A Comparison of G. Hauptmann's "Der Biberpelz" and H. v. Kleist's "Der Zerbrochene Krug"

1902
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A COMPARISON
of

G. HAUPTMANN'S "DER RICHTERFELD"
and

F. W. KLEIST'S "DER ZUBROCHENE KRUG"

by

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Thesis for the Degree of A. B. in German and Romance Language
in the

College of Literature and Arts
of the

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS.

June, 1902.
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

June 2

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

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ENTITLED: A Comparison of G. Hauptmann’s "Der Bibelpelz" and H. v. Kleist: "Der Gerbrochene Kranz"

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OF A.B. in German and Romanic Language

Leroy T. Rhoades

HEAD OF DEPARTMENT OF German
Among contemporary German authors, Gerhart Hauptmann is unquestionably the most prominent. He is probably more widely known and certainly a larger literature has gathered about his name than is the case with any of his fellows. He has appealed powerfully to the taste and thought of modern Germany, and whoever would know its life and its attitude toward the problems of life cannot leave his dramas unread.

Hauptmann was born on November 15, 1862, in Salzbrun. His father was an unusually well educated and active innkeeper at Krone, and thus the child early had an opportunity to observe and study many types of men. From his mother he inherited that deep lyrical element of pietism, without the influence of which the real renovation of German poetry that he has accomplished would never have been carried out.

Gerhart was the youngest of four children. He attended first the Übersalzbrunner village school. He did not like grammar, and on the whole was not a bright pupil. In 1874 he was sent to Breslau to attend the Realschule. Here, too, he did not care for his studies, preferring to read and to dream. When at home his greatest delight was to be permitted to read at pleasure in his father's library.

But this dreamy, rather dull boy was suddenly made to feel the reality of life when financial reverses overtook the family, though he remained free from real pressing need. He was withdrawn from school and sent to a wealthy uncle, Gustav Schubert, but in his family Hauptmann never felt at home. As a helper there also stood between him and the world his oldest brother Karl. To the
groping, Gerhart he was both a guide and a faithful adviser. He had noticed that Gerhart had made figures in clay and wax and he now, advised him to undertake the study of art. This brought him back to Breslau in 1380, this time to the Kunsthalle. He remained here until 1382, when he left on account of illness. At Easter of this year he went to the University of Jena, and entrusted himself for a time entirely to the guidance of his brother Karl, studying zoology, philosophy and archaeology.

In 1383 he took a southern trip, taking with him Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" as his guide book. He pursued his art studies in Italy, but could not remain long as the climate did not agree with him. He received impressions of Spain and Italy which developed into his first book "Promethidenlos". In 1385 he married Marie Thienemann (a sister-in-law of his brother Karl), and after a short residence in Berlin, they moved to the beautiful suburb of Erkner. By this time he had passed from art and belonged entirely to literature, though his art studies have by no means been without influence upon his development, for the marked idealism which he combines with his realistic tendencies certainly reflects the influence of the months spent in his Roman studio.

Hauptmann's first published work was an epic poem "Promethidenlos", 1835. It is filled with the unclear idealism of an immature lad, while his inner sympathy with the poor and wretched led him into naturalism. Out of this grew his first novel, "Bahnwärter Thiel", 1837. He has written only one other novel, a psychological study, "Der Apostel", 1890, since which he has devoted himself entirely to dramatic work.

Hauptmann's first drama "Vor Sonnenaufgang", written in 1889,
introduces us into a thoroughly repulsive family; the poet brings us into the home of a rich peasant; the father a drunkard, the mother ignorant, coarse and haughty. But in this hateful home there is a pure and exquisite girl, Helene, who has, however, been brought up outside its corrupt influences. Now a stranger, Loth, comes. He is interested in social reforms and comes to study the condition of the miners. He is attracted by Helene who loves him sincerely and idealizes him as a savior from the miserable and degraded conditions about her. He, however, learns of the curse of alcoholism that rests upon her family and, lest it should be transmitted to his children, he leaves her. When she realizes how she has deceived herself in him, she cannot bear the disappointment and so kills herself. In this first drama the tendency to write realism and idealism appears. There is a sense of satisfaction in Helene's suicide. She has saved herself from two equally tragic fates,—from her family and from her weak lover.

"Das Friedenfest", 1890, also deals with a corrupt family, but the corruption here is mental and not physical, and the drama has a happy ending. The saving influence is a pure girl to whom the better one of the sons of the house is betrothed. The triumph is brought about by woman's love, pure and simple, which is a genuine idealistic touch.

In "Einsame Menschen", 1891, is introduced an ambitious man who succumbs to the power of the commonplace. The hero, Johannes, is a writer and a dreamer who finds himself limited in his aspirations and speculations by the commonplace conservatism of his own family and of his wife. But suddenly there comes into his home
Anna Mahr, a young student. She is in sympathy with Johannes and mutual love is the result. This might have continued, leading to the wife's ruin, but Anna saw this and she left, never to return. Johannes, no longer loving his wife and unable to keep Anna, drowns himself.

"Die Weber", 1892, deals with the uprising of the starving weavers of Silesia in 1844. Some say it has no unity; others complain that there is no hero. The hero is hunger. It is a wonderfully realistic play.

The same year Hauptmann wrote another play of an entirely different character, "Kollege Crampton". It is sad, but the pathos is relieved in the end. It deals with a ruined artist who is at war with the conservative art elements represented by Die Akademie. There is a reaction in this drama from the extreme realism of "Die Weber". Side by side with the sadness is an element of poetic beauty in the touching devotion of the daughter for her ruined father, and it is through this devotion, and that of an art student who loves her, that Crampton is finally saved.

Never in German art have the poetical and the realistic formed such a harmonious unity as in "Hanneles Himmelfahrt," 1893. A young girl, abused by her father and driven to despair, tries to drown herself, but she is saved by a young schoolmaster. He, knowing of no place to take her, as the inhabitants of the village are all very wretched, carries her to the poor-house. The realism of the play lies in the wonderful reproduction of the scene there; its idealism in the vision of the dying child, who sees her own death, her mother, the ascended Christ and all the glories of heaven.
"Florian Geyer", 1895, is in a way a repetition of "Die Weber", but on a higher plane and with the added difficulties of an historical drama. It is very realistic and deals with the social question of the Reformation. It has a prologue and five acts, and calls for seventy-seven speaking characters. It failed because of its lack of perspective and unity of effect, and Hauptmann is said to have taken the failure very much to heart. The only character that assumes real interest is Marei who is devoted to the hero unto death.

"Die Versunkene Glocke", 1896, is perhaps Hauptmann's best drama. It is poetical and dramatic. Heinrich, a bell-maker, has just finished a bell for a chapel up on the mountain side. As they are drawing the bell up, one of the wheels of the wagon breaks, and the bell rolls into the lake. Heinrich is dragged part of the way down with it; bruised and bleeding he reaches a mountain fell where he is nursed by Bautendelein, half-elf, half-human. For her he deserts wife and children and says he will not return to them until the bell sounds in the lake. His wife drowns herself and, as she sinks, her fingers pass over the bell and it sounds. Upon hearing this sound, Heinrich, terrified, returns to the village. but finds himself an outcast because of the ruin he has brought upon his family. He returns to the fell to die a child of nature once more.

"Fuhrmann Henschel", 1898, was not a great success. Hauptmann tries to picture not only the ills, but the causes that lead up to them. Henschel appears a contented man, but one who is overcome with the trouble into which fate plunges him and, just as Hannele, he takes his life.
Turning now from this brief general survey of Hauptmann's works we undertake a somewhat more detailed study of one of his earlier dramas, "Der Biberpelz", and of its relations to Heinrich von Kleist's comedy, "Der Zerbrochene Krug". The plot of Der Biberpelz is briefly as follows:— The action is the repetition of two thefts, the thief in both cases being a washerwoman, Frau Wolff, and the person robbed a wealthy man of the village, a certain Herr Krüger. The first thing stolen is a cord of wood. Frau Wolff hears of this wood through her daughter, Leontine, who was Herr Krüger's servant, but who has left him because he commended her to carry this wood into the sheds. Krüger, when he finds that the wood is stolen, reports the theft to the town judge, von Wehrhahn, and tells the judge that since the servant neglected carrying in the wood, her parents will have to pay for it. Frau Wolff is summoned and told that her daughter must return to Krüger's service. But she invents a falsehood, saying that her husband does not wish Leontine to work any more, and also tells the judge that she knows nothing of the wood since she was at Trepow the night it was stolen.

Of the Biberpelz Frau Wolff learns through her daughter Adelheid, who has heard that Frau Krüger has bought one for her husband. Herr Wulkow, a fisherman who has just bought a deer-skin from Frau Wolff, tells her he would give sixty thalers for a "Biberpelz" if he could get one. This, of course, spurred Frau Wolff on, and the Biberpelz is stolen. Herr Krüger is searching for the thief and Frau Wolff comes as a witness with Adelheid, who has found a suspicious bundle on the road to the depot. Dr. Fleischer, a good friend of Krüger's, says he saw a fisherman with a Biberpelz. Wehrhahn says this proves nothing because many fishermen wear such
garments, and dismisses the point by asking Wulkow, who happens to be present, if this is not true. He then examines the bundle which contains a vest of Krüger's, a key and a note, and decides at once that the thief has escaped to Berlin and so dismisses the case.

These questions may occur from this brief sketch of the plot. Why did Frau Wolke steal the wood and the "Biberpelz"? Why was Wehrhahn so unconcerned about finding the thief? Who was this fisherman that Fleissher saw with a "Biberpelz"? All these points are made very clear in the course of the play. First, why did Frau Wolke steal? Because she was so ambitious; she hoped great things for her daughters; the theatre is hinted at. For her family she would risk anything, would steal, lie and deceive, and for them she worked night and day. In spite of her faults one becomes attached to her and does not want her to be caught. In fact, one does not expect that she will be. It seems to be in the system, and had she committed any number of thefts we would expect the same result because of the character of the judge. This brings us to our second question.

Why does Wehrhahn not find the thief? Because he is prejudiced. He has heard through Motes, one of the minor characters, that Herr Krüger and his friend, Dr. Fleissher, hold secret meetings, receive, read and distribute democratic papers, and do not celebrate the Emperor's birthday. These things are the basis of his prejudices. Therefore, when the wood is stolen, he makes no attempt to find the thief, and when the "Biberpelz" trial comes on and Fleissher appears as a witness, he listens with scorn and at once dismisses him because he is politically suspicious of him, and
he repeats his action in the case of the bundle. He does not care who stole the "Pelz" nor whether it is ever found again. His concern is about the democratic meetings and his only thought to strengthen his position with the government by great zeal in that direction, rather than by efficiency in his official work.

The third question is answered in the last act. When Frau Wolff sees Wulkow in the office, she tells him that Adelheid and Fleischer have seen him with a "Biberpelz". This proves without a doubt that Frau Wolff stole the "Pelz" and sold it to Wulkow, and this fact makes the ending all the more ridiculous, where Wehrhahn tells Wulkow, after all have gone:

"Das ist nämlich hier unser fleiszige Waschfrau .......... die Wolffin ist eine ehrliche Baut".

As soon as "Der Biberpelz" was presented, the relation between it and Heinrich von Kleist's comedy "Der Zerbrochene Krug" was noticed. To indicate this a brief consideration of that drama must be undertaken.

We know from Kleist's biography that the idea of "Der Zerbrochene Krug" sprang from a wager which he made with his friends Heinrich Zschokke, Ludwig Wieland, and Heinrich Geissner. There was hanging on the wall in Kleist's room, where these gentlemen had met, a French copper-plate, la cruche cassée. The engraving represented a couple of sad and shame-faced lovers, a scolding mother with a broken pitcher, and a stern and disagreeable judge. Wieland was to write a satire on the story told by this plate, Zschokke a tale, and Kleist a comedy.

The first time Kleist's drama was presented upon the stage was March 2, 1803, at Weimar. It was not a success. It was too
long and drawn out. If it had been condensed and given in one act instead of three, as it was presented, it would have been a great success, for the public seemed to enjoy it at first, but they became tired and made so much noise in showing their dissatisfaction that nobody could hear a word of the conclusion of the play.

The story of the comedy is briefly as follows: Adam, the judge of the village is informed that Judge Walter, an inspector, will be present that day. Adam has great difficulty in preparing himself to receive Walter. He is all scratched, which he says happened when he slipped on the floor just as he was getting up, and he cannot find his wig. Adam tries to induce Licht, his secretary, to take his place, but Licht refuses. Walter comes, announces that there are some people without waiting to have a trial, and says he will remain and see Adam conduct the case, as that will give him a good opportunity to test his ability.

Frau Marthe enters with a broken pitcher, accompanied by her daughter Eve, Eve's sweetheart Fuprecht, and his father. Adam is much disturbed at seeing them. Frau Marthe testifies that her pitcher was broken the past night and accuses Fuprecht of the misdemeanor. Eve, influenced by her mother, affirms this, and Adam seems much relieved and considers the case ended. But Walter commands him to proceed in a legal way. Fuprecht says that he did not break the pitcher himself, but that it was done by a man who jumped out of Frau Marthe's window just as he was entering the door. Walter tells Eve to tell all she knows about it. Eve now affirms that Fuprecht did not break it and that she dare not tell them who did.

After a short intermission, Frau Brigitte, who has been
sent for, appears. She has a wig in her hand which she says she found under Frau Marthe's window. She also says that she and Licht have traced foot-prints in the snow, one misshapen foot and one sound foot side by side, from Frau Marthe's garden up to Adam's door. The wig fits Adam exactly, but he declares that it does not belong to him. All the witnesses have been examined now and Walter commands Adam to pass sentence. He pronounces Puprecht guilty and says he shall be imprisoned. Now Eve, all her love bubbling up, cries out in order to save her sweetheart. "Der Richter Adam hat den Krug zerbrochen". Adam, seeing his crime disclosed, flees and Walter sends Licht to pursue him. When Adam has fled, Eve admits that Adam came to the house to show her a letter stating that Puprecht had been drafted to serve in India. Walter tells her that his letter is false, and all seem contented now except Frau Marthe who says she shall take her case to Utrecht to a court, and there have Adam punished.

A comparison of these two dramas shows first, that both Der Biberpelz and Der Zerbrochene Krug are analytical dramas. The exposition only puzzles one, but the action itself clears up, step by step, the preceding story. Everything is entirely cleared up in Der Biberpelz for the audience, though not for the wise Wehrhahn. In the "Krug" the judge sees everything because he committed the crime himself. Both received the same criticism when put on the stage; they were tiresome. If interest is lacking in Der Biberpelz, it is because it repeats by the theft of the wood and that of the "Biberpelz," while in Kleist's it is too much drawn out.

In both dramas a misdemeanor, scarcely bad enough to be called a crime, has been committed during the night. Both shun
publicity. The question of detecting the guilty one falls, in both cases, upon the town judge. Herr Krüger's wood and coat have been stolen and he hastens to the town judge, Wehrhahn. In the former the Krug has been broken and Frau Marthe appears before the town judge, Adam. Both accusers, Frau Marthe and Krüger, are inhabitants of the village and respectable ones too. They found at the side of each judge a poor secretary, Licht with Adam and Glasenapp with Wehrhahn. These secretaries might have been able to clear matters up if they in turn had not been blinded by their ambition to advance their own positions.

In both plays the trials are conducted with a great deal of confusion and under great difficulties, and as soon as a point begins to get clear, a cloud at once falls again, so that it becomes more and more involved and more drawn out. This, in both cases, is the fault of the judge. Neither Adam nor Wehrhahn have any inclination to clear up the trial. To both of them it is fatal. With Hauptmann, Krüger, the plaintiff, is a political enemy of the judge; while with Kleist, Adam is still more interested in the pitcher for he himself is the guilty one.

But there is a difference in the two cases. On the"Krug" Adam's honor and position depended, and he is determined that they shall not find the guilty one. On the other hand, Wehrhahn does not care whether the thief is detected nor whether the wood and the"Pelz"are found. His honor is not at stake. He resembles Adam only in the one point,—that both are unable to carry on the trial. Adam intentionally tries to bring about confusion so that he may not be suspected or found out, while Wehrhahn brings about this confusion unintentionally.
In both cases there are witnesses. Adam for good reasons, by grumbling and interrupting, confuses his witnesses, while Wehrhahn, judging from the confusion, might be suspected of stealing the "Siberpelz" just as much as Adam of breaking the Krug. But Adam not only did break the "Krug," but he started out to ruin a pure girl; the play might easily have developed into a tragedy, and since the best comedies tend toward the tragic, this point tends to make Kleist's "Der Zerbrochene Krug" an excellent comedy.

Wehrhahn, although he did not steal the "Pelz" himself, is not much better than Adam. He wishes to play the gentleman and to gain a place of high standing in the world, and to this end he misuses his office; and when they are on the very track of the thief, he will not follow up the clue because he is politically suspicious of the witness.

In Kleist, through the agency of the inspector, there is a higher grade of justice. In Der Siberpelz the public remains in doubt about the fate of the thief. It is clear enough that Frau Wolff stole the wood and the "Pelz" and she surely is very uneasy for she knows they are on her track. If Wehrhahn's judgment did not reach, we know that it was God's will, but still we should like to know something about the future of Frau Wolff. On the other hand, in Kleist's drama, we know that justice will be done, for Frau Marthe says she will take the case to the court of Utrecht.

In Hauptmann the interest is divided between Frau Wolff and the judge, and the setting is between her home and the judge's office. In Kleist, the criminal and the judge are one and the
same person. The motives of the two criminals in the two plays may be contrasted. Adam was led on by human interest, a sensual desire; but Frau Wolff's interest was the care for her family. She wishes nothing for herself, but all for her family. For then she steals wood and the "Pelz." She is also quite different from Frau Marthe. The latter would ruin her daughter just to get satisfaction for the "Krug."

In this, as in many other features, the later drama reflects the modern spirit. The shrewdness, the ambition to advance in the world, and the self-interest of all parties is characteristic. In Kleist's drama the contrasts are perhaps more glaring; certainly the guilty judge shows much less cleverness than does Frau Wolff. His drama, too, is a completed action, while Hauptmann's comes to no logical end, but is rather a series of scenes from real life to which it is true, even in minor details and dialect.

The comparison of the two is thus of great interest in the light it throws upon the different methods of two literary epochs and two writers. Kleist's drama undoubtedly was in Hauptmann's mind as he wrote, but there is no evidence of improper borrowing. Indeed, Hauptmann's originality seems all the more striking by reason of the contrast.