‘Guckt euch selbst an!’ Büchner’s Woyzeck and the Pericope Adulterae

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Abstract

Büchner refers twice in Woyzeck to the biblical story of Jesus, the Pharisees and the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53–8:11, known to scholars as the ‘pericope adulterae’). Setting these allusions into the context of a minor Enlightenment tradition of using the pericope to turn arguments for penal reform into more general arguments in favour of socio-political change, this essay shows how the pericope allows Büchner to articulate questions of social complicity in crime in such a way as to suggest the necessity not only of mitigated punishments but of broader social reform.

Was ist das für eine Welt, in der es das Richtige nicht zu tun gibt.1

In Woyzeck, Büchner twice alludes to the biblical story of Jesus, the Pharisees and the woman taken in adultery – that is, to John 7:53–8:11, known to scholars as the ‘pericope adulterae’. One reference is made by Woyzeck as he defends himself from suspicion at the inn, after the murder: ‘Meint Ihr ich hätt Jemand umgebracht? Bin ich Mörder? Was gafft Ihr! Guckt euch selbst an! Platz da […]’.2 The allusion is inexplicit but clear: ‘Guckt euch selbst an!’ – look at yourselves: ‘If I am a murderer, so too are you; cast not the first stone.’ The other allusion is made by Marie. Reviewing her feelings of guilt with help from the Bible, she cites the pericope as one of three passages on sin: ‘[…] aber die brachten ein Weib zu ihm, im Ehebruche begriffen und stelleten sie in’s Mittel dar. – Jesus

1 Monika Maron, Stille Zeile sechs (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1991), p. 119. ‘What kind of a world is this, in which it’s impossible to do the right thing.’ Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own. Thanks to Jennifer Knust for ongoing help with the pericope adulterae, to Patricia Larash for aid with Stäudlin’s Latin, to Will Waters for help with several sentences, and to Aaron Garrett for useful conversations.

Aber sprach: so verdamme ich dich auch nicht. Geh hin und sündige hinfört nicht mehr.’ Marie reflects on this in despair: ‘Herrgott! Herrgott! Ich kann nicht. Herrgott gieb mir nur soviel, daß ich beten kann’: despite her sense of guilt, she finds that she cannot stop sleeping with the Drum Major.3

At first glance it would seem that the common problem is compulsion, or more precisely the question of where psychological and social compulsions end and free will begins; but I believe that the matter goes deeper than that. Taken alone, Woyzeck’s line could seem like a determinist argument for the complicity of society in what its members take for individual agency, Marie’s an admission of the will’s weakness when faced with strong feeling. This would not be entirely wrong, but I think it would fail to do justice to Büchner’s complexity, amounting merely to a dramatic proof of two favourite theorems of Enlightenment jurisprudence, and conveying a fairly flat sense of the play. Taken in context and linked with a certain modern reception of the pericope, however, they suggest a more subtle argument, the traces of which are also visible in Büchner’s philosophical notebooks on Spinoza and Descartes and in the lecture on the cranial nerves of the barbel fish.

Let me begin by describing what I think is a minor Enlightenment tradition of using the pericope to turn arguments for penal reform into larger arguments for socio-political change. Beginning around 1750, the pericope’s punchline – ‘Let him who is without sin cast the first stone’ – appears in a number of texts to suggest that the roots of certain delicts are to be sought not alone in the heart or the will or emotions of perpetrators, but also – and perhaps primarily – in social conditions or pressures acting externally upon them. These texts roughly agree with Cesare Beccaria’s classic argument of 1764 ‘that the punishment of a crime cannot be just, that is necessary, if the laws have not endeavoured to prevent that crime by the best means which times and circumstances would allow,’4 but they also differ from it, as from others concerned with the problem of legal accountability or Zurechnungsfähigkeit, in that they shift the critical focus from the matter of punishment to that of prevention.

Take, for example, the following formulation of 1820 by the Tübingen philosopher Carl August Eschenmayer:

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3 ‘And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery, and set her in the midst... And Jesus said unto her, ‘Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.’ – [...] My God! My God! I can’t! – God, just give me enough strength to pray.’ – H4, 16, MBA 7.2, pp. 31–2; TMW, p. 149.