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»Middle Kingdom between the East and the West«

Noble Democracy and the »beautiful Polish woman« in German-language drama of the 19th century

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## English Summary

An intensive use of motifs, stereotypes and images such as »Polish Diet«, *liberum veto*, »Polish freedom« or the »beautiful Polish woman« in German-language popular science, journalistic, literary and dramatic productions in the period between the dissolution of the Polish-Lithuanian Noble Republic and the foundation of the German Reich suggests a profound occupation with Eastern Central European social concepts, extending far beyond the legitimization of power relations to encompass what would amount to an almost complete re-apportioning of the Noble Republic to its neighbouring powers.

In fact these references provided the platform for a multi-faceted discussion on the emergence of a new social order in the wake of the fundamental crisis resulting from the French Revolution. An appropriate ideological context was furnished by the dualism between West and East, which had been revived following a hiatus spanning several centuries and which in its turn concealed the polarity between culture and barbarism, progress and underdevelopment, order and anarchy. The Polish-Lithuanian »Middle Kingdom between the East and the West« (Ernst M. Arndt, 1842), subsequently designated Eastern Central Europe in the 20th century, took on the function of a transitional zone and crossover point between Eastern and Western influences. This mental-geographical no-man's land, with its mixture of the half-foreign and the half-familiar, was ideally suited to the presentation of progressive social concepts such as democracy and the emancipation of women to a German-language audience, preserving the necessary distance while at the same time enticingly inviting participation.

The libertarian traditions of the Sarmatian Noble Republic with the supposedly irrational institutions of elective monarch and the unsettling power of the individual as manifested in the application of the *liberum veto* may well have appeared as archaic, even barbaric structures, yet they nevertheless revealed their forward-looking dimension, reaching beyond absolutism and the revolution in France. This was the reason drama was able to recognise the Polish state system as a breeding ground for modern constitutional monarchy and democracy. It was possible to introduce into discussions within bourgeois Germany an image of the noble »beautiful Polish woman«, descended from the legendary Amazons from whose mythical past her strength, independence and political commitment were »imported«, as the personification of individual and bourgeois liberty, and offering a canvas for the projection of controversial social reforms.

A comparison between the lexical and journalistic representations on the one hand, and the dramatic texts on the other, reveals above all a remarkable creativity, non-conformity and intellectual achievement on the part of the playwrights, far exceeding the bounds of prevailing opinion and stereotypes, and occasionally producing interpretations which have only recently become established in historical research on Eastern Central Europe.