

Friedrich Hebbel's Maria Magdalena¹ has been identified by some scholars as one of the greatest bourgeois tragedies of German literature. More precisely, it is often viewed as an important social and historical document which chronicles the crucial 19th century transition towards a capitalistic society.² Hebbel himself, in the introduction to his play, states that:

... die dramatische Kunst soll den welthistorischen Prozess, der in unseren Tagen vor sich geht und der die vorhandenen Institutionen des menschlichen Geschlechts, die politischen, religiösen und sittlichen, nicht umstürzen, sondern tiefer begründen, sie also vor dem Umsturz sichern will, beenden helfen. p.11

It is this drive to rationalize the human condition, the sociological and anthropological aspects of the work, that will be the focus of this paper. The specific approach chosen is a highly unusual, maybe even untried, one for, it attempts to meld current anthropological theory with Hebbel's depiction of society. The justification of this procedure will follow.

¹Edition used: Friedrich Hebbel, Maria Magdalena (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam Jr., 1983). From here on in the play will be referred to by page numbers only.

²R.M. Werner, for example, states: " Sie (Hebbel's tragedy) ist sozial, denn sie beleuchtet den gesellschaftlichen Zustand und zerlegt das Bürgertum dialektisch; sie ist historisch, da sie eine besondere Form der gesellschaftlichen Erscheinung, den patriarchischen Staat beleuchtet: sie ist aber auch Metaphysisch, indem sie die Idee aus dem Leben hervorgehen lässt, ohne sie erst ausdrücklich aussprechen zu müssen." Found in Joachim Müller's, Das Weltbild Friedrich Hebbels (Halle: Veb Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1955) 209.

For Hebbel the confrontation between the 'I' and the societal 'we' (which usually manifests itself in the state) was a topic which merited artistic attention for, as he stated:

..., dass das Individuum, wie herrlich und gross, wie edel und schoen es immer sei, sich der Gesellschaft unter allen Umstaenden beugen muss, weil in dieser und ihrem notwedigen formalen Ausdruck, dem Staat, die ganze Menschheit lebt, in jenem aber nur eine einzelne Seite derselben zur entfaltung gelangt.³

The historical and philosophical validity of this statement is not at issue here and will, therefore, not feature in the discussion.⁴ What shall be noted, however, is that Hebbel, here, makes an observation of a philosophical as well as of a sociological nature: philosophical because it clearly advocates a specific path that humanity should take (the "muss"); and, sociological because it makes certain observations of the already existing pattern of human behaviour.

When combining this observation with the one found in the introduction, little doubt remains that for Hebbel, as for most realists, accurate and realistic depiction of human behaviour served as one of the foundations of his works.⁵ Still, since this point forms the basis of this essay, further

³quotation taken from Mueller, p. 195

⁴...although Professor Narveson and his fellow libertarians would certainly put up some fuss.

⁵This claim, on the surface, appears to entail the fallacy which surrounds the perception of the realistic movement, namely the assumption that the realists attempted to duplicate reality as such. Yet, the incorporation of accurate depiction of human behaviour in a work, can not lead to the conclusion that the work necessarily attempts to duplicate reality as it exists; the existence of subjectivity within the art of the realists is readily acknowledged here. What is claimed,

evidence needs to be cited. Once more we will turn to Hebbel:

Nur dadurch, dass es uns veranschaulicht, wie das Individuum im Kampf zwischen seinem persönlichen und dem allgemeinen Weltwillen, der die Tat, den Ausdruck der Freiheit, immer durch die Begebenheit, den Ausdruck der Notwendigkeit, modifiziert und umgestaltet, seine Form und seinen Schwerpunkt gewinnt, und dass es uns so die Natur alles menschlichen Handelns klar macht,...- nur dadurch wird das Drama lebendig.⁶

Two points are reemphasized: (1) Hebbel views existence as a struggle between the will of the individual and that of humanity at large; (2) by depicting this struggle the drama clarifies the human condition. Again philosophy is intertwined with an almost scientific need to understand and depict human behaviour. It is this 'need' that allows us to categorize Maria Magdalena as a socially conscious play and to analyze it using the sociological/anthropological approach.

A finalized thesis can now be formed. From the above made observations the following premises have been established:

1) For Hebbel the depiction of the human condition is a vital aspect of the drama of the realistic period.

however, is that within the subjective parameter of a realistic work, accurate depiction of the human character was (and still is) a necessity; without it the work cannot be classified as realistic .

⁶Quote found in Andreas Huyssen, ed., Buergerlicher Realismus (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1974) p. 79

2) Any depiction of the human condition, even if one allows for some degree of subjectivity in the choice of approach, should be accurate if it is to be labelled a successful realistic work of art.

3) Our present understanding of human behaviour, gained through relatively modern disciplines of sociology and anthropology, allow us to judge if the author's attempt to depict human behaviour can be labelled successful.⁷

Having established these premises the core thesis of this essay can now be expounded, namely, that in Maria Magdalena Hebbel depicts the human condition in an accurate manner, thereby allowing us to state that the play possesses the minimum requirements needed to be classified as a successful piece of realistic art. Using Radcliffe- Brown's theory on social sanctions and applying it to specific passages of the play, it will be shown that little discrepancy exists between Hebbel's depiction of human behaviour and that of current anthropological theory. It should be noted that the subject matter of the text lends itself exceptionally well to

7 It is important to state at this point that if a play is as unsuccessful on this level, it does not follow that the work cannot be labelled as successful from a different (i.e. aesthetic) angle.* Further, it should be remembered that this 'test' can only be applied towards authors who specifically state, or have stated, that the depiction and exploration of human behaviour form a significant part in their approach to literary endeavours.

* My gratitude to Rick Salay for this clarification.

such a comparison and thereby facilitates the experiment at hand. Further, it must also be pointed out that for reasons of simplification only one out of many anthropological theories will be applied. Whether or not this is sufficient to label the play as 'anthropologically correct' remains a point of contention. Suffice it to state that by successfully applying this one theory a precedent has been set that might serve as a starting point for future endeavours.

Before starting to apply Radcliffe-Brown's theory to the work under discussion, the theory itself must be outlined⁸. For anthropologists, "sanctions are externalized social controls designed to encourage conformity to social norms."⁹ More specifically:

Each group and subgroup within a society tends to develop its own distinctive pattern or usages and the means of maintaining them without necessary recourse in municipal law. Sanctions there come to operate within every conceivable set of group relationships: they include not only the organized sanctions of the law but also the gossip of neighbours ... informal sanctions may become more drastic than the penalties provided for in the legal code.¹⁰

As mentioned, social sanctions can be **organized** (formal) or **diffused** (informal). We must also

⁸The social sanction theory under discussion has been extracted from A.R. Radcliffe-Brown's Structure and Function in Primitive Society (London: Cohen & West LTD,1965) 205-211, and William A. Haviland's, Cultural Anthropology 4th ed. (New York, N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983) 330-332.

⁹Haviland p.331

¹⁰A.L. Epstein quoted in Haviland p. 331

differentiate between **positive** and **negative** sanctions. By merging these distinction the following

four types of social sanctions emerge:

1) **positive-organized** (i.e. decorations received by members of military);

2) **positive-diffused**, (i.e. compliments given to individuals by other members of society);

3) **negative-organized**, (usually expressed in a society's system of laws: noncompliance with

laws will lead to a variety of standardized punishments ranging from imprisonment to the death penalty);

4) **negative-diffused**, (includes behaviour such as gossip, ostracism etc.).

Anyone familiar with Radcliff-Brown's theory will recognize that this categorization is highly

simplified for, it does not include the more complex distinction between primary and secondary

types of sanctions, nor does it include the (debated) area of religious sanctions. Nevertheless, it

is extensive enough to fulfil its purpose in the following analysis of Hebbel's work.

II

While the second part of this essay will serve as the testing ground for the 'anthropological

approach', it will also shed some light on the intricate relationship, which Hebbel refers to as the

confrontation, between the will of the individual and that of society at large. This conflict materializes itself in the character of Klara whose struggle against a societally imposed fate forms the core of the play. As the upholder of these societal values the character of her father, Meister Anton, must be viewed as a necessary tool for the emergence of the tragic; without his petty sense of morality, based mostly on fear of societal scorn and ridicule rather than on independent thought, Klara's suicide could not be labelled as unavoidable, thereby eliminating an essential element of the tragic: only when the will of the individual, Klara's will to exist with her pregnancy, is confronted with the rigid norms of a society -- embodied in her father -- which deny her right to exist in her condition, can the bourgeois tragedy emerge.¹¹ The dimensions of society's will, as well as the mechanisms it uses to enforce it, will be examined in the following passages.

A minor yet effective example at work is found in the scene III when Klara's mother laments:

Jetzt ist's anders, jetzt muessen wir Alten, die wir uns nicht auf Lesen und Schreiben verstehen, uns von neunjaehrigen Buben ausspotten lassen! Die Welt wird immer klueger... (p. 41)

¹¹A recent, modernized cinematographic version of the play has incorporates the fact that in today's western society the potential for the tragic has effectively been eliminated for, modern values no longer demand Klara's sacrifice. Subsequently, her suicide has been eliminated.

Portrayed here is part of what Kaiser labels the societal "Vernichtungsmechanik" that accompanied the 19th century.¹² The rise of the capitalism brought with it a higher standard of education resulting in a split between the uneducated old and the educated young. Yet this discrepancy in educational standards should be viewed as only one aspect of the more general dichotomy between the old and the post-industrial new way of life. The resulting sense of isolation and alienation with which the pre-industrial revolution generation was confronted is clearly expressed in the lamentation of Klara's mother.¹³ To Hebbel's credit this observation is well backed by anthropological theory. The ridicule that the old generation is exposed to when failing to meet the standards of the new falls under Radcliff-Brown's category of specialized negative diffused sanctions¹⁴; hence, Hebbel's use of the mocking "neunjaehrigen Buben" demonstrates his sophisticated insight into human behaviour.

A more powerful and complex evocation of societal power is to be found in the aforementioned relationship between Klara and her father. The degree to which Meister Anton fears the scorn

¹²For an well documented summary of the interplay between history and Hebbel's Maria Magdalena turn to Herbert Kaiser's Friedrich Hebbel- Geschichtliche Interpretation des dramatischen Weks (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verl., 1983) 53-63.

¹³The relationship between M.Anton and his son is another evocation of this dichotomy. For a more detailed account of this particular aspect turn to Kaiser pp.59,60.

¹⁴Radcliffe-Brown p. 206

and ridicule of his neighbours is demonstrated when he exclaims: "Denn alles, alles kann ich ertragen und hab's bewiesen, nur nicht die Schande!"(p.66). Respect and acknowledgement from his peers is the "nerve" that holds him together: so powerful is societal pressure that he would prefer to cut his throat rather than be shamed by his daughter.(p.65) It is in this statement that the root of the tragedy lies for, by threatening to take his own life if Klara is not "as she should be" (p. 61), he seals the fate of his daughter. Yet it would be a mistake to view Meister Anton as anything more than an incarnation of society as a whole. When, for example, he tells Klara: "Werde du ein Weib, wie deine Mutter war, dann wir man sprechen: an den Eltern hat es nicht gelegen..."(p.64), it is the society-based "man", not a personal philosophical point, that is the motivating power behind his plea. Societal values are thus funnelled down through Meister Anton who in turn seeks to impose them onto his daughter. Consequently, the relationship between Anton and Klara, on its own, does not fully entail the aforementioned confrontation of the 'wills'; only through recognition of Meister Anton's role as a personification of society's will can we understand the nature of the conflict.

Due to this 'trickle-down' scenario, any analysis of the role of social sanctions must focus on the

character of the father: although Klara is at times directly exposed to the demands of society¹⁵, most of the pressure to conform is channelled through Meister Anton. What form, then, do these sanctions take on? Being a law-abiding citizen Meister Anton, unlike his son¹⁶, is not exposed to any form of organized-negative sanctions. Instead, once his son has been imprisoned, he is directly exposed to forms of negative-diffused sanctions. It should be noted, however, that the forms these sanctions take on is generally implied: although Anton keeps referring to the "Schande" that he now is forced to feel, little textual evidence exists for a direct expression of societal scorn. Social sanctions as they apply to Anton can thus be labelled as implicit rather than explicit. One could also argue that the monologues assigned by Hebbel to Anton already include such a high degree of internalization of societal norms that any explicit

15Kaiser, for example states: " Sie (Klara) gibt den Draengen Leornards also nur nach, um das Gerede der Leute zu wiederlegen, ... In der Vereinigung mit Leonard vergewaltigt also nicht nur dieser sie, sondern er exekutiert vor allem auch die gesellschaftliche Gewalt, der Klara ausgesetzt ist." (p.54). In other words, Klara's pregnancy, one of the core elements of the tragedy, is viewed by Kaiser as resulting from direct societal pressure that is applied using the negative, diffused sanction of gossip.

16Karl's imprisonment is an example of a negative organized sanction. Since this example is such an obvious one, it warrants no further attention in this essay. One should note, however, that organized sanctions, be they positive or negative, are usually closely connected to their diffused counterpart; hence, not only is Karl imprisoned, but he is also exposed to ridicule by being led in chains through the whole city.

depiction of applied social sanctions would be labelled as excessive and non-productive. Still, one example of public humiliation should be mentioned, namely Anton's experience with the thief Pocken-Fritz:

Sieh, ich gehe vorhin ueber die Strasse, da kommt der Pocken-Fritz daher...
Frueher wagte der Halunke nicht, mich anzusehen, jetzt trat er frech auf mich zu
und reichte mir die Hand. p.65

Hebbel, here, magnificently demonstrates how a mainly positive gesture, in this case a handshake, can be manipulated to express society's power in a rather obscure manner: through the handshake with a thief Anton is instantaneously reduced in social rank. Since social rank within the lower-class depends on peer recognition rather than birth right, this action must be interpreted as an unusual form of a diffused-negative sanction.

That Meister Anton, himself, is well aware of the rules that govern lower class subdivision is demonstrated in his behaviour towards Adam. From Klara we learn that when the court clerk attempted a (provocative) gesture of camaraderie toward her father while both men were sitting at a table in the local tavern, the latter exclaimed angrily: " Leute im roten Rock mit blauen Aufschlaegen mussten ehemals aus Glaesern mit hoelzernen Fuessen trinken, auch mussten sie draussen vor dem Fenster oder, wenn's regnete, vor der Tuer stehenbleiben..." (p.70). This

outburst against the lower-ranked Adam serves as yet another example of a negative-diffused sanction being used to accentuate a social standard, in this case the upholding of the traditional subclass system.

Hebbel's depiction of societal dominance extends much further than the few examples cited here; however, occurrences of actualization of social sanctions have been narrowed to a point that is sufficient for the purpose of this essay. This evidence must suffice to substantiate the theory that, within the scope of the applied anthropological data, Hebbel has indeed satisfied the minimum requirement that should be imposed on the realistic drama, namely, accurate depiction of human behaviour. Furthermore, it has been shown that anthropology, as well as sociology, can in limited ways be applied to works of literature. It should be noted that this essay is at the embryonic stage of the anthropological approach towards the literature of the realistic period: to adequately cover even as small a work as Maria Magdalena the parameters of this essay would have to be changed dramatically for, many more areas of anthropological theory would have to be consulted.

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AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO HEBBEL'S MARIA MAGDALENA

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