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Teaching eighteenth-century German literature in the era of #MeToo: gender and the Enlightenment canon

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Teaching Eighteenth-Century German Literature in the Era of #MeToo: Gender and the Enlightenment Canon

Ellen Pilsworth

University of Reading

ABSTRACT
This article presents the course 'Seduction and Destruction: 1772–1808', which I taught at Bristol in 2017, at the time of the Harvey Weinstein scandal and ensuing #MeToo debate. I argue for the examination of gender ideologies as a way into more traditionally studied eighteenth-century concepts and movements such as *Aufklärung*, *Sturm und Drang*, and Romanticism. I offer an overview of the texts we studied on the course, and consider to what degree these texts can be seen to critique the gender norms and sexual power dynamics of their own day. Finally, I consider the strengths and challenges of the course at the time, and what made it attractive to students who might otherwise have shied away from eighteenth-century literature.

KEYWORDS
gender; sexuality; enlightenment; infanticide; teaching

Introduction and Overview of the Module

This article reflects on a course called 'Seduction and Destruction: 1772–1808' which I taught at the University of Bristol in 2017. It explored issues around gender, female sexuality, and morality in eighteenth-century literature and culture. Having barely begun to think critically about gender during my own undergraduate studies (indeed, I had read only one book by a German woman by the time I graduated), I wanted to give students at Bristol a better chance to combine critical thinking about gender with their study of German literature. My knowledge of female writers was, sadly, still too limited to populate a whole module with them, but I decided that critically analysing the portrayal of women in texts by men was a step forward in considering the eighteenth-century from a feminist perspective. As Elizabeth Boa has put it: 'One of the earliest and still continuing strands in feminist criticism is reading the male canon consciously as a woman. Such resisting reading is exciting; it asks new questions of old texts.'[1]

CONTACT Ellen Pilsworth e.m.pilsworth@reading.ac.uk

[1]Elizabeth Boa, 'Women, Life and Letters: An Introduction', *GLL*, 44 (1991), 387–91 (p. 389).

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My goal was simply to make students think about women in eighteenth-century Germany, and I had no idea when I outlined the course how timely it would soon become. When term started in October of that year, the #MeToo movement exploded over social media, and there I was getting students to read texts about rape, sexual harassment, and the double moral standards for female sexuality in eighteenth-century German literature and culture. In what follows, I present the course overview and pedagogical rationale, arguing for the examination of gender ideologies as a way into more 'classic' eighteenth-century topics such as *Aufklärung*, *Sturm und Drang*, and Romanticism. Through a brief overview of the selected texts, I consider to what extent they can be seen to engage critically with the sexual and gender norms of their own day, before finally evaluating the course's strengths and challenges.

The course ran for twelve weeks and was assessed by two essays of 3000 words, one in the middle and one at the end of the course. The module description advertised the course with the following blurb:

> *This module explores the late eighteenth-century fascination with the undoing of innocent women: on stage, in prose, and in a great many poems and ballads. Watching the plot of 'verführte Unschuld' (ensnared innocence) unfold was a way for readers and audiences to explore issues around sexuality, morality, and the social freedom of the individual. For instance, how could a society that called itself enlightened still enforce codes of sexual honour which led unmarried women to kill their illegitimate newborns — a crime which was punishable by death — rather than face the public shame of having become pregnant out of wedlock?*
>
> *An essay prize in 1780 with the question, 'What are the best and most practical means of curbing infanticide without encouraging immorality in turn?' received an overwhelming number of responses. This interest was not limited to the academic realm, but also shaped the literature of the period. Around twenty literary works between 1772 and 1791 told stories of seduced, unmarried young women who commit infanticide. These figures alone show the obsession of the period with this theme, but how did it develop over the decades? Did the fiction reflect the facts, or rather the fears of a generation of (mostly male) writers? How, if at all, did Goethe's work as a civil servant influence his work as a poet when it came to the topic of infanticide?*

The aim of the module was primarily to introduce final year students to a number of eighteenth-century literary texts from a range of genres (including drama, prose, and poetry). I also wanted to contextualize these literary sources by reading non-fictional, historical texts, such as contemporary treatises on sexuality and gender roles (by Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Johann Heinrich Campe), as well as evidence from contemporary legal infanticide cases. My hopes were:

- to introduce students to a significant body of eighteenth-century literature at a level of complexity and sophistication appropriate to the final year;
- to familiarize students with Enlightenment debates about gender relations and the role of women in society;

- to develop students' independent research skills and to equip them with the skills for postgraduate study.

As Susanne Kord has pointed out: 'Seduction and, during the second half of the century, infanticide can fairly be called *the* most popular themes in eighteenth-century German literature authored by men,'[2] so it was easy to gather enough texts to populate a module on the theme. We read two plays (Lessing's *Emilia Galotti*, Goethe's *Faust I*), and one short story (Kleist's *Die Marquise von O …*), as well as extracts from La Roche's novel, *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*, ballads by Bürger, Goethe, and Schiller, and selected poems from Arnim and Brentano's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Each of these texts features a heroine who experiences seduction and has to face its consequences, yet their conclusions vary from the 'happily-ever-after' on the one hand (in La Roche and Kleist) to the woman's murder (Lessing), or execution (Goethe and Schiller) on the other. Even after the deaths of these heroines, texts still differed as to whether the women were eternally damned or saved, revealing a contemporary awareness that the laws of society may not be in compliance with divine justice.[3] I wanted to show how the differing fates of these female characters revealed several important contradictions and anxieties at the heart of eighteenth-century German society — themes that were also borne out in non-fictional texts from the time.

To the Core of Enlightenment via an Untraditional Route: Seduction in Theory, Literature, and History

The term 'seduction' (*Verführung*) implies that one has been led astray, usually from the path of virtue, by another person. J. G. Krünitz's *Oekonomische Enzyklopädie* (published 1773–1858) defines 'Verführung' as follows:

> *Seductio*, Fr. *Seduction*, in der letzten Bedeutung des Zeitwortes, die Handlung, da man Andere verführt, sie zu bösen, ungerechten, unsittlichen Handlungen verleitet, indem man ihnen Vortheile vorspiegelt, auch andere unschuldige Verheißungen macht, um sie erst in die Falle oder das Netz zu locken, worin man sie verstricken will, und hat man sie erst so weit, so werden sie durch ihre eigenen Vergehen festgehalten, können sie nicht leicht auf den Weg zur Tugend zurückkehren.[4]

To be seduced, therefore, involves a loss of rational agency, and submission to another's will. It implies going against one's own better (more virtuous) judgment, in the pursuit of some kind of advantage ('Vortheile') or pleasure. This already gets to the core of ideas around individual subjectivity in German

[2]Susanne Kord, *Murderesses in German Writing, 1720–1860: Heroines of Horror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 121.
[3]See Ellen Pilsworth, 'Infanticide in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and *Faust I*: Romantic Variations on a *Sturm und Drang* Theme', *OGS*, 45 (2016), 405–42.
[4]*WB Krünitz – Online*, <http://www.kruenitz1.uni-trier.de/> [accessed 14 April 2021].

eighteenth-century culture, even before gender is taken into account. As Karin Wurst has put it: 'One of the great tasks of Enlightenment (popular) philosophy was to envision the relationship between rationality and sensuality', or the battle between 'Kopf und Herz'.[5] How, then, does the concept of seduction square with the Kantian concept of Enlightenment as 'der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten Unmündigkeit'?[6] For Kant, Enlightenment means taking individual responsibility for one's own thoughts and actions. Seduction on the other hand would imply the opposite of sovereign, rational action, as it was seen as the triumph of the body over the mind, and allowing oneself to be governed by another's reason. Seduction as a concept and as a real event between a man and a woman, therefore, becomes the perfect test case for exploring the agency and limitations of (gendered) individuals.

The form of rational self-assertion advocated by Kant was made practically impossible for women at that time by a system which deliberately subordinated them, as he freely admitted:

> Daß der bei weitem größte Teil der Menschen (darunter das ganze schöne Geschlecht) den Schritt zur Mündigkeit, außer dem daß er beschwerlich ist, auch für sehr gefährlich halte: dafür sorgen schon jene Vormünder, die die Oberaufsicht über sie gütigst auf sich genommen haben (IV, 169).

Both in practice and in most contemporary theory, then, women were denied the agency and individual subjectivity that the doctrine of Enlightenment now newly ascribed to (bourgeois) men. Conceptualized primarily in association with the (weak) body as opposed to the (sovereign, masculine) mind,[7] women stood little chance of achieving the rational independence that Kant described.

I began the course by introducing the contradictions between Kantian notions of freedom on the one hand, and the limiting effects of eighteenth-century gender ideologies on the other, using the opening chapter from Helen Fronius's *Women and Literature in the Goethe Era 1770–1820* as introductory reading.[8] In the first class we read extracts from two eighteenth-century treatises on the subject of gender and sexuality: Joachim Heinrich Campe's 'Väterlicher Rath für meine Tochter' (1789) and Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Grundriß des Familienrechts* (1796), both of which I took from a 1992 anthology edited by Sigrid Lange.[9]

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[5]Karin A. Wurst, 'Gender and Identity in Lessing's Dramas', in *A Companion to the Works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, ed. by Barbara Fischer and Thomas C. Fox (Woodbridge: Camden House, 2005), pp. 231–58 (pp. 232–33).

[6]Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kants Werke*, ed. by Ernst Cassirer, 11 vols (Berlin: Cassirer, 1913), IV: *Schriften von 1783–1788* (1913), ed. by Artur Buchenau and Ernst Cassirer, pp. 167–76 (p. 169).

[7]See Wurst, pp. 232–33.

[8]Helen Fronius, *Women and Literature in the Goethe Era 1770–1820: Determined Dilettantes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), pp. 1–52.

[9]*Ob die Weiber Menschen sind: Geschlechterdebatten um 1800*, ed. by Sigrid Lange (Leipzig: Reclam, 1992).

Presented as advice to his young, bourgeois daughter, Campe's 'Väterlicher Rath für meine Tochter' instructs his reader about 'die Weibliche Bestimmung' which both nature and culture have conspired to allot her:

> Es ist also der übereinstimmende Wille der Natur und der menschlichen Gesellschaft, daß der Mann des Weibes Beschützer und Oberhaupt, das Weib hingegen die sich ihm anschmiegende, sich an ihm haltende und stützende treue, dankbare und folgsame Gefährtin und Gehilfin seines Lebens sein sollte (*Ob die Weiber*, p. 27).

Campe prepares his daughter for the unpleasant reality of gender hierarchy, which he describes as 'Despotismus auf der einen und der niedrigsten Sklaverei auf der andern Seite' (p. 27). So much for 'selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit'!

In *Grundriß des Familienrechts*, Fichte explains the system of male agency and female passivity as grounded in natural differences which manifest in the way sex between men and women takes place. He explains that 'das zweite Geschlecht steht der Natureinrichtung nach um einer Stufe tiefer, als das erste; esist Objekt einer Kraft des ersten, und so mußte es sein, wenn beide verbunden sein sollten' (*Ob die Weiber*, p. 366). He argues that it would be impossible for women to consent to sex for the satisfaction of their desire alone, as this would come into conflict with their highest natural virtue, that of 'Würde' (dignity). The opposite is true for men: 'Der Mann kann, ohne seine Würde aufzugeben, sich den Geschlechtstrieb gestehen, und die Befriedigung desselben suchen' (*Ob die Weiber*, p. 366). Because women are unable to consent to sex for the sake of satisfying their own drives, they must, argues Fichte, do it only for the sake of satisfying a man.[10] This discussion of the sexual relationship between a man and a woman resonates with Campe's description of the marriage dynamic as one of oppression and slavery. Reading these texts with students in the first week of the course showed them clearly that Kant's concept of *Aufklärung,* as the deliberate emancipation of an individual from his self-imposed subjugation, was really only applied to men, even by philosophers such as Fichte who saw themselves as Kantians. For women, it was thought to be impossible on 'natural' grounds. Karen Kenkel summarizes: 'By compelling women to choose self-annihilation as their mode of expression, Fichte disguises inequality.'[11]

As Günter Sasse has argued, this period also witnessed changing ideas around the role of love in marriage. Marriage gradually shifted from being a primarily practical, financial arrangement, into a union based on mutual affection at the core of the bourgeois family — which he designates 'zärtliche Liebe'.[12] Women, especially the unmarried ones most vulnerable to seduction, had to adapt their

[10]'Das Weib kann überhaupt sich nicht hingeben der Geschlechtslust, um ihren eigenen Trieb zu befriedigen; und da sie sich denn doch zufolge eines Triebes hingeben muß, kann dieser Triebe kein andere sein, als der, den Mann zu befriedigen.' (*Ob die Weiber*, p. 367).

[11]Karen Kenkel, 'The Personal and the Philosophical in Fichte's Theory of Sexual Difference,' in *Impure Reason: Dialectic of Enlightenment in Germany*, ed. by W. Daniel Wilson and Robert C. Holub (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), pp. 278–97 (p. 280).

[12]Günter Sasse, *Die Ordnung der Gefühle: Das Drama der Liebesheirat im 18. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996), pp. 38–47.

behaviour and their expectations of men in line with these new ideas. As Sasse puts it, this new form of 'zärtliche Liebe' was no longer purely rational, but it was also distinct from passion, which was associated with sexual desire and considered egotistical. Instead, 'Liebe [wird] in die Nähe der Freundschaft gerückt und so entsexualisiert — als sei die Heirat nur die Beglaubigung einer Freundschaftsbeziehung, die dann, zum Zweck der Kindeszeugung, Sexualität zulassen darf' (Sasse, p. 41). Literary works of this period need to be understood within this ideological context, where gender roles were strictly delineated and female sexuality was only considerable within the confines of marriage and for the purposes of reproduction, or for the satisfaction of male desire (Fichte). Did these taboos on female sexuality perhaps make women more vulnerable to seduction, then, either in reality or in the cultural imagination? How did the real ramifications of premarital sex for eighteenth-century women compare with their imagined depictions in the literary texts? Were eighteenth-century authors' portrayals of gendered power imbalances intended as social critique, or did they seek to preserve the status quo?

We began our exploration of the literary treatments with Sophie von La Roche's epistolary novel of 1771, *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*. Inspired by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa Harlowe; or, The History of a Young Lady* (1748), and under the influence of English moral sense theory,[13] La Roche's work was intended to explore the pursuit of virtue through its eponymous heroine, Sophie von Sternheim. Though Sophie aims to uphold the ideals of virtuous femininity, the novel's epistolary narrative technique prevents her character from becoming a one-dimensional prototype. Sophie reflects on her own behaviour in her letters and diary entries, and the letters by other characters offer an external perspective. In this way, though the novel's reception (particularly by its editor Wieland)[14] praised Sophie as an ideal model for female readers, her character is curious and challenging, and some elements of her story can be seen to subtly critique the contemporary ideals of femininity.

Orphaned at the age of nineteen, Sophie is sent to court to stay with her aunt. Her time there provides ample opportunities for her to hone her 'Tugend' through considering the examples of those around her, who are not all as virtuous as she is. Indeed, there is arguably a hint of irony in La Roche's text when Sophie notes how rare it is to find a lady at court who demonstrates all the required virtues: 'allein es ist so schwer sie immer in einer gleichen Stärke zu erhalten, dass mich nicht wundert, so wenig Personen zu sehen, die darum bekümmert sind.'[15] She and the equally virtuous Lord Seymour are initially drawn to one another, but they do not get together until the end of the story. At court, Seymour is put off

[13]Elystan Griffiths, 'Sophie von La Roche, Shaftesbury and the Problem of Virtue: Inheritance and Self-Creation in *Die Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*', *FMLS*, 50.1 (2013), 82–96.

[14]On the influence of Wieland's preface to La Roche's novel for its critical reception up to the present day, see Becker-Cantarino, *Meine Liebe zu Büchern: Sophie von La Roche als professionelle Schriftstellerin* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008), pp. 87–90.

[15]Sophie von La Roche, *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*, ed. by Barbara Becker-Cantarino (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1987), p. 110.

Sophie by her (innocent) association with the rogue Lord Derby, whose pure lust for Sophie contrasts with Seymour's true love: as Seymour puts it, 'denn Liebe kann man seine [Derbys] Neigung nicht nennen' (p. 93).

Sophie is dressed up for the Prince's pleasure at a masked ball, but she refuses his advances. Ashamed by this attack on her virtue, and having risked the ire of court by refusing the Prince, she turns to her friend Lord Derby, who promises to marry her to protect her honour. But Derby is only motivated by his interest in Sophie as a sexual object, and the marriage he arranges is a sham. When he tries to rape her, her forceful rejection is successful and he gives up the attempt, eventually losing interest in her altogether her when he realizes she is too full of (in his view, 'foolish') virtues to meet his needs: 'Dieses Gemische von Verstand und Narrheit hat ihr ganzes Wesen durchdrungen, und gieβt Trägheit und Unlust über alle Bewegungen meiner muntern Fibern aus' (p. 223). Derby gets rid of Sophie by transferring her to a location in the Scottish mountains. She overcomes a suicidal depressive episode and begins a new life for herself under the name of Madame Leidens, keeping a diary and dedicating herself to the pursuit of virtue by helping those around her. She is finally reunited with the respectable Lord Seymour, and they are married in a union exemplifying Sasse's concept of 'zärtliche Liebe'.

Looking at key extracts from this novel, especially the attempted seductions by the Prince and Lord Derby, demonstrated the contemporary double standard around female sexuality. Because Sophie is young and beautiful, she is seen by others at court as a sexual object and falsely accused of coquetry (to which she firmly objects).[16] In contrast, her virtuous self-conception excludes all hints of sexuality. Ironically, it is her total blindness to the sexual motivations of others that puts her at risk of seduction, not only once but twice! Her story suggests it is not so much the court that presents danger to young women, but rather the total tabooing of their sexuality, as this can make them even more vulnerable to exploitation by men for whom sexuality is not taboo. Furthermore, as Barbara Becker-Cantarino has pointed out, it is the unrealistic expectation that a woman should help her husband on the path of virtue by sublimating *his* sexuality that leads Sophie into Lord Derby's trap. Sophie believes that it is her task to improve Derby through marriage, but this proves delusional. 'Damit', writes Becker-Cantarino, 'ist zugleich das Dilemma und die ambivalente Situation der bürgerlichen Frau im 18. Jahrhundert thematisiert' (p. 97).

Having lived at the court of the Archbishop of Mainz from 1753 (when her husband was ennobled) until 1761, La Roche was familiar with politics, and intrigues, and the double moral standards for women at court. Writing as a woman, however, La Roche had to be even more careful than a male writer in her challenging of the status quo. She knew (and Wieland's preface helped

[16]E.g. La Roche, p. 74.

her in this regard) that her only path to publication was to present her work as a 'useful' text in the didactic tradition, ideally for female readers. The novel's critiques of contemporary female socialization therefore had to remain extremely subtle. One example of a less covert critique demonstrates what would have happened to La Roche's novel, had its challenge to patriarchal society been more explicit. Towards the end of the novel, in her new, more self-aware persona as Madame Leidens, Sophie questions the social rules which state that a woman must remain passive in pursuit of a husband: 'Warum darf ein edeldenkendes, tugendhaftes Mädchen nicht zuerst sagen, diesen würdigen Mann liebe ich?' (p. 284). As Becker-Cantarino points out (p. 90), Wieland's editorial note hastily shuts down that line of enquiry, and the female character's (and author's) challenge to the status quo is discounted by the male editor.

Our next text for study, Lessing's 1772 drama *Emilia Galotti*, could be more overtly critical in its presentation of eighteenth-century codes of sexual morality and gendered power dynamics within the bourgeois family.[17] On the day of her intended wedding to her suitor, Appiani, the eponymous heroine Emilia is taken captive by the Prince and his sinister sidekick Marinelli who, after having Appiani murdered, intends to install her in the house of his chancellor Grimaldi, where he can then make her his mistress. Marinelli tricks Emilia's father Odoardo into believing (wrongly) that she had been unfaithful to Appiani,[18] and so Odoardo begins to lose faith in his daughter's moral integrity and sees this as evidence of his own failure as a father. The tragedy ends with Emilia's death at Odoardo's hands, but the question of who is to blame for her death is not so easy to answer. Indeed, though it is Emilia who dies, the play presents both Emilia and her father as victims of the same repressive code of sexual morality and bourgeois familial norms. The tragedy of the play is that Odoardo and Emilia's respective choices (to kill, and to die) uphold the gendered system of oppression under which they both suffer. Odoardo feels that he has failed Emilia by allowing her virtue to be threatened at all, and he sees his act of killing Emilia as a redress of this wrong: 'Wer sie unschuldig in diesen Abgrund gestürzt hat, der ziehe sie wider heraus' (p. 367). His killing of Emilia is an act of sacrifice, as he not only loses his daughter but also chooses to accept the consequences of becoming a murderer ('ich gehe und liefere mich selbst in das Gefängnis', p. 371). Emilia has in fact never done anything that would compromise her moral and sexual purity (in the eighteenth-century bourgeois conception of femininity, they are the same thing). However, she is so afraid of the mere idea of sensual desire that she chooses to die rather than take her chances as the Prince's mistress in the house of Grimaldi, which she already knows to be a place of pleasures: 'Ich kenne das Haus der Grimaldi. Es ist das Haus der Freude' (p. 369).

[17]On this reading, and for further references, see Wurst's excellent analysis.

[18]Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 12 vols, ed. by Wilfried Barner and others, (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2000), VII: *Werke 1770–1773*, ed. by Klaus Bohnen, p. 364.

Emilia's repression and powerlessness are the product of her socialization as an eighteenth-century bourgeois female, as others have pointed out.[19] However, in contrast to Sophie von Sternheim, Emilia is *not* such a model example of female virtue. Though she says she would rather lose her life than her innocence ('Unschuld'), her frank admission that she has been at the Grimaldis' before, and actually enjoyed it,[20] suggests that her innocence is already partially compromised. She is self-aware enough to know that there might be some aspects of life at the Grimaldis' that she might enjoy, because she has sensual desires of her own: 'Ich habe Blut, mein Vater, so jugendliches, so warmes Blut, als eine. Auch meine Sinne, sind Sinne' (p. 369). Emilia dies a virgin, then, but she has experienced a sexual awakening of sorts. Lessing thus challenges the norm of bourgeois femininity, pointing to the double-standard which taboos female sexuality and entraps both men and women within codes of honour that are ultimately self-destructive.

Our next text, Goethe's *Faust I* (1808), closes with the story of another tragic heroine. Gretchen is sentenced to death for the crime of infanticide after bearing Faust's illegitimate child. Having now become familiar with the norms of eighteenth-century bourgeois femininity and sexual morality, students understood why sex with Faust was so much more dangerous for Gretchen than it was for him. Gretchen's radical agency in not merely submitting to, but actively *pursuing* her relationship with Faust emerged all the more clearly as a result, echoing Maike Oergel's argument that sees Gretchen as a Faustian striver in her own right.[21] Goethe's Gretchen is no stereotype, but rather a defiant character who tries to escape the narrow life defined for her by her status and gender. She is not merely a sexual object for Faust, but demonstrably feels desires of her own. Both in her monologue 'Gretchen am Spinnrade' and the final 'Kerker' scene, her language is passionate, containing frequent exclamatory 'achs!', and she longs to kiss Faust. Even though her socialization as an eighteenth-century female has made her view sex with Faust as an act of moral transgression, she still remembers this 'sin' as a wonderful experience: 'Doch – alles was dazu mich trieb, | Gott! War so gut! Ach war so lieb!' (p. 639).[22]

Her madness in the 'Kerker' scene is the result of her thwarted attempts to live a life in pursuit of her natural desires. Her psyche is torn because she both knows what she wants (Faust, freedom, sex), and that her desires conflict with the expectations of her society. Rather than a sense of personal guilt, it is the judgments of others that haunt and condemn her ('Sie singen Lieder auf mich!', p. 669).The scene 'Am Brunnen' and her own response to

[19]See Wurst, p. 245 for further references.
[20]'Eine Stunde da, […] und es erhob sich so mancher Tumult in meiner Seele' (p. 369).
[21]Maike Oergel, 'The Faustian Gretchen: Overlooked Aspects of a Famous Male Fantasy', *GLL*, 64 (2001), 43–55.
[22]Goethe, MA, VI/1, 669.

the gossip she hears there, admits the part that other women under patriarchy — not just men — play in the policing and punishing of female sexuality.

Gretchen does not deny her crime, but still begs for forgiveness 'erbarme dich und lass mich leben' (p. 668), which leaves us wondering whether her punishment is justified. While Mephistopheles wants to see her executed for her crime, and this is how *Urfaust* ends, *Faust I* closes with a 'Stimme von oben' that declares her saved ('gerettet'), suggesting that in God's eyes Gretchen does not deserve such harsh punishment. The contrasting endings of the *Gretchentragödie* led us to consider Goethe's own conflicting views on the penalties for infanticide. While his literary treatments overall expressed sympathy with perpetrators of infanticide,[23] in 1783 he voted to uphold the death penalty in his role as court advisor to the Duke of Weimar, Carl August. This led to the immediate execution of Johanna Katharina Höhn, who was beheaded on Weimar's market square at the age of twenty-four.[24]

The controversial example of Goethe's conflicting attitudes in literature and politics enabled us to consider infanticide as both a *Sturm und Drang* literary motif and a historical phenomenon. As a counterpoint to selected poems and ballads on the theme, we also engaged with contemporary non-fictional texts discussing infanticide as a social ill. We read the wording of the 1780 *Mannheimer Preisfrage*, an annual essay contest on topics related to the goals of Enlightenment. The 1780 question presented infanticide as one of the most terrible, yet most common crimes of the age, and asked what the best ways of curbing it might be. The wording of the essay question admits that infanticide was doubly bound to the issue of female sexual virtue: it was one of the 'Verbrechen, die mit Tugenden verwandt sind; Tugenden, die in Laster ausarten'.[25] As Kord has argued, the primary motive for a woman to kill her illegitimate child (both in reality and in the fictional depictions) was to escape the particularly gendered form of shame that followed such a pregnancy — a shame to which even death was preferable (Kord, pp. 130–35). In Prussia, however, out of a population of about five million, only about fifty cases of infanticide were reported between 1774 and 1781.[26] Clearly it was not as common an occurrence as the *Mannheimer Preisfrage* makes out. Yet the volume of responses to the essay question (over four hundred), and the large number of fictional texts from this period that feature infanticide as a motif (more than twenty), belie the significant anxiety which this topic provoked in eighteenth-century culture due to its fundamental link with contemporary gender ideologies. In order to illustrate the parallels and contradictions between the realities of infanticide cases and

[23]His 1776 ballad 'Vor Gericht' also takes the side of the accused woman.

[24]See W. Daniel Wilson, 'Goethe, his Duke and Infanticide: New Documents and Reflections on a Controversial Execution', *GLL*, 61 (2008), 7–32.

[25]'Preisfrage', *Rheinische Beiträge zur Gelehrsamkeit*, 2 (1780), 84–86.

[26]Helen Fronius, 'Images of Infanticide in Eighteenth-Century Germany', in *Women and Death: Representations of Female Victims and Perpetrators in German Culture, 1500–2000*, ed. by Helen Fronius and Anna Linton (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2008), pp. 93–112 (p. 94).

those depicted in literature, we read extracts from contemporary legal documents collected in another useful anthology, Andrea van Dülmen's *Frauenleben im 18. Jahrhundert*.[27] Students' feedback suggested they enjoyed juxtaposing these historical documents with the literary texts, as I discuss below.

We ended the course with Heinrich von Kleist's novella of 1808, *Die Marquise von O …* . During a fainting spell[28] at the novella's opening, the Marquise is made pregnant by the respectable Graf F., who later offers to marry her, clearly hoping to save her reputation. Not realizing for several months that she is pregnant, however, she refuses the Count's advances at first, only accepting his proposal to finally escape the shame and misery inflicted on her when her pregnancy becomes obvious. The marriage restores her honour but remains nominal at first, and the couple live apart for over a year, even after the birth of their child. Graf F. is only invited to the christening on the basis of his subsequent good behaviour, and it is only after he makes significant financial commitments to the Marquise and her son that he is invited to visit more regularly. Even then, this is not the Marquise's choice, but is rather on her mother's insistence ('Von diesem Tage an ward er, auf Veranstaltung der Frau von G., öfter eingeladen').[29] After a year of renewed courtship in which the couple are eventually reconciled, Kleist's narrator tells us that they move in together and have several more children. But this final image of a 'happily ever after' is hard to swallow after the story we have just read, and the final lines which suggest the Graf F. has been (and can still be) both an angel and a devil complicates the picture of familial bliss. Through this ending which sees the Marquise happily married to the man who was once her rapist, Kleist offers a biting critique of the institution of marriage in eighteenth-century society, reminiscent of the disheartening advice from Campe to his daughter that we had read at the start of the course.

Strengths and Challenges of the Course

One of the first challenges in designing any eighteenth-century course is the difficulty of the language for students who, in increasing numbers, are learning German from scratch at university. Providing translations is crucial, yet this is more difficult for texts outside of the established literary canon. At the time, I could not find translations of the treatises on sex and gender by Campe and Fichte, for example. As this was a final year course, I did not provide

[27] *Frauenleben im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Andrea von Dülmen (Munich: Beck, 1992). See pp. 348–49, 356–59.

[28] On the contentious issue of whether or not the Marquise in fact consented to sex with the Count, see Michel Chaouli, 'Irresistible Rape: The Lure of Closure in *The Marquise of O …* ', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 17 (2004), 51–81; and Helen Watanabe O'Kelly, 'What Difference Does Feminism Make to the Study of German Literature?', in *Gendering German Studies: New Perspectives on German Literature and Culture*, ed. by Margaret Littler (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 2–11 (p. 10).

[29] Heinrich von Kleist, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. by Ilse-Marie Barth and others, 4 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1997), III: *Erzählungen, Anekdoten, Gedichte, Schriften*, ed. by Klaus Müller-Salget, p. 186.

translations, although this would certainly be necessary with students in earlier stages, and would have required significant preparation time if no pre-existing translation could be found.

As a way of helping students to understand the action in *Faust I* and *Die Marquise von O …* , I showed clips from the theatrical film by Peter Gorski (1960) and the period drama by Eric Rohmer (1976). One German native speaker gave the following feedback, showing that the film clips were helpful even for those students with a solid command of German: 'the film clips helped to get a more specific idea about the play/book, because sometimes you notice things which you would have ignored by only reading it.' Analysing images from recent theatre productions was another helpful way of bringing these texts to life, and aiding students' understanding. For example, we scrutinised images of Gretchen in Peter Stein's 2000 stage production, considering her dress (or undress) and the body language between her and Faust in key scenes.[30] Where earlier illustrations were available, such as that by Peter von Cornelius showing Faust's initial harassment of Gretchen in the street (see Figure 1), these were also discussed in class.

Another challenge was that both the feminist German-language anthologies which I used to source the contemporary theoretical texts and the legal documents relating to infanticide were out of print, and digital copies were unavailable. I had no choice but to create handouts by scanning my own books, which was labour intensive but necessary in order to bring together all the texts I wanted from a diverse range of sources. I had not anticipated how much the students would struggle with texts in Fraktur. If repeating the course, I would certainly transcribe these, although examining texts in Fraktur also gave students a valuable insight into the material conditions of eighteenth-century literature.

Overall, the comparison of literary depictions with historical documents relating to infanticide and the policing of female sexuality proved to be one of the highlights of the course, as this comment from student feedback shows: 'especially when we talked about infanticide it was very interesting to look at the real legal situation of that period. I liked that we compared fictional literature to the legal texts.' This more interdisciplinary approach, bringing literary texts and historical evidence together, seems to have been attractive to students.

As the exposure of allegations of sexual misconduct by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein fanned the flames of the #MeToo movement, the course's focus on the double standards for male and female sexuality became all the more relevant. Wikipedia defines the #MeToo movement as: 'a social movement against sexual abuse and sexual harassment where

[30]Images were sourced from Peter Stein, *Goethes Faust: Peter Steins Inszenierung in Bildern. Photographien von Ruth Walz* (Cologne: DuMont, 2001).

Figure 1. Peter von Cornelius, *Faust bietet Gretchen den Arm*, 1811, engraving, *Wikimedia commons* (public domain), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peter_von_Cornelius_-_Faust_bietet_Gretchen_den_Arm.jpg [accessed 21 May 2021].

people publicize allegations of sex crimes',[31] often on social media. First used in this context by activist Tarana Burke in 2006, the hashtag #MeToo has brought women together online, providing an evolving forum for discussion, and increasingly raising awareness of a previously taboo subject. In October 2017, the Weinstein scandal made the hashtag a household word.

I wanted to encourage the students to consider the similarities between scenes we had studied in the eighteenth-century literary texts and the situations described by Weinstein's accusers. To do this, I showed examples by prominent actresses who had experienced abuse by Weinstein. Here are three examples:[32]

> I said no, a lot of ways, a lot of times, and he always came back at me with some new ask. It was all this bargaining, this coercive bargaining. How do I get out of the room

[31] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MeToo_movement#cite_note-:65-2> [accessed 10 April 2022].

[32] All three were taken from a list of allegations produced by *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/ng-interactive/2017/oct/13/the-weinstein-allegations> [accessed 20 April 2021].

> as fast as possible without alienating Harvey Weinstein?
> (Ashley Judd)

> I was a kid, I was signed up, I was petrified. I thought he was going to fire me.
> (Gwyneth Paltrow)

> Hollywood's power is dying because society has changed and grown, and yet Hollywood male behavior has not.
> (Rose McGowan)

Compared with these actresses' accounts, the situations of Gretchen harassed by Faust in the street, Emilia Galotti kidnapped, Sophie Sternheim dressed up for her Prince's pleasure and later sexually attacked by Lord Derby, and the countless *Mädchen* seduced by older, more powerful men in infanticide ballads, no longer seemed so unfamiliar. While the students had time to read these statements, I put them into small groups and asked them to discuss the question: 'Is *Emilia Galotti* still socially relevant for readers in 2017? Consider reasons both for and against.' Asking the students to reflect in this way encouraged them to consider the vast historical and ideological distance that separates our world from that of Lessing, but it also suggested certain parallels. Indeed, our reading of eighteenth-century texts in this module showed students some of the roots of gendered concepts of sexual morality and the power imbalance between men and women that still lingers today, exposed by any contemporary discussion of rape and sexual harassment of women. Feedback by one student commented rather litotically: 'the module itself offered a nice parallel to some current problems.'

Despite this student's use of the word 'nice', the parallels with the #MeToo discussion that this course brought up had the potential to make some students feel deeply uncomfortable. Though I assumed that the course's title and description would have alerted students to the possibly triggering topics we would discuss, I made sure to flag this again in the first week, and invited students to approach me in private should they find any of the material too disturbing. The above student's comment about 'nice parallels' also raises one final question that I would like to consider in this article. What are the benefits and pitfalls of domesticating the texts in this way, by considering their relevance to contemporary social issues and discussions?

Such an approach might be accused of presentism: the anachronistic application of today's moral standards and interpretations to past phenomena. But what if we turn our lens the other way around, showing by comparison with eighteenth-century texts how little has changed between then and now? When Harvey Weinstein locked his door behind a woman he hoped to have sex with, it was not that different to when the Prince locks up Emilia Galotti in his palace. There is nothing wrong, I suggest, with pointing out the existence of both Lessing's fictional Prince and the real Harvey Weinstein as manifestations of our own patriarchal cultural heritage. As DDGC, the US-based

organization combating the legacy of systemic oppressions within German Studies puts it:

> We recognize that these structural oppressions continue to inform curricula, communities, and daily life in and beyond academia, and that they do constant damage to our students, colleagues, schools, and friends. These aren't violences that happen somewhere else or in another time, but in our very midst. Accordingly, we see them as intensely endurant conditions to be opposed and dismantled, and not merely as research topics to be explored occasionally and debated virtuously. Keeping it simple, we say: tear them down.[33]

It is inevitable that tackling issues of contemporary relevance through the perspective of eighteenth-century study will bring strong emotions into the classroom. Students in 'Seduction and Destruction' were at times shocked and angry. If I were to repeat this module, I would incorporate a weekly learning journal into the overall assessment, encouraging students to reflect more deeply on their emotional responses to these texts, and the perspectives that they offered.

To conclude then, approaching the *Goethe-Zeit* as a messy period in which we find parallels to today's social and political issues can make it more attractive to students who might otherwise shy away from the eighteenth century. Comments made in 2021 by Nicola Thomas and Rey Conquer, representatives of the UK's initiative EGS – Working Towards an Equitable German Studies, are relevant here. They reflected: 'As junior teachers and researchers we were hearing a lot of feedback from our students about how much they wanted a more exciting, more up-to-date, more critically alert curriculum.'[34] There is no reason why the study of eighteenth-century German literature cannot form part of this curriculum, perhaps it is just a matter of choosing a new lens, or, as Boa put it, asking 'new questions of old texts'. It is now over twenty years since Helen Watanabe O'Kelly asked, 'What difference does feminism make to the study of German Literature?'[35] Yet her arguments have still not changed the way students in most UK German departments encounter the eighteenth century. An uncritical approach to the predominantly male canon, she argued then, will cause many a female student to lose interest, and perhaps to 'flee into the contemporary field, because there she hopes to find something she can relate to' (p. 10). My course 'Seduction and Destruction' recruited surprisingly well for an eighteenth-century module, which does suggest that it is neither the literary focus, nor the eighteenth-century setting itself that puts students off the period, but rather the traditional lenses through which it is often

[33] *Diversity, Decolonization, & the German Curriculum*, project homepage, <https://diversityingermancurriculum.weebly.com/> [accessed 20 April 2021].

[34] Rey Conquer and Nicola Thomas, 'Expanding German Studies', Conference presentation at 'Decolonising Modern Languages', Institute of Modern Languages Research (2020). The talk can be watched on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AWJIGWCLZ8> [accessed 14 April 2021].

[35] See note 29.

approached.[36] As the other contributions to this special issue also demonstrate, a more critical, interdisciplinary approach to the Enlightenment period, informed by parallel discussion of contemporary social and political issues, might be a way to reawaken interest in the field among students today. After all, Kant could equally have been speaking for 2022 when he asked: 'Leben wir jetzt in einem aufgeklärten Zeitalter? […] Nein, aber wohl in einem Zeitalter der Aufklärung' (IV, 174).

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Notes on the Contributor

Ellen Pilsworth is Lecturer in German and Translation Studies at the University of Reading. She is the author of several articles on eighteenth-century German poetry, and the co-editor (with Dr Dagmar Paulus) of *Nationalism before the Nation State* (Brill, 2020). Her current project, 'Knowing the Nazis, Inside and Out: Anti-Fascist Publishing in Austria, Germany and Britain, 1927–40' is funded by the British Academy and Wolfson Foundation.

ORCID

Ellen Pilsworth http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7379-0996

[36] 'Seduction and Destruction' attracted sixteen students, which was just under fifty per cent of the final year cohort.