

*Murderesses in German Writing, 1720–1860: Heroines of Horror.* By SUSANNE KORD. (Cambridge Studies in German) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2009. ix+266 pp. £50. ISBN 978-0-521-51977-9.

‘The criminal woman’, wrote Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero in their seminal work on the phenomenon in 1893, ‘is a true monster’ (quoted by Kord, p. 7). Their view reflected deep prejudices about the nature of criminal women. Their paradoxical argument that women were somehow naturally inclined to crime and in committing their crimes they lost their femininity and became like men was highly influential and still resonates in the literature today. Susanne Kord’s excellent study of murderesses in German writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries takes its cue from these unsettling ideas and, by studying criminal women of the past, seeks to shed light on the ‘gender codes, reading behaviours and aesthetic and moral judgments of the present’ (p. 5). In doing so she takes issue both with the grand theory of Michel Foucault and with the empirical approach of those whom she labels ‘positivist historians’ (p. 4). Her own approach is literary, though she emphatically extends the category of ‘literature’ to include philosophical, psychological, legal, historical, sociological, and anthropological sources. Kord is perhaps a little hard on the historians: as her footnotes show, they have provided her with much of her material. There is little doubt, however, that Kord herself combines literary-critical skills with sensitive historical analysis at the highest level.

The book consists of a series of case studies, each of which is related to a larger philosophical, social, political, or aesthetic context. The case of the witch Anna Göldi explores the reasons why seventeenth-century beliefs in witchcraft resurfaced in eighteenth-century aesthetic theories and in the science of physiognomy. Kord shows how the revival of interest around 1730 in the historical story of the alleged late sixteenth-century vampire Elizabeth Báthory mutated into literature and how that in turn shaped a literary-critical tradition that has valued the male over the female and turned the ‘female un-dead of myth [. . .] into the dead women of literature’ (p. 81). The chapter on husband-murderers widens into a discussion of the death penalty, which came to be most widely debated not in the legal realm but in literature. Infanticides were regarded both as the most extreme repudiation of femininity and its ultimate exemplification, while their treatment by the courts was complicated by the literary topos of the violated and wronged female innocent, posing problems that could be resolved only by emphasizing an infanticide’s lower-class status. Poisoners, finally, were regarded as the archetypal female criminals, and their investigation in justice or illumination in literature generally inspired explorations of the mystery of femininity rather than the search for motive.

The final chapter on the ‘etiquette of execution’ is perhaps the most fascinating of all; it is a wonderful piece of imaginative, critical historical writing. Here Kord takes issue with the widely held view that either the spectators or the accused exercised a degree of real power at the point of execution. The terms ‘people’, ‘crowd’, and ‘mob’ could describe the same actual people, but discursively they were different entities; furthermore, the ‘people’ and the ‘crowd’ were routinely

identified as male and the 'mob' as female. This leads Kord to suggest that the really important feature of executions was not their theatre but their etiquette. The 'mob' generated a fear similar to that with which both state and society reacted to the murderess: this could only be managed by enlisting the collaboration of both the individual criminal and the audience at her trial and execution in procedures which both affirmed codes of acceptable behaviour and enacted the bonds of society. Where Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault have regarded executions as antithetical to civilization, Kord concludes that they define it (p. 219).

Susanne Kord has written a fascinating and important book that deserves to be read by literary scholars and historians alike. It is a major achievement.

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