



The rebel as a literary figure: The study of a medieval and a modern test case. Uprising and catastrophe examined through a comparative approach Wernher the Gardener and Heinrich von Kleist

Albrecht Classen*

PhD in Medieval and Early Modern German and European Literature and Culture,
Distinguished Professor

University of Arizona

AZ 85721, 1200 E University Blvd., Tucson, United States

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3878-319X>

Abstract. Many more times than might have been assumed, literary authors have imagined rebels and followed their paths through life, mostly showing them losing in their efforts to fight for justice, freedom, or independence. All rebel figures have regularly faced serious challenges because they rise up against a hegemonic system the powers-in-being defend with all their might. How far are rebels entitled to go in their efforts to right wrongs, perceived as such or not, at the cost of other people's suffering, for instance? When do the rebels' ideals live up to their expectations, when do they turn into their opposite and threaten to collapse into blood-thirsty criminals, as the leading figures of the French Revolution demonstrated brutally. A revolution resorting to absolute violence without any restraints can thus easily transform into a bloody tyranny. At the same time, readers are often invited to empathise with the rebel when his/her cause appears to be right – depending on one's ideological viewpoint – whereas the authorities prove to be on the wrong side of human values. This implies that it is necessary to think hard about the difference between a rebel and a terrorist. Throughout history, poets have regularly engaged with this highly problematic, often tragic, topic, if not quandary. So, in this paper, the focus rested on the discussion and comparison of two major contributions to this discourse on the rebel, one from the late Middle Ages (Wernher the Gardener) and one from the early nineteenth century (Heinrich von Kleist) to illustrate the considerable differences between two concepts of rebellion and to identify shared narrative elements, after all, that is, the two sides of the same coin, thus bringing to light the important

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*Corresponding author (aclassen@arizona.edu)



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discourse on the literary rebel throughout the centuries. This paper made no attempts to trace any direct connections between both texts; instead, the focus will rest on the shared theme, though the contexts are quite different. To help readers grasp the universal relevance of this topic, the discussion first reflected on some of the most famous rebels and rebellions and then turned to the analysis of the chosen literary examples

Keywords: uprising in literature; the medieval robber knight; the modern rebel; the terrorist; Wernher the Gardener; Heinrich von Kleist; revolution; challenge of social structures

Introduction

Throughout history, individuals or social groups have regularly attempted to rise up against injustice, repression, unfairness, tyranny, a military junta, a dictator, a theocratic regime, or a governmental system that represses the people and pursues the goal of supporting only the oligarchy, the king, or dictator. To what extent the rebel is in the right in their efforts remains a matter of debate, mostly depending on the outcome of the rebellion. For some, a rebel is a murderous terrorist; for others, he represents an ideal freedom fighter or a religious savior (Flood & Frank, 2023). Before I engage with my own topic, let us review what we know in general about the history of rebellions across the world to gain a solid sense of the centrality of this issue. A victory over the government (such as in Iran under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, replacing him with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979), for instance, has always changed fundamentally the outlook of the rebel, as the American revolutionary war broadly demonstrated.

The Americans were on the “right” side of history, as we think so today; the British were on the losing or “wrong” side. The French revolution in 1789 granted the victory to the rebels, but the outcome was rather problematic, leading to the rise to power of Emperor Napoleon. And if we consider the Russian revolution in 1919, it is clear that the Zarist regime utterly failed and was destroyed, but the subsequent developments led to the horrible Stalinist regime which cost the lives of millions of

people, both in the Soviet Union itself (1920s) and in Ukraine (Holodomor, 1932-1933), and then in the Soviet Union again, the Great Purge between 1929 and 1953. Tragically, no major rebel emerged during the whole period, there was no effective rebellion in the country, and the country has since then drowned in misery, repression, state-sponsored violence, and lack of freedom, and this basically until today under President Putin irrespective of what the official image propagated by the local government might project. The events in Washington D.C. on Jan. 6, 2021, literally constituted a rebellion against the elected government, but the system survived and imprisoned more than 1,500 rebels for criminal activities. Unbelievably, the current President Trump has pardoned them all, glorifying those rebels as freedom fighters, which illustrates how much the category of the rebel constitutes an ideological and a political concept, a battleground of different opinions (Nance, 2022).

Most rebels have been driven by the desire to challenge perceived injustice, political subjugation, or social structures, and yet there are many options and variations involved because the individual might also pursue a personal agenda or might aim for a global ideal that could lead to the overthrow of the government or of any other kind of power structure. But rebels have also been those who were opposed to a theocratic system, if we think, for instance, of Martin Luther (1483-1546) who was driven to liberate himself and his followers from the

traditional Catholic Church and to create his own, the Protestant Church, because the authorities were not willing to reform what was in dire need to be transformed (since 1517). In modern times, major rebels, such as Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), who liberated India from the colonialist British Empire, or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968), the promoter of a peaceful liberation movement for Black Americans, enjoy the highest respect in recent memory, and this globally. The same can be claimed for Nelson Mandela (1918-2013), who closely followed Nehru's model and brought freedom from Apartheid to South Africa.

Unfortunately, there were also countless other individuals who created much misery for their peoples in their efforts to rebel against the political system they lived under, whether we think of the Chilean dictator, General Augusto Pinochet, who ruled from 1973 to 1990, or of the Ugandan President Idi Amin Dada Oumee (1928-2003), not to speak of the monstrous Adolf Hitler (1889-1945). Their coups d'états indeed overthrew the previous respective governmental system, but even though they then used the political rhetoric of the rebellion (along with the presumed recovery of freedom), the opposite was really the case because those revolutionaries only aimed at a power grab. All feeble attempts to rebel against their repressive regimes in turn were brutally crushed and had no chance in face of the powerful leaders and their all-encompassing system of surveillance, control, and persecutions.

Despite huge differences in their ideologies, worldly outlooks, religious perspectives, or political intentions, we can easily put together a long list of rebels who, very similarly, brought about radical changes in the system they lived under and triggered, as we might say, a paradigm shift, to the better or to the worse, often paying with their lives as a price for their radical efforts, if they were successful. Little wonder that throughout world literature, the figure of the rebel has constantly fascinated writers and

poets because he could be a glorious idealist or an insane revolutionary, a fanatical religionist or a power-hungry autocrat. Whenever we hear of a (literary) rebel, such as F. Schiller (1805), we can expect the treatment of a fundamental challenge to the system, which thus triggered much suffering, trauma, and tragedy, especially when the rebellion failed or turned out to have been driven by a selfish, ruthless, and basically criminal figure. The outcome of the rebel's operations, all by himself or in a group determines posterity's evaluation of the attempted rebellion as a glorious attempt to rise up to a fundamental challenge ("the patriot") or as a mask for extreme egoism and complete lack of social responsibility. For some, the rebel is an ideal figure, for others, he is a condemnable terrorist, as many sociologists have already examined.

Critical Discussions of the Rebel in Literature

The topic of the rebel or the rebellion is so ubiquitous that it appears almost impossible to identify and then investigate a concrete literary and then academic discourse in that regard. The contributors to B. Ayres (2025) limited themselves to nineteenth-century Victorian literature, whereas A. Lubkowitz (2025) perceived the notion of the rebel in metaphorical terms, tracking down a number of nineteenth-century female writers who were also fascinated in hiking. The contributors to O. Ehlen *et al.* (2024), examined the tensions between a master and his disciples in ancient Greek literature. R. Hotz (2009) studied the intellectual rebels in the modern history of Zarist Russia, A. Dunn (2015) focused on the English Peasants' Revolt from 1381. G. Schwerhoff (2024) dedicated himself to the German Peasants' War of 1525 whereas A.J. Haller (2020) investigated infamous rebels such as Robin Hood, the Pirate Klaus Störtebeker, and the American bank robber and outlaw James Jesse, and all of them in their mythical spaces. B. Heuser (2013) investigated military rebels, guerillas, and asymmetrical

warfare, whereas the contributors to R. Cantú (2016) concentrate on the history of the Mexican novel dealing with rebels. Rebels in the Caucasus, as reflected in contemporary literature, was the topic of R.R. Gould (2016) study. For Wulf discussed by R. Mullender (2024), the Romantics can be identified as rebels who protested against the traditional value system and explored the own self in a mystifying sense.

According to D.-P. Baker *et al.* (2023), many times, special military operations could be identified as being carried out by rebels, which might stretch the range of interpretations of this type of persons to a breaking point because those agents work on behalf of the power establishment and hence would not be rebels in the narrow sense of the word, while the contributors to M. Flood & M.C. Frank (2023) suggest that we should even include terrorists within the spectrum of rebels. In fact, the differences between a rebel and a terrorist might not be large and could depend only on the military means which each person utilised to achieve his/her goal. When we finally consult the monograph by Ł. Smuga (2022) on queers as rebels in contemporary Spanish literature, we can easily draw the conclusion that the notion of the rebel proves to be highly diffuse and adaptable to a vast variety of protesters in many diverse circumstances, cultural periods, or political systems. We thus face a serious terminological and conceptual problem, if we want to take the notion of the rebel seriously and acknowledge it as an important perspective toward our past and present in socio-historical and literary terms. In light of the almost inflationary use of the term “rebel”, it might even be pointless to identify it as a specific motif in world literature because it is used by scholarship in an almost infinite range of contexts and meanings. And, what is also quite significant, we have identified rebels in virtually all cultural periods (Woodward & Clark, 1968). In colloquial parlance, the rebel is the angry underdog who tries to defeat the

authorities in the name of justice and freedom, at least as defined by the rebel.

Nevertheless, we should not throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. There are very good reasons to analyse and study specific texts even from different literary-historical periods where an individual tries to rise up against the authorities and change the unjust system he is suffering from or where he – it seems to be almost always a male character in literary texts – attempts to break free from his social class boundaries and gain access to a higher social class (Shepherd, 1993). One of the few comprehensive studies of the rebel as a motif in world literature was published by E. Frenzel (1998), who offered an excellent overview of the different types of rebels and their intentions and strategies, whereas the famous reference work relevant for this and many other similar topics, R.W. Brednich (2003), does not even contain this lemma. According to E. Frenzel (1998), the only one to offer a systematic overview of the rebel figure in world literature, we would have to differentiate between the revolutionary who orchestrates his action in a carefully planned operation, and the rebel who reacts spontaneously in response to a sense of injustice or repression. Some rebels rally against the universal structure of their social life, whereas others target individual rulers or authorities. He is commonly an idealist who carries out his strategy either alone or in company with others who join him in his efforts. The rebel is driven by an innate sense of ethics that justifies even violent acts with which he attempts to overcome his opponents. This would even entail, in extreme cases, the permission to commit tyrannicide, certainly a topic that was already well developed in the Middle Ages (Turchetti, 2013). However, the rebellion, which aims at resisting the unauthorised use of power and military might, often has to resort to physical violence, which then can escalate into a full-blown conflict if not even war. That, in turn,

could place the rebel on the same level as the tyrant, which would critically undermine the rebel's ethical and moral superiority (Classen, 2024). Fighting against a tyrant might hence ultimately transform the rebel simply into a new tyrant, and nothing would have changed; only the figureheads would have been replaced. If the rebellion would not result in a complete reversal of the government, but in a form of adaptation, then the rebel would simply have to accommodate to the power structure and continue with more or less the same politics as before. However, in the case of a political strategy to overthrow a previous imperial government, the rebel could assume the status of a national hero, or mythical figure, such as in F. Schiller (1804). The role of the intellectual rebel who was often the center of attention of nineteenth-century authors was also pointed out (Frenzel, 1998).

Searching for critical studies on medieval rebels, we come up almost empty-handed. E. Frenzel at least points out the existence of rebels who at first fight with all their might against a tyrannical king/emperor, but in the end manage to arrange themselves with him and thus are able to re-establish peace and even friendship, such as in the anonymous Herzog Ernst (ms. A, ca. 1180; ms. B, ca. 1220), in Konrad von Würzburg's Heinrich von Kempten (ca. 1280), and the highly popular *Les Quatre fils Aymon* (late twelfth century). However, as this paper will demonstrate, there are truly remarkable cases of a rebel in some medieval didactic literature, apart from the fact that numerous authors formulated highly critical comments about evil rulers, or tyrants, and this already in the Middle Ages. And, to round off this paper, we also encounter significant rebel figures in later centuries, such as in early nineteenth-century literature. This study drew from two literary texts, one from the mid thirteenth century, the other from the early nineteenth century where we observe protagonists who rise up against traditional

society and launch, what we would call today, a rebellion. But there are major differences between both figures, the first interested only in his personal wealth (not even power), which makes him to a horrible criminal operating even against his own original society, and the latter fighting against social injustice affecting him personally. But his struggle becomes extreme, leading also to a fiasco. The method used in this study consists of a careful critical analysis of both texts, comparing and contrasting them to understand better the various position rebels could assume throughout the history of German literature.

**Wernher the Gardener, Helmbrecht,
and Heinrich von Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas.
An attempt at a trans-chronological
comparison in the history of German
literature from the thirteenth to the early
nineteenth century. An ongoing struggle
to come to terms with the rebel**

To pinpoint our investigation and yet to achieve a broader understanding, this paper will endeavor to carry out an innovative comparative analysis contrasting the thirteenth-century Helmbrecht by der W. Gartenaere (1902) with Heinrich von Kleist's prose novella *Michael Kohlhaas* (Hamacher, 2009) from the early nineteenth century, highlighting the similarities between and the contrasts of the rebellious protagonist. In the medieval narrative, the young protagonist is not truly a rebel who fights against a repressive regime. Instead, as a wealthy peasant's son, he wants to leave his social class behind and turn into a knight, which ultimately, however, results in him becoming a mean, vicious, criminal, brutal, and reckless robber knight. In other words, there is no political issue at stake; the rebellion in this medieval tale does not address ethical or moral issues, except that the rebel transgresses all those norms and principles. In other words, Helmbrecht assumes the role of a rebel against his old social class but turns out to be a careless,

greedy, and violent criminal with no ethics. His rise up against traditional society proves to be a pathetic attempt to grab as much wealth as possible without any ideological, ethical, political, or moral principles. Hence, Helmbrecht utterly fails as a rebel, which conforms with the poet's conservative perspectives to preserve feudal society as in the past.

In the case of von Kleist's novella, the protagonist at first leads an ordinary and respectable life as a horse trader until he faces utmost injustice at the hand of a lower-ranking nobleman (Junker) who mistreats him egregiously without being entitled to it in any way by his own superiors. Kohlhaas tries every legal means available to him to correct the wrong done to him, but all this is ultimately to no avail, so he finds himself forced to turn to self-justice, which quickly develops into a rebellion with much physical damage and the loss of life of innocent people. Ultimately, both characters face their limits, although they try to transgress those with utmost violence, but they are then overcome by the legal system and thus fail and are executed. As far as I can tell, no comparison between both texts has been endeavoured so far, but when we keep in mind the *tertium comparationis*, it makes very good sense to read both texts next to each other as extraordinarily well-developed representatives of the literary genre of the rebel and his struggle against society. In most likelihood, von Kleist was not familiar with Wernher the Gardener's verse novella but drew from some chronicle account/s as a source of inspiration. However, both poets engaged with the same motif and yet investigated it from contrastive perspectives.

The Peasant Helmbrecht

There are not many medieval texts like *W. der Gartenaere Helmbrecht* (ca. 1260/1270), and considering that it has survived only in two manuscripts (Berlin and Vienna), we might have to conclude that it did not exert much, if any, influence (*der Gartenaere*, 1902). One of

the reasons for this lack of historical popularity might have been that the young protagonist tries to rise above his traditional class as a peasant to join the ranks of knights, although he knows nothing about courtly life, does not have any of the necessary resources, and quickly turns into a robber knight who leads the life of a criminal together with his other gang members, as we might call them all. Arrogance, if not extreme hubris, characterises this young man who is lavishly supported by his mother, his sister, and a nun who had fled her monastery in his efforts to turn into a knight, so they all become culprits in the operation to orchestrate a rebellion. However, it is not a rebellion against a system or a leader, against traditional concepts and values; instead, the young man wants only to leave his social class behind and acquire riches quickly. All he finally needs to embark on his adventure is a horse, which only his father can provide. Old Helmbrecht, however, severely warns his son against his plans and then tells him of his nightmares in which he had received prophetic warnings about the dangers his son would have to face, that is, a catastrophic outcome.

Despite the father's advice, Helmbrecht is overconfident that the cap which the three women have made for him with its fabulous images (*ekphrasis*) showing all kinds of scenes from classical literature, then his blond and curly hair, and his physical appearance altogether would guarantee his way into the world of the courts (vv. 299-328). Old Helmbrecht tries his best to keep his son from making a fool of himself and to protect him from the severe hatred he would encounter at court as a peasant, but young Helmbrecht dismisses everything his father tells him and only insists on getting his horse. Despite his better understanding, the father then buys the horse for an enormous amount of money, trying to appease his son, but he only adds oil to the fire and thus loses him altogether. He urges him to be content with water instead of wine, which is

reserved for the nobles; he should eat the simple food his mother prepares for him instead of robbing farm animals. For the young man, his father's words amount to a bothersome sermon he does not want to listen to (v. 561).

Helmbrecht attempts to be a rebel, but he pursues nothing but a rebellion against his family, his own social class, and the material limits of his peasant life. He no longer wants to work the plow and get dirty hands; instead, he wants to join the rank of knights and enjoy the courtly lifestyle (envy, greed). However, as the narrator explicitly points out, he only joins the brutal and military forces of a nobleman who carries out military operations against his opponents or neighbours and happily utilises a gang of reckless young men like Helmbrecht who are all characterised by a criminal mind: "dâ wart der knabe gesinde/an roube wart er sô swinde/swaz ein ander ligen liez/in sînen sac erz allez stiez" (659-662; the fellow joined their company. He became such an effective robber that whatever anyone left behind he stuffed it into his bag). Of course, it even gets worse, although Helmbrecht at first achieves surprising triumphs, gaining many riches, though illegitimately, as a robber. Upon his first visit back home, he completely alienates the entire family by using foreign-language phrases which no one understands (Classen, 2007). This gets so bad that the father questions his identity and refuses him entrance to the house until he has named himself and has provided him with the names of the four oxen they own. For a short time, everything then looks good, but the young man behaves very arrogantly and can even seduce his sister to join hands with one of his fellows. But first, in their conversation, the father reveals that in his youth he had visited the court and had observed the traditional courtly values. By contrast, what his son is telling him now confirms that a major decadence has occurred, which thus explains why the young man fits in so well. Whereas in the past, knights had spent time with the ladies, wooing them in a

polite manner, now they would pay attention only to wine and drink so much that they would get completely drunk. As he admits openly: "triegen daz ist hövescheit" (1005; deception is the new courtly manner).

Our rebel thus turns into a mirror of the general decline in culture, especially at the courts, as the poet argues, so the poem really addresses larger issues and utilises Helmbrecht's rebellion against his father only as a vehicle for broad social and cultural criticism from a very conservative point of view. The real rebel hence appears to be the poet himself who has very harsh words to say about the aristocratic class, as formulated by father Helmbrecht. His son has fully adapted to and adopted the current courtly mores, which throws a highly negative light on the world of nobility. But his son acts even worse because all the gifts that he brought with him for the family he had stolen from people, and after seven days at home, he is bored to death because he has not done any robbery for all that time (vv. 1094-95). His father, by contrast, appeals to his son, of course in vain, to stay home, to disregard the court, to enjoy life as a peasant which would be so much more comfortable and secure in financial terms than to be a "armer hoveman" (v. 1107; a poor courtier).

However, young Helmbrecht refuses to listen to the reasonable arguments, and instead, he announces that he needs to go on a renewed rampage of violence punishing all kinds of people – peasants, merchants, other rich people – for presumed transgressions against his own honour. This means that he decides to intensify the degree of his murderous looting because he wants to get rich at all costs, and this together with his other gang members. They are all exposed indirectly as the worst possible criminals who demonstrate no mercy, no pity, and do not respect any laws or rules. These robber knights are no rebels in the traditional sense; they rebel against all social, moral, ethical, and religious rules and order and destroy everything they can put their hands on. In fact, their rebellion

proves to be a pretense to secure a license for their criminal activities, which in the second part of the verse narrative then turn against young Helmbrecht's own rural community because those robbers do not have the means to fight against the nobility and hence turn against the peasants because those own farm animals, or against merchants because those own valuable goods (Görner, 1987).

Having arranged a secret marriage between his sister Gotelinde and his companion Lemberlinde – meaning: a person who devours lambs – the entire group of robber knights turns to a renewed rampage of violence: “manec wite-we unde wise/an guote wart geletztet” (1464-65; many widows and orphans were robbed of their properties), a metaphorical expression of the ultimate transgression of all laws and order these ruthless young men brutally pursue, not sparing even the weakest members of society. However, at that moment, in the midst of their festivities in honour of the marital couple, a judge and his assistants appear, apprehend them all, and execute all except for Helmbrecht. But he is not spared; instead, he is punished by way of his left leg and his right hand being hacked off, and by losing both eyes, which makes it impossible for him ever to wield a weapon, to get onto a horse, or to see anything, a miserable example of the consequences when a rebel fights only for his self-interest and hurts everyone else. This sad character lives for one more year when he is finally apprehended by a group of peasants who had all suffered from his terrible mistreatments before and who now avenge themselves by lynching the protagonist. The erstwhile rebel had turned into a monster who had only pursued selfish values and had recklessly attacked, robbed, harmed, and killed his helpless victims. This rebel thus proves to be, at least in the poet's view, a perverted peasant who did not want to accept his inherited social status and wanted to rise up to the class of knights but only turned into a pathetic and violent criminal. This Helmbrecht

was not even a Robin Hood, especially because he turned particularly against his own former community members, robbing them even of their essentials, endangering their children's lives, raping young women (v. 1865), and hurting them in endless other manners. One peasant stuffs some soil in his mouth as a reminder of the hell waiting for him, and the others hang him off a tree (vv. 1904-09).

The poet concludes his narrative with warnings for all other people who might consider imitating the life course of Helmbrecht: “in geschehe als Helmbrecht” (v. 1918; it will happen to them as it did to Helmbrecht), that is, “si komen ouch danne an die wide” (v. 1930; they will also hang off the willow tree). There is nothing positive about this protagonist, and his rebellion was first directed against his own parents, then against the family at large, finally against the entire village community, and against the own social class. In the fake illusion that he might gain new social status because of his attractive physical appearance (blond hair) and because he owned this spectacular ekphrastic cap, young Helmbrecht wrongly believed that he could leave his peasant class behind and join the aristocracy, a terrible misunderstanding of the true options he might have had, that is, to inherit his father's farm, to marry, and to enjoy his modest but pleasant existence.

Of course, this is the opinion of the conservative poet who insisted on the traditional values of feudal society according to which every individual had to stay in his/her class into which s/he was born. However, Wernher also included considerable criticism of the world of the aristocratic courts where the ideals from the old days were also no longer observed because the nobles appear to have resorted to vicious and murderous methods to repress their subjects. This entails that young Helmbrecht reflected a profound worry about the moral, ethical, and social decline of thirteenth-century society. But, according to this verse narrative, the attempt to resort to rebellion was also no good

option and would cause only disaster for the rebel and his countless victims. However, we also need to keep in mind that the young man did not simply hit upon the idea of leaving his social class and join robber knights. His entire family was essentially involved in transforming Helmbrecht from an obedient and content person into a rebel who aspired for a higher social status. The run-away nun was the first one to produce the precious cap; the sister and mother contributed in their own ways, and the father, foolishly, and this despite all his prophetic dreams, granted him the horse and only then tried to hold him back from his dangerous efforts to turn into a robber knight (Menke, 1993).

Even though the general framework signals that the protagonist operates as a rebel, in essence, he fails in that regard miserably especially because he is not driven by any ideals, intends only to gain as much material goods as possible without any distinctions, and steals from other people wherever he can, ultimately badly hurting his own social group and even his family. The parents are extremely pained about the outcome of their evil son's operations but cannot help him at all because he has become an outlaw. And Helmbrecht's sister loses her honour and disappears from view after her bridegroom has been hanged. We are hence dealing with a rebel who does not gain any respect and whose terrible ending does not evoke any empathy in us. His transgression against the laws of the land, the social system of his time, theological principles, and moral and ethical ideals leave us behind deeply disappointed, as the poet actually appears to have intended with his work, a literary warning against uncalled-for rebellion that was not directed against any injustice but created only injustice, that was not intended to change the class structure but reconfirmed the feudal system, and that was not aimed at bringing about any form of new freedom for the individual; on the opposite, Helmbrecht robs everyone whom he can overwhelm with his weapons and only accumulates

wealth for himself, which thus at the end fully justifies his severe punishment (Andermann, 2018).

Heinrich von Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas

Germanist scholarship has paid an enormous amount of attention to Heinrich von Kleist's novella *Michael Kohlhaas*, which makes it unnecessary here to engage with all the relevant details contained in the narrative and many of the questions which research has raised (Hamacher, 2009) Ha. Suffice it here to combine these few facts: The Prussian officer and author Heinrich von Kleist was fascinated by the sixteenth-century story of a rebel called Hans Kohlhaase and published the first version of his novella in 1808 (Reuß & Staengle, 2010). In contrast to the medieval case, Kohlhaas simply pursues his ordinary business with his horses when he runs into a conflict at the border where two of his best horses are taken away as pawns for missing papers. Those new administrative rules are, however, completely arbitrary and illegal, as he soon finds out once he has left and reached Leipzig.

The narrator describes Kohlhaas as a most worthy individual, as an honest and generous horse dealer who is liked everywhere and proves to be a truly upright character who would deserve the best treatment from and respect by his neighbours and the authorities. However, although a shining example of a highly dignified citizen, in one respect, he faces an Achilles Heel, "Das Rechtsgefühl aber machte ihn zum Räuber und Mörder" (9). His sense of justice made him, however, into a robber and murderer). The legal issue arises because the Junker Wenzel von Tronka, who has assumed the rein of his house after his father's death, who had been a benevolent and honourable man, lacks in ethical principles and operates arbitrarily without any legality or justification.

Although Kohlhaas tries everything possible to pay his respect to this young upstart nobleman, offering his horses to him at a very reasonable price, the Junker proves to be haughty, arrogant, selfish, and pompous, deeply

disrespectful of the people below him in social terms. The offer is rejected, but two horses have to stay behind, along with one of Kohlhaas's servants to take care of those, until he has secured the necessary papers to cross the border, an artificial demand that is not authorised by the higher-ups in Dresden and is hence nothing but an arbitrary and illegal rule by the Junker to make more money. The impertinent Junker, however, stays in power because the aristocratic circles both in the countryside and in the capital, both in Saxony and in Brandenburg, collude with each other to the great harm for the ordinary people, including this horse trader, although the latter, just before his execution, can regain his ethical superiority by means of a secret about the ruling house written on a piece of paper that he swallows in view of the public (Ockert, 2005).

Kohlhaas tries out every avenue available to him to gain his right as an individual and a respectable and honourable citizen of his country. But although the authorities admit that he was abused by the Junker and that the latter had no right to impose arbitrarily tariffs at the border, they refuse to help him because they are so corrupt (13). Ultimately, Kohlhaas resorts to military means, that is, he becomes a rebel in the classical sense of the word driven by the external circumstances to defend himself against personal repression, pursues justice with his weapons, with arson, but then also with continuous appeals to the authorities to support his legitimate quest. The injustice committed by the Junker in this once instance might not amount to a major matter, holding back just those two horses, which barely survive their mistreatment. However, for Kohlhaas, the entire issue amounts to a "schändlich und abgekartete Gewaltthätigkeit" (14; shameful and manipulative act of violence). The narrator describes in drastic terms what is going on in the protagonist's heart reflecting on the terrible abuse he has to suffer from the castellan in the Junker's service and others: "Rechtsgefühl" (14;

feeling of justice) and "Goldwaage" (14; gold scale). But he is not the only one to experience this violence; everywhere, people complain bitterly about this volatile, selfish, cruel, and unjust aristocrat. Kohlhaas's servant, whom he had left behind at the castle to take care of the two horses, is badly beaten and chased away to get rid of him, barely surviving this suffering, and Kohlhaas's wife, Lisbeth, who reports to her husband what has happened, calls the actions at the Tronkenburg, the Junker's residence, as "Freveln" (17; wickedness); the servant uses the term "Raubnest" (17; nest of robbers).

It would go too far in our context to engage with the long list of abuses, mistreatments, and even violence committed by the Junker and his administrators. Suffices it here to confirm that the Junker emerges as a criminal who can maintain his position because of his family connections (corruption), which defeats even the legal suit which the protagonist had brought against him with the help of an influential attorney. After all his efforts to pursue the judicial path have failed, there is nothing left for Kohlhaas but to resort to his own right, pronouncing an *urfehde* against the Junker, a vendetta which quickly develops into a massive military campaign because he can attract many supporters who delight in the freedom to commit violence on his behalf. This vendetta causes much suffering among the civil population, many buildings are burned down, and it almost looks like an internecine strife might erupt when, due to various circumstances, Kohlhaas is finally apprehended and put on trial, which ends with his death penalty. Kleist offered a most remarkable short story about this upright, but in the end extreme man who was willing to sacrifice everything in his life to secure his right, to receive justice, and to win his day in court, and this against the highest members of the Saxonian and Brandenburg dynasties. He is denied all that, but the narrative itself emphasises the principal need for justice and warns against the corruption and moral and ethical decline in

sixteenth-century society. Kleist might have intended to criticise his own society through this historicising novella, but he did not reveal the true purpose of his story.

Conclusions

It cannot be the purpose here to develop a new interpretation of Wernher's *Helmbrecht* or Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* all by themselves. Instead, the intention was to reflect upon the motif of the rebel as presented here in this famous short story (Kleist's novella) and, by comparison, as developed by Wernher the Gardener in his verse narrative. There are major differences and significant parallels, and the outcome of both stories proves to be the same, the rebel is executed. In a way, both protagonists had turned to extreme violence in order to achieve their goals, for which they are tried and punished. But they differed radically in their personal agenda. Whereas *Helmbrecht* only wanted to leave his peasant class behind and rise to a higher social level out of selfish motives, *Kohlhaas* tried with all his power to gain justice in his matter. But we are also told that his opponent, the Junker, represented the entire class of aristocrats who abused their authority and power and became, so to speak, enemies of the people. *Helmbrecht*, by contrast, not able to pursue his goal as he had originally hoped for, declined rapidly from the dreamed-of courtier and knight to a brutal, reckless, mean, and vicious robber who did not hold back for anyone and thus became the enemy of the people. Oddly, *Kohlhaas* also turned to violence to pursue his goal and thus accepted the victimisation of many innocent people serving his purposes. Nevertheless, throughout the novella, we are explicitly told how much he himself had to suffer from injustice and abuse by the Junker and his many different allies at the highest echelons of society. While *Helmbrecht* turned into a criminal for purely material reasons, *Kohlhaas* accepted the consequences of his military actions as something necessary for the overarching

purposes to secure justice for himself. Neither here nor there, however, does violence find any approval, neither by the late medieval nor by the early nineteenth-century poet.

Of course, there are huge differences between both narratives, but both were predicated on the concept of the rebel. *Kohlhaas* was virtually forced to turn to the vendetta since all his efforts to gain his right through legal means were crushed. He did not intend to gain a new social status, but as the military leader of his private army, he quickly rose to the level of a general. Since his actions led to massive damage and harm among the people, he was both feared and admired. Even the various princes got involved, but they could not provide him with any satisfying resolution because they all watch out for their own interests and the aristocratic class. At one point, *Kohlhaas* even seeks out the famous Protestant reformer Martin Luther, but the latter insists on purely peaceful actions (43-55), which does not help the protagonist at all because the system itself has become so corrupt. Kleist's narrative certainly ends tragically because justice is denied, the upper social class protects their own even under the worst circumstances, and *Kohlhaas* becomes, because of his actions, a criminal rebel who thus deserves his death penalty.

Helmbrecht, by contrast, wants to align himself with the upper class but has no sense of or care for justice, morality, or ethical principles. His only option to achieve his goal is to pursue injustice, crime, and violence, and this against his own people. His rebellion is not driven by any ethical ideals; instead, he only wants to gain wealth and social approval from his fellow robber knights. He destroys the bond with his family and endangers his sister's life in that process. *Kohlhaas* loves his family and is deeply committed to them, but he also brings about the end of his family, with his wife being attacked by a soldier when she tries to submit *Kohlhaas*'s petition to the Margrave of Brandenburg in Berlin. She dies from her wounds. And her husband, as we know, is executed at the end.

Mysteriously, however, his children receive the rank of knights and can thus rise to the upper echelon of society (105-06). In an odd twist of the events, while we are asked to contempt and reject the rebel Helmbrecht and cheer on at his final execution through lynching at the hands of his former victims, the peasants, we certainly feel torn in our evaluation of Kohlhaas. To quote the narrator once again: “Das Rechtsgefühl aber machte ihn zum Räuber und Mörder” (The sense of justice, however, made him into a robber and murderer). Helmbrecht also ended his life due to his criminal activities. But the direction he took was the very opposite to the one embraced by Kohlhaas. We can thus conclude that any rebel constitutes a dialectical figure, fighting against the traditional order and destroying much what society has built for a long time, and this whatever the ultimate intentions might be.

Helmbrecht fails in the end because he was, in his basic character, a robber and murderer, whereas Kohlhaas, in his character being a noble, fair, generous, and upright person, is driven into becoming such a criminal and hence likewise meets his death at the hands of the hangman who decapitates him. Both men are earnestly advised by their family members and others to abstain from their actions and hence their violent deeds, but they are so strongly determined by their goal that they cannot stop in the midst of their paths. It would have been easy for Kohlhaas simply to retrieve his horses, feed

and fatten them again, and thus to forget his financial losses and hence the injustice committed against him. Similarly, Helmbrecht, once having returned home to the peasant family, he could have accepted his destiny, embraced his new-found but stolen wealth, and then live a comfortable life. Yet, while the first one demanded justice at all costs, the latter aimed at even more wealth and thus turned into a miserable and contemptible criminal. To be sure, as both poets clearly indicate through their texts, the rebel challenges his society to the extreme, and consequently the authorities are forced to oppose him, drawing from their established power source, and thus they overcome and execute the enemy of the people. Little wonder that poets throughout time, such as Wernher the Gardener and Heinrich von Kleist, embraced this theme and explored it in most moving, troubling, controversial, and challenging terms. Any rebel proves to be highly unsettling because his actions threaten the traditional political and economic structures for good or for bad reasons.

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Бунтівник як літературний персонаж: дослідження середньовічного та сучасного тестового випадку. Повстання та катастрофа, розглянуті через порівняльний підхід Вернера Садівника та Генріха фон Клейста

Альбрехт Классен

Доктор філософії у галузі середньовічної та ранньомодерної німецької та європейської літератури і культури, почесний професор
Університет Арізони
AZ 85721, просп. Університетський, 1200 Е, м. Тусон, США
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3878-319X>

Анотація. Набагато частіше, ніж можна було б припустити, літературні автори уявляли бунтарів і простежували їхній шлях у житті, здебільшого показуючи їхні поразки у спробах боротися за справедливість, свободу чи незалежність. Усі постаті бунтарів регулярно стикалися з серйозними труднощами, оскільки вони піднімаються проти гегемонічної системи, яку чинна влада захищає всією своєю могутністю. Наскільки бунтарі мають право йти на крайні заходи у своїх спробах виправити, на їхню думку, неправду, навіть ціною страждань інших людей? Коли ідеали бунтарів виправдовують їхні очікування, а коли вони перетворюються на протилежне і загрожують перетворитися на кровожерливих злочинців, як це жорстоко показали провідні постаті Французької революції? Революція, що вдається до абсолютного насильства без будь-яких обмежень, може легко перетворитися на криваву тиранію. Водночас читачів часто запрошують співпереживати бунтареві, коли його/її справа здається правильною – залежно від ідеологічної точки зору – тоді як влада виявляється на хибному боці людських цінностей. Це означає, що потрібно ретельно подумати про різницю між бунтарем і терористом. Протягом історії поети регулярно зверталися до цієї надзвичайно проблемної, часто трагічної теми, якщо не сказати дилеми. Отже, у цій статті увага зосереджувалась на обговоренні та порівнянні двох важливих внесків у дискурс про бунтаря: одного з пізнього Середньовіччя (Вернер Садівник) і одного з початку XIX століття (Генріх фон Клейст), щоб проілюструвати значні відмінності між двома концепціями бунту та водночас виявити спільні наративні елементи – адже це, врешті-решт, дві сторони однієї монети, висвітлюючи важливий дискурс про літературного бунтаря протягом століть. Ця стаття не робила спроб простежити прямі зв'язки між обома текстами; замість цього увага зосередиться на спільній темі, хоча контексти суттєво різняться. Щоб допомогти читачам усвідомити універсальну значущість цієї теми, обговорення спершу розглянуло деяких із найвідоміших бунтарів та повстань, а потім перейшло до аналізу обраних літературних прикладів

Ключові слова: повстання в літературі; середньовічний розбійник-рицар; сучасний бунтар; терорист; Вернер Садівник; Генріх фон Клейст; революція; виклик соціальним структурам