

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

HEBBEL, CHRISTIAN FRIEDRICH

Hebbel's Life. Christian Friedrich Hebbel (1813-1863) was born at Ditmarsch, in Holstein. He was brought up in poverty—the son of a bricklayer, yet despite hindrances proved unusually studious, and made his way to the University of Hamburg. From that University, in the typical fashion of German University students, who tend to follow Professors from one institution to another, he moved on to the University of Munich, where he studied philosophy, literature, and history. In 1839 he left Munich to return to Hamburg—he walked the distance, to be again with the woman who loved him—and in that year saw the publication of his first drama, *Judith*, which like most of his subsequent plays—is set either in Biblical times or in the German Age of Knights. For the next two years he traveled in Italy and France, on a stipend from King Christian of Denmark, then made his way to Vienna, where he was to find a new life—a glamorous and wealthy change for him—and a future in Austrian comfort and high society. Only one regret continued to eat at this complicated man, that he had left the faithful-to-the-end woman whom at one point he had walked from Munich to Hamburg to be with.

Hebbel's drama. Hebbel picked up the theme of bourgeois drama which had been growing in Germany from the time of Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* and Schillers *Kabale and Liebe*. (It took an eighteenth century of middle class development, before this literary genre would be possible, a genre which we might say would culminate in the great work of Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906). Cultural/social developments plunging back into early modern Europe were the prerequisites of the kind of searing social dramas Hebbel wrote—such developments as the self-conscious family unit, the availability of urban work in the professions, and the domestic conflicts, even tragedies, brought on by the conflict of the old class system with the newer forms of individualist democracy.)

Maria Magdalena. *Maria Magdalena* (1844) is the only play of Hebbel's to be set in the present, and arguably the play where his power and sense of social complexity are most forceful. That may be because it is the play in which he most ripely conceives the larger meaning of his work. In the Preface to the play he argues that drama is the highest art, because it reflects the dialectical growth of mankind through ascending stages of culture, a notion he understands in terms of Hegel's philosophy of dialectical history. (He references Greek drama and Shakespeare as earlier examples of the way new levels of human consciousness are virtually worked through to in great drama.) In the present play Hebbel plunges us into a moment of crisis in the family of Meister Anton, an illiterate carpenter, who though fallen in class clings hard to such old fashioned class values as 'honor,' 'family honor.' The clinging to old values is fatal. In the first place Anton's wife, who hears that her son is a thief—the report is later proven false-- kills herself for shame. Then Anton's daughter, believing she has been forgotten by a certain secretary she loves, ends up pregnant with a child of a man she scorns, an opportunistic clerk, yet marries him, for only so, she thinks, can she maintain her father's honor. (There is the outdated category of honor again.) As it turns out, her impregnator proves unsatisfied with the dowry she offers him, and abandons her, whereupon she does in fact drown herself, to ensure her father's honor. At the end of the play we see the world through Anton's eyes, a man dazed and confused by the new world around him, in which values he relied on are being transformed.

Reading

Primary source reading

Gubelman, A., *Studies in the Lyric Poems of Friedrich Hebbel: the sensuous in his lyric poetry*, 2013.

Secondary source reading

Schwarz, E., ed. *Nineteenth Century German Plays*, 1990.

Further reading

Garland, Mary, *Hebbel's Prose Tragedies*, 1973.

Original language reading

Hohendahl, Peter Uwe, *Literarische kultur im Zeitalter des Liberalismus 1830-1870*, 1985.

Suggested paper topics

Hebbel believed that drama is the highest art, because it embodies new and upward developing stages of culture—as had been the case in Ancient Greece and now in the work of Shakespeare. Do you find this a plausible account of the importance and greatness of drama? Can you add examples, of cases in which drama seems to play the historical role Hebbel attributes to it?

The middle class family drama became prominent and popular in 18th century Germany. (Lessing and Schiller were creative in this direction.) What reason would you give for the development of this form? What is necessary to raise this form above the level of popular amusement concerning middle class families? Where does the tragic element enter in this kind of drama—for it does enter, regularly—to give depth and meaning to the genre?

Excerpt <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13030/13030-8.txt>

MOTHER. When one is very sick, as I was, and does not know whether one is going to get well again or not, a great many things revolve in one's head. Death is more terrible than you think--oh, it is awful! It casts a shadow over the world; one after the other it blows out all the lights that shine with such cheerful brightness all around us, the kindly eyes of husband and children cease to sparkle, and it grows dark everywhere. But deep in the heart it strikes a light, which burns brightly and reveals a great deal one does not care to see. I am not conscious of ever having done a wrong; I have walked in God's ways, I have done my best about the home, I have brought you and your brother up to fear God, and I have kept together the fruits of your father's hard work. I have always managed to lay aside an extra penny for the poor, and if now and then I have turned somebody away, because I felt out of sorts or because too many came, it wasn't a very great misfortune for him, because I was sure to call him back and give him twice as much. Oh, what does it all amount to? People dread the last hour when it threatens to come, writhe like a worm over it, and implore God to let them live, just as a servant implores his master to let him do something over again that he has done poorly, so that he may not come short in his wages on pay-day.

CLARA. Don't talk in that way, dear mother! It weakens you.

MOTHER. No, child, it does me good! Am I not well and strong again now? Did not the Lord call me merely to let me know that my festal robe was not yet pure and spotless? And did he not permit me to come back from the very edge of the grave, and grant me time to prepare myself for the heavenly wedding? He was not as kind as that to those five Virgins in the Gospel, about whom I had you read to me last night. And that is the reason why today, when I am going to the Holy Communion, I put this dress on. I wore it the day I made the best and most pious resolutions of my life; I want it to remind me of those which I have not yet carried out.