The sexual drive as a political problem

This paper examines the manner in which the sexual drive as a disrupter of political order is represented in three plays written in German. Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death*, Friedrich Hebbel's *Agnes Bernauer*, and Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Visit* have been chosen for this study – three plays which span markedly differing political orders, but share in common the problem of channelling this erratic energy within the parameters of a stable society.

The Committee of Public Safety in *Danton's Death* is at first unable to overcome Georges Danton's popularity with the gallery. However, in Act III scene v, Büchner represents the Parisian mob turning on Danton for the supposed treachery fermenting beneath his decadent licentiousness, which draws rancour when set against the post-revolutionary social backdrop of poverty, hunger and prostitution: "Danton has a beautiful wife. He takes his bath in burgundy, he eats venison off silver plates and sleeps with

your wives and daughters when he's drunk"[1]. The indignation seems directed here as much towards the permissiveness presumed by one's fellow man, as it is towards the allegations of bribery – a permissiveness which can no longer be indulged during such straitened times. In this linguistic struggle to define who defines the revolution, Danton's defining act of treachery is to subvert the egalitarian conception of the revolution. Danton's unrestrained pursuit of physical pleasure is a political problem as soon as that égalité comes to take on a puritanical bent.

Having already encountered the violent drunkard Simon battering his wife – whose daughter Suzon is prostituting herself for their sake such that he will "thirst if her well runs dry"[2] – we are aware of the social reality that underlies Danton's romantic quest to hunt down "the Medici Venus piecemeal in all the *grisettes* of the Palais Royal"[3]. Yet before this sexual exploitation can come to be portrayed as the furtherance of an aristocratic form of economic exploitation, we are party to an exchange between Danton and Robespierre. "The social revolution is not yet accomplished"[4] declares Robespierre as a call to arms before later continuing, "We must cut off the hand that presumes to hold it back,"[5]: a turn of phrase and

[1] Büchner, (1971), p.59
[2] ibidem, p.9
[3] ib., p.16
[4] ib., p.22
[5] ib.

thought which echoes the fundamentalism of Matthew 5:30[6]. Danton on the other hand, advocates that the time has come for laissez-faire – "Why get into each other's hair"[7] – and retorts that Robespierre's vice / virtue dichotomy overlooks our essentially Epicurean modes of behaviour: "I would be ashamed to wander between heaven and earth for thirty years with such a priggish face, for the miserable pleasure of finding others less virtuous than myself"[8].

During the sobering reflection of their last night alive, Danton's friend Camille Desmoulins remarks, "We're villains and angels, geniuses and boneheads, all in one … they're not on the scale people imagine … don't contort your features into a caricature of virtue or wit or heroism or genius. We all know each other here"[9]. Libertinage may make one politically vulnerable during a time of want, its social costs cannot be overlooked, yet when faced with a political regime that pits virtue against vice, Danton's voice encompasses a tolerance of fallen human nature, even as it is cut off. Büchner, one imagines, has far less sympathy for a man infatuated by an ideal than for a man infatuated by the flesh.

The totemic force of Agnes in Friedrich Hebbel's *Agnes Bernauer*, threatens, through the suggestive power of her beauty, to entice Albrecht onwards "till the whole

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[6] *The Insight Bible: New International Version*, International Bible Society, (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., 1992), Matthew 5:30, p.969; "And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."
[7] Büchner, (1971), p.22
[8] ib.
[9] ib., pp.66-67

German empire begins to totter"[10]. Is this attraction a case of "love at first sight" or rather a culturally sanitised sexual longing? In Albrecht's case his upbringing is blamed by Rolf von Frauenhoven thus, "Lazy Wenzel of Prague educated him; and the notions then put into his head to the sound of flute and violin, God himself will never be able to eradicate"[11]. This sudden romantic infatuation is to be explained in part by the sheer intensity of beauty which Hebbel credits his heroine with: "such an angel of beauty"[12] before whom even the public executioner quails in his task[13]. Likened by Hans von Preising as to a precious stone that "aroused the wildest passions, and incited both the good and the wicked to murder and to theft", Preising informs Agnes that she has "brought about a condition of affairs which is not concerned with guilt of innocence – but simply with cause and effect"[14]. This implies, with a mythologising aspect reminiscent of the question "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?" that there exists a certain pitch of desirability beyond which it is untenable to impute agency to those mortal actors who find themselves in the vicinity of the siren.

Agnes' power over men causes strife amongst her peers in Augsburg – as Barbara

[10] Hebbel, (1990), p.201
[11] ib., p.200
[12] ib., p.199
[13] ib., p.247
[14] ib., p.244

upbraids her “You ought to be ashamed of estranging every girl’s sweetheart from her”[15] – and it comes, for Hebbel's fifteenth century Bavarians, to be associated by degrees with the occult. Ernest reflects on the tales of Erick’s Anna, exclaiming, “By the devil, surely she can compete with the barber’s daughter”[16]; Marshal von Pappenheim – upon sight of Agnes – momentarily loses control over his sword such that upon beating his brow he cries, “The devil! What am I doing?”[17], the servant Stachus brings word that Agnes has come to be known in common parlance as the Witch of Augsburg[18].

When thinking of Agnes in their interrupted seclusion at the Vohburg Castle, Albrecht regrets that apparently “It is not intended that I shall enjoy my happiness like a boy munching the cherries he has stolen”[19]. Arousing not merely a fear that Agnes has occult power, but exciting also that suspicion of lascivious foreign blood, Albrecht’s sexual drive sows the seeds for ethnic aspersions and mistrust. “Don’t forget,” Frauenhoven remarks, “that he has as much Italian as German blood in him, and perhaps a few drops more … and if you can’t give him a pair of new eyes that see beauty as ugliness and ugliness as beauty, you

[15] ib., p.187
[16] ib., p.215
[17] ib., p.241
[18] ib., p.228
[19] ib., p.224

won't get far with him"[20]. Eroticism is the implied fruit of that unsettling fecundity associated with these exotic European climes: Knippeldollinger, Agnes' curiously persistent and over-familiar godfather, dreams that he gave her "cherries, the large foreign ones"[21]. The sexualised fruit surfaces again only to be repressed as Albrecht – winking, and thinking upon Agnes and then of his father – speaks of closing his eye "as the mouth closes when it has eaten a cherry"[22].

There is a greater truth than ressentiment in Agnes' renunciatory words, "how rich I am in my poverty, how strong in my powerlessness"[23]. The value accorded to her beauty cuts dangerously across class lines for a political system which fights in the name of a divinely ordained hierarchy. Without the arbitrary conferment of nobility-value-authority to sustain the legitimacy of the monarchical system, the German military banner held aloft by Ernest will fragment into shreds: "We have to put the mark upon a thing, worthless in itself, that gives it value; we have to raise dust above dust … Woe to him who does not understand this wise regulation of the race"[24]. By cutting across these sacred values, this profane physical attraction or "romance" threatens to disorder the social order as directly as the encroaching

[20] ib., p.199
[21] ib., p.185
[22] ib., p.200
[23] ib., p.245
[24] ib., p.255

fiscal influence of the bourgeois class: as the Mayor dismally intones of the guildsmen's presence in the Augsburg Great ballroom, "Pearls and peas all in one sack"[25].

The political solution avowed by Ernest, such as it is, to this disruptive desirability, is to carry out one's social role, elevate duty and conquer one's own desires. Paradoxically this dispassionate pursuit of responsibility involves for Ernest a certain abdication of personal agency: "Some things have to be done blindly as if in sleep. This is one of them. The great wheel rolled over her, and now she is with Him who turns it"[26]. Killing Agnes in the name of "the widows and orphans whom civil war would create"[27] casts the cherry into the Danube, and Ernest's advice to his son in the wake of this emotional and hormonal turmoil is to now consider the gratitude of his citizens should they be able to say, "We all lived and died in peace and harmony because he conquered himself"[28].

Temptation of a different kind presides over Guellen in Dürrenmatt's *Der Besuch der Alten Dame*, which evinces modernity in its focus upon money-relations as the root of power-relations. Although in the limited case of Alfred Ill the extra-marital sexual drive – which lends the liaison of Ill and Claire Zachanassian its clandestine "frolicking"[29] –

[25] ib., p.193
[26] ib., p.248
[27] ib., p.233
[28] ib., p.254
[29] Dürrenmatt, (1990), p.28

instigates the fraught political problem at the heart of the play, this is not more generally typical of the consequences that libidinous forces are portrayed as having in this work. Certainly, a gendered inequality of emotional and reproductive vulnerability is reinforced by the character of Claire Zachanassian; her painful instrumentalisation in her formative relationship with Ill presages, via an implicitly divine or karmic mechanism, the eventual arrival in his life of retributive furies: "Your love died many years ago. But my love could not die. Neither could it live. It grew into an evil thing, like me, like the pallid mushrooms in this wood … Their tentacles sought you out"[30]. This is tidy retribution, yet it is hardly consistent with the secularised trajectories of the other characters in Dürrenmatt's play. In Guellen, Dürrenmatt has portrayed an economic reality such that this kind of fatalistic comeuppance will only apply where market forces provide incentives for it to do so.

Where Danton's relations with impoverished prostitutes resembled aristocratic exploitation, Claire Zachanassian's succession of wealthy husbands instrumentalises sexual relations in a manner not out of keeping with the operation of the free market. Ill's reminiscences on Agnes Bernauer – "slim and supple as a willow, and tender, ah, what a

[30] ib., p.88

devilish beautiful little witch"[31] – result from a recognition not a condemnation of Claire Zachanassian's former sexual capital. Crucially, higher living standards permit us to draw the veil of free will over an individual's life trajectory. In Danton's Paris, desperate hunger could be staved off whilst public executions killed one's appetite: "The children are complaining, they're hungry. I've got to let them see, to keep them quiet"[32]. By contrast, for Claire Zachanassian's husbands and for all in Guellen but Ill himself, the stakes are not as high. An ironic refrain backing Dürrenmatt's text makes reference to the notion that greater prosperity can cure all ills, and that it is mistaken to fear evil when poverty is the truly δεινός quantity: "These monstrous things / do not exceed / The monstrous plight / of poverty"[33]. The schoolmaster tellingly mends his speech to conform to the lexicon of economic liberalism: "Nor am I blind to the fact that poverty is the root of much evil, nay, of great hardship"[34]. In this understanding, evil is no longer a valid frame of reference, since if people were only empowered to expend their energies in wealth generation, and sate their appetites in the acquisition of consumer products, then by all indicators of standard of living, the world would be objectively better.

[31] ib., p.15
[32] Büchner, (1971), p.68
[33] Dürrenmatt, (1990), p.99
[34] ib., p.91

It is possible to Marx-monger that a culture of consumption promotes the primacy of physical possession as fulfilment and thereby provides a readily extensible metaphor for the instrumentalisation of male-female relations. Baudrillard writes that in consumer capitalism, "human relations tend to be consumed (in the double sense of the word: to be "fulfilled" and to be "annulled") in and through objects, which become the necessary mediation and, rapidly, the substitutive sign, *the alibi*, of the relation"[35]. The fetishisation of consumer products comes to serve as a stimulus for economic activity and, I would claim, furthers the inroads of capital into the commodification of male and female bodies by encouraging consumers internally to conflate sexual desire with the acquisitive urge. Albrecht arguably wanted to possess Agnes Bernauer simply because she was beautiful, but in the case of the Guelleners they desire possessions that will serve as signifiers of their relations with others and with the object world. The United States looms large on the periphery of this brave new world, one which purveys not only new yellow shoes[36], but also a Remington[37], Camels[38], a Buick[39], *Life* magazine[40], and in the celebrity supplements, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis[41] and

[35] Jean Baudrillard, 'The System of Objects', *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998), p.418
[36] ib., p.49
[37] ib., p.53
[38] ib., p.68
[39] ib., p.83
[40] ib., p.75
[41] ib., p.55

"Ro-mance"[42].

The middle-class aspiration which this acquisitive urge entails is concerned with betterment, and this aspirational engine can subsume the sexual drive to work in favour of economic growth and social stability: "If you can't fork out when you want to dance, you have to put off dancing. You want to dance. They alone are eligible who pay"[43]. To become valued and desirable oneself one must be the kind of person who can afford desirable products, since to possess is culturally elevated as a virtue: of her late Armenian husband Claire Zachanassian extols, "An exemplary man, that old tycoon. With a veritable navy of oil tankers. And racing-stables. And millions more in cash. It was worth a marriage"[44].

Claire Zachanassian promises, "I shall turn the world into a brothel"[45], and over the course of the play, her Guellen does indeed turn into a meat market, albeit one in which the price is fixed. She sardonically characterises a commotion outside Ill's grocery shop as "Haggling over the price of meat"[46], she refers to her eighth husband as "the new guy"[47], who she divorces within a day[48], and she puts patriarchy on a pedestal by commenting that "You

[42] ib., p.71
[43] ib., p.67
[44] ib., p.42
[45] ib., p.67
[46] ib., p.47
[47] ib., p.44
[48] ib., p.64

only have husbands for display purposes, they shouldn't be useful"[49]. In the world of the meat market, at the wedding "every bridesmaid was a film starlet. With breasts like this"[50] that are "in fashion today"[51]; an engaged girl called Louisa runs half-naked across the street[52] pursued by Toby, one of the two indentured "herculean gum-chewing brutes"[53]; and Alfred Ill's own daughter Ottilie leaves the house wearing a red dress the propriety of which her father questions: "isn't it a little bold?"[54]. Her response signals the value shift that has taken place since consumerism quite literally came to town: "O silly Daddy. You should just take a peek at my evening dress"[55].

Guellen feels modern not merely because economic value has taken primacy over rigid class evaluation, but also because in a society where the marketplace metaphor for desirability and status prevails, a failure to conquer one's sexual drive, even for the politically powerful Claire Zachanassian, no longer necessarily threatens the established order. In fact, the unrestrained sexual drive appears to bolster the selfsame modes of being-in-the-world which foster consumerism. It commodifies and it cultivates the will-to-possess – "That blond

[49] ib., p.86
[50] ib., p.67
[51] ib.
[52] ib., p.45
[53] ib., p.24
[54] ib., p.81
[55] ib.

bass out there on the left, with the big Adam's apple, he was really most singular"[56]; and it acculturates one to the manipulation of a shared code of mystifications abstracted from materiality: as the partly prosthetic Claire Zachanassian opines, "I like men in shorts and vests. They look so natural"[57].

To conclude, Büchner depicted a Paris where in the words of Robespierre, an "utterly effete class"[58] of gentlemen feared puddles and rhapsodised over "the new play"[59] whilst the proletariat starved, leading his Danton to wonder "why people don't stop in the street and laugh in each other's faces"[60]. The Terror functions as a polar opposite to the ethic of conspicuous consumption as when Legendre directs the Committee's judgement towards "those here who wear silk clothes, drive around in carriages, sit in boxes at the theatre, and talk like the dictionary of the academy"[61]. This is an atmosphere in which the aspirational bourgeois must forgo the very objects of their acquisitive desire – it is also a time in which infatuation with the flesh is not only immoral but also politically imprudent. For the sacred and political order constructed around rigid ascriptions of nobility in Hebbel's *Agnes Bernauer*, an unconquered sexual attraction which cuts across class lines imperils the very

[56] Dürrenmatt, (1990), p.22
[57] Dürrenmatt, (1990), p.31
[58] Büchner, (1971), p.22
[59] ib., p.32
[60] ib., p.32
[61] ib., p.13

constituent fabric of authority, and with greater rapidity than the encroaching fiscal influence of trade. And whilst in *Der Besuch der Alten Dame*, the unbridled sexual drive functions to promote the ethic of consumer capitalism, Dürrenmatt demonstrates that a collective culture of rampant consumerism can hide a multitude of sins, commodifying and instrumentalising individuals just as surely as Danton's forays into the Palais Royal.

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