

## Problems of female authorship in „Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim“

The letter-novel “Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim”, written by Sophie von La Roche and published anonymously in 1771, can be regarded as a primary example of the conflicts connected to the concept of female authorship in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In this time of strictly divided, idealised gender roles it was not only uncommon but presumptuous and daring for a woman to enter a public sphere, such as authorship, on her own behalf. The concept of authorship in that time was embedded in the debate of genius, creativity and role modelling, each of them qualities which were attributed to *culture*, the male contribution to society and to the world in general. Women on the other hand were assigned to *nature*, with attributes such as irrationalism, being unformed (by culture) and being repetitive (instead of creative). In such circumstances the concept of female authorship faces several problems at once: Firstly not only the problem of entering the public sphere but also the problem of authorising female writing in the sense of literary quality, and secondly the problem of distinguishing female authorship with regards to topics and aesthetics.

In the development of “Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim” there are different strategies of ensuring the authority of the text by contextual means. There is for once the editor, C.M. Wieland who takes responsibility for the publishing of the text in its preface. According to Loster-Schneider [1995] this is a strategy to legitimate the entry of a female writer into the public sphere: The editor has taken the writer by surprise in publishing a text that was intended for private use for the benefit of a public audience.

But this is not the only effect that results from Wieland’s initiative. By publishing the novel with him as editor and an advocate for its usefulness he establishes some authority by lending his (male) authority to the text and therefore to the author as well. At the same time he makes sure that the reader is reminded of the female-ness of the novel by commenting on the text in footnotes. This is somewhat ambiguous, on one hand he takes the liberty of editing the text and explaining this to the reader: *“Um die vortreffliche Schreiberin für nichts responsabel zu machen, was nicht wirklich von ihr kömmt, gesteht der Herausgeber, daß die in [] eingeschlossenen Zeilen von ihm selbst eingeschoben worden [...]”* [Fräulein von Sternheim, p. 73], on the other hand he supports the narration by appointing letters to the fictional characters, not to the author: *“Doch, hier spricht ein junger Engländer, welcher billig für seine Nation eingenommen sein darf, und ein Enthusiast, der das Recht hat, zuweilen unrichtig zu rasonieren”* [Fräulein von Sternheim, p. 77].

Another contextual strategy to justify the text towards its readers is the form of the novel itself. As Becker-Cantarino [1991] points out, the letter is the main way of expression and communication of the educated bourgeois woman in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore the form of the novel as a letter-novel can be regarded as a contextual frame for a female author. This is closely related to the concept of aesthetics and sensibility: The common private letter written by women in that time was regarded as more natural and closer to actual conversation than the stiff bureaucratic letters men usually wrote in their sphere of work [Bovenschen 1979], thus bringing forward the aesthetics of corresponding to the inner mind, apparently unmasked emotions and the idealisation of concepts such as friendship and gender-appointed virtues, all of these features being characteristics of the

coming Age of Sensibility (and therefore justifying the literary quality of La Roche's text several years later).

Apart from those contextual particularities of female authorship, the novel and its contemporary reception provide some other aspects of what was apparently understood as, and expected from, female writers. The editor Wieland comments in his preface that he acknowledges the text because of its high moral concepts and because of the service the text can probably provide in the education of young women. This educational value is derived from the female protagonist who is, following the argumentation of Sally Winkle [1988], "*simultaneously a rational exemplary female role model and a sentimental feminine ideal*". This idealisation shows the biggest problem of female authorship in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: To be approved as a female writer (and to protect their own social integrity) one was restricted in the range of themes and behaviours of the fictional characters to the ones that were socially acceptable for a woman to know and talk about. When Winkle [1988, p.43] describes "*idealisation of woman*" as being "*accompanied by silencing and objectification of half the human race*" she speaks for women of that time in general; writing women, however, had the additional problem that they were not silenced but bound to the expectations and guidelines of a literary market dominated by men. To what extent female authorship is contorted by these circumstances in assumed freedom of speech (and writing) has to be analysed in each individual case.

Therefore it is not surprising that La Roche's female protagonist, precisely because she is idealised, does not even see the need to change anything about the existing social system she lives in. She does, however, operate in this system for the benefit of other women, as Bötcher-Joeres [1986] points out: "*Sophie's method of recognizing her limited sphere of activity, but using that sphere to the fullest, represents a dubious victory, but one worth noting. The fact that she concentrates her efforts entirely on women and on the family as an institution worthy of attention is also not to be overlooked: it is clearly women who are improved because of her actions, and that overt attention to her sex was certainly not lost on her readers*".

Again the restrictions in socially acceptable female authorship become apparent: As long as the female writers do not attempt to transgress the virtual borders of gender roles but help to educate other women with their fiction, at the same time affirming the existing system, they have chances of being recognised as authors.

At this point the latent problem underlying the concept of female authorship in the 18<sup>th</sup> century becomes clear: In opposition to "normal", unmarked authorship, female authorship is marked and distinguished by even more restrictive factors concerning all areas of writing, publishing and reception, solely based on the sex of the executing writer. As a consequence, the term "female authorship" should be analysed in regard to its contextual meaning in a framework of references to the patriarchal system of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and in regard to which of the described distinguishing features are appointed to it because of the idealised concepts represented by contemporary literature critics.

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