

**Mingchao Mao**, *Friedrich Hebbels Arbeit an Schiller. Die Schiller-Rezeption in Hebbels Ästhetik und Dramatik*. De Gruyter, 2019. IX + 289 pp, €99.95.

Mingchao Mao's *Friedrich Hebbels Arbeit an Schiller* aims to document connections between two prominent literary figures of the German nineteenth century. While touching upon many relevant issues, the author mainly sets out to examine the impact of Schiller's theoretical and dramatic writings on Hebbel's own dramatic corpus.

Mao shows how Hebbel coped with the fear of authorial epigonality—of having reached his own artistic peak in a time when the greatest of his forebears still cast a rich light on the literary world. While Shakespeare and Euripides were too iconic and too far in the past to even call on for comparison, Schiller and Goethe, the greatest literary minds of the century, had passed away only a few decades before Hebbel's first attempts at dramatic writing, and were still very much alive in German collective memory. Mao rightly points out that the insistence of scholars in going after every instance of incorporation or rejection of, say, Hegel or Schopenhauer in Hebbel's theoretical writings puts out of focus his actual starting point, which is evidently the essays of Schiller (102-106). Hebbel expresses ambivalence over Schiller's dramatic writing. Mao documents how his admiration for and intellectual affinity with Schiller go hand-in-hand with his need to critically distance himself from his predecessor, who was still being read and staged enthusiastically forty years after his death (7). Hebbel believed Schiller to have been a great **theoretical** writer on drama, but lacking in skill when it came to constructing convincing characters for the stage. Mao scales down Hebbel's harsh judgment of Schiller's work by demonstrating that, though extremely popular, its true value was not correctly appreciated in the nineteenth century, as the author was often reduced to a reference point for one's own political, philosophical or aesthetic ideas (42). Chapter 3 outlines Hebbel's familiarity with the ongoing critical debate on this topic (42-81), and shows that Hebbel's interest in Schiller, sparked after his enthusiasm for his poetry in his university years (26-41), stayed constant in his lifelong search for a model for his own dramatic writing.

Mao identifies the main research gap that he intends to fill as such: none of the previous studies on Hebbel's reception of Schiller are systematic, as they all draw parallels between the two authors' corpora while avoiding thorough contextualisation within the aesthetic discourse surrounding the older poet. Mao briefly mentions the ongoing debate on whether or not to consider Hebbel's thoughts on tragedy a trustworthy paratext for the interpretation of his dramas. Mao explicitly advocates for a more syncretic reading of Hebbel's theoretical and dramatic writing (17), as he himself provides in the chapter devoted to Hebbel's incorporation of Schiller's theoretical writing into his own (82-133). Mao selects a small array of short essays

and a long series of diary entries of varying lengths that testify to the impact that Schiller's aesthetics had on Hebbel's, specifically focusing on the 1848 review of the posthumous epistolary exchange between Schiller und Körner. Showing no interest in the biographical component of the letters, Hebbel analyses Schiller's commentary on his own characters and makes several remarks on how these are conceived from the start as emotionally unrealistic. Speaking of *The Bride of Messina* (1803), Hebbel details how the characters lack all psychological nuance, and so does the motive behind the actions that trigger the downfall, as the change of heart which characters display by the end of the play is only due to superficial factors. Mao points out that such bitter insistence on Hebbel's part is symptomatic of his own interest in learning how psychology can concretely add depth to characterization. While many diary entries confirm his ease with current psychology, a series of notes on the writing process for his *Nibelungen* (1861) proves Hebbel's efforts to make his theoretical knowledge part of his practice as a writer (133).

According to Mao, while Hebbel usually condemns Schiller's construction of characters, his critiques provide him with a chance to explore his own ideas on how to build more realistic characters. Mao discusses every instance in which Hebbel addresses Schiller's perceived weaknesses, either the characters' excessive pathos or the lack of convincing motives behind their action. This was an impression shared by his contemporaries, amongst whom Karl Immermann, who argued against Schiller's excessively rhetorical tone that killed any chance of liveliness in his characters. Hebbel found Schiller's style enjoyable but unfit for dramatic speeches (95). By frequently quoting Immermann, Hebbel —then in his thirties—stated in his diaries his conviction that Schiller prioritized pathos over realism. From 1835 to his late days, Hebbel reiterated that Schiller's characters show no ambivalence between their will (and desires) and the constraints of events, which he believes must give foundation to any effective dramatic conflict. Hebbel attacked the stiffness of characters, like Joan of Arc in the *Maid from Orleans* (1801), as he felt the need to advocate for characters to evolve throughout the drama. Only psychological growth could make characters individually truthful.

Mao's extensive survey of Hebbel's critical view on the artificiality of Schiller's dramatic characters and their speeches is vital to fully understanding the chapters devoted respectively to Hebbel's 'rewritings' of Schiller's dramas *The Maid, Love and Intrigue* (1784) and *Demetrius* (1805). In 1837, Hebbel stated his intention to correct the flaws in Schiller's *Maid* through his drama *Judith* (1841). In his letters, Hebbel vehemently criticises how the protagonist, Joan of Arc, lacks any authenticity, as she and the other characters seem like wax dolls in a display cabinet. The two dramas share some elements of structure, as Hebbel's analysis of Schiller's drama and of his own confirm, and of content, as seen in the heroines' (relatively) altruistic motive for the killings, their bearing arms and their virginity. Mao pushes the idea that Hebbel attempts to correct the mistakes of the *Maid* by actively working on nuancing Judith's



motive. He explains in chapter 5 (143-184) how *Judith* is the actual anti-conception of the *Maid*. Mao then turns to a scarcely studied essay by Hebbel, the “Story of the Virgin from Orleans” (1840), published under a pseudonym. Mao demonstrates how the reiterated critique of Schiller’s characters is fundamental in this small historical text as well. As Hebbel distinguishes historical facts from fiction by specifically avoiding the integration of the love story between Joan and Lionel as it was constructed in Schiller’s drama, he deliberately distances himself from his model. The idea that the drama was unknown to him is easy to rule out, considering that the *Maid* was an unavoidable term of comparison for all literary production on the theme in the German-speaking world. The omission of the love story could be due to the implausibility not of their love but rather of how they discover their mutual affection. Mao interprets such deviation from the canon as a critique of the sentimentality of the drama, pinpointing a series of intertextual references to Schiller’s drama in Hebbel’s essay, and convincingly discussing the extent to which Hebbel’s writing is based on his reading of Schiller.

In chapter 6 Mao carries out a comparative reading of Hebbel’s drama *Maria Magdalena* (1844) and Schiller’s early drama *Intrigue and Love* (1784). Hebbel only mentions the piece in a short diary entry commenting on an 1847 staging of the play and displaying utter surprise over its ‘nothingness’. However, Mao also illustrates how several plot elements testify to the plausibility of Hebbel using *Intrigue and Love* as an outline for his own drama. Chapter 7 (220-261) discusses Hebbel’s unfinished *Demetrius* (1864). Published posthumously, it is a close adaptation of Schiller’s fragment of the same title. The idea to finish what he considered Schiller’s literary project most deserving of admiration had been on Hebbel’s mind for eighteen years; a diary note confirms that he intended to follow Schiller’s conception in his own text. Rather than expanding the fragment he already had in his hands, Hebbel rewrites it entirely. In a letter, Hebbel declares his intention to adopt Schiller’s fundamental thinking without quoting a single line of the original fragment. Mao documents how the two authors face the same difficulties in terms of plot. The interest in motive surfaces in Hebbel’s conception, as he notes down his wish to choose a completely different emotional stand to trigger his characters into action. The thoughts of an older Hebbel on characters’ truthfulness are consistent with those expressed in his thirties.

Mao’s study provides further proof of the recent understanding that Hebbel’s fear of being left out the contemporary and future literary canon exacerbated his criticism, and consistently influenced his own reception of canonical German literature. Reading Schiller and continuously criticizing him was necessary for Hebbel to affirm his own identity and uniqueness as a dramatist. Yet, as Mao convincingly demonstrates, Hebbel’s dramatic writing is the direct result of a tireless study of the eighteenth and nineteenth century canon. The analysis of Schiller’s dramas allows Hebbel to potentially improve his own writing and to exercise his eye for effective character constructions. Therefore, Mao’s volume shows no interest for the young Hebbel’s enthusiasm for Schiller’s poetry, which did not leave its mark on his own work.

While Mao gathers substantial evidence of Hebbel's harshness towards Schiller's dramatic pieces, in its focus on Hebbel's critique of characterization, this book argues that Hebbel's idea of style, for one, is not that different from that of Schiller himself. Mao offers scholars an up-to-date overview of Hebbel's reception of Schiller that however also adds new information to the state of the art, making *Friedrich Hebbels Arbeit an Schiller* a valuable resource for those interested in the reception history of Schiller, and, more specifically, in Schiller's role in the development of Hebbel as a dramatic author.

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