Brecht's Tradition

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Appendix

Introduction. In 1928 a noted historian of drama asserted that Shakespeare’s episodic history play had exerted minimal influence on the development of modern theater; that same historian then mentioned as drawbacks of the history play that it is not suspenseful except to those who know “the course of history” and that it is held together not by a firm plot but at the most by “the presence of such characters as Richard III or Hotspur.” Perhaps it was still too early to appreciate what Brecht had learned from Shakespeare’s histories, and perhaps it was necessary for Brecht to be appreciated in this regard before one could give Lenz, Grabbe, and Büchner their due. At any rate, we now realize that the episodic play grounded on a more or less anti-Aristotelian approach deserves singling out as a significant cultural development and that this kind of drama derives its unique identity from the very omissions which have so often been held against it. When I say “we,” I actually mean those who have read the key works which constitute the bridge from Lenz to Brecht. Unfortunately, Lenz seems to have been wholly neglected by English and American translators and neither Grabbe’s Napoleon nor his Hannibal can be read except in German. The same is true of Kraus’s The Last Days of Mankind, and here the outlook is no brighter than present actuality: no one honestly expects this mammoth work to be translated in toto. In view of this, it was felt the reader of Brecht’s Tradition would welcome selected exemplary scenes whose style and content were pertinent to the text’s discussion. It is to be hoped that full translations of The Tutor and The Soldier as well as of Grabbe’s historical dramas will in time be available and thus render superfluous at least part of what has here been added.