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THE SUBTLER DISCRIMINATIONS:
GENDER AND CULTURAL AUTONOMY IN THE HISTORICAL NOVELS OF RENATE FEYL

Some years ago, Renate Feyl edited a collection of absurd but real quotations about gender. Her title, *Sein ist das Weib. Denken der Mann*, echoes for readers of her historical fiction, in which thinking is also a woman's activity, though one for which the woman pays a price, even if her life seems at first a model of emancipation at the peak of the Enlightenment.

Feyl's novels recreate actual women of high cultural attainment in bastions of German classicism like Weimar and Jena. They show these women as more compromised and negated in their identity than their achievement suggests. In *Idylle mit Professor*, Feyl traces the rise of Victoria Gottsched—later the redoubtable *Gottschedin*—from modest origins to arbiter of the emerging serious drama. She develops independent identity and creativity, but Feyl traces the degree of subtle subjugation to which this formidable woman had to submit at the hands of men.

Novelist Sophie von la Roche is the subject of *Die profanen Stunden des Glücks*. Again, attainments that would have given a man complete autonomy did not keep la Roche from being exploited. Her reputation, her friendship with Wieland, her brilliance in a circle that included Heinse and Lavater, her many connections by blood to leading literary figures (she was the grandmother of Clemens Brentano and Bettina von Arnim)—none of these marks of respect and stature hide the arbitrariness with which men made decisions about her life and her identity.

Das sanfte Joch der Vortrefflichkeit (1999), Feyl's latest novel, has been acclaimed for its linguistic virtuosity, in keeping with the stylistic excellence displayed in the novels of its subject, Caroline von Wolzogen. Published anonymously in *Die Horen*—a monthly periodical edited by her brother-in-law Schiller (*the* Schiller!), Wolzogen's novel *Agnes von Lilien* was thought to be by Goethe himself. Much as Goethe admired her, Wolzogen was gently relegated, unable to achieve full repute.

These novels depict turning points in their main characters' lives, fates largely shaped by their womanhood. And what historical era would more provocatively comment on stories of achievement mitigated, subtly qualified by gender bias, than the age of the German Enlightenment, when the contrast of bias against rational social experiments and visions of emancipation make such age-old discriminations appear all the more stultifying? Feyl's strategy works to maximum effect, revealing unacknowledged gender inequality among cultivated men.

Feyl's placement is itself provocative. Born in Prague, raised in Jena, she is almost always ranged among the influential newer women writers of the former German Democratic Republic. But she is almost anomalous in drawing almost exclusively on the past, a trait much more pronounced among Austrian writers. I argue that Feyl's way of understanding the present from the past is not characteristic of an officially Marxist viewpoint, with its glance toward the future. It is a more distinct mark of the Austrian consciousness. Once a German-language writer from Prague would have been

axiomatically seen as Austrian; perhaps Feyl has tapped into literary roots laid down well before her birth, for her viewpoint is more Austrian than East German.