

GRILLPARZER'S "SAPPHO."

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE PLAY, WITH NOTES ON THE TEXT.

BY

EDITH A. PITBLADO

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I. LIFE OF GRILLPARZER

Franz Grillparzer was born in Vienna, on January 15, 1791. The beautiful Austrian capital, with its precious tradition of legend, of music and song, impressed him with its spirit. He loved his home passionately; the Austrian people were his people, and he knew them intimately. He remained Viennese to the end of his days, and a few months before his death he said: "Ich bin kein Deutscher, sondern ein Österreicher, ja ein Nordösterreicher, und vor allem ein Wiener."

Grillparzer's parents, like those of Goethe, were widely dissimilar in character. His father was an advocat, a stern, reserved figure, very earnest, but with little practical sense. He paid almost no attention to the education of his four children, although he encouraged them to read the ghost stories and horror tales of which he was morbidly fond. From him Franz inherited his serious and upright nature and his critical faculty of mind.

The poet's mother was a member of the noted Sonnleithner family. Her father's home was a rendez-vous for all the musicians of Vienna, and Haydn and Mozart were honored guests there. In such a household it was not to be wondered at, that all the children should develop a passionate love of music.

Grillparzer received from his mother this musical talent, and artistic temperament. He was given piano lessons but was never satisfied with his own interpretations. He felt restrained by rules, and longed for free artistic expression.

Unfortunately for her children, Marianne Grillparzer transmitted to them the darker side of her character also -- a brooding melancholy which in her own case ended tragically in suicide. Franz alone of the four brothers struggled successfully against this common morbid tendency. The others all went down before it. Karl became a soldier, and later received a position in the customs. For some reason, he accused himself of murder, and it was only with great difficulty that he was rescued by Franz from the consequences of his act. He remained dependent on his brother for the rest of his life. Kamillo held a subordinate clerk's position in the government, but was never successful. Adolf committed suicide in 1817, at the age of seventeen.

During Grillparzer's early youth the family lived in a large house in the old part of Vienna. The father took little interest in social life, and preferred to live in retirement. The poet spent his childhood in this gloomy old house with huge dark rooms which his lively imagination peopled with all manner of ghosts, goblins, and robbers.

The elder Grillparzer was opposed to public schools, and the boys were put under a private tutor, from whom they learned practically nothing. As their father paid no attention to them, they grew up under very lax discipline, a state of affairs which continued until it was time for Franz to take the examination for the Gymnasium. Then there was a rude awakening, and an immediate change. Another tutor was engaged, and by dint

of much serious application, Franz was admitted, in 1801, to the St. Anna Gymnasium in Vienna.

Here he remained for three years, but was a most unsatisfactory student. He had no interest whatever in his studies, and spent the greater part of his time reading history, especially the lives of the saints, in whose sufferings and martyrdom he took a deep, and somewhat morbid interest.

In 1804 Grillparzer left the Gymnasium and entered upon a course in literature and philosophy at the University of Vienna. He was no better in his studies than before and the chief importance of this part of his life lies in the friendships which he made. He and two other young students, Ignas Joseph Mailler and Georg Altmutter, formed a 'Society for Mutual Culture' which met once a week. Political and religious topics were banned, but they discussed art and literature with great warmth and enthusiasm. Grillparzer had already formulated plans for his first play, "Blanka von Kastilien." He now completed the tragedy and attempted to get it published, but it was refused.

At the wish of his father the young poet now began the study of law. Here again he had no interest in his course, but forced himself to concentrate upon it, in accordance with the desire of his father, who, at this time, was very ill.

The condition of the elder Grillparzer soon became very serious. He was deeply moved by the chaotic war period of 1809. The entrance of the French into Vienna, and the Peace of Pressburg were the events which hastened his death. He died

on November 10, 1809, leaving his widow and four children almost penniless. On Franz fell the burden of providing for the family. He managed by tutoring to earn enough to keep them, and also to scrape together the necessary money to finish his law course.

In 1813 he entered the household of the Count von Seillern as private tutor to the count's nephew. The old nobleman was coarse and unintellectual, and Grillparzer found his work very uncongenial, but he managed to read a great deal, in secret, from the count's extensive library. It was here that he received his first introduction to English literature.

In the spring of the following year Grillparzer became seriously ill, after a severe cold. The heartless count returned to town, leaving the poor young man on the estate, under the care of the village physician. For some time his life was despaired of, but thanks to his strong constitution, he finally recovered and returned to Vienna.

Soon after this he took an unpaid position in the court library, where he spent his days in devouring the works of the ancient Greek dramatists, and also became interested in Spanish literature. He translated Calderon's "La Vida es Sueño" (Life is a Dream,) and through this made a friendship which was to be of great importance in his life. Hebenstreit, the editor of the "Modezeitung" saw Grillparzer's translation, and thought it so excellent that he published it side by side with a similar translation by the critic and dramaturgist Schreyvogel-- to the obvious detriment of the latter. Schreyvogel, who was acquainted with the Grillparzer family, was at first very angry, thinking

the young poet had purposely tried to embarrass him. Later, when he discovered the truth of the matter, he took a great interest in Grillparzer, and became one of his most intimate friends.

Schreyvogel encouraged Grillparzer in the writing of his first important play "Die Ahnfrau." Grillparzer had told the noted critic of his somewhat vague and fantastic plans for this tragedy. Schreyvogel saw great promise in them, and insisted that Grillparzer write his play immediately. The first version was strongly romantic in style. It is the story of the ruin of a house due to the sin of the ancestress. She is doomed to watch the members of the family perish, one by one, and is powerless to avert their fate. Schreyvogel suggested changes in the play which made it practically a Fate Tragedy (1), although Grillparzer denied even its resemblance to that form of drama. It was largely because of his annoyance at this designation that he decided on the classical story of Sappho for the theme of his next play. He wanted a subject entirely different from that of "Die Ahnfrau."

"Sappho" was first performed April 12, 1818. It created a great sensation, and Grillparzer was offered a position in the government service, on the condition that all his future dramas were to go to the Burg theater.

He had begun to prepare the plot of his "Medea" tragedy, when the suicide of his mother, January 24, 1819, shocked

(1) Fate Tragedy:- a type of play belonging to the Romantic School. A further discussion of this dramatic form will be found in the discussion of the origin of the play "Sappho."

him beyond measure. He was crushed by this tragedy, and decided to make a journey to Italy, in order to recover from the effects of his loss. He applied for a passport, but as this was delayed he started off without it, and through the efforts of a friend he managed to join the suite of the Empress, who was making the same journey. The young man with whom Grillparzer was travelling, became ill in Naples, and the poet remained with him until he recovered, thereby overstaying his leave-of-absence. For this he was severely criticized by other workers in his department.

On his return from Italy Grillparzer published a poem, "Die Ruinen des Campo Vaccino," deploring the fact that the symbols of Christianity were to be seen above the ruins of the ancient Colosseum. This poem was taken as a direct insult to the Church and to the Emperor and a great scandal ensued. These unhappy experiences following so closely upon his bereavement were more than enough to offset any good impressions which the Italian journey might have made on him.

Grillparzer now began work again on "Das goldene Vliess." He planned a trilogy, and had already written the first part, "Der Gastfreund," before he left for Italy. He soon finished the second and third parts, "Die Argonauten," and "Medea." In the tragedy he shows the development of Medea's character. She belongs to the barbaric country of Colchis, and her nature is the exact antithesis of the sunny, cultured world of Greece, to which Jason belongs. Like "Sappho" it is a tragedy of conflicting natures and forces.

Medea, like Phaon and Melitta, is a child of nature. She has been brought up in unrestrained freedom, and chafes against the fetters of civilized Greek society. Jason is intellectually her superior. He is a cultured aristocrat. Their temperaments and their heritages are entirely dissimilar, and it is this difference which motivates the tragedy.

The play was first produced in March, 1821, but it was not a great success at the time, although some later critics consider it his best work.

"König Ottokar's Glück und Ende," a drama based on the fall of the king of Bohemia, and the rise of the Hapsburg dynasty, was completed in 1823, but was not produced until two years later, on account of unfavorable censorship.

The years during which he wrote "König Ottokar" were the happiest of Grillparzer's life. At an evening party, in 1821, he met Katherina Fröhlich, the youngest of four sisters, a strikingly beautiful girl, with whom he fell passionately in love. It is interesting to note that in almost every one of his plays, Grillparzer depicts this sudden initial impulse of affection. This was neither the first nor the only love affair of his life, but it was by far the deepest. They became engaged, but they were too much alike in temperament ever to be happy together. Both were intensely individual, and neither would yield. The engagement was broken off, but their friendship continued throughout their lives. Grillparzer was a welcome guest at the house of the Fröhlich sisters, and spent many hours in their company.

In 1826 Grillparzer visited Germany where he met many of the literary celebrities of the time, including the Romantics Tieck, Fouqué and Chamisso. But his goal was Weimar-- and Goethe. Grillparzer regarded Goethe with something akin to blind hero-worship, and looked forward to his meeting with the great author with awe, and no little trepidation. He was invited to an evening entertainment at Goethe's house, and there he met his idol for the first time. But he was sadly disappointed. Goethe seemed to him stiff and ceremonious. He had an air of cold condescension almost like that of a monarch, and Grillparzer looked in vain for the gifted poet of "Iphigenie" and "Tasso."

Their next meetings were no more propitious, although Grillparzer found Goethe warm-hearted and friendly. They discussed "Sappho" and Goethe praised it highly, and encouraged Grillparzer in his writing. But the younger poet was not at his ease. He was overawed, and felt that his own works were unimportant beside those of Goethe, while the latter did not understand the sensitiveness and timidity of Grillparzer's nature. Thus the visit to Weimar, which, like the Italian journey, might have meant so much in Grillparzer's life, proved unfruitful, although his regard for Goethe was in no way diminished.

After his return to Vienna Grillparzer continued to produce plays, but was constantly vexed by the arbitrary censorship of the Metternich regime. Also his own affairs were not progressing favorable. He was moved from one minor position

to another without the slightest regard for his wishes, and his life was embittered by criticism and persecution.

For his next play Grillparzer selected a subject more likely to meet with the approval of the censor. "Ein treuer Diener seines Herrn" was written for the occasion of the coronation of the Queen of Hungary. It was performed on February 28, 1828, and was enthusiastically received.

In "Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen" (1831) Grillparzer again turned to classical antiquity for his theme. He used the old legend of Hero and Leander, with which he had been familiar for many years. This drama is perhaps the most beautiful love-tragedy in German, and has been compared to "Romeo and Juliet" in English literature.

In 1834 "Der Traum ein Leben" appeared. The idea of this play probably went back to his early studies of Spanish literature, and it was no doubt suggested by Calderon's "La Vida es Sueno." It was produced with great success, and is still one of his most popular plays.

Grillparzer visited Paris and London in 1836, and made the acquaintance of many of his contemporaries in the literary world. After his return, "Weh dem der lügt," his only comedy, was finished, and produced in 1838. It was a complete failure, and Grillparzer was so hurt by its reception, that, during his lifetime, he allowed no more of his plays to be given to the public. With the exception of the fragment "Esther," his other dramas were not even published until after his death. These plays are: "Libussa," a fantastic and symbolic legendary

play; "Ein Bruderzwist in Hapsburg," a historical drama; and "Die Jüdin von Toledo," a tragedy of illicit love.

In 1832 Grillparzer was made Direktor of Hofkammerarchiv, and he retained this position until he was pensioned in 1856. During this latter part of his life he busied himself with his later dramas and also undertook a journey to Greece, and another visit to Germany.

Now he was hailed by Austria as its foremost poet and dramatist, and showered with honors. In 1849 he was presented with the Order of Leopold by Francis Joseph I, and in 1861 he was appointed member of the council of the Empire. But he could never forgive the slights and insults which he had received earlier in life. As he grew older the melancholy tendency became stronger and at last he refused to go out in society. In 1849 he moved into the house of the Fröhlich sisters, and they cared for him until his death in 1872.

One of the most notable traits of Grillparzer's character, and one which had a deep influence on a great many of his literary works, was his intense patriotism. He was essentially an Austrian and was definitely opposed to any union between his country and Germany. He objected particularly to the Prussian methods of government, and protested against the domineering spirit of that country, but he understood the weaknesses of Austria, and recognized the need for forcefulness and decisive action.

He was almost narrow-minded in his national feeling, and even declined the offer of a German firm to publish his works, although by this means his plays would have been given a much wider circle of readers.

He was politically a conservative, and was strongly opposed to any form of revolution. His reaction to the trying period of 1848 was one of extreme distress, and he went away for a time, to escape from what seemed to him absolute chaos. At this time he wrote his charming short story, "Der arme Spielmann," in which he expresses his love for the Viennese people, and his intimate connection with them.

Grillparzer reinstated Austria in its true place in German literature. Since the time of Walther von der Vogelweide, (1) poetry had been practically dead, and had given place to music, in the lives of the Austrian people. The drama had been flourishing at the Burgtheater, largely because of the excellence of the actors, but none of the plays they produced were by Austrian dramatists. All were 'imported' from Germany and foreign countries. Grillparzer gave them plays written by an Austrian, for the Austrian public, and so great was his genius that his plays have now come to be known and admired, not only by his own people, but by the whole world.

Grillparzer belongs to no distinct school of literature. He is in turn romanticist, classicist, and realist. But in his romanticism he is always a master of form. His romantic dramas are free from that looseness of structure which is a weakness of so many others of that class. In his

(1) Walther von der Vogelweide was the greatest of the early German Minnesingers. He led a roving life, but Austria was his native land. His literary career began about 1190.

historical plays he is often idealistic, but his realism is neither brutal nor stark. It is always veiled in beauty. His classical tragedies are excellent in form, and style, and because of their themes, possess an universal appeal. This latter group of plays is more widely known outside his own country, than are the others, a fact which is due, in part, to the familiar legendary subjects.

II. ORIGIN AND SOURCES OF "SAPPHO"

A. Origin

On July 29, 1817, Grillparzer was walking alone along the bank of the Danube. At the entrance to the Prater, that famous and beautiful park of Vienna, he encountered a friend, Dr. Felix Joel. The two began chatting, and the discussion soon turned to a new opera by the composer Kapellmeister Weigl. Joel asked Grillparzer if he would consent to write the libretto, but the poet answered he had no appropriate subject in mind. His friend at once replied that he had already hit on such a theme -- the legend of the poetess Sappho. "Na--ist das ein Operntext?" he asked triumphantly, but Grillparzer cried in reply, "Eine Tragödie ist's!"

Joel protested; there were too few events, the plot could not be made dramatic enough. But Grillparzer had suddenly seen the possibilities of the subject, and his viewpoint could not be shaken. The two friends soon parted, Joel returning to the city, while Grillparzer strolled farther into the park, alone with his thoughts, his brain filled with this new plan.

Since the appearance of "Die Ahnfrau," Grillparzer had been much annoyed by the criticisms which that play had called forth. It was spoken of as a "Fate Tragedy," and indeed it does possess the essential characteristics of that type of play.

The Fate Tragedy was a literary class very popular among the Romantic dramatists. All plays of this type have similar themes, and in all, the atmosphere, which is one of horror and terror, is built up by means of the same devices. There is usually a storm

cloud hovering over the scene, symbolic of the approaching doom. The night is dark, and the setting of the action is a lonely spot. Owls hoot dismally, and bats flit eerily about. The tragedy is often connected with a definite date or place, or with some material object, such as a dagger or knife. Unnatural love is a common theme, and it often brings about the murder of relatives. The characters seem to feel the overhanging doom, and the element of heredity is often connected with this.

It is easily seen with what apparent justice "Die Ahnfrau" was grouped with these plays. The whole atmosphere of mystery and the supernatural, is similar. A fatal dagger plays an important part in the action. The young lovers are discovered to be brother and sister. The hero kills his own father, without being aware of his identity. The spirit of the ancestress is symbolic of the brooding spirit of fate, overhanging the characters.

Nevertheless Grillparzer strongly objected to this classification, and contended that he had no such idea of 'fate' in mind when he wrote the play. For months he searched for a subject for his next work. He wanted some simple direct theme, which would allow him to exhibit his real poetic genius, and show that he was not dependent on ghosts, robbers, and other sensationalism for the production of a successful play.

At last he had discovered such a theme. The story of Sappho was simple in the extreme, and there would be plenty of opportunity for free imagination.

By the time Grillparzer returned to his home, late that

evening, the play had taken shape in his mind.

The next morning he went to the library and pored over the fragments of Sappho's poetry. One of the two longer odes struck him as being particularly appropriate, and he translated it at once.

On the following day he set to work on the composition of his tragedy, and applied himself so diligently that it was completed in the remarkable short period of three weeks. He later revised it slightly, the most important change being the elaboration of the character Rhamnes, who was called merely "Diener" in the first version.

The first performance was given on April 21, 1818, at the Burgtheater. It was a great success, and the critics were, on the whole, favorable, with one notable exception. Grillparzer had sent the original manuscript to Müller, one of the foremost contemporary critics, who had praised the work, but advised certain changes. These changes Grillparzer refused to make, giving his reason in the matter. Müller was highly incensed at what he considered a gross insult, and, in consequence, when the play was produced, he was scathing in his criticism.

B. Sources

Grillparzer's main source was, of course, the story of the ancient Greek poetess, Sappho, but so little is known of the events of her life, that he was able to let his poetic imagination have full rein.

According to tradition, Sappho was born in Mitylene, on the island of Lesbos. She was the greatest of the ancient poetesses and flourished between 630 and 570 B. C. It is thought that she left Lesbos for Sicily, on account of political turmoil, but she later returned to Mitylene where she became the centre of a female coterie, and founded a school of poetry. She was the author of a large number of poems, but only two complete pieces, "To Aphrodite," and "To a Maiden," together with some fragments, have come down to us. These display intense feeling, and glowing imagination. The ode "To Aphrodite" was used almost in entirety by Grillparzer in Act I, scene 6, of the play.

The remaining facts of Sappho's life are purely legendary, as is the figure of Phaon, who was known in Greek mythology as a boatman at Mitylene. He is said to have been originally an ugly old man, but having carried Aphrodite across the sea without accepting payment, he received from her the gift of youth and beauty. After this, Sappho fell in love with him and when he slighted her, leaped from the Leucadian rock.

In the later Greek comedies the figure of Sappho was always a ridiculous one. She was represented as an aged spinster who pursued Phaon, a young and handsome youth. He spurned her advances, and in her excess of passion, she leaped from the rock into the sea. The plunge having effectually cooled her ardor, she was picked up by a boat, and conveyed unharmed to the shore.

This story was the kernel of the play, but it was so vague, and above all, so brief, that Grillparzer was able to make use of other materials and motifs which impressed him.

Zacharias Werner's "Wanda" had some influence on him at this time, although its similarity to "Das Goldene Vliess" is more marked.

Another work of more importance in connection with "Sappho," is Mme. de Staël's "Corinne." Grillparzer had been strongly impressed by this novel, and had written his opinion of it in his "Studien zur französischen Literatur." (1816). It is the story of the poetess Corinne's love for an inferior man, Lord Nevil. They meet under much the same circumstances as do Sappho and Phaon. Corinne is riding in triumph to Rome, where she is to be crowned poetess of Italy. Just as Sappho drops her lyre, so she lets fall her wreath, and it is returned to her by the young man, who is awed by her fame and beauty. She is impressed by his appearance, and feels herself attracted to him. Both she and Sappho feel the awakening of love at the moment when they are at the height of their fame.

Still another work had a tremendous influence on Grillparzer, and its effect is seen not only in this play, but, in a great many of his other writings. This was a French work—"Télémaque" by Fénelon. While still a boy, Grillparzer had become acquainted with this poem through his tutor, Gartner, and later it became one of his favorite works. The points of similarity between it and Sappho are very marked, even the scenery and the names of characters showing Fenelon's influence. A brief sketch of the plot will serve to illustrate its resemblance to Grillparzer's tragedy.

The goddess Kalypso has been deserted by Odysseus, and lives on a beautiful island, surrounded by her maidens. Telemachus, Odysseus' son, comes in search of his father. He has been through many dangers and tribulations, and is grateful to have reached, at last, a peaceful spot. Kalypso persuades him to stay, and takes him to her grotto in the hillside, where a feast is prepared in his honor. Telemachus does not feel happy. He is discontented, and longs for his father. His mood at this time recalls Phaon's melancholy yearning for his home.

Kalypso falls in love with the young man; but he looks upon her with honor and respect, as a divine being. In one of her maidens, Eucharis by name, he finds a sympathetic companion. Eucharis is the counterpart of Melitta, a young and innocent maiden in contrast to the more mature figure of the heroine.

Kalypso becomes enraged, just as Sappho does, but like Sappho, she later becomes aware of her own folly. Telemachus escapes from the island on a ship, while Kalypso sadly returns alone to her grotto.

Grillparzer was not the first dramatist to use the story of Sappho for the plot of a tragedy. Franz von Kleist's "Sappho" appeared about the time of Grillparzer's birth, and exhibits quite a number of the same elements as the greater work of Grillparzer. It has been suggested (1) that Grillparzer was familiar with this earlier drama. A. Sauer (2), however, denies the fact that Kleist's play was one of Grillparzer's sources. At any rate, the play of our poet is, in every way, superior to the earlier work, and shows a much deeper artistic sense, as well as finer form and characterization.

(1) J. Schwering, "Franz Grillparzer's hellenische Trauerspiele," Paderborn, 1891, P. 14.

(2) Review of Schwering's book in "Anzeiger für deutsches Altertum" 19, 308-338.

III. Critical Analysis of "Sappho."

(a) Theme and Characters.

In "Die Ahnfrau," there is little or no character development. The play is of the romantic type, and the external action is important. In "Sappho," Grillparzer turned to an entirely new field, that of the psychological drama. A study of this play becomes a study of the psychological development of the three principal characters. In the main, the action is internal, and what little external action there is, takes place as a direct result of the mental changes undergone by the characters.

The main theme of the play is the conflict between art and life. The true artist can never live a normal, social life. He must always stand aloof, and, as it were, watch life from a distance. It is when he tries to draw near, and share in the joys and sorrows of this life that catastrophe inevitably overtakes him.

Grillparzer was by no means the only poet to recognize this fact. This same theme in literature can be traced from Goethe, through Grillparzer, up to the present, where we find it expressed particularly strongly in the works of Thomas Mann. (1).

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- (1) Thomas Mann is one of the foremost contemporary novelists of Germany. In all his works, the important problem is the continuous conflict of the soul torn between the contemplative world, and the world of actuality. His short story "Tonio Kröger" expresses this conflict perhaps the best of all his works.

This doctrine of artistic conflict is the subject of Goethe's play, "Torquato Tasso," with which Grillparzer was familiar. Here, too, we see the same conflict, between the two views of life, the two natures, so diametrically opposed. On the one hand we have Tasso, the great Italian poet, a man above the world, lost in his own creations. On the other hand is Antonio, the strong, vigorous, efficient man of the world. Tasso feels that he has lost touch with life, and seeks to establish contact with it, through love. But he succumbs in this encounter with real life, and returns, chastened by the experience, to his poetry.

There is no tragic catastrophe in this play, as there is in "Sappho," and it is possible that this is at least one reason for the storm of criticism aroused by Sappho's suicide. But the development of the problem is entirely different in the two plays. Sappho is overwhelmed almost immediately, while Tasso discovers his folly only after a long series of minor clashes with life. Also there is a difference in the natures of the chief characters. Sappho is a woman, highly strung, and extremely sensitive. She feels keenly the slight put upon her, and at the same time she is under a strong emotional strain. The events of this one day are too much for her. Her deeply sensitive, and passionately emotional nature is shaken by this blow. For her there is no retreat; she finds peace only in death.

Tasso is also a sensitive nature, but he is a man; therein lies the great difference between the two characters. He is not so emotionally tense as Sappho, and his catastrophe therefore, is not so devastating. He can return to his poetic world, broadened by life's experience.