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# Grillparzer's Erny and Lessing's Emilia

Cowen: Grillparzer's Erny and Lessing's Emilia

by Roy C. Cowen

Similarities between Grillparzer's Erny in *Ein treuer Diener seines Herrn* and Lessing's Emilia Galotti have already been suggested, albeit somewhat incidentally. In his edition of Grillparzer's works, Rudolf Franz comments on Erny's exclamation in Act II when she discovers Otto waiting for her:

Der Ausruf: *er selbst!* erinnert an Lessings "Emilia Galotti", Aufz. 2 Auftr. 6, wo Emilia ihrer Mutter von dem Erlebnis in der Kirche erzählt. ...Daß auch sonst Ernys Stellung zu Otto und ihr Schicksal (der als letzter Ausweg gewählte Tod) mit Lessings Heldin nahe verwandt sind, liegt auf der Hand.<sup>1</sup>

And when Erny stabs herself at the end of Act III, Franz remarks: "Der Ausgang Ernys erinnert an den der Emilia Galotti und an dessen Vorbild, den Tod der Virginia; jedoch ist die Notlage Ernys zwingender als die der Lessingschen Heldin" (IV, 388). But such annotations, while suggestive, hardly exhaust the similarities, nor do they penetrate to the crux of possible problems.

Of course, there are occasional attempts to delve below strictly superficial similarities, but they tend more to emphasize the differences between Emilia and Erny as such than to draw conclusions from the degree of resemblance and the points of divergence. For example, Adolf D. Klarmann, although calling attention to a basic similarity, stresses the differing roles they have in the lives of the men endangering their virtue:

Hier liegt ein wesentlicher Unterschied zwischen dem Emilia — und dem Ernyschicksal. Der Prinz stellt Emilia nach und hat es darauf abgesehen, sie für sich als Geliebte zu gewinnen, koste es auch das Leben des ihr anverlobten Grafen. Nicht so Otto; wie wir am Anfang unserer Betrachtung festgestellt hatten, liegt ihm weniger an Erny als an der Sucht, die "bornierte" Ruhe des alten Bancbanus zu stören.<sup>2</sup>

Klarmann's further line of thought — Erny's sense of guilt, Bancbanus' inability to cope with it and this old man's relationship to his young wife as a literary topos — necessarily obviates any consideration of the presentation of the two young women. Moreover, it does not take into account Grillparzer's view of Emilia as a dramatic character and of Lessing as a dramatist.

Of all of Grillparzer's characters, Erny offers the most patent possibilities for direct comparison with one of Lessing's. Yet because previous interpretations have, at most, stressed the differences more than the similarities, they have not addressed themselves to the questions: Do we have good reason to assume that Grillparzer was influenced by — or at least thinking of — *Emilia Galotti* when he was re-forming the historical figure of Bancbanus' wife to suit his own purposes? If so, what changes did he make and to what effect? And what does his treatment of the Emilia/Erny-character reveal about his relationship to Lessing, especially as he saw it?<sup>3</sup>

Here is, of course, not the place to attempt a detailed interpretation of *Emilia Galotti*, a play whose intent and even central character have been questioned almost since its first performance without anyone's establishing a definitive answer.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of the present paper and of the overall structural similarity of the two plays, however, let us assume that Lessing's drama is not dominated by Emilia, about whom her creator asks: "Weil das Stück Emilia heißt, ist es darum mein Vorsatz gewesen, Emilien zu dem hervorsteckendsten, oder auch nur zu einem hervorsteckenden Charakter zu machen?"<sup>5</sup> Lessing's answer to this question is negative. Of course, in matters of a possible influence, we are not dealing with the author's or our own interpretation of a work but rather with another author's concept

of it.<sup>6</sup> What especially justifies the present assumption is the fact that Grillparzer himself, as we shall see later, cites yet another statement by Lessing as an indication that Emilia is not the central character.

In turn, we must assume that Grillparzer considered a gray-haired old man to be the main character in *Emilia Galotti*, just as one is in his own *Ein treuer Diener*. Admittedly, the two old men seem to stand in entirely different relationships to the respective young women in their lives. Nonetheless, there are certain suggestive similarities. Emilia is engaged to Count Appiani, who, as many critics have pointed out, represents a virtual carbon-copy of Odoardo. By marrying him, Emilia would, in effect, have been marrying a younger version of her own father. For her part, Erny likewise marries, in an extended sense, a counterpart to her father when, in deference to the latter's dying wish, she marries his best friend Bancbanus. Moreover, Odoardo's thinking, to wit, his inclination to flee from the temptations of court, lies behind the actions of both Appiani and Emilia, whose suicide represents a type of flight. Erny, almost in conscious violation of the natural impulses of her youth, patterns her thinking as well after that of an elderly man, her husband, whom she also calls "Vater."<sup>7</sup> In both plays, therefore, we have innocent young women in the foreground whose values and conduct remain directly attributable to a much older man. And in each case the threat to the young woman, although sexually motivated, is a threat to the values of the old man, to whom the ultimate realization of justice is fittingly left.<sup>8</sup>

One further detail suggests Grillparzer's desire to retain an essential feature of Emilia Galotti's dilemma. It is the fact that he deviates from his sources when he does not allow Erny to be raped.<sup>9</sup> After all, the fate of her historical counterpart would have provided additional motivation for the revolution on the stage just as it had for the real one. But adherence to his sources would have forced Grillparzer to obviate the most crucial and striking similarity to Emilia.

What speaks against seeing too much similarity in details and subtle realignments of characters and events is that many interpretations consider these two plays diametrically opposed in their implied intentions. While both have historical revolutions as their sources, Emilia's fate does not lead to a revolution on the stage.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Odoardo, professing his faith in a "higher justice," even turns himself over to the Prince and thereby seemingly defers to legality, at least for his life on earth. Yet this play has been frequently interpreted, not as a statement of servile acceptance, but rather of defiance and rejection of established authority. We recall, for example, Werther's open copy of *Emilia Galotti*, the arguments of Franz Mehring for a "revolutionary" interpretation of this "bourgeois tragedy"<sup>11</sup> and many other indications that posterity has considered Lessing's work, despite all superficialities of plot and statement, as anything but a praise of servility toward the established order.

Yet servility is the very quality that was for many years attributed to *Ein treuer Diener*. Grillparzer himself felt compelled to write in his *Selbstbiographie*:

Man hat dem Stücke vorgeworfen, daß es eine Apologie der knechtischen Unterwürfigkeit sei; ich hatte dabei den Heroismus der Pflicht-treue im Sinn, der ein Heroismus ist so gut als jeder andere. ...Seine [Bancbanus'] Gesinnungen können übrigens nicht für die des Verfassers gelten, da Bancbanus bei allen seinen Charakter-Vorzügen zugleich als ein ziemlich bornierter alter Mann geschildert ist (IV, 153).

But more recent critics, e.g. Horst Denkler,<sup>12</sup> have also come to recognize that there is no little criticism of the state implied by this play about the virtues of a "bornierter" old man. That the representation of unyielding faith in terrestrial justice and of an almost superhuman constancy

## Cowen: Grillparzer's Erny and Lessing's Emilia

for its own sake is described by his creator as “borniert” — this fact alone should obviate a too literal interpretation of Bancbanus' personal servility as the “message” of *Ein treuer Diener*. While reading the text of his play might deceive us about Grillparzer's intentions — whether conscious or subconscious —, its reception, no less than that of *Emilia Galotti*, leaves great room for a politically critical interpretation. Thus we should not forget that the Austrian Emperor, even though the play had passed the censor, immediately tried to suppress it after its initial performance by buying up all rights for future performances and publication (IV, 153 f.). If we accept political implications in Odoardo's last speech, then we can well interpret the closing speech of Bancbanus, who also places his faith in a “higher authority,” as a “warning” to future rulers. Both plays reveal therefore an, at best, paradoxical stance toward established authority. This similarity, together with the many others, seems to militate against our looking at *Emilia Galotti* as a possible influence on *Ein treuer Diener*.

Among his *Studien zur deutschen Literatur*, we find the following comment by Grillparzer:

Bedeutende Schauspielerinnen... wissen sich in der Rolle der Emilia Galotti nur so zu helfen, daß sie eine verborgene Neigung zu dem Prinzen voraussetzen, besonders um das widerliche: “meine Sinne sind auch Sinne”, und ihren Wunsch zu sterben, zu motivieren. Lessing scheint aber einer solchen Geheimlehre nicht geneigt gewesen zu sein, da er einmal an Nicolai schreibt: “Die Rolle der Emilia erfordert gar keine Kunst. Naiv und natürlich spielen kann ein junges Mädchen ohne alle Anweisung.” Wie aber nun diesen Widerspruch erklären? damit, daß Lessing erwiesenermaßen mit dem Schluß nur spät, und da mit einer Art Übereilung zu Stande kam. Er hatte sich das ganze Stück deutlich gemacht, nur den Schluß nicht, und da merkte er vielleicht, daß er ein vortreffliches Schauspiel, aber ein schlechtes Trauerspiel geschrieben hatte (III, 758 = Tagebuch 4255).

We may infer that Grillparzer, the creator of some of the psychologically most complex characters in German drama, could scarcely accept the centrality to a “vortreffliches Schauspiel” of Emilia, whose role is merely “naiv und natürlich.” Specifically, Grillparzer questions the discrepancy between the character that Emilia shows in the first acts and that which she suddenly reveals in the last one. He feels that the reason she gives — “meine Sinne sind auch Sinne” — seems “tacked on.” Yet *Emilia Galotti* remains “ein vortreffliches Schauspiel” because not Emilia as a character but rather her fate is the focal point.

We can draw but one conclusion from Grillparzer's critique of *Emilia Galotti*: If he was indeed thinking about Lessing's drama while writing *Ein treuer Diener*, then he can only have done so in the sense of correcting or improving on its faults, not of imitating it. It therefore stands to reason that Grillparzer might well have wanted to retain the total effect of Emilia's fate but improve on those details that disturbed him. Among Grillparzer's notes we find the following description of Erny's situation:

Es ist vor allem nötig, ihren Charakter, das Besondere ihrer Lage und Gemütsverfassung festzusetzen. Liebt sie den Prinzen? — Nein. Hat sie ihn nie geliebt? — Nein. War er ihr immer ganz gleichgültig? — Hier muß ebenfalls wieder mit nein geantwortet werden (I, 1319).

How easily this description could be applied to Emilia's dilemma is obvious.

Like Lessing, Grillparzer concedes the necessity of showing a transformation in the Erny-Emilia character, if the audience is to accept her fate. But rather than create this change in terms

of appearances, i.e., through the revelation of a previously unsuspected, hidden sensuality, Grillparzer reverses and internalizes this change. Lessing begins with Emilia's abhorrence of Hettori and lets it be revealed suddenly as a conscious or unconscious suppression of her physical attraction to him. Grillparzer, on the other hand, begins with Erny's attraction for Otto and lets her mature into a character that not only embodies the same quality that distinguishes her husband but also coincides with the overriding theme of the play: *Treue*.<sup>13</sup>

We probably do not share Grillparzer's somewhat harsh objections to Emilia's revelation, and we could, as many critics have in fact done, argue that Emilia also undergoes a degree of maturation. We could, therefore, find a consistency in her characterization that Grillparzer missed. Nonetheless, we would certainly have to concede that an entirely different dramatic effect is involved when Grillparzer eschews a revelation of weakness in favor of an affirmation of new-found strength. In other words, Emilia recognizes a hitherto suppressed weakness, but Erny suppresses an already recognized and troubling weakness. In turn, while Emilia overcomes her weakness by eliminating any possibility of her succumbing to it, Erny puts the final stamp on her new-found strength.<sup>14</sup> It does not even seem far-fetched to consider Erny's expression of *Treue* as an admirable contrast to the fanatical loyalty incorporated by her husband.

For Grillparzer, Emilia's action represents the violent *Verlegenheitsgriff* of an author unable to extricate himself from the intricacies of his work, more particularly from the character he painstakingly developed in the preceding acts as one prepared to accept force as the only way to make her succumb. We may infer that Grillparzer wants Erny's action to appear forced upon her by external circumstances. This action must at the same time appear as a triumph over her own character, which has produced these circumstances. Regardless of what Emilia may have felt in the church, she did not patently encourage Hettori.<sup>15</sup> The character she shows in her account of the episode does not give us sufficient reason to anticipate her later dilemma as one motivated by her own character. Erny, however, has already done enough to encourage Otto von Meran. This is substantiated by Grillparzer's note:

Wenn nicht aus dem Betragen Erny's hervor geht, daß sie früher doch einiges, wengleich unschuldiges, Wohlgefallen an dem Prinzen gebhabt, so handeln die ganzen 3 ersten Aufzüge de lana caprina (IV, 434 = Tagebuch 1619).

Consequently, while Emilia's part in motivating her potential seducer and her own dilemma remains almost passive and unperceived by the audience, Erny herself bears patent responsibility for Otto's impulsive and violent action yet retains her inherent innocence.

Presented in this manner, Grillparzer's play appears to indulge in the same excess of "logische Schärfe" that its author half-critically ascribes to Lessing.<sup>16</sup> Yet he does so in the sense of homage. For, as far as Lessing's role in the development of German literature is concerned, Grillparzer sees him as an important predecessor of Goethe and Schiller, for whom he expresses his admiration, for example:

Klopstock hat den Anstoß gegeben, Lessing den Weg gezeigt, Goethe ist ihn gegangen. Vielleicht ist Schiller ein größeres Besitztum der deutschen Nation, denn ein Volk braucht starke, fortreibende Ein-drücke, aber Goethe scheint der größere Dichter zu sein (IV, 132).

In *Ein treuer Diener*, of course, Grillparzer appears to be turning back the clock to Lessing. For we might be tempted to find Lessing's treatment of Emilia's revelation more in keeping with Grillparzer's own dramaturgical views, views that can be inferred from his criticism of Goethe, whose talent he calls more epic than dramatic:

Das Drama überhaupt soll ein Spiegel sein, in dem sich die lebendige Handlung malt, sein Drama ist ein Gemälde. ...Die äußere Form des Dramas erstlich besteht im Dialog; zum dramatischen Dialog ist aber nicht genug, daß verschiedene Personen abwechselnd sprechen, sondern das, was sie sagen muß unmittelbar aus ihrer gegenwärtigen Lage, aus ihrer gegenwärtigen Leidenschaft hervorgehn, jedes Wort muß überdies eine unverkennbare Richtung nach dem Zwecke des Stückes oder der Szene haben und dieses letztere ist bei Goethen größtenteils nicht der Fall. Seine Personen sagen gewöhnlich alles was sich über einen Gegenstand Großes und Schönes sagen läßt, das ist recht schön, und ich möchte um alles in der Welt keine der schönen Reden in Tasso und Iphigenia vermissen, aber dramatisch ist es nicht. Daher kommt es, daß Goethes Stücke sich so schön lesen und so schlecht darstellen (III, 765).

A like attitude can be recognized in Grillparzer's statement on Schiller's dramatic technique:

Wenn man die beiden Monologe der Elisabeth und des Lester wegstreichen könnte in der Maria Stuart! Schillers größter Fehler ist gewiß der, daß er zu oft selbst statt seiner Personen spricht. Auch Wallensteins Monologe verderben viel, was vorher gut gemacht war (III, 762 f.).

From these critical comments on his predecessors we can conclude that Lessing does come closer to Grillparzer's ideal than Goethe and Schiller. For Lessing obviously avoids letting his "naive girl" Emilia say "alles was sich über einen Gegenstand Großes und Schönes sagen läßt."

Yet even Lessing, on occasion, falls victim to their basic failing. Admittedly, we hear only Emilia speaking. What she says — in contrast to the words of Iphigenia and Maria Stuart — stems from her "momentary emotion." But Lessing has, in Grillparzer's opinion, allowed himself an undesirable degree of subjectivity by allowing Emilia's revelation to seem "tacked on" in deference to the author's needs rather than anticipating it as part of "eine unverkennbare Richtung nach dem Zwecke des Stückes." In other words, Grillparzer sensed the presence of the author Lessing in *Emilia Galotti* just as he had that of Goethe and Schiller in their plays — even though Lessing avoids monologues comparable to those of Iphigenia and Maria Stuart.

For Grillparzer the play remains autonomous, and consequently the logic of the work itself is not necessarily the logic of its author. In fact, the inner logic of Grillparzer's dramas lies in showing the illogical manner in which man's life can evolve. In speaking of his idol, Lope de Vega, he says: "Lopes Verdienst liegt nicht im Herbeiführen der Situationen und Ereignisse, sondern in der naturwahren und poetischen Behandlung der unberechtigt und ungerechtfertigt herbeigeführten" (III, 572).<sup>17</sup> Lessing seemed to be acting capriciously by tacking on a resolution. In Grillparzer's opinion, the playwright can, by adhering to the "unverkennbare Richtung nach dem Zwecke des Stückes," show life as capricious but never appear so himself.

In conclusion: it could well be claimed that Grillparzer had Lessing's Emilia in mind when he shaped Erny. But regardless of the degree of actual influence, the main differences between the two characters correspond to the criticism Grillparzer expressed on *Emilia Galotti* and to the changes he would probably have made, changes that reveal the relationship he saw between himself and Lessing.<sup>18</sup>

University of Michigan

- 1 *Grillparzers Werke*. Herausgegeben von Rudolf Franz. Leipzig/Wien: Bibliographisches Institut, [no date]. IV, 383.
- 2 Adolf D. Klarmann, "Bancban und die Hirtenflöte." *Austriaca. Beiträge zur österreichischen Literatur. Festschrift für Heinz Politzer zum 65. Geburtstag*. In Zusammenarbeit mit Richard Brinkmann herausgegeben von Winfried Kudzus und Hinrich Seeba. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1975, p. 194.
- 3 Grillparzer's remarks on Lessing have been published in Edward Dvoretzsky, *Lessing. Dokumente zur Wirkungsgeschichte 1755-1968*. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, Nr. 38. Göppingen: Alfred Kümmerle, 1971. Artistically, Grillparzer uses Lessing in his *Friedrich der Große und Lessing*. But Grillparzer's attitude, both in his direct comments on, and in his representation of, Lessing is, at best, ambivalent. See, for example, Karl S. Guthke, "Lessing in der Unterwelt. Grillparzers Totengespräch und seine Vorgeschichte," which also appears in *Austriaca* (vid. footnote 2), pp. 169-187. In the more recent secondary literature, occasional note is also made of further parallels between the two dramatists. Gerhard Baumann, *Franz Grillparzer. Dichtung und österreichische Geistesverfassung*. Frankfurt/M.: Athenäum, 1966, p. 255, writes about *Der Traum ein Leben*: "Die Anlage erinnert verblüffend an den 'Faust' — Plan von Lessing." The fact that Lessing's interests were not always remote from those that Grillparzer would develop is made clear enough, for example, by Hans Mayer, *Von Lessing bis Thomas Mann*. Pfullingen: Neske, 1959, p. 102. He points out that Lessing wanted to translate Calderón's *La vida es sueño*, i.e., one of Grillparzer's inspirations for *Der Traum ein Leben* and a play that the Austrian had already translated before the appearance of *Die Ahnfrau*.
- 4 One of the more unusual hypotheses is that of Frank Ryder, "Emilia Galotti and the Algebra of Ambivalence." *Husbanding the Golden Grain. Studies in Honor of Henry W. Nordmeyer*. Ed. by Luanne T. Frank and Emery E. George. Ann Arbor: Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, 1973, pp. 279-294. Ryder maintains that Lessing, unable to criticize the state openly, intentionally introduces discrepancies, leaves out essential or expected information and otherwise obviates any one interpretation.
- 5 *G. E. Lessings sämtliche Schriften*. Ed. by Karl Lachmann, 3rd ed. revised by Franz Muncker. Stuttgart, Berlin, Leipzig, 1886-1924, XVIII, 18.
- 6 Nonetheless, many of the following points are treated in greater detail in Roy C. Cowen, "On the Dictates of Logic in Lessing's *Emilia Galotti*," *German Quarterly* 42 (1969), 11-20.
- 7 Grillparzer himself comments in a diary entry from 1821: "Die hübsche E + + , ohne überflüssigen Geist, aber jung und blühend, an einen bejahrten, fast widerlichen Mann verheiratet, der ihr aber an Bildung überlegen ist, und sie durch Gefälligkeiten und Aufmerksamkeiten aller Arten an sich zu fesseln oder vielmehr zu gewöhnen weiß... [sic] sieht ihren Mann als den Schöpfer dieses behaglichen Daseins an und ist ihm darum recht aufrichtig gut." *Franz Grillparzer: Ausgewählte Briefe, Gespräche, Berichte. Sämtliche Werke*. Herausgegeben von Peter Frank und Karl Pörnbacher. München: Hanser, 1960-1965, I, 1319. (All Quotations are from this edition.) While the editorial note, in which the entire entry is cited, suggests that such is also the motivation for Erny's faithfulness to Bancbanus, no specific statement is made by her in the text that she is motivated by comfort. At a crucial moment, she addresses Bancbanus as "Mann! Gatte! Vater!" (I, 1118), and each of these designations describes her relationship to her elderly husband as a different one. Taken together, however, they illustrate the complexity of her feelings toward him.
- 8 The similarity of their situation is further emphasized by the fact that both women look to the older men to save them. Grillparzer writes: "Bancbanus war der Freund ihres Vaters. Als sie ihn als verlassene Waise heiratete, fühlte sie die innigste Achtung für ihn, die Verehrung eines Kindes, sie liebt ihn aber auch. Otto bringt zwar Gefühl und Sinne in Aufregung, aber es braucht nur jenes Zuges von Vertrauen von Seite ihres Manns (wo er ihr den verlorenen Zettel zurückgibt), um alle Eindrücke aus ihrer Seele wegzuwischen" (I, 1320).

9 See, for example, Rudow: Grillparzer's Erny and Lessing's Emilia

- 10 Lessing reveals his intentions in his letter of 1758 to Nicolai, when he states: "daß das Schicksal einer Tochter, die von ihrem Vater umgebracht wird, dem ihre Tugend werter ist, als ihr Leben, für sich schon tragisch genug, und fähig genug sei, die ganze Seele zu erschüttern, wenn auch gleich kein Umsturz der ganzen Staatsverfassung darauf folgte" (Lachmann-Muncker, XVII, 133).
- 11 See Franz Mehring, *Die Lessing-Legende. Eine Rettung*. Stuttgart, 1893, an excerpt of which is reprinted in *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Emilia Galotti. Erläuterungen und Dokumente*. Herausgegeben von Jan-Dirk Müller. Reclam, Nr. 8111/11a. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1971, pp. 82-84.
- 12 Horst Denkler, *Restauration und Revolution. Politische Tendenzen im deutschen Drama zwischen Wiener Kongress und Märzrevolution*. München: Fink, 1973. p. 96.
- 13 Grillparzer writes about the characterization of Erny: "Es ist hier zweierlei zu berücksichtigen. Sie sich selbst treu bleiben zu lassen und das Interesse des Stückes zu bewahren" (I, 1319).
- 14 We see that Klarmann's argument about Otto's real intentions, i.e., more to hurt Bancbanus than to possess Erny, has little relevance here, for she obviously believes that Otto is motivated by lust.
- 15 Ryder's observations on how Lessing neglected to include motivation — as opposed, we add, to Grillparzer — seem especially appropriate in this context (*vid.* note 4).
- 16 IV, 75. See also Grillparzer's diary entry 4030: "Was den Wert Lessings ausmacht ist die Vereinigung des Kunstsinns mit der Logik. Es ist zwar weder der Kunstsinn so rein, noch die Logik immer so echt; aber in dieser Vereinigung sind sie vielleicht noch nie dagewesen; ja gewöhnlich schließen sie sich sogar aus" (III, 755).
- 17 Note Grillparzer's comment at the conclusion of his discussion of Lope's *El villano en su rincón*: "Ich wollte Lessing hätte Calderon und Lope de Vega gekannt, er hätte vielleicht gefunden, daß ein Mittelweg zwischen beiden dem deutschen Geiste näher stehe als der gar zu riesenhafte Shakespeare" (III, 522). *Cf.* however Mayer's assertion (note 3 above) that Lessing did know Lope.
- 18 The preceding is a somewhat revised version of a paper presented at the Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, 22-24 April 1982.



