

Friedrich Hebbel Biography

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Biography

The plays of the German author Christian Friedrich Hebbel (1813-1863) combine realistic presentation with highly theoretical and philosophical principles.

Friedrich Hebbel was born on March 18, 1813, in Wesselburen, Holstein, the son of a poverty-stricken mason. Harboring youthful literary ambitions, he journeyed to Hamburg as the protégé of Amalie Schoppe, a popular writer. He failed to qualify for the university but met and established a relation with Elise Lensing, who later bore him two illegitimate sons. With her financial support he sought in vain to enter Heidelberg University in 1836 and then moved on to Munich.

After nearly 3 years of private study and privation Hebbel returned to Hamburg and completed a successful first drama, *Judith* (1840), a study of motivation in which altruism gives way to a self-centered desire for revenge leading to tragedy. A second drama, *Genoveva* (1840), treats the vicissitudes of a virtuous 8th-century Countess of Brabant. In 1843 Hebbel described his dramatic theory in the essay *Mein Wort über das Drama*: the individual ego, whether willing good or ill, must in its unavoidable drive toward expression conflict with the totality of mankind existing in the flow of time; that is, the developing individual inevitably clashes with historical development.

In the bourgeois tragedy *Maria Magdalena* (1844) the conflict originates for the first time, as Hebbel said, "within the bourgeois milieu itself," where custom and tradition exert a paralyzing effect upon the principals. After an Italian sojourn Hebbel settled in 1845 in Vienna and in 1846 married Christine Enghaus, a prominent actress. His subsequent career was successful and prosperous. Hebbel himself considered *Herodes und Mariamne* (1848) a "masterpiece." Here theory and dramatic effectiveness combine to expose the motives of two equally guilty and innocent principals, while the remarkable drama *Agnes Bernauer* (1852) depicts the innocently destructive power of great beauty in conflict with interests of state.

Hebbel's later dramas display a classicizing shift to verse. In *Gyges und sein Ring* (1854) he examines psychological motivation in ethical and religious terms, indicating how a Hegelian synthesis may emerge from antithetical views. His most ambitious undertaking is the trilogy *Die Niebelungen* (1855-1860), where, as he said, he sought to motivate in "purely human" terms the vital historical "turning point" when the Germanic peoples accepted Christianity.

Hebbel's verse tends toward the analytical and reflective, while his extensive diaries trace the development of his thought. He died in Vienna on Dec. 13, 1863.