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## Ambivalence sexuelle et identité juridique à travers les âges

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**ABSTRACT.** The consideration of *bisexuality*, as a biological phenomenon, was variable in law history. At first, the hermaphrodite was considered a prodigy in antiquity before to be inserted in a legal system modeled on binary classification which was strictly organized around masculinity and femininity. Roman jurists and after them the medieval canonists refuted the proven existence of both male and female sexes in one body. With very few exceptions, this orientation persisted in the Ancien Régime, during which this physiological particularity was analyzed as deviant sexual practices and, as a consequence, condemnable. The study of several trials against hermaphrodites shows the social embarrassment caused by sexual ambivalence. This strange physiognomy was enough to suggest he was a criminal. Nowadays, French legal system is fortunately milder but it remains shaped around a unique and defined sex as stated in the person's birth certificate. Therefore it fails to recognize the concept of third gender.

**Keywords:** hermaphroditism, deviance, identity, law, history

« À l'origine du corps hermaphrodite était une dualité réelle ou rêvée, une blessure ou un idéal. Combien de temps l'écriture et les beaux-arts, les lois et les rituels, mirent-ils pour donner à la fusion ou à la confusion des deux sexes en une même créature leurs primitifs visages ». Ce passage extrait de l'avant-propos de l'ouvrage de P. Graille<sup>1</sup> induit combien les constructions sociétales et intellectuelles de toutes sortes peinent à intégrer l'être bisexué. Dans ses travaux sur les fondements de la hiérarchie entre les sexes, l'anthropologue F. Héritier<sup>2</sup> a mis en évidence la « valence différentielle des sexes » et indique avant tout que les structures de la parenté reposent sur des inventions culturelles fondées sur un constat banal : il existe seulement deux sexes dont la conjonction est nécessaire pour engendrer. La parturition demeure elle-même à l'origine d'autres jeux d'opposition au sein de la famille et c'est finalement tout un univers social qui s'organise autour de la



**Elfriede Jelinek:**  
**Feminism, Politics and a Gender and Queer**  
**Theoretical Perspectivation of**  
***Krankheit oder Moderne Frauen* & *Ulrike Maria Stuart***

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**ABSTRACT.** Our article will proceed in a twofold way: on the one hand we attempt to introduce the audience more in depth to Elfriede Jelinek's work, extrapolating mainly her style of writing on the basis of the theoretical reflections that underlies her textual production; on the other hand we want to focus on two plays that are interesting and prime examples for her exposure to the question of feminism, gender-roles and gender-identifications and the very deconstruction of these complex concepts in the respective texts. Moreover we want to illustrate the whole thematic complex by visual examples of the plays or by sound recordings.

**Keywords:** Elfriede Jelinek, feminist perspective

## 1. Introduction

Elfriede Jelinek usually is labeled as 'feminist writer.' However, whereas secondary literature in the 80s deals with Jelinek's 'feminism' from a contemporary feminist perspective, emphasizing aspects of visibility, awareness and equality with respect to Jelinek's writing the term 'feminist writer' nowadays is used more like a 'standing matter' without any consequences regarding the applied theoretical approaches. It seems that hardly anybody undertakes readings and analyses of Elfriede Jelinek's texts that are based on recent gender- and/or queer theories. In the following article we will try to show that the just mentioned theoretical views and perspectifications turn out to be productive in reading Elfriede Jelinek's complex texts, no matter

whether the older texts are concerned, like *Krankheit oder Moderne Frauen*<sup>1</sup> (*Sickness or Modern Women*), or the more recent ones, like *Ulrike Maria Stuart*.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Poetics and (Feminist) Politics

Elfriede Jelinek is not only a feminist writer, she is, to the same extent, a deeply political writer. In fact the two aspects cannot be separated from each other. Early in her career, triggered through the contact with the student movement, she shifts from formal-aesthetic problems and language play to content and political impact.<sup>3</sup> Already in her first novels, *wir sind lockvögel baby!* (1970) or in *Michael. Ein Jugendbuch für die Infantilgesellschaft* (1972), both having a character of linguistic rebellion and aiming at popular culture, Jelinek draws on Roland Barthes's analysis of myth to reveal how pop cultural forms work as palliatives to oppressed sectors of society by suggesting that all men and women are equal.<sup>4</sup> Culture industry, as Jelinek stresses last but not least out of her Marxist conviction in *Die endlose Unschuldigkeit*,<sup>5</sup> follows a strategy of de-historicizing and depoliticizing in order to make readers, listeners and spectators of all classes feel equal instead of offering them improvements in their material welfare. A concession, however, the ruling class is not willing to make.<sup>6</sup>

According to Barthes the effect of myth is to transform history into nature, that means, what we think that is naturally given is given through language and discourse at a given moment in time. Thus, the discrepancy between reality and its representation in language is what is concealed by myth. Jelinek's primary assumptions in this respect are: "es kann nämlich alles *mütös* werden [...]." ("everything can become *mythicious*," as one could try to translate *mütös*).<sup>7</sup> She warns and outlines her guiding principle: "ich spreche von den dingen die sich in den begriffen einnisten" ("I speak of the things that settle down in the concepts," our translation).<sup>8</sup>

Jelinek deconstructs myths insofar as she adopts and amplifies the meaning of the original myth which brings this myth to a halt. That does not lead to an entmystification but rather to a denouncing of the myth through exaggeration. This kind of artificial myth that Jelinek then produces hyperbolises, overacts and perverts the ideological myth and reveals what Roland Barthes calls its 'naivety'.<sup>9</sup>

However, as already mentioned, textual and political strategies go hand in hand. When she says that "everything can become *mythicious*,"<sup>10</sup> one has to be aware of the fact that this word *mütös* does not exist in the German language – thus it is also a nice example of one of her stylistic and at the same time political approaches to language, namely creating neologisms, using certain linguistic devices – like suffixes – that mutilate a word and



transform it semantically, like in this case the suffix 'ös,' which designates a more negative semantics of a word (like komatös [comatose], maliziös [malicious], porös [porous] etc.), or using the phonetic spelling of a word instead of the correct orthography, in this case she writes "ü" instead of "y." Themes, concerns and style intertwine. Jelinek suspends all the usual categories of a novel (or a play), like time, place, figures, story lines (or, in the case of plays, monological or dialogical structures etcetera). Jelinek also abolishes the hierarchization between high and low literature in the way that she takes in the patterns and techniques of trivial literature into high literature.<sup>11</sup> More than this, she creates a 'new language,' a language that takes part in the performance and thus in the message of the texts. Since there does not exist a means of expression beyond language (or similar semantic systems), Jelinek carries clichés to the extremes, making them visible in and through language, taking possession of them and finally emptying them of meaning. This functions because of her seemingly uncritical adoption of the clichés which brings to the fore its absurd character. All of this is part of the already mentioned fundamental idea of the deconstruction of myth within her works. One could argue, generally, that her poetics, and, as the critique formulates it, the "new language," that she develops, perform the political. "This new language," as Shanta Rao in *The political aesthetic of Elfriede Jelinek's early plays* points out, enables her to present her critical views on Austro-German cultural history, particularly her belief that the historical subjugation of women (within private and public spheres) is closely aligned to the formation of a distinctly gendered subjectivity."<sup>12</sup>

Subjugation, violence, be it sexual or physical violence against women, or, at a larger scale, in and through language within the context of mass media, builds a central thematic complex in Jelinek's texts.<sup>13</sup> She discloses the symbolic violence of the state, i.e. the functioning of the police and military forces as an expression of the state's power and dominance. Also she unveils the latent and turned into a taboo sexuality within all these realms.<sup>14</sup> Matthias Konzett puts it even more pointed, namely that Jelinek reveals the "pornographic addiction and self-debasement in consumerism and nationalism"<sup>15</sup> of the entire cultural landscape. Jelinek hence is received as a "socialist feminist believing the overthrow of capitalism to be the prerequisite condition for the success of feminism."<sup>16</sup> Moreover Jelinek is understood in the way that "under the present socio-economic conditions, healthy sexual relations are a virtual impossibility between men and women."<sup>17</sup> Jelinek herself very recently formulated her feminist position as follows:

I do not fight against men, but against the system that is sexist. The system that judges the worth of women, the system that judges a woman's worth through her youthful body and looks and not for what she does. Men are defined through what they do, women through their looks.<sup>18</sup>

What we do, in the following analysis of her two plays, is to read Jelinek both feminist and queer.

### 3. The Play *Krankheit oder Moderne Frauen*

All those aspects of her writing that can be described as 'deconstruction of myth,' of language, of realism in literature lead us to the question of how to deal with her texts from a gender and queer theoretical perspective that is itself based on the deconstruction of gender and sexual difference. Reading Jelinek's plays we will try to take some of those theoretical aspects in consideration, drawing a bow from *Krankheit oder Moderne Frauen*, *Sickness or Modern Women*, an early play, to *Ulrike Maria Stuart* from 2007. *Sickness or Modern Women* was written in 1984 and is a broadly discussed play within feminist critique. Let us briefly provide you with a short overview of the plot: The traditional Christian couple Carmilla and Benno and their Children come to the Practice of Dr. Heidkliff, a sportive doctor, dentist and gynecologist who is in a relationship with Emily, a vampire and writer. Carmilla needs help since she is about to give birth to her sixth child. Heidkliff, however, has left for a swim and so Carmilla's husband helps her in a fatal way, Carmilla dies. Emily, watching the scene, bites Carmilla who consequently becomes a vampire herself. The two women then establish a lesbian relationship, feeding themselves with the blood of Carmilla's children. Emily convinces her seemingly progressive boyfriend Heidkliff to construct a mechanism that allows her to move out in her eye-teeth. The two women suck dry the other children and attack their husbands, discovering that they are beings without blood. The two women have to flee. The two men arm themselves, follow them and shoot the two women, who have become a kind of double-creature.<sup>19</sup>

The tendency of the existing interpretations of *Sickness or Modern Women* can be described in either feminist and/or gender theoretical ways, thus not only the problematic of locating women within patriarchal patterns is being reflected but also the reduction of women to their bodies, to the seemingly given biological substrate, to a definition of women in opposition to men. Those interpretations often refer to Jelinek's own statements and feminist views: "The woman does not have a place, a position (of her own)," says Jelinek in her *Essay on Ingeborg Bachmann*, "she is the other, the man is the norm."<sup>20</sup> However important those analyses are, let's have a close look at the dramatic texts itself, at its numerous traits of queerness, starting from a definition of Queer Studies: "Queer studies," as one could summon up, "considers, and conducts a political critique of, anything that falls into normative and deviant categories, particularly sexual activities and identities."<sup>21</sup> Already this aspect, as simple as it sounds, is fundamental to the conception



of the play's two main female characters that at a certain moment in time not only do they become a lesbian couple but they are also regarded from their bodily and mental condition, as vampires. Historically speaking, Lesbian vampirism can be regarded as a figuration in 20th century exploitation film, rooted in Joseph Sheridan le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* (1872) about the predatory love of a female vampire for a young woman.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the word 'queer,' as it appears in the dictionary, has a primary meaning of 'odd,' 'unconventional,' or 'out of the ordinary.' [...] 'To queer,' then, is to render 'normal' sexuality as strange and unsettled, to challenge heterosexuality as a naturalized social-sexual norm, and to promote the notion of 'non-straightness.' Thus, queer studies expands the scope of its analysis to all kinds of behaviors, including those that are gender-bending, as well as those that involve 'queer' forms of sexuality.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, "it proposes that we deliberately challenge all notions of fixed identity, in varied and non-predictable ways."<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler, well known as one of the founders of queer theory, questions the binary opposition of heterosexuality and stresses the varied and fluid constitution of human sexuality and personal identity, the overlappings, the plural affiliations and inter-identitarian states of existence that characterize lived reality.

In connection to these brief definitions and aspects of queer theory we suggest that Jelinek's texts in question *do* render 'normal' sexuality strange and unsettled and challenge conventional ideas of heterosexual behavior and relationships in manifold ways. As already pointed out, Emily, the main female character, embodies the deconstruction of binaries not only in the sense that within the vampire itself the dichotomy of life and death dissolves, but also because the desire structures that give this figure contour turn out to be fluid and unsettled. Already at the very beginning of the play when the strange relationship of Heathcliff, the gynecologist and dentist at the same time and his fiancée Emily, who is also a writer, unfolds, we notice – leaving aside Emily's appearance, i.e. the blood trickling out of her wounds and the arrows that stick in her body –, their dialogue, that's something wrong with the couple and their relationship. Emily says:

I'm outside of you. I know exactly the point where I begin and you end. You are bothering me. You open chapter. You menue. [...] There really is something growing out of you that Mother Nature can't possibly have intended in such a shape. Am I here? I think so. Prey in my jaws. (3)

There is no emphatic relationship between them, she is completely outside of him and upset of him. His sexual organ seems ridiculous to her as well as his intellectual condition, out of his body grows strange flesh, out of her body grow arrows and blood and big eyeteeth, symbols of her power to kill as well as to re-create, to bring into being what has already been dead. We'll

come back to those teeth later. Heathcliff seems to be completely unimpressed with those features and he responds: "Of course, because you are my future fiancée. And therefore, where I am, so are you. Yoo-hoo. In this way I spare you the weary search. Good day. I am useful for you. The way your head is useful for you too." (3) Emily, however, utters: "Where you are *not*, there is happiness." (4) But it is not only her disgust that comes to the fore, Heathcliff too correlates her with nauseous feelings on the one hand and at the same time welcomes her and asks her whether she, at last, has a "woman's pains" since he is "too fond of performing operations" (4). However, it is not menstrual blood dropping out of her body and thus she rejects. A few lines further she says, and this might be a key to the relation: "I touch you. I don't move you. I'm only sharpening a pencil. Others are moved by wheat fields. Will I soon turn against you? I wouldn't go so far as to tear a piece off an animal. I am nature; so I often remind of art." (4)

She is nature and art at the same time, she is dead and alive, he is a human but she calls him an animal. Things do not go together here, binary logic fails, either in a philosophical way or simply caused by a wordplay, "I touch you. I don't move you." (4) The latter can be better understood in German: "Ich berühre dich. Ich rühre dich nicht." (195) Indeed, identities tend to develop in a hybrid and not in a fixed way in Jelinek's play, the heteronormative system is disrupted, even the exaggeratedly overacted male identities in the play that are likely to fall apart just because of the hyperbolic rhetoric and the deconstruction of the binary oppositions that, within Jelinek's discursive composition of female and male identity-formation, disfigure. "I am visible from close by as from afar [...] I go right back where I came from [...] I am in antithesis." (2)

Heathcliff, interestingly, is *in* antithesis, *in* a contradiction and it is a contradiction per se, at least sometimes. Sometimes he's a conglomerate of either/or, neither/nor and mostly both or everything at once.

Heathcliff: "I am visible from close by as from afar [...]" (2), i.e., he's visible, not from either/or, but from both sides at once. The same counts for: "I am the one others measure themselves by [...]" (2). Briefly afterwards: "There I find others like myself." (2) First he seems to be quite unique, then he encounters others like himself (2). He is neither the one, nor the other purely and simply, but both at once. A few pages later he says: "My professional secret is the division of above and below." (8) He is continuously concerned with dealing with binaries, many of them turning out to be ambiguous and contradictory in the text.

Sometimes, however, he is also the very dominant part of the binary opposition, fulfilling the inherent hierarchic structure:

The sky is above, in an extension of the axis of my body. [...] I have a heart. I am a measure. I am a must." (2) Here Heathcliff is the man, he's in command, he seems to be the master, he is



the centre and everything is concentrated around him, as Emily is: Heathcliff says: "You are around me. A circle I trace from here." (5) Emily serves as the constitutive outside of his identity-formation. "I am the other, that nevertheless still exists. You have to get used to that. (6)

And briefly after this passage there is a strong allusion to a text by Ingeborg Bachmann, *The Book of Franza*, where the female protagonist tries to kill herself by banging her head against a pyramid, escaping her faith, her master, her dominators, her rapists. And hence says Emily: "I'm going now, to bang my head on the stone of a pyramid." (7) However, Emily simply disappears from the scene, she, the vampire, can't kill herself by banging her head on a stone. The reference to Ingeborg Bachmann's book *Franza* however can't be overlooked. It is a compelling and feminist note since Franza tries to kill herself after having been violated in many respects. The book strongly reveals the suppression of women and accuses the men that harm Franza. Jelinek's text can thus be *also* understood as feminist in a very basic way of understanding. Consequently, and with regard to those feminist, reconstructive as well as deconstructive moments in the text one can state that in *Illness or Modern Women* no consequent and clear cut building of binaries takes place. The text on the whole does not insist on a univocal explicit either/or distinction, it is contradictory and ambiguous, it is feminist and deconstructive and, as above said, frequently both at the same time. And so is Emily: "I am the beginning and the end. I also occur even more often in between." (5)

This either or, in-between, sometimes both-at-once status of Emily we would like to theorize through one significant bodily aberration, her two oversized eye-teeth, that are – after the intervention of her boy-friend, the dentist – sliding, extendable, retractable. We would like to modify the often undertaken allusion of the teeth becoming a phallic symbol insofar as we would suggest a reading of her teeth through the concept of the *lesbian phallus*, a term coined by Judith Butler. In her reading of Jacques Lacan's *Mirror Stage* Butler continues in a way to use the term 'phallus' for the symbolic function of a certain body part, thus in notable distance to the physical organ and based on the assumption of "the transferability of the phallus, the phallus as transferable or plastic property."<sup>25</sup> We cannot go very much in depth here regarding this complex theoretical trait, but we want to draw on those theoretical presumptions as well as on Butler's strong thesis that: "[T]he phallus is fundamentally transferable."<sup>26</sup> Butler asks herself which organs dominate the formation process of the ego, a process that is structured by the narcissistic imaginary relation to an 'other':

By entering into that narcissistic relation, the organs cease to be organs and become imaginary effects. One might be tempted to

argue that in the course of being set into play by the narcissistic imaginary, the penis becomes the phallus.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover Butler emphasizes that the phallus can only be regarded as a "phantasmatic moment in which a part suddenly stands for and produces a sense of the whole."<sup>28</sup> In addition she stresses the point that "[i]f what comes to signify under the sign of the phallus are a number of body parts, discursive performatives, alternative fetishes, to name a few, then the symbolic position of 'having' has been dislodged from the penis as its privileged anatomical (or non-anatomical) occasion."<sup>29</sup> Biddy Martin interprets Butler's conception as follows:

The lesbian phallus is Butler's provocative figure for the plasticity, substitutability, and detachability of the phallus. That which is supposed to organize the terms of sexual difference becomes plastic, mobile, subject to substitution, and attached to the figure of the lesbian. The body has not become irrelevant but is rendered capable of representations that exceed binary divisions and that redistribute symbolic authority and routes of desire.<sup>30</sup>

Taking this into account one can interpret Emily's teeth, those teeth belonging to a lesbian vampire and made retractable through the intervention of her fiancé, the dentist/gynecologist, as a kind of lesbian phallus, not only because she wants them to "be able to stick forward and then disappear again" (52), she wants her fangs to be able to shoot out (5) and her prey would be, let's listen to her: "If I bite someone, I'd rather it was a woman. Man is most like a dog tied to a wall." (539). Within the frame of Queer Studies one could provisionally conclude then, again in Judith Butler's terms:

When the phallus is lesbian, then it is and is not a masculinist figure of power; the signifier is significantly split, for it both recalls and displaces the masculinism by which it is impelled. And insofar as it operates at the site of anatomy, the phallus (re)produces the spectre of the penis only to enact its vanishing, to reiterate and exploit its perpetual vanishing as the very occasion of the phallus. This opens up anatomy – and sexual difference itself – as a site of proliferative resignifications.<sup>31</sup>

The ambivalent structure of the text is pictured in this very metaphor of the lesbian phallus which is itself an ambivalent and multilayered figure of power. The heterosexual privilege is being irritated, the 'original' signifier questioned and transformed, however not abolished since in the end the masculine principle again gains a kind of brutal power over the two women. However, whether death will be the end or whatever kind of end their deaths entails it is not clear, we will reflect on this open end at the end of the paper. Before that we would like again to refer to Lacan's *Mirror Stage* and the formation of the Ego within the very process. Emily, after having received



the mechanism to mobilize her teeth gains a form of special control over her body, acquires a seemingly wholeness as a lesbian vampire at the moment she acquires the apparatus (which creates, additionally, a kind of cyborg vampire status, a vampire as cybernetic, spare-part-death-alive organism, a fact that should be reflected as well (but due to lack of space not in this text). It is a kind of phallic wholeness, a moment, where "that body 'assumes' or 'comes to have' the phallus"<sup>32</sup> – regardless how long that status will last (it will not last long, as the text suggests, but that is not important for now). Emily: "It's going. It works! It's coming! And a hearty welcome, my god!" (56).

This state of 'wholeness' might also be considered as a status of *androgyny*,<sup>33</sup> a status of an 'original' wholeness. And at this very moment another allusion seems to make sense. As already mentioned, in the end Emily and Carmilla become a kind of double-creature which reminds of the critique of Plato's *Symposium*,<sup>34</sup> more precisely of Aristophanes's speech about people, who, in primal times [...] had doubled bodies, with faces and limbs turned away from one another. As somewhat spherical creatures who wheeled around like clowns doing cartwheels (190a), these original people were very powerful. There were three sexes: the all male, the all female, and the "androgynous," who was half man, half woman. The creatures tried to scale the heights of heaven and planned to set upon the gods (190b-c). Zeus thought about blasting them to death with thunderbolts, but did not want to deprive himself of their devotions and offerings, so he decided to cripple them by chopping them in half, in effect separating the two bodies.<sup>35</sup>

That is the story, though not yet told in a queer theoretical perspective. Emily and Carmilla could be understood as those creatures, which, as the myth suggests, desire the other half, the woman. Oliver Claes points out that Jelinek conceptualized the two women fused out of the conviction that men and women are sexually not made for each other, the fusion of two women seems to be the only way out. This reading draws a lot on interviews and author commentaries by Jelinek itself, an approach that has its pitfalls. The fusion of the two women does not seem to create a kind of female wholeness with clear-cut desire structures. One could try to link the creature, at least partly, to the third sex, to the 'androgynous' without neglecting the close relation of the women, without neglecting the female to female version of the myth. Within Greek mythology double creatures or creatures 'in-between' were not rare, there is the figure of Hermaphroditos, son of Hermes and Aphrodite that fused with the nymph Salamacis and became a hermaphrodite. In Plato's interpretation the androgynous creatures gain no importance, they vanish. Within Queer Theory this very figuration is, on the contrary, of high importance with regard to the understanding of different and quite complex and manifold forms of the human existence. Some of these forms become readable in Jelinek's text, we take one further example from a dialogue between Emily and Carmilla, where, above all, Emily posits herself

quite off key, quite "queer" compared to conventional ways of existences, quite in-between, taking the androgynous condition as a form of in-betweenness that exceeds aspects of sexual and gender-identity and goes further, draws identitarian strength and power out of different sources; Emily:

We're not deficient. We're the undead, Carmilla! [...] We can't reveal ourselves to be powerful. Our existence is styleless in irritating ways. We're only pseudo dead people. We're the worst. [...] We're not death nor life. [...] Carmilla, will you understand, we are and are not! [...] We mock creation. [...] Now that nature is finally messed up, they're singing snappy songs about her. [...] I go away. Then I produce myself over and over again by myself. (64-65)

This citation speaks for itself; Emily unites numerous traits of queerness and also of androgyny, she is neither the one, nor the other, she produces herself out of herself in an endless process, which is not only motivated by the fact that she is a vampire but also by the fact, that she is a writer, a creator, a *female creator*. Carmilla, differently, gains her identity out of sickness, which is also not a characteristic that is gendered per se, this kind of discursive hypochondria, performed by Carmilla, can be found with any person, regardless of his/her gender.

I'm avoiding the formalities of a fatal illness. So I'm only sick as a mockery. I love to talk about my illness. [...] (67) Sickness is beautiful. It's indispensable to me. I am sick, therefore I am. (68) I am a beautiful sick! Sick! Sick! Sick! (69)

Being sick is not the end, death is not the end. Although being wounded by their husbands/fiancés, and although having fallen down to earth, one cannot really be sure whether they died. The question is: Can they die? Vampires, according to their literary, mythic construction, usually are killed by getting a pale driven into their hearts or by sunrays. 'Modern' vampires, as they are constructed for example in the TV-series *Twilight*, do neither fear sunrays, pales, crucifixes or what on earth used to be a means to kill them historically. One has to, as suggested in *Twilight*, dissect them and then burn them. And in Jelinek's play there are no sunrays, no pales, only bullets, but filled neither with plumb nor with holy water. Though the hunters beg for the light to be turned on – a scene which could as well be understood as a further attempt to killing the creature, the woman vampire – the text does not inform the readers whether the light will be turned on. The hunters desire for light – and we do not know why they are so desperately calling for it – is not being fulfilled in the text. Hence, although the double-creature falls and lies still one does not know whether this creature is really the loser of the game, an interpretation, that is consequently formulated by the critique, or whether



the creature is the creator, the endless creator, who is sick and strong and dead and alive and double and bites and writes and therefore *is*.

#### 4. The Play *Ulrike Maria Stuart*

The second play we are analyzing is *Ulrike Maria Stuart*, a play that was never published as a book but only staged, the first time in 2006. Since a typescript of the play exists we are able to both analyze the text itself as well as the production directed by Nicolas Stemmann. While *Krankheit oder Moderne Frauen* is one of the plays that within secondary literature is often read as a text with strong feminist intentions – though it was never read “queer” like we tried to – *Ulrike Maria Stuart* is read and analyzed differently. The critics as well as the literary scholars focus on the topic of terrorism. Surely this topic is the central one in this play. Jelinek reveals the connection between violence and counter-violence and the connection between the brutality of language and the brutality of action. Also central is the question how a ‘good ideology’ turns into terrorism. All these topics were widely discussed in the media and society, especially in Germany but also in Austria in 2006 since two prominent members of the RAF (Red Army Fraction) appealed for clemency: Brigitte Mohnhaupt, who was sentenced to prison because of nine murders and several attempted murders, and Christian Klar, also sentenced because of several murders (Mohnhaupt was released in 2007, Klar in 2008).<sup>36</sup>

Hence this text does not deal as obviously with gender-topics as *Sickness or Modern Women* does. However, the reasons why we still did choose this text are manifold: first of all there are some interesting parallels between *Sickness or Modern Women* and *Ulrike Maria Stuart*. The most important one is the topic of the ‘woman as creator.’ Just as Emily, whose name refers to the writer Emily Brontë, is a writer too, Ulrike Maria Stuart is writing, similar to one of her antetypes, the journalist and later terrorist Ulrike Meinhof. Moreover, Ulrike Maria Stuart and her counterpart Gudrun, also called ‘The Queen,’ based on RAF-terrorist Gudrun Ennslin and Queen Elisabeth of England in the interpretation of Schiller, are both politically active. Both texts discuss the possibility if and how women are capable, better allowed to, ‘create,’ to ‘wield power.’ And in both texts this question is associated with ‘maternity.’ So *Ulrike Maria Stuart* is one more example to show that Elfriede Jelinek does refer to questions of sexual difference in nearly all of her texts. This of course happens quasi automatically since her texts are characterized through a genuinely deconstructive gesture. Thus her texts play with and challenge and shift and slip and hence ‘criticize’ binary oppositions of which certainly the socially constructed opposition men vs. women is one of the most important ones and therefore constantly target of

Jelinek’s texts. Like Emily and Camilla, who are vampires and therefore ‘undead people’, Ulrike, the main ‘character’ in *Ulrike Maria Stuart*, dies at the beginning of the text, or better, is already dead at the beginning of the text, talking as a dead person.

One more reason why we chose this text is the staging directed by Nicolas Stemmann. While in *Krankheit* Emily does ‘usurp’ the phallus, or the lesbian phallus, as we argued in keeping with Judith Butler, in this staging two men do usurp the vagina and, speaking of it, also maternity. Even if the dramatic adviser and the actors assured that this idea, in their opinion, is not motivated by any feminist, gender or queer theoretical considerations, the impact that is caused by their staging is at the same time problematic as it is multilayered and thus worthwhile getting scrutinized.

#### 5. The Text – Maternity and Power

“Väter, sagt uns, ist die Mutter tot?”<sup>37</sup> (“Fathers, tell us, is mother dead?”; our translation<sup>38</sup>). With this question asked by the “princes in the tower” the play starts. And this very first sentence already gives an important clue for the reading of the text. The fathers, set in plural, interpret the woman, by and large, reduced to maternity. Of course things are not that simple in Jelinek’s text and so the “choir of the old men” answers: “Nein, Kinder.” (“No, children.”) only to tell them that, in fact, she is dead. And they go on:

[...] überschätzen sollte man sie auch nicht, eure Mutter, ihre Theorien sind nur auf Sand gebaut, wahrscheinlich hat sie keine und behauptet alles, ohne vorher auch nur einmal nachzudenken, denn für die Frau stellt sich das Sinnproblem viel unausweichlicher und auch massiver als für Männer, ja, die Frauen haben ein Emanzipationsproblem dazu [...]

[...] but also you shall not overestimate her, your mother, her theories are built on sand, probably she does not have any, claiming everything without reflecting only once, because for the woman the problem of the meaning of life is much more inevitable and massive than for men, yes, additionally women have an emancipation-problem [...]

The protagonists in Elfriede Jelinek’s play – like in all her plays – are on the one hand pluralistic and oscillating characters, changing their point of views all the time. On the other hand one, all of them speak about the same things in the same way. That is why the doubts whether women are able to develop a complex theory are not only perpetuated by male ‘characters’ but also by female ones, especially by Ulrike Maria Stuart. Another broadly discussed topic concerning women and their ‘natural behavior’ in the play is the impossibility of combining political and intellectual activities with maternity.



The need for power is not compatible with being mother, says Ulrike herself, addressing her sons, the 'princes in the tower': "Nicht mal euer Tod würde eurer Mutter ihren Thron vergällen, [...]" ("Not even your death would embitter the throne to your mother [...]").

One must not forget that Jelinek's characters are not reliable ones. Talking about maternity and power they only imitate clichés, twist and turn and hence at least partly deconstruct them. The text's approach is highly ambivalent when women are connected with maternity and revolution:

[...] Frauen sind ja immer starker als die Männer, und am stärksten sind sie wohl als Mütter. Mütter bleiben sie. Und auch als Revolutionärin sind sie stark, das ist das Gegenteil von Mutter, die aus ihrem Stolz heraustritt, wenns ums Kind geht, die sich selbst vergisst bevor sie sich gekannt hat [...] Diese Frauen! Mütter müssen sie ja immer sein, egal von wem.

[...] women are always stronger than men, and they are the strongest when they are mothers. Mothers they stay. And also as a revolutionary they are strong, that's the contrary of mother, who forgets her pride, when it comes to the child, who forgets herself before she even got to know herself [...] These women! Mothers they always have to be, no matter of whom.

In this short example the impact of Jelinek's writing becomes visible: Throughout long passages the inferiority of women was (and will be) emphasized also by the character Ulrike Maria Stuart. But here she does talk about their strength. Of course this is combined with the cliché of the strong and self-forgetting mother but also with that of the revolutionary. This symbol for political activity is at the same moment again set against maternity. But the unreliability of the character is empathized also when she talks about mothers as forgetting themselves (using the term 'self-forgetting' literally) before they even get to know themselves. This example shows that different contradictory 'truths' are confronted with each other, thus revealing the construction of myths like 'maternity', the 'naturally given' differences between men and women etcetera.

Let us now point at some interesting parts of the text that form a connection to *Sickness and Modern Woman*. For instance, there is Ulrike Maria Stuart's lesbian relationship:

Warum hast du es zum Schluß sogar mit einer Frau denn noch getrieben, also wirklich, Mami? Fragen die mich glatt. [...] Nein, diese Frage, die beantworte ich nicht, die ist mir zu persönlich liebe Kinder, mit der Frau, da mein ich mich schon selber, [...]. Why did you even fuck a woman in the end? Was this really necessary, mommy? This they really ask me. [...] No, I will not answer this question it is to personal, my dear children, with the woman I am referring to myself, [...].

Not only the heteronormative sexuality, but also Ulrike's identity is thematized and subverted when the character itself questions his very sexual and gender identity: "[...] und keiner hätte euch erkannt, nicht mal der eigne Vater, bin das ich? Wahrscheinlich. Nein, doch nicht, ich bin vielleicht die Mutter, keine Ahnung." ("[...] and none of you would have been recognized, not even by your own father, am I the one? Probably. No, I am not, maybe I am the mother, no idea.") Both texts, moreover, do deal with the question whether women are able to 'create' (in *Sickness* also symbolized through Emily's strongly developed and active sexuality, through her acting as the 'maker', the 'doer' in the relationship with Carmilla, her 'manly' desire structure). This goes so far that Emily starts to compare herself with Jesus when she exclaims: "Ich bin der Anfang und das Ende" ["I am the beginning and the end."] <sup>39</sup> Also Ulrike and Gudrun compare themselves with God and/or Jesus:

[...] du hast das bloß noch nicht kapiert, daß wir gar keine Menschen sind, wir sind viel mehr, die Menschen wollen wir erlösen in der Zukunft, [...].

[...] you still did not get it. We are no humans, we are much more, we want to redeem the humans in the future [...]. (Ulrike)

[...] ich könnt doch glatt ihr Jesus werden [...].

[...] I nearly could become their Jesus" [...]. (Gudrun)

Before we leave the text let us briefly reflect on the very end of it. An angel has the final words, an angel who towards the end appears a couple of times. The characterization of the angel in *Ulrike Maria Stuart*, normally a sexless being, indicates that we have to deal with a 'manly' figuration due to its macho attitude and macho views. In a very rude way he refers to all 'female failures', first of all to an implied lack of intellect: "[...], die blöde Fotze, Fotze, Fotze, die schnallt nicht, wie alle Weiber, die bloß keifen und die Typen anschreien können, es nicht schnallen, [...]" ("[...] this stupid cunt, cunt, cunt, doesn't get it, like all skirts, who only are able to natter and shout at guys, don't get it"). Similar to the "choir of the old men" that in the beginning held the power to interpret the life and death of Ulrike, the manly angel at the end has the power to not only interpret the lives and deaths of Ulrike and Gudrun but also to foresee the future memory of them:

[...] man wird zwar in dreißig, vierzig Jahren noch von euch vielleicht mal reden oder Ausstellungen machen oder auch Symposien und Tagungen und Workshops, allerdings wird dort dann in seiner grinsenden Armseligkeit euer Gedächtnis doch erst recht nicht leben, [...], nur das Vergessen ist auf eurer Seite, [...], wie oft ihr noch das Bleiben wünscht, es ist euch nicht gegeben [...]. [...] maybe in twenty, thirty years one will still speak of you or make exhibitions or symposia or conferences or workshops, however, in its grinning paltriness, the remembrance of you, will



certainly no longer live, [...] only the oblivion is on your side, [...], no matter how often you desire to stay, you won't [...].

In Jelinek's text the man has, again, the final words (similar to Illness, yet without the company of a gun), a circumstance which can be read as a strong and pointed critique on the manly dominance with respect to memory and/through (the power of) language.

## 6. The Play, Directed by Nicolas Stemmann

Nicolas Stemmann takes a lot of liberties staging Elfriede Jelinek's text. In addition to the many cuts he undertakes he uses long passages from a discussion between Jelinek and the Austrian author Marlene Streeruwitz, published in 1997 in the feminist revue *Emma*.<sup>40</sup> Twice in the course of the play actors, disguised as giant vaginas, appear, quoting parts of the talk. The first time two female actors appear after a little more than 30 minutes, shortly after a voice from the off stage has announced the "Vaginamonologue by Elfriede Jelinek. Vagina monologue by Marlene Streeruwitz" (our translation). Additionally the talk is introduced as "[t]he vagina dialogues from Elfriede Jelinek and Marlene Streeruwitz". The allusion to Eve Ensler's<sup>41</sup> famous book does already incline the direction of the conversation: The same way as Ulrike and Gudrun are imprisoned in their ideology, Elfriede Jelinek and Marlene Streeruwitz are imprisoned in their feminist ideology. At the same time the authors are not able to loosen themselves from their assumed female identities.

Of course one can say that Nicolas Stemmann only underscores what Jelinek herself very often did and still does emphasize, that the woman as singular fate does not exist. In one of her interviews given after winning the Nobel Prize Jelinek said: "Und deswegen kann man den Preis nicht nur für sich selbst annehmen, sondern als Frau muss man ihn als Mitglied einer unterdrückten Kaste, ob man will oder nicht, mit den anderen Frauen teilen. Da darf man nicht 'ich' sagen."<sup>42</sup> ("And hence one cannot only accept the Prize for oneself, but as a woman you have to share it with the other women as part of a suppressed caste, no matter if you want it or not. You must not say 'I'"; our translation) When Nicolas Stemmann uses the following part of the discussion published in the journal *Emma* in his staging, one does not notice too much of a difference: "Man gesteht uns nicht zu, Ich zu sagen. Und im Grunde können wir es auch nicht." ("We are not allowed to say 'I' and basically we are not able to say it.") Moreover, one could claim that the 'speaking vaginas' are not only a personification of the 'vagina dialogue' but also a critique of the reduction of women to their biological sex. In her book *Ihre Welt bedeuten. Theater – Feminismus – Repräsentation* Katharina Pewny alludes to Jean-Pierre Vernant's reading of the Medusa Gorgo:

Das Spezielle der Vernant'schen Interpretationsweisen der Figur Gorgo ist die (unter Berufung auf die Abbildungen) vorgenommene Gleichsetzung von weiblichem Gesicht und Genitale. Ihr Anblicken rufe Schrecken und Lachen hervor. [...] Die Unverwechselbarkeit individueller unterschiedlicher Gesichter verschwindet hinter der Gleichsetzung unter dem Zeichen des weiblichen Geschlechts.<sup>43</sup>

[The special approach of Vernant's interpretation of the figure of Gorgo is, under reference to the illustrations, the equalization of the female face with the female genital. Gazing at it evokes fear and laughter. [...] The uniqueness of these individual and diverse faces vanishes behind this equalization under the sign of the female genital. (our translation)]

Thus, according to Katharina Pewny, every single female character, every individual trait is being erased through the equalization of the female face with the female genital. Moreover, the way the talk is cut by Stemmann and only the most lamenting passages are used; the way the actors play and the combination of the ideological gridlocked 'protagonists' with the 'real' authors, together with the second appearance of the 'vaginas,' confirm the apprehensions that Nicolas Stemmann's staging does not only support the intentions to subvert and criticize the patriarchal system, but also ridicules these.

What turns out to be even more problematic in the course of the staging is the second appearance of the vaginas. In this part of the play two men speak some passages of the discussion between Jelinek and Streeruwitz. First they talk about rage and resignation, afterwards, relatively extensively, about having children. On the one hand this element of travesty adds just another dimension to the pluralistic characters of the play. To exemplify this, let's have a quick look at the character of Ulrike Maria Stuart. In Jelinek's text she is, at least, a composition of the historical Maria Stuart, the Maria Stuart from Schiller, of Ulrike Meinhof and of an undefined author-figuration. With the first appearance of the vaginas Stemmann added the 'real Elfriede Jelinek' to the character. With the second one he adds a kind of 'manly dimension' to it – whatever 'manly' would then signify in this context.

Yet, given the described scenario, another motive comes to the fore: the women who, only one hour ago, were talking about the impossibility of 'female creativity', are significantly substituted by men. Similar to what Elfriede Jelinek showed more than 25 years ago, namely in her first play *Was geschah nachdem Nora ihren Mann verlassen hatte oder Stützen der Gesellschaften*<sup>44</sup> (*What Happened after Nora Left Her Husband, or Pillars of Society*<sup>45</sup>). In this play Weygang, one of the male main characters, not only answers questions in the place of Nora, but he also speaks in a mock voice. Thus he takes over and mutilates the voice of the woman at the same time. Similarly, in Stemmann's Interpretation of Ulrike Maria Stuart, manly vaginas speak passages of the text where maternity becomes the central topic,



taking away the last domains of women. Taking away domains, voices, having the final say, characterizes what men do – be it at the moment when an angel, connected with the male terrorist Andreas Baader, has the final say and humiliates the female characters in the text, be it Nicolas Stemmann himself who has the final say on stage, copying Weygang's behavior from *What Happened after Nora Left Her Husband, or Pillars of Society*. Stemmann's use of the 'Jelinek wig' in the end of his staging beats in the same notch.

Although there is no way to prove that Nicolas Stemmann's directing is characterized by deliberate anti-feminist implications, his partly unconsidered use of symbols connected with 'femininity,' usurped by characters that are staged as 'men,' is at least very problematic. Interestingly, one could read Stemmann's strategy of substituting the female actors by male ones also quite differently, as a kind of queer travesty, however without a clear-cut idea or 'intention' behind it. The speaking vagina is, as we have emphasized above, per se a most ambivalent figuration, worth a lot of critical questioning with respect to the reduction of women to body parts. We can't discuss this in length here, but Stemmann's putting together of the two images, 'female and male vaginality,' can be considered as taking part in the project of cross-dressing in order to stage crossed forms of gender-(performances) that reveal that gender is constructed, performative and thus contingent. Stemmann's staging is a dissonant one, is one that *also* transgresses sexual norms and hence can *also* be read, at least partly, as a non-straight, oblique figuration, taking into account all the ambivalences that lie in this figuration and interpretation.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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4. Cf. Spanlang, *Elfriede Jelinek. Studien zum Frühwerk*, 158–166.
5. Cf. Elfriede, Jelinek (1980), *Die endlose Unschuldigkeit*, Schwäbting.
6. Cf. Jelinek, *Die endlose Unschuldigkeit*, 49; cf. Allyson, Fiddler (1994), *Rewriting Reality. An Introduction to Elfriede Jelinek*. Oxford/Providence: 40–42.
7. Jelinek, *Die endlose Unschuldigkeit*, 49. [our emphasis]
8. Cf. Jelinek, *Die endlose Unschuldigkeit*, 49, cf. Fiddler, *Rewriting Reality. An Introduction to Elfriede Jelinek*, 40–42.
9. Alexandra, Heberger. (2002), *Der Mythos Mann in ausgewählten Prosawerken von Elfriede Jelinek*, Osnabrück, 26 f. Marlies Janz calls her approach a

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38. Here and in the following you will always find our own translation in brackets after the English citation.

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## A. S. Byatt's *Possession* and Its Critique of Academic Obsessive Interests

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**ABSTRACT.** The present paper is an attempt to explore the multiple-layered structure of A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990). The author labels this novel as 'romance' and indeed it is deservedly so since the main line of action in the book centers on an ardent love affair going on between two academics and their desperate and painstaking attempts to secure a position in the competitive world of the academy, a point the novel is at pains to unravel and finally fulfill. Subsumed under this main rubric are many topics such as the pretensions and even absurdity of the academic interests, the exigencies of criticism and writing biographies, the relation between the past and the present and above all the author's oblique and sometime overt irony and sarcasm of the secondariness of the whole critical enterprise. The book is exemplary in representing the tenets of metafiction and postmodernistic handling of the artistic material. As such a reference will be made to the innumerable allusions and intertextuality of other texts, both past and contemporary.

**Keywords:** possession, critical, creative love, academic

### 1. Preliminary Remarks

One of the convenient approaches in dealing with a text like the present one is the interdisciplinary one in estimating both the technical and thematic aspects of Byatt's novel, *Possession*. A reference to similar works is also useful as this novel is in line with a tradition already present in contemporary fiction: the campus novel and its diversifications. In her illuminating and insightful article, "People in Paper Houses," A. S. Byatt identifies the difficulty of "reporting speech in a land where understatement is the normal style of all classes, and how facts have an unreal, almost satirical ring when committed to paper" (Byatt: 1979, 41).

Although ostensibly talking about the predicament of the contemporary British novelist divided between commitment to the Victorian tradition and