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## SHIFTING UNDERSTANDINGS OF LESBIANISM IN IMPERIAL AND WEIMAR GERMANY

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### ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to understand how, and why, understandings of lesbianism shifted in Germany over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through close readings of both popular cultural productions and medical and psychological texts produced within the context of Imperial and Weimar Germany, this paper explores the changing nature of understandings of homosexuality in women. It argues that, over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the dominant conceptualization of lesbianism transformed from an understanding of lesbians that was rooted in biology and viewed lesbians as physically masculine “gender inverts,” to one that was grounded in psychology, and imagined lesbians as inherently traumatized, mother-fixated, and suicidal. This paper suggests that this shift was facilitated by the increasing influence of psychologists like Sigmund Freud, and greater German preoccupation with trauma and suicide following World War I, and highlights the importance of historical context in shaping self-understanding.

As a state that began anew not once, but twice, in the early nineteenth and twentieth century, Germany was in a continuous process of reinventing itself and forming national self-understandings. This culture of redefinition facilitated a reexamining of values and beliefs previously taken for granted, including the association of homosexuality with moral depravity. Within this context, heterosexual doctors and scholars, in addition to gay and lesbian writers, became deeply invested in understanding what it meant to be gay or lesbian. This paper will focus on the more popular academic and cultural works that dealt specifically with lesbians, who have received relatively scant attention compared even with gay men.

These understandings did not remain static, but rather changed over time and were greatly influenced by their respective historical contexts. In particular, over the course of the Imperial and Weimar eras, both mainstream and lesbian under-

standings of female homosexuality shifted dramatically, with psychology replacing biology as the primary way of understanding lesbianism. While in the late nineteenth century, a lesbian would explain herself to others as neither fully biologically male nor female, by the 1920s she would understand herself as a woman, but a psychologically incomplete or damaged one.

My analysis will begin chronologically with thinkers of Imperial Germany, a period that begins with Germany's unification and establishment as a state in 1871, and ends in 1914 with the start of World War I. In this period, German sexologists, in addition to prominent lesbian writers and thinkers, understood lesbians primarily as “gender inverts” whose existence could be explained primarily through biology or medicine. The Weimar era begins in 1918 with the end of World War I and the establishment of a democratic government in Germany, and ends in 1933 when the Nazis

come to power. Weimar-era writers began to question some of the assumptions of their predecessor and base their understanding of lesbianism in psychology. Lesbian women were increasingly viewed as woman who were mistreated by their mothers as children and were unable to recover from this abuse. Emerging over a backdrop of Weimar concerns about suicide, this conceptualization of the feminine mother-fixated lesbian also became inextricably tied to suicide.

This paper will first very briefly look at understandings of lesbianism in theory and culture prior to World War I. It will then discuss the ubiquitous nature of suicide in Weimar culture and the new understanding of lesbianism within this context by Weimar thinkers. It will conclude with a discussion of this Weimar conceptualization of the lesbian in major cultural productions, namely *Mädchen in Uniform* and *Der Skorpion*.

### I. IMPERIAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF LESBIANISM

In his influential 1886 tome, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Richard von Krafft-Ebing devotes a chapter to lesbianism titled, “Congenital Sexual Inversion in Women.” For Kraft-Ebing, lesbianism, or “Uranism In Women,” is an inborn (“congenital”) condition, which is caused by biological factors.<sup>i</sup> Although he acknowledges situations or circumstances that he believes might induce homosexual behavior in so-called “normal” women, namely impotent husbands, prostitution, and being kept from men, he describes these contexts as exceptions to the rule. According to Krafft-Ebing, most lesbians are congenitally homosexual, and have stereotypically masculine features and masculine expression, thus constituting a “third sex.” As such, he devotes much of his analysis to emphasizing the physical and social gender nonconformity in homosexual women.

In his case studies, Krafft-Ebing draws attention to the women’s feelings of having been homosexual their entire lives and indicates when they have physical characteristics he considers masculine, which they almost always do. For example, he notes at the end of his study of a “Miss N.” that she has “masculine features, deep voice, manly gait... small breasts, cropped her hair short, and made the impression of a man in women’s clothes.”<sup>ii</sup> He emphasizes that the “female homosexual” neglects behaviors expected of women, such as playing with dolls, appreciating art, and giving attention to her appearance, and instead partakes in activities associated with men.<sup>iii</sup>

Psychology only comes into play when he notes the feelings of depression, loneliness, or dissatisfaction that bring his patients to him. In his work, despair or trauma is not a cause for homosexuality, or inherently connected to it, but rather the result of a lack of understanding of homosexuality. For example, he writes of Mrs. X, “She suffered from nervousness because she could not always realize these desires.”<sup>iv</sup> There is only one mention of an attempt at self-harm that he deems as a “noteworthy” aspect of his patient’s childhood, which he otherwise describes as being of “nothing of importance.”<sup>v</sup> His patient, a “Mrs. M,” drank poisoned coffee at the age of ten, because she “fancies her mother did not love her” and hoped to make herself sick in order to draw her attention.<sup>vi</sup> But Krafft-Ebing moves quickly forward without dwelling on the incident and he does not return to this incident, or the patient’s mother again.

Almost twenty years later, Aimee Duc, a lesbian writer, has one of her lesbian characters describe herself as a “Krafft-Ebing type” in her popular 1903 novel, *Are These Women?*, thus endorsing Krafft-Ebing’s understanding of the lesbian.<sup>vii</sup> Her characters view themselves as “humans who are neither men nor women,” and dream of writing doctoral dissertations about “the scientific positive proof of a third sex.”<sup>viii</sup> Some of the women are described as being very masculine, and the implication seems to be that as educated women they are inherently “inverted,” or members of the “third sex.” The only despair depicted here is the sadness experienced by one

of the characters when her lover temporarily leaves her for a man, which is, as with Krafft-Ebing’s case studies, a sadness brought on society’s condemnation of homosexuality, not homosexuality itself.

The next year, Anna Rühling gave her speech, “What Interest Does the Women’s Movement Have in the Homosexuality Question?” to the annual meeting of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, and echoed much the same notions about the homosexual woman’s gender inversion.<sup>ix</sup> In her plea for feminists to take an interest in lesbians like herself, Rühling bases much of her argument on lesbian’s desires being “inborn” and therefore, according to Rühling, inextricably connected to a masculine presentation.<sup>x</sup> She argues that “in people with primarily masculine characteristics, the sex drive is naturally directed towards women,” and delineates the various “masculine” qualities of lesbians and how these qualities would aid the movement.<sup>xi</sup>

The possibility of a conventionally feminine lesbian is acknowledged just once, and her existence is explained as self-deception—she is only pretending to be feminine to avoid “being detected” as a homosexual, and is thus taking part in a “bitter comedy.”<sup>xii</sup> In their natural states, all lesbians for Rühling have experienced an “inborn drive to love” women their entire lives, as a result of their “masculine characteristics.”<sup>xiii</sup> There is no mention either of the mother or childhood trauma.

Duc and Rühling’s embracement of Krafft-Ebing’s work is important in that it demonstrates that Krafft-Ebing’s concep-

tualization of the lesbian woman as gender inverts, whose biology dictated their sexuality, was not confined either to medicine or non-lesbians. Lesbians themselves read his work, and many perceived themselves as he expected them to and even actively incorporated his theories into their fiction and activist work.

Sigmund Freud expressed similar attitudes in his highly influential and widely read work on sexuality, the first of which was published a year after Rühling's speech in 1905. In this early work, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, lesbians are virtually nonexistent. The only instance in which they are specifically discussed is congruent with Krafft-Ebing's theory; namely, Freud notes that lesbians do have so-called masculine characteristics, physically and mentally.<sup>xiv</sup> However, when he discusses homosexuals in general, he defines homosexuals primarily, not as feminine men or masculine women, but as "men whose sexual object is a man, and not a woman, and women whose sexual object is a woman, and not a man."<sup>xv</sup> The emphasis is therefore shifted from the gender expression or physicality of a lesbian or gay man to their sexual desire, which he sees as having a psychological, not medical, origin.

He refers to the idea that one is born attached to their "sexual object" as "crude," and writes that "it is even possible to doubt the very existence of such a thing as innate inversion."<sup>xvi</sup> Instead, he suggests that "inverts" become inverted through early childhood experiences or through situational influences such as war or prison.<sup>xvii</sup> Interestingly, while he

writes nothing about the lesbian's relationship with either of her parents, in 1910 he added a footnote in which he suggested that in their childhoods, "inverted" men have intense fixations on their mothers. These fixations cause them, according to Freud, to identify themselves with a woman, and then to look for men resembling themselves to mother, as they have been mothered, pointing to an early interest in mother-fixation.<sup>xviii</sup>

He specifically does not, however, link "inverts," with or without mother fixations, to "nervous degeneracy."<sup>xix</sup> He acknowledges that many homosexuals have been observed to suffer from "nervous diseases," but disagrees that homosexuals are inherently "degenerate" for several reasons. One of these reasons is that there are "inverted" individuals who do not suffer from any serious "deviations from the normal," and even some who are especially intellectually gifted and "efficient."<sup>xx</sup> Before the war, Freud does not explicitly connect homosexuality with suicide or despair.

## II. BACKGROUND ON SUICIDE AND THE WEIMAR ERA

In the aftermath of the war, and the establishment of the Weimar democracy, suicide became much more ubiquitous in German intellectual discourse and cultural production, and was frequently depicted as being connected to broader social or political problems or debates.<sup>xxi</sup> Suicide rates had been higher in Germany, especially in Berlin, than elsewhere in Europe since the nineteenth century, but it was not until the Weimar era that suicide attracted such significant

attention.<sup>xxii</sup> Some of the factors that help explain this preoccupation with despair and suicide likely include the trauma of WWI and the return of "shell shocked" soldiers, the increasing prestige attached to the social sciences, and the political and economic desperation of Weimar Germany. However, it was also critical that in Weimar Germany, suicide statistics became, for the first time, readily available to the public and widely reported in the press.

A flurry of censuses of Berlin were completed in the 1920s, and they each had a question concerning causes of death.<sup>xxiii</sup> The censuses all revealed that the Berlin suicide rate was the highest of any city in Europe, and was increasing rapidly, especially for women. Significantly, these censuses were not only circulated amongst intellectuals, but were also published directly or written about in popular and accessible publications, such as *Berlin in Zahlen* (Berlin in Numbers).<sup>xxv</sup> In response to public interest, individual suicides were covered in tabloids, and papers regularly ran lists of recent suicides, making suicide hard to ignore.<sup>xxvi</sup> Suicide, therefore, became to be understood by many Germans in the Weimar era, as a modern, even Weimar, problem and a "sign of the times."<sup>xxvii</sup> Although suicide may have been a problem for decades, the public's increased awareness of suicide created an association with the Weimar era. This perception allowed Germans to connect the problem of suicide to pressing contemporary political and social issues. Suicide notes of the period often allude to structural or political problems such as poverty, insufficient care of the poor by the state, a lack of

cultural acceptance of homosexuality, and harsh punishments of students and children, suggesting that the authors expected their notes to reach an audience.<sup>xxviii</sup> It is also clear that they were capable of politicizing their despair.

### III. LESBIANISM AND FREUDIAN PSYCHOLOGY AFTER WORLD WAR I

There was significant literary and cultural exchange between Austria and Germany in this period, facilitated by the two countries' shared German language and devastating defeat in World War I, and thus concerns about suicide were omnipresent in Austria as well.<sup>xxix</sup> Freud's 1920 case study, *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman*, his first and only attempt at writing about homosexuality in women, features suicide and despair more centrally. The case concerns an eighteen year old girl from a "family of good standing," whose parents bring her to Freud with the hopes of "curing" her lesbianism.<sup>xxx</sup> The young woman, who is never given a pseudonym, had fallen in love with a "cocotte" and was actively pursuing her.<sup>xxxi</sup> This incensed her father and, when he passed the two women walking arm-in-arm, he gave them "an angry glance which boded no good."<sup>xxxii</sup> In response, the cocotte became angry with the young woman and demanded that the young woman leave her and never see her again.

Distraught, the young woman immediately threw herself over a wall and onto a railway, an action Freud considered to be "an undoubtedly serious" attempt at suicide.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Her suicide attempt is of such interest to Freud because it be-

comes, as Darcy Buerkle argues, the "point of return" in the text. Freud begins his discussion of the case with her suicide attempt, tells the story of her suicide two more times, and continuously references the moment in which she flings herself onto a railway.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Suicide in this essay, unlike in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, is impossible to miss or not take seriously.

As in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud's primary concern is her childhood experiences and her current influences, rather than her physical features. However, while in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* he still finds that masculinity is a lesbian trait, in this essay he emphatically dismisses the idea of "third sex." He begins his discussion of the possibility that his former patient is of the "third sex" by suggesting that "readers unversed in psychoanalysis" would be interested in knowing whether the young woman has "physical characteristics plainly belonging to the opposite sex, and did the case prove to be one of congenital or acquired homosexuality?"<sup>xxxv</sup> That Freud believes that nobody familiar with psychoanalysis would be interested in the woman's physicality demonstrates the lack of emphasis placed on gender inversion in Weimar psychology.

He answers the question, however, noting that the young woman had "no obvious disturbance of the feminine physical type," although he acknowledges that she played the "masculine role" in her relationship and had some "masculine" physical and intellectual characteristics.<sup>xxxvi</sup> However, he also argues that these qualities could be present

in so-called "normal" women as well, and that physical "hermaphroditism" is actually independent of homosexuality.<sup>xxxvii</sup> He acknowledges later in the essay that homosexuality might be "partly an inborn constitution," but it does not follow in Freud, unlike in Krafft-Ebing, that homosexuality being innate also means that it is biological.<sup>xxxviii</sup> In fact, Freud believes that psychological experiences, not biology, results in homosexuality, and thus "the supposition that nature...created a third sex falls to the ground."<sup>xxxix</sup>

While Freud places great emphasis in this study on the young woman's relationship with her father and brother, her mother plays a critical role in his analysis as well. According to Freud, the young woman passed through a normal feminine Oedipus complex as a child, and had a relatively normal childhood in all but two respects.<sup>xl</sup> The first was an early strong attachment to a female teacher.<sup>xli</sup> The second was her mother's unusually "strong disciplinary methods" and harsh treatment of her daughter, despite her indulgence of her sons, which according to Freud, would cause the young woman to be inclined to find a more supportive mother, and could result in a mother-fixation.<sup>xlii</sup> However, Freud interprets his patient as also having strong heterosexual desire until she was traumatized by the birth of her brother when she was sixteen years old.<sup>xliii</sup>

In Freud's telling of her story, the woman experienced a resurgence of her infantile Oedipus complex during puberty which caused her to experience a great unconscious need to have a male child with her father.<sup>xliiv</sup> According to Freud, when

her mother, whom she supposedly hated, gave birth to her father's son instead, she became so enraged and frustrated that she unconsciously turned away from all men and became fixated on her mother instead.<sup>xlv</sup> Since her mother was so cold to her, she was frustrated here as well and needed to find a mother substitute.<sup>xlvi</sup>

This is evidenced by her primary interest in women in their thirties or forties who, with the exception of the cocotte she was seeing when she was brought to Freud, were mothers.<sup>xlvii</sup> The cocotte, though not a mother, was a full ten years older than the young woman, which Freud considers significant.<sup>xlviii</sup> He says explicitly, "the analysis revealed beyond a shadow of a doubt that the lady-love was a substitute for-her mother."<sup>xlix</sup> He even acknowledges that in her "conscious motives," she was only interested in her mother and mother's reactions to her relationships with women, not to her father's reactions, and therefore concludes that she has "a strong mother fixation," in part due to her mother's emotional neglect of her.<sup>i</sup>

Despite the seemingly tragic situation of a young woman who feels unloved by her mother to such a degree that she is psychologically traumatized to the point of becoming homosexual, Freud does not see her suicide attempt as inherent to homosexuality. He states that the young woman is not in any way sick, that her homosexual behavior is within the realm of normality, and he was very hesitant to try to force her to become heterosexual.<sup>li</sup> Her suicide attempt is instead explained as being the result of her father's

lack of acceptance of her homosexual relationship, and the older woman's refusal to continue a relationship with a young woman whose parents disapprove.<sup>lii</sup>

Suicide, as Freud discusses it in this case study, is a common course of action for homosexuals, not because of their homosexuality, but because society forces them to hide their relationships or feelings of the same sex. Furthermore, the consequences of a homosexual relationship often led to circumstances that induce such panic that suicide is inevitable.<sup>liii</sup> While Freud consistently accuses his patient of lying or deceiving him, the woman's suicide attempt is the one aspect of her life he finds believable.<sup>liv</sup> This is especially interesting because, as Buerkle argues, Freud did not consider the suicidal inclinations of Dora, a patient he assumed to be heterosexual, to be "real," but rather theatrics to get her father's attention.<sup>lv</sup> Here, however, he considers the homosexual woman's suicide attempt to be "real" and done with the intent of dying, suggesting that homosexuality and suicide are indeed linked in Freud's mind.

Charlotte Wolff responds to "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" in her book, *Love Between Women*. Charlotte Wolff was a young lesbian doctor, psychologist, writer, and lesbian organizer living in Berlin during the Weimar era.<sup>lvi</sup> As a Jewish woman, she was forced to flee the Nazis in the 1930s, living first as a refugee in France, before ultimately settling in Great Britain in 1937.<sup>lvii</sup> Thus, when *Love Between Women* is published, it is done so both in the English language

with a British publisher, and in 1971, in the context of the second wave feminist movement. Her forced migration and difficulties in obtaining a license to practice medicine and psychotherapy as Jewish refugee once in Great Britain, in addition to the cultural differences between Weimar Germany and postwar Great Britain, likely a role in the timing of her response.<sup>lviii</sup>

*Love Between Women* is therefore not a "Weimar era work" in the traditional sense, and must have also been influenced by the context in which it was ultimately produced. However, it was also deeply influenced by sexologists and writers of the Imperial and Weimar Germany, to whom Wolff writes in response. She states explicitly many of the themes and ideas about lesbianism that can be seen in lesbian cultural productions of the 1930s. As Wolff herself was a young lesbian in Weimar era Germany, as well as a psychologist, she speaks from both personal experience and psychological theory. Her work is useful, then, as a framework for understanding how lesbians coming of age in the Weimar era might have perceived themselves as lesbians, and perceived their own suicidality and relationships with their mothers.

Wolff agrees with Freud's assessment of the young homosexual woman to an extent. Like Freud, she is not interested in biology or 'gender inversion,' but instead on psychology and childhood experiences. She supports his notion that lesbianism is caused by a mixture of inborn tendency and external influences, and agrees that a mother's treatment of her daughter plays a

tremendous role in the daughter's psychosexual development and the development of lesbianism in girls and young women.<sup>59</sup> She differs primarily on two points. First, she does not agree that sexuality, or the desire to literally have the child of either parent, is of prime importance to lesbianism, but that instead, the "essence" of lesbianism is emotional relationships with other women in general, and with the mother most particularly.<sup>lx</sup> Secondly, Wolff argues, the father is never the desired sex-object for the lesbian, and she proposes a much simpler explanation of the psychogenesis of the young woman's lesbianism.<sup>lxi</sup> The lesbian is a woman whose experience with the Oedipus complex is never normal, as her libido becomes "stuck," or fixated, on her mother, and she never makes the transference to her father.<sup>lxii</sup>

She argues that the mother's treatment of her daughter is the most significant force in the development of lesbianism, far more so than cultural, educational, or geographical background.<sup>lxiii</sup> She notes that, in her experience, the only difference between a heterosexual woman's background and a lesbian woman's background is how she perceives her relationship with her mother.<sup>lxiv</sup> A heterosexual woman is likely to have either neutral feelings towards her mother, or feel that she was her mother's favorite.<sup>lxv</sup> In contrast, homosexual women are far more likely to report that they were neglected or unloved by their mothers, or that their mothers preferred their brothers or would have loved them more had they were born a boy, and are far less likely to view themselves as being their mother's favorite.<sup>lxvi</sup>

She argues that the lack of love or positive attention towards the girl traumatizes her psychologically, and causes her to develop a mother fixation.<sup>lxviii</sup>

While Wolff does not discuss suicide, she does believe that most lesbians, due to the relationship with their mother, have psychological trauma and emotional difficulties. She theorizes that this lack of maternal love results in lesbians developing aggressive tendencies towards themselves, which result in depression and self-loathing.<sup>lxix</sup> The lesbian further experiences frustration as an adult, when she searches for a woman she can both be mothered by and can mother as she wished she could have been mothered, which is often very difficult.<sup>lxx</sup> She also suffers emotional difficulties, according to Wolff, due to her inability to properly fulfill her maternal desires due to her childlessness. She views these problems as being particular to homosexual women, and not necessarily applicable to homosexual men.<sup>lxxii</sup>

Markedly different from Krafft-Ebing's writing on lesbians significantly earlier, Wolff never uses the language of "gender inversion." Unlike Rühling, throughout the text she refers to both "masculine-type" and "feminine-type" lesbians and does not see either type as participating in deception. Similar to Freud, Wolff focuses on her patients' psychological experiences, and her interpretation of those experiences places the greatest emphasis on lesbian women's fixations on their mothers, which she connects explicitly to despair.

Wolff also addresses a cause for despair and stress among lesbian schoolgirls: their

often unrequited crushes on female teachers. She writes that teacher-pupil relationships are indeed often part of lesbian love, as a teacher's care for a student can be "akin, though not identical" to maternal love.<sup>lxxiii</sup> This uniquely fulfills the lesbian schoolgirl's need to be mothered by a mature woman who is not her mother, and the lesbian teacher's need to mother a young woman. Such a relationship is explored in the popular 1931 film, *Mädchen in Uniform*, which also depicts a suicide attempt.

### III. LESBIANS IN WEIMAR CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Writers and artists in the Weimar era increasingly depicted suicide and suicidality in their fiction.<sup>lxxiv</sup> Suicide became such a popular trope that a character in Vicki Baum's popular novel, *Grand Hotel*, exclaims, "My God, does everyone have a tea cup of veronal [poison] ready?"<sup>lxxv</sup> Suicide was featured especially in novels that had a political purpose and explicitly connected personal despair to widespread social or political ones in order to make clear that "radical change" was necessary immediately, and doing nothing had a human cost.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Given this context, it makes sense that homosexuality as well became more explicitly connected to suicide, not only in conservative literature obsessed with "degeneracy," but in sympathetic works as well.

The 1931 film, *Mädchen in Uniform*, deeply interweaves the themes of mother fixation, loneliness, and suicidality. In many ways, it epitomizes the kind of political film Föllmer describes as being part of the Weimar cultural landscape. It tells the story of a young teenage girl, Manuela,

who after her mother's death and her years of living alone with her father, is sent to a strict Prussian boarding school for young women.<sup>lxxvii</sup> There, she falls in (mostly unrequited) love with one her teachers, Fräulein von Bernberg, and mistakenly becomes drunk and confesses her love to her friends.<sup>lxxviii</sup> She is overheard by her headmistress, who proclaims that girls like Manuela "do not belong in boarding school," and punishes her with complete isolation from her peers.<sup>lxxix</sup>

The film focuses on the individual despair of a young girl who experiences homosexual attraction at the kind of strict boarding school that was becoming increasingly controversial in this period, and explicitly connects her story to broader structural problems. Fräulein von Bernberg acts as mouthpiece for the writer, making such dramatic and political statements as, "This love you call sin, I call the great spirit of love, in all its forms" and "I can't stand by and watch children be made into scared, helpless creatures."<sup>lxxx</sup> Then, to underscore the seriousness and tragedy of homosexual love and harsh education in a cultural context where everyone has "a tea cup of veronal ready," Manuela attempts suicide after being informed that she is no longer allowed contact with other girls or the teacher she loves.<sup>lxxxii</sup> In the film, her friends save her, and the last line is Fräulein von Bernberg scolding the headmistress for her intolerance and harshness.<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

Christa Winsloe, a German lesbian writer, wrote the film based on her stage play, *Gestern und heute*, which in turn was based on her semi autobiographical novel, *Das Mädchen Manuela*.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> In

the novel, the story has an even darker ending. Manuela succeeds in jumping to her death, and the last paragraph reads, "And there was Manuela, lying on the hard stone steps in front of them. Herr Alemann spread his arms and kept the struggling crowd from following Fräulein von Bernberg."<sup>lxxxiv</sup> In the novel, even more so than the film, the societal mistreatment of young lesbians and school children has a deadly impact.

Manuela's feelings for her teacher are complicated, as while they can be "read" as romantic love, they appear to go beyond a simple crush or romantic feeling. While the other girls who also appear to have developed schoolgirl crushes on her swoon over their attractive teacher, they are not as totally consumed by a desire to please and attract individualized attention from the teacher as Manuela is, nor do they suffer when she is not there.<sup>lxxxv</sup> While the other girls can sleep after they are kissed goodnight by the Fräulein and left alone, Manuela states at her door, longing to get up to see her at night.<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

Winsloe viewed the original novel as well as its later incarnations, to a lesser extent, as a story primarily about how she coped with living after her mother's death. As such, the absence of the protagonist's mother in each incarnation is intentionally central.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> As a motherless child, Manuela's love has a much stronger sense of urgency. The closest Manuela has to a mother is Fräulein von Bernberg, who acts as both love interest, and through her mothering of Manuela, a substitute mother.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> The Fräulein herself even explains her student's attentions

to her by reminding the headmistress that young girls "need someone to lean on at this age," and Manuela has no one.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Thus her suicide attempt can be understood not only as a reaction to being deprived of her friends and the woman she loves, but also deprived of a mother figure who might have been the first since the death of her mother to take care of her. Manuela's love for the Fräulein is inextricable from her need for the teacher's maternal care.

As with Aimee Duc's novel, *Are These Women?*, we can understand *Mädchen in Uniform* as a reflection of how Weimar lesbians understood their own sexuality, especially as Winsloe's work was so popular amongst other lesbians in the Weimar era.<sup>xc</sup> The film was popular with the general public as well, and was voted the most impressionable film of the year by the readership of the newspaper, *Der Deutsche*.<sup>xcii</sup> This suggests that it either presented an image of lesbian love the general German population already recognized, or that the film influenced and changed the way the German public viewed lesbian love.

Importantly, unlike Duc's protagonists twenty years earlier, neither Manuela nor Fräulein von Bernberg are explicitly masculine-coded. Manuela is not in any rush to disassociate herself from femininity or to write a doctoral dissertation on the scientific proof of the "third sex", but rather is shown to be lesbian, or at least have homosexual tendencies, by her desire for the attentions of her attractive teacher, and her utter despair when the woman she loves is snatched away from her.

Anna Elisabet Weirauch



also emphasizes lesbian desire over gender inversion in her three volume novel, *The Scorpion*. The first volume in her series was released in 1919, the second in 1921, and the third in 1931.<sup>xcii</sup> Nenno reads the second volume of *The Scorpion* in particular as an indictment of the gender inversion theory, and the way in which lesbian subculture in Berlin alienated young lesbians like Weirauch's protagonist, Melitta Rudolf, who have nowhere else to go to find others like themselves, but cannot fit into the subculture in part due to their inability perform gender inversion.<sup>xciii</sup> As an explicitly feminine women with exclusively homosexual desire, Melitta is shown to be in a precarious position, where she is comfortable neither in conservative bourgeois life, as a lesbian, nor in the Berlin subculture, where she is expected to dress and behave in more stereotypically "masculine" ways.<sup>xciv</sup>

*The Scorpion* tells the life story of Melitta Rudolf, who begins the novel as a motherless little girl living in her aunt's lonely and conservative bourgeois home. Like Manuela, Melitta desperately wants to find someone to love her the way she imagines her mother would have loved her, and spends the first two volumes desperately searching for this affection. As in *Mädchen in Uniform*, suicide is shown to be connected with lesbian desire, albeit in a more complicated way.

In the first volume, the mother fixation is not shown as being inherently connected to suicide. Melitta is shown to develop this fixation as the result of both losing her mother and being treated unkindly by her aunt, resulting in her developing "a fan-

tastical notion of what a mother is," and even believing that "her own mother's premature death was the cause of all the misfortunes of her life."<sup>xcv</sup> Her goal, as Wolff or Winsloe would expect, is then to find an idealized maternal figure to care for her.<sup>xcvi</sup> She finds this mother figure in the older and beautiful Olga Rado, who teaches her literature, languages, and gives her the love and attention she needs, guiding her as a mother would, and referring to her as "little one."<sup>xcvii</sup> Olga also introduces her to a cigarette case adorned with a scorpion: the only animal capable of suicide. As a specter of suicide, its reality and its possibility, the cigarette case haunts Melitta's life and the novel itself.

However, it is not the more obviously mother-fixated Melitta who commits suicide when she is isolated from Olga by her Aunt Emily, but the mother figure herself, Olga Rado. Olga's suicide is not shown in the narrative to be the result of an unhealthy mother fixation. Instead, Olga's suicide is linked to the societal lack of acceptance of lesbianism. She commits suicide out of exhaustion, after Aunt Emily badgers Olga with endless cruel letters, signed with Melitta's name, taunts her with Melitta's upcoming engagement, threatens her, and accuses her of seducing Melitta.<sup>xcix</sup> Rather than induce Melitta to suicide herself, due to the loss of her mother figure, Olga's suicide pushes Melitta to escape from her Aunt Emily after she comes of age, and go to Berlin, where she hopes to find herself.<sup>c</sup> However, in case "the effort proves worthless," Melitta keeps Olga's loaded revolver to allow her an exit at any point,

which allows for suicide to always remain a viable option for Miletta, throughout the second volume.<sup>ci</sup>

In the second volume, suicide is even more omnipresent, and the psychological impact of Melitta's mother fixation becomes stronger. As she fails to acclimate fully to Berlin's lesbian subculture, and her feelings of alienation and loneliness increase rather than dissipate, Melitta constantly considers her "beloved revolver," which acts as a constant temptation to take the same "exit" Olga did.<sup>cii</sup> Her revolver beckons not only herself, but another mother fixated lesbian acquaintance, Gisela, who is also shown to have been traumatized by a lack of maternal figure.<sup>ciii</sup> After having made remarks indicating her wish for death on an earlier occasion, she breaks into Melitta's apartment and ransacks it in order to find the revolver.<sup>civ</sup> She is only mollified when Melitta talks sweetly to her, calling her a "poor child," and tucking her into bed, and caring for her the way a mother might care for a sick child.<sup>cv</sup>

Melitta's mother fixation factors into her inevitable suicide attempt as well. As she contemplates going for her revolver, and thinks longingly of it being "all over" in twenty seconds and of them finding her dead body on the floor, she sought, "someone who would protect her from herself, to whom she could kneel, in whose lap she could hide her face, and who would lay kind, strong hands on her head."<sup>cvi</sup> She first cries out for her mother, as she does repeatedly in the novel, and then thinks of Olga, whose hand she imagines firmly against her head instead of her revolver.<sup>cvii</sup> When

her door is forced open and she is eventually rescued, she breaks down, and cries, “I am still too much of a child to run around the world so hopelessly alone!”<sup>2viii</sup>

Despite her cry, she does ultimately end up alone. In the third volume, she chooses to succumb to her melancholia and nurture the memory of Olga, rather than continue the effort of looking for another to love her the way Olga did.<sup>cx</sup> She withdraws to the country, builds herself a house, and satisfies her maternal desires through the adoption of a puppy.<sup>cx</sup> She is not fully happy, as she has no one to love her, but she has a creature to give her love to, and she makes peace with her “tragic destiny.”<sup>2xi</sup>

Suicide and despair in *The Scorpion*, as in suicide in *Mädchen in Uniform*, is shown to happen as a consequence for the lack of societal acceptance of homosexual women, as well as the result of psychological problems inherent to the mother fixation. Suicide occurs without the mother fixation in Olga Rado, while Gisela attempts suicide solely out of a loneliness that stems from her mother’s mistreatment of her. For Melitta, both are critical. Her desperate desire for a mother figure to guide her through the world clearly plays a role in her anguish, but the narrative hints that in a more just society, her mother fixation could be resolved. Had society left Olga and Melitta to their own devices, each could mother the other and be mothered in return, and could have happily spend their lives together.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

A lesbian like Melitta could not be understood within Krafft-

Ebing’s framework of lesbianism. She possesses no physical characteristics classified as masculine, nor does she partake in any standard boyish activity, besides loving women. She can only be understood as a lesbian in the Weimar era, when lesbianism comes to be understood as having a basis not in biology, but in psychology, with the rise of Freud and the social sciences. This psychological understanding of lesbianism allowed lesbians to be understood as such principally on the basis of their desire for women. This desire mostly came to be explained and understood as the result of early childhood trauma due in part to psychoanalytical convention, and in part to contemporary concerns about harsh discipline. The association of lesbianism with suicide is the unfortunate result of a combination of Weimar society’s preoccupation with suicide, and the reality of lesbian suicide.

That neither Imperial nor Weimar era thinkers, heterosexual or lesbian, could imagine lesbianism as a component of healthy womanhood is painfully indicative of a sociocultural context in which proper womanhood was narrowly defined, and the extent to which women who fell outside those parameters were severely marginalized. The violence and loneliness brought on by this marginalization coupled with shifting sociopolitical conditions and cultural trends informed how lesbians understood themselves and were understood by others. While the Weimar era ushered in a definition of lesbianism that was centered on love between women, rather than a particular kind of physicality, it came with a powerful stigma. In early con-

temporary Germany, a lesbian could only explain herself as either a damaged woman or not a woman at all.

As painful as this is, it is critical to remember that these understandings resonated with many contemporary lesbians, and helped them make sense of themselves, when no other explanations were imaginable. Lesbians were active participants in redefining themselves and describing their own experiences, often in ways congruent with psychological and medical dominant thought. That these understandings shifts suggests that how members of groups, especially marginalized ones, understand themselves is both complex and contingent on historical context. What may be deeply illuminating for an individual in a particular time and place may not be in another. Rather, individuals are in a continual process of reshaping and redefining themselves.

## SHIFTING UNDERSTANDINGS OF LESBIANISM IN IMPERIAL AND WEIMAR GERMANY VICTIMS: Meghan Paradis

## END NOTES

- <sup>i</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: The Classic Study of Deviant Sex*. Trans. Joseph Lopiccolo. (New York: Arcade, 2011), 263.
- <sup>ii</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 279.
- <sup>iii</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 264.
- <sup>iv</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 265.
- <sup>v</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 266.
- <sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>vii</sup> Aimee Duc, "Are These Women?" in *Lesbians in Germany, 1890s-1920s*. eds. Lillian Faderman and Brigitte Eriksson. (Tallahassee: Naiad Press. 1990), 18.
- <sup>viii</sup> Duc, "Are These Women?", 5-6. (emphasis mine)
- <sup>ix</sup> Anna Ruehling, "What Interest Does the Women's Movement Have in the Homosexuality Question?" in *Lesbians in Germany, 1890s-1920s*. eds. Lillian Faderman and Brigitte Eriksson. (Tallahassee: Naiad Press. 1990), 83.
- <sup>x</sup> Ruehling, "What Interest Does the Women's Movement Have in the Homosexuality Question?", 84.
- <sup>xi</sup> Ruehling, "What Interest Does the Women's Movement Have in the Homosexuality Question?", 85.
- <sup>xii</sup> Ruehling, "What Interest Does the Women's Movement Have in the Homosexuality Question?", 91.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ruehling, "What Interest Does the Women's Movement Have in the Homosexuality Question?", 84-85.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Trans. James Strachy. (New York: Basic Book Inc. 1975), 11.
- <sup>xv</sup> Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 2.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 6-7.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 6.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 11.
- <sup>xix</sup> Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 4.
- <sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxi</sup> Moritz Föllmer, "Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin," *Central European History* 42 (2009): 195-221, 195.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Föllmer, "Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin," 196.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Darcy C. Buerkle, *Nothing Happened: Charlotte Salomon and an Archive of Suicide*. (Ann Arbor: UMichigan Press: 2013), 167.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Buerkle, *Nothing Happened*, 167, 169.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Buerkle, *Nothing Happened*, 167.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Föllmer, "Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin," 196, 201.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Föllmer, "Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin," 220.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Föllmer, "Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin," 220.
- <sup>xxvix</sup> For more detailed discussion about suicide in interwar Austria, especially as it relates to Freud, see Darcy Buerkle's monograph, *Nothing Happened: Charlotte Salomon and an Archive of Suicide*. (Ann Arbor: Michigan Press, 2013).
- <sup>xxx</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman." Trans. Barbara Low and R. Gabler. 1926. Online, 148.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 147.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 148.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Buerkle, *Nothing Happened*, 220.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 153.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 154.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 169.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 171.
- <sup>xl</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 155.
- <sup>xli</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 168.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 148.
- <sup>xliiii</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 156.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 157.
- <sup>xlv</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 158.
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 156.
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 147.
- <sup>xlix</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 156.
- <sup>l</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 169.
- <sup>li</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 150.
- <sup>lii</sup> Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", 162.
- <sup>liii</sup> Buerkle, *Nothing Happened*, 220.
- <sup>liiv</sup> Buerkle, *Nothing Happened*, 221.
- <sup>liv</sup> Buerkle, *Nothing Happened*, 205.
- <sup>lvi</sup> Harriet Freidenreich, "Charlotte Wolff: 1897-1986." *The Jewish Women's Archive*. Online.
- <sup>lvii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>lviii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>lix</sup> Charlotte Wolff, *Love Between Women*. (New York: St. Martin's. 1971), 51.
- <sup>lx</sup> Wolff, *Love Between Women*, 13, 60.
- <sup>lxi</sup> Wolff, *Love Between Women*, 59.
- <sup>lxii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>lxiii</sup> Wolff, *Love Between Women*, 116.
- <sup>lxiv</sup> Wolff, *Love Between Women*, 118.
- <sup>lxv</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>lxvi</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>lxvii</sup> Wolff, *Love Between Women*, 118.
- <sup>lxviii</sup> Wolff, *Love Between Women*, 19-20.
- <sup>lxix</sup> Wolff, *Love Between Women*, 180.
- <sup>lxx</sup> Wolff, *Love Between Women*, 13.
- <sup>lxxi</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>lxxii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>lxxiii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>lxxiv</sup> Föllmer, "Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin," 195.

- <sup>lxxv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>lxxvi</sup> Föllmer, "Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin," 196.
- <sup>lxxvii</sup> Christa Winsloe, *Mädchen in Uniform*. Film. Directed by Leontine Sagen. 1931. Berlin: Bild und Ton GmbH.
- <sup>lxxviii</sup> Winsloe, *Mädchen in Uniform*.
- <sup>lxxix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>lxxx</sup> Winsloe, *Mädchen in Uniform*.
- <sup>lxxxi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>lxxxii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>lxxxiii</sup> Buerkle, *Nothing Happened*, 247.
- <sup>lxxxiii</sup> Buerkle, *Nothing Happened*, 247.
- <sup>lxxxv</sup> Winsloe, *Mädchen in Uniform*.
- <sup>lxxxvi</sup> Winsloe, *Mädchen in Uniform*.
- <sup>lxxxvii</sup> Buerkle, *Nothing Happened*, 247.
- <sup>lxxxviii</sup> Winsloe, *Mädchen in Uniform*.
- <sup>lxxxix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xc</sup> Buerkle, *Nothing Happened*, 246.
- <sup>xc</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xcii</sup> Nancy P. Nenno. "Bildung and Desire: Anna Elisabeth Weirauch's *Der Skorpion*." in *Queering the Canon: Defying Sights in German Literature and Culture*, ed. Christoph Lorey and John L. Plews. (Rochester: Camden House, 1998), 207.
- <sup>xciii</sup> Nenno, "Bildung and Desire", 209.
- <sup>xciv</sup> Nenno, "Bildung and Desire", 209.
- <sup>xcv</sup> Anna Elisabeth Weirauch. *The Scorpion*. Trans. Whittaker Chambers. (New York: Greenberg, 1932), 2.
- <sup>xcvi</sup> Nenno, "Bildung and Desire", 211.
- <sup>xcvii</sup> Weirauch, *The Scorpion*, 138. (example)
- <sup>xcviii</sup> Weirauch, *The Scorpion*, 45.
- <sup>xcix</sup> Weirauch, *The Scorpion*, 189-190.
- <sup>c</sup> Weirauch, *The Scorpion*, 205.
- <sup>ci</sup> Weirauch, *The Scorpion*, 205.
- <sup>cii</sup> Weirauch, *The Scorpion*, 324. (for example)
- <sup>ciii</sup> Weirauch, *The Scorpion*, 278-280.
- <sup>civ</sup> Weirauch, *The Scorpion*, 283, 299.
- <sup>cv</sup> Weirauch, *The Scorpion*, 301-303.
- <sup>cv</sup> Weirauch, *The Scorpion*, 337.

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- <sup>cvii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>cviii</sup> Weirauch, *The Scorpion*, 339.
- <sup>cix</sup> Nenno, "Bildung and Desire," 219.
- <sup>cx</sup> Nenno, "Bildung and Desire," 218.
- <sup>cx</sup> Nenno, "Bildung and Desire," 218.

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