Lenz and Schiller: All’s well that ends well

Although often grouped together under the heading Sturm und Drang, the plays of Lenz and those of the early Schiller reveal fundamentally different attitudes to play-writing. One feature they share is an apparent uncertainty about how to end their plays: somehow they both wanted to build an optimistic, forward-looking conclusion onto a play that had presented apparently unresolvable contradictions. A comparison of Der Hofmeister and Die Soldaten with Die Räuber and Kabale und Liebe, reflecting particularly on the relationship between the final scenes and the plays as a whole, will illuminate some of the similarities and differences between these two playwrights.

I.

The extent to which Lenz and Schiller knew each other’s work, or knew of each other’s work, remains unclear. Details of Lenz’s later life remain unclear, but scholars have found no evidence of his having known Schiller’s writing, and indeed his attention was turning away from the German literary scene by the time that Schiller began publishing. On the other hand the young Schiller’s immersion in the culture of the 1770s makes it likely that he would have known at least some of Lenz’s work from a relatively early stage. Nevertheless there is a notable absence of identifiable references or borrowings and the only concrete evidence we have dates from the mid-1790s. In 1796 Schiller wrote to Cotta asking to be sent copies of Der Hofmeister and Die Soldaten, and in the following year he persuaded Goethe to release various manuscripts for publication in Die Horen. The few comments by Schiller that have survived provide no clear evidence of his attitude to Lenz’s work, over-determined as they are by the need to approach Goethe with delicacy over these potentially embarrassing texts, but on the other hand it seems entirely plausible that he would have been a willing participant in the pathologising of Lenz that was to become codified for future generations in Dichtung und Wahrheit. Taking his cue from Goethe’s word “wunderlich”, Schiller stressed that the Lenz texts contained “sehr tolles Zeug” but thought them worth publishing because they had an interest that lay in their “biographischen und pathologischen Werth”.

The critical literature on Schiller’s early plays is full of references to Lenz, which are used in order to indicate a Sturm und Drang style with which Schiller

2Letter to Goethe. 2.2.1797. Qtd. in Müller and Stotzer (n. 1). Vol. 1. P. 360.
was familiar, but there appear to be none of the many direct quotations or semi-quotations that reveal Schiller’s close knowledge of, for example, Klinger, Leisewitz or Goethe. There are some overlaps in their use of sources and motifs, but the similarities are of a general nature and do not imply anything more than a common cultural background. This essay will therefore leave on one side the question of influence and turn to something unashamedly comparative. Comparisons are, we know, odious and usually reach a conclusion no more startling than that A was A and B was B – and C, too, would have been C if it had been introduced into the debate. Nevertheless comparisons can throw light on the individual specificity of A and B if there are sufficient similarities for the salient differences to stand out.

Comedies (if Lenz’s plays are comedies) and tragedies (if *Die Räuber* and *Fiesko* are tragedies) clearly belong to different traditions, but the conceptions of drama held by Lenz and the young Schiller have more fundamental similarities. Both lie on the periphery of the Sturm und Drang. Both challenged the abstractions of neo-classicism and strove to re-engage represented reality with a social and historical continuum. Instead of the refined abstraction of verse, they offered the grittiness of prose, with emotional extremes leading to the transgression of propriety. Both Lenz and Schiller had the anti-Aristotelian realism and the intensity that have often been seen as hallmarks of the Sturm und Drang, and often subordinated the spoken word to the action on stage. However, neither of them regarded intensity and authenticity of expression as a sufficient legitimation for drama but turned, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, to an aesthetic that is in a sense educational. In both cases this educational purpose has often been identified as political, as exposing the consequences of the abuse of social power. However, they shared aspects of a Pietist background which not only fuelled the emotional intensity of their writing and alerted them to questions of injustice but also affected their understanding of drama as something that had a moral purpose. Both of them are regarded as having gone further than most of their contemporaries in showing the dependence of human behaviour on material circumstances, that is to say on social and psychological processes, but both also went further than most of their contemporaries in rejecting the most radical form of this tendency, namely, the materialism found in the French Enlightenment.

The starting-point of this essay is the observation of the difficulty that students and audiences, not to mention critics, have often had in accepting that

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3 Lenz wrote a poem on the Semele story and a play about the estrangement of two brothers (*Die Kleinen*), neither of which Schiller could have known; both *Der Hofmeister* and *Die Räuber* are built around versions of the story of the Prodigal Son, as is *Kabale und Liebe*; in both *Die Soldaten* and *Kabale und Liebe* the plot revolves around the attitudes of characters from different social classes to the reliability of written documents.