

Grete Minde

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Grete Minde was a woman who in the early 17th century was accused of burning down her hometown of Tangermünde along the Elbe and subsequently executed. When I biked through that town in the summer of 2012 I came across a sculpture of a young woman in chains. The name Grete Minde told me nothing as I was naturally ignorant about the story. Subsequent inquiries into the matter has revealed that she was innocent and the victim of the judicial system.

Fontane has taken the old story in one of his earlier novellas and reshaped it fundamentally. In the story we meet Grete as a young girl in love with the neighbour's boy Valtin. She is not happy at home. Her father is old and her mother is dead, and the household is run by her elder half-brother Gerdt and his young wife - Trude. The latter plays the role of the evil step-mother although she is not much older and technically a sister-in-law. Trude is envious of the blossoming love she observes developing. She has obviously not married for love. When the father, who has an important function in the town council dies, Grete is at the mercy of her half-brother and his spouse. Her alienation from the home is further enhanced when a child is born. A child she incidentally finds appallingly ugly. Added to her apartness is the fact that her mother was of Spanish extraction and her appearance shows an element of the exotic as a consequence. But more seriously, her mother was Catholic and hence her Protestant upbringing is somewhat tainted by Catholic influences. Gigas, the minister, who is in charge of her religious education is concerned. Although fond of the girl he has a theological temperament, which intimidates her a little, and tries to impress on her that it is purely by the grace of God we receive salvation not through our own feeble efforts. Maybe the founding principle of Protestantism but hardly something most people in their daily lives may appreciate beyond the homage of lip-service. That Grete also carries a splinter of a cross as a memento from her dead mother, something Trude loses no opportunity to disclose, does not exactly lessen his concern.

Grete is not happy. Life is not worth living she confides to Valtin. He assures her that he loves her, which gives her strength. There is constant conflict, and Grete shows herself to be quite strong-willed as she grows up, and able to give at least as much as she takes. Being harassed she gradually grows up to stand up to Trude and get the better of her in argument. As a result there is an uneasy truce, as the latter understands that she can no longer boss her around. One day, however, it all comes to a head. Valtin and Grete have been out in the town during the festivities occasioned by the visit of the Kaiser. The baby has been left to the care of the maid. When they are back their absence has already been noted by the parents of the baby who have returned earlier. A row ensues that ends with Grete hitting her sister-in-law drawing blood. The situation is intolerable, and she decides to escape, something she has had in mind for quite some time. Valtin is persuaded to come along, after all, as he rationalizes it, he was responsible to the final event having talked her into joining the unfortunate excursion into town.

They escape and encounter a group of people going down the Elbe on a raft. It seems at first idyllic, but Grete suspects foul play and they escape one night from the raft presumably to evade being robbed. Then we hear nothing of them for three years. Then it turns out that they have been traveling with a troupe of actors. Valtin is dying and they have a common child born out of wedlock. On his deathbed Valtin implores her for the sake of their child to return to her former home and half-brother and beg for forgiveness and plead to be taken up again, if needs be, as a mere maid. Grete is too proud to undertake such a step, but she is finally over-ridden by the desperate and dying Valtin. After he is dead she has trouble getting him buried. A Protestant pastor refuses to do so, while some nuns are far more accommodating, the old Domina taking a liking to Grete, but at the same time seeing in her the sign of death. As she leaves for Tangermünde, she prophesizes that within three days she will be dead. She will be right.

At her former home, her half-brother Gerdt shows total indifference to her plight. She humbles herself to no avail. Then her pride takes over and she demands her share of the inheritance. Not out of charity but as a right. Gerdt steadfastly refuses. The case is brought to the city council, where he claims that Grete's mother brought nothing to the house. It was the inheritance of his own mother that was the foundation of the wealth they now enjoy. The council agrees with him. Grete conceives in her rage a terribly revenge, She returns to the home, lures her nephew away, then with him climbs a tower, and puts fire to it. The fire will eventually spread and destroy much of the town, but before that she shows herself high above for all the spectators to enjoy the sight of her with her nephew. Her half-brother is also there to watch her and his child expire as the place on which they stand falls to the ground enclosed in the flames.

Once cannot help observing that at that time, just as in the Third World today, unless you belonged to some institution, such as a monastery, or an extended family, preferably rich and with influence, you are very vulnerable indeed. Grete and Valtin, who seems to have played the weaker part of the couple, had to seek refuge in a traveling troupe, residing on the lowest rug of the social ladder.

Quite a story. Fontane tells it well with no indication of the dramatic ending as the story unfolds. It manages to give a nice and poetic description of life in the early 17th century. He exploits obvious but yet not intruding symbolism. It all starts out with the boy Valtin wanting to show a nest. A birds nest gives associations of comfort and care, something at least Grete misses at her home. Birds will then figure throughout the story illustrating Grete's desire to flee and to be free. In the final scene, before she commits her desperate act, the birds fly back and forth, as if they were seeking for a place to rest, but fail to.

The novella is historic taking place some two hundred and fifty years before composition. The past is to some extent conveyed by the style of the Ballad, be it in prose rather than verse. Still this is something that cannot be sustained, and inevitably pieces of modernism in language and turns of phrases are mixed in. This does not disturb, although contemporary critics pointed out the element of anachronism it entailed.