II

Rudolph Hans Bartsch's "Elisabeth Koett"*

This novel, by an Austrian writer unknown to American readers, is an attempt to study the character and to present the career of a great actress. Elisabeth is the daughter of a janitor in the city of Graz in Styria, and is playing small parts upon the provincial stage when she is discovered by three lovers and connoisseurs of the theatre, Wigram, the librarian and philosopher, Rasmus, the pagan student and tutor, and Baron Gundenau, the aged antiquary. The first helps her to develop her genius by

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his interpretation of the parts she essays, and the third creates her an opportunity by his influence. It is still a fourth, however, the young business man, Hiller, who gets her an engagement in Vienna, in return for which she becomes his mistress in accordance with a pact previously entered into by them. This step is not regarded from the conventionally moral point of view by the author; for that Elisabeth must have lovers is accepted as a foregone conclusion not only by him, but by her three platonic patrons as well. But the Baron has made her promise that she will take the gowns and other gifts she needs from no man she does not really love. She does not love Hiller, hence her spiritual deterioration through a determination to take a short cut to that fame and success which she craves. At Vienna lover succeeds lover, and her vanity as a woman replaces her pure inspiration as an artist, without, however, affecting the quality of her acting, though it leads her to prefer an inferior class of rôles which enhance her individual importance.

Her worldly success is complete. She is even able to marry Baron Zeibern and so to become one of those great ladies who watch her from the boxes while she imitates them on the stage. But the very ease of these material conquests deprives them of all value and significance. They turn to ashes in her mouth. She becomes one of the women whom Wigram, with anticipatory irony, describes to her in the opening chapters of the book, as "ravening ogres. They experiment with men, start each time with a subtle presentiment, and end in disgust and contempt. Two or three men scarcely suffice for a season. And then these women, who are so empty themselves, raise a great cry of reproach against those whose souls they have found equally void." These Heddas and Noras, he continues, are greater than their sisters "only in that greed for the spiritual man whom the very society in which they live has destroyed and lost. And hence it is that our rich women carry with them that expression of gentle suffering. It is this fact that makes their eyes half-expectant, half-disconsolate, that gives their hands that nervous grasp. They knead a dream. And you have seen their lovely, listening throats, bent forward ever, their quivering lips, and their cheeks which are no longer muscles, but nerves. Our times have produced men who conquer all things, attain all things, enjoy all things, are apt for all uses, but have lost the depth of the immortal secret of life. And thus a new woman has arisen—yourself, Elisabeth, are such an one—to whom no distance is too far upon her quest, who must seek, and seek and seek. The noblest of them find, in the end—their own true selves." So does Elisabeth find both her self and Wigram, too, whom she has long scorned while dwelling among the "ready made" folk of society—but not before she has compassed the death of a youthful poet no less spiritual, to whose worth the vulgarity of her acquired view blinds her. But when, in her regeneration, she throws off the shackles that bind her, and tours the Slavonic provinces in big motor cars with her company as the apostle of the German Race, she produces the play he wrote for her, and finds in it her greatest rôle.

It is a queer book, with many extravagances of thought and speech; but in spite of what will seem to all save Teutons the perverseness of its nihilistic creed of death as the one cleanser of the obscure and murky modern world, it offers what so few English and American novels have to offer, namely, some criticism of life. It is a serious book, and, in its picturesquely imaginative and emotional style of expression, often arresting if not actually beautiful. Moreover, it not merely interprets modern life, but seeks to interpret the literature of the past in its spirit. The pages in which *Macbeth* is subjected to this process are singularly searching and creative. One wonders if this was the spirit in which *Macbeth* was performed at St. Wandrille. It is certainly the one spirit in which any kinship between the romanticism of Shakespeare and the romanticism of Maeterlinck is revealed. "Whispering, breathing upon him, maddening him by the magic of her person—thus she fought for and with him. They embraced so often that in the intimate interchange of speech they seemed a

single being with two souls. She implored, she flattered, she sang, almost, the suggestion of those horrors, and the ecstatic desire, the glowing hope softened the bloody awe of her words. She was more like a spoiled and wilful child who, in ignorant petulance, insists upon evil, than like a heartless criminal." So Elisabeth played Lady Macbeth, with simplicity of manner and complexity of mood, softening her and yet thereby rendering her the more terrible, in short making her a modern woman, a creature of soul and nerves, restored to savagery through civilisation.

Analysis of the other arts is not lacking, and the author in his contemptuous characterisation of the little dilettantes of Austrian poetry, painting, and sculpture, shows a nostalgic longing for the vigorous and manly makers of the Renaissance. He seems to dream of a renewed art wherein modern subtlety of spiritual expression may yet be combined with vigour of conception and execution on the grand scale. *Elisabeth Koett* is, perhaps, an attempt to realise this synthesis in fiction and in a female figure of heroic proportions who shall symbolise modern woman. She is an actress, because, as the author says, while it is the most physical and earthly of the arts, it is the only one in which a woman can attain to genius. But it is easier to emasculate a masterpiece of the past than to create a new one to embody the same perception of the truth, especially when the writer is a realist and seeks to employ as his material the *disjecta membra* of the life about him. From this point of view it is an artistic error to introduce constructive criticism into the pages of such a novel. The creative touch revives Lady Macbeth at the expense of Elisabeth, who seems pale and incomprehensible compared with her interpretation of that part. There is no adequate framework of action to afford a basis for the development of her character, and the capricious impulsiveness with which she acts, however truthfully it may paint the psychological portrait of the "new woman," reduces itself simply to insufficient motivisation when viewed from the artistic standpoint. Nothing really forces her to take a lover, nothing really obliges her to give up her husband, since vanity and disgust are not essentially fatal. Hence the story lacks any deep tragic seriousness or any true force of spiritual regeneration. It is, however, a brilliant bit of writing, and will help the reader to gain a broader view of modern life by revealing to him how general are many of those problems that are apt to be regarded as local and particular. Whatever differences in cultivation may exist between the two cities, Vienna and New York are the same in their fundamental social mechanism, as may be seen by the following comment on the theatrical situation in the former capital: "He (Hiller) observed that it was not the public taste of the great city that dragged down the repertory of its stage. It was the disgraceful competition of theatre with theatre that caused the exploitation of ever lower and lower instincts across the footlights, in order to drag the much-desired masses to the box office. And he also discovered that one could make the sparks of success fly upward easily enough if the fuel used was paper—money." Commercialism is the same corrupting curse in old Austria as in young America, and it may even afford some encouragement to learn that there are forces for evil at work in Austrian politics—forces that arise from complicated race hatreds fomented for purposes of selfish individual aggrandisement—from which ours fortunately must be forever free.

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