

**POST-WAR WOMEN'S WRITING  
IN GERMAN**



# POST-WAR WOMEN'S WRITING IN GERMAN



**Feminist Critical Approaches**

*Edited by*

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# CONTENTS

Preface	vii
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## Part I

1. Introduction	1
<i>Chris Weedon</i>	
2. Reading Women's Writing: Feminist Critical Approaches	9
<i>Chris Weedon</i>	

## Part II: The Federal Republic, 1945–1990

3. Women's Writing in Occupied Germany, 1945–1949	25
<i>Franziska Meyer</i>	
4. Women's Writing in the 1950s and 1960s	45
<i>Franziska Meyer</i>	
5. The Early Novels of Ruth Rehmann	61
<i>Franziska Meyer</i>	
6. Women's Writing, 1968–1980	77
<i>Cettina Rapisarda</i>	
7. Women's Writing of the 1980s and 1990s	101
<i>Margaret Littler</i>	
8. Original Differentiation: The Poetics of Anne Duden	131
<i>Johanna Bossinade</i>	

<b>9. Searching for Intercultural Communication: Emine Sevgi Özdamar – A Turkish Woman Writer in Germany</b> <i>Isolde Neubert</i>	153
<b>Part III: The German Democratic Republic</b>	
<b>10. Women Writers in the GDR, 1945–1989</b> <i>Eva Kaufmann</i>	169
<b>11. Developments in East German Women’s Writing Since Autumn 1989</b> <i>Eva Kaufmann</i>	211
<b>12. Reading Christa Wolf</b> <i>Chris Weedon</i>	223
<b>Part IV: Austria</b>	
<b>13. Post-war Austrian Women Writers</b> <i>Allyson Fiddler</i>	243
<b>14. Reading Ingeborg Bachmann</b> <i>Elizabeth Boa</i>	269
<b>15. Reading Elfriede Jelinek</b> <i>Allyson Fiddler</i>	291
<b>Part V: Switzerland</b>	
<b>16. Women’s Writing in German-Speaking Switzerland: Engaging with Tradition – Eveline Hasler and Gertrud Leutenegger</b> <i>Christine Flitner</i>	305
Afterword by <i>Chris Weedon</i>	327
Notes on Contributors	329
Bibliography	331
Index	354



## PREFACE

This book offers the first broad-ranging study of contemporary women's writing in German in the context of wider literary developments. It combines a number of overview chapters with more detailed readings of individual authors. It outlines the development of women's writing in the four major German-speaking countries in the post-war period. Writers are located in relation to the social position of women and developments in gender politics. In the more detailed studies of individual authors, the book presents readings of selected texts informed by current debates in critical theory. These debates themselves are presented to the reader in chapter 2.

Certain key themes are addressed throughout the book. We ask what *Frauenliteratur* (women's writing) as a concept signifies in the different countries and how this relates to issues raised by recent feminist criticism. Central here is the question of whether it is possible to identify a specifically 'female' or 'feminine' aesthetic and what this might mean. Thus we look at the degree to which we can talk of common issues, themes, literary forms and use of language in the work of women writers.

This book was conceived during my time as Alexander-von-Humboldt fellow at the Freie Universität Berlin. I am very grateful to the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung in Bonn for its support. I should also like to thank contributors and translators and particularly Franziska Meyer and Helmut Peitsch for their generous help with the final stages of the book.





## Chapter One



# INTRODUCTION

*Chris Weedon*

In German-speaking Europe, as in other parts of the Western world, the last three decades have seen increasing interest in writing by women. Both feminist presses, such as the Verlag Frauenoffensive, Orlanda, Ulrike Helmer Verlag (Edition Klassikerinnen), Antje Kunstmann Verlag and Kore in Germany, Wiener Frauenverlag in Austria and eF eF and ala in Switzerland, and mainstream publishers have published a range of new and old work by women writers. The Fischer Verlag, for example, has a long standing series *Die Frau in der Gesellschaft* (Women in Society), Ullstein has *Die Frau in der Literatur* (Women in Literature) and Rowohlt *Neue Frau* (New Woman). In addition to new work, many texts by women, both fiction and non-fiction, which have been out of print for decades or even centuries, have been republished.

This increase in the availability of German women's writing has gone hand-in-hand with an interest on the part of feminist literary critics and historians in writing by women. Scholars have begun to recover the forgotten history of women's writing, producing among other things, the essential bibliographical information which helps further research.<sup>1</sup> They are producing new annotated editions of texts long since out of print and developing new ways of reading.<sup>2</sup> This work is part of a more general feminist tendency in the humanities and social sciences which is particularly strong in cultural history and criticism. It draws its inspiration from feminist cultural politics.

New forms of feminist culture developed quickly after 1968 with the growth of new women's movements throughout the Western world. Feminists began to question the male bias of established cultural traditions and modes of literary and cultural analysis, linking

them to the reproduction of patriarchal relations in society. Patriarchy is one of the founding concepts of contemporary feminism. It refers to structural social relations that privilege male interests over those of women. Feminist concepts of patriarchy were initially developed in the context of the radical social movements of the late 1960s. Among other things, the 1960s saw the advent of ideas of individual liberation which focused on the free expression of repressed sexuality. Writers such as Herbert Marcuse gained popularity with their theories of the unhealthy repression of sexuality in Western capitalist societies.<sup>3</sup> The answer for many 1960s radicals seemed to be 'free love' and the free expression of sexual needs and desires. For women, 'free love' was made possible by more than just ideas of sexual liberation. The introduction of the contraceptive pill had revolutionary implications. Whatever its long-term side effects, it gave women control over their own fertility, independently of any action on the part of their male partners. Promiscuity and 'free love', however, did not change male attitudes towards women. The expectation that a liberated woman should be sexually available to men was often experienced as yet another way of men controlling women. This negative experience of sexual liberation, together with experience of sexism in the male-dominated radical movements of the 1960s – the civil rights movement, the student movements and the anti-war movements – led to the founding of new women's liberation movements in most Western countries.

The women's movements in the Federal Republic, Austria and Switzerland, as elsewhere in the West, developed via networks of self-help, campaigning and consciousness-raising groups into strong forces for social change. Both the extent and degree of radicality of feminism in the three countries varied significantly. The Federal Republic was at the forefront of developments. In Austria and Switzerland things developed more slowly. Feminists set themselves political and social agendas designed to improve the situation of women in society. These included demands for equal access to education and public life, equal pay, full-time nursery facilities, free contraception and abortion, lesbian rights and an end to domestic and sexual violence.

The new feminism also affected education, culture and the arts. In looking to traditional sources of knowledge for an understanding of their social position, women found themselves invisible. History, sociology, literature, art history, philosophy all took men as their focus. Women's lives were absent from social history, women's

writing from literary history, women's art from art history. Where women were represented, as, for example, in psychological theories of sexual difference, they were defined by male standards against male norms which were assumed to be universal.

The assumption that 'man' is coterminous with 'human' has been a feature of modern Western thought since the Renaissance. For centuries the 'Rights of Man' had indeed been the rights of (middle- and upper-class, white) men. Women's difference from men, which was always related back to their capacity for motherhood, had long been interpreted as proof of their inferiority to men.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, women were seen as more emotional and intuitive and less rational than men. This difference was said to justify restrictions placed on women's access to education, the professions and public life. The response of liberal feminists from the 1700s onwards was to argue that rationality was the defining feature of human beings and that, given the same opportunities, women could be equally rational and capable in public life as men. Physical bodies – male or female – should not determine how one is seen and treated as a human being. For Mary Wollstonecraft in Britain in the 1790s and for Hedwig Dohm in Germany in the 1870s, the social and cultural construction of ideas of women's nature was a central focus of political struggle. It remains so for contemporary feminist movements. Many contemporary feminists, however, would move beyond a liberal framework, drawing on radical feminist, Marxist and poststructuralist theories.

The history of German-speaking feminism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a history of struggle under social and political conditions inhospitable to feminist aspirations. Key figures such as Luise Otto in Germany in the 1840s and Hedwig Dohm in the 1870s, or Rosa Mayreder in turn of the century Austria, were confronted with deep-seated beliefs in women's natural difference from men. These were supported by a broad-ranging body of contemporary medical, psychological, philosophical and religious writings.<sup>5</sup> Motherhood was regarded as the basis of women's essential nature. Her exclusive role was to be wife and mother. So strong was this belief, that it shaped the form of much German feminism even during its highpoint from 1880 to 1914. Unlike Hedwig Dohm (who remained a strong feminist polemicist until her death in 1919) and other radicals, moderate feminists stressed a philosophy of difference. Rather than suffrage, equal education and access to the professions, many bourgeois feminists

argued for women's special social role as mothers. This included bringing uniquely female mothering qualities into public life. While the emancipation of women in the Weimar Republic made considerable advances, by 1933 German women would once again find themselves ideologically reduced to their biological and social roles as mothers. These ideas would be officially extended to Austria after annexation in 1938.

Gender relations in the post-war German-speaking world were marked by the legacy of Nazi ideas about women, which had deep roots in German cultural history. The splitting of Germany into two states along radically different ideological lines meant that women's writing would develop differently in East and West. While the German Democratic Republic pursued policies ostensibly based on women's emancipation through involvement in paid work and political and cultural life, many aspects of patriarchal thinking remained intact, particularly in the domestic sphere. As chapter ten demonstrates, women's writing would come to play an important critical role in contesting patriarchal gender relations. Yet it was not only different social and economic systems that led to the separate development of women's writing in East and West. East German (GDR) cultural policy played an important role in shaping literature by both women and men.

In the immediate post-war decades, social life in West Germany and Austria was marked by traditional ideas about the nature and primary domestic role of women. The Nazi legacy, together with long-established traditional thinking about women, was compounded by moves, found throughout the Western world, to encourage women to abandon their new-found roles and highly skilled jobs in the wartime production industries. With the return of men from the front, women were expected return to the home. In Switzerland gender roles were equally traditional. In looking at women's writing in the Federal Republic, Austria and Switzerland in the post-war period, it is clear that the widely held assumption that a writer will succeed, if only she or he is good enough, fails to take account of the gender power relations both within and between the various literary institutions. While literature has always been subject to historical changes in taste, a naive believe in quality cannot explain, for example, why so many works of male authors have been canonised while the works of women authors have not. Nor can it explain the negative connotations of triviality still ascribed by many writers and critics to the very term *Frauenliteratur*. To understand this we need to look at

the gender politics of the literary institutions. This is one focus of the following chapters.

The current place of *Frauenliteratur* within the powerful institution of the university might help to clarify institutional aspects of the problems it faces. Under the present day conditions of academic life, the study of women's writing, whether in teaching or research, is confronted by a serious dilemma. The interest of women scholars in texts by women authors is often part of a much more broad reaching ghettoisation in research. In teaching, this finds its expression in the fact that courses on women's writing are for the most part taught by women and attended by women students. Once these courses are established the few set texts by women authors which have long belonged to the canon often disappear from the syllabi of male colleagues. The result of this is that the teaching of women's writing is left to a small number of women lecturers. If one of these women moves on or takes maternity or study leave, the newly discovered female classics disappear altogether because male colleagues do not wish to teach them, or do not consider themselves qualified to do so. On the other hand – and here lies the dilemma – the gender-specific division of labour within universities makes feminist research and teaching all the more urgent.

Gender has long been a fundamental but often unacknowledged category in the understanding of literary texts in their historical context, whether these are written by women or men. This is clear from the methodological blind spots of those courses which – usually drawing on unquestioned academic common sense – identify history, politics and literature automatically with the history of men. The changes in approach to the study of German literature which have come about since the 1970s and which have given rise internationally to a large number of feminist works, remain strikingly marginal to the publications of the majority of male academics. They continue to work with implicit gender norms which refuse to take women's marginalisation and questions of gender power seriously. In order to counteract this methodological blindness, a change in the self-understanding of women's researchers is necessary. Friendly and polite invitations to male colleagues to fill in the gaps in their knowledge via 'gender studies' can easily overlook the fact that – as Christa Wolf remarked – privileges in history have never been relinquished willingly. Feminist approaches insist on a thorough-going critique of patriarchal assumptions and power relations and on changes in

the practice of both women and men which would make feminist critique redundant.

Gender is also a fundamental category in writing itself, not for essentialist reasons, but because patriarchal societies place women differently in all spheres of life. What gives post-war texts by women writers a unity beyond their historical differences, whether we look at the late 1940s, the 1980s or the 1990s, is the fact that women are working under conditions and within structures that are patriarchal. As we shall see in the decades under consideration here, gender-specific ways of writing were always formulated quite clearly. The category 'gender' is in no way a late discovery of feminists. The sex of the author is almost always a decisive factor in the way in which male literary criticism evaluates writing. It is used to define the boundaries of women's writing as a category of exclusion.

This book is a reply, necessarily partial and selective, to the exclusion and marginalisation of women's writing in the post-war period. It divided into five parts. While the introduction outlines the range and objectives of the volume, chapter 2 discusses recent theoretical approaches to reading women's writing. Here I outline the issues at stake in reading women's writing and introduce different ways of reading developed by modern critical theory. Particular emphasis is given to feminist critical theories. These include both deconstructive and woman-centred theories of women's writing and 'female' or 'feminine' aesthetics.

Part Two focuses on the Federal Republic of Germany. In chapter 3 Franziska Meyer looks in detail at the position and work of women writers in West Germany during the immediate post-war years. Having set a context, she then offers a more detailed study of the short prose work of Elisabeth Langgässer. In chapter 4, Meyer examines developments in West German women's writing in the 1950s, paying particular attention to the work of Gisela Elsner. Chapter 5 offers a detailed study of the work of Ruth Rehmann. In chapter 6, Cettina Rapisarda charts the transition to explicitly feminist women's writing, concentrating on the politicised works of the 1970s. She looks, in particular, at the ideas about the nature of women, prevalent in the 1970s, many of which stressed female difference and authenticity. In chapter 7, Margaret Littler looks at shifts in women's writing in the 1980s and 1990s, paying particular attention to those texts which can be read as addressing the concerns of the 'postmodern' world. In chapter 8, Johanna Bossinade offers a detailed reading of a short story by

Anne Duden drawing on Freud and Derrida. In chapter 9, Isolde Neubert looks at writing by Turkish women in Germany focusing on the work of Emine Sevgi Özdamar. This chapter raises questions of racism, ethnicity and identity which are marginalised in mainstream German women's writing.

Part Three looks at women's writing in the German Democratic Republic. Eva Kaufmann (chapter 10) outlines the very different cultural and sexual political contexts of women's writing in the GDR and looks at its development over the forty years of the state's existence. In chapter 11, she examines the responses of women writers to the events of 1989 and the subsequent changes in East German society. She considers the position of women writers from the former GDR in the new united Germany and looks at the contributions that they are currently making to German literature. In chapter 12 I take three important novels by the key GDR writer Christa Wolf, and read these texts in the context of GDR cultural politics, arguing for the importance of historical understanding in the reading of Wolf's work. I go on to consider Wolf's role as a specifically *woman* writer and discuss the relevance of theories of a female aesthetic to Wolf's work.

Part Four focuses on Austria. Allyson Fiddler (chapter 13) looks at the development of women's writing in Austria in the post-war period. She locates writers in relation to social and sexual-political developments and places them within the broader context of post-war Austrian writing. In chapter 14, Elizabeth Boa offers a detailed reading of the work of Austria's most famous woman writer Ingeborg Bachmann. In chapter 15, Fiddler offers a detailed study of selected works by the controversial writer Elfriede Jelinek. She considers the relevance of recent feminist theory to reading Jelinek and asks whether Jelinek's work throws light on the question of 'female' aesthetics.

Part Five looks at Switzerland. Chapter 16 outlines the development of Swiss women's writing in relation to the social position of women in Switzerland and in the context of developments in cultural and gender politics. It relates Swiss women's writing to the broader literary context and offers more detailed readings of the work of Eveline Hasler and Gertrud Leutenegger.

The brief afterword draws some conclusions about the usefulness of concepts of 'women's writing' and 'female' or 'feminine' aesthetics and the development and reception of women's writing in the post-war period. We hope that the volume will serve as a useful and interesting resource for teachers, researchers and students

and encourage others to continue the task of reclaiming women's writing and fighting for the serious consideration of gender in literary studies.

## Notes

1. Gisela Brinker-Gabler, Karola Ludwig and Angela Wöffen (1986) have compiled an extremely helpful reference book on women's writing in German 1800–1945. For the post-war period see Gnüg 1985, Brinker-Gabler 1988a and 1988b. Bibliographies of texts translated into English include Resnick and de Courtivron 1984 and Frederiksen 1989.
2. The literature on feminist ways of reading is immense. Useful introductory anthologies include Showalter 1985, Greene and Kahn 1985, Belsey and Moore 1989, and Eagleton 1991.
3. See in particular Marcuse 1969.
4. See Jaggar 1983.
5. Turn of the century sexist writings include, for example, Möbius 1900 and Weininger 1980 (orig. 1903).



## Chapter Two



# READING WOMEN'S WRITING

Feminist Critical Approaches

*Chris Weedon*

In German-speaking Europe, as elsewhere in the Western world, the 1970s and 1980s saw the development of a wide-ranging feminist culture. This included new writing, art, film-making and theatre. Yet these years also saw the development of new approaches to the study of literature and culture more generally. Gender became an explicit component of this work. Established disciplines were challenged for their perpetuation of patriarchal images of women and their practice of excluding or marginalising women's cultural production. A concerted effort was made to redress the absence of women's lives, experience, and creative work from history, literature, sociology, psychology and the arts. In the process new feminist forms of analysis and new ways of reading culture were developed.

The founding texts of this new feminist criticism and literary history were explicitly committed, political interventions aimed at exposing and transforming the structures, beliefs and imagery that underpin patriarchy. In addition to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which first appeared in German as early as 1951, key early texts written in English were widely read in the German-speaking world. These included books by Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan and Shulamith Firestone.<sup>1</sup> Their objectives were to redress the silencing of women in patriarchal culture and to understand and transform patriarchy itself.

Where literature was concerned, critics set out to analyse how literary texts naturalise conservative ideas about gender difference, privileging male views of women as different and usually inferior. Perhaps the classic text of this genre is Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*

first published in English in 1970 and in German in 1971. In this book Millett analyses the work of a range of male authors and theorists, exposing the sexist assumptions that underpin their representations of women.

As will become clear from the detailed discussions of both literary institutions and texts in this book, patriarchal societies position women and men in different ways. Such societies function according to what is called the 'sexual division of labour'. While men are seen to have primary responsibility for the public spheres of work, culture and politics, women's primary responsibility is seen to lie in the so-called 'private' sphere of the family. This social division is founded on assumptions about what is naturally appropriate for men and women and it has had profound effects on women as producers of cultural texts. As the first chapter by Meyer (below) suggests, the broad-based sexual division of labour, together with conservative assumptions about women's nature and gender roles, had particularly profound effects on women's access to the literary institutions and market in West Germany in the 1950s. While similar forces were in play in Austria and Switzerland (chapters 13 and 16), Eva Kaufmann (below) shows clearly how the situation was different for women in the German Democratic Republic.

Among the founding assumptions of feminist criticism was the belief that cultural practices, including literature, art, theatre and film, play an important role in forming both our ideas about what is natural and appropriate and our subjectivity, that is, our conscious and unconscious senses of self. The key projects of feminist criticism have included making these processes visible by looking at representations of women in male-authored texts. Soon, however, many feminist literary critics changed focus to look at if and how *women* writers contest patriarchal gender definitions in their work. This new perspective raised fundamental questions in feminist criticism about whether women write differently and if there is such a thing as a 'female' or 'feminine' aesthetic.

In the German-speaking world, Silvia Bovenschen's essay 'Über die Frage: Gibt es eine weibliche Ästhetik?' (1976, 'Is There a Feminine Aesthetic', 1977) and her substantial study *Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit. Exemplarische Untersuchungen zu kulturgeschichtlichen und literarischen Präsentationsformen des Weiblichen* (1979) helped set the terms of the debate. In the 1980s, much pioneering work was conducted at the Hamburg Centre for Women and Literary Studies, *Frauen in der Literaturwissenschaft*. Sigrid Weigel

summarised the perspective behind this project in her influential essay 'Double Focus' (1985, German original 1983):

Feminist literary criticism investigates the consequences of the patriarchal order for the aesthetic representation of women in literature written by men (that is, *images of women*) as well as for the possible existence and actual examples of literature written by women (that is, *women's literature*). This division into images of women and women's literature is merely a conceptual aid; it should not lead to a schematic confrontation between 'masculine' and 'feminine' culture. Instead, it should allow a detailed investigation into the relations between the two and prompt the questions: How far do the images of women in male discourse and male poetics take women's social and individual reality into account? And, does women's literature reproduce these images of women or does it liberate itself from them and if so, how? (1985: 59)

Since the early 1980s, feminist critics from the Hamburg centre, together with the Argument Verlag, have published a series of influential volumes of feminist literary theory and criticism, hosted path-breaking conferences and produced an important newsletter.<sup>2</sup> This *Rundbrief*, which reached its forty-third edition in December 1994, continues to play a crucial role in co-ordinating feminist literary studies in the German-speaking world.

## Feminist Critical Approaches

Feminist criticism has developed over the last three decades into a wide-ranging body of work which varies radically in objectives and approaches. The early concern with patriarchal imagery and language and the move into the study of women's writing, were linked to ideas of sisterhood predominant in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since the mid-1970s, with the diversification of an initially mainly white, middle-class women's movement, differences between women have come to the fore. This shift in feminist politics has affected both women's writing and literary studies. Most feminists now explicitly recognise that Western patriarchal societies are governed by power relations of class, race and sexual orientation as well as gender. Moreover, Western women enjoy privileges not shared by women from the 'Third World'. Whereas sisterhood might still be a desirable goal, women do not all share the same oppression but are differentially placed in society by these other forms of power relation.

Yet feminist literary studies have not only been affected by changes in the politics of the women's movement. As the various chapters in the book demonstrate, feminist criticism draws on a wide range of very different theories. These include, for example, perspectives that stress female difference, those that draw on psychoanalysis and those that use poststructuralist theories of meaning and subjectivity. Contemporary forms of feminist critical analysis can be loosely grouped together according to their founding assumptions about the nature of women, language, meaning and subjectivity. In the following, I outline key approaches under two main headings: 'woman-centred' criticism and 'poststructuralist' approaches. The aim of this is to give the reader a framework within which to locate the readings of texts which follow in individual chapters. Those chapters dealing with individual authors or texts draw more directly and explicitly on influential forms of critical theory than the more historical overview chapters (for example, chapter 8 draws heavily on Freud and Derrida, chapters 14 and 15 on a range of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic ideas). Yet all the chapters implicitly address those questions that have been most central to feminist criticism namely:

- How do texts construct the meaning of gender and women's subjectivity?
- Do women in patriarchal societies write differently from men?
- Is there an identifiable female or feminine aesthetic?
- How does women's writing subvert dominant patriarchal meanings?

## **Woman-Centred Criticism**

Woman-centred criticism developed partly in response to early feminist work on 'images of women' which analysed the representation of women in texts by men. Woman-centred criticism seeks to redress the absence of women's writing and women's perspectives in the traditional study of literature. It argues that women's writing is different from writing by men precisely because women themselves and their experience of life are different. It seeks to recover and interpret this difference. Woman-centred approaches ask how women's writing is different and how it relates to the patriarchal societies in which it has been written.

Four questions stand out in woman-centred criticism: Do women use language differently from men? Does there exist an

identifiable female aesthetics? How might we account for such differences as do exist? How can women use existing language to express their differences and to resist patriarchal forms of subjectivity? Woman-centred criticism can be categorised according to the ways in which it understands difference. It works with three main approaches to the question of women's difference from men. These can be described as theories that are: (1) biological, (2) psychoanalytic and (3) social and historical. The theoretical assumptions that ground different woman-centred approaches to reading have profound implications for how we read literary texts.

In biologically based theories, men and women are seen as different because their bodies are different. This is the assumption behind much radical feminist critique. It breaks with the tendency in liberal feminism to dismiss the importance of the body.<sup>3</sup> Radical feminist theories posit an essential, natural womanhood which has been deformed by patriarchal social relations. They look to women's bodies: their cycles, their sexuality and their capacity for motherhood and celebrate these as sources of positive strength and female identity which defy male definition and control. Women's cultural production, including writing, should reflect aspects of women's true nature and experience.

The most influential texts in radical feminist thinking were published in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. A powerful example of such work is Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*, originally published in English in 1978 and German in 1981. This text demonstrates several key features of radical feminist theory and politics. It understands patriarchy as a world system of oppression which affects women everywhere. Daly takes examples of repressive social practices from different continents and historical periods – European witch burning, clitoridectomy, Chinese footbinding, Indian *suttee*, Nazi and U.S. gynaecology – and shows how they have functioned to control women. She also shows how, in writing about these practices, male scholars have played down or masked their violent and repressive aspects. In opposition to this, Daly envisages a new and creative female culture, separate from men, in which patriarchal definitions of women's nature are rejected, language is reclaimed by women and given new meaning, and women's bodies and minds are set free from patriarchal control.

Radical feminist ideas about women and their cultural production tend to be founded on an absolute difference between women and men. They reverse the patriarchal norms according to which the male is valued above the female and celebrate a womanhood

which is often defined as closer to nature, as nurturing, emotional, maternal, sometimes homoerotic and often mystical.<sup>4</sup> Rationality loses its privileged status to a view of subjectivity which values the physical and emotional. From this perspective, which revalues qualities seen as of lesser importance by patriarchal societies, woman's special, different nature is the source of her unique cultural productivity.

A central problem with biologically based approaches to female difference is that they reinstate many of those aspects traditionally seen as feminine, revaluing them but leaving the patriarchal mainstream intact. To be defined by our bodies has mostly meant to be denied access to those spheres of life not obviously connected with women's domestic, caring roles. In the context of radical feminism as a political movement, however, this is not an issue, since the only way forward for women is separatism.

The second major type of woman-centred criticism looks to rewritings of psychoanalytic theory for its understandings of difference. Psychoanalysis has long been a controversial subject for feminist writers and critics. While early texts like Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* were highly critical of Freud for his sometimes openly misogynist and sexist theories, subsequent feminist critics, influenced by Lacan, have reinterpreted and rewritten aspects of psychoanalytic theory for feminist ends. In the English-speaking world, Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1975), which brought together Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis and appeared in German in 1976, helped begin this process.<sup>5</sup>

Criticism of Freud has focused on texts such as *Some Psychic Consequences of the Anatomical Differences Between the Sexes* (1974), in which Freud outlined his theory of penis envy. Yet an influential group of feminist critics has found other much more useful ideas in Freudian theory and in its further development in the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Feminists turned to Freud for a theory of gender difference which does not tie it to biology. In Freud, masculinity and femininity are acquired in the process of psychosexual development. We are not born already masculine or feminine. Indeed Freud posits the existence in the infant of what he calls 'polymorphous perversity'. Sexual desire can, at this stage, go in any direction. The processes of psychosexual development in Freudian theory, through which the infant becomes a normal, gendered adult, involve the repression of those aspects of sexual desire that are incompatible with either adult male

or female sexual identity and behaviour. The process of repression involves the formation of the unconscious which becomes a site of resistance which continually threatens the precarious stability of adult sexual identity.

The idea that both masculinity and femininity are social constructs founded on repression has been central to the development of feminist psychoanalytic criticism. The normatively patriarchal aspects of Freudian theory which so worried Kate Millett, for example the role and status of the penis in psychosexual development, have tended to be seen as reflections of the patriarchal society that produced Freudian theory rather than as a fundamental flaw in psychoanalysis.

Feminist rewritings of Freud, which have helped shape woman-centred psychoanalytical criticism, fall into two main groups, one North American and one French. In the United States, feminist psychoanalysts such as Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein produced new versions of psychosexual development which stress the importance of the infant's differential relationship with its mother for the formation of gender identity.<sup>6</sup> The mother's body has a privileged role in psychoanalytic theory because it is the child's first love object. In traditional Freudian theory, however, it is the intervention of the father which disrupts the pre-Oedipal symbiotic relationship between mother and infant. In the process, the penis comes to signify control of the satisfaction of desire, and having or not having a penis and the possibility of losing it become crucial elements in the different psychosexual development of girls and boys. Feminist rewritings of this theory emphasise the primary importance of the pre-Oedipal phase of development.

Much more influential in literary analysis, however, has been the other main school of feminist psychoanalytic criticism which initially developed in France, drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan. Its key figures are Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous.<sup>7</sup> The Lacanian theory of the split subject, the unconscious, the symbolic order and the Other have become widely used in both psychoanalytic and some poststructuralist feminist criticism.

Lacan produced a general theory of the acquisition of gendered subjectivity within what he terms the *symbolic order*, that is, the realm of the law, language and social organisation. Like Freud before him, Lacan posits ungendered desire (or libido) in the pre-Oedipal infant. The acquisition of gendered subjectivity requires entry into language – the realm of the symbolic order – and at the

same time the repression of aspects of desire incompatible with the laws governing the symbolic order. This involves the formation of the unconscious which, in feminist appropriations of Lacan, becomes the site of the repressed feminine.

In Lacanian theory the process of psychosexual development which results in entry into a patriarchal symbolic order and the acquisition of gendered subjectivity involves an additional phase, the mirror stage. This marks the end of the pre-Oedipal symbiotic relationship of the infant with its mother and the beginning of the acquisition of subjectivity. According to Lacan, in the pre-Oedipal phase, the infant is unable to distinguish between things associated with its own body and the external world. It has neither a sense of physical separateness from the rest of the world nor of its own physical unity as an organism. Its main sensation is fragmentation. The initial conscious recognition by the infant of its body as something separate from the world around it comes with its first identification with a mirror image of itself or another complete, unified body. Through this identification the child gains an imaginary experience of what it must be like to be in control of one's body and one's needs.<sup>8</sup> This identification is based on what Lacan calls *misrecognition*. The child is unable to distinguish between the form that it identifies with and itself. The structure of misrecognition of the self-as-other remains the basis for all future identifications even after the child has acquired language and entered the symbolic order. This idea of a disunified, split subject has become crucial in much feminist theory and was further developed by Kristeva into her influential theory of the 'subject in process'.<sup>9</sup>

Language in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis is motivated by the wish to control desire. To symbolise control over the presence and absence of objects, above all for the infant, the mother's breast, is symbolically to control the source of the satisfaction of desire. The actual position of control – the source of meaning and the laws that govern society – is what Lacan calls the position of the Other. No one can actually occupy this position but individuals identify in an imaginary relationship with the Other when they speak.

In feminist appropriations of Lacanian theory, the questions of women's difference and their relation to a patriarchal symbolic order have been theorised in a number of ways. The emphasis on language as the site for the acquisition of gendered subjectivity led Julia Kristeva to develop a theory of the feminine and masculine aspects of language. In her book, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984, original 1974), she looks at writing as a site of resistance to



the patriarchal symbolic order. She sees the language of the symbolic order as masculine, reflecting its patriarchal structure. This order represses the feminine aspects of language which have their roots in the pre-Oedipal and which reside in what Kristeva calls the *semiotic chora*, a dimension of the unconscious. The feminine constantly threatens to disrupt the masculine language of the symbolic order, reasserting itself most visibly in poetic language. This shift of focus away from men and women to language suggests that masculine and feminine aspects need not be tied to biological maleness and femaleness.

The appropriations of Lacan to be found in the work of both Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray are rather different. For Cixous, gender is cultural and is constructed according to a set of binary oppositions which underpin patriarchal society and require transformation. In this context the repressed feminine aspects of language can be expressed through a return to the female body, the body of the mother, which was central in the pre-Oedipal phase of psychosexual development. Cixous develops a theory of *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) which involves 'writing the body'.<sup>10</sup>

Luce Irigaray goes much further than either Kristeva or Cixous in transforming Lacanian psychoanalysis. She develops the idea of a separate and different female libido which, repressed by patriarchy, is the site of female power. Women's culture, including writing, should in this model give expression to woman's essential difference.<sup>11</sup>

The third group of woman-centred approaches to reading are those which look to social, historical and cultural explanations of women's difference. Focusing on the work of women authors, such works seek to identify what makes women's writing different and to construct female traditions which can serve as the basis for ideas of a female aesthetic. A classic example of feminist criticism written in this tradition is *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. In their analysis of nineteenth-century women's writing, they identify depictions of madness as a form of resistance to patriarchy through which an authentic female voice can assert itself.

This kind of woman-centred criticism places great emphasis on women's experience. It tends to avoid any thorough consideration of how language constructs rather than reflects the meaning that we give to our experience. To address this issue, feminist criticism found it necessary to move away from models of language as expression of female experience or a female libido, to

poststructuralist approaches in which language constructs both gender and the meaning of experience.

## Poststructuralist Feminist Criticism

Difference, in poststructuralist theory, is an effect of language. Indeed subjectivity depends on *access to language*. Language, in the form of competing discourses which propose different versions of what is natural or true, is a key site of political struggle, including sexual political struggle. Part of the social role of literature and literary criticism, for example, can be seen as the reaffirmation of subject positions and forms of subjectivity for women and men, which foreclose any questioning of the social power relations which they sustain. The effect of this is to render patriarchal relations not only seemingly natural but even desirable.

Poststructuralist theory, particularly that influenced by Foucault, suggests that a whole range of social institutions and practices are concerned with constituting the meaning of sexual difference – for example, science, medicine, literature, psychology, social science, religion, education, the media and the law. These forms of discursive practice not only constitute the meaning of sexual difference in language, they involve material practices that shape our conscious, unconscious and physical identities and our desire. Different types of discourse play different roles in the constitution of gendered subjectivity, for example, academic disciplines offer theories of gender which often claim scientific truth, religion sees the guarantees of the nature of gender difference in divine will, and literature addresses the emotional as well as rational dimensions of subject formation.

Poststructuralism offers a way of deconstructing representations and the ways in which signifying practices construct subjectivity. In poststructuralist theory, signifying practices not only tell us what we are and should be and how we should look, but they constitute the nature of our desires in gender specific ways. As Rosalind Coward argues in *Female Desire*:

Representations of female pleasure and desire from fashion to food to family life and sex produce and sustain feminine subject positions. These positions are neither distant roles imposed on us from outside which it would be easy to kick off, nor are they the essential attributes of femininity. Feminine positions [and also masculine

subject positions] are produced as responses to the pleasures offered to us; our subjectivity and identity are formed in the definitions of desire which encircle us. These are the experiences which make change such a difficult and daunting task, for female desire is constantly lured by discourses which sustain male privilege. (1984: 16)

Structuralist theories, for example those important in the development of poststructuralism, namely Saussure's linguistics, Levi-Strauss' anthropology and the Marxism of Althusser's *Reading Capital*, look for deep structures which determine the forms taken by everyday social life. Levi-Strauss, for instance, sought to identify universal principles of kinship regulation governing modern societies. Saussure attempted to outline a general, universally valid theory of language which could serve as the basis for semiology, the name he gave to a naissant 'science of signs'.<sup>12</sup> It was on the basis of a critique of this theory of language and corresponding critiques of the model of subjectivity implicit in Saussure's theory and in most of the Western philosophical tradition that poststructuralist theory developed.

Saussurean theory of language was radical in its break with ways of seeing language as expressive or reflective of a world outside of itself. Saussure insisted that language does not label meaning, which is already constituted in the world, but constructs meaning by dividing up experience of the world into meaningful segments which are distinguished by their difference from one another. The language system is composed of chains of signs, consisting of signifiers (sound or written images) and signifieds (meanings) which are related to each other in an arbitrary way, that is, there is no natural connection between the two. The meaning of signs is given by their relation of difference from all other signs in the language system. For example, there is nothing natural and intrinsic to the signifier 'woman' that gives it its meaning. Meaning is given by the difference of the signifier 'woman' from other signifiers such as 'man', 'child' or 'girl'. As such, meaning is social and historical rather than natural.

Poststructuralism takes up Saussure's theory that meaning is constructed in language and is the product of the difference between terms, but contests the possibility of fixing meaning in the positive terms which Saussure called signs. Instead of speaking of signs as fixed terms, poststructuralist discourse speaks of *signifiers* whose meaning is always plural, constantly deferred, and can never be fixed once and for all. The poststructuralist critique of

Saussurean structural theory of language involves challenging both the fixity of meaning in the sign and the intentional speaking subject as author and guarantee of meaning. These ideas promised feminists a way of theorising and transforming both patriarchal language and subjectivity.

Both these aspects of poststructuralist theory are clearly articulated in the writings of Jacques Derrida which have influenced much poststructuralist feminist textual analysis.<sup>13</sup> Derrida rejects what he calls Saussure's *logocentrism*, according to which signs have a meaning prior to their articulation in speech or writing, a meaning which is recognised and used transparently by the rational speaking subject. Derrida locates meaning in an infinite process of textuality. He replaces Saussure's concept of language as a system of chains of signs, each of which has a fixed meaning, with a concept of *différance*, in which meaning is produced via the dual strategies of difference and deferral. From a poststructuralist perspective there can be no fixed signifiers (meanings); signifiers are subject to an endless process of deferral. The effect of fixing meaning, that is the effect of representation, is always a temporary, retrospective fixing, dependent on its discursive context, but always open to a plurality of meanings.

The very practice of cultural criticism is an illustration of the process whereby critical readings attempt to define and fix the meanings of cultural texts or practices. Yet rereadings are always not only possible but inevitable. The meanings of the signifiers 'woman' or 'man', for example, as they are articulated in discourse, vary according to discursive context and are open to constant challenge and redefinition. This is the case whether we are concerned with rereading nineteenth-century fiction, contemporary television, religious discourse, or the categories of critical analysis itself. Language is thus not only plural but political.

Feminist writers of both fiction and non-fiction have attempted to deconstruct discourses of femininity, masculinity and heterosexism, showing them to be neither natural nor inevitable but rather socially specific and historical. Deconstruction, as developed by Derrida, theorises the basis of discourses as sets of primary oppositions in which one term is privileged over the other. This discursive process of privileging and marginalising forms the basis of access to social power. As Hélène Cixous points out in her influential text *The Newly Born Woman* (1987), key oppositions structure patriarchal discourse: man/woman, active/passive, culture/nature, rational/emotional. They also structure racist

discourse: white/black, developed/underdeveloped, civilised/primitive, First World/Third World and all other discourses concerned with the reproduction of power relations. Yet, post-structuralism suggests, both these oppositions and the attempts to fix meaning and social relations as natural and inevitable are undermined by the very structure of signification itself which eludes such fixing.

It is in the inevitably temporary fixing of meaning, necessary for communication, that subjectivity is constituted. Even simple reversals of dominant hierarchies, which seek to determine what is natural or true, can have far-reaching effects on our sense of ourselves as subjects. A good example of this is the essay by Adrienne Rich 'On Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience' (1981), in which she argues that feminism and feminist analysis would be 'more accurate, more powerful, more truly a force for change' if it did not take the hierarchical opposition heterosexual/homosexual for granted. To question the nature of this opposition would be 'to deal with lesbian existence as a reality, and as a source of knowledge and power available to women or with the institution of heterosexuality itself as a beachhead of male dominance'. Rich argues that most feminist analysis does not raise the fundamental question of whether, 'in a different context, or other things being equal', women would choose heterosexual coupling and marriage. Heterosexuality is presumed to be the 'sexual preference' of 'most women', either implicitly or explicitly. It is not explained as an institution imposed on women by patriarchy that powerfully affects 'mothering, sex roles, relationships and societal prescriptions'. Ideas of 'preference' or 'innate orientation' are not questioned. To raise these questions, reversing the heterosexual/lesbian opposition, is to produce a difference of view which has far-reaching consequences for how we understand contemporary gender relations.

If Derrida offers a powerful critique of the fixing of meaning and intentional subjectivity which has influenced much feminist deconstructive work, this theory has arguably less to offer when it comes to the analysis of the social construction of subjectivity and meaning in historically specific discourses, both inside and outside hegemonic social institutions and practices. It is here that feminists anxious to use poststructuralist principles in ways directly concerned with making visible and challenging power relations have placed Derridean principles of how language works and of deconstruction in a context which takes detailed account of existing

social and institutional relations. Poststructuralist feminists have drawn here on Michel Foucault's historical accounts of the penal system and of sexuality which attend to how particular discourses, legitimating specific forms of social practice, constitute individuals as subjects inserted into specific forms of power relation.<sup>14</sup>

In *The History of Sexuality. Volume One* (1981), for example, Foucault attempts an analysis of the discourses which constitute sexuality and their implications for the production and government of sexual subjects. *The History of Sexuality* is concerned with locating:

The forms of power, the channels it takes and the discourses it permeates in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behaviour, the paths that give it access to the rare or scarcely perceivable forms of desire, how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure – all this entailing effects that may be those of refusal blockage and invalidation, but also of incitement and intensification. In short, the 'polymorphous techniques of power'. (1981: 11)

This analysis is concerned with the ways in which social power relations are produced and sustained in the discursive production of historically specific sexuality, the subjects which it constitutes and governs, and the emergence of resistance to this power. Sexuality is seen as a primary locus of power in contemporary society, constituting subjects and governing them by exercising control through their bodies. The ways in which discourses of sexuality constitute the body, mind, emotions and desires of individuals are always historically and socially specific and a site of constant struggle. Sexuality and sexual difference have no essential nature or meaning.

In poststructuralist feminist analysis, language is not an abstract system but rather a set of historically and socially specific discourses, produced within social institutions and defining social life and subjectivity. A wide range of discourses and allied social practices – including literature – are concerned to constitute, define and fix gender difference. The same signifiers may occur in different discourses and signal radically different meanings, legitimating different modes of producing and governing individuals as sexual subjects. This is particularly clear, for example, in the ways in which radical feminists ascribe new meanings to traditionally feminine qualities, be these positive or negative in patriarchal discourse. In doing so they attempt to organise social relations in ways different from the patriarchal mainstream, a difference focused by the concepts of being woman-centred and woman-identified. For example, emotionality and intuition are

posed as superior female qualities, not available to men, and conventionally negative signifiers such as 'hag', 'crone' and 'spinster' are invested with positive, creative meanings (Daly 1979).

However, mainstream discourses also use signifiers of sexual difference, femininity and masculinity in conflicting and contradictory ways. For example, signifiers of femininity ranging from sexual woman to housewife and mother are invested with different meanings and different values by different discursive practices, and from one historical moment to another. Literature is a key site for studying these differences and contradictions.

Poststructuralist theory breaks radically with the dominant humanist model of subjectivity. Instead of positing a unique essence with which each individual is born and which she or he develops, poststructuralism sees the individual as the site for the construction of modes of subjectivity which may well be contradictory, and which will demand the repression or marginalisation of other possibilities. Literature plays an important role in this process of constructing individuals as gendered subjects.

Different discourses, often reflected in literary texts, offer different sets of oppositions which attempt to lay out principles of difference and meaning. They also offer different gendered modes of subjectivity structured by, or in opposition to, patriarchal power relations. Thus this way of looking at language and subjectivity does not amount to a pluralist model of language and society, since different discourses have varying roles in defining social practices both inside and outside formal social institutions like education, the family, the media and the law. The subject positions which discourses offer involve differential access to social power.

Literary criticism based on this type of poststructuralist theory needs to look at literary constructions of gender in the context of other discourses of gender in circulation. Such analysis can point to weak points, contradictions, and resistances in patriarchally defined orders of meaning. It is only by analysing the mechanism of power at this level that it is possible to identify the potential for resistance and transformation.

The two major groups of feminist theory outlined here disagree radically about the nature of subjectivity, language and meaning. Whereas woman-centred criticism tends to see women's writing as an expression of a female perspective, be this based on experience or the feminine dimensions repressed by a patriarchal order, poststructuralist criticism stresses fictional texts as a site for the

construction of the meaning of gender and subjectivity. Both, however, share the assumption that the patriarchal order in which women live places them differently from men. This different positioning involves relations of power and is likely to produce different forms of negotiation and resistance in women's writing.

The chapters which follow do not subscribe to ideas of woman's essential difference as the source of women's creativity. In their different ways, they are interested in how writers negotiate and offer resistance to patriarchal definitions of women. It is women's different positioning in patriarchal societies and the contradictory nature of competing definitions of femininity under patriarchy, which make it likely that many women will write differently from their male counterparts. The rest of this volume investigates this possibility, seeking to analyse the particular contribution of women writers to postwar writing in German.

## Notes

1. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published in German in 1966 by Rowohlt; Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) was published by Kurt Desch Verlag in 1971 and reprinted in 1974 by dtv; Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1971) by Suhrkamp in 1971; and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* by Fischer in 1975.
2. These publications include, for example, *Die verborgene Frau, Feministische Literaturwissenschaft* and *Frauen. Weiblichkeit. Schrift*.
3. For a substantial overview of feminist approaches to women's 'nature', including women's bodies, see Jaggar 1983.
4. For a sense of the concerns and power of radical feminist writing see Daly 1979 and Griffin 1982 and 1984.
5. For an introduction to psychoanalytic criticism see Wright 1984. For a useful guide to concepts in feminist psychoanalytic criticism see Wright 1992.
6. See Chodorow 1978 and Dinnerstein 1987.
7. For an introduction to Lacan see Gallop 1985. For a brief introduction to Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous see Moi 1985.
8. See Lacan 1977.
9. For a selection of Kristeva's important writings see Moi 1986.
10. See Cixous and Clément 1987 and Sellers 1994.
11. See Irigaray 1985.
12. See Levi-Strauss 1969, Saussure 1974 and Althusser 1970.
13. Texts of key importance in the early development of feminist forms of deconstruction are Derrida 1973 and 1976.
14. See, in particular, Foucault 1979 and 1981.



## Chapter Three



# WOMEN'S WRITING IN OCCUPIED GERMANY, 1945–1949

*Franziska Meyer*

When studying the work of both female and male authors, regardless of the period in which it was written, it is important to bear in mind the following questions. Which texts do we read and when do we read them? What conditions were necessary for these texts not only to be produced, but to be published and to find their way to a broad reading public? In other words, who decides which works are important and of aesthetic value and what criteria do they use in deciding this issue? Why, for example, do we find in a 1979 edition of the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* an article entitled '100 Books of World Literature' which only includes one female author – Anna Seghers (Wiggershaus 1989: 416)?

All these questions are central to an analysis of patriarchal power structures within literary institutions. An historical survey of women's writing in West Germany from the year 1945 to 1968 enables us to recognise the mechanisms of exclusion and devaluation of women writers more easily than is often the case in our immediate present. In this period the publishing industry, the organisation of writers in groups, and last but not least, media literary criticism played a decisive role in determining whether texts were published and widely distributed.

Literary studies, as taught in schools and universities, and research into literature also play an extremely important part in the canonisation of texts. Here decisions are made about what is important and, in this case, what is representative of West German literature of the post-war period. In looking at writing by women in the first two decades of the Federal Republic, it is imperative to

investigate the conditions of literary production for women writers inside the literary institutions.

Hanser's *Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur vom 16. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Fischer 1986a) is a standard reference book which deals with the Federal Republic up until 1967. If we look here for accounts of women's writing in the years 1945 to 1968, the result is striking. Index entries for the terms 'female' and 'femininity' point to a small number of articles on children's literature and popular romances. Writers such as Ingeborg Drewitz, Ruth Rehmann and Barbara König – not to mention Marieluise Fleisser – whose work had been known for some considerable time are not only missing from the index of names but also from the almost nine-hundred page long book itself. Gisela Elsner, who was extremely successful in the 1960s, suffers a similar fate and is only mentioned once as a marginal imitator of Günter Grass. These absences are proof of a significant methodological failure: the well-known editor and the contributors still believed in 1986, that they could disregard more than fifteen years of feminist research. But it is more than this. What we see here is an institutionalised forgetting of women writers.

The failure of one of the most well-regarded literary histories to address the question of gender is all the more significant since the series sees itself explicitly as a *social* history. It claims to deal with 'the literary culture of a period' in the context of 'political, economic and social relations [and] social mentalities' (Fischer 1986a: 9). The editor, Ludwig Fischer, writes in his preface 'public institutions – the literary market, educational institutions and the media – play a particular important role here. They are not separate from literature, they decisively effect its quality, its range and the way in which it is received in a particular period'. Given this approach, the blindness to gender is all the more serious. The index contains the concepts 'racism', 'class struggle' and '*Sexualfeindlichkeit*' (hostility to sexuality). Once and once only is the term *Frauenliteratur* mentioned and it is dismissed as a term connected with protest literature of the 1970s.

Periodisation in literary histories does not usually rely on the self-definitions of the writers involved. This sort of periodisation ties *Frauenliteratur* to a narrowly defined historical phase and explicitly negates texts which were written before 1968. These are given a quasi pre-literary status.<sup>1</sup> In the following many examples will be given of how a covert stigmatisation of women writers, particularly in the literary climate of the 1950s, not only decisively

affected the reception of texts written by women but also hindered their production.

The persistent way in which women writers have been excluded from the canon is evident in the naive, well-meant but patronising title of a volume published with a large print run in 1979: *Frauen schreiben. Ein neues Kapitel deutschsprachiger Literatur* (Serke 1979). In stressing the apparent newness of this writing, Jürgen Serke's emphatic subtitle ignores the works of women writers of earlier decades.

Even feminist literary studies are often not completely innocent of this type of periodisation which can easily lead to exclusions. All too often we find women's writing identified with texts influenced by the new women's movement of the 1970s. The often undifferentiated use of the terms 'feminist' and 'pre-feminist' literature is also methodologically questionable. The search for so-called 'precursors' of the feminist texts of the 1970s in early periods easily falls into a teleological way of thinking. This runs the risk of disregarding the different historical and social contexts of writing by women and of projecting present-day feminist expectations back onto earlier decades. This can lead to a reading of women writers of the 1950s in terms of the aesthetic and often moralising concept of 'conventionality' (Weigel 1989: 29) and to an unhistorical use of the more radical standards of the 1970s. It is like accusing naturalism of not being expressionist enough.

This type of simplified periodisation suppresses the disparities, the complexities and the contradictions of literary discourse in the 1950s and 1960s. If actual texts of this period are lost from view, then a critic like Sigrid Weigel can construct general and false oppositions such as the following: 'While women writers of the 1950s and 1960s were still totally preoccupied with love, the absence of love in women's writing of the 1970s is striking' (1989: 215).

In this chapter, I would like to encourage a rereading of a period which is often over-simplified even in feminist accounts. The history of women's writing in the first two decades of the Federal Republic demands a revision of the canon of West German literature of the post-war years. Up until now this period has been identified with the (male) literature of *Gruppe 47* (Group 47) – Andersch, Böll, Lenz, Grass, Johnson, Walser, supplemented by Arno Schmidt and Koeppen. This rereading does not seek to discover a female 'Other', nor does it concentrate exclusively on literary texts without asking about the conditions of their production.

As late as 1983, Sigrid Weigel – in my view correctly – criticised an exclusively metaphorical way of talking about women's writing and regretted the absence of 'the interpretation of actual texts in theoretical discussions' (1983b: 150). How we read is also important. Numerous recent readings of texts by women writers use French poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory (Irigaray, Cixous, Derrida, Lacan). In the process they often reduce literary texts to illustrations of pre-existing theoretical models. For example, the question of *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) is arguably unproductive if the answer is known in advance. Despite their high theoretical aspirations and often thought-provoking results, these types of interpretation – which are usually applied repeatedly to a relatively limited selection of writers – tend to reduce completely different texts to sameness.

In contrast to this, women's writing will be discussed in the following three chapters in its broader social and historical context. Where ways of writing and genre are concerned, it is imperative to look at the appropriate literary traditions. Every woman writer is at the same time a reader. For example, Marie Luise Kaschnitz and Elisabeth Langgässer's change to short-story writing after 1945 was part of a more general tendency in Germany to model literature on the American short story. The early prose work of Ingeborg Bachmann and Ruth Rehmann can only be fully understood if we take account of the reception of French existentialism in the late 1940s in West Germany. Gisela Elsner's satirical texts clearly belong – in spite of many contradictory elements – to the new realism of the 1960s. Strong traces of the French *nouveau roman* (for example, Nathalie Sarraute) – which was widely read in the 1960s – can be found in the early prose of Renate Rasp, Gabriele Wohmann and Hannelies Taschau.

As early as the first decades of the twentieth century, European modernist literature by both female and male authors was marked by strong doubts about language and ideas of language as a prison. After 1945 writers also searched for the 'right' language – with very varied results.<sup>2</sup> This search is a feature of the immediate post-war period, the avant-garde literature of the 1950s, and the 'new realism' of the 1960s. As will be seen in chapter 6, the innovative interventions made by feminist literature in the 1970s included the thematisation of the patriarchal and sexist nature of existing language.

Numerous woman writers of the period 1945 to 1968 take up themes which have become identified with feminist literature of

the 1970s. In women's writing from the 1950s onwards, we find lesbian love, abortion, women's search for identity in the prison of existing norms of youth and beauty, as well as illusionless depictions of marriage and authoritarian patriarchal family structures. Examples include the prose of Johanna Moosdorf, Gabriele Wohmann, Gisela Elsner, Marie Luise Kaschnitz, Ruth Rehmann, Ingeborg Bachmann and, last but not least, Hannelies Taschau's first novel which was published in 1967.<sup>3</sup> Yet, before 1968, these themes were not and could not be depicted via a wide-ranging discourse of emancipation.

When interpreting actual texts I consider the following points. In looking at the level of fictional representation I ask what access women's writing can give us to the everyday reality of women and men in post-war Germany. On the ideological level I am interested in constructions of femininity and masculinity 'which must not necessarily differ from those of male authors' (Weigel 1983b: 149). The utopian dimension of texts by woman writers lies in their existence as 'the second sex' (Simone de Beauvoir). Do traces of this 'different way of being in the world' (Christa Wolf) occur in the texts? Are there contradictions and breaks in the way in which life is perceived and narrated which could point towards a possible 'freeing of writing' from 'male perspectives'? (Weigel 1983b: 150)

Rarely have traditional relationships between the sexes been so radically disturbed as they were in the immediate post-war years. Like women in other European countries involved in the Second World War, German women had to work hard on the so-called 'homefront'. They were not only responsible for the survival of their families; in addition to this they also performed (as in the First World War) all sorts of heavy physical work in industrial production, for example, in the munitions industry. The writer Elisabeth Langgässer, who lived in Berlin, was conscripted to a cable factory in 1944. Later she would describe her experiences in the short story 'An der Nähmaschine' (1980a).

The strong position of women in social and economic life persisted into the immediate post-war period. It was mostly women who, left to their own devices, fought for survival on an everyday basis in a world governed by ruins and starvation. In a city such as Berlin, at the end of the war, women made up 64.2 percent of the population (Rapisarda 1987a: 88). Even today the striking number of elderly single women testifies to the effects of the war.

In May 1945 the majority of the German population was overcome by worry and uncertainty about the safety of their next-of-kin.