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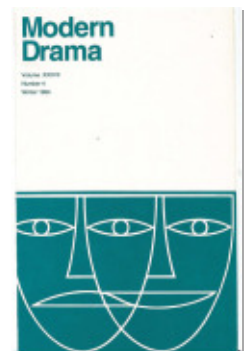
## Comparative Perspectives on Gender and Comedy: The Examples of Wilde, Hofmannsthal, and Ebner-Eschenbach

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# Comparative Perspectives on Gender and Comedy: The Examples of Wilde, Hofmannsthal, and Ebner-Eschenbach

GAIL FINNEY

As almost everyone is aware, fiction and poetry have received considerable attention in feminist criticism. By contrast, until recently drama has been largely neglected. This disparity has much to do with the relative absence of women in the theater world: as playwrights and directors, women were a very minor force until the last few decades. This state of affairs is closely bound up with the public nature of drama, in contrast to the more private genres of novel or poem; the writer of a play normally wants to see it produced, and the difficult access to theater as a public institution intimidated women for centuries. Moreover, for the greater part of theater history women were virtually invisible even as actors. In ancient Greece, as women became increasingly important in family life and correspondingly insignificant in the public arena, they were excluded from the stage; this practice was maintained throughout the Roman, medieval, and Elizabethan periods. Although the Italian *commedia dell'arte* began allowing women access in the sixteenth century, the legacy of the theater as a masculine institution has been far-reaching and powerful.

In keeping with this overall trend, the history of comedy has been the history of male comedy. William Congreve's infamous statement three hundred years ago that women lack a sense of humor<sup>1</sup> and the more recent claim of critic R.H. Blyth that women are "the unlaughing at which men laugh"<sup>2</sup> have been representative of the general male attitude toward female humor, or the lack thereof. As if in support of this sentiment, the majority of comic dramatists, comedians, and theorists of comedy have indeed been men. Yet given the ancient and long-standing assignment of "lower types" of characters to comedy, given its status as something to be, as Robert Torrance puts it, "not only laughed at, but laughed off,"<sup>3</sup> and – perhaps most importantly – given the thematic significance of male-female relations in comic drama, it is not surprising that the role of women in comedy has been greater than has been traditionally recognized.

Recent work, most notably by Judith Wilt, Judy Little, Nancy Walker, Regina Barreca, and Susan Carlson, has begun to reveal the contributions of women to British and American comedy as well as the critical biases which have suppressed these contributions until now. Foremost among these biases has been the role of expectation: women's humor has not been recognized and treated by the critical literature on comedy because it has not been expected. Judith Wilt's summary description of British male humor as an ideological construct can serve as a contrastive point of departure from which to talk about female humor. Wilt writes:

Women are only just beginning to realise that male humour has various functions, but none of them is intended to please or benefit them. It can be a bonding device, assisting male solidarity (and excluding women). It can be a smoke-screen, set up to dissipate an aura of good humour (distracting and deceiving women). Finally, it can be a form of assault, a teasing attack (putting women in that mythical region, their place). In any event it is used to avoid, to impede, or to deride the possibility of free equal relationships between men and women.<sup>4</sup>

This ideology – the ideology of male comedy – has traditionally been framed within a structure that proceeds from the established order to a disruption or inversion of this order to the restoration of the status quo at play's happy end, where all knots are unraveled and other knots – marital ones – are often tied. While women characters may be allowed great freedom and unconventionality in the course of a comedy's disruptive plot, they typically assume or resume traditional female roles by the close of the drama. As Susan Carlson writes, "Women are allowed their brilliance, freedom, and power in comedy only because the genre has built-in safeguards against such behaviour."<sup>5</sup> The ultimate thrust of British male comedy, in other words, is to support the established order.

British and American women's comedy presents us with a very different state of affairs. Rebellious against precisely these conventions of male comedy, comedy by women is typically inflammatory; it tends to be subversive, even destructive, of the status quo rather than affirmative of it; correspondingly, it emphasizes not closure and resolution but process and recognition; its destabilizing tendency does not typically produce joyous celebration or lead to a happy ending, yet humor is still present; in its rupturing of cultural and ideological frames it tends to avoid the didacticism of much male comedy and to promote a multiplicity of views (*Last Laughs*, 3-22).

What about the German situation? Answering this question necessitates looking first at the tradition of German comedy by men.<sup>6</sup> At this point an anecdote is in order: years ago a friend of mine who specialized in British literature was fond of saying, "You ought to write a book on German comedy: you'll be finished in a week." The dearth of comedy in Germany, the non-

comic nature of the Germans, has been bemoaned at least since the age of Goethe. It is after all one of the characters in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* who observes that "Germans are temperamentally inclined to treat everything seriously, and [to] being treated seriously by everything."<sup>7</sup> The stereotype of German earnestness is borne out by the critical literature on comedy. In his highly influential *Essay on Comedy* (1877) George Meredith has this to say about German humor:

The German literary laugh, like the timed awakenings of their Barbarossa in the hollows of the Untersberg, is infrequent, and rather monstrous – never a laugh of men and women in concert. It comes of unrefined, abstract fancy, grotesque or grim, or gross, like the peculiar humors of their little earthmen. Spiritual laughter they have not yet attained to; sentimentalism waylays them in the flight. Here and there a *volkslied* or *märchen* shows a national aptitude for stout animal laughter, and we see that the literature is built on it, which is hopeful so far; but to enjoy it, to enter into the philosophy of the broad grin that seems to hesitate between the skull and the embryo, and reaches its perfection in breadth from the pulling of two square fingers at the corners of the mouth, one must have aid of "the good Rhine wine," and be of German blood unmixed besides.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most important theoretical German-language works on the comic, Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), holds that a joke, which Freud defines as "the contribution made to the comic from the realm of the unconscious," is always tendentious: either exposing or obscene; aggressive or hostile; cynical, critical, or blasphemous; or skeptical.<sup>9</sup> In other words, for Freud, every joke contains an element of seriousness; a joke is never just a joke.

Returning to the drama per se, we find that one explanation for the poverty of German comedy holds simply that the German "attitude toward life" is "predominantly tragic."<sup>10</sup> In his landmark study of the tragicomedy, Karl Guthke characterizes a number of German plays traditionally designated comedies as tragicomedies, a synthetic genre in which the juxtaposition of tragic and comic elements intensifies each mode by contrast.<sup>11</sup> In a somewhat similar vein, Helmut Arntzen investigates what he calls the "serious comedy" – the German *Lustspiel* from Lessing to Kleist.<sup>12</sup> The thrust of all these evaluations is essentially the same: there is something not very comical about German comedy. But moving from the general to the specific, looking at some canonical German comedies individually, yields another perspective from which to view matters.

Beginning with Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767), one is struck, in this struggle of girl to win back proud boy, by the importance of regional stereotypes to the plot: Lessing plays up the contrast between the warm-hearted, somewhat romantic Minna, whose homeland is Saxony, and the Prussian Tell-

heim, whose actions are dominated to an obsessive degree by his rigid code of honor. Unlike the comedy of Britain, France, and other countries, which depends on nationally shared social values and cultural norms, German comedy before Bismarck, as the product of individual duchies or principalities (including those of the Austro-Hungarian empire) rather than of a single, cohesive nation, must remain provincial. More will be said on this subject later.

What about the convention of the happy ending, as established in British comedy by male writers? In this connection the memorable conclusion of Jakob M.R. Lenz's *Der Hofmeister* (*The Tutor*, 1774) comes to mind, in which the engagement of the young couple Fritz and Gustchen occurs against the grim background of Gustchen's tutor Läufer's self-castration in remorse for having seduced her. The traditional comic ending of engagement or matrimony is darkened in other German comedies as well. At the close of Heinrich von Kleist's *Amphitryon* (1807), the comic authenticity of Amphitryon's union with Alkmene is undermined by the viewer's knowledge of *her* tragedy: that she was unable to distinguish Amphitryon from the god Jupiter in Amphitryon's guise during a night of love. Similarly, Georg Büchner's so-called comedy *Leonce und Lena* (1842) is pervaded by a mood of melancholy and resignation, and the marriage ceremony of the royal title characters at the play's end depends on their obliviousness to the social misery around them. In yet another twist on the marital happy ending, the close of Max Frisch's *Don Juan oder Die Liebe zur Geometrie* (*Don Juan or The Love of Geometry*, 1962) finds the great seducer trapped in what has been characterized in the play as "true hell" – marriage – with fatherhood imminent.

These examples demonstrate the frequent resistance of German comedy to closure in harmonious matrimony. Other comedies, such as Gerhart Hauptmann's *Der Biberpelz* (*The Beaver Coat*, 1893), thwart closure altogether: at the drama's end the thefts committed remain unsolved; no criminals have been brought to justice. Little wonder that the audience at the play's première remained seated at the final curtain in anticipation of an additional act.

Reviewing this brief survey of German comedy by men, we make an intriguing discovery: it has much in common with women's comedy in the British and American traditions – a frequent de-emphasis on closure concomitant with a thwarting of the conventional happy ending, elements which subvert comic structure and hence the established order it reflects, and (regarding comedy up to the late nineteenth century), a provincialism analogous to the gender-specific nature of a good deal of women's humor. My point is neither to undermine the dichotomy between male and female humor in Britain and the United States nor to suggest that German comedy is somehow feminine, but rather to indicate that in the German tradition the parameters shift in accordance with the very different sociocultural background of the German-language realm.

I mentioned in connection with *Minna von Barnhelm* the phenomenon of particularism, or the existence of many small states in lieu of the single culture so crucial for the existence of national comedy. Comedy is the least universal of literary modes; as Barreca writes, "It is rigidly mapped and marked by subjectivity."<sup>13</sup> This is of course the familiar syndrome behind the existence of Polish jokes, Jewish jokes, jokes about lawyers, jokes about blondes, etc.; one has to be familiar with the stereotypes to "get" the joke. In the German-language realm, the lack of national cultural norms led (and still leads) to provincial humor – jokes about Bavarians, jokes about Swabians, jokes about East Friesians. Just as women have been marginalized vis-à-vis men in Britain and the United States, German male (and female) writers are marginalized vis-à-vis culturally cohesive and powerful nations like France and Britain.

A further important factor influencing the shape of comedy in Germany is its philosophical heritage. The traditions of linguistic skepticism and of German idealism, focusing on ethical and epistemological issues, give a more ponderous cast to much of German comedy and even comic theory; Freud for example cites Kant in defining the comic (12, 199). Finally, the cataclysmic effects of twentieth-century German politics must be mentioned in any consideration of twentieth-century German comedy. Although, as Carlson observes, twentieth-century comedy in general accommodates despair (16), it is only to be expected that the mode of black comedy would be especially pervasive in the country that played a significant role in both world wars and carried out the Holocaust. Both these features lead in the German-language realm to a subversion of the conventional comic mode that links it to contemporary women's British and American comedy; in both cases, the less comic a comedy is, the more subversive it is of the genre and hence of the common code of values on which the genre rests.

To clarify further, it is not my intention to deny the existence of differences between comedy by men and women in Germany, since differences clearly exist, but rather to suggest that the sociocultural peculiarities of the German-language realm should prevent us from wholeheartedly appropriating Anglo-American or other gender-based models to talk about German comedy. The descriptive model for German comedy, in other words, must take into account not only gender but also positionality.

Thus far women writers have played only a minimal role in the critical discourse on German comedy, as is reflected by Bernhard Greiner's recently published UTB volume entitled *Die Komödie*; this accomplished and original study, treating German comedy from Gryphius to Botho Strauß, does not deal with a single female author.<sup>14</sup> But work on women writers of comedy in the German-language realm is beginning to be done, and it is at this work that my remarks are directed, in the hope of steering us away from easy distinctions and pat analogies – a hope I share with contemporary women's comedy.

To make this abstract mode more concrete I would like to highlight three examples, Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895); Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Der Schwierige* (*The Difficult Man*, 1921), widely regarded as the finest modern German comedy;<sup>15</sup> and Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's *Ohne Liebe* (*Without Love*, 1891). All three plays are set at the turn of the century, all treat the aristocracy, and all share the classic comic plot, the pursuit of marital union. However, the titles of the three plays lead the reader or viewer to expect a significant anti-comic element: earnestness, difficulty, and the absence of love, respectively. These elements provide a useful vantage point from which to look at the less obvious similarities and differences among the three dramas, produced by the above-mentioned factors of gender and socio-cultural milieu.

In these comedies of manners by Wilde and Hofmannsthal, the concepts of earnestness and difficulty are bound up with attitudes toward language conveyed by the two plays. In the farcical world of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which Auden called "perhaps the only pure verbal opera in English,"<sup>16</sup> the word is all-powerful, and emphasis is placed not on the "vertical" relationship between word and referent, between signifier and signified, but on the horizontal dynamics among words, the way they interact to form witty puns, paradoxes, and aphorisms. The linguistic game-playing so favored by Wilde's two dandies, Algernon Moncrieff and John (Jack) Worthing, is of course at the heart of the play's central pun: the only earnestness here lies in the homophonous name "Ernest," which Jack assumes in town to live a "life of pleasure,"<sup>17</sup> in contrast to his more reserved life in the country as Jack. "Ernest" is thus an empty signifier in a double sense: not only is it a false name (or at least so we think at the time), but its homophonic cousin "earnest" is an inaccurate, even inverse, designation for the persona it names. Much of the play's comic effect stems from such inversions or paradoxes.

This social set is not disturbed by the disparity between surface and substance which Wilde takes such pleasure in poking fun at; indeed surface is all. As Algernon's cousin and Jack's fiancée Gwendolen advises, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing" (301); the summary statement of her mother, Lady Bracknell, is even more to the point: "We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces" (304). Accordingly, the signifying name becomes omnipotent, acquiring for the play's characters the power to force its image onto the object it labels as well as onto its homophonous equivalent. Refusing to believe that the man he has always known as Ernest is really called Jack, Algernon insists that "You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life" (257). And both Gwendolen and Jack's ward Cecily, with whom Algernon becomes enamored, reveal that they have always longed to marry a man named Ernest, "The only really safe name" (264) and a name with something "that seems to inspire absolute confidence" (288). Given the



play's farcical character, it is not surprising that both Algernon and Jack decide to "resurface" themselves to conform to the ideal of the girls they want to marry by having themselves christened Ernest.

When this process is rendered unnecessary by the revelation that Jack really had been named Ernest as a baby before being inadvertently lost in Victoria Station, he is symbolically reborn as the person he has been posing as. Once substance corresponds to surface, the comic effect dissolves and the comedy must end. It is this emphasis on surface, which at least appears to be the sole level on which the play is operating, that has led scholars like Adolf Barth to write of the "seeming lack of any serious issue"<sup>18</sup> and has produced summary descriptions such as the following one from a theater program: "A witty and playful comedy, with no apparent purpose besides fun."

Hofmannsthal's Count Hans Karl Bühl is as "difficult" as Wilde's so-called Ernest is not earnest. Where Wilde's dandies intend to transform themselves in name only by being rechristened, at the outset of the play Hans Karl, on the threshold of his watershed fortieth birthday, genuinely seems about to start "ein neues Leben"<sup>19</sup> ("a new kind of life"),<sup>20</sup> as his new servant formulates it. Hans Karl's sense of being at a turning point also stems from his survival of the First World War, from which he has recently returned. Yet as has often been noted, Hofmannsthal gives the play the trappings of turn-of-the-century Vienna, complete with references to the Hapsburg monarchy, and his characters belong to an aristocracy which the war had done away with.<sup>21</sup> The anachronism seems intended to underline the contrast between postwar Vienna, which Hofmannsthal saw to be characterized by a leveling of class, taste, and values, and the Viennese nobility of *la belle époque*. In any case, his use of Viennese dialect in particular reflects the provincialism of German comedy, alluded to above.

Ascribing a special value to his wartime experiences, Hans Karl several times refers to the changes they have wrought in him: "Es ist draußen viel für mich anders geworden" (II, x) ("At the front many things came to look different to me" [742]). Where Wilde's Ernest is earnest only in name or word, the war has made Hofmannsthal's protagonist genuinely sensitive and reflective, "difficult." Correspondingly, Hans Karl values language and does not use it lightly, claiming, "Durchs Reden kommt ja alles auf der Welt zustande" (II, xiv) ("For everything in the world is set in motion by words" [759]). And yet, reflecting the linguistic skepticism so prominent in the German-Austrian tradition in general and in Hofmannsthal in particular, Hans Karl repeatedly laments the misunderstandings caused by words and as a result often prefers to remain silent.

The differences between the farcical comedy of Wilde and Hofmannsthal's more philosophical, reflective brand of comedy are unwittingly anticipated by Gwendolen's admonishment in *Earnest* that "This is not the moment for German scepticism" (301). Unlike Wilde's characters, who are more interested in



the playful relationships among words than in the relationships between words and referents, the skeptical Hans Karl Bühl agonizes over the gap between words and their meanings, between what words connote or suggest and what they are meant to signify. It is no accident that Hans Karl's favorite is a local clown, who is able to enchant his audiences with mime and gestures, without resorting to language.<sup>22</sup>

Although the distinct sociocultural milieus which produced the comedy of Wilde and Hofmannsthal lead to differing attitudes toward language and corresponding differences of tone and mood, the common gender of the two writers is reflected in some striking similarities. Prominent among these is the tendency to place sweeping generalizations about the sexes into the mouths of their characters. A few examples will illustrate this device. Attempting early in *Earnest* to moderate Jack's hope that he will win Gwendolen, Algernon observes that "girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right" (256). Algernon later comments that "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his" (270). In a statement laden with paradox and veiled autobiographical significance, Gwendolen quips that "The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive" (290).<sup>23</sup> Although such gender generalizations are typically meant humorously or ironically, they nevertheless serve to focus surface attention on clearly demarcated sex roles, i.e., on sexual difference.

In *The Difficult Man* as well, such absolute generalizations about the sexes abound and are made by both male and female characters. Hans Karl's sister Crescenz insists that "Aber Männer sind doch nie so verliebt" (I, iii) ("But men are never so much in love as all that" [654]), just as other women characters stereotypically claim that "Die Männer sind ja natürlich sehr terre à terre" (II, vi) ("Of course men are very *terre à terre*" [738]) and that "So müssen doch Frauen sein, der Moment ist ja alles" (II, xiv) ("that's what women should be like, since the moment is everything" [762-63]). In like fashion, Hans Karl's rival Neuhoff speaks of women as people "die im Grunde zwischen einer leeren Larve und einem Mann von Bedeutung nicht zu unterscheiden wissen" (II, ii) ("who cannot tell the fundamental difference between an empty mask and a man of weight and standing" [728]). Insofar as the characters of Wilde and Hofmannsthal act according to the script of their own gender generalizations, they offer a heightened manifestation of Judith Butler's conception of gender as performance: "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. ... As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority."<sup>24</sup> In these comedies, gender is performed in a double sense, to the second power, as it were: by the actors who create male and female roles, and by the charac-

ters they portray, performing according to their scripted generalizations about the sexes.

In Ebner-Eschenbach's turn-of-the-century one-act comedy *Without Love*, such generalizations are striking by their absence. Although best known for her realist fiction, this aristocratic Austrian writer (1830-1916), who in 1900 was considered the foremost woman writing in German, was a devotee of the theater from an early age and tried her hand at a number of plays. As mentioned, like *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Difficult Man*, the title *Without Love* signals an element antithetical to comedy, in this case a state opposed to the conventional comic ending of marriage or engagement. Looking at the three comedies in terms of their attitudes toward marriage and, concomitantly, of their endings, will provide the clearest illustration of the national and gender-based differences in comedy outlined in the first part of this essay.

Analysis of the marriage issue in *Earnest* requires careful comparison of the body of the play with its conclusion. Many of Algernon's witticisms take comic stabs at the institution of matrimony, such as his dry observation that "in married life three is company and two is none" – a truth proven by the "happy English home" (260) – or his claim that "Divorces are made in Heaven" (255). Yet he falls in love with and proposes to Cecily within an hour of meeting her. That she has already been engaged to him for three months, or to the fantasy conception of him which Jack's stories have created in her mind, speaks for itself as a comic comment on the depth of motivations for marriage. A classic farcical comedy, *Earnest* portrays the lovers' struggles to reach the altar but only dimly intimates the trials that lie beyond it. The three happy couples on stage at the play's final curtain stand as graphic testimony to Katharine Worth's statement that "Only in Utopia can this [perfect] harmony be achieved; in theatrical terms that meant farce."<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to the flash-decision engagements so typical of comic endings and epitomized by *Earnest*, the marriage between Hans Karl Bühl and Countess Helene Altenwyl envisioned at the end of *The Difficult Man* rests on a much more solid foundation, thus flying in the face of comic convention. In this respect too, as with regard to tone, mood, and attitude toward language, in Hofmannsthal comedy is problematized, darkened, made more "difficult."

Quite unlike Wilde's dandies, who make superficial social contacts with ease and speed and break them as readily, Hans Karl has developed an antipathy to social gatherings and is reluctant to form friendships, since for him they penetrate more deeply and therefore lead to a certain vulnerability. Whereas his nephew Stani, reminiscent of Wilde's Algernon, makes the decision to marry Helene in the time it takes to ascend a flight of stairs, Hans Karl gives the same question a great deal of thought, having sustained himself through the war's worst moments with the fantasy that Helene was his wife. The earnestness with which he views marriage bursts the bounds of conventional

comedy; marriage is for him “das Institut ... das aus dem Zufälligen and Unreinen das Notwendige, das Bleibende und das Gültige macht” (II, x) (“the institution that binds chance and promiscuity into what is necessary and permanent and valid” [744]), “zwei Menschen, die ihr Leben aufeinanderlegen und werden wie *ein* Mensch” (II, xiv) (“two human beings who join their lives together and become *one*” [766]).

Similarly, in contrast to the love of Wilde’s Cecily for Algernon as the phantom brother of Jack’s tales, Helene’s feelings for Hans Karl are based on years of actual experience with him. Her unorthodox confession of love reveals her desire for her “part” of him rather than for possession of him, a desire in keeping with a love based on a friendship she characterizes as of “unimaginable” proportions (III, viii). We are far here from the love-at-first-sight motif so central to conventional comedy. Correspondingly, Helene shares Hans Karl’s skepticism toward language, describing conversation as “Worte, die alles Wirkliche verflachen und im Geschwätz beruhigen” (II, i) (“words that flatten everything real under a dead layer of soothing syrup” [713]). The countercurrent to classic comedy running through Hofmannsthal’s play is perhaps best summed up in Hans Karl’s declaration that he and Helene “are not playing” (II, i) – a claim that points up the seriousness which contrasts so markedly with the lightness of the play whose title would seem to validate earnestness.

Ebner’s *Without Love* also depicts the world of the fin-de-siècle Viennese nobility, yet without anachronism. Especially when seen in the light of *Earnest* and *The Difficult Man*, this play can be said to demonstrate a double provincialism or marginalization – of both culture and gender. Like a number of Ebner’s other plays, *Without Love* focuses not on the wives or brides-to-be of conventional comedy but introduces another class of women to the forefront of drama: elderly, single, divorced, or abandoned female figures. Although the unmarried Emma of *Without Love*, who at twenty-four considers herself an old maid, has been courted for three years by the stuffy mama’s boy Count Rüdiger, in uncomic fashion his marital aspirations remain unrequited by play’s end. Indeed it is Emma’s grandmother, designated simply as “The Countess,” who is enthralled with Rüdiger rather than Emma herself, and most of his courting is displaced onto the elderly lady. On Emma’s birthday he brings flowers to the Countess, and when Emma points out to her old flame Count Marko that her engagement to Rüdiger is only a rumor, Rüdiger suggests that it is the Countess who hinders their union. In fact it is his role as the “Verführer aller Großmütter”<sup>26</sup> (“seducer of all grandmothers”), as Emma disdainfully calls him, which stands in the way.

In the end it is not Rüdiger to whom Emma becomes engaged but her cousin Marko, the only man she has ever loved. Yet although she claims to have loved him in the past like a bridegroom, he loved her like a sister and married her friend instead. Now that his wife has died, he returns with his

young daughter to undertake a different kind of marriage with Emma. In contrast to conventional comedy, Marko's descriptions of his former wife's behavior emphasize the dark potential of romantic love – its possessiveness, its jealousy, its smothering and stultifying effects. Having obviously suffered under his wife's insecurities and lack of trust in him, he denounces love as an "illness" (726) and bemoans the fact that literature and art devote so much attention to unhappy lovers while neglecting those who are unhappily loved.

Unlike Wilde's, Marko's "jokes" about marriage are not funny. When the Countess predicts that Rüdiger's moodiness will fade away once he is married, Marko cynically remarks that he (Marko) knows what fades after marriage. When Emma explains that she cannot marry Rüdiger because she does not love him, Marko counters that lack of love is no hindrance to matrimony. Accordingly, Marko now seeks in Emma a "good comrade" for his heart (727). Reflecting the feminist sympathies of Ebner herself, in accepting Marko's unconventional proposal Emma asserts her desire to be his equal partner in life and his first authority in all matters within her ken.<sup>27</sup> Marko insists that he is marrying not out of love but out of deep respect; Emma gives as her reason insurmountable liking. The ultimate emphasis here is not on sexual difference, as is the case with the gender generalizations of Wilde and Hofmannsthal, but on sexual parity.

Thus is the play's title fulfilled, as the curtain falls on a union without love – without romantic love and the jealousy and possessiveness it so often brings. Hence *Without Love* goes even further in subverting the conventional comic ending than *The Difficult Man* with its wholly serious emphasis on the importance of friendship in marriage. Ebner replaces the regional provincialism of Hofmannsthal's play, clearly embedded in the fin-de-siècle Viennese aristocracy and participating in the tradition of linguistic skepticism so prominent in German-language culture, with the "gender provincialism" of her feminine and feminist vision, eschewing a light-hearted treatment of romance in favor of a penetrating look at the psychosexual dynamics of love relationships. Although only three examples, drawn from three rich theatrical traditions, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Difficult Man*, and *Without Love* may therefore serve as paradigmatic points on a spectrum of comic drama whose interpretation will ideally be illuminated by this broadened, comparative perspective.

#### NOTES

- 1 William Congreve, "Concerning Humour in Comedy," in *Theories of Comedy*, ed. Paul Lauter (Garden City, N.Y., 1964), 212–13.
- 2 R.H. Blyth, *Humour in English Literature: A Chronological Anthology* (1959; Folcroft, Pa., 1970), 15.
- 3 Robert M. Torrance, *The Comic Hero* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 2.

- 4 Quoted by Regina Barreca, "Introduction," *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Barreca (New York, 1988), 7. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text.
- 5 Susan Carlson, *Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition* (Ann Arbor, 1991), 17. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text.
- 6 Throughout this essay I use the word "German" to mean "written in the German language" – to refer, in other words, to Austrian and Swiss literature as well as to German literature per se.
- 7 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, ed. and trans. Eric A. Blackall, in cooperation with Victor Lange (New York, 1989), 166.
- 8 In *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, N.Y., 1956), 30–31.
- 9 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York, 1960), 208, 115. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text.
- 10 Otto C.A. zur Nedden and Karl H. Ruppel, *Reclams Schauspielführer* (Stuttgart, 1954), 756.
- 11 Karl Guthke, *Geschichte und Poetik der deutschen Tragikomödie* (Göttingen, 1961).
- 12 Helmut Arntzen, *Die ernste Komödie: Das deutsche Lustspiel von Lessing bis Kleist* (Munich, 1968). For a detailed systematization of the definitions of comedy and of the literature on German comedy, see Wolfgang Trautwein, "Komödientheorien und Komödie: Ein Ordnungsversuch," *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft*, 27 (1983), 86–122.
- 13 Regina Barreca, "Making Trouble: An Introduction," in *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Barreca (Philadelphia, 1992), 2.
- 14 Bernhard Greiner, *Die Komödie. Eine theatralische Sendung: Grundlagen und Interpretationen* (Tübingen, 1992).
- 15 Hans Steffen, "Hofmannsthals Gesellschaftskomödie 'Der Schwierige,'" in *Das deutsche Lustspiel*, vol. 2, ed. Steffen (Göttingen, 1969), 125.
- 16 W.H. Auden, "An Improbable Life," in *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969), 136.
- 17 Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *Plays* (Harmondsworth, 1954), 280 (the three-act version); subsequent passages will be followed by page reference to this edition.
- 18 Adolf Barth, "Oscar Wilde's 'Comic Refusal': A Reassessment of *The Importance of Being Earnest*," *Archiv*, 216 (1979), 121.
- 19 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Der Schwierige* (Frankfurt, 1956), Act I, scene i; subsequent passages will be followed by act and scene number in parentheses.
- 20 *The Difficult Man*, trans. Willa Muir, in Hofmannsthal, *Selected Plays and Libretti*, ed. Michael Hamburger (New York, 1963), 639; subsequent translated passages will be followed by page reference to this edition, from which they will be either taken or adapted.
- 21 For a survey of the treatment of this anachronism in Hofmannsthal scholarship, see

- Walter Pape, "'Ah, diese chronischen Mißverständnisse!'" Hugo von Hofmannsthal: 'Der Schwierige,'" in *Deutsche Komödien: Vom Barock bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Winfried Freund (Munich, 1988), 210–11.
- 22 Moving beyond the issue of linguistic skepticism in Hofmannsthal, Thomas Heine contrasts the unreliability of verbal communication in the play with the force of gestures, which in their spontaneity and avoidance of verbal communication prove capable of expressing genuine feelings. "The Force of Gestures: A New Approach to the Problem of Communication in Hofmannsthal's *Der Schwierige*," *German Quarterly*, 56 (1983), 408–18.
- 23 For a perceptive discussion of the play's homoerotic subtext and its undermining of heterosexual representation, see Christopher Craft, "Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*," *Representations*, 31 (Summer 1990), 19–46.
- 24 Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore, 1990), 270–82; here, 278–79.
- 25 Katharine Worth, *Oscar Wilde* (London, 1983), 153.
- 26 Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach, *Ohne Liebe*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, (Berlin, 1920), 2:709; subsequent quotations will be followed by page number. Translations are my own.
- 27 On Ebner's relationship to the nineteenth-century women's movement, see for example Helga H. Harriman, "Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach in Feminist Perspective," *Modern Austrian Literature*, 18 (1985), 27–38.