

Imke Meyer  
Bryn Mawr College  
[Kmeyer@brynmawr.edu](mailto:Kmeyer@brynmawr.edu)

Gender and Cultural Memory  
in Ingeborg Bachmann's Narrative "Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha"

The preposition "nach" in the title of Ingeborg Bachmann's narrative "Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha" has commonly been understood to signify a goal-oriented movement through space towards a particular location. The text's English translation likewise renders the "nach" as "towards." "Towards Gomorrha" has been read as the protagonist Charlotte's inner movement towards the possibility of entering into a lesbian relationship. In my opinion, however, the title's "nach" need not necessarily be understood to mean "towards;" it could just as well mean "after" or "beyond." The title would then point towards something that is both temporally and spatially situated "beyond" Gomorrha. Gomorrha evokes not merely the association of sexual deviance; it also signifies the location of that which is old and empty—it is a sign for practices that are no longer useful and therefore will be discarded and destroyed.

Bachmann's text reflects on the structure of a social institution, namely the institution of marriage. On the content level, the reflection is prompted by the fact that Charlotte, a married woman, is confronted with a female suitor who would like to enter into a lesbian relationship with her. This confrontation leads Charlotte to interrogate the structure of her marriage. Over the course of the narrative, it becomes clear that, from the perspective of the text's female protagonist, the institution of marriage has served to reproduce particular kinds of power structures. It also becomes clear that an abandoning of the state of marriage would not necessarily spell the end of the perpetuation of the power structures that obtain in marriage. To the contrary: the lesbian relationship imagined in the text would exhibit the same kinds of patriarchal power structures that are constitutive for interactions between men and women within the framework of marriage.

Bachmann's text is critical of the phenomenon of the perpetuation of patriarchal power structures by female agents. At the same time, the text admits that it is quite unable to construct an alternative vision. This vision would have to be situated in a context radically different from the one in which the protagonist finds herself in post-war Vienna. Though on the face of it, Charlotte appears as emancipated in comparison to her turn-of-the-century ancestors depicted in, say, Schnitzler's texts, the social conventions and institutions structuring the interactions between the sexes in post-war Austria have not been altered in any fundamental or radical sense. To the contrary, the women in Bachmann's text seem to have internalized the traditional structures to such an extent that they become agents of their reproduction, thus aiding and abetting in their own subjugation as women. Thus, the cultural legacy of oppression is perpetuated continuously and turned into the only cultural memory available to both men and women. In my opinion, it is this state of affairs to which the "Gomorrha" in the narrative's title refers. A radical rethinking of power structures, of the cultural memory of social institutions such as marriage, and of the interactions between the sexes would require the destruction of this Gomorrha. Only after and beyond it would the imagination of new

social institutions and of new cultural paradigms—paradigms not built upon oppression, coercion, othering, and exclusion—become possible.