Women in Theodor Storm: The Opposition of Conformity and ‘Otherness’

Introduction

Research on German literature has not usually considered the works of Theodor Storm for their contribution to the Woman Question. Storm is more commonly known as a “Heimatdichter” (“regional writer”) whose works both evoked the traditions of the region he depicted, Schleswig Holstein, and implicitly criticized the prevailing social and political structures (Jackson termed him a “democratic humanitarian”).¹ Consideration of the Woman Question in Storm’s works is muted, particularly in comparison to Theodor Fontane; in this regard, his female characters have little in the way of vocation, other than marriage. Moreover, women who do not conform to this pattern are socially excluded and designated a role as ‘other’, as Storm portrays them as either lonely spinsters or ‘demonic’ women. More recent research, however, has identified that it is necessary to re-evaluate Storm’s contribution to the Woman Question, due to the fact that he often wrote “about women for primarily women readers”. This research proposed to “investigate Storm’s narrative strategies with respect to the dominant patriarchy of his time”, in order to determine whether these narrative strategies were used “to challenge questionable social institutions or ideologies”.²

This chapter seeks to further this research by offering a new interpretation of Storm’s works from a gender-based perspective; to this end, it traces the development of female character types in Storm’s works. The first of these types is the ‘weak woman’, one who conforms to social expectations. This type has her binary opposites in two sub-types of women who are ‘other’; these two sub-types shall be termed the ‘marginal female performer’, and the ‘demonic woman’. I examine the semiotics of textual, actual and perceived barriers for each of these types in turn, and consider the extent to which all of these women are ‘superfluous’. This analysis of barriers aims to show that despite

Storm’s perceived lack of engagement with the Woman Question, issues of concern to women are present in the sub-text of his works. In order to provide a balanced assessment of Storm’s female characters, a representative cross-section of his novellas (from the early work *Marthe and Her Clock*, through to his final work, *The Dykemaster*) will be discussed.

**Storm, Women and the Extra-Text**

An important part of the methodology adopted in this book is to consider how biographical details (Lotman’s “extra-text”) influence a particular writer’s attitudes towards women. In Storm’s case, his relationships with women throughout his life have been identified as both a source for his attitudes towards his female characters, and some of the inspiration for his writing. This section will now explore whether this extra-text is in opposition to text, as Lotman’s theory states.

In a similar way to the Brontë sisters and George Eliot, Storm’s early life was marked by the absence of a mother figure. Reportedly starved of affection by his mother, Lucie Storm (née Woldsen), Storm looked for substitute mother figures, who came in the form of his maternal great-grandmother, Elsabe Feddersen, and Lena Wies, the local baker’s step-daughter. At the age of thirteen, Storm was devastated by the death of his eight-year-old sister (also Lucie), and it was her death that prompted him to write his first poem. Jackson has considered how Lucie’s death gave rise to Storm’s “preoccupation with the incest theme”, which is evident in *Celeste* (1840), the poem “Thick as Blood” (1853) and *Eekenhof* (1879).

Storm’s somewhat peculiar relationship with Bertha von Buchan, whom he met in 1836 when she was just eleven years old (he was nineteen) may even be said to have had paedophilic undertones. He became infatuated, and was inspired to write fairy-tales and poems for her. Storm proposed marriage when Bertha turned sixteen, but she refused. Jackson alludes to the influence of Storm’s relationships with his sister and Bertha von Buchan on Storm’s writing, noting that he wrote things either for them or in response to traumatic events

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