
CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS

German Women Writing after 1945

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The prospect of writing about literature by women since 1945 in Germany is a daunting one. The complexity of the project lies in the abundant and varied contributions women have made to the literary landscape since the infamous “zero hour” (1945). It lies also in the need for a reflective look at the advances women writers have made, particularly since the late 1960s, at the questions that have stirred the literary imagination and at the remarkable literary movements they have initiated. Owing to the immense contributions women have made since the postwar era, not only in the area of literature, but also in film and theater, a retrospective can provide a scant series of snapshots of authors, issues, and themes that represent only partially the expansive register of works by women in Germany. In part, this essay retains the divide between the literary developments of East and West Germany because of a belief in the embeddedness of literature within a specific cultural, political, and social context. Admittedly, however, there are points at which the borders between East and West blur, especially in the case of former East German authors who were either widely read in the West or had relatively easy access to “foreign markets” and borders.

This survey begins with the women’s movement in West Germany that grew out of the politicized climate of the late 1960s. The desire to affect social change and introduce institutional reform provoked questions that primarily concerned the distribution of power along lines of gender and the organization of life spheres. At the same time, the theo-

retical shifts regarding authorship and the function of literature opened new avenues for women writers. In defiance of the male-dominated literary market of West Germany's restorative postwar period, the writers who rode the second wave of feminism challenged the literary establishment and published their own narratives.

A review of the 1950s produces merely a handful of names, of which only a few are mentioned here: Marie Luise Kaschnitz (1901-1974), Luise Rinser (1911), Nelly Sachs (1891-1970), Anna Seghers (1900-1983), and Rose Ausländer (1901-1988). Among this list of writers, the name of poet and novelist Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-1973) stands out for her sensational literary success at the age of 27. Recognized for her poetry by one of the most prestigious literary cliques at the time, *Gruppe 47*, Bachmann's career was launched by their support. Established as a poet, Bachmann expanded her literary repertoire to include the writing of prose. However, the alleged transgression of genre boundaries was viewed as a scandalous violation, for which the literary establishment strongly criticized Bachmann. Of the three novels of Bachmann's *Todesarten*, only *Malina* (1971) was completed and published before her death in 1973. Even though the women's movement did not immediately embrace Bachmann's work because of its own initial commitment to a prescriptive feminist agenda, Bachmann was transformed later into an icon. Her keen and subtle exploration of power relationships within traditional gender arrangements, in particular, anticipated some of the issues that would later be taken up by feminism.

The move to politicize the private sphere, which became the mantra of the women's movement of the late 1960s, cast a light on the spheres of experience that public discourses conventionally overlooked or even dismissed. Yet for women, the private sphere was an essential part of the political equation, since it was the sphere in which the majority of women resided, and that consequently defined their identities. The introduction of the private realm called for working through the publicly invisible, if not the repressed arena of human activity, and turning inside out what Foucault referred to as "subjugated knowledges." With the spotlight on the private sphere, the first questions that most haunted literature were those of the formation of gendered identity.

Interventions: Questions of Identity

A difficult project awaited the growing number of women writers who were new arrivals on the literary scene in West Germany. These writers, bereft of models, stumbled into a no-woman's land with questions con-

cerning subjectivity, the workplace, family, female sexuality, and female identity as configured within a patriarchal system, as well as the possibility of a female aesthetic. In Elfriede Jelinek's play *Was geschah, nachdem Nora ihren Mann verlassen hatte?* (What happened after Nora left her husband? 1977), Ibsen's Nora expresses the *Aufbruchsstimmung* that accompanied the venture into the new topographies of self-expression. Nora tells her employer: "I am immensely curious. I slammed the door behind me which means that there is no going back, just forward." Although Jelinek's Nora, impeded by the social structures, eventually returns home, a further sense of curiosity led women writers, if not their protagonists, to the exploration of uncharted territories and to a critical confrontation with the social conventions that silenced women as social actors. The deluge of protocols, interviews, and journals bore witness to a struggle for voice and the desire to work through the deeply ingrained psychological structures that inhibited self-realization. These texts served to create a counter-public sphere, in the Habermasian sense of a forum for narratives that resist dominant social narratives and that seek to empower the disenfranchised. These texts furnished a counternarrative to an ideologically fermented understanding of gender. Erika Runge's interviews in *Frauen: Versuche zur Emanzipation* (Women: Attempts toward Emancipation, 1969) were exemplary in their documentation of women's preliminary reflections on their position within the patriarchal order.

With the advent of the 1970s, a shift occurred from a documentary mode of representation to more subjective explorations of gendered identity. The growing emphasis placed on subjectivity reflects a decisive development in the literature of both East and West German women writers, although each political context evoked specific considerations. Authors in the former GDR frequently addressed the role of women within a socialist society that promoted equality in the public realm, but tacitly perpetuated traditional gender relations within the home. In Gerti Tetzner's *Karen W.* (1974), the protagonist candidly evaluates her marriage and describes the deadening, claustrophobic routine from which she longs to break out.¹

In the West, *Verständigungsliteratur*, a genre of experiential literature, flooded the market. It purposively engaged writers and readers in an experiment of self-discovery and a process of consciousness-raising. Identified as *Frauenliteratur* (women's literature), which implies litera-

1. See Nancy Lukens and Dorothy Rosenberg, ed. and trans., *Daughters of Eve: Women's Writing from the German Democratic Republic* (Lincoln, NB.: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

ture by women and for women, this aggregate of works was prescriptively authentic, uncensored and confessional in its ideological postings. The most remarkable evidence of this genre, in terms of its resonance, is Verena Stefan's pastiche of autobiographical reflections in *Häutungen* (Shedding, 1975). As the title of this immediate best-seller suggests, the protagonist attempts to shed the various layers of discourse that have held female identity hostage. The first barrier Stefan faces in her desire to configure an identity, i. e. to create a protagonist outside of patriarchy, is language itself. In an analytical preface to her work, Stefan succinctly identifies the difficulty of articulating female sexuality without drawing upon medical jargon or derisiveness that reduce the female body to a sexualized object. She writes: "Language fails me as soon as I wish to convey new experiences." Stefan's realization echoes Christa Reinig's much quoted observation that "Literature is a tough male business that has been around for three thousand years. Every woman must experience it when she uses the word *I*. From that point on, nothing works."² The theoretical conundrum many writers faced in producing a female subject outside of the descriptors of hegemony found a response in the works of such French feminists as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Monique Wittig, who experimented with the concept, based on psychoanalysis, of writing the body. Their project posed a subversive practice of claiming the female body and of exploring new subjective languages in order to cast experience and identities anew. Still, a number of authors like Reinig (*Entmannung*, Emasculation, 1976) found other means to deconstruct traditional gender norms and engage in literary experiments that range from satirical to surreal, to autobiographical representations. Among them are Margot Schroeder (*Der Schlachter empfiehlt noch immer Herz*, The butcher still recommends heart, 1976), Jutta Heinrich (*Das Geschlecht der Gedanken*, The gender of thought, 1977), Brigitte Schwaiger (*Wie kommt das Salz ins Meer?*, Why is there salt in the sea?, 1977) and Svende Merian (*Der Tod des Märchenprinzen*, The death of a fairy tale princess, 1980). In the case of novelist Karin Struck (*Die Mutter*, The mother, 1975), the venture of a "new femininity" called for elevating the experience of motherhood and female sexuality in response to the denigration of the female body and the devaluation of the maternal.

The programmatic reflex of women's literature (*Frauenliteratur*), popularized in the 1970s, incited a polarization of male and female identity that often essentialized gender differences and hypostasized a universally victimized "woman," subjected to patriarchal oppression. With time these representations became insufficient to probe the dynamics of gen-

2. Christa Reinig, "Das weibliche Ich." *alternative* 108/109: 119.

der, just as gender, as the sole analytical category, became inadequate to explain the multiple vectors of identity. While the analysis of gender became more nuanced, so too did the question, which Silvia Bovenschen explores in her collection of essays entitled *Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit* (Imagined femininity, 1979), of how a unique female aesthetic evolved into an investigation of the alternate means of representing female subjectivity practiced by many women authors. The exclusionary posture of a univocal, that is, hyphenated feminism, based on the concerns of an all-white, middle-class population, unwittingly created its own margins and erased the complex and often contradictory positioning of the subject in terms of class, ethnicity, sexual preference, national identity and race. The voices of Afro-German women in the collection *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out, 1986) edited by Katharina Oguntoye, May Opitz, and Dagmar Schultz, were among the first to challenge radically the assumptions that fixed identity within the discourses of mainstream feminism and to unsettle the ethnocentric equation of Germanness with white. Much like the experiential literature that preceded the publication of *Showing Our Colors*, these essays drew upon personal experiences within a larger sociohistorical context, with the exception that these testimonies unmasked the racism that has yet to be dealt with in Germany.

Questions of identity continue to pose new challenges and gain a dizzying complexity with each border crossing and subsequent displacement, especially for those authors who write in German, but who are not German per constitutional law. Libuše Moníková, who left Czechoslovakia in 1972, describes in her novel *Pavane für eine verstorbene Infantin* (Pavane for a dead princess, 1983), the travels of an academic between her native Prague and Göttingen, where she teaches a seminar on Kafka and Arno Schmidt. The displacements the protagonist encounters are reflected in the disjointedness of the text, in the constant allusion to both figurative and literal amputations, in the representation of exile, as well as in such banal formulations as "Good day, who do you think you are" (15). Although Moníková's protagonists are emotionally rooted in the Czech Republic, they are cast as disabled and ailing. In *Pavane*, the main character, who harbors a fascination for the literary representation of disabilities, takes to a wheel chair to play out the role of a physically challenged person so as to free herself symbolically of the dependencies that have inhibited her as a writer. Her injured hip, an outward symptom of her psychic impairment, encumbers mobility. It is only once she burns the wheelchair in a ritual-like exorcism, along with her sister's photograph, a doll, and a box of tablets that

suppress appetite, that the protagonist frees herself from the traditions that have governed her productivity.

While in Moníková's novel it is the body that manifests the experienced displacements, it is the loss of language that reflects a metaphorical "homelessness" in Emine Sevgi Özdamar's collection of short stories entitled *Mutter Zunge* (Mother tongue, 1993). Lamenting the loss of her native language as a symbol of the "in-betweenness" of identity, the protagonist attempts to recall: "If I would only know, exactly when I lost my mother tongue" (7). The figures Özdamar presents are all strangers to their native and adopted countries. They are shown as trafficking back and forth from Turkey to Germany through what the author refers to as the "Germany Door." It marks a point of entry and departure through bureaucratic turnstiles where identities are reconfigured and negotiated with each border crossing. For authors like Moníková, Özdamar, Herta Müller, Sahilia Scheinhardt, to name only a few, the dislocations portrayed within the text resonate with the critical discussions of attribution surrounding literature by non-German citizens, and the inclusion of their texts to the body (*ius sanguinis*) of German literature.³

Dialogues with the Past

The explorations of subjectivity and interpersonal relationships in many narratives of the 1970s were situated in the immediate present. With the increasing interest in the relationship of the subject to history and as part of a genealogy, a turn toward autobiographically inflected narratives appeared. The mother/daughter relationship ranked as a principal theme in protocols and interviews with such titles as Barbara Franck's *Ich schaue in den Spiegel und sehe meine Mutter* (I look in the mirror and see my mother, 1979), or more dramatically, Erika Schilling's, *Manchmal hasse ich meine Mutter* (I sometimes hate my mother, 1981). These texts reveal a progression from a rejection of the mother as a model symbolic of a dramatic performance of separation, and the desire for autonomy sought by daughters during the early phases of feminism, to the onset of a dialogue and an exploration of the constraints that have informed traditional mothers' lives. In the fictional setting, but in most cases still autobiographically motivated, the narrative gestures toward a working through of a damaging symbiotic relationship that has a pow-

3. See Leslie Adelson, "Migrants' Literatur or German Literature? TORKAN's *Tufan: Brief an einen islamischen Bruder*," *German Quarterly* 63.3/4 (1990): 382-387, and Fritz J. Raddatz, "In mir zwei Welten," *Die Zeit* 26 (1994): 45-46. Noticeably, Raddatz's article does not feature one woman writer except within a passing note.

erful grip on the daughter's psychic development. The mother/daughter relationship figures prominently in Gabriele Wohmann's, *Ausflug mit der Mutter* (An excursion with mother, 1976), Helga Novak's *Die Eisleiligen* (The ice saints, 1979), Ingeborg Drewitz's *Eis auf der Elbe* (Ice on the Elbe, 1982), Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Klavierspielerin* (The piano teacher, 1986), and Waltraut Anna Mitgutsch's *Die Züchtigung* (The punishment, 1985). Of prime significance in these arduous confrontations with the mother is her function in the formation of the daughter's gendered identity. These narratives also make manifest that the past, as it is embodied in the relationship between generations, cannot be separated from the present. Indeed, it is an integral part of the fabric of the present and future.

For a number of writers who belong to the postwar generation, the exploration of identity led to personal investigations of Germany's fascist past. With the inclusion of the experiences of women and children and the dynamics of the private sphere, the general discourses about the Nazi regime and its consequences achieved new insights. These works called for a confrontation with personal experiences, with the making of subjectivity, with the cultivation of selective memories and with the wounds of history. The recognition of the intersection of personal and national identity called into being a genre of *Väterliteratur* (literature of the fathers) that highlighted the father as a traditional representative of history, the public sphere, and the state. The deep psychological wounds left by parents whose unresolved traumas imprinted themselves on the psychic structures of an emotionally ambivalent postwar generation became the topic in Jutta Schütting's *Der Vater* (The father, 1980) and Brigitte Schwaiger's *Lange Abwesenheit* (Long absence, 1983). It is interesting to note that many works that belong to this genre are engaged in the process of mourning because the father's death releases many of the questions that have burdened the younger generation. These narratives often substituted for a rebellion against the father and then, through him, against the politics of the fatherland. Of particular interest as the first to reflect critically upon the relationship between daughter and father in order to understand her development within the historical context of fascist Germany, is Elisabeth Plessen. As a member of the SDS, the League of Socialist German Students in Berlin in the 1960s, the protagonist Augusta, in Plessen's novel *Mitteilung an den Adel* (Such Sad Tidings, 1976), renounces her aristocratic name and privileges in an initial break with the father and all for which he stands. More importantly, she demands to know why her father did not resist Hitler's regime. In the course of her autobiographical reflections, she recognizes her father's willingness to give and obey orders, his uncontested acceptance of tradition, his vague, stereotypical percep-

tion of human nature, the need for male bonding and heroism in war, and an inability to develop close relationships.

On the way to her father's funeral, Plessen contemplates a new approach to the narration of history that allows her to criticize the intolerable generalizations that informed her father's world view. She demands an honest confrontation, a method she employs in scrutinizing her own past. This approach to documenting the past may also be seen in Plessen's novel *Kohlbaas* (1979), which features the historical sixteenth-century rebel from Heinrich von Kleist's famous novella of the same name. Here Plessen experiments with a new kind of historical narrative that self-consciously merges fiction and fact, a technique that leads her to position herself as "the writer" within the text. Instead of assuming a false objectivity, Plessen struggles with her biases, reveals the inevitable gaps in reconstructing history, and admits to a lack of knowledge at times. She revives the Kleistian setting to work through the charged debates among the Left of the 1970s in West Germany, who sought to define political engagement and weigh its extreme expression in the terrorist activity of Baader-Meinhoff group. Plessen meticulously traces the personalities of various types of revolutionaries, and concludes that the activities of those like Ulrike Meinhoff cost too many people their lives – a price too high to pay. At the root of the narrative, however, is the question of resistance and the specter of Germany's fascist past.

A number of writers like Ingeborg Drewitz (1923-1986), Ruth Rehmann (1922), and Christa Wolf (1929) who experienced wartime and fascism also responded to the much delayed and perilous need to remember. Ruth Rehmann's novel *Der Mann auf der Kanzel: Fragen an einen Vater* (The Man in the Pulpit, Questions for a Father, 1980), for one, takes issue with her father's role as pastor during the Nazi period and his proverbial conformist stance *vis à vis* the insidious racial politics which the Church adopted and openly supported. Yet despite the biographical focus of the work, the primary motivation and underlying interest is the subjectivity of the author herself, and the desire to identify the ways in which parents' lives, their experienced histories, write themselves, often unconsciously, onto the bodies of the generations that follow. The questions that inform and structure the dialogue with the past, indeed, reveal the present concerns of those who pose them.

The autobiographical excavation of the past in Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* (Patterns of Childhood, 1976) is a search for the missing pieces of the puzzle of "how did we become the way we are?" (145). With her inquiry, Wolf sets out to counter the willful erasure of historical memory from present day consciousness and insists upon recognizing that "what is past is not dead; it is not even past. We cut ourselves off

from it; we pretend to be strangers" (3). She engages in a dialogue with a past self that Wolf calls Nelly to signal the simultaneous distance and proximity of the past and its voices. As a work of memory, the narrative retraces the locations of childhood to reflect on Nelly's development and review the activities and gestures of daily life that were signs of repressed knowledge and the potential resistance. In addition to providing a textual surface to maneuver dialogically between past and present in order to work through the past, these "documents" serve another purpose. They provide an opportunity to pursue alternatives and resist the compulsion to repeat a horrifying history when faced with choices similar to those of Wolf's generation. Ground breaking in its intense self-reflexivity, *Patterns of Childhood* is in a unique position as one of the first works to deal with the fascist past as part of the GDR's own history, in contrast to its official location within the borders of West Germany.

On stage, Gerlind Reinshagen traces a family history that reveals not only the development of fascist tendencies but also a potential for resistance in the same character in the trilogy *Sonntagskinder* (Sunday's children, premiered 1976), *Das Frühlingsfest* (The spring party, 1980) and *Tanz, Marie* (Dance, Marie, 1987). Reinshagen was among the first to show that the home was not innocent of ideology and that women participated in the war machinery and the beliefs that fueled it. The dramatist shows how women can become collaborators. In *Sonntagskinder*, the traditional socialization of girls fosters dependencies that perpetuate relationships of domination and subservience. The limitations placed upon women by traditional expectations of their roles robs many women of their dreams, which makes them susceptible to Nazi propaganda. As the mother figure in the play, who represents a typical fellow traveler, admits: "I still had the dreams that I used to have in my childhood ... But they are poison ... They prevent us from adapting to things" (Reinshagen, 336). Reinshagen avoids one-dimensional stereotypes by giving her protagonists multifaceted identities that often produce a change of mind or allow for resistance to the status quo. Perhaps a more direct implication of women's complicity is the book *Judasfrauen* (Judas Women, 1990) in which Helga Schubert documents ten women's accounts of collaboration and denunciation. Interestingly, most of these women engaged in betrayal for reasons of love, rather than a desire to further their careers, as was often the case with men. Both of these works seem to respond to a widely held view that women remained outside of history as its victims rather than as participants or agents. Both of these roles must be taken into account in order to reveal the makings of history.

The project of many of the works discussed here invariably recalls Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich's often cited study *The Inability*

to *Mourn*, a psychoanalytical résumé of the historical amnesia that screened out the trauma of World War II and its atrocities. Many women writers reviewed the symptoms that suggested the denial of knowledge and the missed opportunities to intervene or remember, as well as an unacknowledged pain or trauma. The works thus serve to mourn the loss of the potential for change. They seek to illuminate what Christa Wolf refers to as the blind spots that consciously or not, obstruct utopian visions. Given that many of the narratives that initiated the work of memory and mourning first appeared in the mid-1970s, it may be said that the repression of the past in official public memory is an agenda shared by both East and West Germany.

It is the overwhelming reception of Ruth Klüger's recollection of her childhood experiences as a survivor of Auschwitz in *weiter leben. Eine Jugend* (continuing on. A Childhood, 1992) that manifests the ongoing need to remember the Holocaust, to work through the brutal crimes against humanity that Germany staged, and to resist the impulse to bury the past. The author recalls her aunt's advice when she emigrated to the United States to erase the memories of the past. As she realized then, "I thought, she wanted to take away from me the only thing I had, namely the life that I had already lived. One can't throw that away, as if I had others stashed away in a closet" (Klüger 228). Yet, Klüger describes in numerous interviews her long avoidance of the memories of the past and the ways she sought to outmaneuver recollections. She ends up struggling with the reliability of memory, the desire to reconstruct the suffering she experienced as a child, and self-reflexively grapples with her own subjectivity in reporting the events of history. She writes: "Yesterday I wrote these sentences, they appear false today, wrong. I want to erase them but hesitate" (Klüger, 166). It is the difficult process of looking a horrific history in the face in order to pass on this knowledge to the generations to come. Klüger dedicates her book to friends who live in Göttingen.

The work of remembering and mourning continues in the literature of post-unification, particularly in those works by authors of the former GDR. In contrast to the close attention paid to Germany's fascist past in much literature since the 1960s, these works specifically address the history of the GDR since its inception in 1949 and its ideological foundations. In Monika Maron's novel *Stille Zeile Sechs* (No. 6 Stille Zeile, 1991) the main character Rosalind Polkowski quits her job as historian and refuses to place her intellectual capabilities in the service of anyone but herself. She meets Herbert Beerenbaum, a Communist of the old guard and powerful GDR functionary, who hires her to take down his memoir while he dictates the significant moments of the past. As his memoir, which serves not only to legitimate the official history of the GDR but his

own life, unfolds, the protagonist is faced with her conflict-ridden relationship to her own father and his biography, in addition to the history of the GDR. With Beerenbaum's death, the protagonist inherits the hated manuscript. To open it would mean to accept his history which she refuses to do. This novel may be the beginning of a new "literature of the fathers".

An insightful and challenging dialogue with the past in the works of women writers has proceeded along numerous lines. A search for role models and the need recognize and to counter the exclusion of pioneering female artists and scientists from the canon has produced a series of works within the past twenty-five years. (Books have appeared on Luise Gottsched, Lily Brown, Rosa Luxemburg). In *Respektloser Umgang* (Irreverent Discourse, 1987), Helga Königsdorf imagines a meeting with the physicist Lise Meitner, who was denied recognition of her contributions in the study of radioactivity, which were credited mainly to Otto Hahn, who won the Nobel Prize. Such historical omissions, now referred to as "gender censorship" were not uncommon experiences for a woman and a Jew, especially during the Hitler period. Yet, as Königsdorf, who is a trained physicist herself, shows, many important women denigrate their own achievements in order to be accepted into male dominated fields. To indicate that Meitner did not expect fame, Königsdorf's character states: "I will leave a trace in people around me which will become a new message when it is united with all the other traces, even when my name is long forgotten." (Königsdorf, 114). With this imaginary dialogue, Königsdorf provides a much needed role model for women, particularly in the sciences, and secures Meitner her rightful place in history.

Reaching back into the history of music, Elfriede Jelinek transports the nineteenth century composer Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-1896) into the 1920s and onto the modern stage in her play *Clara S.* Clara visits the Italian writer d'Annunzio, who embodies the fascist and capitalist tendencies of men who consume women and art. This postmodern pastiche critiques the mode of production of male artists and caustically takes to task the historical reasons for women's absence from the field of music. Clara, not only a composer and a famous concert pianist, but the mother of eight children, complains about the straight jacket of her existence in her marriage to the famous classical composer Robert Schumann: "The female artist pays. If she is an artist, her limbs rot away one by one from her living body as a result of the artistic production of man" (Jelinek, 95). In the end, Jelinek allows Clara to strangle her husband as a belated gesture of poetic justice.⁴

4. For a comprehensive study of women dramatists and the German stage, see Helga Kraft, *Ein Haus aus Sprache: Dramatikerinnen und das andere Theater*, Stuttgart: Metzler,

Deconstruction of Myths and Tentative Utopias

While until very recently literary historians regarded myths as conveyors of universal truths, the works of many twentieth century women writers contributed significantly to changing this perception. Their interest in myth expresses a desire to intervene in traditional historical narration and in representations of the past and to rewrite the narratives that have traditionally defined culture.

Many authors seem to share Roland Barthes's definition of myth as "depoliticized speech" that "has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal" (Barthes, 142). It is to the credit of cultural materialists and the postmodern practice of debunking unquestioned eternal values that a major revision of mythology has taken place. Women writers especially have developed a keen sense for the need to deconstruct absolutes since their experiences as females in a patriarchal society contradicted the "universal truths" that defined them. In the process of deconstructing myths, fairy tales, and archetypes, women writers challenged notions that naturalized gendered roles, and that locked women away in towers and into a disenfranchised mode of existence. In revisiting the "canon", contemporary authors found that concepts of "woman's nature" were based on naturalized historical, cultural constructions (as described by Judith Butler) that assured the continuation of privileges for a certain portion of the population and sustained power relations that disadvantaged women. As women writers deconstructed popularized myths, they simultaneously reconstructed their own versions of female existence and identity.

One of the first writers to pioneer the deconstruction of myth was Ingeborg Bachmann. In her short, lyrical story *Undine geht* (Undine goes, 1961), Bachmann touches upon the experience of women who have been socialized to depend on the love of men, a practice that leaves them open to exploitation. Undine, who represents a self-sacrificing mermaid – this imagery recalls the fluid "feminine" element of creativity – refuses to surrender to her traditionally assigned role. The impossibility of self-definition in a male dominated society causes her to leave for good. Bachmann opts to break with an existence that objectifies women, even if it is painful.

More than Bachmann, Irmtraud Morgner lavishly highlights the magical elements of mythology. In her book *Leben und Abenteuer der*

1996. It should be noted that an increasing number of women playwrights beginning in the 1970s were able to conquer the stage, thus contributing to a public discourse on their own terms.

Trobadora Beatriz nach Zeugnissen ihrer Spielfrau Laura (Life and Adventures of the Trobadora Beatriz as Chronicled by her Minstrel Laura, 1973), the GDR author virtually rewrites the magical tale of Sleeping Beauty. Here, "Sleeping Beauty" is no longer a passive, young girl, but rather a mature, married troubadour of medieval times, who actively produces literature and songs. She induces her own sleep to last from the twelfth to the twentieth century, since she no longer wants to live in the male-dominated cosmos of the dark ages, in which her own desires have no chance of fulfillment. Contrary to the Grimms's version of the fairy tale, Morgner's Sleeping Beauty is not awakened by the kiss of a prince, but by the dynamite of an engineer, who blasts through the prickly rose hedge. Instead of carrying her off to his castle to make her his bride, the "anti-prince" tries to use her for a lucrative business deal. Morgner's humorous dynamiting of the traditional fairy tale reveals that there is nothing universal about women's condition as traditional interpretations of fairy tales would make one believe happily ever after.⁵ Morgner's Marxist training in historical materialism, and her initial belief in the imminent success of a great communist society, made her one of the first writers to question mainstream assumptions about women that circulated within the literary canon. Indeed, Morgner demonstrates that women can be writers and even active heroes in picaresque novels. Her work is populated with many mythological women figures. For instance, through "the beautiful Melusine," Morgner etymologically corrects the association of this figure with water, since the name derives from the medieval Luisinia, which means the "Lady of the Light" (*Women's Encyclopedia*, 630). Hence, Morgner furnishes an alternative to Bachmann's murky feminine water symbolism. By contrast, Melusine writes things down in an attempt to bring light to the dark ages, to which she still belongs. When asked why her book became an instant success, even in the FRG, Morgner answered: "I believe the reason lies in its subject matter. Both socialism and women's emancipation are on the agenda. This is the subject matter of an epoch" (Gerhart, 24).

Through Morgner's method of intertwining and contrasting epochs in *Life and Adventure*, it becomes clear that mythological structures supply meanings that are ideologically based. The thorny hedge, which actually traps women, has literally been blasted away to make way for an improvement in the future. The productive powers at work here, as

5. Klaudia Heidemann Nebelin's new book *Rotkäppchen erlegt den Wolf. Marieluise Fleisser, Christa Reinig und Elfriede Jelinek als satirische Schriftstellerinnen* reveals that the aggressive humor especially in Reinig and Jelinek is directed against men who usually misunderstand or fail to see the humor. The author contends that women have learned to laugh at men's jokes even if it is directed toward them.

Morgner's female troubadour maintains, are desire and eroticism. However, Morgner theoretically considers a feminist utopian goal secondary to an economic goal of general betterment that is considered reasonable, through the socialist political structure of the GDR (Gerhardt, 26). The hope to achieve a "concrete utopia" in the GDR, in the sense of Bloch's *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (The Principle of Hope), was dashed by the collapse of the communist government in 1989. It is difficult to gauge whether Morgner – despite her public pronouncements – anticipated the destruction of this utopia and surreptitiously critiqued the patriarchal structures of her country (Gerhardt, 198).

In the 1970s, women writers in the FRG also took an interest in probing and rewriting traditional mythic representations. Both Christa Reinig and Christine Brückner, for instance, selected the figure of the vilified, "unfaithful" Greek queen Clytemnestra, who kills her husband Agamemnon and is murdered by her son Orestes. The figure of Clytemnestra may have attracted many writers as one of the very few strong women in mythology. The depiction of Clytemnestra in Reinig's *Entmannung* and Brückner's "*Bist Du nun glücklich, toter Agamemnon?*" (Are you finally happy, dead Agamemnon?, 1981) challenges early versions of the female "other" and invites society to view this type of female, embodied in Clytemnestra, anew (Komar, 20). While Brückner lends a modern voice to the ancient queen and retains the historical context, Reinig gives a modern woman the ancient name: "Reinig's 1970s Klytemnestra struggles for survival as a person rather than for dominion over a kingdom. She can only wound her husband, not kill him. Her children are lost to abortions, not to ritual sacrifices." (Komar, 24) Yet the present day woman is still punished for her desired autonomy and must go to prison.

Unlike Reinig and Brückner, a number of feminist writers undertook the exploration of a matriarchal mythology, hoping to find a non-aggressive model of communities that allegedly preceded the institutionalization of patriarchy. One of the results was a concept of femininity that was based on the inherently different and superior nature of women. A major theoretical debate about essentialism emerged that, for the most part, was resolved by the late 1980s. It was widely recognized that such essentialism introduced a new dichotomization of the sexes that merely reversed poles. The creation of a new mythology that retained asymmetrical power structures could hardly produce a better society.⁶

Another representation of a strong mythological woman may be found in Grete Weil's novel *Meine Schwester Antigone* (My sister

6. See Sonja Distler, *Mütter, Amazonen und dreifältige Göttinnen: Eine psychologische Analyse der feministischen Matriachatsdebatte*, (Wien: Picus Verlag, 1989).

Antigone, 1980). Here, the writer reflects on the experience of being Jewish and a survivor of the Holocaust. Weil's mistrust of mythology stems from its exploitation by fascism, which served to obfuscate Nazi demagoguery. Her project is to expose the abuse of myth. As a result, Antigone, who resists the law of the land, becomes a model in her fierce struggle for the freedom that she gains by refusing to comply with state law. The female narrator plans to write a book about Antigone, who progressively becomes her imaginary companion and a symbol of uncompromising resistance. The book leaves open the question of whether the narrator has the courage to fight for freedom, or whether she falls short of her model because she has been socialized against engaging in confrontation.

It does not come as a surprise that Christa Wolf too turned to the realm of mythology. In 1983, Wolf published the well-received novel *Cassandra*, along with four theoretical lectures she had delivered at Frankfurt University (*Poetik-Vorlesungen*) in 1982, on the making of the novel. Not only did the temporal displacement offer her a way to go beyond her own experiences (which she had explored substantially in *Patterns of Childhood*), but the setting in antiquity gave her the opportunity to mask her growing criticism of the communist regime. Unlike Morgner, Wolf only indirectly infuses contemporary historical and political realities into her story. In writing this book, she also became aware of the legitimacy of a feminist agenda. In order to understand women's situations, she revisits the original scripts of patriarchal society and fills in the voids by imagining the voices of women that have been stifled throughout history. With the prophetess Cassandra, who in the classical myth is cursed by Apollo and fated never to be believed, Wolf shows that there are other motives behind wars other than the righteous agendas often proclaimed. At the same time, her various descriptions of Amazons, nymphs, king's daughters, and female slaves demonstrate the significance of context in the construction of gender and contradict the notion of a feminine essentialist ontology.

Wolf's interest in mythology continues on into the 1990s. Her book *Medea, Stimmen* (*Medea, Voices*, 1995) turns the commonly transmitted Medea myth on its head: Medea neither kills her brother nor her sons, nor does she love Jason. Instead, she enjoys a satisfying non-binding relationship with another man. In Wolf's version, sexuality has no hold over Medea's life. Yet it is her shedding of traditional female characteristics that precipitates her downfall and constitutes her tragic flaw. Jealousy and fear of the powers she develops through her knowledge of medicine, her love of people, and her courage to follow her own desires lead to her exploitation as a political pawn. Wolf is not shy in implying

that it is no picnic to be an independent thinker. Cynically, Medea maintains that human beings too easily surrender to the dominant discourses of society that determine what a person may be. In a less than disguised form, Wolf evokes her own situation after the fall of the Berlin wall and the fierce criticism against her for her role as an unofficial *Stasi* informer, however brief and inconsequential. It may be added that she drew much more criticism than a number of male writers who had even stronger ties to the East German secret police. As Medea, Wolf may see herself cast as a scapegoat, an image which is not only politically but also artistically denigrating.

A quite different reworking of myth can be found in Gerlind Reinshagen's play *Medea bleibt* (Medea stays, 1996). The author does not return to antiquity but chooses, as Christa Reinig did, a modern setting for a mythological story.⁷ She inquires: How would people nowadays react to a Medea? Reinshagen draws conclusions that address the present historical situation. The modern Medea, who is called Jana, leaves her drinking husband, Wolf, for another man. He takes her back, however, after Jana's new live-in boyfriend finds a younger, richer mate. Medea does not kill her children, but rather a neighbor does, who can no longer take present day, superficial tendencies to come to arrangements. Despite the contemporary context, Reinshagen has observed in conversation (March 1996) that age-old emotions, such as those played out in the Medea story, continue to lay the foundation of Western culture. This points either to a renewed interest in the revival of transhistorical truths or to a need for a more refined analysis of the influence of history on the way we have become who we are.

It will be the work of contemporary authors, as it has been for those authors who have been writing for the past four decades, to challenge the myths and narratives of identity that hinder discovery, the knowledge of history, and the potential for change.

7. Marianne Fritz created a "new Medea" in 1978 in her novel *Die Schwerkraft der Verhältnisse*. Her fate follows more closely that of the mythical Medea. Fritz describes the life of a *petit-bourgeois* Medea, Berta Schrei, between 1945 and 1963. She wants to save her children from a damaging post-war society by killing them. After a failed suicide she lives on in a mental asylum.

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Additional Notable Post-WW II Writers

Katja Behrens (1942), Elisabeth Borchers (1926), Barbara Bronnen (1938), Brigitte Burmeister (1940), Daniela Dahn (1949), Eva Demski (1944), Hilde Domin (1912), Elke Erb (1938), Fless Bettina (1961), Barbara Frischmuth (1941), Kirsten Hensel (1961), Hanna Johansen (1939), Sarah Kirsch (1935), Ursula Krechel (1947), Ilse Langner (1899), Christine Lavant (1915), Gertrud Leutenegger (1948), Friederike Mayröcker (1924), Angelika Mechtel (1943), Johanna Moosdorf (1911), Christine Nöstlinger (1936), Birgit Pausch (1942), Erica Pedretti (1930 - 1994), Renate Rasp (1935), Brigitte Reimann (1933-1973), Friederike Roth (1948), Erika Runge (1939), Herrad Schenk (1948), Helga Schubert (1940), Helga Schuetz (1937), Jutta/Julian Schutting (1937), Brigitte Schwaiger (1949), Ginka Steinwachs (1942), Marlene Streeruwitz (1950), Eva Zeller (1923).