

Myth

Myth:
German and Scandinavian Studies

Edited by

Evan Torner and Victoria Lenshyn

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P U B L I S H I N G

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FOREWORD

The graduate program in German and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Massachusetts has gained national and international renown for the lively and innovative scholarship produced by its students and alumni/ae. Following upon the 2007 publication of the collection *From Weimar to Christiania*, growing out of the 2006 *Experimentations* graduate conference, this volume provides more evidence for the energetic engagement of UMass graduate students, the quality of their work, and the attention it has attracted elsewhere. Once more this graduate conference, which took place February 15-17, 2008, attracted a wide variety of graduate student participants, this time from five different countries and twelve different universities, and once more it drew an enthusiastic audience of faculty, other graduate students, and members of a wide-flung community. The conference garnered additional attention because it also featured the U.S. debut screening of award-winning Icelandic filmmaker Hrafn Gunnlaugsson's Viking film *Embla* (2007), the director's cut of the third film of his "Raven Trilogy." Focused on a time of struggle between the old Viking gods and an increasingly militant Christianity, the film was an apt accompaniment to a conference addressing the topic of "Myth." Gunnlaugsson was a lively presence as he responded to questions after the film screening, his appearance at UMass supported by a generous grant from Icelandair. A keynote address delivered by Professor Glenn Alexander Magee of Long Island University on "The Mythology of Reason: Romanticism, Idealism and the Quest for a New German Myth" added to the intellectual substance of the conference.

"Myth" is of course a multi-valenced term, and this volume shows that its contributors pursue its many different meanings. It can designate the founding beliefs and narratives of a culture, perhaps deriving from an archaic past, and some essays here explore those ancient stories and their relevance today. In the Barthian sense, "myth" can also refer to narratives that legitimate particular social structures, while other authors emphasize myth's function in sustaining hegemonic structures. Some contributions combine those two meanings, showing how the stories a culture tells itself over time can sustain unjust social arrangements. Finally, some of the chapters here show how myth can delegitimize dominant structures and even take on a counter-hegemonic function by fostering alternatives and hope. What this volume thus also demonstrates is the range and creativity

of the cultural studies research being produced by younger scholars in the fields of German and Scandinavian Studies today. The appearance of this second volume of collected papers from a German and Scandinavian Studies graduate student conference testifies yet again to the cutting-edge investigations produced by the graduate students who are the future of our fields and especially to the energy and ebullience of the graduate students of the program in German and Scandinavian Studies at UMass Amherst, who organized the conference out of which these papers emerged and who put this volume together.

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INTRODUCTION

“Over the centuries we have transformed the ancient myths and folk tales and made them into the fabric of our lives. Consciously and unconsciously we weave the narratives of myth and folk tale into our daily existence.”
—Jack Zipes

This anthology emerged from a graduate student conference bearing the name “Myth” held at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in February 2008, at which upcoming scholars explored the boundaries, functions, histories, and cross-sections of myths in German and Scandinavian literature, film, and history. Though the ample mythic traditions in German and Scandinavian literature and folklore - coupled with an overt public interest in the topic since the nineteenth century - provide a firm foundation for a study of myth and mythology, this project expands on how mythic symbolism not only constitutes the substance of the Eddic poems, but also how mythic structures are to be found in modern cultural structures in literature and beyond. Joseph Campbell and Hans Blumenberg’s groundbreaking studies in universal mythology aside, this anthology intends rather to contextualize myth as both socially determined and historically specific, raising questions about truths ensconced in myth and, perhaps, the myth of truth itself. We are the first to acknowledge how ambitious such a project is, but with these conference proceedings we hope to open up a public debate on German and Scandinavian mythology, especially how the function of such myths transcends traditionally assumed locations of study such as classics and anthropology (Hansen 26).

One of the chief challenges for scholars writing about myths is how to define the term. Eleazar Meletinsky makes an admirable attempt at a definition by paraphrasing sociologist André Sauvy, who identified several traditions and tropes of myth in past structures repeatedly created “by the social psychology of culture”: “the eternal return to the past [‘the good old days’]; ‘the promised land’, ‘the horn of plenty’, and predestination; the ‘political’ myths of Fascism and of liberal democracy; the social demagoguery of parties and nation states; and the myths of popular opinion and the prejudices of specific groups and persons” (17-8). In understanding myth, one’s vantage point might depend on one’s field of

study, one's belief system, one's theoretical view, or the social movement in which one wrote. Religious scholar Mircea Eliade, for example, founded his definition of myth in the 1960s in the context of religious studies, where he attempts a more extended definition of myth still grounded in a notion of the sacrosanct as something that "narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time [...]." For Eliade, "the myth is regarded as a sacred story, and hence a 'true history,' because it always deals with *realities*. The cosmogonic myth is "true" because the existence of the World is there to prove it; the myth of origin of death is equally true because man's mortality proves it, and so on" (5-6). Yet Eliade's theory emphasizes the importance of myth for understanding "not only how things came into existence but also where to find them and how to make them reappear when they disappear" (14).

Robert Segal, on the other hand, rejects the constraints of Eliade's theory grounded in religious studies as *against* the social sciences, for Segal argues that even Eliade was unable to make his arguments without borrowing from the social sciences (2). If one takes the word "sacred" out and instead regards myth quite simply as a story then, as Segal posits, an even broader understanding of the concept can be attained: "myth can be taken [. . .] either as a belief or credo" (4) or "a conviction false yet tenacious" (6). As a story, we can read into myths the symbolism, motifs, character development, narrative structures, and ideology that all contribute to the complexity of the role of myth and how one might come to understand it. As an example of one approach to myth, Segal discusses structuralists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss who theorized that myths were logical structures organized by oppositions, or dialectical structures that also provided in its structure a resolution (113-4). When we understand myth as a story with "symbolic language" (Hansen), then we find our entry point into understanding the veiled constructions of meaning and ideologies behind the myth, whether they are social, metaphysical, moral, or political.

The framework for this project can be found in this broad concept of myth evident in German and Scandinavian texts, where mythic structures in literature and film, social texts, and history continue to be evaluated. German and Scandinavian literature provides a strong context for such a project, since some of the most renowned mythic icons come from these cultures, such as Siegfried of the Middle High German epic poem, *Song of the Nibelungen*, or its Norse equivalent Sigurd of the *Völsungen Saga*. Later revivals of these mythic tales are to be found throughout literary history (i.e. Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungen*), but the structures are also found in 20th-Century literature such as Thomas Mann and

Hermann Hesse. Richard Wagner's "ideologically charged notion of the *Volk*" is only one example of how the boundaries between myth, culture, and ideology intersect. Addressing distinct waves of scholarship on myth over the centuries, Meletinsky registers the absolute importance of ideology and mytho-poetic symbols for political developments in the 20th-Century, noting how many intellectuals of all disciplines¹ have theorized political myths in what he calls a "rebirth of mythology" (15). In the latter part of the 20th-Century, politically charged mythic structures are often identified and analyzed based on their relationship with Nazism in Germany and Communism in the East, most notably in Roland Barthes' essay collection *Mythologies*. Aside from political ideology, in psychology, Freud's infamous Oedipus complex is an identifiable mythic structure whose allegory repeatedly appears in literature and is utilized in literary criticism. Repressed sexual impulses, for example, might find expression through alternative symbolic means such as dreams (Meletinsky 40, Segal 91, 94). Carl Jung transcends the sexual complexes discovered by Freud and sees myth as an expression of "consciousness out of the unconsciousness" (Segal 102), a transformation that does not stem only from sexual repression. These examples illustrate the complexity of myth as it has taken shape in the 20th-Century, emerging from 19th-Century trajectories that place traditional myth in the realm of religion as counter to science, to an attempt to rejoin myth and science in areas such as psychology (Segal 137), to a secularization of myth through political mythification.

This volume explores these various trajectories of myth. It not only provides Germanists and Scandinavianists a collective forum to read each others' scholarship while also showcasing the best and most recent work being done by the next generation of scholars on a topic fascinating to many in both fields. The contributors to this volume approach 'myth' from a variety of subject areas and time periods. As a result, the overarching picture provided in the following eight articles is quite expansive and cover broad geographic distances and time. Several striking characteristics can be detected in these articles, however. The first is their attention to finer points within German and Scandinavian cultural heritage without losing sight of the larger, globally interconnected picture. Another is their incisive analysis of mythic tropes across national and disciplinary boundaries, incorporating literature, theater, film, linguistics, the media, and social history in arguments that test the borders drawn between varying constructed truths. Each essay explores myths not only in their

¹ Ernst Cassirer, Thomas Mann, Georges Sorel, Roland Barthes, Mircea Eliade, Henry Hatfield, John T. Marcus, Reinhold Niebuhr, André Sauvay (17).

monolithic, symbolic quality, but also in their contingency on the specific cultural realities of their origin.

This volume is divided into four parts: The Gendered Myth, Imagined Communities – Myths of Solidarity, Constructing the Social through Myth, and Wisdom and Memory – Mythic Constructions of the Psyche. Each part demonstrates the interdisciplinary backgrounds and methods of the authors and how their work converges to comment on and explore myths of a similar nature of scholarship in German and Scandinavian Studies. The first section looks at myths relating to gender. Scandinavianist Jonas Karlsson (Yale University) revisits the topics of male sexuality and idealized womanhood through a close and semi-biographical evaluation of August Strindberg's dramas *A Dreamplay* and *The Father*. Karlsson emphasizes Strindberg's emotionally therapeutic goal of redeeming male sexuality through idealized female archetypes, such as the Virgin Mother. Germanist Anna Zimmer (Georgetown University) then examines a deconstruction of gender roles and the myth of the "perfect life" of the postfeminist, successful and modern woman in the fairy tale genre through a reading of Austrian dramatist Elfriede Jelinek's "Death and the Maiden," a retelling of the Grimm Brothers' *Snow White*. With an acute analysis of the various gender ironies established by Jelinek, Zimmer provides an object lesson of how the dramatist combats new gender myths with the inconsistent constructions of older ones.

The second section looks at myths of the community. Victoria Lenshyn (University of Massachusetts Amherst) examines East German Jewish author Jurek Becker's *Bronstein's Children* as a literary debunking of the myth of assimilation and the resolving of racial conflict through the resolution of class conflict in the former German Democratic Republic, especially regarding the Jewish experience in a post-World War II German state. Lenshyn explores the text through the lenses of trauma and recovery in East Germany, advocating for an interpretation of that country's history beyond the dynamics of Marxist-Leninism. In her socio-historical article, literary scholar Diane Liu (University of Massachusetts Amherst) describes the experience of German and other European Jewish exiles in Japanese-occupied Shanghai during World War II; an experience of exploitation by the host country based on racial stereotypes equivalent to formulaic notions of the 'rich Jew'.

The third part focuses on the construction of the social sphere through myth. Literary scholar in both the German and Scandinavian fields, Kevin Richards (Ohio State University) proposes a reading of the mythic tale of Thor's acquisition of the slave children Thialfi and Røskva as a psychological re-channeling of fears of the Scandinavian pagan tradition

of child exposure. In the second article, translator Katelyn Petersen (University of Alberta, Canada) applies her work on cultural translation to focus on migration literature that examines a myth of tolerance in contemporary Germany. Peterson discusses German-Turkish author Necla Kelek's explanation of "tolerance wrongly translated," a social behavior best summarized as "live and let live" – a well-intentioned social method of avoiding racism which, as author Peterson describes in Kelek's definition of the behavior, only perpetuates continued cultural misunderstandings and further intolerance.

The final chapter consists of two papers examining mythic constructions of wisdom and the psyche. Medievalist Adam Oberlin (University of Minnesota) provides a re-reading of the Eddic poem *Fáfnismál*, suggesting that the heroic Sigurð – a mythic figure across German & Scandinavian traditions – and his act of taking on magical wisdom through his journeys was misinterpreted by medieval audiences, who saw such wisdom as knowledge of chivalry. Instead of the traditionally accepted proto-Christian ideal, Oberlin posits that a deep-rooted Odinic tradition is reflected in Sigurð's acquisition and employment of wisdom, as well as in the Old Norse morphology itself. Literary scholar and historian Delene White (University of Massachusetts Amherst) focuses on the function of flashbacks and fantasies in the book and filmic adaptation of Jurek Becker's *Jacob the Liar* as a literary method that challenges the official memory in the GDR that marginalized Jewish suffering and Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.

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PART I:
THE GENDERED MYTH

PATER SEMPER INCERTUS EST:
THE DIALECTICS OF MALE SEXUALITY
IN STRINDBERG'S *THE FATHER*
AND A *DREAMPLAY*

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August Strindberg (1849-1912) began his literary career as a proponent of Naturalism, and it was with dramas such as *Miss Julie* and *The Father*, in which the psychology of the characters is laid bare with uncompromising precision, that he achieved his European reputation. Particularly shocking, even for an audience already acquainted with the stark realism of Ibsen, was the grimly pessimistic picture of sexual desire painted in these works, where love is inherently aggressive in nature, and the game of courtship and seduction a fierce battle of conquest. Thus the story of *Miss Julie* is that of a young, unmarried woman of the aristocracy who falls victim to the skillful ruses of her servant Jean, below her in rank but superior to her in intelligence and willpower. Julie ends by committing suicide, an act of senseless desperation largely portrayed as the inevitable consequence of her biological inferiority as a woman. Yet the supposedly weaker sex returns with a vengeance in *The Father*, a tautly choreographed "dance of death" (the revealing title of another Strindberg drama), in which the husband and wife of a failed marriage battle each other over the custody of their common daughter. In this case, it is the woman who emerges victorious: acting from instinct mixed with malice, the wife (Laura) manages to raise doubts in her husband (Adolf, a captain in the cavalry) about the paternity of the child (Bertha) he has always believed to be his own. Increasingly desperate about the possibility of ever again finding certainty in this matter, he is finally consumed by the abyss of insanity and dies of a stroke.

Strindberg has often been accused of misogyny, and it is undeniably true that both *Miss Julie* and *Laura* display the same kind of amoral manipulateness and putatively biologically grounded incapacity for logical thinking upon which he also bestowed theoretical formulation again and again. Yet it should be kept in mind that Strindberg was always

his own fiercest critic. Possessed of an almost uncanny capacity for introspection—as much a curse as a blessing—he applied the scalpel of vivisectional analysis not only to his fictional creations, but also, and perhaps even more impressively, to himself. His semi-fictional autobiography, *Son of a Servant Maid*, invites comparison with Rousseau's *Confessions* in its naked candor and unabashed confessional character. It is for this reason that every attempt by later commentators to demask or debunk Strindberg's construction of femininity will be sure to have been prefigured by the author himself. The unsettling greatness of *The Father* may well reside primarily in its utterly merciless exposure of male sexual anxieties. It is this exercise in psychological introspection that shall be at the focus of the present essay. Reading *The Father* side by side with Strindberg's later experimental drama *A Dreamplay*, we shall regard the construction of femininity primarily as projection of the male psyche, to which it is here subservient in function. Whereas *The Father* confronts the spectator with a dual nightmare of sexual menace and eventual impotence, *A Dreamplay* can be regarded as a salvaging countermovement, offering a problematic comfort to these same horrors. Together, the two dramas construct an unsettling dialectic of sin and repentance, in which the male protagonist remains iconically fixed while the female is transformed from a biological *femme fatale* to an essentially mythical ideal of a Virgin Mother.

The extension into the realm of myth, however, is already evident in *The Father*, despite the play's reputation for psychological realism. On the one hand, to be sure, the Captain's¹ increasing desperation over the sudden uncertainty about the legitimacy of his daughter may seem understandable enough. At stake is not only the future—if the child is not his own, he makes clear, he has “no rights over it, and want[s] none” (177)—but the past as well, as all the care and love he has lavished upon Bertha would have been given for the wrong reasons, and he would have “suffered seventeen years at hard labor as an innocent man” (178), as he pathetically puts it. Yet whether his ultimate descent into madness is psychologically believable or not, it is quite palpable that the torture endured by the Captain is also existential in nature, symbolizing an irremediable deficiency at the very core of male sexual desire. Even after

¹ Although he is normally called by his first name by the other characters of the drama, Adolf's primary identity is given as “CAPTAIN” (140)—an archetypally male profession—in the *dramatis personae*, and that is also how he is typically referred to in the secondary literature. All quotations from Strindberg's dramas are from the translation by Evert Sprinchorn. *Selected Plays*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, and will henceforth be given in parenthesis in the text.

Laura has reassured her husband that his suspicions are “completely groundless” (196), he refuses to believe it: “My child? A man has no children; only women have children” (197). The fact that the phrase commonly associated with Sigmund Freud—*pater semper incertus est*—no longer holds literally true in the age of DNA-testing matters little in this context.² Strindberg worshipped motherhood all through his life, tending to see in it the fulfillment of woman’s destiny. With the birth of a child, according to Strindberg, a woman’s libidinous passion for the man who begets it is transmuted into a selfless and essentially chaste love for the offspring. This may certainly seem like a mixed blessing, as it effectively denudes motherhood of all its eroticism; yet it is exactly this kind of closure that the male sexual experience inherently lacks, thereby dooming it to an endlessly frustrating circularity. Even though their marriage had once been happy—as is hinted at in the Captain’s delirium: “Laura, when you were young, and we walked among the birch trees [...] beautiful, heavenly! How beautiful life was” (196)—the monotonous passing of time has crushed all affection under its weight. An atheistic scientist and freethinker, he declares: “For me, since I do not believe in a life in the hereafter, my child was my [...] form of immortality, the only form of it that has any basis in reality. Take that from me, and you cut the thread of life” (177). Yet this secular religiosity requires a leap of faith which, like paternity, can essentially only be *believed* in, never *known* for certain. Without this faith in a final closure, the endless drudgery of everyday existence becomes almost impossible to bear. Work will turn into despair as soon as the hope of a reward is taken away.

But if there is no progress in male sexuality, there well may be a regress. The theme of incest becomes increasingly prominent as the action approaches its terrifying climax. Assuming a maternal role, Laura attempts to pacify her increasingly distraught husband:

Cry, cry, my boy, and your mother will comfort you, as she did before. Remember? It was as your second mother that I came into your life. Your big, strong body was a bundle of nerves. You were a giant child who had come into the world too early, or perhaps had come unwanted. (179)

As his sanity begins to slip away from him, the Captain repeatedly identifies himself with the mythical hero Hercules, bound in servitude to

² Freud discusses this dictum in his 1909 essay on *Family Romances*, but as his primary focus is on the child’s uncertainty regarding its father, his analysis is of limited applicability in the present context.

Omphale.³ In a final desperate attempt to break free, he cries to himself: "Awaken, Hercules, before they take your club from you!" (197). This symbolic emasculation, however, is as much a relief as it is a defeat. Deprived of his weapon, the officer no longer has to work, to perform, but can submit himself to a state of infantile passivity, resting his head in the lap of his old nurse, tied up in a straightjacket.⁴ This unsettling fusion of pleasure with humiliation, celestial rest with hellish bondage, is also evoked masterfully in the ironic echoing of Shylock's famous words from *The Merchant of Venice*:

Yes, I am crying. A man and crying. Hath not a man eyes? Hath not a man hands, organs, senses, affections, passions? Is he not fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, warmed and cooled by the same summer and winter as a woman is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? Why should not a man be allowed to wail, a soldier to cry? Because it is unmanly? Why is it unmanly? (179)

This has little to do with any social critique of traditional gender roles; the despair expressed in these lines reaches much deeper, into the very core of man's existence, where he is torn between the necessity of strength and the longing for relaxation.

It is against this gloomy background, I suggest, that it will be rewarding to take a quick look at *A Dreamplay*, a piece that Strindberg wrote in 1901, during the brief period of marital bliss with his third and last wife, the Norwegian actress Harriet Bosse. The action of this groundbreaking drama is notoriously difficult to retell, as the plot is deliberately structured according to the associative and often incoherent logic of dreams, yet its underlying idea is straightforward enough: the daughter of the god Indra descends to earth in order to experience what human existence is like, and to ascertain whether the universal complaints about life's inevitable shortcomings are justified or not. Assuming a human identity, she nevertheless retains her divine compassion as she reappears in scene after scene, sometimes playing an active role, sometimes merely watching from the sidelines. Her selfless love and

³ In his 1982 study on *Strindberg and the Poetry of Myth*, Harry G. Carlson interprets *The Father* as a modern retelling of this ancient story.

⁴ Camille Paglia brilliantly connects the "themes of sexual menace" apparent in Strindberg's play with the painting *Madonna* by his friend and contemporary Edvard Munch, in which "The male is a timid, starved fetus shivering at the bottom" (Paglia 505).

perfect understanding are ultimately rejected, however, and she takes leave of earth in a sacrificial pyre, a victim to mankind's benighted selfishness.

If not the most frequently performed, *A Dreamplay* has certainly come to be Strindberg's most well-liked drama, and critics too have generally been prone to take its rather sermonizing message of humanism and compassion at face value. Gone, it seems, is the hopeless despair and crass brutality prevalent not only in *The Father*, but in most of Strindberg's naturalist dramas. Although infused with a sense of Buddhist resignation, the primary mood of *A Dreamplay* is one of hope and reconciliation. Yet the redemption proffered is fraught with difficulties, and hidden just beneath the surface of its sometimes cloying sentimentality, the nightmare of *The Father* lingers on, preventing the establishment of any final peace. Particularly, we may fruitfully read the character of Agnes as an attempt to turn the predatory Laura into an agent of salvation, whose promise of final rest can be trusted in unconditionally. Obviously a being of divine origin, Agnes is a kind of Virgin Mother of celestial purity and goodness, whose boundless compassion for everyone *in general* denudes her of any subjective libido that could make her desire attach to anyone *in particular*. Yet what Strindberg tries to set up as a vision of liberation in *A Dreamplay*, is implicitly deconstructed by the grim pessimism of *The Father*.

In fact, the continuity between the two dramas appears to be almost explicit, as already in the second scene of *A Dreamplay* an "*Officer in a very unusual modern uniform*" (653) resurfaces to play the male counterpart to Agnes. She finds him idly "rocking back and forth" (653) in a chair, mindlessly striking his saber against a table. Speaking "*as if to a child*," Agnes gently chides him and takes the saber away. The officer complies with dreamlike docility, and it is impossible to overlook the element of almost sadomasochistic pleasure in his submissive plea: "Oh, please be nice to me, Agnes; let me keep my saber" (653). Not altogether surprisingly, critics have been eager to invoke Freud in this context. Evert Sprinchorn, for instance, remarks:

Sixty years after Freud, the symbolism of this scene is elementary. The daughter of the gods is a mother figure in the eyes of the Officer, who describes her as the embodiment of the harmony of the universe, and like a good nineteenth-century mother she is telling her son, rocking in his crib, not to masturbate. (Sprinchorn 141)

This is probably to take Freudianism one step too far, reducing a multifaceted symbolism to a somewhat crude psychologizing. More importantly, it entirely overlooks the element of pleasure in the relief

experienced by the officer as he is deprived of his weapon.⁵ The monotonously rocking movement, however, is surely significant, and Sprinchorn may well have a point in linking this to the sort of bootless expense of vitality commonly associated with masturbation—D.H. Lawrence refers to it in his essay on *Pornography and Obscenity* as a “vicious circle,” voiding the self of content “till it is almost a nullus, a nothingness” (Lawrence 180). Yet there is scant need to limit this state of endless repetition to any one particular sin, for—just as in *The Father*—it should rather be seen as metonymic for human existence in general. As another character remarks in another scene: “That’s what life is—going through it again and again” (703). Similarly, the officer has to endure the neverending hardship of being a “stableboy and carry out manure” (654), a job that presumably earns him his living, as the phrase goes, but does not yield any rewards that would lead him beyond that.

Repetition—even regression—is equally palpable in a later scene, where the Officer (who is never given a name) finds himself back in school, suffering intense humiliation as he is unable to answer even the simplest of questions: “Now, boy, tell me: how much is two times two?” (695). He even has to suffer physical chastisement as the teacher “grabs the Officer by the hair and shakes him” (695). Here too, the strength of the grown man is reduced to childlike impotence.

In *The Father*, the Captain is deprived of his club; in *A Dreamplay*, the Officer of his sword. The phallic significance of these weapons is naturally difficult to overlook. Crucially, it points to an aggressive quality that Strindberg generally held to be intrinsic to sexual desire. Not altogether surprisingly, Nietzsche reacted with enthusiasm to *Le Père* (he read the play in its French translation 1888), which he expressed in a letter to “the Swedish genius”:

I read your tragedy twice with great emotion; it surprised me beyond all bounds to get to know a work in which my own conception of love—in its

⁵ It is interesting to compare this with the famous scene in Arthur Schnitzler’s *Leutnant Gustl*, where the protagonist gets involved in a brief verbal altercation with a baker, and the latter grabs hold of the hilt of the lieutenant’s sword, threatening to break it in two. Convinced that his honor has been irreparably damaged by this insult, the hotheaded young man decides to commit suicide that same night, a duty he is miraculously relieved of as it turns out that the baker died before him from a stroke. The sword here functions primarily as the visible symbol of a man’s honor, a virtue traditionally linked intimately with the male identity. Though it is probably a sheer coincidence, it is fascinating to note that Schnitzler’s novella appeared in 1901, the same year that Strindberg composed his *Dreamplay*.

means a war, in its foundation a hatred to the death between the sexes—is expressed in a grandiose manner.⁶

The Captain himself says something similar: “it’s like race hate. If it’s true that we are descended from the apes, it must have been from two different species” (181). Sexuality is never just pleasure, a reciprocal give and take engaged in by two individuals in mutual agreement. Hidden beneath the surface of even the most harmonious sexual relationship there is always a power game, a nakedly primitive struggle for dominance. Echoing Hamlet, the Captain muses: “To eat or be eaten—that is the question!” (192). Yet if on the face of it, the female would seem to be the victim of this aggression, it is ultimately rather the male who suffers the most acutely under the destructive force of his own sexuality. Indeed, Strindberg’s women are often markedly astute in turning their victim-hood to their own advantage, demanding of the man a strength and determination that is painfully at odds with his existential forlornness. If the infantilization suffered by the Captain in *The Father* is in itself highly disquieting, it becomes doubly so by the scorn it provokes in Laura to see the man who had once “conquered” her stripped of all his masculine potency. Even as she cajoles him into assuming the role of her child, she cannot but be revolted by the incest implicit in this Oedipal constellation:

I loved you for the child in you. But—oh, you saw it well enough, every time your nature changed and you came to me as my lover, I blushed with shame, and your lovemaking was a joy followed by the anguish of incest. The mother became her boy’s lover – . Disgusting! (179-80)

In *A Dreamplay*, however, the essentially chaste motherhood of Agnes has entirely eclipsed any libidinal desire in her, thus precluding exactly this type of conflict. The Officer can submit to her without hesitation, surrendering the weapon he feels assured she will not require him to wield. She comforts him that she has “come to rescue” him from his “imprisonment” (654), ultimately liberating him from the vicious circle of travail without end. He can finally rest, secure in the knowledge that she only has compassion for the weakness he has now given in to. To offer an analogy that is perhaps not altogether arbitrary, it is as if Strindberg were

⁶ My translation. The German original reads: “Ich las zwei Mal mit tiefer Bewegung Ihre Tragödie; es hat mich über alle Maaßen überrascht, ein Werk kennen zu lernen, in dem mein eigner Begriff von der Liebe — in ihren Mitteln der Krieg, in ihrem Grunde der Todhaß der Geschlechter — auf eine grandiose Weise zum Ausdruck gebracht ist” (Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 15 188).

trying to apply a Lutheran soteriology to the realm of human sexuality, pronouncing salvation to be a product of grace alone, not of works.

This, then, is the redemption held forth in *A Dreamplay*, hinging on the combination of compassion and chastity embodied in Strindberg's ideal of the Virgin Mother. Yet to a psychologist of Strindberg's caliber, it almost goes without saying that such a solution must needs be precarious. Ultimately, the submissive—even humiliating—character of the Officer's renunciation cannot be accepted, inescapably provoking a concomitant reaction of reasserted pride and rebellion. Indeed, it is almost as if the very innocence of Agnes arouses a desire for wanton cruelty, amply demonstrated by the battery she is subjected to at the end of the drama, as the benighted bystanders vent their frustration on this Christlike "lamb" (the Latin meaning of "agnus") of God. The chastity of Agnes is as much *pre-* as *post*sexual, and the revolt against the maternal oppression inevitably takes the form of a wilful defilement of a virginal purity. Yet of course, this defilement will in its turn give rise to the yearning for forgiveness, thus completing the vicious circle of sin, repentance, and uneasy atonement, out of which it may well appear impossible to break free. It is a dreary logic of endless repetition, invoked towards the end as a "constant strife between the anguish of joy and the pleasure of suffering, the torments of remorse and the delights of sensuality" (728). The utter hopelessness of this situation is perfectly epitomized by the door that remains fixed in place in scene after scene, firmly closed until the near end, when it is finally opened with ceremonial solemnity. Yet predictably, the great excitement of the assembled bystanders turns instantly into disappointment and perplexity as it is revealed that behind the door there is "nothing—nothing at all" (724). Again, it might be tempting to use Freud here, who regarded any sort of vessel or empty container as symbolic of the female reproductive organs. Yet perhaps a better reference in this context would be Shakespeare, who frequently gave expression to a similarly dark pessimism about human sexuality, and who could refer metonymically to the vagina as a "nothing," or—in *King Lear*—as "the sulphurous pit" (*King Lear* IV.vi). One might consider, for instance, his Sonnet 129, in which "Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame" is "Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight"; and which ends with a couplet expressing a hopeless despair over the inexorable logic of this oscillation between desire and disgust: "All this the world well knows, yet none knows well / To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell" (Shakespeare 870). The sexual import of the anticlimactic opening of the door in *A Dreamplay* is further underscored as the people immediately

vent their frustration over this “swindle” (724) on Agnes, who is significantly held responsible for it.

Strindberg famously referred to *A Dreamplay* as “my most beloved play, child of my greatest pain” (Strindberg, *Plays: Two* 167), and he explicitly intended the role of Agnes to be played by Bosse, his then beloved wife. Certainly, his genuine tenderness for her is much in evidence throughout, infusing the action with a spirit of melancholy resignation. Yet the unquestionable beauty of *A Dreamplay* can never quite disguise the fact that the sweetness of the atonement offered by Agnes still comes at a high price. The peace and comfort she instills in her male counterparts retains an element of emasculation, making the revolt against her inevitable. If *A Dreamplay* was indeed conceived as a sort of antidote to the sexual pessimism of *The Father*, its ultimate efficacy must remain very much in doubt.

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MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO'S THE
MOST POSTDRAMATIC OF THEM ALL?
ELFRIEDE JELINEK'S
DER TOD UND DAS MÄDCHEN I

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In 1972, American poet and professor Adrienne Rich published an essay titled “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.”¹ Rich wrote with a sense of urgency: “We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (19). Today, many years after the height of Second Wave feminism and the *Frauenbewegung*, Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek continues to write in this spirit—for her, fairy tales are such suspect writings of the past and are still deserving of feminist critique. While postfeminist culture suggests that women have achieved emancipation, Jelinek counters this viewpoint:

[. . .] what's so stifling is that we all claim that things have changed fundamentally, that women now have choices. It's actually much worse now than when there was still a feeling of anticipation, of expectation (*Aufbruchsstimmung*), a belief that one must simply fight hard enough for things to change, an optimism. Now one is made to feel like a hysterical old hag who keeps on screaming even though it no longer matters. (quoted in Bethman 68)

Written in 1999, Jelinek's first of five *Prinzessinnendramen*, *Der Tod und das Mädchen I* (*Schneewittchen*), is composed in such a way that postdramatic techniques—such as the separation of the vocal from the corporeal and the suspension of meaning-making—question the traditional fairy tale from which she borrows and challenge the story's affirmation of gender-related ideologies and institutions. This well-known Grimm fairy

¹ I would like to thank Susanne Neuenfeldt, as her article alerted me to the existence of this essay.

tale is not spared Jelinek's criticism as John Stephens and Robyn McCallum explain: "[. . .] even the most revered cultural icon can be subjected to mocking or antagonistic retellings [. . .] not so much a retelling as a *re-version*, a narrative which has taken apart its pre-texts and reassembled them as a version which [has] a new textual and ideological configuration" (4). Inline with Hans-Thies Lehmann's description of postdramatic theater, Jelinek's play's "political engagement does not consist in the topics but in the forms of perception" (Lehman 184). Furthermore, Jelinek's play deconstructs the conventional genres of fairy tale and drama through its form. The four remaining plays that complete Jelinek's quintet take on the retelling of another fairy tale (*Dornröschen*), the challenge of being a woman and a writer (*Rosamunde*), the false triumph of Jackie Kennedy after the death of her husbands (*Jackie*), and the difficulties that modern women writers face (*Die Wand*, a play about Sylvia Plath and Ingeborg Bachmann). Jelinek's re-versions of iconic stories in the quintet prove that even today seemingly successful women do not necessarily lead perfect lives, thus exposing the mythical nature of postfeminism.

Unlike traditional fairy tales, Jelinek's play questions the assumptions and allusions presented by stories and challenges adults who heard them as children to rethink the values they transmit. Stephens and McCallum explain the importance of children's stories to a society: "Under the guise of offering children access to strange and exciting worlds removed from everyday experiences, they serve to initiate children into aspects of a social heritage, transmitting many of a culture's central values and assumptions and a body of shared allusions and experiences" (3). In order to question the norms presented in these texts, Jelinek—as Horace Engdahl describes—"[. . .] manipulates the codes of pulp literature, comics, soap operas, pornography, and folkloristic novels (*Heimatsroman*) so that the inherent madness in these ostensibly harmless consumer phenomena shines through" (43-4). Fairy tales could now be added to this list of genres tackled and dismantled by Jelinek. Cathy Lynn Preston, in her essay titled "Disrupting the Boundaries of Genre and Gender: Postmodernism and the Fairy Tale," writes of the potential of fairy tale re-versions to question the boundaries of gender and challenge other dominant ideologies. She quotes Amy Shuman: "[. . .] when we borrow another's words, and traditional phrases and stories are not only another's words but are the words of the anonymous and sometimes authoritative, traditional 'other,' we negotiate between the world the authority describes and the world we describe" (198). With these words, she suggests that retelling stories allows one to possibly even tell a story with new (gender-

related) values. Furthermore, this technique, as utilized by Jelinek, creates the semiotic implosion of the fairy tale by working from the inside (i.e. using words from and motifs of the original tale) in order to question the traditional semiotic significance and meaning-making devices of the story.

One gender-specific ideology questioned by Jelinek's play is the beauty myth, a myth that must be contextualized within postfeminist culture. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra in their book, *Interrogating Postfeminism*, describe this elusive term: "Postfeminism broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the 'pastness' of feminism [. . .] As postfeminism has raised a premium on youthfulness, it has installed an image of feminism as 'old'" (1-11). Furthermore, they argue that postfeminism highlights the role of woman as empowered consumer, but ignores injustices and "[. . .] has become so installed as an epistemological framework that in many ways our culture has stopped asking the kinds of questions that it appears to settle" (6). Jelinek, however, fights to reopen such questions. Her writing seems to suggest as Tasker and Negra argue, "The necessity of feminist critique, at a time when women face significant challenges to their economic well-being, hard-won reproductive rights, and even authority to speak, while popular culture blithely assumes that gender equality is a given, seems to us self-evident" (12).

Indeed, years after many gender myths have been critiqued and demystified by feminists, Jelinek refuses to abandon the fight for women's rights and equality. By focusing on ostensibly successful, self-determined women, Jelinek's princess plays challenge the postfeminist viewpoint that women are truly emancipated. Jelinek explains: "[. . .] the norms are still determined exclusively by men, in particular the cultural norms of patriarchy. [...] Women are still reduced to biology" (quoted in Bethman 68). The problems Jelinek describes—which are fueled in part by the ideologies portrayed in fairy tales—are today part of a larger social phenomenon: the beauty myth. In her seminal work, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, Naomi Wolf claims this ideology of femininity has arisen in response to the increasing power of women and changing gender roles. Wolf explains, "The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us" (10).² Wolf argues that while the accomplishments of women are being celebrated, an obsession with beauty and 'perfect' physical appearances is

² It must be noted that Wolf has been described as a postfeminist; in some ways, Jelinek prescribes to her line of reasoning, in other ways she abandons it.

resurging, exploited by the media, and drawing attention away from women's intellectual and artistic achievements.

Jelinek's play challenges not only the modern beauty myth, but also disputes an earlier variety of this myth: the German Romantic discourse on artistic genius, which juxtaposed masculine notions of intellectual and artistic accomplishment with feminine beauty and women's bodies. Furthermore, German Romanticism also marks the origin of the written fairy tale as a German literary phenomenon, making Jelinek's critique two-fold. Jelinek said about her princess plays: "Diese kleinen Texte sind ja zum Teil sehr philosophisch, sie verarschen unter anderem die Philosophie Heideggers, denn die Gebiete, aus denen die Frau am gründlichsten ausgeschlossen ist und war, sind: das Denken und die Musik" (quoted in Lücke [2004] 22). Jelinek's later princess plays demonstrate the difficulty that women face in artistic realms, but her first play reveals how women struggle to even think in a male-dominated world. Relatively little has been written about Jelinek's *Der Tod und das Mädchen I*, but Bärbel Lücke and Susann Neuenfeldt provide interesting insights into the problem of thinking outside current power relations. Lücke shows how Jelinek's first three plays in the quintet challenge theories by philosophers from Plato to Heidegger and illustrates how Jelinek reveals that men are allowed to think while women are often denied this right. However, she ignores the important role that fairy tales play in disseminating these myths. Neuenfeldt also fails to address the propagandistic role of the fairy tale, but acknowledges that "[. . . Jelinek] wirft [. . .] die Frage danach auf, ob es überhaupt ein Sprechen außerhalb bzw. *jenseits* dieses männlichen Imaginationsrahmens geben kann? [. . .] Gibt es ein Sprechen außerhalb dominanter Macht- und Herrschafts-verhältnisse" (151)? Notably, Jelinek does not tell a new story, but rather deconstructs *Snow White*: "Jelinek's social criticism is formulated not from the safe distance of superior knowledge but from the depths of unqualified contamination" (Engdahl 44). With this statement Engdahl suggests that Jelinek pushes for change from within a dominant discourse, not from a distanced utopia; the techniques of postdramatic theater such as the utilization of new audio-visual media forms that disconnect the voice from the body and question traditional meaning-making devices enable her to do so.

In Hans-Thies Lehmann's influential work, *Postdramatic Theatre*, his largely descriptive portrayal of postdramatic theater offers definitions of this emerging genre. In an attempt to define postdramatic theater, he writes, "[...] *postdramatic theatre*, again and most definitely, does *not* mean a theatre that exists 'beyond' drama, without any relation to it. It should rather be understood as the unfolding and blossoming of a potential