German Literature

In the long nineteenth century, German literature witnessed a tumultuous series of social, political, cultural, and economic developments. The lands which would become Germany in the unification of the German Empire in 1871 experienced revolutions, rapid industrialization, increasing urbanization, and war. At the Congress of Vienna (1815) after Napoleon’s defeat, the hundreds of German territories that had formed the Holy Roman Empire (dissolved in 1806) were consolidated into a German Confederation of thirty-nine states. In 1848, people in the German states at large gatherings in cities like Berlin and Frankfurt demanded freedom of the press, voting rights, and constitutional government, which led to beginnings of a revolution that eventually failed. A conservative Prussian-dominated German Empire was formed after conflicts with Austria, France, and Denmark.

One of the pervasive issues of nineteenth-century German culture is the changing perception of differing gender and sexual behaviors. Homosexuality itself was not named as such until 1869, which left other terms with varying definitions such as “pederasty,” “Uranian” or “Uranian love,” and “sodomy.” Even after homosexuality’s more or less clinical categorization in 1869, other terminologies persisted.

The literature of this period spans from the end of Classicism to the beginnings of Romanticism, to the “conservative” Biedermaier works and those
of Junges Deutschland (Young Germany), to Realism, Naturalism, and onward to Modernism and the fin de siècle. Stereotypically, one may think of Victorian-age and nineteenth-century literature as rather sterile and perhaps monotonous, especially when one looks for works that make reference to sex or gender. An examination of German-language literature of this time period makes clear, however, that such an estimation is indeed unfounded. As one can see, sex and gender, in various senses of these complicated terms, were often on the minds of nineteenth-century German-language writers.

Romanticism, the most prevalent aesthetic movement of the nineteenth century, was an artistic current that cultivated a climate in which expressions of sexuality (“traditional” or otherwise) were more likely, if not slightly more acceptable. Moreover, rooted in the German literary movement of Empfindsamkeit (Emotionalism or Sentimentality) men were permitted to express affection for one another, as male friendships were perceived to be some of the strongest bonds present in nature, possessing or embodying a supreme spirituality.

Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) wrote one of the best known Romantic novels and perhaps the prototypical Romantic novel, Lucinde (1799), which treats Lucinde’s love and marriage to Julius. This novel, which seems fragmentary, includes sections in which Julius, the protagonist, describes his own development and learning of Männlichkeit (“manliness” or “masculinity”) and meets Lucinde, who personifies complete humanity. Schlegel portrays in Lucinde a brand of
sexuality that encompasses emotional and physical love in addition to intellectual stimulation and connection. Schlegel’s other work includes homoerotic poetry that is often left out of collections. Naturally, there were shocked reactions to Schlegel’s work alongside supporters’ encouragement not to allow private behaviors and emotions to be dictated by public and church censorship.

Heinrich von Kleist’s drama “Penthesilea” (1807) delivers a different version of love, this one implemented through the introduction of Amazons. Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons, and Achilles are mutually attracted, which leads to a struggle between their two versions of the sexes. Penthesilea comes from a homogeneous society of female control; Achilles resides in the Classical utopia of the male ideal, Greece. Although in love, Penthesilea brutally slays Achilles, leading her to kill herself in her rage and sadness. She stabs herself with a dagger, an act resembling the penetrative arrow shots and removal of armor that killed the object of her sexual attraction.

Affected, like many others, by the adoration of “Classical” male beauty and Greek ideals, which had been fostered by Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) and which waned by the middle of the century, poet August von Platen (1796-1835) became an example of an author who transgressed gender boundaries, too far for some. Platen’s poetry was seen as (too) overtly homoerotic by critics who included writer and poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). Heine’s criticism and mockery of Platen culminated in his Die Bäder von Lucca.

*(The Baths of Lucca; 1829)* in which Heine made reference to Platen’s supposedly questionable sexuality. Heine’s graphic criticism of Platen and his work was not well received, and Heine faced a great deal of public condemnation.

The construction and effects of male gender and sexuality play a different role in Georg Büchner’s (1813-1837) fragmentary drama “Woyzeck” (published posthumously). Lacking a fixed order of scenes, Büchner’s play begins with Franz Woyzeck, a weak man who hears voices, in a servile position as a barber to his captain, who insults him. In order to earn extra money, Woyzeck volunteers as a subject in medical experiments conducted by a physician who makes him eat only peas. His lover, Marie, is unfaithful to him with another soldier. The captain inspires Woyzeck’s jealous rage, which leads him to stab Marie and eventually take himself into or drown himself in the waters of a nearby pond. Despite the time at which Büchner wrote it, “Woyzeck” displays a rather pre-Expressionistic “conclusion,” leading to the death of the main female figure.

Similar to Kleist’s “Penthesilea,” “Woyzeck” resolves gender confusion and transgression through violent, artificial deaths.

Gender behavior and social ideals were displayed in Jakob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm (1786-1859) Grimm’s *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children’s and Household Tales*; 1812, first edition). Often thought to be the painstaking transcriptions of the Grimms’ travels around the German states to speak with elderly housemaids and storytellers (the “folk”), the fairy tales of the Grimms
were actually gleaned from conversations the brothers had with women of their social circle, who related the tales of their nannies. Not only did the Grimms hear the stories from a source that is (still) not conventionally recognized, but the brothers also sculpted the tales into the versions that they wanted to publish. The tales were made supposedly more acceptable to children with supplementary Christian elements, less overtly erotic content, and embellishments that made the originally brief tales into more literary works. Among the crafted components of the tales are the gender features of the characters. Males filled the role of the capable, strong, and chivalrous or rescuing figure; females were either evil, in which case they were cunning, calculating, dark, and untamable, or good, in which case they were innocent, honest, obedient, and passive.

Contributions to women’s efforts to obtain emancipation continued throughout the nineteenth century. At the start of the century, Karoline von Günderrode’s (1780-1806) work was “a feminist confrontation with the age’s poetic conventions” (Saul 238). Also using a male pseudonym “Tian,” Günderrode published poetry (e.g., Gedichte und Phantasien; Poems and Fantasias; 1804) and dramas (e.g., “Mahomet, der Prophet von Mekka”; “Mohammed, Prophet of Mecca”; 1805) as well as contributions to journals. In the latter half of the century, writer Louise Otto-Peters (1819-1895) advocated women’s rights and education. She founded the Frauen-Zeitung (Women’s Newspaper) in 1849 and was one of the founders of the Allgemeiner Deutscher
Frauenverein (General German Women’s League) in 1865. Otto-Peters also demonstrated a commitment to the common nineteenth-century theme of the Volk (folk; people), which she integrated into her conception of sexual roles and gender.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the elements of Modernism began to captivate artists in the various media. More traditional forms of artistic expression were challenged and eventually mutated into other aesthetic styles. Gender and sexuality played sizeable roles in these artists’ work. The “feminine” became ever more threatening, feared to be in danger of growing out of control. Psychological meanings were discovered and interpreted in artistic expressions; Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud’s (1856-1939) very influential and bestselling book Traumdeutung (The Interpretation of Dreams; 1900) popularized the notion of the unconscious and the importance of sexual(ized) readings of psychological problems.

Gender, sexuality, and youth are mixed in Frank Wedekind’s (1864-1918) dark drama “Frühlings Erwachen” (“Spring’s Awakening”; 1891). The adolescents in this play are sheltered by their surrounding adults from sexual truths. Wendla Bergmann, the main female figure, is protected from adulthood by her sensitive mother; Melchior Gabor and Moritz Stiefel, the two main male characters, have clandestine and incomplete communications about sex. Melchior and Wendla eventually have sex in the woods in a scene that displays a
sadomasochistic pubescent sexuality. Wendla later dies from a failed abortion. Moritz experiences failure in school and commits suicide, later appearing to Melchior in a cemetery. Melchior is sent to a disciplinary reform school from which he escapes. Other scenes include one of masturbation, involving Hänschen Rilow, and (implied) homosexual love between Hänschen and Ernst Röbel. This drama caused a great deal of scandal for its frank depiction of adolescent curiosity and adult obliviousness.

Ever the controversial figure, Wedekind experimented with gender/sexual themes in later works as well, including his Lulu plays. The Lulu tragedy consists of two previously separate dramas: “Erdgeist” (“Earth Spirit”; 1895) and “Die Büchse der Pandora” (“Pandora’s Box”; 1904). This work contributes to the (pre-)Expressionistic thread of Büchner’s Woyzeck (mentioned above) in that a woman, namely Lulu, meets a violent death, an event that concludes the dramatic action. “Earth Spirit’s” prologue introduces Lulu as a bestial, threatening figure, and over the course of both portions of the tragedy, Lulu indeed destroys any male who comes in her path. In her seductive designs, Lulu personifies female sexuality and the problematic femme fatale figure that appears often in fin-de-siècle German literature, art, and music. Lulu exposes a female eroticism that defies any notion that females should/could not enjoy their sexuality. The drama illustrates the supposed danger of female sexuality that has grown out of control. At the end of “Pandora’s Box,” Jack the Ripper is the final male presence that
resolves the issue of Lulu’s threatening nature. He murders Lulu and departs with a sense of accomplishment. Not only do the plays have one of the best known “lesbian” characters in German literature, Gräfin Geschwitz (Countess Geschwitz), but they also served as the inspirational material for Alban Berg’s opera *Lulu* and G.W. Pabst’s film *Pandora’s Box* (1929).

Another controversial work, Arthur Schnitzler’s (1862-1931) drama “*Reigen*” (“Hands Around” or “La Ronde”; 1900), thematizes Viennese sexuality and had to be published by the author himself, as no publisher would accept it. Each of the ten scenes of this play portrays a sexual coupling of a character from the previous and following scenes in such a structure: AB-BC-CD-DE and so forth. The drama’s characters comprise figures from multiple levels of Viennese society, from a soldier to a prostitute, from a maid to a count. Though he leaves homosexuality out of this drama, Schnitzler combines in this relatively short play the sexual values and the class implications of his contemporary society into a critique or frank commentary that inspired vehement opposition to his work.

One can see that sex and gender, to some extent, occupied the imaginations of German-language writers in the nineteenth century. The works that these writers produced received varied reactions. These authors often could not find publishers in their time who would accept their submissions; works by Kleist, Büchner, and Günderrode are among those that were “(re-)discovered” in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Thanks to continuing literary

scholarship, such works that thematize sex and/or gender in some way or those that were written by women, who likely faced an uphill battle in the acceptance or publication of their work, are increasingly discussed and discovered.

**Suggested Reading**

Lorey, Christoph and John L. Plews, eds. Queering the Canon: Defying Sights in German Literature and Culture (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998).


Kyle E. Frackman