Eugenics and Motherhood in German and British New Women Writings

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In her book *Feminism and Motherhood*, historian Ann Taylor Allen locates the emergence of motherhood as a dilemma in the beginning of the twentieth century. Until then, women had no choice, so womanhood could safely be identified with motherhood (Allen 2005: 1). The educational, social and political emancipation of women at the turn of the twentieth century and the availability of 'other forms of self-realization' instigated the debate on the relationship between motherhood and feminism that is still ongoing today. In a comparative approach, I will show how the 'maternal dilemma' (Allen 2005: 1) is central to the plot structure and thematic design of British and German New Woman writing. Looking at novels by Sarah Grand, Helene Böhlau, Mona Caird and Dolorosa (Maria Eichhorn) published during the 1890s and early 1900s, I will show how motherhood is reimagined, and how much of this re-imagination interacts with and reformulates the newly emerging pseudo-science of eugenics.

The relation between eugenics and literature has received some critical attention in Anglophone scholarship (Hanson 2013; Childs 2001; Richardson 2003; Turda 2010). In Germany, the question of heredity has equally been pursued in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literature, but the focus has been on the work of male naturalist writers (Weingart et al. 1992; Parnes et al. 2008). In this article I extend and further develop these insights in three ways: comparatively, by investigating the role of eugenics in British and German literature, temporally, by connecting fin-de-siècle ideas on degeneration to the modernist period, and in terms of 'brows', by extending the attention from the accustomed highbrow canon to middlebrow fictional texts.

Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century eugenicists based their ambition for racial improvement on evolutionary theory. Darwin's 'natural selection' and Herbert Spencer's 'survival of the fittest' were key concepts in the construction of eugenic theories in both Germany and Britain. Eugenicists advocated interference in the evolutionary process not only to ward off the degeneration of the race they saw around them, but also to bring about more efficiently the ideal human race. According to Spencer's social Darwinism, helping the unfit survive through charities and state support would result in their multiplication, while the laws of nature would have them perish instead. Preventing the unfit from breeding, known as negative eugenics, was therefore proposed as a measure against degeneration. Positive

eugenics, on the other hand, advocated the propagation of the fittest. Positive eugenics included interference with women's reproductive functions. The control over and use of women's bodies in eugenics provoked various responses from women authors. Some adopted positive eugenics to advocate for female agency in partner selection, as well as to argue for a civic motherhood which 'sought political recognition for reproductive labour' (Richardson 2003: 9). Other female authors opposed the equation of women and mothers and were reluctant to pinpoint motherhood as the main justification for emancipatory reform. I will look at the treatment of motherhood in both pro- and anti-natalist narratives in Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), Helene Böhlau's *Das Recht der Mutter* (1896), Dolorosa's *Unfruchtbarkeit* (1919) and Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894). These narratives depict an array of attitudes towards women's issues that were equally progressive. Their treatment of motherhood prefigures the established centrality of reproduction in modernist fiction (Newman 2016: 32).

Grand, Böhlau, Caird and Dolorosa, each in their own way, were controversial figures, because they challenged traditional ideas of women's roles in their fiction. Mona Caird was one of 'the most forthright' among the New Women writers (Bell 2013: 91). She is best known for her article 'Marriage' in the *Westminster Review* (August 1888), in which she attacked the 'conventional ideas of marriage and the fetishizing of premarital virginity' (92). Caird's fiction was as provocative as her article. A review of Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) describes the main character Hadria, who, like Caird, sees in marriage a system of oppression for women, as an 'astonishingly foolish person' for not recognizing that 'marriage is an institution devised by women for the benefit of their sex, and exacted by them from men as the price of their affections' ('The Daughters of Danaus' 1894: 665). While Caird's novels attack the existing forms of marriage and motherhood as a whole, other New Women authors, such as Sarah Grand, sought a restructuring of the social system from within. Both in her fiction and in her essays, Grand maintains the holiness of marriage at the same time as demanding more educational and political rights for women for their role as mothers to the nation. Her bestselling novel *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) is, on the one hand, hailed in *The Englishwoman's Review* as 'eminently a work of today', while, on the other, the portrayal of venereal diseases and 'strange experiences' of the main character are deemed inappropriate reading material for 'the impressionable soul of a young girl looking out into life' ('Reviews' 1893:198). Contrary to Sarah Grand and Mona Caird, Helene Böhlau was never 'an active campaigner for women's rights' (Diethe 1998: 160). Nonetheless, Böhlau's novels show her awareness of feminist issues and belong to the social protest fiction written by women in the fin-de-siècle era (Woodford 2014: 87). *Halbtier!* (1889) and *Das Rangierbahnhof* (1896) are prominent examples of Böhlau's engagement with woman's emancipation, and both novels have received some attention in scholarship.[1] Böhlau's *Das Recht der Mutter* (1896) is not as

1. See Brinker-Gabler1988; Shafi1988, Grant 1995, 1999; Chambers 2007; Bauer2014; and Woodford 2014.

prevalent in research, despite its international reach.[2] Published two decades prior to the formation of the *Bund für Mutterschutz* in 1905, the novel is a subversive portrayal of single motherhood. Dolorosa's *Unfruchtbarkeit* (1919), also absent from research, depicts urban overcrowding, poverty, suicide and illegitimacy. The novel was described in the *Tiroler Tageblatt* as a counterwork to Zola's *Fecondité* (1899) (qtd. in Gilleir 2015: 43). Dolorosa, although now mostly forgotten, was an incendiary figure in her time. She wrote novels, short stories and erotic poetry, was a cabaret dancer and part of the artistic and literary scene in Berlin at the turn of the twentieth century. The comparative approach helps retrieve these forgotten novels and affiliate them to a larger transnational network of narratives by women writers. Regardless of their take on motherhood, these female authors engage with eugenic and evolutionary ideas to support their claims. Their specific use of eugenic theories often deviates from the dominant (male) approach to eugenics.

Eugenics and Motherhood

Spencer's *The Principles of Biology* (1866), where the term 'survival of the fittest' first makes its appearance, contains a chapter on the 'Multiplication of the Human Race', which measures the fertility of women in relation to their position in society. Spencer links the 'deficiency of reproductive power' in women to both 'bodily labour' in the lower classes and 'the overtaxing of [...] brains' in the middle-class woman. He goes on to explain that 'flat-chested girls who survive their high-pressure education' don't produce the desired 'well developed infant' (Spencer 1898: 486). According to Spencer, the higher rate of multiplication in England compared to other continental countries is a result of 'the easier lives which English women lead' (Spencer 1898: 484-5). Juxtaposed to his concept of 'the survival of the fittest', this view on female fertility seems to suggest that women's lack of evolution is a prerequisite for the evolution of the human race. Female development in either muscle or brain leads to irregularity in fertility and inferior production of offspring, which results in a degenerated race. Darwin justifies the exclusion of women from the survival of the fittest in *The Descent of Man* (1871) by arguing for an innate sexual difference. Men, according to Darwin, '[delight] in competition'. And while this competitiveness might pass 'too easily into selfishness', this particular characteristic is the main drive behind 'the survival of the fittest' and behind the evolution of the human race. Women on the other hand, have 'greater tenderness' and show 'less selfishness' (Darwin 1871: 326). The mellower nature of women is, according to Darwin, due to women's 'maternal instincts' (Darwin 1871: 326). 'These qualities' are not only displayed by a woman towards her own offspring, but are often

2. The Swedish poet Oscar Levertin, for example, reviewed Helene Böhlau's *Das Recht der Mutter*, alongside works by Leo Tolstoy, Hermann Hesse, Oscar Wilde and Emile Zola. See Levertin 1922, on urn:nbn:de:gbv:8:2-430061.

extended 'towards her fellow-creatures' (Darwin 1871: 326). In her recent work on Darwin, Evelleen Richards points out that *The Descent*, instead of relying on 'dependent [...] observations of and readings into the literature on the sexual dimorphism and courtship behaviors of a huge range of sexually reproducing species' in fact reiterates 'a mix of culturally laden constructions of sexuality, gender, and race' (Richards 2017: 23).

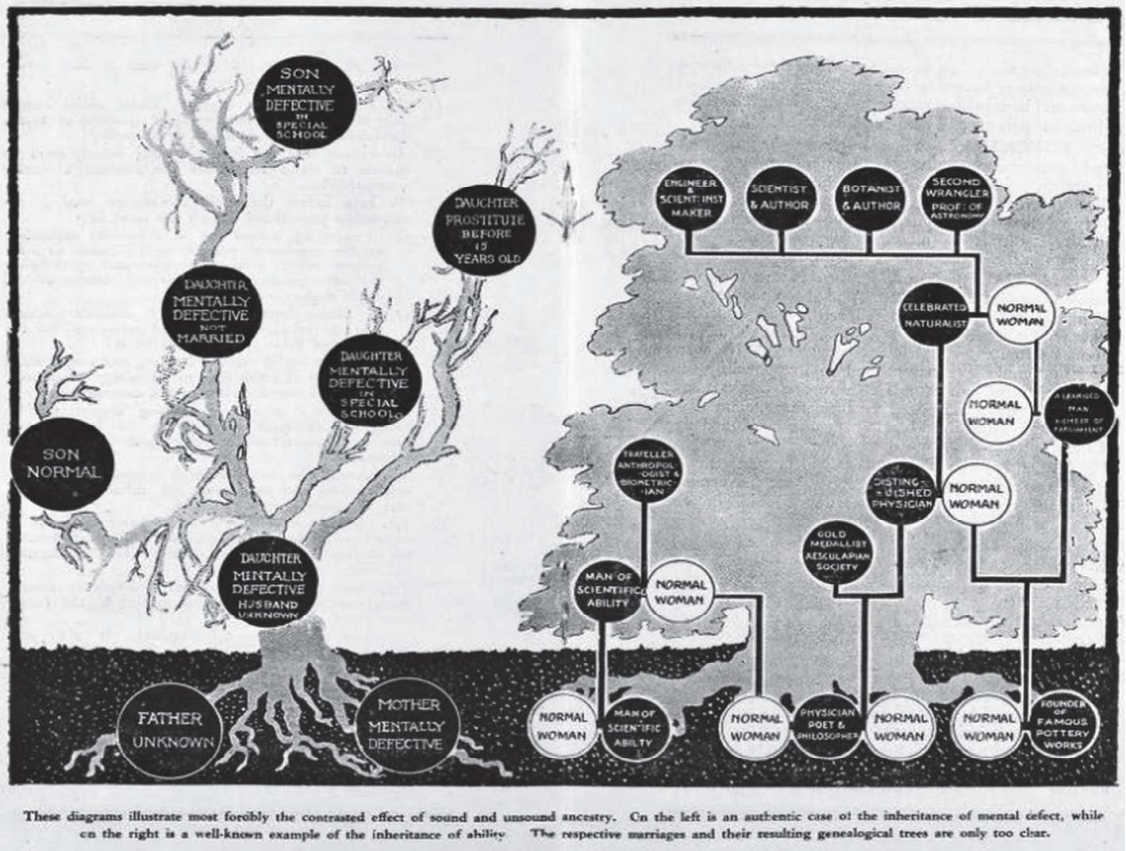

Fig 1. 'Those Who Come After: A Word on Racial Responsibility'

Most nineteenth-century eugenic theories repeat Darwin's depiction of an innate sexual difference as well as Spencer's position on women's fertility. This picture (fig. 1) from a leaflet titled 'Those Who Come After: A Word on Racial Responsibility' published by the Eugenic Education Society, shows two genealogical trees. The thriving healthy family is marked by the active nature of men (engineers, botanists, authors, poets) and the placidity of women, all marked as normal women. By contrast, the decaying tree is marked by the absence of these 'men of science and ability' and the recurrence of illicit female sexual activity. This stance is reiterated by Major Leonard Darwin, Charles Darwin's son and the chairman of the Eugenic Education Society in his response to an article proposing financial arrangements for illegitimate children. When Sybil Gotto, a social hygienist and member of the Eugenic Society, wrote an article in the *Eugenic Review* praising a Norwegian law

that aimed at securing the financial support of illegitimate children by their biological fathers (Gotto 1917: 190), Leonard Darwin replied that

> the descendants of illegitimate unions are, I myself have no doubt, on the average inferior in civic worth to the descendants of legitimate unions; and as it will make for future progress of the world that the higher social levels should be filled by the more fit, it seems to me on the whole advisable that the illegitimates should remain in the lower levels. (Darwin 1917: 303)

Gotto's attempts at introducing fathers in the discussion on illegitimacy are thus lost in Leonard Darwin's response. Instead, illegitimate children are poised as a threat to eugenic ideals and the danger of Gotto's proposal on the current patriarchal structure is revealed. Leonard Darwin asks:

> If a prostitute can entrap a young man of property, and either become or pretend to become the mother of his child, she would get an enormous prize as a reward for her skillful handling of the affair. Would not such unions become more common than they are, and would not the effects be dysgenic? (Darwin 1917: 303)

Motherhood loses thus all ennobling qualities and becomes a eugenic crime, even a self-serving scheme, once outside the bonds of marriage. Women are denied the male struggle for survival. A mother ensuring the protection and survival of herself and her child instead of being regarded as belonging to the fittest becomes a threat to the bourgeois structures behind the eugenic 'science' of Leonard Darwin and other eugenicists.

Another perceived threat to patriarchal eugenics was women's campaign for political, educational and social emancipation at the turn of the century. In a chapter on 'The Woman's Question', Karl Pearson, a prominent figure in eugenic research, writes: 'we have first to settle what is the physical capacity of woman, what would be the effect of her emancipation on her function of race-reproduction, before we can talk about her "rights"' (Pearson 1888: 371). Women's position within society is thus considered dependent on her reproductive function. He concludes this chapter by admitting 'that the past subjection of woman has tended largely to expand man's selfish instincts' (Pearson 1888: 394), but at the same time reiterates Darwin's notion of a selfless womanhood. He asks whether perhaps

> this very subjection has in itself so chastened woman, so trained her to think of others than of herself, that after all it may have acted more as a blessing than a curse to the world? May it not bring her to the problems of the future with a purer aim and a keener insight than possible for man? (Pearson 1888: 371)

Instead of granting more agency and freedom to this blessed and celebrated disposition, however, Pearson suggests that since woman has 'learnt self-control in the past by subjecting her will to his, so in the future she may be able to submit her lib-

erty to the restrains demanded by social welfare, and to the conditions imposed by race-permanence' (Pearson 1888: 394).

The patriarchal form of motherhood was also prominent among eugenicists in Germany, especially in the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Rassenhygine* and the journal *Archiv für Rassen- und Geselschaftsbilogie* both founded by Alfred Ploetz. Allen identifies this branch of German eugenics as the 'herrschenden Richtung' who concurred with right-wing politics 'hinsichtlich der Wichtigkeit hoher Geburtsraten für die militärische Stärke Deutschlands' (Allen 1991:49). In spite of the aim of military prowess, the role of mothers in this eugenic ideology corresponds with that in Britain. This is best exemplified by Dr. Josef Graßl's frequent contributions to the *Archiv für Rassen- und Geselschaftsbilogie,* especially in an article he wrote titled 'Zur Frage der Fruchtfähigkeit und der Mutterschaft', and in a second installment the following year. In these two articles, his condemnation of illicit female sexual activities and the resulting degeneration is more pronounced than in the examples from British eugenics. He appeals: 'wollen wir ernsthaft Rassenhygiene treiben, müssen wir die Frau zum Gegenstand unserer Fürsorge machen, und zwar die Mutter in der Frau und nicht die Geschlechtsdrohne' (Graßl 1909: 366). He categorizes women as either 'Mutter' or 'Dirne' and argues that the rise of civilizations is due to the first and its fall into degeneration a consequence of the latter (Graßl 1909: 358). He writes that a 'Dirnenvolk' strives to limit the number of their children, because of the pleasure and comfort loving nature of the woman as 'Dirne'. The 'Mutterkultur', on the other hand, reigns supreme because of the selflessness of the mother who grants her valuable 'Errungenschaft' for the next generation and by doing so securing 'die Existenz des Volkes' (Graßl 1909: 365). Graßel not only states an essential difference in character between men and women, but also elaborates on the sexual nature and value of this difference, granting a 'scientifically' grounded sexual double standard. He claims that 'im Gegensatz zum Weibe negiert aber die Abweichung von dem normalen Geschlechtsleben beim Manne nicht die Männliche Eigenschaft. Ein Mann, der den Koitus in prohibitiver Form ausübt, ja selbst einer, der sich der Prostitution hingibt, kann noch immer großen Wert haben, aber eine Frau, welche gewollt kinderlos ist, ist entwertet' (Graßl 1908: 503). According to Graßl then, neither sexual abstinence nor promiscuity devalues man's contribution to the fertility of the nation, while woman's value hinges exclusively on her maternal role. Graßl thus links degeneration with illicit female sexual activity in his conceptualization of the 'Dirne' and also paradoxically denies the existence of sexual life for women other than that resulting in childbearing. Unsurprisingly, Graßl identifies the women's emancipation movement as potential threat to motherhood. He comments:

> Wenn die Frau von der Sklaverei, unter der sie zu leiden hat, befreit werden will, so gelingt ihr dies lediglich vermittels der wirklichen Mutter. Und als Hilfsmittel dazu ist die politische Freiheit zu betrachten. Wenn diese Freiheit aber Selbstzweck der Frauenemanzipation wird, wenn die Frau die große Gefahr, dass in der politischen Freiheit das Dirnentum die füh-

> rende Rolle einnimmt, nicht zu überwinden vermag, dann ist die Erreichung dieses Zieles auch der Todesstoß für die Mutter und damit die Nation (Graßl 1908: 522).

Graßl's view on motherhood, as well as Pearson and Leonard Darwin's, represents the dominant eugenic outlook on the role and function of women within a eugenic utopia. Far from being a homogeneous and constant discourse, eugenic conviction's differed across the different social, political and economic groups. This also applies to fiction, especially in New Woman novels in Germany and Britain which imagined different portrayals of eugenic motherhood.

'Saxon Edith' and 'der Blondkopf': Imagining the Eugenic Mother

In the novels of Helene Böhlau and Sarah Grand, many of the elements from this profoundly patriarchal eugenic discourse are repeated. Selflessness, motherly womanhood and the role of women as contributing to a 'fit' race are recurrent themes. In the novels of the German author Helene Böhlau, for instance, we recognize such eugenic discourse when she describes a family as 'Alles blonde, Große Gestalten, rosige Menschen, die das Maß gewöhnlicher Sterblicher um ein beträchtliches überschritten hatten' (Böhlau 1904: 86). Böhlau's novels also advocate for maternal feelings in women that transcend the biological bond. In Böhlau's novel *Das Haus zur Flamm* (1907), Marianne, a character who is constantly surrounded by visitors and guests in her house, explains the attraction of her company: 'Ein bißchen Schein, ein bißchen Geist und Welt; das mag locken – aber was sie zurückführt, ist die barmherzige Mutter. Wahrheit und Stil ist's: daß sie mich zuletzt nur mütterlich empfinden. Kommen sie mit ihren Wunden, ich verbinde sie' (Böhlau 1915: 55). The 'barmherzige Mutter' who transcends 'Schein', 'Geist' and 'Welt' in Marianne voices an essential and innate motherhood that is reminiscent of Charles Darwin's characterisation of women. Here, Böhlau participates in granting women an elevated and special position within society due to their maternal nature. Böhlau's novels, however, also argue for the same elevated position regardless of the mother's marital status. In *Das Recht der Mutter* (1896), for example, Böhlau portrays the struggle of Kristine, an unmarried young woman who becomes pregnant and has to fight against society's rules and stigmatization in raising her son. The young mother declares that from the day she registered her illegitimate child, she has started 'den Kampf um mein heiliges Recht, das heilige Recht der Mutter, heiliger als alle Menschensatzung' (Böhlau 1906: 318-319). This right to motherhood finds eugenic validation when her child is described as strong and beautiful, much like the 'blondkopf' Kristine herself, who is also 'stark und gesund' (Böhlau 1906: 321, 181, 137). The eugenic rationale is further evident when Kristine's healthy, illegitimate baby is contrasted to the many children of the Majunke family. When Frau Majunke expresses her disgust at Kristine and her illegitimate child, a friend of the single mother lashes back:

> Wollen Sie damit sagen, daß Sie ehrbarer als der Blondkopf sind? [...] Glauben Sie, sie dürfen in aller Ehrbarkeit Kinder auf die Welt setzen, ins Elend hinein, wie es ihnen behagt? Kinder, die so einem erbärmlichen, kranken, armseligen Leben entgegensehen [...] Kinder, die Sie nicht im Stande sind, zu erziehen und zu ernähren, denen Sie nicht einmal so viel Gesundheit und Lebenskraft mitgeben können [...] Solche elenden, verlassenen Kreaturen! So schlecht bei Kraft! So nervös und schwach geraten, so gelb und zapplig – und so en masse und so erbärmlich erzogen, so doppelt schlechte Fabrikware! (Böhlau 1906: 302)

The unfit Majunke children, despite being born within wedlock, serve to disprove Frau Majunke's maternal fitness. Kristine's motherhood, on the other hand, is eugenically sound and legitimate. In Böhlau's writing it is clear that female sexual transgression does not automatically entail a degenerate offspring. The patriarchal eugenic formula, such as the one in the Eugenic Society's decaying tree or in the writings of Leonard Darwin, is refuted in the narrative by Kristine's 'kräftiges Kind' (Böhlau 1906: 316). Böhlau's novels thus echo the dominant take on eugenics in her representation of ideal bodies and in her construction of maternal feelings as essential to womanhood. At the same time, Böhlau's narratives dissociate the connection between degeneracy and female sexual transgression made by male eugenicists. Moreover, the eugenic emphasis on woman's essential maternity is used to expose society's double standard in idealizing married mothers and demonizing unmarried ones. For Böhlau, recognizing the biological primacy, social importance and sovereignty of motherhood requires supporting and respecting it, regardless of social conventions and laws.

In the novels of the British author Sarah Grand female sexual transgression and illegitimacy are not as freely discussed and advocated as in Böhlau's. Like Böhlau, however, Grand's novels teem with eugenic references and a high regard for motherhood. In one of her short stories, the protagonist is called 'Eugenia', and she is described in overtly eugenic language. The narrative asserts that 'with such women' as Eugenia as 'mothers of men, the English-speaking races should rule the world' (Grand 1894: 27). Grand's novels, like those of Böhlau, represent motherhood as intrinsic to women's nature. This maternal nature is however seen as a service to the nation and thus as the premise for granting more civic rights to women. Pearson's call for women to 'submit [their] liberty to the restrains and demanded by social welfare' (Pearson 1888: 394) is in Grand's novels inverted: women should be granted more agency, given the primacy and importance of their maternal role. In Grand's novels, 'social welfare' and 'race-permanence' (Pearson 1888: 394) are key elements for the continuation of the human race, but women's sacrifice, self-denial or anonymity are not a prerequisite for their realization. Rather, it is women who gain superiority in the process of race regeneration. Grand writes: 'the roar of the rolling spheres, astronomers say, is so tremendous as to be beyond the hearing of our mortal ears; and the sudden upward impulse of the human race in our day, as shown in the attitude of women, is beyond the earthbound comprehension of most men' (Grand 1894: 50). Grand's Eugenia is a good example of this superior understand-

ing. She picks the fittest partner in eugenic terms and proposes marriage herself (Grand 1894: 49). The marriage then produces 'fit' and healthy offspring (Grand 1894: 51). However, not all Grand's plots have such a happy – and eugenically ideal – outcome. In fact, the portrayal of ideal motherhood in Grand's novels is rather the exception than the rule. Her novels more often present dysfunctional mothers: mothers whose gendered socialization as societal women teaches them to care little about their offspring, or women who are kept ignorant through lack of proper education and contract sexually transmitted diseases by marrying unfit men, ending up with deformed children. In *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), Edith is as racially superior as Eugenia. She is repeatedly referred to as 'Saxon Edith' with a 'magnificent physique' (Grand 1893: 72, 137, 299). Unlike Eugenia, however, Edith's 'ignorance of life' (Grand 1893: 201) leads her to accept an unfit mate and in turn give birth to a deformed child. Her baby is described as 'old, old already, and exhausted with suffering' and denounced as a eugenic crime: 'as his gaze wandered from one to the other it was easy to believe that he was asking each dumbly why had he ever been born?' (Grand 1893: 246). Edith herself contracts the venereal disease and transforms from a girl with hair 'the colour of burnished brass' to 'gray and ghastly and old' (Grand 1893: 72, 258). She becomes 'quite mad' and she and the baby die (Grand 1893: 298, 497). The physical deterioration and degeneracy is also accompanied by complete disruption of the 'natural' maternal bond. Edith 'had no smile for [her baby], and uttered no baby words to him – nor had he a smile for her' (Grand 1893: 249). In one of her insanity moments, Edith even exclaims 'I want to kill that monstrous child!' (Grand 1893: 262). The classical love plot, and by extension Darwin's sexual selection model where men compete over women proves fatal to Edith in *The Heavenly Twins*. By contrast, in Grand's short story 'Eugenia', rational sexual selection by women ensures the thriving, not only of Eugenia, but also of the race as a whole. Richardson writes that 'in disseminating the new, eugenic love, Grand hailed male literary precedent as a source of contamination that was to be upturned at all cost. Rewriting the love-plot, she exposed the health risks of conventional romance' (Richardson 2003: 123). For Grand, healthy and fit offspring are not the result of learned and genius men, but rather of female empowerment and education. Women's maternal role doesn't function as a means for their submission, but sets the grounds for their active involvement in reforming society.

'Mordet das Kind die Mutter': Reclaiming the Struggle for Survival

In spite of the dominant discourse, many female authors dismiss the idea of an essential motherhood for women altogether. I will present two examples: the British writer Mona Caird and the German writer Dolorosa, the pseudonym of Maria Eichhorn. Both Dolorosa and Caird challenge the idea that the maternal instinct should be innate to women, or that motherhood is the ideal destiny for all women. In Dolorosa's novel *Unfruchtbarkeit* (1905), for example, motherhood is systemat-

ically presented as tied up with death. Only a few sentences into the novel, a mother, whose many pregnancies and childbirths have left her sick and exhausted complains that 'Ich wusste [...] dass ich keine Kinder haben dürfte, wollte ich mich lange gesund halten. Und dann schenkte Gott doch eins nach dem anderen' (Dolorosa 1919: 3-4). The mother dies at the end of the novel, and her children are passed on to various relatives (Dolorosa 1919: 297). This is one of many instances that intertwine motherhood and death in *Unfruchtbarkeit* (Dolorosa 1919: 48-9, 7). Women's individual persona, health and professional ambitions are threatened by childbearing. Instead of the eugenic ideal of a selfless and sacrificing motherhood, women in Dolorosa's novel are struggling and competing for survival. This struggle is rendered all the more difficult if women have children. Interestingly, however, in unsettling the eugenic ideal of motherhood, Dolorosa's novel nonetheless uses the same eugenic language reserved for depicting the evolutionary struggle. The life-or-death struggle that is related to motherhood in *Unfruchtbarkeit* is described as follows:

> Das Leben trägt sich sehr schwer, und zehnfach schwer für ein junges Weib, das mit dem Fluche der Mutterschaft belastet ist. In solchem Falle mordet das Kind die Mutter... Das mörderische Gesetz des Lebens ist eben nicht umzustoßen, das jedes Wesen sein Dasein nur durch die Aufhebung und Vernichtung eines fremden ermöglichen kann. (Dolorosa 1919: 127)

Dolorosa uses Herbert Spencer's 'survival of the fittest' to describe the mother/child relationship. By doing so she challenges the evolutionary claim that men are active and competitive while women are static and selfless, yet she does so using the same eugenic and evolutionary language and imagery that propagates this sexual difference. By contrast, female protagonists who manage to evade 'the burden of motherhood' are the ones to flourish. Virginia, unlike the unfortunate mothers that surround her, has a successful career as an actress precisely because of the absence of children. Describing Virginia, Anke Gilleir writes: 'sie geht [...] alle Beziehungen, die ihre Unabhängigkeit beeinträchtigen, aus dem Weg und ist damit nicht nur eine vollkommen autonome Gestalt, sondern merkwürdigerweise auch die einzige heitere Person [...] in einer Geschichte, in der alle durch sozialen Zwang zerrüttet sind' (Gilleir 2015: 45). This cheerfulness is the result of her awareness of the survival law of anti-natalism, which is her 'Rezept' to remain fit and thrive (Dolorosa 1919: 297). Instead of an early grave induced by motherhood, she rises to fame and fortune (Dolorosa 1919: 295).

Apart from this opposition between suffering or perishing mothers and flourishing childless women, the novel also portrays some mothers who outlive their children in the struggle for survival. Fredine, the novel's protagonist, is the best example of this surmounting. Like Edith in *The Heavenly Twins*, Fredine's child is born 'schwächlich und dürftig' due to the father's venereal disease (Dolorosa 1919: 287). Like Grand, Dolorosa's narrative thus disputes the eugenic patriarchal argu-

ment as maintained by Graßl and others of the irrelevance of the men's sexual promiscuity in producing healthy offspring. The father's blood that runs through the veins of Fredine's child is 'vergiftet von einer unreinen und schleichenden Krankheit' (Dolorosa 1919: 288). Unlike Grand's character Edith, however, Fredine remains healthy. While the child gets 'das furchtbare und heimtückische Gift eingeflößt', Fredine's 'blühnde Gesundheit' remains untested (Dolorosa 1919: 288). The sick and weakly child can not only be contrasted with the mother's physical health, but also to the mother's flourishing laundry business. The novel closes with a twist on the classic love-plot ending. Fredine, now owner of a laundry factory, only agrees to marry her lover if he promises to never ask her to bear him children (Dolorosa 1919: 305). The novel thus locates the evolutionary struggle for survival between the mother and child: the flourishing of both at the same time seems impossible. Yet, this is not the result of a malicious intent of mothers towards their offspring. Rather, the mothers in Dolorosa's *Unfreuchtbarkeit* are weakened physically and financially, and so are defeated both by biology and society. Darwin's self-sacrificing mother and Spencer static middle-class ideal are thus undermined in this novel by representations of motherhood in terms of conflict and competition.

Dolorosa is not the only writer who depicts conflicts within motherhood and does not take women's maternal nature for granted. Mona Caird's novel *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) also repeatedly deploys the language of 'survival of the fittest' to negotiate women's position within society. Hadria, the novel's protagonist who abandons her husband and children to pursue a career in music composition in Paris, challenges the sincerity of virtuous womanhood in society. She tells her sister-in-law:

> It is cunning, shallow, heartless women, who really fare best in our society; its conditions suits them. They have no pity, no sympathy to make a chain of [...] they don't mind swallowing indignity and smiling abjectly, like any woman of the harem of her lord, so that they gain their object. That is the sort of 'woman's nature' that our conditions are busy selecting. Let us cultivate it. *We live in a scientific age; the fittest survive. Let us be 'fit'.* (Caird 1989: 347)

Hadria exposes the scientific ideal of the static, self-sacrificing and selfless maternal woman as a tool to subject women. In reality, according to her, the competitive, ruthless women are the ones who survive in contemporary society. Hadria also argues that motherhood in its current form is a construct. She denies that such a thing as 'free motherhood' exists (Caird 1989: 342). In another passage, Hadria debunks the myth of essential motherhood in a patriarchal society, because the elevation of motherhood is only granted within marriage. Watching a wedding procession, Hadria seizes the opportunity to point out the incongruities of assuming maternal instinct in all women and at the same time only endorsing maternal feelings for married women. She tells her friend Lady Engelton, to imagine if the bride 'on any day *previous* to this, had gone to her mother and expressed an overpowering maternal instinct – a deep desire to have a child!' (Caird 1989: 254). When Lady

Engelton is horrified by the idea, Hadria goes on to ask if, 'on any day *subsequent* to this' the young bride should have a 'profound objection to the maternal function' (Caird 1989: 254). Lady Engelton is equally shocked and states that the bride 'would be wrong in her objection' (Caird 1989: 254). After pointing out the hypocrisy of being 'horribly shocked at the presence of an instinct to-day, and then equally shocked and indignant by its absence to-morrow', Lady Engleton defends her position by referring to 'men of science' (Caird 1989: 256). Hadria responses by wondering why 'women are ready, with open mouths, to reverently swallow this male verdict on their inherent nature as if it were gospel divinely inspired' (Caird 1989: 257). This passage denounces the scientific authority of men on the subject of motherhood, and also condemns women's implication in this patriarchal rhetoric.

Investigating the use of history and the temporal structure in *Daughters of the Danaus*, Lisa Surridge asserts that

> Rather than seeing women as biologically fixed in a particular role, as did eugenic feminists such as Sarah Grand, or seeing society as evolving progressively towards the current gender system, a conclusion strongly implied by Darwinists such as E.B. Tylor and John Lubbock, who used marriage as a key index of social evolution, Caird argued that social relationships were socially constructed [and] eminently liable to change. (Surridge 2005: 129)

Accordingly, Hadria exposes motherhood in the 'present social state' as 'the sign, seal, means and method of a woman's bondage', because it creates biological chains 'of [the mother's] own flesh' (Caird 1989: 341). Like Dolorosa, Caird often links motherhood with death. Hadria informs her sister-in-law of the 'thousands of women [...] to whom the birth of their children is an intolerable burden, and a fierce misery from which many would gladly seek escape by death' (Caird 1989: 342).

The struggle for survival between mothers and their children is also repeated on the plot level. While Dolorosa locates this struggle between mothers and young children, Caird expands it to adult children, but also explicitly frames it as a gendered struggle between mothers and daughters. When a Mrs. Jorden, described as a 'woman who ruled her family with a rod of iron for thirty stern years' reiterates the Darwinian formula that 'to the true woman [...] there is no joy to equal that of self-sacrifice', Hadria is quick with the comeback 'except that of exacting it' (Caird 1989: 386). This questioning of maternal self-sacrifice is demonstrated by the struggle between Hadria, her sister Algitha and their mother. Mrs. Fullerton is described as once having shown 'signs of qualities', an interest in poetry and the possession of an imagination (Caird 1989: 33). But since her marriage and childbearing years, her talents and promise, 'her development', was submerged and stifled (Caird 1989: 33). 'The long stagnation' resulted in 'the slow decay and disuse of her faculties' (Caird 1989: 362). While the subjection of women in the patriarchal system is achieved most successfully through reproduction, the resulting self-negation and degeneration of the mother provides in turn a leash on the daughters, a means of

asking them to do the same. The chief obstacle to both Algitha and Hadria's plans of moving to London and Paris to pursue their artistic and professional ambitions is the distress it would cause their mother (Caird 1989: 29). After the departure of Algitha to London, the mother tells her second daughter that if, she too, would desert her, it would kill her (Caird 1989: 45). It nearly does kill the mother, when, years later, Hadria leaves for Paris. The struggle for survival is most pronounced when Hadria has to return to her mother's sickbed while 'knowing, and realizing vividly, that if her mother lived, her own dreams were ended forever' (Caird 1989: 362). Mrs. Fullerton survives, but the doctor urges her to avoid stress and agitation. The illness, which was caused by Hadria's abandonment of husband and children and the rumors and scandal associated with it, becomes the rein with which the daughter's ambition is kept in check and ultimately destroyed. Rather than provide a triumphant survival of one over the other, however, both mother and daughter end up in a vicious circle of sacrifice that demands further sacrifice. Hadria notes that the current social system requires such an endless cycle of sacrifice of women, while men, exemplified by Hadria's brothers are not asked for reparations (Caird 1989: 268). The demand on daughters hinders them from developing outside the strict boundaries set out by patriarchal society.

Like Dolorosa, Caird undermines the traditional patriarchal image of motherhood as passive and selfless which Darwin, Spencer and other eugenicists sanctioned as a biological given. By highlighting the struggle between mothers, their offspring and society, both women writers contradict the reductive and restrictive positioning of women in eugenic theories and science at large. Both Caird and Dolorosa debunk myths of motherhood by relocating evolutionary struggle for survival from the male sphere to the relationship between mothers and their offspring. The re-imagining of motherhood by New Women writers as a dilemma also paved the way for more complex portrayals of motherhood in literature. For example, Marie Géraldine Rademacher's concept of 'benevolent narcissistic mothers' in the works of D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, 'which fundamentally challenges the ideal image of romantic motherhood and the myth of selfless mothers' (2019: 11), shows how central portrayals of dysfunctional motherhood are to modernism. Such thematic correlations between New Women writers and modernist highbrow texts further debunk myths of a great divide between the brows, as well as expand the traditional boundaries of the modernist period and consolidate the new understanding of modernism in recent scholarship.

Whether pro or anti-natalist, all four authors attempt to beat the eugenicists in their own game by using the scientific discourse of eugenic theories and evolutionary biology to argue for women's emancipation, to grant women more rights and power. Reading four authors comparatively allows locating the similarities and differences between German and British New Woman writings. As shown by the pairing of Grand/Böhlau and Caird/Dolorosa, portrayals of mothers in the novels of female authors transcended the boundaries of national literature. Motherhood, whether as a heavy burden or an ideal to be attained, moves from the margins to the

center of the novel. The love plot is reduced and becomes either a means to achieve an elated state of existence, or the cause of suffering. The striking thematic overlap between these novels in reimagining motherhood reestablishes the need for a transnational research into women's writings, especially in entangling the rich intertwining of emancipation, science and literary innovation.

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