

**AN INTERVIEW WITH KAREEN SEIDLER ON EARLY  
MODERN GERMAN *HAMLET*, ITS IMPORTANCE  
FOR *HAMLET* STUDIES, AND ITS NEW  
TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH**

*Anna Mikyšková*

**KAREEN Seidler** holds a PhD and an MA from the University of Geneva and an MPhil from the University of Cambridge. Her MPhil dissertation on *Romio und Julieta* was awarded the Martin Lehnert Prize of the German Shakespeare Society. She has taught at the University of Geneva and at Freie Universität Berlin and worked as assistant editor for the *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*. Currently, she is a translator and editor for several scholarly and commercial venues. Additionally, she works for the German Institute for Humour.

**AM: Can you tell us something about yourself and your research interests? When did you become interested in early modern theatre and what do you find most fascinating about it?**

KS: Like a lot of kids, I read *Macbeth* in school, but the real love affair with Shakespeare and early modern theatre started during my studies in Geneva. I attended a few seminars on Shakespeare, and one about (versions of) *Romeo and Juliet*, taught by Lukas Erne (who later became my PhD supervisor and eventually co-editor). And so I learnt that there is not just one *Hamlet* text, but actually three early modern versions. And I was hooked. I've always loved close reading and I also studied comparative literature. So comparing texts was a lot of fun. A little later, I learnt about the German version of *Hamlet* – *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*.

Also, I'm a big theatre fan (lately rather in the audience or in front of the screen, during my studies also onstage or backstage), for instance, I directed Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good morning Juliet)* for the Geneva English Drama Society and we went to the Edinburgh Fringe with the English Department theatre group, presenting our own Shakespeare adaptation.

There are many things I find fascinating about early modern theatre, for instance, that there was no such thing as a "fixed" text (which we have taken so seriously

for such a long time); the imaginative ways in which different spaces were used; how a ‘world’ could be conjured with words, gestures and movement instead of props and scenery; the different layers of meaning in language that can sometimes only be unearthed with detailed study.

**You were a member of the research project *Early Modern German Shakespeare* at the University of Geneva, whose aim was to prepare and publish critical editions of four early modern German adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays, namely *Romio und Julieta* (*Romeo and Juliet*), *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* (*Hamlet*), *Tito Andronico* (*Titus Andronicus*), and *Künst über alle Künste* (*Taming of the Shrew*). The first volume with *Romio und Julieta* and *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* was published by Arden in 2020, the second volume with the two remaining plays came out quite recently in February 2022 (congratulations!). What was the main inspiration for the project and how did you become part of it?**

I actually wrote [my PhD](#) on *Romio und Julieta* and *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*. It also included annotated and collated editions of the German texts. So when Lukas Erne proposed that I be part of the project, I was of course thrilled and more than happy to participate.

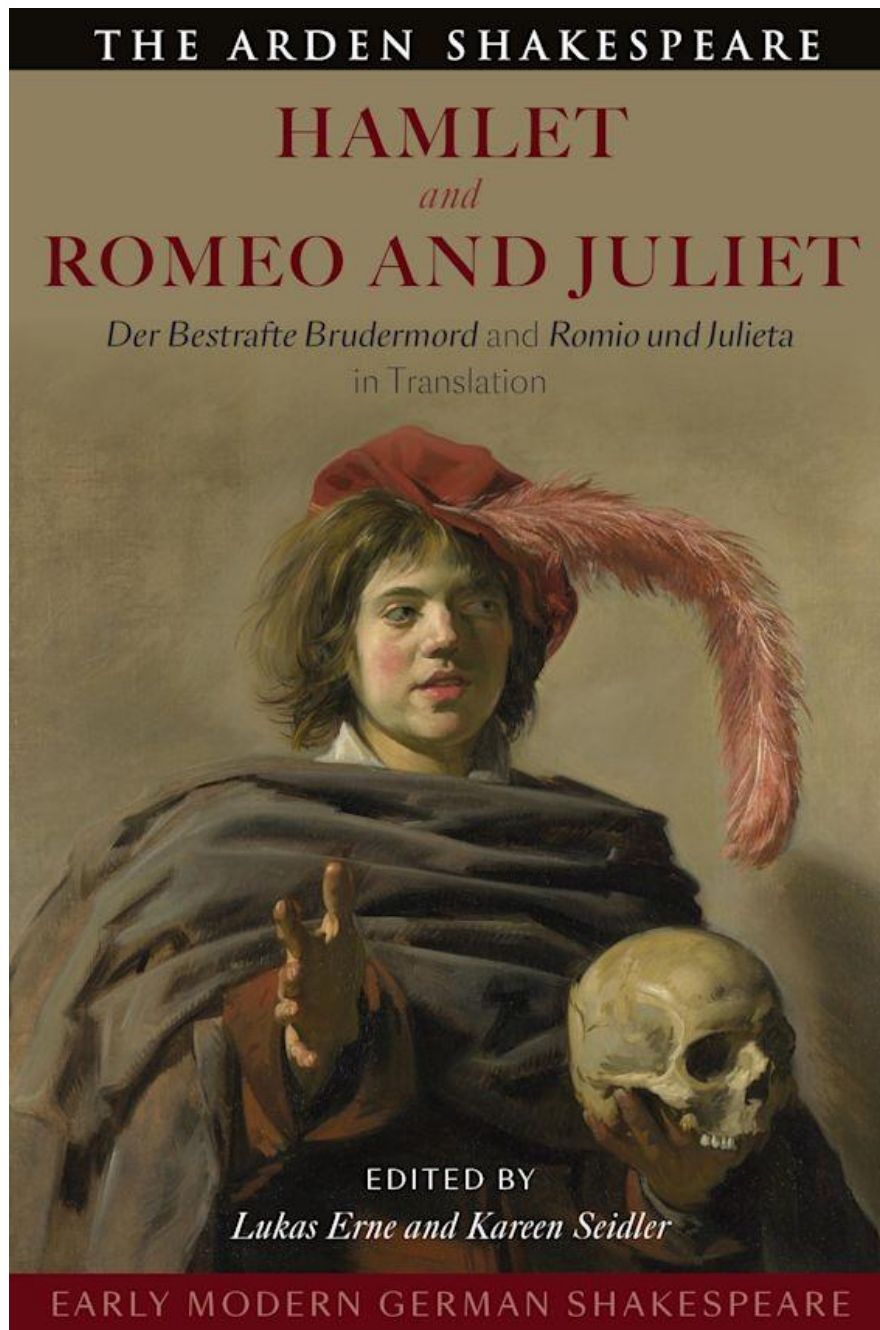
The main inspiration for the project was a growing interest in, shall we say, non-normative versions of Shakespeare’s and early modern plays – and the fact that although English-speaking Shakespeareans were familiar with these German texts in the nineteenth century (when English-speaking scholars still read German!), this is no longer the case in the twenty-first century. So the aim was to make these texts available to the English-speaking scholarly community. Our editions provide readable English translations, a rich commentary which explores the texts’ relationship to Shakespeare’s and informative, scholarly introductions.

**Why is it important to know the early modern German versions of Shakespeare? How can these texts broaden our understanding of Shakespeare or early modern theatre business in general?**

These texts, much like the early quartos (or “textually challenged quartos,” as Lukas Erne calls them), are early modern theatrical evidence, also evidence of early modern staging to a certain extent. In many instances, they can contribute to scholarly discussions on specific moments in Shakespeare’s plays or even help to elucidate textual cruxes for editors or theatre historians.

To give just one example: In Hamlet’s encounter with his mother in Act 3, *Brudermord* provides its answer to the long-standing question of whether Hamlet, when asking his mother to look “upon this picture, and on this” (*Hamlet*, 3.4.51), is referring to large wall-portraits or miniatures of his father and his uncle: “there

in that gallery hangs the portrait of your first husband, and here in this room hangs the portrait of the present one” (*Brudermord*, 3.5.5–7). Here and elsewhere, the early German versions are an important and, so far, underused resource for the problems Shakespeare’s texts pose.



Lukas Erne and Karen Seidler’s volume with the first critical English translation of *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* (Arden 2020).

**Why did you and your colleagues choose these four German texts for your critical editions? Are there more German adaptations of Shakespeare's plays that wait for their English scholarly translation?**

The texts of six German *Wanderbühne* (literally, "strolling stage") plays based on Shakespeare survive: in addition to our four edited plays, there is *Das Wohlgesprochene Uhrtheil, oder Der Jud von Venedig* (*The Well-Spoken Judgment or the Jew of Venice*, a loose adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*) and Andreas Gryphius' *Absurda Comica oder Herr Peter Squentz* (*Absurda Comica or Mister Peter Squentz*, featuring the Pyramus and Thisbe sequence from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). We chose our four playtexts because their relationship to Shakespeare is clearest and most relevant. Another seven Shakespearean plays only appear in performance records or repertory lists. And a plot summary (or "argument") of a performance of *King Lear* has been preserved. Additionally, a number of plays by other early modern English authors were adapted (and some texts are extant), for instance, by Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Dekker.

**You translated the German version of *Hamlet*, entitled *Der Bestrafte Brudermord oder Prinz Hamlet aus Dännemark*. Do we know when the German play was written or to which version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* it is most related?**

*Hamlet* was probably first brought to the Continent in the early seventeenth century and adapted for German audiences. This adaptation considerably shortened the play (for instance, nearly all soliloquies have been cut) and streamlined the plot. The play was again adapted around the 1660s, when elements such as the Prologue were added. The text we have was printed in 1781, based on a manuscript dated 1710.

As for *Brudermord's* relationship to Q1, Q2 and F *Hamlet*, the situation is quite tricky. One thing is certain: *Brudermord* is not the Ur-*Hamlet*. That is to say, *Brudermord* is based on Shakespeare and not vice-versa. However, fascinatingly, *Brudermord* contains elements that are unique to Q2/F and elements that are only found in Q1. In quite a few instances, for one line from *Brudermord*, the first half is actually from Q1 and the second from Q2. So it seems most sensible to assume that *Brudermord* is based on an early Shakespearean acting version that contained elements of both Q1 and Q2.

**What is known about the staging history of *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* and/or its original audiences?**

Only a single performance of a *Hamlet* play in Germany is reliably documented. On 24 June 1626, a "Tragoedia von Hamlet einen printzen in Dennemarck" was

performed at the court of Dresden. Yet we do not know how close this performance was to the extant text. *Romio und Julieta* was also performed in Dresden during this time. This was probably not the first performance of a *Hamlet* play in Germany – nor the last.

The English Comedians (as the English itinerant players were called) started out by performing in their mother tongue. The large majority of the population had no knowledge of the English language, yet, according to the Englishman Fynes Moryson (who travelled throughout Europe in the 1590s) despite “not vnderstanding a worde [the English] sayde” everyone (“both men and wemen”) “flocked wonderfully to see theire gesture and Action.”<sup>1</sup> Possibly, while the performances were still in English, only extracts of plays were performed, which were largely intelligible without language. The Germans were so fascinated, because they did not know professional theatre companies. In a sense, the English Comedians can be credited with founding German professional theatre.

**What are the main differences between Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*? To what extent is the German text determined by the fact that it used to be staged by German wandering players?**

One main difference is length: Q2 of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is about 3,800 lines long, F about 3,600 lines and Q1 only about 2,200 lines. In comparison, *Brudermord* is really short. It only counts 1,200 lines. The play has been streamlined. Once an action is planned (e.g. to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia) it is immediately carried out. In a similar vein, the night scenes in Shakespeare’s Act I (I.i, I.iv, I.v) have been grouped together at the beginning of *Brudermord*. The German play has untangled and simplified the different strands of the Shakespearean plot. The subplots are largely eliminated (e.g., Rosencrantz and Guildenstern only appear as “servants” when they are to accompany Hamlet on his sea voyage and are later renamed “bandits” when they attempt to kill him).

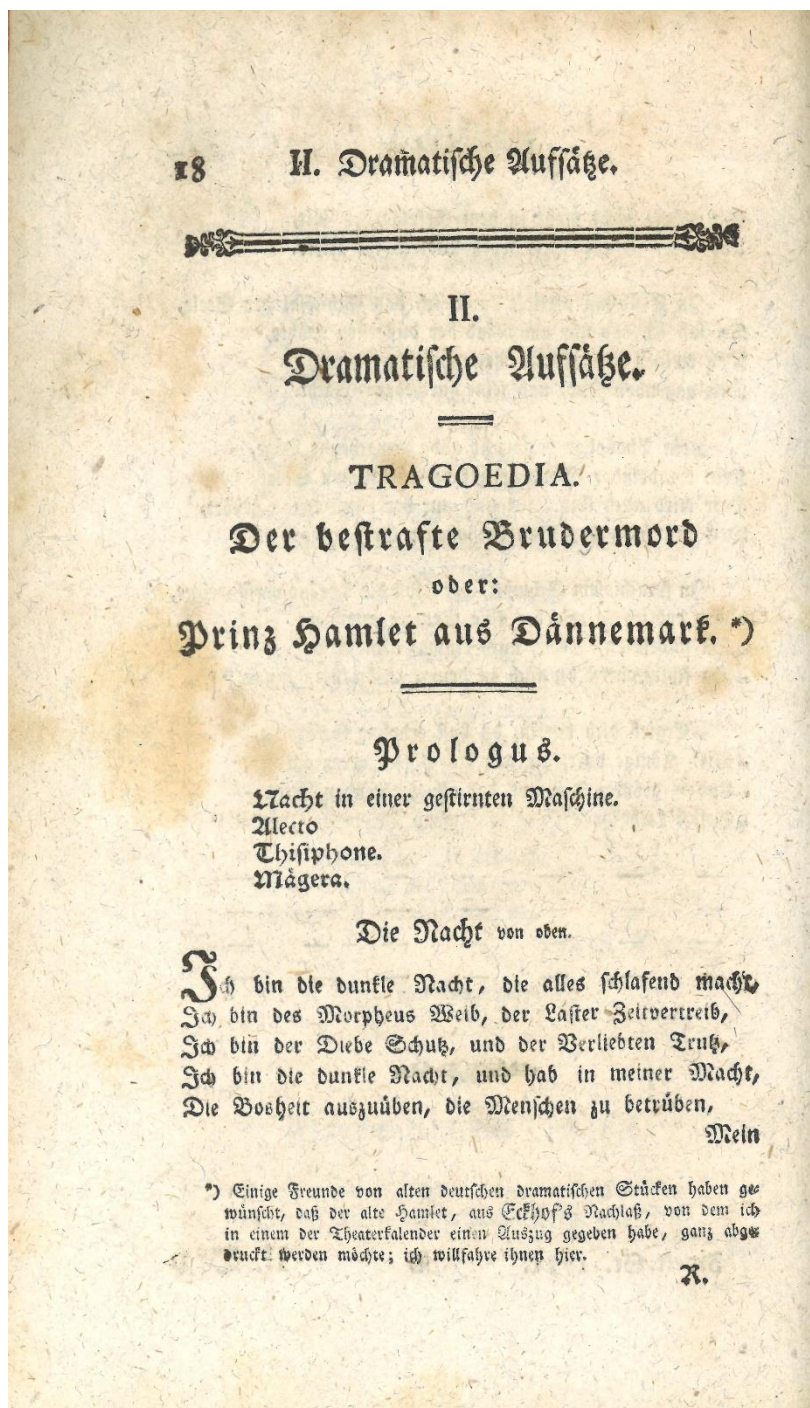
What *Brudermord* shares with other *Wanderbühne* plays is an emphasis on physicality. This originated at the time when the texts were first adapted for audiences who did not understand the language the plays were performed in. Ophelia’s madness is transformed into physical comedy, the Ghost boxes one of the guards over the ear, and Hamlet escapes the two “bandits” in a slap stick episode.

The text of *Brudermord* contains a few elements that can be traced to German players, for instance Act 2, Scene 7 – corresponding to Act 2, Scene 2 in Shakespeare

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hughes, ed., *Shakespeare’s Europe: Unpublished Chapters of Fynes Moryson’s Itinerary: Being a Survey of the Condition of Europe at the End of the 16th Century* (London: Sherratt & Hughes, 1903), 304.

– dramatizing the arrival of the players at court. Here, the leader of the players is called Carl. This scene contains a transparently topical passage about Carl Andreas Paulsen (1620–1687) and his company.



Title page of *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* (1781).

**Can you give us any specific example of early modern staging practice present in *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*? Was it a challenge to translate the play for readers not necessarily familiar with early modern English or German theatre traditions?**

In the Prologue, Night enters “*from above*” (0.0 SD). This implies the use of stage machinery and it illustrates that while around 1600 the English Comedians performed on make-shift stages with little or no scenery, towards the end of the seventeenth century, the companies had elaborate scenery and stage machinery at their disposal. One of my favourite passages from a contemporary document lists the following scenery that is to be painted for the court theatre in Český Krumlov (where *Romio und Julieta* was performed in 1688 and where the extant manuscript originated): seven clouds, seven waves, a shore, twelve water animals, a whale, a prison, twenty-two sheep and three turtles.<sup>2</sup>

I believe that our translation and edition present the texts in a way that makes them easily accessible for any scholars or students interested in early modern drama and theatre.

**I was surprised to learn that the German version of *Hamlet* contains a prologue, in which the Night and three Furies foreshadow the story of the tragedy. What is, in your opinion, the significance of the prologue? Was it a usual practice of German itinerant playing companies or is there more to it?**

The Prologue is likely to have been a late addition (probably during the 1660s); it contains several echoes of Andreas Gryphius’ *Carolus Stuardus* (1657), and its style has been termed “Senecan” (G. R. Hibbard).<sup>3</sup> There are some inconsistencies between the Prologue and the plot of the play which also suggest that it was added later. It was by no means unusual to have a play preceded by a prologue, for early modern German as for early modern English playtexts. The German adaptation of *The Shrew* also features a prologue. The purpose of the Prologue in *Brudermord* may have been to add some “gravity” to the play – and a spectacular beginning.

**What was the biggest challenge in your translating process? For instance, were you not too much influenced by your knowledge of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*?**

The biggest challenge was undoubtedly the early modern German language, especially allusions or idioms that are not easy to understand, even for native speakers of modern German. One very useful resource is Grimm’s *Wörterbuch*, which, to a certain extent, is the German equivalent of the OED. When it came to translating verse, we

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<sup>2</sup> Josef Hejnic and Jiří Zálaha, “Český Krumlov und die Theatertradition,” *Teatralia zámecké knihovny v Českém Krumlově* 1 (1976): 37–63, 49.

<sup>3</sup> G. R. Hibbard (ed.), *Hamlet*, Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford, 1987), 373.

were very fortunate to have Anthony Mortimer to help us out, an experienced translator of poetry (Petrarch, among others).

Previous translators of *Brudermord* had a tendency to ‘Shakespeareanize’ their translations: they tried to make their English translation sound as close to the original Shakespearean text as possible – presumably to highlight the proximity of the adaptations to the source. This was certainly not our aim. We translated as faithfully as possible, while keeping the text readable and accessible. Our collation and annotation point to the many parallels to Shakespeare’s texts. Of course, it is nearly impossible to work on *Brudermord* without having *Hamlet* as a constant companion. But I believe we managed to steer clear of emulating Shakespeare’s language in our translations.

**What was your strategy in the choice of the language register? Did you want your translation to make an impression of an early modern English text of a kind, or did you opt for a more contemporary language?**

Our edition is particularly concerned with the relationship between the German adaptations and the Shakespearean originals, and this can only be revealed by a reasonably close translation. On the other hand, we have tried to arrive at a text that feels natural and is easily readable in English, and that occasionally entails a departure from what the German text literally says. When such departures are significant, we draw attention to our translation choices in the commentary. We have therefore decided to translate the texts into modern (British) English. Yet while we have tried to steer clear of the awkwardly archaic, and given the origins of the texts we have translated, we think there is a limit to how modern the translations should sound.

**Do you think that your English translation of *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* could be staged one day? Could, in your opinion, both actors and audiences appreciate this alternative version of a well-known story?**

Yes, of course. I’d be very happy to be involved! The edition is also intended for theatre practitioners – and audiences. Our translation of *Romio und Julieta* was performed in [an online staged reading](#) and we did [an online read-through of the translation of \*Tito Andronico\*](#) by Lukas Erne and Maria Shmygol. Both texts worked really well in performance and I’m sure that our *Brudermord* would, too.

**What are your future translating projects? Any chances you will be working with early modern material again or do your professional plans lie elsewhere?**

Currently, I’m working as a freelance translator and proofreader. I’ve also translated some other early modern texts, for instance, [a selection of essays by the theatre scholar Claude-François Ménéstrier](#) and articles and book chapters on theatre and history. And I certainly hope that more work in that vein will be coming my way.



*Anna Mikyšková*

**Dr Seidler, thank you very much for your time and I wish you all the best in your future translating projects.**



Dr Karen Seidler (from her personal archive).

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