Martin, Laura (1999) Die Marquise von O… and The Scarlet Letter: a study in vicarious gender-jumping. In: Saul, Nicholas, Steuer, Daniel, Mobus, Frank and Illner, Birgit (eds.) Schwellen: Germanistische Erkundungen einer Metapher. Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg, pp. 251-264. ISBN 9783826015526

Copyright © 1999 Königshausen & Neumann

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

Content must not be changed in any way or reproduced in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holder(s)

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details must be given

http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/92526

Deposited on: 07 May 2014

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
http://eprints.gla.ac.uk

Schwellen

Germanistische Erkundungen einer Metapher

Herausgegeben von
Nicholas Saul, Daniel Steuer,
Frank Möbus und Birgit Illner

Königshausen & Neumann

III.

Thresholds and Gender

—

Schwellen und *gender*

LAURA MARTIN

Die Marquise von O... and *The Scarlet Letter*: A Study in Vicarious Gender Jumping

Many today would say we stand on a threshold – postfeminism has been proclaimed and the 'strident voices' of the past thirty-odd years may now lower their tones because (depending on whom you ask) either their goals have been achieved or paradoxically because the goals have revealed themselves as undesirable and even harmful to women. So, standing at the end of feminism, it seems, we are given the choice of moving on or moving back. Of course, with any step forward we continue to carry the memory of the past with us, and so the metaphor of sudden change reveals itself already as unfortunately too precipitate: perhaps it would be more accurate to say we stand at a cross-roads, baggage in hand, and we have a multitude of ways before us to choose from.[1]

My question would be this: is there a way forward now in the feminist study of 'classic' literary texts? It has long been shown that women's work has been unfairly excluded from the canon, and that many of the productions of the male pen are at least one-sided and at worst misogynist. Can we return to the canon now and discuss the ways some of these texts specifically do *not* partake in the construction of patriarchal reality – at least not for the modern reader? Can we talk about the similarities of men writers and women readers without erasing or negating the differences? Or is any such attempt hopelessly apologetic for an old order, still strong enough in any case not to need *my* support?

The perception of the blurring of gender boundaries in the authorial stance is nothing new. Amanda Anderson claims that the typical nineteenth-century male writer felt effeminate due to his preference for a retreat into a world of sentiment and fantasy over forays into the aggressively competitive world of the marketplace, and because he was selling the products of his imagination much as a prostitute sells her 'love'. On the other hand, Ann Mellor, among others, has argued that the Romantic poet in particular has co-opted and expropriated feminine discourse for his own purposes, seeming feminine, then, and closer to nature, to the language of the people and of emotion, but in actuality just enacting yet one more deed of colonisation of the feminine other.[2] Tania Modleski warns of just such

[1] For feminist discussions of 'postfeminism' in the 1990s see Tania Modleski: Feminism Without Women. Culture and Criticism in a „Postfeminist" Age. New York 1991, and Imelda Whelehan: Modern Feminist Thought. From the Second Wave to „Post-Feminism". Edinburgh 1995. Henceforward all page references for these two titles will be given in the main body of the text, as will second citations of any other works referred to more than once in this article.

[2] Amanda Anderson: Prostitution's Artful Guise. In: Diacritics 21, 1991, pp. 102-122; Anne Mellor: Romanticism and Gender. New York and London 1993. (See especially Chapter 1: Gender in Masculine Romanticism).

appropriation in many so-called 'post-feminist' discussions, and she pleads for a feminism, whether practised by women or men, of integrity. For her, 'postfeminism' reeks strongly of reaction, and she roundly condemns those who give a mere nod to the woman question and then proceed as if these past 30 years had not occurred (p. 6-11). The danger here, it seems, is that apparently 'politically correct' interpretations of classic literary texts will mask unexamined gendered assumptions under a veneer of seemingly pro-feminist vocabulary.

Yet, admittedly, we must move on, if always being aware that we are studying a system from within that system, always in danger of employing unexamined assumptions and giving value to that which has none.[3] What are we to do, for example, with texts that fail to fit neatly into categories of 'misogynist' or 'not misogynist'? Does such binary thinking suit the purposes of the feminist project, or is it by nature contrary to it? And what do we do with texts which have a varied reception history, which have been interpreted by some in a feminist-friendly way and by others in a way inimical to women? Furthermore, what are we to do with texts by known woman-haters, which otherwise seem quite enlightened from our perspective? Is a modern reader who persists in finding the good in such texts being wilfully ignorant and just plain naïve, or might there be an argument supporting readers' responses, even if opposing authorial intentions might be provable from the author's biography and if radically other readings are possible from the text?

Iser himself is not clear on how much responsibility the reader is allowed, saying at one point that there are infinite possibilities and every reading, even by the same reader, is new: „one text is potentially capable of several realisations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way" (p. 280); and elsewhere he states that „the author had to use a variety of cunning stratagems to nudge the reader into making the 'right' discoveries" (xiv).[4] But do we *have* to allow ourselves to be nudged? And how much are texts allowed to change their meaning over time in a way that has nothing to do with any new insights or discoveries into the condition of their production, but instead is due to altered ways of thinking, or reception by audiences not 'implied' by the text? It is the intersection of feminism and reader-response, or even of cultural theory and reader-response, which require a lot more investigation in regard to the study of the 'classics'.[5] I will be more specific in order to illustrate my meaning.

[3] The problems feminists face in trying to criticise a social order from within that order were perhaps earliest and best described in Myra Jehlen: Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism. In: Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society. 1981, pp. 575-601.

[4] Wolfgang Iser: The Implied Reader. Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett. Baltimore 1974.

[5] Patrocinio P. Schweikart called for precisely this combination some years ago: „To put the matter plainly, reader-response criticism needs feminist criticism." Patrocinio P. Schweikart: Reading Ourselves. Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading. In: Speaking of Gender. Ed. by Elaine Showalter. New York 1989, p.21. Unfortunately, for Schweikart, what feminist criticism is to bring reader-response theory is the alleged knowledge that all texts in the canon and all interpretative communities are androcentric; she plainly does not argue for the open-ended readings I will be defending here.

Heinrich von Kleist had, as is well known, quite a bit of difficulty with women. His sister Ulrike was a cross-dressing, physics-learning *Mannweib* whom Kleist often deplored. From an early age, he seems obsessed with directing the educational programmes of the women and girls around him. He set his fiancée Wilhelmine von Zenge composition topics designed to inculcate the womanly virtues, such as „Wodurch erwirbt und erhält sich nun wohl eine Frau das *Interesse* ihres Mannes?"[6] A woman's duty, he said elsewhere, is „Mutter zu werden, und der Erde tugendhafte Menschen zu erziehen" („Aufklärung des Weibes" II, p. 318) – never questioning, of course, just why these virtues needed to be inculcated if they came so 'naturally' to the other sex.Yet most such material comes from Kleist's early years, before or just after the 'Kant-Krise' which turned topsy-turvy all his ideas of a well-ordered world, neatly divided into categories such as right and wrong, and even perhaps, categories such as masculine and feminine. Furthermore, the poetic output of Kleist's pen might be said to convey a different message: the discrepancy is as much generic as it is temporal.[7]

Die Marquise von O... for example could be read, as I shall argue, as an empathetic account of the very difficult socialisation process required to make a good wife and mother out of a woman. At first, it does seem that the heroine already has all the requisite womanly virtues: she is, after all, already a mother, and since her widowhood she has returned obediently to the house of her father. It is her mother who has requested her return, but it is explicitly „in das Kommandantenhaus, zu ihrem *Vater*" (my emphasis) that the Marquise returns. There she looks after parents and children and lives a quiet and docile existence: „Hier hatte sie die nächsten Jahre mit Kunst, Lektüre, mit Erziehung, und ihrer Eltern Pflege beschäftigt, in der größten Eingezogenheit zugebracht." Her first marriage is described ambiguously – she was „deeply and tenderly fond" of her husband („dem sie auf das innigste und zärtlichste zugetan war", II, p. 104) – perhaps he was an older man, and an obedient daughter had submitted to an arranged marriage devoid of passion?

Yet during the course of the story before us she must learn to submit to a different imperative: she must learn to accept a new, perhaps younger and more handsome husband, this time not in response to her parental command, but in fact in direct rebellion against it. She will have to internalise this imperative as an inner compulsion or as sexual passion. She will incorporate as desire the external contingencies around her and, at least outwardly, accept them as her own. Many a

[6] Heinrich von Kleist: Sämtliche Werke und Briefe. Ed. by Helmut Sembdner. 2 vols. Munich 1987, vol. II, p. 509.

[7] Anthony Stephens: Heinrich von Kleist. The Dramas and the Stories. Oxford 1994, p.3 and Ruth Klüger: Die andere Hündin. Kleists Käthchen. In: Kleist-Jahrbuch 1993, pp.103-115 have also made a note of the time difference in Kleist's overtly misogynist or patronising statements to and about women made early in his life and his subsequent literary output.

reader has wondered aloud whether the Marquise really wanted it or not, or indeed they have proclaimed that they *know* that she *did* want it;[8] yet the story of *Die Marquise von O...* is that of the social construction of desire, not merely its discovery. Indeed, the Marquise stands on the threshold between the eighteenth century conception of marriage as duty to family and society and the nineteenth century conception of marriage as the expression of individual desire in romantic love.[9]

Boundaries between inner and outer inform the entire text of *Die Marquise von O...*, as has long been recognised. The fortress of the commandant, the Marquise's father, is invaded by a marauding Russian army. As the Marquise, her mother and her two daughters are unfortunately still present in the castle, this invasion represents as well the penetration of manly war and violence into the idyllic domestic sphere described at the outset of the story. That penetration is graphically re-enacted, as if on cue, by the gentlemanly Count on the supine body of the unconscious Marquise: this most bodily infringement of boundaries between self and other initiates the plot of the story, as the characters must afterwards attempt to set aright a world which has thereby been turned upside-down.

There are other physical boundaries which are crossed and re-crossed, and the boundaries always signify on a moral or ethical level as well. The Marquise is banished by a furious father when it is revealed that his daughter is pregnant but claims not to know by whom. She has, he thinks, transgressed the sexual mores of their society by giving herself without his permission to another man. Paternal authority is thereby injured, as are gendered roles, for the exchange of women is the business of men, not the women themselves. The Marquise has trespassed. She retreats to her own manor house, an idyllic country seat, where she can attempt to transform her status as an outcast to one of independence and self-reliance. Here, it has been said, the Marquise finds her self and gains strength by turning

[8] The 'discovery' that the Marquise wanted it all along was first made by the psychoanalytic critics of the 1970s. See for example Dorrit Cohn: Kleist's „Marquise von O...". The Problem of Knowledge. In: Monatshefte 67, 1975, pp. 129-144 and Erika Swales: The Beleaguered Citadel. A Study of Kleist's „Die Marquise von O...". In: DVjs 51, 1977, pp. 129-147. Of course, there is also Kleist's own witty epigram ironising just this point of view in some of his contemporary readers (I, 22).

[9] In a different but not totally unrelated context Jeannine Blackwell discusses the connection between a conception of romantic love and a woman's obedience to the bureaucratised state, which provides for the woman where the individual familial patriarch no longer does. The woman may appear more free due to her free choice in love, but in reality one father-figure has simply replaced another. Similarly, the Marquise cannot be said to be any more 'free' of social constraints when she chooses to 'love' the Count. Jeannine Blackwell: Marriage by the Book. Matrimony, Divorce and Single Life in Therese Huber's Life and Works. In: In the Shadow of Olympus. German Women Writers Around 1800. Ed. by Katherine R. Goodman and Edith Waldstein. Albany, New York 1992, pp. 137-156.

inward. She becomes, one might say, more 'masculine', if masculinity is associated with activity and self-determination and femininity with the opposite.[10]

Such concrete divisions between self and other as the Marquise thinks she can insist on are almost immediately revealed as spurious, however. Just as the extended family's original idyllic existence in the father's house could not withstand invasion from without, so the Marquise's more feminine idyll together with her daughters is first invaded, then voluntarily renounced. First the Count, wanting to make amends for his trespass by marrying the Marquise, lies to get past the major domo then sneaks around to the back of the property, where he finds an unlocked gate. In reality he is only performing another act of penetration and trespassing. Though at first she is again passively receptive to his advances, this time she eventually runs away from him; it seems at first, then, that she *has* strengthened her self. The Marquise's seclusion is eventually ended not by the Count, but by her mother, who persuades her daughter to return to the paternal house, and then persuades the father to forgive the daughter. As the Marquise was violently excluded from the father's part of the house earlier, now he must come to her part of the fortress. Significantly, it is the mother who orchestrates this re-drawing of the boundaries, bringing the daughter back into the family fold but then insisting that the father go to her, not *vice versa*. Peeping through a keyhole at the scene of their reconciliation, a room from which she is excluded, she rejoices at the sight of the father in the daughter's boudoir, the daughter perched on the father's lap and enclosed in his embrace and passively submitting to his kisses and caresses.

The mother's role has puzzled readers, and her readiness to compromise has been attributed variously to a weakness of character or proof of her unquestioning conformity to the status quo, regardless of the human costs.[11] Both interpretations may indeed be true, but a look at her function in the plot proves more valuable than a character assassination, however well deserved: the kiss the mother allows signifies that the family romance can now resume, with the daughter safely back in the possession of the father, ready to be traded again in future.[12] The mother plays the role so vividly described by Mary Daly in *Gyn/Ecology*: ensuring not her daughter's individual freedom, perhaps, she yet ensures that the daughter is safely re-inscribed into the social order, the only place she can be said

[10] See, for example, Elaine Showalter: The Female Malady. Woman, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980. New York 1987 for the difficulties nineteenth century women faced in trying to construct a (sane) 'self' when selfhood itself is defined as a masculine prerogative. Of course, the concept of the Marquise creating a 'self' at all is, to say the least, extremely problematic. See Peter Horn: Heinrich von Kleists Erzählungen. Eine Einführung. Regensburg 1978, p. 83.

[11] See Heinz Politzer: Der Fall der Frau Marquise. Beobachtungen zu Kleists „Die Marquise von O...". In: DVjs 51, 1977, pp. 198-128 and James McGlathery: Desire's Sway. The Plays and Stories of Heinrich von Kleist. Detroit 1983.

[12] Harriet Murphy says the same, but reduces the story to a constricting cynicism with which I disagree. Harriet Murphy: Theatres of Emptiness. The case of Kleist's *Marquise von O...* In: Oxford German Studies 1996, pp. 80-111.

to have an existence at all. For a moment, all seems calmed, quietened, as each reverts to the old social and familial role.[13]

The crossing of boundaries in this story is most often an infringement of self by the other; in particular it is the feminine self which is constantly imposed upon and which is so often injured that it cannot be said to circumscribe anything at all. Though her pregnant body obviously already includes an other, anyway, paradoxically the Marquise is as empty as the 'O' of her name implies. She is a receptacle only for semen and semantics. Yet I have said that the story represents the socialisation process which results in the creation of a good wife and mother, so something must, in the end, be made of the Marquise after all. The good wife and mother, the story implies, is just such an empty cipher, or she is a woman who is willing to seem to be so: she is the non-entity hiding behind the feminine mask described by Joan Rivière so long ago in *Womanliness as Masquerade*.[14] What really lies behind the mask remains unknown to most discourse, however, and so the direction of the Marquise's desire and the amount of her knowledge must remain matters of speculation.

Speculation, the filling of the empty spaces in texts, is, we remember, precisely how Iser tells us the meaning is achieved. The question is: whose meaning do we allow to be valid here? It is a question that can be asked on the level of the narrated events as well as on the level of the reader of Kleist's text. Should the Marquise replace her own experience of events – rape, betrayal, deceit-with the version of the Count, who calls it true love? Does she ever really do this, or does she only pretend to? Likewise, should the reader allow her or his feelings of horror to be assuaged by the traditional happy ending – marriage – or do other meanings continue to exist even after the placid dénouement?

A daughter to be protected in time of war, booty to be taken by the enemy, a sign of the family's shame and then after marriage a sign of its social advancement: the Marquise functions more as a vehicle for the circulation of meaning among men than as an individual, despite her period of strengthening by turning inward. Although her mother is upset when she thinks the Marquise is lying to her about the pregnancy, the father and brother are downright indignant at her infringement of what they see as their rights to control her. It is just when the Marquise seems most likely to escape men and their meanings in her country idyll that the Count reappears. As earlier he penetrated her body, and is now invading her garden, he will soon colonise even her mind. A Gabriel to her Virgin Mary, he whispers meanings into her ear, telling her obliquely that he knows of her condition and its origins. Meaning is deposited into her ear: he knows, he says,

[13] Mary Daly describes, in the context of various cultures, the impossible (if probably unconscious) bind mothers find themselves in when integrating their daughters into a social order so indifferent to the needs of women. Mary Daly: Gyn/Ecology. The Metaethics of Radical Feminism. Boston 1978.

[14] Joan Rivière: Womanliness as Masquerade. In: Formations of Fantasy. Ed. by Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan. London 1986, pp. 35-44 (First edition 1929.)

„als ob meine Seele in deiner Brust wohnte"; and there it is left to germinate.[15] Although various plot-delaying devices intervene, these meanings are at least ostensibly accepted (*empfangen*) by the Marquise at the end of the tale, when the Count again takes possession of her, this time paying for it as deed and document are signed over to her and to their mutual progeny.

Till the end, then, the Marquise acts as if she had a self, and rebels against being bound within the roles of *happy* wife and mother. Earlier she would gladly have remained in her feminine idyll, a happy *mother* if not a wife, enjoying all the appurtenances of Kristevian 'maternal *jouissance*' and its 'psychotic', because hermetic and anti-social, implications. But this interim space must be abandoned as untenable.[16] Later, placing the advertisement to find the father, she is willing to be a *wife* to the unborn child's father, but not a *happy* one, merely a dutiful one. When she does finally marry the Count, it is out of the renunciant's sense of duty to family. By the very end, however, after a year of marriage to him, the Marquise does what everyone, family, Count, and reader, is waiting for: she accepts the Count as her lover, granting him all rights of a husband. She agrees, then, not only to accept her position as the wife of her rapist, but to like it, or act as if she does. Does she or doesn't she? Speculations about her intentions or her feelings for the Count must, be it noted, remain just that – speculation. Kleist specifically does not give a psychological account of the Marquise's development, but rather a social one: she moves from one social role to another; her choice in the matter is limited at best, and in the story of *Die Marquise von O...* Kleist portrays just this dilemma faced by a woman who attempts to construct a self where selfhood is an impossibility. The dilemma may be taken as illustrative of the human condition in general, but Kleist has without a shadow of a doubt chosen to depict it in a specifically feminine context.[17]

[15] Heinrich von Kleist, op. cit. (Note 6), vol. II, p. 129. The impregnation of meaning through the ear parallels the Christian scene of the Annunciation, where Gabriel impregnates Mary with the word of God. See Julia Kristeva: Stabat Mater. In: The Kristeva Reader. Ed. by Toril Moi. New York 1986, pp. 160-186. See also my paper entitled Loss of Memory, Estrangement from the Body. Heinrich von Kleist's „Die Marquise von O... ", published in the CD-ROM Proceedings of the ISSEI Conference held in Utrecht in March 1996.

[16] „And yet it is jouissance, but like a negative of the one, tied to an object, that is borne by the unfailingly masculine libido". Julia Kristeva: Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini. In: J. K.: Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art. Oxford 1980, pp. 237-270, here: p. 240.

[17] Critics who speculate *unselfconsciously* on the Marquise's motivations are even more numerous than those who would determine Kleist's intentions. Indeed, Kleist's story appears to have hit a raw nerve in the twentieth-century psyche, for nearly every reader creates an idiosyncratic version of why and what the Marquise 'really' did, thinks and feels and defends this version vehemently if necessary. Obviously, we read fiction because we enjoy empathising with characters, and the pychologising of fictional constructs is to some extent a necessity if we are to make sense of the fiction. Yet it is important to distinguish carefully between what is in the text and what we would like to be in the text. Ii this context, it seems strange that even recent critics such as Seán Allan talk of the „genuine love" the Marquise discovers for the Count (and he for her), and

So, if an apparently content and socially integrated woman can be shown to be socially constructed only through such an excruciating process, does Kleist not imply by extension that the whole of the „gebrechliche [...] Einrichtung der Welt"(p. 143) , the social order the Marquise leaves and then comes back to, is just such a shaky proposition? If even such a naturally unproblematic and unworldly character as the young woman depicted here can learn what it is she is supposed to desire only with *this* amount of difficulty, then ideas of selfhood, of gendered desire, and of gendered roles are exposed as anything but 'natural'. Ideas of the Marquise's 'true love' or her final admission of her sexual desire fade away as insignificant. The story boils down to this one fact: a woman is booty to be taken in time of war and in this fact inheres the very essence of marriage within the patriarchy. No amount of contrition, tears or fainting, on the side of either party, before, during or after the deed, can change that fact.

It has been speculated that Kleist could play so adroitly with sexual and gendered identity because he himself may have been homosexual. This would have in some way made him more easily able to identify with female characters.[18] But, rather than pin the author down to specific categories which would determine the way he wrote, it is much more fruitful to see that it is just such categorisation which he is defying, in this work and elsewhere, and perhaps even in his feeble early attempts to educate his sister and fiancée.

Interestingly, one critic had to speculate just such gender-role blurring in the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne in order in part to 'explain' his ability to depict his female characters so sympathetically. Perhaps a protracted period of sleeping in the same bed as his uncle is what led to his renunciation of manly duty in nineteenth-century capitalist America in favour of the artistic calling.[19] Whether or not such speculation can do anything more than gratify the critic's prurience, however, it is certain that Hawthorne, like Kleist, had a conscious struggle with

of her „realisation that no human being (herself included) is proof against the temptation to do evil" (p. 318) without questioning what „genuine love" or „evil" mean. These assertions, furthermore, have no textual basis; they represent an opinion of what 'must' have been going on in the mind of a character whom Kleist himself refrains from fully explaining. Much as I am in agreement with most of what Allan writes, I must say that in this, he follows a course not so far from critics such as Schmidhäuser and McGlathery (Note 11), from whose overt misogyny he would apparently like to distance himself. Seán Allan: Auf einen Lasterhaften war ich gefaßt, aber auf keinen--Teufel. Heinrich von Kleist's „Die Marquise von O... ". In: GLL 50, 1997, pp. 307-322; Eberhard Schmidhäuser: Das Verbrechen in Kleists „Marquise von O... ": Eine nur am Rand strafrechtliche Untersuchung. In: Kleist-Jahrbuch, 1986, pp. 156-175.

[18] Joachim Pfeiffer, without simplifying the matter, discusses the problematic nature of Kleist's relationship to accepted gendered roles. He mentions the early biographical work on Kleist which sought to find a causal connection between the author's sexual preference and his mode of writing. Joachim Pfeiffer: Friendship and Gender: The Aesthetic Construction of Subjectivity in Kleist. In: Outing Goethe and His Age. Ed. by Alice A. Kuzniar. Stanford 1996, pp. 215-227, here: p. 217.

[19] Barbara Erlich: Family Themes and Hawthorne's Fiction. The Tenacious Web. New Brunswick, New Jersey 1984, p. 118.

gendered role models. Much of his work represents a working through of the cruel deeds of his patriarchal puritan ancestors – and these on the paternal side of his family only, although Hawthorne had been bereft of his father at an early age and actually grew up with the maternal Manning side of the family.[20] Further, Hawthorne felt confessedly effeminised through his choice of profession and yet reacted defensively against the feeling: in a phrase much quoted by feminists over the years, he deplored the hordes of „scribbling women" flooding the nineteenth-century literary market and edging out „real" artists such as himself. What is more, he disliked the feminists he knew, thought the burgeoning feminist movement was regrettable, and kept his wife and two daughters 'innocent' and 'pure'. Daughter Rose he refused to let write, for example, and daughter Una he forcibly kept home from school.[21]

And yet *The Scarlet Letter* is often read as a feminist manifesto.[22] Hester Prynne, the heroine of the novel, is young, beautiful, energetic, and strong-willed. She resists the attempts of men around her to control her fate, and makes a life for herself amidst all forms of adversity. First, her father marries her off to an older man, and it is his decision, not hers, to face the hardships of the New World, but she follows, she copes. When she finds herself pregnant in her husband's continued absence, she takes the knocks alone, protecting a lover she knows will not be able to stand up to 'public shaming'. When the Reverend Dimmesdale, her erstwhile lover, is in danger of being driven insane by the hypocritical ministrations of the long lost husband (who is disguised as a doctor and only pretending to be solicitous), Hester has the strength of mind to offer to flee with Dimmesdale into the woods away from puritan Boston. But he is too weak. She bears up well when Dimmesdale performs a public act of self-immolation in a confession of guilt, which unfortunately no-one understands, just as she has borne up quite well in the seven years as an outcast, with no help from the man who helped to get her there.

A concentration on the character of Hester leads almost inevitably to a pro-feminist interpretation. She can clearly be shown to be unfairly subjected to external barriers and confines, and yet to overcome them. Moreover, she can be shown to be morally superior to those who would condemn her. Shipped across the water to a new land supposedly freer, fairer, and more democratic, she becomes, with her embroidered scarlet 'A' on her breast, a living symbol of the canker in the rose of this New World. It is not, however, that her transgression exemplifies the corruption already grown rampant, but rather that her good behav-

[20] Barbara Erlich, op. cit., pp. 121-123.

[21] Louise DeSalvo: Nathaniel Hawthorne. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey 1987, p. 19 and T. Walter Herbert, Jr.: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Una Hawthorne, and The Scarlet Letter. Interactive Selfhoods and the Cultural Construction of Gender. In: PMLA 103, 1988, p. 293.

[22] For feminist interpretations, see for example Nina Baym: The Scarlet Letter. A Reading. Boston 1986, and Carol Bensick: His Folly, Her Weakness. Demystified Adultery in „The Scarlet Letter". In: New Essays on „The Scarlet Letter". Ed. by Michael J. Colacurcio. Cambridge 1985, pp. 137-159.

iour shows the boundary between the Elect and the Damned to be mighty blurred: Obeying the spirit, if not the letter, of the law, Hester lives a life of charitable good works while the supposed Christians around her spurn and revile her for what, after all, was only an act of love. Hypocrisy is rampant, not only in the Reverend Dimmesdale's tortured but concealed self-examinations and Chillingworth's assumed role as physician, but also in the gossiping townswomen, in the supposedly abstemious puritans who covet the lush work of Hester's needle but openly despise her for a sinner, and even in those secretly sympathetic to Hester because they know they have also sinned but have never been caught. Hester's life of good works and quiet forbearance makes them look bad indeed in comparison.

The threshold metaphor recurs throughout *The Scarlet Letter*, and each occurrence shows the boundaries to be both false and arbitrary. Hester we first meet as she crosses the threshold from the dark prison where she has given birth to her illegitimate child into the bright sun of the panoptically puritan Boston market-place, a place, paradoxically, of benightedness, not enlightenment. She goes on to live on the borders, both literal and figurative, of the puritan community. As a scapegoat, she represents the sins of the community which they would exclude; yet her representative function for the community can only be based on similarity to them, and her banishment to the margins only serves to reinforce an arbitrary distinction between what is held to be sacred and what profane. Only in times of illness and death may she cross the threshold of any of the Boston homes, but then, when some citizen is in danger of crossing *that* ultimate threshold, she is most welcome as a skilled and patient nurse; so her exclusion is not by any means absolute, but calculated by the community to its own advantage. Her mere existence must remind them constantly that their purity is only defined in relation to her defilement.

She lives between forest and sea-the vast expanses leading back home to the Old World and the terrible darkness where dwell wild animals and wild Indians. Living on the edge, she can include the woods just beyond in her territory. It is in the woods that she meets Dimmesdale and offers to flee with him; yet in the real puritan Boston, the woods functioned as the place of banishment and certain death for any real adulteresses. Hester, like the Marquise, has turned the scene of her ostracisation into the location of her independence. She lives liminally, but on her own terms as much as this is possible: she is respected as a wise woman, and feared as a witch; but the latter pigeonholing she resists, unlike the governor's own sister, the *known* witch Mistress Hibbons.[23] Hawthorne shows the artificiality of boundaries yet once again when Hester removes the signs of her guilt, the 'A' and her cap; through this she becomes feminine once again: „Her sex, her youth and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past."[24] Just as femininity was shown to be socially constructed in

[23] Nina Baym, op. cit. (Note 22), p. 56.

[24] Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Scarlet Letter. Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Ohio 1962, vol. 1, p. 202.

Kleist's story, so here, too, it is something that can be taken up or laid back down.

But Hester's marginalisation has much more serious implications, for her thoughts become as wild as her surroundings:

> The world's law was no law for her mind. It was an age in which the human intellect, newly emancipated, had taken a more active and wider range than for many centuries before. Men of the sword had overthrown nobles and kings. Men bolder than these had overthrown and rearranged [...] the whole system of ancient prejudice [...] Hester Prynne imbibed this spirit. She assumed a freedom of speculation [...] which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatised by the scarlet letter.(Scarlet letter, p. 164)

Hester trespasses against much more than the moral standards of the community; her progressivist thoughts undermine the very basis of their existence as a community. She has taken – Hawthorne has allowed his female protagonist to take – the revolutionary ideas published and publicly espoused by men against tyranny and begun to apply them to her own situation where she, as a woman, is suffering from the sexual double standard.

Yet despite this powerful language, an interpretation which sees Hester as a strong-willed, independent, enlightened and humane woman, and as the epitome of Emersonian self-reliance and self-sufficiency runs into a few difficulties. First of all, Hester's existence can hardly be said to be enviable: She must live almost without a community, and deny herself any mode of self-expression beyond the elaborate embroidery of her letter. Indeed, she is very nearly selfless, for she works only in the service of others, nursing, sewing, caring for the dying and listening to the love problems of the living, even if latterly her self-effacing duties are more respected as the ministrations of a saint than of a witch. Hester's story represents no great victory of women over life's contingencies, then, after all. It represents rather a woman's quiet submission to being voiceless and her resignation to having to hope for a better future, not create it for herself.[25]

Furthermore, *The Scarlet Letter* has often been interpreted, in a tradition begun by D. H. Lawrence, as not being about Hester at all, but about the virtuous albeit guilty Dimmesdale and his path to perdition: the title would then refer not to the visible sign on Hester's breast, but to the hidden one on Dimmesdale's, the psychosomatic manifestation of his submission to temptation, to the temptress, to Hester.[26] *Die Marquise von O...* obviously also has interpretations opposed to the one I have presented here. Whereas Dimmesdale is thus seen as hopelessly

[25] See for example Judith Armstrong: The Novel of Adultery. London 1976, p. 105

[26] See for example Henry James: Nathaniel Hawthorne. London 1967, p. 110, and Darrel Abel: Hawthorne's Dimmesdale. Fugitive from Wrath. In: Nineteenth Century Fiction 11, 1957, pp. 81-105.

emasculated, castrated by the female monster, the Count is made harmless as just a poor bloke who got caught with his pants down.[27]

Furthermore, both stories end with a re-inscription of the peripatetic woman into the patriarchal order. Despite the unheard-of circumstances the female hero has experienced, all ends, so it would seem, happily. No revolutions take place. The Marquise learns to accept her role as wife and mother, and Hester hers as 'old wife' and wise woman, as well as symbolic sinner: Hester returns to Boston and „resume[s], – of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have imposed it – resume[s] the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale" (p. 263). The revolutionary thoughts of yore are forgotten, just as are the Marquise's dreams of independence. One woman produces a long series of little Russians, the other marries her daughter off to a wealthy lord, back in the Old Country, where a Utopia has not even been attempted. Whereas *The Scarlet Letter* can be interpreted, then, as Hawthorne's silencing of an impertinent woman, much as he presumably would have liked to have silenced the scribbling women cluttering the literary market-place with their wares, Kleist has, supposedly humorously, revealed the ridiculous fantasies and self-deceptions of a woman who would like to think of herself as pure.

The discrepancy between the interpretations of these two works can, of course, be described as the understanding of them as prescriptive or merely descriptive. Was Kleist telling women to lie back and enjoy the rape, or was he describing in an admittedly graphically symbolic way a fundamental reality about marriage – that in patriarchy, it amounts to rape? Has Hawthorne's Hester merely been silenced, or has her silent rebelliousness changed anything in the consciousness of a close-minded community? Is she a Moses left standing at the frontier which she herself will never cross, or is she suitably chastened for her past sins? But let us go one step further: does it really matter exactly what the author thought he was saying, what he would, if we could ask him, say he was saying? The prescription/description dichotomy is really just in the mind of the reader, perhaps.

This blurring of the boundaries between authorial intention and readerly wilfulness has, of course, its dangers. I am not the first to point that out. But there is, indeed, space for manœuvring. While reception history, authorial biography and all the implications these have for women should not be suppressed – indeed, they should be reiterated lest we forget! – the reader need not be controlled by the meanings which have gone before. Modleski speaks for a criticism that rejects given meanings, whether found in the text or even in the reader or interpretative community: „fully politicised feminist criticism", she says, „has seldom been content to ascertain old meanings and [...] take the measure of already-constituted subjectivities; it has aimed, rather, at bringing into being *new* meanings and *new* subjectivities, seeking to articulate not only what *is* but 'what has

[27] See especially McGlathery (Note 11) and Schmidhäuser (Note 17) for such interpretations of *Die Marquise von O...*

never been'".[28] The prescription of meaning is performed not just by the writer, nor his/her critics, but also the reader. The reader can create meanings, she does not simply have to accept them. It is not necessary to imitate the attitude of the Marquise, nor need we assume the headache Mrs. Hawthorne got upon reading the sad message for women in her husband's work. Life need not imitate art; but the *poisis*, the making/creating power, may be said to be a part of everyday life.[29]

I would like to illustrate my point with another example, which can also serve to show that the kind of interpretation I am attempting has a far greater validity than just for the two works studied here. One critic deplored the fact that when he taught Henry James's *Daisy Miller* to his young women students, they invariably identified with the heroine and erroneously made a late twentieth-century text out of one written a hundred years earlier.[30] *Daisy Miller* is about an ignorant, but innocent young American girl who is figuratively torn to bits by expatriate Americans in Europe, while a sympathetic but cold young man, Winterbourne, looks on. Winterbourne wants to help, but cannot muster the true compassion to do so because he cannot understand Daisy. The young women readers understand Daisy more than the author intended, intones the critic, for the reader is left just as ignorant of Daisy's intentions as was Winterbourne. They are reading things that are in a sense not there: but is this not just what Iser says reading is

[28] Tania Modleski: op. cit. (Note 1), here: p. 46.

[29] Leverenz assumes a helpless apathy on the part of the female reader of Hawthorne's text: David Leverenz: Mrs. Hawthorne's Headache. Reading „The Scarlet Letter". In: Nineteenth-Century Fiction 27, 1982-1983, pp. 552-575. Similarly both Mortimer and Murphy (Note 12) assume that the reader of *Die Marquise von O...* is simply baffled. Armine Kotin Mortimer: The Devious Second Story in Kleist's „Die Marquise von O..." In: German Quarterly 67, 1994, pp. 293-303. – Feminist studies of both *The Scarlet Letter* and *Die Marquise von O...* tend either to play down the possible misogyny of the author and of the reception history (see, for example, Linda Dietrick: Prisons and Idylls. Studies in Kleist's Fictional World. Frankfurt a. M. 1985, and Nina Baym, op. cit.), or to reduce a complex text to mere misogynist spoutings (DeSalvo, Note 21; Mary Jacobus: In Parenthesis. Immaculate Conceptions and Feminine Desire. In: Body/Politics. Women and the Discourses of Science. Ed. by Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth. New York 1990, pp. 11-28, also, for other works of Kleist, Julie Prandi: Spirited Women Heroes. Major Female Characters in the Dramas of Goethe, Schiller and Kleist. Berne 1983.) When they do neither of these, some, such as Murphy, still assume an ignorant and disempowered (female) reader.
A few feminist critics fall into none of these traps, namely Dale M. Bauer: Feminist Dialogics: A Theory of Failed Community. Albany 1988 (Chapter Two is on Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*) and Marjorie Gelus: Patriarchy's Fragile Boundaries under Siege. Three Stories of Heinrich von Kleist. In: Women in German Yearbook. Feminist Studies in German Literature and Culture 10, 1995, pp. 59-82. Ruth Klüger expresses my sentiments, too, when she says in a discussion of Penthesilea: „Kleist war sicher kein Feminist im heutigen Sinne. Doch die von ihm geschilderten Konfliktsituationen eignen sich für ein feministisches Literaturverständnis"(Note 7. p. 115).

[30] Richard A. Hocks: „Daisy Miller", Backward into the Past: A Centennial Essay. In: Henry James Review 1, 1980, pp. 164-178; Henry James: Daisy Miller. A Study. In: The Complete Tales of Henry James. Ed. by Leon Edel. London 1962 ff., vol. 4, pp. 141-207.

all about? While James's 'point' in the story is certainly worthy of discussion, can it not be true that these young women have an insight into James's fictional character? Perhaps they have been in situations similar to hers, where they too have not been understood, where someone else has told the story for them as the late Daisy's is told as it is seen through the perspective of Winterbourne. Perhaps, therefore, they can empathise with Daisy in a way this one critic, and maybe even James, could not. Indeed, these young readers would undoubtedly benefit from learning to put more critical distance between themselves and the object of their study; their failure to do so is in effect no different from the one I have found in sentimental interpretations of *Die Marquise von O...* [31] Yet it is interesting and enlightening to let the basis from which this critical distance needs to develop be one quite different from that normally considered 'objective': that of a paternalistic scholar such as Hocks. It is in any case highly ironic that Hocks's relationship to his young readers so obvious mimics the paternal and condescending, if well-intentioned relationship of Winterbourne to Daisy.

In short, the reader can be trusted: She is not, as Modleski says in the context of a discussion of the consumption of popular culture, *merely* a „cultural dupe" (p. 37). While it would certainly behove these young readers to recognise that they are creating meanings, why should this activity be denied them, as it was denied Daisy Miller, the Marquise von O... and Hester Prynne? Much has been written about the 'duplicitous' strategies used by authors: Kleist's irony leads the reader up the garden path, Hawthorne uses romance and melodrama to seduce his reader into accepting serious art, and women writers have used all sorts of ruses such as claims of economic hardship and overt sentimentality to gain acceptance for their works. But the duplicity of the reader needs also to be recognised. Thus we may be able to gain a different understanding, for instance, of why women readers have been putting up with this thing called 'Literature' for so long: it is not likely that they have been merely passive victims too stupid to see how they are being duped; rather, they have been active creators of their own meanings, the same as all of us.

Both Kleist and Hawthorne can be said to be writers of 'both/and' rather than of 'either/or'. Kleist undermined nearly every clear statement with an immediate ironic qualification; no claim is ever safe with him, nothing is totally true or untrue. Hawthorne has been known to annoy readers with his use of gratuitous modal verbs and refusal to decide whether to believe the supernatural explanations scattered through his narratives. My reading, too, refuses to claim absolute boundaries separating right readings from wrong ones or masculine writers from feminine readers.

[31] See above, Note 16.