

Die Ruber

F:Schiller

November 22-27, 2010

Schiller paired with Goethe seems now rather forgotten, definitely seen if seen at all as a mere pendant to his more illustrious and long-lived companion. This was not always so, his reputation during the 19th century being definitely more widespread than now. To a modern reader his work of literary criticism with a strong dose of philosophy may be more attractive than his rather melodramatic plays, written maybe not so much with an intention of being staged as being read aloud. But melodrama is the stuff of which operas were made during their heydays. And perhaps not surprisingly Verdi recycled many of Schillers plays into operas, 'Die Ruber' being no exception.

'Die Ruber' was written when Schiller was only twenty-three. It is often seen as the epidemic of 'Sturm and Drang'. The plot is dramatic enough. Two rival sons Karl and Franz, are born to the duke of the Moor. The elder has all the advantages, looks and love, being favored by his father and the object of desire of their young beautiful relative Amalia. Karl is spoilt and lives the life of a spendthrift at the university at Leipzig. News of his prodigality reaches the old court, and Franz, the younger sees the opportunity to take advantage of this, to present his elder brother in an even more incriminating light to his father and bring about the rejection of the former by the latter. His stratagem works. The father rejects the elder son and heir, under the mistaken assumption that this will bring about a reform on the part of the prodigal, and a genuine reconciliation. The effect is that the disinherited son rejects bourgeois society altogether and allows himself to elected the leader of a band of robbers. Later on Franz plants the idea that his brother Karl is dead, and the father is so stricken by the news that he is taken for dead. (In fact he is not, on the eve of burial he comes to his senses, only to be kept captive in a tower, to starve to death.) The beautiful Amalia is devastated as well and swears fidelity to the memory of her love and resists desperately the advances of Franz openly as well as seductively when needed. Later on she is, however, told by an accomplice of Franz, that both her beloved and the old father are still alive.

Karl in the meantime is engaged in acts of great brutality. Burning down entire cities in vendettas and evading the capture by numerically superior forces. A stranger seeks admission to the gang, Karl is sceptical at first, only true outlaws are entitled to join, but when he learns that the stranger too has a beloved by name of Amalia from whom he has been forcefully separated by circumstances, his heart weakens. At the same time a complot to oust him by a jealous rival is prevented by slaying. Karl returns to his old home, visits Amalia under disguise, she suspects nothing, but feels a strange attraction to that stranger, while his smarter brother suspects foul play and orders his servant to kill him. The latter refuses though. Karl chances upon his father in the tower, liberates him, learns about the misdeeds of his brother and orders one of his underlings to bring him alive to his attention, so he can deal with him appropriately. The underling swears either to have two of them return or none. Franz has been stricken by a fever and taunted by

horrid dreams, He orders his servant to get the local priest, who when arrives is treated to a nihilistic sermon about the death of God. Franz is overcome by the situation, the castle has been set alight, and he kills himself. The underling who was to fetch him, stays true to his oath, and kills himself as well. There are many suicides in this melodrama, Karl himself has briefly contemplating it as well, when facing the impossibility of his rejoining his Amalia. Now the climax of the play is approaching. Karl reveals his true identity to his father, who is overcome and dies by shame at seeing his beloved son a criminal. Amalia is brought to him, and instead of rejecting him because of his outlaw status, she embraces him. Karl is overcome by conflicting emotions. He who just a moment before had been convinced that he had to renounce her forever, now has her heart in his hands. But of course he cannot abandon his gang, they have served him well and died for him, and so they remind him. Thus Amalia wants to die, to be killed by Karl. But Karl cannot do it. He is a coward she cries out, and others offer to kill her instead. Karl is provoked, if anyone is to kill her, it is he, and he promptly puts an end to her. The others are aghast. Karl has now no way to go. But instead of choosing suicide, he decides to give himself up to justice, so some poor guy he has once wronged can get his bounty. And the play ends.

It is a fairy-tale of course, set in no definite time and place. There is no realism afoot, in spite of some of the dialogue being set as tentative. Characters do not talk as much as indulging in long well-formulated declamations.

Schiller read and admired Shakespeare. This youthful drama is not restricted to blank verse, although in later plays Schiller would try his hand at that, but it mirrors much of Shakespeare in verbal virtuosity, especially at the end. In fact it would be a rather interesting exercise to try and rewrite 'Die Rube' in a Shakespearean mood. Still, verbal proficiency notwithstanding, the drama as such, unless clothed in the more melodramatic medium of the opera, is hard for the modern audience to warm to. The exalted sentiments no longer strike chords, at least not in their raw forms. It remains, however brilliant and accomplished, a youthful work, and only charming if seen as such.

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