

# Kotzebue and Popular Romanticism: Triumph and Repudiation

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In the literary world, the commencement of the Romantic era is usually identified with the 1798 publication of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. In the theatrical world an unstructured predecessor, here termed "popular romanticism," emerged slightly earlier, its birth attended by enormous immediate obscurity. Its consideration is of interest in view of what Europe and America thereafter became, both socially and theatrically, and what to a discernible degree we remain.

Unsupported by any manifesto or philosophy such as Wordsworth supplied in his famous "Preface,"<sup>1</sup> popular romanticism may be defined as an emotionally-centered basis of perception and decision-making, one in which feelings were the final arbiter of judgment. In the burgeoning acceptance of this daring new attitude, attentive observers could hardly have failed to sense the ending of an old era and the beginning of a new. Its precipitating event, re-enacted in the capital cities of the West, was both literally and figuratively dramatic. It was also stunningly sudden, an almost instantaneous popular international endorsement of a drastic shift away from the ordered world of the Age of Reason into the turbulent world of popular romanticism.

As an institution, the theatre which launched this phenomenon was a stage designed to appeal to the taste of the day, a stage filled with tireless Georgian morality, steeped in the belief that it was only necessary to bring the erring to an understanding of the error for redemption to follow. This belief, therefore, led to the diligent, scrupulous moral preachments of the time, in which unfailingly noble sentiment ever hoped to work its wonder and restore the lost. At the same time, the most upright of the *dramatis personae* had to guard themselves against any unwary slippage into unreflecting moments, the philosophical banana peel of the eighteenth century which might bring a sudden skid into the ditch of the unredeemed. "I love you," quoth one hero of the day, "but though you protest you love me, I fear it is only pity." "Nay," his adored one replies, "I love you, but you are moved by duty."<sup>2</sup>

Ablaze with passion, this couple is nonetheless following the only course possible to eighteenth century propriety, a tirelessly virtuous, instructive fastidiousness. Nothing but the most scrupulously irreproachable proposal—of whatever kind—must be offered or accepted. This characteristic is often exaggerated in the genre, sometimes to a point approaching unconscious humor, as in Mrs. Francis Sheridan's *Discovery* of 1763. Much of the play's tension, effectiveness and popularity derived from the son's determined willingness to give up the woman he truly loves in order to save his father. The latter, however, protests, "I deserve the ruin I have brought upon myself, and am content to sink under it." Father: "I cannot ask it, my son." Son: "I'll give up all, even my love, to save you!" The engaged girl would herself abet the sacrifice, but a stunning *deus ex machina* puts matters right. Though not necessarily so overblown, it is the kind of perennially high-minded self-sacrifice which characterizes much of eighteenth century drama.

Through this rigorous middle-class rectitude, all things are possible: long-lost sons or long-gone fathers are reunited with families, innocence betrayed is rescued, duels offered are prevented, fortunes are transferred to legitimate claimants, husbands restored, wives reconciled, gamblers chastened, roisterers sobered, rakes reformed. But always and always, the emotional agonies undergone by the characters relent only when acted upon according to the most careful scrutiny, applying only the most fastidiously elevated standards, the most highly refined sense of duty. Hence the inexhaustible admonitions of the time were functional; they brought the light of reason to conduct, and so reformed it.

Onto such a stage burst Augustus Ferdinand Friederich von Kotzebue III, a playwright who soon came to be called "the German Shakespeare." His plays were produced more often in Germany than those of Goethe, Schiller and Lessing combined. Translated into a dozen languages, his work was wildly applauded, according to one authority, in "every playhouse in Europe and America." This claim is, if not provable, quite probable.

It is important to notice the international character of the acceptance of Kotzebue. That German drama by a German playwright should be popular in Germany is one thing; that it won immediate and overwhelming success all over Europe, in England and America is something else. The stunning new philosophic viewpoint which Kotzebue offered was everywhere embraced; plainly he had captured the spirit of the time as it is not often caught.

The play which opened the floodgates was *The Stranger*. It swept Europe, and was the first of two Kotzebue plays to open in London in the spring of 1798. Some critics hailed the author as greater than Shakespeare. The *Times*, hushed into awe, affirmed of *The Stranger*, "Its beauties 'are not of an age, but of all times.'"<sup>4</sup>

A few months later the play had crossed the Atlantic and proved equally popular. Brought first to the Park Theatre in New York, the work was praised by critics in unqualified terms, one of them saying, "I believe it may be asserted that this drama is without a parallel." The opening night audience evidently agreed, refusing to leave until the play was announced for performance the following night—unheard of in the repertory system of the day—and they "testified their approbation by huzzas."<sup>5</sup> During the remainder of the 1798-99 season at the Park, *The Stranger* was repeated once in every seven performances; indeed, the theatre's manager, William Dunlap, confessed that it was "the success of this piece alone" which allowed him "to keep open the theatre."<sup>6</sup> The drama was, moreover, phenomenally popular everywhere it played, and it remained a standard repertory item on both sides of the Atlantic far into the next century.<sup>7</sup>

And what was this theatrical paragon like? Briefly, the plot concerns itself with an anonymous misanthrope—yes, the Stranger—who, previously deserted by his wife, lives in isolation from the world. Nearby dwells a woman who passes her days in humble deeds of charity which mark her unceasing repentance of having deserted her husband in favor of another man several years earlier. Each learns the other's name by word of mouth and they are discovered to be, of course, husband and wife.

They meet, but mutually decide to continue their separation despite their lingering love. She, it seems, must pursue her penitence alone as a species of moral obligation. He, likewise, is committed to solitude, for, if he were to take back the woman he loves, he would be forced to "renounce his character and become the derision of society." In the final portion of the play, he offers his wife the financial "means of indulging in charity the divine propensity of your nature." Affirming how richly she merits her reduced circumstances, however, she refuses:

Never! By the labour of my hands must I earn my sustenance. A crust of bread moistened by the tear of penitence will suffice my needs and exceed my merits. It would be an additional reproach to think that I served myself, or even others, from the bounty of him whom I had so basely wronged.<sup>8</sup>

Thus determined, they tearfully enact their renunciation, and at the final parting,

Their hands lie in each other's: their eyes mournfully meet. They stammer another "farewell" and part, but as they are going, she encounters the boy and he the girl [their children, previously ushered in by a friend].

CHILDREN: Dear Father! Dear Mother!

They press the children in their arms with speechless affection, then tear themselves away, gaze at each other, spread their arms, and rush into an embrace. The children run and cling round their parents. The curtain falls.

The popularity of *The Stranger* derived, I believe, from two things, both observable from this summary. The first is that the play establishes an unmistakable and impeccable standard of Georgian propriety, and, given the background already developed, this is readily demonstrable.

The Stranger, Haller by name, is perfectly correct when he points out that, were he to take back his erring wife, the act would be "to renounce his character and become the derision of society." Any enlightened, right-thinking eighteenth century rationalist would have been happy to point out the Age of Reason's reason for this. Simply put, to take back a woman who had scorned her oath of marital fidelity would constitute a deed almost as reprehensible as the original lapse. The husband would at least seem to be countenancing her act, perhaps even endorsing it, and neither was to be tolerated. Adultery could not be condoned, least of all by the offended—assuming him to be male.

Additionally, the husband who would readmit a publicly unfaithful wife could not be other than an object of scorn, a pitiable wretch, for had he not, after all, failed to control his wife? This duty remained basic to manhood, and it was regularly seen as fundamental to church and home alike; for Haller to fail in this duty and then condone the (presumably) consequent sin would surely be as he said, "to renounce his character and become the derision of society."

Beyond the personal disgrace, of course, lay the fact that, to many, he would be denying nothing less than the divine plan itself, which had placed the husband at the head of the household, charged with maintaining God's order therein.<sup>10</sup> To forgive an adulterous wife would assault, therefore, home, church and society at large. Better the children motherless, the husband solitary.

So ran the conventional eighteenth century view upon fidelity in marriage. It was a public, a parental and a personal duty to endorse through action that such a woman would be made the only useful thing she could hope to become, a wretched example, low, alone, perpetually penitent, an object calculated to demonstrate the wages of sin with all possible clarity and certitude. Mrs. Haller, of course, knows this and concurs in it. She cannot even accept money from her husband to use for the benefit of others—"it would be an additional reproach," she laments, "to think I served. . . others from the bounty of him whom I had so basely injured." hence, "a crust of bread moistened by the tear of penitence will suffice my needs and exceed my merits."

All this is old news. The Georgian sensibility, steeped in a stern yet delicate sense of duty, had been misting the eighteenth century eye for almost a hundred years. It was not this that made *The Stranger* popular, but it was the set-up. However the couple may desire reconciliation, society and their own thoroughly instructed understanding admit of but one course: renunciation.

Yet upon all this, Haller and his reaffirmed wife turn their backs. And in the capital cities of the West, and likewise in towns and villages, cheering audiences reversed a settled standard with their plaudits, and they did so in the most emphatic terms, making of the new play an unprecedented triumph—and at the same time a repudiation. The Hallers had examined themselves and their situation with all the meticulous moral exactitude which the eighteenth century demanded, and they were led to an irreversible conclusion. Unbelievably, stunningly, they ignored it. They turned their backs upon the injunction to a stern moral duty. They reconciled. They followed not the dictates of the head, as the age past instructed, but the dictates of the heart. The popular romantic revolution had erupted.

If the moment was greeted with thunderous ovations at the time, it has been ignored since. Beginning with William Dunlap,<sup>11</sup> critics early and late dismiss the play as "sentimental claptrap"—Ashley Thorndike's phrase of more than fifty years ago.<sup>12</sup> More recently, Walter Meserve's *An Emerging Entertainment* allowed the play 'a heroic rescue, plenty of sentiment, plus the usual melodramatic devices and contrivances [which] provided audiences with the emotional stimulation they wanted.'<sup>13</sup>

But not all these "usual melodramatic devices" were in fact commonplace when Kotzebue wrote them. The most extraordinary device, however, became so rapidly and so completely a standard component of popular theatre, a part of its very atmosphere, that the moment of its emergence in *The Stranger* escaped subsequent notice. This remarkable device is the method used by the Hallers to effect their reunion; in reaching this decision, emotions are allowed not merely existence, but dominion.

Assuredly, this idea did not spring full-grown from the brow of Kotzebue; circumstances had prepared a welcome for *The Stranger*. From the time of Rousseau and the stirrings of the French Revolution, the sands of Reason had been running out, and increasingly emotion bid to replace them. Moreover, during the decade of the 1770's in Germany, *Sturm und Drang*, if diffuse and short-lived, nevertheless had made clearly known its preference for the heart rather than the head. Calculated or accidental, then, the arrival of Kotzebue, heart in hand, was well-timed.

But it would almost certainly be a mistake to credit Kotzebue with philosophic ambitions in making the statement he did. Time and again during his career he repudiated such a notion. What he repeatedly affirmed was his quest for popular success, with the conviction that plays which had won artistic triumph were, pragmatically speaking, failures. He maintained that

Few of our masterpieces are effective on the stage because they fail to make a popular appeal. They assume a higher degree of culture, a higher power of comprehension than in fact exists. . . the people desire to be entertained.<sup>14</sup>

Entertainment remained Kotzebue's single-minded aim. Under no illusions as to what this implied about his work, he candidly admitted, "I know I write no masterpieces and that as a dramatist I am only entitled to secondary rank." The great objective, in Kotzebue's view, "is not to produce an ideal work of art;" the prime goal, rather, should be "exciting interest."<sup>15</sup> Not mincing words, the Kotzebue biographer, L. F. Thompson, summarized the matter by declaring that his subject "had no ideal which he desired to impart in dramatic form," and that the dramatist "was, in fact, the Philistine *par excellence*."<sup>16</sup>

Whatever the playwright's goals and character, however, his play was a watershed. With the ubiquitous production of *The Stranger*, beginning in the late eighteenth century, the criterion of the emotionally based decision swept into a mass acceptance whose repercussions have by no means disappeared as we approach the twenty-first century. The movement to the new standard constituted a sort of democratization of philosophy, inasmuch as anyone, however disenfranchised from achievement or culture, place or name, could make confident claim to valid grounds for a decision. Reason might mislead, but the heart could be trusted. Reason, of course, had repeatedly been used to mislead—the rationalizations defending workhouse, sweatshop and child labor offered the cynically specious construct whereby such institutions were maintained. But suddenly unschooled maids and machinists had only to inquire of their hearts to be led into truth. They could bypass the mazes of reason with which they were ill-equipped to deal, and it is not to be wondered at that they embraced the release with enthusiasm.

Their role models showed the way. Even under threat of death or dishonor, the typical nineteenth century hero or heroine of the popular stage follows the dictates of heart rather than head—and is unfailingly rewarded. It seems, therefore, that not quite all the fevered emotionalism of this theatre was emotion for its own sake, as is commonly charged. At the crucial moment, it is emotion employed as the basis for a decision.

From the early Kotzebue onward, emotions are with great rapidity and frequency used in this way, as a guideline for characters' choices. Before *The Stranger*, the emotional ice-jam had creaked and shifted, cracked and strained. Then, not with the "Preface" and the poems of Wordsworth did the dam burst, but with the



reconciliation drama of Kotzebue, and the river of feeling poured through. We're still regaining our feet and our composure.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Wordsworth's preface did not appear until 1801 in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*.

<sup>2</sup>The dialogue is drawn from William Whitehead's *School for Lovers*, a restrained example of its kind. Caelia and Sir John are the lovers.

<sup>3</sup>Ashley H. Thorndike, *English Comedy* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), p. 411. See also L. F. Thompson, *Kotzebue: A Story of his Progress in France and England* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honore Champion, 1928), pp. 5, 28, 54, 168; Ashley H. Thorndike, *Tragedy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), pp. 320-21, 327-28; Oral Sumner Coad, *William Dunlap* (New York: the Dunlap Society, 1917), 206-10. Patti P. Gillespie and Kenneth N. Cameron, *Western Theatre: Revolution and Revival* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 369, calls Kotzebue "The most popular playwright in the world in the early nineteenth century."

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Coad, p. 207; see also Thompson, p. 25; Robert Canary, *William Dunlap* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), p. 29.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Coad, p. 212; see also George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1928), II. 44-45; William Dunlap, *A History of the American Theatre* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1832), pp. 253-54; Barnard Hewitt, *Theatre U.S.A.: 1658-1957* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), pp. 53-54.

<sup>6</sup>Dunlap, pp. 253, 258, 261.

<sup>7</sup>Fritz Leuchs, *The Early German Theatre in New York* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1928), p. 16. The durability of *The Stranger* is partly indicated in the career of Anna Cora Mowatt, who did not act professionally until 1842, nearly a half century after the play's premiere, and who kept the work actively in her repertoire in both America and England throughout her brilliant twelve year career, Eric Wollencott Barnes *The Lady of Fashion: the Life and the Theatre of Anna Cora Mowatt* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), pp. 119, 174-75, 257; Barnes observes, "Anna Cora could scarcely have maintained her position as a star without appearing at least two or three times a season in the role of Mrs. Haller." Similarly, the British star, Fanny Kemble, found the play still effective in New York—"Many handkerchiefs in requisition," reported the *New York Mirror*, April 6, 1855. In frontier America as well *The Stranger* was long a standard among touring troupes like those of Sol Smith; Sol Smith, *Theatrical Management in the West and South for Thirty years* (New York and London: Benjamin Blom, 1968), reprint of the 1868 edition, pp. 48, 89.

<sup>8</sup>August von Kotzebue, *The stranger*, in Dougald McMillan and Howard Mumford Jones, eds., *Plays of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1954), p. 892.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>This viewpoint is, of course, in direct line of descent from the hierarchical Great Chain of Being of the Renaissance.

<sup>11</sup>Dunlap, pp. 257-58.

<sup>12</sup>Thorndike, *Comedy*, p. 414; without pointing specifically to *The Stranger*, David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1968), p. 15, accurately observes that after Kotzebue, "drama was to be clearly grounded. . . in a philosophy of feeling;" see also, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup>Walter J. Meserve, *An Emerging Entertainment: the Drama of the American People to 1928* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977), p. 110.

<sup>14</sup>August von Kotzebue, *Über Recensenten Ufuq*, quoted in Thompson, p. 46, 47. Kotzebue was realistic about what his quest for popularity implied, believing that "None of my plays will be staged in fifty years."

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.* In the process of exciting interest, substance sometimes emerged; Robertson Davies, *The Mirror of Nature* (Toronto, London: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1983), p. 66, has observed, for instance, that the central focus of *The Stranger* helped lead "directly toward radical changes in moral ideas. . . [viz.] marriages do not go astray because one partner is at fault and. . . a wife who has made a mistake deserves a hearing and a second change;" at the same time, however, the sincerity with which these issues were raised by Kotzebue can be questioned (see below).

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 19, 40-41. Thompson's conclusion may seem harsh, but the account given here only brushes the outlines of a career of devoted opportunism and philosophical cynicism; see, for instance, August von Kotzebue, *Die Deutschen Kleinstadter*, ed. Ernest Haftel (London: Librairie Hachette and Cie., 1855), p. 111; Thompson, pp. 10-18, 37-38; Dunlap, pp. 254, 255-47, 258; August von Kotzebue, *Historical, Literary and Political Anecdotes and Miscellanies* (London: Henry Colburn, 1807), II, pp. 98-100, 184-86.