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CREATING WOMEN:

THE FEMALE ARTIST IN FIN-DE-SIECLE GERMANY AND AUSTRIA

Ann McGlashan

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Germanic Studies,
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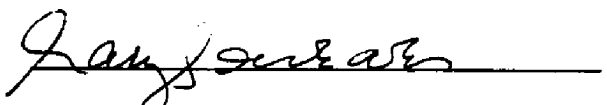

Mary Jo Weaver, Ph.D.

Date of Oral Examination: February 23, 1996

Dedicated to my mother
May McGlashan
and to the memory of my father
John McGlashan

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Introduction

We in the late twentieth century feel strangely drawn to the epoch of one hundred years ago known as the "Fin de siècle," the "Jahrhundertwende," or simply the "turn of the century," as if there were no other. The Fin de siècle holds our fascination due to the richness of its cultural make-up and the contradictory nature of its messages. Hardly another period in history has been so closely analyzed in recent years, or has given rise to so many overviews, both scholarly and popular, of life, politics, art, and culture. Peter Gay, for example weaves contrary strands of eroticism, sexuality, love, and psychoanalytic self-consciousness to paint a picture of an obsessive society in The Bourgeois Experience. Paul Hofmann presents a Vienna alive with intellectual genius in The Viennese: Splendor, Twilight, and Exile. Frederic Morton's A Nervous Splendor sets the scene as an entire society heads towards disaster amongst splendid display; Carl Schorske's Fin-de-Siècle Vienna unravels the political and social factors which made Vienna a particularly fascinating case study in the European context; and in Modern and Modernism, Frederick Karl examines how artistic sensibility held sway as the avant-garde pushed its way into the twentieth century.

But there is one aspect of the Fin de siècle which no author seems able to ignore: the prominence of the "feminine" in its many manifestations as literary and artistic metaphor, the "femme fragile," the "femme fatale," the "süßes Mädel," fleshed out in such characters as Frank Wedekind's Lulu, Arthur Schnitzler's Mitzi, and Gustav Klimt's controversial Judith/Salomé.[1] We are reminded by Frederick Karl in Modern and Modernism that these feminine

images are abstractions, and should not be confused with flesh-and-blood women:

> Once Modern and Modernism began to define themselves in the last fifteen years of the century, one of the fiercest of all personal battles . . . came over women. Here it is not a question of women's participation in Modernism--few female writers or artists were avant-garde--but rather a question of the portrayal of women in Modernistic works. One can say the conflict was not over women, but over woman. (145-46)

Karl makes it clear that his understanding of the term "avant-garde" is far removed from its earlier nineteenth-century political use denoting strong, radical forces for change. Karl uses "avant-garde" as a literary term describing new aesthetic possibilities, especially in language and in literary imagery, which arise from and break the boundaries of existing artistic forms in a constant progression. Since most critics seem to agree that women involved in the creative arts in Germany and Austria at the turn of the century still adhered to the aesthetic tenets of nineteenth-century Realism, which, if we are to accept Karl's analysis, becomes obsolete as Modernism changes cultural rules, then women's voices cannot speak in a modernistic context, and may be dismissed in favor of the abstraction "woman."

However, feminist criticism offers a different point of view on that "fiercest of all personal battles" in the Fin de siècle (Karl 145). Rather than accept the distinction between the battle over "woman" as an abstraction and the struggles of real women existing in the world, many proponents of Anglo-American feminist criticism consider both battles to be inextricably linked. In War of the Words, for example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe the turn of the century in Britain and America as an era characterized by "gender strife" in both the political and artistic spheres (xiv). As women began to make

progress in their struggle for an existence equal in rights and opportunities to that of men, by entering the workplace, lobbying for more humane laws pertaining to the family and personal development, and demonstrating for women's suffrage, male fear of female encroachment grew apace and was manifested by public diatribes, prohibitive laws, and private oppression. Against this background of real-life struggle, literature and art also became battlegrounds where men fought to retain their privileged position as the exclusive arbiters of culture. Thus, the abstraction "woman" cannot and should not be completely separated from the real women who gave rise to it.

This double-edged concept of "gender-strife," in real life and in the discursive sphere, is clearly applicable to Germany and Austria in the same time period. Indeed nowhere else in Europe was the delineation between male and female so rigid. While Prussian and Austrian militarism dominated the social scene with strictly masculinist codes of ethics, the women's movement was rising from the ashes of its disbandment after the 1848 revolution.[2] Indeed, when the Bund deutscher Frauenvereine was formed in 1894, thirty-four already existing women's organizations joined (Frevert 113). In a society drowning in conflicting emotions, the demands of women for new freedoms conflicted with old prejudices and a paranoid fear of change. This fear of a perceived growth in female power in the real world gave rise to a new science of sexual difference, grounded in positivist thought and bolstered by psychology. This science of sexual difference attempted to "prove" by deterministic methods the natural inferiority of women. As a consequence, the proven "abnormality" of the female sex presented a perfect foil for the new cultural elite of the "Dekadenz" movement, whose cultivated love of the degenerate was a means of separating themselves from the bourgeois optimism

of nineteenth-century Realism, and from overly nivilistic Naturalism. As art borrowed from science and science from art, the distinctions began to blur. Thus the abstract images of women, the "femme fragile" and the "femme fatale," became both a concrete means of halting women's progress and the artistic metaphor for the degeneration of an epoch.

Karl's use of the term "avant-garde" also blurs the distinction between the literary and the concrete. His dismissal of real women from the modernist conflict rests on the use of "avant-garde" as a purely aesthetic term, as opposed to Realist and Naturalist. Women are not "avant-garde" because their artistic works do not conform to Karl's definition of Modernism in the artistic fields. However, Karl also uses the term to designate an elitist company of artists, a "cell," in which artists could separate themselves from the despised world of the bourgeoisie, and which is a purely male construct:

> What occurs is that the artist has rejected his historical context--associates, family, childhood friends, even his social background and name--for a "new name" and a fresh social context. The milieu artiste exists outside history and tradition, with its own rules. Artists create their own caste, a society within the society. (17)

The masculine character of this "avant-garde artistic fraternalism" (18) is also accepted by Carl Schorske. In Fin de siècle Vienna, he explains how Vienna's young "culture-makers" (xxvi) defined themselves "in terms of a kind of collective oedipal revolt" against "the authority of the paternal culture that was their inheritance" (xxvi). By describing this revolt in terms of Freud's Oedipus metaphor, Schorske indicates that his "culture-makers" were an exclusively male group, akin to Harold Bloom's young poets engaged in the struggle against their literary forefathers.[3] The "milieu artiste," then, effectively separates the "culture-makers" not only from outmoded, bourgeois

notions of culture, but also from women's participation. In the words of Janet Wolff, "the literature of modernity describes the experience of men" ("The Invisible Flâneuse" 141).

Therefore, just as the fragmented female figures which proliferate in the literature and art of the Fin de siècle cannot be readily explained away as mere abstractions, so the lack of female voices to help illuminate the complexities of the period cannot be passed off as a purely literary or aesthetic judgment, as Karl does. The insistence on a progressive mode of cultural discourse, in which the avant-garde constantly breaks the boundaries of the rear-garde, and in so doing puts its stamp on an entire epoch, has obscured the fact that the avant-garde itself is self-appointed. As the young "culture-makers" set out to define themselves, to tell their own story, and give themselves "a new name," that which is not included becomes undelineated, undefined, unimportant. Our image of the Fin de siècle, then, is colored not only by the aesthetic innovations of the avant-garde, but also by their own self-image, a "fraternalism" which has been fossilized by the critical establishment into a universal descriptor, and which omits women altogether.

Most of the studies billed as overviews of the Fin de siècle see the period through the lens of this "fraternalism," and describe a culture without female "culture-makers." Where women are considered part of the wider picture, they are most often discussed in sociological terms, either as the victims of a society pulled apart by contradictory sexual mores, as in Peter Gay's three-volume work, The Bourgeois Experience, or as the objects of the so-called "woman question," as in Jan Romein's massive history of the period around 1900, The Watershed of Two Eras, [4] rather than in terms of their influence in the "making" of culture as a whole.

At worst, women are portrayed simply in terms of the members of the male elite with whom they were involved. In The Viennese, for example, Paul Hofmann makes much of the young Alma Schindler's affairs with the "modernist shockers" of the age (113):

> Shapely Alma, a dilettante wanting to become an artist or a composer, was then just starting her gallery of famous men. . . . she would marry Court Opera director Gustav Mahler, Walter Gropius, and Franz Werfel, and she would become the mistress of Oskar Kokoschka before adding more trophies to her amorous collection. (116)

Alma Schindler, the author of a powerful autobiography, and herself a promising composer until forced to relinquish this on her marriage to Gustav Mahler, is here reduced to a "culture-maker" manquée, whose only talent is an ability to collect famous men, in whose voices, talents, and cultural artifacts she is reflected.[5]

This tendency to describe women in terms of their effect on men can already be seen in a review written in 1891 by critic and author Fritz Mauthner. As he stands before a painting by Alfred Stevens entitled "Sphinx," he sees in the image of this most famous of trophy collectors the embodiment of his own epoch:

> Ein junges Weib vom Boulevard; sinnlich und tiefsinnig zugleich; die Gesichtsfarbe einer Schwerkranken und in den Augen die Glut von toller Lebenskraft; das Frauenzimmer hielt einen Finger an die Lippen und man wußte nicht, ob sie dem vorübergehenden ein Zeichen gab, ihr un bock zu bezahlen, oder ob sie sich selber zurückhielt, die tiefsten Schmerzen des Zeitalters zu verraten. (299)

Mauthner likens the Fin de siècle to a woman, a being full of contradictions: strength and weakness, power and mystery, depth and shallowness. She is unknowable, but could just as well be an empty-headed flirt as an omniscient

sibyl. But the most important aspect of this painting for Mauthner is not the enigma the woman represents, but her origin. He goes on: "Natürlich war das Bild mit Meisterschaft gemalt" (299). She is an artificial woman, created in the mind of a master painter and constructed through his genius as "eine vollendete Kunstleistung" of canvas and paint (299). This is the contradiction which lies at the very heart of fin-de-siècle culture: its symbol is female, but that symbol cannot take form without the genius of the man who gives it life, and cannot be understood without the critical faculties of the man who gives voice to the thoughts she cannot speak. Mauthner attempts to make us see the woman in the painting not by describing her outward appearance, the colors of her clothes and hair, but by describing her thoughts, by interpreting her performance, by narrating her story. This defining away of "woman" and, by extension, of women themselves, permeates all cultural discourses in the Fin de siècle, be they critical, scientific, sociological, philosophical, or aesthetic.

Elaine Hobby says of the study of history,

> we find in the past what we look for: by and large, we only come up with answers to the questions we think to ask. So the present creates the past--or creates our perception of it, which is all we have. (204)[6]

It is obvious that the questions we have thought to ask about the Fin de siècle are not adequate to allow us to gain an even reasonably complete picture. By asking different questions we will be able to deconstruct what has become an ideology of exclusion to find its roots in the past, and from there to rebuild a more inclusive cultural edifice, from a viewpoint in which women become visible.

In her 1979 treatment of the construction of femininity in German literature, a work still highly relevant today, Silvia Bovenschen makes the

point that the marginalization of women in literature and social culture under the category "Frauenfragen" leads to the impoverishment of both fields:

> Die Annahme, daß sich einzelne Bereiche des Lebens unter ihm erfassen und abhandeln ließen, während sich alle anderen Bereiche dem auf das Weibliche gerichteten Zugriff entzögen, verharmlost das Problem und macht überdies die Frauen zum Objekt eines Partialinteresses. (Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit 19)

Janet Wolff takes up this very point when she suggests that sociological research be opened up to new lines of questioning:

> The recovery of women's experience is part of the project of retrieving what has been hidden, and attempting to fill the gaps in the classic accounts. The feminist revision of sociology and social history means the gradual opening up of areas of social life and experience which to date have been obscured by the partial perspective and particular bias of mainstream sociology. ("The Invisible Flâneuse" 155)

Wolff searches the philosophical and sociological literature of the end of the nineteenth century for a female equivalent to Baudelaire's flâneur, the detached spectator-artist cruising through the urban landscape, considered by Walter Benjamin to be the quintessential figure of Modernity. She comes up empty-handed. A flâneuse cannot exist, says Wolff, because of the unequal weighting of the public, that is, male, over the private, that is, female, sphere in nineteenth-century society, and the emphasis on the city rather than the home as a necessary backdrop to modernist thought. Wolff sees a danger in accepting this "silence" with regard to the private sphere without deeper questioning:

> This silence is not only detrimental to any understanding of the lives of the female sex; it obscures a crucial part of the lives of men, too, by abstracting one part of their experience and failing to

> explore the interrelation of public and private spheres. For men inhabited both of these. (152)

This silence in the sociological field translates into women's invisibility in the field of art history, according to Gerda Pollock, who sees the freedom of the flâneur as an exclusively masculine prerogative:

> . . . the flâneur/artist is articulated across the twin ideological formations of modern bourgeois society--the splitting of private and public with its double freedom for men in the public space, and the pre-eminence of a detached observing gaze, whose possession and power is never questioned as its basis in the hierarchy of the sexes is never acknowledged. (Vision and Difference 71)

Woman as the object rather than the possessor of this observing gaze can be rendered all but invisible when out of range.

It is time to redress this inequity. However, my study is not primarily a reevaluation of aesthetic principles in order to move women's cultural artifacts into the existing canon of the fin-de-siècle avant-garde. Nor is it a plea that a separate canon should be constructed, a female avant-garde built on the basis of the critical concept of "écriture féminine," in which male writers become the tokens.[7] My purpose is rather to add another dimension to that picture of artistic life at the turn of the century now held to be universally valid. I want to expose the network of anti-feminist cultural forces which encouraged an exclusive "fraternalism" in this period, and to reveal its effects not only on the male artists of the time, but also on the invisible female artists.

For women artists did indeed exist and were making use of their creative powers. The sheer amount of women writers catalogued in the lexicons by Gisela Brinker-Gabler et al. and Elisabeth Friedrichs, for example, attests to a fact ignored by most cultural critics of the period: women writers at the turn of the century were prolific. But although they inhabited the same historical and

geographical space as their male counterparts, their discursive space was very different, that is, the cultural messages influencing women were diametrically opposed to those influencing men, and women artists fared no better than their less creative counterparts. In fact, they fared worse, since the intersection of creativity and femininity became a flashpoint for fin-de-siècle culture as a whole.

In this most elitest period of artistic endeavor, art had become "almost a religion, the source of meaning and the food of the soul" (Schorske 9). The question therefore of who could possess the life-giving creative spark, the flame of genius, was of tantamount importance, and became a source of acute anxiety in light of women's increasing demand for social equality. Creativity, a means of power in a chaotic world, had to be seen as an exclusively male trait, if Culture itself were not to fall into the lionesses' den. To this end, male creativity was bolstered in its validity by the new sciences of sexual difference, psychology and psychoanalysis, by the ever-increasing importance of the public, hence male, sphere of influence, and by a tradition of male elitism reaching back to Goethe and beyond. On the other hand, women's artistic attempts went against scientific "fact," against social norms, and against an idealized literary and artistic image of their sex. "Das Ewig-Weibliche" heralded by Goethe did not draw women upwards, but bound them to the earth. The woman artist, as a being which attempted to combine nature with genius, led an oxymoronic existence.

In my first chapter, I will trace the efforts to define woman as non-artist from the late Enlightenment to the Fin de siècle, and show how the reification of woman as symbol and the mystification of woman as muse combined to exclude the possibility of autonomous female creativity. By means of this

analysis, it will become clear that the forces at work in the Fin de siècle did not belong solely to the artistic sphere. Due to the increasing rift between public and private, the Fin de siècle fell heir to a peculiar maelstrom of cultural, social, intellectual, as well as aesthetic forces which sought to exaggerate the polarization of male and female spheres, leading to both the reification of "woman" as an artistic device and the vilification of woman as natural being. The very pervasiveness of these forces at work in society and in art amounted to that ideology of exclusion which gave the Fin de siècle its character.

In my second chapter, I will discuss the means by which the scientific, sociological, and philosophical texts of the late nineteenth-century emphasized the physical, mental, and creative inferiority of woman, as they attempted to define her as a wholly earth-bound being. Using examples from influential biologists, social scientists, anthropologists, and philosophers such as Cesare Lombroso, P. J. Möbius, Otto Weininger, Havelock Ellis, and Georg Simmel, I will trace the ultimate polarization of the genders into Male, to whom nature had given creative power, and Female, who by nature was devoid of creativity. By analyzing the various sources and proofs used by these writers, I will reveal their use of what I call "layered discourse" to define "woman": by piling layer upon layer of discourse from several unconnected sources (literary, scientific, philosophical, religious, folklore etc.), these writers sought to narrate the story of woman in such a way as to leave no possibility for the true subject to emerge and tell her own story. However, I will also discuss how some women did attempt their own narration, albeit with varying degrees of activism. By contrasting such different writers as individualist Lou Andreas-Salomé and ardent feminist Hedwig Dohm, I will examine the different reactions of women

intellectuals to this barrage of discursive anti-feminism, and show how their own interpretations of women's creativity differed.

In my third chapter, I shall discuss the image of the female artist as it comes down to us in the biographies of the literary men of the Fin de siècle, and in the works of these men. Despite the existence of actual autobiographies and diaries of women artists, most of our information about them comes from reading about the men with whom they interacted. Here they figure solely as muses or as hindrances to men's art. Nor can we turn to men's literature for an in-depth view of the problems of the creative woman in the Fin de siècle, since women artists in these works are exclusively performers: they are singers, actresses, dancers, or pianists, who perform for male spectators rather than create for themselves, as I will illustrate by means of examples from the arts, in particular Wedekind's Erdgeist and Die Büchse der Pandora, and Schnitzler's "Frau Berta Garlan."

If we are to gain any insight into the invisible and silenced female artist, we must turn to the work of women artists themselves. Therefore, in my last three chapters, I shall analyze works by three women writers, all of which have a female artist figure as a main character. All three of these authors had to come to grips with the contradictions in their lives as both women and artists: Lou Andreas-Salomé remains a perplexing figure, neither militant feminist nor reactionary, involved, like Alma Schindler, with famous men, and allowing them to define her, yet also defining them in her critical writings; Helene Böhlau lived a reclusive life, yet is better known for her espousal of progressive feminist causes in her works, and is thus often dismissed as a writer of Tendenzliteratur; and Ricarda Huch, though one of the vanguard of female intellectuals as a student in Zürich, is now considered a conservative

writer whose scholarly treatise on Romanticism is better known and more widely read than her novels. Just like their creators, the artist figures in the works I will be studying do not follow a predictable pattern: in Salomé's Eine Ausschweifung, Adine is so plagued by self-doubt that it is not clear whether she will succeed as an artist or will fall by the wayside; neither of Böhlau's protagonists, Olly in Der Rangierbahnhof and Isolde in Halbtier!, lives to see the fruits of her success; and Rose in Huch's Vita Somnium Breve, later renamed Michael Unger, while the most successful artist of the four, gives up her art to experience motherhood. The emancipatory success that these fictional artists achieve or do not achieve is an important aspect of these works. But perhaps more significantly, all four give us insight into the world of the fin-de-siècle woman artist, as they are seen struggling with the same oxymoronic existence as their creators.

I heed Silvia Bovenschen's warning that changing the questions we ask may be an immense task, and thus it may only be possible to accomplish "provisorische Brückenschläge über die Abgründe einer unerforschten kulturhistorischen Szenerie" (Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit 21). However, a beginning must be made. It is my belief that, as the silenced female artist emerges from the invisibility imposed upon her by the traditional view of the Fin de siècle, her own images and narratives will begin their transformation of this view, allowing the chasms to narrow and the bridges to become more secure.

Notes

[1] For overviews of this phenomenon see among others Bram Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity; Nina Auerbach, Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth; Silvia Bovenschen, Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit: Exemplarische Untersuchungen zu kulturgeschichtlichen und literarischen Präsentationsformen des Weiblichen; Gail Finney, Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism, and European Theater at the Turn of the Century.

[2] For information on the effect of the women's movement on late nineteenth-century attitudes towards women see Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres and Mary Jo Maynes, eds., German Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: A Social and Literary History, especially the articles by James Albisetti, John Fout, and Kay Goodman.

[3] See Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence. Compare also the analysis of this concept in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.

[4] In Jan Romein's text, the contribution of women is confined to two chapters at the end of over 600 pages, and women commentators such as Austrian sociologist Rosa Mayreder and Swedish feminist Ellen Key do not give their opinions on the subject of his book, Europe in 1900, but on a subset of that subject, the "woman question." It is also interesting that Romein's book was published posthumously in 1978, after having been finished by his wife. It is not clear how much of the final chapters include her influence.

[5] I use a translation here of Georg Simmel's phrase with which he describes the tangible results of men's creative powers. See my discussion of