# *Women* & Death

## Representations of Female Victims and Perpetrators in German Culture 1500–2000

Edited by Helen Fronius and Anna Linton

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and
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# Contents

List of Illustrations vii

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1
*Helen Fronius and Anna Linton*

1: Death and the Maiden: A German Topic? 9
*Stefanie Knöll*

2: Murdering Mothers in Bible Stories and Fairy Tales in Germany, 1550–1900 28
*Ruth B. Bottigheimer*

3: Virgin Sacrifices: Iphigenia and Jephthah's Daughter 43
*Anna Linton*

4: Mourning and Violence: Kriemhild's Incorporated Memory 60
*Bettina Bildhauer*

5: Narratives of Dismembering Women in Northern Germany, 1600–1800 76
*Mary Lindemann*

6: Images of Infanticide in Eighteenth-Century Germany 93
*Helen Fronius*

7: Mourning with a Female Heart? Grief and Gender in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany 113
*Anna Richards*

8: Female Vampires, Victimhood, and Vengeance in German Literature around 1800 128
*Jürgen Barkhoff*

9: Murderous Women in German Opera 144
*Lawrence Kramer*

10: Constructing the *femme fatale*: A Dialogue between Sexology and the Visual Arts in Germany around 1900 157
*Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius*

11: Media Representations of Vera Brühne as *femme fatale* 187
*Clare Bielby*

12: Gender in the Work of Grief and Mourning: Contemporary *Requiems* in German Literature 203
*Gisela Ecker*

Works Cited 221

Notes on the Contributors 257

Index 261

# Illustrations

1.1 *Der Tod und das schlafende Weib* (Death and the Sleeping Woman). Hans Sebald Beham, 1548. 10
1.2 *Tod packt eine Frau* (Death Seizes a Woman). Käthe Kollwitz, from the series *Tod* (Death), 1934–37. 12
1.3 *Der Tod und die Bürgerin* (Death and the Townswoman). Unknown, from the series *Der doten dantz mit figuren* (The Dance of Death with Figures), c. 1485. 14
1.4 *Tod und Witwe* (Death and the Widow) and *Tod und Tochter* (Death and the Daughter). Niklaus Manuel Deutsch, 1517. 15
1.5 *Tod und Frau* (Death and the Woman). Niklaus Manuel Deutsch, 1517. 16
1.6 *Herkules am Scheideweg* (Hercules at the Crossroads). Artist unknown, 1494. 20
10.1 *Elisabeth Bàthory.* R. A. von Elsberg, 1904. 159
10.2 *The Sphinx of Paris.* Alfred Stevens, 1867. 163
10.3 *Salomé.* Henri Regnault, 1870. 165
10.4 *Salomé II.* Lovis Corinth, 1900. 167
10.5 *Salomé.* Max Oppenheimer, 1912. 168
10.6 *Der Kuss der Sphinx* (Kiss of the Sphinx). Franz von Stuck, 1895. 169
10.7 *Liebkosungen* (Caresses). Fernand Khnopff, 1896. 170
10.8 *Sphinx.* Franz von Stuck, 1901. 172
10.9 *Cleopatra.* František Drtikol, 1913. 173
10.10 *Die Liebe* (Love). Albert von Keller, 1907. 174
10.11 *Salomé: le goût du sang* (Salome: The Taste of Blood). Gustav Adolf Mossa, 1904. 175
10.12 *Frau Aventuire* (Lady Adventure). Max Slevogt, 1894. 176
10.13 *Einsamer Ritt* (Solitary Ride). Hans Thoma, 1889. 178
10.14 *Ich bin die Heilige Demokratie, ich erwarte meine Liebhaber* (I am Holy Democracy, I Await My Lovers). Adolphe Willette, 1887. 179
10.15 "Lustmord an der Prostituierten F.H. in Wien" (Sex Murder of the Prostitute F.H. in Vienna). Erkennungsdienst Vienna, date unknown. 180
10.16 *Lustmord* (Sex Murder). Otto Dix, 1922. 180
11.1 Vera Brühne walking into court. 186

11.2 Brühne and her daughter on different sides of the courtroom. 194
11.3 Cultural associations between Brühne and Dietrich. 197
11.4 Cultural associations between Brühne and Ilse Koch. 198

# Introduction

*Helen Fronius and Anna Linton*

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE FEMININE and what might be called the "force of life" is straightforward in its origins and commonplace in its representations. Women bear children, and so whatever is life-giving can be represented as feminine: Mother Nature, Earth-Mother, Gaia, Terra. Less straightforward in origin, but hardly less commonplace, are representations of women and death. In contrast to images of the feminine as fertility or fecundity, there is no surface biological reason why the conjunction of the feminine and death should fascinate, appall, or thrill. Yet, whether as victims or perpetrators, martyrs or tyrants, in heroism or in womanly weakness, women portrayed in cultural representations of death receive special attention.

This may be the shadow-side of their connection with birth. Certainly in the Judaeo-Christian tradition the first woman, Eve, from whom all descend, is also the woman who, by her special disobedience *as a woman*, brought death into the world, and she is punished for her transgression through her biological function as life-giver: Child-birth becomes painful. And while it is true that in the Christian strand of these traditions Mary, the God-bearer, remedies this disobedience and provides the means of eternal life for all, it is also true that she does this by a certain denial of the feminine — she is a pure virgin. Moreover, she is passive: She receives in obedience, whereas Eve actively transgresses. Female goodness is estimated in reverse proportion to female agency from the very beginning.

Historically, this Christian foundation intermingled with myths from the classical world and tales from the folk tradition to form the background to German cultural development in the modern period, a period rich in representations of women and death. These representations are the focus of the current volume, the product of a three-year research project based at the Universities of Oxford and Edinburgh and funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council. Taking as its starting point Jacqueline Rose's demand for the scrutiny of images that preserve and reiterate gender assumptions,[1] the project aimed to produce a cultural history of women and death in the German-speaking world, using examples from the Renaissance to the present day.

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This is, however, no seamless five-centuries-long story, assessing historical periods individually and examining women separately in each role — as victims and as perpetrators. Rather, scholars from diverse fields have been brought together in order to draw out common themes and ideas across epochal and disciplinary divides. The point at which boundaries blur and lines of argument converge, the moments of historical and ideological change, are those most valuable for an understanding of cultural attitudes and beliefs. And a multi-disciplinary approach, in particular, allows the gender norms encoded in representations of women and death to emerge.

Several chapters have sought to diagnose moments of historical change in the way in which women are represented in literature, in nonliterary texts, and in the visual arts. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the eighteenth century features repeatedly as one such moment of change. The editorial histories of children's anthologies of Bible stories and fairy tales clearly reveal changing cultural attitudes toward women, as Ruth B. Bottigheimer demonstrates in her survey of these genres. With each new edition providing a snapshot of women's current status in society, Bottigheimer posits a definite change in attitudes after 1750. On the one hand, women who do not fulfill the cultural expectation of caring, kind, but weak femininity (such as the Old Testament figure of Jael) are gradually edited out of children's Bible stories, until they are free of images of women as perpetrators of violent acts. On the other hand, German versions of children's fairy tales, especially those popularized by the Grimm Brothers, take as their models predominantly gender-neutral European fairy tales, and inscribe them with misogynistic gender roles. The Grimms' edition turned male villains into female ones, replaced ogres with ogresses, and gave more speech to wicked women than to good girls, whose virtuous nature is directly linked to their ability to hold their tongues.

Mary Lindemann's analysis of how narratives about women who killed their husbands changed over two centuries also identifies the period after 1750 as a watershed in attitudes. Sixteenth-century accounts tend to construe mariticide, especially dismemberment murder, as a warning against the ubiquitous presence of the devil in the world, and of evil in the guise of women. In these narratives, the woman's victim, her husband, is portrayed as a sacrificial lamb, slaughtered by a monstrous female. This individual act triggered fear of social dissolution and of the entire female sex. In late eighteenth-century accounts, none of the attributes and none of the meanings present in sixteenth-century texts still occur. After about 1750, the narratives refer to the female perpetrators as "unworthy" rather than as "unnatural" or "monstrous." The murder is explained by references to the culprit's individual circumstances, personality, and current social conditions rather than attributed to the flaws inherent in all womanhood. Lindemann sees this change in emphasis as reflecting both the Enlightenment context and a change in literary tastes, and therefore the changed expectations of the reading public who consumed these stories. Crime narratives had to meet the readership's genre expectations. As new literary genres such as the novel had primed readers to expect narratives to portray perpetrators as individuals, however flawed they might be, readers expected crime narratives similarly to eschew the depiction of stock figures of evil. The image of the murdering woman thus changed in this period from one of the personification of rebellion and the wanton nature of all womankind, her deed prophesying social doom and political upheaval, to one of a flawed human being whose faults derived from her upbringing and environment.

The work of several scholars included in this volume make valuable contributions to our understanding of female agency, eschewing simplistic notions that view female victims as disempowered and female perpetrators as empowered. Jürgen Barkhoff's chapter, for instance, examines the figure of the female vampire in German literature. Female vampires underwent a transition from passive victims of the (male) vampire's aggression to aggressive, predatory monsters, thereby reversing gender roles. But these texts do more than simply indulge in the image of the sexually predatory, violent woman. Barkhoff shows how the German texts featuring female vampires tend to focus on the factors that render them victims rather than perpetrators, by analyzing their psychological makeup, for example, thereby destabilizing misogynistic patriarchal discourse. The most striking examples are texts by E. T. A. Hoffmann, which use the strong sexual potential of the vampire motif for a radical criticism of the way male discourse around 1800 defines the female body as deficient, subjects it to parasitic abuse, and condemns it to be perverse. The literary imaginary, Barkhoff argues, can offer a space where the dominant gender discourses of the time may be countered and destabilized.

Kriemhild is another figure whose status as either victim or perpetrator turns out to be problematic, even though she is remembered as the archetypal female killer. In the *Nibelungenlied* she suffers male violence when Hagen murders her beloved husband Siegfried. Although her status as a victim appears at first glance to be indirect (after all, she is not killed herself), Bettina Bildhauer's chapter shows very clearly how Kriemhild's incorporation of Siegfried's injury into her own body means that she is as much a victim of Hagen as Siegfried was. However, she does not accept her status as a victim passively, but instead uses it to initiate her own campaign of vengeance, whereupon she becomes a classic female perpetrator and agent in her own right. But the issue of her agency is more complicated than this suggests, as Kriemhild's violence is ultimately futile. She fails to kill the man she set out to kill, and she and her son both perish in the outbreak of violence that she engineers but is ultimately unable to control.

A further area in which victims and perpetrators cannot be neatly segregated is in the iconography of infanticide. Helen Fronius discusses this iconography in German literary and nonliterary writings between about 1770 and 1790. Many women depicted in this period take a proactive stance to the problem of unwanted pregnancy by killing their newborn babies. And yet the women never appear as perpetrators in these texts. The male authors of several hundred texts discussing infanticide strove to diminish women's agency by arguing either that the women had no choice but to kill their infants (with reference to societal and legal factors), or that they were unable to take responsibility for their actions because they lacked the mental or emotional capacity to do so. Above all, nearly all the texts emphasize that the women lost consciousness during the terrible act, and awoke to see what they had done with horror, disavowing any intention to murder their offspring. The agency involved in the killing of the child is thus removed from the women. If real-life infanticide cases were committed in an attempt by women to regain control over their lives, the texts tell a different story. They recast infanticide as an action that, in fact, speaks to women's lack of power and agency and is a testimony to the weakness of their sex (psychologically, emotionally, socially, and economically). The poetry, in particular, makes their actions appear futile, as the women themselves always die as a result of the act that they have committed.

The futility of female agency can also be seen in the Grimms' versions of German fairy tales featuring violent and even murderous women, as Bottigheimer elucidates in her contribution. However monstrous and cruel the actions of wicked women in fairy tales appear to be, their efficacy is ultimately diminished as their victims return to life, or as they themselves are subsequently done away with. In the fairy tales, women's violent actions are often intended to advance their own fortunes, for example, by improving the marital prospects for themselves or their children. Although the fairy tales ensure that there are no effectively murderous women, as stepmothers and witches fail miserably in achieving their selfish ends, their intent is always swiftly and brutally punished. The threat that their actions pose is thereby neutralized.

The thorny issue of female agency is particularly striking in the constellation of sexuality and death. This constellation was already long established before the beginning of the period covered by the project, and it is clearly demonstrated in Stefanie Knöll's chapter on the motif of death and the maiden in early modern German art. Although the motif developed from the pan-European dance of death cycles, which carried a strongly didactic *memento mori* message, in German lands it was gradually freed from that context and became a pictorial tradition in its own right. And as this happened, the (usually young) female victim became increasingly sexualized. Here we have a clear case of woman as the embodiment of sex, drawing death to mankind, for the woman's sexual allure is emphasized in a number of the prints, and in some there is even a suggestion that, far from rejecting death's advances, she permits or even encourages them. In these images, the female figure is eroticized and, at the same time, punished for her sexuality, which is conflated with vanity, pride, and folly, not least by association with the female figure *voluptas*. Significantly, the woman is exposed to the gaze of the (male) artist and viewer. Her revealing garments, in some cases even her nudity, render her exciting, while her powerlessness in the face of death — which, if gendered, appears as male — harnesses her sexuality and makes it safe.

The most obvious means of neutralizing the threat of female sexuality is marriage. Married women tend to be invisible in terms of representations relating to the theme of women and death, as the young and available are culturally fetishized. The representations generally focus on women who occupy a liminal space in society: virgins, widows, or older unmarried women, for example. It comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with Girard's theory of sacrifice that Iphigenia and Jephthah's daughter, discussed in the chapter by Anna Linton, should appear to be girls on the cusp of womanhood, for whom marriage is a none-too-distant prospect. Luce Irigaray has pointed out that women are material objects of desire and exchange,[2] and this makes them particularly suitable for the sacrificial economy: The offering must be something precious to the sacrificer. At the same time, these girls are vulnerable because of their weak community ties, and are therefore ideal victims. Marriage would take them across the boundary into a clearer social role, protecting them from both the sacrificer's knife and the writer's pen. Significantly, their deaths are represented as standing in for, and thus equated to, the marriage denied them: The burgeoning sexuality of young girls is neutralized at the plot level by sacrifice and, if these stories are read etiologically, by the marriage for which the ritual recalling of these narratives was to prepare teenage girls.

As part of the same process, women who assert their sexuality are demonized as dangerous. We see this clearly in Clare Bielby's discussion of the 1960s "press trial" of Vera Brühne. Bielby shows that Brühne was tried and convicted in tabloid newspapers not so much for the crime of which she was legally accused (involvement in a murder), but for her unconventional and emancipated lifestyle. She is described as a cold, calculating beast who emasculates the men with whom she comes into contact, is accused of failing in the primal female role of mother, and is even associated with the crimes of National Socialism through the coupling of her name in the press with a female concentration-camp guard.

The discussion of this real-life postwar case follows Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius's investigation of the numerous *fin-de-siècle* representations of such *femmes fatales* as Judith, Lulu, Cleopatra, and Salome. Hoffmann-Curtius argues that there is a link between the German notion of women as sexual criminals, as explored in sexology and criminology discourses, and the depiction of *femmes fatales* in the arts. In these images, female sexuality is portrayed as incalculable, threatening, and capable of murderous deeds. The figure of the Sphinx, in particular, allowed artists to bring these suspicions to the fore by combining beauty and bestiality. These images permit the spectator to enjoy "gruesome womanhood" while safely harnessing it through art, thereby assuming the hegemonic position that defines normal and deviant. Anchored and encoded in art, these images inspired and accelerated discourses that strove to locate the demonic in woman and to define female desire as lethal. But images of female sexuality rarely occur in isolation. Depictions of the most aggressive *femmes fatales* emerge contemporaneously with images of self-sufficient, chaste masculinity in the figure of the virtuous Christian knight, self-denying and solitary. Here we see how images of female sexuality are related to constructions of male sexuality: Depictions of deadly female perpetrators are the horrifying counterpart to the male artists' vision of virtuous male heroes. That the ebb and flow of these images is clearly linked to the cultural context is evident when we consider that the flood of Salome images came to a complete halt with the onset of the First World War. They were replaced instead with images of artists as sexual murderers (*Lustmörder*), suggesting that artists had turned the tables on threatening women by dismembering them in their paintings.

In the end, then, the threat of empowered female sexuality had to be neutralized — and to be seen as neutralized. Brühne is compared with the solid German housewife of the early '60s — and found wanting. Salome, as Hoffmann-Curtius and Lawrence Kramer show, develops in Oscar Wilde's play and Richard Strauss's opera from the passive young girl of the biblical narrative into a Sphinx-like figure who deals death to man through her revealing dance — only to be punished for revealing her untamed desire in her grotesque kiss of Jokanaan's severed head. King Herod, the man whose judgment has been swayed by Salome's desirability, restores order by commanding his guards to kill her.

Woman's liminal state is particularly emphasized by defining her as body, and thus associating her with animals. This can happen literally, as in the cases of Jephthah's daughter and of Iphigenia, who become sacrificial offerings, or metaphorically, as in the association of the *femme fatale* with the cruelly enigmatic and animalistic Sphinx. The association draws on a long-established discourse that regards reason as the male sphere, leaving the irrational as the domain of women. Woman's function in the process of birth strengthens this association. Paradoxically, her role as life-giver can also cause her to be associated with death. As Helen Fronius shows, in the eighteenth century, only women could be charged with infanticide, a crime which some suggested was the result of the trauma of labor on the already irrational female constitution.

We have argued that representations of women and death focus on young, available, or otherwise sexually alluring women, and that the old, infertile, or unavailable tend to become invisible. This is, of course, not the case when we consider representations of mourning, which is often thought of as a gendered activity, insofar as it is carried out in many cultures predominantly by women. Women (of all ages) have been regarded as more prone to weeping than men because of their physical constitution — Galenic theory, for example, considered them wetter and colder — and because of their connection with emotions rather than reason, the heart rather than the head. However, two contributions to the current volume question this simple association. Anna Richards argues that although the eighteenth century tended to map the emotion/reason dichotomy onto the female/male divide, such a clear division is not recognized in the discourses, both literary and nonliterary, surrounding grief and mourning. A more differentiated discussion of mourning begins to emerge in the psychological writings of the time, although, as Richards points out, these are themselves underpinned by certain gender assumptions. The issue returns in the final chapter, in Gisela Ecker's analysis of poems by two twentieth-century women writers (Marie Luise Kaschnitz and Friederike Mayröcker) that deal with the loss of life partners. Significantly, neither woman thematizes her gender in exploring her own loss, focusing instead on the role of writing in working through grief. Their position as poets is more interesting to them than their gender here. Toward the end of her chapter, Ecker suggests that we may even be witnessing a more general shift in the gender division of the work of mourning, with contemporary male writers addressing the topic in several recent works of fiction, with conspicuous mourning among the gay community in the era of HIV/AIDS making male demonstrations of grief more acceptable, and with the internet providing new platforms for (potentially more anonymized) expressions of emotions.

At the end of such a wide-reaching study of representations of women and death, the conclusion to be drawn is that the conjunction of women and death in art and in history is — ironically — fertile for the human imagination. That women who give life also somehow threaten it by their agency is not unexpected; what is unexpected is the fascination of that threat. It reaches into the depths of what it is to be human, raising moral and political questions, evoking desire and disgust, and stirring up something far less easy to define or describe. The ever-present element in all these discussions of representations and the women they depict is, of course, the viewers, the readers, the audience. Often their presence is obvious: indoctrinated by clear gender stereotypes, as Bottigheimer suggests; titillated by nudity, by the fetishistic arrangement of female flesh, as Knöll, Fronius, and Hoffmann-Curtius emphasize in their contributions. But elsewhere the fourth wall remains unbroken, and we are simply aware of the viewer, the reader, the audience, somewhere behind it: troubled and yet troubling, judging and yet judged, fascinated and, at the same time, fascinating.

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