



## Rezensionen

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Die nachfolgende Rezension von [Elfriede Pöder](#) erschien im *austrian history yearbook*, vol. XXXI, 199-201.

Boa, Elisabeth: *Kafka: Gender, Class, and Race in the Letters and Fictions*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Pp. x, 304.

"My reading, by contrast, sets the story in a political context of class and gender relations, in the early twentieth century." (3) Elizabeth Boa tells us right at the beginning of her differentiated and intriguing reading of the short story "Up in the Gallery" with which she introduces her study *Kafka: Gender, Class, and Race in the Letters and Fictions*, a reading that demonstrates both Boa's hermeneutic sensitivity and her her critical skills.

These relations were analysed, formed, and commented on not only by Otto Weininger, whose "Geschlecht und Charakter" - as is sufficiently known - widely influenced the German novel, but also by major figures of the women's movement of that time such as Rosa Mayreder or Irma Troll-Borostyani, to name but two, none of which are mentioned in this study, not even by reference (Compare Sigrid Schmid and Hanna Schnedl, *Totgeschweigen. Texte zur Situation der Frau von 1880 bis in die Zwischenkriegszeit* [Vienna, 1982]. This volume contains texts of many more women addressing gender-class relations in Austria of the early twentieth century.) This is irritating since Elizabeth Boa introduces herself as a feminist literary critic and reader with a definite historical perspective so that her (feminist) reader expects a recognition of corresponding sources available not least because of the research that has been done by feminist scholars in the German speaking countries since 1970.

By this I mean that the criteria by which Boa selects her references are not thoroughly comprehensible, especially when it comes to the question of (feminist) gender theory and feminist literary criticism in particular. I am saying this despite my awareness of the problem of researching in a time of computer-aided scholarship, on the one hand; and despite my awareness of the fact that Kafka's "work has provoked a vast and disputatious literature" ( 1), on the other hand. Classics such as Silvia Bovenschen's *Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit*.

*Exemplarische Untersuchungen zu kulturgeschichtlichen und literarischen Präsentationsformen des Weiblichen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1980), exploring ideological aspects underlying the production of female/feminine images; Rosa Mayreder's still revealing and instructive *Zur Kritik der Weiblichkeit. Essays. Zusammenge stellt und eingeleitet von Hanna Schnedl* (Munich, 1981), published in 1905; and Renate Berger and Inge Stephan's edited work *Weiblichkeit und Tod in der Literatur* (Cologne, 1987), in which the complex relation between male writers and the "woman" is explored, would have been of immediate interest for Boa's study.

Yet, Boa certainly is very differentiated and admirably clear in analysing the intricate ways in which gender, class, and race form complex conspiracies both in the fiction and in the letters of Franz Kafka; the latter she explores on the basis of Kafka's correspondence with Felice Bauer and Milena Jesenska. And it is here that the concepts of both masculinity and femininity evolve as the result of a permanent interaction between Kafka, the man and lover, Kafka, the writer, and the writing process. All of these three levels mutually influence one another and thus - consequently - leave their traces in real life and in Kafka's narrations, witnessing the fragile and not yet theoretically well-defined bond between social agency/identity and fiction. Among the many achievements of this study, I find the elaboration of these three levels in their interdependency, without privileging one over the other, full of insights in regard to the gender-race-class triangle. This is also true of Boa's reading of "The Metamorphosis"; in it the complex social significance of Gregor Samsa's switching identity becomes evident as pessimistic comment on middle-class masculine identity in a time when gender roles were changing, anti-Semitism was frightfully present, and new classes were emerging.

Post-Freudian, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist approaches, along with reader response criticism inform this study in its New Historicist pursuit of the question of gender, class, and race. Thus, we learn as much about masculinity as about femininity and "the intertwining of class and gender in shaping desire" (241) as we learn about "Sexuality [...] as crucial transmission-point of power relations" (241), especially in Boa's discussion of "The Trial", which, as Boa concludes, "at once challenges liberal individualism and orthodox socialist idealisation of the working classes. Power relations are shown to be interfused with erotic value, shaping desires, coded also through racial discourse, which the subject cannot excise by an act of will". (241)."

And what about "the male" or even "the female" reader (4)? This is a question of great significance to Boa, too, which she introduces at the beginning of her study and that she once again addresses when closely analysing "The Trial". Is the woman-reader implied at all and if so where is she posited by Kafka's narrative? "If 'The Trial' does not address women directly, its demolition of dominant masculinity and its denaturalization of the female images do not exclude female readers but rather create space for redefinitions and renegotiations" (241f.).

No such reader is given space by "The Castle," since it is "less radical than 'The Trial'". But its anatomy of patriarchy uncovers endless contradictions: there may be accommodation, but scarcely affirmation, and a subterranean humour makes the scandal of patriarchy ludicrous. Although the humour offers no programmatic exit, it is a kind of rebellion" (286).

What kind of reader, then, does "The Castle" posit? Is it a reader in a gendered subject position? One would like to know here, too; yet, the answer is not given, so that the "female" reader once more is left slightly irritated.