
Frank Wedekind's 'Lulu' plays:
History and Modern Myth

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Frank Wedekind's 'Lulu' plays have long been regarded as his greatest literary creation, largely owing to the enigmatic and captivating figure of Lulu herself. She has been interpreted as a femme fatale, a high-class prostitute, a child of nature, a victim of bourgeois society and a symbol of human or animal instincts. Consequent disputes about her characterisation have dominated the critical discourse surrounding *Erdegeist* and *Die Büchse der Pandora*. Although critics have tended to see the interpretation of Lulu as the key to understanding these plays and any message that Wedekind may have intended them to convey, no critical consensus has been reached about her or about the plays in their entirety.

In recent years, however, the idea has emerged that the original, uncensored version of the plays can assist in our interpretation of Lulu, and can therefore aid our understanding of the interpretative puzzles that the plays set. *Die Büchse der Pandora: Eine Monstretragödie. Ein Buchdrama*, to give it its full title (or the 'Monstretragödie,' as it has become known, to avoid confusion with the later play that also bears the title *Die Büchse der Pandora*) was completed in 1894. However, it was neither performed nor published at the time, and only became available to scholars when the manuscript was acquired by the Munich Stadtbibliothek in 1971. During the 1980s a series of critical assessments of the 'Monstretragödie' were made, gradually bringing it to public attention. In 1988, Hartmut Vinçon published the first critical edition of the 'Monstretragödie,' based on his own reconstruction of the play from the manuscript.

The text of the 'Monstretragödie' evokes many historical events and cultural phenomena that locate the text in the Germany, Paris and London of the 1890s. Some might find this surprising, because Wedekind is generally seen as a dramatist before his time, owing to his radical dramatic style and daring themes, which have led to him often being described as a precursor of Brecht. In the opinion of Nicholas Wright, for example, who adapted the

'Monstretragödie' for performance at London's Almeida Theatre, the 1894 text is "a profound and ambiguous masterpiece, written 100 years before its time." However, the 'Monstretragödie' seems to define Wedekind very much as a dramatist of his time, which was an age of transition. The radical nature of the 'Monstretragödie' pushed the boundaries of what was then acceptable, thereby revealing the limitations, norms and values of the age and the changes that it was experiencing. Accordingly, a close analysis of different versions of the text reveals that, in what seems to have been a systematic effort to distance the later versions of the 'Lulu' plays from their historical context, Wedekind made many small textual changes that remove most of the references and allusions to Germany, Paris and London in the 1890s. He also added symbolic and mythological elements, the combined effect of which was to turn *Erdegeist* and *Die Büchse der Pandora* into a myth for the modern world. This lack of specificity is also manifested in an ambiguity in Lulu's characterisation in the later plays, which is absent from the 'Monstretragödie.' This indistinctness may not only explain the fascination of the familiar Lulu character, but also why the later plays have retained their theatrical appeal and continue to be relevant to audiences today.

Religion and morality

By engaging with contemporary themes, Wedekind rooted the 'Monstretragödie' in the historical context in which it was written. One example is his treatment of religion and morality. Wedekind's era was one of increasing secularisation, as most famously encapsulated in Nietzsche's declaration that "der alte Gott nicht mehr lebt, an den alle Welt geglaubt hat" in *Also sprach Zarathustra* (322). Alongside Nietzsche's hatred of Christian morality, Darwin's discoveries, which were spread in Germany by Ernst Haeckel, also raised questions about the teachings of the Bible (Meyer 136-7). Germany had recently undergone rapid industrialisation, whereby its population trebled over the course of the nineteenth century and there was a large-scale migration from the countryside to the cities, but also uneven growth, resulting in an era of 'boom and bust' that culminated in the stock market crash of 1873 (Boa 5). The importance of money to *Die Büchse der Pandora* suggests that

capitalism, in many ways, started to overtake Christianity as the new religion. Wedekind was highly aware of this phenomenon, which he encapsulated in the line "Wenn ich Millionär bin, werde ich dem lieben Gott ein Denkmal setzen" that he gives to Hänschen in III, 6 of *Frühlings Erwachen*.

With the weakening of religious values came the common contemporary perception that morality was declining as a result. This view, as represented by Bavaria's powerful Catholic population, led to the establishment of strict censorship of modernist theatre. Modernism therefore became associated with a questioning of religious belief and its associated traditions in favour of scientific knowledge. Plays such as Wedekind's were particularly affected by censorship, because their depiction of perceived 'immoral' themes was seen as aiding that decline.

The first scene of the 'Monstretragödie' specifically locates the play in this era, when Schöning says of his dead wife that "Sie war zu sehr Gattin und Mutter, als daß sie sich zu dieser Huldigung ihrer eigenen Person gegenüber hätte verstehen können" (147). This description makes her into an embodiment of the dying old order in which a woman was perceived as either a wife and mother, or a prostitute, an expectation that the imaginative figure of Lulu challenges until money forces her into prostitution in London (Bovenschen 53). However, in *Erdegeist*, where the portrait is of Schön's fiancée, this allusion to a specific era disappears. The sense that the traditional expectations of women are being overtaken is also illustrated by Schwarz's suicide on discovering that Lulu was not a virgin when they married. In the 'Monstretragödie,' this impression is reinforced when Alwa says of the deceased painter: "Er war hinter seiner Zeit zurück" (206). This comment disappears in *Erdegeist*, as it ties Schwarz and the play in which he appears to a time when expectations of female virginity until marriage were becoming unrealistic, as well as being part of a wider characterisation of Schwarz as a Romantic figure unable to cope with the contemporary world (Midgley 208).

Nietzsche

The 'Monstretragödie' is specifically located in the era when

enthusiasm for Nietzsche was at its height by means of overt references to Nietzsche's life and work in connection with Alwa's ballet:

GOLL (zu Alwa) Sagen Sie mal, junger Freund -
wie nennt sich denn Ihr Drama?
ALWA Zarathustra.
GOLL Zarathustra -
SCHÖNING Was soll ich denn dabei...?
GOLL Ich glaubte, der wäre im Irrenhaus.
ALWA Sie meinen Nietzsche.
GOLL Sie haben Recht. Ich verwechsle die
Beiden.
ALWA Ich habe den Stoff allerdings aus seinen
Büchern. (158)

In the 'Monstrettragödie,' Alwa goes on to outline the plot of the ballet, which draws its content from *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Alwa's first act portrays the rope-dancer and the old and young women in the town, and other figures from Nietzsche's Book I, and Alwa's second act is based on the 'Tanzlied' in Book II. Alwa claims to have had difficulty with the third, an account of Zarathustra's encounter with the fire-dog in the section 'Von grossen Ereignissen' in Book II of *Also sprach Zarathustra*. The fourth act depicts his return to his cave, which appears as 'Zarathustras Heimkehr' in Nietzsche's Book III, and portrays Zarathustra in his cave with his animals, along with the two kings and the celebration of the donkey from Nietzsche's Book IV. The comical tone of the discussion of the ballet, resulting from Alwa's attempt to present this philosophical text as an evening's theatrical entertainment, is very critical and mocking of Nietzsche and his thought. The same is true of the subsequent discussion of the 'Übermensch,' which includes Alwa's declaration: "Der Übermensch [...] ist ein geflügelter Lockenkopf mit breiter Halskrause -- unter der Halskrause das Wesentliche, um sich nicht fort-, sondern hinauf- zu pflanzen" (160). The familiarity with Nietzsche's biography, the content of *Also sprach Zarathustra* and the idea of the 'Übermensch' that this section demands is very much characteristic of the 1890s, when *Also sprach Zarathustra* was

at the height of its popularity and Wedekind would certainly have expected his audience to be familiar with it.

However, in *Der Erdgeist* of 1895, the plot summary has disappeared, removing the demand on the audience to be familiar with *Also sprach Zarathustra*, which no longer forms the basis of the ballet:

GOLL Ich habe ganz vergessen - wie nennt sich
doch Ihr Ballett?
ALWA Dalailama [sic].
GOLL Ich glaubte, der wäre im Irrenhaus.
ALWA Sie meinen Niemeier.
GOLL Sie haben Recht. Ich verwechsle die
Beiden.
ALWA Ich habe dem Buddhismus auf die Beine
geholfen. (329)

As Niemeier is a common German (and particularly Bavarian) name, this superficially removes all reference to Nietzsche, and therefore to the 1890s, as Nietzsche died in 1900. However, owing to Nietzsche's immense popularity at the time, and the first syllable of 'Niemeier' being the same as that of 'Nietzsche,' the audiences may have expected 'Nietzsche' even without the reference to *Also sprach Zarathustra*, thereby producing a comic effect. This expectation would have been strengthened by the appearance of the word 'Dalailama' owing to the frequent association between Buddhism and nihilism (both suggesting a rejection of current religious beliefs) in Nietzsche's work. However, for later audiences who were perhaps less familiar with Nietzsche, Wedekind's use of Buddhism in this context also evokes a general trend away from Christianity and towards mysticism, which cannot be pinned down to any specific period since Wedekind's time. The 1913 text is almost identical with that of 1895, except that Alwa tells Goll, "Sie meinen Nietzsche, Herr Sanitätsrat" (414) instead of "Sie meinen Niemeier." Presumably this alteration was intended to aid the flow of the dialogue by giving the audience what they expected, although it conflicts with the wider patterns of Wedekind's textual alterations. However, he may have included it -- given that Nietzsche's name remained well-known but

familiarity with his work declined -- as a means of demonstrating Goll's foolishness. In addition, Nietzsche's impact on *Erdegeist* is preserved when Schöning tells Lulu: "Du sehnst dich nach der Peitsche zurück" (191), alluding to the famous line "Du gehst zu Frauen? Vergiss die Peitsche nicht!" in *Also sprach Zarathustra* (86). This quotation is retained in *Erdegeist*, although Schöning no longer tells Schwarz "Sie will die Peitschel" (195). Such covert allusions to Nietzsche, which do not require a detailed knowledge of his work but increase the impact of the play if the reference is understood, are testimony to how well established Nietzsche's name had become by the time that Wedekind created *Erdegeist*.

Commodification

Consistent with Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, much of the explicit Christian imagery of the 'Monstretragödie' is absent from the later plays, including Schigolch's warning to Lulu "Du sollst gestraft werden -- wo du gesündigt hast" before she goes to find a client in V, 1 of the 'Monstretragödie.' Equally, in this scene, Alwa calls Lulu "meine kleine Marie" and she says that Schigolch "soll sich eine barmherz'ge Schwester suchen," which are absent from the 1913 text. This heavy use of religious vocabulary in the context of prostitution suggests that Christian values are being challenged by the need for money, which is becoming the new religion.

The question of monetary value as opposed to human values is far more present in the 'Monstretragödie' than in the later plays. Many of these indicators are centred on prostitution. In the 'Monstretragödie,' Schöning's rhetorical question "Wer prostituirt [sic] sich nicht?" (200) suggests that Wedekind interpreted the idea of 'selling oneself' in a very broad sense, including many different kinds of work, and thereby emphasising the importance of capitalism for his era. Equally, he tells Schwarz "Sie ist dein Eigentum - laß sie das fühlen" (200). However, neither of these lines is included in *Erdegeist*. The question of monetary value, as opposed to human self-worth, is also raised when Jack asks Lulu, "Don't you be ashamed yourself, to sell your love?" to which she replies "What could I do?" (308). Although the theme of commodification of human relationships dominates, Wedekind also considers the question of value outside

the context of sexuality. For example, when Lulu destroys Schwarz's paintings in the 'Monstretragödie,' he is concerned with the loss of luxuries such as a trip to Norway, raising questions about the value of money and Schwarz's personal values, whereas in *Erdegeist* her actions leave him genuinely facing financial ruin.

The resonance that such a theme of commodification would have had in Wedekind's time is demonstrated by its similarities with the contemporary thought on money in Georg Simmel's *Philosophie des Geldes*, published in 1900. The basis of Simmel's argument is that trade is a special form of social interaction whereby the value of the object being exchanged is established by the subjective opinion of those involved, namely how much or what the buyer is prepared to give, and how much or what the seller will accept, rather than the object having any intrinsic value. In the part of Simmel's text that was published in newspapers and journals in the 1890s (and so might have been read by Wedekind), he interprets the influence of money on both the individual and an entire culture. Significantly, Simmel thought that money created distance between people because of its use as a tool in climbing the social ladder, which in turn questions the value of human relationships, and argued that "die Verhältnisse des modernen Menschen zu seinen Umgebungen entwickeln sich im Ganzen so, daß er seinen nächsten Kreisen ferner rückt, um sich den ferneren mehr zu nähern" (406). If, for example, economic interests contradicted family interests, the tendency would be to choose the former, resulting in the loosening of family ties, and the same is true in other spheres of life.

Simmel's suggestion that nothing has an intrinsic value (as indicated by Wedekind's 'Jungfrauaktien') and his questions about the value of money as opposed to the value of human relationships and self-worth are, therefore, precisely those raised in the 'Monstretragödie.' The choice between money and living our chosen lives, as represented by Lulu's turn to prostitution and the reactions of others to her decision, echoes Simmel's concern with the effect that money was having on society. Although money remains crucial to the later *Die Büchse der Pandora*, the later plays do not echo contemporary thought on the relationship between money and the social culture of the time in the same way as the 'Monstretragödie.'

Political and social history

The historical specificity of the 'Monstretragödie' implicates Wedekind's own society in the social criticism of the play, thereby making its members appear to be the 'monstres' of the subtitle. A line spoken by Madeleine de Marelle to a group of other characters in IV, 1, "Mais - vous êtes des monsters," suggests this interpretation of the word 'Monstretragödie,' particularly as this line does not appear in the later *Die Büchse der Pandora*. Instead, the absence of many of the historical references and allusions of the 'Monstretragödie' from *Erdgeist* and *Die Büchse der Pandora* creates a sense of timelessness in these plays, and therefore no longer incriminates Wedekind's contemporary audiences as the object of his social criticism.

Perhaps the most specific historical change is Alwa's line "Der -- der Reichstag ist aufgelöst" (201). The historical reference here is to the dissolution of the Reichstag by Caprivi in 1893 in an attempt to make the Parliament pass a bill on changes to the strength of the German army (cf. Craig 258). The fact that Wedekind seems to have completed Acts II and III in Paris in 1893 before leaving for London supports the idea that the dissolution of the Reichstag would have been at the forefront of his mind when he was writing these passages. It also alludes to the political situation of the 1890s, when the Reichstag had far less power than the Emperor and his appointed Chancellor. However, in *Erdgeist*, this line is changed to "In Paris ist Revolution ausgebrochen" (358 and 441), which is historically implausible given that there was no revolution in Paris in the 1890s. Indeed, the 'era of revolutions' in France ended in 1871, and was followed by the relative political stability of the Third Republic. However, given that "[i]n their own eyes, and those of others, the French since 1789 have been the revolutionary nation" (Tombs 7), Wedekind's reference to a revolution in Paris creates a 'timeless' effect, as no audience since Wedekind's time would have been overly surprised at the idea of another revolution in France. The importance of this reference is emphasized by Schön's repetition of "In Paris ist Revolution ausgebrochen" in Act IV of *Erdgeist*, shortly before his confrontation with Lulu, which does not appear in the equivalent scene of the 'Monstretragödie.'

It is undeniable that Wedekind included some elements in the

later plays that do have a historical resonance. One such example is cholera, which is crucial to the new Act I of *Die Büchse der Pandora*. Although there was a cholera epidemic in Hamburg in 1892 (Rothe 39), cholera has largely disappeared from the modern developed world. However, other infectious diseases are now a threat, and any audience could imagine what cholera might be like, so the dramatic effect is retained. Equally, the importance of Jack the Ripper to the plot would not be diminished if the historical allusion was not recognised. Therefore, the later plays are not separate from history, but they do not have the same spectrum of specific and diffuse historical allusion that is present in the 'Monstretragödie.'

Modern myth

Alongside removing historical detail from the text, Wedekind enhanced the mythological effect of the later plays by refining the characterisation of Lulu to create more uncertainty about her origins. For example, in I, 4 of the 'Monstretragödie' (171), Lulu claims to be 18, whereas in *Erdgeist*, this reference to her age has disappeared. Similarly, Schöning tells Schwarz: "ich kenne sie seit dreizehn Jahren" (196) in the 'Monstretragödie,' which changes to the less precise "Etwa seit ihrem zwölften Jahr" in *Erdgeist*, making it impossible to establish Lulu's age from the textual details given, although this calculation is possible on the basis of the 'Monstretragödie.' By removing many of the basic facts from Lulu's past, and thereby enabling her to claim that she is a 'Wunderkind' because she has no father (467), Wedekind opens the possibility of reading her as a symbolic, or even mythological figure, as she has no certain father, no mother, and not even a definite age. The mythological element of *Erdgeist* and *Die Büchse der Pandora* owes a certain amount to their titles, referring to Goethe's *Faust* in the first instance, and the Pandora myth in the second. The motto to *Erdgeist*, taken from Schiller's *Wallensteins Tod*, also adds to this aspect of the play through its comment "Dem bösen Geist gehört die Erde, nicht / dem Guten", and its invitation to read symbolically rather than literally in order to establish the connections between the play and its motto. Above all, the Prologue to *Erdgeist* can only be read symbolically, as it has no literal connection to the plays themselves,

but rather establishes metaphorical links between characters and animals, and associates Lulu with the biblical myth of Eve in the Garden of Eden through its references to her as a snake. All of these elements combine to give the later Lulu the timeless quality that was noted by Rothe (55).

Conclusion

This analysis has indicated that Wedekind deliberately altered the character of Lulu from the way in which it appeared in the original text so that it became ambiguous and mythological in the final version. A full consideration of this shift in the characterisation of Lulu is outside the scope of this paper. However, it is significant that a comparison of the different versions of the 'Lulu' plays reveals that the changes that Wedekind made to his central character mirror similar changes to textual detail in other aspects of the plays. Wedekind's conception of his drama changed significantly, shifting from the historical context of the 1890s to an indefinite and mythological, but distinctly modern, setting. The overall effect of these alterations is undoubtedly to distance the later versions of the plays from the era in which they are rooted. The pattern of changes that Wedekind made to the text reveals that Lulu's characterisation was just one consequence of that wider change. It seems that it is precisely the timelessness, flexibility and inherent ambiguity in the later plays that leave the character of Lulu open to interpretation and has thereby contributed to the lasting fascination with *Erdegeist* and *Die Büchse der Pandora*. Rather than providing any answers to the questions raised by the Lulu character, the 'Monstretragedie' reveals that Lulu is not the key to solving Wedekind's interpretative puzzle, but rather an important manifestation of his approach to the plays in their entirety. In addition, the pattern of changes described in this article demonstrates that the 'Monstretragedie' cannot be the key to understanding the more familiar *Erdegeist* and *Die Büchse der Pandora*, because the ambiguity of the later plays was created in direct contrast to the specificity of the original version. It therefore remains to be questioned why Wedekind made these changes to the 'Lulu' plays, and what effect he intended them to have.

The removal of the plays from their historical and social

context of Germany, Paris and London in the 1890s distanced the later plays from the social criticism of Wedekind's contemporaries that is apparent in the original version. It must be remembered that, alongside the threat of censorship with which Wedekind's work is so often connected, the 'Lulu' plays also had to be capable of attracting an audience in order for any theatre to stage a performance of the play, so as to reduce the financial risk of an empty house. Wedekind could not persuade any theatre to stage a performance of the 'Monstretragedie.' It is possible that making the plays less critical of their audience was one factor that contributed to the later plays' greater commercial success because they were less open to objection from the theatre-going public, as well as being less vulnerable to censorship. By making the plays less historical, Wedekind changed the themes contained within them from specific echoes of his own era into generally relevant modern themes such as religion, morality, sexuality, value and commodification. Finally, Wedekind's mythologization of *Erdegeist* and *Die Büchse der Pandora* leaves their moral standpoint open to interpretation because of the absence of any clear criticism or approval of the plays' themes, which has undoubtedly led to the critical preoccupation with interpretation of the morality or immorality of the Lulu plays. This lack of direct engagement with any particular culture or era gives the later plays their enduring appeal and relevance to even the most contemporary audiences.

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Zwischen Konstruktivismus und Intuition: Zum Verhältnis von Ethik und Ästhetik bei Robert Musil

David Wachter

Bei der Klärung der Frage, in welcher Weise ästhetische Erfahrung eine ethische Dimension entfalten kann, steht das Thema einer künstlerischen Gestaltung der eigenen Existenz an zentraler Stelle. Inwiefern kann eine ästhetische Einstellung zu sich selbst wie zur Welt bei der Selbstgestaltung von Individuum und Gesellschaft eine tragende Rolle spielen? Wie ist diese Selbstgestaltung im Rahmen des Ästhetischen genauer zu denken?

Robert Musils Hauptwerk *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* thematisiert diese Frage auf grundlegende Weise. Das in ihm etablierte Ethos eines experimentellen Selbst- und Weltverhältnisses steht einem rein hedonistischen Verständnis des Ästhetischen ebenso entgegen wie der Vorstellung einer bloß kompensatorischen Entlastungsfunktion von Kunst. Denn ästhetische Erfahrung steht für Robert Musil im Zentrum einer konstruktiven Selbsterfindung des von traditionellen moralischen Bindungen befreiten Menschen, der zu einem ergebnisoffenen Experiment mit den eigenen Seinsmöglichkeiten bereit ist. Dieses Ethos der Selbstgestaltung entwickelt Musil in zwei komplementären Perspektiven, die einander zunächst entgegengesetzt werden, deren mögliche Vermittlung jedoch das Hauptanliegen seiner Philosophie darstellt. Die erste Perspektive wird hier mit dem Leitbegriff 'Konstruktivismus' charakterisiert. Sie basiert auf der Vorstellung einer bewußten und rational bestimmten Selbsterfindung eines Menschen, der die Wirklichkeit auf ihre noch unverwirklichten Möglichkeiten hin analysiert und am Leitfaden dieser Möglichkeiten neu konstruiert. Indem der Roman jedoch diese konstruktivistische Disposition an ihre Grenzen führt, weist er auf die Notwendigkeit einer ergänzenden Perspektive hin, der gemäß sich Ethik und Ästhetik nicht im rationalen Konstruktionsprojekt, sondern im Medium der Intuition treffen. In dieser Intuition erfährt sich das Individuum als