

Die Frauen der Dichter

Leben und Lieben an der Seite der Genies. 12 Portrts

K.Feuerstein-Praßer

November 18-29, 2018

'Cherchez la femme'. The expression is famous, suggesting not only hidden motives for otherwise inexplicable actions, but also promising the disclosure of the secret of success. Without loyal wives easing the path of their famous husbands, those famous husbands would not have been so famous after all. Sometimes there are claims that the young wives actually did more than provide carnal and practical support but even were unacknowledged collaborators in the creative pursuits of their mates; and not only that but were in fact the true originators of work for which their husbands got all the credit in the unfair world of male dominance. So extreme is not the case presented by the author, who is content with presenting factual circumstances shed of speculative elaborations.

It all is chronological, the first wife and mate being the one of Goethe, Christiane Vulpius born 1765 and the last the widow of Heinrich Böll who died in 2004. The examples are all taken from famous writers, and writers in German to boot.

The first one out is, as mentioned above, Chistiane Vulpius, whom Goethe took a liking to, and kept many years as a combined housekeeper and bed-mate. The bourgeois society of the small Weimar community was scandalized and she was ostracized from polite society who could not fathom what Goethe could possibly see in her. Goethe himself kept aloof, in fact he did not mention her existence to his mother for many years. She had no pretensions of being at the same intellectual level as her mate but he was obviously very fond of her, maybe in the same way you are fond of a dog for its fidelity and undemanding love. In the end, impressed by her steadfastness in face of danger, when the town was overrun by French troops, he decided to marry her after all. She was sixteen years younger, yet he survived her and was predictably heartbroken when she died. After all he was well in advanced age when it occurred, and really what did he have to look forward to? Yes, but what did he see in her? One obvious answer is sex. In other words there was more than fondness, there was attraction as well. And sometimes, not to say often, the obvious answer is the right one, and one is tempted to count this as one of those cases. The author claims that Goethe as a young man had no success with women. Reading his autobiography one gets a somewhat different impression of a young man gallantly mixing with the young ladies. True is that he had for many years an intensive, but yet Platonic, relation with an older woman - Charlotte von Stein - who must have had a much more intellectual influence on him than any other woman (so if you are looking for the woman behind the scenes, she would be a more appropriate choice). Goethe's sojourn in Italy changed him profoundly. W.H.Auden in his preface to the English translation of 'Italienische Reise' speculates that Goethe for the first time in his life tasted sex, no doubt both dallying with Italian beauties and consorting with prostitutes. When he returned home he was finally ready for the homespun variety, and Christiane fell into his lap without he having to do any pursuits on

his own. Charlotte von Stein broke off all contact with him.

The case of a famous man picking up a lowly, if enticing girl, who would have nothing to do with his literary pursuit and work is not uncommon. The opposite is far rarer, you do not expect a refined, intellectual woman to consort with a brute. The case of Heinrich Heine, falling for a pretty young girl selling shoes in a store in Paris, is another example. Maybe both he and Goethe had had their tastes whetted by prostitution ready for the good whore upon whom they could bestow innocent angelic features. Heine never tired of extolling her refined virtues. To his family in Hamburg, to where he took her once, she was foremost a beauty, a voluptuous figure indeed, whom Heine loved to dress up and show off. And she loved it her interests being simple. To this example one may also add that of Nelly Kröger of Heinrich Mann, a young woman he met in a bar, and the liaison with whom, caused many a raised eye-brow. In fact she was so despised, not to say detested, by his brother and sister-in-law, the Thomas Manns, that when she committed suicide they were deeply relieved. Talk about snobbishness. But those examples are in a sense the exceptions, in all other cases, except possibly Alma Mahler, the women were very capable on their own, and more equal relationships ensued. Mahler is an exception in another way. She was a groupie, and intentionally sought out famous men, starting with Mahler, then having an affair with Gropius, and ending up marrying in the end Franz Werfel, whom she detested, as he was Jewish, but anyway she followed him in exile to the States, where she finally died demented in the 60's. It is very hard to understand her sex appeal, at least if you look at a picture of her as an older bitchy woman with her consort Werfel fat and bald. Nevertheless she was not entirely devoid of talent, being a competent composer, but that side of her personality comes across as somewhat prosaic and irrelevant to her pursuits.

Clara Westhoff was a very able and promising sculptress (and later an accomplished painter) when she had the misfortune of meeting Rilke. Rilke may not have been in love with her, he may have been more enamored by her friend Paula Becker, but she was otherwise engaged and Rilke was timid, so he maybe out of absentmindedness or resignation, drifted into marriage with Clara something which was bound not to work out. Rilke being, as we all know, the quintessential poet. His skin very thin, neurotic to the core, and with a hysterical selfishness, as opposed to the robust one of a Goethe. With a man so self-absorbed, marital life was an impossibility. Unfortunately for Clara, she would go down in the eyes of posterity as the wife of Rilke, only recently has she met with some independent interest be it posthumous. But if Rilke was bad, Kafka was far worse. The tortuous psyche of the writer from Prag made Rilke seem almost normal. As far as marriage it never went that far with Franz, but he kept his unfortunate Felice Brauer on the hook for many years, reluctant to let her off. What did she see in him? An intriguing fellow no doubt, but one with whom there was no future. Kafka was riddled with doubts whether she was the right woman for him, meaning a true soul-mate, never giving a thought to the question whether he was the right man for her or just wasting her time. He acted out of astonishing callousness, writing of her in very disparaging terms to a girlfriend of hers with whom he was keeping up a correspondence behind her back. The girlfriend predictably could not resist spilling the beans passing it on, and Felice was likewise predictably hurt to the chore. And Kafka? He was puzzled, he probably meant no harm, only being unable to stay his literary impulses, and writing was of course the

main thing in his life. Incredibly they came back together and eventually even shared a bed and Kafka reported dutifully to his diary that it was awful. This might very well have been true, and as an obsessed writer he found no reason to hide it. Poor Felice Bauer was a competent business woman, who eventually were forced to emigrate with her future husband to the States, and late in life, harangued by financial problems, sold the letters she had received from Kafka to make ends meet.

The case of Katherina Pringsheim was yet very different. She was born into a very wealthy Jewish family. Her father was a professor of mathematics, incidentally in the circle of Weierstrass¹, but also a lover of music and friend of Wagner, and later in life an accomplished art collector. His family lived in a palace-like residence in Munich and kept a regular salon, where Thomas Mann earned entrance as the author of *Buddenbrooks* and started to court the only daughter in the house. She was the first female 'abiturent' in Munich and pursued studies in physics and mathematics, which she eventually abandoned in order to marry Thomas Mann whom she had initially ignored but who had managed to win the approval of her family as a first, and as it would turn out, crucial step. It is hard to believe that she did it out of love, but she was definitely intrigued by the literary potential of her husband to whose career she would as a married woman totally devote herself. Unlike his brother, Thomas Mann seems to have had a fairly low libido, in addition his orientation appears somewhat confused, so he may not have known where to direct it. But nevertheless he managed to father six children starting what promised to become a literary and cultural dynasty, but which would eventually peter out. Katia, as she was informally known, survived her husband with almost a quarter of a century and eventually reached an extreme old age, having survived three of her six children. To all appearances very competent at running the Mann household, always making sure that he could work undisturbed, taking care of all the practical chores of a large family, eventually including the logistics of exile, sacrificing, as she claimed, her own interests. In many ways a model wife for a writer.

The life of Martha Löffler was in some ways similar to that of Katia Mann. She too came from a wealthy background and also took it on as her life mission to assist the literary career of her husband Lion Feuchtwanger. Also as Frau Mann had been, she was at first rather indifferent to her future husband, who on the face of things hardly had any sex-appeal. Short of stature, peering through thick glasses. However, unlike Katia Mann, she also had to contend with a long series of extra-martial affairs on the part of her husband, nor did she have any children. The first child of the couple, which actually prompted their marriage, died shortly after birth, and the second was aborted. She and her husband went into American exile and were neighbors with the Manns at the Pacific Palisades, but unlike

¹ Understandably the author does not go into details when it comes to the mathematical achievements of Katia's father, but a search on the genealogy project reveals that Pringsheim had twelve students and thirty one descendants. He was not a student of Weierstrass in Berlin, but of Königsberger in Heidelberg, where he presented a dissertation already at the age of twenty-two. Königsberger, on the other hand, was a student of both Weierstrass and Kummer and had 43 students, among them the philosopher Husserl and the eminent Max Noether, father of Emmy Noether. Pringsheim worked in complex analysis, especially infinite series and on boundary values of analytic functions. Together with Sleszynski he is known for a theorem concerning absolute convergence for certain continued fractions.

them they did not return to Europe after the war. And finally she did, as did Katia Mann, go through a very long widow-hood.

Veza Taubner-Calderon was much older than Elias Canetti when they met when he was still a teenager. At that age a few years really makes a huge difference. His mother strongly disapproved of the affair, viewing the consort of her son as a vicious cradle-snatcher and it eventually came to a break between mother and son, but no real loss to Canetti, Veza played the role of a mother anyway. Soon the marriage became 'white' in the sense of a total cessation of sexual relation, and as a result Canetti was free to pursue carnal affairs on his own, as long as he made full disclosures. As Veza died fairly early she was never able to experience and enjoy the pinnacle of her husbands literary career, while he could bask in it and take on a young wife. Her own literary career, very serious one as far as she was concerned, never took off ground, and has only received some attention long after her death, no doubt due to the elevated status of her husband. So far she is the only one of the wives treated so far taking an active interest and role in the writing of the husbands, her only rival among the dozen chosen by the author being Anne-Marie Cech the wife of Heinrich Böll, who in many ways seems the ideal partner in a marriage more or less conducted on equal terms. Without her I would have been lost, Böll claimed, and one cannot but agree with him. She took an active part in his writing, correcting misspellings, suggesting alternate formulations pointing out obscurities and did also do a lot of translating from English into German (not always with the best of results), although initially her translations were published under her husbands name. She too would have an extended widow-hood stretching out her life.

Finally we have the case of Helene Weigel, the long-suffering wife of Bertolt Brecht. A renowned actor on her own, she got involved at a fairly early age with Brecht while he was still married to his first wife. Brecht did not only have affair on the side, he was a true polygamist, who always had at least one or two 'Nebenbuhlen' with whom he had open and intense relationships. Egotism comes in many forms, we have already referred to the neurotic ones such as practiced by Rilke and Kafka, the solid harmonious ones as guiding the life of Goethe, and in the case of Brecht we come across the aggressive one. But as self-love may be the only true love, just as glee may be the only form of true joy, it has a tendency to spill over provided it is, as in the case of Brecht, overflowing and generously shared, and thus benefiting the intimate circle around him. This may go some way towards explaining the charm he must have exercised. It is hard enough for ordinary men to meet the emotional demands of one wife, it is much tougher to do the same for a multitude juggling them around. A case of excessive energy available to fuel your selfishness. Anyway after exile in California, the couple lost little time returning to Europe and were welcomed with open arms to the new-founded state of DDR. There they got generous support for establishing 'the Berliner Ensemble' where Brecht could freely stage his plays. But for him this did not last too long, he soon got sick and expired, while his widow continued the work with the theater. But the erstwhile enthusiastic support of the regime cooled and towards the end it almost became hostile.

When all is said and done this book is about nothing but gossip, and does in no essential way differ from the low-brow gossip most people cherish concerning the lives of celebrities of today, meaning in practice movie-stars, who like the Gods of antiquity are

seen as larger than life and set to perform on a charmed stage to awe and inspire us all. During the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th the writers did indeed enjoy celebrity status, once they were successful. There was a material reason for that, for one thing there was a large educated middle-class and the production of books were relatively cheap. There were radio and newspapers which created and conveyed the status, and the movie industry and other related distractions were only coming into their own, and besides drawing a lot from literature. It was the film 'Die blaue Engel' that made Heinrich Mann famous. Thus it was more of a case of literature being filmed than being replaced. And indeed The Werfels, both the brothers Manns, Feuchtwanger and Brecht shared an American exile and knew each other of course belonging to the charmed circle of influential writers. Thus the book becomes a reminder, or to put it more harshly, a rehash of a well-known story. When it came to Goethe and Heine, although they did overlap in life, there is little, as far as I know, of any personal interchange. The times were very different back then. However, there is one couple I was not aware of namely that of Achim von Arnow and his wife Bettine Brentano. This was indeed a marriage of some convenience, no overwhelming passion on either side, at least not from hers. It was a marriage between friends not lovers. Through her grandmother who knew Goethe's mother, she succeeded in engaging in a correspondence with the sage. He suffered her and her visits to Weimar, but only up to a point. Apparently she did not know when to hold off before getting to be a nuisance and become an impostor. Her attitude to Goethe's wife was one of superiority, feeling that she was in a position to appreciate the great man so much more than her. This got more and more on Goethe's nerves. The last straw was when she at an exhibition got into an argument with Christiane, an argument involving blows and name-calling. After that Goethe cut off all relations with her, never to be resumed. Bettine was hence an early groupie coming to grief. Nevertheless her life and career seem more interesting than that of her husband, and in that way she stands out from the rest of the wives in the book. She was ambitious and could not abide the lack of it in her husband, who seemed satisfied with changing his literary career for one of a farmer, be it on a a large estate to which he had come through inheritance. They had many children together, (the amount of progeny usually has no relation to the happiness of a couple, be it spiritual or conjugal) yet lived apart, as Bettine could not stand country living and wanted the excitement of a city. His unexpected death was a shock to her but also a liberation, and only then did she truly come into her own. She became a writer in her fifties. It was kick-started by having her correspondence with Goethe published. It made a hit, and hence her name as well. Further correspondences were published, and then she started to engage herself politically in earnest, supporting the Grimm brothers who had run into trouble, giving advice to the Prussian king through her book 'Dies Buch gehört dem König' hoping for a liberalization of the country. She can in retrospect be seen as a pioneering Feminist and as such overshadowing her husband in the eyes of posterity.