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**THE UNMARRIED MOTHER IN GERMAN LITERATURE**  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE PERIOD 1770-1800. By  
Oscar Helmuth Werner, Ph.D. New York, Columbia University  
Press, 1917. VIII+127 pp. \$1.00 net.

Some time in May of the current year middle western papers carried a news item telling of a girl who had to face the jury for having killed her new-born babe. The trial but rehearsed the age-old story. In fact, there was scarcely anything new or peculiar about the case except the verdict, which was unanimous acquittal. The girl had concealed her condition until the last day and had resumed work the day after the tragedy. Her martyrdom for months previous and the wretched state in which she appeared before her judges made it plain that justice no longer had any claim upon her.

We have here an illustration showing how completely the views have changed regarding a crime which for centuries has been looked upon as one of the blackest that could be committed. The subject of unmarried motherhood, to state it broadly, has of late years attracted the widest attention in circles of social reformers and legislators, both in this country and abroad. In Europe the Woman's Movement, once the inequity of archaic laws and customs had become apparent, took it upon itself to bring about a new distribution of responsibilities more compatible with social justice. Its first signal success was achieved in France when in 1913 the French Senate abrogated that notorious paragraph of the Code Napoléon, "*La recherche de la paternité est interdite.*" In Norway the victory was even more sweeping, the Storthing in 1915 decreeing that henceforward children born out of wedlock shall enjoy the same family and inheritance rights as legitimate children. The principle underlying this legislation is evidently to regard marriage as consummated as soon as a child is born, or is expected to be born, to a couple. The aim, then, is to keep the parents of the child together by depriving them (especially the father) of any advantages possibly accruing from separation. The responsibility of parenthood is thereby placed squarely upon the shoulders of man and woman alike; self-discipline, the basis of citizenship in any democratic country, is hoped for as a result. At any rate it would seem that the unmarried Norwegian mother could ultimately still maintain herself on the level of a divorcee or even of a deserted wife. Whatever we may think of such race-policy, the fact remains that modern society strives to preserve in each single case two of its members, the unfortunate mother who might otherwise come to utter ruin, and the innocent child for whose murder there can not now be the slightest impulsion.

One might muse a long while over the question how it has come about that 'modern society' has any use for a kind of individual for whom our forebears not so many generations ago could hardly invent a punishment cruel enough. But we touch upon the modern

aspect of the problem only to point out that there *is* a distinct present-day interest involved in any study that has unmarried motherhood for its subject. Dr. O. H. Werner, whose task it has been to investigate the social and literary background of the *Gretchen-Tragödie* in Goethe's *Faust*, is well aware of this, as his preface and also his treatment of the material clearly indicate.

To most of us the fate of Goethe's Gretchen is so intricately interwoven with the development of Faust himself, her tragedy exhausts its subject so completely, that we easily overlook the social problem involved in it. This may in some measure account for the fact that up to the present the question just what standing the mother of a fatherless child had in the eighteenth-century society, what punishment awaited her if she killed her child, has received but scant critical attention on the part of literary historians. This in spite of the enormous popularity which, as everybody knows, any novel or drama dealing with inter-class love commanded in the pre-revolutionary age. To give an idea of the extent of the field to be covered, we wish to quote from Dr. Werner's "Introduction" in which the public interest generally attaching to the theme in Germany during the Storm and Stress period is briefly outlined. The author formulates his questions as follows (p. 11):

"To what state of public opinion on the subject of child-murder did Goethe address himself? If that opinion was hard and cruel as compared with that of our own time, to what is the fact due? What were its antecedents in social and religious usage, in legislation and in the administration of the law? When did the revolt against the inhuman treatment of unmarried mothers set in, what form did it take, who were its leaders, and what its effects? Finally, I shall discuss more fully than has been done hitherto the poems, plays, and novels which deal with the subject and reflect the changing phases of public opinion with regard to it."

Accordingly we have the chapters: (I) "Traditional Status of the Unmarried Mother" (pp. 12-39); (II) "The Humanitarian Revolt of the Eighteenth Century" (pp. 40-68); (III) "The Literary Reflex of the Revolt in the Storm and Stress Period" (pp. 69-104); and "Concluding Observations" (pp. 105-111).

The author begins his study with "the first stage of the evolution of the human race" and goes on setting forth the doctrines regarding sex relations as developed by the early Christian church and the Fathers, in contradistinction to which the laws and customs of pagan peoples subsequently converted to Christianity are described. Naturally the procedure tends to take a rather summary course, and we may doubt if the variegated material on hand dealing with these matters is already sufficiently sifted and organized to allow of such simplification. The axis around which the whole question revolves is given in the sentence (p. 25): "I know of no more terrible page in history than the attempt of the church through

canon and civil law to define marriage and to stamp out a delict which it made possible by its definition." The contention is here that the church by its strict enforcement of monogamy, while failing to improve the morals of the male part of the population, was really responsible for the increasing numbers of 'unmarried mothers' with all the contempt implied by the term; that consequently the church was also responsible for all the crimes by which the unhappy girls tried outwardly to conform to its demands: concealment of pregnancy, abortion, infanticide.

These are extremely hard roads to travel. The whole argument involves a tacit consideration of 'what would have happened if,' to wit, if the church had simply conformed to the laws and customs of the newly converted peoples, as it did in so many other respects. Let us grant for the moment that the pagan world which the church set out to conquer was, as regards sex questions, in a state of natural equilibrium. But did not the structure of this society change completely with the advancing centuries? And if there was room enough in the social systems of the old Roman Empire and of the Franks and the Anglo-Saxons for legal concubinage, does this prove that provision should have been made for it in the statutes of any subsequent generation? The fact is that economically and socially the later Middle Ages present a picture altogether different from that revealed, e.g., in the *leges barbarorum*. We simply cannot conceive, however, of the conditions of these people in any forms but those actually studied in history. The question, then, is really this: Could this society have safely existed after fully absorbing the Christian teachings of the day, without any remodeling of its ancient marriage laws? Or, from another point of view: If monogamy was to come into its own, were there any other intermediate stages possible in the development but just those under attack, church or no church? The ultimate answer to both questions will probably be that the mind of medieval peoples should have been different in many other and the most decisive respects, if we want to reply in the affirmative. Most likely, however, that they knew better what they were about than we ever shall with all our historic intuition. An historian should never forget, certainly not when dealing with questions of such sweeping importance, that it is simply incredibly difficult to visualize a past so far removed from our own age as is this, expecting to do justice to all the forces at work in it.

The relative strength of traditional forces on the one hand, and of material conditions of existence on the other in determining the attitude of a people toward all questions of social interest is just what we should like to know a great deal more about before we go ahead. The worst of it is we cannot even keep the two factors from becoming intermixed. Naturally we stand aghast when we contemplate the terrible penalties that the law had in store for the

child-murderess up to the eighteenth century: drowning, empaling, burning and burying alive, because we unconsciously transfer both crime and punishment to our own environments. But when those laws took shape, it was firmly believed by both legislators and those who were legislated on that the soul of a child that died unbaptized (which would be the case under the circumstances) lost its claim to salvation. Was it not an unpardonable sin, in an age when a thief was hanged, to bring such a fate upon anybody—an innocent babe, at that? And how could the church humanely have evaded the issue—since admitting that any soul might go to heaven without baptism would of necessity have unraveled the whole texture of the creed? If Christianity was or had to be adopted, in the shape which it had assumed by that time, these doctrines had to be adopted too. No referring back to Christ (as Dr. Werner does in and between the lines) could have altered the situation; where was Christ save in the doctrines of the church? Logics were terribly primitive in those days, and since the true factors moving at the bottom of Life were not known, terribly binding too, binding for a thousand years or more to come, binding to the last conclusions that could be squeezed out of the once-granted premises, while in the meantime tradition had made the most horrible caricatures of justice appear as the normal status. The big difference between the pagan beliefs and the new faith was that Christianity was a religion of salvation, making this salvation dependent upon the convert's submission to a distinct set of ceremonies and an acceptance of certain well-defined formulas of creed. Ceremonies occasioned by the birth of an infant in the pagan world had determined the earthly life or death of the new-born, but not its life to come.

It was the passing of this mechanistic conception of Christianity which, in the eighteenth century, made possible a reform of the laws pertaining to infanticide. Of course, the dynamic factors by which the disappearance of this conception was brought about, economic changes and, accompanying them, a gradual loosening of old social bonds and fetters, the advance of science, a deeper penetration of the phenomena of human life, also contributed their share directly to the solution of the problem. Thus it is perfectly legitimate to ascribe the reform simply to the Humanitarian Revolt which was at the same time the outgrowth and the conscious expression of the new situation in its totality.

Our author does not enter into a discussion of these aspects of the development, but he does give us a lucid exposition of the facts of the case as he found them, and of the attitude of the contemporaries toward them. In his second chapter he deals with the problem as it appeared in Germany in the last decades of the century. Seemingly 'unmarried motherhood' was everywhere on the increase. Inflated prosperity (after the Seven Years' War),

the rise of the theatre, university morals, the privileges of the nobility, and especially the prevailing army system which condemned soldiers to celibacy, are blamed as the chief causes of the evil.<sup>1</sup> Was it really that conditions had never been worse before? We must not forget that then for the first time in history something like what we call public opinion began to take shape in Germany; naturally topics of this type were the first to be seized upon inasmuch as their treatment, while of universal appeal, could least be objected to by the political authorities. Thus the question suggests itself whether in reality the impassioned discussion which now broke loose in all quarters was not simply a manifestation of the newly awakened public conscience. The author leaves it to his readers to judge for themselves; the material submitted, though necessarily condensed, is abundant and illustrative. In this connection the greatest interest probably attaches to the Mannheim prize of one hundred ducates offered by von Dalberg in 1781 for the best answer to the question, "What are the best and most practicable means to eradicate infanticide without promoting prostitution?" Some hundreds of answers poured in, three of the best shared the prize, dozens were published. Did these publications effect any change?

To be sure, something had been done for the unmarried mother in the meantime, the edicts of Frederick the Great of 1756 and 1765 touching us as the first breath of a spirit of humanity that has not died since. Yet in many states there still was the church penance, and wherever even that was abolished the situation remained desperate enough. It was simply the situation of which Goethe, with a few strokes, has drawn such an overpowering picture in *Faust*: respectable people (Gretchen included) knew, or thought they knew, only too well that it was from the ranks of these girls that prostitution continually recruited itself afresh. Hence, e.g., the wrath of Miller in *Kabale und Liebe* when informed of the young aristocrat's love for his daughter, no matter how idealistic; there was no other end to such affairs. On the other hand, there was the girl, knowing what was to be her fate among her family and friends if she was ever found out: virtue, honor, the respect of people, her chance of marriage, even the chance of decently earning a living—all gone forever. That to a troubled state of mind infanticide should appear as the only way out, is only too natural. At any rate we may understand how the enormity of the crime was outweighed in the girl's mind by the consequences of a confession. Whether there is a final solution to the problem at all remains to be seen, in spite of Norway. In Goethe's day it was about the most hopeless subject that could be discussed, as all the testimonies, all

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Werner here utilizes Lenz's essay *Über die Soldatenehen*, written 1773/6 but not published until 1914. (Leipzig, ed. by Karl Freye.)

the views and opinions expressed by conservatives and reformers which Dr. Werner records, prove to conviction. About as many remedies suggested as writers interested, and not one of them able to do more than replace an old evil by a new one. This is really the background of the famous line,

“*Der Menschheit ganzer Jammer fasst mich an,*”

symbolizing, as it does, in Gretchen's fate the tragical limitation of human nature in all its complexity.

It is necessary to be acquainted with this state of affairs, if we want to understand the extent and the kind of popularity which the theme then enjoyed in literary circles. Any attempt at a reform of the social status of the unfortunates had to start in the sphere of literature, thus, in the Age of Pedagogy, necessarily assuming didactic form. This did not mean teaching in abstract terms of law and theology, but by the living picture on the stage, by the ever-remembered words of a song, a ballad. The success of the method is shown by Bürger's “Des Pfarrers Tochter von Taubenhain,” which Brentano discovered scarcely a generation later re-shaped into a living folksong. Of the imaginative literature evoked by this situation we gain a comprehensive view in Dr. Werner's third chapter. The author judiciously omitted everything that did not obviously come under his prime caption. The motif is really under the surface in a host of productions, to name only one as illustration, in Goethe's ballad fragment “*Es war ein Knabe frech genug . . .*” However, one may well claim that only a slight unfocusing might have blurred the whole picture. Dr. Werner reviews his field by going over all the sub-motifs that are discovered in the treatment of ‘unmarried motherhood’: the forsaken girl, hatred and jealousy, fear of shame, ridicule of parents and of the world, the blustering father, dark outlook for the child's future, emphasis by the church on virginity at marriage, despair, popular superstitions, the hell-motif, the ‘eternal feminine.’ That almost all of these motifs have a direct bearing upon each other is a fact to which the author calls due attention.

Preceding this discussion, however, purpose and style of this literature are looked into. The point that interests us chiefly is the ‘naturalism’ of the day. The author shows a judgment at least independent in sentences like this, “Erich Schmidt would be quite right in condemning the use of so much crass realism were it not for the conscious attempt to apply the *Abschreckungstheorie*.” In proof of this contention (“a conscious attempt”) he gives various quotations which seem quite convincing; only the passage taken from a letter of Bürger's “—scenes which will make your hair stand on end,” is hardly well chosen. Bürger's attitude is far better accounted for by the democratic element in his makeup. One might question whether this didacticism was a real incen-

tive or rather an excuse, a point which could only be decided on biographical grounds. Aside from this, however, we must not overlook the fact that the habitual modes of thinking, ways of expression etc. of a generation may continue in force long after the disappearance of the interest that originally called them into being. Forms of presentation always exist in us in the larger aspect more or less conventionalized, simply because ordinarily they become ingrained in us long before any creative instincts become articulate. The real dynamic behind a given production, sub- and semi-conscious reactions of a mind upon a changed situation, may be totally different from the factors that first molded the form, and the treatment of a subject is a 'form.' Thus here, too, we would after all rather speak of a didacticism at last come to life, fired with imagination, nay, with the spirit of revolt, carried along by all the creative fervor of the young geniuses who had come under the spell of Shakespeare, Shakespeare in German prose.

Such didacticism let loose upon such a subject, with the 'tragedy from civil life' in vogue everywhere, was bound to provoke at least some performances evidently crude and absurd. To say this and to illustrate it might have been sufficient. Unfortunately Dr. Werner does not avoid the shoals of a rather extensive esthetic discussion. Strange to say he views his material wholly from an absolute standpoint, which is here, to say the least, superfluous. Even more strange, he simply applies the ancient formula of  $\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\sigma$  καὶ φόβος to judge drama and ballads alike. Now this formula, backed by the authority of Lessing, certainly held sway throughout the period—and had its share just as certainly in producing all the shortcomings of the Storm and Stress drama which the author tries to bring to light by using it as a touchstone. He admits (p. 74) that practically all the writers succeeded in arousing pity, while he is inclined to believe that for fear they purposely substituted horror and disgust. We know what the latter are, terms taken from our every-day vocabulary; the Aristotelian 'fear,' however, is a great deal more perplexing to us and, maybe, to the author too, since he handles it entirely on a level with horror, disgust, and pity.

We find the result of such loose thinking on page 75, in a footnote. Here the author tries to vindicate Gretchen's innocence in granting that fateful permission to Faust, by referring to the well-known institution called in German *Probenacht*, in French *nuit d'épreuve*, etc. Says Dr. Werner: ". . . If conception resulted and the lover was honorable, legal marriage followed. The danger of the custom lay in the lover's being of a frivolous or vicious mind and his refusal to accept the social consequences of his paternity Faust proved to be a lover of the latter type—hence the tragedy of Gretchen." But to begin with, the custom existed (and exists) only in rural communities where for a number of reasons it is of importance to know before marriage whether a girl can have issue or

not. Cathedrals are not found in villages. Secondly, the incident with Bärbelchen testifies strictly against the assumption, so does Valentin's wrath, etc. etc. Goethe gives the complete explanation of Gretchen's conduct in one line, "*Was tu ich nicht um deinetwillen?*." The motive is as simple as it is typical. Gretchen knows that she is doing wrong ("*Das ist des Landes nicht der Brauch*"); it is only her boundless love that makes her sacrifice—and her sin—appear to her as negligible. She is innocent in a higher sense, because she consciously anticipates no other pleasure than making her lover happy. This is exactly where the tragical element enters, in this case of a purely ethical stamp, the motif: "How can good come to be evil?" If Dr. Werner's *aperçu* were to apply, the natural tragedy of anything beautiful destroyed would be left in Gretchen's fate, but nothing humanly tragical. 'Pity and fear,' to be sure, would be aroused anyway, but the point is that 'fear' and 'pity,' without the addition of long footnotes, are at best inadequate expressions of some emotional by-products of the tragedy; the melodramas of Iffland and Kotzebue are based exclusively upon them. We may now reflect whether, by any miracle of an abstract definition, the two terms could ever be made to go to the bottom of what we experience as 'tragical.'

We should hardly have paid so much attention to this point, if Dr. Werner did not wind up his whole book with a panegyric on the time-worn *Schönfärberei*: "the province of art is to attract, to ennable, to lift up, to emphasize the beautiful, not to repel, to drag down, to debase, to stress the horrible," etc. (p. 111). Whatever is true in this is a truism, but it is not the whole truth. The method of the Storm and Stress movement was, if not the best, the most effective way to wean the public away from the complacency and self-satisfaction of the old rationalism: only in this fashion could it be prepared for the maturer works of Schiller and of Goethe. For the historian (and we are here dealing with an historical sketch) it is important to recognize the intrinsic necessity of the development in its various aspects, whilst he gladly leaves it to the philosopher to determine and characterize our own esthetic attitude toward it, in the proper place.

In the reviewer's opinion, these are not exactly minor points; but they may be left out of consideration just because Dr. Werner's interest is sociological rather than literary. In his concluding remarks he summarizes the effect which the Humanitarian Revolt at length had upon penal and social legislation. The establishment of new orphanages, maternity houses, homes of refuge, etc., are traced back by the author to the public interest aroused in these problems by the literature which they in turn had first evoked. Society slowly began to assume its modern appearance. While infanticide became more and more obsolete, other aspects of the problem only came into better view. If the author carries out his

intention, mentioned in the "Preface," of pursuing his study of the subject in German life and literature up to the present day, he will find ample material.

In regard to matters of form it may be said that hardly any misprints have been noticed in the English text; there are a few others, none of them of consequence. E.g., the use of capitals in books is different in German from the system which is here—inconsistently—followed; hyphens are often omitted where needed in German; Schröter's *Staatsanzeige* and the *Göttinger Gelehrte Anzeigen* are preferably quoted as here given. The whole paragraph "Writers of this period . . ." on page 96 belongs to page 98, so as to precede the paragraph "Jung-Stilling in . . ."

The index (pp. 124-127) lists authors and periodicals while omitting titles of poems and dramas, etc.; to give, however, simply the names of Bürger, Goethe, Lenz, and others, with a score or more page-numbers following them, is of hardly any practical value. The bibliography (pp. 112-123) might well be the pride of its compiler; it contains approximately one hundred and fifty titles, of which eighty-five percent bear an eighteenth-century date. Almost all of these books and pamphlets were obtained in this country. The books bearing upon the origins and early development of human marriage, etc., are on the whole not relisted, but must be found in the footnotes. Evidently the author has not here tried to give the whole amount of his reading, a discreet "etc." (p. 18) veiling all titles that seem missing.

Quotations are ample, judiciously chosen, and well condensed. With a few unexplained exceptions (pp. 64, 88, 89) all those in prose are given in English translation, which brings the book within easy reach of anybody who may take a purely sociological interest. The author does not disdain to make ample reference to facts of which his reader had better be reminded although the student of German literature may be well conversant with them. Finally, Dr. Werner is to be congratulated on his fluent and lucid style which makes his work an attractive and readable little book.

H. W. NORDMEYER.

*La Salle, Ill.*