

FOOTPRINTS OF A GIGANTIC *HUND*

by MICHAEL ROSS

After two years of *Hound* centenaries one might expect that everything had been said about this story. Still, there is another *Hound* centenary to be celebrated in 2003, which gives me the opportunity to relate its extraordinary success in a country which, in canonical circles, is better remembered for its music and spies than for its interest in the Holmes stories: Germany. One hundred years ago, in March 1903, *Der Hund von Baskerville*¹ was first published in German translation, by Lutz of Stuttgart, who had introduced Holmes to German readers in 1894 and had published all his subsequent exploits. The German first edition of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* became a great success, and the story had been reprinted and re-issued many times in the following decades. It has been translated into German no less than nine times between 1903 and 1987. The huge success of *Der Hund von Baskerville* with the German public is also indicated by an amazing number of theater plays and films, as well as a TV show and even a stage musical based on it. Some of these have the honor to be “Houndian” firsts in their respective fields.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the theater (including opera, operetta, and vaudeville) was still the most popular place for entertainment in Germany. Theater managers were constantly on the lookout for popular plays with which to fill their houses and their purses, and it was only a question of time until they struck upon the detective play. In 1905, the first Sherlock Holmes play was performed on a German stage, to be immediately followed by a string of similar plays, some loosely based on the famous Gillette play. The success of these plays in the 1906 season almost inevitably led to the world’s first stage adaptation of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. On 2 December 1906, *Der Erbe von Baskerville* (The Heir of Baskerville) by Fred Gibson premiered in Halle. There remains some doubt whether this was a translation of an English play (as the author’s non-Germanic name suggests) or an original German play (since no English original could be traced), but internal evidence leads me to believe that it was written by a German, or, at least, not by an Englishman.²

Wherever the author came from, he made a mess of the story. Holmes and Dr. Jackson (*sic*) live at Bakerstrasse 33; Henry von Baskerville is already married to a South American music-hall singer (he wants to divorce her, though); Dr.

Lyndhorst (formerly known as Mortimer) is the guardian of Henry's mentally ill sister Jane; the Barrymores have a charming daughter, Anny, who will eventually become the new lady of Schloss Baskerville; and scheming Prof. Chaspicke is not only behind the hound, but also behind the legend, which he actually invented and forged. Holmes solves this case by disguising himself as a drunken policeman and threatening the villains with a bomb that turns out to be a tin of sardines, before luring Chaspicke into a trap reminiscent of "The Empty House." The whole plot is so complicated that one wonders how the audience was supposed to follow it. Not too many viewers were put to the test, for *Der Erbe von Baskerville* was no success. It had a short run in Berlin, and there may have been one or two touring companies with it in repertoire, but that was it.

Within weeks of the first night of *Der Erbe von Baskerville*, two further plays premiered in Germany, both entitled *Der Hund von Baskerville*, and both much more successful than their predecessor. The first of these was written by Julius Philip and Richard Oswald, a young actor who was to be connected with the *Hound* for many more years to come. Their version was far more faithful to the original story, although there were some significant changes. In the first act, for example, Stapleton attaches a bomb to the ceiling of Sir Henry's room at the Northumberland Hotel. Holmes notices this, and severs the fuse with a single gunshot just in time. Later Holmes creates an anaesthetic that can be administered through his tiepin. This is useful when Stapleton and his confederate Barrymore, who had been hiding in a suit of armor, trap Holmes.

The other, even more successful *Hund* was written by Ferdinand Bonn. His case deserves special attention for several reasons. Bonn was one of the big stars of German theater around 1900. He was an ambitious, although generally unsuccessful, playwright. He ran his own theater, focusing on his own plays, most of which were not popular with the audience and intolerable to the critics. On the brink of ruin, he wrote his first detective comedy, *Sherlock Holmes*, which became a great popular, if not critical, success. As a follow-up, he wrote his own version of *Der Hund von Baskerville*. Bonn, whose strained relationship with the press was well known, feared that another set of damning first night reviews would end his career. He therefore decided to have a secret first night. On 17 January 1907, *Sherlock Holmes* was scheduled at Bonn's Berliner Theatre. But right after the beginning of the play, the director came forward and told the audience that they would now be witness to the premiere of his new play, *Der Hund von Baskerville*. At the same time, he reported this piece of slyness to the newspapers. On the next morning, many papers reported that *Der Hund von*

Baskerville had premiered, but none could review it, since no critic had seen it. Some critics loudly complained about this unheard-of dealing with their profession, but this only helped to publicize the play. It was exactly the kind of publicity Bonn needed to keep the business running, and a couple of months later the Kaiser himself attended a performance and made some favorable comments.

In his version, Bonn changed most of the characters' names (Sir Henry becomes Lord Walter, Stapleton is Argyll, Barrymore is Robin, etc.), and added a few characters, most importantly a pair of incompetent police detectives called Knox and Smallweed. To raise the stakes, Bonn added a subplot about a treasure hunt (which borrows heavily from "The Musgrave Ritual"). Holmes is seen in several disguises, most notably as a monk and as a Tonga-like Australian aborigine. Significantly, Schloss Baskerville is transferred from Dartmoor to Scotland, a classic *locus horribilis* full of romantic associations. The Scottish setting, mentioned in the play's subtitle, is emphasized by scenes with locals in kilts.

Bonn's version of the *Hound* is the only known stage version of the time where the hound is actually seen on stage. By happy coincidence, Bonn owned a black Great Dane that was trained to run across the stage pursuing Lord Walter. At first, Bonn even tried to make it more fearful by using a muzzle with electric lamps—needless to say, the effect was rather less terrifying than hilarious.³

The importance of the two plays by Philip/Oswald and Bonn can hardly be exaggerated for the further development of German *Hound* versions. It can be said that all later adaptations, at least up to 1955, were based as much on either or both of these plays as on the Canon. Both plays made use of effects and motifs that were then (and during the next decades) considered vital to any successful detective play: Holmes's disguises and the bomb threats, for example. More importantly, both plays stressed and expanded the gothic horror that is present in the story: an old castle with secret passages, eerie Scotland, old paintings with moving eyes, suits of armor that suddenly move. For German authors and audiences alike, these became integral parts of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

There were two further German stage *Hounds* at the time that obviously wanted to cash in on the success of the other plays. Interestingly, all five stage *Hounds* were written or first performed during the 1906/07 season, and they all more or less disappeared from programs as quickly as they had come. The detective plays were a passing fashion. At their height in 1907, however, there were nights when several theaters in the same city would compete against each other with different versions of *Der Hund von Baskerville*. On 11 March 1907, for ex-

ample, three different versions of the *Hound* plus another Holmes play were performed in Berlin.⁴

The quick fall of the detective play was matched by the rise of the early detective films. During the first decade of the 20th century, German film production was not yet fully developed; most films were imported from France, the United States, and Denmark, among others. The Danish series of Sherlock Holmes films produced by Nordisk was successfully shown in Germany, and it is in this series that we find what some scholars call the first film version of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. However, the Nordisk film in question, *Den Grå Dame* (The Grey Lady), does not feature a hound at all, but rather a phantom lady used for much the same purpose.⁵ By the middle of the 1910s the German film industry had grown considerably, and, in 1914, the Berlin-based Vitascope produced the world's first film version of *The Hound*, featuring a Great Dane. The script was written by Richard Oswald, who had co-authored the second *Hound* stage adaptation. Sherlock Holmes was played by Alwin Neuss, who had starred in several of Oswald's stage plays, including the *Hound*. To a historian of German film, the list of the crew on *Der Hund von Baskerville* reads quite impressively. Hermann Warm, who was to work on the classic *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, designed the sets; the photography was by Karl Freund, whose work for Murnau and Lang in films like *Der letzte Mann* and *Metropolis* makes him one of the most important directors of photography of the '20s; last but not least, Oswald himself soon became one of the best-known directors of his time, especially for his literary adaptations and his *Aufklärungsfilme* (a mixture of sensational drama and sex education). Both Freund and Oswald worked in Hollywood during and after the Nazi period.

The film's success was immense. Although it was released in the hot summer of 1914, it had full houses at every screening. Within a fortnight, almost 50,000 tickets had been sold in Berlin alone; another couple of weeks later, the film's 200th performance was celebrated in Berlin (a rare occurrence for any film at the time). Until recently, this *Hund von Baskerville* was believed to be lost (together with most films from the silent era); however, I was able to track down a copy in a European film archive recently. This survivor seems to be more or less complete. After decades of educated guesswork on the film's actual plot and quality, I offer comments based on fact.

As might be expected, the story of the film bears some resemblance to Oswald's stage version, although it is not a straight adaptation. In the film, Bar-

rymore knows that Stapleton is a villain (he seems to have been a former confederate), and secretly warns Sir Henry not to stay at Schloss Baskerville, without success. Sir Henry meets Laura Lyons and saves her life when the horses of her carriage shy because of the hound. When Sir Henry writes a letter to Holmes, asking for help in the matter of the supposed threats, Stapleton prevents the letter from reaching Holmes by putting a bomb into the letterbox. Stapleton then disguises himself as Holmes and does the detective work, apprehending Barrymore as the author of the warning notes. Meanwhile, the real Holmes reads in the papers about his alleged investigations at Schloss Baskerville, and—after a short discussion with Watson—leaves for Baskerville. He arrives there just in time to see his doppelgänger affix a bomb to the ceiling of Sir Henry’s dining room. As on stage, Holmes defuses the bomb with a single shot. He then withdraws, leaving Sir Henry’s grateful thanks to the false Holmes, who is utterly confused by the failure of his plan. With the help of Barrymore, the real Holmes enters Stapleton’s house, where he finds a notebook providing proof that Stapleton is really a Baskerville. Stapleton catches Holmes in the act and pushes him through a trapdoor and a long tunnel into the cave of the hound. At the end of a short fight, Holmes overpowers the animal and escapes. Now Holmes in turn puts on the disguise of Stapleton and calls on Sir Henry at a time when the real Stapleton, still disguised as Holmes, is present. During an interview between the two men a fight ensues, which is quickly ended by Barrymore, who had been hiding in some armor—this time helping Holmes (rather than working against him, as he had on stage).

By modern standards, the film falls short of a faithful adaptation of the Canon. The characters of Dr. Mortimer and Beryl Stapleton are missing completely; Laura Lyons is merely a suitable fiancée for Sir Henry; and Watson remains in Baker Street. Moreover, we know Stapleton is the villain from the outset, while Holmes’s detective work is reduced to marksmanship and physical power. At the time, however, this was a perfect detective film. There is virtually no detective film of the period that doesn’t have its share of trapdoors, secret tunnels, technical gimmicks, bomb explosions, and gunshots, and *Der Hund* couldn’t have succeeded without these elements. It also uses the gothic horror elements from the earlier plays, including references to a Scottish setting. Reviewers noted that the technical quality and production values were superior to other productions. Indeed, the later-to-be-famous production team came up with a number of interesting sets, camera shots, and lighting effects, which suggest painstaking work during the filming. The acting is also quite good, although today we would certainly prefer a leaner Holmes and a less bald Watson.

The success of the film was so great that the same team immediately started work on a sequel, *Das einsame Haus* (The Isolated House), which was released later that same year. This film had nothing to do with the original *Hound*—actually, it did not feature a hound at all. Instead it tells the story of Stapleton’s escape from prison and his subsequent attempt to drown Sir Henry and his fiancée in a submersible house. By now, the technical side had completely won over any detection work, but audiences seemed quite happy with this. During the following years, no less than five more sequels were produced, including two rival versions of episode three, a result of a legal argument after the merger of Vitascope with the Union Company. One of the sequels, *Wie entstand der Hund von Baskerville* (On the Origins of the Hound), is set in medieval times and tells the story of Hugo (or Rodger, as he is called here) Baskerville; even this film has Sherlock Holmes (or rather one of his ancestors) investigating.

In 1929, Richard Oswald returned to the original story one last time, directing what was to become the last silent Holmes film. This production was aimed at international markets, with actors from the United States, Italy, England, and Germany playing the leading parts. For the title role, Oswald made a public search for “Germany’s biggest dog,” which turned out to be a Newfoundland. From what we know from reviews and synopses of the time, the film seems to have remained reasonably faithful to the original story, although there are hints of the occasional bomb attack and a man in armor. It is interesting to note that Watson is referred to as Holmes’s “young friend and colleague,” thus allowing younger viewers to identify themselves with him more easily.⁶ The reviewers stressed that the film was hardly groundbreaking. Some saw this as a positive return to the old values of entertaining storytelling; others called the film outdated and unintentionally funny. It certainly must have seemed outdated very shortly after its release, since the talkie revolution was just taking place.

As might have been expected, it was not long until the first German sound *Hound* was unleashed in 1936.⁷ According to a film business paper, there were plans to make a parody film scripted by Curt Goetz, whose 1932 stage comedy *Dr. med. Hiob Praetorius* includes Holmes and Watson in a framework story. In the end, *Der Hund von Baskerville* became a straightforward, if somewhat free adaptation of the original story, in which humor is only present in the person of the young and mostly incompetent Watson. The most important change from the original is the character of Beryl Vandeleure (!), who is present at Schloss Baskerville throughout the film and functions as both a red herring and love interest for Sir Henry. While Bruno Güttner’s Teutonic and very modern-looking Holmes fails to convince by today’s standards, Fritz Rasp’s sinister (but

innocent) Barrymore and a couple of eerie exterior shots of the castle and its surroundings provide some nice moments of horror. Audience reactions seem to have been not too enthusiastic, but the film had one infamous fan: There is evidence that Adolf Hitler ordered a copy of the film for his private use.

A year prior to the making of this film, the new medium television had officially started in Germany. At the time, television was little more than a gimmick, producing pictures of deplorable quality on an absurdly small screen. The Nazis had only supported its development in order to claim technological superiority over other nations, and when resources ran low during World War II, they did not bother to continue with the newfangled medium. After the war, activities were resumed, and in 1952 a regular service with better quality was set up, but throughout the 1950s very few people owned a TV set. By August 1955, less than 180,000 licenses had been issued. So it was a comparatively small number who were able to watch the world's first television adaptation of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which was broadcast on German television on 16 August 1955. TV dramas were produced live then. Unfortunately, the TV *Hund von Baskerville* was produced weeks before the station started recording their productions on magnetic tape. All we know about this show is from the surviving shooting script and the reminiscences of the late Wolf Ackva, who played Sherlock Holmes in the show.⁸

As with so many of the previous German *Hound* adaptations, the story is set in Scotland, which in this case provides many opportunities for references to the proverbial Scottish miserliness. The story line is a mixture of the original story and the stage version by Ferdinand Bonn. The latter's influence is particularly obvious in the scenes involving a secret passage behind the portrait of Hugo Baskerville, and in some of the dialogue. Where this version differs greatly from nearly all its predecessors is the Watson character. This time, Watson not only has much to do, but he is also intelligent enough to draw the right conclusions from what he sees and hears. He is perhaps a little too outspoken in what he thinks of others, and he most strongly disagrees with Mortimer's taste for Richard Wagner. (It is interesting to note that this time it is Watson who plays the violin.) Ackva recalled that Watson "was rather thoughtful and careful," while his Holmes was a "dynamic, brilliant criminologist" rather than a cynic or drug addict. The only photos of the production that still exist show the "star" that played the title role: a German Shepherd, Prinz, a police dog in Frankfurt am Main.

The 1955 TV show marks a turning point for *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in Germany. Until then, virtually all adaptations of the story had been of German origin, and thus contained the typical elements that go back to the early stage dramatizations. In the decades that followed, German culture became increasingly influenced by western Europe and America, especially in light entertainment. Thus there was (and still is) no need for further German *Hounds*. Instead, British and American productions came to Germany. Both the film (1959) and the TV version (1968) starring Peter Cushing were shown. The radio adaptation by Michael and Mollie Hardwick was translated and produced in 1966; the 1978 spoof made its way to Germany as well as the three TV adaptations of the 1980s, starring Tom Baker, Ian Richardson, and Jeremy Brett, respectively.

There was only one exception. One place might be seen as a biotope for the German pre-war Holmes and *Hound*, because any western influence was deliberately suppressed: socialist East Germany. The Cushing film was released in East Germany, and the 1939 Rathbone film was broadcast on television there. (Because of World War II, it had never been released theatrically in Germany.) That was about all the western influence you could get where *The Hound* was concerned. Instead, in the late 1970s, East German TV dug up the 1936 German *Hound* film, which has still never been shown on West German TV. A few East German films for children allude to Sherlock Holmes; when they do so, it is invariably the pre-war Germanic Holmes rather than the sophisticated British original. It was in this isolation that the last important German contribution to the history of the *Hound* came into existence, and for all I know, it might be another “first contribution”—a stage musical based on the story.

Its title, *Ein Fall für Sherlock Holmes* (A Case for Sherlock Holmes), does not make it clear that this is another adaptation of the Baskerville case, but the cast list eliminates all doubts. Besides Holmes and Watson there are Lord Henry, Beryl, a butler, Stapleton, Mortimer, Frankland, and—Lady Pubdustery. (That last character may have been part of a framework story rather than the main story of the *Hound*.) A little guesswork is necessary in regard to the actual story, since the LP contains the songs without any linking texts. It seems that the musical followed the original story fairly closely; still, there are hints of a torture chamber in the castle. I would not be surprised to learn that suits of armor or secret passages were involved as well. What can be said most definitely is that the music is quite outré, ranging in style from '20s swing to '80s electronic music, without the slightest hint of Victorian melodies.

Here ends the trail of the *Hund*, and it is unlikely that it will continue in the near future. This does not mean that the German public has lost its interest in the story. Three out of six German Sherlock Holmes books currently in print are different editions of *Der Hund von Baskerville*. Some of the films are frequently repeated on German television, with the 1959 Cushing version and the 1983 Richardson telemovie leading the pack, while the Brett version was issued on video a few years ago. As the specific German image of Sherlock Holmes and his greatest case gradually disappear from the collective memory, there simply is no need for further *Hunde*—as long as there are enough *Hounds* to chill us.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that *Der Hund von Baskerville* literally translates as “The Dog of Baskerville,” thus taking Baskerville as a place name rather than a surname. So far, only one translation carries the correct title *Der Hund der Baskervilles* (1984). Furthermore, Germans do not distinguish between a hound and a dog (linguistically speaking).
2. In the play, the Baskerville estate moves from Dartmoor to Essex. It is difficult to believe that any English writer would put moors and rocky hills there or would call it a “godforsaken place” as does Henry von Baskerville at one point. To do so is not poetic license but poetic cruelty; Essex has a reputation as beautiful, fertile country.
3. Readers of German may want to check the complete text of the play, with my numerous annotations in Ferdinand Bonn, *Der Hund von Baskerville* (Cologne: Baskerville, 2001).
4. To avoid confusion with the other plays, the Oswald/Philip version was entitled *Nick Carter* in Berlin, and the action was lifted from England to America, and dealt with by American dime novel hero Carter.
5. Most prominent among those counting the Nordisk film as a version of the *Hound* is Philip Weller (see *The Hound of the Baskervilles: Hunting the Dartmoor Legend*, Tiverton, England: Devon Books, 2001, p. 99). Detailed information on this film and all the other entries in the Nordisk Holmes series can be found in Bjarne Nielsen’s excellent study *The Great Northern Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Denmark: Pinkerton, 1997).
6. There is a tradition of young partners for Holmes in German adaptations, going back to the Harry Taxon character in the infamous “penny dreadfuls,” *Aus den Geheimakten des Welt-Detektivs* (From the Secret Files of the World Detective).
7. The film was produced in 1936 and released at the very end of that year, although the official Berlin premiere was in January 1937.

8. I am greatly indebted to Uwe Sommerlad, whose research led to the discovery of the script for the first television *Hound* and who interviewed Wolf Ackva about it. A short report on this was published in *The Hound*, Vol. 6 (1997). Uwe's research into German Holmes films has been invaluable to me, and he is one of the main contributors to the first German book on Sherlock Holmes films, which has just been published by Baskerville.