GENDER AND HUMOR IN GERMAN LITERATURE OF THE FIN DE SIÈCLE

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ABSTRACT

Melanie April Ungar: Gender and Humor in German Literature of the fin de siècle
(Under the direction of Eric Downing)

This dissertation explores the intersection of gender and humor in German-language literature of the fin de siècle. At the turn of the century, the German-speaking countries of central Europe experienced a surge of interest in humor theory as well as unprecedented feminist activity, making the relationship between humor and gender a fruitful area of study. However, most literary criticism on gender and humor published in the last forty years has focused on the gender of a humorous literary text’s author rather than how humor affects representations of gender within the text. This dissertation therefore examines literary works by decidedly non-feminist authors like Theodor Fontane, Thomas Mann, and Frank Wedekind as well as the feminist activist Hedwig Dohm and analyzes how humor works to influence gender representation in novels, short stories, dramas, and polemic essays. Ultimately this dissertation argues two main points: First, humor in literature of the fin de siècle often acts as a social leveler and creates a space in which men and women can prove themselves intellectual and moral equals. Second, humor in this literature often goes beyond depicting men and women simply as equals and challenges traditional and essentialist gender roles by exposing them as social constructs devoid of any “natural” foundation. In order to make these arguments, this dissertation engages with humor theory, classical to contemporary, as well as Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity.
To my parents. Thank you for your love and your laughter.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION........................................................................................................................................1

CHAPTER 1..................................................................................................................................................29
"Always Quick and Clever": Humor and Fontane's Frauen

CHAPTER 2................................................................................................................................................74
"War sie nicht eine Frau und er ein Mann?": Gender and Humor in Thomas Mann's Early Fiction

CHAPTER 3...............................................................................................................................................137
Roleplay: Sex and Humor in Frank Wedekind’s Frühlings Erwachen

CHAPTER 4.............................................................................................................................................191
"Spotte des Spottes": The Uses of Humor in the Feminist Writings of Hedwig Dohm

EPILOGUE..............................................................................................................................................237
INTRODUCTION

As recently as 2007, Vanity Fair—a pop culture magazine with a monthly circulation of over 1.2 million—felt it totally reasonable to publish an article titled "Why Women Aren't Funny" by the American journalist Christopher Hitchens. I bring up this odious piece of writing not to argue, as Hitchens does, that there exists some sort of "humor gap" between men and women, but rather to illustrate that such an assumption was recently so widely accepted that a so-called "public intellectual" could base a 2,700-word think piece around it without stopping to consider the veracity of his assertion that "men [are], taken on average and as a whole, funnier than women."¹ In his essay, Hitchens asks: "Why are women, who have the whole male world at their mercy, not funny?" Which leads me to ask: Why are men, who control every government and corporation in the world, so desperate to insist that women are not funny? The answer, of course, boils down to power and who is supposed to exercise it. Funny women prove that women are not the "incompetent" speakers the patriarchy makes them out to be² and are instead fully capable of "ignoring the script that tells [women] when to speak (almost never) and when to laugh (when someone else tells [them] to)."³ Funny women grab discursive power for themselves.


² Susan Purdie, Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 133.

³ Regina Barreca, They Used to Call Me Snow White ... but I Drifted: Women’s Strategic Use of Humor (New York: Viking, 1991), 182.
Since I began researching humor and gender in 2011, I have witnessed a shift in consensus in Western society about who and what can be considered funny. In 2011, the most recognizable (or arguably the only recognizable) feminist comedian in America was Tina Fey, whose award-winning television series 30 Rock had been tackling topics like menstruation, women in the workplace, and feminist hypocrisy since the beginning of its run in 2006. In the last five years, comedians like Mindy Kaling (The Mindy Project), Amy Schumer (Inside Amy Schumer), and Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson (Broad City) have joined the ranks of female showrunners like Fey who self-identify as feminists and whose feminist brand of humor has brought them critical and commercial success. Schumer, most notably, achieved international fame when she wrote and starred in the successful 2015 film Trainwreck, which grossed over $140 million worldwide. Trainwreck is a funny and entertaining film, but thematically and structurally, there is very little about it that could be described as innovative, as it follows the plot of nearly every romantic comedy: woman improves herself and earns the affections of a deserving man. Nevertheless, Trainwreck received a great deal of media attention when it was released for the unabashed sexual humor of its titular character. Several days into its release, the film began to receive attention for a very different reason: a lone gunman in Lafayette, Louisiana had entered a movie theater playing Trainwreck and opened fire on the film's audience, murdering two young women and injuring nine other people before committing suicide. The shooter, a 59-year-old white man, had a history of calling into a local talk show and expressing his anger about "the growing power of women." A former host of the talk show summarized the shooter's views by saying: "He was anti-abortion. The best I can recall, Rusty had an issue with
feminine rights. He was opposed to women having a say in anything. Unsurprisingly, the shooter's choice of film turned out to be premeditated—police searched his motel room and found a journal in which the shooter had scrawled *Trainwreck*’s title and showtimes among a series of rambling misogynistic remarks.

The Lafayette shooting raises the same question I posed at the beginning of this introduction: why do misogynistic men find the mere *existence* of funny, feminist women so threatening? So threatening that one particularly unhinged man felt the need to take lethal action against a theater of strangers watching a comedy film? Regina Barreca, a scholar of humor theory and gender studies, provides something of an answer when she argues that "[m]aking your own jokes is equivalent to taking control over your life—and usually that means taking control away from someone else." At the same time, Sean Zwagerman, who studies many of the same topics as Barreca, is also correct when he writes that this type of statement "overstates humor's subversive action." As much as I enjoy them, even I doubt *Broad City*’s fart jokes are going to help pass the Equal Rights Amendment. However, I do believe humor can do cultural work that seriousness cannot. As this introduction will demonstrate, humor is a force that can be at once

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6 Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White*, 110.

disruptive and enjoyable; it is therefore ideally suited to making people consider ideas they 
would never otherwise entertain. And as this dissertation will prove, humor is especially adept at 
forcing people to think critically about normative gender roles.

So what does all this have to do with German-language literature of the fin de siècle? I 
have found that by thinking about humor’s capacity for cultural criticism, I am able to read many 
works of literature in new ways, and the most productive time period for this type of literary 
analysis is the fin de siècle. The years between 1890 and 1910 were a period of social upheaval 
and unprecedented feminist activity in German-speaking countries. They were also years of 
renewed theoretical interest in the function of humor. All of this is reflected in the literature of 
the period, yet relatively little literary criticism exists that examines the relationship between 
humor and gender within turn-of-the-century texts. In the past forty years most of the critics who 
have written on the subject have used the gender of an author as a starting point to discuss the 
ways in which gender is then depicted in the author's text. One example of this phenomenon is 
Helen Chamber's 2007 book *Humor and Irony in Nineteenth-Century German Women's Writing: 
Studies in Prose Fiction 1840-1900*, which presupposes a distinct female literary tradition and, 
consequently, a specifically female approach to literary humor. These types of texts do valuable 
feminist work by exposing readers to those writers whom the canon typically ignores, but their 
scope is limited. I am much less interested in how the gender of an author influences his or her 
writing than I am in how an author can utilize humor to challenge essentialist notions of gender.

In this dissertation I argue two main points. First, I argue that humor in German literature 
of the fin de siècle frequently acts as a social leveler and creates a space in which men and 
women can exist as intellectual and moral equals. Additionally, I argue that humor in this 
literature often goes beyond simply depicting men and women as equals and challenges
traditional and essentialist gender roles by exposing them as social constructs devoid of any "natural" foundation. I substantiate these arguments by engaging in a close analysis of the humor in literary works by Theodor Fontane, Thomas Mann, Frank Wedekind, and Hedwig Dohm, and my analysis is shaped by the following questions: how does humor function in the text? How does it engage in social criticism? Are characters in the text more likely to be mocked for deviating from gender norms or conforming to them?

**German Women in Life and Literature at the fin de siècle**

In order to argue this thesis, I first need to provide some historical background information to establish why the fin de siècle is a period that lends itself especially well to a study of gender in German literature. Two historical trends from the twenty years around the turn of the century emerge as particularly relevant to this discussion. First, the German women's movements, which were always relatively conservative compared to their English and American counterparts, briefly became more "radicalized." Concurrently, literary and artistic depictions of "ambiguous" female figures like the femme fatale proliferated, arguably in response to the social agitation and uncertainty generated by the women's movements.

Prior to the 1890s, the vast majority of German feminists accepted a "dualist model of sexual difference." In other words, most members of the women's movements believed that men and women were innately different and destined to play very different roles within society. Even the most forward-thinking women were influenced by "German conceptions of citizenship."

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which "linked rights to duties." Consequently, many of the women's movements campaigned for women's access to education under the argument that educated women would better fulfill their duty to society by becoming better wives and mothers. These early feminists valued egalitarianism in marriage and in public life but viewed the fight for women's suffrage as overly ambitious. Things started to change right around the turn of the century. In 1894, 34 disparate women's associations joined together to form the Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine (BDF), and by 1902, even the largely moderate BDF was in support of the fight for women's suffrage.

German culture did not remain unaffected by this heightened feminist activity. Gender was increasingly seen as "an unstable category" at the fin de siècle, and the art and literature of the period reflected this instability. In his book Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture, the art historian Bram Dijkstra remarks that "[d]iabolical women with the light of hell in their eyes were stalking men everywhere in the art of the turn of the century" and attributes these femme fatales of the visual arts to the social upheaval in which they were produced. Gail Finney makes a similar argument about fin-de-siècle drama in her book Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism, and European Theater at the Turn of the Century, in which she asserts that "male dramatists were often deeply ambivalent toward women, and the versions

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11 Weedon, Gender, Feminism, & Fiction in Germany, 1840 - 1914, 8.

12 Evans, The Feminist Movement in Germany, 37, 51.


of womanhood they created for the theater are correspondingly ambiguous."\textsuperscript{15} This dissertation will contribute to this discourse on female figures at the fin de siècle by discussing the instances in which such ambivalent depictions of women were not meant to be taken seriously. Some femme fatales, I will argue, are so exaggerated as to be intentionally absurd.

\textbf{What is humor?: An Overview of Pertinent Terminology}

This dissertation concerns humor, a term I have selected after a lengthy period of deliberation, since it is not an especially straightforward word. Both the English "humor" and the German \textit{Humor} share a long history that goes back to Hippocratic medicine and the four bodily humors, and although the word is no longer used as a synonym for \textit{Körpersaft} in many modern contexts, the original meaning survives in phrases like the English adjective "good-humored," meaning "of an amiable or cheerful temperament." Today "humor" is most often used as an umbrella term for anything that provokes mirth or laughter from an audience, which is how I will also employ it here. English synonyms for this definition of humor include "funniness" and "the comic," while German humor theorists tend to employ terms like \textit{die Komik} and \textit{das Komische} to the same effect. In modern English, a humorous situation, person, or literary passage is described most often as "funny" and sometimes "comic" or "comical." If the thing in question is especially humorous, it is called "hilarious." None of these words translate particularly cleanly into German, where \textit{humorvoll} is most often used as a character trait to describe a person with a sense of humor and where something funny can be described as \textit{lustig}, \textit{witzig}, or \textit{komisch} depending on the situation.

As the above paragraph has already begun to suggest, over the course of writing this dissertation I have encountered several problems connected to the terminology of humor theory. First, there is the problem of widespread semantic disagreement. No two scholars writing about humor use the same exact terms to refer to the same exact phenomena. I am continuing this tradition to the extent that none of the definitions I offer in this dissertation will be perfectly identical to those in pre-existing scholarly works on humor, although all are the result of extensive research. Second, there is the problem of translation. My textual analysis is in English, whereas all of the literary texts I analyze and many of the theoretical texts are in German. The greatest complications are caused by terms like "wit" and Witz, of which the German Witz is arguably the larger term with more varied sub-meanings. Depending on the context, it can be translated as either "wit" or "joke," two terms with little overlap in modern English. Third, many of the phenomena associated with humor-as-umbrella-term do not fit snugly under its canopy. For example, irony and parody are often funny but not always. They are therefore concepts that overlap with humor but are not strictly subordinate to it. As a result of these issues, it is vital that I attempt to clear up as many terminological issues as possible in this introduction before moving on to literary analysis.

This dissertation is about humor in literature, but it is especially focused on finding and examining what I have decided to call "moments of humor" within a given text. A moment of humor is not necessarily a joke (ein Witz, ein Scherz) in the way that a joke is often understood to be something self-contained and intentional, something with a set-up and a punchline, or something requiring the triad of teller, audience, and butt. A moment of humor can be any phrase, situation, or circumstance in a work of literature that comes across as funny. Here it is important to talk about how inherently subjective humor is. As Jean Paul writes in his Vorschule
Almost a century later, Theodor Lipps elaborates on this idea by comparing the adjectives *komisch* and *blau*: "Das Wort 'komisch' will, allgemein gesagt, zunächst nicht wie das Wort 'blau' eine Eigenschaft bezeichnen, die an einem Gegenstande angetroffen wird, sondern die Wirkung angeben, die der Gegenstand auf unser Gemüt ausübt." In other words, humor is less a trait than it is an effect. The subjectivity of humor makes it a challenging topic to write about, particularly with the rigorous objectivity demanded by academic scholarship. I must therefore make a couple concessions about the work I do in this dissertation. First, just because I identify something in a literary text as a "moment of humor" does not mean I believe *every* person who reads that text will find the passage in question as funny as I do. I can only hope that my analysis of the passage will help my readers see it in a new, more comical light. This brings me to my next concession: over the years I have devoted to this project I have come to realize what a large role my own comic voice plays in my analysis of literary humor. By writing about a text, I am, in a sense, performing it, and I must concede that *occasionally* my performance of the text is funnier than the text in and of itself. However, as I will explain later in this introduction, it is exactly this performative element of humor that makes it such a fascinating topic to study in conjunction with gender.

Perhaps no humor-related topic is more closely associated with performance than comedy, which—like humor—is a complicated term with a long history. Today neither the English "comedy" nor the German *Komödie* is entirely independent of its Greek origins, and

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both continue to be associated with the dramatic genre in literary scholarship, even as their definitions have broadened in numerous other directions in practical usage. Those literary scholars who do not use "comedy" to refer to plays that are representations of "people who are worse than average," as Aristotle famously defined it,\(^\text{18}\) often use the term in the medieval sense that Dante employed it—to describe a work of literature that begins badly and ends well. This high potential for semantic confusion is one of the reasons I have chosen to write about humor, which is more widely accepted as an umbrella term, instead of comedy. Furthermore, I did not want to restrict myself to writing about comedy as a literary genre, since I find it equally if not more interesting when a moment of humor pops up in a text that is not considered a comedy in most senses of the word.

Another term that crops up frequently in literary discussions of humor is irony. Most broadly, irony can be defined as any situation in which what is said or done is actually the opposite of what is meant or expected. Today the terms "ironic" and "sarcastic" are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to verbal expressions of irony, but sarcasm—derived from a Greek verb meaning "to tear flesh like a dog"—is still much more likely to be associated with anger, irritation, or scorn than irony, which is derived from a Greek word that refers to a type of feigned ignorance or, as Northrop Frye puts it, "appearing to be less than one is."\(^\text{19}\) Irony has deep roots in literature and in comedy in particular. One of the stock characters of classical Greek comedy, the \textit{eirôn}, is a master of understatement who uses his dry wit and cleverness to expose the buffoonery of others. And for most modern literary scholars, irony remains a concept closely


connected with humor—since irony is frequently employed in a way that is intended to be funny—but not chained to it. Helen Chambers writes that "[h]umor is frequently ironic, but irony is not necessarily humorous" and thus defines irony as "a literary technique that allows the reader to infer more than one level of meaning in a text and to think beyond its surface meaning."\(^\text{20}\) Again, irony is useful in thinking about literary humor, but focusing solely on irony would result in an entirely different project than the one I am undertaking here.

Two more terms which often appear in connection with humor theory and with each other are parody (Parodie) and satire (Satire). Unfortunately, there is little consensus among humor theorists about the exact definition of either term. Speaking generally, it is possible to say that both parody and satire involve a degree of imitation (Nachahmung), which is usually an imitation of style—style of writing, style of speaking, style of dress, etc. What prevents parody from being the same as imitation is a distortion of whatever is being imitated, usually to comic effect. The parodist may reproduce certain elements of a source material, while simultaneously introducing something unexpected or exaggerated into the mix. Of the two terms, satire is narrower in meaning than parody, since most humor theorists of the last two hundred years agree that satire differentiates itself by always having "an aggressive function."\(^\text{21}\) Satire is intentionally critical of its source material, whereas parody may actually celebrate the very source material it is causing to appear silly, which accords with Francis Hutcheson's statement that literary parody

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can "move laughter in those who may have the highest veneration for the writing alluded to..."\textsuperscript{22}

Parody, even extraliterary, is especially pertinent to the topic of this dissertation because of its role in modern gender theory, a topic I will cover at length towards the end of this introduction.

\textbf{How does humor work?: The Three Categories of Humor Theory}

It seems as if nearly every Western philosopher since Plato has made a brief attempt at explaining the causes, effects, or workings of humor, and in an attempt to organize this multiplicity of ideas, modern scholars have taken to dividing all theories of humor into one of three camps: disparagement theory, incongruity theory, and release theory. Today most scholars who research humor agree that no single theory is able to explain every aspect of humor, so an understanding of all three is necessary to gain an understanding of humor as a whole. Sean Zwagerman astutely summarizes this situation in his book on women's humor in English and American literature, writing: "The problem is not that all past definitions and theories of humor are wrong, but that they are all right—somewhat and sometimes."\textsuperscript{23} And in writing this dissertation, I have discovered that all three families of humor theory are indeed crucial to understanding the intersection between humor and gender.

The oldest category of humor theory is disparagement theory, often called superiority theory. Thomas Hobbes's assertion that "the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the

\textsuperscript{22} Francis Hutcheson, \textit{Reflections upon Laughter, and Remarks upon the Fable of the Bees} (Glasgow: Printed by R. Urie for D. Baxter, 1750), quoted in Morreall, \textit{The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor}, 27.

\textsuperscript{23} Zwagerman, \textit{Wit's End}, 2.
infirmity of others” is the quintessential example of a superiority theory.\textsuperscript{24} Theories in this category regard humor as primarily tendentious, aggressive, and/or corrective, and they examine the ways in which humor functions as a tool for claiming and/or maintaining power. Some theorists in this camp view humor in a chiefly negative light. Depending on the theorist’s cultural context and political leanings, a theorist of this camp might see humor as either an ignoble weapon that threatens to tear apart the fabric of civilized society or a sinister force, disguised as subversive entertainment, that helps maintain the hegemonic status quo. The former view dates back to Plato, who associated laughter with “malice”\textsuperscript{25} and believed men “prone to laughter” were a detriment to the state,\textsuperscript{26} and—to a lesser degree—Aristotle, who argued that "a joke is a kind of abuse."\textsuperscript{27} The view that humor is largely "affirmative"\textsuperscript{28} (i.e. humor reinforces pre-existing power structures more often that it subverts them) is more modern; it frequently makes an appearance—at least in passing—in 21\textsuperscript{st}-century think pieces written by concerned social liberals who worry that even the most feminist comedians are ultimately hurting their own cause. For example, even an approving article on comedian Tina Fey’s television series \textit{30 Rock (2006-}


\textsuperscript{25} Plato, \textit{Philebus}, 50a, quoted in Morreall, \textit{The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor}, 13.


\textsuperscript{27} Aristotle, \textit{Nichomean Ethics}, bk. 4 ch. 8, quoted in Morreall, \textit{The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor}, 15.

\textsuperscript{28} Andreas Böhn, "Subversions of Gender Identities through Laughter and the Comic?," in \textit{Gender and Laughter: Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media}, ed. Gaby Pailer et al., Amsterdamer Beiträge Zur Neueren Germanistik 70 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 49.
2013) contains the ominous line: "What might be intended as feminist commentary could turn into, or be interpreted as, exactly the opposite." However, many other theorists laud humor for the subtlety with which it can act as a social corrective or challenge prevailing cultural attitudes. The English writer Christine Brooke-Rose, for example, optimistically calls humor "perhaps the only successful weapon in any struggle for equality." Clearly, disparagement theory is relevant to any discussion of humor and gender in that it raises issues of power and social hierarchy.

The second category of humor theory is incongruity theory, which sees humor emerge from an amusing gap—intentional or otherwise—between expectation and outcome, between appearance and reality, between signifier and signified. According to this type of theory, most forms of humor result from two things that are normally kept apart being brought together. Some of the earliest incongruity theories were developed in the eighteenth century by theorists who had read and disagreed with Hobbes. In *Reflections Upon Laughter* (1750), the Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson argues that humor arises from the combination of things that are partly—but not entirely—different from one another ("...generally the cause of laughter is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea.") And forty years later, Immanuel Kant famously asserts in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790) that "[d]as Lachen ist ein Affekt aus der plötzlichen Verwandlung einer

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gespannten Erwartung in nichts.”

Incongruity theory is useful because it acknowledges that sometimes things are funny precisely because they seem random, nonsensical, or absurd and that it is possible for a person to find something funny without making a value judgment about it. But incongruity theory is also useful for helping to explain, in concrete, mechanical ways, why things like cross-dressing are so often deemed humorous.

The final category of humor theory is release theory (sometimes called relief theory), which pays the most attention to the physical, mental, and emotional workings of humor. For this reason, release theories are often developed by psychologists and medical practitioners who hypothesize about the physiological as well as the sociological functions of humor. These are the theorists who ask questions like: Does humor have an evolutionary purpose? What effects does humor have on the human body and brain? Is laughter simply a means for releasing bodily and psychic tension? The earliest release theories tend to rely on medical knowledge so outdated as to render those theories useless as anything other than historical curiosities. But release theories rooted in philosophy and psychology, unlike those based around speculative discussions of blood vessels, are useful when thinking about "humor as a form of escape before the inhibitions that society imposes upon the individual.”

Release theory is therefore also useful when investigating why feminist humor is often so much more palatable to many audiences than

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serious feminist polemic. In what ways is humor ideologically as well as psychologically freeing?

**What was the state of humor theory at the fin de siècle?**

Although humor had long been of interest to all kinds of thinkers—from philosophers to novelists to medical doctors—the late nineteenth-century saw a surge in theoretical writings devoted exclusively to investigating the causes and functions of humor. Of these theories, the most influential and enduring are Henri Bergson's collection of essays *Laughter* (1900)\(^{35}\) and Sigmund Freud's book *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (1905),\(^{36}\) both of which are concerned with humor's social benefits. Bergson uses the term laughter (*le rire*) in his essays and Freud tries to differentiate between *Witz* and *Humor*—which he makes the subject of a separate essay in 1927—but both men end up discussing humor in general and how it functions in Western civilization at the turn of the century.

Bergson, for example, explicitly argues that laughter's "natural environment" is society and that "the utility of its function… is a social one."\(^ {37}\) Laughter is never the laughter of an individual but of a group. In Bergson's opinion laughter functions to correct human behavior by revealing a type of automatism he calls "absentmindedness." Likely influenced by the industrial age in which he lived, Bergson formulated the idea that a person is most humorous when he or she resembles a machine. Since a machine is ignorant of itself, a person's level of self-awareness

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is inversely proportional to how laughable or ridiculous that person is. When people laugh at rigidity or "absentmindedness," they are laughing at a type of mechanical behavior that has no place in human society. Bergson asserts that laughter humiliates the social non-conformist and thereby encourages the humiliated person to behave more like a properly socialized human being. In summary, "[t]his rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective."\textsuperscript{38} At first, it might seem sensible to interpret Bergon's theory of humor, in which the most awkward and out-of-touch members of society are laughed back into line, as affirmative and therefore conservative. In one such passage that supports this view, Bergson writes: "Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow-beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream."\textsuperscript{39} But to a scholar of gender studies, the most interesting part of Bergson's theory is his notion that "rigidity" is what is inherently comic, which would also imply that any person who "automatically" adheres to gender conventions in an "inelastic" way can be found funny. And indeed, as I will argue in the chapters of this dissertation, many of the funniest characters in German literature of the fin de siècle are laughable precisely because of how stringently they attempt to adhere to norms of gender, nationality, and class.

Writing a few years after Bergson, Freud is also interested in how humor can either facilitate or disrupt human interaction in a society rife with rules for regulating individual behavior. Today Freud is still the most well-known proponent of the idea that jokes are frequently hostile or, as he calls them, "tendentious." According to Freud, tendentious jokes permit two people (the joker and the listener) to disparage the object of the joke, which can range

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 74.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 147.
from a common enemy (person or institution) to a sexual victim depending on the situation.

Freud posits that the listener is the person intended to derive the most pleasure from a tendentious joke, since the listener does not have to expend any energy in order to witness the joker take down the joke's object. The listener simply receives the joke and laughs as the joke's object is made contemptible or ridiculous. The joke becomes a source of pleasure (*Lustquelle*) to the listener in that it has a satisfying effect (*Befriedigung*). In a successful joke the joker puts some inclination (*Tendenz*) of the listener that would otherwise remain repressed into words. Effective tendentious jokes override the listener's internalized social critic and give the listener access to normally prohibited pleasure. Freud considered himself a scientist rather than a literary critic, but since many of the example jokes in *Der Witz* come from literature—especially works by Heinrich Heine—Freud's joke theory proves useful in analyzing textual examples of contentious humor and trying to figure just who or what is being disparaged and why. Freud tended to think of women and humor in terms of how often jokes—especially dirty jokes (*Zoten*)—disparaged women by turning them into targets of humor, but I have found that the literature of the period often uses tendentious humor to question gender rather than police it.

As I have shown, both Bergson and Freud's theories of humor allow for ways to think about humor and gender, even though neither man wrote very explicitly about their intersection. The English novelist George Meredith, on the other hand, dealt specifically with this topic over twenty years earlier in his writings on humor: "An Essay on Comedy" (1877)⁴⁰ and the prelude

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to his novel *The Egoist* (1879).\(^{41}\) One of Meredith's key arguments is that a true "Comic poet"—his term for a superlative sort of humorous writer—can only exist in an equitable society. According to Meredith, the Comic poet finds "a state of marked social inequality of the sexes" repellent and uses comedy as a platform that "lifts women to a station offering them free play for their wit."\(^{42}\) Meredith is also of the opinion that high comedy (as opposed to low) affords its women characters the most opportunities to show off their wit and "sound sense." He expresses his frustration with works of sentimental and romantic fiction, which relegate women to the roles of "the pretty idiot, the passive beauty, the adorable bundle of caprices."\(^{43}\) Society encourages women to emulate these vapid literary heroines since they are agents of the patriarchal status quo. Humorous writing, however, stimulates social change by providing new models of womanhood. The heroines of comedy, Meredith writes, are "clear-sighted" worldly women; "they use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or a pilot." Women in comedy may battle men intellectually, but the two sexes ultimately prove to be more alike than they are dissimilar. Meredith writes that "the Comic poet dares to show us men and women coming to this mutual likeness; he is for saying that when they draw together in social life their minds grow liker…."\(^{44}\) He then presents German comedy as an example of how gender inequality can negatively impact humorous literature, deriding "German attempts at comedy" as unrefined and grotesque and faulting German society for "the poor voice allowed to women in German

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\(^{43}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.
domestic life."\textsuperscript{45} Admittedly, Meredith's argument does start to become a bit circular at this point: humorous literature allows for more egalitarian depictions of women, but only an egalitarian society can produce truly humorous literature. Nevertheless, Meredith's argument that humorous literature is well-suited to the task of promoting gender equality—an argument he developed right around the time when nineteenth-century women's movements were gaining momentum—is obviously relevant to the topic at hand.

\textbf{What other theories are useful for thinking about humor and gender?}

Theories of humor from the fin de siècle are helpful for thinking about the literature of that period in a historical context, but I have also found several other theoretical texts useful for framing arguments about humor and gender as a social construct. Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptualization of the medieval social phenomenon "the carnivalesque," provides an especially useful frame for thinking about funniness as a social leveler. According to Bakhtin in his book \textit{Rabelais and His World} (1965), carnival is marked by the breakdown of social boundaries.\textsuperscript{46} The division between actor and spectator disappears, and the social distinction between nobleman and peasant is suspended. Bakhtin argues that carnival and the comic festivity and laughter that accompany it constitute a "second life" for the people of the Middle Ages, a social realm that exists alongside the religious and feudal formality of the everyday world. This second life acts as a sort of parody of "extracarnival life," since carnival inverts social order by celebrating the fool and mocking the king. However, since carnival only takes place during a few sanctioned parts of the year, it must renew and reinforce the same traditions it temporarily tears down. Thus

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 31.

Bakthin's conceptualization of the carnivalesque, which draws on ideas from both incongruity and release theories of humor, creates a way of thinking about humor as something that can be both subversive social leveler as well as affirmative social stabilizer.

Another useful theory of humor is the one Susan Purdie sets forth in her book *Comedy: the Mastery of Discourse* (1993). In Purdie's model of humor, "funniness" works first by transgressing a law—of society, of language—which "implicitly" reinforces the law. However, the humorist ultimately claims some power over the law by acknowledging it but also toying with it. Purdie calls humorists "masters of discourse" because they are able to recognize rules and break them at the same time. A funny woman is therefore perceived as threatening because she appropriates a "discursive power" normally reserved for the more powerful members of society: men.

What does humor have to do with gender performance?

The theoretical text that has most influenced the direction of this dissertation is Judith Butler's seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1989), in which the author argues that gender is always "an imitation without origin." According to this framework, most gender performance would seem to fit Fredric Jameson's definition of "pastiche," which Butler quotes Jameson describing as "a neutral practice of mimicry" or "parody that has lost its humor." Butler, however, is most interested in the subversive potential of intentionally parodic gender performance, especially

47 Purdie, *Comedy*.

when that parody provokes laughter. But although Butler asserts in the *Gender Trouble*’s preface that "laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism,"49 she makes very few explicit mentions of humor or laughter or how they operate in the rest of the text. Nevertheless, Butler’s theory of gender performativity does a great deal to illustrate the ways in which humor and gender intersect.

Butler establishes that gender, just like humor, is an effect. Butler acknowledges that gendered behavior appears to be caused by an interior organizing principle—an immutable "gender core" located within the self but maintains that the opposite is the case.50 In actuality, gender is performative, and a gender performance, much like a humorous performance, is "a doing"51 or "an act"52 that constitutes itself. Similar to how nothing is inherently humorous, gender cannot exist out of context. Both gender and humor are highly contingent, as both are dependent on their audience and cultural milieu. Furthermore, both gender and humor are things at which it is entirely possible to "fail." The obvious difference here is that a failed joke usually does not generate even close to the same amount of outrage, revulsion, or violence that a failed gender performance does (Butler points out that "...we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right."53), but a failed gender performance can be turned into a successful joke. The question then is whether or not the resulting joke is subversive or merely disparaging.

49 Ibid., viii.

50 Ibid., 136.

51 Ibid., 25. Butler cites Nietzsche's *On the Geneology of Morals* to support this turn of phrase: "…there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything."

52 Ibid., 139, 146.

53 Ibid., 140.
Butler, for her part, sees intentional gender parody—like drag—as a subversive tool and therefore an agent of progress. At one point she argues that since it is unlikely any society is ever going to completely transcend categories of gender and sexuality (at least not any time soon), activists should instead attempt to subvert these categories through parody. She calls this type of action "the subversive and parodic redeployment of power," and according to Butler, drag performances subvert the hegemonic gender binary because they mock "both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" and provoke laughter by revealing gender to be "an ideal that no one can embody." Drag is therefore a type of parody that ultimately questions "the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmic, and mimetic—a failed copy…" But Eric Downing points out that gender parody, especially within Butler's theory of gender as "a stylized repetition of acts," is "structurally identical with (and repetitive of) the inherited cultural reality [it] would discard." In other words, drag can never be purely subversive, as it uses the same repetitive mechanism as non-parodic gender performance and thus reifies gendered behaviors at the same time as it mocks and subverts them.

54 Ibid., 124.
55 Ibid., 137.
56 Ibid., 139.
57 Ibid., 146.
58 Ibid., 140.
Of course, drag is not the only type of gender parody. As this dissertation will prove, gender is routinely parodied during moments of humor in works of fin-de-siècle literature, even those written by antifeminist men. This dissertation therefore investigates the line between imitation and parody. When and how does gender performance go from being simply imitative to parodic and funny? When does funny literature challenge gender inequality and when does it challenge gender itself?

Chapter Breakdown

Each chapter in this dissertation explores these questions of humor and gender in the context of a particular author and genre. The first chapter focuses on novels, the second on short stories, the third on drama, and the fourth on polemic essays. As this dissertation does not limit itself to examining humor only in the works of female authors, three of the featured writers are men who—even in their own time—were not considered feminists.

The first chapter examines the novels of Theodor Fontane (1819-1898) and looks closely at what is arguably Fontane's funniest novel, *Jenny Treibel* (1892). In this chapter, I argue that humorous moments in Fontane's novels tend to result from discrepancies, e.g. between words and actions or expectations and events, and that these discrepancies expose class and gender roles as silly and arbitrary. *Jenny Treibel*, in particular, reveals the artifice involved in performing gender and invites the reader to laugh—not just at the novel's more ridiculous characters—but at the mores of their society.

The second chapter concerns the short stories of Thomas Mann (1875-1955) written between the years 1897 and 1903. Thomas Mann greatly admired Fontane's skills as a humorist, and I begin this chapter with a comparison between the two authors and humor in their fictional
texts. Mann's sense of humor was crueler than Fontane's, and I argue that the humor in his early short stories depends on the scathingly critical voice of the narrator. Thomas Mann the turn-of-the-century man was not interested in alleviating the social oppression of women, but the mean humor of his early short stories reflects a complicated and critical attitude towards the gender roles and sexual norms of fin-de-siècle Europe. This attitude is also apparent in Mann's novel *Buddenbrooks* (1901), which I argue features the funniest woman character in his oeuvre: Tony Buddenbrook.

The third chapter explores the nuances of gender performance and gender performativity in the play *Spring Awakening* (1891) by Frank Wedekind (1864-1918). Wedekind always insisted that *Spring Awakening* was meant to be humorous, but not all productions of the play are faithful to the author's intent. In this chapter, I argue that the written play highlights the silliness of social institutions and pokes fun at the roles young men and women are expected to learn to perform in order to become adults. However, I also argue that certain production choices can erase the humor of the original drama when the play is performed.

The fourth chapter of my dissertation analyzes the essays of Hedwig Dohm (1831-1919), a writer and supporter of women's rights who refuted the popular arguments of nineteenth-century "antifeminists" in a series of humorous essays. Dohm, even more so than the sexually progressive Wedekind, was ahead of her time both politically and stylistically, and in this chapter, I argue that Dohm's writings are persuasive because of how effectively she employs humor to make the explicit argument that gender is a cultural rather than a biological construct. At the same time, Dohm displays a nuanced understanding of how humor can be employed in ways that hurt rather than help the feminist cause.


Paul, Jean. Vorschule Der Ästhetik. 2nd ed., 1813.


"ALWAYS QUICK AND CLEVER": HUMOR AND FONTANE'S FRAUEN

One of the authors writing around the turn of the century whose work best illustrates the argument that humor in literature can create spaces in which men and women can be depicted as intellectual and moral equals is the Berlin-based writer Theodor Fontane. Fontane was born in the year 1819, but he did not begin his career as a published novelist until the late 1870s. The titles of the works Fontane left behind when he died in 1898 immediately suggest where his interests lay as a novelist: Fontane was a man who liked to write about women. Seven of his novels are titled after their female characters, and several of the novels that do not follow this pattern still feature women as their major or even main characters.¹ Schach von Wuthenow, for example, receives about the same amount of attention from the narrator of Schach von Wuthenow (1882) as the object of his seduction (and the story's ultimate heroine), Victoire Carayon, and the charming divorcée Melusine makes a big splash in the Der Stechlin (1898), a relatively male-centric novel. More impressive than the number of women in Fontane's novels is the size of their personalities. Fontanes Frauen, as his leading ladies are sometimes called in the secondary literature, tend to be memorable. They make moves, steer plots, and talk and talk and talk. Even in novels written in the third person singular, they thwart easy analysis. These are women who demand further thought and consideration from the reader.

Critical attitudes towards the female figures in Fontane's novels have evolved alongside women's movements and feminist theory. The character of Mathilde Möhring is a good yardstick for these changes. Published posthumously and thus lacking the heavy editing of Fontane's other works, \textit{Mathilde Möhring} (1906) tells the simple story of a serious and intelligent young woman who marries her exact opposite. Her husband Hugo, an indolent dreamer with some money and connections, sees the sense in taking Mathilde as a wife despite her total lack of wealth and sexual allure, and Mathilde's approach to the marriage is equally tactical. She directs Hugo's studying so that he passes his law exams, and after he secures the job she finds for him, she manages his career and runs his household until his death by tuberculosis. Largely unshaken by the loss of her husband, Mathilde then pursues her original plan of becoming a teacher and arrives at the end of the novel none the worse for her adventure in matrimony. Earlier critics expressed horror at Mathilde's cool and calculating personality. Dismissing her as a \textit{Manipulatorin}, they interpreted her pragmatism as selfishness and had trouble making sense of a literary woman who was "weder eine 'femme fatale' noch 'eine femme fragile'." \textsuperscript{3} Recent critics, however, find the "role reversal" in Hugo and Mathilde's relationship fascinating. \textsuperscript{4}


does not suffer punishment for her sharp mind and take-charge attitude is remarkable, as is the nineteenth-century depiction of marriage as a team sport.5

Even Hugo's death can be read not as a takedown of bossy wives or men who fail to live up to gendered expectations but as a criticism of rigid gender roles. Despite her superior talents, Mathilde's gender prevents her from physically taking her husband's place; she can only direct him from backstage. Hugo has to perform the male role of leader and provider even though it goes against his natural inclinations, and the stress of playing the role eventually contributes to his death. However, the novel does not suggest Mathilde's diligence and vigor are always preferable to Hugo's languid romanticism. Instead it takes a more nuanced view of human nature. After Hugo dies Mathilde realizes, "Ich dachte, wunder was ich aus ihm gemacht hätte, und nu finde ich, daß er mehr Einfluß auf mich gehabt als ich auf ihn."6 This statement might be a bit of wishful-thinking or exaggeration, but Mathilde does consider herself a more well-rounded person for having known Hugo, who taught her the value of being "hülfreich" and "nicht so scharf." The ideal human being, the novel suggests, adapts to new circumstances and experiences instead of clinging to what feels "natural" or conforming blindly to society's dictates.

Fontane died before he could put the final touches on her story, but Mathilde is still a good representative of Fontanes Frauen in many ways. She is intelligent and resourceful, but although she makes the best of her circumstances, it is clear that the social rules governing a woman's conduct are holding her back from her full potential and placing limits on her happiness. Mathilde avoids the miserable victimhood that afflicts Effi Briest and Cécile von St.

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6 Theodor Fontane, Mathilde Möhring, ed. Peter Demetz (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1988), 133.
Arnaud, but she also lacks the supposed advantages that make them so susceptible to unhappy marriages in the first place: wealth and beauty. That is not to say that all beautiful or wealthy women in Fontane's oeuvre meet tragic ends. Melusine Ghiberti is as content at the conclusion of *Der Stechlin* as she is at the beginning despite remaining a single divorcee, and in *L'Adultera*, the adulterous Melanie van der Straaten achieves satisfaction, if not outright happiness, by starting a new life with a new family. As Helen Chambers argues, "Fontane's novels, though not overtly radical, suggest routes to female happiness that diverge from the straightforward *Gartenlaube* model of virtue rewarded and present a complex, multifaceted, and nuanced view of the possibilities for women within the social structures of his time." 8

Chambers' assertion aligns with the prevailing critical attitude towards Fontane's treatment of women. His novels are admired for their subtlety and lauded for their sympathetic portrayals of intelligent, imperfect women, but few critics feel comfortable calling Fontane "ahead of his time." His biography looms too large. Scholars who study Fontane's life are quick to point out that Theodor Fontane, the nineteenth-century man, was no great champion of women's rights. He did not support (or see the point in) women's suffrage; his relationship with his mother was fraught; he caused his wife a great deal of stress; and he probably never won


father of the year. Some scholars attempting to revamp Fontane's image argue he was a progressive father and husband given his conservative time and bourgeois circles. Eda Sagarra cites letters from the *Ehebriefwechsel* between Fontane and his wife Emilie that portray her "as a genuine partner of her husband, in every sphere of their relationship" and insists Fontane respected his clever daughter Martha (called Mete) and treated her "intellectual capacity and evident gifts with the seriousness they deserved."

It is probably a safe assumption that Fontane never intended to become a feminist hero, but the fact that contemporary critics keep trying to turn him into one is a testament to the complexity of his female characters and his male characters. Critics often deride Fontane's male figures for being "durchschnittlich" at best and spoiled man-children at worst, this in spite (or maybe because) of the social advantages their gender and class afford them. Ezechial van der Straaten—the wealthy but well-meaning blowhard who loses his wife to adultery—is a favorite target of this type of criticism. But increasingly critics have come to the conclusion that the gender norms governing the lives of Fontane's characters can be as restrictive and dangerous for the men as they are for the women. Schach von Wuthenow blows his brains out because of his vanity and misguided notions of honor. Effi Briest's husband, the Baron von Innstetten, destroys his family in the name of honor, as does Cécile's husband, the Oberst a. D. In the vocabulary of

13 Ibid., 122.
Jeffrey Schneider, these men are victims of "the paranoid logic of honor" that circumscribes male identity during the nineteenth century. As contemporary feminists like to say, the patriarchy hurts everyone—not just women.

The number of duels, suicides, and terrible deaths in Fontane's oeuvre might help explain why there is not more scholarship on the funny elements of his novels. When summarized, Fontane's novels sound bleak. But as Fritz Martini asserts, Fontane had a predilection for _Kleinhumor_ well-suited to a Realist writer. His plots are simple but his novels are not; they contain copious amounts of dialogue and provide a multiplicity of perspectives. The characters of Fontane's novels tend to live in actual cities like Berlin as opposed to small, imaginary villages, and most express at least dim awareness of the wars and politics churning the waters around them. According to Martini, they "haben ihr Dasein in der konkreten Gesellschaft und sie sind zugleich deren Kritik." Social criticism in Fontane is further expressed through "the language of irony," which "spielt im Demaskieren des Missverhältnisses zwischen Prätention und wirklicher Beschaffenheit oft in das Komisch über." Small everyday moments—"eine episodische Situation, ein Gespräch"—serve as sites of social criticism, meaning Fontane's works require a certain level of intelligence from their readers, "ein flexibles Mehrwissen," in order to be fully enjoyed.

17 Jeffrey Schneider, "Masculinity, Male Friendship, and the Paranoid Logic of Honor in Theodor Fontane’s Effi Briest," *German Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 267.
19 Ibid., 129.
Fontane uses narrative detachment to help generate many of the funny moments in his novels. A distant, third-person narrator offers characters plenty of room to contradict one another, the narrator, and themselves, providing potential for the "Freiheit des olympischen Lachens."\textsuperscript{21} The most ridiculous, most absurd characters in Fontane are those who lack critical distance from themselves; the Wittiest, most sympathetic are those who are aware of their flaws and willing to make fun of them.\textsuperscript{22} Martini refers to this ability as \textit{Selbstonie} and considers it an especially positive trait in a literary figure. A person who can laugh at himself, the reasoning goes, clearly knows enough about himself to recognize the limits of his subjectivity, which in turn makes him capable of greater objectivity. And a person who sees his own flaws will be more understanding of the flaws of others, granting him modesty and forbearance.\textsuperscript{23} Some scholars view Fontane himself as the ultimate example of this laughing model of leniency. Wolfgang Preisendanz cites passages from the author's epistolary correspondence in which Fontane argues that the best way to capture life on the page is through humor rather than ugliness.\textsuperscript{24} Fontane's novels express attitudes that are critical of society as a whole but rarely cruel towards its individual members, and although Fontane's personal letters are filled with stinging barbs, his novels lack the "righteous indignation" that fuels mean humor.\textsuperscript{25} There is a sense of tact and

\textsuperscript{21} Martini, "Ironischer Realismus: Keller, Raabe Und Fontane," 130.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 139, 140.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 140–1.


\textsuperscript{25} Garland, \textit{The Berlin Novels of Theodor Fontane}, 283.
humanity in the humor of Fontane's fictional works that even Thomas Mann yearned to emulate.26

For these reasons, it can be difficult to generalize about Fontane's comedic habits and strategies, but a few trends related to humor emerge from his fictional oeuvre when viewed as a whole. First, there are Fontane's narrators. Since most of his novels contain a high percentage of dialogue, it can be easy to neglect the narrator when looking at funny characters, but the narrator's witty observations may result in some of a novel's biggest laughs. Henry Garland calls Fontane "master of the crisp short biography,"27 and in Fontane's novels these biographies are often disclosed by the narrator, who draws the reader's attention to various absurdities of character or inconsistencies of behavior. Due to his privileged voice, the narrator is in a unique position to become an engineer of humor.

Per Susan Purdie's theory of funniness, the three parties involved in a joke are the Teller, the Audience, and the Butt,28 but when discussing Fontane's characters and the moments of funniness in his novels, I prefer to divide the people implicated into two less comprehensive categories: the targets and the engineers. The engineers of humor are similar to Tellers; they share jokes, use irony, and point out sources of humor with the specific intention of provoking amusement and laughter from other characters or the reader. The targets, on the other hand, are the Butts of funny moments and scenarios. Laughter is at the expense of their ideas and behavior. Sometimes targets are actively mocked by engineers but not always. It is entirely possible for

26 Swales, "Nimm doch vorher eine Tasse Tee...," 136.
targets to bring down laughs upon their own heads unintentionally and without even realizing
that they have become a source of humor.

In addition to the witty narrator, one of Fontane's stock characters is the hilarious older
lady who speaks her mind and speaks it with an accent. She alternates, like most of Fontane's
characters, between being an engineer of humor and a target, but she is usually capable of both
roles. A few examples of this type are Frau Schmolke in *Frau Jenny Treibel* (1892), (middle-aged) Frau Dörr in *Irrungen, Wirrungen* (1888), Schwester Adelheid in *Der Stechlin*, and Tante
Marguerite in *Schach von Wuthenow*. The narrative purpose of these women varies from novel to
novel. That they serve as comic relief seems a given, but in works with so few mother-
characters, they also represent a kind of dysfunctional maternal authority. They make passes at
nurturing and dole out advice with varying rates of success.

In a few cases, the funny old woman's use of dialect and lack of sophistication threaten to
obscure her fundamental good sense. Frau Schmolke and Frau Dörr, for example, come across
as absurdly chatty even for Fontane characters. Frau Schmolke turns every conversation into a
monologue about her dead husband, and Frau Dörr is prone to making bawdy remarks that
mortify her listeners. But both women have acute enough instincts to predict the emotional ups
and downs of the young women in their acquaintance. Frau Schmolke foresees that Corinna will
end her scheme to marry a rich bourgeois and become a professor's wife to her cousin, and Frau
Dörr recognizes the harm that will come to Lene for taking her affair with a count too seriously.

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29 See Antje Janssen-Zimmerman, "Das Defizit Als Chance: Fontanes 'Fehlende' Mütter," in
"Weiber Weiblich, Männer Männlich"? : Zum Geschlechterdiskurs in Theodor Fontanes

These older women possess emotional and narrative foresight, but their apparent silliness makes them inconspicuous vehicles for literary foreshadowing.

In other cases, the funny older woman represents a set of ideas or people the novel wishes to criticize. Dubslav von Stechlin's sister Adelheid is the most extreme example of this phenomenon. A hard and unpleasant woman, she embodies the conservative values of "the quintessential Prussian aristocracy." Adelheid's behavior in the novel is bigoted and arrogant but depicted in a way that makes it more funny than depressing. She spouts "comic xenophobia" about the English and the Swiss so over-the-top it makes a mockery of all nationalism, and her insistence on coming to "nurse" her brother when he is on the verge of death only highlights how ludicrous it is to assume all women are innately nurturing.

On the whole, the funny old lady character is a target of mockery more often than an engineer of humor. She lacks the critical distance from her habits and inclinations to become truly witty. It is tempting to read a level of misogyny into how often her type pops up in Fontane's oeuvre, but the funny old lady is not mocked simply because she is an irregular female. Tactless and outspoken, she deviates from just about every sort of feminine ideal, but she is treated with far less sympathy when she strives to conform to cultural norms than when she abandons them altogether. For instance, Frau Dörr is "presented as overweight and somewhat grotesque," sexually pragmatic, and more clever than her husband, but she is an entertaining

31 Ibid., 246.
32 Ibid., 247.
and likeable figure because she is not pretending to be someone she is not. Adelheid, on the other hand, preaches the virtues of maintaining a "Mittelzustand" and is dedicated to keeping up appearances, both literal and figurative, but she is an outrageous, almost villainous character—a self-righteous, tight-fisted nun.

Surprisingly few characters in Fontane's novels exist only as targets of mockery, and they are usually tertiary figures like Leutnant Vogelsang in *Frau Jenny Treibel*. The vast majority of characters appear so "lifelike" due to Fontane's skill with dialogue that they avoid feeling like mere caricatures.35 Garland, praising Fontane's intuitive grasp of human psychology, writes that the author "realized how intricately admirable, reprehensible, and neutral qualities are interwoven in the human psyche and was unwilling to calculate the plus and minus and arrive at a formal judgment."36 Furthermore, the characters who repeatedly function as targets of humor are often more sympathetic than those who carefully monitor their outward behavior and live in paralyzing fear of ridicule. Seriousness is not depicted as a particularly desirable trait. The most conspicuous example of this attitude is Schach von Wuthenow. Most literary criticism on *Schach* centers on the Prussian conception of honor and Schach's tragic interpretation of it. The novel, critics argue, critiques strict codes of masculine conduct and the men too cowardly or inflexible to challenge them. But Schach fears becoming a target of mockery just as much or more than he fears falling short of a masculine ideal. He would rather die than become a laughingstock, a mindset the novel presents as inherently ridiculous. In the end, Schach's seriousness is the silliest thing about him.


36 Ibid., 65.
Frau Jenny Treibel

No discussion of Fontane's use of humor is complete without an in-depth look at his novel Frau Jenny Treibel. Published as a series in Die Deutsche Rundschau in early 1892 and then as a book later in the year, Frau Jenny Treibel is the Fontane novel most likely to be described unreservedly by its critics as humorous, comedic, or funny. Set in contemporary Berlin, the novel follows the attempt of Corinna Schmidt, the charming daughter of a professor and member of the Bildungsbürgertum, to marry into the Besitzbürgertum. Her mark is Leopold Treibel, the "under-average" youngest son of a financially-successful businessman, to whose family she has been connected all her life through her father, Professor Schmidt. Schmidt was once in love with Leopold's mother Jenny, a native daughter of the Kleinbürgertum, and believed his love to be reciprocated, but when Herr Treibel came courting, Jenny made the savvy decision to marry the up-and-coming businessman instead. The novel pits woman against woman, since Jenny—despite all her sentimental proclamations to the contrary—wants her youngest son to make a good financial match, and Corinna is all charm and no money. Corinna and Leopold become engaged, but Jenny puts up such fierce resistance to the match that Corinna ultimately capitulates and agrees to marry her cousin Marcell instead.

The reasons why critics are more comfortable discussing the humor in Frau Jenny Treibel as opposed to Schach von Wuthenow are fairly obvious. For starters, no one dies in Frau Jenny Treibel. No one so much as fleetingly considers suicide. None of the characters ends up in a state of dishonor or illness or poverty. In fact, not much happens at all, prompting some critics to question whether the novel contains anything that actually constitutes a plot.38 The novel often

37 Ibid., 140.

seems like one long dinner or garden party. Critics are equally doubtful about whether or not *Frau Jenny Treibel* has what could reasonably be described as a "happy ending." Does a novel end happily just because there is a wedding and no one dies? More importantly for the themes of this dissertation, can a novel ever be called a comedy just because it has some variation of a happy ending?

In his book on Fontane's Berlin novels, Garland calls *Frau Jenny Treibel* "a complete and perfect comedy." He justifies the term comedy and its association with the stage by claiming that "fully 70 percent of the text is composed of direct speech." He goes on to reference the novel's light tone and comic characters—which rarely veer into total caricature—but never fully explains his definition of a comedy. Clearly Garland cannot be working off of Dante's definition of a comedy, in which a story's characters begin in bad circumstances (Hell) and end in good (Paradise). The characters in *Frau Jenny Treibel* neither significantly improve nor worsen their situations over the course of the novel. A few characters move cities or gain spouses, but none of them breaks through any barrier of class nor achieves an increase in emotional well-being. They are all exactly the same as they were at the beginning. Accordingly, *Frau Jenny Treibel* also fails to hold up as a comedy in the tradition of Greek New Comedy, in which there "is usually a movement from one kind of society to another." This movement typically occurs after a romantic couple overcomes the obstacles that stand in the way of their relationship (usually

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40 Garland, *The Berlin Novels of Theodor Fontane*, 141.

parental) and marries. But in Fontane's novel, the young man, Leopold, is far too terrified of his mother to take a stand for his supposed beloved, and the young woman, Corinna, eventually becomes discouraged and gives up on the idea of economic advancement. Although the novel ends with a wedding, no true "exchange of women" has taken place, since Corinna's husband Marcell—in addition to being an actual blood relative—is very much a younger version of her father in terms of both profession and social class. *Frau Jenny Treibel* does not even qualify as a romantic comedy in the vein of Jane Austen or any number of contemporary films, in which the most important "movement" involves an internal shift of character or "change of heart."

Although Corinna's father and cousin want to believe she is "gänzlich umgewandelt" because she calls off her mercenary engagement to Leopold, Corinna confesses to Marcell that she still has a "Sinn für Äußerlichkeiten," but not the stomach to fight Jenny Treibel for them. Corinna is not a less superficial or more moral person by the end of the novel; she just has more realistic and less ambitious goals.

At this point it is tempting to throw out the very idea of "comedy" and simply describe *Frau Jenny Treibel* as an exceptionally funny novel. However, the word *Komödie* gets bandied about by the novel's characters almost as often as it does by its critics, so it is worth thinking about what they mean when they use it. The first character to speak the term aloud is Corinna's jealous cousin and eventual (and inevitable) husband, Marcell Wedderkopp. Marcell has just

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42 Ibid., 164.


44 Interestingly there IS a critic who tries to argue that FJT fits the Greek definition of comedy perfectly: Susan Wansink, *Female Victims and Oppressors in Novels by Theodor Fontane and François Mauriac*, Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures (CCRLL): 53 (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1998), 83–4.
been witness to a protracted exhibition of Corinna's flirting techniques, which he rightfully recognizes were aimed at the Treibels' youngest son Leopold. Marcell accuses Corinna of playing "beständig eine Komödie." In this context, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that Marcell—a teacher of literature and a budding archeologist—is using the term in a way that references the Greek tradition of social movement and is not flattering to Corinna. In his own pretentious way, he is calling her a gold-digger, but Corinna fails to find insult in his words. What Marcell calls a *Komödie* or *Koketterie*, Corinna calls an expression of a woman's "altes Eva-Recht," the right to move up in society through any (socially-acceptable) means available to her.

Marcell is not the only character to wield the word *Komödie* like a weapon. In the final face-to-face showdown between the novels' sparring female characters, Jenny sneers at Corinna's attempts to seduce her son into a poor financial match. She says she believes that Leopold proposed to Corinna, but "schließlich ist das alles eine Komödie." For Jenny in this moment, a comedy is something ridiculous and improper—a farce, but the irony of her stance is that Jenny was once the young heroine of her own comedy. She improved her status through a marriage to someone above her economic station, but unlike in a Greek New Comedy or a modern-day rom-com, Jenny's comedy did not end with her wedding. Instead, Fontane's novel picks up Jenny's story thirty years after the point where most comedies leave off and recounts her long descent into sentimentality and hypocrisy.

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Perhaps it is Corinna's father, Willibald Schmidt, who is closest to the mark when he jokingly refers to the engagement situation as "diese ganze Tragikomödie." Some critics have referred to Frau Jenny Treibel as a "failed comedy," a judgment that certainly seems appropriate when applied to Corinna's actions, but the novel is not called "Corinna." If we consider Jenny the novel's main character, *Frau Jenny Treibel* becomes something of a "post-comedy," a novel that explores the unspoken question at the end of every generic comedy: what happens next?

The novel is certainly a comedy in the modern-day conception of the term in that it contains many moments of humor; arguably it packs more laughs per page than any of Fontane's other novels. But what really makes *Frau Jenny Treibel* unique is that no character escapes the novel unscathed. Everyone serves as the butt of a joke. Sometimes the narrator describes a character or a situation in a way that is funny; sometimes a character intentionally says something funny (usually about another character); and sometimes a character unwittingly behaves in a way that is funny to the other characters or to the reader. But in spite of all the mockery that is perpetrated, no character in *Frau Jenny Treibel* is depicted as entirely bad or ill-intentioned, not even the titular grand dame. The joking, it seems, is all in good fun.

Although most of the characters in the novel act as engineers of humor, some have moments in which they display ambivalence about the value of humor. But generally the characters' comfort with mockery and concomitant discomfort with seriousness is directly related to their level of self-awareness. This correlation conforms to Henri Bergon's assertion that "a

46 "Aber wie es auch liegen mag, Marcell, wir müssen uns nun darüber schlüssig machen, wie Du zu dieser ganzen Tragikomödie Dich stellen willst, so oder so." Ibid., 346.

comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself."\(^{48}\) In *Frau Jenny Treibel*, Lieutenant Vogelsang is a minor character who inhabits the highly "comic" end of the spectrum. Vogelsang lives in perpetual "Furcht des Gefopptwerdens" but fails to realize his anxiety only makes him a more likely target of ridicule. On the other end of the spectrum are the quick-witted characters Corinna, Professor Schmidt, and Herr Treibel. All three are characterized as being naturally *heiter*, but they are regularly criticized by the other characters for being too *spöttisch*, which begs the question: is such a thing possible in the *Fontanischen* universe?

Most of the criticism on *Frau Jenny Treibel* that examines the novel's humor focuses intensely on class. Fontane had a notorious hatred of the bourgeoisie ("Der Bourgeois ist furchtbar."\(^ {49}\)), and he stated in a letter that in writing *Frau Jenny Treibel* he intended to expose the social class's "Schwäche" and "Lächerlichkeiten" to the reading public.\(^ {50}\) Fontane's words confirm what is already evident from the text: the novel's humor serves a socially critical purpose. But why in this novel does Fontane consistently choose funny writing over serious as the vehicle for his message? Like many of Fontane's novels, *Frau Jenny Treibel* features a host of minor characters whose major purpose seems to be comic relief, but here it is unclear what exactly they are supposed to be providing relief from. Many of his other novels successfully combine funny elements (hilarious old ladies) with serious ones (suicides, ostracism, slow painful deaths), but it is nearly impossible to find a scene in *Frau Jenny Treibel* that is not played for laughs. Perhaps the novel's lack of earnestness is merely a symptom of Fontane's incredible contempt for the bourgeoisie, but I hesitate to make this argument, as it seems rooted in the


\(^{49}\) Turner, "Fontane’s Frau Jenny Treibel," 133.

\(^{50}\) Ibid.
unfair idea that funny novels (or people) are somehow less worthy of intellectual attention and admiration than their serious counterparts. This way of thinking implies that if you truly care about a topic, the only intelligent way for you to approach it is from a place of seriousness. Consider the popular phrase, "This is no joking matter." Fontane's extensive use of humor in his writing certainly seems to suggest that he does not adhere to such a belief.

The funniness and light tone of *Frau Jenny Treibel* do not diminish its value as work of literature; rather they illustrate one of its central messages—that seriousness devoid of meaning (here in the form of sentimentality) is both a menace to society and the great enemy of critical thought. The subtitle with which the novel was originally published, "Wo sich Herz zum Herzen find't," is itself a joke—the first small jab at the kind of "poetic" sentimentality the novel so thoroughly disparages over the course of more than two hundred pages. It prepares the reader for a heartfelt love story which the novel never delivers and instead establishes an ironic tone. The novel's many moments of irony (most of them funny) serve to formally demonstrate another of its central themes: appearances can be deceiving, and people often say and do the exact opposite of what they believe.

The idea that "things are not what they appear" is an old cliché, but in *Frau Jenny Treibel* Fontane prevents the topic from becoming stale by exploring the social forces behind the phenomenon. The novel tackles a number of tricky questions about human behavior. Why do people bother to adopt certain modes of speech and behavior that are at odds with their authentic

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51 Consider the number of comedic films that have won Oscars compared to the number of films on serious topics.

52 Helen Chambers, *Humor and Irony in Nineteenth-century German Women’s Writing: Studies in Prose Fiction, 1840-1900* (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2007), 4. "Humor is frequently ironic, but irony is not necessarily humorous…"
selves? Where do their behavioral models come from? What happens when their behavior is exposed as inauthentic? Does anyone actually have an authentic self, and is it worth seeking out?

As critics have already pointed out, these types of questions are often tied up with issues of social class. Professor Schmidt calls Jenny "der Typus einer Bourgeoisie," by which he means a small-minded person intent on accumulating wealth. Her repeated assertions that "Gold ist nur Chimäre" and that she values "the poetic" above all else are therefore part of a duplicitous performance. Without always being aware of it, Jenny is playing at being someone she is not. But while Schmidt criticizes Jenny's idealistic posturing—so at odds with her pragmatic bourgeois values—he also describes Jenny's bourgeois-ness as a gift: "…sie war talentiert dafür, von Kindesbeinen an…"53 It is an interesting way for him to describe his friend, since the reference to "talent" suggests that a person can be born with bourgeois inclinations while simultaneously implying that being bourgeois is an act rather than a state. Perhaps Jenny is simply more skilled at acting bourgeois than she is at acting poetically idealistic. So is "bourgeois" something people perform or something they are? Schmidt usually seems to be arguing for the latter, but the novel as a whole takes a more ambivalent stance. Near the end of the novel Schmidt quotes Pindar to Corinna, "Werde der du bist!" and encourages her to marry Marcell. His advice is predicated on the assumption that Corinna already has a true self which is known to him (member of the Bildungsbürgertum, content Professorenfrau) and should alter her behavior to match this true identity, but as Schmidt has repeatedly demonstrated by this point, he is not always a reliable authority on the character of his daughter. The novel ends with the questions of who Corinna is and to which class she best belongs left open.

53 Fontane, "Frau Jenny Treibel," 368.
Frau Jenny Treibel raises many of the same questions about the naturalness of gender that it does about class but in a more subtle fashion. Schmidt does not go on diatribes about "der Typus der Frau," and with the exception of a short passage in which "deutsche Weiblichkeit" is debated, the characters in the novel do not spend their time openly discussing gender roles. Instead, moments of humor work to expose gender as culturally-constructed. By using humor to perform this sort of commentary, the novel gets away with criticizing society's flaws without providing any solutions for how to correct them. Some theories of humor state that laughter is always part of a corrective program, but in Fontane that is not necessarily the case. Frau Jenny Treibel reveals the artifice involved in performing gender and encourages the reader to laugh at it, but the novel never attempts to make any statement about "true" or "natural" gender roles. It poses questions about the origins of gendered behavior but does not claim the authority to answer them.

As in so many of Fontane's novels, Frau Jenny Treibel features a pair of women—both important characters—and sets them up for comparison. Examples of such pairs in Fontane include Effi and her mother (Effi Briest), Victoire and her mother (Schach von Wuthenow), Lene and Käthe (Irrungen, Wirrungen), Brigitte and Ebba (Unwiederbringlich), etc. The list goes on and on. Sometimes the women in these pairs are on loving, friendly terms with one another but not always. In a few cases the women seem to spend half the novel talking to or about one another, but there are also instances in which one woman does not know the other exists. The exact nature of the relationships between the women varies widely since there are simply so many of them. But even among this abundance of female pairs, Frau Jenny Treibel stands out for its depiction of two clever, ambitious women whose similar strengths, values, and moral
weaknesses ultimately pit them against one another. Their clash is the center around which the rest of the novel revolves, and the story's male character are mere satellites.

There is already a fair amount of criticism that examines Corinna and Jenny's tumultuous relationship and its feminist implications, but this criticism tends to gloss over what I consider vital to understanding the text's attitudes towards Corinna and Jenny in particular and gender as a whole: humor. Corinna and Jenny are both very funny women, but whereas Corinna is nearly always an engineer—the conscious author of the funny things she says and does, Jenny is frequently an oblivious target. And although the other characters—especially Professor Schmidt—speak critically and at length about both women, they are much more likely to talk about Jenny in a way that provokes laughter at her expense.

The character Jenny Treibel ignites an incredible range of reactions from literary critics. None of them seems to find Jenny sympathetic, but some critics form much harsher judgments of the bourgeois lady than others. Susan Wasink, for example, describes Jenny as a "cruel and manipulative ruling matriarch" who has "no heart; she has sold it in exchange for ambition and greed."54 Glenn A. Guidry criticizes Jenny's maternal instincts, accusing her of exhibiting "a remarkable lack of sympathy, or any kind of feeling, for her own flesh and blood,"55 and David S. Johnson even attributes to Jenny a sort of power of emasculation.56 However, not all critics see Jenny in such a negative light. David Turner, for one, argues that the text presents a nuanced

54 Wansink, Female Victims and Oppressors in Novels by Theodor Fontane and François Mauriac, 59, 65.


portrait of Jenny, treating her with "a strange mixture of irony and admiration." Considering the novel's tendency towards ambivalence, I am inclined to agree with Turner.

The narrator introduces Jenny on the first page of the novel as a "mit Geschmack und Sorglichkeit gekleideten und trotz ihrer hohen Fünfzig noch sehr gut aussehenden Dame." This first look at Jenny establishes several key aspects of her character: her attention to superficial appearances and her well-preserved charms. The narrator then goes on to describe Jenny's "Korpulenz," which prevents her from moving quickly up a staircase. Turner claims Jenny's "stout figure naturally lends itself to humorous effect," but in addition to taking issue with the word "naturally," I do not think Jenny's size serves a purpose here that is chiefly humorous; rather Jenny's large size is indicative of her social power. Her presence in the novel and in the other characters' lives is as figuratively large as it is literally large.

One of the first clear suggestions that Jenny is something of a ridiculous figure comes from the narrator. He subtly comments on the relationship between Corinna and Jenny by noting that Jenny likes to refer to herself as Corinna's "mütterliche Freundin," but no mention of whether Corinna agrees with this familiar title is ever made. The humor of the situation becomes apparent both retrospectively (Jenny turns out to be neither friend nor mother to Corinna) as well as immediately (Jenny expresses sentiments that are probably not reciprocated). In a short aside, the narrator succeeds in pegging Jenny as someone accustomed to taking liberties in her relationships with other people and putting on airs, and in this case her airs are gendered.

57 Turner, "Fontane’s Frau Jenny Treibel," 137.
59 Turner, "Fontane’s Frau Jenny Treibel," 137.
60 Ibid.
61 Fontane, "Frau Jenny Treibel," 299.
As a woman of a certain age, Jenny recognizes she is meant to play the role of caring mother to those younger than she is, but in practice she is very bad at caring about anyone other than herself. Jenny is only able to view herself as a mother-figure to Corinna in the abstract. As soon as Corinna becomes engaged to Leopold, Jenny recoils at the idea of becoming her mother-in-law and Corinna becomes "eine gefährliche Person." The ironic gap between Jenny's motherly words and actions are even funnier in her dealings with her daughter-in-law Helene and Helene's sister Hildegard. Jenny's intense dislike for Helene is so out of proportion with Helene's actual "flaws" that their relationship takes on a strong note of absurdity. On the one hand, Jenny faults Helene for being too bland and refers to her son, Helen's husband, as "unser armer Otto" for having married such a "temperamentlose" woman. On the other hand, she resents her daughter-in-law for taking too much initiative and attempting to play matchmaker between Leopold and her sister Hildegard. But most hypocritically, Jenny derides Helene for her hamburgisch tendency to emulate the English lifestyle. Early in the novel Jenny complains of Helene, "Das ist so hamburgisch, die kennen alle Engländer, und wenn sie sie nicht kennen, so tun sie wenigstens so. Mir unbegreiflich." Helene is a German who fancies herself a kind of Englishwoman, but Jenny, as the other characters constantly remind one another, was born a petty bourgeois but now fancies herself as socially important as an aristocrat. When Leopold announces his engagement to Corinna, she angrily informs him that "die Treibel's wachsen nicht auf den Bäumen und können nicht von jedem, der vorbeigeht, heruntergeschüttelt werden."
high-and-mighty attitude, however, is not shared by her husband, who takes it upon himself to remind her of their actual place in society:

Wer sind wir denn? Wir sind weder die Montmorency's noch die Lusignan's [...] wir sind auch nicht die Bismarck's oder die Arnim's oder sonst was Märkisches von Adel, wir sind die Treibel's, Blutaugensalz und Eisenvitriol, und du bist eine geborene Bürstenbinder aus der Adlerstraße, Bürstenbinder ist ganz gut, aber der erste Bürstenbinder kann unmöglich höher gestanden haben als der erste Schmidt.66

It is also Treibel who provides an opposing opinion of Helene despite his own mixed feelings towards his daughter-in-law. Jenny complains that Helene, who desperately wants her sister Hildegard to marry Leopold, will continue playing the role of "die Zurückhaltende und Gekränkte" until she gets what she want, but Treibel is unconcerned with whether Helene's behavior is part of an act or not because overall he believes that "Helene Munk hat unsern Otto glücklich gemacht."

Jenny is a character quick to identify female behaviors as performances and criticize them as poorly executed. But most of the male characters around her do not seem to care whether a female behavior is a performance as long as it is a somewhat believable one. In addition to Treibel, Professor Schmidt expresses difficulty understanding Jenny's scorn for her daughter-in-law. During the day trip to Halensee, he tells Jenny that it is "doch kein Zweifel, daß Helene eine schöne Frau ist und von einer, wenn ich mich so ausdrücken darf, ganz aparten Appetitlichkeit..."67 Helene has successfully cultivated an attractive feminine exterior, so why shouldn't Otto be happy with her? According to Schmidt, "[a]lle Männer sind abhängig von

66 Ibid., 437–8.

67 Ibid., 412.
weiblicher Schönheit," but Jenny knows from personal experience that there is much more to female charm than beauty, and she finds Helene lacking.

Jenny is an avid performer of bourgeois femininity, but sometimes it becomes obvious to observers beyond the narrator that her behaviors are affected rather than "natural." Schmidt, for example, describes the young Jenny he knew as a "Püppchen" whose mother "in ihrer Weiberklugheit" carefully groomed for upward mobility. Jenny confirms these claims when she tells Corinna about her former "kastanienbraunen Locken," which her mother always kept carefully curled: "Denn damals, meine liebe Corinna, war das Rotblonde noch nicht so Mode wie jetzt, aber kastanienbraun galt schon, besonders wenn es Locken waren, und die Leute sahen mich auch immer darauf an. Und dein Vater auch." In hindsight Schmidt can see that Jenny's effect on him was (and continues to be) the result of a deliberate performance, but it hardly matters: "Nun ist das Püppchen eine Commerzienrätin und kann sich alles gönnen, auch das Ideale..."

As a child Jenny was a successful enough performer of femininity that those around her found her performance appealing rather than funny. She was a doll, but her "automatism," as Henri Bergson, might put it, was not yet so apparent that it reached a point where it became humorous or off-putting. Jenny's granddaughter Lizzi is not so successful. For a character that barely makes an appearance, Lizzi Treibel is the subject of a great deal of discussion. Jenny scathingly refers to the child as "Lizzi, die doch die größte Puppe ist, die man nur sehen kann,"

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 305.
70 Ibid., 300.
71 Ibid., 305.
72 Bergson, "Laughter," 117.
and even Treibel—in his typical joking manner—expresses concern about the way his granddaughter is being raised. Helene apparently lacks the subtlety of Jenny's mother, so although Lizzi is considered a "Musterkind" in the family's circle of acquaintances, her behavior and appearance are far too stiff to be believable in a human let alone a child. The narrator comments, "Die Kleine, wie sie sich da präsentierte, hätte sofort als symbolische Figur auf den Wäscheschrank ihrer Mutter gestellt werden können, so sehr war sie der Ausdruck von Weißzeug mit einem roten Bändchen drum." And when Lizzi cuts her finger one day, her grandfather cries out in relief, "Gott sei Dank, so viel ich sehen kann, es ist wirkliches Blut." Lizzi is an example of the point where performance crosses over into accidental parody. She is no longer a girl; she is a mannequin or maybe an automaton. If she ever had any "innate" instincts or personality traits, they have been thoroughly quashed by her mother's attempts to turn her daughter into the societal ideal of the clean, pretty, and well-behaved bourgeois little girl.

It is not entirely surprising that Helene fails to pass off Lizzi as a model little girl because she herself is lacking in certain female charms. When Jenny is preparing for her dinner party early in the novel, she looks critically at herself in the mirror and compares herself to the younger Helene, but Jenny is ultimately unworried about how she will look standing next to her pretty daughter-in-law because:

...die Commerzienrätin wußte recht gut, daß Jahre nichts bedeuten und daß Conversation und Augenausdruck und namentlich die 'Welt der Formen,' im einen und im andern Sinne, ja im 'andern' Sinne noch mehr, den Ausschlag zu geben pflegen. Und hierin war die schon stark an der Grenze des Embonpoint angelangte Commerzienrätin ihrer Schwiegertochter unbedingt überlegen.


74 Ibid., 378.

75 Ibid., 308.
Jenny understands that youth and good looks are not the only things that make a woman attractive, but she does understand the usefulness of props. For the party Jenny wears a brocade lavender dress and small diamond earrings", but as the narrator emphasizes, they alone are not capable of imbuing the older woman with an impression of wealth and elegance; rather "die sichere Ruhe, womit sie zwischen ihren Gästen thronte" is responsible.76 Jenny presides over her dinner party like a queen, a role she plays well, but her regal image is still carefully constructed. Even her "dominierende Stellung" at the end of the table is the result of a well-placed pillow on the seat of her chair, something the narrator points out with relish.77 In many ways Jenny is like an actress who knows how to find her best and most flattering light, but because the narrator acts as a high-definition camera, exposing every piece of wire and smudge of make-up, she cannot hide all her tricks and techniques from the novel's readers. The narrator reveals the artifice behind Jenny's behavior, and thus her performance as a powerful, dignified woman becomes more funny than believable. Jenny is less a queen bee than a wannabe.

The role, however, at which Jenny fails most miserably is that of the "poetic," sensitive, and idealistic woman, and it is due to this failure that she becomes the "butt" of the entire novel. Jenny admits to having chosen money over "happiness" when she married Treibel and furthermore claims to regret her decision. She talks at length about the value of "das Poetische" and personal "Glück" to anyone who will listen, and at Halensee she goes so far as to tell Schmidt she should have married him:

Oft, wenn ich nicht schlafen kann und mein Leben überdenke, wird es mir klar, daß das Glück, das anscheinend so viel für mich that, mich nicht die Wege geführt hat, die für mich paßten, und daß ich in einfacheren Verhältnissen und als Gattin eines in der Welt

76 Ibid., 137.
77 Ibid., 316.
Schmidt, of course, does not believe a word Jenny says but gleefully plays along. He commiserates and sighs dramatically, and "Jenny, trotz aller Klugheit, war doch eitel genug, an das 'Ach' ihres ehemaligen Anbeters zu glauben." Jenny's vain obliviousness to her own shoddy showmanship constitutes her primary "comic flaw". Everything that makes her a target rather than an engineer of humor can be traced back to how poorly she performs the role of the regretful idealist. Jenny knows she crossed a bourgeois-sanctioned moral line when she purposefully married for money, so she has committed to spending the rest of her life pretending to atone for her self-interested social crime. Ironically, her attempts to make herself appear more serious and sympathetic are exactly what instead make her an object of laughter and scorn. As Schmidt says of the Besitzbürgertum: "Sie liberalisieren und sentimentalisieren beständig, aber das alles ist Farce; wenn es gilt Farbe zu bekennen, dann heißt es: Gold ist Trumpf und weiter nichts." But what Schmidt and many critics of Frau Jenny Treibel fail to realize is that the position Jenny finds herself in is due as much to her gender as her class background. The novel reveals her and Corinna's situations to be impossible. An ambitious woman in Wilhelmine Berlin must marry well in order to attain a greater level of material comfort and social power, but she is not supposed to speak openly about her aims. If the woman does admit to an appreciation for creature comforts, as Corinna does, the people around her will either demonize her (as Jenny and Helene do) or refuse to believe her and try to talk her out of what she wants (as Schmidt, 

78 Ibid., 410.


Schmolke, and Marcell do). Alternatively, if the woman denies deriving any pleasure from wealth i.e. Jenny, she risks appearing ridiculous. The "poor little rich girl" story is a difficult one to sell, and Jenny does not manage it.

So where does Jenny go wrong? As other critics have demonstrated, Jenny's failure to convincingly play a woman of deep feelings and literary ideas rather than a money-grubbing social climber is due largely to her misunderstanding of art. Before their relationship sours, Jenny tells Corinna:

...wenn mir nicht der Himmel, dem ich dafür danke, das Herz für das Poetische gegeben hätte, was, wenn es mal in einem lebt, nicht wieder auszurotten ist, so hätte ich nichts gelernt und wüßte nichts. Aber, Gott sei Dank, ich habe mich an Gedichten herangebildet, und wenn man viele davon auswendig weiß, so weiß man doch manches. Und daß es so ist, sieh', das verdanke ich nächst Gott, der es in meine Seele pflanzte, deinem Vater. Der hat das Blümlein groß gezogen, das sonst drüben in dem Ladengeschäft unter all den prosaischen Menschen – und Du glaubst gar nicht, wie prosaische Menschen es giebt – verkümmert wäre...  

Jenny makes a number of pronouncements about poetry here that ring false to any reader with a basic understanding of literature, especially Realist literature. For starters, Jenny seems to believe that memorizing poetry is equivalent to having a critical understanding of it; she thinks her ability to recite a couple of poems makes up for her total lack of a formal education. She also invokes but then makes diminutive the Romantic symbol of "die Blume," trivializing the life of poetry and love she claims to value. And finally and most tellingly, Jenny strikes a correlation between "das Poetische" and social class. The petty bourgeois people who raised her were hopelessly "prosaisch," and she was only spared the same fate due to divine intervention. Under

81 Ibid., 301–2.

this model, Jenny was destined for better things, even though she later says of her wealthy husband, "die Prosa lastet bleischwer auf ihm."\(^{83}\)

What Jenny actually means by poetic and prosaic is never entirely clear, but she seems to associate 'the poetic' positively with her own serious and elevated emotions and 'the prosaic' negatively with Treibel's sense of humor and general lightheartedness. Jenny uses poetry the way some people use sad music or alcohol—to intensify a serious mood while stifling thought—and she talks about the book of poems Schmidt gives her like it is a decorative prop:

...wenn mir schwer ums Herz ist, dann nehme ich das kleine Buch, das ursprünglich einen blauen Deckel hatte (jetzt aber hab' ich es in grünen Maroquin binden lassen) und setze mich ans Fenster und sehe auf unsern Garten und weine mich still aus, ganz still, daß es niemand sieht, am wenigsten Treibel oder die Kinder.\(^{84}\)

Why does Jenny read and cry where no one can see if she is just going to tell everyone about it later? Clearly she has little interest in poetry or music beyond the impression her opinions about the subjects make on other people, but she also does not understand the ways in which her words and actions betray her cultural ignorance. So when the opera singer she invites to all her parties inevitably performs the same three ballads that her guests "schon von zwanzig Treibel'schen Diners her kannten,"\(^{85}\) Jenny is unaware that everyone from the narrator to Marcell is making fun of this fact behind her back.

It is no coincidence that Jenny, a woman, serves as the novel's embodiment of sentimentality. At one point while thinking to himself, Treibel describes sentiment as something people turn to when they have no idea what they are talking about: "und darin sei niemand größer und zuverlässiger als die Frauen." But even as the novel reinforces this gender stereotype,

\(^{83}\) Fontane, "Frau Jenny Treibel," 429.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 300.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 335.
it also challenges the idea that women are naturally more prone to sentimentality than men. *Frau Jenny Treibel*’s most sentimental character is a woman, but so is its least sentimental character: Corinna.

Literary critics tend to have a more sympathetic view of Corinna than Jenny in spite of the characters’ similarities, but a few judge the younger woman rather harshly. Glenn A. Guidry calls Corinna's "manipulative" conversation style "a direct expression of her character" and argues her manipulation of Leopold "differs from Jenny's only in its deviousness." Other critics see Corinna as the novel's true heroine and Fontane's "most fully developed and engaging woman character," perhaps because Fontane modeled her after his "own highly-gifted and independent-minded daughter." Monika Shafi points out that Corinna differs notably from most of Fontane's young female characters in that she avoids falling into a tragic love story. But does Corinna's "happy" ending make her more or less of a feminist heroine? Contemporary critics are fond of wringing their hands over Corinna's wasted potential. Why doesn't she put her cleverness to better use? Why doesn't she take up intellectual studies instead of social-climbing? Some fault Fontane for being too patriarchal to write a way out for his heroine; others argue that

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86 Guidry, "Fontane’s *Frau Jenny Treibel* and ‘Having’ a Conversation," 8. 9.

87 Zimmermann, "Women and the City," 77.


90 Wansink, *Female Victims and Oppressors in Novels by Theodor Fontane and François Mauriac*, 91.
Corinna's fate (marriage) is simply the most realistic, considering the dearth of opportunities for middle-class women living in Berlin in the 1880s.  

During a conversation with Marcell, Corinna is adamant about her lack of interest in women's emancipation. She says:

Ich erfreue mich, Dank meiner Erziehung, eines guten Teils von Freiheit, einige werden vielleicht sagen von Emanzipation, aber trotzdem bin ich durchaus kein emanzipiertes Frauenzimmer. Im Gegenteil, ich habe gar keine Lust, das alte Herkommen umzustoßen...  

Due to these types of passages, Shafi sees Corinna's sense of humor as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is the defensive mechanism that allows a clever woman like Corinna to survive in a society that denies her autonomy. Ironic distance sets her free. On the other hand, Corinna's disinclination to take anything too seriously is also what depletes her "Energie zum Widerstand" and leads her into a marriage with Marcell. Her good-natured pragmatism prevents the sort of idealistic thinking necessary for revolt.

Scholarly critics, like many of the other characters in the book, have a tendency to project their own views onto Corinna. A lot of the scholarship assumes Corinna would be happy if only she were to take a few classes at a nice university. Put that brain to work! But Corinna's words contradict this assumption. When Marcell encourages her not to waste her potential, she replies:

›Sich einschränken‹, ach, ich kenne das Lied, das immer gesungen und immer gepredigt wird, aber wenn ich bei Papa die dicken Bücher abstäube, drin niemand hineinsieht, auch er selber nicht... in solchem Augenblicke wird mir immer ganz sonderbar zu Mut, und Leopold Treibel erscheint mir dann mit einem Mal als der Rettungsanker meines Lebens, oder wenn du willst, wie das aufzusetzende große Marssegel, das bestimmt ist, mich bei gutem Wind an ferne, glückliche Küsten zu führen.  

91 Böschenstein, "Das Rätsel Der Corinna," 326.
93 Shafi, "Werde, Der Du Bist," 72.
The novel as a whole often appears to agree with Corinna's doubts about the value of an academic life. Professor Schmidt is one of the most incisive wits in the novel, but he is far from perfect. Corinna calls him "einseitig und eigensinnig," and the narrator comments that the old man is "ein liebenswürdiger Egoist, wie die Meisten seines Zeichens," who takes little interest in that which does not directly implicate him.\(^95\) He and his teacher friends smugly refer to themselves as "Die sieben Waisen Griechenlands," and although its homonym, "Die sieben Weisen Griechenlands" is meant to be a form of "Selbstironie," it is also clear that the men are generally very pleased with themselves. Their lofty intellectualism, however, is tempered by human nature. The narrator says of their club meetings: "So versicherte beispielsweise jeder, 'ohne den Abend' eigentlich nicht leben zu können,' was in Wahrheit nicht ausschloß, daß immer nur die kamen, die nichts besseres vor hatten."\(^96\) Not even these self-professed orphans of Greece actually prefer intellectual discussion to theater and skat.

I imagine if *Frau Jenny Treibel* were made into a romantic comedy today, the last scene would be a shot of Corinna and Marcell standing hand-in-hand over an archeological dig in Greece.\(^97\) But in the novel, Corinna makes it clear that such a fate does not interest her. After Corinna decides to break off her engagement with Leopold, Schmidt enthusiastically declares that Marcell will be soon be traveling to Mycenae and "du [Corinna] wirst ihn begleiten." But instead of expressing delight at the trip, Corinna says she is really "mehr für Haus- und

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 461.

\(^{96}\) Ibid., 346.

\(^{97}\) The ending of the BBC’s adaption of Elizabeth’s Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters* (1999) comes to mind.
Marrying Marcell does not offer Corinna any more freedom than marrying Leopold; Shafi even argues Corinna would have been better off with the wealthier, more weak-willed man. Leopold admires Corinna's intelligence, and his wealth would provide her with the leisure to pursue whatever hobbies or studies might interest her. Marcell, on the other hand, feels threatened by Corinna's cleverness and charm and spends the whole novel trying to put her back in her "rightful" place.

Corinna and Jenny, however different their fates, are similar in that they are both able to slip into the role of charming bourgeois woman whenever they please. At the same dinner party where Jenny reigns like a queen, Corinna captures the attention of Leopold and the visiting Englishman Mr. Nelson and keeps them utterly entranced. She has something witty to say about everything from Leutnant Vogelsang ("Wir nennen ihn für gewöhnlich Vogelsang. Aber ich habe nichts dagegen, ihn umzutaufen. Helfen wird es freilich nicht viel." ) to the Treibels' pet cockatoo. The enrapt Mr. Nelson declares Corinna "always quick and clever …, das is was wir lieben an deutsche Frauen." She laughs and jokes, and even Marcell, who believes his cousin is behaving poorly, cannot avert his jealous eyes. When Marcell rebukes her for misrepresenting "deutsche Weiblichkeit," Corinna assures the men that she can cook and sew with the best of them, but her comic reassurances only highlight how arbitrary the definition of German femininity is in the first place. Why does it matter that she is an expert in Kunststopferei? The men are transfixed by her cleverness, not her cooking skills, but symbolically it is interesting that the skill at which Corinna excels is "invisible mending." She is an artist of illusion, adept at

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98 Fontane, "Frau Jenny Treibel," 469.
99 Shafi, "‘Werde, Der Du Bist’," 68.
100 Fontane, "Frau Jenny Treibel," 325.
making things appear the way other people want them to. The difference between Jenny and Corinna, however, is that Corinna never completely loses herself in any role she performs. She never tries to convince herself that she loves Leopold or detests material wealth, and the novel respects her emotional honesty.

But in the end, Corinna's lack of sentimentality results in a jarringly unsentimental outcome, and her marriage to Marcell is a parody of the "happy ending" of the typical romantic comedy. The other characters repeatedly tell Corinna and Marcell that they are "made for one another," and Schmidt even tells Marcell, "Du sollst sie haben, und du wirst sie haben, und vielleicht eher, als du denkst." But everyone is vague about why Corinna and Marcell belong together. Frau Schmolke, the Schmidt's servant (and the novel's requisite accented old woman), offers one reason to Corinna: "Du mußt einen klugen Mann haben, einen, der eigentlich klüger ist, als du – du bist übrigens gar nich 'mal so klug – un der 'was Männliches hat, so wie Schmolke, un vor dem du Respekt hast." It is a plausible albeit unfeminist argument, but its validity is immediately thrown into question by the person who presents it, a silly old woman incapable of talking about anything besides her wonderful dead husband. What exactly makes Marcell so manly? Whenever Corinna does something he does not like, Marcell runs to her father like a tattle-tale child, and it reaches the point where Schmidt lightly chides him for his behavior: "Ja, Marcell, nimm mir's nicht übel, aber das ist ein schlechter Liebhaber, der immer väterlichen Vorspann braucht, um von der Stelle zu kommen." Marcell also has some of the strictest expectations for Corinna's gender performance. He hates her use of Koketterie because it

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101 Ibid., 370.
102 Ibid., 460.
103 Ibid., 364.
is the kind of over-the-top performance he can see through, but he believes in the concept of a *deutsche Weiblichkeit* and becomes grumpy when Corinna "takes everything so lightly"\(^{104}\) and does not adhere to it.

Nevertheless, Marcell fails to make a changed woman out of Corinna, and the scene in which he expresses his feelings for her is profoundly unromantic. In a letter to Corinna, Marcell states:

...ich habe da, wo mein Herz spricht, nicht das Bedürfnis, zu einem Engel zu sprechen, im Gegenteil, mich bedrücken Vollkommenheiten, vielleicht weil ich nicht an sie glaube; Mängel, die ich menschlich begreife, sind mir sympathisch, auch dann noch, wenn ich unter ihnen leide.\(^{105}\)

Marcell's words provide a cynical reformulation of the "I like you just the way you are" cliché: "Perfection stresses me out, so I am okay with human imperfection." He does not even use the second person singular. Corinna, for her part, obliges her suitor's wish for imperfection by refusing to change. She confesses to Marcell that she really did want to marry Leopold, and when Marcell tells her she is being too hard on herself, she corrects him and insists she would have been very happy as Leopold's wealthy bourgeois wife. The "love scene" ends with Corinna offering a piece of practical wisdom: "Denn ich gehe davon aus, der Mensch in einem guten Bett und in guter Pflege kann eigentlich viel ertragen."\(^ {106}\)

Marcell's letter to Corinna comes across as patronizing and a little cold, but the novel certainly does not mock it the way it does Leopold's letters to Corinna. Leopold, like his mother, possesses a streak of sentimentality, so when Jenny forbids him from visiting Corinna during

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 340.

\(^{105}\) Ibid., 468.

\(^{106}\) Ibid., 471–2.
their engagement, he holes up in his room reading Goethe ("was, ist nicht nötig zu verraten"\textsuperscript{107}) and writes letters to his fiancée. One of them reads:


The letter strikes the reader as funny rather than touching because everything in it—from Leopold's word choice to his promises—is false. The vocabulary of war and the language of love sound especially ridiculous coming from Leopold because he is not a hero; he is utterly lacking in \textit{Mut}, and Corinna eventually realizes she is wrong to cast him in such a role simply because he is single and male.\textsuperscript{109} Corinna's aversion to sentimentality overcomes her fantasy of wealth, and she stops reading Leopold's empty and repetitive letters and starts considering other options.

More than any other figure, Leopold exposes the silliness of gender roles. He tries his best to play the role of a capable bourgeois man but fails spectacularly at every turn. He wanted to serve for a year with the \textit{Gardedragonern} "war aber, wegen zu flacher Brust, nicht angenommen worden, was die ganze Familie schwer gekränkt hatte."\textsuperscript{110} In an attempt to redeem himself, Leopold engages in a daily ride to his favorite café, but the narrator is critical of his efforts: "Jeden Tag war er zwei Stunden im Sattel und machte dabei, weil er sich wirklich Mühe

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[Ibid., 450.]
\item[Ibid., 456.]
\item["Und mit meiner Einbildung, ihn zum Helden umschaffen zu können, ist es auch vorbei."
Ibid.]
\item[Ibid., 383.]
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
gab, eine ganz leidliche Figur." Leopold tries too hard because he lacks the instinct for subtlety of a good actor, and everyone around him mocks his performance. His mother calls him a passive child, and his sister-in-law describes him as "unter Durchschnitt, jedenfalls weitab vom Cavalier."\textsuperscript{111} When Leopold tells Jenny about his engagement to Corinna, they both struggle to maintain their roles—she the faint of heart and he the strong of arm:

Jenny kam in ein halb ohnmächtiges Schwanken, und sie wäre, angesichts ihres Sohnes, zu Boden gefallen, wenn sie der schnell Herzuspringende nicht aufgefangen hätte. Sie war nicht leicht zu halten und noch weniger leicht zu tragen; aber der arme Leopold, den die ganze Situation über sich selbst hinaus hob, bewährte sich auch physisch und trug die Mama bis ans Sopha. Danach wollte er auf den Knopf der elektrischen Klingel drücken, Jenny war aber, wie die meisten ohnmächtigen Frauen, doch nicht ohnmächtig genug, um nicht genau zu wissen, was um sie her vorging, und so faßte sie denn seine Hand, zum Zeichen, daß das Klingeln zu unterbleiben habe.\textsuperscript{112}

Jenny swoons and Leopold catches her, but the narrator emphasizes how ill-suited both are to their actions. Jenny, like most fainting women, is entirely conscious, and Leopold, who can barely support her weight, is actually the more delicate person.

In an article on masculinity and degeneration, David S. Johnson calls Leopold "emblematic of the growing crisis of confidence in the authority and legitimacy of the hegemonic model of bourgeois masculinity"\textsuperscript{113} in the late nineteenth-century. Furthermore, he argues that Fontane's depiction of Leopold does not simply reassert "the hegemonic virtues of bourgeois masculinity" but instead examines the "assumptions at the root" of the idea of bourgeois manhood.\textsuperscript{114} It is true that Leopold is hilariously bad at performing "the manly virtues

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 382.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 431.

\textsuperscript{113} Johnson, "The Ironies of Degeneration," 148.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 149.
of productivity, strength, and self-discipline, “115 but the novel never presents a model of these traits to which Leopold might aspire. The two most likeable and sensible male characters are Schmidt and Treibel, and their most pronounced characteristics are their easygoing natures and sharp wits. Leopold, the novel seems to be saying, just needs to take himself and his masculine role a little less seriously.

But what does it mean that the novel ends with the triumph of the most sentimental character? Admittedly Jenny is coerced into taking on another dreaded hamburgisch daughter-in-law, but otherwise she gets what she wants. She prevents a marriage between Corinna and Leopold and brings new wealth into the family. Corinna, on the other hand, gives up on the type of life she wants—a life much like Jenny’s—and recedes into the dusty background of academia. Throughout the novel Corinna plays by the rules of her society and performs one of the roles available to a bourgeois woman. She makes no attempt to emancipate herself from this female role, but ultimately she is not rewarded for conforming to it. It is true that Corinna avoids the mockery the novel heaps on Jenny, but her characteristic ambivalence starts to become more disheartening than refreshing by the novel’s end when she tells Marcell she does not really believe in happiness: "Aber wer ist glücklich? Kennst du wen? Ich nicht."116 Schmidt’s advice to Corinna to "become who she is" to achieve happiness remains highly suspect because the novel never establishes that any of the characters have "natural" identities beyond those they (attempt to) perform.

115 Ibid., 147.

Frau Jenny Treibel questions the existence of a "true self," but in Zur Genealogie der Moral Friedrich Nietzsche denies it completely with the oft-quoted assertion: "es giebt kein „Sein" hinter dem Thun, Wirken, Werden; 'der Thäter' ist zum Thun bloss hinzugedichtet, — das Thun ist Alles."¹¹⁷ Judith Butler famously expounds upon this idea in Gender Trouble when she postulates that all gender is performative, an imitation of something for which an original does not exist.¹¹⁸ The multiplicity of viewpoints in Fontane's novels seems to support these ways of thinking about subjectivity and the self. Jenny Treibel claims she is poetic; Willibald Schmidt calls her sentimental, but their judgments have little authority. Jenny's actions are most persuasive to the reader and trump all declarations. The novel Frau Jenny Treibel can also be read as an illustration of the Nietzschean idea of man as "Komödiant der Welt," which posits that God created humans for the purpose of his own entertainment.¹¹⁹ Its characters serve as sources of amusement, and the reader laughs at those foolish enough to believe themselves important. In Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, Nietzsche considers the connection between wisdom and laughter and conceives of a future in which the "Komödie des Daseins" is acknowledged and


embraced. He advocates looking at one's own life from a narrative distance and laughing at oneself:

"Wir müssen zeitweilig von uns ausruhen, dadurch, dass wir auf uns hin und hinab sehen und, aus einer künstlerischen Ferne her, über uns lachen oder über uns weinen; wir müssen den Helden und ebenso den Narren entdecken, der in unsrer Leidenschaft der Erkenntniss steckt, wir müssen unsrer Thorheit ab und zu froh werden, um unsrer Weisheit froh bleiben zu können!"\footnote{121}

Despite this advice, Nietzsche realizes how difficult it is for people to truly "observe" themselves, remarking that "der Spruch 'erkenne dich selbst!' ist, im Munde eines Gottes und zu Menschen geredet, beinahe eine Bosheit."\footnote{122} The philosophical impulse to postulate an inverse correlation between laughter and self-knowledge dates back to Plato's dialogue \textit{Philebus}, in which Socrates calls the condition of self-ignorance the main "vice" that contributes to a person's ridiculousness.\footnote{123} People who believe "they excel in virtue when they do not"\footnote{124} provoke pleasure in those to whom they appear ridiculous but also pain, since this pleasure is the result of envy.\footnote{125} Nietzsche later builds upon this idea but puts a more positive spin on it: "Lachen heisst: schadenfroh sein, aber mit gutem Gewissen."\footnote{126}

\footnote{121} Ibid., sec. 107.
\footnote{122} Ibid., sec. 335.
\footnote{124} Ibid., sec. 49a.
\footnote{125} Ibid., sec. 50a.
\footnote{126} Nietzsche, \textit{Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft}, sec. 200.
Theodor Fontane’s novels demonstrate his mastery of the "artistic distance" Nietzsche describes in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. The majority of his characters are akin to "Affen Gottes" in that their funny words and actions trigger amusement from a distant observer—the reader—but his novels do more than just entertain. When we as readers laugh at Leopold for his "zu flacher Brust" or at Jenny for her maternal tyranny, we are not merely laughing at the inadequacy of their gender performances. The only reason we find Leopold and Jenny ridiculous is because the essentialist gender roles of nineteenth-century Germany are fundamentally ridiculous.
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"WAR SIE NICHT EINE FRAU UND ER EIN MANN?: GENDER AND HUMOR IN THOMAS MANN'S EARLY FICTION"

Following a chapter on the great social Realist Theodor Fontane (1819-1898) with a chapter on Thomas Mann (1875-1955) makes a certain logical sense. Mann openly admired Fontane as a man and author and was still finding new things to say about his writings and persona as late as 1954 (Noch einmal der alte Fontane).\(^1\) Numerous critics have dissected the relationship between the two men, comparing their writing styles and assessing Fontane's level of influence on Mann, someone he interacted with professionally but never met in person.\(^2\) The most productive comparisons between the two are those that look specifically at Fontane's later novels and Mann's early fiction. Mann's first novel, Buddenbrooks (1901), is generally agreed to owe the greatest stylistic debt to Fontane,\(^3\) particularly in dialogue-heavy scenes that take place around a dining room table.\(^4\) But most of the critics performing the comparisons of the two writers concede that the literary strategies of Fontane and Mann are as different as they are similar. Mann admired many elements of Fontane's writing, but that does not mean he attempted

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\(^1\) Thomas Mann, "Noch Einmal Der Alte Fontane," in Reden Und Aufsätze; 1, vol. 9, Thomas Mann: Gesammelte Werke in Zwölf Bänden (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1960), 816–22.


\(^3\) U. Janssens-Knorsch and L. R. Leavis, "‘Buddenbrook & Son’: Thomas Mann and Literary Influence," English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature 82, no. 6 (December 2001): 525.

\(^4\) Wimmer, "Theodor Fontane und Thomas Mann im Dialog," 117.
to emulate all of them; and even when Mann did try to follow Fontane's example, he was not always successful. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Mann's views on humor.

In the essay "Der alte Fontane" (1910), Mann expresses his admiration for Fontane's "Milde, Güte, Gerechtigkeit, Humor und verschlagene Weisheit," which Mann calls typical traits of "klassische Greise." However, Thomas Mann's humor—particularly the humor in his early fiction—is far from mild; on the contrary, it is striking how mean and sharp it can be. Nevertheless, in this chapter I will argue that Mann's early humor, in spite of its sharp edges, functions as both a weapon and a shield in a way that has a huge impact on how these texts represent gender. The humor of Mann's early fiction often comes from the narrator and seems to target the narrative's characters—but in a way that humanizes those characters even as it makes them seem ridiculous. The larger targets of humor in these texts are actually the gender norms that prove so destructive to the characters who try and fail to adhere to them in Mann's early fiction.

**Humor, Irony, and Thomas Mann**

Of the two, the term most commonly associated with Thomas Mann is not "humor" but "irony." As I have already discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, irony is not necessarily funny, which is probably one of the many reasons why some scholars feel more comfortable calling Mann—a writer obsessed with degeneration and disease—"ironic" as opposed to "humorous." Although there are numerous scholarly articles and monographs devoted

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5 Thomas Mann, "Der Alte Fontane," in *Reden Und Aufsätze; 1*, vol. 9, Thomas Mann: Gesammelte Werke in Zwölf Bänden (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1960), 9.

to irony in Thomas Mann—far too many to review here—critical assessments of Mann's humor are fewer in number. Most of these scholars tend to agree that Mann is a humorous writer even though he "is still frequently associated with Teutonic humorlessness" in the popular imagination, but they often disagree about how and why he is humorous. One critic writes, "A major problem in appreciating Mann's humor lies in the fact that it is often too cerebral or too cryptic to be considered funny," while another claims that "Mann can see the funny side of anything, without needing to be ironical." One critic argues that Mann is chiefly a master of satire, while another praises his deft use of parody. One critic argues that Mann is chiefly a master of satire, while another praises his deft use of parody. One of the arguments I find most convincing comes from Werner Hoffmeister, who claims that Mann uses humor for two purposes: to ward off sentiment and sympathy in the reader and to cultivate "a sympathetic or at least tolerant acceptance of things as they are, including human frailties and follies, pain and

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suffering." The second half is this argument is backed up by some of Mann's own ideas about humor (and certain forms of irony) as positive, life-affirming phenomena.

There is no consistent use of terminology in scholarship on Mann's humor, probably because the author himself is inconsistent. Mann tended to re-interpret his entire career based on his latest project, and unfortunately for scholars of his earlier work, Mann developed most of his theories on irony and humor towards the end of his life. There are only two essayistic texts prior to 1940 in which Mann refers specifically to literary humor. The first is Mann's 1903 review of a novel by Toni Schwabe, a woman writer concerned with female homoeroticism. Mann writes of the novel: "Zuweilen blitzt Humor auf; und Humor ist oftmals dort, wo die Sinnlichkeit schwach ist. In den feinsten Fällen jedoch ist er eine helle Waffe des Geistes gegen die Sinnlichkeit: sie wird verspottet..." It is probably wise not to read too much into this pair of sentences, since here Mann is specifically referring to the kind of work humor does in Schwabe's text, but this idea of humor as positive mockery, as a "bright weapon of the intellect" reoccurs in Mann's thinking. In 1911 Mann again praises humor in a short text in French for the Parisian magazine *La Revue des Revue*, where he refers to humor ("l'humour") as something that "can inspire works with a general humanity and a depth of rare truth." Humor, according to Mann, is

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13 Ibid., 69.

14 Quote from Eric Downing!


16 The wording is possibly an allusion to the "Helle Wehr! Heilige Waffe!" of Act 2, Scene 4 in Richard Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*.

by its medieval medical definition a fluid and therefore opposed to dryness ("de sècheresse"),
and as part of its fluid nature, humor is broader, coarser, more violent, and less beholden to form
("la religion de la forme") than irony. Later, in a speech for the students of Princeton University
titled "Die Kunst des Romans" (1939), Mann expands upon this idea of irony as something
distant and formal when he provides a definition of something he refers to first as "Ironie" and
then more specifically as "Welt-Ironie" and "epische Ironie":

Es ist ein in seiner Gelassenheit fast ungeheuerer Sinn: der Sinn der Kunst selbst, eine
Allbejahung, die eben als solche auch Allverneinung ist; ein sonnenhaft klar und heiter
das Ganze umfassender Blick, der eben der Blick der Kunst, will sagen der Blick
höchster Freiheit, Ruhe und einer von keinem Moralismus getrübten Sachlichkeit ist. [...] 
Sie dürfen dabei nicht an Kälte und Lieblosigkeit, Spott und Hohn denken. Die epische
Ironie ist vielmehr eine Ironie des Herzens, eine liebevolle Ironie; es ist die Größe, die
doller Zärtlichkeit ist für das Kleine.18

Epic irony, as Mann explains it here, shares several similarities with his previous ideas about

*Humor* and *l'humour*. Like humor, epic irony is described as broad and bright, but unlike humor,
it is something too gentle and distant to engage in mockery. For Mann, irony is born of

Apollonian objectivity, and in this speech, he seems to regard this as something positive. But

over a decade later, during a radio interview in 1953, Mann spells out the differences between

irony (*Ironie*) and humor (*Humor*) and clearly privileges the latter.19 Irony, according to Mann,
is the result of a distant, Apollonian objectivity, and it provokes no more than an "intellectual
smile" in its listener or reader. Humor, on the other hand, inspires "laughter swelling up from the

heart" (*das herzaufquellende Lachen*), which Mann claims to value above all else. He tells the

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interviewer: "Ich freue mich immer, wenn man in mir weniger einen Ironiker als einen Humoristen sieht, und ich glaube, dass nicht schwer sein wird, in meinem Schreibwerk das humoristische Element nachzuweisen." It should not be difficult to find humor in his works, Mann continues, because he inserts the humorous elements on purpose—even into such serious tales of tortured genius as Doktor Faustus. Furthermore, Mann rejects the idea that irony dominates his early works; rather a "pessimistic humor," inspired in part by the "low German humor" of Fritz Reuter, permeates the novel Buddenbrooks. I agree that Buddenbrooks is funny in a way that provokes sympathy for as well as laughter at its deeply flawed characters, but I hesitate to take Mann at his word here, since he offers up this particular opinion about irony and humor over half a century after writing Buddenbrooks. Instead, I would argue that the third-person narrators present in much of Mann's early fiction produce a type of humor that is much meaner and harsher than Mann acknowledges in his Rundfunk interview.

Part of what is so fascinating about this interview is Mann's insistence that his writing is humorous by design, which is probably not something he needs to clear up. The moments of humor in Mann's texts sometimes seem incidental but never accidental, thanks in part to the prominent, authoritative voices of his third-person narrators. As Dorrit Cohn points out in "The Second Author in Death in Venice," many of Mann's texts feature a third-person narrator "who intrudes loudly and volubly into his tale." Cohn argues that readers are prone to confusing a

20 Ibid., 803.
21 Ibid., 804.
22 Ibid., 803.
text's actual author with the third-person narrator in such instances, but especially "in cases where a narrator takes earnest moralistic stands on weighty problems of morality." According to Cohn, the reader is actually more likely to grant the third-person narrator "a personality of his own" when his tone is "more jocular," as is the case in Mann's early stories and in *Buddenbrooks*. Comparing late Fontane and early Mann, Martin Swales identifies the jocular narrator as key to understanding many of the stylistic differences between the two writers: "Bei Fontane ist die Erzählstimme durchwegs taktvoll, unemphatisch, subtextuell virtuos. Wohingegen Thomas Mann als Erzähler... gerne als überlegen-ironische, kommentierende, wertende Instanz in Erscheinung tritt." Although both authors are masters of "the controlled detached narrative voice," the authorial narrators of Thomas Mann's works tend to be more obviously opinionated and openly judgmental than Fontane's, and they therefore play a more conspicuous role in generating moments of humor.

**Gender, Sexuality, and Thomas Mann**

In writing a chapter about gender and humor in the early works of Thomas Mann, it is necessary to look at gender more broadly and not just at women. Several conditions necessitate this broader focus. First, although Mann's fictional texts contain many memorable female characters (Lisaweta Iwanowna in *Tonio Kröger*, Clawdia Chauchat in *Der Zauberberg*, and Diane Philibert in *Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull*, to name just a few), Mann's narratives are almost never structured around the problems and concerns of these women.

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24 Ibid., 125.

25 Swales, "Nimm doch vorher eine Tasse Tee...," 136.

26 Janssens-Knorsch and Leavis, "*Buddenbrook & Son,*" 526.
Andrew J. Webber points out that Mann’s "most significant works are driven by all-male configurations of interest, and when women are indeed focalised, there is often a suspicion that they are acting as foils or even as substitutes for men.” Webber therefore argues that Mann "is a writer who exhibits a special, acute, and ambivalent interest in manhood and rarely puts women and female experience centre stage." 27

Scholars read Mann's alleged lack of interest in women in several ways. Some, like Webber, believe Mann's texts do not focus on the female experience because Mann, a homosexual and casual misogynist, was too concerned with privileging the male experience. Here I should note that this dissertation chapter, although it will touch on the representation of sexuality in Mann's texts, will not focus on Mann as a homosexual author. Other critics also choose to look beyond Mann's personal predilections and instead view him primarily as a product of his time and artistic epoch. Whereas many nineteenth-century novels featured female protagonists, reflecting a largely female readership and "increasing interest on the part of male novelists in the challenge of representing the psychology of the opposite sex," 28 male writers at the turn-of-the-century often chose to criticize the patriarchal culture in which they grew up by focusing on conflict between fathers and sons and the ways in which "repressive sexual morality" limited men. 29 In other words, male writers took stock of the cultural upheaval all


around them—the feminist movements, the rise of theory on homosexuality—and decided to make it all about the struggles of (ostensibly) heterosexual men. According to this theory, rejecting female protagonists is merely one step towards rejecting a larger Realist program.

With a few notable exceptions (including, I will argue, Tony Buddenbrook), the women in Mann's fiction rarely come across as unique individuals with rich inner lives. Mann is known for being a writer who repeats his favorite themes and leitmotifs in text after text, and the same female figures crop up repeatedly throughout his oeuvre. Claus Tillmann argues that Mann's male protagonists mature and develop as the author ages, but his female characters barely change from the first text to the last.30 Even at the end of his career Mann remains much more interested in the idea of Woman—*das Ewig-Weibliche*—than individual women.31 Some critics therefore view Mann's women as mere "vessels to contain thematic content, the substance of thought and feeling the work carries" as opposed to human characters.32 The women, in a functional sense, are more passive than even the most pathetic of Mann's male characters, which is no small feat since Mann's early fiction contains some of the most pathetic male characters in literature, and their foils are the unattainable, inaccessible *femme fatales* that constitute Mann's favorite female type.

Tillmann divides Mann's *femme fatales* into two categories: the woman who drives the lovesick male protagonist to ruin with her scorn and casual indifference and the dominant,


31 Ibid., 7–8.

demonic seductress who destroys him on purpose. The latter women, as Todd Kontje puts it, "seem to enjoy nothing more than watching their would-be lovers suffer and die" and show up with alarming regularity in Mann's earliest stories and novellas. The worst of all of these women is undoubtedly Amra Jacoby of the short story "Luischen" (1900), who convinces her obese, weak-willed husband to throw a large party so that her young lover, a composer, can perform before an audience. For reasons totally inscrutable to the reader, Amra then decides that her husband must perform as well—by doing a silly little song and dance "im rotseidenen Babykleide." Her husband, the consummate sad sack, goes along with her plan, realizes in the middle of his humiliating dance number that Amra and the composer are having an affair, and drops dead. Amra is simply the most extreme version of a common character. Like all of Mann's *femme fatales*, her motivations are highly mysterious—both to the reader and to the male protagonist who is obsessed with her, and the text never suggests Amra is hiding anything resembling a complex, inner life beneath her veneer of stupid cruelty. Mann's villainesses rarely get backstories.

Here it is important to note that Mann was not alone in making use of the *femme fatale* archetype at the turn of the century, a period in which gender was becoming an increasingly "unstable category." Although the fatal woman had been a popular figure in the art and

33 Tillmann, *Das Frauenbild Bei Thomas Mann*, 27.


literature of nearly every previous era, depictions of this type of woman exploded in frequency during the European fin de siècle. Scholars like Bram Dijkstra\textsuperscript{37} and Gail Finney\textsuperscript{38} see the proliferation of fatal women in the art of this period as the result of male artists reacting fearfully to the rise of feminist movements in the late nineteenth century. In the visual arts of the fin de siècle, female figures are increasingly depicted as beautiful demons preying on male victims, as sexual sadists who "personify the regressive, bestial element in woman's nature."\textsuperscript{39} Similarly, the \textit{femme fatale} of nineteenth-century literature is:

\begin{quote}
\text{cold, arrogant, and inaccessible, yet irresistible; defiant of social convention; mysterious, enigmatic, and exotic, often Middle Eastern or North African; charming yet cruel, sometimes to the point of perversity and even sadism; she frequently takes the form of the \textit{allumeuse} (literally, "a woman who ignites"), who excites men's desire without satisfying it. But the essential, defining quality of her nature, combining as it does beauty and death, is its two-sidedness.}\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

This description fits many of Thomas Mann's female characters, including Amra Jacoby of "Luischen," but Amra is also a good example of how Mann plays with the \textit{femme fatale} archetype rather than adopting it indiscriminately. Amra's cruelty is so incredibly over-the-top she becomes a caricature of a stereotype that ultimately serves to expose how ridiculous the stereotype is in the first place.

Nevertheless, Thomas Mann was not a proponent of feminism. His fictional texts suggest it, and his essays and letters only reinforce this deduction. One of the most telling of Mann's non-

\textsuperscript{37} Bram Dijkstra, \textit{Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).


\textsuperscript{39} Dijkstra, \textit{Idols of Perversity}, 258.

\textsuperscript{40} Finney, \textit{Women in Modern Drama}, 52.
fiction works is his essay on Hedwig Dohm (1831-1919), a pioneering feminist activist and author who happened to be Mann's grandmother-in-law. The essay is clearly supposed to be an expression of Mann's admiration for Dohm, who had been dead for over twenty years at the time of its publication, but the overall tone is deeply condescending. Even the title of the essay, "Little Grandma," seeks to diminish its subject. Vahya Elsaghe points to this text as proof that Mann was uncomfortable with the idea of women writers, noting that Mann does not even mention Dohm's prolific writing career until page four of ten. When he does deign to bring it up, his remarks are cringe-worthy:

Sie schrieb Romane -- nun, die waren nicht gerade sehr wichtig, obgleich sie als Dokumente aus dem Berliner und Münchener Gesellschaftsleben gewiss ihren Wert behalten werden. Aber erstens war es damals bei uns, anders als in den angelsächsischen Ländern, etwas Außergewöhnliches und Imponierend-Halbanstößiges, im bürgerlichen Sinne „Unweibliches,” dass eine Frau überhaupt Bücher schrieb; und zweitens war Little Grandma ja eine Kämpferin und Ruferin im Streit, welche die Freiheit und Selbständigkeit des Weibes, die sie als Novellistin praktisch betätigte, auch als Journalistin, mit Artikeln, die sie für die liberale Presse und für Frauenzeitschriften verfasste, theoretisch-gesellschaftskritisch verfocht und sogar in Versammlungen auftrat. Ihre märchenhafte Person reichte dabei kaum über das Rednerpult hinaus; aber die Hauptsache war, dass ihre Augen darüber hinausblickten, und die machten mehr Eindruck als ihre Worte.42

Mann is so smugly patronizing in this passage it is almost impressive; he manages to list Dohm's many accomplishments and dismiss them at the same time. She wrote novels, but they were documents of a society, not works of art. She gave speeches in feminist assemblies, but her piercing gaze made more of an impression than her words. (One wonders if Mann ever attended any of these feminist assemblies.) Most courageously, Dohm published her writing even though


she risked seeming "unfeminine" by associating herself with the decidedly masculine realm of German letters. The entire essay goes on in this supercilious vein. Mann devotes an unwieldy amount of the text to descriptions of Dohm's tiny but fierce person, her *märchenhaft* stature and laughing mouth, seemingly unaware that he is engaging in exactly the kind of sexism Dohm skewered in her own writing. And although Mann depicts Dohm as laughing, it is her husband he goes out of his way to describe as "witzig" and a crafter of satirical poems. It does not come as a surprise when Mann admits that Dohm did not like him—the man who took her brilliant granddaughter away from her doctorate studies in Mathematics—and once called Mann "ein verdammt alter Anti-Feminist."  

Reading Mann's essay in 2016, it strikes me that his attempts to put a "little woman" in her place by making her passion seem comical, her life's work frivolous have ultimately backfired. When Mann makes reference to Dohm's "damned antifeminist" comment, he is clearly trying to reclaim narrative authority through the use of self-deprecating humor. The subtext of the "Gerichtsszene" passage reads something like: "The little woman thought she had the right to play judge and criticize me! Ha ha! How quaint!" The irony is that Mann, in trying to show he is a good sport about kooky old feminist ladies, proves Dohm's verdict about his antifeminism correct.

I am including all this information about Mann and his attitude towards women to establish something crucial: Mann the man did not care about the social oppression of women, but his fiction reflects a complicated and critical attitude towards gender roles and sexual norms in general. Robert Martin writes of Tonio Kröger—a protagonist who closely resembles his

43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 470.
creator: "Tonio recognizes that mixed in with his love of the ordinary is contempt for it and an inchoate recognition of the tyranny of the conventional." The same can be said for Mann and his fascination with "ordinary" Teutonic masculinity. Critics frequently describe Mann's male protagonists as "effeminate." Many of them, like Mann did, take great care with their dress and personal grooming and become emotionally attached to other men (or more likely, other boys). They take after their artistically-inclined, dark-skinned mothers instead of their bourgeois, business-minded fathers, and this "maternal inheritance" leaves them aimless and unhappy. They struggle to play the role of the bourgeois German man; the stress of constantly putting on a performance makes them ill, and they vacillate between wanting to fit in and the desire to be free to pursue their own artistic and intellectual interests. Binaries and dialectics are "fundamental to Mann's intellectual grasp of things." As a result, his fictional works are very concerned with investigating the types of people who violate the gender and sexual binaries that society has constructed. However, the fact that these texts call the gender binary into question does not mean they celebrate those who violate it.

**Gefallen** (1894)

In 1894 Thomas Mann became a published author of fiction at the age of nineteen when his short story “Gefallen” appeared in the magazine *Die Gesellschaft*. Written before Mann hit

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46 Tillmann, *Das Frauenbild Bei Thomas Mann*, 18.

47 Webber, "Mann’s Man’s World," 66.

48 The secondary literature sometimes uses the terms short story and novella interchangeably to refer to Mann’s early works of short fiction.
his literary stride (or his twenties), the story differs in several ways from most of the texts in his oeuvre. The most striking is the way in which Mann structures the text, which has the well-defined frame narrative typical of works of German Poetic Realism. As a result, the text also has two narrators, one of whom (Dr. Selten) recounts an allegedly true story from his youth yet speaks of his past self in the third person ("[d]er Held meiner Geschichte"

49). The frame begins with a group of four young men—one of whom is the frame narrative’s first-person narrator and one of whom will narrate the embedded story—dining together and discussing whether or not it is unfair that society discriminates against sexually-active young women but not the men who sleep with them. Formally the text is a throwback to an earlier time, but as Esther Lesér points out, its subject matter is very current for the 1890s.50 The emancipation of women was a hot topic at the end of the century in Germany, and even cossetted bourgeois men were taking part in the discussion. The story is therefore an interesting mix of old and new literary traditions.

The frame narrator never divulges many details about himself,51 but he immediately sets up two of his friends, Laube and Selten, as ideological opposites.52 With ironic hyperbole the narrator describes Laube as "der blutjunge, blonde, idealistische Nationalökonom, welcher, wo er ging und stand, über die gewaltige Berechtigung der Frauenemanzipation dozierte."53 As this

49 Thomas Mann, "Gefallen," in Frühe Erzählungen 1893-1912 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2012), 17.


51 See Cohn, "The Second Author in Death in Venice," 124. Despite speaking in the first person, the frame narrator has a lot in common tonally with the ironical, "shadowy observers" who serve as Mann’s third-person narrators.

52 Lesér, Thomas Mann’s Short Fiction: An Intellectual Biography, 23.

language suggests, the narrator finds something inherently goofy about a young man who is passionately in favor of women's rights. The frame narrative depicts Laube as a man who takes the world's problems a little too seriously, whereas Selten, in spite of his keen sense of irony, is a man who takes himself a little too seriously. He is "der Ironiker" in the group of friends, and the narrator first depicts him making fun of the old-fashioned chair in which he is sitting "in seiner scharfen Weise." Selten supposedly demonstrates "Welterfahrung und –Verachtung" in every gesture, but the narrator, although younger and apparently less worldly than his friend, makes fun of these pretentious shows of apathy. Selten, he says, "war die Älteste unter uns vieren. Wohl schon um die dreißig herum. Auch hat er am meisten 'gelebt.'" The use of "schon" and the sarcastic quotation marks leave no doubt the narrator's attitude towards Selten. The frame narrator finds his older friend amusing, but he is not so young that he respects his claim to having "lived" more than the rest of them. Selten later attempts to claim narrative authority for himself in the Binnenerzählung, but in the frame, he is the subject of gentle mockery.

Selten is a funny figure in the frame narrative because his world-weary indifference is excessive and unearned, whereas Laube is funny because his earnest enthusiasm is totally over-the-top. He grasps at any excuse to bring up the "die schmachvolle soziale Stellung des Weibes" and gesticulates wildly during his tirades. At one point the narrator interjects during one of these diatribes with the ironic comment: "...er sagte nie 'Frau,' sondern immer 'Weib,' weil sich das naturwissenschaftlicher machte." To anyone familiar with medical antifeminist rhetoric of the late nineteenth-century, Laube's use of 'Weib' seems especially ridiculous and inept because the antifeminists of the period made abundant use of the same term. Laube is well-meaning, but as a

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 15.
result of the narrator's mocking tone, he comes across as silly and a little dopey. By association, so does the emancipation of women.

Laube's arguments about the rights of women are interrupted by Dr. Selten, the resident "Cyniker," who proceeds to tell them a story, the *Binnenerzählung*, "fix und fertig in Novellenform." Indeed, stylistically the embedded narrative does not resemble an oral tale at all, and out of context, the plot sounds very melodramatic: A very young man falls in love with a virtuous actress, takes her virginity, and later finds out she has begun prostituting herself on the side like the rest of her colleagues. The young man is forever changed by this experience and becomes a man for whom "die Liebe im Haß sei und die Wollust in wilder Rache." The tale's audience is supposed to believe this outcome is true because after "Gefallen" returns to its frame narrative, Dr. Selten reveals in the story's second-to-last paragraph that he was the innocent young man in the *Binnenerzählung*. In terms of dialogue, Selten gets the last spoken word, but his friends are initially skeptical about the truth of his story. The frame narrator is inclined to believe it is true due to its "simplicity" ("…gerade diese Einfachheit spricht für ihre Wahrheit."), but Laube still does not think the story—however moving or truthful—justifies their society's sexual double standard. Selten brusquely responds to his feminist friend by spelling out the intended moral of his tale: "Wenn eine Frau heute aus Liebe fällt, so fällt sie morgen um Geld." Why a feminist should accept this statement as a "moralische Berechtigung"

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 17.
58 Ibid., 47.
59 Ibid., 48.
60 Ibid., 49.
for the mistreatment of women is never explained, and the short story ends on a serious, symbolically heavy-handed note, with poor, sad Selten violently grabbing at a bunch of lilacs.

Writing about "Gefallen," Hermann Wiegmann attributes a functional purpose to the frame narrative. In his opinion it creates the emotional distance necessary for Selten to find humor in his traumatic past. Thus, a tragedy becomes a tragicomedy.61 I would argue that "Gefallen," despite its ostensibly tragic themes—the fall from idealism to cynicism, the loss of innocence—is one of Mann's least serious, most tongue-in-cheek works. Furthermore, the text becomes even more humorous upon a second or third reading. Once the reader knows for certain that the "hero" of the Binnenerzählung is a younger version of its narrator, there are a number of passages that read differently than before. For example Selten's habit of referring to his younger self in the third person comes across as pretentious and a little narcissistic.62 He describes himself as "ein hübscher, schlanker Junge" whom all the girls stare at in loving admiration. In Poetic Realism, a frame narrative is frequently employed to make a story seem more like a real account, but in "Gefallen" this structure mostly makes Selten seem pompous. Despite the story's somber ending, Selten's youthful heartbreak never comes across as tragic for the reader, and although feminism is made to look silly, so are men's expectations of women.

The funny ironic commentary that begins in the first part of the frame narrative does not end when the Binnenerzählung takes over. Naturally Selten, "der Ironiker," continues in much the same tone. Early on he describes his protagonist, a university student, as "innocent":


62 Thematically, I admit, the third-person approach makes sense; the innocent boy is gone, and Dr. Cynicism now occupies his body. Selten is not the man he used to be, as the cliché goes.
—rein am Leibe wie an der Seele. Er konnte mit Tilly von sich sagen, er habe noch keine Schacht verloren und kein Weib berührt. Das erste, weil er noch keine Gelegenheit dazu gehabt hatte, und das zweite, weil er ebenfalls noch keine Gelegenheit dazu hatte. 63

These funny little reflections on the foibles of youth and the nature of virtue pop up throughout the embedded story. As the narrator, Selten expresses some of them directly and puts others in the mouth of the protagonist's slightly older friend, Rölling, who addresses the younger man as "Kleiner" and claims to know everything. 64 In many ways, Rölling plays the same role in the embedded story that Selten plays in the frame narrative. Both men are described by their younger, more idealist friends as jocular and impossible, and both believe they are old enough to know how the world works and qualified to impart their knowledge to the ignorant.

When the student becomes paralyzed by his feelings for Irma Weltner, an actress he has never encountered offstage, it is Rölling who encourages him to take action and guides him through the practicalities of getting in touch with such a woman outside the theater. First, however, there is a humorous misunderstanding about just what the student wants from the actress. Rölling assumes he is hoping to have sex with her and says, "Schlimm, Kleiner. Nichts zu machen. Bist nicht der erste. Völlig unnahbar. Lebte bislang bei ihrer Mutter. Die ist zwar seit einiger Zeit tot, aber trotzdem—durchaus nichts zu machen. Gräßlich anständiges Mädel." 65 The phrase "dreadfully respectable" is funny on several levels, most obviously because respectability is supposed to be a positive trait, but in a sexually attractive young woman it is something of an annoyance. Irma's respectability is especially irritating because actresses are assumed to be sexually available. At the same time, a respectable actress is so rare that her clean-living makes

63 Mann, "Gefallen," 18.
64 Ibid., 36.
65 Ibid., 20.
her twice as attractive as other women of equal virtue. Irma's respectability is not dreadful; it is exceptional. Rölling, however, suggests that her upstanding way of life may not be worth it financially. When he finds her address for the student, he comments: "Du, das ist übrigens eine scheußlich billige Gegend. So wird die Tugend belohnt." Rölling's wisecracks about the harsh economic repercussions of "virtue" serve as foreshadowing of Irma's future side-career, but they also provide her with an excuse for her behavior before she even requires one.

Todd Kontje argues that the moral of "Gefallen" is the idea that women "are not to be trusted," but the story really seems to be suggesting that idealized expectations of women and unsophisticated notions of romantic love are not to be trusted. Neither Selten (the narrator) nor Rölling treats the young student's emotional state with much respect; his feelings are usually described in such a way that they end up seeming silly and overblown. In the beginning the narrator has only seen Irma from his vantage point in the audience: "Er verliebte sich zuerst in ihr Gesicht, dann in ihre Hände, dann in ihre Arme, welche er gelegentlich einer antiken Rolle entblößt sah, - und eines Tages liebte er sie ganz und gar. Auch ihre Seele, welche er noch gar nicht kannte." Here the narrator facetiously depicts the woman as a series of body parts and the man as an aesthete who falls in love with each individually. The woman's soul, the narrator blithely suggests, is the least consequential part of her. The man does not even have to know her soul to fall in love with it. However, the narrator also recognizes that it is the man's perspective that is faulty here. Falling in love with something unknown is not romantic; it is ridiculous. Accordingly, the student is shown to behave ridiculously. He spends all his time going to plays, crying, and writing bad poetry, and his lovesick behavior is described as "lächerlich. Ein jeder

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66 Ibid., 21.

würde lachen." And what is especially laughable is how little the student's love has to do with its ostensible object. Rölling accuses his friend of succumbing to decadence, a form of self-indulgence, and it is true that in the beginning, the young man's love is all about himself.

Even after the student shows up on Irma Weltner's doorstep and begs an audience with her, the text continues to hint that his feelings of "love" are problematic. When the student sees Irma in her apartment for the first time, the narrator says: "Er hatte sie niemals so reizend gesehen, in keiner Rolle, wie in der Wirklichkeit." This ambiguous phrasing of this clever little sentence foreshadows the shock that is to come when the young man learns that women are always performing a role, even in "reality." The young student may be naïve about women and gender performativity, but the narrator constantly reminds the reader that Irma is an actress and furthermore, a good one. For example, towards the end of the student's hour-long, unannounced visit to Irma's apartment, the student moves to leave, and Irma asks him if he really wants to go "mit einer betrübten Verwunderung, welche, wenn sie gespielt war, jedenfalls realistischer und überzeugender wirkte, als jemals auf der Bühne." Women, this remark implies, might be even better actresses off the stage than on, and Irma, whether or not her young admirer realizes it, is always play-acting.

The student is so encouraged by his first real meeting with Fräulein Weltner he experiences a feeling of gnostic superiority that resembles Thomas Mann's definition of irony. Sitting with his friends in a restaurant, he regards them "mit einem überlegenen Lächeln... als machte er sich im Geheimen über sie lustig, die so dasaßen und Cigaretten rauchten und

\[68\] Mann, "Gefallen," 21.

\[69\] Ibid., 23.

\[70\] Ibid., 26.
The narrator, however, retains the advantages of hindsight and narrative control, and the real joke here is that the student, who makes fun of his friends' ignorance, still knows nothing. The student believes he grows more knowledgeable about the world after each new interaction with Fräulein Weltner, but to the reader, his feelings look a lot like puppy love. Mann helps create this impression through a liberal application of ironic exclamation points, italicized words, and excessive flower imagery, and Rölling teases his friend by saying he is "zu zahm für die wilde Ehe." Even after the two young people consummate their relationship (a series of dashes stands in for the sexual act), the student has a lot left to learn about the way society works. He is perpetually at Irma's feet, which the narrator attributes in part to "das ganze äußere gesellschaftliche Übergewicht der Frau von zwanzig Jahren über den Mann gleichen Alters." Rölling jokes that it is the young man's birthday, for he is reborn, but the text does not present this rebirth as something positive. The narrator specifically refers to Irma and the student's relationship as similar to one between a mother and a child, suggesting that the student is as innocent but also as ignorant as an infant.

Interestingly, the scene in which the young man finally learns the truth about "the world" and is forced to grow up and grow teeth is also the most humorous in the story. The narrator describes it as "ein lustiger, amüsanter Morgen" that breaks up a love story that would otherwise

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71 Ibid., 28.
73 Mann, "Gefallen," 38.
74 Ibid., 37.
become "boring." The scene opens with the student deciding to pay a surprise visit to Irma and unwittingly interrupting her breakfast with an elderly john. At this point the student is still so naïve that he doesn't know what to make of Irma's bathrobe or the man's uncombed hair: "Wer das nur sein mochte?! Er zerbrach sich hastig den Kopf darüber." Mark Anderson writes that "Mann stages the encounter between the two suitors as farce, a comic and largely silent pantomime of exaggerated gestures and spluttering remarks." The old man's lower lip is mentioned several times as it droops and waggles in response to his confusion and annoyance, and the student concludes that the man must be "etwas wirr im Kopf." In actuality the student is the only person in the room who has no idea what is going on, and the old man tries to tell him as much, calling him "überflüssig" and finally yelling, "Sie dummer Junge Sie! Sie dummer, dummer Junge Sie!" The student remains clueless and orders the old man to leave, and the john is so rattled by their exchange that he complies. Struggling to get his old bones out of the chair, he gets "sentimental" and moans, "Ich armer alter Mann!" and promises the student, "aber wir werden… wir werden uns sprechen! Das werden wir! Das werden wir!" The student replies by shouting, "Werden wir auch!" after the man a couple times so that by the time the old man has made it out the door, both men seem to be mimicking the repetitive, incoherent bickering of children.

This incident immediately precedes the moment when the student sees a stack of bills near the bed and realizes that Irma has become a prostitute. Thus it is the last time his dumb,
youthful innocence stands in contrast to the worldliness and knowledge of an older man, but "Gefallen" takes an ambivalent stance on manhood. According to the story, a boy cannot become a man until he understands the sexual weakness of women. Selten's final message to his friends in the frame narrative is that women who have sex for love will also have sex for money, but as evidenced by the text, even a man who has absorbed this highly questionable lesson—like Irma's john or Dr. Selten—can still be laughably pompous or simply ridiculous. The student's response to Irma's admission of infidelity is to kiss her violently and then run outside and attack the blossoms of a lilac bush, a metaphorical but nevertheless silly and pathetic response.

Furthermore, although the text privileges the male point of view, it displays real sympathy for its fallen woman by allowing Irma to briefly explain her motivations for prostituting herself. In a paragraph that is not necessary to advance the story's plot, Irma vents about how sick she is of playing a role for the sake of a morality that does not benefit her. Frustrated with the idealism of her young lover, she explains:

"Ich bin schließlich beim Theater. Ich weiß nicht, was du für Geschichten machst. Das thun ja doch alle. Ich hab' die Heilige satt. Ich hab' gesehen, wohin das führt. Das geht nicht. Das geht bei uns nicht. Das müssen wir den reichen Leuten überlassen."

Here Irma reminds the student as well as the reader that she is first and foremost an actress. As a woman, she is "in the theater" even when she is not physically on stage, and although she is capable of playing many different feminine roles, some are more enjoyable than others. The role of impoverished saint is particularly unsatisfying for Irma, and she is angry that the student has expected her to play it for so long.

Dr. Selten, the cynical anti-feminist, has the final word about women in the frame narrative, but the moral he offers up (a woman who falls for love will fall for money) does not

\[79\] Ibid., 46.
actually contradict any of what Laube, the feminist, was arguing earlier. Why should a woman be considered fallen because she is sexually active? As Irma shows, sometimes society leaves her no other choice.

"Der kleine Herr Friedemann" (1897)

Published in the Neue Deutsche Rundschau in 1897, "Der kleine Herr Friedemann" is an early short story by Thomas Mann containing many of the same themes that dominate his later works. The titular character is a sickly dilettante and social outsider whose obsession with a scornful, mysterious woman and—less overtly—with the music of Richard Wagner leads to his untimely death. The story follows Friedemann from infancy, and Esther Leser calls it "a miniature novel whose miniature chapters present a full-scale theme." Roderick Stackelberg identifies this theme—found in many of Mann's early works—as "the search to achieve through withdrawal into art the personal fulfillment that participation in inhospitable social reality cannot provide." Friedemann, like so many Mann protagonists, utterly fails at bourgeois German manhood, and his retreat into a world of aesthetic beauty only exaggerates his failure. But the narrator, even though he frequently mocks "the little Mr. Friedemann," does not totally condemn him either. Ultimately, the humor in this story functions as both a weapon and a shield for its flawed characters, each of whom embodies a different gendered and/or sexual stereotype.

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"Der kleine Herr Friedemann" begins with the memorable line: "Die Amme hatte die Schuld." This line and the few paragraphs that follow set up the tone and major themes for the rest of the story. As the narrator blithely reports, Friedemann's father, the only other man in his family, is already dead, and the women in his life sometimes do him more harm than good. One day while his mother and three sisters are out of the house, "das Unglück" occurs and the wet nurse drops Friedemann on the floor, leaving him with a lifelong physical deformity. Friedemann's working-class nurse, like a comical drunken Eve, is "at fault," but even more so are the bourgeois women in his family, who know their baby's caretaker is an incorrigible drunk but leave Friedemann alone with her anyway. Herbert Lehnert therefore calls this first scene "a satire both of the literary movement of naturalism and of the bourgeoisie." The facts of Friedemann's life should be tragic, and in a more straightforward work of Naturalism, disability and alcoholism would be no joking matter. In Mann's text, however, the snarkiness of the narrator lifts them into the realm of the humorous.

Friedemann, who spends the rest of his life as a small, curved figure "mit der komisch wichtigen Gangart, die Verwachsenen manchmal eigen ist," provokes both sympathy and derisive laughter from the reader. The term "verwachsen" is key to understanding this effect, as it is also Nietzsche's term in the foreword to Der Fall Wagner for the descent into decadence.

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81 Thomas Mann, "Der Kleine Herr Friedemann," in Frühe Erzählungen 1893-1912 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2012), 87.

brought about by Wagner's music.\textsuperscript{83} Friedemann's own descent begins innocuously enough. After deciding his disability precludes him from ever participating in an erotic relationship, Friedemann turns all his attention to developing "educated" interests like music and literature, pursuits that leave him feeling content but "ohne große Affekte."\textsuperscript{84} Determined to take a measured amount of pleasure from all life has to offer him, good or bad, Friedemann stops distinguishing "between happy and unhappy experiences," a practice which causes the narrator to exclaim: "Ja, er war ein Epikuräer, der kleine Herr Friedemann!"\textsuperscript{85} Such mocking comments, neither scathing nor uncritical, are typical of the way in which the narrator pokes fun at Friedemann, who both embodies and humorously distorts a specific type of turn-of-the-century masculinity: the dilettante.\textsuperscript{86} By definition, a dilettante is a person (but realistically, a man) whose interests are superficial, and for a period of time, Friedemann is too shallow a figure to be in any emotional peril. But then Friedemann meets the beautiful Gerda von Rinnlingen, and—as Michael Minden describes—his cursory cultural pursuits are "effortlessly swept away by the sexual storm."\textsuperscript{87} Friedemann's initially amateurish interest in music and the theater (he plays the violin, but not particularly well) makes him susceptible to the dangers of Wagnerian affect that

\textsuperscript{83} Friedrich Nietzsche, "Vorwort," in Der Fall Wagner: Ein Musikanten-Problem, Friedrich Nietzsche: Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe Werke Und Briefe (Nietzsche Source, 2009), http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGB/WA.

\textsuperscript{84} Mann, "Der Kleine Herr Friedemann," 92.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{86} There is arguably an element of self-mockery present whenever Mann makes fun of a vain, well-dressed aesthete.

will completely overtake his uneventful, bourgeois life and make him truly "verwachsen" in the Nietzschean sense. The first time Friedemann gets within arm's length of Gerda is at a performance of Wagner's Lohengrin, and eventually the two bond over a shared interest in music. However, neither Friedemann's musical nor erotic passion is meant to be taken seriously, as is evident by the ridiculous nature of his death. Minden points out that whereas "Tristan's and Isolde's Liebestod (love-death) occurs on the symbolic threshold of land and sea," Friedemann "in a clear parody of the Dionysiac moment… drowns himself in a river at the edge of an ornamental garden, not deep enough to cover his own backside."88

Friedemann's passions are depicted as absurd, but he is not an entirely unsympathetic figure. As pathetic as Friedemann is, he is still—in spite of his hunched back—not as grotesque as his three able-bodied sisters. With humorous bluntness the narrator informs the reader that the sisters never marry "denn ihr Vermögen war nicht eben groß, und sie waren ziemlich häßlich."89 There is definitely a sense in the story that Friedemann's withdrawal from the realm of passionate love and the marriage market—despite his less than ideal appearance—is a conscious decision, whereas his sisters are never offered such a decision in the first place. Their lack of wealth and physical quirks disqualify them:

[Friederike] und ihre Schwester Henriette waren ein wenig zu lang und dünn, während Pfiffi, die Jüngste, allzu klein und beliebt erschien. Letztere übrigens hatte eine drollige Art, sich bei jedem Worte zu schütteln und Feuchtigkeit dabei in die Mundwinkel zu bekommen.90

88 Ryan, "Buddenbrooks: Between Realism and Aestheticism," 47.

89 Mann, "Der Kleine Herr Friedemann," 89.

90 Ibid., 93.
It is no coincidence that the elder sisters, who are neither small nor shapely enough to be considered attractive as women, have feminized versions of masculine names, while the youngest sister, who has a saliva problem, has a dog's name. The text certainly does not present the trio of spinster sisters in a flattering light, but neither does it cruelly condemn them for failing to live up to expectations of what a bourgeois woman should be. They are not bad sorts. Unlike many of the other women in town, the sisters do not openly engage in mean gossip about Gerda or any other women more romantically fortunate than themselves. As the narrator comments: "Besonders wenn eine Verlobung in ihrer Bekanntschaft sich ereignete, betonten sie einstimmig, daß dies ja sehr erfreulich sei." The italics serve as an ironic touch, but the sisters' behavior in the text does nothing to suggest that they are not, in fact, happy for the married women of their acquaintance. They even speak positively of the controversial Rinnlingens, whom Pfiffi calls "durchaus angenehme Menschen" (and then shakes herself like a dog). Mostly the sisters and their grotesqueries serve as enjoyable comic relief, and their weird, sometimes disgusting habits in combination with their good hearts humanize them and highlight just how ridiculous and over-the-top stereotypes about "spinsters" can become. For example, as the adverb "einstimmig" from a previous quote suggests, the sisters are described as having something like a hive mind: "sie… hielten treu zusammen und waren stets eine Meinung." At various points in the text, the sisters repeat one another unnecessarily and speak in unison, almost like a trio of

91 See Hoffmeister, "Humor and Comedy," 69–70. Summarizing the relationship between humor and the grotesque in stories like "Friedemann," Hoffmeister writes: "We see an abundance of ludicrous, pathetic, and grotesque figures in Mann's fiction, and there is plenty of pain, disease, and mental anguish. Yet the reader, in some strange way, derives pleasure from the manner in which a highly imperfect world is presented. Mann's humor, as a mode of his poetic imagination, makes the inadequacies and absurdities of human existence not only acceptable but aesthetically enjoyable as well."

92 Mann, "Der Kleine Herr Friedemann," 93.
witches except totally harmless and impotent, making them comical and not at all frightening. More than anything, the sisters help prove the story's broader point that love—especially the Wagnerian love their brother attempts to imitate—is absurd within the context of the "bourgeois social order" because it "is tied to beauty and money, mainly money." The real target of the text's humor is how superficial bourgeois society can be. Women don't even have to be hunchbacks to be denied an erotic life.

Friedemann's period of erotic self-denial—as well as the "Seelenfrieden" reflected in his name—ends when he meets Gerda, who immediately strikes a blow against his peace. Gerda, like Friedemann's sisters, is not a typical bourgeois woman, but where the sisters are revolting, Gerda is alluring. The other women in town are scandalized by Gerda's behavior and bearing, which one woman describes as "burschikos" and somehow lacking all feminine appeal. This same woman, however, admits that the men in town are not at all put off by Gerda's androgynous demeanor. On the contrary: "Unsere Herren sind jetzt noch wie vor den Kopf geschlagen…" On the basis of Gerda's androgyyny, several critics interpret Friedemann's obsession with her as queer attraction. Robert Tobin argues that Mann would have been influenced by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs' theory of "the third sex," the idea that male homosexuals are female souls in male bodies and female homosexuals are male souls in female bodies. In

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93 Lehnert, "Thomas Mann’s Beginnings and Buddenbrooks," 36.
94 Mann, "Der Kleine Herr Friedemann," 94.
95 Lesér, Thomas Mann’s Short Fiction: An Intellectual Biography, 41.
96 Mann, "Der Kleine Herr Friedemann," 95.
97 Robert Tobin, "Making Way for the Third Sex: Liberal and Antiliberal Impulses in Mann’s Portrayal of Male-Male Desire in His Early Short Fiction," in A Companion to German Realism
Tobin's opinion Gerda and Friedemann both belong to *das dritte Geschlecht* because what Friedemann truly admires about Gerda are her "gender-inverted" characteristics.\(^98\) The story never suggests that Gerda is a homosexual or in possession of a male soul (whatever that means), but it does present Friedemann's interest in her as something outside of what is healthily heterosexual. Gerda, similar to Clawdia Chauchat in *Der Zauberberg*, is childless and (allegedly) unwell. For many of these same reasons, critics like Hannelore Mundt point out that Gerda "can be interpreted as an emancipated woman and thus as a threat to patriarchal structures..."\(^99\) Such is Gerda's power that she can unsettle Friedemann just by looking at him across an opera box "without a trace of embarrassment."\(^100\) In what is likely one of many references to the Nietzschean assertion that "[d]er Mann hat im Hintergrunde aller seiner Empfindungen für ein Weib immer noch die Verachtung für das weibliche Geschlecht," Friedemann finds Gerda almost as hateful as he does alluring and leaves the opera house feeling both angry and aroused.\(^101\) Friedemann is confused by the ease with which Gerda makes him feel demeaned because: "War

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\(^{98}\) Ibid., 317.


\(^{100}\) Mann, "Der Kleine Herr Friedemann," 101.

This is less a rhetorical question than an expression of Friedemann's gender confusion.

The first time Friedemann sees Gerda she is driving a carriage and wielding a whip while her male servant sits impotently behind her. The imagery here is not subtle. Both the carriage and her name clearly indicate that Gerda is a Wagnerian character. And as Mann surely knew, Nietzsche writes in *Der Fall Wagner* that Wagner is "ein ganz grosser Schauspieler" concerned less with music than its effect ("Wirkung"). In Nietzsche's estimation, Wagner's music is purely performative. Nietzsche refers to women ("die Frauen") the same way in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* when he poses the question: "...müssen sie nicht zu allererst und -oberst Schauspielerinnen sein?" Friedemann is attracted to both Gerda and Wagnerian theater because of the effect they have on him, not because of any inherent qualities they possess. Thus Gerda is not meant to be an individual woman; from the beginning she is presented as a cultural and gendered trope. It is also possible that this scene is a playful reference to an iconic photo of Nietzsche, in which he and Paul Ree are posed as if about to pull a carriage containing a whip-wielding Lou-Andreas Salome. The highly staged photo is itself a joke, indicating that Nietzsche probably never meant his most famous quote about women ("Du gehst zu Frauen? Vergiß die

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Peitsche nicht!"\textsuperscript{105} as an endorsement of wife-beating. The scene with Gerda and the carriage is likewise not intended to be taken seriously, something the narrator makes explicit by describing the dopey exchange Friedemann has with another man after Gerda has concluded her theatrical entrance:

"Sie hat eine Spazierfahrt gemacht und fährt nun nach Hause."
Der kleine Herr Friedemann antwortete nicht, sondern blickte vor sich nieder auf das Pflaster. Dann sah er plötzlich den Großkaufmann an undfragte:
"Wie meinten Sie?"
"Und Herr Stephens wiederholte seine scharfsinnige Bemerkung."\textsuperscript{106}

Gerda and the narrator have a way of colluding to make all the other characters seem especially ridiculous. When Friedemann realizes that Gerda has come to call on his sisters, he debates whether or not to join them: "Und obgleich er volkommen allein war, sagte er ganz laut vor sich hin: 'Nein. Lieber nicht.'"\textsuperscript{107} Shortly afterwards he discusses the possibility of returning the social call with his sisters, and they are as grotesque as ever. Pfiffi shakes herself and starts to drool, and two of the sisters repeat the final word of the third sister's sentence like demented parrots.\textsuperscript{108}

Regardless of how seriously Mann took his own sexual orientation, in "Der kleine Herr Friedemann," Friedemann's sexual confusion and resultant suffering can be downright funny. After Gerda "humiliates" him at the opera by looking at him, Friedemann can't stop repeating, "Mein Gott! Mein Gott!" Later when he pays her a visit at her home, she looks at him again and he almost has a total meltdown: "Alles Blut stieg ihm plötzlich zum Kopfe. Sie will mich quälen


\textsuperscript{106} Mann, “Der Kleine Herr Friedemann,” 97.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 98.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 99.
Admittedly, as the story rolls towards its fatal conclusion, Friedemann's mounting paranoia starts to become less funny and more alarming. At one point he wonders, "Konnte sie, wenn sie ihn durchschaute, nicht ein wenig Mitleid mit ihm haben?..." The narrator seems to be requesting the same thing of the reader.

**Tristan (1903)**

Similar to "Der kleine Herr Friedemann" Mann's short story "Tristan" ends with a death, but although the setting of "Tristan" is a sanatorium for tuberculosis victims, the humor that punctuates the later story is even more pronounced than that in "Friedemann." The third-person narrator provides much of this humor by keeping a great deal of distance between himself and the story's protagonist, Detlev Spinell, who never warrants the same amount of pity Friedemann does despite also being a sickly aesthete. The title "Tristan" is a playful reference to Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), which is vital to the structure and content of the story but never specifically mentioned by name. In a 1901 letter to his brother Heinrich, Mann refers to the novella in progress as "[e]ine Burleske, die 'Tristan' heißt!" Tellingly, Mann shortens the title to just one half of the *Liebespaar*, thereby "violating the symmetry of Wagner's opera, in which Tristan and Isolde are accorded equal status." Gabriele Klöterjahn is

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109 Ibid., 107.

110 Wiegmann, *Die Erzählungen Thomas Manns*, 129.


112 13. February 1901 (GKFA 21, 155) cite using Zotero

113 Cerf, "Mann and Wagner," 54.
ostensibly the Isolde to Spinell's Tristan, but these "slender, tubercular characters" are nothing like their "robust Wagnerian" counterparts.\(^{114}\) Gabriele, for instance, has no interest in betraying her alpha-male husband, Großkaufmann Klöterjahn, and Spinell, her admirer, is a weird-looking writer who mails several letters per day but never seems to receive many in return.\(^{115}\) These characters, especially the men, are intentionally parodic figures.

In a manner Eve Sedgwick would appreciate,\(^ {116}\) Gabriele is actually less important to the story and Mann's system of binaries than her husband. Herr Klöterjahn and (by extension) his infant son represent the masculine world of life and commerce, whereas Spinell clings to the feminine realm of art and death. Spinell and Klöterjahn are both caricatures of rival masculinities, and ultimately the story does not favor one over the other. Although Klöterjahn's son "literally has the last laugh," the adult men are portrayed as almost equally ridiculous,\(^ {117}\) but also equally dangerous to the woman they claim to love. The mockery the text heaps on Spinell and Klöterjahn does two seemingly contradictory things to their forms of masculinity: it renders them silly while simultaneously revealing them as destructive. These men have no conscious desire to harm Gabriele, but by adhering to certain models of masculinity and imposing competing models of femininity on the woman they desire, they collude to kill her anyway. The

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 46.

\(^{115}\) Thomas Mann, "Tristan," in \textit{Frühe Erzählungen 1893-1912} (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2012), 329.


\(^{117}\) Stackelberg, "Teaching Mann’s Short Fiction," 33.
humor in this story therefore serves to uphold as well as critique various gender norms of the fin de siècle.

Gabriele's husband, Herr Klöterjahn, is a clear caricature of a Northern, bourgeois businessman, and the first signal that the reader is not meant to take him seriously comes in the form of his speech patterns. Much like a couple of the sillier characters in Theodor Fontane's novels, Klöterjahn is an ostentatious code-switcher who sprinkles his native German with English expressions. The narrator, rather than allow readers to form their own opinion on this habit, immediately passes judgment on it. When Klöterjahn guides his wife into the sanitorium, he says, "Langsam, Gabriele, take care, mein Engel…" and the narrator comments ironically: "...und in dieses 'take care' mußte zärtlichen und zitternden Herzens jedermann innerlich einstimmen, der sie erblickte, - wenn auch nicht zu leugnen ist, daß Herr Klöterjahn es anstandlos auf deutsch hätte sagen können." Many of Klöterjahn's English expressions appear when he is telling his wife how to behave, drawing attention to the inherent ridiculousness of one spouse bossing another around.

Klöterjahn is the type of bourgeois man who is accustomed to directing and instructing others, but the narrator manages to humorously convey the insecurity and ignorance at the core of such a man. Speaking with one of the sanatorium's doctors, Klöterjahn presumptuously attempts to present himself as a voice of medical authority. He explains to the doctor that his wife's illness stems from a problem with her trachea, not her lungs:

"Es ist, wie gesagt, die Luftröhre," wiederholte er. "Ich glaubte wahrhaftig, es wäre die Lunge, als es losging, und kriegte, weiß Gott, einen Schreck. Aber es ist nicht die Lunge, nee, Deubel noch mal, auf so was lassen wir uns nicht ein, was, Gabriele? hö, hö!"

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118 Mann, "Tristan," 322.
"Zweifelsohne," sagte Doktor Leander und funkelte sie mit seinen Brillengläsern an.\textsuperscript{119} Klöterjahn's preoccupation with the exact site of his wife's illness has a ring of superstition to it. If "it is only her trachea," she will be fine, but if her lungs start to fail, she will die. He clings to this belief even as his wife's health declines precipitously. Towards the end of the story, another doctor tries to set him straight but somewhat bungles the attempt with his poor communication skills: "'Herr Klöterjahn,' sagte Doktor Müller sanft, 'erstens ist die Luftröhre ein wichtiges Organ…' Er sagte unkorrekter Weise "erstens," obgleich er gar kein "zweitens" darauf folgen ließ."\textsuperscript{120} Even when it is clear that Gabriele is truly on the brink of death, Klöterjahn does not give up on his own line of medical reasoning, asking a nurse, "Hat sie wieder ein bißchen Blut aufgebracht? Aus der Lunge, wie? Ich gebe zu, daß es vielleicht aus der Lunge kommt…"\textsuperscript{121} Klöterjahn is neither emotionally nor intellectually well-equipped to deal with the tragedy unspooling before him, but the text almost seems forgiving of this inadequacy, which seems to stem from the businessman's natural affinity for "life." Although he is coarse and loud, Klöterjahn is also "gutgelaunet, wie ein Mann, dessen Verdauung sich in so guter Ordnung befindet wie seine Börse…"\textsuperscript{122} Blond-haired and red-faced, Klöterjahn is a picture of rigorous Aryan health, which in the Mann universe means he must also be a little dense.

Detlev Spinell represents the other extreme end of this Schopenhauer-inspired spectrum. If Klöterjahn is aligned with life and the will, then Spinell—the aesthete—is aligned with representation, and the narrator mocks him almost more ruthlessly than Klöterjahn. Some of

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 323.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 356.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 368.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 326.
Spinell's features resemble those of a boy, some of a dark-complexioned man, and his "wunderlich" appearance causes his fellow patients to refer to him as "der verweste Säugling" behind his back. Like that other grotesque protagonist, Herr Friedemann, Spinell is well dressed and has finely shaped hands and feet, but Spinell's retreat into aestheticism is even more ludicrous than Friedemann's:

Er [Spinell] war ungesellig und hielt mit keiner Seele Gemeinschaft. Nur zuweilen konnte eine leutselige, liebevolle und überquel-lende Stimmung ihn befallen, und das geschah jedesmal, wenn Herr Spinell in ästhetischen Zustand verfiel, wenn der Anblick von irgend etwas Schönen, der Zusammenklang zweier Farben, eine Vase von edler Form, das vom Sonnenuntergang bestrahlte Gebirge ihn zu lauter Bewunderung hirriß. "Wie schön!" sagte er dann, indem er den Kopf auf die Seite legte, die Schultern emporzog, die Hände spreizte und Nase und Lippen krauste. "Gott, sehen Sie, wie schön!" Und er war imstande, blindlings die distinguiertesten Herrschaften, ob Mann oder Weib, zu umhalsen in der Bewegung solcher Augenblicke...

"Wie schön!" becomes Spinell's catchphrase in the story, and it neatly and humorously sums up all that is wrong with his decadent approach to art. Spinell is so obsessed with beauty that it robs him of language, a particularly unfortunate thing to happen to a writer. Spinell, however, is less a writer than a "writer." The narrator uses quotation marks to describe Spinell at "work" and comments: "Die Worte schien ihm durchaus nicht zuzuströmen, für einen, dessen bürgerlichen Beruf das Schreiben ist, kam er jämmerlich langsam von der Stelle, und wer ihn sah, mußte zu der Anschauung gelangen, daß ein Schriftsteller ein Mann ist, dem das Schreiben schwerer fällt als allen anderen Leuten." Klöterjahn is at least good at his job, even if he devotes perhaps too much attention to it and not enough to his wife. Furthermore, Klöterjahn's productivity extends into his domestic life where—with a little assistance from Frau Klöterjahn—he has produced "ein Prachtstück von einem Baby." Spinell, on the other hand, is a writer who cannot even bring

\[123\] Ibid., 328.

\[124\] Ibid., 358. Note Mann’s use of the gendered word Mann here to refer to professional writers.
himself to produce words. Virile Klöterjahn is humorously over-productive, effeminate Spinell humorously under-productive, but both models of manhood contribute to Gabriele's death.

Bearing Klöterjahn's absurdly healthy son sucks the health out of Gabriele, and Spinell's "pathological greed for aesthetic intoxication" finishes her off.

Gabriele is arguably the least ludicrous character in the story, but she is also little more than a beautiful tubercular shadow, lacking the verve of Der Zauberberg's Clawdia Chauchat. She finds Spinell strange but admits that he inspires in her "eine seltsame Neugier, ein nie gekanntes Interesse für ihr eigenes Sein." At first, this information strikes the reader as sad. No one has ever encouraged this woman to ponder her own humanity before? But the underlying assumption of Spinell's effect on Gabiele—that women need men to teach them how to think—is also sexist and condescending. Neither Klöterjahn, who maneuvers his wife around the sanatorium grounds barking about her trachea, nor Spinell, who creates an entire backstory for Gabriele's engagement to Klöterjahn based on a few sentences, actually cares about Gabriele's inner life.

What Spinell likes least about Gabriele is her last name and the fact that she "belongs to" Klöterjahn. Towards the end of "Tristan," Spinell writes an angry letter to Klöterjahn in which he

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125 This is a self-deprecating joke on Mann’s part, who says the same thing about himself in a letter to Gottfried Köwel: "Das Schreiben wurde mir immer schwerer als anderen, alle Leichtigkeit ist da Schein" (December 10, 1946).


127 Mann, "Tristan," 337.

128 Talk more about this scene? Probably should.
accuses the businessman of contaminating his wife's soul with his "uninteresting personality," and he refers to Gabriele in this letter as the "Frau, die Sie die Ihrige nennen…" Gabriele, according to Spinell, deserves to be something more than the housewife of an ordinary bourgeois businessman, but what exactly? Klöterjahn's in-person reply to Spinell reveals that Spinell is far from a feminist hero. He tells Spinell: "Meine Frau hat mir einmal geschrieben, Sie sähen den Weibspersonen, denen Sie begegnen, nicht ins Gesicht, sondern schiehten nur so hin, um eine schöne Ahnung davonzutragen, aus Angst vor der Wirklichkeit." As a result of his extreme aestheticism, Spinell is so afraid to corrupt his idea of Woman that he refuses to look at actual women, and by mocking Spinell, Mann's narrator mocks a society that figuratively does the same thing.

The only prolonged moment of seriousness in the story occurs when Gabriele and Spinell sit at the piano together while she plays an arrangement of Wagner's Tristan and Isolde. And even this scene is interrupted early on by a funny description of Gabriele's walking companion, who nearly dies of boredom during the opera's Vorspiel. ("Unterdessen hatte bei der Rätin Spatz die Langeweile jenen Grad erreicht, wo sie des Menschen Antliz entstellt, ihm die Augen aus dem Kopfe treibt und ihm einen leichenhaften und furchteinflößenden Ausdruck verleiht."
The next several pages, however, are devoted to rapturous descriptions of the opera's effects, which allows a moment of authenticity and "Leidenschaft" to punctuate the story's artifice and

129 Mann, "Tristan," 359.
130 Ibid., 365.
131 Ibid., 351.
The next time the music is interrupted, it is not for a comic aside but rather because "jene Kranke, die neunzehn Kinder zur Welt gebracht hatte und keines Gedankens mehr fähig war" has appeared at the door, "stumm und stier, irrewandelnd und unbewusst." In this new tonal context, the pathos of the sick woman's situation is allowed full play. She, like Gabriele, is a woman whose health has been decimated due to the actions of men.

**Buddenbrooks (1901)**

Although it is not a work of short fiction, no analysis of humor in Mann's early works would be complete without a look at his first novel, *Buddenbrooks: Verfall einer Familie* (1901), on whose merits Mann would be awarded the Nobel Prize in 1929. *Buddenbrooks*, as its subtitle suggests, describes the decline of a merchant family's fortunes over the course of several generations, but a sense of humor pervades nearly every chapter of the narrative, even those in which a main character suffers a great personal misfortune. But within the context of this dissertation, what really makes *Buddenbrooks* stand out from the rest of Mann's early tragicomic works of fiction is the character of Tony Buddenbrook, a major female character who is funny and memorable without being a femme fatale.

Like all of Mann's texts, *Buddenbrooks* is the subject of mountains of secondary literature, much of which concerns the character of Antonie (Tony) Buddenbrook. The most popular scholarly debates swirling around Tony relate to how important or unique her character

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133 Mann, “Tristan,” 354.

134 Note that Mann has once again given his female character a masculine name.
is within the novel as a whole. Some critics argue that Tony, the only character to appear on both
the first and last page of the sprawling text, is the "central figure"\textsuperscript{135} or "the backbone"\textsuperscript{136} of
\textit{Buddenbrooks}. She survives the slings and arrows that her siblings and nephew cannot and, apart
from enduring some stomach troubles in her later years, remains physically untouched by the
march of time. In his monograph \textit{The Ironic German: a Study of Thomas Mann} (1958), Erich
Heller famously argues that Tony exists in the novel as a "parody of life" in that she is "the
comic incarnation of Schopenhauer's 'idea of the species.'"\textsuperscript{137} For Heller, Tony's gender is largely
incidental, but more recent criticism has begun to ask what it means that Tony, a woman, is also
a source of comic relief. Most critics writing about Tony agree that she is funny, but they
disagree about whether the reader is meant to laugh at Tony for being a silly woman or at the
societal norms that have shaped her. Some believe the reader's attitude towards Tony is meant to
change as the novel progresses—that Tony begins the novel as a well-developed, somewhat
sympathetic character who turns into "a gross caricature" of her former self as she ages.\textsuperscript{138}
However, I will argue that although the narrator frequently makes Tony an object of mockery,
the novel as a whole uses her to make fun of things much bigger than just one woman. She
becomes a means of playfully critiquing things like bourgeois gender norms, marriage, and
pretentiousness.

\textsuperscript{135} Kontje, \textit{The Cambridge Introduction}, 30.

\textsuperscript{136} Ryan, "\textit{Buddenbrooks}: Between Realism and Aestheticism," 121.

\textsuperscript{137} Erich Heller, \textit{The Ironic German: A Study of Thomas Mann}, Corrected (Mamaroneck, NY:
Appel, 1973), 47.

\textsuperscript{138} Linda Kraus Worley, "Girls from Good Families: Tony Buddenbrook and Agathe Heidling,"
\textit{German Quarterly} 76, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 206.
Tony is a fascinating humorous figure because she is funny on several different levels. On the one hand, she is definitely a target of humor, as the reader is frequently encouraged to laugh at her expense. Usually the narrator engineers these moments of humor by saying something about Tony that makes her look ridiculous or foolish, and from time to time she is targeted by a member of her own family. Even in her youth, Tony shares certain similarities with the titular character of Fontane's *Frau Jenny Treibel*, in that her greatest comic weakness is a glaring lack of self-awareness. Like Jenny, Tony is a member of the *Besitzbürgertum* with an exaggerated sense of self-importance that is largely unwarranted by her actual place in society, and this incongruity often prompts laughter at Tony's expense.

On the other hand, Tony is also an intentional agent of humor, described as "ein ziemlich keckes Geschöpf" in her teenage years, who instinctively understands the power dynamics of mockery. The narrator provides several examples of situations in which a teenage Tony makes fun of people who lack her social clout, and he offers a cursory judgement of her bad behavior:

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\text{Es ist ferner nicht schön, eine ganz winzige kleine Frau mit großem Kopfe, welche die Gewohnheit hat, bei jeder Witterung einen ungeheuren, durchlöcherten Schirm über sich aufgespannt zu halten, beständig durch Rufe wie 'Schirmmadame!' oder 'Champignon' zu betrüben.} \]^{139}
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As described here, Tony's sense of humor is mean, bordering on malicious. At first the narrator's words seem to condemn Tony's actions ("nicht schön"), but later his tone is clearly more admiring than admonishing when he describes how impervious she is to reprimand: "...so mußte man sehen, wie sie einen Schritt zurücktrat, den hübschen Kopf mit der vorstehenden Oberlippe zurückwarf und ein halb entrüstetes, halb mokantes 'Pa!' hervorstieß..."^{140} Young Tony is a

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140 Ibid., 70–71.
capricious figure who can afford to laugh at the expense of other people because she moves through her small, Hanseatic city "wie eine kleine Königin […], die sich das gute Recht vorbehält, freundlich oder grausam zu sein, je nach Geschmack und Laune." According to the narrator, Tony laughs at others in an explicit show of power.

Even after her ignominious first divorce and subsequent loss of social capital, Tony continues to make fun of people too lowly in status or too weak of mind to fight back. When Tony's mother takes an increased interest in religion and begins inviting men of the cloth to their home on a regular basis, Tony turns teasing these men into her own personal hobby: "Tony moquiere sich ganz einfach, ja, sie ließ es sich leider angelegen sein, die geistlichen Herren lächerlich zu machen, sobald sich ihr Gelegenheit dazu bot." The narrator applies the verb "sich moquieren" several times throughout the novel to Tony, as contemptuous teasing is one of her favorite activities. Her brother Tom, however, is "viel zu diskret und verständig" to openly engage in such behavior, and Tony's teasing becomes another sign of how immature she is compared to her brother. On one occasion, after Tony causes some awkwardness at the dinner table by asking a pastor whether he likes a dish she knows he finds disgusting, Tony is described as openly snickering ("vor sich hin kicherte") whereas her brother Tom displays self-control ("Selbstüberwindung") and merely raises an eyebrow. In this instance, Tony's laughter signals her childishness more than it illustrates her willingness to assert social dominance, but Tony's immaturity is one of the novel's more ambivalent elements. Immaturity seems like it would be a character flaw, but the narrator does not always condemn Tony for her childish impulses and

141 Ibid., 71.
142 Ibid., 264.
143 Ibid., 265.
naiveté. On the contrary, Tony's childishness is often depicted as one of her more charming qualities. For example, the narrator appears to side with Tony against the men of the cloth, inviting the reader to share in her delight at the pastors' expense. When one of the pastors enjoying the hospitality of the Buddenbrook home dares to accuse Tony of vanity as evidenced by her carefully curled hair, Tony retorts: "Darf ich Sie bitten, mein Herr Pastor, sich um Ihre eigenen Locken zu bekümmern?!"\textsuperscript{144} The narrator then gleefully explains why Tony's response is a discursive victory: "Und Pastor Jonathan besaß äußerst wenig Haupthaar, ja, sein Schädel war nackt zu nennen!" The next pastor to experience a Tony-takedown seems to deserve it even more than bald, judgmental Jonathan, since the narrator immediately marks him with an unflattering nickname: "Tränen-Trieschke aus Berlin, der diesen Beinamen führte, weil er allsonntäglich einmal inmitten seiner Predigt an geeigneter Stelle zu weinen begann…"\textsuperscript{145} The pastor, in addition to being prone to overwrought, public displays of emotion, is a married man with children who nevertheless falls in love with Tony, "nicht etwa in ihre unsterbliche Seele, o nein, sondern in ihre Oberlippe, ihr starkes Haar, ihre hübschen Augen und ihre blühende Gestalt!" After Tränen-Trieschke leaves a love letter for Tony in her bedroom—a mix of "Bibelextrakten und einer sonderbar anschmiegsamen Zärtlichkeit"—Tony immediately humiliates him by reading it aloud to her mother "völlig ungeniert und mit lauter Stimme." Under the circumstances, Tony's mocking cruelty towards Tränen-Trieschke and his ilk seems more than a little justified, and this makes her character very different from the laughing femme fatales in so many of Mann's early works of fiction whose motivations remain totally inscrutable.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 308.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 309.
However, Tony's "triumphs" over the pastors are not presented without commentary. The narrator continues to poke fun at Tony as she pokes fun at the pastors, and his tone towards her is deeply patronizing. For example, the narrator explains Tony's distaste for the religious men in her house with the ironic comment: "Als gereifte Frau, die das Leben kennengelernt hatte und kein dummes Ding mehr war, sah sie sich nicht in der Lage, an ihre unbedingte Heiligkeit zu glauben." The assertion that Tony is a mature woman who knows something about life is an ironic echo of Tony's favorite new saying. The difference, of course, is that Tony earnestly believes what she says about her newfound maturity, and the narrator, who repeatedly calls the thirty-year-old Tony childish, does not. The narrator's irony is especially potent in this instance because although Tony no longer believes in the "holiness" of religious men, she still worships at the altar of the Buddenbrook family name, which the novel presents as equally or even more undeserving of veneration. Thus, the novel directs mockery towards two different targets of humor simultaneously, expressing scorn for the pastors through Tony and a sort of good-humored, mocking contempt for Tony through the narrator. A good humorous comeback is not a total "triumph" unless it appears effortless on the part of the person who comes up with it, and the narrator takes this element of victory away from Tony. When Pastor Jonathan criticizes her curls, the narrator pre-empts her retort by saying: "Ach! er hatte nicht mit Tony Grünlichs spitzig sarkastischer Redegewandtheit gerechnet. Sie schwieg während einiger Augenblicke, und man sah, wie ihr Hirn arbeitete." The reference to Tony's "sarcastic eloquence" is itself mostly sarcastic. In previous chapters, Tony has not proved herself to be much of an extemporaneous speaker, and her attempts at pointed comebacks have mostly been underwhelming. After

146 Ibid., 308.
Grünlich corners Tony one-on-one for the first time, the narrator describes how she tries to figure out how to respond to her unwanted suitor's profession of love:

Ihre Lippen bewegten sich – was sollte sie antworten? Ha! es mußte ein Wort sein, das diesen Bendix Grünlich ein für allemal zurückschleuderte, vernichtete … aber es mußte ein gewandtes, witziges, schlagendes Wort sein, das ihn zugleich spitzig verwundete und ihm imponierte … "Das ist nicht gegenseitig!" sagte sie, immer den Blick auf Herrn Grünlichs Brust geheftet; und nachdem sie diesen fein vergifteten Pfeil abgeschossen, ließ sie ihn stehen, legte den Kopf zurück und ging rot vor Stolz über ihre sarkastische Redegewandtheit nach Hause, woselbst sie erfuhr, daß Herr Grünlich zum nächsten Sonntag auf einen Kalbsbraten gebeten sei.\footnote{Ibid., 109.}

Just as the narrator helps spoil Tony's victory over Pastor Jonathan by describing the gears visibly turning in her head as she cooks up a retort, here the narrator points out the movement of Tony's lips as she thinks up a reply to Grünlich, which brings to mind a child at a loss for words. A good comeback should be instantaneous, and the narrator wants the reader to know that Tony's is not. The narrator, rather than Tony, is the one manufacturing the humor in this passage. He builds up reader expectations for what Tony is about to say to Grünlich (something witty and cutting, something that will destroy him forever), making it all the more amusing when Tony's actual comeback amounts to the lame phrase: "The feeling is not mutual!" The narrator then further highlights this incongruity by sarcastically calling Tony's reply a "fine-tipped poison arrow" and describing how smugly satisfied she is with her own way with words. Finally, he completely undercuts her moment of triumph with a concluding sentence about how Tony, who hoped to turn away Grünlich "for all time" will have to see him the next day at Sunday dinner.

At least when she is younger, Tony understands the limits of her own wit and tries not to engage with people who try to get a rise out of her through mockery and teasing. When her brother Tom jokingly compares Tony's looks to their homely cousin Klothilde's, Tony resists the
urge to make a comeback because "Tom war ihr überlegen, da half nichts; er würde wieder eine
Antwort finden und die Lacher auf seiner Seite haben. Sie zog nur mit geöffneten Nasenflügeln
heftig die Luft ein und hob die Schultern empor." Tony's self-control in this passage
demonstrates that she understands the power dynamics behind a disparaging joke and will try to
prevent herself from becoming the butt of such a joke whenever possible. Unfortunately for
Tony, the narrator always retains the discursive upper hand in Buddenbrooks, and the older Tony
gets, the more often he invites the reader to laugh at Tony.

Tony is similar to many of Mann's fictional protagonists in that she nurtures an unhealthy
obsession, but unlike so many of Mann's male characters, her obsession has nothing to do with
art or sex. Tony's desires are more practical: she wants to see the Buddenbrooks family rise in
power and reputation. But no matter how toxic Tony's hubris becomes, the narrator treats her
blind family pride like a comic rather than a tragic flaw. Tony's Hochmut comes off as funny for
several reasons. For one, it is naked and over-the-top. When her first husband Grünlich accuses
Tony of having luxurious tastes, she admits that she does; she inherited them from her mother's
side of the family. The narrator explains:

Sie würde mit der gleichen Ruhe erklärt haben, daß sie leichtsinnig, jähzornig,
raschsüchtig sei. Ihr ausgeprägter Familiensinn entfremdete sie nahezu den Begriffen des
freien Willens und der Selbstbestimmung und machte, daß sie mit einem beinahe
fatalistischen Gleichmut ihre Eigenschaften feststellte und anerkannte … ohne
Unterschied und ohne den Versuch, sie zu korrigieren. Sie war, ohne es selbst zu wissen,
der Meinung, daß jede Eigenschaft, gleichviel welcher Art, ein Erbstück, eine
Familientradition bedeute und folglich etwas Ehrwürdigeres sei, wovor man in jedem Falle
Respekt haben müsse.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 101.
¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 222.
The narrator is clearly a figure of authority in the novel, as he is able to discuss Tony's personal habits even in the subjunctive ("She would have explained..."), and he uses this authority to poke fun at Tony's "pronounced sense of family," which is so extreme it has induced a fatalistic outlook in an otherwise ambitious and strong-willed character. What is particularly interesting about this passage is that although the narrator makes it seem funny that Tony considers every character quirk a precious "heirloom," the novel as a whole fetishizes several of the other characters' inherited traits, e.g. Thomas's blue-veined hands and Hanno's musical abilities. There's something hypocritical about the narrator making fun of Tony's fatalism in a novel so concerned with heritable traits and degeneration.

The key to understanding the novel's bemused attitude towards Tony's obsessive family pride is her gender. Tony's obsession with the family name is inherently ridiculous because Tony is not only a woman but a daughter. After she marries for the first time at the age of eighteen, Tony no longer bears the Buddenbrook family name, and from the start there is never any possibility of her bearing its heirs. Tony loses any chance of the reader taking her seriously the second she starts to believe her father's self-serving, manipulative claim that she is "ein Glied in einer Kette" capable of contributing to the Buddenbrook family legacy.\(^\text{150}\) Ingeborg Robles argues that Tony is a funny character precisely because she takes things seriously that do not deserve to be taken seriously.\(^\text{151}\) She sees only tragedy in situations in which someone smarter or more perceptive, like her brother Tom, would be able to find humor.\(^\text{152}\) I agree with Robles, but I

\(^\text{150}\) Ibid., 173.

\(^\text{151}\) Ingeborg Robles, Unbewältigte Wirklichkeit: Familie, Sprache, Zeit Als Mythische Strukturen Im Frühwerk Thomas Manns (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2003), 215.

\(^\text{152}\) Ibid., 223.
would also argue that Tony's gender is primarily what makes her serious attitude towards her family seem so absurd. Whenever Tony is allowed to participate in serious family matters—however superficially—the narrator mockingly describes how she is filled "mit einem unbeschreiblichen Würdegefühl." The irony, of course, is that Tony is neither dignified nor important. Her Würdegefühl is merely that—a feeling of being worth something, and an unjustified one at that.

Even in instances in which Tony's voice flows unimpeded for several paragraphs, the novel finds ways of inserting commentary on the quality of what she says. For example, a letter Tony writes to her family during her first stay in Munich appears in the novel in quotation marks because her mother reads it aloud to her brother Tom. Tony, who is all of thirty years old at this point, writes: "Siehst Du, ich bin eine alte Frau, die das Leben hinter sich hat, und habe nichts mehr zu erwarten auf Erden, aber wenn zum Beispiel Erika später bei Leben und Gesundheit sich hierher verheiratete, so würde ich nichts dagegen haben, das muß ich sagen…" The various ironies contained in this single sentence cause Tom to burst into laughter and interrupt his mother's reading, saying: "Sie ist unbezahlbar, Mutter! Wenn sie heucheln will, ist sie unvergleichlich! Ich schwärme für sie, weil sie einfach nicht imstande ist, sich zu verstellen, nicht über tausend Meilen weg…” In her brother's estimation, Tony is funny—delightfully so—because of how poorly she disguises her true feelings and motivations. She cannot "pass" as a modest, retiring woman even when she tries.

Whereas the men of the novel are permitted to become obsessed with things like love, music, and Schopenhauer, the women—with arguably the exception of the mysterious Gerda—


154 Ibid., 339.
tend to have far simpler, less intellectual drives. Tony's narrative foil may be her musical sister-in-law, but her comic shadow in the novel is her cousin Klohtilde, the poor relation who lives with the Buddenbrooks for most of the novel and acts as a mostly silent witness to their decline. Klohtilde is like Tony in that they both appear in the first and final pages of *Buddenbrooks*, but unlike Tony, Klohtilde does not drive any portion of the narrative; she is simply present for various plot points. Tony is defined by her *Hochmut*, but the word the narrator most commonly applies to the passive, retiring Klohtilde is *Demut*. In another inverse way, Klohtilde resembles Tony in that both women are strangely ageless, but whereas Tony seems perpetually young, Klohtilde is old from the start: "ein außerordentlich mageres Kind in geblümtem Kattunkleidchen, mit glanzlosem, aschigem Haar und stiller Altjungfermiene." Apart from her innate spinsterhood, Klohtilde's only defining characteristic is her slow, insatiable appetite, which the narrator describes as impervious to mockery:

> Sie ließ sich nicht einschüchtern, sie aß, ob es auch nicht anschlug und ob man sie verspottete, mit dem instinktmäßig ausbeutenden Appetit der armen Verwandten am reichen Freitsiche, lächelte unempfindlich und bedeckte ihren Teller mit guten Dingen, geduldig, zäh, hungrig und mager.

Both Tony and Klohtilde are mocked for their desires, and both women understand that they must occasionally let others' *Spott* wash over them. Neither woman allows mockery to influence her actions. Klohtilde continues to eat, and Tony continues to plot her family's social ascent.

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157 Ibid., 35.
Tony is hungry for social recognition, and Klothilde is literally hungry; but early on, the novel hints that neither woman's hunger will be sated. Towards the middle of the novel, the narrator describes Klothilde's eating as futile: "Es war unfaßlich, wie völlig erfolglos die arme Klothilde täglich so gute und reichliche Nahrung zu sich nahm. Sie wurde beständig magerer." In this way, Klothilde's comically thin figure presages Tony's thwarted social ambitions. Each of Tony's marriages (including her "third marriage," the marriage of her daughter) ends in disaster.

One important difference between Tony and Klothilde is how they are presented to the reader over the course of the novel. Klothilde is never a well fleshed-out character to begin with, so it is unsurprising that she continues to be summed up as "aschgrau und mager wie stets, mit gedehnten und freundlichen Worten" even in the last pages of the text. The reader is often meant to laugh at Klothilde but never made to feel contemptuous of her. The character of Tony, on the other hand, experiences something of a decline. Claus Tillmann and Linda Worley both agree that Tony moves from being a main character to more of a "Nebenfigur" towards the end of the novel, although they disagree about exactly how and why this change occurs. Tillmann notes that the narrator's tone towards Tony changes drastically: "an die Stelle der feinen Spöttelei zunehmend beißender Spott und kaum noch verhüllte Verachtung," and Worley points out that Tony retreats in importance after her relationship with Morten Schwarzkopf comes to an end, arguably because "after a woman has lived out the 'romance plot,' she is no longer in the center

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158 Ibid., 267.
159 Ibid., 834.
160 Tillmann, Das Frauenbild Bei Thomas Mann, 86.
161 Ibid., 85.
of male fictional interest." But ultimately Worley argues that the downgrade in Tony's status is not the result of any casual misogyny on Mann's part; rather Mann realizes what a potentially sympathetic—almost feminist—figure Tony is and intentionally "diminishes Tony, attempts to distance the reader from her and lessens reader identification with her, thereby preventing Buddenbrooks from being read as social agitation." 

I agree that as a well-rounded character, Tony peaks with her marriage to Grünlich. Although Tony perceives herself as being more important than ever after her first divorce (see my previous points about Würdegefühl), she no longer receives quite as much attention or bemused sympathy from the narrator, and after her short-lived second marriage she receives even less. But the events leading up to Tony's divorce from Grünlich provide what I agree are some of the most feminist moments in the novel, since they give the reader a glimpse of how few options are available to Tony as a woman—even as a wealthy bourgeois woman. And although the scenes in which Tony is courted by and married to Grünlich are humorous, she is not the primary target of the text's humor. Really the text is exposing the absurdity of the bourgeois institution of marriage and the highly gendered role that Tony is expected to perform within it.

The Grünlich episode of Buddenbrooks is unique in that it is one of the few plotlines (or arguably the only one) that presents Tony as a perceptive figure with good instincts. Unlike the "mushroom lady," Grünlich actually deserves the mockery and scorn Tony heaps on him. After meeting the young man for the first time, her judgment is emphatically negative: "Ich finde ihn

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163 Ibid.

164 Boa, "Buddenbrooks: Bourgeois Patriarchy and Fin-de-Siecle Eros," 132.
erlaubte sich Tony zu bemerken und zwar mit Nachdruck."\textsuperscript{165} Her parents, who do not know Grünlich any better than Tony but consider her no more than "ein großes Mädchen", tell her she is wrong.\textsuperscript{166} Her father, in a speech act that today might be called "gaslighting," goes so far as to tell Tony: "Du weißt nicht, was du sagst."\textsuperscript{167} But Tony proves that her judgment of Grünlich is based on more than just visceral dislike, and she can support it with evidence from their interaction:

"Ja, er macht sich allzu wichtig!" fing Tony wieder an. "Er sprach beständig von sich selbst! Sein Geschäft ist rege, er liebt die Natur, er bevorzugt die und die Namen, er heißt Bendix… Was geht uns das an, möchte ich wissen… Er sagt alles nur, um sich herauszustreichen!" rief sie plötzlich ganz wütend. "Er sagte dir, Mama, und dir, Papa, nur, was ihr gern hört, um sich bei euch einzuschmeicheln!\textsuperscript{168}

Even though everything Tony says here turns out to be correct, her diatribe nevertheless contains humor at her expense. To begin with, there is a hint of hypocrisy in Tony's first statement, since who is she to criticize someone else for an inflated sense of self-importance? And secondly, she gets a little carried away when she makes fun of Grünlich for daring to tell them his name. Ignoring her more sensible points, Tony's parents continue to interpret her increasingly passionate outbursts in response to Grünlich as childish, but where Grünlich is concerned, the novel is mostly sympathetic towards Tony, whose distress in response to Grünlich is never depicted as anything other than genuine. Grünlich is the figure who is "false" and who makes use of romantic tropes to this own nefarious ends.

\textsuperscript{165} Mann, \textit{Buddenbrooks: Verfall Einer Familie}, 107.

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 108.

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 107.

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 108.
Tony, although she is not quite sure why, smartly interprets Grünlich's proposal of marriage as an attack. But although she bursts into tears in most of them, the scenes in which Tony responds to Grünlich's exaggerated mating displays are played for laughs. For example, when Tony first learns of Grünlich's proposal of marriage, her first instinct is to cry: "Was will dieser Mensch von mir –! Was habe ich ihm getan –?!" Her reaction is both reasonable (Grünlich is a creepy stranger, and his proposal comes out of nowhere.) and incongruous (Young ladies are supposed to rejoice at receiving marriage proposals!), and the unexpected incongruity of her response is what makes it so funny. Much of the comedy in Tony's early scenes with Grünlich comes from the fact that Tony does not play along with the courtship rituals Grünlich performs for her, exposing them as absurd. As a result, she momentarily appears to be the only sane person in what the novel reveals to be an insane, albeit highly conventional situation: an 18-year-old being pressured to marry a stranger. Grünlich plays his part of the lovesick suitor with gusto, if not finesse, but Tony goes off script. When Grünlich surprises Tony at home and throws himself at her feet, her first response to him is again an expression of confusion and disbelief: "Was—fällt—Ihnen—ein!" When Tony continues to thwart his advances, Grünlich accuses her of insulting him, of destroying him, and finally asks: "Sie wollen mich nicht töten?" Tony is not a femme fatale; she has only encountered such figures and scenes in novels, so of course she reassures Grünlich that she does not want to kill him. It is, however, quite telling that Grünlich attempts to endow Tony with the motivations of a femme fatale. He is calling on the binary popular in the literature of his time that divides all young women into good girls (women

\[169\] Ibid., 112.

\[170\] Ibid., 117.

\[171\] Ibid., 121.
who love men) and femme fatales (women who want to kill men) and using it to manipulate Tony, whose resolve almost falters when she admiringly considers how much Grünlich has begun to resemble a character from a novel.

At first the humor that imbues this episode in the novel is lighthearted and fun, but it takes a dark turn when Tony's parents increase their pressure on their daughter to marry Grünlich. They work very hard to convince Tony that she is being childish and unreasonable in refusing Grünlich's offer of marriage, and Tony becomes so miserable that she loses her appetite and vigor. The narrator says, "Man mußte Mitleid mit ihr haben." And although there is an ironic touch to the narrator's description of how Tony has begun sighing in a "heartbreaking" manner, the reader does have sympathy with her because all textual evidence backs up her unfavorable opinion of Grünlich. For instance, when Tony is explaining to Morten Schwarzkopf why she cannot stand Grünlich, she describes how off-putting she finds his facial hair: "Unter anderem hatte er goldgelbe Favoris … völlig unnatürlich! Ich bin überzeugt, daß er sich mit dem Pulver frisierte, mit dem man die Weihnachtsnüsse vergoldet…" A few pages later, Morten is able to recognize Grünlich on sight based on Tony's description alone: "Morten starrte fassungslos in das rosige Gesicht des Herrn. Er hatte Bartkotelettes, die aussahen, als seien sie mit dem Pulver frisiert, mit dem man die Weihnachtsnüsse vergoldet." Tony's description of Grünlich, it turns out, is funny, offensive, and accurate.

Tony eventually accepts Grünlich's offer of marriage, perhaps losing some of the reader's sympathy in the process, but the novel's depiction of her as a young wife provides a humorous,
critical look at the nineteenth-century institution. The narrator shows that being a wife and a mother are not things that come naturally to Tony as a woman but rather roles that she consciously decides to play. She collects the costumes of a wife ("...sie schwärmte für Schlafröcke."\textsuperscript{175}) and adopts a posture befitting a lady in charge of a household:

Sie hielt sich überaus aufrecht, drückte das Kinn ein wenig auf die Brust und betrachtete die Dinge von oben herab. In der einen Hand den zierlichen lackierten Schlüsselkorb, die andere leichtthin in die Seitentasche ihres dunkelroten Schlafrockes geschoben, ließ sie sich ernsthaft von den langen, weichen Falten umspielen, während doch der naive und unwissende Ausdruck ihres Mundes verriet, daß diese ganze Würde etwas unendlich Kindliches, Harmloses und Spielerisches war.\textsuperscript{176}

The key word from this passage, which describes Tony's posing and props, is \textit{spielerisch}. Tony is playing at being a wife, and although she tries to appear serious ("ernsthaft"\textsuperscript{177}), there is something decidedly unserious about how affected her mannerisms are. Like an actress playing an obedient wife, she knows her cues, so when her father asks her if she loves her husband, she delivers the line expected of her: "'Gewiß, Papa', sagte Tony mit einem so kindisch heuchlerischen Gesicht, wie sie es ehemals zustande gebracht, wenn man sie gefragt hatte: Du wirst nun doch niemals wieder die Puppenliese ärgern, Tony?"\textsuperscript{178} Again, the narrator seems to be making fun of Tony and her childish transparency, but he is also making fun of all the forces that have put her in this ridiculous situation. Tony was right not to trust Grünlich's intentions; he is a con man who has played her whole family. It took one bad actor to recognize another.

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 215.

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 223.

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 230.

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., 232.
As I have already mentioned, the novel's depiction of Tony becomes less and less flattering as she ages. After Tony returns to the Buddenbrook family home as a divorcée, her speech is increasingly repetitive and absurd, and her dialogue is reduced to a select number of stock quotations. She insists that she is an old woman ("eine alte Frau"\(^{179}\)) who knows something about life ("Man hat doch immerhin das Leben kennengelernt..."\(^{180}\)) and is no longer a silly goose ("Man ist doch keine Gans mehr!"). The narrator's descriptions of Tony, however, subtly undermine her claims to maturity, and every time she delivers one of these lines, it is played for laughs at her expense. At one point the narrator writes of newly divorced Tony:

Im übrigen begann Tony um diese Zeit sich sehr oft der Redewendung "Wie es im Leben so geht ..." zu bedienen, und bei dem Worte "Leben" hatte sie einen hübschen und ernsten Augenaufschlag, welcher zu ahnen gab, welch tiefe Blicke sie in Menschenleben und -schicksal getan...\(^{181}\)

The obvious joke of this passage is that Tony is supposed to be a shallow woman who has never looked "deeply" at anything. The insinuation from the narrator is that Tony—despite being a mother and divorcée—has learned and experienced very little. Her theatrics are merely that.

Nevertheless, there remains something appealing about Tony, even when she is at her most ridiculous. She is reminiscent of Brecht's Mutter Courasche in that she ultimately comes across like a woman making the best of a bad situation. Her marriages are disasters, but she survives them and even has the gumption to end the second one—to Permaneder—herself. As Tony reminds Klothilde in the final pages of the novel, she has fought for her family ("Man müht

\(^{179}\) Ibid., 330.

\(^{180}\) Ibid., 262.

\(^{181}\) Ibid., 256.
sich und nimmt Anläufe und kämpft…"\(^{182}\)), even though she ends up with little to show for her efforts. There is something absurd, yes, but also strangely admirable about her unflagging family pride and ambition.

**Conclusion**

In examining the short stories "Gefallen," "Der kleine Herr Friedemann," and "Tristan" as well as the novel *Buddenbrooks*, this chapter demonstrates that the early fiction of Thomas Mann is full of mocking, disparaging humor targeting the characters who are least successful at obscuring the performative aspect of their gender performance. At the same time, it is often the humor in these texts that creates a space for and emphasizes their most emotionally honest moments—like the scene at the piano in *Tristan* and Irma Weltner's frustrated outburst about the financial burden of living as a "virtuous" woman. Both male and female characters in Mann's fiction are shown to suffer under society's highly gendered expectations of them, but their suffering is also mocked because those gendered expectations are so arbitrary in the first place. And in these early works, taking gender roles too seriously is fatal nearly as often as it is funny.

\(^{182}\) Ibid., 835.
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ROLEPLAY: SEX AND HUMOR IN FRANK WEDEKIND'S *FRÜHLINGS ERWACHEN*

At first glance Frank Wedekind appears to have little in common with his literary contemporaries Theodor Fontane and Thomas Mann. From a modern perspective the adultery in Theodor Fontane's novels seems almost quaint, whereas the sexual frankness of Wedekind's dramas, particularly *Frühlings Erwachen*, continues to scandalize audiences in the twenty-first century. Thomas Mann took great pains to uphold his reputation as a professional and an upstanding member of bourgeois society, whereas Wedekind embraced the seedy underbelly of the artistic world, an affiliation that famously caused a scandal involving numerous prostitutes at his funeral in 1918. But in spite of their personal and artistic differences, the writings of all three authors have at least two things in common. First, their works all reflect ambivalence towards the idea that gender and sexual identity are expressions of a natural order. Second, their writings use humor to poke fun at and criticize sexual and gender norms of the fin-de-siècle, ultimately depicting them as destructive cultural constructions.

In this chapter I will look at how gender is depicted as a constructed, performative act in Wedekind's works of drama and fiction, even in ways that were probably never intentional on the part of the author. To illustrate Wedekind's complicated attitude towards women, sex, and gender, I will perform a close reading of his novella *Mine-Haha oder Über die körperliche Erziehung der jungen Mädchen* (1903), and as an introduction to his views on humor, I will analyze his essay "Der Witz und seine Sippe" (1887). I will then perform a close reading of Wedekind's drama *Frühlings Erwachen* (1891) in order to analyze how various instances of humor function within their scenes as well as within the play in its entirety. Specifically, I will
look at the effect of these humorous moments on how the play represents the phenomenon of gender, arguing that the humor in Wedekind's dramas destabilizes gender roles by exposing them as social constructs. Finally, I will look at two modern adaptations of the popular play and examine how they do or do not incorporate humor into their productions.

*Mine-Haha oder Über die körperliche Erziehung der jungen Mädchen* (1903)

Although I argue that Wedekind's works often criticize the assumption that gender is something innate rather than performed, Wedekind, the turn-of-the-century man, had as little respect for the actual women's movements of the late nineteenth century as Mann and Fontane. Today Wedekind often appears in the popular imagination as a progressive, sex-positive figure, and indeed some of the reasons why Wedekind did not support the women's movements were probably related to sex. Most prominent first-wave feminist groups, especially those in German-speaking countries, took a negative view of sex work, and Wedekind was an enthusiastic fan of prostitutes on both a personal and philosophical level. As Elizabeth Boa notes in *The Sexual Circus: Wedekind's Theatre of Subversion*, Wedekind kept diaries about the women he paid for sex in which he "admired their spirit, their erotic skills and the magnificence of their dancing."1 The author's fixation on female sex workers, who make titillating appearances in most of his works, has led more than one critic to the conclusion that Wedekind's approval of prostitutes did not come from a very progressive place after all. Jennifer Ham writes: "Wedekind's interest was not in social or political equality for the sexes, but rather a freer expression of the erotic..."2

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2 Stephanie E. Libbon, "Frank Wedekind’s Prostitutes: A Liberating Re-Creation or Male Recreation?," in *Commodities of Desire: The Prostitute in Modern German Literature*, ed.
other words, Wedekind did not think women needed the right to vote, but he did support their right to have lots of interesting sex (preferably with him).

Despite Wedekind's political intentions (or lack thereof), his stories and plays scrutinize the social conventions regulating gendered and sexual behavior in ways that continue to fascinate readers and audiences over one hundred years later. Perhaps the most puzzling of Wedekind's depictions of the female sex appears in *Mine-Haha oder Über die körperliche Erziehung der jungen Mädchen*, a novella published in 1903 in which Wedekind casts himself, "the author of *Frühlings Erwachen,*" as the story's frame narrator. The story begins with Wedekind introducing the memoirs of a (highly fictional) elderly female neighbor who has given the young playwright access to her writings before flinging herself from the roof of their building. In the memoir fragment published by "Wedekind," the woman writes about her highly unusual upbringing inside a walled compound. At first the young girl, Hidalla, lives in a co-ed dormitory with many other children, all of whom are trained to "think with their hips" by an older girl, but at the age of seven, she is placed in a coffin-like box stamped with her first name and shipped to a household of seven girls between the ages of seven and fourteen. Hidalla spends the next seven years learning to dance and play musical instruments from girls only marginally older than she is. In her last year inside the compound, she becomes a nightly performer at its theater, but with the onset of puberty, she is released into the outside world, illiterate and ignorant of almost everything. From the frame narrative, the reader knows that Hidalla eventually grows up to become Helene Engel, a wife, mother, and teacher, but how she manages such a transition

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remains a mystery, as the interior narrative breaks off right after Hidalla first glimpses the city beyond the compound's walls.

Elizabeth Boa presents three possible readings of this novella: utopian, dystopian, and satiric. In the utopic reading, the girls are better off for their bizarre, body-focused upbringing because "a bodily culture of the senses is set against the mind as the source of illusion."³ Much of the support for a utopic reading comes from Wedekind's biography, as the author was a champion of Körperkultur and "believed in the body's own ability to instruct."⁴ Wedekind practiced gymnastics and had his children do the same, so it makes sense that his idealized literary children would also learn to walk on their hands. But for a utopic reading to make sense, the girls' illiteracy must be interpreted as a rejection of pernicious cultural influences and a return to animality and nature,⁵ and since the girls are being educated exclusively to become costume-wearing stage actors, this is a difficult argument to make.

Boa sees many more dystopian elements in Hidalla's story, which "evokes a nightmare world of rigid control enforced not by an identifiable enemy-class of teachers or patriarchs who can be opposed or laughed at, but by the children themselves."⁶ Although Helene, the adult narrator, never explicitly condemns the way she was raised, neither does she present it in a particularly appealing light. As a little girl she is ripped away from her best friends and literally transported in a box like a commercial product to a house full of strangers. The only adults with

³ Boa, The Sexual Circus, 191.


⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Boa, The Sexual Circus, 192.
whom she interacts, the two women who maintain the household, are silent figures of terrifying ugliness, and Hidalla learns that they are forced to work as slaves for the compound forever because as children they broke its (obviously unwritten) rules: one slept in the same bed as another girl, and the other attempted to run away. Boa argues that in spite of the girls' exclusively female teachers and overseers, "the monstrous ugliness of lesbian and individual love reveals the secret locus of desire as adult, male and heterosexual." For these same dystopian reasons, *Mine-Haha* can also be read "as a grotesque satire of the way in which girls are actually brought up"—as ignorant creatures valued only for their bodily appeal. The satire argument is difficult to make because the most widely-accepted theories of satire define the satiric work as one that is intentionally critical. Satirists employ mockery, exaggeration, mimicry, and sometimes humor specifically because they want their readers and audiences to think critically about what they depict. Unfortunately, Wedekind left behind no record of why he wrote such a weird novella. Parody, on the other hand, is not always intended to be critical—often it is merely meant to be funny or unsettling—but parody can nevertheless prompt criticism of whatever is being parodied. And *Mine-Haha* provides numerous examples of parody.

According to Judith Butler, gender is a parody of a thing for which no original exists, and in *Mine-Haha*, the girls of the compound learn to parody the behavior of grown men and women even though they rarely come in contact with adults. Their entire lives are devoted to practicing very specific ways of producing movement and sound, a couple of which are simply bizarre. Most notoriously, each girl must learn to walk on her hands even as her skirts fall over and cover her face: "Von ersten Tag an hatte man mich hergenommen und auf den Händen gehen lassen."

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7 Ibid., 193.

8 Ibid., 194.
Zwei der Mädchen hielten mir dabei die Beine hinauf. Das Haar hing mir auf den Fußboden, das Kleid fiel mir vom Gürtel her in den Nacken. There is clearly nothing innate about this type of movement for Hidalla. In the beginning she requires assistance from the other girls to keep her legs in the air, and her hair—still in its girlish braids—drags on the floor. In this way, "walking on one's hands" becomes a metaphor for gendered behavior. Some of the girls eventually become so skilled at walking on their hands that the movement begins to seem natural, but it is still a technique that they have to learn and practice. It is unlikely many of these girls would have learned to walk on their hands if older girls had not demonstrated and encouraged the behavior. For as the novella's alternate title, "On the Bodily Education of Young Girls" makes clear, there is nothing natural about how Hidalla and her peers transition from children to women. Even their bodies have to be educated.

Walking on one's hands is not a typical habit of adult women in the Western world, so it remains more of a metaphor for gender performativity than an example of it. But Hidalla and her cohort learn this type of movement so that at age twelve or thirteen they can begin dancing in literal theater performances. Like everything else on the compound, the theater is shrouded in mystery. The older girls who perform in the theater every night occasionally come home to their houses and tell the younger girls about their experiences, but the younger girls are never allowed to watch any of the shows. In fact, they are never allowed inside the theater until the very first time they perform on stage. Hidalla describes needing to be led by the hand through the pitch-black dark on her first night at the theater, being told she will play a young farmer woman, and

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then being "left to her fate."\textsuperscript{10} Rehearsals do not exist on the compound, so Hidalla is expected to learn everything through imitation: "…ich solle nur achtgeben, was die übrigen Bäuerinnen tun, und alles genau nachmachen."\textsuperscript{11} Words like \textit{nachmachen} and \textit{nachahmen} crop up frequently in \textit{Mine-Haha}, as creativity is not so highly prized as pure imitation.

The first show Hidalla learns to dance through imitation is "Der Mückenprinz," which contains a number of adult themes. In one of the early scenes, a human prince pierces the abdomen of a female mosquito with an "arm's-length needle," pinning her to a tree and letting her die slowly before the eyes of her lover, the titular \textit{Mückenprinz}.\textsuperscript{12} Later, \textit{die Mücke} takes revenge through an attack on the wife of the human prince:

\begin{quote}
Nun summte sie auf der Bühne umher und wartete, bis die beiden eingeschlafen waren. Dann schwebte sie leise zum Bett, kniete über der Hofdame nieder und bohrte ihren Stachel durch die seidene Decke. Die Hofdame fuhr mit einem Schrei empor, und die Mücke entfloh. Der Prinz, der darüber erwacht war, wollte seiner Liebe noch einen Kuß geben, stieß aber auf Widerstand. Er zog sie zum Bett heraus, und da zeigte es sich, daß sie einen geschwollenen Bauch hatte.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Helene, the narrator of the text's \textit{Binnenerzählung} does not comment much on these childhood experiences, but an adult reader of \textit{Mine-Haha} can obviously infer that these scenes are meant to depict women being raped. The first rape is purely malicious, and the next is an act of righteous vengeance that results in something resembling a pregnancy. The final rape victim of the \textit{Mückenprinz}, however, is not the \textit{Bäuerin} the human prince partially undresses and places in his bed, but rather the prince himself. The prince wakes up and finds "seinen Bauch unter dem

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 35–6.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 41.
Spitzenhemd ebenso dick geschwollen wie vorher den der Hofdame.\textsuperscript{14} This unexpected turn of events delights the slighted wife, who joyfully claps her hands. Rape, pregnancy, and murder are common narrative tropes, but these particular rapes are being acted out by illiterate pre-pubescent girls who have little knowledge of the world outside their compound. Even more disturbingly, "Der Mückenprinz" proves hugely popular and is performed by Hidalla and her peers at least two hundred times.

Over and over again, the girls of the compound are asked to perform adult behaviors with which they have no personal experience for the enjoyment of a largely invisible, adult male audience. While Hidalla is waiting for her turn onstage during her first performance of "Der Mückenprinz," she hears "[z]wei tiefe, rauhe Stimmen." They are the first male voices she has ever heard in her life, and they are engaged in criticism of her girlish calves. Helene, the adult narrator, says she can still hear these critical, male voices ringing in her ears.\textsuperscript{15} At times like these, \textit{Mine-Haha} seems surprisingly insightful about what it is like to be a young woman and to be constantly under the scrutiny of myriad nameless, faceless men. Male influence on female life is so powerful that it stretches even inside the walls of an all-girl compound.

\textit{Mine-Haha} is nevertheless the perfect example of how \textit{ambiguously} sex and gender is treated in Wedekind's works. Rather than seeming like a scathing criticism of society's treatment of young girls, the novella often comes across like the result of a voyeuristic adult man putting his fantasies about girlhood on paper.\textsuperscript{16} In particular, the scenes that take place in the house and

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{16} Boa, \textit{The Sexual Circus}, 195. On the character Helene Engel: "...the conscious adult is necessary as a stand-in for the narrator, concealing the author-voyeur and the truth that her childhood is just a masculine fantasy."
concern the girls' relationships with one another do not reflect much familiarity with the inner lives of girls. In one of most appalling passages for a modern woman reader, Helene writes that all of the girls in the compound are more or less the same person mentally:


The visual presented here of several girls sitting around a table, taking in food in voluntary silence, is a jarring one for anyone who has spent about five minutes around actual human children. What is this tableau supposed to mean? True, there is something lovely about the idea of a group of girls knowing each other so well they can predict one another's words and thoughts, but that is not quite the case in "the park." The girls of the compound can predict one another's conversation because they all think and even feel the exact same things. Their sense of self is expressed as a sort of collective consciousness ("unser Selbst"), and it resides in their legs and their feet, not in their minds. Their only enduring individual traits are their gaits. Helene states that her child-self was happy, that she grew fat and strong, but there is little joy in the descriptions of her childhood. "Wir waren glücklich, eine wie die andere," she says before cryptically continuing, "aber das war auch alles."18 Is this situation, in which girls without education or families become nothing but bodies in motion, meant to be ideal or horrific, likely or absurd? The novella tends to leave these kinds of decisions up to the reader.

18 Ibid.
Mine-Haha is representative of Wedekind's oeuvre in that it raises questions about sex and gender but never answers them conclusively. The novella is atypical, however, in the seriousness of its tone. Mine-Haha is not a funny read, and to gain insight into Wedekind's thoughts on humor, I will turn to his own writings on the subject.

"Der Witz und seine Sippe" (1887)

Wedekind wrote the essay "Der Witz und seine Sippe" in 1887, only four years before the publication of Frühlings Erwachen. Even as a young man, humor was more than just a literary technique for Wedekind; it was also a way of thinking and living. At one point in the essay Wedekind floridly refers to Humor as "ein trostreicher, leitender Stern durch die Nacht des Lebens."19 Scholars have criticized "Der Witz und seine Sippe" for its unoriginal ideas, and rightfully so, but the essay nevertheless provides a valuable lens through which to view the humor of Wedekind's later literary works.20

Like so many theorizers of humor before and after him, Wedekind spends most of "Der Witz und seine Sippe" attempting to define and draw distinctions between various forms of humor. He begins by praising der Witz (the joke), which he compares to such culinary delicacies as "Mixpickles oder Kaviar"—tasty, but lacking in nutritional value.21 Jokes are the "spice of

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21 Wedekind, "Der Witz Und Seine Sippe," 139.
conversation," and even "bad jokes" can be entertaining in their sheer stupidity. According to Wedekind, "[e]in Witz entsteht im allgemeinen dadurch, daß zwei Begriffe, die durchaus unvereinbar schienen, plötzlich aufeinander platzten und nun doch diese oder jene Beziehung zueinander zeigen." This idea that a joke can expose a previously unnoticed relationship and bring about a mild revelation on the part of the listener shows that Wedekind sees the critical potential in even small types of humor. For although he professes to find jokes eminently rare and therefore valuable, Wedekind differentiates between the joke, which always exists on a small scale, and humor, which endows humans with god-like powers of observation:

Wedekind views humor, with its ability to bestow sublime objectivity upon its practitioners, to be more meaningful and lasting than the humble joke. It is also more widely applicable to the themes of human life because from an Olympian distance, everything—arguably even gender—appears fleeting and insubstantial:

Die Wirkung des Witzes erstrekt sich nie über den einzelnen Fall hinaus; dem Humor dagegen ist der einzelne Fall nur Mittel zum Zweck. Er greift ihn heraus, um an ihm Moral zu predigen, freilich stets die nämliche Moral, die alte salmonische Weisheit: Alles ist eitel.

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22 Ibid., 140.
23 Ibid., 142.
24 Ibid., 143.
But humor is not easy; it requires a certain amount of life experience and talent for critical thinking, the sort which children and—according to Wedekind—most women lack. Allegedly women are too emotional for the coolly objective humor Wedekind espouses, and particularly women "in bloom" lack the necessary talent for abstract thinking.\textsuperscript{25} (Leave it to Wedekind to equate a woman's mental abilities with her sexual availability.)

The fact that Wedekind, a man of the fin de siècle, believes humor is gendered is not surprising, but some of the reasons he comes up with for these gender distinctions are not as hideously sexist as one might suspect. Women simply do not spend as much time "on school benches" as men and therefore lack the formal education that makes Wedekind's higher brand of humor accessible.\textsuperscript{26} Wedekind argues that the life experiences of women instead make them much more suited to coming up with rapid-fire Witze in conversation. Whereas men tend to hide behind euphemisms, no-nonsense women (perhaps because they lack the subtlety a good education provides) are much more likely to "hit the nail on the head" and "call the child by its true name."\textsuperscript{27} Moreover Wedekind admires (albeit condescendingly) the skill with which women turn jokes into "weapons" that both attack and disarm the men at which they are aimed.\textsuperscript{28} The obvious implication here is that women become proficient at using jokes as weapons because, unlike men, they are not permitted to wield real weapons. These "witty" women are guided not by intellect but rather by gut instinct and necessity, and it is unclear whether Wedekind attributes this gendered state of affairs more to nature or nurture.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 145.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 146.
The last type of humor Wedekind attempts to define is also the one he values the least: *Frivolität*. He defines frivolity as the intentional measuring of "das Erhabene, das Heilige … mit dem Unwürdigen, dem Schimpflichen" and ascribes its existence to the nefarious human impulse to drag the sublime through the dirt.²⁹ Frivolity, which brings together two seemingly disparate things, is just another type of *Humor* according to Wedekind's own definition, so his attitude towards frivolity seems a tad hysterical. He insists that frivolity is "ein schleichendes Gift, ein todbringendes Miasma" and that frivolous people, so skilled at hiding their bad intentions, are some of the most destructive in society.³⁰ *Frivolität* also gives rise to *Galgenhumor* (gallows humor), which only succeeds in stripping all seriousness from a given situation without producing the sublime results of true humor.³¹

Wedekind's take on gallows humor might surprise anyone familiar with the dark humor of his plays. *Frühlings Erwachen*, after all, features a teenager who has just committed suicide moping about a graveyard with his head under his arm. But for Wedekind, humor must have a very specific outcome in order to be successful. It cannot just be dark; it must also be "positive" and "comforting."³² In the essay passage most cited by literary critics, Wedekind asserts that true *Humor* should evoke a complex emotional response:

> Der Mund möchte lachen, das Auge weinen; da aber jedes das andere an der Ausführung seines Vorhabens hindert, so gelangen die Lippen nur zu einem leisen Lächeln, während sich die inneren Enden der Augenbrauen fast unmerklich in die Höhe ziehen. Dadurch

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²⁹ Ibid., 147.

³⁰ For whatever reason, Wedekind thinks women are better at seeing through the frivolous person’s "mask" to the demon beneath.

³¹ Wedekind, "Der Witz Und Seine Sippe," 148.

³² Ibid., 149.
Whereas a reiner Witz results in the kind of choking, full-bodied laughter that brings a person to tears and a frivoler Witz provokes scornful laughter, Humor leads to warring emotions and a small smile. Critics have made much of this passage because it provides them with a starting point for reading dramas like Frühlings Erwachen and the Lulu cycle, plays that resist clear categorization even when the term -tragödie appears in their subtitles. Wedekind's essay on Humor suggests that a combination of laughing and crying, comedy and tragedy has always been his aim and that by bending literary genres he is actively seeking to elevate them.

Frühlings Erwachen

Arguably the humorous drama for which Wedekind is best known to modern audiences, Frühlings Erwachen: eine Kindertragödie, was first published in 1891. The play, which covers such topics as masturbation, homosexual love, rape, teenage pregnancy, abortion, and suicide, was not performed until 1906 and then only as an edited version that omitted some of its more scandalous content. If the play's themes explain why it was censored for so many years, perhaps they also explain part of its enduring popularity. Teenage angst has not gone out of style.

Wedekind labeled his drama "eine Kindertragödie," but several critics have interpreted this decision as ironic. In the introduction to his 2007 English translation of Frühlings Erwachen, Jonathan Franzen comments on the subtitle's "comic ring" and argues that it conjures up the image of "tragedy…stooping to get through the door of a playhouse." He further asserts that

33 Ibid.

"the conventional attributes of a tragic figure—power, importance, self-destructive hubris, a capacity for mature self-reckoning—are by definition beyond the reach of children." According to Franzen the play is still a celebrated literary text not because it panders to adolescents but rather because its author "makes fun of teenagers—flat-out laughs at them—to the same degree he takes them seriously." 

Considering the attention they must pay to every nuance in the text, it is unsurprising that the text's translators have undertaken some of the most in-depth analyses of the humor in *Frühlings Erwachen*. For example, in the introduction to his 1995 translation, Eric Bentley writes, "In 1891, [Wedekind] had subtitled his play a TRAGEDY of childhood. In 1911, he asks us to take it as a COMEDY. Thus, putting two and two together, we can correctly conclude that what we have here is a tragi-comedy." Bentley's approach is perhaps overly literal, but he makes a good point in that it is just as ludicrous to disregard the play's tragic elements as it is to overlook its inherent comedy. Bentley is also critical of interpretations that see "the play as simply social-revolutionary." Such readings often invoke Wedekind's own words about *Frühlings Erwachen*. In a letter dated December 5, 1891 and addressed to an unknown critic ("Sehr geehrter Herr!"), Wedekind writes of the play "in der ich die Erscheinungen der Pubertät bei der heranwachsenden Jugend poetisch zu gestalten suchte, um denselben wenn möglich bei

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., xi.


38 Ibid., xxxv.
Erziehern, Eltern und Lehrern zu einer humaneren rationellern Beurteilung zu verhelfen.\footnote{Frank Wedekind, "An Einen Kritiker, Zürich, 5. XII. 1891," in Frank Wedekind Prosa: Erzählungen, Aufsätze, Selbstzeugnisse, Briefe, ed. Manfred Hahn, vol. 3, Frank Wedekind: Werke in Drei Bänden (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1969), 452.} What Bentley so astutely points out is that some of the tragedy that occurs in Frühlings Erwachen is not due solely to the inadequacies of its featured parents and educators. Moritz Stiefel, for instance, commits suicide after learning he has failed out of school, "but none of the other boys respond as negatively as Moritz, though they all experience the same pressures."\footnote{Bentley, "Ten Notes," xxv.} Bentley therefore argues that Moritz' real tragedy occurs long before his actual academic failure; it comes from the "sense of doom," the \textit{thanatos} the schoolboy carries within him from the very beginning.\footnote{Ibid., xxiv.}

The tragic deaths in \textit{Frühlings Erwachen} may seem "inevitable," but they are also totally preventable. According to J.J. Hibberd, the play uses humor in order to underscore this very point. He argues that the comedic touches in \textit{Frühlings Erwachen} are not meant to diminish the seriousness of the social problems the text presents, "rather they underline the point that the suffering depicted is unnecessary."\footnote{Hibberd, "Imaginary Numbers and ‘Humor,’” 643.} Invoking Wedekind's definition of \textit{Humor} in "Der Witz und seine Sippe" as something lofty and critical, Hibberd concludes that the humor in \textit{Frühlings Erwachen} is intentionally alienating, almost Brechtian. It prevents the audience from becoming so caught up in the play's myriad tragedies that they forget to consider those tragedies' social causes.\footnote{Ibid.} Furthermore, Hibberd sees the Masked Man (\textit{der vermummte Herr}), who appears at

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40 Bentley, "Ten Notes," xxv.

41 Ibid., xxiv.

42 Hibberd, "Imaginary Numbers and ‘Humor,’” 643.

43 Ibid.
the end of the play like a *deus ex machina* to rescue the play's only surviving main character, Melchior, as the personification of Wedekind's *Humor*.

I agree that much of the humor in *Frühlings Erwachen* provokes critical thinking, but Hibberd's take on the play's ending is too clean and too simple. To see the Masked Man as a shining figure of hope and Melchior (a rapist) as a figure worthy of such a figure's tutelage is to ignore the play's incredible ambiguity. The ghost of Moritz, who spends his days observing and laughing at the living, fails to tempt his friend Melchior into death, but his argument—that laughing at the world is preferable to suffering in it—is not totally specious. Every tragedy in *Frühlings Erwachen* comes about as a result of one character or another, child or adult, taking life much too seriously. By Wedekind's own definition, a child is not truly capable of *Humor*, and in his play, neither are the doltish grown-ups. As a result, they wreak death and destruction on themselves and one another. Moreover, the humorous moments in *Frühlings Erwachen* are often less about alienation and more about destabilization. They reveal the silliness of social institutions and poke fun at the roles young men and women are expected to learn to play. But sometimes the play's humor succeeds in making its characters endearing even as their social roles are revealed as ridiculous.

The scene that makes the best starting point for an analysis of humor in *Frühlings Erwachen* comes at the beginning of Act III, when the teachers of Moritz and Melchior's school gather to decide what to do about the "Selbstmord-Epidemie" which they fear will engulf their institution as a result of Moritz' recent suicide. It is a suitable starting point exactly because its funniness is so blatant and so immediate. The stage directions introduce the faculty as Affenschmalz, Knüppeldick, Hungergurt, Knochenbruch, Zungenschlag, Fliegentod,
Sonnenstich, and Habe bald. These names declare their owners to be caricatured buffoons, which the audience quickly realizes they are, but the ridiculous monikers do something else as well—they begin to point to the absurdity of Moritz' actions. These are the men whom Moritz allowed to dictate his fate? These are the men whose decisions contributed to Moritz' spectacular and grisly death? Due to the teachers' involvement in it, Moritz' suicide starts to look just as ridiculous as their names.

The rector Sonnenstich opens the scene with a monologue, whose serious subject matter (the expulsion of Melchior, the prevention of future suicides) is made to seem significantly less so by its laborious, convoluted wording. As Franzen points out, the phrase "den Gymnasiasten an seine durch seine Heranbildung zum Gebildeten gebildeten Existenzbedingunge zu fesseln" is linguistically funny in a way that makes it nearly untranslatable but which effectively sets up Sonnenstich as a gasbag. He seems to be attempting to establish his authority through show rather than substance, and his projection of himself as a serious person of importance is shattered when one of the teachers responds to his request for comments with the statement: "Ich kann mich nicht länger der Überzeugung verschließen, dass es endlich an der Zeit wäre, irgendwo ein Fenster zu öffnen."

This single sentence packs an intense ironic punch, as the formality of its language allows the audience to think, just for a second, that Knüppeldick is composing a sensible response to Sonnenstich's tirade. But in actuality, he is merely making the banal request that someone open a window and has probably completed ignored the highfalutin words of his superior. The next thirty-three lines of the scene continue the joke as the other professors join in

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44 Franzen, "Authentic but Horrible," xvi.

with their own remarks on the subject of the window. Professor Zungenschlag lives up to his name by stuttering through a simile that compares the room temperature to that "wie in unterirdischen Kata-Katakomben, wie in den A-Akteksälen des weiland Wetzlarer Ka-Ka-Ka-Kammergerichtes;"\(^{46}\) Professor Fliegentod addresses a stilted, thirty-one-word request to his "Herrn Kollegen" asking that they not open the window directly behind him; and Professor Hungergurt fools the audience into believing he is about to get things back on track ("Ohne die Kontroverse meinerseits belasten zu wollen, möchte ich an die Tatsache erinnern…") only to end his lengthy statement by reminding the teachers that the other window has already been sealed up. Meanwhile, the rector tries to throw his weight around after each off-topic comment by ordering about Habebald, who in turn obsequiously and unfailingly responds: "Befehlen, Herr Rektor!" The rector eventually resorts to a vote to decide the fate of the window but does nothing similar for Melchior, whom Sonnenstich refers to only as "der schuldbeladene Schüler" in a second speech, following which the teachers go right back to quarreling about the state of the room's windows. Their language retains its exaggerated formality even when things turn nasty and Fliegentold suggests that Zungenschlag have a Drainage installed in his Stirnhöhle.\(^{47}\) These men are walking, talking jokes. Their language is grandiose but lacking in content. Their titles are lofty but their concerns are petty. As teachers, they claim to know what is best for their students; they claim the right to pass judgment on their students, but they themselves are easily distracted and bicker like children. Ignorant, oblivious souls trapped in the bodies and speech patterns of adult educators, they are human examples of Wedekind's Witz, laughable combinations of supposedly disparate elements.

\(^{46}\) Ibid.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 299.
The comedy act continues after Melchior enters the room, and Sonnenstich furiously describes the document of which he is the suspected author as "eine in Gesprächsform abgefasste, 'der Beischlaf' betitelte, mit lebensgroßen Abbildungen versehene, von den schamlosesten Unfälserein strotzende, zwanzig Seiten lange Abhandlung." Almost everything about this description is hilarious—first, that Melchior chose to frame his explanation of sex as a dialogue and gave it the rather technical title, "der Beischlaf," second, that it contained life-size illustrations (of what exactly? genitals? reproductive organs?), and third, that a boy who learned about sexual intercourse from late-nineteenth-century books and illustrations and his own "Beobachtungen in der Natur" managed to write a twenty-page treatise on the subject. Sonnenstich, of course, is oblivious to the humorous side of the situation and agrees with Moritz' father that such a document must have been in some way responsible for the young man's untimely death. This idea is itself ludicrous, especially since the audience knows that the promise of sex, as represented by the ready and willing Ilse on the eve of his suicide, was the only thing that almost succeeded in keeping Moritz tethered to the mortal plane.

If all Wedekind had intended with this scene—or with the play as a whole—was to point out the failings in his era's sexual education policies and to depict all adults as heartless and draconian, much of the humor in this scene would have been entirely unnecessary. The adults here come off far more clueless than heartless: "[t]heir crime is being grown-up and stuffy and unimaginative; they're insecure buffoons, not morally culpable killers." More monstrous figures would certainly have stirred up more sympathy in the audience for Melchior and his

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48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 266.
generation, so why does Frühlings Erwachen produce clowns instead? And why poke fun at Melchior's adolescent scrawlings? The answer to these questions goes back to the play's overarching message about humor. The teachers are flawed not just for obvious reasons (for making Melchior into a scapegoat for Moritz' death, for holding antiquated ideas about sex and adolescence) but also because they fail to see Melchior's sex document for what Sonnenstich's words reveal it to be—incredibly funny. These men have played the roles of bourgeois authority figures for so long that they are no longer able to recognize absurdity in themselves or in anyone else.

Taking sexuality too seriously is a recurring theme in Frühlings Erwachen, and the characters involved in the making, reading, and condemning of "der Beischlaf" are not the only ones who get caught up in it. The text uses Hänschen Rilow, a character who for the most part embraces his sexuality, to demonstrate the inherent silliness of sex, especially of the adolescent variety. In one of the play's most memorable scenes, Hänschen delivers a soliloquy directed at a postcard of the Venus of Palmo Vecchio which he has been utilizing as a masturbation aid. His first actions after he enters the stage seem ominous. Carrying a light and appearing alone, he bars the lavatory door, withdraws the postcard from its hiding place, and quotes Shakespeare: "Hast du zu Nacht gebeten, Desdemona?"\(^5\) The quote, of course, is from Othello and is spoken by the titular character just before he murders his wife. The difference here is that Hänschen is not committing an actual murder—of a wife or any other living woman; he is merely planning on disposing of his piece of pornography before his attachment to it gets out of hand. His soliloquy goes on for several pages, revealing that this act of destruction is not Hänschen's first incident of "domestic violence." He has disposed of several postcards—most of which also depicted

classical female figures—in the same manner and has come to view himself as a figure akin to Bluebeard, the prolific wife-murderer of fairy tales. Shortly before ridding himself of the latest image, Hänschen berates the Venus for her frustrating immobility, which he interprets as cruelly teasing chastity.

For a second, this weird and funny scene almost seems out of place in Frühlings Erwachen. What is it doing in a play that is ostensibly about a fatally botched abortion, teenage suicide, and a remorseful rapist? Adrian Del Caro makes the common argument that "Wedekind depicts children in a normal or natural sense, while he intensifies the ludricous [sic] aspects of adulthood." But while Hänschen's masturbation habits may be normal and natural, his theatrics in this scene are just as ludicrous as the names Knüppeldick and Fliegentod. He is not spared the mockery the play heaps on its other characters. The main difference between Hänschen and most of the figures in Frühlings Erwachen is that Hänschen seems to be in on the joke. Much more so than the other characters, he is aware that living in society means following a script, and often that script is ridiculous. Hänschen's circumstances have cast him in the role of schoolboy, but he casts himself as Othello, an act that both honors and defiles his bourgeois education.

This scene, despite the solitary nature of the sex act it references, can also be read as a parody of sexual relations between men and women. Much like the author of "der Beischlaf," fourteen-year-old Hänschen has little to no experience with actual women and must use the artistic and literary resources available to him to imagine how men and women interact. His fantasies are reflections of his culture, and what they reflect is not flattering. Hänschen, discomforted by the intensity of his sexual urges, takes out his distress on his "wives." The

women are nothing but art postcards, but this fact does not prevent Hänschen from cursing their attractiveness, accusing them of frigidity, and making them complicit in their own "deaths." At the same time, the entire scene is played for laughs, and the audience is never meant to side with the wife-murderer but to laugh at him. Without resorting to heavy-handed moralizing, the scene dismantles ideas about the sexual threat of women as old as the story of Eve. After all, a man blaming a real woman for provoking his sexual aggression is just as absurd as a boy blaming an art postcard for his masturbatory urges.

Later, when the rest of the play's characters are struggling with death and loss and incarceration, Hänschen enjoys a second sexually-charged interlude, this time with his male friend Ernst. Again there is a sense that both boys are consciously play-acting, modeling their tryst on what they have learned about adult heterosexual romance. They walk through a mountainous vineyard at sunset, dreaming aloud about the future while church bells chime. Ernst plays the "female" role of the more hesitant, more emotional lover. After Hänschen kisses him, he claims he set out from home intent on doing nothing more than talking to his friend and turning back, but once Hänschen initiates sexual contact, he is quick to profess his feelings for the other boy: "Ich liebe dich, Hänschen, wie ich nie eine Seele geliebt habe…” Hänschen, although he initiates the kiss with Ernst, is the more standoffish, stereotypically "male" partner. He does not speak as much in Ernst and tells his friend, "Lass uns nicht traurig sein! –Wenn wir in dreißig Jahren zurückdenken, spotten wir vielleicht! –Und jetzt ist alles so schön!" (73) Although Hänschen's second sexual episode is not as overtly funny as his first, it still succeeds as

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53 Hibberd, "Imaginary Numbers and ‘Humor,’” 640.
54 Wedekind, "Frühlings Erwachen,” 315.
"a parody of an idyllic love-scene." The fact that both adult roles in this parody, man and woman, are convincingly played by adolescent boys undermines the gender distinctions of the original. In "Der Witz und seine Sippe," Wedekind argues that women "in der Blütezeit" struggle to master Humor because they lack the ability to view the world from a distance, but here it is the schoolboy Ernst who does not understand why his friend Hänschen is laughing; here it is Ernst who one minute dreams of a future as a pastor and paterfamilias and tearfully clings to his boyfriend the next. The boys' romantic urges may be natural, but there is nothing natural about how they choose to express them, just as there is nothing that makes women more inherently emotional than men.

The scene between Ilse and Moritz, a girl and a boy, also supports the argument that life is a series of roles to be played, and it is better to laugh at them than take them too seriously. Ilse is a character who thrives on good humor in spite of her seemingly miserable circumstances. She is a former playmate of Wendla, Melchior, and Moritz who, rather than continue with school, has embraced the scandalous life of an artist's model, a career that requires her to consciously take on whatever roles the male artists ask of her. She "wears a myriad of costumes and strikes endless poses," and she is accustomed to catering to men's needs. Therefore it is no surprise that she responds sympathetically but also breezily to Moritz when she finds him in the woods on the verge of committing suicide. Startling Moritz with a touch on the shoulder, Ilse asks him if he has lost something. He responds meaningfully, "Ich weiß nicht, was ich verloren habe." But Ilse, either out of ignorance or on purpose, takes his statement literally and responds with the

55 Hibberd, "Imaginary Numbers and ‘Humor,’" 640.
57 Wedekind, "Frühlings Erwachen," 292.
practical piece of advice: "Dann hilft auch dein Suchen nichts." Her flippant attitude provokes loud exclamations from Moritz ("Sakerment! Sakerment!"), which she ignores.

Ilse proceeds to tell Moritz about her experiences working with various artists and describes some of the figures she has been asked to portray—*eine Säulenheilige*, the virgin Mary, etc. The contrast between these dignified personages and her own person does not seem to bother Ilse, and she is equally irreverent when she talks about the artists who paint her, calling a couple of them "*eine verhauene Nudel*" and "*ein Tropf,*" 58 and making unflattering comparisons to ignoble members of the animal kingdom. 59 She also describes a few wild incidents with the artists. In one, she and the "*verhauene Nudel*" get into a violent brawl that ends in a "schrecklich" bout of kissing. In another, a man named Adolar drinks from an ashtray, and Ilse gets so drunk the artists have to put her to bed. The most disturbing story involves an artist who takes Ilse home after she goes on a three-day *Karneval* bender and passes out in a snowy street. The man literally stumbles upon Ilse and then keeps her as his prisoner for fourteen days, forcing her to dress up and pose for him and making daily threats to kill the both of them. Much like Helene Engel recounting her bizarre childhood in *Mine-Haha*, at no point does Ilse reflect deeply on any of these incidents. She simply describes them to Moritz and gaily goes on with her life. She has dealt with far worse than Moritz and his failing grades, but preferring jokes to lamentations, she does not take her problems very seriously and instead counts her blessings for being able to hang out with artists she values more highly than "*Erzengel und Millionäre.*" 60 To a modern reader, Ilse's lack of trauma can seem disturbing, her nonchalance almost pathological, but the play

58 Ibid., 293.
59 Ibid., 295.
60 Ibid.
presents her as a potential savior for Moritz. She offers him animal delights ("kuhwarme Ziegenmilch") and animal treatment ("Ich will dir Locken brennen und dir ein Glöcklein um den Hals hängen."), which would give Moritz an escape from the cerebral human anguish he suffers. All Moritz needs to do, Ilse suggests, is emulate her simple, bodily silliness.

Unfortunately, the only part of Ilse's story Moritz fixates on is her description of the loaded gun with which her kidnapper threatens to shoot himself. "Lebt dieser Heinrich noch?" Moritz asks Ilse repeatedly, less concerned with her well-being than that of the psychopath who abused her. Her responses ("Was weiß ich!" and "So Gott will, nicht!") show Ilse, despite her whimsicality, to be the more sane person in the conversation. Once she leaves, Moritz begins a bizarre rant that turns the weirdest elements from Ilse's stories into a sexual fantasy involving a mirror, a filly, black stockings, and a murder by pillow straight out of Othello. He then shouts: "Aufschrein! – Aufschreien! – Du sein, Ilse! – Priapia! – Besinnungslosigkeit! – Das nimmt die Kraft mir! – Dieses Glückkind, dieses Sonnenkind – dieses Freudenmädchen auf meinem Jammerweg – Oh! – Oh"! In his darkest hour, Moritz recognizes that he would be better off if he were more like Ilse, a child of fortune and sunshine but also admittedly a "joy girl," a prostitute. But the sun sets and Moritz determines, "Jetzt gehe ich nicht mehr nach Hause."

From start to finish, Moritz's suicide contains too many elements of the ridiculous to appear truly tragic or unavoidable. Even before Ilse waltzes onstage to rhapsodize about the joys and perils of the bohemian lifestyle, Moritz has already taken the edge off the scene by childishy wishing for a particular gravestone ("eine schneeweiße Marmorurne auf schwarzen

61 Ibid., 294.
62 Ibid., 295.
63 Franzen, "Authentic but Horrible," xvii.
Syenitsockel") and imagining that he will think of whipped cream when the time comes to pull the trigger because "sie stopft und hinterlässt dabei doch einen angenehmen Nachgeschmack". Whipped cream and death! The grotesque comedy of this combination goes completely unrecognized by Mortiz, which is part of what makes it so funny for the audience.

The humor in the scene between Moritz and Ilse works in several different ways. Ilse's sunny sense of humor has been shown to stave off pathos, but it is more than just an emotional self-defense mechanism. The flippancy with which she talks about playing the Virgin Mary one day and Leda the next is funny, but the absurdity of her situation also serves a critical function. Ultimately Ilse is just an exaggerated version of every other woman. She plays whatever part is required of her, and as all women are expected to, she expresses gratitude towards the men who costume and direct her. By laughing at light-hearted Ilse, the reader (or audience member) also laughs at the larger social system that envelops her. The humor surrounding Moritz also has more than one purpose. The laughter he and Ilse provoke prevents the reader from becoming too emotionally caught up in Moritz's suicide while at the same time making him a more sympathetic figure. Clearly a character who thinks of marble gravestones and whipped cream before killing himself over a failed school exam is just an overly sensitive kid. The reader can laugh at Moritz and pity him at the same time.

Moritz's funeral further diminishes the seriousness of his death, especially once the scene turns to the reactions of his classmates. The boys intersperse gruesome speculations about the state of his corpse ("Hing die Zunge heraus?" "Die Augen!") with casual conversation about the

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64 Wedekind, "Frühlings Erwachen," 292.
progress they have made on their homework assignments. Otto even complains that Moritz owes him five marks for the bet they made about whether or not Moritz would fail out of school. (Clearly Moritz lost in more ways than one.) Ilse and Martha, appearing at the end of the funeral, do not bring much more gravity to the scene than the Gymnasiasten. They pour flowers over Moritz' grave in a true semblance of grief, but Ilse interrupts the somber moment by claiming to know exactly why Moritz killed himself. "Parallelepipedon!" she tells Martha, "Aber sag es niemandem." "Meine Hand darauf," Martha replies. This exchange highlights the absurdity of Moritz' death. The notion that a geometrical figure could provide a reasonable cause for suicide is ridiculous, and Martha's super serious acceptance of and response to the suggestion makes it seem even more so. However, Ilse's theory successfully demonstrates that no better reason for Moritz' death exists. He may as well have killed himself for the sake of geometry. The funeral Moritz fantasized about has become a farce, and his suicide weapon—in the hands of Ilse—a souvenir. In the end, Ilse reduces Moritz' death to nothing more than a grisly tableau: "Die Königskerzen waren über und über mit Blut besprengt. Sein Hirn hing in den Weiden umher." Moritz' once melancholy thoughts are now so much spattered brain matter.

Not all of the humor in Frühlings Erwachen is quite so dark. Wendla Bergmann, despite the various tragedies visited upon her throughout the course of the play, can be quite the comic figure, and Wedekind intended her as such. He wrote in a letter to a director: "Ich dass mein möglichstes, um den Humor zur Geltung zu bringen, ganz besonders in der Figur der Wendla, in allen Scenen mit ihrer Mutter, auch in der letzten, das Intellektuelle, das Spielerische zu heben)

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67 Ibid., 304.

68 Ibid.
One of the play's funniest scenes corroborates Wedekind's claim, as it features Frau Bergmann attempting to explain how babies are made to Wendla. The conversation comes about because Wendla's sister has just given birth, and Frau Bergmann tells her: "Denk dir, Wendla, diese Nacht war der Storch bei ihr und hat ihr einen kleinen Jungen gebracht." Wendla's response is funny in a way that is almost uncomfortable, since it capitalizes on her extreme naïveté: "Einen Jungen? – O das ist herrlich - - Deshalb die langwierige Influenza!" Wendla's mother was apparently so concerned with keeping her daughter in the dark about sexual matters that she preferred to tell Wendla her sister was seriously ill rather than pregnant. The exchange between mother and daughter continues, but Wendla initiates a chain of persistent questions that suggest she is beginning to have her doubts about this stork business.

WENDLA. Warst du dabei, als er ihn brachte?
FRAU BERGMANN. Er war eben wieder fortgeflogen. – Willst du dir nicht eine Rose vorstecken?
WENDLA. Warum kamst du nicht etwas früher hin, Mutter?
FRAU BERGMANN. Ich glaube aber beinahe, er hat dir auch etwas mitgebracht—eine Brosche oder was.
WENDLA. Es ist wirklich shade!
FRAU BERGMANN. Ich sage dir ja, dass er dir eine Brosche mitgebracht hat!
WENDLA. Ich habe Broschen genug…
FRAU BERGMANN. Dann sei auch zufrieden, Kind. Was willst du den noch?
WENDLA. Ich hätte so furchtbar gern gewusst, ob er durchs Fenster oder durch den Schorstein geflogen kam.


Ibid., 282–3.
Frau Bergmann's increasingly desperate attempts to distract her daughter from the gaping logical holes in her story resemble something out of a modern sitcom. Wendla is fourteen years old, on the cusp of adulthood, but her mother is literally trying to distract her from the reality of sex with shiny objects.

Only after Wendla threatens to find out the truth from the chimney sweep ("Oder soll ich lieber den Schornsteinfeger fragen?—") does Frau Bergmann relent and agree to tell Wendla how she came into the world. But she requires that Wendla put her head in her mother's lap and cover it up, an awkward, childish posture. The result is that Wendla speaks her next several lines from underneath her mother's apron. Frau Bergmann, consumed with the task ahead of her, does not see the humor in this arrangement. She is busy making completely over-the-top declarations in regard to what she is about to do: "Der Himmel weiß, Wendla, dass ich nicht die Schuld trage! Der Himmel kennt mich!" What is not Frau Bergmann's fault? What is she refusing to take responsibility for? Her daughter's natural curiosity? The embarrassing physicality of sexual intercourse? She is nearly unable to continue with her explanation, "ecstatically" proclaiming, "Ich verdiene ja, dass man mich ins Gefängnis setzt – dass man dich von mir nimmt…" Frau Bergmann's increasingly hyperbolic declarations combined with Wendla's equally melodramatic words of encouragement ("Rasch, Mutter – ich halt's nicht mehr aus.") seem to be building towards something revelatory. The scene, therefore, becomes even more comic when Frau Bergmann frustrates the audience's natural expectations by telling Wendla: "Um ein Kind zu bekommen – muss man den Mann – mit dem man verheiratet ist … lieben – lieben sag ich dir –

72 Ibid., 283.
73 Ibid., 284.
wie man nur einen Mann lieben kann!"74 Also hilarious is Wendla's drawn-out reaction, "Großer – Gott – im Himmel!" when it is clear to the audience that Wendla has interpreted the word *lieben* very differently from the way her mother intended it.

This funny moment will later prove to be a turning point in the play. Wendla's mother takes sex so seriously she becomes incapable of speaking frankly about it, and Wendla takes her mother's words so seriously she unwittingly becomes pregnant. Wendla's earlier assumption that the act of making babies "kann ja doch nichts Hässliches sein, wenn sich alles darüber freut"75 proves that in her innocence, Wendla is wiser about reproduction than her mother. Even after Frau Bergmann becomes aware of her daughter's pregnancy, she still stands by her exaggerated view of the matter: "Einem vierzehnjährigen Mädchen das sagen! Sieh, ich ware eher darauf gefasst gewesen, dass die Sonne erlischt!"76 Frau Bergmann's inability to perceive the humor in her own hysterics, to distance herself from the situation she has helped create, ultimately contributes to Wendla's death.

Wendla never learns the truth about how babies are made until it is too late, and her comical naiveté turns the idea—promoted by Hänschen—that girls and women are consciously, intentionally seductive on its head. The act of sex may be natural, instinctive, but the way in which girls are supposed to respond to their sexual instincts is learned. Wendla only knows what she has been told, and unfortunately she has been told very little. When her mother tells her that babies are brought about by "love," her mind immediately turns to kissing. Later in the hayloft, Wendla will object to Melchior's initial sexual advances with the objection: "Nicht küssen,

74 Ibid., 285.

75 Ibid., 284.

76 Ibid., 313.
Melchior! [...] Man liebt sich—wenn man küß—" 77 Just as Melchior develops his ideas about sex by reading books, Wendla bases her definition of love on romantic stories. Both are products of their social environment, but in the *Kindertragödie*, Wedekind does not take the serious approach to this idea that Naturalists before him did. Instead, he makes it accessible through humor.

The scene in *Frühlings Erwachen* that has the most to say about the value of humor is also the scene that has created the most controversy in recent scholarship: the very last scene. Although Wedekind intended even the "Schlußscene auf dem Kirchhof" to contain humor, 78 it does not always yield a humorous interpretation, especially when staged. Eric Bentley writes, "If there is a style problem in a given production, it will be acute in the final scene, which can either prove, in performance, too heavy or too light, too grim or too pleasant, too actual or too fantastic." 79 These problems are understandable upon a cursory examination of the text, which opens on Melchior trampling over gravestones and blaming himself for Wendla's death. "Ich bin ihr Mörder!" he cries, but his heartfelt wailings are interrupted by the ghost of Moritz, the comic-relief-cum-suicide-victim, who plods across the graves, "seinen Kopf unter dem Arm," and informs Melchior that he has just knocked over his grave marker. 80 The next few pages are devoted to Moritz' descriptions of his carefree afterlife. By his account, Moritz is enjoying his death much more than he ever did his life because it has allowed him to achieve sublime perspective. He and the other ghosts "sitzen auf Kirchtürmen, auf hohen Dachgiebeln," not

77 Ibid., 288.


79 Bentley, "Ten Notes," xl.

because they are restless but rather "vergnügungshalber." They know "dass alles Dummheit ist, was die Menschen tun und erstreben, und lachen darüber," and they smile at the so-called tragedies of the living.\textsuperscript{81} This attitude, which closely fits Wedekind's own definition of humor, is what Moritz uses to tempt Melchior into joining him in death. Melchior, however, does not take Moritz up on his offer. The Masked Man (\textit{Der vermummte Herr}) intervenes and talks him out of it by warning Melchior that Moritz has become "der erhabene Humorist… das erbärmlichste, bedauernwerthesthe Geschöpf der Schöpfung."\textsuperscript{82} The Masked Man's harsh (but rather hypocritical) judgement of Moritz leads the critic J. L. Hibberd to the conclusion that the play is only rejecting one very specific type of humor, Wedekind's \textit{Galgenhumor}.\textsuperscript{83}

I would argue that sublime humor, whether it is \textit{Humor} or \textit{Galgenhumor}, is not what proves problematic but rather Moritz himself. Moritz is unhappy not because he is above it all but because, despite his claims, he has still failed to completely rise above the earth and human concerns. Moritz first begs Melchior and the Masked Man not to send him back down to his grave and then begs them to stop arguing. Moritz, it seems, has not achieved indifference at all. And indeed, Melchior confirms as much, telling Moritz, "Du bist immer noch derselbe Angstmeier!"\textsuperscript{84}

Moreover, it is unclear whether the Masked Man will be a better or worse role model for Melchior than Moritz' ghost. Melchior admits some ambivalence about his own choice, saying of the hooded man, "Wo dieser Mensch mich hinführt, weiß ich nicht. Aber er ist ein Mensch." The

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 317.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 320.

\textsuperscript{83} Hibberd, "Imaginary Numbers and ‘Humor,’” 644.

\textsuperscript{84} Wedekind, \textit{Frühlings Erwachen}, 321.
hooded man's greatest asset is the simple fact that he is human. And although the Masked Man lacks the ability to carry his head under his arm, he is not significantly less absurd than Moritz. In fact, he might be even more prone to using humor to minimize human tragedy. Standing in front of Wendla's gravestone, he tells Melchior that his mixed-up emotional state is only temporary: "Mit einem warmen Abendessen im Leib spottest du ihrer." When Melchior expresses doubt that a warm supper can rid him of his guilt, der vermummte Herr replies: "Es kommt auf das Abendessen an!"

At the very end of the play, Melchior bids farewell to his dead friend. He has decided to walk with the Masked Man, but he confesses to Moritz, "...und wenn ich einmal ein alter Mann in grauen Haaren bin, dann stehst gerade du mir vielleicht wieder näher als alle Mitlebenden." One possible interpretation of this cryptic statement is that it is Melchior's final acknowledgement of the value of Moritz' newfound philosophy. Perhaps one day Melchior, too, will be able to "warm himself on decay and smile," but as a member of the living, he will need to attain the wisdom of age in order to do so.

It seems likely that if Moritz had developed a sense of humor in life, he would be smiling in a bed (perhaps with Ilse?) instead of a grave. Unfortunately, he, his teachers, and his parents all fall victim to the trap of—as Hänschen phrases it—wearing "lange Gesichter, um ihre Dummheiten zu bemängeln." The tragic, yet avoidable events of Frühlings Erwachen reveal the

85 Ibid., 319.
86 Ibid., 320.
87 Ibid., 322.
88 Ibid., 314.
folly in such behavior, and the play puts forth the argument that laughter is not just the best medicine but perhaps also the best preventative.

Thus far I have looked how humor functions in Frühling's Erwachen as a text, but Wedekind's Kindertragödie is a play, one performed many times during the author's life. So how does this humor translate to the stage? Does the humor retain its ability to be destabilizing and socially critical? In the next section, I will look at how critics responded to early productions of Frühling's Erwachen and examine two modern adaptations of the play.

Frühling's Erwachen: Reception

In the years since Frühling's Erwachen first appeared in print in 1891, the play has been performed in countries all over the world, adapted for several films, and turned into a Tony Award-winning Broadway musical. Most people familiar with the original play are aware it was not performed at all until over a decade after its publication in 1906 and not in its unabridged, uncensored form until the 1970s. This gap between the publication of the play and its first stage production means that literary critics of the fin-de-siècle were given ample time to voice their opinions on the play as text. Despite Wedekind's complaints twenty years later that early critics of Frühling's Erwachen did not understand his play for "what it was" and overlooked its humor,89 several of the text's extant reviews mention humor explicitly. In an 1892 issue of Die Gesellschaft, Michael Georg Conrad says of the play: "Praktvollste Mischung von schneidenster Satire und gemütvollstem Humor, dazu als Grundlage dichterisch ernsthafte Erfassung eines

Lebensprobleme von höchster pädagogischer Bedeutsamkeit."\textsuperscript{90} This view that \textit{Frühlings Erwachen} is both humorous and poetically and pedagogically serious appears more than once in reviews of the text. In 1898 Edgar Steiner specifically recommends the text to educators \textit{in spite of} its humorous elements. He writes: "\textit{[Frühlings Erwachen]} ist—trotz aller Satire und Komik, ja scheinbaren Schlüpfrigkeit—ein tieferstes Buch, das ich allen Pädagogen—nicht etwa den Schülern—zur Lektüre empfehlen möchte."\textsuperscript{91} However, not all of the early critics see the text's humor as something positive. In an 1899 issue of \textit{Die Gesellschaft} Arthur Möller-Bruck cattily remarks: "Sicherlich ist sie [die Kindertragödie] in einer Zeit entstanden, in der der Dichter schon den Ernst und das Noch-etwas-ernst-nnehmen-können verloren hatte."\textsuperscript{92} Maximilian Harden, on the other hand, compares \textit{Frühlings Erwachen} favorably to that other "unperformable" play of the fin-de-siècle, Schnitzler's \textit{Reigen} (1900), even though he deems Wedekind's play \textit{less} funny: "Das Ganze ist ohne Architektur; nicht so witzig, doch viel stärker, tiefer, künstlerischer als Schnitzlers 'Reigen'..."\textsuperscript{93} Very few critics of the text published in 1891 seem in danger of overlooking Wedekind's humorous intentions, even if they disapprove of them.

The first stage performance of \textit{Frühlings Erwachen} took place in the Berliner Kammerspiele on November 20, 1906. Max Reinhardt directed, and Wedekind played the role of the Masked Man. Despite his close involvement with this production as well as subsequent productions in other cities, Wedekind was never entirely happy with how early performances of

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 863.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 870.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 871.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 875.
the play were interpreted or received. Some of the play's *Komik*, it seemed, had been lost in its staging. Lili Deutsch reassured Wedekind that she had "laughed aloud" during the particular performance she attended,\textsuperscript{94} but Wedekind reported in a letter to Karl Kraus that an early audience had received the play in silence: "Es hat sich buchstäblich nicht eine Hand gerührt."\textsuperscript{95}

Some critics of *Frühlings Erwachen*’s earliest productions make no mention of humor, and those that do seem either confused or offended by it. One such reviewer cannot make sense of the play’s final graveyard scene, in which a deceased main character dolefully carries around his own severed head. "Soll das eine Burleske sein?" he asks, "Oder tiefe Tragik?"\textsuperscript{96} Writing about a later production in Kassel, a different reviewer accuses Wedekind of conducting a personal experiment in which the *Kindertragödie*’s confused audience members are the subjects. How much *Blödsinn* is a theatergoer willing to endure? The reviewer writes of Wedekind: "Seine Bizarrien will er uns für Originalität, seine selbsgefälligen Posen für Sturm und Drang aufhalsen. Wo er satirisch wird, zeichnet er Karrikaturen. [...] Wie niedrig muß Wedekind das Publikum taxieren, um davon Erfolg zu erwarten."\textsuperscript{97} Apparently not all audiences felt unfairly "taxed" by the bizarre elements and caricatures in *Frühlings Erwachen* because it was still being performed at the start of World War I, much to the horror of Ernst Adolf Greiner, who calls the play irreverent, unpatriotic trash in a 1915 issue of *Bühne und Welt*. He remarks with disgust that "[e]s gibt Menschen, die nichts besseres zu tun haben, als drei Stunden den Witzen und Zoten Wedekinds zu lauschen…" If Greiner’s argument sounds familiar, it is because it touches on a

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 877.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 938.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 877.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 898.
much larger debate about humor that still exists today: in what situations is humor appropriate? In what situations is it inappropriate? Is tragicomedy inherently offensive?

At least a few of Wedekind's contemporaries are of the opinion that tragicomedy is at least aesthetically offensive. Karl Scheffler, dismayed that Frühlings Erwachen does not work as "a great comedy," calls tragicomedy "der Bastard des ganzmodernen Kapuziners, des Vorurtheillosigkeitsphilisters."98 Greiner, on the other hand, complains that Frühlings Erwachen fails as a tragedy because it is too "lächerlich."99 Several reviewers hint at the idea that Wedekind only wrote a "tragicomedy" because he was not talented enough to write anything else. The most plainspoken of these reviewers writes: "Eine Tragödie zu schreiben, ging über die Kraft Wedekinds..."

Those early critics who are not outright offended by Frühlings Erwachen's mix of humorous and tragic elements are still not sure the staged productions of the play succeed. A review in the Berliner Zeitung of the world premiere reads: "Kaum kenne ich ein Stück, das weniger frivol wäre als 'Frühlings Erwachen'—selten sind heikle Dinge so reizlos, so eintönig vorgetragen worden..."100 Another critic agrees that the play can seem a little stiff—in his opinion because the teenage characters all speak like "erwachsene Zeitungsschreiber, die ihre geistige Hilflosigkeit mit erschreckendem Papierdeutsch überdecken."101 This aversion to adults playing teenagers who (arguably) speak like adults is something that comes up again and

98 Ibid., 886.
99 Ibid., 914.
100 Ibid., 876.
101 Ibid., 912–3.
again. A reviewer in *Die Neue Zeit* is not exactly praising *Frühlings Erwachen* when he gleefully comments: "Welche Geilheit ist es, 'Frühlingserwachen' auf die Bühne zu bringen, wo Männer in mittleren Jahren mit rasierten Gesichtern die Mutierung der Kinderstimme simulieren müssen!"

Just as humor does not always translate from the author's intentions, to the page, to the reader, not all humor survives the transition from the stage to the page. And conversely, a clumsy staging of a play can result in the audience laughing at things that were never meant to be funny. In his review of a Munich production of *Frühlings Erwachen* in *Das literarische Echo*, Leo Berg complains about just this phenomenon:

"Bei der Aufführung ging vieles verloren. Ganze Szenen, und zum Teil recht wichtige, wurden und mussten gestrichen werden, anderes versagte oder kam lächerlich heraus, oder es wurde dadurch gefälscht, dass das Karikierte, das aber subjektiv wahr ist, nun auch als objektive Karikatur in die Erscheinung trat, also etwas ganz anderes wurde."\(^{103}\)

In Berg's opinion, it was not an overall lack of *Humor* that crippled this production, but rather how differently the humor came across on the stage.

Even though he is best remembered as a dramatist, Wedekind never stopped feeling frustrated by how the "something" he had written could become "something completely different" in the hands of a cast and director. But when it came to his *Kindergöttinge*, Wedekind mostly objected to how seriously the play was treated. After witnessing a rehearsal for a Berlin production of *Frühlings Erwachen* in 1907, Wedekind famously complained to director Fritz Basil that his staging overemphasized the drama's tragic elements, turning the play into "eine leibhaftige wirkliche Tragödie mit den höchsten dramatischen Tönen..., in der der Humor

\(^{102}\) Ibid., 948. (See ___)

\(^{103}\) Ibid., 949.
gänzlich fehlte." He advised the director to make several tonal changes, writing in a letter to Basil: "Ich glaube, daß das Stück um so ergreifender wirkt, je harmloser, je sonniger, je lachender es gespielt wird. [...] Ich glaube, daß das Stück, wenn die Tragik und Leidenschaftlichkeit betont wird, leicht abstoßend wirken kann."\textsuperscript{104} Wedekind used this same argument—that \textit{Frühlings Erwachen} becomes off-putting when played straight—in a letter to Georg Brandes: "Sie schrieben mir einmal, dass Ihnen mein 'Frühlings Erwachen' nicht gefiele. Ich glaube dies Missfallen lag daran, dass Sie es bei der ersten Lektüre zu ernst auffassten und den Humor übersahen, den ich mit vollem Bewusstsein in jede Scene hineinzulegen suchte."\textsuperscript{105}

There is something a little pathetic about a humorist complaining that no one gets his jokes (but it's not his fault!), and Wedekind does seem unduly focused on his critics, whom he believes were poisoned by "die grauenvolle Humorlosigkeit" Naturalism left behind as its cultural inheritance. In his preface to the play \textit{Oaha}, Wedekind complains:

\begin{quote}
Seit etwa 1901, vor allem seitdem Max Reinhardt es auf die Bühne brachte, hält man [das Stück] nun für eine bitterböse steinernste Tragödie, für ein Tendenzstück, für eine Streitschrift im Dienste der sexuellen Aufklärung und was der spiessbürgerlich pedantischen Schlagworte mehr ist.\textsuperscript{106}
\end{quote}

Wedekind's phrasing here is a tad hyperbolic—few critics interpreted the play as a gravely serious tragedy—but it is true that even those critics who gave \textit{Frühlings Erwachen} positive reviews and commented favorably on Wedekind's sense of humor did not see the \textit{Kindertragödie} exactly the same way he did. Hermann Breuer, for example, saw Wedekind as a modern

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{105} Wedekind, "Kommentar: Frühlings Erwachen," 805.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 807.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Aristophanes, whose comedies hold up a mirror to society and reflect its imperfections. But Wedekind claimed he intended Frühlings Erwachen as "ein sonniges Abbild des Lebens, in dem ich jeder einzelnen Scene an unbekümmertem Humor alles abzugewinnen suchte, was irgend wie daraus zu schöpfen war." Even as a scholar and person who tries to see the humor in everything, I must admit I find Wedekind's insistence on the "sunniness" of Frühlings Erwachen perplexing. A play that features, among other things, a rape, a botched abortion, and a messy suicide can be funny, but can it also be "a sunny portrayal of life?" As I will demonstrate in the next section of this chapter, most adaptations of Wedekind's play tend towards gloominess rather than sunniness.

**Frühlings Erwachen: Adaptations**

In 1893 Wedekind wrote in a letter to his mother that he was grateful to Frühlings Erwachen for helping him make a name for himself, but he was certain the play would never be "groß." He was very mistaken. In 2015 Frühlings Erwachen is undeniably Wedekind's best-known and most widely beloved work of literature. Schoolchildren read the text in Germany, and university students perform it in America. The play is such a phenomenon that even the Broadway musical based on it has been translated into several languages, including American Sign Language. The play's enduring popularity means that today most scholars are not

107 Ibid., 897.

108 Ibid., 807.

109 Ibid., 803.

dependent on other reviewers' accounts to get a sense of what *Frühlings Erwachen* is like when it is performed. Anyone with an internet connection can watch a filmed production of the *Kindertragödie* or listen to songs from the Broadway musical. For this chapter, I will focus my analysis on two adaptions of *Frühlings Erwachen*, the wildly popular Broadway musical, *Spring Awakening* (2006), and the English-language film *The Awakening of Spring* (2008)\(^\text{111}\). Both are products of the early twenty-first century; and both hew fairly closely to the original source material, but—for reasons that will become clear—only one has achieved commercial and critical success.

When *Spring Awakening* opened on Broadway in December of 2006, it was an instant hit, well-received by audiences and reviewers alike. Nearly every major American newspaper and magazine published a positive review of the show, which was heralded as "a sprightly step in the right direction"\(^\text{112}\) towards a new type of musical theater, one that combined popular music with canonical literature to produce fun, financially viable art. Unlike the "pedestrian screen-to-stage adaptations" popular on Broadway at the time, *Spring Awakening* was applauded for being a "truly original new musical"\(^\text{113}\) that was at the same time an "exciting re-imagining"\(^\text{114}\) of a classic play. At the 2007 Tony Awards *Spring Awakening* dominated the competition, winning the awards for Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical (Steven Sater), Best Original Score

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\(^{114}\) Lahr, "TOPIC A."
(Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater), and Best Direction of a Musical (Michael Mayer). Spring Awakening is, by most metrics, the most successful adaptation of Frühlings Erwachen to date, but what causes it to succeed where other adaptations and productions have failed? I will argue that Spring Awakening works as an adaptation for two seemingly contradictory reasons: first, the catchy pop-rock songs, whose lyrics are more earnest and sentimental than anything Wedekind wrote for the Kindertragödie, and two, the musical's embrace of the original text's sense of humor.

In the preface to the show's libretto, the playwright and lyricist Steven Sater gives a simple answer to the question of why he chose to turn Frühlings Erwachen, of all things, into a musical: "I knew and loved the play, …I had long felt it was a sort of opera-in-waiting…"115 He began writing the show's book, he claims, with a vow "to remain true to Wedekind's fierce original intent."116 For a literary scholar, perhaps the most striking thing about the musical is just how much of Wedekind's text Sater leaves intact (albeit in translation). Wendla, Melchior, and their teenage compatriots retain their German names and, when not singing, spout what one reviewer calls "formal, 19th-century dialogue"117 and another "starchy language."118 They have the same problems and fall prey to the same tragic fates as the original characters, even though their journeys towards those ends are punctuated by spurts of pop-rock and choreographed dance. This mix of old and new, high and low art makes for a surprisingly satisfying viewing

115 Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik, Spring Awakening (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007), vii.

116 Ibid., viii.


118 Rooney, "Review: ‘Spring Awakening.’"
experience and helps explain the musical's broad appeal. *Spring Awakening* is a show that can be understood and appreciated by middle-aged theater critics as well as school-aged theater geeks. One fifteen-year-old fan of the musical sums up its appeal particularly well when interviewed on National Public Radio: "The songs connect our time to their time. But issues don't really change; they just get swept under the rug."¹¹⁹ This argument—that the themes of Wedekind's original play are timeless—appears in numerous reviews of *Spring Awakening*, but the fan on NPR is especially perceptive when she points out that the show's music plays an important part in translating these "timeless" themes for modern audiences. But as happens with even the best translations, something is lost.

One of the most vocal critics of *Spring Awakening* is Jonathan Franzen, who calls the musical "insipid" and "overpraised."¹²⁰ According to Franzen, *Spring Awakening* commits the grievous error of taking its teenage protagonists more seriously than the original play does, and even a fan of the musical has to concede this point. Not all of the songs, but many of them, are tonally very different from what Wedekind wrote in *Frühlings Erwachen*. The musical number, "Mama who bore me" is one such song. It appears in a scene (taken from two separate scenes in the *Kindertragödie*) in which Wendla banters with her mother about skirt length and storks. The song that preempts and later interrupts this comic dialogue is meant to be "a sort of elegy the girl sings for herself."¹²¹ The lyrics are earnest, almost despairing:

"Mama who bore me.  
Mama who gave me  
No way to handle things. Who made me so sad.

¹¹⁹ Ulaby, "‘Spring Awakening’ Brings Teen Angst to Broadway."


Mama, the weeping.
Mama, the angels.
No sleep in Heaven, or Bethlehem."

We know from Wedekind's writings on the topic that he intended Wendla to be a playful, humorous figure, especially "in allen Szenen mit ihrer Mutter." Even though Frau Bergmann leads her daughter to an early grave, their relationship is not supposed to invoke pathos. Sater, on the other hand, wants to give voice to "some silent cry" with his music. And his songs work within this context not just because Duncan Sheik's "strong melodic lines" are pleasing to the ear, but because pathos does not seem out of place in a musical about teenagers. Early reviews of the musical praise its lyrics for this very reason. As one reviewer writes, "Sater's book and lyrics seem to capture from within the uniquely teenage feeling that every emotion is the most tempestuous, frightening, passionate or exciting one ever experienced." Admittedly, the lyrics in *Spring Awakening* can be frustratingly vague and sentimental at times. What exactly is the meaning of the "purple summer" the cast sings of in the musical's finale? But even this very valid criticism can be spun as a positive because "[w]ho can afford to indulge in gooey self-expression if not romantic 14-year-olds?" Furthermore, the original run of the musical

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125 Lahr, "TOPIC A."

126 Rooney, "Review: ‘Spring Awakening.’"


128 Rooney, "Review: ‘Spring Awakening.’"
benefited from something many early-twentieth-century productions of Frühlings Erwachen did not: an almost uniformly excellent and age-appropriate cast. Lea Michele, who played Wendla, really was a teenager when the show was first being workshopped, and she was only twenty when it opened it on Broadway. Jonathan Groff, the original Melchior, was only a year older. According to the NPR reporter Neda Ulaby, "[t]he actors are kids, most of them between 15 and 20 years old. So when they sing about growing up, it feels dangerously immediate."¹²⁹

Even the "gooiest" songs of Spring Awakening do not tip the musical into a morass of sentimentality because—particularly at the beginning of the show—the earnestness of the lyrics is balanced out by the by the comic spirit Wedekind so desperately wanted to effect in the original play. Writing about the show's off-Broadway debut for The New York Times, Charles Isherwood calls the musical, with its mix of nineteenth-century dialogue and modern microphones, "bold, funny and inviting" and says "it evokes, perhaps a little too broadly, the mournful comic streak in Wedekind's play."¹³⁰ Later, reviewing the musical's Broadway opening, David Rooney praises director Michael Mayer's decision to "ratchet[] up the comedy in the opening scenes, particularly from doomed problem pupil Moritz… and the various adult authority figures," an artistic choice which "allows the drama to build in different directions."¹³¹ Some reviewers, however, echo those among Wedekind's contemporaries who were befuddled by the presence of humor in a supposed Kindertragödie. They disapprove of the ostensible tragedy's embrace of comedy, and one indignantly remarks that "[s]cenes that should be pungent, 

¹²⁹ Ulaby, "‘Spring Awakening’ Brings Teen Angst to Broadway."


¹³¹ Rooney, "Review: ‘Spring Awakening.’"
moving, or shattering become comic sketches rather than wrenching explorations of emerging emotions in young adults not sufficiently prepared for them."\textsuperscript{132} But I would argue that \textit{Spring Awakening} is popular among young adults precisely because it does not tell teenagers how they "should be" or underestimate their ability to find humor in tragic situations. In \textit{Frühlings Erwachen}, Wedekind shows that growing up can be just as silly as it is poignant, and \textit{Spring Awakening} does the same.

However, not all of the musical's sunnier aspects are inspired by Wedekind's play. One way in which the musical initially lightens the mood for modern audiences is by utterly transmogrifying Wendla's rape. The scene resembles the original at first in that Wendla repeats the word "no" as Melchior forces himself on her, but eventually her "no" turns into an explicit "yes" as a chorus comprised of the other young cast members softly sings "I Believe" in the background. ("I believe… / There is love in heaven. / I believe… / All will be forgiven."\textsuperscript{133}) As Jonathan Franzen sums up the change: "The casual rape of Wendla Bergmann by the play's central character, Melchior Gabor, becomes a thunderous spectacle of ecstasy and consent."\textsuperscript{134} This transformation has not been lost on those reviewers of the musical who are familiar with the original play. Some see the change as a necessary simplification of Wedekind's morally ambiguous text,\textsuperscript{135} but at least one reviewer argues that the omitted rape makes the musical


\textsuperscript{133} Sater and Sheik, \textit{Spring Awakening}, 60.

\textsuperscript{134} Franzen, "Authentic but Horrible," \textit{x}.

\textsuperscript{135} Klein, "An Awakening for Broadway?"
"paradoxically less feminist." Indeed, it is rather perverse to insert a song about love and forgiveness directly into the middle of what was once a rape scene. The Masked Man of the original play does not think Melchior should die for the mistakes he has made, but he also does not offer the teenager any soothing, optimistic platitudes about forgiveness and "purple summers" as the musical does. I agree that the musical does Wendla a disservice by "softening" the details of her story, and I believe that this change directly contributes to how much more serious the musical becomes in its second half. The audience feels acutely sorry for Melchior when he is sent to the reformatory, and when Wendla dies, she is not just a victim of a predatory boy and an inadequate sex education, she is a victim of innocent teenage love. The humor of the original play is abandoned, and the musical devolves into sentimentality. However, even in its most sentimental and least critical scenes, Spring Awakening is still an entertaining viewing experience. The same cannot be said for other adaptations of Frühlings Erwachen made in the same decade.

The 2008 film, The Awakening of Spring, is currently available through the popular streaming service, Hulu. Like the musical adaptation Spring Awakening (2007), the film is an English-language production that leaves some scenes from the original text intact while changing and inserting others. And although I will continue to refer The Awakening of Spring as a film, it is perhaps better described as a filmed stage play. The title credits read: "Based on the play 'Frühlings Erwachen' By Frank Wedekind / Adapted for the Stage by Arthur Allan Seidelman." There are no curtains; there is no audience, but the acting and minimalist set dressing resemble

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what one would expect from a modern theater production; and the camera rarely breaks the fourth wall.

Ultimately the similarities the film shares with the musical do not work to its advantage. At least a few Internet commenters claim they only watched the film because they initially mistook it for the musical. The funniest of these reviews reads: "…I wanted to listen to some of the awesome tunes associated with the musical. All I got was ONE LOUSY CLARINET.‖¹³⁷ I will come back to the "clarinet," which is one of many reasons why The Awakening of Spring, the 2008 film, is not as successful an adaptation of Wedekind's play as Spring Awakening, the 2006 musical. More generally, I will argue that the overarching reason why The Awakening of Spring is not a satisfying viewing experience is because the film is too serious an interpretation of its source material and only succeeds in being funny unintentionally.

Now let's return to the "clarinet," which is, in fact, an oboe. The oboe brackets and pervades the entire film, as it provides the film's sole (and yet ubiquitous) musical accompaniment. Internet reviewers of the film are quite hung up on the oboe, which most misidentify as "that annoying clarinet."¹³⁸ (One reviewer actually refers to the sound it produces as "awful violin music."¹³⁹) I am bringing up the oboe not only because it is almost impossible not to, but also because the oboe is the best and most egregious example of how this particular

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¹³⁸ dudebrabant, "This Isn’t Bad (spoilers)," review, The Awakening of Spring Reviews & Ratings - IMDb, (March 13, 2010), http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1332002/reviews.

adaptation of *Frühlings Erwachen* goes wrong: the film sets up the oboe as something serious and fails to recognize that it registers with the viewer as something annoying and ridiculous.

The oboe's music is the first and last thing the viewer encounters when watching the film, and everything about it seems like a serious, self-conscious decision on the part of the filmmaker. One of the actors, in addition to playing the "Minister" and the "Doctor," also takes on the role of the "Musician" and parades gravely across the screen with an oboe at regular intervals. The other characters do not interact with the Musician, and he is not dressed, as they are, in a modern take on nineteenth-century clothing. Perhaps the director intended the Musician as a vaguely Brechtian element, an agent of *Verfremdung*, and although the Musician succeeds in alienating the viewer from the action of the film, he generates a lot more laughter than deep thought, since for most viewers, I would argue, it is nearly impossible to take a man carrying an oboe around a low-budget film set seriously. Furthermore, Wedekind is not Brecht. As I have already argued in this chapter, Wedekind sometimes uses humor in a distant, "Olympian" manner to mock authority figures and excoriate social institutions, but he also uses it to emphasize his characters' humanity in such a way that endears them to the audience. The oboe player in *The Awakening of Spring* provokes neither empathy nor reflective criticism.

At least the oboe ends up being funny, albeit unintentionally so; the same cannot be said for most of the film. The same scenes that are successfully played for laughs in the Broadway musical are either boring or—more frequently—creepy and embarrassing in the film. Everything is just a little bit off, and not in a quirky or absurdist way. For example, most of the actors are significantly older than their characters, and because *The Awakening of Spring* is a film and not a play in a theater, the camera captures every crow's foot. The film even begins with a long, close pan across the cast members' faces while the oboe drones on in the background. As I already
mentioned, one of the recurring complaints about the earliest stagings of *Frühlings Erwachen* centered on the actors' ages. The men playing Moritz and Melchior, it was argued, were much too old to convincingly play the fourteen-year-old *Kinder* of the *Kindertragödie*. And indeed, there is something unsettling about watching a woman who looks twenty-five affect the airs of a child and argue with her mother about skirt length. Moreover, there is something even more unsettling about watching a group of grown men feign the ignorance of and obsession with sex that characterizes early adolescence.\(^{140}\) The scene in which Hänschen—or in this case, Henry (the names have been anglicized) disposes of his masturbation material features mimed self-gratification just like the musical does, but the scene in the film is deeply uncomfortable to watch, whereas the scene in the musical is awkward but also—thanks to rapid pacing and a sense of silliness—quite funny. In the film, the decidedly adult man playing Henry rolls around with his shirt off, and the camera zooms in on his face as he sensually rubs bits of paper (the remains of the art postcard) across his mouth. The scene goes on for much too long, and the over-acting, the adult shirtlessness, and the intimate placement of the camera produce an effect that is deeply off-putting. Similarly, a scene in which two of the teenage girls engage in a little same-sex kissing—a scene that is not in the original play—is probably meant to be sweet and sexually progressive but mainly feels awkward and forced. The sexual themes that *Frühlings Erwachen* presents in a humorous way are inaccessible in *The Awakening of Spring* due to how unpleasantly discomfiting they become.

The Broadway musical *Spring Awakening* and the film *The Awakening of Spring* are both flawed modern adaptations of *Frühlings Erwachen*, and both struggle to represent the humor

\(^{140}\) Adding to the confusion, the parents of these supposed fourteen-year-olds are played by actors who range in age from their mid-sixties to early-eighties.
Wedekind hoped would pervade the original play. The musical often slides towards sentimentality, and the film is never funny on purpose. These unfunny moments have the opposite effect on the audience. The musical’s sentimentality leads the audience to get so caught up in sympathy for its characters that the audience members are less likely to think critically about what is happening on stage, whereas the film is so alienating that its viewers are not likely to want to think about it at all.

**Conclusion**

Although Wedekind's *Frühlings Erwachen* is still read as a text in classrooms all over the world, it is a play, and plays—much like gender and humor—are performed. Every staging of the *Kindertragödie* adds yet another layer of performance to a play that is already rife with parodic gender performances. The most popular productions of *Frühlings Erwachen* seem to be those that succeed in performing the humor of the original text, a humor that simultaneously pokes fun at absurd social conventions (like gender and sexual norms) while provoking sympathy for its teenage characters. The least successful productions are those in which the humor is lost and Wedekind's clever, complex drama turns into a sort of dreary morality play. Through my written performance in this chapter, I hope I have read some of the humor back into *Frühlings Erwachen*, thereby restoring the commentary on gender that I believe exists in the original text.


"SPOTTE DES SPOTTES": THE USES OF HUMOR IN THE FEMINIST WRITINGS OF HEDWIG DOHM

In the previous chapters of this dissertation, I have analyzed the literary works of three male authors writing around the fin de siècle, none of whom supported women's suffrage. In examining their novels, novellas, and plays, I have argued that these writers—regardless of how antifeminist their personal views were—nevertheless created literary texts in which gender norms are questioned and inevitably exposed as constructs through the texts’ moments of humor. This chapter is therefore a departure from the previous three in that it looks at humor in the fictional and polemical texts of Hedwig Dohm (1831-1919), a woman who self-identified as a feminist and publicly championed women's rights. Dohm was a friend of Theodor Fontane, a grandmother-in-law to Thomas Mann, and a contemporary of Frank Wedekind, but as a woman and an active Frauenrechtler, Dohm's writings reflect the most explicit dissatisfaction with the gender norms of fin-de-siècle Germany. In this chapter I will argue that Dohm, in her funny feminist essays as well as in her unfunny works of prose fiction, demonstrates a nuanced understanding of how humor can be used both to liberate women and to keep them in line.

The "Cult" of Hedwig Dohm: Trends in Scholarship

Contemporary secondary literature on Hedwig Dohm likes to allude to the popularity she has achieved among twenty-first-century feminists and academics. In Nikola Müller's annotated bibliography of Dohm, a short introduction to the author appears under the chapter heading
"Kultfigur Hedwig Dohm,"¹ and one of the most recent, full-length biographies of Dohm is titled *Spuren ins Jetzt*, a nod to the writer's visionary ideas and far-reaching influence.² The average scholar of German literature, however, is probably unfamiliar with even the name 'Hedwig Dohm.' Like so many German women writers, Dohm was a well-known public figure in her own time but, having been excluded from the canon, is no longer widely read. After her death in 1919, Dohm and her writings languished in obscurity for decades before being "rediscovered" in the 1970s at the height of second-wave feminism. Müller writes that to these feminist scholars, Dohm, a woman whose writings predated *The Second Sex* by over seventy years, appeared "[w]ie eine einsame Ruferin in der Wüste."³ In 1980 Elisabeth Plessen called Dohm "eine Vordenkerin,"⁴ and indeed, the idea that gender is socially constructed was a radical notion even among women's rights activists when Dohm first started publishing feminist essays in the 1870s. Most women's rights activists in nineteenth-century Germany subscribed to a "dualist model of sexual difference" and argued, for example, that better educated women would make better wives and mothers.⁵ Dohm's argument—that women deserve the same rights as men because women are people, too—set her apart from her peers.

Scholars have been trying to figure out what forces shaped Dohm's unique views ever since the "rediscovery" of her writings, and unsurprisingly, many have turned to her biography for answers. Although I myself do not intend to engage in a biographical reading of Dohm's texts, I believe providing some background information on a relatively obscure figure like Dohm will be helpful to readers of this dissertation chapter. Dohm, in spite of her prescient views on sex and gender, was undoubtedly a product of her own upbringing and experiences. The woman who would become the Kultfigur Hedwig Dohm started life as Marianne Adelaide Hedwig Jülich, the first daughter and third child of seventeen. When she was born in Berlin in 1831, her parents Wilhelmine Henriette Jülich and Gustav Adolph Gotthold Schlesinger were still unmarried, and her father had not yet changed his surname from 'Schlesinger' to the less obviously Jewish 'Schleh.' In 1853 Hedwig Schleh married Ernst Dohm, editor of the satirical magazine Kladderadatsch, and together they had five children, including four daughters who survived into adulthood. In the 1860s and 1870s, the Dohms hosted a popular salon in their Berlin home, frequented by a clique of well-known intellectuals that included Theodor Fontane. Dohm began publishing her writing during these salon years, and although she received no formal education past the age of fifteen, one of these early pieces of writing was a 600-page work on the history of Spanish literature. Today Dohm is best known for her polemical essays, novels, and short fiction. Her first feminist essays began appearing in various liberal publications in the 1870s, and Dohm would later edit and republish many of them in the volumes Die Frauen Rohner, Spuren Ins Jetzt, 15.

7 Ibid., 32.

8 Ibid., 42. The Dohms' friends and connections came in handy in 1869, when the family, fleeing Ernst's debt-collectors, was forced to leave Berlin, and only financial help from the Dohms' friends made it possible for them to return.
Natur und Recht (1876), Die Antifeministen (1902), and Die Mütter (1903). The 1870s also saw the publication of Dohm's Lustspiele, several of which were staged and subsequently reviewed by Theodor Fontane, but all of which tend to be ignored by modern literary scholars. Most of Dohm's prose fiction was published after the death of her husband Ernst in 1883, including the "generations trilogy" of novels (Schicksal einer Seele, 1899, Sibilla Dalmar, 1896, Christa Ruland, 1902) and the novella Werde, die du bist (1894). Never content to play the retiring widow, Dohm continued to write and publish feminist (and later, antiwar) essays until shortly before her death in 1919 at the age of 87.

Hedwig Dohm led a long, interesting life, and feminist and literary scholars have been eager to mine it for support for their own theories about the writer. Much has been made of Dohm's unhappy childhood and poor relationship with her mother, "whose behavior toward her firstborn daughter was indifferent and distracted at best, brutal at worst." Late in life, Dohm contributed an essay to the volume Als unsre großen Dichterinnen noch kleine Mädchen waren: selbsterzählte Jugenderinnerungen (1912). For a memoir titled "Kindheitserinnerungen einer alten Berlinerin," Dohm writes relatively little about herself, but what she does say is damning. Dohm describes herself as "ein Kind ohne Mutterliebe. Einsam unter siebzehn Geschwistern." Many scholars therefore point to Dohm's childhood as the likely source material for her essays criticizing the nineteenth-century cult of the mother and as the inspiration for the bad mothers in

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10 Rohner, Spuren Ins Jetzt, 18.

her fiction.\textsuperscript{12} I do not disagree with this argument, but I find that most of this sort of biographical literature on Dohm is overly speculative. For example, modern scholars know that Dohm stayed with her husband until he died, but they have no idea what the marriage was like—happy or fraught—as Dohm never wrote anything about it one way or the other.\textsuperscript{13} So when Dohm writes in the "Kindheitserinnerungen" that everything she has ever written about women, she has experienced "in tiefster Seele,"\textsuperscript{14} we cannot assume that she is doing anything other than speaking generally. Of course, this has not prevented Dohm scholars from devoting pages upon pages to the writers' marriage and the "Mythos Ernst Dohm"\textsuperscript{15} in support of their own theories. I understand the impulse behind this kind of scholarship, but it is not what I plan to do here.

Recently, secondary literature that concentrates on Dohm's writing rather than the details of her life has focused heavily on her prose fiction, but this has not always been the case. In an essay from 1981, Plessen writes that's Dohm's comedies, novels, and novellas "sind…längst aus dem Trend der Zeit gekommen und vergessen," a fact Plessen attributes to the inadequacy of Dohm's prose.\textsuperscript{16} This idea that Dohm's fictional prose lacks the "Frische und Witz"\textsuperscript{17} of her polemical writing is a common one among critics of the 1980s and 1990s. In an overview of the writer from 1998, Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres faults Dohm's fiction for its "aimlessness" and "purple


\textsuperscript{13} Müller, \textit{Hedwig Dohm}, 18.

\textsuperscript{14} Dohm, "Kindheitserinnerungen Einer Alten Berlinerin," 57.

\textsuperscript{15} Rohner, \textit{Spuren Ins Jetzt}, 49.

\textsuperscript{16} Plessen, "Hedwig Dohm (1833-1919)," 137.

\textsuperscript{17} Müller, \textit{Hedwig Dohm}, 12.
prose," calling the works "emotional and passionate but often clumsy and ineffective as well."18 Scholarship on Dohm's fiction has become less overtly judgmental over time, but much of it still focuses on the work Joeres calls Dohm's "most effective novella," Werde, die du bist, 19 which was republished in 1977 for the first time after Dohm's death.20 However, there has been a notable uptick in articles written about Dohm's other short stories and novels in the twenty-first century, most likely due to the efforts of Nikola Müller and Isabel Rohner, the editors of Edition Hedwig Dohm ("erste kommentierte Gesamtausgabe"21), and to the original texts' accessibility on the Internet.

Critics who are familiar with Dohm's entire oeuvre still tend to agree on one thing: there is a striking "contradiction between the positive, radical and witty political essays and the depressing, frustrating fates of the female protagonists in the fiction."22 Dohm famously said of her work: "Alles, was ich schreibe, steht im Dienst der Frauen."23 As a result, modern scholars have been eager to make sense of how Dohm might have intended her uninspiring, deeply flawed female protagonists to contribute to the fight for women's rights to the same degree as her polemical writings. The obvious conclusion most reach is that Dohm's essays and fiction complement one another. Whereas Dohm's essays make the case for all the ways in which gender


19 Ibid.


23 Die Zukunft, 5. Jg., 3.10.1896
equality will lead to a brighter future, her novels and short stories illustrate the dangers of maintaining the gender status quo. I agree with Sandra Singer's assertion that "Dohm's works effectively portray male and female characters who have lived according to dominant social norms and still feel an inexpressible sense of loss and self-alienation." In other words, Dohm's female protagonists do not serve as feminist role models because they were intentionally written as warnings. At the same time, most critics are hesitant to categorize Dohm's fiction as "pessimistic" because many of even the most depressing works contain hope for future generations of women, who—as Charlotte Woodford argues—"possess greater opportunities to shape their lives differently" and can learn from the mistakes of Dohm's protagonists.

Modern secondary literature on Dohm's polemical writings is far more complimentary than criticism of her fiction and usually content to marvel at the prescience of Dohm's arguments and the wittiness of her prose. Müller sums up much of the scholarship on Dohm's essays when she writes about Dohm's "lockere, ironische und argumentativ so überzeugende Schreibe, die ihre Texte auch hundert Jahre nach dem Verfassen noch so frisch und zeitgemäss erscheinen lassen, als kämen sie geradewegs aus der Feder einer noch lebenden Autorin." I absolutely agree with Müller and other critics who have lauded the ways in which Dohm deploys humor that can be, by turns, biting and mocking or playful and sympathetic, but whereas past...

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27 Müller, Hedwig Dohm, 11.
28 Ibid., 14.
29 Plessen, "Hedwig Dohm (1833-1919)," 135.
scholars have merely mentioned Dohm's keen sense of humor, I intend to undertake an intensive study of it. I will argue that although Dohm never wrote an explicit essay on *Humor* like her contemporaries Frank Wedekind and Thomas Mann, her writings nevertheless reflect an intuitive understanding of humor's power and uses. In Dohm's frequently depressing prose fiction, the author illustrates how humor can be used to prevent social change—how mockery and laughter can discourage a woman from straying outside of her prescribed gender roles. But in her essays, Dohm turns that mockery and laughter back on the "antifeminists" who are trying to prescribe these gender roles in the first place. In short, I argue that Dohm takes the mocking, punitive humor employed by her political enemies and turns it into something progressive and liberating.

**Werde, die du bist (1894)**

Today Dohm's novella *Werde, die du bist* is probably the most widely-read of the author's fictional works, as it is certainly the most accessible. The text has been republished several times since 1977 and even translated into English. The novella makes use of a frame narrative, but this literary technique barely softens the story's depressing emotional impact, which I would liken to a punch to the gut. The novella's *Binnenerzählung* is comprised of the diaries of the fictional, 58-year-old Agnes Schmidt, who begins writing an account of her life after the death of her husband and is eventually committed to a sanatorium. The sanatorium's doctors regard Agnes as a lunatic, but in the most quoted passage from the frame narrative, Agnes insists: "Hier in Ihrer Anstalt war ich weniger irre als während meines ganzen früheren Lebens. Großes habe ich gedacht, Herrliches geschaut."\(^{30}\) She gives one of the doctor's her diary as proof of her claim.

As the above quote suggests, what sets this novella apart from so many others like it published in the late nineteenth-century are its subject matter and viewpoint. The story's main protagonist and narrator is neither a young woman nor even an older woman reflecting on her youth; Agnes Schmidt is an older woman writing about her life as a bourgeois, German widow and the struggle to find her purpose in a society that assumes she doesn't require one. In allowing her older protagonist to speak at length about her widowhood, Dohm writes "contrary to convention" and creates "a clear protest against the 'living-dead' status of the widow in the nineteenth century." 31

Consider Wedekind's Mine-Haha oder Über die körperliche Erziehung der jungen Mädchen, which I examined in the previous chapter of this dissertation. Like Werde, die du bist, Wedekind's fin-de-siècle text is a novella with a frame narrative that purports to contain a widow's memoirs, writings which she has voluntarily turned over to a younger man prior to her death. But the similarities end there. Helene Engel, the narrator of Wedekind's Binnenerzählung, writes exclusively about her strange girlhood on a fictional compound; her memoirs break off the second she steps foot into the wider world as a young woman. Dohm's Agnes, by comparison devotes only a tiny fraction of her diaries to her girlhood, which she describes as ordinary but mentally and spiritually unsatisfying, partly because she is never permitted to read as much as she would like. Even as a girl, Agnes dreams of escaping the restrictions imposed on her due to her class and gender: "Ich träumte oft, dass ich fliegen konnte, weit, weit fort, und so hoch, wie

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31 Abigail Dunn, "'Ob Im Tode Mein Ich Geboren Wird?': The Representation of the Widow in Hedwig Dohm's 'Werde, Die Du Bist' (1894)," in Women and Death 3: Women's Representations of Death in German Culture since 1500, ed. Claire Bielby and Anna Richards, Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), 94.
der Himmel ist."32 Wedekind's Helene, on the other hand, experiences a girlhood on a compound that is strictly regimented and totally illiterate, but even writing in retrospect, she never complains about her circumstances or dreams of escape. Despite structural similarities, Mine-Haha is an account of an exceptional girlhood, whereas Werde is an account of an ordinary womanhood, and—contrary to all expectations—the quotidian, nineteenth-century womanhood is ultimately depicted as far more stifling and restrictive than the girlhood in which the girl is a literal prisoner.

As Dohm argues more explicitly in her essay "Die alte Frau" (1903), for a bourgeois German woman at the turn of the century, it does not get better.33 The indignities and iniquities that accompany womanhood multiply with age and reach a nadir of awfulness when the woman becomes a widow. When Agnes's husband dies after a long illness in Werde, die du bist, she finally has the free time and mental energy to reflect on just how unfair her life has been and how poorly society treats her now that she is no longer tethered to a man. One of the things that bothers Agnes the most is how both strangers and family members alike now feel free to mock her to her face. As I have already mentioned, Werde, die du bist is a thoroughly depressing and unfunny read, but the novella is very aware of humor and its potential for abuse. All of the humor in Werde is of the disparaging variety, and in describing the hurt Agnes' experiences when she is mocked, the novella acknowledges the power one person can exert by making fun of and laughing at another.

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32 Dohm, "Werde, die du bist," 43.

Early on in Agnes' widowhood, she decides to visit her daughters, both of whom are now married with children of their own. Immediately she feels infantilized, but also, paradoxically, infantilizing:

Es machte mich gleich im Anfang nervös, dass meine lieben Kinder mich noch immer "Mämmchen" nennen. "Mutter", ein schönes Wort; "Mämmchen" ist, als nähme man die Mutter nicht ernsthaft, nur so wie eine drollige Alte, als verpflichte es zu nichts. Und Eugen und Heinrich, meine Schwiegersöhne, sagen Mamachen zu mir. Große, erwachsene, fremde Männer nennen mich Mama. Agnes becomes increasingly aware of the power of names and titles throughout the text, and this is one of the first instances in which she experiences dissonance between who she thinks she is and what other people call her. The nicknames her family members confer upon her do not correspond to anything she feels for them. The ostensibly affectionate Mämmchen conveys a lack of respect, while Mamachen is overly familiar. These names—meant to indicate that Agnes is an intimate part of the family—actually alienate her from it. They quickly make her realize two things about this new chapter of her life: First, her daughters are no longer her children; they are strange men's wives. ("…waren das wirklich noch ganz meine Tochter? Sie gehen allerwege in die Fußstapfen ihrer Männer.") And second, as an older woman and a widow, people no longer take Agnes seriously in any role, not even in the hallowed role of mother.

Agnes' struggle to be taken seriously continues throughout her stay with her daughters' families, especially once she realizes that the role of "Großmutter" is nothing like what she expected it to be. Agnes' grandchildren take her even less seriously than her daughters do. In one scene, after Agnes tries and fails to bake one of the children a birthday cake, they gather around her and tease her mercilessly:

…die Kinder fielen mit Neckereien über mich her. Sie tanzten wie kleine Wilde um mich her und sangen den Gassenhauer: "Wir brauchen keine Schwiegermama." Und alle

Agnes does not blame the grandchildren for their actions. At first, she blames herself, saying she has become "unlustig" in her old age. But as her "doch—doch" indicates, Agnes knows that the laughter directed at her, by the adults as well as the children, is not merely an expression of silliness and mirth. Their laughter is meant to chastise her and show her how superfluous a grandmother is to a nineteenth-century, bourgeois family. Furthermore, the melody the children sing to Agnes gives voice to their father's true point of view. Agnes is no longer the mother ("Mamachen") or the grandmother; she is the mother-in-law. Like their mothers, Agnes' grandchildren walk in their fathers' footsteps, since the male perspective is the only one that matters.

Agnes does not enjoy the taunts of her grandchildren, but she appreciates their honesty. She recognizes that the children are merely expressing opinions that the adults in their lives are too well-mannered to speak aloud. Moreover, Agnes' interactions with her grandchildren make her question the organic character of family ties:

Ich hatte mir eine Großmutter anders gedacht, die Kinder wahrscheinlich auch. Sie mögen mich nicht besonders gern. Das ist ganz natürlich. Ich bin nicht lustig, bringe ihnen nichts mit und weiß keine Märchen. Bloß weil ich ihre Großmutter bin und alt, das ist doch kein Grund, mich lieb zu haben.\[36\]

Nineteenth-century German society tells Agnes that there is nothing more "natural" for a woman than the maternal roles of mother and grandmother, but she is beginning to suspect the opposite. Here she sees it as "natural" that her grandchildren feel no affection for her whatsoever, since Agnes herself does not take naturally to the role of grandmother. Agnes understands that she

\[35\] Ibid., 50.

\[36\] Ibid.
does not live up to expectations of a grandmother because the ideal grandmother is a societal construct that has nothing to do with her personal reality.

Agnes' reality is actually quite grim. As one of her grandchildren gleefully points out, she is "nur eine Witwe." Rather than become angry, Agnes reflects solemnly on this childish taunt: "Weises Kind. Eine Witwe, das heißt: Dein Mann ist tot. Du bist mit ihm begraben." The new men in Agnes's life are her sons-in-law, and she has far less patience for their jokes and "endless mother-in-law anecdotes." Her daughter Marlene's husband Eugen, for example, makes fun of Agnes's appetite ("Was Mamachen essen kann! beneidenswert!") but Agnes sees through his "jocular" tone to the reprimand behind his words: she is consuming more resources than that to which she is entitled as "only a widow."

Even more unbearable for Agnes is the way in which her sons-in-law seek to discount her experiences and feelings through humor. In one case, Eugen renders her sense of enjoyment ridiculous: "Als ich neulich Abend meine Freude über den Duft der Lindenblüten äußerte, sagte er: 'Fasse dich nur, Mamachen', und er sagte es so komisch, dass wieder alle lachten." In another incident, Eugen makes fun of Agnes's fear of some shying, rearing horses: "'Gottes Wille geschehe', sagte Eugen lachend, um mir die Angst wegzuschüren, 'wenn dir etwas Menschliches zustoßen sollte, Mamachen, deine Töchter sind ja versorgt, du hast zwei reizende Schwiegersöhne' u. s. w." Agnes's grandchildren and sons-in-law repeatedly urge her to lighten up ("Humor, Mamachen! Humor!")), but instead, their jokes always make her feel sad. The idea

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 52.
39 Ibid., 53.
40 Ibid. "Solche Scherze machen mich immer müde."
that an older woman can experience the same deep emotions as a younger man is absurd to Agnes’s sons-in-law. After all, Agnes has everything a mother-in-law should want—namely, well-married daughters. An older woman has no right to desire anything more, and the laughter her sons-in-law provoke is intended to remind Agnes of this fact. They are effectively joking away her right to subjectivity.

Agnes reasserts her subjectivity by writing down these experiences from her own perspective, but the scenes that she describes in her diary could just as easily be played for laughs if staged or if told from the point of view of an omniscient third-person narrator. If Agnes were a character in a Theodor Fontane novel, she would probably be one of several kooky old ladies supplying comic relief. But in Dohm’s novella, Agnes is able to articulate her feelings of sadness in the first person, and her emotional hurt spoils any fun the reader might have at her expense.

However, there is at least one scene in the novella that would be difficult to make funny from any perspective. Proving that laughter can be cruel and baseless, the most vicious laughter at Agnes’s expense comes randomly from a couple of strangers. Agnes is merely going for a walk by herself in Berlin when she is sarcastically catcalled: "Hinter mir her rief ein junger Bursche: 'Na, junge Frau, wie geht's?' Ausgelassenes Gelächter." Agnes is annoyed by the mockery and derision she provokes in other people simply by existing as an older, single woman in the world, and she recognizes that the boys' laughter is representative of a much larger phenomenon: the society in which Agnes lives finds her continued existence unpleasant. The boys' laughter has almost nothing to do with her personally; the boys are just foot soldiers in a

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41 Dohm, "Werde, die du bist," 59.
centuries-long war on women, and their best weapon against a respectable older woman is mockery and shame.

**Die Antifeministen: Ein Buch der Verteidigung (1902)**

In addition to her fiction, Hedwig Dohm spent the final forty years of her life writing and publishing polemical essays in support of women's rights; they were some of the first as well as some of the last things she ever wrote. Dohm penned her first four feminist essays in the 1870s and initially published them as monographs, but after "Die Frauen Natur und Recht" appeared in 1876, she did not return to polemical writing until 1896, when she published "Herrenrechte" in her friend Maximilian Harden's magazine *Die Zukunft*. From the mid-1890s onward, Dohm was a frequent contributor to liberal publications like *Die Aktion* and *Die Zukunft* as well as magazines with overtly feminist aims such as Minna Cauer's *Die Frauenbewegung* and Helene Lange's *Die Frau*. By the beginning of the twentieth century, there was enough of an audience for Dohm's work that she was able to compile, revise, and republish much of her feminist writing for the volumes *Die Antifeministen: Ein Buch der Verteidigung* (1902) and *Die Mütter: Ein Beitrag zur Erziehungsfrage* (1903).

For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the essays that make up *Die Antifeministen* and some of their earlier incarnations. I am choosing to concentrate on these essays for several reasons, the foremost being that I find them to be among Dohm's funniest writings. Similar to many feminist bloggers writing today, Dohm excels at tearing apart other writers' faulty arguments in an entertaining manner, and nearly all of the essays in *Die Antifeministen* are framed as barb-filled ripostes to less progressive pieces of writing. Secondly, the essays in *Die Antifeministen* perhaps best represent the famous tenet of feminism Dohm
espouses in "Die alte Frau" (1903), an essay in which Dohm rails against the poor treatment of older women in German society. In an oft-quoted passage, Dohm urges older women to stand up to those who would mock them, writing: "Spotte des Spottes, mit dem man dich einschüchtern, dir die Türen zur Freude sperren will." Dohm's decree is a feminist battle cry, but it also acknowledges that mockery, a form of disparaging humor, can be and often is used as a tool of the oppressor. Dohm understands that mockery can prevent the oppressed from speaking out against their mistreatment. The German term Dohm uses, "einschüchtern," is an especially apt way to describe the effects of mockery, as it means "to make shy (schüchtern) through fear." The fear mockery evokes is the fear of humiliation, but Dohm argues that older women especially should not be afraid of society, as they already stand outside it: "Wer von der Gesellschaft nichts mehr will, hat nichts mehr von ihr zu fürchten." Although Dohm is specifically reaching out to "die Greisin" with this piece of advice, I would argue that "mock the mockery" is the larger credo guiding much of Dohm's polemical writing. She refuses to be cowed by ridicule (Spott) and instead chooses to utilize it herself (spotten). In this sense, Dohm proves herself the opposite of the "humorless feminist" of misogynistic legend. She does not object to all contentious humor; rather, she sees it as a tool that can be used on behalf of women even as it is being used against them.

Before I begin an in-depth analysis of the texts that comprise the body of Die Antifeministen, I would like to quickly introduce some of Dohm's stylistic techniques. Although they engage in several discourses (medicine, philosophy, etc.), the essays of Die Antifeministen all follow a similar format and contain many of the same humorous rhetorical strategies. The structure of a Dohm'schen essay is typically as follows: First, Dohm introduces her interlocutors, some of whom she provides with humorous aliases. Then she faithfully reprints their arguments
and counters each one a few lines at a time. Dohm is fond of exclamation points and multiple question marks, and she often inserts her own parenthetical commentary into the middle of a quote. As her opponents’ arguments build, she points out the weaknesses and inconsistencies in their thinking. Sometimes she sarcastically agrees with what her ideological opponent is saying, just to highlight how unreasonable it is; at other times she follows a train of thought all the way to its inevitably absurd end. But throughout much of each essay, Dohm maintains a superior, jocular tone that indicates just how silly she finds her opponents' arguments.

The 1902 edition of *Die Antifeministen* consists of an introduction and five chapters, two of which contain explicitly demarcated subchapters. Nearly every section of the book contains material from Dohm's previously published work; she pulls out a line from a book review here, an anecdote from an essay there, and pieces them together into a cohesive whole. The most interesting editorial choice Dohm makes is her decision to omit the names of many of the antifeminists whose ideas her own work counters. In the original essays, Dohm usually names her antifeminist interlocutors, but in *Die Antifeministen* she refers to many of them simply as *der Herrenrechtler* or *der Gynäkologe*, even as she takes direct quotes from their writings. There are some practical explanations for why Dohm would make use of such aliases: for one, they improve the flow of a text that has been stitched together from bits and pieces like Frankenstein’s monster. But there is also a psychological reason why Dohm would not want to name her opponents: namely, she does not want her readers to feel sorry for them, the poor men being attacked by the belligerent feminist.

In the introduction to *Die Antifeministen*, Dohm addresses some of the criticism that has been leveled at her previous publications and explains why she finds much of it unwarranted. The allegation she finds most ridiculous is her opponents' claim that she, an elderly woman
writer, is waging a war (Geschlechtskampf) against men. Dohm takes pains to articulate that she
does not oppose all men (#notallmen), just those men who do not view women as human beings
equal to men. Furthermore, she insists: "Ich wende mich nicht gegen Personen, sondern gegen
Ideen." Dohm's use of aliases in Die Antifeministen is therefore a means of turning an
individual man who might warrant sympathy (Dr. Max Runge) into an idea (the misogynistic
gynecologist).

The subtitle of Die Antifeministen is Ein Buch der Verteidigung, and in her introduction,
Dohm reiterates that she writes in order to defend the human rights of women, not to impinge
upon the rights of men; or as she phrases it, "meine Feder ist nur mein Schild." So what exactly
is it about Dohm's writing that makes men feel they are under attack? Dohm suspects it is her use
of Spott that so unnerves them, but she defends her right to it, arguing: "Und wie sollte ich mich
ehrerbietigen Ernstes befleißigen, Einwürfen gegenüber, die den Spott in unvergleichlicher
Weise herausfordern." According to Dohm, the arguments of the antifeminists deserve to be
mocked, and anyway it makes far more sense for a lowly woman to make fun of a man than the
other way around:

Oder meint man: nie dürfe die schwache Frau über den starken Mann spotten, immer nur
der starke Mann über die schwache Frau? Wäre das nicht, als schlügen große Jungen
kleine Mädchen, und den kleinen Mädchen läge ob fein stillzuhalten? Haben nicht die
Männer Jahrhunderte hindurch jeden auch noch so bescheidenen Anspruch der Frau mit
Hohn und Spott zurückgewiesen? Bin ich nicht selbst, als ich vor 30 Jahren meine ersten
Schriften in der Frauenfrage veröffentlichte, mit Hohn und Spott überschüttet worden!

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42 Hedwig Dohm, Die Antifeministen: Ein Buch Der Verteidigung (Berlin: Dümmler, 1902), 2.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
In this passage Dohm does two things. First, she invokes the right of the humorist to "punch up" while denouncing those who only "punch down." The colloquial terms "punching up" and "punching down" are often used in humor theory to describe, respectively, "an oppressed party making fun of a more powerful party" and "a more powerful party making fun of an oppressed party." Here Dohm makes use of the same metaphor to invoke the unsettling image of the "large boys hitting little girls." In this comparison, men who make fun of women are like large, violent boys, and it is absurd to expect their smaller victims to "hold still" and not fight back. Moreover, Dohm argues that women who make fun of men are not only "punching up," they are also acting in self-defense. Dohm is personally familiar with the "scorn and ridicule" heaped on women writers of feminist literature, so she understands that the situation she describes is not merely theoretical. However, she refuses to be intimidated.

The next accusation Dohm addresses is her opponents' claim that using Spott is somehow misandrist. "Männerfeindlich diese Form der Polemik?" she asks in a tone tinged with disbelief. "Und wäre ich den Männern liebevoll, bis an die Grenze des Erlaubten gesinnt—mich durch meine Gefühle bestechen lassen, wäre das nicht—weiterschisch?" Dohm's point here is that there is no tone of voice a woman can use to express her opinions that will not be criticized. An opinionated woman is either a scornful man-hater or an emotional sissy. Dohm especially finds fault with the suggestion that she is a man-hater and offers up a metaphor laced with dry humor to explain why this cannot be the case: "Hasse ich etwa den Löwen, gegen dessen Angriff ich mich wehre? Aber, weil ich ihn schön und königlich finde, kann ich mich doch nicht von ihm auffressen lassen." This metaphor is clever because on the one hand, it overtly (albeit sarcastically) flatters men by comparing them to noble, beautiful lions, while on the other hand, it implies that men are dumb, dangerous beasts. The metaphor's phrasing is skillful, too. Dohm's
use of the passive construction "lassen" minimizes the blame she places on men for the sad
disenfranchisement of women, and the humorously emphatic "doch nicht" suggests that the fight
for women's rights is just as reasonable and inevitable as basic self-defense against a wild animal
attack. Misandry, she is arguing, does not exist.\textsuperscript{45}

Dohm ends the introduction to \textit{Die Antifeministen} on a rallying note. She remarks that the
woman question has become more urgent than ever and then, after slipping into the first person-
plural, reminds her fellow feminists: "Unsere Feinde kommen uns von oben und von unten." Of
of course Dohm does not mean this battle-tinged terminology literally. She explains:

\begin{quote}
Das heißt: sie begründen ihre Gegnerschaft entweder mit der geistigen und körperlichen
Minderwertigkeit der Frau, oder sie decken sie mit der erhabenen Mission des Weibes als
Priesterin des häuslichen Herdes, mit ihrer mimosenhaften Zartheit und ähnlichem
Flügelschmuck.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

Here Dohm makes fun of the contradictory nature of antifeminist rhetoric: women are either
idiots or angels (or both). The brunt of Dohm's contempt lands on the idea that women are
somehow too spiritually pure to enjoy basic human rights. The derisive dismissiveness of "und
ähnlichem Flügelschmuck" is a condemnation all in itself. Dohm, like so many humorists, seems
particularly averse to sentimentality, and thus she is especially eager to expose (via \textit{Spott}) the
instances in which antifeminists rely on sentiment to cover up their lapses in logic.

The first chapter of \textit{Die Antifeministen} is an essay in which Dohm identifies what in her
opinion constitutes the four types of antifeminists ("vier Kategorien der Antifeministen"). A
large percentage of the content in this chapter comes from Dohm's 1896 essay "Herrenrechte,"

\textsuperscript{45} See "ironic misandry" in modern feminist humor: Amanda Hess, “The Rise of the Ironic Man-
-drinking_male_tears_and_banning.html.

\textsuperscript{46} Dohm, \textit{Die Antifeministen}, 3.
which I will look at separately in a moment, but Dohm also contributes some new, funny material for the 1902 version. Case in point—the initial breakdown in which Dohm lists the four antifeminist types:

1. Die Altgläubigen.
2. Die Herrenrechtler, zu denen ich die Charakterschwachen und die Geistesdürftigen zähle.
3. Die praktischen Egoisten.
4. Die Ritter der *mater dolorosa*. (Unterabteilung: die Jeremiasse, die auf dem Grabe der Weiblichkeit schluchzen.)\(^{47}\)

Much of the humor here comes from the contrast between the formality of a numbered list and the list's actual content. Right away Dohm establishes that she is not above calling her opponents names ("Geistesdürftigen") and mocking their beliefs (consider the melodramatic connotations of the word "schluchzen"). Dohm then goes on to define each type of person on the list, speculating about their motivations and ridiculing their favorite antifeminist arguments.

Dohm actually directs the least vitriol towards the first type of antifeminist on her list. In Dohm's schema, "die Altgläubigen" are literally keepers of an old, long-held belief (rather than post-Reformation Roman Catholics), and they are legion. Dohm writes: "Die Majorität aller Menschen gehört zu ihnen. Diese Vielen nennen die Gewohnheit ihre Amme, die sie von der Wiege bis zum Grabe sicher nährt."\(^{48}\) This last sentence pokes gentle fun at the antifeminists, who, in a metaphor containing a wet nurse, are clearly the suckling infants, dependent "to the grave." Dohm also compares *die Altgläubigen* to beings in far-off galaxies whose view of Earth is thousands of years old: "Analoges im Geistesleben. Die Rückwärtsgläubenden sehen heut

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\(^{47}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{48}\) Ibid.
noch auf Erden Zustände, wie sie vor Jahrhunderten waren."\textsuperscript{49} As previously displayed in the lion comparison, Dohm excels at writing metaphors that read like underhanded compliments. Here she compares old-fashioned antifeminists to technologically-advanced extraterrestrials, but in such a way that makes the antifeminists look even more regressive than before.

Clearly Dohm reserves much of her ire for the second category of antifeminist on her list: "die Herrenrechtler," i.e. the men's rights activists (MRAs) of the German fin de siècle. These are the men who are concerned less with preserving tradition and more with preserving their own male privilege, or as Dohm phrases it, "[die Herrenrechtler] pochen mehr auf ihre Rechte als auf die himmlischen."\textsuperscript{50} Dohm is especially contemptuous of \textit{Herrenrechtler} because out of all the antifeminists, they are the most likely to use mockery to trivialize feminist concerns. They are "die Spottlustigen im Lande der Reaktion,"\textsuperscript{51} and although Dohm is a humorist herself, she derives no pleasure from humor that comes at feminism's expense.

These issues of \textit{Spott} and who is permitted to be \textit{spottlustig} are especially present in Dohm's 1896 essay "Herrenrechte," which she reformulated for this section of \textit{Die Antifeministen}. The earlier composition is noteworthy because it concerns itself even more explicitly with issues of mockery and laughter than the version that appears later in the revised monograph. Whereas Dohm is coy about naming her interlocutors in \textit{Die Antifeministen}, she begins "Herrenrechte" with her opponent's name, Julius Duboc, and goes on to frame "Herrenrechte" as a direct response to Duboc's essay "Die äußerste Linke der Frauenbewegung," which appeared in \textit{Die Zukunft} a month prior.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 8.
Julius Duboc (1829-1903) was a German author, journalist, and philosopher, and today he is chiefly recognized for his writings on atheism. But in 1896 he took it upon himself to publish his thoughts on the German women’s movement or, to paraphrase Duboc himself, "the modern woman playing at politics." In his short essay, Duboc describes a political division among the women's rights activists and criticizes the leftist feminist desire that every woman receive "Anerkennung als gleichberechtigte Bürgerin in der Verfassung," arguing that it is impossible for women to become equal to men in every respect and in every relationship. He finds marriage particularly antithetical to equality, since "every parliament requires a majority vote," and half-jokingly warns of a feminist future in which men and women have switched roles and the man must wield the "Küchenlöffel." As evidence that such a dystopia is possible, Duboc cites a personal ad in the Zürcher Tageblatt in which a woman of means claims to be looking for a husband with a gentle, modest demeanor who knows how to run a household and is good with children. Duboc responds ominously: "Man könnte das für einen schlechten Witz halten, aber Witze, auch die schlechtesten, sind bekanntlich äußerst bezeichnend für die Zeit, die an ihnen Geschmack findet." Duboc does not explain why he means by "a bad joke," and out of context it is not entirely clear who or what the joke is targeting. Is the ad making fun of feminism? (A man caring for children? That's ridiculous! Those crazy feminists…) Or is the ad making fun of the narrow, unrealistic expectations men have for their wives? And why does Duboc consider the ad a bad joke? Is it objectionable because it doesn't make him laugh? Because the punchline is too obvious? Or does Duboc find the very idea of a house-husband offensive? His grim explanation that jokes are indicative of their time suggests the latter. So although Duboc maintains a light and supercilious tone throughout his own essay, he is well aware that the existence of potentially feminist "jokes" is a sign of the growing power of the women's movements he so derides.
Duboc's condescending essay seems to have attracted Dohm's attention largely because of its mocking, humorous tone. Dohm takes the time to refute the content of her opponent's statements with measured, logical arguments, but she spends nearly an equal amount of time explaining why Duboc's "laughter" at feminism is unjustified. Ironically, in her own essay Dohm writes critically of Duboc's use of Spott while simultaneously employing it liberally herself.

Dohm begins "Herrenrechte" with a moment of sarcastic gratitude. She gives thanks for antifeminists like Duboc, writers and politicians who introduce views to the "Frauenwelt" so conservative they make the arguments of all antifeminists, even the "moderate" ones, less convincing. She then launches into her own counter-assault on Duboc's ideas about the women's movements: "Drei Punkte sind es, ziemlich unwesentliche, scheint mir, die Julius Duboc mit den Pfeilen seines Spottes zu treffen sich bemühmt." In just one sentence, Dohm makes several jabs at her opponent. First, she minimizes Duboc's arguments by immediately qualifying his "points" as "rather irrelevant." Then she describes Duboc as merely attempting to make these points. Ultimately, the "arrows of his mockery" miss the mark. This idea of "missing the mark" becomes Dohm's focus in the essay, as she often claims to object less to the fact that Duboc uses mockery than that he uses it poorly.

For example, Dohm alludes to Duboc making fun of "die Frauenversammlungen, die, gleich den Parlamenten, als Rechte und Linke miteinander streiten." Dohm does not disagree with the suggestion that a political divide exists within in the fight for women's rights but rather the idea that Duboc finds it not only worthy of note but worthy of mockery. Dohm therefore responds to Duboc with one of her favorite polemical strategies: a sarcastic rhetorical question.

52 And also because he quotes her. And also because Die Zukunft is supposed to be a liberal magazine.
"Ist Duboc ein Denker?" she asks. "Das heißt, er brauchte gar kein Denker zu sein, um bemerkt zu haben, dass bei jeder sozialen oder politischen Bewegung eine Rechte und eine Linke sich bildet..." Dohm then produces a sober explanation of why a large group of diverse people (albeit women) might have a spectrum of political ideas, which she ends with a standalone, one-line paragraph: "Aber Herr Duboc lacht."

By this point, Dohm's larger rhetorical strategy in "Herrenrechte" has developed a distinct structure. First she acknowledges a particular way in which Duboc, her philosophical opponent, is trying to use disparaging humor to undermine and discredit the German women's movements. Dohm then explains why Duboc's attempt at mockery is not actually funny while making fun of how not funny it is. Like an insulted comedian, she fights humor with humor.

As the essay continues, Dohm makes it more and more obvious that she is contemptuous not only of Duboc's antifeminist arguments but also his jokes at feminists' expense. In another early paragraph, she writes unfavorably of Duboc's "wit" as well as his ideas about marriage: "Das zweite Schadenfeuer, das Duboc mit den Wasserstrahlen (ich meine das Wasser nicht böse!) seines Witzes löschen will, ist das eheliche Verhältnis, wie es sich aus der von den Frauen gewollten Neuschöpfung entwickeln würde." The humorous parenthetical aside is another of Dohm's favorite rhetorical strategies, and here ("no offense to water!") she uses it to take aim at her opponent's "wit." Dohm's use of humor is so effective in this case because it allows her to demonstrate her own capable wit and denigrate Duboc's at the same time.

Another form of humor at which Dohm excels is the brief, humorous anecdote, and "Herrenrechte" contains two of her best. Since Duboc argues that a marriage cannot function unless the husband retains the "majority vote," Dohm provides an example of how ridiculous such a strictly gendered hierarchy can appear in practice. She writes:
Ich war an einem Sylvesterabend Ohrenzeuge, als so ein Herrenrechtler (er braute noch am Punsch) seine Frau, die mit dem Glockenschlag zwölf "Prosit Neujahr!" rief, zur Ruhe wies mit den Worten: "Ich habe hier zu bestimmen, wann Mitternacht ist."53

With just a few lines, Dohm puts gender relations in perspective and shows how silly it is that men insist on being in charge of absolutely everything. Time is independent of a single German man's verdict; the husband at the party has no real control over when midnight is, and time will march on without him. In refusing to allow his wife to ring in the New Year, the husband comes off as petulant and demonstrates just how arbitrary it is that a man (even a drunk man) is permitted to define the rules of the world instead of a woman. Dohm expands on this idea more explicitly in Die Antifeministen when she once again speculates about the vastness of the universe and the relative insignificance of man. She says dismissively of the Herrenrechtler: "Ach Gott, sie sollten doch mit ihrer Männlichkeit nicht so protzen." She warns the reader that humans might not be the only thinking beings in the universe and that the men of Earth may in fact be "Parias der Weltschöpfung."54

In Die Antifeministen, Dohm even comes up with a term for men who—at least on some level—know they do not deserve to be in power: die Charakterschwachen. According to Dohm, fear and insecurity motivate the antifeminism of this particular breed:

Die Charakterschwachen machen Front gegen die Frauenbewegung–aus Furcht. Sie haben immer Angst, von der Frau–besonders von ihrer eigenen–unterdrückt zu werden. Weil sie sich heimlich ihrer Schwäche bewußt sind, betonen sie bei jeder Gelegenheit ihre Oberhoheit.55


54 Dohm, Die Antifeministen, 7.

55 Ibid., 7–8.
Dohm is aware that the "woman who wears the pants in the marriage"\textsuperscript{56} is a common humorous figure in the popular imagination, and here she repurposes it for feminist use. Men who habitually defer to their wives' wishes—ostensibly out of cowardice\textsuperscript{57}—are often targets of antifeminist mockery, so here she turns their own insult back on them by painting the \textit{Herrenrechtler} as the real cowards. The argument—admittedly not an original one—is that only an insecure man trying to hide his own weaknesses would feel the need to insist upon the greater frailty of all women.

As Dohm later points out, sometimes an antifeminist's attempt to redirect attention away from his own shortcomings only serves to highlight them. Such is the situation in the next humorous anecdote Dohm relates about talking to a \textit{Herrenrechtler}: "Ein Anderer vertraute mir einmal, er würde sich nie mit einer Ärztin verheiraten, aus Angst, sie könnte eines Tages seinen Gänsebraten mit einem Skalpell tranchieren. Ich riet ihm Vegetarier zu werden."\textsuperscript{58} Dohm recognizes that the man who tells her this is half-joking ("Spaß muss sein!")\textsuperscript{58}, but it is the sincere antifeminism behind his words that bothers her. The image of the doctor-wife carving her husband's roast with a scalpel illustrates how absurd antifeminist arguments can become and exposes the faulty logic of the type of man to dream up such a scenario. Dohm's comeback, on the other hand, is drily humorous but logically sound. By reprinting the man's joke and including her own mocking reply, Dohm is using the man's own joke against him to reclaim the discursive upper hand.

\textsuperscript{56} Dohm, "Herrenrechte," 94. (Dohm uses two different phrases to refer to this phenomenon: "Die Frau hat die Hosen an" and "Die Frau schwingt den Pantoffel.")

\textsuperscript{57} The modern English parlance for such a man is "whipped."

\textsuperscript{58} Dohm, \textit{Die Antifeministen}. (See also Dohm, "Herrenrechte," 96.)
Later in "Herrenrechte," Dohm goes beyond simply rebutting Duboc's points and devotes several paragraphs to her own thoughts on marriage, inheritance, and the nature of man. First Dohm argues that for most modern people marriage is already a partnership in which neither party consistently defers to the other's wishes; next she points out how unfair it is that a brother ("Dummheit kein Hindernis!") will always enjoy opportunities that his sister, who is otherwise equal to him in birth, never will, and finally, most compellingly, she objects to the idea that the "Natur des Weibes" is anything other than socially constructed. In any case, Dohm sees no inherent virtue in the natural man "der, wenn er Hunger hat, seine Mitmenschen auffrisst und der das Weib vergewaltigt, wenn ihn die Lust dazu anwandelt." But at the end of the essay, Dohm returns to what really bothers her about Duboc's criticism of the women's movements: his laughing, mocking tone. She writes: "Der Narben lacht, wer Wunden nie gefühlt. Darum eben lacht Herr Duboc." In other words, is easy for Duboc to joke about the fight for women's rights because he already enjoys more privilege than his feminist contemporaries want for themselves. It is for this same reason that the term Herrenrechtler is a joke in and of itself: men already have more than their share of rights.

In the final part of "Herrenrechte," Dohm acknowledges that Duboc's assumptions about the inferiority of women are widespread and submits as evidence a misogynistic nursery rhyme she found "in the hands of her little granddaughter" about little girls having one-thousandth the value of little boys. Dohm reproduces this rhyme in its entirety and then ends the essay with the

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60 The saying about scars and wounds appears in Act 2 of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and is spoken by Romeo, who is reacting to the friendly mockery of Mercutio. Dohm was no doubt aware of how the quote's original context might complicate its interpretation, but I believe she is using it more straightforwardly here.
simple line: "Herr Duboc lacht. Ich nicht." Dohm's statement is a powerful way to conclude an essay, but it is not entirely true. As a humorous writer, Dohm "laughs" just as often as Duboc, but she is laughing at very different things. Duboc mocks women's rights activists, whom he literally compares to children playing with guns (harmless fun provided the guns are not loaded). Dohm, on the other hand, mocks Duboc's condescending mockery, thereby acting in accordance with her own exhortation: "Spotte des Spottes!"

Perhaps because the men's rights activist is himself "spottlustig," Dohm seems to enjoy making fun of the Herrenrechtler more than any other type of antifeminist, but he is only the second category on her list. In Die Antifeministen she defines two further types. The third type, "der praktische Egoist" distinguishes himself from the Herrenrechtler by not having an ideology that stretches beyond himself. His response to the suggestion that women receive the right to study or vote is simply: "Wozu? was habe ich davon?"61 Probably due to the narrowness of his worldview, Dohm does not expend many words on the practical egoist. And although she does seem to delight in mocking "Die Ritter der mater dolorosa" through hyperbolic language (she calls them "Schutzengel, die ihre Götterhände über das gequälte Weib halten"), she chooses to give them their own chapter of Die Antifeministen. Thus Dohm concludes her taxonomy with a message for her critics, particularly those who accuse her of not taking antifeminist arguments seriously: "Man nenne mir den Schriftsteller, das Buch, die Broschüre, das die Gegnerschaft mit Geist, Logik und Gerechtigkeit vertritt, und ich will es eifrig und vorurteilslos studieren."62

There is a tinge of sarcasm to this challenge, as Dohm obviously does not expect any balanced, logical arguments from her opponents. What Dohm is really doing with this line is reiterating her


62 Ibid., 11.
right to make fun of the antifeminists. In effect, she is saying: I will only stop making fun of antifeminists when they stop producing silly nonsense.

Dohm is aware that not all people who write antifeminist screeds are Geistesdürftige. She believes some are otherwise rational thinkers with enormous intellectual blind spots, and the most tragic of these for Dohm personally is Friedrich Nietzsche. In 1898 she published an essay in Die Zukunft on misogyny in Nietzsche's writings titled "Nietzsche und die Frauen," which she later included in a somewhat abridged form in the chapter "Die Altgläubigen" in Die Antifeministen. Dohm was a vocal admirer of Nietzsche's philosophy, and references to his works crop up in many of her texts. Ruth-Ellen Joeres theorizes that Nietzsche appealed to Dohm because as a feminist, "she was attracted to a discourse that stressed individuality and autonomy…" But Dohm's admiration for Nietzsche was not unequivocal, and her criticism of the philosopher appears even in fictional works. For example, the short story "Rätselbilder vom Leben und vom Tod" (1913) ends ironically when the elderly female protagonist, who has just chosen to reject nihilism, is "killed by a falling bust of Nietzsche."

In her polemical writings, Dohm takes a more direct tactic, spelling out the various ways in which Nietzsche's theories fail women. The Nietzsche subchapter in Die Antifeministen does

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63 I am aware that not everyone interprets these passages about women in Nietzsche as literally as Dohm does and therefore might dispute the assertion that they are misogynistic, but in this chapter I am choosing to focus on Nietzsche through the lens of Dohm's writings. For a more nuanced interpretation of Nietzsche's writings about women and femininity, I suggest turning to the 1994 collection of essays Nietzsche and the Feminine, edited by Peter J. Burgard.

64 Joeres, "Hedwig Dohm," 90.


66 Joeres, "Hedwig Dohm," 90.
not include quite as many quips and humorous asides as many of the other chapters, possibly because Dohm truly feels betrayed by the dead philosopher, a "thinker" she otherwise respects. Just as Dohm answered the Spott of the Herrenrechtler with more Spott, she responds to Nietzsche's misogynistic philosophy with her own feminist logic. This is not to say that Dohm maintains a serious tone throughout "Nietzsche und die Frauen"; on the contrary, she makes liberal use of hyperbole and comes up with many unflattering metaphors, deliberately injecting humor into an otherwise serious critique. For instance, Dohm writes at the start of the text that she is unsurprised when writers of mediocre intellect publish their misogynistic musings, but she has difficulty making sense of it when geniuses do the same:

> Woher aber die phänomenale Erscheinung, daß selbst vornehme, kühnste Denker, sobald sie die Feder zur Frauenfrage ergreifen (warum thun sie es nur?), eine Pause für den Kopf machen und mit Gefühlen, Instinkten, Intuitionen, ewigen Wahrheiten jonglieren?67

Dohm once again chooses to express her frustration via a humorously plaintive rhetorical question ("Why do they do it?") and scornful phrasing. These great thinkers no longer think; they "give their heads a break" and "juggle feelings and intuitions" instead. The word "jonglieren," so often associated with clowns, highlights how silly Dohm finds antifeminist thinking, and she further belittles misogynistic philosophers by calling them junk peddlers "auf einem Gedanken-Trödelmarkt."68 Even when Dohm writes about how greatly her idol Nietzsche has disappointed her, her words are laced with a comic level of melodrama:

> Ich las, was er über die Frau geschrieben, mit Bestürzung, tiefem Erstaunen. Verhüllten Hauptes hätte ich aufweinen mögen: "Auch Du, mein Sohn Brutus!" Ein Schauder faßte

67 Dohm, Die Antifeministen, 21.

68 Ibid.
mich, wie wenn plötzlich aus der erhabenen Schönheit des Ozeans ein Mißgebilde sich reckt.\textsuperscript{69}

In Dohm's hands, a philosophical text is something that can provoke Shakespearian howls of betrayal and induce the same horror as a monster rising from the sea. She tempers even genuine frustration with humorous hyperbole.

Dohm's takedown of Nietzsche's misogyny begins with name-calling and dabbles in ad hominem attacks, but for most of the essay, Dohm cleverly pits Nietzsche against himself, using his own words and ideas to build an argument against him. On more than one occasion she reprints Nietzsche's assertion that "[d]er Mann macht sich das Bild des Weibes und das Weib bildet sich nach diesem Bild." This is a quote from the second "book" of \textit{Die fröhliche Wissenschaft}, and the passage in which it appears, "Wille und Willigkeit," is structured like a conversation between a wise man and a few everyday misogynists. "Der weise Mann" explains to the other men that a man cannot be corrupted by a woman because a woman lacks the \textit{Wille} to do much of anything. A woman is therefore "unschuldig im zweiten Grade" for her existence (\textit{Dasein}).\textsuperscript{70} The first time Dohm makes use of this quote, it caps her brief criticism of the writers Guy de Maupassant and August Strindberg, both of whom depict women as animalistic she-devils. It is with a touch of gallows humor that Dohm writes: "Strindberg unterscheidet sich aber dadurch von Maupassant, daß seine Bestien die Männer töten, während Maupassants Bestien von ihren Liebhabern getötet werden."\textsuperscript{71} Dohm then reprints the Nietzsche quote about "das Bild des

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 24.


\textsuperscript{71} Dohm, \textit{Die Antifeministen}, 22.
Weibes" and appends to it the comment: "Wie wahr! Wie wahr!" Since Dohm is familiar with the context of the Nietzsche quote, her cry of agreement contains a touch of sarcasm. Dohm agrees with the assertion that men create an image (Bild) of woman, but she interprets it rather differently than Nietzsche probably intended. Obviously Dohm rejects the idea that women lack Wille, but she is only too aware that the Bild des Weibes is something that has been "made" i.e. constructed by forces outside women's' control. Nietzsche, in Dohm's view, has no idea how right he is on this point.

The next way in which Dohm uses Nietzsche's own ideas against him is by pointing out that he, too, is intellectually fallible. She quotes his aphorism from the Morgenröthe that "[a]uch grosse Geister haben nur ihre fünf Finger breite Erfahrung, — gleich daneben hört ihr Nachdenken auf: und es beginnt ihr unendlicher leerer Raum und ihre Dummheit." Dohm seizes on this idea of "experience," arguing that women are far outside Nietzsche's realm of expertise. Citing biographical information about the philosopher, she contends that Nietzsche has even less of a right to claim knowledge about women than most men, as his personal interactions with women were few and far between. (Dohm describes him as "frauenfremd.) In the version of "Nietzsche und die Frauen" published in Die Zukunft, Dohm concludes this line of argumentation with the zinger: "Friedrich Nietzsche ist kein Sokrates; er weiß nicht, was er nicht weiß." Nietzsche may be wise enough to recognize that every mind has its limits, but as Dohm effectively argues, he is unable to recognize his own.

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73 Dohm, Die Antifeministen, 29.

74 Hedwig Dohm, "Nietzsche und die Frauen," in Hedwig Dohm: Ausgewählte Texte; Ein Lesebuch zum Jubiläum ihres 175. Geburtstages mit Essays und Feuilletons, Novellen und
Often Dohm does not have to look outside Nietzsche's writings on women in order to use his own words against him because his Bild des Weibes is already wildly inconsistent. On the one hand, Nietzsche argues in Jenseits von Gut und Böse that if women are granted more rights, they will lose their charms and bring about what Dohm refers to as the "Verhäßlichung Europas." On the other hand, Nietzsche claims that women are by nature superficial and pedantic, selfish and predatory, causing Dohm to wonder what "charms" could possibly be lost: "Womit ist's zu Ende? Mit den Tigerkrallen, den weiten, schweifenden Begierden, der innerlichen Wildheit, dem Egoismus? Würde es Europa wirklich so sehr verhäßlichen, wenn einige dieser reizenden Eigenschaften zum Teufel gingen?

Dohm's sarcasm is blatant here and continues as she works her way through the rest of the passage from Jenseits, especially once she starts quoting Nietzsche's thoughts on turning women into "Freigeister und Litteraten."

According to Nietzsche, even a godless man finds an unpious woman "lächerlich" and—due to the strain on the woman's nerves—somehow unfit for bearing children. Dohm is incredulous: "Warum soll denn die Frau durchaus fromm sein, wenn der Mann unfromm ist? Nur um des Kontrastes willen?"

In her view, Nietzsche is the "laughable" figure in this situation.

Eventually Dohm affects an attitude of contemptuous pity towards her interlocutor and addresses


76 Dohm, Die Antifeministen, 27.

77 Ibid.
him in the manner of a priestess praising a god but also, paradoxically, of a parent chastising a child:

O Nietzsche, Du hoher, priesterlicher Geist, tiefer Geheimnisse Wisser und doch der einfachsten Wahrheiten Nichtwisser! Mit Gott und Göttern kannst Du reden, mit den Gestirnen, mit dem Meer, mit Geistern und Gespenstern. Nur mit und über Frauen kannst du nicht reden.\textsuperscript{78}

Dohm's admiration for Nietzsche's other writings may be sincere, but her hifalutin phrasing when she praises him winks at her reader. Nietzsche may have a "priestly spirit," but Dohm knows that he is not a god; and addressing him like one ("O Nietzsche") only highlights his human susceptibility to error. He can speak "with the sea" (whatever that means) but not "with or about women." To emphasize this point, Dohm once again reprints Nietzsche's assertion about each person's limited realm of experience, outside of which lies only "Dummheit." The subsequent conclusion of Dohm's essay consists of only one stand-alone line: "Also sprach Zarathustra."

This final line is representative of Dohm's tone and strategy throughout the essay. She uses Nietzsche's own words to counter his more misogynistic arguments, and although she faithfully transcribes them, she contextualizes them in such a way as to make them sarcastic.

More deserving of Dohm's contempt than Nietzsche are the doctors she includes in the category of \textit{Ritter der mater dolorosa}, men who claim women are physiologically unfit to study at the university level (or at all). Dohm first wrote about these antifeminist men of science in 1897, when she published the essay "Die Ritter der mater dolorosa" in \textit{Die Frauenbewegung}. The original essay is an indignant response to a couple of antifeminist pamphlets authored by male doctors—one a professor of gynecology in Göttingen, the other a neurologist in Berlin. Dohm preserves and expands much of her initial critique in \textit{Die Antifeministen}, and additionally,\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 31–32.
she includes criticism of an essay by a third doctor, the neurologist and psychiatrist Paul Julius Möbius. Thus her title for this chapter of the book references three doctors—"Drei Ärzte als Ritter der mater dolorosa"—all of whom she offers anonymity in Die Antifeministen except for "der schöne Herr Möbius," whose views Dohm seems to find the most offensive. The reasoning she provides for naming this particular man among her many opponents drips with sarcasm: "Den Namen des Autors möchte ich hier nicht unterschlagen, der Herr Möbius könnte sonst denken, ich wollte ihm den Ruhm seiner fulminanten Entdeckung schmälern." Needless to say, Dohm does not find the scientific "discoveries" of any of these doctors to be "brilliant."

This chapter of Die Antifeministen is noteworthy for how personal Dohm makes many of her arguments. More than in her other polemical texts, she leans on her own experiences as a woman to come up with counterevidence to prove the male doctors wrong. At the beginning of the chapter she modestly points out: "Diese drei Ärzte haben den immensen Vorteil einer umfassenden Universitätsbildung vor mir voraus. Ich aber habe den Vorteil, eine Frau zu sein..." The advantage of being a woman turns out to be a considerable one in the late nineteenth-century, especially since the doctors Dohm is criticizing are fond of making grand, sweeping statements about the nature of the female soul. Dohm is especially contemptuous of the idea that no one understands a woman better than her gynecologist, and she draws on personal knowledge to counter it:

Ich kenne unendlich viel Frauen, die in der Lage waren, einen Frauenarzt konsultieren zu müssen, und ich möchte darauf schwören, daß nicht eine einzige unter ihnen war, die dem fremden Arzt Aufschlüsse über ihr Seelenleben gegeben hat, noch daß der Frauenarzt je Neigung an den Tag gelegt hätte, darüber informiert zu werden.

79 Ibid., 35.
80 Ibid., 36.
Here it is not so much the anecdotal content, but rather the exaggerated, elegant prose that makes Dohm's argument so amusing. Dohm's rephrasing of the belief that a gynecologist "besitzt am meisten Gelegenheit, das Seelenleben des Weibes zu studieren" is a form of parody, as it exposes the basis for the initial belief as totally absurd.

Dohm maintains a tone of incredulous superiority throughout the chapter on the three doctors, whose assertions about the female mind and body become increasingly ludicrous. One doctor claims that adolescent girls should avoid "das abstrakte Gymnasialwissen" because the time spent sitting in a school and thinking might damage their developing bodies. Dohm points out the practical error in such an argument—girls' schools are typically more poorly ventilated than boys' lofty-ceilinged Gymnasien—but she also expresses how difficult she finds it to even engage with the stupid idea that thinking might damage a girl's reproductive organs: "Darüber ernsthaft zu reden, kommt mir beinahe lächerlich vor. Von der Weisheit, die das simpelste Knabengehirn nicht sprengt, wird auch ein Mädchenkopf nicht aus den Fugen gehen." 81 She can only speculate that the men who believe such a thing must have really hated their own time at school: "Himmel, wie sauer muß den Ärzten das Gymnasialwissen geworden sein!"

This last exclamation is typical of Dohm, a writer who is not content to merely argue against her opponents. She also likes to theorize about the origins of their faulty belief systems, and in the case of these antifeminist doctors, she thinks she understands why they harbor such erroneous beliefs about women: "Ich meine, die Frauenwelt erscheint den Frauenärzten wie eine große Krankenstube, weil sie nur kranke Frauen zu Gesicht bekommen." 82 Due to their overexposure to sick women, these doctors assume all women suffer so terribly during

81 Ibid., 38.
82 Ibid., 42.
menstruation and pregnancy that they are incapable of doing anything and must be protected ("geschont."). But Dohm is not naïve; she is aware that misogyny is a much bigger factor in these doctors' misapprehensions. The same men who claim women are too delicate and too ashamed to work three months out of the year are the same who benefit from the labor of female cooks, maids, and factory workers. Dohm pokes fun at this nonsensical reasoning by pretending to take it seriously while imitating its circular absurdity: "Aber, wenn die Scham ihr gebietet, den Vorgang zu verheimlichen, so weiß doch niemand etwas davon, und wer soll sie denn nun schonen, wenn niemand weiß, wann geschont werden muß?"83 The numerous clauses and vague wording of Dohm's statement serve to highlight the silliness of the doctors' argument.

Dohm is most scornful of the antifeminist doctors' pretense that they only want to restrict women from studying (medicine in particular) out of benevolence. Nurses and midwives, Dohm argues, prove this is not the case, as both work under far more distressing conditions than well-paid doctors. To point out this disparity, Dohm relies on one of her favorite techniques: the humorous rhetorical question. Pursuing the antifeminist line of logic about female delicacy, she asks:


Each question comes off as more sarcastic than the last, ending with Dohm's biting conclusion that screams must be music to midwives' ears. In this passage, Dohm once again mimics the

83 Ibid., 40.
84 Ibid., 49.
hyperbolic language of her opponents in order to make fun of how ridiculous their claims are while also pointing out the many contradictions in their arguments. According to Dohm, "[s]chreiende Widersprüche" are a hallmark of antifeminism because antifeminist beliefs are not based in fact.85 Fortunately for Dohm, contradictions are a type of incongruity and therefore easily exploited as a source of humor.

It also helps that many of the antifeminist doctors' proclamations border on the apocalyptic, so Dohm does not have to exaggerate them in order to make fun of them. One doctor claims that if women are allowed to study, they will lose their womanly charms to the point where men will no longer be interested in them sexually, leading to the extinction of mankind. Dohm does not even have to unpack this particular idea to show how silly it is; she simply repeats it: "Das ganze Menschengeschlecht stirbt aus, wenn die Frau Medizin studiert!" Dr. Moebius makes an even more outrageous claim when he argues that women should not study at university because they will start to resemble people more than animals and will therefore be less appealing to men. Dohm's response to his argument contains one of her best put-downs: "Die Tierähnlichkeit macht sie bewundernswert? [...] Wir wollen der Tierliebe des Herrn nicht zu nahe treten." Of the three Ritter der mater dolorosa, Moebius is clearly Dohm's favorite target of Spott, and she puts her white-knight metaphor to good use with him, describing how he wields "seine tapfere Lanze für den Schwachsinn des Weibes."86 Dohm seems to relish pointing out the blatant contradictions in Moebius's stance on women, as he is clearly unable to spot them on his own. For example, she writes:

Nachdem der schöne alte Herr Möbius dem Weiße die lange Liste ihrer tierähnlichen Qualitäten entrollt hat, setzt er mit goldiger Naivität hinzu: "Sehen wir uns auch genötigt.

85 Ibid., 62.
86 Ibid., 58.
These types of passages are already so logically flawed that all Dohm has to do to make fun of them is provide a gently mocking frame.

In the next chapter of *Die Antifeministen*, "Weib contra Weib," Dohm has to exert herself a little more in order to counter the arguments of her three interlocutors: Laura Marholm, Ellen Key, and Lou Andreas-Salomé. For Dohm, these antifeminist women writers have more in common with Nietzsche than Moebius in that publicly criticizing them causes her to experience "Gewissensskrupeln."\(^{87}\) Although she disagrees with many of their individual views, Dohm admires the trio's writerly skills and "exquisite" minds. Nevertheless, Dohm does not hesitate to make fun of the inherent hypocrisy of women writers advocating the oppression of women. In Dohm's opinion, such women are guilty of "ungratefulness," as they clearly enjoy a degree of freedom most women do not and thus have benefited more than most from the "fruits" of other women's feminist labor. As such, she is not afraid to call them on their nonsense and mock the bad logic behind their arguments.

It helps Dohm's case that, unlike the antifeminist doctors of the previous chapter, the three women writers do not agree about the nature or purpose of woman: "Bei Laura Marholm ist der Daseinszweck des Weibes der Mann; bei Ellen Key ist er das Kind; bei Lou Andreas-Salomé ist das Weib etwas Selbsteigenes, das nur seine eigene Entwicklung sucht."\(^{88}\) The only thing the three women have in common apart from their gender is a strong aversion to the radical women's movements, since all three suffer from the nebulous fear that a woman with too many human

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 80.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 84.
rights will no longer adhere to their idea of what a woman should be. The grand irony, of course, is that none of these women live according to their own ideals. Laura Marholm, who does not think women should even want to own themselves (sich selbst besitzen) let alone earn a living from an occupation, profits from the publication of her books, prompting Dohm's sarcastic question: "Oder schenkt sie den Buchhändlern ihre Bücher? Ich bin überzeugt, sie nimmt dafür, soviel sie kriegen kann." Ellen Key does not believe that women should exert themselves intellectually, but she is a well-educated woman who writes theoretical texts. Dohm is quick to mock the hypocrisy of such a position: "Ellen Key hat studiert. Ob ihre Weiblichkeit es ausgehalten hat? Wie überzeugend wäre es, wenn sie vor uns hinträte mit den Worten: 'Ich spreche aus eigener Erfahrung, denn trauernd sitze ich auf den Trümmern meiner Weiblichkeit!'" With this humorously hyperbolic exclamation, Dohm illustrates the Catch-22 of being an antifeminist woman writer. Why should anyone read a woman's theory of womanhood and femininity when that very theory proposes that women should not possess intellectual authority? Key is Dohm's favorite target of mockery in this chapter, perhaps because Dohm is so adept at using Key's own language to insult her:

Ellen Key fürchtet auch, "daß ein so begrenztes Wesen, wie die Frau es ist, von einer zu großen (intellektuellen) Kraftentwicklung zersprengt werde." Wenn es nicht unhöflich klang, könnte ich sagen, daß ihre Kraftentwicklung bei der Abfassung ihres Essays nicht zu groß gewesen sein muß, da sie ihr begrenztes Wesen nicht zersprengt hat.

Dohm's quick disclaimer ("If it wouldn't sound impolite, I could say...") followed by a bald-faced insult is reminiscent of Dr. Moebius's insistence that calling women feeble-minded is not saying anything to their detriment. The difference between Dohm and Moebius, however, is that

89 Ibid., 128.

90 Ibid., 128–29.
Dohm’s ironic wording is fully intentional and meant to provoke a chuckle from the reader, while the rest of her statement highlights the paradox Key has created for herself as an antifeminist woman.

Dohm's unique frustration with Marholm, Key, and Salomé is that all three embody the saying, "Do as I say, not as I do." The gap between their written words and lived actions is ripe for mockery, but eventually Dohm seems more exhausted than amused by their moral incongruity. Dohm describes reading Key's writings about how women should not write, clutching her head, and wondering: "Bin ich verrückt oder..."91 Ultimately, Dohm just wishes these women would follow their own advice for women:

Bei Gott, wenn diese lieben und hochbegabten Dichterinnen so sehr gegen die Berufstätigkeit der Frau und ihre Konkurrenz mit dem Mann eifern: warum bleiben sie denn nicht selbst im Rahmen der Weiblichkeit, fern jeder Berufstätigkeit, warum produzieren sie denn Fallobst und ähnliches Zeug?92

This passage is entirely typical of Dohm's criticism of her fellow women writers. She begins with an exaggerated cry ("By God…") and then lays out a rhetorical question that starts with a compliment of her interlocutors ("dear and highly gifted poets") and ends with a humorously dismissive insult of their anti-feminist screeds. But at the very of the "Weib contra Weib" section, Dohm turns away from this type of humor-laced attack and makes an earnest plea for the right to be herself: "Was ich sein kann, das will ich sein." She then repeats her favorite piece of Shakespearian-inspired wisdom ("Der Narben lacht, wer Wunden nie gefühlt. Darum eben lacht der Antifeminist.") , which seems an odd choice at the end of the section "Weib contra Weib." Ostensibly female antifeminists—by virtue of being women—suffer many of the same "wounds"

91 Ibid., 131.
92 Ibid., 134.
as feminist women like Dohm. Furthermore, Dohm makes use of humor and laughs at her ideological opponents far more often than Marholm, Salomé, or Key, which makes her denouncement of laughter seem a tad hypocritical. But Dohm, as I have established, differentiates between the *Spott* of the oppressor and the defensive *Spotten* of an activist, and her final line ("Dieses Buch der Verteidigung ist mit Herzblut geschrieben.") reiterates her point that she does not use mockery to diminish others but rather to passionately defend her own human rights.

**Conclusion**

Hedwig Dohm was ahead of her time—that much is already widely accepted in scholarship on the feminist theorist and writer. She was one of the first people to publicly call gender a social construct independent of biological sex, but as this chapter explains, she was also one of the first feminist writers to understand the complex role humor could play in the fight for gender equality. Dohm's works of fiction, like the novella *Werde, die du bist*, illustrate the ways in which humor that disparages women—that "punches down"—harms and oppresses them, but in her feminist essays, Dohm shows that she is not afraid to "punch up" and use similarly disparaging humor against her antifeminist interlocutors. In accordance with her insistence that she is merely a "defender" of women, Dohm reserves her most cutting humorous remarks for those interlocutors who have themselves made the most jokes at women's expense. At the same time, Dohm does not shy away from making fun of the bad ideas of good writers whom she otherwise admires—like Friedrich Nietzsche and Lou Andreas-Salomé. All of Dohm's critiques, however, are infused with humor. She employs a limited but effective arsenal of rhetorical weapons to mock and dismantle her interlocutors' arguments. She also frequently uses a
technique favored by the feminist bloggers of today—she quotes her interlocutors back at themselves, highlighting every unfortunate turn of phrase and piece of bad logic. In repeating their arguments within her own text, Dohm effects a sort of written drag. She "performs" her interlocutors' arguments about women but in exaggerating them reveals them to be baseless.
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EPILOGUE

I opened this dissertation with an anecdote about the American comedienne Amy Schumer, so allow me to close it with another one. In the fourth season of her Comedy Central show *Inside Amy Schumer*, Schumer portrays a character named Amily Schinton (an intentionally silly play on the name Hillary Clinton) in a skit titled “Madame President.” Amily Schinton has just been inaugurated as President of the United States and wakes up on her first day in the White House only to discover that she has started her period. The skit follows President Schinton on her first day in office and shows her gradually devolving into a whining, velvet-tracksuit-wearing caricature of a woman on her period—a woman who yells at a foreign ambassador for eating the last chocolate on a snack tray and fails to give the kill order for a terrorist because she is too busy adjusting her hot water bottle. The skit ends with a shot of the next day’s newspaper. The front-page headline and subhead read: “IS PRESIDENT SCHINTON PLUS SIZE? Representatives for President Schinton deny claims she is a size twelve.”

This skit is illustrative of several points I have made in this dissertation. For one, humor—like gender—is highly dependent on context. Any viewer with a passing knowledge of Amy Schumer knows that she is a vocal feminist and Clinton supporter who intends this skit to be subversive. By acting out and exaggerating misogynist concerns about a female president, Schumer seeks to demonstrate just how absurd those concerns really are. But what if a viewer with no knowledge of Amy Schumer and some rather misogynistic attitudes were to come across this video clip—would they immediately recognize it as a progressive work of humor? Or would they see the skit as a piece of comedy that confirmed their worst fears about female politicians?
(They’re fat and emotional!) This sort of ambiguity leads me into another point I have made in this dissertation: even gender parody that is intentionally subversive must engage in the same sort of repetition as all other forms of gender performance, and this repetition can reinforce the very gender norms that subversive gender parody attempts to expose as arbitrary. The “Madame President” skit is an excellent example of this phenomenon exactly because President Schinton’s zany behavior so closely mirrors the sort of professional incompetence a misogynist actually expects of a female president. Entertaining though it may be, it is unlikely that this skit has changed anyone’s views on women and gender, and the same is most likely true of the humor in the fin-de-siècle literature of Theodor Fontane, Thomas Mann, Frank Wedekind, and maybe even Hedwig Dohm.

However, this dissertation has demonstrated that humor is especially effective at creating spaces within works of literature where the “naturalness” of gender is put into question. This is especially true in German literature of the fin de siècle, as the German women’s movements active from 1890 to 1910 generated a lively discourse about gender roles among doctors, philosophers, and other intellectuals and contributed to the increasingly ambiguous attitudes about gender and sexuality held by authors and artists of the period. Even writers who did not support women’s suffrage (e.g. Fontane, Mann, Wedekind) express skepticism about gender norms through humorous moments in their literary texts, while the explicitly feminist writer Dohm harnesses humor in her polemical essays to refute the arguments of antifeminists. These gender-questioning moments of humor therefore appear across many literary genres and in many forms.

The first chapter of this dissertation examined the novels of Theodor Fontane and argued that moments of humor in these novels often result from “failed” gender performances but that
Fontane’s humor functions in such a way that it ultimately questions whether a “successful” gender performance is desirable or even possible. This chapter focused on Fontane’s novel *Frau Jenny Treibel*, a text that hinges on the clash between two funny, social-climbing women: the titular Jenny and her almost-daughter-in-law Corinna. The novel, although it makes fun of them, can be surprisingly sympathetic towards these ambitious women—especially Corinna, the more self-aware and less sentimental of the two. Even though everyone in her family and household encourages Corinna to “become who she is,” Corinna rejects the idea that her authentic self is inevitably tied to her gender and class (or that it even exists at all), and while her wit and sense of humor do not save her from a mediocre marriage, they do save her from this type of facile thinking.

The second chapter explored the early works of one of Fontane’s admirers and literary successors—Thomas Mann. Whereas the first chapter highlighted the gentleness of Fontane’s sense of humor and his lenient attitude toward human absurdity, the second chapter demonstrated just how mean the humor in Mann’s early fiction could be in comparison, even as it expressed a similar ambivalence towards fin-de-siècle gender norms. This chapter looked at three of Mann’s funniest short stories—“Gefallen,” “Der kleine Herr Friedemann,” and “Tristan”—and analyzed the ways in which the humor in these texts criticizes those characters who fail at performing their gender and those who succeed, thereby humanizing otherwise unsympathetic figures and critiquing the various forms of masculinity and femininity they attempt to perform. The chapter also looks at Mann’s turn-of-the-century novel *Buddenbrooks* and its quasi-heroine Tony, who is as silly as she is resilient. Tony is frequently a target of humor for the narrator and several of *Buddenbrooks*’ other characters, but ultimately the novel mocks the world’s gendered expectations of Tony as much as it mocks her vanity and pride.
The third chapter of this dissertation investigated the humorous portrayal of gender and sexuality in Frank Wedekind’s drama *Frühlings Erwachen* and studied the reception of early productions of the play as well as two twenty-first century interpretations of it. This chapter found that the success of a *Spring Awakening* production is inevitably tied to how well it reenacts the humor of the original text, a humor that destabilizes gender roles and sexual norms and exposes them as destructive social constructs. Reviews of various productions of *Frühlings Erwachen* reveal how easily the humor Wedekind intended to provoke with his *Kindertragödie* can become lost in the translation from stage to page, highlighting the contingent quality of humor and by association gender.

The fourth chapter of this dissertation concerned the written works of the feminist activist Hedwig Dohm. Dohm was a writer capable of very funny put-downs in her polemical essays, but her fiction—almost all of which highlights the day-to-day plight of German women—is much more serious. This chapter argued that Dohm’s oeuvre demonstrates an extremely nuanced understanding of the ways in which humor can be used both to fight for feminist causes and scare men and women into adhering to prescriptive gender roles, depending on how that humor is employed. For her part, Dohm uses various humorous rhetorical devices in her polemical essays to counteract the disparaging humor of antifeminists and reveal the antifeminists’ arguments to be invalid.

In my opinion, future research on gender and humor in the German and the American context would be most interesting and productive if it were to explore Hedwig Dohm’s stylistic heirs in the twenty-first century. The type of humorous, feminist polemical rhetoric Dohm perfected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is now being performed by dozens of writers and comedians of both sexes—but especially by women—all over America and in
German-speaking countries. A study of this kind would look at how the so-called “third wave” feminist movements in Europe and in America are influencing comedy and humorous writing as well as their reception and determine whether or not humor is still one of the best means of creating spaces where men and women can interact as equals and where gender can be exposed as socially constructed.