

**THE LIFE AND
WORKS OF
FRIEDRICH HEBBEL**

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The Life and Works of Friedrich Hebbel by T. M. Campbell

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T. M. CAMPBELL

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Review
T. M. CAMPBELL, Ph.D.



BOSTON
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PREFACE

No apology need be offered for presenting to the English-reading public an account of the life and works of Friedrich Hebbel. The only apology in place is for the errors in fact and judgment that no doubt have been made in the course of the work. Hebbel still remains a much debated writer. Even his enemies concede a certain unique grandeur to his efforts, while his adherents believe that these efforts were, in large measure if not completely, crowned with success. We see him now against the background of a largely discredited philosophy, the systems of Schelling and Hegel. What seems, however, to connect him with those systems is far less important than the original intensity of his own nature. He did not draw his teaching from books. He stands, it is fair to assert, at the beginning of modern dramatic literature. Apparently without direct influence on Ibsen, he none the less anticipated Ibsen. He is the profound and lonely forerunner, more comprehensive and constructive than Ibsen and all who have come after him. The value of the *person* is indeed a leading motive in all his work, but he does equal justice to the power of vital conservatism. The Individual and the Universal—these are the two extremes between which he endeavors at every moment to establish a true relation. To him the very existence of the individual is a never ending problem, and this, together with the search for that upon which the individual can find assured rest, makes up the general elements of his tragedy. The individual has no license for ruthless expansion, while the social order, always the ultimate factor in any crisis, cannot become tyrannical without dissolution and subsequent rebirth. A just estimate of our powers in their relation to the powers above and around us, and the passion for filling our sphere, while resigning what is beyond it—such is the poet's definition of individuality, his conception

of a true education. Only then is the real identity established in man between morality and necessity.

For a new message Hebbel also wished to evolve a new form. On the one hand he desired to fuse the evolution of character with the unexcelled composition of the Greek drama; and on the other, while striving for something like Shakesperean vividness in the main scenes, he intended to accord greater room than Shakespeare to the general forces, or, to use his own expression, to the "divine antagonist." However much we may dispute about the value of this new form, which is explained at some length in the course of our discussion, there is no doubt that it has remained largely Hebbelian. It has found no followers of note, and perhaps it is destined not to. Meanwhile the poet's fame rests securely on the reality of his characters and the depth of his insight into life.

The particular problems debated in Hebbel's plays will be analyzed in the following pages. Among the most striking is that of woman, for Hebbel is a woman's poet. This statement, however, should not convey any suggestion of sentimentality, for no poet was ever further from that than this rough-hewn Schleswig-Holsteiner. The sternest idealism breathes through his tragedies, which make scarcely the slightest concession to popular taste. He is a woman's poet in the sense that he has an almost unerring penetration into the mysteries of her soul, and that he portrays women who are fully conscious of their individual rights over against unjustified demands. But here again the speculative cast of his genius leads him to ultimate relations and not on the paths of propaganda. It is characteristic of his women that they are nearly always superior to his men. From Judith to Kriemhild they are endowed with his penetrating intelligence and his inflexible moral demands in all essentials. Even Nora cannot stand comparison with Marianne or Rhodope. And as for woman in both weakness and strength, *Mary Magdalene*, which is said to have made a deep impression on Ibsen, is perhaps the most powerful tragedy ever written on that theme.

Hebbel's life, like his writings, was a struggle for expres-

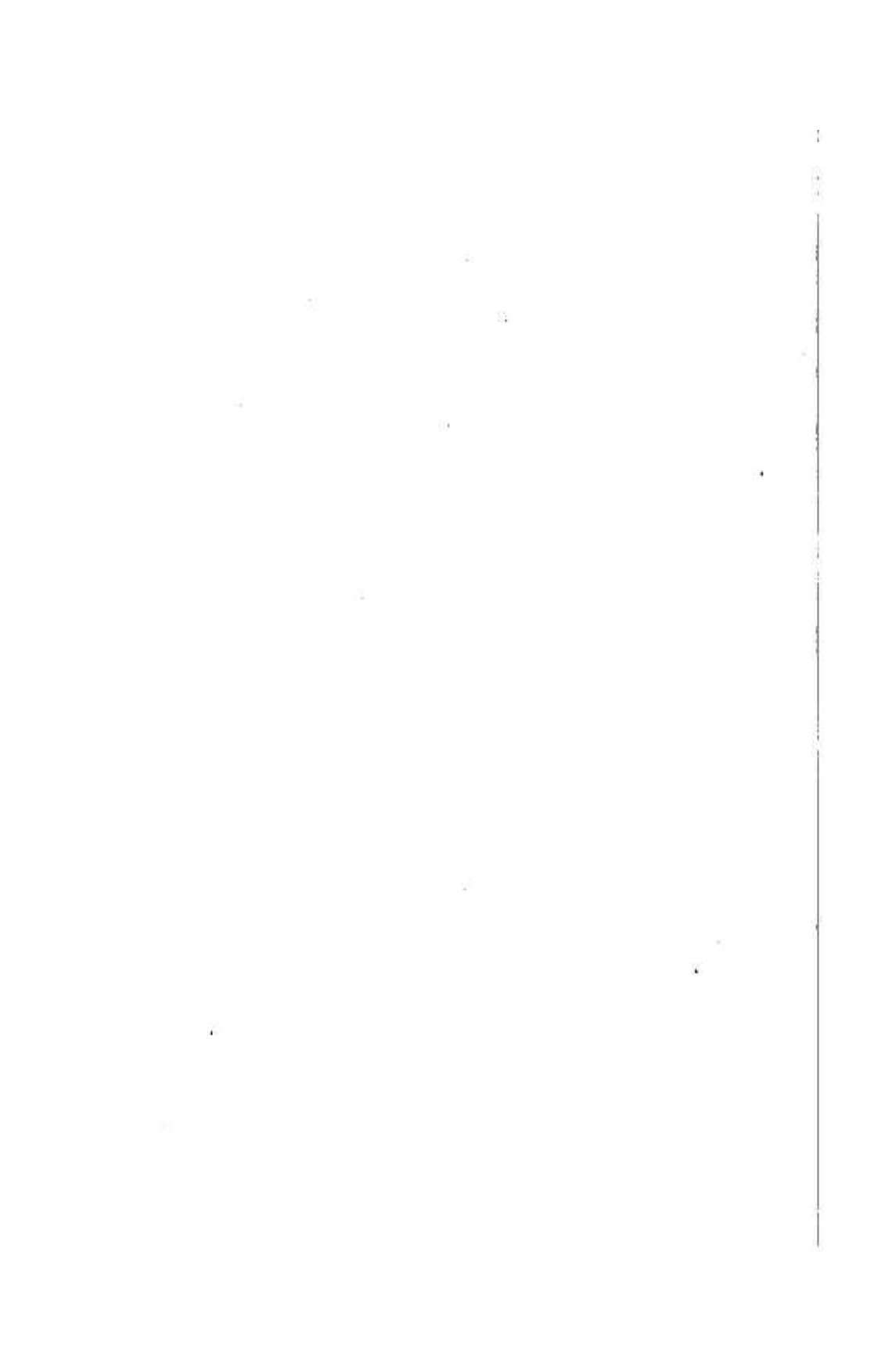
sion. He was an indomitable fighter, and but for that we should never have heard of him. Most men would have succumbed to what he went through with. He risked everything for his art—isolation, poverty, starvation, even the happiness of other people. His struggle measures for us the force of his convictions. His personality is not a lovable one, nor is his life free from the blight of egotism. Egotism indeed—according to his own teaching the pitfall of each individual—nearly became his curse. But he shows the abundant and inflexible energy of genius, he compels our admiration, and his life and his works are full of instruction to those who examine them.

The chief source of Hebbel's biographers is his extensive *Diary*, one of the most remarkable books in all literature. In addition there is a large fund of letters to draw on. His intimate friend, Emil Kuh, in a monumental biography of the poet, also gives much documentary evidence. Hebbel's life, indeed, whether in its sins or its virtues, is recorded with unusual fullness. The following work is based on an independent examination of the chief records, as far as that did not seem superfluous. References to the extensive literature of the subject are made where due in the course of the discussion, or else in the bibliographical appendix.

I wish to express my thanks to Professor O. E. Lessing, of the University of Illinois, for his helpful criticism, and also to Professor H. C. Davidsen, of Cornell, for placing his collection of monographs on Hebbel at my disposal.

Lynchburg, Virginia

July 26, 1918.



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