Studies in Scottish Literature

Volume 7 | Issue 4 Article 6

4-1-1970

A Scottish Imitation of Bürger

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A Scottish Imitation of Bürger

Of the many German works which became known in Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century, two of the most popular were Bürger's *Lenore* and Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*. Their fame is attested by numerous translations and imitations, and by many critical comments in the magazines. Edinburgh Public Library possesses two relevant pamphlets whose character has not hitherto been recognised. Both were printed in 1800 by J. & A. Denovan of the Lawnmarket in Edinburgh.

The title-page of the more interesting of the two appears on page 268. The frontispiece shows a phaeton drawn by three fire-breathing winged dogs, on one of which there is a headless figure who carries a staff surmounted by a miniature skull. In the phaeton are a skeleton in military uniform and a young woman in white. The sides of the vehicle are decorated with skulls, and the wheels emit clouds of smoke. A devilish figure leers out of the surrounding mist, and stretches its arms towards the company. Beneath the picture are the lines:

> 'Mid rolling smoke and flashing Flame
> The awfull Phaeton flew.

The main body of the pamphlet is a ballad in 125 four-line stanzas, which tells the story of Charlotte, Albert and Lord Fossberg. As Albert goes off to fight with the Prussian troops in Silesia, Charlotte promises everlasting fidelity. Once he has gone she marries Lord Fossberg. On his return Albert goes to the castle and demands to see Charlotte; after a quarrel, he is killed, and his body is thrown into a cavern. His ghost visits Charlotte by night in a "swarthy phaeton" and bids her prepare her "guilty soul" for "God's all-righteous judgment." Charlotte goes mad, flees from the castle, and throws her self into the cavern beside the corpse. The phaeton bears her soul to the "judgment seat," and Fossberg becomes a hermit. The poet concludes by pointing the obvious moral.

I can find no poem of Bürger's which could possibly be regarded as the original of this piece. There are numerous parallels, however, between *The Hussar of Magdeburg* and the various translations of Bürger published in Britain between 1796 and 1800. The most im-

portant of these were William Taylor's versions of "Der wilde Jäger," "Des Pfarrers Tochter von Taubenhain" and "Lenore," which were reprinted in 1830 in his *Historic Survey of German Poetry* (II, 25-51), and Walter Scott's versions of the first and last of these poems, which are included in most editions of Scott's *Poetical Works*. From "Der wilde Jäger' Denovan has taken the ghostly huntsman with his merciless whip, and the mysterious sounds heard by the peasants at midnight. From "Des Pfarrers Tochter von Taubenhain" he gets the wooing of the poor maiden by the rich lord, the heroine's solitary flight from the castle, and much of his nature-imagery. From "Lenore" come the scene of the soldiers' return, the dead lover's appearance outside his mistress' room, and the description of the heroine's midnight journey to the grave. There are many verbal parallels, among which the following are particularly striking:

With beating heart, from off her couch,
The lovely Charlotte sprung
Oh! sure my Albert's gone, she cried,
Her lilly hands she wrung.
(st. 2)

At break of day from frightful dreams
Upstarted Ellenore:
My William, art thou slayn, she sayde,
Or dost thou love no more?
("Lenore," tr. Taylor. st. 1)

That smelt so sweet in flower
(st. 69)

Sweet smelt the beans in flower.
("Des Pfarrers Tochter," tr. Taylor, st. 16)

And now the plaintive nightingale,
Began her love-sweet song;
And loudly craick'd the noisy rail,
The waving grass among.
(st. 73)

And when the amorous nightingale
Sang sweetly to his mate.
She heard his quail-call in the field;
And oh! ne'er made him wait.
("Des Pfarrers Tochter," tr. Taylor, st. 12)

No peace, her troubled heart could find;
She sinks in fell despair:
—To madness drove—she shrieks about,
In anguish tears her hair.
(st. 110)

And when the soldyers all were bye,
She tore her raven hair,
And cast herself upon the growne,
In furious despair.
("Lenore," tr. Taylor. st. 6)

Besides these major parallels, there are obvious similarities in diction. Charlotte, like Ellenore, has "lily hands" and "raven hair," and such words as "taper," "tramp," "Frederick," "cat," "corse," "laurel," "sable," "midnight-hour," "judgment-seat," "spur," "owl," "plume" and "impious" are prominent both in the earlier translations and in Denovan's poem. An article in the *Edinburgh Magazine* for 1800 (Vol. XIV, pp. 441 ff.) remarked on Bürger's fondness for onomatopoeia or "imitative harmony"; and *The Hussar of Magdeburg* is suitably full of "clanking chains," "gingling wheels," "dashing waves," "rattling drums" and "brazen trumpets," to say nothing of birds that coo and chirp, bells

that go "ting," wheels that hiss, chariots that thunder and crash, and characters who emit yells, howls, cries, and peals of laughter. The names "Charlotte" and "Albert" do not occur in the earlier poems, but their source becomes obvious when we turn to the second of these pamphlets.

The title-page of this is shown on page 269. Lexina, the "White Rose" of the title, laments that her father, Winniski, will not allow her to marry Polwatski. She is attacked by a wolf, whom Polwatski kills. Winniski and "the proud Lord of Omzlaw" find the lovers together, and the latter fights with Polwatski. Lexina flings herself between them, and is killed by Polwatski's sword. Polwatski commits suicide. The story is told in nine pages of exclamatory prose-poetry, which is probably intended to remind the reader of the popular translations of *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*. The following passage from Lexina's lament is representative:

> Ah' woe is me!—whether shall I wander—where shall this poor—this bursting heart unload the burden of its grief—oh! how canst thou smile most heavenly morn, sad dost thou remind me of the day that is past—Yes, ye glorious sun, when ye beheld me rejoicing in thy splendour with the little inhabitants of the grove—Yes, beauteous sun ye have witnessed the spring of my youth and the summer of my days—soon shall thy enliv'ning ray instruct the noisome nettle to shoot apace on the grave of Lexina!

The last page of the pamphlet informs us that two more works by J. F. Denovan are "speedily" to be published. One of them is *The Maid of Drontheim, a Ballad, Translated from the Norse Tongue*; its character can be deduced from that of the two poems examined.

Clearly, these works are of no literary merit. They are interesting, however, as further evidence of the British enthusiasm for German literature in the last few years of the eighteenth century, and for the way in which they reflect the popular conception of two of the most widely-discussed authors.

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THE

HUSSAR

OF

MAGDEBURG;

OR, THE

MIDNIGHT PHÆTON.

A Ballad,

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN,

OF

GOTTERFRIED AUGUSTUS BURGER;
AUTHOR OF *LENORA*, &c.

By J. F. DENOVAN.

Sperate misere cavete felices.—Hor.

EDINBURGH:

PRINTED BY J. & A. DENOVAN,
AND MAY BE HAD OF ALL THE BOOKSELLERS;
AND MESS. G. G. AND J. ROBINSONS,
Pater Noster Row,
LONDON.

1800.

THE

WHITE ROSE

OF

VILNA.

A Poem,

WRITTEN ORIGINALLY IN THE POLISH TONGUE;

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN

OF

GOETHE,

Author of the SORROWS of WERTER, *&c.*

BY J. F. DENOVAN.

Jeder Jeungling sehnt zich so zu lieben,
Jedes Maedchen so geliebt zu sein ;
Ach! du heiligiste von unserm Trieben,
Warum quillt aus ihm die grimme pein ?

Anon.

Edinburgh.

1800.