

Schiller's Money

By Dagmar Lorenz, Wiesbaden DE, © MoneyMuseum
(Translated by Geoffrey P. Burwell)

2005 is Schiller Year. On 9th May 2005 it will be 200 years since the writer died. While German scholars of literature and Swiss patriots once again pay tribute only to his intellectual powers, this article will provide an insight into the pecuniary circumstances of his life and work.

Hard times

In the winter of 1784 hard times set in. The 25-year-old playwright Friedrich Schiller, acclaimed star of the Mannheim theatre and author of the successful play "Die Räuber" (The Robbers), was up to his ears in debt. His patron, Henriette von Wolzogen, had demanded the return of a considerable sum she had once lent him. But how could he raise the money? Schiller's contract with the Mannheim Theatre had run out, and the director had even advised him to change his profession. A journal project with which Schiller had hoped to improve his precarious financial situation seemed to be doomed to failure.

The writer recalls some admirers who were unknown to him. Six months earlier four young people – the two sisters Dora and Minna Stock and their two fiancés Ludwig Ferdinand Huber and Christian Gottfried Körner – had written him an effusive letter. So what could be more obvious than to inform his admirers about his own miserable situation? Schiller wrote a letter of thanks, embellished with complaints about the financial situation of German writers and his own gloomy prospects: if it were not for these wretched "commercial considerations" he would have been able to devote his creative powers, following the "prompting of genius," principally to the theatre. Now, instead, he saw himself compelled to waste his energy as a journalist on dubious magazine projects – that was the tenor of the letter.

The quartet of admirers were concerned about the poet and invited him to Leipzig to pay them a longish visit. Schiller wrote back – and the first time he addressed his letter to Körner, the young man from the Leipzig circle of friends who was to become his close friend and patron. "Up to now," wrote Schiller, "fate has hindered my designs. My heart and my muses were at the same time overcome by necessity. All that is needed is such a revolution of my fate that I begin to become a completely different person – that I begin to become a writer."

The request for the "revolution of fate" did not remain unheard. The friends encouraged Schiller not only to continue working on his new play "Don Karlos." They also looked for a possibility of publishing the journal that was planned, the first and only issue of which could soon appear as "Rheinische Thalia," published by Göschen, Leipzig. A loan that Schiller received from Körner allowed him to settle his most pressing debts in Mannheim and to set out to visit his new friends in Leipzig. The crisis was over, the poet Schiller saved – for the time being.

Schiller or a writer's career in the 18th century

"To make of oneself who one is" – Jean-Paul Sartre had once demanded of himself and of the hero of his great Flaubert biography. If, however, this credo is applied to Friedrich Schiller, born in Marbach, Swabia, in 1759, it inevitably collided with what Schiller had described in his letter as "fate" – that was above all the social barriers of his origin. His father was a 2nd lieutenant in the

service of Duke Carl Eugen of Württemberg and on the latter's orders he had to place his 13-year-old son, Friedrich, in the duke's "military nursery," in which the country's gifted children were trained to become qualified personnel in the service of the House of Württemberg. For eight years young Friedrich Schiller lived in conditions which, as he wrote later, were "like torture" for him: the military drill, the draconian punishment and the constant supervision of all aspects of life. When he had completed his training as a regimental doctor and left the institute, he was by no means a free man. So that he could live an existence he himself had chosen, Schiller – with the duke's persecutors in hot pursuit – had to flee from Stuttgart. In Mannheim he scraped through for one year as a writer for the theatre and celebrated his first successes with the public with the production of his "Räuber."

But for the help from friends and patrons, however, he would hardly have managed to earn his livelihood in later years: it was Goethe who recommended the poet who had turned up unexpectedly in the Weimar intellectual company for a professorship in Jena, an act that was not completely altruistic, for Goethe thereby kept a potential rival at arm's length and at the same time obliged him to be grateful. And later, through his collaboration on Schiller's magazine projects, Goethe contributed to bolstering Schiller's position with the publishers. When it emerged that serious illness would prevent the author from following any very regular activity in the years remaining to him up to his death, magnanimous patrons, including the Danish minister of finance, again helped out.

And also Schiller himself did everything in his power to safeguard the existence of his wife and children: in Berlin, then the capital of Prussia, where he was invited to an audience with the young queen, Luise, he brought up the matter of a pension. Back in Weimar, he managed to persuade the duke to double his pension. He could thus bring his success as an author for the theatre and a poet to bear – and in the end the emperor in Vienna even raised him to the nobility.

When Schiller died on 9th May 1805 at the age of 45, he left – measured by the short lifespan he had been given – an immense work that he had wrested from his weakened body in hard work. That he had also succeeded in wresting his social advancement from the limitations of his time may well have appeared equally impressive to his contemporaries.

Robbery, wartime economy and the art of making money in Schiller's dramas

Schiller's most popular plays – beginning with the "Räuber" and extending to "Don Karlos" and "Wilhelm Tell" – are doubtless emotional panoramas that made great theatre, in which heroes and criminals, lovers and schemers quarrel about power, love and freedom.

The fact that Friedrich Schiller left his stage to great emotions and not, for example, to the petty affairs of everyday life contributed, in the 19th century, to the stereotype image of the idealistically-minded poet who hardly had prosaic reality in mind.

Indeed, in these dramas there is rarely any obvious mention of concerns about money and everyday problems, yet the power of money does sometimes invisibly guide the actions of Schiller's figures – for example, in "Die Räuber," a work of his youth imbued with emotionalism. The hero of Schiller's drama, Karl Moor, flouts the bourgeois world of values because he violently misappropriates the property of others and then generously distributes it among the poor, instead of – like his scheming brother, Franz, – acting with extreme conformity as an egoistic legacy-hunter. His roguish brother's great gesture against the rapacity sanctioned by society is again heightened at the end: Karl wants to turn himself in to the judicial authorities by giving the price on his head offered for his arrest to a poor day-labourer. Such magnanimity, laid on so thick, was guaranteed to

have its effect at the premiere in Mannheim. The female theatre-goers' tears are likely to have poured into their handkerchiefs like mountain torrents.

How completely different, on the other hand, is the way in which the conditions of the material world are later depicted in Schiller's "Wallenstein" Trilogy. The famous general of the Thirty Years' War is not presented by Schiller as a lawless man oozing magnanimity, but as a roaming gentleman of fortune in the symbolic and literal sense. The Schiller expert Norbert Oellers has pointed out in his "Wallenstein" interpretation that the "luck" frequently invoked in the drama has to be understood as "Fortuna": as an allusion to the ancient goddess of capricious, haphazard chance. Under the lucky star of Fortuna, who at a certain favourable moment inundates someone with those external good things in life which she deprives him of the next moment, Wallenstein wins and loses. His character is already revealed in the first part of Schiller's drama, in "Wallensteins Lager" (Wallenstein's Camp). Here, too, Fortuna is omnipresent: we encounter a motley crowd of mercenaries who have only joined Wallenstein because he guarantees them good fortune in war and prospects of rich booty. For the soldiers it has nothing to do with religion, justice or any higher aims. All that counts is material gain. In "Wallensteins Lager" Schiller shows us a cosmos, devoid of senses, which cannot be healed by invoking ancient traditions and loyalties. It seems as if in "Wallenstein" the world of the ideal has finally resigned.

“Poor” Schiller, “rich” Goethe

Since the writer's death Schiller's name has been misused. Depending on the prevailing Zeitgeist, his works, but also his biography, have been monopolised for this or that political ideology. The poet of "Die Glocke" (The Bell) served the bourgeoisie as the credentials for its own philistine attitudes. The workers' movement in imperial times did not hesitate to declare the author of "Die Räuber" a champion of the class struggle – regardless of the subsequent patent of nobility granted him by an authoritarian state – and sought to back Schiller in this position, who came from a modest background, against the wealthy Frankfurt "son of a bourgeois family," Goethe. The cliché of Friedrich Schiller as the penniless poet, whose notorious lack of success was mirrored in Goethe's fame, persistently survived all later attempts to appropriate Schiller to their own ends – for example, by the Nazis or the orthodox communists.

Perhaps on the 200th anniversary of his death it is high time to create a picture of Schiller in keeping with the current trend: so what about Friedrich Schiller as the intellectual entrepreneur with business acumen, who successfully resists the attempts by state authorities to patronise the citizens, who escapes the threat of turning university staff into civil servants and motivates sponsors to make generous donations of money for special purposes? The manager Friedrich Schiller could effortlessly serve as a role model in times of economic depression! It is true that this cliché would be just as false as all the others before it – but as Wallenstein once said in the writer's words: "The paths of my fate have nothing in common / Nor do the furrows of my hand. / Who would like / To interpret my life for me in a human manner?"