

EPHEMERAL CLASSICS? THE INFLUENCE AND FATE OF THE ‘PROFESSORIAL NOVEL’

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An exotic subject crops up, sets the cultured afire for a year or two; after five years the whole hubbub is forgotten; after ten years it is only the diligent literary scholars who will remember that there was ever a famous historical novelist called Felix Dahn.

Georgy Lukács¹

The attitudes of academics and teachers to the depiction of the ancient world in popular culture, particularly in historical films and novels, vary considerably, but are frequently unfavourable. A successful work set in the ancient world often provokes stinging criticism because of historical inaccuracies, or is only barely tolerated on the cynical grounds that the interest it sparks in the ancient world may in the future produce increased enrolments. When academics themselves become involved in the production of these works, criticism can become personal, and range from accusations of venality on the one hand to intellectual snobbery and jealousy on the other. Objective criticism of artistic merit in these works can be difficult to find.

These problems are nothing new, and may be traced back to the emergence of the historical novel in Western Europe as a commercially successful form in the early 19th century. One of the most interesting manifestations of this genre, although largely forgotten today, was the so-called ‘Professorenroman’, or ‘Professorial novel’, a form which appeared in the Germany of the late 1800’s. Its two leading exponents were academics at German universities, Felix Dahn, a professor of law, and Georg Ebers, an Egyptologist.

Dahn (1834-1912) came from an artistic background; his father was a theatre director in Munich and his mother a French actress.² His chosen profession was, however, the law, and his specialization the history of law in early Germanic society. In 1851 he moved to Berlin to complete his studies. One reason behind his move was that he had been subjected to an attack in an anonymous leaflet by an ultra-conservative Catholic; hatred of Christianity, and in particular of Catholicism coloured his later fictional writing.³ In Berlin he joined a literary society which included the outstanding novelist Theodor Fontane, and also made the acquaintance of the greatest figure in 19th-century German classical scholarship, Theodor Mommsen. Following graduation, a failed marriage, a period of poverty when he scraped a living as a journalist and a year-long journey throughout Italy, he was finally appointed Professor of Law at Würzburg in 1863.

It was at Würzburg that Dahn’s chief work of classical scholarship was written, his study of the late Greek historian Procopius. As he explained in the introduction to this work, his intention to study the laws of the Germanic peoples led inevitably back to consideration of the codification of Roman laws under Justinian (reigned 527-565), and the history of his reign, which was chronicled by Procopius; only when this was first studied properly would it be

1 Lukács (1962), 183.

2 Biographical details are taken from Martini (1957).

3 Cf. the portrait of the Bishop Eusebius in *Julian the Apostate*; he is made a direct accomplice in Emperor Constantius’ plan to murder his uncles and cousins.

possible to trace the development of Germanic law throughout the succeeding centuries.⁴ Procopius is, moreover, one of the major sources for the history of the Germanic kingdoms, particularly those in Italy and Northern Africa, following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. Dahn's study, which was published in 1865, was dedicated to Mommsen, and was not only a highly influential work in its own field, but was also an important representative of the type of classical scholarship in late 19th-century Germany largely inspired by Mommsen, whose driving aim was to publish all works written in classical antiquity in modern scientific editions, particularly those previously neglected by scholars because they did not fall within a rather narrow literary canon.

But Dahn had already begun writing historical fiction which drew heavily on his scholarship for narrative details. He began his most successful work, *Ein Kampf um Rom (A Battle for Rome)* in 1859, before he had achieved academic success, and eventually published it in four large volumes between 1876 and 1878. The work describes the final years of the Gothic kingdom established in Italy on the ruins of the Western Roman Empire.⁵ It established Dahn's reputation as a major writer and proved to be extremely profitable for him; by 1900 it had been reprinted 30 times and even after World War I was being recommended to German youth as suitable patriotic reading.⁶ Buoyed by the success of this work, Dahn proceeded to write a series of dramatic novels depicting the fates of the various Germanic kingdoms, including two which dealt with the Emperor Julian and the invasions of Attila respectively, but did not achieve very great success with them.

Much of the historical background in *Ein Kampf um Rom* derives from Procopius' historical works, although Dahn invented important roles for characters mentioned only in passing by his sources,⁷ and appears also to have been influenced by contemporary anthropological accounts of the Germanic past: the novel begins with a dramatic scene set at midnight during a storm where the four main characters swear an oath to defend the Gothic kingdom at any cost and sprinkle their own blood over the hidden grave of a hero, a ceremony known from medieval Icelandic sources.⁸ Other aspects of the novel reflect themes of near-contemporary historical fiction; one of the four Gothic heroes, Totila, is saved at the siege of Naples by a beautiful Jewish girl, Miriam, who sacrifices herself out of love for him, recalling similar plots in works like Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Another dimension in the work was the collapse of Austrian rule in Northern Italy in the 1850's and 60's and the growth of Italian nationalism; the stereotyping of the leading Italian characters as malevolent and treacherous and the Germans as both heroic and fatalistic in the face of final disaster seems in some respects to reflect the despondency and anger with which Dahn, a fervent pan-Germanic nationalist, greeted these events.⁹ Nevertheless, it should also be recalled that the themes of Roman duplicity and barbarian nobility, of the corruption of the imperial court, particularly under the influence of eunuchs, and the decay of classical society were already freely available to Dahn in Procopius, in his openly published *Wars* and the poisonous *Anecdota* or *Secret History*.¹⁰

4 Dahn (1865), 3.

5 For a resume of the novel, see Simon (1974).

6 Simon (1974), 113 n. 2.

7 Cf. his treatment of the figure of the Roman senator Cethegus (*PLRE* 2.281-2), who becomes one of the main villains of Dahn's work, constantly scheming to restore Roman power.

8 See the discussion in Simon (1974), 110f.

9 Martini (1957), 484. Dahn's poetry of the time is filled with bitter hatred of the new Italian kingdom: cf. his poem *Gegen Rom (Against Rome)* of 1875.

10 In his study of Procopius, Dahn stressed how the extreme contrast between Procopius' ideal of the Roman state and its present corruption was the most important element in his thinking; see Dahn (1865), 108.

Dahn's name is often linked in literary discussions with that of Georg Ebers (1837-1898), although Ebers came from a quite different background.¹¹ His parents were both Jewish, but converted to Lutheranism in the 1820s, and Ebers grew up in a household determined to assimilate into mainstream German society. He originally intended to study law, but suffered a number of illnesses as an adolescent; it was during one lengthy period of convalescence that, in order to overcome boredom, he began studying hieroglyphics, and soon developed a consuming love of ancient Egypt. In 1869 he obtained a professorial position in Jena; in the same year he departed on a two year archaeological expedition to Egypt, and returned there for a second season in 1872/3. Besides his digging, he also purchased one of the most important Egyptian papyri on medical matters, dating to ca. 1500 BC, which he published in a critical edition in 1875.

Like Dahn, Ebers supplemented his academic work by writing fiction. He wrote a series of novels set at different stages of Egyptian history, extending from the Old Kingdom down to the time of Hadrian. Of these, the most influential was undoubtedly *Eine Ägyptische Königstochter* (*An Egyptian Royal Princess*), first published in 1864, but considerably revised throughout his later career. This one work had been printed over 400,000 times by 1926, and was translated into 16 languages. Ebers earned a sum of more than 1,000,000 marks for his entire Egyptian series,¹² making him one of the most successful novelists of the 19th century, at least in commercial terms.

Eine Ägyptische Königstochter is set around the time of the Persian conquest of Egypt (525 BC); one of the two heroines is Nitetis, an Egyptian princess sent to marry the insane Persian king Cambyses, but the cultural milieu of the work is Greek, particularly at the beginning, and a second heroine, named Sappho after the poetess, marries Kambyzes' brother. Many of the main characters were in fact taken from Books 1 to 3 of Herodotus, like the Greek courtesan Rhodopis, who lived in Egypt and who is made the grandmother of Sappho, or King Croesus of Lydia. Ebers fleshed out the meagre narrative of Herodotus by including depictions of daily life and customs amongst the Egyptians and Persians, and took details for these from reports on the great 19th-century archaeological expeditions to Egypt and Mesopotamia.¹³ In later editions of this book, Ebers added end-notes to provide complete academic references, and to bring the work up to date with the latest discoveries in his field. In the opening chapter two Greek mercenaries visit Rhodopis' house, famous for its social gatherings, and there is a detailed description of her garden:

In the garden of Rhodopis there were perfumes, flowers and the humming of insects, like on an enchanted night. Acanthus, pomegranates turning red, hedges dotted with tiny snowballs, jasmine and lilac, roses and laburnum crowded one upon the other; lofty palm-trees, Nile acacias and balsam trees towered above the bushes; large bats with delicate wings flittered above the whole scene, and from the river there came the sound of singing and laughter

(*Eine Ägyptische Königstochter*, Ch. 1).

Ebers later provided this description with an endnote which set out the evidence for the Egyptians' skill in building gardens:

11 Biographical details are taken from Richter (1959).

12 Bramsted (1964), 277.

13 Cf. the descriptions of Babylon with which Book 2 opens.

The best pictures of the ornamental gardens of the ancient Egyptians have been found in the graves of Tell el-Amarna (18th Dynasty). Lepsius, *Monuments from Egypt and Ethiopia*, Part III, pp. 102 ff. They are also found in graves at 'Abd el-Qurna in the necropolis of Thebes, e.g. in the grave of Anna, who numbers the trees of his garden, and in the grave of the general Amen em heb which we excavated. Cf. also Erman's *Egypt and Egyptian Life in Antiquity* p. 249ff. 272ff. and Maspero, *Histoire ancienne des peuples de l'Orient classique. Les origines. Égypte*, p. 340.

Despite this constant attention to historical detail, Ebers appears to have been very conscious of the potential for criticism of his work by his academic colleagues, and in the preface to his second edition defended his decision to publish fiction of this kind with this argument:

[I cannot deny] that there are a great number of respectable academics who indicate to a young student of the sciences that he has acted wrongly if he has clothed the achievements of serious studies in a costume woven by imagination. With regard to some works I admit they are right; but the friendly reception which this book received from so many learned people demonstrates, I believe, that it is still accepted with good grace if an academic does not disdain just once, for his own pleasure and that of others, to make the results of his researches available to the widest possible audience.... Whoever takes a learned work in his hand already has an explicit interest in the sciences, but it can happen very easily that someone, who only seeks entertainment in these pages, is inspired by what he has read and searches out a learned study, and so perhaps has been won over for the study of the ancient world.

Nevertheless Ebers could also display a patronising attitude to some of his readers. The implicit assumption that contemporary women's education should include Latin, but that Greek was the sole preserve of male academics, is revealed in the following remark on ancient names:

From now on I give these in the Latin, instead of the Greek form; for more than one of my lovely female readers has assured me that they would grasp Ibykus and Cyrus as recognizable names, whereas the 'Ibykos' and 'Kyros' of the first edition appeared to them as strange, over-learned, and for this reason alienating...

Dahn and Ebers were major figures of the literary world during their day; it is therefore surprising that their fame is matched by a complete neglect in modern criticism. Despite the prominence of their works in purely commercial terms, practically nothing has been written about them in mainstream literary criticism in the immediate past.¹⁴ This neglect may be due to a whole range of social and literary factors over a long period of time, beginning with the disapproval of fellow academics hinted at by Ebers in his preface, but the final straw seems to

14 Cf. the leading annual bibliography of modern German literature, *Bibliographie der Deutschen Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft*, in which there are only two periodical articles listed over the period 1989-1998 dealing with Dahn, and none at all dealing with Ebers.

have come from the Hungarian-born Marxist Georgy Lukács, whose damning appraisal of Dahn's historical legacy is cited at the outset of this article, and whose theory still exerts a powerful influence over some schools of modern German literary criticism. Lukács' attitude towards both Dahn and Ebers was unremittingly hostile, and at times the language he uses to dismiss them is simply insulting:

'Milieu' in the historical novel, however, inevitably degenerates into a deadening preponderance of antiquarianism. This can take quite vulgar forms as in the once so popular novels of Dahn and Ebers...

if one disregards the fact that one is dealing with works of art and looks on them as essays... Ebers appears as the vulgar popularizer of a superficial and banal egyptology...

we have in Ebers and Dahn an anticipation of the flattest and most soulless naturalism in German literature.¹⁵

Lukács' assessment of Ebers and Dahn focuses almost exclusively on literary qualities, and does not attempt to explain the enormous, albeit ephemeral popularity of their works. But whether we accept his views or not, is there anything which might help to explain why it was that these works were so widely read in late 19th-century Germany, and in this period and society alone? Some elements in them clearly reflect aspects of contemporary culture and ideology: in the case of Dahn's novels describing the Germanic past, widespread interest in this area was undoubtedly excited by Wagner's operas. With regard to the classical aspects of these works, in the late 19th century Greek and Latin dominated the educational system for the German upper and middle classes, and it can be assumed that a large part of the audience for these books must have been familiar at some level with the core texts in classical languages, which in Greek meant either Homeric epic or the literature of Athens from the 5th and 4th centuries BC, and in Latin works from the period spanning 60 BC to 120 AD.¹⁶ Although the barbarian societies depicted by Dahn and Ebers in their novels, both Gothic and Egyptian, were very much on the periphery of this world, and their culture was either ignored, misunderstood or misrepresented by these classical writers, the recognizably classical attitudes on the part of many characters derived from Procopius or Herodotus may have provided a useful way of introducing a contemporary audience to these alien societies. More importantly perhaps, the growth of archaeological and anthropological studies in the 19th century sparked widespread public interest in exotic societies. The ancient East established a physical presence in the midst of major German cities like Berlin, where the Egyptian Museum was founded in 1828, and soon obtained an extensive collection of artefacts including mummies and papyri. The barbarian worlds constructed by Dahn and Ebers thus offered a reading public opportunities to satisfy their intellectual curiosity about these societies, but also indulged their innate sentimentalism with an abundance of romance and tragedy. As Ebers commented in his preface to *Eine Ägyptische Königstochter*:

15 Lukács (1962), 245.

16 For a detailed discussion of classics within the German educational system see *The Teaching of Classics in Secondary Schools in Germany*: London HMSO, 1910.

I do not wish and should not make myself entirely free of the basic attitudes of the time and the country in which my readers and I were born; for if I had wished to depict purely ancient people and conditions, I would have become in part incomprehensible to the modern reader, and no longer enjoyable, and would thus have failed my intention from the beginning.

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17 Unless otherwise indicated, translations in this paper are my own. I would like to thank Dr Clara Tuite of the English Department, University of Melbourne, for helpful advice.