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Anti-Semitism in the Reception of Arthur Schnitzler's Writing

Abstract

Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931) was one of the most prominent Viennese fiction writers of the twentieth century. He was born Jewish, and although he was not religious and self-identified primarily as German, he witnessed and experienced a great deal of the anti-Semitism characteristic of turn-of-the-century Vienna. Although his writing has been increasingly well regarded since his death, his stories were often criticized during his lifetime, particularly when they featured Jewish characters. This paper analyzes some of these criticisms and argues that they were frequently driven by anti-Semitism.

Arthur Schnitzler was one of the most prominent Viennese writers of the twentieth century. His prolific output includes numerous plays, short stories, and novels, which mainly examine the themes of love and death in the context of turn of the century Vienna.¹ Schnitzler's stories and plays are highly regarded by modern audiences, but negative reactions to his work by critics, the public, and the government were common during his lifetime.² Although some of these criticisms were due to reasonable differences of opinion regarding the merit of Schnitzler's writing, much of the negative reception is best explained by the increasing presence of anti-Semitism in Austria and Germany during his career.

Schnitzler was born in 1862 to a wealthy Viennese family; his father, Johann, was a successful laryngologist.³ Arthur Schnitzler initially followed in his father's footsteps, graduating from the University of Vienna in 1885 with a doctorate in medicine.⁴ He also served in the medical corps for several years during his early adulthood.⁵ However, Schnitzler's interest in writing eventually led him to abandon these careers in favor of a life as a playwright and novelist. He published his first major work in 1893, and continued to write until his death in 1931.⁶

Despite the fact that many successful members of Viennese society were Jewish, including a large percentage of doctors and lawyers, the city's anti-Semitic prejudice was strong.⁷ Discrimination against people of Jewish ethnicity in Vienna increased around the turn of the century, in part due to the election of anti-Semitic mayor Karl Lueger, and continued to worsen throughout the first half of the 1900s.^{8,9} Jewish people faced considerable pressure to disown their heritage, become baptized, and assimilate to Austria's predominantly Christian culture.¹⁰ However, even those who converted to Christianity were seen as lesser people because of their Jewish "blood," and these conversions led some anti-Semites to stereotype Jews as obsessive social climbers.^{11,12}

¹ Dagmar C.G. Lorenz, ed., *A Companion to the Works of Arthur Schnitzler* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003), 196.

² *Ibid.*, 195.

³ Arthur Schnitzler, *My Youth in Vienna*, trans. Catherine Hutter (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶ Lorenz, *A Companion*, 1-8.

⁷ Bruce Thompson, *Schnitzler's Vienna: Image of a Society* (London: Routledge, 1990), 8.

⁸ Peter Gay, *Schnitzler's Century: The Making of Middle-Class Culture 1815-1914* (New York: W.W. Norton 2002), 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁰ Thompson, *Schnitzler's Vienna*, 9.

¹¹ Gay, *Schnitzler's Century*, 112-115.

¹² *Ibid.*, 226.

Although Schnitzler's childhood was not as badly marred by prejudice as those of some children his age (likely due to his socioeconomic privilege, the fact that his family did not practice Judaism, and the tendency of upper class Jewish families to associate mainly with each other), he experienced discrimination as a young man both in medical school and in the army. During this period, Schnitzler observed troublesome indications of his country's bias against Jews, including incidents of brutal violence against Jewish students, a decree declaring all children of Jewish descent to be "ethically subhuman" beings "without honor and void of all the more refined emotions," and the segregation of the army into Jewish and non-Jewish units.¹³ Throughout his career, Schnitzler rarely made overt political statements in either his writings or his newspaper interviews.¹⁴ This avoidance of political themes makes it all the more significant that he chose to expound upon the effects of anti-Semitism in two of his more well-known works, *Der Weg ins Freie* (*The Road into the Open*) and *Professor Bernhardt*.¹⁵ It is likely that his traumatic experiences in the medical corps were a primary reason for his decision to use these works as platforms for Jewish activism.

One of the first incidents in which anti-Semitism influenced the reception of Schnitzler's writings occurred in 1900, when he published the short story *Leutnant Gustl*. This work criticized the attitudes and practices of Austrian officers and created an uproar among Schnitzler's supervisors, who objected to his characterization of officers as hypocritical, weak, and prejudiced against Jewish soldiers.¹⁶ The military's subsequent decision to remove Schnitzler from his position as reserve officer was probably at least partially due to the accuracy of his accusations of anti-Semitism.

During this same period, fellow students told the aspiring writer that he lacked the knowledge and authority necessary to write about Viennese women because, as a Jew, he was incapable of understanding them.¹⁷ Additionally, an acquaintance discouraged him from reading classic German novels that were supposedly beyond his comprehension for the same reason.¹⁸ This bigotry must have been especially wounding given that the non-religious Schnitzler identified as German more than Jewish.¹⁹

Schnitzler returned to the subject of the army's unfair treatment of Jews in his 1908 novel *Der Weg ins Freie*, the story of a young Jewish composer and his efforts to become a member of the social elite despite his marginalized ethnicity.

¹³ Schnitzler, *My Youth*, 115-131.

¹⁴ Thompson, *Schnitzler's Vienna*, 160.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Lorenz, *A Companion*, 154-155.

¹⁷ Gay, *Schnitzler's Century*, 115.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Andrew Barker, *Fictions from an Orphan State: Literary Reflections of Austria between Habsburg and Hitler* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012), 50.

One of the novel's supporting characters, a Jewish soldier, is the victim of anti-Semitic events similar to those depicted in *Leutnant Gustl* and witnessed by Schnitzler himself.²⁰ Hermann Bahr, an influential author, critic, and (later reformed) anti-Semite, wrote a strongly negative review of *Der Weg ins Freie* upon its publication.²¹ Bahr admired Schnitzler as a writer, befriended and mentored him, and praised several of his other works, which suggests that his dislike of *Der Weg ins Freie* may have had more to do with its pro-Jewish message than its literary merit.²² Although it is difficult to measure the repercussions of an individual review on an author's career, it is probable that Bahr's criticism undermined Schnitzler's reputation in the eyes of audiences and critics.

Schnitzler experienced another setback four years later, shortly after the publication of his play *Professor Bernhardi*.²³ The title character of this work is a Jewish doctor who unjustly loses his job and is sent to prison as a result of cultural and political anti-Semitism.²⁴ Viennese officials, probably motivated by their own anti-Semitic convictions and fears of riots at performances, were quick to prohibit its staging. Although *Professor Bernhardi* was performed elsewhere, its censorship within Schnitzler's home city probably hurt the author financially, damaged his reputation, and cost him an opportunity to reach a larger audience with what has since become one of his most well-known works.

The most egregiously anti-Semitic response to Schnitzler's work was the reception of *Reigen*, a play that examined ten sexual encounters between people of varying social classes. Schnitzler initially released *Reigen* to the public in 1903, and it was met with near-unanimous criticism from the country's newspapers.²⁵ While a few critiques were anti-Semitic in nature, the majority merely objected to sexual content that reviewers felt was morally reprehensible.²⁶

Responses became viciously bigoted when regular performances of *Reigen* began in Vienna in 1921.²⁷ The difference in reception between the play's publication in 1903 and its production eighteen years later can be explained partially by the "rise of extreme nationalism and anti-Semitism in the aftermath" of World War I.²⁸ The show was initially well received, but organized protests

²⁰ Thompson, *Schnitzler's Vienna*, 136-137.

²¹ Donald G. Daviau, ed., *The Letters of Arthur Schnitzler to Hermann Bahr* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 34-37.

²² *Ibid.*, 28-37.

²³ Thompson, *Schnitzler's Vienna*, 168-174.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Otto Schinnerer, "The History of Schnitzler's *Reigen*," *PMLA* 46, no. 3 (1931): 840-841.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 848-859.

²⁸ Lorenz, *A Companion*, 6-7.

began shortly after it opened. Violent riots, which included anti-Semitic taunts and sometimes stink bombs, ensued at multiple productions after certain newspapers panned the show and ran columns encouraging readers to disrupt it.²⁹ Although it would be understandable for some of Vienna's more conservative citizens to be wary of the public portrayal of sexual intercourse and the effects it could have on the city's youth, *Reigen* did not pose a serious threat. These performances were carefully orchestrated to be as tasteful as possible, and sexual acts were not depicted on stage.³⁰ The public response to *Reigen* was organized mainly by the Christian Socialist Party and other groups whose actions were driven by anti-Semitism rather than legitimate concern about the show's content.³¹

In late 1921, a trial was held to determine whether performances of the play could continue. Although English translations of the proceedings are unavailable, the consensus among scholars is that the court's ruling in favor of *Reigen* was easily justified by the blatantly anti-Semitic and political motivations of the prosecution, as well as the numerous literary experts who came to the play's defense.³²

The final ten years of Schnitzler's life after the *Reigen* controversy were productive, but his later work did not garner as much popularity or critical acclaim as the rest of his writing.³³ Many modern critics agree that the quality of Schnitzler's creative output did not decline over time; his relative slump in popularity in the 1920s can be attributed to the aftermath of the *Reigen* scandal, the ever-increasing anti-Semitism leading up to the advent of World War II, and a general loss of interest in Schnitzler's limited thematic content.³⁵

As prejudice against Jews declined in the latter half of the twentieth century, Arthur Schnitzler's work experienced a steady rise in popularity. He is currently regarded as a talented and influential playwright and novelist, and his postmortem success has eclipsed the level of acclaim he received while alive. Although he achieved a considerable amount of fame and popularity in his lifetime, his stories and plays were sometimes the subject of considerable ridicule and controversy. Considering the bigoted nature of many of these criticisms,

²⁹ Schninnerer, "Schnitzler's *Reigen*," 848-850.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 846-848.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 852.

³² *Ibid.*, 850.

³³ G. J. Weinberger, *Arthur Schnitzler's Late Plays: A Critical Study* (New York: Peter Lang), 1-10.

³⁴ Robert Kann, "Arthur Schnitzler: Reflections on the Evolution of His Image," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8, no. 4 (1967): 548-549.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Lorenz, *A Companion*, 196.

particularly those concerning *Der Weg ins Freie*, *Professor Bernhadi*, and *Reigen*, it seems clear that one prominent factor in the negative reception of his work was the striking anti-Semitism that characterized Austria and Germany during his career.

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