

Thomas Mann's novella *Luischen* [*Little Louise*]: Gender trouble

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Since the nineteen nineties at least, that is after the publication of Thomas Mann's diaries, every examination of his early novellas has had to face up to the conjecture that they are making ample use of those literary structures, which serve to conceal the topic of same sex love. They seem to represent progressive stages of the author's working through of his personal stigma. It was not before the year 1912 that homosexual love, the love of an aging man towards a boy, was openly made the subject of a narration (that is *Death in Venice*). In the preceding stories the narration of homosexual desire had been taking place under the guise of heterosexuality. As a result the author had to invent intricate techniques of camouflage. According to his own statement, Thomas Mann developed these techniques in his «breakthrough story», *Little Herr Friedemann*, in a way, that entirely satisfied his needs for the first time; that was in 1897: «Since *Little Herr Friedemann* I am suddenly able to find those discrete forms and masks which enable me to present my experiences to the public.»¹

In an earlier paper on Thomas Mann, given at the Conference in Arles in 2004, I based my interpretation of the novella *Little Herr Friedemann* on the following theses:

- that physical deformity – Herr Friedemann's hump – is a stigma that is analogous to the stigma of homosexuality and serves as its signal in the text;
- that the love object, Gerda von Rinnlingen, is represented as a *femme fatale*, who, in the context of the text's covert theme of homosexuality, plays the role of the rejecting male lover;
- that Gerda von Rinnlingen at the same time is constructed as a parallel or female mirror of the protagonist. Her physical complaints mask his suffering; in other words, both suffer from the heterosexual gender order.²

The novella *Luischen* [*Little Louise*], written in 1897, published in 1900, is thematically closely related to *Der kleine Herr Friedemann* [*Little Herr Friedemann*]. The protagonist, Herr Jacoby, the

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¹ Hans Rudolf Vaget: *Thomas Mann-Kommentar zu saemtlichen Erzaehlungen*, Muenchen: Winkler, 1984, p. 55 (my translation, A. L.-K.). Letter to Grauthoff, 4/6/1897.

² Astrid Lange-Kirchheim (2006): «Gender Trouble in Thomas Mann's Early Novella *Der kleine Herr Friedemann* [*Little Herr Friedemann*]». *Proceedings of the Twenty-first International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis*, Arles, France, 2004, Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada, pp. 63-69.

counsellor-at-law, also has a stigma. Like little Herr Friedemann's hump, his corpulence is a physical deformity. In this text the character stigmatised is the husband. The love object, in this case his wife, is like Gerda von Rinnlingen a *femme fatale*, an exotic beauty called Amra. The fatal ostracism of the homosexual is played out within the frame of a relationship triangle. Amra takes a lover, the composer Alfred Lütner, and with his help arranges a party. Acquaintances and friends participating in the festivity contribute to the entertainment with a variety of performances. Amra more or less forces her obese husband to take the stage as a chanteuse, to dress in a baby-dress of red silk and sing to her lover's music. In this role he realises that his wife has not only publicly exposed him as a cuckold. By means of the transvestite costume, she has also divulged the secret of his homosexuality. As a result he collapses on the stage and dies.

The strict division of the novella into five chapters corresponds with the five-act structure of a tragedy. Like Oedipus, the deceived husband is made to see and to know. This formal allusion to classical tragedy together with the fact that the fatal unmasking of the protagonist occurs in the public domain – and not as in *Little Herr Friedemann* in private – accentuates to a much greater extent the social dimension of the process of exclusion. In my analysis I will attempt to show how the strategies by which heteronormativity is imposed are made visible in the text.

One of these strategies is the institution of marriage. The marriage between Christian and Amra Jacoby is regarded by the narrator as one of those «adventurous combinations of contrary qualities» «the origin of which not even the most practised literary imagination could possibly conceive.» They do, however, occur with sufficient regularity to be suitable «as the basis for the mathematical composition of a farce.»³ The coupling of the beautiful woman with the ugly man corresponds on the one hand with the polarisation of sexual stereotypes, on the other with the binary construction of gender. The implicit hierarchy in the relationship is responsible for the instability of the arrangement. The woman is required to function as a complement. According to Georg Simmel, this is her responsibility as a woman (1911), but it is a role she can refuse to comply with. Simmel points metaphorically to the risk of insurrection when he defines the relation of the sexes as one of «master and slave».⁴ Seen from this perspective, Amra is, as the narrator indicates, indeed a «perilous woman» (174). The narrator can give no reason «why precisely Amra should have married Counsellor-at-law Jacoby». But he, «on his part, loved her, and that with a love so passionate as is surely seldom found in people of his physique, and yet his love was humble and timid in accordance with the rest of his nature» (177). For the lawyer the marriage with Amra seems to be a matter of survival. His declarations of love, delivered weeping and on his knees, culminate in the desperate plea that she will never betray or deceive him. He tries to make it clear to her that even if she can't love him, his love for her is still something worthwhile, something for which she should be at least a little grateful to him. In retrospect, one could conclude that the collusion in the marriage benefits both characters – Amra, the beautiful, sensual wife, camouflages her husband's lack of masculinity, in other words his homosexuality. He for his part guarantees her honour and reputation. The narrator makes a particular point of emphasising her sultana-like «vegetative and lazy voluptuousness» (174) and indirectly questions her standing as «a moral woman» (179).

With the theatre comparison in the first paragraph the narrator introduces the central metaphor of the text and anticipates its conclusion, the festivity that reaches a climax in a series of performances on an improvised stage. The party begins as a farce and ends as a tragedy, in a scandal with fatal

³ All quotations from *Little Louise* (page numbers in brackets) are taken from the following collection: Thomas Mann: *Children and Fools*. Translated from the German by Herman George Scheffauer, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928, pp. 173-200, here p. 173. For the German text see Heinrich Detering et al. (Eds.): *Thomas Mann. Grosse kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe. Werke – Briefe – Tagebuecher*. Vol. 2,1: *Fruehe Erzaehlungen 1893-1912*, ed. by Terence J. Reed, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2004, pp. 160-180.

⁴ Simmel, Georg: «Das Relative und das Absolute im Geschlechter-Problem». In Georg Simmel, *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie. Philosophische Kultur*, ed. by Ruediger Kramme and Otthein Rammstedt, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996 (= *Georg Simmel. Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 14, pp. 219-255).

consequences for the person scandalised, the counsellor-at-law, Christian Jacoby. Here the festival, defined by Freud as the celebratory violation of a prohibition,⁵ loses its primary function as an illusion or ritual. Here the observer's distance is removed. The hero on the stage is excluded by his fellow players and also – as it were in a second scene – by the public. As a result, he is no longer a symbolic, fictional victim, but becomes a real one.

Although Amra, a woman, has the initial idea for the «most original party», it is organised by a committee that, with one exception, consists «wholly of gentlemen» (182f.). The party is thus a reflection of patriarchal society and the generational and gender differences that determine it. It is the younger of the gentlemen, who, following barrister Witznagel's lead, demand «something startling», a «clou» as the chief feature and climax of the party (186). They are not satisfied with the suggestion of the father figure, the court actor, Herr Hildebrandt, that the party conclude with his representation of famous men: he has in mind a «startlingly realistic» (195) portrayal of Goethe, Bismarck and Napoleon. Instead, it is Amra, the wife, who conceives the clou and in so doing places herself at the head of the fraternal horde that challenges the rule of the father. Moreover, she is described here as an artist, which also underlines her subversive role.

Central terms in Mann's story, particularly in its last two chapters (in act IV and V of the tragedy, so to speak), are «Mr» and «gentlemen»⁶ – the party and its preparation are all in male hands. Herr Hildebrandt, the actor, equipped with a respectable dark suit and a Caesarean head, demonstrates the dominant hierarchy's claim to power and demands obedience to phallic-mon(arch)istic norms. At the same time, this claim to power is ironically undermined 1) by the *exaggerated* use of the address «Meine Herrschaften» which, like the generic terms «Mensch» («man» or «person») or «man» («one») in German, renders women invisible, and 2) by Herr Hildebrandt's wife. A singer in «a riding-costume» with a «Brünhilde voice» (184, 189), she is the phallic woman who subverts the asymmetrical gender order. Her contribution to the festivity is the «delightful» English song «That's Maria!» which she delivers in a phallic performance accompanied by the regular prodding of a long cane (195). Her husband intimates that it is a song of particular appeal to the male audience, describing it as «a bit piquant, but of most uncommon effectiveness» (185).

The song «Luischen» [«Little Louise»], the clou and climax of the party, is conceived by Amra and composed by her lover, Alfred Lütner. The married couple, the Hildebrandts, mirrors the other married couple, the Jacobys. Both cross the gender borders, both violate the norm of heterosexuality. Frau Hildebrandt's masculinity makes of their marriage a phallic alliance, Christian Jacoby's effeminacy makes of his a feminine one. As female homosexuality is less offensive, it is the effeminate man who is punished for his transgression with a body that is «monstrous» and «formless» (175). This calls to mind the proverb «Clothes make the Man» which is provocatively transformed by Thomas Mann into «Bodies make the Man». In showing that the body is judged in terms of gender performance, he anticipates the work of Judith Butler. The elephant, Christian Jacoby, is literally «a body that matters» and as such an affront to the symbolic order. In its endless feminine undulations that lack masculine (self-) discipline, his body *un-makes* the man.

Expressed in terms of gender theory, the novella *Luischen* [Little Louise] creates a space of hypervirile masculinity which is constantly undermined by its opposite, by both homophile and homophobic tendencies. Witznagel, the name of the young barrister decorated by duelling-scars, is its signifier (the phallus as the object of a joke).⁷ Phallogocentrism produces the discontent in culture, which is projected outwards and vents itself in the selection of a scapegoat. In the manner in which Counsellor-at-law Jacoby, who is after all a representative of law and order, is forced to break a taboo, is forced to perform the role of the effeminate man, «malice» and «politeness» mix and become indistinguishable (189). With the request

⁵ Sigmund Freud [1912–13]: «Totem and Tabu», *S.E.*, vol. 13, p. 140.

⁶ In German «Herr(en)» and «Herrschaften».

⁷ The German «Witz» means «wit» and «joke», «Nagel» means «nail».

– «Christian, I propose that at the close you appear as a chanteuse in a baby-dress of red silk and dance something for us» (187) – Jacoby’s wife, in front of the whole organising committee, delivers her husband up for execution. In the literal transformation of this abhorred in- and subhuman colossus from a human being into an animal – into a dancing bear – lies, in the text’s own words, the «social significance» of the party «in honour of the newly-brewed spring beer» (182, 195). It is the grotesque transposition of the stories of Easter and of sacrifice – Christian Jacoby is both Oedipus and Christ.

He is the object of a kind of mobbing, which in psychotraumatology is considered to be a type of collective trauma defence. Using double bind messages – hence the mixing of «malice» and «politeness» (189) – the collective forces the victim to carry out the actions that its members deem «necessary».⁸ In the process they draw on Jacoby’s own self-loathing. Even the narrator joins in and is himself guilty of «blaming the victim»: «No spectacle is more unlovely than that of a man who despises himself, but who nevertheless out of cowardice and vanity would like to be amiable and to please; and, in my opinion, it was not otherwise with the counsellor-at-law, who went too far in his almost grovelling self-deprecation, so that he was utterly unable to keep the necessary amount of personal dignity» (176). By blaming the victim the accuser attempts to protect himself from his own fear of becoming a victim of trauma, of himself being ostracised.

The performance «Little Louise. Song and Dance. Music by Alfred Lütner» (195) as the chief and closing act of the festivity is a masquerade in a number of ways. It is a masquerade in the sense that it is an unmasking. The protagonist’s eyes are opened. His own performance has for him the effect of a revelation, an unveiling, the suddenness of which is compared with the rending of a curtain. It is also a masquerade in the sense that it is a gender performance. The transvestite gender travesty works by detaching the gender qualities that seem to be specific to femininity and masculinity and by giving them the status of signs. Gender identity is thus shown to be a construction. Ultimately it is possible to use transvestism, as Marjorie Garber does, as the name for the signification process of culture itself, as a metaphor for the symbolic order. Accordingly, all culture is transvestism.⁹

The medium of the unmasking is the music. The unveiling is the effect of a sudden change of key. The expected transition from C-sharp major to F-sharp major does not occur; instead there is a sudden turn and the key changes to F major. This «interpolation» follows on the «long drawn out» second syllable of «Lu-is-chen» (198) transforming the three-syllabled feminine form of the German diminutive into the two-syllabled masculine Lou-is. The sudden (musical) turn from C-sharp major to F-major symbolises the switch from feminine to masculine, or from heterosexual to homosexual. It is no longer «Little Louise from down the alley» who, in the silly refrain that Jacoby is to sing, «charms the heart of every man,» but Little Louis.

To polka and to waltz I rally,
And dance them as no other can;/
Little Louise from down our alley,
Who charms the heart of every man (198).¹⁰

The counsellor-at-law, a «pathetic figure» (197), naïve in his compliance with the dominant gender order, is forced to follow the melody and in so doing to out himself. Stressing the two syllables of «Lou-is» is one of those «original» effects that, according to the narrator, qualify the otherwise insignificant

⁸ Amra manipulates and coerces her husband by means of the following reproach: «You refused in discourteous terms to support the entertainment by your cooperation, which everybody considered necessary» (190).

⁹ Marjorie Garber: *Vested Interests. Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety*, New York/London: Routledge, 1991.

¹⁰ Note the German version: «Den Walzertanz und auch die Polke / Hat keine noch, wie ich, vollführt; / Ich bin Luischen aus dem Volke, / Die manches Männerherz gerührt ... ». *Thomas Mann. Grosse kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 2,1, p. 178.

composer, Alfred Lautner, as an artist (181). There is a significant difference between the expected modulation from C-sharp major to F-sharp major, which would have resulted in a small upward shift from six sharps to seven, and the actual modulation to F major, which involves a downward movement to a key with one flat. If the music is understood as a metaphor here, then the distance from C-sharp major to F major can be seen to signify the difference between masculine and feminine and the discrepancy in their status. Sharps elevate individual notes in the tonic key by a semi-tone; flats lower or, as the name suggests, flatten them. And this is exactly what happens to the figure of Christian Jacoby. The <stout man> (174) is literally flattened so that he collapses and dies, «making the boards rattle» (200) as he crashes to the floor.

The fatal humiliation is not the result of the realisation that he has been deceived by his wife and her lover, the love-pair, as the narrator for reasons of decorum seems to suggest. It is caused by the wife's betrayal of her husband, her public exposure of the animal (the dog, the elephant, the bear) in him i.e. the sodomist. Around 1900 sodomy was a common term for homosexuality. The horror this performance of effeminacy and beastliness arouses in the public is comparable with that evoked by classical tragedy. It is the horror and fear of the return of chaos, disorder, the repressed, which at the turn of the century is identified and stigmatised as homosexuality. The function of the taboo of homosexuality is to secure the stability of the heterosexual gender order. That is the reason why the representation of *this Oedipus'* suffering requires the camouflage of the cuckolded husband, or of the ludicrous transvestite.

Thomas Mann's stigma-management in his novella *Luischen [Little Louise]* is not only evident in the parallel drawn between the exclusion of the homosexual and the exclusion of the female from the symbolic/masculine order. The story contains other exclusions, those that are based on race or ethnicity. The performances for the Spring festival include Negro dances that are described in terms that are culturally devaluing: «and, behold, there stood a number of hideous Negroes, in screaming costumes and with blood-red lips, who gnashed their teeth and raised a barbaric howl...» (195). Moreover, both protagonists, and some of the other characters, are shown to be of Jewish descent. Counsellor-at-law Jacoby conceals his origin with a «Christian» name, which is meant to override the signal effect of his surname Jacoby. The first name of his wife, Amra, is an artificial creation¹¹ whose exotic oriental ring camouflages the Jewishness of the Hebrew name, Anna, which, however, remains audible. It is the physical stereotype of the nose, «in profile [...] a bit too large and fleshy» (174) that clearly identifies her as a Jew. The already evident exclusion of both married partners – as a homosexual and as a woman – from the phallogocentric order is doubled by the stereotypical equivalence: «am I a Jew – I am a woman».¹² In Counsellor-at-law Jacoby this produces a «grovelling self-deprecation» (176), self-contempt and an excessively humble and timorous submissiveness that corresponds with Jewish self-hatred. His wife Amra's reaction to her abasement is, in contrast, projected outwards as «sensual malice» (178), a «mocking tone» (179) and as «avid slyness» (174). Finally, the singing, mincing transvestite Jacoby can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the outsider figure of the artist, represented here pejoratively by the narrator as the «small artist» (180).

If one were to generalise the narrator's derisive comment about the other artist in the story, the «petty mime» (180) Alfred Lautner, one could say that none of those characters in the novella, who are stigmatised, succeeds in being «unhappy in a respectable manner» (180). The narrated events show, however, that the reactions to social and cultural exclusion – and the strategies of exclusion include not only the gender discourse but also the language the narrator uses – become (self-)destructive. In Amra, the beautiful Jewess torments the ugly Jew till he dies. A degree of destruction is reached that

¹¹ The name Amra is «composed of the initial letters of» Anna, Marguerite, Rose, Amalie (173).

¹² For further evidence of this stereotypical equation see Otto Weininger [1903]: *Geschlecht und Charakter. Eine prinzipielle Untersuchung*, Muenchen 1980, pp. 409, 429. See also Heinrich Detering: *Juden, Frauen, Literaten. Zu einer Denkfigur beim jungen Thomas Mann*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2005.

exceeds and cancels not only ethical, but also aesthetic demands: the counsellor-at-law is executed by means of a play within a play. It is thus an act of narrative justice in the novella that an editor with a typically Jewish name, Doctor Wiesensprung, is permitted to deliver a lecture at the festivity on the topic «Spring beer and its social significance» (195), and that a young physician, «a small Jewish gentleman with serious face and black, pointed beard» (200), is given the task of diagnosing Jacoby's death and uttering the text's menacing last word: «Aus», that is «All over»: an exit and an end in many respects.

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