

*Introducing the author and playwright  
Elfriede Jelinek*

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Writer and Nobel laureate for literature in 2004, Elfriede Jelinek has been called Austria's best-hated author for her socially critical and boldly explicit works that range in subject from the subjugation of women to the rise to power of the political rightwing in Austria. In recent years, her writing has increasingly focused on dramatic expression in national political dramas, her so-called "princess dramas," and her recent play *Bambiland* (2003). Her work reflects her strong sense of the value and responsibility of an author to speak out, even when the topic is an unabashedly political unpopular one; in a 1999 interview Jelinek characterized herself in this way: "I would say that I am certainly not an author of either discretion or suggestion, but the opposite. I am an author of the axe" (Bethman 65).

The performing arts were part of Jelinek's early life in Austria. Born in 1946 in the small town of Mürzzuschlag in Austria to a father of Czech-Jewish origin and a Catholic mother from a prosperous Viennese family, Jelinek wrote poetry and studied music from an early age. She studied composition, piano, organ and recorder at the Vienna Conservatory, and in 1964 began the study of theater and art history at the University of Vienna. During her years at the university, her writing began to take a more critical direction as she became part of student protests and came face to face with the inequalities that were being masked in popular culture and platitudes. She

became engrossed in the historic Austria and it took on a profoundly political aspect in her work as she wrote about and around Austria's role in World War II.<sup>1</sup> The Austrian writing tradition provided Jelinek many examples of social criticism imbedded in text and she developed a linguistic style that elevated her literary writing at the same time that it provoked her critics.<sup>2</sup>

Even in her dramas, Jelinek routinely employs language in unexpected ways, creating drama from a poem or chant and using sophisticated intertextual references. As the Swedish Academy noted in regard to her dramas and radioplays, "...she successively abandoned traditional dialogues for a kind of polyphonic monologue that does not serve to delineate roles but to permit voices from various levels of the psyche and history to be heard simultaneously." Jelinek has spoken of this as well, "My plays are made up of long monologues, which is similar to prose working with language...it can be likened to a musical or compositional work with the language." Her work has been praised and attacked for its critique of Austrian rightwing politics and xenophobia, violence and injustice against women, and in her recent play, *Bambiland*, for her criticism of the United States and its policy in Iraq.

In addition to the Nobel Prize, Jelinek received the prestigious Franz Kafka literary prize in 2004 specifically highlighting "her criticism of all expressions of xenophobia," as expressed by Prague's mayor Pavel Bem, who presented the award. Perhaps Jelinek's most controversial political acts and dramas have arisen from her dismay and disgust at the rise in prominence of Austria's right-radical Freedom Party led by Jörg Haider in 2000.<sup>3</sup> Jelinek actively and publicly protested the strong racist tendencies that she saw revitalizing in Austria; she wrote essays of protest that were published in French and German and were published in newspapers and magazines around Europe (Kallin 329). Jelinek's protest culminated in the withdrawal of her works from Austrian stages<sup>4</sup> and a staged reading on the steps of Vienna's *Burgtheater* of her play *Das Lebewohl*. Several months later Jelinek and German director Ulrike Ottinger staged the play in Berlin, Germany. This intertextual drama reflects on the context of Austrian politics by knitting together excerpts of the Greek tragedy *Oresteia* and the publicly available personal and political discourse of politician Jörg Haider. The political tableau of *Oresteia* intertwined with the rhetoric of the political right in Austria force twenty-first century audiences to see the patriarchal social order in Aeschylus's text and recognize the injustices toward women and minorities being reiterated in modern Europe.<sup>5</sup>

Jelinek's work also reflects a concern for women and how they are limited by society.<sup>6</sup> Her attempt to expose this gender oppression, violence and submission has brought her considerable criticism, as Lynn Neary on NPR's *Day to Day* recounted, "Her critics describe it as 'obscene, vulgar, blasphemous' and even feminists have criticized her for her explicit descriptions of female sexuality and violence." The violence to which Jelinek is referring is not limited to overt violence; she is also often exposing the latent violence of films, books, television and society that effectively stereotypes women and paralyzes people against change, limiting the ability of women to gain a voice.<sup>7</sup> In Jelinek's work, the impulse to deconstruct/ reconstruct gender identity is tempered by the fact that she views this issue as one limited in scope to western middle-class (academic) women; she speaks frequently about this position of

relative power and is intensely aware that many more women are faced with daily doses of abject violence and oppression.<sup>8</sup> It is perhaps this clinical gaze that makes Jelinek willing to adopt a language of violence, and endure her loudest critics; she seems committed to writing about the ugly, unseemly, and grotesque in the world.

Finally, to *Bambiland*, one of Elfriede Jelinek's most recent and controversial dramas. The play is highly critical of United States' foreign policy toward Iraq, particularly blind patriotism that makes dissent synonymous with treason. *Bambiland* is a world-wide amusement park that gains an important new dimension when "War-tainment" is introduced. The drama vacillates between the message that "everyone is welcome to play" and the more ominous message "everyone plays, whether they like it or not." From embedded media reporters, to the axis of evil, to Aeschylus, Jelinek juxtaposes an extended, provocative monologue with visual images: materials from Iraq including war photos—both official and unofficial photos ranging from the assault on Baghdad to the prison at Abu Ghraib, photos of the stone panel friezes of ancient Iraqi palaces, the Flood Tablet from the Epic of Gilgamesh, descriptions and diagrams of US weapons, and popular cultural references to movies, videogame, cartoons and television. The monologue is not limited in its perspective; from popular cultural to Greek myth to Nietzsche, the audience wavers among the viewpoints, often noticing the change in the point of view a few lines after it has occurred. The emotional range is also far-reaching from tragic to naïve, and from flat political-speech to rage. In *Bambiland*, Jelinek constructs the text of the play with densely-layered language; the leavening of the monologue occurs on stage through its interface with images or, as Christian Schlingensiefel did when he directed the play at the *Burgtheater* in Vienna, through the format of a game show in which the audience is provoked to reflect on its past.<sup>9</sup> In the end, Jelinek's play makes a statement about the incendiary nature of language and also charges that the world is prepared, even eager, to have war because it can now be viewed through the lens of entertainment.

Many of Jelinek's texts are not yet available in English so her work has limited accessibility in the United States; this may change with her new status as a Nobel laureate. Although her books regularly become bestsellers in German-speaking Europe, it should be noted that she is even better known as a dramatist in a city—Vienna—that takes its playwrights and theater very seriously. Jelinek's dramas are neither easy nor simple; they are remarkably funny at times, and powerful, and they lend themselves to creative staging. Her work makes it clear that she is not writing for prizes or recognition; she is writing because language is both her passion and her curse, whether the subject is the Holocaust or domestic violence. As she said in her Nobel Prize lecture, "Sometimes language finds itself on the way by mistake, but it doesn't go out of the way. It is no arbitrary process, speaking with language, it is one that is involuntarily arbitrary, whether one likes it or not. Language knows what it wants. Good for it, because I don't know, no not at all."

## Notes

1. See Allyson Fiddler. *Rewriting Reality: An Introduction to Elfriede Jelinek*. Oxford: Berg, 1994.
2. Other Austrian authors of this tradition include Johann Nepomuk, Nestroy, Karl Kraus, Ilse Aichinger, Franz Innenhofer, Thomas Bernhard, Ingeborg Bachmann, Marlen Haushofer, and Peter Handke.
3. The Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) or Freedom Party headed by Jörg Haider was able to form a coalition government with the Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP) or Austrian People's Party in 1999-2000. The platform of the Freedom Party was regarded by many as blatantly anti-Semitic and anti-foreigner.
4. "The government has once again made the right socially acceptable. That was when I finally parted ways with Austria. I forbade them to perform my plays in the state theaters..." Elfriede Jelinek, interview with Anders Lindqvist, Swedish Public Service Broadcaster 7 Oct 2004.
5. The intertextual use of Greek drama has become a common thread among women writers in the German and Austrian tradition. As noted by Kallin, Christa Wolf's *Kassandra* (1983) is pivotal and "...started a long debate on the role of this and other myths for Western civilization and gender relations." (330).
6. Some prominent examples include: *Die Klavierspielerin* (*The Piano Teacher*) from 1983 and *Krankheit oder Moderne Frauen* (*Illness or Modern Women*) from 1984 and in later works, *Ein Sportstück* (1998), *Gier: Ein Unterhaltungsroman* (2000) and *Der Tod und das Mädchen I-V* (2003).
7. "And what's so stifling is that we all claim that things have changed fundamentally, that women now have choices. It's actually much worse now than when there was still a feeling of anticipation, of expectation (*Aufbruchsstimmung*), a belief that one must simply fight hard enough for things to change, an optimism. Now one is made to feel like a hysterical old hag who keeps on screaming even though it no longer matters. That is really my frustration, that nothing has fundamentally changed; economic power is still in the hands of men, and overwhelmingly so" (Bethman 68).
8. See also Eva Ludwiga Szalay, "Of Gender and the Gaze: Constructing the Disease(d) in Elfriede Jelinek's *Krankheit oder Moderne Frauen*." *German Quarterly* 74:3 (2001): 237-259.
9. *Bambiland* and its sequel, *Babel*, were published in a single Suhrkamp volume in 2004.

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