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The Crystallization of Early Modern European Drama in the Folk-Theater Tradition in Tyrol

The Marienberg *Griseldis* from 1713, Staged in 2016

Since the Late Middle Ages, the southern part of the German-speaking area – Bavaria, the German-speaking lands of the Habsburg Empire, especially the County of Tyrol and the capital Vienna, and Swabia – have been extremely vibrant and vivid spaces for popular drama and theater.¹ This area might serve as a principal background for understanding the so-called folk-poetry tradition, as Johann Gottfried Herder in his “theology of folk poetry”² pointed out: “If, all of a sudden, a *Macpherson* were to arise in Tyrol or Bavaria and sing some German *Ossian*, this might suffice, so far would we let ourselves be carried away” (“Wenn da auf einmal ein *Macpherson* in Tyrol oder in Baiern aufstünde, und uns da so einen deutschen *Ossian* sänge, ginge es hin, so weit ließen wir uns etwa noch mitziehen.”)³ The idea of folk literature, as Werner Michler states, doubled each existing literary genre: *folk* theater, *folk* literature, *folk* poems, and so forth

1 For Tyrol, see, e.g., Ellen Hastaba. “Theater in Tirol: Spielbelege in der Bibliothek des Tiroler Landesmuseums Ferdinandeum.” *Veröffentlichungen des Tiroler Landesmuseums Ferdinandeum* 75/76 (1995/1996), pp. 233–343, p. 233; Bernd Neumann and Hannes Obermair. “Tiroler Spiele.” *Killy Literaturlexikon: Autoren und Werke des deutschsprachigen Kulturraumes*, edited by Wilhelm Kühlmann et al., vol. 11, 2nd edition. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011, pp. 546–548, p. 546. – For Vienna, see, e.g., Otto Rommel. *Die Alt-Wiener Volkskomödie: Ihre Geschichte vom Barocken Welttheater bis zum Tode Nestroys*. Vienna: Schroll, 1952; Herbert Zeman. “Die Alt-Wiener Volkskomödie des 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhunderts: Ein gattungsgeschichtlicher Versuch.” *Die österreichische Literatur: Ihr Profil von den Anfängen im Mittelalter bis ins 18. Jahrhundert (1050–1750)*, edited by Herbert Zeman, vol. 2. Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1986, pp. 1299–1333; *Volkskomödie und Volkstheater in Wien. Ein literarhistorisches Handbuch*, edited by Wolfgang Neuber. Graz: Styria, 1989; Jürgen Hein. *Das Wiener Volkstheater*, 3rd edition. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997; Johann Sonnleitner, editor. *Hanswurstiaden: Ein Jahrhundert Wiener Komödie*. Joseph Anton Stranitzky, Joseph Felix Kurz, Philipp Hafner, Joachim Perinet, Adolf Bäuerle. Salzburg: Residenz, 1996.

2 The term is that of Robert T. Clark. “Herder, Percy, and the Song of Songs.” *PMLA* 61 (1946), pp. 1087–1100, p. 1095.

3 Johann Gottfried Herder. “Von deutscher Art und Kunst. Einige fliegende Blätter.” *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Literatur 1767–1781*, edited by Gunter E. Grimm, vol. 2. Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993, pp. 443–562, p. 555. The translation is ours.

Audience in the library of the Benedictine Abbey of Marienberg during the *Griseldis* performance in 2016. Photo by Maria Gapp.

began to be identified alongside any general, conventional, or canonical theater, literature, and poems.⁴ Folk-lore was born.

It seems, however, rather difficult, if not impossible, to identify folk plays empirically and to distinguish them conclusively from 'ordinary' plays. Nevertheless, the existence of folk plays continues to be tenaciously asserted. The only criterion seems to be the sum of assertions stating that a certain play was a folk play. This sum is, indeed, huge, and has been amassed over and over again during the last two centuries. A further, somewhat more reliable criterion could be that folk plays are written in vernacular languages, though this is not an exclusive criterion. A certain marginality, however, in terms of language (the text was often written down in local dialect), place of performance (far from cultural or political centers), and poetics and aesthetics (far from canonical literature and 'high' culture) constitutes one of the main characteristics and qualities of folk plays.⁵

For the rise of folk poetry from the late seventeenth to the nineteenth century, several causes may be considered. On a more practical level, debates on folk poetry have been connected to the idea of a broader, more popular audience. On a more political and philosophical level, such debates aimed to construct a German identity against cultural otherness or, more precisely, against French literary otherness, which was widely experienced as invasive in German culture in the late seventeenth century. The emphasis on a supposedly essential German character has also been strongly connected to emerging patriotism and national identity-building processes during early German Romanticism. Furthermore, debates on folk poetry demonstrate an awareness of *poetae minores* as well as canonical poets, and clearly show a fascination with 'nature' and 'natural life' as a reaction to industrialization and urbanization, and, as a result, with traveling to the Alps, especially from Britain and Germany. On the whole, the attraction of folk literature expresses a cultural discomfort and societal unrest and tends to promise an identitarian vanishing point.

In folk literature, dramatic genres were considered last and only after lyric and epic genres had been collected, published, and discussed.⁶ With respect to

4 Werner Michler. *Kulturen der Gattung: Poetik im Kontext, 1750–1950*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015, p. 174.

5 For a summary of different viewpoints, see Toni Bernhart. *Volk – Schauspiel – Antivolkststück: Genese einer kulturgeschichtlichen Formation*. Habilitation thesis, University of Stuttgart, 2017, forthcoming.

6 This can clearly be deduced from an analysis of nineteenth-century folk-play collections. At a certain point in the first half of the nineteenth century, students of literature became interested in dramatic texts that within the previously prevalent context of folk poetry had been overlooked and neglected. See, e.g., Franz Horn. *Die Poesie und Beredsamkeit der Deutschen, von Luthers*

The Benedictine Abbey of Marienberg seen from the construction site of the library in 2015.
Photo by Janina Janke.

myths, themes, and motifs, folk theater is strongly based on the early modern dramatic and literary tradition, and especially on the Bible, including the tradition of passion plays, Ancient Greek and Roman myths and literature, and Christian legends and tales. Folk theater also, if to a lesser extent, adopts works from canonical literature. Favorite characters in folk plays were Genovefa, Hirlanda, Perpetua, Griselda, Mary Stuart, Absalom, Saint Eustace, and Saint George. Transmitted works of this type have been documented in several catalogues.⁷ Folk plays and the folk theater tradition can thus be seen as a late – perhaps the last – crystallization of early modern drama in Europe.

The ‘Griselda Myth,’⁸ which is the basis of the play under scrutiny in this article, draws on the final novella from Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (around 1350). After its translation into Latin by Petrarch, Griselda became one of the most seminal characters in European literatures. In his impressively in-depth, detailed bibliography, Raffaele Marabito reports the reception of the plot throughout global literature.⁹ All the same, he does not touch upon the Griselda reception in the German folk-play tradition, which is quite far from canonical reception.

Zeit bis zur Gegenwart, vol. 2. Berlin: Enslin, 1823, pp. 254–304; Heinrich Lindner, editor. *Karl der Zwölfte vor Friedrichshall: Eine Haupt- und Staatsaction in vier Actus, nebst einem Epilogus*. Dessau: Karl Aue, 1845, pp. 5–81; Karl Weinhold, editor. *Weihnacht-Spiele und Lieder auß Süd-deutschland und Schlesien*. Graz: Damian & Sorge, 1853, pp. III–VI; Heinrich Pröhle. *Weltliche und geistliche Volkslieder und Volksschauspiele: Mit einer Musikbeilage*. Aschersleben: Fokke, 1855, pp. XIX–XLIV.

7 Adalbert Sikora. “Zur Geschichte der Volksschauspiele in Tirol.” *Zeitschrift des Ferdinandeums für Tirol und Vorarlberg* 50 (1906), pp. 339–372; Karl Konrad Polheim. *Katalog der Volksschauspiele aus Steiermark und Kärnten: Nebst Analekten aus Bayern, West- und Ostösterreich*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1992; Hastaba, “Theater in Tirol.” – For the tradition of the passion play, see Michael Henker, Eberhard Dünninger, and Evamaria Brockhoff, editors. *Hört, sehet, weint und liebt: Passionsspiele im alpenländischen Raum*. Munich: Süddeutscher Verlag, 1990; Jaša Drnovšek. “Early Modern Religious Processions: The Rise and Fall of a Political Genre.” *Poetics and Politics: Net Structures and Agencies in Early Modern Drama*, edited by Toni Bernhart, Jaša Drnovšek, Sven Thorsten Kilian, Joachim Küpper, and Jan Mosch. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018, pp. 215–224.

8 The term was coined by Madeline Rüegg. *The Patient Griselda Myth in Late Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, forthcoming.

9 Raffaele Marabito. “La diffusione della storia di Griselda dal XIV al XX secolo.” *Studi sul Boccaccio* 17 (1988), pp. 237–285. On Griselda’s reception in particular vernaculars, see Achim Aurnhammer and Hans-Jochen Schiewer, editors. *Die deutsche Griselda: Transformationen einer literarischen Figuration von Boccaccio bis zur Moderne*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010; Rinaldo Comba and Marco Piccat, editors. *Griselda: Metamorfosi di un mito nella società europea. Atti del Convegno Internazionale a 80 anni dalla nascita della Società per gli Studi Storici della Provincia di Cuneo, Saluzzo, 23–24 Aprile 2009*. Cuneo: Società per gli Studi Storici, Archeologici ed Artistici della Provincia di Cuneo, 2011; Madeline Rüegg, *The Patient Griselda Myth*.

Title page of the Marienberg *Griseldis* (1713). Photo by Toni Bernhart.

Considering the great success the character achieved, it is little surprise that Griselda was adopted eagerly also in the folk-theater tradition of the southern German-speaking area. These adaptations may be reconstructed through catalogues of regional archives.

In his paper on the history of folk plays in Tyrol from 1906, Adalbert Sikora reports a dozen performances of Griselda plays in different places in

Tyrol during the period from 1750 to 1800.¹⁰ Furthermore, three hand-written *Griselda* plays in vernacular German have been transmitted to the present day. Two of them are preserved in the Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum in Innsbruck and are briefly described by Ellen Hastaba in her commented bibliography of play manuscripts in the Ferdinandeum¹¹; the third one is the Marienberg *Griseldis* of 1713.

In the context of a research project on folk-theater history conducted within the DramaNet framework,¹² we searched for manuscripts of folk plays in regional archives. In January 2014, we visited the archive of the Benedictine Abbey of Marienberg in South Tyrol, which was founded in the eleventh century, and discovered several manuscripts of school plays that were written in Latin or German and that had, until then, been completely unknown to scholarship.¹³ One of the manuscripts is a *Griselda* play by an anonymous writer, entitled *GRISELDIS Ein Arme Paurn Tochter wurde wegen Ihrer fromen sitten und schenen Dugendten mit einem Margrafen mit Namen WALTHERO Verehelicht, welche in wehrender Ehe eine solche Geduldt hat sēchen lassen, an wēlcher sich alle Ehefrauen Spieglen sollen* (*Griseldis*: a poor peasant's daughter, for her pleasant modesty and beautiful virtues, was married to a count named Waltherus; during her marriage, she demonstrated such an abundance of patience that it shall be a mirror for all wives).¹⁴ The title page indicates the place and year of a staging: Meran in 1713. In 1724, the Benedictine monks of Marienberg established a school in the town of Meran, which is about 60 km from the abbey and was, at the time, the

¹⁰ Sikora, "Zur Geschichte der Volksschauspiele in Tirol."

¹¹ Untitled. Incipit: *Wo wirdt sie abzuholen sein | ohne brauth Kan ia Kein hochzeit sein*. Manuscript, fragment, eighteenth/nineteenth century. Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck, shelfmark FB 32118; *Schau Spiel Von der Gräffin Griseldis*, manuscript, nineteenth century. Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck, shelfmark FB 32134. See Hastaba, "Theater in Tirol," no. 360 and nos. 453–457.

¹² See http://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/we03/forschung/drittmittelprojekte/dramanet/Team_-Topics/index.html#bernhart. Accessed 25 September 2018.

¹³ For a more detailed theatrical history of Marienberg, see Toni Bernhart. "'Griseldis' (1713): Ein Neufund aus dem Stiftsarchiv Marienberg und die Geschichte des Schultheaters am Benediktinergymnasium Meran." *Nestroyana* 37(2017), pp. 175–187, pp. 176–183.

¹⁴ *Griseldis*, Meran 1713. Archive of the Benedictine Abbey of Marienberg, Mals/Vinschgau (Italy), no shelfmark. – We profoundly thank Markus Spanier OSB, Abbot of Marienberg, as well as the archivists Ulrich Faust OSB and David Fliri for permission to reproduce the title page of *Griseldis*.

Waltherus (Christian Mayer) and Griseldis (Judith Abart). Photo by Maria Gapp.

capital of the historical County of Tyrol. The manuscript's history is unknown. However, it can be assumed that the *Griseldis* manuscript found its way to the Benedictine school of Meran, from where it was brought to the abbey after the school was closed in 1986.

The play consists of four acts, each of them of five scenes. Two funny interludes have been inserted: one after I.1, the other after III.1. In its original form, *Griseldis* apparently included four choruses: "Chorus 1mus" after I.2, and "Chorus 4tus" after III.5; the second and third choruses are missing, as are a few pages of the text. The manuscript also lacks a musical score. With respect to music, it was a quite usual practice in folk-play manuscripts that only the texts of sung parts, often referred to as either 'Aria' or 'Recitativo,' were recorded, but no score.¹⁵

The dramatic text derives from a scholarly context. The language is German, but some quotations from Latin literature are included in the characters' speech. Stylistically, the dramatic text is a rather typical mixture of literary language and local dialect. Some Middle German also emerges throughout the text, which leads to the assumption that the play was based on pre-existing versions.

The diction, register, and style of the characters' speech are class-specific. Such poetic differentiation leads one to assume a certain erudition on the part of the author. While Waltherus, his confidant Vigilius, and the counts and courtiers make use of a rather elevated diction and style, peasants and working people use an informal, occasionally vulgar language. Everyday work life is portrayed at length, with farmers' tasks and merchants' duties described in detail. The advantages and disadvantages of marriage are discussed, too.

We were fascinated with this play at first sight and developed the idea of performing it on stage. In scholarly, artistic, and organizational terms, it was a long trajectory from discovering the manuscript in 2014 to staging the play in the Benedictine Abbey of Marienberg in 2016. Ten performances were finally put on stage, all of which were fully booked and had great public resonance.

From the very beginning, it was obvious to us that the staging of such an 'unstageable' play would be a challenge. From a contemporary perspective, *Griseldis* seemed 'unstageable' because of the play's not very fashionable choice of a humble and obedient wife as its protagonist. Griseldis puts all her faith and fortune in God's hands and for this she suffers injustice and mental torture from her husband, who claims to be testing her loyalty.

The first step on our way to the play's performance was to find the right coordinates in space and time. We approached Markus Spanier, the abbot of the

15 For music in folk-play history, see Franz Gratl. "The Role of Music in Folk Drama: An Investigation based on Tyrolean Sources." *Poetics and Politics*, pp. 185–198.

Start of rehearsals in the library. Photo by VinschgauDesign.

Griseldis (Hermina Asam) with child. Photo by VinschgauDesign.

Marienberg Benedictine Abbey, who was impressed by our endeavor and instantly decided to support it. Since theater has been a constant activity in Benedictine history and school tradition, Abbot Markus became enthusiastic about our plan and came up with the idea of showing the play in the context of the 200th anniversary of the re-foundation of the Marienberg Abbey in 2016. As a suitable space he suggested the new library building, an underground structure in the monastery garden, which at that time was under construction, and therefore still empty and not yet filled with books.

The abbot introduced the idea to the monastery *conventus*, which approved the project. Thereafter we met with amateur theater groups from the surrounding villages in the community of Mals/Vinschgau. Amateur theater is very common in Tyrol; it looks back on a long tradition, and nearly every village has its own theater group. In the end, eight of these groups were eager to participate, appreciating the opportunity to work with professional theater makers and – as the occasion had never arisen before – to form one ensemble out of the eight local groups. In 2015 and 2016 we conducted two workshops to introduce the play and try out some first readings and possible stagings of the text. Finally, twenty-five local amateurs, who ranged from eight to eighty years of age, formed the cast. Everybody who wanted to play was invited to play. This, as a consequence, forced us in our capacity as directors to find roles for every willing actor and set the first paradigm for the scenic concept: Griseldis was to be represented by five actresses of three generations. This multiplication of the main character formed the crucial point in the play's dramaturgy. Through her being mirrored in five actresses, the personage of Griseldis loses her individuality and is transformed into an allegorical phenomenon. In conclusion, we worked with the multiplication of people, space, and voices as the artistic guiding line throughout the whole piece. In a four-week period of reading-rehearsals, the local actors got used to the historical language of the play; their common local dialect facilitated the pronunciation of the characters' speech.

Some of the costumes were made out of rag paper, which is the same material the play's manuscript is written on. This paper consists of textiles, mostly hemp and linen, which are ground, dissolved in water, and drained through a screen. This sort of paper is very strong and flexible. A local tailor sewed coats and skirts out of rag paper, while a group of volunteers assisted in painting the fabric with colorful patterns.

Finally, the scenic rehearsals began in October 2016, in the newly built library designed by the architect Werner Tscholl, winner of the Italian Architect of the Year Award 2016. Tscholl is renowned for his sensitivity in dealing with historic monuments. He constructed the subterranean library under the cloister garden of

Two counts on the left (Vivienne Gapp and Barbara Strobl), Waltherus (Christian Mayer) and Vigilius (Hannes Warger) on the right. Photo by Maria Gapp.

the monastery and integrated the existing rocks and Romanesque stone walls of the eleventh century into his modern concrete architecture. This unusual space formed the set and stage design for the *Griseldis*. Its special acoustic and spatial defaults had a huge impact on the performance. The walls, consisting of concrete and stone, sharply reflect every sound and spoken word, creating echoes and delays. We worked with these acoustic phenomena and tried to create a musical atmosphere through the voices of our actors.

A conventional stage-audience theater setting would have been impossible in this particular architectural layout. We found a solution by placing the audience-platform along a diagonal in the center of the room: half the audience faced a Romanesque stone wall, while half was looking towards a newly built concrete wall. Throughout the whole performance we played with the fact that half of the audience could see one scene on their side of the stage but hear the other one from behind their backs, and vice versa. As a result, a strong focus lay on the characters' speech and the voices of the performers, which became very present and prominent in the space, differentiating scenes on the two stages on either side. From time to time, the performers' voices connected and formed choral songs, which were based on the text of *Griseldis* and had been composed by the local musician, composer, and folk music expert Ernst Thoma.

It was a long, adventurous, and intensive rehearsal period, bringing together individuals of different cultural and educational backgrounds. In the end, the whole process led to a unique experience for every single person involved: the monks, the architect, the local inhabitants of the villages, the members of the DramaNet project, and finally the actors and the audience. Ten fully booked performances were shown in November 2016 and the media response was overwhelming. This experience has encouraged us to continue interweaving artistic with scholarly approaches to early modern theater and drama and placing apparently ‘unstageable’ plays in a contemporary cultural context, creatively confronting one with the other.