

**The Feminine Beast: Anti-moral Morality in  
Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Literature**

Dorothee Ostmeier  
University of Oregon

*Texts of the early Twentieth Century link animalism, gender struggles, and issues of identity in their stark critique of bourgeois gender ideology. This essay places selected texts by Bertolt Brecht and Frank Wedekind in the center of this debate as they elaborate on Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of the Western nature/culture divide and his animal imagery. For Brecht, corruption of bourgeois value systems, including gender concepts, undermines any possibility for an authentic lifestyle, whereas Wedekind – a generation earlier – explores the corruptibility of authenticity itself.*

*Dorothee Ostmeier is Professor of German and Folklore, and Participating Faculty of Comparative Literature and Women and Gender Studies at the University of Oregon. Her research and teaching focuses on the border areas between German literatures, culture and philosophies of the 18th to the 21st centuries. She has published two books. One discusses Nobel Price laureate Nelly Sachs' cryptic dramatic writings, which she composed after escaping Nazi persecution in 1941. Ostmeier situates Sachs' oeuvre within the ongoing debate on obsessive memory in the face of the universal disappearance of idealist utopias. The other book analyzes gender tensions in poetic dialogues between lovers in the early Twentieth Century demonstrating how these texts radically anticipate gender discourses of the late twentieth century. Her interest in fantasy and the uncanny tackle the moves from utopian to anti-utopian tales and have inspired essays, focusing on the Brothers' Grimm, ETA Hoffmann's, Michael Ende's and Cornelia Funke's fantasy texts, and the film "Ever After." These essays interrogate the borders between reality and fiction and expose the psychological and social risks of crossing such borders. Ostmeier views the fascination with such risks as a desire for an ethics that evades the violence of authoritative structures.*

**Introduction**

The *Moritat* of Bertolt Brecht's 1928 *The Threepenny Opera* summarizes the tensions between the human and animal that determine the plot of the opera.<sup>1</sup> While suggesting that bourgeois morality distinguishes humans from animals, the opera also critiques the biased criteria of such distinctions. In the tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche's reflections on morality, Brecht as well as Wedekind view

morality itself as the major crime.<sup>2</sup> They explore the crucial and disturbing implications of bourgeois gendered morality for individuality and society. By adopting Friedrich Nietzsche's idealization of the beast—and especially the human beast—as the animal that is free from moral constraints, they explore the tensions between the oppressive power of morality, the submissiveness it demands, and the challenges of liberating oneself from it. While searching for alternatives to moral suppression they point to the disturbing intimate link between moral law and gender stereotypes.

In the “Vorspiel” of *The Threepenny Opera* Macheath, a gang leader dressed in elegant bourgeois attire listens to a murder ballad that ironically presents Macheath's own crimes:

See the shark with teeth like razors.  
All can read his open face.  
And Macheath has got a knife, but  
Not in such an obvious place.<sup>3</sup>

Animals show and perform what they are. They do not submit to a split between being and appearance, “*Sein und Schein*,” outside and inside, theatricality and performativity, and intention from bodily presence; they do not know shame, as Derrida has argued in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Derrida associates shame with knowing oneself, that is, with self-consciousness. He writes:

He would be a man only to the extent that he was able to be naked, that is to say, to be ashamed, to know himself to be ashamed because he is no longer naked. And knowing *himself* would mean knowing himself to be ashamed. On the other hand, because the animal is naked without consciousness of being naked, it is thought that modesty remains as foreign to it as does immodesty. As does the knowledge of self that is involved in that (Derrida 5).

Derrida distinguishes between the animal's authenticity in being naked and the human's awareness of it. Human reflections of the naked body are associated with shame and modesty. While animals expose their authenticity, civilized humans are accustomed to covering up parts of themselves. Brecht addresses these issues in moral terms and identifies the split between authentic and non-authentic lifestyles as creating the potential for crime. In fact, an authentic lifestyle is not at all possible in the context of bourgeois society. Animals express the danger they represent (we can certainly also associate here the danger of the tiger in the film *Life of Pi*) whereas humans hide the danger and the crime that is part of human social life as well as of their sex life. Moral discourses are engrained in our psyche, as are their sense of justice, their awareness of moral conventions, and the so-called crime of violating them. However, Brecht's critique of bourgeois society redefines crime and identifies moral discourses themselves as corrupt. There is no bourgeois life without crime. Bourgeois concepts of morality, especially Christian concepts, are totally undermined by Brecht's deep-rooted and mostly satirical interrogation of the concept of criminality itself.<sup>4</sup> While Brecht takes issue with morality and crime, Wedekind introduces figures of amorality. The following discussion disentangles this amorality from the limitations of moral discourses in order to create space for their alternative discourse of authenticity.

Animals are beyond morality, while men are consciously or unconsciously controlled by it. Men hide their crimes in order to adhere to social and moral codes as they are represented by Mac's bourgeois requisites: white gloves, cane and hat; white gloves cover his "bloody" hands, and the hat and cane project a conventional bourgeois outlook on life. Peachum's business is another example of social corruption: as an antagonist to Macheath he organizes and equips the beggars who appear to work for his so-called "established" business. This business is built on theatricality and performativity: signs with moralistic slogans, biblical quotes, and the calculated effects of the beggars' outfits trick the naïve

middle class into giving money to the beggars. Theatrical skills are the basis here for moral deception.<sup>5</sup>

### **Brecht's Animalistic Metaphors**

Brecht illustrates these deceptive social strategies when he also exposes the deceptions that mark gender relations: Peachum exploits the erotic attraction of his daughter's legs to distract customers from his deceptive business practices, and Macheath uses his marriage to Polly to ascend the social ladder. Males exploit women for economic profit, and, in the case of prostitution, for the satisfaction of their drives and desires. This kind of exploitative politics also informs conventional marriages as Brecht argues in the sonnet "On Kant's Definition of Marriage in *The Metaphysic of Morals*."<sup>6</sup> He refers to Kant's claim: "*Sexual union (commercium sexuelle)* is the reciprocal use that one human being makes of the sexual organs and capacities of another (*usus membrorum et facultatum sexualium alterius*)... Sexual union in accordance with principle is *marriage (matrimonium)*, that is, the union of two persons of different sexes for lifelong possession of each other's sexual attributes" (Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 96).<sup>7</sup> Prompted by Kant's proposal that marriage guarantees the rights to sex with one's partner, Brecht concludes:

That pact for reciprocity in use  
Of sexual organs and worldly possessions  
Which marriage meant for him, in my submission  
Urgently needs securing from abuse (Poems 1913-1956, 312).

As long as Kant's definition informs the bourgeois legal system it inscribes prostitution, a legal sexual relationship, into marriage law. For Brecht, Kant seems to be the placeholder for Western bourgeois morality. He reduces marriage to the objectification and commodification of the human body. By polemically exposing this phallic logic of the legal system Brecht insists on the

necessity to check wedding contracts more carefully. For the skeptic they not only present total disillusionment with all concepts of idealistic love but also disparage the contract as a document that promotes exploitative relationships. Brecht polemically explores this definition further when he refers to the withdrawal of sex by one partner in a marriage as a legal issue:

I gather certain partners have defaulted.  
 They have recently — and I think that this is not a lie —  
 Withheld their sexual organs:  
 There are loopholes in the net and they are wide.<sup>8</sup>

The “I” satirically suggests soliciting the court to confiscate the organs. By taking the materialism in Kant’s approach literally the “I” exposes the absurdity of approaching the body as possession. *The Threepenny Opera* reinforces this critique of marriage as an exploitative bourgeois institution through female antagonist action. The following two examples not only challenge the status quo of morality but also gesture towards an alternative to morality, towards a thought-provoking amoral morality.

Example 1: Polly’s wedding song promotes the brutal revenge of the oppressed with the association of worker and woman: the proletariat as the exploited female and the female as exploited proletariat. Polly, the bride, figures herself as a maid in a pub. Her song “Pirate Jenny” interrupts her own wedding celebration by articulating the revolutionary and destructive threats that inform secretly the minds and the actions of the suppressed, the woman or the female worker. In her refrain she warns the male audience:

But one of these evenings there will be screams from the harbor  
 And they’ll ask: what can all that screaming be?  
 And they’ll see me smiling as I do the glasses  
 And they’ll say: how she can smile beats me.

And a ship with eight sails and  
All its fifty guns loaded  
Has tied up at the quay. (Brecht, *Collected Plays 2*, 164-165)

The song presents a threat to the conventional order, a threat that is hidden and not obvious to the exploitative society. In fact, it lingers in the repressed, in the unspoken or not yet spoken, and thus functions in the same way as the hidden knife that the ballad/*Moritat* introduces. Jenny's smile hides its real reason, she is aware of her customers' ignorance in the face of her strategic plans for revenge. She knows: "And you see me dressed in tatters, and this tatty old hotel // And you never ask how long I'll take it" (Brecht 164). The customers see but don't know the implications of their superficial seeing, namely the female revenge that their suppressive ignorance evokes. This revenge has been quietly languishing before its articulation as a warning song.<sup>9</sup> Brecht uses the general present tense in order to show the timelessness of these silent exchanges. By articulating the smile's subversive silence, the song exposes the hidden secret of the smile's threat. This gesture of the song undoes all legal, conventional and sentimental concepts of morality. What on a first glance sounds like a brutal challenge to the moral code has to be seen as a moral gesture in itself, as the anti-moral of morality it disrupts and provokes by revealing the psychological, social and political consequences of oppressive arrogance and self-assurance. Brecht's so-called alienation effect is here semantically charged as a moral effect: it is not only a formal interruption, but also a gesture that points to oppression as a destructive power of silencing. Polly's entertainment of the wedding party turns into moral didactics: but instead of enunciating positivistic law it opens up the space of silence as the space of unexpected powers of destruction. By applying the imaginary logic of the *Moritat* one could argue that Polly presents the shark that exposes two threats in this context: the threat of the labor force and the threat that is a component of every marriage contract.

Example 2: Brecht also suggests another direction of subversive politics, namely collaborative solidarity. At one point Lucy and Polly, both lovers of Macheath, show female solidarity against the exploitation by their lover. In their dialogue in act 3, part 8 they both overcome slowly—although only for a short time—their hostility towards each other:

Polly: I'm so happy to have found such a good friend at the end of this tragedy...

Lucy: ....Oh, Polly, men aren't worth it.

Polly: Of course, men aren't worth it (Brecht 214).

This is another example of Brecht's antithetical experimentation with the psychology of relationships. A couple of years later Margarete Steffin, Brecht's actual lover and collaborator, associates the issue of solidarity with its underlying revenge in the sonnet that she sent him in a letter from Paris in 1933:

imagine: all women you seduced once  
come to your bed...

all are standing there strict and quiet.  
each wants from you tonight  
her fun,....

I see myself in this row  
I see myself going to you without shame  
and there you lie poor, sick, and pale.<sup>10</sup>

The abused lovers sadistically victimize their exploiter. They prostitute their former lover by viewing him as nothing more than a sex object. Brecht's and

Steffin's didactic warnings point to the gruesome sadism that ignorance in social life and the private, intimate sphere can provoke.

These tensions between sexual exploitation and revenge demonstrate the social and psychological fringes of bourgeois morality. By confronting these taboo topics Brecht's opera and Steffin's poem conjure up morality's repressed violence. The texts expose troubling questions of the modernist agenda: How does one break with bourgeois ethical norms and stereotypes without being unethical? What are the implications of exposing the shark's teeth—and not hiding them—or the knife, as Mac does? What are the challenges of a life that constantly encounters threats, the life-threatening presence of the human beast? These questions are at the root of modernism's debates at the beginning of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in gender discourses. The visible threats, the teeth, and the knives unveil the comforts of morality. The poetic dialogue between Margarete Steffin and Bertolt Brecht circles around this issue: the desire for independence and liberation from marriage institutions and love conventions on one side, and the pain of losing the security and stability that these institutions and conventions provide, on the other.<sup>11</sup> How should we think, act and relate to each other outside of bourgeois moral constraints? By exposing the a-morality of morality, Brecht—in the tradition of Wedekind and Nietzsche—opens up the space for psychological and social negotiations of anti-morality.





Figure 1: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Die Scham*, date uncertain, oil on cardboard, 68 x 72 cm, private collection.

The imprint of moral discourses onto the psyche is also explored in Wedekind's work, in his investigations of shame and ignorance as the upshot of morality's suppressive violence in Frau Bergmann's repressed sexuality in *Spring's Awakening*, and of the implications of being shameless in the figures of Ilse and Lulu. Focusing on the expressionist fascination with the figure of the nude, art historian Sherwin Simmons comments in his essay "Allusions of Such a Pure Female: Ernst Kirchner's Images of Marzella" on the social pressures that underlie shame. Kirchner's painting, entitled "Shame," reflects on seeing and its exploitation of the seen. The on-looking masks observe how the girl covers her eyes. They see the "not seeing." While the masks intrude into the comforts of her intimacy and publicize the private, "Shame" here is presented as blinding herself and withdrawing into purely bodily presence. She shows the wounding powers of

the exploitative, scopophilic glance. The pornographic aspects of this act have critical—perhaps moral—functions. By exposing the vulnerable nakedness of the exploited object, the “other” is isolated and alienated from conversation and dialogue, and “Shame” is pushed into the sphere of pre- or post-linguistic silence. This silence has the potential to turn into the brewing agency of revenge, of vulnerable withdrawal or other reactions. According to Derrida, shame is based on the human need for clothing. It expresses the sense of decency and provokes evil,<sup>12</sup> psychological and cultural turmoil and corruption. Wedekind certainly tackles these issues in his *Spring's Awakening* and *Lulu* dramas, texts admired by Brecht.

Simmons also links this image to Wedekind's short novel, *Mine Haha oder Über die körperliche Erziehung der jungen Mädchen*, that presents troubling tensions between the utopian ideal of female adolescent nudity, its aesthetics and its vulnerability to brutal exploitation by male voyeurism.<sup>13</sup> A fictional female narrator reveals her disquieting and—at the same time—riveting upbringing in a pedagogical enclave whose educational mission is built on fostering dance, movement, and enthrallment with the naked body, thereby detaching the girls from feelings of shame. “We could distinguish each other only because of bodily differences. If one of us said ‘I’ then she referred to herself as bodily presence from head to toe. We felt ourselves more in legs and feet than in eyes and fingers. I do not remember how any of the girls talked. I know only how each walked” (Wedekind. *Mine Haha*, 5.2:864, trans. by author).<sup>14</sup> The girls developed their bodily authenticity and were trained not to be aware of their nakedness. They were detached from any rational awareness of their psychological self, their identity, subjectivity and/or personality, and thus exhibited—to speak with Derrida—the shamelessness of animal behavior. However, the girls' naïve identification with the physical grace of pre-puberty and is brutally disillusioned with the onset of menstruation. At that point the girls have to leave the enclave and are reintegrated into the conventions of patriarchal society. These memories are the last expressions of the narrator before she commits suicide, failing to accept the

shame that results from a guilty conscience. This problem of accepting shame is the issue Derrida addresses so strongly later in the 20th century.

Wedekind points here to the dilemma of the adolescent girl being caught in the alternative liberalization of the body from bourgeois moral constraints on the one hand and the impossibility to escape from them in the long term on the other. Such troubling ambiguity is also engrained in Kirchner's painting. The imaginable comfort of Shame's relaxed position clashes with her backwards glance and her covered eyes, indicating her vulnerability to the onlookers' gazes even as she attempts to deflect them. Shame covers her eyes while she is totally exposed to the bizarre glances of the masks.

Wedekind also expresses such tensions between female exploitation and liberation in the context of animal imagery. What is the status of animality? Does it promote freedom from moral law as Nietzsche and Derrida suggest, and what are the implications of such freedom? Donna Haraway confronts these issues in her "Companion Species Manifesto" by promoting the concept of "naturecultures" that undermines the dualism between nature and culture.<sup>15</sup> While she refers to companionships with real dogs in multi-species urban and suburban environments, we are, however, dealing with animal metaphors for human relationships in aesthetic discourses. How do these relationships reconcile desires for beauty, dominance, and power with the idea of training for companionship, in Haraway's terms for "technologies of behavioral management." Wedekind shows in *Mine Haha* and other texts that the focus on managing the aesthetics of the female body in human society is never driven purely by aesthetic pleasure but is often corrupted by male desire. Companionship in inter-human and bisexual relations is an illusion.

**Bestial Gender Troubles in Frank Wedekind's *Spring's Awakening* and "Lulu plays."**<sup>16</sup>

In *Spring's Awakening* the discourse on sexuality is also closely linked to its silencing by bourgeois institutions, the schools and the parent generation: The

oppression of sexuality and homosexuality, of breaking the taboo and especially of its articulation, pushes sexuality into secrecy, and thereby ruins the lives of the younger generation. Wendla's mother, Frau Bergmann, confesses her inability to respond to her daughter's request for sex education. She realizes that she lacks the language to address sex. In fact, her sentences tumble and get lost in pauses and gaps:

“It's enough to drive one crazy! –Come, child, come here, I'll tell you! I'll tell you everything...Merciful providence! But not today, Wendla, tomorrow, day after tomorrow, next week. Whenever you like, dear heart...”

(Wedekind, *Spring's Awakening* 35)<sup>17</sup>

This impossibility and inability to access and contextualize her own desires and their physicality results in Wendla's rape. The hayloft scene exposes the power of the instincts that drive the action, impersonal forces that completely eclipse the agency of the youth. The students are exposed to their unconscious desires and lack the ability to suppress and cultivate their instincts since society prohibits addressing such experiences. The vital power of bodily desire results in tragedy, Wendla's rape by Melchior, pregnancy and death, and Melchior's expulsion from school.<sup>18</sup> Educational institutions, representing Wilhelminian society's taboos and total ignorance and obliviousness of the younger generation's needs, fail.<sup>19</sup>

The so-called rape in Wedekind's hayloft scene is perhaps not rape: figures are manipulated by their own desires that cannot find any articulation or expression. The instinctual reality precedes linguistic expression. It takes on uncontrollable power that society tries to suppress through domestication, authoritarian rule and fatal abortion. Erhard Weidl, the editor and commentator of Wedekind's works, suggests a close connection between Melchior's view of sex between dogs, humans and the hayloft scene. He points out that Melchior's question, “Have you, for instance, ever seen two dogs running together across

the street?" (*Spring's Awakening* 12) remains unanswered question and anticipates the sex scene. (Weidl 801). This argument is supported by Wedekind's satirical elegy "Die Hunde" (*Werke* 1.1: 424-425). It establishes a link between the domestication of a dog in heat and a virgin daughter. In *Spring's Awakening* Wedekind goes a step further when Melchior argues in-midst of a sex scene: "There is no such thing as love! That's a fact. – It's all just selfishness and self-seeking. I love you as little as you love me" (40). Melchior argues for the immorality of sexual instincts, their narcissism and sadism, as Brecht does in actual discussions with Margarete Steffin 35 years later.

However, Wedekind presents also another perspective on the sexual act: In her only and last monologue after the so-called rape scene Wendla expresses total bliss while she mourns her isolation and solitude at the same time. There is no one to share it with. After withdrawing from the domestic sphere she ponders:

Why did you slip out of the room? - To look for violets!—Because mother can see me smiling. — Why can't you keep your lips together? – I don't know. – I really don't know, I can't find the words...

The path is like a lush carpet – not pebble, not a thorn. - My feet don't touch the ground [...] Oh God, if only someone would come that I could embrace, that I could tell the whole story to!"

(*Spring's Awakening* 42)

Wendla mirrors her mother's loss of words, her obliviousness and tumbling of sentences when trying to talk about sex; for her it is momentary bliss, whereas for the mother it is misery. These are two opposite perspectives of the silencing power of sexual taboos: the mother's fear of the suppressed and Wendla's poetic bliss. Wendla's desire to share her happiness with someone is completely repressed as soon as parents and physicians interfere with her situation. Social conventions force her to be quiet, imprisoning her into monologic and poetic isolation in this very brief but most poetic scene of the drama. Wendla's faltering

speech can be viewed in the context of Julia Kristeva's concept of the "chora" since Wendla shifts her style of speaking as soon as she is alone. She starts inventing metaphors, associating her path with "a lush carpet" instead of only expressing her incapacity to speak like her mother does. Wedekind points here to two types of repressed speech: the repression that leads to stagnation and passivity and the other that produces and innovates speech. In fact, he demonstrates the danger of the repression that leads to stagnation because it violates others. All later dialogues and social interactions are based on lies and betrayal. Melchior's rape presents a third perspective: instinctual desire silences his rational interrogation of Christian concepts, such as selflessness and morality, and forces him to give in to his desires.

The discussed four reactions to social repression/oppression reflect four moments of agitated silence: Polly's silence as the brooding power of revenge in the context of *The Threepenny Opera*; the mother's wounded silence; Wendla's poetic bliss as an effect of being silenced; and Melchior's and Wendla's experimentation with their sexuality. The abysses between these various experiences, linguistic and experiential, mark the tensions between the power of inarticulate instincts, their vitalism and the drive to experience them outside of moral limitations and constraints. What does this have to do with animalism?

Wedekind employs various fictional references to point indirectly to the animalistic features of these abysses. The first encounter between Wendla and Melchior takes place outside of the city, in the forests. Wendla looks for "Waldmeister" (woodruff); Melchior carries her basket and convinces her to stay with him in the woods. These motivic references to "Little Red Riding Hood" are linked to their conversation about social actions driven by selfishness and pleasure instead of self-sacrifice and responsibility. Melchior insists: "There is no such thing as sacrifice. No such thing as unselfishness!" and then he admits that his perspective makes him feel "like an outlaw" (Spring's Awakening 24) as it presents a stark conflict with his Christian upbringing. The rational discourse has mythic undertones that are presented by the staging as a hidden reference to the

vernacular werewolf motif that reflects the tensions between seduction, power, enchantment and vulnerability.<sup>20</sup> Melchior as the potential predator promotes irrational, “hypnotic” and “strange[...] thoughts”(22), that anticipate his submission to his sadistic instincts and are provoked by Wendla’s masochistic desire to be beaten at the end of act 1, scene 5, and their instinctual intercourse in the hayloft scene. The discourse of the irrational reveals the instincts that are fictionalized in the transgressions between wolf and man in werewolf stories.

Another perspective on teenage sexuality is presented through the figure of Ilse, the socially marginalized young woman who leads a bohemian life outside of academic and bourgeois culture. Although she is socially marginalized, she is perhaps the most liberated figure of this play: one version of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century’s male fascination with Woman as prostitute and saint.<sup>21</sup> As an outcast, Wedekind’s Ilse is free to experiment with her attractive body and her artist friends’ exploitation of it. She is also the only figure who offers Moritz a way out of his desperation and fear of sexuality, and who later—after Moritz’ suicide—shows empathy and commitment to mourning. Her a-moral lifestyle breaks with the stiffness of bourgeois conventions. By challenging all moral codes Ilse nevertheless represents strong moral responsibility and concerns despite her amorality. In fact, her kindness outshines the normative parameters of the adults’ behavior and the other teenagers’ obsession with their own problems.

The link between the attractions of vitality and an amoral lifestyle is further explored in Wedekind’s dramatic experiments with his Lulu figure in the dramas *Earthspirit* and *Pandora’s Box*. As a dramatic variation of the Ilse figure in *Spring’s Awakening*, Lulu explores her amorality, her commitment to the moment, and the power of instincts further. In Lulu these aspects are explicitly addressed in terms of animality and bestiality. Of course, she would never speak of herself using animal metaphors. These are present as male projections and conceptions.

Wedekind explicates here Nietzsche’s endorsement of the beast as an essential but repressed part of humanity in his texts on morality. In *Beyond Good*

and *Evil* Nietzsche contrasts the exotic ideal of the human as a beast<sup>22</sup> that is freed from morality with the domesticated herd animal of modern civilization.

We misunderstand the beast of prey and the man of prey (...) thoroughly, we misunderstand "nature" as long as we still look for something "pathological" at the bottom of these healthiest of all tropical monsters and growths, or even for some "hell" that is supposed to be innate in them; yet this is what almost all moralists so far have done. (*Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 298-299)

Nietzsche plays with the term animal and describes the "Raubtier" also as "Untier," translated by Kaufmann as "monster." By replacing the morally charged syllable "Raub" with the syllable "Un" he negates the moralistic connotations. The conventional concept of the beast has to be revised and rethought. Conventional beasts are non-beasts. Nietzsche elaborates this ideal of the beast further in *Genealogy of Morals* when he asks:

One may be quite justified in continuing to fear the blond beast at the core of all noble races and in being on one's guard against it : but who would not a hundred times sooner fear where one can also admire than not fear but be permanently condemned to the repellent sight of the ill-constituted, dwarfed, atrophied, and poisoned (*Basic Writings of Nietzsche* 479).

The encounter with the beast links fear to marvel, it entices and enchants, whereas the fearlessness that results from domestication is associated with the decadence of the tamed animal that is passively exposed to outside control, "dwarfed, atrophied, and poisoned." The drama, *Earthspirit*, presents this double-edged relation of the tamer to the tamed as a relation between the "Prologue" and the play itself. The "Prologue" places the male taming of the female beast (in this case Lulu) in the context of the circus and its spectacle, while the play



focuses on the beast's--that is Lulu's--rejection of being controlled. The play investigates the tense limits of male domestication. In the "Prologue" the tamer asserts his control over the beast, while the beast is able to liberate itself.<sup>23</sup> Wedekind emphasizes the gender issues involved when the drama translates the circus metaphor also into gender relations. The actual play undoes the power of male taming. Lulu resists this power and frees herself from submissiveness. Subjectivity and individuality, idealistic, moral and/or social concerns do not play a dominant role any more. They are superseded by antagonistic gender struggles that take center stage. The animal tamer of the circus exhibits Lulu as a snake representing the wild animal as such and defining her viciousness as a split between the ferocious and the beautiful. She is called a soulless, tamed creature, a screaming murderess and is described at the same time as true, wild and beautiful. She not only appears as a snake but also in a Pierrot costume associating animalistic and commedia dell'arte features. As object of his exhibition the animal tamer and menagerie artist calls her "the primal form of woman" (*The Lulu Plays* 11), and he introduces himself as a human genius with "a single, ice-cold domineering look" (*The Lulu Plays* 9).<sup>24</sup> His props are a revolver and a whip. These references to the spectacle of power relations in the circus prevail in the following four acts of the play and are transferred to the domestic sphere. They control the last scenes of acts three and four when the revolver switches hands and ends up in Lulu's possession. In defense of her freedom she takes control of her suitor and third husband, Schön, when she dictates a divorce letter to his fiancée that he must transcribe and then kills him in the end. The "beast" strikes out against her tamer. She takes charge asking him to write: "I am writing to you at the side of the woman who dominates me" (*The Lulu Plays* 83). Lulu disillusiones Schön's sense of power by revealing the hidden emotional and psychological entanglements of his dependence on her. In fact, her analyses of his corrupted bourgeois psyche, and his concepts of love and marriage reverse the perspective of the spectacle. Lulu as the fabricated object of male spectatorship turns into a spectator herself: "Marry her – then she'll

dance in front of me in her childish misery, instead of my dancing in front of her!” (*The Lulu Plays* 81). By moving into the subject position Lulu sees the other side of the spectacle, a scene of female suffering. She knows that male fabrications of feminine culture and attraction, aesthetic appearance on stage, paintings and dance create psychological catastrophes. In her analysis of the male entertainment industry Lulu also goes a step further and asks Schön: “Look yourself in the face for once.” And then she defines this “face” as not having “a scrap of conscience.” She calls him “coldblooded” (*The Lulu Plays* 81). For her his face turns into a stage that reveals his hidden destructive emotions, drives and desires. Lulu, the so-called beast, reclaims the authenticity of Schön’s face as a scandal. As the German word “Gesicht” also refers to vision/seeing/sight, she sees Schön’s face as an expression of his corrupt way of seeing, perceiving and manipulating bourgeois reality. Lulu’s vision critically explores the deplorable causes and effects of bourgeois perspectives. At the end of act three the man, who previously was a figure of brutality, turns into a child. Lulu observes: “He’s crying like a child, the terrible despot” (*The Lulu Plays* 82). She tames her tamer by confronting him with his past. The male face turns into a child’s face. This defacement functions also as a moment of de-gendering, debunking his masculine identity. Schön realizes: “Now – for the – execution...” (*The Lulu Plays* 83).

The patriarchal order and its tendency to appropriate authenticity through marriage, art and/or dance fail. In earlier acts Lulu’s male partners attempt to appropriate her through artistic means, by portraying her in a painting, and promoting her as a dancer or as a trapeze artist. However, Lulu always escapes as the “other” that plays along only as long as she can resist the attempts of taking possession of her. Wedekind scholarship has demonstrated the complex connotations of the motifs of dance, whip, tightrope- walking and trapeze artistry (Hafemann 27-36; 104-109). Wedekind explores here a topic that he also tackled theoretically in the essay “Zirkusgedanken” from 1887, written between the composition of “Earth Spirit” (1895) and Pandora’s Box (1904) and in form of a

plea addressing a concerned church representative. This text promotes elasticity and virtuosity as a mode of physical and mental attitude:

“Everyone falls at one point into the abyss. However the heel of the person who is missing the elasticity of the foot joint will turn into an Achilles heel, it splits, the person remains lying, and the chase runs over him raucously and with yapping. Thousands of human lives are turned into dust this way” (Wedekind. “Zirkusgedanken” *Werke* 5.2:97, tr. by author).

Circus horses, riders and tight-rope-walkers function as examples of “elasticity” as they turn their failures into success by overcoming barriers, especially the barrier of failure itself. The female tight-rope-walker, for example, only pretends to fall. In fact, all artists mentioned are female and circus art is presented as a feminine art form.<sup>25</sup> The concept of elasticity as the ultimate art elaborates on Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian, its ideal of wild bestiality (see Schank, 150), on his criticism of the fearful tight-rope-walker at the beginning of *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, and on dance as an expression of ecstatic life that Zarathustra in the end privileges over his own sermons and speeches to his disciples.<sup>26</sup> *Lulu* models this complex concept of elasticity in various ways, especially in stretching bourgeois concepts of gender to their total limits and destruction.<sup>27</sup> She performs the ecstatic life that Nietzsche at the end of *Zarathustra* limits to dance and poetry alone. She personifies and feminizes the complex connotations of this dance poetry. The last part of Nietzsche’s text is organized around repetitions of Zarathustra’s last song that is called “The Dance Song” as well as “The Drunken Song.” The ecstatic association of singing, dancing and drinking is semantically linked to declarations of the midnight, its dream, its “woe,” “joy” and “agony.” (*The Portable Nietzsche*, 339, 436). This dream must certainly be differentiated from Freud’s dream and its communication of the individual psyche’s trauma. Zarathustra’s dream points to the abyss of the night, and its darkness mediates between the sharp contrasts of woe and joy,

temporality and eternity. These moments of mediation are beyond the possibility to be conceptualized. By being translated into the broad metaphor of dance and its elasticity the dance breaks through physical, intellectual, psychological and social barriers. As dancing song and drunken song it evokes the delirium of not knowing as it precedes or follows consciousness.

Throughout the play Lulu is called all kinds of names by her suitors, associating her with the fluidity between Nelli, Lulu, Eva, Pandora, Melusine, and Mignon. Her authentic self cannot be grasped by one name or mythological reference. It moves between and beyond all of these cultural icons. She leads a precarious life without permanent bonds, without self-definition or any assertion of identity. Her authenticity is linked to constant uncertainty and to her struggle against being controlled by male projections. Wedekind's term "elasticity" also works well to describe Lulu's maneuvering of gender relationships and their abysmal manipulative power.

There are a few moments in which she describes her social dilemma as the need to withdraw from the projections and morals of others. When Schwarz asks her to look into his eyes she admits that she only sees her own costume, "Ich sehe mich als Pierrot darin" (Wedekind. *Werke* 3.1 423). In this I see myself as a Pierrot. Tr. by author), and whenever she is alone she places herself in front of a mirror acceptingly nodding at herself. She later confesses to Alwa: "When I looked at myself in the mirror I wished I were a man...my own husband!-" (*The Lulu Plays* 93). The replacement of "a man" with "my husband" indicates the dilemma: The desire to possess oneself as an other remains an imaginary irreality. It is a function of the subjunctive. Lulu negates all concepts of knowing, concepts of truth, soul, love, and religion and stresses to Schön that she does not care at all what others think. She promotes an elastic mindset that negates the one-dimensionality of rationality. The so-called beast reveals its insight into male psychological corruptions and the deviousness of manipulating females. With her sharp psychological wit she distinguishes between the feminine beast as the authenticity of the true, wild and beautiful and its antagonist, the soulless

destructive force. She stages Nietzsche's ideal of the fearsome but remarkable blonde beast by confronting Schön with the destructive instincts that control his seduction of women. As the imaginary "beast" of male perception she reveals the actual bestiality of masculinity. Schön, as the figure that controls and tames is turned into a tamed beast before he is killed. Lulu takes control of Schön and reverses the gender roles by reversing the power of domestication.

The drama asks how one can possess or better enjoy oneself as an other—and every moment anew—and how to keep a distance from expectations, and societal structures. By becoming herself, desiring herself, and not anyone else Lulu is different from all other figures. As a female Narcissus she insists on avoiding fixed appearance, fixed meaning and signification. Her elastic mindset allows her to focus on the moment and not to stretch it out into time. Lulu abstracts her being from semantic inscriptions, and her so-called 'immorality', monstrosity, and ferociousness lie in this withdrawal. Wedekind theatricalizes this concept of authenticity and animalism, and experiments with it as an alternative to morality. Nietzsche has termed this concept "the blonde beast."

The fictional status of the animal and the beast at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is ambiguous: it connotes the criminality of domestication, besides issues of liberation promoted by Nietzsche. But the metaphor also leaves open a space for negotiating something new, a new ethics. In Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* this ethics is addressed not only through epic devices but also through the subplots of immorality. In Wedekind it is inscribed into the enigma of the Wendla, Ilse, and Lulu figures and into their negotiations with the controlling male environment. Wendla is sacrificed, Ilse arranges her life in the midst of decadence, and Lulu is perhaps the most abstract and fluid figure of all who always lives on the edge, between enjoying the exhibition of human beauty, attractiveness, ecstatic and aesthetic presence while confronting its exploitation by male projections and desire.

## Conclusion

In the essay “‘Fiction’ and the Experience of the Other” Peggy Kamuf, translator and editor of Jacques Derrida’s work into English, describes the experience of fiction in the following way:

That which I am calling the experience of fiction, then, would be essentially equivocal, hanging as it does between the suspension of the referent, as signaled by fiction’s mark, and the persistence of the assumption of referential language, whereby fiction also always exceeds itself towards something other. (Kamuf 143)

Kamuf directs our attention towards the space that fiction opens up, between suspension of the literal and the insertion of the figural, metaphorical, and semantic. The figure of Lulu has to be positioned into this space of the in-between. Every moment she fabricates her aesthetic presence anew, male desires attempt to prolong it, to hold onto it, and literalize it. However the evanescence of the aesthetic moment cannot be grasped and utilized, thus it causes aggression and the desire to overpower it and gain control over it. This tension between creating a reference and suspending it at the same time characterizes authenticity. Lulu claims it, and, as Wendla and Ilse, she moves beyond the shame that undermines it. In fact, all three are shameless in various degrees. They demonstrate the intricacies of living shamelessly.

In his cinematographic envisioning of the Lulu figure in *Die Büchse der Pandora* (1929), Georg Wilhelm Pabst presents her from beginning to end with a radiant smile that captivates not only her male and female lovers but also the audience in seeing the spectacle. The audience watches Schön who is watching Lulu, and shares his scopophilic pleasure. In the move from one shot to the other, the photographic image interrupts the cinematographic flow. Lulu presents an aesthetic presence that cannot be owned or domesticated. It is beyond domestication. With the insertion of this visual leitmotif Pabst’s film privileges her

aesthetic appeal over her criminal presence. I view Lulu's smile<sup>28</sup> as a reference to a potential authenticity that cannot be lived/realized in the context of the money-driven and projection-driven psyche of modernist society.

Brecht, Kirchner, and Wedekind elaborate on Nietzsche's positive perspective towards "the blonde beast" but address also the destructive risks of its sexual attractiveness and bestiality. In doing so they also open up the space "towards something other" as Kamuf would say. Pabst points to the possibility of this other with Lulu's smile. However, in order not to lose this smile Lulu has to sacrifice herself at the end of "Pandora's Box." The question remains: How can an ideal aesthetic figure of fiction negotiate a literal presence? The texts discussed present this task as radical risk-taking in experimental thought and question the binary logic in the use of terms like male and female, animal and human, nature and culture.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Moritaten were sensational stories of murders, executions etc., sung in ballad form by Bänkelsänger in the 18th c. and 19th c. The word is derived from 'Mordtat'" (*The Oxford Companion to German Literature*, ed. Henry Garland and Mary Garland, Web 6 Aug. 2014).

<sup>2</sup>For major references to Wedekind's reception of Nietzsche's animal imagery see Jennifer Ham's article. "Taming the Beast. Animality in Wedekind and Nietzsche." Influential scholarship on Brecht's reflections on Nietzsche has been presented by Reinhold Grimm in his book *Brecht und Nietzsche oder Geständnisse eines Dichters. Fünf Essays und ein Bruchstück*.

<sup>3</sup> My own translation. See Mannheim's and Willet's translation in Brecht, Bertolt. "The Threepenny Opera." *Brecht Collected Plays*. Vol. 2. 147.

<sup>4</sup> In the collection of "Lieder, Gedichte, Chöre" published in exile, in 1934 (Paris: Editions du Carrefour), Brecht broadens this perspective as sharp critique of fascism and inscribes crime into the moral roots of Christianity and its stark influence on fascism.

<sup>5</sup> Brecht's attack on Aristotelian theater in "Kleines Organon für das Theater" (1948/49) is closely linked to an attack on morality since Aristotelian theater is built psychologically on moral grounds, namely on pity and fear.

<sup>6</sup> "Über Kants Definition der Ehe in der Metaphysik der Sitten." Bertolt Brecht: *Werke. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe in 30 Bänden*. 11:270. All future references to this source will be quoted in parentheses as (GBA).

<sup>7</sup> The commentary of the Brecht edition notes: "Diese Ehedefinition formuliert Kant in *Die Metaphysik der Sitten (1797), Erster Teil. Rechtslehre, § 4*: "Geschlechtsgemeinschaft (*commercium sexuelle*) ist der wechselseitige Gebrauch, den ein Mensch von eines anderen Geschlechtsorganen und Vermögen macht" und "die *Ehe* (matrimonium), d. i. die Verbindung zweier Personen verschiedenen Geschlechts zum lebenswierigen wechselseitigen Besitz ihrer Geschlechtseigenschaften" (GBA 11: 395).

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<sup>8</sup> I modified the Willet/Manheim translation since it missed some nuances of the original. I strongly suggest to also read the German version of the poem, especially stanzas 2-4:

Ich höre, einige Partner sind da säumig./ Sie haben – und ich halt's nicht für gelogen –  
Geschlechtsorgane kürzlich hinterzogen./ Das Netz hat Maschen und sie sind geräumig.  
Da bleibt nur: die Gerichte anzugehn/ Und die Organe in Beschlag zu nehmen.  
Vielleicht wird sich der Partner dann bequemen/ Sich den Kontrakt genauer anzusehen.  
Wenn er sich nicht bequemt – ich fürcht es sehr – /Muß eben der Gerichtsvollzieher her. (GBA  
11.1: 270)

<sup>9</sup> This threat could be linked to Julia Kristeva's concept of the female *chora* and its vibrant energies that break through patriarchal structures and question their power. Polly's disruption of the wedding through the rhymes of her song indicates the perspective of the unexpected power of an unknown other in this scene.

<sup>10</sup> Steffin, Margarete. *Konfutse versteht nichts von Frauen. Nachgelassene Texte* (199). Trans. by author.

<sup>11</sup> Some of these issues are further explored in Ostmeier, *Poetische Dialoge zu Liebe, Gender und Sex im frühen Zwanzigsten Jahrhundert*.

<sup>12</sup> "...clothing derives from technics. We would therefore have to think shame and technicity together as the same "subject." And evil and history, and work, and so many other things that go along with it" (Derrida 5).

<sup>13</sup> Ortrud Gutjahr places this text (as well as other texts by Wedekind, especially *Spring's Awakening*) in the context of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century discourses that focus on physical education but she also argues that this text refuses to commit to any of these. "Aber ebenso wie der Text all diese (teilweise erst entstehenden) körperbezogenen Epochendiskurse aufruft, widerspricht er auch jedem einzelnen: der Idee der Lebensreform durch die hermetische Abgeschlossenheit der Enklave zur Außenwelt und dem fehlenden Bewußtsein von Protest oder alternativer Lebensführung, der Reformpädagogik durch die uniforme Behandlung der Schülerinnen, bei der gerade nicht individuelle Fähigkeiten gefördert werden; der Nacktkörperkultur durch die artifizielle Kostümierung und Verkleidung der Körper; der Gymnastikbewegung durch die strenge Körperdressur, die sogar mit Schlägen unterstützt wird; dem freien Tanz durch die Entindividualisierung der Tänzerinnen und die Vorgabe genauer Bewegungsabläufe" (102-103).

<sup>14</sup> "Nur an den körperlichen Unterschieden kannte man sich gegenseitig auseinander. Wenn eine "Ich" sagte, so meinte sie sich immer ganz damit, vom Scheitel bis zur Fußspitze. Wir fühlten unser Selbst in den Beinen und Füßen beinahe noch mehr als in den Augen und Fingern. Von keinem Mädchen ist mir im Gedächtnis geblieben, wie sie sprach. Ich weiß von jeder nur noch, wie sie ging." (Wedekind, *Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in acht Bänden*. 5.2: 864). The text "Eden" describes such integration into sexual reality as a socially organized ritual that links sadism to entertainment. (886-914). All future references to this source will be cited parenthetically.

<sup>15</sup> In the end Haraway insists that "there is no room for romanticism about the wild heart of the natural dog ....but there is large space for disciplined attention and honest achievement. Psychological and physical violence has no space in this training drama." Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. 45.

<sup>16</sup> The association of the masses with the beast is further critically explored in Walter Ruttmann's film "Berlin, die Sinfonie der Grossstadt" (1927). Here the driving of cows into the slaughterhouse functions as analogy to the masses of anonymous workers that are entering the factories.

<sup>17</sup> Future references to this source will be cited from this edition.



<sup>18</sup> Wedekind's masked man makes absolutely clear that this tragedy was totally unnecessary.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Ham suggests reading this text as Wedekind's response to pedagogical discourses, especially the controversies around black pedagogy, the progressive school reform movements at the turn of 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Wedekind's studies of Nietzsche. Ham shows the stark influence of Wilhelminian black pedagogy onto Wedekind's own upbringing and argues that his drama reflects such oppressive educational culture. She presents the drama as a response to the following cultural facts: 1. to a school controversy (Schulstreit) that was also addressed by Kaiser Wilhelm II in a widely publicized national conference in 1890 in Kassel. This conference exposed "traditional book learning as hopelessly remote and sorely lacking any natural connections to students' own life experiences" (Ham 54). 2. to the School Reform movement and its many experimental schools in Germany and Switzerland (for example, the country boarding school in Ilseburg, the middle school in Haubinda (1901), Freie Schulgemeinde Wickersdorf (1898), Odenwaldschule (1910). Walter Benjamin attended Haubinda and Klaus Mann the Odenwaldschule) and 3. to Wedekind's intense studies of Nietzsche as they are reflected in Melchior's and Moritz' plaidoyer for natural vitalism in human relations. (See: Ham. "Unlearning the Lesson: Wedekind, Nietzsche, and Educational Reform at the Turn of the Century.") Wedekind's critique of black pedagogy has also to be placed in the context of his comparison between education and domestication in the play *Fritz Schwitterling* (Ham, "Taming the Beast," 154). In my view we need to add Wedekind's interests in the medical and legal discussions of homosexual rights to this list. By staging homosexual friendships in *Spring's Awakening* and lesbian relationships later in *Pandora's Box* he publicizes these non-public medical discussions. His plays function not only as theatrical investigations of educational and cultural issues but link these also to sexual, homosexual/lesbian, and psychoanalytic discourses.

<sup>20</sup> Jack Zipes refers to Paul Delarue's reconstruction of a French vernacular version of "Little Red Riding Hood" that introduced a werewolf instead of a wolf into the tale. Angela Carter in "The Company of Wolves" (in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* [1979]) relates Little Red Riding Hood also to this vernacular tradition.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin elaborates on this topic in "Metaphysik der Jugend," his only experiment with lyrical drama.

<sup>22</sup> In the essay "Nietzsche's 'Blonde Beast': On the Recuperation of a Nietzschean Metaphor" Gerd Schank traces the history of this metaphor. He points out that "Nietzsche uses the word 'beast' as metaphor that carries positive connotations for his idea of the wildness and cruelty of nature (the 'Dionysian' element in Nietzsche's works), an aspect of human animals that should not be permitted to be destroyed..." This presents a stark contrast to "Rousseau's view of an originally 'good' nature, which Nietzsche viewed as based on 'hypermoralization.'" (Schank. "Nietzsche's 'Blond Beast': On the Recuperation of a Nietzschean Metaphor." *A Nietzschean Bestiary. Becoming Animal Beyond Docile and Brutal*, 140-155; 144-145). According to Schank these positive connotations also apply to the term "blond:" "...the blond beast is an image more applicable to the ancient Greeks than to the original Germans" and serves as an example of Nietzsche's "ideal of the Greek hero and agon culture," as described by J. Burckhard, who interpreted the Greek's bestiality to be a sign of their health (150).

<sup>23</sup> The "Prolog" inscribes the interest in eradicating domesticated heroes into a theoretical investigation of the dramatic genre: "Was seht ihr in den Lust- und Trauerspielen?! / Haustiere, die so wohlgesittet fühlen, /...Das wahre Tier, das wilde, schöne Tier, / das meine Damen! – sehn Sie nur bei mir." Wedekind presents the conflicts between heroes and heroines of traditional "Lust und Trauerspiele" (*Werke* 3.1: 404) in terms of Nietzsche's distinctions between the herd animal and the wild beast. The modern drama as "circus" exhibits the anti-morality of the beast. Spender's translation does not catch these theoretical reflections on the history of theater when he calls these plays "plays of joys and griefs" (*The Lulu Plays*, 10).

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<sup>24</sup> By using the term “Genie” Wedekind probably refers satirically to the traditions of the “Genieästhetik” of the second part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This specific reference is lost in Spender’s translation. The explicit inscription of gender dualism into the concept of genius is a parallel to Otto Weininger’s concept of genius in *Sex and Character. An Investigation of Fundamental Principles*, especially Chapter 4 of “Second or Main Part: The Sexual Types” entitled “Endowment and Genius” (91-100).

<sup>25</sup> The German text calls circus art one of the most unflawed: “Übrigens soll es auch Städte geben, ...wo unter allen Kunsleistungen diejenigen des Zirkus fast die in ihrer Art vollkommensten sind.” Wedekind, “Zirkusgedanken” 94.

<sup>26</sup> Katrin Hafemann views Zarathustra’s dance and its likeness to the dynamics of thinking in general as a leitmotif of modernity.

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer Ham entitled her recent book on Wedekind’s theater “Elastizität” referring also to the essay “Zirkusgedanken.” In her insightful introduction she outlines the many philosophical and scientific discourses on elasticity of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, referring to Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Freud and the physiologist Buttersack (Ham, *Elastizität*, 8ff.). Ham refers to Lulu’s acrobatic body “as mobile energy” and to Lulu herself as “elastic heroe(s) who for a time elude the forces of fate surrounding them by adapting to circumstances and creating their own spaces of willful performance” (5).

<sup>28</sup> This smile is quite different from the smile in Polly’s marriage song. There it expresses the silent power of personal revenge whereas Lulu’s smile moves beyond such psychological tensions.

<sup>29</sup> I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Robert Mottram and Josiah Simon who both contributed to this essay with thoughtful formatting, editorial, and stylistic observations.

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