerting me to Heine's exposé, he noted that Müller found *Nachleben Brechts* 'genau' ('accurate'). Consequently, I would describe the playlet as a pastiche, a work of close imitation that, to my mind, is so close to Müller's own writing style that it is virtually indistinguishable from its inspiration – even today with the benefit of hindsight. The use of quotation and intertext; the dense, concentrated formulations; and the thematic proximity to Müller's relationship with Brecht all rang true to me. And clearly to Frank Hörnigk, too, the editor of Müller's collected works.

But what then led me to dismiss the clear attribution of authorship to Knopf and not Müller at the bottom of the newspaper's page? I remember my supervisor drawing my attention to this detail when he handed me the source. We could not reconcile the clarity of the statement with the diversity and the accuracy of the five pastiches that sat next to each other on the page. And each piece clearly carried the name of their apparent author. We concluded that it was some kind of mistake on the

newspaper's part, and that Knopf had indeed edited the section and, most likely, solicited the contributions.

So where does this leave my article? It would seem that this is not a case for retraction, given that the article was written in good faith, without any desire to deceive, and that at least half of it refers to a genuine work by Müller. Indeed, Retraction Watch, the leading website that catalogues retracted scholarship (<http://retractiondatabase.org>), lists few publications in the humanities, and the most frequent reasons for retraction are fake peer review and plagiarism. The conclusions reached in my article remain largely sound because the analysis of *Nachleben Brechts* found themes and treatments similar to those of *Philoktet 1979*. This is not an example of egregious bad practice, and Heine's exposé has hardly led to calls for the article's removal. Indeed, Heine speculates that both Brecht and Müller would probably have been more 'amüsiert als empört' ('amused than outraged'). When I shared the story with my former supervisor, he was charmed and entertained by Knopf's shenanigans.

I am thus left with a slightly red face, the result of a lack of due scepticism towards an ambiguous source as a younger scholar. I had been fooled by a remarkably faithful fake and constructed arguments based on it. I have not suffered the same fate as Hugh Trevor-Roper, the once fêted historian who authenticated one of the greatest fakes of recent times, the Hitler diaries, before changing his mind. That decision opened him to scorn and ridicule. In the grand scheme of things, my mistake is of a very different degree. But it does emphasize the need to be rigorous and judicious when confronted with contradictory evidence – a good lesson for any researcher.

NOTES

- 1 Translations from the German are mine.
- 2 Heiner Müller, 'Fatzler ± Keuner', in Müller, *Werke*, Vol. VIII, ed. Frank Hörnigk (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), pp. 223–31.
- 3 Matthias Heine, 'Wie man Heiner Müller wird', *Die literarische Welt*, 1 February 2020, p. 25.

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