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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

**Henry Mackenzie, Alexander Thomson and
*Dramatic Pieces From The German***

A volume entitled *Dramatic Pieces from the German* was published in Edinburgh in 1792. It contained three works, which were described as follows:

I. The Sister; a Drama, by Goethe, author of the Sorrows of Werter. II. The Conversation of a Father with his Children; by Gesner, Author of the Death of Abel. III. The set of Horses; a Dramatic piece by Emdorff.

The "Advertisement" read:

Of the three following Pieces, the first and second may look forward to the approbation of the Public with some degree of confidence. The Authors are well known, and much admired in this country. The reputation they have acquired by their former works, the Translator hopes, will not be lost by those which now, for the first time, make their appearance in an English dress. The third is one of the most admired little comedies of the German Stage, and was a peculiar favourite of the late King of Prussia.

A footnote referred those who required "an Account of the German Theatre" to "the Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Vol. ii p. 180," where Mackenzie's lecture on the subject was first printed. The plays offered were translations of Goethe's *Die Geschwister*, Gesner's *Unterhaltungen eines Vaters mit seinen Kindern*, itself a translation of Diderot, and Ayrenhoff's *Der Postzug*.¹

An account of Henry Mackenzie in the *Public Characters of 1802-1803* contained the following statements:

He had procured the materials for his lecture through the medium of a French work. But, desiring afterwards to enjoy the native beauties of German poetry, he took some lessons in the language of Germany from a Dr. Okely, then studying medicine at Edinburgh. The fruits of his attention to German literature appeared farther in the year 1791, in a small volume containing translations of the "Set of Horses" by Lessing and of two or three other dramatic pieces executed partly, we believe, by Mr. Mackenzie, and in part by Dr. Okely.²

¹ *Modern Language Review*, XVII (1922), 412.

² *Public Characters of 1802-1803* (London, 1803), pp. 368-369.

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The same information appeared, obviously from this source, in Chambers' *Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen*,³ and in other works of reference. The case for Mackenzie's authorship has been argued by W. C. Dekker, who pointed out that the erroneous ascription of *Der Postzug* to "Emdorff" had appeared in Mackenzie's lecture four years earlier.⁴ A copy of the 1792 volume in the National Library of Scotland, however, is inscribed "By Alexr. Thomson."

The evidence of the *Public Characters* is suspect for a number of reasons. First, the phrase "we believe" implies doubt in the writer's mind. Second, the book is assigned to 1791 instead of 1792. Third, the writer is uncertain about the number of pieces in the volume. Fourth, *Der Postzug* is ascribed neither to Ayrenhoff nor to "Emdorff" but to Lessing. Fifth, the reference to "a French work" is inaccurate, since Mackenzie avowedly made use of two such works.

The ascription to Mackenzie is inherently improbable. Mackenzie knew no German in 1788, and apart from this passage I can find no evidence that he ever learnt any. He was decidedly hostile to Gessner and Goethe, using words like "embroidered" and "ludicrous" of the former,⁵ and describing the *Werther* and *Stella* of the latter as "equally reprehensible."⁶ He is unlikely, therefore, to have translated them, and still more unlikely to have expressed the hope that the "reputation . . . acquired by their former works" would be maintained by those now offered. In his lecture, he alluded to Frederick the Great's comments on *Der Postzug* in a way which showed quite clearly that he regarded them as derisory. He would hardly, therefore, have introduced the play as the late king's "peculiar favourite."

The ascription to Thomson, on the other hand, seems highly plausible. Alexander Thomson, the author of *Whist*, was familiar with the German language and enthusiastic about German literature. Between 1787 and 1792 he had written nineteen sonnets in imitation of *Werther*.⁷ In 1792 he was engaged on a version of *Die Räuber* and was reading *Die Indianer in England*.⁸ His *German Miscellany* of 1796

³ Chambers, *A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen* (London, 1875), III, 55.

⁴ *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, XXXIX (1924), 343.

⁵ *The Anecdotes and Egotisms of Henry Mackenzie* (London, 1927), p. 163.

⁶ *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, Vol. II, Pt. 2, p. 179.

⁷ Thomson, *Sonnets, Odes and Elegies* (Edinburgh, 1801), *passim*.

⁸ *ibid.* Sonnets LXXX and XCV.

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contained translations of the latter play and of some pieces from Meissner's *Skizzen*. In 1799 he promised a translation of Gellert's *Das Loos in der Lotterie*.⁹ There is no doubt, therefore, of his ability and readiness to translate German plays. In *The Paradise of Taste* he expressed a decided preference of Gessner to Theocritus.¹⁰ In the *Essay on Novels* he compared Goethe and Homer to the advantage of the former.¹¹ The choice of works in this volume, and the introductory comments on them, are thus in accordance with his views, in so far as these are known.

If the book were by Thomson, it might well be attributed to Mackenzie. German drama was known to the Scottish public only through Mackenzie's lecture, and the appearance in Edinburgh of a volume of German plays would inevitably, at this date, bring his name to mind. Tytler's version of *Die Räuber*, which also appeared in 1792, was commonly attributed to him; the error appeared as late as 1830 in Taylor's *Historic Survey of German Poetry*.¹² If the book were by Mackenzie, however, it would scarcely be attributed to Thomson. Thomson was known at this time as a poet, but no translations, adaptations or criticisms of German works had as yet appeared under his name.

The printed statement in *Public Characters of 1802-1803* must obviously carry more weight than the manuscript attribution in the National Library; and the recurrence of the still unexplained name "Emdorff" is of considerable, though uncertain, significance. The confidence with which the book has been ascribed to Mackenzie is not, however, justified by the evidence available to us.

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⁹ Thomson, *Pictures of Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1799) last page.

¹⁰ Thomson, *The Paradise of Taste* (London, 1796), p. 39.

¹¹ *Edinburgh Magazine*, II (1793), 148-149.

¹² *Modern Language Review*, XVI (1921), 297.