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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON OLD IDEAS: FRIEDRICH DÜRRENMATT'S PARODIES OF MYTHS AND ARCHETYPES

Abstract: *Who dares to portray the demigod Hercules as an inadequate, impotent failure? Who dares to mock tragic heroines like Antigone? Who dares to mock the biblical Judith and her bravery? Who would portray an ideal emperor as one who betrays and sacrifices his empire? The Swiss author Friedrich Dürrenmatt, reconstitutes these famous ancient myths, motifs, symbols and archetypes in his works of art and literature in order to provoke reconsideration of modern-day values such as sacrifice, value of human life, patriotism and bravery. In doing so, he also touches upon issues such as globalization, nationalism and bureaucratization as everyday problems that the individual to rise to his/her heroic potential. The research focuses on Dürrenmatt's recurring motifs with special emphasis on mythic, historical and biblical figures in the plays *Romulus the Great* and *Hercules and the Augean Stables*.*

Keywords: myth, Dürrenmatt, comedy, (anti)hero, Hercules, parody, grotesque

Introduction

One of the distinguishing features of myths is their lasting presence in all forms of art even after several thousands of years. Now more than ever, in a period that is being described as the postmodern, has the polysemy, adaptability and inexhaustibility of myths made them the focus of interest, especially in literature. Mythic content and motifs are being used, varied, reinterpreted, and demythologized in (post)modern literature.

¹ Postdoc at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of J. J. Strossmayer in Osijek, Croatia

Myths and the motifs of myths cannot become obsolete, especially in drama, as John White emphasizes in the following statement: "This approximate identification of myth with drama and hence plot, calling to mind that plot is the essence of drama, explains why myth so often appears on the stage rather than emerging as a motif to a modern plot of a novel" (1971: 26). The question is, who dares to distort the inherent values of some of the best-known myths as well as to incorporate them into contemporary comedies instead of tragedies? Who dares to portray the demigod Hercules as an inadequate, impotent failure? Who dares to mock tragic heroines like Antigone? Who dares to mock the biblical Judith and her bravery? Who would portray an ideal emperor as one who betrays and sacrifices his empire? The Swiss author Friedrich Dürrenmatt, reconstitutes these famous ancient myths, motifs, symbols and archetypes in his works of art and literature in order to provoke reconsideration of modern-day values such as sacrifice, value of human life, nationalism, patriotism and bravery. Furthermore, Dürrenmatt also addresses the issues of globalization, poverty, capitalism and materialism, decrease in moral standards and the lack of moral values. The research focuses on Dürrenmatt's recurring motifs with special emphasis on mythic, historical and biblical figures in the grotesque comedies and parodies *Romulus the Great* and *Hercules and the Augean Stables*.

Dürrenmatt's plays have greatly been influenced by Bertolt Brecht, Georg Büchner, August Strindberg, Thornton Wilder, and the movements of expressionism and absurdist drama, but the myths of those such as Prometheus, Atlas, Sisyphus and, quite especially, the Minotaur and his labyrinth, remained the framework for his creative work – be it painting or writing. His short stories like *The Trap* or *The Tunnel* contain elements of eschatological myths; his short story *The City* is a labyrinth in itself and his ballad *The Minotaur* gives rich insight into his fascination with mythology.

Dürrenmatt's oeuvre has already been the focus of various research studies, among which there are several studies into

Dürrenmatt's use of myths. These studies include Martina Steinberger's dissertation: *Das Antike-Bild Friedrich Dürrenmatts* (Salzburg, 1991) where she explores the complete image of the antique in the whole of Dürrenmatt's work as well as Véronique Brandner's *Der andere Dürrenmatt. Auf der Brücke zwischen zwei Welten* (Frankfurt/M., Berlin u.a.: Lang 1993), which is in its methodology similar to this research, as it investigates hidden mythic motifs, e.g. Brandner compares Traps from *The Breakdown* with Hephaestos.

A more recent research is one done by Kapcsandi Katalin in her 2005 dissertation *Metamorphosis Mythorum: Die (Ver)wandlung der Mythen. Mythologische Elemente bei Friedrich Dürrenmatt*. Her paper attempts to define Dürrenmatt's notion of myth and mythical elements, i.e. his *Stoff*, and she interprets his usage of myths such as those of Pythia and Oedipus.

Among the multitude of research papers on Dürrenmatt's labyrinth-motif, two papers must be mentioned: Martin Burkard's *Dürrenmatt und das Absurde. Gestalt und Wandlung des Labyrinthischen in seinem Werk*. (Bern, Berlin, Frankfurt u.a.: Lang, 1991) and Otto Keller's *Kritik des aberländischen Denkens in Stoffe I: Der Winterkrieg in Tibet. Das Labyrinth: Weltgleichnis oder Epos einer neuen Aufklärung*. (Bern u.a.: Lang, 1999).

This particular research focuses on Dürrenmatt's use of the mythic figure Penelope, tragic heroine Antigone, the biblical figure of Judith in *Romulus the Great* and the myth of Hercules in *Hercules and the Augean Stables*. The analysis will show that in Dürrenmatt's plays the ancient mythic heroes become victims of contemporary societies and are (post)modern antiheroes stuck in parodies.

Dürrenmatt and mythology

Dürrenmatt argues that myths are timeless and appear randomly before disappearing again. Meaning lies not in their believability or their mere existence, but, rather, with the fact of

whether or not we can recognize ourselves in them (1992: 35).² He goes on to describe myths as constantly reoccurring archetypes and pre-constellations that mankind finds itself in at all times (1996: 31)³. He uses these omnipresent myths as grotesque topcoats for his base texts which enable him to show how confusing reality is and how, as a result of that, an individual is unable to take action in terms of opposing injustice, living by and reviving moral values.

The cult of myth is closely associated with the cult of heroes and tragedy. However, Dürrenmatt's mythic heroes act unusually antiheroic. He explains that myths are conflicting, therefore he provides a more logical variant, but also admits that logic does not always correspond to common sense, in fact, it does so very rarely (Dürrenmatt 1992: 7).⁴ In his best-known essay *Theatre Problems* he argues that myths that have been destroyed and have become mummies can only become material (*Stoff*⁵) through parody (Dürrenmatt 2006: 159). In contemporary times it is impossible for individuals to express heroic values. It is a time when Creon's secretaries and clerks resolve the case of Antigone, and not Creon himself (1988: 56)⁶; a time when the individual is lost in a world where political power has become so bureaucratic and mechanical that no true tragic protagonists, let alone heroes, can arise. His protagonists seem to

² "Die Mythen sind zeitlos, sie vermögen immer wieder in unsere Zeit einzubrechen oder sich aus ihr zurückzuziehen. Ob sie etwas bedeuten, liegt außerhalb ihrer Glaubwürdigkeit oder gar ihrer Existenz, es liegt daran, ob wir uns noch in ihnen wiederfinden oder nicht."

³ „ein Archetypus, eine Uerscheinung, eine Urkonstellation, in die der Mensch immer wieder gerät. Es ist das immer wiederholbare innerhalb des Menschlichen.“

⁴ „Da die Mythen sich widersprechen, gebe ich eine logischere Variante als die übliche, wobei ich aber freilich zugeben muß, daß das Logische mit dem Vernünftigen nicht immer übereinstimmt, eigentlich selten.“

⁵ According to Dürrenmatt and his explanation at the beginning of *Der Winterkrieg in Tibet*, *Stoff* is the term used to describe the results of his thoughts and the mirrors, in which his thoughts and his life reflect: „Die Geschichte meiner Schriftstellerei ist die Geschichte meiner Stoffe. [...] Aber die Stoffe sind die Resultate meines Denkens, die Spiegel, in denen, je nach ihrem Schliff, mein Denken und damit auch mein Leben reflektiert werden.“

⁶ "Kreons Sekretäre erledigen den Fall Antigone."

struggle fruitlessly against a bureaucratic, overwhelming and thus hardly visible and inconceivable power, which does not leave room for heroic actions.

It is interesting how not only Dürrenmatt thinks that modern time is not an age for tragedy and heroism. George Steiner argues in his *Death of Tragedy* that rationalism and a godless world have pushed the tragic art form aside. He emphasizes "tragedy is that form of art which requires the intolerable burden of God's presence. It is now dead because His shadow no longer falls upon us as it fell on Agamemnon or Macbeth or Athalie" (Steiner 1963:353). Similarly, Northrop Frye claims in *The Anatomy of Criticism* that the present-day hero is in his power and/or intelligence, weaker than we are, and we see him in a state of captivity, frustration or absurd. Literature of the last 100 years or so has, particularly according to Frye, a tendency towards the ironic mode (Frye 1979:45).

Dürrenmatt's representations of mythic greatness no longer function as such. On the contrary, his protagonists instead of being depicted as larger-than-life heroes become mere mortals, or, more accurately, failures. In Dürrenmatt's interpretation, the strongest demigod in antiquity fails at his tasks – his Hercules cannot clean the filthy Augean stables. His princess Rea, who is in actuality, a parodied version of tragic Antigone, mythic and archetypal Penelope and biblical Judith is nothing but a fleeing coward. For Dürrenmatt myths are the incentive to re-examine and challenge the accepted traditional opinions about mythic heroes who are usually explicitly associated with the notion of greatness. Instead of depicting them as great, he deliberately blurs the lines separating the heroic and antiheroic, the mythic and the historic to create a multifaceted subversive antihero with no nostalgia for heroic values whatsoever. Victor Brombert defines all modern heroes to behave such that they "do not conform to traditional models of heroic figures; they even stand in opposition to them" (1999: 2).

Dürrenmatt's mythic antiheroes

The emperor Romulus in Romulus the Great

Romulus the Great is a play Dürrenmatt worked a lot on over a period of about fifteen years, which goes to show that it was very important to him. The first version dates from 1949, but it was never published, only staged in Basel and Zürich. The second version, which will be cited in this paper, dates from 1957. There are two more versions which were published in 1961 and 1964, subtitled *Third Version (Dritte Fassung)* and *New Version (Neue Fassung)*, respectively.

This parody of history and the hero-myth is subtitled “an un-historic historical comedy” (*ungeschichtliche historische Komödie*) because it depicts pseudo-historic events on the day of the fall the Western Roman Empire when the chicken-farming emperor Romulus awaits the arrival of German barbarians, whilst spending his day feeding his chickens and collecting eggs in a run-down, shabby palace, without a care in the world, even though his Minister of Finances has robbed the treasury and terrible news about the fall of the Empire awaits to be delivered to him.

The paradoxical subtitle itself is enough to confirm that this play is unusual. In dealing with history, historic figures and rules, playwrights tend to write dramas in the narrow sense or tragedies, not comedies. However, Dürrenmatt is decisive in going in a completely opposite direction and distancing himself from tradition and convention, both historical and literary. Instead of depicting, as one would expect, his protagonist Romulus Augustus true to his historical persona of a sixteen-year-old emperor of the Western Roman Empire, Dürrenmatt depicts him as a tired and disappointed old man who has retired to his summer villa and dedicated his time to his chickens. A strong, young emperor, eager to fight for his empire, standing bravely in the face of the enemy approaching the gate, willing to sacrifice his life and family for the greater good, is a dramatic

impulse one would expect to find in a conventional historical drama. But this dramatic impulse is nowhere to be found in Dürrenmatt's comedy *Romulus the Great*. Instead of such a heroic character, Dürrenmatt creates a chicken-feeding and egg-collecting emperor who has no interest in defending his empire from the approaching barbarians. In doing so, Dürrenmatt creates a distance between the historical reality and the literary fiction. This distance is bridged with the fine fabric of the text of his play in which Dürrenmatt isolated single strands of historical reality and exchanged them with his own comical fiction. Dürrenmatt's notion of history can thus be considered relative and shifted; the history has been preserved only as base for the plot with some true facts remaining, such as the date of the fall of the Roman Empire and the name of the emperor. Obviously, what was more important for Dürrenmatt was the idea of creating an emperor who would not be a hero, but who would critically approach the idea of a homeland/state/empire or other type of political establishment:⁷

Auch lockte es mich, einmal einen Helden nicht in der Zeit, sondern eine Zeit an einen Helden zugrunde gehen zu lassen. Ich rechtfertige einen Landesverräter. Nicht einen von denen, die wir an die Wand stellen mußten, aber einen von denen, die es nie gibt. Kaiser rebellieren nicht, wenn ihr Land unrecht hat. Sie überlassen dies den Laien und nennen es Landesverrat, denn der Staat fordert immer Gehorsam. Aber Romulus rebelliert. Auch wenn die Germanen kommen. Dies sei gelegentlich zur Nachahmung empfohlen. Ich will mich präzisieren. Ich klage nicht den Staat, der recht, sondern den Staat an, der unrecht hat. Das ist ein Unterschied. Ich bitte, den Staaten scharf auf die

⁷ An interesting discussion about whether or not Dürrenmatt's *Romulus* is a traitor of his or our time is done by Donald G. Daviau. Daviau concludes that despite all the faults of this play, which arise in its literary analysis like reverse logic, the unsolved problem of *Romulus*' guilt and other moral questions, as well as the failed aspirations of the text to become a political and social model, make this play excellent for the stage because it teaches us to accept the reality maturely and calmly, just like *Romulus* (Daviau 1979: 104f).

Finger zu sehen und sehe ihnen scharf auf die Finger. Es ist nicht ein Stück gegen den Staat, aber vielleicht eins gegen den Großstaat. Man wird meine Worte sophistisch nennen. Das sind sie nicht. Dem Staat gegenüber soll man zwar klug wie eine Schlange, aber um Gottes Willen nicht sanft wie eine Taube sein (Dürrenmatt 1966: 177).

It is through the character of Romulus, who calls himself not only a traitor, but also a judge and executioner of his own empire, that Dürrenmatt expresses such strong criticism towards the institution of state when he says:

Nicht ich habe mein Reich verraten, Rom hat sich selbst verraten. Es kannte die Wahrheit aber es wählte die Gewalt, es kannte die Menschlichkeit, aber es wählte die Tyrannei. Es hat sich doppelt erniedrigt: vor sich selbst und vor den anderen Völkern, die in seine Macht gegeben (Dürrenmatt n.d.: 65)

Through the allegory of the Western Roman Empire in the play, Romulus (i.e. Dürrenmatt) judges the brutality and tyranny of the past, but also announces the massacres that would happen in the future, e.g. the Second World War. Vlado Obad noticed that Romulus is the only one who realizes that the institution of an empire became a cover for killing, pillaging, enslaving nations and getting away with it legally, (Obad 1982: 96) when he exclaims: „Es wird niemand leichter zum Mörder als ein Vaterland.“ (Dürrenmatt n.d.: 53). In refusing to take part in the war with the approaching enemy, Romulus is considered to be a traitor among his subjects, but in actuality, this makes Romulus a different kind of hero, a type of protagonist Dürrenmatt calls “brave man” (“*der mutige Mensch*”) who refuses to give in to pressure of waging wars and spreading bloodshed. This distances him from the traditional hero in that he considers the individual and the family more important than power or politics, of which he is a mere symbol. Such a pacifist depiction of an emperor is Dürrenmatt’s clear expression of opposition to violence and war

in the name of the state. The irony increases exponentially at the end of the play when it turns out that the feared barbarian Odoacer is just as much a peaceful ruler as Romulus.

***Parody of Antigone, Penelope and biblical Judith in Romulus the Great*⁸**

At first glance, there is no evidence that Dürrenmatt incorporated the myth of Antigone into his play *Romulus the Great*, but there are some direct references to the myth, i.e. the Greek play. When Romulus hears that his daughter Rea is currently studying the play, he strongly advises against it. Here is where Dürrenmatt's own ideas on contemporary theatre arise. Namely, Romulus says that she should not study the old, tragic text, but learn the art of a comedy, which is more suitable for their time: "ROMULUS: Studiere nicht diesen alten, traurigen Text, übe dich in der Komödie, das steht uns viel besser." (Dürrenmatt n.d.: 31). We have already established that the situation Dürrenmatt is referring to through the words of Romulus is our own, the (post)modern.

Dürrenmatt's play is full of irony and mocks classical dramatic forms and elements such as *anagnorisis*. For instance, when Romulus' future son-in-law returns from German captivity in what should be a traditional recognition scene, the one person who should recognize him, his fiancé Rea, cannot. In fact, they reunite when Rea recites verses from Antigone under the guidance of a professional actor. Instead of the situation being festive and solemn, chickens flapping their wings and making a lot of noise interrupt the recital. As a result, Rea's instructor

⁸ A study into Dürrenmatt's character of Rea in *Romulus the Great* was previously published in *Treća*, a journal of the Croatian Centre for Feminist Studies, see: Novak, Sonja. "Tko se ruga Antigoni i Penelopi ili Dürrenmattove tragi(komi)čne antijunakinje." *Treća*. Zagreb: Centar za ženske studije. 14.1-2 (2012): 51-58. As opposed to this paper, the previously published study focuses on examining the genre of tragic comedy on the example of Dürrenmatt's play *Romulus the Great*. In addition to this, in this paper the research focuses only partially on the character of Rea and also greatly extends the previous study in examining Rea as a parody of the biblical figure of Judith.

commands her to yell and shout, thus making an overkill of her performance. Sabine Schu describes Rea as a travesty of Antigone, claiming that this is the result of the influence of the literature that she was studying, namely Rea's misunderstanding of the Antigone myth (Schu 2007: 161).

At this point, the references to the Antigone myth or the Penelope archetype in the plot are still only superficial, but they deepen and become more obvious as soon as Rea is asked to marry the trouser manufacturer Caesar Rupf who would, in exchange, save the Empire. Her father Romulus advises her against it, but she feels she needs to do it. In this, she resembles Antigone when she felt that she needed to bury her brother Polynices against Creon's wishes. Antigone dies for burying her brother, but Rea wants to destroy her own life in vain, i.e. for the good of an already crumbling Empire, by leaving her fiancée Ämilian, whom she still loves, for the old and wealthy capitalist Rupf who would save the Empire by paying off the Barbarians and investing money into the Empire. When Rea accepts to marry in order to save the Empire, she puts the well-being of the state first, as opposed to Antigone, who put her family first and disobeyed the law of the state, i.e. Creon's will. According to Romulus' words, Rea's mistake lies in the fact that one should love their country less than another human being: "ROMULUS: Nein, man soll es [das Vaterland] weniger lieben als einen Menschen" (Dürrenmatt n.d.: 53). Then he advises her to go and marry Ämilian. Another parody of the Antigone myth is the way Dürrenmatt's anti-heroine dies. While Antigone chooses and accepts her own destiny and allows herself to be buried alive because of her beliefs, Rea drowns while cowardly fleeing from the invasion of German barbarians.

In this aspect, Rea can also be considered a parody of the biblical figure of Judith, a brave woman who lures the captain of the enemy army Holofernes into her tent and chops off his head in order to save her people. Judith has thus become an archetypal character of a strong woman willing to sacrifice herself for the salvation of her nation. In visual arts she is mostly represented as

a beautiful woman holding a sword in one hand and the head of Holofernes in the other. The deuterocanonical Book of Judith has throughout the centuries served as inspiration to many playwrights such as Marko Marulić's *Judita* (1501), Friedrich Hebbel's *Judith* (1840) and Howard Barker's *Judith. A Parting from the Body* (1992). For example, Marulić's *Judita*, published during the war with the Turks in Dalmatia and, as the first epic poem published in the Croatian language, was utilized to emphasize the graveness of the political and social situation and the need for heroism when staring in the face of heathen enemies. On the other hand, Hebbel's *Judith* shows deeper psychological characterization of both Judith and Holofernes, both of which have been transformed from archaic religious characters to psychologically motivated individuals (Fricke et al. 1963: 770). According to Hebbel himself, his Judith does not act as an extended arm of God whose crime is justified, but as a woman who was raped and reacts out of fear and revenge (Stolte 1963: 418).

As opposed to both of these examples, Dürrenmatt's Judith incorporated in *Rea*⁹ is incapable of acting bravely no matter what the case is – be it individual and personal reasons or for the greater good. She is a mere parody of the archetypal Judith, ready at first to sacrifice herself for the salvation of the empire, but talked out of it by Romulus, thus showing her susceptibility to the influence of others. In the biblical Book of Judith, she leaves the safety of her hometown Bethulia and visits Holofernes in his tent, thus surrendering herself willingly and consciously to the enemy, with her only weapon being her beauty, charms, wit, wisdom and

⁹ Dürrenmatt's fascination with the character of Judith is obvious when one considers that he incorporated the myth into three plays: *Romulus the Great*, *Die Widertäufer* and *Achterloo*. In addition to this, the Schweizerische Literaturarchiv stores an unpublished fragment of Dürrenmatt's play *Judith und Holofernes* that later became the starting point for the creation of *Achetrloo*. (Schu 2007: 149) In all of the plays, Dürrenmatt depicts Judith as an immature and well-protected young daughter, while the original archetype is based on a mature and experienced woman.

bravery. Dürrenmatt's Judith does not face her enemy willingly and ready to chop off his head. Her sacrifice includes marrying a wealthy man who will save her empire with a substantial investment and pay-off of the German barbarians. In the end, she changes her mind about sacrificing her love for the empire and runs off with her fiancé Ämilian in pursuit of her personal happiness, but drowns in the sea, with the smallest ounce or hint of heroisms going down with her. She might have become a heroine in Dürrenmatt's terms and might have transcended beyond the tragic if she had only accepted her fate calmly like her father, because according to Dürrenmatt, accepting one's death means choosing a path towards freedom:

[...] seinen Tod, der doch den äußersten Zwang darstellt, als den Schritt zur Freiheit, zur Befreiung hin begreift und sich damit als wahrhaft freier Mensch beweist. Die Freiheit hätte die Tragik überwunden (Dürrenmatt 1998: 210).

Furthermore, because of Rea's misconception of the most important values in life, she is also a parody of Penelope. According to Barbara Clayton, "as a mythic archetype, the figure of Penelope is passed down from Homer with two distinctive components. She is the idealized faithful wife, and she is a weaver who unweaves, creating a web that is never finished" (Clayton 2004: 83). She is best known for her faithfulness to Odysseus, for her patience, virtue and strength. She is an archetype of devotion, chastity and female wisdom here being parodied through a naive, inexperienced and weak girl unable to recognize her fiancé and willing to trade in her love in exchange for a worthless and crumbling empire. Dürrenmatt distorted the images and archetypes of three mythic heroines – Antigone, Penelope and Judith – and blended them into a parody of values to become Rea, an anti-heroine of epic proportions.

The parody of heroes does not end with Rea; all the glorious Roman soldiers turn out to be *milites gloriosi* who run away at first signs of trouble. The twist that ends the play – the

fact that Romulus' adversary Odoacer also proves to be a pacifist and humanist, as well as a passionate fellow chicken farmer – is another parody of heroism. Additionally, Roger Alan Crockett describes the play as showing “exaggeratedly heroic deeds in an unheroic time” (Crockett 1998: 29), which is most obvious in the character of Spurius Titus Mamma – a herald that had been riding for two days and two nights to inform the Emperor of the fall of Pavia. The role of the herald bringing news of great battles is a convention in classical drama, where the king immediately receives him, but not here. Dürrenmatt mocks this scene in that Romulus' servants do not allow Spurius Titus Mamma to bother Romulus – instead he is sent to sleep, like a child to its room. He refuses to go to sleep throughout the play, but ironically sleeps through the most dramatic moments.

Dürrenmatt himself explains the impossibility of existence of heroes in contemporary drama:

The world today as it appears to us can hardly be encompassed in the form of the historical drama as Schiller wrote it, for the simple reason that we no longer have any tragic heroes, but only vast tragedies staged by world butchers and produced by slaughtering machines. Hitler and Stalin cannot be made into Wallensteins. Their power was so enormous that they themselves were no more than incidental, corporeal, and easily replaceable expressions of this power; and the misfortune associated with the former and to a considerable extent also with the latter too vast, too complex, too horrible, too mechanical, and usually simply too devoid of all sense. Wallenstein's power can still be envisioned; power as we know it today can only be seen in its smallest part for, like an iceberg, the largest part is submerged in anonymity and abstraction. [...] There are no true representatives, and the tragic heroes are nameless. Any small-time crook, petty government official, or policeman better represents our world than a senator or president. Today art can only embrace the victims, if it can reach men at all; it can no longer come close to mighty (Dürrenmatt 1982: 252f).

The Hercules myth in Hercules and the Augean Stables

This comedy focuses on one of Hercules' twelve tasks, where he is summoned to Elis in order to clean the Augean stables filled with faeces, as it is a country of farmers, with several times more animals than people. But Dürrenmatt's Hercules is a failure. He is a drunk, penniless brute and, paradoxically, an impotent philanderer who bullies his assistant and is unable to satisfy his lover Dejanaira.

The choice of base plot for the play is explained by Dürrenmatt himself through Polybios's words in the prologue of the comedy: "Bieten wir schon Mist, dann nur einen berühmten"(Dürrenmatt 1966: 361).¹⁰ The difference between the mythic Hercules and Dürrenmatt's Hercules is that Dürrenmatt's Hercules does not perform the twelve labours because of glory, heroism, altruism or benevolence towards mankind. The reason is much simpler – he needs money, and he needs it badly. Furthermore, Polybios reveals that his deeds were not at all heroic and it turned out that he was just (un)lucky up to now in completing the tasks and that collecting the wages was more difficult than anticipated:

POLYBIOS: Die drei ersten Arbeiten, die ich vermittelt habe, brachten wenig ein. Der nemeische Löwe, nach dessen Gewicht sich das Honorar richtete, erwies sich als ein Balkanzwergberglöwe, die Riesenschlange Hydra sackte in den lernäischen Sümpfen ab und die Keryneische Hindin sauste auf Nimmerwiedersehen davon.

[...]

HERKULES: Der Erymanthische Eber stürzte vor meinen Augen in den bodenlosen Abgrund.

¹⁰ This can roughly be translated as follows: "Since we have to offer the audience some manure, we'll make sure to at least offer some famous and well-known manure."

POLYBIOS: Und damit das Honorar. Fünfzehntausend Drachmen liegen da unten (Dürrenmatt 1966: 365f).

Hercules had to master all these tasks that actually proved to be rather degrading, e.g. the Nemean lion was indeed a small mountain lion in the Balkans and the Erymanthian boar leaped into the abyss right before his eyes, leaving Hercules helpless and unable to collect his fee for the task. The most degrading job was definitely performing for the national circus of Elis Nationalzirkus Tantalos where he was even promoted from weightlifting to wrestling an elephant and boxing a gorilla. But again, the circus went bankrupt, its manager vanished and our hero was unable to collect his fee yet again. Furthermore, he was forced to move on to the next Labour, although he had not started, much less completed the cleaning of the state of Elis, which remains hopelessly buried under growing mountains of manure.

Dürrenmatt has completely de-mythologized his character of Hercules; he only used the Hercules-myth as a cover to describe and criticise the different layers of society. Firstly, he extensively criticizes the bureaucracy. Namely, in order to perform his task and collect his fee, Hercules must obtain several different permits from different bureaucratic entities before he can start work: "PHYLEUS: Für alles braucht man in Elis eine Genehmigung" (Dürrenmatt 1966: 392). Before Hercules can even think of getting his hands dirty, he must receive a permit from The Ministry of Civil Engineering, the Employment Agency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Water, the Ministry of Faeces, etc.

Moreover, Dürrenmatt criticizes the political sphere by depicting the state of Elis as being run by ignorant money-and-power driven illiterates who can count only to three and cannot remember the words to their national anthem.

The choice of heroic task is also very carefully made in order to strip Hercules of his heroism: Gustav Schwab calls this task unworthy of a hero (Schwab 1909: 182). Dürrenmatt

accordingly depicts Hercules' image as one of a national hero and opposes it to our traditional notion of a national hero. His Hercules is aging, sick and tired of women, but because of high expectations he must keep at least the image of a hero alive. But the reality is far from the expectations. Hercules is an impotent Don Juan, which becomes obvious when it is discovered that it is actually Augias' foreman Kambyses who sleeps in Hercules' tent and deals with all the women instead of him, while he only keeps the myth of the vital lover alive. Hercules acts completely different than a hero should: he rapes a prostitute in broad daylight in the middle of the city park, he vandalizes banks and he drinks and eats too much. He shows virtually no brain power or heroic values, just sheer muscle power and explains his behaviour as having to rage every once in a while: "Ich muß einfach hin und wieder rasen" (Dürrenmatt 1966: 384).

Finally, he confesses to Augias' 14-year-old daughter Iole who had sneaked into his tent with romantic ideas on her mind that he is not really a hero, but a man who coincidentally inherited a characteristic that other people lack – abundant strength – which actually makes him unfit for this world and time:

HERKULES: Held ist nur ein Wort, das erhabene Vorstellungen erweckt, die begeistern. In Wirklichkeit bin ich aber nicht ein Wort, Iole, sondern ein Mann, der aus Zufall eine Eigenschaft bekommen hat, die andere nicht in dem Übermaß besitzen: Ich bin stärker als die andern Menschen und darum, weil ich niemand zu fürchten brauche, gehöre ich auch nicht zu den Menschen. Ich bin ein Ungeheuer wie jene Saurier, die ich in den Sümpfen ausrotte. Ihre Zeit ist um, und auch die meine. Ich gehöre einer blutigen Welt, Iole, und übe ein blutiges Handwerk. Der Tod ist mein Begleiter [...] Ich bin ein Mörder, vom Ruhm der Menschen übertüncht (Dürrenmatt 1966: 410).

At the same time, the piling of the omnipresent faeces in ever increasing amounts in the state of Elis adds to the grotesque

tone of an already hilarious parody connecting the mythic world with the present by questioning issues such as pollution and overwhelming bureaucratic machinery comprised of incompetent and illiterate peasants who instead of inspiring him to greatness, drive him towards indifference.

Dürrenmatt uses the Hercules myth to depict his protagonist in a confrontation with the real contemporary world – he is a character within which irreconcilable differences reside: a hero must become a mere employee of the state and, even more ironically, a circus. There is no way out of this absurdity for him.

Conclusion

Dürrenmatt is quite familiar with myths and mythology and quite fascinated by them. His re-interpretations of myths are based on elements from traditional and conventional patterns interwoven with elements that demythologise these heroes. His heroes are almost always condemned to failure and their characteristics are irreconcilable, contributing to the grotesque and absurdity of their world.

These comedies of his, as he himself labels them, represent worlds where different cultures, myths and heritages clash, leading to a greater level of irony, not only of events, but also of characters. Dürrenmatt's Rea is thus simultaneously a parody of Antigone, Judith and Penelope, his Romulus is a hero to his family, but a traitor to his empire and his Hercules is an impotent Don Juan and incompetent worker for hire.

In addition to completely humanizing mythic heroes, Dürrenmatt often combines mythic elements with real and present-day moments, thus achieving the effect of realistic representation of contemporary society, which he mocks. By redefining mythic figures as caricatures, he expresses criticism towards social concepts such as national heroism or bravery and sacrifice. For Dürrenmatt, the chaotic world of today cannot produce a tragic hero anymore and even if it could, the world has been rationalized, mechanized and dehumanized to such a degree that the hero would not survive or be successful for long.

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