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The Noise That Banish'd Martius: *Coriolanus* in Post-War Germany

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The rumour that *Coriolanus* was banned in Germany after the Second World War, and banned by the American authorities, is persistent. It is passed on in theatre programmes, like the one for a recent production at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford.¹ Terence Hawkes mentions the same story in "Shakespeare and the General Strike": "*Coriolanus* was banned by occupying American forces when they reached Berlin in 1945."² And on the SHAKSPER electronic conference there was a lengthy debate on the matter in 1995.

The only source that is always indicated by British and American scholars is Philip Brockbank's introduction to the Arden edition of the play.³ Brockbank refers to an article by Dirk Grathoff⁴ on Günter Grass's views on Brecht's *Coriolan*. Grathoff in turn quotes a book by Bernhard Kytzler on *Coriolanus* in history and art (with wrong page numbers);⁵ Kytzler describes the ban briefly, without any indication of sources. However, his account turns out to be an unacknowledged quotation from Leopold Stahl's 1947 book *Shakespeare und das deutsche Theater*;⁶ and there we lose all traces. A serious journalist, insisting on independent corroboration, could not have published the story.

The persistence of the rumour is probably due to the frisson that its contents produce. It is strange that those who claimed to fight against the Nazis for freedom, also the freedom of speech, should introduce censorship, the very opposite of what they were claiming to stand for. But the occupying forces after all had to counteract the effects of more than a decade of Nazi indoctrination.

Accepting the need of censorship for this purpose in general, however, makes the case of *Coriolanus* even more intriguing. We would certainly expect material to be banned that served the promotion of Nazi ideology, not the works of the author who, more than anybody else, stood for the shared values of those that were bringing culture, their [end of 179] culture, back to the

Germans. In the discussion on SHAKSPER, one contributor tried to cope with this problem, in the absence of detailed evidence, by suggesting that probably the ban only concerned "translations, adaptations, and independent versions," implying that the play itself (as the term goes), and the interpretations it allows, would not justify such a ban.

Fortunately, we are no longer reduced to relying on scant evidence and on speculation. We have more, though by no means sufficient, material to study the ban of plays in the context of Nazi and Allied theatre policies; and this may also make it possible to say something about the issues that determine their discussion.

In the framework of Nazi cultural policies the traditional forms of theatre (as against newly developed forms like the "Thing-Spiel," a type of community drama) did not serve political agitation; for this purpose radio and the cinema, with their much larger audiences and more powerful means of manipulating emotion, were increasingly used from the mid-thirties onwards. The theatre became increasingly de-politicised, and was re-assigned its traditional bourgeois function of entertainment, moral uplift and education.⁷ This is also why it was possible for prominent actors and theatre managers like Gustav Gründgens, Heinz Hilpert and Saladin Schmitt to continue theatrical traditions without serious interruption after the war.

The Nazis had put some restrictions on the repertory, however: as we know from the correspondence between a Munich theatre and the *Reichsdramaturg* in 1939, French and English authors, also classics, were to be avoided after the beginning of the war (a useful reminder of the fact that the ban of a play need not be due to its supposedly seditious contents). The exception from this rule was Shakespeare, of course, who, it was argued, had entered German co-ownership due to the merits of German actors and scholars.⁸

The plays by Shakespeare most frequently performed were, in accordance with the role assigned to the type of theatre where they were performed, the comedies, in particular *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado About Nothing*;⁹ they best suited the theatre's task of taking people's minds off the unpleasant realities in which they found themselves. In the West of Germany these policies did not change after the war. As Stahl observes, the Shakespeare repertory did not significantly change after 1945; what was characteristic of productions immediately after the war had already developed in the course of the 1943/44 season: the total rejection of realism.¹⁰

In the American occupation zone, on which I am going to concentrate here, Theater Officers were appointed who had to supervise theatrical activities in their region. As Max Frisch reports in his diaries: [end of 180]

The Russians take intellectual matters very seriously; obviously they send their best people, while their counterparts on the other side are, with few exceptions, friendly nobodies. In Frankfurt we met an American, a splendid fellow, helpful in everything, who heard of Eliot for the first time from us; Theater Officer.¹¹

The American authorities seem to have been the most liberal. While in the Russian, British and French zones individual plays had to be licensed for production, in the U.S. zone *producers* had to get a licence, and their work was then only subjected to post-production scrutiny; because plays, unlike newspapers, magazines, radio programmes, etc., are usually presented more than once this amounted to an efficient enough kind of censorship.¹²

The aim was to eliminate texts and passages which showed anti-democratic, militarist, nationalist, pan-Germanic, and fascist tendencies, or which were directed against the occupation forces and compromised their safety. The Theater Officers were also to check "for material likely to create civil disobedience or discontent."¹³ In the late summer of 1945, even before the theatres re-opened, a kind of "suggested reference guide"¹⁴ was published in Munich which contained a twelve-part list of classical and contemporary plays recommended by the authorities. It included *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* (which, interestingly, proved to be the most popular of the tragedies), *Richard III* and *King Lear* and all the comedies. It also contained a black list of plays that should not be performed:

Considering the present mental and psychological status of the Germans many plays have to be avoided which under normal circumstances are musts of a good repertory. To give a few outstanding examples:

1. All plays accepting the blind mastery of Fate that unescapably leads to destruction and self-destruction, as the Greek classics or f.i. Schiller's *Braut von Messina*.
2. *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare
3. *Coriolanus* ([both for] glorification of dictatorship)
4. *Egmont*, Goethe (Opposition to foreign occupation forces).

5. *Wilhelm Tell*, Schiller (Gessler, for us Hitler, could be Eisenhower to Germans.)¹⁵

The list runs to thirteen items, single plays and groups of plays, the last being "all plays by those German authors who readily shifted to the service of Nazism."¹⁶ It is striking to find the Greek, German and English classics among the plays to be banned (no French plays are mentioned in the list); Shakespeare's two plays are the only English items listed.

The reasons given for the ban of these plays — we should remember that they are given solely as "outstanding examples" — are interesting. [end of 181] They are based on two assumptions: (a) motifs and themes are present in the texts of the plays and have an effect on the audience; (b) certain of these effects would, under the circumstances given, overwhelm all the others. These effects concern the safety of the occupation forces with Goethe's *Egmont* and Schiller's *Tell*; they concern people's attitudes towards their own freedom to act with Schiller's *Braut von Messina*, the Greek classics, and the acceptance of dictatorship with the two Shakespeare plays. With *Coriolanus* they reflect certain views that had been common under the Nazis.

Coriolanus had not been popular on the German stage;¹⁷ it was barely performed during the Nazi years.¹⁸ On the other hand, *Coriolanus* had played a significant role in education. In German schools the reading of Shakespeare had been an important feature for a long time; the revaluation of English in the late thirties also made it possible to read his works in the original.¹⁹ Shakespeare's plays were to be read as presenting the ideals of Germanic humanity, where the brave, generous, good and honest always triumph, even though they may have to die.

Coriolanus was published in several editions for schools; one of them, which came out in 1934, makes the ideological aims quite explicit:

The importance for the new Germany of this last and most mature of Shakespeare's plays lies in its heroism. The poet deals with the problem of the people and its leader; he depicts the true nature of the leader in contrast to the aimless masses; he shows a people led in a false manner, a false democracy, whose exponents yield to the wishes of the people for egotistical reasons. Above these weaklings towers the figure of the true hero and leader Coriolanus, who would like to guide the deceived people to its health in the same way as, in our days, Adolf Hitler, would do with our beloved German fatherland.²¹

This may have been the most common view of *Coriolanus*, one that requires a selective reading of the play. But as the crucial issue was the relationship, the mutual conditioning of the leader and his people, different views were possible, without jeopardising the ideological message of the play. *Coriolanus* could also be presented as a leader who fails because he lacks both love for his people and the overpowering belief in his mission,²² unlike, we may presume, another leader, whose success was therefore guaranteed.

* * *

Was *Coriolanus* banned? We have no evidence beside the text I have quoted to support this; nowhere was a production of the play stopped according to the licensing regulations I have described. Already in 1946 the head of Theater Control in Bavaria, Walter Behr, declared that his office did not try to make any prescriptions concerning the repertory [end of 182] or performance style.²³ The anonymous list that I have quoted, the only source for a ban, seems to be the work of somebody with a good grasp of the ideological situation and of the traditions of drama, but little interest in theatrical conditions.

The fact is that there was no need to ban *Coriolanus* in the theatre. In the continuity of West German theatre, which bridged the collapse of the Third Reich, *Coriolanus* would have continued to be unpopular and insignificant in terms of propaganda. The fact that it was only performed again in 1952²⁴ need not be due to the suspicion that fell on it after the end of the war; it had not been much performed before that either. It should perhaps have been banned in schools, considering the glorification of dictatorship for which it had been used under the Nazis. But the only evidence of such a ban for ideological reasons of which I know concerns *The Merchant of Venice*.²⁵

What was it that was supposed to be banned? Not *Coriolanus*, "the play itself"; rather, as the events make clear, a way of construing the play as a glorification of dictatorship was to be avoided, a construction considered probable under the circumstances. The censors rightly considered the source of meaning not in the text, but in certain traditions of using it.

The term *construction* has been used deliberately. The problem is not so much the foregrounding of specific aspects of the text rather than others for ideological purposes,²⁶ which may posit a notion of textual integrity rarely found in Shakespeare productions outside Stratford or England, also one that came into existence only in the eighteenth century and outside the theatre.²⁷ The problem is rather how stories and their meanings

are passed on or contested in the theatre, and how the text is used in this.

With *Coriolanus* and the German theatre this may be illustrated by two conflicting and complementary episodes, which I should like to mention in conclusion. One is Bertolt Brecht's *Coriolan*, produced in 1953, a re-writing of the story which he himself understood as a deliberate shift from the traditional view of the play as the (bourgeois) tragedy of the individual to the tragedy of the belief in one's indispensability.²⁸ The other is less well known. In 1952 a manifesto was published in Germany, which led to heated debate. In this so-called Düsseldorf Manifesto leading German theatre managers and directors spoke out against unwarranted experiments on stage and declared that "at the centre of theatre work there must be nothing but the unadulterated reproduction of the poetic work of art".²⁹ The ultimate responsibility was to rest with the work of art, not with those who put it on stage. The manifesto was inspired and presented by Gustav Gründgens, the most prominent of those theatre people whose career had started under the Nazis and continued in the *Bundesrepublik*.

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Notes

1 See the programme for the *Coriolanus* production at the Swan Theatre in Stratford (1994): "In the years immediately following the Second World War [the play] was banned by the occupying American authorities."

2 Terence Hawkes, "Shakespeare and the General Strike," in *Meaning by Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1992), 42-60, 45.

3 Philip Brockbank, ed., William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, The Arden Shakespeare, (London: Methuen, 1976), 86.

4 Dirk Grathoff, "Dichtung versus Politik," *Brecht heute I* (1971), 168-87.

5 Bernhard Kytzler, *Coriolan*, Dichtung und Wirklichkeit. 26 (Berlin: Ullstein, 1965).

6 Ernst Leopold Stahl, *Shakespeare und das deutsche Theater* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1947).

7 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Kurze Geschichte des deutschen Theaters* (Tübingen: Francke, 1993), 299.

8 Wolfgang Petzer, *Theater: Die Münchner Kammerspiele 1911-1972* (München: Desch, 1973), 269.

9 Egon Mühlbach, "Statistischer Ueberblick," *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch* 80/81 (1946), 113-21, 120.

10 Ernst Leopold Stahl, *Shakespeare und das deutsche Theater*, 737. Stahl's book is itself an example of this kind of continuity. It was originally meant to be published in 1942, commissioned by the "Beauftragte des Reichserziehungsministers für den Einsatz der Geisteswissenschaft im Kriege" (source: a 1942 C.V. in his papers at the Swiss Theatre Collection, Berne).

11 Max Frisch, *Tagebuch 1946-1949* (Zürich: Ex Libris, 1950;1975), 213, trans. B.E..

- 12 Wigand Lange, *Theater in Deutschland nach 1945* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1980), 317-20.
- 13 Quoted by Wigand Lange, *Theater in Deutschland nach 1945*, 320. This in a country where the excessive obedience to authority of so many citizens had made possible the rise of Nazism.
- 14 Ernst Leopold Stahl, *Shakespeare und das deutsche Theater*, 732.
- 15 See Wigand Lange, *Theater in Deutschland nach 1945*, 321-22. The list contains a total of 13 items; the anonymous document, which comes from the private collection of Eugene Bahn, seems to be the same as the one mentioned by Ernst Leopold Stahl, *Shakespeare und das deutsche Theater*, 732. The ban of *Wilhelm Tell* is particularly ironic; the play had already been banned by Goebbels, because Gessler could be read as Hitler.
- 16 Wigand Lange, *Theater in Deutschland nach 1945*, 322.
- 17 Martin Brunkhorst, *Shakespeares 'Coriolanus' in deutscher Bearbeitung* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1973), 157. No productions in Germany are recorded for 1941 and 1942, 1940 it was played seven times in Düren, 1939 four times in Gera (no major theatres), 1938 nine times by one company; in the Nazi years the play consistently appears among the five or six least popular in the statistics of the *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch*. Werner Papsdorf, "Theaterschau: [end of 184] Shakespeare auf der deutschen Bühne 1940/42," *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch* 78/79 (1943), 128-37, 128, calls it a rarity ("eine Seltenheit").
- 18 *Julius Caesar* was not performed very frequently either; and it was obviously not presented in the way the U.S. Theater Officers feared. In Jürgen Fehling's production at the Berliner Staatstheater (1940/41) Werner Krauss, as a pale Caesar marked by death, emphasized the pathological features of someone affected by epileptic fits. (Papsdorf, 129).
- 19 Hubert Pollert, and Thielke, "Zeitschriftenschau," *Shakespeare—Jahrbuch* 74 (1938), 196-222, 221. See William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, Englische Reihe.89 (Braunschweig: Westermann, 1934).
- 20 Wolfgang Keller, "Shakespeare und die deutsche Jugend," *Die neueren Sprachen* 45 (1937), 259-78.
- 21 "Die Bedeutung dieses letzten und reifsten Werkes Shakespeares im neuen Deutschland hegt in dem heldischen Zuge, der ihm innewohnt. Der Dichter behandelt das Problem von Volk und Führer; er zeichnet die wahre Führernatur im Gegensatz zur urteilslosen Menge; er zeigt ein falsch geleitetes Volk, eine falsche Demokratie, deren Träger den Wünschen des Volkes um egoistischer Ziele willen nachgeben. Ueber diese Schwächlinge ragt hoch empor die Gestalt des wahrhaften Helden und Führers Coriolanus, der das missleitete Volk zur Gesundung führen möchte wie Adolf Hitler in unseren Tagen unser geliebtes deutsches Vaterland!" (Hüsge; quoted in Martin Brunkhorst, *Shakespeares 'Coriolanus' in deutscher Bearbeitung*, 157.)
- 22 Lieselott Eckloff, "Heroismus und politisches Führertum bei Shakespeare", *Zeitschrift für neusprachlichen Unterricht* 37 (1938), 97-112.
- 23 See Ernst Leopold Stahl, *Shakespeare und das deutsche Theater*, 732. Walter Behr offered several thoughtful contributions on the theatrical condition in the Germany of the post-war years, in which he comments on repertory policy, on the influence of the Nazi years on acting style and audience behaviour, and on the non-appearance of a new German drama. (Walter Behr, "Geleitwort", in *Theater-Almanach 1946/47*, ed. Alfred Dahlmann (München: Kurt Desch, 1946) and Walter Behr, "Gefahren des Darstellungsstils", in *Der Theater- Almanach 1947*, ed. Alfred Dahlmann (München: Kurt Desch, 1947), 155-60. He was himself German, a comedian in Werner Finck's Munich Kabarett "Katakomben", which had been closed down

by the police in 1935. On this see Hans Daiber, *Deutsches Theater seit 1945* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1976), 35.

24 Martin Brunkhorst, *Shakespeares 'Coriolanus' in deutscher Bearbeitung*, 159.

25 In 1947 a Wiesbaden school class was reading the play. An American UNESCO representative turned to the U.S. minister of defense: "I was astonished to find [...] an English class studying *The Merchant of Venice*. It did seem to me that Germany in this day and age was an inappropriate place to teach *The Merchant of Venice*. [...] I understand very well that true comprehension of *The Merchant of Venice* does not necessarily require an interpretation that this play is anti-Semitic. Nevertheless, it is so easily open to anti-Semitic reactions and interpretations, and the German teachers and German children have so long been conditioned to anti-Semitic reactions, that the book ought not to be used in German schools at this time under our auspices." (Letter from James Marshall to Robert Patterson, 28 February 1947. National Archives [end of 185] Washington; quot. by Wigand Lange, *Theater in Deutschland nach 1945*, 323.) Reading the play had to be discontinued.

26 Terence Hawkes, "Shakespeare and the General Strike," in *Meaning by Shakespeare*, 51.

27 Margreta de Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

28 Bernhard Kytzler, *Coriolan, Dichtung und Wirklichkeit*, 158.

29 "...dass im Mittelpunkt des Theaters nichts als die unverfälschte Wiedergabe der Dichtung zu stehen hat" (quot. in Annette Poppenhüger, "Gründgens heim Müsli", *Die deutsche Bühne* 63.10 (Oktober 1992), 50-53, 51.