

GEORGINA PAUL

Gender in GDR Literature

Studies of gender in the GDR have tended to focus on the situation of women in the East German state. This emphasis is understandable, since the GDR's policies on women – the constitutional commitment to equality between men and women from the founding of the state in 1949 onwards, the creation of a social environment which enabled women to combine work and family, together with the broadly successful state promotion of women's further education and professional qualification – meant that over the course of the state's existence women's lives in East Germany became distinctively different from the lives of women in Western European countries. By contrast, as historian Mary Fulbrook has commented: 'Official conceptions of masculinity changed very little during the forty years of the GDR. [...] If East Germany was a more "working class" society in its official imagery and rhetoric than West Germany, then it was also in many respects more "male" in a very traditional construction of masculinity.'¹ The interest in the topic of gender would seem, then, to lie with the study of women, and it is notable that Fulbrook's chapter on 'Gender' in her study *The People's State* (2005) is almost exclusively concerned with this aspect of East German gender politics. The present chapter proceeds from a different premise. In the first place, gender as a social construction, regulating as it does the interaction between men and women in the interests of the social whole, is always necessarily relational, and to take masculinity as read – as Fulbrook does – is to miss important information about how a society conceives of itself. Taking a closer look at the patterns of representation of masculinity in GDR literature will reveal a more

complex picture than Fulbrook's assumption about traditional 'working class' masculinity would lead us to expect. In addition, it is widely accepted among social historians that women's emancipation was restricted in the GDR because of the authoritarian and paternalistic nature of the state in which women's social progress was always defined and determined from above, in the higher echelons of the state bureaucracy where women were notably under-represented.² This does not altogether square with the literary historians' viewpoint, which sees the contribution made by women writers in speaking to their women readers' self-awareness and challenging the state's paternalistic notions as a major aspect of GDR literature in the 1970s and 1980s.³ Considering gender in terms of the literary representation of both men and women and their relations to each other will bring a more multi-faceted picture into view than the one familiar from the social historians' narratives, while at the same time raising questions of class difference and generational shifts to complement those of the symbolic function of gender in GDR texts selected from four decades.

The 1950s: A hierarchy of masculinities and the dual image of women

As an instrument of agitation and propaganda, explicitly understood in accordance with Leninist principles as a medium for communicating the objectives of the ruling Party, the socialist realist literature of the founding years of the GDR displays the gender politics underlying the young socialist state. Central to the rebuilding of the postwar economy, as well as to the ideology of socialist collectivism, was the physical strength, the professional expertise and the complementary skills of the working-class *Brigade*, the smallest unit in the competitively organized shift-work of the state-owned East German factory or plant.⁴ The brigade lent itself to literary representation, in that it provided a limited cast of characters who could be used to depict a range of

differing attitudes typical of the society at large and the antagonisms between them. The common focal protagonist in early factory-based plots is the working-class *Aktivist*, a worker of particular ambition and energy who galvanizes his more reluctant colleagues in the brigade, raising production norms for the collective social benefit in opposition to the individual worker's personal interest in defending his own wage-packet by maintaining existing norms. Typically, the fictional *Aktivist* is a physically strong man with a particular professional skill (bricklayer, metalworker, and so on), but otherwise little education. He represents a raw force and practical vision for how the job at hand can best be done which, however, also needs the guidance of committed direction, above all that of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), whose 'leading role' in society was asserted in the GDR constitution. Thus the *Aktivist* and his brigade are not represented in isolation, but in relationship to the factory and Party management, men of superior training and overview.

These masculine models can be seen in Eduard Claudius's exemplary work of early socialist realism, *Menschen an unsrer Seite* [People at our Side] (1951). The central *Aktivist* figure is Hans Aehre, based on a historical bricklayer called Hans Garbe who gained the socialist accolade of 'hero of labour' (*Held der Arbeit*) for his feat in repairing a ring furnace while it was still firing at the Siemens-Plania works (later the state-owned electro-carbon works at Lichtenberg) in 1949–50. Claudius, himself a former bricklayer, had published a work of reportage about Garbe in 1950.⁵ Claudius's fictional Aehre is a forceful person who must persuade his brigade of doubters that they are capable of working collectively on the furnace without shutting it down, which would cost the factory six months' lost production. At points, Aehre is portrayed as the symbolic representative of all socialist workers whom the novel is

encouraging to think of themselves as the ‘ruling class’ in the state, no longer subordinate to the capital-owning class or to factory managers:

‘Yes, we are workers, Comrade Backhans. We are workers. Even if an engineer or a foreman or the contractor is present – it’s we who build the furnace, we! And if there is no foreman who wants to help us or no engineer, well then, we’ll build it anyway ... of course we will ... it must be possible for us to do it by ourselves.’⁶

Elsewhere, however, Aehre is shown to require the restraining guidance of the Party. The Party instructor, Schadow sees him as ‘a wild colt, which doesn’t care to wear a bridle and yet which, if it’s going to draw the cart, will definitely need to be kept in rein.’⁷ Schadow is one of a number of characters in positions of authority in the plant whose decision-making creates the context for Aehre’s heroic act. Another is the factory director, Carlin, a former mechanic who has risen to his position without substantial training but who nonetheless possesses the necessary personal qualities to guide the factory through turbulent times, a ‘hard hand, when it’s needed’, ‘an unerring eye for people and things’, and whose leadership ‘is purposeful and not to be deflected’, as the haut-bourgeois director of research, Doktor von Wassermann (himself a throwback to an earlier model of bourgeois masculinity) notes appreciatively.⁸ While the narrative is focused on the *Aktivist* plot, in a manner intended to invite the identification of the ordinary working-class reader, in fact the novel presents a hierarchy of masculinities, with the higher echelons portrayed in terms reminiscent of the positively connoted characteristics of nineteenth-century

bourgeois entrepreneurialism, now transferred to the SED leaders: rationality, good judgement, the capacity for hard work, goal-orientation, and effective governance.

The representation of the women in the novel, meanwhile, is notable for its dual aspect. Katrin Aehre, Hans's wife, is, on the one hand, the source of sexual reward for masculine purposiveness and, as the firer of Aehre's sexual desire, the strikingly infernal source of the energy that drives him, at least in his imagination: 'The heat rose up in him, and hunger for her. He thought: the work, is it me that does it? No, not me! Her! A real devil, she sits on my back and drives me onward.'⁹ The combination of fiery heat and sexualized, devilish energy inspired by the woman in the man makes of the *Aktivist* a kind of reconceived genius figure.¹⁰ But the rather conventional female role presupposes that the wife remains confined to the domestic sphere, leaving the field of public action to her husband. In the course of the novel, Aehre is compelled to take leave of his inherent conservatism with regard to his wife and watch her move into his sphere of industrial production, enabled by the state childcare system which provides their child with a kindergarten place. In the face of his resistance, Katrin lays claim to her desire to be 'a whole human being', grasping the opportunities provided by the state to 'learn something, too, and do something which I can see and which is durable' rather than being defined solely as a woman and a wife.¹¹ Suse Rieck, meanwhile, the sole female character in the brigade of men, is presented, 'blackened by the coal and streaming with sweat', as a modern socialist working-class woman, at home in the industrial environment, while simultaneously fulfilling a more conventional role as the corporeally present Muse to the artist figure Andrytzki.¹²

The symbolic system of gender in *Menschen an unsrer Seite* is, then, a complex one. Working-class male physicality, the strength needed to build the state, is

aligned with the female as the conventional source of inspiration and male sexual energy – symbolic terms familiar from the bourgeois literature of modernity.¹³ As in the literature of the bourgeois era, raw physicality needs the guidance of conventionally masculine-connoted intelligence and purposiveness, characteristics now associated with the higher echelons of the socialist hierarchy: the Party leadership is constructed as quasi-bourgeois. The female figures, meanwhile, are moving into a double role, both sexualized body, affirming the male's connection to the physical world and acting as the source of his inspiration and sexual reward, and the ambivalently genderless or masculine-connoted 'Mensch' (human being), seeking fulfillment through work on the same terms as men, as encouraged and endorsed by the East German state. The same structural pattern can be seen in other literary works of the 1950s. In Elfriede Brüning's *Regine Haberkorn* (1955), for example, Erwin Haberkorn provides a similar model of ambitious male working-class energy, needing the guidance of the works director Hintze, the union leader and foreman Mielke and the works Party secretary Sasse in order for that energy to be targeted in such a way as to make it more than just a means to personal gratification. The latter is by implication the working-class man's main motivation if left unguided by the Party. Like Aehre, Erwin is conservative in his attitudes towards his wife, the eponymous Regine, and needs to be educated in the course of the novel to appreciate that she, too, wishes to realize her talents within the socialist collective, not remain constrained as a wife and mother at home – moreover, the state is in need of women's participation to boost the labour force. Part of the aim in this female-authored novel is to negotiate male sexual expectations of women in this new era where men and women are also potentially equal working partners. The moral high ground is taken by Regine as burgeoning *Aktivistin* and brigade leader, at times too busy to fulfill Erwin's sexual needs, not the

manipulative seductress Käthe Behnert who lures Erwin away by soothing his masculine ego, but loses out in the end.

The majority of the works of the 1950s are transparently moralizing in this way and idealizing in their representation of the positive development of workers and the superior visionary wisdom of the Party leadership. The early works by the dramatist Heiner Müller, who would become the GDR's most important successor to Brecht, present a refreshing exception in their more rigorous realism and challenging open-endedness, although the stock characters remain recognizably similar. In *Der Lohndrücker* [*The Scab*] (1957), another version of the Hans Garbe story, the *Aktivist*, here called Balke, is less sentimentally presented. A clear-sighted man who understands that his 'heroic' action is for the greater good within the present economic system, he is also shown to have accepted Nazi rule when he worked in a munitions factory during the war, denouncing a communist saboteur back then who turns up in his present factory as the new Party secretary. This raises issues of recent national history, political commitment and personal trust more overtly than Claudius's novel does. The focus of the play is also more on the contest between the different brigade members and their attitudes to their work, offering a palette of masculinities jostling (sometimes violently) for preeminence, while the factory director and Party leadership are depicted as more compromised by the struggle to build up the works in less than ideal historical conditions.

The aspect of the advancement of women is quite absent in Müller's treatment of the Garbe material. It does feature, however, in one of his best (and most controversial) works of his early period, *Die Umsiedlerin oder Das Leben auf dem Lande* [*The Resettler Woman, or Country Life*] (1956/1961, 1964). The eponymous resettler, Niet, for most of the play an unassuming character shown fetching beer for

her wastrel lover, Fondrak, decides at the end not to follow the latter in his flight to the West, nor to accept the advances of another of the villagers, but to take the offer of a farm from Flint, the Communist mayor, and work it independently.¹⁴ It is a subtle sign of the changing times, as is the political criticism of Flint for neglecting his wife for a younger woman, since the Party must be seen to be above reproach.¹⁵ But these are passing moments in an otherwise largely male-dominated play, where the women are mostly seen as sexualized objects of desire for their menfolk. The Party secretary (*Sekretär*) and the district administrator (*Landrat*) are portraits of efficient, clear-sighted leaders in the standard socialist-realist mould, and Flint is depicted positively, despite his womanizing. Nonetheless, Müller delivers a markedly realistic assessment of the competing interests within the rural community which make the building of communism such a tough objective. The play was strongly criticized for its ‘counter-revolutionary, anti-communist, anti-humanistic’ tendencies,¹⁶ as a result of which Müller suffered an effective work ban which lasted until the 1970s. In terms of his generally less than idealizing account of the Party leadership and eye for the insubordinate working-class man who is not easily persuaded by state propaganda, Müller anticipated the more interesting developments in socialist realism in the 1960s.

The 1960s and 1970s: Triangles

By the late 1950s, criticism of mechanistic plot-construction in the socialist-realist novel was being voiced by even the strongest adherents of SED cultural policy, and by the early 1960s, the kind of crude idealization of the Party leadership and of working-class activism that had characterized the literature of the founding years was receding. Paradoxically, the period following the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 was one of increasing openness to criticism in the GDR’s socialist

literature. In part, this was because the Wall screened the state off, making politicians and committed writers alike feel less exposed to the judgements of the West and able to concentrate on the problems at hand in the consolidation of the socialist system. But it was also because a generation of younger writers began to move onto the scene, coming up through the Bitterfelder Weg, the cultural-political initiative started in 1959 to bring the intelligentsia into the workplace to gain first-hand experience of life in production. For writers such as Christa Wolf or Brigitte Reimann, seen as up-and-coming youngsters, it was an eye-opening encounter with the struggle to build the economy in the face of persistent supply shortages, cash-flow problems, a sometimes overly dogmatic Party leadership and a workforce often resistant to the ideological frameworks imposed by the regime.

Striking in the literature of the 'era of arrival', as the early 1960s came to be called after Brigitte Reimann's 1961 novel *Ankunft im Alltag* [Arrival in the Everyday], is the plot device of situating a young woman between two significant alternatives in her choice of love relationship. Recha, the Jewish orphan in *Ankunft im Alltag*, must choose between the Party official's son, Curt, and the artist, Nikolaus, as they all work out their practical year in a power plant before going on to study. Curt is revealed to be a self-interested opportunist, whereas Nikolaus, ostensibly less politically engaged, shows commitment to the workers' collective at the risk of his own personal goals. Predictably, it is Nikolaus who gets the girl as the symbolic sexual reward for his right social instincts. In Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel* [Divided Heaven] (1963), Rita Seidel relives in memory her love affair with Manfred, a talented chemist who, after a new lease of life brought on by Rita's optimistic belief in him, slips back into cynicism when his innovative work does not receive due recognition from the Party authorities and eventually flees to the West just before the

building of the Berlin Wall separates the lovers forever. At the end of the novel, it is hinted that Rita will find a more apposite partner in the Party functionary Wendland, a man honestly committed to the socialist collective as she is.¹⁷ There are further variants on this triangular plot structure in the literature of the 1970s. Ulrich Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* [*The New Sufferings of Young W.*] (1974), following the model of Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* [*The Sorrows of Young Werther*] (1774), is narrated from the perspective of the tearaway youth, Edgar, but at issue is the contest for the affections of the female character, Charlotte (Charlie), fought out between him and her unimaginative, conformist fiancé, Dieter. Karin, the central character in Volker Braun's *Unvollendete Geschichte* [*Incomplete History*] (1975), is torn between her boyfriend, Frank, a socially marginalized character who is viewed with suspicion by the authorities but who really loves Karin, and her father, the Party functionary with tunnel-vision who demands of his daughter that she reject Frank, with disastrous consequences: implied is a strong critique of the state's paternalistic standards. As becomes evident from this list, at issue in these triangular plots is the moral opposition of opportunism, self-interest or political conformity versus the genuine energy, imagination and commitment needed for social transformation. The female characters validate the male characters when they behave with integrity, maintaining the conventional symbolic role of the woman as sexual reward. However, the moral validation shifts towards the more marginalized male figures as literature consolidates its critical role in the course of the 1970s vis-à-vis the stultifying effects on society at large of a too rigidly dogmatic political system. (Interestingly, in Christa Wolf's major novel of 1968, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* [*The Quest for Christa T.*], it is the marginalized *female* figure who is validated in her own right, without reference to a male figure as the rewarded lover.)

Two novels show particularly illuminating parallels in their organization of the triangular relationship, both of them landmarks in the history of GDR literature: Erik Neutsch's *Spur der Steine* [Trail of Stones] (1964) and Brigitte Reimann's *Franziska Linkerhand* (1974). Both feature the same tension between the transformative physical energy of the working-class man versus the judgement and leadership of the quasi-bourgeois Party man as was evident in the literature of the 1950s, but now with the socialist-trained professional woman caught between them. In their different solutions to this triangular contest, they display the changing politics of literature from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, as well as the different gender perspectives of the male and female authors.

In *Spur der Steine* the conflict is between the dynamic but wayward brigade leader, Hannes Balla (played in Frank Beyer's 1966 film of the novel by the charismatic actor Manfred Krug¹⁸), and the Party secretary, Werner Horrath, sent to instill discipline, who, in falling as an already married man for the female engineer Katrin Klee, impregnating her, and not having the courage to stand by her, emerges as duplicitous and compromises his authority. In *Franziska Linkerhand* the triangle is formed by the dumper truck driver Wolfgang ('Ben') Trojanowicz, the quasi-bourgeois architect Horst Schafheutlin (secretly and unrequitedly in love with Franziska), and the vibrant, temperamental and sexually attractive Franziska, a trained architect who is also the locus of the novel's utopian energy. Both works play on major building sites which stand for the construction of the socialist state:¹⁹ *Spur der Steine* in a fictional chemical plant essential for the industrial future of the GDR so that it is of the essence that the teams of builders and engineers identify the most time- and cost-efficient building methods; *Franziska Linkerhand* in the symbolically named Neustadt (literally, 'new town') where industrially pre-fabricated units are used to

build apartment blocks to house the workers from the local power plant (based on the Schwarze Pumpe at Hoyerswerda, where Reimann was writer-in-residence). Neutsch's novel endorses scientific method as the key to the future of the socialist state; Reimann's criticizes the development of a socialist architecture from which human individual creativity has been eradicated, with its consequence of soulless urban living.

In *Spur der Steine*, the physically dominant Balla, a 'mixture between robber captain and cowboy',²⁰ is drawn to the female figure; but she, educated and qualified and so transformed from the locus of sexual energy alone, chooses the physically weaker quasi-bourgeois male figure, the symbolic representative of attained culture. Indeed, she recoils from the 'raw force'²¹ of Balla before whose gaze she feels stripped naked at their first encounter.²² Nonetheless, her feminine influence is instrumental in gradually taming Balla, imposing the discipline on him to settle for her friendship alone as a preparatory step for his eventual acceptance of the discipline of Party membership towards which he is patiently led by Horrath. The quasi-bourgeois man, meanwhile, the bringer of discipline and purposiveness to others, fails with regard to himself. Placing his own (physical) desires above the claims of the Party, Horrath stands in the end as a morally discredited figure. Neutsch's novel and especially Beyer's film implicitly posit the continuing need for Balla's virile force to build up the state, and, interestingly, what draws Kati Klee to Horrath is his energy and determination and his dedication to achieved action, even if it involves bending the rules, characteristics he shares with Balla. Kati is represented as loving 'real life' which 'cannot be squeezed to fit a formula',²³ and it is this which motivates the symbolic validation through her of both of the less than conformist men who desire her. But she is also the locus of clear moral judgement. She loves truth²⁴ and is

incapable of duplicity,²⁵ so that her love for Horrath fades as he proves unable to declare his love for her publicly when it matters. So, too, though, does her belief in the Party's authority when its rulings become driven by dogma rather than by acknowledgement of achievement. The ending of the novel shows both Horrath and Kati Klee deprived of their agency through their treatment at the hands of the Party bureaucracy, an implied criticism of SED dogmatism which is characteristic of much of the better GDR literature of the 1960s and beyond.

Reimann's novel organizes the vectors of energy differently. Here, the simultaneously sexualized and intellectually trained and qualified woman chooses not the quasi-bourgeois Party man, but the virile working-class man. This is emphatically not a formulaic choice. Reimann's novel is differentiated in its depiction of the working-class characters, including strikingly negative portraits of Franziska's estranged husband and his family, the grotesquely reactionary Exß clan, with their 'mistrust of those above them, their little-man-on-the-street ideology, their scams with their wage-packets'.²⁶ The gang of rowdy, bellicose characters who populate the pub in Neustadt also stand apart from the usual idealizing representation of the working class in GDR literature. Among the great virtues of Reimann's novel, alongside its vibrant style, are its author's eye for what life was really like in the GDR's dismal, often socially dysfunctional provinces, and her talent for authentic characterization. Franziska's lover, Ben, is partially based on a real-life lover of Reimann's, and the love represented between the two figures is personal and psychologically believable, albeit symbolically also an expression of Franziska's predilection for the 'whiff of adventure and proud, wild independence'²⁷ which is validated above Schafheutlin's subservience to order. Ben proves elusive, not faithful – not tameable – in contrast to Balla, who is so disappointingly tamed in Neusch's novel. But neither is Franziska's

vital and utopian force tamed by a relationship with a man who is not daring or imaginative. Rather, she opens up a new dimension in the overly organized and conformist mindset of Schafheutlin, initially focused, as his name suggests, on the realistically possible achievements of today rather than the greater vision of the socialist future which propels Franziska's work: 'It must, it must exist, the intelligent synthesis of today and tomorrow, of dismal prefabricated blocks and cheerfully dynamic street-scene, between the necessary and the beautiful, and I'm on the hunt for it, arrogant as I am and, oh, how often fainthearted, and one day I'm going to find it.'²⁸

The 1970s and 1980s: Women in the vanguard

Reimann began writing *Franziska Linkerhand* around the time of the publication of *Spur der Steine*, when as yet little of the radical writing by women which would come to be associated with the GDR had been thought of. By the time the novel appeared posthumously in 1974, the same year as Irmtraud Morgner's *Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz nach Zeugnissen ihrer Spielfrau Laura* [*The Life and Adventures of Trobadora Beatrice as Chronicled by her Minstrel Laura*] and two years after the re-issue of Christa Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, which had been withdrawn from circulation under political pressure shortly following publication, it entered a context in which women writers were making their mark as the bearers of challenging and utopian thinking, embracing what Julia Hell calls the 'feminine imperative of change'.²⁹

Wolf and Morgner were among the GDR's foremost literary innovators who, as committed progressive socialists, were intent on using their works to contribute critically to the development of GDR socialism, while simultaneously drawing

consciously on their status as women. Early works such as Morgner's *Hochzeit in Konstantinopel* [Wedding in Constantinople] (1968) and Wolf's short stories published in the early 1970s, especially 'Selbstversuch' [*Self-Experiment*] and 'Neue Lebensansichten eines Katers' [New Life Attitudes of a Tom Cat], launched a defence of the imagination vis-à-vis a GDR regime enthralled in the late 1960s by scientific planning and cybernetics as the route to social progress,³⁰ and this in turn maps onto the texts' gender symbolism. The quasi-bourgeois male characters, dedicated to scientific investigation, appear emotionally stunted and motivated only by their own career advancement, whereas the female characters are visionary and hold the key to the rethinking of social relations.³¹ This function of female characters set a trend. By the mid-1970s, Wolf's *Christa T.*, Reimann's *Franziska Linkerhand*, and Morgner's *Trobadora Beatriz* were all exemplifying women's desire for both self-fulfillment and a different, more productive way of conceiving of social community. As Dorothea Schmitz-Kösters comments: 'In the early 1970s, women evidently see it as their role to initiate movement, to break through conformism, to articulate genuinely socialist aspirations – for the development of the personality, for self-fulfilment, for happiness – and to battle for their realization.'³²

Both Wolf and Morgner emphasised what had been achieved in the GDR in terms of creating the conditions for women's emancipation, and in this sense affirmed state policy. But they also used their women characters to communicate criticism of inherited modes of social behaviour, including gender norms. Morgner's compendious *Trobadora* novel fuses realist elements with a highly inventive (and very funny) confabulation of Romantic, mythical and magic motifs in a tale of a strong-willed medieval troubadour who, awaking from an 800-year sleep, comes to live with a female tram-driver and her son in East Berlin, introducing into the household a host of

imperious female figures from classical myth. The novel marked a breakthrough to a more overt literary representation of erotic relations between men and women than had been considered admissible before, and even included hints at lesbian desire, a major taboo in the prudishly heterosexist GDR.³³ Together with its 1983 sequel, *Amanda. Ein Hexenroman* [Amanda. A Witch-Novel], it was intended by Morgner to engender ‘self-confidence, courage, even “megalomania”’ in her female readers,³⁴ challenging the persistence of complacent patriarchal thinking. Wolf’s work of the late 1970s and early 1980s on the women Romantics – essays on the poet Karoline Günderrode (1780–1806) and the novelist and political activist Bettina von Arnim (1785–1859), written to accompany re-editions of their work³⁵ – and her imaginative account of a fictive meeting between Günderrode and her contemporary Heinrich von Kleist at a party in 1804, *Kein Ort. Nirgends* [No Place on Earth] (1979), were on the one hand part of a trend within the East German literature of the 1970s to look to the Romantic tradition as a medium of veiled criticism of the political present. But they also reflected upon the historical conditions of forms of post-Enlightenment subjectivity and gender identity, highlighting personal and emotional restriction as the price men paid for their public standing, validating female friendship and its utopian potential, and showing the disenfranchised women as paradoxically more intellectually free.³⁶ Wolf’s work on Günderrode also had the effect of restoring this largely forgotten writer to the nineteenth-century German literary canon.

Wolf continued her efforts to counteract what she perceived as the alienation of human individuals under patriarchy with her work of the early 1980s on the ancient Greek legend of the siege of Troy, as told in the Homeric epic, *The Iliad*. Her 1983 novel *Kassandra* [*Cassandra*], a fictional monologue of considerable lyrical force, retells Homer’s story from the perspective of the female seer who was fated to foresee

the fall of Troy but not to be believed. In the accompanying four lectures, Wolf addressed the history of women's exclusion from political agency and raised issues of feminist aesthetics, but also contextualized the fictional project within the Cold War stand-off of the 1980s. *Kassandra* was at its heart an anti-war work, tracing the international bellicosity of the Cold War back to the aggrandizement of aggressive and self-alienated masculinity in Western culture's foundational literature and positing the disastrous consequences of women's historical removal from positions of social power.

The 1970s saw the rise of the New Women's Movement in the West, and Western feminism provided a very productive frame for the reading of these GDR works, assuring their authors an international reputation, at least within the discipline of German Studies.³⁷ This synergy between the GDR women writers and Western feminism remained somewhat ambivalent, however. There was no organized feminism in East Germany as there was in West Germany – the GDR authorities would not permit special interest groupings to form which might challenge their monopoly of political debate – and East German writers were generally keen to distinguish their stance from that of Western feminists. In the author's preface to her hugely influential 1977 volume of interviews with GDR women, *Guten Morgen, du Schöne* [Good Morning, You Beauty] (which was widely read in both East and West Germany), Maxie Wander locates the utopian impulses of her book in the GDR context of achieved gender equality and stresses the benefits for the whole of society, men and women alike, of the rethinking of customary gender roles: 'We cannot emancipate ourselves in opposition to men, but only in discussion with them, for what we are looking for is liberation from the established gender roles, for human emancipation more generally.'³⁸ This must, at least in part, be read as a jibe at

Western feminist separatism, and is highly characteristic of the GDR's specific brand of feminism, with its emphasis on the social collective, not on the gains to be made for women alone. Nonetheless, there is evidence of the reception of Western feminist writing by women writers and thinkers in the GDR,³⁹ especially visible in the case of Wolf's *Kassandra* project,⁴⁰ and the status of the GDR women writers at home was surely helped by the fact that their works achieved such good sales abroad where they *were* read in a feminist context.

Following in the wake of Reimann and Wolf and Morgner came a number of younger women writers who entered the literary scene in the course of the 1970s and early 1980s and whose work differed from their predecessors' in terms of a greater focus on personal, less parabolic narratives.⁴¹ Helga Königsdorf, Helga Schubert, Rosemarie Zeplin, Christine Wolter, Charlotte Worgitzsky, to name but a few, all published well-received volumes of prose fiction which dealt with aspects of women's day-to-day experiences – in their domestic and sexual relationships, as working mothers juggling childcare and housework with their professional commitments, dealing with abortion or with illness. These fictions can be seen as negotiating expectations of women in the social sphere and vis-à-vis policy makers.⁴² In that the female figures have a less socially or culturally symbolic role in these fictions, they mark, too, a kind of normalization of women's experiences as the material of literature. In a sense, this had already been achieved much earlier by the notable women poets of the GDR. Sarah Kirsch's poetry of the late 1960s and early 1970s appeared so radical at the time precisely because it eschewed any political posturing, instead articulating private concerns, including emotional conflict within the male-female couple, sketched against acutely observed scenes of rural domesticity. Elke Erb's work, too, attained a high degree of autonomy from the pressure to be political

in the GDR context, instead making precise observations of the interactions of subjects and their lived environments, captured in distinctive verse forms.

The 1980s: a diverse landscape

Up until the 1980s, the representation of gender and gender's symbolic import in GDR literature can be understood in relation to the politics of the state, as endorsing, criticizing or inciting debate on it, even though the prominence of the GDR's major women writers is attributable in part to their reception in the context of Western feminism. The picture in the GDR's last decade is more diffuse, a symptom of the growing diversity of GDR literature itself as the state's notion of what constituted 'socialist' literature came to seem increasingly outmoded. No prominent trend in gender representation and gender symbolism characterizes the 1980s, though a number of developments are worthy of note.

The 1980s saw the rise of environmental depredation as a major concern in the GDR, made the more acute by the spectre of nuclear fallout after the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster in April 1986. Several GDR writers were also active in the peace movement, as the stationing of a new generation of nuclear missiles on German soil brought Cold War tensions to a head. These political issues form the backdrop to works such as Monika Maron's *Flugasche* [*Flight of Ashes*] (FRG 1981), Wolf's *Kassandra*, discussed above, and *Störfall* [*Accident*] (1987), which responded directly to the Chernobyl incident, and Helga Königsdorf's *Respektloser Umgang* [*Disrespectful Conduct*] (1986), which tells of a hallucinatory encounter between a narrator-figure and Lise Meitner, the woman member of the team of physicists which discovered nuclear fission in 1938. All build on the female figure's propensity to generate a moral 'critique of civilization' (*Zivilisationskritik*), since she occupies a

position somehow disassociated from a supposedly male-created social order or from male-generated science and as such could reach out to readers beyond the GDR. But while these works continued, in a feminist vein, to suggest the transformative potential of the feminine, Christoph Hein's novella *Der fremde Freund* [*The Distant Lover*] (1982) brilliantly used a female protagonist to tell a story about self-alienation in modern society, an important corrective to the role of the fictional female as the mediator of alternative ways of being.

Volker Braun made a mark with his more locally relevant *Hinze-Kunze-Roman* [Novel about Hinze and Kunze] (1985), a cleverly critical representation of the symbiotic relationship between a manipulative Party functionary Hinze and his exploited chauffeur Kunze, a final, negative stock-taking on the relationship between the working-class man and the GDR quasi-bourgeois and the regime's failure to overcome class hierarchy.

The success of Maxie Wander's *Guten Morgen, du Schöne* spawned further ventures in the genre of 'protocol literature'.⁴³ Two volumes of interviews with men, both edited by women, were published in the course of the 1980s, Christine Müller's *Männerprotokolle* [Men: Protocols] (1985) and Christine Lambrecht's *Männerbekanntschaften: freimütige Protokolle* [Male Acquaintances: Candid Protocols] (1986), neither of which had anything like the resonance of Wander's book. Yet they did begin to address the self-understanding of men in the GDR, which had hitherto not really been closely examined (and which remains a notable gap in the scholarship on the GDR and on GDR literature).

Uwe Saeger's *Nöhr* (1980) is a novel about a male identity-crisis which also cautiously addresses male homosocial bonding, if not explicitly homosexuality. The latter was still a taboo topic. However, the formation of interest groups under the

umbrella of the Protestant Church in the 1980s enabled gays to make some headway at last against the state authorities' negative attitude to homosexuality.⁴⁴ The first GDR film about gay experience, Heiner Carow's *Coming Out* (1989), ironically received its première on the night the Berlin Wall was opened. Gay literature remained marginalized until the end of the GDR.⁴⁵

Finally, the writers who emerged post-unification from the so-called 'unofficial scene' of the 1980s deserve mention. While gender was not a prominent theme in general in the work of the GDR's youngest generation, nonetheless a number of women writers made their debuts in this context for whom gender and gender relations were a significant issue. Gabriele Stötzer-Kachold wrote radically feminist, overtly erotic poetry, deploying experimental linguistic techniques and bringing the female body to the fore in a manner not hitherto seen in GDR literature.⁴⁶ Barbara Köhler, already in the 1980s thinking about what it means to write as a woman in a tradition shaped by men,⁴⁷ in her work after 1990 went on to explore the way in which the conventions of grammar fix gender and, notably in the essays in *Wittgensteins Nichte* [Wittgenstein's Niece/Noughts] (1999) and her poems responding to Homer's *Odyssey* in *Niemand's Frau* [Nobody's Wife] (2007), sought to raise to conscious awareness the conventions according to which subjectivity is thought of in oppositionally gendered terms in a manner which owes something at least to the GDR's specific tradition of feminist-inflected *Zivilisationskritik*.

NOTES

¹ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State. East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*, paperback edn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 141.

² See Fulbrook, *The People's State*, Chapter 7; Michael Schwartz, 'Emanzipation zur sozialen Nützlichkeit: Bedingungen und Grenzen von Frauenpolitik in der DDR', in Dierck Hoffmann and Michael Schwartz (eds.), *Sozialstaatlichkeit in der DDR. Sozialpolitische Entwicklungen im Spannungsfeld von Diktatur und Gesellschaft 1945/49–1989* (Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte; Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2005), pp. 47–87; Susanne Kranz, 'Women's Role in the German Democratic Republic and the State's Policy Towards Women', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 7.1 (November 2005), 69–83.

³ See Dorothee Schmitz-Köster, *Trobadora und Cassandra. Weibliches Schreiben in der DDR* (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1989); Lorna Martens, *The Promised Land? Feminist Writing in the German Democratic Republic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

⁴ Julia Hell's *Post-Fascist Fantasies. Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997) looks at early family narratives from the GDR rather than novels of industrial production, which produces a different gender narrative from the one presented here, focused on the anti-fascist father (Chapter 1).

⁵ Eduard Claudius, *Vom schweren Anfang* [The Difficult Beginning] (1950).

⁶ Eduard Claudius, *Menschen an unsrer Seite* (Berlin: Volk und Welt, 1951), pp. 171–

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⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54.

¹⁰ See Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius. Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women's Press, 1989).

- ¹¹ Claudius, *Menschen an unsrer Seite*, pp. 274–5.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- ¹³ See Georgina Paul, *Perspectives on Gender in Post-1945 German Literature* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009), Chapter 1.
- ¹⁴ Heiner Müller, ‘Die Umsiedlerin oder Das Leben auf dem Lande’ in Müller, *Die Stücke I*, ed. Frank Hörnigk (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), p. 281.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 234–5. On socialist morality, see Josie McLellan, *Love in the Time of Communism. Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- ¹⁶ See editorial commentary in *ibid.*, p. 545.
- ¹⁷ Julia Hell persuasively reads Wendland as an ‘ego ideal’ and brother figure to Rita, rather than a future lover: *Post-Fascist Fantasies*, pp. 177–85.
- ¹⁸ The film was banned a few days after its premiere. See Joshua Feinstein, ‘Constructing the Mythic Present in the East German Cinema: Frank Beyer’s “Spur der Steine” and the 11th Plenum of 1965’, *Central European History*, 32.2 (1999), 203–20.
- ¹⁹ See Detlev Schöttker, ‘Die Wirklichkeit unserer Städte: Wiederaufbau, Kulturkritik und Literatur’, *Merkur*, 62.4 (April 2008), 318–27.
- ²⁰ Erik Neutsch, *Spur der Steine* (Halle/S.: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1964), p. 223.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 852.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- ²⁶ Brigitte Reimann, *Franziska Linkerhand* (Berlin: Neues Leben, 1974), p. 111.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 161.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 582.

²⁹ Hell, *Post-Fascist Fantasies*, p. 67.

³⁰ See Brigitte Rossbacher, *Illusions of Progress. Christa Wolf and the Critique of Science in GDR Women's Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

³¹ See Martens, *The Promised Land?*, p. 31.

³² Schmitz-Köster, *Trobadora und Cassandra*, p. 51.

³³ See Beth V. Linklater, *Und immer zügelloser wird die Lust: Constructions of Sexuality in East German Literatures, with Special Reference to Irmtraud Morgner and Gabriele Stötzer-Kachold* (Bern: Lang, 1998); Georgina Paul, “‘Über Verschwiegenges sprechen’: Female Homosexuality and the Public Sphere in the GDR before and after the *Wende*”, in Elizabeth Boa and Janet Wharton (eds.), *Women and the Wende. Social Effects and Cultural Reflections of the German Unification Process, German Monitor 31* (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 226–37.

³⁴ Martens, *The Promised Land?*, p. 58.

³⁵ Christa Wolf, ‘Der Schatten eines Traumes. Karoline von Günderrode: Ein Entwurf’, in *Werke*, ed. Sonja Hilzinger (Munich: Luchterhand, 2000), vol. 6, pp. 107–75 and ‘Nun ja! Das nächste Leben geht aber heute an. Ein Brief über die Bettine’, in *ibid.*, pp. 177–221.

³⁶ Wolf, ‘Der Schatten eines Traumes’, pp. 141–44.

³⁷ See Angelika Bammer, ‘The American Feminist Reception of GDR Literature (with a Glance at West Germany)’, *GDR Bulletin 16* (Fall 1996), 18-24.

³⁸ Maxie Wander, *Guten Morgen, du Schöne. Protokolle nach Tonband* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 2003), p. 9.

³⁹ See Martens, *The Promised Land?*, pp. 10–12, 18–22; also sociologist Hildegard Maria Nickel's account of the study of Western feminist literature in the interdisciplinary research group at the East German Academy of Sciences under the aegis of Irene Dölling in Gerda Szepansky, *Die stille Emanzipation. Frauen in der DDR* (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1995), pp. 106–7.

⁴⁰ See Wolf, 'Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen', in Wolf, *Werke*, vol. 7, p. 161.

⁴¹ See Cheryl Dueck, *Rifts in Time and the Self. The Female Subject in Two Generations of East German Women Writers* (Amsterdam, New York, NY: Rodopi, 2004); Julia Petzl, *Realism and Reality in Helga Schubert, Helga Königsdorf and Monika Maron* (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 2003).

⁴² See Martens, *The Promised Land?*, Chapter 5.

⁴³ See Reinhard Andress, *Protokolliteratur in der DDR. Der dokumentierte Alltag* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

⁴⁴ See McLellan, *Love in the Time of Communism*, Chapter 5.

⁴⁵ See Denis M. Sweet, 'A Literature of "Truth": Writing by Gay Men in East German', *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*, 22.1 (Winter 1998), 205–25; Denis M. Sweet, 'Renegade Lit: Gay Writing at the End of Socialist East Germany', in Christoph Lorey and John L. Plews (eds.), *Queering the Canon: Defying Sights in German Literature and Culture* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), pp. 293–308.

⁴⁶ See Linklater, *Und immer zügelloser wird die Lust*, Chapters 4 and 5.

⁴⁷ See Birgit Dahlke, ' "... auf einem Papierboot bestehen". Schreiben in der DDR der 80er Jahre', in Georgina Paul and Helmut Schmitz (eds), *Entgegenkommen.*

Dialogues with Barbara Köhler (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 45–61.