

Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Edgar Wallace

In 1959, Siegfried M. Pistorius interviewed Friedrich Dürrenmatt in the latter's home above Neuchâtel and found that Dürrenmatt had complete sets of the novels by Edgar Wallace, Georges Simenon, and Agatha Christie on the shelves.¹ In his book on Dürrenmatt's prose works, Peter Spycher mentions this fact, but says nothing concrete about influences from these authors on Dürrenmatt's detective stories.² I intend to show elsewhere that Simenon's inspector Maigret has contributed certain traits to the figure of Inspektor Bärlach (*Der Richter und sein Henker*, 1952; *Der Verdacht*, 1953), and that Dürrenmatt's novel *Das Versprechen* (1958, based on his filmscript *Es geschah am helllichten Tag*) is a clever transformation of Simenon's novel *Maigret tend un piège* (1955). Here I wish to point out the influence of some works by Edgar Wallace on Dürrenmatt's short novel *Die Panne* (1956).

In 1905, Edgar Wallace published a novel entitled *The Four Just Men*. It was followed by two related novels, *The Council of Justice* (1908) and *The Three Just Men* (1925), and by a collection of short stories, *Again the Three* (1928). The heroes in all four books are the same: a trio of friends named Leon Gonzalez, George Manfred, and Raymond Poiccart. A fourth friend had been killed before 1905 in Bordeaux. These men, all extremely rich, have made it the purpose of their lives to find out and punish all those criminals against whom the present laws provide no protection, or who are too clever or too powerful to be caught by those responsible for enforcing existing laws. Gonzalez, Poiccart, and Manfred are known in the world as "the four Just Men"—although, in fact, only three Just Men are still alive to carry out the actions recorded in the four books mentioned above.³

In Wallace's novel of 1905, Gonzalez, Poiccart and Manfred hire an expert murderer to help them kill the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. This politician wants to pass a Bill which would force foreign politicians who have sought—and found—refuge in England to go back to their countries—where certain death is awaiting them. The Just Men first try everything in their power to get the Foreign Secretary to withdraw this Bill—to no purpose. They have to kill him in order to stop the Bill from passing parliament and to save the lives of idealists like Manuel Garcia. Aren't the Just Men murderers? No. Manfred says: ". . . we kill for justice, which lifts us out of the ruck of professional slayers. When we see an unjust man oppressing his fellows; when we see an evil thing done against the good God . . . and against man—and know that by the laws of man this evildoer may escape punishment—we punish."⁴

Before 1905, the Just Men had killed at least sixteen persons, among them "General Trelovitch, the leader of the Servian Regicides," a French army contractor named Conrad, and the philosopher Hermon le Blois "for corrupting the youth of the world with his reasoning."⁵ They have killed bribers of juries, suborners of witnesses, swindlers; they have attacked "systems which defied correction, corporations beyond punishment."⁶ It is only natural that the Just Men are hunted by the police forces of the entire world; 1000 pounds is offered as a reward for their capture.

Why this instinct for justice? Manfred explains: ". . . we kill and we will kill because we are each sufferers through acts of injustice, for which the law gave us no remedy."⁷ But this had been one motive only; later, the Just

Men felt that they were "indispensable instruments of a divine providence."⁸ "I am judge, jury, hangman," says Manfred.⁹ By 1925 (*The Three Just Men*), Gonsalez, Poiccart, and Manfred have become reconciled to the world. They are friends with some London police officers. In 1928 (*Again the Three*), they run a sort of detective agency and amuse themselves by solving smaller problems—in the style of Sherlock Holmes.

One of the main motives in most of Dürrenmatt's works is the idea of justice. In the early works, Dürrenmatt is upset about the injustice of God: God is a sadist, he loves torturing humans, he does not reward the good or punish the bad.¹⁰ Inspector Bärlach, like Manfred, is his own judge, jury, and hangman (*Der Richter und sein Henker*), and Claire Zachanassian manages to get justice because—like Wallace's Just Men—she is enormously rich (*Der Besuch der alten Dame*, 1956). After Peter Schneider had written a study on *Die Fragwürdigkeit des Rechts im Werk von Friedrich Dürrenmatt* (Karlsruhe: C. F. Müller, 1967), Dürrenmatt wrote down some variations on his own theory of justice: *Monstervortrag über Gerechtigkeit und Recht* (1969).

It is clear that the ideas propagated by Wallace in *The Four Just Men* and some later books must have appealed to Dürrenmatt. They had appealed to Agatha Christie before—who used them in her book *And Then There Were None* (1940) where a judge kills a collection of criminals who are "all quite untouchable by the law."¹¹

In Dürrenmatt's *Die Panne*, the traveling salesman Traps walks into the trap of four just men. They are: an attorney, a judge, a defense lawyer and a hangman. They are not enormously rich like Wallace's men, but they have no financial worries either: they are pensioned. The word "trap" is used prominently in the "Prologue" to Wallace's *The Four Just Men*: the criminal "traps" a girl; then Manfred "traps" the criminal—and kills him. This is what happens to Dürrenmatt's criminal named Traps: he has murdered his boss—by seducing the latter's wife and by letting the boss know about it. The boss who had had a heart condition, had promptly died. Traps cannot be prosecuted; nobody considers him to be a killer; he is not even conscious of the fact that he is responsible for the death of his boss. But Dürrenmatt's four just men find out: they question Traps, trap him, establish the truth, and condemn him to death. There is considerable fun in Wallace's novel of 1905; Dürrenmatt's tale also bristles with irony. In the prose version, Trap hangs himself; in the radio play version (also 1956) he continues to live—and to kill.

The theory of Dürrenmatt's four just men is exactly the same as Wallace's. The judge explains to Traps: "Unsere Art, Gericht zu halten, scheint Ihnen fremd . . . Doch, Wertgeschätzter, wir vier an diesem Tisch sind pensioniert und haben uns vom unnötigen Wust der Formeln, Protokolle, Schreibereien, Gesetze und was für Kram sonst noch unsere Gerichtssäle belasten, befreit. Wir richten ohne Rücksicht auf die lumpigen Gesetzbücher und Paragraphen."¹² Like the Just Men in Wallace's books the just men in Dürrenmatt's story use the death penalty. Dürrenmatt's men have reintroduced it privately after it had been abolished by the government.

In 1960, Dürrenmatt told Jean-Paul Weber that a short story by Maupassant (he had forgotten which one) had inspired him to write *Die Panne*.¹³ Peter Spycher has tried to identify the story and suggests that "Le Voleur" in the volume *Mademoiselle Fififi* might be the tale Dürrenmatt had in mind.¹⁴ There are, in fact, some striking parallels—but there seems to be no doubt that *The Four Just Men* are at the root of *Die Panne*.

It is only to be expected that Dürrenmatt's story is, in many ways, a parody of Wallace's novel. Wallace's Just Men are comparatively young and work hard to keep up with the most glaring crimes which would—without their intervention—go unpunished. Dürrenmatt's just men are old and pensioned. Although every interview turns up some crime (“ . . . ein Verbrechen lasse sich immer finden”¹⁵), they are overjoyed when they are confronted by a juicy murder: “Glück, wir haben Glück. Ein Toter ist aufgestöbert . . .” (p. 55) exclaims Dürrenmatt's prosecuting attorney. He and his friends deeply regret that the sort of crimes committed before the advent of the atomic age and formerly punished by Wallace's Just Men are no longer fashionable (p. 38). Governments and multinational corporations cannot be punished, not even by millionaire gentlemen detectives; today's fans of justice have to be satisfied with trapping unimportant people like Traps. Wallace's criminals die at the hands of the Just Men; the peak of Dürrenmatt's irony is reached when his criminal commits suicide and when Dürrenmatt's just men profoundly regret the death of their victim.

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NOTES

¹S. F. Pistorius, “Der Einsiedler von Neuchâtel: Besuch bei Friedrich Dürrenmatt: Ein literarischer ‘Raketenfabrikant,’” *Westfälische Rundschau*, 19. Feb. 1959.

²Peter Spycher, *Friedrich Dürrenmatt: Das erzählerische Werk* (Frauenfeld and Stuttgart: Huber), 1972, p. 125.

³It is quite possible that there are one or two more books by Edgar Wallace with Gonzalez, Poiccart, and Manfred as heroes—I was, for instance, unable to locate a copy of *The Law of the Four Just Men*.

⁴Edgar Wallace, *The Four Just Men*, 7th ed. (London: Pan Books, 1971), pp. 8-9.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶Edgar Wallace, *The Council of Justice* (London: Pan Books, 1973), p. 125.

⁷Wallace, *The Four Just Men*, p. 46.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁹Edgar Wallace, *The Three Just Men* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1930), p. 136.

¹⁰See A. Arnold, *Friedrich Dürrenmatt*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Colloquium, 1974), chapters 1 and 2.

¹¹Agatha Christie, *Ten Little Indians*, 17th ed. (New York: Pocket Books, 1965), p. 175. First published in 1940 under the title *And Then There Were None*.

¹²Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Die Panne: Eine noch mögliche Geschichte* (Zürich: Arche, 1960), p. 51.

¹³Jean-Paul Weber, “Friedrich Dürrenmatt ou la quête de l'absurde: un portrait-interview,” *Le Figaro Littéraire*, 10 Sept., 1960, p. 3.

¹⁴Spycher, pp. 231, 401-402.

¹⁵Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Die Panne und Der Tunnel*, ed. F. J. Alexander (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 46.