Untangling the Heroic from the Sacrifice

Malwida von Meysenbug's Attempt to Appropriate a Common Female Topos in and for her Political Novel *Phädra* (1885)

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Malwida von Meysenbug had an unusual life for a noblewoman of the nineteenth century.[1] Born into the Rivalier family in Kassel, her father gained the name of "von Meysenbug" in 1825 for his services to the crown as the personal advisor to William I of Hesse-Kassel. Meysenbug soon grew to feel constrained by her conservative family and the lack of educational and professional opportunities available to her. Through mostly autodidactic readings and conversations with the theologian Theodor Althaus, as well as through the writings of the Young Hegelians, she obtained a thorough knowledge of Hegel's philosophy. Meysenbug witnessed the Democratic Revolution and the National Assembly in Frankfurt am Main in 1848; it was during this period that her democratic convictions came to the surface, leading to a rather strained relationship with the rest of her family, who remained loyal to the royal family. To escape the growing estrangement, Meysenbug moved to Hamburg in 1850, where she enrolled as a student at the newly founded Hamburger Hochschule für das weibliche Geschlecht (Hamburg University for the Female Sex), founded by Johannes Ronge and Johanna and Karl Fröbel.[2] When the Hochschule was forced to close by the Senate of Hamburg in 1852 due to the democratic tendencies and suspected activities of its founders, Meysenbug fled to London into exile, since she risked being arrested after her flat had been searched for compromising political material or evidence of contact with already arrested democratic revolutionaries. Meysenbug lived in London for eight years, becoming friends with fellow exiles such as Johanna and Gottfried Kinkel, and meeting many European revolutionaries who had also been forced to come to London to avoid being prosecuted in their

1 The following biographical information is taken from Martin Reuter, 1848, Malwida von Meysenbug und die europäische Demokratiegeschichte: Die Politik einer aristokratischen Demokratin im 19. Jahrhundert, Kassel 1998, and Debbie Pinfold / Ruth Whittle, Voices of Rebellion: Political Writing by Malwida von Meysenbug, Fanny Lewald, Johanna Kinkel, and Louise Aston (Britische und irische Studien zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur; 40), Oxford 2005.

2 See also Catherine M. Prelinger, Religious Dissent, Women's Rights, and the Hamburger Hochschule fuer das weibliche Geschlecht in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Germany, in: Church History 45, Issue 1, 1976, pp. 42–55.

homelands, such as Alexander Herzen, Giuseppe Mazzini, Carl Schurz, Ferdinand Freiligrath, Lajos Kossuth, Stanislav Worcell, and Giuseppe Garibaldi. In London, she also met and remained in contact with Thomas Carlyle, whose writings on heroism, together with the ideas of Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche, left a palpable mark on Meysenbug's concept of the heroic. Meysenbug adopted Herzen's youngest daughter, Olga, and moved with her to Paris in 1860. There she met Wagner for the first time and began to engage with Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy. Meysenbug anonymously published the first volume of her memoirs, *Mémoirs d'une idéaliste* (Memoirs of an Idealist), in 1869 in French.[3] In 1870, she moved to Bayreuth to be closer to Wagner and his family, having become close friends with all of them. It was in Bayreuth in 1872 that she met Nietzsche at the cornerstone laying ceremony for Wagner's theatre. They subsequently became close friends as well, until Wagner and Nietzsche had their falling out in 1878, whereupon Meysenbug sided (mostly) with Wagner, though she and Nietzsche remained in contact. In 1874, Meysenbug moved to Sorrento, Italy for health reasons, after Olga Herzen had married the historian Gabriel Monod the year before. In 1875–76, Meysenbug published her memoirs in German, a translation of the first volume and a new second volume covering the time until Olga's marriage, this time under her name and to great acclaim. In 1876–77, Meysenbug invited Nietzsche and Paul Rée to Sorrento to stay with her. They stayed in a shared house for a year and participated in her philosophical and political salon. In 1885, Meysenbug published her novel *Phädra*, which she considered her *opus magnum*, and was distraught by the resounding silence with which it was received by both its readership and critics. Meysenbug met Romain Rolland in Rome in 1890; she became his mentor, and they kept up a correspondence until her death. In 1898, Meysenbug published an addendum to her memoirs, entitled *Der Lebensabend einer Idealistin* (Sunset Years of an Idealist), which once again was well-received. Meysenbug died in 1903 in Rome, where she is buried in the Protestant Cemetery (Cimittero acattolico). In addition to the publications already mentioned, she left behind numerous novellas and reflective essays, as well as a substantial correspondence amounting to close to 18,000 letters.[4]

Meysenbug was a staunch feminist and political thinker of her time, even if in today's modern view of feminism, her ideas and suggestions appear very conservative or even downright dowdy. The volumes of her *Memoiren einer Idealistin* made her famous across Germany, if not Europe, and they inspired many of the bourgeois political activists of the 1880s and 1890s to take up the task of cam-

3 Mémoires d'une idéaliste, (anon), Geneva/Basle 1869.

4 See Annegret Tegtmeier-Breit [et al.] (Ed.), Die Korrespondenzen der Malwida von Meysenbug, Teile 1–3, Briefregesten 1827–1903 (Veröffentlichungen der staatlichen Archive des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, Reihe C, Quellen und Forschungen; 46), Detmold 2000/2001.

paigning for equal rights, education, and access to the job market. A political element is always present in Meysenbug's writings, and her female characters and protagonists are usually designed as role models for women to emulate so they can develop their individuality, in accordance with Hegel's and Nietzsche's concepts of the individual. Meysenbug operated and wrote at a time when the social norm was a strict gender binary with very clear divisions between acceptable female and male behaviour, which also extended to what was appropriate for the portrayal of female and male heroic figures in arts and literature. Subverting, transgressing, or even flouting this binary was almost conceptually impossible, and if it happened in literature that a woman presumed to be heroic – that is, performed masculine/male actions and took on male status – it almost always resulted in her punishment and death.[5] This has to be kept in mind when analysing the hero, and the heroic deed, in Meysenbug's *Phädra*.

As already stated, Meysenbug was a close and long-time friend of two of the most influential personages of the second half of the nineteenth century, Wagner and Nietzsche. In their correspondence, Wagner and Meysenbug exchanged their ideas and ruminations on concepts such as the individual, the role of the nation state in world history, the need for a cultural genius to shape society at a fundamental level, and similar topics also found in Wagner's theoretical writings such as *Oper und Drama*[6] (first published 1851) and *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde*[7] (1851). Wagner's and Nietzsche's (as well as Hegel's) influence on Meysenbug's political thinking is fundamental, and has been traced in minute detail by the historian Martin Reuter.[8] But these influences are also very present in Meysenbug's literary texts, and we will see a scene from the novel *Phädra* of quite Wagnerian composition in the following. Wagner's concept of the hero and the myth, as presented and played out in his operas, is, of course, also shaped by Hegel, who says the following about heroes:[9]

> These are the great men of history whose own particular purposes include the substantial, which is the will of the world spirit. They are heroes in the sense that they have never drawn their purposes and occupation from the calm, well-ordered course of the world sanctified by the established system, but from a source whose content is hidden and which has flourished to current existence, from the inner spirit which is yet subterraneous, which knocks against the outside world as against a shell and bursts it, because it is a different core than the core of this shell, – who, therefore, appear to draw from

5 See Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly, Beauty or Beast? The Woman Warrior in the German Imagination from the Renaissance to the Present, Oxford 2010, pp. 183–211.

6 Richard Wagner, Gesammelte Schriften, 14 Vols., ed. by Julius Kapp, Leipzig 1914, here Vol. 11.

7 Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 57–173.

8 See Reuter, 1848, Malwida von Meysenbug (Fn. 1).

9 For a detailed discussion of Hegel's influence on Wagner, see Peter Ackermann, Richard Wagners "Ring des Nibelungen" und die Dialektik der Aufklärung (Frankfurter Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft; 9), Tutzing 1981.

> themselves and whose actions have brought forth a condition and global circumstances which seem to be only their cause and their work.[10]

In my reading of this passage, a hero is someone who lives in an established system of values, hierarchies, and social norms and expectations, but who transgresses the rules of such a system, expanding and transforming them beyond the scope of what was thought applicable and even possible. The recognition (*Erkenntnis*) of the potential for transformation and transmutation, as well as the courage to act on it, is what makes these individuals heroic. While Hegel saw these qualities in the famous political and military leaders of world history, Wagner interpreted them as the core of artistic creation. For Wagner, the artist was the one who would eventually lift society, if not humankind as a whole, to the next higher plane:

> The creator of the artwork of the future is no other than the artist of the present who anticipates life in the future and yearns to be included therein. He who fosters this yearning within himself by his ownmost ability already lives a better life: – only one, however, can do so: – the artist.[11]

Meysenbug followed a similar trajectory in her thinking, in that the artist is the ideal hero and a fundamental change in society is only possible with the artist-hero to guide the masses in forming a nation:

> What was the crucial point, then? Not to elevate the raw mass as such to sovereignty, as democracy had flatteringly promised, but to clear the paths, to define the laws, to shape the institutions, to provide work and income for everyone, to bring the uplifting light of true education into the hollow wasteland of the beast of burden's life. This was and is necessary, but must not only be aimed at those below, but also at those above, in order to unify all classes into one nation that flocks around its geniuses and heroes in joyous recognition and basks delightedly in their blessed light; just as it is the greatest thing, after the genius itself, to recognise and love the genius.[12]

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10 All English translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own. "Dies sind die großen Menschen der Geschichte, deren eigene partikuläre Zwecke das Substantielle enthalten, welches Wille des Weltgeistes ist. Sie sind insofern Heroen zu nennen, als sie ihre Zwecke und ihren Beruf nicht bloß aus dem ruhigen, geordneten, durch das bestehende System geheiligten Lauf der Dinge geschöpft haben, sondern aus einer Quelle, deren Inhalt verborgen und zu einem gegenwärtigen Dasein gediehen ist, aus dem inneren Geiste, der noch unterirdisch ist, der an die Außenwelt wie an die Schale pocht und sie sprengt, weil er ein anderer Kern als der Kern dieser Schale ist, – die also aus sich zu schöpfen scheinen und deren Taten einen Zustand und Weltverhältnisse hervorgebracht haben, welche nur ihre Sache und ihr Werk zu sein scheinen." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte, in: ibid., Werke in 20 Bänden, Theorie-Werkausgabe des Suhrkamp Verlags, Frankfurt am Main 1970, Vol. 12, pp. 45–46.

11 "Der Erzeuger des Kunstwerkes der Zukunft ist niemand anderes als der Künstler der Gegenwart, der das Leben der Zukunft ahnt und in ihm enthalten zu sein sich sehnt. Wer diese Sehnsucht aus seinem eigensten Vermögen in sich nährt, der lebt schon jetzt in einem besseren Leben: – nur einer aber kann dies: – der Künstler." Richard Wagner, Oper und Drama, in: Gesammelte Schriften, Leipzig 1871–83, Vol. 4, pp. 1–285, here p. 229.

12 "Worauf kam es also an? Nicht darauf, die rohe Masse, als solche, zur Herrschaft zu erheben, wie die Demokratie es ihr schmeichelnd versprach, sondern die Wege zu öffnen, die

How, then, did Meysenbug depict this act of the artist-hero to unify the nation – or *a* nation, in any case – in her novel, and what did she consider the role of women, or female heroes, in this understanding of shaping the world?[13] Apart from Wagner, another influence on the way she thought of the hero as a transformative power of society was the British philosopher and historian Thomas Carlyle, whom Meysenbug met during her exile in London and with whom she maintained a casual, friendly correspondence. In his 1841 book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*,[14] based on a lecture series he had given in May 1840, Carlyle detailed his belief in heroic leadership as the primary force in the development of nations and societies. In the six lectures, he examined different types of heroes and illustrated them with examples from history, ranging from Odin to Muhammad to Dante, Luther, Cromwell and Napoleon. In Carlyle's view, only the "Great Man" is able to withstand the pressures and contradictions of his time and follow his chosen path to a heroic existence for the betterment of society. Once a "Great Man" has emerged in this manner, he rallies followers around himself and in effect becomes the founding father of a society:

> Faith is loyalty to some inspired Teacher, some spiritual Hero. And what therefore is loyalty proper, the life-breath of all society, but an effluence of Hero-worship, submissive admiration for the truly great? Society is founded on Hero-worship. […] In all epochs of the world's history, we shall find the Great Man to have been the indispensable saviour of his epoch; – the lightning, without which the fuel never would have burnt. The History of the World, I said already, was the Biography of Great Men.[15]

As we shall see, the protagonist Philipp in Meysenbug's *Phädra* is just such a Great Man. He emerges from the catastrophic events of the second book of the novel to become the founding father of an ideal, humanistic society in Corfu in the third volume. In addition, Philipp's attributes throughout the novel correspond to two of Carlyle's conceptions of the hero, namely the Poet and the Man of Letters. It is Philipp's poem that makes him a hero and worthy to be followed in the eyes of his counterpart, young Bianka, in the third book of the novel – a poem which speaks to his trustworthy nature and inspiring soul. It fits into Carlyle's classification as such:

Rechte festzustellen, die Institutionen zu gestalten, damit Arbeit und Verdienst für alle da sein und in die dumpfe Öde der Lasttierexistenz der beglückende Strahl wahrer Bildung dringen könne. Dieses tat und tut, aber nicht nur nach unten, sondern auch nach oben hin, not, um alle Stände zu vereinen zu einem Volk, das sich in freudiger Anerkennung um seine Genien und Heroen schare und in ihrem segenspendenden Lichte beglückt lebe; wie es denn ja, nach dem Genius selbst, das größte ist, den Genius zu erkennen und zu lieben." Malwida von Meysenbug, Memoiren einer Idealistin und ihr Nachtrag: Der Lebensabend einer Idealistin, 2 Vols., Berlin 1881, pp. 54–55.

13 For an in-depth analysis of Meysenbug's political thought expressed in this novel, see Birgit Mikus, The Political Woman in Print: German Women's Writing 1845–1919 (Women in German Literature; 19), Oxford 2014, pp. 87–105.

14 Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History, London 1841.

15 Ibid., pp. 15–17.

> Poetry, therefore, we will call *musical Thought*. The Poet is he who *thinks* in that manner. At bottom, it turns still on the power of intellect; it is a man's sincerity and depth of vision that makes him a Poet. See deep enough, and you see musically; the heart of Nature *being* everywhere music, if you can only reach it.[16]

The connection to music which Carlyle stipulates might also have influenced Meysenbug's thoughts on and regard for Wagner's ideas.[17] In the novel, Philipp develops from Poet to Man of Letters over the course of the third book. This not only results in him turning into an almost larger than life role model for his family, friends, and acquaintances, but also enables him to effortlessly build up the ideal community with the locals once he reaches Corfu. It is his mere presence which awes people and inspires them to better themselves, be it in education or formation of character, just as Carlyle writes:

> If Hero be taken to mean genuine, then I say the Hero as Man of Letters will be found discharging a function for us which is ever honourable, ever the highest; and was once well known to be the highest. He is uttering-forth, in such way as he has, the inspired soul of him; all that a man, in any case, can do. I say inspired; for what we call 'originality', 'sincerity', 'genius', the heroic quality we have no good name for, signifies that. The Hero is he who lives in the inward sphere of things, in the True, Divine and Eternal, which exists always, unseen most, under the Temporal, Trivial: his being is in that [...].[18]

These conceptions of the hero clearly inform Meysenbug's portrayal, or construction, of one of the main protagonists in her novel. However, I argue that there is a second hero in the novel in the figure of Bianka, Philipp's stepmother, the focal point of the Phaedra plot and, structurally, the element of conflict in the first two books of the novel. However, for Bianka to emerge as a heroine, or show and fulfil her heroic potential, she has to undergo a transformation first, before she can stand at Philipp's side as an equal.

In the novel, the Phaedra story arc is confined to the second volume. It is loosely based on Euripides' version of the myth, in which Phaedra (Phaidra), Ariadne's sister, is the second wife of Theseus and stepmother to Hippolytus (whose mother was the Amazon Antiope/Hippolyta). Phaedra falls in love with Hippolytus but she manages to keep her desire secret, only confiding in her former nurse. However, Hippolytus learns Phaedra's secret from her nurse – but as a proud and virginal acolyte of Artemis, he rejects her. Phaedra spitefully writes a letter to Theseus, claiming that Hippolytus has raped her. Two versions are known from here on: in the first one, Phaedra hangs herself after writing the letter to reinforce her claim and bring Theseus' revenge upon Hippolytus. Theseus

16 Ibid., p. 99.

17 Wagner, Carlyle, and Nietzsche were, of course, not the only intellectual influences on Meysenbug as an author, but are the focus of this article due to their writings on the hero and the heroic. A detailed analysis of Meysenbug's intellectual development can be found in Reuter, 1848, Malwida von Meysenbug (Fn. 1).

18 Ibid., p. 185.

then curses his son with one of the three curses given to him by Poseidon. Hippolytus is dragged to death behind his chariot when his horses are frightened by a sea monster. In the second version, Theseus kills his son after reading Phaedra's letter, and she hangs herself out of remorse, since she did not intend for Hippolytus to die.[19]

Meysenbug's *Phädra* is a novel in three books, following two main protagonists: the nobleman Alfred and his illegitimate son, Philipp. Book I narrates Alfred's adult life, his unhappy marriage with the noblewoman Bianka, and Philipp's childhood, ending with the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Alfred, estranged from his wife, enlists as a medical officer, while Philipp is sent to college in England to keep him safe. In Book II, the role of protagonist shifts to Philipp. The second book depicts Philipp's young adult life and is the core of the Phaedra narrative, playing out between Philipp and his stepmother Bianka. The book culminates in Bianka's suicide and the 'volcano scene' in which Philipp is 'reborn' as a hero, enabled by Bianka's sacrifice. Book III finds the older Philipp on his way to Corfu, where he wants to set up a new society in the spirit of idealistic humanism. He has written the epic poem "Phädra" as a redemptive act to enshrine Bianka's sacrifice. In Corfu, he meets Bianka's reincarnation, 'young Bianka', who has sworn to love no other man than the author of the poem "Phädra", since they share the same ideals. United in their spiritual love and plans for a utopian society, the novel ends with Philipp and Bianka in the midst of a small group of like-minded friends, preparing to launch their humanistic life in their self-founded society.

In contrast to the Phaedra myth, Bianka the stepmother does not know her stepson. Since he is an illegitimate son, Bianka finds his very existence an affront to the strict moral code which she, as a noblewoman, has been raised to observe at all costs. Bianka is repulsed when Philipp's name is mentioned, and she has not even seen him, which makes the slightly convoluted plot, including false identity and name changes, possible. Philipp is in Paris as a soldier at the end of the Franco-Prussian War and he witnesses the rise of the Paris Commune; but when political power shifts and he finds himself wearing the wrong uniform, he flees the city and wanders north until he reaches the sea, where he breaks down from exhaustion in a cave on the beach. He is saved by a mysterious, beautiful woman who brings him into the house of her noble great-aunt. As he recovers from his experiences in the war, he falls in love with this woman who calls herself Madeleine. After several weeks, they spend their first night together in the same cave in which Madeleine had found him unconscious, but the next morning, Alfred appears on the beach. Alfred has returned from the war (where he had been working as a medic) and was searching for Philipp when he was directed to the castle by the sea. Once Alfred sees Madeleine, he unmasks her as

[19] After: Ausführliches Lexikon der Griechischen und Römischen Mythologie (47th edition, 1902), Wilhelm Heinrich Roscher (Ed.), Vol. 3, Section 2, pp. 2220–2232.

Bianka. Philipp breaks down at this discovery and Bianka commits suicide. But also in contrast to the original myth, in which Phaedra calculatingly kills herself to bring her husband Theseus' wrath down on her stepson Hippolytos, Bianka leaves a suicide note for Alfred in which she claims all responsibility and guilt.

> You were honest with me and wanted to set right the transgressions of youth. I believed unspoiled virtue to be more worthy than merciful, compassionate love – this was my error and this confession is my atonement. Farewell, save yourself for your son, preserve him for the ideal! Let this beautiful being never soil himself with common happiness![20]

Alfred keeps her death secret from Philipp by immediately taking him to Italy so he can recover. It is only after a year that Philipp learns of Bianka's suicide. He and his father have hiked up to the top of Mount Vesuvius to witness the ongoing lava flow. (Meysenbug is referring to a historical event here, the eruption of 26 April 1872 which destroyed the towns of Massa di Somma and San Sebastiano.) Philipp asks his father whether he has heard anything from Bianka since the fateful day. The scene that follows is one of *anagnorisis* (the moment of critical recognition or discovery) and *peripeteia* (the unexpected reversal or turn of events, usually towards decline, though Meysenbug subverts this in her narrative) in the classic Aristotelian sense. It is also heavily imbued with Wagnerian imagery and rhetoric:

> The young man remained silent and Alfred saw only, in the light of the subterranean flames, a tear rolling slowly down his cheek. Then suddenly, he cried out, extending a hand defensively against the flaming gorge: "Silence, demons of the night, you are vanquished! But you, pure light," he cried, turning towards the moon, which appeared in tranquil clarity from behind a cloud and radiated silver across the land to their feet – "all hail the messenger of conciliation; you, gleaming stars, sing in heavenly choirs: 'Peace on earth! May love absolve humanity of evil and may the holy deed lift the guilt from us'. Father," he continued, gripping his father's hand and pulling him away, "Come, come! Away – away from the spirits of the depth – away and towards the redemptive deed!" […] Deeply moved, Alfred stood and joyfully marvelled at his beautiful son who stood before him, exaltation in his eyes, cheeks aflame, resembling a demigod.[21]

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20 "Sie waren offen gegen mich und Sie wollten das Vergehen der Jugend gut machen. Ich glaubte, dass unbefleckte Tugend höher sei als erbarmende, mitleidsvolle Liebe – das war mein Irrtum und dies Geständnis ist meine Sühne. Leben Sie wohl, retten Sie sich dem Sohn, retten Sie ihn dem Ideal! Dass diese schöne Gestalt sich nie beflecke mit gemeinem Glück!" Malwida von Meysenbug, Phädra, Berlin/Leipzig ^{2}1907, p. 328.

21 "Der Jüngling schwieg und Alfred sah nur, beim Schein der unterirdischen Flammen, dass eine Träne langsam über seine Wangen rollte. Plötzlich aber rief er, indem er die Hand wie abwehrend gegen den flammenden Schlund ausstreckte: 'Schweigt, Dämonen der Nacht, ihr seid besiegt! Du aber, reines Licht,' rief er, sich gegen den Mond wendend, der eben in ruhiger Klarheit hinter einer Wolke hervortrat und das Land zu ihren Füßen mit Silberglanz überstrahlte, – 'sei gegrüßt als ein Bote der Versöhnung; ihr, leuchtende Sterne, singt in Himmelschören droben: "Friede sei auf Erden! Die Liebe erlöse endlich die Menschheit vom Übel und die heiligende Tat nehme die Schuld von uns". Vater,' fuhr er fort, indem er des Vaters Hand ergriff und ihn fortzog, 'komm, komm! Fort – fort von den Geistern der Tiefe – fort zur erlösenden Tat!' […] Tief gerührt und beglückt staunte Alfred den schönen

The redemptive act, it turns out, is Philipp's composition of the epic poem "Phädra". The religious connotation introduced in this passage goes even further. When Alfred reads the poem he remarks, "Your 'Phädra' is a divine poem; a new gospel that absolves from guilt and teaches true love."[22] Such terminology strongly alludes to Meysenbug's social as well as political ideals: this social ideal sees Bianka in the role of Philipp's (heroic, Christ-like) saviour. Philipp is only now, through her sacrifice, enabled to create a new, better world, first in writing, then, as the novel progresses, also as the creator of a new society which he develops during his travels, thus becoming the apostle of Bianka's sacrifice for love and the humanist spirit.

It is safe to assume that Meysenbug knew Jean Racine's play *Phèdre* (1677), either in the original version or in the German translation published by Friedrich Schiller in 1805, based on Euripides' version of the myth.[23] Meysenbug slightly adjusted the setting for her version of the story: Bianka has not met Philipp before they meet at the beach, and her motivation for previously avoiding him lies not in her desire for him, but in a misplaced sense of virtue which led her to shun her husband's illegitimate child. Racine lets the tragedy unfold even though Phèdre never acts on her love for Hippolytus – as Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly has pointed out, Phèdre's confession of her desire as she is face to face with Hippolytus is enough to set the tragedy in motion.[24] In contrast, Meysenbug lets Bianka consummate her desire for Philipp, but this manifestation of her sexuality is immediately punished – Bianka must take her own life in order to absolve Philipp, so that he can overcome the conflict and live on. Interestingly, Meysenbug has Bianka kill herself not by hanging, but by throwing herself off a cliff into the sea, like Phèdre's nurse Oenone in Racine's play. In Bianka's case, the sacrifice and its intent is heroic because of the tragic entanglement in guilt and the intent to abrogate this guilt, but it also eventually results in creating an individual (Philipp) who is fit to reshape society. In *Phädra*, Meysenbug takes her female hero to a metaphysical level: it is her suffering and sacrifice that brings out Philipp's true individuality. Invoking Wagner's concepts, it is the birth of an artist-hero who, with the epic poem "Phädra" along with the formation of a new, idealistic society (the settlement in Corfu), creates a new life, a new future, for humankind; and invoking Hegel's concepts, this hero draws his strength to do so from a source that, for

Sohn an, der, Begeisterung im Auge, mit flammenden Wangen, einem Halbgott gleich, vor ihm stand." Ibid., pp. 340–341.

22 "Deine 'Phädra' ist ein göttliches Gedicht; ein neues Evangelium, das von der Schuld erlöst und die wahre Liebe lehrt." Ibid., p. 343.

23 Jean Racine, Phèdre, Edward D. James / Gillian Jondorf (Ed.), Cambridge 1994; Friedrich von Schiller, Phädra. Trauerspiel, Tübingen 1805.

24 See Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly, Tod und Weiblichkeit. Phädra – Weibliche Identität zwischen Göttern und Männern, in: Programmheft zu 'Phädra', Salzburger Festspiele, Salzburg 2010.

the remainder of the novel, is hidden, unseen, yet central – transformed by him from a subterraneous source into a force in art and society.

In this, Meysenbug is also aligned with Nietzsche's concepts of the hero and the heroic. As Karl Jaspers explains, Nietzsche saw in human beings the (universal) potential to improve themselves, though they were also always endangered by their reality, and the need to overcome themselves in order to better themselves. In contrast to Carlyle, Nietzsche not only saw the surrounding society as the danger, but also the inherent insecurity, the self-awareness of one's shortcomings and failings, and humans' need to belong as dangers which could prevent someone from becoming a better version of one's self.

> Images of the human being are either descriptions of types of his reality or they are sketches of his potential. The images drawn by Nietzsche lie on both levels. […] The essential point is that even in psychological depiction, there is already a deficit: the gaze pushes toward the 'higher humanity'. The second level, therefore, shows figures who outgrow their mere existence as human beings. Humans appear either as an embodiment of decency, but one which is so constantly under threat that it permanently fails when confronted with reality; or they torment themselves over their own deficiency, which also manifests in miscarried deeds and must be overcome. Thus Nietzsche sees one last possibility on a third level, beyond all higher human beings, and on which the actual aim of humankind is to be found: the *Übermensch*.[25]

This is not to say that Meysenbug constructs Bianka as an example of the *Übermensch*, but rather that she reflects on Nietzsche's earlier writings regarding heroic existence. Meysenbug focuses on the role a female hero might play in the improvement of society in her very own, idiosyncratic way, namely as a powerful enabler (of men). She presents the potential of a female hero, not as a Great (Wo)Man, but in the framework of heroic existence as the state of preparation, of transition from one state (of humankind, society) to the next, better one. In Bianka, Meysenbug attempts to transform, or even reclaim, the death of Phaedra, the female hero, into the foundation of a new, better order (of the world, of society), whose first representative is a Great Man able to continue the initiated transformation in real, practical terms.

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[25] "Bilder vom Menschen sind entweder Beschreibungen von Typen seiner Wirklichkeit, oder sie sind Entwürfe seiner Möglichkeit. Die von Nietzsche gezeichneten Bilder liegen auf beiden Ebenen. [...] Das Wesentliche ist, daß schon bei der psychologischen Darstellung jedesmal ein Ungenügen mitspricht: der Blick drängt zum 'höheren Menschen'. Die zweite Ebene zeigt daher Gestalten des Hinauswachsens der Menschen über ihr bloßes Dasein. Die Menschen erscheinen entweder wie ein Wohlgeratensein, das aber so gefährdet ist, daß es durchweg an der Wirklichkeit scheitert, oder sie verzehren sich in einem Ungenügen an sich selber, das auch in der Tat sich verirrt und das überwunden werden soll. Daher erblickt Nietzsche noch über alle höheren Menschen hinaus eine letzte Möglichkeit auf einer dritten Ebene, auf der erst das eigentliche Ziel des Menschen liege: den Übermenschen." Karl Jaspers, Nietzsche: Einführung in das Verständnis seines Philosophierens, Berlin/Leipzig 1936, pp. 139–140.

> Since for Nietzsche, the existence of humankind as such is not final but something that needs to be overcome, and since human beings can only pave the way and themselves be passage, humankind must perish. A person can be aware of this necessity and incorporate it into their will. Thus Nietzsche calls 'heroic greatness' the 'only state of those paving the way'. He sees in them the 'pursuit of the absolute demise as a way to endure themselves' (14, 267). 'Heroism is the willingness for self-demise' (12, 295). Yet, the basis of heroism is not the yearning for demise as such, but the One Goal which alone matters: 'Heroism – the attitude of a human being who seeks a goal even though he himself is no longer of significance' (12, 295).[26]

In the same way as Jaspers interprets Nietzsche's idea of the human, Meysenbug presents Bianka as the female hero, or at least a human becoming aware of her flawed existence and, by recognising the necessity of her own death in order to overcome and improve the state of her world, entering into heroic existence. Only through this process, leading in the third book of the novel to the rather strange incarnation of young Bianka, is it possible for the female hero to become an equal to the world-changing, society-founding Great Man, the male hero, and take part in the formation of society. It has to be said, however, that Nietzsche rejected and rebuked the worshipping of heroes. As Jaspers points out, Nietzsche saw hero-worship as demeaning to the worshipper – for he would have to lie to himself constantly in order to keep the illusion of a perfect human being, the hero, alive. On the other hand, such worship would also demean the proclaimed hero himself, who, as a consequence of being worshipped, would be isolated from and placed under immense scrutiny by society, basically stripping the hero of the very humanity which has to be continually overcome.[27] As such, the third book of Meysenbug's *Phädra* constitutes a clear break from Nietzsche's conception of the hero and the heroic, and remains faithful to the ideas of the hero as a nation-building, society-forming man who almost demands worship through his mere existence, and who employs his genius to the admiration and loyalty of his worshippers. In the writings of Hegel, Wagner, and Carlyle, the female hero does not appear; it seems a forgone conclusion that the hero can only be male. In contrast, Nietzsche's conception, especially that of heroic existence, does leave room for imagining a female hero, even though Nietzsche, too, always speaks of the male hero. It is in this imaginative space that Meysenbug constructs her female hero and plays out her fate in becoming an equal to the Great Man.

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26 "Da das Dasein des Menschen als solches für Nietzsche nicht endgültig ist, sondern überwunden werden soll, der Mensch nur vorbereiten und Übergang sein kann, muß er zugrunde gehen. Diese Notwendigkeit kann er wissen und in seinen Willen aufnehmen. Daher nennt Nietzsche 'heroische Größe' den 'einzigen Zustand der Vorbereitenden'. In ihnen ist das 'Streben nach dem absoluten Untergang als Mittel, sich zu ertragen' (14, 267). 'Heroismus ist der gute Wille zum Selbstuntergange' (12, 295). Der Grund des Heroischen aber ist nicht das Untergehenwollen als solches, sondern das Eine Ziel, an dem alles liegt: 'Heroismus – das ist die Gesinnung eines Menschen, welcher ein Ziel erstrebt, gegen das gerechnet er gar nicht mehr in Betracht kommt' (12, 295)." Ibid., pp. 301–302.

27 See ibid., pp.144–145.

Strikingly, it appears that women's sexuality does not have a place in Meysenbug's ideal society; on the contrary, only through Bianka's death, as penance for her desire, is it possible for Philipp to undergo his last, necessary transformation. In the incarnation of young Bianka, Meysenbug places her idea of a progressive woman at Philipp's side: young Bianka is able to subordinate her sexuality in favour of an idealized, abstract love for the (to her) unknown author of the poem "Phädra". Only when this abstract love is proven true and pure is young Bianka allowed to fall in love with Philipp, the embodiment and enactor of the ideal concepts she loves for their own sake. Throughout the third book, the origin of Philipp's ideal individuality is always present but unseen: the poem "Phädra" functions as a connection between Philipp and young Bianka, who is marked as his worthy counterpart in her unwavering loyalty and sympathy to the (to her unknown) author and his fate. The heroic sacrifice necessary for women, Meysenbug seems to suggest, is to set aside their interest in the well-trodden path of marriage, family, and not least sexuality, in order to become the second half of a new society. This goes directly against the grain of the common way of thinking in the second half of the nineteenth century, according to which women should use their inherent power as mothers of the next generation to instil the values of a better society in their children.[28] However, according to Meysenbug, only if women are able to extricate themselves from society's expectation that they should seek fulfilment in marriage and motherhood, and from their own maternal as well as physical desires, will they be able to be a heroic, formative force.

Unfortunately, Meysenbug's attempt to imbue the woman who sacrifices herself for the sake of a higher ideal (brought about by men) with a heroism equal to that of the male hero, does not work. It is a very common topos in literature that the woman dies while the man repents and lives to do great deeds, especially if the woman harbours guilt in one form or another, and even more so if one of these forms is of a sexual nature. Meysenbug's take on this topos reflects her idea of an enabling power in women, which can, and must, be used for the betterment of society. But obviously, with Bianka's death and reincarnation, Meysenbug does not create an equal female force, nor an equal image to that of the male hero, but only fulfils the topos according to the patriarchal requirements of the existing, established literary image of the female hero, which lies under the control of female sexuality. Meysenbug's ideas and constructs of the female hero and female heroic existence conflate with the patriarchal notion of women's sacrifices for men.

[28] For detailed discussions of this topic, see, for example, Ann Taylor Allen, Feminism and Motherhood in Germany, 1800–1914, New Brunswick, NJ 1991; id., 'Feminismus und Eugenik, im historischen Kontext', in: Feministische Studien 9, Issue 1, 1991, pp. 46–68; Georg Dörr, Muttermythos und Herrschaftsmythos: Zur Dialektik der Aufklärung um die Jahrhundertwende bei den Kosmikern, Stefan George und in der Frankfurter Schule (Epistemate / Reihe Literaturwissenschaft; 588), Würzburg 2007; Peter Davies, Myth, Matriarchy and Modernity: Johann Jakob Bachofen in German Culture, 1860–1945 (Interdisciplinary German Cultural Studies; 7), New York 2010.

I would like to end on a thought that goes beyond the scope of the novel discussed here and in the time frame of the late nineteenth century. I posit the following: In the essay *Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno describe the *Odyssey* in terms of the formation of the bourgeois subject.[29] In flouting the power of language and names, and controlling his desires, the hero Odysseus is able to withstand mythological forces and temptations. In discovering and mastering the mechanisms of this trick (*die List*), he establishes control and governance over mythological forces, tames them, and renders them impotent. Horkheimer and Adorno see in this the basis of patriarchal rule and the inherent potential of both fascist and capitalist power structures. It is essential that the hero here is a male hero; the formation of his bourgeois subjectivity also hinges on the control not only of his sexual desires, but also on that of the female mythological figures he encounters (the Sirens, Circe).[30] In this context, the question arises whether a female hero can actually exist on her own merits, in the enlightened, bourgeois idea of a hero, or whether the very notion of heroic action, the formation of a heroic subjectivity/individuality – since it is a patriarchal concept – limits her to only a handful of sites within the heroic discourse. Those places that are open to female heroism are deliberately kept open by an enlightened, bourgeois discourse which bases its defining concept of the enlightened subject on the heroic overcoming of mythological, chaotic forces in favour of rationality and rational order. These places are furthermore designed to include heroic death as a mechanism of control of female heroic action; female heroes might go against established social systems or systems of rule and power, but they seem (perhaps by definition) to lack the power to overthrow or change them, as many male heroes might do.

29 Max Horkheimer / Theodor W. Adorno, Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente, Frankfurt am Main [21]2013, pp. 50–87.

30 This has been thoroughly criticized by Helga Geyer-Ryan / Helmut Lethen, Von der Dialektik der Gewalt zur Dialektik der Aufklärung, in: Willem van Reijen / Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Ed.), Vierzig Jahre Flaschenpost: Dialektik der Aufklärung 1947–1987, Frankfurt am Main 1987, pp. 41–72. For a discussion of the problematic bourgeois hero, see also Bettina Plett, Problematische Naturen? Held und Heroismus im realistischen Erzählen, Paderborn 2002.