

More than skin deep? Ideals of beauty in the romance novels of Hedwig Courths-Mahler

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“Ihre äußere Schönheit ist der
Deckmantel für die Häßlichkeit
und Niedrigkeit ihrer Seele.“
(Courths-Mahler 1995: 558)

One of the assumptions about romantic fiction is that the heroine will be beautiful, and the romance novels of the best-selling German writer Hedwig Courths-Mahler (1867-1950) do little to shatter this stereotype. Upon close analysis, however, it becomes clear that the depiction of feminine beauty in Courths-Mahler's novels relies upon a specific set of polar oppositions, which can offer insight into the understanding of femininity and the female body during the interwar period. In this essay, I wish to examine two principle pairs of opposites in Courths-Mahler's fiction. First, there is the opposition between natural and unnatural beauty, which manifests itself in the natural beauty of the heroine conflicting with the artificially enhanced beauty of her rival. Second, we can discern in many of Courths-Mahler's heroines a distinct lack of awareness of their own beauty, a naivety that once again sets them apart from their rivals, who are usually only too keen to employ their physical appearance to secure their goals. Schiller's aesthetics, as articulated in his essay “Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung,” will be invaluable here in determining how Courths-Mahler attempts to secure the reader's positive reactions to her natural, artless heroines. At a time when popular German practices such as nudism and *Wandern* sought to employ the

body as a conduit to nature, Courths-Mahler's decision to associate her heroines with nature rather than with artifice can be read as a literary counterpart to the ideals of other endeavours within the Weimar Republic. Furthermore, the advocacy of a certain type of woman as the ideal heroine may provide evidence of a conservative, possibly even regressive, reaction to developments in women's fashions and, more significantly, in women's social position during these years.

There can be no denying the popularity of Courths-Mahler's romance novels. Not only did she publish over two hundred different novels, but they also managed to achieve large sales figures, at times exceeding the one-million-copies-sold mark (see Sichelschmidt 1967 for details of sales figures). Even after her death, Courths-Mahler's novels continued to sell widely (Schwarz 1979), but it is their impact in the years of the Weimar Republic that will form the focal point of this essay. As Gustav Sichelschmidt writes, it was precisely during this period that Courths-Mahler achieved her greatest success: "Die eigentlichen Jahre ihrer Prosperität sind aber dann das Dezennium nach dem ersten Weltkrieg. In dieser Zeit trifft sie den Geschmack der Massen wie wenige" (Sichelschmidt 1967: 8). Clearly, Courths-Mahler's texts responded to a particular demand at work in the interwar period. In addition to providing sales statistics of individual novels, Sichelschmidt also demonstrates that Courths-Mahler was at her most productive in her output of novels during the early years of the Weimar Republic. Calculating an average output of 4.8 novels per year over her thirty-five year working life, Sichelschmidt goes on to show that her most prolific period came just after the war: "Im Jahre 1919 waren es dann aber zehn Romane, und im Jahre 1920 stellte sie ihren Rekord mit nicht weniger als vierzehn Romanen auf" (Sichelschmidt 1967: 34). That is certainly a considerable achievement, but to fully appreciate Courths-Mahler's domination of the market in the Weimar years, it is also necessary to recall her penetration of two other media. First, in the 1920s, twenty-one of her novels were made into films (Sichelschmidt 1967: 10), allowing her to reach a potentially different audience. Second, her novels were frequently published in serialised format in newspapers and magazines. Indeed, Roland Opitz, quoting the work of Walter Krieg, goes as far as to state: "[I]n den zwanziger Jahren [konnte] keine Frauenzeitschrift und keine Provinzzeitung auf ihre Texte verzichten" (Opitz 1993: 534). What is it about these simple, formulaic romance novels that could account for their astonishing level of popularity during the years of the Weimar Republic in particular?

One area worthy of further examination in this regard is Courths-Mahler's approach to character construction as applied to the heroine and her rival. Many of her heroines possess a set of common qualities

that distinguish them from their rivals and, more interestingly, from the trends in women's fashions and behaviour in Germany in the 1920s. The heroines tend to display a natural beauty on the surface, which is complemented underneath by an appealing naivety of character. Whilst Courths-Mahler did not restrict the use of these techniques to her novels of the Weimar years, they nonetheless did attain a specific pertinence during this era, which may also account for the huge popularity of these novels during this particular period. Indeed, there are very compelling reasons why this combination of qualities should have struck such a chord with a wide readership during the years of the Weimar Republic. In her study, *Women and Modernity in Weimar Germany: Reality and Representation in Popular Fiction*, Vibeke Rützou Petersen defines the Weimar era as a period of "frightening modernity" (Petersen 2001: ix) and highlights the role of Weimar popular culture as a forum for responses to this new world. For Petersen this period represents a breakthrough point for popular fiction on account of the new means of cultural production and dissemination that emerged to assure its widespread success. Part of Petersen's work considers the function assigned to the body – in particular the female body – in many examples from the popular fiction of the Weimar period. Here, too, Petersen identifies a significant sea change: "It is obvious that the female body is a vast field of cultural signification. This practice is in itself nothing new [...] What is new, however, is mass or popular culture's uses of women's bodies as signifiers" (Petersen 2001: 143-144). What, then, do women's bodies signify? Petersen argues that the popular fiction of the period treats "woman as the embodiment of the darker sides of modernity, the irrational, threatening, and decadent aspects" (Petersen 2001: 3). It is therefore tempting to read Courths-Mahler's female protagonists as reactionary counterparts to these new women, functioning as embodiments of a safe, reassuring femininity, which is immune to social change. For many readers, these heroines would have a palliative effect, alleviating the anxieties created by this "frightening modernity." In this regard, it is vital to remember that Courths-Mahler's readership was far from exclusively female. Romain Geib, for example, in his 1993 documentary film "Tracing the Herald of Victorian Romance: Hedwig Courths-Mahler," draws attention to the huge success of Courths-Mahler's novels among soldiers in World War I.

Friedrich Schiller's discussion of the naïve in his essay "Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung" provides a valuable tool for understanding what Courths-Mahler is trying to achieve with her heroines. This is not to suggest that Courths-Mahler was a dedicated student of Schiller's aesthetics, but rather that Schiller pinpointed a positive human reaction

to certain character types, i.e. the naïve, which form the precise model for many of Courths-Mahler's heroines. In the introductory section of the essay entitled "Über das Naïve," Schiller contemplates our reactions to Nature in its widest sense, including not only the natural world but also, for example, the uncorrupted innocence of children or the "traditional customs of rural people" ("Sitten des Landvolks") (Schiller 1992: 706). According to Schiller, such phenomena arouse in us "a kind of love and tender respect" ("eine Art von Liebe und von rührender Achtung"; Schiller 1992: 706). Or, as he puts it even more forcefully a little later in his essay: "Unser Gefühl für Natur gleicht der Empfindung des Kranken für die Gesundheit" (Schiller 1992: 727). It is not surprising, therefore, that a writer of popular romance such as Courths-Mahler would seek to create character types that have, at least as one of their objectives, the aim of inducing such love, or similarly strong emotions, in their readership through a calculated association with all things naïve and natural. The privileging of "natural" women also has a clear link to the Weimar era on account of that period's obsession with robots and similar constructs, seen most memorably in the Maria simulacrum in Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*. If the machine-woman Maria is femininity at its most disturbing, then Courths-Mahler's heroines embody femininity in its most non-threatening form. In order to further clarify his notions of the naïve, Schiller employs a set of oppositions, pitting "nature" against "artificiality" and "truth" against "deceit": "[D]enn die Natur im Gegensatz gegen die Künstelei und die Wahrheit im Gegensatz gegen den Betrug muß jederzeit Achtung erregen" (Schiller 1992: 714). As I shall demonstrate in greater detail below, Courths-Mahler employs these binary pairs again and again to elicit the reader's sympathies and affections for her heroines, whilst at the same time instilling negative feelings for the heroine's rivals, who frequently bear the marks of the New Woman.

When considering a genre of fiction such as the popular romance novel as it appeared in the Weimar period, it is important to emphasise the fact that this was intended as a genteel form of entertainment, and this has an inevitable consequence with regard to descriptions of the female body. In fact, as the examples below will show, Courths-Mahler restricted her descriptions of the female body to a small subset of areas considered suitable to dwell upon in any detail. Of primary importance, in her characterization of female figures, are the two extremities of the body, namely the feet and the hair. At a period in history when German women wore clothing covering much of the body, it was of course inevitable that authors would be forced to concentrate on the visible. The genre of discreet romantic fiction, which includes no descriptions of nu-

dity or sexual activity, offered little opportunity to deviate from these specific areas. The effect of this approach is not so much an eroticisation of the hair or the feet as a tendency to endow them with symbolic significance. In *Die Adoptivtochter*, for example, Leutnant Theo Frensen's unrequited passion for the heroine Britta Lossen is signalled through emphasis of these two parts of the body. In the following scene, Courths-Mahler allows the narrative point of view to follow Theo's lustful gaze from its starting point – "Wie ein Rausch überkam es ihn. Ein eigenartiger leiser Duft entstieg ihrem Haar, ihren Kleidern" (Courths-Mahler 1995: 738) – to its finishing point: "Er seufzte tief auf, und sein Blick irrte wieder an ihrer Gestalt herab bis zu dem schmalen Fuß" (Courths-Mahler 1995: 739). It is important to stress that although the reader knows Theo to harbour a great passion for Britta, at no time does Theo's gaze linger on any part of the body more obviously connected to sexual attraction. As we shall see in further detail below, a woman's hair functions, in Courths-Mahler's fiction, as a multivalent symbol not merely of feminine beauty or of German beauty, but more significantly of *natural* beauty. The use of blonde and dark hair as indicators of good and evil in Courths-Mahler's novels has been discussed elsewhere (Silbermann 1993). However, for these texts from the Weimar period, hair may also be seen as a direct counterpart to one of the most striking emblems of the New Woman, namely the short bobbed hairstyle known as the *Bubikopf*. Petersen discusses the symbolic power of this hairstyle and proposes an important set of opposites: "The media creation of the desirable, tall, slender, and non-curvaceous body of the *Bubikopf* was unsuitable as a model of strength, fecundity, and German-ness" (Petersen 2001: 56). Courths-Mahler's heroines tend to be blessed with such extraordinarily long hair that they stand opposed to the bobbed new women. In order to appreciate Courths-Mahler's construction of her heroines and their rivals more fully, I shall look at three of her novels from the Weimar years in detail.

Die Adoptivtochter (1919)

In his essay "Hedwig Courths-Mahler in literaturwissenschaftlicher Sicht," Roland Opitz presents a further reason for the author's choice of "a 'natural' person" ("eines 'natürlichen' Menschen") (Opitz 1993: 539) as heroine, namely that such a person can provide an innocent point of view for the lavish descriptions of the lives of the upper classes. A case in point can be seen in the novel *Die Adoptivtochter*, where the heroine, Britta Lossen, enters the employment of the very wealthy Frau Claudine

Steinbrecht. Britta's lower-class origins cause her to perceive every aspect of Frau Claudine's home and lifestyle with a sense of wonder. Indeed, Courths-Mahler makes frequent use of fairy tale imagery to underline Britta's reactions. Given the fact of Britta's financially difficult childhood, this narrative approach works convincingly, yet also allows Courths-Mahler to dwell on the details of fashion and décor that are a trademark of her style. Occupying a position of relative poverty means that Britta would not ordinarily be considered as a suitable match for the gentlemen who form her mistress's circle of acquaintances or who frequent her parties. However, Britta's natural beauty is such that not only are several men attracted to her, but even women of higher social standing perceive her as a rival: "Frau Michels aber haßte Britta aus Eifersucht, sie fühlte, daß Britta ihre Rivalin war" (Courths-Mahler 1995: 653). Through the motif of beauty, the narrative of *Die Adoptivtochter* establishes a contrast between the outwardly beautiful Frau Michels, who is full of hate inside, and the outwardly beautiful Britta, whose inner self is innocent and naïve. Britta's natural appearance, complemented by her naïve character, manages not only to draw the attention of the men but also has a transforming effect on her previously bitter and temperamental mistress: "Brittas Jubel war so herzerfrischend und *ungekünstelt*, daß Frau Claudine herzlich lachen mußte" (Courths-Mahler 1995: 643, my emphasis). In such scenes, Courths-Mahler is able to create a heroine designed to appeal to male and female readers of all ages.

Die Adoptivtochter also affords us a very clear example of the proximity between Courths-Mahler's approach to constructing her heroine and Schiller's aesthetics. If we consider the following passage from the introductory section of "Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung," we shall see how close it comes to describing Courths-Mahler's depiction of Britta in a key scene:

"Das Naive der Denkart kann daher niemals eine Eigenschaft verdorbener Menschen sein, sondern nur Kindern und kindlich gesinnten Menschen zukommen. Diese letztern handeln und denken oft mitten unter den gekünstelten Verhältnissen der großen Welt naiv; sie vergessen aus eigener schöner Menschlichkeit, daß sie es mit einer verderbten Welt zu tun haben, und betragen sich selbst an den Höfen der Könige mit einer Ingenuität und Unschuld, wie man sie nur in einer Schäferwelt findet" (Schiller 1992: 716).

The scene in question occurs in Chapter 14, when Britta accompanies Frau Claudine to the Stadträtin's residence for tea. The Stadträtin is extremely jealous of Britta's beautiful, young appearance and, in collusion

with Frau Michels, enjoys making spiteful comments, which cast doubt on whether Britta's physical beauty is entirely *natural*. It is Britta's hair, in particular, which forms the target of the Stadträtin's aspersions during this tea party. It is revealing to note the repeated use of the term *echt* in the following exchange:

“Die Stadträtin glaubte aber nicht an die *Echtheit*, sie hätte Britta gern in Verlegenheit gesetzt. [...] ‚Liebes Fräulein, denken Sie sich, wir können es nicht fassen, daß Sie so unglaublich starkes Haar haben. Ist das wirklich alles *echt*?‘ fragte sie Britta. [...] ‚Gewiß ist es *echt*‘, sagte sie ruhig. ‚Ich möchte Ihr Haar einmal gelöst sehen.‘ Britta lächelte. ‚Ah, es ist nichts Besonderes, gnädige Frau.‘ [...] Da erhob sich Frau Claudine [...] ‚Komm, Britta, ich helfe dir. Es ist Ehrensache, daß du dich von dem Verdacht einer *falschen* Behauptung reinigst.‘ [...] Sie löste auch die dicken, goldenen Flechten, so daß die goldige Flut in schönen Wellen herabfiel. Wohlgefällig breitete sie den goldenen Mantel aus, der nun bis auf den Boden herabfiel” (Courths-Mahler 1995: 682-683, my emphasis).

This passage exemplifies many of the aspects of Courths-Mahler's techniques already identified above. First, Britta displays all the qualities of a naïve, innocent person as categorised by Schiller in his essay. Although not at a royal court, Britta is certainly in a socially elevated setting at the Stadträtin's residence, which is characterised, to use Schiller's terms, as “artificial” (“gekünstelt”) and “corrupt” (“verdorben,” “verderbt”). Second, Britta remains innocently unaware not only of the Stadträtin's true nature (she assumes it is merely curiosity) but also of her own beauty (“es ist nichts Besonderes”). Third, the juxtaposition of *echt* and *falsch* in this passage recalls assertions such as the following from Schiller's essay: “denn die Natur im Gegensatz gegen die Künstelei und die Wahrheit im Gegensatz gegen den Betrug muß jederzeit Achtung erregen” (Schiller 1992: 714). Fourth, the emphasis on Britta's beautifully long hair allows Courths-Mahler to confirm her heroine as the very antithesis of the New Woman of Weimar Germany, with her short, bobbed hairstyle.

The plot of *Die Adoptivtochter* provides a further means whereby Courths-Mahler can underline the value of tradition over innovation. As the novel's title suggests, Britta's natural personality captures the heart of Frau Claudine so completely that the latter decides to adopt her, thereby making her heir to the largest fortune in the town. However, it is not this newfound wealth that enables Britta to secure the love of Doktor Herbert Frensen. Even before her elevation in social standing, his reactions to her had been based on her natural, innocent character, as one can see in passages such as the following: “Welcher Adel lag auf ihren

reinen Zügen!" (Courths-Mahler 1995: 671). There are two major consequences of this approach to character and plot construction in *Die Adoptivtochter*. First, Courths-Mahler is able to create a female protagonist who can function as a counterpart to the New Woman: her hair is extremely long, unlike the popular *Bubikopf* style; she displays an innocence and naivety which, even in Schiller's day, was associated more with the pastoral setting than the modern metropolis; and her lack of artificiality sets her at the remotest extreme from the unnatural woman of modernity. Second, the novel presents Britta's journey to happiness as a result of these same personal qualities. Although the unhappiness of her rival is left open to interpretation in this particular text, the next novel to be analysed here leaves no such room for doubt.

Die Menschen nennen es Liebe (1921)

Komteß Pia Buchenau, the heroine of *Die Menschen nennen es Liebe*, provides a further example of Courths-Mahler's techniques of female characterization. In this novel's exceptionally convoluted plotline, Pia finds herself with a most bizarre rival: Liane von Brenken, who had been for a short period of time Graf Lothar Buchenau's second wife, i.e. Pia's stepmother, and then, as part of a confidence trick, the object of Hans von Ried's affections, the man to whom Pia becomes engaged. In a manner sure to delight followers of Bruno Bettelheim's theories on folk and fairy tales, Courths-Mahler contrives to conflate the stepmother and love rival into one person. Once again the author employs sets of opposites to ensure that her readership's sympathies lie with Pia, and Courths-Mahler's strategy of character construction opposes Pia not only to her immediate rival, Liane, but also to all aspects of modernity. She remains the very antithesis of the New Woman: "Es kennt sie jeder hier in der Umgegend, und alle haben sie gern, weil sie so *natürlich* und *kindlich* geblieben und auch zu den einfachsten Leuten freundlich und zutraulich ist" (Courths-Mahler 1995: 287, my emphasis). On other occasions the reader learns how Pia rejects modern fashions in favour of comfortable clothing (Courths-Mahler 1995: 299), how she would rather be out of doors than inside (Courths-Mahler 1995: 301), and how her hair is the very opposite of the 1920s *Bubikopf*, as Maria tells her: "Kind, du weißt gar nicht, daß der liebe Gott der Frau das Haar zum Schmuck gegeben hat. Und dich hat er in wahrhaft verschwenderischer Fülle mit dem herrlichsten Haar ausgestattet" (Courths-Mahler: 414).

Once again, Courths-Mahler emphasises the lack of artifice in Pia's appearance and in her character: "an ihr ist alles ursprünglich und *echt*"

(Courths-Mahler 1995: 323, my emphasis). As is the case with other heroines, Pia's lack of artifice is coupled with a total lack of self-awareness about her own beauty, as one can observe in the following example where the reader gains insight into Hans's thoughts: "Dieser junge Körper schien von seltener, edler Schönheit zu sein" (Courths-Mahler 1995: 335). Immediately following this sentence, the narrator then adds: "Pia ahnte nichts von seinen Gedanken" (Ibid.). Pia's rival, on the other hand, is at pains to make the most of the impact her physical appearance has on the men she meets: "Sie war blendend schön, und gehoben wurde ihre Erscheinung noch durch die vornehmsten und geschmackvollsten Kleider" (Courths-Mahler 1995: 373). Furthermore, as Pia is something of an *enfant sauvage*, imbued with strong associations with the natural world and little experience of the world beyond her father's estate, it is not surprising to find her naivety described in terms resembling Schiller's notion of "tender respect" ("rührende Achtung"), as for example in the following sentence: "Sie war sehr rührend in ihrer Unschuld und Unwissenheit" (Courths-Mahler 1995: 388). In this manner Courths-Mahler is able to establish simple but effective associations between, on the one hand, natural beauty and a genuine personality and, on the other, between artificially enhanced beauty and a treacherous personality.

Courths-Mahler's depiction of Liane as a confidence trickster further strengthens these associations. When Hans narrates his own experiences to Graf Buchenau, the author's choice of vocabulary to describe Liane underlines the artificial, constructed aspect of her beauty: "Die schöne Frau betrieb es als *Handwerk*, törichte Männer in ihre Netze zu ziehen" (Courths-Mahler 1995: 376, my emphasis). Hans's disillusionment with Liane in particular becomes representative of his distrust of the New Woman in general, as he makes explicit in the same speech: "Keiner Frau der großen Welt könnte ich je wieder vertrauensvoll mein Herz öffnen. Immer wieder würden Zweifel an der Echtheit ihres Wesens in mir aufsteigen. Nur Komteß Pia und ihre Eigenart, ihr ehrlicher, ursprünglicher Charakter flößten mir Vertrauen ein" (Courths-Mahler 1995: 378). This is a clear example of the link between physical appearance and moral character identified by Petersen: "In fictional representations from popular culture, it is the physical that reveals inner qualities and the body of the 'new' woman has been invested with contemporary discussions about virtue and wantonness" (Petersen 2001: 139). Contrasts between Pia and Liane continue throughout the novel until Pia and Hans have their reconciliation scene, which is set in the open countryside adjacent to a set of old Germanic ruins. Pia's self-comparisons with her rival reach their emotional lowpoint when she exclaims: "Was bin

ich für ein Nichts gegen diese wunderschöne Frau” (Courths-Mahler 1995: 558). However, Hans quickly replies with a point of view that Courths-Mahler asks the reader to accept as well: “Vergleiche dich nicht mit ihr, mein Liebling. Ihre äußere Schönheit ist der Deckmantel für die Häßlichkeit und Niedrigkeit ihrer Seele” (Courths-Mahler 1995: 558). Once again, the happy ending of romantic fiction serves here to strengthen the link between the natural woman and happiness.

Der verhängnisvolle Brief (1924)

Adding a further dimension to Courths-Mahler’s idealisation of natural beauty, the final text under consideration here takes its male hero, Hasso von Ried, on a journey from the streets of Berlin to Africa, before returning him to a large estate in pastoral Germany. The African settings allow Courths-Mahler to explore the contrasts between the familiar German and the exotic Other in a variety of ways. As might be expected, the two very different women who are attracted to Hasso are of central importance in this regard. Although they never appear together in the novel, they still manage to function as a pair of binary opposites, their contrasting characters encapsulated in their physical appearance. On the one side is Frau Ilona Deckmann, who is Brazilian by birth and, although already married, has her eyes set on Hasso. On the other is Carry von Hartenfels, the young German woman who will eventually become Hasso’s bride. The choice of a non-German woman allows Courths-Mahler to emphasise her exotic beauty, as one can observe in passages such as the following: “eine blendend schöne Erscheinung von lebhaftem, rassigem Temperament, mit flammenden schwarzen Augen und einem wundervollen pfirsichfarbenen Teint” (Courths-Mahler 1995: 79). These descriptions form a counterpart to the blonde, Germanic Carry with her “bright, shining eyes” (“hellen, leuchtenden Augen”) (Courths-Mahler 1995: 230).

While a woman’s torso was not a suitable object for lingering descriptions in Weimar popular romance, this restriction did not include the clothes covering the body. Here, Courths-Mahler uses clothing as a further emblem of difference between the two women, once again seeking to establish a contrast between natural and artificial beauty. This can be seen when Ilona appears wearing “a fantastic robe made of soft Indian silk, sumptuously embroidered” (“ein phantastisches Gewand aus weicher, indischer Seide mit reicher Stickerei”) (Courths-Mahler 1995: 103). The impact of this outfit is echoed in the narrative, which emphasises the artificiality of Ilona’s appearance through the comment: “Es

hatte wirklich alles einen *theatralischen* Anstrich” (Courths-Mahler 1995: 103, my emphasis). In contrast, Carry’s clothes function as a further emblem of her simple nature, as one can see in the descriptions of Carry’s outfit during the reconciliation scene towards the end of the novel: “Ein weichfallendes, *schlichtes* weißes Kleid fiel an ihrer schlanken Gestalt herab” (Courths-Mahler 1995: 250, my emphasis). This opposition between Carry and Ilona finds further reinforcement in the narrator’s characterization of Ilona’s residence, the so-called “Ilonafarm,” which again serves to link Ilona to the artificial: “Auf der Ilonafarm ist keine Eigenart, keine *Natur*” (Courths-Mahler 1995: 122, my emphasis). Carry’s characterization, by way of contrast, is subject to a repeated, leitmotif-like use of the almost archaic German adjective “hold,” as in Hasso’s declaration: “So etwas Frisches, Unberührtes ging von dir aus - du mein stolzes holdes Glück” (Courths-Mahler 1995: 212; for further details, see also pp. 227, 228, 253). Through this clearly differentiated approach to the two characters, Courths-Mahler depicts Carry as the embodiment of traditional German values, which the true German Hasso von Ried will choose over the superficially appealing figure of the exotic Other. When Hasso finally does marry Carry, he is quite literally marrying the girl next door: the Hartenfels estate lies directly next to his inherited estate at Marwedel.

Conclusion

It is surely no coincidence if, in Courths-Mahler’s novels, it is the genuine, natural woman – and not her false rival – who finds her way to a happy relationship with a male character. “Im allgemeinen jedoch, so auch die Schriftstellerin Courths-Mahler, klammern sich die Autoren an den ihrer Epoche und ihrem Milieu eigenen Zeitgeist, den sie wie einen Stempel dem auf Liebe sich gründenden Liebespaar aufdrücken” (Silbermann 1993: 81). For the Weimar era, this “Zeitgeist” was characterised by the fear that the modern, machine-like New Woman threatened the model of the normal heterosexual relationship within a traditional family unit. Courths-Mahler’s consistent privileging of the natural heroine over her rival suggests that only the natural woman is capable of achieving happiness. For Courths-Mahler’s many male readers, this argument offered a sense of reassurance. As Alphons Silbermann writes: “Fundamentale Gegebenheiten [...] werden dahingehend verstärkt und stabilisiert, daß sich angesichts ihrer Darstellung antisoziale Impulse, Beängstigungen und Frustrationen verlieren, um Zustände der Sicherheit und Bedeutung herbeizuführen” (Silbermann 1993: 79). For Courths-

Mahler's many female readers, the texts functioned as an admonition about the dangers of embracing the model of the New Woman too closely: only the natural woman achieves happiness. Of the three texts selected for study here, *Die Menschen nennen es Liebe* presents the clearest condemnation of the New Woman of Weimar modernity. The construction of Pia as the very embodiment of a way of life that seeks happiness in the natural world and in freedom from vanity stands opposed to that of a rival who, whilst superficially beautiful, remains treacherous and grasping underneath. Employing an aesthetic with roots in Schiller's discussion of the naïve personality, Courths-Mahler's romance novels, which typically force the hero to choose between two women, provided a vehicle for the propagation of a conservative rejection of the New Woman in favour of her more traditional antecedent.

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