

Classic Poetry Series

Franz Grillparzer
- poems -

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Franz Grillparzer(15 January 1791 – 21 January 1872)

Franz Seraphicus Grillparzer (15 January 1791 – 21 January 1872) was an Austrian writer who is chiefly known for his dramas. He also wrote the oration for Ludwig van Beethoven's funeral.

Biography

Franz Grillparzer was born in Vienna, Austria. His father, E.J. Grillparzer, was a severe pedant and a staunch upholder of the liberal traditions of the reign of Joseph II, and was an advocate of some standing. His mother, Anna Franziska, was a nervous, highly-strung woman who belonged to the well-known musical family of Sonnleithner. His father destined Grillparzer for the legal profession, and, after a desultory education, Grillparzer entered the University of Vienna in 1807 as a student of jurisprudence. Two years later his father died, leaving the family in difficult circumstances. After obtaining his degree from the university in 1811, Franz first became a private tutor for a noble family; then in 1813, he entered the civil service as a clerk at the Imperial and Royal Hofkammer (Exchequer) in Austria. In 1821, he unsuccessfully applied to the position of scribe at the Imperial Library, and later that same year, he was relocated to the Ministry of Finance. In 1832, he became director of the archives at the Imperial and Royal Hofkammer, a position he held until his retirement in 1856. Grillparzer had little capacity for an official career and regarded his position merely as a means of independence. From early youth, Grillparzer displayed a strong literary impulse. He devoted especial attention to the Spanish drama, and nearly all his writings bear marks of the influence of Calderón. His autobiography, which was written in 1853 and brings down the narrative of his life to 1836, is a model of clear, simple, and elegant prose, and it throws much interesting light both on his personal character and on the tendencies of his time. Among his posthumous writings are many fragments of literary, philosophic, and political criticism, all of them indicating a strong and independent spirit, not invariably just, but distinct, penetrating, and suggestive. It is characteristic of him that he expresses extreme dislike of Hegel's philosophy on the ground that its terms are unintelligible. On the other hand, he gives evidence of careful and sympathetic study of Kant. Of modern literary critics, Gervinus was most repugnant to him, mainly because of the tendency of this writer to attribute moral aims to authors who created solely for art's sake. He rather maliciously says that Gervinus had one advantage and one disadvantage in writing his history of German literature, — the advantage of common sense, the disadvantage of knowing nothing of his subject. Of a quiet contemplative nature, Grillparzer shunned general society. He never married. To a stranger he seemed cold and distant, but in conversation with any one he liked his real disposition revealed itself; his manner became animated, his eyes

brightened, and a sarcastic but not ill-natured smile would play upon his lips. It was one of his sayings that the art of writing poetry can neither be taught nor learned, but he also held that inspiration will not visit a poet who neglects to make himself master of his subject. Hence before writing a play he worked hard, striving to comprehend the spirit of the age he wished to represent. He was exceedingly fond of travel, and at different times visited all the leading European countries. After 1840, when his solitary comedy was rejected by the public, he almost passed from the memory of his contemporaries. Fortunately for him, his admirer Heinrich Laube settled in Vienna in 1849 as artistic director of the court theatre. By and by Laube reintroduced on the stage some of Grillparzer's forgotten works, and their success was immediate and profound. To his own surprise, Grillparzer became the most popular author of the day; he was ranked with Goethe and Schiller, and lauded as the national poet of Austria. On the eightieth anniversary of his birthday all classes from the court downwards united to do him honour; never, probably, did Vienna exert herself so much to prove her respect for a private citizen. He was buried with an amount of ceremony that surpassed even the pomp displayed at Klopstock's funeral. He was originally buried in the Währinger Cemetery in Vienna, now known as Schubertpark. He now lies in Hietzinger Friedhof.

In 1807–1809, Grillparzer wrote a long tragedy in iambics, *Blanca von Castilien*, modeled on Friedrich von Schiller's *Don Carlos*. He also produced the dramatic fragments *Spartacus* and *Alfred der Grosse* (1809). When Grillparzer began to write, the German stage was dominated by the wild plays of Werner, Müllner, and other authors of the so-called "fate-tragedies." Grillparzer's play *The Ancestress* (German: *Die Ahnfrau*), published in 1816, was penetrated by their spirit. It is a gruesome fate-tragedy in the trochaic measure of the Spanish drama, already made popular by Adolf Müllner in his *Schuld*. A lady, who has been slain by her husband for infidelity, is doomed to visit "the glimpses of the moon" until her house is extinguished, and this end is reached in the tragedy amid scenes of violence and horror. Its general character is similar to that of Werner's dramas; it only differs from them in containing individual passages of much force and beauty. It reveals an instinct for dramatic as opposed to merely theatrical effect, which distinguishes it from other fate-dramas of the day. Unfortunately, its success led to the poet being classed for the best part of his life with playwrights like Müllner and Houwald. In 1817, the first performances of *The Ancestress* made Grillparzer's *Ancestress* was followed by *Sappho* (1818), a drama of a very different type; in the classic spirit of Goethe's *Torquato Tasso*, Grillparzer unrolled the tragedy of poetic genius, the renunciation of earthly happiness imposed upon the poet by his higher mission. An Italian rendering of this play fell into the hands of Lord Byron, who, although the translation was very bad, expressed his conviction that the author's name would be held in reverence

by posterity. It is full of the aspiration of the Romantic school, but its form is classic, and its chastened style presents a striking contrast to the noise and fury of *The Ancestress*. The problem of the play has some resemblance to that of Goethe's *Torquato Tasso*, for in both we find the struggles of a poetic nature which is unable to reconcile itself to the conditions of the actual world.

Grillparzer's conceptions are not so clearly defined as Goethe's, nor is his diction so varied and harmonious; but the play has the stamp of genius, and ranks as one of the best of those works in which an attempt has been made to combine the passion and sentiment of modern life with the simplicity and grace of ancient masterpieces. In 1821, Grillparzer completed his *The Golden Fleece* (*Das goldene Vlies*) trilogy, a project that had been interrupted in 1819 when his depressed mother committed suicide, and by Grillparzer's subsequent visit to Italy. The trilogy opens with a one-act prelude, *Der Gastfreund*, then depicts, in *The Argonauts* (*Die Argonauten*) Jason's adventures in his quest for the Fleece. *Medea*, a tragedy of classic proportions, contains the culminating events of the story of Medea, which had been so often dramatized before. The theme is similar to that of Sappho, but on a larger scale. It is again the tragedy of the heart's desire, the conflict of the simple happy life with that sinister power, be it genius or ambition, which upsets the equilibrium of life. There is delicate art in the delineation of the mingled fascination and repulsion which Medea and Jason feel for each other, and when at last repulsion becomes the dominant force, the dramatist gives splendid utterance to the rage of the disappointed wife and mother. Medea, her revenge stilled, her children dead, bears the fatal Fleece back to Delphi, while Jason is left to realize the nothingness of human striving and earthly happiness. The end is bitter disillusionment; the only consolation renunciation. Some critics consider *Medea* Grillparzer's highest achievement.

Historical tragedies

For his historical tragedy *King Ottokar's Fortune and End* (German: *König Ottokars Glück und Ende*, 1823, but owing to difficulties with the censor, not performed until February 19, 1825), Grillparzer chose the conflict of Otakar II of Bohemia with Rudolph I of Germany. It appealed strongly to the patriotic sympathies of Vienna, dealing as it does with one of the proudest periods of Austrian history, the founding of the house of Hapsburg. With an almost modern realism he reproduced the medieval setting of the play, at the same time not losing sight of the needs of the theatre. It cannot be said that the materials of the play are welded into a compact whole, but the characters are vigorously conceived, and there is a fine dramatic contrast between the brilliant, restless, and unscrupulous Ottokar and the calm, upright, and ultimately triumphant Rudolf. Through Ottokar's fall, it is controversially argued that Grillparzer again preached the futility of endeavour and the vanity of worldly greatness. A second historical tragedy, *A faithful Servant of his Lord* (German: *Ein treuer Diener*

seines Herrn, 1826, performed 1828), attempted to embody a more heroic gospel; but the subject of the superhuman self-effacement of Bankbanus before Duke Otto of Meran proved too uncompromising an illustration of Kant's categorical imperative of duty to be palatable in the theatre. It brought down upon the author a storm of abuse from the liberals, who accused him of servility. On the other hand, the play displeased the court, and its presentation was stopped. It hardly deserved to be made the subject of so much contention, for it is one of the least powerful of

With these historical tragedies began the darkest ten years in the poet's life. They brought him into conflict with the Austrian censor - a conflict which grated on Grillparzer's sensitive soul, and was aggravated by his own position as a servant of the state. In 1826, he paid a visit to Goethe in Weimar, and was able to compare the enlightened conditions which prevailed in the little Saxon duchy with the intellectual thraldom of Vienna. To these troubles were added personal worries. In the winter of 1820-1821, he had met and fallen in love with Katharina Fröhlich (1801-1879), but whether owing to a presentiment of mutual incompatibility, or merely owing to Grillparzer's conviction that life had no happiness in store for him, he shrank from marriage. Whatever the cause may have been, the poet was plunged into an abyss of misery and despair to which his diary bears heartrending witness; his sufferings found poetic expression in the fine cycle of poems bearing the significant title *Tristia ex Ponto* (1835).

More masterpieces and a setback

Still, during this time, Grillparzer completed two of his greatest dramas, *Waves of the Sea and of Love* (German: *Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen*, 1831) and *The Dream, a Life* (German: *Der Traum, ein Leben*, 1834). The earlier play dramatizes the story of Hero and Leander, as a love-tragedy full of poetic expression and with an insight into character motivation that predated the psychological dramas of Ibsen. The work again is formed on classic models, but in this instance his feeling is so distinctly modern that it does not find adequate expression in Grillparzer's carefully measured verse. The subject has never been more happily treated than in some passages, which, however, are marked rather by lyrical than dramatic qualities. The poetic influence of <a href="

Later life and final masterpieces

In 1836, Grillparzer paid a visit to Paris and London, in 1843 to Athens and Constantinople. Then came the Revolution which struck off the intellectual fetters under which Grillparzer and his contemporaries had groaned in Austria, but the liberation came too late for him. Honors were heaped upon him; he was made a member of the Academy of Sciences; Heinrich Laube, as director of the Burgtheater, reinstated his plays into the repertory; in 1861, he was elected to

the Austrian Herrenhaus; his eightieth birthday was a national festival, and when he died in Vienna, on the January 21, 1872, the mourning of the Austrian people was universal. With the exception of a beautiful fragment, *Esther* (1861), Grillparzer published no more dramatic poetry after the fiasco of *Weh dem, der lügt*, but at his death three completed tragedies were found among his papers. Of these, *The Jewess of Toledo* (*Die Jüdin von Toledo*, written in 1851), an admirable adaptation from the Spanish, has won a permanent place in the German classical repertory; *Ein Bruderzwist in Habsburg* is a powerful historical tragedy and *Libussa* is perhaps the most mature, as it is certainly the deepest, of all Grillparzer's dramas; the latter two plays prove how much was lost by the poet's divorce from the theatre.

Assessment

Although Grillparzer was essentially a dramatist, his lyric poetry is in the intensity of its personal note hardly inferior to Lenau's; and the bitterness of his later years found vent in biting and stinging epigrams that spared few of his greater contemporaries. As a prose writer, he has left one powerful short story, *Der arme Spielmann* (1848), and a volume of critical studies on the Spanish drama, which shows how completely he had succeeded in identifying himself with the Spanish point of view. Grillparzer's brooding, unbalanced temperament, his lack of will-power, his pessimistic renunciation and the bitterness which his self-imposed martyrdom produced in him, made him peculiarly adapted to express the mood of Austria in the epoch of intellectual thralldom that lay between the Napoleonic Wars and the Revolution of 1848; his poetry reflects exactly the spirit of his people under the Metternich regime, and there is a deep truth behind the description of *Der Traum, ein Leben* as the Austrian Faust. His fame was in accordance with the general tenor of his life; even in Austria a true understanding for his genius was late in coming, and not until the centenary of 1891 did the German-speaking world realize that it possessed in him a dramatic poet of the first rank; in other words, that Grillparzer was no mere Epigone of the classic period, but a poet who, by a rare assimilation of the strength of the Greeks, the imaginative depth of German classicism and the delicacy and grace of the Spaniards, had opened up new paths for the higher dramatic poetry of Europe.

Cultural references

He is honored in Austria with a pastry, the Grillparzertorte. Outside of Austria, the modern reader is perhaps most familiar with Grillparzer via disparaging references to him in the popular John Irving novel *The World According to Garp*. The book also features a story within a story entitled *The Pension Grillparzer*.

Erklärung

Fragt ihr mich, was das Schöne sei?
Seht zu, ob ich ´s verfehle;
Ein Gleichnis beut die Liebe mir:
Es geht vom Körper aus, gleich ihr,
und endigt in der Seele.

Franz Grillparzer

In Der Fremde

Schon bin ich müd zu reisen,
Wär's doch damit am Rand,
Vor Hören und vor Sehen
Vergeht mir der Verstand.
So willst Du denn nach Hause?
O nein! Nur nicht nach Haus!
Dort stirbt des Lebens Leben
Im Einerlei mir aus.
Wo also willst Du weilen?
Wo findest Du die Statt?
O Mensch, der nur zwei Fremden
Und keine Heimat hat.

Franz Grillparzer

Kuß

Auf die Hände küßt die Achtung,
Freundschaft auf die offne Stirn,
Auf die Wange Wohlgefallen,
Sel'ge Liebe auf den Mund;
Aufs geschloßne Aug' die Sehnsucht,
In die hohle Hand Verlangen,
Arm und Nacken die Begierde,
Übrall sonst die Raserei.

Franz Grillparzer

Wenn Der Vogel Singen Will

Wenn der Vogel singen will,
Sucht er einen Ast,
Nur die Lerche trägt beim Sang
Eigne, leichte Last.
Doch der Fink, die Nachtigall,
Selbst der muntre Spatz
Wählen, eh' die Kehle tönt,
Für den Fuß den Platz.
Gebt mir, wo ich stehen soll,
Weist mir das Gebiet,
Und ich will euch wohl erfreun
Noch mit manchem Lied.
Denn in Deutschland weht der Sturm -
Sturm, man weiß, ist Wind - ,
Wähnen, wenn der Ast sie schnellt,
Daß sie flügge sind.
Und hier Landes dunkelt's tief,
Nacht wie Pech und Harz,
In den Zweigen nächst dem Stamm
Nisten Dohlen schwarz.
Kauz und Eule dämisch dumm
Schaun zum Astloch raus,
Nur der Starmatz schwatzt vom Platz,
Kanzelt für das Haus.
Tiefer unten aber steigt's
Auf vom Boden dumpf,
Und die Frösche quaken laut
Aus verjährtem Sumpf.
Und so schweb ich ew'gen Flugs
zwischen Erd' und Luft,
Und kein Platz dem müden Fuß,
Als dereinst die Gruft.

Franz Grillparzer