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Schiller’s Poetics of Crime*

This essay introduces the tradition of Histoires tragiques in the seventeenth century and of Pitaval’s Causes célèbres in the eighteenth as a basis for Schiller’s interest in the genre of crime literature. From the start Schiller employs a variety of genres – drama, prose, poetry and essay – to treat the sort of sensational crime more commonly recorded in popular leaflets, chronicles, anthologies of legal cases or other historical sources. This literary practice is taken as a starting point for the development of a “poetics of crime”, based primarily on Schiller’s introductions to Die Räuber, Der Verbrecher aus Infamie and his German edition of Pitaval. Sensationalism is the premise of this poetics (1), the human soul its object (2), the aesthetics of representation its method (3), the legal education of the public its aim (4), and popular literature its medium (5).

Schiller was a crime writer of considerable standing. Neither the fact that he composed relatively few works in prose nor the fact that crime literature as a literary genre was still in its infancy can seriously undermine this claim. After all, his dramas after Die Räuber owe their success to plots centred on major crimes, tyrannicide, assassination and elaborate romantic intrigues – and all of this combined with a wealth of “collateral damage”.¹ It is not only the theatre, however, which becomes a test bed for the new “Gerichtsbarkeit der Bühne” (FA 8. 190),² which uses literature as a tool of instruction. Many of Schiller’s poems, ballads and essays also deal with the question of the law and its boundaries, a preoccupation found even in Schiller’s use of metaphors. In short, the


² Schiller: Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken? (1785): “Die Gerichtsbarkeit der Bühne fängt an, wo das Gebiet der weltlichen Gesetze sich endigt”.
common subject of these works is “tragedy”, except that, historically, this term cannot be limited to the Aristotelian definition of the genre.

It is rather more appropriate to refer here to the Romance tradition of the “Histoires tragiques”, much-loved since the Renaissance, which encompasses popular collections of grisly chronicles or tragic, sensationalist tales. Such collections crossed both language barriers and geographical borders and circulated throughout Europe. Titles like the following reveal this understanding of “tragedy” to be a realistic, sensational theatre of crime and atrocity in the Early Modern period: François Rosset’s *Histoires tragiques* (1605), Martin Zeiler’s *Theatrum tragicum* (1628), Jean Pierre Camus’ *Les Spectacles d’horreur* (1630), Georg Philipp Harsdörffer’s *Grosser Schau-Platz jämmerlicher Mord-Geschichte* (1649–52), Johann Merck’s *Trauer-Schau-Bühne* (1669), Erasmus Francisci’s *Hoher Trauer-Saal* (1669), Jean Nicola de Parival’s *Sinnreiche / Kurtzweilige und Traurige Geschichte* (1671), Johann Samuel Adams’ *Theatrum Tragicum* (1695), Johann Christoph Beer’s *Neu-eröffnete Trauer-Bühne* (1708–31).³

This article argues that Schiller knew much more than has previously been thought about the genre in its transition from documentation to fiction, from the “historia” or “chronica” to the “fabula”, from the legal “species facti” to the use of actual criminal cases as a basis for literary works. This is rendered particularly obvious by the later, but nevertheless enormously influential, collection of authentic court cases which the French lawyer François Gayot de Pitaval published in twenty volumes under the title *Causes célèbres et intéressantes* (1734–43). The success of the genre can be compared with the popularity of modern “Reality TV”. In today’s book market, topical casebooks of forensic medicine and criminal history can be found next to a Berlin, Dresden or Pfälzer Pitaval – even a publication on the Washington sniper of 2002 is advertised as a Pitaval case. Between 1734 and 1789 eighteen publishers produced nine different versions of the *Causes Célèbres* in twenty-five editions, totalling 253 volumes.⁴ Among these are, most importantly, the revised editions, continuations and adaptations of François-Alexandre Garsault (1757), Jean-Claude De La Ville (1766–69), Robert Estienne (1769–70), François Richer and Nicolas-Toussaint Le Moyne Des Essarts (1772–89). Translations into German began to appear from 1747, resulting after a hundred years in sixty impressive volumes of *Der Neue Pitaval* under the editorship of Julius Hitzig und Willibald Alexis. These sixty volumes were used by many crime writers as a source for their stories. Pitaval became the name of an entire genre – his terrific claim that
