

Introduction

Ob man nun dazu tendiert, die fortdauernde Ungleichheit zwischen den Geschlechtern im 19. Jahrhundert als notwendigen Bestandteil der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft zu verstehen oder ob man eher meint, diese Ungleichheit als einen Widerspruch zu den Grundprinzipien bürgerlicher Gesellschaften zu sehen, der sich zwar lange hielt, aber dennoch als Konsequenz dieser Grundprinzipien allmählich zu weichen hat, [erhält] die geschlechtergeschichtliche Perspektive dadurch zentrale Bedeutung für die Frage nach dem Bürgertum und der Bürgerlichkeit des 19. Jahrhunderts.

— UTE FREVERT, *Bürgerinnen und Bürger*

This book examines the ways in which three nineteenth-century women – Ida von Hahn-Hahn (1805–1880), Fanny Lewald (1811–1889), and Ottilie Assing (1819–1884) – wrote about and redefined selfhood and autonomy. All three confronted problems of exclusion in their respective societies, and all three wrote emancipatory texts which went against the grain of these societies. There has been a resurgence of interest in Hahn-Hahn's and Lewald's work in the last thirty years due to the publication of texts such as Renate Möhrmann's now classic work, *Die andere Frau*.¹ Ottilie Assing is less well known. However, she is a topic of discussion among Americanists because of her journalistic activity in the US as well as her relationship with Frederick Douglass.²

1 Renate Möhrmann, *Die andere Frau. Emanzipationsansätze deutscher Schriftstellerinnen im Vorfeld der Achtundvierziger-Revolution* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1977), as well as Möhrmann, ed., *Frauenemanzipation im deutschen Vormärz* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1978).

2 See, for example, Maria Diedrich, *Love Across Color Lines. Ottilie Assing & Frederick Douglass* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999); on Assing's journalistic work, see

Although these authors came from different backgrounds and had very different life experiences, their works share several features, thus making a comparison of their respective attempts to redefine autonomy and self-hood interesting and valuable. Central to each was a belief in emergent Enlightenment values, such as the importance and worth of the individual and the inborn need for self-development, as well as the faith that humanity continued to progress in a positive linear direction. Supported by this belief system, each of these authors depicted herself as an agent of social change in a society where more women were just beginning to gain access to widespread publication of their work. In fact, this increased access to authorship and, thus, power, authority, and influence, is vital to their notions of progress and human development. Because each recognized such access had been limited mainly to men (of a certain socio-economic background), these authors chart progress, in part, according to increased human rights for other groups. Finally, and paradoxically, each author creates a paradigm of self-development that rests on the exclusion of another socially more vulnerable group. I will examine the ironies and contradictions in their positions, as all three argued vehemently for inclusion of a previously excluded group (women, Jews, African American slaves), but did so by defining another group (“other”) who did not deserve inclusion. As a result, their works mirror those aspects of Enlightenment ideology which had defined as “non-individuals” all those who were not Christian, male, and presumably white, and therefore also mimic the more sinister aspects of racializing discourse which were also gaining ground at this time.

The texts selected for consideration in this book were chosen because they exemplify the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion. They encompass different genres and address different themes and plots. They are the following: *Jenny* (1843), *Diogenes* (1847), *Politische Briefe für und wider die Frauen* by Lewald (1863 and 1870, respectively); *Gräfin Faustine* (1841) and *Orientalische Briefe* (1844) by Hahn-Hahn; and Assing’s numerous

Christoph Lohmann, Introduction, *Radical Passion. Otilie Assing’s Reports from America and Letters to Frederick Douglass*, ed. and trans. Christoph Lohmann (New York: Peter Lang, 1999: xiii–xxxvii).

journalistic reports from America published in *Morgenblatt für gebildete Leser* (1851–65), a well-respected German weekly. Before moving on to a discussion of the central role of individual autonomy in these works in Chapters 2 through 4, it is crucial to historicize their concept of legal and social selfhood. Some of this historical context already belongs to an educated reader's store of cultural knowledge. At the same time, it is essential to understanding both how unusually progressive these texts are as well as the reasons for their exclusionary impulses. Thus, a lengthy portion of Chapter 1 will be devoted to contextualizing these themes via reference to mainly historical studies of this particular time period.

All three authors were born in the first two decades of the nineteenth century and grew to maturity during a time of huge transition and change. In Europe in general, and in the German context specifically, many of these changes had their roots in Enlightenment ideas about civil society. Philosophical discussions about the centrality of human rationality to the social order led to the questioning of divine rule and authoritarian monarchies. Over time, the focus of political discussions also shifted to the fitness of individuals, regardless of their birth, as the basis for society. Hence, a new importance was placed on individual freedom, happiness, and self-development as necessary to social health and progress. Moral values, formerly believed to be the province of the church, were becoming increasingly secular and at the same time increasingly foundational to this new civil society.

There were tremendous economic changes in tandem with this shift of focus to the individual as the locus of social and political power. With the rise of the middle classes, German society – as well as the rest of Western Europe – was increasingly separated into the private (home, family) and the public (business, government) spheres. This shift led to increased gender stratification as women were increasingly excluded from public participation and relegated to the private realm of home and family. Previously, the household had not been defined in a “familial way” but rather was a conglomeration of various aspects of everyday life (both work and home life). There had not existed this strict separation between women and the public sphere.

Simultaneously, the rise of the middle class also brought about an increase in educated readership and a proliferation of publications for these new readers. Women had many more opportunities to bring their written work to a larger audience. Using this venue, many women such as the authors discussed in this book relied on the accepted Enlightenment values of freedom and individuality to protest other more exclusionary tendencies of their age. In Hahn-Hahn's and Lewald's work, for example, this led to strong statements in favor of women's social participation and independence. Assing focused on the abolition of slavery.

General discussions of civic equality and freedom do not simply involve questions of gender, but also of race. The nineteenth century saw the abolition of the slave trade in Europe (and much later the US) as well as the rise of biological racism. The importance of race throughout the nineteenth century to categorizations of human worth is evident in both seemingly objective scientific investigations into human origins as well as more obviously racist discourse used to support European colonialist endeavors. Though Germany did not actually become a colonizing power until the late nineteenth century, issues of race and racial categorization are still relevant to a discussion of German literature earlier in the century, since metaphors of slavery and conquest had filtered into everyday discourse. Hahn-Hahn, Lewald, and Assing used these metaphors both in their ordering of the world as well as the understanding of their place and role in it. In order to accomplish this, they relied not only on the progressive, forward-thinking Enlightened vocabulary available to them. They retained a strong need to quantify, racialize, and exclude others in order to maintain the coherence of the boundaries of self, and thus make use of strategies which we would today call "orientalist" or "colonialist." It should be noted that the very use of these strategies means that, at least with respect to the populations they denigrate, they fail to live up to their own ideals. It is this dynamic of autonomy and exclusion present in their texts that ultimately is the focus of this book.

Over the past several decades, feminist literary scholarship has thankfully brought about a revival of interest in authors such as Hahn-Hahn, Lewald, and Assing, as well as investigations into the historical conditions which made their assertions of autonomy so admirable and laudatory.