Language and Gesture in Schiller’s Later Plays

Schiller’s language is deeply engrained in the German cultural heritage. It has also sometimes proven to be controversial. This essay argues that it is the key to understanding his dramatic art. Traditional approaches, linked with a rigid notion of classicism, often start with the premise that the verbal text, particularly in the case of the late plays, is primary, unambiguous and illustrates ideas from his theoretical writings. The approach taken here emphasises that the verbal text produces and explores paradoxes or contains ambiguities which are complemented by the non-verbal element of gesture. Schiller is experimental throughout his career; heterogeneity and diversity are as important as the archetypal and exemplary.

“My starting point is the importance of language for the interpretation of Schiller’s plays. It is often neglected, taken for granted, and misunderstood. From the appearance of Don Carlos onwards, there is, in contemporary reviews, often more detailed attention to Schiller’s language and particularly to the handling of verse. In respect of the later plays, contemporaries recognised that Schiller’s language was an important ingredient in the milestone that his drama was. Judgement of the later plays is on the whole more favourable than that of the early plays. There is a considerable degree of interaction between Schiller as dramatist on the one side and the theatre-going and reading public and actors on the other. Schiller profits from a more positive attitude to verse drama and his own close association with the theatre; audience and actors profit from Schiller’s refinement of the German language. Although “sententiousness” is sometimes singled out as a negative quality of Schiller’s style and

of drama in general (as an intrusive, a retarding factor), it is, by contemporaries, also singled out as a positive quality (it is seen to be characteristic of serious drama). Here begins one of the themes of debate concerning Schiller’s style that recurs after his death. About gesture there is little, but there are clues to the importance Schiller was attempting to invest it with. Although Amalie von Voigt in her account of the premiere of Wallenstein’s Lager in Weimar mentions that Schiller himself “Für’s Gruppiren u. dergl. […] überhaupt kein solches Talent hatte wie Goethe”, the overall effect of the production was “plastisch und malerisch”. There is, however, seldom detailed discussion in contemporary reviews of the interrelationship between gesture and the verbal text.

Scholars have often approached the style of Schiller’s later plays in a teleological fashion, viewing it as the culmination of a process, as the curbing of earlier excesses and the overcoming of the Sturm und Drang, the putting into practice of classical principles, rhetorical precepts, ideas from Schiller’s aesthetic writings. This approach tends to see language, and verbal language alone, as action. It insists on the primacy, indeed the monopoly, of dialogue – on the “Alleinherrschaft des Dialogs” – the Hegelian concept taken over by Peter Szondi in his influential study of modern drama. It is an approach that finds clarity, unequivocality, rationality, “Eindeutigkeit der Rede”, in Schiller’s plays. Klaus Berghahn, who takes this approach, pays only lip service to gesture. J. G. Robertson took the opposite view and emphasised what he saw as the deterioration of Schiller’s style as he advanced. In the later plays Schiller forgot “all that he had gradually learned in the art of pregnant dramatic expression. The characters of Don Carlos […] delight in vague and general sentiments, and the bombast which, in prose, Schiller was gradually eliminating from his work, returns again in the form of a glittering rhetoric”. Similar views were expressed recently on the popular television programme, Das literarische Quartett.

We can, on the other hand, take an approach to Schiller’s style which emphasises both the differences between early and late plays and elements of continuity. The elements of continuity are clearer when we consider gesture. One feature of this style is diversity and heterogeneity, which in the later plays

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6 J. G. Robertson: Schiller After a Century. London: Blackwood 1905. Pp. 50–51. Robertson’s criteria are Shakespearean drama (from which Schiller mistakenly distanced himself) and the French classical style (which he mistakenly imitated).