

Daniel Call's *Schocker*: German Knittelvers in the late twentieth century

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Abstract: The word “Knittelvers” has been used since the eighteenth century to describe four-stress rhyming couplets which seem to be rather simply and awkwardly constructed, and whose content is frequently comical, coarse, vulgar or obscene. Today German Knittelvers is perhaps best known from the works of Goethe and Schiller, as well as other late eighteenth and early nineteenth century writers.

Well-known examples occur together with other verse forms in Goethe's *Faust* and Schiller's *Wallensteins Lager*, as well as in ballads and occasional poems by both poets. While literary critics have shown considerable interest in Knittelvers written from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, there has been almost no discussion of the further use and development of this verse form from the nineteenth century to the present, despite the fact that it continues to appear in both humorous and serious works by many contemporary German writers. This article focuses on an example of dramatic Knittelvers in a late twentieth century play, namely Daniel Call's comedy *Schocker*, a modern parody of Goethe's *Faust*. Among other things, Call's play, as well as other examples of Knittelvers in works by twentieth and early twenty-first century poets, demonstrates that while this verse form has undergone some changes and variations, it still retains metrical characteristics which have remained constant since the fifteenth century. Today these four-stress couplets continue to function as a means of depicting comic, mock-heroic and tragicomic situations by means of parody, farce and burlesque satire.

Keywords: Knittelvers; verse form; couplet; rhyme; satire; parody; Daniel Call; *Schocker*; *Faust*

Since the eighteenth century the word “Knittelvers” has been used to describe four-stress rhyming couplets which are seemingly rather simply and awkwardly constructed, and whose content is often comical, satirical, coarse, vulgar or obscene. Today German Knittelvers is perhaps best known from the dramatic and non-dramatic verse of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when, after being recommended by Gottsched in his *Critische Dichtkunst* in 1737, it was used together with other verse forms by poets such as Herder,

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Goethe, Schiller, Tieck and Novalis. Well-known examples are the Knittelvers lines in Goethe's *Faust* drama and Schiller's play *Wallensteins Lager*, as well as in ballads and occasional poems by both poets.

While literary critics have shown considerable interest in Knittelvers written by poets from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, there has been almost no discussion of its further use and development from the nineteenth century to the present, despite the fact that German poets have continued to use this verse form in many different contexts to achieve a wide variety of effects, both humorous and serious. In the twentieth century alone it has been used effectively in both dramatic and non-dramatic verse by writers such as Gerhart Hauptmann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Karl Kraus, Joachim Ringelnatz, Gottfried Benn, Kurt Tucholsky, Karl Valentin, Walter Mehring, Bertolt Brecht, Peter Huchel, Peter Weiss, Ingeborg Bachmann, Peter Hacks, Robert Gernhardt, Peter Ensikat, Wolfgang Schaller, Peter Schneider and many others. To mention just a few examples, Hofmannsthal uses Knittelvers in his morality play *Jedermann: Das Spiel vom Sterben des reichen Mannes*, first performed in Berlin in 1911 under the direction of Max Reinhardt, and performed every year since 1920 (except for the years 1938–1945) as part of the *Salzburger Festspiele*. Karl Kraus uses it in many poems as well as in his play *Wolkenkuckucksheim*, a modern German version of Aristophanes' satirical play *The Birds*. Peter Weiss uses his own variant of this verse form in *Marat/Sade* and most of his other plays, Robert Gernhardt in humorous poems such as "Du", "Malade Ballade" and "Die Stürmung der Stadtbücherei von Fort Worth", and Peter Ensikat and Wolfgang Schaller in texts written for German cabaret performances in *Die Distel*, the *Leipziger Pfeffermühle* and *Die Herkuleskeule*.

As an example of the use of Knittelvers at the end of the twentieth century, I will focus here on a few scenes from Daniel Call's hair-raising and shockingly funny burlesque comedy *Schocker*, written in 1992 as a modern parody of Goethe's *Faust, erster Teil*.¹ Throughout most of Call's play, Knittelvers is featured not only as a verse form, but also figuratively as a means of depicting the arrogance and incompetence of the main character, who has difficulty using this flexible and allegedly "easy" verse form, and whose infelicitous, awkward rhymes occasionally betray the subconscious desires and urges of his depraved and lewd mind.

Call replaces Goethe's Mephisto by the handsome young man *Schocker*, who first appears as a cocker spaniel rather than a poodle, and Faust by a sleazy,

¹ Daniel Call, *Schocker*. Text available for download on Galissas Verlag's webpage: www.galissas-verlag.de/play/schocker. Page numbers refer to this text.

seedy, untalented and brutally ambitious Austrian provincial theatre manager, aptly named *Dr. Viel*, whose ultimate goal is to take over the directorship of the venerated, world-famous Vienna *Burgtheater*, also known by Austrians and referred to in this play as "*Die Wiener Burg*". Related to this overarching goal is Dr. Viel's desire to have a sexual relationship with *Susannchen*, a young aspiring actress of minimal talent whom he selects to play the role of Gretchen in his "Faust-Musical", a pepped up "modern" version of Goethe's *Faust*.

Call's play contrasts the idealistic striving of Goethe's *Faust* with Dr. Viel's petty ambitions and lewd desires, and there are many obvious structural and thematic parallels between the two plays. The eighteen scenes ("Bilder") of *Schocker* include – in a different sequence than in Goethe's play – "Prolog im Himmel", "Vorspiel auf dem Theater", "Dr. Viel am Schreibpulte" (a reference to the stage direction at the beginning of Goethe's opening "Nacht" scene), "Spaziergang", two "Studierzimmer" scenes, "Kantine im Keller" (a play on Goethe's scene "Auerbachs Keller in Leipzig"), "Talentschmiede" (with obvious references to Goethe's "Hexenküche" scene), "Foyer" (with some parallels to Goethe's "Garten", "Gartenhäuschen" and "Marthens Garten" scenes), "Garderobe" (with clear parallels between Call's character "Fräulein Umlaut" and Goethe's "Marthe Schwerdtlein"), and "Garten" (in which Schocker persuades Fräulein Umlaut to kick Susannchen out of her house so that she must go back and stay with Dr. Viel, where he will more easily be able to seduce her).

In addition to fifteen scenes which refer in various oblique ways to Goethe's play, there are also three rehearsal scenes of Dr. Viel's "Faust-Musical" directed by himself: in the first scene, Susannchen rehearses the role of Gretchen, while Dr. Viel imagines that *he* is Faust, and tells Schocker that he (Dr. Viel) should play that role. The second scene is a modernized version of Goethe's cathedral scene ("Dom"), and the third is a rehearsal of the duel between Valentin (played by an actor named Herr Beppi) and Faust (played by an actor named Herr Beppo).

In the *Prolog im Himmel*, the opening scene of Call's play, the recently deceased provincial Austrian theatre manager Dr. Viel finds himself at the Gate of Theater-Heaven, where the archangels Raphael, Gabriel and Michael of Goethe's *Faust* are replaced by the *Theatergötter* Peter, Michael and Gerhard. While the theatre gods speak in verse, Dr. Viel speaks mostly prose in his Austrian dialect. He is furious to discover that he is already dead, for this second-rate provincial *Dramaturg* had great plans for the future:

Aber meine – meine Pläne! Intendant wollt i wer'n, weil – jeder
 Dramaturg wird doch mal Intendant! Ganz was Neu's wollt i schaffen,
 ganz – innovativ, verdammtnochmal! Hätts mir noch a paar Jahr g'lassen,

ein – paar – Jährchen – bloß! I wär an der Burg g'landet! Ganz sicher! Mit allem Drum und Dran! Paßts auf: wann ihr mich nochamal runterlassts, ganz ganz kurz – sagen wir: dreißig Jahr? – dann versprech ich euch – ein ABO an der Wiener Burg – wenn i erstmal Intendant bin da... (p. 6)

Dr. Viel, who aspires to nothing less than the directorship of the venerable Viennese *Burgtheater*, tries to bribe the theatre gods with offers of a bottle of champagne at each premiere, a VIP lounge, and the opportunity to have sex with the young actresses:

Eine Flaschen Champus versprech ich euch – pro Premiere. Und eine echte VIP-Lounge. Und – ihr könnt die Anfängerinnen bumsen wanns wollt! I will doch nur eine Chance – eine klitzekleine Chance. (p. 7)

Since the Almighty Theatre-God turns out to be an Austrian from Graz, Dr. Viel hopes that this god will sympathize with his plight and this will work to his advantage:

Der Herrgott is a Östreicher! I hab's g'wusst! Allmächtiger! Hör mich an!
I komm aus demselben Land wie Du! Schau da muessens mir zusammenhalten!

The Almighty, however, tired of Dr. Viel's babbling and wanting to get rid of him, tells the theatre gods to give him a little provincial theatre somewhere with a five year probationary period. The theatre gods transmit this message to Dr. Viel in four-stress rhyming couplets:

Peter:	Weils unserm Herrgott so gefällt Führt Dich Dein Weg zurück zur Welt
Michael:	Dort darfst den Spielplan Du gestalten Nach Herzenslust ein Haus verwalten
Gerhard:	Und hast Du unsre Gunst behalten Wirst weiter schalten Du und walten
Die Theatergötter:	Bedenk, dass die Fünfjahresfrist Des Intendanten Hürde ist. (p. 8)

This scene is followed in Call's play by the *Vorspiel auf dem Theater*. Although Dr. Viel now has his own provincial theatre, he has failed to come up with an idea that will attract an audience, with the result that the press and theatre critics stopped attending performances after the first year. In the next scene, a parody of the "Nacht" scene in Goethe's *Faust*, Call ridicules universities by

suggesting that Dr. Viel's university education has not stimulated his creativity or imagination. Calling on the gods to help him achieve success as a theatre director, he simply can't understand why he doesn't have any brilliant ideas, *for after all he studied theatre, German language and literature, an introductory course in sinology, and even got his doctoral degree!* We hear thunder whenever Dr. Viel utters an expletive, but when he calls on the gods directly they do not react. He is frustrated not only in his ridiculously high and overblown ambition to become director of the Vienna *Burgtheater*, but also in his sexual desires, a parallel theme that runs throughout the play:

Ihr Götter!... I bleib net an so einer Provinzschmieren kleben! Da könnt's ihr einen darauf lassen!... Wann i nur mal wos zum Bumsen hätt. Da hat man schon so a Schwanzlerl und weiss net wohin damit... (p. 10)

When the gods do not respond to his entreaties, he calls in desperation on some of the great actors and stage directors of the nineteenth and twentieth century to come to his aid:

Brecht! Reinhaaaardt! STANISLAWSKIII! Hoerts mich net? NESTROY! ALTES HAUS!
(*Keine Reaktion*) Noch immer nix. Gründgens! Gründgens, du schwule Sau!

The only one to respond to his desperate call is Gustav Gründgens, whose portrayal of Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust* is widely considered to have been one of the greatest performances in German theatre. The great actor appears in the midst of thunder, lightning and fog, and proceeds to insult and humiliate Dr. Viel with epithets such as "Wurm", "Kreatur", "Kröte", "Wicht", "Nullgesicht" and so forth. Dr. Viel harbors the illusion that even if Gründgens can't help him become director of the Vienna *Burgtheater*, the great actor can at least use his connections to get him a theatre directorship in Hamburg. But Gründgens, speaking in Knittelvers, continues to insult him both as a person and as a would-be theatre director:

Du schmier'ger Wicht, Du Nullgesicht –
Erringst Erfolg im Leben nicht!
Wirst nimmer gross, bleibst ewig klein,
Wirst wie die meisten Schlusslicht sein. (p. 11)

Gründgens then broadens his criticism and scorn toward all the untalented epigones who look backward rather than forward and try to imitate the great writers, actors and theatre directors of the past:

Bleibst einer von den Intendanten,
Den jämmerlichen Dilettanten ,
Den frühen Greisen, jungen Siechen,
Die ausgetretne Pfade kriechen,
Die andere vor Jahren bauten
Die inspiriert nach vorne schauen...

After further ranting against pitiful “Beamtenseelen” like Dr. Viel who think they are artists, Gründgens vanishes as mysteriously as he appeared. As if to emphasize the contrast between the truly great personages of the theatre with those in Dr. Viel’s theatre, Call now introduces the theatre trainee Helmuth, who, like Wagner in Goethe’s *Faust*, greatly admires his “master”:

Ich bin so voller Hochachtung
Voll inständiger Bewunderung
Für Euer Schaffen, Doktor Viel –
Zu sein wie Ihr, dies ist mein Ziel. (p. 13)

In contrast to Goethe’s Wagner, however, Hellmuth’s admiration also reveals his homosexual attraction toward his master:

Was bin ich wohl in Euren Augen?
Ach! Könnte ich nur in Euch tauchen,
könnt tief und tiefer in Euch krauchen!
...
Wie gern würd ich mich in Euch puhlen,
In Eurem Geist voll Wonne suhlen!
...
In jede Hirneswindung bohren
Um Teil zu sein von allen Poren!

Dr. Viel, in a parody of Faust’s “O sähst du, voller Mondenschein” speech, picks up on the sexual imagery in his response to Helmuth:

Da schau her! Vollmond! Bleckts runter wie a grosser, runder Arsch. Da wird man richtig melancholisch, gell? I mein, so konzeptlos... (p. 14)

In a humorous persiflage of Faust's serious thoughts of suicide in Goethe's opening "Nacht" scene, Dr. Viel, flattered by Hellmuth's adulation, but feeling sentimental and melancholy due to his lack of any original artistic imagination, contemplates suicide as a way to get back at the *Theatre Gods* who have failed to respond to his desperate entreaties for inspiration and helpful ideas. In his inflated sense of self-importance, he imagines his funeral staged by no less than the great twentieth century German theatre and film director Peter Zadek:

I bring mich um! Leckts mich alle mal am Arsch! Speziell ihr da drob'n! (*es donnert*) Ich mach euch einen Strich durch die Rechnung! I mach mir selbst den Garaus! Und mein Begräbnis inszeniert der Zadek!... (er geht daran, sich umzubringen)

This is followed by a parody of the scene "Vor dem Tor" in *Faust*. In Goethe's play, Dr. Faust feels refreshed and inspired by his walk with his assistant Wagner among the common, everyday people of the village:

Ich höre schon des Dorfs Getümmel,
Hier ist des Volkes wahrer Himmel,
Zufrieden jauchzet gross und klein:
Hier bin ich Mensch, hier darf ich's sein! (*Faust* 937–940)

As he hears the sounds of the people outside, Dr. Viel's reaction is equally enthusiastic, but couched in terminology which was used at times by antisemites in Germany and Austria in the first half of the 20th century:

Die Volksseele – i werd verrückt! Du sitzt jahrelang in Deinem Büro und trotzdem gehts Leben weiter draussen! Und plötzlich merkst, dass sie noch immer wallt und pocht, die Seele, die völkische! (p. 15)²

Whereas Faust is dissuaded from committing suicide by the sound of the Easter churchbells, Dr. Viel is restrained by the sound of the beer-drinking songs of "das Volk":

Des hat Fleisch! Des hat Blut! Des hat Leben! Da verschieben wir den Selbstmord und gehn raus! (p. 15)

² For a critique of this nationalist ideology see Springer 1926.

Dr. Viel's trainee Hellmuth's negative reaction to "the people" recalls that of Faust's assistant. Wagner says to Faust:

Mit Euch, Herr Doktor, zu spazieren
Ist ehrenvoll und ist Gewinn;
Doch würd ich nicht allein mich hier verlieren,
Weil ich ein Feind von allem Rohen bin.
Das Fiedeln, Schreien, Kegelschieben
Ist mir ein gar verhasster Klang ... (*Faust* 941–946)

Similarly Helmuth complains to Dr. Viel:

Mich schreckt des Volkes dümmlich Wesen –
Lasst uns 'Theater Heute' lesen.³ (p. 15)

Dr. Viel's final words to Hellmuth in the third scene of *Schocker* unambiguously reveal that he, in contrast to Goethe's Faust, is a petty tyrant with an inflated image of himself, easily susceptible to false flattery:

Nun hörst mir mal zu, Freundchen! I mag Dich wirklich, weil Du der einzige bist, wo massgebliche Persönlichkeiten richtig einschätzt! Des gefällt mir! Aber wannst was werden willst als Hospitant, als popliger, dann hast Deinen Intendanten wortlos zu gehorchen, verstanden? DASS DAS MAL KLAR IST, MEIN HERR!!

The contrast to Goethe's *Faust* becomes even more stark when we compare Goethe's scene "Vor dem Tor" with Call's "Spaziergang" scene above, in which he directly depicts the most basic physiological urges of the "Volk" in the crudest possible way:

Goethe, *Faust*, Vor dem Tor:

Vierter Handwerksbursch: Nach Burgdorf kommt herauf, gewiss dort findet ihr
Die schönsten Mädchen und das beste Bier

...

Schüler: Blitz, wie die wachern Dirnen schreiten!
Herr Bruder, komm! wir müssen sie begleiten.
Ein starkes Bier, ein beizender Tobak

³ Incidentally another play by Daniel Call was selected to appear in the German theatre magazine *Theater Heute* five years after he wrote *Schocker*.

Und eine Magd im Putz, das ist nun mein Geschmack.
(814–815, 828–831)

Compare this with Call's *Spaziergang* scene:

1. Bürger: Ficken?
 1. Bürgerin: Fünzig Mark.
 1. Bürger: Ficken.
 2. Bürger: Bier?
 1. Bürger: Ficken.
 1. Bürgerin: Gummi.
 1. Bürger: Ohne.
 1. Bürgerin: Hundert Mark.
 2. Bürger: Bier?
 3. Bürger: Saufen.
 ... (p. 15f.)

In contrast to Arthur Schnitzler's play *Reigen*, in which most of the dialogues preceding and following the sex acts are elaborate, indirect and "elevated," Call's *Spaziergang* scene depicts "das Volk" in a type of linguistic *Reigen* or round-dance in which language has been reduced to the barest minimum necessary to communicate human urges for sex and alcohol, and to carry out negotiations for the former. Dr. Viel is so inspired and refreshed by this crude sexual propositioning and desire for drinking that he gets carried away and cries out ecstatically:

Ihr lieben Leut, was haltets denn davon, zur Abwechslung mal ins Theater zu gehen? Ihr könnts auch gleich ein Konzepterl mitbringen...

and then quotes the famous phrase from Martin Luther's *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* in a slightly different version: "Des is dem Volk aufs Maul geschaut!"

Unfortunately, the "Volk" mistakes his last word "geschaut" for "gehaut":

- Die Bürger: Auf's Maul!
 Hellmuth: Ihr scheint das Volk nicht zu entzücken –
 Wir sollten lieber uns verdrücken.
 Die Bürger: Auf's Maul! Auf's Maul!
 Haut ihm auf's Maul! (p. 20)

In a humorous reference to Don Giovanni and Leporello in Mozart's opera, Dr. Viel deflects the people's anger to Hellmuth by casually pointing to him and deceitfully crying out: "Das ist der Chef, den müsstv vertrimmen," so that they fall upon Helmut and start pommeling him so viciously that he loses his teeth and can no longer speak without lispng.

The poodle, which follows Faust into his study in Goethe's play, is represented here by the cocker spaniel "Schocker," who initially arouses Dr. Viel's sexual desires by masturbating against his leg and licking Dr. Viel's crotch. Rather than repelling the dog, Dr. Viel kisses it, and amidst an explosion with lots of vapors and stage magic, the cocker spaniel is transformed into a beautiful young man whom Dr. Viel assumes is a homosexual:

Dr. Viel: I werd verrückt! Du bist ja gar kein Hund! Du bist – eine TUNTE!
 Du bist schon der Zweite heut! Ihr müsstv mich falsch verstanden
 haben, Jungs! I bin net so einer! (p. 22)

Whereas Dr. Viel speaks in rather inelegant prose, the handsome young Schocker, like almost all of the other characters in this play, speaks only in four-stress rhyming couplets as he appeals to Dr. Viel's overwhelming urge for sexual gratification and his ardent desire to become a successful and powerful theatre director:

Nun bin ich hier, mich Euch zu fügen –
 Und fügen ist mir ein Vergnügen!
 Ihr spürt, wie Euch die Lust anschwillt?
 Ich bins, der diesen Hunger stillt!
 ...
 Ihr spürt, Euch schwinden Zeit und Macht?
 Ich bins, der Euch erfolgreich macht!...

What follows is a delightfully comic parody of Mephistopheles' self-description in Goethe's *Faust*. Whereas Mephisto describes himself there as "Fliegengott, Verderber, Lügner", Schocker simply calls himself a consultant or advisor:

Bei mir, mein Herr, lässt sich das Wesen
 Gewöhnlich aus dem Namen lesen,
 Wo es sich allzu deutlich weist
 Wenn man mich Referent nur heisst.

Schocker than tells Dr. Viel that he will make him the powerful director of the Vienna *Burgtheater*, and that all he requires as a fee for his services is Dr. Viel's soul:

Ihr seid der Herr, gebt die Befehle,
 Ich werde Euch die Massen ziehn.
 Als Gage nehm ich Eure Seele
 Und bring Euch an die Burg nach Wien. (p. 23)

Not realizing that Schocker was sent to him by the Princes of Hell ("die Fürsten"), Dr. Viel, naively assuming that the Almighty Theatre-God has answered his prayers, is totally unaware of his blasphemy as he thanks him for hearing his entreaties, and simultaneously signs the pact with the devil in his own blood. He then cries out: "HERRGOTT, DU HAST MEINE GEBETE ERHÖRT!" and thunder is heard from above.

In the second "Studierzimmer" scene (Bild VI), Schocker presents his "Konzept" and his "Erfolgsrezept" to Dr. Viel. Schocker, like Mephistopheles in *Faust*, has a very low opinion of humanity, including theatre audiences:

Der Mensch ist böse, stur und blöd.
 Und er ist ganz besonders dumm
 Sitzt klatschend er im Publikum. (p. 25)

Since people's lust for the sensational is satisfied by movies, television, videos, and so forth, they feel no need to go to the theatre. i.e. unless the theatre can provide something even more sensational. Schocker's drastic, bloody solution is simply to publicly shoot down the "opposition" in all the other theatres during the curtain call at the end of each premiere:

Wir müssen alle Regisseure,
 Bühnenbildner und Akteure
 All der andern deutschen Bühnen –
 Hoch vom Norden in den Süden –
 Blut verspritzen und vergiessen,
 Sie coram publico erschossen.
 ...
 Wir blasen ihre Lichter aus
 In der Premieren Schlussapplaus (p. 27)

In the meantime Dr. Viel will stage his “Faustical”, a modernized version of Goethe’s Faust with pop music:

Dieweil müsst Ihr Euch konzentrieren
 Ums Faustical zu inszenieren
 Die Sensation, die wir erstreben
 Ist der Premiere Überleben.

In this context “surviving the premiere” means not only getting an enthusiastic audience response and good reviews, but also – quite literally – not getting shot at and killed during the applause at the end of their *own* opening performance. For the audience, the “sensation” will be the possibility that the director, actors, set designers and stage crew at Dr. Viel’s theatre will *also* be publicly murdered, as will already have happened at all the other German-language theatres:

Dr. Viel: Du meinst, i soll ein Massaker anrichten nur, dass die Leute bei mir zur Premieren rennen und hoffen, dass i auch d’erschossen wird? (p. 27)

At first Dr. Viel vehemently opposes this plan, telling Schocker among other things that he is a psychotic killer and a maniac. But then the “*Wiener Burg*” appears in the background, beckoning and winking so promisingly that Dr. Viel gives in and asks Schocker for a revolver.

Part of the dialog in the next scene (VII. Bild: Kantine im Keller), in which Dr. Viel sees Susannchen for the first time, is a crude, crass version of a similar dialog in Goethe’s *Faust*. Compare these two conversations:

Goethe:

Faust (to Mephisto): Hör, du musst mir die Dirne schaffen! (*Faust*, line 2619)

...

Mephistopheles: Es ist ein gar unschuldig Ding,
 Das eben für nichts zur Beichte ging;
 Über die hab ich keine Gewalt! (*Faust*, lines 2624–2626)

...

Faust: Wenn nicht das süsse junge Blut
 Heut nacht in meinen Armen ruht,
 So sind wir um Mitternacht geschieden. (*Faust*, lines 2636–2638)

Daniel Call:

Schocker: Das Kind in der Jungfräulichkeit
 Kennt Schuld nicht und Verdorbenheit.

Dr. Viel: Die will i ficken.

Schocker: Ich kann zwar vieles für Euch tun
 Doch krieg ich solche Maid nicht rum.

Dr. Viel: Bist jetzt meine Referent oder was? Wann i die will, musst mir
 die auch besorgen, und wannst sie mit einer Hauptrolle nach
 der anderen köderst! (p. 31)

Whereas Goethe blends Knittelvers with many other verse forms in his *Faust* drama, Call uses these four-stress rhyme-pairs throughout his play for almost all of his characters, with the notable exception of Dr. Viel, who speaks throughout most of the play in his Austrian prose dialect, except when he unsuccessfully tries to employ Knittelvers in speaking to Susannchen. (Does he perhaps subconsciously feel that speaking to her in rhyming couplets will make him more attractive and appealing to her?). The only other characters to speak in prose are the “Voice of the Almighty”, who also speaks with an Austrian accent, and the common citizens (“das Volk”) in Call’s “Spaziergang” scene. As we have seen, however, the “prose” of the citizens – if we can even call it that – is reduced to one-word utterances – the bare minimum needed to communicate their basic urges and desires.

In the twelfth scene even the Almighty Theatre-God seems to become infected as his indignant prose morphs into Knittelvers at the end of his short prose tirade against Frä. Umlaut and Susannchen:

Ja, was ist jetzt? Beten tuts wie die Bläden und machts eh was wollt! *Kinder, nein, was soll der Kitsch? Des is ja wie bei Millowitsch!* (my emphasis) (p. 49)

Here Call, speaking through the Almighty, gets in a jab at Willy Millowitsch (1909–1999), a German stage and TV actor who directed the “*Volkstheater Millowitsch*” in Cologne until a few years before his death.

In the “Talentschmiede” scene [VIII. Bild], which is somewhat analogous to the “Hexenküche” scene in Goethe’s *Faust*, the “Hexe” is a female consul who reveals that Dr. Viel’s lust for Susannchen is intertwined with his ambition to become director of the Vienna *Burgtheater*. By means of both force and deception, he clearly wants to conquer and “take over” both Susannchen *and* the famous theatre. When the consul asks him to show her his yearnings and desires, the stage direction reveals what Dr. Viel really wants:

(In Kassandras Feuer erscheint, sich lasziv windend, die Wiener Burg. Sie hat auffallende Ähnlichkeit mit Susannchen gewonnen.) (p.34)

The “Konsulin” then hypnotizes Dr. Viel and encourages him to rhyme by having him repeat the lines of her magic formula. Having noticed his sloppy speech habits, she advises Schocker to improve Dr. Viel’s diction by teaching him how to rhyme:

Das Schlimmste ist die Sabbelei
Mein Rat, bring ihm das Reimen bei. (p. 36)

Just as the witch transforms the aging Faust into a handsome young man in Goethe’s drama, the consul – with the aid of a pipe and new clothing from the leading designers of men’s apparel, perfumes and eyewear – casts magic spells which greatly enhance the outward appearance of Dr. Viel:

Konsulin: ...
Besorge ihm was anzuziehen –
Am Besten von Armani, Boss,
Parfüm von Kern, bloss nicht von Moss!
Dazu ne Brille von Dior
(die gaukelt Intellekt ihm vor)
Zur Krönung dient dann eine Pfeife
Als Zeichen seriöser Reife...

In summary the consul observes:

Mit frischem Glanz und neuem Kleid
Wird selbst dies Nichts Persönlichkeit. (p. 36)

After his transformation Dr. Viel, dressed in his new outfit (“in neuer Montur”), meets Susannchen in the foyer of the theatre, and in an attempt to arouse her interest tries to “chat her up” by speaking in Knittelvers for the first time in the play. It is immediately obvious, however, that he has great difficulty using this relatively “easy” verse form, and his infelicitous, awkward rhymes betray the subconscious desires and urges of his depraved, lewd mind. In his frustration he slips back into his familiar Austrian prose, complaining to himself that he gets tongue-tied when he tries to speak in Knittelvers:

Dr. Viel: Auch mir kam der Skandal zu – Öhren
 Doch solls net meine Proben stören.
 I mach da nämlich gerade eine Produktion
 Die wird der Renner der – Session.
 I werd den Faust als Musical in Szene setzen
 Und muss das Greterl noch besetzen.
 Da hab i gleich an Sie gedacht
 Und Sie telefonisch – Herrgott (*es donnert*), wos reimt sich jetzt
 auf “gedacht”?
 Angemacht –
 angelacht – Ein Kreuz ist des mit die Knittelreimen! Dass man
 net einfach so reden kann, wie einem der Schnabel gewachsen ist,
 wannst Erfolg haben willst!
 Ich dacht, dass Sie die Rolle ziert,
 Und hab Sie gleich antelefoniert.

Susannchen (*für sich*):

Der Mann spricht reichlich sonderbar –
 Verwirrt mir Herz und Sinne gar. (p. 37)

Susannchen's reaction to Dr. Viel's words is reminiscent of Gretchen's reaction to Faust, the difference being that Dr. Viel gets tongue-tied in his clumsy attempt to impress and deceive Susannchen, whereas Faust's words to Gretchen are sincere and convincing, even if she doesn't completely understand what he says.

Dr. Viel, accustomed to speaking prose in his Austrian dialect, finds it extremely difficult to speak in Knittelvers. Finding appropriate words and rhyme-words, which come naturally to Schocker and most of the other characters, is a great challenge for him, as evidenced by the following lines spoken to Susannchen:

In diesen Zeiten solch furchtbarer Verbrechen
 Ist des Risiko von einer Premieren fast net zu berechnen.
 Da brauchts als Intendant viel Mut
 Bei solcher – Flut – Theater – Blut ...Herrgottsakrament (*es donnert*)
 i wird noch wahnsinnig!... (p.38)

His utterance of the words “Flut” and “Blut” appears to be a Freudian slip, for after all he has been murdering the directors and actors in all the other theatres. He continues:

Und wannst in der Dramatik schaust
 Gibts eh nix Bessres als den Faust.
 I habs ein bißerl neugefaßt
 Dem Text mit Musi Pep verpaßt.
 Morgen fangen die Proben an
 Premiere in neun Monaten – hat sich des jetzt gereimt oder net?
 Wohnen kannst bei mir im Haus
 Ich klapp das Gästesofa aus. (p.38)

Dr. Viel senses that something is wrong when he tries to rhyme the final unstressed syllable of *Monaten* with the stressed prefix *an*, and his words reveal his subconscious awareness that he will make Susannchen pregnant. He is well aware of the difficulty he has trying to speak in Knittelvers and nail down its four-stress rhyme-pairs:

“Nun red i schon so verschraubt, dass i einen Knoten krieg in der Zungen, und
 lauf herum wie eine Schaufensterpuppen – und lassts sich noch immer net
 nageln von mir! Des hab i jetzt von dem Pakt! Nix! (p.39)

For him one of the worst aspects of his pact with Schocker is that he feels compelled to try to speak in Knittelvers!

Fräulein Umlaut is the counterpart of Marthe Schwerdtlein in Goethe's *Faust*. She warns Susannchen not to stay at Dr. Viel's house, since, as she expresses it, all men just want to “force themselves between your legs”. She suggests that since men want nothing but sex, Susannchen might just as well further her career by making good use of this male compulsion. When Susannchen tells her fellow actress that she is living at Dr. Viel's house, Fräulein Umlaut replies with her characteristic bluntness:

Geholt hat Dich der wilde Mann
 Damit er mit Dir vögeln kann! (p. 40)

The overwhelming effect of Faust's words on Gretchen in Goethe's play is echoed in Susannchen's innocent reply to Fräulein Umlaut:

Dass er so schlecht ist, glaub ich nicht
 Dieweil er gar romantisch spricht.

To this Fräulein Umlaut replies that once Dr. Viel gets her pregnant, he'll leave her for other women:

Hast erst 'nen Braten Du im Ofen
Geht der mit andern Weibern schwofen! (p. 41)

In order to shield Susannchen from Dr. Viel's lust, Fräulein Umlaut offers to let her live at her house.

Call's eleventh scene is the first of three "rehearsal" scenes directed by Dr. Viel. At the beginning he speaks to Susannchen in four-stress couplets, but when he consults his "advisor" Schocker he slips back into his familiar Austrian prose. As in the Knittelvers of earlier German poets, Call creates a humorous effect through the use of improbable, clumsy or unexpected rhymes, in this case rhyming the German word *Eckchen* with the English word *action*. In Dr. Viel's modernized, "pepped up" version of *Faust*, Gretchen utters the words:

"Er macht mich tierisch an, der Mann"

which ironically applies to Dr. Viel himself as well as to *Faust*. Daniel Call also utilizes phrases from pop music. When Gretchen finds the little casket which Schocker has left in her room, the chorus creates a humorous atmosphere of pure *kitsch* with a variation on the words from the 1988 album "Look Sharp!" by the Swedish pop music duo "Roxette":

Listen to your heart
Listen to your love
Listen to your soul (p. 42)

It is revealing to compare Gretchen's famous song "Am Spinnrad" in Goethe's *Faust* with the increasingly explicit and graphic sexual imagery in the lines sung by Susannchen in Dr. Viel's version:

Susannchen: (<i>singt</i>)	Wie fühl ich mich berührt Wie bin ich angerührt Als hätt ein Mixerstab Sich tief in mich gequirlt Ich kann ihn nicht vergessen!
Chor:	Sie will sich an ihn pressen!
Susannchen:	Er hat mein Herz geklaut Ach könnt ich seine Haut

Nur auf der meinen spüren
 Könnt ich ihn nur berühren
 Könnt ich mich an ihm reiben
 Chor: Sie will es mit ihm treiben – (p. 43)

Dr. Viel's new text for Gretchen reveals his own sexual fantasies about Susannchen. As she and the chorus sing these words of lust and desire – in which she describes Faust as “ein Mann wie Stahl” – Dr. Viel egotistically imagines that *he* is Faust, and that her words refer specifically to *him*. Turning to Schocker, he says:

“Des is jetzt ein ganz neues Gretchen, verstehst? Weil die is von Anfang an scharf auf ihn, weil er so ein Mannsbild is. *Eigentlich musste i den spielen.*” [My emphasis]

Dr. Viel's sexual fantasies are even more explicitly revealed as Susannchen continues her song:

Ich will mich an ihn verschenken
 Mich unter ihm verrenken
 Seinen Dödel küssen! (p. 44)

In his arrogant attempts to “improve upon” what he calls Goethe's “empty chatter”, Dr. Viel again reveals his lascivious, perverse, deviant imagination. When he says to Schocker:

“I hab dacht, i mach sie ein bisserl pervers, dass der ganze Schmus was Verruchtes kriegt ... Könnt ja sonstwas drin sein in dem Kästerl. Reizwäschen oder Handschellen, hab i mir denkt ...”

Schocker's reply indicates that he completely understands what Dr. Viel is thinking:

Ich denke – Interpretation
 Ist – subjektive – Intention –

for Dr. Viel's “interpretation” of Goethe's Faust clearly reveals his lascivious intentions toward Susannchen. In a reference to the scenes “Der Nachbarin Haus” and “Garten” in *Faust*, where Mephisto keeps Marthe's attention focused on himself while Faust converses with Gretchen, Schocker has to find a way

of undermining the solidarity between Fräulein Umlaut (who plays Marthe Schwerdtlein in Dr. Viel's version) and Susannchen. He therefore flatters her to such a degree that she wants him to stay and spend the night at her house so they can become more intimate. By means of this ruse Schocker subtly persuades her to kick Susannchen out of her house, so that the young actress has no choice but to return to Dr. Viel:

- Frl. Umlaut: Ein Tässchen Tee und ein Likör?
 Zur Lockerung ein Aquavit?
 Das hält uns locker, stark und fit!
 Nun kommen Sie doch schon herein!
- Schocker: Ja, leben Gnädigste allein?
- Frl. Umlaut: Das Mädchen, das bei mir logiert...
 Wird heute einfach ausquartiert! (p. 47)

Initially Fräulein Umlaut has moral qualms about abandoning Susannchen to Dr. Viel's lust, but her ethical struggle doesn't last long, and she quickly yields to the temptation represented by the handsome young Schocker. Dr. Viel, of course, is right at hand ready to "rescue" Susannchen and take her to his house. She has little choice, and in a parody of Gretchen's prayers in the *Zwinger* scene in Goethe's *Faust*, she prays to God:

- Herrgott! Gib mir Mut und Kraft
 Dass ers nicht in mein Bettchen schaff! (p. 49)

At this point the Almighty (Theatre-God) complains that people such as Fräulein Umlaut and Susannchen pray like imbeciles, and then just do whatever they please anyway. To him their prayers, words and actions are nothing more than a corny melodrama. Meanwhile Schocker "prays" to *his* god, the "Prince of Darkness", also known as Satan, to release him from his service to Dr. Viel and his consequent unwelcome sexual entanglement with Fräulein Umlaut, whom he refers to as an "old tart". But Satan does not respond, and Schocker is condemned to continue the night of drinking and debauchery with Fräulein Umlaut:

- Schocker: Nur gebe mir ein Zeichen, Meister!
 (kein Zeichen)
 Ich hab verstanden. Scheibenkleister.
- Frl. Umlaut: Willst Du dann nicht das Weinchen trinken?
- Schocker: Viel tiefer kann ich nicht mehr sinken. (p. 49)

The second rehearsal scene (Scene Thirteen in Call's play) corresponds to the "Cathedral" ("Dom") scene in Goethe's *Faust*. Whereas the choir there sings the *Dies irae* in Latin, the pop music chorus of nuns in Dr. Viel's version sings in *English*:

Oh! Ohohohohh – Heavenly father, she killed her mother!
 Oh! Ohohohohh – Heavenly father, what says her brother?

Daniel Call casts the words of the chorus in the form of English strong-stress meter, analogous to the German *Knittelvers* which predominates throughout this play. In Dr. Viel's version of this scene, which also reflects his own relationship with Susannchen, we find out that "Goethens Heinrich Faust" has gotten Gretchen pregnant:

Ich bete hier in Deinem Haus:
 Heut blieb die Periode aus!
 Gebär ich bald 'nen kleinen Klaus
 Als Kind von Goethens Heinrich Faust? (p. 50)

Call's use of the old eighteenth and nineteenth century genitive form "Goethens" adds an archaic touch to this passage, and in fact throughout this play, Call blends modern colloquial German, dialect and slang with the language of the *Goethezeit*. For example, although Dr. Viel addresses Schocker with "Du", Schocker addresses him with the formal *Ihr*-form, and Dr. Viel uses the third person singular *Er*- or *Sie*-form in speaking to those he considers to be his subordinates, such as Helmut (and Susannchen when he is angry with her).

At the end of this scene, Dr. Viel outrageously and ridiculously changes the meaning of Gretchen's remark: "Nachbarin, Eurer Fläschchen!" In Goethe's play Gretchen, about to faint, asks the woman next to her in church for her flask of smelling salts. In Dr. Viel's version, Gretchen is accusing the woman next to her of having provided the bottle of poison which killed her mother:

Susannchen (schlicht): Die Mutti liegt in Schutt und Asche
 Das Gift zog ich aus meiner Tasche
 Frau Nachbarin, s'war Eure Flasche

In his desperate effort to find rhyme-words, Dr. Viel comes up with lines that are nonsensical and ludicrous.

Concerning the death of her mother, compare Gretchen's words in *Faust* with Dr. Viel's casual "modern" version:

Gretchen: Sie schlief, damit wir uns freuten. (Goethe, *Faust*, line 4572)

Gretchen: Die Mutter starb für eine Nummer! (Dr. Viel's version (p. 51))

The end of this rehearsal scene reveals Dr. Viel's egotistical, tyrannical, and brutal authoritarianism toward those he considers to be beneath him. In his post-rehearsal "evaluation" he humiliates Susannchen in front of the other actors and actresses, calling her "lustlos" and referring to her sarcastically as "Fräulein Susannchen":

Ganz Deutschland stiert mich an zur Premierien! Da will i mich net blamieren wegen so einer bläden Kuh! Und ein bisserl mehr DANKBARKEIT, Fräulein Susannchen, dass Sie dran teilhat an die Sensation! Doppeltes Tempo! Doppelte Kraft! Und vergessens die Zwischentön net, weils davon lebt, das Texterl von mir and Herrn Goethe!... Dass das MAL KLAR IST! (p. 52)

The evening of the premiere of Dr. Viel's "*Faust – Das Musical*" finally arrives, and even Linda, the pretty TV moderator, speaks in Knittelvers to her audience of millions. One of the most humorous passages in Call's play is her capsule summary of Dr. Viel's "*Faust-Musical*:"

Der alte Faust, ein hochbewährter
Professor, Doktor und Gelehrter,
Wie Einstein ein Allround-Genie,
Übt sich in schwärzester Magie
Weil er so unzufrieden ist,
In Bücherwust das Fleisch vermisst.
So tut den Teufel er beschwören,
Der Teufel tut den Ruf erhören,
Und tut ihm einen Diener geben,
Der tut ihm auf ein neues Leben.
Der gibt die Jugend ihm zurück,
Verspricht Zerstreuung ihm und mehr,
und jetzt wirts tragisch in dem Stück,
Denn Faust gibt seine Seele her.
Es folgen Spass und Spannungen
Und allerhand Verwicklungen
Bis hin zum rührgen Happy-End,

Das bisher nur der Autor kennt,
 Der Goethens Faust neu adaptierte,
 An seinem Haus selbst inszenierte,
 Dazu die Titelrolle spielt,
 Ich stell vor: Herrn Dr. Viel! (p. 62)

In the final dungeon scene (“Kerker”) there is a ludicrous discrepancy between Susannchen’s physical condition – she is now visibly “hochschwanger” – and her role in Goethe’s *Faust* as the mother who drowned her child. Accompanied by “schmalzige Musik,” she sings:

Wenn, Kindlein, ich Dir Blumen pflück
 Dann leg ich sie Dir auf Dein Grab,
 Weil, Mutter ich, kein Kind mehr hab! (p. 67)

This laughably absurd and incongruous situation corresponds well with the burlesque characteristics of Knittelvers. Dr. Viel’s “Faust Musical” ends as a total farce in which all the supposedly dead characters surprize the audience and appear gathered together alive and well in Gretchen’s cell:

Alle: ÜBERRASCHUNG!
 Dr. Viel: Des Baby is doch gar net tot
 Und auch net Valentin, der Idiot –
 ...
 Frl. Umlaut: Ach Gretchen, wie mich alles reut!
 Das mit der Mama tut mir leid!
 Doch lebt auch sie, ist nicht hinüber,
 Mit einem Mann in Rom am Tiber! (p. 69)
 ...

Das Ärzteteam der Notaufnahme:
 Das Kind war beinah schon erfroren!
 Ihm sausten seine kleine Ohren!
 Doch ist der zuckersüsse Zwerg
 Schon längstens wieder übern Berg! (p. 70)

The real surprise is yet to come however. As the actors come to the front of the stage to take their bows, Goethe, who has taken a leave of absence from Heaven and entered the theater in disguise, stands up in the audience and assassinates Dr. Viel with a revolver. In the afterworld Schocker informs the dead Dr. Viel that Goethe took revenge on him for desecrating his work:

Schocker: Er sagt, Ihr habt sein Werk geschändet,
Wie niemals es ein Mensch zuvor. (p. 71)

In the concluding scene in the Afterworld, the final words of Goethe's *Faust, Erster Teil*, Mephisto's "Sie ist gerichtet!" and the Voice from Above "ist gerettet!", are condensed into just two words spoken by the greatly relieved *Wiener Burg*, "Gerichtet – Gerettet", meaning that Dr. Viel has been judged, and that the Vienna *Burgtheater* has been rescued from the certain disaster that would have befallen it if Dr. Viel had become its director.

Daniel Call's play, along with both dramatic and non-dramatic Knittelvers by other twentieth and early twenty-first century writers, demonstrates that while its rhythmic structure has undergone some changes and variations, this verse form still retains formal and semantic characteristics which have remained constant since the fifteenth century. These rough and rugged four-stress couplets retain a comic, coarse, crude, sometimes vulgar character, and as in Daniel Call's play, continue to function as a medium to depict mock-heroic and tragicomic situations through farce, parody and burlesque satire.

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